Beauty from Ashes

by BakerTumblings

Summary

John Watson, MD, is a freelance Medical Coordinator, who has been hired by British Government leader Mycroft Holmes to work miracles on behalf of his brother, who is suffering from terrible sequelae of addiction, failure to thrive, and unsuccessful rehab stints. Cue the headstrong encounters!
John leaned forward to tuck a second pillow behind his back on the narrow cot, then leaned back on his elbow as he flipped yet another page of the rather unique medical history he perused. The rustle of the page turning seemed to penetrate the light slumber of the other occupant of the room, who inhaled deeper, turned his head on the pillow, before then settling back to - hopefully - a more restorative phase of sleep. The history and physical were soon consumed, along with the hospitalisation course, followed by the discharge summary. The medication reconciliation, given the history, was entirely sparse, raising more questions than answers as John studied it. John wondered about the omitted details, the motivation, the protective nature of his employer. He viewed the laboratory studies, radiograph reports, and there was the niggling doubt that these records also had been carefully selected to present a somewhat jaded, incomplete, deliberately vague picture of his current patient.

Who snored lightly, a pitiful sound, followed by a quiet, sleeping moan of distress.

John eyeballed the wireless pulse oximeter readout that was by his bed, stable, heart rate a bit elevated but probably not fully awake at the moment. Intervening on a sleeping patient was risky and needed to be timed carefully to avoid panic, injury, or regression. The last thing John wanted to do on this first day of meeting this new client was to have a reactive response, an immediate setback. Silently pressing to his feet, he adjusted the roller clamp of the IV fluids, lifted a dark curl from the man's temple, brushing it away from his eye while assessing both temperature (normal) and skin (mild diaphoresis, not unexpected) as he touched lightly.

Flipping open his leather folio, he clicked his sleek, weighted, engraved biro, and began to write.

*Pt is a 28 year old single male with long-standing drug history discharged this day from an elite rehab, where the staff had demanded his removal for treatment non-compliance, with consent and at bequest of patient's brother. Tox screen yesterday (UDS) still positive for substances and it is unknown how the patient procured them. I have conditionally agreed to take this client on in his flat as a 1:1 observation, but have estimated a rather low probability of successful long-term detoxification and rehabilitation...*

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John’s role and vocation was unconventional, strictly cash pay, as a one on one counselor, medical patient advocate, and total care provider. His informational advert used words like professional, experienced, skilled, unique, and flexible. Initially, with each new patient, he insisted on a live-in arrangement, where he provided all rehab services, care, simple meals (complex ones by request, which cost more, but he was almost always game), detox services, monitoring, activities of daily living, medication therapy, healthcare when necessary, and rare consults only if needed. He was the only one in England, and in high demand. He had a back-log of patients waiting, mostly by reputation, recommendation, or word-of-mouth referral; less often, his website
or via email. This one had come as a direct walk-in, in person, an uninvited visitor to his office, where he was finalising a previous patient's paperwork.

The tall man, plain, simple features, aristocratic bearing, carrying an umbrella, arrived at the seldom-used office, showed himself in, and sat down. Wordless initially, he turned his head carefully as he absorbed everything there was to know about the way John Watson presented himself. The office, elegant and tasteful. Use of colour, blandly professional. Medical school diploma in a refined frame, hung, free of dust. Med school graduation photo, small headshot on his flyer - but personal photos, none. Military awards, service records, blatantly and conspicuously absent. Mycroft Holmes turned his cool blue eyes to John, paused, waited, and was pleasantly surprised at John's unfaltering return stare - patient, cool demeanor, confident. Though Mycroft himself had many tasks to see to as did John, neither man gave the impression of anything but casual composure. On to business, then, the visitor mused, posture straightening, his request for services.

"Thank you for seeing me."

John's steady, silent eye very clearly stated that he'd been given no choice. And then just as clearly, get on with it.

A dossier was handed to him. "Here are my credentials. And the application form for your next client." The file contained two papers, one a government issued information sheet all properly notarised, and the application form. The identification form, John knew immediately was carefully impersonal, shallow, bland, and too perfectly benign. He wondered as to the actual identify of the obviously government official before him.

“What’s this all about, then?” John asked. “And who are you really?”

The right corner of the man's mouth twitched but did not smile. Impressed, then. "I represent your next job. Your next patient."

"You're rather presumptuous." Chuckling at his bravado, John conceded that he was at least being sought by someone bold and unafraid.

"I worry about him."

"Relation of yours?"

"Brother." A hand extended, fingers long, well-manicured, not quite warm as John shook it. "I am Mycroft Holmes."

John gave a snort of acknowledgement, leaned back in his chair as he slid the application form to the top, and began to read.

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"You can begin immediately." It was not quite a question yet prompted a response.

“I haven't agreed to take on this client.” John glanced down again through his readers - which he didn't actually need but he reveled in the look, the studious presentation they gave him - at the application form and request for services that the man across from him at very scantily filled out. Name: Sherlock Holmes, age 28, and chief complaint: substance abuse, acute and chronic, with impending detoxification. A couple of other diagnoses - high functioning sociopath, social integration disorder - had been hastily written in as if an afterthought. Or a tempting plea.

Mycroft’s expression changed not a bit, the same, steady, pale-eyed stare. “I suggest that you give
“I am one of the best, and I give everything serious consideration.” John let his steady gaze drive his words home. "I choose my patients very carefully.”

While John had been threatened many times over his career - over his life actually if one threw Harry and his da into the mix - but never with quite so few words before. Ever. Words weren’t particularly necessary, as Mycroft’s slight smirk, the narrowing of an eye, and simple statement, “My success rate in recruitment is 100%.”

Ah, John realised. Military. He grinned, at least he could be amused at the brazen statement, then, as he could palpate the warning - the dire warning - as obvious as an incarcerated hernia. “My treatment success rate is fairly high, as well.” John let his eyebrow raise, keeping his face solemn, unemotional. “And I don’t resort to threats and certainly don’t try to intimidate people to obtain them.”

“Your very role as caretaker and personal health advocate can be intimidating. I have done my research on your methods, which vary greatly based on setting and client. You have had amazing successes on those who had been deemed incorrigible and a lost cause.” Consulting his pocket notepad, he spoke a few names that he had no business knowing, elaborated on a few that had John almost alarmed at how he had been compromised, his patients confidential identities known to this man. He never leaked personal information, worked either completely on his own or rarely with very few, implicitly trusted and well-compensated aides, and yet, here was someone who apparently had violated him, his records, his patients. John's feet were just about under him before he realised it, angry, furious, and very visible to Mycroft, who held out a cautionary hand and John stilled. “I have done my research and will continue to guard your privacy Your patients identities remain confidentially between us. Even as you manage to assist what will likely - most assuredly - be one of your greatest challenges yet.”

“I won’t be threatened. And if your little display is supposed to motivate me into agreement, think again.”

Had John not been watching for pupillary dilation, he may have missed it. He was quite anxious about John's response, and John could almost feel the power dynamic shift slightly in his favour. Mycroft reached for his mobile, then repocketed it, and stood. “I’m glad we’ve had this little … chat. To know where we all stand.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“Indeed,” Mycroft said softly. "How expedient for my situation that your previous client terminated his services, just... last evening, wasn't it?" The little smirk was telling, and John couldn't stop the few rapid blinks, the surprise he was sure was on his face.

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John’s finger had disconnected the call, the line silent, and a curious expression left behind on his face. It was not the first time a patient had suddenly decided he was done, finished, ta very much, moving on. Usually, however, he had an inkling it was coming. This time, not at all. He mulled briefly the terms the patient had used - I've decided... I no longer need... terminating our agreement... honour the contractual clauses... payment is forthcoming... I've already arranged for a courier to deliver your belongings to you in the morning ... thank you. John had tried his usual negotiations to gradually taper visits or even just to give them both closure with one, final exit session, but the patient had been quite tersely adamant: No.

He had still been puzzled when a dark suited messenger in a black car had dropped off boxes of
the last of his supplies there at his office early that morning, waited for his signature, and drove away.

Now, glancing across his desk at Mycroft's almost-smug face as he watched John connect the dots, he had quite a bit of clarity into the situation. Meddlesome bastard.

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While John was certain that this man somehow was ultimately responsible for his previous patient's abrupt departure, he was not inclined to confront him about it. "I have a few other patients who have also been waiting. Much longer than you. In fact, I have a consult set for this afternoon." With serious expression, John pushed the paper aside, removed and folded his glasses. "You may have to wait your turn like everyone else."

"Turn it down."

"Last I checked, I don't actually have to take orders from you."

John's office line rang, then, voicemail engaging immediately, and there was a woman's voice apologetically asking to cancel that afternoon's consultation appointment. Mycroft did not smirk, and John did not comment.

"You thrive on adventure. I dare say, you miss it." Mycroft glanced about, eyes resting deliberately on the desk, walls, picked up his business card to brush his fingers over John's degrees and credentials. "Interesting, Dr. Watson, your office." Mycroft set the business card back in the holder on John's desk. "What's displayed. And what isn't."

"None of your concern," John said flatly, in a tone that hopefully conveyed the topic closed.

"Your concern is your next patient, so it is fortuitous that you are currently between patients."

"If I even accept Mr. Holmes as an appropriate client."

"It would be wise if you do," the man said in a much gentler tone. "About your fee schedule, I'm prepared --"

"I think you've misunderstood --"

"Dr. Watson, your schedule is clear." His tone was becoming more emphatic, fierce undertones, beginning to show frustration. "I highly recommend it."

John weighed his options, considered banishing the sod from his office, or storming out himself - justifiably, he thought. He also considered this new situation, obviously not routine nor destined to be easy by any stretch. Silence won.

"The car is waiting. Come along. I understand you have a contract, which I will sign. I have some addendums, as well."

When John did not immediately argue, Mycroft could tell that John was at least interested enough for the moment and would cooperate to a small degree. John stood, shrugged as he slid his desk chair home. "Addendums. Of course you do."

"We should arrive at the flat at approximately the same time as my brother. But we shouldn't delay any longer." Mycroft rose as well, letting the activity mask the exhale of relief.

"I shall be needing to gather a few things --"
They have already been acquired.

“I haven’t...” John began again, then let a breathy exhale of laughter sound, and changed tacks. In his mind, he imagined uttering *fuck it all*, opting to keep his professionalism at the forefront and holding the curse on his tongue. “Fine. I will agree to accept this client on a probationary period only. One week.” John would probably know if there was any hope much sooner than that, decided to be accommodating. Generous even.

“Your probationary period is unacceptable. Six weeks minimum.”

John kept his gaze level. He’d occasionally had a client that long, or longer, but it was very unusual. And signified the severity of whatever he would be walking into. "No."

Mycroft blew a breath between pursed lips seeming to imply that he was settling and therefore somehow to be commended for it. “I would actually have preferred three months.”

“I will agree to a week. As to a contract, not yet. I agree only to meet him today,” he waited for Mycroft to reluctantly nod before continuing. Mycroft stepped to the window, tapped once “- and we will leave the rest to negotiate within the next day or so.” Mycroft looked mildly concerned at his own concession to the terms, and John smiled then. “I trust first impressions will be quite revealing.”

Two men arrived, and John hastily gathered what he knew he would need, pointed to a few boxes, and followed the whole procession to the waiting stretch car. Black and creepy. Upon seeing the chauffeur, the assistants, John could only turn a wan smile at Mycroft. "What was it I was asking about first impressions? Nice touch." John slid his pack from his shoulder and identified the man holding the door to the rear of the car as another upper-ranked military officer. The compulsion to salute was strong even after all this time. "Ta."

"First impressions, Dr. Watson. Do not be misled." Quietly, seriously, Mycroft looked out the window as the car manoeuvered the London streets. Cryptically, he added, “You have no idea.”

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A mute trip across town ended with their vehicle against the kerb outside a cafe on Baker Street. John remained seated as contents of the boot were carried through a side door and up a flight of stairs. The only sign Mycroft gave John that he might have been mildly anxious was the small repetitive movement of his thumb along the engraved carving of the wooden umbrella handle, the tic of a nervous distraction, a talisman. Mycroft consulted his mobile briefly, then nodded to John as he exited the vehicle then stood as John followed, waiting only a short time until a smaller car arrived. Mycroft stood at regal attention as an attendant opened the rear door. When nothing was forthcoming, John glanced at Mycroft, who seemed disinclined to move, so John placed a hand on the roof, bending forward to peer inside.

Chapter End Notes

Yup, he’s in the car.
Convergence

Chapter Summary

Mycroft has hired John to help Sherlock recover, and they have just arrived at Baker Street, where John will attempt to get things sorted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sleek inside of the car was lush, clean, well cared for. There was the scent of old, well maintained high-grade leather interior along with a citrusy tang, but as he tucked his body deeper inside the car there was more: sweat, stale breathing, and illness. John took note of very little else as his eyes surveyed the reclined man who lay essentially non-responsive, cockeyed across the seat in the far corner of the vehicle.

What John wanted to say was, 'Are you fucking kidding me?' Instead, he did take in signs of life along with the gaunt pallor. "This man most likely belongs in a medical hospital. Immediately." John took the seat next to the man, moved closer to assess the situation, going so far as to take the occupant's motionless hand and feel for strength and quality of his radial pulse. The man in the car’s skin was hot, pulse thready and rapid. Drawing closer, John shook a shoulder, snappily, and speaking a curt hey, then hello. He pried open an eyelid then, taking into account stale breath, hot, fetid, too rapid yet shallow, and found his half-mast eyelids alarming. "I am not accepting this patient in this condition. It is inappropriate for this type of setting." He swiveled to eye Mycroft steadily, challenging, his own eyes flashing fire into the cool blue ones opposing him. "As I believe you are well aware."

"He will be brought inside. He needs to be here, at his home. I promised him we would try."

"He is not medically cleared, not for a home setting."

"You are a physician, Dr. Watson."

"First do no harm," John quoted without delay. "You are risking his health and his recovery if you proceed."

"He has refused everything in his previous setting. And he has been most uncooperative, quite unhappy. Everyone feels this is a better option."

"Everyone, who? Exactly who feels this is for his benefit? I think that list might be short, with only two names on it both ending in Holmes."

"Riskier to have forced him to stay where he was."

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"Mr. Holmes? I am Dr. Landau, one of Sherlock's physicians. I'm sorry the call isn't better news, but we discovered something concerning your brother and needed to bring this matter to your attention."
"Go on."

"Well, yes, of course, as you know, we round on all of our patient's regularly, at least hourly to assure their safety. This morning staff found Sherlock's bed was empty, and he was discovered having syncopised on the bathroom floor..."

Mycroft kept quiet, though his sigh over the mobile was loud enough to be heard.

"We mobilised our medical response team of course, there was no sign of injury. The nocturnist evaluated him quite thoroughly."

"Isn't there an exit alarm on the bed?"

"It had been deactivated."

"You should be aware of something else. Medical work-up routinely includes testing for the presence of substances. There are some positive findings that are difficult to explain..."

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"This is riskier? I am not --"

"His treating physician discharged him."

John's explosive response was delivered in low volume on his high energy setting. "Of course he did. How forcefully did you threaten him?" There was something of a snore from Mycroft's brother, and then the patient closed his eyes again. Flipping Sherlock's hand over, John assessed turgor and fingernail state. Dehydrated, clearly, but not unkempt for long by account of the state of his fingertips which were clean and relatively trimmed but his entire hand was dry. "It's unsafe. By insisting, you are jeopardising..."

John halted his words as Mycroft slipped further into the car, and with a sedate, restraining touch on John's arm, he spoke kindly to his brother. "We're home. Baker Street, Sherlock." The gentleness in his tone surprised John in the sentiment and the concern that was intrinsic in his body language and words. "As promised."

Surprisingly, there was a flicker of responsiveness, and briefly Sherlock's eyes tried to open, movement of his upper body as if he were considering moving but couldn't quite manage it. An encouraging sign, John knew, and he thought perhaps an ambulance might not need to be immediately dispatched. Under his fingers, John could feel a jump in pulse rate, but soon it settled back down to where it had been, still tachycardic, and his breathing along with his body relaxed. Mycroft met John's eyes in the car there, the three of them in the back of the car, and his gaze and expression were more somber, concerned. "Dr. Watson, please. Trust me when I say that this:" and here he paused, seemed a little overwrought as he swallowed hard, "you, Dr. Watson, you are perhaps our last resort." Both of them took a long, slow look at Sherlock, who gave a shiver and a toss of his head. "Many others have failed, and... Please."

"Inside, then."

Exiting the vehicle, John watched calmly while Mycroft directed the backseat passenger be mostly lifted, dragged, and otherwise carried up the few steps to the first landing. John and Mycroft held the doors as they needed, and then followed the oddly angled parade inside the front door, stood at the bottom of another flight of seventeen steps. "You'll need a chair," John said as the hired muscle stood, statue-esque, at the bottom of the steps.

Three pairs of eyes questioned John without speaking, and had John been inclined, he would have
speculated out loud that Mycroft must only employ people who communicate telepathically, and so John continued explaining. "A straight backed, plain chair. Put him in it, carry the chair up the steps, upright and head first, of course. Much safer, and easier on everyone that way." When they simply stood there, John glanced at Mycroft who also stood there looking at him. "Your option is otherwise to sling him up over your shoulders. The army carry. Or fireman's carry. Either is going to be much more difficult up the stairs." John pressed, then, and had no problem giving orders, making a decision. "A chair will be safer."

"There is one upstairs," Mycroft said, his chin raising at John a bit, as if waiting for John to begin his new job immediately. He held out a key in John's direction. "You'll need this."

Mycroft was looking pointedly at John's hand which was rubbing small circles on his shoulder, having risen unbidden and unconsciously to press into the divot, which was still numb but fully healed. His wound. The association was obvious to them both, that John could never quite forget and that Mycroft knew not just about the career-ending injury but perhaps even some of the back story. Quickly John ceased, reaching out his hand for the outstretched keys proffered. "Thanks."

His narrowed gaze took in John's quick cover up, his recovery, the way he stood taller, head back, chin forward. "You are..." capable?

"Of course," John snapped back, effectively communicating bugger off without actually speaking it.

John considered that Mycroft himself was unlikely to actually lift a finger, while the other two were holding up the patient. Sherlock's head was down, hanging not entirely limp but close, and John spritely ascended the stairs in search thereof. Part of him resisted, but the rest, the logical part, realised that he also was hired help, and this was not completely inappropriate. The flat was slightly musky from disuse, stale aired, John thought, but otherwise in acceptable condition. Bookshelves were comfortably full, couch, chair, television. There was a desk near the window, kitchen he presumed off to one side, hallway to the left, bedrooms then, and another floor above. Quickly he located a suitable chair from the kitchen, returned to the group huddled at the bottom of the steps. With short directions, John took one side, coordinated their efforts with the others, and soon had reassembled them all inside the doorway of the flat.

The assistants hesitated at the couch, John shook his head. "Bedroom."

"Down the hall and to the left." Mycroft busied himself with his mobile while clarifying the direction they were headed.

John led the entourage into the room, setting the chair close to the mattress, and began to oversee the simple task of depositing the weak-limbed man onto the bed. Once he was assured he was comfortable, breathing easily, and safe for the moment, he returned to the hallway, where he could still see the motionless form on the bed for the moment. To Mycroft, he demanded, "If the intention is for him to stay here and not in the hospital as he probably needs, I'm going to need a substantial amount of supplies, equipment, and the possibility of more going forward."

"Indeed."

"My clothing, basics, along with --" John stopped mid-sentence as his own familiar cases were brought in, set down.

Arms akimbo, he considered the other man. Mycroft was smirking.

"Did you break into my flat?"
"Of course not," Mycroft said with quiet arrogance. "I only hire professionals."

John's computer bag joined the small pile against the wall, and the novel he'd been currently reading peeked out of the top of the bag. He couldn't stop the incredulous snort of surprise and then remembrance of Mycroft's apparent unlimited access. "Never mind then."

"Some basic equipment is already here, medical and otherwise," Mycroft explained, "and more will be brought in. Whatever you find you need additionally, simply let me know, and I will have it delivered." He stared at John. "There is almost nothing I cannot procure for you."

"Pulse ox, to start with. I can monitor heart rate with it, too. He needs immediate IV fluids. I will be drawing my own labwork. A courier can deliver lab tubes to the hospital, soon as I draw them, and I want results run stat and faxed to me. You have one here?"

Mycroft nodded, "I am given to understand all of that is in one of the crates. I and a medical advisor brought much of what we expected may be necessary, although he is a bit more ill than when last I'd seen him."

"He may yet need admission."

"You cannot --"

"No," John said sharply, and when Mycroft's mouth immediately opened to argue, protest, and give orders to the contrary, John held up a no-nonsense hand. Not wanting to disturb his patient, he took a few steps toward the sitting room, and with controlled, calm authority, continued. "You listen to me. We are not jeopardising your brother's very life just for the convenience of keeping him here. If I determine he is beyond my scope or becoming unstable, I will take appropriate action.” On hearing the power in John's bearing, his voice, Mycroft felt the slightest bit of relief that he'd made this drastic and somewhat complicated decision. He didn't even care that it would cost him a fortune, but grateful and willing to pay provided it would help his recalcitrant, fractious sibling. John was continuing. "Means of payment for incidentals at my discretion. No visitors until I agree. Favourite foods, for when his appetite returns. Laundry service."

"Whatever you deem necessary, I will supply it." A Visa card appeared in Mycroft's hand, and John simply flicked his eyes to the desk, where it was placed.

"I will be wanting every bit of his medical records, but for now the crucial items are his discharge summary and current medications. The last thing he needs is to suffer withdrawal of anything else on top of his present condition. Have I made myself clear?"

“Crystal.” Mycroft watched as another box of supplies was carried in. As expected, not a single question had been voiced from any of his staff, the orders were simply obeyed. He considered one of them as it went by, stopped the procession, opened the box lid, extracted a small file.

"Records."

"Looks a bit light?"

"There's more, I assure you." This he handed to John, gestured off-handedly and the box was carried into the bedroom with the rest, "Somewhere."

One of his helpers came back, "That's the end of it," and they heard the front door close. "Last item of business for tonight anyway. The contract. For your signature when you're ready," and Mycroft held the papers out, on a clipboard. "You insisted on meeting him first. And now you have."

Without a word initially, John went back to the doorway, more comfortable if he had this rather
unfamiliar patient under his charge well within his line of sight. “Fuck your contract. I agreed verbally to a week, as I said, and that’s it. If I feel we can make any progress, we will talk then. but right now, I have work to do.” There was a soft groan from the bed along with the sound of a rustle of fabric, and John began to roll up his sleeves already. Mycroft did not make a move to leave, as John spun on his heel, hesitating only long enough to snarl, "I work alone." John was in full stop order mode, the don’t mess with me tone, the authoritative demeanor. He was taking control here, and would have satisfaction. It was the primary reason why Mycroft had found, pursued, and hired him. "I'm sure you know this about my methods already."

"What if you need ...?"

"Assistance?" John finished the question as if it were not worth asking. "Well, one would hope that I certainly have resources if I do."

"I expect to be kept abreast of any developments."

"I expect to be left alone to do what you're paying me - generously - to do here. End of discussion."

Nodding, Mycroft handed John a card. "My private contact information."

The final phrase he spoke, "Fine, now get out," as he entered Sherlock's bedroom and flicked on another lamp, casting light across the bed, the supplies, and a cot that had already been placed against the wall. He pushed the door closed as Mycroft's footsteps could be heard growing quieter, more for a statement than anything else.

Had John more time, he would have been impressed at the efficiency and apparent thoroughness of the arrangements. His go-bag of belongings, clothing, toiletries, had been brought. He would set the cot up against the corner, not the exact one but similar enough to the model he’d slept in in Afghanistan. It wasn't always needed with his patients, the constant and direct observation, but he knew upstairs or in another room was out of the question, and apparently on that fact, he and Mycroft agreed.

The man in the bed moaned again, and John came to Sherlock's side, took his hand. "Good afternoon, Mr. Holmes. I am Dr. Watson."

Chapter End Notes

A medical home is a team-based delivery of care that allows a patient to remain in their own home. It is coordinated between patient, provider, and needed services.
Primary Survey

Chapter Summary

John has been hired by Mycroft to provide live-in, continual care to Sherlock. John is game for the challenge, and is just ready to get acquainted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John knew that the transport, the moving from wherever he'd been earlier in the day (nowhere pleasant, obviously), being dressed and driven by car, then being carried up the steps, deposited on the bed, would be exhausting, particularly when under the influence and certainly malnourished. As John watched, even the faintest rousing elevated Sherlock's heart rate; there was no reserve, no residual activity tolerance. He took only a few minutes of his time perusing the history and physical, then the discharge summary. After reading these, he set the file aside, noting that Mycroft had supplied actually very basic and fairly bland information.

A quickly obtained set of vital signs gave John the immediate direction he needed, and Sherlock slept through all that. Blood pressure low, heart rate and respiratory rate high, oxygen level marginal, and hypothermic for the moment, he had actually been expecting more lability. Immediate hydration, as John had already suspected, was the priority. "Time for some water, Sherlock," John said, sliding him upright and tucking another pillow behind his back. "Care for a drink? Here's a straw," and when John offered, there was no response. He was not surprised, but willing to consider the simplest and most basic hydration if Sherlock could do it without aspiration risk. Moving on, then.

In his quick inventory perusing the supplies, John located both phlebotomy and intravenous supplies, placed a tourniquet, cannulated a vein, drew off a few tubes of blood before connecting a bag of IV fluids, normal saline to start. Dextrose would be added to subsequent bags, but crystalloid volume expansion was more important at first. He could tell that Mycroft had both done his homework and had serious connections, given that there was a small chemists shop at his disposal, a wide assortment of items; John hoped he would need very little actual medications. He would, later of course, make some attempts at nutrition when Sherlock was awake, able to eat safely.

While getting him settled, he kept up a quiet litany of procedures, explanations of current findings, what the plan was, and reassurance that all was going to be okay. "So we're just going to give you a bag or two of IV fluids, see if we can get you feeling better. Tomorrow, you're going to need to eat, but tonight we'll let you rest, recover." He attached a disposable, adhesive pulse oximeter, one of the new wireless ones, to Sherlock's toe, connected it to the monitoring base which he would keep close enough for him to keep an eye on it, next to the cot. The readout was in soft blue and gave him heart rate and oxygen saturation levels. "So this is your room, yeah? You have an interesting collection here." Briefly, John paused to glance around again, chemistry books, tables and charts framed, a skull on the cupboard. Ordered, comfortable, not fussy, or so he thought until he went looking for clean, easy, comfortable clothing or pyjamas, pulled open the top dresser drawer to find that the man had indexed his socks.
A sock index?

John glanced back at the sleeping bed-occupant, puzzled, more than a little curious. Who does that? Each little discovery was enlightening, but he was not expecting that. "Perhaps when you're better, you can fill me in on precisely why you've done this."

He carried lab forms in his own gear, and completed one then arranged for a courier service to pick up the specimens. He considered the cardiac monitor, mostly out of curiosity with a little concern thrown in, but decided that nothing would specifically be gained from it at this point. He then sat back again to watch, wait, listen, and plan. His clipboard was handy and quickly finished with. He organised supplies, listened to Sherlock's breathing patterns, and after a bit of time could tell his charge was less stressed, his work of breathing reduced.

Taking a few minutes while Sherlock seemed more deeply asleep, he roamed the flat, finding a well-stocked kitchen, an ample supply of healthy food choices and a few items that roused his curiosity even more about the Holmes' brothers - from a rather diverse selection of imported teas to more than a few assorted boxes of ginger biscuits. And an unopened pack of cigarettes, which John wrapped then stashed inside a far corner of the kitchen cupboard. One of the cabinets creaked, another slammed harder than John had expected, and the noise was loud in the otherwise quiet flat. Distantly, he could hear movement in the flat beneath Sherlock's, and the running of water, street noise. Other tenants in the building, then, or customers at the cafe.

He put the kettle on, and as the tea steeped, he heard noise in the hallway, footsteps growing closer, then a three-rapped knock on the door. Much too soon for the specimen pick up.

John took a quick step toward the bedroom to glance in, found Sherlock resting, eyes closed, IV infusing, and returned to the door.

"Yoo hoo? Sherlock?" came the voice followed by an actual attempt to turn the knob.

John opened the door to find a bespectacled kindly woman ready to unlock the door with a key. "Hello," he said, ready to introduce himself but she seemed not put out by his presence.

"Oh, I knew I heard someone up here." She peered around John to get a glimpse of the room. "Is Sherlock home? Finally?"

"Resting," John thought she seemed harmless enough, certainly concerned about the person she'd inquired regarding. "I'm helping him out for a bit."

"Sweet talked his way out of rehab, then? Or he escaped again," she mused, nodding and a little happier at her second choice, "Not a surprise there."

"I just put on tea, do you want a cup?" John was definitely not beneath doing a bit of creative information-gathering by whatever means he could.

"No thanks, but you're a dear to offer."

"John Watson," he volunteered.

"Martha Hudson, Sherlock's landlady. I live downstairs." That explained the key, John knew. "Does Mycroft know you're here?"

"Mycroft " -- hired me? -- "asked me to stay on for a bit."

"That right?" John couldn't decide if she looked doubtful or overly concerned. "If I'd known you were coming I'd have hoovered."
"Oh, no worries here, it's fine." They exchanged a cautious smile, and John found himself liking her quite a bit as they very briefly chatted about non-important things, neither particularly in a hurry, in the open doorway.

There was a cute smirk about her as she grew pensive, backed up to look John over from head to toe. "You seem a nice man, I do hope you know what you're in for."

The outer door opened, and heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. John could see a uniformed man with clipboard coming up behind Mrs. Hudson. "Blood sample for the hospital?" he asked John, a tired sounding twang to his speech.

John produced the plain brown bag avoiding Mrs. Hudson's alarmed gaze. "I'm fairly certain you're just supposed to say you're here to pick up a package," John chided.

There was a flash of fear on his face, and with wide eyes, he tried again, apologetically, "I'm here to pick up a package."

"Better," John said nodding, signing, and then watching him safely stow the bag, hustle downstairs and out the door to the kerb. After the courier had left, there was a faint moan from down the hall audible to them both. In Mrs. Hudson's direction, he simply nodded. "Duty calls."

"Yes," she agreed, "I'll certainly be staying out of your way, not to worry." He smiled as she returned down the stairs.

Tea and a ginger biscuit first, both of which he carried into the bedroom.

Sherlock was still mostly laying in bed, a little more restless, but his eyes were open for a bit. John opened his laptop to find a bit of music for background noise, settled on a new easy listening stream, kept the volume minimal. He unfolded and set up the cot, stretching out sheets, pillows, duvet. While it may have been narrower than any typical bed, it offered good back support, didn't creak at all, and suited him quite well. He'd spent many a night on not nearly as nice accommodations in the army.

Staring at the cot then, he could feel fullness in his chest at the association. His face crumpled just slightly as he could recall when the cot would have been considered luxurious, when he'd been forced to sleep on much harder surfaces. Deep breath, slow exhale, relax. Even so, features back to neutral, John knew the pain of betrayal still stung deep.

++

"Johnny?"

The woman's annoyed voice was followed by a nudge of her shoe on his lower leg from above the blanket. "Go 'way," he said, his tone sleep-roughened and low. A poke happened again, so he continued, "Piss off."

"What the hell are you kipping on the floor when there's a perfectly good bed?"

"Too soft." John rolled onto his back, feeling the tightness and twinge of his shoulder wound. He adjusted and pulled the pillow down under his neck again. "It's terrible."

"Well, this is weird. You're back in civilisation now. Act bloody civilised, for god's sake."

Civilised. John chewed the word a few times, could almost taste the bitterness of it. He'd crashed at Harry's, telling her a very minimal story, only that his injury had got him discharged from the
army. Which was sort of true in the end.

He'd shown her the shoulder wound, puckered and ugly. She had no idea that the internal, hidden scars were worse.

Much, much worse.

++

He began making a list of demands for Sherlock's brother, pulled out his mobile to text them while they were fresh in his mind.

**Real and complete medical records. John**  He wondered if that was clear enough, added

**Unaltered and unadulterated**

**No more cigarettes under any circumstances**

As you wish. Records not to your liking? MH

**They're fine for someone who likes shallow fiction.**

Tomorrow. MH

**Fine.**

I will include nicotine patches. You will thank me later. MH

John read the message, did not respond.

++

This was unusual practice, and not in his usual wheelhouse. Typically, he had enough time to get acquainted with his next patient before they ever met, before clapping eyes on them, before he was just thrown into the deep end of the ocean and expected to not only swim, but to save the life he’d been assigned. *Save the life.* In all likelihood, the man was medically fragile, more than John liked. He would very likely get worse before really making any progress, so John was oddly grateful for the rest that Sherlock was getting but anxious to begin working with him. His new employer, the annoying git with the umbrella and the pompousity, had asked for three months sight unseen.

He perused the box of items for what he was looking for. At least his new employer had researched him enough to know what he preferred, what supplies he liked, and he was not disappointed. At present, he would assess, to interact with this man who probably belonged inpatient somewhere - hospital, facility, psych hospital, John wasn’t entirely sure. But he was disheveled, and John would wash him, change his attire while figuring out his both short term and longer term goals for his care.

Unless he ended up back in hospital, and judging by his cachectic state, John was wagering maybe fifty-fifty on that.

The microwave was quickly put to use, heating the bath-in-a-bag wipes, and John spoke before touching his patient, particularly when he’d be exposing skin. Startling someone awake, particularly when so obviously traumatised, was not something he wanted to begin with.

“Sherlock?” John pulled down the blanket. “I’m Dr. Watson, remember? I’ve been assigned to
care for you, and am going to get you washed up. Going to take a listen and check you over pretty
good, and then maybe you can go back to sleep, all right?"

No response.

John eased the man up - slim, very little muscle mass - to remove his shirt. The curls were greasy,
flat, his cheeks hollow and pronounced, his oral mucous membranes dry and pale. His chest
showed signs of pectus excavatum - Marfan’s perhaps? - given the hollowed sternum, and John
wondered about his aortic valve. He would measure him later. There was substantial precordial lift
- signs of a degree of dehydration as well as a hyperdynamic circulatory response. He washed
both arms and Sherlock’s front, then eased him over, turning him just enough on his side, to very
quickly and cursorily wash his back. He stopped mid wipe.

There were scars criss-crossing his upper back and shoulders, down along his ribs, healed and
shiny. He wondered exactly what history the patient had. He would do a more thorough skin
assessment and exam the following day, he knew, and this primary survey was simply to do a
high-level assessment, become familiar, find out a few things. Still holding him up on an angle,
John one-handedly placed his stethoscope in his ears, listened front and back, then turned his
attention to Sherlock’s face, inspecting eyes, nose, ears, and throat with his otoscope.

There was still very little response, although Sherlock was not limp or without muscle tone, and
his eyes were open somewhat, seemed unfocused and unseeing but a good sign nonetheless. John
procured another soft tee shirt from the cupboard, slid the patient into it, carefully threading the IV
bag and tubing through. He turned to the man’s particularly concave abdomen, hearing faint
bowel sounds, seeing very little fat and poor skin turgor throughout, set about to washing him -
legs, feet, pelvis, genitalia - and then re-dressed him in a clean pair of pyjama pants. He assessed a
nearly empty bladder so far - non-distended anyway, although when he pressed slightly, there was
a bit of restlessness and the eyes of the patient opened a bit more intentionally. Good sign, that. He
wasn’t completely dehydrated, then. And given the sensitivity to bladder palpation, John was fairly
certain he would figure it out when Sherlock needed the loo.

After confirming he was warm enough, tucked back in beneath the duvet, John helped himself to
a yoghurt, and carried a bottle of water back to the bedroom. It was interesting that Mycroft hadn’t
even needed to ask him about his typical treatment plan, his practices, or even sleeping
preferences. Then with chagrin, he recalled that Mycroft had compromised his former patients
somehow, and in all probability his own medical history (and beyond, obviously, given his
apparent knowledge about John’s injury), so determining small details like sleeping arrangements
was probably an easy discovery.

Eventually he silenced the music stream, dimmed the lighting. By the time John had put on
pyjama pants of his own, Sherlock was showing signs of restlessness again. His skin was very
warm, breathing was shallow, heart rate was elevated, pulse oximetry a little lower. This time it
stayed there.

He placed a hand over Sherlock’s forehead. ”Let's get you up for a visit to the loo, Sherlock.”
John pulled out a few tricks to attempt to rouse him enough to move on his own steam, but the one
that ended up working was a very gentle crede's maneuver of Sherlock’s abdomen directly over
his bladder.

"Jeeez Christ! Off me," he slurred, but did manage to sit up. Disconnecting both pulse oximeter
and aseptically capping the IV, John eased Sherlock to something of a sitting position.

"Don't get up yet. Sit a moment.” John kept a hand on Sherlock's torso, partially to help hold him
up but also to be able to predict where his weak muscles might fail him. He leaned quite far
forward over his feet, off the edge of the bed, and John held firm. "Wait."
Sherlock's head raised then, pale eyes meeting John's in confusion. There was so much nystagmus that John knew he couldn't be seeing anything too clearly. "Who the fuck 'r you?"

I'm your worst nightmare, he wanted to say. I am sobriety. I am recovery. The options were endless. Settling on the truth, he said, "Your brother hired me to help you get better."

"No. 'M fine. Get out." And with that, Sherlock stood, legs bobbling and threatening to buckle even as he reached out both arms in a desperate attempt to avoid the floor.

"Sure thing, whatever you say," he quipped, using both hands to steady Sherlock's body and ready with his knee and legs to brace a fall if necessary. "Loo first."

By some sort of miracle, Sherlock did manage to only trip once but did not reach the floor the short walk to the toilet. "Leave," he managed to fuss at John.

"Not a chance," he said, as Sherlock's eyes closed as he sat. "And we'll need a sample, so here," he said, offering out a wipe with sterile specimen cup at the ready. "Wash off first, mid-stream collection please."

"Piss off," he said, and then said it again with something of a giggle.

"Oh, you're right hysterical you are."

For all the fussing that could have then ensued, the patient did end up cooperating under John's directions, but not without at least verbally protesting every step of the way. John had to prod and then prompt through collection, where to set the container, then when to stand back up, and through at least a minimally effective hand-washing.

Exhausted, Sherlock managed to ambulate - stagger, more like - to the bed, but once he'd sat down, he collapsed in the direction of the pillows. His heart rate was markedly elevated, John could see on the oxygen monitor when he'd reconnected, no reserve, probably nutritionally deficient as well as impending withdrawal, given the history he'd gleaned. He remained asleep through John's tucking him back onto the pillow, sheet placed, IV reconnected, and did not appear bothered in the least that John left the reading light on. He dipped the urine sample then set the rest to the other specimens awaiting collection. Positive for ketones and protein but not for glucose, specific gravity elevated, still dehydrated. He settled, and continued to alternate between reading from his computer screen and watching the patient.

He heard the fax machine some time later, arose to evaluate the blood work that had been sent, found his haemoglobin and blood counts low, knowing it would go lower still, given the dilution also effect of the needed fluids that he was currently receiving. His chemistries were fairly abnormal but nothing that had him ready to call for an ambulance. The more critical results was a perilously low albumin, given the degree of malnourishment. No infection, bleeding studies normal, liver enzymes elevated, blood alcohol level undetectable.

Sometime later, he tweaked the alarms of the monitors, readied himself for sleep, adjusted the lamp, slept very lightly himself, there on the cot tucked into the corner of Sherlock's room. He'd already hung a new IV bag, and began to learn Sherlock's breathing pattern and rhythm, which would come in handy when and if it changed, as even when John was dozing, his mind was still paying attention.

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"You're needed in post op again," the voice sounded, along with a hesitant tap on his wrist. Canvas under him, hot smells of sand and the distant acridness of blood were a vivid reminder of
his station, location, and job. Night shift call, then. He'd been shaken awake by the nurse, Tom, who'd been working with John in their nightmare of traumatic injuries. "Chip wants to give report bedside, you've a bunch in the ward, one really sick ..."

Having only slept a minimal few hours, exhausted - they all were - John's feet went into boots, stood with the off-going doc, and report ended up at bedside of one boy, including the words hot mess, train wreck, and good luck. Surgery had already happened, and they were left with impending critical illness and haemorrhagic shock. Tom, the nurse had a unit full of 10 other patients, he kept to them, John rounded on them briefly, came back to the ill soldier, lowered his body into a chair, nothing to do but wait, blood was infusing, more surgery would kill him, as multi-system organ failure set in. They could only hope for the best. He wrote a few orders, the ward settled, and he closed his eyes.

Only to awaken to the sound of something different, patterned breathing no longer as expected. Shallow, weak efforted breathing. More pallor than earlier.

He sat forward, focusing on the face, and was dimly aware Tom, the nurse at his elbow. John cycled a blood pressure, lifted the blanket to find more drainage, the man's dressing saturated over a rigid abdomen.


"Morphine two," he echoed. "Back to the OR?"

Sadly, John looked up at Tom, knowing the motivation for the question, wanting to fix the unfixable problem. John shook his head. That quickly, there was a groan, a grimace, a hitch in his breathing. Almost as rapidly as they both watched it happen, the patient's colour went from pale to cyanotic to lifeless gray.

The heart monitor alarm sounded then, heart rate elevating from eighty, to 100, 130, then an abrupt drop to forty, a few wide beats, and then pulseless electrical activity, all other waveforms gone. An agonal gasp, and then nothing. There hadn't been time to obtain let alone administer the narcotic; his suffering was over.

A lot of hand connections - John's over the patient's shoulder, Tom's on the patient's hand, and then, with an exchanged glance, Tom's hand on John's shoulder and almost immediately John's hand coming down over Tom's. Full circle, caregivers to patient, caregiver to caregiver, and back. There was a soft squeeze, a brush, all completely a very human show of support, the acknowledgment that sometimes there was still nothing that could be done except be present.

"You knew before it happened."

"His breathing changed, woke me up."

"You never turn it off, then, eh Captain?" Another patient called out Tom's name softly, and he moved away. John took a deep breath, himself, reached out to tighten the roller clamps in the IVs and blood products, halting the infusions. The patient's eyes were already closed.

++

It was only a short time later that he awakened to the sense of his intrinsic radar alarming, something brewing, higher energy, a bit of impending distress.

It marked the beginning of a very long stretch of time. The quick breathing turned into marginally
laboured breathing, too quick, signs of distress. It was accompanied by sweating and shaking, both pulse and blood pressure high, febrile. Sherlock sweated off the pulse oximeter sensor, so John left it off temporarily. Sherlock quickly drenched the pillowcase and sheets, and the towels that John brought from the loo across the hall were also quickly dampened and rumpled in Sherlock's restlessness. But the worst part was the restlessness, the obvious perception that his body had been deprived of something, as his tissues protested and screamed out for relief, for medication, for escape, for soothing.

The IV remained intact, and several bags infused, a bit of dextrose and some electrolytes. He got quite skilled at assessing bladder distention, and Sherlock fuzzed less when John cued him through the routine. The tremors and tachycardia, however, did not seem to be abating even after a few hours. Another text to Mycroft, as John requested and received a few additions as far as medications and supplies, which was thankfully delivered promptly. Lorazepam was given in incremental doses with some effect, and although it was a trade-off to natural detoxification, it was certainly safer to withdraw with pharmacologic assistance when there were other comorbidities. When the day gave way to night and to another day, John bathed the patient again, changing pyjamas and bedding. He was exhausted, himself, after continual monitoring and wondering. While John had only used the availability of an assistant a few times over the past year, he put one of them on standby just in case additional hands were needed.

Later that day, he managed a quick shower as Sherlock slept. Although John found it tiring, he felt infinitely better afterward. It gave him an idea.

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"Come on, you. Bath."

"Fuck off."

"Nice mouth," John said, wrapping his arm around Sherlock's ribs and hoping that his feet would manage to at least off-load some of his weight.

"Who'r you again?"

"Mycroft's idea of trying to help you recover."

Had Sherlock the energy, John was fairly certain he would have rolled his eyes. As it was, John staggered with him a bit, letting him perch on the closed toilet while the tub continued to fill. Testing the water, he was amazed not for the first time that sometimes he felt like an overqualified nanny, or an overpaid babysitter. "God, he's 'diculous."

John handed Sherlock a toothbrush. Who stared at it, stupidly, as if he didn't recognise it and didn't understand what John's nonverbal request was. "Brush your teeth, Mr. Holmes."

"Don't call me that."

"Then take the toothbrush." Still staring. "Mr. Holmes," John pressed, bobbing it in his line of vision.

"You're a royal pain in my arse."

"Which your brother pays me well to be. Which is more than you can say, isn't it? You choose to be difficult for free."

Sherlock made a few swipes with the toothbrush as John turned off the bath water, testing it again. John considered that Sherlock was still very weak, and had to reach out an arm to steady him from
bobbling onto the floor.

"In you get," he prompted, pointing.

"Soon ’s you leave."

"So you can drown? Not a bloody chance."

"No."

John stretched a bit, then reached for the hem of the tee shirt, began to raise it, which Sherlock managed to allow. From a standing position in front of him, then he tugged on his arms until he stood. "Off," he said to Sherlock, reaching for the tie of the bottoms. With a shaky movement of his hand, Sherlock reached down and grabbed the entire front of the pyjama pants in protest. John chuckled. "Listen, you can argue with me and this will be a non-stop battle, which I will win, mind, or you can cooperate and we can get this over with. You've been sweating and laying in it for a whole day, the bed-bath cloths are only so good."

"No looking," he fussed and released his hand.

John ended up keeping up a constant stream of distracting chatter as he washed Sherlock’s scarred back first, aware of how he tensed at the touch but Sherlock kept silent. While John wanted to ask, he did not, knowing it was definitely not the time. Sherlock was able to wash his own face, then John had him tip his head back while he shampooed and rinsed. Both of those activities seemed to be quite enjoyed, though Sherlock didn't admit to it, he definitely moaned a few times and relaxed under John's touch. Working efficiently, John washed long limbs, carefully keeping the capped IV site from getting wet, moved on to his feet, everything in between without further discussion. Sherlock had simply leaned his head back against the tub enclosure, eyes closed, too fatigued to complain any longer or with any oomph behind it. Quickly, John flipped the drain to empty, and wrapped Sherlock's head in a towel to prevent heat loss, then boosted Sherlock to the tub edge, wrapped another towel, and finally eased him to the mat on the floor, where he more or less collapsed against the side of the tub. Sherlock's eyes stayed closed, and he didn't move as John stalked out of the room.

John brusquely changed the entire bed with fresh sheets. Returning to the bathroom, he cued Sherlock through the donning of pyjama pants, although by that point it was limited to commands like 'pick up your foot' and 'budge over', he was that drained. John then partially encouraged, partially lifted him back toward the bedroom. It wasn't until Sherlock had tumbled onto the bed, duvet pulled to his chin, that John sighed deeply, beyond exhausted himself. He applied the pulse oximeter, mostly for his own peace of mind, decided that a night without IV fluids would hopefully ensure he would both eat and drink the following day. Plus, he was hopeful that Sherlock might actually sleep uninterrupted for a few hours, given that they were both tired. The constant vigilance and long hours of watching and attending to Sherlock's safety had taken a toll.

The shaking Sherlock developed, that began after the shower was of a different variety entirely, simply an intrinsic response to abrupt change in body temperature coupled with calorie burning and exhaustion. Debating only briefly, John toed off his slippers, assembled necessary items within arms reach, and grabbed his own blanket. Wrapping it around him, he perched on the top of Sherlock's bed, a hand placed on Sherlock's arm, meant to be a centering, grounding weight. He adjusted the pillow, closed his own eyes just for what would only be a minute until Sherlock's body adjusted, equilibrated, allowing him to fall asleep. "Sleep now, you're all right." He let his arm brush over Sherlock's shoulder then down to his elbow. Shuddering, Sherlock shifted just a bit closer, pressing nearer for warmth and in response to John's presence. The shaking was still strong, and John sighed, hoping the tremors would ease as he began to get warm. Eventually, it
subsided in gradual waves, and finally Sherlock's breathing eased to steady, even, deep. John pressed his hand up against Sherlock's towel-dried hair, brushing it off his forehead. "Better?" but it was obvious that he was. As he could feel the muscles relax against his side, he could tell that Sherlock was still awake although much improved from earlier.

"Thanks," the weak voice near his shoulder whispered.

"Of course. Sleep now, you're safe," he said, brushing casually over Sherlock's back and feeling the faint ridges of scars through the soft tee shirt. Their origin was still a mystery.

He'd only meant to stay a moment, until Sherlock had nearly fallen asleep, enough for John to head back to his own bed. As it turned out, they were both sound asleep when Sherlock must have entered REM sleep, and John himself was just lightly dozing when a combination of internal and external stimuli converged, collided. Outside the flat, down the street, there was the distant sound of a vehicle, too fast, the screeching of brakes, a horn, followed immediately by a rather loud, harsh crash. John was dimly aware that there were voices tending to the immediate needs there, but only briefly when his own situation escalated.

Sherlock must have been at a vulnerable place in his sleep phase, or dreaming, because as he jolted awake, he flinched. Then outright panicked.

It would be long minutes before Sherlock's calling out stopped, the flailing of limbs fighting and pushing, the uncontrolled trying to get away, the inability to process even the simplest of reassurances. It took all of John's wits to calm Sherlock down, to let him eventually just tire himself out, there on the bed, with John's legs pinning Sherlock's longer ones, and holding his wrists such that neither of them were harmed in the struggle. The forced restriction, the partial immobility, was what finally seemed to help.

In the end, both wide awake, two people, breathing loud, hearts pounding, trying to assess the findings, do damage control, determine the next step. John's mind had somewhat been falsely assured that now that the physical addiction and detoxification symptoms had abated, that perhaps the real recovery could begin now. However, having just been enlightened, he realised that Sherlock's real struggles went deeper.

John's words had been all soothing, quiet pleadings - you're okay, stop, I'm here, don't fight, relax here, I've got you, please, you're safe, safe, safe.

Sherlock had uttered only one phrase over and over: don't hurt me.

Chapter End Notes

Things will get moving in just a bit, where more medical intervention is required - but next up, a few snippets of back story!

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Please let me know - nicely - if I missed anything or if a typo slipped by. Thanks for reading along.
The loud crash from an auto accident down the street late one night has startled and upset Sherlock, and as John manages to comfort him, he utters a plea: don't hurt me.

John takes care of things, because that what John does. And what John is.

Sherlock, however, is not particularly open to being cared about. We know how he feels about caring. And who he learned it from.

Gradually, John could feel very minutely that Sherlock's muscles were no longer threatening tetany, his shoulders still tense but his legs quivering as they relaxed. The quick respiratory rate seemed to ease, and John very minimally allowed the leg that he'd thrown over Sherlock's to lighten up, give him more room, fully slide off. It had been instinctual, the limb restriction, the restraining of flailing limbs - that with the steady flow of calming words - and Sherlock was at least no longer panicking on the outside.

"You know where you are?"

Single nod.

John chose to believe his charge. "You are safe here."

There was a shrug, the clear response that Sherlock had heard him but did not fully agree.

"I'm not going to hurt you." The arms John was holding were slightly trembling, and he eased his grip from Sherlock's upper body. "See, you're okay."

Dimly, John could hear the accident of whatever type being addressed, the arrival of another vehicle or two, flashing lights barely visible behind the draperies, the sound of unintelligible words of distant emergency responders. He reached one arm around for his mobile, which he'd set in arms reach, slid and flicked until the flashlight was on. He set it behind them so it cast a faint glow behind them, and looked to see if Sherlock's eyes were open.

They were. And they were wet eyes, shimmering, tear tracks. Without much conscious thought, John picked up the top edge of the sheet, blotted Sherlock's face, letting it fall. "I'm sorry you're upset," he said quietly, and with one arm reached behind Sherlock, touching reassuredly on the shoulder simply as a manner of comfort. Unfortunately, outside on the street, at that moment there was a shifting of vehicle, flatbed being unhinged perhaps, bumper falling loudly against something immovable. Whatever the source, something solid ended up striking the pavement, grating and echoing, precisely at the moment John's hand pressed against Sherlock's back. His scarred back.

He tightened, flinched at the touch, trying to pull away.

John let go immediately, watching in the side-lit room as Sherlock grabbed at the blanket, pulled it
up and burrowed his face in it.

++

Mycroft had looked up when his door opened suddenly. An urgent finding, he knew immediately, given the interruption and the look on his PAs face.

"We have a problem." Mycroft saved and closed his current working screen project, bringing up security feeds on the adjacent monitor as the man said, "Camera View 15C."

Nausea settled immediately in the pit of his stomach and he bloody knew: It was Sherlock. Sherlock who was supposed to deliver a message, and that was all. Steady. You can fix this.

A couple of months ago, Sherlock had been found, not specifically what Mycroft would consider overdosed but quite impaired, had been brought to Mycroft's home until he sobered up. Mycroft had talked, pleaded, cajoled, threatened, and finally succeeded. He got his brother to agree to do something productive, something that would at least keep his mind and body occupied from time to time. In exchange for Mycroft pulling some favours regarding his university, he also agreed to avoid the more serious recreational drugs - having discovered the thrills of cocaine and heroin - they both would share the occasional cigarette, and Mycroft hoped the substitution would buy them enough time for Sherlock to both do Mycroft's bidding and pursue something of benefit. His early assignments including gathering information, listening to conversations where Mycroft knew there was exchange of material or goods, observe behaviour or various activities. This last time, there had been a quick plane trip and a personal meeting had been arranged. It was supposed to be safe, include cursory observations and the delivery of a verbal message, and Sherlock was supposed to have returned home.

The grainy view on video feed 15C however, as it loaded, made Mycroft break out into a cold sweat. Sherlock on camera, shirtless, arms outstretched, head lolling about, feet barely holding him up, a burly masked man behind him, something in his hand... The rubbish bin was just barely close enough that he managed to be sick into it.

"Retrieval. Immediately." He said, wiping his mouth, another retch working it's way up. "Send the team that had extracted the hostages out of Myanmar." It had been successful for the hostages, scorched earth for the captors.

"Yes sir, right on it."

++

The coincidental collision of John's hand in Sherlock's personal space and Sherlock's memory seemed to outright sizzle in the room, and John, no stranger to handling emotional trauma, whispered quietly, again, "You're safe here, Sherlock. Safe," and though he removed his hands he did not shy away. Heat radiated from his patient, stress and sweaty exertion and increased metabolic rate, catecholamine surges, as Sherlock's mind tried to choose between fight or flight. Despite the temperature rising, John let the covers alone, giving Sherlock the illusion of protection he was seeking, hiding beneath the sheet.

"I'm thinking a cup of tea'd be nice about now." Despite the statement, he made no efforts to move right away. "Want one?" From under the covers there was a single, negative shake of his head. "You alright if I step out, just a couple of minutes?" He thought he would bring him one anyway, something about hot tea soothing emotional upset might be worth a try.

A hesitancy and a small shrug. John took that as a no, and Sherlock turned over, a quick repositioning putting his back to John. John could almost imagine the unspoken if you're going to
"You know," John posed quietly, "I think I'll wait."

Their breathing and pulse rates settled, eased off, diaphoretic skin cooling and drying. Eventually, there were no further sounds from out on the street, vehicles moved or towed, the cluster of activity ended, and they were left with the typical late-night, muffled London sounds, people occasionally walking or driving, a distant dog barking, an even more rare quiet horn from far away.

"Who --?" John began to ask but stopped, wanting to let his fingers brush comfortably along the hidden marks along Sherlock's back but knowing it wasn't quite the right time. Why? Punished for something? Held hostage, whipped? Fetish gone awry? he wondered at the realm of explanations. Whatever it was, couldn't have been too long ago. He hesitated, decided to finish the question, gentle and quiet. "Who hurt you?"

Who hurt you?

The question got Sherlock's attention, not in the words but the delivery, and he glanced back over his shoulder at the raw brokenness, the roughness, of John's words. John, who was watching him, seemed unaware of the intonation, the inflection. Even in the state he was, Sherlock was certainly aware that something was not quite right with his companion, something hidden, some history.

John misinterpreted Sherlock's movement, his attention, and thought perhaps he'd begun to reach through. A hand touched Sherlock's posterior shoulder, light, gentle, warm. "Someone hurt you, obviously. And I can certainly listen if you want to share it." When Sherlock continued to stare, John continued, his fingers tracing one of the deeper lines, assessing for depth, severity, scar tissue. He tried to steel his temper, gentle his voice, soften his tone. "If you're worried about visitors, they are not permitted until cleared by me, including your pompous arse of a brother."

Too close, Sherlock knew, and deliberately seized upon a deflection, pointing out a red herring. "My head hurts." It was also not untrue.

"If you're asking me for narcotics, there aren't any in the flat."

"You could get some."

"Of course I could. But I won't. Absolutely not."

"My head hurts," he said again, a little more emphatically, and John could well believe it. Between the bath earlier, the shaking, the sweating worsening his dehydration, the emotional upset, the triggering factor of the accident outside, and even more importantly the recent and probably ongoing physical detoxification processes, he would have been shocked if there was no headache involved. "Ten out of ten." Had John been less sympathetic, he would have snickered at Sherlock's ingrained use of the pain scale that providers used to assess pain.

"I'm sure you're dehydrated, need fluids. First step in managing most headaches. You want water or tea?"

"No."

"Paracetamol, then. After a full glass of water."

"No."

"All right, then. You're left with my stimulating company, then."
A small snort, then, and Sherlock looked away again, still with his back to John.

"Your headache will probably only get worse if you don't make something of an effort."

"IV fluids."

"You're perfectly capable of drinking."

"I thought you were hired to help me."

John did chuckle at that. "I am." He hoped Sherlock believed that, that each gentle persuasion, each refusal, was with the intent toward helping him. The motion of Sherlock's back under John's hand that was still lightly on his shoulder was nothing short of an indignant huff. Changing tacks, John let his thumb trace one of the scars carefully, the tee shirt a soft layer between their skin.

"This one didn't heal too evenly. A little sensitive, still?"

There was a twitch of Sherlock's shoulder, similarly to the reflexive jolt a horse or cow uses to flick off a pesky fly.

John wasn't swayed into moving his hand, but did stop the investigative effort of his thumb. "What person hurt you?"

The snarky lifting of the corner of Sherlock’s mouth was absolutely telling. He reacted to the use of John's word 'person.'

"Ah," John said, "that is helpful. Not one person. Multiple persons then, people. You might even have quite a list of offenders in that mighty brain of yours." Sherlock felt the bed dip as John moved. "I'm getting tea, Sherlock. I'll bring you a cup back. Two sugars, yeah?"

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Indeed, Sherlock thought to himself, a list with many offenders over many years. Many of them didn’t mean to be hurtful, he knew now, but then, people were stupid, unthinking, unsympathetic, just forcing their own agendas on those in less powerful of a position than themselves. He could hear John out in the kitchen. Kettle, water, mug, counter, spoon.

Sherlock could have written or spoke, if he chose, quite a long list. Instead, he reflected. Who hurt me? His thoughts wandered to very early memories indeed.

All the ways Sherlock ended up isolated as a child. Earliest memories, family outings and being chided for asking too many questions, too curious, running off excitedly and seeing new things worthy of investigating grew wearying on the rest. So his parents would cite higher reasons, visit places "for older children" and go off with Mycroft. He would be left in care of nanny or butler without engagement or connection, who would be with him in physical presence, but the caring never made it to their eyes. One or two of them had called him 'high maintenance' within his hearing, and it would be long in the future before he realised it was a harsh criticism.

Young school memories, excitement about academia, an early and voracious reader who discovered the pleasure of solitude and enlightenment. He dashed far ahead of his classmates, answered too many questions first, and if unstimulated would end up bored in the classrooms - to his teachers’ chagrin. He found a love of the sciences and hands on chemical reactions, a pure discovery of natural physics and life science reactions through experimentation. There had been a primary education science project and science fair with an amazing grade, stellar work beyond his years. Unfortunately, it earned him the disdain from peers even then and the teasing taunts of geek, nerd, brain. One had used the word 'freak.' When his face showed the hurt, it was seized by
others, became his nickname until summer holiday. *Freak.*

Years later the word still had significant power over him, bringing back the isolation, the hurt, the nausea. On the inside, anyway.

There was even one of Sherlock’s earlier secondary science instructors, Mr. Longmire, criticising his application of the scientific method to his plant growth project as affected by various light filters. Sherlock would long remember the sting of the words more than the actual turn of phrase, but both had remained hurtful, had not lost their bite on his memory. “That’s making a bold assumption up front. Your applications might be right, but the process isn’t, which makes you wrong. You’re going about this backwards, Sherlock. People don’t do things this way, and you’ll never succeed unless you learn to keep it simple and follow the rules.”

There was the obligatory church attendance on major religious holidays, and Sherlock accompanied, sitting in the family pew between Mycroft and his mum. The singing interested him, particularly the Latin pieces, the same words from year to year, and the incense from the thurible served only to irritate his nasal passages and make his eyes water. When he wasn’t looking around at the ornate sanctuary and admiring the monstrance, he would chance to sneak a look at a few of the other children. One of these, a girl about his age smiled briefly, gave him a look of interest until another little boy seated near her noticed, leaned close, whispered something clearly disparaging, and the two of them giggled quietly, snubbed him directly. She never spared him another glance. He withered just a little bit inside, and the following year, memories still vivid, he conjured up a bit of vomiting in order to stay home with one of the nannies. The year after, he wasn’t asked to join.

He learned to keep his eye contact to himself. If you don’t look at them directly, he realised, the hurt of their despisement was less.

At home, Sherlock learned quickly to be more self-sufficient, to lean on his own understanding, a high-priced lesson. The turning point drove hard the message one day, when in his mind, he’d finally achieved something deserving celebration. The trophy, his trophy, awarded school-wide was wrapped in his jacket, crammed into his backpack, and he was nearly vibrating with excitement to share it with mum, dad, and Mycroft. Instead of the family turning in his direction, however, when he arrived to the sitting room, words already erupting from his excited mouth, he was shushed quickly, a serving girl arriving to literally place her fingers to his mouth, shoo him from the room with a curt, busy, Master Holmes, we’ll call you for dinner. When he thought about it later, he wished he’d bitten the maid.

Seated at his desk in his room then, while he waited, he considered that he had indeed trumped the school, been selected as best scholar, his project gaining notice of not only his own school but others in the area and his moment, his time, was still worthy to share. The dinner summons happened, and before he could share anything, before anyone even really noticed him, his mum was in tears. “Mycroft is leaving home in a few weeks, Sherlock. You need to grow up and help, stay out of everyone’s way while we get him ready.” Further explanations ensued, where he was told Mycroft was going to be fast tracked to government spot with an internship through his university, there would be quite a bit of energy expended on his future involvement, and that Sherlock was going to be in a rather tall shadow going forward. The words may have been different, but the message was quite clearly received. “You understand, don’t you dear?” they’d asked him. You’re a leftover, a second thought, an add on. He was being left behind. His own news not only paled, but bittered and festered.

Dinner was abysmal. There was no appetite. He poked at his food, was reprimanded for not being more excited for his older and rather successful brother. The nausea was quite genuine as he excused himself from the table, shoving back as bile rose in his throat.
He hid the trophy, the certificate, and his hopes under his bed.

The evening he'd wanted, celebrating with family, positive affirmation, had turned into an unpleasant association, leaving him alone and ignored. It was the last time he would give them the power to hurt him, he thought. The very last time indeed that he would allow himself to be vulnerable. It would be the last time he stuck out his proverbial neck at home, looking for accolades, approval.

The violin that night, his obligatory thirty minute practice time was deliberately screechy, non-productive, avoiding every finger exercise his teacher had laid out. The strings hissed, out of tune intentionally and with little care other than to make the worst noise he could generate, until finally the butler knocked rather timidly at the door. "Master Sherlock," he said, tentatively, waited for Sherlock to stop and look up at him. There was the faint cloy of his father's pipe, the late night ritual in the study. The butler'd been sent, Sherlock knew, by his family to shut him up. "Beg pardon, but the hour grows late, and I wonder if you couldn't be troubled to save your ... practicing for tomorrow?"

++

The kettle hummed, bubbled, finally clicked off. John selected one of the Earl Grey varieties, obviously selected intentionally for Sherlock, had been guessing on the sugar quantity but given the new box next to it, he thought perhaps he'd been correct. Perhaps this cup of tea would be the beginning of stimulating Sherlock's appetite, the gateway to nutrition, healing, sustenance, hydration, energy to get on with things as he recovered.

He hoped. Pocketing a few snacks in case Sherlock did actually seem interested, he picked up both mugs, thinking that even if Sherlock didn't, he would find the tea to be quite satisfying.

++

He spent more time at school, citing that he'd joined a club or a sports team and neither parent even attempted to see through the bluntness of the fabrication. He'd located the hangouts, where there were no expectations and no scruples. He found himself on the receiving end of mockery from a random punk from school from whom Sherlock had bummed his very first fag from. When the boy reached over to light it, Sherlock inhaled, choked quite violently, and was on the receiving end of quite a bit of bullying from the boy and those in the vicinity. The spluttering and coughing may not have lasted, nor did the watery eyes and high colour about his face, but the need for revenge took roots. No more, he thought. Time to carefully select a new skill set, given that academia had bought him nothing so far.

That weekend, Sherlock stole some money from one of the housekeepers, bought his own pack of cigarettes, and, armed with videos he'd found on the internet, smoked them all, every last one. The resultant vomiting felt like self-flagellation, the punishment for being different, the penance for wrongdoings. The righteousness and sense of accomplishment at the end felt like a step up. He'd had enough of the vulnerability, and if this is what it took, then he was all about ending past associations.

He did more than only learn to smoke a cigarette. And smoke it well, though he refrained from more than a few at a time. He could link rings, adjoin rings, puff rings, and then direct a small column of smoke through them to connect them. He found camaraderie with those in detention, with others who smoked, the commonality with the commonplace and the stupid. He was with a group one afternoon when restless boredom went rogue and school vandalism had occurred. Unfortunately, he did not see it coming, and the new group of these acquaintances offered him up as the sacrificial lamb, his idea, his plan, his doing. He alone was suspended from school.
Oh yes, the list of those who’d hurt him was quite long indeed.

Smoking led to other groups, older university students who had other ideas, other means of mind alteration. It eventually brought him to a supplier of cocaine, an acquaintance named Victor. And Sherlock still refused to think about Victor. Most of the time, anyway.

He grew out his hair not because he enjoyed it, but motivated only after his mum suggested a trim cut to keep his curls under control. Spitefully, he grew his hair to great proportions and reveled in his extensive unruliness, from his curls to his behaviour. He did the homework for his classes, didn’t turn it in, deliberately scored low on tests, ended up in scholastic trouble much of the time. The academic dean summoned him more than once, and the letters would be sent home. His parents offered to hire him a tutor and when he refused, they let the matter drop.

Who hurt me? he thought. Who didn’t hurt me?

Right on the heels of that thought, though, was another: And shame on me for letting them.

++

Distantly, as if from underwater or through a far-off tunnel, Sherlock could hear shouting, footsteps, the staccato burst of what he assumed must’ve been guns being fired. His back ached, his arms stretched and screaming with the fiery pain of both inner and outer abuse inflicted on them. Every now and again, he could feel the faint crawl of congealing blood as it trickled down about his torso. Was it possible, his mind poked at him, to will oneself to unconsciousness, to unresponsiveness? If there was a gunshot wound in his future, it would be nice to skip the fear entirely, be unaware of the actual bullet trajectory and penetration.

Apparently willful loss of consciousness was not possible. Agony kept him pinned in the moment, in limbo, suspended in both literal and figurative senses.

Pounding at the closed door, interruption of the burly man over his left shoulder, his penchant for deducing the man long past, so the pounding was loud and resonating in the silent room. Kicking, the heavy sole of steel boots, a loud boom as something exploded the door lock. It swung open to reveal a black-garbed militant, cap, facepaint, eyes glittering, rifle shouldered. Another burst, loud ringing in Sherlock’s ears, exacerbating the pounding of blood, heart attempting to deliver more oxygen, higher cardiac output, haemorrhaging increasing in a terrible cycle of harmful synergy - more blood, more blood loss. Another soldier behind the first, each spoke quietly, neither specifically to Sherlock.

Blades were produced from belt-holders, his arms freed, and he was too weak to anything but crumple to the floor in an ungainly heap.

From there, the recollections grew even more jumbled, blurry.

A car, a blanket, a medic, liquid medication that dulled his mind and brought, finally, the blessed relief of pain reduction, a drug-induced sleep.

A bed, pillow, warm blanket, the medical scent of some sort of clinic, staff in soft-soled shoes. His eyes, half open, half closed, caught the outline of someone in her vision in front of him. "Ah, Mr. Holmes, good, you're awake."

Sherlock opened his eyes, unseeing, unfocused, and unwilling to particularly engage. There was pain, aching, fatigue, not all of his synapses and faculties complete restored and his mind dull. Something cool touched his ear, "Sherlock? Sherlock, oh thank god."

"My?" he whispered into the mobile, voice harsh, parched, dry, barely audible.
"My team reports you'll be all right."

A guttural noise was all Sherlock felt necessary.

"I'll be seeing you on your return."

"No."

"Yes, of course. You can debrief the committee on what went wrong, but I must tell you, going forward you are going to have to follow instructions to the letter, this deviation from protocol is most concer--"

The growl from within Sherlock's chest, weak though it was, surprised the person holding the mobile to Sherlock's ear and his eyes cut quickly to Sherlock, who summoned every last bit of energy, pushed and flung at the phone. The effort exquisitely activated every pain receptor from the top of his head down. The mobile gave a mildly satisfying crackle as it landed on its edge a few feet away on the lino, a starburst shatter of the screen, and broke into silent pieces.

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On his comfortable (and mostly clean, thanks to John) sheets, on his expensive mattress in his family-funded flat, he knew that this person who'd been brought, hired, paid to help him was just another who would try, fail, and who would leave, and if Sherlock wasn't careful, would hurt him too, just like the others. Paid to take the role of a friend - though this one was a bit more invested, intriguing, an unsolved mystery. But when the pay ended, when he'd been determined a waste of time and effort - so did the possibility of Sherlock's discoveries, of a distraction, a very shallow interaction. He was another job, another task, another number, another paycheck.

Caring, Mycroft told him a very long time ago, was not an advantage. It'd taken him a long time to build his protective walls up high enough. He imagined a tower, another layer of pointed stone and masonry being adjusted, laid around the top, each piece angled just perfectly and pressed into place. Another row higher, another protective sealing of mortar.

John gentled even more, his voice, his manner, his body language. From Sherlock's vantage point, peeking out from underneath the damp sheet edge, he could see that his keeper, his minder, - jailer, perhaps? - John, comfortably relaxing in the chair. For all John's relaxed demeanor, Sherlock knew he was on high alert, all hackles raised, very keen. “Sherlock, truly, I just want to help you move beyond whatever demons are chasing you. So,” he said, calm and steady, “what's got such a grip on you?” John crossed an ankle over a knee, sipping at his tea. Sherlock's cup sat steaming next to the bed, and he inhaled - detecting both brand and sweetener method. He wanted it, yet resisted.

As John waited, he turned on a smaller lamp, casting a warm glow to the room. Sherlock could almost hear his clinician mind, always looking to assess, gather data, get a good look at his patient or client. The symbolism of illumination was not lost on Sherlock - John was trying to get a glimpse of things that Sherlock'd worked hard to keep quite safely hidden.

