Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/3317819.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M, Multi, F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Sherlock (TV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, Greg Lestrade, Mycroft Holmes, Irene Adler, Jim Moriarty, Victor Trevor, Sebastian Wilkes, Sally Donovan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>relationship tags added as they come, character tags added as they come, Alternate Universe - Kushiel's Legacy Fusion, BDSM, Bondage, Submission, Domination, Sadomasochism, religious prostitution, Prostitutes, more kink tags added as they come, bottomlock, virgin!kink, Virgin!Sherlock, Oral Sex, Anal Sex, Awkward Sherlock, Johnlock - Freeform, Sherstrade, BAMF!John, restraint play, degradation kink, Humiliation kink, Prostate Milking, Sherlock is a dick to John, Victor isn't as much of a bastard as we all assume he is, OMC - E. Ames the marquist, OFC - Ari the quirky receptionist, Grumpy John IS a dour pilgrim, Hate to Love, OFC - Helen Belfours, Spanking, menial labour kink, rope play, Shibari, John being nice to animals, shut up that's totally a kink, Urethral Sounding, sadsim, OMC - Wilkerson, omg so many threads to weave together am I tangling them yet?, Genderqueer Character, Strap-Ons, cross-dressing, corsets, silk stockings, fantasy-talk, talk of an orgy/gang, talk of edgeplay, talk of bloodplay, dude there are some murders happening, also Sherlock getting all angsty because reasons, Sherlock/twins (OMC &amp; OMC), a good old-fashioned consensual gang-bang for all, Bellydancing, the Rage Sniff, Knifeplay, Bloodplay, we do get to hear him say redbeard after all, mostly i just feel bad for john like 24/7 tho, collar/leash play, au source compliant offscreen non-con, Moriarty shows his true fucking colors and I just want to cry, suicide ideation, Suicide, revenge murders, the almighty return of BAMF!John, Sherlock may be a slightly concussed damsel in distress but he ain't no wilting flower, Fluff, Tender Feelings, SWEET CHRIST THEY FINALLY TALKED ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS AND SHIT, that took long enough, Mycroft is sometimes a sweet older brother (but don't tell him I said so)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of A Wound Unheal'd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections:</td>
<td>Ether's Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2015-02-09 Completed: 2017-07-15 Chapters: 57/57 Words: 161889</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Wound Unheal'd

by chucksauce

Summary

At fifteen, Sherlock discovered the truth about the red pinprick in his left iris: he was marked by the punisher-god Kushiel, destined to receive pleasure and pain as one.

Intrigue and gossip swirl among the London-D’Angeline elite, and Sherlock, a modern-day courtesan, must follow the threads of a conspiracy that could topple governments, with the help of his sworn protector, John--a celibate warrior priest who sees Sherlock’s methods of devotion as utterly abhorrent.

As twenty-six, Sherlock must discover the depths of his devotion, and what sort of sacrifices one must make as the chosen avatar of a god.

Notes

This story is dedicated to the lovely mapleleafcameo, who not only inspired the prompt but then donated a gracious gift during a fund-raiser to get my sorry arse up to the ill-fated DashCon back in July ’14! I promised her 10k of porn without plot, but then plot snuck in and made that number a little bit larger... :D

If the word-count looks intimidating, don't fret: this is an AU fusion with the Kushiel's Legacy series, which put the EPIC in epic fantasy. You don't have to be intimately familiar with that universe, though, because I'm attempting to make it as accessible as possible to those not familiar with the series. There's all manner of hover-title easter-eggs (for computer readers), and even an Appendices section for more info about characters and the D’Angeline world in general.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter Notes

Beta'd by a-cumberbatch-of-cookies for coherence by a person unfamiliar with the Kushiel universe, and by hollowforest for general coherence and awesomeness. <3 <3

Occasionally you'll see hover-titles with little tidbits not big enough to warrant their own entry in the Appendices.

Sherlock stood in his parents’ run-down little greenhouse, over a tray of spoiled meat he’d nicked from the fridge, administering dropper-fulls of drain cleaner to the old pork cutlets, lost in the stench and the flourishes of a Puccini opera blaring from his little stereo. If one asked, he’d almost embarrassed to admit it now, but at the age of fifteen, Puccini was his most obvious indulgence in sentimentality.

Over the soaring warble of Maria Callas’s aria as she plead, Signore, ascolta!, the greenhouse door swung open and shut. Considering his father rarely ventured out to what he referred as “the lion’s den,” it was easy to guess that Sherlock’s mother had come to bother him about something inane, like loading a dishwasher or feeding Heidegger, the cat Mycroft had abandoned since leaving for Uni. Sherlock ignored her outright in favour of turning to record notes on a nearby notepad.

“Sherlock.” Her voice was soft, quiet. She’d learned how deep into concentration her younger son could go, and how hard he startled when yanked from it. Possibly the caustic chemicals he wielded made her a bit more circumspect. When Sherlock didn’t answer, she leaned over and tapped the power button on the stereo. In the sudden silence, she tried again. “Sherlock.”

“Hmm?” He lifted the bottle of Drān-o before turning to face her.

Her hair, blonde and already greying at the temples, was pulled back into a low ponytail. Sherlock could tell by the way she clasped her hands and pursed her lips she had something rather important to say. Then her eyes fell on the bottle, and she frowned.

“Please tell me you’ve only just taken off a face mask, Sherlock. The fumes from that--”

“Of course,” he lied, lifting the unused mask from the worktop.

She huffed a sigh. “Sherlock, I came out to talk to you about--” She smiled, tight and lopsided, unsure how to proceed.

That was enough to properly get his attention, and he placed both the Dran-o and the mask back on the worktop.

She only smiled that way when she hedged around a truth she didn’t want to tell. “I know it’s a sore subject, and it’s been a while since it’s come up--”

Sherlock looked back down to his notes, certain he didn’t want to hear whatever would come next. “If it’s about the dead mice, I swear Heidegger--”
“It’s not--what dead mice?” She sighed, shaking her head. “No. It’s about your eye.”

For as long as Sherlock could remember, he’d had a bright red dot in his left iris, bold and bloody against the cooler hues of his eyes, which were green or blue or gold-shot depending on the light. He had been long-diagnosed with sectoral heterochromia, which explained the blue-green-gold; until then his parents had assumed it was also to blame for the red spot, though no one had ever seen vivid scarlet as a colour manifested by the genetic trait.

The red spot in his eye hadn’t helped with the bullying, before Sherlock learned to bite back and quicker. After numerous doctors gave it up as an benign manifestation of the heterochromia, his parents did their best to just ignore it.

Sherlock’s mother shifted her weight, pursed her lips, and pinned him with a serious expression. “Now Sherlock, hear me out before you write it off completely?”

That didn’t bode well. He looked up to her again, silent for her explanation.

“Mycroft found an old story--an epic poem that dates back to about fifteenth-century France.”

Sherlock let his confusion show in furrowed brows. For some reason his heart beat faster in his chest, though he didn’t know why.

“Our family traces its history there, you know.”

How could he not know? France was home to Terre D’Ange, the region where Blessed Elua put down roots. When he and his companions--the angels who followed him--mingled with the people, that divine beauty and all those blessings were borne out in Terre D’Ange’s citizens. Pretty enough to be a girl had been another thing Sherlock had heard most of his childhood, despite only being a fraction D’Angeline, an eighth on his mother’s side.

He cleared his throat. “What did Mycroft find?”

“It’s called the *Ysandrine Cycle,*” his mother whispered. “I think you should come read it.”

Sherlock stripped his safety gear and stowed it away neatly before following her through the back garden and into the office of their old farmhouse. Bookcases lined the walls, a lifetime of sating curiosity: a section by the door dedicated to Mrs. Holmes’s pre-motherhood life as a mathematician, and the rest to her ever-expanding interests. The only decoration in the room was a small, hand-painted sign in beige and brown that explained his mother at once: *All Knowledge is Worth Having.* It was a nod to their Siovalese ancestry--Siovale being the province given to the angel Shemhazai, who brought knowledge and the love of it to Terre D’Ange.

It was a motto Sherlock had heard all his life, and one he’d appreciated until he realised he could better utilise his brain by deleting superfluous information like how to chat up girls or basics on the solar system. Those chestnuts didn’t factor into his everyday life. They took up valuable real estate.

Now the sign loomed ominous. His mother crossed to sweep a bit of clutter away from the keyboard and monitor before pulling out the desk chair for him to sit.

The poem Sherlock read, poorly translated to English, told the story of a young D’Angeline queen and her tumultuous time in office as she suffered betrayal by her own family, her own protectors and narrowly escaped civil war.
Through it wove a second story, that of a young woman named Phèdre, marked by Kushiel and servant to Naamah. Phèdre, led by her patron-gods, served her queen by uncovering these terrible plots. And just once the poem mentioned a word left untranslated: *anguissette*.

In a second email his mother opened, Mycroft laid out what his research had uncovered on that word. It traced its roots back to an apocryphal verse kept these days only by Kusheline priests:

*Mighty Kushiel of rod and weal,

Late of the brazen portals,

With blood-tipped dart, a wound unhealed,

Pricks the eyes of chosen mortals.*

Sherlock leaned back in the computer chair, tilting it far enough the hinge groaned in assent.

“What does it mean?”

His mother shook her head. “I’m not sure. But I think we should head to London and visit the temple of Kushiel.”

The sky drizzled late January slush, grey and too-bright, as Sherlock and his mother exited the train station en route for the temple of Kushiel. Neither spoke as they walked the few remaining blocks; the way she twisted her wedding band, he could tell she was thinking of his father, and the fact that she probably hadn’t told him where they were headed. Sherlock’s father was raised good old C of E, but was more latent atheist than anything. While Sherlock had never seen them outright disagree with one another on religious matters, he could also tell that by their polite reticence that they’d likely come to a truce on that point.

For his part, a knot of anxiety had twisted itself somewhere in Sherlock’s middle as the train had drawn farther from home, as each step led them from the station to the temple doors.

Kushiel, in his divine and terrible compassion, had been Adonai’s punisher, until Adonai sent his own son, Yeshua ben Yosef, to die as a sacrifice for humanity’s sins. When Yeshua’s blood mixed with the tears of the Magdalene, who wept openly over his body, Blessed Elua rose from where they mingled in the soil, Adonai’s own grandson. Elua declared everyone should “Love as Thou Wilt” and defied Adonai’s admonishments to return to the heavenly kingdom, Kushiel realised his love of those in his mercy was greater than his love of Adonai.

He and seven other angels--Anael, Azza, Camael, Cassiel, Eisheth, Naamah, and Shemhazai--left Adonai’s court to follow at Elua’s side.

Elua and his Companions had found a small following in Britain sometime during the thousand years of war between Britain and France, though their descendants and converts were not officially recognised and granted protection until shortly before the first World War. Since the *Entente Cordiale* between France and Britain, the French Embassy in London oversaw the head
temples to each god or goddess.

While Sherlock had been to the lush floral gardens of Elua’s temple on many occasions, and the libraries of Shemhazai’s a few times as well, he had never been to Kushiel’s temple, and couldn’t begin to guess what awaited.

As a child, his mother had taught him about Kushiel and the other Companions who’d abandoned the One God to follow Elua. Kushiel, the punisher, saved his brand of mercy for adults—only someone of legal age could choose to submit to his chastisement: ritual flogging. As a child, Sherlock couldn’t imagine the kind of mistakes that would lead a person to submit to a beating, but as he’d gotten older, he’d begun to see the appeal. Sometimes it was a relief to get caught red-handed. It brought its own joys.

Even still, it was ludicrous for his mother to think some genetic trait signified he was some god-touched whipping boy.

So Sherlock followed his mother silently, his sulk apparent though he was smart enough not to voice his opinions, which were about as atheist as they came. He just wanted to get this all over with and get home to his experiments. It was a perfect waste of an afternoon.

Kushiel’s temple was an old stone building, the main doors carved from heavy wood, a symbol of interlocking keys wrought in bronze fixed on the outside. Those symbolised the keys to Hell, which Kushiel had, at one time, kept for Adonai.

As they stepped inside, Sherlock blinked rapidly to adjust his eyes to the dim lighting, which was near-pitch after the overcast sunlight outside. The heat was stifling, and they tugged their coats and scarves off, only to find an attendant waited to receive their garments. Apparently they kept it overly warm on purpose, though to what end Sherlock wasn’t sure.

The decor was sparse and mute, which in the gentle glow of lamplight held a warm sterility he found appealing. Bare grey stone walls, illuminated every few feet by electric sconces, were otherwise unadorned, and an unfinished black stone floor stretched beneath their feet. The alcove before them held a bank of candles, which lit up a tableau of stern-faced Kushiel bearing a rod in one hand, a flail in the other.

Sherlock tried to ignore the shiver that ran down his spine.

“Welcome,” came a young male voice from a black-robed figure, face hidden by a bronze mask in Kushiel’s likeness. “How may we be of service?”

“We have an appointment with Sister Roberts,” his mother answered from behind him, clasping Sherlock by the shoulders as if she thought he might run away.

She couldn’t have been more wrong. The more Sherlock saw of this temple, the more he wanted to investigate its mysteries.

The attendant bowed, a slight bend at the waist and an inclination of the head, before turning silently to lead them through a side door into a more modern-finished corridor, which was disappointing after the dramatic entryway. The attendant stopped before a closed door and tapped twice with his knuckles, which thudded loud in the relative silence.

Sherlock swallowed against the frisson fear that had begun to constrict his throat, ignoring the way it buzzed in his head, at once paralyzing and thrilling. He couldn’t begin to guess where his fear came from, only that the closer they got to Sister Roberts, Kushiel’s head priestess in London, the sharper and sweeter that fear became.
A muffled voice replied, “Come in.”

The attendant pushed the door open and Sherlock’s mother steered him into the small, well-lit office. A woman in her mid-thirties, in similar black robe, sat behind a heavy old desk, fingers laced together. Red and black satin gleamed at the hems of her robe as she rose to greet them, extending a hand to Sherlock and his mother.

“Mrs. Holmes, I take it?” Sister Roberts asked as she indicated they should sit. “How may I be of service?”

“It’s about my son,” his mother answered. Her gaze was straight ahead, her back straight and stiff.

Sherlock fought back a frown. Was she nervous?

“Mum thinks I’m magically god-touched because of a completely unimportant genetic trait,” Sherlock blurted out. “She wants you to tell her I’m special. Which is pointless, because we both already know how painfully unique I am.” The last bit was directed bitterly at his mother, while he clenched his hands at his sides, willing the bite of nails in his palms to override the fear. What on earth did he have to be afraid of?

His mother turned wide-eyed to him, ready to correct his rudeness, but sighed and nodded. Sister Roberts smiled, serene and thoughtful as she studied the mouthy teen before her. Her deep blue eyes raked over Sherlock until he felt she could peek within the cracks of his personality, suss out every last one of his faults. For a moment Sherlock wondered if this was how other people felt when he shot off deductions about them in the middle of the dining hall at school. When she caught and held his gaze, he couldn’t breathe.

It wasn’t necessarily because she was attractive, though she was, being at least in some part D’Angeline. Sherlock had never been immediately attracted to anyone based on physical appearance, which was helpful as he had learned that usually the prettier the face, the slower the brain. Sherlock, of course, had little patience for those people.

His breath caught because of the knowledge banked in her gaze, an assessment of his person with the weight and wisdom of her priestesshood, and it made the blood beat in his ears like the rumble of a distant drum.

“You have the spot,” she murmured at last. “Six hundred years, and no one’s even--”

“But what does it mean?” Sherlock’s mother’s voice had risen, despite the sort of calm she typically exuded before strangers. Frustration tinged her words.

“May I have a moment with your son?” Sister Roberts asked, though she didn’t look away from his eyes.

His mother frowned. “I don’t see--”

“Ma’am, I have questions I must ask him that a mother may not want to hear, nor may he be willing to answer if you are in here.”

“Ah.” She shot him a glance before averting her eyes, rising from her seat. “I’ll--I’ll just be--yes. I’m sorry.” She exited quickly, closing the office door behind her as she left.

Sister Roberts leaned forward on her desk, raising her laced fingers to touch her thumbs to her lips. “You appear frustrated by this whole situation,” she noted. “Why? Why use it to hide
“What point is there in naming a genetic condition with some mystical religious source?” he snapped. “What good could that possibly do?”

She raised her brows in amusement, her face otherwise impassive. “Does your mouth get you into frequent trouble?”

“What--?”

“Does it?”

Sherlock didn’t know what to make of a question like that, and he let his confusion show.

Sister Roberts chuckled softly before pressing her fingertips to her lips. “I’ll take that as a yes.” She tugged open a desk drawer, removing something that she kept concealed. She rose from her seat, extending her free hand as if she expected Sherlock to give her something. “With your permission I would like to perform a small test. Your hand, please?” When he hesitated, she added, “I promise I will explain myself to you, either way, afterward.”

Heart beating faster in his chest, Sherlock lifted his hand, placing it palm-up in hers. He watched as she revealed a long pin, maybe three inches of steel with a pearl head, flexing her fingers to extend it. It glinted in the light, sharp and thin. Curiosity and the remaining frisson of fear buzzed in his head like too much pinched bubbly at Christmas.

She drew a wet-nap from the drawer, tore it open, and sterilised the pin and the pad of his forefinger. “You may watch, or you may close your eyes. I’ll count to three.”

Sherlock blinked, lifting his gaze to meet her. He nodded once, and returned to staring at the pin.

“One, two, three.” With a flash the pin caught the light as she lowered it, jamming it squarely in the pad of his index finger.

“Oh!” he gasped, staring at it in surprise. He hadn’t thought she’d actually stick him with it, but the pain blossomed in his finger, sharp and metallic. He tried his best to ignore the way it manifest itself elsewhere. Electric heat tingled in his veins, bringing a hard blush to his cheeks. Instinctively he had pressed the heel of his free palm against his groin, and when he realised she’d seen him do that, he blushed harder.

She plucked the pin from his finger, dropping it onto her desk to take a tissue from the box nearby. She wadded it and pressed it to the drop of blood that had begun to bead on his fingertip. “I apologise for all that, though your reaction is nothing to be ashamed of. I had expected as much.”

“You expected--?”

“I have never seen record or reference to a male pricked by Kushiel’s dart, but I don’t suppose it’s impossible. Was your reaction--arousal--typical?” Her tone, clinical and impersonal, was somewhat comforting.

Sherlock squeezed his injured finger against the others, trying to blot out the sensation, the
way it distracted him. He stayed silent a long while, remembering all sorts of myriad minor
injuries, tussles in the locker rooms unseen by teachers. “Yes.”

“This is how they found the last one, actually,” Sister Roberts replied, gesturing to the pin.
“A steel pin with a pearl head. I don’t think that part is necessarily important, but it’s pretty. Priests
and priestesses of Kushiel have kept them ever since. Mr. Holmes—”

“Sherlock.”

“—Sherlock, I believe you are an *anguisset*.” Sister Roberts pronounced the word with
perfect French inflection, dropping the final consonant so that it sounded more like *an-gweess*.
Sherlock recognised it as the masculine form of that word from the Ysandrine Cycle. “You have
been chosen by Kushiel, but for what purpose I do not know. Have you heard of Phèdre nó
Delaunay, of Iriel de Fiscarde, or Mara?”

The first was the name of the woman from the poem, the one who’d served her queen and
averted war.

“I’ve read the Ysandrine Cycle. Phèdre nó Delaunay was a servant of Naamah and
something like a spy, wasn’t she?”

Sister Roberts laughed then, and Sherlock wondered why someone with her dry humour
might ever be a priestess to Kushiel, who’d always struck him as a dour disciplinarian. There were
stranger things, though.

Things like Sherlock. Apparently he was god-touched, after all.

“She was, and more;” Sister Roberts answered. “Let me get your mother, and we’ll discuss
what it means—but I’ll spare her the more, ah, intimate details of what your situation entails.”

She winked at him then, and Sherlock found himself at once annoyed and relieved.
Annoyed, because it seemed she was being awfully flippant about all this; relieved because the
less his mother knew about his apparently god-given masochistic tendencies the better.

When Sherlock’s mother was settled once more in her chair, Sister Roberts paced behind
her desk slowly, outlining her verdict. “Sherlock is indeed an *anguisset*. The red spot in his eye is
what was once called Kushiel’s Dart. It’s the only outward sign of his appointment, and the last
one to bear such a mark lived over six hundred years ago. Sherlock mentioned he’s read the
Ysandrine Cycle, and he had the right of it—Phèdre no Delaunay, later appointed Comtesse de
Montreve in Siovale, was the last one chosen by Kushiel.

“What gets left out of history are the more important parts of her story, though: yes, she
diverted a Skaldic–er, German–invasion, and prevented a civil war, but later she wound up going
on an errand that prevented a dark and terrible Persian god from utterly destroying an entire
country and spreading outwards in a terrible plague—”

“That sounds like an incredibly fancy way of saying she kept a bunch of Zoroasters from
spreading their religion,” Sherlock interjected.

“Sherlock!” his mother snapped.

“You make a valid point,” Sister Roberts agreed, unperturbed. “The priests to Angra Maiyu
had their citizens burn and salt the fields, starve the livestock, poison the wells, and murder their
loved ones in the name of their dark god. Whether you want to attribute her work to divine
intervention or human, you can’t deny it was a very necessary thing?”

Sherlock felt his teeth click together, that was how quickly he snapped his mouth shut. Dealing with her was a lot like debating with Mycroft. And she wasn’t nearly as priggish about it. He decided right then that he definitely liked her.

“So I’m going to wind up preventing the end of the world, or something?” Sherlock asked. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Are you always so serious?” Sister Roberts asked, and he realised he’d been frowning in thought.

When he didn’t answer, she added, “It’s up to you to see this as a blessing or a curse. No one else can decide that for you. I can say this: may you find comfort in his mercy, and don’t ever mistake your ability to yield as a weakness. I have no idea why Kushiel has chosen you, but he has.”

With that overly cryptic message she looked to his mother.

The expression Mrs. Holmes turned on him then was indecipherable: there was joy in the way the corners of her mouth twitched, concern in her furrowed brow, and pity in her eyes. The pity pricked at his ego—whatever feelings Sherlock had about his pronouncement aside, he didn’t need her pity. That was certain.

“What do we do now?” His mother turned back to Sister Roberts, wringing her hands, stroking her thumb against the opposite palm.

“He has many options, the same as he always did: he may choose to enter the priesthood in whatever temple he chooses, he might elect to become a servant of Naamah or follow any other career path he desires. Or he can ignore it, carry on as he has been, and learn to live with this new information. The choice is always his.”

Sherlock fought the urge to scowl, her advice too vague and placating to suit him. Priesthood was certainly out of the question. He couldn’t imagine being a dry old scholar who counselled idiots, or even in Kushiel’s case, administered his punishment. Nor could Sherlock ever see himself going into Naamah’s service when he came of age. The idea of entertaining strangers with Naamah’s arts, of fucking some faceless patron, made his stomach turn.

That was it, then. Sherlock would live his life, and whenever Kushiel decided to ring him up with his destiny, he’d deal with it then. Or not.

When neither Mrs. Holmes nor Sherlock said anything for another long minute, Sister Roberts spoke again, this time directly to Sherlock. “Just because Kushiel has chosen you does not mean you need to live in fear of his calling. You will always be free to choose.”

“Brilliant.” Sherlock let all his frustrations, all his fear and confusion rest in that one word.

Mrs. Holmes shot him a warning look before laying a hand on his shoulder, though she still faced Sister Roberts. “Thank you for your time, sister. We’ll leave our offerings and be on our way.”

They did as she said, detouring through the empty sanctuary on their way out to light incense before an immense, ancient-looking bronze statue of Kushiel. The god’s face showed a study in compassion and firm disappointment.

Sherlock closed his eyes, bowing his head over the lazy blue spiral of smoke like he hadn’t
done since he was six years old in the Temple of Elua, his mind blank. What could he say, or pray, or think to this god he wasn’t even entirely convinced existed, whom now at least two people were certain had handpicked him for some melodramatic fate?

Thanks, I suppose. If you’re really there.

Sherlock don’t know if it was all the smoke or the fact he hadn’t eaten in a day and a half, but a wave of dizziness struck him then, and blood beat in his ears with a sound reminiscent of the silent thump of birds’ wings and the distant thunder of a drum. Sherlock stumbled, his hand striking the incense bowl as he lost his balance, sending its contents scattering in a cloud of smoke, ash, and the spicy stink of resin. When Sherlock opened his eyes, his vision had gone blood-red, though it cleared just as quickly.

“Sherlock, love?”

He ignored his mother, staring up into the face of the statue. Some trick of the design or the lighting made it appear to be looking down directly at him. Sherlock swallowed hard, trembling though he couldn’t tell why.

A tiny voice at the back of Sherlock’s mind parroted Sister Roberts’s words: It’s up to you to see this as a blessing or a curse.

It may have been up to him, but Sherlock preferred to reserve judgement until he had more evidence.
A Rough Trade (Sherlock)

Sherlock was twenty-five when he saw, finally, the power he wielded in yielding, in embracing Kushiel’s Dart and Naamah’s gifts.

Through Uni he watched as peers succumbed to their hormones. Sex became a tool for connection, for manipulation, for gains of all kinds. And that wasn’t necessarily a misuse of sex, merely the most uncorrupted way of viewing it. While the opportunity didn’t present itself so readily in the chemistry department--Sherlock had, after all, driven away anyone foolish enough to give him a second glance--that didn’t mean it was too late for him try various other routes.

DS Lestrade’s flat was small, shabby. Late-night street lamps pried their light between the cracks in the heavy curtains of the front room, and the air smelled faintly of whatever takeout he’d left half-eaten on the stove. Sherlock scrubbed sweaty palms on the thighs of his jeans, still sticky and hot from the bar he’d just been lurking in.

“The place is a mess, sorry,” came Lestrade’s gruff voice as he closed the door behind them. He flashed Sherlock a smile, studying his guest once more before he chuckled. “You’re sure we haven’t met before? You look familiar...”

Sherlock relaxed his posture, looked up at Lestrade through thick lashes, praying he didn’t recognize Sherlock as the mad amateur who’d tried to burst down his doors two years prior, just to offer him assistance on a case. “Nobody you’ve met,” he answered. “I swear.”

Lestrade shrugged, the thought lost in the pleasant buzz of a shared pint or two, tossed his jacket on the sofa. He flicked on the lamp nearby, dim golden light painting his features with warmth.

Sherlock supposed he would have been an attractive fellow, if he actually found people so. Lestrade had a rugged, mischievous sort of smile he’d flashed at Sherlock several times at the bar, peppery hair beginning to silver at the temples. And he was empirically fit, which was more than Sherlock could say for many of his fellow ‘Yarders.

Sherlock swallowed hard, offering him a smile. He had no idea what came next, only that if he could find his way into Lestrade’s bed, maybe the detective would listen on the next case.

“Care for a drink?” Lestrade dropped his keys onto the counter as he entered his pitifully tiny kitchen. “Juice, water, beer?”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock answered as he trailed into the kitchen, and then mentally kicked himself for it. Was that a standard part of these encounters, which he’d just rocketed past? His hands were shaking. This wouldn’t do at all.

Sherlock reached up and traced the outline of Lestrade’s shoulder, and offered him what he hoped was a coy smile. Given Lestrade's behaviour at the bar, Sherlock could guess the detective had no problem taking the lead, which suited Sherlock fine.

Now Sherlock just had to bluff his way through this event sufficiently enough to win his favour. Never mind being an utter bloody virgin.
Lestrade leaned in, eyes locked on Sherlock’s, and drew in a deep nasal breath, scenting him like a bloodhound.

Sherlock’s mind whirled—was this a typical part of courtship? Or, at least, pre-coital ritual? Why had he never seen anything about this in his research? Was he supposed to—to sniff him in return?

“Nervous, love?” Lestrade had Sherlock all but pinned against the counter, arms braced on either side, though they didn’t actually make contact. “First time with a bloke?”

Ah, Sherlock thought. Now there was an inroad, and one that wasn’t too far from the truth. The way his breathing hitched as he asked let Sherlock know—this would be something he found enjoyable.

So Sherlock nodded, unable to trust his voice.

The soft growl Lestrade emitted was affirmative. Sherlock had guessed well.

But hearing it—that Sherlock wasn’t prepared for. Heart hammering against his chest, yes, breath rapidly matching Lestrade’s: he had anticipated these things. He had not, however, counted on his body actually responding to the stimuli. It had never done so at the behest of another person; the way desire flooded his system at that predatory little noise made his head swim, made his vision go red.

That noise promised hunger, promised such a good bruising.

“Are you ready, then?” Lestrade asked, his eyes never leaving Sherlock’s. “Such gorgeous eyes.”

Goddamn it all, was Sherlock actually blushing?

Lestrade lowered his head, dropping kisses along Sherlock’s jaw, the curve of bared neck. And Naamah’s tits, the way it shot like a jolt straight to Sherlock’s previously-never-interested cock had his knees buckling already. If he wasn’t careful, Lestrade might actually make him ejaculate, and it would happen soon enough that he’d know for certain Sherlock was woefully inexperienced.

Humiliation seasoned his desire, deepening it from something novel and sweet into a thing savory enough to sustain Sherlock.

“I— I want,” Sherlock started, but he couldn’t make his voice work.

“Speak up, love.” Lestrade’s voice rumbled in his ear and Elua, how did anyone concentrate like this?

“I’d like—” Sherlock screwed up his courage, praying to Naamah or whoever was listening he didn’t bollux this one completely, “—I’d like to perform oral sex on you—”

Lestrade, maybe seven years Sherlock’s senior, huffed a laugh as his hips rocked forward, brushing Sherlock’s. “Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

The outline of Lestrade’s bulge against his thigh, hot and insistent, and Sherlock’s brain blanked utterly on logical processes. His vision swam red again, and then he saw it, all laid out perfectly like an origami flower unfolding in his mind: clear appreciation for age difference, experience difference.
“Will you teach me?” Sherlock asked, and it wasn’t acting that made his voice tremble in his throat. He couldn’t meet Lestrade’s eyes.

Lestrade’s knuckles brushed Sherlock’s chin, tilting the younger man’s face level with his own. “I’ll take good care of you.”

He led Sherlock to his bedroom, which was noticeably cleaner than anywhere else in the flat. The room smelled faintly of him: traces of his cologne, an under-layer of maleness that left Sherlock’s head spinning.

*Heightened sensory perception is a typical part of arousal,* Sherlock told himself. This was biology 101, and Sherlock wrapped himself in it like a blanket, safe and familiar. *You’re also about to hyperventilate, unless you start breathing more normally, idiot.*

“So you want me to show you how to give, hm?” Lestrade’s voice rumbled in his ear, scattering thoughts like waves on a beach. “On your knees.”

The imperative in his voice! Oh, Elua if that was how he had steadily risen through his ranks, forget DI--he’d make Commissioner before he knew it.

The sound that escaped Sherlock’s mouth must have pleased him, because he chuckled, his eyes narrow with intent as Sherlock kneeled. The way Lestrade’s gaze roamed over Sherlock left him vulnerable, wide-open. Could he tell Sherlock had never done anything like this before, that Sherlock was only using it as a means of securing his assistance in accessing cases?

*If this works, I swear I’ll dedicate myself to Naamah’s arts,* Sherlock thought, ignoring the high probability of failure.

If Sherlock had had the forethought to assume fear would dampen the arousal blazing in his veins, he was wrong. Maybe that was normal, or maybe it was because of his accursed nature as an aguisset. Kushiel’s priestess had warned him of what he was, all those years ago--he transmuted pain into pleasure. Did that include nonphysical pain?

If anything, the edge of fear made the lust addling his brain even worse. In the nanoseconds between dropping to his knees and reaching for Lestrade’s hips, all he could think was, *What will Lestrade do if he finds out?*

Whatever it was, Sherlock had no idea--he could only hope for something in the vague shape of brutal.

With shaking hands, Sherlock let fingertips trail along the fly of Lestrade’s trousers, straining around his erection. It seemed huge. Sherlock had never been this close to another person’s prick before.

Lestrade let out a quiet hiss, rocking forward to push himself against Sherlock’s palm. Fingers threaded through Sherlock’s hair, not tight, not quite yet.

“Unbutton. Unzip. Slowly.”

Sherlock did as told, fumbling at first with the button of Lestrade’s pants, each tooth of the
zipper like a tumbler in a picked lock. Momentary success achieved, Sherlock leaned forward. The scent of Lestrade through his thin black boxer-briefs left Sherlock punch-drunk. He had no right to smell that good.

The fingers in Sherlock’s hair tightened, and he surged forward, pressing his cloth-covered cock against Sherlock’s cheek, nose. Gorgeous heat and scent barraged the senses. “D’you want it?”

Unable to form words, Sherlock nodded, his eyes drifting up to meet Lestrade’s, whose cock was still wedged firmly against his face.

Whatever Lestrade saw in that moment was enough to make him lose some of the measured control he’d exerted so far. With a growl, he plunged his free hand into his pants, fishing himself free of that last cotton barrier.

He was hard enough already that his foreskin slid back to reveal a fat, dusky purple glans, slick with his excitement.

“Use your tongue.”

Unsure of what to do with his hands, Sherlock braced them on his thighs and began to lick at Lestrade’s cock, long swathes from root to tip. It was not entirely unlike a popsicle, he realised.

“Christ, love, you weren’t kidding, were you?” His tone was exasperated but not unkind. Sherlock looked up to see Lestrade staring down at him.

“Is this—” Sherlock paused, licking another stripe along his shaft. “Is this okay?”

A smattering of thoughtful seconds happened, and Lestrade nodded. “You’re getting there. Kiss me.”

Sherlock didn’t think Lestrade meant for him to come up off his knees.

He parted his lips slightly, pressing a loose, wet kiss against the head of Lestrade’s cock, the bitter salt of him like a heady aphrodisiac. Sherlock wanted more.

“Use your hand to steady me,” Lestrade murmured, and as Sherlock wrapped a hand around the base of him, he continued, “that’s it. Now, again.”

Sherlock swallowed, pausing a moment to slide that cock along the seam of his lips. When Lestrade groaned, he began: with lips and tongue he teased the head of Lestrade’s cock, drawing on everything he’d only learned minutes before while snogging in the kitchen. The slick warmth, the indrawn breath and the scent of him had Sherlock working him with more and more enthusiasm, until his hips jerked once. Sherlock caught Lestrade’s thigh, steadying himself, and felt the muscle there tight and hard.

“Fuck, you’re a fast learner.”

Sherlock looked up him while resuming pace, and felt his cock twitch. Gathering some courage, Sherlock worked his hand around Lestrade’s shaft as he did, until fingers tightened in his hair to the point of gorgeous pain. That was when Sherlock realised he’d been thrusting his hips fruitlessly, desperate to find friction in his jeans.

“Take me all the way into your mouth. As much as you can.” Lestrade shifted, pressing a shin between Sherlock’s thighs.
Sherlock was so desperate for attention he rutted against that leg unthinking, eyes squeezed shut against his shame. It was good, but not nearly enough. He shifted forward, taking Lestrade as far into his mouth as he could, and when his nose buried into the wiry thatch of dark pubic hair, he had cause to thank Naamah for the summer he’d gotten bored and learned sword-swallowing, judging by the string of unintelligible curses Lestrade let loose.

Saliva pooled in his mouth, and Sherlock tried to find a way to alleviate that as he began to work up and down Lestrade’s length, trying to find some way to swallow lest he dribbled out of the corners of his mouth. And Elua, he didn’t want something that stupid turning Lestrade off in the middle of his first oral sex act.

As Sherlock came up he attempted to swallow, working throat and jaw as loosely as he dared, until molars brushed against Lestrade’s flesh.

Lestrade hissed, drawing back as his hands tightened reflexively in Sherlock’s hair, yanking the younger man’s head back. He slid from Sherlock’s mouth with a wet pop.

Had Sherlock failed? One small mistake and all bets were off?

Sherlock flushed with the embarrassment of it from scalp to chest, he was certain. He stared at the ground.

“Eyes up here,” Lestrade snapped. When Sherlock looked up he found Lestrade’s mouth set in a wavering line, eyes hooded. “Careful with the teeth, yeah?”

Lestrade pivoted his hips, effectively slapping his cock against Sherlock’s cheek. Which shouldn’t have been nearly as hot as it was.

Sherlock nodded, eager to please. But Lestrade had other ideas.

When Lestrade pushed him back against the bed and stripped him down, Sherlock had no idea what he was in for. He watched as Lestrade undid his own button-down, peeled off the vest beneath, shucked trousers. All Sherlock could see was skin, glorious skin dusted with hair and glowing in lamplight. Years of furtive, ineffectual wanks to the bounty of the internet was nothing compared to an actual live person, ready to give him whatever he was willing to take.

For the first time in his life, he wanted all of it.

Lestrade crawled forward, hands braced beside Sherlock’s shoulders as he hovered above. Sherlock could feel heat radiating against his bare skin in the cool air of the bedroom.

“I realized I forgot to ask--what’s your name, anyhow?” Lestrade’s self-deprecating chuckle did funny things to Sherlock’s chest-region.

A drumbeat pulsed in Sherlock’s ears, like the stirring of faraway wings. *Yielding will not make you weak.*

He forced a smile, unable to think of anything other than the truth. “Sherlock,” he whispered.
An eyebrow raised then, and a rueful, predatory smile twisted Lestrade’s mouth. He lifted a
hand, traced fingertips along Sherlock’s hamstring, to the curve of bare arse. “Sherlock Holmes?”

Shit, Sherlock thought. He remembers.

“Sherlock Holmes, the same kid that shows up at my job periodically raising all hell,
demanding to help us poor mortals on our cases?”

The tone in his voice was somewhere between amusement and anger. Panic frayed the
edges of Sherlock’s arousal, then, certain he’d just made a grave mistake.

All he could do was nod, unable to pull his gaze from Lestrade’s.

A hard slap rang through the stillness, Sherlock’s thigh burning from the weight of
Lestrade’s hand. He couldn’t hide the noise he made, then. Somewhere between a keen and an
affirmative, it was mortifying. But it did nothing to dampen how much he wanted Lestrade.

“So you thought you could seduce me, hm? Let me get good and worked up, and then
blackmail me into letting you behind the crime tape?” Another blow landed in the same place, and
the fire in Sherlock’s veins threatened to immolate him.

“Not--not blackmail,” he stuttered. “Not blackmail.”

“What then, d’you do this to all the inspectors? Some sort of Met-slug?”

“Just you,” he cried as another blow landed. “I swear.”

And then, when Sherlock expected another strike, the rough heat of Lestrade’s hand was
replaced by silken hardness as he shifted, drawing his cock along over-sensitized thigh.

“I’m not that easy to get one over, y’know.” His words came out half-growl, half-threat.

What left Sherlock’s mouth then was not part of his plan, and he could almost see his entire
scheme crumbling down around him as the words fell out of his mouth, barely intelligible for their
speed: “That was my plan originally--you are surprisingly attractive and out of everyone on the
Met you were the one most hesitant to mock me and send me on my way. But then I could tell by
the way your breathing changed in the kitchen that you enjoy dominance play and especially the
idea that I hadn’t a clue what I was doing with another man--”

“--So this isn’t your first time then?”

“--But it is, that’s the beauty of it. Not just my first time with a man. My first time anything,
period. But you’ve already noted that I like rough treatment, didn’t let that dissuade you from the
fact that this was my first male encounter--confident in yourself, aware that you’ll not scare me
away so easily--”

“Well, Christ, if it’s only to get into my office--”

“I don’t even want the files anymore, I just want you to fuck me!” Sherlock clamped his
mouth shut, eyes wide in surprise. Had that really come out of his mouth?

Lestrade sat up, then, and the silence stretched palpable in the room. Sherlock fought the
urge to cover his eyes in the crook of an elbow and let the bed swallow him whole. He waited for
the rejection to come, as it so often did in Uni: “What the hell are you doing? Get the fuck away
from me.”
He did not expect laughter, deep and genuine. Lestrade shook with it until tears threatened to spill from the corners of his eyes, and Sherlock did cover his face in the crook of his elbow then.

Even in the middle of utter humiliation, Sherlock’s erection didn’t flag--as much as he may have wanted it to.

After another long moment Lestrade caught control of his mirth, fell silent again. His consideration brushed like featherweight against Sherlock’s skin.

Sherlock uncovered his eyes.

“So you’ll not come banging down my door, expecting me to risk my job, just because we’ve fucked?” Lestrade asked, and this time his tone was gentler, milder than it had been all night.

“No,” Sherlock said. “I won’t.” *Yielding is weakness, and I’m an utter failure,* he thought.

“So you still want to--”

“Elua, please!” Sherlock pushed himself up and wrapped his fingers around the back of Lestrade’s neck, crushing their mouths together. He came at it with no skill, no delicacy, just the hot wet slide of lips and teeth and tongue, and broke off long enough to whisper into parted lips, “Just please, please fuck me.”

Lestrade grinned, wolfish against his mouth. “I think we can arrange that. Make yourself comfy, by all means.”

Sherlock was at a loss there--what did that mean, exactly? Did he need to get comfortable, or get comfortable in a sexual position? From what he’d seen, what they were about to do usually entailed someone on all fours, which didn’t look comfortable so much as practical. Was that what Lestrade wanted?

Sherlock nodded, and rolled over onto hands and knees. He closed his eyes against a new wave of embarrassment, the odd sensation of lifting his bare arse in the air, utterly exposing his most private places.

“Gorgeous arse on you,” Lestrade muttered, and he trailed a calloused hand over smooth, pale skin.

Sherlock could feel years’ worth of rough trade, of handling guns and criminals and danger, and how in the bloody hell could callouses be sexy?

Lestrade chuckled. “Must be my magnetism,” he answered, and that’s when Sherlock ducked his head again.

He’d been saying all that aloud, powerless to the pull of desire in his veins.

He felt Lestrade shift his weight on the bed, the noise of a nightstand drawer sliding open, and then the return shift of weight, the click of a bottle cap opening. Cool, wet liquid dribbled against his cleft, and he jerked, making a surprised noise.

“First time for this, too?”

Sherlock nodded, unable to trust his voice.
“I’d better not fuck it up, then, had I?” Lestrade’s voice was rough again, abraded.

“Please,” Sherlock whimpered.

With those thick, calloused fingers, Lestrade began to work him open. The intrusion was unpleasant, slightly painful at first, but that only sweetened his need, until soon Sherlock relaxed into it, thrilled and ashamed at the bizarre combination of sensations assailing him.

And when Lestrade crooked his fingers and curled against Sherlock’s prostate, he howled and bucked, begging, “Please, please--want you--please--”

But Lestrade held off, withdrawing, and Sherlock whined at the loss.

And when Lestrade slipped in three, Sherlock let loose a cry so loud and strained he suddenly understood the ridiculous keening porn stars indulged in--his body couldn’t help but produce that ridiculous noise, and distantly, he tried to care.

Oh, but he didn’t. It felt too good.

They stayed this way a good while, Lestrade loosening him up with fingers and sheer evil dilligence, until Sherlock came round again to begging.

“You think you can take this cock?” Lestrade growled, slipping his slick hand free, dropping to press his chest against Sherlock’s back. He lined himself up until the head of his cock nudged Sherlock’s hole. “You think an inexperienced little prude like you can handle me?”

“Please, fuck--please,” Sherlock gasped.

And Lestrade pushed himself in, inch by inch.

In Sherlock’s mind, the sensation was too familiar, too dirty to be anything he should enjoy. And yet, and yet, when Lestrade’s fat cock brushed against his prostate, he knew this was something he’d chase the rest of his life, this high so much clearer, so much stronger than cocaine.

This, this, he realised, was Naamah’s blessing--the pure art of two people coming together. This kind of bliss was something to strive for, something to search for and bestow, and the giving was what made the taking so sweet.

As Lestrade found his rhythm, hitting home again and again against Sherlock’s prostate, Sherlock remembered his promise: If this works, I swear I’ll dedicate myself to Naamah’s service. And he realised it was an oath he could gladly accept.

I will, oh Naamah, I will--!

That was when Sherlock tasted honey on his tongue, felt the bright lady smiling on him. His vision went white. He knew his offering had been acceptable, even as he came.

Afterward, he and Lestrade both agreed it was probably best their encounter was a one-time affair. Sherlock couldn’t help but feel somewhat rejected, but he supposed it was for the best, as he confessed his oath to follow Naamah’s path.
Lestrade himself wasn’t of D’Angeline heritage, but he was familiar enough with the culture, and he nodded appreciatively. “Good luck with that,” he offered, and leaned forward to kiss the corner of his mouth.

Sherlock’s heart fluttered in his chest, and for once his smile was genuine.

The next day Sherlock headed for Naamah’s temple first thing, a live dove in a small wicker cage as his offering. Naamah’s priestess stood him before the great stone statue of the goddess, kind and sensual, lips parted in joy and enticing welcome.

_Naahmah, accept me as your servant. Lead me in your desire and comfort me with your grace. May your blessings be mine to give._

The dove, trapped between his hands, flapped then, struggling to be free. Sherlock opened his hands, and it launched into flight, white feathers shining in the dim light.

The priestess laid a light hand on his shoulder, and he turned to face her.

Round eyes, irises like liquid amber, peered at him through the half-mask Naamah’s clergy wore.

“Our offering is acceptable, brother. Come forward, and accept the blessing of your appointment.”

She held her hands out, one holding a golden wafer, the other a glass of deep red wine. The wafer on his tongue melted into the golden sweetness of honey, the wine heady and bitter.

Then she curled a hand around the back of his neck, and pulled him forward into a loose-lipped kiss.

To his surprise, desire blossomed light and dizzying in his veins, and when she pulled back, she smiled.

“Go forth,” she said, stepping back. “If it is your wish to train with the Houses, apply and may Naamah bless your path, even as Elua guides your steps.”

As Sherlock left the temple, the desire in his blood transmuted, fizzing into a kind of hope, a kind of joy he’d never felt before. Not since the Kusheline priestess had pricked his finger, had named his affliction a blessing. For the first time in ten years, he felt like his choices were more right than mere logic would allow, and he had no idea how to quantify that experience.

It was enough, for now, simply to enjoy it while it lasted.
Sherlock was highly surprised, then, when his mobile pinged one rainy afternoon two weeks later. It was a message from a strange number.

He retrieved the text, which read, [This is Greg. I’ve got a head-scratcher down here on Fleet Street, if you’ve got the stomach for it.]

His thumbs quivered over the buttons, unsure of how to frame a reply. Who the hell was Greg, and what did he mean by this?

The next message came in. [I don’t expect anything in return. But you shot off some bang-up observations, that night we had two weeks ago. I’d be curious to see what you think of this one.]

So Greg was... DS Lestrade?

Sherlock’s mouth twisted into a smile, and his heart fluttered against his ribcage as he tapped out a reply: [What is the address? -SH]
Once Sherlock was dedicated in the temple of Naamah, he didn’t waste time in seeking out his path. He certainly wouldn’t take a House as was custom, and leave his patrons to the whims of the House’s dowayne, or head of the House, but carve his own way with a private tutor. Kushiel, or else his stubborn nature, compelled him to do his training on his own terms.

He sought out Ms. Irene Adler, a brazen woman who’d made her marque in Mandrake House--whose pleasures ran toward domination and sadism--and set up her own business, her own salon, in Belgravia of all places. Her name was murmured in the tight circle of Naamah’s servants in London, a legend unto herself for completing her training and delighting patrons enough to build her clientele by the age of only 21, which was unheard-of. Most servants completed training after two years, but could take up to five to receive enough patron gifts to finish the sacred marque, or tattoo that fulfilled their financial ties to their House.

It was easy enough to contact her, to set up the interview. But Sherlock knew the difficult part lay in convincing her to take him on as a student.

The day of his interview dawned fair and bright, an idyllic late-spring morning whose warm breeze promised the start of something new. Sherlock refused to take it as a good sign. He was far too logical for that sort of nonsense. Even still, the hope that fluttered in his chest was undeniable.

*Maison Adler* loomed ahead of him, grand and white. Neatly trimmed shrubbery rose high around its facade, decorated the walled perimeter of her compact estate in the posh little district.

Sherlock rung in at the gate and a calm female voice activated the gate to admit him entry.

The same woman welcomed him into the small, sophisticated parlour, her calculating smile and modest attire suggesting she was likely Ms. Adler’s personal assistant.

“You’re Sherlock Holmes?” the assistant asked, taking his coat.

Sherlock gave her a brief nod.

“Make yourself comfortable and I’ll go fetch Ms. Adler. Won’t be but a moment.” Her smile was polite, her tone perfunctory.

She didn’t expect this interview to go much further than the introductions, then.

That was a fair assumption, Sherlock noted. Many freshly-sworn servants came knocking on her door, desperate to learn from and repeat her success. But even now in her thirties, Ms. Adler had yet to accept a student--her time was her own to command.

Sherlock tried his best to make himself comfortable on the plush little loveseat in the parlour, all too aware of its creamy damask upholstery, of the rich mahogany furnishings and sophisticated decor.
“A moment” stretched into ten, into twenty. Sherlock gave up his position on the seat to pace, to quell his anticipation.

After half an hour of waiting, Ms. Adler appeared in the doorway, a lithe woman clad only in her skin, a dangerous smile curving her dark red lips.

*Intimidation tactic,* Sherlock thought. But knowing a thing didn’t change its effectiveness.

Not that he was overly distracted by the female form--it was the utter poise and brazen choice of nudity that unnerved him.

“You must be the prick of our Lord Kushiel’s little dart, then, aren’t you?” *Elua above,* even her rich voice suggested a secret world of all she could inflict. “That’s quite the selling point if it’s true.”

Sherlock stilled his pacing, his posture erect as natural pride warred within against the *anguisset* urge to submit. He did not lower his gaze to the floor and counted it a narrow victory. “I am.”

Ms. Adler’s gaze narrowed, skeptical. “That remains to be seen.”

Sherlock clenched his jaw, his ire as pricked as his left iris.

“There are many who darken my door, begging for my instruction. What sets you apart?”

“I am what I am. Surely you see the wisdom in my learning how to yield from the one person absolutely brilliant at requiring submission.” Sherlock fought to keep his posture erect, to only figuratively bend at her feet and bare his neck to this wolf of a woman.

Ms. Adler let out a short bark of laughter, surprised by his bluntness. “Rumour is, you’re the first *anguisset* to crop up, pardon my pun, in the last several centuries. What proof do you have?”

“The assurance of the head priestess of Kushiel’s Temple in London, the evidence of an abnormality in my iris, and the unnerving urge to be your whipping boy despite my very certain predilection for men, Ms. Adler.”

He hadn’t meant for that last bit to come out, but that didn’t make it any less true. And as surely as he knew it’d been accidental, so he could see it’d been the right thing to say.

She raised an eyebrow, a smirk fighting for purchase at the corners of her mouth. “Interesting. Let me see it, then.”

She crossed the room in a few sure strides, completely confident in her nudity. Her hips swayed, her small but pert breasts swung gently, and the predatory gleam in her eyes never faltered. Despite her diminutive stature, she filled the room.

Sherlock swallowed hard as she took his chin with forefinger and thumb, tilting his face down to inspect for herself. Skeptical green eyes studied his, commanding his attention, but after a moment her sure smile faded, replaced by a slight parting of the lips.

“It’s true. Elua’s balls, it’s true,” she whispered. But then her dominating character slid back into place and she patted his cheek roughly. “What a pretty package for a whipping boy. Patrons would cut themselves on those cheekbones.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, unable to meet her gaze any longer.
“And Sister Roberts was certain of your--”

“Yes. She pricked me with a pin when I was fifteen, only to watch my reaction. I’m sure you can imagine.” Sherlock ignored the memory of that particularly fateful day, the anger and uncertainty, the humiliation of exposing a part of himself he hadn’t even known had existed. His voice cracked on the next bit, though. “Feel free to test it yourself.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Ms. Adler let go of his chin, her eyes sliding from his face to scan the room blindly as she considered his answer. “No, I’ll take you at your word, though I may have to phone Sister Roberts. But here you are at my doorstep. You’ve dedicated yourself at Naamah’s temple?”

“I have.”

“And yet you did not apply to any of the thirteen Houses of the Night Court to sponsor your service?” She crossed to a low settee and stretched across it like a lazing Roman emperor. “I found my time there rather useful, when it came to building myself a network.”

Sherlock fought not to roll his eyes. “Yes, a network’s all well and good, but you are still well-connected, and I should have an opportunity to learn from the best.” He had a sudden streak of intuition, and pounced on the tactic before he’d considered the possible outcomes. Ms. Adler kept baiting him—it was possible she was the type to prefer her patrons a bit bratty, a bit resistant. Oh, he could give her just that, if it made his case. “Though if they are going to drag out the bargaining process like this despite being determined on the outcome the way you seem to enjoy doing, I may as well just look up all the positions in *Les Trois Milles Joies* online and call it a day.”

Ms. Adler howled with laughter. “You’re going to be a pain in my arse, aren’t you? But you’re right—I can’t pass up an honour like this. What are your terms?”

“Proper and complete training in Naamah’s arts in a purely textbook fashion.” Sherlock ground out. He had no idea why she found any of this so funny. “I have no desire to call into question your professionalism or the quality of my tutelage, Ms. Adler. I fully intend on making my **marque** doing what I’ve been called, apparently, to do. You are the best in your field, and I will settle for nothing less.”

Ms. Adler nodded. “I will require the cost of your training from the price of your assignations, traditionally given to the House that would buy your **marque**. Any patron gift above that set price is yours to put against the price of your **marque**. Do you agree?”

“Happily.” Sherlock drew a deep breath, finding himself on surer ground.

“When do you propose we begin?”

“How does tomorrow sound?”

She loosed another laugh. “Smart, pretty, and eager. Oh, you will break hearts and bank accounts when you come into your own. I’m certain of it.” She stepped back, taking the whole of him in again. “I can do a great deal with that—I accept your terms, Mr. Holmes. Now, I have stipulations for you as well.” She rose, and circled him as a hawk might a field-mouse.

Sherlock raised his eyebrow in question.

“In addition to teaching you Naamah’s arts, I will choose your clientele. You will, of course, have final say as to whom you do and do not make assignations with, but they will all be patrons I’ve vetted.”
Sherlock nodded. The idea of entertaining complete strangers of Ms. Adler’s choosing was at once terrifying and thrilling in a way it never had been before, in a way he would have never guessed at when the idea was first mentioned to him in Sister Roberts’s office all those years ago. Even still, it seemed odd that Ms. Adler would send her former patrons his way, if they were the type to receive punishments rather than dole them out. He pushed the thought away, determined to focus on it more later.

“I will also teach you to hone your observational skills, your ability to recall even the most mundane information when it is needed. Are you good with languages, Holmes? Puzzles?”

Sherlock thought of his trip to Fleet Street, the week before, to help DS Lestrade. He’d been able to make a few keen observations, but that was a long shot from solving the case himself. A small, proud part of him hoped that maybe with her instruction he might improve on his ability to impress the Yard with his intellect and skill. It could be a useful career, once his time as a servant of Naamah ended. If he ever chose to end it.

“My mother’s family was Siovalese,” Sherlock answered by way of explanation, deciding to keep his mouth shut on his sideline as a sometime consultant for the Met.

Siovale was once the province believed to host the angel Shemhazai, whose sphere was a passion for knowledge and ingenuity. Anyone who knew anything about D’Angeline society--such as one of Naamah’s most notorious servants--would recognise the admission for what it was. It went without saying that a family which traced its ancestry to Siovale would be the type to offer their children the widest array of education they could afford, including something as simple as various foreign language studies. *All knowledge is worth having*, after all.

“I would’ve guessed as much. Well, then. We will supplement whatever impressive schooling you’ve already endured with a healthy dose of courses of my choosing. When you debut, you’ll be the sharpest Dart in the room.”

Sherlock saw no harm in that--oh, dear, she would train him in her arts and he would have to tolerate more schooling? He could endure inane language courses and appallingy simple maths or whatever it was, for the opportunity to learn from the best. “You have a deal.”

When he stuck out his hand to seal the deal, Ms. Adler’s grip was firm, unyielding. “Call me Irene.”

Sherlock excelled and even found himself enjoying his tutelage under Irene’s thumb. Aside from covering *Les Trois Milles Joies* and the other traditional texts of Naamah’s trade, Irene had him studying anything and everything from the patterns of an ever-whirling geopolitical climate to the most far-flung languages. Tumbling classes, various martial arts. She insisted that each intellectual pursuit was best matched with a physical one. She tested him after dinner parties on his ability to observe the details of clothing, conversation, and body language her guests offered, and taught him to draw inferences on his findings. She taught him how to tell and how to spot a lie. Though their personalities and natures sometimes clashed, Sherlock found himself genuinely appreciative for all that Irene demanded of him.

One aspect on which they clashed, of course, was his insistence for going to cases at odd hours, for putting his body--and therefore his most enticing commodity--to danger. The arguments were legendary, but in the end Sherlock won--as long as he swore not to get directly involved
with any criminal apprehension.

He was definitely pleased to note that with her training, he was getting closer and closer to being able to solve a case on his own--but he certainly wasn’t going to tell her that.

One summer day, six months into Sherlock’s training, a knock sounded at the door of Irene’s study, where Sherlock was holed up, poring over *Les Histoires D’Europa*. Sherlock looked up from his textbook as the subtle flowery notes of her perfume mingled with the sharp, spicy scent of the man accompanying her as they entered.

At a glance, the newcomer was not much taller than Irene, a slim-shouldered man in Westwood with a slicked back widow’s peak despite his age--he couldn’t have been more than thirty-five. The coiled violence that he emanated sang in Sherlock’s blood, and the beating of Kushiel’s drums in his head nearly drowned out the introduction.

“This is my old friend, Sherlock. Come greet Jim Moriarty.”

Sherlock rose at once and came to kneel before the pair as per Irene’s expectations, though his gaze rose in challenge to the man’s face.

A near-hungry smile curled Jim’s upper lip. “So this is who all those rumours are about, love?” His high, Irish lilt sounded like music in Sherlock’s brain.

“You know me too well. How could I pass him up?”

"And he is what you say he is?"

"See for yourself."

Jim’s snakelike stare slithered across Sherlock’s skin and up to his eyes. "Elua's balls, Irene. You’ve found yourself an *anguisset*. But why show me your little secret, hm?” His tone was coy, an odd parody of flirtation.

"Genius needs an audience, or so I’ve heard."

Jim laughed at that. “Have you tested the merchandise?”

“Certainly not. I’ll not diminish his debut-price.”

Jim laughed, rocking on his heels. Then he circled round Sherlock, tsking. “Oh, this one’s already lost that honour. He’s already given his *première* to some ham-fisted halfwit.”

Sherlock couldn’t help but think of Lestrade, then. He’d been rough, sure, but not cruel. And afterward, he’d recognized that Sherlock was more use to him as a brain rather than a fuck.

Even still, his heart sped up just a touch--how could this stranger tell from just a glance?

Irene hummed thoughtfully and Sherlock felt the heat creeping under his skin. He’d specifically failed to mention that he was no virgin. He’d let her make her own assumptions. She’d insisted repeatedly that his debut would draw a wider audience if he was still untouched.
They both agreed it was an antiquated notion, but one patrons still ascribed to.

“Kushiel’s Dart,” Jim mused. “How fitting, for you to meet one of Kushiel’s line, then?”

It was common belief that some of the families once tied to nobility from Terre D’Ange were descended of the gods themselves, that the blood of angels ran in their veins. Just as his mother claimed common Siovalese ancestry and therefore Shemhazai’s gifts, so this Jim fellow claimed direct Kushiel line ancestry.

And the inexplicable pull Sherlock felt to this man certainly begged to confirm that belief.

“Sir,” Sherlock answered, neither a confirmation or denial of Jim’s assertion.

Jim looked over to Irene. “Care if I test him? In intellect only, of course.”

Irene waved her hand dismissively, though she spared a glance for Sherlock. “If my student doesn’t mind, neither do I.”

Sherlock nodded.

Jim flashed him a small, deceptively gentle smile before grabbing him roughly by the hair to yank his head back. The breath caught in Sherlock’s throat and his eyes went wide, certain that the surge of his desire was written plainly across every part of him.

But then Jim bent over, bringing his mouth close to Sherlock’s ear, until Sherlock was awash in the spicy scent of aftershave, the stubble grazing his cheek, the pain across his scalp and in the back of his neck from the angle it was forced into.

“Sherlock, care to tell daddy what he was up to this morning? Has Irene made you learn these things?”

Sherlock stammered as Jim held tight to his hair, his eyes scanning wildly over Jim’s clothes, desperate for any clues. Seizing upon only a few, he tried to make his brain work—but it was still terribly scrambled from the desire singing in his veins—Irene had never tested him under those conditions, and it made a world of difference.

“Given your—your attire you’ve likely been on some sort of business, though it’s hard to say what. You tend toward sleek, modern lines and that skull-and-crossbones tie suggests you are allowed to have a bit of personality compared to the others you do business with, suggesting you are higher up. The fresh smell of your aftershave would suggest that either you’ve reapplied it recently, or else you’ve just cleaned yourself up to come over. Which might also suggest that you’re not as high up on the social ladder as you’d have people believe. That’s—I’m—” Sherlock spared a glance for Irene, humiliation at disappointing her in front of her colleague washing over him. Even that held its own allures. “I’m sorry—”

Irene’s wolfish grin was back. “That’s more than most can pick off Jim. You’ve done well.” She looked to Jim then, rolling her eyes fondly. “You can let him go now, love.”

