You Have Drawn Red From My Hands

by J_Baillier

Summary

John getting injured leads Sherlock on a path of guilt and revelations.

Notes

It's been a while, hasn't it, since the last J. Baillier solo venture? Well, this one takes our boys further than ever before. Out of all places on this Earth that I have visited – and there have been many – there is a tiny island nation that grabbed my heart, yanked it out and kept it. It's a bit like the effect John has on Sherlock, really, so it's rather fitting that in this tale of woe, johnlock goes to Iceland. I hope all you lovely readers will enjoy the ride; I would, of course, love to hear from you!

Timeline: before The Fall.

See the end of the work for more notes
"He's stable, but his circulation still requires some support. No respirator – he's been breathing fine on his own with just supplemental oxygen." The ITU doctor's English has a strong Icelandic accent, and he’s sporting a rehearsed smile which Sherlock finds macabre.

Why is he smiling? John is ill.

Smiles are not reassuring, nor are they useful. Pointless social placation for idiots. Smiles can be used to hide uncomfortable truths and to cushion a crushing reveal.

Sherlock’s heartbeat is drumming against the bony halls of his skull, and he feels like a trapdoor is about to be sprung underneath him. His whole being is waiting for more information, for a sentence starting with 'however'.

However, he’s dying. However, he has irreparable brain damage. However, he will never wake up. However, he will never come home. However, you've lost him, haven't you, you bloody selfish
idiot.

The however never comes. At least Sherlock doesn't think so. In his current state, words might not even pierce through the haze of panic that's clouding his judgement.

"He's quite delirious, though," the doctor warns Mycroft more than him. He must be addressing the man because Sherlock's panic and confusion must be bleeding out and cracking his facade that was never so carefully constructed and impenetrable as he would have wanted to believe. When it comes to John, it appears it's like spun glass.

He wants to kick his brother for projecting such fiscal calm.

Sherlock flinches when his own name registers in his ears. He manages to blink back into his surroundings, swivels his head around and soon becomes face to face with Mycroft who is sitting right by his side in an identical, worn, wooden chair.

"Were you listening?" his brother asks. His usual, exasperated tone is not being employed – this one is a rare variety, one that is openly bleeding concern. Sherlock shakes his head slightly to try to keep the synaesthesia at bay, lest everything gain a tint of cerise. This is what happens to him when he can't keep his cool: senses threaten to swirl together into an overwhelming maelstrom of cerebral noise. He focuses on the hospital's faint, ambient smell of antiseptic and that seems to help.

Even Mycroft has been genuinely concerned about John, then. Interesting. Sherlock wonders which one the man worries about more right now, John or him – he has always thought Sherlock quite brittle when it comes to crises. Mycroft always, always underestimates people.

Then again, he may be overestimating Sherlock's ability to function right now.

The doctor is watching him, probably trying to gauge the meaning of Mycroft's question. His smile has waned, and he's now regarding Sherlock with the confusion of someone trying to decide what sort of language to use, how much to simplify things. It's an expression Sherlock hates – he's seen it plenty of times, in his youth, usually when people have been informed of certain diagnoses he had been given at an early age. John has never cared about any of that, assuming he even knows about them.

"As I said, he's relatively stable," the doctor finally tells them both.

"Stable?" Sherlock repeats, because he'd been distracted by the man's facial antics. The fear that gnaws at his guts like a persistent rodent must be still lowering his IQ at least by thirty points. Hateful.

"The laparotomy went well. The gastric surgeon repaired the small traumatic lesion in his descending colon and irrigated the abdominal cavity. Extended-spectrum antibiotics seem to be kicking in quite well already. He's young and healthy, which makes his prognosis good."

The words sound like gibberish to Sherlock, and he's compelled to ask if John is alright. Usually, he has no trouble understanding medical jargon, but his brain feels like damp cotton.

"You must excuse my brother; he's had a taxing few days," Mycroft tells the doctor dryly.

Sherlock wants to shove him into the nearest garbage chute for making such excuses.

He also wants the doctor to redo all the tests on John, maybe order a brain scan or two just to be on the safe side. Have they made sure they've found everything that's wrong with John? Are these good doctors? Couldn't Mycroft find some that are even better? Couldn't he have them flown in
from somewhere?

*Stable.* That's good, isn't it? It has to be. "He's going to be alright?" he directs his words to the
doctor and sounds more pleading that is dignified. He needs more data, he needs reassurance, he
needs promises, and he knows it's a pipe dream in an uncertain, unfair universe, but---

"Well," the doctor vacillates, "Complications are possible, but I'd say it is most likely he'll pull
through just fine once the septic shock settles."

*He'll pull through.* That translates to *not dying right now.* That's something. That's definitely
something. Can he trust these doctors? Has Mycroft done a background check?

"How long?" Sherlock then asks and wants to bite his tongue for uttering such an unprecise, lazily
formulated thing. He blinks, trying to ground himself with sensory information he alone controls.
He isn't quite sure what he intended to ask, but it must've been important.

"How long what?" the doctor asks.

Next to him, Mycroft shifts in his seat. "What my brother is likely attempting to inquire is, how
long until Dr Watson can be discharged or transported back to Britain?"

Mycroft always pronounces *Britain* with humble reverence like it's the most glorious thing on the
planet. His patriotism, to Sherlock, has always appeared to be one of the rare genuine things about
the man. Everything else is a carefully constructed theatrical performance; his whole life steered as
though he's always managing an intelligence operation.

"Assuming no complications develop, he likely needs to be kept under observation for
approximately a week. He could be transported by Medevac after a few days, provided that a
hospital bed awaits him at the London end."

The doctor had probably told Sherlock about the likely duration of the full recuperation period, but
he'd been too wrapped up in his own head to hear it. *Embarrassing.* "Three days. Then medical

Mycroft's face, at first headed for a frown, sets into something resembling realisation. "While
home nursing staff and all the necessary equipment can be arranged--"

Sherlock shoots him a dirty glance, sensing there will be a stern *no* arriving at the station of
Mycroft's train of thought by the end of that sentence. "There will be no nurses. I'm going to look
after him."

The doctor looks disinterested. Any conversation regarding what happens to his patient in London
later hardly concerns him, so he's probably wanting to get onto looking after other patients now
that the acute matter is settled.

Mycroft, however, is anything but done with the topic. He looks both curious and alarmed as he
studies Sherlock's expression. He must be trying to work out what has prompted this insistence on
taking on such an uncharacteristic duty.

Sherlock hardly knows himself why letting no one else sort this out feels so important. Shouldn't
John enjoy all the best modern medicine has to offer? Why does he suddenly want to shove John
into a box and hide him under the bed?

Looking at Mycroft, Sherlock suspects that a scolding reminiscent of their childhood is about to be
delivered. He's half-tempted to stick out his tongue but knows that it would most likely not be
conducive to the swift conclusion of the discussion.
"You have no medical training, not to mention that you're not exactly---" Mycroft suddenly pauses as though he was about to say something insulting. It's rare for Mycroft to pull his punches. It must mean he's read something on Sherlock's face indicating a mental state more fragile than usual.

"We survived out there just fine," Sherlock says pointedly, wanting to dissipate suspicions that he may not have been listening, "I doubt looking after an IV for fluids, pain medications and antibiotics requires much training."

"You're not a doctor. You won't know what to monitor." Mycroft argues condescendingly.

"I'm not, but he is," Sherlock barks at him.

Dr Jakobsson has probably picked up on the disbelief in Mycroft's tone because he perks up as well. "Dr Watson will not be able to do much beyond resting for weeks. He'll need assistance with meals, moving around---"

Sherlock flicks a dismissive hand at the doctor, not even looking at him. "Obvious. He's been ill before, and we've been fine."

"This is not the flu," Mycroft scoffs.

Sherlock knows he should argue, should make his case, but in the end, he opts for silence, merely knitting his lips tightly together and attempting to stare the other two current occupants of the room down.

Mycroft takes on the challenge for a minute, then rolls his eyes and performs an exasperated exhalation. "Let's postpone this discussion until we actually get to that point. May we see him now?"

Sherlock wants to slap himself when realisation dawns: that's what he had wanted to ask – how long until he can see John?

"I'll call the ward and find out what the situation is," Doctor Jakobsson promises. He digs out a phone and makes the call. Sherlock can only decipher a few words through his knowledge of Norwegian – Icelandic is rather far from both that and Danish, even though there are grammatical similarities and some words are almost the same.

"He has woken up from anaesthesia, but he's still tired and confused. You can see him, but we'll have to keep it brief," the doctor promises.

He's about to be reunited with John. Now that it's finally happening, why does the thought of doing what Sherlock has wanted the most, ever since they got separated out there, fill him with such dread?

Mycroft's glance sweeps him from top to bottom, takes in his bird's nest of tangled hair, the shadows of sleep deprivation and the sleeve of a brown, damp hospital pyjama sticking out from his coat. It hardly matters what his brother thinks of his personal grooming right now.

"Are you sure you want to do this right now?" Mycroft asks austerely.

Sherlock wants to scream. Why must he bicker with these idiots, when he needs to go to John?

Then again, it doesn't matter what he wants right now – the only important thing is that he tries to fix this, tries to repair what he has wrecked, if that's even possible. John hadn't needed Sherlock to survive in Afghanistan, but there he'd had his trained comrades by his side. Here, in the land
neither of them had planned on travelling to, he had had no one else to rely on besides Sherlock.

He needs to survey the damage, no matter how much it hurts. He has let sentiment creep into his life disguised in jumpers and tea and shared smiles in the dark after cases, and this is the result.

"Follow me," Doctor Jakobsson says, and they trail behind the man through several sets of doors. Sherlock is vaguely aware that he should probably be registering the route in case he needs to return this way, but his thoughts feel as though they've been scattered in the wind, and nothing he might try to memorise right now would probably stick.

"Gjörgæsludeildir – Intensive Care Unit" is what a sign above a pair of sliding doors says.

Suddenly, it sinks in where exactly they're going.

Just as they're about to walk through, Sherlock makes a U-turn with the smoothness of trying to lose someone tailing him and disappears into a restroom in the corridor.

He stands in front of the mirror, taking in the visage of himself.

His hair is a mess, his hands full of stinging scrapes since clambering over the sharp rocks of the lava fields known as hrauns in Icelandic had made him stumble numerous times. His shoes are wet and ruined, but thankfully they had been placed next to his trolley at the other hospital, so he's wearing them. His toes feel macerated – sore yet numb from what is probably frostbite. His trousers and shirt had been rain-soaked and ruined, so in their stead, he's wearing the almost formless, and thus rather ill-fitting, ugly, brown hospital pyjama under his Belstaff coat. He's also sporting a pair of heelless tube socks ubiquitous in many a public hospital.

The cold that seemed to have seeped into his very bones is gone, but it has left in its wake an enervated exhaustion. He's still shivering, as though his inner thermostat has gone utterly mad. It's warm in the hospital, but he doesn't want to give up the shield of his coat.

He'd had a space blanket in the hospital. The sound it had made when he moved around it had made him feel as though someone was shoving an ice pick into his eardrum. Somehow, it had reminded of John popping bubble wrap at home. It drives Sherlock absolutely crazy because he never knows when the next horrid pop will come. He should have explained it to John how much it bothers him, but sometimes he lets the man have his innocent fun since he allows Sherlock much graver crimes in the context of flatmateship.

There are many things he ought to have said out loud. Why has he wasted so much time being silent in the flat when he could have been talking to John?

There's dirt under his cuticles. He needs to look presentable, or John might worry, and that won't be good for him. Not in his state. He rinses his hands under the tap – the water smells very mildly of sulphur – curious – and attempts to coax soap out of the wall dispenser without success. It isn't empty, but there isn't a lever to operate it in sight, and if it has a movement detector then he has no idea how to activate it.

The universe is now mocking him in the form of a plastic soap dispenser.

He slams his palm on the offending contraption to no avail. He takes a fist to it. He may have also yelled some select expletives. Still no soap.

Mycroft slips into the restroom, all composed empathy and unconcealed worry and carrying the bag containing the clothes he'd brought for Sherlock. Of course the man had been sensible enough to bring some from home. Mycroft is always useful in a crisis. He relishes them.
Well, perhaps not this one.

"Why are you having a row with a soap dispenser?" Mycroft asks, raising his brows as he takes in the scene. He puts down his briefcase on the floor. It's an expensive leather one – a bag the likes of which he wouldn't usually be willing to put down anywhere in a public restroom.

Sherlock doesn't reply. He leans on the sink, chest heaving. He lets his head droop down, dirty curls cascading over his eyes to hide the sting of saltwater pooling into the corners of his eyes.

He doesn't remember any details of what the doctor had said anymore. He isn't even sure if they had been conversing in English, or whether Mycroft had used his flight time from London City to Reykjavík to supplement his passable Norwegian with whatever extra letters and grammar would turn it into Icelandic?

He should have been better prepared for the possibility of ending up in this country. He chastises himself for not learning Icelandic. Then again; would that have allowed him to formulate an escape plan earlier, one that would have spared John from all this? Perhaps not, because a sheep farmer had told him – a sheep farmer he'd met in the middle of the wilderness who had helped him – that here everyone speaks English. There's a historical reason for it, US army barracks in Keflavík, shut down in the early 2000s----

"Sherlock? You're not listening, are you?"

Mycroft regards him with pity, his face looking rather jet-lagged. The flight from London to Reykjavík is not long, but he must not have had much sleep since Sherlock's whereabouts had become unknown. "We need to put you in a bed. They must have told you repeatedly at the A&E you absconded from that you're exhausted and dehydrated. You need rest. You can barely stand."

Sherlock's head snaps around to glare at him. "Not until I've----"
Mycroft nods. "Of course. Not until you've seen him. Do you need a moment alone before we go in?"

Sherlock shakes his head fervently but still doesn't make a move towards the door.

The worst edge of the panic is receding, and he now feels similar to when the last bits of post-case adrenaline begin to dissipate. Usually this state would devolve to him becoming first ravenous and then sleepy, and John would then lead him to bed after making sure he'd filled his stomach with takeout.

John has been there for him so long now that he suddenly realises he doesn't remember how to do those things on his own – how to fulfil the stupid needs of the transport without being mollycoddled just a little. He should feel pathetic over that, really, but John does not do these things because Sherlock can't, he does them because he wants to and because that is how the world is supposed to work when everything is fine.

It's not fine, now, because John could have died and Sherlock feels cast adrift even by the theoretical possibility.

He doesn't know what to say to John. He tells Mycroft as much, fingers still curled around the edge of the sink like a lifeline. He never tells Mycroft these things, because Lord knows what the man will do with such knowledge of his weaknesses. Mycroft could easily be mean at this point, remind him that this is what it's like for everybody else when Sherlock keeps almost getting himself killed. He could point that out, relish the sweet nectar of giving Sherlock a taste of his own medicine, but he doesn't.

This is one of the reasons he has not banished Mycroft from his life: when push comes to shove, his brother can be reasonable and is capable of containing the told-you-sos that must be threatening to break out of his brain like the contents of a well-beaten pinata. That, and he fixes things when they get broken.

Mycroft can't fix this.

He places his palm on Sherlock's shoulder, fixing Sherlock's gaze with his own. The contact is grounding. It's bearable. His brother is one of the only people allowed to touch Sherlock, and he only does it under exceptional circumstances.

"John Watson is stable, but still fighting off the remains of septic shock. There's nothing you can do at this point except hover and worry, neither of which is going to do him much good. We are going to see him briefly, and then you and I are going to take a taxi to an acceptable hotel. You are going to eat, you are going to sleep, and in the morning, we'll come back. Is that understood?"

Mycroft's fingers curl into Sherlock's stiff shoulder muscles. If he doesn't reply, there will be a slight shake performed soon, and his brain feels scrambled enough already.

"Yes," Sherlock croaks with a hoarse voice, swallowing down unshed tears.

When they reach the doors of the intensive care unit, he still tastes salt water and fear.
Chapter titles have been borrowed from Björk songs (some of them from her collaborations with Mount Wittenberg Orca), and the story title is from Tanita Tikaram's "Twist in My Sobriety".

The tale of the English-speaking hunter is based on a story told to me by an American couple traveling around northern Iceland: they got lost and came across a sheep farmer chap; they were worried he wouldn't understand them but to their astonishment he spoke perfect English. Due to the American military influence the great majority of Icelanders do speak amazing English, and they also understand Swedish since it's somewhat related but Swedes, Danes and Norwegians in general do not understand much of what they're saying.

Betaed by 7PercentSolution and ASilverGirl. Much obliged.
A mere three metres now separate them from the heavy steel doors of the compound. They are still running, even though it's unlikely anyone is in pursuit. Whoever their kidnappers are – whoever they had been – they are now all incapacitated, if not dead. Most of them are lying on the floor in unsightly heaps of flesh and bone in one of the underground levels due to an explosion of a gas pipe rigged by Sherlock to ensure their escape. Brutal and efficient. Unavoidable.

It's not as though they hadn't first tried to negotiate their release. John had even tried asking nicely, and their captors had threatened to break his thumbs. It soon became apparent that there would be no demand for ransom; their captors' plan was purely retaliatory and thus likely excruciatingly cruel.

Lungs burning and chest muscles heaving from the run uphill, Sherlock slams his palm onto the pneumatic button that opens the blast doors. They slide only halfway open – the electrical wiring controlling them from down below may well have become faulty in the explosion. Thankfully, the actual blast has not reached this far and harmed the doors themselves.

After some stuttering and creaking, the doors begin descending again, threatening to trap them in the damp air of the near dark of the entrance hall. Sherlock quickly pushes a barrel underneath while John tries to hold them open with one arm, grunting and grimacing until he decides to trust that the heavy metal barrel will hold, at least for a moment. His other arm is in an odd position across his abdomen, but Sherlock doesn't have the time to analyse such an observation right now.

They limbo themselves beneath the door into a cold wind and grey daylight. To ensure that they can now safely take a moment to get their bearings, Sherlock kicks the barrel backwards to deter anyone left alive from following them. Door slides down with a reverberating clank.

There's no way in anymore – not that they'd want to go back – but there is no alternate shelter in sight, either, Sherlock realises as he takes in the scenery. They're standing on top of a ridge. Before their eyes, snow-flecked highlands full of sharp-edged, black boulders spread wide. Low mountains frame vistas of brown-grey moss and small streams. On the horizon looms a wall of snow, half-shrouded in cottony clouds but high above, embraced by clear blue sky. The colours are bleak, volcanic and desolate. There are no roads in sight.

It's hard to judge the hour from the low-hanging sun but, in all likelihood, it's close to noon. Since their phones had been confiscated, neither of them have had access to the time since they were taken captive. They'd been flown in by some type of cargo plane, eyes and ears covered. The flight had taken several hours, which did little to narrow down their destination location. He and John had only been able to have short, stolen conversations – lest their mysterious captors hear – but one thing had been agreed upon: they were clearly not on British soil anymore.

"Well, that was---" Sherlock starts.
John interrupts him by raising his other arm. "If you're about to say tedious, then I won't be responsible for my actions." Sherlock would have expected a sardonic grin, the knowing and conspiratorial smile he always gives Sherlock after they've dodged a proverbial or literal bullet and come out of a case on top. This time, no such expression materialises. Instead, John looks wary, expectant, even ominous. Sherlock doesn't like it. Is it just because they've been hauled so far from their native soil?

"I was going to say unnecessary," Sherlock replies dryly. "They could have tortured and killed us in London. Why go to all this trouble, even if this place could easily hide a massacre of corpses?"

Sherlock turns a semicircle on his heels. The shape of one mountain in the distance arouses the ghost of a memory – something in his Mind Palace correlates to it. He doesn't press his fingertips onto his temples, even though the haptic sensation often helps him focus. At any rate, he tries to avoid doing it in public. He knows John would never mock these... things he sometimes needs to do, but he still feels uneasy even under such accepting and familiar scrutiny.

Thankfully, it only takes him a very brief moment to find what he's looking for in the geography section of his vast cerebral library. "We're in---"

John shifts on his feet impatiently. "---Iceland," he interjects, stealing Sherlock's deduction.

"How did you work that out?" he asks John, genuinely curious. It's not often that John matches the pace of his intellect, and he's quite sure that John has never travelled to Iceland before.

John cocks his head towards the bunker. "A manufacturer's plaque in the fuse box of the elevator," John says, and Sherlock nods.

Sherlock's brows knit together. John always gives Sherlock's reasoning the space and the audience it deserves because he obviously enjoys listening to his deductive flow. Why does John suddenly appear downright fretful? They aren't in immediate danger anymore, and the aftermath of this ordeal will undoubtedly be mopped up by a certain alleged small-time government official with Sherlock's surname. The issue of the background organisation of their captors being yet unidentified remains, but that is hardly their most pressing issue right now.

He sticks his hands in his coat pockets. The wind is biting, whispering a promise of snowfall, which fits with the grey hue of the clouds in the distance. The location is, indeed, perfect for the disposal of the bodies of two Englishmen; the highlands in the interior of a small country that does not even have roads that are open all year round.

Sherlock realises his hands are shaking, but it's out of excitement and not shock. This is what they do, the two of them. Soon, the jittery nervousness will give way to the deliciously devious flood of post-case adrenaline. It makes Sherlock almost drunk with himself, with life, intoxicated by John's presence. They may be in the middle of the wilderness in a foreign country, but they're in this together. The two of them, against the world, nothing new to it.

Just the way Sherlock likes it. He glances John with the sprout of a smile, but it wanes when he takes in the full sight of the man. John is standing not in his usual parade rest, but spine snapped oddly straight, an arm across his torso as though he had been reaching for something in an opposite pocket.

He remembers in a flash that John had held his arm in that peculiar position before, back when he'd been too busy trying not to get buried alive to analyse the gesture further.

John doesn't ask how Sherlock has deduced their whereabouts, even though he usually always asks about these things, always. He seems distracted and worried, and he looks pale.
Deduction: something is going on, something that is raising alarms in his head. Sherlock turns to face John and tries to see, attempts to synthesise what he sees into a theory, to make sense of what he sees in the context of John being more impatient than usual. His gaze narrows. He must have missed something, which isn't like him. "What's wrong?" he demands. He isn't in the mood to play games; he needs information if he's to reason their way out of here.

John looks sheepish, now. "Promise me you won't freak out. I need you not to," he pleads, and it's not the tone he uses when he wants Sherlock to stop doing something at home that's highly disruptive and dangerous but interesting yet knows Sherlock will only keep such a promise until he comes up with a good enough excuse to get back to it. John knows that Sherlock can never help himself; what he wants to do, he simply goes and does and damn the consequences. No, John's current tone is not that endeared, habitual thing he knows is useless but does anyway – his message must be urgent and gravely momentous.

John presses his arm tighter across his torso and gasps.

The cause cannot be anything else than pain.

Sherlock's heart leaps into a faster pace, causing a sensation like a swallowing down a golf ball. It passes. It must.

John's breathing is still off. Before Sherlock has a chance to ask why, John wraps both arms around his own midsection. "Sherlock, there's----"

Sherlock wastes no time in striding closer. He draws his hands out of his pockets, then lets them drop to his sides as he comes to a halt right beside John, unsure what to do.

He needs information; he needs data, why is John not telling him everything this instant?

John finally opens the eyes he had been momentarily pinching shut. He's slightly greyishly pale but still meets Sherlock's eyes with a stern gaze. "Promise me you won't freak out."

"I don't make a habit of 'freaking out'," Sherlock protests, but he's aware of the unease in his tone.

"Please, John, say that you're not hurt!"

John starts pawing at the hem of his parka – thankfully, their captors hadn't bothered to remove their coats; they'd just been duct-taped together back-to-back, their wrists cuffed and ankles tied with rope in a rather unprofessional and messy manner. He drags his shirt from underneath his trouser collar and lifts it along with the parka, revealing a sliver of skin on his lower torso.

Sherlock drops down onto one knee to see better, fingers already reaching for the shirt to raise it further.

There's a wound there, on the left side of John's lower abdomen, about five centimetres long. It is narrow, slit-like, with clean-cut edges. It's trickling blood, but the flow is sluggish and slow. The lateral parts of it look shallow, but in the middle, Sherlock can't see how deep it extends. His mind leaps to a higher gear, focuses, narrows down, directs all its powers of observation to this one small detail.

He's a war general, and the information flowing into his neurons are his troops.

*Stab wound, non-serrated blade, left lower quadrant along the midclavicular line – organs at risk include large intestine and small intestine, depending on depth. No significant bleeding – no arteries have been punctured. Additional risks: sepsis, slower significant bleeding, injury to relatively superficial musculature; will not compromise ability to walk in itself, but pain and*
infection may begin to limit that.

Conclusion: need to get a move on, find help, fast!

Sherlock rummages around his coat pocket for the packet of tissues he is certain is still there, courtesy of the flu he’d had a few weeks ago. He digs out a wad of clean ones and presses it onto the wound. Then, he gazes up at John's who's frowning as he's trying to peer down to see the wound better himself.

The blaring alarm going off in Sherlock’s head had managed to make him forget one thing, one bit of pertinent information he needs to acquire. How?

As usual, John appears to have read his mind: ”One of the unarmed guards managed to slip a blade in after I pulled that other guy off you,” he explains. One of their captors had collapsed on top of Sherlock after he’d managed a satisfyingly precise uppercut on their jaw, likely causing at least a whiplash injury in their neck.

"Blade? What blade?" Sherlock demands. Typical of John not to provide the pertinent details first.

"One of those Swiss Army things. Sunk in up to the hilt. Must've been sharp, I barely felt any pain until we stopped running."

"It's the adrenaline," Sherlock says too sharply, too dismissively. He's supposed to be empathic in this situation, isn't he? Then again, he's expected to solve this, to get them out of there, which means that he can't go soft now, can't waste time on social niceties. John will understand, he always does.

Sherlock leans down on one knee to inspect closer, daring to lift the upper corner of the wad of tissues John has now taken over pressing down on. Then, he separates the edges of the wound slightly by pulling at the skin with his thumbs in opposite directions. John hisses but doesn't stop him. While the trickle of blood is slow, it keeps concealing whether deeper structures have been pierced. The only things Sherlock can be certain of right now is that the wound is relatively small and John is now smiling at him – though it's a sad, resigned, almost apologetic one – so clearly he isn't about to expire right now. He curses under his breath for not coming up with anything else to do to investigate further; he doesn't know how a surgeon would inspect such an injury. Sherlock does know a lot about injuries, but he's not a physician. Diagnostics is a form of deduction, based on clinical evidence and theoretical knowledge, but they told him early on during careers counselling at Harrow that while he could have excelled at that part, the whole communicating-with-patients lark would have wrecked any attempt at becoming an actual doctor.

It's easier to deal with the dead, anyway. "How superficial does it feel?" he asks John.

"I don't know," John says.

Sherlock almost snaps at him: what do you mean 'you don't know', but refrains. When it comes to the practical side of medicine, he is forced to lean on John and if John doesn't know these things, then how could Sherlock possibly be any better informed?

One avenue of inquiry finally presents itself: Sherlock knows Swiss army knives. The largest models have file-shaped blades, the maximum length of them being 6 centimetres. That should be plenty enough to pierce the peritoneum in someone with John's physique, unfortunately. Sunk in up to the hilt – isn't that what John had said?

"What did you do with the knife?" Sherlock interrogates, replacing the tissues and standing up. He doesn't stop pressing on them.
John’s fingers are curling and uncurling by his thighs – not out of anger but probably as a means to distract himself from the pain. "I didn’t do anything with it – he pulled his hand back, holding it and I managed to deck him with a rock." John begins to demonstrate what he’d done, but halts, barely stopping himself from doubling over. He takes a deep breath and swallows, and Sherlock’s innards twist as he watches the barely contained pain trying to contort John’s feeble attempt at a smile into a grimace.

Sherlock digs out a clean wad of tissues which John accepts and takes over pressing it against his stomach. Sherlock removes his scarf and uses it to tie the tissues against the wound, creating a makeshift belt. John watches him, standing with his back ramrod straight, sweat trickling down his temple. Eventually, he slumps forward a bit, and Sherlock barely manages to grab his arm before he drops down to his haunches, dipping his head below his knees.

It’s good that they have their coats – they’d been snatched off the street. At least they’ll be warm enough, even if this terrain will shred their shoes to ribbons. John is wearing hard-soled walking shoes, but Sherlock is in his usual leather oxfords.

John manages to scramble back onto his feet, the colour of his skin slowly regaining a rosier tint. Sherlock steps back, and John’s shirt and parka descend on the makeshift bandage as he takes a step back to lean against a boulder. He closes his eyes for a moment, working hard to try to catch his breath. He doesn’t look as though he’s about to pass out anymore but not good, either.

Sherlock is breathing faster now as well, swatting away the first tendrils of panic. He needs to focus, needs to make a plan, needs to know more if he’s to calculate how much time they have. "Is it through the peritoneum, do you think?" he asks.

John blinks. Then, his gaze becomes more focused. "You tell me."

His tone, his posture, everything is signalling barely suppressed pain to Sherlock. The blood in the old tissues, now dropped on the ground, had been dark, flecked with darker particles. Sherlock can’t postpone the inevitable deduction any longer: perforated bowel, most likely.

"I don’t know," Sherlock lies. It’s not good for John to have to worry right now. It won’t change what they need to do.

"There’s a first," John hisses between clenched teeth.

"I’m not a doctor; I’m not you!" Sherlock parries and instantly regrets it.

"I’d need to explore the wound to say for sure, but it wouldn’t be smart to do it without clean instruments. Get us out of here," John commands.

Sherlock extends an arm, which John swats away angrily. "I can walk." He proves his point by setting off towards where the ground begins to slope down. His progress is slower than his usual walking pace, but it’s... enough. It’ll have to be.

Sherlock hurries to his side and steals a brief, sweeping glance to make sure he isn’t about to pass out after all. He then turns his line of sight elsewhere, looking for a route, because if he keeps looking at John, he can’t concentrate on working out their location.

The distinct mountain shape he had recognised has to be Herdubreid, Iceland’s national mountain, the photo of which Sherlock remembers seeing in a book about glacial geology. Since it’s on the right, they must be facing south. They’re in the interior, which is drawing an infuriating blank in his knowledge base besides the fact that the area is so desolate that NASA had done landing practice here.
The vegetation is scarce. It all looks desolate, volcanic, untouched by human hand – just like another planet. Only some patches of ground they can see as they make their way down from the ridge housing the bunker look lush and green – judging by the shape, they must be the bordering meadows of rivers.

There are roads in Iceland, of course, but they mostly just circle the island nation along the coastlines. Mountain routes? It's May, so not all the routes piercing the wilderness will even be open. Sherlock curses under his breath; why the hell hasn't he memorised them? It's John's fault that he knows too much about Star Trek or War or whatever, but is missing vital information such as Icelandic topography. John forces him to spend evening after evening marinating his brain in drivel, and Sherlock puts up with it because he'd be happy staring at a wall if that came with John's company.

Once they have descended to the valley floor, Sherlock surveys the possibility of a road on the opposite side of the ridge. No such luck; it appears that this bunker, looking like a setting for a WW2 film, is only accessible by helicopter. They had been flown in, shifted from a plane to a helicopter at some point, but obviously, their transport had not lingered around. Whatever radio or satellite phone system their captors had been using the contact others is now behind the bunker doors, likely at least partly destroyed by the explosion. There are no vehicles within sight that they could commandeering. Shame. Hotwiring a 4WD jeep would have been child's play for him.

Surely there are mountain huts for hikers somewhere in these parts, or perhaps hunting cabins?

"I'm not getting any younger or less stabbed by standing here," John says, and usually such remarks come with an amused gentleness, but this time there's a sharp, accusatory edge there. John had fared admirably clambering down the side of the ridge, but the descent seems to have taken a lot out of him.

The deduction stemming from John's tone is frightening: John is worried. Then again, he'd be a naive fool of a doctor if he weren't.

The fact of their predicament threatens to rattle Sherlock to the core if he allows himself to think about it carefully. John is his backup, his protector, not the other way around. He's the brains, but John is what keeps things together.

There may be an infection developing already. Things leaking into the peritoneal cavity, causing first peritonitis and then----

He pivots on his heels. "John?"

"Mm-hmm?" John pushes himself off the rock face of a boulder he has been leaning against, probably assuming Sherlock has now formulated a travel plan. He looks somewhat composed and less pale, now. Perhaps the makeshift bandage is doing at least something to the pain. Sherlock wishes he had his secret stash from home with him – heroin hasn't been used legally for pain in a long time, but once it had been an important painkiller on the battlefield, and cocaine could keep them both going well beyond exhaustion.

"How fast does intra-abdominal sepsis develop?" Sherlock asks, proud of himself for keeping his tone so calculated and calm.

"I'm not discussing that with you, you tosser, because it's not going to do us any good. We need a game plan, now."

Suddenly, he sways a little, his face ashen. Sherlock steps closer.
"I'm fine, fine, just--- just--- do that thing, your thing, the deduction thing," John says and presses his left arm onto his stomach again. He grits his teeth and Sherlock's hand hovers near his elbow uselessly.

"It's not that easy," Sherlock says quietly. It feels like a confession and admission of guilt. He lets his hand drop.

"Everything you do you make it look as easy as falling off a cliff and equally sensible. You have the compass directions figured out?" John asks, squinting as he gazes out towards the south.

They don't have compasses. Their mobile phones had been dropped off the plane into the Atlantic, or at least that's what they'd been told.

Fear would tear Sherlock to pieces like a hyena if he let it. He needs to focus on John, on finding the way, on being who he pretends to be when he tries to be very clever, and John believes that, he really does and sometimes, just sometimes---

“This place looks like Mordor,” John scoffs, looking out into the distance.

“Bordeaux?” Sherlock asks, suspecting he'd heard wrong.

“No, Mordor.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sherlock mutters with his eyes closed, his focus already elsewhere. He’s upending everything he finds in the Mind Palace regarding geography and Iceland and wilderness survival. He has a box of matches in his breast pocket. Why had John confiscated all his cigarettes months ago but left the matches?

As far as he knows, their best bet is to head north. South of the Icelandic highlands lies nothing but glaciers and emptiness. There are bigger villages and cities up north, but is the terrain less mountainous that way and navigating it thus doable?

Iceland. Iceland. A ridiculously small island nation that had survived ridiculously well a major economic upheaval. Whaling. Strong American influence until the closing of the Keflavik military base in ---- 1998? 2001? Sheep. Fishing. Some world-renowned novelists. Recent volcanic eruptions with Strombolian and Vulcanian phases at Eyjafjallajökull and Grimsvötn, the former causing major interruptions in air travel. There are three major glaciers in the middle.

The edges of two of those glaciers had been visible from the bunker ridge – or can he be sure of that? Maybe they’d just been multiple tongues of one glacier? It's surprisingly hard to gauge the scale here. Still, as long as they keep those suspected glaciers behind their backs, they should be headed towards the north, towards civilisation. They might be facing a walk of up to over a hundred kilometres, judging by the size of the entire country.

Dressed for a crisp day out in an English city during late Spring, rather than a chilling day out near the arctic circle, a stroll in Regent's park this will not be.
I am awestruck, honoured and most delighted over the reception this story has received. I love this fandom.
Their progress across the landscape gets slower and slower as the light wanes. Nightfall is gradual in this latitude, the sun decadently lounging at the edge of the horizon for hours. In a few weeks, it will barely dip below it during the night.

Both of them seem to be trying their damnedest to pretend that the reason for their snail-pace progress is that they're tired and their shoes are unsuited to the rugged terrain of snow-flecked lava fields, but Sherlock is acutely aware that the real reason is that John is in an increasing amount of pain. It's evident in the way he keeps supporting his midriff with an arm draped across it and how he takes great care in progressing over boulders that entail twisting his torso or bending his back. He's also out of breath in a manner out of proportion to his fitness level.

His wound is not bleeding, at least. Sherlock has checked this, repeatedly. John seems slightly confused and surprised by his medical diligence. Wouldn't he do the same if their roles were reversed? Sherlock suspects that he would fuss like mad.

"Does it ever get warm here?" John wonders out loud when they stop to get their bearings.

"July is most likely the warmest month. We're in the subarctic zone, but the North Atlantic Current makes the climate more temperate than one would expect. There's also the Atlantic subpolar gyre, of which the Irminger current—"


It's John's fault, really, for initiating what Sherlock now realises must've been an attempt at small talk to lighten the mood. Should he apologise? Should John apologise for being waspish?

A quick sideways glance reveals that John is forcibly exhaling against his knuckles. Sherlock wastes no time in shedding his gloves and passing them unceremoniously to John.

"Thanks," John says and pulls them on. They're big for him.

John then sighs and looks sheepish. "Look, I didn't mean---"

"It's fine," Sherlock says pointedly. They are both distracted, tired and in want of a bed and a meal, neither of which are likely to be available anytime soon. This is not a time to bicker over social niceties or Sherlock's lack thereof. He doesn't want others to apologise for his shortcomings; John does it sometimes but this isn't something Sherlock has ever requested help with. It reeks of pity, and it's hateful.

"You having memorised the whole bloody internet may well be what's going to get us out of here," John insists, and to Sherlock, his childlike faith in his abilities while his own intestines are leaking into his abdomen is nothing short of ridiculous.

Sherlock tries to ignore his blistered, smarting feet which keep messing with his focus. He climbs an eroded mound of volcanic rubble to see if he can still see the protruding edge of a glacier on which he has been trying to keep an eye. Disappointingly enough, that part of the landscape is now covered in cottony mist. The Icelandic highlands have the feel of a large bowl, wedged between the glaciers and mountains off to the west and east, the tops of which are now also covered in soft, suffocating clouds. In the north, a more open vista looms. That's where Sherlock
covered in soft, suffocating clouds. In the north, a more open vista looms. That's where Sherlock thinks they'll be most likely to find a road, so that's where they need to head.

"I am open to ideas, you know. You're the one with the army experience," Sherlock offers.