"I'm here, waiting, whenever or if ever you're ready." John seemed to savour the tea, picked up a biscuit he'd obviously brought with him, gestured in Sherlock's direction, an offer to hand one to him. Sherlock let his non-responsiveness be his answer, and John muttered a quick all right, took a bite himself.

++

*Who hurt you?* had been the question.
Sherlock could have named those many people, or the person who’d introduced him to cocaine, perhaps named Victor. Victor played him, fueled his addiction, his being used for only the brilliance of Sherlock’s mind, the ultimate betrayal, his hateful manipulation, abandoning him without a second thought. It had evoked Mycroft’s discovery, and then his brief sober debt to his brother that ended in a spectacularly bad scene involving a whip. Once captured, he’d been unable to keep silent, seeing the treachery, and then thoughtlessly and heedlessly provoked his tormentors. He’d brought about perhaps much harsher treatment and injury than if he’d been smart, kept quiet, been a better game-player.

Other people, he’d learned, were idiots, the lot of them not worth his time. He just bloody didn’t care anymore, had courted high risk activities and dangerous liaisons perhaps in the hope that one of these days his luck would run out. In fact, there had been the slightest twinge of relief when he’d nearly smelled death at the door, his back bloodied and barely aware. He almost regretted the timing of Mycroft’s rescue. A few more minutes and it would probably all have been over.

And so began the more recent downward plunging spiral to substances, escapism, and emptiness. Which he tried unsuccessfully to fill with being clever, with more substances, with being smarter than everyone else. The rehab where he’d nearly ended it before his brother pulled him out.

John simply sat, hands clasped, elbows on his thighs, sitting near the edge of Sherlock’s bed. He seemed to have grown roots and showed no sign of moving, and Sherlock finally decided that in order to be rid of him, he would answer.

"Everyone. Everyone hurt me."

John showed little reaction to the evasive answer, perhaps just a small frown from one eyebrow. Unhurried, he unfolded his hands, "All right," he said, getting up, "thank you for speaking anyway. I'll take a lie over silence this time."

"Don't pretend that you care, doctor."

"John."

"Eventually you'll give up, move on, decide I'm not worth the trouble. Everyone does." It was the most words Sherlock had spoken in a long time.

"Sounds like you're the authority on that. So you've given up on yourself too?"

Sherlock sighed, reached a hand out for the tea next to the bed, picked it up, hoped John was watching carefully and that he was feeling faint twinges of success, of victory, of being quietly pleased, that his patient was opening up, ready to drink. He leaned up on an elbow, extended his arm holding the cup. And upended it, dumping the entire contents slowly on the floor, desiring maximum splatter. It sounded wet on the carpet, splashing at John's feet. For good measure, there was a thunk as Sherlock dropped the cup as well.

"Now," he said, flatly, glancing over to see John sitting calmly, having not moved at all, simply watching him. "About my headache..."

John waited until Sherlock’s eyes were closed again before allowing himself to let the smallest smile appear on his face. *Good*, he thought. *Making progress.*
Deliberately choppy, vague, and intentional flight of ideas.

I can always count on John to be gentle when needed and know exactly when is the perfect time to get a little more assertive.

++

If something snuck by me, please let me know gently. This chapter was a little angsty, a little persnickety as I tried to find the right balance between timelines. Thanks for reading.
Sherlock did not arrive at his current state of emotional disconnection in a vacuum. Neither, apparently, did John.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Who hurt you?**

It certainly wasn’t the first time he’d ever asked that question. He’d asked it quite a lot on his A&E rotation in med school when screening for domestic violence. He’d asked it when his sister Harry had come home from school with suspicious bruising and a torn blouse. He’d asked it of his uni roommate and of one of his early girlfriends and of a random person he’d stopped to help once in a bar brawl he’d been misfortunate enough to be present for.

Growing up, he hadn't needed to ask it of his mum. Even if he hadn't been in the house to hear the yelling and see the split lip, there was never a question of who. That had been quite obvious.

++

"Who hurt you?" John asked quietly to the tail-wagging bundle of tangled fur, giggling at the exuberance of the animal. A rough tongue swiped over his wrist as he loosened the leash that had been stuck on the corner of the fence down the road from his house. "Oh, wait, no one, you silly dog," he answered himself as his fingers pressed over the burrs that were matted in the little guy's fur. Just burrs, stuck fast. Further wiggling, licking, climbing and stepping seemed to satisfy no one as the young dog seemed hell-bent on climbing inside John's jacket, inside his very skin.

"Sshhh," he laughed at the dog's exuberance. "You're okay," he said as he picked gingerly at the burrs, freeing them from the hair at last. One final whimper and the burrs were gone, the dog's big feet managing to get stuck inside John's jacket. "Stop it, for pity's sake," and he stood then, looked around. The nearest occupied building was a small convenience store, and John led the now-prancing animal to the doorway. The smiling face of the older man at the counter beckoned.

"Is this your dog?" John asked. "Found him tangled on the fence."

"No ones," the shopkeep replied. "Saw a strange car stop couple minutes ago, hooked him there, drove off. Lotta yelling in the car, good riddance, ask me." He gestured at his cane. "Would-a got out there 'ventually." He found a cast-off bowl, filled it with water, and the dog lapped and slurped and seemed generally pleased, tail still wagging. "I'm sure he's yours if you want him. You're Watson's boy, up the road there with your mum and sister? Better check first." He was shaking his head but still smiling at John, who kept a hand on the dog. "Good luck."

"Yes sir." He'd recruit Harry to help sway their mum. Maybe now that he was twelve he could find a job to help out.

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"It's a picture frame."

"I know that, obviously," John fired back at Harry, who had just watched him unwrap his eighteenth birthday gift.

"I hand painted the camo." The wood frame had indeed been carefully hand-painted in army fatigue camouflage, pixelated and steady. Brushing a thumb over the edges, he tilted the frame to look at the lower right corner. Harry chuckled, "Yes, and hid my initials there so you won't forget me when you deploy."

The swearing-in ceremony was in a few days, and Harry, at a few years younger than John, was intermittently fussy and blase about it. "We'll get a photo for it, you, me, and mum, yeah?" He stretched out an arm, pulled her close, adding, "I love it, thanks."

"You're sure it's okay to take with you?"

"God yeah, of course. Your paint job is amazing, Harr." The smooth, shiny polyurethane finish would protect it during travel and barracks life, John hoped. "I'll keep it forever."

++

Who hurt you?

He'd asked it in the army, too, when fights got out of hand, when barrack life got too boring, when there was alcohol involved. He'd been stationed outside Kandahar a long time, seen people come and go, rotating to various units. He'd asked 'who hurt you?' most noteworthy and quite memorably, to a young Afghan boy when, as Officer of the Day, he'd been summoned by a local community leader. Over the three years that John had been there, they'd had a few opportunities to cross paths about one medical need or another, but it was rare. Each respected the other, stayed out of the way as much as possible, so a summons meant something serious. Carrying his medical bag at the request of the translator, John followed the man to a small home of a poor family.

There had been a translator required for the visit, of course, though John didn't need local language skills to have his own radar activated, his body on high alert. Something had happened. The fear in the boys eyes when he'd seen John’s uniform - camo, tee shirt, boots - had been enlightening enough. Eyes were puffy from recently cried tears, a few fingertip-pattern bruises visible on the boy's arms, and a wounded look - John suspected mistreatment from the beginning. The examination had been as gentle as John could manage, and as soon as John had pulled back the covers, seen the deep crimson blood, he'd been fairly certain what he'd find on the boy's body.

The anal tearing had been profound, a pulsating, arterial ooze that had saturated his clothing and the bed linens, evidence of local tissue injury and bowel perforation. John worked hard at hiding any expression, knowing that his presentation, word choices, and demeanor were mission critical to the needed interventions. If the patient didn't die outright of blood loss, without intervention, the peritonitis and infection that would certainly set in would prove fatal within a few weeks. “He needs surgery or he will certainly die,” he'd said via the translator. John explained the risks of surgery vs. no surgery, explained the urgency of the procedure. A question or two had been asked, flat, emotionless. The family had stepped out of their one roomed house, ostensibly, John hoped, to come to an agreement to let John operate. Taking advantage of the momentary unsupervised time, he'd chatted a bit (weather, a toy in the room, family, the special blanket he'd been clinging to) with the boy, who was conscious, reluctantly interactive, although understandably quiet and likely in a terrible amount of pain. “Who hurt you?” John asked, in as gentle tone of voice as he could.

In answer, the boy spoke nothing, simply shook his head, looking resolutely away with wet,
frightened eyes. “He is afraid,” the translator told John. “He is afraid of you and your uniform. His family may choose to let him die rather than be cared for in your military hospital.”

John looked at the boy, at the translator, could feel fury building inside as the details seemed to sharpen in his mind. “It was a soldier.”

The translator looked steadily at John, those beautiful dark Afghan eyes meeting John’s, interrupted by the occasional blink. The unspoken affirmative answer to John's not-really-a-question was obvious, and the look exchanged was solemn and poignant. “He will never give you a name.” There were a few foreign phrases exchanged then, the translator and the boy in the bed, quick sentences, matter of fact judging by the tone. “He insists that I do not answer you, do not tell you.”

John could feel his jaws clench. “I admire your loyalty to him then. I don't suppose he would change his mind, but...”

The translator was smiling sadly, shaking his head already. “He will not. The people fear retribution, you understand.”

John’s mind engaged as the boy’s family elders returned, having made their decision. They wanted assurance of his safety, and John thought perhaps they were going to refuse. John spoke of measures to keep the boy safe and protected in the army hospital. The boy's father, stoic although with an angry set of his jaw, did finally then give John permission and consent to do the surgery. When the message was communicated to the patient, John could see the shuddering and watched his fearful reaction, the dread and the pain. The lad pulled the thin blanket up over his face. There was an overwhelming urge to protect the boy, to creatively come up with ways to keep his soldier contacts to a minimum.

Protector. Defender. And healer, John thought, hoping to lessen his anxiety. He accompanied the boy from the jeep transport as he was carried by stretcher into the pre-op area. He left briefly to make arrangements with the officer in charge of non-combat, emergency surgery scheduling. A group of corpsman entered the room, unfortunately, and it could not have been more clear that one of the soldiers was recognisable to the boy. There was panic, cringing, a full out fear response as the boy trembled and tried to curl into a foetal position, hiding his face behind his white-knuckled hands.

John came alongside the stretcher, said, "I'll see you in a few minutes," helped move the entourage further inside the building, to the holding area, getting the boy away from the source of his distress. He watched the stretcher then be carried into the operative suite, where he would have an IV started, antibiotic therapy, and be scrubbed for surgery. After the doors closed, he turned to stare quiet as death, at the corpsman, who stood, still watching.

An arrogant, defiant face looked back at him, the slightest smirk about his mouth. John wanted to slap it off, for starters, and approached. John thought nothing of his own stance, the bearing that came so naturally, his shoulders squared. He made a point to commit to memory the name and rank of the man from the embroidery on the uniform. Their opposition: the officer to the enlisted, Captain to Sergeant, man of integrity to abuser of children, army surgeon to rapist. His eye narrowed in response to the man’s audacity, the challenge and daring for John to act.

Protector. Defender.

The words circled, hovered in John’s mind as he nodded once. “I'm ordering you to stay away from that patient, that's an order. Do you understand me, sergeant?”

Another smirk, "yes sir," delivered in a borderline insolent tone, mouth curled in almost a smile of
having gotten away with something. John spun on his heel, headed to the operating room. There was a very small bit of a snicker as soon as his back was turned. John settled his mind despite the anger smouldering. A few deep breaths, concentration at the upcoming surgical procedure, at righting the wrong, beginning steps of a healing process, of restitution. Compartmentalise, focus. John exhaled some of the tension from his body.

The translator, in surgical hat, mask, and OR scrubs, was at the boys side already, as John had insisted at least until he was satisfactorily asleep, as John joined the OR team. John held his breath, pulled down the mask long enough to smile reassuringly at the frightened boy on the OR table, pulled the mask up quickly, not quite breaking sterility. “Tell him he’ll be safe, we’ll get him all fixed up.” He paused as the message was delivered, and the boy looked hard at John, clinging with his tear-filled eyes, his soul. “I don't suppose it is necessary to confirm, but clearly he had crossed paths with that corpsman previously? It was quite obvious to me.” Brief exchange in their native language.

The translator said nothing immediately, but his face was flushed, angry, and he simply nodded. "He is very afraid."

"I need to know, is he sure that was the man?"

The translator's dark eyes grew darker. "He is sure, and so am I. It was at his hands that he suffered."

“Please tell him that I will handle things.” A scrub nurse appeared, but John continued to hold the gaze of both translator and patient. "Please assure him that he is safe here." Only then did John face the nurse who out the sterile gown to him. He deftly slid his arms in, spun so that it was tied, held out his hands, sterile gloves donned. The scar from a teenaged altercation on his left knuckle was barely visible, and then covered by the gloves. John barely thought about it anymore.

++

He’d been on his way home from his shit job at a warehouse packing, unpacking, re-packing when distracted by some yelling, a commotion down the block. While he was exhausted - long day in sixth form classes, studying for his A-levels, and working a few hours to help with family finances - whatever was happening niggled at his suspicions that something was afoot, and he hesitated only a few seconds before striding over.

His boots were loud enough to attract the attention of the three boys circled around something, and John could make out the form of a boy laying curled up in the center of the cluster of people. From a few meters away yet, he called out "Hey!"

"Mind your own fuckin' business," one of them snarled, posture aggressive, "little boy."

At sixteen, John was not tall but a tenacious athlete with a spirited competitive drive within. The group before him, probably the same age, thugs, all of them.

Five minutes later, chest heaving as he caught his breath, John leaned against a wall, wondered if his own ribs were cracked - Jesus, they hurt like a son-of-a-bitch - but he’d got a fair number of his own licks in too before someone else happened by, scared them off. He pressed against his side with his hand, knuckles bloodied, over his ribs that were already starting to swell painfully as he glanced around. The boy, the first victim, had managed to find means to scramble to safety and run away.

"You sure you're all right?" the stranger, who'd come upon them, threatened to call the police, was asking. "Want me to call someone for you?"
"'M fine," John said, wishing he wasn't as winded as he was. "Thanks." There was terrible, metallic taste in his mouth - blood of course - and he turned away, spitting, grateful that no teeth went with the wad of blood.

"Not a bad rout," impressed, he said to John, "getting rid of all three of them. I've seen them here before, up to no good."

"They ran when you came, thanks for that." The timing had been expedient, John knew. Longer would likely have gone the other way.

"You handled 'em, not me."

++

Surgery went well, with minimal blood loss despite the extensive peri-anal repair, bowel resection, and creation of a transverse colostomy to rest the bowel as it healed. John would have performed the procedure with care no matter what, but given the boy's young age and the plans for eventual reconnection and colostomy take-down, he made sure to allow for the smallest openings, healthiest tissue for reconnection, that would facilitate the most successful future surgical procedures and leave minimal scarring.

He was moved to the post operative ward, and John spoke to the charge nurse about securing a screen to cut down on visibility and contact he would have with the majority of the personnel. Once all his post op orders had been written and reviewed, John changed out of his scrubs, checked in one final time for the evening on his patient who was sleeping. He asked the nurses to let him know if there were any problems, and went immediately to present himself to the administrative assistant of the base commander.

"Sir?"

"I need to file an internal misconduct report to the MPs. Confidentially."

The form was straightforward. John detailed the facts, findings, and operative course surrounding what he knew, including the direct testimony of the boy, cited that his patient's name was being withheld, the confession and assurance of the translator, and read through the report before signing it.

The barracks he shared with a couple other guys was mostly still, guys tired from the day, seeking escape in sleep or quietly browsing the internet. Efficiently he stripped, crawled into bed. Above his bed hung a framed photo next to a unit commendation. He closed his eyes, grateful that most everyone he worked with and among were just good people.

++

John had only been there a year or so when one of the nurses approached him at breakfast one day. "Seen the headline?" She flashed her iPad his direction as she asked the question.

"No."

Reading, she smiled, "Unit achieves exemplary reduction in surgical complications." Taking a couple steps her direction, John looked at the screen to see a couple photos of their surgical team, and an article a few paragraphs long as she kept reading. They had made some changes to procedures, monitoring, and the big brass had got wind of it. "Nice to get noticed for doing something good, yeah?"

"Great article. Send me the link?"
"Better than that, They're getting copies made, framed up for us."

John glanced at the photo, a candid close-up. He was grinning from the far left edge, the team clustered about the bedside of a patient, nurse, corpsman, another doc, one of the techs. The photo would later hang on the wall by his bed and be a source of encouragement and warm memories, a visible token to the unit John took such pride in.

++

"Captain? Captain Watson?" There was a knock at his tent, where he'd been straightening up. "Sir?"

"Come," John answered, pushing the door open. There was always the possibility for an urgent summons, a bad situation, a need in the medical tent, or something else dangerous. He got the feeling, given the somber expression, it was a combination of all of them.

"The CO wants to see you, sir." Nothing further was offered. They fell into step across the base, and the other man left John at the doorway to the CO's office.

The man looked up from his desk as John entered, gestured for the door to be allowed to close and at the seat across from him. "Sir?" John finally prompted.

"I have your incident report."

"Yes sir."

"Are you certain you want to proceed?"

"Of course I am."

"There's something you should know. And then I'll give you twenty-four hours to think about it. To think about it carefully." Making sure he had John's full and undivided attention, he continued to speak.

++

Over coffee, sitting by himself in the mess hall, he sipped. The twenty-four hours was unnecessary, and though John had tried to answer immediately - proceed, sir - his CO refused. After leaving the office, he'd stopped in to see the boy, found him with stable vital signs, quite a bit of pain for which one of the nurses was already obtaining a paediatric dose of pain meds, but a small smile for John despite the discomfort when he recognised him.

Later that afternoon, when John was back in surgery, there was a message delivered, that the boy's nurse wanted to see him right away. John asked them to relate that he would be along at his first opportunity, finished the current case, and strode purposefully to the post op wing.

He entered quickly, looking around immediately as he sensed a heavy air about the place. It was one that seemed to settle in when in the past something had gone wrong, or unexpected, or simply a poor outcome. Another quick glance, and his eyes latched on the bed by the room divider, did a double take. There was an empty bed, that had previously contained his healing young patient. The nurse who'd sent for him had already seen him enter of course, and she'd stood, crossed to him right away, began to tell him that he'd been moved. Transferred to a local, indigenous hospital for further care. The family had moved with him as well. She was apologetic, nearly in tears, told him there'd been nothing she could do, that the CO had signed off on the transfer consent, that it had happened quickly.
"I'm sorry captain," she said again, and John knew the hospital, the care, the patient's progress would take a very different course now. John could feel the heaviness in his chest, knowing there would be no IV therapy, no further antibiotics, and probably no reversal of the colostomy when he'd healed.

After thanking the nurse for her efforts, John turned, ready to appeal the transfer to the CO, at least find out details about where the boy had gone, and why. He was only a few steps outside the CO's door when he saw the sergeant a short distance away, across the path, watching John.

He was beyond pleased. He was gloating.

Resisting the urge to bring his fists - or worse - into play, John continued into the office, where the CO was seated. Neither spoke at first. The expressions - John aggravated, the CO sadly resigned - made some of it unnecessary.

A paper cup of coffee was placed in his hand. The bitter liquid, John thought, was somewhat appropriate in the also bitter circumstance.

"File the report."

"I don't advise it. You do not realise what you may be setting in motion."

"File it." John's words were sure, confident, steady.

"Captain, I strongly suggest you reconsider." The man ran his fingers through close-cropped hair, clearly feeling a level of distress. "Once it leaves my hands, there is almost nothing I can do to help you if ..." He left the rest of the sentence implied.

"You didn't see, sir..." John let his voice stop, setting the emotion aside. "If that were your son, would you feel the same?"

"There are more civilised ways to address this."

John lost the battle of holding his tongue, but he kept his voice quiet. "Civilised? Civilised? What was civilised about what that soldier did to that young child?"

"I know. Let me take care of it."

"With all due respect, sir, rape and a high-level cover up is not what this country needs from the people who are here to help them. I don't care that the perp is some nephew of some government official."

"All right." Sigh. John could tell that he didn't agree, but wouldn't fight him any longer.

The report was filed.

++

A few days later, word came down through the ranks of the unit that there were some reassignments pending, not an unusual occurrence, and one that John paid little attention to, given that it didn't usually affect the senior surgical staff. Some squadrons were being formed for some temporary, intermittent search and rescue missions, some of a medical nature, that some folks were being rotated back to England; most, so the rumour went, were staying put.

The list was posted that Friday. The sergeant - staying on base. Captain John H. Watson, MD - reassigned for one of the teams to be deployed and mobilised into enemy territory.
A lot of activity surrounded the restructuring of the unit, the compound abuzz with activity as John, along with his new team members boarded their transport. Goodbyes and last minute details flew, and John signed off on his patients, packed a few meager and only mandatory belongings, his mind heavy with disappointment and what smacked of a personal vendetta, of betrayal and failure. The life may have been saved, he knew, but the final disposition was unknown, his ultimate quality of life compromised. Unsurprisingly, as the vehicles were loaded up, the sergeant was there again in the periphery, amidst the cluster of people. When John's gaze found him, the sergeant smirked, winked, and mouthed the words “Good luck.” The victorious grin on his face was particularly malicious.

The first few weeks were especially difficult with his new role, new team. They laboured, succeeded, failed, and kept moving. Rescues happened more often than deaths, but John felt each life lost or each body recovered as another personal failure. The team saw to triage under extreme circumstance and rendered basic first aid until the fighting made it too unsafe. The team grew proficient at anticipating needs, at radioing for evacuation at precisely the right moment. Time passed, each day that felt much longer, hardships, miserable conditions, bone-weary fatigue, the toll of their tasks, and lousy food. They'd slept on the hard ground until John almost couldn't remember an actual mattress, let alone the cot he'd had in the barracks back on base.

One evening, their team was given a search-and-rescue, mobilised to find an injured British soldier, who'd been presumed abandoned outside the city in the low foothills. It was on that mission that the rescue failed spectacularly when a sniper had taken aim at the team members. The end of the mission stood with a death count of two, including the soldier they'd been searching for, and severe injuries reported of three of the squad.

John was medevac'd to a field hospital with a gunshot wound to the shoulder, multiple rib fractures, and a pneumothorax.

++

After Harry had fussed at him for sleeping on the floor, John sighed and tried to spend the next night on the bed. The dream overtook him, a sensation of drowning under piles of fabric being flattened over his head, into material through which he couldn't breathe. Awakening with a shout, heart pounding, skin diaphoretic, he sat up, panicked. Somehhow he managed to assure Harry that he was fine when she showed up wide-eyed at his door. Her feet padded back down the hall. And John slid his body quietly back to the floor, taking pillow and blanket with him.

++

The company clerk stood at John's bedside, proffered laptop in hand. He'd just been moved out of the acute area that morning after his chest tube had been removed, was now in a general ward. There had been a little concern for a minor wound infection, but thankfully, that had resolved with good wound care and those several days of IV antibiotics.

"Yes, please," John said, reaching out for it with a shaking hand. Soldiers in the post-op ward had brief access to unit technology from there, and John was hoping for a response from his sister Harry regarding a place to stay once they'd shipped him home so he could continue to rest and recover. Just until he could find something else to do, once he was able.

"Need help getting set up?" the clerk asked as John couldn't stop the wince as his shoulder throbbed with the requisite movements.
"No, thanks."

None the less, the clerk did reach out to steady the computer, tucked a pillow under John's injured arm. "I have something else for you, too," he said with less animation, holding out what John recognised immediately as medical discharge papers.

There was a dry lump in John's throat, a twinge of nausea, a stab of regret. The military had been the focus of most of John's life, from early on. Education, keeping physically fit, applying to med school, enlisting, basic training, deployment. He'd wanted to be a career army surgeon, to retire with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel after twenty years' service. Apparently two doctors had signed off on him, that he would no longer be able to perform his duties, and was being let go.

Blink. It was over.

"Thank you," John whispered even as he wished he didn't have to reach out and accept them. Now what?

A few days later, wound freshly bandaged, pain meds on board, he was helped into a vehicle for transport to the airport for his last military flight - home to his sister's flat outside London. At his feet was his trunk, filled with his clothes, boots, a book, personal gear, his letter of discharge, Harry's picture frame, the wall photo and plaque. And his invisible, broken dreams.

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Mycroft had read John's file previously, including of course the restricted access bits, the confidential, sealed misconduct report John had submitted. There were copies of the orders that had violated protocol and the hierarchy that should have prevailed when John was assigned to the mobile mission. He could clean up John's record, reinstate him to active non-combat status, and even issue post-discharge the promotion, letters of commendation, or military awards he would likely have been entitled to had he stayed in active duty.

There were a few pieces to add to the file he was keeping on the doctor, however, and he read them again before inserting them. First, the dishonourable discharge papers of the sergeant who had done the unthinkable and who, in Mycroft's opinion, deserved far worse than a discharge. Far worse. The former sergeant had thankfully been unable, despite his relative's influence, to prevent Mycroft from issuing that order and seeing it carried out to fruition.

Next, the piece they were still working on discovering. Mycroft hated not knowing. He added the grainy MI surveillance photo and brief biographical data form on the young boy that John had operated on, whose status and whereabouts were yet unknown. He had an operative asking around, showing the photo, trying to locate him. It was, Mycroft had been told, probably too late. Given the ensuing unrest among the locals in that area and the poor access to medical care, and the length of time that had already passed, the most likely scenario was that the boy had either died or been abandoned in disgrace by family.

Tucking the file into his locking desk drawer, he leaned back in his chair, his gaze falling to the family portrait from when he and Sherlock were in their teens. His own smile more formal, Sherlock's lopsided and lively, his hand on the head of the family dog who most certainly was not smiling despite what Sherlock had insisted. Including the pet had been his parents concession to getting Sherlock to agree to appear in the portrait. Unbidden, he smiled to himself at the memory of how quickly Sherlock had disappeared on the heels of the photographer.

He checked the time and consulted the information he'd been given by one of his PAs. Perfect. John would be in his office. Time to make first contact. John Watson had another life to save.
Apologies for the blatant errors surrounding military protocol and events that are certainly fictional. As I've said in other pieces, please just squint and forgive me for my ignorance. There is deliberate jumping between John's earlier days and the events surrounding his injury.

I have a renewed commitment to getting these two broken men to a place where they are comfortable, safe, and at peace with where their complicated journeys have been to this point. I may have to add an extra epilogue to make up for all this.

There were a few more bits of history about John that I wanted to include, but given that this was supposed to be a short chapter, I'm resisting the urge to add more details. I'm hitting post rather quickly before I change my mind, and I'm definitely adding a Happy Ending tag. Because I feel like I owe them and anyone reading along. Next chapter will be our favourite pair back on Baker Street. I'm done hopping timelines for a while and ready to watch John deal with Sherlock's obstinance as he starts to recover.

If I have missed something, please let me know gently.
Chapter Summary

Last we left them was in the flat on Baker Street, where John has been hired and brought in as an independent medical practitioner, and things are not all that good. A weak and tired Sherlock had an unpleasant nightmare, complained of a headache, intentionally - defiantly - spilled his tea, and John is also exhausted. Despite Sherlock's being in serious need of nutrition, he is refusing to eat.

No worries, John has a plan. But it's kind of doubtful that Sherlock's going to like it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Now," Sherlock had said, "about my headache."

John didn't answer immediately, set his own tea down, folded his reading material, retrieved a towel to sop up the mess Sherlock had made, offhandedly. Giving Sherlock more attention than necessary for that display would, John knew, be counter-productive. Without much of a show of any emotion, John reached for his stethoscope, prepared for another round of vital signs. "We can start here, with this. I may have some extra meds for you, depending, for some of the shaking, the heart racing, withdrawal symptoms, and we can talk if you want."

"Piss off."

John smiled pleasantly, not giving Sherlock's defiance much of a foothold. "Do you know what day it is?"

"Oh dear lord, I'm oriented. No hallucinations. Why must you insist on being boring, an idiot, like all the rest?"

"I'm not inclined to force you to do anything."

"Then you'd best just leave right now. We're done here." Sherlock was as snippy as John'd heard him.

"Is that what this is, then? You drive people away. Would you prefer it if you were forced? Because that's not usually my style."

"I've had things forced on me. Including your irritating presence."

"I can well imagine you've been threatened, restrained, even medicated against your will. Meds are not my first line treatment for you, now that you're at this stage." John had certainly needed to give him lorazepam as he'd been dangerously withdrawing a few days previous, the shaking tremors rendering him unable to much else and a sign of dangerous brain overactivity, but that acutely stage was mostly over. "Other things first. Which means I'm calling someone to come sit with you while I take care of a few things."

"Call my brother."
"I work with an aide, nice woman, Molly. She's a med student, nearly a junior doctor." John had emailed her a brief report, what he anticipated would be a quick outing then a nap where he wasn't subconsciously listening and waiting for Sherlock to awaken, need something, require intervention. That kind of vigilance did not allow for very deep or restorative sleep most of the time.

"I want my brother."

"You are not calling the shots here. My assistant will be here shortly, I have some errands to run, and I'd like a bloody shower without worrying you're getting into trouble." He didn't say specifically that he was worried Sherlock would be using if unattended but it was implied and they both knew it. John was fairly certain, even though Mycroft had said he'd searched the flat for illegal substances, Sherlock probably had something stashed around the flat somewhere. Plus, John wanted - needed - a nap, he didn't add aloud. Although, he thought, the shower would also be almost as welcomed. The few quick showers he'd taken, timed when Sherlock seemed dead asleep, had been all efficiency, door open, and not a second longer than necessary. Nap first, shower second... *ahhhhh.*

"Right, you don't trust me."

"Not even a little." John agreed as he reached out, stretched, began to wrap the blood pressure cuff around Sherlock's upper arm. He felt the need to soften his statement. "Not yet anyway, but I will." The velcro closure was loud in the room moments later as he removed it. "100/50, not bad." There was a pause as his fingers held Sherlock's wrist, eyes glued to his watch, counting. "Heart rate's too high, just under 100. How is your headache?"

"What answer gets me something strong?"

"None of them, probably." Sherlock made a face, turned in the bed so his back was to John, like the petulant toddler John kept getting glimpses of. John was glad his back was turned so that Sherlock couldn't see the smile on John's face, actually pleased at the spark of sassiness. "Paracetamol. And a full glass of water should help a bit anyway. I'm picking up lunch while I'm out, what do you like?"

"Caviar and Dom Perrignon." The brief sidelong gaze Sherlock leveled at John from back over his shoulder was absolutely daring him to engage. *Russian caviar.*

"Right, got it, sweet iced tea and toasted cheese. Maybe some fruit." Most of that was already in the kitchen anyway.

From John's angle, he could see Sherlock's carotid artery, rapid, bounding. Still dehydrated. The infrequent water intake was not enough, and John watched Sherlock's dry lips and hard swallow.

"You drinking anything?"

"No."

"I can pick up something you would enjoy drinking?"

"I told you, Dom--"

"Something non-alcoholic. And preferably non-caffeinated."

"You offered me tea, caffeinated."

"Yes, I remember, the carpet appreciated it." John smiled at him, thinking that when Sherlock was
feeling better he would still probably be a handful although for different reasons. "No?" and when Sherlock shook his head, John continued, "Clarifying that means also not swallowing the paracetamol?"

"Obviously."

"You want it by another route of administration?" John tipped his head at the box of supplies that were at the foot of his cot, knowing Sherlock could see him in his peripheral vision. "There are suppositories in here with the supplies, and I've a glove..."

"God no."

"I didn't think so. Fine, keep the headache, cancel the tea and cheese, IV fluids for you. And a surprise for you after I've eaten lunch, a bit later." Deftly, he primed a new IV set, assured the site was still patent with a flush, connected it, and finished cleaning up the floor from Sherlock's earlier tantrum of tea spillage. "You'll feel better, Sherlock. I know this is pretty miserable. This'll help, headache's common."

Only a few minutes of watching the IV infuse, and John's mobile pinged with an incoming text from Molly to let him know she'd just arrived. He met her at the door, showed her around briefly, and introduced her to Sherlock. John reminded Sherlock that he'd be back soon, and he patted his arm on the way out. Sherlock was definitely awake, John could tell, but very deliberately ignoring him. "Text me if you have any issues, questions. Any concerns. Ta."

++

When he returned an hour or so later, a quick run to a medical supply store as well as an even quicker stop to grab lunch, he was tired, ready to close his eyes. Sherlock seemed to be sleeping when John checked in on both of them, found things calm enough, got a reserved thumbs up from Molly. He put a few things away in the kitchen, then returned to the bedroom, where he collapsed to sleep the sleep of the dead even as Molly kept a close eye on his patient. The skill of falling asleep near immediately had been useful while deployed, on call, exhausted - that he could close his eyes and fall asleep quickly in the midst of activity, noise, commotion. Body knackered, he rested, sleeping well for the first time since his arrival days before, knowing he was not going to be urgently summoned or awakened and need to be responsible for whatever was going on.

The sound of hushed arguing - fussing - and Molly's quiet responses awakened him a few hours later.

"I'm fine, and don't need your help."

"I'm not leaving you unattended. You're weak!" Molly protested, calmly.

"I'm not using the loo in front of you."

"I'll help you, be in arms reach in case your legs give out."

Sherlock was stubbornly insisting, and Molly tried to shush him when John stirred and rolled over, his sleep disturbed by their escalating conversation.

"Sherlock," John said, low, his voice gruff.

"Now you're in for it, you woke the warden." Sherlock's voice sounded weaker than previously.

"Let Molly cap your IV and help you. Stop being ridiculous."
"You do it."

"You're fine, she's a trained medical professional."

"You're awake, you can --"

"No. Sherlock, be reasonable. It's okay. You can do this." John's lethargy was difficult to fight through - must have been in a deep sleep cycle, he knew - and he spoke with his eyes mostly closed and body still quite relaxed from the cot. "Please?"

In the silence, John was torn between asserting his need for Sherlock to comply with some not-unreasonable behaviours and expectations, and feeling compassion for him with the inclination to get up and help his patient. The exaggerated huff that came from the bed gave John the imagined vision of Sherlock as a feisty, curly-headed three year old yelling at a butler, stomping his feet, or sticking his tongue out at whomever crossed him or had the gall to deny him anything.

John was not engaging in this argument, hoping for Sherlock to comply and not be so terribly bloody difficult about it. "You can use the loo now with Molly's help, or wait a bit until I'm more awake and out of the shower, your call."

There was no answer but another huffing exhale, and John watched through tired, half-mast eyes as Sherlock allowed Molly to tend his IV then let Molly take his arm, supporting quite a bit of his weight, and lead him across the hall. Alone in the room, John let himself smile. Making progress, it seemed.

++

It wasn't too much longer until John'd had a long, relaxing, ridiculously hot shower then rejoined the pair in Sherlock's bedroom, where Molly had long since reconnected the IV and was worrying at her fingernail as she watched him. He was supine, inclined on a couple of pillows, pale skin, eyes closed.

"He's got no reserve," she said. "Really tachycardic, laboured breathing after very minimal activity." John inspected the pulse oximeter readout, which was as Molly said, heart rate still elevated. His oxygen level was acceptable at the moment. "Lowest pulse ox with activity was 87%.

"I know. Today, hydration and nutrition. Tomorrow, maybe, he'll be better."

From the bed, Sherlock's voice was tired. "I'm not eating. Not hungry."

"I have ways to work around that, Sherlock. Remember the surprise I promised you? But first, for me, some lunch. I brought extra in case you decide otherwise." Sherlock's eyes were not sharp, not focused, bleary, and John knew that he had waited long enough. "Shall I fix you a plate?"

Sherlock didn't answer. Not even the comforting smell of the soup, sandwich, or sliced orange sections could get him to change his mind.

++

John had also made contact with Mycroft Holmes while he was out.

I have an update, and a few questions, if you've time? John

Ellipsis, message read. That quickly, his mobile rang.
"Thanks for ringing so fast." John thought perhaps he would start off with something unexpected. He got to the matter of more import. "Wanted to let you know I found the contract you'd already signed. I added my signature, can fax it to your office if needed."

"That shouldn't be necessary."

"Need to make you aware of something, too."

"Please go ahead," Mycroft said into the silence when John paused.

"The contract includes consent. He's refusing to eat, and I'm not playing the game with him. I'm not going to beg, and I'm done trying to sweet talk him into it. He may have a feeding tube next time you see him." John gave a very brief synopsis of what it would entail.

"He will certainly refuse, fight you."

"He hasn't the strength right now. And I won't force him, when it comes down to it. But perhaps ... well, that remains to be seen."

"Fine. Do not feel you have to seek my permission every time ..."

"Oh, trust me, I don't. It was a courtesy call, as you had requested to be kept up to date. Nutrition, however he can get it, is in his best interests."

"I hired you for your sound medical judgment. I trust that you will proceed wisely."

John changed tacks then, proceeding with the rest of the update, Sherlock's risk for refeeding syndrome, the possibility of a confirmation xray with mobile services, that he was sending another round of labwork in the morning, the concerns he had about his mental health. "I'm still waiting on those records you assured me were coming."

"I had them delivered." A discharge summary had been in the file from Sherlock's emergency appendectomy at age 17, and a bout with back strain in his twenties.

"Again, incomplete. Shockingly, there's no mention of any mental health issues or substance abuse."

"I'll see what I can locate."

He sighed, Mycroft's reluctance speaking volumes as to what John sort of already had an inkling about. "All right, thanks for your time, Mr. Holmes." John cleared his throat. "Oh, last thing, I want a list of some of his favourite things, from childhood, university or more recent, any of it. Pleasant associations for him: books, food, music, movies, activities, games."

The silence was deafening. Activities and games? Mycroft could have snorted, settled for rolling his eyes.

"You do know your brother well enough to at least give me something?"

The voice on the other end of the line, to John, sounded timid, younger. "I shall try."

John disconnected, leaning on the wall outside of the chemists, wondering if Mycroft was scrambling trying to come up with some sort of list. He hoped, whatever he found, that it would be helpful. Even more, he hoped it had given Mycroft something to think about.

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"Up you get." John hooked the IV from the bracket on which the bag was hanging.

"I don't need to."

"Did I say it was for you to use the toilet?" Sherlock glanced up, and John could see that his eyes were even tired, listless.

"I can take a nap in the bath?"

"Not for a bath either. Maybe later, if you want, and are still up for it, sure."

Sherlock seemed to consider that, finally replied, "Go away."

John sighed, pulled at Sherlock until he was sitting upright, then without allowing much resistance or the chance to say no, he boosted him to his feet. Together, they moved across the hall, listing to one side awkwardly, given that John was supporting the weight of them both.

He'd already placed a barstool opposite the sink, and let Sherlock drift down until he was seated. On the vanity by the taps were a razor, towel, shaving cream, and Sherlock's aftershave set out nicely. "Really?" he asked, as if already bored.

"Yes, a shave. You're a mess."

"Your surprises suck," he whispered.

"Oh, this isn't it, actually. But you're welcome." John turned the water on, allowing it to warm, meanwhile pushed gently at Sherlock's head until he was able to lean it back, so it rested against the wall.

The bathroom light was bright and clear, the water warm, a bit of steam making the room cozy. He draped a towel over Sherlock's pyjamas. John widened his stance to put himself on a safer, easier level to shave him, began to speak. "One of my favourite things to do, for some reason. Always enjoyed shaving, myself, someone else, didn't matter. Definitely with a straight razor, strop, real shaving cream - you know, the real deal. Here's the hot towel," he said, easing the cloth against Sherlock's bearded jaw. "Was pleased to see you prefer a real razor, actually."

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At the evac hospital, the last stop before John would be sent to the transfer center, Tim, one of the nurses, helped prop him up in bed, his only request of him that day other than pain medication was to perhaps, if he had time, to help John shave. When the shift had nearly been over, John figured it wasn't going to happen, tried to reassure himself that it was all right. So when Tim had come back with razor, shave cream and a smile, John had been both thrilled and relieved. It was just one of those things for him, something that made him feel lousy when he couldn't get to it and much better, more like himself, when he was clean shaven.

The water wasn't hot exactly, but Tim set about, efficiently wetting, lathering, then shaving with a rather cheap, disposable razor. The one time John'd forgotten about his injury, tried to reach up his left hand to help, caused a grimace and almost outright groan as the pain radiated through his chest, arm. "Ow, shit," he breathed, and Tim stopped mid-glide to make sure John was all right.

"Whoa, watch that." Tim had lightly chided. "Don't aggravate things."

"Forgot." John took a few deliberate deep breaths, and the spasm eased. "Damned inconvenient, dominant arm."
"For more things than just shaving. Surgeon, I heard, yeah?"

"I was," John said, trying to be way more casual than he was feeling about it. "I'm luckier than many," John said, wondering for whose benefit that statement was.

"Very true, of course. Still hurts." Both of them could sense a subject change was in order, and Tim rinsed out the razor, then demonstrated the tightening of the upper lip and John complied. "Never grew a beard, eh?"

"Never liked it, really."

"Nah, me neither." Tim's dark eyes studied what he was doing, flicking down to John's jaw. "At least yours comes in nice, though."

There was a moment, then, when Tim's eyes met John's, simply friendly. Neither looked away. The contact was there, a connection, mostly casual and pleasant, but interested, maybe, feeling each other out. Just a very slight amount flirtatious but very proper, too. John let his eyes linger, testing the waters. It had been a long time since anyone had really flirted with him. "Thanks, I... uh," John hesitated as Tim's hand hovered, razor still over his lip. "Don't get distracted now."

With a sparkling eye, he smiled broadly with a small laugh, then set about his task again. "Of course not, I would never. All good here." The rest of the shave was more quiet, efficient, still oddly charged, companionable. The water was even more cool when Tim was done, took a step back. "Feel better?"

"Oh yes," John said in a drawn out growl of appreciation, his right hand this time coming up to feel his now dry and clean shaven face. "I can't tell you how good..." he let the sentence trail off. "Thank you very much."

"Turned out all right, but you started off pretty good too," Tim said then began quickly rolling up the linens, disposing of the razor, straightening up, then teased, "Must be your lucky day: first time this week someone didn't need a blood transfusion or sutures when I was done." Their shared chuckle was short lived, as there was a phone ringing down the hall, and the sounds of a busy medical unit. "Gotta run. Best of everything to you, doc."

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Sherlock sat quite still, watching for a bit as John chatted, talked, about everything and nothing, explaining unnecessarily what he was doing as he softened, applied shaving cream, began to work, stopping every so often to rinse, reapply, or stretch.

"Almost done," he said finally, knowing Sherlock was still awake though his eyes had drifted closed a little bit ago. "You enjoyed this, I'm glad," he said low, meaning it and understanding. That moment, with John's thumb over Sherlock's cheekbone, razor poised, their faces very close, Sherlock opened his eyes.

Their gazes met, locked, connected. For a moment, Sherlock's eyes were more bright as they stared. Remotely, the things John had seen before in Sherlock's face - curls, long eyelashes, bowed upper lip, full lower one, regal nose - seemed to be much more than the sum of their parts. It was a bloody, nice, handsome, attractive face. Frozen mid-movement, John's hand on Sherlock's face, their thighs touching, resting against each other as Sherlock sat and John worked in close proximity, there were a few lingering moments of awareness, of virility, of their nearness.

It was intimate, shaving someone, crossing the usual personal boundaries, the task requiring...
John gave himself an invisible shake, a mental jolt. Blinking a couple of times, he broke their eye contact, smiling a little. "Keep holding still, then, like I said, nearly there." His voice sounded a little tight to his own ears. A minute or two later, the grating sound of blade on razor stubble, running water, and he rinsed Sherlock's jaw one final time, drained the sink, washed off the blade. "That should feel much better, more human I suppose," he quipped, keeping it light. "You want to do your own aftershave?" A faint, shake of the head. "All right, then. This is nice product, by the way," he said, shaking out a little, applying it. "Now," John said, standing tall again. "Anything else while we're in here?"

"No." Sherlock brought a hand up, his fingertips brushing over his now smooth chin, and though he was tired, John could still tell he was pleased, that it did feel better. "Thanks," he said as his arm fell back to his side.

"You're welcome," he said, always impressed when patients managed to express polite gratitude especially when they were feeling lousy. "We could go to the kitchen, find you something to eat."

"No." Unsurprised, John gave a slight tug on his arm, but Sherlock was not especially motivated to stand. "Sleep," he said, protesting weakly.

"Is your intention to starve yourself to death?"

"The IV is fine."

"Actually no it isn't, it's not nutrition, no protein." John flicked off the light, took Sherlock under the arms with one of his, began to help him back across the hall. "So, back into bed with you. You and I need to come to a decision."

++

"My errand from earlier, picking up something for your care, was hoping not to need it."
Sherlock's body was still, relaxed, but his eyes were open and he was staring at John, paying attention and very curious. "A feeding tube."

There was a sharp burst of an exclamation, something akin to a snort of laughter. Sherlock thought John was kidding, but quickly realised his error and his features darkened. "No."

"Then you can just bloody well eat." John watched Sherlock's jaw clench in stubborn refusal. "Fine, no big deal, really. Nutrition until you're better." Sherlock seemed to be watching John as if he'd just told a huge lie, was waiting for the reneging, the punchline, the reconsideration. "Non-negotiable, hydration and nutrition, Sherlock. One way or the other."

"No hospital." Even in Sherlock's weakened state, the fear he was emitting was almost palpable, a circling and escalating energy that John could tell would end up doing more harm, make Sherlock entirely too anxious, if Sherlock couldn't, or they both couldn't - very quickly - rein it in.

"Oh," John said, understanding - or so he thought. "Not permanent, that goes into the abdomen. Temporary, flexible, very small." Sherlock still looked especially doubtful. "Through the nose."

"No hospital," he stressed again, looking at John as if he expected to be captured and hauled off. The rapid heart rate John had been so aware of earlier was now markedly elevated, and John didn't need to look at the monitor to know that for a fact.

"Of course not, I can do it here." The wide-eyed not-completely-thinking clearly expression was back, Sherlock staring hard at John. "No problem." He sat back against the bed, perched on the edge. "Take a deep breath, Sherlock. You're all right." The tremors began again, his arms shaking without conscious effort, the tremors of his thigh muscles John could feel vibrating the mattress.
"I'm not lying. We can do this right here at home."

"Pass."

"The better option would be for you to eat, anyway. What is going on here, that you won't?" John tried to keep his voice calm. "Are you not eating because you miss the drugs and are hoping I'll give in, supply you with something?" There was a slight shake of the head. "Are you hoping that by not eating, you're going to die?"

"God no. Just not hungry."

"Nauseous?" John asked, and Sherlock gave a slight shake of his head, no. "Usually eating something small will help, you realise. Last time I'll ask: dinner?"

"No."

"Your refusal to eat is, I think, simply you being stubborn. It's your childish way of throwing a temper tantrum." He retrieved a can of vanilla protein-enriched shake from the table from his earlier purchases. "I'd offer this to you open but I've seen you in action. Will you try to drink this?"

"No. God, leave me alone. Tired."

"Fine. That's your decision, then." He explained what he was doing as he assembled supplies, noting that if he wasn’t one-hundred percent sure the tube was in, there would be a mobile xray confirmation required before he would risk using it. While John'd never had an issue, he would not subject Sherlock to anything risky - and instilling tube feeding into a lung would have disastrous consequences. "I said earlier I wouldn't force you to do anything, and I still mean that." He waited until Sherlock looked at him. "I think it's wise, will help you start to regain your strength. Do I have your permission to proceed?"

A minute ticked by, maybe a little bit longer before Sherlock gave a small nod, and then looked away. John couldn't tell if it was nerves or if he was plotting something. Mostly he thought his patient lacked the energy to plot much at all.

With Sherlock in the bed, reclining back against several pillows, John laid everything out, and put on gloves. "You will follow my directions to the letter, and this will go fine. Perhaps once you’re stronger, you’ll feel more like eating and have a bit more of an appetite.” He flushed the tube, coated the tip in surgilube, and placed his hand securely on Sherlock’s forehead. He inserted the thin, flexible, weighted tip into Sherlock’s left nare. "Bit of pressure here," John advised, advancing the thin tube, "and then in the back of your throat, just like that. When you feel it, swallow.” John changed his hand position so that he was supporting the back of Sherlock’s head, ready to help him angle forward as they reached the next step of the procedure.

Sherlock’s eyes were wide and his frown grew more furrowed when he could feel the tube encroach on his nasopharynx, nearing his gag reflex. John backed off just a bit, waiting for him to breathe easily, relax again. “Means were nearly there, now when I advance it, you’re going to give a swallow, maybe a second one, and then it’ll be down. All right?” He rolled his eyes as John slid the tube in a little farther, but then swallowed and retched at the same time, and John seized the moment, the opening that would most likely indicate a straight passage into the esophagus, and flexed his neck forward, slid the small bore feeding tube down. It slid easily, passed smoothly, and John flicked his eyes to Sherlock’s - they were open, watery, his dilated pupils intently watching him. “You’re doing fine. Great, one more swallow, and we’re there. Ready, swallow.” He advanced further in, having reached the centimeter marking he’d pre-measured. ”Done, good job.”
He swallowed again, turning his head slightly to each side, feeling the foreign tube, his brow furrowed.

"Breathing okay?" Unhurried, John watched him carefully, not alarmed, glanced at the monitor still displaying numbers from the sensor on Sherlock's toe. Stable, in all readings.

"Yes, John."

He removed the stylet, connected the cath tip syringe, gave a small air bolus as he listened with his stethoscope over Sherlock’s epigastric area. "Perfect, nice air bolus sound, good and loud."

Removing the stethoscope, he pulled back from the tube and got back a small amount of air plus pale, thin green bilious stomach contents. "Great, definitely stomach." He dipped the end of the feeding tube into the cup of water he'd brought in prior to beginning, submerging it. Sherlock continued to breathe, chest rising, air exchanging, as John waited. No bubbles.

"Breathe in," he cued, then slid his fingers to Sherlock's lips, closing them, then partially occluded both nares with another finger, "and out, gently." There were still no bubbles. "Definitely not lung." He capped the tube, taped it securely to Sherlock’s nose, tucked the end under Sherlock’s collar while he binned the rubbish, cleaned the area.

"You did very well." John took in a lot, seeing how Sherlock was acting, gauging his reaction by his expression, trying to imagine how overwhelming his current status must be. "Feeling all right?"

He didn’t answer, but his look seemed to imply that no, of course it doesn’t feel all right.

Grabbing the syringe again, he instilled a small amount of water, and when there was no coughing, he instilled half a can of the complete nutrition he’d purchased. “So that’s all there is to it, until you’re agreeable to eat like a normal person.” Sherlock frowned at John’s words, and he noticed, continued, “Yes, that’s right, I did just insult you a little bit, sorry, because you’re perfectly capable of eating, you’re just refusing.” He opened his laptop then, cued up some classical orchestra music, set the volume to low, and pulled the sheet up over Sherlock. "Rest now. You did quite well, thanks."

Half an hour later, Sherlock was still mostly awake, and since there’d been no nausea or vomiting, John bolused with the rest of the can, flushed and clamped the tube. He rinsed the supplies, put them away.

Sherlock closed his eyes while John made light conversation, talking more about random stories from the news and from the more sedate anecdotes from Afghanistan. Safe ones. After a bit, it seemed that Sherlock had fallen more deeply asleep, and John wondered perhaps if it was because he was no longer hungry.

A few hours later, he could sense Sherlock was ready to stir, eventually looked up from his book to find that Sherlock was very definitely awake. His hand rested over his own belly, John could see, probably sensing that his gut was waking up, being stimulated, the production of digestive enzymes and stomach acid, probably a very different sensation from what he’d grown accustomed to. "Full?"


John checked residual of the feeding tube by aspirating contents, found it negligible, and partly to himself, partly to Sherlock, said, “Perfect. Maybe a couple of days of good nutrition will make a difference for you.” John tucked the end back to loop over Sherlock's ear, out of the way, the end resting inside the collar of his tee shirt. "More energy to stay active, generates more of an appetite.
It's a good cycle, better than how it's been anyway."

"It's bothersome." John worked hard not to react immediately to Sherlock's very obvious statement. "The tube," he fussed again at John when John's response was not as forthcoming as Sherlock apparently wanted.

"Of course it is, what did you expect?"

Sherlock scowled.

John couldn't stop the smile at his expression. "Let me remind you, this was your decision."

"Was not."

"Our decision. We made this together."

"You gave me an ultimatum."

"Semantics. Every choice you make has consequences." They met eyes then, their gaze steady, serious. John was reminded of his own choices - med school, enlisting, filling out that incident report that changed everything, his new choice of vocation. Sherlock's mind was full of so many choices he couldn't even settle on one - university, the way he chose to alienate people, drugs, the assignment gone badly, Vincent.

Choices. He vaguely was aware that he could have fought John off, resisted the feeding tube, at least put up enough token resistance. That he did not was puzzling. He'd even nodded in agreement before John had begun. He shut his eyes again, still wide awake but seeking some sort of refuge from those bright physician eyes that saw too much, turned his face away.

A hand patted his shoulder again. "Before you crash here and fall asleep again, I asked Molly to bring over a few movies, thought we'd put one on later out in the sitting room. I'll set you up on the couch..."

"No."

"I'll turn up the volume then so you can at least listen to it."

"You're not going to stay in here with me?"

"You're not going to join me out there?"

John watched as Sherlock reacted with surprise to that statement, brows down, eyes open although briefly to look over at him. Did he really expect that John wouldn't push him, challenge him from time to time, even just given the few days John had been at this assignment. Quickly, Sherlock's animation faded, and he resumed the appearance that it didn't even matter, that he didn't care. Off-handedly, pretending he wasn't paying attention either, John opened his laptop, checked his email, found a short list from Mycroft, and perched on his cot as he read the requested information.

Interesting indeed.

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John cued Sherlock through a bedtime routine again, noting that he was still without energy, heart rate still quite high as he used the toilet, brushed his teeth (which John finally took pity on him and did some of the scrubbing), and offered him mouthwash (refused) and a beverage - water (also
refused).

"I don't need that, do I?" Sherlock asked.

"What, water? Of course you do, and you can eat and drink even with the tube in." For someone who actually enjoyed eating, John would have used the term pleasure feeds, but he didn't think that would be productive with Sherlock. "And actually, you might be a little thirstier now than you were before."

John filled the glass, held it out. Sherlock looked both perplexed and irritated, took a small sip, then shook his head no. They were in the bathroom, the mirror in front of them, and their eyes met, their reflections framing both heads.

"The feeding tube probably isn't the look you want to keep forever, is it?" John angled an eyebrow, one hand on his hip, gestured at the tape on Sherlock's nose. "I mean, it's kind of distracting from ..." and here John paused, a little awkwardly, not sure what he wanted to complete the sentence with: the cheekbones, the hair, the eyes, smile, or the recent shave? "... the rest of what you got going on here."

"Not thirsty."

"Pain medicine for your headache?"

"Oxy?"

"Sherlock," John growled, although fondly.

"Codeine?"

"Of course not. Paracetamol."

"No."

"Fine, suit yourself, but I can crush it, give it down the tube, along with a folic acid and thiamine." Sherlock just stared, waiting for more of an explanation. "Helps the brain recover. Mitigates the withdrawal symptoms." John knew Wernicke's encephalopathy would be particularly late to occur now, but recent research still suggested that the deficiency should still be treated as soon as possible.

There was a protracted sigh, and Sherlock still looked quite tired. "I thought this was supposed to help." He leaned hard on John, feet dragging, body not cooperating.

"Instantly? Come on, you're brighter than that." John guided him back to the bed, deposited him on it. "It took a long time to get this malnourished, and we can't correct it too fast."

"Why not?"

"Dangerous. Refeeding syndrome can actually make you sicker. While I'm thinking about it, just so you know, we're sending off bloodwork tomorrow, phosphorus, haemoglobin, and a panel of everything else." Sherlock laid down, turned on his side. "Nope, head up. Here's another pillow."

"Ugh." His protest was followed by him not moving.

"Sit up, Sherlock, come on." And John wrapped both arms around him to lift him, tucked two more pillows behind him, let his thin body then relax, elevated safely to give meds, a bit of water, and another very small feeding. The calculations how much nutrition he needed had been easily
completed based on Sherlock's body weight, his height, and caloric requirements. That would be enough for the first day, within the safe recommendations, that small amount. He pulverized the few pills, showing each label to Sherlock out of concern that he would worry John was slipping him something, diluted, instilled, then flushed them. "Keep sitting up, at least half an hour." Sherlock's brows furrowed again. "Prevents reflux."

"Stupid."

"Aspiration pneumonia is also stupid. And somewhat preventable." Once John had stashed the supplies again, he disappeared briefly across the hall, returned with one of Sherlock's expensive skin lotions. "Your hands are atrocious. Let's get them less dry, then, shall we?"

John perched next to Sherlock on the bed, took one of his hands and a nail file, made quick work of shortening and shaping his nail tips, then smoothing and rubbing lotion into them, his hands, over his wrists. After he'd done both, taking his time as he worked the lotion in, massaging knuckles and palms and the soft fleshing pad of his fingertips, he set the bottle aside and saw Sherlock watching him curiously. "Mycroft told me," he said quietly, almost sheepishly, by way of explanation. "Said your hands bother you when they're dry, not taken care of."

"What else?"

"What else what?"

"What else did he say?"

John stifled the smile, let only a small grin peek out. "That I should consider information an advantage and to wield it carefully."

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Chapter End Notes

It is standard procedure to do a confirmation placement xray after placing a small bore feeding tube. To make up for the creative license I allowed him to get away with skipping that, John assessed three different ways that the feeding tube was correctly placed and then watched carefully for tolerance and complications.

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Refeeding syndrome is a metabolic disturbance (phosphorous, magnesium, and potassium primarily) that can occur when someone is severely malnourished and then exposed to nutrition too quickly. It can be very dangerous, even fatal, with cardiac and neurological complications.
Mycroft had texted, said he was possibly looking at a trip in the upcoming weeks, depending on how things were going, and wanted to swing by briefly to check in on Sherlock before making a final decision. John had responded that he was sleeping but he was welcome anyway. Sherlock was only sleeping short intervals, and John wanted to protect those if he could manage.

They had both paused outside Sherlock's bedroom, and in the dim light watched long enough for Sherlock to snuffle in his sleep and roll over. John had pinned the end of the feeding tube to the front of his tee shirt to prevent getting tangled in it or have it accidentally dislodge.

Once they'd moved, by tacit agreement, back to the sitting room, John found himself seated across from Sherlock's brother, who seemed, surprisingly, in no rush to leave.

"So, what stringed instrument does he play?"

"Why do you ask?" Mycroft's tone was guarded, as if the ability to play a musical instrument was highly classified and must be closely monitored. "What did he say?"

"Oh, he said nothing."

"Then how ...?" Mycroft asked and stopped when he caught sight of John's face - pleased with himself.

John knew the corner of his mouth turned up and made no effort to hide it. He felt a bit of satisfaction escaping through his partial smile, hoping eventually Mycroft would stop playing games and give him a little credit where it was due. It had, after all, been Mycroft's suggestion to attend to Sherlock's hands. "Calluses and unique arm definition."

"You don't say." A more careful scrutiny and Mycroft snorted. "Seems doubtful, actually."

"Found a brick of rosin on one of the shelves. No instrument. Empty stand," John let his eyes flick over to the corner by one of the bookshelves.

"Most musicians don't get callouses unless they play daily or are professional. As with asymmetric muscle development."

"I did a bit of experimentation with some background music. He seems to conduct when there are strings playing," John nodded his head back at his laptop. "Your email said that he liked classical music. Orchestra seems to stimulate it more than symphony. Piano alone had no impact."

"So he said nothing."

"I watch him. And may have done a fair amount of guessing." John could feel himself relax a little, given that Mycroft seemed unruffled. "And then I found the rosin, so..."
"Indeed," Mycroft toyed with his cuticles, grateful again that John was overseeing care and keeping of his brother, that he seemed actively engaged. "Violin."

John had a momentary image of Sherlock under stage lights, curls bouncing, violin positively thrumming as he played it. He had a harder time picturing Sherlock following a conductor, and forced his train of thought back to present. "And you, what do you play?" There was a snort but no answer, and John made a tsk-tsk sound.

Mycroft aimed for (and hit) arrogant and condescending. "This has no bearing on what you were hired to do, Dr. Watson."

John was not cowed, pressed the issue simply for the contrariness of doing so. "Perhaps. But, oh come now, certainly with your upbringing you're not about to be upstaged by a younger sibling's talent." Silence. "Cello," he stated, a guess, glancing at how Mycroft sat forward in the chair, trying to picture him with a stringed instrument.

"No."

"Oboe."

"And risk a stroke? No." There was a degree of incredulousness about him at the apparently untenable thought.

"You realise that's a myth."

Rather than guess again, John simply remained silent, hoping to convey that he was no longer playing, and Mycroft answered quietly, "French horn."

"Of course. Posh." John could have meant the words as an insult, but his delivery was soft and he knew he was mostly amused at their dynamics. "Where is his violin now?"

"I suggest you ask him that question, Dr. Watson."

++

Earlier, John had flipped through the playlist to find Dvorak, set it to play softly. He'd helped Sherlock to the loo and back to bed, offered him water, which Sherlock had only taken a sip of. "Ready?"

"Does it matter?"

"Would you rather --?"

"No. But I thought you said this might help stimulate my appetite." John shook a can, opened the bag with tubing, poured it in then connected it to the end of the feeding tube. He'd done bolus feeds, thought infusing more slowly by gravity would be easier for them both. "It isn't working."

"Yes, but your weight's not going to go up after only a day, but it will. Your skin turgor is better, urine's less concentrated."

Sherlock scowled, as if mentioning the word urine was taboo.

John shrugged, "It is what it is, an improvement. As I said, you didn't get this way overnight. It's going to take some time."

"The tube is annoying," he muttered, eyes downcast and very briefly cross-eyed at the tape on his
nose, the sensation of the liquid infusing making the tube cooler, fuller. "The IV was better, except you took it out." John had removed the site as it wasn't being used, and he'd leave the line in again in the morning after using it for drawing blood. Given Sherlock's pallor, he thought perhaps his blood counts were still entirely too low. But just in case, one venipuncture was more tolerable than two.

"Not nutritious, IV fluids, this is much better for you. And remember what I said, temporary."

Sherlock's foot started moving just barely keeping the rhythm of the music, and he sighed as if tired, closed his eyes, shifting around on the bed.

"Uh uh," John chided. "Sit up, head up while this is infusing. Gravity and all, you know."

"If you make some allusion to Newton and the apple I will hurt you." Sherlock's foot kept time, barely, and John watched the specific point of the music for Sherlock when the strings built, swelled, crested. His breathing preceded the highest volume, and his right hand - what may have held a bow - made a few very small-scale sawing motions in time with the melody. "You know it didn't really fall on his head."

"Legend, of course. But there was an apple, and it's flight from a tree did apparently trigger his curiosity. Wasn't he sent home from his university after an outbreak of plague?" John agreed with him, tossed in the question about plague. He adjusted the closure on the roller clamp, watching Sherlock's hand still as it rested on the blanket, but noted that he was still breathing in sync with the music and continued to do so. "So sitting up is best during, maybe a half hour after, make sure your stomach is emptying."

"Is my labwork back yet?"

"I haven't heard the fax machine."

"Digestion is tiresome. And tedious."

"Explain," John said, seeking clarification.

"I'm exhausted." He sighed, relaxing boneless into the pillows, his body still and quiet. "And I'm not even doing anything."

"Sleep then. Recovery is not easy." John watched as the last of the feed ran in, and he disconnected, flushed, capped, and tended to the supplies. "Maybe later you'll have enough energy to walk to the couch. Or the kitchen."

Sherlock made a face at that. "Or throw you out of my flat."

"You'll need to work up to that, I think." Beethoven's seventh started, and John stayed to watch Sherlock not exactly sleep, but listen, his eyes closed. Once the song built to the peak of the second movement, mid melody, he hit pause on the laptop.

"Hey." Sherlock fussed from the bed and from behind his closed eyelids, which then snapped open, displeased, complaining though not giving reason. Not caring if Sherlock noticed, he smiled as he saw the man's toe in mid-direction and both hands as if bowing and fingerling something. Sherlock found the abrupt cessation of movement, particularly at the middle of a musical phrase, especially frustrating.

"Sorry," John said, "thought I heard the fax machine." Enter, the music resumed, and within a few measures, Sherlock's face relaxed.
So when he and Mycroft had connected later, John was ready.

++

The morning had started with John making arrangements to have bloodwork picked up again, as he’d been saying. This trip to the bathroom, John had had to support Sherlock more than in previous mornings, and just the few steps back to bed when they’d finished - loo, teeth, Sherlock had refused both shave and bath offers - as he was completely winded. John affixed the pulse oximeter again, found it marginally acceptable, but heart rate was still quite high, higher than it should have been and did not return to normal ranges in the time frame it should have, as expected.

John pulled out supplies, and this time, Sherlock’s veins did not fill as they had previously. He filled and tied a couple of gloves with very warm water, set them on Sherlock’s inner elbows, another on the back of his hand, hoping the warmth and vasodilation would help bring up a suitable vein. The tourniquet was tight, and John pulled a chair to Sherlock’s bedside, took his time searching.

Sherlock was studying him, and the process. John couldn’t help the mischievous thought and put it to words. "Should I let you do this instead?"

"I think not." Sherlock rotated his arm so the dorsal vein was more accessible along the back of his arm. "How's that one? Any better?"

"Other than probably impossible to actually perform on yourself? It's fair." He shrugged, feeling the lack of bounce, went back to a lower cubital vein. "This one's good enough. Now, big pinch," he said finally. Cannulation was successful though not easy, and the tubes filled slowly, and once he released the tourniquet, Sherlock hissed out a breath.

John connected the IV cap, taped everything in place, asked, "I know that one was sore, sorry, but we got it. You all right?"

From his pillow, he didn't even raise his head, simply said, "Feel like I just ran a marathon."

John set up the mornings small feeding, set the lab package together (chemistry, haematology, blood bank specimens) and placed it just inside the door for the courier, made two cups of tea, and returned to sit with Sherlock. There were a few things he wanted to do, things to try with the man based on some intimations from the email, as well as some between the lines things Mycroft had given him, but at the moment, Sherlock wasn't up for any of it. Sherlock's tea grew cold.

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The computer was still playing, something by Vivaldi that John did actually faintly recognise, when John heard the fax for real this time.

He scanned the printouts, giving a quick overall look before sitting down to study and compare them. Chemistries still skewed but no worse. Specifically his phosphorus and magnesium levels were good, so the feedings could be safely advanced.

The bigger issue, though, was that he was still very anaemic. Transfusion-worthy, even. He'd sent off type and screen: Blood type A positive, no antibodies detected. It would require some arrangements, then, in order to accomplish that. Hearing a noise from the bed, he returned to Sherlock's door to find him awake, eyes open, questioning, and having cleared his throat as a request for information.

"Well, the feedings are going all right, and definitely not making things worse."
"As if I care."

"You complain enough that I thought perhaps you did." John slid down his lower lip to evaluate the colour of his gums: pale. "Your blood count is still pretty low. It's why you're winded, weak."

"Not specifically helpful."

"Ever been told your haemoglobin or haematocrit are low?" There was a negative shake. "No abnormal blood values in the past?"

"Other than positive tox screens, you mean?"

"Touche."

"I have no idea," Sherlock did actually answer the question. John set aside the papers, set about offering Sherlock food and beverage, which was not even acknowledged this time. He added a concentrated protein supplement to what would loosely be termed breakfast, set it to gravity infuse again, flushed it when it was done. After a bit, Sherlock had fallen back to sleep, and John watched his pulse rate, oxygen level, and respiratory rate while digging out his mobile.

Need to have another conversation with you. In person or via mobile is fine. JW

I will ring you shortly

When the phone rang, John took it briskly out into the other room to minimise disturbances for his patient. John didn't hedge, waiting only long enough to say hello and thanks for the prompt call. "Has your brother ever been diagnosed with thalassaemia?"

A few seconds went by in silence. "Thalassaemia?" John could hear keyboard strokes in the back. "One L, two esses." Of course, John realised, not surprised at all that he would look it up immediately, and supplied him with the spelling.

"Not to my knowledge." Mycroft spoke carefully, slowly.

"Anyone in your family?" He could hear keys again, decided to elaborate. "It's a type of blood disorder of the haemoglobin, causes anaemia and requires monitoring of iron levels. Transfusions in more severe cases. Most common in those of Asian descent, but Mediterranean and middle eastern as well. And sometimes just spontaneously."

Silence.

"I warned you about withholding records and history from me. No is a fine answer if that is the truth."

Silence.

"It's not a genetic defect, if that's what you're thinking. And I'm not positive he's got it, but it helps me try to find a cause for his anaemia." John could well imagine Mycroft holding the phone as he read from a computer screen in front of him, thinking nothing of making him wait. "Call me back when you're done being rude and ready to actually talk to me."

John was ready to disconnect the call, heard Mycroft intake of breath and then his voice. "I'm not aware of that diagnosis nor of a familial tendency, what I know of it anyway." John heard nothing on the other end of the line. "I will make a few inquiries with our parents."
"I'm going to have them run additional blood studies regardless, but it would help explain things." He heard movement in the bedroom. "And treatment is essentially the same, but again, knowledge is power."

"Indeed."

"He will most likely need a transfusion. Today if possible or tomorrow. I will be needing to make arrangements with the hospital, and it can be done in their infusion suite."

"No."

John gripped the mobile, wishing it was the neck of the man he was talking to. No seemed to be both of their favourite words. Ready to launch, John began, "He is activity intolerant. The lack of oxygen carrying blood cells puts him at risk ..." for heart attack, bleeding, hypoxia, risk of infection, he didn't get to say.

"Dr. Watson. I'm not saying no to the transfusion, if that's what he needs. But I hired you to care for him in his flat. Do it, but do it there."

"Even if I agreed to that, which is not happening, the hospital as well as the NHS blood and transplant would unlikely allow it. They have protocols for administration, you realise..."

"I will make a few calls." There was a rustling of papers, a sigh. "I will be in touch no later than lunchtime today, at which point we can make plans."

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John caught a short nap as Sherlock did, but awakened each time Sherlock moved, rolled over, or made even the slightest noise. The furrow on Sherlock's brow deepened with activity, and John watched with a sympathetic eye. He was obviously still very uncomfortable with any movement, and a deep sound of discomfort seemed to be growing more frequent, deep in his chest.

"Why am I having such pain now?"

"Electrolytes affect everything and as fluid shifts, solutes do too." John was prepared to elaborate except that Sherlock did truly seem terribly uncomfortable. "Want something for the aching?" Nod. Consulting the time, John crushed and reconstituted a mild pain reliever along with Sherlock's nutrition, set it to infuse by gravity again.

"I swear you're making this worse, whatever bullshit you're doing to me is awful."

"Which cliche would you like to hear right now?" John stood, adjusted the pillows again."We can do the 'no pain no gain' one. But probably closer to the truth is the 'pain is weakness leaving the body' one. Ultimately, you'll end up stronger, better nourished, more energy ..."

"Whatever you gave me isn't going to help. I need something much stronger, and ..."

"Sherlock ..."

"No, seriously let me make a phone call, someone can bring me ..." He continued a moment or two, speech a little pressured, the anxiety of his physical symptoms beginning to spiral. Once he'd stopped to catch his breath, he looked intently at John, the tremors aggravated as his upset grew. "Give me your mobile."