Jim sighed quietly, intended only for Sherlock. The ghost of his warm breath tickled Sherlock’s ear, and caught between the pain and the small caress of breath, Sherlock could hardly tell up from down. Jim’s eyes scanned upward for Irene.

“You’ll invite me to his debut?” It wasn’t so much a question as a statement of fact.

“Of course, but you’re not taking him home.”
Jim leaned back, his nose a hair's breadth away. He planted a chaste, soft kiss at the corner of Sherlock's mouth. "Soon, then."

It sounded like a threat, like a promise.

Six months after his first meeting with Jim, Sherlock found himself on the eve of his twenty-sixth birthday, and declared by Irene to have raced through her teaching with the sort of zeal she'd only ever seen in herself.

That night Irene would host a party, a small do with hand-selected guests, and the main event would be auctioning off Sherlock’s debut as a servant of Naamah.

As day wore to its end, night stole in sharp and bitter, clear as glass. Sherlock stood before the full length mirror of his small room in the finished attic above Irene’s townhouse, inspecting himself: Irene had encouraged him to grow out his black curls a bit shaggy, and her requirement to cross-train his intellectual pursuits as well as his physical had broadened his shoulders and chest, given him gently sculpted arms and abs, powerful thighs that were as useful in landing a kick as wrapping around the waist of a patron.

He knew, on a theoretical level, the sort of image he cut: patrons would find him attractive, despite how his personality might repel them. And the ones who knew of Sherlock’s nature would pay handsomely for the chance to beat the sweetness into him.

Patrons like Jim, he thought. But he knew better than that--Irene had already pointed him toward the patron she intended to win his debut, had gathered Sherlock’s consent. Jim would have to wait until later.

Irene rapped gently at Sherlock’s bedroom door, pushing it open after he invited her in. She studied him, her skin pale against the black cloth of her dress. Her smile was at once proud and certain.

“You’ll do brilliantly tonight, Sherlock. Are you nervous?”

Sherlock shook his head, unwilling to admit the truth: if what came at the end of tonight was anything as enjoyable and successful as the fumbling tumble with Lestrade, it would be worth this training; if he let Irene down, though, his career as well as his chances with Jim would come to nil.

Irene went all out for Sherlock’s birthday and debut. She’d rented out a private art gallery, its current works’ theme centred around sensuality and sexuality. Paintings and photos lined the walls, colours rendered in warm flesh-tones of all shades, the curve of bodies slotting together. As a setting for any other sort of party, it would’ve been garish, awkward. But to celebrate a servant
of Naamah’s debut in service and society, it was rather brilliant: the setting would serve perfectly to build the tension and desire in the atmosphere that Irene would prefer.

For his part, Sherlock endured being dragged round by Irene, from group to group to make introductions. Sherlock made sure he played up his submissive qualities: the cant of his head, the slight tension of his shoulders, only glancing at potential patrons through his lashes briefly. He could feel their gazes like a scrape across his skin, and by the end of the night it would leave him raw and wanting.

It certainly didn’t help that Jim was there, peering at him from the outskirts at all times. His presence was a buzz at the base of Sherlock’s skull, the press of a razor-sharp gaze between his shoulderblades.

At one point, Irene led him to a group by a small bust of a man in orgasm. A tall, blonde man with a strong jaw ignored him, while a softer-set short brunet man with glasses and a blonde woman with what could only be described as a “sweet” face greeted them.

“Sherlock, the iceberg over there is Victor Trevor. This is his sister, Cara, and her husband, Mike Stamford.”

Sherlock offered his hand, giving them his best act. Victor snorted derisively, though Cara and Mike both made appreciative noises at Sherlock’s display. The way husband and wife looked at Irene indicated they’d both likely been her clients, which made no sense. They were both too--too common, honestly, to meet Irene’s exhorbitant fees.

But then, Irene was infamous for tastes that ran far and wide.

“Pleased to meet you,” Sherlock offered, though it couldn’t have been further from the truth. Both Mike and his wife seemed far too soft for his tastes, and he was genuinely glad they wouldn’t be the ones to win his premiere.

“Quite a birthday party, isn’t it?” Mike asked, to which Sherlock couldn’t help but offer a curt smile. But then he collected himself, playing the overly submissive creature once more.

In all truth, he hated the act. But he knew it would be best to play it safe and broad tonight. Later, later there would be time for clients who would earn his downcast gaze, his bent knee, his begging. He could easily imagine Jim earning that honour...

Irene cut into his thoughts, though, clasping Sherlock gently on the shoulder. Her smile was mischievous, similar to the one she used at dinner parties to make it appear she'd had too much wine. “That reminds me--Sherlock, later you’ll simply have to thank Mike--he helped me find the perfect birthday present for you.”

Now that was unexpected--Irene hadn’t mentioned anything about a birthday present, aside from his debut. What else was up her sleeve?

Eventually the night’s main event could be put off no longer. The guests approached the brink of rowdy and impatient, all of them conscious of their bank books stashed in blazer pockets and purses, ready for the chance to win a night with Irene Adler’s first--and likely only--pupil.

Only a few of them knew of Sherlock’s true nature, his status as an anguisset, though after tonight anyone who mattered in London’s D’Angeline society would certainly hear tell.
Irene clinked a spoon against the stem of her champagne flute as she stepped into the well-lit corner designated as her stage. The poise with which she held herself, the genuine appearance of her performance-smile (which Sherlock couldn’t help but recognise now that he knew her better) left Sherlock wondering what she would have been like as an actress, as an opera singer. But he quickly pushed the thought away, focusing on maintaining his submissive act just a little longer.

“Friends, old and new. We all know why we’re gathered here tonight: the debut of my young protege. I am pleased to say, that while he has not usurped me as the youngest adept to do so, he has surpassed me as the adept to complete his training the fastest. Je vous présente, with great pride my star student, Mr. Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock joined her side, the heat and light of the corner in which they stood distracting him from the assembled crowd beyond. He stumbled through his well-rehearsed speech about his “excitement and pleasure at this opportunity,” until he happened to glance up, and somehow caught the eye of a stranger standing at the back of the small gallery in an austere grey suit, his arms folded across his chest. He looked just short of furious.

“So, ah, thank you,” he finished lamely.

Irene took him in a polite hug then, before stepping back and offering a theatrical, melodic laugh.

“One last thing before we move on to the auction. As it is also Sherlock’s birthday, as well as his debut, I felt it only appropriate to present him with a gift tonight that will hopefully be of great use to him in the months to come. Mike, did you--? Oh, lovely. Come on up, then.”

Sherlock tried to find movement in the crowd, a sign of Mike moving toward the stage, but the only thing he could see from beneath the glare of the lights was the figure from the back, the stranger in grey, moving silently across the room toward them. As he drew closer, he fell into the odd region where Sherlock could no longer see him, so Sherlock cast his eyes about as if this were any other stage performance, for surely Irene had trained him in that as well.

The crowd murmured at the prospect of a birthday gift, of a delay in their merriment, but all Sherlock could think of was the coiled anger, the danger in the creature he’d spotted at the back of the room—and now that man was moving forward? Was this the patron Irene had intended for him to go home with tonight?

But that didn’t make sense, he’d already met--

The stranger in grey stepped into the well-lit corner Irene and Sherlock used as their stage, and his face was devoid of the anger Sherlock had seen only moments before. In its place was a bland, polite smile, all deep blue eyes and kind laugh-lines in a face not much older than his own. Dishwater-blond hair, compact shoulders, body held in parade position—

parade rest, grey suit, the marred line of a gun holster and the odd glint of--of daggers at the man’s belt--surely Irene didn’t--

Irene’s voice intruded once more upon his thoughts. “It is customary for a House to present a graduating adept with a gift at their debut, and each House staffs its own guard to ensure the safety of their servants. As I am no House, and have no such staff to offer, Sherlock, I thought it best to send you with your own personal guard. My good friend Mike knew of a recent Cassiline graduate in need of placement, and I felt the pairing would be perfect. Sherlock, this is Mr. John Watson.”
Sherlock nearly choked on his own tongue, even as a titter of amusement rose from the guests. No wonder Irene hadn’t mentioned this birthday present, had seemed far too amused earlier--

Cassiline priests were world-renowned body-guards dedicated to Cassiel--the one angel who followed Elua but chose to stay at his side to protect him, rather than to find love and family and a plot of Terre D’Ange for his own. Often Cassiel was referred to as The Perfect Companion.

Therefore, no one claimed Cassiline heritage, but rather his devotees were recruits who joined with their ranks as one might sign up for the military. They spent years training in the arts of defence, for oneself and for their patron. Many were hired on as bodyguards to heads of state, to celebrities of the highest calibre. Their vow--to defend their patron with their life--was the stuff of legend. It was also well-known that Cassiline priests were held to austerity: they abstained from taking a partner, from ever indulging in their more flesh-bound desires.

Of course Irene had found it funny and appropriate to saddle her debutant pupil trained to sexual pleasures with a sodding virginal warrior-priest.
On Assignment (John)

“You can’t be serious sir.”

In his entire time in the Cassiline brotherhood, from the age of sixteen ’til now, John Watson had never come so close to insubordination. Considering he was nearly twenty-six, that was certainly an accomplishment.

“You know I am, Watson.” Brother Vincent leaned back in his office chair, fingers steepled. “You’ve been put up for assignment, and you’re going onto post in a week.” Vincent tapped the folder that lay on the desk between them. “Irene Adler has requested your services for her adept-in-training. We don’t normally honour these sorts of requests, but the subject is a special case.”

John squeezed his fists together behind his back, his expression carefully blanked as he hid his indignation within the framework of parade rest. “Sir, what could possibly make this a ‘special case’ for warding one of Naamah’s--Namaah’s--” despite his disgust, he still couldn’t bring himself to say the word whore. It was unthinkable to disrespect even a servant of one of The Misguided.

Brother Vincent laid his hands on his desk, his face nothing but sympathy--which, in this case, counted for little. “This servant is god-marked, Watson. None of us have seen the mark of Kushiel’s dart in some six hundred years.”

John let his bewilderment show. “What has that got--how did--”

“It seems a friend of yours owed Ms. Adler a favour. He recommended you for the job when she explained the situation.”

“A friend, hm?”

“A Mr. Stamford, if I recall.”

John fought not to growl his frustration. Before this he’d been staring down the barrel of a lifetime in the Brotherhood, training the young cadets that joined their priesthood. But now Elua, in all his misbegotten humour, had seen it fit to send him elsewhere. To test his vows in ways John wasn’t sure he could imagine. All thanks to Mike Stamford. “I’ll kill him.”

Brother Vincent allowed himself a small, sympathetic chuckle. “Your anger gets the better of you, Brother Watson. This is a special honour.”

John snorted.

“It is,” Brother Vincent insisted. “But I must warn you--after they brought this request to our attention, I did some digging within our own records, sparse as they were. They didn’t exactly have the internet six hundred years ago.”

John lifted an eyebrow. “And?”

“The last recorded anguissette--those pricked with Lord Kushiel’s dart--was a courtesan called Phèdre nò Delaunay. She, too, was assigned a Cassiline guard. But he was weak--he fell for her wiles and was condemned anathema.”

John raked a hand through his short-cropped hair, his nostrils flaring. “And now you’ll throw me under the bus, just the same?”
Brother Vincent leaned back in his chair, scanning John with an appraising look. “Not at all. You are made of spit and nails, Watson. I believe you are strong enough to come out of this unscathed.”

The gala was a disgusting display of exactly the sort of hedonism John had expected from a servant of Naamah--nude statues and paintings on display, nothing but pornographic debauchery. Champagne flowed as the moneyed denizens of London’s upper crust mingled, and John felt just how separate he was from all this.

Even before the Brotherhood, he’d been a poor kid from the outskirts of the city, and it never mattered how friendly he was, how diligent or honest he made himself, it was never enough to compete with the popularity of his peers. It certainly didn’t help that his sister had taken her own status as a social butterfly and used it to careen headfirst into a whole slew of messes--drunken rages, screaming matches with his parents, the entire debacle of being caught behind closed doors with her “best friend,” a girl three years her junior.

It was difficult to be anything other than “Harry Watson’s kid brother.”

And when his parents died? His choice was the foster system, Harry, or the Brotherhood.

He’d never looked back.

He’d found his footing there in Cassiel’s meagre wing of the Sanctuary of Elua in London. He’d found companionship and the safety of a structure he’d never imagined possible. There was the pressurised fire in his blood each morning as he went through the Telling of the Hours, the circular defense style all Cassilines were drilled in until their movements were as natural as breathing. There was blessed quiet as he meditated each night, content to contemplate Cassiel’s choice--a love so strong it rose above all other emotion, until it was pure and unassailable. The devotion he would feel for Cassiel, in giving himself limb or life for a ward.

It was not to gain Cassiel’s favour, or even Elua’s. It was his duty, and that was that.

But here in the self-indulgent lap of the city’s most privileged, John couldn’t imagine anything further from that sort of devotion. Not to some scrawny tart who enjoyed a good beating.

He fought down the roil of nausea as a scantily-clad woman walked past with a tray heavy with champagne flutes. She’d glanced at his drab grey suit only once, and knew better than to even bother offering her wares to him.

The lights dimmed, and a sharp-angled woman in white stepped onto the small dais bathed in light. He recognised her from the dossier he’d been given--this was Irene Adler. There was no picture, however, of the anguish he was condemned to ward.

She clasped her hands together and launched into a speech, thanking her guests and illuminating her own privileged status within their elitist little circle. And then she called her student on-stage.

The man who joined her was tall, whipcord thin but trim for it, dressed in a bespoke suit that did him all sorts of favours. His curly hair made him appear ten years younger than his baritone voice betrayed him to be, but he looked sheepish for all that, shy in a way no servant of Naamah would
ever be. Not even, as John understood, the false modesty of Alyssum House.

This was the *anguisse*. This was John’s ward.

*Lord Cassiel*, John thought. *Keep my feet on your path.*
The auction went off without a hitch--Victor Trevor had won, spurred by the chance to settle a score with Irene, with whom he'd been at odds for years. Why Irene wanted Sherlock to go to him, Sherlock couldn't fathom. But Sherlock had seen the way Victor had placed his bids, each volley becoming more and more animated as he met each counter-offer with a glare. It reminded Sherlock of a hunter, unwilling to lose sight of his quarry. At a dizzying £5,000, Victor finally claimed his victory.

The date of the assignation was set for a week after the fête. As the day drew closer, Sherlock found the anticipation unendurable, and spent most of his time defraying that by pestering both Irene and his brother, who saw fit for the first time in years to contact him, offering his congratulations at Sherlock's new appointment.

[But why now? Why bother with me for the first time in seven years, now that I'm a legally-sanctioned whore? - SH] Sherlock grinned, knowing his word choice would rankle.

[You mustn't speak of Naamah's servants that way. I was merely stating surprise and my genuine wish that this avenue is more fruitful than your dreadful attempts at crime-solving. - MH]

[What would you know about it? - SH]

[You aren't the only one with connections in this, brother. You know that very well. - MH]

Sherlock frowned at his phone, another train of thought derailing him.

[Who is Victor Trevor? - SH]

The pause between his question and Mycroft's response was lengthy enough for Sherlock to have built a tower of his textbooks and turn them into target practice for his knife-throwing. By the time he'd ripped through a rather handsome rendering of *D'Aulaires Myths*, Mycroft's reply pinged on his phone.

[First cousin to various English nobility, suspected history involved in drug trafficking. Cleared of suspicion two years ago. Lost favour with your mentor about ten years ago, the details of which are unknown. Why? - MH]

[No reason. - SH]
Sherlock smirked at that--he was sure Irene would approve of that title, somehow.

FINE.

he typed, [Irene talks in her sleep. She said his name, but later would not explain. She became rather angry and told me to piss off, actually. -SH] One lie was as good as another, wasn't it?

Whatever her game is, do take care dear brother. -MH

Sherlock rolled his eyes and tossed his phone onto his bed. Leave it to Mycroft to be of no help whatsoever.

Over the course of the week, another distraction presented itself in the form of his newly appointed Cassiline guard.

John had, as was custom, moved into a disused guest-room in Maison Adler, but that certainly didn't mean he had to pretend to enjoy it. Any time Sherlock saw him, John glared with the skill of a disapproving nun. His obvious appall at his ward and patron were palpable.

This didn't surprise Sherlock--or Irene, who had taken great pleasure in pulling strings to get him posted with them--in the slightest. Cassilines were trained in strict austerity, following the example of Cassiel, who among Elua’s Companions never sought earthly pleasures, choosing to remain at Elua’s side. “The Perfect Companion.” It was a little-known fact outside the brotherhood, but Cassilines often referred to Elua’s other companions as The Misguided.

So it made sense that despite his being assigned to ward Sherlock, he didn’t have to like it--Sherlock and Irene were the polar opposite of everything John Watson fixed his compass by, dealing in intrigue and Naamah’s service as they did.

That didn’t mean Sherlock couldn’t needle him about it, though.

Three days before his first assignation, Sherlock found John in the kitchen, at ease for once while he made a pot of tea. He’d just finished his morning routine, the physical training taught to Cassilines to perfect their duty: John’s hair was still sweat-damp, clinging to his forehead and the nape of his neck. His skin had lost its flush, and his body moved with a certain languor Sherlock never saw in the Cassiline. The unguarded slant of his shoulders, the way the morning light streaming in from the large window haloed him in whitish overcast light was surprising--as was the genuine smile after his first sip from his mug. It was odd, seeing the person beneath the veneer of sulking Cassiline.

Sherlock's final footsteps into the kitchen changed all that, however.

John tensed up again, the lines of his dark grey t-shirt straightening to rigid corners at the shoulders. He turned a wary glance at Sherlock, the muscle in his clenched jaw flexing as he took in Sherlock's appearance.

Sherlock, of course, had deigned to wear little more than a sheet from his bed down to the kitchen.

He waited for some sort of admonishment--"For Elua's sake, put on something decent, would
“Sleep well?” Sherlock asked, pleased to note the way his sleep-rough voice rumbled in his chest. Irene had mentioned several times it would be a lovely commodity in his assignations.

"Just fine." John's words were clipped short, bitten off before he had a chance to say anything more scathing.

Sherlock leaned forward, letting his chest brush across John's shoulder as he reached for the teapot. "May I?"

John sidestepped, his face a rictus of silent scowl. He waved his hand in the general vicinity of the teapot as if to say, "All yours," in the most snide way possible.

Sherlock tried not to grin too smugly as he went through the motions of making his cuppa. "You take your tea without sugar. Is that a personal preference, or a dictation from your order not to enjoy anything?"

John banged his mug down onto the worktop, its contents sloshing out. Without another word he stalked out of the room.

The night of his assignation came finally that following Friday. Sherlock spent the better part of the afternoon readying himself despite the thrum of desire that grew with each passing hour.

With each step of his pre-assignation ritual, he meditated on the night to come. How rough might Victor get? was what had him biting his lip in anticipation while he had a long soak in a bath scented with lavender and cedar. What sounds would Victor make, how would he taste?—that tantalized him as he shaved (which had never been much of a problem anyway—thanks to his meagre D'Angeline heritage, he'd been blessed with a striking sparsity when it came to post-pubescent hair growth). How well would Sherlock please his first patron? was a warm thought that budded low in his abdomen as he applied a rigorous twist-and-diffuse to his unruly mop of curls.

Elua above, if the way he teased himself were anything like what he was walking into tonight, he’d consider Victor’s £5,000 well-spent.

He'd only just gotten dressed—a trim black suit and charcoal shirt that stretched just this side of tight across his chest—when Irene knocked at his door.

"Come to see me off?" he called as she entered, hands behind her back. Sherlock could see the edges of the nondescript white parcel she held.

She dipped her chin once in agreement. "I've brought you a gift."

"Not another Cassiline, I hope."

Irene laughed, shaking her head. She drew the parcel from behind her and offered placed it on his
"No, nothing like that. I did some research--what do you know of sangoire?"

"The root word is 'blood,' but otherwise--" Sherlock frowned.

"You have the right of it," Irene replied. "It's a rare dye, the making of which is incredibly difficult to find. I had to loan my services to a potentially questionable patron for the name of a remaining dye-maker. The last person to wear this shade was the last anguissette. It's proscribed for any but those marked by Kushiel's dart, according to the old laws."

Sherlock looked down at his shirt. "So--"

"The last anguissette was well-known for the sangoire cloak she wore to assignations. But these days, cloaks are quite out of style, and draping that much red on you would look ridiculous. But I found a way around that." Irene’s smile twisted her mouth, her diligence and pride obvious.

She opened the box as Sherlock stepped closer to his bed. Inside was a folded wool greatcoat, black and dark-grey. A single red buttonhole coloured the lapel. Sherlock lifted the coat from its nest and the weight of its fabric made a soft noise as it fell loose from its fold. The small label on the collar read Belstaff Custom Clothiers, London.

The interior of the coat was a red so deep, the only thing Sherlock could compare it to was blood-at-night.

"Your own sangoire cloak. Try it on."

Sherlock spun it over his shoulders, letting the weight of it settle before plunging his arms into the sleeves--it fit just so over his suit jacket, and in his full-length mirror it looked as though she'd had it bespoke just for him. The effect was--well, dramatic, but in a way Sherlock thoroughly appreciated. The only hints of sangoire peeked from the edges of the lapels, the red buttonhole that blazed there. It made the red mark in his iris stand out, and for once Sherlock was proud to see it so noticeable.

"I--thank you."

They stood in silence a moment, until Irene gave a discreet cough. "It's time. Go make me proud, anguisset."

Sherlock and John rode in silence to the Trevor estate on the outskirts of the city, in the back of the sleek black saloon Irene contracted for the evening. John sat up front by the driver, leaving the expanse of the backseat to Sherlock. Even still, John's ire radiated off him in waves.

Sherlock considered making conversation, something to wind the Cassiline up, but decided against it--tonight would be a first for both of them, and it would do no good to rile up the one person sworn to protect him should anything go awry.

Instead, Sherlock retreated into the recesses of his mind, unfolding various scenarios that might occur that night. What brand of scene did Victor intend to set? Could it be domination play, or did he have some sort of sex-dungeon in his cellar? Irene had offered him the assignation contract to peruse, which outlined the boundaries both parties held firm, accepted as a legally binding document should those boundaries be surpassed. But that didn’t detail the scenario Victor intended, merely Sherlock’s rules for the game. All Sherlock could know for certain was that all
parties knew his signale.

Redbeard, he thought. If things got to be too much, all he had to do to put a hold on the evening was that one little word. The first tendrils of excitement crept in his veins, just considering the extents to which he would have to be pushed to resort to his signale.

He took a deep breath, found himself smiling in anticipation.

Victor Trevor’s estate crept into view just as the sun was nearly sunk below the horizon. At night it was spotlit in tasteful display just short of ostentation, all white and isolated as it was from anything else nearby. The saloon’s tyres crunched on the too-neat gravel drive, and the tendrils of excitement blossomed into a riot of desire, anticipation, that raced through his blood and tangled low in his abdomen.

Naamah, this is your doing, Sherlock thought, and almost felt silly for it. It was still difficult, sometimes, to believe in a pantheon that defied the ordered logic of the scientific realm. But here he was, touched by one god and dedicated to another. It was a bit late to go back on that. Please, don’t let me embarrass myself.

His heart fluttered and the pulse in his ears stuttered like the wings of the dove he’d released in the temple a year before. A small, still centre warmed his core: he was there with Naamah’s blessing.

The driver put the car into park and came round to open Sherlock’s door. John climbed out and fell into stiff parade rest at Sherlock’s side and slightly behind, his proximity and dour disapproval entirely distracting.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock hissed as they made their way up the steps of the estate’s facade.

“I protect and serve,” John ground back. “Let me do my job.”

“You don’t have to be quite literally up my arse to do it,” Sherlock snapped back. “And control your face—you’ll scare my patron off with that scowl of yours.”

John loosed a small growl and fell back a step. Sherlock was sure he was glaring daggers as sharp as the ones at his sides, right between Sherlock’s shoulder blades.

Just then a member of the house staff opened the door to greet them. Sherlock smoothed his annoyance from his face, his body already slipping into the loose-jointed grace he’d been taught, designed to inspire from every angle the desire that made the servants of Naamah so notorious. He flashed John a calm, mischievous smile, already caught in the riptide of his calling.

The staff member, a woman called Regina, took their coats, making a small noise of appreciation at the sangoire interior of Sherlock’s Belstaff. Regina pointed toward the stair.

“Mr. Trevor said to send you straight up,” she explained.

When John started to follow, she cleared her throat. “Erm, not you. You may wait down here, if you like, or in the sitting room just beyond.”

From Sherlock’s position two steps up, he could see the flex of John’s jaw, the protest a-brew.

“But I’m here to--”
“To what? To prevent me from being the plaything to the ludicrously wealthy? You aren’t the only one with an oath.”

John’s dark blue eyes flashed bright, then, and he crossed his arms. “I won’t be foresworn for your--your--”

Sherlock grinned--if the bloody-minded Cassiline wanted to remain within arm’s reach, so be it. He’d have to deal with every last noise that came muffled through the door. He leveled his gaze at John as he said, “Regina, he is oath-sworn to protect me. I can leave him posted outside the door, it will be perfectly fine. It was in my contract.”

Upstairs, only one door stood ajar in the well-lit hallway. Old portraits lined the walls at intervals, and deep, plush carpeting silenced Sherlock’s footfalls. He shivered, almost wishing he still had the protection of the Belstaff, as his hand hovered just shy of the door.

“Get in here. I didn’t pay £5,000 to be kept waiting,” a deep, masculine voice snapped from within the room.

Sherlock, despite the scowling Cassiline at his back, fought to wipe the small grin from his face as he pressed the door open.

Inside, he found Victor Trevor seated at a desk in a cozy study. As Sherlock recalled, Victor’s face was all hard angles and arrogance, the product of fine breeding and privilege. Brassy blonde hair swooped to one side, the beginnings of a light brunet beard softening his jawline. From where Sherlock stood, the only thing he could tell Victor wore was a dark blue silk robe, which framed the muscled stretch of exposed neck and chest in a navy vee. For a first patron, he cut a very agreeable figure.

Sherlock was only mildly disappointed to find he wasn’t ensconced in some dimly lit sex dungeon, but the night was still young.

“What are you staring at? Come here now.” Victor rose and braced his knuckles against the surface of his desk, the predatory menace plain in his voice, in every rigid muscle on his frame.

Sherlock dropped his gaze to the plush carpeting as he crossed the room to stand in its centre. Victor straightened, came close enough to circle round him, until Sherlock could feel his heat like an electrostatic charge.

“Irene Adler’s creature,” Victor mused. “I’m sure the auction was rigged. Why did she send you to me?”

Sherlock blinked, gaze still cast to the floor. He could see Victor’s bare toes as he drew still before Sherlock. “I don’t know.”

Victor stepped closer, gripping Sherlock’s chin and tipping his head back roughly. “What?”

Sherlock’s heart was in his throat now, this opening going unlike any scenario he’d imagined. He had no idea what to anticipate, unsure what was expected of him from this line of questioning. This was not one of the typical scenarios outlined in Les Trois Milles Joies, but hit much closer to
“I don’t know--sir?” Inwardly Sherlock thought, *Yes, good, play up your submission with the use of titles. You’ll find your foothold soon enough.*

Victor released his chin, shifting forward to press his chest against Sherlock’s, his lips inches away. His voice curled like sin, even as he whispered, “Answer me, you pretty little whore. Why did Irene send you to me?” Victor snared a fistful of Sherlock’s hair, squeezing slowly and tilting his head back once more, forcing Sherlock to meet his gaze.

Sherlock’s breath caught in his chest, the sensation rocketing straight to his groin. His mind whirred lightning-fast. Tenuous as his loyalties to Irene may have been, she still owned his marque. Any information he betrayed to his patron could mean she sold Sherlock’s marque to sodding Balm or Gentian house, the two whose clientele preferred much, much gentler pleasures.

Even still, all he knew was that they’d fallen out of favour and that he didn’t know why. That, and what Mycroft had told him--

“I don’t know why she sent me. All I know I’ve gathered on my own, that you were under suspicion for drug trafficking but your name has been cleared.” The words tumbled from his mouth before he could catch them.

“Don’t play stupid. Everyone knows I’ve been cleared. Did she send you here to spy on me?”

“If she did, why would you be stupid enough to take her bait?” Sherlock snapped.

Victor released his hair, and then strong hands gripped Sherlock’s shoulders and pushed him to his knees. Sherlock’s hands strayed to Victor’s hips, both for balance and to let his cheek brush against Victor’s cock, which had begun to tent the silk robe in a rather distracting way.

“If you won’t tell me outright, I can spend all night dragging it out of you,” Victor warned, and Sherlock fought not to mirror the smile that curled at the edges of Victor’s mouth.

So this was the game, then. The no-win scenario. Sherlock could do this.

Sherlock’s irritation got the better of him, all desire aside. This line of questioning was completely pointless. He didn’t know why Irene had sent him, but now that he knew the rules of their little game, he knew exactly which tact to take. “You may as well try.”

“That fucking mouth,” Victor mused. “I bet it gets you into trouble. How ‘bout we find a better use for it?” With that Victor twitched open his robe, revealing his half-hard cock, long and thick, the foreskin not yet retracted.

Sherlock’s couldn’t help the low moan that escaped. Once Victor’s cock sprang free, Sherlock gladly set to the *languisement* with everything he’d learned.

Sherlock trailed open-mouthed kisses along Victor’s shaft, grazing bollocks and exposed thigh with his fingertips. He licked his lips before tonguing foreskin, rolling it back with his lips carefully.

Victor murmured a soft, "Fuck," anddribbled precome slick and salty.

Sherlock lapped at his cock, only taking the glans into his mouth while looking up through his lashes to catch Victor’s eyes. Victor gave a frustrated grunt, tangling his hands in Sherlock’s hair. “Open that pretty little mouth, whore.”
Sherlock did, and Victor barely waited for it to open wide enough before thrusting in, sinking to the hilt on his first go--and it was too much, too fast. Sherlock could take him deep, given just a little more time, but he hadn’t had the opportunity. He gagged reflexively, his body lurching even as he fought to make sure none of his teeth so much as grazed Victor’s length, but he didn’t have time to catch a breath before Victor took his own pleasure, setting a punishing pace that left Sherlock struggling for air, tears stinging until they streamed from his eyes. His fingertips dug into Victor’s hips, hanging on for the ride.

But, Elua above, Sherlock loved it.

His neglected cock ached, heavy and hard against the restraint of his trousers. Sweat beaded at his back and chest as he fought to keep still. He tried to shift, to rock his hips and find some kind of friction, anything, but his splayed-knee stance made it impossible.

Above, Victor grunted, his rhythm growing erratic. Sherlock felt as his bollocks contracted, high and tight against Sherlock’s chin, but at the last second, Victor jerked free of Sherlock’s mouth.

“Not letting you off that easy. On your feet.”

Sherlock rose; a thick strand of saliva extending from Victor’s cock to his lower lip stretched and snapped. Sherlock could almost imagine the picture he made: eyes tear-bright, lips flushed and wet, chest heaving, hair a mess. Elua, he needed.

“Lace your fingers behind your head. That’s it.”

Sherlock did as told. Victor drew near once more, unconcerned with his robe, which had slipped completely open to reveal a long swathe from neck to toes, all gently sculpted muscles and smooth skin. Sherlock couldn’t help but stare. Victor’s eyes burned, dark with lust; his chest and groin were flush, the latter of which still glistened from Sherlock’s mouth.

Victor drew close, grasping at the buttons of Sherlock’s shirt before leaning in to whisper, “Naamah’s tits, you really are getting off on this, aren’t you?” His voice ran warm, ragged.

Sherlock’s voice came out in a raw whisper. “Yes.”

“You remember your safe-word?”

“Y-yes.”

“Do you want to use your signale?”

“Not in the slightest,” Sherlock whispered.

Warm brown eyes snared his gaze and Victor shifted, brushed his lips against Sherlock’s. “I can’t tell you how pleased I am to hear that.”

Sherlock closed his eyes. This small admission amidst the rough treatment like its own sort of blessing. Truth be told, Victor hadn’t come anywhere near Sherlock’s boundaries, hadn’t even begun to test what it meant to be an anguisset.

Victor pulled Sherlock to him, then, a hand splayed at the small of Sherlock's back, and kissed him until Sherlock's knees were weak, until Sherlock's interlaced fingers strained with the effort of not untangling long enough to wrap his arms around Victor. For one small moment, Sherlock found the heat, the friction that his body very much needed. When his hips brushed against Victor's thigh, need and want jolted through him.
Victor drew in Sherlock’s bottom lip, giving it a sharp nip before releasing him. "Are you ready?"

"Please," Sherlock found himself panting. "Please."

With that, Victor made quick work of Sherlock’s buttons and fastenings, only allowing him to break his pose long enough to strip, before standing erect once more, hands laced behind his head.

The dominating character slid back over Victor’s features, his jaw set firm, his chin aloft. "You will not move. You will not make a noise unless it’s to use your signale or else tell me why Irene sent you. If you do well, I’ll give you a little reward."

In counterpoint to Victor’s rough treatment only minutes before, he let the silence between them stretch taut before stretching out to trail his fingertips along the outline of Sherlock’s musculature, the soft lines at bicep and tricep, the curve of his rib and the crease of where arse met thigh. Everywhere his fingertips touched tingled slight and sweet, until Sherlock was fighting not to lean into it, to coax it toward the places he needed to be touched, to neck and nipples and abdomen. Victor stood close, radiating body heat against Sherlock as he reached around to sweep both hands down Sherlock’s spine, his hips just far enough away that Sherlock couldn’t so much as accidentally brush his erection against Victor.

Sherlock trembled, breath shaking as his muscles strained to hold position without flinching, without making a noise. When Victor trailed back up to his left nipple, circling it in the world’s gentlest torture, Sherlock bit his lip to keep his noises silent. When Victor pinched, he couldn’t help himself—the sharp bite of pain after being set on edge by tenderness cut straight through him, and his moan was unmistakable.

Immediately Victor’s hands fell away. “I knew it. Just couldn’t follow my rules. Well, we’ll have to do something about that--” Victor circled round and pushed him squarely between the shoulder blades.

Sherlock stumbled toward the desk, the vague shape of things beginning to coalesce. His pulse hammered in his throat, hoping he was right.

“Bend over the desk, whore.”

Sherlock unlaced his fingers and placed them on the desktop, bracing himself as he leaned forward somewhat.

“Down,” Victor growled, shoving Sherlock between the shoulderblades again until his elbows buckled and his cheek pressed against the leather inkblotter. “I want you over the fucking barrel--”

Sherlock’s breath caught in his throat, the term snagging something in memory—criminals lashed over barrels, flogged for their crimes— and the vague shape of the evening solidified, details lighting up bright. He was more than pleased with what he saw.

Unsatisfied with Sherlock’s position, Victor smacked his arse viciously, the ringing blows of which echoed in the stillness of the study, accompanied only by Sherlock’s responding moans, until Sherlock had worked his way forward, hips flush with the edge of the desk even as his face still pressed to its surface.

“Stay still,” Victor snarled.

Sherlock felt the absence of Victor’s body heat then, cooling along the burning skin of arse and thighs, and he clutched at the opposite edge of the desk, all too aware of the chilly, unforgiving press of the edge against his groin. Footsteps circled quietly round, until Sherlock could see Victor standing in front of him, just from the periphery of his vision.
He could see some movement, but it was the soft slither of cloth that told him what would come next: Victor slipped the belt free from his robe and wrapped it over Sherlock’s eyes, knotting it tight.

A new sort of thrill sang in Sherlock’s veins—he’d known, of course, that blindfolding was a fairly common element in these sorts of scenarios, but was an entirely different beast, bent naked and prone over a stranger’s desk, unable to see. His hips bucked against the desk, a fresh wave of sensation that only drove him further round the bend.

His knees buckled just a bit. He found himself shifting desperately, trying to find some sort of relief against the hard edge of the desk that dug into his pelvic bone. The rough scratch of the unfinished underside where his cock slid against it was delicious.

Then he heard the low slide of a desk drawer opening, and Victor chuckling softly.

“You’re no virgin, are you?” His tone was high, feigned innocence.

Sherlock was too flustered to even try to lie, so he squeezed his eyes shut beneath the blindfold, preparing for whatever may come. “No, sir. I’m--this is my first since I’ve sworn to Naamah but--”

The thick, blunt strike of something flexible caught Sherlock across the upper thighs. He cried out.

Victor snarled, “I paid five thousand pounds for your debut, and you’ve already gone and fucked someone for free?”

The pain from whatever it was Victor had struck him with fizzed in his blood, even as heat and need pooled low in his abdomen; he could almost imagine his neglected cock under the table leaving a trail of precome as it brushed against the underside of the desk. Tears stung behind his closed eyes and threatened to slip free.

This was better than anything he could’ve hoped for on his first assignation, short of that sex dungeon.

“Please--I’m sorry--”

The object struck again, and again, and it wasn’t for a few more blows until some distant, still functioning part of Sherlock’s brain recognised the texture: he was using a medium-weight rope, like a cotton clothesline, which explained the weight and the flexibility.

Oh.

“Move your feet wider, whore.” Victor spat. “If I paid that much for spoiled goods, I’ll just take it out of your flesh.”

Air evacuated Sherlock’s lungs in a rush as he spread his legs wider, until his feet were positioned before each end of the desk. There was no turning his knees inward to close his thighs, no resting easy as each foot was forced up onto the ball and toes. Sweat pricked and collected at the base of his spine. A noise escaped him, low and needy, all too aware of how exposed his now slightly-parted arse was, the secret, sensitive backside of his ballocks.

He felt the rope properly, then, as Victor secured one hand, and then the other, to the nearest legs of the desk. Then his ankles, with the remaining desk legs. Involuntarily Sherlock gasped and flexed—he was, indeed, over a barrel.
Lungs heaving, he tried to listen for a clue as to what might happen next, but nothing happened for a long time. Long enough that Sherlock began to fear maybe Victor had slipped from his study to leave him bound and gagging for who-knew-how-long.

He whimpered at the idea, at the imagined gulf of humiliation of someone else--Regina, possibly, or--and this was a dizzying thought--John discovering him as he was, strapped to a desk, bare to the world. Would it be enough to tempt the Cassiline's celibacy, or disgust him even more?

It was nearly enough to make Sherlock lose his fragile hold on impending orgasm right there.

But then Victor’s hand at the base of his spine, hot as a brand, heavy as an anchor, lifted Sherlock from that daydream, centering him once more in the present.

Sherlock heard the plastic snap of what he instantly recognised as a cap--lubrication, which means--

Slick fingers trailed from Sherlock’s perineum up to the base of his spine, lingering only momentarily at his entrance. He whimpered, his straining legs faltering, which tightened the pull against his wrists until he was forced to correct.

“Did your first fuck show you how to come untouched, whore?” Victor’s words were poison dipped in chocolate, sweet and dangerous.

“I--”

Another harsh smack, and Victor growled, “Answer me!”

“N-no sir, no, I’ve never--”

Without any warning, Sherlock felt the pressure, the stinging stretch as Victor plunged a digit into him, wiggling and thrusting before Sherlock had any time to adjust. Sherlock cried out, ignoring the pain in his arms and wrists to attempt thrusting back against Victor’s hand.

A minute later, when Victor added another, and grazed Sherlock’s prostate, he nearly howled for the sweet, unbearable pressure building within him. It felt so amazing it brought tears to his eyes.

“Did your first fuck make you feel--” and here Victor twisted his fingers, scissoring them, stretching Sherlock further and brushing his prostate again, “--like this?”

Sherlock thought of Lestrade then, the way he’d been gentle even at his roughest, compared to Victor. It had been good, so good, but--

“Never like this!” Sherlock’s tears now leaked freely, soaking into the blindfold or escaping to drop to the leather inkblotter his face was still pressed against.

Another torturous drag against his prostate. “Who treats you better, whore? Who knows what you need?”

“You, sir, you!” Sherlock almost hated himself for saying it. Hated himself for its being true. It felt like a little betrayal to Lestrade, whom he’d always regard with just a bit of tenderness for being Sherlock’s first.

And now Victor’s voice dropped, almost inaudible. “I’m going to milk you dry, you nasty little thing. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Just to come again and again, until it hurts? Until there’s nothing left?”
“Pl--please, you--please--”

And so it began: Victor teased his prostate mercilessly, until precome dribbled from Sherlock’s leaking cock at an embarrassing rate, each press a fresh shockwave that built and burst, each orgasm producing less and less, leaving him ever more sensitised and muscle-sore, until he was a sobbing, incoherent mass of nerves and euphoria. Until he had nothing left to give.

After the fourth, Victor’s hand slipped free: relief and torture in one. Every last part of Sherlock felt hollowed-out, well-used and drained. His voice had strained, brittle and hoarse after crying out, moaning with each fresh onslaught. Sweat had sprung, cooled, and dried over every part of his body exposed to the air, still a slick and sticky sheen between his stomach and the desktop; he could only imagine the way his semen decorated the underside of the desk, the floor. He slumped, boneless, his weary sigh earning a soft chuckle from Victor.

But what Victor said next, Sherlock would never have guessed: “Now, sweetheart, let’s get you untied and more comfortable.”

Where Victor had been all hard lines and sharp angles before, now his entire demeanor was curves and smooth planes.

Sherlock felt the instant the ropes were un-knotted enough to fall slack, the ache in his arms, his shoulders, his thighs and calves threatening to cramp from their strain. Victor helped him up, supporting his weight as he led him, still blindfolded, from the study and down the hall. The difference in air temperature on sweaty, sensitive skin had Sherlock shivering.

He heard a sharp intake of breath and the floor gave a soft creak. He was sure that John had followed them wordlessly, likely a grim death-scowl on his face as they relocated.

Despite his worn-out state, Sherlock felt the fresh flutter of desire in this humiliation: John had seen. Had heard everything. Here was the one person who would absolutely disapprove of Sherlock’s state, seeing him in all his well-used glory. It shouldn’t have been nearly as arousing as it was.

Then another door opened and after a few steps Sherlock was guided to sit on a bed. He fell back onto it, sure that John was posted outside his door, and that even that wouldn’t be necessary-- Sherlock had worn down Victor’s jagged edges, had drawn out his solicitous side. It wasn’t uncommon, he knew, for a dominant partner to be just as tender as they could be harsh--but he’d not expected Victor to behave so.

Perhaps it was just Victor’s nature. Or perhaps Sherlock had softened him, had succeeded in whatever scheme Irene had in mind when arranging their assignation. At present, Sherlock really couldn’t make himself care either way.

Victor spent the next eternity plying a still-blindfolded Sherlock with water, rubbing down sore muscles with soft, soothing noises and gentle hands that worked massage oil into the tensest of places, until Sherlock was boneless again and writhing with it.

This too, he knew, was Naamah’s gift, even to her male servants. Who needed a refractory period, when one served a goddess of pleasure?

All during this, Victor’s erection never flagged, nor did he seem intent to do anything about it, focused solely on attending to his guest. Sherlock distantly hoped he would be able to satisfy, though the rough treatment juxtaposed with this thoroughly attentive after-care left him utterly confused as to how that final satisfaction would occur.
When it became apparent to them both that Sherlock could, indeed, go another round, Victor hummed smugly to himself, and loosened the sash covering Sherlock’s eyes. Sherlock blinked rapidly, the dim light too-bright after being so long in the darkness.

Distantly it reminded him of that first trip to Kushiel’s temple, and he fully understood then the quiet calm that came from submitting to this sort of treatment, the lightness of being that followed.

Sherlock had been warned that the aftercare would likely come in the form of a physician and a massage therapist after the assignation after he and Victor had parted ways. It was not an act required of patrons. But as fiery as Victor had been earlier, now he was soothing, reverent. That priceless dichotomy in itself was reminiscent of Kushiel’s mercies: after a supplicant received their punishment, their admonishment, the priests and priestesses were ordained to administer such care as they could, whether it was a cold compress, cleaning the cuts and weals from a flogger or whip, the loving press of lips to forehead in benediction.

As much as his pleasure had been Naamah’s blessing, so too was it Kushiel’s.

Victor stretched alongside him, nuzzling the hair behind his ear, all honey and sweetness. “Would you like to…?”

Sherlock turned to catch his eye, his smile genuine. “It would be my pleasure.”

And it was. It was.

Chapter End Notes

OKAYSO Here are your warnings for this chapter:

1.) The author being a dick to John, and John being more obstinately anti-Sherlock than we are all probably used to. I did my best to explain this in-chapter, but I'll say it again: the place he's in right now makes him absolutely polar opposite to Sherlock in regards to most of the things they hold dear. So I'm not kidding when I say these idiots are really going to have to earn their happily-ever-after.

2.) Victor and Sherlock *do* sign a legally binding contractual agreement to the terms and boundaries of this assignation, including a safeword (aka "signale"), and as such consent is granted. And Victor does check in with him, and provides aftercare, but during the scene itself a-cumberbatch-of-cookies originally had some issues about full consent vs Sherlock only wanting to go through with it because of the contract... I have endeavored to rewrite and make his enjoyment more clear, but just in case I did want to give you a heads-up.

3.) Restraint-play, degradation, mild humiliation, prostate milking, and blindfolding all occur in the sex scene. If those aren't your cuppa, just skip the sex and understand that some hella kinky times were had and everyone had fun.

4.) John *is* posted outside the room, and is probably incredibly not happy with it. I did this as much for story logistics as angst-factor for when the two of them get together. But I'll throw the issue of his consent into the mix because when he insisted on being posted just outside he may not have realised what he'd be subjected to overhearing, and there was probably a great deal of discomfort on his part for it. And I'm counting that as a consent issue--"he could've walked away" was not an option,
because he is *oath-sworn to his god*, so he wouldn't have felt that he'd be able to walk away without damning himself for breaking his oath. Talk about a rock and a hard place.
Life in *Maison Adler* was nothing comparable to anything John had known before. It wasn’t like his life before his parents died, defined by the close security of its warmth and light. Nor was it like his time in training with the Cassiline Brotherhood, sedate and measured save for those hours carved out of each day to train for close-range combat. Life in *Maison Adler* was tense, to say the least.

Around each corner lurked the probability of their hedonism thrown in his face. It came from the way Irene and her assistant, Kate, gossiped over what John felt was far too much detail about assignations. It manifested itself the way Sherlock sauntered through rooms when he wasn’t in a fit of manic possession, single-minded in whatever currently had his attention.

*That* aspect was fascinating, actually. John had never seen someone who threw themselves so wholeheartedly into whatever it was they focused on. Not the way Sherlock did. This was fine when it came to inexplicably dismantling the toaster (until Sherlock went on a tangent about the eroticism of electricity play). The taunting was unbearable when it came to simpler things, like when in the middle of a yoga routine Sherlock broke concentration just long enough to wink at John.

John wasn’t stupid. He *knew* Sherlock was just taunting him with the knowledge of just how different they were. It didn’t make it less annoying. It also didn’t make John want to punch Sherlock any less.

Beyond that, those first few weeks were uneventful--John woke before dawn each morning to move through the Telling of the Hours in the same way he’d done for the last ten years. He provided silent guard when they left the house. Even without strict structure, there was a rhythm to it, if only John could learn the steps of this dance.

In the final few days before Sherlock’s first assignation--the first true test of John’s training--John practised harder than he ever had before. He ran through the Telling of Hours tirelessly each morning, sometimes two or three times, pushing as hard as he could to remember each position, each transfer from one form to the next, arms swinging with the weight of his daggers, with his gun empty and safety on. Being what Sherlock was, John was uncertain of how he might have to intervene. Loathe as he was to think of the very real possibility of interrupting what would no doubt be a completely bewildering display of debauchery should Sherlock give his *signale*, he knew his oath to Cassiel, to Sherlock, depended on his readiness.

John found himself in the kitchen after his routine each morning, chugging water while he waited for the kettle to boil, his tea to steep. Joints loose and muscles pleasantly turned to putty, John liked the quiet reprieve of those early morning hours before the rest of the house woke.

As that first assignation loomed ever nearer, John focused more and more on the probability of having to defend Sherlock against his patron, and prayed to Cassiel as he dunked his teabag into his mug that whatever he found would not be as bloody as he feared.

*Cassiel, grant me the strength and focus to do whatever needs doing.*

It became his mantra in those three minutes while his tea steeped. But then his tea was ready and John gave up on his thoughts to relax into that first sip, the only time he allowed himself to think of home or the many mugs of tea after his morning training in the temple. Things like tea weren’t guarded then as precious stolen moments of reprieve in a foreign land, and the ache it brought was bittersweet.
Sherlock’s final footsteps into the kitchen changed all that, however.

The creak of the floorboards as Sherlock shifted his weight was a noise John had trained himself to recognise. Both Irene and Kate had softer footfalls, their steps closer together, and usually tapped out in the click of heels on the hardwood. But Sherlock largely went barefoot when not required to leave the house, and his gait fell somewhat heavier.

John tensed, drawing in a quick breath to hold him steady against whatever Sherlock might throw at him this morning. Then he turned to find the bastard wearing nothing more than his bedsheet.

Sherlock moved forward in a manner that put John in mind of a panther slinking toward wounded prey. This wasn’t the first time John felt like a gutted gazelle around his ward.

“Sleep well?” Sherlock’s voice resonated deep and sleep-rusty.

John clenched his jaw, only too able to picture this voice asking this question to a patron after a night of--of--whatever it was Sherlock was going to get up to, exactly.

"Just fine.” John’s words were clipped short, bitten off before he had a chance to say anything more telling. Anyone as trained to body language as the denizens of Maison Adler would catch the telltale signs of a virginal priest pushed to his limits, fighting not to imagine exactly what they got up to.

John couldn’t tell who he hated more for it, himself or them.

Sherlock leaned forward, letting his chest, warm and solid, brush across John’s shoulder as he reached for the teapot. "May I?"

John sidestepped, his face a rictus of silent scowl. He waved his hand in the general vicinity of the teapot, unable to word any phrase that wouldn’t make those thoughts obvious.

Then Sherlock turned that terrifying eagle-eye on John, raking him over. "You take your tea without sugar. Is that a personal preference, or a dictation from your order not to enjoy anything?”

John silently thanked Elua, Cassiel, any of them that gave him this opportunity to take umbrage and escape. He banged his mug down onto the worktop, its contents sloshing out. Without another word he stalked out of the room.

# # # # #

So far John had made a complete arse of himself, of that he was certain. He fell into parade rest just outside Victor Trevor’s door, unable to do more than replay his stupidity from before. The embarrassment and anger banked in Sherlock’s eyes, the mocking sympathy in Regina’s voice. It was enough to twist John’s stomach until he sought comfort in prayer once more.

_Cassiel, just let me get through the rest of tonight, please. Let this pass quickly and uneventfully._

Then he heard the first hard clap of skin against skin, and every muscle tensed, his heart racing. Was Sherlock in trouble? How would John even know?

But the noise that came after was worse. Sherlock moaned, a deep and needy sound that twisted
John’s stomach even more.

So Sherlock wasn’t in trouble.

John closed his eyes as the noises continued, unable to block the images that sprang readily to mind. Sherlock dressed as he had been in the kitchen three mornings prior, only now he’d been knocked to his knees, making this desperate keening sound as someone did with him as they pleased. It was enough to spear John with a rush of--

*Cassiel, strengthen me. Keep me from straying, John thought. Help me be pure and untainted, and don’t let this stupid job distract me from my oath to you. Please, Cassiel, please--*

He repeated it right until he heard the rhythmic sound of skin against skin, little gasps and sighs as loud as if he were in the room with them.

His stomach lurched and John squeezed his hand around his fist, absolutely unwilling to indulge in his first, most base instinct. It would prove he was too weak, too unsteady for Cassiel’s service. He refused to lose this one thing he could cling to. He *could not* allow himself to be corrupted that way.

So as the heat of instinct flushed his skin, he meditated instead on his first vigil on The Longest Night, his first year of service to the Brotherhood. He recalled the way the bitter cold insinuated itself between skin and muscle to dive deep into his bones until he thought the night would never end, that Elua would sense how weak he was and freeze him for his failures.

Not that Elua would, he knew, but Cassiel might, just to weed out one too weak to serve.

He recalled his mediation from that and every vigil he’d served, each *Longest Night* he’d bent knee to the statue of Elua until dawn, willing his heart to turn true and unwavering to Elua’s needs, his future faceless ward’s needs, even when that superseded their *wants*.

The words came from memory, from devotion found that first winter solstice: *Cassiel make my intentions good, my heart pure, my will unwavering. Lead my dagger to the hearts of those who would do ill to my ward, and my dagger to my heart should I fail them.*

But the warmth in his blood was Elua’s, the first of The Misguided, and he knew it was this god’s smiling face he must turn away from to do what needed doing.

Just beyond him, within him, steel rang against steel like the memory of so many hours in the temple. A calm, stern voice whispered only, *Protect and serve.*

This vigil would be longer than The Longest Night, of that John Watson was certain.
Sherlock’s contract included him spending the night, and he woke the next morning still in Victor’s overlarge bed, buttery morning light pooling across the duvet tangled between his legs. Then he realised he was alone.

It made sense, certainly—who was he to expect a client to have a lie-in? There might be some who would indulge, but it wasn’t a sure-fire thing. That Victor had already risen, and probably left orders for him to be shunted out by a certain time was certainly within his rights.

Even still, Sherlock tried not to feel just a little bit disappointed.

Before he could properly stir, however, he heard movement in the en-suite bathroom, muffled by the shut door.

“No, no, he didn’t say-- well, of course I expected that.” It was Victor’s hushed voice, clearly taking a telephone call. “Oh, he’s definitely--hm. All right. I can do that.”

Curiosity pecked at Sherlock’s brain, suspicion sneaking in behind to fill in the cracks, but he heard the sounds of Victor ringing off. Then the click of the door unlocking. Sherlock quickly shut his eyes, forcing his body into stillness, feigning sleep.

Victor’s weight dipped the bed, his hands skating up Sherlock’s exposed calf and thigh. “Good morning.”

When Sherlock made a show of groggily opening his eyes and offering his softest, most submissive smile, Victor’s grin turned wicked.

“I’ve still got you for another few hours--and I know exactly how I want to spend it.”

For all that his predilections were tamer that morning, Sherlock’s remaining time with Victor was no less enjoyable.

By the time Sherlock left Victor’s bedroom, fully dressed and with the slight stiffness in gait that advertised his well-shagged tiredness, Victor had already gone, leaving a tray of breakfast delivered by Regina and a small parting gift in his wake—a disposable PIN card with a note that thanked him for a night truly well-spent. Sherlock had gladly accepted the breakfast and the PIN card, which he fully intended to put toward his marque. Afterward he’d cleaned himself in the en-suite and dressed.

Out in the hallway, John still stood by the door, his posture stiff and his mouth settled in to a firm, disappointed line. He refused to meet Sherlock’s eye, though a tell-tale redness that blossomed on the tips of his ears and neck told Sherlock either he was fully aware and embarrassed of all that had passed, or else he was furious about it. With John, it was likely both.
Even still, it didn’t dampen Sherlock’s good mood, a loose easiness he’d never quite experienced before. He offered John a wide grin and an enthusiastic, “Good morning, dour pilgrim.”

John stared ahead, drilling a hole into the wall across from him. When he spoke, his voice was brittle, rusty from a long night of disuse. “Ready to leave?”

“Indeed.”

Within the week, Irene had made arrangements to meet with her tattoo artist, one who specialised in the design and rendering of marques. After three meetings she declared that Sherlock was ready to see what they’d come up with.

The shop was a far cry from the last tattoo parlour Sherlock had visited, which had been for a case. Where that one had been covered from floor to ceiling with garish band posters and framed vintage B-movie stills and furnished with mismatched furniture in a dizzying array of neon animal prints, Irene’s tattooist worked in a clean, well-lit studio, done in cool colours with sleek furniture in the waiting room. Music, upbeat and unrecognisable, played over the speakers, but it didn’t hide the drone of the tattoo gun.

Sherlock took it all in, tried to to tune it all out with the constant bouncing of his knee. Irene noticed, laid her hand there to still him. It didn’t stop his bounce or his nerves.

Their wait wasn’t long, however. Within ten minutes a heavily inked man came out in neatly pressed trousers and rolled shirtsleeves (of some awful paisley nightmare) that showed off the marks of his trade. His five-day beard was neat, dark hair stylishly cut and gelled into place. He had broad shoulders and a nice smile that displayed affably crooked teeth. The solicitous wink was a bit much, though.

This idiot has the demeanor of either an indiscriminate flirt or else someone whose inability to hide attraction is entirely unprofessional--

“Sherlock, this is my very good colleague, Edward Ames. Mr. Ames and I have worked very diligently to produce a design we believe you will like.”

“Lovely to meet finally meet you, Mr. Holmes. Irene has told me an awful lot about you.” Mr. Ames extended his hand, and when Sherlock shook it his grip was firm, friendly, his fingers strong and callus-worn. All flirtation aside, Mr. Ames was obviously someone who made a lifelong habit of sketching, painting, creating, and who took great pride in his work.

“Come back to my office and we’ll discuss your marque.”

For all that the front of the shop had been neutral colours and clean lines, Mr. Ames’s office was an exercise in chaotic eccentricity: binders of his work and other references were stuffed into the shelving behind his desk, two-deep in most places; the walls an array of designs and notes push-pinned to cork boards. His desk, surprisingly, was devoid of clutter, but from the looks of it, he’d probably done that in the ten minutes during which Sherlock and Irene had been waiting. For now, however, his laptop was closed, tucked neatly into a corner. A large, well-loved sketchbook sat on the desk between Mr. Ames’s chair and the guest chairs opposite.

“Take a seat. The wait hasn’t been too long, I hope?” Mr. Ames flashed Sherlock a polite smile as he wound around to his side of the desk, gesturing toward the chairs.
“Elua’s sake--” Sherlock snapped. “Let’s see it already.” Then he caught himself, his natural impatience slipping through the chinks in the polite, polished armour Irene had helped him construct. Before he could retract the statement, Mr. Ames let out a huff of laughter, holding up a hand to forestall his apology.

"Don’t, don’t. Save your manners for your clients. I can appreciate that you’re as ready to see it as I’m ready to show you, darling."

Already seated, Irene covered her amusement with a soft cough.

Mr. Ames opened his sketchbook, leafing past whorls of stark black and brilliant colour, the flashes of images arranging themselves in the mind’s eye before slipping away to the next. Sherlock could see fragments of winter scenes, of portraits and lettering, stylised animals and objects. Finally his book fell open to the place Mr. Ames had intended, and when he spoke, his voice was softer now, devoid of the earlier joviality and flirtatiousness he’d first displayed.

"I’m sure you’re aware, Mr. Holmes, that I’ve been commissioned to do many of the marques needed in the city these past five years. Has Irene told you about my latest project?"

He tapped the drawing displayed before him, a column of twisting vine-work and clusters of pink-petaled eglantine; tucked into the tangling vines were the words, Créer est de Vivre. The next page showed a similar design, but rather than the vines and pink flowers, this one was a cascade of bright blue gentians that would extend in a wave from the line of one shoulder, down the spine, and spill across the hip opposite, with the phrase La Vérité et La Vision. In another, a riot of tiny purple heliotrope grew upward from the base of the spine and extended along the arm as a half-sleeve. Its phrasing read, Tu et pas d’Autre.

Three flowers, and three mottos. Eglantine, Gentian, and Heliotrope Houses.

"You're redesigning the House marques?" Sherlock asked, unable to hide the surprise in his voice. The current designs for each House were the ones set several decades ago by the main branch of each still in Paris. Traditionally a council from the main Houses in Paris met to negotiate a new design, but the last time might have been turn of the century.

Furthermore, Mr. Ames didn't have a trace of French accent, and it was highly unlikely he'd spent any amount of time there learning his trade. So even though he was House-trained (Eglantine, obviously, as their bent was creativity of any kind), the extreme unlikelihood that he would be chosen over a native D’Angeline set a great bar of expectation for the quality of his work.

"I am, Mr. Holmes. I’m sure you can appreciate the honour, and the work I’ve been shifting aside to make time for your design."

Sherlock felt his eyebrows raise. If this prat was about to flap on about his precious commissions as an excuse for a subpar design, or to assume Sherlock would be besotted with whatever they threw at him, it wouldn’t work.

Mr. Ames, to his credit, did neither. He flipped to the next page, and let the work speak for itself.

Sherlock hated the sharp intake of breath that betrayed his pleasant surprise at the design offered to him. A stark black archer’s bow stretched out horizontally, meant to curve the breadth of his shoulders, the string un-nocked by the arrow that would run the length of Sherlock’s spine. The shaft of the arrow was fashioned from twinned vines twisting, embellished with staggered briars tipped with red; similar red accents could be found at the subtle whorls at the ends of the
bow, the arrowhead at one end and the fledging at the bottom end of the arrow-shaft, which would rest at the base of Sherlock's spine.

In all truth, Sherlock had hoped, hoped he would find something likeable about the design Irene and Mr. Ames had settled on. He didn't actually expect it to pass muster, not completely. He was certainly prepared to argue details into their tedium to be absolutely certain he would approve of the ink that would indelibly mark this passage in his life.