"They didn't train us for this, that's for sure." John slumps down to sit on a rock.

The sight makes Sherlock restless, even if he knows he must allow John to rest every once in a while. He should probably say something else, something more, to start a conversation to try to get John's attention away from all the useless worrying.

In the end, it's John who speaks up first. "Looks a bit like Yorkshire in winter, doesn't it, only with a lot more doom," he says, taking in the scenery.

Sherlock gives him a tight smile. He'd laugh if his sense of humour weren't overrun with a pressing need to focus on deducing the compass points. There are no trees from which he could assess the branch growth direction. Neither of them has analogue wristwatches, and the stars aren't visible, so a flimsy knowledge base of Icelandic landmarks is all he has to go on. At least moss patterns on rocks and the positioning of anthills have offered some hints as to the direction from which most sunlight comes. If he remembers correctly, there is some kind of a stick-and-shadow method exists which he has neglected to learn, and had John been taught that in the army he would have probably already volunteered the information. Sherlock could very likely work it out, but there are no sticks in this damned country since there are no trees, only heathers and small, gnarly bushes.

It's quiet. Only the occasional shrill cries of ground-dwelling birds break the silence. There is no wind, no sound of traffic, nothing pointing to human life. It's the sort of a silence that is often fetishised in world literature – in books about philosophical hermits living in the desert and depictions of dead calms during historical sea journeys. Sherlock suspects that feeling at ease in this level of desolation requires one to be at peace and acquainted with oneself. He's unlikely ever to reach such a state. Right now, the silence is like an echo chamber in which his thoughts and fears are multiplied in volume and impact.

The last rays of the sun are now gilding the landscape in warmer hues. All the colours go well together, but this is still not the bright, beautiful display of holiday postcards. It is a tableau that cares little for the bourgeois rules of human aesthetic. It simply is – distant, alienating, lawless and hostile.

Sherlock thinks John might enjoy the bleak beauty of such a place, had they come here under different circumstances. John seems more at peace with the world than him, more of a fatalist, more accepting of how things are. ‘With you, rules and laws are pretty much a matter of perspective’, he had once told Sherlock. He doubts whether John has ever considered how taxing it is to inhabit a world so devoid of framework and context. Life must be much easier for John, who seems to effortlessly move between these worlds – the comforting life of a normal person, and the danger and excitement of being Sherlock's companion.

When it's not a good day, Sherlock often wonders how easily an alternate source of excitement could entice John away from him. Is their relationship a transient state, an in-between place on a route to a more decent, more normal life? For John, their life is like visiting an amusement park, isn't it? He can come in, have a thrill, and when the lights are about to be turned off, he can leave at will for the comfort of a more common existence. He is free to leave, but Sherlock is always left behind, standing in the dark, waiting for the lonely night to slither in and bring its demons.

Loneliness in the form of a Johnless existence would be an infinite version of that nightfall. When John is up in his bedroom, sound asleep, Sherlock finds the presence of another human in the flat comforting. When he's trying to shove his demons back into the closets of the Mind Palace where
they belong, it's reassuring to know that if it all becomes too much, there's a door he could knock on. John would be annoyed at being woken, but he would put on a dressing gown, come downstairs, make tea and make things easier with his mere presence.

John has no idea of his own importance. The situation seems so unbalanced: being with Sherlock, he gets his fix of excitement while always having an exit at his disposal. Sherlock, on the other hand, pretends to have everything he didn't even know he needed until John limped into his life, but he is only allowed to enjoy those things through the proverbial glass of friendship.

Sometimes John well-meaningly attempts to combine the two worlds he operates in, to shove his sane, normal things into Sherlock's world: girlfriends, rugby pals, birthday gatherings at the pub. When he does that, things always, always, go wrong. Either Sherlock lingers in the periphery like a bothersome ghost, or he tries to join in on the normality. The end result does not vary: worlds collide, people get embarrassed and insulted, and John is forced to choose to either follow Sherlock home or to stay and placate. He always chooses Sherlock, even if he has just been dumped or embarrassed and all that is entirely Sherlock's fault. Things backfire even when Sherlock has tried his damnedest not to be himself. Sherlock wonders why even that tends to annoy John since otherwise, he seems to very much prefer the real Sherlock and not the housetrained version everyone has been trying to turn him into all his life. 'Stop being so bloody weird,' John had growled at him once when he'd served tea for him and that week's candidate for getting a leg over.

He's not... right, in John's opinion, when he's himself, and he's certainly not right when he's trying to be something else. Was it because he'd neglected to serve any biscuits?

Why does John stay? He constantly gets inconvenienced and put in danger because he shares his life with Sherlock. What would need to happen for John to prioritise an easier existence, his health and his sanity over their relationship? Sherlock has no idea, just like he has no idea what good things John sees in him. Are those supposed good qualities enough to carry them through this ordeal, to keep them alive? The risks they have enjoyed pretending are only theoretical have now become a reality. John got hurt pulling an attacker off Sherlock. Will that make him realise the price he's paying for their lifestyle?

Sherlock bites his lip. Why are these fears resurfacing right now? He has more pressing things about which to worry. He helps John back up into a standing position with a tight, apologetic smile that probably doesn't even reach his eyes.

They continue walking. John is slow, too slow.

This is not a novel dread for Sherlock – this phobia over the transience of the happiness that has crept into his bones during their time together. Good things in Sherlock's life have never tended to last; he's somehow incompatible with them. He had been hoping John would be the exception.

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

Luck is on their side: after an additional hour of painstaking scrambling over treacherously moss-covered lava rocks which provide a constant threat of a twisted ankle, they arrive at a small clearing. Rife with heathers and coarse grass, it's shielded from the elements by the rock face of a massive, eroded, iron-red boulder. What makes the sight promising is that off to the side stands a small wooden cabin. Its roof has holes which have been covered with nailed-on pieces of tarp, the window sills have cracks, and the place looks abandoned, but compared with the prospect of spending the cold night outside, it is a sight most welcome.
"Oh, thank fuck," John exhales. "You think anybody's home?"

Since no roads lead here, the locals must visit by horseback or with a snowmobile or jeep suitable for negotiating such terrain. Even if someone lived here, that person would have to have a means to get to the nearest town at regular intervals. No such vehicle – equine or otherwise – is within sight, so the answer to John's question is likely not what they were hoping.

"I doubt it," Sherlock replies and wastes no time in crossing the clearing and hurrying up the short steps to the building. There is no lock on the door – no thieves in these parts? He knocks, and the old wood rattles on its hinges.

There's no answer. He glances at John over his shoulder with a shrug, which John mirrors.

Without even asking if it's necessary, Sherlock hurries back down the steps and offers him an arm which is gingerly accepted. They make their way up the creaky steps.

Inside the small cabin, the air is dusty but odourless. There is no electricity; half-burnt candles are strewn on table tops. There's a narrow kitchenette with rusty pots and pans and a bedroom with stacked beds. No sheets or pillows are available, only a pile of thick woollen blankets that have been doubling as duvets. Sherlock's gaze keeps scanning for signs that someone might have been here recently, but he finds nothing. There's no way to know whether this place is still used or not. At least it offers shelter against the elements.

John slumps down in the first chair he finds. He keeps shifting, trying to find a comfortable position. Sherlock watches him, feeling utterly useless. Eventually, John wrenches himself back into a standing position and slowly makes his way to the bedroom, running a palm along a wall for support. He divests himself of his shoes and his coat and takes over the lower bunk bed. Sherlock follows him, grabs two of the blankets, dusts them as best he can and spreads both of them over John, who is now shivering violently, his forehead clammy and his eyes bright. Fever.

"Is this alright, are you comfortable?" Sherlock asks.

John gathers his features into a tired smile and anger slithers into Sherlock's mood because someone in John's condition shouldn't be wasting his energy like that. John's expression does make him feel a bit lighter – if John can smile, things cannot be that bad, not yet. This is what he does for Sherlock: reassures, consoles when Sherlock is unsure of himself, and even though he should see through such a smokescreen of white lies and politeness, it always works. When John smiles at him, it's hook, line and sinker.

"It's fine," John says and smiles still. The purpose of it seems to be consolation, which to Sherlock seems is deeply unreasonable since John is the one with a hazardous infection brewing in his intestines.

He doesn't know what to do. Even if he had medical supplies at his disposal – even if they were at home – he wouldn't know what to do.

"I'm not a healthcare professional", Sherlock says to no one in particular, fingers twitching at his sides with frustration. "I can't do much."

This pathetically obvious statement is an apology for the fact that Sherlock has still not come up with a better plan than walk north. They're wasting time resting, but John can't possibly walk much further without a break, no matter how much he pretends to still be relatively alright.

I don't know what to do.
Sherlock hides his shaking hands in his coat pockets, and his fingers curl into the bottom seams so hard his knuckles must be turning white.

"You're doing fine, stop fidgeting,---" John pauses, mouth still poised for at least a word more, but the pain takes over, and he has to focus on breathing.

Sherlock would give his left thumb to have heard the last of that sentence. Was his name the word that was omitted? Unlikely, since John has no qualms about using it and it's just the two of them here. An aborted endearment? He's selfish, so selfish and weak for wanting such things for himself right now.

"How would you treat this at the clinic?" Sherlock asks once John's breathing finally settles into a calmer rhythm.

"We wouldn't; we'd send the patient to a hospital A&E. A CT would be taken, and there would probably be surgery--- Well, it's kind of pointless to discuss that, since I'm hardly going to tell you to pick up a rusty butter knife and have at it. I would need antibiotics, though, not just surgery. IV fluids, too."

Even though he's speaking in hypothetical, John does need those things right now; Sherlock knows that much. The first scientists to experiment with intravenous fluid therapy used a goose's hollow feather as a makeshift cannula, but there are no birds here. He can't magic things out of thin air, can he?

He returns to what passes for the living room and methodically goes through the cabinets and upends all the drawers and makes an even worse mess of the kitchen than it already is. Finally, he finds an old, brown bottle of aspirin, the tablets inside of which have been half-ground to a powder through the years. The contents of the container smell mildly of vinegar.

Acetylsalicylic acid degrades into acetic acid and salicylic acid. It would still retain its analgesic properties, but lose its unfortunate effects on platelet aggregation. Perfect.

His search yields nothing further regarding medication, but there's a vintage packet of English Breakfast teabags in a familiar international brand hiding under an old newspaper. There's also a tube of some cream for cow udder infections, but it is years past its due date and already opened, so Sherlock drops it into the kitchen bin with a disgusted grunt. It would probably do little to improve John's condition, even if it had once may have contained some antibacterial components. Besides, who knows how bacterially contaminated it has become by now.

He finds a pan that is relatively grime-free, more matches to supplement his own stash and some firewood. It must have been brought in, considering the lack of trees nearby. The wood-burning stove in the kitchen agrees to co-operate, and after a quick trip outside to scoop some snow into a kettle for melting, Sherlock spends fifteen minutes standing restlessly by the stove. Eventually, the water boils. It takes some more rummaging around to find a pair of old, chipped mugs.

He's almost proud of himself when providing John with a steaming mug tea with a dose of the aspirin. He looks away when John begins dragging himself to a sitting position. It's obvious that even the slightest movement is now causing immense pain.

"What'd you make this out of, moss?" John complains after tasting the tea and nearly spitting it out.

"Old Twinings packet. Don't go claiming it tastes any worse than Twinings usually does. You said so yourself: you need fluids."
Sherlock takes a cup of the dreadful tea for himself into the sorry excuse for a living room. Tea is, of course, a useless knee-jerk response: it has diuretic properties and thus will do little for John's fluid balance. At least he may have managed to swallow the aspirin with it. What tea is, is a ritual of assumed necessity and Sherlock usually scoffs at those things. He considers such habits a method of lesser minds to seek comfort in a chaotic world, but suddenly it had felt like a task of utmost importance. He must have tea with John because if he's honest with himself regarding the situation at hand, he can't be sure how many teatimes with John he may get to enjoy in the future.

How long should they rest here? The route towards the north had looked rather challenging even in daylight: uneroded and thus young and sharp lava fields spread out from the clearing. How long will it take until John can't walk even on even ground anymore? Or, has that point been passed already? He had had significant trouble getting up the steps, so negotiating the rugged terrain may already be impossible.

Sherlock swallows the last dregs of the tea that tastes like floor scrapings and then peers out the door. There's not a single pinprick of light anywhere. How far are they from civilisation?

He lights six candles around the hut, taking one to the window sill of the bedroom. John is asleep and Sherlock allows himself a moment of just watching the ascent and descent of his chest, the steady rhythm of which calms him a little.

He then carries one candle in his hand to find his way around the living room. In a space that had once housed a drawer, he notices an old map flecked by fly droppings and yellowed by age. He studies it, memorises every detail as best he can, hangs it on display in the main hall of the Mind Palace. The map shows the whole of Iceland, but, unsurprisingly, this hut is not marked on it. He manages to triangulate their general location based on the glaciers and the one peculiar mountain he had recognised: they are somewhere in the northern parts of the Vatnajökull National Park. The map confirms that there are no significant mountain roads in the immediate vicinity, but some F-marked roads do pierce into the interior. They'll need luck to happen upon one of them since they might well just end up walking between two such routes. And, that's assuming those roads are even open at this time of the year.

There are at least 100 kilometres between them and the possibility of finding help in any direction.

There is no possibility of John managing to cross such a distance on foot.

Like a restless spirit, Sherlock wanders back to the bedroom with his candle. John's slumber is now more fitful, his breathing is heavier, and drops of sweat are gathering on his forehead. He must've been in considerable pain before the aspirin had allowed this feeble rest. Why hadn't he said anything? Is it because Sherlock can do little about it, or because John thinks he doesn't know how to offer consolation? It's a crushingly sad thought that John might think him so useless. He readjusts the blanket on top of John so that it covers his shoulder. The other one has been kicked to the floor.

It's true, isn't it, that he doesn't know what the right thing to say or do is, never has? Even in this state, John is the one making an effort to keep Sherlock's spirits up, to help him believe that he can sort this out. Since false assurances are not part of his social repertoire, all he can offer John right now are geographical facts, and those are hardly very consoling.

Maybe John isn't complaining despite having many reasons to do so because he had wanted to help Sherlock concentrate on the brainwork. He probably hopes there's a tangent to be discovered here, an option that could circumvent a death march across this barren, inhospitable land, a trump card Sherlock could whip out.

Solve it, John tells him in his head.
What if he can't?
The Sky Caves In

And these fingertips
Will never run through your skin
And those bright blue eyes
Can only meet mine across the room filled with people that are less important than you
- Of Monsters And Men

After the stale-tasting tea, Sherlock means to only curl up on a worn leather sofa to momentarily close his eyes, but he ends up sleeping for hours. When something finally jolts him out of the fitful rest, guilt and alarm hit him in the solar plexus like a physical punch, even though he could have hardly done much during the darkness apart from waiting. Still, he should have been up; should have been alert and awake in case John needed him.

Dragging himself up from the sofa feels like a herculean effort. Every muscle aches, he feels stiff and exhausted, and blisters on his feet smart. The cold sharpness of the pain at least serves to banish the last dregs of sleep.

He hurries to the bedroom. Early morning light is already squeezing past the worn lace curtain in the dirty window made out of hand blown glass, the patterns of which might interest him as a physical phenomenon, were he less preoccupied with the fear hammering in his skull.

John's eyes are open in the twilight and weariness gives way to relieved recognition when he notices a presence beside his bed.

Sherlock's knees nearly buckle from relief. He hadn't even let himself consider the possibility that John might not----

How fast does intraperitoneal infection develop? How quickly can sepsis kill a person? John wouldn't tell him. John rarely denies him data, except when he thinks that piece of information may put his brain on a fruitless, frenzied loop, like a dog chasing its tail. John had refused to tell him things yesterday.

"Is it---" Sherlock simply asks, because he chokes on the rest of the sentence and John can probably guess the rest of it anyway.

"Worse, you mean?" John says, his tone rhetorical and his mouth twisted into a pained grimace. He is clearly feverish, even more so than last night. Beads of moisture are prickling on his forehead, sweat has drenched his shirt, and his complexion is closer to ashen grey than normal.

Sherlock doesn't like the way John slowly shifts on the bed so that he can see him better.

He lifts the woollen blanket away and gently tugs John's shirt up. Why did he have to go and fall
John accepts his scrutiny as if it were the most normal thing in the universe, as though Sherlock knew what he was doing, as though there was something he could do. It's strange how illness and injury erase the lines of acceptable conduct, exorcise embarrassment and temporarily declare a moratorium on the delicate rules of usual conduct between friends. Instead of touch being a sensitive, tightly regulated commodity, it becomes a natural thing, even a necessity.

They've suffered through both a shared bout of influenza and a vile food poisoning due to a regrettable incident with a mould experiment wreaking havoc in Chinese leftovers. There have been wounds, burns, falling into the Thames. All those episodes have created a silently agreed-upon exception, a bubble existing out of time and space, in which there are no boundaries, no mortification, no doubt over consent. Then again, small insignificant injuries and illnesses notwithstanding, it has always been Sherlock who has been stricken, if not both of them, never just John. Never like this.

During those incidents, Sherlock had needed John, or they had needed each other. Afterwards, he had always experienced an odd hollowness he has come to realise is him not wanting to let go of that intimacy. Every time, he had grieved going back to a safe distance between friends. As to what sort of a new path he would want their shared life to lead he has no precise idea since he has very little experience in relationships. Still, there is no doubt about it: John withdrawing from their sickness-induced intimacy always left him bereft of something he had never realised wanting until the man limped into his life and completely changed it by just existing.

Would John be angry if he knew how Sherlock had relished those utterly unsexual touches, like a man lost in the desert receiving a mouthful of water? Would he be repelled by Sherlock twisting the manner in which he acted upon his professional instincts into something that offers personal delight as well as comfort? Then again, isn't a doctor's duty to heal and also to comfort? Would John want him to return the favour in an inverted scenario? After all, nobody wants to die alone---

- NO.

Sherlock physically shakes his head to banish the thought. He's wasting time thinking about this, now. He's procrastinating facing the facts even though the solution has an expiration date.

He leans closer to peel his scarf – John must have retied it sometime during the night since the knot is different from what Sherlock had used – and the tissues off the wound. He then swallows down bile as he takes in the sight. He is not a squeamish man, but this is very different from looking at a similar injury on a corpse would be. The remains he surveys during cases belong to people he hadn't known and frankly wouldn't have even cared to – this is John, and even the smallest of injuries on the man tend to unsettle Sherlock in an infuriatingly irrational manner.

The stab wound is surrounded by red, raised, painful-looking inflamed skin, and it is slowly exuding brownish liquid. Sherlock presses the fingers of his right hand gently on John's lower stomach near the wound, because it feels like the thing to do. He feels the muscles underneath contract involuntarily, and John hisses through clenched teeth.

"Stop picking at it," John snarls and Sherlock retracts his hand quickly. In the dim light he hadn't realised he'd gotten some of the exuding fluid on his hand, but now that his fingers are no longer pressed against the damp skin, the sensory data is unmistakable. He wipes his fingers on his trousers – there's no water here, nothing to wash his hand with, and he doesn't care about his clothes. The only thing he could do to clean up would be to go outside and rub his hand against a patch of snow.

John's tongue quickly darts across dry lips. "That's called defoncé, the cramp in the abdominal muscles. Involuntary. Peritoneal irritation," he informs Sherlock with a calmness Sherlock cannot
currently even imagine trying to muster.

Sherlock doesn't know the precise clinical meaning of this, but he's still certain it's a sure-fire sign of worse.

John wraps himself in the blanket again without bothering to cover his wound even with his shirt.

"Can you get up?" Sherlock asks quietly. "I don't think anyone is likely to find us here."

What he really means to ask is: 'can we go on?' John isn't stupid, despite Sherlock's frequent chiding to that effect. He knows what they're up against.

"I can make more tea, you can have some more rest---" the words stumble out of Sherlock before his brain even catches up. He's trying to bargain with the universe, to sham having a plan, to pretend that there are options, that he can help.

John tries to swing his head and shoulders off from the bed to sit up but is forced to throw himself back against the worn mattress, eyes squeezing shut as he tries to control the obviously excruciating pain.

Sherlock can't remember any seconds ever feeling longer than those he spends watching John trying to get his breathing under control, practically writhing in agony. Tears of pain prickle at the edges of John's closed lids, betraying their existence by amassing at the corners of where his laugh crinkles would be. Sherlock loves those lines, loves bringing them out.

"Give me a minute," John rasps. "I'll give it another try in a moment," he tries to promise, and Sherlock wants to scream.

They don't have a moment.

Sherlock straightens his back and stands by the bed, dust rising up from the worn carpet and swirling in patterns around him in the cold morning light. His fingers curl into fists, fingernails digging into the middle of his palms as he fights the panic sinking its tendrils into the core of his being, clouding his judgement. Were his nails longer, they'd draw blood. He imprisons his lower lip between his teeth to keep it from quivering, to keep John from seeing that he's nearly losing control, that he's in freefall. He doesn't want to disappoint John, doesn't want to reveal that in moments like this when his intellect and his skills are no match for reality, instead of focusing on survival, focusing on prevailing somehow, he has an almost irresistible urge just to make it stop because he can't watch this.

John finally manages to calm his breathing down and opens his eyes again, attempting a lacklustre smile. He's still trying to smile as though this is a nice Sunday lie-in at home.

Sherlock opens his mouth to say something, but when their eyes meet, all the comforting and good things he could have uttered seem to have made a hasty retreat from his vocabulary. "I don't know what to do," he whispers, averting his eyes to study the lace patterns in the curtain. "I'm not a doctor."

He's an idiot who repeats useless things, now. If he's their best chance of getting out of this, then what hope at all do they have? He wants John's gaze to harden, for him to demand that Sherlock really put his mind to it, solve it you bloody genius, because that always grounds him, gives him a clearly defined space in which to operate, lends him the confidence he sometimes lacks.

Instead, when he dares to stop looking at the bloody curtains, there's nothing but gentle patience in John's eyes as he slides his hand out from underneath the blanket. Sherlock grabs it like a lifeline and John squeezes it. It's grotesque, it really is – John comforting him.
There's no room for patience or comfort or reassurance. Time is a luxury they don't have, and Sherlock is still wasting it trying to memorise every tiny bit of this moment. Then again, if things go... badly, then any memory of his last seconds with John will count. Those memories will be the dearest he has, but they will also hurt the worst.

"You're my consulting detective. That's plenty enough for me," John says quietly, and Sherlock finds he can perhaps breathe a little bit. John is slurring his words slightly, and Sherlock tries to convince himself it's nothing to worry about, but dread creeps in any way, hangs onto his lapels, and whispers in his ear.

After John closes his eyes again, Sherlock goes outside to attempt getting a better estimate of the compass points. The sun has now climbed higher above the horizon. It had been so cold in the hut that at no point had he shed his coat; he is happier of its presence than ever because it proves to be quite a good armour against the small black gnats that immediately descend on him when he steps out.

Near the rust-coloured cliff face shading the hut, there's a well he hadn't noticed before. He would have been suspicious of its contents, anyway – animal carcasses often fall into unused water sources, contaminating them. He peers in through the broken lid: the water smells like rotting plant matter, and a puff of gnats rises from the well. He'd been wise to use the snow instead of this. He rubs his hands with snow and feels oddly guilty about doing so.

Suddenly finding himself yearning to get a bit of distance between himself and the hut, he walks around the cliff that turns out to be a giant boulder. He relieves his bladder and realises he hasn't eaten or drunk anything for more than 36 hours except for the abysmal tea. It's typical of him to forget about those things when something important is going on. If he tried to eat at this point, he'd probably just end up gagging, anyway. Anxiety always does that to him.

He starts making his way back to the hut – which in the light of day looks even less inviting and more akin to a hovel. His approach scares off a small wilderness bird that springs to a frantic, fluttery flight from somewhere in the heathers surrounding the well. Its voice is a pathetic little squawk but offers a meagre consolation – a reminder that they aren't the only living things here.

He hesitates by the hut door – there is little he could do inside besides checking up on John, and Sherlock wants to allow him the rest he obviously needs in his state. Then again, no rest will fix what's wrong with him, and they can't really stay here any longer.

The possibility has now burrowed itself into his bones: John, gone. It cannot even be fully processed. Preposterous. Impossible.

Although... the fear is making it all a little easier to imagine, now.

He has lost important things and people, before, but his family had mostly shielded him from the raw reality of those events. He doesn't remember losing Grandmére; he'd been too young to attend the last moments of his maternal grandmother as she lay dying of cancer. Redbeard had been taken to the vet to be put down while he'd been at school to spare him of the agony or witnessing the dog being taken away.

The precise moment of loss would not have been the worst part, anyway. The no longer having was because that is the part Sherlock remembers of Redbeard's demise. His only friend, only real friend until John. He had been quite small, but he remembers. It had been as though a blade had violently sliced through the fabric of his life, leaving behind a gaping hole that opened at the most inconvenient moments, always when his defences were down. A sudden shadow in the doorway, an expectation of seeing his beloved dog hurrying to him, but then – suddenly like a kick in the
gut – the realisation would dawn that such a moment, which had been an everyday occurrence taken for granted – would never happen again. It felt like being an amnesiac, being told over and over again about the same tragedy.

How would it feel like, John not being in his life?

Life would go on. Most likely Sherlock would go on, too, somehow. He'd persist, exist, prevail over the sorrow at some point, but a piece of him would forever be buried in a casket with John H. Watson – the piece of him John had taken and somehow made better. Every morning upon waking up at 221B, he would for a fleeting moment listen to floorboards creaking upstairs of the sound of someone walking in the kitchen. Then, he would remember. How would he even find the strength to even get out of bed?

A realisation jolts him: the fear he feels right now is the same one that materialises every time John brings home a woman.

It is not merely death Sherlock fears, then – any manner in which John could abandon their current arrangement would make him feel this way. Does this mean he loves John? Could any other emotion evoke such a strong, obsessively jealous and possessive feeling? Is he in love? What does that even mean?

John thinks in the terms society has shoved down his throat from infancy: friend, husband, wife, colleague, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual. Roles and commonly-agreed-upon labels. Sherlock has never been good at fitting any sorts of preconceived notions of how a human is to be, how to behave. Is there a place for him in the semantic fabric of John's life, or does he exist outside of it in some undefinable limbo that John doesn't like to examine very carefully? Love without sex equals friendship? Molly is his friend, is she not? Lestrade, at a pinch? The word 'friend' seems woefully inadequate when it comes to John.

Sherlock has never found much use for his sexuality. His body responds like that of any healthy human male would, but the connection between his genitals and his heart has never happened. Sex may not be what he wants with John, or if he does, they are not at a stage where that could be explored even on a thought level.

John, in his complex entirety, is what he wants. He wants the barriers to be gone, to be able to seek a deeper connection. That might entail touch, but it would not be given any more weight than any of his other senses or skills. The only fantasies of a physical relationship with John have been so oddly tame that John might laugh just like Victor had. 'Is that what you want? That, and nothing else? Are you sure you're even all that gay?' Victor had asked and then abandoned him for the rugby captain.

He shouldn't be doing this sort of a pre-death inventory of John in his life, not now, when he's supposed to be saving the man. God, he's a time-wasting idiot, isn't he? In his stead, John would have already sprung to action instead of wasting time like this. He's stalling. Postponing. Procrastinating. Unless a pole with an IV bag of antibiotics and a fully equipped operating room with a skilled abdominal surgeon are about to materialise magically, a waiting game will prove deadly. Like he had told John, they can't rely on someone happening by them here – even if this were a place frequented by those owning livestock during the summer months, there would likely be no visitors for some time, not until the roads opened. And, do they not use helicopters and GPS nowadays to keep track of sheep, allowing the owners to return home for supper or monitor their livestock remotely? No need for bare-bones hovels to stay in, unless caught in a storm.

This is a rare event in the sense that he can't rely on Mycroft finding them, either. Their mobile phones are likely on the bottom of the Atlantic, so an attempt at tracking them would prove utterly pointless. Mycroft may well believe they have perished or become lost at sea in a plane crash –
maybe there's a wild goose chase of a rescue mission happening hundreds, even thousands of kilometres south of here? The thought of a seawater-soaked Mycroft braving the waves on the deck of a military vessel, royally annoyed but also quite beside himself, offers Sherlock some fleeting amusement. It's likely Mycroft is already worried to the extreme. Sherlock can't spare any sympathy for the man at current because he needs all such mental energy he can muster to keep his worries from knocking the feet out from under him.

Stop delaying the inevitable.

If he stays, in all likelihood, no one will come to their aid. John will die, and Sherlock would eventually follow. Starving to death in the Icelandic wilderness, likely driven to madness by guilt is not how he wants to go.

If he leaves, at least there is a chance that he might find help for them both. John might still run out of time, but there is a chance.

The choice is practically a no-brainer. He can walk. John can't. They had to wait out the darkness because no one could safely negotiate this terrain in the dark without breaking a bone, but now it's daylight.

It's obvious. He needs to walk out of here, alone. But, even if it's the only sensible option, actually executing it will still feel.... as easy as falling off a cliff. Leaping off a roof. Committing murder. If he fails and John perishes here, alone, knowledge that he'd chosen the most cerebral option and tried his best won't help at all. It doesn't change the fact that they're in this mess because of him.

He should go back in right now, tell John what he's about to do. Maybe John has come to the same conclusion, assuming he hasn't fully succumbed to the confounding vapours of fever. Sherlock wants to spare the man the pain of having to command him to do this. John must know it's the only way.

He doesn't want to walk back into that horrid bedroom, doesn't want to hear John's false promises of being fine, or waiting right there. He feels guilty enough as is. He's at the door of the hut now, cold fingers wrapping around the rusted handle. Instead of entering he finds himself frozen by indecision. He has no idea what state John will be in when he walks into the bedroom. What if he has already----

He is putting off the decision to leave for fear that if he went, John would die alone. Giving into such a thought, he is wasting their only bargaining chip with the universe – time.

Sherlock realises that he can't go back in to see John. If he goes in and finds out that it's too late, he won't have the strength to save even himself. His conscience will be heavy either way – for leaving John alone here and now, or for giving up and staying. Still, the knowledge that he will have tried will be more consolation than being there for the last breath. It's selfish but proactive.

He never curls up in a corner and gives up. Not when it's about John. Not ever.

A decision is made. He goes to get help. Not a minute more wasted. If he goes back in, he will be tempted to stay. There's nothing he can do in there to help. Nothing at all. He has no antibiotics, no morphine, no surgeon at his beck and call. Nothing.

He lets go of the door handle, forces himself to descend the three steps to the ground. He turns, lifts up his coat collar, and begins walking towards where he's certain enough north is.

Leaving John behind is like dropping into icy water: the moments before one does it are the worst. After that, it's still a terrifying freefall, but at least the decision is already made.
Foot Soldier

Chapter Notes

I know you're all on tenterhooks to find out what happens, so how could I keep you waiting for longer than a day?

Judging by the changing light Sherlock has already walked for six hours, although scrambling and crawling and trying not to break an ankle would be a more apt description of his journey so far. His flat-soled shoes are treacherously slippery on the snow-flecked terrain and offer little friction on the large lava rocks. Moss and lichen are growing on the older lava fields but which makes matters worse by concealing potholes.

Sunshine is scarce despite it being summertime – what little there had been of it earlier that morning now has to wedge between sleet, rain and a suffocating fog that seems rolls down the mountains. It's like a living being, enveloping the contours of the eroded old volcanoes in the distance like a burial shroud. Sherlock might enjoy the sight if he wasn't so completely at the weather's mercy right now.

The fog feels as though it's clinging to clothes as tightly as it clings to Sherlock's mood, and not even the occasional appearance of sunlight warms him much. He's shivering, clothes thoroughly dampened by sweat and sleet that has melted in his neck and meandered down his back. Only the exertion of negotiating this hostile landscape keeps him from tumbling over the edge of hypothermia. His palms are full of small scrapes from reaching down to balance himself and from losing his footing and having to cushion his fall by gripping the sharp rocks. He can't feel his toes – icy water has seeped in. At least he doesn't feel most of the blisters anymore.

He finds a modicum of pride in the thought that a lesser man would have given up already in the face of such a predicament – sat on a rock and wept for their fate. If he was just trying to save himself, he might have been tempted, too, but fear drives him like a devil and refuses to crack open the door to resignation.

Fear is not one emotion. Instead, it is an intricate web of several different ones, all merging into an entity a brain cannot properly contain without spilling over to the realm of the physical. Butterflies in the stomach, a tingle down the spine, goosebumps, pounding heartbeat, blood rushing through veins at a heightened speed – all these can be signs of a good kind of protective fear. Fear can make one avoid excessive risks and to double-check a parachute, or it might make someone freeze up in horror, might keep them from saving someone. Still, that fear lives in the realm of the concrete; it's a reaction to a genuinely threatening situation at hand.

Then there's the other kind, the one that breeds itself, tears chunks out of self-worth and confidence, one that gnaws at its own heart until that heart bleeds out. It's the one that clenches up a jaw, brings on a shiver and a shake, paralyses with its second-guessing and self-blame. It is a convergence made up of the anticipation of loss, guilt, and shame and most of all: the need to deny failure until the very last minute and even beyond it, beyond the point when the catastrophic outcome has become clear and inevitable.

This is the fear that grips Sherlock now, as he continues scrambling across endless moonscapes of
This is the fear that grips Sherlock now, as he continues scrambling across endless moonscapes of black volcanic rock and low vegetation. Two things keep him going, keep that fear from taking over completely: *John*, and *vengeance*. If both of them won't make it out alive, he is going to single-handedly wipe everyone connected to John's demise off this bloody planet, employing methods that will make the Spanish Inquisition look like a bunch of playground ninnies.

Anger rises again and hastens his steps as he remembers walking out of the bunker and finding out about John's injury. *They won't get away with this if John dies.* If they make it, he couldn't care less about the fate of their kidnappers. Mycroft can flex his covert operative muscles and make sure their adversaries get what's coming to them; Sherlock will hardly want to be involved because it would remind him of that moment when he realised what the worst case scenario was in this dreadful business.

Not for a second can he allow himself to consider giving up, rolling over, making a final resting place for himself among the fog-refreshed mosses and the pastel-coloured heather. Not once, because this is not about him. Death is hunting in this mist, and the prey it has in its sights is the only thing Sherlock has ever wanted to keep.

"Hey! *HEY!*"

He's yelling before his tired eyes have even made a final confirmation that it is a human being he has spotted and not a mirage. His trail has been lined with many troll-like lava shapes that have repeatedly tricked his food-and-sleep -deprived brain into thinking there's someone walking the moor-like valleys.

The wind must be drowning out his words because the human shape in the distance does not turn to face his direction.

He yells again, and it's not even words he's producing, but any noise that his raw vocal chords will agree to produce.

He breaks into a run across a mossy opening in the lava field, wades over a shallow stream at the end of it as fast as his weary legs can carry, ignoring the stinging cold of the glacial water as it rises to his ankles. Soon, his trousers are soaked to the knees, but it will be worth it if he can alert this distant traveller to his plight.

Their plight.

He yells at the top of his lungs between panting breaths and *finally*, a few hundred metres before their paths would cross, the man stops and turns. He's middle-aged, wearing a coarse grey woolly jumper – *God, Sherlock loves jumpers more than ever now, he's going to buy John a dozen new ones to take home* – a peaked cap, some manner of insulated trousers and wellingtons. He's carrying a shotgun and a dead bird. It must be one of the rock ptarmigans Sherlock has been spotting. He hadn't heard a gun discharging – could he have been so distracted?

"*Halló?*" the man answers, craning his neck towards Sherlock.

Sherlock slips, falls on his bottom in an undignified heap on the moss, scrambles back to his feet and crosses the last few metres separating them.

Dizzy with relief, he leans his palms on his knees, trying to calm his breathing as the man looks on. Normally, he has good stamina, but the last three days have taken their toll. First, their limbs had been tied so tightly for a day that the circulation had been compromised, then they had been
locked in a cell too tiny to allow lying down properly. Add to that their long and arduous walk to
the hut, and now this excruciating traverse of the highlands, all without food or even much water,
and it's no wonder he's knackered. He had drunk from a stream, the water so cold that it had made
his teeth ache. Besides the tea, that has been all the sustenance for days. He hadn't even wanted
that dreadful tea, but he had consumed it because he'd foolishly thought it might somehow console
John to see him do that. Useless sentiment. He should have left sooner to find help. He should
have done something earlier ----

"Hvaðan komstu?" the man asks him.
Sherlock blinks, brain drawing a blank. He doesn't speak Icelandic – who the hell does, except for
Icelanders?

He quickly tries the Palace. Language group: North Germanic, Indo-European, formerly
constituted West Nordic together with Faroese, Norn and Western Norwegian--- useless, utterly
useless. Sherlock remembers he does know a bit of modern Norwegian, thanks to a case involving
two chess players, mining rights in Kongo, the former spouse of the royal's family's accountant ----

oh never mind.

"Hvor er jeg?" he asks hesitantly, uncertain whether he's got it right. He's quite sure his
Norwegian pronunciation is appalling.

The man regards him with curiosity, then opens his mouth. "A few miles south of Ábær. Where
would you want to be?" he asks in thickly accented English.

"You – you speak English?"

The man laughs into his greying beard. He has kind eyes, but Sherlock is aware that he's so
grateful to come across any form of life in these parts that he'd probably think a carnivorous
dinosaur has a pleasant smile.

"Of course. Nearly all Icelanders do. Are you alright? You look a bit roughed up."

"I just walked----" Sherlock waves his arm in a wide sweep towards the direction from where he'd
come from, "from the interior between Vatnajökull and another glacier. There's a hut about five
hours from here next to a cliff with a well; my friend is there, he needs help---"

The man frowns. "Was it a rental hut? On the Kjölur route?"