"Not a chance. I can help, soon as this ..." John glanced at the hanging bag, about half done, and left the sentence unfinished.
A growl interrupted him, and Sherlock reached up his hand to the feeding tube in frustration. "I should just pull this out."

"All right, if you're done with it." Though his muscles were tensed, ready for action, John stayed completely still. He did not touch the tubing, or move to stop him, but if Sherlock moved to actually pull the tube, he would shut it off to minimise the mess and prevent choking.

John's lack of immediate response must have surprised him. "Really? You would let me?" Long fingers explored the edges of the tape on his nose, and then along the tube, holding it in place.

"Of course I would. But just so you're aware, it would mean that you will need to eat all your meals, drink what I bring you, cooperate, follow instructions."

The hand relaxed, tube and tape remaining in place, and John worked hard not to exhale audibly in relief. Sherlock's eyes drifted closed, his mouth pursed in annoyance, a mild grimace as he shifted in the bed. In a quiet voice, he asked, "How long will it take before I start to feel more like myself?"

"Couple days more and you should see and feel improvement." While Sherlock seemed to be napping again, John considered that one of these times Sherlock would definitely pull the tube, having had enough of it. Thinking that it could be anytime, he made sure to give the days medications - thiamine, folic acid, proton pump inhibitor being the only ones at present - just in case it happened sooner rather than later.

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The next time Sherlock was awake, John was ready for a bit of distraction as he waited for Mycroft to get back to him. He turned up the thermostat pre-emptively, helped Sherlock to the loo, started the water in the bathtub without specifically giving him a choice.

"Not again," Sherlock fussed, but his voice was quiet. John affixed a waterproof sleeve over Sherlock's IV site, secured the edge with tape.

"Just soak, if you want. And it's been a few days, actually. I know it takes a lot out of you, but the heat should help with the muscle soreness."

"You're a bloody nag."

John ignored that. "Bath bomb," he said, tossing one in that he'd found under the vanity. "And bubbles." He squirted a bit of whatever posh liquid he'd found as well. While he wanted to question their origin, he considered that both products did not seem especially newly purchased. Without speaking his concern out loud, Sherlock reached a tired hand up toward his hair. "No worries, I'll wash that, rinse with warm water from the tap; no soap." Without much fuss, John eased the shirt off him, let Sherlock slide off the pyjamas with a minimum of shyness this time, held his elbow steady as he stepped into the tub.

Despite the fact that John would have let Sherlock soak longer, relax a good duration of time, he was just so pale and weak that the bath wasn't a drawn out process at all. Hair washed quickly then towel dried, he soon helped Sherlock to his feet, wrapped him in a big bath sheet, and brought him back across the hall to the bed. "You turned the heat up?" he asked, eyes closed, leaning into the pillows John had propped against the headboard.

"You shivered last time, thought it would help," John swapped out the damp towels for dry, set a couple of pillows where he wanted.
"And I think it would help your sore muscles with some of this oil, a massage." From his own supplies, those that Mycroft had secured from his bedsit, he held it up. John always kept a small supply of it in his equipment. It was infrequent, but he had found that several of his patients ended up benefiting from massage.

One eye opened, partway, more cautious than curious. If Sherlock had more energy, John wondered, he might be putting up some resistance or even mildly alarmed.

"It'll help." John was already tucking fresh pyjama pants over Sherlock's feet as he talked, adding thick socks from the indexed sock drawer (which he chose not to comment on yet), pulled them up, tied at the waist. "Here," and he held out some water for him, "have a bit?" Sherlock took barely enough that the level didn't really go down in the glass. John set it aside, then stood waiting by the side of the bed. "Go on, on your stomach then."

The one opened eye closed, no words offered. John pulled up the duvet while nudging Sherlock and helped him to roll over, onto his stomach. There was only brief resistance, and then Sherlock did finally allow John to push him into position, adjusting pillows, making sure the feeding tube wasn't tugging. With Sherlock fairly close to the edge of the bed, John angled his hip, perching against the edge where he could still reach everything, right up against Sherlock's side. Warming his hands up then coating them with a light sandalwood massage oil, he began carefully and lightly stroking between Sherlock's shoulder blades, his fingertips pressing, easing, starting in slow, gentle circles. The oil warmed under John's already warm hands, was thick and heated against Sherlock's skin. John made no tracing, no deliberate emphasis on the scars, simply treated the whole of his back. He'd barely grazed over his shoulder when he realised what was missing.

"Just give me a sec here," he said, letting his touch lighten as it occurred to him he'd forgotten to turn the music on low, which he did with his smallest knuckle out of deference to the oily state of his hands. "This piece all right?" John asked, peering at the now playing section of his screen. "Says it's selections from Tchaikovsky."

"Not my favourite but acceptable."

"I can change ..."

"It's fine," Sherlock murmured. "Everything is just so bloody sore."

"Your muscle cells are screaming, I know." John had restarted the rubbing, more lightly as Sherlock needed to reaccommodate. "Too hard?" He leaned up so that he could let his body weight do the bulk of the work as Sherlock shook his head no. The muscles along his bony spine were tight, initially he was tensing as John slowly let his hands run from waist, up along his back over kidney area to rib cage, then approaching scapula and into cervical spine muscles.

Within a few minutes, the song had changed, and Sherlock's breathing was more even and in synchrony with the movement of John's hands. The musculature of Sherlock's shoulders was the last to finally loosen, and John continued his ministrations for a few more minutes, then began to slow his movements, backing off gradually.

"Still awake?" he whispered.

"Hmmm."

"Stay relaxed while I," and as John was speaking, he tucked Sherlock's arm down, "help you get rolled over," and he left him lay fully on his side, "so your back doesn't get any more sore," and he tucked a pillow under Sherlock's leg to take the strain off his back, "and you can rest a bit." A few pillow adjustments later, the duvet pulled up, towels hung up, room straightened, and John
surveyed the scene.

*Okay, Mycroft,* he thought, glancing at his mobile, checking the volume. *Your move, or I am taking matters into my own hands.*

John was just searching for the infusion suite appointment scheduling number when his caller ID flashed: Mycroft.

Chapter End Notes

Thalassaemia is fairly common, often more an incidental explanation for anaemia. Most of the time it requires no treatment, but there are various medications that help, and some patients are transfusion dependent. John will definitely run blood iron studies to be sure there is not iron overload, which can be very problematic for patients with thalassaemia.

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Muscle aching is very common in the presence of electrolyte imbalance and sometimes does, as with what Sherlock experienced, get worse as it begins to correct.

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Please let me know (kindly) if I missed anything or if a typo snuck by. Seems every time I re-read something, I find something and tweak it.
"Who are you, exactly?"

Recap: Mycroft has hired John, a medical coordinator specialising in live-in home care, to see Sherlock through recovery, detox, and healing. There is a feeding tube because Sherlock has no appetite and has been mostly refusing to eat. He continues to be activity intolerant due to low blood counts, and John wants to take him to the infusion center for a blood transfusion.

Mycroft has advised John that taking Sherlock back to a facility for a transfusion is definitely not on.

"It's Dr. Watson," John said, seeing the incoming call from Sherlock's brother. He answered his mobile, stepping out to the hallway so as not to disturb Sherlock's tenuous sleep more than necessary. An occasional twitch, a little bit of rapid eye movement, and he had been watching a while now as Sherlock's exhausted body would try to pass from one sleep stage to another.

"I'm on my way to your location now. I have a form that requires your signature."

"Form for what, exactly?" John asked.

"I'll explain it all in person." The call disconnected, and John's teeth clenched. He had a feeling it wasn't going to be the last time that day, either.

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"Who are you, exactly." The bureaucratic red tape that had been not only rapidly initiated but looked to be already completed - save John's signature - would have taken a regular person weeks to have accomplished, if it would have even been a possibility.

John did not expect a verbal answer, but he did expect the smirk on Mycroft Holmes' face. He was feisty enough to appreciate that he stood correct on both counts.

Person of influence or no, John lowered the papers. "I'm not signing this."

Mycroft's expression changed not one iota. "I'll remind you that I hired you as a medical coordinator. To coordinate medical care in the home."

"And I'll remind you that did not include the involvement of unsafe medical practices. I told you right up front ..."
The grin on Mycroft's face was out of place, out of character, and disconcerting. "Oh, I recall what you said."

"I don't care if you have bloody permission or waivers or special dispensation from the church of England to do any of this. I don't have to agree to it." John glanced again at the paperwork. There was a letter of intent stating that a transfusion was medically necessary outside of the typical infusion suite setting and a certificate of medical need that, once John signed it, would be taken back to the hospital where NHS blood and transplant blood products would be issued. It had already been signed by the director of pathology, who oversaw the lab, the director of medical services, and a few other titles John hadn't actually heard of since med school. It certified that the transfusion would be attended by at least one provider of medical care.

John could almost imagine a duel in his mind, the gloves being dropped, swords drawn - or pistols, more likely - the two of them ready to pace off. Both of them were calm, voices low. "I assure you, Dr. Watson, if you press this matter, he will suffer despite your best intentions for his safety."

"He trusts me." John gestured at the lightly sleeping form. "Trusts me to keep him safe. Not to let him come to harm."

From their vantage point in the hallway, where John could keep an eye on his patient, Mycroft also looked steadily into the room. "He will never trust you again if you betray him thus."

"I am not betraying him, I am doing what is best, wisest, for his health."

"I can forbid this."

"I can resign on the spot, contract be damned." John had never broken one but there was grounds for it if he was being unable to hold to his ethical standards. He got the sense that Mycroft had chosen this hill to die on, decided to pursue more information. "So, what exactly is the problem with taking him to the hospital for a transfusion, bringing him back here? Perhaps you should enlighten me."

"You realise he's been hospitalised, institutionalised, previously."

"I'm fairly certain we've been over my multiple requests for complete records. Do you want me to complain about it again?"

"My PA is boxing them up, and they will be delivered shortly."

"Oh, did you hear that?" He brought a hand to his ear as if listening. "The sound of my hopes dashing to pieces on the floor. Pardon me for my disbelief."

Mycroft did not appear to be amused. "Suffice it to say that yes, he's had traumatic hospitalisations. Several, in fact. In the acute detox phases, he's out of it enough that he tolerates the first few days, maybe a week. After that, his mental health deteriorates quite alarmingly." John let his raised brow ask the question. "Sectioned yes." The pallor to Mycroft's face was a sad hue, and John could actually glimpse the emotion just under the surface giving clue to how bad it must've been. "I've always hated the word."

Thoughtfully John nodded, letting the information sink in. Changing the subject, he cautioned, "A blood transfusion is risky, out of the scope of practice to be performed away from back-up emergency medical equipment. I'm uncomfortable with doing this here." From inside the bedroom, there was the full-limbed myoclonic twitching of unfulfilling sleep, and Sherlock awoke with a start, a gasp, uncertainty. Handing the papers back to Mycroft as he entered the room, John
pulled wide the draperies on his way to the bed to let more light in, to help orient. Speaking soothing words, he began trying to settle Sherlock back down and prevent him from being too rattled, too stressed. "You're safe. It's all right."

"God, hurts ...so sore. Nightmare. Thought I heard Mycroft." The words were clear to John, close as he was, but not his usual diction.

From the doorway, Mycroft spoke. "No nightmare, Sherlock. I'm here in the flesh."

"Nightmare, then. Told you."

John didn't want him wasting energy on further pointless, sibling fussing. "Your brother and I are just touching base on how things are progressing."

Sherlock laid his head back down on the pillow. "Not well." Against the white of the pillowcase, Sherlock's skin was nearly camouflaged against it but for the dark hair. John straightened the pillow, tucked in the duvet, made sure the feeding tube wasn't pulling or catching on anything.

"Love what you've done with your nose, brother-mine."

"Piss off." While Sherlock's words may have been powerful, the delivery was weak enough that it was comparable to the high-pitched meow of a frail kitten.

"Should coordinate very nicely with that new shirt mummy just bought you."

John couldn't stop the smile at both Mycroft's words and Sherlock's weakened attempt to respond somehow. "Easy there, the both of you. I'll not have you harassing my patient," and Mycroft chuckled, victoriously, just a little. "Until I'm sure he's able to hold his own with you."

Mycroft spoke to John. "His lack of vigor is so disappointing," and then he turned to face Sherlock, "Well, sparring with you will apparently have to wait."

"Yes. Doctor's orders." John wished that Sherlock had the energy to return the jibes, and considered that eventually there would possibly be some entertaining encounters that John would, in all likelihood, have to referee. And as annoying as it was sure to be, John did actually look forward to it in small doses. He'd always preferred slightly feisty to this malaise Sherlock was trapped in currently.

Mycroft had approached, a hand reaching out awkwardly to touch Sherlock's arm. If nothing else, the gesture conveyed a bit of tenderness toward Sherlock, and was a reminder to John that, just perhaps, Mycroft did have good intentions toward his brother.

Sherlock's eyelids even appeared tired as John caught Mycroft's eye, pulled down Sherlock's lower lip to expose very pale gums, then did the same with his lower eyelid. "I don't suppose you're ready for something to eat or drink yet?" With very minimal movement, Sherlock shook his head, closed his eyes. "I'll be back in a moment, just going to walk your brother out."

They paused in the sitting room. "You realise he's doing rather well with you, Dr. Watson."

With a catch of his shoulders in a partial shrug. "He needs a blood transfusion. You saw his heart rate, how pale...?"

"Yes, of course, I believe your word." Pause for dramatic effect, Mycroft breathed, continued, "and I agree, which is why I have already taken such radical measures," and he indicated the papers he was still holding. "If you continue, press this matter, take him to hospital, he will absolutely regress, to the point that he may not work well with you again. I guarantee that."
Mycroft waited, patiently, but John held his words. "Please proceed here at Baker Street. I have never begged in my life, but know that if I were to do so, this would most likely be the time. You - he - we have worked to hard to get to this point for you to jeopardise absolutely everything now, John. Please."

John could feel the first signs of cracks in his armor, his arguments. "But all right, suppose - and I'm not saying I am in agreement yet - we proceed here," he began, but a cold sweat broke out across the back of John's neck. He hesitated, recalling the flinching at the loud noise, the scars, the plea from Sherlock that night when he'd cried out, 'don't hurt me'. He recalled the trust John had worked on, had built, when placing the feeding tube in the flat and not in an office or hospital. While they had a long process to go, Sherlock did, or was beginning to anyway, trust him. It was precarious as well as delicate. Sectioned. The word played about in John's mind, wondering.

Mycroft's sincerity was visible, palpable, and John's mind sensed, envisioned the desperation too.

"I'm really not okay with this," John said again with a sighing huff, but he could feel the crumbling of his resolve, his stubbornness beginning to abate. "However, it may be the lesser of two evils. And I will be compiling quite a few conditions that you will either meet or find someone to do so, to ensure we've removed as many variables as possible. Before any of this is going to happen."

Mycroft did look quite relieved, but appropriate serious as opposed to victorious, for which John was also glad. "Thank you." The quiet whisper was confirmation that he truly was grateful.

"I'm going on record that you've agreed to assume the risk. I'll minimise it best I can, but ...

Mycroft was nodding.

He reminded himself of the military environment, where blood was given in much less ideal situations, where there would occasionally have been the essentially unscreened emergency trauma situations, where dogtags were the only means of crossmatching and blood was given as a last ditch, lifesaving effort. In his mind, he reminded himself that he hadn't lost patients there due to transfusion complications in even far less ideal situations. Here, he could take measures to guarantee as much safety as possible. If an emergency were truly to arise, he would be close enough to the hospital to save his life, and at that point, there would be fallout and he would have no other choice.

"Sit," John said, deciding already on his immediate plan of action. "I'll sign your damn papers in a minute, and when you take those back to the pathology department of the lab, you're going to drop off another ABO sample. Extra confirmation on his blood type."

"I thought you already knew his blood type." Mycroft had not yet sat down as asked, and John glared at him, pointed at the chair until he complied.

"Of course I know it."

John was nothing if not patient, volunteered nothing further immediately. Mycroft wasn't placated by the answer, not yet. "So if he's already low, how smart is it to send another specimen?"

"I don't tell you how to run the country," he said, taking a shot at whatever Mycroft did for a living when he wasn't micromanaging John's medical care, "so I'd appreciate it if you'd let me rule my particular kingdom here. But if you must know, ABO mismatch is the deadliest kind of blood transfusion reaction, and sending off another sample assures that we'll hands down, full stop, get the right type. It cuts down substantially on the already remotest incidence of human error."

"It was just a question." The snide tone was back, dripping and arrogant.
"Of course it was," John said. "And there's your answer, but the one I wanted to give you was the same one Sherlock told you a few minutes ago." He hesitated, waited, made sure Mycroft was paying close attention. "Piss off."

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Sherlock slept through John getting supplies out again. While he assembled things, he ran the stats in his head, the absolute risk factors, the percentages, the feasibility. He would sweat the whole time, and he would be ready for the worst case scenario, but he would do it. A second IV line would be best practice anyway, so pulling off a small tube for the blood bank wouldn't be any additional sticks for Sherlock.

"Budge over," John said, touching Sherlock on the arm, trying to make room at the edge of the bed so he could sit down.

This time, John went for a large bore line in the antecub, explaining to his patient that another IV was being placed just in case, that he was sending a small extra sample to the lab for further testing.

Mycroft watched John bag and seal the lab specimen with the appropriate order inside. "This goes to accessioning," he said, setting the bag down. He filled out a prescription order for the unit of blood (which he'd never done before and would likely never do again, and figured Mycroft would take care of the rest of the process). Under his name, he put his mobile number. He signed the forms Mycroft had brought, and held on to them briefly. When Mycroft looked at him questioningly, waiting for John to let go, John's expression was serious. "This is a big deal, you know. We have a lot to do to finish getting ready."

"I understand, and I ..." Mycroft seemed puzzled by his own feelings on the matter, brow creased, "I'm grateful. You continue to impress me."

"Wait till you see my list of conditions."

"Take care of what you can, email me the rest."

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The email list John crafted was to the point, included every medication he could think of that Sherlock might have required, a few additional monitoring pieces of equipment, and a bottle of scotch for himself that perhaps he'd have just the smallest sip of later, once they were on the other side of the blood transfusion. Actually, probably not and he didn't expect Mycroft to bring it anyway. But if he did, it would be saved for the completion of this patient, the moving out, the moving on. He texted Molly requesting a phone call at her earliest convenience, during which he explained what was transpiring, and that he needed a unit of blood picked up when it was typed and crossed from the hospital along with all appropriate tubings, fluids, filter, and paperwork. He also asked her to stay with them for the duration of the transfusion.

Intubation equipment, he hedged about, and ended up deciding that he didn't want it inside the flat, but in a fully staffed ambulance that would be parked outside for at minimum the first hour of the transfusion, the most dangerous time.

The anaphylaxis kit also ended up on the list. Then as a final item, he listed full and complete medical records as previously requested.

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Sherlock had no interested in drinking anything, so John took care of his nutritional needs again, parenteral nutrition, followed by the protein supplement, but held off on the paracetamol in efforts to not mask any fever reaction later with the transfusion just in case there would be one. Just by watching Sherlock's carotid pulse quality, John knew the blood transfusion was becoming unavoidable, and needed to happen sooner rather than later. His cardiac workload - supplying oxygen, perfusion tissues - must have been remarkable. By mid afternoon, John had received a few deliveries from Mycroft, all appropriately labeled, and then finally notification from the lab that the blood was ready. Final arrangements in place, he texted Molly, approved pick-up. Then, once he knew Molly was going to be arriving shortly with the blood in a cooler, that time was of the essence to infuse it within two to four hours, he helped Sherlock to the loo. When he was ready to head back to bed, John held him fast in the hallway a moment, also partially holding him upright. He could hear the pulse oximetry alarms sounding remotely, sensors still attached to Sherlock's toe, from the bedroom.

"Not the bedroom this time."

"Fine, floor," he truly looked like he didn't care, but John held him steady, keeping his knees from buckling.

"Sitting room this time. Couch." John wanted him closer to the door in case there was a problem, where if a team needed to get to him there was better, quicker, more open access. Emergency transport, if needed, would be easier from the room nearer the stairs.

Sherlock groaned, and John could hear the non-verbalised complaint that the couch was too far away.

"You can rest on the couch."

"Bed's closer."

"Humour me," John said, helping propel him the other direction, where John had already set things out that he would need, including a hook for the blood products, the rest of the monitoring equipment, the IV fluids in case they were needed. Everything else was close enough at hand. "So, you listening?" John asked, letting Sherlock sink into the couch, no reserve, no energy. Sherlock tried to catch his breath, ended up mildly diaphoretic for a bit. John connected the actual telemetry monitor this time, where he could see not only the heart rate but the ECG rhythm and complexes. He would know if Sherlock was getting into trouble that way, just for his own peace of mind.

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The wind howled outside the makeshift medical tent, sand pinging against the thick plastic windows. John exchanged a glance with the barebones medical staff that had intentionally stayed behind with two patients too unstable to survive transport. Bad weather, threat of attack, executive decision - withdrawal of patients and personnel had been well-performed. Most of the power was already out, the emergency generators supplying some of the IV medication pumps, heart monitors, oxygen condensers, enough electricity for light to see to basic needs. There was no air transportation - too windy - and no hospital within a several hour radius even if the patients were stable enough to be evacuated by ground.

Small medical team, all volunteers, and two patients, who had no choice. The first was a vascular repair with tenuous blood restoration to a foot. Moving him would be dangerous, possibly induce vascular spasm, impede circulation, and none of the medical team wanted to risk the man losing his leg.
The second, the sicker, more fragile patient, was a young man with a cardiac history, already diagnosed with heart disease at his young age, signs of probable viral endocarditis. John wondered at how he had passed his admission physical workup given his underlying disease, made it into the service at all. Heart function - ejection fraction - after this last go-round of chest pain had been down to less than 15%, his heart muscle weakened, dilated ischemic cardiomyopathy, inconclusive signs of vegetation on one of the valves. Even turning and positioning him induced coronary spasm. The ECG monitor at times showed evidence of ischaemia.

"Doc?" the patient whispered.

John rose, approached his bed, and out of deference to the patient's obvious distress and the need to hopefully allow those who were waiting out the storm, there in the makeshift hospital, to rest, he perched next to the bed. "You all right?"

"I have a bad feeling." John's glance flicked to the monitor, took in the sagging ST segments, the quickly-evolving terrible gray colour of the man's face. "Something's not right," he said, face tight and afraid, eyes clinging to John's. "Doc?"

Taking his hand, John could only watch the man's face as the ECG changed configuration again, the ST segments inverting, widening, slowing. There was a breath, another, and John felt one of the nurses approach from behind him, touch him on the shoulder.

There was nothing to be done, but the offer was made anyway, "Can I bring anything?" She knew, as John did, that even in an urban hospital this would likely be futile. "Epi?" It was the first drug for pulseless rhythms and would need CPR to circulate it if the patient deteriorated.

John shook his head, not wishing to subject the man to final minutes of torture, for his last awareness to be pain and suffering, to be frightened. The outcome was foregone.

She nodded, sadly, still feeling the urge to do something, ease the process. "Pain medicine?"

The man's eyes were now wide, frozen, unseeing. Perfusion had already ceased, circulation previously compromised now profoundly so. Complexes on the monitor still marched along but not generating much, if any, of a pulse. Pulseless electrical activity.

"It'll be okay," John said, his hand still clinging to the patient who was still somehow managing to cling in return, but the grasp was loosening.

The nurse eased a hand along the man's temple, brushing lightly against the skin. "We're here," she said.

The complexes grew slower, wider. the colour went from pale to cyanotic to gray.


Beat.

Asystole.

Alarm silence. He placed his stethoscope to the patient's chest, listened a full thirty seconds, watching the monitor and for signs of chest rise. Nothing. John checked the time. "Time of death oh-nine-fifteen."

"God, I hate it here sometimes," she said, flipping the monitor off.

"I know." John stood, the losses hard still after these few months deployed. "Thanks ..."
She let out a harsh snort of sound. "You too. Sorry ..." there was nothing more, that he was so sick, that ...

The dividers between patients seemed a blessing, then, keeping the sounds and sights of the dying from the immediate view of those in the next beds already worrying it was going to be their turn next.

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A couple of pillows behind his back seemed to help a little, and John tucked another under his knees. Once it finally seemed Sherlock's distress was such that he could likely listen, he tried again to explain things. "Remember I had told you your blood counts were low?" John watched his heart rate, 140s after activity, still, and staying there. "Dangerously low. We're going to give you some blood this afternoon."

The heart monitor immediately jumped up ten points. "No."

"Sherlock," John began, ready to explain, but in short order, John's mobile buzzed. It was Molly letting him know that she was a couple of minutes out and had actually secured a ride in the back of the ambulance that had been commissioned to wait out front. "No hosp -"

"You need it." Sherlock's eyes were wide, panicked, and John was quick to say, "Right here, at home, you're staying," but Sherlock wasn't hearing, wasn't listening, had already presumed the worse and was upset, retreated somewhere unpleasant in his mind, body restless, breathing hard.

"I can't -- you don't understand --" The monitor alarmed 196, and his hands were shaking as he began to pick, randomly reached, tremulous, desperate, for the feeding tube, both IV sites, but his coordination was off and he couldn't actually grip anything. It was reminiscent to John of the patients he'd seen half out of their minds with illness, sepsis, meningitis. Reasoning with someone in that state was almost impossible. With unfocused eyes, his frightened expression seemed searching for something, wary and suspicious.

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He was missing something. Still. The block of time that was gone, was still gone, and it was important. He hated not knowing. There was something right there, and he couldn't get to it, couldn't sharpen the image, couldn't use the fine tune knob of the microscope to see. It was like trying to see a reflection in a mirror that was broken, the spiderweb of a shattered looking glass, useless and frustrating. No matter how he squinted, turned it, moved, it was still out of his reach, unobtainable.

Something ominous, threatening was on the horizon, headed straight for him. He couldn't see it, perceived the threat, he'd been sold out, held against his will. It was from a long time ago, the absent memories haunting, revisiting from time to time. Especially when that sense of foreboding niggled at him. Like now.

A quick tug at his arms, still held fast, strapped in. The rest was fuzzy, the details, his location, what was happening. Then stinging, floating, complete amnesia. Details, the missing details, was disturbing.

What remained sharply vivid, though, was the loss of control, the anxiety, the sense of impending doom.
Less fortitude, and he'd be crying. There was a stupid piece of pride that at least clung to that. No weakness, no tears.

It would have surprised him to know that the tears had indeed been flowing over his teenaged cheekbones. He waited, there was no choice but for it.

"You're safe, you're staying," John leaned close, bending right over him, holding him by both upper arms and speaking calmly to him. Sherlock'd at least nodded to a question or two when he could hear the deep rumble of the ambulance arriving out front, the beeping reverse notifications as it parked, deployment of the brake, several doors open then slam. Sherlock's behaviour deteriorated, associating the rig with obvious unpleasantness, and despite John's telling him he wasn't being transported, he clearly didn't believe it. Tachypneic, diaphoretic, simply beside himself, he was largely untouchable and unreachable as the sound of approaching people got closer to them. He was agitated, hyperventilating, lips cyanotic, the pallor becoming a dusky underneath it as his oxygen consumption rose. He thrashed best he could given his weakened state.

The idling noise of the engine got louder when the door opened. Moments later, Molly and Mycroft were inside the flat, stunned into complete stillness, both with wide eyes as they watched John attempt to deal with the half-hearted agitation, the distress, the emotion underneath it. The worst part, John realised as he attempted to subdue the flailing and thrashing limbs, was the anguished and deeply heartfelt words that came from Sherlock’s gut - starting with no! and devolving to a cry of despair. A tear slid out from the outer canthus of his eye, dripped down onto the pillow before John could brush it away. There was just the one, and John tried to spare Sherlock his dignity.

John pegged his glance on Mycroft. "Have them turn the bloody ambulance engine off." Mycroft disappeared briefly, and Molly set the cooler down. "Thanks," John said. Sherlock's hands were twisted in John's shirt, legs too weak to thrash but definitely not relaxed either. "Sherlock, listen. Stop this right now. You're staying. This is all precautionary."

A broken whisper, broken and hurt. "Please no." His voice sounded younger, vulnerable.

Mycroft had returned then, a stealthy presence at John’s elbow. He'd heard. “I tried to warn you.”

From the couch, Sherlock was clearly not processing things well, but he was calmer - exhausted, absolutely nothing left, no more fight. Eyes closed for a bit, opened abruptly, scared again. "John?"

“We’re not going anywhere, Sherlock. We’re absolutely not. I told you about needing a transfusion, and we can do that right here.”

There was still panic in Sherlock’s frightened eyes - a deep terror, fear, absolute panic, actually - but he stared hard at John, motionless, making an attempt at comprehension.

“Take a deep breath. They’re dropping supplies off, and then it’ll be just you and me and Molly.” For as much as watching Sherlock's struggling, the resignation and surrender was almost as bad. He'd given up, as if he no longer cared.

“And I,” Mycroft added, earning a glare from John.

“No.”

“Until you get started."
John's teeth clenched, decided fighting with one Holmes at a time was plenty, thank you very much. "And then you are leaving. Unless your brother gives permission."

Both looked at Sherlock who clung to John still, and slowly shook his head - even that small amount of movement seemed to tire him, John thought, and he was anxious to get started, apparently having already waited longer than medically prudent. A quick glance at the heart monitor was somewhat reassuring - nothing urgently brewing or evolving so far. "Out," Sherlock verified, in a quiet voice.

"You're safe, you'll be fine," John said, disentangling Sherlock's grip from him so he could stand. He washed his hands again along with Molly, who did the same. They found gloves, and stood side by side, he and Molly while they went through the verification process - name, date of birth, group and type, unit number, expiration date. There was another full set of vital signs, a temperature monitor that John had only read about that was wearable and would readout continuously on an app he'd just downloaded on his phone. The strip went below Sherlock's axilla, high up on his lateral ribcage on his chest. They compared the lab printouts with Sherlock's bloodwork from earlier. All seemed in order.

John primed the tubing, connected the blood, and set it to infuse slowly at first, using one of Sherlock's two IV sites.

He was taping down tubing when Mycroft cleared his throat. "I have several more items to bring in," Mycroft advised as John grabbed his own bottle of water, took a sip, watching Sherlock, the blood, and the monitors with vigilance.

He returned with a a bottle of expensive Jameson, and what looked like a very large, heavy crate of what John assumed were medical records. John locked eyes with Mycroft Holmes, who said, "I truthfully expected you to insist on them prior to commencing," and his eyes flicked to the bag of dark crimson blood.

"He needs it too much for me to be a complete prat about it." John blew out a quiet breath. "Crisis averted this time. Your withholding information could have harmed him."

"I deemed it on a need to know basis."

"How irrelevant is it now?"

Mycroft snuffled a bit, hands in his trouser pockets. "Perhaps I erred in judgment." He tapped the box with his foot. "Not exactly light reading."

"I wouldn't expect it." John wondered, finally, if an explanation of what had happened to Sherlock's back would be forthcoming. "Any surprises?"

"Spoilers, Dr. Watson." True to their discussion, Mycroft said his farewells, asked for an update when the infusion was complete, and left.

The first half hour passed, and Sherlock stared nervously at the blood as it dripped, the tubing burgundy red, entering his arm, until John finally moved the set up behind him, where he couldn't see it as readily. "You're fine, this is going fine. Maybe close your eyes?" John said, watching the man primarily, glancing at the monitors every now and again. He and Molly talked quietly, mostly about her present school studying, papers, and projected course for next session. Mostly Sherlock's eyes were half open, but he was calm at least if not sleeping.

At the ninety minute mark, with no sign of any issues, John asked Molly to go kerbside to dismiss the ambulance.
Sherlock shifted on the couch, and John was right there to help him reaccommodate, knowing by sound and sight that even moving was uncomfortable. Once he'd turned, John adjusted his arm so that the blood was dripping unhindered. For good measure he checked the other site, found it intact, and Sherlock muttered, "This is why you put in the second IV site?" They listened as the ambulance drove away and Molly returned.

"Yes."

"Redundancy."

"Not if something happens, and the only line infiltrates."

"They're annoying."

"You'll keep them both until the infusion is complete and I deem it appropriate to remove them." He watched Sherlock swallow, wriggle his nose as if the tube was bothering him. "Plus, they were not easy to get in, thank you very much, with your history and the scarring and your probably being a little dry."

"Most people can't get me." He relaxed his head back against the pillows. "You're a pleasant exception."

"God, the compliment."

"Don't get used to it. I'm anaemic, you know."


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"John! John!" His eyes were open, sensing the level of alarm, the urgency of the middle of the night awakening by one of the medics. "Need you for a trauma."

Minutes later, clothing and boots, medical bag, he was in the passengers seat being rocketed across camp to where an overturned vehicle fire was burning, a civilian vehicle nearby, abandoned. A lure, John knew, a trap, rigged to injure the person who came to investigate, offer aid. Intended to maim, not kill.

Shit.

He didn't recognise the injured, checked a dog tag. "Corporal Kennedy, I'm Captain Watson," he said, quick survey as he'd approached. One of the corpsmen there flashed a light at the man's lower extremity - crushed in a tangle of metal, sliced nearly clean off, the ankle and foot nearly unrecognisable as such. A makeshift tourniquet had been applied, but the blood continued to pump. There was a puddle of ooze, dark, burgundy, too much.

Shit, shit.

"I didn't see, I couldn't tell, there was ..." and he rambled a few minutes while John could see nothing else amiss. "So glad," he said, clutching at the medic who brought John's pack to them, began to open it.

"Glad?" John asked. Confusion, hypoperfusion, hypoxic, could be anything, so he sought to clarify while distracting.
"Can feel both my feet. Gonna be all right."

From close to John's side, a voice spoke up, "How is he even still conscious? Half his blood volume's on the ground."

John ripped open some IV supplies while the medic next to him primed a line. "Little IV fluid for you, some blood soon," John said. "Jeep ride to the hospital," he added.

"Both feet, both feet," he said again, "So relieved, can feel them both."

"We'll see about the damage," John said quietly, "IV poke here, hurts like a bear." He cannulated the vein, which was nearly flat, with a large bore 14, sensing massive fluid resuscitation and blood products in the man's future, if he even survived to the OR. "Take a look at your leg."

"Girlfriend likes to dance, need both feet," he said, though his voice was quivery, weaker.

"I'll try," John said, the line connected, running wide. "But Corporal, you should know it's pretty beat up."

"Beat boxing, beat one off, beat you up, the beat goes on ..."

A backboard appeared, and many hands came together, turning, sliding, lifting. The jeep was still running, transported the team to the OR.

A week later, sans one leg from above the knee down, the man was medically discharged. John had stopped by to say goodbye to him, offer support. From the wheelchair, the man had looked up, attempted a smile and wave, then his sad and shocked eyes were drawn back down to where the trouser leg folded up, tucked neatly underneath him.

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Another glance at the monitors, the blood was just finishing, and all was stable. He offered Molly the chance to leave, and she smiled, nodded, and was gone with a grateful smile. John changed the roller clamps so that the saline was infusing, clearing the entire line of the last remnant of blood, wanting Sherlock to be given the advantage of every available corpuscle. Once it had completed, he capped, flushed, red-bagged the used tubing. He would take an uneventful blood transfusion any day of the week. Wonderfully, thankfully, spectacularly, mundane, routinely, boring. Thank god.

As promised, he texted Mycroft that all was completed without complication. Assessment wise, Sherlock of course looked no different, his heart rate still high, still working a bit to breathe. Effects of the transfusion would not be immediate in most cases, but within a few hours and hopefully over the next few days, John expected that his colour would improve along with his stamina. He was, however, more relaxed, therefore, and so was John. Sherlock watched as John’s grin briefly appeared, an assurance that he was fine. Sherlock closed his eyes, calmer, restful.

"What movie do you want me to put on?" John asked, holding up a Fast and Furious movie in one hand and a classic James Bond in the other.

"The inside of my eyelids will be eminently more fascinating than either of those."

"Want me to help you back to bed before I watch the Bond film then?"

In answer, Sherlock crossed his arms over his chest, mummy-style, and closed his eyes. "Cold," Sherlock whispered, and John tossed a blanket over him, tucked in, then took a seat at the opposite end of the couch, after loading the disc. It took about one-quarter of the movie to elapse
before John realised that at some point, Sherlock had tucked his toes under John's thigh. The movie was excellent, as John'd known it would be. He glanced frequently at Sherlock, telling himself the monitoring was all part and parcel of post transfusion monitoring. The frequent checks of his mobile - assessing the continuing temperature readings - all standard care, and had nothing to do with the toes, or the long eyelashes over pale skin. It could have been the vulnerability John had witnessed, or the underlying grit Sherlock had managed to show, ultimately listening and following directions and trusting.

The movie held his attention, the toes under his thigh a distraction from time to time. When the movie ended, he figured it was as good a time as any to remove some monitors, get Sherlock back to bed, remove the IV sites, grab a bite himself. Glancing over again at his patient, he was surprised to see Sherlock was wide awake, quiet, resting, breathing easily. The eyes staring at him were pale, glittery, intense. It took John a moment to realise why.

Not only had Sherlock's toes ended up under John's thigh, where they were delightfully warm and a not-unpleasant connection, but at some point, John's hand had found Sherlock's ankle, his calf, and his hand lingered, circled, as if they belonged there. He realised that, without conscious effort, that his fingers had very definitely been moving, settling, circling. The heat between their bodies, the skin contact, was a reminder of their proximity, an expression of comfort.

It was quite intimate. John worked hard not to startle, stand up, back away, flee. Heart pounding, he slowly let his fingers relax, slide off of where they rested - possessively - on Sherlock's calf. Wordlessly, he let go completely, and stood up.

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Chapter End Notes

There is actually a continuous read-out wearable temperature monitor that communicates via bluetooth with an app, available on Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/TempTraq-Wearable-Smart-Thermometer-Continuous/dp/B01L9GV66U?th=1

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Don't try this at home, even if someone's older brother says it's ok and gets permission. Blood products are for hospitals or infusion suites only.
The monitors were quickly removed, Sherlock holding his breath as John removed the chest leads and temperature monitoring pad, set them aside. A quick check of the rest of his vital signs - everything stable - and John shut the telly off, waited for Sherlock to at least agree to moving back to bed. Once standing, Sherlock seemed to take a fresh look about the room.

"Oh," he said, a lopsided although fleeting smirk. "Access."

"Yes, and thankfully unnecessary." John stood next to Sherlock as he simply gathered himself, the mere act of standing upright somewhat taxing and worthy of attention, focus, bloody effort. "Stand up tall, now."

"I am tall."

John's whispered 'berk' brought brief smiles to them both, but John didn't lose sight of what they were doing. His knees bracketed Sherlock's own in case they buckled, and one arm held Sherlock's nearer arm, the other spread across Sherlock's back. Support, readiness, camaraderie. "While you're up, deep breath." He did, and John prompted through a few other directions, "blow that out," the relaxation of his tense shoulders, some posture adjustments, nothing especially aerobic. The hand behind Sherlock's back massaged lightly at first, then stronger, the fingers and thumb of John's hand working, pressing into tight, sore muscles of Sherlock's back. "Shoulders up high, good, now back down, relax." Even after a few minimal tweaks, John thought Sherlock seemed slightly more at ease. "Better?"

Half-hearted shrug.

The ordeal of getting Sherlock back to the bedroom wasn't awful, not quite as exhausting as the trip out, but still, by the time Sherlock was kind of sprawled long-limbed across the bed, he was still winded. The distance and the effort and the change of focus for John, from the lean build of Sherlock's ankle - *that he'd been caressing unknowingly, but it couldn't have been long, could it? Focus, Watson* - to monitoring his progress, his remaining symptomatology, was helpful in his regaining his own control, too.

"You said ... blood would help." An accusation was buried in the statement somewhere.

"It will. It's not usually immediate. Sometimes, but not always."

"Exhausted." Sherlock rolled again, arching his frame, trying to get his head toward the pillow, mostly succeeding. "And sore."
John had known that already, simply by the expression, the grimace. "Hungry?"

"I'd like to be. Too tired to eat."

"Well, I can bring you something anyway, if you want to try."

"Maybe just tea, if you're offering."

John padded out to the kitchen, flicked on the kettle, did a quick inventory of the kitchen, straightened up a bit while he waited. The box of medical records sat untouched, and before too much time had elapsed, John was back in the bedroom. The migration to Sherlock's bedside included two cups of tea, a plate of crackers, fruit, cheese, and nuts. If nothing else, John wanted something available in case Sherlock opted to try something. He also carried back the solidly packed box of Sherlock's medical history.

"You're going to be disappointed. It's not exciting in the least." Sherlock sipped the tea, the tube dangling askew in front of his mouth and getting in his way, the scowl deepening each time it happened. Finding a piece of silk tape in the supplies, John secured the tube out of the way, although once he'd done that, Sherlock handed the cup back, too uninterested and fatigued to have any more.

"That's fine, but it's relevant."

Sherlock looked unconvinced.

John reminded him, his tone neutral, "Hospitals don't hold any appeal for you, do they?" Sherlock was as closed off as could be. "Frightening, even."

"Do you blame me?"

"Of course not, given all the unpleasant associations." Asking about blame was somewhat insightful, though, as if someone had given him a hard time. "It's not your fault, your reaction, you know."

"I think I'd rather die than go inpatient again."

John could have called out his behaviour right there, his choices, his poor choices, the path he was on. He would have mentioned that if the goal was avoiding hospitalisation that he should clean up his act and stay that way. But John could see his heart rate, from the simple pulse oximeter monitor that he'd reconnected, rise a bit. One thing at a time. "I'm sorry you were upset earlier."

They were treading on thin ice, he knew attempting to proceed delicately.

"Don't force me to go, no matter what."

"No one can promise that." John set the tea down, tried to keep his voice gentle as possible. "You're safe here, and there's no plans on the horizon other than getting stronger." With an intentionally cool voice, he added, "So you're right, the records may not be helpful in the least. I'll take a look through."


"Once, yeah?" John's emphasis on the word and his accompanying smirk let Sherlock know of his disbelief, and from the pillow there was a self-deprecating moue. If Sherlock had been watching for John's reaction, a fussing response, John didn't plan on giving him one. "Door stop, then, when I'm done."
"Kindling," Sherlock suggested. With a heavy sigh, he watched John assemble a cracker, cheese, grape. The only thing it looked like he had energy enough to move was his eyes. "To annoy Mycroft."

John sipped, snacked, adjusted Sherlock's pillows. "Want anything?"

Minimally, he shook his head.

"Guess you don't want to do your own feeding then?" John asked, only sort of kidding.

"If I had the energy for that..." he let the sentence drag out, trail off, still not moving.

John shook a can of tube feeding, prepared it, set it to infuse slowly by gravity. Sherlock barely seemed awake. "Mind a little music?" When there was no response, John clicked a few buttons on his computer, serenading them this time with something more current, easy listening. He heaved the crate of paperwork near his cot, got engrossed in the records Mycroft had in fact come through with the delivery.

For the most part, Sherlock was right. Rehab, drug stint, a few overdoses - unintentional, by the records, but John wondered if there had been a time or two when it was more than that, where he certainly didn't put any value on his own life and the high risk-taking behaviour was evidence of that. From time to time, he looked over at Sherlock, wondering at the sadness and loneliness that seemed conveyed in the timeline, the circumstance where he'd been brought in as a Joe Bloggs, unresponsive. He'd been involuntarily committed that time, a brief stint that ended his first attempt, first year, at uni. Mycroft had called it sectioned. When he'd glanced over at one point, Sherlock seemed to be snoring softly, his hand curled over the slight - albeit temporary roundness of his belly. Sherlock was thin enough that it probably felt quite "full" to him after a feeding. Once it was done, John rose to take care of disconnecting, flushing it.

He was tired, too, the days events not specifically bodily exhausting to him but certainly the vigilance required had been taxing on a certain level. He set the papers aside, stopped the music, and turned out the light.

++

The following day, John had been through the box, learned a few things, was mostly ready to pack it away for Mycroft to pick up. "Well, you definitely don't have thalassaemia."

"So?"

"Your anaemia is from other causes, then. Probably poor nutrition, bone marrow underfunctioning rather than something acute. That's all."

"I say it again, so?"

"Well, it would be noteworthy if you had it and were planning on children some day. Or if you had a severe enough case - which is a moot point - to develop iron overload, or need regular transfusions, which you don't. Your iron levels were mostly in the range of normal."

Sherlock looked somewhere between bored and irritated.

"It's your health history, is all. So I thought you might be interested."

"Not in the least."

"I'll get this packed up. Anything appeal to you food-wise? Placing a shopping order for delivery
for later today."

"Perhaps pain medicine stronger than the crap you've been giving me."

It puzzled John why Sherlock was particularly angry, feisty, downright irritable. "Something on your mind?"

"Get away, leave me alone."

"What's wrong with you today?" John gave him another quick once-over, not seeing anything overtly amiss.

"I. Don't. Feel. Right."

"Mind, it takes time, recovery." Sherlock made a puss-face, turned away annoyed. "Let's get rid of those IV sites."

"Let's put something stronger into them first."

"That's a no."

"Spoilsport. Waste of a good IV access."

"I'll be encouraged that the access is still good, that you're aware of quality work. An underhanded compliment, ta." There were gloves, gauze, tape, pulling of both lines. Sherlock looked everywhere but at John, so he didn't notice the little extra touch John had surreptitiously put into the task. It wasn't until John had binned the waste that Sherlock happened to glance down, see the folded, square white bandages. With smiley faces drawn on them.

"Oh dear lord, no." Long fingers reached immediately toward the gauze taped to his skin.

John had been ready for him, quickly snatched at Sherlock's hand, caught it, held fast, not allowing Sherlock to do as intended, rip it off. "Leave it. I'll not have you bleeding on the sheets. Or your clothes."

Given Sherlock's present irritation, John did in fact decide to let him stew in his own juices for a bit, made a few progress notes (or lack thereof), and was just ready to pack up the empty box with Sherlock's medical records when he spied a folded envelope stuck between layers at the edge of the cardboard bottom of the crate.

It was sealed, marked with the initials WSSH, and dated with only the word 'summer' and a year. Quick calculations would have been Sherlock at about age 16, and John settled back against his pillow, back against the wall, to open the envelope.

The entirety of the several pages of documents were written in French. Almost immediately, he recognised enough words to know that these records were more unusual, more serious, possibly going to be enlightening. And trouble. Sherlock had spent time in a psychiatric hospital in France. Best he could tell, had a length of stay of about three weeks, and John recognised the ominous nature of some French words, procedures done while admitted there.

Traitement par èlectrochocs. Electroconvulsive therapy, the words similar enough to English that they were not a huge stretch. The documents would need translation, but John got the gist of them.

There was a brief moment where he must've forgotten to breathe, and the whispered words 'oh god' seemed to be circling in the room as if he'd uttered them.
Sherlock spoke. "What?"

John supposed that he had, indeed, whispered the exclamation out loud.

"First of all," John said slowly, buying time, "I'm not sure where this came from." Sherlock, for all his fatigue from earlier, his irritation, seemed rather calmly, singularly, seriously focused on John for the moment. John scanned the rest of the document, found it likely to be a discharge summary. "Let me remind you that you're safe here."

"Get on with it."

Easy, keep it light, go for a roundabout approach for the moment. "Do you remember being hospitalised in France?"

"I wasn't -" he began, somewhat confidently, but then he hesitated, puzzled, stopped speaking. "Oh, right, we used to have family holidays there, summers, I think, spent a summer..." and at that point, his brow furrowed. "But I was never..."

John's mind spun, wondering how best to proceed. He fired up his mobile, opened google translate, brought the camera to the form. He was particularly grateful that he was on his cot, while Sherlock was a few feet away in his bed and unable to see what John was perusing. The separation was a good thing. "Your date of birth, January 6."

Sherlock nodded.

"This is a discharge summary, written in French. From the summer you were sixteen, or thereabouts."

"No, can't be. Wrong." He brought his hands to his face, rubbed, temples. His brow wrinkled again. "I wasn't. I don't remember, oh, might have been..." he held out a hand for the papers, which John ignored. "John," he cued, his fingers wraggling for John to hand the papers over.

"You're going to bloody well wait for me on this." The mobile, the translator app, one that he'd used fairly regularly in the army, utilized the camera, simply and easily translating more common languages just by holding it over the foreign words. John had already recognised enough words to be alarmed, but now he could get them all. There was apparently a family scandal, social crisis, hint of legal proceedings which were thwarted. A teenager brought to a medical hospital not in good shape, transferred to the psych facility.

Family scandal.

Family scandal.

His jaws clenched again, and he wished Mycroft's neck was in the room so he could wring it. Throttle it. Forcing his own jaws to relax, he flicked a glance at Sherlock, who was still watching. He'd be lucky to still have any teeth left by the end of this particular patient, the way he kept grinding them together.

The papers shook a little as he straightened them, adjusting the mobile, kept reading. John had never heard of the hospital nor the name of the small town, but it sounded private and exclusive. Some of the translated words included a few such as intermittent catatonia, mania, severe depression, and aggressive behaviour. The paragraph threw the phrase 'sociopathic tendencies' in, and John could feel more than his teeth come together in annoyance. There was tightness in his chest, irritation on behalf of the medical profession in general, a wave of pity for the man who now lay a few feet away. Something just didn't seem right, and he kept reading.
"John," Sherlock finally said again, a bit of an edge this time, obviously not appreciating being kept waiting and his limits were being tested.

The writing was small, and John took his time despite knowing that Sherlock was running low on patience. Finally, he folded the papers up, set them aside. With a dry mouth, he steeled himself, drew a calming breath. Holding the papers in one hand, he moved over so that he could sit on the foot of Sherlock's bed, closer, where he could see for himself, gauge his reactions, be closer, be on the same horizontal level. Be prepared.

He disliked giving difficult news. But, like other unpleasant things, it had to be done. He faced it, owned it, and began ...

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He'd done it too many times over his career - surgery, med school, the military hospital. "We worked hard, tried everything, were unable to save the life." "I'm sorry for your loss." "The damage was just too much, I'm sorry." "The cancer has spread, unfortunately, there's probably not a lot of time left." "Inoperable, I'm afraid." "Incurable," was one of his least favourites.

It was not all roses in his present role, either, as a home medical coordinator. "She refuses to quit using." "I got a call from the morgue." "The drug screen is positive, I'm sorry." "There's been a setback, a relapse."

He typically tried not to be long-winded, using clear language, not rushing.

He'd received his share of bad news, too. "You'll never perform surgery again, Dr. Watson, I'm sorry." "The nerve damage is permanent." "Don't bother your da when there's a bottle nearby." There was the bad news he'd read when he'd been selected for the special teams deployment, where there had been an attack, his injury. There had been the young boy, John's patient, the victim that had been at the epicenter of the confrontation in his unit. "I'm sorry, John. His family signed him out of the hospital. We don't know where he is now."

Take stock, regroup, make a plan.

Or, sometimes, run, hide, fight.

In this case, buckle up.

++

Sherlock sat quietly. He listened, his face a study in maintaining a void of expression. The blinking, faster than usual, at least clued John that Sherlock was hearing him. While John could tell that his breathing was shallow, there was essentially no other outward reaction.

"Papers."

"I already explained..."

"I want to see them."

"They're in French."

"So?"

If the situation were reversed, John knew that he would want to see them personally, too. "I can translate for you. I use an app..."
"Unnecessary."

John was a breadth of a second behind, realised the truth. "You speak French."

"Of course. Fluently."

John held the envelope tightly, making no move to hand them over yet. A small part of him was concerned that it just wasn't wise.

"John, please."

"Hold on a moment."

"They're mine, my records. Give."

"Speak these words before I do, out loud: I am safe here."

"Don't be an idiot." They stared, both serious, focused. John raised one eyebrow, and Sherlock snarled, "No."

John's smile did not quite reach his eyes. "Repeat after me: I am safe here." Sherlock's eyes blazed back at John, his jaw set in stubborn, silent, imperious defiance. John was not going to be cowed. "I swear to you, I will light them on fire if you don't do what I bloody tell you."

Huff, clenched jaw, puff, sigh, annoyed face. "I am safe here."

"Like you mean them."

"Oh for gods sake, give over."

John stayed right where he was, but reached out, and the papers were snatched from his proffered hand. He watched every nuance of Sherlock's very slight changes of expression. He read each page, slowly, then finally folded them up, put them back in the envelope, held it out in John's direction.

"Electroconvulsive therapy."

"Yes."

"Shock therapy."

"Yes."

"How can I not remember that?"

"Not an uncommon thing. Sedation, general anaesthesia." John did not add that the whole point of the therapy is to treat rather severe mental health issues, that by doing so, the therapy causes seizure-like activity of the brain, that there is rigidity, sore jaws, confusion, memory loss, and often an almost post-ictal state in many patients.

"I have vague recollection of going for testing. The hospital was in the mountains, I think."

"You have questions." John kept his voice, eye contact steady. "Ask away, if it's something I know."

"Would they have started an IV? Scalp wires?"
"Yes to both, of course. For medications and monitoring."

"Extreme."

Sherlock's insight was encapsulated singularly in that word, but John didn't want to leave it so harsh sounding. "Usually only for certain types ..."

"Extreme," Sherlock offered again, flatly.

John didn't disagree. With a qualifying and hopefully softening half shrug, he did finally nod, agree, "Yes."

"Ever seen it?"

"Medical school rotation." John could have volunteered quite a bit more, but Sherlock didn't seem particularly receptive. He remembered the patient, not a lot of details, but could still hear the altered speech afterward, the flat personality, the haze, fog, dullness of interactions.

"How is it possible that I don't remember it?"

"Again, much of that is expected. Retrograde amnesia for a block of time." John could almost feel and sense Sherlock's walls going up, being built up around him. "You were really young, Sherlock. I know it's frustrating to be missing a memory like that."

Icy daggers shot John's direction. "Dare say you recall being sixteen, yeah?"

"True. But sixteen is still young, and obviously, you were in a bad way, having a rough time."

"I had no idea." The voice was younger again, hurt.

"You'd been using already, before that. For a while, by your records. It stands to reason then, that you don't remember," John told him, softly.

"No one told me."

"I'm sorry."

The cool aloof voice was back, distanced, and Sherlock's shoulders shrugged as he said, "It's fine. Fiiiiiiine." The word was drawn out, as if to make it so.

John wanted to ask at least seven questions right off the bat, to find out what he remembered about the circumstances that led to this treatment, the crisis - family scandal - that precipitated it. Clinically, Sherlock was stable enough for a conversation like that, but emotionally, there was too much fragility, too much at stake. John would back off, simply support, wait for the right opening, for opportunity.

And for the moment, Sherlock said he was fine. In fact, he said it twice. He was done.

John didn't believe that for a second - fine? no I don't think so - as he watched Sherlock shift in the bed, lean a little over to turn on his side, pull the duvet up to his chin. There were closed eyes, stillness against the pillow, the faint rise and fall of his chest, breathing. For a few minutes, John thought perhaps Sherlock had drifted off to sleep, but then there was the slightest shake of his shoulders, a tiny hiccup, a different pattern of breathing. He stayed where he was at the foot of the bed, watching, waiting, listening. There was the sound of hard swallowing, a tremulous couple of breaths, and Sherlock's hand worked its way to his mouth, fingers over lips that, John was close enough to see, trembled. Ah, John realised, he was trying to suppress any outer sign of distress.
He stayed like that, eyelids squeezed tightly shut rather than be merely closed and relaxed, fingers pressing lips against teeth, for a few minutes. Shortly, John could sense movement under the covers, and the faint wedge of Sherlock's toes slid down in John's direction to tuck under whatever part of John was within reach. At the moment, it was John's thigh.

The seeking, the searching, even if was just toes toward John, seemed to convey that he was tentatively, figuratively peeking around the corner, trying to find meaning, reaching out, to make sense of it. To connect, to not be alone. John was ready, took the opportunity, speaking into the openess, into Sherlock's pain. "I'm sorry you found out this way. I'm sorry it happened, and for whatever triggered it," John's words were barely more than a whisper, and he reached his hand down to touch Sherlock's leg. John's fingers spread out over the muscle, which was tight, quivered slightly at the warmth pressing down through the bedcoverings.

The touch did Sherlock in, a warm, expressive demonstration of caring and concern. It was the tipping point, the catalyst, the final straw. From the pillow, duvet right up close to Sherlock's face, there was a snuffle, the faintest moan, a very softly breathed, "Oh god, no." A quick inhale of distress, and then a sob. The duvet went up over Sherlock's face, pulled by pale fingers.

The sob was the first of many.

John didn't give the situation any hesitation, simply launched quickly but smoothly, tucked himself up against the headboard, wriggling under the covers himself, reaching out an arm and an offer of comfort, of physical presence, of another person to help share the hurt. And so that was how Sherlock ended up, head resting against John's armpit, knee tucked up over John's knee. John's solid arms wrapped around Sherlock's thin frame. John let the tears fall, offering kleenex and simply his presence, an easy embrace. Words came, simple statements offered in support, a restatement of any and all varieties of "you're okay, you'll be okay, I'm not going anywhere, you're better, and you're safe."

Eventually, spent, Sherlock lay exhausted, wrung out, limp with very little muscle tone. His cheeks were splotchy, still pale but evidence of having been upset, coloured a faint pink hue. "I still don't remember, barely anything. It's just ... gone."

"I know. Part of me is glad you don't remember more than that, it was probably a rather unpleasant experience." Sherlock's head rolled slightly closer, just under John's nose, and he breathed in the scent of shampoo, of clean male, tinged faintly of sweat. "Explains your extreme aversion to hospitals."

There was a sniffling snort again.

"Quite understandable." John felt the longing to brush his hand over Sherlock's head, to soothe the idea of the therapy he'd had - electric impulses to this very head. This head, subjected to controlled doses of electrostimulation. Had they cut his hair? John was feeling both protective and territorial, caring for the totality of the person under his care, his charge. First, he recalled the familiar words, *do no harm*. He breathed slowly, pondering, then asked quietly, "Listen, all right if I ...?" and he brushed his hand over Sherlock's temple, stroking and smoothing the unruly hair, taming the curls, hoping to quiet the maelstrom of thoughts probably whirling. Sherlock nodded, but did more than that too. He *preened*, turning slightly against the pressure of John's hand, a cat responding to a rub on the ear, a distraught child seeking comfort from a quieting embrace, a wounded soldier that would calm and settle under the confident hand of a nurse. As John's fingers splayed, rubbed casually, Sherlock's head sought out more, more touch, more connection. A nonverbal plea, don't stop, don't leave, make it better, keep going.

"I had a nanny who used to do that when I was little."
So many things John could have asked about, starting with something like where was your mum and other unhelpful observations.

"My curls were blond then."

"Not hard to imagine."

"Ginger as a ..." Gulp, swallow, shuddering inhale. ". . . as a teen."

There were no electrodes on his head, no therapy, no physical scars. Barely audible, he spoke into the curls, "You're okay." John slowly stretched out his fingers, drawing the locks out and then letting them spring back in place. "A nice association, then, the nanny?" Dwell on the coping, the positive, the pleasant.

"Yes. I seem to recall not sleeping a lot, one of them would read to me, late at night." John filed that away for another day.

John chuckled a little. "I seem to recall reading late at night too, but with a torch, under the covers, until my sister ratted me out, put the kibbosh on that. We shared a room. Small house, you know."

"I had a wing." He said it exactly as John took it, negatively. "Keep me out of everyone's way, they hoped."

"I'm sorry for that, too." He aimed for lighter-hearted, "Though you were probably quite a handful, in their defence." Right now, you're quite an armful, John didn't say out loud, but his arms tightened anyway, and there was a response from the man, an exhale, a cleansing breath.

"True." Long minutes went by, John's fingers working a while until they tired. When he stilled, Sherlock didn't move, but was definitely still awake.

"I seem to recall something, though not directly, not exactly anyway." His words were quiet and low, as if embarrassed or ashamed. "I think I remember being strapped down. Wrists and ankles."

"Sometimes. Not always." The head tucked beneath his chin turned upward, questioning. "Only if you were endangering yourself. Out of control."

Had Sherlock asked, he would have explained that the ankle restraint was how they could monitor the presence and absence of seizure activity. The tetany would have been prevented in that extremity only, by a tourniquet over one ankle. "And I think I remember saying, begging, don't hurt me." There was another shudder, hitching of Sherlock's torso, and a moist warmth through John's tee shirt, close to Sherlock's eye, but neither acknowledged it. Another full body tremor jarred the mattress, and John's hand eased Sherlock's head closer, the fit quite close, secure, reassuring.

John's arms tightened, his own eyes nearly filling in empathy, throat tight, remembering that night where Sherlock had clung, his words tripping over each other, don't hurt me, don't hurt me, don't hurt me.

Even as it was still gut-wrenching, it made more sense now.

++

Eventually Sherlock had fallen asleep, limbs finally relaxing. John disentangled himself in slow, gradual degrees, over the course of long minutes until their bodies were no longer touching at all. To prevent heat loss and minimise the risk of awakening, John tucked the duvet in close as he slinked back in the bed. He waited a while, watching Sherlock's respiratory pattern stay calm,
even. He waited longer, until he was sure he could risk it.

John crept stealthily out of the bed, down the hall, taking his mobile with him.

**Come at once if convenient.**

It wasn't enough, wasn't answered immediately, wasn't even read right away, so John sent another. It was rare that as a civilian he resorted to swearing. This time, he felt justified.

**If inconvenient, get the buggering fuck over here anyway.**

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**Chapter End Notes**

ECT is still a thing, safe and effective when done well, used rarely for patients intolerant to medications or when medication is ineffective. The facts, as John mention, are that the patients get general anaesthesia along with sedation for the treatment, and there is a tight cuff or tourniquet placed on an ankle for monitoring purposes. Also true that patients frequently experience some amnesia while in therapy.

Google translate does exactly what John says. Very, very cool. Only available in certain languages. I found it particularly helpful to translate a label on a bottle of wine. Yes, it was actually important at the time. Cherry notes and a finish of pepper...

So the question is, did Mycroft intend for that particular record to be in the box? Did he know about it at all? Oh Mycroft, you might've just unleashed Dr. Watson opening a can of whoop-ass. [Whoop-arse?]

And yes, of course Mycroft knew.

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Please let me know gently if I missed anything. This chapter, ugh. The loose ends deliberately left here, I can assure you, John's got them all in hand.

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I know I keep promising to make things better... We're not quite there yet. But I do assure you, this is where the healing begins.
Implosion

Chapter Notes

This chapter starts off as expected with John and Mycroft, and ends up with an explanation then goes ... somewhere else.

Oh, Sherlock...

I'm beginning to think that none of these characters should be particularly underestimated, yeah?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John's mobile rang, and he snatched it before the first ring had completed. Curt: "Hello, Mycroft."
Lilting: "I wondered when I'd be hearing from you."
John kept silent. Seething. Hopeful that the anger was well-communicated over the connection.
"How's your French, Dr. Watson?"
"Quite rusty, ta. Thank god for technology."
"You have questions, and I ..."
"I believe you were instructed to come over."
"Yes, well, that is not poss---"

John hoped that Mycroft was particularly irritated, aggravated, aggrieved, irked, annoyed, and most of all insulted when he realised he was speaking to a disconnected mobile. He immediately powered his own off, and went to stand in the doorway of Sherlock's bedroom to watch him, keep a close eye, while awaiting the sound of car arriving, door opening, and footsteps on the stairs.

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"You knew."

"Of course I knew."

"You set me up."

"You were fully vetted. You have handled many unexpected twists. In the military as well as personally."

"Imagine how betrayed your brother feels."

"Imagine how betrayed he would have felt to learn it from me after all this time."

"He has."

"Not exactly, yeah." Mycroft's brow raised slightly as if to punctuate his not-question. "I felt this a
more palatable option."

"He already has some difficulties with you, his past." John wanted to ask how long Sherlock has resented his brother, opted not to. "Not helping, this."

"Oh, but it will. He’ll come around. I think it's high time he moved on, don’t you?"

"No, I think this little ... dramatic reveal was all about you."

"Be that as it may..."

"Would have been nice to have discussed this, planned well, done this when he was better. When he was ready." John and Mycroft were still toe to toe, barely inside the sitting room, though John was quite attuned to the possibility of any sound from down the hall. So far, still silent. "Timing."

"I believe I warned you when you took the job, that you had no idea what you were in for. I meant it then, and still do."

"You had no right to withhold this kind of --"

"You chose to enlighten him immediately. You could have read that summary, saved it for later. You went all in, laid all the cards out on the table as it were."

"This is much more serious than a card game." John's voice was low, threatening, unhappy as he reminded Mycroft of the stakes.

"The analogy is apt though." Mycroft checked his pocketwatch, though John was fairly certain it was more about making an impatient show of boredom than for actual information. "Now, you summoned me here. Exactly what do you seem to think you need from me?"

Mycroft's condescension in both tone and posture was palpable, and unacceptable, and John was not about to let it go unchecked. "I feel compelled to remind you that none of is is about what I need, nor you for that matter. It is all about what Sherlock needs." John raised a brow. "You opened this door. You need to go talk to him."

"Au contraire, Dr. Watson. I stood back and watched you open it."

"As I knew that you would. You do have a predictable penchant for full disclosure, do you not?"

"I stood back and watched you open it." There was a slight smirk, a bemusement as John's eyes widened at Mycroft's intentional, provocative use of French.

Defensive, John bristled. "He was sitting right there, watching. I was unprepared, and to have attempted a cover-up, a diversion, would have undermined the trust he has in me. No choice but to proceed."

"Yes, thank you very much. I'll take that virtual satisfaction. For now."
One of the youngest in his new governmental division, Mycroft had been settling into his new role less than a year when the rest of his family went on holiday to a lovely, smaller cottage in rural France. Though they'd invited him, he'd felt obligated to decline, unwilling to ask for time off after a relatively short tenure there. This position, they all were aware, was a gateway, a stepping stone, to greatness. To bigger and more influential governmental roles.

He would later regret the decision to not accompany them.

There would be an email from time to time, his mum sending along a few pictures or a short update on their adventures. Usually, it was a short, "Here's a photo of us with " so-and-so, or of one of the buildings, or a remote connection to London, an estate groundskeeper, a sighting of an animal. But they were light, shallow, almost pointless in their nature, so when a few days went by and he hadn't heard anything, it did not alarm him.

The wee hour of the morning mobile ringing, however, did.

His mum hadn't even waited for him to say hello. "Mycroft! It's just horrible, I can't believe it... your brother, and that friend." He'd sat up, bleary, blinking. Her sobs penetrated the late hour and the long days having found him deeply asleep, and he couldn't keep up with her continuing words through her upset.

"Mum! Slow down, what's gone on?"

A quivering breath, the moan of deep-seated pain. "Oh, god, please come fix this."

"You. Owe. Him." John's words were slow, delivered with all seriousness.

There was a snort, Mycroft's head tipping slightly to the side as he did, as if he disbelieved John's statement.

"Oh, yes." John'd had enough, moved down the hall on solid footsteps. "The explanation is long overdue."

He stood in the doorway, a hand holding the door open. From his vantage point, he could see Sherlock, still either sleeping or resting. Mycroft stood in the sitting room, had not budged but his eyes were more open, face more drawn. The unspoken resistance might as well've been audible. John held his expression, but was not displeased. *Good. Let him be anxious.*

"Sherlock," John said gently, his voice calm and unhurried. "Your brother is here."

Silence, communicative and intentional. John could hear Sherlock breathing, knew he'd been heard.

"I asked him to come."

"Threatened." Sherlock hadn't moved, spoke monotone from his bed.

Even upset, exhausted, and probably very uncertain - truly, the gravity of the event must have left him still shocked - Sherlock could still perceive what John wasn't saying. With a wry smirk, John replied, "Sort of, yeah."

"Is he injured?"
"Not yet."

"Pity."

"Agreed," John let himself speak his mind. "You need to talk to each other."

"Joy bells," came the response, slightly muffled against the pillow. "No interest, no thanks."

John left the door wide open, made a sweeping gesture with his other arm, beckoning Sherlock's brother. The ensuing next seconds seemed to freeze, devoid of motion, reminiscent of those rare times in the army when a subordinate hesitated just slightly, making a choice, before following one of John's orders. John's body responded out of almost reflex, of rote. His bearing rose, chest out, shoulders tensed back and imposing. The expression, though, was the clincher. It had always been. One eye would narrow, a brow slightly raised while the other slightly creased. Steady, dark eyes seemed to rivet, demanding obedience and threatening somehow just in the pointed, direct gaze that seemed to say or else.

Mycroft apparently was not as immune as he would have liked to think he was. A few steps, a disappointed sigh, and he was in motion, crossed in front of John to approach Sherlock.

John waited until he was a couple steps inside the room, that Sherlock was all right for the moment, and began to close them inside for their private, family discussion.

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Mycroft would remember very little about the trip to France except that he sweated the entirety of the train ride. He'd gone to work early to discuss his need for a few days off. His immediate employer listened, expression completely guarded. Mycroft nervously stood there to give account of those few loose ends and a few business details to see to before he could even think of travel plans, of temporarily leaving the job.

He'd begun to explain the urgency of the situation, but before a name, detail, or request had been issued, there was a hand held up, halting his words.

"I already know about your younger brother. Drug possession, illegal substance use. Physical outburst."

Mycroft stared, surprised. They already knew? The word came out of his mouth before he could reign it in. "How?"

Faint smile, one of confidence and the upper hand. "It is our business to know our pressure points. Our vulnerabilities."

His immediate supervisor had been brutally direct, blatantly obvious in his next instruction: You must handle this, discreetly, and allow no black marks to even think of finding their way to your own record. Am I making myself clear, Holmes? A mobile number had been pressed into his hand. It was, he'd been told, someone who could clean things up, make things go away, and was to be implicitly trusted.

When Mycroft had nodded, both of them with wide open eyes, staring, his supervisor had laid it even further on the line. Your own career is at stake, so act quickly, as this whole department could be affected if you screw up. Think carefully, because you would be offered up, the token sacrifice, without a moment's hesitation. There can be no hint of misconduct or impropriety.

The empty office he'd been left in seemed to be closing in, his throat tight and stomach roiling. The stakes, he realised, were much higher than they'd seemed.
His mother had only said that Sherlock'd been caught high, a drug bust involving the son of the
town's mayor. They'd both been taken away, the friend to jail, Sherlock due to his age to a
juvenile holding center. The friend had apparently blamed Sherlock for all of it, and that news had
not gone over well. The municipal law enforcement was believing the local resident, the politically
connected young man. By the time his mum had phoned, Sherlock had been taken to a hospital,
out of control due to a breakdown of sorts. Agitated had been her word, violent behaviour,
spouting all sorts of ugliness.

*Physical outburst*, his supervisor had said. He could well imagine the teenaged temper-tantrum,
fueled artificially, the anger he'd occasionally sensed in his brother finally breaking free.

He'd tried to ring his mum as the train was pulling into the station, but there was no answer, his
family unreachable. The address he had at least gave him a direction. From the back of the cab, he
phoned the number he'd been given, his assistant, his cleaner. Names and sketchy information, as
much as he had, was exchanged.

"Sit tight," the voice had said. "I'll get back to you."

Mycroft had arrived much later to the hospital, his mobile ominously silent. The hospital had no
information available, no record of Sherlock's whereabouts. He pressed, standing to his full height
and very aware of his youth and his inexperience even as he demanded to talk to a supervisor. But
his assertiveness paid off with success when a stoic hospital administrator approached. All he was
told was that he'd been transferred to a small, private hospital there in France. When he'd asked for
more information, the matron only shrugged. "A threat to himself, and a threat to others. Sent for
treatment, all it says." When he asked for a phone number, another shrug. "Not listed here, I don't
have it. It was doc to doc consultation, best of my knowledge."