But this? Devoid of the flowery fussiness of colour and detail which characterised the House marques, or the sameness of so many of the few independent marques, which tended to follow similarly to House canon, this design was perfect. There would be no mistaking this tattoo for anything other than a unique, independent marque, and certainly not one that would need frequent retouching for the more fickle colours like yellow and orange. This was a blessing, considering how well-used Sherlock certainly hoped he'd be.

"What better than the dart which pricked you?" Mr. Ames's voice was still soft, his words thoughtful. "We argued over so many designs. But in the end, we found old insignia from the last anguisette--"

He lifted the book to slide free a few printouts, obviously taken from the internet. One showed an ancient-looking sketch in a manuscript, a pattern resembling a briar rose, whose thorny vines would have stretched along the spine of the last anguisette. Another showed a sketch of a flag, black with a single red circle in the centre, a golden arrow crossing it. A third showed a family crest, on which the arrow pattern had been repeated in one corner.

"--and it was that that led us here. We wanted something classic, clean, and a little more masculine for you, but something that still paid homage to your calling and its heritage. What do you think, Mr. Holmes?"

"I." Sherlock blinked rapidly, unsure how to quantify the fluttering in his chest. He was thrilled and terrified in equal measure. Moreso than the old poem he'd read ten years before, moreso than the knowing smirk of a Kusheline priestess, this felt like the visceral connection to a thing bigger than himself that Sherlock had not yet realised he missed.

For once, Sherlock was at a loss for words, and when he looked up to Mr. Ames to nod dumbly, he was sure the truth of all that weighed heavy in his gaze. Whether or not Mr. Ames read it there or not was inconsequential.

Mr. Ames only smiled warmly, his bright blue eyes crinkling at the corners, and scratched at his stubble-lined jaw. His mouth, his shoulders said self-deprecation, but his eyes shone with pride.

For the first time in nearly ten minutes, Irene let her presence be known. "If you'd like, Mr. Ames has set aside time to start today. We'd allotted the time to allow for your disagreements, but as you seem to have none--"

"I--yes. Yes."

Sherlock thought of the gifted PIN card, which had been converted to cash and put into his bank account, a modest thousand which had gone largely to procuring Mr. Ames's time and dedication to designing the marque in the first place.
Sherlock found himself shirtless, trousers unzipped and rolled down just enough to expose the lowest part of his back, stretched face-down on a padded leather seat, unable to hide the shiver that rippled across his skin.

Irene had, after Sherlock's agreement, left him there to his fate while she and Kate went to run errands. Only John remained, still camped out in the front waiting area, likely scowling enough to scare off any clientele.

Mr. Ames had led him to a private room, his public demeanor having slid back into place. "Get shirtless and stretch out for me, darling. I'll be back soon and we'll get started."

The air was slightly chilly, but that wasn't really what had Sherlock shivering; it was the anticipation of the tattoo gun, the god-awful drone, the curiosity of what sort of pain he would experience. Even the anticipation was… distracting.

Sherlock turned to face the door as it opened, and Mr. Ames returned. He washed his hands, pulled on nitrile gloves, and swabbed down Sherlock's skin before applying the transfer paper, pressing it just so until he'd inked the temporary guidelines along Sherlock's shoulders and spine.

"Have a look in the mirror, love. Tell me what you think."

Sherlock paused, only too aware of what his current position hid. After all, he'd been pleasantly abuzz, just waiting for the first marks from the tattoo gun. He prayed his blush wasn't too obvious.

"I--erm. I'll take your word for it," Sherlock answered.

Ames shook his head. "None of that. It's different, seeing it on paper versus on your body. Have a look." He gestured toward the mirror again.

"No, I'd really rather--"

His blush must have deepened, because Ames's eyes widened a fraction in realisation. "Wait, are you--is this to do with your anguisset business?"

Sherlock buried his face in his arms and hoped the table would swallow him whole. It was odd, though. What did it matter if this man saw? Any client would certainly see that and much more, and be just as much of a stranger. Was it simply the context?

Sherlock fought down a wave of anger, at himself and the absurdity of the situation. He was Sherlock Holmes, thank you very much. He was more than the bloody spot in his eye or the embarrassment that radiated off him in waves.

This man Ames knew what Sherlock was, and if Ames was even a fraction as intelligent about anything the way he seemed to be about his art, he would've already put two and two together. If not, well, now certainly wasn't the time for Sherlock to start getting hung up on the ignorance of others.

Jaw set, he pushed himself up from the padded table and strode to the mirror, almost daring Ames to say something about the very noticeable way the line of his trousers had been ruined by his "anguisset business."

The thrill of that, though, the slight edge of danger that came with brazenly sporting an erection outside a client's pre-arranged scene--that didn't make matters any better. Quite the opposite, really. Sherlock fought to keep his breathing even, to appear as calm about the situation
as he possibly could. He drew a deep breath, steeling himself against the surge in his pulse, and twisted in the mirror to get a better view of the temporary arrangement of his marque. After a slight pause and a discreet cough, Ames snapped back into motion, offering a small hand-held mirror to aid in his inspection.

The curve of the bow leant the illusion of breadth to Sherlock’s slender shoulders, composed as it was with the long, thin length of the shaft along his spine. It was only the outline, of course, and none of the colour, but it was enough to get the idea.

"It suits. Let's get on with it."

He flashed a glance, just once, at Ames as he lowered himself back onto the table, mindful of his predicament as he shifted to arrange himself as comfortably as he could. Ames hadn't said a word, frozen with slightly raised brows, his lips drawn apart as if to say something but unsure as to what.

It wasn't until Ames sprung back into action, arranging his accoutrements on a sterile tray, that the tattoo artist felt comfortable enough again to speak.

"I can't tell if that's your being some god-touched anguisset or you just being into some seriously kinky shit, darling, but Elua help your patrons."

To his surprise, Sherlock laughed.

An hour and a few inches of ink later, Sherlock found himself bandaged, dressed, and strolling back toward the waiting area of Ames's shop with loose-limbed, heavy-lidded ease. The marque’d area still stung, his skin feeling scraped raw, but it was a pleasant distraction. Ames walked with him in companionable silence, his demeanor having not broken at all after the initial shock of seeing Sherlock's affliction in action.

"They should warn every tattoo artist about anguissets, I think," he said with a laugh, clapping Sherlock on the shoulder. "You squirm like a bloody squid."

Sherlock merely huffed in mild amusement. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Ames."

"Call me Edward. It was my pleasure."

They shook hands in the foyer before Edward slipped back toward his office, leaving Sherlock alone with John and the receptionist, a dry-witted young assistant named Ari wearing a ridiculously distracting scarf.

"All finished here. Dinner?"

The easy smile John had worn while conversing with the receptionist slid away, locked tight again behind his neutral mask as he stood, falling into parade rest. “I think it would be best if we got back home.”

“Nonsense. It’s only half-six, and I’m sure Irene has already done without us. My treat.”

Sherlock wasn’t sure why he was being so bloody insistent; maybe it was the memory of mingled horror and anger on John’s face when he’d exited Victor’s bedroom, maybe it was the added oxytocin and dopamine in his system from his time in Mr. Ames’s chair. It certainly had nothing to do with the delicious thrum of the pain at the small of his back or the dark blue in John’s eyes when he glared.
John sighed, squaring his jaw. His lack of argument meant as much in the way of acquiescence as having actually said yes.

Sherlock tried not to smile at his tiny victory.

Dusk had given way to sharp January night, whose dry winter darkness made the neon lights for every bar and restaurant sign shine brighter, a sea of red-on-yellow, white-on-blue incandescence. The noise of passing cars and night-time pedestrians swirled around Sherlock, who was determined to enjoy his dinner company one way or the other—if he could not find a way to make the bitter Cassiline smile again, he could at least have fun teasing him until he snapped.

They strolled along in strained silence for some way, Sherlock letting the heartbeat of London pulse around him. Which would he succeed in first—making John smile, or making him punch Sherlock in the teeth? All it would take for the later would be to find the weak spots in his armour and dig in. Getting him to smile felt like a nearly insurmountable challenge—which was just the sort of thing Sherlock went in for.

He mentally kicked himself for concocting such an asinine idea. He and John would never see eye-to-eye, and any progress towards civility would just be destroyed again the next assignation Sherlock took.

Two blocks and several aborted attempts at choosing his tactic for the evening later, Sherlock still found himself with nothing to say.

John actually broke the silence first. “Where are we headed, anyhow?” he asked, his words still strained.

“That depends. I know of an excellent Italian restaurant a few blocks away, or if you’d prefer Chinese—”

“I don’t actually care.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Instead he studied John’s frame, the steady tic of his pulse at his throat. “On the one hand, Angelo’s fettuccine is homemade and I hear it’s rather good, but if you’re more the dim sum type—” that earned a twitch at the corner of John’s mouth “—ah, yes. Okay. Chinese it is.”

John frowned, letting his eye flick over to Sherlock. “How?” He seemed shocked that the word had escaped his mouth.

“You sounded resigned when you said you didn’t care—you were deferring to my choice, since you fancy yourself a station below me, being my guard. Which, really, is rather ironic considering your believed superiority, where morals are concerned.” Sherlock waited for the obligatory rebuttal, but when he glanced at John, the Cassiline’s expression was thoughtful. Sherlock pressed on. “You didn’t react at all to the suggestion of Italian, though you likely enjoy it well enough—you are trained Cassiline, so you’ll make do with whatever is available. When I offered Chinese—more specifically, dim sum, you smiled just slightly. So, dim sum, on me.”

John didn’t bother hiding his surprise—raised eyebrows, a pleased baring of teeth. “That—that was amazing.”

Sherlock shrugged, unable to stop the smug smirk that fought for purchase on his face. He knew exactly why Irene would train him to catch a lie, to dissect a person based on observable
evidence and use it to pull together a person’s confidences or else their coercion. She dealt in information and favours as much as Naamah’s pleasure. “It’s my job to read the details.”

That slight milimetre of progress eroded away at the mention of his job. John stiffened and fell a step behind Sherlock, his eyes fixed on the middle-distance once more.

Sherlock wanted to throttle himself. What a stupid lapse in intelligent word choice. For the first time in his life, he wondered why he couldn’t have been more like the entertainers of Eglantine House, or the joyful servants of Orchis House, who inspired mirth and laughter with their mere presence.

He pushed the thought away; it was no good wishing to be what he wasn’t. He merely had to struggle onward through what promised to be a terse, awkward dinner.
“Dinner?”

John was certain his surprise showed. Sherlock Holmes… was asking him to dinner?

John felt his insides tighten. Of course he would. Sherlock Holmes seduced people for a living, divine though that calling may have been. What made John any different: just a conquest, a game for Sherlock to win at. A flighty, arrogant Servant of Naamah betting his own wiles against Cassiel’s retribution.

“I think it would be best if we got back home.”

Home was safe. At home, John could run through his prayers or his exercises when the noise in his head became too much. He could hide in his room. He didn’t have to face the people he was forced to live with and serve.

“Nonsense. It’s only half-six, and I’m sure Irene has already done without us. My treat.”

Then John made the mistake of looking at Sherlock’s face: usually, every expression Sherlock wore felt fake, calculated to beguile or empower or enrage, depending on what he needed to do to goad people. But then there were moments like these: moments where that facade slipped, and the bunch of his shoulders, the way his face relaxed and those strange eyes instantly shed ten years. Moments like this, where for some inexplicable reason he seemed to want to take John to dinner, for no other reason than to enjoy his company.

It was such an innocent expression, and how could John guard against that?

John sighed in acquiescence.

Sherlock beamed.
The Ambassador's Daughter (Sherlock)

Sherlock wanted to kick himself. The dinner crowd was much heavier than the speedy service he was accustomed to later at night. All around them customers jostled, brushing elbows and chair-backs.

Adding a crowd (read: potential threat to John’s ward) to the strain already between them didn’t help matters. John tried his level best to angle himself to watch the door, the restaurant proper, and Sherlock all at the same time, his jaw tight and lips pursed. At one point a customer bumped into them, pushing John against Sherlock’s side. Sherlock felt the hard edge of one hidden steel vambrace bite into his side.

Rather irrationally, Sherlock wondered what John would look like if he’d found himself somehow shirtless in a hand-to-hand fight: no tame button-down to hide the functional vambraces that shielded his arms, daggers in hand, the grim light of battle shining in those stupidly blue eyes. The matte-black SIG would still be holstered at his side--that didn’t come out until a Cassiline intended to kill.

He stepped away from John, evading the contact, and pinched the bridge of his nose. It would do no one any good for him to go along daydreaming like a swooning D’Angeline schoolgirl.

Who said he was swooning, anyway? D’Angelines, no matter how thin the traces, appreciated beauty. It was in Sherlock’s blood to find pretty things eye-catching. It was his job, however, to make sure he was the one doing the distracting.

“Oh, Liu,” Sherlock said, slipping into character as the harried hostess came their way. His shoulders relaxed, his voice warmed, the insincere edges of a smile tinting his words. “My friend and I--we wondered if your back room might be available? I would be happy to pay my compliments to you and your mother. Is she in tonight?” Sherlock palmed a quid from his trouser pocket and held out his hand, which the hostess caught in a polite shake.

Liu, the sixteen-year-old daughter of the owner, bit her lip in thought. “Let me see.” She held up one finger as she turned to wind her way through the restaurant in search of her mother, Hwei-ru.

“Sherlock, what’s--” John started, but broke off to glare at him as a couple of middle-aged divorcees on vacation squeezed past them, forcing them back against the wall.

Sherlock leaned to keep his voice low and audible, and he absolutely did not notice the clean scent at the collar of John’s shirt. “Her mother is a long-time friend of Irene’s. She will take us to a private section in exchange for recommendation again to Irene’s--erm--attentions. And of course I’ve bribed Liu.”

“Did you promise to--to--”

Sherlock groaned, tempted to wear down John's priggish morals just to spite the stupid Cassiline.

“No, of course not. Not even servants of Naamah are as perverted as you make us out to be, John. What a twisted mind you have--”

“Now don’t start--”
“I slipped her a bit of cash, that’s all. No untoward sexual favors for the sixteen-year-old girl.” Sherlock let the mockery sink into his voice, waggling his fingers ominously as he stated that last part.

John’s eyes scanned around them and he coughed in embarrassment. The divorcees were staring at them oddly, having overheard the last bit of that exchange.

Luckily Liu and Hwei-ru appeared through the crowd again and ushered them back to the reserved section of the restaurant.

# # # # #

Despite Sherlock’s training, he wasn’t one for small talk when he didn’t have to. John was neither a patron nor a socialite for him to simper to. He watched John and the other restaurant-goers in stilted, purposeful silence. John studied his menu and pretended not to notice Sherlock.

After Liu took their orders, John broke the silence first.

“Why are you doing this?”

Sherlock blinked, his focus snapping away from a couple on the verge of marriage proposal to consider John’s question.

Why was he doing this?

“What?” he asked, scrambling for an answer. “I believe you are likely hungry, and if I can’t offer you a decent meal, you’ll just go home and continue living off beans and toast. I’ll need you in better condition than that, if I am to expect you to guard my person.”

John’s squared jaw and narrowed eyes were just short of a proper glare, but then he relented. “So this isn’t any sort of apology for your behavior. Good. Glad to get that cleared up.”

“There’s nothing to apologise for.”

John’s eyebrows shot up. He was about to offer an enthusiastic disagreement when Sherlock’s phone chirped in his pocket.

[Another murder. Could really use your help, if you’re not currently seeing to Naamah’s business. ;-)] Lestrade’s message read.

[We’ll be on our way shortly. Address? - SH]

He looked up to John. “Well, so much for dinner. Bit of a bust, anyway. Let’s be off.”

Before John could protest, Sherlock rose and began weaving his way through the tables and chairs, beelining for the exit.

Outside, John dropped into stiff parade rest until a taxi showed up. They climbed in just as Sherlock’s phone chirped again, and Sherlock gave the address to the driver.

“Where in Elua’s name are you dragging me now?” The blandness in John’s tone didn’t do much to cover his annoyance.
Sherlock only offered him a wide, manic grin in return. Oh, he was about to really piss off the Cassiline.

# # # # #

“I can’t believe you,” John hissed as the taxi let them off at a condemned townhouse cordoned off with crime scene tape. “What is this supposed to be?”

“Earn your keep or apply for reassignment,” Sherlock snapped back, finally reaching his surly Cassiline limits. “I assumed you’d enjoy this aspect of my day-to-day life. You're married to your work, in a sense, and so am I. I’m not only useful for Naamah’s business.”

White-hot fury flashed in John’s eyes, but Sherlock didn’t wait around for it. He turned and stalked off to find Lestrade.

Upstairs, Lestrade greeted him with a smile more terse than he usually had for Sherlock. In another second, Sherlock saw why--the body of a young woman sprawled in the centre of the room, limbs all at wrong angles.

Lestrade cleared his throat, raising an eyebrow at John’s presence. “She’s the D’Angeline--”

“--ambassador’s daughter,” Sherlock finished. “Madeline D’Arbos.”

John raised an eyebrow, clearly awaiting explanation.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Her mother, Roxanne D'Arbos, is currently pushing forward several trade agreements to Parliament."

Sherlock closed his eyes, thoughts racing. He’d overheard Irene and Jim discussing Mme D’Arbos’s work, not two months prior. He built the scene as he remembered it: Late one evening, Irene and Jim lounging in the sitting room over glasses of wine. Conversation had meandered from gossip to politics somewhere along the way as Sherlock occupied himself next door in the study with a tome on criminal history. It was the sound of Jim’s laugh, a smooth and dangerous thing, that caught his attention. Then again, anything Jim did was enough to drive Sherlock to distraction when he came by Maison Adler.

“You think D’Arbos’s wheedling would hurt your business, pet?”

Irene laughed, dismissive but pleased. “Not in the slightest. I only worry that these measures will cause even more of the native non-D’Angeline masses to equate our devotion with something they consider dirty and taboo. So in that way, I suppose I do. But certainly not in the way you mean.”

John’s voice broke his concentration. “Was she in the wrong place at the wrong time, or was this a message to the Ambassador?” Only a trace of his earlier anger remained, replaced by genuine curiosity.

Sherlock stooped to peer at the body, focused on an empty vial near her lifeless hand. “No obvious wounds, no trace of what was in the vial, but I’d imagine a tox screen will reveal a wealth of information. Certainly a message to the Ambassador.”
Lestrade frowned. “We’ve gotten all that much on our own. You’ve got nothing else for us?”

John stepped forward, crouching beside Sherlock to inspect the late Miss D’Arbos. “But if someone coerced her, why aren’t there any signs of struggle? Surely they didn’t just sweet-talk her into killing herself?”

Sherlock hummed in thought, scanning the room.

“No prints,” Lestrade said, following his train of thought. “Whoever was here--if it was anyone--scrubbed the place clean.”

Sherlock rose fast enough to send the blood rushing from his head, spinning to face Lestrade and John. “High-profile murder and absolutely no leads. Oh, this is brilliant!”

# # # # #

Three sleepless nights later found Sherlock and John chasing their suspect, Marcus Smith, through Peckham on foot, John cursing his risk-taking all the while.

“You absolute dick--” John huffed as he sprinted alongside Sherlock, “--if you get killed I will find some way to raise you from the dead--” he broke off again as they dodged a little old lady walking her dog, “--and I will murder you myself!”

Sherlock bit off a laugh, opting instead to pause and consider the best route to cut off their suspect. He swerved down a dark alley. “Thought you’d be glad to be rid of me,” he called over his shoulder.

They spilled out of the opposite end of the alley onto a bustling road across from a theatre. Smith was less than a block away.

“This way!”

John pushed ahead, and managed to tackle Smith in front of a Nigerian restaurant, to the shock of a few passers-by. His victory was short-lived, however, as Smith thrashed to free himself, caught John on the ear, and knocked him off. John pushed himself up and attempted to catch him in a headlock, but Smith swerved toward Sherlock.

Sherlock grinned, a flash of inspiration lighting up his frontal lobe: John wouldn’t do anything more than restrain Smith unless he had need to do so.

Sherlock could give him a reason.

Sherlock half-heartedly attempted to seize Smith, who freed himself once more with a well-placed elbow to Sherlock’s stomach. Smith turned to punch him in the teeth, but before the blow fell both Smith and Sherlock registered the sounds of steel ringing as twin daggers slid free of their sheaths.

“Don’t you dare,” John growled. He crouched, battle-ready, gripping each dagger with deft assurance, angled to offer him the choice of punching with knuckles or slicing with steel. “Turn yourself in. And leave him out of it.”
“You’ve gotta be bloody kiddin’ me! I didn’t sign up for this--”

Sherlock lunged, using Smith’s distraction against him. He caught Smith in the middle, driving them both to the cement, but now Sherlock had the advantage. He pinned him and twisted his arm, using the tension to keep Smith from breaking free again. “You ‘didn’t sign up for this’--who hired you?”

“Fuck off!”

John dropped to crouch before him, lowering one dagger point to rest on the cement before Smith’s face, a deadly reminder of who the man dealt with. “Try again.”

“I don’t--”

Before he could finish making his excuses, however, London’s finest finally arrived on the scene. The wail of sirens overtook the noise of the street.

An officer cuffed Smith and hauled him to his feet. After his rights were read the officer began walking him toward a police car.

Two shots rang out.

Everyone scattered and ducked, but all Sherlock registered were the horrified screams of civilians and the aborted cry that died in Smith’s throat at the second shot. Smith crumpled to the pavement, half his cranium scattered behind him.

# # # # #

Every crime scene Sherlock had assisted with, every violent fantasy he’d ever entertained in the privacy of his little room at Maison Adler, paled in comparison with the stark reality of the man assassinated not ten feet away. Perched in the back of an ambulance, he closed his eyes, blotting out the ensuing chaos of police men and women springing into action. He couldn’t erase the slow-motion image of the way Smith’s skull had shattered, exploded outward. The seat of an entire person reduced to a spray of blood, the shrapnel of skull and grey matter on the pavement.

Sherlock clenched his teeth against the nausea, and drew his knees up to his chest. It did nothing to help.

He forced his eyes open, only to see John giving his statement on the far side of the crime scene. John had sheathed his daggers and allowed an officer to run his ID for the SIG.

Even from his viewpoint, Sherlock could see the way John’s hands stayed steady, his shoulders squared but not drawn tight. The incongruity struck him, sufficiently distracting and more fascinating than the mystery of D’Arbos’s murder: John was more relaxed after close proximity with a man’s violent death than after a night-watch while Sherlock went on an assignation.

Once they were cleared to leave, Sherlock hopped from the back of the ambulance and didn’t even wait for John to catch up as he power-walked away toward Peckham-Rye station. Ever observant, though, John caught up quickly and fell in step beside him.

“No cab?” John asked, his tone gentler than Sherlock had ever heard it.
He hated it.

Rather than faint like a fragile daisy into the warm pity in John’s voice, Sherlock focused on the grander scheme, drew strength from that distance. “Madeline D’Arbos’s murder and Smith’s assassination were merely an opening gambit. Whoever wanted that message sent to her didn’t wait for Smith to talk.”

John offered only a thoughtful nod, a faint smile softening the expression. “Before that, though. That was something. Didn’t think you could hold your own in a fight like that.”

“Just because I like getting beaten occasionally doesn’t mean I can’t defend myself.”

Beside him, John laughed harder than the rejoinder warranted. Sherlock could only guess he was siphoning off the remaining adrenaline in his system.

He spared a glance for the Cassiline at his shoulder, entirely surprised to see the shape of an unrestrained smile, the way laugh lines creased his cheeks and bunched at the corners of his eyes. For half a second, Sherlock’s senses must’ve caught muddled signals from a restaurant nearby—he breathed in the faintest whiff of apples, sweet and crisp like the fall harvest. Just as quickly it was gone, replaced by the sharp January air and the familiar stink of London.

This was just another fascinating aspect of the Cassiline glued to his side—when confronted with his first bit of proper action in the field, his response was amusement rather than distress.

Given a choice between John’s mirth and his own morbid preoccupation, Sherlock let John’s laughter wash over him, bit his lip to hide a grin. “A man did just die, you know.”

“Well, he was a very bad man, wasn’t he?”

Sherlock let loose what could only be described as a giggle.

John drew in a deep breath, reigning himself. “I think I’m starting to see why Irene hired me. D’you get into scrapes like this often?”

“Often enough. Did Irene not tell you I consult for the ‘Yard?”

John snorted, shaking his head. “Failed to mentioned that one. Can’t imagine why.”

Silence fell between them, coasting on the whoosh of passing cars, of voices in the night. For once it wasn’t strained, merely companionable.

“Did you think your job would be easier?” Sherlock didn’t know where the question came from, or why his voice sounded so distant as he asked.

“Tonight? That’s what I was trained for. That’s the easy part, compared to--” But John cut himself off, his expression shuttered once more.

Sherlock could almost guess the way that sentence was supposed to end: That’s the easy part, compared to accompanying you to assignations just to sit by while patrons rough you up.

Sherlock had nothing to say to that, so he focused on the route that lay ahead of them. Somewhere in an oft-ignored place in Sherlock’s chest, he felt the slightest twinge of sympathy for John. He had nothing to say about that, either.
Caught & Released (John)

Three nights of no sleep, of blazing rows and even more incendiary leaps of intellect--this is what it took to get from “this corpse is the Ambassador’s daughter” to “this is where the suspect is, and if we go now we’ll catch him.”

Now here they were, feet pounding Peckham pavement, February air burning in their lungs. Marcus Smith dodged and weaved, only occasionally looking back before ducking into an alley or across a street.

“You absolute dick--” John huffed as he sprinted alongside Sherlock. “If you get killed I will find some way to raise you from the dead--” he broke off again as they dodged a little old lady walking her dog, “--and I will murder you myself!”

Oh, he was furious at Sherlock for risking himself this way. Incandescent. But there was something, an undeniable pull more noticeable than a shepherd’s crook to the neck, in watching his ward fire off inference after leap of logic, in burning muscles and heaving lungs as they chased a criminal, in the thrill of danger and the promise of Cassiel’s clear focus should aught go awry.

He nearly slammed into Sherlock’s back, who had paused to scan their surroundings. Sherlock swerved down a dark alley, calling over his shoulder, “Thought you’d be glad to be rid of me!”

John didn’t have an answer to that, instead opting to lose himself to the call, to Cassiel’s molten steel in his veins as they careened out onto a bustling road at the opposite end of the alley. John caught sight of Smith and threw himself forward even harder, desperate to close the last half-block between them and this case being done.

Before the doorway of a Nigerian restaurant, John leapt forward to tackle Smith, catching him in the midsection with his shoulder. Smith let out a grunt as they crashed to the pavement. John ignored the jarring thud of impact, the sharp bite of concrete at palms and cheek. He lifted his head just in time for Smith to ram him in the ear with an elbow and pain exploded in his skull, blotting all thought only momentarily. It was just enough time for Marcus Smith to free himself and dart toward Sherlock.

John sprung to his feet, sparing half a second to glance at Sherlock, who caught his eyes and grinned. Then the bastard lunged toward Smith and made a paltry attempt at trying to catch him from behind. Smith used that same sharp elbow to catch Sherlock in the stomach before turning, balling up his fist to connect with Sherlock’s mouth.

John’s hands went to the hilts of his daggers, heard them sing as they slid free.

Smith halted mid-swing, and Sherlock jerked up to see, eyes wide enough for John to see the brilliant red speck from where he stood. In that moment John felt that crook around his neck so strong it nearly jerked him forward.

“Don’t you dare,” he growled as he lowered himself into a crouch. He spun his right dagger, then left. The points faced outward so John might grip them for punching with knuckles or slicing with steel. He planted his feet to the concrete, strong-arm out for the jab, weak arm in to block, shoulders and hips angled to make a smaller target. The first position ever taught within the walls of the Brotherhood. His mind cleared of all thought save the memory of muscle, the analysis of telltale movement. “Turn yourself in--and leave him out of it.”

In that moment Cassiel’s love, the love of a warrior and a protector, lit behind his sternum.
Marcus, he was certain, could see it. How anyone couldn’t see it was unthinkable.

Marcus threw his hands up before him, palms outward in panicked supplication. “You gotta be bloody kiddin’ me! I didn’t sign up for this--”

Then Sherlock dove forward, driving his shoulder into Smith’s spine, and sent them both sprawling across the ground. Sherlock sat up quickly, a work of wonder in his own right, to grab Marcus’s arm and twist it back and up, a classic defensive pin.

John was more than impressed. He fought not to grin.

*His* charge could do that. *His.*

###

When the shots rang out, when Smith flew backward and the passersby screamed, John only had eyes for Sherlock. He dove forward to pin him against the hood of a police car, the freeze of the hood beneath his palms, the fragile bulk of his ward beneath him. John squeezed his eyes shut, certain any second he’d feel the shock pass and the unimaginable pain of bullets lodged in his body. But that never came.

Another second and his hearing came back online in time. Officers screaming into their comms, “Suspect down! Shots fired!” Pandemonium erupted as the amassed crowd scattered, their shrieks echoing from the shop-fronts.

John jerked up to frisk Sherlock, desperate to prove his ward was unharmed. Sherlock rolled his eyes and pushed him off. John fell back, the relief so strong it nearly buckled his knees.

###

John kept Sherlock in his periphery as he gave his statement, as he allowed them to copy down the serial from his SIG and quickly holster it again, as he handed his ID over.

Sherlock had pulled his knees to his chest, lost in his own head, shivering like a small child. John wasn’t sure if it was the shock of the situation settling into his bones, or the cold. It was likely both.

And John hated that for him. He hated that Sherlock had to see exactly the sort of crime he solved first-hand. This, too, was a form of protection, wasn’t it? His desire to take the fear from Sherlock, to erase that memory from his brain?

But then he caught Sherlock’s gaze as his ward came back to the surface long enough to scan his surroundings. He couldn’t quite read what was writ there.

A minute or so later Sherlock hopped up from his perch in the back of an open-door ambulance, stalking off toward the station.

John sped through the remainder of his statement and bolted for Sherlock’s side.
The way Sherlock held himself, upright and stiff, gaze fixed forward, somehow reminded John of Harry. Of how she faked strength in front of their extended family after their parents died. That crook at John’s neck pulled hard, made him fight the urge to grasp Sherlock by the shoulders, to wrestle the prat into a hug, to comfort and protect.

Instead he said, “No cab?”

Sherlock’s expression hardened and his pace quickened. “Madeline D’Arbos’s murder and Smith’s assassination were merely an opening gambit. Whoever wanted that message sent to Madame D’Arbos didn’t wait for Smith to talk.”

John pushed against that facade once more. “Before that, though. That was something. Didn’t think you could hold your own in a fight like that.” He let a smile colour his tone, but he hoped to prick Sherlock’s pride. To reinforce that false strength with something a little more substantial.

Sherlock snorted, taking the bait. “Just because I like getting beaten occasionally doesn’t mean I can’t defend myself.”

This struck John as funny, and sad, and not a little demented. The laugh it wrung from him was loud enough to echo back to them from the darkened shop windows.

Sherlock stopped, and John let himself be studied, for once. His mirth was infectious, because Sherlock bit his lip to hide a smile. His expression became a pantomime of disapproval. “A man did just die, you know.”

“Well, he was a very bad man, wasn’t he?” John bit out before stifling something that was definitely not a giggle. After a moment he pulled himself together. “I think I see now why Irene hired me. D’you get into scrapes like this often?”

“Often enough. Did Irene not tell you I consult for the Yard?”

John snorted, shaking his head. “Failed to mention that one. Can’t imagine why.”

Silence fell between them as they strode toward the station. It was late enough they might make the last train home if they hurried. The moment was odd—golden and comfortable in a way John hadn’t found yet since his assignment.

Sherlock broke it first. His voice was small and curiosity genuine. “Did you think your job would be easier?”

“Tonight? That’s what I trained for. That’s the easy part, compared to--” John stopped himself, aware of what he was about to say. That’s the easy part, compared to standing by as the one person I’m supposed to guard to the end of the earth whores himself out to patrons who only want to hurt him.

But that was true, wasn’t it?

John felt that glow behind his breastbone gutter and nearly extinguish; the crook on his neck loosened entirely. It was true, and there was nothing either of them could do to stop it being true.

Somewhere, he was certain Elua was laughing his arse off, having saddled the two of them together.
Helen Belfours (Sherlock)

This chapter contains a sexual scene with an OFC based entirely off my favorite patron from *Kushiel's Dart*. I know some of you might not dig OFCs, so this is your warning. :D

After Victor Trevor, offers and requests for Sherlock’s service came in at a steady trickle: middle-class hopefuls and socialites vying for a night just the same as minor celebrities and political officials. Usually their gifts and payments made sense, although one unnamed movie star did offer him a trip to a sun-drenched island off the coast of Greece in exchange for something as simple as dinner and a movie. Irene had a good laugh over that one--there wasn’t even talk of Naamah’s services. Of course, they turned it down.

Much to Sherlock’s private disappointment, Jim never once put in an offer.

The ones Irene did accept, however, met with little rhyme or reason in Sherlock’s estimation: he could understand her attempting to cultivate information (or at least blackmail) from the higher-up clientele, but just as frequently she sent Sherlock to middle-class patrons with absolutely no ties to any of their social circle. Sherlock had his own say, of course, and voiced it quite frequently: he had no desire whatsoever to go to a man whose idiocy outweighed his bank account, and only little more to go to women at all.

One offer came in that spring, however, that caught his eye: Helen Belfours, a director at the D'Angeline embassy, whose better qualities had less to do with her job and rather more with having been a contemporary of Irene’s during their time in Mandrake house.

Irene pitched the offer on a lark, but Helen’s credentials snared Sherlock’s attention and held it for ransom.

"You're--you're saying yes?" Irene punctuated the question with a short, sharp laugh. It was impossible for her eyebrows to rise any higher on her forehead. "You actually want to go to her?"

"Do you suggest I say no?" Sherlock folded his arms across his chest, irritation colouring his tone.

Irene's expression sobered, and she studied Sherlock thoughtfully. "Don't say yes just because I've made a joke."

"Is she unskilled enough for you to find this funny, or is it that she's a woman?"

While he’d never actually serviced a lady, Sherlock wasn't unfamiliar with the female anatomy or how to best serve it. Truth be told it would be a reasonable opportunity to put any curiosity he might have on the subject to rest. He had other reasons as well, and he certainly did not wish to go into those with Irene.

"Here I've thought you were unwilling to go to female patrons. Colour me surprised. She's quite good at what she does--almost as good as me." With a wink Irene rose, plucking the missive from Belfours from the table. "I'll contact her and get the contract drawn up."
Belfours House was an heirloom of sorts, a country retreat that had been in the family longer than anyone cared to recount. It was where Helen often entertained a guest list that included many of the darlings of elite society.

As Sherlock and an ever-reticent John stepped from their car, the morning that greeted them was bright and mild, promising to warm up as the day progressed. Ahead, the house sat tucked between hills whose grass had just hit the first vibrant rush of spring. Gleaming white fences closed in the extensive pastures, skirting the hills and dividing the meadows as far as Sherlock could see.

John cleared his throat as he brought in the rear, and Sherlock turned to look at him, expecting another argument. Instead, John’s face was more carefully blank than he’d ever seen, and John merely tilted his head back toward the car. Sherlock had left his luggage in the boot.

"Shut up."

Sherlock loathed menial labour, and there must have been something to Helen Belfours’s cunning to have guessed that so easily. The request had been deceptively simple: a rather nude Sherlock was to clean up a large, tangled pile of roses Helen’s gardner had carelessly spilled on the floor of her bedroom, and then arrange them in a vase before Helen came back from her morning walk.

But then she’d trussed him up in a black web of shibari knots that bound his wrists to his biceps, constricted his trunk before traveling low enough to knot gently around his then-flaccid cock and trail back along the cleft of his arse to follow the line of his spine, rejoining the knots that bracketed his shoulders and wrists. Then, with a sadistic grin, Helen pushed him to his knees.

"Remember, love." She ran her fingertips along Sherlock’s cheekbone, the ghost of a lacquered fingernail tracing his skin. "Every. Last. One." Each word was punctuated with a tap on his nose.

Sherlock couldn't help his strangled growl.

After an hour, his lips and cheeks were pricked and bleeding from rose thorns where he’d bent to pick the stems up with his teeth. Every joint ached, every muscle felt the strain of the morning’s task. Sweat rose and collected, rolling in tingling little trails from his hairline. The rough wood-grain was hell on his knees, and he’d have rope-burn for a week. He was so hard it hurt--and of course, the wily bitch had anticipated that when she’d rigged up some of the rope as a makeshift cock ring, keeping him desperate.

Sherlock was fairly certain he was in heaven.
Then, before he was even halfway through the task she’d set him, Helen Belfours returned home from her morning walk, her boots like a war drum down the corridor of hardwood floors.

She may have been barely five feet tall, but Helen Belfours filled up a room. She didn’t need to speak: her body language sang at full volume. Each movement, each gesture and expression exemplified her poise, her superiority in any given situation. She was sturdy, her petite frame all angles and curves, with thick brown hair swept back into a braid that fell like a cable between her shoulders. Softeness framed her face but her eyes gave away the lie--eagle-eyed and sharp, Helen Belfours seduced with sweetness before she sank in her claws.

Helen leaned in the doorway to her bedroom, looking pointedly at the pile still in the floor. Sherlock sat up, a rose still between his teeth. He maintained eye contact, knowing what was expected of him, as he lowered it onto the pile by the vase. Absently, he licked at a bloody spot on the inside of his lip before he spoke. It gave him a moment to think.

If he made excuses, he might come off as too weak, which would defeat the fun of “taming him.” Then again, if he went on the offensive and accused her of this obvious no-win scenario, it was far too literal to maintain the mood, which was key. It didn’t matter that knowing the name of the thing didn’t diminish his enjoyment--the illusion empowered his patron.

It didn’t also matter how well he knew the script she expected--her ire, the knotted ropes and the prick of thorns were enough to make his anticipation completely real.

And therein lay the beauty: they both knew the psychology, the rules of this game. And still, she’d found a way to get under his skin.

“You ask too much.” With that he dropped his eyes, bowing his head, the glimpse of her displeasure speeding his heart just a tic faster.

“What was that?” Helen’s tone was sharper now, her words more clipped.

“A-the hairbrush, madame. A spanking.” Elua, the word alone made him feel like a child again, caught with the hose while attempting to make a moat around his garden shed. The blush burned hot under his skin.

She twitched her head in assent, as if the whole thing were a bother to her. But he saw the way her body went a touch more rigid, even slouched against the doorframe. He’d done well.

Sherlock rose and retrieved the hairbrush with his mouth, his wrists still secured to his biceps with the rope. The motion tugged at the harness, the bit that extended from his torso to the
knots forming his cock ring, the taut length nestled along the cleft of his arse. He fought not to shift against it, to exploit the distracting way it bound him.

Helen accepted the brush when he kneeled before her, but made no move to maneuver either of them into position. Instead she said simply, “Before I reward you,” and here she waggled the hairbrush, “you must prove how much you want it. I know you don’t favor women, as a general rule. Show me how eager you are for your punishment.”

With that she dropped the brush onto the table beside the vase and undid the flies of her trousers, just enough to reveal that she wore nothing beneath but her own skin. A trimmed thatch of dark hair glinted in the sunlight.

Sherlock swallowed, unaccountably nervous. He’d never actually performed the languisement on a woman before, though he knew well enough how to in theory--his training had covered the art of it, though Sherlock understood well the difference between words on a page and a body in action. If he embarrassed himself with this, he embarrassed Irene’s competency as his mentor.

He found himself surprised to notice the difference in scent, on his knees before Helen; it was entirely different than the musky male notes he was accustomed to, but it was somehow no less enticing. He would have to file that away for later examination.

“Well?” She snapped. “Are you going to sit there all day, or do you wish to give your signale?”

So that was her real game, Sherlock thought. She wanted to see how far she could push him, to test the bounds of his sexual flexibility.

With a pleasant irritation borne of being challenged, Sherlock leaned forward and set to work, drawing her trousers away as best he could with his teeth. Bound hands made everything difficult: the cloth clung to her hips and thighs, unwilling to slide loose. Sherlock was close to admitting defeat at such a simple task when Helen gave her most put-upon sigh.

“Here, I suppose I’ll do that for you, too.”

She pushed her trousers down past her arse, widening her stance as best she could to accommodate.

_Naamah, guide me_, Sherlock thought as he leaned forward.

He pressed his lips to the centre of her pubic mound, right amidst the patch of hair, a wet little kiss as he let the point of his tongue flick along the top of her opening. He shifted, trailing kisses to frame her mound as he worked up the courage to delve lower along the smooth skin of her labia. The scent of her tangled his brain in knots, and he knew he worked with Naamah’s blessing.

He experimented with lips and tongue, and the occasional hint of teeth along her labia, growing accustomed and even bold as he tasted her, until Helen’s composure broke enough that her hands strayed to his hair, until her breathing became uneven and she let out an impatient whine.

He knew he had her, then. He went for her clitoris next, swollen and ready as he used his tongue to map its texture, its shape, before using his lips to suck gently, pulling Helen into a rhythm that kept her hips chasing his movement until her hands tightened in his hair and she held his head still, riding against his mouth. He fought for balance, overwhelmed with her blatant
pleasure.

*He* was doing that. Sherlock, who had never given a woman a second glance, was taking this woman apart bit by bit. It was incredibly heady.

*This is mine, too,* he thought, Naamah’s generosity filling him until he thought he’d lose focus. It became so much easier to understand why men had taken Naamah to their beds in exchange for coin, why her gift was as much for female pleasure as for male.

Helen’s movement became erratic before long; the noises escaping her stretched from quiet grunts into a series of clipped, arrhythmic moans. Abruptly she went onto the balls of her feet, her calves and thighs tightening as she rocked against him one last time before shuddering with her orgasm. Saliva and her fluids clung to his chin as he pulled back; he couldn’t begin to imagine what sort of mess he looked like.

Deep down, a small part of him was proud he’d given his first female orgasm, even if it was only the much easier external variety. Just knowing he could get this far made him want to see this thing through, to exceed both Helen’s and Irene’s expectations until he’d brought his patron to her much-coveted bone-deep orgasm several times.

After a moment Helen came back to herself, her smile languid though her eyes narrowed again in purpose-driven focus. “It’s an acceptable start. On the bed. Now.”

Sherlock struggled to shift his balance, to rise to his feet, but he managed. Helen finished dropping her trousers and sat down on the edge of the bed. “In my lap.”

He swallowed down the embarrassment of stretching across her lap like an errant child, his whole upper body aflame with it. Once settled, however, Sherlock found it difficult to keep his balance: his legs were so much longer than Helen’s he had to stretch himself out carefully, perched on the balls of his feet, and his hands were absolutely useless, tied in position as they were to lace his fingers together behind his head.

The muscles in his lower back trembled already with the strain of finding his centre of balance, and Helen ran a fingertip across them. He tried to ignore the way his cock pressed against her thigh, trapped tight within the rope between their bodies. It was fascinating how much smoother, how much softer her skin was than that of the men he’d experienced.

Then the bristles of the brush—coarse and natural—trailed along his spine in a threatening scratch. Sherlock twitched with it, each bristle lighting up a small trail of pleasure. He could imagine the thin red lines that would appear on his skin with each drag of the brush. The thought of being so marked, even temporarily, spurred him to press against her thighs.

“None of that.”

Sherlock stilled, the tremor in his back and hamstrings enough of a distraction that he missed her movement until the brush had smacked against the outer half of one arsecheek, the percussive noise worse than the sting. Still, he lurched, unintentionally thrusting his hips against her thigh once more. After a moment, another fell, this one harder, the pain brighter.

“Count them, Sherlock. One for each rose still left on the floor.”

Sherlock’s eyes flashed open at that, his heart racing. From his position he could see—well over twenty flowers still in the heap. “Yes, madame.”

Each blow inched lower, closer to the thin, sensitive skin where arse met thigh, the blunt brush blazing a path of pain that left Sherlock panting in the intervals. Occasionally Helen stilled
the brush to brush her fingertips over the inflamed skin, which became its own unique torture, as
the delicate touches on oversensitised skin translated into more pain. The count dragged on, until
tears formed and escaped Sherlock’s eyes, until he couldn’t help but tighten his muscles in
anticipation of each blow, until “Twenty-five!” escaped with a genuine sob.

With that the brush stilled, the next blow never came. Instead, Helen dropped it onto the bed
and ran a hand along the trench where muscle ran over spine, fingertips dragging through the
sweat on Sherlock’s back.

“Sh, shhh,” she whispered. “You did so well, Sherlock. You took every last bit of your
punishment, you behaved so nicely--”

For all that some distant part of Sherlock’s brain recognised this as part of their little script, it
didn’t stop the words from affecting him just the same. Her pleasure, her praise, was as sweet as
the punishment had been, and Sherlock basked in it.

“--looked so beautiful, all tied up in my knots, that gorgeous arse red from my brush--”

Sherlock sagged against her, languishing in the aftermath of his strain, the burn still
throbbing, her cool palm sliding against his skin.

“Can you get up, Sherlock? Can you stand?”

He fumbled, finding the strength hidden somewhere to find his balance and lever himself up
from her lap, the clench of the ropes nearly too much from where they bit in, sure to abrade and
bruise if he didn’t get out of them soon.

Even that thought was welcoming. He’d gladly wear the reminders of his time with Helen
Belfours for the next week.

“Lie down, Sherlock. It’s time I rewarded you for all your hard work.”

Once situated, Helen made quick work of undoing the knots that bound Sherlock,
smoothing her fingers over each spot to make certain circulation was flowing as it should.

“Any tingling? Any numbness?”

At each spot, Sherlock would shake his head, torn between the relief of his freedom and the
ever-urgent need to address his still-straining cock, slick as it was with precome from everything
Helen had done to him thus far.

And still, Helen drew him back from the edge of that precipice until he felt grounded, body
and brain in synch once more. Helen finished her ministrations and brushed a sweat-damp curl
from Sherlock’s forehead.

“Would you like your reward now, love?”

Her smile was sweet, timid, and her stern green eyes softened. Her words dripped like
honey.

“Please,” he whispered.

Helen leaned back to undo her shirt, each button revealing the modest cleft between her
breasts, a pale stretch of stomach firm and flat from years of horseback riding. Once free from her
button-down, a lacy, nude-coloured bra was all that remained. Then she tilted her head, clasping
her braid and working quickly to undo it. Her hair fell in thick waves around her face, curtaining
across her shoulders and back.

Until now, Sherlock had almost forgotten Helen had been trained in Mandrake House, that her proficiency outshone his own. Even barbed Mandrake House taught its adepts the more delicate arts of Naamah’s service. He certainly remembered as she leaned forward to blow a cool breath against his feverish skin, her hair trailing along his stomach in its wake. He recognised it as a skill taught to all House adepts, which the *Trois Milles Joies* named *wind in the grass*.

Once she’d slid down the length of his body, she drew her fingertips along the length of his cock, and Sherlock was certain that even that would be enough to make him come.

And yet. And yet.

Helen straddled him, leaning forward to pull a foil wrapper from beneath her pillow, which turned out to be a condom. She tore it open with her teeth and rolled it onto him slowly, gingerly, all too aware of his precarious state. She offered him an apologetic smile, which made Sherlock chuckle.

This, too, was part of Naamah’s gift. It wasn’t all whips and flogs, but smiles shared in intimate moments, an agreement between two people. Many of his clients forgot that, clearly working only to impress him with their cruel creativity or else chase their own delights.

Helen lifted up, positioning herself until the tip of Sherlock’s cock nudged along the cleft of her labia, slick and ready.

“Do you want this, love?”

Sherlock, never in a million years, would have ever expected himself to want a woman this badly, to want his own release so desperately that he would gladly accept whatever was offered—and here he was, Naamah’s hand having led him here to Helen Belfours’s bed, and all he wanted was to bury himself inside her, wrapped in her warmth until he shuddered and cried out.

“Please, please—”

Helen began lowering herself.

Then a sharp series of raps sounded against the bedroom door.

“Bloody fuck, seriously?” She groaned, flashed him a sincerely apologetic wince before pitching her voice upward to be heard through the door. “Go away. Whatever it is, it can surely wait—”

“It’s a matter of urgency, Ms. Belfours—” came a muffled voice. Sherlock guessed it was one of her house staff.

“I. Am. Busy!”

“It’s your employer on the phone, and he said to remind you of your duties. You have an email waiting for your immediate response.”

The blush of arousal blanched, her mouth caught in a worried downturn. “I’m—I’m getting it now. Thank you, Mal.” Helen rose as footsteps receded from the door, snatching her mobile from her trouser pocket. A few taps later, and her expression shuttered, the mood now completely broken.

She looked back up to Sherlock, her voice strained. “I--I apologise. I will have to cut our
visit short--but I’ll leave your payment and your gift with Mal. Please don’t think poorly of me--”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock replied, working hard to keep the bite from his tone. It wasn’t fine, but it also wasn’t his call—she had contracted him, after all. “You have personal matters to attend to. I’ll just see myself out.”

Helen held up a hand in placation, her expression torn. “Yes--all right--” she turned and grabbed a satin robe from a hanger on the back of her door, slipping it on before stepping from the bedroom. He got the briefest flash of her marque, a trail of brilliant purple five-petaled flowers limning the length of her spine. Mandrakes, the house standard.

Sherlock huffed a gusty breath into the silence. He stared down at his erection, which was still existent, against all probability. He groaned and threw an arm over his eyes. It certainly wouldn’t do to leave the room in such a state.

He took matters into his own hands before gathering his clothes. It didn’t take long.

# # # # #

Once he’d collected himself as well as his payment and the gift Helen had left with Mal, Sherlock sought out John. Another of the house staff pointed him toward Helen’s stables, which stood on the eastern side of the property.

It was only half-ten, which Sherlock found surprising. His little game with Helen had started after breakfast, and while the initial half of the game had been an hour of menial labour, he’d felt like the latter half, Helen’s return, had taken so much longer.

A shiver ran across his skin despite the warm spring air: if this morning had been that good, what did she have planned for the remainder of the weekend, had she not been called away?

He dwelled on that thought as much as he wondered who her “boss” was, that they could interrupt a weekend that had obviously been high on Helen’s priority list.

He frowned, thinking of Victor—the same thing had happened with him, hadn’t it? A muffled phonecall, and their time cut short. Both had tried to hide their anxiety, but neither of them counted on Sherlock’s astute observation.

Were the two connected?

It was with that thought running rampant in his head that he finally reached the stables. He found John currying a dappled Appaloosa, its shoulders a soft grey that faded to white across its ribs and flanks, speckled with matching grey spots like a dalmation.

“Lovely girl, aren’t you?” John murmured to the horse as he worked the large hand-sized brush across her spotted flank. “Shame they don’t take you out more.”

Sherlock watched as he brushed the Appaloosa, as John smiled until his body held a loose grace, none of its familiar coiled tension. He’d stripped his customary Cassiline uniform—the dove-grey suit jacket and darker button-down hung folded over a stall door out of harm’s way—left only
in a thin white t-shirt and his trousers. The t-shirt shifted and clung to John’s shoulders, the curve of his back as it dipped inward before being tucked in just above the hips.

Among the sweet smell of hay and the faint odor of manure, came a scent like apples basking in sunshine, sweet and warm and full of flavour. Sherlock closed his eyes, breathed in deep.

_He’s not averse to hard work and strict standards, and very adaptable--he chases criminals and navigates formal functions as well as he grooms a horse, and fits in just as comfortably, _Sherlock thought.

A little piece of the puzzle that was John Watson, Cassiline priest and protector, threatened to slot into place, just beyond Sherlock’s grasp.

“John?” Sherlock called, absolutely loath to interrupt what was obviously a pleasant way to pass the morning for his protector. “We’re leaving a bit earlier than expected--”

John tensed and spun to face Sherlock, his eyes raking him over. “Are you all right? Did she--” He was coiled again, ready for a fight. “Did she ignore your _signale_?”

Sherlock forced himself not to grin even slightly--despite the way John vehemently disapproved of his occupation, he was nonetheless observant of its rules, of the importance of the _signale_.

“I’m fine, John. She was called away on business, that’s all. We were having--”

Before Sherlock could cut himself off, he saw the fire, the concern in John’s eyes die until his expression was stone-cold once more.

John’s jaw flexed, and he gave a curt nod before turning to collect his shirt and jacket.

Sherlock could hear the way John had probably assumed that sentence would likely end: “We were having a wild kinky orgy with every kind of debauchery that you find abhorrent.”

He fought not to groan at his stupidity when it came to the Cassiline; he’d just made the ride home very awkward, yet again.
John cried the first time it happened.

He'd woken up from a dream, the contents of which still swam before his eyes: the inner sanctum of Elua's temple, the sky above cloudless and blue, a blanket of sweetgrass and anemones swaying gently around him in the cool breeze. His bare feet sank into warm soil, soft from rain. John understood why Elua had fallen in love with the earth and its people. Before him Elua's statue stood, the smiling god who bestowed his love and his gifts so freely.

John wished he could accept them, wished he could find fulfillment in Elua's gifts the way everyone else did. But no, his master was Cassiel, and Cassiel was jealous of his own.

Sherlock kneeled at the base of the massive statue, forehead pressed to Elua's feet. His hands and feet were bound in bronze manacles, heavy with Kushiel's chains. The curse of Naamah's grace hung heavy in the air around them. It infected John until it boiled his blood and set his skin afire. Prayers to Cassiel for relief went unanswered.

When Sherlock rose, mother-nude save for the manacles, a bronze mask obscured his face, but those eyes--blue-green and gold, the brilliant red mote swimming in his left eye--were unmistakable even if John didn't already recognise his body.

And his body! Pale and scarless, carved of stone and layered in the softness of skin, it begged to be touched. John found his calloused hands roaming along narrow shoulders, wiry biceps and trim waist.

Sherlock shuddered, a silent plea for more.

*Cassiel*, John thought, *please, stop me. Help me to be strong.*

But his prayers went unheard, and somewhere in the distance he heard laughter, warm as the sun. Damned Elua!

John felt his resolve crumbling viscerally, a dam somewhere in his middle buckling against the strain of floodwaters, Naamah's temptation and Elua's joyous laughter.

*Elua, please don't make me choose*, John pleaded. *Cassiel, keep me strong.*

But Sherlock backed away, the mask and chains still binding him in heavy bronze, but his eyes shone with curiosity. Would John succumb to this weakness in his blood? Wouldn't it be fascinating to find out?

Around them Elua's temple fell away. They stood at a dusty crossroads, twin paths stretching diagonally away, carved from dry soil. Sherlock disappeared, too.
John knew, then, what he must do. This was his fate: to choose, and choose again. There was no way of knowing which was the correct path. One led him to stay by Sherlock's side, to abandon Cassiel and court damnation. The other was Cassiel's path, cold and stony.

Only Elua knew, and his laughter had fallen silent.

John stood at the crossroads and pulled a deep breath through gritted teeth. He stepped forward.

He jerked awake. His blood still beat thick in his veins. Desire and confusion tightened in his abdomen.

He'd been taught again and again what he must do in situations such as this, but he could not find the prayers to work through to calm himself down. Only the rough warmth of his calloused hand sneaking below the sheet, slipping beneath the waistband of his pants, to grip the base of himself, that part long-denied. Even at that, his toes curled, his breath juddered like the wind was knocked out of him. Ten years, he had gone without this.

But muscle-memory was a curious thing, and his body remembered what he'd tried so hard to forget: how to grip just so, when to twist his wrist or thrust upward against the tight ring of his fingers, the slick heat as precome leaked and smeared across the head of his cock. Tears stung at his eyes, the pyre of his dignity incinerating under the weight of his dream-memory: Sherlock's skin against his palms, the soft shudder and sigh he offered as John caved to his own weakness.

Elua, don't do this to me. Cassiel, don't make me choose. Make me strong--

John bit his knuckle as he came, unsure if he was stifling a cry to Cassiel or Elua.

John wondered if he was still dreaming when the faint scent of apples drifted around his room. Against the backs of his eyelids John saw the kind face of Anael cupping a sprouting seed in his hands.

The Good Steward, who promised life and prosperity, the faintest drop of whose blood ran in John's veins. Possibly Anael would show him the way, where Elua stifled a laugh and Cassiel fell silent to his pleas. John could choose to trust The Good Steward to lead him on the correct path, toward life and prosperity, but John still didn't know which way was which yet.

He would have to choose, and choose again.

###

The next morning, John skipped his usual routine in order to steel himself at his little desk, to hunch over and peck out the email to his prefect:

Brother Vincent,

_I write to ask for guidance. This assignment tests me too much. It feels like I will break my vows one way or another: abandon my charge or else allow myself to be seduced by The Misguided. Is it possible to apply for reassignment without breaking my vow? Any insight you can offer would_
be wonderful.

Cassiel keep you,

Brother John Watson

The reply took two days to receive.

Brother Watson,

I’ll tell you what I tell all our Brothers and Sisters: this is part of what it means to be a Companion. You must stare this temptation in the eye and refuse to budge. The love of a priest or priestess to their ward must be perfect to guard them always, and to be perfect it must remain pure. To do otherwise would be to break your oath to Cassiel, whose oath to Elua was certainly more difficult. He stared down the will of The One God to hand his loyalty--and his dagger--to Elua in pure and perfect love. Anything less is a disservice to your ward and a disservice to Cassiel. Damnation follows.

When you swore your life and your gun to guard Sherlock Holmes that was an unbreakable vow. You cannot apply for reassignment. The temptation you face is more than the average Companion, but I believe in you. Strengthen your devotional time to Cassiel, lose yourself in your training until these poisonous emotions are lanced and drained from you. Do not lose faith, Brother Watson.

Cassiel guide you,

Brother Gavin Vincent

Prefect of the Cassiline Brotherhood, London
Further Developments (Sherlock)

Chapter Notes

Self-edited, but unbeta'd by other eyes. Let me know if you have any questions or see any slip-ups. <3 <3

(Hell, just leaving a comment in general makes my day.)

The hum of tattoo guns in other rooms almost lulled Sherlock to sleep until the door to his room opened with a soft click. Mr. Ames cleared his throat.

“Not surprised to see you back so soon, darling.”

Even from Sherlock’s supine position, his eyes closed, he could hear the smile in Mr. Ames’s voice. He suppressed the urge to snap, “Don’t call me darling.” Instead he opted for, “Late session last night?”

Mr. Ames laughed. “On the nose. How can you tell? You haven’t even looked at me yet.”

Sherlock lifted his head to crane over his shoulder. “Your voice was hoarse and I caught the distinct smell of coffee and cigarettes from all the way over here. Now I see your clothes are rumpled, suggesting you either threw them on in a hurry because you ran late this morning or else you’re still wearing yesterday’s clothes. You’re usually an immaculate—if tacky—dresser, but the coffee stain on your sleeve of that hideous shirt indicates that you are indeed wearing last night’s clothes.”

Mr. Ames shook his head, chuckling. “All right, you caught me. I had a client who made her marque last night and booked a session immediately after.” He frowned in thought. “Poor thing, though. She showed up an absolute wreck, didn’t even have her Adept’s Card. All she’d say was that she’d almost given her signale. I nearly turned her away.”

Sherlock huffed impatiently, the state of another Servant of Naamah neither here nor there to him. But curiosity took hold of his mouth and he found himself asking, “Why didn’t you? She wasn’t in any state to get up onto your table.”

Mr. Ames sighed. “She wanted it done before she went on a trip. Said she’d be off for some time.”

“Are you awake enough to be working on my marque this morning, then?”

Mr. Ames rolled his eyes. “I kipped on a cot in the back, and I’ve had just enough caffeine to wake me up without making me jittery. I’m all yours this morning, love.” He gave Sherlock a wink and set to pulling out his tools from the nearby cabinet. “From what it says on your account, you made quite the killing recently. Three whole inches’ worth. You think you can stand my table for that long?” Here he waggled his eyebrows, having grown accustomed to Sherlock’s predicament during their sessions.

Indeed, the generous gift Helen had left as an apology would translate into a knot of embellishment a third of the way up the arrow-shaft. Curiously, she’d left the pre-loaded card with
a hastily-scrawled note that only read, “My employer also sends apologies for the interruption.”

What should Sherlock care about Helen’s employer?

“That depends on how generous you are with the ink,” Sherlock replied, then frowned. Had he really just flirted with his marquist? Intolerable.

But Mr. Ames just laughed. “All right, don’t get your knickers twisted.”

# # # # #

“It’s simply unheard of,” Irene fussed, scowling into her glass of pinot two weeks later. “Investigating--there’s no possible way a Servant of Naamah could--.”

“No, I agree. Having done such a thing would have violated the precepts he swore on,” Irene’s guest offered.

Amelia Chamberlain was the picture of her house canon: perfection. Sherlock could see it in the turn of her smile, the precision of the pin curls in her dark hair, the poise which dictated a straight spine even sitting on a sofa, the attractive angles her elbow and wrist made while she held her wine glass. She had retired from her long service in Camellia House after having met her now-husband, Dominique Chamberlain, the head of Banque Nationale in Paris. They were in the city on his business, but Amelia had made it a point to visit with Irene.

Irene, having trained Sherlock to the fullest, had seen to it that he’d also learned the unobtrusive handservice required in Ceres House, the oldest and most influential of all thirteen. Her reasoning being that it would only lend to his submissive nature and skill set as an anguisset. He loathed it, but he saw the wisdom in Irene’s showcasing him to her colleague that evening: he could be a second set of eyes and ears should she need them. He bowed, his spine a gentle arc as he stood to her dominant side just within eyesight. He held out his hand to take Amelia’s empty wine glass, which she handed over without even glancing.