"No, directly southwards from here. Probably hasn't been used for years – all the food was
expired, there was no electricity, and the well is unusable. The emergency services need to be
contacted immediately; my friend was st--- got sick," he rephrases, deciding that announcing
they'd been kidnapped and participated in a knife fight might not be the most important or
reassuring thing right now when it comes to getting this stranger to help.

"The only hut I can think of was old Egil's hunting cabin. You say there's someone there, right
now? Sick?"

Sherlock almost flings himself at the man's feet for the sheer joy of witnessing him understand the
problem.

The man's gaze sweeps him from top to bottom, taking in his torn clothing, his lack of a hat and
gloves, his wet shoes and trousers and his probably pathetic expression and says the loveliest of
words: "There's a road a mile north. I left a car and a satellite phone there. You can walk some
more?"
Sherlock would walk to the ends of the Earth if there were a promise of help and transport waiting at the end of the trek.

The man slings the bird on his shoulder – its legs have been tied together with string for that purpose, and they begin making their way along what appear to be narrow animal paths. Now that a destination is at hand, scrapes and cuts and bruises begin registering in Sherlock's conscience. As they hike towards the car now visible on the horizon, Sherlock starts to shiver violently. His fingers are numb from the cold and he's, feeling increasingly miserable.

After climbing onto the backseat that smells cosily of wet dog, Sherlock listens with his eyes closed as the man contacts something called The Icelandic Society for Search and Rescue. "What about the emergency number?" Sherlock demands after he ends the call.

"The emergency number would just reroute the call to the Society," the man explains and introduces himself as Birgir Viglundsson as he inserts the keys and the engine purrs to life. Sherlock instantly forgets the name – impolite, yes, and John would tell him it's *a bit not good*, but it's irrelevant.

He's done what he could. Now, all John needs is to hold on.

At first, the road consists mostly of rocks and small boulders, but gradually it turns to loudly crunching volcanic gravel. Sherlock notices with alarm that they're not heading *towards* John, but northwards, away from him. "We need to stay, we need to get to the hut --" he commands in a frantic tone, leaning in the gap between the shotgun seat and the front seat.

"As you said, there are no roads. Mountain Rescue is flying in. They'll take your friend to Akureyri or straight to Reykjavik if they find him in a bad way. We can't get to him from here. I'll take you to Akureyri, looks like you might need some patching up as well." He passes the satellite phone to Sherlock. "Do you need to call someone?"

Icelandic Emergency services are probably outstandingly well equipped to handle such scenarios. Still, Sherlock is not going to leave anything to chance. If there's a further asset he can employ, he most certainly will.

He calls Mycroft, relieved that even in his exhausted state he has no trouble remembering the very private number Mycroft only gives to relatives and his PA. His brother answers on the second ring, relief nearly choking up his greeting after he hears Sherlock's voice.

Sherlock manages to give him a brief explanation of the situation and to convey his precise whereabouts with the help of his rescuer. Mycroft naturally has too many annoying questions, and few of them get answered because exhaustion claims Sherlock mid-call, and he passes out across the back seat, a dead game bird for a pillow.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

When Sherlock wakes up, he is no longer in a car. Instead, he appears to have been delivered to the emergency department of a small hospital. *Sjúkrahúsið á Akureyri* is what the sheets are saying.

Akureyri, then – a larger city in the north he remembers the hunter mentioning. Apparently, it's big enough to have medical services, and Sherlock seems to recall there being an airport as well.
He's clad in a baggy, ugly, beige hospital pyjama and wrapped in a space blanket. The rattling noise that the silver-coloured monstrosity makes as he shifts on the trolley is like nails on a blackboard and reminds him of John's terrible habit of popping bubble wrap. He doesn't complain about it because for John it seems to provide the same sort of satisfaction that some of the repetitive things Sherlock does to curb his anxiety.

He leans on his elbows to survey his surroundings; black dots dance in his visual field for a moment, but a shake of his head helps. He locates his wet shoes on the floor under the trolley. After roving his gaze around the rest of the room, he spots his coat in a plastic bag in a basket under the bed. He's dizzy, thirsty and exhausted, but none of that matters; he needs to find out if John has been found already.

Judging by an unlocked computer nearby and a chair facing towards him, someone has been keeping an eye on him. The door to the room is ajar, so they have probably just stepped out for a moment. Sherlock wants to kick himself for succumbing to exhaustion: an accomplice of their kidnappers could easily have taken advantage of the situation. Then again, they may all be dead or at least trapped in that bunker.

He rips out an IV from the back of his left hand – it's obvious someone has had to make several attempts to start one due to the state of his veins after his cocaine days. He drops down from the trolley, slips into his disgustingly cold and wet shoes with a grimace and goes to the computer. Unsurprisingly, the user interface is in Icelandic and looks as old-fashioned as most other patient record systems Sherlock has seen. He'd told his name to the hunter, so it has been entered into the system, but Sherlock realises that they don't know John's – he'd only mentioned a friend. What the hell is a John Doe in Icelandic?

After a few guesses which bring forth no data whatsoever, he growls in frustration, dons his only slightly damp Belstaff and stumbles out of the cubicle. His toes are aching and tingling which must be a good sign – frostbite hasn't made them necrotic – at least not yet.

He walks straight out of the emergency room, gathering a few confused glances but no one tries to stop him. He meanders from corridor to corridor until he reaches the information desk near the main entrance. He wastes no time in asking about an unknown patient found in a mountain hut and learns that the rescued tourist they mentioned on the news' was never brought here. Instead, the suspected traveller been flown to a larger hospital in Reykjavik. According to the woman manning the reception desk no name has been mentioned in the news reports. Can Sherlock be sure it's John?

He hurries out of the building. A cab is idling near the front entrance, waiting for a patron and Sherlock wastes no time in claiming its back seat.

The driver puts down the newspaper he'd been reading and takes a minute to study his strange customer still half-clad in hospital garb.

Sherlock realises he should have buttoned up the coat. The back of his hand is bleeding from the IV, and he hides it between his thighs.

"I need to borrow your phone. Please," he adds as desperately as he possibly can. "It's an emergency."

"They have phones at the hospital," the man suggests, but his tone is kind and worried instead of the snark Sherlock would have expected from the average London cabbie.

*Another English-speaker. Good. The hunter wasn't kidding.*
"I'm not going back in there," Sherlock announces. "Please," he reiterates with a slightly more composed tone. He hasn't specified that he wants to make an international call, but the driver may have already realised this, which would explain his reticence. "I will obviously reimburse you for the cost."

The man frowns, smacks his lips and passes him the old model mobile phone. "Do you want to go somewhere?"


Mycroft answers on the second ring. "Where the hell are you now?" he demands. "Your and John Watson's phone signals disappear off the coast of Norway, and suddenly you're calling from a satellite phone saying John needs to be rescued from a *hovel in the Icelandic highlands*, then you hang up on me. Are you alright, and more importantly: *current location, if you please*?"

Sherlock huffs into the phone. Nevermind where *he* is. "Where did they take John?" he demands. There will be hell to pay if Mycroft hasn't found that out yet. He could have asked a simpler question, such as *'how is John'*; but he wants to hold on to the idea that John is alive, wants to verbally cling to the assumption that it is all being sorted out already.

"That would be the *Landspitali Islands* – Reykjavik University Hospital. He was flown in an hour ago; he's being stabilised at the intensive treatment unit and being prepared for surgery. I'm still in Oslo, about to board a flight to Keflavik. I shall be there in three and a half hours."

Sherlock hardly cares whether his brother is in London, here in Iceland or the bloody Moon, because *John is alive*. Relief overwhelms him, and he doesn't even register what Mycroft may be saying at the other end.

The bliss does not last long, however, because the words *'intensive treatment'* and *'surgery'* eventually sink in and worry starts to eat away at him again. Intensive care is... both a good and a bad thing. Sherlock had known from the start how serious the situation was, but it's a whole different thing hearing it confirmed in such cold, clinical terms. Why are they not operating already? Is John so unstable that he's not even eligible for surgery?

Either way, Sherlock needs to be there, right now.

"Is that all you have on him?"

"What else would there be? What good would further details be?"

Mycroft never thinks like that. He is usually the Machiavelli is small details, OCD in his desire to know anything and everything when it comes to Sherlock or his work. The deduction is easy: he's trying to protect Sherlock, just as John had done. Why do they all think he's made out of spun glass?

Then again, he hardly feels very steady right now, not on his feet nor in his head. But that's the exhaustion, nothing more to it.

Mycroft has the utter gall to change the subject: "More importantly; are you alright? Where are you?"

How could anything be more important than the state of John? Sherlock is obviously better off since he's capable of calling people. Mycroft can be so daft sometimes. "I'm in some excuse for a town called Akureyri." The cab driver gives him a disapproving glance in the rear-view mirror.
"The only thing I got out of the emergency services was that a man who had contacted them was transporting you to a nearby town to get medical attention. Are you hospitalised?" Mycroft asks.

"I've been discharged," Sherlock lies effortlessly.

"Were that true, you would be contacting me from the hospital, not from a number that my assistant has just traced to a phone registered to a cab driver."

Sherlock grimaces. "I've discharged myself."

"Sherlock Holmes---" comes the stern reply – the opening statement of a stern lecture, "if you're leaving a significant injury unattended---"

Sherlock rolls his eyes, covers the phone with his palm and leans forward to address the driver. "To Reykjavik, please."

"Sure, but I need to see some money first. That's 380 kilometres."

Sherlock curses under his breath. He doesn't have his phone or his wallet, or even a passport. Come to think of it; he doesn't have anything at all valuable with which to barter. The kidnappers had even removed his watch.

Judging by muffled disapproval sounding from the phone, Mycroft is still chastising him. Sherlock removes his palm and sighs resignedly, ignoring his brother's attempt to interrogate him about his current state of health. "I'm in a cab, the driver of which is demanding proof of my ability to pay before he'll agree to take me to Reykjavik. Sort it out."

He passes the phone back to the driver who converses with his brother, the driver now speaking what sounds like Danish. Iceland has a significant number Danish immigrants, and it's a language in which Mycroft happens to be fluent. *Goddammed linguistic genius.*

Whatever Mycroft tells the man must be convincing because as soon as the driver terminates the call they pull off into traffic and head towards the main Icelandic Ring Road.
"Where to in Reykjavik?" the driver asks after they've left Akureyri behind, glancing at his passenger in the rearview mirror.

Sherlock can't seem to get warm, no matter how small a shape he huddles into inside his coat. The wet noises his ruined shoes are making are irritating to the extreme. "The university hospital." He kicks off the offending footwear with a grunt and pulls his feet up onto the seat, manoeuvring himself into sitting sideways while still buckled up. He massages his white, cold, disgustingly macerated toes inside his wet socks.

"The Landspitali is the only university hospital."

Sherlock leans the side of his head on the headrest and closes his eyes. "Well, that one, then."

"You escaped hospital to go to other hospital?" the driver asks, the edge of his mouth quirked up in amusement. "What happened?"

Since Sherlock is travelling without a wallet and identification, he needs to keep on this man's good side, lest he is reported to the police as some vagrant if the man decides not to trust Mycroft, after all. The truth would likely raise brows. Besides, Sherlock finds himself curious as to what sort of a tale Mycroft has whipped up. "What did the man on the phone tell you?"

"He says you have English intelligence."

Sherlock snorts. *Well, he got that part right.*

"I mean like James Bond, you know, zero zero seven, your mission failed, and you need to get home quick and secret. He says he will wait in Reykjavik and pay for this ride."

"Who did he say he was?"

"Your boss."

*Ha. He wishes.*

"But why do you want the hospital?" the driver repeats insistently.

Sherlock sighs. Some London cabbies aren't much less nosy, but he's not in the mood to chat. He rarely is. On the other hand, it's going to be a long ride lost in the swirling worry in his head if he doesn't engage, and he feels antsy and impatient enough already. Best to find distraction where he can.
"My friend was hurt, and he was taken to Reykjavik." Saying the words out loud turns out to be difficult. He nearly chokes on the F one. Uncharacteristic. He must be more stressed out than of what he is actively aware.

"Does he do English intelligence, too, your friend?"

"You could say that, yes. He's my flatmate."

"Flatmate?"

"We live together. You know, housemates."

"Oh. Workmate, housemate, friend. Is it... bed friend?"

Sherlock's eyes widen, although it might be more due to habit than any actual abhorrence. It's John who is so bothered by these assumptions and who seems to want Sherlock to splutter indignantly if someone insinuates that they're romantically involved like he does. What does it matter if some taxi driver in goddamned Iceland thinks they're sleeping together? Why does it matter what anyone thinks? Is it truly such an insulting notion to John's sense of self-worth? He knows John doesn't mean to hurt him with his protestations but they do sting – just as badly as the fact that John is willing to bed any floozy rather than to romantically consider someone with whom he already is in some kind of an odd relationship.

For a moment, Sherlock actually considers indulging in a fantasy by playing along to what the driver is assuming, but he isn't exactly sure how tolerant this man is. "No, not like that, but good friends. Very good friends."

The description falls woefully short of the truth, but there is no proper word for the two of them, is there? It's a strange sort of limbo between lovers and friends. Even the word partner, while truthful, leaves a lot open for interpretation. Sherlock wouldn't dare to ask John if there's a better word for it – the man would be livid and sulk. He's very touchy about these things, preferring to avoid addressing the stranger aspects of their... cohabitation.

Having firmly put his foot down on pretending the world is the way he often hopes it is, Sherlock finds himself continuing his explanation to the driver. His nerves are clearly shot if he can't shut up. "He's a... necessity. Well, not just a necessity, more like an imperative. I can only function at the highest level when he's present. He makes me feel like... not myself. Not someone else, but a nicer, better version of myself. A version he sees and I don't, and nobody else does, either, but I feel it, I feel how he thinks that and it makes me sometimes... project that person that he sees. This might not make much sense, but---"

The driver regards him with sympathy. "My wife is like that. A person who doesn't try to make you into anything, but you still want to be that person they see. She makes me want to do well, and I want to, for her. So I clean house, work, instead of, you know, drink and boat."

"Drink and boat?"

"Take boat out and drink. With friend."

Sherlock decides that, right now, he'd give his left leg if he could boat and drink with John.
The taxi pulling up at a parking lot Sherlock up. He scrambles into a sitting position on the back seat where he had slipped into lying on his side, tangled up in the seat belt. He had briefly allowed himself to close his eyes and drift away and apparently that had turned into a nap. He feels guilty about it. What if he slept during the very moment when John---No.

Mustn't fall sleep again. Not until I see him.

"Why are we stopping?"

"Petrol," the driver replies and opens the driver's side door. "You want anything? Food?" he points at the petrol station on the opposite side of the parking lot.

If Sherlock ate something now, it would likely come right back up. There is something else, however, which might help, something that is very likely available here – cigarettes. Smoking just might help him regain a modicum of equilibrium. John would not approve of it, though.

John isn't here, his head helpfully supplies. The thought hits him square on the chest like a bullet. He needs to get control over himself, to stop feeling to stop feeling unmoored, drifting helplessly like a boat when its rope has been cut.

Just this once. It will be nugatory to curb his anxiety for any longer than a few moments, but at present, he'll take any help he can get not to fall apart.

Pathetic. John would be able to keep a level head if your roles were reversed. He wouldn't need pharmacological relief.

He's not John. He's not half as strong. "A packet of smokes, please. Cigarettes?" he clarifies, unsure the driver would understand the colloquialism.

"Okay."

"Not the menthol ones."

"No menthol. What about drink?"

Maybe it would do him good. "Tea, if at all possible."

The driver takes off, but after a few steps, he returns. "But no smoking in the car."

Sherlock rolls his eyes as he scrambles out into the fresh air to wait for the man to return.

It's warmer than it had been up north – the sun has come out. The signs of life and civilisation all around him are reassuring – people, cars, buildings.

While the driver makes some calls – indulging in a cigarette and a hotdog – Sherlock manages to smoke a third of his packet. When they get back in the car, the high dose of nicotine is making his head swim. He coaxes the driver to find a classical channel and tries to focus on the music.

"How long to Reykjavik?" he asks when coastal scenery begins to give way to moorlands. They must be heading back towards the interior.

"We're in Staður, so about an hour and forty minutes."

Sherlock closes his eyes but doesn't even attempt to chase the tail end of sleep.

Instead, he considers the mess they've left behind. One day, someone will enter that bunker and find evidence of a skirmish. One of the operatives connected to the network they'd looked into –
and which Sherlock had then revealed to be connected to Eastern European organised crime – is an air traffic controller which may have helped limit the group's exposure and concealed them from the Icelandic authorities. There are plenty of old, abandoned airfields in the country due to former American military activity among other things, and some of the wilderness may be quite suitable for landing even without a tarmac. The interior is a place where many things could be hidden and lost.

The case which had lead them here had all started with an email from a man called Howard Garrideb. He was one of three brothers; Joseph – the middle one – had been murdered and Howard was convinced that it had been a case of mistaken identity; he was certain that the real target had been his older brother who had made a name for himself within organised crime. The motive appeared to have been counterfeit antiquities sold even at premier venues such as Christie's and Sotheby's. Sherlock had quickly confirmed Howard's suspicions and seen through the game the older brother Richard Garrideb was trying to rig up to cast off suspicion about his profession. With John and Lestrade's help, Sherlock had effectively toppled half the criminal empire's UK operations in one afternoon. The only thing he had underestimated was the global nature of the older brother's connections. Howard Garrideb managed to flee the country before his brother could retaliate, leaving Sherlock and John in Richard's crosshairs. Sherlock cannot be certain about the background of their kidnappers, but he would be surprised if they turn out to be unconnected to the three Garridebs.

If he'd been faster, cleverer, stealthier---- He had been quite pleased with how the case was wrapping up, but this unexpected end result does make his question his actions. Although he can't help wondering whether all this could have been prevented, he's not worried about the aftermath. If the bunker full of more or less dead men will lead a diplomatic incident, it'll be sorted; that's what Mycroft excels at. If a British Intelligence -backed coup or a wet job abroad needs to be swept under the carpet, his big brother is definitely the man for the job. Even though Mycroft always grouses about these things when they're connected to Sherlock, the truth is that he likes nothing better than to flex his intelligence muscles, especially if it leads to Sherlock owing him a favour.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The relative calm borrowed from the cigarettes has passed by the time they pull up to the main entrance of Iceland's largest hospital.

Sherlock hesitates in getting out of the car. He leans heavily against the backrest, squeezing the edge of the seat with his fingers. The car feels like a safe haven, and he doesn't want to step out into the rain nor does he want to walk into the building if there's even the slightest chance the news will be less than good.

"I hope your friend is okay. Better to know, you know, than to keep guessing?" the driver suggests.

Sherlock inhales a ragged breath. He'd like to think it had been the sudden smoking that is making him feel congested, downright suffocating. *Must be sentiment.* He hasn't cried for years, but now he feels like he just might steal a moment for himself to do just that.

John has been in danger, and they've both been injured before. What is so different this time? Why is he being so ridiculous and irrational?

A shadow the shape of a man approaches the car in the heavy rain. The visage jolts Sherlock out
of his reverie, and he leans towards the front seat to see better. Dressed in immaculate, dove-grey
pinstripe and walking with a decisive gait, Sherlock hardly needs to get a look at the man's face to
know who this is.

The driver steps out of the car, and Sherlock drags himself off the backseat and into the rain as
well.

Mycroft takes a long look at his current outfit, and his mouth tightens. "Discharged yourself,
indeed."

He pays the driver in Icelandic Krona, probably tipping the man handsomely.

"Goodbye," the driver says, and Sherlock thanks him curtly. The taxi drives away, and Sherlock
follows it with his gaze as long as he can. He misses that warm backseat, the bliss of not yet
knowing how badly his life has been wrecked by what may be happening in the hospital.

Mycroft hates dawdling. "Shall we?" he asks, still scrutinising Sherlock carefully as though trying
to decide if he's even fit to be on his feet.

Sherlock grits his teeth and makes a move towards the main entrance. He stops before entering,
underneath an awning that blocks the rain. "Have you seen him yet?"

"They are rather restrictive in their visitation practices, but I have managed to negotiate us access.
No, I've not seen him. His re-intake into the ITU after surgery happened less than an hour ago."

"But he's alive?"

"Usually being admitted to intensive care entails a beating heart, yes."

Sherlock wants to punch his brother.

"I would have called that taxi driver back to inform you if Doctor Watson's status had changed,"
Mycroft offers.

'Status'. What a euphemism. It's strange how Sherlock now wants to take a swing at Mycroft even
more acutely, but and at the same time, he finds himself relieved at the sight of the man. He's
almost tempted to say thank him.

Thank you for sorting this out. Thank you for... being here?

Mycroft is good in a crisis, any crisis. He organises things, keeps everyone informed, smooths the
path, walks over pointless bureaucracy.

He also reads Sherlock like an open book. "What did you do with the rest of the cigarettes?" he
asks blandly, probably having decided this is not a decent time for a lecture.

Sherlock hadn't thought that the ridiculous synthetic-fibre hospital clothes or his coat would have
retained any of the smell since he had been standing in a windy spot when smoking, but there's
likely a small tell in his behaviour that Mycroft can read.

It doesn't matter. There are more important things to attend to than his brother's compulsion to
begrudge his life choices, so he circumvents arguing by wordlessly pulling the packet out and
giving it to Mycroft who slides them into his own breast pocket.

Sherlock finally notices a plastic bag Mycroft is carrying, which he now presents to Sherlock. It
contains some of his clothes, brought from home.
"I assume you would like to find a men's room first?"

"No." Sherlock drapes his coat tighter around himself. It will serve to conceal the strange sight of him wearing an ill-fitting hospital pyjama underneath.

Mycroft reaches out and then plucks a ptarmigan feather out of Sherlock's hair with a briefly baffled swing of his brow. He then sighs. "Very well. I have informed Harriet Watson of the situation, established you as next of kin and requested a word with his doctor first before we head to the intensive care unit on the third floor."

Sherlock blinks. Next of kin? Not entirely accurate, but not... wrong, either? Would John object to such a description? After all, Sherlock has imagined being exactly that – being more to John than he is right now. Now, he may have missed his chance forever. It's yet another sordid aspect to how badly he has failed both of them.

Chapter End Notes

No matter what happens to John, neither his folks nor Harry never seem to show up. I wanted to at least acknowledge that a stork didn't drop the dude on an orphanage doorstep.

Hot dogs (pylsur) are something you can buy at any petrol station in Iceland – yet another sign of that American influence.
Sherlock allows himself to employ a formidable collection of his nervous ticks while a surgeon talks to him and Mycroft. He bites his lip hard enough to draw blood as his fingers tap a staccato accompaniment to the doctor's recital of words such as *laparotomy*, *sepsis* and *ruptured bowel* but the walls still feel like they're drawing closer. The doctor's words register on a surface level, but Sherlock does not stop to examine them in any detail because the most of the medical tidbits can wait. What Sherlock needs right now is proof that John is not dead, that he's not dying, and listening to some doctor yapping about irrelevant details is not going to provide him with that. Even if John won't even want to receive him, he needs to see with his own eyes that John will live, that he'll be fine----

What the *hell* had he been thinking? He had run away like a frightened idiot. Isn't this exactly what John is always berating him about – not letting him in on the plan? It is one of the only things John has ever asked of Sherlock, yet he fails to deliver such a simple thing over and over again. Standing on that moor, he had thought he'd made the only possible decision, but it was still a cowardly one. What if their roles had been reversed, and he had found himself dying all alone in the dreadfully lonely place?

He remembers standing on the front steps of the hut, hesitant, horrified, fearful, holding on to the last bits of determination. If he'd gone in and John had been---

*He isn't. He's here, he's alive, and he must think you abandoned him.*

Finally, the doctor stops wasting his breath. Mycroft tries to engage him in the conversation, but he can't concentrate. They briefly argue about who should look after John in London – why? Why is *Sherlock* now wasting time on such premature planning?

Finally, they're escorted to the Intensive Care Unit. Well, *almost*, because Sherlock slips away to a hallway men's room to try to get a hold of himself. Unsurprisingly, Mycroft sees right through his attempts at feigning calm. He makes use of that mortifying moment to change into his own clothes. Somehow, that trivial thing feels important. He wants to feel more like himself. He's stalling, he knows he is, but knowing doesn't make any of it easier.

Mycroft finally tells him to stop wasting time preening in front of the mirror and steers him out of the toilet and back towards doomsday. By the time they arrive back at the ITU doors, he gives up trying to grab the reins of his nerves. *John wouldn't be like this.*

John wouldn't have ended up in this scenario to begin with – of that Sherlock is certain.

He trails behind Mycroft, who is doing all the talking. That bloody showoff has apparently taught himself the basics of the Icelandic language on the flight from Oslo.
Distraught, Sherlock neglects to acknowledge the nurses flitting around the four-patient area in which John has been placed. John would call him out on that, possibly, if he were well, would tell him to behave with a quirked-up lip that signals that he doesn't actually think it'll ever happen but he doesn't even care. John always calls him out on his rudeness, except for when he's rude to the man himself. Either John takes it with a grain of salt, tries to get to the bottom of why he's in a foul mood, or remains grumpy for a moment until his natural propensity for forgiveness and thinking the best of everyone – even and especially of Sherlock – kicks in.

They'd gone on a case once to Belfast. A case John had solved. Sherlock had been so annoyed by this that he'd given John a most intense and uncalled-for chastising on the flight back for being a representative example of general human idiocy. John had been standing in the aisle, waiting for the staff to open the doors so they could get out. Sherlock had ridiculed him for not sitting down and just observing the other passengers because their behaviour could easily tell when the doors were opened; no need to crane one's neck looking idiotic; it's flock behaviour, akin to small fishes' actions when a predator shows up. John had not appreciated such a lesson, especially delivered loudly in the presence of others, and hadn't spoken much to Sherlock during the disembarkation and the train ride home.

At Baker Street, Sherlock had made tea, which he usually never does, and torn open a packet of biscuits and, miraculously, that had been effort enough that John had become amicable again. John knows he's utterly rubbish at these things, but he never stops believing Sherlock could do better, could be better.

What would Sherlock have to do for John to not be able to forgive him anymore? To stop believing that he could be more than he's always been?

Mycroft clears his throat, and Sherlock flinches.

John's name is mentioned. A curtain is pulled back, and there he is.

Sherlock's breath hitches as he takes in the sight. Perhaps he should have listened to the doctor more closely. On the other hand, how could any words have prepared him for this?

John is as pale as he'd been in the dim light of the hut, a greyish, sickly tint to his skin. There are drainage tubes and a Foley catheter snaking out from under the sheet covering his torso. There are several IVs, ECG wires, an arterial line in his wrist…

Intensive care, Sherlock reminds himself. It's for the best. At least John isn't on a respirator. He must've been intubated for surgery, surely, but now he's breathing on his own. It has to be important. It has to be a good sign.

A comment from the doctor floats around Sherlock's brain like a screensaver: 'breathing on his own'. That means John should be conscious enough to be able to talk to him, doesn't it?

Or, is he sedated? Why?

Sherlock knows what all those machines are for, but he still hates them, hates that they're needed, hates that he's the reason for this.

John's eyes are closed, but he's not sleeping since there's a frown twisting the skin on his sweat-damp forehead.

In pain?

Sherlock's quick glance at the monitor above the bed reveals a heart rate of 110 beats per minute. The green ECG line is drawing steady, even complexes. Blood pressure normal as far as Sherlock
can tell, but he doesn't know whether that is John's own doing or the result of some infused medication.

He's vaguely aware of Mycroft standing behind him, side by side with a nurse who had given them an encouraging smile before pulling back the curtain.

Sherlock shifts closer, unsure what to do. Would taking hold of a hand or shaking a shoulder cause pain or dislodge a wire? What part of John would be safe to touch in an effort to quench his sudden and desperate yearning for a physical contact, for further proof that this is not a mirage, that they made it out alive?

Images of days past try to push through, but Sherlock refuses to let them. He usually has much better control over memories he has no use for, but the locking system of the Palace is malfunctioning as it tends to do when he's not in control. Memories from the funerals of relatives are seeping through: a much younger Mycroft standing behind a much younger version of himself, hands on his shoulders, tasked with keeping him quiet and most importantly, civil. Sherlock realises he remembers these things now because the analogy is obvious: they have been situations in which he has had no idea how to behave, no model of what to do.

John would know. John always knows; he instinctively does the right things when Sherlock is upset, hurt or otherwise under the weather.

John coughs weakly and groans.

Sherlock feels mute and defenceless.

"John?" the nurse whispers close to the pillow, "There are visitors." Her pronunciation of the name is very much Nordic, forgoing the softening effect of the H and making it sound more like a Jon.

Sherlock is tempted to correct her but refrains, focusing instead on the slight flutter of John's eyelids, a shift of his hand, another groan he doesn't know how to interpret. Pain? Some other kind of discomfort?

There's an odd constriction in Sherlock's chest. He swallows, which makes his throat hurt somehow. He feels detached from his body, stares at his own hand hovering uselessly between his thigh and the bed rail.

John opens his eyes halfway. They are glassy and unfocused, but undeniably his. He shifts his hand which has been arranged on top of the sheet, grasping a wire and then letting go. His movements are lethargic, purposeless, odd.

Sherlock wishes he could pluck up the courage to enclose John's palm in his own, but his guilt and his worry are still suspending him in indecision.

John squints up at the ceiling, the bright lights making him blink.

The whole room seems to be waiting for something.

"John," is what Sherlock is finally able to say. It's more of an exhalation than a word – an echo whispering through a cave, wind moving in wilderness heathers.

John is frowning, confused. "Sh'lock-----" he starts, but it doesn't seem like he's actually addressing someone. He's still looking at the ceiling. His voice is raspy, confirming Sherlock's assumption that he had been intubated for surgery.
"I'm here," Sherlock says quietly. Too quietly.

Behind him, Mycroft takes a step closer, probably to hear better since their fledgeling conversation is almost drowned by the cacophony of a group of staff walking past in the hallway, mixing with other ambient sounds of the intensive care unit.

John's strange, watery gaze still doesn't focus on anything in particular. "Sherlock left me," he says mournfully, "the bastard left me," he reiterates, and now his tone is a perfect storm of astonishment and anger.

Sherlock looks away because he can't possibly look at John anymore.

"Bastard," John adds for good measure and then exhales.

It isn't an endearment; it isn't the same as when John tells him that he's a berk or a git or a mad bastard or a bloody wanker. Those are things John says to him when he's being himself in a way that John likes, and he likes to imagine they could all be preceded with the word my.

Sherlock would give anything to be John's bloody wanker again. He had no idea that was all he had ever wanted out of life.

He forces himself to face the bed again and opens his mouth before deciding what to say, scrambling desperately to gain some sort of a hold on his emotions. "I – I – I----"

He's stammering. He hasn't done that since he was nine years old, for Christ's sake – that's when the Special Needs Liaison of his boarding school had found him a more skilled and less irritating speech therapist.

John tries to turn away, to his side, but some tube or other snags and the nurse hurries to the opposite side of the bed to sort it out. John slumps back onto his back like a deflating balloon, gasping and grimacing as the movement must have strained his surgical incision.

The nurse presses a button on a small infusor pump hanging from an IV pole. "Epidural," she tells Sherlock as though it explains something.

"Where am I?" John asks from the general direction of the nurse, now sounding confused in an almost child-like manner. He has closed his eyes again.

The nurse leans closer again, murmurs things about the hospital and the surgery, keeping her tone reassuring and her explanations simple.

Sherlock stands uselessly and listens, hands hanging by his sides, thumb running across the rest of his fingertips; his anxiety needs to bleed out somehow.

He tries to tell himself that John's behaviour is disconcerting but understandable. John is gravely ill, and his body is directing all its resources to the injured organs even at the expense of his intellect---

It's so hard to hold onto cold facts today.

His eyes dart to the nurse. "Is he alright? I mean--- I don't know what---" the rest of the sentence he hadn't even formulated properly scatters into the wind howling through the Mind Palace.

Mycroft plants a palm on the small of Sherlock's back and practically shoves him away from the bed. "It's best we give Dr Watson his rest," he suggests, and the nurse nods.
A hand of the imaginary sort is gripping Sherlock's heart so tightly that he can't even breathe anymore.

He lets himself be led to the middle of the room, away from the bed. Mycroft's fingers are curling tightly into his shoulder, so tight it hurts, but the slight pain is good because it grounds him; he might crumple to the floor otherwise.

The curtain is drawn to hide John from him. Had that been the last glimpse they'll ever have of each other?

He's breaking. Cracking. Shattering. This is it; this is how it happens, this is how it ends.

"Thank you," Mycroft nods to the nurse, and to Sherlock, his voice sounds like it's coming from underwater.

"We'll be returning in the morning," Mycroft adds with a pleasant faux tone with a stern edge and then grabs Sherlock's elbow as though disciplining a child. Mycroft then escorts him out of the intensive care unit into a cul-de-sac in a nearby corridor.

Sherlock can no longer see properly, his vision now a blur of salt water. Tears condense on his eyelashes and turn his vision into a prismatic mess of light and faded pastel hospital colours.

He leans his palms on a wall, lets his head rest against its cold surface.

"Listen to me," Mycroft orders him. "He isn't himself right now, and you've suffered through quite an ordeal yourself. You're not thinking straight, and in such a state there is nothing you can do for his benefit."

There are palms gripping Sherlock's shoulders again, cold fingers coiling painfully into his sore muscles. He doesn't even have the energy to lift his head.

"Doctor Watson is not himself right now. You should take his initial reaction to the recent events with a grain of salt. There will be a time to discuss everything calmly, once all parties concerned have rested and have their wits about them."

Sherlock shakes his head.

Mycroft doesn't know what he has done. He doesn't understand, can't understand because he doesn't have all the information. There is nothing to talk about, no excuse Sherlock could offer for what he had done. He could bargain with himself as much as he wants, could lie to himself that he couldn't have left if he'd said goodbye and that would have condemned both of them. But, to John, it's all the same, because the fact remains that John had likely woken up in that hovel feeling scared, alone and abandoned. No explanation will wipe away the memory of that sensation, the moment of such a horrifying realisation.

Mycroft is right in micromanaging and mollycoddling him right now – he can't manage without John, not anymore. He's weak. He's a coward whose very existence hurts people. This had all happened because John had followed him, because the man has such poor taste in friends and because Sherlock had been so enamoured by the notion of someone liking him that he had let John drift into danger in his wake.

Fear turns his stomach, so he pulls himself away from his brother's grip, makes his way to the already familiar bathroom in the corridor outside the ITU, crumples to his knees before a toilet seat and retches. Nothing comes up, so he leans against the stall door, shaking. Tears are now dripping freely down his cheeks.
He tries to imagine his heart ossifying in his chest, shrivelling to a dried, functionless mass on an autopsy table, empty ventricles no longer contracting. He has rarely been more tempted to shoot up, but there is nothing at his disposal with which to chase oblivion.

They were not lovers, him and John. They were not… anything like that, but John could still not have been more important to him. His thirty-two years on this Earth should have taught him that destruction follows those who walk by his side. Now, the risks of endearment have come to play.

He should never have mistaken John's fondness for him as unconditional. If he truly messes up, this is what happens, and he always, always makes precisely these sorts of mistakes.

What good is a noble motive, if the cowardice hiding behind it simply leads to another kind of devastating loss?
When the World Comes to An End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So I take off my face
Because it reminds me how it all went wrong
And I pull out my tongue
Because it reminds me how it all went wrong
And I cough up my lungs
Because they remind me how it all went wrong
But I leave in my heart
Because I don't want to stay in the dark

- Of Monsters and Men

The cab ride from the hospital to the outskirts of Reykjavik takes less than ten minutes. During the journey, Sherlock says not a single word to his brother.

At the Hilton Reykjavik Nordica, Mycroft escorts him into a suite with a door adjoining it to his own, orders food from room service and opens the wardrobe door to reveal two more of Sherlock's suits and some other assorted clothing from home. Mycroft pointedly places a packet of nicotine patches on the bedside cabinet and then makes a brief call. Sherlock can't find the energy to eavesdrop on it.

He sits on the bed, every muscle aching, thoughts sluggish and empty. It is as though colours have drained from the word and a strange silence swept through his head like a winter storm.

When the room service delivers a fruit salad of all things, he pecks at it just to avoid a brotherly lecture. It tastes like ashes, and he has always abhorred the texture of canned grapes.

Mycroft had wandered to the balcony for his call. He re-enters the suite, pulls the doors closed because a bone-chilling wind is flapping the curtains about, and pockets his phone. It looks to be a cheap model – must be a burner.

"You need not concern yourself with your captors. It was possible to make use of the same ways they used to enter undetected to expatriate their remains to the custody of Interpol. The facts of the circumstances of their demise will not leave this room."

Before Sherlock can come up with something to reply, a knock on the door produces a private doctor from a house call service. It goes without saying that this is Mycroft's doing, and it's useless to protest – his brother wouldn't have it. Not that Sherlock even has the energy to protest being looked over. Any distraction is better than to try to make sense of the contents of his thoughts that hang heavy like rain clouds.

No suspicion of broken bones or internal injuries arises. All Sherlock has amassed are bruises and blisters – his feet are a mess. He's relieved that the doctor finds nothing at all to recommend returning to the waiting arms of an A&E. There is, however, a stern order to drink enough fluids.
and to rest, which doesn't seem to satisfy Mycroft. Perhaps he had summoned the doctor with the purpose of trying to coax Sherlock to concede to hospital care, after all.

"He will be fine," the doctor tells Mycroft who refuses to let go of the dismayed frown he had arranged on his face. Such a clichéd gesture of a dutiful big brother.

No, Sherlock will not be fine. Fine has died on a lonely hilltop in the wilderness, wiped out of existence by the same stab of a knife that nearly killed one John H. Watson.

"Your landlady sends her love," Mycroft remarks, pronouncing the last word with the same sort of slightly belittling bafflement with which he usually regards Mrs Hudson. "She pestered me terribly when your whereabouts were unknown. She promises in her message that your residence shall be in a presentable state upon your return."