"Address, please."

"Only a postal box given, and the town." She handed him an index card, facility name and
address listed. "Good luck to you." Before he could even say thanks, she'd turned away. Mycroft
shrugged, a wry smile. It would have been an insincere expression of gratitude anyway.

++

"Oh, no, Dr. Watson. You're staying." John's hand froze on the doorknob at Mycroft's statement.

"It's not a medical thing, it's really none of my ..."

"John, please," Sherlock spoke, his voice sounding old and tired, slow. "Of course it is."

"For all your requests for information, it strikes me peculiar that you wish to remove yourself
now." Mycroft on the defensive was a miserably haughty being, even as he tried to press the issue.
"I'm certain --"

"Just stop." John was not about to be oppressed or cowed. He turned back to face the men in the
room, a dark look about him. "Family scandal? Are you sure I have clearance?"

"You've been escalated a few levels higher," Mycroft spoke quietly, "since the day you arrived."

John had asked him once, when he'd pulled strings at the hospital and with the NHS blood and
transplant division, who are you? This time, he kept the question to himself.

++
Mycroft dialed his mum's mobile number again from the kerb, heart pounding, imagining his parents having to navigate a system they'd never encountered before. Sherlock's drug usage, Mycroft had managed to keep from them, hoping like many other young people, he'd outgrow it and they would never need to know about it. Apparently he'd waited too long, and they had to be (understandably) blindsided.

Voicemail again, he left a curt message requesting a return call. The facility name he'd been given was also rather undiscoverable at first, no listing, no further information available at first. He found another cab, requested to be taken to the city in which Sherlock, and likely his parents, were now. His mobile was still silent, and once there, he found a small coffee shoppe. And, there at a table, overnight bag at his side, mobile charging, he waited. The heaviness of the day, the stress of travel, the worry about not only Sherlock but the rest of his career had him feeling overwhelmed, and he tipped his head back against the wall, closed his eyes just for a minute.

Next awareness was of the barista shaking his arm gently, "Sir? We're closing soon. And your mobile's been flashing a while now."

He must've been knackered to have missed the vibration of the mobile. Three missed messages, two from his mum and one from a blocked caller. He checked that one first, and was mildly queasy to listen to the very short message: *It's all being taken care of. His mum's were also to the point: Call me when you get this. The second one more irritated, Where on earth are you?*

He dialed quickly, shouldering his bag and leaving the cafe with an embarrassed wave to the woman who'd woken him. His parents, he learned, were waiting to visit Sherlock and would meet him at a hotel they'd reserved a few blocks away. His offer to join them was immediately dismissed by his dad, saying that they only had a few minutes each day, and couldn't miss it. The line was then silent.

He attempted to ring the number of the man who had helped already only to find that the number he'd been given, the number he was to use for assistance, was no longer in service.

++

After a rather frantic and disjointed few minutes when he finally was able to locate his parents - his dad, eyes distant and overwhelmed, and his mum, tearful - he could finally piece together the story. The boys'd been caught, arrested, charged - all of this Mycroft had already known. Sherlock had been blamed, fingered as the supplier, and as he was being taken to the juvenile centre, he'd spiraled explosively out of control as the officer attempted to place him in the rear of the police vehicle. There had been kicking, flailing, and a surprisingly well-placed blow from Sherlock's handcuffed arms at the policeman.

The legal charges had started off with assault, drug use, intent to deliver, and a few other misdemeanors, but had been "somehow, surprisingly" reduced to possession. The solicitor that had been assigned the case had apparently even been puzzled when informing the family that due to his age, his records would be sealed as a juvenile. For all that the other boy had insisted it had been Sherlock, there'd been a drastic change of story, a confession, a complete turnabout, an admission of guilt that didn't include the naming of anyone else. Mycroft's dad had shrugged then, relating that the attorney had no explanation for the pardon, the expungement, the mercy. They'd been advised to simply accept their rather surprising, turn of fate in their favour.

"So I gather he's still hospitalised? Safe?"

"Yes, calm last we saw him. Not up to talking yet. He'll be there for three weeks." His dad went on to explain that the rage, the agitation, the seriousness of the attack on the police officer and the unresponsiveness of his brother to any of the medications they'd tried, had left them with few other
"I don't understand. He's been ... sectioned?" Mycroft could only whisper the word.

"I suppose so, but... This hospital, I wish you could see it. State of the art. Beautiful facilities and grounds."

"Three weeks seems excessive."

"His physician met with us at length. He assures us that this is highly effective. They've already begun, today was his second treatment."

Treatment? "Different medications, then? They found something that will help?"

His parents had exchanged a glance, worrying Mycroft with their evasiveness. "No," his dad had finally said, reluctantly. "Electroconvulsive therapy."

"I've never heard of it." Please don't let it be what it sounds like.

By the time they'd explained it, Mycroft was far beyond queasy, lurched to his feet in distress. Thankfully, the gents off the lobby was not only close but vacant, where he emptied his stomach in privacy. His dad had come in as he was rinsing out his mouth. "He was so out of control, you realise. Sounds like it was quite ... violent and ugly." Their gazes had met in the mirror, the fluorescent lights washing out Mycroft's already pale complexion though his cheeks were blotchy from retching. "He hid this from all of us. So I don't want to hear that you are feeling badly, son. If we had only known he was using drugs before, perhaps we could have prevented it from getting this bad."

"If only..." Mycroft echoed, giving his mouth a final rinse.

"We could have kept him out of trouble."

"Indeed." He could feel his heart racing, pounding, picturing Sherlock alone, frightened. "Is he ... okay?" His throat was very dry, the words coming out strained.

"He will be. Very restricted visiting. Hospital is completely confidential, secure, gated, and locked of course. All records will be completely sealed, too." Mycroft followed his father out of the gents on shaking legs. "And on another stroke of good luck, because of the conditions of admission, his stay is fully paid for somehow."

Mycroft was glad his father's back was toward him. "Curious," was all he could find to say.

++

"I'll see myself out." Mycroft had barely finished the story. They all knew it was the abridged version.

"Wait." John was not about to let him rush through this without giving Sherlock a chance to speak. "Sherlock?"

Blink. Blink. Eyes random, unseeing, lost in thought. He pulled idly at the duvet with his fingers.

"Any other questions, anything you want to say? Or ask?"

"No."

"Well, then." Mycroft stood to his full height. "I'll see myself out," he said again with a bit more
"I'll walk out with you."

"Stay." From the bed, behind closed eyes, under the covers, "Just say whatever you want in front of me." John and Mycroft exchanged a quick glance, many things unsaid, an exchange of worry and of course a mutual decision for some censorship. Perhaps. "For a bloody change."

John briefly thought of arguing, decided Sherlock could probably stand hearing whatever he had to say. Though he would be careful, he thought Sherlock could benefit from knowing someone was on his side, willing to defend him, to stand up boldly on his behalf. To Mycroft, "You realise this has rather eroded my trust in you. What little there was."

An inhale, a controlled and deliberate silence. Soundless exhale.

John cleared his throat quietly. "It leaves me wondering what else has been hidden, if there will be other surprises you have in store for your brother. And," John could feel the defensiveness, the protectiveness, embraced both, and continued, "the correct answer had better be absolutely nothing."

"You should understand, Dr. Watson, that people don't always do what is best. That ultimately decisions are made that have gross impact on their futures. Repercussions." He was icy, aloof. "Like filing an internal misconduct report, as I'm sure you recall."

"I would do it again."

"And I would like to have the opportunity to choose again, but to take my present position, security, and experience to that 23 year old uncertain, government official fledgling to the situation." There was emotion on Mycroft's face, unpleasant, remembering what John could tell was also a terrible association. "I was completely alone, and had many things happening simultaneously, serious things, and undefined responsibility. It was difficult to control what was going on, working with limited data, in a different country, with extremely limited resources."

John had enough. His skin tingled, fists itching for some brotherly striking, and his mouth engaged. "Enough. Sherlock and I," the sarcasm dripping from his lips in waves, "are so devastated that you had decisions to make and felt abandoned." He rose, stood by the bedroom door. "Let me remind you that Sherlock was the one left alone, and had zero control over what happened to him." John jerked his head toward the door, an invitation to leave. "Out." Rather, a dismissal. "Now." ++

After Mycroft left, John watched Sherlock settle, or try to, his body and mind probably seeking the escape of sleep but unable. A few seconds, a thrash, another position, a frustrated breathing and tossing of position. Restless, itchy, anxious.

From the chair opposite the bed, he waited until the time seemed right. "Change of scenery?"

"No." Sherlock flopped again until he was on his back, one knee raised, arm up along his face. The feeding tube came in contact with his hand and he let out an irritated sigh. John thought briefly, that he would grab it, pull it out, and actually kind of wished he would. His patient could control so little of his present situation, that his removing the tube might actually help him express some of the anger. That little bit he could control. The arm skittered briefly across his chest before grabbing the selvage of the sheet, relaxing.

"Let me know if you need something. Want something."
"I think you can well imagine what I want."

"You know what I mean."

"Fine." His voice was monotone, flat. John would have preferred angry. "I want you to get the hell out."

"Other than that, sorry." He consulted his watch for the time, asked Sherlock out of technicality if he was eating. When Sherlock simply rolled his eyes in defeat, John set about taking care of that. If nothing else, he thought, perhaps a full stomach would help him find the escape of sleeping more readily. Sherlock watched John's actions with distant eyes. "This day has been hard on you," John finally said, sensing that Sherlock was a bit more receptive and the room was still and quiet.

"I always thought something big was missing. I think I always knew, a missing piece of the puzzle, something that was never talked about."

"I should think you'd be angrier," he offered, dangling the idea out to see if Sherlock would nibble at the concept.

"Yeah, well." He let his eyes drift closed, and John did then note a couple of things: he was breathing more rapidly than usual, and his jaws seemed tight. "What makes you think I'm not angry enough?" Sherlock didn't wait for John to reply. "Because I'm fairly pissed off."

"Just checking," John said, somewhat pleased that Sherlock at least acknowledged that emotion. "How do you usually handle being angry?"

"Stupid question."

"Yeah, that's not an option for you." John perched in the chair across from Sherlock's bed. "Some people like to exercise, go for a walk, burn off some frustration somehow. Get the blood flowing."

"A cigarette would be nice."

"Fine."

John was pleased when Sherlock's eyes then snapped open, coming to rest abruptly on John's face with both shock and delight.

"Not in the flat. You can get dressed, and we'll go outside."

"I can't. Not like this, not with this," he gestured at his nose. "I dare say I'd collapse if I tried to walk that far."

"Okay, something to aim for, then."

"You'll take me out for a smoke?"

"One. And yes."

"I'm not hallucinating this?"

"No."

"Dr. Watson. You've managed to surprise me."

"John."
"I know, I used the title deliberately." Sherlock's one-sided smirk was back. "Not very doctor-like."

"Not the first rule I've bent. Won't be the last either."

John could recall some bending - and breaking - of the rules. On the big decisions, the ethical dilemmas, or on patient safety, John had never compromised. But there'd been softer gray areas, and he'd occasionally been called on to advocate for patient or family when the system was failing them or when a delay would have been costly. He'd helped patients qualify for medications, extended admissions when needed, or in the army, had recommended an extra day or two of R&R for both physical and emotional recovery when it was necessary.

John cued up some background music a bit later, hoping that the noise would lull Sherlock to sleep, or at least relax him enough to settle. After the fourth or fifth toss and turn, with accompanying huff and tug at the bed linens, John paused the music.

"Good, that was a terrible arrangement anyway." The venom with which Sherlock spoke was far more than the music deserved, and they both knew it.

"Are you really upset about the musical performance?"

"Yes." Not quite a snarl.

"There's not something else on your mind, perhaps, making you a little irritated?"

There was a slow turn as Sherlock rolled over to issue a death glare at John. "Pardon me for being unpleasant."

"Oh, you don't have to be pleasant." Sherlock snorted at that, and John thought he heard the word 'idiot' under Sherlock's breath. "If nothing else, Sherlock, our relationship is confidential. What you tell me goes no farther, unless you tell me you're suicidal or conspiring to injure someone, in which case..." John let the sentence trail off, weighing his words, "well, I suppose I should have to report that, though in all fairness, I might give you a head start in one particular direction."

Sherlock, for all his orneriness and irritability, let out a small chuckle. He actually snickered, a bubbling though short-lived sound deep in his throat. "That was terrible."

"I was kidding, by the way." Clearly, the way John defended himself, he was likely not kidding and Sherlock knew it.

"I don't think you were."

"Don't test me." John was grateful for the laugh, even the brief one they'd shared. "On a more serious note, I've been told I'm a good listener, so you can mostly have free reign to say what you'd like."

Sherlock's face just sort of closed, the seriousness descending on his expression like a wet blanket. His lips, still pale, drew together in a tight line, as if he wanted to speak but was resisting.

"Just an offer, if you're interested. Whatever you'd like."

John watched a few emotions play about on his face, and finally he gave in. "I should have
known, should have remembered, something that big, that ... drastic. It makes no sense that my brain would have somehow ... deleted it." For the animation of the earlier snippets of conversation, this was low, flat, monotone.

"You were not to blame." The look on Sherlock's face clearly indicated he disagreed. "Not your fault."

"You ever keep things from people? Big things, I mean."

++

The sounds of the generators in the triage area were a background noise to the rapid pace, the high acuity, the crisis - the lights, the movement, people everywhere, controlled chaos. Captain Watson and one of the triage nurses moved quickly from one trauma patient to the next. Tagging, ordering stat resuscitation if there was any benefit, forming a mental line to the OR, pulling the occasional sheet over a lifeless face, moving on.

"Doc!"

"Carnegie," John said checking the dog tag. "Pain?"

"No," the soldier said, something akin to a smile on his face. "Thank god. Can feel both legs, too. Thought I was done for when the strike hit." His voice was a little slow, little shaky, his arms cold, clammy, even his ears dusky. Shock.

A brief survey, the quickest glance between John and the nurse. The trauma tag she handed him was black, and he nodded. Both legs were gone, the abdominal dressing saturated, skin and organs shredded. How he was even remotely conscious defied any description or explanation. Aorta probably clamped off somehow, John thought. "We'll take a look at you in a couple of minutes. IV fluids for now," John said, the sternal IO line infusing wide.

The breath Carnegie exhaled was through shaky, somewhat blue-hued lips. "'Kay. Hey, doc?"

"Yes," John made sure to keep his eyes bright, away from the damage, away from the nurse just in case their exchange was too revealing.

"I'm gonna be all right, yeah?"

"Of course," John lied. "Right as rain, kicking up your heels in no time."

++

John restated the question about withholding information. "There's a time for that of course. Keeping things from people for very limited reasons."

"You ever keep things from me?"

"Such as?"

"Oh, treatments planned or your expectations. How long you're staying on with me?"

"I think I've been fairly up front with you. How long I stay depends on the contract I signed with your brother." He kept it intentionally light. "And how well you progress, I suppose." Sherlock's face looked tight and drawn at John's words. "Not anytime soon, all right? We still have some work to do yeah?"
"And you owe me a cigarette."

"As I promised, yes. And you don't have to worry about me keeping big things from you."
Sherlock still seemed aggravated just under the surface, and John wanted to find a way to defuse it before it became more problematic. "I think I proved it today."

Sherlock asked the question with his eyebrows, not speaking a word, as if challenging John's comment.

"Keep in mind that I certainly could have folded that record back up, that paper, without saying more than something vague."

"Maybe you should have." Sherlock's shoulders were tight, his irritated voice dripping venom. "Bloody hornets nest, it ended up being. Maybe I'd rather not have ever known."

"I don't think, actually, that you mean that. You just said it helped explain things, that something was missing."

"I'm done. Go away. Stop talking." Another huff, a folding of the pillow, and Sherlock angled on his side again, turning completely away from where John sat. "Leave me the hell alone."

++

John heated up his own dinner, brought it into the bedroom, sat cross-legged on his cot while Sherlock ignored his efforts to draw him out, start a conversation, or otherwise engage him. It wasn't until John had crawled under his own blankets and the room was completely dark that Sherlock finally sighed audibly and began to speak.

"You know, it's not that it happened. There were times, I know, desperate times. I don't remember a lot of it, the times I'd taken too much, or too often. I get that, I guess. There's a vague memory of pain and being beyond reach, out of control. And not caring, not at all, a death wish of sorts I suppose. I do, well, I sort of ..." The quivering breath, and John considered moving closer, of reaching out a hand to touch as Sherlock talked, to be closer, using proximity as a centering tool. To remind him, still here, still safe, still okay. "So yeah, not that it happened, but that it was secreted, non-disclosed. Hidden."

Pressing up on an elbow, John flipped the small lamp on, casting warm illumination across the room. It was barely enough to faintly glow around them. "Betrayal." John spoke the word quietly. He knew, he remembered, how hurtful that was.

"Exactly." There was another pause. "You think I could ever get those memories back?"

"Why would you want to? It had to be unpleasant." John sighed. "It may never come back spontaneously, you know, and hypnosis or other forms of guided imagery or recall, they are not without some drawbacks. Risky, even. I just don't see that it would benefit you too much. Some repressed memories are probably best left repressed, despite your quest for wanting to know about it."

"At least now I know why I hate hospitals passionately. Even the very word makes my skin crawl, that knot deep down." John nodded at Sherlock's uncertainty, as he sought to be sure that John was understanding. "I can't, it's... Cold sweat." John moved quietly in the room to sit against the edge of Sherlock's bed, and he nodded when Sherlock looked over at him again. "Also explains, well," and Sherlock's voice was quiet, he looked down as if he were ashamed, "explains something else too."

The silence drew long, longer. John finally uttered, "You don't have to say anything more, you
know, it's okay." Sherlock's demeanor was oddly quiet, regretful. "I mean you can. It takes rather a lot to truly shock me." Like a French discharge summary. Or being reassigned to a mobile SAR unit. Or the first time his 8 year old self realised the bruises on his mum were definitively linked to the knuckles on his da.

++

"But why? Why do you stand for it, mum?"

"It's the drink, Johnny. It makes him ... he doesn't realise."

"He shouldn't. And you shouldn't," John began, reflecting on other times there had been excuses, rationalisations, covering up. *I fell, I tripped, the dog, I'm clumsy sometimes ... "Don't let him!"

Her voice was sad, and her face even sadder, when she shrugged. "I'd never leave you behind, or Harry. And he'd never..." Her voice trailed, and then she plastered on a smile, ruffled John's hair. "We're okay."

"I'll tell him. I'll defend you."

His young spirit and invincibility made her smile. "You'll do no such thing. It's fine."

"But!"

"No, Johnny." Her sweet and loving hands came around his face, brushing at his fringe before tweaking just a little playfully at his nose. "Promise me you won't."

"I don't want to."

She glared into his innocent now-not-so-innocent eyes, reminding him that she was in charge. "Don't make things worse. Please."

"All right," he finally harrumphed, wishing he could fix things.

++

"Good stuff, yeah?" Victor sat back in the couch in the uni dorm, posture atrocious as was Sherlock's. Neither noticed nor cared. "Top notch."

"Fair, I suppose. For the price, it should be better than this, actually." The room shook as Sherlock's choppy eye movements prevented him from focusing.

"You know what else is good, on top of the good stuff," and Victor grinned as he watched Sherlock catch his drift, his meaning. The sex between the two of them was always heightened afterward.

"I do," and there was some rough and tumblehouse, good natured grinning and nipping and the inelegant, partial removal of clothing. Both were breathing heavy, pressing and seeking and Sherlock finally flipped over on his front, which was where it all went askance. He bucked a little, forcing Victor to grab him about the waist to prevent losing contact.

Victor, his long lean frame pressing down onto Sherlock, grinned, chuckled, "So that's how it goes tonight," and he pressed a kiss against Sherlock's shoulderblade, then quickly reached to catch Sherlock's wrists together, holding them together and still above Sherlock's curly head and pressing another hand down firmly between Sherlock's shoulder blades. "Sounds very, very good," and he punctuated his words with the undulating roll of his pelvis as Sherlock immediately
tested the strength of the grip holding his partially immobilised hands.

It all went completely to shit from there, the explosion of Sherlock's desperate and wiry frame underneath Victor. A flail, growl, a quick twist, arms breaking loose, body spinning and off balance because of the restrictive clothing still on various limbs.

There was the abrupt roundhouse of a lower arm, the stronger ulnar bone coming into full frontal, direct contact with the meaty, fleshy portion of the bridge of Victor's nose. It exploded in a bright red, splattering volcano.

++

Sherlock's cheeks coloured, and he looked down, his own hands slightly fascinating apparently. It didn't take any manoeuvering to lean in just a bit, let his hand cover Sherlock's, once, briefly, before moving back again. It was meant as a simple reminder that he wasn't alone. "What else does it explain, Sherlock?"

"I, uh... it also explains my rather poor reaction when I, uh... got held down by a partner."

"During sex?" John said quietly. "Oh."

"Yes. He tried to hold my arms up over my head, just for a bit." There was an audible swallow, and Sherlock kept his eyes averted. "It didn't end well. My reaction was rather extreme. Broke his nose."

"Ouch."

"Blood everywhere."

"I can imagine." John saw no need to mince words. "Yeah, I would consider restraints completely off-limits for you in the future. Completely."

Sherlock's eyes were clouded, remembering. "Yeah, I suppose."

"End of the relationship?" John queried, sensing that Sherlock was trying to reconcile his discovery with the behaviour.

"Quite traumatically." His eyes stayed downcast. "And since then, nothing."

"No relationships? No partners?"

Sherlock was solemn, and added, "And no sex."

"I'm sorry you had a lousy experience. I would hope you haven't given up on it entirely."

"I suppose not entirely."

John could not have specifically put words to the relief he found in Sherlock's statement, but he absolutely was. Perhaps it was the earlier discussion about John's eventual moving on, when Sherlock was better. He was, despite his contrariness, good company and John did not especially like to think of him alone. There was a small smile shared between them, the light reflecting off Sherlock's cheekbones and curls, the golden light particularly flattering and warm. The energy of the moment, the very late night discussion, dissipated a bit, and John offered to stream a movie on his laptop.

"That'd be nice, I suppose."
"Requests?"

"Not really. Although, given your penchant for (whatever movies John had chosen before), perhaps you could find something suitably intellectual?"

Sherlock only lasted through the first few minutes of the movie anyway, before falling asleep, and John wasn't far behind him.

++

John handed Sherlock the journal he'd added to their shopping list, a few bags of groceries that had just been delivered. They'd had a good morning, blood work sent and resulted approaching normal, a walk out of the bedroom again. Sherlock was laying on the couch, recovering from just the simplest activity, but overall John thought he was actually a little stronger.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, set the magazine down. "This one is lame, I found a typo in one last year."

John didn't bat an eyelash, simply pulled out the red biro from the holder on Sherlock's cluttered desk, offered it out to him. "Good, if you find any more, circle them, correct them as you'd like. We'll send the editors your corrections."

"How about a cigarette?"

"I have more nicotine patches, we'll change that tonight. You're still on twenty one milligrams, right?"

"You have a funny way of saying no." A sideways smirk, a roll of the eyes. "Doesn't help, no matter the milligrams."

"Make the best of it, I suppose. Or go without." John had moved to the kitchen, begun to unpack the shopping. "Some do find them helpful."

"You still owe me one." John came back to the doorway, questioning what Sherlock was saying. "A cigarette," he clarified.

"Dressed. And outside." Holding an empty bag, John stood where he could see the couch. "Ready when you are."

He shook his head, but the interest was definitely there.

John took the remainder of the bags into the small kitchen area. "I'm making lasagne tonight. Your brother tells me you enjoy a fine Italian dish."

"Of course I do. Can you get me Roberto Bolle instead?"

"The dancer?"

"Obviously."

"What does he have to do with lasagne?"

"Oh come now, John. He's an Italian dancer. A very hot, fine Italian. A dish."

"Oh dear lord, your verbiage is pathetic. What are you, thirteen? And I have to say, the comment is rather out of character for you."
"Your word choice originally, dish, and yeah well, I am younger than you."

"Four years does not give you the right to young adult slang."

"Give me your computer, I'll show you his picture. Even you'd agree with me."

At that, John had stopped what he was doing. "Even me?" Their eyes met, John in the kitchen, still holding a can of tomato sauce, and Sherlock attempting to make a joke about John's preferences. But apparently, they both realised, it hit closer to home than Sherlock was expecting. Or actually, not at all close to home. There was a moment, an eye connection, a charged pause in the air. It was Sherlock having assumed John was straight and John's expression clearly indicating something else entirely.

"Really?"

"Problem?"

"Of course not."

With a somewhat wry yet secretive kind of a grin, John raised his head a little, confidently. "Care to rephrase that at all?"

Sherlock's own grin was mildly mischievous. "Not especially. No need, apparently." As John tossed the can of sauce in his hand, he heard Sherlock mutter quietly, a whisper, "It's always something."

It didn't take long for John to assemble a simple, tried and true lasagne recipe while Sherlock did in fact peruse the journal John had obtained for him. A few times, he would cry out in annoyance and point out a few more formatting or typographical corrections, enough to get John wondering about how he would actually contact the editors of the magazine as he'd suggested.

John set the timer on the oven, and then took a seat opposite the couch, waited for Sherlock to set the journal aside, expectantly. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Other than you being bisexual?" A brow raised in amusement, just barely.

"Focus, Sherlock." John raised an eyebrow back at him, a dare, a challenge, a reminder of who was attempting to be in charge here.

"All right."

"Given the recent ... events that came to light, I think restoring normalcy to you should be a short term goal."

"A goal." Cautiously, he repeated the word, obviously concerned at where John was heading.

"Wondering if you wanted to talk about a plan."

"If you ask what my short and long-term objectives are for my immediate health I'm going to bed."

"I was thinking more along the lines of diet, activity, regaining your strength."

"Yes, to all of it." He looked bored again. "And?"

"I was going to ask if you feel your appetite is improving."
"My appetite is always abnormal."

"Having a feeding tube is also abnormal."

Sherlock was quiet, and John pressed on quickly, not wanting to identify too much with the adjective.

"It's been a good thing for you, I think your nutritional status is better. But I think it's reached the end of its usefulness, and it's time to get rid of it. And move on."

"Fine."

"I actually expected you to remove it long before this. You know, display of uncooperative temper or some such."

"I'm never uncooperative." His delivery was flat, and John didn't especially care for it.

"Your baseline personality trait is difficult." John stated. "And that can be a good thing when you're faced with a challenge like you --"


"Yes. Strong-willed is just a positive facet of defiant."

"That's not what people usually say."

"That's because you don't stop at strong-willed or defiant. You take it further, dial it up all the way to impossible."

Sherlock brought up a hand, running his finger around the tape on his nose again. "So what's stopping me from pulling this out?"

"Nothing."

"It appears that you want me to." Sherlock sat up straighter. "Do you?"

"I'll remove it for you."

"Fine." Sherlock's bravado was short lived, and he grew suddenly still. "It doesn't hurt, does it?"

"Of course not, certainly much better than going in."

"I don't really remember that."

"Untape, slide out, no problem." John waited until Sherlock had nodded his agreement. "The expectation is, then, that you'll eat and drink from time to time. Regularly. One good meal a day at the very least, small snacks in between."

"I'm not promising."

"Then I'm not promising I won't put it back in." John wanted to elaborate, wanted to reassure him that the short term goal was to help Sherlock feel more normal than he had in a very long time, and a feeding tube - definitely abnormal. He wanted improvement, measurable progress, and a sense of more wellness than ill health.

"Go ahead then." Sherlock extended his head toward John then, his nose extending slightly. It was a show of request, agreement, permission.
"All right." He brought out a few things, gloves, flushed the tube before removal so it was more clean than if he hadn't, and untaped the holder from Sherlock's nose. The tube slid out easily ("deep breath in, now exhale, good, all done"), and John binned the entirety of the set up. After handing Sherlock a tissue to blow his nose, which he did with a grateful smile, John returned to the kitchen, put the final touches on the meal. As he'd intended to stimulate Sherlock's olfactory senses, the lasagna smelled heavenly by the time it had baked, and Sherlock did manage to eat more than a few bites anyway. There was a bath that evening, an assisted shaving adventure that Sherlock started but John needed to finish, and clean sheets again. The bedroom ended up dimly lit, with John reading and Sherlock dozing lightly, until John finally, with heavy eyes himself, shut out the light and hoped for a good night.

++

Nighttime still ended up proving a bit challenging, and Sherlock's sleep was disrupted either by trying to get comfortable, or dreaming, or something else entirely that woke him up. He would still, unfortunately, get the shakes from time to time.

"You all right?" John knew Sherlock was awake, could hear the breathing pattern, the activity, the irritated huffing he would do as he lay there.

"Want to come join me?"

"Not an answer, actually." John sat up, the cot making a slight creaking noise as he did so. "I asked if you were all right?"

There was another huff, and John could hear Sherlock moving, shifting, so he reached over to put the small lamp on again.

At which point, the reason for Sherlock's being awake and uncomfortable became obvious. His hand had fallen to his groin, where his pyjamas and the sheet were quite tented.

"Oh, right," John glanced at Sherlock's face, hoping he wasn't terribly embarrassed. "Would you like me to step out so you can handle that?"

"Handle, very funny."

John was on his feet. "I'll just ..."

Sherlock's voice was annoyed. "Is this not something that falls under your jurisdiction?"

In John's peripheral vision, he could see Sherlock's hand idly moving, not terribly deliberately or focused yet. "Actually no it is not. Unless it is a medical emergency, lasts more than four hours or is causing severe pain. And treating priapism involves needles and is ... well, let's start with unpleasant, just in case you're wondering, and an A&E visit. I haven't ..." and he hesitated, "needed to intervene," letting the omitted words be obvious, "... since my A&E rotation in med school."

"That wasn't the kind of treatment I was referring to."

"I am here to take care of your medical needs," John offered, calmly. "An erection does not typically need medical attention."

"I did invite you to join me, I didn't say for what."

"I really don't think ..."
Sherlock interrupted. "Seems, actually, that you are medical and that it did get your attention." Sherlock leaned back, arched a bit to get comfortable, and there was a sultry roll of his pelvis. He made a guttural chest noise. "I think it could fall under your ... jurisdiction quite nicely."

John wasn't terribly surprised, and might have found the situation a little tempting but for the brokenness and hurt this was masking. "You know the last thing I would do is take advantage of you or do something that would ultimately ..." he stopped, Sherlock's eyes grew veiled, and then downcast. His hand stilled. "... be a bad idea."

"Even if I was asking?"

"Boundaries." John stood up, quickly securing a sachet of lubricant from his medical supplies, opened it and held it out. "At least don't get sore." Sherlock seemed surprised by John's offer, his provision, but he held out his hand. "I'll give you a few minutes." Before he stepped from the room, he tipped his head toward the nightstand. "Tissues are right there."

++

The following day was rainy and miserable, the flat chilly despite the tea that John kept suggesting to Sherlock and sipping himself. Sherlock was ... well, he was as miserable as the overcast weather. Discontentment seemed to simmer, fester, and build.

"Is there something that you would like to do? Card game?" John attempted an activity which was met by a borderline hostile glare when he glanced over. Changing approaches, and aiming for casual conversation. "If you were making a list of things to do, what would be on it?"

"Subtle."

John licked his lip, let the smile come despite Sherlock's attempt to provoke him. "Maybe I'm not trying to be."

"Of course you are."

"You realise I can't fix this. I can't make you instantly feel more like yourself."

There was a snort. And a refusal to respond, no further talking. Dinner went untouched. The evening found Sherlock more withdrawn and non-communicative to the point that John continued his own occasional sigh and Sherlock didn't fuss about either of their unrest. There was a current of hostility underpinning the entire evening. John finally gave up but stayed close by, watching Sherlock peruse a journal without actually seeing it, abandon that for the previous day's newspaper that he ended up finally ripping in disgust. John put the telly on later that evening, which Sherlock participated in by turning his back on it, nose into the couch cushions.

"Okay," John finally said, flipping a button on the remote to blacken the screen. "Bath."

"No."

He hesitated, trying to figure out what would best motivate Sherlock, decided to surrender the imminent battle for the sake of the war.

“All right, you can skip it tonight, but we’ll do it first thing in the morning. And in return I expect better appetite and more energy tomorrow.” There was no response, simply a turning of Sherlock’s head further into the cushion, away from John.

“You know, Sherlock, another provider would have, long ago started not only psychotropic medications but probably a combination of medications for depression, mood-stabilising agents.”
"They did that once already. Tried to, anyway."

"And?" John prompted. When Sherlock hadn't answered, John got more specific. "How’d it go? Did you feel better?" John could almost imagine a previous treating physician hoping for some sort of progress being met with Sherlock’s dissatisfaction. The silence was enough of an answer. "Not even a little, then?"

There was a long silence, a pause, and John could see the moment that Sherlock decided to speak. “I barely tolerate myself on a good day. My thought processes with mood elevating medications rendered me much less likable.”

"All right. I understand." John was in no rush, and thought Sherlock's answer was a bit of a promising sign, his insight. “Can I ask for one thing of you?"

Again, a hesitation. “It depends.” There was a long enough break that John was beginning to wonder if Sherlock had fallen asleep. “And it seems you already asking me the question is asking one thing.”

“Oh good, you’re feeling better if you’re nit-picking my syntax.”

A huffing exhale, a sigh. “Go ahead then.”

"Give me something to work with here." He restated the question that had started out the conversation: what would you like to do?

"How about my exhaled cigarette smoke?"

"No." John was not deterred or distracted. “Make an effort to do something. A visible effort. I’m not sure I even care for the moment what it is, I just want you to summon something from within yourself.” John had already looked through the list Mycroft had sent him long ago of Sherlock’s favourite things, none of which at the moment seemed applicable. "What would you like to do?"

“I suppose you’re going to ax the request for a cigarette?” He hadn't turned back around to look at John. "You do owe me one. Promised, even."

"You know the conditions. Dressed. And we walk outside." John was actually grateful for the permission he'd already given, it took the power out of the request. “Surely you can do better than that.”

“I’ll consider it.” The non-committal to the request was not surprising, but John was at least feeling somewhat positive that it was not an outright no.

From the dark of the bedroom, later, Sherlock cleared his throat.

"Yes?" John knew he'd been summoned, that Sherlock was making sure he was paying attention.

"My violin."

"What about it?"

"It's being held as collateral, I borrowed against it, special deal with the pawnbroker's shop." John's attention had been grabbed. "Payment in full plus small fee gets it back."

"Do you have the money?"

"Mycroft does." Sherlock sounded irritated. "And you have his credit card."
"I should --" John began. "How much are we talking here?"

"Never mind. Don't bother." With a muffled huff, John could hear him flip over in the bed. There was another sigh and then stony silence. And then a flip back and some fussing, "You know, you asked me to come up with something..."

"Where is it?" John considered the aggravation, wondered if perhaps the violin would indeed help pull him from the slump he was obviously in.

"Forget it." His voice was almost a hiss.

Calmly, John spoke slowly. "I'm not going to ask you again."

The exhale was loud, followed by a full minute of aggravated silence. "New Bond Street. Tag's under the wool section of my sock index."

"Right." He hesitated. "Been meaning to ask you about that anyway."

"Not tonight."

++

"Great, thanks for coming," John uttered, opening the door to admit Molly, who had agreed to swing in briefly so John could run a couple of errands, stop by his own flat for a few things, and pick up something from the bakery a few blocks away Sherlock had mumbled in his sleep, something about Paul's Doughnuts. Now that the feeding tube was out, and staying out, John was trying to keep Sherlock's appetite on the upswing. He also had Mycroft's credit card, and would stop by to see about retrieving Sherlock's violin.

"He'll probably sleep. Kind of a down day, flat." They chatted about Molly's latest class, and about the perpetual mist of the past few days weather. "He shouldn't really need anything until after I get back. Food if he wants it. Blood count yesterday morning was good. Stable."

"Good news, that."

"Progress I suppose. Text me if you need anything, yeah?"

She smiled, patted her bag where John could see a textbook she'd brought along. "Maybe just a system to help me memorise the bony facets of the ankle."

++

John arrived home in time to find Molly pacing nervously in the hallway, outside the closed door of the loo.

"He said he needed a minute, said he was bloated, said he needed a moment of privacy, that ... you know, to use the toilet."

There was a faint niggling of fear in John's gut. Not wanting to alarm Molly, or add to her obvious concern, he tried to reassure her. "I'm sure it's fine. Been in there long?"

"Maybe ten minutes," Molly whispered. "He seemed, I mean, to ask a person to step out for that, I thought..."

"Of course. Reasonable," John turned away, growing more uneasy. He quickly set down the violin, the bag from his flat, the shopping, knocked on the door with a tight knuckle. "Sherlock,
mate, you all right in there?" There was no answer, and John exchanged a worried glance with Molly, tried the doorknob to find it locked.

"Fine, fine, good lord, leave me alone." Sherlock was speaking animatedly but it wasn't his voice, not in tone nor cadence.

Oh no.

A few other sounds from inside the room, as if trying to walk but stumbling, and then some muttering, as if the vocal dam had broken loose.

"Unlock this please," he asked, fairly certain that Sherlock wouldn't comply, and he bent to consider the lock on the door. It was not ancient, rather solid-looking, but a simple mechanism. He removed one of the wall-hangings, found a straight, long-ish nail, pulled it out of the plaster. "This might work," he said quietly to Molly. "Here's hoping anyway."

The knob jiggled, the lock on the inside engaging with the mitred edges of the point on the nail, and rather quickly, John opened the door. To find Sherlock sitting on the edge of the tub, unsteadily, eyes glazed, nystagmus when John tipped his chin to peer closely. "Oh, shit," Sherlock managed to say, and that simple monosyllabic utterance seemed to start something. He rambled something about tobacco ash, speech pressured, his affect mildly euphoric. There was white powder on the vanity by the sink, and John brushed a fingertip through it, evaluating the texture, then turned to Sherlock.

"How many lines did you do?"

Quickly, he wiped up the countertop then washed his hands as Sherlock shrugged, evasive.

"I'm so sorry," Molly said, speech abnormally high pitched herself. "I didn't think he, I didn't mean, oh god!"

Sherlock's speech rambled along the ash topic and then demonstrated a rather bawdy mnemonic for recalling cranial nerves, told Molly that ankle bones were idiotic and boring. And then he began to get personally insulting, something about her lipstick before John interrupted him.

"Stop it," John said quietly, low, but with enough force to get Sherlock's attention. "Be nice."

"I'm so sorry," she said again to John. Then to Sherlock, she shook her head at him, "You shouldn't have done this. I trusted you!"

"Yes, well, you were easy prey." His eyes grew brighter, his face fiercely animated. "Not a challenge at all. Too easy." To the open doorway, he called out, "Bring me someone interesting!"

John felt badly for her, a mistaken judgment call that he could certainly understand. "It's okay, of course you didn't know." Her tears threatened, and she was distraught with the threat of getting much worse. "Molly, we're fine. I'll just get him back to bed. It's probably best if you go, yeah?" Her eyes were big, wet but not overflowing as she looked back at him and did find some comfort that he wasn't angry, simply addressing her calmly. "I've got this."

"If you're sure," her voice wobbled, and at John's nod, she disappeared, footsteps quickly growing quieter, the door shutting behind her.

The silence in her wake was heavy.

With a serious inquiry, John turned to Sherlock. Sherlock made his second mistake of the afternoon then, when he had the audacity to bloody smirk back at John.
"Seriously?" John growled.

Sherlock said nothing, but his lips thinned out as he fought against the smile attempting to break loose, to provoke John further.

"Where was it hidden? I searched. This room even." John shook his head, considering the room and all its hiding places. "Inside the toilet tank?"

"Inside the toilet paper spindle."

"No it wasn't, I'd looked there."

"Then I guess I'm not telling you." He looked sharply at John, animated and not-quite giddy. "For next time I get bored."

"Seems like not that long ago we were discussion withholding information. Remember?" Sherlock couldn't hold eye contact too long, but he attempted. "Got something you need to say to me?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"You don't seem to understand, either. This is not helping, not helpful. Dangerous." John stood, ordered Sherlock to wash his hands, blow his nose (no blood, John was glad to see, thank god), and brush his teeth. "Need the loo?"

"I want your computer."

"Tough."

"I need to do some research! My brain is finally awake, finally! No time to lose, I swear, now ..."

"Absolutely not. Your computer privileges remain revoked." John took Sherlock's arm, guiding him firmly back across the hall. He was already sweaty, both of them were for different reasons of course, and John slid his hand down over Sherlock's radial artery. Tachycardic, though not as rapid as it could have been. "Any chest pain?"

Sherlock just stared back. "I am not getting into bed. You don't understand, I need your computer, while I can still think!"

It took come creative coercion, but within a few minutes, John had Sherlock at least laying down, a few monitors placed - temperature, pulse oximeter again - his phone open to keep an eye on the mobile app that tracked temperature - only mildly elevated so far. Eventually, Sherlock did admit that he had no chest pain, was not feeling untoward in any way. John kept a wary eye on him, blood pressure high initially, but as things began to normalise, he thought perhaps things were on the mend, that they had dodged the proverbial bullet this time.

He knew, however, that there were bigger problems than just Sherlock's intermittent use of cocaine.

He seemed to have a dangerous behavior pattern. John needed to find a cure for his boredom.

++
A/N to self: You are not perfect, and neither is your writing. Stop editing, stop over-editing, leave the commas fall where they are (mostly) all right, and let the piece fly, flaws and all! That is all, self. Onward!

+++++

And, yes Roberto Bolle is probably more delicious than lasagne.

+++++

I have a friend who has visited London, and threatens to do so regularly just to get one of the specialty pastries from Paul's. No firsthand knowledge, though.

+++++

Part of this chapter was a hair-breadth away from the chopping block... It actually still is, yet it remains where I put it, trembling, knowing that my fingers are still itching to do something with it - remove it, relocate it. It does, however, address Sherlock's frustration and John's integrity.
John phoned Mycroft later that evening, after Sherlock seemed more deeply asleep, monitors silent and stable. And still visible or audible to John.

"Ah, Dr. Watson. More happy news from the home front I presume."

"Not exactly."

"Oh, well, if you're calling about your recent financial outlay, I did take note that Sherlock's violin has been re-claimed from the pawnbrokers."

"Yes. I figured you were monitoring credit card usage."

"Seems rather annoying to have had to purchase something that the family already owned. At one time anyway."

"You'll have to settle that up with your brother."

"Yes, well, his income is lacking, of late. Was there something else?"

"Bit of a relapse, actually. Wanted to let you know."

Pregnant pause. Then a caustic repeat of John's word: "Relapse."

"I caught him high." He plunged ahead, a bit further, succinctly describing the situation, relating the brief facts, and that it had been cocaine.

He could hear a small inhale and then absolute stillness. "I see. And where were you when this occurred?" John could hear the understandable disappointment, not unlike his own of course but different. There was a curt edge to Mycroft's voice as he added, "Is that not what you have been hired to prevent?"

"It is an impossibility that anyone monitor someone else one hundred percent of the time." There was little emotion in John's explanation, and he reminded Mycroft: "This setting in particular, there are quite a few variables, unlike in an institution."

"Are you recommending an alternative setting?"
"Not at this point."

"You weren't with him when this occurred."

"I personally was out of the flat, and my associate was with him. Unfortunately, he had locked himself in the bath."

"While you were out on an errand?" John could almost hear the wheels turning, click together. "Oh. The violin, of course."

"It could just as easily have been me present."

"But it wasn't. This was not a coincidence, by any stretch."

"He chose this. I'll emphasise that this was not her fault. Let's not lose sight of the fact that it was Sherlock who made a poor decision today."

"Indeed." Mycroft sounded less annoyed after John's reminder, a little softer and concerned. "Was there any intervention required, medically?"

"No. He seems to be recovering. This time."

There was a faint tsk sound. "This should have been exactly what you were expecting, Dr. Watson." The icy tone was back. "I warned you that he was going to do the unthinkable and challenge all of your skills. I'm disappointed that he caught you unawares."

"Oi, I wasn't exactly caught unawares," John began, then realised that technically, in some ways, he had. "Sometimes recovery means allowing clients to make choices. Give a person enough rope to hang themselves with, as it were."

"I see." His tone, however, very clearly indicated that he in fact, didn't.

"I did want, however, to let you know about the setback. And that he's all right."

"Whatever your expectations are, he will break them. Whatever you want him to do, he will not. He's been known to see through many measures and attempts at behaviour modification, and I guarantee that he will not only notice, but find a way to continue to frustrate you." The sharpness in Mycroft's tone gave way to something softer. "To thwart your efforts."

"He is not particularly motivated toward recovery."

"Given the chance, he will always prefer to wander his way through life somewhat impaired."

John swallowed hard, steeling himself to ask a difficult question. Sidestepping where he wanted to go, he started with, "I am concerned that he will continue to find ways around my monitoring, continue to make his only mission that of getting his way."

"Ah, yes, and therein is the challenge with my brother. He is clever. So not trust him and do not underestimate him. Stronger men than you and even pairs of aides have been deceived and outwitted."

With a humbling pause, and the knowledge that failing to ask the hard question would do his patient a disservice, John plunged ahead. "Do you have any suggestions?"

The line was so quiet that for a moment, John wondered if the faint rustle was the sound of Mycroft Holmes blinking.
"Has anything worked, or come close to being helpful?" John asked.

"Not as yet." Mycroft sounded distant and his voice was an odd whisper.

"I am curious as to what has already been tried and found ineffective. Would save me a bit of time and effort, knowing."

It was still silent on the mobile.

John cleared his throat, deciding that rendering Mycroft speechless wasn't necessarily a terrible thing. "Well, if you should come up with anything, please let me know." He was glad to be moving on from that particular request for help, feeling a modicum of accomplishment simply in the asking of the question. "In the meantime, I find myself needing a few additional supplies. You should have already received an email. Ta."

++

The video monitoring equipment John had requested was quickly delivered. It was small, unobtrusive, and allowed John to visualise the bedroom from the kitchen or sitting room. The small camera was easy to place, and he didn't think Sherlock noticed. The model he'd requested was strictly closed loop with varying IP addresses, and was intentionally not connected to any wireless internet. John made sure that he could manually reset it and change the security codes, that it would be Mycroft-proof. The second camera on the circuit ended up in the only discreet location he could place it in the bathroom, where neither the toilet nor the shower was actually visible, but only the sink, shower rod, and cabinet. One of his greatest fears, now that he knew Sherlock was given to this risky behaviour, was that his health and safety would somehow be compromised. Hence the need for the cameras.

As much as he hated needing to add that type of surveillance, he didn't trust his patient, and was concerned that he would try it again.

++

"So, do you care to explain yourself?" John asked, pulling over the chair toward the foot of the bed. His tone of voice, arms crossed in front of himself, and the single raise of an eyebrow conveyed exactly what he was talking about.

"Seemed the thing to do."

"Stupid thing."

"Helps me think. Quiets the noise in my brain."

"There's no science behind those statements. As you are probably well aware, cocaine is not a brain friendly substance." With annoyed disbelief, Sherlock looked on at John. "It blocks the effects of dopamine, and can give you a very profound low feeling afterward."

"It helps me. You should have let me continue my research before it wore off."

"What research, exactly, are you prattling on about?" John spread his arms wide, a request. "Please, do tell. What are you currently working on?" When Sherlock broke eye contact and looked away, John tapped the edge of the bedframe to get his attention. "I've seen no evidence of any projects you have going."

"Well, I'm just getting started. I have these ideas..." He had the gall to actually look even more
annoyed that John hadn't condoned, allowed, and supported his false claims. "My brain is different, and I needed it, but instead --" His mouth closed tightly mid-sentence, lips pursed, and then he set his jaw, refusing to continue.

"Are the kind of little stunts you pulled before you came to where you are now, this place, here, under my care? Finding ways to continue using, that drove your previous care providers around the bend?"

"What do you mean?"

"Using while in rehab, wasn't it?" John paused, waiting for him to nod. "Saying the right things to get yourself released but having no insight to what you're doing. Trying to see what you can get away with, working the system. Non-compliance."

"It's like you've just this moment met me for the first time." Arrogant and emboldened, he held out a hand as if to shake John's in greeting. "Name's Sherlock Holmes."

John let his eyes glance down to the outstretched hand, making no move to grasp it, and with a serious expression, looked back at Sherlock. "So is it the thrill of trying to get away with it?"

There was a defiant look in Sherlock's eyes as he smirked back at John. "Or are you actually trying to harm yourself?"

"I was never in danger."

"Actually, it's exactly that kind of situation that can be quite dangerous. Deadly. When you've been clean for a span of time, and then use again, it can quite easily turn deadly. Bad shit can happen." John chose his words intentionally, but Sherlock didn't particularly respond to the crassness. "Your body has grown unaccustomed to the substance, or the amount, or both." John did not shy away from a hard conversation, opted to ask one final question of Sherlock. "Does your life mean so little to you that you would risk it like this?"

"I don't have a death wish."

"Then start acting like it." He stood, knowing there was an edge to his voice and thinking that perhaps it was time his patient heard him speak his mind. "Breakfast will be --"

"It's after twelve."

"Breakfast," John continued with quiet force, "in a couple of minutes. I expect you to join me in the kitchen." John had absolutely learned to minimise the chances Sherlock had to find a loophole, a technicality, a hole in something John had said. Clarity and completeness, then, whenever possible. "And to eat."

"Yesterday you brought it in here."

"Yeah, well, holiday's over. Meals are all going to be served and consumed in the kitchen or sitting room from now on."

"I'm exhausted. Too tired to even think about walking all the way out there."

"Then it might be a long crawl." John looked at the bed, then considered the length of the room to the doorway and down the hall toward the kitchen. "Better get started."

"You can't possibly be serious."

"You can't possibly think I'm not."
"Then I'm not eating. Tired. And staying here."

++

He fired up the teakettle, set some potatoes to finish frying on the hob, the sounds of this late breakfast that he knew would carry down the hall. He put on some music as he worked. From out at the kitchen table, John watched the camera feed, seeing Sherlock wide awake, laying in bed, his foot tapping, eyes restless, muscle tone anything but restful. The sheets were thrown back, and John watched in amazement as Sherlock got out of bed and moved over to John's cot, searching under his pillow, then started rummaging into one of the boxes of supplies. John toed off his shoes so that on stockinged feet, he could move slowly and undetected to the doorway, where he stood a moment, watching, before speaking.

"Looking for these maybe?" he asked, holding the bag of Paul's doughnuts. "Or something else that doesn't belong to you?"

Sherlock froze, in the bent position he'd been in when John had caught him, started speaking. The sounds from the kitchen were very muted but enough, apparently, that Sherlock had been completely unaware John was on to him.

"I asked you a question."

Slowly, Sherlock stood to full height again, turning to meet John's somewhat amused, somewhat aggressive question. He held John's gaze for a moment, obviously in thought, saw John's lack of shoes. The smirk was unstoppable, Sherlock having apparently connected a few details. "Where is it?" he asked back.

"Where is what?"

"Camera, obviously." His eyes roved the shelf, the corners of the bedroom, the headboard, seeking and searching. He did not see to be able to locate it. "Makes no difference, I will find it eventually." With sharp pale eyes, he watched John, probably hoping that John's gaze would flick to where it sat, the small, vague, unobtrusive device that was sort of hidden in plain sight where John had placed it earlier.

"The price you pay for being unable to be trusted."

"Loo too?"

"Remind me again where you were, just yesterday, when you did those lines of coke?" Sherlock blinked, and John very calmly continued. "So what do you think?"

"Perverse, actually, is what I think."

"Fine by me," John said, knowing that while there were indeed cameras there, their positioning in the room was the least invasive as it could be. "Behave and I won't need them. Now come on," he said, calmly. "Breakfast is almost ready."

"No th--"

"Get out here, Sherlock, for breakfast. Change of plans, it just became compulsory. Obviously you're not too tired as you claimed." Had Sherlock been a young lad, John imagined that there might have been a foot-stomping tantrum. "Don't test me on the consequences. I don't think you'll enjoy that."

All huff, no action.
"Plus, I will gleefully eat all these doughnuts if you take too long." The flicker over Sherlock's face did in fact convey to John that he was somewhat interested in them. As extra motivation, John opened the bag, inhaled with obvious enjoyment. And he wandered back to the kitchen, hopeful that Sherlock would eventually follow. The bag was still closed and sealed when Sherlock joined him, dressing gown hanging loose and untied. He glared at the bag and at John, flopping into the chair and being completely immersed in a rather sulking disposition.

"Good choice," John commended, looking to affirm the behaviour without giving it undue praise. Plus, he was absolutely fine with Sherlock in a strop. "So, your tea's grown a bit cold. Microwave's that direction," he said casually.

++

John was pacing as he contemplated his next steps, taking a few moments with his tea by the window, moving to the kitchen at times, addressing little tasks or pausing to intently study something he hadn't seen before. The flat was a veritable wealth of the odd collectible - a rare edition book, a skull (which he wiped clean of dust and set on the mantle), a harpoon, a piece of sea glass. He'd helped Sherlock to the couch, where he'd lain without moving much and certainly without any energy while John worked out his unease, his strategy.

"Just stop." Sherlock had taken the sulky strop to actual grousing.

"Stop what exactly?"

"Wearing a bloody path in the floor." John hadn't actually realised he'd been doing it, stopped where he stood, in Sherlock's line of vision.

"I want to try something."

"No."

"I think you might like it."

Sherlock pasted on a fake grin. "By all means, I'm sure I have another stash here somewhere in my flat. I'll demonstrate my technique for you."

"Thank you no, and stash - only one?"

"Of course I'm not answering that, but I've been hoping for this very moment —"

"The consequences of you using again will be quite severe." Sherlock, from his recline on the couch, rolled his eyes at John's promise. "I'm not threatening you with anything specific, but it would seem to me that this particular setting" and John gestured at the room, the flat, speaking slowly so that Sherlock would have no doubt to his meaning, "might be too lenient, too much freedom," and John stopped again for emphasis, "too many choices, you see." He did not want to make any idle statements so he waited until Sherlock looked at him, and then he continued, "if there were to be another relapse."

The silence in the flat lingered, a heavy mist, the possibility of an unwanted storm brewing.

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" Keeping his tone what he hoped was gentle but serious, John dropped slowly into the chair next to the couch, laid a hand on Sherlock's elbow. "And what I'm not saying?" One quick nod, and Sherlock rapidly broke eye contact and looked away. "Let's try not to have to do anything that drastic, shall we? It's entirely up to you." Without forcing a response, John took a deep breath, changed directions of the conversation. "So I've
given it some thought, looking for something other than chemicals to occupy your mind.”

He picked up a book he’d chosen for this very reason, not wanting mindless television
programming or even simply music, but something more interactive, something meaningful,
something a little more personal.

“Thought I’d start a new book, something highly recommended, I haven’t read it yet either.
Figured we’ve got time while you recover. And I don’t sit around doing nothing all that well,
mind, either. So at least this feels somewhat productive.”

He looked incredulous, shocked. "You want to read to me."

"You told me once that you'd enjoyed it."

"When I was six."

"Then suggest something else." Steadily, John looked back at him pointedly, patiently. "Well?"

"Yesterday, you retrieved my --" violin. Sherlock's eyes flicked over to where the music stand
was, a small assortment of sheet music, where the rosin lay on the shelf, and seemed puzzled
where John might have placed the violin. The violin that had, by design, removed John from the
flat so that Sherlock could take advantage of Molly. He pressed up on his elbow to survey the rest
of the room, searching for it and coming up empty.

John knew, of course, and kept the satisfied look off his face. "Absolutely not."

"But it's --" mine.

"-- a privilege, is what it is." Sherlock seemed legitimately surprised, shocked. John wondered
again, definitely not for the first time, how many people had actually told the bloke 'no' up until
now. "You have to earn that."

"I don't believe that's --" fair.

"Tough." He tapped the book again that he was still holding. "So, based on what you had told me
quite a while ago, that you had a --"

"You are not my nanny from my childhood."

"Seems that's perhaps what you need, here. Someone to make sure you eat, keep you out of
trouble, rub your head maybe," and with that Sherlock's cheeks coloured slightly and John
grinned just a little inwardly at his self-consciousness about it, "micromanage your day. Help you
to behave yourself."

"Seems you're doing a bang-up job of that," he muttered.

John felt the bristle start at his criticism but stayed the course, brought the conversation back to
topic. "The book is --"

"Not interested." He'd tossed a gaze around the room once more, obviously still violin-hunting,
then gave up, annoyed but pretending to relax into the couch with displeasure.

"It's just light reading, not terribly complicated plot but apparently engaging. Nice length, couple
hours." Sherlock's jaw came out again, stubbornness personified. John responded in kind. "Well,
anyway, I'm reading it, out loud, so you might as well listen, make the most of it."
“Dear lord, please, at least tell me you have chosen well.” Sherlock was at least still paying attention enough to crane his neck in an attempt to see the title.

“Your brother said Treasure Island was a favourite of yours as a boy. I considered it, but I wanted to start with something a bit shorter. It’s called The Graveyard Book, by Neil Gaiman. Thought perhaps we would try it.”

“I will hurt you if you get too dramatic or if you attempt to use outrageous voice characterisations.” For all his negativity, Sherlock seemed rather impassioned as he fussed at John.

"Feeling better, are we? The threats are just rolling off your tongue today." John opened the book, flipping through a few of the opening pages.

Sherlock wasn't quite done. "You threatened me too, if you'll recall, with something unacceptable. Untenable." An eye narrowed, clearly Sherlock had heard the threat of the return to an inpatient situation and wasn't too thrilled by it. Good. There was a snort, then, as he moved on to a less important topic. "And, worse, you threatened to eat all the pastries." Ah yes, John was pleased to see the feistiness and the verbal sparring making an appearance.

Winking, John simply answered, "Yet I seemed to save them all for you. You're welcome, by the way. Still have glaze on your chin." He settled back into the chair across from the couch, the book finally open to the first page of text. "Now, there are some illustrations, and if you're quiet and good, I'll be sure to show them --"

"Oh god, please, just shoot me now." He did, however, quiet down as John chuckled merrily, and began to read.

John had finished most of the first chapter, glancing over fairly regularly to see Sherlock's interest and gauge his reactions. His voice was just beginning to tire, and rather than do too much in one sitting, he flipped forward a page or two, checking length. After showing one of the more clever illustrations mostly just to prove that he would (and affirm Sherlock's good behaviour), when he looked over to find Sherlock still awake and paying attention, he gave it a few more paragraphs and sighed. "That's good for today, I think. This is a good stopping point anyway."

"Thank god, the mindlessness was nearly putting me to sleep," he whined, but John wasn't fooled. He'd been moderately engaged and listening. The reviews and recommendations he'd read when selecting this particular book were spot on - reading level for a young adult but interesting enough to keep a grown-up's attention. And suitable for reading to an audience.

"I'm fixing tea, want some?"

Though Sherlock agreed, he'd fallen asleep by the time John set the cup down next to where he reclined on the couch, a blanket pulled up around his neck again. John relished the faint stirrings of victory within. Sherlock had fallen asleep with the slightest smile on his face. But even more cause for celebration was something else John noticed. The book had been moved from where John'd set it, and Sherlock had read another few pages, and moved the bookmark.

Maybe. Just maybe.

While John had a few moments peace, he cleaned up around the flat and managed to again peruse the email Mycroft had sent him so long ago, the list of what types of things Sherlock liked and enjoyed. It was probably time to step it up again, keep Sherlock's head in the game.

++

"So," John said just a bit later the next morning, after what had ended up being a restless night.
While neither of them talked, John knew Sherlock had not slept well, having been kept awake himself by the sighing, tossing, turning. He’d showered quickly, dressed, and had knocked off some of his daily email tasks, documentation, and a bit of pleasure reading as Sherlock did finally doze. When Sherlock seemed to be more awake, still laying in bed but clearly not getting back to sleep, John decided it was time to get moving. "Breakfast. And then a shower. You're getting dressed."

"Why bother. There's no point."

"Ah, but there is."

"I have no strength." This was delivered as statement of fact. "And even less interest."

"And how do you propose to regain your strength if you simply sit around and do nothing?"

"It matters not."

"Most people would say it doesn't matter. Or more likely, they would say I don't give a shit."

One eye opened briefly to express Sherlock's dissatisfaction with John's commentary on his use of language. "Your posh boarding school is showing, is all." He kept the comment light, adding, "I would have gotten beat up for saying that at my school."

"I don't give a shit." The eye closed, and he rolled over, turning his head further into the pillow and away from John, but there was definitely a smirk. A solid one at that.

John couldn't help the small snicker as Sherlock attempted the retort, it just sounded foreign with his diction and tone. "Better, I suppose. But it is time to get up, if nothing else, being more active and awake during day hours should have an effect on your sleep quality." Sherlock seemed disinclined to listen, let alone move. John grabbed the edge of the duvet, tugged it down a few inches to expose Sherlock's shoulder, let the cool air reach him to help wake him up.

Sherlock's hand grabbed at the top edge, holding it, preventing John from dragging it down further. "You're a cruel man with no mercy."

"I'll even give you the choice of shower first, or breakfast first, your call."

"Wait. Shower?" His head had angled to the side as he considered John's word. "Instead of a bath."

"I was beginning to think you were going to miss that word, again." It had been intentional choosing, both times. "Think you're up for it?"

An eye opened again, looking at John as if to assess his seriousness, his intent. "You're not getting in with me, are you?"

"Wasn't planning on it, no. And I'd prefer not to have need of a water rescue this early in the day."

"Then I'll shower first."

"I do suggest making it a relatively quick one. It does tend to expend a lot of energy."

Several minutes later, the steam was rising behind the shower curtain and Sherlock was arguing that John didn't need to stay in the bathroom with him, that he wasn't likely to drown for gods
sake. Chuckling to himself, John did leave the bath for a few minutes to gather Sherlock a change of clothing.

"You doing all right?" he asked upon his return.

"I don't know. Been unmonitored for approximately forty-five seconds, might have gotten into trouble."

"You know what I meant. But do you want help with your hair?"

The answer that came back was an unconvincing no, but John could hear that Sherlock's movements were slower, that he was holding on to the grab bar and breathing heavily.

"I'll give you a quick hand," John said, and then heard the entendre and quickly amended, "with the shampoo." He flipped the water off the shower head to the faucet and flicked the drain shut. "Have a seat."

They'd developed a fairly smooth system of when to tip, when to scrub, lather, and rinse. In short order, a towel was wrapped about his trim waist and Sherlock was seated on the closed toilet lid. Another towel was about his shoulders, and he was leaning his head back against the wall.

"It's surprising how exhausting a shower is, honestly," John said, recalling after his injury when he'd needed more than a little assistance to bathe, let alone get in the shower. "But you'll get your strength back." He tugged the towel up around Sherlock's hair, dried as best he could given Sherlock's lack of strength to even hold up his head, and let Sherlock simply sit for a few minutes.

Eventually, Sherlock seemed to revive and was ready to go again, and John stepped back to get a good view of Sherlock's reaction when he noticed.

And notice, he did, coming up short. He stared. And thankfully, did continue to breathe.

"What is this?"

"Your clothes."

"I can see that, of course. Obvious." He was grousing about, and stood up as he reached an arm out for the items John had brought. From within the depths of Sherlock's closet, he'd grabbed a few pieces of attire that had obviously been somewhat recently worn, off some of the hangers that were front and center. A button front dress shirt in pale gray. A bespoke pair of well-cut trousers. Black wool socks from the index. A soft, silky vest from the chest of drawers, fabric that called, a siren song. John had run his fingers over it, savouring the rather incredible soft texture, imagining how good a vest like that would feel on whomever was wearing it. Or touching it, John had needed a mental shake, back to the task at hand. Sherlock hesitated, though his fingers came out lovingly to touch the shirt's placket and buttons. "Why?"

John didn't choose to answer right away, he was so enthralled by the expressions on Sherlock's face, the crinkles at the eye, the smile, the sparkle, the clearly pleasant associations. Surprising Sherlock was quite a delight. "I have it on some authority that you appreciate wearing fine, well-fitting clothes. And I know you haven't done so for a while now." Neither of them spoke the name of Sherlock's brother, but both did recall that Mycroft had indeed weeks ago supplied John with some information as to Sherlock's likes. "I think it's high time to remedy that." His statement was slow, thoughtful, and triggered a kind, appreciative smile on Sherlock's face.

Mycroft's list had given the hint that Sherlock did fully enjoy his creature comforts. Clean hair and selected products. Well cared for hands. Quality dress clothing. A few others that John looked forward to testing out.
By the time the shirt was ready to be buttoned, Sherlock's fingers were shaking and tired and he was leaning hard against the wall. Swatting his fingers away good naturedly, John finished the buttons, rolled up the sleeves, and gestured toward the sitting room. The body, despite the lack of energy and the subsequent collapsing onto the couch, looked much different in this style of menswear. Long legs seemed longer and more fit, though the trouser waist was still loose from weight and muscle loss. The shirt hugged nicely across the shoulder, the buttons snug and secure across the pectorals. Forearms also seemed more fit and trim under the sleeve cuff rolls. The socks over long feet and bony ankles clung too, seemed healthier than white socks or slippers. John had pictured it, but actually seeing it had a whole different effect.

There was a confidence, a charisma that seemed to hover there, to be part of him now. It had somehow been put on along with the clothing. The quality of the fabric along with the tailoring gave the impression of both comfort and style, of being quietly understated. Of financial means. John had grown used to seeing lounge pants or pyjamas and dressing gown. The trousers were just pleasing and flattering in all the right places.

Except that the man wearing them was moaning slightly on the sofa, quietly but clearly claiming that he had been run over by a truck and could someone please notify the authorities.

John couldn't stop the chuckle. "I hear you, however, notifying the authorities as you have requested, is particularly likely to bring your brother over here." Deciding that Mycroft might actually be useful as a point of allegiance, John and Sherlock against Mycroft, he made sure to add, "And I should tell you that he's not especially pleased with either one of us right now."

"I can imagine," Sherlock gave John a small sympathetic nod, "Ugh."

"Exactly. At least eat something first, before we have to deal with him." From the kitchen table, John produced a banana and granola bar, handed both over, which were quite efficiently consumed. A few sips of water without being asked, even, and John wasn't sure if he should credit the shower or the clothing, but was grateful just the same. John had already perused the morning headlines on his laptop, mentioned that maybe later they would discuss the meal options for the next few days, maybe order something in for dinner, and he was mid-sentence, ready to ask if he was ready for another chapter from their book, when he noticed that Sherlock had already fallen asleep. His face was still in repose, his breathing deep and even, young-appearing, relaxed. His bowed lips were slightly apart, the faintest hint of teeth showing. Though he was still on the pale end of the skin spectrum, John thought that his colour was much improved from when they'd first met those weeks ago.

"Guess the book can wait," he whispered, mildly disappointed. The plot had introduced a new twist and he was curious himself.

In his fatigue, Sherlock had drawn the blanket up over him, probably slightly chilled from the shower, and in doing so, his wrists had been wrapped together and caught underneath the edge of the union jack pillow. Carefully, so as not to disturb him, John eased the edge of the blanket out from around his wrists, remembering Sherlock's history, of the medical treatment, of the way he'd recalled being restrained. A frown crossed his face as he recalled Sherlock's words about the sexual partner he'd had, who had probably unwittingly but definitely unknowingly held his wrists together. The protectiveness, the fondness John was feeling had him quite concerned that, upon awakening, Sherlock might feel held, bound, restricted. The blanket caught just a little under his forearm, and in tugging it completely free, John could feel the heat emanating off Sherlock's body as he ensured that there was nothing holding him, no reason to panic, no unpleasant associations or triggers. There was just the faintest amount of warmth in his chest as he did so, which suffused even a little further when Sherlock turned his head, his nose coming close to John's arm and he inhaled, and smiled.
The news anchor droned on and on about something pointless and irrelevant, the words taking up space and poorly chosen, Sherlock was saying and then he recommended that they fire their teleprompt writers. As had become their routine, he was dressed, had eaten, and they caught a few minutes of the mid-day news report.

"I'll be right back. Need anything from the bedroom?" he asked.

Upon his return, Sherlock was still fussing about the news content and delivery, but stopped, halted abruptly, mid-rant, when John set a pair of Italian leather shoes down in front of Sherlock.

"No."

"What do you mean, no?" John asked with something of a grin, choosing yet again to be at least tolerant of Sherlock's predictable belligerence.

"Whatever it is, I am quite sure I don't want to do it."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you've probably lined up a testimonial appointment at Mrs. Hudson's, or something godawful at the library or some support group for addicts--"

Clunk.

For whatever else John was discovering about Sherlock, he absolutely loved getting him to shut up when he was animatedly fussing. Which he did a lot. That abrupt cessation of Sherlock on a rant was a noteworthy, satisfying accomplishment.

This time, there was a lull, a silence, and then a heartfelt gasp when he could find his words again. "Oh, John."

In front of him, onto the coffee table, Sherlock was staring at what John had also just set down by the shoes. Two items, released from John's capable hand, had settled onto the table with a click and a crinkle.

A pack of cigarettes and a lighter. "Really?" he gasped again.

"It's frightening that you act as if this is the best gift you've ever seen." John was shaking his head, shoulders shaking with mirth as he laughed. "Honestly and truly. Frightening."

With something resembling great ceremony, with no prompting or encouragement, Sherlock sat up. His shoes slipped on, deftly tied with a minimum of flair. He sat a moment as John gestured, reaching without words for Sherlock's left arm, his index finger beckoning. Slowly, Sherlock let his arm come out for John to grasp. With two confident hands, John flipped Sherlock's arm over, slowly and gently, sliding his sleeve upward to expose the area near his elbow. The nicoderm patch rested there, waiting. Both of them watched as John lifted the edge of the adhesive, began to peel back the previous day's dose.

It was a laughable reverence, John knew, that Sherlock stood, eyes wide, stunned into quiet cooperation. "Really?" he asked John again, a hushed whisper, still disbelieving.

"I promised you. Did you think I wasn't going to come through on that?" Sherlock's look of chagrin answered that. "Well, shame on you for thinking that. You're ready."
"My first trip out of this flat in a long time."

"Let's do this."

"Get it over with, you mean?"

"Something like that, yes."

John slid his own jacket on, pocketed the lighter and pack, then held up Sherlock's Belstaff for him to slide into. With a minimum of movement once their coats were on, John opened the door at the top of the steps, where they both stood, looking down.

"Worried?"

"Not about going down. Energy to get back up."

"You don't remember being carried up them, do you."

"No."

"You don't have to do this, you know. You can back out of the deal."

"Not on your life."

John was encouraging. "You can absolutely do this. You're ready. And they're just steps, you know." At Sherlock's skeptical pout, John continued. "Worst case scenario, I'll toss you over my shoulder, army carry you back up."

"With your injury?" Sherlock said quickly. "Are you sure you're able?"

It caught John up short. He tried to recall if Sherlock had seen him shirtless, or if they'd talked about it (knowing full well they hadn't), or what could possibly have given that away. He knew for a fact that he usually turned away when quickly dressing or changing shirts in Sherlock's presence. "How did you know?"

"I didn't, not completely, until you just now confirmed it. But it fits, the army, the --" and they exchanged looks again, John surprised and Sherlock smug. "Oh please, of course you're military. You almost have it tattooed across your face. It explains your forced retirement, your current vocation." Sherlock looked bored at the need to explain himself. "Your range of motion is a bit more limited on the left side, dominant arm, probably a broken rib or two. Shot?" he asked, pausing long enough to take in John's nod. "Not a usual role for army surgeon, in the line of fire. Unusual assignment then."