The topic that had come up, of course, was a recent scandal that had made headlines all across the UK and France: a Bryony House adept in Paris, Frédérique nó Bryony, was under investigation following the death of a British patron during an assignation.

“He still swears it was an accident--that their wager had gotten out of hand. Wouldn’t testimony from Bryony’s dowayne be enough to acquit him?” Irene asked.

“It’s an international incident. He’d still be under heavy scrutiny, but the victim being one of yours--” and here Sherlock was sure Amelia meant from London-- “they can’t help but take a fine-toothed comb to it, can they?”

Irene sighed, staring into the dregs of her glass. “What do the other houses say about it?”

“They all stand behind Frédérique,” Amelia answered. The Parisian lilt to her voice held a sombre note.

During the lull in the conversation that followed, Sherlock caught a movement in the corner of his eye. John slipped through the sitting room, headed from the kitchen toward the stair. Rather than his usual seething rictus, the twist to his mouth held something akin to anguish, desperation. What could bother the staunch Cassiline that badly?
It distracted Sherlock enough that he almost knocked Amelia’s elbow with his knee as he offered her a fresh glass of wine.

Amelia, who had noticed the near miss, raised a well-sculpted eyebrow at him before turning back to Irene.

“So, chère, this pupil of yours. I hear he’s quite the rising star, no?”

Irene straightened her already impeccable posture. “He does me credit,” she demurred, her tone anything but humble.

“Already half his marque complete since his début, is the rumour?” Amelia turned to regard Sherlock with her full attention. “He’ll outstrip your record at this rate, won’t he?” Her voice was pleased, the innocent question laden with a subtle barb.

Sherlock didn’t let that little observation go unnoticed. Their acquaintance was as much a friendship as it was a rivalry, hidden deep in layers of well-wrought manners and flattering smiles.

“A third of the length, but only a quarter of the overall design. But I do hope so,” was Irene’s reply. Her tone made her meaning plain: If he outdoes me, it’s only proof that my teaching is far superior than anything a house or any other independent mentor can offer.

# # # # #

Later, after Amelie had taken her leave and the house had settled into its nighttime routine, Sherlock lay awake, curled in his bed. He felt a pattern tugging at the back of his brain, just out of cognisant reach. The Ambassador’s daughter, Bryony’s investigation, these were somehow linked. Sherlock had no idea how, except that they both involved the death of a person on foreign soil.

He rolled over in a huff, mashing his face into the pillow. He was reading into things, wasn’t he? French and D’Angelines were likely the victims of all manner of crimes in the UK, and the same for Brits in France.

Sleep was impossible, anyhow. Between the hamster wheel he found his thoughts running on and the anticipation of an assignation on the following day, it was nearly impossible to slow down enough to drift off.

Out of bed, Sherlock reached for his violin. The ritual of tuning the strings, rosining his bow gave him welcome distraction. He played a low note, closing his eyes to focus on the hum of the instrument, the vibration of the sound in his conscious. His fingers stretched of their own accord, pressing and sliding along the neck where they wanted, until his mind was clear and the only thing in him was the music.

He recognised the tune. The lilting notes held hands and swayed together. It summoned tall grass on a night breeze, the silence between cricket chirps, a mother humming to her son in bed as she brushed the hair from his forehead.

That memory came unbidden: his mother had hummed him this song, an old D’Angeline lullaby that called Elua’s children home. But why had his subconscious led him here?
A creak outside his door jerked his thoughts away. Sherlock glanced to find a shadow blocking the light coming from under his door. He slid the bow along the strings once more, pretending to continue uninterrupted as he moved silently toward it. The shadow didn’t leave.

So Sherlock played. He let the song drift on, and improvised over it until it held sweet curls of melody, until the sunshine peeked between notes like the promise of a clear morning after the night.

When the piece reached its natural conclusion Sherlock held still and silent for a few beats, and still the shadow hadn’t left.

He jerked the door open to find John standing outside his room, the wide-eyed look of one caught red-handed written plain on his face.

“‘I was just—’”

Sherlock cut him off. “You were upset earlier. What happened?”

The guilty look vanished from John’s face, replaced by that stony curtain. “Leave it alone, Sherlock. Just go back to bed. Or to your violin. Good night.”

"Good night” managed to sound like “piss off.” It was interesting, after that naked expression he’d worn only a moment before.

“John, wait.” Sherlock leaned out, caught John by the bicep. He had no idea why he’d done it or what he intended to do next, only that he couldn’t let John leave just then. “Wait.”

John let out a deep, irritated breath. He offered up a smile that almost looked more like a threat. “Go to bed. We’ve a long day tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is tomorrow. What happened tonight?”

The muscle in John’s jaw clenched. He remained silent.

Sherlock let him go, watched his form slip into the darkness down the hall until it melded with the shadows and disappeared.
Chapter Notes

I have wanted to write John's perspective of this scene since I wrote the original. I am so tickled to get to play around in his head.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John was thankful the kitchen was abandoned this time of night. Maison Adler had finally wound down, its inhabitants content to retreat to the comfort of their rooms. It made it that much easier for John to escape the confinement of his own, those four walls that pressed closer every day.

His room signified everything he’d been thrust into in the few months since being assigned his ward: isolation, kept on the edges of something he simply did not belong to. Not Irene, nor Kate, nor Sherlock had need for companionship, no real care to give him theirs. Well, Sherlock was an exception--there had been the night he’d insisted on taking John out to dinner. It flickered in tiny moments when they forgot who they were to one another, when they were allowed to just be two humans sharing a conversation.

Even still, nighttime in the kitchen was nearly as peaceful as early morning there. John found an unexpected ally in the stillness, in the solitude he chose willingly.

But tonight the faint strains of Sherlock’s violin seeped through the walls, a formless tune he couldn’t place. His hand shook as it held the water glass to his lips. He squeezed it tighter, willed his heart to slow, for the panic to subside.

_You cannot apply for reassignment._ The words loomed over him, had done since he’d received them that night. There was no escaping this. No hope of evading his own damnation, and he knew it.

He refused to whinge in prayer. Or to dive into the release of the Telling of the Hours, for what would likely be the millionth time since he’d come here. Instead, he indulged in a fantasy he’d never let himself consider before.

What if his parents hadn’t died? Or, if when they did, he hadn’t chosen Cassiel’s service? How different would things have turned out?

He could have been a normal man, certainly—one who held a job and had a vast net of acquaintances. He would’ve likely found a wife, a nice quiet woman with a name like Emily or Sarah or Mary. Maybe they would’ve had children.

But what would’ve come from the fire in his heart? He craved the fight as much as the silence. How would that have gone, in this imaginary life? John had been angry, always angry, before he’d come to the Brotherhood. A bloody restlessness in his heart, his hands, his fists. He could only imagine that having turned out poorly without the structure the Brotherhood offered.

He would never have met a problem like Sherlock Holmes. But he never would’ve faced an eternity of torment for that, either.

_Stop it_, he thought. _Thinking this way isn’t going to get you anywhere good._ He sighed, surveyed
the kitchen one last time, and carried the water glass up to his room.

Halfway up the stairs from his bedroom, Sherlock’s playing finally resolved itself into something familiar: it was an old nursery rhyme-song.

\begin{verse}
Beneath the golden balm \\
settling on the fields \\
evening steals in calm \\
and farmers count their yields. \\
The bee is in the lavender, \\
the honey fills the comb, \\
but here a rain falls never-ending \\
and I am far from home.
\end{verse}

John swallowed against the lump in his throat. It was ridiculous, he knew, letting a silly old nursery rhyme turn him soft and maudlin. But he closed those last few feet to stand before Sherlock’s door, praying the creak of an old floorboard wasn’t enough to give him away.

He let his free hand splay against the wood of Sherlock’s door, let his eyes droop closed while he let himself imagine he wasn’t there, that he wasn’t torn between his god and his heart.

The music drifted on until the melody sank into the song’s fields, until it rose with the stars of its descending night, as sweet as honey and as barbed as a bee. The final note drew out, held John frozen in place. And then silence.

But then the door to Sherlock’s bedroom jerked open. From inside, Sherlock looked triumphant to have caught John red-handed.

“I was just--” John spluttered, and he hated himself in that moment. He hated how transparent he must’ve been, how stupid he must’ve looked

“You were upset earlier,” Sherlock asked, either unwilling to hear his excuses or else saving him from an explanation. “What happened?”

Morbid embarrassment replaced all that vulnerability in John’s chest. “Leave it alone, Sherlock. Just go back to bed. Or to your violin. Good night.”

As he turned to go, Sherlock caught him by the arm, his grasp like a brand on John’s bicep. “John, wait--” he looked as startled as John had felt a moment before, glancing down at his hand on John before meeting his eye, blinking quickly away. “Wait.”

John forced himself to breathe, to ignore the uncertainty written on Sherlock’s face. He forced himself to think of Sherlock’s assignation the next day, of the part John would have to play in that. That longing, that embarrassment all curdled on his tongue. “Go to bed, Sherlock. We’ve a busy day tomorrow.”
“Tomorrow is tomorrow. What happened tonight?” Sherlock’s eyes, wide and searching, flitted between his own. Blue-green-gold, with that damned red speck. Damned by his own gods, too.

It made John think of the dream he’d had, where Sherlock had worn nothing but chains and a bronze mask. He clenched his jaw and remained silent.

Unable to find whatever it was he searched for, Sherlock released his hold. Torn between relief and regret, John beat his retreat back to the safety of his own room.

Chapter End Notes

The "song" is taken (in-universe) from a poem called "An Exile's Lament" by Thelesis de Mornay, the poet laureate from the original *Kushiel's Dart* series. It's such a beautiful bit of verse, and I can't express how pleased I am to have found a home for it here. (Fun fact: In the story, Thelesis, a native of Terre D'Ange, wrote this while trapped in accidental exile in Alba or Eire--that is, Britain or Ireland.)

I'm also really incredibly tickled by the fact that I've been able to make this chapter's title into a three-part pun. Like, I can't even.
The next morning Sherlock came down to find John, Irene, and Kate all gathered at the television, shock and horror written on their faces as the news reported an overnight story from abroad.

A recurring clip played on the screen: a building reduced to thick black smoke and rubble. People running for their lives. The clip would restart, and the instant the explosion rocked a middle floor, the scene would break out into pandemonium once again.

“--bombing the D’Angeline embassy in Washington, D.C. yesterday has claimed the lives of over five hundred people, and authorities are no closer to any leads on this tragedy. The bombing occurred at 4pm Eastern Standard Time, just before many would have left for home. The building and a nearby apartment building were demolished--”

Kate turned to Irene, and the horror was plain in her voice. “Why would someone do this?”

Selfishly Sherlock immediately thought of the UK-D’Angeline Ambassador’s daughter, Madelyn D’Arbos, her body left in an abandoned flat. “Someone wants to harm France and Terre D’Ange’s presence globally.”

From the corner of his eye he could see as the three of them jerked to face him; he was too busy studying the image on-screen.

“Sending a message,” John murmured, his voice small and detached.

Sherlock could feel John’s eyes on him, and when he allowed himself to break away from the screen, he nodded slowly. In the space of the next heartbeat, he took in Kate’s indrawn breath, Irene’s pained exhalation, and the way John stiffened, eyes wide at the revelation.

“What--who, though?” Irene asked, for once having lost any semblance of her usual smarm and self-poise. Her eyelids fluttered as she ran through the situation mentally. “There are no overt enemies to Terre D’Ange--”

“Quite the miracle in this day and age, isn’t it?” Sherlock replied. “But that seems to have changed.”
Sherlock closed his eyes and tried to blot out the noise his brain was kicking up: if this were a case, his teeth would have already been sunk in deep, his mind worrying at this problem like a starved dog over a steak. But the bombing was not a case—not his case, at any rate—and he still had his own responsibilities to account for more immediately than playing a political riddle-game. He forced himself to depart their company for the kitchen, to make his tea and collect his thoughts for the day—and the assignation—ahead.

###

As far as Sherlock could tell, the assignation was a disaster. He’d been contracted to an evening with a bloody accountant from the National Treasury, a hawk-nosed man whose mouth curled with his boredom, which only grew as the night wore on.

Sherlock had arrived, suited and ready for a night of whatever the patron might treat him to, only to be led to the bedroom of a posh townhouse and told to strip. When the accountant, Rhys Wilkerson, entered the room minutes later, Sherlock found himself suppressing a wave of dismay.

Wilkerson was an entirely unimpressive specimen: short and scrawny, his features pallid and unappealing. It was the first time Sherlock had ever wondered why he’d come to a patron—so far Naamah had led him to find something, something attractive about all of his partners, something fascinating to lead him down that road.

“Do your best,” Wilkerson had said as he stripped, before stretching out on the bed, as if he were laying down to sleep.

Sherlock’s eyes roamed the meagre stretch of Wilkerson’s body, taking in the relaxed pose, the way nothing about his body at all indicated there was tension or excitement held at bay.

It almost seemed like Wilkerson was as resigned to this as Sherlock was.

Even still, Wilkerson had freely contracted Sherlock. And Sherlock never backed away from a challenge. He would catch Wilkerson’s attention.

He dropped to one knee on the bed, trailing his fingertips along Wilkerson’s chest and stomach, feather-light caresses that typically left goosebumps in their wake. He dropped light kisses after that, absolutely certain he would win Wilkerson’s attention.

It didn’t.

Neither did straddling him, or teasing strokes along his legs and thighs, or even his still-flaccid cock.

Growing irritated, Sherlock tried taking Wilkerson into his mouth—surely with just the right friction, just the right combination of heat and wetness, he’d feel his patron stir.

Wrong again.

Getting nearly desperate, Sherlock unmouthed him long enough to slip a finger into his own mouth, wetting it thoroughly before pressing it against Wilkerson’s hole. Slight resistance, and then it slipped in.

Above him, Wilkerson only sighed, unimpressed.
Sherlock found himself just shy of giving up, of admitting he had no idea what to do to make his patron respond to him—and that was when Wilkerson pushed himself up on his elbows.

“You’re not very good at this, are you?”

The look of shock on Sherlock’s face must’ve told Wilkerson volumes. He felt his mouth hanging agape.

“Here, like this.” Wilkerson rose from the bed, guided Sherlock to sit with his back against the wide, heavy headboard. He slid open a nightstand drawer and produced silk handkerchiefs, dainty little flowered things in pastel colours. With them he tied each of Sherlock’s wrists to the headboard posts.

Rather than asking, Wilkerson looked down at Sherlock’s groin, taking in the slight stir of interest at being bound at the wrists. He met Sherlock’s eyes, and gave a slight nod. Sherlock nodded in response.

So that's his game? Embarrass me first?

He returned to the drawer and pulled out what could only be nipple clamps. Sherlock’s breath caught in his throat—they were shiny steel, rubber-tipped and low-tech, the way all the best sex toys were, nothing more than a single piece of metal with the resistance of a pair of tweezers, banded by a small sliding piece that could lock them into place at any width.

Just thinking about them set Sherlock’s heart beating faster.

Wilkerson applied them with a small, sweet smile, like he was tying ribbons in Sherlock’s hair. Sherlock couldn’t help but let loose a whimper of approval as the unrelenting squeeze of those clamps held his nipples tight.

"You're a true masochist, I know," purred Wilkerson. "You're going to love this."

Sherlock had been wrong—diminution hadn’t been the key to Wilkerson’s desires. He was a sadist in the strictest sense. Now that was interesting.

Next Wilkerson pulled from his magic drawer a few different implements: another, larger silk scarf done in an equally delicate pattern, a box of thick nitrile gloves, a several packets of alcohol wipes, and a thin metal implement, roughly three inches long and gently textured, with a ring at one end like a keychain. Beside that he placed a ball-gag, nothing more than a black leather harness affixed to a hard red rubber ball. He also produced a jewelry box, which opened to reveal a delicate chain and various metal weights. Lastly came an unattractive tube of medical grade sterile lube.

“I am going to blindfold you now,” Wilkerson’s thin voice held a slight, breathless note.

In general, Sherlock wasn’t overly fond of blindfolds—he preferred seeing his patron, taking in every last detail they put on display. It left him with no warning as to which direction a scene may take, no way to read ahead in the text. But Wilkerson’s statement didn’t require a response, and Sherlock merely peered at him through his lashes before closing his eyes.

Wilkerson lifted the large scarf, done in deep blues and printed with purple and yellow pansies, and tied it around Sherlock’s eyes. Sherlock could still see from the bottom of the scarf, in the gap between nose and cheek, but the effect was the same.

This time Wilkerson’s voice was little more than a whisper brushing against the shell of his ear.
“Now I’m going to add weights to your nipple clamps. It’s going to hurt quite a lot.”

Sherlock nodded, his breath coming out a stutter. “Please.”

The clamps tugged gently, one at a time, as Wilkerson added the thin little chains to their ends, and the minute click as the weights were clipped on were the only warning he got before the pull intensified, the clamps straining just that much more against his flesh. The pain, sharp and sweet, thrummed in his veins until he let out a small cry.

“Next I’m going to use this gag on you, Sherlock. This will make it harder for you to breathe--your instinct will be to breathe quickly through your mouth, and this will prevent you from doing so. If you wish to give your signale, I want you to hold up three fingers. Can you do that for me?”

Sherlock nodded again before the ball was pressed into his mouth, and he bit down. The straps slid into place around his head, holding the ball firm. The unyielding rubber made it harder to swallow, stretched his jaw wide like the first bite of an apple. Indeed, between being bound and being gagged, he did have to fight the instinct to suck in lungfuls of air, and had to rely on only his nose.

“How’s that? Enjoying yourself so far?” Wilkerson traced his fingers along Sherlock’s ribs idly as he asked the question.

Sherlock let loose a whimper whose edges were tinged with panic--he had a love/hate relationship with gags. The way they excited a patron were lovely, but there was something about the way this one act of restraint kept his words in check spooked him--not that he’d ever admit that or cow to it, of course.

“What if I performed fellatio on you like this, Sherlock? Would you like that?” Wilkerson waited a beat, but not long enough for a reply. “I could do anything I wanted to you. I could make you forget your signale entirely.”

Sherlock bit hard into the ball, swallowing reflexively. He whined around his gag.

Wilkerson gave a soft chuckle, his lips brushing against Sherlock’s ear. He nipped the cartilage once, hard. “Have you ever heard of urethral sounding, Sherlock?”

Sherlock froze. He knew the practice existed, and the rudiments of it, but it had been largely glossed over as a very rare occurrence, something one patron in a million would be interested in giving or receiving.

“Ooh, you have! That’s good. That’s what I’m going to do to you. Lube you up and slide that little piece of steel right into your penis.”

His choice of words, the indulgent tone of his voice, should have been a turnoff. The idea itself would have even the most seasoned Valerian House adept calling out their signale before the words had left his mouth.

It made Sherlock’s head spin. A noise of protest escaped around the gag.

“Remember your signale. Three fingers.”

Even now, he refused to give in so easily--he was the best, the one most suited for this sort of play, wasn’t he? He wouldn’t dare shy away from this--an act that even his teaching had thought fit to skip over--simply because it was unknown. Sherlock gave a jerky nod.

He heard shuffling, felt movement as Wilkerson shifted his weight on the bed to address the final
implements in his little spread. Nitrile gloves snapped, the crisp rip of a little packet--the alcohol wipes. Then Wilkerson’s voice, low and gentle in his ear again.

“The tricky thing about sounding is the risk for infection. So much preparation is needed to keep you safe. But I’m going to take care of you. I will keep you safe. This may sting--”

And then the cold swipe of the alcohol swab over Sherlock’s cock, the mind-blotted burn of the chemical against his delicate skin. Sherlock let out a ragged, pained moan, his fists jerking against their restraints. And, despite it all, his body wanted more, even of this.

“I had to clean you off. I’m sorry. It’s a necessary evil. Normally there would be other, more gentle ways of sterilising the site, but being what you are, I think you liked it too, didn’t you?” Wilkerson talked, not really needing an answer, his voice only a reminder that he was right there with Sherlock, attentive and caring even as he drew Sherlock past a whole new horizon of pain. A second wrapper tore. “Right now I’m wiping down the plug with another wipe. There’s a difference, you know, between penis plugs and urethral sounds. Plugs are designed for sensation, sounds for dilation. I don’t think you’re quite ready for dilation, are you? Not a first-timer like you. But your penis would look so, so beautiful, opened wide for me. Maybe another time.”

The idea of dilation, of anything pressing into his tiny, disregarded orifice suddenly took on a new and frightening dimension. He was now intimately aware of his urethra, of the pain he was about to undergo being an entirely new, entirely unknown quantity.

“No,” he tried to say, though the gag only muted him until his protest was nothing more than, “Mmph!” Beneath the blindfold, his eyes went wide and fear brought the sting of tears.

“Be brave, Sherlock. You can do this.” Wilkerson smeared a cold, thick dollop of the medical-grade lube across Sherlock’s glans. “Just getting you nice and slick.” His warm, gloved hand wrapped around Sherlock’s shaft, his thumb rubbing circles across the slit. “I have to make sure the meatus is well-prepared to keep from injuring you.” He waited a few beats, apparently watching to see if Sherlock would relent.

Sherlock was close to hyperventilating around his gag, his head shaking side to side. He tried to protest again.

“The urethra is such a fragile thing--it’s easy to tear, prone to infection, but I will take such good care of you.”

Fear blotted out all thought other than Now would be a good time to stop this.

Against all sanity, though, Sherlock’s cock twitched, half-hard and rising.

Wilkerson tutted. “Breathe deep. Calm down, Sherlock. This will be so much easier if you’re not erect when I slide the plug into you. Can you do that for me? Can you calm yourself down?”

Sherlock wanted to give a desperate laugh for the confusion between his mind and body just then-all of his fear and enthusiasm, the conditioning that rendered him ready to show his patrons the depths of his arousal, the emphasis of an erection as undeniable proof of his desire. Instead he drew a ragged breath through his nostrils, his eyes screwed shut beneath the silk blindfold. He tried to block out the tension in his body, to purposefully relax his muscles and even out his breath and heartbeat. It took several long minutes, but eventually he began to feel the fear and arousal recede, a tide ebbing back from the shore. Where before he was a juddering, dizzy mess, he was now collected and merely trembled.

You can always stop this game. You can always give your signale. Just three little fingers.
No. No. I will see this through.

“Good, good Sherlock. You’re behaving so well for me. You’re just wonderful at following orders, aren’t you?”

Sherlock let out a sigh at the praise.

Then came the phrase Sherlock didn’t realise he still dreaded: “All right, Sherlock, are you ready? Can you take this little plug for me?”

Sherlock let out a noise, jerked against his restraints. Wilkerson had only coached him into serenity to take it away, to mix him up once more. He felt the cold press of the plug against his urethra, breaching the first little bit. He sucked in a breath and his body went rigid, sure of the painful stretch to come. But it didn’t, even after the plug slid in a little further.

“Five millimetres wide, Sherlock. Well within the limits of that gorgeous, elastic tissue in your penis. You can do this. I heard you’re so good at taking.”

The plug pressed in a bit further, a matter of millimetres. At each increment, Sherlock was sure there would be pain, but no: it was neither pain nor pleasure, just an odd sensation and sense of fullness his brain didn’t know how to quantify. His every cognisant thought narrowed down to that unforgiving steel implement, sliding smoothly and minutely into his body.

After several minutes of these testing little pushes, Wilkerson whispered, “It’s already an inch inside you, Sherlock. Naamah! Just look at you. You’re doing so well. I’m pleased you’ve lasted this long. No one else has taken it the way you have. They’ve all given their signale before the fun even began.”

The litany of Wilkerson’s praise continued as he slid the plug further and further in, with Wilkerson telling him about each notable milestone—“You’ve taken two inches, Sherlock!”—“Do you feel the base and the safety ring against your glans? You’ve got all three inches inside you right now. You should see the way your penis is stretched around it. You’re just wonderful at opening up everything for me, aren’t you?”

At this last marker, Sherlock did begin to feel a burn, weak and distant, building somewhere in the middle of his length. The rod itself had warmed to his body heat, still slick with lube; the odd sensation being its stiffness, the way it pressed his flesh open and kept it there. It didn’t take long for him to realise it wasn’t actually a burning sensation at all, just the newness of feeling a part of his body he’d never been aware of before.

“The interior of the urethra is similar to the labia minora, did you know that? Just as delicate and sensitive. It’s a shame so few people realise how wonderful this is--but now I’ve shown you, haven’t I?”

Sherlock couldn’t help how hard he was now--and surprisingly, the plug did nothing to hinder his erection. There it was, just the familiar thrum of arousal wrapped tightly around this little steel rod, only three inches long.

The pain at his nipples, the restriction of hands and sight and even his mouth, and now this--Sherlock let loose a string of muffled moans, his body torn between the discomfort and the need for more, more of everything, enough to make him orgasm so hard he’d forget his own name.

Then the heat of Wilkerson’s body pressed along his side, that voice in his ear again like something soft and clinical and warm and strange: “Do you feel that, Sherlock? Do you feel what seeing you like this has done to me?”
Sherlock registered the firm ridge of Wilkerson’s now very interested cock against his thigh. Wilkerson rocked back and forth gently, emphasising his words.

“What if I fucked you with that little plug the way I want you to fuck me, Sherlock?” The breathless expletive, after the detached way Wilkerson had said everything else, went straight to Sherlock’s groin. “Would you like that? Nice and slow, until every muscle in your body is straining?”

As he spoke, Wilkerson grasped the safety ring and slid the plug out and back in, the barest fraction of movement. It felt like leagues and miles to Sherlock, still surrounded by blind-folded darkness and the images his overactive brain couldn’t help but produce. He could almost see in mind’s eye the sight of his own cock spread open like an alien eye, speared by this steel bar; he could imagine the gaping pucker of his flesh whenever it slid free, the way precome would dribble freely from the stretched slit. The sensation his brain had originally interpreted as burning exploded in a symphony of bizarre, sweet pleasure that left him crying out around the gag, each noise a plea for more.

“You, Sherlock,” Wilkerson panted, “you are a rarity. An abnormality. Who else could handle this, but you?” He continued to work the plug in and out, each gentle ridge of its design a new threshold for Sherlock to fight the urge to rock against. “Next time we’ll go deeper. I’ll use my longest sound—it reaches all the way to the prostate. Can you imagine? Feeling your prostate from the inside?”

Wilkerson's weight on the bed shifted, and the warmth of flushed skin pressed against Sherlock's thighs. Then a bony ridge of knuckles, the back of Wilkerson's hand, pressed gently against the root of Sherlock's cock right where it met his balls. Then another shudder of the mattress, and Sherlock guessed Wilkerson had dropped to his hands and knees, arse and hand against Sherlock.

A slick squelch sounded, and the movement of Wilkerson's body rocking back and forth before Sherlock made it all to clear what he was doing. Sherlock could picture it clearly in mind's eye, Wilkerson bent before him, working open his own arse before Sherlock, a pantomime of penetration.

Sherlock moaned again, tried to tilt his hips out to catch some sort of friction against his cock, to stoke him until the only thing keeping his orgasm in check was the slender rod plugging his slit.

If he--how would--could he ejaculate with the sound in the way? Would that hurt?

Sherlock wished desperately he could see Wilkerson, that his hands were free to grasp Wilkerson's hips and work himself along the cleft of Wilkerson's arse. He needed to come. He needed to test that theory.

"When I'm ready, you're going to fuck me, Sherlock. I want you to give it to me just as hard as you wish I was fucking you instead."

Behind the obstruction of his gag, Sherlock fought the urge to smile in frustration. Sadist, indeed.

And still they moved together, Sherlock's whines and Wilkerson's quiet grunts hanging thick in the air between them, until Sherlock ached from the strain of his position, the tension of shoulders bunched and biceps curled, of abs and thighs working to find purchase for Sherlock's pelvis against Wilkerson. But Wilkerson stayed just beyond reach. With each futile thrust, the weights swung on their chains, jerking the nipple clamps until pain of it felt like Sherlock's nipples would be pulled entirely from his flesh and he could scream from the agony of it. They danced in this fruitless mimicry of penetration until Sherlock's balls drew tight and high against his body, until he
was sure he would burst. Occasionally he felt the slick trail of his own precome against Wilkerson's knuckles, only distantly surprised it could slip free from the sound.

And with each whimper that Wilkerson let loose, Sherlock was certain he'd found his prostate; in response that same part of Sherlock ached in jealousy, begging to be teased.

Then Wilkerson halted abruptly. More shifting on the bed, and with a delicate tug, Wilkerson slid the plug free. Sherlock moaned at its loss; only the oversensitive awareness of this place inside himself, the dire need for orgasm kept him afloat.

“I’m so proud of you, Sherlock. You’re a much better adept than I originally thought you’d be. You’ve made me so happy. I’ll untie your hands and undo your gag, if you’d like to try again to please me?”

And this time, when Sherlock was free to roam Wilkerson’s body, he knew: it wasn’t the acts themselves, nor the sensations they produced that pleased him. They were a lovely windfall to the real kink at play: exacting, rigorous attention to detail. Wilkerson was a man who took pride in his impeccable accounting for the Treasury. That his life behind doors would be no less precise came now as no surprise.

And what, if nothing else, was Sherlock blessed with other than acute observation, brilliant recall, and a near-religious love for the scientific method?

# # # # #

Afterward, when Sherlock had been freed from his restraints, when he’d done all he could do to give Wilkerson the level of meticulous attention his patron craved, he found himself stretched supine on Wilkerson’s bed, settling into the sweet ache that came from a really good scene.

Wilkerson, at this point, had tucked his head against Sherlock’s chest and traced little shapes on his skin absentmindedly. Sherlock noted he held a certain tension in his spine, his chest and shoulders--one that meant he was preparing to speak, but didn’t know what to say.

So Sherlock went on pretending to be oblivious, allowing himself to enjoy this rare moment with a patron. It was odd, certainly, to have Wilkerson cuddled up against him--the act felt too intimate, too close, even for someone he’d just had very thorough sex with. He did appreciate, though, was that Wilkerson’s attention to detail included aftercare that sought to be emotional as much as it was physical. It was just awkward, considering there was very little basis for them to share an emotionally intimate moment.

“Thank you so much for coming to me, Sherlock,” Wilkerson’s thin voice whispered against his skin. “I wasn’t sure you’d want to come. I know I’m not much to look at.”

Sherlock didn’t know what to say to that, so he laid a hand on Wilkerson’s thinning hair. He hadn’t been sure at first why Irene would vouch for the squirrely, unattractive little man, but now he had a better idea. It wasn’t the worst way he’d ever spent an evening, certainly.

“And I suppose I should return the favour. Can you remember something for me, lovely? With that brilliant mind of yours?”

Sherlock fought the urge to twitch against the syrupy sweet tone and pet name--it had been fine in-scene, but now it was embarrassing. He was glad he couldn’t see Wilkerson’s face.
“Hm?”

“When Irene asks, just tell her it’s Chamberlain. She’ll know what I mean.”

Sherlock nodded, unable to keep his brows from creasing. So that was why Irene had sent him? For information that pertained to ‘Chamberlain’—Amelia’s husband Dominique? Or a completely unrelated person with the same surname (highly unlikely)? He tucked it away for later examination, just as a soft chime sounded from Wilkerson’s mobile on the nightstand.

“Oh, our time’s up,” Wilkerson noted. He pushed up from his recumbent position to regard Sherlock with a fragile expression, as delicate as a schoolboy. His mouth twitched in a smile, and he blushed slightly. “But thank you. Will you come to see me again?”

Sherlock took a millisecond to consider. The man was devoid of any pleasing aesthetic, and his only lure was the novelty of the scene he’d just played out with Sherlock. Would it be as enjoyable a second time, if Sherlock knew it was coming?

“If Naamah wills it,” Sherlock replied, laying the flirtation heavy in his voice to obscure the second meaning from his words.

Wilkerson flushed to his roots, pleased. He rose and began to scrounge for his pants, and then turned back to Sherlock. “I can’t forget this—” he handed Sherlock a Naamah’s purse-card, on which so many patrons put their gifts as an offering of their gratitude above the assignation fee. The PIN card was matte black with a subtle, shiny relief of two hands cupped together. It was standard fare for patrons to leave their gifts on these cards, rather than worry with leaving a substantial amount of cash-money in hand or else writing a check where there was even more of a paper-trail.

Sherlock accepted it with a smile, and began getting dressed.

# # # # #

Downstairs he found John in the kitchen, chatting with a mousy woman who held a teapot in hand. She was plain, on the attractive side of horse-faced with lank brown hair, and going entirely on her casual attire, Sherlock could guess she was the lady of the house.

Interesting, that. Wilkerson had a wife, one that allowed him to eke out his less-than-vanilla tendencies upon servants of Naamah.

John looked up when Sherlock entered, the familiar pinched quality returning to his face as he took in the sight of Sherlock, flushed to glowing with the efforts of his calling. Then John's eyes cut back over to Ms. Wilkerson, flashed her a smile that indicated he was quite ready to leave.

“Thank you for the tea, Ms. Wilkerson.”

Sherlock ignored the frisson behind his sternum, the tug between pride in a job well done and the scorn of someone in such constant proximity. Then he drew himself inward and up, tilting his chin up to pin John with an icy glare before turning to Mrs. Wilkerson with a much softer expression. "Thank you for sharing your husband with me this evening, madame." He sounded each vowel, each fricative and plosive with enunciation that he hoped jabbed barbs straight into John's skin.

Mrs. Wilkerson smiled, unaware of their silent feud, and waved away the formality. "It's my
pleasure. I'm glad to see him so relaxed after he's had a visit from Naamah."

As their hired car pulled up to the kerb, Sherlock lost himself in thought. Why would an accountant with the National Treasury be keeping tabs on the head of a French bank, and what did Irene want with that information?

Chapter End Notes

FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO BE FOREWARNED:

The sex scene up there depicts urethral sounding, which involves the insertion of an object into the urethra. In this case said object is a sex toy designed specifically for the act (a urethral sound), to ensure the best possible safety via the object itself. And our patron does take good care of Sherlock.

I get that this may not be some people's cup of tea, but I wrote it with the idea in mind that not all of Sherlock's patrons are going to be your standard "whips and chains" types, and that there are many facets to the BDSM community, which does its best to shelter kinks and fetishes as long as they fall under the umbrella of Safe, Sane, and Consensual.

If you wish to skip the bit with the sound itself, I'm adding hover-tags on underlined words to denote the beginning and end of that particular act.

That being said I'm sorrynotsorry for the pun that is this chapter's title. :D
The Wilkerson kitchen was certainly posh enough, all gleaming tile and stainless steel. Sherlock had sauntered his way up the stairs to Wilkerson’s bedroom, leaving John to watch him depart, that same grave misgiving John always had on an assignation, leaving Sherlock to the hands of anyone who might do him proper harm.

Wilkerson’s wife, a plain woman with thin brown hair and darker brown eyes, patted John on the shoulder to catch his attention and introduced herself. He hated the sympathetic look she offered him.

“Care for a cuppa?”

John pursed his lips and worked his jaw in thought. There was nothing to do but wait, an interminable sentence. Whatever John had done in a past life to deserve this—if he were to believe in that sort of thing— he didn’t know.

After a moment he only nodded, and followed her into the kitchen.

Silence sat wedged between them as John took a stool at the island and Mrs. Wilkerson busied herself by filling the kettle, fiddling with cups and teapot, strainer and loose-leaf tea. John halfheartedly hoped she’d start cleaning something, or reading something on her phone, anything other than talk to him. He wanted to listen out for signs of trouble, not make what was sure to be very strained conversation. But the kitchen was spotless and she appeared to have zero desire to whip out her mobile.

Furthermore, how could he really look at a woman who condoned—or at least tolerated—their partner having dalliances like this, even with a Servant of Naamah? Was she weak of will, or desperate for him to stay? Mr. Wilkerson wasn’t a large man, so physical coercion seemed unlikely, but maybe he had other means? John suppressed a shudder, fought back the foreboding that pricked between his shoulderblades and behind his eyes. Had he just left his ward with a mental abuser?

“It’s nothing nearly as bad as you’re thinking,” Mrs. Wilkerson said at long last.

He looked up to realise he’d been glaring at the granite, that she stood directly opposite him at the island, hands braced wide on the worktop.

“We have an arrangement,” she said simply.

“Certainly.”

Content for the time being, Mrs. Wilkerson retreated to lean a hip against the worktop closer to the stove. She pulled her mobile out and buried her nose in the glow of her screen.

John closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He sat torn between the desire to stand posted outside Sherlock’s door to be sure all was well or to sit there in the kitchen and retreat into his own mobile, content to block out Mrs. Wilkerson and anything he might overhear.

Instead he conceded to pacing the kitchen, ostensibly to study the few personal effects the room had to offer. He sincerely prayed he could find interest in a few accent ferns, a framed picture, and
a refrigerator full of artwork from their--

Children?” John blurted out.

Mrs. Wilkerson smiled at him. “Two boys, eleven and nine.”

John blinked rapidly, completely unsure how to process this new information. “Are they--”

“With my mum tonight. We normally have a date night each week, and sometimes I enjoy a night in while he takes his own personal time.”

“You call that personal time?” John asked before he could stop himself, pointing toward the ceiling to indicate his ward and her husband on the floor above.

And here Mrs. Wilkerson only offered him another smile, this one deeper, warmer. “Of course. We all have needs, Brother Watson.”

The expression he wore must have been fairly transparent.

“If you have a friend that’s wonderful for having a laugh, but terrible at life advice, do you go to that friend when you’re having a rough time?”

“What does that--”

“Brother Watson, I’m sure you understand the concept of polyamory?”

Polyamory was something free-loving vegan hippies did, John was sure. Something no intelligent, self-respecting person would buy into. Certainly not respectable normal couple like the Wilkersons--

“It means we trust each other to be there at the end of the day. That in everything he has my best interests at heart, and I have his. This is something he needs that I can’t give. It’s as simple as that.”

Disgust burned in John’s gut, and he looked away.

“Love as Thou Wilt.” Her words made John look back up at her. “That’s the first tenet, isn’t it? Elua’s first blessing?”

Before John could reply, the kettle got up to a boil, and she busied herself with preparing the tea.
Sherlock was absolutely certain he would burst if he didn’t ask Irene immediately what that little tidbit of information meant. Just one word, one name. Chamberlain.

That interview would not come til morning, however, and until then Sherlock had to find the means of distracting himself. He paced around what felt like his ever-diminishing room, considered the violin for an entire thirty seconds. But no. Tonight was not a violin night. It was a danger night, and even tailed by a surly bodyguard, Sherlock was certain he could find some sort of adventure in the seedier parts of London. It was time to go irritate John.

Sherlock stood poised outside John’s locked door, knuckles hovering inches away from knocking. John’s voice murmured inside, and Sherlock leaned closer, pressed his ear to the wood.

“--My Lord Cassiel, please--lend me your strength and your conviction. Purge my flaws--make me a Perfect Companion. I cannot see the correct way forward on the path you’ve set me on. Take this from me, or else release me into Elua’s damnation--”

The desperation in his voice twisted Sherlock’s stomach.

Sherlock paled, and withdrew his ear. A prayer. John Watson, the man whose heart beat iron and gunsmoke, who gentled horses and threatened criminals with sharp objects, now begging his god for strength?

If it were any other act he’d caught John in, any other private speech, Sherlock wouldn’t hesitate to deduce him to shreds. As it was, Sherlock knew too well the desperate plea sent out to a being who may or may not be there. He had intruded, and he knew it.

Sherlock crept away from his door as silently as possible, and came back to it with louder footsteps to serve as a warning. He cleared his throat and knocked, a crisp rap against the wood.

“What is it, Sherlock?” John asked when he’d answered the door. His voice held the edge of wariness. “It’s midnight.”

“Your light was on.”

Awkward pause.

“Yes, and?” John braced himself by an elbow against the door frame and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. “One could hope that I’d be off the clock for at least a few hours a day. Is that too much to ask?”

Sherlock studied him, trying to find the right words to justify barging in on his time. As it was, Sherlock’s time was largely his own, even when he went to clients. How different must it be, to be assigned to a ward he couldn’t stand, in a house that defied every moral conviction in his body, on-call at his ward’s erratic whim?

This is why he begs for strength. He was upset the other night--maybe he applied to the
**Brotherhood for reassignment. He got shot down.**

Even still, John had a job, and that job was Sherlock.

“We’re going out.”

John studied him again with hard eyes, which raked over Sherlock in a way that left him feeling bare. It was odd that untrained John seemed to have the same effect as his brother’s eagle-eyed gaze, as Irene’s or Moriarty’s. Sherlock fought the urge to shift uncomfortably.

“Like hell we are. Did you not just hear what I was saying?” John let out a testy snort, a bull ready to lower his head and plow forward.

John’s phone chimed from his nightstand, and he glanced back toward it before locking horns with Sherlock.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he grated.

Back in his own room, Sherlock’s phone had gone off as well.

[Need you down here, mate. Looks like one of your lot’s involved. Want to see what you make of it before I go stirring up trouble with the Houses.-- GL]

Sherlock’s stomach plummeted, and he dropped down onto his bed, staring at his phone. Someone had murdered a servant of Naamah?

Sherlock thought of everything he knew about sex-crime related homicide, everything he’d experienced in his short months as a servant. He couldn’t imagine how another servant, one who wasn’t wired as he was, who had no idea what to expect in such a situation, might have experienced this sort of crime. It made him nauseous to think of.

In a new message window addressed to John, Sherlock typed, [I’m sure you just received the same text I did. Let’s] but then he paused, backspacing the last word, thinking again of John’s complaint. The man was on-call twenty-four hours a day. Should Sherlock leave him out of it, or offer to wait until morning?

But more important were the time-sensitive nature of the crime scene and the imperative that Sherlock not go out on cases without John to protect him.

There was nothing for it. [Be ready in ten. --SH]

# # # # #

The crime scene wound up being a deserted nook of shore along the Thames, just beyond Potters Fields park. John had been silent the entire trek, though from what Sherlock could tell, it wasn’t the same recalcitrance that he’d wielded back in the hallway of their townhouse. After Sherlock had given him the scant details he’d gotten from Lestrade (merely the address and the contents of the initial text), John had merely nodded and followed where Sherlock led. John’s presence was an iron post Sherlock could tether himself to as his thoughts cast him about.

In an odd way, Sherlock found himself grateful for that.
Their shoes crunched along the gravel walkway as they approached the scene, lit bright as day by a host of portable flood-lamps. Yarders milled around the perimeter, a few investigators snapping photographs of the body and the nearby ground. Lestrade stood to one side, supervising as his team did their work. Beside him Sally Donovan stood, arms crossed and grim-faced.

Sherlock suppressed the twin urges to completely avoid her and single her out to goad her further—since the very beginning, Sally had been vocal about Sherlock’s involvement in cases. On one level Sherlock didn’t blame her—his presence was entirely illegal; on the other, though, she’d made the attacks personal after he’d been called into more than a few cases.

Sherlock allowed himself the time to study her as they approached: she slouched somewhat, clearly several hours past her bedtime, her hair pulled back in a fraying bun that only accentuated the austerity with which she glared at nearly everyone at this late hour.

He couldn’t help remember the last thing she’d said to him during the D’Arbos case, a jab in a stolen moment while Lestrade had ducked from the office for a moment.

“It’s a wonder you’ve gotten this lucky—but I guess that’s the perk of being the boss’s fucktoy, isn’t it? Did Naamah teach you how to solve crimes, or was that your bitch-of-a-mentor’s doing?”

His mouth pulled into a hard slash, his guard raised for whatever volleys she might throw this time.

When she caught sight of him, however, she merely rolled her eyes and remained silent.

Lestrade looked nearly as off-balance as Sherlock felt. Had the body been that badly abused; had Lestrade thought of Sherlock when he’d found the body of a servant here on the beach?

“How do we know what House he or she was from?” Sherlock asked as he approached. “The marque-”

Lestrade held up a hand, shaking his hand. “No, it’s not— you thought it was a servant of Naamah?”

Sherlock blinked, thinking over Lestrade’s text once more. *Looks like one of your lot’s involved.*

Oh.

The penny dropped in John’s bank at the same time. “You mean, it was a patron?”

Lestrade jerked his head toward the body in the centre of all those lights. “Just take a look. I think it may be.”

Bathed in the white wash of light, the shirtless corpse’s pallor was enough to see it had been water-logged for some time. The lacerations and sagging nature of his skin suggested more than two weeks, and that he had been murdered before being dumped in the river: chunks of flesh were missing from the victim’s face, with a message slashed into his chest: VIOLATOR.

Once the on-site coroner carefully rolled the remains of the victim onto its stomach, a swathe of skin and tissue over his spine had been brutally carved away, exactly where a marque would stretch. Detritus clung to the exposed muscle, the edges of skin curled away from the wound, bloated and discoloured as the rest of the victim. Even the muscle had been blanched by the water, until every last ounce of exposed flesh was cast in the disturbing white-grey tones of a ghost.
“Violator,” Sherlock murmured. He pursed his lips and circled the body, taking in what few clues he could still glean from a body so badly damaged by the polluted water of the Thames. “Suspect appears to be in his late thirties, and his slacks and shoes would indicate he was upper-class. The love note on his chest and the strip on his back definitely point us in the direction of a House-raised murderer, but it’s worth investigating further before we jump to that conclusion—”

Sherlock felt the hollowness of the words coming out of his mouth at the end, every fibre of him praying that further investigation led them away from the Houses of the Night Court, away from D’Angeline implication. It was too close on the heels of Frédérique nò Bryony’s implication, to the bombing and D’Arbos’s murder. He prayed his motivation wasn’t as transparent as it felt.

“The ID on the body is Sebastian Wilkes,” Lestrade offered. “Investment banker from Shad Sanderson. We’re preparing the body to haul back to the morgue for an autopsy and dental record for confirmation.”

Sherlock nodded. “And you’re also checking that name against House databases, of course?”

“We do know how to do our job,” Sally chimed in, the scorn plain in her voice. “You haven’t given us anything we couldn’t have worked out for ourselves quite quickly. Must be nice to be favored without any merit.”

“Shep—you—” Lestrade’s tone was a warning, plain and clear.

Sally clenched her jaw, her eyes darting between Sherlock and her superior officer. She huffed once and turned on her heel, stalking off.

In the meantime, Sherlock turned to glance at John. John, who stood relaxed with his arms folded across his chest, vambraces glinting from beneath the edges of his shirtcuffs, that dove-grey uniform suit having been thrown on in a hurry as they’d gotten the texts from Lestrade. John’s face was impassive, thoughtful, as he watched after Sally.

Sherlock ignored the spike of self-loathing that speared through his middle. John likely shared Sally’s opinion. He had no reason to believe Sherlock was worth anything more than a plaything for the wealthy, no reason to believe Sherlock had any real merit as a person.

For some reason, this mattered. A lot.

Sherlock pushed the thought away, and closed his eyes to focus on what they knew. How could he prove his worth, to Sally and Lestrade? To John?

Then a flash of insight occurred to him, though it was one that he hated to follow. It could lead him further down the rabbit-hole toward some larger plot against the D’Angelines in London, and he hoped to all nine gods he was wrong.

Even still, the lapping water of the Thames against distant docks, against the gravelly shore beneath their feet, took on a hollow ring like a drumbeat against his ears. Sebastian Wilke’s body flashed red in his vision, and he knew he was on the right path.

# # # # #

Mr. Ames’s studio felt completely different bathed in streetlight, empty and silent as it was when
they broke into it roughly an hour later.

“What the hell are we doing, Sherlock?” John hissed as Sherlock picked the lock and disabled the alarm.

“Investigating,” Sherlock said simply, scanning their surroundings. The pale, sleek lines of the waiting room now held shadows, slashes of light filtering through the thick wooden blinds across the windows. “We need to access a few personal files.”

“Of your bloody marquist?” John snapped. “I swear to you, if we get caught--”

“Which you are,” a new voice noted, heatless and intrigued.

Sherlock straightened and turned toward Mr. Ames’s door to find the man himself leaning against the darkened doorframe, arms crossed over his broad chest. For half a second Sherlock considered Ames’s bulk, how that compared to John’s if they were indeed threatened.

On queue, John bristled beside him, body battle-ready if Ames wished to engage.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Holmes?” All traces of Ames’s usual levity were gone, his words dry and brittle. “You could’ve waited til morning to make an appointment. You know I’d make room for you.”

There was no point in lying. Ames had already heard their reasoning, and Sherlock decided it would be more expeditious to enlist Ames’s help rather than his censure.

“We need the files of a servant--one who came in roughly three weeks ago.”

“I enjoy the business of quite a few servants of Naamah, Sherlock. To all of whom I have legally sworn confidentiality. Give me one good reason to break that.” Ames’s words were sharp, now, barbed with something dangerous Sherlock never thought could be in Ames’s mien. The look on his face was thunderous.

“I believe one of them may be a murderer.”

That broke the spell Ames wove, the threat radiating from him. He stepped back, arms swinging free, the look on his face sharp-eyed and alarmed. “Murder?”

“Three or so weeks ago. Have you seen anything suspicious? A servant come to you crying late one night, maybe?” Sherlock prayed his memory of that conversation was wrong, that there was nothing to this wild hare he found himself chasing.

But Ames slacked completely, and ran a hand across the buzzed scruff on the back of his head. “You’re talking about--that conversation you and I had during your last visit, aren’t you?” His words came out as a statement, their weight enough to sink to the bottom of the Thames.

Sherlock merely nodded, a minute dip of the chin. “What was her name, Mr. Ames? Any information you have--it may be quite important.”
In the stillness of his own room, John couldn’t help but replay Mrs. Wilkerson’s words:

*Love as thou wilt. That’s the first tenet, isn’t it? Elua’s first blessing?*

He flopped down at his meagre desk, stared at the faded photograph sitting there. It was one of the few possessions he’d bothered taking with him after he’d joined the Brotherhood: a battered old 35mm of Harry, their parents, and him, huddled together in-frame and laughing. They’d gone on a camping trip. John was only nine.

John peered around the rest of the room: close quarters, spartan decor. It still held all the signs of being a guest bedroom despite his months of living there. There was no escaping that he was still a stranger here, an alien in a foreign land.

*Elua’s first blessing--*

Where had Elua’s blessings been, the night his parents’ car crashed? Where had they been, when John’s only options were his drunk older sister, foster parents, or Cassiel’s care?

He closed his eyes, trying desperately to breathe in deep and let it go. That’s what the Brotherhood had taught him to do: rid himself of the anger that flared so easily in him. The lesson was always the same: unless he could channel the anger, the fear, to fuel combat, it held no place in the breast of a Cassiline warrior-priest. All it would do was obfuscate the senses and endanger the heart to worldly ways.

Worldly ways--like his idiot ward, who threw himself in harm’s path for the whims of pleasure and money. Beneath all the cold intellect and calculated, coy smiles, John caught glimpses of a man altogether different. Sherlock Holmes was his fierce intelligence, yes, but he was so human, easy to damage and harder to repair.

John swallowed against the lump that formed in his throat, the taste of green and sunlight strange on his tongue. He recalled his dream--the cupped hands of The Good Steward, his own divine ancestor, supporting soil and the fragility of new life.

This was his new life, wasn’t it?

If there was some way in his power to protect, to fortify the man in his care with ways other than Naamah’s distractions--what sort of man might Sherlock Holmes grow into?

He touched the picture of his lost family. “My Lord Anael--you’ve left in my veins the power to do good, to sprout life from barren soil. How--”

But what good would that do? How could he look to Anael, or hope to build a new family and nurture it, when he’d dedicated himself to Cassiel? And was that to imply the Brotherhood didn’t serve as family enough?

“--My Lord Cassiel, please--lend me your strength and your conviction. Purge my flaws--make me a Perfect Companion. I cannot see the correct way forward on the path you’ve set me on. Take this from me, or else release me into Elua’s damnation--”

Footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor in the hallway, stopped at his door. A sharp rap against his door sounded seconds later.
Face burning, praying anew to Anael and Cassiel alike that he hadn’t been overheard, John answered the door. Sherlock, still suited and now wearing an inscrutable expression, stood on the other side.

Elua, he did hear-- “What is it, Sherlock? It’s midnight.”

Sherlock’s voice held an odd note. “Your light was on.”

“Yes, and?” John braced himself by an elbow against the door frame and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. “One could hope that I’d be off the clock for at least a few hours a day. Is that too much to ask?”

Sherlock studied him. John was tired of it—the x-ray observations, the constant need to school his body language into passivity, neutrality. He hated being on-guard every waking moment.

“We’re going out,” Sherlock answered. Whatever he’d taken from John’s statement was not nearly enough for Sherlock to reconsider the mission.

The fucking prat. “Like hell we are. Did you not just hear what I was saying?”

John’s phone chimed from his nightstand. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Sherlock retreated and John only barely kept from slamming the door shut. It was a text from Lestrade, and shortly thereafter another from Sherlock.

There was a case on—which meant John’s spoiled ward got his way again.

#
#
#
#

Wind gusted in from the Thames, lashing at their bodies as Sherlock and John stalked down to the crime scene. The stink of river water was thankfully still subdued by the chilly nighttime air of spring. The river and nearby park held the hum of the city at bay. Ahead of them, industrial lamps and milling bodies led them directly to the crime scene.

Periodically Sherlock glanced at him, but John kept his gaze straight ahead, unwilling to engage him in some petty squabble here at a crime scene.

When they reached the perimeter of the scene, Lestrade gave them a distracted nod as he carried on with a few of his crew. Beside him, Sally simmered.

John genuinely hoped both Sherlock and she would refrain from sharpening their claws. He didn’t have nearly enough energy for it.

Neither did the two of them—Sherlock kept his mouth shut and Sally only rolled her eyes.

When John looked down to the body, he understood why.

John had seen a good deal of unpleasant things in his day—he’d opted to take rudimentary emergency medical training during his rearing within the walls of the Brotherhood; he’d pored over the same manuals and anatomical studies as his peers as they dissected what each point of damage resulted in for an assailant, what it might mean for their ward.
Still, it did nothing to prepare John for what they found at this scene: the fluorescent light from the flood-lamps washed the shirtless corpse white and chalky. The lacerations and patchwork stab wounds were nothing to the missing chunks of the victim’s face. A message had been slashed into his chest: VIOLATOR.

Once the on-site coroner carefully rolled the remains of the victim onto its stomach, a swathe of skin and tissue over his spine had been brutally carved away. Detritus clung to the exposed muscle. The edges of skin curled away from the wound, bloated and discoloured as the rest of the victim. Even the muscle had been blanched by the water until every last ounce of exposed flesh was cast in the disturbing white-grey tones of a ghost.

Nausea roiled in John’s middle. All he could think was that if he ever failed in his duty, this could easily be his ward. That body could be Sherlock.

*I'd rather perform the Terminus than let this happen, John thought.*

“Do we know what House he was from?” Sherlock asked as he approached. “The marque--”

Lestrade held up a hand, shaking his hand. “No, it’s not--you thought it was a servant of Naamah?”

That gave John a proper jolt of surprise. Even Sherlock looked dumbstruck. “You mean, it was a patron?”

Lestrade jerked his head toward the body in the centre of all those lights. “Just take a look. I think it may be.”

But once Sherlock had switched tracks, John could see him gearing up to zoom ahead: “Violator,” Sherlock murmured. “Suspect appears to be in his late thirties, and his slacks and shoes would indicate he was upper-class. The love note on his chest and the strip on his back definitely point us in the direction of a House-raised murderer, but it’s worth investigating further before we jump to that conclusion...” Sherlock trailed off, nearly as bloodless as the corpse.

“The ID on the body is Sebastian Wilkes,” Lestrade offered. “Investment banker from Shad Sanderson. We’re preparing the body to haul back to the morgue for an autopsy and dental record for confirmation.”

Sherlock nodded. “And you’re also checking that name against House databases, of course?”

“We do know how to do our job,” Sally chimed in, the scorn plain in her voice. “You haven’t given us anything we couldn’t have worked out for ourselves quite quickly. Must be nice to be favored without any merit.”

“Sally--” Lestrade’s tone was a warning, plain and clear.

Sally clenched her jaw, her eyes darting between Sherlock and her superior officer. She huffed once and turned on her heel, stalking off.

John relaxed into his customary parade rest, then, barely comforted to be granted a reprieve from Sherlock’s and Sally’s ridiculous fighting. It wasn’t necessarily that he disagreed with her most of the time--he hated the way they baited one another. It was a childish waste of time.

John caught Sherlock glancing at him, then. Sherlock’s expression betrayed a flicker of fragility before he shook it off, closed his eyes to think. That moment, though: the marginal widening of those eyes, blue-green-gold with that unmistakable red mote, the minute slackening of the jaw--little more than parting the lips, really--was just another pang straight to John’s sternum.
Sherlock was a good man, valued only for his worth as a sodding temple prostitute, really, rather than the genius brain and slippery, well-hidden good will lurking just beneath a pretty veneer. What would he have been like, as a member of the Brotherhood? How would the Cassilines have polished so rough a gem?

Granted, it was damned difficult even for John to see it most times. But it was infuriating that neither Sherlock nor the people around him even tried to grasp his true worth.
“Her name was Cecily Noualt.”

Ames had led them to his office, turned on the one LED desk lamp tucked into the corner. Around it lay scattered all his latest sketches, drafts of various marques with doodles tucked into the margins. A cup of cold coffee, long-abandoned, sat forgotten by his printer. He dropped into his office chair, leaving Sherlock to pace and John to stand in the doorway.

“Do go on.” Sherlock stopped pacing long enough to cut his marquist a rude glare. “We’re not here for a crime drama. A man has been murdered.”

Ames nodded. “She was from Camillia House.”

“Sans faute ou un défaut,” Sherlock muttered absently.

“Honestly I was surprised she’d made her marque when she came to me.” Ames leaned forward and toyed with the corner of an sketch absently. To Sherlock, Ames seemed far more tired, older than Sherlock had yet seen him. His always-smiling mouth felt the gravitational tug down to a haggard, half-hearted frown.

“Why’s that?” John asked from where he leaned against the closed door, arms crossed over his chest. The edges of his vambraces glinted in the lamplight.

“A few years ago some bastard cut her face up. She wasn’t fit to serve any longer.”

Sherlock frowned. “If that had happened, there would be a record of who had done it, and legal action taken. Unless—it happened outside the House, didn’t it? Not on assignation.”

Ames shrugged. “Not sure. It was all the talk of the Houses when it happened--there had been rumours of Noualt making Second when she made her marque.”

John tilted his head in thought. “Is it--I may be wrong, but wouldn’t the House sell or release her marque if she was no longer fit to serve?” Disgust curled at the edges of his lips, Sherlock was certain.

“But she could still provide the House with some sort of service or make them some sort of income,” Sherlock answered. “I have no idea what that would be, in her case. In Houses like Eglantine,” here he nodded to Ames, “it’s a little more obvious. They could still work within their chosen art form to make money for the House, and if they never received a single patron-gift,
they’d never make their marque.”

Ames nodded, grim-faced.

“But Camillia, that’s—that’s basically a bunch of supermodels, isn’t it? What could they possibly do other than look pretty?”

Sherlock couldn’t help but turn a growing grin on John, then. “Excellent question.”

# # # # #

By the time they left Ames’s office, the night owls had gone to roost, and the early-risers were beginning their day. Only a few hours shy of dawn, and London began another cycle of its bloom. Several blocks away from a Tube station and taxis in short supply, they resigned themselves to the long walk to get to either.

Despite the warmth of spring in the daytime, before dawn the air held the chill of a winter it couldn’t quite shake off. Sherlock shrugged, burying deeper into his Belstaff. The sangoire lining within the upturned collar caught on the hint of stubble forming on his jaw. His eyes burned, and he was tired enough he could feel his brain grinding to a halt until he’d had some sleep and something to eat.

He blamed that on having essentially gone from an assignation to a crime scene with only a stop at home for a change of clothes.

“You all right, there?” An unfamiliar note of concern coloured John’s question.

“Hm? Yes, sure.”

“You were saying something, and you just stopped.”

“I--”

“S’at what I think it is?” A new voice curled up from an alleyway beside them. “All manicured, pretty enough to be a girl? One’a dem French whore-boys, innit? Who’s this, your boyfriend?”

Another voice let out a laugh, and when Sherlock and John turned they saw three men emerging from the shadows. The ringleader was taller than Sherlock and twice as wide, all muscle.

Another guy with a neck tattoo chimed in, “Nah, bruv, dat’s ‘is happy customer, innit?”

Sherlock, who’d been coasting on the dregs of sleep deprivation, woke to the burn of adrenaline, of fight-or-flight in his system. Beside him John stilled. He shifted, body coiled and ready for action.

“It’d be best if you just move along,” John said, his voice mild in warning.


“When you’ve saved up enough drug money to afford his contract rates, by all means. Until then,
walk along.” Steel shone cold in John’s voice, so hard and sharp it cut right through John acknowledging Sherlock’s profession.

The other two, likely hoping to have their turn once their fearless leader was done, fanned out to circle Sherlock and John. Beside him John tensed completely and angled himself to block Sherlock from two of the three thugs.

“If anything happens, just get away as fast as you can. Don’t worry about me,” John whispered. Sherlock nodded once as he stared down one thug, a wiry man with meth-teeth who blew him a kiss. Beside him, Neck Tattoo licked his thick lips. Sherlock watched as a droplet of sweat ran along the whorls of faded ink.

“Move along,” John warned again.

Rather than heed his advice, the ringleader threw himself forward with a grunt, and John went into action.