Sherlock hardly cares about the state of the flat. He doesn't care about the amenities and features of this suite, either; Mycroft tries to give him a lengthy explanation of them which he ignores by switching on the television and turning the volume up to a level that cannot be anything but a protest.

He doesn't deserve any of this comfort around him.

Mycroft tries to repeat some of the useless things he'd said in the hospital, and Sherlock tries to banish him by swatting the air between them as though slapping an insistent gnat. He huddles deeper into his coat which he had slipped back on again after the doctor had finished his examinations; having the balcony door open had thoroughly chilled the room, and he still feels as though the cold is diffusing down into his bone marrow even though Mycroft had turned up the thermostat temperature. Finally, Mycroft gives up and slips through the door into his own suite.

Sherlock slumps onto his back on the bed, legs still dangling over the edge, and falls asleep only to wake up an hour later, gasping from a nightmare the details of which elude him afterwards. He shrugs off his coat but not his suit jacket, then gathers the duvet around him but whatever dreams had made him so hag-ridden refuse to loosen their grip on his nerves.

The promise of hot water is the only notion that feels even remotely consoling, so he drags himself to the shower, shaking so hard his teeth nearly clatter.

Soon, blood from countless scrapes swirl into artistic patterns mixes with mud and slides down the drain. The dress shirt and trousers he'd changed into at the hospital are likely ruined since he hadn't cleaned himself up at the hospital before changing into them.

He sits down at the bottom of the bathtub, the shower pelting him with steaming hot water that smells vaguely of sulphur just like the tap water at the hospital had done. Soon, the en suite is filled with steam, but the shaking refuses to subside. When Sherlock tries to stand up he's hit with a dizzy spell, and he collapses into a heap at the bottom of the tub again, nearly cracking his head on the faucet.

The racket brings in Mycroft who unceremoniously helps him out by gripping his arm, drapes a towel around him and then deposits him back into bed after completely turning off the arctic torture of the air-conditioning.

A bedside table lamp is flicked on, and Sherlock is then presented with his pyjamas from home, a glass of water and three tablets.

"Paracetamol and lorazepam," Mycroft explains, making it sound like a treat for a spoiled child. Sherlock doesn't care about his disapproval which is counter-intuitive, anyway, since Mycroft is
the one hand-feeding benzodiazepines to an addict whose sobriety has always been a very flimsy construct.

Usually, Sherlock would loudly protest the notion that he's unhinged enough to require pharmacological intervention, but tonight he downs the pills without protest.

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He wakes up with a start. The suffocating blackness in his dreams mixes with the darkness in the room, all sense of time and place eluding him. Only after someone slams a door in the corridor does Sherlock flinch properly awake and learn that he has slept for twelve hours. He fumbles around the top of the nightstand and finally, his fingers make contact with what he craves: the nicotine patches. He slaps three onto his arm.

Disoriented and drenched in cold sweat, he then drags himself out of bed and wanders to the window, stretching more extravagantly than he deserves. He then pulls aside the curtains and stares out over what a tourist map on the table nearby tells him what he's seeing are a road called Sudurlandsvegur and a mostly residential area named Laugadalur. Beyond that looms the sea and even from this distance, Sherlock can make out white foamy caps forming on the waves. The water is not blue but depressingly grey. On the right side of the view looms the rock face of Esjan, a low mountain, and off to the horizon he can barely make out the narrow cape of Akranes. Sherlock realises he doesn't even know from which precise direction John had been flown into the city. All he knows that they'd been somewhere in the north, and Reykjavik is on the west coast.

Sherlock idly scratches the edge of one of the patches. They're slowly kicking in, making him feel marginally less like a bag of rattling bones.

Mycroft soon knocks on the door between their rooms – the sound of the drapes rolling along the rod must have alerted him to Sherlock's wakefulness.

"John's hemodynamics are stabilising in a satisfactory manner," Mycroft declares before he has even closed the door between their rooms after himself.

Mycroft likes having the upper hand – he knows Sherlock would have demanded an update immediately. He doesn't usually call John by his first name, but in his current state, Sherlock doesn't feel confident in his deductive abilities to try to analyse this change further. "Meaning what?"

"Assuming no significant complications develop, his likelihood of survival looks outstanding," Mycroft explains.

"Your estimate or the doctors'?" Sherlock demands. Mycroft does so like to think he always knows better than anyone, medical professionals included.

His brother spreads his arms. "I am not in the habit of bringing good tidings when there are none. It's a waste of everyone's time and a guarantee of disappointment. He is sedated still to allow time for recovery from surgery, and they say his delirium was well explained through severe illness and residual effects of anaesthesia. It appears sepsis can cause a malfunction of cognitive abilities just as it can of the kidneys, for instance. I have been reassured that any incoherence should prove transient."

Useless words, empty promises and false reassurances. Black dots dance at the edge of Sherlock's
visual field, and he gives into the impulse to yawn. He then retreats until his shins come into contact with the bed. He lets his boneless knees drop him down into a sitting position.

"It was the Solntsevskaya Bratva," Mycroft tells him while raking his gaze around the room. After surveying the sight of his younger brother, he takes up position before the large window, hands clasped behind his back. He's expecting a reaction to his words from Sherlock, clearly – some sign of recognition, a flash of epiphany on his face. Maybe even some asinine expression of gratitude. He assumes that Sherlock cares about revenge or knowing exactly who is behind it all, but it hardly matters which group of incompetent idiots had dragged him and John to this desolate place. It doesn't change the outcome.

"That art theft you solved two years ago? Impressionist paintings being used as a means of payment for larger narcotics batches?" Mycroft reminds him. "It appears that this more recent case of yours was connected to a lot of things which even Interpol have been unable to connect."

Mycroft's attention begins to feel uncomfortable, so Sherlock moves to sit on an uncomfortable leather-and-chrome sofa half-hidden behind a wooden screen. His aching calf muscles complain, and he stretches them one by one by lifting his shin up on the coffee table and pulling at his bare toes. Some blisters crack and begin smarting. "I know what the case was about. I was there," he says coldly.

"You were right about one of the Garridebs being the UK contact."

"Obvious."

"Suffice to say, the British branch of their operation has now been promptly shut down. The air traffic controller connection was... curious. A profession erroneously assumed to have high morals. I had a subordinate look into worldwide records of reported wrongdoings by airline crews as part of the review of the current national terrorism alert level. You'd be surprised."

"People rarely surprise me." Sherlock doesn't care that it had been the most powerful conglomerate of the Russian mafia which had masterminded this retaliatory plan to kidnap him, drag him to some backwater area of Iceland and to torture him to death. All that is now over, but there will always be someone else to take up that endeavour. Not a day will go without someone being sufficiently motivated to threaten their lives. It's a part of Sherlock's chosen line of employment, but such a risk should not extend to anyone else.

John had decided to follow him into danger that first night, but Sherlock would be loath to classify it as informed consent. Evidence of that is the fact that he's here, sleeping between high thread count cotton sheets in a hotel suite while John lies in a hospital room, drains running into his abdominal cavity and brain mangled by septic shock.

People often assume John is an emotional bodyguard of sorts, someone to shield others from Sherlock's prickly temper, but Sherlock now realises there may be another side to this: maybe John needs protection as well – from his own addiction to adrenaline and to people who leave a trail of destruction in their wake.

*It wasn't supposed to go like this.*

The worst of the shock has worn off now, leaving in its place a resigned blankness that pulls at Sherlock like a tide.

John’s words return to the surface of his memory again. *'The bastard left me.'*

Sherlock had been called out on what he must have always known he is, but still, it's like a punch
Mycroft is studying him, trying to find a way to burst the bubble of oppressive silence he has now cocooned both of them into. No matter how petrified, bereft and lost he feels, he mustn't show it – anything Mycroft might say will only end up widening the cracks now spreading in the Mind Palace. There's no point in sharing the pain because there's nothing anyone can do to lessen it, and the intensity of Mycroft's fussing increasing would only make him homicidal on top of devastated.

"No survivors in the bunker, then?" Sherlock asks quietly, stands up and opens the wardrobe door. He can't tell if this is his dark blue suit from Baker Street, or a replica hastily acquired by Mycroft. The fit will reveal the truth.

"No. You and the good doctor were... thorough."

"How much buttering up will you have to do to the right Icelandic power players?"

"None. There will be a catered trip later this year to Kenya, a token of goodwill between the Icelandic Foreign Ministry and the Home Office. Off the books, of course. Thankfully, The Icelandic Secretary of Defence is a great fan of large game. As I said, the mop-up was not very extensive since no human remains are officially involved."

"Not much of a payback for Icesave, but it's a start," Sherlock quips and slips on his jacket. He then notices his Belstaff hanging in the coat rack by the door to the corridor, washed and brushed. The pills must have plunged him into a deep enough sleep that he hadn't heard someone come in and retrieve it for express dry cleaning. Usually, such a measly dose of the drug wouldn't do anything for him; he must've been drained enough to need only such a minor nudge to succumb.

Mycroft studies him now that he is more fully in his brother's line of sight again. "You don't look rested."

"The pillows were dreadful. When can--- I go home?" he almost says 'we', but that's a fool's hope, isn't it? John will have nothing to do with him, now.

They were supposed to have each other's backs. He should have left a note, why the hell did he not leave a note--- well, he would have had to go back into the hut to do that. Would John have been able to read it? Had he been forced to face John, he could never have walked away, couldn't have left his best friend, even if it had been their only chance, because John is his only person, his only--- ever--- in the world, and he must've felt so alone---

"Doctor Watson will obviously not be fit to fly for days. There will be no further surgery since this morning's CT scan looks satisfactory, and he is now mostly coherent, but---"

Sherlock's head snaps towards Mycroft after he has finished tying his shoelaces.

Mostly coherent...? What an infuriatingly vague expression.

Mycroft gives him a tight-lipped smile. The man's smiles are most often carefully constructed and as devoid of actual joy as a ribbon-cutting ceremony at some government building nobody needs. "I assumed you would want transport to the hospital as soon as you woke up. A car is waiting downstairs. As I said, he's more coherent, but not completely out of the woods yet. They are weaning him off noradrenaline, which the doctors assure is a reliable sign of the circulatory shock receding."

Sherlock ignores the assumption that he's going to visit the hospital. "In all likelihood, he could be flown home very soon – he won't soon need anything that a well-equipped medical flight service couldn't handle," he points out. "The only serious contraindications to flying would be unstable
hemodynamics, an undrained pneumothorax or an active bleed."

"I'm sure Doctor Watson would be the first to advise you to leave such evaluations to actual physicians. What about ample time to heal and to gather his strength? He is better off at the ITU than being dragged around the skies of Northern Europe just because you have the patience of a whippet that has spotted a rabbit."

Tired of being spoken down to, Sherlock pushes the front door to the suite open and slips out into the corridor. He sways a little on his feet, his sense of balance not catching up with his inner ear just yet.

_Exhaustion and dehydration_ – the diagnoses of yesterday's unnecessary doctor visit come to mind. He leans onto a wall, the velvety texture of the wallpaper offering a mildly soothing haptic experience. When Mycroft joins him in the corridor, he shoves his palms against the wall and straightens his arms to stand up properly again. Just as he is about to start towards the lifts another bout of dizziness, now coupled with nausea, hits and he finds himself seeking the comfort of the wall again.

"I would insist we go back inside, but I doubt you'd listen." Mycroft waits patiently while Sherlock focuses on getting his breathing under control.

_John. I'll listen to John, not to anyone else because John doesn't have anyone at the hospital who would know what had happened, no one who would keep him company._

Still, he's not the one John wants to see right now. That had been obvious yesterday. He's not going to torture himself by going back there just to have John pull his stitches attempting to wring his neck.

_The bastard left---'_

Sherlock presses his fingertips on his closed lids in a futile attempt to stop the room from spinning. When he opens his eyes, Mycroft has moved his briefcase to his left hand and is tactfully offering Sherlock the support of his other arm.

Sherlock declines it with an insulted glare and leans his shoulder against the wall instead, making no move towards the lift. Finally, vertigo subsides.

Mycroft takes a step forward. "Shall we?"

"I--- can't," Sherlock manages. "I don't know what to do," he tells mostly himself. Curling his fingers around the edge of where the metallic lift frame meets the wall as though someone is threaten dragging him off by force.

Mycroft studies his expression for a moment, then rocks back on his heels with a pitiful smile. "This will pass. What would Doctor Watson do, if your roles were reversed?"

_He would have shared his plan with me. He would have done what I couldn't. He wouldn't have risked that I'd die believing he betrayed me. He would have said goodbye._

Even worse than the guilt is that John won't _like_ him anymore. He has broken something neither of them can fix.

It was good while it lasted.

Oh, how he has wished his disguise of a high-functioning sociopath would turn into reality. Why couldn't the notion be a spell – uttered enough times, it would change his very core into something
incapable of feeling like this?

"Come on, the car is waiting," Mycroft prompts impatiently.

"He doesn't want me there."

"If the situation was the opposite, do you think he would listen to your current, emotionally compromised, highly reactive protestations?"

It's a moot point because John would never endanger people as he does, would never allow them to become collateral damage. In his line of work, Sherlock is selfish to have even cultivated hope of companionship. Alone does not protect just him; it should be established to protect others. He has finally come to his senses about this, so why does he need to repeat it to himself over and over and over again to truly believe it?

Mycroft is not done with advice yet. "It appears to require repeating that Doctor Watson was not himself yesterday – you should have heard some of the things you have uttered during your less coherent moments of illness, Brother Mine."

Sherlock manages to produce a pale shadow of a snort.

The lift announces its arrival with a ping, prompting Mycroft to pick up his briefcase from the floor. He watches Sherlock for a moment. "Very well. I shall visit, then, and report back." He places the briefcase in the doorway to the lift to keep it from leaving, then digs out a mobile phone from his coat pocket – one identical to Sherlock's old one, now lying at the bottom of the Atlantic.

Sherlock accepts it wordlessly.

"Keep it turned on," Mycroft instructs him.

"In case you need to track me?" Sherlock argues feebly.

"It can be tracked it even if the power is switched off. It should be obvious that you ought to be reachable in case of a change in Watson's status. I trust you not to get into further trouble in your current state. And, for heaven's sake, eat something." He passes Sherlock a credit card which soon joins the new phone in the left main pocket of the Belstaff.

"Tell him---" Sherlock calls after just as the lift doors are closing.

Mycroft reaches out an arm and the doors clang back open. "Yes?"

Which is more pathetic: the foul deed he has already done, or attempting to apologise via proxy?

"Never mind. Just make sure he's looked after."
I've finally assembled a master post of all my on location fic research at tumbl. Iceland photos included.

I am also celebrating the milestone of soon reaching a million words of Sherlock fic published at AO3. Come join the party - there'll be a fun giveaway on the 25th of October!
The strange silence surrounding me
Grows closer
Feels colder
But I'm ready to suffer the sea
Black water
Take over
- *Of Monsters and Men*

Sherlock trundles back to his suite and drains a small bottle of orange juice from the minibar. It only makes him marginally less shaky, and the sudden onslaught of cold, acidic liquid turns his stomach.

Sitting in the room with the curtains drawn doesn't seem like a viable option regarding his mood, so he buttons his coat, which now smells faintly of some sort of dry cleaning solvent instead of moss, sweat and swampland. He vacates the suite, sceptical that the worries pulling his shoulders into a hunch and clinging onto him like a thick fog will let go, even if he finds a more open space where he could try to make sense of his thoughts.

He doesn't make eye contact with anyone he stands next to in the lift or passes by in the hotel lobby. From the front entrance, he walks towards the seashore, the brisk wind feeling as though it consists of tiny needles which scrape the exposed parts of his skin raw.

When he crosses a quiet side road, the sense of John's phantom following his footsteps is so strong that he's almost tempted to glance back, to reassure himself that there's nobody there. It has become a habit, constantly checking that John is trailing him. John, who has slotted himself into every part of Sherlock's life. He wonders if the tiny aftershocks of him no longer being there would ever stop, even after years of loneliness. In his line of work, he's selfish to have cultivated hope of enduring companionship. He can't afford to make such a mistake again, especially if there still is a chance that whatever lacklustre apology he could formulate might be accepted.

*The bastard left me.*

Forgiveness truly seems like a fool's hope.

Placing blame is often easy, but it is just a beginning, not a plan forward. John may attempt to take on some of the blame, if only for having poor taste in friends. John would never endanger people like Sherlock does, would never allow them to become collateral damage. That part will be solely Sherlock's shame to carry.

*Stop wallowing,* Mycroft would tell him right now, and his brother is right. He needs to remedy the situation, to do what must be done, even if it means making some major decisions regarding his future. This dawdling, this procrastination is him being selfish and wanting to keep the illusion of their life together for a moment longer.

What has happened to John cannot be allowed to happen again. It does not matter whether John
wants to see him again or not; Sherlock will pay his debt by setting the man free.

He climbs up onto a large rock demarcating the edge of a coastal walking path and sits there, watching the foam-peaked waves of the now nickel grey sea roll in. He would have enjoyed such scenery in a different set of circumstances. John would have, too, he's sure of it.

He should have gotten this.... thing, this excruciating attachment to someone he can't have, out of his system long ago, but how? At times, he had even considering following John's example and finding some willing, warm body with which to distract himself. Still, it would never have been the same. He has never wanted sex just for physical gratification, and it wouldn't solve anything because it would be with the wrong person. John would probably just give him a thumbs-up for getting a leg over. To be supportive of such nonsense as one-night stands is how John had once insinuated Sherlock ought to behave. Wingman had been the term John had used. Sherlock had been so disgusted that he'd retreated into his bedroom and stayed in there for the rest of the evening even if his phone kept pinging with messages from Lestrade in the kitchen. What did I do now?! John had yelled numerous times through the door.

The answer is nothing. That is what John had done. And, that will forever be the problem. John would kill for him, probably even die for him. But love him? What a fool's hope.

He cannot fuck John Watson out of his system because John is in his head and in his heart and eliminating his influence would require tearing out those very organs. Maybe it's simply rotten luck that the person he would come to entertain ridiculous fantasies about is, perhaps, the most atrociously straight man on the planet.

What Sherlock cannot purge, he must endure without. John doles out his affection so freely and so carelessly to women, yet denies it from the one who'd truly value it. Sherlock wonders how John will react to him doing the same.

Sherlock bites his lip, lets out a hollow, disbelieving, ragged laugh that does not contain any humour at all. What a travesty.

It will be easy, all this, if John is as livid with him as he suspects, septic delirium or no septic delirium. It would be for the best. Fate brings people together and rips them apart. He must prepare for that tide to crash in, but no matter how long he stares at the waves, trying to calm himself down, he still feels like he's being tugged in two opposite directions.

Eventually, his coat is no longer a match for the cold wind. Yet, he grits his teeth and ignores his discomfort. He wonders how long John had had to wait for help and how he'd felt when the infection had been at its worst. Being a bit chilly while sitting on a city seashore hardly compares as a punishment.

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In London, Sherlock enjoys walking and not even longer distances ever discourage him but he has no taste for sightseeing and the scenery in these parts of town is dull. After wandering down the empty promenade built high up to shield pedestrians from the roiling sea, he turns and goes back to the hotel and up to his suite.

He snoops around Mycroft's rooms out of idleness and habit. His brother's laptop must be in his briefcase and thus with him or in the safe, and he's too clever to use a lock code Sherlock could
He downs one minibar-sized bottle of whisky from each of their rooms. As a rule, he never drinks alcohol, and his narcotics habits haven't seasoned him to its effects, so even a little is enough to muddle his faculties. It blurs his senses, slows his brain, which is why he normally would never welcome its effects. Now, he'll take what relief he can get. He hardly needs to justify having a drink to anyone else than Mycroft, who reads too much into everything he does anyway. He had let Sherlock off the hook surprisingly easily about visiting the hospital. Maybe Sherlock should make some deductions about that.

There are probably places to score in Reykjavik, but finding them would take time and effort he lacks right now, and his feet hurt.

After emptying the rest of the tiny liquor bottles available in his own room on a whim, he falls asleep on the uncomfortable leather sofa without bothering to take off his coat – it feels like the only safe constant in this rapidly changing universe.

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He's startled awake hours later, when the new phone begins vibrating in his pocket, the generic ringtone mostly muffled by the wool blend. Even this muted auditory assault is enough to make his head pound to the rhythm of his heartbeat. He's disgustingly sweaty, and his mouth feels like the desert.

"Yes?" he answers hesitantly, wondering if the phone has been connected to his old number. If not, then the caller must be Mycroft.

"Meet me at reception," Mycroft tells him curtly and rings off. Sherlock nearly calls him back, wanting to know immediately why he'd be summoned like a minion. Suddenly, it occurs to him that the reason for such economic communication could be that something new and alarming has happened to John. Then again, not even Mycroft would be so cruel as to leave him hanging like this, not even for the less than five minutes it will take him to drag himself downstairs. No, Sherlock realises that in all likelihood, Mycroft is simply trying to avoid an argument by giving him an order.

He knows he has no excuse for avoiding going to the hospital. It's just that he doesn't know which piece of rubble to grab first to start making sense of the explosion site he has made of his life.

He raises a hand in front of his face, using it to direct an exhalation into his nostrils to test whether Mycroft would be able to pick up on his drinking earlier. It's pointless – there will be other signs to deduce from besides just the smell on his breath. Nothing is too subtle for his brother to pick up. At least he can always tune out of the chastising, or fall back on cutting remarks about Mycroft's dietary failures. Pedestrian, but always effective.

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When Mycroft takes in the visage of him in the downstairs lobby, his lips thin into a line that does not know whether to curl into an approximation of a pitying smile or to pout in disapproval. "At least you have rested," he concludes and straightens Sherlock's shirt collar. "Assuming you are in
a state fit to visit those worse off than yourself, your presence at the hospital is kindly requested."
After this declaration, Mycroft begins walking towards the doors and Sherlock hurries after him.

He has no counterarguments, so he trails wordlessly behind Mycroft to the semicircle of driveway outside where a cab is waiting.

He has to do this sooner or later – his proverbial walk to Tyburn Tree.

He scrambles into the back seat. He realises he hasn't asked who is requesting his presence, or if it had been a figure of speech to lull him into a false sense of security. Are there terminally bad news to be delivered? No, even in his half-hungover state he would have read that on Mycroft's face the moment he clapped eyes on his brother. Is he being summoned for a meeting with the doctors? No, Big Brother would have attended and delivered the news to him.

Mycroft looks downright grotesque as he attempts to twist his features into something approaching encouragement. "There should have been gloves in the wardrobe delivered for you," he remarks.

"Stop fussing," Sherlock growls from behind gritted teeth. It must be a nervous tick, this micromanagement Mycroft feels compelled to perform when there's a crisis. Lord save his minions. What does it matter if he has gloves or if his fingertips fall off?

"I was able to converse with Watson this afternoon. He is most eager to see you," Mycroft says, and it feels as though he's scanning Sherlock's every move and expression. "Seeing his current state for yourself should dissipate some of your gloom."

Of course, John would want to see him, how else would he get to use his admirable right hook or at least the verbal equivalent of it? In their relationship, there has always lived the assumption that they are a team, that they will cover each other's backs, that they will never abandon one another. Even if Sherlock is terrible at reading between the lines and abysmal at understanding the emotions of others, those things he has been certain of even if an official spoken or written pact has never been made. He has now broken that ground rule, at least from John's perspective. How could John be anything but angry?

He's going to hold onto the emptiness he feels, to try to bounce off John's words as though they are gnats colliding with armour, and then walk away. The worst has already happened – what more could there be to harm him? How could this confrontation be worse than what he has already endured?

Yearning for distraction and not caring about Mycroft having to pay for roaming charges, he brings up John's blog on his new phone and reads through some of the older entries, hoping it will help in shifting into his normal mindset of communicating with his blogger. He needs a reference, a framework, because this – a foreign hospital in a foreign country, John being wrapped up in sheets, ill and perhaps only partly cognizant of what is going on – is something he doesn't know how even to begin to negotiate. He needs a reminder of who he is when he is the Sherlock Holmes everyone else sees – cold, unfeling sociopath, do your research. Only that disguise can keep him afloat, he's sure of it.

'Sherlock chooses to be this crusading consulting detective and I choose to be his colleague' is what John had said in his write-up for the blind banker thing. By using the word choice, John had referred to a conscious decision, even a rational one, instead of saying that he had accidentally drifted into Sherlock's orbit.

Crusade. A term referring to a religious undertaking that has little to do with sense and science. And what a false prophet John had picked!
All these people he involves in his adventures... They're not safe. We're not safe. There are forces out there and they're coming for Sherlock Holmes,' one blog post reads. Sherlock knows most of them by heart already, but it feels more concrete seeing the words on the screen than just relying on his formidable memory. John had known all this right from the start, and he'd still stayed. He thinks he has made an informed choice, but that choice had been based on his own addiction to danger, that much is obvious. John would not hesitate to save Sherlock from his own Achilles' heel, whatever that is; he'd do everything he possibly could to keep Sherlock safe and sane. Isn't that what he is duty-bound to do for John, then, since the man obviously doesn't know what's good for him?

Mycroft interrupts his train of thought. "He's doing fine under the circumstances." Mycroft opens an issue of The Times he'd been carrying under his arm in the lobby. "You have most certainly done your part in ensuring his survival."

Sometimes even his arguable very intelligent brother can be the greatest of dunces. Sherlock nearly tells the driver to let him out, but that would only delay the inevitable. Best to just get this over with, even if the shock of it all still reverberates around his skull. The faster he sheds any futile hope still lingering, the better. Will John understand his reasons for his actions and see how he could never have done the sensible thing if he'd had to look in John's eyes while making the ultimate decision? Maybe he'll understand it all on an intellectual level, but the emotional side will linger like a bad smell from under the floorboards, slowly poisoning them both? A few more hours out there, and John would have become one of the Phantoms of Regrets Past in the Mind Palace. Sherlock will be damned if he does admit the truth, and damned if he does not. And yet, this truth still has less devastating potential than the plain fact of why it had been so difficult to do the right thing – that his sentiment for John has grown too large and too fragile.

"You will both be fine," Mycroft tells him, offering half of the newspaper.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. He has never been very good at being fine, which his brother must be perfectly aware of. He can do manic; he can do desperate, he can do reckless, he can do absolutely utterly delightfully ecstatic, but fine? A stable, normal, content, balanced state of being? At best, he has momentarily held onto that flimsy construction by his fingernails, constantly at risk of slipping into the abyss that always awaits in his head.

John had sometimes made him believe that fine is a state he might reach, someday. John had given him a lot of things he had thought he could never have. John's loyalty cannot be unconditional, nor can John's... fondness for him. Whatever John feels for him can likely be erased by betrayal – if more intense feelings ever even existed outside of the vast desert of Sherlock's loneliness.

There is no one.

I have no one.

I can't do this, Mycroft.

I can't lose him; I can't.

He says none of this out loud. Instead, he lets fate drag him to receive the final killing blow.

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They are asked to wait in the foyer of the intensive care unit for John's nurse to come and collect...
them. Sherlock is aware of why one does not simply walk into a patient room at an ICU – there might be a procedure going on, something unsightly that would upset visiting loved one with weaker stomachs than that of a consulting detective. John is likely being prepared for their visit; Sherlock imagines drains being covered by a blanket and sweat wiped off a brow. *Like preparing a corpse for viewing.*

He doesn't think he needs to be shielded like that. They should force him to see it all, to take in all the gruesome and punishing details, like a dog whose nose is pressed into a mess it has made.

Sherlock halts at the door. He can't see John's bed from there, only the feet of the patient placed closest to the entrance. He realises that, even after all his soul-searching, he has no actual plan. "I need to know what to do," he whispers mostly to himself, half-hoping Mycroft doesn't hear and half-hoping he does.

"You are going to walk in and allow Doctor Watson to thank you for saving his life. Which is what he explicitly told me he desires to do as soon as humanly possible," Mycroft tells him quietly, stepping closer to stand by his side. Sherlock hates the calmness of his voice, his collected poise. How can he be so unaffected by everything?

John's nurse reappears and seems to pick up on Sherlock's hesitation. "It's alright to need a minute," she tells him in heavily accented English.

A minute for what? A minute to wave a magic wand to make John well, to somehow whisk them back home where they used to belong?

Mycroft's patience with his vacillation finally wears thin and he pulls Sherlock back into the hallway, fingers gripping his coat sleeve like a vice. "Sherlock Holmes. Go in there, and let the poor man thank you. He is more interested in your welfare than he is in his own, and terribly worried about you. The precise nature of your connection is a discussion for another day, but I must insist you do not toy with such a thing at a time when you appear to be in as grave a need of being reminded of its purpose and benefits as he is."

"He doesn't want me here," Sherlock confesses and shakes off Mycroft's grip.

"Why on Earth not? I spoke to him mere hours ago and what he told me was the exact opposite. He does not fear me, nor has he any other incentive to lie to me. Whatever it is you are finding so difficult ought to be set aside, because he must have a need for company and out of the two of us, I hardly think he prefers mine."

Finally, Sherlock feels he can walk back in, if only to stop growing old in this corridor listening to Mycroft's supercilious lectures. He needs to go through this, go home and try to make sense of *Life after John.*

A different nurse than the one they'd just met appears to escort them in again. "Have you been waiting long?"

Sherlock shakes his head.

"You are... Sherrold?" she asks, hesitating a little.

"Sherlock."

"He's been asking for you. He would not calm down this morning until I told which hotel you have. Mister Holmes left information," she explains in her broken but understandable English, nodding towards Mycroft.
John must be *dying* to put him on the spot, to let him hear it, to make it clear that this is the last
time they see one another. That must be why John is so anxious to see him. It *must* be. Logic
dictates it. They walk back into the room. The white, flimsy curtain that reminds Sherlock of
shower cubicles in cheap hotels is drawn away.

An involuntary gasp escapes Sherlock’s lips. Swollen and still greyishly pale and unmoving, John
resembles a drowned corpse. His eyes are closed, but at least he is breathing steadily and quietly.
Asleep? Sedated?

The nurse steps closer, probably reading the confusion and alarm on his face. "He needed a lot of
fluids yesterday. They don't stay in the veins for long with sepsis, so they leak elsewhere,
especially with abdominal issues. It's okay, really – this always happens and it goes away during
the next days. He'll be alright," she assures Sherlock.

He nods as he minces his way to stand by the bed proper, distracted and devoid of his usual need
to make it known that he's quite well-versed in human physiology and clinical medicine. "John?"
he asks with a raspy voice since his throat is so dry.

Eyelids crack open – not with a confused flutter but easily, effortlessly. Blue eyes, now sharp and
familiar, fix on Sherlock and the most beautiful smile spreads on John's face. "There you are,"
John says. He sounds like himself. "God, I'm so happy to see you."

The words sound so tender, so relieved, that Sherlock finds himself speechless. For a second he
allows himself to hope that his previous visit had just been a bad dream and John's accusatory
words just an illusion created by the illness. It seems unlikely, though – they had been too spot on,
too close to the truth. It seems unlikely that such a cataclysmic shift could have happened in John
views what had happened, so why does he sound so kind? Is this a lie designed to protect
Sherlock? Is this like it had been in his childhood, 'he doesn't know what he's doing', 'he's in
therapy for those issues, it's no use disciplining him', 'bless him, he doesn't know how to function
in that sort of a situation, just needs a bit of understanding, that one', 'he doesn't know how, so we
need to just let it go and not embarrass him'. Is John lying to him, forgiving him through gritted
teeth, because he thinks Sherlock incapable of even understanding what a terrible thing he has
done?

"You're alright?" John's tone gently demands an answer. His smile is still sunny, relieved, and
lights up the room. Sherlock doesn't remember him being such a talented actor.

"Mycroft says you visited before, but they gave me stuff and I don't remember much of it. He said
you escaped from some A&E?" John asks, the notion appearing to amuse him. Usually, he
lectures Sherlock about not submitting to proper medical care. This exaggerated leniency must be
part of the act.

John is holding out a hand.

Sherlock hesitates to take it, because it's so swollen that the finger joints are nearly lost in the
nooks and crannies of doughy, mottled skin.

Hesitantly, he grabs hold as gently as he can. John's hand feels warm and wonderfully familiar,
and the way in which their fingertips curl around each other's feels so natural that it's torture,
absolute torture. The times they've held hands have been practical, case-related. Not like this. Not
this, ever.

John seems to notice his apprehension and grips his palm even tighter. "You look like you've seen
a ghost."
I very nearly created one.

Chapter End Notes

There’s still time to [join my Million Word Party & giveaway](#); the link now includes details of which fics the winners will get to choose one from to read in advance.
See, this one shot shatters the glass, then misses  
And you stand reflected in me  
- Kyla La Grange

They've held hands before. Sherlock is convinced he remembers every one of those occasions, and the fascinating novelty of it will never wear off. Now, he practically stares at John's thumb stroking over his bruised and scraped knuckles, wanting to memorise every sweep and press. Since the early days, Sherlock has secretly relished these moments when John is willing to forget the invisible boundaries which define what is and what isn't acceptable when it comes to their relationship. It's a guilty secret, of which he has many when it comes to John. John has always allowed him more wiggling room than he allows others, presumably because he thinks Sherlock has no sense of what is normal or usual. The notion is not flattering, but sometimes, he takes advantage of that assumption of John's and indulges. John doesn't mind feet on his lap, a sleepy head on his shoulder in the back of a cab or standing so close that they're breathing the same air bit of air in and out like a strange match of ventilatory tennis, as long as it happens under the pretence of 'it's just Sherlock, he doesn't understand these things'.

John gives his hand a squeeze and Sherlock looks up, studying the smile John is so effortlessly offering. It's terribly tempting to lose himself in it, to stay suspended in that uninformed joy and to pretend it isn't his fate to keep turning such smiles of John's into grimaces. He would become a permanent feature on John's features in the form of frown lines and wrinkles of pain – a catalogue of ways in which Sherlock will make him age faster than he should with worry and suffering.

Sherlock realises that the moment is dragging long. He'll need to sound business-like to throw off the suspicion that something is going on. "Any pain?" he asks equanimously, glancing at the infusor pump the nurse had used the night before which is still attached to an IV pole. 'Epidural' is the word she had used to explain its function – a continuous nerve block.

"Not really when I just lie still. Sitting up is a bitch, though," John huffs. He's still firmly holding on to Sherlock's hand, and it's strange how neither of them appears to be flustered in the least even though Mycroft is witnessing such a blatant display of affection.

"Is he being looked after?" John then asks, his words directed at Mycroft.

Sherlock turns just in time to witness Mycroft looking rather scandalised at John's inquiry; he wouldn't be surprised if Mister British Government saw fit to remind John that he is in charge here, so things are obviously going to run efficiently. If someone else were talking about Sherlock as though he wasn't present, he'd be livid. Why he has no trouble allowing John such things he has little idea. Perhaps it is because John never seems to be attempting to insult or belittle him. He does tease Sherlock, but rarely about things that would really pierce through and wound. He could do so, easily, because he knows Sherlock so well. He knows Sherlock because Sherlock has made the mistake of letting him in and paving the way for this fiasco.
Mycroft is practically twitching in irritation in the uncomfortable-looking chair he has enthroned himself. "We assembled here at the hospital yesterday when both of us arrived in Reykjavik. As you may remember, we're staying at the Hilton. He has showered, slept, and eaten, though very little of the last two," Mycroft announces with regal contempt.

"You've seen a doctor, haven't you?" John asks Sherlock in a warning tone and his forefinger raised as is John's habit when he really wants to make a paint.

His gaze sweeps over Sherlock, making him feel exposed.

"Hypothermia and blistered feet. Nothing a blanket and a hot brew could not remedy," Mycroft assures, the carefully contained aggravation already gone.

John accepts this with a nod and then shifts his gaze back to Sherlock. "I think we've lost your scarf. They must've cut it off me," he says apologetically.

Why would that matter? Does John think he cares about such a thing?

"It's fine," Sherlock says, and his voice sounds weak and unsure in his own ears. He has a sense of watching a film that's being played too fast, the celluloid threatening to unravel from the roll. He still cannot wrap his head around the one hundred and eighty-degree change in John's attitude.

Could Mycroft be right, and John had just been confused, delirious, ill? Is it true that he doesn't even remember Sherlock being here yesterday? Does he assume all his recollections are distorted by the illness?

On the other hand, what John does or doesn't believe won't change anything.

"I've been calling you my Swiss Army knife, you know," John then tells him with half a wink and a nod to the nurse standing nearby. He jiggles their joined hands slightly to reinforce his point. "You get me out of all the tight spots."

Sherlock barely notices his hand going limp in John's hold. "I'm not, it's not, I'm---" he trails out, not sure what he's protesting. He shouldn't upset John, not in his current state. He wishes he knew how to finish what he'd started -- and that applies to both his interrupted sentence and this friendship. He doesn't know how to apologise, especially when John is pretending he doesn't even need to. Apologies are pointless. John always apologises for him, and says other things for him, too.

He was fooling himself before when he thought he could navigate this existence without John. He just hadn't met the man yet, hadn't realised how difficult trudging through daily life had been until John came along to make everything so much easier. He's as convenient as he is lovely, and that is the trapdoor Sherlock had fallen through. He needs to learn how to manage on his own again.

John is frowning now, first looking at their joined hands and then at Sherlock, who is decidedly evading his gaze. John glances at Mycroft, whose patrician brows rise in pretending he has no idea what John is after. He always knows what people want and is equally skilled at ignoring them when it suits him. It's infuriating when he does it to Sherlock, pretends he has no idea what's going on.

"Sherlock?" John asks, and it's obvious he has caught wind that something is amiss.