John's mouth was dry, and throat tight. "That's uh.... brilliant." Sharing that he was impressed seemed to come out before thinking about it. "And yes, something like that." He didn't particularly want to get into it immediately, refocused them to the present. "Be quite assured that I can still lift you if necessary."

"It won't be," and with that his brow wrinkled again in concern, "hopefully."

"Don't get used to this. This is a one-off. The only time I accompany you for a smoke. Perhaps consider this your very last one, ever." Sherlock almost laughed at the concept, and John could only shake his head at the notion that he had no intention of making that consideration true. "Congratulations on quitting."

"I think not."
"I still don't particularly approve, you know. You don't have to do this."

"Perish that thought!" he jested back, and seemed a bit more determined. "You promised."

"And here we are."

Their destination was seventeen steps and a short distance away to a bench not far down the street. It ended up being almost anticlimactic in John's opinion, the cigarette between Sherlock's lips, the flick of the lighter, the inhale, the light-up. It was a few inhales, exhales, and Sherlock crossing an ankle over his knee as he imposed his presence on the bench, on the street, the pedestrians, the small section of street block he'd taken up a commanding ownership of. The Belstaff, unbuttoned, draped flattering also with a dominance befitting its well-dressed owner. John had chosen not to sit down, but ambled about along the kerb a bit, biding his time, watching, waiting. Surveying the area, keeping a close eye on their surroundings, and trying to be nonchalant about staying out of the range of the second hand smoke.

In the end, Sherlock extinguished the cigarette after only smoking perhaps a bit more than half of it. John received it carefully, binned it, and then joined Sherlock on the bench. "You know, it says a lot about a person who can blow smoke rings and do the little tricks you do, as if you weren't even concentrating on it."

"Oh?" Sherlock quipped back, watching John and returning the smile. "What does it say about me?"

"That you were mocked when you first started to smoke. That you felt compelled to practice until it became second nature. That you're most certainly a perfectionist with extremely high, almost unattainable standards. That you are a creature susceptible to habit. To addiction. Which seems an obvious statement, given where we are, you and I."

"If I advised you that one of those statements was a lie, would you know immediately which one was untrue?"

"None of them are false, I don't think," John said, having taken a casual glance around, then meeting Sherlock's gaze directly. A few vehicles went by, loudly, a horn from down the street, a yell of a boy chasing a dog, conversations of passers-by. "Observations, are all. They're not set in stone, as such. If you would feel better, you can certainly tell me which one you would like not to be true."

There was a small, lopsided smile, Sherlock's eyes crinkling as he did so. "No, they're kind of spot on."

Without the necessity of a spoken word, they stood up again, with Sherlock leading the way back to their door. After returning to the sitting room, John's mobile buzzed with an incoming text, which he read, laughed at, and then promptly showed Sherlock.

It was from Mycroft, and included a grainy CCTV camera shot of them from outside the flat, the cigarette visible, both of them depicted in the photo as pleasantly engrossed in conversation. Accompanying the photo was one word: Really?

It was as John had suspected earlier, that the two of them on the same team as it were, with Mycroft opposing, was somewhat unifying, and both laughed again. Unfortunately for Sherlock, he couldn't stop the exertional, accompanying cough that came with it, and John couldn't refrain from commenting on the poor health habit of smoking. At Sherlock's glare, he finally held up a hand. "All right, enough said about it."
"Oh, I fully expect you'll continue to work it into conversation from time to time." There as a throat clearing as an attempt to suppress the cough that wanted to let loose. "Not a doubt."

"I'll make an attempt to quit if you do likewise."

He left that unanswered, and apparently decided to turn tables. "So, your injury. A result of ... what was it Mycroft let slip, something about an incident report?" Though John wanted to deny it, he knew Sherlock had heard them. "Or misconduct, wasn't it?"

"Indirectly, I suppose." He answered slowly, then realised he should have said nothing. Because Sherlock continued. "Yours?"

Sherlock's eyes bored into John's, watching for anything, signs of stress, something that would give anything away about what had happened. John was having no parts of it, and returned the stare, impassively for a few moments, wordless, stoic. He'd grown quite skilled, given his current profession, at keeping everything on the outside business as usual. Show nothing.

Sherlock's gaze was laser sharp, watching every nuance of John's behaviour. "You don't want to talk about it."

"Not even this much."

"As a matter of curiosity, do you have full and complete recall of your injury, being shot?"

John thought about maintaining radio silence about it, but Sherlock's tone was softly curious and the topic less direct. "Vividly."

"Awful to remember?"

"Yes." Unwanted, the ribs, the shoulder, gave a twinge of pain memory, a faint reminder. John remembered feeling the sharpness, the sting, the burn of muscle, flesh, and lung tissues being damaged, and the hissed words of his: oh shit! John held Sherlock's gaze, their eyes communicating much, and John returned the volley of Sherlock's question. "Though not remembering something isn't much better, is it?"

"No, it's not."

The energy in the room, sapped, gone, the mood hushed. John found another movie they hadn't watched together yet, a documentary on beekeeping that he'd found stashed in a pile near the disc player. Though it didn't interest him, he thought Sherlock might have apparently at one time enjoyed it. As the opening credits rolled, John glanced over to find Sherlock laying on his back, eyes half mast, mostly asleep. "You all right?" he asked low.

There was an answering nod, just once, and Sherlock glanced over knowing John was studying him. "By the way, thanks for ..."

John smiled at the acknowledgement, the expression of gratitude, the appreciation. And equally, for changing the subject. "You're welcome." Behind them, the movie played for an audience that paid very little attention.

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John's mind had obviously been reminded of previous unpleasantness, and his dreams that night were a spiraling mixture of the young boy calling out and the sergeant laughing as he pulled the trigger, hitting the boy before leveling the rifle at John. There was heat and sand and London fog
and cigarette smoke - all hostile, all attacking, all out to get him. In the dream, he wanted to run away, wanted to attack, was frozen in place. One of his unit members called out to him, needing aid, calling, calling, *calling*.

"John. John!" The voice was Sherlock's and accompanied by a nudging kick, a sharp and emphatic jostle of the frame of the cot on which he lay.

Consciousness returned, a lightswitch, a horrified realisation, a quick snippet of thankfulness that Sherlock knew enough not to touch, to shake, to get too close to someone having a nightmare.

Skin hot and sweaty, heart racing, throat dry, remnants of fear still prickling in John's gut, he sat bolt upright in the dark room. "What?" Reality returned quickly, suddenly, the twinge of embarrassment of the nightmare as he could hear Sherlock moving a few feet away, speaking his name. Leaning back into the pillow, he tried to steady his breathing. The faint outline of Sherlock sitting on the edge of the bed was all he could make out in the low-lit bedroom. "Are you all right?" he asked, the caretaking role surfacing immediately.

"Hardly think that's the right question."

"I'm sorry that I woke you," he said quietly. The dreams didn't occur often, and he hadn't had one in a long time. His shoulder somehow was throbbing, the pain sharp and swollen-feeling on the inside of his joint, the aching where the ribs had long ago healed revisiting him as well. The sound in his ears from the rapid beat of his pulse and the partially-remembered stress of the dream was loud, relentless. "I'll just, uh," he began to swing his feet out of bed, knowing sleep was now going to be particularly evasive until his body and mind calmed themselves down. "I don't want to keep you awake."

"Leaving the room is not necessary."

"I know that," John said, snippier than he meant to be, "sorry."

"Stop bloody apologising."

Staying where he was, sitting, breathing slowly, counting the inhale, counting the exhale, he reminded himself that this was all right, normal, expected. The silence in the room was not uncomfortable, and John could feel himself starting to unwind. The biofeedback techniques he'd learned in med school and then applied after discharge from the military were still quite useful, and his awareness of both breathing and muscular tone was helpful as he perched there. Sherlock spoke again, though, and he was so engrossed in his own mind that he didn't hear the words clearly.

"What was that, again?" Just in time, he swallowed the word 'sorry' before it was spoken. "I missed what you said."

"I said," Sherlock told him, "that if you wanted, we could go a little farther in the book."

Sigh, heart rate lowering another few beats per minute. Inhale, pause, exhale. "I'm not sure I'm up to reading just now."

"I could read, this time."

The offer, the selflessness of Sherlock's suggestion, John knew was quite atypical, quite unusual, quite special. It was also, he knew, not to be ignored or declined. "That sounds," and he cleared his throat, "like a nice idea. I'll get it."

His feet were quiet as he padded out to the living room, snatched the book, and returned to the
bedroom, stopping first at the loo. When he realised what was different in the bedroom, his steps slowed to a halt, and he could only stare a moment, trying to decide the best reaction.

Sherlock had slid to the other side of the bed, the light on the nightstand was on, and John's pillow had been brought to the empty spot of Sherlock's bed. It was an obvious invitation, one that made sense on one level, and was cause for mild alarm on the other. A long arm with elegant fingers appeared, reaching toward the book John was holding. "All right," he said, quiet and low, but took up his own blanket from his cot before joining Sherlock.

Sherlock's voice was perfectly suited, his pacing and rhythm absolutely lovely as he flipped to the bookmark and started to read. His cadence, pronunciations, and inflections were easy listening, and John found himself following along with his eyes as well while Sherlock read. The story brought them back, yet again, to the graveyard and the crypt and the chase scene. One of the pictures was quite cleverly done, and Sherlock stared at it for a longer pause, his fingers holding the page in mid-turn as he then pointed.

"That's not what I pictured the room looking like. Not at all."

"Oh?" John hadn't given it much thought, his usual reading habits were just to mostly accept things at face value and move on. Apparently not Sherlock.

"Of course not. The dialogue doesn't have any mention of an echo in the room, so all this stone doesn't make sense. It should be more earthy, dirt, which would absorb some of the sounds. Plus, Bod doesn't even ..." and he explained why the writer had used such specific description about the murderer and why the chapel illustration would have been better served in a different presentation. "And then the Honour Guard, of course, has to do with ..." John listened with half an ear, hearing what Sherlock was saying on one side, but thunderstruck on another, that he was not only reading, but analysing and applying the plot.

Sherlock had paused, and was obviously awaiting a reply. "You realise," John said, slowly, "that this is fiction. It's a tall tale."

"You realise," Sherlock levered back at him, "that quality writing such as this is meant for more than entertainment. The symbolism is remarkable."

"If you say so. Mostly for me, pleasure reading is just that - mindless escape from reality. Entertainment."

Sherlock continued to read, if a bit slower than previously. Both of them seemed a bit more pensive, more introspective, though. While John was pondering the applicable symbolism of the book to their current situation (if there was a parallel, he didn't think so but wasn't sure) while Sherlock was considering that the story just might be, as John said, purely for entertainment. He doubted it.

++

The following evening, Sherlock was complaining of a headache and was grouchy. John couldn't help but wonder at what he'd already set in motion with Mycroft, hoping for the best. Mycroft's list, the email, the things John had requested that Sherlock enjoyed, had included the fact that Sherlock enjoyed chemistry. A few texts had gone back and forth as John's plan had solidified and taken shape.

Sherlock said something about an interest in doing some research? John

He's always been fascinated with microscopic examination of various substances. What
about it?

Can you bring something for him?

Such as?

Your email about his likes mentioned the sciences. Microscope perhaps?

I believe I can get my hands on some spare lab equipment.

Something to occupy him

He would be immediately dissatisfied with any commercially prepared set.

Then put together a custom one.

Are you quite sure?

John couldn't help chuckling, was glad Sherlock was resting.

I'm not asking you to provide him the means to build a bomb. John

He hit send as another thought struck him.

Actually, I am asking you NOT to provide him with the means to build a bomb. Just for some basic experimentation, something he would find enjoyable, to keep his mind busy.

John

Don't say I didn't warn you. MH

Make sure you include enough personal protective equipment with the supplies you send.

I so hope you know what you're doing, Dr. Watson.

I'll be doing plenty of research, not to worry, before he starts mixing compounds.

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John could hear Mrs. Hudson talking with someone at the door a few hours later. "Sure, take the boxes right upstairs, then." A few minutes later, John watched Sherlock's expression turn from bored to annoyed to interested to fascinated as he unpacked a microscope and a few slides, a source light, and a few vials of assorted chemical substances in varying forms for slide preparation.

"What is this?"

"You mentioned research."

"And you expected this would somehow be helpful?"

"Something to do, yes."

Sherlock seemed to then turn his eye to John as if considering an important question, and then it seemed to John that he was being inspected for purchase. Or perhaps, he reconsidered the threat of vivisection when Sherlock's grin turned a step shy of sinister. John watched with growing
cautiousness when Sherlock pulled out a slide, cover, and a large toothpick. "Open your mouth."

"What?"

"Cheek cells."

"So in your world, open your mouth seems to mean please John may I please have a few of your cheek cells to look at under this microscope you arranged to be brought in?" John could vividly recall the respect he'd mostly been given his whole adult life, from his uni classes and profs, into med school and among his teachers and peers, his military days for the most part. His patients and their families - barring these most recent Holmes' examples - typically spoke to him well and treated him like the professional he was. "Your lack of social skills is appalling."

"John."

"Take your own cheek cell sample scrapings. Or ask me nicely." Even from where John was in the room, watching Sherlock fiddle around, he could see his jaws clench at being given directions. "You can't even do it, to politely ask permission, can you?" The set of Sherlock's face - defiant and resistant - was such that John couldn't stop the giggle. And Sherlock's irritation at John's chuckle unfortunately only brought a bit more of it from his mouth. "Did you want to look?"

"I don't know. Are you going to attack if I come closer?" Sherlock's mouth twitched just a little before he could stop it. "Harvest something without my consent?"

"Never mind then. I rescind the offer." Haughty eyes seemed to issue a challenge.

John could model what it looked like to change his mind. "I would like to look, actually, yes." He half expected Sherlock to grab him, hold him down, and do something like pluck a few hairs or obtain the oral scrapings. "Interesting. Does the oil make a big difference in the way the light diffuses through?"

"It does. There's methylene blue here too, for dying other slides, to pigment them to show up better. A few other agents for obtaining single-thickness samples."

John nodded, stepped back. "Nicely done. There's a list I printed out of household items that are at least interesting to view under a microscope. Probably some things you already have laying around here. Insect parts, maybe in a window ledge or something. Onion skin. Salt. Fingernail clippings. I think there was something growing mould in the back of the refrigerator." Sherlock briefly looked at him, then quickly away, sullen. "What is the problem here? Does it bother you to be prompted to use basic manners? Like a responsible adult would do without needing to be told, mind you."

"You already treat me like a child."

Pulling one of the kitchen chairs out, John sat down across from him, hoping that it would be more conducive to exploring this rather odd behaviour. "Can I remind you that just yesterday, was it, I took you outside so you could have a cigarette? Not exactly treating you like a child." When there was an almost comical continuance of ignoring John and what he was saying, John could only shake his head. "I'm sorry you've chosen to be so stubborn about this. I'm trying to help you.
That's what all of this was about."
"I know."

"I'm also sorry you feel that you're being treated like a child. But," and John hesitated, trying to choose his words well, "do you think that might be for a particular reason?" He waited, not really wanting a verbal response but hoping that Sherlock would at least listen. "All right, while I have had my reasons for it, I'll make more of an effort. To treat you the way you'd like."

There was a mumbling. A displeased, muffled, unintelligible mumbling.

"You know very well that I didn't understand that."

Sherlock's cheeks coloured under John's stare, but he looked back at John, and after clearing his throat, tried again. "Please John, can I have a few of your cheek cells to look at under this microscope that you so kindly obtained?"

"Was that so terribly hard?" John put a hand fondly on Sherlock's head, ruffling the curls, then pulled his chair closer. And opened his mouth.

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Sherlock had set out a few liquids, a few agents he'd gathered, a couple from under the sink, to clean off some of the beakers and to wipe down some of the slides he was done with. John offered to help, was turned down, and had started to think about dinner when Sherlock's voice interrupted his musings.

"Oops," he said, "oh, no," and then there was some breaking glass and an awful, protracted, violently strong retching sound. The stench from the table was overpowering, and John immediately leapt over, grabbed Sherlock by the arm, and pulled him away from the fumes.

"You mixed the bleach and the vinegar, didn't you?"

"It was only a little," he said, gagging again. John pushed him down onto the couch, handed him a trash can in case it was needed for the retching, and quickly flung open both windows in the room. "The bleach was old, needed it stronger to get the residual deposits off the glassware." This time, when Sherlock retched, it was with the remainder of lunch and barely contained in a towel John grabbed, thrust at him.

"You know, for a self-purported genius, that was something only a bloody idiot would do." He stood in the room, that was now growing chilly, hands on his hips as he looked around. "Lay low, deep breaths, while I clean up your toxic waste hazard."

He was curled on his side, uncomfortable, a hand pressed into his epigastrum.

John binned what he could, sealed the bag, and carried it to the kerb. When he returned to Sherlock, he could only shake his head. "You'll probably have a bit of a headache. The fumes will leave you feeling a bit off."

"I know that."

Part of John wanted to call him on the attitude he was unjustly displaying, but he looked so miserable, pale and sweaty, that those desires dissipated. He opened the window wider despite the chill, thought about a blanket. "Stomach still upset?"
In answer, there was another gag, and John made another decision, gently supporting and lifting Sherlock's arm again. "Off to the bedroom with you. The air will be clearer there, and we'll open a window there too." He did exactly as he'd said, tucked Sherlock who was still mostly doubled over, into the bed. He tucked up the duvet over him against the chill, patting Sherlock's shoulder, and stood just smiling down at the turn of events. "One day you'll learn, won't you?"

"I did know better, thought I had it under control." With a quiet voice, he spoke candidly. "A mistake."

John edged onto the bed, leaning for a moment. He let his hand slide down Sherlock's arm, watching him closely, taking in skin tone, color, stopping at his radial artery. "Pretty high again, of course." He slid the slightly sweaty fringe off Sherlock's forehead, taking particular note of the grimacing, the furrowed brow. "Pain?"

"God yes." He curled up tighter around his belly as another cramp must've hit. "Ow."

"I'll let the flat air a bit longer, and be right back shortly. Unless you need me before then."

"All ri--" he said, or started to, and then stopped, obviously still nauseous, a hand coming to his stomach. His head rolled back into the pillow, clearly not feeling well, and he took a few deep breaths.

"You'll be better soon." John went back out to the kitchen to survey the area quickly. It was cold, the fresh air from the cross ventilation of the open windows having aired out the flat to within an inch of its life, the toxic chlorine gas Sherlock had inadvertently created now gone.

The relative calm of the flat was quickly broken, though, seemingly as soon as John could feel himself begin to relax. From down the hall, there was an urgent, abrupt movement from the bedroom. An expeditious flinging of sheets, he thought. John was on his feet and moving before he was even consciously aware of it, knowing he was needed, an ominous sense of foreboding in the atmosphere. Something was very definitely wrong. "You all right?" he asked from the hallway.

"John!" came the call as he arrived at the doorway, flicking on the light. The distress and pain in Sherlock's voice, in his bearing, was alarming as he was sitting up. "J--!" The word was cut off abruptly.

There was a bubbling, a retch, the sound of propulsion of fluids being ejected again. The few steps to Sherlock's bedside were focused and intent. Sherlock was still in bed, sitting up with his hands randomly flailing, panicking in a desperate attempt to get help. He was vomiting again, a copious amount. His eyes were wide open and frightened, seeking John, unable to call out again for the process at hand.

This time he was vomiting bright red blood clots.

Lots of them.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, all my medically savvy readers: Name the condition Sherlock has.
Thanks for continuing with this story. As always, please let me know if I missed something, or if in my editing I lost the flow or something. Overuse a verb? This chapter seemed to need the word "abrupt". And "smirked". (Wait, is that a siren? Is smirk even a verb? Is that the comma police?!) 

Things not to do:
1. smoke while wearing a nicotine patch.
2. mix bleach with anything else. Ever.
Differential diagnosis for haematemesis (vomiting blood):

- Bleeding gastric or duodenal ulcer
- Erosive gastritis
- Bleeding esophageal varices
- Esophageal trauma or perforation
- Pharyngeal haemorrhage
- Mallory-Weiss tear
- Malignant process of involved structure
- Overdose, particularly of anticoagulants, antiplatelets, or medications that can precipitate/potentiate bleeding (NSAIDs or aspirin, for example)

I had so much fun with this chapter, another very linear format.

"Sherlock!" John had breathed, "oh, god," approaching the bed, gathering the first thing he could as a vessel for the blood. Haematemesis. Bright red clots.

There was quite a bit at first, clot, bright red, along with thin liquid, and John held the trash can up to Sherlock's chin, holding him as the heaving continued.

Once the initial barrage passed, John leaned closer to feel a pulse - sky high.

"You awake, you with me?" he asked. As he saw Sherlock nod, catching his breath best he could, he could almost see the pallor creep across his face. The ominous, cyanotic duskiness was one John associated with ... very negative outcomes. "Shit," he whispered.

"What's happen --?" he began, and another hurl came upon him, spitting out a mouthful of bright clot.

With a hand on Sherlock's arm, he slid his mobile from his pocket, dialing 999.

"Ambulance. Dispatch immediately. 221B Baker Street, 28 year old male, vomiting bright red blood clots. Large volume, multiple times. Conscious." For the moment, he didn't say. By this time, Sherlock's eyes were closed, his lips pale.

"No hospital," he said in a whisper at one pause of John's end of the conversation. Sherlock's voice, his entire body, shook with both emotion and near vascular collapse. The tremors were also a bad sign.

"Hospital." John said in reply to Sherlock, then answered a couple of additional questions from the dispatcher. "All right, thank you, the door is already unlocked."

"No," he said again. "You promised."

"I did no such thing." And he hadn't, which they both knew. He reached over, turning Sherlock's head to the side, watching his airway and too afraid even for a moment to leave his side until other
trained help arrived. "Oh Sherlock." He ached for the man who'd such unpleasant associations. "There's no choice but for it this time."

There was a broken half-sob, a gutwrenching sound that worked its way out of Sherlock's throat and right into John's chest.

"I'll be with you the whole time. I'm not going anywhere." Sherlock's face was turned in toward John's neck, seeking warmth and protection, to burrow somewhere deep within John where no one else could get to him. The tremors subsided just a little as John held him close. There was another bout of retching, a smearing of blood on Sherlock's chin, John's shirt, and onto the bedding. Neither one cared. "Where is that damned ambulance?" he said quietly. In answer, there was a small distant sound of the two-toned siren. Sherlock's arms reached around John, tighter, tighter as the sound must have permeated his awareness of what was coming. 'I've got you,' John whispered to the curls by his chin as the siren grew louder and then stopped.

They were here. Time to go.

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A loud, bold knock was followed by the sound of the ambulance crew entering the flat. The narrow stretcher on wheels, along with the two men and their few bags of equipment made even Sherlock's large room seem crammed. Introducing himself as Dr. Watson, John confirmed Sherlock's name, birthdate, symptoms, and brief history while the other medic drew out some equipment, IV, lab tubes, heart monitor.

"No one sticks me but John."

"Sherlock," John was impressed that the man could still speak given the low circulating blood volume and pallor he had. The shaking returned in full force.

"One phone call, you're all fired," he said, opening his eyes weakly to see John shaking his head. "Except you."

"I can, if you ..."

"Only John." Sherlock's insistence was punctuated by a growl of sorts. He was certainly conscious and interactive, but clearly not thinking on all cylinders and definitely a little bit beyond reasoning with. Trying to argue with him, it was obvious to all of them, would be a pointless waste of time - time that they might not have.

"Fine by us," the medic said, taking in the assortment of equipment in the bedroom, eyeing up John and finding some camaraderie. "He just needs a line before we transport. Labs. Fluids running. Use our supplies or the hospital will just re-do it if he arrives with unfamiliar access." John took gloves, tourniquet, chlorhexidine, flicking at a vein and grateful it had filled. John didn't even mess around with trying to find a line other than antecubital, pulled off a bouquet of tubes, hooked up the running line the medic handed him. The lack of argument or even challenge to John's qualifications, role, was a testament to how terribly unstable Sherlock looked and the urgency with which things needed to flow for Sherlock's safety. Sherlock's shaking - hypovolaemia certainly - made rendering any care or treatments extra hard.

"Cold," Sherlock whispered.

John took the supplied blanket up. "Blood loss'll do that." There were a few additional times he vomited up a mouthful of blood, but nothing quite as voluminous as the previous episodes. The paramedic had even been somewhat impressed by the size of the clots and the volume from
earlier. The medics were a good team with a good flow, working in tandem, moved the stretcher close to the bed. While they orchestrated Sherlock's sliding from one to the other, which they mostly performed for him, John pulled out his mobile again. "What hospital?"

"No hospital," Sherlock muttered as the medic overruled him, speaking over him as the team leader, answered, "Closest. Bart's."

He clicked on Mycroft's contact information. **En route to Bart's. Vomiting significant amounts of blood. Conscious. You need to meet us there. John**

(Sent, delivered, received, read).

John's mobile pinged a few minutes later as Sherlock was being loaded into the rear of the ambulance.

It's going to take me at least an hour, minimum. I'm unavoidably out of the city. Will do my best to get there ASAP. Please update me as you are able. Mycroft ++

There was one physician waiting for the ambulance, and the charge nurse as well, who even knew John's name - thank you Mycroft - and they were quickly ushered into one of the large bays inside the doors of the A&E. Sherlock had a tight grip - death grip - on John's hand, and the tension in his whole body was obvious, though to the staff it may have been attributed simply to critical injury or haemorrhage.

"Onset?"

"45 minutes ago, max an hour. Sudden onset of vomiting earlier secondary to accidental inhalation ..." and here John hedged as a couple of staff members descended on Sherlock, who let out a frightened whine, his fingers now clenched even harder in Sherlock's vice grip. "... of noxious fumes..."

"John?" the young shaky voice was back, his entire body tensed. The ambulances heart monitor alarmed, and another nurse arrived. "John!"

"... without proper ventilation," John added. "Chlorine gas. No LOC. Stomach contents at first, violent and projectile, then just bile. Bright red blood with clot half hour later."

The medic was nodding, and spoke up then. "500 mls at least. Impressive, burgundy." One of the A&E techs arrived, helped the lot of people gathered moving Sherlock to a regular A&E bed, began to connect the bedside monitor and various equipment to Sherlock. John'd had to let go of him of course, circled around the bed in an attempt to stay out of the way. The labs were labeled and sent, and a registration clerk arrived with name band. It took barely a moment for it to register to John that Sherlock, in the overwhelming chaos, was trying to curl up on the bed, arms up over his face, and was softly, brokenly, calling his name.

Ignoring the clerk's last question completely, John moved to Sherlock's head, brushed a hand over his curls. "I'm here, yeah, you're okay. Not going anywhere." John burrowed his own hand under the blanket to find Sherlock's cold, clammy, tremulous one. He held on tight, a deathgrip, an anchor, a lifeline, a plea. "I know you have a lot to do right away with him," John said to the nearest doc, "but can we thin the crowd a little? It's a bit anxiety-provoking." A moment of eye contact, and John's serious gaze at the doc seemed to convey more than he'd uttered. **He has anxiety, this is not helping.**
"And you are?"

"Dr. John Watson. I've been his private medical coordinator a few weeks now."

"Detox or rehab?"

"Something like that, yes." Given the setting and the urgency of determining the issue, both kept answers short and quick.

The doc nodded, seemed to take a liking to John and wanted to keep moving. Approaching Sherlock's side again, closer, he addressed the few people standing, watching, helping, tending. "Okay, thanks, let's give me some room here, I'll need some space for a few minutes." He spoke gently and calmly, his manner such that no one reacted other than to finish their present task and then step back, most of them leaving the room now that they'd seen to the most critical needs.

There were some bookkeeping questions, confirmation of name, date of birth, surgical history, and medication list obtained mostly from John. The physician did a brief exam, listening to heart, lungs, lightly palpating abdomen, percussing lower belly, "History of varices?"

"Not to my knowledge. Sherlock?"

"No."

"Cirrhosis? Ulcer? Previous GI bleeding?"

"No," Sherlock whispered, and John was nodding, concurring.

The doc settled his hands over Sherlock's lower right costal border, fingertips sliding slightly in. "Deep breath," he directed, and Sherlock complied. Both docs watched his face, waiting for a grimace. There was none. "Liver's not enlarged," he said with a look of consideration.

"Mallory Weiss tear?" John suggested. "Timing and presentation fit."

"Perhaps, fairly likely." They swapped a few other sentences, and the doc stepped out to enter some orders, telling John he would make a few calls as well, and get back when there was a plan or updates.

One of the techs arrived to do an ECG, and John helped connect the leads, attempting to minimise the tremors for tracing quality. They'd no sooner finished than a radiology tech pushed a portable unit into the room.

"Holmes?" Two people nodded. "Portable chest."

A hard plate was carefully placed behind Sherlock, and John waited for what he hoped was the best timing to inform Sherlock, "I'm going to have to step out while they get this." Sherlock's unhappy eyes snapped to his and he brought both hands up in John's direction, trying to grab two fists of John's shirt. "A few seconds and I'll be right back in."

"No, you promised." The anxiety escalated, his speech too rapid to be fully understood. "You bloody promised!"

"Sherlock, it's ..."

"No, I refuse. Take me home. I'll sign myself out," The staff there halted, knowing the lingo and what it meant (assault if the patient was refusing). Sherlock eyed the door, a hand brushing over the monitor leads, and John didn't doubt that he would at least try, and then probably collapse.
The tech, John, and the doc all met eyes. It was John who made the first suggestion. "If you have lead, I don't mind staying bedside." A shrug, and then the lead apron and vest were placed around John. Sherlock had grown silent, eyes wide. "All right, Sherlock?"

At his nod, the film was obtained, the radiology unit a state of the art piece of technology that showed the image immediately. Though John couldn't see the actual image, having no desire to rattle Sherlock any further, the physician viewed it quickly. "No free air." John breathed a small sigh of relief at the lack of catastrophic finding. "Little atelectatic. Smoker?"

"Trying to quit. Nicoderm." John was relieved that there was no diaphragmatic perforation, no free air.

"Time of last meal?"

"Four hours, liquids. Solids at least six. At least."

The lights were dimmed, Sherlock's blood pressure hovering low, the IV fluids infusing wide open, and he closed his eyes with one hand still wrenched around John's shirt sleeve, clinging like a burr to a long-haired dog, or a desperate shipwreck passenger to a lifeboat. Absently, John let his free hand brush at Sherlock's arm, smooth his hair, straighten and then crisp up the sheets, eventually finding tissues to try to wipe the blood from his neck and lip.

The physician returned, somber, assessing at a glance where Sherlock's vital signs were displayed. "Gastro's in the way in, GI lab suite will be available soon," he told John. The doctor then turned to Sherlock, who seemed ready to detonate at the slightest provocation. "You'll need a scope tonight, called an endoscopy, check out the source of bleeding, cauterize or inject it if needed."

"No."

John reached out to steady Sherlock's shoulder as he tried to sit up. "I'll talk to him."

Some labwork was delivered, and the doctor glanced at John, then the patient, and asked, "When was your last drink, Mr. Holmes?"

Both John and Sherlock stared at the man who asked the question. John posed one of his own. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, there's no alcohol detected in his blood, but his MCH is elevated. Quite elevated, actually."

John was nodding at that, "Right. He's been anaemic. Blood transfusion about two weeks ago." He turned to Sherlock to explain the connection but Sherlock's stomach chose that moment to lurch, and a basin was handed quickly to John who directed Sherlock's head over it as he vomited up another round of bloody liquid and clots. While Sherlock emptied his stomach, again, into the basin, John found himself wondering how quickly the specialist would be here.

++

The sign over the door in the Gastroenterology suite read EGD Procedural Area - No admittance.

"John, John, John?" Sherlock's voice was a study in vibrato, a low and pained sound that was encroaching on the line where panic would set in. "Get me out of here, I swear it, now." They had been quickly shuffled down a hallway to the restricted area, and Sherlock started with a leg over the siderail, followed by the other foot off the bed then rattled himself fully off the stretcher, stood where he could see the doorway, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, lips thin, pale, shaky, and with a small line of crusty blood on his jaw from when he'd last vomited. The monitor had come disconnected, a high pitched urgent alarm sounding until someone silenced
"I can’t, don’t you understand anything?" The IV line stretched a bit tight, too tight, until the nurse moved the large volume bag closer, the pole on wheels moving easily with her foot. "I can’t," he said again. "Don’t ask it of me."

John stood close, not holding or restraining, and not anxious to have to pull rank and have Sherlock brought to compliance by force. "Deep breath, it’s going to be all right." John leaned low to tell Sherlock if he doesn’t relax, he’ll be anaesthetised, put under general, which will guarantee him at least an overnight. The private procedure room was just their small group - the nurse, John, Sherlock, and the physician. "You can do this. More," he said, pausing a little and gentling his words, "you need to do this. I’m going to help you."

The nurse came to John then, nodding, sympathetic but looking to help. "We’ve got this, there’ll be sedation soon, I have someone coming who can help hold him. Once the sedation’s on board, he’ll calm down. Or we can …" Her eyes flicked at the supplies laid out, where there had been soft wrist restraints tucked off to the side in case they were needed.

"Absolutely not." He knew that his voice had just gotten low, deadly. It was the Captain Watson mess with me and prepare to die voice, and he was largely okay with that. His directive was full stop non-negotiable. "No restraints."

Despite the quiet exchange, Sherlock heard, of course, and John approached, placed what he hoped was a calming hand over Sherlock’s shoulder. Frantically, Sherlock’s hand came up to John’s shirt front, scrabbling, a fist holding and unhappy, upset. His eyes were dilated, wild. "John!" The hand clawed at John’s neck, his collar, leaving scratches behind in a desperate attempt to hide somehow, seeking refuge inside John’s protective body.

To the nurse, John simply breathed, "There’s a history." The specialist was still there, watching, waiting but ready to intervene as soon as he was needed. John caught his eye. "No restraints."

"All right. No restraints," he echoed. "Mr. Holmes?"

Sherlock answered, a faint moan, turned his head away from everyone except John.

His hands found Sherlock’s shoulder, and he got into Sherlock’s direct line of vision. "You’ll be fine, stand still a minute." Sherlock’s shaky legs were only weakly holding him up, and John’s hold on his arms became the only thing keeping Sherlock from crumpling on the floor. "Sit here," he indicated the stretcher, "please. Before you fall over and hurt yourself worse."

Another attempt to move away, a moan, and Sherlock's stomach roiled again, a retching of mostly just thin bloody tinged fluid. "Don't let them hurt me," he pleaded softly, tone broken and vulnerable sounding. He barely leaned a hip against the procedure bed there in the room, but at least it gave him some support.

John kept a strong hand firmly in Sherlock’s, who clung and scrabbled for any part he could reach of John’s. To the providers there watching, waiting, he spoke to them. "Med school, paed rotation, had a mum desperate to stay, special needs child, SID or something. We ended up letting her get in the bed with him, behind him, calmed the boy down. Ended up really, absolutely fine. Minimal sedation, procedure completed, no complications." Sherlock's free arm clenched around his belly as he doubled over, another spasm, and he stared pointedly at the door, his intent for escape clear and obviously not possible. "I suggest if we want his cooperation and to proceed safely, that might be an option. Let me get behind him, talk him down, and keep him calm." Sherlock only had eyes for the door, and John could sense that it was time to declare their plan. Somebody make a decision. "Yeah?"

"Fine," the doc answered, less than thrilled but agreeable, with the nurse nodding tentatively as
well. "Let's tell anaesthesia we're almost ready for them."

John squeezed Sherlock's icy hand. "We'll try it." He slipped off his shoes and pulled off his jumper, as it was bulky and he thought Sherlock would perhaps feel more secure without the extra layer between them.

"Your job is just to keep him calm and cooperative, Dr. Watson. No getting in my way, and keep the chatter to a minimum."

"Oh trust me, no worries. I have no intention --"

"John," Sherlock said, his voice wobbling. "John, I can't... oh god," and he started to hyperventilate, skin clammy.

"Now look at me," John insisted, emphasising his words carefully, "Eyes on me." Once Sherlock had done so, John said to him resolutely, "I've got this, and you're going to trust me, follow directions."

"What if I can't?" This in a sorrowful whisper, frightened and shaky.

"I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you again."

There was a harsh swallow, an obvious dilemma, a struggle, an inner conflict. "I just can't!"

"Up you go," he said, patting the stretcher, which, in Sherlock's defense, did look somewhat menacing.

"Just sit for the moment," John prompted, lowering the siderail on the other side of the bed. "Sit for now, but eventually, you'll be laying on your left side, I'll be right behind you."

Sherlock was suddenly stock still, resistant to any measure of cooperation, his body tight, statue-like, jaws clenched, feet planted.

"I've got you, all you have to do is listen, it's going to be fine." John spoke reassuringly. "There'll be a little sedation, you'll relax..."

"I don't want to."

"I know."

"There's nothing else for it?"

John went for scientific. "Medically speaking, waiting is risky, the bleeding needs to be stopped, need to make sure there's no perforation." John brought his hand to Sherlock's chin, tipping his head gently until he met his eyes, "but you do have to agree to it."

He was still met with stony silence. John could sense that the nurse was intently watching, listening, then must've conferred a bit with the doc as Sherlock maintained radio silence, waiting for John to press onward so they could get started.

A clipboard was offered to John, biro attached. "You're also going to need to sign consent."

When he held it out for Sherlock, there was more complaining, a frustrated gesture with his arms. "You do it," he fuzzed, nearly a whine.

"I can't. I'm not your power of attorney."
All of them were still standing, the doc spoke then quietly, addressing Sherlock and John. He explained simply, stating that this needed to get done, that it was time to get started, and ending with the fact that the risk of doing the procedure was much less than not doing it.

Sherlock was not convinced, his eyes wide, dilated, and frightened. "You'll stay with me?" John nodded. "You're all bloody certain?" At the next nod of John's head Sherlock signed with a large loopy scrawl, tossed to the board in the direction of the doc. "Doesn't change the fact that I still don't want to," he said, with a petulant scowl.

"Sorry, mate, really doesn't matter what you want. You need this. And all you have to do is listen to me." John let go of Sherlock's arm, choosing to convince Sherlock to come to him. He climbed up on the stretcher, backed up as far as he could against the siderail, laid on his left side, arm up. Putting the bed, he spoke evenly. "This spot's for you. Come here." The stand off continued. "Now please."

For a moment, it seemed he might turn tail and bolt, IVs and everything else be damned.

"That's an order, soldier," John breathed quietly.

An expectant breath, a moment of tension swirled about the entire room, the team holding their collective worries, and Sherlock froze a moment longer before moving, sitting and then scooting over close to John on shaking limbs. He was hyperventilating, tremulous, but did as John asked, getting into a left lateral decubitus position in front of John. He was unable, John knew, to put together any sentences.

One of the nurses arrived, gently, slowly, began to re-attach the heart monitor. "Routine monitoring," John assured him as he bristled, tensed as if he was going to pull away or start fighting uncooperatively. There was a blood pressure cuff again, a pulse oximeter, both of which John was able to talk Sherlock into cooperating with, accepting, tolerating.

Sherlock's body was tense, tightly coiled, barely able to stay on the stretcher. John considered a few approaches, deciding finally but quickly on directing the team as much as he could, within reason.

"Good for you, rest here, breathe in, head down. Breathe out, just like that." He continued to talk, cuing the scrub nurse and physician with his directions to Sherlock. "See, you're doing so well - they're going to dim the lights, little oxygen in your nose, here's the IV fluids soon, might feel cool. Perfect, good job, just like that on your side. They're sworn to maintain confidentiality, no photos please, and I'm sure," and here John couldn't stop the chuckle, "this won't actually make it into the procedure note." Sherlock's shivering was pronounced as John made minor adjustments to their position, tipping his head up off the pillow as a paper chux was placed over the pillow. The whooshing sound of a suction catheter was activated, tucked out of sight but within close reach.

John forced his own breath to slow, in out, relax, hoping Sherlock would follow suit.

"Mr. Holmes, one last time, name and date of birth, and why you're here."

He answered, voice stressed, high pitched, citing the reason as vomiting blood.

The lights dimmed, inversely proportional to the tension that John could feel throughout Sherlock's body in front of him. With a warm hand, he brushed up along Sherlock's arm as he lay. There were tremors, mostly of his arms, as the doctor nodded to the nurse. There was a hesitation, and then the rote words followed. "I have a time out. Sherlock Holmes. Endoscopy. Equipment?"
"Yes." The nurse answered.

"Consent." The physician was speaking quietly, reading from the computer screen in front of him.

"Yes."

Sherlock's whisper was quiet, a background accompaniment, mouth dry and body tense, "Oh god."

"Let's get started."

"John?" Sherlock began to turn toward John, up on an elbow, as if John was going to rescue him, let him flee the room. "John!"

"Shh, you're fine. Lay back. I've got you." Careful not to fling an arm or leg over Sherlock to hold him in place, John spoke quietly, guiding with an open hand, until he twisted back around so that his back lay toward John's chest again. "That's it, just be easy."

An adjustment of Sherlock's arm, and the anaesthesiologist approached. "Good for you, here's a little bit of medicine to help you relax." He swabbed the IV port, began to bolus with midazolam.

"If you're following that with fentanyl," he began, and the anaesthesiologist nodded, looking pointedly at the next syringe he was holding, "he's not opioid naive," John said quietly.

"Sedation doesn't work well on me," Sherlock said, "at all," his body tense and rigid, his shoulders legs, everything rock hard. "I need --" John watched with a bit of dread as the physician picked up a bite block, and Sherlock caught sight of it and stopped talking abruptly. The physician looked down at them, nodded for the lights to be dimmed a bit more, and Sherlock's breathing became audible, coarse, anxious. "John!"

"Shh, it's okay, sshhh, it's a bite block to protect your teeth is all. You're getting a little more medicine, I've got you, you're safe here. Completely safe," John slid his hand up toward Sherlock's free arm, where he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was going to resist, push away the hands trying to help him, that he would fight the bite block.

Almost definitely, they would have used one many years ago for the ECT he'd endured, though Sherlock hadn't remembered until this moment.

"They have to put it in while you're pretty awake because sometimes people's jaws clench once the narcotics are given." Their hands met, locked. "Can you try to just let this happen? I'm here, they're helping you, you're just going to take some deep breaths. In and out through your nose, nice and slow, while the medicine starts to help." John nodded to the doctor, who smiled at Sherlock, ready to begin, the bite block offered under Sherlock's nose.

"Here you go, open," the doctor prompted, and John wished he was close enough to step on his foot to get him to shut up, clearly he was impatient.

"It's to protect your teeth, we don't want a chip." It was also, John knew, to protect the scope as well as the gloved fingers of the doc, who would be guiding it to the back of Sherlock's throat, but Sherlock didn't need to know that. "In through your nose," he prompted. Sherlock nodded faintly, the effort must have been terrible, and John gave him a little encouraging squeeze as he opened his teeth for the piece of plastic, "Good for you, nice and easy." He watched the nurse again, "Little more medicine, looks like the good stuff this time," as he could see the white syringe approaching the IV line, and the straps were velcroed around the back of Sherlock's head, and the panicked look seemed to escalate in Sherlock's eyes and face. "Okay, all routine stuff, you're good, breathe with me," and John took an exaggerated inhale. He could feel the trembling muscles of Sherlock's
body attempt to follow directions. "Good, and now breathe out," which they both did. With the quick rate John was going to have to breathe in to accommodate Sherlock, he hoped he didn't hyperventilate himself.

The anaesthesiologist puffed a little more medication into Sherlock's running IV, sped the fluids up a little, checked another blood pressure. John could see it flashing over Sherlock's bed, too high due to anxiety. The hospital providers, all of them, shared a glance, as if skeptical that John would be able to talk Sherlock through this, into complying. The physician gave a little shrug, nodded at the syringe, directing for another small dose to be given.

"Breathe with me," John said again. "Close your eyes if you want."

There was a gurgle, a movement of Sherlock's tongue and lips as he tried to say something, and John was quick with his hand to catch Sherlock's hand before he pulled the bite block out.

"Little more medicine, Mr. Holmes, and we'll get started as you go to sleep." The doctor's voice was calm, and he was, John thought, appropriately assertive and in control. There was a nod at the nurse. "Another half milligram of midazolam."

Another sound in Sherlock's throat, a questioning one this time, and John spoke low in Sherlock's ear. "More sedation, you're doing fine."

The endoscope was lubed up, out of sight for the moment, and once Sherlock's eyes barely drifted closed, the doctor brought suction to Sherlock's pillow. "Another fifty of propofol. You'll feel the scope over your tongue, nice deep breaths through your nose now, good, and ... here we go, swallow when you feel it..." John watched the scope and the long fingers of the gastroenterologist begin advancing into Sherlock's mouth, and he had to remind himself to breathe as he could feel Sherlock's head press back against him.

Sherlock's hand tensed, reached, and there were a bunch of things that happened right away. A gag first, and the reflexive reach for the foreign object, which John grabbed instantly. John watched carefully for signs of distress, his arms around Sherlock, one under the pillow, the other holding one or both of Sherlock's hands, whichever was threatening his procedure, equipment, or healthcare provider. The suction was used, clearing Sherlock's mouth around the scope, another gag as they did so, and in short order, the GI specialist breathed a loud sigh of relief "we're in!" and the scope was advanced into Sherlock's esophagus. Thank god.

The scope was an eternity of nine minutes. John felt it endless, and, once he heard they were nearly done, heard that they had retroflexed the scope to see the lower esophagus once more, he wondered if perhaps Mycroft could put him in for a medal. This had been totally, completely, absolutely exhausting.

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The procedure ended, the Mallory Weiss tear confirmed, endoscope and bite block removed. All the bleeding had stopped. There was minimal need for slight cautery, just to be sure in one friable area, some photos, and then the nurse was back to inspect the monitors and peer down at Sherlock with a smile at John.

"I'll leave the lights dim for now, he can wake up slow on his own." His blood pressure cycled again, very low this time, and she sped up his IV fluids. His heart rate had, with the sedation, slowed to mostly normal range. John would know once Sherlock started to awaken; his heart rate would absolutely climb back up again as awareness returned.

John's sighing breath ruffled the curly hair on the pillow in front of him. The scent of Sherlock's
shampoo hit John's nose, along with a hint of sweat - he'd been moving, stressed, and clearly his perspiring body had reacted, the last several hours having taken their toll. Carefully, John let go of the hand he'd still been holding, letting the sedated man in front of him have the freedom he most certainly needed.

The doc popped back in, checked Sherlock's vital signs on the monitor. "BPs still a little low, he run that way?"

John nodded.

"We can get that rail down, let you up if you want."

He shook his head, "Not yet," knowing first off that Sherlock would awaken if he tried to move that much, and second that he wouldn't be happy if John were not right there where he'd promised to be, when he did return to consciousness.

"Suit yourself, catch a nap while he sleeps."

Smiling, John whispered, "Probably a good idea."

"Bit unorthodox, this, but worked out very well."

"Thank you for letting me." John's voice was quiet, sincere, "I can't tell you what harm would have been done to him, to have forced him and used restraints, or general anaesthesia. It would have set us back so far, you have no idea."

"I'll be back when he's more awake, go through findings again, with him this time."

"Thanks."

John closed his eyes, breathing deeply, the scents of Sherlock's familiarity, the knowledge that he was near, safe, close also comforting.

Soft shoes on the lino, quietly, but John opened his eyes again. The nurse appeared, tucked the oxygen back more securely in Sherlock's nose, patted them both, then turned back to the electronic documentation for a few minutes, then left the room. Without thinking too much John's arms tightened around Sherlock, and he welcomed the relief at Sherlock's much more stable condition, the procedure being over, and that he would be all right.

Crisis averted.

Without too much conscious thought, he pressed his lips lightly, slowly, gently to Sherlock's shoulder, and left them there a few seconds. His own eyes widened at the action when he realised. For a few moments, he mostly held his breath, wondering if Sherlock was actually awake, had felt it. The tenderness, the sentiment, the investment he'd made in this particular patient had grown deep, deep roots. There was no immediate response, no questioning breath or turn of the head, just the chemically relaxed body in his arms, nestled in the security of John's embrace.

Sherlock was another ten minutes before anything began to be different. First change John noticed was that his breathing picked up, a bit quicker and deeper. There was tension, first in his shoulders, then in his head stirring. Several more minutes elapsed, arms twitching just a bit, uncooperative even as he was still rather sedated, before anything verbal kicked in. The sound at first was simply a guttural complaint, a rumble deep in his throat. Moments later, it was, "John," he whispered, and John shushed him gently, letting his hand brush over Sherlock's temple, soothing and gentle, easing his hair back where it belonged, the oxygen and strap from earlier having mussed it. Sherlock twisted his head, moaned a little, which was followed shortly by the
statement, "I don't wanna do this." Briefly, there was a little struggling of his arms coming up toward his face, protective and reflexive, pushing away at nothing. The hyperventilation continued, heart rate monitor alarming with the elevated rate, and Sherlock's voice was still gravelly as he said, "Let me up!" The alarm was silenced from out at the desk, John figured when it stopped.

"They're done, Sherlock, you did great." John let his arms be simply a presence, drawing Sherlock's tense body against him without restricting his movement for the moment. "All over."

"They did?" John assured him again the procedure was completed, and Sherlock nodded, his shoulders relaxing and his respiratory rate settling back down to the level of the deeply sedated. A few minutes later, he was up on an elbow again, and it was "When are they going to get started?"

Chuckle softy, John also leaned forward, patting him. "All done, they're finished. No more bleeding."

A mournful sob sounded in Sherlock's throat as the realization kicked in that John was speaking the truth, and John was moved by a rush of pity. He covered the silence with a few instructions as Sherlock tried to get a grip on himself.

"Don't go anywhere."

"I'm not, not yet. But you're all done, and I'm so proud of you."

A hand came up to the oxygen he was wearing, and would have pulled it away except that John cleared his throat in warning.

"I'm going to get up in a couple minutes, when you're ready. Leave that alone," and Sherlock's hand stilled, the oxygen tubing safe for the moment. John soothed, "Good job, it's all right." He eased his body away just a little, preparing eventually for Sherlock not panicking when he did need to get up completely. His arm pressed on Sherlock's shoulder in a gesture of security, of the sense that he should stay right where he was. "When you're more awake, they'll start talking about letting us go home." Weakly, Sherlock heard that and was suddenly motivated to sit up until a dizziness must have descended on him and he swayed briefly before laying back against the pillow. John took that moment to push himself upright and off the stretcher. "Your throat might be a bit sore, from the vomiting earlier and the tube just now, the scope they used." John stayed quite close to the bed, where Sherlock could not only see him but feel him, where his arm lay on the edge of the procedure stretcher.

Now that he had a moment, he stretched out his own neck. Then, checking his mobile, he found two texts from Mycroft.

Unavoidably detained. Update please?

and later, I hear the procedure is over and all is well. Please let me know when you are ready to return to Baker Street. My driver is on stand-by for you both.

He fired off a quick "ok" then repocketed the device, glad to remain in the moment, where Sherlock needed him.

There on the stretcher, still on his side but looking a little forlorn, was Sherlock, eyes open but unfocused, lost somewhere in thought. "You're doing great," he told him. A lone, stray tear slid from Sherlock's left eye, the one closer to the pillow, and dripped down into the linens. John reached over, tucking and lifting the corner of the sheet against it. "Soon as they say it's safe, I'll take you home."
Had the room not have been stock still and quiet, John would have missed Sherlock's single, heartbroken word: *please.*

+++ 

Sherlock did not end up clearing the sedation as quickly as John - as anyone - would have liked, and they were both somewhat frustrated by the time the physician wrote the discharge orders and went over their discharge instructions. There had been more than one discussion about the physician wanting Sherlock to stay overnight, but John immediately put the kibbosh on that recommendation with a flat out 'no'.

"I will watch him, at his home, and we will return immediately if there are any issues."

"He really should be monitored ..."

"Trust me, I know what to look for, and I will monitor him." He intended to step to the hallway to talk to the doctor, but Sherlock must have sensed it, reached out a hand to desperately fist John's shirt again, holding him fast. John reiterated that he had a medical home, would be quite attentive, and understood that the first sign of trouble would be game-changing. He conceded that the IV site could be left in, though he doubted he would need it, which helped somewhat. When they finally were ready, John also had copies of all Sherlock's labwork, procedure note, and a new prescription for a proton pump inhibitor to augment the healing MW tear.

Later that night, having been driven home by one of Mycroft's affiliates, John led Sherlock directly to the loo, where he insisted that Sherlock use the toilet and brush his teeth. Though he resisted initially, John glared, and pressed, and in short order it had been accomplished and they were in the bedroom. John helped Sherlock into the chair opposite the bed while he efficiently (speedily) changed the bloody linens. Once that was ready, he removed Sherlock's shoes, offered him pyjama pants and a vest. John pondered the monitoring equipment briefly, whispered "sod it," and connected only the pulse oximeter to Sherlock's toe again. It would give him hypoxia and extreme heart rate alarms, and that was enough. He set the alarms rather permissively, then nudged Sherlock toward the bed, and climbed in next to him. No discussion had been necessary, and it was unquestioned, any other option not even a consideration given Sherlock's silent pleading and John's protectiveness. And after the preceding events, the high emotion, John felt it wisest and best.

John turned out the light. "Good job tonight, I wasn't kidding about that," John said, quietly, his voice still managing to be loud in the stillness of the room.

"Thank you for..." and the sentence died off. The words were thick, and got stuck in Sherlock's throat.

"I know. You needed it." John patted his upper arm, looking over at Sherlock. In the dim light, two sets of eyes were open, darkly glittering from the short span away, two separate spots on their individual pillows. "Success."

"Had you not been there..."

"But I was. I promised you I would be, and we did it."

"I felt your mouth on my shoulder. Your lips." The utterance was matter of fact, spoken without set-up, without further opinion.

"You're imagining things."
"I felt it, your lips pressing."
"You'd had sedation, I'm sure it was..."
"Right here," Sherlock insisted, reaching his long fingers up to the very area John was denying...
"You did not, you weren't even conscious then, and nothing happened anyway."
"So I was sleeping, or nothing happened?" Sherlock was intense, looking at John there in the faint glow in the room. "Seems you don't have your story straight."
"You were having a hard time. It must have been very hard, the association, having a procedure, now that you know why hospitals bother you."
"John."
"I don't blame you. You have every right to your feelings."
"You're deflecting."
"Caught that, yeah?" John opted not to argue about it further, simply rested back against the pillow. He let his eyes drift closed, hoped Sherlock would give it a rest.
"You feel affection for me, and that's the only way you would have done that."
"Go to sleep, Sherlock."
"You can do it again if you want."
"If you keep this up I will move. I probably should anyway."
"You ever kiss a patient before?"
"No."
"Do you want to, again?"
"No, please..."
"Other medical staff then?" John exhaled, a large huff of air. Sherlock was more awake than he'd been the whole night. "No, really, I'm not that tired right now, just... humour me, talk to me for a bit?"
"Yes, occasionally other medical staff I suppose, in the army there were a few nurses I guess, another doc once. Stuff just... happens.
"Men and women?"
"Yes.
"But not patients."
"No."
"Not before today."
"It barely counted. It was meant to be, I don't know, comforting."
Sherlock’s breathing eased a little. A few moments later he mumbled something, and John asked him to repeat it quietly, in case he was talking in his sleep. "Chemistry," he said.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I was going to get my PhD in chemistry. I’d be a doctor too, and then you wouldn't have any qualms ..."

"Oh god, Sherlock, stop it. If I pressed my lips on your shoulder it was only out of affection, fondness. A means to comfort you. I know you were terrified, and I was proud of you for doing so well."

"I could probably finish my PhD, and then --"

"Stop. It has nothing to do with anyone's education, status, degree, or ... shoe size for that matter. You're my patient, and my involvement with you is, should be, strictly professional."

"Kissing a patient's shoulder isn't strictly professional, though, is it?" Sherlock was needling him, instigating, looking for any possible button and attempting to push it.

With that same fondness very much in his thoughts, John could only smile at his antics, decided to push back. "You must be exhausted, after the day you had."

"Can we lay like that again?"

Under the covers, John could feel the faintest stirring below his waist. "We shouldn't. You know that."

"All right, then. The other way is fine too." John shouldn't have been surprised when Sherlock's hand grabbed John's arm, pushing at his arm and chest until he rolled on his side facing away from Sherlock. A pillow was tucked down, ruched down, against the back of John's neck, followed shortly by the press of a warm, pyjama-clothed body up against his back. "Just relax." John could feel the faint rumble, the chuckle as Sherlock spoke to him, close enough that even the breathy exhale as he spoke was palpable against his neck. Sherlock's knees tucked up behind John's, and an arm snaked around his waist. "I've got you." The words, echoes of what John had said earlier, multiple times early, were spoken through an obviously grinning Sherlock - John could hear the smile. There was a different, almost raspy quality to Sherlock's voice after the events of the day, but he was in good spirits as he snuggled up. "Though I must warn you," he added low, "you're not exactly what I would consider safe here."

John kept completely still in Sherlock's arms, willing his body to stand down, to relax, to remain motionless and unprovoking. Because beneath his legs, at the top of the back of his thighs, there was a bit of movement, the shifting of body parts under pyjamas, the knowledge that Sherlock's body was responding to him, filling out, making itself known. He could feel Sherlock behind him, breath, arms, chest, knees, feet and all the parts in between. There was a tension, an arching of Sherlock's back, the tightening of Sherlock's arm across his middle, in preparation for pressing, the imminent rolling his hips, grinding his erection against John's pelvis. "Sherlock, stop," he directed, his own voice sounding a bit stressed. "Behave." From the portable monitoring base, the heart rate alarm sounded, elevated. "See? Behave," he said again with a wry amusement. "Even the universe is trying to tell you."

As John expected after the mild reprimand, there was a huff of annoyance, and the loosening of Sherlock's arms, a little bit less tension on the way he was holding his body.

"Good night," he whispered next, and Sherlock twitched a bit but didn't answer. Soon, the
evening out of Sherlock's respiratory pattern and the softening of his hold let John know that he had managed to fall asleep. It was a long time before John was able to do the same.

Chapter End Notes

A Mallory-Weiss tear is the split or tear that occurs in the mucosal lining between the distal esophagus and stomach. It can, just like it did to Sherlock, cause acute massive bleeding when the tear occurs somewhere vascular. Most often a MW tear will heal on its own without intervention. It is most often caused by vomiting in vulnerable patients.

On a personal note, I had an endoscopy a few years back, and it is definitely a scary thing in those few moments between the "time out" call and when the sedation kicks in. I thought Sherlock being the little spoon, nestled against John's protective tenderness sounded too good for them to miss out on. (I may just ask MF if he's available if I never need one again.)

My facility uses a portable radiology machine that is just... heavenly. Immediate images, visible to physician, nurses, IV team. Instant gratification, thy name is advanced portable technology. In this case, they were immediately able to rule out diaphragmatic perforation because there was no "free air" in any of the places where it just shouldn't be.

Thanks for the comments and the love. Sorry for the cliff-hanger last time. This chapter ending - in bed. Right where they *ahem* should be. They're closer now than they ever were.

I have "never" posted two chapters only a day apart. But it was finished, and I was kind of like, eh, why not? That said, please let me know if I missed anything.
Protestation

Chapter Summary

John Watson has made amazing progress as Sherlock's independent medical coordinator. There have been improvements in nutrition, mobility, self-care, and socialisation, but some setbacks too: a brief relapse, a hospital procedure, and even more importantly, boredom.

While Sherlock continues to recover, John searches for something that can engage both his mind and his transport.

If things continue, and Sherlock behaves, John might just work himself right out of a job. On some levels, that is entirely the point!

Chapter Notes

Chapter's a bit shorter than planned, but there's fanart!

Fanart, I tell you. And it's exciting and a first and I just couldn't wait to share it.

Here is the link, and I'm including it again at the end with a little more of my reaction. The link is now working, sorry for the delay!

Fanart!

The night, once John fell asleep, was uneventful from a physical standpoint. Unless of course, it is slightly unusual that he'd awoken with a man sprawled across him, a hand splayed over his chest, a pyjama-clad leg thrown across his thigh, an armful of patient. Sherlock's head was close, resting on his shoulder, eyes closed and fully relaxed in sleep. His mouth was closed. It didn't take John long to quickly realise that this was not just Sherlock who'd moved, given the fact that John's arm was resting around behind Sherlock's back, encircling him as well. His own hand was spread out just over Sherlock's waist, a statement of belonging, and security, and possession.

Care-taking on a whole new level, he considered, not terribly unhappy with their proximity to each other. He worried a bit less when there was the reassuring sounds of breathing, of being near enough to sense distress, and when if Sherlock needed something, he was quite literally within arms' reach.

He was curious, however, as to what had awakened him, and it didn't take long before he could hear noise streetside, from outside the flat. His acute sense of paying attention even when asleep was apparently still on high alert and functioning well.

He began to dislodge himself from under Sherlock's body, easing him as gently as he could so that he could slide loose to go check on things. A groan of protest sounded, rattling and indistinct, noise made from an exhausted patient with an irritated throat. He removed himself as quickly as he
could then tucked the covers in where he'd vacated, holding in warmth, promoting rest as best he could. He rested his palm gingerly against the side of Sherlock's head, thumb stroking his temple and fingers massaging very lightly as he knew Sherlock liked and responded to. "Sshhh, I'll be right back." He took a few steps toward the door, grabbing mobile, slippers, and dressing gown as he did.

Just before leaving the room, John turned a careful eye to the still-slumbering man in the bed. One eye had opened, but there were no signs of distress, no panic, no anxiety. A nod, head burrowing slightly into the pillow. Trust. There were sounds of someone on the stairs, and John could tell by the steady trod and the weight of each step, it had to be Mycroft. Before the key could even turn in the lock, John casually opened the door, having run fingers through his hair and straightening his appearance up best he could.

"Good morning," John managed, hoping it was still morning and thought, based on the amount and angle of the lighting, that it probably was. "Did I miss your call, then?" He knew quite well there had been no call, and no text, and even before caffeine, he was not about to be inconvenienced without a bit of push-back. "You know, the advance notification you're supposed to give me." His turf, sort-of, his rules.

"And good morning to you as well. Sorry to have awakened you."

"Yes, well," John tried not to act as if Mycroft wasn't dressed to the nines while he was in a robe. "I presume you'd like to see Sherlock."

"I've been concerned." He made no move to sit or enter farther. "How is he?"

"Sleeping. Exhausted. Stable so it seems."

"Good."

"As I've asked earlier, I would prefer he'd not be woken up. Yesterday was, well..." and John beckoned Mycroft toward the kitchen table, elaborating briefly on the challenges and the anxiety and the ultimately successful procedure, not giving the full details of exactly how bad it had been nor his role specifically. "The heads up in the A&E was helpful, though. Your doing I'm sure. Thank you for that." At the slight tilt of Mycroft's head in acknowledgement, John found he had no interest in waiting longer. "I'm about to make tea. Can I fix you some as well?" Mycroft shook his head, choosing instead to sit down as John turned on the water, set out a mug and PG Tips. "So, here he is," John said then a few seconds later, raising the lid on the laptop and opening the monitoring application. Sherlock was as John had left him, seemed perfectly still and quiet.

"Interesting."

"What is?"

"That he's so far from the edge of the bed." Mycroft cast a look at John, a slight raise of one eyebrow and the faintest curl of one side of his mouth. "Unusual." John knew of course that Sherlock usually slept on one side, often hugging the edge, an arm hanging down. Today he was much more in the center, and the entire bed did look rumpled, slept in, even in the lower resolution of the camera monitor. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Do you have something specific you wanted to ask me?"

"There is no need, given the state of the pillow." John knew a smile flickered across his face, along with a slight shake of the head, but he did glance to the computer screen to find that the indentation of the other pillow was rather obvious.
"Would you like to go wake him up and receive assurances that my presence was completely above-board and proper? Because you can." Rather quickly, John made up his mind that he wouldn't shy away from anything, wouldn't give even the appearance of trying to hide anything. "If you're going to suspect anything beyond that, I would rather you did. In fact, I'm almost willing to go wake him myself."

"I highly doubt that is necessary."

"You didn't see how severe it was yesterday, by the way. His reaction to needing the hospital visit." The kettle sang out, and John brought the mug to the table to join Mycroft and where he could keep an eye on Sherlock via the laptop image. "It was quite ..." John frowned, word searching, settled on "... extreme, and I wasn't sure how things were going to fall. I take it you've seen him ... in a bad way?"

"I have certainly seen him at some very low points."

A small movement on the laptop caught John's eye, and both of them watched as Sherlock moved a bit in his sleep, an arm, the bend of a leg. "He would have been sedated and restrained had I not forbidden it." John kept his voice cool but knew Mycroft was getting the message that it was worse than imagined, quite the evolving drama. "Thankfully I was able to intervene. No restraints, he'd all but snarled at the faintest hint of possibly needing them.

"It's happened before, as you know."

"Had that occurred, I fear he would have needed admission, psychiatric admission perhaps. The set-back would have been devastating."

"You prevented it."

"He needs professional counseling to overcome that. To give him some coping skills to manage without turning to ... some of the other things he turns to."

"I chose you for this setting. To be clear, are you quitting? Because may I remind you that there's a cont--"

"I know, contract. No, I'm not quitting, but this deep seated issue may need more intensive, targeted therapy. Cognitive retraining, exposure therapy..." John could hear muffled sounds, words, mumbling from down the hall, and turned to consider the laptop feed. Sherlock was still in the middle of the bed, but had pulled the duvet over his head, limbs either moving quickly or tremors having begun in earnest. There was a thump as he repositioned forcefully on the bed, the headboard hitting the wall and echoing as the sounds rarefied bidirectionally through the walls and from the doorway. "Excuse me."

By the time John had arrived at the door, the duvet was back to his shoulders and Sherlock seemed to be slumbering. Even the monitor that had remained on was now reading normal values, consistent with sleeping. He added a pillow to the far side of the bed, quietly and cautiously, could see the relaxed nature of his face again. His breathing was deep and even. He returned to the kitchen, to find that Mycroft had steeped his tea, removed the bag, adding a half-spoonful of sugar, and then as John approached, pushed the finished cup in his direction.

"Half spoon of sugar. As is your usual preference."

"Thanks..."

"I know about most of your preferences, Dr. Watson." The unstated inference was written in the sparkle of his eyes, the knowing look in Mycroft's demeanor, his face, in case his emphasis of the
"word wasn't enough.

"John."

"Sometimes I prefer the title."

"And today you're reminding me to keep my distance." He made the statement. John wished he'd taken a moment to dress, feeling quite the dynamic at odds between them, the disadvantage of being wearing bedclothes to his visitor's well-cut suit. Though he was not about to be intimidated based on his attire, he was quite aware of it.

"You care about him."

"Of course I do." John shrugged with some irritation as he explained. "He's a patient. He's been through truly some unimaginable things. Needs a direction once he's recovered. He mentioned education, resuming studies in chemistry, by the way."

"He hated it. Hated the regimentation, the study, the academics. Was probably smarter than his professors. Can you imagine him in a traditional classroom?"

"Not exactly," John agreed.

"It was an abysmal failure, so don't encourage it."

"What I'd like, is to see him succeed." He left unstated that he thought Mycroft wrong for his lack of support. "I'll encourage him with whatever he's bloody interested in. If he feels inclined to," and here John gestured in frustration, searching, "I don't know, take up knitting, I'd support it, and you should too."

"I think we both know what he's interested in." Mycroft smiled a half-smile of his own perceived wittiness. "Not chemistry per se. Not the subject, but the substances."

John sighed, with a disappointed need to explain himself. Again. To someone who was being difficult for the love of being a royal pain in the arse. It had to be slightly genetic. "You know bloody well that's not what I'll be encouraging, nor recommending."

“I chose you for your integrity, for your success rate, for the way your mind has worked in the past with patients deemed unsalvageable.” Mycroft’s eyes are intense then, and he is gearing up in mind and body language to deliver something of prime importance. “I am letting you know that your contract is only for care. There are no other governing standards, you are not specifically held to traditional conventional methods, even considering non-approved, off-label as it were, ideas and interventions.” He stood, John's attention riveted, and turned a thoughtful, pensive eye to John as he sat, in his robe and slippers, holding his own. "So, no, to answer your question from earlier, I'm not reminding you to keep your distance. I'm merely asking that you have a care with his heart."

A moment of connection, of electricity, of eye contact that seemed to sizzle all the way to John's very brain. A flicker of a glance toward the laptop, a reminder of the discerned bed-sharing. Permission, encouragement, or instruction? "Exactly what are you ...?"

"I do not, nor have I ever questioned your ethics. So far, I have been quite impressed." John held his tongue, the many things he wanted to respond seeming inadequate and unnecessary. "And do not think for a moment that I say those words easily."

A rustle again, a soft sound, a footstep from the bedroom. Distantly, the pulse oximeter alarm sounded, a disconnect. Two sets of eyes snapped to the computer, the bed empty, covers folded
back, a pillow haphazardly tossed on the floor. "John?" The voice was raspy, low registered, from the hallway. There was the swish of a hand on the wallpaper as he moved closer, a hand reaching out for balance and fall prevention, steadying himself along the wall.

On his feet quickly, tea and Mycroft abandoned, John rose to meet him, took his arm to hold him upright and prevent capsizing. He was indeed tremulous. "Couch, I think," he decided.

"I feel awful."

"Explain please."

"Get rid of him." With a tolerant smile and sure hands, John held Sherlock's shoulders as he slowly collapsed onto the couch. Long limbs fell and lay there, weak but not twisted. An adjustment of pillow, a repositioning of Sherlock's ankle, a smoothed blanket overtop. "Out."

"Oh, Sherlock," Mycroft purred, "such a charming host you continue to be. Dr. Watson and I were just discussing how positively wretched yesterday was for you."

"Piss off. And get out while you do it."

"Sherlock," John chided lightly, "go easy, would you. He was concerned, came to check on you, and isn't staying much longer. Yesterday wasn't easy for him either."

"Whose side are you on?" It was a caustic question.

"Do you really need to ask that?" John could only shake his head a bit at Sherlock's lack of any insight. "Yours of course."

Had his voice not been weak, his throat still sore apparently, the next word would have been a summons, a demand, a strongly issued imperative. As is was, a quiet word, singly spoken. "Mycroft."

"Yes, brother mine." This was delivered with a slightly condescending air, and John would have intervened had Sherlock not simply blown past it. Two standing men peered down at the closed-eyes reclining one, awaiting his statement.

"I want my violin."

Toe to toe almost, despite the difference in height, John and Mycroft met eyes again. Neither made a move nor spoke a word. Finally Mycroft broke the contact and took a few steps to stand at the foot of the couch, where Sherlock could see him more easily with his rather icy focus.

He spoke slowly, clearly. "This would be the same violin you'd used as a set up for some unwise and unhealthy choices?"

"This would be the same violin," Sherlock spat, "that is mine. It is being held unfairly."

John waited, quietly, letting the discussion play out around him. At this point, he felt no need to contribute to any of it. As to the violin, he had considered hiding it in the flat, but decided that Mrs. Hudson's flat, on the floor beneath them, was a much wiser option.

Sherlock, from the couch, turned, annoyed, huffed again. "Dr. Watson works for you. And he is obligated to do whatever you demand."

With a particularly challenging look to him, Mycroft rocked slightly on his heels, swiveled to make and maintain eye contact with John. "Is that so?" He asked the question rhetorically to the
room, and again, John had little interest in answering that.

"He is an employee." The word might as well have been slug, vermin, pond slime.