Without even removing his daggers, John slid forward, body moving like water as he swung one arm out to catch Ringleader’s inner wrist, knocked the switchblade free. It clattered on the ground beside them. Ringleader let out a grunt of surprise as he scrabbled for his knife--

But as all that happened the other two lurched forward. Meth-Teeth grabbed Sherlock by the wrist, trying to spin him round and push him into the alleyway. Sherlock stumbled but kept his feet, then used that forward momentum to drive himself and Meth-Teeth to the ground. Before he could get a hit in, a sharp tug at his collar brought the fabric right against his windpipe.

He saw stars. Neck Tattoo grunted and hauled him up, shoved him against the brick. Neck Tattoo stifled Sherlock with a massive hand over Sherlock’s mouth, his bulk heavy against Sherlock, his breath hot and sour. Sherlock could feel the hard bulge of a dormant switchblade in Neck Tattoo’s trouser pocket. Beside that grew another bulge, which scared Sherlock even more. Brick mortar cut into Sherlock’s palms and all he could think was, Oh, Elua, not this--no--

Sherlock heard John’s yell not ten feet away, muddled like noise through deep water. He tried to slip his fingers into Neck Tattoo’s pocket to prise the knife free, use it to gain his freedom, but there was no room to maneuver.

That was about the time Sherlock registered the metallic ring of John’s daggers sliding free of their sheaths.

“Sherlock, down!” This time the cry came through clear as a bell, and Sherlock ducked in time for John to pitch one blade forward--it spun end over end until it sank into the soft join where Neck Tattoo’s arm met shoulder.

Neck Tattoo screamed.

Sherlock barely had time to slide free before Neck Tattoo dropped to his knees. He turned, jerked John’s dagger free from its new home just in time to see Meth-Teeth clamber to his feet and Ringleader tackle John to the ground.

Sherlock spared a glance for Neck Tattoo, who was well and truly out of the fight. If he’d not been trapped by that bastard not forty seconds before, he’d be alarmed at the amount of blood gushing from the wound.

With a terrified whimper, Meth-Teeth scrambled back from where he rose. He turned and fled, trainers pounding the pavement.
“So you’re one’a dem fancy guards, then?” Ringleader cried. “Bet they didn’t train you in anything useful, did they?”

Ringleader leaned up from where he straddled John, drawing back to punch. John bucked, catching Ringleader in the groin before thrusting the butt of his remaining dagger to pound into Ringleader’s temple. It knocked him off balance just enough for John to scramble free, which was all the advantage he needed. John rose and spun, his boot catching Ringleader in the sternum before John found centre again. Already John’s eye began to swell. Abrasions on his ear and cheek gleamed red and wet in the streetlight.

Ringleader sprawled for a second before screaming in rage. He clutched at his temple as he scurried to regain his feet again. His free hand disappeared behind his back before reappearing—with a gun trained on John.

“Back the fuck off!” Ringleader shouted. “I ain’t wanna hafta go this way, blud, but you ain’t just leave us with the birdie over there—”

Before he could say anything else two shots echoed, deafening. Ringleader slumped and hit the pavement dead.

Sherlock couldn’t help but stare wide-eyed at the body on the street before him. “John—we’ve got to—”

But John, still calm, shook his head. “We have to stay and sort this out with the authorities. He pulled a gun on us, so I was within my vows.” But now the the steel in his voice was gone, replaced by a waiver Sherlock barely caught. Whether it was at the act he’d just committed or the prospect of facing authorities, Sherlock wasn’t sure.

Cassilines did not draw their guns unless they intended to kill, a last-ditch effort to protect their ward. It was part of their training and therefore their legal right to carry a firearm. In the social circles Cassilines usually found themselves, reason to use it was extremely rare. Precedent with authorities in this weren’t well-known, and it was reasonable to fear the outcome.

John pulled out his mobile, tapped out a number and hit send.

“Hello? Yes, my name is Brother John Watson, and I need to report an incident.”

# # # # #

After several hours of interrogation and conference with his superior, Brother Vincent, John and Sherlock were released. If it had gone any more smoothly, Sherlock would’ve suspected Mycroft was involved.

# # # # #

Over the breakfast table several hours later, Sherlock ignored his tea as Irene questioned him about his assignation with Wilkerson. Even after a scant few hours of sleep, that assignation felt like
days ago to Sherlock, with all that had happened afterward.

“All he said was ‘Chamberlain,’” Sherlock said.

Irene sat back in her chair, looking pleased. “Chamberlain, hm? That explains a good deal.”

Sherlock laced his fingers together and pinned her with a raised brow. “Explains what, exactly?”

Irene turned a coy smile on him, clearly evasive. “I didn’t take you on as an adept to question me, did I?”

“No, but you trained me to question everyone’s motivations. What does it explain?”

Irene rose from her seat with a sigh. “Fair enough.” She tapped her finger against the table, thinking. “I have reason to believe that Victor Trevor has blown through his inheritance, and yet he can still afford his lifestyle—which includes paying handsome sums to secure the virgin-price for a very rare adept of Naamah’s service.” She inclined her head to Sherlock, as if her meaning weren’t already plain. “Naturally I would question where his funds come from, when they can so directly benefit my coffers.”

Sherlock nodded. “So Dominique Chamberlain, then?”

“Obviously. But I have no idea why Dominique would risk his own fortune—or embezzle from the Banque Nationale—for one lordling’s son with whom he has no obvious connection.”

“And that’s where I come in, isn’t it?”

Irene’s grin was sharklike. “Good boy.”

Sherlock bristled at that, but said nothing.

“Even before he contracted you, I knew he’d been dallying at the Houses far too frequently for someone whose assets were seized when he was investigated years ago. When the officials released them, he burned through it all fairly quickly. He’s always had a weakness for Naamah’s gifts.”

Sherlock sat back in his seat, wheels turning quickly in his mind. Victor was receiving money from an unrelated source—Chamberlain—in order to keep up appearances? To continue indulging in everything the Houses had to offer?

“Which Houses does he frequent?” Sherlock asked.

“All of them,” Irene replied. “He visits them as whim dictates.”

Sherlock steepled his fingers, pressing his lips to them. In his mind, puzzle pieces drifted closer to fitting together. “Has that rate increased significantly since he’s started receiving this money? When did it start?”

Irene shrugged. “I’m not sure. I know he was shy of bankruptcy only a year ago. But now? There’s no way he could’ve invested or even shimmied his way into the pants of someone willing to make him a kept man. So I’d say that yes, he does visit the Houses far more frequently than he ought these days. Why?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No reason.”

“Sherlock…” she drawled.
But before she could finish, her mobile rang. The moment was lost. She glanced down to it and a smile broke across her face. She lifted it, pressed answer before pressing it to her ear. “Ah, Jim, sweetheart!”

She turned and exited quickly, Sherlock watching as she left. He spared a moment to think of Jim, of the still-banked desire to find out what Kushiel’s scion could offer Kushiel’s chosen. Sherlock indulged in a pleasant shudder as he reached for his mobile and pulled up Lestrade’s number.


# # # # #

Several hours later, Sherlock moved through asanas, hoping that yoga might clear his mind. Thus far playing his violin had failed to work, as had soliloquizing to his skull. He exhaled deeply as he shifted from Full Lotus up onto his hands and folded knees. Forehead to the mat, he rolled his weight forward to balance on his crown and tucked slid his hands backwards between his knees. He pulled them back toward the middle in such a way that positioned his elbows together right at his navel. On his next inhale he lifted his head, and on the next he lifted his knees. He balanced on his hands only, his feet and knees still tucked into Lotus even as they stretched back and away from him.

The pain in his muscles and ligaments stirred desire like banked embers, cleared all thought save for the pure hum of pleasure. He exhaled and it came out a breathy moan.

A slight creak disrupted his warm calm: the door to his bedroom opened and an intruder let out a pleased hum. A familiar spicy scent filled the air, and Sherlock fought not to lose his balance. Jim.

The sweet tug of Naamah’s grace ratcheted sharp until it spiked through his chest, a shot of adrenaline and a more barbed need. Sherlock knew the way his skin warmed was obvious in the daylight streaming in through his bedroom windows. He kept his eyes shut, praying his infatuation wasn’t glaringly obvious. He knew it was anyway.

“It’s nice to see you’re this… flexible,” Jim said. Sherlock could hear his footsteps; Jim circled him like prey.

“My training is rather extensive, sir.”

Jim snorted. “Sir? No, I think you remember my name, don’t you?”

Sherlock nearly lost his balance as the memory of their first meeting washed over him: Jim’s fist tangled in his hair, forcing his head back at a painful angle as Jim’s breath whispered across his ear. Sherlock, care to tell daddy what he was up to this morning?

“I do,” Sherlock murmured.

The circling stopped beside Sherlock, and deft fingers slid across his scalp. His voice uncurled like a snake in the sun: “Say it, Sherlock.”

Rebellion stirred in Sherlock’s chest--who was Jim, to play with him without ever paying for a
night? “No.”

Fingers tightened in his hair. “Try again.” Jim’s voice hardened, and Elua but Sherlock loved it.

“No.”

Jim jerked hard, breaking Sherlock’s balance until he threatened to topple over, his face centimetres from the mat-covered hardwood. Jim’s merciless hold was the only support between him and a bloody nose. The electric thrill of fear and a whole new sort of pain arced through his bones. His heart jackhammered beneath his ribs.

Jim shifted his stance to maintain his grasp while straddling Sherlock, only barely withholding his weight from Sherlock’s already precarious balance. He leaned close and purred, “Say it, sweetheart. You know my name.”

Sherlock’s eyes opened wide, his breath caught in his lungs. “Daddy,” he wheezed. He felt dirty just saying it. Ashamed at his wrecked resolve, at the pleasure he took from the way Jim pushed him around. “Yes, daddy, I’m sorry--”

Fingernails raked across his still-stretched hamstrings and Jim laughed. His slender fingers--cool to the touch--slipped lower and around to Sherlock’s front until they traced the length of the erection Sherlock’s thin yoga pants couldn’t hide.

Sherlock loosed a gasp like a plea, drawn so taut he was certain it wouldn’t take much more to make him finish right there, to his eternal humiliation.

“Good, good.” The heat of Jim’s breath, the bite of spearmint, the graze of his stubble had Sherlock drowning. “Now get yourself together, pet, and go downstairs. I’m sure Irene has good news for you.”

With that Jim stepped back, used his hold in Sherlock’s hair to pivot Sherlock back until his knees touched the floor once more. Sherlock’s muscular control was destroyed--no graceful break in asana, just an ungraceful collapse onto his mat. Sherlock lifted his head to see that Jim offered his hand. Sherlock took it, pulled himself up. Anything to keep Jim from leaving just yet. He hated himself for that, just a little bit.

Jim stepped back into Sherlock’s space until they were chest-to-chest. “Just remember,” he murmured, tilting his head up to ghost his lips along Sherlock’s jaw. “If you’re patient, Daddy will reward you. I know just--” his hand slid down to cup Sherlock again, “--what to give you.”

Sherlock’s knees nearly buckled. He couldn’t help but buck forward into Jim’s hand.

With that Jim retreated, whistling gaily as he exited the room.

Sherlock stood frozen, unable to function again until the front door opened and closed below, the scent of Jim’s aftershave still lingering in the air.

# # # # #

Predictably, Irene looked more pleased than a cat in cream when Sherlock finally calmed down enough to make it downstairs. He found her in the sunny little nook off the backside of the kitchen. She looked up from the book she’d been lost in.
“You have good news for me, I hear?” Sherlock asked, tilting his chin up. He refused to meet Irene’s gaze, to let her know just how much Jim affected him.

“I do!” Irene produced a manila folder tucked under her thigh and offered it to Sherlock.

The single packet of paperwork inside was a basic assignation contract. Finally! Jim had made an offer to--

“He’s contracting me for a night with--with Amelia?” Sherlock couldn’t hide the confusion and dismay in his voice. “Amelia Chamberlain?”

Irene grinned. “Oh, don’t look so put out, love. Since he contracted you, he fully intends on being there. He loves to watch from the shadows, manipulate the scene...”

Sherlock shivered at the thought, but before his eyes slipped shut, he caught a glimpse of John, propped up at the counter with a mug of tea.

John, whose eyes widened before his face shuttered back to stony neutral.

Sherlock suppressed a little wave of anger. What should he care what his frigid guard thought?

He turned his attention back to Irene. If she’d caught the minute exchange between Sherlock and his guard (of course she did), she didn’t let on. Even still, Sherlock frowned at her. “But what connection does he have with the Chamberlains?” This felt far too coincidental, after Wilkerson had name-dropped Dominique right into the middle of an intrigue with Victor Trevor.

Irene grinned as she tucked her feet in and swiveled to sit up. She propped her elbows on her knees, looking for all the world like a schoolgirl. “Now that’s the real question, isn’t it? So many of us from the Houses know each other, have history--it’s not like the isolation you contend with, Sherlock. Even between Houses, we’re encouraged to mingle, to build our network as wide and solid as we can.”

Sherlock nodded. Among other functions, it was one of the main reasons Cereus--first and oldest of the Houses--held the annual Midwinter Masque. It was the gala to end all galas, a fete where all the Houses joined together in the revelry and their layman guests were invited by special invitation. It was the one time of year a servant of Naamah might find their own amusements for the night, no assignation involved. The tenuous acquaintances made on Midwinter Night could lead to vital connections, to lasting friendships.

“So they know each other,” Sherlock said. “If there’s no other connection, him giving her this sort of--present makes no sense. She’s Camellia House, besides. What would she want, playing Mandrake to my Valerian?”

“Rumour has it they go further back than even Jim and me. I’ve never had confirmation, but it’s whispered he fostered with her family for a time before either of them went into service. So that’s what I want from you, when you go to them. Find me proof, one way or the other.”

“What good would knowing do?” Sherlock couldn’t fathom any advantage the information could offer.

But Irene only smiled. “Are you going to sign the contract, or should I throw it in the bin?”
Possible Squick:
Moriarty uses speech associated with Daddy Kink. I know this isn't some people's cup of tea, but to me it feels like a fit that comes with canon precedence (given some of his word choice in-show).
In the waning hour before dawn, the prospect of walking until they found a cab somewhere between Ames’s studio and their home was completely undesirable. John did his best not to knuckle his eyes in exhaustion. If he was worn out, Sherlock was likely to drop at any moment. John kept Sherlock in the corner of his eye, taking note of the bluish smudges beneath bloodshot eyes, the way Sherlock hid himself further and further in his coat, likely cold from his tiredness. As it was, Sherlock had set out on a meandering ramble just to keep himself awake, though whether or not he knew it was that, John wasn’t sure.

“--It’s all supposed to be a divine calling. Anguisses are chosen to restore balance. I don’t restore anything, not like the old ones.” Sherlock’s voice held none of its usual crispness, as wilted from his lack of energy as everything else about him. The admission held a note of insecurity. “The old anguissettes. Do you know of them?”

“Very little,” John admitted. He’d attempted to learn what he could of their folklore, but there was very little to be found save for the few mentions in the Ysandrine Cycle and a scan of an old portrait. The woman held the same scarlet droplet in her eye, her expression every bit of the same immodesty Sherlock wore. “One stopped a war, didn’t she?”

Sherlock nodded. “Two wars and a Zoroastrian god.”

“That’s quite a record.” John couldn’t help but smile, and very nearly asked if Sherlock thought he might live up to the standard. But that was too personal, too intimate.

“The gods aren’t so active these days, thankfully.”

John thought about his dreams, the ones he usually tried so hard to avoid. He wasn’t so sure.

“But the first anguissette--she was the interesting one.” Sherlock had found his train of thought, and his posture straightened a bit, his voice found more strength. “The Kusheline temples keep closer records than those elsewhere. She was the daughter of Naamah and a murderer. *Mara bore the curse of her father's blood, and she went with her eyes veiled. In atonement for the curse she bore, she went unto Kushiel, and in pity he granted her penance and made her his handmaiden.*”

John thought for a moment. “You were picked by Kushiel--but is that why you serve Naamah rather than become one of his priests?”

“I’ve never…” Sherlock furrowed his brow, trailing off in thought. After a few sluggish blinks and a disoriented shake of his head, it was clear he’d lost the thread.

“You all right, there?” John suppressed the urge to lay a hand on Sherlock’s elbow, lest he start stumbling.

“Hm? Yes, sure.”

“You were saying something, and you just stopped.”

“I--”

A new voice curled up from an alleyway beside them: “S’at what I think it is?”
Three men had emerged from the shadows.

In his head, John could hear Brother Vincent reciting from *Les Chants des Quarante-huit Heures*, the songs and methods he’d been taught since he’d first entered Cassiel’s service: *When I am in the centre surrounded by enemies...*¹

As they traded words John sized them up. Their leader was the worst threat—he was twice Sherlock’s size and carried a knife. He’d have height, weight, and reach in his favor. John would need to take him out as quickly as possible. Next was the one with tattoos held himself like one who’d never properly fought before, who intended to use his size without relying on skill or intuition. The one who looked like a drug addict had a sway in his gait—a scrapper, but not inclined to go in first if his two buddies could handle it. He was as likely to flee as to fight.

*Pierce the flowers and strike the willow freely from the west or east*¹ --

John angled himself between Sherlock and the street thugs. “If anything happens, just get away as fast as you can. Don’t worry about me,” John whispered. He prayed that Sherlock heard him, that he actually obeyed the command.

To the ringleader, John only said again, “Move along.”

But the ringleader sprung into action, and each moment became a freeze-frame: the thug shifted on his back foot before lunging forward, his hand thrusting the switchblade forward. A sharp, high note sounded in John’s head, and he sidestepped before catching the assailant’s inner wrist and knocked the switchblade free.

*No matter how the wind and clouds may change in the eight directions*¹ --

Distantly he registered the weapon clattering on the asphalt. From the corner of his eye, the scrapper darted forward. Toward Sherlock.

But then his attacker rose again, knife in hand, and slashed out at his midsection.

*Don’t remain in one place and don’t step without purpose*¹ --

John led with his right and pivoted with his left, spinning to the side to drive an elbow down against the man’s shoulder. The man grunted and moved to catch John, but in the next second John twisted his torso and drove the heel of his hand hard into the bastard’s ribs, followed with a leg-sweep.

John looked up to see that the one with tattoos had Sherlock pinned against the alley wall, and before he could accurately assess his hands went for his daggers--

*Sabres, spears from four sides, chaotic as tangled strings*² --

--and shouted, “Sherlock down!”

The dagger circled end over end, caught him in the join of his shoulder. He screamed, dropped to his knees.
In his periphery the ringleader grunted and John spun just as he thrust his shoulder into John’s midsection, carrying them both to the ground. In the freeze-frame they sailed backward for an eternity before slamming into the pavement.

John turned to direct the impact away from the back of his skull, but caught cheek and ear. The side of his orbital bone and pain exploded in a way he’d not experienced in a long time.

_In the dim night without moonlight^2--_

Panic seized him momentarily until that voice spoke again--

_the release of power will not be in vain if the mind is calm^3--_

“So you’re one’a dem fancy guards, then?” the ringleader cried. “Bet they didn’t train you in anything useful, did they?”

The man leaned up from where he straddled John, drawing back to punch. John bucked, catching him in the groin—*When his power is as heavy as a thousand pound weight*^4--before thrusting the butt of the remaining dagger into his temple.

John scrambled free, and that was all he needed. He leapt up and spun—*Among thousands of people only three or five can get close; It is not difficult to stop them just by extending the hand and foot slightly*^4--

The sole of his boot struck the man’s sternum and he retracted, finding centre as the thug flew backward. In his periphery John could hear the last goon, the drug-addict, fleeing. Trainers slapped cement, carrying the coward far away. Already John’s eye began to swell, but all pain was absent in the moment.

The ringleader screamed in rage. He clutched at his temple as he scrabbled to his feet again. His free hand disappeared behind his back before reappearing with a gun squared at John’s chest.

“Back the fuck off!” he shouted. “I ain’t wanna hafta go this way, blud, but you ain’t just leave us with the birdie over there—”

Before he could say anything else—*The quicker you are the slower I am; once I start to fight gods and devils will praise me*^5—John whipped his SIG free and two shots echoed, deafening. The ringleader slumped and hit the pavement dead.

Sherlock’s voice caught his attention, muffled beneath water and ringing gunfire. “John--we’ve got to--”

John shook his head, forced himself to fight down the terror of what he’d just done. He’d trained the better part of his life to only do this if absolutely necessary. This was not the victory he’d anticipated. Nausea roiled in his gut, but he betrayed none of it.

*If the method is not proper, don’t use it--*

*If the first attack misses, attack again--*

_No matter how marvelous the god or devil--*

*He will break his teeth even if his spirit is not frightened from his body.*^6
John stood in the kitchen of Maison Adler the following afternoon, in silent prayer as he made his tea. Hours later and his hands still shook; it took effort to contain the motion, to betray none of his fear, his guilt.

*I failed. My first time properly defending Sherlock, and I failed him. They reached him, they hurt him*--

He was so deep in self-flagellation he barely heard the doorbell ring. What did it matter, anyhow? No one ever came to visit him. Why would they?

From the next room, Irene’s voice rose in greeting. “Ah! To what do I owe this surprise?”

“Mixing business and pleasure, I’m afraid,” the guest replied, a male voice, light and lilting.

Jim Moriarty.

John had only met the man once before, on his last visit to Maison Adler. Jim Moriarty had been polite enough, but something about him had rubbed John the wrong way. Possibly it was the oily quality of his voice, the cold and probing way he regarded those he wasn’t actively charming--Irene and Sherlock, for example. It felt like Moriarty could see right through him, right down to the failures and faultlines hidden deep in his soul.

But that was silly, of course. He was likely no more able to see John’s secrets than Sherlock or Irene, whom John knew could observe, could infer, but nothing more.

John pointedly tuned out their conversation as he continued making his tea, resolutely focused on replaying his pre-dawn failures.

*I should have moved faster, I could’ve pulled out the daggers sooner. If I’d only done better, I wouldn’t have had to use my gun*--

But it was no use. By the time the water had boiled, the tea had steeped, he was no closer to finding a conclusion as to what he should have done. One thought kept coming back to him, each time he replayed the fear in Sherlock’s wide eyes as that thug pinned him to the brick wall--

John was unfit for service. Sherlock would be better off if John resigned his gun, accepted his failure and his damnation. At least Sherlock could be assigned a better guard, if that were the case.

The thought ached--he’d spent the better part of ten years training and believing unerringly in his adequacy, his strength and devotion. But even the ache surprised him: he’d wanted out of this assignment since he first met his insolent ward, and now he held nothing but regret for having left Sherlock open to attack.

He thought of his dreams again, of Cassiel’s stern silence, Elua’s laugh and Anael’s hope. He had failed all of them.

Before he knew it, fifteen, thirty minutes had passed and he had drained the mug. He drew in a deep breath, resolved to send another email to Brother Vincent before nightfall. He drained the remainder of the teapot into his mug, tried to savour the bitter taste as it hit the back of his mouth.
But then Irene and Sherlock ended his respite, entering the kitchen mid-conversation.

“He’s contracting me for a night with--with Amelia?” Sherlock couldn’t hide the confusion and dismay in his voice. “Amelia Chamberlain?”

Irene grinned. “Oh, don’t look so put out, love. Since he contracted you, he fully intends on being there. He loves to watch from the shadows, manipulate the scene...”

John went rigid there at the counter. He could easily guess who they were talking about. If there was one assignation he did not want to follow Sherlock to, it was Jim Moriarty. He couldn’t stomach the thought of Sherlock alone with him, various weapons, and the intent to do harm in the name of good fun. He clenched his fists, trying to block out the image.

But what was this, exactly? John hadn’t ever met any of Sherlock’s other patrons--how was he to know if Jim Moriarty was any different from the rest of the poncy bastards? Was guarding Sherlock on any other assignation easier, simply from not knowing?

Sherlock flicked his gaze to John, and the confusion hardened into something more resolute.

_Sherlock knows I’ve failed him._

*What good is my vow to protect him? Why would he trust that?*

*He’s never liked me anyway--this just sealed my fate.*

The thought made John’s stomach drop.

John would email the Brotherhood as soon as possible. John rarely had a reason to distrust his gut reactions to people, and Jim Moriarty made his skin crawl.

The sooner Sherlock had a proper, better-trained Cassiline by his side, the safer he’d be when he went to that snake in Westwood clothing.

Chapter End Notes

All lines of Les Chants des Quarante-huit Heures (“The Songs of the Forty-Eight Hours”) come from [here](#). Some of the stanzas have been used in whole, in order, and others cobbled together. Wording is directly credited to the site listed above.

1.) Method #23: Whole Circle Hand Method
2.) Method #25: Staring Method
3.) Method #11: People Conquering Method
4.) Method #12: Victory Method
5.) Method #15: Fist Connecting Method
6.) Method #33: Only One Method
7.) Chapter title: Method #29: Opening and Closing Method

Additionally, the name “The Songs of the Forty-Eight Hours” is an invention of my own and refers to “The Counting of the Hours,” which is obviously a canon name, as well as “The 48 Methods” in Ba Gua Zhang, which are a series of poems each linked with an “aspect of body alignment, application, or strategy.” Since Cassiline fighting style is based loosely on Ba Gua Zhang, it seemed appropriate to link these two
together this way.
Even with the anticipation of his assignation with Amelia and Jim looming ahead of him, Sherlock couldn’t lose track of the unfolding case. He needed that list of House-patrons. The murders, the bombings, these were linked somehow, if only he could find the right connections. He was torn: he suspected Victor was somehow involved, which would make the whole witch-hunt a lot neater to wrap up, faster to deal with. But the part of Sherlock that held the memory of his first assignation genuinely hoped the evidence was wrong.

Either way, he was at an impasse: whatever officer had been assigned to handle that particular set of information was under direct orders to keep it from Sherlock. He prowled through NSY, barely containing the urge to smack something off an officer’s desk as he went on a tirade, thundering towards Lestrade’s office.

“You realise this makes absolutely no sense?” he called to no one in particular. “You ask for my help, and yet when I list the things I require to get your job done, suddenly we’re wrapped up in red tape!”

“Sherlock--” John fumed, bringing up the rear, “if your little tantrum results in me having to defend your stupid arse against the police and then I get arrested--” He sounded just shy of hauling his ward out of the building by his ear.

“John--do you not see what kind of farce--”

“Sherlock!” Sally Donovan called out, voice stern as she stalked over to him. “You’ve got three seconds to calm down immediately, or you’ll find yourself in a bloody cell! What are you on about?”

Lovely.

Sherlock turned a smile on her, cruel and cold. “Absolutely none of your concern, Detective Sergeant. Run along while I talk some sense into your superior--”

“Talk?” She scoffed. “Do you think any of us are stupid to fall for that? We know how you get him to listen--”

Sherlock let out a growl of frustration and tore at his hair.

“Besides,” Sally lifted a manila folder she’d been holding, waggled it in the air. “I’m guessing this is what you’re looking for, isn’t it?” Her face betrayed the exact same expression as bullies Sherlock remembered from childhood, the ones who played keep-away with his belongings. “All these names and dates, and no way you’re going to see it!”

Sherlock dropped his hands from his hair, paused his ranting and pacing long enough to take her in, well and truly. Then it came to him in a flash: he saw what he’d missed every time they butted heads.
Genuinely resents my position outside the Met. Enjoys lording what little superiority she has over me. Three months since her last sexual encounter, if the tension always present in her voice is any indicator.

This made things so much easier.

“You’re curious, aren’t you?” he asked before his head had caught up with his mouth. “You are. What could be so good your boss would be willing to risk his job, for my sake?”

Sally’s face went bright red, the fury in her eyes unmistakeable. “Sherlock--”

“Admit it, Sergeant Donovan, curiosity’s got the cat.” He poured every last bit of his training into that sentence, his voice curling deep and sure.

Sally lunged forward, snatching Sherlock by the collar and jerking his face close. John started toward them, but Sherlock stayed him with an outstretched hand. The glare he leveled at Sally rivaled her own at Sherlock.

“Listen here,” she spat. “You will not come in here and play your freaky little head games. You are not wanted here, and if I were you? I’d get out of this building while you can.”

Oh, Sherlock was absolutely correct. He leaned forward until his lips nearly brushed her ear. He pitched his voice down even further, specifically to rumble low into her subconscious. “Even the lawful good need a chance to be bad, hm?”

When she decked him hard enough to cut his cheek, Sherlock knew he had her.

Having heard the entire exchange, John didn’t so much as flinch when she landed the punch.

###

Outside on the kerb, Sherlock still clutched at his throbbing cheekbone, glad for the distraction. If he couldn’t have the dossier from the Night Court Houses, he could at least have… well. A lovely thought to occupy his afternoon. And the potential for another inroad with London’s finest.

Even still, he whirled to turn on John.

“Some help you were! Scary Cassiline assigned to protect me, and there you were with your thumb up your arse.”

John merely tucked his hands behind his back, levelled a mild expression at Sherlock. His voice, however, didn’t match his calm exterior. It came out light and amused. “You went pulling a cat’s tail, Sherlock--you got exactly what you asked for. I might’ve stopped her before she mauled you.”

He enjoyed that, Sherlock realised. He genuinely enjoyed seeing her hit me.

He had no idea what to do with that.

###
It didn’t take long. By the time he’d gotten back to Maison Adler an email pinged his mobile.

*All right, freak. Say I take you up on the offer. Doesn’t mean any special treatment, got me?*

# # # # #

Sherlock’s only welcome was a terse, “Get your arse in here,” when Sally opened her door.

He stepped in quickly, not looking back to an ever-silent John who would stand watch just outside.

Sally’s flat was nothing special. Plain walls with predictable artwork, the sort of mediocre decor befitting someone who mainly lived at her job. But the woman herself was hardly recognisable: hair pulled back in a low chignon while wisps sprang free to caress her neck, bolder makeup that accentuated her cheekbones, her lips. But the biggest surprise was what she wore: a bespoke suit, deep charcoal grey, that obscured every feminine curve and built instead a masculine silhouette.

“Did you do as I asked?” Here a note of uncertainty crept into her voice, try as she might to reinforce it with iron.

Sherlock slid into the spell, that beautiful subspace where he could let go and rely on Sally to guide him. His body relaxed, doe-eyes downcast. “Yes--” He faltered, unsure of what pronoun to call her.

“Sir,” she finished for him. “Show me.”

No artifice then, no dithering dance toward the goal.

Sherlock slipped his jacket from his shoulders, folded it neatly and laid it across the back of a nearby chair. Chin still down, he lifted his eyes to hers as his fingers found the first button of his shirt. One button, then the next, each inch revealing a column of deep plum satin and steel boning. Then his trousers, underneath which hid lacy black panties that hugged his arse *just so*. Elua, he was half-hard just standing still for her inspection. Garters. Silk stockings he couldn’t resist stroking.

The present unwrapped, his clothes discarded on the floor, he retrieved a pair of stilettos from the bag he’d brought, just as requested. He took pride in slipping into them, raising him even higher.

“So the freak does know how to follow orders.”

His voice went soft. “You dressed up for me, it only seemed fair to do the same for you.”

Sally drew close, circling round him like a shark. “I didn’t dress for you. I did this for *me,*” she snapped. “And you did this for me.” She ran her fingers along the lacing in the back, inspecting her gift.

Sherlock couldn’t help but let loose a huff of breath as she circled back round to face him.

“You get off on this, don’t you? Nasty little freak, playing dress-up like some common slag?”
He shuddered, the truth of it written in every line of his body.

She grabbed the top of his corset, yanking him down to her level. “You’re lucky you’ve got Naamah’s blessing for this. If I caught you on a street corner, I’d have to take you in. Can you imagine what would happen?”

Sherlock shook his head.

“I’d call all the officers in. They know what you are, yeah? They know how much of a fucking masochist you are. First we’d cuff you.” She wrenched his arms behind his back, snatched a set of handcuffs from an accent table. Freezing metal clamped tight around his wrists, ratcheted into place. “I’d hold you still while they all took their turns frisking you.”

Sherlock could already feel the pull of his shoulder muscles, imagine a host of strange hands roaming his body roughly as they took advantage of his position.

“You’ve got half the Violent Crimes division wanting to get a piece of you—and we would. We’d get you back for every insult, every pompous, jackassed thing you’ve ever done to us.” Then her voice slipped into a growl, strangely masculine and brusque. “We’d gang up on you.”

Sherlock whimpered.

Without another word she circled him again, pushed him forward so hard he teetered on his precarious heels. “Bed, now.”

The layout of her flat was simple enough, but Sherlock walked in a daze, dizzy with desire, to her bedroom. Only a few steps inside, she shoved him forward and facedown onto the bed. Half his face mashed into her pillow-soft duvet. He subconsciously splayed his legs as wide as he dared, just praying to feel her hands on him again.

She raked her nails up one thigh. The burn had him pressing his groin against the edge of the bed.

“That’s right,” she growled. “I want to watch you squirm. We’d all watch you squirm until you were gagging for it. Until you didn’t give a fuck who took you, so long as you could get it.” With that she grabbed a garter strap and snapped it hard against his still-inflamed thigh.

She stepped away and Sherlock heard the zip of her fly, shuffling as she dropped her trousers. He couldn’t resist taking a peek, and was thrilled and bewildered to see a soft bulge in the pair of navy boxer-briefs she wore.

She caught him staring. “That’s right. I want you to see it. Watch me get hard for you, just like all those officers that want to fuck you nice and rough, one right after the other.”

The way she cupped herself had Sherlock pressing into the mattress again, finding a slow rhythm. Warmth curled in his belly, pooled hot and heavy in his groin. She slid the boxer briefs down just far enough to reveal a prosthesis strapped into place. A packer. Sodding hell, she had a packer and Sherlock prayed he’d get to play with it, with her. He wanted nothing more than to feel its smooth silicone, to watch the way her face would relax and contort as he stoked this fantasy.

But then she reached behind her and slid open the drawer to her bedside table. She pulled out a beaded black shaft of hard plastic and a small bottle of lube. Sherlock didn’t miss the way her hands faltered for a moment, but he couldn’t pull his eyes away, could only watch in hungry fascination as she lubed it up, lifted the packer and slid the black rod into place. Now erect and proud, she tossed the lube on the bed and stroked her cock lazily. It was gorgeous: a shade of brown only barely different from her own skin, veined and nearly indistinguishable from a biological cock. A quick glance at her face showed her blushing, an unsure smile stretching her
lips.

“You like this?”

“Yes sir,” he breathed.

She crossed back over to him, slid a hand over his arse and delved between his legs to cradle his balls. A whimper escaped him and he rocked harder against the edge of the bed, pivoting his hips from the small of his back, where the corset held him firmly in line, to show her just the way he could move, the curve of his arse as it pumped against the duvet. Already he could feel his own cock slipping free from the lacy black panties, leaking against his stomach and her bed. His breath juddered out in gasps, the corset restricting his airflow until the lack of oxygen burned fuzzy at his edges. He squirmed as she watched him find the friction he desperately needed.

“How do you want me to fuck you, freak? You want me to take it easy on you, the way Lestrade did when he popped your cherry?” She paused a moment, and her voice lost some of its surety again. “Or d’you want me to fuck you the way Dimmock would? He really can’t stand you, you know. He--he’d show you no bloody mercy.”

“I want--” Sherlock panted, “I want you to fuck me the way you would, sir. I’m not here for them, only you. Only you.”

She slapped his arse hard. “Good. Now--now close your legs.”

There it was again, Sherlock noted. That creeping uncertainty. She may have had the will, the desire to dominate, but Sally lacked the experience, the confidence. Something new spiked through him, and in his muddled state he wasn’t sure what it was--disappointment, or compassion, or something else altogether. He would have the privilege of showing her just how good she could be.

Sherlock swallowed hard, sliding his knees back together. “Permission to speak, sir?”

“What is it?” she snapped as she stepped over his legs to straddle him.

“The way your voice sounds when you take charge--I won’t be able to think of anything else the next time we’re on a case together.”

Sally growled and jerked his cuffs, forcing his chest to lift and bow up from the mattress, until his weight was balanced between his hips and his arms. “You won’t breathe a word of this to anyone.”

“No! No sir! I wouldn’t--”

“Good.”

She plucked at his garter belt until the clasp hook slid free, and she dragged his panties down just enough to let her shaft slide along the cleft of his arse. Her hold on the handcuffs served as her leverage. Sherlock could just imagine the way it must’ve looked: the length of her darker-toned strap-on nestled between his plump, pale arse cheeks. It felt like a tease, just a warm-up designed to make him needy. With her free hand she drizzled some of the lube where skin met silicone until she could glide through the slick mess, picking up a rhythm.

Though she never even attempted penetration, happy to glide along against his arse, each thrust forced Sherlock’s pelvis against the mattress. Lace bit into skin, and the chafe was nearly as delicious as the inability to find the right angle, the right friction to really send him on his way. His arms, shoulders, back protested the strain of his position until he was biting his lower lip hard to
distract himself. He teetered there, just at the edge of getting lost in his desire. His hips thrusted up and back to meet her, to offer her more.

A quiet, steady mantra of “Please, please, please,” filled the air, and it took Sherlock a minute to realise it came from him.

“That’s right, beg for it,” Sally grunted. She released the cuffs, dropping to press her front along his back, to grab onto his shoulders for leverage as she thrust harder, faster. “I want to hear you.”

Finally, the weight against Sherlock was enough to give him exactly the angle he needed to rut against the bed, desperate as he moaned for her. Sweat built and clung where skin met skin, the buttons of her shirt pressing tiny indentations into his flesh. The wide steel boning of his corset transformed into an unforgiving cage that made each breath a struggle until he saw stars.

And then every last sensation drew from the periphery to his centre, pooled in his groin. His feet slipped as they pressed to find purchase, the stilettos unable to find a grip on the hardwood floor. His thighs and abdomen strained to press harder, to rock faster between Sally and the mattress. Orgasm loomed near, and all without ever having been penetrated, without once having his own cock touched by anything other than the bed.

“Sir!” he gasped. “Sir--I’m so close--”

Sally lifted, withdrawing all points of contact. “Don’t you dare. I’m not done with you yet, freak.”

Sherlock pushed his hips up and away from the edge of the bed, his breath ragged. His shoulders screamed with the strain of their angle, his ribs nearly bruised within the confines of the corset.

“On your feet.”

Sherlock struggled to find his balance, to push himself to stand. He wobbled a bit but found his footing, and took the chance to drink Sally in: her face beaded with sweat so that her makeup smudged, hair a mess. The way her clothes rumpled pleasantly and her strap-on cock jutted free from the fabric was a sight so beautiful it was a wonder artists hadn’t yet rendered it in oils or stone. She pushed her boxer-briefs down until they slipped free and puddled on the floor at her feet. Sherlock wanted to mouth along the trim lines of her thighs, her unshaven calves. He couldn’t explain why, exactly, but even little details like this were intoxicating.

“I think you’ve earned this--” Sally retrieved the handcuff keys from the pocket of her trousers. In a moment, his hands were free.

He paused a moment to stretch cramped muscles, the relief as wonderful as the pain had been.

Sally climbed back onto the bed and gestured he follow with the crook of a finger. The way her knees splayed and bobbed, her expression expectant and now surprisingly playful, she put him in mind of a mischievous young man, barely legal. And this--Sherlock had done this. Sherlock had yielded the space and the permission to be in charge, and she’d flourished with it.

“I want your mouth on me.” Her tone now came out relaxed, a spoiled prince certain of his place. For the first time in their acquaintance, Sherlock thought he may have found the kernel of Sally, that one small aspect that made him fall just a bit in love, the way he did with some of his patrons.

Sherlock tipped forward and crawled across the mattress, maintaining eye contact with her as he paused, hovering right next to the shaft of her jutting cock. Up close, it quivered with each breath Sally took, each minute adjustment to her posture or position. Honestly, Sherlock was torn between reveling in its silicone texture and taste, or pretending her cock was flesh and blood. He had no idea which he’d rather more, only that he wanted to please Sally.
Sherlock propped himself so that he could take her shaft into one hand, and traced the fingertips of his free hand along her inner thigh, over one strap and ever-closer to her labia.

Lips pressed just barely against her shaft, he whispered, “Sir, may I touch you, too?”

Her expression shuttered for a moment, but Sherlock spoke again, guessing why. “It’s just--I’ve always wanted someone who is both, and--”

“Touch me, freak.” Sally’s breath came out in a gust. “I want your fingers inside me while I fuck your mouth.”

Sherlock used lips and tongue as he worked his way along the side of Sally’s cock, his fingers stroking the exterior of her labia, tangling in the moisture-slick curls that protected her most sensitive places.

“Your lips. Your fucking lips,” Sally sighed, hitching up a little higher to see him better.

As he worked along her shaft, giving her every possible visual cue he could, he gently circled her clitoris with his thumb, the little nub already swollen. She let out a noise at that, and he kept at it as he licked the length of her cock, just until her eyes squeezed shut and her hips jerked, trying to find more and better friction.

Sherlock smiled to himself, absolutely certain of where to go next. He’d heard the idea of topping from the bottom, but never the reverse. And yet here he was.

“Sir--please, please watch me? I love getting to show off for you, sir.”

Sally’s eyes popped open, her gaze wild and keen. “Show me then, freak. Show me what you can do.”

Sherlock took the head of her strap-on into his mouth, lavishing it just as thoroughly as any cock he’d had the pleasure of tasting. Simultaneously he slipped his second and third fingers deep into her until he found the soft tissue of her g-spot. He picked up a rhythm, then, bobbing on her cock as he swirled his fingers in relentless circles, until her grunts and cries lost form and coherency, until her back arched and her clawed fingers scrabbled for any sort of hold. Then Sherlock pulled back.

“Please, sir, don’t make me make you come just yet?” He kept his tone just this side of weak. “Please, sir. I know this lovely trick--”

“I said I want you to show off for me, freak! Get to work, then!” Sally snapped, but it was exactly what Sherlock needed--she’d backed off just enough from orgasm to get this to work.

Sherlock took her cock in his mouth again, and pressed his fingers in further, up and behind her g-spot until he found a spongy little node on the backside of her pubic bone. It was nearly impossible to get to, even with his long fingers, but when he flicked across it, the way Sally bucked and the walls of her vagina tightened reflexively told him he’d found just the right spot. And he brought that rhythm back--no mercy, every last bit of speed and pressure specifically designed to one end…

And as her bucking went from fast to arrhythmic, to erratic, as her eyes squeezed shut in concentration and flew blindly open, she finally hit that high note Sherlock had hoped for--her whole body caved in on itself, wrung tight. A gush of fluid, then, dripping from his fingers and palm, sliding across her thighs and puddling below her on the duvet.
Just seeing her like this--open and soft--was a gift Sherlock had never expected, not even as he’d goaded her in the office at the NSY, not as he’d answered her email or made his way over to her flat. And yet here it was, offered to him as a reward of good service.

Eventually Sally collected herself long enough to cast a critical eye on Sherlock. He knew what she saw: corset splattered with her fluids, garters and hose askew, panties still pulled to roll and bunch mid-thigh, his own cock hanging free and unattended. He was so aroused he was sure he’d crawl out of his feverish skin if he didn’t get off soon.

“Now I want you--” Sally didn’t have to finish before Sherlock toed off his stilettoes and moved forward.

“Please? Please sir--”

“I’ll let you, don’t worry,” she snapped, every ounce of authority reserved in her smooth tone. She pointed at her nightstand drawer. “Condom first.”

Sherlock’s hands shook as he darted forward to retrieve the prophylactic. But soon enough it was open and rolled on. He took himself in hand, and mimicking her earlier action, nestled the length of his cock between her labia, until his glans brushed against her clitoris. Sally let out a gasp and her hands flew up to grip his shoulders, and he rocked forward again, a much gentler version of the exact maneuver she’d used on his arse. He did a few more times, right until she grunted with impatience, and he realigned himself to slip inside.

The heat, the tightness was different from a mouth, which Sherlock found fascinating. The texture was completely alien and lovely.

Sally gasped, pushing her hips up to meet him, her cock trapped between their bellies, and soon they found a rhythm, a give-and-take like none they’d found in the two years they’d worked together. Sally clawed at the clasps of his corset, impatient finally with the lack of exposed skin. It was difficult, but she managed, and the relief from Sherlock’s midsection felt like heaven–he didn’t realise how much pressure had been exerted on his ribs, his abdomen, until at last he was free.

“May I?” Sherlock asked, his fingers toying with the buttons of her shirt.

“Please,” Sally panted.

One by one her buttons came undone, revealing a compression shirt shaped like any ordinary vest, except when rucked up this one had a row of hook clasps down the side where the binder portion separated from the outer shell. Sherlock paused his movement to undo them, and Sally shifted until together they stripped her of it.

With newly bared flesh to explore, Sherlock bent low, clasping her sides as he rocked into her, mouth fixed to one dark brown nipple. They found their pace, then, roaming hands and lips with each ebb and flow of where their bodies joined, until sweat beaded the brow and muscles strained with the exertion, still not enough, never enough.

It wasn’t til Sherlock leaned up, and without a hitch in their rhythm he began to work Sally’s strap-on, his eyes on hers. The ring of his fingers and thumb moved at double-time along her shaft, twisting at the crown before plunging down. Her breath caught then, her back arched, and she rocked harder. Then her hips stuttered, the beat faltered, her whole body clenched in the thrall of orgasm. Her nails bit deep into the flesh of Sherlock’s shoulders, until he was sure they’d broken skin, his vision tinged red and bloody. He followed soon thereafter, unable to restrain himself any longer.
When breath returned and the sweat on their skin cooled, they lay twined on ruined sheets. Sally shifted to study Sherlock. Dark eyes roamed the edges of his outline, the slope of shoulder and curve of cheekbone. When she made it up to his eyes, she swallowed.

He said nothing, merely raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“So that’s what you do.” Her voice held a quiet regard, a factual statement made warm by the innocence with which she said it. She paused, trailing her fingertips along his side. “Are all Naamah’s servants like this?”

“To some extent. I also bear Kushiel’s mark.”

She nodded. Even most non-D’Angelines knew of the pantheon and the ways in which their priests and priestesses served. “So pain really is your thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but that’s not the whole of it.”

She frowned, her movements halted.

“It is my privilege to remind a patron of the blessings Naamah grants us all. It’s my calling to enjoy pain. It’s my training to be observant, to be what a patron needs and take what a patron needs to give.” Sherlock sat up then, apprising her. “You, for instance. You haven’t liked me the entire time I’ve worked with your unit--”

“It’s not as if I’ve been your favorite, either, freak.” The term, which had once been an insult Sherlock hated to hear, held a new sentimentality that almost made him smile.

He continued, “Also, you resent of Lestrade’s willingness to bend the rules and any belief in the talents which claim I to have. So I, presenting as a cisgendered white male, represent everyone you’ve had to prove yourself superior to in order to have the position you hold. That goes deeper than you may realise: you’re torn between femininity and masculinity in a job where embracing either means sacrificing half of who you are. You showed me that tonight--”

“With--” Sally gestured down at the still-proud strap-on that nudged against Sherlock’s thigh.

“Among other things.” Sherlock glanced to the discarded binder. “But it’s not some weakness on Lestrade’s part that allows me to work with your unit. He recognises the intelligence of utilising what resources he has. Similarly, you are what you are and you do what you do because your hard work has proven you are excellent at your job--”

“I never thought I’d hear the great Sherlock Holmes say that one--”

“And I am what I am and I do what I do because it is what I have been made to do. It’s either help you lot or else become a criminal mastermind.”

This startled a laugh out of Sally. “This doesn’t mean I’m going to go any easier on you at a crime scene.”

Uncharacteristically, Sherlock winked. “I would hope not, Detective Sergeant.”
She drew in a breath and studied him again, the gears working hard in her head. After a while she nodded. “All right. I’ll pass along that dossier. Don’t make me regret it.”

“I certainly endeavor not to, sir.”

Sally laughed and smacked him on the shoulder.
ALL RIGHT KIDS HERE’S THE NEW CHAPTER!

I know your notifications probably went apeshit today, but this is the only new chapter I’ve uploaded today--the rest have been slid over from Counting the Hours into this story. (I may also post the next "John" chapter today, depends on how life happens. No promises tho.)

Brother Watson:

I do not like repeating myself, especially when the question borders on heresy. It is not yours to question Cassiel’s will. Do not forget that. You have sworn a binding oath, John. If you doubted then as you do now, you would have been better served not having sworn it at all.

Per your concerns that you did not defend Mr. Holmes adequately, I ask this: did Cassiel keep Elua completely unscathed? He followed where Elua led in faith. Despite what turmoils they faced, he loved Elua too well to do aught else. He offered his dagger, but Elua chose to score his hand.

The same could be said of the anguisset. He may face danger, from external sources or his own making, but you did your sacred duty. You can do no less, you know.

I can’t advise you on Mr. Moriarty. Keep your faith and listen to your instincts, but do not let your prejudice cloud your judgements. I know it must be difficult. Naamah was the most shameless of all the Misbegotten. I will pray for you, my brother.

Cassiel guide you,

Brother Gavin Vincent
Prefect of the Cassilne Brotherhood, London

# # # # #

John was certain he would die of apoplexy before Sherlock Holmes finished his rampage through New Scotland Yard. As temperamental as Sherlock could be on any given day, John hadn’t seen him as unstable, as wild-eyed as this. It didn’t matter how John threatened--none of it slowed down this human whirlwind.

John wasn’t sure if he was relieved or alarmed when Sally showed up during Sherlock’s quest to talk to Lestrade.
“Talk?” she scoffed. “Do you think any of us are stupid to fall for that? We know how you get him to listen—”

Sherlock put on his best fractious manner.

“Besides,” Sally lifted a manila folder she’d been holding, waggled it in the air. “I’m guessing this is what you’re looking for, isn’t it?” She grinned, a sour and mean thing. “All these names and dates, and no way you’re going to see it!”

John watched on as Sherlock stared her down, silent for nearly a full ten seconds.

Oh no, John thought. He’s gone from riot to scheme--

“You’re curious, aren’t you?” Sherlock’s tone slid into something sultry and coy. “You are. What could be so good your boss would be willing to risk his job, for my sake?”

Sally’s face went bright red, the fury in her eyes unmistakable. “Sherlock--”

“Admit it, Sergeant Donovan, curiosity’s got the cat.” The way his voice curled--it turned John’s stomach.

John had thought, stupidly he realised, that this work was separate from Naamah’s beguilement. He didn’t know what he expected, really. This was what Sherlock was trained for, what Naamah did. Manipulation and bartering with sexuality, playing on the basest of urges. It was selfish and shameful. In his own misguided way, Sherlock was only doing his duty to Naamah, wasn’t he?

And that hurt, really. Every time he relaxed, he thought maybe he got to see a side of his ward no one else saw, that nasty display came back out. The two were inseparable. It wasn’t a mask he could take off.

How in Kushiel’s hell was John supposed to find the inspiration to unwavering devotion he was supposed to feel? How was he going to spend the rest of his life shadowing this duplicitious man?

Then Sally punched Sherlock, a glancing blow off the cheekbone. John was relieved she did it for him.

# # # # #

“Some help you were! Scary Cassiline assigned to protect me, and there you were with your thumb up your arse.”

By the time they’d exited the ‘Yard, John had found his centre.

John could think of Sherlock’s behavior the way he did Harry’s. It was useless getting angry at a mule for being a mule, after all. It wasn’t worth the effort. It would allow John could move forward, at least. As long as Sherlock didn’t endanger himself or others, John could learn to let go of the notion he had to find devotion to his ward. Devotion to Cassiel would have to suffice.

It would take some paradigm-shifting, but John could work on that.

“You went pulling a cat’s tail, Sherlock--you got exactly what you asked for. I might’ve stopped her before she mauled you.”
Deepest Cut Wins (Sherlock)

Chapter Notes

A barrel-full of thanks to the ongoing support you all have shown me. I can't express what it means to me. I am flabbergasted and only hope I can continue to live up to your expectations.

Check the bottom for a very minor warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

By the time Sherlock and John were en-route to Maison Adler the first streaks of grey tinged the London sky, blending with the light pollution so subtly it took looking away and looking back to recognise it.

Sherlock’s hands itched to tear open the packet Sally had given him, but he resisted. Some desires became sweeter when delayed.

Halfway to their destination, John broke the silence. The striations of shop-light and street-light streaked his profile, a many-hued wash. In Sherlock’s mind, it was a sharp contrast to the way he viewed the world: cut and dry, black and white.

“Why do you do this to yourself?” John’s gaze had not left the window, his words clipped. He sounded the way Mycroft used to, when he’d come home from school bloody-nosed and black-eyed.

Sherlock only stared at him. It was the first time John had ever broached the subject of his service to Naamah willingly.

John continued. “Most of your lot only serve as a way to fund their education, to network. But you do this—” and here he gestured at the boning of the corset, its hooks a visible topography beneath Sherlock’s thin white shirt, “--to yourself for fun. To get piddly information from people who don’t actually like you. Don’t you think you’re worth more than that?”

Sherlock blinked, fought back the urge to lash out in near-instant anger at John’s line of inquiry.

He remembered the way Sally had smiled at him before he left. Something had eased in her, a self-surety he’d never seen in her even at her most demanding.

He thought of the adoration in Wilkerson’s eyes, of the way Helen had looked genuinely put out for leaving him wanting. He remembered the care Victor showed him after their first night, of the languid pleasures they took and gave the morning after. The subtle fondness Lestrade still showed, even after Sherlock had proven himself properly useful in their collaborative efforts at crime-solving.

How could he ever explain that to someone other than another Servant of Naamah?

How could this ignorant Cassiline not understand what it meant to dedicate the body as well as the soul?
“I do it because I was called to do it.”

“You were called to--to rent yourself out for favors?”

“It is no more or less than Naamah’s service for Elua,” he snapped. “Are you implying she devalued herself?”

John’s eyes widened then, realizing his mistake in some part. “I--”

But Sherlock knew the deepest-cut-wins game well and had no intention of losing it: “Why do you lock yourself away from the world and hide behind Cassiel’s skirts like a boy playing at war?”

That whipped John’s head his direction so fast Sherlock was certain he heard John’s neck pop. “I what?”

Sherlock tipped his chin up, letting his silence answer for him.

John, Sherlock noticed, was beautiful when he was angry. He was always attractive, but with his temper getting the better of him, his dark eyes flashed like polished sodalite in the oncoming dawn. His jaw tightened and his shoulders squared, ever the warrior. It was only when just shy of furious he gave Sherlock his full attention. The weight of his regard scraped along Sherlock’s skin and left a burning tingle in its wake.

John said nothing, merely turned to glare hatefully out the window again.

# # # # #

*Maison Adler* held its breath, poised and hesitant to begin a new day. Irene and Kate still slept, likely one wound around the other, and the maid had not yet arrived. Despite the lingering venom, Sherlock and John tiptoed carefully, neither willing to break the house’s peace with their disagreement.

Alone in his room Sherlock tossed the packet on his cluttered desk, ready to sit and analyze, just as soon as he’d procured some coffee. But fatigue got the better of him as he turned once more for the door, each blink heavier. Waxing strain from staying up all night--and the waning second or fifth wind--dragged him like a millstone now that he was alone in the stillness of his bedroom.

Were it not for the night’s exertions, he could’ve ignored it. But Naamah’s grace demanded much from the transport. He could catch an hour or two of sleep, he decided. The file’s secrets would hold.

# # # # #

The sun had sunk low, casting long shadows in the orange glow of late afternoon when Sherlock woke. His head pounded and his whole body protested, stiff from the dead slumber he’d succumbed to for the last ten hours. He blinked burning eyes, somnolent disorientation floating in his brain like smog, unwilling to dissipate.
Against his better judgement he sat up, immediately turning to the nightstand for his mobile. Where it should’ve sat was nothing but empty space. He must’ve left it in his trouser pocket, then.

But when he stumbled over to where they lay in the floor, it wasn’t there. Nor was it in his Belstaff or the bag of accessories he’d taken to Sally’s. Had he left it at hers?

He would have to borrow Irene’s, then, give it a call.

Sherlock stepped out onto the landing, and the maid called out to him.

“Awake now, Sherlock?”

Mrs. Hudson was a genial woman in her sixties who excelled at her job: she kept a fine tether on the chaotic house and always had polite conversation to offer when it was wanted--and occasionally when it wasn’t. Irene prized her, however, for her discretion. After several years in Irene’s employ, Mrs. Hudson had proven herself more wily and circumspect than she appeared.

Sherlock grumbled in affirmation as he plodded down the stairs.

“You’ve slept the whole day. Come into the kitchen, I’ll make you a cup to wake you up. Coffee or tea, dear?”

“Coffee,” Sherlock groaned.

Once he’d settled in she set about making the coffee, her pleasant chatter filling up the kitchen. When she set the mug in front of him, however, her expression turned concerned.

“Your mobile rang off its hook this morning,” she said. “I brought it out here and silenced it.”

Sherlock jerked his head up, now completely awake. “Where?”

“I’ve got it here.” She dug into her apron pocket and produced the missing mobile. “It was that detective from the Yard calling you.”

Sherlock snatched the phone from her, thumbed the passcode and ignored the voicemails, instead ringing Lestrade right back.

“You’re actually calling back, rather than texting?” Lestrade asked by way of greeting. His voice was muffled, likely from a meal hastily eaten during a quiet moment.

“I was sleeping. What did you want?”

“I left you voicemails, you know.”

“Pointless. Now tell me.”

Lestrade sighed on the other end of the line, his voice now clear. “Good call on the registries from Camellia and Bryony. Victor Trevor had a night with each of the adepts and we’ve got witnesses placing him there.”

Something in Sherlock’s stomach sank. “I’ll be there in twenty.”

“What for? We’ve got our man--we’re working on a confession now. As soon as he admits to getting those adepts kill to their targets, we’re ready to lock his arse away.”

Something obstinate gelled behind Sherlock’s breastbone. “I haven’t gotten a chance to analyse
the data--"

“How’d you get--”

“Nevermind that. Just--

“It’s a done deal, Sherlock.” Lestrade insisted. Then his voice softened just a fraction. “I know you have your reasons for wanting him to be innocent.” He huffed a breath, but continued before Sherlock could interject. “As much as you don’t like to admit it, Naamah’s servants always have a soft spot for their patrons. It’s likely the only reason you’re marginally nicer to me than you are to anyone else here. But you can’t ignore the facts. We all miss things.”

That one hit Sherlock right in the chest.

“It’s not--I don’t--!” His protests sounded flimsy, even in his own ears.

“Sherlock.” Lestrade’s voice was sterner now. “Just accept it, mate. You can’t outdo us at our job every time.”

Sherlock growled in frustration. “Fine. I’m glad we’ve got this sorted.”

Back in his bedroom, he picked up the packet containing the dossier, glared at it.

Of course he wanted Victor to be innocent, had hoped--

Sherlock had let bloody sentiment skew his judgement. It made him no better than any of those stereotypes of doe-eyed adepts falling for the first patron that took them. Except he would apparently be blind-sided by anyone who had the opportunity to dominate him. Was he that common, that easily swayed?

A long-ignored part of him simply echoed his own fifteen-year-old voice: What point is there in naming a genetic condition with some mystical religious source? What good could that possibly do?

Lestrade was, for once, right.

He flung the packet at the wall. It smacked hard and slipped down in the crack between his mattress and the wall. He’d clean up his mess later.

# # # # #

“Rachel Howells, mid-thirties.” Lestrade gestured at the body before them, bent unnaturally on the cellar floor. She’d been found in the bottom of an abandoned house by some neighbor-kids two weeks after Victor’s arrest.

“Yes,” Sherlock replied, his tone clipped. “I can see that.”

The other on-duty officers had retreated until only the stirred dust in the hastily-erected industrial lights and the distant whisper of rain remained with them and John. The smell wasn’t terribly strong, as far as these things go. The body hadn’t had a chance yet to decompose.
This murder had been in the last six hours.

He bent low to inspect her. “Rope-burn and bruising at the throat—” *strangulation*. The other bodily wounds were more gruesome: “Slashes with a razor-sharp instrument along each rib, deep slits across the tops and interior of the thighs. Nicked the femorals there and there.” He frowned as he pointed to the lethal wounds on the inside of each thigh.

The nude body also offered callouses on her palms and feet. The uneven cant to her hips, even bent as she was, suggested scoliosis or wearing a lopsided belt--utility, most likely. The tattoo on her hip--a group of deep violet flowers shaped like stars--made him almost certain.


Lestrade frowned. “I don’t know anything about bloody flowers--”

“They’re *mandrakes*.”

“Isn’t that one of the Night Court Houses?” Lestrade asked the same time John asked,”You’re saying the adept got killed this time?”

Sherlock rose from where he squatted. He threw an annoyed glance to John, who stood in parade rest on the periphery, eyes averted in a way they hadn’t been for Sebastian Wilkes’s corpse.

“No, you idiot.” Sherlock snapped at John.

Then he turned back to Lestrade. “Yes, Mandrake is a House--for Naamah’s dominant servants. And this, this isn’t a *marque*--”

Lestrade interjected with, “But I thought your lot got tattoos when you finished your time?”

Sherlock gesticulated at her hip. “Not there. *Marques* always cover the spine, and sometimes a large portion of the back. They are *not* neat little decorations for the arse of a prison guard--”

“We never told you that--”

“Look at the flowers. She was a domme, but never affiliated with a House. It’s a common tattoo in the BDSM community outside the Houses. Combined with her callouses and the orientation of her hips? Took a job that suited her nature--prison guard. No, she was *not* an adept.”