"Being grateful--- that was not what you were supposed to say," Sherlock explains, and that should cover everything that's pertinent right now. He's not going to mention any mortifying details to remind John of what had happened, but this should jog the man's memory enough that they could get to the sordid business at hand.
John's brows are performing his trademark: a slightly exaggerated V-shaped thing that makes an appearance when he's not taking Sherlock entirely seriously. Sherlock suspects he might be affected by the euphoria-inducing properties of some of his medications since he seems downright exhilarated despite his physical state. Relief is emanating from him in affectionate waves, and it has all thrown Sherlock for a most confounding loop.

"Do I often say things I'm not supposed to?" John asks, glancing conspiratorially at Mycroft. "He likes to think he can predict everything that people do," he adds, cocking his head towards Sherlock.

"Quite true. Despite his supposed credo of basing theories only on factual evidence, he jumps to conclusions and even pre-emptively reacts to his own misguided guesses about human behaviour."

Sherlock crosses his arms. Being talked about as though he isn't even in the room is one of the easiest ways to rile him up. That's what he had been forced to put up with from adults all his through his childhood. Adults, who were rarely interested in anything else about him than his shortcomings. "I like to think I know you well enough to anticipate your reactions with some accuracy," he tells John, narrowing his gaze.

"Is this what you mean when you said you sometimes have conversations with me when I'm out of the flat? Maybe that Mind Palace John of yours isn't like me at all. He is, after all, you."

Sherlock now almost wishes John would ask what it is that he was supposed to say. That would drag it all out in the open, and maybe this would all be over, then. He should speak up, but the amused and conspiratorial glances John and Mycroft have just exchanged makes him want to stop communicating altogether. They're making light of something beyond serious, and he's the only one seeing reason, as usual.

John huffs and now looks a bit pitiful. "We're just yanking your chain. We're all a bit tired, you know." He nudges Sherlock's knee with his knuckles.

Don't make light of this. Don't forgive me. Don't make it harder.

John idly taps his hand on the sheet covering him. It's not an invitation to sit there, of that Sherlock is certain. The silence drags on, but it's an amicable and peaceful one because John is making it that way. John, who looks like something that the cat dragged in, is trying to put everyone at ease because he's John and that is what he does. The soothing effect of his presence is like a drug when they're at home, and there is no case, and everything is terrible.

"I wish they'd let me eat something," John laments with a sigh.

Sherlock immediately grabs the cup of half-melted ice chips placed on the bedside cabinet, but John waves him away. "No, thanks. I was cold enough for two days."

A memory barges in, uninvited and disturbing: Sherlock remembers staring into the well in the wilderness, the echo of the wind ricocheting in the darkness and stale air inside the small structure. He'd been shivering from both the cold and from the adrenaline his body hadn't known what to do with. Stupid, useless, defective, traitorous Transport, making him feel even worse instead of helping him to focus on using his intellect to survive.

He practically shoves himself out of the memory, out of his Mind Palace. Usually imagining returning to the open air of its courtyard grounds him since it helps him shake off the feeling of dread created by dwelling into unpleasant recollections. But, not this time, because the front garden has changed. Heathers he doesn't remember ever planting there are now growing in thick
tufts near the entrance, lining the path to the gates where the landscape dissolves into white, suffocating mist.

Fragments of a conversation finally pierce through and pull him back to his surroundings. He blinks, and the world reorients itself.

John has been talking to Mycroft again, their lines of sight still connected.

"How are you feeling?" Sherlock manages to patch together, and the words come out in a demanding jumble without the proper rising intonation at the end of the question. He sounds deranged in his own ears, especially since he had already asked about pain and is that not the most important component of someone's general level of malaise in a hosp---

"Well, I'd rather be at the Hilton, like you," John jokes and lets out a somewhat congested cough that cuts through Sherlock's racing thoughts. His fingers twitch as a compulsion hits to do something, to help, to fix things but he's as helpless and useless now as he had been out there when John had still been dying.

He turns to face the window, his breath now coming and going in erratic gulps. He knows these warning signs: anxiety creeping up high that it begins to distort his ability to interpret his surroundings, thoughts running rampant. A minute ago, he had needed a connection with others to distract himself, but now it's too late for that – now, he needs to limit the damage, to prevent the mortification of someone realising he's losing control. He needs a quiet spot to contain the mounting stress but if that isn't allowed, then he might just end up yelling at John to stop it, to stop this charade, to stop placating him like some stupid, irresponsible child and to get on with it, to get to the part where he gets his punishment.

He should be called out on what he's done – this prolonging of the inevitable is torture. Then again, perhaps that's exactly what John is after. Maybe he has sworn Mycroft to secrecy. Maybe they've teamed up to teach him a lesson.

They're too late – that lesson has most certainly been learned.

In a desperate scramble to get himself under control, he makes use of a hand disinfectant container hooked to the end of John's bed. The pungent smell feels like it's burning off his nostril hairs and it stings terribly on the scrapes in his hands and but the pain is just enough to stop him from being pulled into the tide of his anxiety, at least for a moment.

"How'd you get here? To Reykjavik, I mean?" John asks him.

_**Easy question. Factual information. Yes, good.**_

"I found a local farmer hunting on the highlands who contacted the emergency services. I was taken to a hospital in a nearby town. Took a taxi from here." He's annoyed that Mycroft has told John about him absconding from A&E; the man can be such a tattletale when it comes to Sherlock's shortcomings, and John usually lectures him in a most annoying manner for such antics.

"You took a cab," John chuckles, and it must be the drugs talking since he doesn't seem to be even mildly disapproving. He then briefly closes his eyes and focuses on breathing for a moment while his face distorts into a blanched grimace.

Sherlock realises laughing must be irritating his mauled abdominal muscles. His hand hovers above the handrail of the bed.

John opens his eyes and glances at the infusor pump hanging from the IV pole. "Press the button,"
he prompts, and Sherlock does as he's told. A whirr and a click and a running tally of millilitres on the small digital screen signal that something is being dosed. There's little Sherlock can do right now to fix things, but he can press a button. He can do that much. He wants to press it again, just to make sure.

He feels exhausted and thoroughly achy now that the adrenaline the Transport had marinated itself in upon their arrival is dissipating.

"Cat got your tongue?" John jokes again.

He shouldn't be wasting energy on being amusing for Sherlock's sake. As a matter of fact, he shouldn't do a single thing more for Sherlock's benefit, ever.

"Will there be more surgery?" Sherlock hears himself asking with a detached tone to direct John back to a more important topic than his own quietude.

John finally lets his arms rest beside his torso instead of continuing his fidgeting. Perhaps the press of the button is starting to kick in. "They're saying it's unlikely unless there's a complication. Antibiotics are kicking in already. No fever," John announces triumphantly.

"Arrangements are being made for expatriation as soon as medically possible. Would you prefer The Weymouth Street Hospital or The London Clinic?" Mycroft cuts in politely, referring to two private hospitals located within walking distance of Baker Street.

"I'd be fine with even any NHS hospital or wherever you'd find a spot in. Doesn't have to be a posh private one. As long as they'll be willing to put up with him visiting--", John adds, flashing a smile to Sherlock, "--I'm fine with anything."

He then grabs the edge of Sherlock's jacket, coaxing him to grant John his full attention. "Hey? You're starting to worry me. Anything to say for yourself?" John says, and the look in his eyes still seems as playful and calm as his smile.

Sherlock doesn't buy into the theatrics. It must be a stalling technique, pretending everything is just peachy. "We'll get you home as soon as possible."

John's smile finally vanishes at hearing his cordial, dismissive tone. "I'm quite alright in here, no need to hurry. I'm as fine as you could expect. Is that what you're looking so serious about? They say I'm doing well, so don't you go worrying yourself over nothing. Seriously, Sherlock, you did your part, and you did good. You can breathe a little, now."

John is studying him carefully. "I hope I didn't say anything awkward when you first visited. I don't really even remember that. Are you alright?"

Mycroft comes to Sherlock's rescue: "You will both be debriefed about the incident by MI6 once back on British soil, but your interview can naturally wait until discharge. There will be no legal ramifications."

"What about complications?" Sherlock mutters. He's still not convinced John is out of the woods. He's even less convinced that everything is as fine as everyone else is trying to pretend regarding the stab wound. He wants to kick himself for not doing the requisite research into complications of laparotomy and intra-abdominal sepsis?

"Those are always possible but let's jump over that hurdle only if we come to it. They told me it was quite a simple repair – a very short bowel resection, and once they got the shock under control, it's been going quite well."
"We were informed of all this by the doctor yesterday, and I messaged you earlier," Mycroft points out, and Sherlock isn't quite sure why. Is he trying to hint something to John?

He hadn't noticed a message, but admittedly, he had been quite preoccupied. Digging out his phone to check for it would be highly incriminating.

Best to go on the offence. He whips his head around to glare at Mycroft. "I am not demented," he snaps and Mycroft's lips tighten. "And I'm fine, despite whatever you're insinuating," he tries to sound stern, but since he's mostly addressing his own shoes, the overall effect may not be very convincing.

"Don't mind him. It's alright, I know you hate hospitals like the plague," John tells him quickly and quietly. He then turns to Mycroft. "How long will you stay in the country?" he asks the man conversationally, probably to defuse the tension.

"Since you will likely soon be stable enough to be transported, I will be returning on the same flight. As will Sherlock."

It's unusual for Mycroft to take time off work like this. He could do a lot of it by telecommute, but intelligence and PR and politics do often require a personal presence. A personal touch, like Mycroft likes to phrase it. Blackmailing and intimidating people is easier in person – much less risk of a paper trail.

"No sightseeing tours, then?" John teases both of them, his eyes bright and his features crinkling with laugh lines.

It looks so lovely and familiar that Sherlock is forced to look away lest it derails him completely. He shouldn't indulge in any more of this if it's all going to be taken away. He wants nothing more than to drink in the sight of every square inch of John, alive and warm and nearly alright already, but such memories will only make things worse later on.

He curls his toes in his shoes, digs his nails into his palms and manages to catch the tail end of a passing calm. "I think I've seen quite enough of Iceland," he says. "Besides, Mycroft gets appallingly carsick in buses, especially ones filled with American package tourists."

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It takes Sherlock two days to start marginally recovering from the whiplash of his first hospital visits. He delays his third for two days, appeals to exhaustion and achy limbs requiring rest and even conjures a headache to stall going back. Meanwhile, Mycroft becomes a regular presence at the intensive care unit, probably because there is sod all else to do in the small capital city for someone like him. There is a surprisingly large selection of fine dining restaurants in the city, however, to which he insists on dragging Sherlock in the evenings.

He tries to fake trying to solve a case via email after finally managing to take over Mycroft's laptop, but it doesn't discourage his brother from nagging.

Eventually, Mycroft calls him out on his delay tactics. "You're not an ailing Victorian maiden, and healing blisters on your feet hardly prevent you from getting into a taxi. Get up."

Sherlock groans, mummifies himself even tighter under the warm duvet and snakes his arm out from underneath to flap a dismissive wrist in the air. "Go away."

Mycroft's patience appears to have worn thin this morning, since he grabs the edge of the duvet and yanks it away, leaving Sherlock shivering on the bed in nothing but pants and the 'I love
Iceland shirt he had purchased off a street vendor downtown after dinner last night. It is the sort of sarcastic novelty gift John tends to bring him from medical conferences and never has such an inversely sarcastic printed statement served its purpose better.

"Your clothes have just been delivered by the express laundry people," Mycroft announces as Sherlock slides off the bed to shiver in the draught of the air conditioning. "You need a haircut."

"You need a muzzle," Sherlock counters, and drags himself into the en-suite. Judging by the quiet, springy creak, Mycroft has taken a seat on the sofa while he waits more or less patiently for his brother's re-emergence.

Sherlock shaves, trying to avoid watching himself in the mirror. During the past few days, he has wanted to sleep more than he probably has in a decade, but nightmares slice his slumber into small pieces, and he keeps waking up to hyperventilate in the dark, cold sweat making him feel as though all the warmth is evaporating from his body.

If only his brain wasn't so fond of what-ifs and simulating every single one of them in his dreamscape: what if he hadn't found help in time? What if John had died while he stood outside the hut, staring at his shoes and trying to come to the obvious conclusion that he needed to find help on his own? John had once told him that emergency medicine was about making the best possible judgment call with the limited amount of information available at the time. Had he done that? He must have known John would feel terrified and betrayed over finding himself abandoned, feverish and injured, in the middle of some Icelandic excuse for a moor. He must have, so what Sherlock did could not have been the best possible judgment call at all.

Mycroft clears his throat, and Sherlock flinches. He exits the bathroom after turning off the tap and wordlessly recovers his suit from the laundry bag while Mycroft's gaze is homed in on him like a laser sight, deducing and interpreting.

"Your reticence to see him – yes, Sherlock, it is that obvious," Mycroft pauses to emit a loud, melodramatic, condescending sigh in best Holmesian fashion, "---is rather baffling. I thought you'd find real-time evidence of his recovery most reassuring."

Evidence? Seeing John is evidence not of recovery, but of a crime committed.

"Of course I like seeing him," Sherlock counters petulantly. He does, but the joy is being drowned out by pain right now, to the extent that looking at John is like a knife being twisted in his guts.

How could he not have realised before what would eventually happen? How could he not have anticipated that any sort of acquaintance would only end in tears? He can't pinpoint the exact moment when John had begun to mean more to him than could be safe or sane, so it must have happened gradually. At which point should he have become aware of the danger?

Maybe he should try to blame Mycroft. Maybe he had been so fixed on proving his annoying brother wrong about his snobbish dismissal of sentiment and companionship that he'd let John become collateral damage.

"You've both had a trying time. Joining forces presently will help you both in putting this behind you," Mycroft suggests, and he doesn't sound judgmental anymore. For lack of a better word, he's pleading. "The two of you will be solving crimes all over London before you know it."

Thank heavens his brother is not a talk therapist. He'd get punched in the nose for sounding like the narrator of a children's program.

There is nothing to get over, nothing to put behind them. This is what they do – manage
Dangerous situations and prevail, but their luck will run out at some point. It very nearly already did, and this is where one of them needs to step off the train to disaster.

He must get a hold of himself and make a better judgment call than he had in the highlands about what is best for John.

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Before heading to the hospital, they have breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Sherlock pushes around a piece of toast he has worried into crumbs on his plate.

Mycroft gives him the occasional worriedly disapproving glance but mostly leaves him alone.

His tea is now lukewarm and disgusting, and it makes him homesick. Everything is wrong, derailed, upsetting and difficult, wrong, wrong, WRONG.

Suddenly, he can't bear the normality of how people are going about their business. He feels as though his skull is about to cave in from the clinking of the cups, crunching of the cornflakes, the infantile pan pipe muzak playing. He stands up abruptly, eyes darting around the room for the most convenient exit. Mycroft grabs his wrist – not hard enough to blanch his fingers but firmly enough to drag him back to the present.

"Sit down and drink your tea," Mycroft prompts and practically slaps his palm onto the warm mug. He pours Sherlock a top-up from a still-steaming pot.

Sherlock curls both his hands around the porcelain with shaking fingers as though it were a lifeline, closes his eyes and focuses on the soft, warm touch of the steam on his chin as he holds the mug close to his face.

John is safe. At the hospital. Looked after. Can't do anything for him now.

He has already done his worst, and John is still alive.

Could he repair the damage done, this crack in their very foundation? It's not like a bacterial infection or a broken bone that can be mostly forgotten when it has healed.

He tells himself to stop holding on to such hope.

John has always managed to make him feel like a better version of himself – until now.

The end justifying the means has always been his credo – until now.

Will this ever stop running an infinity loop in his head? When he wakes up, hyperventilating in the dark, will he keep hallucinating the scent of heathers years from now?

After they've finished their teas, Sherlock insists on walking to the hospital in a futile attempt to clear his head. The pain in his feet makes the walk agony.

They discover that John has been moved to a high dependency unit instead of the ICU since he no longer needs a noradrenaline drip or supplemental oxygen.

Mycroft busies himself with making plans for expatriation while Sherlock watches a nature program with John. Well, he would, if the man wasn't nodding off every five minutes.
The safety of Baker Street and the domesticity of their old life feel like abstract constructs – a nice dream that will eventually be interrupted by the next alarm call.
"The feelings that hurt most, the emotions that sting most, are those that are absurd -
The longing for impossible things, precisely because they are impossible; nostalgia
for what never was;
the desire for what could have been; regret over not being someone else;
dissatisfaction with the world’s existence.
All these half-tones of the soul’s consciousness create in us a painful landscape, an
eternal sunset of what we are."
- Fernando Pessoa

Sherlock has never been all that drawn to luxury, but the private plane Mycroft has arranged to
transport the three of them home is a relief. He had not been looking forward to negotiating the
busy crowds at airports, even if Mycroft's diplomatic status could have smoothed the curves of
security and checking in for them.

It's day five after John was airlifted to Reykjavik, and his recovery is progressing as expected. He
isn't fine, far from it – he doesn't have the energy to even sit for more than a moment yet – but he
looks like himself.

John had insisted he could make do with a regular seat on a normal flight, but a negotiation
between the ICU doctor and the physician at the flight company had resulted in a recommendation
of a trolley and an accompanying nurse who would make sure John arrived at the selected London
hospital safely. Watching her at work has made Sherlock realise how ill-informed his own
insistence at wanting to look after John single-handedly at home had been, and Mycroft has
thankfully refrained from mentioning how insistent he had been at first that he should do all of it
alone. The things the nurse keeps doing don't appear all that complicated, but all of them are
things Sherlock has no clue how to manage, especially since he'd hardly want to try to work them
out under Mycroft's scrutiny. His brother had offered to arrange professional home nursing at
Baker Street, but Sherlock had declined; the idea of a strange person in the flat makes him highly
uncomfortable. What is more, being around John right now makes him uncomfortable, and since
the Landspital had been reluctant to discharge John unless he was transported to another hospital
in the UK instead of a private residence, the decision had been easy.

They're now airborne over the Atlantic, and the rugged Icelandic coastline begins to give way to
scarce southern islands that hide some very fascinating volcanic geology. A village on one of the
larger islands had once been evacuated when a volcano had popped up in the middle of it
practically overnight. Sherlock had shared this fact with John during an ICU visit, relieved at
having something to say. Their interactions continue to be stilted and difficult – evasive gazes and
clippered words from Sherlock when he isn't managing to sham normal service. "We're both still a
bit roughed up, I guess," John had mused the day before. It is probably just exhaustion that has
kept John from confronting him about his behaviour any further, so he keeps leaning on this
excuse.

Mycroft has naturally kept poking and prodding him about this and that in his behaviour, but since
Sherlock has adamantly refused to engage, he finally seems to have grown tired of the game of
trying to read his younger brother's mind and has thus left him to his own devices.

After the mainland disappears into the cradle of the blue sea, there is nothing to watch from the plane windows except for the gleam of the sun on waves far below, so Sherlock closes his eyes and lets himself drift off into the Mind Palace. People – even John and his brother – tend to assume it's a safe and consoling place when in reality it can be anything but. Turn the wrong corner, and he might be faced with things he'd prefer stayed buried six feet under.

Last night, after finishing packing his meagre collection of belongings, he had lain on the bed, his thoughts drifting back to the dream he'd had the night before. He'd walked the marble halls of the palace, a trail of blood meandering behind him. The vivid red on white had been a startling contrast in the quiet, sterile emptiness of the rooms. There was no pain, no wound, but emotion, life and warmth were bleeding out of him all the same. When he had finally found a way out nothing remained of him but a carcass; a lifeless, emotionless monument to what his life had been or what it could have been. He knows he should keep away from the Palace for a while, but it's the only home he has left. Inside, he still controls the pain. Outside, it keeps catching him unawares.

He's been in this state before, many times: tempted to stay forever in the bleak land in his own head. Certain pharmacological means make this easier to achieve. Most often, when he has temporarily lost a battle with the dark, he has been able to crawl out on his own, but sometimes it has been another person who has helped. Once, it had been Mycroft. Once, Lestrade, by proving to Sherlock that there could be a line of work for him that could give him a sense of purpose and to motivate him not to seek relief in a seven percent solution.

The third time, it had been John. He has proven to be a most effective repellent for Sherlock's darker moods, offering consoling company and respectful silence in which Sherlock is safe to shake his proverbial fist to the world when it gets to him. Soon, he'll be left to face it alone, and he is not certain he's got it in him to battle the relentless onslaught of suffocating dullness and self-hatred that awaits behind the next corner. He doubts the universe will suddenly grant him the skills to achieve the level of content equilibrium on his own which he has enjoyed with John. The abyss had undoubtedly been nipping at his heels around the time of the serial suicide case, but John had turned the twilight in his head into the brightest sunlight. After leaving Barts after their very first meeting, Sherlock had been giddy to the extreme, and he hadn't even understood why. He'd even winked, for God's sake.

The land where nothing matters much and nothing has a point is beckoning again, and he can't muster the energy even to care. The colours are bleeding out of the world without John.

He no longer thinks that John may have been trying to deceive him, that in reality, he's still angry. That theory he had been forced to abandon since John appeared so unwaveringly happy every time he visited the hospital in Reykjavik. It seems that John honestly thinks that he'd merely been confused by illness and remembers everything all wrong.

Sherlock's own, very vivid and accurate memory is a curse of another sort. He remembers John's curious, fearless suspicion of him, the false hesitation John had tried to project at the notion of sharing a flat because like Sherlock, he hadn't had much to lose. They'd both been ready to pounce on anything that could jolt them out of stagnation. But, that yearning for distraction had soon turned into so much more. More than Sherlock could ever have imagined finding.

The brief flash of elation of remembering that first meeting gives Sherlock enough courage to open his eyes. The steward is walking the length of the cabin, making sure all seatbelts are fastened since the sign is on.

He hates planes. Ways in which he can physically defuse his anxiety and nervous energy are
limited, and the ambient noise level drives him around the bend. At least on this flight, he'll be spared from having to put up with hordes of other passengers.

"You'll be home soon," Mycroft says. It's an odd thing to say – they're not in the habit of offering pointless, clichéd reassurances to one another. They see past such theatre, know one another well enough to know that such statements will merely amuse in their ridiculousness, not comfort. Then again, they hardly have very serious and honest discussions about their lives, either, and sometimes Sherlock wonders if Mycroft would genuinely want to hear what he's thinking. Would he be alarmed, worried, would he laugh at the absurdity of the things in Sherlock's head?

"If you're referring to 221B Baker Street, it is not a home. It will be a building, with me in it, until he comes home." And, it will cease being a home altogether after he leaves.

"A tad dramatic, that." Mycroft's tone is dismissive and belittling. Mycroft might be useful, but he's almost never helpful.

Would John be accepting and understanding of what goes on in his mind? On occasion, Sherlock has wondered whether John's encouragement and positivity are nothing but subconscious cues for Sherlock to hide the darkness he carries. Has he kept his head proverbially above the water not just because John has made him care again, or because there's a high probability that John wouldn't be able to face the real him? Maybe John would be uncomfortable, or he'd make light of what goes on in Sherlock's head. Perhaps he'd even leave if he knew everything, particularly if he knew the things his presence makes Sherlock think about. There is a thin consolation in the thought that he'll never have to face such mortification or rejection.

"You're behaving as though he's in a coffin instead of a hospital bed. He'd be furious over such maudlin nonsense, so snap out of it," Mycroft coaxes in a low voice, and receives a gin and tonic from the steward.

Sherlock wonders what strings Big Brother had pulled to get hold of this plane. It obviously doesn't belong to any charter company or medical evacuation service. Probably a counter-favour for orchestrating a Middle Eastern coup or something.

Mycroft gives the straw and the small glittery paper umbrella stuck in his drink a most disapproving glare, fishes them out and sips the cocktail. "I do wish you wouldn't allow yourself to be so affected. Then again, you were always so sensitive that I should not be surprised."

The venom spurts out before Sherlock realises how much he is revealing of himself in its patterns:
"You'd wish your pitiful solitary existence on me, then? Seeking out occasional gratification from paid company and channelling your loneliness into making governments collide like snooker balls? Is that it? Is that what a more worthy, a more cerebral existence would be, to live like a corrupted monk? Fantasizing about plucking up the courage to have an affair with your secretary and then going home to watch those chilly marble floors being polished by immigrants from countries you've treated like pawns in a game of monopoly?"

"Lower your voice, please." When Mycroft says please, it's not a polite word – it's a warning. "I have once watched Doctor Watson beside what he was convinced could well have been your deathbed. He didn't throw in the towel, did not act up like a five-year-old whose favourite toy has broken down, nor did he take a plunge down the well of despondency you're currently staring down at. He held his ground."

Mycroft is talking about the time Sherlock had been shoved into the Thames by a suspect and efficiently drowned. John had been at work when it happened; Lestrade had been the one to jump in after him. The first thing Sherlock remembers afterwards was John's concerned face and red-rimmed eyes and the ghastly feeling of having to cough up what felt like half the river bottom.
Afterwards, he'd been stuck at home with pneumonia for a week and John had looked after him, of which he has some very fond memories. He had been both unsettled and intrigued by how affected John had been by his almost-expiration. Some boundaries had been broken during that week; Sherlock had consciously given up trying to be on his best behaviour with John in the house. For the first time after Victor, he had allowed someone into his life instead of only letting them hover on the periphery. John had witnessed, for the first time, one of his so-called black moods, since he had been housebound and bored and poorly and head full of emotions arising from John's presence he didn't have a clue how to manage.

John hadn't even flinched when Sherlock couldn't help taking all his anger and frustrations out on the only other person present. After a few one-sided rows, he had tentatively sought John's attention in other ways. Instead of turning to his standard remedy of cocaine, he had turned to John, and it had worked.

'Look, I don't know what the bloody hell's wrong with you, but if you want me to give you even more space---' John had suggested, running his hands through his hand in exasperation when he'd stood in front of the fireplace, holding the packet of cigarettes he had rudely confiscated from Sherlock.

'No,' Sherlock had plucked up the courage to reply. 'Don't.'

'Then what do you want me to do? I'm not going to sit here while you hurl abuse at everything and everyone, me included. And no, you're not smoking, you idiot, not when you've got your windpipe full of seaweed.'

Sherlock had shifted around on the sofa and faced his new flatmate. 'You can do what you please.'

John had slumped back into the armchair he'd begun frequenting. 'If you'd just try to explain what's wrong, then we could---'

Sherlock had slammed the back of his head against the sofa cushion with a growl. 'Everything. Nothing,' he had finally explained, 'I don't know how to describe it.'

John had watched him carefully, not with frustration anymore but with a calm, patient expression. 'Alright. I think I sort of understand.'

Sherlock is quite convinced he really did. From then on, he paid more attention to Sherlock, but ignored his pointless complaints about the irritating minutiae of everyday life on planet Earth and treated him like there was nothing wrong with him. John assumed that he didn't have to be treated as though he was fragile. He assumed that this was simply a part of their lives now, something that happened sometimes and which just needed to be dealt with calmly and rationally. It helped. For the first time, Sherlock's anxiety was not being increased by someone who was constantly present; instead, John seemed to create a safe space in which he could be himself, where even the not-so-nice sides of him were accepted. For the first time, he was not classified as a problem and dragged to rehab or a child psychiatrist or a school curator. John had looked at him and said, 'Alright. Is it any wonder he had grown unhealthily attached to someone who would treat him so... nicely?'

Since he is the one who has been drowned in help all his life, he has no idea how to go about helping others. He can't fix John's dangerous addiction to their lifestyle, or the reason why he'd want to stay with Sherlock of all people.

Mycroft extends an arm past him to close the window blind. "Don't underestimate John Watson's patience with your whims. If there is an issue, let him address it."

"I'm not him! I don't know how to do these things---"
Mycroft cuts him short with an austere glance. "No, but you can talk. Lord knows you've always been good at that. You seem to have no trouble admitting this to me, so nothing is stopping you from telling him that you don't know how to manage whatever it is that has sent you hurtling out of orbit. He'll understand that you have not been in this position before."

"What position?" Sherlock demands, glaring daggers at his brother. He should cut this conversation right here, but Mycroft always manages to get under his skin and he can't resist trying to win every argument they manage to cook up.

The accusatory steel in Mycroft's eyes softens. "Prior to this, you have only lost people you did not choose to include in your life. Now, the threat had been to someone you have elected to share your life with. I may not be the best source of advice on relationships—"

"You think?" Sherlock throws himself against the backrest of his seat in protest when it refuses to recline even though he's pressing the button.

Mycroft glances towards John's trolley. He's too far away from the two of them to hear the conversation over the engine noise.

"As I was about to say: I would not suggest you throw away something important just because of misplaced guilt. Is this about his delusional ramblings at the hospital? I hope not – I would be very disappointed if you put any stock in that nonsense."

Finally, Sherlock manages to keep himself from arguing any further. The sooner he manages to keep quiet, the sooner Mycroft stops poking the hornet's nest. He doesn't know anything; he wasn't out with the two of them, there trying to survive.

Mycroft slides a newspaper out of a receptacle on the wall and Sherlock breathes a sigh of relief that the conversation is over. But, Mycroft doesn't open the paper; instead, he is now looking at Sherlock with a dispirited expression. "I've seen what happens when you lose your motivation. I can't watch that from the sidelines again, Sherlock. It's too frightening."

Sherlock looks away, smooths a crease on his trousers to distract himself. He can't expose himself to any more of this sort of talk, lest he starts getting disgustingly emotional. In this tin can in the sky, there's no way to run from his brother's scrutiny except for---

Turbulence is making the plane shake, but Sherlock still unlocks his seat belt. He rises to his feet and runs his hand along the wall for balance as he makes his way to John's trolley, taking a seat next to it. It fits easily in the space between a conference table and the bar. He leans away to close a window screen nearby because John would hate the bright sunlight hitting his retinas; his eyes are currently closed. When Sherlock turns to face the bed again, John's beautiful, dark blue eyes are focused on him and he's smiling.

"Nice plane," he comments.

"Mycroft has his uses." Sherlock makes a survey of the readings. John's nurse, sitting behind a conference table nearby, glances at him and then focuses on scribbling notes on her paper chart.

"It'll be the Royal London, then?" John asks. Mycroft had repeatedly offered to arrange for him to be transferred to a private hospital, but John had repeatedly insisted he was fine with wherever the NHS decided to offer a spot.

Sherlock nods. "I'm sorry we can't take you home yet."

John's smile transforms into a grin. "It's fine. I'll need physio anyway; this will spare us finding
someone who does home visits and who you wouldn't frighten off walking around in just a sheet."

He doesn't walk around half-naked *that* often, does he? John never seems to mind – Sherlock has even experimented on the subject. As long as no outsiders are present, John is not bothered in the least by Sherlock's lack of clothing. He has even stolen some appreciative glances when he thinks Sherlock couldn't possibly notice. Yet another infuriating bit of behaviour from the *very not gay* man.

"Besides, you're not much of a nursemaid, are you?" John teases and bumps his knuckles on Sherlock's arm. "Last time I had the flu you were a right arse about it."

Sherlock now feels guilty for that, too. Why can't he do these things like a normal person? When John is ill, it makes him nervous. It makes him think about complications and not knowing what to do and being alone. Even if it's just the flu.

"I'm sorry I can't do more," he offers.

It's John's turn to look worried. "Two apologies in five minutes? What is going on with you? Sherlock, I only patch you up at home and let you languish on the sofa when ill because I know what to look for and when to drag you to a hospital. Without proper medical training, you can't be expected to do the same. Hell, I shouldn't be expected to do it, since the GMC doesn't exactly condone doctoring relatives and friends."

"Why do you do it, then?" Sherlock rises from his seat and perches down at the edge of a bar seat slightly further away. The plane judders slightly with turbulence again, which forces him to curl his fingers around the edge of the chair for balance.

What he actually wants to ask is: *why does it feel like you enjoy doing it?*

John now looks slightly embarrassed, as though Sherlock had caught him in the act of something untoward. "I know you hate hospitals, but for some reason when it's just me you… almost behave. I could ask you why that is."

Sherlock swallows, but the strange constriction in his throat does not disappear. There's something about this conversation that feels increasingly intrusive and confusing, and thus it's best to make it grind to a halt. He should never have tried to call John out on anything. The motivations and behaviour of other people, *normal* people, are a minefield where he always loses a proverbial limb.

"You'll need a new phone. Mycroft has sorted it all out." He shoves his hand into his pocket to retrieve the latest-model iPhone Mycroft had given him to pass on. John receives it without protest, which isn't like him. Sherlock wonders if he feels bad about his old phone being lost since it had been a gift.

"Is this so that you can text me at all hours at the hospital?"

Sherlock makes a face of mock superiority. "Obviously."

He gives in to the impulse to retreat and returns to the seat next to Mycroft. It's not one specifically allocated for him since they're allowed to sit anywhere, but it's one where the engine noise is bearable and the angle of the sun from the galley window hadn't created a glare as it reflects from the wing.

He hates flying at the best of times, and this is most definitely not one of those.

Mycroft soon leaves his own seat to talk to John in low, hushed tones. Sherlock presses himself
against his seat, feigning complete disinterest but he can’t help stealing a glance at the pair after a few minutes. He is forced to quickly turn away when his stealthy attempt at gathering intelligence is ruined by the fact that John is looking straight at him with a strange expression: he appears apprehensive and a little pitiful, even.

The reason must be something Mycroft has said. Knowing his brother, Sherlock suspects it has been a plea to ignore his shortcomings since he can hardly help them.

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Once back in London and safely deposited in a private room at the hospital, John commands Sherlock to go home and get some sleep. "I'm not going anywhere. Come visit when you're done with the debriefing tomorrow. We can text whenever we need to."

It's a relief to leave John in the hopefully capable hands of the Royal London Hospital's surgical unit. Even though the nurse escorting them on the plane was probably competent, Sherlock had still somehow felt responsible for making sure everything went smoothly during the flight.

The messages they begin exchanging a few hours afterwards sound normal and feel like a relief – it's something Sherlock finds he can manage; much more relaxed than conversing face-to-face. It's always been easier leaning on social norm and expectations via SMS since succinct, to-the-point communication is more readily accepted by others through that medium.

Mycroft stops by at Baker Street that evening to frown at him in various ways, and Sherlock calls him a tosspot over tea.
Sherlock spends their first full day back in London being debriefed by MI6 under Mycroft's supervision. Since the culprits of their kidnapping are either dead or had already been in police custody by the time they were transported out of the UK, their sordid Iceland affairs get cleared up relatively quickly. He's almost – *almost* – disappointed when the proceedings end as soon as late in the afternoon. Riling up Mycroft's minions always offers a modicum of entertainment, and now he has no excuse not to get in touch with John.

From Vauxhall Cross, he walks to across the river and then makes a detour to Tachbrook Street to a sandwich shop Mycroft had recommended. He eats half of his chorizo and arugula concoction and donates the rest to a flock of seagulls. Nothing tastes the way it's supposed to.

His walking pace slows the closer he gets to Victoria Station. Were he a decent, sensible friend, he'd hop on the District Line, get off at Whitechapel and make his way to the Royal London Hospital's surgical ward 13D, but since he is none of those things, he lingers near the main entrance to the station hating himself for a good fifteen minutes, until he lets himself walk off towards the Buckingham Palace grounds and home.

Mycroft had said he'd send someone to take John's statement tomorrow. What he could add to what has already been said, Sherlock has no idea. *He's* the observant one, after all.

His phone vibrates with a text alert - he'd put it in silent mode since Mycroft had personally confiscated it for the duration of the interviews.

'*CT looks good, they say the fever is probably just exhaustion,*' John's message reads.

Sherlock is momentarily alarmed and confused. What fever? He scrolls through his messages and notices that John had sent two during the night which he must've opened but had been too half-asleep to be aware of what he was doing. He'd slept like the dead which isn't like him at all. Yet another sign that he needs to solve the John problem quickly before it drags him down so deep
that he ceases to function altogether.

'You awake?' the first message had read.

'Mild fever tonight, new CT scheduled in the morning. I feel fine so I don't think we need to worry,' says the second. The lack of reply had probably discouraged John from sending more.

When Sherlock has landed himself at A&E, a bed ward or the ITU, John has always sat with him until the early hours of the morning and returned to the hospital after just a few hours of sleep. Why? Why would he do such a thing? That's what family members, spouses and lovers do, not flatmates? Does he pity Sherlock, think that he has no one who would do that for him?

'You're a rubbish patient, and I don't want to leave these people at your mercy,' John had once joked when Sherlock had tried to get him to go home instead of waiting for some idiot to cart him off to the OR to pin his ankle. There are many things at which he's not very good.

He walks rest of the way home, but before sliding the key into the lock on the front door, he fishes his phone out of his pocket.

'That's good. MI6 will talk to you tomorrow. SH' he texts to John.

John replies before he has even made his way upstairs; the message only contains one of those imbecilic smiley faces, and it's pathetic how happy he is to receive such a thing.

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He solves no less than four cases during the next two days, mostly by scraping of the bottom of the barrel of his backlog of emails. Mrs Hudson fusses about; Molly calls a few times for his opinion about a cold case project he's helping with for the Met and the neuropathology findings of a mildly interesting poisoning case finally arrive. He plays the violin, making beginner mistakes because he's restless and distracted. At least he manages to forgive himself for small musical blunders – the wrong notes, the scratchy sounds, the off-key passages – because he cannot forgive himself ever for the bigger, more important things. Usually, the music releases the building pressure of emotion that sometimes threatens to fling his psyche into chaos. Now, the violin refuses to wrench those truths out of him. It's not a conduit, just an instrument, a piece of wood with strings, the bow an awkward thing in his hand.

The biggest of the mistakes he will carry for the rest of his life is that he didn't chase John Watson off the minute they met. That he smiled, that he tried to be likeable, that he winked like some amorous con man, and by the time John realised how he really was, he had been hooked already. John's seven percent solution: danger. His dealer: Sherlock.

He wants more cases. He needs more cases, but his email is overflowing only with idiocy and Lestrade has nothing for him, so he flits about the flat like some waif, and the walls keep moving closer and closer. He starts walking the windy streets of London for hours and hours, pretending he's doing something case-related that cannot possibly wait instead of trying to escape the contents of his own head.