"That seems harsh, given how he helped you yesterday." A brow arched. "Above and beyond, from what I hear."

"My violin." Sherlock was not distracted. "Unfairly held."

The twitch at the corner of John's mouth seemed to amuse Mycroft just a little, and they both seemed rather content to let Sherlock fuss just a little. Which he did, when he'd apparently grown tired of waiting for someone to cater to his demand. "It's mine, and I want it returned."

Mycroft backed down from John's focus, his watchful eye, and turned away just a little. There was a resolution, a serious moment of clarification. "I believe its return will be up to your physician. When he feels you are ready and deserving, it would appear. At his sole discretion. And not a moment sooner."

There was an abrupt turn on the couch, an unpleasant reaction, and Sherlock took a deep breath as if he were about to launch into a scathing diatribe.

The first syllable was hardly even sounded when Mycroft held up a hand. "Not another word, Sherlock. Not one. Out of not only your hands, but mine as well."

Sherlock's quiet receiving of that edict was, in John's opinion, ominous. A few more exchanges with Mycroft, casual and shallow. The farewell to Sherlock was not exchanged, but not a long pause as Mycroft waited, either, hand on the doorknob.

"Wait."

Which Mycroft did.

"I need a new mobile."

A short burst of staccato non-laughter. "So that you can ring up some of your miscreant, degenerate connections and have them obtain whatever your poison of the month is? I rather think not."

"Between the lot of you, I'm sure you could monitor my usage if you were willing. You know, like the child you continue to treat me as." They were both sliding toward harpish and John cleared his throat to no avail.

"If the shoe fits."

"Twat," Sherlock breathed. "Not wearing any." A bare foot poked out of the blanket as if he needed to prove something they already knew.

"May I remind you of the difference between literal and metaphorical devices?"

"Piss off."

"Sherlock, that's enough." John chided, gently as he could but he was glaring at Mycroft. "You too. Before you hinder his recovery any further." For all that John had wondered about anyone ever saying no to Sherlock, apparently it was also a rarity that Mycroft was spoken to, corrected,
either, given their somewhat shocked, puzzled looks. "He's recuperating, or trying to, and this is
not helpful in the least."

A few breaths passed. "Mobile." Sherlock said again, with intensity.

"I believe I already said no to that." Mycroft's posture seemed to stand down a bit, and he
expounded. "While I could of course intercept your every text, search, or mobile record, it has not
escaped me that you very likely have a contingency plan, a code as it were, for occasions such as
this."

Had John not been watching, he'd have missed Sherlock's rather cheeky grin that was fairly
quickly hidden, probably attesting to the fact that Mycroft had assumed correctly.

"However, Dr Watson knows how to make that happen. Again, when he determines you're ready,
I will see to it that one is provided for you."

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"So how are you really? Not the fussy game face you put on for your brother."

In answer, there was a squint and a slight cock of his head, the curling of one side of his face. "All
right."

"Earlier you said awful."

"Well, I definitely don't feel like myself, but I haven't for a long time now." An exhale, and
Sherlock's eyes closed. "Somewhere between awful and all right."

John smiled in spite of the subject matter, and shook his head. "Helpful. A rather wide range,
yeah?" John turned on the telly again, settled on an episode of Top Gear which elicited a groan
from Sherlock but nothing further. "Up for a piece of toast now or do you want to wait a bit?"

Blink. Only his eyes moved to stare at John. "Those are my only two options?"

"They are."

"Then I'll wait." There was a faint growling of Sherlock's stomach. "No, seriously, not all that
hungry right now."

It was several episodes, a nap, and two cups of John's own finished tea along with his breakfast,
before he finally decided that Sherlock's later had come to fruition. He set a small plate down in
front of him, toasted light brown, butter nicely melted, cut on the diagonal to form large triangles.

"Dull."

"It's later. You said you would wait a bit."

"Truly, not hungry."

"Putting something in your stomach would be wise."

There was an unintelligible whisper.

"Again please?"

"No thanks." He'd definitely changed his original message.
"I missed what you said the first time." John drew a bit closer, perched on the edge of the coffee table to place a finger under Sherlock's chin to tip his face upward so John could look at him directly. Sherlock huffed, but he allowed John to poke at him a little, drawing down a lip to evaluate the colour of his gums, press a palm to his forehead, and finally a few fingers to his wrist. Temperature seemed normal range, pale still but not alarmingly different, heart rate acceptable. "Say again?"

"Leave it." Sherlock moved not a bit, though he left his hand in John's grasp, moving his other hand to tuck the blanket in around him, pulling it close, wrapping. Burrowing, hiding? His eyes closed as John watched him.

The pulse rate under his fingers jumped up, the faintest little bit of perspiration on Sherlock's brow. It only took John a moment. "Are you afraid to eat?"

One eye opened. The pause drew out a little, and then, "Wouldn't you be, if you were me?"

"A little, I suppose. But the bleeding had stopped last night, the tear already beginning to close, as they tend to do." John smiled down at him reassuringly. "Look, the way these things usually work is that the rebleed risk lowers exponentially over time. So the longer you've lasted, the less likely it is to occur."

"What if it happens again?"

To that question, there was no good answer. And John didn't want to verbalise the one they both knew: we do it all over again. "Maybe something to drink, then."

"All right." There was a few assortments of options that John had stocked up on, so he brought out a few small glasses of different flavours. It gave Sherlock the ability to choose, to have some measure of control.

"You realise," John began, "that as long as there is no vomiting, it's extremely low risk of it recurring at this point. I would, however," and he paused until Sherlock looked up at him, "absolutely avoid the mixing of chemicals that you know you shouldn't, yeah?"

"Perhaps." John wondered about hinting at his mistake, and was quite glad to see that he had the wherewithall to at least blush a little in automatic response. Another moment, and Sherlock picked up one of the pomegranate varieties of juice. After draining the small glass, he eyed the toast but didn't move a muscle.

"You can certainly go ahead if you want."

"You always harp about protein. Why no beans on that?"

It was true, that John had fairly regularly heated and served beans on toast; today, the toast was plain. "You want the straight up reason or the watered down one?"

Scowl, the pursed lips speaking that Sherlock thought that premise utterly ridiculous.

"All right, well, you probably ended up swallowing some blood, the blood in your stomach will be only partially digested, passes through of course. When it reaches the colon, it tends to act as a laxative. Old blood, a normal enough circumstance." Sherlock's wide pale eyes took in what John was saying, his expression as if he wanted the full story. "It demands to come out. Beans have that effect too, and I didn't want there to be any distress, any urgency, if we put beans on top of that process already brewing. I thought both of those in combination would be a bit much ..."

On cue, there was a much louder grumble than before, ominous in the pause in conversation.
"Good lord, seriously?"

"Probably. Soon. It's normal, it'll pass --"

And with that word, Sherlock moaned a bit with an undertone of an incredulous, disbelieving half-giggle. "You're kidding me, right?"

"-- and all will be fine." Unfortunately, the word fine was not as convincing as it should have been, and Sherlock's senses immediately picked up on it.

"Seems to me you're still holding something back. What are you not telling me?"

John pondered.

"Out with it."

"Well," John began, and there was another louder, lower rumble of Sherlock's stomach. "Let's just say that we'll both be appreciative of the room freshening spray in the loo."

"We'll both?"

"Do you have delusions that I'm actually going to let you close the door?"

"Oh please." Sherlock's eyes were closed, a hand disappearing under the blanket, obviously some stomach cramping was going on, given the sounds and his reaction. "No."

"No getting around that, either. We've seen what you're capable of when left to your own in there." John raised a displeased eyebrow then. "And I know this isn't great timing, but I am informing you that the next time Molly is over, the next time you see her, you will be apologising to her for your little stunt the other day. Bad form."

Pfff! he breathed, followed by, "Fine." Then, still a little bristly from either the topic or of being reminded about his misdeed, he spoke again. "That's ridiculous, and I'm not sure I believe you, anyway. How bad could it be."

"Believe whatever you'd like. Pass a little gas if you have any doubt." Under his breath, Sherlock muttered something that sounded like hell no. "GI bleeding smells awful on the way out."

"Well, if it's true, I need you to get Mycroft back here immediately."

John gestured as if he wanted Sherlock to continue. Sherlock simply stared at John, apparently waiting for him to grab his mobile and do as Sherlock asked. "Not without a good reason."

"Because if anyone is keeping me company in the loo, he's a viable choice. A better choice. I think that will make it more tolerable for you and more exciting for me."

"No, Sherlock. While that has some entertainment merit, we're not ... Just, no. You're stuck with me for company."

"Speaking of, feeling a little," and there was a pensive, drawing to Sherlock's features as he moved to a sitting position, a hand over what indeed was a faintly distended belly.

"All right, let me know."

"Anything else you neglected to tell me?"

"Did we discuss colour yet? Consistency?" Sherlock's pale eyes turned to John's darker ones,
inquisitive but since he didn't actually ask the questions, John answered both anyway. "Black. And probably diarrhoea."

"Oh god, shut up."

"You sort of asked."

"This was not included when they asked for consent. Someone should have told me. I would have refused all of it, and maybe ...

"I'm telling you now." Another low pitched, more rapid rumble, and Sherlock let out a soft belch. "But really, keep this in perspective. They saved your life, avoided the need for surgery. This is just ..." John shrugged, "expected. Temporary. I'll work its way through, pass. Don't make it into more than it needs to be."

"You started it."

"You asked about the beans."

"You could have just said that we're out of them." Idly, one of Sherlock's hands rubbed over his lower abdomen. "It's what someone polite would have done."

John had been called a lot of things, and could summon up polite when circumstance indicated it. "I prepared you. Somehow I don't think you're especially fond of surprises."

"Maybe white powdery ones. Now that would be a surprise."

The light mood vanished. "Just stop that. Your thinking patterns are problematic." Though Sherlock had likely been attempting to be humorous, there was an element of truth and a disturbing line of thinking. John let his foot come up against Sherlock's, there on the floor. "I'm worried about you. And about your choices."

"Well, in a minute, you're going to probably to need to worry about finding that room spray."

"That's fine."

"Normal to be kind of crampy?"

"Blood makes itself known and demands to come out."

++

"God, you weren't kidding." Sherlock had complained, protested and been unsuccessful in his repeated attempt to ban John from the room while he was otherwise occupied. Ultimately, John had hovered in the hallway, door to the loo open, paying minimal attention but close enough to prevent either misbehaving or injury if Sherlock became dizzy and toppled over. There had been room spray, vigorous hand washing, and a few marginally inappropriate bursts of chuckles from both of them at one point, shortly after Sherlock observed that his eyes - and John's - were watering. By request, John had cracked open one of the sitting room windows just a little to let in some fresh air. After Sherlock had been safely ensconced on the couch again, John gestured toward the window. "Become a regular thing. The bleach and vinegar experiment, and now this."

"A cigarette, then. A trifecta."

"No."
"Obviously. Though I wouldn't have refused if you'd agreed."

John could only smile at Sherlock's persistence. "You are feeling a little better, though, yeah?"

"Sort of, yes. But you weren't kidding about ..." and he cut off his own sentence, choosing instead to end with, "Wow."

John couldn't help grinning at his shocked, rather humbled expression. "I tend to be honest. You should know that."

"Let's never speak of this again."

"Fine." He nodded toward the toast after another moment. "Start with that, if you would, and then perhaps I'll be most cooperative in changing the subject."

"Is that something of a threat?"

"I think I would choose creative encouragement."

"Extortion?"

"I think that involves money."

"Coercion?"

"Perhaps." John sighed. "Take a bite and the exact terminology won't matter as much."

Surprisingly, Sherlock complied. "So," he said with also out of character cooperation and having another bite, "while you're tending to be honest, you could tell me the story of what happened with that incident -- no, misconduct report."

"You could tell me about the scars on your back instead." John was not interested in discussing the army incident, his reporting of the sexual assault of the sergeant who'd harmed the young boy, but he wasn't about to simply let Sherlock get something he wanted for nothing, not in this case anyway.

A stand-off, but a calm one with very little emotion on either of their parts, both choosing not to engage. The moment seemed to vacillate between them, as to who was going to give in, who might open up first, when Sherlock finally grinned, relaxing again into the couch cushions again. The plate in front of him only had remnants of crust. "So," he began again, "how long do the GI bleed effects..." and he drew out the word knowing John would immediately know to what he was referring. The scent. "... typically linger?"

The question was good for a mutual laugh, the decision to avoid the more personal subjects and stick with the merely distasteful ones. Some street noise - fender bender, followed by some rather vigorous arguing outside - distracted them from all of the previous topics of discussion.

+++ Sherlock did manage, with quite a bit of encouragement, to stay awake in longer stretches over the next day or so. He managed to eat fairly regularly, just small meals that were gentle and bland initially. His IV site had long been removed, and John sent off another blood count to the hospital lab for haematology testing. Results came back quickly, and both were pleased to find that it was holding stable. John was particularly grateful, given that Sherlock was probably still borderline anaemic when the Mallory-Weiss tear occurred. The shaking seemed less as time went on, with him a little more ambulatory though still napping several times a day. Rebuilding his energy level,
they both knew, was going to be slow. They had animated discussions about something John read online every now and then. Between the two of them, they argued about meals and the shopping and the qualities of their favourite Dr. Who actor.

The remaining unread portions of the book dwindled, the plot of Bod and the graveyard and the sinister characters winding its way through the pages. John picked up the book, thumbing through the last few unread pages as if counting them. "We can probably finish it this sitting."

"I already know the ending. Predictable."

John smirked. "Good. Then recount it for me, starting from where we'd left off. Since you already know, you can certainly fill in the details."

Apparently Sherlock hadn't completely expected that, his face a bit stunned, and the way he'd sprawled on the couch much more tense. "Well, I uh... could summarise it for you, the plot."

"I kind of prefer more than a summary, ta. So go ahead, and leave nothing out." He closed the book completely and set it aside, turning his body and his attention to Sherlock in mock anticipation. He let the silence draw out to prove his point. "Well?"

"I think Bod was about to..." he said and gestured at the book, putting his arm across his face, his eyes, rotating on the couch so he was on his back. "Solve the mystery and leave the graveyard of course. The end." A slipper dangled on his toe, bouncing nervously with the movements of his toes, and John reached out his own foot, flicked it off, leaving Sherlock's foot bare. "Hey."

"Hey yourself. Sit up and be nice while I read the book, thank you very much." He spoke kindly as Sherlock did indeed replace the offed slipper. "Plus, you can't see the pictures with your arm thrown over your eyes."

"I told you..."

"All the same to you, I think I'd rather let the author finish his own story, ta."

++

"Ugh, that ending. What was that all about?" Sherlock whinged.

"So, he gave him a passport and money, and off he popped." John clarified.

"And a name. He gave him a name."

"... 'and Bod walked into it with his eyes and his heart wide open' is the last line."

"You read it already, ta." Sherlock was snippy.

"Symbolic?" Tapping the book, John wondered why the snit was so pronounced.

"Over the top, trying too hard. The better end would have been from the song, 'leave no path untaken'. The one his mother used to sing to him."

"But then the final plot wouldn't have been disclosed."

"Of course, but it was obvious, the author didn't need to spell it out in quite such ridiculous and predictable words."

"People want to be told things, so it's clear. They need to be sure."
At one point during the early stages of John's reading, Sherlock had casually patted the couch next to where he was sitting, and John had abandoned the chair, moved over. It was easier than flipping the book around to show the illustrations. But both of them were enjoying it for reasons far beyond convenience. It was cozy, friendly. The togetherness was beyond proximity, it was a statement of devotion, of warmth, of sharing a space and more. There was a hitch of Sherlock’s leg, of restless movement there on the couch, where they were side-by-side, and he let it bump softly against John's thigh, left it there, leaned in gently. "There are plenty of ways to say something without using words."

Heat began in John's chest, just a bit, settled across his arms, radiated outward and down. It was more than Sherlock's touch, the muscle and warmth of his leg. It was more than the timbre of his voice and the sass of their conversation. It was more than the pale blue irises, pupils dilating as he watched. Warmth from where their shoulders were close, where their legs touched through clothing seemed to increase, and John was full stop aware of the point where the outside edges of their knees were pressed together, lightening up a few inches along their thighs before there was visible space between where they were sitting. Sherlock's tee shirt had bunched up at one edge of his waistband, and the dressing gown he was so fond of was untied and hung open. It was the totality of the man - the zest, the snark, and all the rest. He met Sherlock's eye, steady, even, full on. "Oh, is there something you wanted to say?"

A deep chuckle, a baritone of a musical laugh. "I believe I've already said it." He glanced at John's chest, his stature, the way his shoulders were back, a glance at his belt, lower. "And I believe the message was already well-received." There was a rather bold look about him again as he raised his eyes to meet John's. "Or am I mistaken in that?"

John's mouth was a bit too dry for an immediate comment, and eventually he muttered something about making the shepherd's pie that Sherlock had requested, then moved into the kitchen to get started on it.

++

"You're being ridiculous."

From across the darkened bedroom, John tucked his own blanket up to his chin, laying on his side on his own cot, listening to Sherlock grumble.

"What if I need something?"

"I'm fairly certain, Sherlock, that I can probably attend to your needs just as well from over here. Do you need something?"

"No, but ..."

"Then please make an attempt to fall asleep?"

"I slept better when you were next to me. Warmer or just... I don't know. I just did."

"You're better now, there's no reason ...

A deep, warm chuckle floated in the darkness. "There's lots of reasons." The lower baritone register of his voice, the intentional gravelly character to it, was rattling and John suppressed the notion that he would probably be able to feel that right through his ribs. If, that is, he placed his hand there as Sherlock talked. Which he couldn't do from where he was, which, he knew, was where he needed to stay.

For lots of reasons, as Sherlock had said.
"Sherlock." He tried for logic. "It's late. Maybe tomorrow you'll have more energy, provided you get a few uninterrupted hours of sleep tonight."

"All right. I want to do something fun tomorrow."

"Sure. We'll start with a shower, and you can get dressed. Maybe coffee at Speedy's again."

"Your definitions of fun need serious overhaul."

"I'll work on something."

"I have an idea."

"I'm sure you do. And I'm fairly certain it's either illegal or unethical or foolish."

"You wound me to the quick."

"Please. Sherlock, please. Try to go to sleep."

A huff, a gather of bedcovers, a harrumph as he turned over away from John. From only a few feet away, from the comfort of his pillow, John smiled. He was doing that more and more as Sherlock's personality, fiery and unpredictable though it was, was emerging. Though his mind settled, his body relaxed. He had a fair idea of what the night was going to hold.

He was not disappointed.

Hours passed. A faint disturbance in the room, and John was nearly instantly awake. Across the room, it was silent. The outline of Sherlock's body in repose was just faintly visible from the middle of the night just barely visible glow from behind the curtains. It was too quiet, too perfect. So holding himself completely still, his respirations deep and even, he waited. An inhale, a faint rustle of fabric, too smooth and quiet to be that of a sleeping, reflexive turning in bed. The dark profile of two long legs appeared from under the duvet, the torso sitting up, the deliberate removal of the sheet.

"Need the loo, do you?" John said.

"How do you do that?"

"It's a gift."

"A curse."

"Depends on your perspective." He sighed, pushed up on an elbow. "Now, do you need the loo, or were you just hoping to slide into my bed next to me?"

"That is not a bed."

"Answer my question."

Stony silence.

"Realise if you say loo, I expect you to actually go."

"False alarm."

"I thought so." A few minutes passed, both of them awake, but John hoped perhaps he would
relax again. "Want me to put some music on quietly?"

"No." A few restless turns, an agitated breath, a flumping onto his side. It didn't exactly bode well, and John was about to ask what was the matter when Sherlock cleared his throat again. "John?" His voice sounded a bit younger, then, and John waited for him to pull out the stops. The silence was heavy, and it seemed like there was something. Something brewing, something bothering him. Something.

"What is it?"

"I don't know." A quick breath of air, a regathering of thoughts. "I mean, this started out as, well, you know what it started out as. I was planning..., well. Anyway." Keeping quiet, John let him work through his thoughts, his feelings, find a way to express himself. "I'm just... I can't sleep."

"Restless."

"Yes."

"I suppose, before all this, if you were feeling like this, you'd be using?" He spoke softly, hoping not to offend, but a curious, thoughtful question.

"Yes." Even his exhale was now sounding shaky.

John tucked a pillow behind him, fully awake now and on high alert. "So, what are some things you can do instead?"

"Nothing. There's nothing." John was about to speak again when Sherlock continued. He was getting worked up, voice pressured. Even from across the room, John was fairly certain he could feel the tension. "My head is loud, and ..."

Abruptly, before John could even respond to what he was doing, Sherlock had thrown back the covers, lunged to his feet and strode from the bedroom all in a bundle of energy.

John was after him, and had just enough time to get his foot into the bathroom before Sherlock could try to shut the door. "Don't do it."

"Get out." Sherlock was pressing the door, trying to close it, trying to force John's foot out of the way. He lacked both leverage and strength, but didn't stop trying.

"Sherlock, no." There was a guttural cry, and Sherlock, in his still rather weakened state, gave up, his arms letting go and he braced himself as he leaned over the sink, head bowed there in the bath. Something inside John however, had some warning bells chiming distantly, his radar searching, and he began to let go of the door, gave the slightest impression that he was going to pick up his foot and move it back out of the way, when Sherlock seemed to detonate. The quick way he sprung into action, trying to dislodge John, to close the door, was all John needed to know he was being played, at least in that moment. "Absolutely not, you're not getting away with that." Still struggling at the door, Sherlock no match for John of course, and eventually did let go for real. "Back off," John ordered, and when Sherlock did, he matter-of-factly, but gently took him by the wrist to lead him out to the sitting room. "This is where the work starts. You can do this."

"Oh, god, just get away from me."

John led him to the kitchen instead. "How about you put on some tea?" Blank, incredulous eyes stared back at him. "Some tea, Sherlock. You know how to make tea."

"Your job."
"Tonight, it's yours."

"You suck. Your program sucks, your plan sucks, your stupid pyjamas suck." There was a fierce restlessness, and Sherlock was about shaking as he even stood there. "And," desperately he looked at John with wild annoyance, "and your hair sucks."

Trying not to be condescending, John asked, "Do you feel any better? Did that help?" With wry awareness, he needed to make a concentrated effort not to straighten his hair at Sherlock's comment.

"And your questions suck."

"Make me some tea, please, Sherlock."

John was somewhat surprised when a shaking finger reached out, flipped the switch of the kettle. "I want a cigarette, then, if you won't let me have the good stuff."

"Not inside the flat."

"I smoke in here all the time."

"Not with me you don't."

"Your methods suck too."

"Two mugs, yeah?" The ceramic chattered as Sherlock set it down. The kettle was beginning to steam, just faintly, as the water began to heat. "Grab the box of tea, then, will you please?" He complied, tried to look at John, tried to make eye contact but was unable. "Good job."

"Oh fuck you. Empty praise."

"The swearing, I have to say, doesn't become you." The words came out before John could stop them. "Oh, oops. I'm sorry for that, now's not the time to be fussing at you. I'm sorry."

"Fuck you again. Better?"

"Sherlock please." Sherlock fidgeted, arms crossed, a hip leaning against the countertop. John knew he was treading lightly when he asked, softly, "How long do the cravings usually last?"

"Until I do another line. Or take another hit, depending." A laugh. "I have no idea, actually."

"Guess we're going to find the answer to that question then." He took the sugar from the cabinet, set the honey out so it was ready, found two spoons. Trying to at least act casual, he made sure to speak slowly, carefully. "Sometimes it's helpful to think of the three Ds of dealing with cravings. Ever hear of them? Want to take a stab at them?"

"Do it, dose yourself, and don't stop using."

"Not exactly, as I'm sure you know. No real guesses? All right, the third one is for when you're feeling a little less jittery, so we'll save that, but the first two might help. Delay is the first one, meaning is obvious. You note the time, and delay the urge by a set period of time. It's - wow, early - three am. Do you think you can delay the craving for maybe thirty minutes? Sixty minutes?" John was standing right alongside of Sherlock, a hand holding securely on his upper arm, watching intently. If ever there was a danger night, a risk of relapse, they were both dancing around the edge of the volcano of it right then.
He rolled his eyes as John was speaking. "Stupid."

"They might be, but if they help does it matter?" He moved his hand to Sherlock's face, turning it to face him. "Well, think we can delay this for thirty minutes?" A hesitation, a faint nod, a brief meeting of the eyes. "All right. In thirty minutes, we'll talk about it again. Delay the craving."

Conversation halted as the water boiled, teabags were steeped, and a few minutes later, mugs were being carried - by John, given the state of Sherlock's tremors - back to the sitting room. "Carry on, I know you're on a roll and wish to further bore -- oh, I mean enlighten me." Sherlock picked up the mug as if to sip but the shaking was too pronounced so he returned the mug to the table, for which John was grateful, not looking to add burns to the list of things they experienced together.

"You can probably guess the second one."

An inhale, and Sherlock closed his eyes, tipping his head back toward the ceiling, a steadying breath for which John was also glad to see. "Distract."

"Right, I figured you knew."

"Pointless. It's almost impossible to redirect my mind."

"What's worked in the past?"

"Nothing," he answered quickly. "Not ever."

"Suppose we're at your parents house..."

"No thanks."

"Just suppose we were, and you couldn't ..."

"I'd excuse myself and take care of things."

"It's the middle of a big gathering and you can't get away to get your supplies. You could probably find another room of the house, or something outside might hold your interest. What are some things you could distract yourself with?"

"Violin."

Gently, John took one of his hands, held it up. "Cold fingers, very shaky, probably not going to work right now."

"Stable, one of the horses maybe."

"You used to ride."

"Quite a bit. Escapism from whatever nanny or stable boy they tried to pair me up with." A corner of his mouth twitched, and when John noticed, he thought it quite a good sign. "A good game, galloping away from someone who's supposed to be minding you."

"Glad we're not on horseback, then. You'd certainly leave me in the dust."

"In a heartbeat."

"Something else. Another idea."

A sigh of frustration. "There isn't much else."
John considered what he knew. There wasn't sports, he didn't want to encourage drinking, Sherlock was not necessarily a board game player. His knowledge of movies seemed to be more of the educational science variety. "Telly?"

"No."

He decided to ask anyway. "Card game, board game?"

"God no."

"Twenty questions?"

"I think you're already on question fourteen."

The tea was a bit cooler, and John sipped at his. "Want me to dump some of that out so it doesn't slosh over the edge?"

"I don't really want it anyway."

He leaned forward, patted Sherlock's knee this time, and thought perhaps Sherlock was a little calmer, beginning to de-escalate. "I know we just finished the other book, but until we come up with a few more ideas, I do have a copy of Treasure Island."

Sherlock flicked a glance at John.

"We had talked about it, one of your favourites?"

"It's three am."

"So?" John wondered if he was being thoughtful or just negative and looking for reasons not to start the book. "We're both up. Why not?"

"Can we read back in the bedroom, then?" Sherlock almost looked contrite at asking the question. "In case, you know, I do get sleepy." At John's questioning look, Sherlock shrugged. "There might've been a time or two when I was out of ... stuff, and there is kind of a crash, you know?"

"All right."

Though Sherlock absolutely wanted John to stretch out with him, and pouted when John wouldn't, John chose to pull a chair close to the bed, leaving Sherlock alone under the covers, the reading lamp on, and Treasure Island in John's hands. A few pages went by, but it seemed Sherlock wasn't able to pay attention too well, and at one point, before the captain even got a chance to begin to make plans with Jim, Sherlock's eyes were closed. He was, finally, *blessedly,* asleep.

++

"Up for an outing?" The morning had passed slowly, Sherlock was still lacking energy and exhausted, but this morning had been more productive than previous ones. They hadn't yet discussed much about the distress from the previous night, other than that Sherlock said he was feeling a little better.

"Please. I do not care for the park, or the tube, or any of the coffee shops within walking distance. I have no interest in ..."

"Get your coat, and get up. If you can complain that much, you're up for it." Matter-of-factly but
grateful for the impetus, John stood up. "We're going out."

Fuss, complain, whinge - Sherlock tried it all but finally coats had been donned and they stepped out to the kerb. Sherlock spotted the car immediately. "I have no interest in joining my brother. None."

Me neither, John didn't say. "It's not him. I just arranged a car."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll come to it. Eventually."

"Library." John was silent. "Museum." "Cemetery." A little too much excitement when he pressed, "Morgue?"

"Get in," John finally said. "The destination will be rather obvious when we arrive at it."

It was only a few blocks, and the car stopped in front of a multi-story building. There was old, well-maintained brick, some wrought-iron work along the corners and precipices, a black railing by cement steps. "What is this?" and Sherlock asked as he turned to look for signage. "Wigmore Hall?"

"Well spotted."

"Fine, we're here. Now let's go home."

John left the car, door open, and stopped at the drivers side window, where he was handed an envelope, tickets contained therein as requested. He moved toward the building, not another word spoken to Sherlock. The front door, a couple steps, and he turned to wait for Sherlock. He didn't beckon, beg, gesture, or speak. He simply waited, hands in his pockets, calmly and without particular emotion.

His mobile buzzed.

Raw talent, not worth it. SH

John pondered that Sherlock was texting him. His mobile buzzed a few more times.

Driver's mobile.

Bad idea. I don't want to come in.

You have more pressing obligations or something? John responded.

Might actually be terrible. SH

I happen to have heard the performer today is apparently quite good. Up and coming.

As if your opinion matters. SH

Talented.

Says you.

You'll never know if you don't come inside.
From the main entrance, John gestured finally back at the car, an invitation as he opened the door to the building and waved wide his arm as if allowing Sherlock to enter ahead of him. There was no movement from the car, so John went inside and let the door close behind him. The driver, he'd already ensured, would go nowhere and had back up in case Sherlock got the inclination to be more difficult. For the moment anyway, John knew he didn't have the strength or the stamina to bolt from the car or take off on foot.

Cretin. The driver won't leave. SH

Stay in the car then. I'll return after the performance, maybe an hour or so.

Boring. SH

There is another option you realise

I haven't mastered the art of self-combustion. Yet. SH

A few of the concert-goers gave John an odd glance as they passed him to head into the concert hall as he laughed at the incoming text. An usher holding programmes caught his eye, a little shake of his head at the mobile, as if reminding John that it could not be used inside the ornate auditorium.

John glanced around, the rich wood and decor regal and understated. Wigmore Hall was one of the smaller concert venues in Marylebone, a place to spend the evening. There were several bars, a small auditorium, ornate stage, thick crimson curtains, spacious lobby. Their evening performances were usually a well-known music group, opera, or small theatre event, but the matinees tended to be smaller crowds, less expensive, and featured some very talented musicians either performing for graduation recitals or simply playing because they loved it as they waited for bigger and better discovery. Which happened fairly regularly.

He left Sherlock's text unanswered, letting him stew a bit in the car, hopefully stimulating his interest and his restlessness.

I'll come inside but it's going to cost you. SH

That's not how this works.

It is today. SH

I'm not saying yes to that. Nor would anyone who knows you.

All right then. But I require motivation. What will you give me for coming in? SH

Satisfaction at doing what I expect of you. Self respect.

Boring. Tedious. SH

We will discuss the return of your violin if you stay the whole concert and behave. Discuss.

Will you hold my hand during the concert? SH

I'm sure your brother will be delighted to read this later. If he's not monitoring my mobile, I'm fairly certain he is privy to the driver's mobile.

Will you? SH
Concert begins in ten minutes. I will go in without you. And I am taking your ticket inside with me, so I suggest you give the mobile back to the driver and get promptly inside.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart!

Or copy and paste:

https://madeleinefs.deviantart.com/art/Fanart-for-Beauty-from-Ashes-726687571

There's fan art! And it's amazing. It conveys the tenderness and steady commitment of John while showing Sherlock is recovering. Check it out. Leave her some love! Thanks to the talent of madeleinefs for making part of this story come to life. I am overwhelmed.

---

So, yeah, not to belabour the point, but there are certain characteristics to what happens after a gastrointestinal bleed.

I'm about five minutes out from hitting post, already found a little typo, tightened up a few things. Please let me know if you see anything glaringly wrong.

_____

Next chapter: Sherlock discovers something accidentally. And John sets something in motion. It just might not be what you think.
Sherlock continues to improve, physically, but John is concerned as he attempts to find an acceptable distraction.

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Recap: Mycroft hired John as an in-home medical consultant. Sherlock has progressed to being more active though his energy is low. They've struggled with eating, a relapse, deception, the repressed treatments Sherlock endured as a teen. He has recovered from a frightening development of a Mallory-Weiss tear, where John helped him deal with an unavoidable hospital procedure. Last seen, John was waiting for Sherlock inside a small concert hall.

Chance encounters ahead, and a past connection might prove significant...

Chapter Notes

The delay in updates is unavoidable. Apologies! I keep re-reading this, adding to it, wanting to rework some of it, and am posting before I get sucked into it again. If there are edits to be made, please let me know gently, and thanks for the encouragement, always!!

At the end of the work, more Fanart!!! It's amazing.

There is a violin piece at the concert John and Sherlock were ready to attend in the last chapter, an encore. If you like a bit of the background or would enjoy listening to the hints dropped in this chapter, I was listening to a violinist playing F. Chopin - Nocturne in C# minor, and then some more plot happened.

Click here Nocturne

Yes, I am quite aware that the violinist has brown curls.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The musicians were loud and commanding despite their small number. Eight stringed instrument players and several percussion members who played an assortment of complimentary, background fill, a creativity with sound that John had never seen, heard, or imagined before. They were very much in sync with each other, cued by breathing, slight movements, an inhale at a key point, or a more obvious nod or countdown of one of their hands. Musically, their performance was crystal clear, sharp, carrying throughout the concert hall with no amplification required. Attendance at the lunchtime matinee was sparse, though there were clusters of small groups. Had John been more interested, he would have suspected a ladies book club, a sixth form music theory class, a group of professors, a theatre performing arts field trip, a couple on a lunch date, a man trying to impress a much younger interest, secretary perhaps. And he would have looked around more, but his eyes
and his attention were divided between the stage, which was certainly worthy, and Sherlock, whose demeanor was not only fascinating and drawing, but riveting.

Sherlock sat still, taking it all in, positively enthralled. Enraptured. The musical ability, the performance, the song selections, all had him held in powerful clutches. Occasionally he would breathe a complimentary word or two to John; most often he would simply sit, watch, his entire body practically humming. Long fingers held a programme, occasionally during a brief break between songs reading about the history of a piece, or comparing one of the arrangers from an early number to a later one, a page held splayed, the front cover curled back.

But mostly, just... focused.

There was an ovation at the end, and an encore.

The encore was well worth the (reasonable) price of admission, and John had a brief twinge of pity for those who had already slipped out. Not much, though, _eh, their loss_. It was also not quite John's undoing, listening and watching and feeling, but close. The shining star of the concert. One musician, a violinist, had swapped instruments with one of the stage crew, who carried out an older, more vintage instrument, exchanging the first violin carefully, fading into the background in his black stage attire. The swap was so smooth, John only noticed it because it had commanded Sherlock's notice, when Sherlock couldn't stop staring. The violinist, a gentle smile about him, moved to centre stage, the lights dimmed, the rest of the orchestra drifting back into a semi-circle behind him just beyond the stage spotlight. Secondary, background, accompaniment. The violin in his hand, quickly tuned to perfection, a final check to see that the rest of the ensemble was ready, rang out in clear, crisp melodies while the rest of the instruments simply carried a long, drawn out, background chord or some fill, a muted, complimentary foundation. The piece had no description in the programme, and John didn't recognise it but did suspect it to be a highly significant work just given the expression and how personal it seemed, and clearly there was a story unfolding in the music, a tale of hardship and resolution. It bent, and yearned, and twisted, mourned. It wailed, it peaked. Dissonant chord, a slide, a hold, minor diminished chord though John couldn't have named it.

It settled, swelled again, fuller, and then a few notes resolved. It waned slowly. It _healed._

As the final notes, the overtones held, held, _held_, then began to dissipate, John was acutely aware of his adjacent seat. Reaching a quick hand to cover Sherlock's, his skin sliding warmly over Sherlock's, their connection. He leaned very close, his other hand touching his upper arm as their bodies touched, and whispered with a degree of urgency, "_Breathe!_"

Slow exhale, the words light as air, a hitch in his throat as he whispered, "Perfect." He did as John requested, breathed in, out, in. "Oh my god, did you hear that violin? Oh, the warmth of those strings, the precision? The tale? The story inside the music?"

Around them, there was standing, applauding, shuffling, milling, but neither man paid much attention. House lights went back on. Truly, the performance, the encore specifically, had taken Sherlock's higher functions, his words. It was impossible not to watch him, his reaction, his full-body response, the emotion of his face, his speech reduced to exclamations interspersed with the inability to communicate, all of his body gushing with and without needing words.

Idly, John's thumb brushed easily, relaxed, over Sherlock's hand that he was still holding, lazy circles. Up on the stage, where Sherlock's attention was mostly focused, the musicians were chatting, but John could tell that Sherlock was somehow revisiting, recalling the sensation of their craft, their artistry. With slow, understated movements, John turned his hand so that it slid inside of Sherlock's, their fingers curling, unfolding, twining together. _Will you hold my hand if I come_
John was fairly certain that Sherlock hadn't even noticed, so taken was he with his musings, his thoughts. He was certainly not in a rush to leave, content to bask in the harmonic remnants certainly still lofting about the hall.

His thoughts must have eventually quieted, and many had already left. Sherlock's eyes caught John's then, as if noticing that time had passed. Smiling, John squeezed his hand loosely, gently, and both pairs of eyes darted their glances downward to see the clasp of hands. "You fussed when I asked about this!" Sherlock accused.

John leaned close, their breaths almost meeting. He could faintly catch scent of Sherlock's shampoo, his aftershave, the poncy deoderant he wore. "Maybe I did. But I never said no, now, did I?" And so with that said, he let his fingers loosen, and their hands separated. John stood slowly, as if ready to leave but not in a rush.

Sherlock was still quite pleased with the music, but not too good-natured that he couldn't continue to complain, lightly picking at John's knuckles before dropping the extremity again. "If I'd known it was going to be that easy, I'd have made the bargain for something much more fun."

Their driver was waiting, as had been arranged. Holding the door for John and Sherlock to slip inside, the driver was fairly careful to note the pleasure on Sherlock's face and just as carefully conceal any response to it, keeping his comments to himself. In the back of the car, John could finally sigh with relief. Sherlock had not caused a scene, had eventually given in, done as requested, tolerated the activity, had managed a crowd and an outing. Making progress, he thought to himself as he watched Sherlock staring out the car window.

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The night was cold and windy, no hint of any rain for a change. His steps in his well-worn boots echoed as he searched for the familiar face, any face who could direct him to the next supply, next hit, next line.

"Oi!" came the angered yell from down the block. "Walk on! 'e's not here, and I'll call the coppers on you next if you don't scram!" There were more words that included damn drunk drugs and kids in it, but it was delivered with more excitement than clarity.

With something of a snit, Sherlock hollered something back, though the explanation - police involvement - seemed likely, that his source usually easily discoverable on this street, had been cut off. Or relocated, arrested. Damned inconvenient, now. Ignoring the yelling that continued at his back as he retreated, he turned his steps to an even seedier part of town. He'd find something worthwhile. Though his coat was thin, he pulled it around himself against the bite of the breeze, and had just crossed another side street when he heard it.

It grabbed his attention. A trick of an addled mind? An open window? Too remote for a nightclub. Standing taller, he turned in small circles hoping to hear it again.

Sounds on the wind and the echoing quality of the tones bouncing off building structures made for some confusion as Sherlock turned, seeking the loudest likeliest point of origin. He headed a different direction a few times, lost the music, turned around. Finally, it did grow a bit louder over the gusts, and he actually recognised the melody line as something from Dvorak, something classical. It brought back brief memories of music lessons and the warmth of his childhood home. Followed by more unpleasantness, not all childhood musical associations were pleasant, and he wished he had time to quiet his mind with chemicals before meeting up with whomever was playing. Because he was quite certain it was live and not a radio. He could just tell.

While life on the streets for the most part had taken away most elements of surprise, Sherlock was
indeed caught off guard when he pinpointed the origin of the music, out of the elements best as could be done, and the person who was playing.

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"You said we would discuss my violin's return."

"Are you ready for it?"

"I'd rather have a replacement mobile."

"Funny thing about responsibility, you have to earn it. Privilege, not an entitlement."

"Mobile, then."

"It's also not Let's Make a Deal. We were going to discuss the violin's return." A huff, a crossing of the arms, a slouching exhale, and Sherlock turned away. "I am quite willing, if it's something you're interested in and can assure me you're ready for. But it's not a bargaining chip. You do not trade this reward for something else."

"Fine."

"It's at Mrs. Hudson's, of course."

"Of course." The snippy echo had quite an edge.

"Before you get all in a snit, do you know why it's there?"

"Oh," he began, a slightly dramatic pause, "I'm sure you're going to tell me." With crossed arms, John continued to watch Sherlock, neither of them speaking a word for the moment. Sherlock grimaced, "Or you think you're going to make me tell you."

John waited, letting the moment draw out, deciding how he wanted to continue this discussion-turned-confrontation, and then choosing simply not to. "I'm not, actually. It's nothing we haven't already mentioned. You know why it is where it is." John let the subject completely drop, choosing not to let Sherlock's behaviour or words dictate John's plans, best he could avoid that happening anyway. "You can speak up, answer the question, or it stays. Your choice."

Where in the past few days, Sherlock's restless energy had been easier to refocus into something else, whether making snide comments about things he observed out the window or on the telly, or in a few slides he created to then view under the microscope, today he just couldn't settle. It was a few minutes at the window, a fussing at the drapes, a repetitive thumb-click on a biro from the desk, a manic rearrangement of one of the shelves of books.

From where John sat, pen to paper of Sherlock's file jotting a few notes on some of the printouts and records he kept (mostly that Sherlock looked at and complained about, tedious, boring, not in the least exciting), he watched as Sherlock rearranged the bookshelf into height order, and then, unsatisfied, alphabetical order.

"Sherlock," he finally cued when he thought enough time had gone by.

"What?!" His jaw changed shape as his teeth clenched. John let his gaze just rest on him, watching silently. "Yes, John?" The same vicious, caustic edge was still there.

"Are you sure you can't perhaps be a bit kinder with your tone?" The nastiness, the venom, he just couldn't quite let him get away with. "I actually don't think I quite deserve it."
"Not entirely."

Small shrug. "Honest," John stated. "Is there something you'd like to ask me?"

"I believe I was told that it was completely and fully up to you, so it matters not if I ask."

"Fair enough," John agreed, though he was concerned about Sherlock's sense of what was owed him. "Do you feel you're ready to have your violin returned?"

"Seems hardly likely I could send you out of the flat to fetch it again, once it's already here."

"Non responsive."

They met eyes, John's intent and watchful, taking in all of Sherlock's restless body language, his energy in search of an outlet. "Of course I am," and this time, his inflections were a little smoother and more patient. John, however, didn't doubt that it was all contrived, fake.

They were both quite aware that Mrs. Hudson was home, given the occasional sounds from below the flat, the telly, the chattering at times either at the show she was watching or occasionally on the telephone. Rising to his feet, John nodded, a smile that he hoped was encouraging, and he told Sherlock, quietly, "I'll be right back with it, then."

Which he was, violin case in hand, and the moment was electric, tingly, meaningful.

"What?" Sherlock said as John approached with it. "No sappy, sentimental words of wisdom?"

John knew that it had been humbling, the whole experience, the relapse, the way he'd been caught, and there were many things he wanted to say. "Nope. Just a quick reminder about trust." Sherlock's body was completely still, but he was focused and intent, completely attuned to John's face, a quick glance at the case, and back to John's eyes.

"You probably mean broken trust."

"I suppose, yes."

The case transferred hands, was set down immediately on the nearest flat surface. Sherlock did not immediately reach to open it, and John appreciated the moment that he was at least making a communication effort. "I expected more along the lines of once-bitten, twice-shy."

"Suit yourself." John watched the case being unlatched, Sherlock's elegant fingers perhaps a bit rusty at the handling he was doing. "I don't think you need me to make a speech."

"God no."

Over the next not even ten minutes, which ended up being as much stamina as Sherlock had in him, John found himself quite glad there were no interruptions for those brief moments. Because Sherlock somehow even managed to make tuning the instrument a delight to watch. Although John had only been up this close to a stringed instrument a few times, he found the posture, the carriage, the correct body positioning rather poised and graceful. But for Sherlock, also a strain. Sherlock had begun reconnecting with his instrument standing upright, feet spread, back straight, arms lifted into position, crisp. They both seemed to take on a different energy, symbiosis in action.

But it didn't last as Sherlock fatigued. Within a couple of minutes, John had moved to secure a tall stool, offer it to him, who smiled with gratitude and perched on it. But his arms never quite regained their earlier, higher lift, the posture required to play proficiently. As they sagged, so did
the tone, the energy, the performance, which was some scales, a few runs or arpeggios, a smooth well known melody, a chorus of something John thought might have been written by Mozart, and then snippets from a couple of pieces, some of which John recognised while others were unfamiliar but no less beautiful. The last few measures, slower, soulful.

"You're getting tired, it's okay if you stop, you know," he finally said, approaching Sherlock again, and was surprised when Sherlock let him remove both instrument and bow from his now exhausted arms. They flopped to his lap, limp and tired as he slouched on the stool. "That was wonderful," John began, changed his mind on extending the compliment, and ended with, "Did it feel good, to play again after all this time?"

"It did," he said, breathy. "But, wow, muscle memory be damned, arms are killing me."

As John moved to where the case was still open, Sherlock took a few steps toward the couch and folded himself into it. A controlled, long-legged collapse. John brought the case to where it was in Sherlock's line of sight. "Wipe down with this?" he asked, pulling a velvet-like polishing cloth from the burgundy interior. Sherlock nodded, one eye open, watching John's hands move over the neck, bridge, body of the instrument wiping off the dust, bits of rosin, a stray strand from the bow. It was nothing short of a caress, hand over cloth circling, slowly and carefully stroking the highly polished spruce. One-eyed, watching and remembering, Sherlock was just slightly jealous of the violin.

++

"That's close enough," came the words, but they were not unkind. The violinist had paused long enough to speak, resumed the music again. Sherlock, even in his drug-hungry state, was impressed that the man could have fit the casting call for the original old man and the sea. Long beard, weathered skin, crusty wool knitted hat, and bulky sleeves. He was tucked inside an overhang near a deserted building. The wind was non-existent there in the lee of the building, and the cool air seemed quite a bit warmer without the wind chill effects. Wanting to be a bit closer, to hear better the tone and watch the fingering and the way the bow hair caught, raspy, on the strings, he did in fact heed the warning and pause, feet stilled, head inclined.

Listening.

The notes were smooth as honey, melodic and rich even in the outdoor makeshift amphitheatre, and Sherlock stood, hands wrapped around his coat and tucked under his arms as he listened to the continuation of the song. Another pause in the music, and Sherlock glanced at the man, who was now staring boldly.

"Food in that crate, if you're hungry." A quick arpeggio, the high note held. "Not much, but you're ..."

"Do you have...?" The mans sharp eyes turned his direction, piercing, threatening. Sherlock tried again, "I don't suppose...?"

"No. No stash, so don't bother looking. And no money, should you care to think you can toss me and find anything." He nodded once, kicking a short wooden box in Sherlock's direction. It was as close to an invitation, an offer as he was going to get.

"No thanks." Not getting comfortable, nor close, and definitely, Sherlock thought, not taking orders from anyone.

"Suit yourself." Conversation for the entire night was done, and Sherlock hung around for as long as the man played, helping himself to what ended up being a small apple and a piece of stale
baked goods, probably a compassionate handout. But it hit the spot. And Sherlock, for his strung-out meanderings from earlier, found the music soothing and was actually disappointed when the man abruptly bagged the instrument, picked up what meager things must have been his own, and disappeared down the street.

Though he came back to the same place every night, hoping he would be there, hoping to hear him play, it would be five nights before Sherlock found him there again.

++

The black, hard shell case was fitted inside, the now shiny-again instrument tucked securely into the padded upholstered interior. Royal blue velvet in dark contrast to the black case, warm reddish-hued wood.

John moved the clip that held the bow in place, ready to put that away, and Sherlock protested. "You have to loosen it first." When John's fingers froze uncertainly, over the case, Sherlock added, "The bow itself, not the clip."

"Like this?" John's fingers found the tension screw, began to loosen it.

"Obviously."

"Hey, I trained on surgeon's tools not musical accessories." The horse-hair became less tight, relaxed in the thin dark wood, the arch of the bow looser, and John settled it into place within the case, slid the clip home, and it all snapped shut and was set aside. "Thank you, you know, might have been more polite."

"I didn't ask you to do that."

"What's got into you? I would have thought this," and John gestured, "playing, which was amazing by the way, would have been a good thing?"

There was another sigh, and John very much perceived sadness surrounding Sherlock. Oh.

"You don't have to play, of course, if it makes you unhappy." John gentled, compassionate as he took a knee by the couch. "That piece, that one at the end, that was beautiful. I didn't recognise it."

His fingers fussed at the blanket, straightened it, let his hand settle over Sherlock's arm and stay there. It was not shrugged off.

"Original, not mine. Best I can remember it, not quite as the genuine version but close. Written by someone I used to know."

"It's sad, I think." John kept his tone carefully neutral, thoughtful, tender. "Beautiful, though. And apparently special to you?"

Sherlock looked away. Blinked.

++

Sherlock came a bunch of nights in a row, listened to music, never really spoke much to the man. He estimated the musician's age as somewhere between fifty and ninety, knowing that street life can prematurely age a person, that homelessness was hard, clothing and food were scarce, so it was hard to tell chronological age. One night, the man had paused, regarded Sherlock coolly, sizing him up, taking it all in. "Requests?"

"Chopin. Nocturne in C# minor?" There was a freeze, a contemplative hesitation, and Sherlock
thought perhaps the man was unfamiliar, until there was a nod, a slow blink.

The man had smiled, then closed his eyes, breathed deep, put his bow to the strings and began to play. It was amazing. Honey and lilt and the swell of the ocean, the fall of quiet snow in all it's serene glory. Sherlock had grown accustomed to the acoustics of the makeshift, outdoor amphitheatre, where to stand for the best carrying tones, the sweetest amplification. The piece completed, two quick claps from Sherlock in applause, a distinguished nod from the man, whose eyes seemed younger, more lively. "Very nice."

"You play, then." The man pointed his bow in Sherlock's direction, punctuating his statement.

"Used to." It had been a long time since Sherlock had touched his violin, longer since he'd taken lessons. But the instrument was safe, stowed somewhere at his parents' home. At the way the musician stared at Sherlock, as if amused, entertained, an eye narrowed under the scrutiny, and suddenly Sherlock did not appreciate being deduced. "How'd you know?"

"Mostly, a good guess. But your foot taps along, you know. Thought I caught your mimicking the fingering, bowing, on the piece you asked for. A fairly lesser-known piece. Studied it probably, then."

"Oh." Sherlock completely stilled, uncomfortable, his eyes glanced around as if considering taking off as if startled. His fingers splayed out, not wishing to give away anything further, and he crammed them back into pockets. There was a hole now in one of them.

"You might like this one, then, if the Chopin is appealing."

A mini-concert, then, of a softly building, slow, sad number. It wailed in all the right spots, finely crafted in the somber sections, and eventually ended with a flourish, a low tone, an ethereal ending that was resolute and bittersweet. "Beautiful. Composer?"

"Original work."

"Why are you on the streets? This could be your livelihood."

The man shrugged, his voice and shoulders defeated. "Bad choices, burned a bridge, too proud to..." There was a scuff of his feet, an adjustment of the instrument, a resigned inhale, exhale. "Not so different from you." The bow pointed accusingly in Sherlock's direction, just briefly, in the man's hands. His fingers, rough callouses but not old, as he pointed at Sherlock. Sherlock revised his age calculation to the younger side. Fifties, probably no more. The long fingers, elegant, confident, despite the living conditions, were well cared for.

"Will you play that again?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

And tomorrow, he did indeed play it again. And the day after. The melody lingered in Sherlock's mind, his brain supplying other harmonies, imagining more to the piece. It soothed, calmed, made him anxious to hear it again. It reverberated.

The following day, when Sherlock arrived, there was something different.

Very different indeed.

++

"Ever perform? Recitals, anything?"
"No." Sherlock flopped into the couch cushion, drawing his head onto the pillow that was there. While he was obviously not tired or looking to sleep, his tone had been quite closed. End of discussion.

"You're very good. The lessons must've ..."

"Just stop it."

John had a gnawing discomfort that he was restless, that the unsettled nature was going to be only getting a bit worse. "Interested in ...?"

"No. Nothing." Very close to a snarl.

The message - back off - received loud and clear. John lightened up, moved toward the kitchen. "All right then, I'm making tea, I'll fix you a cup. Maybe something on the telly?"

"Will you just leave me the hell alone?"

John stared, watching the cadence of Sherlock's chest rise, the shoulders moving with respirations. There was a shudder or two, a catch of his breathing, the tension of upset and of a mind whirling and unhappy. "I'd like you to listen to me a moment." Knowing Sherlock was indeed listening, John spoke quietly, soothing he hoped. "Another craving, I presume?"

"Idiotic question. Move beyond that and stop being so imbecilic."

"Delay, distract. Remember?"

"Yes, of course. And if you tell me the third one, the third bloody D is drink water or deep breath, I swear I might fling you out the window. Or myself. Or you first and then..."

"Stop. No, it's not, and I agree," John shook his head, coming closer and sliding to perch on the edge of the coffee table by Sherlock's position on the couch, "those terms are rather patronising, shallow. For some people, though, effective." He let his fingers brush lightly on the back of Sherlock's shoulder, barely touching and not moving. "Don't write them off completely, all right?" There was warmth emanating through the shirt to John's fingers, to where they were together, where John was reminding him he was not alone, not helpless, not so far away from anyone that he couldn't get help, couldn't get back. "Want to guess again on the other D?"

"Are you sure you don't want to grill me needlessly on the first two? Find out my delay intentions, come up with something else to distract me." He was manic, speech pressured, energy radiating and coiling and spiraling something fierce. "Although," and he sat up with a quick twist of his body, abrupt, grabbed at John, "I can think of something that would actually be a very welcome distraction."

He pulled, vaulted himself up, pulling rashly and fiercely grabbing at John, suddenly moving toward him at the same time. Caught off guard at least just a little, John did not gather himself together enough to resist until Sherlock had already pressed their lips together, hard.

The stronger by far, and with better leverage, John allowed the kiss to linger only the briefest moment, long enough to sense warm lips and taste his skin. He could feel Sherlock's sharp inhale, the stubble, the desperation through his very pores. He forced himself to breathe deep, bring his hands up slowly between them, and push calmly away. "Absolutely not." *Fuck off,* would have been his first choice, but professionalism ruled the few seconds. "That is not on. And you know it."
"Distract me, then, and be bloody quick about it."

"I'd suggest a walk if you had a bit more energy." A groan from the couch. "Look, take a deep breath in spite of you mocking that earlier. You're all right." Though they were close, the only thing still touching was John's hand on Sherlock's arm, and he let him thumb stroke once, twice, a slow brush, a gentling. "Treasure Island?"

"No."

"Want me to take care of your shoulders, after playing, since they're sore?" He shook his head, but there must've been a flicker of interest, as he was not as emphatic as he could have been. "Oh, maybe your hands again, like before?"

A brief hesitation, and John could tell Sherlock was considering that though he kept silent.

Bloody stubborn git, refusing to ask for something offered, something he wanted even. "I'll grab the lotion, nail file. Relax, you'll enjoy it."

++

Sherlock had been anticipating his evening encounter with his musician acquaintance, had actually brought a pack of cigarettes, hoping to smoke and enjoy whatever was on the musical programme for the evening. That the music was not playing as he'd approached was not necessarily unusual, but the sight that greeted him was over the top alarming.

Two uniformed policemen. And a familiar, wool-capped body laying on the kerb. Ambulance attendants there but not acting urgently. Oh god, no. Retrieval, transport. Sherlock took the whole scene in at a glance, and spoke aloud before he thought better of it. "Robbery."

The taller officer spied him. "Oi, you there. What did you just say?"

"I said robbery." This, he delivered with a snippy, almost condescending air, staring at the hat, at the angle of the body - defensive, protective - and hearing the strange silence, the absence of music, the absence of everything, even the way the man breathed through sometimes congested sinuses.

"Who are you? And did you know this man?"

Sherlock could not have looked away from the man's lifeless, pale, colourless body if he'd tried. "I'm no one."

The other detective snorted perhaps in agreement, finally, at Sherlock's declaration. "Robbery? Ridiculous, actually. This guy's homeless, has nothing."

"He has talent, he has promise, he has -- had -- a future. Blink, the facts are changed, previous reality no longer the case. "His violin is gone."

"Violin?" A few steps, and the man with silver hair approached, sizing him up. Sherlock caught sight of the musician's hand, where he'd fallen, a few scratches on his knuckles, maybe a bruise already beginning. He must've been unconscious when he'd hit the kerb, with no attempt to break his fall and his fingers, bowing hand, right hand dominant, splayed funny, swollen, one of them bent at an awkward - clearly broken - angle. The DI had spoken, Sherlock had missed it, and he was now looking at him impatiently, and obviously just going through the motions and not optimistic about getting any reliable information. "Name please?"

"Mine or his?"
"Start with his."

"I don't know."

"Why did you need to clarify the question then, if you don't know?" The DI was now looking more closely, trying to ascertain if Sherlock was impaired, trying to check pupils, reactions, ability to maintain eye contact. "Yours then."

"I'm not telling."

"Get out, then, before I --"

The other detective intervened, the silver-haired one, without as much of an attitude. "Wait." To Sherlock, he turned, gentled. "I'm sorry about your friend."

"Not my friend."

A sigh, and Sherlock could sense the DI was already mentally packing it in. "Anything that could be helpful?"

"He loved his violin."

"Brand, anything distinguishing about it?"

"Notched, really etched across the scroll." When the DI looked puzzled, Sherlock added, "The piece at the top, where the tuning pegs are." The ambulance crew lifted the body to the stretcher, onto an unzipped piece of white plastic vinyl as Sherlock stared. "Used to be a musician, possibly professionally or close to it. Recent family argument, probably. Homeless less than six months."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Last night."

Another sharp consideration, the other, nastier detective. "This is your dealer, is he?" The pocket tablet and biro came out again. "You guys working the streets together? I'll need your name, please. Now."

His feet were on the move without warning, a burst of motivation to escape, flee. Sherlock's familiarity with the area alleys and shortcuts came in quite helpful, evading the policemen. That and his long legs, loud on the pavement. When he reached a spot he felt safe in, having eluded the DI following him, no feet approaching, the street anonymously silent and annoying, he paused. Sherlock wondered about the violin, who'd taken it, and if they'd appreciate the fine quality of music it was able to produce, when it occurred to him that it was likely already being sold for a pittance. Drug money or something else.

Pity. Though the instrument wasn't in great shape, definitely signs of wear and tear, in the hands of the talented musician, a master's hand, it transcended possibility for a beautiful song. He had certainly proven that the past evenings, playing because he loved it. Then, playing for Sherlock.

"Hey, you all right?" A woman spoke to him, cautiously from a few doors away, having seen him standing by himself. So engrossed in his musings, he hadn't even noticed her approach. Something white was being held out to him, in her outstretched hand. There were kind eyes and a pitiful expression. He took in her soft tchuck-tchuck sound, her face, then at her hand again. A kleenex. A kleenex? It wasn't until after he'd snapped at her until she disappeared that he was fighting back tears. Oddly, sentimentally, he wanted to tell her about the man who was now laying dead on a
cold sidewalk, being loaded into an ambulance to end up on a morgue slab. It didn't seem right that he was the only one who was missing him, remembering him. He gave himself a mental shake. Ridiculous. Sentimental. *Idiot.*

For a few days, maybe a week, Sherlock moved with extra vigilance. Kept to the shadows, kept a wall or safe corner behind him, listened intently, kept to himself even more than he already did. He checked out a consignment store for musical instruments (nothing), he paid more attention to some of the chatter of the homeless (which was unhelpful except that he heard of a new place to crash, a den), who certainly paid more attention than many in the city. A few times he heard orchestral arrangements, or strings playing, and made sure he didn't linger, stop, or get maudlin. *Rebuild the walls, no one comes in or out again.* And then he found another supplier, a cheaper one, and there was an accidental, recreational overdose, a token hospital visit, a signing out against medical advice, and a visit from his brother with a proposition.

++

"This is stupid," Sherlock muttered, as John pulled a chair closer to the couch, taking one of Sherlock's hands in his own. The emery board seemed small in his sturdy fingers, and the sounds a bit grating and rough until he'd flipped it over to use the fine side.

"Why do you feel that?"

A clench of the jaw, a tightening of the lip. *I'm not saying.*

"Well, I tend to think if it helps you relax, if you enjoy it, feel a little ..." John hesitated, not wishing to sound degrading, "taken care of, and it's good, so don't fret about it." Rather quickly, the nails were shortened, smoothed, one hand then the other, and John retrieved the bottle of lotion from under his leg where he'd put it to warm. The lotion was nicely scented, subtle, and as he rubbed the first of Sherlock's hands, he spoke a little about how he'd found Wigmore Hall and that he'd enjoyed choosing a musician that he thought Sherlock would not only like, but admire, that they would both appreciate. "So this one came up, the matinee, and I don't know about you, but I thought that final piece was absolutely incredible."

A sigh.

"All right. Good thing I don't mind carrying on a one-sided conversation, then." John could tell Sherlock was feeling a bit less agitated, so he digressed from the music, taking his story from the encore proceeding to a mildly embellished story about how he played clarinet for a year in school before the music teacher sent home a note that perhaps John would be more suited for a percussion instrument. "So they suggested drums. Other hand please," and Sherlock, smirking as soon as the drums were mentioned, complied. "My da said that drums were for students with no other talent, and maybe it would serve them all right if I just quit." The lotion made a slick sound into John's palm, then a rippling and sliding whisper of a noise as John began working and massaging Sherlock's other hand. The fingers, long, lean, the palm relaxed, the back of the knuckles rather dry and needed a second round of lotion, rubbing, allowing the skin to moisturize and hydrate. With a quick glance at Sherlock's face, he thought maybe he'd at least try. There had been a few minutes of relatively comfortable silence.

"So, the last D." John waited, watching Sherlock's eyes, his face for too much irritation.

There wasn't any, yet, though his words were resigned. "Here we go, knew it was inevitable."

"Yeah, well, I have a captive audience, and I like to be productive with my time." Flipping Sherlock's palm so that his thumb was in the center, he began to press a little more firmly, deeply rubbing but gentle and kind, a deeper tissue massage. The faint purr in Sherlock's throat was
enough motivation to continue, working between each section, palmar surfaces, spaces between metacarpals. Sherlock's hand was warm, fingers coiled, relaxed.

"Decision, of course," Sherlock said, dully.

"Yes. Decision. Keeping a mental list of reasons to stay away from cocaine, heroin, whatever your Siren song is. Along with that, you make up your mind, I mean, really, concretely deciding ahead of time that there are better things to do."

"Banal."

"An intentional choice."

"Worthless."

"Perhaps. But your way hasn't proven to be all that long-lasting or effective, has it?"

"Sounds too easy." They were both watching John's fingers over the back of Sherlock's hand, thumb rubbing, the lotion warmer and soothing. "Name it, claim it. Not how it works."

John rotated Sherlock's wrist in his hand, pushed up the cuff of the sleeve, began to very gently rub, to massage his lower forearm. Muscles under John's fingers were thick and solid, stronger than they would have originally appeared. "Sherlock, after all these years," rub, rub, circles, sliding halfway up his forearm, "I can concretely assure you that nothing - absolutely nothing - about this is ever easy."

John pressed in, the hand between his own relaxed, supple, trusting. A few deeper massages, softly into the base of Sherlock's thumb and down his wrist, and there was a faint sound from Sherlock's throat. A slow, steady rumble of low, satisfaction. It conveyed pleasure, and a faint plea for more, harder, and that's good.

The vibration carried both through the air and through John's hands, his knee where they were actually touching. From within the pit of John's stomach was an answering stirring of his own. He glanced up toward Sherlock's face, pulling his eyes from the relaxed elegance of Sherlock's hands to find Sherlock also watching him. And inside the eye contact, the two of them, was an obvious expression of appreciation. And concern. And intimacy.

John let himself linger there, a hard swallow of his own that Sherlock took note of, and then a nervous tongue licking his lower lip while Sherlock watched that. His interest and attentiveness, bold. There was the raise of an eyebrow, then, and the room seemed to warm between them as John's hands shifted positions, kneading. After another round on the other hand, he lightened his touch, slowed down his ministrations.

With slow and deliberate movements, John slid his hands free while taking a deep breath, making ready to slide back and end the impromptu hand care. Sherlock allowed it, then just as quickly, a striking attack, lunged with his hand, grabbed John's in his own, holding it there, steady, securely. It was a declaration of connection, of belonging, of thanks. Of declaring things on his own terms.

On quiet feet, John smiled, fondly, his own heart pounding as he stood up fully and stepped away.

++

The rest of the evening found Sherlock mostly flat on his back, the couch, too fatigued to argue much, eat much, or keep his eyes open. The offer of a shower was a flat no, and he was only slightly more interested in the offer of a bath, but turned that down too. "God no, I'm just... Tired."
"All right." John spent a bit of time straightening up from dinner - bangers and mash, a classic favourite, a bust, untouched for Sherlock but John had enjoyed it. "You know," John finally said, "I guess if you're that tired, we can just get you into bed, then. It has been, I realise, quite a long day for you."

"Not really. All I did was sit around. Brief walk to and from a car."

"More than you're used to doing."

"Shouldn't be. No energy. It's ..." and Sherlock sighed, frustration evident in his face and his tone "... unacceptable." The word didn't convey enough negativity, and there was a faint growl again of a different kind than while John was massaging his hands. "Intolerable."

"If you're not starting to get a bit more energy within a couple of days, I think we'll need to check another blood count just to be on the safe side."

Sherlock shrugged, unimpressed.

He had no idea of what John would be asking of him.

Not one inkling.

Which was, John knew, not necessarily a bad thing. Not yet.

++

Greg Lestrade had a name of the homeless violinist now, one last lead before closing the file, leaving the homicide unsolved, another annoyance. The door to the mostly unmarked shoppe had a bell as he entered.

"Sir?"

"Looking for a violin, may have been dropped off, would have had either no receipt or forged one, last week, perhaps. Certainly not before this past Monday, no longer ago than that."

"I did get one, in fact, just that time frame. Kind of beat up and weathered. There's a nicer one up here..."

"No, I'm interested in that one." The shopkeeper nodded, gestured to where it currently was.

"Pretty scratched, but could probably be filled and polished..."

"Is this the scroll?" Greg ran his fingers over the deep grooves by the end of the strings, but the pegs.

"Yes."

"I'll give you a good deal on it, if you still want it."

Lestrade shook his head, realised he needed to clarify. "Actually, I need to know exactly when this was brought in. And the name of the person who dropped it off."

"Tuesday morning was the drop off," he said, checking the tag. "But no can do on the name," he said, just a bit haughty. "That information is confidential, and I go to many lengths to protect my clients. And there most often is no proof of ownership, other than a signature. Probably a family instrument this one, though, so no official trail..."
"I see." The DI's eyes skittered about the inventory as if wondering about business practices, about much of the store contents. "You do realise you're required to turn over transaction records to the authorities if there's a reason. Or a request."

"I check through reports of stolen merchandise through a clearinghouse, it wasn't ..."

Greg sighed, removed his ID and badge, opened it, placed it on the counter. "I'm investigating the murder of the owner of this violin, which we believe was stolen this past Monday, so you're going to give me the name and contact..."

++

Sherlock's pale eyes were wide, uncertain, startled. "You've always drawn blood here."

"Not anymore."

"That's ridiculous." Even with just the hint of John's informing Sherlock that his next round of lab tests would be drawn on site at the hospital, there was a bit of sweating, fussing, pupil dilation, and a nervous movement with both hands as he wiped his apparently sweaty palms on his trousers. The morning had started off with fatigue that was no better but no worse. John had insisted on a wash, dressing, and when Sherlock had resisted all of those things, John had cued him through getting dressed, button front shirt. He had managed to refuse socks, and had not yet eaten anything, had barely sipped at his tea.

"Not really. It's more expensive, requires more handling, more man-hours. There's no valid reason why you can't get to a hospital lab to have it drawn there."

The fussing, the push back that Sherlock was clearly thinking - as if written across his forehead - remained unsaid.

After a moment, John rescued him. "I know you don't want to."

"You're right, I don't."

"I have a plan, and I'm going to help you."

"Not interested."

"Never-the-less," John began, tone gentle, hoping that Sherlock would see his point once he explained it.

Sherlock interrupted. "It's wrong of you to make me, to insist. Forcing a patient to do something is assault."

"Not exactly, given that assault implies harm. You are being encouraged --"

"I'm not. Doing. It."

"Look," John began again, and when Sherlock's mouth opened as if he was going to cut him off, again, John raised both a hand and an eyebrow, and pressed on. "Getting over some of the things in your past, Sherlock, is a good idea. Healing. Restorative."

"Frightening. Irrelevant."

"I can help you."

"Believe I already said no."
"Believe I already said no."

"I don't need it. Don't want it."

"What if you ever need the hospital again?" A few breaths, both of them considering how difficult that experience had been. "Having a successful connection, break the bad associations?"

"I'll be quite content never needing to go there again."

"You've shown amazing strength, what you've been through, survived. What you've been forced to overcome so far. Does it make sense to let this one thing win, have power over you? You can defeat this thing, once and for all."

"No." He turned away, put his arm across his eyes, trying to feign disinterest. But his chest, his breathing, the bounding pulse at his neck told a different story to John's trained eyes. "Not interested," he said again, his voice attempting to convey dismissal, boredom.

John had held the trump card close to him, pulled it out now to play it, lay it on the table. "Not even for a mobile once you go through with it?"

John watched the argument wrestle itself around inside Sherlock's head and play out over his features. The arm lifted up off his face to consider John, his seriousness, his nonjudgmental expression, his focus on Sherlock. Eventually, his hands folded, palms together, and his eyes shut for a bit. Stewing, mulling it over, weighing the cost. Enough time has passed that John fixed and drank his tea, made some arrangements for a food delivery and laundry pick-up, all the while giving Sherlock time and space.

John had grabbed his book, was lightly paying attention to the book and Sherlock in equal measures, when Sherlock finally made a small sound in his throat. "Exactly what is this plan of yours?"

++

"God, my heart's pounding."

"Good, it's a sign of life, actually."

Small frown. "You know what I meant."

"Of course I do. While you throw the word idiot in my direction with regularity, it's not always the case."

"What's your timetable here?" The diction was tight, nervous. "How long do I have?"

"The journey of a thousand miles ..." John said, proffering the beginning of a quote and leaving it hang.

John was somewhat surprised when Sherlock finished the quote. "... begins with a single step." Sherlock's voice was uncertain, stressed.

Smiling, John shrugged. "Relax. How long do you need?" They were still in the sitting room, coats out and ready, awaiting a driver that John'd requested from Mycroft.

++
I can send someone tomorrow. Where to? Your text failed to mention your destination. MH

Hospital. Routine blood work.

A courier should be sufficient instead. MH

No, he's going to have blood drawn at the hospital.