Lestrade nodded. “Right. What about the cuts and bruises? Did a proper Mandrake adept get jealous?”

Sherlock shook his head. “Highly unlikely.” He rose again, paced. The evidence was fairly damning--it wouldn’t take much to connect the crime with yet another adept. Even still, he was loath to do so. The idea of any of Naamah’s servants being mistreated enough to warrant murder, of her adepts being so corruptible-- Damn, no. This was sentiment, once again.

His voice hardened, his expression darkening in self-annoyance. “Sebastian Wilkes assaulted and traumatised an adept, ruining her career--then he got away with it thanks to loopholes and probably bribery. Frederique’s victim frequently gambled poorly on horse-races and got his head bashed in by one. Do we see a pattern?”

Lestrade looked bewildered.

“Rachel Howells was into edgeplay,” came John’s quiet voice from his corner. “If it was an adept, they may have been on the receiving end of a scene that went very wrong.”
For a second Sherlock’s heart stopped. “How could you possibly know that?”

John glared at him. “I know it exists, even if I’m not stupid enough to engage. I’ve chosen celibacy. The way the cuts are oriented, any one of them would cause minimal damage as long as they were kept incredibly shallow.”

Sherlock had to concede the point—if there was anyone who would know about finding lethal areas of the human body with a blade, it would be his Cassiline. “Flechettes!” At their equally blank stares, Sherlock explained: “They’re incredibly sharp blades, sharp as razors, that get used in some highly-controlled edgeplay scenes. Valerian patrons and Mandrake adepts have to go through rigorous certification in order to use them. But edgeplay would never get anywhere near the femoral—the flechettes could slice through skin like a sigh in the silence. So this was definitely with intent.”

“So someone from that other House--” Lestrade started.

“Valerian,” Sherlock prompted.

“Valerian, right. We should be able to check into their records, see if there were any assault charges against Ms. Howells here and go from there.”

“There’s something else here,” Sherlock noted. When Lestrade and John both looked to him, he explained. “This couldn’t have been a hit made by Vi—er, Mr. Trevor. He’s still in lockup.”

“But that doesn’t clear him of the other charges, Sherlock.” John’s voice held a bitter note, one Sherlock couldn’t place.

“The records,” Sherlock growled. “I need to check that dossier.”

# # # # #

Steady rain thundered on the roof of the cab that took them back to Maison Adler. The water distorted the street-light until it flashed in streaks and fits, liquid lightning just against the glass.

“Do you love him?”

Another ignorant question lobbed out right when Sherlock needed silence. John was making a habit of that.

“I care about all of them,” he snapped. “Now shut up.”

# # # # #

In two weeks, Sherlock hadn’t moved the file from where it had fallen to hide beneath his bed, a failure swept out of sight. Flopping onto the floor to crawl under the bed and retrieve it was undignified, but there was nothing for it.

He didn’t make it to his desk before he’d ripped open the packet to scan its contents.
Bryony was at the front. Sherlock skimmed down until he found Frederique’s name highlighted. Both the date and Victor’s name in the patron column, right where he expected them.

Camellia’s page, however, brought different news. The only time he’d been logged at that House in the last six months were January 6th. While it was possible he could’ve gotten Cecily Noualt to wait several months—roughly four, in fact—it was impossible he’d been there to do it on those particular dates.

The 6th was Sherlock’s birthday. The day he’d debuted.

His phone was pressed to his ear, ringing down the line before he realised it.

“Yeah?” came Lestrade’s voice on the other end.

“These records have been doctored. Someone is trying to frame Victor Trevor.”

# # # # #

“Is it so impossible for you to work out?” Sherlock tugged at his hair, vitriol rising from his center. Lestrade had called them back in—not that Sherlock had intended to do anything other than storm the ‘Yard that night, anyhow—and it felt like they were all just shy of spilling blood in his office.

“Let’s say this is true,” Lestrade started, everything about him screaming fatigue and frustration. “Okay, you have an alibi for him on the sixth. Witnesses. That would clear him for Noualt and Sebastian Wilkes, but not Frederique and his victim. We’ve still got the dates and witnesses for that one.”

“If one set of witnesses have been proven false, one set of paperwork doctored, and the proof that this latest killing wasn’t at his behest—these are all too much for it to have been coincidence! If he’s innocent of two out of three, what does that say about the remaining murder?”

“It’s not as if we can ask Ms. Noualt or Frederique—”

“You don’t have to! Have you gotten any closer to finding this third adept?”

A sharp rap broke the tension, and Sally stuck her head in. She glanced at Sherlock just the same as she scanned everyone else in the room. Sherlock wasn’t sure if he should feel thankful or snubbed for that. He tilted his chin and looked back to Lestrade, determined to match her behavior. He avoided John’s eyes—there was absolutely no reason his damned guard should make him feel ashamed.

“Yes?” Lestrade asked, though it came out as little more than a groaned prayer for distraction.

“Sir, we’ve got a lead on the Howells case—”

“Did you find the adept?” Sherlock asked at the same time as Lestrade asked, “Oh, thank Christ.”

Sally stepped into the office and handed Lestrade the file. “There’s no ties to Victor Trevor on this one—”

“—Like I said!” Sherlock interjected.
“--But there is a name that matches the Camellia house log. It was also in the D’Angeline Bryony House log, once we went back more than six months.” Apparently the news was good enough that she offered the same triumphant smile to Sherlock as she did Lestrade. “Lorraine Carver.”

###

Sherlock propped himself against one of the columns outside the Met to wait for Victor, thankful for having worn his Belstaff, given the May drizzle blowing under the eaves. He shook it out as he Victor pushed the door open.

“Sherlock--what in the name of Naamah’s tits are you doing here?”

“Who is Lorraine Carver, and what does she have against you?”

“Who--what are you--no.” Victor frowned before stretching to look out from under the eaves. The weather didn’t improve his expression. Shaking it off, he held out one arm in greeting. “Please--”

Sherlock stared at him for a few seconds, and then it sank in: Victor wanted to hug him in greeting. He stepped awkwardly into Victor’s reach, allowed himself to be embraced in a half-squeeze. It wasn’t that he was averse to the gesture, simply that he had no precedent for it, no experience aside from Lestrade and now Sally in dealing with a patron outside the confines of their contract--and neither of them went around hugging him.

Still, Victor’s hand lingering on his shoulder was not unpleasant.

You care too much, Sherlock, Mycroft from memory warned. Caring is not an advantage.

A car swished by, and all around them a city went on, unaware of the chaos in his own microcosm.

The muted warmth of Victor standing near was so nice, though. It was so rare that Sherlock felt connected to anyone like that, like they were familiar and comfortable, outside an assignation. Sherlock hated himself just a little more for it, but did not move away.

Footsteps approached, and Sherlock jerked back in time to see John striding toward them, a parting gift of terrible coffee in each hand. Sherlock’s heart thudded fitfully in his chest at John’s neutral expression turned sour.

John knows, came a traitorous voice in Sherlock’s head. He can see how weak you are. It’s disgusting.

He ignored it and turned back to his former patron. “We don’t have time for this, Victor. Now, who is Lorraine Carver?”

Victor withdrew and raked a hand through his brassy blond hair, softer and paler now without its usual pomade to style it. Whether or not he had noticed Sherlock’s moment of weakness, Sherlock couldn’t tell.

“What does this have to do with anything? I just got out--”

“Thanks to me, you did. Whoever this woman is, she has attempted to frame you.”
Three more cars swept past, sluicing through the rainwater in the street as Victor stared at him thoughtfully. Just beyond them, John cleared his throat and pointedly did not look at them.

“Not a clue. What do you mean, ‘thanks to you’?”

“Consulting detective. I work with Scotland Yard on occasion. You have no idea who Lorraine Carver is? She seems awfully intent on ruining you.”

“No, I said. I do not know who this person is, and I won’t if you ask me a hundred more times.” The heat in Victor’s words read like so much frustration. “But if you’re a--consulting detective does that mean you’re investigating it?”

Sherlock, despite the little gutter of warmth he’d felt only minutes before, shot him a wilting glare.

“Obviously.”

Victor inclined his head ever-so-slightly, eyebrows slightly raised, expression confused and hopeful. His eyes flickered up and down Sherlock, properly taking him in. “Man of many talents. Thank you, if you were one of the ones to help me so far. What can I do to retain your services?”

Victor’s behavior so far--the hug, the lingering contact, the openness written clear on his face--was so beyond the original impression set Sherlock had gotten of Victor, the arrogant and brash man whose hauteur brooked little social nicety and whose temper flared so hot against Sherlock’s skin.

Sherlock shifted uneasily from foot to foot, all too aware of his muddled judgement, of the way John’s glare bored into the back of his head.

John, who’d so recently given Sherlock that same hot-and-cold, open-then-not regard, the one that left Sherlock off-balance and unaccountably fighting to win his untouchable good opinion. The one Sherlock had seen the night Marcus Smith had been shot, that had been wiped from his face the night he’d stood outside Sherlock’s door and listened to him play. The one that got stonewalled away anytime John remembered Sherlock’s service to Naamah, or else his appointment from Kushiel.

Sherlock hated it. He hated that John could be so damned hung up on something so essential to him. He hated himself for wanting that approval so much--even more than he wanted the warm regard of a former patron.

Cassiline duties lasted a lifetime. Sherlock would be saddled with this for the rest of the foreseeable future.

At this point the silence had stretched on, punctuated by those damned swishing cars. Sherlock scrambled to remember Victor had said last.

*Thank you. What can I do to retain your services?*

“Try not to kill anyone.” His tone was brusque, his body locked tight. “Stay out of the Houses until this all gets cleared up.”

With that Sherlock brushed past, eager to escape, eager to lock himself away in his bedroom where things made sense. Away from Victor’s warmth and the John’s icy stab of glares, where his violin would play, his feet would pace. Where he could think about this bloody case without his head getting done in by one man he’d slept with nearly six months prior. Where he could clear his mind of it all in preparation of his looming assignation with Jim and Amelia.
Minor Warning:
John's occasionally an idiot that likes to eat his own foot. So watch out for him implying some slut-shaming not only directed at Sherlock but Naamah herself. I told you, the man is occasionally dumb.
Grounded Off-Center (John)

Chapter Summary

New chapter! I'm trying to get John's side caught up now that they're all in the same story, that way we can get away from backlogged chapters as soon as possible. <3

Weak, early-morning sunlight struggled to lay its claim to the little courtyard behind Maison Adler--London had gifted them with a miserable summer rain that washed the dawn sky white-grey. His training clothes clung to him, slick and taut. Before they'd gotten back home, a downpour had pummeled the earth of Irene’s little courtyard, bruised the lavender and gardenia. Loam and floral cloy swelled in his throat. Sleep-deprivation submitted to livewire adrenaline--sweat in the eyes and pulse in the ears. John's chest heaved from his exertion. The air tasted green-life, life, life.

“Why do you lock yourself away from the world and hide behind Cassiel’s skirts like a boy playing at war?” Sherlock’s voice echoed, dripping derision.

“...the question borders on heresy,” Brother Vincent had written.

John struggled to focus: deep breath in, pivot on right heel and twist the torso. Drive all power through the left blade. Half-step back, side-step, duck and slash on the exhale. Speed it up.

“I know it exists, even if I’m not stupid enough to engage. I’ve chosen celibacy.”

Cassiel chose, John thought as he spun low, crouching to leg-sweep an imaginary enemy. And chose. And chose.

“There’s something else here.”

He willed himself to move ever faster until the racket in his head give way to muscle memory.

“Do you love him?”

Edges blurred, daggers singing as they sliced through the raindrops.

“I care about all of them. Now shut up.”

His vambraces, polished steel cushioned by worn leather, shone in the watery light.

“I do it because I was called to do it.”

John prayed his soul was half as well-polished.

# # # # #
When he could move no more, John collapsed there in the dirt. The mess didn’t matter. He drank in air thick as honey while the rain abated and the humidity ripened. Sweat stung his eyes and a familiar pain clogged his throat. A single thought pounded with his pulse.

“Love as thou wilt.” - “Love as thou wilt.” - “Love as thou wilt.”

Where skin touched soil, a tingling began at the base of his spine, spread outward like ink in water. John wished: that the earth might swallow him whole, that he could bury himself until he became the fertile minerals and decay, that his fingers were roots and his peace blossomed like wildflowers, a riot in the sun.

The buzz arced over his skin, enveloping him. The sky hung above, its mercurial nature a blessing and a curse. Beneath him, the ground was ever-constant. After all else, a drop of Anael’s ichor still flowed in his veins.

Stillness grew in his heart, steady as the sapling that had sprung from Anael’s acorn. Elua himself had pressed it into the clay, once-upon-a-time.

And yet.

Behind it lay that desperate hunger, that thirst for something greater. It yawned in his chest like the distance between stars, impossible to traverse. John had the feeling that would never abate.

“He loved Elua too well to do aught else.”

I can do no less.
The remainder of May slipped through Sherlock’s fingers like loose, dry beach sand. The murders stopped and worse, so did the investigation despite Sherlock’s best efforts. With no new leads, no new evidence, Sherlock was left with a puzzle that still had too few pieces.

He tried to push these thoughts away as he paused between guests to refill wine glasses. It would do no good to focus on an impasse when there were potential patrons scrutinising his service.

This was just another of the many intimate little dinner parties Irene held, a group of notables that surely were brought together to loosen information, strengthen a network of acquaintances. Per usual, Sherlock performed as a pretty little ornament, serving each course and dispensing wine and water like an easily-ignored garçon. The work itself was mindless enough, as thoroughly trained as Sherlock was for the task, save for the fact that among the dinner guests, Jim was present.

Worse, Jim ignored him outright.

Sherlock had yet to do anything that would covertly win him Jim’s attention—whether it was glancing up in hopes of catching his eye as he placed a dish in front of the patron opposite Jim, or casually allowing his elbow to brush Jim’s arm as he refilled the glass of a nearby seat-mate.

“It’s a sodding tragedy, and you can believe they’ll do something about it!” The exclamation came from a barrel-chested man seated near Irene, whom Sherlock recognised as Amelia’s husband, Dominique Chamberlain.

“Surely the authorities are investigating the bombings to the best of their ability,” another guest replied. “And now that there’s been another in Germany—”

Just the week before, the D’Angeline embassy in Germany had fallen victim to an explosion. Authorities deemed the event linked with the bombing in the U.S., but investigations into each incident yielded little.

It was the sort of distant news Sherlock had filed it away at the time, too occupied with his studies or lamenting the stalemate in his own investigation.

“What do they want?” Jim asked, his voice light and smooth. “D’Angeline relations with both America and Germany are quite beneficial. No extremist group from either country would target them for political reasons, one would think. Unless it’s to do with religion—”

“What does it matter?” Dominique interjected. “What’s done is done. Americans and Germans alike are beginning to fear their D’Angeline population.”

“It’s not as if they were overly fond of us to begin with,” another guest said. “The fact is, the world at large has never been much in favor of the one country on earth whose prosperity and beauty has always been apparent!”

Sherlock fought the urge to roll his eyes. This had been volleyed as levity, but had fallen inelegantly in the centre of the crowd, a juvenile attempt at morale-stoking.

Jim rose from the table, smiling apologetically as he did. “That’s likely the sort of thinking that’s given them reason to attack our embassies, don’t you think? What more could they want, than to
give France a reason to withdraw its presence?” He let his gaze linger on the guest who’d made
the faux pas before addressing the table altogether. “If you’ll excuse me a moment—”

He made his exit as the remaining guests murmured to themselves, picking at the remainders of
their entrees. Sherlock sprang into action, circling the table to quietly clear the plates away. When
his trolley was laden, he rolled it to the kitchen, bent on retrieving the dessert for the evening, a
light pear-and-brie tart.

The kitchen granted a welcome reprieve from the otherwise inane chatter of the dinner party. The
dishwasher hummed contentedly, cleaning the last of the cookware, nearly ready to accept the
dinner mess. Mrs. Hudson and John had both excused themselves, their maid to her own home
and John to his room for sulking or whatever he got up to in his spare time.

He’d only just started loading the dinner plates onto the worktop by the sink when the back stairs
gave way to a telltale creak. Jim had entered, and the way his lips twitched in a smile looked more
like a python’s satisfied countenance as it circled its prey.

“Some party,” Jim drawled, leaning his hip against the island worktop. “Made better by a cheeky
attendant.”

Sherlock willed himself not to let the dish in his hand rattle as he stacked it atop its mates, his heart
a quicker thud in his chest. So Jim had noticed his attempts.

Of course he had--he was as observant as Irene and Sherlock himself, wasn’t he?

Sherlock couldn’t help the way his cheeks burned. Suddenly his little game felt immature, the sort
of thing a dull-witted, besotted teen might resort to. He started to reply, but remembered the way
in which he’d been instructed to address Jim. It would only make his embarrassment worse.

Instead he opted to keep his chin level, his eye-contact unwavering.

“Too good to speak to Daddy, are we?” The way Jim’s tone slithered between words felt like the
opening notes of a pretty little melody, tempting and barbed.

Sherlock could hardly make his voice work. When he spoke it came out as a hoarse whisper. “No,
Daddy. I’m not.”

Jim closed the meagre distance between them then, invading Sherlock’s space like it was his to
claim, and ran a knuckle along Sherlock’s cheek. Sherlock tried to relax under Jim’s gaze, the way
those eyes flickered back and forth across his skin. It was impossible.

“One more week. You’ll make such a lovely parting gift.”

Sherlock swallowed hard. Was that what his assignation was, a parting gift before Amelia went
back to Paris?

Even still. The next week would be an eternity.

# # # # #

That night, Sherlock lay tangled in his sheets, desperately listing the periodic table backwards in
an effort to bore himself to sleep. From Ununoctium to Lanthanum, he could only replay his
encounter in the kitchen. From Barium to Yttrium, it was the way Jim’s scent filled his head, and Strontium to Scandium was that melodic voice tipping downward in an inflection so sinful Naamah herself would blush. By Aluminum, the only thing he could think of was the heat that came off Jim, nearly chest to chest as they’d been.

By the time he reached Oxygen, Sherlock knew what he needed. There was no fighting the low build, want and need bubbling at his core. With a frustrated grunt he tossed his blankets back, took himself in hand.

Sherlock burned for Jim, whose presence filled his mind and boiled his blood. Jim got into his brain and left him dizzy, like a head full of helium.

How often had he done just this--had he grasped himself at the root, full to bursting with the need to simply kneel at Jim’s feet? How many times had he stroked himself, sweat-slick just like this, while he imagined all the ways Jim would know how to pluck each string until Sherlock sang only for him?

He thrust up into the ring of his fingers, thumb darting to swirl leaking precome across his glans, foreskin sliding along his shaft with each push.

If he performed well for both Amelia and Jim, surely Jim would take him in a private assignation. Elua, he could only hope.

He was not fool enough to hope that someday, at the end of his service, Jim might recognise him as an equal, rather than an adept to be humoured, to be taught. He was not stupid enough to entertain daydreams of to what future that recognition might lead.

He had never wanted that from another patron. Why should that be any different for Jim Moriarty?

And still, he could imagine a future: days of intrigue and long nights filled with the lash, the paddle, skin and sweat. Jim could consume him body and soul and Sherlock would thank him for it.

Sherlock stifled a cry, knuckle between teeth, just imagining the way Jim might look, nude save for the dark glimmer in his eyes as he wielded a flogger. Even in his mind his vision was painted in red and shadow. Sherlock stroked faster, nearly on the edge of orgasm.

But then his mind jumped, and it was no longer Jim holding the flogger.

It was John, the same ferocity that lit his eyes as he’d fought those street thugs, the same confidence he exuded as he did anything in life. It was John wielding the flogger, John crowding him against a wall, a bed, a St. Andrews cross, catching Sherlock by the hair and holding him in place while he sank into him, nails scoring red lines along his shoulders, his spine.

Honey and the faint taste of apples exploded on Sherlock’s palette, and the fluttering wings of a dove pulsed in his throat, in his head.

Sherlock was so startled the orgasm broke free, semen oozing over his fist and onto his stomach. His eyes flew open and he just stared in bewilderment at his ceiling until his breathing regulated.

His thoughts raced: How...? Why?

He wrestled the thought until eventually he decided it was a fluke, crossed wires and nothing more.

His whole life, Sherlock had done just fine without the flirtation, camaraderie, or acceptance of his
peers. He’d been safe, cocooned in the intimacy of cool logic and unchanging fact, with his lab in the garden shed and the dusty tomes nicked from his mother’s library.

Then the prick of Kushiel’s dart and the goad of Namaah’s desire had dragged him to Elua’s feet, who saw fit to curse him with a need for something deeper. He craved physical contact so desperately his chest ached with it: whether it was a pat on the shoulder and Irene’s fraternal regard, Mrs. Hudson’s frail motherly comforts in the form of a hug, or the shallow postcoital contentment that came when wrapped in the arms of a patron.

Oddest of all, those vulnerable moments had taken him more and more frequently to the memory of John’s voice as he brushed that appaloosa in Helen’s stable, of their rare companionable silences. He had no idea what to do with John—the idiot who knocked him off his rails, a stubborn prig who piqued his anger and whose smile was so rare that earning it felt like drawing down the moon with a tattered length of yarn. In another lifetime, they might have been friends.

He’d never in his life had one of those. It was easy to see why he could be confused.

# # # # #

All those crossed wires aside, Sherlock was nearly ready to throttle his Cassiline as John bounced a knee the entire ride to Jim’s penthouse. John’s fingers twitched like they itched for action and his eyes found no focus. Sherlock saw plainly that his thoughts were too loud and too thick for anything else.

Elua, but it was annoying.

# # # # #

Though John was given little more than a perfunctory nod, Jim and Amelia greeted Sherlock as warmly as any guest of honour, rather than a servant of Naamah.

“Sherlock!” Amelia’s tone was genuinely pleased as she leaned up to kiss his cheek right there in the foyer. “I’ve had half a mind to contract you myself since Irene first introduced me to her pupil. I’m quite glad Jim has done the job for me.”

Jim gave Sherlock an appraising look, his smile sharklike, but his words were for Amelia. “Your birthday is the perfect excuse to share this little treat before you and Mr. Chamberlain return to the continent, I think.”

Amelia laughed, completely unbothered by this comment. Sherlock found it likely the Chamberlains’ was an open arrangement, as it was not uncommon among D’Angeline upper-class. “Jim tells me you play violin, Sherlock. Is that true?”

Sherlock could feel John’s eyes on his back, but he ignored it. “It is,” he answered, praying that if he left off calling her madame, or Jim sir, he wouldn’t be prompted to call Jim aught else in anyone else’s presence.

It had been embarrassing enough to call him Daddy the two times they’d been alone.
Jim quirked his eyebrows at Sherlock, a split-second expression to say that he knew what Sherlock had omitted. He mouth was very nearly a smile. “I happen to have one with me. I believe I’ll have you play while Amelia and I dine.”

With that he turned and ushered them into his penthouse, but was surprised to find that John followed them in as well.

“What’s this?” Jim asked. “Does the Cassiline normally come along to watch? Ooh, I knew there was something perverse with you lot.” His words drewled in a tease, one that held the barb of a threat.

John went red-faced but ignored his comment, only replying with, “I am bound in service. I go where I am led.”

Sherlock, who stood further into the penthouse and behind Jim, cut him a bewildering, accusatory glare that read, *What do you think you’re doing?*

John refused to meet Sherlock’s eye, steadfastly holding Moriarty’s gaze. He hadn’t behaved this way since the first or second of Sherlock’s assignations. Why the sudden change?

*He doesn’t like Jim at all,* his mind supplied. *Or else he actually sees Jim as a threat.*

That thought sent arcs of eager anticipation through Sherlock. That boded very well indeed.

“That’s quite commendable,” Jim said, “but you’ll need to sit guard outside the door like a good little puppy. I didn’t pay for you to enjoy our evening.”

John’s eyes went wide but before he could say anything, Sherlock interjected. He had better do so carefully: showing his own temper was not considered good training at all, but neither could he allow this ridiculousness. “John, all will be as well as it ever is. For you it’ll be a boring night of contemplation or whatever it is you usually get up to.”

Sherlock knew full well John mainly just brooded during these assignations, but there was absolutely no point in goading the Cassiline further.

John’s jaw twitched, but he only gave a curt nod and turned back out into the foyer.

# # # # #

Sherlock found the intended instrument in the far corner of the dining room and set to warming up the instrument, to scanning through the musical selections left on the nearby stand, as Jim and Amelia took their seats.

Strings tuned, bow rosinced, Sherlock poised the space of three breaths, and then he played. Notes spilled out, warm and seductive as they wove around the spacious room, slinking and idling next to one another until they built a complex auditory sculpture, sound made sensual and subtle.

At the table Jim and Amelia paid him no mind, content to chat and sip cocktails as they waited for their meals to arrive. All throughout dinner Sherlock did his best to focus on the music, always on the music, lest his mind wander to what might happen after dinner. He watched the host and his guest, and played tirelessly through soup, entree, and salad.
After the last of the plates had been cleared and a simple sweet digestif had been served, Jim finally turned his gaze to Sherlock, bidding him to finish. Sherlock put away the violin and approached the table. As long as he’d waited for this, time slowed to a crawl now, each detail demanding his notice.

“Now may I have my dessert?” Amelia asked, drink turning the edges of her Parisian lilt coy and amused. A pretty blush rode her high cheekbones, the hollow of her throat above the low neckline of her dress. She was indeed the ideal of Camellia canon: without fault or flaw, a rare blend of all the opposites that comprised the other houses.

“If you like,” Jim answered. “Sherlock, heel.”

Sherlock dropped to kneel at Amelia’s feet, his eyes downcast. Fingers—thicker than a woman’s, blunt-nailed—twisted in his hair and jerked. His head snapped back and the dim, golden ceiling light—low-watt Edison bulbs, designed to inspire intimacy—swam in his vision. Jim stepped behind him, his legs bracing Sherlock’s back. *Subtle spicy Jim mingling with muted floral Amelia*--

Amelia smiled and circled the rim of her tumbler with her fingertip. “After all that lovely playing I’m sure you’re parched, darling.”

Sherlock’s Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat and he did his best to nod his head, a miniscule movement given Jim’s hold on his hair.

Amelia lifted the glass to his lips, helped him drain the remains of the generous glass of armagnac. The sweet, robust swirl of white grapes and vanilla-and-and honey oaking burned as it filled his mouth, slid down his throat. A little bit dribbled from the corner of his lips and hugged the curve of his chin, rolled halfway down his neck. Amelia leaned forward in her chair, ducking to lick the brandy from his skin. She kissed him then, chasing the taste to its last drop.

At length she pulled away, straightened her posture, and arranged her face into neutrality, though a hint of amusement still coloured her voice. “Now we’ll play a game, I think. Jim tells me you’re quite adept at the little trick he can do—you pick up obscure details and find hidden truths. He says you play detective when you’re not doing Naamah’s work.”

When Jim released him, Sherlock let his eyes drop to the floor at her feet once more—*bespoke stilettoes, House-made*--and let his mind replay the evening, honing in on every detail he could muster. If he could do this thing—if he could prove his genius to Jim, and then impress him in the bedroom, there was absolutely no reason why it wouldn’t lead to more--

“Your shoes are the latest from Eglantine-Paris, but your dress, while done in classic lines, is a colour that went out two seasons ago—but you are a trendsetter in the City of Elua, which means either you’ve fallen on hard times financially or else your attachment to it is sentimental. Possibly both. This is also corroborated by the fact that you mentioned you’d considered personally buying a night with me, but have not yet done so. Why would the flower of Camellia House not get what she wants as soon as she wants it? Especially when it would be a lovely jab at my mentor, who is a rival and possibly a former lover. You are married, so it could be that—but no, obviously you are here tonight and you have removed neither your engagement ring nor wedding band. You are here with your husband’s blessing. This leads me to believe that there are hard times, indeed, in the Chamberlain house—"

*Can you remember something for me, lovely?* Rhys Wilkerson’s voice echoed in his memory.

*Naturally I’ would question where his funds come from,* Irene had said, less than twenty-four hours later.
Sherlock stopped himself before the train of his thoughts jumped tracks, gave away Irene’s intelligence-gathering. Financial hardship for the Chamberlains, but they had money to burn via Victor Trevor?

And still--what, exactly, linked Trevor and the Chamberlains?

When Sherlock dared to glance back up at Amelia--who’d gone pale and a bit rigid with displeasure--he noticed her eyes. Warm brown, a familiar shape, hardened with anger. In that moment he knew three things:

She and Victor were somehow related.

He had made a grave misstep with a patron.

He’d ruined an assignation, and worse, it had happened on Jim’s dime.

Sherlock fought back a wave of panic--he’d never get a second assignation with him. That much was certain.

Amelia rose abruptly and stalked off into the hallway, her stilettoes clicking harshly against the hardwood as she left.

Jim grabbed Sherlock by the hair again, wrenching his head back until he could see Jim’s face looming above, contorted and red.

“How dare you speak to my guest that way,” he snarled. “Is this the sort of behavior Maison Adler condones?”

Sherlock couldn’t breathe. How had he let his tendency to show off get the better of him so thoroughly he’d destroyed any chance of proving himself worthy of Jim’s time or attention? His mouth gaped, gasping for words, for apologies, but found none.

“I want you out.”

With that Jim, released his hair, shoving him to the side. Sherlock rocked, catching himself. He pushed to his feet, and the thickness of his blunder wedged immovably in his throat. He cast about, vision darting but unseeing, as he stumbled toward the door--sleek lines, modern furniture, blood-red chair in a sea of black-white-grey. Jim strode behind him in silence.

This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be.

Sherlock was the best at what he did. This could not be happening.

And yet. When he grasped the knob to the front door, it filled his hand, solid metal. He twisted it, found John waiting just outside in the foyer. John glanced up at them in the beginnings of confusion.

“How Sherlock, a moment.” Now Jim’s voice was hushed, conspiratorial.

Sherlock turned, unwilling to look him in the eye. This was it. Jim would tell him off for good, and all because of the same idiot mistake that got his arse kicked at school--

“You were lovely tonight.”

Sherlock was so surprised he forgot his contrition, his embarrassment, long enough to actually look at Jim’s face. There he found a mischievous smile, a wicked glint to Jim’s eyes.
“That was perfect. You performed beautifully—the violin and the deduction.”

Sherlock wasn’t sure what his own face was doing at this point, other than twist in bewilderment. “I--what?”

“I really can’t stand that woman. It was a delight to pull her down a peg.” Jim stepped forward, crowded him against the doorframe until that spicy scent filled Sherlock’s head again, muddled his senses. “Daddy is quite happy with you right now, Sherlock. Oh, Daddy will reward you just as soon as he can.”

With that he grasped the back of Sherlock’s neck and jerked him down for a kiss, deep and probing. Claiming.

Shame gave way to arousal and Sherlock sagged against the doorframe, letting his body press along Jim’s. Elua, Jim’s stubble, that spicy scent-- His hands flew up to clasp Jim’s biceps to keep himself steady. But then his curiosity got the better of him and he pulled back.

“I--I don’t understand-- You meant for this to happen. Is this why you called me a parting gift?”

Jim’s lips, kiss-slick, stretched into a sharklike grin. “I’ll tell you if you’ll tell me what you know about your little detective case. Later. Must keep up appearances for my guest and all.”

As baffling as everything else in the last five minutes had been, this one thing made sense. An information trade. Reasonable enough, really. Of course anyone as prominent as Jim Moriarty in the circuit of Naamah’s servants would want to be kept abreast. The developments of the case had splashed across the news, as sensational as it was.

Still, it left Sherlock reeling from the third about face to happen in as many minutes. Jim always found new ways to keep him on his back foot, to retain the lead in this dance of theirs.

“Well, then.” Jim stepped back, satisfied. He glanced over to John. “Good night to you both.”

John.

Slight widening of the eyes, pursing of the lips, indrawn breath--

Shame burned in Sherlock’s gut once more. John had heard. John had heard Jim refer to himself as Daddy. John would know he liked to be called that, that Sherlock had called him that.

Jim’s retreated, his door closed, leaving Sherlock alone with John and all that judgement.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration was hard to come by on my own, so google helped me out a LOT for this chapter.

Check out chapter 5 of the Appendices to see for yourself! :D
Quick heads-up: in case you missed it due to all the buggery last week as I rearranged chapters, I've worked John's chapters into this story. 22, 24, and now 26 are all-new and were never added into Counting the Hours.

Otherwise? Happy first day of Halloween October. Enjoy!

John was glad to have leave of Irene’s dinner party. Just living at Maison Adler was enough to supply one’s fill of D’Angeline intrigue for a year. Small talk, John could handle. It wasn’t as if he’d have to engage, exactly--he usually just hovered on the perimeter as a wall decoration, a subtle status symbol to put the hostess above her guests. But listening to some of the stories a group of Naamah’s servants and other notables would tell about their--adventures? It was hardly polite dinner conversation.

He’d gone through evening meditation and prayer, and availed himself of this precious free-time to watch the match. Well. The television was on, at least.

John’s thoughts kept coming round to one single point. He couldn’t fathom how Sherlock could find some sort of emotional connection with his patrons--especially when he kept everyone else at arm’s length. Was that Naamah’s doing, some foolish notion that there was genuine love between patron and adept? Is that what made the prostitution palatable? If it did exist, surely it diluted any and every attachment.

Lately, any time John was in close proximity to Sherlock a particular memory overwhelmed him. Anael’s gifts had let him draw strength from where he lay on the grass in the courtyard, and yet it did nothing to quell that yawning hunger he’d never felt before.

He had identified it, at least--it was the part of him that missed his deceased parents, his sister, the various lovers he would never take. The spouse he’d never settle down with.

Cassiel’s road was a long and lonely one.

The Brotherhood maintained that Cassiel’s devotion and Elua’s love would fill that void--but here John was, bound for life to the impossibility that was Sherlock Holmes and spiritually lacking for it. It didn’t matter that Cassiel did it for love of Elua. John couldn’t find it in him to do the same--not with Sherlock being what he was.

Elua would not bless John with the deep, name-defying love that transcended the flesh.

His solitude was only thrown into sharp relief by the way Sherlock looked at John or else refused to do so. For a few stolen moments in their short time together, John had foolishly hoped maybe the ice had broken, that they found a way to see eye-to-eye. Now since their argument Sherlock rarely acknowledged him.

John’s road felt impossibly long and lonely.

Someone on the television scored and the crowd went ballistic, but John hardly noticed.
Pretending to watch the game was pointless. John rose from his bed and turned the television off, determined to clean his teeth and go to sleep early. It was the only thing to quiet his head these days.

The hallway stretched to his left just outside his door, dark save for the one golden swathe where it overlooked the sitting room. Conversation rose from the adjoining dining room; Irene’s guests sounded fairly deep into their cups. John ignored it and made for the bathroom.

“Oh, sorry—” John started as he bumped into someone.

It was Jim Moriarty. His oil-slick smile slid into place as he replied, “Ah, the infamous Cassilline. We haven’t properly met.”

John panicked for a moment--here alone he was stripped of his role, the facade of the guard on duty who would remain silent and watchful. The last person in the entire assembled group he wanted to speak to was Moriarty.

He made damn sure, however, that his face remained neutral, relaxed. It would do nobody any good--least of all Sherlock--if Moriarty saw how much John disliked him.

Except, maybe it would. What if John’s behavior dissuaded Moriarty from wanting the assignation with Sherlock?

“You’re absolutely right. We haven’t. Can’t say I’ve wanted to.” He let every last ounce of his distrust, his disdain show in his voice. Then he doubled-down on it with direct eye-contact and a leery smile--the one even Brother Vincent found threatening.

It produced rather the opposite effect, however. Moriarty looked absolutely delighted.

“No wonder they have you locked upstairs. All bite, aren’t you?” Moriarty reached up and patted his cheek, a shade stiffer than affection.

John caught his wrist, squeezed until he was sure the bones ground together.

A new light flared in Moriarty. He ameliorated John with his eyes until he found whatever it was he sought. At last he brought them back up to level with John’s. His smile was hateful, all pretense of cordiality evaporated.

The shock of it came like a punch to the ribs. John was certain, certain, Jim had a knack for seeing through a person.

“If you had your way you’d be sitting at Sherlock’s feet, heelimg like a good dog.”

John bared his teeth, squeezed Moriarty’s wrist harder.

“Can’t say I’ve ever liked guard dogs, myself.” Moriarty’s voice came out lilting and distant, then, like he had more pressing thoughts. “If I had one I’d rip every fang from its mouth. I have no use for a bite worse than my own.”

The unspoken dare in Moriarty’s raised eyebrows nearly had John tackling the bastard and tumbling down the steps with him. Only his training kept him from it.

“Such a temper.” Moriarty’s singsong trailed off as he jerked his wrist free, turned, and sauntered down the hallway. Rather than heading for the main staircase, though, he went down the back stairway into the kitchen.
Sherlock would likely be in there. Irene had him on waitstaff-duty, after all.

Curiosity got the better of John, and he was thankful for his light steps as he crept to the top of the stair, just hovering around the corner. Sound from the kitchen carried up the narrow passage beautifully.

“...Too good to speak to Daddy, are we?” Moriarty’s voice dripped poison.

A measured silence. John held his breath, though he wasn’t sure why.

“No, Daddy. I’m not.” The admission sounded like it’d been pried from Sherlock, desperate and ashamed.

Disgust burned like bile in John’s throat. How deep did Kushiel’s dart really pierce, that mere words could do this to him? And Moriarty knew. What kind of demeaning, perverse--

“One more week. You’ll make such a lovely parting gift.”

*What the hell does that mean?* John wondered.

# # # # #

Of course, all this meant John couldn’t sleep.

He tossed in his bed for a while, letting himself tangle in the sheets, trying to find the right position. His body would have none of it. By the time the house had gone silent John gave up and plopped down at his desk to thumb through a medical journal he’d procured. That had been his dream, once upon a time. Going through med school, maybe being a surgeon.

He heard a creak from the next room: the tell-tale depression of springs. The squeak of the wooden bedframe. John sat up from where he’d been slouching toward the text, eyes boring through the wall he shared with Sherlock. A blush burned instantly at his cheeks, his neck, his ears.

Another creak. And then again. The noise became a steady rhythm.

It knocked the wind from John’s chest, set his blood boiling. Damn his mind, but impressions of Sherlock sprawled in bed the next room over flooded his imagination. Sherlock, furtively grasping, twisting, relieving--

The godawful weakness of his flesh manifested low in him, an insidious snake curled in the cradle of his pelvic bone, ready to strike. John struggled to tune it out.

Then came the sound of a muffled moan from Sherlock’s room, a sporadic expulsion of *mmms* and *aaahs*. John bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut. His traitorous abdomen tightened all the same.

*Cassiel, give me strength.* It became a mantra.

But the weakness in him did not abate, did not relent to the will of his devotion. It intensified. Guilty tears stung his closed eyes. He leaned back in his chair, let his hand drift down until he pressed the heel of his palm against himself, already half-hard.
Cassiel, make me stronger. Help me, please--

A memory slammed into him, inexorable: the dream he’d had shortly after his arrival at Maison Adler. Sherlock wore Kushiel’s bronze mask, bound before Elua’s statue and surrounded by blood-red anemones. John’s palms had skimmed his ward’s warm, bare skin. Elua, but how John had wanted. He remembered, too, the first night they’d gone to an assignation. The lash had snapped mercilessly, made Sherlock cry out. That noise had been torture and tease in one, try as he might to deny it.

And what does that say about you, John?

John’s hand had found its own rhythm against his soft flannel pyjamas. He hated himself, hated his fickle body and its betrayal. He hated how good it felt.

It was all confusion, he knew. He had never known this sort of pleasure with another person. It was only natural he would respond to someone so keenly honed to Naamah’s gifts, wasn’t it? That was no excuse, though. Not this meaningless lust, never this--he would never be fit to serve if he carried this in him. Yet another failing, he knew.

Would this have been the case, if he’d been assigned to a dignitary, some faceless head of state? Someone older than him, someone with a family and a decent, respectable career?

There was no way to know. But Cassiel and Elua himself must have gauged him worthy of this--this tribulation. He would have to meet their demands.

I will do better, he promised himself. It was the only thing that stopped him from crying out as he tipped over the edge.

# # # # #

A week later John was no better than he’d been the night of the dinner party. He couldn’t forget the way his capricious body obeyed its own whims. His devotion struggled to outmatch it, failed miserably.

On their way to Moriarty’s flat, John could only replay his exchange with Moriarty and the one he’d overheard in the kitchen.

If you had your way you’d be sitting at Sherlock’s feet, heeling like a good guard dog.

Moriarty’s declaration circled and twisted back in on itself, stringing together with the famished whisper Sherlock had given to another question entirely: No, Daddy.

It twisted John’s stomach to remember the way he’d allowed himself to imagine his ward, for Elua’s sake. How far he’d been stoked, just remembering the sound of Sherlock’s voice on assignations, when he was pushed so close to his limits.

He was no better than Moriarty or any of the others, was he?

Stop it. Now is not the time for self-flagellation, John thought. Focus on tonight. Hollow the self. Become the training your ward needs.

John was absolutely certain that if anyone were to test Sherlock’s signale, it would be Moriarty.
The bastard reeked of fine-tuned sadism.

The night could not possibly pass quickly enough.

###

The foyer John had been sequestered to was little more than a 5x5 anteroom that buffered the flat from the hallway beyond. Ventilation in the small space was terrible, which meant it was stifling hot despite the air conditioning that cooled the rest of the building in the oppressive summer heat.

You’ll need to sit guard outside the door like a good little puppy.

It had taken every ounce of restraint to neither break Moriarty’s teeth nor throw Sherlock over his shoulder and haul him back to the safety of their house, honestly.

John strained his ears to find the only sound coming from the flat was Sherlock playing the violin. He closed his eyes and let himself get lost for just a moment. It was nothing like the lullaby Sherlock had played just months before. This was mid-tempo and sweet, smooth like silk on skin.

Focus, damn it. Stay on guard. You’re not here for a bloody concerto.

John’s edginess only multiplied when the music stopped. He crossed his arms and let his hands rest on the dagger hilts at his belt--traditional warrior stance. It would only take a nudge to set him into motion, and that gave him comfort. He pushed away thoughts of kicking in the door, of doing whatever he had to do to dispatch Moriarty and Amelia. He would pull Sherlock down from some hideous torture device, if he had to, shouting orders and leveling all who stood in his way.

Sherlock could be strapped to a post, whipped until his skin split. Would he be foolish enough to withhold his signale? Would Moriarty even honour it? What if Moriarty brought out flechettes--

“I want you out. Out!” came Moriarty’s voice from the within the flat.

John stepped away and whirled to face the door, his mind finally hitting that silent calm. Only that high, clear note rang in his ears. It was just faint enough to draw the consciousness to the centre, which let instinct direct muscle memory.

The door swung open. Sherlock and Moriarty barrelled into the hallway--Sherlock dazed and Moriarty thunderous. Then Moriarty winked at John.

John had no idea what to do with that--Moriarty had done a complete 180 in a wink, had swerved from anger to charm, edges smoothed.

Sherlock, however. He kept his eyes downcast, his body curled inward like a kicked dog.

John had seen Sherlock playacting before, and this wasn’t it. John’s heart hurt for Sherlock just then, a momentary pang. Whatever he’d done to bollux up this badly must have been monumental, but Sherlock’s mute panic was so… visceral.

And that made no sense. Why should John feel sorry? Clearly no harm had come to his ward, and this had only served to shorten their stay here. By itself, that was some relief.

Then Moriarty’s voice curled with unfathomable humour. “You were lovely tonight.”
John’s eyebrows shot up past his hairline, he was sure. Sherlock appeared equally as surprised.

“That was perfect,” Moriarty purred. “You performed beautifully--the violin and the deduction.”

Sherlock had deduced--?

“I--what?”

Childish confidentiality slipped into Moriarty’s voice. “I really can’t stand that woman. It was a delight to pull her down a peg. Daddy is quite happy with you right now, Sherlock. Oh, Daddy will reward you just as soon as he can.”

Then to John’s horror, Moriarty stepped forward, crowded Sherlock. John fought the urge to pry him free, but Moriarty wrenched Sherlock down and kissed him hard, a reward given as a punishment. Sherlock collapsed against the doorframe, clinging to Moriarty for support.

Rage exploded white-hot somewhere in John’s middle. Elua, that ringing drowned out all noise and fury burned in his bones. He couldn’t breathe.

_Do not let emotion cloud your judgement_, Brother Vincent had told him countless times. _Anger is only good for the fight._

“Well, then.” Moriarty stepped back, satisfied. He met John’s eyes, laid that dare once more. “Good night to you both.” He retreated to his flat and the door clicked shut behind him.

Sherlock turned to John then; he looked horrified.

_I almost hope Moriarty does something worth killing him over_, John thought. _Forgive me, Cassiel, but I do._
Darkness settled solid and snug over London, calling the neon and fluorescent out to dazzle. The London humidity hazed their glow, transforming it into something reckless and desperate.

Sherlock wanted to kick himself--of course their driver was gone for the night. He wasn’t due to be picked up until the following morning.

It was mortifying to think of all he’d missed out on, having fallen prey to his own stupid self-aggrandizing tendencies. His memory echoed loud with his voice, speeding through thick and fast deductions. He’d gotten too wrapped up in his own needs to consider Amelia’s. Still, Jim had hoped for it. Was it really a loss?

In an effort to ignore his own extreme embarrassment, Sherlock focused instead on his revelation--Amelia was related, somehow, to Victor. More importantly, she was giving him money, but had recently fallen on hard times herself.

Was it as simple as blackmail? As much as he hoped his patron wasn’t the type to do that, Sherlock knew better than to assume Victor was completely blameless. He had, after all, been charged with major drug trafficking felonies only a few years ago. One didn’t garner that sort of suspicion without some sort of basis, even if one was later acquitted.

Could Victor be using their familial tie as some sort of extortion? Sherlock wasn’t even sure how that would work. He knew nothing of Amelia’s family, true, but Victor had been a poster-boy of breeding and affluence, according to Irene and Mycroft.

Maybe Amelia or her husband was embezzling in order to pay him off. Had the Chamberlains been doing poorly before they became Victor’s benefactor? Had Victor’s debts that had driven them to that state?

“What the hell happened in there?” John asked. Already he’d pulled out his mobile, was tapping in the number to call the driver back round. They’d only been out for two hours at best.

Sherlock, having gotten his own mobile to call Irene, tried to think of an answer that didn’t betray his stupidity. Failing that, he snapped, “Quiet. I think I’ve found a new lead--”

The call connected, and he heard Irene’s voice on the other end. “Hello? Sherlock, what--”

“I need to know where Amelia’s staying while she’s in London.”

“Whatever for? She’s there with you, isn’t she?”

“I can’t explain. Where is she staying?”
This time there was a pause, papers shuffling. “She’s at the Berkeley. You’re sure?”

“Yes.” Sherlock thumbed the ‘end’ button before Irene could ask anything else.

# # # # #

The Berkeley resided in Knightsbridge, in an area so close to the D’Angeline embassy and the Night Court it was commonly known as Knight’s Doorstep. The affluent and the adventurous would venture there for a night of excitement a perfect blend of opulent and rough.

The hotel, of course, was the brand of stupidly posh that left even Sherlock—a Belgravian resident and plaything of the wealthy besides—feeling uncomfortable, conspicuous.

Without a room number or a key-card, there was only one way to use that disparity to his advantage. Only three Houses prevented their servants of Naamah to meet their patrons in the hotels—Alyssum, Mandrake, and Valerian. It would be a simple sham.

Sherlock checked himself in a window’s reflection. Once he’d smoothed down his hair from where Jim had pulled it, everything sat well: his well-trimmed black suit, a red shirt so dark it brought out the fleck in his eye, marked him as something rare, something exotic. It would’ve matched the sangoire lining of his Belstaff—such a pity the June weather had made the coat’s weight unbearable.

Sherlock turned to John, who had followed in silence, having given up his line of questioning in the car.

“I need you to wait out here until I text you.”

John shook his head, tipped his chin up. Ever obstinate. “Not a chance.”

Sherlock didn’t have time for their little dance. He stepped into John’s personal space, uncomfortably close. “What I need to do next requires not appearing like a threat. Plenty of unescorted servants come here to mingle. I’ll text you to join me just as soon as I can. Trust me on this.”

John didn’t concede without a proper argument hissed between the two of them, but in the end Sherlock won out.

As Sherlock turned back to the entrance, he pulled an identity around him like a cloak. He let himself become exactly what he wanted the concierge to see: an average servant of Naamah, concerned only with indulgences. It would take equal parts flattery and flirtation, sweetness and seduction.

The man at the desk—Emile, his nametag read—smiled, bright white teeth against dark-tanned skin. He possessed the kind of brazen quality that bode well for Sherlock’s gamble.

“What can I get for you?” Emile’s voice held friendliness, an edge of flirtation that would not go amiss here in Knight’s Doorstep.

But then Emile met Sherlock’s eyes and gasped.
Sherlock frowned, unsure of what to make of that. Many people had been surprised by the red fleck against the blue-green-gold. But this--something in Emile’s face read as recognition.

Sherlock pushed onward, his voice just the right mix of flustered and coquettish. “I do need your help, actually, see--”

“That mark in your eye,” Emile started, his words faltering. “How did you get that?”

Sherlock willed himself to smile, to pretend like it wasn’t a question he’d heard all his life. Usually right before something unpleasant happened. “I was born with it. As I was saying--”

“You were born with it.” Emile’s gaze flitted across Sherlock’s face, taking him in. “D’Angeline?”

This wasn’t going the way Sherlock had hoped. He’d honestly planned to have Emile wrapped around his little finger by now. Instead he found himself being interrogated. “I don’t see what that has to do--”

“A curse in the blood.” The expression Emile wore now was deadly serious. “I just thought they were old stories.”

Sherlock was now completely taken aback. Not even the Kusheline priestess had been sure, before she’d pricked his finger. This complete stranger had gotten it in one go.

“My grandmother stuck to the old Roma ways,” Emile said as if this were explanation enough. “She used to say meeting one of you was good luck. Whatever you need—if it’s in my power, the answer is yes.”

For maybe the first time in his life, Sherlock’s mouth was actually hanging open. This man is ready to hand over his first-born or offer me a kidney, Sherlock thought.

It took a moment but he found his voice, remembered the story he’d concocted on his way from Jim’s flat. “I need to get into a room. I’m a--well,” and here Sherlock fell back into his act, leaned forward until he was within an intimate distance, so close he could smell the cheap but pleasant aftershave Emile wore. “I’m a servant of Naamah, and I think I’ve gotten here before my patron. Could you let me into the room? I don’t think my loitering about the lobby would be appreciated--”

“Gladly. What is the name?”

No hesitation. It was boggling to think this complete stranger was willing to defy a major company policy on the promise of good luck.

Sherlock told him and Emile immediately set to tapping at the computer. “I’ve got it here. Do you know if your fees will be billed through us, to either Ms. Chamberlain or to Mr. Moriarty? It’s in her name, but he’s the one that’s reserved the room.”

Well, that was somewhat unexpected, but Sherlock couldn’t say he was entirely surprised. Had Jim known already about Amelia’s financial duress? “Ah, not necessary. I’m paid up through my House.”

“Excellent, Mr…”

“nó Jasmine,” Sherlock answered. It would be safer to keep his name clear, and was common for adepts to take their House-name if they wished to protect their birth name in the digital age. “Call me William.”
"Hm, William." Emile mused, as if the name itself was a gift. “I’ll escort you there myself.”

Sherlock waved him off. “It’s no bother, I’ll be fine--”

“What kind of gentleman would I be then?” Emile grinned, his previous manner returned. Then he waggled his universal key-card in the air beside his face. “Besides, I won’t get into nearly as much trouble if there’s not another key made--that gets logged on the account.”

Sherlock’s mind spun in place as they rode the elevator up to Amelia’s floor. He wrestled with his goal and curiosity as Emile led him down the hall. Before he could reach a decision they paused at Amelia’s door as Emile slid in the key-card. The door unlocked with a thick, mechanical click.

Sherlock met Emile’s eyes again, unsure of what to say.

“Ah, William, you have questions. Come back when you’re not on Naamah’s business and I’ll explain it better, eh, rinkeni chavo?” With a wink he swung open Amelia’s door and departed.

Sherlock pulled out his mobile and texted John. [Room 214. -SH]

###

Amelia’s suite was nearly a flat unto itself. It was all wide open space and a flowing decor, comprised of a main sitting room and two separate bedrooms. The ambient light of Knight’s Court’s attractions streamed in through the expansive windows overlooking Hyde Park, limning the suite’s shadows in an enigmatic glow.

Amelia and Dominique had certainly made it their home during the past month.

Sherlock could hardly find the energy to be impressed by this opulence, other than to wonder at Jim’s generosity.

He worked quickly while John kept watch, unsure of when Amelia or Dominique might return. He rummaged through everything from drawers to common hiding nooks. He even managed to deduce the combination to their safe and open it--but the only yield was a collection of heirloom antiques.

It was frustrating. There was only the possibility he might find something to cement a connection between Victor and Amelia.

In the end, only one artefact proved noteworthy, but Elua it was worth it. Beneath her pillow hid an old tattered copy of Les Trois Milles Joies, that textbook every servant of Naamah knew by heart before they debuted. Excitement thrilled in his blood. He forced himself to take a seat on the couch and give it a leisurely thumbing-through.

If there was anything he’d learned as Irene’s pupil, it was that presentation was everything.

Eventually the heavy thunk of the tumblers unlocking heralded her return.

Amelia froze in her doorway, fear apparent as she took in the well-lit sitting room. Her eyes flitted to Sherlock seated in the centre of her sofa, to John by her elbow, which she jerked away. “What the hell are you doing here?”
John shut the door behind her and to her credit she did not startle, but pinned Sherlock with her glare.

Sherlock scarcely contained his excitement as he held up the textbook, open to reveal a name scrawled on the inside cover. “What’s your connection to Lorraine Carver?”

Chapter End Notes

**A Few Points of Interest:**

--*rinkeni chavo*: Romani/Tsingano in this universe for “pretty-boy” ([click here](#) for more information on Tsingano lingo in-story)

--*Note on the presence of the Roma/Tsingano in this story*: Carey adapted the name “Tsingani” from a less-often used descriptor ([Cingane](#)), and I have chosen to continue that here as I have not seen evidence that this name has become a slur, unlike certain other terms. If I have used this name in poor taste, please let me know. I do not wish to offend anyone.

In Carey’s books, Romani/Tsingano people are a major presence, both as a people oppressed and underrated as well as a strong alliance to the main character, Phèdre (occasionally they perform as Phèdre’s "homeless network," actually!). They are portrayed in a very positive light. Two Tsingano characters possess what they refer to as the *dromonde*, or the ability to “see down the long road,” --which is to say, they are seers and can perform divination of both the past and present. (This is not a common ability, nor is it limited to the Tsingani in a form of race-based exoticism. Literally every culture Phèdre comes into contact with, including her native D’Angeline, have their forms of mystics.)

I am including Emile here in that spirit, and with the idea that he would recognise an *anguisset(te)* due to oral tradition--one could assume that Phèdre’s actions and interactions with their people were significant enough that her legend might be preserved in that way, however twisted as oral tradition is wont to become after 500 years.

--*Winter Variation John’s suit/uniform / Summer Variation John’s suit/uniform*

--*Amelia’s Suite*

--Fun fact about The Berkeley: it was built on the site of a previous club called *Esmerelda’s Barn*, the cellar of which was a lesbian bar called The Cellar Club.
The car ride from Moriarty’s penthouse had been fraught, and despite framing the question every way he knew how, John couldn’t get a decent explanation from Sherlock. And now, now Sherlock wanted to traipse off alone into some hotel, presumably to find Amelia Chamberlain. “Not a chance.” It was a credit to Elua’s divine intervention that John did not headbutt his ward when Sherlock invaded his space. Instead he held his ground, did not let his gaze flinch. Sherlock growled, “What I need to do next requires not appearing like a threat. Plenty of unescorted servants come here to mingle. I’ll text you to join me just as soon as I can. Trust me on this.” “Not going to happen. You still haven’t told me what happened back there--” John jerked his thumb over his shoulder, as if that were an accurate indicator of what had unfolded at Moriarty’s penthouse. “It’s unlikely Amelia has left Jim’s.” Sherlock crossed his arms and looked for all the world like a petulant child. “I know she’s related to Victor, and she’s recently become financially unstable. This doesn’t make sense--I learned from Wilkerson--” “You mean the--the husband that you--” “Yes. Irene sent me to him to discover where Victor was getting his money from.” This conversation was quickly rising past John’s ears. “But why does he--” “Exactly!” Sherlock exclaimed. “That’s it exactly, John. Victor’s family money dried up when he went to prison, so why--” “Wait, he did? When?” John had the feeling they were still not on the same page. Maybe not even the same book. More importantly, John wondered, what in the name of Elua possessed Irene to send Sherlock to a criminal? Sherlock jerked back and tore at his hair. “Why, Elua? Why did you give me an idiot for a guard?” He spun around quickly, taking in their surroundings. “John, we don’t have time for this. Just--shut up long enough for us to get this thing accomplished, and you’ll have the next week off-duty. I won’t even try to leave the house.” John snorted in irritation. “How long?”
“Give me fifteen minutes, and I’ll text you.”

“Fifteen?”

“Yes, John. Should I write that number down for you?” Sherlock’s tone was especially acerbic--whatever it was, this must have been serious. If it involved Victor and money, it likely concerned the case.

And, if John were being honest with himself, if there was some way to drag Moriarty’s name into the mud through all of this, it would be worth it.

John stepped back. “Fine. I’ll give you fifteen minutes to text me. Past that, I will come in, throw you over my shoulder, and drag you out bodily.”

Triumph flashed in Sherlock’s eyes but he tempered his glee with decorum, cleared his throat, and nodded once. “Right.”

Sherlock spun on his heel, marching for the hotel’s doors. Such a flair for the dramatic, that one.

John pinched the bridge of his nose and slipped his mobile free.

[I think Sherlock’s found a new trail for the adept assassin case. He won’t tell me what’s going on though. - JW]

The reply only took moments to ping back. [Do u need backup or is he being a prat & withholding evidence again? I can arrest him 4 u... - GL]

John smiled at that. [Not sure. It’s a possibility, both backup and evidence. V tempted to let u arrest him regardless. Be on standby? - JW]

With a sigh, John put his mobile away and leaned against the side of the hotel. Fifteen minutes. He could hold out that long.

###

[Room 214. - SH]

Eleven minutes, John thought. Not bad.

The interior of the hotel swallowed him, all dazzling lights and soft lobby jazz. Disgustingly rich guests milled about, and John fought the urge to look down at his uniform. It had been designed, of course, with service to the high-end in mind, but it was undeniably Cassiline. There was no mistaking his dove-grey trousers and waistcoat with its asymmetric placket lined with gleaming buttons, the leather shoulder-holster that housed his SIG, the shining vambraces encasing each forearm, or the steel dagger hilts bracketing his hips. Who else in all of London wore weaponry and a suit?

No one gave him a second glance, though. Knightsbridge--and especially here in Knight’s Court--was definitely an area where Cassilines were frequently seen with their wards. In fact, only the concierge at the front desk took notice.
“Sir--Sir!” The man, a dark-skinned lad who couldn’t have been more than twenty-two, smiled and waved him over.

John turned to the man and prepared to retrieve his credentials with the Brotherhood.

“You’re a Cassiline, yeah?”
John let one eyebrow raise in answer. *Obviously.*

“I’m Emile. You’re going to your--ah, your patron? Ward? Am I right?”
John nodded and continued reaching for his wallet.

“You’re with the pretty-boy William.”

“William?” John frowned. “I don’t--”

“Tall, dark, with a red petal in his eye?” The sort of smile Emile offered John now looked just shy of besotted.

What had Sherlock done or told the poor man?

“Listen, I don’t know what er--William has promised you, but--”

“No promises, *chavo.* He’s in room 214. Go on up, but remember me. Emile Didikani. Don’t let your friend forget my name.”

“Right,” John drawled, unable to do anything but stare at the man in bewilderment. “Emile.”

“Didikani.”

“Emile Didikani. Okay.” John, not entirely caught up, just nodded and turned to leave.

But if Emile Didikani noted his confusion, he didn’t react to it. He only offered him an impossibly wide grin and a half-arsed Cassiline salute--arms crossed, palms laid on the chest, a quick bow from the waist.

He looked like a tit, but John was mostly glad for his help. Probably.

#
#
#
#

John watched while Sherlock plundered the Chamberlain’s hotel suite. Elua only knew what he was after, and John felt more comfortable manning the door, running interference, in case trouble did crop up.

“This is for the case, isn’t it?” John asked at one point, one eye on Sherlock and the other on the door.

“Of *course* it’s for the case,” Sherlock snapped as he jerked up from his kneeling position to inspect a discarded sock. “I would hardly go breaking into someone’s suite otherwise.”

John snorted. “I doubt that.”
Eventually Sherlock seemed to find whatever he’d come for—though why it was a sodding textbook John couldn’t fathom. But it was not his place to question, merely to stand guard as Sherlock sat himself as the focal point of the room, intent on reading said book until their unwitting host returned.

John thought of his phone, sitting heavy in his breast pocket. He was glad he’d had the forethought to tap out a message, leave it unsent. It wouldn’t take but a second to send it, and help would be on its way.