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Two days later, some irritating thing nudges him awake, and his name registers somewhere in the haze of a slumber he has finally managed to chase down. After the first night back in his own bed, he hasn't managed to wind down even for a moment. Until now. "Get lost, Mycroft," he grouses.

"I'll have to disappoint you there, and I doubt that's who you were looking for when you came in," a familiar voice complains, tinted with a soft hint of humour.

Sherlock cracks open a lid and shifts onto his back. "Go away," he grouses at the vaguely man-sized shape standing nearby.

"It's my bloody flat," Lestrade tells him and shoves his shoulder gently.

Sherlock huffs, turns to his back and then crosses his fingers on his chest on top of his coat. He narrows his eyes to slits. "I didn't think you'd be home until much later."

The DI sits down on the sofa table. "As I told you, it's been eerily quiet lately on the crime front. I took half a day off, my first in eleven months." He crosses his arms, one brow raised in slight amusement. "But, more importantly: why are you on my sofa?"

"Couldn't sleep," Sherlock remarks dryly and sits up, yawning. He glances at a wall clock; he'd slumbered for four hours, tossing and turning on the narrow sofa. He has crashed here before, numerous times in fact, around the time Lestrade had begun to let him help out with cases. He hadn't had a... permanent residence back then.

"There's this thing called a hotel, you know; you should try one, I heard they're nice."

Sherlock doesn't dignify that with an answer. Unfamiliar surroundings and overzealous air conditioning are hardly a solution to his problems.

Lestrade's weathered leather coat squeaks as he leans forward on his perch. "John still at the hospital?"

"There has been talk of discharge tomorrow or the day after."

"Can't sleep without him in the flat?" Lestrade teases.

Sherlock is tempted to flip over to face the wall and ignore the man. Why is he surrounded by people hell-bent on analysing everything he says or does or doesn't say or doesn't do?

"I was like that after the divorce. You get used to having someone around."

Sherlock opens his mouth to protest that the scenario is not analogous at all, but something stops him. They don't sleep in the same room, but the thought of John being upstairs has always calmed him down in a way he doesn't quite understand. It's something he really hadn't expected when he'd first considered finding a flatmate. Then again, John is in every way something that he had not expected.

"Arms, please," Lestrade then says tiredly, obviously trying to convey a sense that he's only ticking boxes.

"Please," Sherlock snarks with an eye-roll. "That's not why I'm here." Why is he surrounded by people who never, ever, take anything he says or does at face value? Mycroft would probably answer that it's because addiction shuts down his ability to be honest with everyone, especially with himself. It's not true. He simply elects not to believe certain things.
"We have a deal, and I'm holding to my end of it."

Obediently, Sherlock sits up, plants his feet on the floor, shrugs his coat off his shoulders, unbuttons his cuffs and slides the sleeves up to his forearms. Lestrade nods approvingly at the lack of fresh track marks, though the sight of the old scars always shifts his expression in the subtle manner of which he's probably not even aware.

They do, indeed, have a deal. As Lestrade had put it some years ago: 'when you need someone to tell you off before you go off the deep end, you come here. No judgement, no questions asked. I keep you company, and you stay over as long as you need, but if you take off before the danger night's over, I'll be calling Mycroft.'

Sherlock doesn't want help from either of them, because there is only one person who could help him make sense of this, and that one person – namely, John – is someone he cannot currently consult.

He's not here because he had wanted to be lectured and advised. He had just wanted to sleep because at home John is everywhere and nowhere.

Sherlock stands up and stretches his arms behind his back, swaying a little when that tips his balance.

Lestrade hasn't removed his coat, and now he has grabbed his car keys again. "Come on. We'll get coffee, and I'll give you a lift to the hospital."

"Why does everyone assume I'm holding a constant vigil by his bedside?"

Lestrade stops in his tracks, turns to look at him in full-on bewilderment. "That's what he'd do, isn't it?"

"I'm not him!" Sherlock protests. There are a million ways in which he is not unlike John at all, and that is precisely the problem.

Lestrade dangles the keys from his forefinger. "You're right. None of my business, right? He's out of danger, isn't he? He'll be home in no time; that man must hate hospitals almost as much as you."

Mrs Hudson is cleaning up their flat, changing sheets, baking even though that sort of nourishment will not be allowed for some time. It's obvious that her baking is a compensatory thing for her anxiety and worry and it seems to work to make her think she is doing the right things to fix everything. If only it were that easy for Sherlock. He would wash the whole bloody flat, floor to ceiling, with a toothbrush if that made the slightest bit of difference.

"What have you got on, then, for today?" Lestrade asks, obviously trying to sound encouraging when he is, in actuality, frustrated.

"I could use a ride to Barts," Sherlock suggests. If he hovers long enough and smiles, Molly might let him help with something involving a skull saw.

What did he even do with his spare time before John? How did he keep himself from succumbing into the stagnation of boredom? He does still get bored, but it doesn't feel like his brain is liquefying inside his skull and oozing out unless he plugs all the holes with the contents of a syringe.

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He's just about to leave for home when John grabs his wrist and uses the bed remote to bring himself to a higher sitting position.

Sherlock turns to face him again.

"Is this... one of those things that you have every once in a while?" John asks quietly, carefully. It sounds rehearsed. It sounds like something he has carefully put together because he doesn't want to spook Sherlock.

"What things?" he asks, irritated. They had watched a film, blearghed at the hospital's depressing offerings of liquid diet and enjoyed a somewhat amicable silence.

"You're not yourself," John says, and it's not a question, it's a conclusion. A consensus. Has John been talking to Mycroft? What's next – an offer of antidepressants, or some trite offering of a sympathetic ear?

"You should worry about yourself, not me," Sherlock counters.

"That's just it. Everything's fine." But you're not, is what John probably refrains from saying. Everything else is fine, but you refuse to be.

He should say it now, say goodbye, say that they have had the best of times but those should now come to an end. He should, but something stops him. It would be cruel not to help John get better first, he tells himself. It would be cruel to say it, now.

He slides on his coat, ties his scarf just the way he always does, shoves his hands into his pockets. John watches him, his usual thinly veiled admiration now marred by sadness and resignation.

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John has been home for seventy-two hours. Today is not a good day.

Sherlock has already exhausted himself pretending that everything is fine and that he is not bothered by the heavy sense of malaise and loss that lingers in the flat. He doesn't remember being this taxed since he stopped putting on his best normal person act right after John had moved in.

John is currently based in Sherlock's bedroom, because it's closer to everything relevant, such as the bathroom, and Sherlock is within hearing range if he needs something. All this means that there is no safe space for Sherlock in the flat, how could he even escape, since his own head will follow wherever he goes? He has barely slept after crashing at Lestrade's. Mrs Hudson had changed the sheets in both their bedrooms, but John's – where Sherlock is now somehow supposed to sleep in – still smells both right and wrong at the same time. Trying to calm down in there feels like wearing someone else's trousers.

John often wants company – it appears that he gets bored, too, when bedridden. Every time Sherlock tries to be quiet, tries not to alert him to the fact that he's in the kitchen or the sitting room and vacillating between doing nothing and wanting to bang his head against a wall, John calls out in a voice that makes Sherlock believe for a fraction of a second that things are alright, that John still likes him. Perhaps he does, but he shouldn't. He must not.
John has tried to interrogate him about what he calls a *black mood*. John trying to help him is a grotesque concept, since *John* is the one trying to recover from having approximately three centimetres of his descending colon removed. *It won't affect Dr Watson's digestion at all, once healed. He should be right as rain if he just gives himself a proper sick leave,* the doctor who had discharged him from the surgical ward had told Sherlock. Instead of reassuring, to Sherlock it had sounded like an accusation. The doctor had probably not intended it to sound that way, but even if he'd been talking about the weather an accusation is likely what Sherlock would have heard.

It makes him paralysingly sad that, under different circumstances, he would have probably enjoyed their current circumstances: illness enables an easy intimacy not otherwise allowed, but John would likely think it perverse if he knew Sherlock wants such things. He should never have held on to some naïve hope that John's protestations of not being gay may not have been the *entire* truth. Sherlock had hoped he could have been the exception.

He has never been a person someone wanted, the person someone picked over others. He has never been *someone's*. Lord knows John has plenty of reasons not to choose him. Last night, Sherlock had been so angry and frustrated with himself that he had somehow managed to blame *John* for everything. *This is what you chose, when you chose us. These are the consequences.* However, this had only lasted for approximately three minutes until the guilt had flooded through Sherlock again. He had made three different teas afterwards, and John had gone for his standard enquiry of *'are you alright'*. Sherlock had skilfully improvised a rambling explanation of being annoyed with a failing experiment regarding the differences in sediment produced by different black tea varieties.

Tea is among those things John is now allowed to eat and drink. *Liquid diet. Soup. Yoghurt.* Sherlock serves him whatever Mrs Hudson rustles up or what he has managed to find and purchase from the nearest Tesco Metro that should be acceptable. He has developed a habit of standing between the aisles and reading product labels for inordinate amounts of time, relieved to have gotten out of the flat but then slightly overwhelmed at the sights and sounds of all that sensory stimulation. At some point, anxiety eventually flares up and worry drives him back home. He doesn't really eat very much himself, simply watches John do so, because his mouth tastes the way the air in John's room – *his bedroom* – now smells, which is a stale human brine of sickness and stagnancy and regret.

When John throws up, which often happens if he eats too much or too quickly, Sherlock takes the bucket to the bathroom and rinses it. He's not bothered by these things – he's a consulting detective, after all, and the remains and products of human bodies practically give him his livelihood.

Three times a day, he gives John his antibiotics and milder pain pills – the stronger ones are locked into a small safe right next to John's bed. Sherlock hasn't been able to deduce the lock combination yet. The system is courtesy of Mycroft, who has convinced himself that his brother is always at risk to want to score.

This must be a record low for him: his brother thinks he is a terrible enough person steal the pain medication from the most important person he has ever had.

Then again, he *is* a terrible enough person. He is.

"Sherlock?" John calls out.

*Oh, God.*
Sherlock is making frightening plans, isn't he?

What he hasn't factored in is that, come chapter 13, there will be an intriguing surprise....
You Are Going to Have to Find Out for Yourself

I live the life of letting go.
- Of Monsters and Men

Two days later, John develops a fever and an increased need for the painkillers Sherlock is not allowed to administer. The deduction is obvious: this could signal a complication. Sherlock brings him the spare blankets Mrs Hudson had brought up earlier and helps him cocoon himself into them. He accepts John's quiet 'thanks' with a curt nod, making a note of his fever-bright eyes which are now even more strikingly blue than usual.

This could mean having to return to the hospital, which would mean that Sherlock could rescind this stuffy, guilt-laden duty of nursing. The thought should be a relief, but it feels like anything but. It's startling how much he enjoys being needed, if only in this utilitarian and unromantic manner. It doesn't just feel like paying back a favour – it makes him feel like he belongs here, that he's still an integral part of John's life in a way that is good and not destructive. That he deserves to be here. This is very much a novel experience for him – he has always been the one others have managed, helped, assisted, altered and tried to fix.

No matter how long he sits alone in the kitchen trying to analyse his motives, one part of him always ends up with a simple conclusion: he is doing this because he wants to, and he doesn't entirely understand why. It is also getting easier. Less awkward. He does these things that are required, and John lets him.

There is also a crisp, cold fear that Sherlock is now fighting to keep in check – a violent, possessive need to keep John safe here with him and instead of somewhere he can't control. It helps him decide what to do about this alarming development in John's recovery.

He double-checks the spreadsheet he'd made on John's laptop: too little time has passed from the last anti-inflammatories to give John more for the fever. The last reading had been a disconcerting 39.4. That's 0.8 above the average of the past 12 hours.

Gritting his teeth, he calls Mycroft who unsurprisingly insists on wasting time by prodding into his emotional state. He asks whether he should be worried that Sherlock is suddenly so sensible as to ask for help. Sensible is what people have been hoping to wrench out of him since he was little, and when he actually manages to perform in such a manner, he gets snidely berated for acting uncharacteristically. He tells Mycroft to sod off which is hardly very cerebral, but against this adversary, he can rarely win and resorting to such a juvenile comeback will help his brother attain a satisfactory level of smugness allowing them to move onto the actual pertinent business at hand.

"I simply need a second medical opinion," Sherlock points out in a tone that's more defensive than he had intended. Mycroft somehow always manages to get through his armour like an amoeba squeezing through a filter.

"That would be the first medical opinion since the GMC considers it inadvisable for physicians to doctor themselves and Watson is hardly in a state to do so right now, and your expertise mainly
focuses on those already beyond any help."

If Mycroft were actually present, he'd now be seeing a tongue stuck out. "Just--- will you sort it out? Please," Sherlock adds through gritted teeth. He wouldn't demean himself like this for anyone but John.

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An hour later, a knock on the door marks the arrival of a gastric surgeon with a military service background easily readable from some very similar signs to what Sherlock had spotted on John upon their first meeting. Some additional clues tell him the man is currently serving in British intelligence, obvious even just from the Mycroft connection. The doctor is in his late forties, wearing a relatively cheap off-the-rack suit and a utilitarian haircut. Single, workaholic, owns a motorcycle. His demeanour is down-to-business, and Sherlock finds this somewhat agreeable. He explains the situation, appreciating how the doctor does not dismiss this as the questionable ramblings of a layperson. Perhaps he's been briefed that Sherlock is not exactly clueless when it comes to many medical issues. The doctor asks a few questions, leafs through the documents that had been given to them at the Landspitali and from the Royal London, and Sherlock then directs him to the bedroom. Sherlock then lingers just outside the door to listen in.

John recognises the doctor and instantly calls him by his first name, sounding downright delighted in his greeting. Everything reeks of a reunion. Sherlock quietly retreats closer to the kitchen, where he can still hear most of what's being said.

Judging by the snippets of conversation, the two surgeons had met during John's stint in Afghanistan. Their discussion does not seem to be laden with the usual heaviness John carries when he begrudgingly discusses his army days, and Sherlock dares to wonder that if John could actually get over getting shot, could he get over another instance of getting injured?

His train of thought is interrupted when his ears pick up his own name being mentioned.

"He's my flatmate, well, best friend and we sort of work together," John explains in a business-like tone.

Best friend. Not colleague. Not just flatmate. That's... good. But undeserved. Not to mention dangerous. He doesn't think he has ever been a best friend to someone. Mostly, the thought makes him flattered and confounded and happy, but one part of him can't help wondering if it's a dead end. It might just be a label that rules out many other possibilities. God, why is he still even considering this? It's pointless. It's his own useless, petty desires getting the best of him. It's like wanting the Moon to be dragged down from the sky. 'I'm not gay; he's not my date.'

"Well, he does his thing, and I tag along," John adds peevishly.

Sherlock is disappointed to hear him using such a belittling tone about his own role. How could he not realise how vital, how necessary he is? Is this one of the things that John insists others cannot deduce, that they need to be told in words?

"Saved my arse in Iceland. He does that," John says, and his voice is accompanied by the sound of the velcro of a blood pressure cuff being wrapped around his arm. "Likes to pretend he's some sociopath." John chuckles.

There goes that excuse, then. All that remains now are Sherlock's true faults, the ones that make people pity him instead of fearing him.
"Patrick," Sherlock mutters to himself, testing whether the doctor's name truly tastes as easily palatable as John makes it sound. He realises he's jealous, which is logical because he always is jealous of anyone who has been allowed to share John's life before they met.

Should he join them in the bedroom? Why isn't he in there already? Shouldn't he be kept in the loop? After all, he is the one who has orchestrated this home visit. He snaps his spine straight and prepares to take his rightful place by John's side.

"Have you kept in touch with James, then?" the doctor asks in a knowing but mostly carefree tone just as Sherlock walks in the door. He's tapping a vein on John's forearm to visualise it better.

Sherlock is startled when John's eyes instantly lock with his, and something uninviting flashes in the man's gaze. During the next few seconds, anger and apprehension whirl together in his shifting expression, and he seems to be scrutinising Sherlock's reactions very carefully.

"No," John says sternly and dismissively, shifting his gaze to the sight of blood flowing into a sample vial instead of the doctor.

The surgeon frowns slightly at John's strange anger, then twists his torso slightly so that he can address Sherlock while swapping the vials. "I don't think you need to worry. No sign of local infection or peritoneal irritation. I'm doing a leucocyte count, haemoglobin and c-reactive protein to be on the safe side and I'll leave you with a few vials of cefotaxime if the results come back alarming."

"That's an intravenous solution, then?" Sherlock asks, crossing his arms and leaning slightly on his wardrobe. He doesn't approach the bed because an odd sense of alarm still seems to be emanating from John. Or, perhaps not alarm. Embarrassment? Fear that someone will say the wrong thing? John doesn't treat him like this, not ever, not even when discussing things which he doesn't like revealing to anyone. He withdraws, but he's somewhat polite about it, always explains to Sherlock that he doesn't want to continue the discussion. He doesn't look at Sherlock like this – like he wants him gone because he's about to witness something John wants to hide.

"Yes. Watson here says that you could manage such a thing." The surgeon cocks his head at John.

Sherlock hadn't considered this in detail yet but yes, he could. He would. He's had plenty of practice finding veins on himself – surely it can't be more difficult finding one on John. He's had to do similar things a few times when asked for a favour by a dealer. He's not going to advertise this credential, of course. No self-respecting doctor would leave their patient in the care of an ex-junkie, even if said patient would never dismiss him on those grounds.

Sherlock shoves the now surfacing memories of his cocaine days back where they belong in the lower levels of the Palace where sunlight never reaches.

John must've been thinking of his past habits, too, since he'd told this... Patrick such a thing. It is a strange dichotomy that John would acknowledge his dodgy history when it benefits him but shun the very notion of it otherwise. At least he uses all those polite, distant terms that doctors tend to favour: addiction, problem, issue, history, habit. Not smackhead or junkie or self-destructive idiot. That last one had been among Mycroft's favourites. Sherlock knows that John would blow a gasket if he started using again, but he doesn't judge Sherlock like many of his colleagues do based on his past behaviour.

The surgeon stands up from the bed, donks his gloves in the bin next to the wardrobe and pockets the vials of blood. "I'll give you a call if anything comes up in the results you need to know about."
"I would appreciate being forwarded the results, whatever they are," Sherlock says.

"To put in your chart?" John asks, and there's still a slight edge of venom in his voice, but he has clearly managed to shake off being so alarmed by Sherlock's presence.

"Where'd you find this guy?" John asks, going for playful but ending up slightly sarcastic. He's pressing down on a wad of gauze on the puncture site. His hair is a mess, and he looks sweaty; the fever must've gone down at least a bit.


The surgeon glances at him, appearing surprised at something. The use of a first name, most likely.

John snorts. "His brother," he explains. "It was good to see you," he offers, and it sounds like he's trying to shoo the other doctor away. Why?

Now that the tension has mostly abated, Sherlock realises what he has just been given: a fascinating piece of a puzzle that is John. He had mistakenly thought he knew most of what was worth knowing already, but it appears he had been very wrong.

Since it is unlikely that the summoned surgeon would answer any of the questions Sherlock is now formulating in his head since John's had so exceptionally dismissively shut down the conversation, Sherlock would prefer for this Patrick to now leave. His presence feels like a chafing clothes label, a thread sticking out of a neat cardigan.

He hovers by the door expectantly while the doctor shakes John's hand and packs his medical bag. Sherlock then shadows his steps back to the foyer. "Thank you," he says.

"Call me if he takes a turn for the worse," the doctor tells him and passes him a handwritten card with a mobile number. "Always nice to catch up with colleagues from Camp Bastion."

"Were you there for long?"

"Two years. I stayed on for six months after they sent John home. It was soon after the Taliban raid," he says pointedly, as though it has some significance when it comes to John.

"He doesn't talk about his service days," Sherlock says and wants to bite his tongue because he's effectively telling the man off for saying more than John would probably want him to. Shouldn't he be making use of this opportunity to find out more? It must be this whole sordid Iceland business that's making him maudlin and overprotective.

The surgeon nods. "Right, yeah, I'm not surprised. Nice to meet you and good night."

Sherlock watches from the window as the man walks to the black, armour-plated car parked on the opposite side of the street, carrying with him the secrets of John Hamish Watson.

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The next day, the lab results trickle into his email box, all benign.

He's in a sour mood since John has been quiet and thoughtful and practically ignoring him. Sherlock bites his lips so hard he draws blood when he realises a part of him is disappointed
someone else is not going to take over John's care. Then, he remembers what it was like, walking away and resigning John's fate to the universe and he feels as guilty as he feels exhausted.

In the afternoon, John drags his duvet-wrapped self to the sitting room, makes some small talk, asks Sherlock to light the logs in the fireplace. He seems keen for company, almost too much so, almost like he's trying to make up for something.

Sherlock makes tea and ignores what's on TV in favour of staring at the swirling Darjeeling in his cup, wishing that he could read from the tea leaves on the bottom the answer to a question that now will not leave him be.

*Who is James?*

who

Things begin to approach normal during the next few days, but Sherlock doesn't let himself completely believe that this is how they will continue. He still needs to man, still needs to take responsibility for both their futures. He will, once he has managed to put a damper on his curiosity regarding John's past. He just doesn't know where to even begin to unravel all that.

Mycroft pops by gawk at the proceedings on a Tuesday evening just as Sherlock has settled down on the sofa, bare toes peeking out from under a throw. John's quiet snoring can be heard from the bedroom. This is not the way he would have wanted John to end up in said room and his bed, but that's a foregone conclusion, a what-if, a pointless indulgence of a thought that always leaves him with a vague sense of loss especially now, especially after what he has gone and done.

"How are things?" his brother asks and regards John's worn armchair with a frown that's difficult to decipher.

Sherlock can deduce from various small clues that Mycroft is en route to the airport – likely to one of the Whatever-istans that have been the focus of his professional attention lately. It explains why he has shown up on this particular evening – he wants to make sure it is alright for him to leave, instead of needing to stay and fix up some mess of Sherlock’s.

There is no *mess*. There is no *problem*. There is just the infinite pointlessness of the cosmos caving in, and Sherlock is the only one who has noticed it.

"Everything is going according to John's original prognosis," he says and feigns a yawn.

"I wasn't asking about him," his brother corrects and sweeps his gaze across Sherlock. He's looking for a weak spot or a tell. "He will be well enough for work soon, I suppose," Mycroft offers. "You have barely left the flat during the past days so a return to your cases will be a welcome change."

John no longer winces if he has to move around the flat for more than a few steps. They had decided that stairs are still not a good idea, so he is still in the wrong room, but that will only be necessary for a few more days. During the past week, Sherlock has gotten rather good at shamming *fine* and *normal* and *moving on*. It's sad how much of it John accepts at face value, but then again, most people are idiots.

He still quite likes *his* idiot, but it can't be helped.

"This is not the first blood-letting your line of work has cost either of you. No reason to lock yourself in the flat and wilt on the sofa," Mycroft prompts again.
"There will be no work for him, apart from being a physician," Sherlock announces. Mycroft will learn of this soon, anyway. "He hardly possesses my skill set. I've indulged this long to include him on cases to keep him in a good mood, but since he has no sense of self-preservation, he needs to be shown his place. He can doctor all he wants, that should keep him feeling useful." He hopes this cold logic will satisfy Mycroft.

"I was under the impression that he followed you around not because you employ him or because he is in needs of a rehabilitating activity, but because he rather enjoys spending time with you."

"That's irrelevant."

"He keeps you in a much better mood."

"The same effect could be achieved by your prompt departure."

There's a shortish silence, during which Mycroft deigns to produce tea in a passive-aggressive manner. Usually, he seems to expect tea to materialise in any physical space he allows his esteemed presence to grace.

Sherlock knows the lecture is not over. Mycroft will invariably dole out whatever advice is burning on his tongue, with or without permission.

"May I make an unorthodox suggestion?"

"You're not really asking for permission."

"Talk to him, Sherlock. It may help."

"How, exactly, will it help? It will not change the fact that he's a liability," Sherlock snaps. The word is wrong, wrong, wrong, he hates himself for saying it because what he actually means is I'm a liability when all I can think of is keeping him safe. He can't think when John is in danger, and suddenly it has been hammered home that he's in danger every single minute he spends with Sherlock. It's a divide-by-zero problem that will only result in infinite frustrations, confusion and a crash of his hard drive, yet he can't let go. At least not before he knows everything important there is to know about John.

Why must he always get addicted to things that will ultimately destroy him?

Mycroft exhales in regal exasperation.

A door creaks. Maybe the scent of tea has wafted down the hallway because John now wanders into the kitchen, his hair sticking up and a pillow crease on his cheek. He's wearing an old, grey dressing gown of Sherlock's, and the intimacy of that fact takes Sherlock completely by surprise. He stares and hopes dearly that John hasn't heard their conversation.

"Have you come to meet the orneriest nurse in the whole of London?" John asks Mycroft with a playful grin, leaning on the frame of the kitchen door. He's a bit pale like he tends to be when he gets up quickly.

"My brother has had many disguises through the years, but I'd say that if a nurse is what he is trying to pass as right now, the effort is abysmal."

John chuckles. "He's done alright. I wasn't expecting bed baths or mushy empathy, anyway."

Even in its most mocking form, John's praise makes him feel like he's a shiny thing in bright sunlight. Sherlock shakes his head slightly, trying to make the feeling evaporate because he
shouldn't be spoiled with such things, but John continues smiling and looking at him like everything is alright, and suddenly it's too much. Something tips over. Overflows. Overwhelms him. Perhaps it's the wounding normality of this moment and the fact of how hard he needs to fight against the yearning to hold onto it.

Without a word, Sherlock hurries upstairs and slams the door behind him after retreating to John's still temporarily abandoned bedroom. Muted voices drift in from downstairs, and he forces himself not to listen. He hopes him removing himself from the situation won't raise too many brows – Mycroft and John are both used to what John calls His Supreme Moodiness.

He drags open the curtains. Thick dust dances in the moonlight and street lights now streaming in. Traffic noises merge with his quiet breathing, and he feels less isolated, less trapped in a box. He notices a photo taped to the mirrored wardrobe door. At first, he wonders how he could possibly have missed such a thing before. Then again, he hasn't spent all that much time here, anyway. Not before, and not even know even though this is supposed to be where he rests. Even though he's not very sensitive to other people's privacy, John's bedroom has always been a space he does not breach lightly.

The photo is a Polaroid snapped at a crime scene. It's of the two of them: Sherlock is on his haunches next to a corpse with only the trousers of the victim visible behind him. He's amused by something John has said – they both are, and their expressions betray a likely private joke, an intimate moment in the midst of tragedy. Giggling at a crime scene. His own smile is unadulterated in a manner he barely even recognises, and John is doing that thing he does when he's trying to conceal how much Sherlock sometimes delights him by looking away, chin tilted up slightly and a smug grin on his face. They look as though the joke may have had a naughty tone.

He flips the polaroid, taking care not to pull it so the sticky tape keeping it in place wouldn't come off.

'Thought you might like to have this, one of the boys from Tech snapped it. GL' the inscription says.

This is what others see, then, when they look at him and John. These private moments, the connection between that is startlingly evident in the image. It's a different thing to feel it than to see it immortalised visually.

Seeing such evidence makes everything feel worse. Again.

*I'm sorry. I should have done better.*

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Days pass. Even though John has now moved back into his old bedroom and is doing very well, it seems that Sherlock's body refuses to believe it and remains in a constant state of alert, ready to react to any sound that might mean that John is in some sort of distress.

He can't fall asleep. That would mean.... nightmares. Darkness. His dreams have become a nightly play of John leaving or dying – or both, somehow. He can't remember when he'd last slept without waking up gasping, the sound of an icy highland wind in his ears and the hallucinatory scent of heather in his nose. He is thoroughly fed up with being shaken out of slumber by the cold fingers of panic, feeling like he wants to tear out his skin to stop it from crawling. During those moments, the yearning to shoot up almost unbearable. Only John can help counter that impulse,
but John has his own troubles right now. Shame burns on his cheeks at the very thought: how could he even consider asking John for consolation, when he's in a hell of his own making, and John is still trying to recover?

This is why he fears boredom above all else: it is the emotion closest to this. It allows him to consider the consequences of his actions, to mull on the possibility of a Johnless life. Now, it's not just boredom that brings on such thoughts. He thinks of little else these days.

He's suspended in dusk, watching the end of the world approaching on the horizon. Why the hell had he been so foolish as to allow another human person such a power over him?

John is snoring on the sofa. This is his chance to seek distraction by trying to solve the only worthwhile case he currently has.

He goes up to John's room, quietly opens the wardrobe door and lifts out a box in which he knows John keeps his meagre collection of army gear. He has not shown the contents to Sherlock apart from an accidental glimpse at the closed box when he had been moving in. The injury and its aftermath are plenty enough reason for his reticence, but Sherlock keeps thinking about his reaction when his colleague had mentioned a James.

He goes through the photographs in the cardboard box. No names have been scribbled behind the images. They are what one would expect; group photographs, a few rather lovely snapshots of John in action at the Camp Bastion hospital and a couple of hastily snapped photos of him in battle gear. Sherlock is tempted to steal one, but John might notice.

Bereft of answers, he replaces the box in the wardrobe, goes downstairs, makes tea. John is sitting up on the sofa and has turned on the television. Sherlock brings him a steaming mug, wishing he could have added a biscuit, but that might still be too much for his digestion at this point.

John looks as if he's in a good mood so perhaps there will be answers even without a baked good. This is the only avenue of inquiry he might have left without leaving the flat – a thorough googling had produced nothing.

"Who's James?" Sherlock asks as casually as he possibly can.

John had been about to reach for the mug Sherlock had placed on the coffee table, but now he halts and stares. His expression does a very sudden change from amicable to accusatory. "No one."

"I was just---"

"There's no Iwasjust when it comes to you. My past is none of your bloody business," John snaps and shifts so that he can straighten his back. "I heard you upstairs, and I hope for your sake that you were just taking up the bloody laundry."

An impulse to apologise hits, but what comes out of Sherlock's mouth is um.

"I'm not your bloody case. If you can't respect that then sod off, will you."

Sherlock does sod off, but only to the kitchen. He knows he can't let this go. He must be embarrassed and angry over the fate of his sister, yet he had had no trouble divulging the details to Sherlock less than a day after they'd met. John doesn't mind discussing personal things, except for this. Something here is amiss, something very important. John calls him nosy and smiles in a crooked way knowing that not answering a question drives Sherlock nuts because he needs data, but he doesn't tell Sherlock to sod off. Not like this.
John will be angry if he doesn't let this go, but then again, John will be angry with him eventually, anyway. Angry is better than dead, and after his colossal fuck-up in Iceland, it's not as though things can get worse.

John *is* his case. Still.
I'm The Branch That You Break

A lead weight for you open palm
And a white shirt over your bloody heart
To think I thought I was all you are
I was missing from the start
- Kyla La Grange

John has been home for two weeks now. He's doing well, all things considered; moves a bit slower than usual since the surgical wound troubles him a bit when he taxes himself, but he's recovering so well that there are no further outpatient appointments scheduled to monitor him. By all intents and purposes, he's on the mend. They should both be fine, but they aren't. Nothing is.

Sherlock can't think about Iceland. He can't not think about Iceland.

The memories creep in when he's alone, and they creep in when he watches John. In his dreams, his imagination adds a disturbing layer of icing onto those recollections, so he tries not to sleep at all. The Transport naturally keeps betraying him on that front since there's no case on.

He wakes up with a start, a scream frozen on his lips, shivering and hag-ridden. Fumbling desperately for the light switch of the light on his bedside cabinet, he manages to shove the whole lamp to the floor with a crash.

Sooner than should be possible – since Sherlock isn't sure if he has fully recovered yet, though the patient himself would probably argue that he is – John barges into his room, gun in hand. Guilt swirls into the mix: John shouldn't be hurrying about like this, he might hurt himself.

John slams his palm on the light switch of the ceiling lamp, which leaves Sherlock blinking and squinting and shaking – cold sweat feels as though it's clinging to his very soul.

John's eyes dart around the room until they set on the broken lamp and he exhales. "You alright?" he asks, trained sternness lowering the pitch of his voice. They're locked in a stare where both try to read the other's intentions. Finally, John stands down, and Sherlock manages a raspy, monosyllabic affirmation to his fineness.

John retreats upstairs.

Sherlock sits in the dark, shivering. His fingers are still tingling from adrenaline. After an hour of sleep evading him, he goes to the bathroom and slaps on so many nicotine patches that they make his head swim, but a craving for oblivion has set in. It doesn't matter if nicotine is a stimulant – sleep is a pipe dream, anyway.

There's a rosewood box hidden under the false bottom of his wardrobe. He could already be attaching the needle to the syringe contained in it. It would be a slow slide into the heart of the storm where nothing moves, and everything just waits, where things slow down to a pace where he can understand and register it all.

It's not a real storm, though, because real storms move, and sooner rather than later, the standstill
ends and everything goes to hell.

No one can shoot up forever. There are consequences, as Mycroft would be the first to remind him. It would solve nothing. He drapes the duvet tighter around himself and tries not to think about anything at all.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"I don't get you, you know," John while having breakfast, glancing at him. "There's the mailbox bursting with emails about potential cases, there's Lestrade calling me because you won't answer your phone, and here you are, trying to grow roots into the sofa. I know you tend to want to have a bit of a sulk now and then, but this is getting excessive."

Sherlock raises his head from the sofa and homes his gaze in on John with an indignant expression. "How nice of you to distil my entire well-being and emotional state into 'having a bit of a sulk'."

"Well, what would you call it, then?"

"You're just trying to heckle me into talking."

"It works, you know." John's shoulders lift in a shrug.

"The heckling?"

"The talking."

Sherlock considers this for a moment. Had it ever helped him, he would have banished many of his problems like a snake sheds its skin during many attempts at getting him to commit to various forms of therapy. It's just words – they don't have the power to change the known universe or reorganise his head since he's convinced he can deduce and circumvent every possible attempt at psychoanalysis and reprogramming of his thinking.

Talking can't offer him any promise of never having to go through this again any less than a weatherman can promise that a thunderstorm will never hit a town twice.

How much undeserved forgiveness could John grant him before the man develops a sense of self-preservation and runs for the hills? If the universe were fair, Sherlock thinks it should leave people such as himself to self-destruct without collateral damage.

"You should at least try to get off that couch, do something. Anything," John pleads.

"That's awfully vague."

"What would you fancy? We haven't got anything planned; the money just came in from the art theft case, so that isn't an issue. Lord knows you deserve to enjoy some of it now and then, since you're the one who earns it. Just pick something." John is looking perky and encouraging and very, very expectant. There's a tinge of desperation in his demeanour, and Sherlock is reminded of the hosts of TV home sales channels. Watching such things is the depth of how low he has sometimes stooped when there's no case on and John is at work.
If he could make himself want at least *something*, that would be an improvement on his current state. Usually, when he's in a bad mood, John manages to cheer him up. His attempts may be fumbling and ill-informed – such as marathons of films full of unrealistic explosions – but his level of devotion to dragging Sherlock out of his own head does deserve acknowledgement.

This time, it's different. This time, everything John says or does makes him feel as though he is being slowly stabbed – a constant reminder that all this is transient, and due to his childish needs and desires for this line of work, this might end sooner rather than later, and that it already nearly did. This is the only sort of work he's ever enjoyed, and John enjoys it, too – it would be very cruel to narrow their existence into something safer, more normal, more secure. He doesn't *want* the Work without John.

"You know, you really worried me in Reykjavik. The world's most verbally effusive man, stammering and speechless. You were looking at me like I had practically awoken from the dead."

"Have you taken your antibiotics?" Sherlock asks and declines a biscuit.

"Yes, and I'd be touched by your concern if I didn't know your asking that is a diversion tactic. You know what Mycroft said to me on the plane? He said that you'd probably need time, that it would probably take longer for you to get back to work than me, but that doesn't make any sense. Things are always better when you've got something on."

John is right there, living and warm. Sherlock tries to reason that he shouldn't be so constantly frightened of him dying. He shouldn't be frightened of anything right now, but he hasn't been able to shake the sense of the brittleness of everything; of how easily any disaster could strike at any minute. Yet, watching John nowadays feels like watching a film he knows will end, the image flicker away into darkness. There will always be a Moriarty in their lives, always someone seeking to separate and destroy them, because it is in the very nature of Sherlock to attract such people like a flame attracts moths.

He secretly watches John's puttering about in the kitchen, drinking in the familiar sight that is now tinted with the serrated edges of doom.

They're both getting stir-crazy. John is right. He does need a case. Maybe that will fix something, or at least buy him time to get his head in order.

---

John has taken a locum shift, but he'll be home any minute now. It's nearly six in the evening.

Tonight, the craving for the contents of the rosewood box has the edge of the infinite and a taste of fate, and he knows he needs to make a choice. He could embrace it, but that would carry the risk of getting lost, possibly permanently.

He *could* devise an alternate strategy. He doesn't remember being tempted by the desire to tell someone before when he's this close to succumbing to temptation. He could tell John that this is a danger night, to outsource to him solving the puzzle that is his head. He has nothing to lose, so maybe he should do what he's never done before – pick the more sensible choice, try it out for good measure. Perhaps it might console John that he tried to make such amends even when he'd already wrecked everything. That he tried to stop himself from becoming even more reprehensible.
Then again, he just might want to face John's disappointment even less than he wants to face withdrawal. John's disappointment is what has driven him to this, so he hardly wants extra helpings of that.

His phone chimes with a text alert. He dives to it like a drowning man towards a life raft.

It's Lestrade, sparing him from a further contemplation of honesty versus relief by texting him an address in Cheshunt.

He's been let off the hook. This'll hopefully be a nice substitute for the needle. It will only postpone the inevitable but who cares. The game is on.