Are you sure that's wise? MH

John grinned to himself, knowing there would be something of a challenge, a questioning of his judgment, and he was glad he'd considered it. He scrolled through his camera roll, found the photo of the signed contract, texted it back.

He'll be there as you requested. MH

I should mention we might not get it done tomorrow. Might require a return trip or two.

Ah, the exposure therapy you'd mentioned. MH

Yes.

I hope you know what you're doing. MH

In his mind, John's text would have read, That makes two of us.

++

Sherlock had been tense the whole ride in the car, but as the hospital sign came into view, it got worse. Much worse. John slid over slightly, just a few inches closer in the back of the car until they were side-by-side. "You're all right. You've got this."

"This was easier in the back of the ambulance."

"You were very ill then. Not terribly alert some of that time."

A purse lipped exhale, a glance at the car's interior. "No toxic chlorine gas in here, I suppose. Maybe a little vomiting would help --"

"Sherlock, no."

There was a breathy curse, and John saw, heard, and felt all the signs of Sherlock's stress, was a little concerned. "If today's too soon, or too much, you say the word, and we'll turn around."

Sherlock glanced quickly at him, surprised.

"You need to know that I might try to talk you out of it, a little, that we continue. But I'm not going to ask you to do something you're not ready for. It's for you to decide."

The next exhale seemed to be a little more calming as Sherlock heard John's words, could sense that he had a little control over the setting, the environment. The escape card. "All right."

John leaned forward, spoke quietly to the driver. "Parking spot, please. Bit away from the door but close enough to see, all right?" Sitting back, he took Sherlock's hand, not surprised to find it icy cold, trembling. "All right so far?"
The smile was as shaky as Sherlock's hand. Another forced exhale. "I'm trying to be." A quick smile, returned with a quick smile of John's. The honesty was, John thought, very much appreciated. There was a pallor, a bounding carotid artery positively pounding, tight lines about Sherlock's eyes, mouth, a worry to his eyes.

Solemnly, two pairs of eyes - dark and pale - locked onto each other, searching for and finding support, encouragement, togetherness. "Will you get offended if I remind you to take a deep breath?"

"Yes. No more D words."

Smirk, both of them. John squeezed his hand loosely. "Done. Don't want to deprive you of your delight in how disastrous my discussion can be ..."

"Oh god, stop now." The smile was a little more natural, then, as the driver manoeuvered into a parking space as John had requested. "Here? Really?" Sherlock looked around, the hospital building looming across the parking lot.

"You're safe."

"You might not be." There was a hint of impropriety, the faintest, briefest smile where Sherlock's eyes sparkled at John. It was quickly replaced with concern again, of anxiety.

John was pleased, even at the transient sense of humour. "Behave." A coping skill.

"Or else, what?" Quick as a flash, the snarkiness was there again and gone. "You'll do what?"

"Nothing that would excite you. Calm yourself."

Steadily, Sherlock raised his head a little, looked right back at John. "I guess that is rather the point of all this." An exaggerated breath, a nervous roll of his shoulders.

"You're doing well."

"Yes, I'm doing a fantastic job of sitting in a parked car in a car-park. Someone notify the authorities, I think I need a commendation."

"This is not a small thing for you. Don't negate the significance." Sherlock looked as if he had more to say about it, shrugged, and then looked down at his hands. John kept going. "You were edgy even thinking about coming over here. And that's the point, as you said, to be calm with repeated exposure, doing a little more each time. And there is no timetable. If it takes a week to get you inside the doors, so be it."

"Waste of time."

"Not if it works."

"So this is it?"

"Not exactly." John had done quite a bit of reading, some research, but it had been a long time since he'd developed his own programme. "Some practitioners add medication, and some try for systematic desensitisation. There are theories about response extinction, and escape response retraining." He acknowledged that Sherlock wasn't a typical patient, had a multitude of factors that had brought them to this place, and that even for him to be sitting in a car where they were was an accomplishment. "I kind of thought you and I would improvise. Make it up as we go along."
"What kind of doctor are you?" There was a rolling of the eyes and a haughty purse of the lips. "Make it up as we go along?"

"I'd be mildly delusional to think anyone else's methods would work with you, necessarily, wouldn't you agree?"

"You're going rogue." Sherlock shifted in the seat. "I think I like that."

++

The following day, they were back in the car-park, a few spaces closer to the door, and Sherlock was quieter this time. Not wanting to press his luck, John offered Sherlock a bottle of water. When he tried to refuse, John nodded his head at it. "A few sips, please."

"Not thirsty."

"Then open the bottle anyway and pretend."

Sherlock seemed inclined to continue fussing, and John marveled yet again at what hills and battles Sherlock seemed ready to die on. Surprisingly, though, he did then as John had instructed. Recapped, set aside. "There, happy?"

"Of course I am. It's my baseline temperament." John smiled over at Sherlock, a dare and a challenge issued.

"No it's not. Satisfied maybe, at least some of the time, but not happy." He engaged, watching John with a knowing grin, a challenge back at him.

Ignoring the comment for the moment, John leaned forward to tap the back of the driver's shoulder. Wordlessly, a book was handed over his shoulder, Treasure Island, that they'd been picking up from time to time. The driver then, leaving the car turned on for the heat to stay running, left the vehicle.

"He's coming back soon?" Sherlock asked, quick, low, a furrow on his brow as the door latched behind the driver.

The driver tapped his hand on the top of the car as he walked off.

"Where's he going?"

"Gone to wait inside for a bit." John said slowly, quietly. "Would you like to join him?"

"No. No. Absolutely not."

"Okay."

"Are you going inside too?"

"No. My place is here with you."

Sherlock stared through the car window to see their driver disappear into the building, turned anxious eyes back to John.

Though John did not utter the words aloud, he made a slow gesture of a deep breath in, deep breath out. Sherlock didn't acknowledge it, but he did in fact breathe a few times in sync with John.
"Okay, that's fine. He'll be along in a few minutes, or sooner if we call him."

Sherlock looked uncertain.

"We're not trapped here. It's all right." John waited, watched Sherlock try to steady his breathing. There was a timid nod, and John allowed himself to feel a little relief. Settling more comfortably into the seat, and hoping he came across more casual than he was feeling, John opened the book to where they'd left off last evening. "You ready?"

"Not especially." With an unsteady hand, Sherlock pressed into his belly, inhaled, held the breath in a few seconds, exhaled shakily.

"Have another sip."

"I am quite on to your tricks, incorporating the bloody D of drink water into this outing."

"And you just took a very deliberate deep breath, little biofeedback technique, so keep your fussing to a minimum please."

"I did n--" and then Sherlock realised quite apparently that he had indeed done what John had said, and groaned a little.

John chuckled faintly. "As I've said before, I don't care what anyone calls it if it helps, even a little. You can fuss all you want." With a small clear of his throat, he began to read again, and Sherlock did indeed take another sip from time to time as John meandered slowly into the next chapter of Treasure Island.

The driver was back, as pre-arranged, and John finished the section they'd been reading. "That's good for today, yeah?"

Sherlock looked troubled. "This is ridiculous."

"What is?"

"That just sitting here is giving me such symptoms."

"You have little control of it." John set the book aside. "But I do think that tomorrow, I'm going to push you, just a little, safely, same rules, okay? But I think you need to see some progress. For a lot of people, the anticipation is harder than the actual thing they're worried about. So having this hanging over your head isn't helpful at all."

John placed his hand reassuringly on Sherlock's knee, patting a bit. Sherlock looked away, out the window until he saw the hospital. John watched him swallow hard, several times, and take a shuddering breath. He gave one single nod.

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"So what's the plan?" Sherlock worried at his lower lip as he waited for for John to answer.

"Well, obviously we're not going to the outpatient laboratory department yet."

"Thank god."

"Soon, though."

Sherlock looked away, fingers clenching in his lap, a bit of a shiver at the mere suggestion.
They were in the car already, almost in sight of the hospital. "I thought we'd get dropped off at the door, go in, to the coffee shoppe just off the lobby inside the front doors, maybe sit for a few, have coffee if you want, and leave."

"No. I can't. I'll be sick."

"You can do this."

"I swear John, I'm nauseous, and the last thing I want to do is..." he gestured, making it obviously apparent that vomiting was very high on his list of fears for the moment.

"I know. You won't." The car approached the main doors. "But we're not going to debate this, or overthink it. You and I are getting dropped off, and you and I are walking in together. No problem."

"I don't think..." he let the sentence drift away.

"If we have to, we can turn around. But listen, we're going inside, all right? I'll help you."

An absolutely frigid hand grabbed John's in a vicelike hold of desperation, but John thought it a good sign, a commitment of sorts. The car halted, in park, and the driver appeared, opening the door between Sherlock and the main door, so that John was behind him, encouraging him with both words and a touch of his hand between Sherlock's shoulder blades. Sherlock hadn't moved, however, still in the back seat of the car, balking.

With two warm hands, John reached out to turn him slightly there in the depths of the car. He took Sherlock's face between his fingertips so that they were eye to eye, and Sherlock was paying attention. "Eyes on me. You're safe." Between John's hands, he could feel Sherlock trying to wrench his head away and out of John's gaze. "No, say it, repeat this, 'I'm safe.'" Sherlock's jaws clenched, John could feel it. "Don't drag this out longer, Sherlock. Say it, come on."

He complied, though it was in an uncomfortable, whispered voice.

Immediately, John smiled. "Good job."

The wary expression looking back at him was unconvinced.

"Feel things, right now. Your heart pounding. A sign of life, remember?" No smile, but John was okay with that. He let his fingers brush over Sherlock's high cheekbones, sliding a little. "Feel my hand here, I'm not going anywhere. Dry mouth. Safe." John dropped his hands, nodded toward the open car door, then nudged at his back, gently prodding, staying ridiculously close to him as they stepped from and exited the car. "Be mindful, you're in charge here." They stood by the car a moment, and John took a few steps toward the hospital, close enough that he could still have reached back to tug at Sherlock. But he didn't need to, and they fell into step together, entering the doors, walking into the lobby. John had been prepared to need to take Sherlock's hand, but was hopeful - and pleased - that it hadn't been necessary. Sherlock walking on his own legs, under his own direction, was infinitely better.

The coffee shoppe was not crowded, as John had chosen the time as carefully as he could, and he approached the barista, ordered two coffees. Shortly, John had carried both to a close table, and they were seated across from each other. Sherlock's entire being was quiet, introspective, and John sipped his coffee while Sherlock understandably ignored his own. "Hey," he finally said, and Sherlock looked up tentatively at him. "You're doing very well."

"Mindfulness?" He tossed John's earlier word back at him. "Seems not helpful."
With a smile, John let his foot come up against Sherlock's leg under the table, tapped his foot a few times for the contact sensation, and set his coffee down. "It's ultimately a good thing. Beneficial. Not to completely tune out all your responses, but lean into them a little. You're uncomfortable, but you're still here, and in a little while, we'll get up and walk back to the door, get in the car."

A small snuffle of a laugh, the lopsided smile that Sherlock probably didn't know he had. "I'm ready," he breathed quietly, "can we go now?"

John watched carefully, looking for additional signs of distress and finding none before asking, "Do you really need to?" John's hand slid along Sherlock's upper arm, a squeeze of encouragement. "Really?"

Small frown, a licking of his lips. "I suppose not."

"Good man." A bit later, "That was a costly admission, wasn't it? That you didn't need to leave right away?"

"I think I'd like to change my answer."

Their eyes met again, John's sparkling and Sherlock's tolerant. "Coffee's pretty good. You might enjoy it."

++

In his office at the Met, Greg Lestrade assembled the paperwork, the few details, the property list, the report from the consignment store owner. It wasn't much as far as strong evidence went, but it had been enough to rattle the man, convince him to utter a confession. A judge had sentenced him, the thief turned killer, to lengthy prison time. The violin had been secured and returned to the man's distant relatives. One of them, a nephew apparently, who not only taught violin but played with a small string ensemble from time to time in smaller venues, occasionally right there in the greater London area. He'd been quite grateful for the instrument being returned, and had made some off-hand comment about hopefully using it from time to time in his performances, as a tribute to his uncle. Greg tagged the file as solved, added his final signature to the front cover, remembering the detail - the violin - from the still unknown stranger that led to the killer's discovery. He drove by that section of town from time to time, could still recall the knitted cap, the sadness of it all.

But still, solved. At least they knew what happened to him. And that, according to the random stranger who'd been at the scene then run away, who'd played the pivotal role in the missing violin, that provided the connection to justice. Probably just a transient drug addict who'd loosely befriended the homeless though musically inclined man. Oh well, probably long gone. Family notified, property returned. The nephew had actually been glad to hear the stranger's report that his uncle had been still actively playing it, finding enjoyment in it, up until the time he died.

Case closed. The file went in, the drawer slid shut. Out of sight, and out of mind.

++

The next few outings, as John suspected, saw lots of progress. Once Sherlock had accomplished something, and enjoyed the feeling of mastery and affirmation, the power dynamic he could have over his surroundings and responses, he got hungry for more success.

The next visit to the hospital, John led him to the outpatient registration area so he could see the check-in procedure, the various steps of the flow of the department. There was a registration clerk
he would have to see, have a wristband applied, paperwork collected, then another waiting area before being taken to the phlebotomy accessioning area. They stood and watched for a few moments, watching groups of people arrive, and the patients being taken through the door one at a time, to return minutes later, usually adorned with gauze and tape over an apparently successful lab draw.

"John?"

Sherlock's voice was low, a little worried, and John could see that he was contemplating the door that separated the waiting room from the depths of the department. He'd been expecting the concern and was glad Sherlock'd considered it prior to the actual time they would be there to get blood drawn. "You're wondering if I'll be able to go in with you."

"Yes."

"Would you prefer I go along, into the back with you, when it's your turn?"

"Yes."

"Then let's make sure that happens. Let me confirm with the receptionist there at the window, all right?"

Which he did, and was told it was absolutely fine.

So the next day, when they returned, John accompanied Sherlock through the doors of the hospital, past the coffee shoppe, and Sherlock made it through the registration procedure with quiet anxiety, glancing at John often and fidgeting from time to time. Together, they took adjacent chairs in the phlebotomy department waiting room. John hoped it wouldn't be long, knowing that the anticipation was indeed an enemy. Sherlock bristled and stiffened each time the receptionist opened the door, clipboard in hand, to call a name.

Finally, the door opened, "Holmes?" No one, including Sherlock, looked up at her. John found himself wishing that he'd called ahead to explain they might need a bit more patience, understanding. "Holmes? Is there a Holmes here?"

He caught her eye then, nodded slowly, hoping she'd get the hint. He leaned a little closer to Sherlock. "Ready?"

A shaky breath, the clenched jaw, arms crossed in front of him with hands folded tightly against him, very close to actually shivering. A faint whisper, "No."

"I think you can do this." No response. "I'm going with you, remember?" The leather shoe began to tap a series of rapid drumbeats against the lino. "If you're ready, now's the time." John stood then, reached a hand down as it to help Sherlock out of the chair. "We can do this," he said quietly under his breath, for Sherlock alone. The receptionist, as well as the smattering of those still waiting, all watched as Sherlock, tight and tense and silent, stood up, completely ignoring John's hand, moving toward and then through the open door.

The back of the department was a short hallway to a special chair, and when John saw it, he grew especially concerned. There was a padded armrest that came down in front of the patient, so that both arms could be easily assessed and for support while the blood was being drawn. To the technician, he was ready to request a variance from their usual procedure, but Sherlock sat in the open indicated chair, lowered the armrest himself, and willingly held out his arm for the blood draw. The phlebotomist had looked briefly at John upon seeing some of the antecubital scarring still evident, but then proceeded to competently and confidently obtain the lab sample on the first
draw. She looked up. "That's it, have a nice day," then hurried them both back out the door.

Retracing their steps, they passed outpatient registration, the coffee shoppe, and left the hospital building to find Mycroft's driver who was waiting patiently by the car's open rear door. Not a word was exchanged, nor was it necessary, as one of them was wearing a wristband and a gauze, and both were sporting matching, easy, satisfied smiles.

++

The following morning, a courier knocked on the door. The delivery for Sherlock was handed over after a signature, which he held up to his ear to ensure it wasn't ticking while John watched, grinning at his antics, amused.

A mobile phone, which had been powered up and configured. It had only been in Sherlock's hand for a few minutes when it sounded with the incoming alert sound of a thunder clap and lightning strike. Mycroft's already set incoming text tone, apparently, Sherlock said with a roll of his eyes. He turned the screen so John could read the message.

**I expect you know what to do - and what not to do - with this.**

Sherlock's fingers flew in response, an outgoing whoosh. **Piss off.**

Sherlock sent the text, then held it out so John could read it. "Not very nice."

An annoyed shrug. "He'd wonder if it was even me if it was anything but rude, otherwise."

John smiled, shaking his head. "Here's your next text then: John says thanks."

Moments later there was another thunder and lightning sound. Sherlock turned the phone around so John could see.

Instead of the text John had dictated, Sherlock had improvised. **John says piss off too.**

Mycroft had replied, **Tell your doctor good luck. And you're welcome.**

++

The day had begun with faxed lab work results, a moderate increase in Sherlock's haemoglobin and haematocrit. "Just going to take time, then," John assured him. "That, and continuing to stay active, build up your ..." John caught sight of what Sherlock was busy with. "What the hell are you doing?" From the kitchen table, Sherlock looked up at him.

"Tobacco ash, John." There was the flick of a lighter, a few leaves ignited over one of the plates from the kitchen cupboard. "It burns differently, depending on type, age, dryness, and age of the plant."

"Where did you get it?"

"I ordered it yesterday. The delivery came while you were in the shower."

"Mycroft's credit card?"

"Of course."

"Next day delivery?"
"Obviously rushed, yes."

"What else did you purchase?"

Sherlock pushed a few buttons on his mobile, handed it out, "That's it. Feel free to check. I'm sure Mycroft is monitoring not only the phone, but his credit card, and would have already been in contact, or worse, over here if there'd been something amiss."

He considered the safety of incinerating things inside the flat, and the mess there in the kitchen already, thought about restricting the activity, and could indeed see Sherlock gearing up for resistance. "Probably wise to open a window, yeah?" which he said, surprising Sherlock quite a bit, and then moved to accomplish it. "So, is that whole leaf tobacco?"

The smile that lit up Sherlock's face, the sparkle of his gray-blue eyes (reflecting the dress shirt he was wearing, apparently, John thought), and the resultant excited tirade on the various types of tobacco plants, nicotine content, their products, their growing patterns, and the rest of the morning passed with relative ease. "A new interest, or is this something you've always wondered about?"

"Oh come on, I realise you felt the need to open the window, but this was as close as I could get to actually lighting up a cigarette as I thought I could get away with."

"Well, please don't light anything else on fire. Curtains, table, the flat in its entirety, actually, including your fringe, anything other than ..." and John watched as Sherlock reached out for a very long fibre that was next to him at the table, obviously from his violin bow, and lit it. "Sherlock."

"Oh come on, these are harmless."

"No, that is flammable. Tobacco leaves, I sort of understand." He stood watching a moment. "But I'm a little disappointed in you."

He looked affronted. "Why?"

"Where's your notebook? Findings of experiments, record-keeping. Come on, keeping track of results?" John nodded at the microscope then. "Can you make slides out of the ash?"

"Never tried. Don't much see the point."

"Well, if you're going to the trouble to order it, study it, and burn it, seems you could ...

"You'd need an electron microscope to ..." and his conversation went in a different direction then.

John had to interrupt quite emphatically for dinner, but managed to convince him to stow everything away so they could actually enjoy dinner at the table. A short walk afterward, and Sherlock, tired, settled on the couch in front of the news while John cleaned up from dinner. He'd just sat down and picked up his book when Sherlock started having a conversation with the news reporter on the telly. The report was a local crime, with a couple of people being interviewed, and a plea from one of the victims for assistance, for closure, for resolution. The reporter had just said that hopefully now there would be more leads forthcoming, that more information would help police solve the mystery.

"No, it won't." And then Sherlock muttered something else under his breath, eyes closed again. John heard the weak voice, turned down the volume on the telly "What was that?"

They discussed the headline from the segment on the news, an active, ongoing case that had been...
in the newspaper the day before. John sipped his usual after-dinner tea, while Sherlock expounded onto the story. Sherlock had latched onto one of the details, something about a missing person, a missing tool and a neighbouring backyard shed, the fact that the police were idiots, and John followed along only to make sure Sherlock was thinking clearly.

"What are you talking about?" John set down the tea. "That doesn't necessarily mean anything, that detail."

"Of course it does. The fact that these people reported the robbery and insisted on this ridiculous detail. A green ladder is the key. It's obvious."

"Not to me. And apparently not to the Met."

He reiterated. "They're idiots." He explained why, with liberal use of various derogatory adjectives, to the point where John finally'd had enough.

Holding up a hand to get Sherlock to stop his tirade for a moment, he said, "I suppose we should report this. There was actually a request for the community to get involved if they had more information. I think there was a tipline, even." At the end of the reporter's segment, long gone now, there had been a phone number posted.

"I've called the desk once before, a long time ago. They never took my information down. Never even put my call through."

A smirk, a shaking of his head. "Let me guess, were you insulting? Impolite?" John was just shy of actually laughing at Sherlock's shocked expression.

A huff of annoyance. "It was a waste of time."

Scrolling and searching on his mobile, John found the number quickly, and dialed before he could change his mind. Given that it was late, there was only a voicemail option, which was actually going to be easier to explain. And easier, when they listened to the message, to simply delete it, if Sherlock was correct. He left his name, number, the information that Sherlock had shared, and rang off.

"Waste of time," Sherlock prophesied again. "I guarantee it."

++

Chapter End Notes

So yes, there's more fanart. This one takes my breath away. It is tenderness and absolutely everything I love about John Watson. It is out of the endoscopy scene in chapter 12. I will eventually put the amazing-ness at the end of that chapter. But for now, I hope you enjoy it as much as I am

Endoscopy suite snuggles!

So while, as Sherlock insisted, the Three D's of helping manage addiction issues (Delay, Distract, Decision), some people, as John insisted, do find a program like that helpful in short term coping. There are a lot of programs, many options and strategies.

Exposure Therapy is a well known means to deal with anxiety, PTSD, fear
Exposure Therapy is a well known means to deal with anxiety, PTSD, fear confrontation, or other situations while assuring a safe environment for the patient. It should only be attempted under direction of a skilled practitioner.
Connections

Chapter Notes

Things might be settling, and they both begin to look to the future.

Enter the presence, influence, and opportunity offered by Greg Lestrade.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John awoke early one morning to the sound of Sherlock's foot touching the carpeted floor. Opting to not call him out on it immediately (though he knew letting Sherlock think he got away with something would absolutely need to be remedied before much time passed), he held still while Sherlock noiselessly - or close to it - left the bedroom. Quietly then, he slipped out of bed himself, noting that Sherlock had bypassed the loo and headed toward the sitting room. John wondered if it was to surf his mobile, do some research on it perhaps, as he'd instituted a no-mobiles-for-patients rule in the bedroom. He was firm, keeping his own only in case of emergency or as an alarm, and Sherlock hadn't fussed terribly about the restriction.

Sherlock seemed more aimless than intent on something, and he approached the window overlooking the street, the light peeking in and illuminating his profile and his curls in the faint, blue hue of the streetlamps. An exaggerated sigh, a few more steps, restless, a slouching down in the overstuffed chair, a defeated posture.

"I know you heard me."

John smiled a bit in the dark room, leaned a shoulder against the wall. "Light sleeper."

"So I keep finding out."

Their voices were hushed, gentle, respectful of the hour and their collective moods. "Feeling all right?"

Sherlock's eyes closed as his head tipped back. "God please, not another set of vital signs." John would have chuckled but for Sherlock's obvious discouragement. That, the overarching negativity, and the snarl.

"No, think this is beyond the scope of what that would tell me, was preferring you'd just talk to me about what's wrong rather than me try to suss it out."

"Nothing's wrong." Not another muscle moved, his head back, body quiet.

"Doesn't seem everything's quite right though, either," John suggested, attempting to open a door, "from over here anyway."

"No."

"Anything specifically on your mind?"

He let the silence momentarily hang over them, and just when John was thinking he'd probably keep quiet, he took a breath and said, "I'm just kind of ... lost." The voice was young, sad.
"I know. I can see it. And hear it."

"And I can't sleep."

"For some reasons, things always seem terrible then. Middle of the night, when everyone but you is asleep, yeah? I know, it's awful."

++

From within the regular ward of the military hospital, John resolved not to put the call light on. Let the nurses, aides, techs care for the really sick or injured patients. The pain from deep within his chest was on multiple levels, even though it had been over five days since the gunshot, his injury, three days since moving out of the acute care bed, his chest tube having been pulled yesterday. The pain kept changing, morphing, grabbing. He could feel the surface nerve endings lighting up on his skin, where there was the puncture of the bullet, the sutures to close it, the surgical stab wound where the chest tube had been, the itchy abrasive sensation of the tape holding his dressings in place. Deeper in, the gratings of rough rib edges, the fracture lines not displaced except when he took a deep breath. No x-ray was required for him to be vividly aware of the exact locations of the ribs - three of them, one broken in two places. Deeper in, although the lung itself had no pain receptors, the pleural space certainly did. Inflammation from traumatic injury, pulmonary effusions and edema from bruised tissues, the atelectatic changes further down in his left chest, the muscles positively **screaming** when he did his breathing exercises.

*Ten times every hour while awake,* they'd said, usually with a tap on the top of the spirometer. Seems he was mostly awake for one reason or another.

The nurses asked how he was doing with his incentive spirometer. John wanted to throw it across the room - challenging task with his dominant arm firmly velcroed into an immobiliser - and stomp on it. Except that the effort would have only aggravated his pain. He wanted to watch while *someone else* threw it across the room and stomped on it.

He wanted to watch while *someone else* threw it across the room and stomped on it.

But he made something of an effort, best he could, to steel himself against the pain, use the damn pneumonia preventative device. Well he knew the science, the medical necessity. That collapsed parenchymal lung tissue could breed more bacteria, more infiltrates, less oxygen, less alveolar recruitment - and pneumonia could be a killer, even of a relatively healthy person let alone someone like him, injured, stressed, debilitated, undernourished a bit from the injury.

*Want a little something for pain, Watson? Then you could do your I.S., maybe it wouldn't be quite as bad.* The staff tried to help. *Maybe we should get out of bed again, we could sit in the chair, we could go for a short walk soon?* John wanted to take their imperial 'we' and never hear it again.

Just the milder stuff, John thought. Maybe it will take the edge off. A hard swallow, a gut-level sensation of having failed at his self-imposed call bell moratorium, he pressed the nurse call.

Rather quickly, there was an aide, who relayed the request, and eventually John was brought medications, two tablets and some tepid water, left to himself. He was, now, unfortunately, wide awake. And alone in his room with his thoughts and his discomfort and his insomnia.

The sounds of the hospital at night, though not as noisy as during the day, were somehow worse. It was a reminder of his physician role, surgeon. Of the men he'd worked on, worked with. Of those from that final mission, the sounds of discomfort, pain, injury. The sounds of the dying. The sounds that weren't made by the ones already dead.
In the hospital, more sounds. Moans of those injured, suffering, the crying out of the occasionally confused or disoriented, the busy sounds of rubber-soled shoes hustling to meet needs, tend the wounded, comfort the upset. There had been an emergency the night before, room across the hall. *Epinephrine one milligram, given, where's the damn defibrillator, still in vfib, shock delivered, resuming CPR, the IV line blew, trying IO now, shit, we're losing him, his family is due to arrive tomorrow, Jesus Christ, shock him again...* and the sounds continued, despite John turning the telly on to cover the drama across the hall. And the pillow that he'd pulled over his head. Usually, though, the noises in the ward were just sad, uncomfortable, and drawn out at night. Amplified, less distraction, more thinking.

Mostly, John used the incentive spirometer when he was trying not to think, to give his mind something less terrible to dwell on rather than to wonder about his young patient, to second-guess his actions, to dwell on things that couldn't be changed. He picked up the mouthpiece, don't picture his fearful, deep brown eyes. Slow steady inhale, stop remembering the surgical suite where he'd loved what he'd been doing. Bellows rising to 1100-1200-1250, excruciating agony and grating - *dear lord, the actual sensation of bone-on-bone* - along fresh, tender, painful fracture lines. Cough triggered with the deep breath, a stuttering grip over his entire left side, the sharp pang of pain, then the faint sensation of mucous moving in his larger airways, the intended effect.

He was so *tired*. Seemed forever since he'd had any restorative sleep.

Slow inhale, bellows rising, not as far this time, barely 1000. But another cough. Mobilisation of secretions. Pain scale, ten out of ten. Twelve, actually, and he meant it even as he knew, as a provider, that ten meant ten and no higher was possible. Faces in his memories, young Afghan eyes looking to him fearfully, trusting, counting on him, blurred as his eyes smarted. Passive exhale only to do it again, stop imagining the smug arrogant face of the sergeant. Slow steady inhale, bellows rising ...

Memories crowded out with each breath. It mattered less that he was awake and mostly alone in a morose hospital ward. Pain scales, and spasms, and thoughts that mostly, pneumonia would be a terrible way to go.

Mostly.

Ten times every hour while awake. For him, two hundred and forty times a day.

++

"I never slept great before. But now, couple hours at a time is all I can ..." Sherlock's voice trailed off again. Despite the calm of the room, even his whisper seemed harsh.

"I know, I hear you." He considered the pain of the man across the room, the timing of when to approach, when to turn off the clinician and be more of a friend, a confidante, a coach. Not yet. "But nothing's hurting, no frightening thoughts, no shakes?"

"Low level headache, but that's been pretty constant, really. Not awful."

"I don't mean this as a platitude, but these things take time."

"Yes that was a platitude, and yes, I know."

John let the silence reign, wondering if Sherlock would say anything further, elaborate, offer insight to his angst. For a while, he continued as he'd been, eyes closed and head back. But after a bit, he turned his head, restless, itchy. He stood again, moving toward the window. Whether he was watching something or not, John wasn't sure. A car drove by slowly, a dog barked off in the
distance, and a gust of wind were the only sounds for a while. Eventually, after another sigh, Sherlock turned his face upward within the confines of the window, drawing John's eye to his silhouette - cheekbones, fringe, laryngeal prominence of his throat. "Pretty outside. Moonlight, I mean."

"Little hazy," John said, coming across the room to join Sherlock at the window. "Not quite a full moon tonight." Without much conscious effort, John's hand ghosted to the middle of Sherlock's back, warm fingers spreading out, the faint touch and connection of humanity, of it's okay, I'm here.

Sherlock wriggled under his touch, pressing a bit into it. Inhale, exhale, thanks for joining me, I'm glad for it. "You know the word lunatic came from scientists long ago observing human behaviour being affected by the phases of the moon."

"I do. It's a myth." He chuckled then, remembering the wards at night when he was doc on call, and that the nurses swore the patients were crazier during a full moon, the fighting more intense, the sleep patterns and mentation sometimes just off at that time.

"Yet still the word remains."

"I remember reading an article in school about how they were trying to link the tides to human behaviour related to phases of the moon, given that the human body is something like sixty percent water." John and Sherlock both seemed to be absently watching, taking in the mostly empty street, the moon, the faint mist in the air, the still night. "As if the brain was affected by tides." Somewhere in the distance, there was an electric click of a heating unit, transformer or solenoid, circuit connecting. "It's hard sometimes to be able to turn off your mind, to simply go to sleep."

Sherlock turned then, deliberately and slowly, to stare at John. John's hand was warm, tingly, still, just barely present against Sherlock's back. The blue-hued moonlight through the window barely lit eyes that sparkled darkly, bed-mussed hair, the faint reflection of teeth behind a not-quite smile. "If I promise not to get into trouble, you can go back to bed, if you want."

"I was actually thinking we could get dressed, go for a walk."

"In the middle of the night?" Sherlock did seem quite perplexed. "Some might call you a lunatic." His brows wraggled at the word choice, challenging John to disagree with him.

"Why not?" At first, Sherlock thought John was teasing. But John held still, hands outward and palms up continuing his words.

"Because it's ..."

"The middle of the night? Who cares?"

"You're making this up again, as we go along?" A small chuckle despite the late hour and the somewhat distressing situation. "Going rogue again, Dr. Watson."

"The first rule of handling Sherlock Holmes." He stared back at John, an eye narrowed and his mouth ready to argue. "No, truly, Mycroft told me."

"You're full of shit, you know."

"Might actually be the only rule."

The slow, charming smile that broke out on his face was then much more genuine. "Handling?"
he asked, the insinuation quite apparent given the grin and the emphasis of the word. Arching his back and pressing into John's touch, Sherlock wriggled so that John's hand was a bit lower down on the area of his back as they stood at the window. Neither was looking out any longer, however. "What else?"

Grinning back, John shook his head and let his hand fall away. "Easy there, you know what I mean." A snort of disagreement, so John continued, "Clothes. Shoes. A walk. I would imagine the gardens are pretty interesting this time of night." A few blocks away, a tiny, walled-in pocket park of sorts, John thought, close enough to Sherlock's flat.

"Gardens?" he asked, disdainfully. "Ugh, no."

"Where would you rather go, then?"

Which was how, a half hour later, they were walking slowly in the direction of the Whitechapel district discussing Jack the Ripper's early victims, something that Sherlock had apparently been interested in as an adolescent. He speculated on how the crimes could have been solved with better investigation, more detail, more bystanders paying attention.

"Know what else would have helped?" John asked, leaning close to him, even though there was no one else who with the slightest chance of overhearing.

"Me."

"I was thinking CCTV or the internet."

Neither hurried, and Sherlock's pace was almost painfully slow, but they kept moving for the most part, stopping occasionally to rest, regroup, or a couple of times to have a quick break on a park bench. John watched Sherlock carefully for signs of overdoing it, asked a few times if he needed to rest. Both of them knew Whitechapel was not going to happen, given their pace, but it had been at least something to talk about, a common theme. Neither of them had ever taken one of the Jack The Ripper walking tours, nor were they likely to, John thought, but it added to the conversation, that perhaps they could look into it, consider it.

"Mycroft can pay for us to have a bloody private tour, at this point."

"I'm going to have a hard time selling that as medically necessary."

Though they hadn't been outside all that long, the sky lightened as the sun began to peek up behind the city buildings. Sherlock made another scathing reference to the poor methodology of law enforcement at the time, the letters mailed to mock them all. "Idiots, I swear. They saw but did not observe."

John chuckled. "Maybe if they'd had a tipline ..."

"Which is pointless anyway."

"... and someone had called it in ...

"They'll not even listen to it."

"... they might have solved it."

"You're delusional." Sherlock was pretty emphatic about it now, and John opted to let it go so as to spare him the aggravation. He hoped that the fresh air, the increased activity, would benefit him when they returned to the flat. A nap certainly seemed more likely, so the less emotion, the better.
"They've surely deleted it, John." Just the previous evening, John had in fact called and left a message on a Tipline regarding a recent news case and the victim's - and the police - request for public help.

There was a rare car or pedestrian, a bit more traffic, early working hour commuters, as the day grew a few minutes older, and John tucked his hands back into his coat pockets against the damp chill. "Maybe. But I - we - haven't had coffee yet, so I'm excused from rational thought."

Sherlock slowed his steps again, and John could see his energy fading, strength and stamina melting away. His voice was even tired and lacking his usual volume and timbre. "I know a good doctor for your caffeine addiction problems."

"I'll be sure to get his name and number later. But come on, time to go back."

++

Baker Street, once they'd arrived, seemed welcoming and warmly cozy after their walk in the night air. It was, John thought - and glad for it - a haven from the difficulties Sherlock was facing, a place to relax and regroup.

"I'm exhausted now," Sherlock moaned. "Seriously. Done." Minimal movement, coat dropped off his frame onto the floor, the couch catching him as he crumpled into it.

"Farther than you've walked in a long time, I reckon." Briefly considering fussing about the long coat in a heap on the floor, or even leaving it where it had fallen, John quietly picked and hung it up next to his own.

"True. But still tired out of proportion ..." He didn't even finish his thought.

A bit of wrangling, Sherlock on the couch, John tucking a blanket over him, so tired that his eyes were barely open, though at the touch of the blanket his body leaned into John's caretaking. Almost immediately his breathing evened out, muscles relaxed, and he fell asleep, his body sinking into the cushions. John silenced his mobile, trading his shoes for slippers himself, turned himself diagonally into the corner of the chair, and figured a few minutes long nap wouldn't hurt anything.

The fresh air, the interrupted sleep, the nighttime excursion, and he did not awake to the silent vibration of his mobile.

John wouldn't have answered it anyway. It was a blocked number.

++

"I'm certain I have no idea," Mrs. Hudson's voice was higher pitched than usual, and the volume pushed into John's consciousness. Hallway, then definitely. There was a lower pitched, answering male voice, speaking quickly. It was such that John couldn't make out what he was saying.

Mrs. Hudson, "You could ring him again."

"I'm here now. Just a few questions is all." Not Mycroft's voice. No one he recognised.

"I really don't want you bothering him, bothering either of them, actually, after all ..."

"If you could show me up, then, that would be a good idea."

There were a few ascending footsteps. John stretched and leaned forward, his neck slightly sore
from his awkward position in the chair. A quick glance at Sherlock assured him that he was still asleep, hadn't stirred at all. The blanket rose and fell along with his chest, slow and even, and Sherlock's skin was a good colour, warmly pink, his face relaxed.

Pressing upright, standing quickly, John tucked his feet back into his slippers, rushed to the door in order to, hopefully, guard a little bit of Sherlock's much-needed rest. Opening the door, he brought his fingers to his lips, shushing the two people just beginning to come up the stairs. "Can we keep it down please?" he asked, taking in the bit of stress in Mrs. Hudson and the stranger half a step behind her.

The visitor was tall, lean, kind blue eyes, wearing a suit jacket, unbuttoned, his dress shirt open at the collar. A professional on a business visit, then perhaps. There was a seriousness to him, the way he carried himself, the confidence. His well-styled salt and pepper hair made him appear a bit older than he actually was. "Someone to see you," Mrs. Hudson said, unnecessarily.

"That's fine, Mrs. Hudson, don't trouble yourself to come all the way up."

"Thank you dear, hip's troubling me this morning."

"You should take it easy."

The tall man, even from the bottom of the stairwell looking up, stopped where he was. "I'm looking for John Watson."

"And who are you?"

"Does my answer determine whether you are or aren't John Watson?"

John was not actually in the mood for games of any sort. "It might." The bizarre meeting, the play, the tension, followed by the evasive and somewhat playful response, and then John chuckled, as did the stranger on the steps. Rather than give in with an answer, the confrontation eased with a smile and he added, even more amused there at the top of the stairs in his slippers, "Or it might not."

"I'm DI Greg Lestrade with the Met, investigations division."

"Then I might be John Watson." Behind him, there was the movement on the couch, the sound of cushion springs adjusting, of heavier breathing. He glanced inside to find Sherlock stirring, flipping over, pulling the blanket tighter under his chin. On steady feet, the DI ascended the steps to hand John a business card, which went right into John's pocket, and the two shook hands.

"Aren't you supposed to flash a badge or something?"

The amused look had spread to the DIs face. "Aren't you supposed to salute or something?"

John's first thought was that Mycroft had had a hand in this whatever except that he had in fact made a phone call the previous day. Choosing to keep conversation light, he smirked, "If you already know that, you probably also know I'm retired army, which makes us both civilians."

"Yes."

His voice was quiet. "You're here about the phone message."

A nod. "Couple of questions."

"Might as well come in, I guess," and John stepped aside to let the other man inside.
"I did try to call. Several times, had some business in the area, so I thought I'd come over."

"Resting, had silenced the mobile." He nodded, remembering that Sherlock had predicted it was a waste of time and would go nowhere. "But yes, right, the tip. The missing property case on the news."

The officer pulled out his notepad. "You're the one who called the tipline?" and when he nodded, he confirmed the phone number.

"Right."

"Dr. John Watson, according to a website search?" He glanced to the paper, "Private, Professional In-Home Medical Consultant?"

"Yes. My client." He angled his head at where Sherlock was sleeping. Or appeared to be so.

"Need to ask you a few things about how you came to know the information you'd called in regarding."

John glanced at the couch again, wondering if Sherlock was awake, listening. He didn't particularly wish to disturb him without good cause. "It was helpful then?"

"Solved the case, actually."

"Yeah, already? Good news, that," John said.

"Except for how you came to know it."

"Dear lord, what does it take to get any rest around here?" the lump on the couch grumbled, quietly menacing. "Shut up."

"Sherlock."

"Or get out. Now." These words were much clearer, delivered with more oomph. Definitely irritated - and awake - enough to speak clearly and loudly.

Apologetically, John looked from the DI to the couch, "Sorry, give me a minute," and he moved to perch on the coffee table opposite Sherlock's head. He knew Sherlock was tired, knew that his sleep had been interrupted and insufficient, and hoped a gentle approach might not agitate him further. He slid a hand to his arm, a centering, calming touchpoint, he wished anyway. In a low voice, "Hey, you might want to wake up for this anyway."

"Piss off." His voice was gruff, annoyed, and quietly indignant.

John glanced at the officer again, who was both entertained and slightly surprised at the interaction. "Sorry not exactly a good time."

"John," came another warning from the couch. Under John's hand still resting on his arm, he could feel a rumbling tremor, aggravation, a threat and a growl.

With Sherlock's eyes closed and his head turned away, John couldn't help the immediate reaction to Sherlock's whinging - a grin. He shrugged at the officer, who commiserated with a small smile and a return shrug of his own. "I can see that. Perhaps we could talk in the hall?" he suggested.

John knew exactly why he felt that way, and opted to draw it out slightly, with any good fortune to amuse Sherlock and allow him a few more moments to fully awaken. "Why?" he asked,
rhetorically. "I might have made the actual phone call, but that was not my information. It was not me who put it together."

John watched as Greg's mouth was already forming a response, a question - *then who was it?* - when Greg's eyes met his again, and John looked very pointedly, tipping his head to indicate his source - Sherlock. The question went unasked.

"Sherlock. There's someone here about the tip. DI Greg Lestrade." His body stilled completely, listening and motionless then from under the blanket. "About your tip."

One eye opened, blinked sharply, the rotation of cornea and pupil toward John. Checking for seriousness, for assurance of no, not kidding. "Really?" A hand on the couch, pressing upward so that Sherlock pushed himself to a sitting position, mostly. He still looked exhausted, and John could see the DI taking in the unkemptness, the age, the fact that John was there at all in his role.

Lestrade opted to cease towering over him, sat down in a close-by chair. Sherlock swung his feet to the floor then, and ran his fingers quickly through his hair though it left his curls still unruly. He brushed a hand over his face, willing himself to more full alertness. "Need to ask you a few questions, find out how you came to know ..." and the DI looked up from his notepad, then held where he was, mid-sentence, staring at Sherlock as if seeing him head on for the first time.

John, however, was watching Sherlock, who had a similar look of recognition about him. Nary a word was spoken initially, just a few moments of eye contact that led John to feel both uncertain and warily defensive at the same time. He opted to wait them both out.

Lestrade cleared his throat. "I've seen you before."

With a degree of snarkiness, Sherlock must've felt he had the upper hand. "Yes you have."

"Recently, late night?" he tilted his head, trying to figure it out. "Bar fight?"

Sherlock shook his head, positively gloating.

Lestrade was struggling, frowning, trying to remember as he looked intently at Sherlock. "Give me a minute, I'll think of it."

"Doubtful." Neither looked at John. "Though about what one would expect from an --"

"Stop right there," John interjected quickly, managing to interrupt the insult certain to follow. "Bit not good."

A few sighs, and Sherlock had no inclination of stating the connection, so Greg seemed to change gears, begin to move past that. "Name please?" Sherlock told him, and that association didn't jar loose any recall either. "I'm here to find out how you knew about the case, the missing property, the green ladder specifically." He looked back toward John, studying him, a casual question.

"Obvious. Neighbouring homes, hiding things in plain sight, a superstitious person would never walk under a ladder, therefore it could be none other than..." and Sherlock wandered down where his mind had obviously linked details released by the press, put it all together.

"How on earth could you have possibly known that?"

"Because you are all idiots."

"Sherlock," John said again, quietly.
Lestrade smiled, "Riiiiiight!" laugh lines developing as his eyes crinkled and a short chuckle at Sherlock's phrase. "I knew I'd ... That's where I remember you from." He sat taller in the chair, obviously pleased and smiling knowingly, very engaged now. "You probably don't remember."

"Of course I do."

"Yeah?" Greg still looked somewhat unsure.

"Look, I don't often have need to run from the police, but when I do, I remember it."

"So that's all, the old man and the stolen violin." A few scrawls on the notepad, biro clicked closed, both pocketed.

"Obviously."

"So," Lestrade began, taking a bit of a look around, considering the room, the time of day - nearly afternoon - with Sherlock still laying down, the entire presence of John there at all (and a reflection of his role). He seemed to see it all - the slippers, the meals, the fact that John was attentive and guarding. "You were definitely not well then." Although the DI continued to look at Sherlock, Sherlock on the other hand was mildly uncomfortable, unable to sustain eye contact at close range, and glanced at John seemingly for support. He was, John could see, worrying at his lip. John considered the dynamics at play, the possible threat Sherlock might've been feeling, and, protectively, he imagined stepping in, asking the DI to leave but held off until there was a legitimate reason. He knew timing was everything as Sherlock had to deal with something unexpected for them both. "It's nice," the detective continued, "to see that you're obviously doing better."

"Are we done here?" Sherlock asked, very closed again, flicking a switch on his demeanor, back to irritable and dismissive.

"I suppose." Lestrade looked between them, contemplative. "Solved the case. Not sure if you heard me say that."

A faint hum of acknowledgement.

"Confession, even, once he realised it had been connected, the ladder, the crime. Yes, solved." Lestrade seemed to be more curious, watching Sherlock, trying to get a read on him. Good luck with that, John offered silently. "Thanks for calling it in." This he directed to them both.

"Of course," John said quietly when Sherlock didn't respond.

Sherlock harrumphed, quiet, a bit of anxiety evident in his fidgeting and his body language, and Lestrade continued, "Clever, though, of you. Impressive. Not sure if it wasn't a large amount of luck, or a remarkably good guess."

"I never guess." Still dismissive, and cold. It wouldn't have surprised John if he'd lay back down, flopped on his side facing away from them both. Still he sat, eyes downcast.

John could see that the detective'd obtained what he'd needed, but wasn't in a huge rush to leave. "Well, thanks for stopping by," John began, wishing to move things along before any serious unpleasantness happened. Before Sherlock did move from aggravated to visibly upset.

"Yes, I guess that's ..." He stood up, and tugged at his coat. His gaze circled the room and he spied something, then he wandered over to the desk, where the violin case was open, the instrument sitting cross-wise over the top. Clearly it had recently been played. "Yours, Dr. Watson?" he asked, cheekily seeing Sherlock watching, guarding, ready to protect if need be.
John could see that Sherlock was very deliberately avoiding Lestrade's face, avoiding his gaze, though watching warily what was going on.

"No, that isn't mine," John said quietly.

Lestrade had been after Sherlock with the comment, anyway, smiled a little in triumph. "Ah. So that explains why you noticed."

John looked from one to the other again. A bit of a flush coloured Sherlock's face.

"That's why you were there in the first place."

"He was quite ... gifted."

Lestrade frowned, running a thumb very lightly along the strings and then up toward the fingering, the board. "The scroll, as I recall. You said the scroll was quite ... etched."

"Damaged, yes." Sherlock was uncharacteristically subdued.

"I remember that incident quite clearly now." Lestrade waited for Sherlock to respond, and when he didn't, he added, "I also remember that you were rather uncooperative that night. Ran off even."

"Got away from you, anyway."

"Some folks cooperate with the police." Greg spoke as blandly as he could. "Especially those who have nothing to hide."

"I might, as you mentioned, have been impaired. If I wasn't at the time, I certainly was after. But also, you were annoying me."

"You were upset about your friend."

"He wasn't my friend. I don't have friends."

++

Greg Lestrade only chatted another few minutes before eventually allowing John to usher him from the flat. They both listened to Greg's retreating footsteps, the closing of the door to the kerb, the sounds of a car driving away.

"I'm sorry," John began, not wanting to ignore whatever they'd been not talking about, "for whatever happened."

"Yes, well."

"Don't let it overshadow the fact that you figured something out. You heard him. Clever, he said."

Sherlock did then flop back to the couch, pull the blanket up around him again. As restless as he was, not a surprise that he couldn't stay covered. "Don't forget impressive."

"Well, yes, of course, impressive too."

"Shut up, John. It doesn't matter. He didn't matter. Nothing matters."

"Not true, and you know it." Sherlock was back on the couch, facing away from the door, shutting out everything and everyone. John lowered himself close enough to lay a gentle hand on
his arm, wanting the warmth and the sensation remind Sherlock that he was cared about. "You want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Well, if you ch--"

"When are you leaving?"

"What?"

"When are you leaving me?"

"Why would you ask that, first of all?" John knew Sherlock wouldn't answer that. "And second, I don't think you're ready. You are doing quite well, much better in truth, but we haven't even talked about --"

"You know what, never mind."

Rather than call his bluff, John set about to putting on coffee, making breakfast, and started to wonder how to prevent Sherlock from feeling abandoned when the time did come—eventually—for him to leave. It left him with a hollow, empty pit in his stomach.

++

Later that day, Sherlock was staring at his mobile, scrolling through heaven knew what. "Oh, that's rich," he said finally.

"Something you want to share?"

"It's you, you and your website advert. Your photo, for god's sake." Lestrade had mentioned it earlier, and Sherlock had apparently overheard it then, decided to do his own perusing.

"What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing. If you like false advertising."

"It's all true!" John said, trying to find some sort of passion in his voice without coming across angry. "Every word of that is tr--"

"Oh, please. You barely mention your military background --"

"Yeah, most people don't specifically want a drill sergeant, you know."

"-- and your biographical data is so benign that it doesn't even say much."

"Again, all true. Pardon me, yeah, for not wanting to come across as arrogant."

"But all that, the write up is fine, more or less. It's the bloody picture that caught my eye."

Picture? What picture? John angled his head, trying to remember anything even remotely remarkable about the photo. Nothing, he thought. "What's the matter with it?"

"Where are your reading glasses, yeah?"

"You're calling me out for that?"
"False advertising. You chose to wear them for marketing reasons, you think it makes you look more respectable." Sherlock was downright sassy. "Studious."

"I need them from time to time," he hedged.

"No you don't. You have a pair, that's different."

"I suppose, maybe that's true. Recommended to me by my website designer."

"Fake."

"Just let it go, all right? It's not like I promote myself as a senior physician with thirty years' experience. If people want to find a medical consultant, they have others to choose from, or other programmes. It's a small detail, I'll grant you..."

"They age you."

"They're respectable."

"I don't like them."

"I'm not re-doing it. If it bothers you, just stop looking at it." John good naturedly reached for Sherlock's mobile anyway, who pulled it back away from him, though tried no other evasive manoeuvres. "Why are you looking at it anyway?" John recalled that Lestrade had commented about his role, that there had been information available about John and his services. "Because that DI mentioned it?"

Sherlock held the phone away but his eyes met and held John's. Their proximity was near enough that their breathing was quite audible, chests moving, close enough that John could see the faintest green-gray flecks in Sherlock's eyes. "Curiosity of course. Funny what your profile says. And doesn't say." John heard the words, recalled that Mycroft had said something similar when they'd first met in John's office. Between his fingers, Sherlock waggled the mobile again. John thought about lunging for it again, and capturing it, decided to let it alone.

It did, however, get John thinking again about keeping Sherlock's mind engaged.

Later that night, while Sherlock was in the shower - briefly, door open of course, with John in near range of the door just in case - John sent off a short email.

++

Dear DI Lestrade

Thanks for your visit today. I hope it was helpful.

As you likely already know, my role as medical consultant tends to be rather unusual and involves getting quite familiar with those under my care. As such, I have a proposition for you. Can we meet to discuss it? It is regarding my current client, whom you met today, Sherlock Holmes. It might be a little unorthodox, unusual for sure, but I hope you will hear me out and give it serious consideration.

Day hours, I can come to your office; evening, I can meet you somewhere. I prefer not to meet at the flat on Baker Street. The reason will be clear once I've explained.

You already have my mobile number, am including it here again. Looking forward to talking with you,
Yours,

John Watson, MD

++

While the email was open, he happened to glance at the email still in his inbox from Mycroft, from so long ago. He perused it again, quickly. It triggered a couple of new ideas, things that Sherlock might like, that might be helpful. He opened a new window, set a bookmark to deal with later, and closed the laptop. Sherlock was still in the shower. And he was whistling.

Whistling.

++

"Molly's coming by late afternoon. I have an errand, and then I'll bring home dinner. Carryout. Indian tonight, I think." They'd spend the past few days simply trying to regain Sherlock's strength by staying more active during the day. There had been a lunch at Speedy’s, a walk here and there, tea with Mrs. Hudson, a little bit of violin (not nearly enough in John's mind) and a few chapters of Treasure Island. They'd done some shopping earlier that day, so it was unexpected, what John was telling him.

Sherlock was taken aback. "An errand." John nodded, waited. "You don't want to tell me more than that."

"I should think that quite obvious. If I wanted you to know, I would have elaborated."

"Yes, well. Enjoy the interview for your next patient, then."

"I can assure you, it's not that. Promise."

Sherlock stared at John, disbelieving. Evaluating and finding everything he saw deficient.

"Believe whatever you want. But I printed out something for you to look at. Either now or while I'm out. Might give you and Molly something to talk about at least." He set some folded papers down next to where Sherlock was sitting at the kitchen table, taking a break from the microscope but making notations in a notebook in careful, small hand.

"No."

"Sherlock."

"No thanks."

John chuckled at his ridiculous toddler-like petulance.

"I'm sure I'm not interested in whatever you want to show me."

"Have you always reacted like this, your whole life, to a really rather innocent suggestion? Shutting it -- no shutting people down without a consideration? Maybe it's something you might find interesting." A sneer, albeit a quiet one. "I would remind you, the concert ended up being not a bad outing for you. Perhaps you should give this a chance."

"Fine." The drawing out of the word let John know that it was anything but. Sherlock held out his hand, as if expecting John to then pick up the papers, which were very close to Sherlock's hand, and place them there.
John was sort of pleased at the audacity of the imperious request. Sort of. "I'm fairly certain you're quite capable, ta, of picking them up and reading them on your own."

++

Greg had wanted to meet at a pub a few blocks away, walking distance, and by the time John left Baker Street, he was ready to relax a bit. He'd had to fuss just a small amount at Sherlock, prompting the apology he'd warned him about that he was obligated to give Molly, which he finally but reluctantly did. He sternly issued a not-so-veiled threat that he was to be on his best behaviour. When Sherlock had raised an eye, sort of a gleeful challenge-accepted gleam to it, John clarified, "By my definitions, yeah." Molly looked on, her expression pleasant but sort of guarded, as if she was going to be watching Sherlock's every move that evening. "Shouldn't be long, Moll, ok? Reachable in an emergency." John tapped his mobile through his pocket, she nodded, and he was off. As he walked, he set a specific incoming text tone and was still grinning to himself when he'd set Molly's alert to the sound of a submarine dive.

The pub was not terribly full, a few patrons here and there, and he quickly spotted the DI at the bar opposite a football game on the telly. Quick, social greetings, and John ordered a pint and gestured to Lestrade to order one for himself as well. They'd chatted sports for a few, swapping a couple of stories from uni days, and John could feel himself relax a bit. The man was reasonable, good enough company, and sharply intellectual.

"So," John finally began, "thanks for meeting me, first off."

"Your email intrigued me."

"I'm asking a favour. One that will definitely require an open mind."

"I'm listening."

"As you know given my role as medical coordinator, I take a client, usually start off with very physical needs, detox, rehabilitation, and sometimes at that point, they return to whatever function they were at before." Greg was nodding, contemplative. "Sometimes it's then support groups, referrals to family counseling or career services. My present client seems to have few more considerations, some unique needs. And," John drew out the word while he searched for a blend of truth and tact, "not a lot of people skills," and at that they both grinned. "Yet," John amended. "But really highly intelligent, off the charts bright. Insightful. Analytical. A scary combination of perception and a complete lack of inhibition."

"With you so far. And not disagreeing, mind."

"He needs a bit of a challenge. A real challenge, not something contrived."

Quite a few questions must have flickered through Greg's consciousness, and with a questioning look, he motioned for John to continue, to explain, to answer the questions he hadn't yet verbalised.

"I am asking you to consider letting him at some of your old case files, perhaps, not necessarily active. Unsolved ones. See what his brain might uncover, for him to take a look at." John's mobile buzzed, not Molly's tone, and he nonchalantly glanced down at the text. Sherlock, of course, with a request for an immediate return phone call. "It could be beneficial to us both, for you, fresh eyes to take a look at things."

"I'm not saying no, not yet," Greg said. "I'd need to clear it with my sup."
"You probably haven't seen exactly what he can do, when he's cooperative, that is," John began, and Greg seemed to particularly react to that with a laugh. "He's really quite..."

The mobile buzzed again. Message from Sherlock. "I should get this, all right with you?"

"Of course. Got a story for you, when you're done, then, mate."

John excused himself from the table, dialing and then taking the call into a back hallway of the bar where he wouldn't disturb anyone else. "Yes?"

"I have an emergency."

John doubted that very much, and asked, "Does it involve a large fire or more than half of someone's circulating blood volume?"

"Not exactly."

"Go ahead."

"I need blueberries."

"What?"

"A carton of blueberries. We've been having a discussion on the merits of various foods, and Molly tells me that they are quite beneficial."

"So you want me to drop what I'm doing and go buy you a carton of blueberries?"

"Two."

"Sherlock. First off," and he took a deep breath, ready to give him several very valid reasons why his request was full stop unreasonable - and then he thought better of it. "Actually, no. This is not an emergency. I am in the middle of something."

"It's important." In the background, he could hear Molly trying to reason with him, too, to hang up the phone.

"I will be home later --"

"Bring me blueberries."

"-- with dinner --"

"I need them now."

"-- and we will discuss this."

"Two!"

"Hanging up now. Behave. Talk to Molly."

"I do not need a babysitter. Particularly one that refuses to do what I tell her."

"You absolutely do, and she is not there to accommodate your every whim..." Drat, he realised that Sherlock had managed to engage him anyway and John stopped speaking.

"I told her --"
"Put Molly on, yeah?" There was an exasperated sigh, a grumble, and he whispered intently, "Now!" and then he could hear Molly apologising through the mobile. "It's okay. I'm ignoring him now."

"I'm sorry, John. You know how he gets."

"Yes, unfortunately. You call me, text me if there's an emergency. From your phone." A grousing came through then as Sherlock continued to whinge. "An actual emergency of course," and she giggled just a bit at that when John clarified, "Not something that he feels is one."

"Sorry, John, I had no idea what he texted you, I didn't know --"

"It's fine."

John rang off, returned to where Greg was waiting, eye on the telly, beer in his hand a bit less full than previously. A glance from Greg, things okay? and John's rolling of the eyes, you have no idea. They shared a grin and then were caught up as the room erupted in cheering over something on the pitch. His mobile buzzed again, drawing their attention, and he set it down between he and Greg to watch the rapidly-arriving text messages on the screen.

This was an emergency.

I needed you.

You have deserted me.

Abandoned me.

Abandoned me in my hour of need.

This blueberry experiment is quite urgent.

Greg caught John's eye, a questioning and perplexed expression. John nodded and shrugged.

If you were truly interested in helping me, you would come home.

Ignoring me is a terrible idea.

I suppose I could set fire to the curtains instead.

Ah, yes, found the accelerant.

While Molly puts out the blaze, I'm fairly certain I can get away. Buy my own berries.

Or perhaps steal them.

It's just down the street, Tesco. Want anything else while I'm there?

At that one, Greg gave John a quizzical glance. "You sure you don't need to intervene yet?"

Brushing a hand across his face, settling on his chin, he sighed and answered slowly, one eye beginning to twitch. "I'm not sure."

Can't seem to find the lighter anywhere.
At which point, John reached into his coat pocket, retrieved the object in question - the confiscated lighter, intentionally removed from the flat - and set it on the table by his mobile, where he and Greg were still watching his mobile screen for updates. Greg, John realised, was highly amused, and he was definitely glad he'd made contact. Perhaps, if they were all lucky, Greg could be one of those people who could assist Sherlock on his journey to wellness. And functionality.

Provided he kept his behaviour this side of completely outrageous or unacceptable.

**You really should be careful what you write in your journal.**

**I'm posting that on social media.**

"Which I don't keep. Never have. And no social media account." He and Greg both chuckled, but it was short-lived as the next text arrived.

**Never mind, I'm done looking for the lighter.**

**No lighter, no problem, fairly certain I can re-wire the toaster and use that instead.**

John sighed, picked up his phone.

To Sherlock, a reply text, **Don't you dare.**

To Molly, **Are things all right?**

**Yes. He's just a little ... barmy. Molly**

**Dodgy.**

**That too. We're ok, don't worry. Molly**

**Sherlock, no fires or threats of any type. Find something to do. Suggestions: violin, microscope, look at those papers I left for you. Quiz Molly on her uni projects. I'll bring dinner home in a little bit.**

Sherlock's texted response came back almost immediately. **Piss off.**

John blew out a breath, shaking his head, feeling every ounce of pity he could muster for Molly who was stuck with the madman.

"Gotta leave?"

"No, his bark is worse than his bite. Hopefully." John turned the phone over so he couldn't see the screen. "This," he said, making a swirling motion over his face-planted mobile on the table, "is what I need to harness."

"I might be able to help, unofficially, maybe a few old, inactive files. If the first couple go well, or at least don't go badly," this was accompanied by two smiles and a mutual rolling of the eyes as John's mobile buzzed, "I will take it up the ladder and maybe we can work something out."

Two more incoming text message vibrations. John simply stared at the mobile, wishing Sherlock would entertain himself somehow.

"Not going to check them?" Greg was chuckling. "Oh, hey that reminds me," he began, remembering that he'd mentioned the story, that he wanted to fill John in on, the story of their
previous encounter.

Another buzz, different tone this time but not Molly's. This time, John could feel the acid churning in his stomach, uneasy. Concerned that it might have escalated.

With a reluctant grimace, John turned the phone over to find a photo had been sent. Sherlock was holding one of John's jumpers under his chin, scissors poised along the garment, in the hand not holding the camera. Molly's concerned visage was in the corner of the photo, and she did not look happy, clearly on her way to hopefully rescue John's clothing.

"That might be my cue," John said, sadly, shaking his head. "There's a fine line, risk benefit, you know." This text message, he opened, read, composed a reply.

**I do not negotiate with terrorists.**

Greg was still chuckling, and though he could tell John was frustrated, he couldn't resist teasing just a bit. "He's got a point, not your best jumper, there." John briefly glared as he stared at the mobile, laid down a note on the table to cover their drinks.

**Terrorists may find their mobile privileges suddenly revoked.**

His mobile buzzed almost immediately, but this time surprisingly, unexpectedly, the message was not from Sherlock.

**Say the word, Dr. Watson, and I can make that happen. Instantly. Mycroft.**

Of course. Sherlock had suspected as much, that Mycroft was monitoring the mobile, usage, purchases, etc., and John was not terribly displeased. Sherlock was, at times, more than one person could handle without a bit of help. Leaving that unanswered, John pocketed the mobile. Time had become borrowed time, and he was feeling compelled to leave. "Thanks for meeting me. You understand, I'm just ..." John could sense that Greg was a decent guy, one who cared about doing the right thing. They were both in service-oriented professions for a reason.

"... searching for a way to help him if I can..."

"Desperate?"

"In a sense, I suppose. He just needs to find an outlet. A degree of purpose."

"I'll see what I can do. If there are no 999 calls from your flat tonight, I'll see about stopping over tomorrow."

++

By the time John hustled up the stairs, Molly had finally been able to redirect Sherlock toward one of her advanced pathology books she'd brought along. Sherlock was actually, vigorously engaged with the text, and had a thumb in between pages so that immediately, when John returned, he was ready.

"Look at this, John. Did you know that the *Paramyxoviridae* family is responsible for diseases like mumps, measles, and RSV?"

"I did, yeah. Med school, remember?" John came over to the book anyway to see the diagram he was intrigued by, listened to a few observations of why Sherlock found the diseases fascinating. He'd idly laid a hand on Sherlock's arm as he looked, then in the next moment of quietness, slid a teasing hand to Sherlock's ear, tugged once gently. "Did you know that you were a royal pain in the arse tonight?"
"I did yeah. You deserved it." Molly took in a quiet, big breath at Sherlock’s presumptuous statement.

"Oh?"

"For leaving me behind."

"For a man who complained about not needing a babysitter, that sounds a bit childish to me. Wouldn't you agree?" he chuckled as he asked both Sherlock and Molly. "You do realise I do actually have a life apart from you," and he thought of his sister and his unit buddies (none of whom he'd seen recently) and his other future patients pending. "And that we are not connected at the hip?"

Sherlock, brow raised and a glimmer in his eyes, was sharp with his tongue and his quick wit. "We could be if you'd loosen up."

"Sherlock."

Molly flushed at his improper comment even as she searched for a diversion, "Thanks John, I really should be going." Disconcerted, she stood, eyes wide and in sudden pursuit of a hasty exit.

With a fluster and a burst of coat, book complete with virus photo that Sherlock initially tried to keep, she shouldered her bag, and stammered farewell to them both. Molly's feet were quiet and determined on the steps, the outer door closed, and they were left staring at each other. "Is this about you being worried that I'm going to, what was your word earlier, abandon you?"

"This is about you withholding things from me."

"You do realise that there are occasions, not necessarily to keep information private, but to wait for the right time."

"I am not a patient person."

"No kidding." John slipped off his shoes, prepared to get comfortable on the couch, the bag of carry-out at his elbow. "There are times, Sherlock, that you just need to trust that I've got your best interests at heart. Trust me, and when the time is right, you'll know everything you need to."

"I could make Mycroft force you to tell me."

"No you can't. And stop making this such a big deal, and all about you."

"How about another cigarette then?"

"No. How about we eat," and John began to unpack the containers of curry, samosas, vindaloo, "and you can tell me what you thought of those papers I left for you?"

"I didn't look at them."

Liar, John thought. "Why not?"

"Because you wanted me to. And because Molly was being all sweet and trying to be clever to get me to look at them."

"Really, do you get a lot of pleasure out of making things difficult? Does it get you the attention you like?"
"Didn't tonight." Actually, it kind of did. Just not quite what you wanted when you didn't get your way.

John spied the folded papers on the far end table. Impulsively, he jumped up to grab them, strode down the hallway, and placed them quickly under his pillow. He wasn't outright looking to hide them, specifically, but if Sherlock was going to go after them, he wanted to make it obvious that he'd been searching.

"Vindaloo?" he said, casually. Sherlock's face, thankfully, seemed a bit surprised, expecting John to continue his persuasive tactics. "It's really rather tasty. Still hot, too."

Sherlock was just getting ready to have another strop. His lips thinned out, jaws clenched, as John dished his own plate, took a bite. He made a subtle display of enjoying the food.

"So now are you curious what they were?"

A huff of annoyance. "You must be painfully aware that of course I looked. I'm just not interested."

"Why not?"

"What makes you think I'd be agreeable to attend a seminar, presented by community leaders or experts, about topics that are likely lame, boring, and a complete and total waste of time?" His sneer was followed by another huff. "As if."

"Did you even look at some of the titles? I happen to know," and John raised a brow, perhaps telekinetically reminding Sherlock that his brother had indeed given him some information about Sherlock's interests, likes, and remote activities. It is where the love of orchestral music had come from, not to mention the hand-rubs, nice clothing, and a few of his more acceptable meal choices. He continued, "that there were a few seminars, at least two, that you might be at least a little interested in attending."

Serious eyes, pursed lips. And stony silence.

"You didn't really even read them, the titles. Just saw it was advanced community education and decided it wasn't for you then?"

"Why are you looking to send me off for an all day class on something probably taught by an idiot? Do you really think I'm going to behave, pay attention and not hassle the lecturing buffoon?" Once he'd started to unload, it continued. "So like everyone I've ever met. Parents pawn me off on a nanny, Mycroft on a rehab center, professors on a poncy private tutor, violin teacher ... and now you, pawning me off on someone else too."

"Pawn you off?" John was puzzled, then realised. "Oh. That's why you... oh. Well, perhaps you should have asked a few questions before jumping to conclusions. The wrong conclusions."

"Obviously you've decided that you need to entertain me. Find little activities to fill the day until you're ... To keep busy. Playgroups, reading circles, craft time ..."

John counted to three, steadied his demeanor, cocked his head and asked, "How many nannies and butlers did you go through as a child?"

"Lots." Sherlock was winding up a bit. "Loads, scads, tonnes, you get the picture."

"Did they quit before you pushed them away? Or did you push them away before you got too attached?"
A faint blush, and John wondered about the correlation between a person's haemoglobin and the ability to colour their own cheeks. Better blood count, he presumed as Sherlock set his jaw and wouldn't respond to that.

"Your wrong conclusions, do you want to know what I mean by that?"

"You're going to tell me no matter what, so."

"If there's a subject you think you could tolerate, with your blessing, I was going to enroll both of us. And go with you," you berk, he wanted to add. "There were a couple of topics that I think you might find ..."

"Distracting?" Sherlock said again, still with the edge to his voice.

"Let's go for diversionary."

"Another bloody D. Great."

"Let's focus a minute here." John bit a samosa, offered the plate to Sherlock, who reluctantly took it. "I take it you missed the one on apiology." A quiet inhale from Sherlock, and a minute body adjustment as he sat up a little straighter, interested but trying not to act like it. "And you probably didn't see the one on forensic criminology either. I saw a few on orchestral strings, thought they are probably beneath you."

"Mycroft told you about my interest in bees?"

"He did."

"That one. Provisionally. And you have to go with me."

"I said I was planning on it." John tried to keep his relief on the inside rather than convey his underlying concern to the outside, where Sherlock would likely exploit it. "If you're sure, of course. There was a historical piracy class, but it was geared for fiction writers so ..."

"God no."

"We could wear eye-patches, brandish swords..."

"No. Bees, John."

"I should mention I'm allergic."

"Fairly certain there won't be any actual bees involved." A frown briefly crossed Sherlock's face that turned quickly to what must've been an epiphany. "We could bring our own - now that would spice up the class."

"Pretty sure, that would be a bit not good." There was still amusement running amok in Sherlock's mind, given the smile on his lips and the crinkling of the edges of his eyes. John watched, enjoyed, for a few moments. "You did hear the 'no' in what I said, didn't you?" He nodded briefly, polished off another samosa. John watched the last of them - that he'd been hoping to get a few more of himself - disappear. "I'll register us after dinner." John sat calmly on the couch, refilled his plate with something else, vindaloo transferring from plate to fork to stomach. Inside, he was doing somersaults at what he hoped would at least get Sherlock thinking about his future.

"I suppose that's fine." Sherlock watched John take another bite. "Probably still be an utter waste of time." In an attempt to conceal the fact that he was actually quite looking forward to getting
Sherlock to do this, John sighed not quite dramatically at his (really rather adorable) snarky attitude. Sherlock noticed. "What." More a statement than a question. "What's the matter, I'm just being hon--"

"No, not that." John let the small smile loose, pointed with his fork toward the carry out bag. "Just that I did something stupid myself. Shouldn't have." It was heady, having Sherlock's full and total regard as he scoped out John's words, his demeanor. "Knew better, did it anyway."

"What." Sherlock's word was quiet.