Which was for the best, really. Sherlock hadn’t so much as touched his mobile since they’d entered the suite, so it was incredibly unlikely he would be so forthcoming with Lestrade.

When Amelia returned and Sherlock dropped his little bomb on her, John’s thumb was already swiping across the glass, mashing the little green Send.

[Could use that backup ASAP. Sherlock’s found something. - JW]

Chapter End Notes

*didikani* is, in KD, actually a Tsingani word meaning *half-breed.*
“What’s your connection to Lorraine Carver?”

Silence fell in the suite like a loaded gun dropping; there was no way of telling when it might go off, or who might be injured.

Amelia Chamberlain paled, but with a sharp intake of breath, she lifted her chin. “First you insult me, and now you’ve broken into my hotel suite. I’ll have your arse for this--get out before I call the police.” Her tone stayed level, calm. Sherlock could tell she fully intended to dodge his question.

Sherlock rose from his spot on the sofa, undaunted. He closed the textbook, tucked it under his arm. “Lorraine Carver. Tell me.”

Amelia dropped her key card on the table by the door, and Sherlock could tell by her movements as she headed toward the mini-fridge in the corner that she fought to control her body language. She stooped, produced a bottle of mineral water.

“I don’t see why that’s any concern of yours, Sherlock.” She turned then, threw her stony gaze at John. “How did you get into my room, hm? One could assume you’ve gotten in here with your guard to do any number of terrible, violent things to me. My word over yours.”

Sherlock grinned at that. “Unlikely, when I have a working relationship with Scotland Yard and you’ve got the name of a murderess hidden under your pillow.”

Amelia’s fingers tightened around the glass bottle poised at her lips. Sherlock saw her weighing her options.

There’s no escaping--John would easily stop her. She could lock herself in the bathroom to call the police, but she’s too angry for that--but in the next moment Sherlock saw her posture shift. Determination shone in her eyes.

“We’ll see about that,” she growled. Her jaw clinched and her painted lips drew into a fierce, jagged line. With a cry she hurled the glass bottle at Sherlock’s head. Luckily she’d telegraphed the movement enough he was able to dodge it, just barely; it sailed past and smashed against the wall, an explosion of liquid and heavy glass. She charged Sherlock.

Somehow John crossed the room before Sherlock could register; he wedged himself between Amelia and Sherlock, a vambraced forearm at her neck, barring her progress. He was close enough that Sherlock could feel the heat from John’s back, the faintest whiff of apples drifting in like a peripheral stimulus, unessential.

“Try it again.” John’s voice came out level, unruffled in the slightest.

Elua, he was a threat even like this. Sherlock was so distracted by his guard he nearly forgot his train of thought.

“Was Lorraine your name, before your time in Naamah’s service?” Sherlock hoped his tone was half as cool as John’s had been. “Perhaps a childhood friend? You do know why that name would catch my interest, I’m certain.”
Amelia’s lip retracted in a snarl, but she said nothing.

“Funny thing about murder investigations. Contractors receive nearly the same punishment as the assassin. In your case, it would be worse. You did know that, didn’t you? Or did you care, all too happy to throw those servants under the bus?”

“They were wronged,” Amelia snarled, her voice angry and desperate around the edges. “I gave them a way out and a way forward. But I wouldn’t expect you to understand that, you masochistic freak.”

Sherlock grinned, a grim and heartless thing. “I’ve seen the damage they did. Who is Lorraine Carver?”

Amelia’s eyes shone bright, righteous vengeance like a banner pinned to her heart. “It doesn’t matter.”

Sherlock stepped back, circled her. He opened the book again. “The paper in the book looks to be about thirty or more years old, given the aging and the typeset—done in a proper press, unlike modern digital print. It’s doubtful you’d need Naamah’s sacred book before primary school, so likely it’s a hand-me-down.”

Amelia remained silent. The quiet ricocheted around the room, punctuated by her rapid, shallow breaths. John remained steadfast, his gaze locked on her, left hand ready at the dagger in case she attempted aught else. Sherlock gave himself a moment to admire John then: D’Angeline steel framework dressed in an Englishman’s coarser features, honed sharper next to a D’Angeline flower like Amelia Chamberlain. He was a fascination.

Back to the task at hand, came Mycroft’s voice from memory. What do we know, and what can we infer?

“The book was your mother’s,” Sherlock continued, and then another thought occurred to him. He remembered what Ames had told him of the injuries that ruined Noualt’s chances at a marque, the likelihood a Valerian servant had received something equally damaging from Rachel Howells. He wondered what had been done to Frédérique nò Bryony. “Given the theme of your murders, she was wronged too, wasn’t she? The legal system failed her.”

Amelia swallowed, maintained her silence, but the shimmer of unshed tears and rictus of anger that tightened her mouth spoke volumes.

Sirens called out in the distance, drawing ever nearer. Sherlock huffed then, pride warming his core. “Thank you, John. I was just about to contact Lestrade myself.”

# # # # #

“You realise your evidence is inadmissible, Sherlock.” Lestrade started, scrubbing a hand over his face. “You broke into her sodding hotel room.”

Hours later, in the confines of Lestrade’s office, Sherlock paced the floor, pausing only now to stare Lestrade down. “I did your job for you, got her to admit her connection and her motive. Now you know how to find your own evidence, given a thread to tug, don’t you?”
“That’s not the point--!”

But Lestrade was interrupted by a ruckus out on the floor beyond his office. Sherlock spun and pried open the blinds; Dominique Chamberlain rampaged, his deep voice loud and furious. Sally and several PCs rushed him, attempting to subdue him.

“Bring that little bastard out here!” Dominique bellowed. “I’ll string Irene’s little lapdog up by his balls! I demand a lawyer for my wife this instant--!”

Sherlock stepped toward the door, had the lever in hand when John caught his wrist and shook his head.

Sherlock shook his hand free and swung the door open.

“Sherlock get back in here,” Lestrade called as he came from behind his desk. “You don’t have to--”

“What did you do to her?” Dominique bellowed. He lunged for Sherlock, only to be tackled to the ground by the PCs that had already attempted to allay him. “My wife, Sherlock! She was your bloody patron, and you’ve gone and done--this…” his words trailed off, a fuming sob escaping him.

“Your wife is suspected of several murders, Mr. Chamberlain, as well as framing an innocent man for it. Now what we have to determine is your innocence.”

Dominique looked up at him, purple-faced. “It was that bastard half-brother of hers! His father ruined their family, and Victor wanted to do the same! You should be breaking down his door!”

The murder theme, the money exchange, and the framing, Sherlock thought. Revenge under a veneer of sibling goodwill.

He opened his mouth to reply when John stepped up from behind, laid a firm hand on Sherlock’s bicep.

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock turned to look at him, but John’s attention was all focused on Dominique.

Then John glanced up, back to Lestrade. “We’re going to go home now. You know where to find us.”

# # # # #

Despite not arriving home til nearly half-three in the morning, both Sherlock and John were wide awake. In the quiet of Maison Adler, Sherlock had taken to puttering around the townhouse in his pyjamas. John had stepped out, insisted on a walk to clear his head.

Of what, Sherlock couldn’t fathom. All the work had been done.

So he busied himself with an ongoing project, tinkering with known aromas and compounds, attempting to design a pheromone-based cologne based on each of the House flowers. He’d just paused to sketch out an equation to account for the chemical composition, an attempt to work out that key ingredient he lacked, when his mobile buzzed on the table beside him.
It was from Sally. *Chamberlain refrained from calling a lawyer--called in a Jim Moriarty. Does that mean anything to you?*

The gears in his mind, which had been ticking forward in lieu of equations and chemicals, halted. Ground into reverse, seeking a new avenue.

Amelia had called in Jim. What could that possibly--Unless Jim had known about all this? Sherlock shook his head. No. Perhaps Jim had suspected.

*You’ll make such a lovely parting gift.*

*You performed beautifully.*

*I’ll tell you if you tell me what you know about your little detective case.*

Sherlock’s heart stopped. Jim had suspected. And he gave Sherlock the victory. With this one little maneuver Jim had stated plainly in the unspoken language between two intellects: *I see what you are, and I see what we can do together. Now I want you to see what I can do. I can wait if you can.*

Then his heart started beating, thumping, thundering in his chest. Jim had declared him an equal.

Sherlock’s skin flushed, his vision ran red. Kushiel’s bronze drums thundered in the distance. It took another minute before his mobile drew him from his reverie.

*[Freak? I know you’re awake. Brain like that doesn’t slow down just for the time of day. x]*

Sherlock blinked rapidly, deciding on a white lie parsed with truth. It wouldn’t do for the ‘Yard to distrust Jim, just because he’d suspected Amelia and handed her to Sherlock on a silver platter. But before he could hit send, Sherlock paused, thumb hovering over the reciprocal ‘x’ at the end of his reply. A kiss. Sentimentality. It had won Victor’s freedom and Sally’s trust.

It couldn’t be as dangerous as Mycroft had always insisted, surely.

*[Doubtful. They were close and he has connections. Possibly she wanted his help contacting a lawyer. And thank you. x - SH]*

---

The next morning Sherlock woke to find he’d fallen asleep at the table, forehead drooped to rest on his forearm amidst all the sample vials of his experimental colognes. The different floral scents invaded his head first, soft and pungent, rounded out with another, lighter scent he couldn’t place. Something so familiar it should be obvious. Something he’d smelled his whole life. Why couldn’t he place it? Head pounding, neck aching, he squeezed his eyes shut harder. Whatever the new scent was, it might be the missing element in those colognes, unless his head was just that thoroughly done in from smelling them the whole time he’d slept.

“Long night?” Irene asked as she walked by, ruffling his hair in an uncharacteristic display of affection.

“Mmmh,” Sherlock agreed, lifting his head. Then came the trial test fluttering of sleep-gunked eyes. Elua, his head hurt.
Something brilliant red caught his eye: at first it was an unintelligible blur, but as his vision cleared the image only made somewhat more sense. Deep scarlet like the mote in his eye, eight petals, one for each Companion.

*Anemone coronaria* var *eluine*.

That was apparent. Elua’s anemones.

What remained obscured, however, was why there was a single one on his worktop.

“What were you working on?” Irene asked, hoisting a generous mug of coffee to her lips. With her hair down, a plum satin robe wrapped around her frame, and the kind of lax posture that came of a prosperous evening, Sherlock could almost imagine Naamah herself looking something like this, fresh-tumbled with any of the lovers she took. And wasn’t that an odd thought.

“Just a--thing. What’s--?” Sherlock cleared his throat and lifted the anemone. “I mean. Where did it come from?”

Irene raised an eyebrow at him, at once sardonic and sweet. “Typically they come from the ground.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You didn’t put it here?”

Irene shook her head. “Mrs. Hudson, maybe? Sometimes she brings in flowers from the garden.”

Sherlock hummed thoughtfully, spinning the little flower between forefinger and thumb. It reminded him of the night before, of allowing himself to indulge in the sentimentality that kept seeping in from the edges of his life. A hug from Victor, a tiny ‘x’ at the end of a text from Sally. An unspoken message from Jim that could only allude to partnership once Sherlock made his *marque*.

Did it matter where the flower had come from, really? It was a small reminder of Elua’s first tenet: *Love as Thou Wilt*.

Sherlock scrubbed his eyes with his free hand. Physical signs from the gods. What sort of chemicals *had* he inhaled in his sleep?

Before he could examine the thought further or else discard it, the door leading out to the back garden creaked open. John stepped through, fresh from his morning workout, bringing with him a breeze that filled the kitchen: sun-ripe apples, wet earth, wild and green things. The underlying tang of sweat, fresh and not unpleasant. His short blonde fringe stuck in spikes against his forehead, as matted as his dark grey t-shirt.

“Morning,” he said to them both. His tone and his smile were far more cheerful than anything Sherlock had ever observed on him.

At this hour of the morning? It was disgusting.

Chapter End Notes
At the end of the first scene, when Sherlock thanks John for calling Lestrade? I was rereading just now to make sure everything was ready to publish and an ambulance totally passed my house right as I got to the sentence about the sirens. Honestly my first thought was, "'Damn, I'm so good it's like I can really hear them!'"

*rolls eyes* Let it also be said I'm foolishly doing final copy-edits while half-asleep and headachey. If you caught any errors, feel free to point them out.
Many apologies for the delay. I've been sitting on this chapter for like a week, but life has been a handful. Anyhow, I do want to give you all a heads-up: I will have to slow down chapter updates for a little while--I've got a few projects coming up that have nasty deadlines. Hopefully I can get back on track in a month or so, but I'm hoping to do at least one update a week. Cross your fingers for me, loves. <3 <3

Belgravia at half-three in the morning stretched long and quiet; even on a Saturday night its residents were far too restrained to indulge in raucousness that late. Above him the light pollution stained the night sky purple and hazy; shadows coalesced and pooled in alleys and overhangs, beneath bushes and across stoops shrouded by porticoes.

It was that unique, miserable pre-dawn hour that always managed to render John small and solitary in a darkness that reminded him of his own shadows. His head spun with the revelations of the evening, the explanation Sherlock had delivered whip-sharp in the cab ride home.

The murders had all been done in revenge. That much he knew already; a desperate grasp at a return to normalcy. But knowing Amelia Chamberlain had gone to such lengths to not only seek her own, but provide it for others--that took a certain brand of courage that John couldn’t wholly overwrite with adherence to the law or an appeal to morality.

It ripped open scars he thought long-closed: the years following his parents’ death, when he wanted nothing more than to train as a Cassiline just to find the drunk driver whose car had careened headlong into his parents’.

Elua, how it had burned in him, threatened to consume him from the inside out.

Brother Vincent had taken him under his wing--had recognised the hardened kernel of goodness in such an angry heart. Brother Vincent had shown him the shape and the breadth of Cassiel’s devotion, had molded his anger into fuel for a desire to learn, to grow, to prosper. Had transmuted his pain into devotion, his hollow depths into a love beyond himself.

What did he have now? Even after ten years he couldn’t escape how often he came back to this.

John’s eyes burned, and he wasn’t sure if it was from fatigue or the emotional hornet’s nest in his head. He sniffed once, forced a smile for no one as he rounded a corner, turning onto the avenue that carried him toward a destination he hadn’t quite discerned.

It wasn’t until he reached Knight’s Doorstep, the centre of D’Angeline society in London, that he understood.

Even at this late hour, Elua’s temple remained open, a harbour for those that sought it. The old stone building loomed familiar. John laid his palm against the heavy oak door. Behind closed eyes he could already see the courtyard, could feel the radiance of Elua’s presence.

A blue-robed attendant greeted him with a chaste kiss of greeting, little more than a brush of lips,
dry and soft against his own.

“What brings you here tonight, Brother Cassiline?” the acolyte asked, a woman maybe ten years older than him, with kind eyes and the sort of serene smile he’d always envied in Elua’s priests and priestesses.

John smiled ruefully, said nothing. Even here, in the safety of Elua’s heart, he couldn’t reveal his own. His chest ached and his throat throbbed, and there was nothing he could do for it.

Understanding his silence, the acolyte nodded and merely laid a hand at his elbow, guiding him toward the inner sanctum.

Beneath the covered perimeter that surrounded the open space where Elua’s statue stood, John toed off his boots, stashed them into a cubby designed for such a purpose.

“I--I didn’t bring an offering,” he stammered.

But the acolyte only smiled, cupped his jaw in her veined hand. “You brought yourself. That is all the offering Elua requires, brother.”

John opened his mouth to say something more about it, but the acolyte cut him off.

“The offerings brought in-hand are for the person bringing them. A dove, a honey-cake, laying an anemone on the altar--they are only a reminder to demonstrate our love for both Elua and others.”

John’s throat tightened. His voice came out rasped, splintered at its edges. “Thank you.”

How many times, John wondered, exactly how many times had he been told this? He was, by virtue of being a Cassiline, a priest in his own right--yet time and again he forgot the simplicity in Elua’s love. It was a benediction, always been offered from acolytes, The Brotherhood, but missing from the source he needed most: his mother.

He closed his eyes as he pressed one bare foot and then the other into soft, rich soil. Beneath the open sky, he didn’t need his sight to find his way to Elua’s feet. Sweetgrass and wildflowers whispered around his calves, bent in the gentle breeze that wafted in from above. A calmness he’d not felt in so long stirred his mind, brushed the cobwebs from his chest and filled his lungs. When the ground tilted upward, he knew he’d reached the mound in the centre that supported the statue. John opened his eyes, drank in Elua’s dim-lit face looming above him.

The stone carving was hundreds of years old--this was the first D’Angeline temple on British soil, even before Britain was named as such. Weather had eroded the finer details, of course, but Elua’s benevolent eyes and rapturous smile remained. John could feel the last of the day’s heat leaching from the statue when he kneeled. The stains on his trousers wouldn’t matter. He bowed low, pressed his lips to the granite plinth.

John thought of his mother again, and of the question that raced in his head the way it had done since he was a child: what if? What if his parents hadn’t died, or he’d never entered The Brotherhood and redirected his anger? What if he had gone after that drunk driver?

Would any of it have mattered, in the end?

There is no way to know, Brother Vincent’s voice, the ghost of a hundred memories, reminded him. We each stand at a crossroads and each decision bears a path we cannot retrace. We can only move forward, and hope to find our way back to the true path when we misstep.

He prayed: words he’d gone over a thousand times, a murmur in the smallest of voices. He
wondered at the path he’d been placed upon, each broken, winding road that had brought him to the temple just now.

He thought of his hand on Sherlock’s arm at the police station, and understood something that had always been beyond his grasp: restraint was a form of protection that had nothing to do with his blades or his anger.

It was another form of love.

And the simple act of protection—it too went beyond the constraints of falling into training, of dispatching with efficiency of motion. Each time he’d interceded for Sherlock, there had been the bone-deep fear for Sherlock’s safety. Each crime scene with a murder victim put him directly in mind of the same happening to Sherlock—and without fail it terrified him.

This is exactly what he’d sought all along: the unquestionable love for his ward he’d always prayed for.

The earth turned beneath him, and beyond the temple life continued in the city of London. Each and every person chose a hundred times a day, and all Elua asked was that each choice was made with love.

It was what had prompted Cassiel, after all.

It was what inspired Anael.

And not just them, but the others, too: it was the purity in Azza’s pride and the conviction in Camael’s sword, Shemhazai’s joy of the unknown, the wholeness in gentle Eisheth’s touch, and the absolution in Kushiel’s lash. Perhaps even the sacrifices Naamah made for Elua.

Now there was a thought. How deep could Naamah’s love delve, if she gave herself freely in Elua’s name? Of any other Companion’s devotion, only her service to Elua required actual sacrifice the way Cassiel’s did. Was it possible that her servants’ and acolytes’ devotion actually compared to those of The Brotherhood?

No one’s love was perfect, but they served in the way they were called. Each of them—even Elua himself—was misbegotten. It never stopped them from acting in love.

Naamah’s service had led four adepts to reclaim some love of self, though the execution was reprehensible. It had led Sherlock to bringing them justice against Elua’s most sacred blessing.

Well, not just Naamah, in Sherlock’s case, but Kushiel too.

John may never understand the love that spurred Sherlock, but did it matter?

Shame—Elua but it washed over John then! For each time he’d attempted to abandon his oath-sworn ward, for the anger and the absolute conviction that his service was merely a cruel test Cassiel had put him to. It had been wrong to assume he only stayed by Sherlock’s side because of his own love for Cassiel.

Then, too, came the shame of what he’d done in the dregs of the night, those times when he gave into the weakness of flesh. Sherlock, regardless of his chosen devotions, deserved better than to be reduced to a sexual object in John’s mind.

Tears John had held at bay for so long refused be restrained any longer. He lowered himself further, forehead to the soil, and let the anguish wash through him. He cried for his parents, his wayward sister and his lost younger self, for the man he could have grown into and the one he’d
become instead. He cried for the injustices he’d done to Sherlock, in word and action, aloud and in secret.

In time, the storm within him fizzled out, left him pummelled clean like the air and the earth after a downfall. Exhaustion claimed him then, and he knew no more.

A few short hours later John woke from a dreamless sleep, deep and hard, to find the sun shone down on him. In the scant sunlight twin anemones had bloomed, brilliant scarlet against the black soil, just beside his outstretched hand.

He rose, stiff and muddy, and studied Elua’s stone face as he stretched sore muscles. His shoulder ached from having slept on it in the night, but it didn’t matter. Elua gazed down all the same, his eyes kind and his mouth smiling. Time could not erase what Elua gave so freely.

John breathed in deep, new tears springing to his eyes--but these were from the swelling in his chest, the wholeness, the completion he’d come to find in Elua’s presence. He couldn’t keep the smile from his face, the one that etched deep into his cheeks and the creases by his eyes. He laughed even as he scrubbed at them with the heels of his palms.

He bent to peer at the anemones again, and considered their meaning. He understood, finally, that he had found the selfless love Brother Vincent had always taught him about. He’d carried that for Sherlock all along. A thing, once seen, that couldn’t be un-seen.

The flowers, the revelation--these were both gifts from Elua. A demonstration, since he’d offered himself.

He plucked the little red flowers before making his way to his shoes, to the door, to his home in *Maison Adler*.

---

John arrived home before anyone had risen, before Mrs. Hudson had even arrived. That--that was fine. He found Sherlock, head cradled on his arm at the little lab table set up in the breakfast nook, and it made John smile.

In his room he stripped his muddy clothes and donned his training gear, determined to move through the Counting of the Hours with new resolve, with newfound focus. Before he left, though, the anemones caught his eye from where he’d laid them on his desk.

One, he pressed into his battered old copy of Elua’s tales.

The other he left beside Sherlock’s sleeping form, there at the breakfast nook, nestled between the oddly-scented vials that surrounded him.

*Will Sherlock even understand this?* he wondered, but no sooner had the thought formed than he realised it didn’t matter. His love was not for Sherlock to ever discern, not in a manner he would ever recognise. This gesture with the anemone was nothing more than an offering in-hand, a reminder for John to demonstrate his devotion with his actions.

---

Chapter End Notes
Just so you guys knoooow, I made a playlist.

Also, this has nothing to do with anything, but OH MY GOD HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT 'HAMILTON' YET??

It's like AP US History and Epic Rap Battles of History had a glorious Broadway love-child, okay. Check it out.
Chapter Notes

Oh my goodness, how is everyone? It's been forever since I've seen all your lovely faces. I've missed you!

I just wanted to say--chapter 31 as it sat in gdocs was like twenty pages long... but then I realized I could split it, add some stuff to it, and have some John goodness in between. SO! Here's chapter 31, and hopefully I'll have 32 drafted here in the next day or so. Striving to have it up by Wed/Thurs... *crosses fingers* However it falls out, the following chapter, the one that used to be the second half of *this* chapter? That'll be up a few days after. So remain faithful, friends!

This chapter, in my haste, has been un-raked by human eyes other than my own. If you see anything, feel free to let me know. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The following month, the Italian D'Angeline embassy was bombed. This time INTERPOL found tenuous connections to a D'Angeline extremist group, the Lies-Beyond Organisation. Despite the clamour for justice and a frenetic scramble made by all manner of intel agencies, no other developments were brought to the public.

#

Summer's grip on London weakened before releasing entirely it to autumn, which in its turn yielded to the sleet-crusted dreariness of late November. As ever, Irene paraded Sherlock around the London-D'Angeline circuit, until the number of requests for his attendance as their accompaniment to one Midwinter Masque or another came in daily droves. He was a highly-sought prize. Sherlock supposed he should feel happy about it, but he couldn’t. There was *one* name notably lacking from that list.

Irene, of course, understood the problem immediately and tried her best to soothe: “You really should pick *someone*, love. This level of pining is a bit obvious.”

But it didn’t matter to Sherlock, not on the Longest Night of the year.

The Midwinter Masque was *the* social event of the year on the D'Angeline calendar: traditionally, it marked the new year and was a brilliant night of masqueraded revelry for D'Angelines. Among the Houses, it meant a night where Servants of Naamah were free to choose their partners without the intricacies of House politics or involvement. For the elite it was a night for networking, solidifying ties in the upcoming year. As a member of both circles, if Sherlock couldn’t spend it in the company of the one patron whose attention Sherlock sought above all others, he was minded to simply forego the whole affair.
The only other notable thing all month came in the form of a surprise visit from his brother.

Mycroft, with whom he hadn’t spoken in several months, hovered primly on the little sofa in Irene’s sitting room, teacup pinched between his fingers. He made pleasantries with Irene and Kate, but by the time they took their leave, Sherlock could see the tightness around Mycroft’s eyes, the level of ire he was fighting just at having to indulge them.

Not that anyone else would’ve seen it, of course, but then they didn’t know Mycroft the way Sherlock did.

Sherlock scarcely waited for the door to swing shut behind Irene and Kate before asking, “What do you actually want, brother? This wasn’t a social call--you’ve got some sort of problem only a first-class D’Angeline whore might solve.”

Mycroft’s eyes shuttered momentarily--Sherlock counted his dig as a win. Then Mycroft sighed softly, sparing a glance for John, who stood stock-still in Cassiline pose by the door.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Whatever it is, out with it.”

Mycroft raised his eyebrow, and Sherlock knew that point wouldn’t be conceded.

Sherlock turned to John. “If you’d give us a few moments? As much as I’d love it, I’m certain you’re not allowed to stab my brother at my request.”

To John’s credit, Sherlock only saw a twitch at the corner of his mouth. Nothing else betrayed his amusement. John ducked once in a neat Cassiline bow before retreating from the room.

With John gone, Mycroft’s posture softened only marginally. “I need you to gather intelligence for me.”

“No.”

Mycroft ignored Sherlock, which Sherlock found infinitely annoying. Instead he plowed on. “My people have been searching for a connection, but have come up dry on every lead we can find. I need you to use whatever networks you have at your disposal. Your compliance would be handsomely rewarded--a solved case could mean your marque, paid in full.”

Sherlock grimaced. “What, and have people think my brother bought my marque? People would certainly talk about that, wouldn’t they? I’m not interested.”

Mycroft placed his teacup on its saucer, and arranged them neatly on the table with only the slightest clatter.

“I believe there may be a connection between the Embassy bombings and your Mr. Moriarty.”

Sherlock jerked back, unable to hide the surprise on his face. Jim may have had a vast social network at his disposal, but this was completely absurd. It was more likely Mycroft was employing this little ruse in order to discredit Jim, to keep Sherlock away from him--but why? Was their compatibility that distasteful to Mycroft?

Sherlock clenched his jaw, set his teacup down with enough force to slosh its contents over the side.
“Our sources believe he may be funding a group of D’Angeline extremists who would see the nation insulated from the rest of the world to preserve its purity—we need you to uncover any ties he might have with the Lies-Beyond organization.”

Sherlock stood, paced the room.

Jim may have been a devout D’Angeline, but to go so far as to pin him to a terrorist organisation? This was just the sort of disgusting thing Mycroft might pull—after all, Mycroft had run off the one person to have ever taken a fancy to Sherlock when they were still in school—a rambunctious boy from first year called Remy. Mycroft had systematically discouraged Sherlock away from anything as distasteful as feelings his whole life. How was this any different?

And yet to deny the bait dangled before him would smack of sentimentality, wouldn’t it? His brother would never comprehend what it meant to serve, so to refuse the case would be tantamount to opening himself up to Mycroft for a whole slew of judgement.

Worse, Mycroft knew this. That arse knew in full that Sherlock would see this framework, and was purposefully using it against him.

Sherlock should refuse on principle—his brother wouldn’t expect that. To hell with his disapproval—hadn’t Sherlock’s entire life been an endeavor to do things the opposite of the way Mycroft would have wanted?

On the other hand, Sherlock reasoned, if he were to take the case—it was infinitely more likely he would only prove Jim’s innocence, and wouldn’t that be a lovely two-finger salute to his meddling older brother?

That bastard, Sherlock thought.

Still, he didn’t have to make the process easy. “I don’t want my marque paid. I’ll need some other sort of favor, to be called in at my choosing.”

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed. “You’re asking for a carte blanche?”

Sherlock said nothing, merely locked his gaze with Mycroft’s.

After an eye-watering minute of neither brother blinking, Mycroft relented, his expression sour and his tone more so. “Fine. Whatever is within my power. You will have that one favor.”

“Swear it,” Sherlock growled.

“By the burning river and the joy of discovery, I swear it. Happy, brother mine?”

Sherlock grinned. He recognised the second half of that oath—swearing by the joy of discovery was an old Siovale custom, something of a sacred trust in Siovalese families. The first half wasn’t familiar—which was of note. Mycroft swore by it without hesitation. It must’ve been frequent and carried some sort of draw. For a millisecond Sherlock thought maybe it’d been a slip-up, but this was Mycroft Holmes, whose entire value lay in his ability to remain a steel trap. The oath itself was the carte blanche.

“Very much, yes.”

Mycroft nodded once, a perfunctory thing, and rose from his seat. “Good. Please forward any pertinent information you can glean to my assistant.” With that Mycroft slid a thin metal business card case from his interior blazer pocket, produced a card for Sherlock. “Good afternoon.”
Two days later found Sherlock poring over a tome of Latin poetry in the library, curled by the fireplace. Rain spattered against the windows, freezing and desolate. Only the crackle of the fire and the weight of a soft old quilt kept the dreariness at bay.

\[\text{O, dear my lord…}\]
\[\text{Let this breast on which you have leant}\]
\[\text{As close in love as a foe in battle--}\]

In mind’s eye, a flash of dove-grey fabric, sliding past him at full speed, the glint of the sun off dishwater-blond hair--

\[\text{Unarmed, unarmored, grappling chest to chest,}\]
\[\text{Alone in the glade,}\]
\[\text{Where birds startled at our voices--}\]

The flash of steel, the shape of a mouth set in fierce determination--

\[\text{Laughter winging airborne, we struggled}\]
\[\text{For advantage, neither giving quarter;}\]
\[\text{How I remember your arms beneath my grip}\]

The memory of wrestling Marcus Smith to the ground, Sherlock opening himself up for potential injury to spur a set of twin daggers into action; the shock of shared laughter in the aftermath, a darkened winter street.

Sherlock closed his eyes a moment, curious at his line of thought and willing to follow its fox-trail. He was part Siovalese, after all--curiosity was nothing to squander. Besides, the memory sparked something warm, something hungry and lonesome in Sherlock. If ever there was a day to indulge it would be a bitter, rainy day like this one.

He pushed back the still-present knee-jerk reaction from being so long trained to its avoidance: \textit{Sentiment.}\n
\textit{Embrace it. Love sits at its core, and that is exactly by which Elua would have us all fix our compass.}\n
So Sherlock let his mind wander.

The set of John’s face each time Sherlock had purposefully goaded him; the way his eyes widened, unguarded and vulnerable, the night Sherlock caught him listening to the violin.

He remembered the comfort and warmth of John’s hand on his shoulder, his elbow, drawing him back from a fight in the middle of the Met, and the weight of his ill-veiled disappointment, contempt at the assignations, the patrons.
Something like shame, and something more delightful, churned low in Sherlock’s stomach—

　　*Sliding like marble slickened;*

　　*Your chest pressed to mine*

　　*Heaving--*

The gleam of John’s skin after his morning routine, the grunts of exertion as he moved from form to form, which sounded so similar to--

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock’s eyes snapped up from the line to find Irene standing opposite him, her thin fingers bracketing the back of the other armchair. Either she’d just exhibited better covertcy skills than she’d ever done in his training, or Sherlock had been *deep* in thought.

He took Irene in: her nails freshly done—*her appointment this morning for a manicure. She’s just gotten home, then, and I have been in this library far too long.* One hand also held a note on thick, creamy stationery bearing a gilt design: interlocking sun and moon outlines.

Sherlock recognized the logo immediately: it was from de Fhirze Investments, a global firm based in London.

“Another invitation?” he asked, already bored with it and glancing back down to his poetry.

　　*As our feet trampled the tender grass*

　　*Your eyes narrowed with tender cunning*

　　*And I unaware*

　　*Until your heel caught my knee, I buckled--*

“No, actually. I’ve given up on apprising you of those, you miserable love-sick puppy.” Irene’s tone was warmer than her words, and she offered them with an affectionate smile, which only deepened when Sherlock scowled. “No, this is request for an assignation, and one I think you’ll find *quite* interesting…”

Chapter End Notes

The “Latin” poem comes straight from Kushiel’s Dart, and I’m not saying anything other than that. If you want to find out, go read that book. (I’m surprised you’ve gotten this far in the story and haven’t at already started that one. :D :D)
Chapter Notes

Many thanks to hollowforest for a lightning-fast beta. She is amazing and a half.

My apologies for a short chapter. I'll make it up to you in the next one, I swears. <3

Brother Vincent--

I know it has been a few months, but I did want to let you know how I've been doing. The last we talked, I listed my concerns, once again, about my placement with Holmes. You counseled for prayer, for devotion, for faith.

I will not lie--in the meantime, those things felt beyond my grasp, no matter how I reached for them. I practiced. I prayed. I stood silent guard and tried my best to protect and serve. Each day, my despair grew.

Then Sherlock solved a particularly gruesome case involving the various Houses of the Night Court. I can’t go into its details, though I’m sure you likely saw the fallout on the news. But at the case’s heart, I began to understand some of what you taught me of Elua’s blessings and Cassiel’s devotion. I discovered I carried that spark in me, though I didn’t recognize the name to call it by until that night--before, I had foolishly mistaken it

John’s hand hovered over the keyboard, his mind stalled in deliberation. He had not yet confessed the most shameful way in which his feelings toward Sherlock had first manifest. The black little cursor blinked on the screen, as patient as it was judgemental.

He pushed away the memory of the dream of Sherlock bound in golden chains, of sweat-damp bedsheets twisted in his fist, the hitch in his chest as he listened through the shared wall of their bedrooms--No, he thought. I only have to lay myself bare before Cassiel, not Brother Vincent.

John tapped the backspace key, and began again.

...I discovered I carried that spark in me, though I didn’t recognize the name to call it by until that night. Before, I had foolishly mistaken it for piqued pride, for anger at his assailants, at any number of things.

But I have found it, Brother, that sacrificial devotion.

Here John hesitated again, and did not go into any further detail over his revelations--not the least of which concerned the possibility that all of the Companions had made their own sacrifices, and that Naamah’s could’ve been just as high as Cassiel’s own. No, now was neither the time nor place for that can of worms.
I have found that, and it gives me great comfort. Though there may still be days that Holmes or the other members of this household try my patience, I would like to thank you for seeing me fit for service here.

Cassiel keep you,

John H. Watson

John hit send before he changed his mind. He stood and stretched, checked the time. He had just enough time to grab a shower before they left for the assignation. And though it still sent tremors of unease through his core, John felt calmer than ever he had in the hours leading up to any of Sherlock’s other assignations. That in itself was a blessing.
Indeed, Sherlock found the assignation interesting enough that three nights later found him in the lobby of another posh hotel in Knight’s Doorstep, John at his elbow in his usual sombre grey attire.

Sherlock’s patrons for the evening were the de Fhirze twins, Apollinaire and Dianne, the co-owners of the multinational investment firm. From what Irene knew, they were very much the type to mix business with pleasure for their more treasured clients. Sherlock, it transpired, was the entertainment.

They were escorted up a back set of stairs along the service corridor. With John posted at the entrance, Sherlock slipped in through the servant’s entrance. Beyond the thin walls separating the back hallway from the front, public, half of the suite, Sherlock could hear a moderate thump of music, the din of fifteen or twenty voices mingling. He suppressed a frisson of excitement and went to change.

The basic aspects of performance were, of course, part of the curriculum of any servant of Naamah—Sherlock may have not been from Eglantine, to have been blessed extraordinarily with song or dance, but he could acquit himself very nicely when the situation called for it.

Such was the case tonight. He concentrated as he undressed, focused entirely on the memory of the song he’d chosen. Each article of clothing drew him down further, the cling of wide-knit fishnet, the swish of gauzy fabrics, the tinkle of metallic trim and tiny sparkling crystals. Then came the jewelry: tight bands at the biceps, a small stack of thin bangles at each wrist, delicate chains that connected from a bangle choker to another spangled chain circling his belly, feet bare save similar chains stretching between an anklet and a toe ring on each. Then came the moderate makeup: just enough khol around the eyes and the lightest application of rouge to cheeks and lips to bring a contrast in a dim-lit room.

By the time he was fully transformed, he’d fallen so deep into subspace that he felt almost disconnected from reality, gliding along, until at last Dianne de Fhirze slipped back to check on him.

Dianne de Fhirze was a striking woman: late thirties, night-dark skin and moon-bright eyes, a mischievous quirk to her lips.

She positively lit up when she saw Sherlock, poised and waiting for his queue.

“Oh!” she squealed. “Look at you! Oh--this--you will do wonderfully.”

The first blossom of heat spread across his cheeks. When he’d taken instruction in any form of dance, he’d always worn the sort of drab training clothes he did when practicing tumbling or boxing, or any of the other physical endeavors to hone body and mind. This was the first time another human had seen him in this get-up, and he felt more than a little ridiculous in it.
Dianne de Fhirze seemed to be of a completely different mind. A silver-lacquered nail trailed along the edge of a row of metallic fringe, her expression at once deeply bemused and slightly helpless.

“Very nicely indeed,” she repeated. Then, gathering her wits about her once more, she straightened up, flashed him a devastating smile. “Ready?”

Sherlock stood just beyond the line of sight in the doorway as Dianne stepped back into the main room. The music quieted, the guests stilled until their attention was solely upon her.

“As many of you know, tonight is not only a thank-you to you, our most valued clients,” and here she broke off as a titter circled the room, “but a celebration--my brother and I turn thirty-nine today!” She paused for the smattering of polite applause and went along. “With that in mind, I’d like to present my birthday present to my favorite sibling and business rival.” Laughter, now. Then a male voice, clearing his throat as he drew nearer.

“What in the world do you have--”

“Happy birthday!”

That was Sherlock’s signal.

As he hit the threshold, someone started the music once more, a new song moderate in speed, the electronic drums reminiscent of a heartbeat. The volume and tempo built as he wended his way through revelers to the centre of the room, the heavy bass pulsing through his body, his hips swaying, arse shaking just so to jangle the little sash full of metal fringe. His arms swung and locked with every other step, a new shape framing his abdomen, which contracted and contorted, the thrilling burn of isolated muscle groups coordinating beautifully to curve his body like water or wind, slither it like a snake between guests and against Apollinaire de Fhirze, who let out a throaty laugh, thoroughly pleased with Dianne’s gift.

And if Dianne was the moon, slender and graceful, Apollinaire was the sun--broad-shouldered, undeniably masculine, a kind of vitality about him that shone like a summer day.

The dance itself was an updated twist on classical belly dancing, and a simplified version taught to most servants of Naamah. After all, when Naamah prepared herself to lay with the King of Persis for Elua’s freedom, the king’s servants taught the dance to the goddess herself.

As Sherlock made his way toward the centre, the guests lifted their voices in whoops and raucous cries, pressing in closer to watch him work. Hands dipped into wallets, pressed folding money into his sash, into the waist of his pants or the tight metal bands at his biceps. Sherlock never stopped moving, just spared a moment of eye contact with each, let them see him.

For most servants of Naamah, especially in the Houses, this use of their art would have been completely below them. Dancing for money, trading on bawdy, heavy-handed titillation--this was the work of a common stripper, an un-trained prostitute. It would have never been a contract request to be honoured. The sensual dances taught to Naamah’s servants were for the seduction of a single patron, or the dance between two servants in a Jasmine House Viewing--the exhibitionist display put on in the Houses for those patrons whose bent ran more along voyeuristic lines than proper participation.
But for Sherlock? This treatment formed its own pleasure: here he was, not as a highly coddled servant of Naamah, but as what any society would look down upon as its lowest common denominator, giving himself over to the pleasure of others, his own dignity shoved to the side. It was intoxicating to someone cursed with Kushiel’s Dart. So for each set of greedy fingers pushing fifty- and hundred-pound notes into the hemlines of his costume, Sherlock revealed just a slice of that desire coursing through him.

He’d been debriefed ahead of time as to the course of events for the party, and as his blood began to rise Sherlock made his way back to Apollinaire, pressing his back to Apollinaire’s chest, letting his body ripple in waves along his patron’s. The guests pressed forward, feverish hands tugging at his flowing hareem trousers, sliding across his sweat-slick skin. Sherlock’s eyes drooped closed, and he let himself be carried on the sensation.

Warmth pressed along his front, sandwiching him against Apollinaire--he opened his eyes to find Dianne staring at him intently, hands skimming his sides. She leaned in, her lips brushing his ear. Her perfume mingled with Apollinaire’s cologne and the mix was a deadly combination that fogged Sherlock’s senses until he could barely remember his own name.

“Are you still okay with this?” she whispered. “You remember what happens next?”

Just the mention of what was in store drew a breathy moan from Sherlock, sent his hips grinding back against Apollinaire. He drew back just enough to make eye contact as Apollinaire leaned to nip the opposite ear.

“What are you saying, sister?”

Dianne pulled back just enough to smile at her twin. “Just that there’s still more up my sleeve.” Then she leaned forward, dropped her voice for Sherlock only again. “I remember your signale, pretty coquelicot. I will tell Apollinaire. We will stop anyone, if you need it. Just for coming to us you are a precious gift.”

Pinned there between the twins, an undulating mass that held him in place, there was no way in hell he would change his mind.

Sherlock met her gaze, held it. He gave a little nod and she smiled. Then she peeled back, turning to the swarming guests.

“Now what would a good birthday present be, if we didn’t share it with you all?”

A cheer went up from the assembled guests, and before Sherlock had to ask, someone pulled a stock into the centre of the room. It was a simple setup: two slats of wood hinged together at one end, with holes for hands and head, with a lock on the other end, propped up on a simple sawhorse frame. A jolt ran through Sherlock just seeing it: already he could feel its unyielding restraint, the bite of wood against the tender flesh of his wrists and neck.

Someone grabbed Sherlock by the sash, yanking him toward the contraption. Another guest threw it open, a heavy crack as the top panel flopped backward and hit the base. When the first set of hands pushed him forward he bent low of his own volition, resting his neck and hands where they were meant to go. Fear and delight in equal measure pounded in his blood, beat loud in his ears.

The weight of the top panel lowered onto him--just barely against the top of his neck, enough to feel but not enough to impair. Despite the noise in the room, the click of the tumblrs slotting into place within the lock reported like a cannon in his ears.

The guests wasted no time, tearing the hareem pants from his body, stripping themselves however
they liked best. Sweaty hands roamed and prodded his back, his sides, grasped and slapped and pinched the meat of his arse. All he could see was the movement of one clothed figure or another before him—a flash of satin waistcoat or shimmering organza—at an angle where he could not look up to see a single face.

Next to his ear, the sound of a zipper, a quick metallic noise, and Sherlock couldn’t hide the whimper that escaped him. Just as the scent of one man blossomed in his olfactories, the press of velvet-hard flesh against his cheek, the lube-slick fingers of another person—more delicate, a woman—circled his exposed hole at the other end. Without ceremony, without synchronism, he was pierced once, and once more.

The treatment that followed blurred into a haze of sensation: fifteen hands or a thousand, gripping greedy at his flesh, the bristle of trimmed pubic hair against his nose as guests took turns employing his mouth. A cock, too thick to take to the root, pressed deep enough to gag him until his eyes watered, a relentless pace that had him squirming helpless against the fingers of someone else as they opened him up from behind. The muscles in his back, his legs, ached in protest, each strike against his prostate sparking brilliant showers of sparks behind his closed eyes.

Naamah, he was lost, he was in heaven, he was beyond.

It didn’t take long, though time became fluid and entirely relative, for his whole body to lock down, now on a cock thrusting mercilessly into his arse, the first orgasm yanked from him like a divine implosion as he swallowed hard, a moan torn from his throat and pressed into the wet flesh of a female guest. Beyond him he could distantly hear the rustle, the slap of bodies, the moans of other revelers enjoying one another, and he sagged helpless in his restraints.

But it didn’t end there. No, by the time he lost count of the turns that had been taken, the offerings from the guests splattered his back, his face, his arse in stripes and smears; he’d been wrung dry. His whole body sagged limp and tender, overstimulated and blissfully aching.

One by one they retreated, after that, until he nearly shivered in the cooling aftermath, but then a firm, wide pair of hands—a man, strong and sturdy—caught his hips, whispered cooing encouragements. The lock on the stocks clicked open, and the top panel lifted.

Sherlock barely had the wherewithal to recognize the sting circling his neck and wrists from where his sweat had slicked the wood and snagged his skin as it dried until it left friction burns; they thrummed like a blissful anchor, bringing him back to reality.

The strong hands lifted him, cradling him like a weightless thing, and then the world swayed as they carried him away. Bare flesh cradled him, hot like a brand against his skin, as he was carried into the next room.

Apollinaire, Sherlock realised.

Then Dianne appeared, holding a few warm, wet flannels. She handed one to Apollinaire as the latter lowered Sherlock onto his own two feet. As well-used as Sherlock was, his legs wobbled like a newborn colt. Then they set to, wiping him clean, drying him just as quickly. Apollinaire hummed and Dianne sang under her breath, twin melodies winding together like a lullabye as they began rubbing scentless lotion into his skin.

Soft, impossibly soft bedding enveloped him when the the twins led him down. Dianne curled against him, her bared body softer, smaller. She trailed reverent fingers along his sternum as the bed dipped and weight shifted. Along his opposite side Apollinaire pressed against him, until he
was bound by the sun and the moon, safe and grounded. The warmth radiating from both of them was divine.

Apollinaire loosed a low chuckle. “Are you well, coquelicot?”

Sherlock closed his eyes again, breathed deep. He didn’t have the energy to do more than nod.

“I told you he came highly recommended,” Dianne purred to her twin. Her lips pressed plush and tender against Sherlock’s neck, jaw, shoulder, in numerous wordless thanks.

Apollinaire’s wide hand cradled Sherlock’s jaw. “You need to eat, rehydrate.”

With that Sherlock felt the cool press of a water-glass against his mouth. He lifted his head enough to drink, guzzling like a man in the desert. The glass pulled away from his lips.

“Not so fast,” Dianne crooned. “We have plenty of time.”

Then a morsel edged its way between his parted lips, and when he bit down, his tastebuds sang under shadowy, creamy dark chocolate, the brilliant dazzle of fresh strawberry. It tasted better than manna, better than ambrosia. And so they fed him, sips of water between different foods—soft, hot, greasy rotisserie chicken, firm sharp cheeses, the crisp brightness of apples and cherries, until Sherlock sagged with a different sort of lassitude.

And so, stomach full and body heavy, Sherlock found sleep between the sun and the moon, anchored in place by their irresistible gravity.

When he woke hours later, the sun had not yet risen, and the shadowy curl of his patrons still enveloped him. But they stirred, blinking awake and smiling lazy smiles, intent upon him like a rare prize.

“How do you feel, coquelicot?” Dianne asked.


On his other side Apollinaire laughed quietly. “You are a wonder. It’s no surprise that patrons fight over you!”

This extracted a laugh from Sherlock, who felt it in his stiff muscles. “Greatly exaggerated, I assure you.”

Dianne leaned back, and Sherlock could feel the weight of her eyes coasting over his skin. “Tell me, what will you take as your patron-gift? I have paid generously for this assignation, but I wouldn’t dare ignore Naamah’s traditions.” She trailed a silver-lacquered nail down the length of his upper arm. “Name it. It’s impressive you’ve lasted the entire night as our plaything!”

Sherlock worked up the muster to prop himself on his elbow, to drag a hand through his tangled curls. He gave the question consideration before he put voice to his thoughts. “For Naamah…” he thought of the poppy left beside him on the table some months before, of his wish to escort Jim to a Midwinter Masque. “For Naamah, make a gift to her temple in my name.” He felt a smile curl at his lips, his demeanor at once slipping into the genuine grooves of a servant of Naamah. “For me? I will remember each moment of this assignation for as long as I live. That will be enough.”

After a moment, Apollinaire let loose a meditative hum. “Is it true--Irene Adler sends you to your patrons to gather information like some spy?”
Sherlock gave himself a moment to study Apollinaire, curious and carved of shadow. “Yes,” he said eventually, the truth of his words borne in his tone. “Sometimes.”

Apollinaire leaned forward with interest lighting his features. “What would you do then, if you were spying on us?”

Sherlock lifted himself, leaned back against the headboard. The wood pressed cool against his back. The question amused him. When he’d accepted their assignation, it was in no small part due to his own curiosity, though he knew the timing of it was coincident: it was likely these two had been the patrons Mycroft had mentioned sending his way. As such, he let himself answer honestly.

“I don’t know of any intrigue buzzing around the two of you or de Fhirze as a company, but you are in a unique position amongst both London and D’Angeline elite and likely to hear a good rumour--especially since there are two of you. Most likely you would mull over your findings together. If there was something I wished to find out, I would likely try to loosen it from you.”

“Such as?” Dianne, too, held the same curiosity as her twin. Her hand glided over Sherlock’s stomach and sternum, arousal budding anew.

Sherlock had never before considered the appeal of his secondary calling as Irene’s pupil. He shrugged and made an educated guess, cast his net carefully.

“Jim Moriarty,” he said. “There are rumours he has ties to a whole host of questionable organizations.”

“Moriarty!” Apollinaire exclaimed. “That man--fascinating and dangerous. You’d do well to stay away from him--”

“He was supposed to be here,” Dianne interjected. “He declined last minute. Honestly, I was relieved.”

Sherlock frowned, and tried to lock away his dismay at having missed a chance to offer himself to Jim. “How so?”

“I met him last at Bryony House Paris, this past spring. April, I think?”

Something tugged at the edge of Sherlock’s thoughts, but he didn’t have time for it. “Yes?”

“He had a terrible row with a man there--some disgusting investment crony from a bank here in London. The things he threatened him with--! It doesn’t bear repeating. But I’ve given him a wide berth since then.”

“Why would you have invited him to your little ‘do tonight, then?”

Apollinaire chuckled. “It’s best to keep one’s prospects in sight. The man is loaded--and so insanely well-connected I’d be surprised if he couldn’t sweet-talk his way into an assignation with the Queen.”

Sherlock laughed at that, brushing away the mental image it invoked.

“But what would the two of you make of it?” Dianne asked. “Once you’d caught the end of a thread that drew your interest?”

Sherlock temporized. There was something in her story that had snagged his attention, but just it remained squarely beyond his grasp. “Irene would mull it over, consider how best she might apply
that information to future contracts or connections.”

Apollinaire loosed a dark chuckle, pressing his hips--and now noticeably interested groin--against Sherlock’s thigh.

Dianne’s laugh was now as bright as her twin’s was dark, and she shifted to catch Sherlock’s wrists. “You’re not too tired yet, are you coquelicot? Just thinking of Irene’s schemes are… inspiring, to say the least.”

Sherlock felt Naamah’s blessing descend over him once more, and the devilish grin he wore was entirely genuine. “Then you’d both best take advantage of your muse.”

Chapter End Notes

1.) I do want to note that I do not agree at all with the appraisal of “common” strippers and prostitutes in this story. One of the problems, unfortunately, with privileged D’Angeline society, is thinking like this--that what they do is any different, at its core. Which, you would think they’d understand--one would really hope that anyone in the sex industry in this universe would find Naamah’s joy and/or blessing in the work (or something similar, really, from whatever their higher power). By extension one would hope that any servant would want the same standards of care and safety for all their fellow sex-workers outside the D’Angeline society. Just… trust me when I say that this is a privilege that I hope to examine later on. **nods**

2.) coquelicot - poppy. She’s saying this because of the mote in his eye.

3.) Oh my god what did I just write. I never in a million years thought this would go on my resume, you guys.

4.) *is burning in D'Angeline Johnlock Hell*

Speaking of burning in hell, here, have some references:
A.) Inspiration!
B.) Even More Inspiration!
C.) So I think I may be Youtube stalking this person at this point?
D.) You know, I'm strangely comfortable with that.
E.) BUT OH MY GOD THIS OTHER GUY THO.

well, I'd planned on doing stuff today, but apparently I'm just going to watch bellydancing on youtube. That's me sorted.
Holy crap, how did a whole month slip by since last I updated?! Things are settling down over here, schedules are regulating and I can start building regular fic-writing time back in. I've missed you guys, missed this little universe! And in the future, please feel free to bombard and/or harass me if so much time passes between chapters!

In my haste to get this to you with out letting another moment pass, this one goes un-beta'd and only barely edited. It's a bit short, but then it's all John really had to say to me about things.

To jog your memory, the last chapter had Sherlock going on assignation with the de Fhirze twins, which involved a gangbang, which Sherlock thoroughly enjoyed, followed by snuggling with the twins (and somewhat else besides).

Here we have John's side of that night.

Just on the other side of the wall, music thumped, surely loud and raucous in the suite, but little more than the whisper of a rhythmic bump in the hallway--a true testament to the soundproofing that went into the rooms at The Berkeley. More pressing were the soft footfalls of dress shoes and heels on the plush carpeting, the delighted hush of voices moving to and fro, their owners all in the midst of or anticipating the evening at hand. Occupants entered and exited the other rooms along their hallway, but John stood guard at the main door of the de Fhirze suite after watching Sherlock slip in through the servant’s entry.

John fell into the familiar, comfortable position of the attending Cassiline: relaxed but back straight, shoulders squared but dropped, hands clasped at the small of the back. He took in his surroundings but focused on nothing, became the still centre of his own little universe, ready for action.

It certainly afforded him the opportunity to reflect on his newfound clarity of purpose. It still came as something of a shock to find himself largely serene on the matter of Sherlock’s assignations, safe in the trust that neither Cassiel nor Naamah would abuse their servants’ faith. It came as a relief, as a welcome balm to find himself selflessly dedicated to Sherlock, to Cassiel’s guidance and Elua’s surety.

After all, this placement, this assignation of his own--it lasted a lifetime where Sherlock’s only lasted the night.

He could see their twined futures spooling out before him, from this moment onward: while John himself would remain celibate, dedicated, Sherlock might take a lover, a partner--who knew? But John was certain by means he didn’t quite fathom, that he would come to give that same level of care and dedication to whomever Sherlock chose--provided Elua saw fit to steer them both clear of that bastard Moriarty--to any children should that come along.

In time, John would have a family--more than any foster home could have promised, more than...
the Brotherhood had given, something more beautiful and concrete that he hadn’t been a part of since he was a child. This—this was Cassiel’s gift for his service, he was sure. This was Elua’s blessing, a second layer that lay hidden by the first bloom of understanding.

So went John’s musings, offset periodically by the routine inspections of their surroundings, for the better part of the next hour. Then the bell for the nearby lift sounded and shattered his calm.

John lifted his gaze, turned to find Emile and another hotel worker exiting the lift and headed toward them—but pushing some sort of contraption. When Emile saw him, the daft man offered him a too-large grin, a knowing waggle of the brows.

“If it isn’t Monsieur Cassiline! I wasn’t aware we were hosting your chavo’s delights again so soon!” Emile’s voice came out a stage whisper, obviously pleased. His head jerked toward the contraption they hauled. “Now this thing makes sense! Your kal’enedral doesn’t do anything by halves, does he?”

Now that attention had been called to it, John took the opportunity to frown at the contraption, which looked something between a leather-padded sawhorse and a stocks, like those ones in all the medieval films. Its steel padlock glinted in the low lighting.

“What the hell is this thing?” John asked, the dread already seeping in around his edges, electrifying his bones with the urge to move, to fight.

Emile straightened and tapped his finger to the side of his nose. “Just a piece on loan from Mandrake House. Your ward’s patron signed all the appropriate forms for it, I promise you.”

Unbidden, the image of Sherlock, stripped bare and bound to this godawful thing, head and hands trapped, body bent and prone, came into John’s mind. His gorge rose with it. Sherlock might enter that thing of his own volition, but once there, once that lock clicked into place—who was certain his signale might be obeyed? What would stop anyone from hurting him beyond his wishes?

The thunder in his heart must’ve stormed his expression, because the next glare he shot Emile blanched the dark-skinned Roma paler than his starched-white shirt. “Get me Dianne de Fhirze, Emile. I need to speak with her. Immediately.”

The joviality fled Emile’s demeanor entirely. He regarded John with something new, a respect, or perhaps concern, he had yet revealed. He nodded somberly. “I will do my best, Cassiline.” This time when Emile offered a Cassiline bow, it was no longer the flippant, sloppy gesture it had been when they met—this bow was crisp, exact.

John couldn’t help but feel a little thankful, just then. Emile earned some small measure of respect in that moment—no one but Cassilines themselves used the bow. That Emile would show him this deference marked his sincerity. It was a measure of how seriously he took John’s request.

Dianne frowned for a moment, a neat little crease between her brows, but she nodded. “He is. It is
well within his contract, I swear.”

John let out a hard sniff, his voice dropping to a growl. “Swear to me. Swear to me his safety and consent are paramount.”

Now Dianne looked thoroughly shaken, but she recovered quickly and lay a light hand on his bicep. She squeezed it once, her gaze never wavering as she made eye contact and held it. “I swear to you, Monsieur Watson. I swear on the de Fhirze name, upon Elua and all his Companions. Your coquelicot is safe in our hands--well, as safe as he chooses to be. I promise you.”

“He damn well better be, or I will personally--”

Dianne squeezed his bicep again, something like sympathy in her eyes now. “I can see what he means to you--it is a hard thing, bound as you are between so many gods.”

“What the hell does that mean?” John hissed, leaning forward, invading her personal space just a little more.

She took the intrusion unperturbed. “You love him. Plain as the nose on your face, Monsieur Watson. What must it be, to be sworn to Cassiel, devoted to Naamah’s servant, and bound by Kushiel’s chains as surely as Sherlock is?”

The blow to John’s middle landed heavier than Brother Vincent’s used to during training. And just like he learned in training, John absorbed it, channeled it right back into his retaliation.

“What you understand, Madame de Fhirze, what his safety means to me. And what will happen if that is violated. I protect and serve.” His hands strayed, hovered over the hilts of his daggers. He certainly wouldn’t pull them out just to scare the woman, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t imply it.

Dianne leaned forward, cupped his jaw in her hand. “Your devotion is stunning. I pray we all find that someday, what you have.” She leaned in and pressed her lips gently to his cheekbone, and John fought the urge to jerk back. “If anything goes wrong, I swear to you on any oath you choose. My brother or I will call for you immediately.”

John closed his eyes, willing his turmoil to abate--it was a futile thing, but he tried all the same. Bronze thundered and steel rang with the rush of blood in his ears, honey and apple on his tongue. It was all overwhelming, and at its still centre, John understood the feeling. His love, even Dianne’s, different though it may be. The love of Elua and every last of his Companions.

All John could do was trust his faith, and even harder, trust his heart.

Chapter End Notes

-chavo: Romani for 'man'

-kal’ enedral: Romani for 'oath-sworn'

-coquelicot: French for 'poppy'

Additional note: I really couldn't resist a patented Freeman Rage Sniff.
ALL RIGHT FRIENDS, SADDLE UP AND CHECK YOUR TAGS! There's a definite trigger warning on this one--PLEASE GO SEE THE END-NOTES.

If you are a brave soul and choose to forego that warning because you don't want spoilers but still want to be forewarned, just know that I'll have the beginning and end of the triggery stuff denoted JUST LIKE THIS.

On a more catch-y-up-y note, this chapter begins the morning after the assignation with the De Fhirze twins, right as Sherlock and John get back to Maison Adler.

“IT seems your wishful thinking has paid off,” Irene commented when Sherlock and John arrived back to Maison Adler the following morning. She held a thick, creamy-white card between outstretched first and second fingers. “Special delivery. Came by courier this morning.”

It was half-eleven and Irene still hadn’t bothered to get dressed; she lay stretched on a settee in the lounge, wrapped in one of her silk robes, her head in Kate’s lap. Kate looked up as they entered, offering John and Sherlock a lazy smile as she brushed her fingers through Irene’s hair.

“What is this?” Sherlock asked, flipping the card over. “What wishful--”

His pulse skyrocketed when he saw the design on the front: a plain black circle, gold-embossed keys intertwined with a proud M in the centre.

“Jim,” he murmured.

Sherlock unfolded the card, took in the spidery handwriting within.

“Sorry to leave you hanging so long, but I hear you’ve been waiting just for me. Too bad Daddy’s been out of town. I can make it all up to you, if you'll contract with me at the Midwinter Masque at the Belfours estate. I promise you’ll forget anyone who came before me.”

When Sherlock lifted his eyes from the card, Irene burst out laughing.

“To see your face right now! I doubt I need your answer--shall I ring him up?”

Beside him, John went deathly still, but Sherlock was beyond caring. Midwinter Solstice couldn’t come soon enough.

Midwinter’s Eve, Sherlock stood facing his mirror, all his primping and preparing done. All he had left was to take his Belstaff, lead John down to the car below. Jim’s chauffeur had arrived only minutes ago, but now that Sherlock stood on the precipice of this thing he’d wanted so long, an assignation with just Jim, he was terrified to move forward.
What if he disappointed?

A pair of dainty knuckles rapped on his doorframe. From the mirror’s reflection, Sherlock could see over his shoulder to where Irene leaned there, a bemused expression writ on her face.

“You’re a rare creature, Sherlock Holmes,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you take this much care in your appearance, not even for your debut. This means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

Sherlock scowled and focused on his own reflection until taking the piss lost its appeal.