He texts the address to John, who replies immediately and eagerly. It's only then he realises he shouldn't have. John's presence is a safety blanket, a seven percent solution of admiration and familiarity, a shield against the rest of the world, but it's exactly what should come to an end because it puts John in danger.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

What follows from Lestrade's message is a satisfactory seven on his scale – a kidnapping connected to a high-end human trafficking operation. Not Sherlock's usual kind of case, this one, since he's not much of a social warrior, but a puzzle is a puzzle, and he may be able to score some reputation points by collaborating on this particular one.

John seems to find a lot of motivation in the tragedies of the victims so he complains much less than usual about lack of sleep and nourishment, even though he could still be considered convalescent. Sherlock nags him about antibiotics. He feels it's his responsibility. John looks at him like he's gone a bit demented.

Everything goes fine until they're all wearing bulletproof vests under their coats and standing in a shipyard preparing for a major takedown. It had taken some admirable diplomacy from Lestrade to allow the two of them to participate in such a high-risk stage in the investigation, but John's excited grin makes up for the arguing.

John has squared his shoulders and is leaning against the side of a shipping container. He's ready, tense with anticipation and excitement.

Sherlock should be the same, but right now he can't seem to concentrate on anything else than John. Doubt gnaws at the bottom of his stomach; his hands tremble even under the warmth of his coat as he stands with his arms crossed. Why is it that everything about John is now getting under his skin like this, cracking his facade? Things had been so much easier when all he'd had to do was try stomp down on any possible hints at more than platonic interest in his straight colleague slash flatmate slash friend.

How does John cope with this? How can he allow Sherlock to do risky things and not lose sleep over it? Is it because John cares so much less for him than the other way around? Does it not hurt John the way it tears at Sherlock to think of even the slightest possibility of being separated by injury or death?

It hardly matters if Sherlock risks his life. His family begrudgingly allows him his whims and his chosen career, but why is John here, following him against his better judgment?

They're both addicts, and John hasn't learned to control himself like Sherlock can with the
cocaine.

This won't do.

He raises a hand to interrupt Donovan's pre-briefing.

She grunts at him in frustration. "What now?"

"We should cut down on the group size," Sherlock insists. He snaps his spine straight, constructs a cold, business-like expression and turns to face the rest of the group instead of Donovan.

"John, go home," he orders. He never uses such a tone and only realises it afterwards. It's a cold command instead of the softer way he prompts John to do for him.

John's brows sink, and his eyes widen. "Me?! What did I do?!"

"I told you, we're too many. It's a risk for---"

"Don't you think outnumbering them would be a good thing?" Donovan cuts in. "Frankly, I'd rather have just him here than the both of you, what with your usual solo act and putting everyone in danger by putting yourself in danger. At least he knows how to take orders."

"Exactly. We're civilians, but you need me, which is why he ought to go," Sherlock says. His tone sounds thin and even colder, and he knows he isn't making all that much sense. He's always the one insisting that they're a team, that both their presences are absolutely vital regardless of the situation.

He plucks up the courage to look straight at John, who has turned into a human-shaped container of fury. He looks the same as he does when he feels particularly belittled. Sherlock had learned this when Lestrade had explained to him a baffling incident at another crime scene that had led to John storming off in a huff. He had memorised that very expression so that he could make sure he would not produce it ever again.

John sticks his hands in his pockets, glowers at Donovan, turns on his heels and walks towards the main road, not even glancing at Sherlock.

"Right, then," Donovan says tentatively. Sherlock returns his attention to her, practically feeling Lestrade's stare in his back.

He tries to focus on the rest of the briefing, but ends up watching the receding shape of a man at the end of the shipyard.

Don't go, he wants to shout and to run after John.

Don't listen to me, even though you should.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The case is solved. They catch the culprits. He acquiesces to assisting with the paperwork because it gives him an excuse to linger at the Met headquarters instead of going home and facing the aftershocks.
Sherlock should feel triumphant.

He doesn’t.

He feels like a tree uprooted, one that can never grow back yet cannot shift to a better place, either. It will shrivel in its place, beaten by the wind until it disintegrates. This evening has proven that he can no longer think when it comes to cases if John is present, yet without him, none of it is worth anything.

Eventually, even Lestrade prepares to leave for home, and Sherlock bids him farewell before the man picks up on his growing unease. He knows John will be angry still over what has happened tonight, which is fair enough, since he should have been angry at Sherlock much earlier.

He takes a cab home. Usually, the sight of 221B in the dark, with the lights on in the sitting room, is a sight he prefers over all others, but tonight it does not promise the safety and comfort it used to.

He almost forgets to pay for the cab, and the driver shouts after him. It's logical that he would make such a mistake since John usually handles that part of the ride. John is etched into every part of his life in ways he probably doesn't even realise yet. The epiphany will come sooner or later, once they are no longer... together?

Is that the right word?

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-a
copiously, not even when he's angry. Not even when he's absolutely livid.

Not even when John's girlfriends dump him does he resort to liquid courage, Sherlock suddenly realises. Why? Could it possibly be that only Sherlock gets so deep under his skin? That is all the more reason to spare the man from more sorrow and to allow the natural death of their acquaintance.

Sherlock suddenly realises that this might be the very moment it happens. It's all wrecked, it's all gone, it's his fault, John will leave, and he will go back to talking to the skull and chasing his own tail in the darkness and-----

"Sherlock?" John asks. "You're not even listening, are you." It's not a question, just a bitter statement. "I don't know why I fucking bother." He rises to his feet, walks to the sofa, drops down on it and grabs the remote but doesn't turn the television on.

Sherlock is still standing frozen by the door, not knowing what to do.

*Why did you ever bother, John? Why would someone go to all that trouble for me?*

"It's--- it's not your fault," Sherlock stammers and want to bite his tongue. John ignores him.

He finally has the wherewithal to hang up the scarf on the same hook as his coat. He goes to the kitchen, grabs hold of the back of a chair, leans on it. His curls are dampening the shoulders of his jacket.

"What isn’t?" John finally asks in his reluctant *I'll bite*-tone. He stands up, gathers his glassware and takes it to the kitchen, slithering past Sherlock to reach the counter. His back is soon turned as he rearranges some of the things already cluttering the sink.

He has asked a question but seems to be having second thoughts about actually listening to the answer. Sherlock has learned that this means that he doesn't really want to hear one – he's just being polite because that's the sort of man John Hamish Watson is.

"None of it is your fault," Sherlock tells him. "You're not useless or weak. Never have been, even if you may have thought that about yourself after Afghanistan."

John needs to know this, needs to hear it from him. Even if Sherlock can't bring himself to reveal to John how badly he had failed him, John should know this much: that he was perfect and lovely and important, whereas Sherlock was just who he has always been.

"Even since Iceland, you've acted as though you can't stand the sight of me. What the hell is the matter with you?" John asks, slamming the fridge door closed after taking nothing at all out of there. "I just don't understand you. Not that I ever really did, but now you're just completely incomprehensible."

Sherlock doesn't look at him. He has no answers. He doesn't understand, either. He wants to be better for John, but John keeps trying to make him be a little kinder to himself, and that doesn't work. It's an unsolvable equation.

He realises that after John leaves, a moment may come when he won't even want the heroin and the cocaine because they can't erase his memory. They will fix nothing, and what will happen to him, then?

He shifts to the sitting room, crosses his arms tightly, wrapping them around himself like a shield as he stands in front of the fireplace John has lit. He still feels cold and alone and completely powerless.
"I don't know," John says. "I don't know if you'll talk to me. I don't know how to make you do that. Lord knows nobody can make you do anything you don't want to do," he says bitterly and then goes upstairs with heavy steps.

Sherlock watches the flames dancing in the fireplace until they die down, turn to glowing embers.

'Why won't you visit him?' Mycroft had asked him two days after John had been moved back to London. 'What are you so scared of?'

The answer burns the back of his eyelids when he closes his eyes.

Me, without him.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Text message at 03:23, sender: Sherlock Holmes:

Get me an MI6 assignment. Minimum 3 years. SH

Text message at 03:36, sender: Mycroft Holmes:

Talk to him.

Text message at 04:01, sender: Sherlock Holmes:

"James", British Armed Forces in Afghanistan, connection to John Watson? SH

Text message at 04:04, sender: Mycroft Holmes:

I assume you are aware of the potential repercussions of such a breach of privacy?

Text message at 04:06, sender: Sherlock Holmes:

My problem, not yours. SH
Our love is never what it was
Never bold enough to carry us
In the beginning, I wanted you so much
Fire, then dark, then dust
- Kyla La Grange

In the morning, Sherlock stays in his bedroom until the door clicks shut as John's heavy steps head to yet another piece of locum work.

Sherlock manages to immerse himself in a bit of research that just might expand a case he's considering taking on to some recent happenings in Warsaw. He even gets to use his Polish as he makes some calls. Despite some intriguing details this unveils, he finds it hard to muster much enthusiasm for digging deeper.

He descends on the sofa, intends to close his eyes just for a moment. The next time he opens them, it's already late afternoon. This gives him some hope that he might manage on his own, like this. Might be able to pass the remaining hours of his life, somehow. Married to my work.

He retreats to his bedroom well before John is due home. He doesn't know how to approach him or if he even should. In all likelihood, John is still very angry and disappointed. It's just as well – this is what needed to happen, isn't it? Now that the end is nigh, Sherlock finds himself oddly calm. Maybe it's relief over not having to discuss Iceland ever again with anyone. Maybe it's the paralysed shock phase before the imminent Johnless reality sinks in, and he loses his footing. Who knows.

It's not raining outside, but still, the sound of the second set of steps coming up the stairs when John is due home is accompanied by the sharp clicks of the tip of an umbrella. Many Londoners carry small, collapsible versions of the item nowadays – only those who wish to make a statement with their choice, or whose thinking tends to be a bit old-fashioned, would choose a full-length model with a wooden frame. Both statements apply to Mycroft.

The other set of familiar steps belongs to John, of course. Sherlock hears words exchanged between and his brother before they enter. Among them, the phrases 'you didn't really have to come all the way here' and 'he is such an idiot, and I wish he'd explain, but I'm not holding my hopes up' make an appearance.

Sherlock listens as the two men make their way into the kitchen. Tea is offered and declined – while office hours have come and gone, Mycroft rarely stops working until eight in the evening. He seems to be in a hurry, so this is very much an impromptu visit. Brought on by what?

Soon, there is a sharp knock on his bedroom door.

"Sherlock." A stern command, not the polite, empathetic request the name becomes when spoken by John through this very door. No, this is his brother demanding access.

"Go away," Sherlock snaps. If he stays in here long enough, Mycroft will eventually give up. He
must since he has a government to run. The government thinks it runs itself, but that's an illusion
carefully curated by the man currently trying to invade Sherlock's privacy.

"I don't have time for these things, you know," his brother points out needlessly.

The reply is obvious. "Piss off, then. Nobody invited you."

John says something, but it's drowned out by Sherlock's frustrated growl. This was painful even
before Mycroft decided to meddle. Damn John for cluing Mycroft in. Damn John for being
John.

It seems that he must face this now. A clean break must be achieved. He can't be without John,
but he sure as hell can't live with the possibility of his death on his conscience. There must be a
life for John somewhere else, and Sherlock will have to make do with The Work and the
awareness that he saved a man from himself.

His fingers coil into a fist. Whenever he threatens to crumble under the mental image of John
walking away and never coming back, he forces himself to think back to his first visit at the
hospital in Iceland, and soon he can practically smell the stench of betrayal and fear and antiseptic
and death that had enveloped him there. The need to banish that suffocating burden lends him the
strength he wouldn't otherwise have left.

Mycroft lets out a loud, exasperated sign on the other side of the door. "Kindly hold this, John,"
he says, and Sherlock tries not to deduce what the item is. Umbrella? Briefcase? What does it even
matter?

He hears someone opening the bathroom door – why? – and then the sound of that someone
rummaging around can be heard, after which determined footsteps return to the door. A quiet,
scratchy noise begins in the vicinity of the lock. It takes only a split second for Sherlock to realise
what's going on. He wastes no time is striding back to the door and grabbing the handle.

"So that's where he keeps the lock-picking kit. I thought that sort of stuff was mainly his thing, not
yours," John's voice points out. He sounds only half-surprised.

Sherlock scoffs. His brother is the British Intelligence Services, after all, when he's not busy being
the British Government and has gone through the same field assignments that every major
operative has had to endure in his youth. He probably learned to pick locks in the cradle.

The scratching stops, the lock clicks. "Step away from the door," Mycroft warns. Not wanting to
gerammed, Sherlock acquiesces, taking a step back and kneading his left bicep because he needs
something to do to banish his anxiety. He must look odd and pathetic, just standing there, like an
animal into whose burrow has suddenly been shone.

When the door opens fully, Sherlock fixes his eyes on John, hastily bumping his brows into a
rehearsed frown. "What did you call him here for?" he cocks his head towards the intruder in
question. If he ignores Mycroft, maybe he will leave.

John spreads his hands. "I didn't!" he exclaims.

Sherlock then attempts to banish his brother by raking him with a glare of freezing contempt, but
the man is immune to such antics.

Mycroft whips out his Blackberry from his pocket. "He won't discuss the practicalities since he
won't discuss anything with me, but I need to know if he's going to be alright with the rent on his
own. I could talk to Mrs Hudson, but to be frank, I have enough to organise without having to sort
out his situation, too.' That was a select quote from an email to me from the good doctor here,
announcing that it appears you have decided to annul your partnership with him without even explaining why. Why on Earth would you want such a thing?” Mycroft makes it sound like he thinks it’s a terrible idea. Of course it is, from his perspective – he probably thinks John has taken over some of his Sherlock-minding duties. It must be such a relief.

"I don't," Sherlock admits quietly. John will hear it, but lying to Mycroft only leads to a double portion of nagging. "But I do need him to leave."

Realisation dawns on Mycroft's face and Sherlock hates it that someone can read him like that.

"Excuse us a moment, will you, John?" Without waiting for an answer, Mycroft closes the door in John's face, which greatly annoys Sherlock. No need to add insult to injury.

Soon, they're sitting on his bed. Usually, Mycroft wouldn't be caught dead sitting anywhere else than a carefully selected, dignified chair.

"Go on, then," Sherlock says listlessly. "Tell me how stupid I've been to allow him here in the first place. Tell me how sentiment is only found on the losing side."

"No, it is not. While I did warn you about engaging in such a thing, once already entangled it is useless to indulge in a game of I-told-you-so. We are now into damage limitation, so it is my duty-..."

Sherlock gives him a warning glare. "No one has assigned you any duty when it comes to me."

"Apart from myself. I would not be here if you could be trusted to make sound decisions concerning your own well-being. You would never ask for assistance, even when you most need it."

"That is precisely the problem – that you think your assistance is required." Sherlock is highly tempted to explode out of his seat and manhandle the meddlesome visitor back to whence he'd come, but such a violent reaction to their usual banter would only add to Mycroft's assumption that something is amiss and that the decisions Sherlock makes are idiotic and must be recalled.

"Stop trying to shift attention away from yourself. Becoming a contained ball of misery is not the way to resolve your problems, but unfortunately, you refuse to learn that lesson even after repeated attempts. Judging by the suffering you are putting yourself through to banish him, I would be so far as to call him your partner and confidant – clearly more than just a colleague who could easily be cast aside. Despite the obvious importance of him in his life, you refuse to engage him in any role right now, even though his support is obviously most needed. Use him as your sounding board, since you are clearly not willing to use me as such, and as you would be the first to point out, this is between the two of you."

Sherlock grunts in exasperation, throws himself on the bed and covers his head with a pillow. It will not discourage Mycroft, but at least it'll muffle his annoying voice.

"I suspect that John's strangely acquiescent email to me regarding his assumed departure may have been a covert attempt to engage my... services in deciphering your behaviour.

"John isn't that devious."

"You underestimate people."

"You overestimate him."
"Don't make him into an idiot. Were that true, he would not have seen the value of your company, nor would you have tolerated his. He is in the plot already, so you would need to make a much greater effort to banish him from it. Achieving such a thing will require explaining yourself, which just might lead to another sort of outcome – one much more beneficial for the both of you. When you cannot solve something, your pride dictates nobody else is even given a try. Perhaps, this time, that could change."

Sherlock lets the pillow drop. There is no stopping Mycroft when he's on his high horse.

"You think you dragged him into your business, while he would be the first to argue that he joined it voluntarily, out of his free will. Pray tell, brother mine: whose life and heart are you really protecting here, his or your own?"

They seem to have arrived at an impasse, since Sherlock is not willing to address the question, to voice his suspicions about his own conclusions or explain the reasons for them, and Mycroft won't be willing to back down. They both are of the persuasion that speaking the truth is a fire that cleanses, even if it might scald terribly and even scar.

"Perhaps... A case? Get back in the saddle, so to speak?" Mycroft suggests. "Some harmless, curious little problem plucked from the bottomless pit of human stupidity that is your email box. That could give your partnership one more chance by involving him?"

"Been there, done that. I'm surprised John didn't share that bit with you. I can solve the cases on my own. John is hardly needed," Sherlock dismisses and throws the pillow at his brother, who catches it nimbly and drops it into a chair by its corner as though it was an animal carcass.

It's the Work that landed them in Iceland. It's Sherlock's fault the Garridebs investigation expanded the way it did; as usual, he was enjoying being cleverer than anybody else. He should have left it at solving the bloody murder. Sometimes he's too brilliant for his own good.

"You refuse to continue working with him, and instead treat him like a case," Mycroft points out. "I have what you requested of me regarding Afghanistan. I would be the first to tell you that your fascination with him is reaching unhealthy levels, but then again, that would very much be hindsight."

It had not been a moment of weakness. Sherlock simply had – has – nothing to lose. "I didn't ask for advice – I asked for information, even if it always comes with a side of condescension."

Mycroft digs out a carefully folded set of papers from his breast pocket and gives them to Sherlock. The first page is a printed photograph of a man in his late thirties. Sand-coloured hair just on the acceptable side of military standards. Stocky build, an all-knowing smile. Dull.

"James Sholto was his commanding officer, although due to Watson's placement at the camp hospital, they did not have daily dealings with one another. There were unsubstantiated but repeated rumours of romantic involvement from several sources, although those sources may not be entirely neutral towards either of the parties involved. No disciplinary action resulted from those rumours or events allegedly connected to them. There is no mention of unacceptable fraternisation in either of the men's service records, and there seems to have been no contact after Afghanistan between the two."

Sherlock is surprised – and isn't. What else than romantic involvement could have caused such a volatile reaction in John? John is not a prejudiced person, but any assumption of him and Sherlock being an item causes a borderline homophobic reaction. Why? "If there was no disciplinary action or threat thereof, only rumours, why and how did it end?"
"Perhaps they feared the consequences enough to withdraw from the affair. If there ever was one."

"You don't sound as sceptical as I would have assumed."

"There was one detail not in the official records, but mentioned by two individuals involved in the incident which led to James Sholto's medical discharge."

Sherlock has already leafed through the files to be aware that Sholto had been brought back to Britain for treatment for extensive burns and stable multiple fractures of lumbar vertebrae.

"Two subordinates of his stated that the outcome of the Taliban raid on the camp would not have been as devastating if Sholto had not been late in attending to post that night. According to them, he had been spending time in the hospital crew quarters."

Sherlock digs out the incident report for the raid. There is no mention of such blame being placed, and he wonders if this is a bit of information Mycroft has obtained by actually tracking down and having these individuals interviewed.

If an affair between officers was being seen as the reason for the death of two servicemen and the severe injuries of their commanding officer, it would explain why that affair had come to an end, wouldn't it?

John and a man. Had this been just friendship, why a nightly visit and why such rumours?

How much does this information change things? The most this could mean is that perhaps John had once considered the possibility of seeking more with him but then decided against it. There is also the possibility that John isn't attracted to him at all, but could Sherlock truly have read the man so wrong? If it was never about his gender, then John’s determination to maintain his heterosexual orientation within Sherlock’s earshot means that it was just about him, about things he is, about things he's not. Somehow, that's worse than a simply case of being straight. Or, perhaps this is a side of John the man will never accept, and that is the reason the relationship with Sholto floundered. Sherlock can hardly force him to change, to come out of the closet. Such matters do not obey the laws of reason and logic. Sentiment makes people so... irrational. Sherlock knows this from his own experience. It is, after all, exactly what has landed him in this mess.

Best friend. Never more than that. Is it a big enough reason to stay? Enough reason for John's sense of self-preservation to be turned off?

This changes nothing, Sherlock decides. The fact remains that he is not willing to be the cause of John’s death.

Mycroft is watching him carefully. Sherlock narrows his gaze and squares his shoulders, trying to project objective disinterest.

"You should know your Watson by now. While you *could* solve things on your own, the protective tendencies he showed within a day of meeting you will not allow you to push him away from the Work, unless you banished him completely from your life. I doubt he is willing to do that, as illustrated by him contacting me. People who are done with someone, so to speak, do not concern themselves with the finances and well-being of the other party, yet that was the topmost thing on his mind. Your partnership should not be about what you assume is good for him. It is much more important to consider what the other party *wants*, and sometimes that is exactly what that person needs. Perhaps the same can be said of you, which is why I hope you’d let yourself reach out for such things instead of assuming you don't deserve them."

"You know, in retrospect, I can't say I wouldn't have preferred the option of things remaining the same."

"I know."

"Perhaps it's just the way it is. We might as well make it work."

"I suppose."

Sherlock?
Sherlock looks up, surprised at his brother's statement because it seems to contradict all the lectures through the years about emotions being a waste of time.

Mycroft regards him with a resigned, patient ghost of a smile. "I have often warned you against caring, against getting involved, but when the damage is already done, sometimes the greatest mistake is to push away someone who has already become of great importance. I don't think I need to relay the evidence for why that applies to John Watson. You are perfectly aware of his importance, and I think that is the very reason why you're panicking and trying to solve the problem by sending him packing."

"I am not panicking. I'm trying to achieve the best possible outcome."

"Oh, how boundless is your martyrdom," Mycroft mocks, "do you really think you're the one who gets to decide for him? That he doesn't know what's best for him, or that he's utterly unaware of what he wants?"

"No, he doesn't know what's best for him!" Sherlock replies. His eyes sting with all the emotion threatening to spill out. What if there aren't any... feelings for John to even be unaware of? He'd make a fool of himself assuming such things exist, especially if John is less straight then he lets on and simply isn't interested in Sherlock in particular. "He has no sense of self-preservation."

Mycroft raises his brows agreeably. "Said the pot to the kettle. I'd be inclined to say that banishing him would be highly detrimental to the preservation of your happiness. He is certainly not an individual who bases his life choices on safety but then again, neither are you. In a sordid way, the two of you truly deserve each other. The gist of the matter is not who is duty-bound to protect whom, but a much simpler question: do you want him to leave?"

Sherlock shakes his head because saying no out loud is too much.

"The man on the other side of that door needs to hear that – in actual words – because right now he is taking you very much at face value. While you will hurt him greatly by chasing him away without explanation, doing so will hurt you even more."

"Who are you and what have you done with my brother?"

"Not all human sentiment is harmful and leads to disaster. If Mummy had believed as you do and had shunned all such human things in favour of her plentiful cerebral pastimes, we wouldn't be here having this conversation, now would we?"

"I'm not her."

"No; I would claim I have inherited most of her reasonable qualities and you her frivolities. Nevertheless, I would advise at least explaining your reasoning to the other person involved
before allowing them to pack up and leave. People do so assume break-ups are their fault when no explanation is forthcoming. At least that is what the person I once cast aside assumed."

Sherlock's eyes go wide. "What?"

"Years ago, there was... someone. I assumed my career and my lifestyle could never safely or reasonably sustain a relationship, so I dissolved what was little more than a fledgeling start of one back then. We never discussed the reasons, and I was left forever wondering how the other party understood what had transpired. I have amassed few regrets in my life, but that decision is certainly one, for the lack of closure alone."

Has the entire universe gone mad? Mycroft Holmes, reminiscing about an old love and giving him relationship advice? "I'm sorry," Sherlock offers because it's the only courteous thing that comes to mind. Is it the right phrase to use in this context?

"I do not require your condolences. I have stuck by my decision and career-wise, it has served me well. You were – are – always the sensitive, emotional one out of the two of us. I doubt you would be able to withstand such a regret for the rest of your life."

He never has these kinds of conversations with his brother, and it's making Sherlock uneasy. Mycroft had always made everything look so simple, made Sherlock feel weak and pathetic because he could not shut out his emotions so easily. If it is sometimes a challenge even for Mycroft, then what chance does he have to manage?

He rises to his feet. "I need to---"

"You need to what exactly? Sulk behind closed doors? Disappear into some bolthole? Blame yourself for things John Watson does not blame you for, at all, despite what he may have said when heavily sedated, septic and fighting for his life? If he'd been deliriously trying to summon a Sumerian demon, would you have taken him seriously? He would not hold you to words spoken in such a scenario, nor would I. That is why you should let go of such misguided things. Let go – or, if that is not possible, then seek exoneration from the one person who can give it to you. That is most certainly not me."

Mycroft stands up, pats imaginary dust off his jacket and opens the door to reveal a still dismayed John who seems to be trying to decide whether to enter the bedroom or to retreat. Most of the anger in his expression seems to have abated; in its place, now, is a mostly a bitter sort of sadness Sherlock decides he abhors.

"It appears," Mycroft addresses John while Sherlock tries to bristle, "that Sherlock has had a fright he does not know how to shake off his shoulders. I have all the confidence in your abilities to aid him, Doctor Watson. Good day," he says and then makes such a purposeful exit that it doesn't even occur to Sherlock to protest. And, why would he – usually he wants Mycroft to make himself scarce as quickly as possible. Today, strangely enough, the thought of being left here without brotherly backup greatly alarms him.

John is still standing on the opposite side of the door, vacillating.

Sherlock feels embarrassed, under scrutiny, anxious and desiring to abandon the scene, but Mycroft has now proverbially confiscated his cards and laid them out on the table. There's no hiding or averting attention, judging by the look on John's face right now.

"Sherlock? What was he on about?"

"His usual meddlesome nonsense," Sherlock dismisses.
John’s shoulders sag a little. Just a little, but a more profound look defeat creeps into his posture as he's eyeing Sherlock warily. "Do you want me to go?"

"Go where?" Sherlock has lost the plot of the conversation. Too distracted, too preoccupied with keeping everything under lock and key. Do not think about all that now, stick to the plan, save him, save yourself by keeping him alive, don’t let him ask---

"Look, I know something's wrong, and what Mycroft just did proves that this can't be just about you deciding I bore you or that I'm useless and you want a better flatmate or that you just want to be on your own. Please, Sherlock, please tell me you don't really want to end this?"

It's John who has revealed his hand now. The desperation emanating from his very being surprises Sherlock and makes him feel like his heart is being wrung dry. He would be awestruck and over the moon after hearing such words if he wasn't still trying to petrify his heart into a state capable of accepting that this must be it, this must be the end if he's to survive – if John is to survive. Still, Mycroft’s words have sprouted doubt into his already weak resolve.

John joins him in the bedroom where he's now twisting a red blotch into his bicep with his fingers through the fabrics of his clothes.

"Something's been wrong for a while, hasn't it?" John asks him quietly.

Sherlock can't lie. He can't lie to John. He can't add that to his tally of wrongs. "I don't know what to do," he mutters towards the darkness in the eastern corner of the room.

"Well, you don't have to work it out alone. Conductor of light, remember?"

The smile Sherlock manages is broken; a pale comparison to the ones he usually finds so easy to give away to John and John alone.

"What did Mycroft mean?" the object of his affection asks, reaching out to pry Sherlock's fingers off from fidgeting with the sleeve of his jacket.

He doesn't answer. Their proximity makes him remember things he wants to be gone: the smell of heathers, the call of some small ground bird in the wilderness, the grey dampness of John’s forehead on the narrow bunk bed.

He had nearly lost his last chance ever to hear his name flow across John's lips again.

John could have died. He could be looking at an armchair never again occupied, a flat never again shared. How could he ever give all of that up willingly, if even losing them by accident would have been too devastating? John could have sent him away, could have told him never to come back, never to contact him again because of his cowardice. He's a saint, that man, for his willingness to pretend none of it ever happened, pretend that he had been glad to see Sherlock at his bedside in Reykjavik.

John’s fingers are still grasping his wrist, shaking his arm gently as though it is being tugged by some small playful animal. "Come on," John tells him, and soon Sherlock discovers himself seated on the living room sofa, a cushion in his lap, two mugs of tea in front of him and John sitting beside him.

It seems he must've gotten lost in thought while John organised them here and made tea.

"Look," , John says; "all I want to know is if you really want me to go."

"I don't want you to go. I need you to leave. Go." Sherlock doesn't even believe himself. He has
never known if he's a good liar or not.

John doesn't look very convinced. His frown lines smooth into a calmness Sherlock wants to drink in like a man dying of thirst in the desert.

"I don't take orders from you," John says, a smile tempting to break out in the quiver of an upturned lip. "If you don't want me to go, I won't. Whatever this is about, we'll sort it, yeah? If you want more space at home to think, you can have space. It's fine, Sherlock. Whatever you need."

John has said similar things before, when Sherlock been on his 'black moods', as John calls them. Maybe he could get John to think that this is some banal seasonal ennui or a between-cases funk. Then again, he is highly tempted to continue being prickly out loud because he hates the way John is now acting like so many have acted towards Sherlock before – placating him like some hysteric. Irrational. Can't help himself.

'Some things are just so difficult for Sherlock,' he remembers Mummy telling a teacher. Aren't some things difficult for everyone? Surely the life of a normal person cannot be as unburdened with emotional turmoil as people have tried to make him believe?

John grabs his mug, retreats into his armchair and picks up a newspaper. Before he actually reads a single paragraph, he watches Sherlock for a moment. "I'm here if you want to talk. If you don't, that's fine, too. Just... no more nonsense about leaving, alright?"

Relief washes over Sherlock, although he knows it's selfish to allow John just to sit there as though it's a regular night in instead of--- of--- this. Whatever this is.

After sitting on the sofa motionless like a discarded toy, he goes to his bedroom, changes into an old T-shirt and pyjama bottoms and drapes his blue dressing gown on top. Then, he re-emerges into the sitting room and grabs his violin. He steals glances at John while playing by ear the main theme of Lawrence of Arabia. He's not as clueless about pop culture as John claims. Before, Iceland was all he could think about. Now, Afghanistan is intruding on all that. Lawrence of Arabia has very little to do with either, but he can't help his associations, can he? Has Afghanistan become something he occupies his mind with to distract himself from more upsetting things? Mycroft is probably right in that he should leave well enough alone when it comes to John's past, but he can't help his curiosity.

Who is James Sholto? Has he had what Sherlock will never be allowed? Why does the very notion of being romantically involved with a man bring on a storm of anger?

He stops playing and looks through the window at anything and nothing. A draft on the floor makes him curl his bare toes, and he imagines a cold night in a tent with a flappy door, John's spine curving around the shape of another man. He can't help frowning as he tries to negotiate that silly, romanticised vision with the sight of John in his usual chair, looking every bit the tired doctor he is. At current, he looks so... straight. Or is that simply a repeated message having jammed itself into Sherlock's brain regardless of its truthfulness? Has he made the right deductions, or taken John's subterfuge at face value?

Was there ever the slightest chance for the two of them to be more, or had John's reticence to accept anything other than a heterosexual identity been the thing that destroyed the... thing he may have had with this James person?

Sherlock lifts the violin to his collarbone again and launches into a Bach partita. Its mathematical, tightly contained air should help him calm down. He doesn't have enough data to imagine any
scenario taking place in Afghanistan properly, so he shouldn't even try. Being able to recreate a
crime scene in his head properly always requires an actual visit to the location. Anything his brain
cooks up regarding John in Afghanistan is conjecture. Besides, John has made his stance quite

The question burns on his lips and refuses to leave him be: who is this James Sholto? He could
read the documents Mycroft had given him a dozen times more, but the real answers can only be
found in John's head.

There is another question that would inevitably follow: 'who am I to you?' but Sherlock must have
now lost the chance to ask it. He also isn't sure whether he could stand it if his significance to John
pales in comparison to what James Sholto had meant.

He needs to let all this go.

"Couldn't you play something a bit cheerier?" John asks, nodding at his instrument. Granted, the
number two partita is quite sombre, and some have even theorised it may be a covert Tombeau
for the composer's first wife. Still, Sherlock finds it necessary to be a little bit appalled on Bach’s
behalf that someone would demand such a masterpiece to be swapped for something cheery.

"This helps me think," Sherlock defends.

John shakes his head. "If you say so." His brows raise a little as he momentarily closes his lids in a
rather John-typical display of resigned exasperation.

Sherlock half-expects him to ask something along the lines of 'are you alright' again. Maybe John
has finally learned that he doesn't know how to answer such queries.

What does 'alright' consist of? How does it feel? Would that be in reference to how he feels on
average, or to a bearable level of wellbeing prevalent in the general populace? Sherlock doubts he
has ever been alright in either context – especially not after Iceland.

John sighs, then takes his newspaper into the kitchen so that he can have a glass of wine and some
biscuits while reading it. It's agonising to think how oblivious he is to the tangle of doubt and
questions in Sherlock's head. This is how it's always been – people see the surface, see the
disconnect between feeling something and being able to express it. They can't help him with any
of it. If he were the cerebral creature he had imagined being before John limped into his life, he
would have made a better judgment call in Iceland.

Sherlock realises he had forgotten to drink the tea John had made for him.

"You want some?" John shoves the wine bottle close to the edge of the kitchen table.

Sherlock shakes his head. They share a look he doesn't know how to interpret. Looking at John
always puts him at ease, reassures him. It works, even now.

I need you to decide to go, because I can't, not when you look at me like that – as though I matter.

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-0-o-0-0-o-
Hope is like a weed, a fly in the ointment, a pebble in his shoe, a whisper in his ear. You have nothing to lose. The whisper sounds annoyingly like Mycroft tonight.

Maybe John deserves to hear his side of the story, to know what he did. Perhaps what Sherlock deserves for his foolishness is for his shame to be laid bare. He has nothing to lose, so what if stops being a coward, sees this to its bitter end? It can't get worse, can it?

If he can't focus on the Work, he'll go crazy, but he'll also go crazy without John, and he may not even want the work without him. It's a cul-de-sac. An impasse. Some might call it love, and if this is it, then it certainly earns its reputation as something that hurts and kills and destroys and twists like a knife and deprives everything else of meaning.

Were Mycroft here, Sherlock would throw something at his smug face. What sort of a sadist first tries to counsel him to steer clear of such a thing, then tells him to hold onto it when nothing hurts worse?

A decision is made: John needs to understand. He must, once they establish the facts. John needs to know that this is an unsolvable case. Maybe John could even come up with an alternate solution that hasn't occurred to Sherlock.

Conductor of light.

Sherlock runs to his bedroom, dives into his wardrobe, shoves an item into his pocket and hurries upstairs, not caring if his hasty steps on the creaky staircase wake John up.

John is a much sounder sleeper nowadays than he used to be. When they first moved in together, he'd get startled by the smallest noises: creaking floorboards, a dropped jar lid – anything. Even a motorcycle driving past would rouse him and often lead to a flashback. John's PTSD has not made any nocturnal appearances for a long time, but it's still down there, ready to take over. Sherlock knows by experience that waking John up in the middle of the night is not a safe undertaking.

"Safe"? Safe is boring, the John who lives in his Mind Palace tells him.

'Maybe that Mind Palace John of yours isn't like me at all. He is, after all, you.' is what the real John had told him.

Once in the upstairs bedroom, he shakes John's shoulder as gently as he has learned to do in order not to bring on a flashback. There's a noncommittal grunt, and a shifting under the duvet John has wrapped tightly around his torso.

Sherlock engages in another shake.

More disgruntled mumbling.

A more vigorous shake. "John?"

"Wha---- Sh'lock." John now has his eyes half open, but his brain still appears to be half asleep. He grunts and performs a quite admirable eye roll when it seems to register that his guess as to the identity of his nocturnal intruder had been correct.

"I need you to wake up," Sherlock says, no longer whispering. Then, he involuntarily clenches his jaw, preparing for the rest of his sordid life in the form of a possibility that not even John can solve this. Brace for impact.

John blinks owlishly a few times until he opens his eyes and keeps them open, rubs his temple and turns onto his back. "Sherlock," he concludes in a tone that is a mix of disappointment, resignation
and slight alarm. "Is it a case?" he asks in a sleepy tone still, sliding the duvet down in preparation of getting up.

Sherlock places a palm to stop him. No reason for John to be deprived of the warmth of the bed. "No case."

"I'm not unlocking my laptop for you at this hour. I finally found a password even you can't crack."

"72467BakerJohn63544?"

"Wanker."

"That was your previous password."

John clicks on the lamp on his nightstand and runs a hand through his hair. "What do you want? It's been a long day."

Sherlock retreats a step, suddenly feeling rather exposed in the dim yellow light. The rosewood box he had shoved into his pocket seems to weigh a ton somehow. "How would you describe me?"

John rearranges his duvet under his arms, probably having decided this is all very pointless and that he should be going back to sleep. "You're not serious. If you think you're allowed to wake me up at fuckoff a.m. so that I'd sing your bloody praises or play some game, then you're absolutely off your rocker. As usual."

"No. I'm not looking for praise. I want you to describe me."

John looks at him pleadingly. "Sherlock, please, for the love of all that's holy – I have a work shift tomorrow, and I'm knackered. Can't we please do this in the morning?"

"No."

"Why?" John asks pointedly.

Sherlock slides his hand into his pocket, takes out the box and offers it to John.

"It's not my birthday," John points out, sounding like he's about to try to deduce what all this is about but it could just be sarcasm. Sherlock has always had a hard time telling the difference, and John knows this.