"Go ahead, then." He gestured at the bag again.

In it were two cartons of berries. The warm grateful smile bestowed on him was, in John's opinion, completely, utterly, totally worth it.

He was less enamored when a handful of them ended up in the toaster. Scorched.

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Later that night, enrollment confirmed for the following weekend in the apiology class, they'd prepared for bed, and John had something on his mind. Rather, John wanted to talk with Sherlock about something that was obviously on his mind. Opting to wait until they were relaxed but still wide awake and the lights were out, he asked Sherlock a few idle questions about random nothingness. Then, looking from his cot to Sherlock's bed though it was dark, he said, "So, I feel like I need to reassure you that you're not being abandoned. We're not done here, by the way. I'm not looking to really get into a heavy conversation right before bed, but please don't worry about how this all works."

"I'm not."

"You might be. You've brought it up a few times." John had been hoping for more casual than this was heading. "It's a several week process, and you'll be key to the planning of it. It's different every time, so we'll talk about it. But it's not happening soon. Your brother, just so you know, initially asked me to sign on for six months."

"Pity you didn't take it. I could have talked him into more."

"I just wanted to make sure you know it will be a very planned, controlled, gradual transition." Sherlock was brooding, and John couldn't see him so he couldn't tell if he was still annoyed, disbelieving, or bored.

"I do promise you, it won't happen before you're ready. All right?"

"All right." Skeptical tone, and John could have elaborated, but Sherlock was apparently changing topics, or at least, projecting onto something else. "So what was your appointment tonight?"

"It was a long shot. Probably won't amount to anything."

"Nothing to do with --" your next patient?

"No, not at all. One day at a time."

John could hear Sherlock slowly nodding against the pillow. And his breathing was more relaxed, sounding less aggravated. Or so he hoped.
In the dimly lit room, his eyes accommodated so he could make out shadows, movement, big shapes. John could see Sherlock restlessly moving for a few minutes, simply watching and paying attention. After a few minutes, the tossing settled, his breathing evened out, and both drifted off to sleep.

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"No, no. Chop that way, away from your fingers," John directed. "Have you seriously never done this before?"

"I shouldn't need to remind you that you're nit-picking at me while I'm holding a knife."

"Could be dangerous, is that what you're sort of ... threatening?" John asked.

"Bloody dangerous in fact."

He went back to teacher mode, demonstrating a better - safer- direction and angle as Sherlock's fingers were perilously close to the knife blade. "Chop the onion and pepper, Sherlock. Not any of your skin, fingertips, or shapes out of the cutting board." Abruptly, Sherlock halted, turning to face John, the knife held loosely in his hand. It would have been a threat except that he was grinning ridiculously and making a low growling in his throat. "Or me," John added hastily.

"Nag."

"If you bleed into our breakfast, I'm not eating it. And I'm hungry, so, just don't."

John was tending to a skillet, heating oil and frying potatoes, waiting for Sherlock to make some sort of contribution toward breakfast. The morning had already been good-natured resistance, to the point that John was beginning to think it was Sherlock's baseline temperament - difficult and feisty. There had been a shower, coffee, and now they were working together on a brunch fry-up. There would eventually be eggs, as well, and ham. A few pieces of bread awaited toasting.

One carton of blueberries sat open on the counter, nearly empty. When John had set it there earlier, Sherlock had waxed profound on the merits of antioxidants and purple foods, punctuated with his sampling of them a few times. John had picked several up while he was talking, and at the first break in his diatribe, he lobbed one up in the air so that it would arc down toward Sherlock. Quickly, good reflexes and a rather permissive toss, Sherlock caught it. A smile was exchanged between them, working there fairly close together. It was, if nothing else, domestic.

"Are these pieces too big?"

They were, but John was not going to complain. "Look all right, should be okay. Toss 'em in." John watched a moment. "What do you usually do for breakfast?"

"Not this. Quick, easy, or skip it altogether."

"You should splurge every now and again."

"Mrs. Hudson takes pity on me from time to time."

"Right. She was telling me. Biscuits."

"Delicious."

"But not a lot of nutrition."
They shared companionable conversation in companionable space, and eventually ended up with two large plates of food, carried to the table. "Not so hard, then was it?"

"Too much work for one person."

"Not really, one fry pan, veggies, eggs, fry. Toast." John shrugged, tucked in to his meal. Sherlock ended up, with a few prompting questions from John, talking about some of his early fascinations with bees and how he got interested. So John had finished first, pushed his plate away, and was listening attentively when, mid-sentence, the doorbell rang directly to their apartment this time. "I'll just snag that, then," John excused himself to get the door. He cautioned his runaway thoughts not to get too hopeful.

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"Can I help?" the young, 8 year old asked while the woman at the stove stirred one of the pots there with a wooden spoon. He'd already been shooed out of the parlour, the dining room, and the front gardens. 'Don't touch', 'the table is already set', and 'you'll get too dirty' had been the admonitions.

"Not with this, no." She sighed. "Too hot."

"I could --" he began, only to be cut off.

"Does your mum need help, perhaps, maybe with the cut flowers? Or with her note cards she'll use for the presentation this evening?" Sherlock had already been banished from there.

"Maybe ...?" he asked then, picking up the knife.

A butler had appeared then, to bend low and chuck the lad under the chin. "Why don't you run along, Master Sherlock."

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As he'd expected, and fervently hoped, it was Greg with a small crate of files. John greeted him, stepped back out of the way to let him in.

Sherlock sat straight upright, swallowed, wiped his mouth, and stared. "Good morning," Greg said to him, glancing between the flatmates.

John shut the door, came back to Sherlock, who sensed collusion, and turned toward John. "What's this all about?"

Retrieving his tea, John began to explain. "I met Greg Lestrade last evening."

"You said nothing other than it was a long shot." Displeased, yes, but Sherlock was also on high alert.

Greg spoke then. "It still is." John hid the smile behind his cup, as he watched Greg establish himself. Silver tinged hair over steady, smart, insightful eyes, Greg approached Sherlock with quite a bit of solemnity, conveying the serious nature of what he was suggesting. "Come join me over here, and I'll explain."

For a brief, horrifying moment, John thought Sherlock was going to dig in his heels about moving. But after a momentary tension, Sherlock stood up to join Greg, where he'd set the box down on the coffee table. Mentally he awarded the first point to Greg for clear directions and an unrelenting expectation for obedience.
"First of all," Greg began, "this is a favour, a privilege, and can be taken away at any moment, so please treat this opportunity with the seriousness it deserves." He explained what had been discussed, that on a trial basis, Sherlock would be given some cold cases, old files, inactive NSY investigations, just to see if maybe, just maybe there was something that had been missed. He took the top file, opened it, and began to show Sherlock some of the cross-referencing, the tabs, the legend to their abbreviations.

"I know all that. Obvious." Both Greg and John turned to look at him, cautious and concerned. "I'm not an idiot. These things you're showing me, that's not what I need to know."

John worried at his lip with his tongue, held his breath a bit. He knew Greg was not a jerk, not by a long shot, but neither could he afford to let Sherlock think he was in charge, running the show, or even that he had a modicum of authority here. "Can I just tell you, my newest secretary, the one I hired right out of school, already knows something you apparently do not: pay attention, listen, and follow directions."

"Then tell me something important. Because what you've given me already is pathetic and unhelpful." The delivery was just short of vicious, and John could see Greg completely engaged with Sherlock, not particularly rattled nor looking to react to Sherlock just yet. "I just need you to get out of my way." Imperiously, Sherlock tipped his chin up slightly, held out a demanding hand, waiting for Greg to hand over the file in his hands.

At that, Greg raised a somewhat displeased eyebrow. "Something else my newest secretary knows is respect for people." A few moments, charged, bordering on tense, went by. "Respect for me."

Sherlock parried back. "I dare say you don't need to be coddled. That's not why you're doing this."

"I'm doing this out of some bizarre desire to give you a second chance. Because I was approached respectfully," and John could almost hear Sherlock's eyes rolling, "and asked nicely, and I think we could help each other."

"Then leave me to it."

"I'll be glad to step out, as soon as I have your signature on this confidentiality contract. And as soon as I tell you one more thing: any more drug use, even once, one slip-up, one overdose, one recreational hit, and this is all over."

Sherlock turned slowly to pin his narrow, suspicious eyes on John. "What, exactly, did you tell him?"

"Very little. But it is fairly obvious why I'm here with you, yeah?"

The stormcloud was gathering, atmosphere heavy with imminent threat of severe deluge, and John even tried to breathe quietly as he watched Greg and Sherlock meet and lock eyes. Briefly, Sherlock's eyes flicked to the crate, weighing the evidence, the favourable circumstance, the DI, and the fact that Sherlock was still a recovering addict in his flat with a 24/7 caretaker. He wanted it, what was being offered, apparently, more than he wanted to grandstand about it.

"I'm uh, sorry. Go on." He gestured to the files. "And then, please, where do I sign?" It seemed the restraint, and the words, were the sourest thing Sherlock had ever tasted, given the look on his face.

The knot of anxiety in John's chest relaxed a bit then, and the respirations didn't quite hurt so much. Greg gave a sidelong glance at John, then resumed his spiel about the records, filing
idiosyncrasies, and enlightened Sherlock on where he might find some of the key bits about the investigators, the victims, the witnesses. "So if you need more information, there may or may not be any available. You'll have to email me, and wait for me to get back to you." With that instruction, Greg looked at Sherlock until he nodded. A stare at John until he did the same. "I have to tell you, some of these may truly be unsolvable. And the files should be as complete as they can be. But even a little bit of help, insight, tips, clues, connections - let's see how it goes, yeah?"

John was glad there was no challenge issued, no 'can't be done' or worse, 'many have failed before you got these.' Clearing his throat, John hoped to prompt the response that Greg was waiting for. "Sherlock."

"Yes, all right."

Greg raised a brow again. "You change your mind, let me know, I'll come retrieve the files."

"I'm not a quitter."

"Good," Greg said, and pointed to the sheet of paper on top of the rest of the files. "And before you sign, I am putting you both on notice that if I choose, I can bring sniffer dogs here, and I reserve the right to random drug test if I feel it's warranted."

You and me both, John didn't say, but held up a hand. "We're only about, what," he glanced at the small calendar near the door counting days in his head, "a couple of weeks out from a medical procedure. His tox screen would light up now, probably, if you ran it."

"I hear you. I still want you to be aware that if I feel the need, at my discretion, I might. And I'll say it again: one strike, no second chances on staying clean. I will not work with you that way. Yes, it's that big a deal, so don't eff it up." John turned to study Sherlock, saw him in turn studying everything about Greg, his demeanor, his passion, his intent to carry out the threat. John said nothing, knowing this was Sherlock's realm, his determination if he would agree to Greg's conditions. He finally nodded, the moment stretching between them while the two men sussed each other out. John could well imagine the mental chess game going on between them, because if Greg was playing a head game, Sherlock was too. Greg seemed satisfied enough at Sherlock's decision, must have felt that he'd been heard and understood. "Sign here."

Biro, long fingers, paper, the scrape of a flared signature. Greg held out his hand, palm up, and Sherlock proffered the now used pen, not quite meeting. Another display of wits, of a power struggle, of each wanting the other to give in first.

John had a brief mental image of the two of them squared off at a duel out of sheer stubbornness and a refusal of Sherlock to even think of compromise. Dear lord.

Both men then turned immediately, intentionally, to stare with a mildly shocked expression at John. Sherlock was unsuccessful at trying to keep the grin off his sappy face. "Are you aware you said that out loud?"

Oops, he thought, no I was not. John let the chuckle out, turned into a full on laugh. Feeling freer and able to act, he approached the ground space between Greg and Sherlock, taking their hands and joining them, tapping briefly at Sherlock's to get him to let go of the pen. "For god's sake, you're a stubborn lot. Ridiculous." He eyed the paper, Sherlock's signature at the bottom, and wondered that it probably wasn't technically enforceable, given that Sherlock wasn't employed or obligated in any official capacity. Either way, a good start by Greg in all likelihood. John shook his head. "I'm putting both of you on notice, that I will not, under any circumstance, referee whatever scrapes you get into. Not taking sides. Not prying anyone's hands from anyone else's neck. Got it?" A chuckle implying at least tentative agreement, and John shook his head again.
"And now, that taken care of, anyone else interested in a fresh cuppa?"

Sherlock looked longingly at the files, then at John to apparently gauge the expected answer.

Greg was the one who remarked. "They'll keep a minute. I think John needs to hear the story of when our paths crossed the first time." He chuckled faintly at the memory as he grinned then even broader. "So yeah, tea would be great." Waiting patiently at the table, then, he wrapped his hand around the steaming mug, blew across the top of it, smiled to himself.

"All right, that's twice you've done that. Grin like you have a big secret." Sherlock was watching Greg's mouth, his eyes. "It was not a huge deal, really. I came across a violin player --"

"That wasn't the first time we met."

Gently smug would have been John's caption to Greg's face as Sherlock froze, quite surprised, stared. He seemed to be furiously running through memories, thinking hard, eyes roving across Greg's face, taking in his whole presentation. "Of course it was. You're mistaken."

"I should preface that we didn't actually officially meet either time. No introductions, no pleasantries. The first time I met you was maybe six months before you stumbled onto the violinist."

"I don't recall that. You have me confused with someone else."

"Yeah, you were a little unconscious at the time."

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"Car 19, Possible DIP, Fifth's Alley. Report of male juvenile, unresponsive."

"Car 19. En route." Having confirmed the instructions, Greg clicked off the radio, glanced at the passenger seat. Getting out from behind his usual spot at his desk was something that he both liked and disliked. Seeing real people, meeting real needs, that was good. Getting away from the mountains of paperwork, also a nice break. But the crisis, the drama and the poverty and the self-induced troubles people got themselves into, not so good. He checked his surroundings, pulled his panda car into traffic. At this rate, this time of day, it would take only a few minutes to get there. He'd so far had a not awful shift, ended up checking false alarms, helping with fender-benders, directing at a broken signaled intersection, written a few citations, and now probably sent to check on another drunk, intoxicated, or impaired kid.

His partner for the evening, Sgt Donovan, sighed. "Yup, wake him up, send him home to sleep it off. Again, probably." She smiled then, just a bit. "Maybe instill the fear of god in him."

"If we're lucky," Greg cautioned. "Though I guess that's better than leaving him there to get mugged. Or assaulted."

"Says you."

"Stay in the car, then. I'll handle it."

A few blocks further, Donovan spied him first, and Greg parked. Despite Sgt. Donovan's complaints, she did follow him out of the car, radioed in their location, lagging behind a little and assuring the scene was safe, given the seedy section of town.

Greg had bent over the young man, shaking his shoulder roughly and speaking loudly, "Hey! Wake up!"
The two officers quickly evaluated the scene. No paraphernalia, no overt sign of trauma, though they did not move him just in case of c-spine injury. Greg confirmed he could feel sufficient air moving with a finger under the boy's nose while Donovan stood nearby. "I don't recognise this one," Donovan said, tapping at his foot with her shoe. "Breathing at least."

"Yes, and his colour is all right," and Greg was relieved at that. He didn't relish the idea of CPR in a dirty alley. "But probably needs A&E."

"Narcan?"

"Breathing all right," and Greg paused, watching the chest rise and counting seconds in his head. "At least twelve." He pried open an eyelid, looking for pupil miosis and finding his pupils normal in size. "Not pinpoint, let's hold off for now. Not sure it's opioid."

"Fine by me, last time I gave it, perp got agitated, combative, ran off."

"This way, maybe, A&E can refer to NA?" He lifted his radio, requested ambulance dispatch. When that was completed, he chuckled a little to his partner. "Rock paper scissors, loser goes through his pockets?"

Donovan's scissors cut Lestrade's paper, which led to Lestrade's disappointing discovery that he carried no ID, no money, no mobile. There was, however, a small bagged supply of white powdery substance. They exchanged a look as, in the distance, the ambulance siren became audible. "A&E and then probably jail, looks like a nice way to end his evening."

"Alive, anyway." Lestrade pulled out his notepad, began to write, another Joe Bloggs report. "Second chance." This he directed to the unconscious form. "Must be your lucky day!"

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"What hospital?"

"I don't recall that. Maybe ... You know, I'm not sure." Across the table, Greg glanced at John, back to Sherlock. "Apparently that happened to you more than once if you need that detail to figure it out?"

"Yeah, never mind anyway."

John found the story sobering, and said so. "Could easily have gone the other way for you. Few hours, left alone?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't have cared."

"Thank you might have been a more appropriate response." John caught sight of Lestrade looking at least engaged, not particularly surprised or upset. "And I hope you care now?"

"What answer gets me into those files quickest?"

"How about the truth and not a manipulative answer?"

His eyes fixed on the mug of tea in front of him, his finger flicking at the handle enough to slide it a few degrees, clockwise, counterclockwise, clockwise, then motionless. "I suppose I do. Right this moment."

John nodded, mostly pleased with the forthcoming answer. "Fair enough, thanks for that." Despite the fact that there was another person in the room, John did not want to minimise the significance
of his words. "You're making progress, just so you know."

The mug moved again, slightly, back and forth, back and forth, as Sherlock nodded slightly, still staring at the cup. John stretched out his legs under the table, seeking to lightly brush against Sherlock's ankle with his, a gentle reminder, a nudge, a juncture, a linking of something like affection. When Sherlock raised his eyes, it was to then look right into John's. They stayed that way a few seconds, legs still touching, communicating their alliance without needing the use of words. John let the moment stretch out comfortably, then decided to continue their discussion.

"So the next time you met? Something about a violin." He left his foot right where it was, but shifted a little in the chair, sipped his tea, watching Greg.

Greg related the tale of the call during another of his shifts, that led to the discovery of a body. He'd summoned an ambulance, and then shortly after that a young man had arrived full of attitude and a very important observation. "First thing he said, do you remember?"

"Robbery." Sherlock answered coolly, his mood speculative.

"Exactly, robbery. Realised the violin was gone." Greg nodded at the files. "Might be nice to get that observation skill put to good use."

"So what happened?" John asked, prompting. He cast a glance at Sherlock, who was more quiet than he'd been. "Ran off, as I think you said?" He directed the question to Greg.

"As I mentioned, bit of an attitude. Arrogant for sure, late hour, unsafe part of town. Asked him if they were drug partners."

"Which was untrue."

"Do you blame me? Seemed a rather logical question."

"I had nothing to do with why he got killed."

"I didn't know that." Greg kept his tone soft. "I mean, I have a fresh murder scene, and in pops this juvenile..."

"Not a juvenile."

"In pops this young adult," Greg amended.

"With a known history," John reminded him.

"You were more intent on me than on figuring out what happened."

Greg chuckled, then, "Look, we had no information, and then you arrived, a bloody distraction." He leaned forward to explain. "An uncooperative person, a witness perhaps."

"I was not."

"Which you could have explained if you'd bothered to stay."

John enjoyed their banter, too much probably, but knew their time with Sherlock was limited before he simply left the table to dive into the material Greg had brought. A refocusing question, then, "You managed to track down the thief?"

"Pawn shop. Got records. Set up an interview, not me this time. But the detective used a bit of strongly worded threats, some hint of CCTV footage..."
"Which there wouldn't have been any of. The spot where he played, occupied, definitely out of camera range."

"Realised that too, did you?" Greg was smiling as he shook his head.

"Had a brother looking for me at the time. Learned to get smart and mostly avoid those bloody cameras."

"... and he confessed." Greg explained that there had been an arrest, a guilty plea, and the killer was now in jail. "So yeah, you telling us that, about the missing violin, ended up solving the case. Got a criminal off the streets."

John found himself gazing over at Sherlock's violin, still sitting, case open. He remembered Sherlock's emotional reaction to the concert, took a bit of a leap, asked the question. "What happened to the violin?"

"Returned to distant family, best I recall. Nephew, I believe. He was quite relieved to get it."

"Was that --" John began. Could that very violin have been used in the matinee concert they'd been to? He recalled the swap of instruments at the concert, the older, more distressed instrument being brought out for the final piece, the encore, and the way it had been played. More importantly, could that perhaps have been the nephew playing it? He jiggled his ankle against Sherlock's, and Sherlock looked up at him.

"I think so," Sherlock responded.

There was a faint tremble of Sherlock's ankle next to John's, and Lestrade's pager went off. With an easy hand, he silenced the squawking, and stood up. "There's my signal for the end of my lunch break. Duty calls."

John stood up, too, though Sherlock remained seated and anxious-looking. Placing a hand on Sherlock's shoulder and giving it an affable squeeze, he thanked Greg for stopping by. Another brush of John's hand, and Sherlock realised what John was prompting him about. He stood, eyes glancing at the case files. "Thanks for this, and ..." his voice shook a bit, and he paused. "... for helping me, before."

"Of course. You're welcome." Greg smiled, closed the button on his jacket. "Glad things are looking up for you."

Sherlock nodded, exchanging a warm look with John, though neither felt that words were needed.

Greg extended a hand. "Looking forward to working with you, Sherlock." Sherlock reached out to clasp and shake Greg's hand without incident, and John was mildly relieved there were no further power struggles over something as basic as a handshake.

"I may need a licensed firearm."

"No." Greg and John answered together, immediately. Greg added, "To review case files?"

"Just for fun, then?"

"I think not."

"Nothing ventured," Sherlock muttered. "Anyway, maybe now you can improve your solved case percentages." The small smirk, definitely intentional, and the seriousness of the mood a few
minutes before completely evaporated. "Looking forward to proving the idiocy of much of your workforce's previous efforts."

"Solve us some crimes, and we'll overlook your complete lack of tact." John's head reared up immediately, thinking Greg should definitely not have phrased it thus.

"I plan on doing exactly that. Tell your people I look forward to humbling them all."

"One thing at a time. Remember what I told you."

Sherlock's grin was big again. "I think I can manage that, Gavin."

Greg's beeper chirped again. "It's Greg," he muttered, clapping a hand on John's arm as he left the flat. He was still shaking his head as he trotted down the steps.

Chapter End Notes

An incentive spirometer, like the one John used after his injury, can indeed prevent pneumonia and is usually hated by post-surgical patients. Once pneumonia has been diagnosed, the I.S. can help speed recovery.

Jack the Ripper. Legendary, unsolved, in the Whitechapel district. There are definitely tours.

DIP refers to a drunk in public.

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As always, please let me know gently if I missed something huge or if you find a typo. Thanks for reading along and hope you are still enjoying!
Progression

Chapter Summary

Funny thing, wellness. When the patient is able to spread his wings and fly. And the doctor will no longer be needed.

*Wanted*, though, now that's another thing altogether.

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John Watson, Medical Consultant, has been working with Sherlock Holmes, recovering addict, for a few weeks. There have been some health issues, nutritional concerns, discovery of past trauma, a relapse, and most recently a bored, understimulated patient with a penchant for getting into trouble. John has managed to convince DI Greg Lestrade to let Sherlock review some old case files.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first night that the case files had been delivered, there was a file-reading, paperwork marathon, as Sherlock insisted on paging through each one in their entirety. Some of them generated a rather vehement litany of complaints.

"Don't they teach how to investigate anything to these officers in training?"

"I cannot believe the lack of detail."

"Did none of these idiots even consider that they needed more information?"

"Listen to this sentence! It makes no sense at all!"

"How am I supposed to review anything and discover *anything* when there are no photos, no eyewitness reports, no crime scene analysis?"

"Does no one know how to construct a complete sentence?"

"I'm emailing Lestrade."

Ten minutes later. "I'm emailing Lestrade again."

Two minutes after that. "Is there any valid reason why he has not yet answered?"

"Other than the fact that it's well past his usual workday hours?"

He made a noise of derision, studying his notes again.

John watched the stack of files dwindle, wondering about how best to help with Sherlock's productivity, focus, and more concerning, his time management. When Sherlock was still reading the final folder, John saw an opening for an intervention as Sherlock flipped to the last page. "That's enough for today."
"But this was only --!"

"No. Enough. You've made notes, you have some ideas written down." The unhappiness was rolling off Sherlock in waves of displeasure, and John kept going, intending to start this whole process well. "You have leads to follow up on. But not right now."

"I've barely started, here."

"A few hours sleep, and then we can discuss --"

"Not we. Me. This has nothing to do with you."

Okay, than, right to hard ball. It was not a far stretch to military muscle memory. Chest out, shoulders strong, the piercing intensity of his stare. The I'm not kidding and you will do as I say low octaved tone. "Except that you are my responsibility. If this," John indicated the pile of cases, "means you're getting better, recovering, and moving forward, that's great. But I am here to ensure that you do it well, and do it wisely."

"But --"

"Sherlock, listen. I'm all about you doing this, solving these. I helped set this up for you, remember? I'm on your side, yeah?" He cleared his throat a few times, lightened his fervor, posture more relaxed, wanting Sherlock to actually answer. What he got was a flicker of eye contact and a nod. Somewhat passable. "But it means sleeping from time to time. Taking a break. Good nutrition. Being sensible."

"No, sensible is you. That's not for me."

"Then think about what happens when things get out of balance for you."

The silence stretched, and John hoped his words sank in a bit. All he could see of Sherlock was brooding.

"Why am I here? Why are there still cameras in various spots in this flat? Why are you fairly closely supervised at all times?"

John could see Sherlock's gaze randomly flitting about on the page in front of him, not really reading any longer and avoiding eye contact at all costs. He hoped he was at least listening.

"You understand what I'm asking of you?"

"Suppose."

John watched the battle still raging, as Sherlock was reluctant to close that final file in his hands. "Balance is how you stay healthy, avoid the things that will hurt you."

"Sleeping is a waste of time. Eating is boring."

"I think you're choosing to --"

A sudden epiphany must've struck him then, and his face lit up. "You still have all the stuff for a feeding tube? I could keep going without interruption then." He began to add something about that making John stop nagging at him.

"No." John could have chuckled - but didn't - at his suggestion, even as he knew that Sherlock would totally go along with it if John allowed it. "Not at all what I'm saying. A break. An actual,
get up and do something else kind of break."

"I need to keep at this, while all these thoughts are fresh."

"Then make your notes, pick one case if that's how you want to do this." John watched him give very little indication he was actually going to go along with John's edict. "So here's the deal: You have fifteen minutes now to finish up, and then you'll eat something. A glass of water, pyjamas, all the things you regularly do before bed."

"You don't understand."

"Neither do you."

"Lestrade might email me back any moment."

"At midnight? I think not." Sherlock seemed surprised to hear that it was that late. "And if for some reason he does, it will be waiting for you in the morning."

"I'm not sure this, this this..." he uncharacteristically flailed for a word, "micromanagement falls under your jurisdiction."

John could tell that Sherlock needed a black-and-white, line in the sand. He needed clear directions. "If I determine that this is in anyway going to be bad for you, your health, your mental status, you name it, I will pull the plug on it."

John let that sink in.

"So I think cooperation is in your best interest if you want this to continue."

"You're unreasonable."

"I want this to work for you, Sherlock, I really do."

"Certainly doesn't appear that way."

"This is me helping you. And for the moment, I'm still calling some of the shots here." They stared for a few at each other - one defiant, the other resolute, and John brought down the conversation a few notches. Gentler tone, softer delivery. "Look, get yourself organised tonight, and then we'll have - yes, I said 'we', on purpose, because that's the truth - all day tomorrow. Your brain needs a rest, too. You'll be sharper tomorrow after a few hours sleep."

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John slept quite a bit worse than usual, knowing Sherlock was on edge and wanted to be doing almost anything else but sleeping. After two thwarted attempts to escape from the bedroom, John, in his fatigue, stood, arms akimbo, knowing that he must not give up or give in. Later he would question the wisdom of the decision, but for some reason, his exhaustion, his constant vigilance, whatever phase of REM sleep he'd just been awakened from, again, he wiped a bleary hand across his face.

"Get into bed."

"I am in bed."

"Scoot across. I'm joining you. And even tired, I sleep lightly. The intention is to get you to stay here for a couple of hours." He made a fanning motion with his fingers until Sherlock did actually
slide to the far side of the bed. "I will wake up if you try to get past me. Guaranteed."

Sherlock stared a moment as if disbelieving. "And you think this will help?"

"I'm limiting your options. Perhaps if you acknowledge that you need to stay abed, you just might f--"

"I need to check email first."

"No."

"But what if --?"

"No."

"John." The word was drawn out.

"Don't whine. Seriously, Sherlock. They called them cold cases for a reason. There's nothing particularly urgent about them. I know you're anxious and eager, but remember what I said. Balance."

A huffing exhale, and then the other side of the bed was still.

John kept waiting for more fussing, more complaining. At the bare minimum, he expected more dramatic sighing.

It was a beautiful thing when he could sense that Sherlock stopped resisting, was less tense. He was at least relaxed, and hopefully would be asleep soon. His own eyes drifted closed, though his senses remained on high alert.

Good thing.

++

The dream mixed with reality, and John's mind immediately lost all track of the dream because reality was quite effectively alarming him. And much more urgently seeking attention.

His eyes opened into a riot of dark curls, his nose inhaling and identifying the fragrance of Sherlock's shampoo. Two heads shared one pillow - his. His arm curled protectively around the trim waist in front of him. The sweet comfort of awakening with another's breathing, the companionable presence of another warm person was something he'd always enjoyed, and this was no exception. Except that Sherlock was pressing his bum back somewhat gingerly against John's pelvis, rocking slightly back and forth, and there was at least one erection involved - his. Pressing with interest against the back of Sherlock's thighs.

"Oh good, you're awake." Sherlock's voice was frequently pleasant to listen to, his diction and tone clear and crisp - when he wasn't fussing, complaining, or being stroppy - and in the morning particularly, it was a little rougher and deeper.

Rougher. Deeper. Oh my.

John pulled his arm away from where it had wrapped around Sherlock, slid backward as rapidly as he was able, trying to put some space between their bodies. Sherlock, once freed however, executed a quick roll himself, doing a one-eighty until he was then facing John, his own arm then circling John's waist and drawing the gap between them closed again. He likened it to the quick snap of a venus fly trap. Or one of those huge, lunging, biting bugs he'd grown to hate in
Afghanistan.

Correction, John realised very quickly with their changed positions. Two erections.

For a very brief second or less, John entertained the thought about staying where he was, giving in to what his body yearned for, held in Sherlock's long-armed embrace, the heat between them radiating under the covers. And then, of course, as what had to happen, his logical, rational, ethical self took over then, and he twisted from Sherlock's grasp to spring from the bed as quickly as he could. Words however, failed him, and he stood by the bed, eyes wide as Sherlock flung back the duvet though he made no immediate effort to get up.

It soon became obvious why. "Care to help?" he said, stretching out his long, lanky body on the sheets, his voice still gravelly. His hand came to rest on the waistband of the pyjamas. "I'll be glad to reciprocate."

John's words came through then, a whisper. "No." He looked away as Sherlock pulled away the string to slide his hand inside, lower, beginning a slow stroke. He focused on getting out, evading, fleeing as quickly as he could. "I'll just give you a few." His feet were not quite awake nor coordinated to leave the bedroom smoothly, instead, he tried for a hasty escape and ended up with a near collision with an immovable object, sliding hard and brushing along the door frame as he left the room.

The loo was only going to be safe for a short time, he knew. No matter, he told himself, this wasn't going to take long. A drop of lotion, the firm grip of his hand, a few pulls, and his breathing caught, hitched as his body tensed, convulsed, released.

Across the hall, he could hear a few gasps, then stillness, followed by some very relaxed, deep breathing. And then the sound of tissues being emancipated from their box.

An interesting beginning to another day in the minefields on Baker Street.

++

Emails flowed rather regularly in one direction, usually accompanied by expressive narrative subtext, which equated to Sherlock complaining passionately. Sherlock's notes grew as he compared the case files to some of the more reliably obtained internet research. John had provided Sherlock with his password-protected laptop to use for both investigating various things as well as creating a few documents as he reviewed, studied, and analysed. A few of the case file folders were returned to the Met, with a synopsis, written brief, and often, a well-written sarcastic solution. Sherlock worked with such fervor, intent, and zeal - using mobile, computer, journals, notes, and John's methodically insightful questions. Lestrade texted John a few days into the process to ask him to assist Sherlock with condensing his multiple daily emails into perhaps one longer email instead.

I'll try. How many a day are you getting?

Yesterday was 27. So far today, somewhere around 10. It was not even noon.

Did you ask him already?

Of course. He said they're all important.

John was already considering hard lockouts on the computer and mobile, more time sensitive restrictions if needed, perhaps email access limitations if Sherlock failed to comply, though he knew that drastic measures such as these would have serious consequences for himself that could
quite possible be miserable. To Greg, I'll see what I can do to take care of it. Might take me a bit.

++

Not surprisingly, John's biggest challenge since the delivery of the cases was to help Sherlock establish a routine of eating, sleeping, and finding time for some other activities. He recommended Sherlock take a break from all the reading - screens, papers, or journals - and began to enforce a daily excursion. Their walks grew longer in both time and distance covered. They talked about whatever case Sherlock was delving into as they walked, bouncing ideas around. More than once, John was able to either ask a question that spurred a new, helpful line of thinking or pose a suggestion that Sherlock called idiotic and then had an epiphany regarding a new angle or detail.

More case files were set aside to be returned to the Met.

Nights were still a predictable struggle. Without fail, Sherlock did attempt to sneak from the bedroom at least once. John did not get into the bed with him again - learned that lesson, thank you very much - but did rearrange the room a bit, boxing up most of the supplies and requesting a courier service from Mycroft, returning some of John's own personal supplies to his office and the rest to Mycroft to be returned to whomever he'd obtained them from. This put John's cot a bit closer to the door and forced Sherlock's traffic pattern where John was absolutely sure to hear him. One night, he simply said, "Need the loo," and John knew better than to leave him wholly unattended. Sherlock had only managed a step in the wrong direction - from the loo toward the sitting room - before John cleared his throat from where he stood silently in the hallway, watching. Waiting. Knowing. "Oh, right."

"Uh huh." As Sherlock slipped past John, who waited in the doorway, John reflexively reached out as Sherlock crossed right in front of him, just as a matter of habit, directing him, ushering him along, as he walked by. The guidance of the hand was only meant as a passing touch, but Sherlock halted suddenly, which left John's hand just below Sherlock's waist. For a brief moment, John thought that Sherlock was very close to pressing his body full up against him. The expected, anticipated movement was nearly broadcast in his expression, the angle of his chest, the hint of excitement in his eyes. "No," John said, his murmur low and growling, ready to step away if needed. "You know better than that."

The flat was quiet, and if John had been listening, he might have heard the clock ticking the seconds off from the old relic that hung down on Mrs. Hudson's wall. He might have heard the faint creak of the roof as the wind blew gently from the south, as usual. He might have been inclined to listen to Sherlock's breathing - elevated, deep. Except that all he could hear was the thrum of his own heart beating loudly in his ears.

"You want it too," Sherlock whined, his own breathy voice quietly matching John's in intensity and gravel. "You can't honestly deny it."

He was right, John knew, but was reluctant to lay it back out for Sherlock to somehow use against him.

"Come on," Sherlock whispered, and he began to duck his head down just slightly, closer to John's face, giving the tell that a snog was very definitely coming. Their breath intermingled, the heat from their skin, their bodies, an aura around them, between them. It would have been so bloody easy to simply press in a little closer, an inhale forcing chests closer with expanding ribs, the hand that still lightly rested on Sherlock's back to tighten and draw them closer.

Sod it, John thought, just this once, leaning upward just a bit, the faintest brush of his lips lightly touching the bowed lips against his. A minor adjustment, head angled, nose to nose, and John's
hand splayed out gently, feeling the firm muscles. The kiss deepened, evened out, more pressure, a deeper inhale, John's arm tightening and beginning to squeeze them closer together. "Oh god," he whispered, then their heads slotted together hard, mouths open, tongues meeting, that first electric force. It was a relief, finally, both of them with bodies nearly straining with the impetus to respond, more, more, yes, more. His mind engaged - stop this, Watson - though he deepened the kiss one final time, arms coming up behind Sherlock to hold at his head, fingers in his hair - pull away, now, this has gone long enough - a forearm behind Sherlock's shoulder, enjoying those few, precious seconds before he knew he would call a halt, knew he needed to cease and desist. Oh, the building, coiling desire...

"Enough," he whispered then, "this ends now," pulling his mouth away after those few glorious seconds. Stolen seconds. Shouldn't-have-happened seconds. Hands steady and now resolute, pulling away from Sherlock's head but holding him quite still, very close, tightly against him. "This is wonderful," amazing, brilliant, incredible, I want more, "but ... no, we can't."

"Sure we can."

"I can't." In a quiet, calm, steady voice, John knew he had to say a bit more. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have even... done this much, but."

"John," the word, again, was a complaint, a plea, then a softer, "I want."

"That's not why I'm here. It's not on."

"But," Sherlock began, arms tightening, hands on the move, one holding at John's back and the other reaching down toward bum and from there, John knew exactly where he was headed (where he wanted him to head, same thing, he realised). Not on, he reminded himself of his own just-spoken words.

"It's all right." While John spoke to Sherlock, he was also addressing himself, a deep breath, a mind made up, determined. His arms loosened up, eased away, sliding around to the front of Sherlock's shoulder, the other to his waist, adjusting the both of them, pushing apart, space between, a cooling down of the sensual need, the desire, the want. "I'm sorry," he said again, "I shouldn't have done."

Oh, the want.

Unbidden, John's mind recalled the advice he'd presented Sherlock with those weeks ago - delay, distract, decision. He could delay this, distract himself, decide to be honourable. He inhaled, the slightest chuckle, regaining his own equilibrium. "I suppose sleep is kind of out of the question now."

"You could join me, you know." Glittering eyes, dark and stormy, dangerous.

And tempting, John thought again, shaking his head, his smile fond as the space between them grew a little. "Oh, Sherlock."

"I am not going for a walk."

"No. Not asking you to." Disengaging completely, he steeled himself to do the right thing, prodding a bit at, he reminded himself, his patient to move toward the bed. "Back in there with you. Sorry."

"That's the third time you've said that, and it's getting annoying. Sorry for what? Because the answer better be for stopping."
"Perhaps. But we can't, Sherlock. Not now, not like this."

"Not now implies later."

"Then I take that back, and stick with a simple no." John nodded his head again at the empty bed, covers mussed, warm and inviting much like the man himself, prickly edges and all. Surprisingly, Sherlock did actually climb into bed, leaving the covers where they were, expressing irritation with an unhappy curve to his mouth, arms crossed. "Thought maybe another chapter of Treasure Island?"

"No."

"Maybe ...?"

"No."

"Suit yourself," John said quietly, knowing Sherlock was also frustrated, rebuffed. He began to draw the duvet up across Sherlock's chest when Sherlock struck. A vice-like handgrip seized John's wrist, and there was a quick lurch of Sherlock's body as he grabbed, pulled with all he was worth, dragging and then wrapping John into a somersault type of crocodile roll, both of them ending up on the bed. Entwined, pressed together, muscles and virility and still with desire still simmering between them.

"Sherlock!" he chided, a bit off balance and twisted both over and under Sherlock's chest and legs.

Eye to eye then, John lay still. Tangled but choosing immobility for the time being. A stand-off, watching, glaring just a bit, waiting. He didn't push Sherlock away, not yet, though he would if he had to. Sherlock's eyes flicked to John's mouth, and his head began to lower.

"No." John uttered just the one word, undecided initially if it was going to be enough to halt Sherlock's behaviour. He vacillated between fighting himself out from his current predicament (which he could easily do), or giving Sherlock enough time to (hopefully) make the right decision. Quietly, he spoke the word again, more softly and more of a plea. "No."

It was enough.

Sherlock let go of him, movements frustrated and angry as he huffed, flipped to turn on his side away from John. Slowly, John removed himself gingerly from the bed, padded on quiet feet back to his own cot, pulled the covers up. It was a considerable feat, John knew, for Sherlock to have stopped, impressve even, given his typical aversion to following anyone's rules, disregarding the consequence of his action. It also demonstrated wisdom, because John would have certainly reminded him what the word no meant in no uncertain terms. It meant that Sherlock was not only teachable but learning. A good choice. In the darkness, John smiled at the progress, despite the frustration - his, Sherlock's - in the room.

A hard swallow, a mulling over of the softness of Sherlock's lips, the shared, stolen kiss. He shook his head at his own behaviour, resolved to keep a bit more space between them. But oh, it had been nice, and even in the darkness, he knew he was smiling, fond of his patient and more than that. Deep breath from across the room, and one of his own, both attempting to be as quiet as possible. There was unity in their frustration anyway. John rolled over, knowing it was going to be quite a while before either of them fell asleep.

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"I have a request from Greg Lestrade." So far, there had been quiet cooperation that morning,
neither of them specifically interactive with each other, but distantly polite. John was largely okay with it. And Sherlock was sipping his tea with multiple things in front of him - laptop, phone, folder, notes, notebook, and a reference journal about profiling.

A sparkling look back, a glimmer of interest. "More current cases? He needs more help?"

"Not yet." John was glad for the excitement anyway. "Fewer emails. He's got enough to weed through with this, okay, on top of all his other responsibilities. I don't think it's an unreasonable request."

"He's terribly unorganised and should have a better way to sort ..." and Sherlock continued, a small tirade of why the system was failing, his support staff horribly incompetent, and of course their solved rate percentage is abysmal. "Which is why they need me! What did they expect?"

John let him go for a few, and once there was a pause, he raised his chin before speaking. "You done yet?" A short nod. "This is his division, these investigations. These are his files, and you are an unofficial consultant right now. His turf, his rules. One email per day, all right? Whether you like or or not, and even though you don't agree."

A silent eye-roll and a downturned smile. "All right. Soon as I send this one, that is."

Of course, John realised. Still pushing limits.

**Sherlock's agreed to limit the emails to one per day.**

**Thanks, helpful. Greg**

**Let me know if I need to help reinforce his agreement.**

**I will. How's it going? Greg**

John wasn't sure how to answer that. **It has its moments.** His mind tried not to think of the kiss, the doorway, the bed-sharing, their history - successes at the hospital and improved physical health.

**Greatly appreciated. Greg**

**He's got a few ready to come back to you. He will be needing new cases fairly soon.**

**I'll stop by in the morning, exchange some unsolved for old. Greg**

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One of the cases Greg brought was that surrounding a twenty year old unidentified body that had a lot of scattered information, random photos, conflicting eyewitness accounts, and more questions than answers. Sherlock began each day with it, a fresh read, talked about it from time to time, and when particularly irritated, would run his hands through his hair in mounting frustration. The file sat open most of the time, and began as a curiosity that turned baffling. That became compelling, drawing. An obsession.

He began to get angry about it. A ceramic mug was thrown across the room. There was a yelling incident at Mrs. Hudson, completely undeserved of course, but it was likely that she didn't hear him, given that it was directed at her through the floor, rapidly and abruptly. There was a screeching session on the violin, also thankfully short-lived, as Sherlock did not have the patience for anything sustained. Mostly, he fumed and fussed at the file itself, annoyed.
Mostly John let him ventilate. But he watched the baseline emotional state never quite get back
down to lower levels, so each session seemed to escalate quicker and to increasingly aggravated
ends. He snapped at John a few times.

"I just need to clear my mind!" Pacing did not seem to help, but seemed a better option than
continuing to yell intermittently at the file. He stormed one way, the other, finally stopped. "I need
a hit!"

John stood up as Sherlock abruptly stalked down the hallway. "Sherlock." He was close behind.

He pushed into the loo, and John just managed to get his foot in the way of the closing door. "Get
out of here."

"Don't do it."

"I want to. I need it."

"Wait!"

"It will help me think."

"It will impair you."

"Get out!"

"You're better than this. Remember what Greg said, one slip and this is over."

An eye narrowed, a quiet gasp, and the pressure on the door vanished as John got his attention.
"You wouldn't tell him."

"In a heartbeat, yes I would." While John did speak the words gently, he could tell they still were
hurtful. "Not that I would want to. But you have a lot to lose here, a lot at stake, Sherlock, and we
both know it."

"I can handle it."

"More than these cases, the files. Your health is at risk."

"It would be unfair of you to tell him."

"Then don't do it."

"John."

"Don't give in."

"Whose side...?"

"Yours!"

"You're a real wanker."

"If it helps motivate you, I will do whatever it takes." John gave back as good as Sherlock was
giving. "This is not okay."

He opened the door so that he was full stop opposing John through the doorway, in more ways
than simple body position, but in attitude, defiant stare. His nose raised along with an eyebrow,
and he clearly in his head was ready for battle, dropping the gloves. "Whatever it takes? Then take me to bed." The restless-manic side of Sherlock was difficult to watch, that edge of not quite out of control but heading there, the escalating agitation that he was not equipped to channel yet. He'd asked for something outrageous, something distracting, looking to do anything out of desperation to lower the frustration. Or perhaps more get a rise out of John, something to draw his aggression, focus, and energy.

"I'll put you to bed," he countered, the threat only half-real. "But I have to admit I don't think you'll stay there."

"You have no idea," Sherlock began with a snarl, "how frustrating it is."

"Don't I?" John took him by the elbow, firmly, guided him back to the couch, and surprisingly, Sherlock let John lead him there. "I certainly remember working triage and having patients come through, and knowing that some of them were going to die. Maybe in an urban trauma centre, with enough staff, enough surgeries, we could have done better. But there were times it was my call to make, who was most likely to benefit from the quickest care." For the time being, Sherlock was at least listening, though John could tell he was very much on borrowed time before he reacted again. "Frustrating? Of course. Did I feel like shit when I bumped someone else from the front of the line or when I knew my staff wouldn't have time to get to all of them? Making a decision that ended up life and death, literally?"

"You weren't by yourself. You followed protocols."

"At times, yes, but ..."

"Mindless. Pathways. Set procedures. No thinking required."

"That's enough. Do you have any idea what you're saying?" A snort was the only answer John received. "For that matter, where would you be right now if I followed a set of directions, cookie-cutter rehabilitation."

"On the street. High, happy."

"Institutionalised. Maybe overdosed. Certainly not here in your flat." John worked hard to keep the energy level sizzling but not to over-react. "Whether you agree or not, you're rather free here."

"Harassed. Micromanaged."

"I remind you what you've already overcome, your progress." Both of course could recall the exposure therapy that had at least helped Sherlock breach the doors of the hospital, have blood drawn, navigate his attendance at a concert.

"Unsolicited." Sherlock's words had a venomous aspect in tone and content. "Unhelpful."

"I'm just saying that you're not the only one who's been frustrated, had to think critically in a no-win situ--"

"Oh I'm going to win," he interrupted, and blew out a puffing breath of contempt. "This," and he gestured at the files strewn about, the random papers, a few things he'd tacked on the wall, "this is much harder, with no set procedures, no standards, and no help from you." John opted to keep silent, though he wanted to remind him that he had been listening, helping, discussing, offering suggestions, asking insightful questions. Sherlock rolled his eyes, staring resentfully back at John. "You had military protocols, you had it easy."

++
"Doc!" The sound came from the doorway of one of the transport vehicles that had just arrived, and John could easily identify the urgency of the summons. "Need you here."

The vehicle was full, too full, of seated injured, a couple stretchers, bloody bandages and the smell of gunpowder and blood. John peered in, surveying quickly, came immediately to where one of the medics was holding pressure over a wound. The medic lifted one corner of the dressing peeled back for John to find bilious fluid, bubbles in the abdominal cavity, and a sucking noise when the soldier breathed.

"Resps getting more shallow. Sucking chest wound when I'm not holding pressure."

John put his gloved hands over those of the medic, replacing the dressing to hopefully minimise blood loss and prevent haemopneumothorax. "Last responsive?"

"Couple minutes ago."

"You gotta help him," came a desperate plea from a soldier behind John, and it was accompanied by a few taps on his back. "God, please! He's my brother in law, and I promised my sister."

John and the medic locked eyes, communicating a cautious reminder to tread lightly, speak little.

Another medic came up from behind John, touched him lightly. "Rest of the truck, nine patients total, four of them with penetrating thoraco-abdominal trauma. Two head injuries both intubated, two compound fractures one of them with a tourniquet in place, vascular. Another died en route."

One of the CRNAs appeared in the doorway, her eyes drawn and searching for John. "One OR is completely down, electricity failed. Working on it now, but that leaves us only two." She spoke clearly, and waited for John to nod. "Who are you sending in first?"

So many people, waiting, hanging on his next word, depending on him to make an impossible decision where someone is most assuredly going to lose.

++

"In triage, the sole decision fell on me. Yes, there was a team, but it was my call to match acuity with resources and personnel." His voice was sharp as he recalled a few moments burned into his consciousness, unforgettable, tragic, unfair. "Felt like I chose life and death a few times. So don't think you have the market on frustration when you're unable to figure things out."

Sherlock stared at his meshed fingertips, or perhaps, not really seeing them at all, staring at the floor. Quiet, actually seeming to be paying attention. "How did you manage it?"

"One day at a time. One case at a time. I did the best I knew to do and focused on the number of people helped rather than the number in my head of those who I sentenced to die." Sherlock's gaze snapped to John's, unhappy with his word choice and obviously self-deprecating tone. "I know, lousy way to look at it. I think that's something we share, you and I, the ..." he pondered over using the phrase, opted in, "... self-loathing afterward. Because it's a hard-to-break mental cycle."

With a minimum of movement, Sherlock nodded, eyes downcast again. "Truth hurts."

"Yes, I would agree. Particularly when it's repeated. Which is why I'm here with you, to help you. To keep you right."

"Would you really tell Lestrade?"
Holding silent for a moment, John waited until Sherlock looked up at him again, pale, tentative, cautious timidly frightened eyes, ones that would be quickly wounded - betrayed - if John wasn't careful. He reached out a hand to grab Sherlock's, a gentle reminder that he wasn't alone, wasn't unlikable, wasn't deserted. "I would, though to do so would hurt me as well." Small squeeze of Sherlock's hand. "Negative escalating consequences are probably the most effective measure - the most effective," he emphasised, "in breaking patterns of addictive behaviour."

"Negative escalating consequences." The echo sounded harsh in Sherlock's faintly bitter delivery.

"It means --"

"I know what it means," he snapped.

John could feel him bristle, breathe, and then settle, a little bit. "This is hard for you, I get it. And I'm not saying I know exactly how you feel. Not knowing details, sensing connections that you can't prove, unable to get enough information --"

"Enough right information."

"-- to figure it out." John could well recall the early triage rotations in the army, the second-guessing, the doubt that crept in from time to time, afterward. "You've solved a few. Positive outcomes. You've analysed more than that. You aren't going to get them all." He shrugged. "Take a break from Kilimanjaro or Everest. Find something smaller to conquer."

"The trivial doesn't appeal to me."

"Then find another way, an appropriate way, to blow off some steam."

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"Watson, you coming?"

"I'll be along." John stood at the bedside of a post op patient who had not yet awakened, worrying. He'd been too long under anaesthesia, a long case to repair an incredible amount of damage, too long hypotensive in triage despite massive fluid resuscitation. Pulse pressure narrowing, Cushing's triad, early signs of increasing cerebral edema, no urinary output.

"They'll let you know if you're needed. Let the nurses do their job."

From the bank of monitors, a chuckle. "Yeah, get out of my way and let me do my job." Ryan, the nurse, stood up to join the trio at the bedside. "I'll call you."

"First sign of --" With a very seriously spoken beginning to the sentence, John's finger had come up without a conscious decision, a symbol of his concern, urgency, and direction.

"Get out of my unit, Captain," came the fondly spoken, reassuring response. "You know I will." A sigh then, and Ryan continued, "And if you point a finger at me again..." the threat went unfinished.

"I know, I know. Sorry," John was quick to smile then, reminding himself that much of this soldier's healing was out of their control anyway, that despite all the aggressive measures in place or that could be added, the outcome was too tenuous to predict. "I'll check back --"

A hand was pushing at John's shoulder, in the direction of the door. "We're fine. I've got this."

"Call me if --"
"He gets more unstable. I know." John still hesitated at the door, and the nurse could only smile at him. "Please go, Captain. I'll send for you if I need you."

John watched the nurse's quiet confidence, hanging another IV bag ready to spike, glancing at the monitors, the ventilator, the patient, taking in the whole, critical picture. His boots barely made a noise as he crossed the camp.

The mess had been converted to a very make-shift karaoke stage, tables and chairs pushed to one side to leave an open dance floor, clusters of snacks, simple decorations. But the lights were low, conversation loud, and the opportunity to unwind apart from the typical stress a very good thing. Though the base was dry, there was obviously some alcohol that had made it into the room, discreetly and not the focus of the evening. A drink was pressed into John's hand, but he didn't take it, murmuring something about being on call. It took John a few minutes to actually enjoy the atmosphere. A few popular karaoke songs were done, one of them very badly, a rousing roomful of people singing "Don't stop believing!" From the periphery of the room, John watched one of his fellow medics grab the mic and announced a full-room participation song on deck. A smattering of applause, a bawdy joke, and then, "I swear to you, we are watching, and if you're not participating, you're doing the next solo, swear to god. That means you too, Lewis, I see you. And Boomer, you and Watson. Eyes on the room." He named a few others, then pointed at the soldier manning the laptop and sound system. Sweet Caroline was cued up.

John had just begun singing, along with the entire tent full of laughing, celebrating, participating troops, thinking this was a much-needed thing to do. His mind eased up, tension beginning to relax, the camaraderie of those he was with giving him an improved outlook when he felt a tap at his shoulder. "Ryan sent me to get you, doc. You're needed in post op."

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Another new file ended up in Sherlock's perusal, and he spent a while reading it, twice over. Notes grew exponentially, the file re-read, while John fixed them an easy dinner of chicken, risotto, and peas. Once it was in the oven, he returned to the sitting room to find Sherlock flipping pages of the file with annoyance.

"Not enough information. Insufficient evidence. And blurry, too distant photos."

John peered at the open page, read a few lines as Sherlock elaborated a bit. "Autopsy report?"

"Yes. Aren't there usually photos?"

"Probably. Should be."

"Not here."

Seated across from him, John helped look as well, confirming the missing information. "If they were done, they are certainly not included."

"John?"

"Mmm?"

"You were shot in Afghanistan."

"And in the shoulder, but yes." A blaze of annoyance seemed to give John the inclination that his investigation was serious and that any degree of levity would not be tolerated. Or even acknowledged.
"Entrance and exit wound?"

"Yes, most often there is both."

"Can the exit wound tell you type of bullet? Angle of trajectory? Wound infection? Collateral damage?" He would have continued except that John held up a hand.

"Slow down, yeah? Depends completely, obviously, on all the variables, the type of gun. Distance to target. Type of shell. Location, of course."

"Wound infection?" Sherlock pressed.

"Mine did not get infected, fairly clean. But I've certainly seen some."

"Would a wound infection determine healing, scarring, residual deficit?"

"Probably, but again, it depends. An immediate infection, of course. Latent, maybe."

"Take off your shirt."

"You don't outrank me, you know." He narrowed an eye, not moving a muscle for the moment. "And I think we've had a discussion before about your use of the social niceties in conversations, you know, complicated, high-tech words like please and thank you."

"John."

"Still waiting." He opted not to call out the whinging.

"Please?" Though it was said through clenched, irritated jaws, John wasn't about to complain about that either.

"Not so hard."

"You have no idea." Growling his response, Sherlock grew impatient. "Off." He glared at John's shirt.

With a smile, an exhale, and a slight shaking of his head, John leaned forward on the couch where he sat next to Sherlock, began to unbutton his shirt. Moments later, he'd slipped his arm free from the garment and Sherlock was studying the wound, looking, touching, sliding, pressing and feeling the entirety of his scar, more narrow at entry, larger starburst at exit, the ridges of scar tissue. He asked a few pointed questions, staring with furrowed brow for a few minutes while his mind must have been trying to make connections. A silent touch at John's elbow, lifting and moving the joint about as if testing range of motion, a deeper frown. The file opened again, and he searched for something, muttering, then finally gasped "That's it!" as he pointed to one of the words in the autopsy.

John was sliding his arm back into the sleeve when Sherlock explained quickly how he'd figured out about the lack of evidence and how helpful actually seeing John's wound had been. "Glad to help, I think," he answered as Sherlock jotted a few notes down.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"I should think it's obvious," he replied, working the buttons closed, tugging at the neck, adjusting the fit.

"I want to see it again."
"For the case?" John asked. "You need more data?"

"I uh," he started. "It was, for the case." There was a slight flush. "But I didn't get to really appreciate ... see... the rest, for other reasons when I had the chance."

"I don't think that's wise."

"Please?" His request was accompanied by a charming, disarming, wonderfully devious glint to his eyes and a devilish smile to match.

"How about a nice biscuit instead? Mrs. Hudson brought ..."

Sherlock was already muttering to himself, rapid-fire. John got up to retrieve the tin of them, and could hear a few words clearly, including had my chance, blew it, stupid, stupid.

"Here, enjoy."

Sherlock glanced from the biscuits to John's face to his shirt again, a disbelieving smile about him still. "Yeah, enjoy, enjoy, enjoy. That's what I was trying to do!"

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"Remember, tomorrow is that apiology seminar."

"I think we should cancel." Sherlock didn't even look up from what he was working on.

"We're going."

"I have things to do. I'm busy."

"Not open for discussion." John explained, again, about the need for balance, reminding Sherlock about why it was important. He mentioned the fact that this outing would likely prove interesting if Sherlock gave it the chance to do so. "You agreed to this, remember?"

"Not going."

"Actually, yes we are." Sherlock sulked the rest of the day. He ignored John's attempts at drawing him into a conversation. He barely picked at any of the food John had set out. He deliberately did not respond to John's instructions regarding the need to take a break.

Studying Sherlock with some intensity, John considered the totality of his actions before doing it. He weighed it, considered it, knew it was likely to get ugly.

And then, he uttered a low suggestion in Sherlock's direction. "You should save that document."

Sherlock glanced over, more puzzled than anything else, not answering or doing anything right away.

"Not kidding." John moved to stand at Sherlock's side, arms at his hips, watching, and he raised a brow in seriousness. "Save that."

A bewildered glance at the window. "No lightning storms. Why should I bother --?" John watched Sherlock's fingers on the keyboard as he complained but did actually save the document he was working on. "You're ridiculous."

We'll see about that, exactly how ridiculous you find that, John didn't say as he pressed the reset button on the modem, which paused, froze, then disconnected all internet service. He'd already
logged in to change the wifi password, and watched as Sherlock looked on, horrified, wide-eyed, anchored in place by his surprise. At his elbow then, a quick keyboard shortcut, Ctrl-Alt-Del, John's fingers quietly pressing the keys again, and the laptop went dark. Lock screen became visible, as well, as it was kept, as John did not allow Sherlock completely free access. Sherlock was dumbstruck, incredulous for a few long, sizzling moments.

"What? You can't! John!" Anger took over then, building, and John held steady as Sherlock began to clench his teeth, emitting a deep sound of unhappiness.

He held up a palm, hoping to calm Sherlock just a bit. "Remember what I said."

"I'm remembering right now that you're the biggest idiot on the planet. A bully. Control freak." Sherlock's speech, angered, was curt, clipped, and hostile. "Do you have any idea how close I was --?"

"Sherlock." The rant continued a few statements, much of it personal, exaggerated, slightly off-topic and focusing on John rather than Sherlock's responsibility in what had happened. "Stop."

"That was unacceptable. Reprehensible."

"Merciful in that your document is safe." John knew he didn't want to hear that, but needed to prompt him with it anyway. "Drastic times call for drastic measures."

"You had no right ..." Sherlock brought his own aggravated hands up into his hair, the curls already untamed and riotous, and grabbed at his head.

"Take it easy, there," John said, and placed his hands atop Sherlock's, hoping to prevent him from acting out in someway, hurting himself. "Now, just listen to me."

Sherlock did, though he continued to seethe.

"Take a deep breath." He let his words remain low registered and slow, removed his hands as Sherlock at least seemed a little less physically aggravated.

"Fuck you." Sherlock's usual derogatory statement was piss off. He saved this particular one when he was over-the-top furious.

"You'll remember, that first night. I warned you." John could feel the steeliness of his resolve, the affirmation that he needed to press the point here.

Sherlock stood, turned to face John, glared for all he was worth.

"You don't frighten me, so the fierce look is a waste of facial muscles. Settle."

"I was so close. How dare you ..."

"You do realise I've been asking you to finish up."

"Two times. You at least usually don't get really annoyed until the third." While this was not entirely true, John had indeed allowed Sherlock to get away with this on occasion. "And I was tuning you out. After a surprisingly short amount of time, you're kind of like ... white noise."

"You don't say?"

"Yes, you know, that background hum, not all that important. Filler."

"Am I filler now, Sherlock? Hmm?"
"You could have warned me." Sherlock's words were out and then he realised that John had. "More than once, I mean."

"You are quite aware that I did warn you, and more than once." He watched Sherlock consider powering the computer on, his movements frustrated again, an unhappy scowl on his face. John kept his voice calm as he continued. "Should it really take more than once? I think I have your attention now, do I not?" There was a fuming moment as Sherlock shifted in the chair. "I think I'd like an answer to that. Out loud, please."

John watched Sherlock's jaws clench, hands tense, breathing muscles tight. Finally, he answered, "You do."

"All right, then. Here's what's going to happen. You're going to go get in the shower. Put on some nice clothes."

"All of my clothes are nice. Yours, on the other hand ..." Pale eyes cast a critical glance at John's attire.

Steady on, Watson. Don't let him provoke you. "I'm going to make dinner reservations. And we're going to go, eat, have a nice meal, a nice walk outdoors home. And we will discuss this. Again."

++

"Angelo's?" Sherlock suggested. "Looks like a hole in the wall place."

"Italian. Small dining. Rave reviews. Family owned."

Before the evening was over, the owner - Angelo of course - had made the rounds of the dining room, stopped to chat with most of the customers, smiling at their compliments, offering some of his own, really working the room. A few patrons he knew well, lingered a bit to talk. Sherlock was watching him, listening to some of the conversation, taking it all in.

"Your eavesdropping skills are a little obvious, you know," John whispered.

"He's in trouble." It wasn't much later that the door opened, then entered two detectives, and before more than ten minutes had passed, Sherlock had gotten involved. He presented a compelling argument that Angelo was quite certainly innocent of their accusations. The trade-off, unfortunately, was that to free him of the serious felony charge, it had been necessary for him to reveal his alibi and admit to a lesser misdemeanor.

Dinner had ended up a bit chaotic, one of the other waiters settling their cheques. They'd left the restaurant to find Angelo in the back of a police car, gesturing furiously for them both to come closer. Sherlock hung back against the building, fingers trying to grip the stucco wall, leaving John to deal with Angelo's beckoning.

++

Heavy sigh, another call coming through the staticky radio, a juvenile drunk and disorderly on a quiet street paved with lots of money and carefully maintained, manicured privacy.

"Hate these calls to these snooty neighborhoods. Last year, had one who attempted to bribe their way out, brush the charges under the rug."

The other officer only nodded. "Not tonight."
"Nope." They would only be assisting another pair of detectives, providing transport while statements were taken, and as the car approached, there were a few adults, upset, a stunned kid in gardener's attire, and once they'd exited the car, they could hear another adolescent struggling and yelling in one of the single-roomed outbuildings.

"Interrupted a fairly substantial exchange of illicit substances, quite a bit of cash. That one," the detective clearly in charge said as they got out of their car, "to the A&E. Tox screen, maybe cat scan his head. Off his gourd."

The other officer seemed apologetic that the scene hadn't quite been secured. "Had to wait for extra hands, and he's barricaded himself in."

The voice was hoarse, punctuated by the occasional thump of a fist or shoulder, a frustrated pounding. Something else was yelled that sounded like 'not mine' and 'go away!'

The partners just arrived glanced at each other, shrugged. "I'll get the door."

"I'll do the take-down."

"Right behind you."

"Cuff and run. Agreed."

Tensions between the adults was high, serious, and removing the source of the disorderly person would certainly help, everyone agreed.

"We're coming in. Step away from the door." The officer placed his hand on the doorknob, confirmed it was locked, rapped sharply a few times.

They were answered by unintelligible, pressured speech, too fast to be clearly understood. Building entry - a lock pick all that was required - was quickly accomplished, both officers quickly securing the flailing limbs and body of the tall, gangly youth who'd made a futile, last-ditch effort to run past. There were quick, cautionary directions as handcuffs were placed, watch his feet, I'm bringing his right arm to the back, snap that cuff tight, seriously stop flailing, you'll only hurt yourself worse, I don't see a head wound, no kicking, knock it the hell off, watch your step, to the panda car with you, Holmes, you said his name was?

The back door of the car opened, and a new burst of effort to wriggle free happened, both officers needing help from one of those already there. More directions, shit, what the hell's he been using to get this violent? watch those damn long legs, here's the other wrist, get that other cuff on before he hurts someone, hold that door, come on you, into the car, duck your head.

A beehive of people were at the door, all of them required to force the still-flailing perp through the door. A sudden lunge, and the solid thwack of something hitting the door frame. More directions, get in Holmes, told you to duck your head, serves you right, shit he kicked my knee, watch out, don't let him hit his head again, hold him tighter will you?

The slamming of car doors and shortly the car and its three occupants were safely inside. "Jesus," the driver breathed.

The other buckled his seatbelt, considered the rear seat occupant now quiet and trembling awkwardly sprawled across the back seat. He picked up the radio, "Transporting to nearest medical facility. We have the suspect contained without incident." A few further directives and responses were exchanged.

There was not another sound from any of them for the entire ride to the A&E.
John watched Sherlock warily consider the police car as it drove away, disappeared from sight, and only then did he speak. "He just wanted to say thanks. Wanted your name, is all."

"I don't do police cars." The tension in his voice was reminiscent of the terrible, stressed-out state he'd been in when he'd been vomiting blood at the hospital. "At all."

"Okay."

"No, you don't understand."

John recalled Sherlock's past, his breakdown as a teenager, remembered hearing the story of the family scandal, that he'd been hauled away and positively traumatised that time in France, when he'd been taken to a reclusive hospital for treatment that John strongly suspected he hadn't needed at all in the first place. It had been terrible, and repressed.

"You're safe here," John said, leaning in close as they stood off to the side of the kerb outside of the restaurant.

"I know. I'm fine." Sherlock did relax some once the car drove away.

"You did a good thing tonight."

"He'll still end up in prison."

John knew it was the truth. "That may be. But he'll end up with a lighter sentence this way, thanks to you."

The compliment left Sherlock acting awkward, and he didn't answer, simply nodded then looked away. By mutual agreement, they started down the sidewalk heading back toward the flat.

"Watching you work like that, make those connections for that one detective, the guy with the beard?"

"Anderson?"

"Was that his name?" John shrugged, knowing that he personally paid quite a bit of attention to medical details, physical descriptions while Sherlock seemed to see quite a bit more data than that. "Anyway, it was kind of thrilling to watch you put all that together. Not exactly showing off, but really ... I don't know, shining as you walked everyone through what had happened."

Sherlock didn't specifically respond to that either.

Smiling, John couldn't resist observing, "I've made you uncomfortable." Sherlock looked away, giving a slight bob of his head in agreement as John spoke. "Well, I'm not done, then. I was proud of you tonight."

He let the words hang, and Sherlock fidgeted, put his hands in and then out of his pockets. Finally, he must have struggled with a response, and managed to look at John with some seriousness. "His chicken parmigiana was delicious. Maybe Mycroft could get his sentence further reduced."

The rest of their walk home was slow, relaxed, and uneventful. Conversation skirted around the current cases, and John was careful that they analysed Sherlock's work habits before arriving back at the flat. Ultimately, they discussed the need for some stretches of time working but attempted
more reasonable schedule. "But people do sometimes work eight, ten, sometimes twelve hours a
day, John."

"Yes, but there are breaks. There is variety. Sitting, screen time, too much isn't wise for so many
uninterrupted hours." John paused, then briefly touched the back of Sherlock's arm. "Look, I
could bore you with the physiology of neurotransmitters and the brain's frontal cortex --"

"Dopamine."

"Yes, of course you know about it," John said more to himself. "Then you realise, too much focus
without a break doesn't help, just as too much screen time can work much like an addiction."

"Oh well, we all know I need more of that." Sherlock aimed for levity, fell somewhat short in the
vicinity of cynicism. "Obvious."

"Which is another reason we are having this discussion. I'm trying to help you."

Sherlock wanted to disagree, argue, and his expression was a giveaway that he was only seconds
away from speaking his mind again.

John intervened. "I should remind you, that had I not insisted on a break, we would not have even
been here tonight." Sherlock's brow creased. "You wouldn't have had amazing food. More
importantly, you would have missed the whole arrest. Angelo wouldn't have benefited from your
deductions, and ..."

"My brilliant deduction."

"Say again?"

"You said it yourself, under your breath inside the restaurant, when I was giving my statement to
that useless investigator."

"I did?"

"I heard you. Brilliant."

John couldn't stop the smile, then the burst of laughter. "All right. I'm sure I did. It was,
overhearing what you did and putting it all together like that. But you're missing my point."

"Which was?" The rhetorical question came with a sparkle in Sherlock's eyes only to be quickly
followed by something else, something exciting and vibrant. He reached out for John's hand.
"While it pains me to say it, thank you for insisting."

"You're welcome."

"Solving a real-time case, one unfolding like that, was ..." A humble, sort of embarrassed flush
coloured his cheeks. John squeezed silently in encouragement. "... was almost as good as ..." he
trailed off, glanced away. "... something chemically induced."

John stopped walking, choosing to stand still while Sherlock's own words seemed to sink in. "I'd
say, having seen you in a variety of mind states, this is not as good as. It's better."

"Perhaps."

"That was quite an admission. Thank you for sharing it," John said, slowly, quietly. "And I would
cautions you that it not to be forgotten."
Conversation ranged for the rest of the walk home, from the mundane and simple to the apiology seminar the following day. But inwardly, John was absolutely thrilled that Sherlock had stumbled on a new distraction of his own discovery.

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Case notes.

Objective: Sherlock continues to make significant progress. Speech is clear. Today marks nine weeks of sobriety (exceptions: one episode relapse during week four, and hospital procedure where he did receive both narcotic and sedation). Vital signs, mentation, neurologic assessment are all in normal ranges, likely baseline. There has been no cogwheeling. Cranial nerves II-XII intact, as are reflexes, coordination, gait. Sleep disturbances continue.

Ongoing: Of concern now still is his ongoing sobriety particularly when unattended or sufficiently frustrated. Previous behaviour patterns are not entirely forthcoming. Response latency indicates he self-censors much of his conversation with an intent to either deceive the examiner or manipulate his environment. Prediction of successful rehabilitation remains unclear at this time.

Productivity with vocation remains unpaid at this time, but private discussions with DI Gregory Lestrade indicate that preliminary approval for per-diem work is a distinct possibility, particularly given the heretofore successful assistance Sherlock has already given them gratis.

Plan:

1. Apiology seminar tomorrow, which truthfully may prove beneath him as far as content goes, but may still symbolise his willingness to trial new considerations as well as manage a socially challenging encounter.


3. Need to engage client's brother for ongoing familial and social support.

Expected tentative discharge date:

This, John left intentionally blank at first. He looked away from his writing over at Sherlock, who was surprisingly, wholly engrossed in something on the telly for the moment anyway.

Expected tentative discharge date: Unable to determine at this time. But preliminary formulation of transition planning will begin soon.

++

Chapter End Notes

Yet again, a long chapter turns even longer - necessary transition for the boys - and the chapter count has gone up again.
*hangs head with knowledge of many more hours of writing and editing*

**
Please let me know kindly if I missed anything. I look forward to sharing the rest of this story with you.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!