He does remember John's birthdays; they're programmed into his phone. It's the only significant day of the year he likes making a note of. Christmas can sod off, and he hardly cares about his own birthday, but if John likes celebrating the day he arrived to grace this Earth, then Sherlock is damn well going to make an effort to join in.

When he says nothing, John finally takes the box off his hands. He turns it around, admires the carvings on the antique rosewood, and then opens the lid.

John's eyes go wide.

The beautiful old box contains, in a symmetrical arrangement, eight unused very modern hypodermic needles, three syringes that don't look very vintage either, a small plastic bag of snow-white powder, another bag of slightly brownish powder, a lighter and a stainless steel spoon.
Sherlock exhales, trying to force his now slightly shaking form to calm down. "If you're angry with me over what happened today---" he pauses, trying to command his voice to be calmer than he feels but ending up sounding annoyingly small and timid, "I want to make sure it's for the right reasons."

John is still holding the box on his opened palm, eyes darting between it and Sherlock. "Have you taken any?" he asks. All the syringes and the needles are still in their sterile packaging, but it's a reasonable question. John probably realises there could be other stashes in the apartment and this could just be a symbolic offering.

Sherlock shakes his head. "I've not used. Not while you've been living here."

"If you've taken nothing, then, of course I'm not angry. The opposite, really."

Sherlock raises a sceptical brow.

"It was kind of likely that this day would come. I'm proud of you ---"

Anger rises in Sherlock like a solar flare. "Don't be so bloody condescending!"

John drags himself out from under the duvet, plants his feet on the cold floor and sits on the edge of the bed. "I'm seriously very glad if this is what you decided to do when a danger night came. Is this why you've been out of sorts? Did they give you something at that other hospital in Iceland that they shouldn't have? Something that's made it difficult to stay sober?"

Sherlock realises that he might be approaching this from the wrong end. What he is attempting is to demonstrate that there will always be something like this that he will need, be it The Work, The Drugs---

...The John? And, the same principle might apply to him in John's head.

"No, they didn't. And this is not the real problem. What you're holding is just a solution I'd rather avoid."

John looks perplexed. He closes the lid of the box and shoves it under his pillow, as though Sherlock would be likely to suddenly have second thoughts – that he might snatch it and scamper someplace to shoot up.

"I asked you a question," Sherlock reminds him, palms now hanging limply at his sides as he stands by the bed.

"Describe you?"

Sherlock turns his left palm upwards in prompt.

"A bit mad. Cleverer than all others in a room combined. Unintentionally funny."

Sherlock raises his brows at this.


"What if there are times when I'm not any of those things?"

John takes a moment to consider this. "Would this be one of those times?"

Sherlock is tempted to say something vague, to circumvent the question, but he doesn't. He has
nothing to lose, so he might as well go for honesty. "Yes."

"I've noticed. I just didn't know how bad it was. You have your sulks and your foul moods, but they usually disappear when cases happen. Now, you're not even taking them, as though you're not in the mood for work. Has this happened before?" John asks with an encouraging, somewhat detached tone. *Doctor Watson is in the house.*

Sherlock looks down at the floor. "Yes."

"You do know that you implying you want to talk about these things is way scarier than you adamantly refusing to talk like you usually do?"

"What if I use people to prevent----" that's not it, that's not at all. "What if I let you----" he trails out and silence falls. *Why is this so hard?*

"When was the last time you felt like this?" John asks, still clinging on to the angle Sherlock had served him on a silver platter but which doesn't help at all.

"Before we met. The argument I had about the Montague Street apartment was because I'd neglected to pay rent again. I'd neglected everything. But that... period was a mild one."

"Why's this one worse?"

"When there's a thing that you want, but you know that you will destroy it by wanting it, what do you do?"

John takes a moment. "I can't say I've ever had something like that. Frankly, I'm not entirely sure I follow. At all."

"I am easily bored, and I thought the Work was what kept away those... periods. Lately, I've come to realise that while the Work may offer satisfaction, its effect is closely tied to another factor – you. I haven't used lately because I haven't needed to. On some days, I don't even think about it. Everything has been different after you came along – until Iceland."

He feels oddly detached, like listening to someone else talking. This is a symptom. This is how he starts to feel when it gets back, the sense that there's nothing out there for him, that he's a spectator at his own funeral. He has felt like this before, and the only thing keeping it at bay is the thing he is trying to kick out of his life. Why?

"I haven't needed the contents of that box. Not when I'm with you, which is why I can't be the sensible, objective one here. I may have replaced one addiction with another, and it has to stop before it destroys both of us."
Sometimes the things I do astound me
Mostly whenever you're around me
– Bjork, "Like Someone in Love"

Instead of protesting or looking appalled, John simply nods.

Sherlock is tempted to try to explain further because it's startling that John might be willing to accept his explanation just like that since Sherlock is hoisting quite a big responsibility on him with his statement. It sounds so pathetic: John being the crutch that has helped him limp on for a few years until this seemingly inevitable caving in on himself.

Maybe John is never going to understand, and he's not even trying to do so; maybe he thinks this is yet another incomprehensible thing about Sherlock he should promptly ignore? His expression isn't dismissive, though – quite the contrary.

Sherlock bites his lip, feeling exposed under John's worried and now also curious scrutiny. Maybe he should just try to steer the conversation towards what he is trying to achieve, even though the very notion is still threatening to break him into tiny pieces despite all his mental preparation.

This is how he was built. Nothing good ever lasts. This conversation is like a ticking bomb he can no longer resist trying to defuse. Or, perhaps defuse isn't the right word – if anything, he's arming it. It comes and goes, this recklessness of his, and it thinks it has the right to hijack his brain whenever it wants to. Most of the time, he can bear the thought that human interaction will never be as easy for him as it is for most others, but sometimes the frustration mounts and he wants to give up. Just like he does right now.

The air in the room feels stuffy, and his skin is crawling. This is useless. He turns to leave, but John grabs his arm and pulls him down to sit on the bed.

"We're not done here," John says quietly. "You came to me, remember? You're finally trying to talk. We'll sort this out," he promises. "Sherlock-- what you said... hasn't it occurred to you that it works both ways? You saved me, not because you're a bloody good therapist and definitely not because you offered a constructive, healthy way of life but because you're you, and I'm me, and we're a pair of messed-up humans who fit together so well it sometimes scares me."

"You don't understand," Sherlock says, fingers drumming nervously on the duvet. "I need--- something, and I can't protect you."

I need you. Desperately.

He exhales, and he's still shaking and then it all tumbles out and he lets it, because he doesn't have anything to lose and John is looking at him like he always does, like he matters, like the things he thinks about when he's alone might not be unreachable, after all: "I can't function without you! I can't think, I can't deduce, I can't be in any way sensible even if there is just a threat of losing you-- You're everything, John, and if I lose you---"
John raises a finger to Sherlock's mouth with a warning glare to halt his verbal barrage. "Then stop shoving me away, you bloody colossal idiot! I hear you. I hear you, loud and clear, I know what you're trying to say, Christ, Sherlock, just please calm the fuck down before you pass out."

"You're not safe with me."

"I don't want to be safe! I never did! I want---" John draws tight breath that sounds the way the last step before jumping off a cliff feels like, "to be with you. I don't want safe, I want you back, the way it used to be, the way we sometimes nearly get killed and then have a laugh about it in the most inappropriate time and place possible. Nothing's changed, Sherlock, it's still us, right here."

John is wrong. Everything has changed. "You were a flatmate before; friend, colleague but you could still be unimportant; I tried to make you unimportant. Now, everything comes second to you."

John is watching him, looking patient and slightly disbelieving. "Sherlock... you can't believe you're the only one with that problem?"

It's a false sort of balm, this; hearing John echoing Sherlock's own sentiment back at him. It's false because there is still plausible deniability there – what John is saying could still be something that leads to a panicked, hasty withdrawal and a prejudiced glare after John realises that they are not talking about the same kind of attachment. Sherlock can already hear it in his head; the inevitable follow-up, the stern denial along the lines of 'God, I don't mean it like THAT, Christ, I told you I'm not gay---'. It might only be a matter of seconds before John comes to this conclusion.

However, when John finally opens his mouth again, what he says is something completely different, something unexpected: "Look, I'd be an idiot if I hadn't realised something happened in Iceland. Somehow, you broke your own heart leaving me out there, even though it all ended well. You did what you did because you had to even when it must've been so hard, and if that isn't someone caring about me more than probably anyone has ever done---" John's tone turns strained as though he's about to choke in his own words. He takes a moment to compose himself. "If you don't want me around anymore, what the hell is there for me out there? Can I go back to what it was like after I came home from Afghanistan? No. I don't want that. I never did. It was hell."

Sherlock's brain screeches to a complete, wordless halt and it takes him a moment to scramble for something to say. He knows what he wants to say, but it's dangerous and reckless. He can't be sure at all if such a thing would be welcome. "I do want you--- around," he says, "I have, I have, and I did, before. John, I do, I want you around. I hardly deserve you, but I need you desperately, all the same, too much to do what's right by you."

He expects John to be appalled, surprised, but instead, he looks utterly unfazed.

John lifts up a warning forefinger, a smile attempting to creep onto his features. "If you ever pretend again that sending me away is doing right by me, I'm kicking your arse till Tuesday, you idiot." John then digs his phone out from the first drawer of the nightstand, slides his finger on the screen to open the lock, taps around with it for a moment, and then presents it to Sherlock.

There's a browser window open to John's blog – to one of his first posts about their life together.

Sherlock reluctantly accepts the phone and scrutinises the screen. He can't see what possibly he could gain from reading those posts. They're old. They contain very little factual information, and they're badly written.

'15th December. Pointless. Nothing happens to me' – the missing full stop irks him. There's a comment from someone called Bill Murray underneath: 'Hi John. I tried emailing you, but it
bounced back. How are things?’ Sherlock snorts at the capital letter missing from the first word. ‘I'm in London at the end of the month. Do you fancy meeting up?’

"No reply from you, unless you emailed him afterwards," he points out to John.

"There you are, then. I never did. I wasn't the sort of person who gave things a try anymore."

Sherlock glowers at the phone. "Excuse me?"

"Read what I wrote again if you need to. Does that sound like a happy person? Someone who engages with others, someone who gets up in the morning to do things, someone who has the energy to maintain a social life?"

"You weren't very accustomed to blogging yet. You probably hadn't even realized you could reply to comments."

John looks at him with sad eyes, eyes full of memories he'd rather bury. They're obviously still raw which is why Sherlock can now read him more easily than usual.

"No, Sherlock. I didn't want to have a blog. I didn't want therapy. I didn't want to see Bill. I didn't want to do anything. I wanted to sit in my flat with a gun in my hand, because if it got worse, then at least I'd have that option. That's why I understand how someone feels when they feel really shitty about themselves. I hated myself, I hated my choices, because I saw everything that had happened as something I brought on purposefully, but that's utter bullshit. Things happen, things we can't always control. I met you, and that wasn't my doing at all even though I might sometimes say that I found you. I needed something, another option to one of those bullets, and something pushed us together. It wasn't just about finding something fun to do or a new friend or that you're fulfilling some yearning for excitement. This is--- us," John practically stammers, and Sherlock realises this is, again, skirting an area they don't venture into. "You reminded me what I'm like when I actually like myself. Maybe that's--- what you need, right now. If you need to hear it now, then--- I like us. I like you. It goes without saying."

Sherlock knows. He's always known, even when he'd tried to chalk it up to John's own addiction to danger. Still, he doesn't know what exactly 'likes' means.

"I think I understand," John reiterates. "I think a part of what you're going through might also be a bit similar to what happened to me. The sudden shock of realising you could lose everything at any time. Part of PTSD. Takes a while to clear."

"How'd it stop?" Sherlock asks, fiddling with the sash of his dressing gown. He can't bring himself to believe that he could be – that he is – the deciding factor in John's happiness. Then again, John is most certainly that for him. "How do you get over that shock?"

John's smile lights up the room. "I met someone. I met someone who showed me that taking those risks are worth it."

Sherlock realizes he's still holding John's phone. He scrolls up to the post about the banker case. It's all good and well that John claims he understands these risks and is willing to take them, but does he really grasp how frail this whole balance of terror is? "You also wrote this; 'All these people he involves in his adventures… They're not safe. We're not safe. There are forces out there, and they're coming.' You wrote that they're coming for me, but that's not entirely accurate, is it? They're coming for us both. Always. And one day this--” he flaps his hand in the empty air between them, "Will be over."

"We're not immortal. Forever was never in the cards. Do you think anyone has it any easier? We
might have a dangerous lifestyle, but anyone could die any day. I've seen that a thousand times at A&Es and in Afghanistan. All it takes is for a car to hit you, an aneurysm to rupture or a bullet to hit. We're all in danger. All the time. Did I say that I wanted out? Never. And you're not allowed to think of it as some sort of a price I pay for you; it's just the way things are.”

“You don't think this is the price we pay for being people like us?”

"Job from 9 to 5, then bangers and mash and EastEnders were never going to be it. Not for you, not for me. We don't want safety; we want more, don't we? And, I wouldn't want to have any of it without you. Not anymore."

A hope flutters in Sherlock's chest. He's giddy, overwhelmed, confused and his mouth has a will of its own and, apparently, he no longer owns a brain at all, because the most fateful question slips over his lips again: "Who's James?"

At first, the look John gives him is a warning, but then he seems to sense the misery and failure bleeding back into Sherlock. No matter what he tries, he always messes things up like this, and of course, John will now leave. Memories of Iceland, of that lonely hut, of standing there trying to decide what to do, are threatening to flow in, to suck him out to sea like a riptide. He tries to control it, desperately needing to preserve his dignity but he's an idiot, he's done it again, John will now completely shut down, and this is---


Sherlock's heart feels as though it's about to stop.

Finally, John speaks again. "He was important once, alright. But it was nothing."

The comment is innocent enough, but it cuts through Sherlock like the knife that had sunk into John's torso. If James was nothing, then what does that make Sherlock? "As much nothing as---" Sherlock can't even finish asking the question.

"I'm not--- I'm not going to discuss this. It's not something I'm proud of, what happened then, but I don't think it's what you think," John tries to explain.

"What do I think, then?"

"Shit, it's-- that didn't come out right. It was a mess, alright? And it has nothing to do with you. If you're trying to find some comparison there---" John draws a deep breath, then snaps his mouth shut.

Sherlock pleads him with his gaze, begs with his very being for John to continue, to talk, to tell him more. He doesn't know why it's so important for him to know; it might simply be that he wants to punish himself.

Maybe it's because this James is the key to understanding whether the two of them could ever have been more or not. It would answer the question whether he has been reading John all wrong – have the things that have made him hopeful been just his own futile fantasies playing out in his head? He is so dreadful at reading people. So dreadful.

John had told him that it's good that they're both unattached. Licked his lips like he'd seen something he wanted. Told Sherlock that it's fine if men are his thing. John had behaved as though they'd been on a first date, and Sherlock had panicked because it was a shock that there was a possibility someone might look at him and see someone they wanted.
He wants to shake his head, tell John he doesn't care, wants to say it's water under the bridge and completely insignificant, but he finds no words.

John looks thoughtful, as though trying to decide something. Something that is not quite a relief but not too far off, either, washes over Sherlock.

"I'd never been with--- Never been attracted to a man before," John says, hesitating before stating the gender. "It was a disaster. I tried to convince myself it ended badly because he was a bloke. I wanted to believe fate was trying to teach me a lesson not to go for that again." He laughs bitterly, hollowly.

Sherlock doesn't need to tell him this is superstitious poppycock. John must know this already. It can be read in the hunch of his shoulders, in the guilty way his head is now hanging and in his sarcastic tone.

John averts his gaze. "I don't know if he blamed me. I doubt it. The fact is that he wasn't at his post that night. They filed complaints, some of his subordinates."

"People like scapegoats," Sherlock offers. He has read the reports Mycroft had given him half a dozen times, and he cannot for the life of him understand how James Sholto being at his post or not in the pertinent timeframe would have impacted the outcome of the events, except perhaps for the man himself getting injured. And, not even that is certain. Hindsight is always 20/20.

"They hadn't even started the whole investigation when I got shot. They never got back to me on it – maybe they swept it under the rug as rumours since I'd already sort of paid the price. That's what I thought, honestly, after I came home, that I was paying for it. I blamed myself for being stupid enough to get enlisted and for getting involved with James – for succumbing to the sense that we were in a whole other world where the normal rules didn't apply."

Sherlock is tempted to ask what those normal rules are since he has never understood much about such unwritten things of human communication.

No wonder John had been in such a sorry state when they'd first met. He had hidden some things well, but the depression had been rather obvious. Another obvious thing had been the desperation with which John had flung himself at the prospect of a new, reckless existence with a man who he had diagnosed as a bloody idiot of a madman right away. Still, Sherlock had never seen the pathetic man John seems to have thought himself to be back then. He could never see that when he looks at John. What he does see is a brave, wonderful, attractive, lovely man he hardly deserves.

Yes, John really is quite lovely. Sherlock remembers thinking so as they walked away from the college in the rain after John had shot a man to save him and giggled about it.

"There was an inquiry into the Taliban raid of the compound?" Sherlock asks after suddenly realising he needs to sound like he knows nothing about this. This is not the time to reveal to John what Mycroft had delivered him. He'll burn the papers, the first opportunity he gets.

"Yeah, but I think they sort of buried the whole after we were both medically discharged. I didn't contact the inquiry, even though I could maybe have helped James, somehow, but I'd been shot, and all I wanted was to turn my back on everything that lead up to it. I've never seen him again, and he hasn't tried to contact me. It took me a long time to accept that he made a choice, too, and I'm not responsible for it. It's not our fault that raid and mortar strike happened or that I took a bullet in the shoulder. Maybe that means he meant less to me than I thought, or maybe more. It's hard to tell."
Sherlock swallows, throat constricting and saltwater burning at the edges of his vision. He wants to flee, but his legs feel leaden. Is John being honest? Was this person, this... this... James the love of John’s life? Is that the reason for John's reticence of discussing him and for John not making a move on Sherlock even if he may be attracted to men on a general level?

Would he always be a consolation prize?

"Sherlock," John pleads, and he'll never get enough of hearing his name cross John's lips, never. "I was sick of my life at home before I enlisted, but it was lonely out there even with James around. We were both looking for something different, something... I don't know. It wasn't built to last, obviously, like you enjoy saying. We just... disintegrated without talking things through." John says bitterly.

Sherlock worries his lower lip, unsure what to say.

"And now I don't even know what I've done wrong," John says with a half-broken laugh. "You chased me off a crime scene so there must've been something."

"You haven't done anything wrong," Sherlock says pointedly.

John scoffs. "Yeah, I did nothing, and that's why you're pushing me away. Whatever it is, I'm sorry. If I learned something from that James thing, it was that life's too bloody short to lose people over guilt that doesn't help anybody, guilt that's directed at the wrong target. Pointless, undeserved guilt."

Sherlock resists the urge to say that it's alright, that a change of topic is needed, but something resonates in what John is trying to say. Uncharacteristically, he listens instead of instantly picking every bit of information he receives apart.

"James was an experiment and not one I ever thought I'd want to repeat. I stepped away from that part of me until... you. And it's different, now. James was just... someone who happened to be there for me. If he'd meant as much to me as you do, I wouldn't have given up like that. You're different. I would never give up on you like that. You're everything."

Sherlock doesn't know what to think. Scepticism permeates his very being because he's hearing the very things of which he has dreamt. Suddenly, they are within grasp. It can't be. Not possible. Besides, it only makes knowledge of what he had done in Iceland all the more terrible.

John finds his voice again and pins him with his gaze. “I---- I've never felt safer than when I'm with you,” he says, unflinchingly meeting Sherlock's gaze. "No one has ever come close. He was important. Or, he could have been. But not like you. Not ever like you. You hear me? I don't want to lose you over something you're going through which I don't even understand."

How could John have felt safe with him? Is he completely deluded? If anything, he keeps Sherlock safe, grounded, marginally sane, alright, contained. On the other hand, John has just demonstrated that he understands what it feels like to be pummelled by the relentless waves of guilt and self-doubt. Sherlock almost protests that in John's past relationships he has been the male, and traditionally the role of protector has been assigned to him, but that's utterly and completely beside the point. He licks his parched lips, heart rate pounding in his ears as his body attempts to decide what the hell it could do with all this anxiety.

He's standing near the doorway, and John is standing right next to him, studying his features. He pretends to examine the floor.

“You were my conductor of light, Sherlock. I couldn’t get up from the bed half of the mornings
before you showed up. I had nothing. I can't promise I can fix whatever has come over you lately, but if you could do that for me, then I sure as hell am not going to----"

John's voice sounds distant, now. Sherlock realises he's losing the battle against the overwhelming sense of confusion and desolation he has only barely kept at bay. He doesn't know how to solve this, doesn't know if he should believe John, doesn't know what to do.

"Sherlock?" John asks, now alarmed.

John climbs out of the bed, steps closer than he usually does, and soon his fingers curl around Sherlock's biceps. It's barely enough to ground him. "I left you," Sherlock whispers. His voice is a broken thing that feels like it's cracking open his very being.

John blinks, frowns, then reaches out his other arm as though offering himself.

Sherlock wastes no time in wrapping his arms around John's torso, curling his cold fingers into the back of John's T-shirt. He's shaking, and it's pathetic, and it's all spilling out, now. "I left you, and you knew that, and now you're pretending it doesn't matter, pretend that I just did it without a second thought or that I made some logical, informed choice, that I have no idea how angry you were, that you could have just died thinking what I'd done----"

John's warm palms slide across his scapulas before he leans back a bit and lets his arms fall. He fixes his gaze on Sherlock to get his attention. "What is going on?"

Letting go of the warmth of John is horrible. "I didn't want to leave you, but I had to, but I couldn't, so that's why ---- it's a wonder the words are even comprehensible since it's all a tossed salad of verbiage in Sherlock's head.

John somehow drags him down to sit on the edge of the bed and takes a seat beside him. Their thighs are against one another. Somehow, that's significant.

"Just--- just please back up a bit. What the hell are you talking about?" John asks, and while his choice of words is aggressive, his stance and his tone are anything but.

"Iceland," Sherlock finally replies. That very name is now an instant trigger for everything about himself he hates. "You're--- important and I left you."

John's mouth opens, lips curling into an O as he breathes out. His head lolls back slightly as he finally appears to be understanding that whatever happened in Iceland still affects things.

"You saved both of us out there," John tells him sternly. "You always do. You're important," he says hesitantly as though he's not entirely sure what it means but somehow, Sherlock is certain he isn't saying it just out of courtesy.

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"You said it yourself," Sherlock argues, surprised at how calm he sounds. "'The bastard left me.' Don't pretend you can't remember when it's the first thing you said to me in Reykjavik."

"I don't recall ever saying anything like that to you," John says, placing his palms on his knees as though needing fortification. "It seems that the way you remember things is a lot different to mine. You were hypothermic and exhausted when they hauled you to that hospital, according to Mycroft. Are you sure that your own state didn't colour your recollections at least a bit? I had sepsis, and I was exhausted and dehydrated, too, and I must've been still coming out of anaesthesia when you visited. You shouldn't take anything I may have said seriously – who
knows what crazy shit you'd say coming out of GA," John jokes, trying to lighten the mood.

It's not working.

It's telling that John has only commented on what he remembers about the hospital; he has said nothing about what he remembers happening out there in the wilderness. Maybe he has decided to forgive it all and thus try to shove all that under the proverbial carpet.

"I remember perfectly well what happened," Sherlock complains, sticking his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown.

John curls his toes on the draughty floor. "Why don't you tell me, then." He doesn't sound sceptical, merely curious.

Sherlock takes a deep breath and hates how ragged his following exhalation sounds. When he's around John, he can't seem to be able to keep a level head. "I went outside to try to get our bearings. You were getting worse, and there was no way we could have continued on foot. I made the decision to go look for help."

"Which was the only sane option. You also found that help."

"But I didn't tell you what I was going to do -- I simply disappeared. You must've thought---"

"---That I got so much worse that you had to move quickly. I was wondering where you'd got to, I think, but I couldn't have been sure if you were just outside. I may have already been feverish with peritonitis and a bit out of it so I could have come to the false conclusion that you'd left at any point when you weren't in the room. There was no way for me to have known you'd left like that. Even if you had explained your plan to me, there's a chance that I wouldn't have remembered much about it except that I tried to call out and you didn't come. After that, my next memories are from the hospital, the morning after the surgery. They probably sedated me for the night."

"It doesn't matter what you remember; I know what I did!" Sherlock exclaims, and John jumps a little at the loudness of his voice. "You must've thought I------" he trails off, unable to say it out loud.

"You did what you had to."

"I didn't do all that I could have."

"Sherlock, is this what's had you in a tizzy ever since we got back? That you think you did some terrible thing out there? I knew, of course, I knew, right from the start that you'd probably have to head out without me at some point to find help. I knew that before we even reached that hut. I should probably have told you to do that much earlier, but I guess I was too exhausted to think straight."

"But you thought I would have left without saying goodbye, knowing you could have----"

"You're not ever going to finish a sentence again, are you?" John jokes gently.

Sherlock buries his face in his hands, an invisible heavy weight on his shoulders. If he needs to do something ridiculous and pathetic like cry, he wishes the Transport would just get it over with. He can't possibly keep this amount of anguish contained for long.

John gives him a moment, and he can breathe again, a little. Sherlock raises his head, eyes stinging, nose congested. "It's going to happen again. If you stay, it's going to happen again, because no one around me is safe," he says.
"I have been injured before, you know. Nothing new under the sun. As I said, we've got a dangerous hobby---"

"Job, at least for some people," Sherlock says indignantly, looking up at John again. He must look a mess, and he hasn't even cried properly.

"Fair enough. We've got a dangerous job, and you must've understood that right from the start just like I did. I'm here because I want to be, and it's not your responsibility to keep me safe. You always do, but I'm aware of the risks, and I accept them."

"It doesn't matter if you'd be willing to stay because I can't take it if something happens to you."

Silence falls.

Sherlock had assumed that it was going to be harder to explain, more difficult to formulate what has been swirling around in his brain as a maelstrom of shame, fear, regret and unpleasant memories.

Will recalling the feeling of walking away from that hovel in the icy desert, then hearing that delirious, accusatory 'you left me' ever stop feeling like a sledgehammer hitting his heart?

He doesn't want to lose John, whether that be through death or betrayal. He doesn't want to hurt John – that's part of the reason why this is so hard – but most of all, he is hesitating and vacillating because he's selfish. He wants this, with John. He wants John to stay, against his better judgment.

"You didn't visit me in hospital here in London. I always wondered why. I was sure you cared, but I wondered if you'd sort of decided that since I was going to be fine, you didn't have to bother. I know how much you hate those places," John muses.

"I thought I'd b."

"English, please."

"I was afraid that as soon as you were better, you’d remember what I had done and hate me for it. Every time I walked into that place that could have been it – you could have realised what had happened and sent me away. In Reykjavik, I thought for a time that you were angry but pretending not to be."

"You didn't have all the information you needed to make that deduction," John points out.

This hadn't occurred to Sherlock. He had been so sure in Reykjavik, so certain of John's wrath, and its absence had been very confusing. And now, John is telling him he has nothing to be guilty about. How does that work? "I thought I betrayed you on the pretext of getting help, that I couldn't face what was going on, and my subconscious commanded me to save myself under the lie of needing to steel myself in order to be able to leave you momentarily to get help."

John looks like someone has slapped him. "So, you're afraid that you may have motives you're not even aware of? How the bloody hell has it still escape your notice that you saved both of us? You made the right decisions. Judging by all that I've heard, you did some serious thinking instead of panicking. You were selfless, Sherlock, and logical, when you thought you went against your morals and your instincts because you knew what you were doing was the best chance we had."

"I failed to meet your expectations. The ends don't justify the means. I don't understand how you could just cast aside your own anger like that. You were livid. I heard you."
John blanches. "Sherlock, seriously, I don't remember half of what happened in that cabin, and I don't even remember you visiting me in that hospital for the first time. Whatever I said, it must've been a bit like that one time when you had the flu, and you thought I was Mycroft and threw your shoe at me? I didn't hold you accountable for that afterwards, did I? I couldn't walk. You had to go get help. I don't know what more there is to it," he pleads.

Sherlock shakes his head, stands up and retreats to the window, tapping his palms frantically against his palms in a futile attempt to banish the anxiety racing through him.

"I get it, I do. I felt responsible for what happened to James, even though it was a choice he made, and he never told me he had regretted any of it, or that he blamed me, but I did, and that's all that mattered to me, and it took me a long time to realise how bloody self-centred that was. That losing people over guilt that isn't based on anything wasn't worth it. Bad things happen to people like us, Sherlock, and it's not your fault."

John climbs down from the bed, pads up to him and gently encloses his hand on his own palm, tugging Sherlock to turn slightly so that they’re facing one another. “I made the wrong deduction at the hospital. I was scared and out of my head with fever, and I came to the wrong conclusion about why you’d disappeared. You know what my first thought was when I woke up properly at the hospital and saw Mycroft standing there? Hmm? I was fucking embarrassed for having doubted even for a second that you’d get us out of there. You knew how tough making the decision to leave was, so you acted in a way that allowed you to do what you had to do. I was so relieved when I woke up; I wanted to see you, wanted to make sure you were alright because you are brilliant and you saved us while I was getting stabbed and being useless.”

“You’re never useless,” Sherlock mutters.

“Nice try,” John jibes him. “Anyone can make the wrong interpretation when injured and out of it. That’s actually a perfect example of what happens when you’re exactly that – injured and out of it. I’ve not told this to anyone, but I tried to punch the medic who reached me first in Kandahar. I was already in hemorrhagic shock and somehow convinced I’d been taken prisoner by the insurgents.”

John looks apprehensive now, slightly embarrassed. Sherlock doesn’t understand why. Of course, someone could jump to the wrong conclusion when their intelligence was diminished by physical distress. That’s obvious.

It's as though John had read his mind: "You weren't exactly at your best. You were obviously afraid and exhausted, and a bit injured, so was it any wonder you were a bit irrational and emotional, too?"

Sherlock takes a step back, still reeling from everything, and John's grip on his palm slips off. "Afterwards, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd let myself hold onto some flimsy illusion that anything is permanent, that this peace and quiet will last, that everything won't end in some glorious destruction sooner or later."

"That is some classic ennui right there. Typical drama queen you," John berates, standing close by.

Sherlock shoots him a dirty look.

"I know that feeling," John says bitterly. "That's how it is when you fall down that self-centred hole where everything is shit, and everything is about you, and it's all still wrong and your fault even when everything is fine on a surface level. My noble intentions didn't much matter when I came home with a bum shoulder and started to blame myself for being stupid enough to go to
Afghanistan in the first place. You should have talked to me, you bloody idiot, instead of sulking and cooking up some madcap theories in your head and passing judgment on yourself. Even if you left because you couldn't bring yourself to talk to me, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because you left to get help, not to save your own hide. I know you. You can be a selfish prick, but never when it matters. You pretend to be all sorts of things, but I'll never believe that you'd be selfish like that, and you could never convince me otherwise."

Sherlock studies his fingernails.

"I wasn't in a good place when Mike introduced us. You took one look at me, told me my life story and suggested we flatshare. No matter how much of a goddamned mess my life is, that's what I think about: the world's cleverest man took one good look at me and chose me. Whatever fuck-up I ever manage, I have that. You could have picked anyone, and you picked me. I happen to enjoy our lifestyle, and following you around is a small price to pay for everything, even if there's a risk I might get stabbed every once in a while. It's been worth the wound. Hell, even just the first twenty-four hours with you would have been worth many wounds. You said I'm important. Well, you're pretty damned important, too. Obviously much more than you realise. If you can't think of any other reasons to forgive yourself, do it for me. Do it because I want you to."

Sherlock looks at him as though he's a bit mad. "I don't like you saying that. That being around me is worth getting nearly killed."

"It is how it is," John says sharply and his face sets like a flint when he glances at Sherlock's sceptical expression. "If you saw something in me worth keeping—" he insists, "then maybe I had more to lose than I thought. Things worth holding on to."

Sherlock shifts on the bed, utterly flabbergasted. "You can't seriously consider my acceptance some sort of a measure of success."

"Not success, but it made me feel that there's got to be something to it, something to me that makes it worthwhile for you to bother. Even when I looked in the mirror and didn't see much there that I liked, clearly you saw something else, and you still look at me like that every day. You even changed what I saw when I looked out the window or opened the door – I used to think London was pretty bloody boring and grey, but now I know there are all these places I never even imagined, Chinese acrobat thieves, murderous cabbies, secrets hidden inside cathedral organs, occult graffiti, secret tube stations. It's not about make-believe, Sherlock, it's not about always having fun – it's about perspective, and you changed mine. I don't know if all of it's an excuse, if it's just a distraction, if this thing we do is a bit not good and healthy, and I don't bloody care, alright? It's what we've got and if we're not going to hold onto that, then what? Shoot ourselves in the head? OD on something? A damned waste is what that would be, if there was a snowball's chance that we could have had another fun day together, yeah? That's all anyone gets, really, a bit of fun in between all the bullshit."

It makes sense. It really does. How can John twist these things so that they make sense?

"I may not be able to fix all these notions you've cooked up about what happened, " John says, pointing a thumb in the general direction of Sherlock's head, "But you better not stop me from trying. Christ, Sherlock, I'm going to punch the next person who calls you heartless or a sociopath. You care. You care so much it hurts, that much is obvious."

Sherlock doesn't know what to say. He doesn't feel better, whatever better or normal or fine even means, but there's a light of understanding now in the cold universe which is flickering in John's gaze, and it feels good. Very, very good.

"Let me be here instead of that box of yours," John says. "I'm not leaving. I'm never giving up on
you. I couldn't, even if I tried." It's hard to digest all this so suddenly. Sherlock glances around. Being in John's bedroom, on John's bed should feel odd, but it doesn't. This is the John Effect – things he would normally find difficult with people, John somehow makes manageable. They're sitting next to each other, shoulders gently touching. John turns to Sherlock and their gazes lock as they often do. With other people, Sherlock tends to avoid extended eye contact, because it's awkward. He could never get enough to being allowed to watch the shifting lines of expression on John's face.

"One day at a time. That's all there is to it. If you insist on me doling out some sort of penance for whatever imaginary slight you may have committed, let this be it: you're not allowed to give up what we've got. That's all I will ever ask of you," John tells him. His arm snakes around Sherlock's waist, and there's nothing strange or awkward about it even though it is something John would never do in broad daylight, under the scrutiny of others. Or, would he? It seems that Sherlock's suspicions of simple homophobia being the reason John would refrain had been an oversimplification, considering what he now knows about James Sholto. Mycroft may have had a point – those files, that breach of privacy had been a risky move, and it did not give him the answers that really mattered.

Without even considering what he's doing, Sherlock twists his torso, wraps his arms tightly around John's neck and arranges his chin on his shoulder. He's holding on tighter than he should, tighter than what may be... decent? Good? Reasonable?

Maybe this will never be more than stolen moments in the dark. Or, maybe John will pull back and this moment will pass and never happen again, but it will have happened, once. He will have had this with John, this once.

His heart nearly stops when John stiffens slightly, and neither of them breathes for a moment.

Then, instead of making a hasty escape John relaxes, even rearranges his position so that he can slowly slide warm palms up Sherlock's back, and the sensation nearly short-circuits his brain. Suddenly he realises he might be hurting John by holding on so tight. He tries to let go, but John pulls him back him. He plucks up the courage to drop his cheek to lean on John's shoulder again.

Then, he feels an exhalation into his curls. It's not a kiss, but the intimacy is undeniable.

"You're an idiot," John tells his left ear, "You can’t chase me off. I won’t go."

Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut to memorise better every inch of skin that is connected to John, every sound, every sensation of what he holds in his arms. How wondrous it is to be allowed.

"My idiot. My important idiot," John whispers, and if Sherlock isn't entirely mistaken, lips are briefly pressed to the side of his neck.

There is much Sherlock doesn't know what goes on in John's head when it comes to him, but he is most curious to learn. He's allowed. He's allowed, now.

This is them. This is more than just colleagues. This is... most important.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o- o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Three days later, there's a case. They make a joint decision to take it. On Sherlock's scale of interest, it turns out to be a shining nine, albeit solving it doesn't take very long.
Later in the evening after the case wraps up, they have some passable Chinese while Sherlock scoffs at Top Gear and John tries to pretend the scoffing isn't funny at all.

The lid of the rosewood box has remained closed. Sherlock hasn't thought about its contents. He doesn't even know where it is. Probably still somewhere in John's bedroom.

At one point during the film they're watching, he realises to his horror that he'd been idly running his fingers along John's shin. He looks up, panicking because he fears a border has been crossed and an awkward conversation will follow.

All John does is gift him with a careful but encouraging smile.

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

Three months later, the world remains the same. They remain the same, except that John has stopped dating. This time, Sherlock actually lets himself try to analyse the reasons for and repercussion of such a change.

Their orbits are spinning closer to one another. Whatever word people might use to describe their relationship, it’s more. Immeasurable. Pontificating the infinity of it no longer scares Sherlock. It is a delectable mystery now, one he will reveal piece by piece. At the centre of that maze stands John, whose smiles are now a little more reckless, a little less restrained, a bit more knowing. A bit more... beckoning?


Most importantly, those smiles have made Sherlock realise that, for the first time after Iceland, he's rather looking forward to facing the dangerous, reckless and most likely astonishingly wonderful unknown.

—— The End ——

Chapter End Notes

It is always such a bittersweet moment to reach the end of a story. I cannot satisfactorily express my gratitude at the enthusiasm this has received from this most wonderful of fandoms. Thank you.

Next up: some short stories co-authored with 7PercentSolution expanding the "On Pins and Needles" 'verse. Also in the cards for the coming months are two new parts in my "You Go To My Head" AU series. I also have some other aces up my sleeve, but those will have to wait a bit...
End Notes

Khorazir has made an amazing illustration for this story!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!