Irene sighed and stepped further into the room. When she reached Sherlock, she lay a light hand on his shoulder. Her voice was soft, thoughtful when she spoke. “Look at me.”

Sherlock knew better than to disobey--this was Irene stripped of all her smug gallantry, a woman whose every thought was writ plain in her expression. Sherlock couldn’t place it, not exactly--worry, maybe, but also pride.

“Have a care with him,” she said. “Jim Moriarty is brilliant at what he does, but it’s in the way a viper is brilliant at seducing its prey.”

“Are you worried about his behavior?” Sherlock asked, his voice catching in his throat at the prospect. He could only imagine what Jim might do to give Irene, of all Naamah’s servants, such pause.

Irene chuckled, shaking her head. “Look at you. Just the thought of it has you trembling.” She cupped Sherlock’s jaw, gave him a soft smile. “No. I’m worried he’ll seduce you so well you’ll not want to come home.”

Sherlock pulled away, rolling his eyes. The sentimentality was embarrassing. “I don’t have time for this.”

But Irene knew better than to rise to his bait. She lifted his Belstaff from where it lie draped across a nearby chair, lifted it to put onto him. Sherlock accepted the peace offering, slipping his arms into it; his knuckles slid along the sangoire silk.

“Go on then, anguisset,” Irene said. “Make me proud.”

The lift ride to Jim’s penthouse flat was interminable. The porter hovered by the buttons and John stood beside him, as silent and stone-faced as he’d been all day. Sherlock still hadn’t the faintest clue why John would be so testy when he didn’t act half this badly on any of Sherlock’s assignations, not in the last several months.

Sherlock frowned. Not since they solved the Chamberlain case back in June, actually. Had it really been that long? He pushed the thought away; it had only occupied nanoseconds, anyway, in the eternal wait for the lift bell to ding.

As the lift ascended, Sherlock let his mind wander. The Midwinter Masque was held in grand old tradition, everyone decked in elegant costume. With Jim holding his contract for the night, it was up to Jim to choose what they would wear. But what on earth would a man like Jim Moriarty choose?

Kushiel and his devotee, maybe? Jim’s mercurial face obscured by a mask rendered in Kushiel’s stern likeness, Sherlock a half-nude supplicant bound and masked before the altar? No, as much as
that would set Sherlock’s blood afire, it was too heavy-handed, too garish.

Maybe a different pantheon altogether. There were always the tales of Hellenic deities; Jim would make a devastating dark god. Hades, perhaps?

The lift’s bell sounded before Sherlock could make his conclusion. The porter led them to Jim’s door, gave it a firm knock, and left with a silent nod.

Jim drew the door open. He offered no smile, but studied Sherlock instead, dark eyes scraping along Sherlock’s skin. After so long, wanting and waiting, this moment had finally come, and with it, a bewildering new landscape. They were no longer acquaintances, united by Irene, but servant and patron. Sherlock’s actions were bound only by Jim’s wishes, and finally nothing stood in the way of that.

How long had Sherlock wanted this exact moment?

*Six months, and a year.*

Jim’s slicked back hair and fresh-shaven face looked so tempting it took every drop of Sherlock’s willpower not to reach out, to touch. Instead Sherlock dropped to one knee, his gaze steady on the floor.

He knew--could feel in his veins--that this was exactly how to please Jim best, damn any onlookers. His heart beat harder for it, until he could taste desire on his tongue, thick and potent like honey and blood.

Jim made a pleased noise. “Daddy’s waited for some time now, Sherlock. I know it must have been so much worse for you--but only a little bit longer, if you’re well behaved tonight.”

Sherlock’s cheeks burned, the shame of knowing full well John had witnessed all this set his heart beating faster. He went dizzy with it. Sherlock closed his eyes, willing his senses to return. They refused, and instead he longed for Jim’s hand--comfort or in cruelty, he could have begged for anything just then.

“Brother Watson,” Jim said instead. “I have made absolutely sure you’ll be provided for tonight. I understand it’s custom for you Cassilines to keep Elua’s Vigil?”

John bristled beside Sherlock. “It is the custom, but I--”

His words were interrupted by a woman whose pale blonde hair was pulled into a finger-wave bun, sliding over to stand quietly just within periphery. Her body language was moulded, sculpted to be as unobtrusive as possible, an ideal personal assistant. From what little Sherlock could see, she had the stamp of Cereus House all over her.

Jim ignored her, lifted a hand to John instead, to halt his protestations. “Ah, no, that’s not how it’s going to work. I have my attendant here to play house while you serve your vigil--I have a shrine just there on the balcony all prepared for you.”

Sherlock dared glance up just enough to see John’s fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, but they disappeared from view as John’s heels clicked together. Going by the slight crease and release of cloth at John’s hip, he’d just performed one of his haughtiest Cassiline bows.

This hadn’t quite been part of the plan, but Sherlock thanked Elua and each Companion that John would be left here tonight, rather than hovering at the edges of the room all night, a scowling grey shadow.
Jim’s fingers snaked through Sherlock’s hair; Sherlock tensed, ready for the pull, but it never came. “Make your way to the guest bedroom, pet. Just around the corner. I’ll be there in a moment.”

The room itself was modest, compared to the lavish modernity in the lounge and dining room. A plush four-poster dominated the room, the decor stark white. When Jim entered a few minutes later—likely setting John up at the alter himself—he stood as a dark beacon in the room. Sherlock found it impossible to look away.

Jim offered Sherlock a calculating smile before turning to a sleek walnut armoire huddled in the corner. He pulled it open to reveal a small bar, shelves of various spirits, and even a small cooling unit. He pulled two small cordial glasses down, and retrieved a dark green bottle from the chiller.

“Some men have such an overblown sense of honour,” Jim said as he poured. Clear liquid so thick it looked the consistency of maple syrup ran from the bottle into the two little glasses. “It must be difficult for those who aren’t Naamah’s service to understand her call. And you’ve got a live-in one. Is he a little bit in love with you, do you think?”

Sherlock frowned as he watched Jim’s back. The line of shoulders and spine, the movement of his arms all spoke relaxed and calm. Jim was teasing him, surely.

Still, he thought of John’s face the night John had caught Sherlock playing the violin, or when they’d been jumped in the alley. So unguarded, so open. He tried and failed not to think of the secret alley his own thoughts had taken a month before, reading Antinous’s Ode, the poem to a prince, the night he’d received the De Fhirze assignation request.

_Alone in the glade_  
_where birds startled at our voices,_  
_Laughter winging airborne, we struggled_  
_for advantage, neither giving quarter…_  

“He’s a Cassiline. I’m sure he despises me,” Sherlock replied and tried to believe it was so easily black and white. Remembering Jim’s many admonishments, he added, “Daddy.”

This back-and-forth, keeping his tone and body language neutral though his thoughts raced in opposite directions—for both John and Jim at once—was enough to leave him breathless and confused. Still, he managed. Even with Jim’s back to him, Sherlock didn’t doubt he was still under close scrutiny.

Jim gave a cheerful laugh as he turned, offering a cordial glass, which Sherlock accepted with a lowered gaze. “Love and hate are two sides of the same blade, pet, divided by an edge sharper than your Cassiline’s blades.”

Sherlock hummed, inspected his little glass. The _joie_ inside sloshed slightly, reflecting the light with silvery clarity.

“What about you? Don’t you hate all your patrons, just a little?” And now Jim’s tone was so stunningly neutral it served as a seductive warning all its own.

“Yes, Daddy,” Sherlock whispered, unable to lie, and he swallowed hard. “A little.”
“How many of them do you fear?”

Sherlock’s abdomen clenched pleasantly; he fought not to shift where he stood and eyed his cordial warily. After a long moment he found the nerve to meet Jim’s eyes, to answer truthfully. “One, not at all. Most, sometimes. You? Always.”

Jim’s answering grin was something dark and dangerous. “Good.” He extended his glass forward, clinked it against Sherlock’s before tossing it back. “Joy.”

Sherlock shuddered, but joined him in the invocation. “Joy.”

The spirit burned, ice and mint as it slid down his throat, and for a moment the lights shone brighter. After being wound up as he had, Sherlock couldn’t help but make a little noise of pleasure.

“Easy, tiger,” Jim crooned as he stepped closer, plucking the cordial glass from Sherlock’s fingertips. “We’ve all night, the Longest Night. I’m in no hurry. You’re not like the Valerian House whores, all trained to endure pain. They whimper like dogs, cringing away from it, only for the sweetness after.” He placed the glasses on a table, and truly invaded Sherlock’s space. His breath puffed against Sherlock’s lips, peppermint. “You embrace pain. You beg for more no matter how much you fear it. All your other patrons may want to explore the former, but it’s the latter that really interests me.” By the time he finished, his voice had dropped to a growl, barely louder than a whisper.

It came like a punch to the chest; Sherlock’s reply was voiceless. “I’m at your command, Daddy.”

Jim snorted and stepped back. “Commands are for Captains and Cassilines, pet. If you want to please me, you’ll know what I want, and do it unasked.”

Sherlock’s mouth went dry, his eyelids fluttered quickly, raking from Jim’s eyes to lips to hands to hips and back. There was no hiding the overwhelming want ringing through his body.

“Oh, you do please me.” Jim strode to the door, his hand hovering over the knob. “You please me a great deal. We have an hour--my attendant will help you get ready.”

“His attendant” was the blonde woman from Cereus House, though something about her build suggested she’d trained elsewhere.

That’s a mystery for another night, Sherlock thought, and easily dismissed it.

She strode into the room in Jim’s wake, a garment bag draped over one arm.

“Strip down,” she said, her tone utterly impersonal. Unsurprising, really. Unless they came together for an assignation or a showing, servants of Naamah treated with each other’s casual nudity the way other Londoners might think of the rain: a fact and nothing more.

Sherlock did as he was told. His reflection in the free-standing mirror in the corner caught his eye, and he gave himself an appraising stare as he slipped free from his carefully-tailored suit. Pale skin, his body on the lean side of athletic, the curves and angles of him soft-sculpted. Not a single mark on his skin. There were certain Houses whose canons were so specific, they even called for a certain number of freckles, but this was not so for him. The only canon he followed was Kushiel’s, and it was this blessing in the blood--or a curse, Emile had called it--that Jim Moriarty wanted him for. He had never been more thankful for the mark in his iris, to have been named an
His heart beat faster, and he was certain that tonight, The Longest Night, would truly live up to its name.

The attendant let out a long-suffering sigh, but said nothing. Even still, Sherlock knew her thoughts likely travelled along the line of *I don’t have time for your vanity.*

Rather than speak, she stretched the garment bag on the bed, unzipped it carefully. Hidden within was the suggestion of cloth, a spangled gauzy fabric so sheer Sherlock could see the fine wrinkles of the bottom of the garment bag. Upon closer inspection, the spangles were tiny diamonds, hand-sewn onto the delicate cloth.

“What does it go over?”

She smirked. “You.”

Sherlock swallowed hard. This--this scrap of cloth, really, would hide *nothing.* He’d be as good as nude.

“Oh, I forgot--there are these.” She lifted a mask from the accessory pouch, a delicate thing of white feathers, brown along the eye-line, with a curved, dark glossy beak, as wicked as any raptor.

Then she raised her other hand, revealing a black velvet lead, its matching collar weighted in the middle with a large teardrop diamond that winked in the light.

Sherlock’s stomach dropped completely. He’d seen this sort of thing, of course--collar play was fairly common in Valerian and Mandrake, and a well-known kink to the world at large. In the privacy of the Knight Court, it would be sublime, but this--Jim meant to display him, a tethered servant, before half or more of D’Angeline London’s realm.

When they were finished, Sherlock stood before the mirror once more, unable to hide beneath the gauze, which went on as a simple tunic and pair of rustic-cut drawstring trousers, just tight enough to stretch taught with movement. The diamonds scratched, and the sheer fabric soothed, whispered against his skin. The feathered mask hid all but his jaw and the bright fleck of red in his iris. The velvet collar clung to his neck, the diamond dipping into the hollow at its base. This would be--

“Torturous,” Jim breathed. He’d slipped back into the room and made no attempt to hide the way he gaped at Sherlock. “Tonight will be absolutely torturous for me. Do you know that?” Then he loosed a little titter. “Of course you do. I should send my girl out right now and do something about--”

But rather than explain himself, he darted forward, cupping Sherlock, who fought and lost to not go rigid at Jim’s touch, which burned like a brand against Sherlock’s most sensitive places.

Sherlock’s breath left him at once, and he could have dropped to his knees again, save for the way Jim held him up.

Jim *tsked.* “Patience.”

It wasn’t until Jim released him, stepped back, that Sherlock took in his own costume: a mask of rainbow-black feathers, a slick suit embellished here and there with opals that gleamed like the feathers of a cormorant.

Then Sherlock understood their costumes: there was an old, *old* D’Angeline story, of a dark figure
who mastered the birds, who kept a tame osprey. Sherlock’s reflection in the mirror showed his eyes flashing wild and shining behind his mask; he could see why Jim viewed him as a rare creature to hold captive.

“Come,” Jim said as he clipped the velvet lead to his collar, but held it slack. There was no command in his voice, only the expectation of obedience.

Sherlock could do no less.

It was some mercy that Jim allowed Sherlock the comfort of his Belstaff as they exited Jim’s penthouse, though he didn’t offer to give Sherlock’s shoes back. As Jim led him toward the door, Sherlock glanced round quickly, praying not to be seen by John. Mercifully, John’s back faced the large window; he was already poised in meditation, musing on Elua’s mysteries for the Longest Night. If Sherlock’s gaze lingered on the Cassiline’s grey shoulders as he slipped through the penthouse doors, he told himself it was out of pity, the idea of sitting stone-still outside on the darkest, coldest night of the year, in nothing more than a Cassiline suit.

Sherlock wasn’t sure what exactly to expect when they arrived at the Belfours estate; it was as bright and noisy as any gala in London, save for the distinct D’Angeline lilting which rendered the overwhelming din a little more lyrical, a shade more musical.

His heart hammered in his chest and he clung to his Belstaff as they stepped from Jim’s limousine and into the foyer. He forced his hands to unclench from where they grasped the placket when an attendant offered to take their coats. His cheeks, ears, chest all burned, and he’d only made it a metre into the manor. Then all Jim had to do was give him a glance, nothing more than a casual flick of the eye.

Bronze drums beat in his blood, pulsed in his head. The coat came off, and the room hushed.

In the eternal space of milliseconds, the warmth of his coat fell away, replaced by the cool draft of his body unprotected in the evening air, a gust of icy wind ripping in as another cluster of guests entered behind them. The burning brand of a roomful of eyes scorched his front, and diamond-tipped daggers of ice froze him from behind.

Then time snapped back into place: the doorman announced their names, and even Sherlock’s anonymity was denied him beneath that osprey mask. He wouldn’t be a nameless servant of Naamah, but a member of a peer’s household, collared and exposed of his own free will.

His body sang, a riot of humiliation and want, ice and fire; there was no hiding how it affected him. He was to be nude and shamefully erect tonight for an entire room, contracted though he was to but one patron. The night would be torturous, indeed.

How long they circled, chatting with guests hidden behind masks and much more concealing costumes, Sherlock had no way of knowing. Time became meaningless to the heat of a hundred stares, the weight of even the slightest brushes against over-sensitive skin. He floated in Jim’s wake, a ghost more than a bird of prey, only giving what he hoped were sufficient responses
when guests spoke to him.

It wasn’t until much later, as Jim paused by the bar, Sherlock kneeling at his heel, that Sherlock heard a familiar voice.

“What a lovely surprise,” a man in a charcoal suit and simple black domino drawled, his voice somewhat heavy from drink. “I’d recognise that half-done marque anywhere.”

Wilkerson.

Sherlock lifted his gaze just enough to offer the ghost of a smile; Jim, in his infinite cruelty, merely tightened the slack on Sherlock’s leash, drawing him upright on his knees so he had no choice but to face his patrons, former and current. Jim leaned down, his lips brushing Sherlock’s ear.

“Eyes on me, Sherlock, or I’ll make you take him right here.”

Sherlock’s throat tightened, his eyes burned. This was too much, and he hated how deeply he loved it.

“Waters, is it?” Jim asked as he straightened and offered Sherlock’s former patron a handshake. Sherlock was certain he’d used the wrong name on purpose.

“Wilkerson, thanks. Mr. Moriarty?”

Jim merely offered a hum of assent.

Kneeling between the two, Sherlock could feel their difference near-viscerally; Wilkerson, for all his exacting rigour and meticulous scrutiny, was nowhere near as socially adept as Jim. His meagre attractiveness fell away entirely, plain and dim when placed side-by-side with the last remaining scion of Kushiel’s lineage, who outshone him like the moon outshines a distant star.

There was no shame in Naamah’s service, Sherlock knew, but whatever he felt seeing the two of them side-by-side and so differently situated, came close.

“Have you spoken with Ms. Belfours recently?” Wilkerson asked. “She told me that the prime minister is coming to London next month.”

Sherlock, despite his hazy state, could smell Wilkerson’s overt social-climbing, his embarrassingly obsequious networking.

“I have in the past few days, and yes, I hear Daniel will be in town soon.” Jim’s tone was entirely put off, cool and detached, and some part of Sherlock wondered if he only entertained this conversation to further Sherlock’s humiliation. Surely he knew, could see, that Sherlock could tell the difference between their positions in D’Angeline strata.

“Ah,” Wilkerson replied. “Yes.” He cleared his throat, clearly scrambling for something else to say.

Before he could find his words, Jim jerked the lead hard enough that Sherlock knew to stand, and led him away.

As the night wore on, so did the guests’ patience, their manners; as more drink flowed and the hour drew ever-nearer to midnight, light accidental grazes gave way to lingering caresses, careless
gropes. Sherlock shivered beneath each touch, and Jim seemed to know each time it happened: with each incident he tugged just so on the lead, drawing Sherlock’s gaze back to him.

_You are here because of me. You are feeling this because of me. Who else can give you this, but me?_ He seemed to say at every pass.

The night grew later, winding from dancing and revelry to the pageant of costumes, and Sherlock took in none of it. He didn’t take in the Eglantine actress costumed as the Old Crone, hobbled forward in rags, propped on her gnarled cane, as she made her way to the dais at the front of the great-hall; he only barely registered the Gentian horologist crying out the seconds, declaring the new hour and the new day, another Eglantine actor dressed as the Sun King entering from the side of the room and bending to kiss the Old Crone. Sherlock knew but didn’t observe, as the Old Crone straightened, a victorious call as she cast off her rags and the mask of age to reveal a young maiden. The beautiful symbolism of a year’s darkness giving way to light was completely lost on him.

His mind drew in nothing but Jim: the curve of his lips and the arch of his brow, and every twitch on that velvet leash, dark and sure.

By the time Jim led Sherlock away, back to the relative safety of his Belstaff and the privacy of Jim’s limousine, Sherlock’s whole body was nothing but the thrum of his need pulsing through him—how any one person could stay insensible for so long, could dip that far into sub-space for a whole evening was something he might revel at later, might ponder on and study, but for now it was simply enough to exist.

The bitter cold cut through that reverie. Sherlock, weak from the night’s demands, trembled violently.

But then they climbed into the limousine, sheltered from the wind and embraced by the heated interior. In its dimly lit privacy, Jim stretched on the plush bench seat opposite him. “Come to Daddy,” he murmured.

That slight tug at the neck, and Sherlock came crawling, ungraceful and desperate, until he practically climbed into Jim’s lap.

“You didn’t disappoint, pet.”

Jim pushed the mask up roughly, claiming Sherlock with a kiss that felt more like a conquest—fingers knotted harsh in hair, teeth on lips until Sherlock tasted copper.

There was no art in Sherlock’s response, only that he begged with his body, for every last bite, pinch, and hard-won caress. The mesh clung to him, sweaty, his skin scored in spots where the diamonds pressed in or dragged, impossibly tight at the shoulder and groin from the way Sherlock twisted and writhed.

The sudden stop of the limousine jarred Sherlock back into reality—they were back at Jim’s building.

In the stillness, the silence of Jim’s inner sanctum, Sherlock’s breath caught and stuttered as Jim detached the lead.
“How long has Daddy made you wait?” Jim’s voice—Sherlock hated the purring dip and melody of it, the way it at once coddled and condescended. It intoxicated him.

“So—so long,” Sherlock stammered as Jim pushed him further into the room, spacious and sparse—it was an inner sanctum, indeed.

The lighting was low, comfortable at present, but did nothing to hide the well-maintained equipment on display: along a far wall, the bed was easily the tamest furnishing in the whole room. All manner of racks and stocks, stools and contraptions held places of pride on the floor, but what really caught Sherlock’s eye was the well-oiled wood of a recessed cabinet. It dominated the wall, surely hiding all the best secrets.

Jim grunted at Sherlock’s answer, shoving him a little harder forward. “If I wanted a vague answer I would’ve asked a vague question, pet.” When Sherlock stumbled and dropped to his knee, Jim took hold of his hair, wrenching his head to look up at Jim. There was no harshness to Jim’s tone or expression. All that cruelty, kept in check with a smile. “How. Long?”

Sherlock swallowed convulsively, his brain grinding to a halt and refusing to budge. How long—how long had it been? An eternity? Two?

Six months. A year.

Six months before his debut nearly a full year ago.

“Nearly a year and a half,” he managed. Then it clicked, the exact date. “Sixteen months, twenty-eight days.”

The fingers in his hair loosened, slid in one gentle stroke through his tousled curls. “I knew that mind was sharp.”

Sherlock basked in the praise, turning his face to catch Jim’s palm with his cheekbone, but Jim withdrew. When he opened his eyes, Jim stared at him calmly, clearly expecting his next silent demand be met.

There had been chastisement and reward, and now Jim had pulled back, removing reinforcement entirely. Submission was not the problem, nor was dominance desired.

Ah.

Sherlock pushed up to his feet, but left his gaze downcast. The soft chuckle Jim let out sounded like a threat and adoration in one.

“How. Long?”

Sherlock fought to keep the frown from his face. His adventures? Did Jim mean his other patrons? Or—was it Sherlock’s secondary hobby, working with the police? To be fair, that did put him in a sort of danger that few servants of Naamah would ever face, but surely Jim of all people would understand the thrill of the chase. Jim had as good as turned Amelia Chamberlain in, after all.

“I’m sorry—Daddy,” Sherlock mumbled, and he made no effort to hide the confusion in his voice.

Jim only hummed, then drew out a little satin eye-mask, padded to block the gaps on either side of the nose, affording true darkness. Then Sherlock saw no more.
Jim’s hand slid along one forearm, drawing it forward, and Sherlock knew to follow suit with his other arm, offering both wrists to Jim, the most simple and visible symbol of his will. The velvet lead slithered around his flesh, tightened nearly too-tight. Sherlock gasped, desire skyrocketing again. Accomplished, Jim tugged him forward again, seven steps forward and five angling to the left, to the centre of the room.

“Kneel.”

Sherlock did, ignoring the bite of a diamond, pressing sharp and merciless against his kneecap. Just before Jim lifted Sherlock’s arms, Sherlock recalled the room’s layout. Dangling from the centre of the ceiling, a large hook hung on a thick chain, which rattled as Jim tugged it toward Sherlock’s makeshift manacles.

Jim attached the makeshift bonds to the hook, tugged the chain to pull Sherlock into an awkward position: arms overhead, nothing but the awkward position of one too high to kneel, when Sherlock was too tired to stand. Already his shoulders protested the pull.

Satisfied, Jim stepped forward again, his body heat its own caress against Sherlock’s near-bare skin. Teeth on Sherlock’s ear left Sherlock gasping.

“We’re ready to play now, I think. I’m not going to waste our time with lesser toys.”

He didn’t give Sherlock time to wonder at that cryptic statement. Sherlock followed the sound of footfalls across the room, the near-quiet squeak of a hinged door opening.

The cabinet.

The swoosh of a drawer, and the tiniest tink of metal.

Sherlock frowned beneath his blindfold.

Return footsteps, and the press of something slender and quite cold against Sherlock’s ribs. Then, with stunning, blade-sharp clarity, he knew.

“Flechettes,” he whispered, his bones turning to liquid. His flagging erection surged and bobbed again, aching after a night of delay, even as tears burned his eyes, trapped beneath the blindfold. “Elua--”

“I’m going to skin you, pet. I’m going to flay every last bit of your skin from your gorgeous frame, and I’m going to treasure it for a very long, long time.”

Sherlock hiccuped, unable to gasp or exhale as the fear constricted in his chest. His head swam, and he trembled, caught between want and curiosity, dire fear and desire. But the blade didn’t touch his skin—he heard the sigh of thin fabric parting neatly from the blade. Jim sliced the costume until it all fell away, pooling at Sherlock’s feet. Then he jerked it free, tossed it somewhere to the side. Something hard and holed grated against Sherlock’s skin: a drainage system below that very spot.

“I’ve heard you’ve never once given your signale,” Jim mused. “Let’s see if we can’t change that.”

Then the blade pricked a taut nipple and Sherlock bucked so hard he swayed on the chain above, utterly helpless. The flechette whispered against Sherlock’s skin, obscenely sharp, parting it so cleanly Sherlock nearly didn’t feel it.

At first.
The true art of the flechette comes from its design, its implementation. Sharper than a surgeon’s scalpel, handled with the sort of care that comes of years of training and certification, the flechette wasn’t made for damage so much as it was pain for the sake of pain. It was vital that a servant of Naamah carry as few scars as possible, and for some the fear of the deadly blades was too much—they wrote it completely from their assignation contracts.

But not Sherlock, of course not. The idea of them always left him with curious chills, an intrigue he couldn’t abandon. But picturing a thing and knowing it are two different worlds, and Sherlock crossed that line, burned that bridge as hot and as recklessly as anyone might.

Molten lines trailing wet blossomed along his ribs, his pectorals, across his thighs. He sobbed for it, each noise a wordless plea, though for what Sherlock himself didn’t know—for mercy? For more?

“I wonder what your signale means--usually it’s something secret and dear. What could be so special about a pirate?” Jim traced the underside of one pectoral, a neat path of agony following in its wake. “Are you ready to give it to me, pet?”

“No,” Sherlock gasped. He clenched his teeth, so close to orgasm he thought he might die from it. “No, Daddy.”

“Interesting. You chose a pirate. So often these signales come from something significant, which means something impressed early on. So, childhood. A preoccupation with pirates?” His words were at once lazy and barbed, a lion circling its prey.

Sherlock said nothing, only trembled beneath so much scrutiny.

“Such a simple thing. But it goes deeper, doesn’t it? You wouldn’t have picked it unless the word meant something too precious to forget, too beloved or too painful, efficiently jarring from the sexual identity. Possibly both. The name wasn’t a person, wasn’t a thing. A pet?”

Sherlock’s gasp gave him away, and he hated being so transparent to Jim. It only drove that humiliation home.

“Now that’s telling. Something too beloved to lose. What else falls in that category? Who else?”

Wide, wet heat pressed and dragged along the freshest cut--Jim’s tongue chasing the blood, and a whole new set of fears buzzed in Sherlock’s brain. Did he normally do that?

As if guessing his thoughts, Jim whispered against his skin, reverent and cruel. “Only for you, pet. You and I are almost equals, two sides of a coin. He made you for me. Everything you are is mine for the taking--a gift only for me. I will cut the heart out of you. I will be your whole world and every waking thought.”

An idle daydream of nights past muddled Sherlock’s senses then: of making his marque, Jim declaring him a true equal. Jim keeping him for a lifetime of intrigue and exquisite use, just like this.

So strong was the memory he lost track of the flechette’s progress, until it whispered along his belly, down, down--

His chest seized, his entire body locking down in a paroxysm of pure terror as Jim trailed it along the length of Sherlock’s cock, the curve of his bollocks, just light enough to keep from leaving so much as a scratch.
“No,” he hiccuped. “Elua, no--”

“Say it,” Jim cooed. “Tell me what I want to hear.”

“Please--don’t--”

“That’s not what I want, pet--”

“Redbeard!” Sherlock sobbed, and the force of his orgasm destroyed equilibrium and his remaining strength, stole the breath from his lungs and the sound from his ears. He jerked and sagged on the chain, drained and limp.

Jim gave him a moment, then slipped forward. Sherlock heard the small noise as Jim put the flechette on a nearby table, and then the heat from his body as he leaned forward, slipped the blindfold from his eyes.

Sherlock blinked in the sudden light, low as it was, completely lost in the endorphins flooding his system. Jim’s face swam into focus, his dark hair shining, his eyes bright with the joy of his handiwork.

“**Heard and obeyed in accordance with Naamah’s will,**” Jim said coolly, reciting the response given to respect a signale. “**Such a good boy.**”

Sherlock struggled to keep his eyes open, so strong was his fatigue, until a gush of warm water sluiced over his skin, washing away the blood until it spiraled in dilute whorls and disappeared down the drain.

“Such a good, obedient little pet. The perfect prize.”

With that Jim freed him from the chain, undid his hands, led him to bed.

“What would you like as your reward?” His words dripped from his lips, poisoned honey. He nudged Sherlock’s chest, tipping him to topple on the bed.

“You,” Sherlock whispered.

The weight of it, the truth of it crushed his chest, and yet it was only partly true. That didn’t make sense, and Sherlock pushed it away even as the faint scent of apples lingered in his senses. A still, small core, somewhere deep within, yearned for safety; he lacked that here, instead reveling in the heady thrill of danger. Rather than think of this sharp divide, he focused on the pain, on the intoxicating if now faint scent of Jim’s cologne, spicy and subtle.

“Irene has trained you as best she could,” Jim commented idly later, tracing a fingertip along a score curving around the edge of Sherlock’s rib. “I’m almost impressed.”

The bleeding had stopped sometime before, and the cuts were shallow enough that it left only the lines afterward; they would heal clean. His fingertip left a burning trail in their wake, and Sherlock closed his eyes, sinking into it, rather than linger on the sting of Jim’s slight.

“What will you do when you’re done?” Jim asked.

Sherlock frowned. “I don’t know.”
“You should consider your options--you’re close to it. Will you still serve as Irene’s eyes and ears, or have you had enough of her little spy games? Maybe you’ll go into your detective work.” Jim’s words held a taunt, the hint of condescension one uses on a child. “It took you long enough to figure Amelia out. Was it your soft spot for Victor?”

Sherlock swallowed, could sense the trap on Jim’s question. If he answered, he’d do Naamah a disservice by lying, and besides, Jim had been an adept of Mandrake--he knew well the bonds between servants and their patrons. Then again, Jim had a wide possessive streak. Sherlock could stay silent, but then omission might be just as damning.

Instead he hummed. “Why didn’t you turn Amelia in yourself? Or are you a cat, leaving a dead bird on my stoop?”

This startled a laugh from Jim, who couldn’t hide his pleasure. “She trained you well.”

Jim’s hand trailed along a score on Sherlock’s stomach, hovered over the fine edge of Sherlock’s dark pubic hair. He pinched a small bit and tugged. “Did she ever tell you of their connection?”

“Former patron.”

“She told you she sent you to find out how he’d come into money again, didn’t she?”

Sherlock frowned, and Jim tugged again. Sherlock flinched, and desire fluttered again in his middle.

“Let Daddy tell you a story, then.” Jim’s smile was once again oiled and closer to a sneer. “Once upon a time, a Mandrake girl bewitched a spoilt rich boy.” Already his voice rose and dropped, the lilt of a bedtime story to a child. “She was good at what she did--so much so she made a switch from a dom. In time she came to spoil him, too. She grew soft. She fancied herself in love, and begged her Dowayne to marry the idiot before her marque had been made. They planned to elope when the Dowayne denied her. Luckily, the night they were to leave, he contracted her there in Mandrake house. They’d planned it this way, so they might leave in the dead of night with very few questions. But then during play-time, while she whipped him senseless, he pleaded for her to pray to Eisheth--and then she knew how close she’d come to ruin. She turned him and his fortune away, no matter how he implored.”

Sherlock stared at Jim, unable to hide his surprise. D’Angelines only prayed to Eisheth shortly before or after marriage for one reason: to open a D’Angeline woman’s womb, that she might bear children.

He couldn’t imagine Irene a mother, for all that she doted on him like a sadistic older sister. Neither could he imagine a heart-eyed Victor, begging for domesticity.

“No wonder Mycroft told me to take care,” Sherlock murmured. He bit his lip when he realised what he’d said. If Jim knew anything about Mycroft--and someone as shrewd as Jim would certainly do his homework, Sherlock was certain--this was a damning implication that Mycroft followed his brother’s assignations. It might be too easy to conclude that Mycroft tracked his work through Amelia’s murders, wanted to use him to find the head of Lies-Beyond. He eyed Jim carefully, but Jim took no notice, still toying with the tufts of wiry brown hair.

“Talk to your brother frequently, then? I’m surprised the British Government has so much free time.”

“Only when I can’t avoid it,” Sherlock admitted, his fears unassuaged.
Jim chuckled at that. “A few trembling flowers from Alyssum might be the only ones who can stand talking to him, and that only for his coin.”

Sherlock shuddered to think of his brother, the stodgy prig, frequenting a House whose canon pledged modesty. He couldn’t imagine any aspect of it.

Jim let his fingertips trail down farther, until they slipped below his ballocks, delving into the cleft of Sherlock’s arse. “Tell me, how were the De Fhirze twins? I hate that I missed your little show.”

But Sherlock lost the thread of Jim’s words, distracted by the pad of Jim’s middle finger, pushing gently against his opening. He was still slick, still loose from earlier--a detail Jim hadn’t forgotten. Jim pressed in, just a little bit, and Sherlock squirmed for more.

“Say it for me again, pet,” Jim growled, too-close and too-loud by Sherlock’s ear.

There was no reason for it, and no reason not to. He’d never be able to separate that word entirely from Jim ever again.

“Redbeard,” Sherlock gasped as Jim drew back and thrust two fingers into him.

The following morning, Sherlock woke alone to a quiet knock on the door. The attendant from the night before poked her head in.

“Time’s up,” she announced cheerfully.

She helped Sherlock clean and bandage his cuts, more for precaution than anything; if Sherlock moved with more stiffness than usual, it could only be said the night had been long and rewarding. He dressed in the suit he’d worn there and followed the woman out and to the dining room.

Jim sat at the sleek dining room table, a plate of fresh fruit and water sitting before him.

“I’d ask you to stay for breakfast, but I’m sure you’ve got more important business to attend to,” Jim drawled as his eyes flitted up over Sherlock’s shoulder.

Sherlock turned to see John enter, his face haggard and his eyes red-rimmed from a night of meditation. As physically demanding as Sherlock’s night had been, he couldn’t imagine performing Elua’s Vigil. It was an exercise in pointless austerity.

John refused to meet Sherlock’s gaze, but Sherlock had come to expect that in the last day or so.

Jim plucked an envelope from the table and gestured for John to take it. His gaze went from mild to something a little sharper, then gave him a wink. “I’ll let you keep track of this, for Naamah’s honor.”

John clenched his jaw until the muscle there shifted under his skin; he delivered a swift Cassiline bow and backed away, silent.

“One more thing,” Jim said. He snapped his fingers, and Sherlock obeyed without thinking. He stepped forward, slid down to one knee.

Jim lifted the heavy diamond, dangling from its velvet collar. He fastened it around Sherlock’s neck, just loose enough to hide below the collar of Sherlock’s shirt if he did up the top button. The
diamond hung heavy against the hollow of his throat; it felt as cold as the December air outside. “This is a present for you, pet--not for Naamah. A little something to remember me by.” Then he cleared his throat and the blonde woman stepped forward, now holding a bundle of familiar gauze fabric.

Sherlock stood speechless. The diamonds sewn into the gauze would be enough to make his marque and then some.

“I don’t need rags,” Jim said. He rose, drew Sherlock to his feet. He grabbed Sherlock by the neck and yanked him forward for one last kiss, possessive despite its chastity.

Sherlock could feel John’s eyes burning into his back, but Jim’s spicy scent muddled his brain.

“Now,” Jim said, “I’m curious to see what Kushiel’s servant and Irene Adler’s creature will do on his own. Surprise me.”

Chapter End Notes

**WARNINGS:**
-- WE'RE FINALLY DOING JIM/SHERLOCK Y'ALL.
-- It's just as fucked up as you'd imagine.
-- In fact, we get into blood play.
-- And Sherlock uses his signale, but it is respected. Well, the first time. Its use is consensually muddled the second time.
-- For those of you who've read the book, just remember The Osprey & The Cormorant. n.n
-- Some of John's actions here might not make sense, but I'll be going into his head in the next chapter, and hopefully that will clear all that up for you.
-- Listen, I know Sheriarty isn't everyone's cup of tea. If it doesn't suit you, that's okay, but don't flood my comments with it? Please remember, this story's here to give everyone a little bit of what they want, and that Johnlock is still endgame. I feel like I say this every chapter, but I swear it's true. I also know there are a handful of you Sheriartys out there, and I'm honestly excited to see what you think of this. I don't get to read that ship too often (feel free to pass along recs!), so I can only hope my offering is worthy.

**SFW REFERENCES TO STUFF:**
-- I don't recommend googling "osprey mask" because the results range from hilarious to confusing to nightmare fuel and back
-- And I sincerely don't suggest googling 'flechette.' The intended tool I'm referring to is essentially just a wicked-sharp dagger that takes this name from Kushiel canon, but the real thing is actually a type of dart, or dart-bullet. The projectile is neat if brutal-looking, but the mixed-in pictures of victims is gruesome. 0/10 DO NOT RECOMMEND. D:
REFERENCES FOR THE COSTUME. NSFW. BECAUSE I LOVE YOU ALL.

-- An approximation of the pants
-- Another approximation for those pants, in case the first one wasn't enough for you perverts :D
-- Just imagine this one, but more...see-thru
-- This isn't even close to what I had in mind for the shirt but it looks cool.
Two weeks. It took two entire weeks between Sherlock receiving that damned postcard and tonight. It was possibly the worst two weeks of John’s life.

The core of him, that hardest, most un-Cassiline part of him wanted nothing more than to skewer Jim Moriarty unprovoked, but he knew he’d never be able to do it. Not without just cause, and being an arrogant viper wasn’t enough. Not when Moriarty was such a well-vetted member of the Knight’s Doorstep community, not when he was a personal friend to Irene and the Kushiel-damned stars in Sherlock’s eyes.

Every time John remembered Sherlock’s distant, hazy state anytime Moriarty came near, his insides twisted like tissue paper, battered and close to tearing.

John had been an utter fool to think he might find happiness and contentment staying by Sherlock’s side, serving the anguisset as he made his marque and moved on with wherever his life led them both. Sherlock’s life—and therefore John’s—would lead only to one inevitable end, and that end was Jim fucking Moriarty.

Worse, was the way Elua tapped at John’s heart whenever he thought of Sherlock at other times: sleep-softened or languid and glowing in the aftermath of an assignation, or shining and razor-sharp with deductions for Lestrade. The pensive, unguarded man who’d thrown open a door one night was the one John held closest to his heart, gave him a reason to protect and serve. The lullaby still echoed in the corners of his memory. That was a Sherlock only he saw, someone vulnerable who needed him, wholly unlike the heavy-lidded seducer who followed Naamah’s calling or the hard, spiky man who walked through life with head held high.

Of course John was a fool. He felt physically ill just remembering the cleanness, the absolution of waking that morning in Elua’s temple, twin anemones blossomed just for him. He'd been so, so wrong.

Still, he refused to abandon his post—not now, not when Sherlock needed him more than the brilliant bastard knew.

The air in the lift was impossibly thin. John stared straight at the back of the porter’s head as they ascended, forcing himself to breathe, to clear his mind with the broom of prayer.

“My Lord, whose hand now guides my daggers here, / To ward my charge, this duty I perform. / Drum-beat, heartbeat, inescapably clear: /To my most prized treasure I am oath-sworn.”
Ever since he’d learned the *Cassiline’s Prayer*, he’d always pictured grim and glorious scenes, daggers shining like stars as he fought faceless foes for an imaginary ward. But the way his heart pounded in a fight and the way it did now was still a drumbeat he couldn’t fail to succumb to. He would have to stand behind and beside, fighting himself not to betray Sherlock just to relieve the world one Jim Moriarty. He would force himself to suffer Moriarty’s snide comments and side-eyeing, to focus wholly on Sherlock. Elua was the compass and Cassiel the needle, but Sherlock was True North, and that was all that mattered. If John murdered Jim Moriarty outright, he’d be worse than imprisoned. He would be foresworn, damned irrevocably.

Still, the thought was seductive. It was better to be damned for that than for abandoning Sherlock.

The lift dinged, its journey complete, and John glared at the back of the porter’s head to keep from looking at Sherlock. The way Sherlock rose from the surface of his own thoughts, alert and tremulous, should never have been warranted by a bastard like Moriarty. If John had to stare at the curves and angles of his face, the smooth skin shaped by beautiful muscle, he’d rather not see it animated by tonight’s patron.

When the penthouse door swung open, Moriarty did nothing more than stare Sherlock down, a wolf eyeing a wounded lamb. And that wasn’t the worst: Sherlock dropped to one knee, his neck bared and ready for the slaughter. John bit the inside of his cheek to keep from tasting bile.

When Jim spoke, it took every iota of willpower to keep from breaking his teeth. “Daddy’s waited for some time now, Sherlock. I know it must have been *so* much worse for you--but only a little bit longer, if you’re well behaved tonight.”

John’s heart slammed in his chest.

“As did you with your blade submit your life-- / To smiling Elua whose heart won all-- / Against your father Adonai in strife, / O let me, yours by faith, fulfill your call.”

John repeated the stanza, praying he would hear nothing else, but Moriarty even interrupted that.

“Brother Watson. I have made absolutely sure you’ll be provided for tonight. I understand it’s custom for you Cassilines to keep Elua’s Vigil?”

John fought to keep his hands from twitching toward his daggers. Elua’s balls, Moriarty wouldn’t do this, would he?

“It is the custom, but I--”

A blonde woman appeared behind Moriarty’s shoulder. Her face tugged at memory, but John couldn’t place it. Jim held out a hand, silenced John’s protests.

“Ah, no, that’s not how it’s going to work. I have my attendant here to play house while you serve your vigil--I have a shrine just there on the balcony all prepared for you.” Jim shifted, his hand gliding through the air to gesture directly behind him. A wall of windows revealed a wide balcony, a lavish shrine tucked against an outer-facing wall that would protect John and the votives already burning there.

That bastard. That utter, utter bastard.

Cassilines honoured no other holiday; Elua’s vigil was paramount. John had come along tonight on the impetus that there would be no chance to hold the vigil. *Maison Adler* had no shrine, and he’d "assumed" neither Moriarty’s penthouse nor the Belfours estate would afford him the opportunity.
Technically, tonight he was offered the chance to leave his post entirely, to go to Elua’s temple for the vigil, but John had done his best to finagle past that. Moriarty must have assumed that much and done this just to completely stymie him, all while appearing to be a gracious host.

Besides, he still had no factual reason to protest the accommodations. Moriarty had not, to John’s knowledge, actually ever acted out of turn with Sherlock, and the precedent of his standing in the Knight Court and among Irene’s household would be enough to vouch for them going to a simple party. He would still be on-hand for when they came back here—and John fought not to shudder at that thought.

It might be better to let Moriarty think he’d outsmarted John. If given a confrontation, John had no doubt Moriarty would find some way to come back full force. He wasn’t sure if his involvement in Amelia Chamberlain’s arrest was entirely altruistic; what if John caused Moriarty to do something ruinous to Sherlock or anyone else in Maison Adler?

Still, if it came to it, Elua might understand if John abandoned his vigil, strong-arming his way past the attendant, in order to at least follow them to the party. Moriarty had him hoisted by his bollocks, all on the twine of John’s own service to Cassiel.

John could follow.

John would follow.

But then Moriarty dropped his hands to tangle his fingers in Sherlock’s hair and he stared right into John’s eyes as he spoke to Sherlock, a cruel smile hovering at the edges of his mouth. “Make your way to the guest bedroom, pet. Just around the corner. I’ll be there in a moment.”

The December air, a sharp wind up at penthouse level, sliced across the length of the balcony, a terrible accompaniment to the watery sun setting in the distance. John was certainly thankful to have his thick uniform coat, but he was sure that it wouldn’t do much to keep him comfortable after the first thirty minutes, if he even waited that long.

Moriarty paid the freeze no mind, strolling with unbroken posture over to the alcove where the shrine had been erected. John was certain it hadn’t been there the last time they’d been stuck in this hellhole, further proof Moriarty had manipulated the situation with a deftness only Irene could rival.

The anger boiling in John’s blood helped keep him warm, at least.

The shrine itself was a small nook of rustic wood, sealed against the wind, housing a statue of Elua and the various standard accoutrements. A small vase of ten vibrant red anemones--one for Elua, one for each of his eight companions, and a final one for the D’Angeline people--stood just to the statue’s left. An antique Cassiline dagger, likely bought at auction, lay just on the right--a reminder of Cassiel’s choice, which cemented Elua’s divinity on earth rather than his grandfather’s heaven. A small arc of flickering votives rose over the statue, its holders inset along the wall, cast a comfortable glow, which reminded John of all his time in the Brotherhood, praying as hard as he trained. In the shelter of the alcove, a thin thread of incense smoke twisted up from its censor, filling the small space with the familiar sweet stink of the temple. Occasionally the wind would slip in, guttering candles and incense alike, but never enough to douse them entirely.

Moriarty even thought to leave a small, ornate cushion in black and gold jacquard for John to kneel upon. This detail only served to push the idea that this treatment was an overt sign of
hospitality Moriarty could claim ignorance to--left to their own devices, Cassilines used no such niceties in Elua’s temple. They knelt on the hard, frozen earth. The pain was reckoned a small sacrifice to pay in Elua’s honour.

“Ah, Cassiline! Here I’ve given you a lovely little place to keep your vigil--I do so care about the spiritual needs of fellow D’Angelines--and you can’t even say thank you?”

John couldn’t so much as manage a smile, so he didn’t. If he spoke, he’d only make things worse.

“Speechless, I see. Well, I’ll take that as a good sign.”

Moriarty’s voice was so smug it took monumental effort not to grab him by the hair and make a regrettable meeting between his face and the alcove wall. John swooped with another tight bow, his movements stiff with cold and anger.

“Well. Tight-lipped is fine. So long as you stay put, stick to your little vigil, you can be as silent as you like.”

John fought not to let his confusion show on his face. Was Jim Moriarty threatening him? Was this the excuse he needed?

“It’s obvious, you know--you can’t stand me. You want to do--” Moriarty leaned in, and his godawful cologne clogged John’s nose. “--Horrible, violent things to me. Things that might get you kicked out of the Brotherhood, hm?”

John swallowed, refused to look at him. He stared hard at the smiling face of Elua, and shook with rage.

Moriarty chuckled. “That’s not the only thing that might get you kicked out, though, is it? It’s not hard to see what else you’re hiding, little Cassiline, not for someone blessed enough to see.” He circled once around John, taking in his measure. “You wear your heart on your sleeve, and it’s not for Cassiel, is it? You can tell yourself that all you like, but it’s not Cassiel that keeps you up at night, that makes it so hard… to pray.”

“You’re making this up,” John grated. His heart thumped harder. Was his devotion and admiration really so base and sinful as that?

There had been those times, late at night--

No. No. Moriarty was playing mind games, nothing more. Of course he had no basis for his speculation. That’s what servants of Naamah did, wasn’t it? Spin lies from half-truths and intrigue? That’s certainly what a snake like Moriarty specialized in.

“Believe what you like,” Moriarty crooned softly. “Doesn’t matter, does it? All it would take would be a few well-placed emails, I think. Brother Vincent worries about you so.”

John couldn’t stay silent any longer. Not about this disgusting game this bastard was playing with him. “Are you threatening me?”

“Am I?” Moriarty leaned back, mild as ever. “I doubt it. I certainly wouldn’t, not a devoted Cassiline intent on keeping his sacred vigil. But it’s only the lesser of two evils, I think, for anyone who’d abandon their post.”

“Staying here while--”

“While what? While Sherlock comes with me and has a safe, perfectly lovely evening at the hands
of his most sought-after patron?”

“I--”

“Have you met my attendant?” Moriarty asked. He gestured over John’s shoulder.

The blonde woman from inside stepped onto the balcony, a mild smile flashing his way before her attention turned wholly to Moriarty.

“This is my dear Mary, Brother Watson. They trained her quite nicely in Cereus House.”

“If you’re trying to coerce me with a servant of Naamah--” John started.

“Oh, certainly not!” Moriarty laughed, all too pleased with himself. “Not at all. I wouldn’t dream of purposefully tempting a man of Cassiel away from his oath. I’m not Irene, after all.” Moriarty held out his hand, and Mary took it, circumnavigating John to stand by her employer’s side. “No, nothing that obvious. Mary here--does she look at all familiar?”

John let his glance flick to her face, her wry smile and sharp eyes. She looked like someone he could have run into at the store, a stranger on the Tube, but familiar nonetheless. “No,” he lied.

“Funny,” Moriarty replied. “She remembers you. She quite fancied you when you were both younger.”

And then it registered, a boulder right in his consciousness.

Mary Morstan.

It’d been, what, ten years or better?

“You trained with me,” John whispered. The wind whipped around him, slicing into the gaps in his clothing, finding the exposed skin at the back of his neck. “You left early on, though. They never explained why. You left Cassiel’s service to join Naamah’s?”

Mary huffed a small laugh. “That’s only part of it, Brother.”

“There are forces at work, entire unseen guilds, you could say, that keep our little way of life preserved. Mary here is one such agent. She’s as good as giving as she is receiving.” Moriarty winked, and John wasn’t sure how to take that.

Was he implying Mary would become violent, if John were to leave?

“I don’t have to worry about you,” Mary said. “I trust Brother Vincent trained you quite well. I do wonder, though, how other members in your household might fare?”

“So you are threatening me.”

“Not at all,” Jim replied. “We absolutely have no need to, do we?”

“That’s it,” John snapped. “I’m calling this assignation off. What would Irene think, knowing you’re doing this?”

“Irene? You think that’s my concern?” Moriarty shook his head. “I taught her what she knows. I imagine she sees into your head better than you think, Brother Watson. No doubt she’s just as ready to call your superior, should you fail.”

“This is--”
“Hush now,” Moriarty snapped. His lips drew back in a snarl and his reptilian eyes flashed in the dying sunlight. “It’s Daddy’s turn to talk. You’re going to keep your little vigil, and you’re going to be thankful. I will escort your little crush to probably the most important social event he’s yet attended, and then when we get home, I will do things to him you will absolutely despise. Oh, he’ll love them, though. I’ll honour his safeword and everything. I won’t have it said I’m a rapist, after all.

“But you, Brother Watson, you will have the opportunity to find out exactly what skills I hired Mary for, should you attempt to leave your post. She hides her daggers in the most fascinating places, I promise. And if you breathe a word of this to anyone-- anyone--well. I’ve already got a whole slew of damning emails between Sherlock and you. It’ll only dent his reputation, but yours will be destroyed .”

“There’s no such--”

“Ah, the beauty of the digital age.” Moriarty gave a dreamy sigh. “ Forgery is a beautiful thing, and no one will be wiser.”

For the first time since their arrival, real fear shot through John then. Moriarty was showing his hand, finally, but only against John himself. It wasn’t enough to act in Sherlock’s defense, because as yet, it was John’s word against Moriarty’s. And they both knew it.

“So, little Cassiline,” Moriarty purred. “Why don’t you take a knee, start ruminating on your lord?” When John didn’t answer, Moriarty turned on his heel, and Mary trailed behind. “Happy solstice, Brother Watson.”

John would keep Elua’s vigil, but it would only be to pray he’d someday have the chance to kill this bastard.

“Each vambrace true, each pointed holy blade / Steers true my hands and stills my mind, o Lord, / ’Til I, your servant, defend unafraid, / But for the killing blow I save my sword.”

Chapter End Notes

Interesting to note:

In Imriel’s Trilogy, the three books following Phedre's in the Kushiel-verse, we learn that Imriel and other scions of Kushiel's house (read: earthly descendants) have the gift of "seeing" the fault-lines in a person's soul, a means of finding the right way to manipulate or punish them. I thought this dove-tailed perfectly with both canon Moriarty and the way I've adapted him here in this fic. It doesn't diminish the independent singularity of his freaky prowess, his intelligence, or his cruelty, though. (Imriel is the protag of his trilogy, obviously, and isn't a Moriarty-type at all, even if other scions in Kushiel's lines are.)

On a more personal note, I knew about two short stories in the Kushiel-verse ("You and You Alone," & "Earth Begotten"), but I literally *just* found ANOTHER
("Martyr of the Roses"), and I'm basically hyperventilating about that RIGHT THE HECK NOW.

I need a new hobby, lol.
Irene stared dumbly at the fabric wadded in her hands. She looked back up to him, her expression sliding from dumbfounded to shuttered. “I believe you may have just set a new record for the value of a patron-gift, in London or elsewhere.”

Sherlock only nodded crisply. “Then I have your leave to have it appraised and sold?”

Irene fixed him with a warm smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I couldn’t stop you if I tried, could I?”

Sherlock gave her a pointed look, and she rolled her eyes.

“Fine,” she answered. “Just wait until you’ve healed, at least?”

Sherlock wasted no time. A week later, just a few days short of his birthday, the very day his private physician snapped her nitrile gloves from her hands and tossed them into the bin, he contacted a former Bryony adept who specialised in gem appraisal within the hour. Sherlock was never more thankful that where Kushiel cast his dart, he also blessed with somewhat faster-than-normal healing. The thin, careful slices into his skin had already healed clean with but a judicious amount of salve.

The studded gauze merited a staggering sum made dizzying thanks to the appraiser’s shrewd negotiations. Even after the appraiser’s fee, Sherlock would have enough to post a down payment on his own Belgravian home, should he choose, after his marque was made.

Ill-suppressed excitement had him clasping the appraiser’s hand harder than normal, but it was easily forgivable.

Out on the sidewalk, he made his appointment with Mr. Ames, volleying text after text with the receptionist, Ari. Come the following morning, he would have his marque in full; he would be free to go where wind and whim blew him.

He shot a glance at John, who’d been stone-faced since that morning at Jim’s a little over a week before. There was something strained there, and though Sherlock had heard him regularly up at all hours, bumping in his room, the recalcitrance felt like it went beyond physical tiredness.

It reminded Sherlock of the John he first met, the night of his debut and the months following, but where that John was righteous in his anger, this one was muted, distant, withdrawn. Resigned.
Sherlock had no idea what to make of that, only that it had something to do with Midwinter Solstice; John hadn’t behaved that way in many months. Did he object to Jim in a way he didn’t with Sherlock’s other patrons? Or was it simply that he’d “come to his senses” in the hours leading to Elua’s vigil, and he’d remembered all that Cassiline priggishness he’d worn on his sleeve in those early days? That would be enough to saddle John with that dreadful resignation, Sherlock thought.

He was surprised to find that thought didn’t sting so much as it just sat in his middle, heavy and cold. He’d come so close to having a friend.

Well. Sherlock could learn to be fine with that--who needed friends when he had an entire police force at hand to supply him with cases, and his pick of patrons from a dazzling buffet of connections, all willing to lavish him with just the sort of attention Kushiel demanded of him? And, if he got his true desire, would he even need those patrons?

Who indeed.

But a whole montage of impressions lingered any time he thought about the Cassiline beside him; not the least of which was Midwinter Night, the way his thoughts had divided both jagged and nebulous between John and Jim as he toasted for joie, the odd scent of apples he’d come to associate with John as he begged for Jim to take him from the suspension chain, to pull him to the bed and give him what he’d wanted more than anything else for the last year and a half.

He sucked in a deep breath, the cleansing air burning his lungs he climbed into the cab after John. He squeezed his phone to keep his hand from shaking. It was easiest to believe it came from the delicious anticipation of the marquist’s needles, that unrelenting burn as his accomplishment was limned indelibly into his skin.

*Tomorrow*, he thought.

Tomorrow he’d be a fully fledged member of the D’Angeline elite, and free to choose his patrons at will. He would be free to approach Jim Moriarty as an equal.

Mr. Ames’s needles were sharp, indeed, and the sprawling burn coalescing until it consumed his consciousness, that limned his upper back as the ink spread across his shoulders to illustrate the bow, the point tipping the knob at the base of his neck, had him squirming unrepentantly.

Ames chuckled and swatted at Sherlock’s arse as he pulled the needle away for probably the tenth time in the session.

“I’d ask if you wanted a break--this is quite a bit of ink in one sitting--but I know better than that.” Then, thinking better of that pronouncement, he added, “Unless you need to--well. Salute Naamah in your own way? Were I not a married man, I’d consider offering a hand, darling.”

Sherlock grunted. “We’re close enough to being finished--”

“I’ll say,” Ames interjected, and Sherlock could very well hear the eyebrow-wagging.

“Get it over with.”

“Your call, darling. Though I’ll admit, I’ll miss you terribly. Best customer I’ve ever had.” Ames couldn’t hide the fondness that suffused his jibing. Then a mock-wistful tone coloured his next words: “I knew our time would come to an end eventually.”
“I can’t say the feeling is mutual,” Sherlock groaned. “Especially with this completely unprofessional harassment.” Even still, Sherlock was surprised to find his words weren’t nearly as barbed as he’d assumed they’d be. Perhaps it was the prospect of his marque being complete, and perhaps this ridiculous man had actually grown on him.

A few hours later, Sherlock stood before a mirror, looking over his shoulder to approve his finished marque. Sable briar vines twisted, climbing his spine, tipped in blood-red thorns at intervals, the shaft of an arrow. The breadth of a bow arced from shoulder to shoulder, similarly accented with the red. The dart that marked him, the bow that cast the shot.

An expanse of black on creamy skin, irritated and red around the freshest ink, soon to be smeared with ointment and bandaged. Once it healed, Sherlock would bare it for Irene, who would give it the final approval.

And just like that, Sherlock would be a fully-fledged servant of Naamah, a master of his art.

Something in his chest tightened. He’d begun this endeavor to weasel his way into Lestrade’s graces, in search of more cases. A year and a half later, he found himself a small delight among the glittering stars of the London Night Court, a sought-after prize. For the first time in his life, he felt profoundly distant from the gangly, smart-arsed boy who regularly got harassed in school, jumped in locker rooms and alleys. He was worth something now, worth his words and observations, worth his delight in pain and rebellion. He was allowed, encouraged to be those things that had marked him his whole life, and in its own way, that felt like freedom.

Ames bandaged him carefully and helped him shrug back into his button-down, a loose and dark-coloured one, before escorting him out to the lobby.

Before Sherlock could finish his goodbyes, however, a courier popped in, his eyes flicking across the room until he spotted Sherlock.

“Are you Mr. Holmes?” the young man asked. When Sherlock assented, the courier had him sign off, and handed him a smallish box.

“What’s this?” he asked as he struggled to open it. The parcel had no names, only a hastily-scrawled heart and a healthy application of tape.

When he pried it open, he was surprised to find its contents: an old badge of Lestrade’s that Sherlock had nicked ages ago, a navy silk sash the color of early evening, a plain wooden hairbrush--and as the other contents were revealed, he found an unsettling theme.

A shining stainless steel sounding rod.

A pair of lacy black knickers.

A small bottle of *Three Thousand Joys*, a type of *joie* whose name mirrored Naamah’s sacred text.

A small string of beads, like the ones from his bellydance costume.
Sherlock’s spine went soft with want and he gripped the box tight lest he drop it. One little memento from each of his most important assignations save one. There was no note, but Sherlock got the message anyway: it was an acknowledgement of each of those assignments, and what they’d meant. It was an invitation to leave those patrons behind, to move forward. It was a gift from the only one who stood in his future now that he was a fully-fledged servant of Naamah.

Before he could so much as process it, though, his mobile vibrated. He ignored it in favour of blinking rapidly, of fitting the lid back upon the box. His heart pounded, and all he could think of was this overt move from Jim, a display of the power he had, the sort of power Sherlock could submit to should he choose.

His mobile began buzzing again a moment later.

He snatched it from his pocket and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, Mrs. Hudson?”

“Oh, Sherlock--” Her voice froze his pulse instantly. It was drawn, high and scared.

Sherlock’s pounding heart nearly stopped. Mrs. Hudson was a chatterbox, glib and doting, but she was level-headed. For her to sound so overcome was unthinkable.

“Sherlock, there’s been an incident--”

“Say no more, Mrs. Hudson. I’ll be there as soon as possible. Is anyone hurt?”

“Irene and Kate--” her voice hitched in a sob, muffled by her hand.

“I’ll be there. Get somewhere safe if you haven’t already.”

Sherlock ended the call, looked to John, who’d tensed, ready to spring into action based only on Sherlock’s tone. John gave him a single curt nod, and they bolted out the door.

Maison Adler was close enough, just a few blocks away, that Sherlock and John ran. Feet pounded pavement, the only thought in his head as they dodged shoppers were two little words:

Elua, please.

They didn’t bother drawing rein before the house, instead barreling in through the still-open front door before they drew up short.

The house was deathly still, no sign of anyone. The lounge was museum-like, everything as he’d left it that morning; a still-steaming cup of tea, Irene’s phone sitting askew beside it, as if she’d only walked away for a moment.

“Sherlock,” John murmured. When Sherlock turned to face him, John jerked his head upward, toward the stairs and the bedrooms.

They took the stairs as quickly as they dared without sacrificing silence, stepping against the wall at the edges of the steps to prevent them squeaking. The second-floor landing sat just as still, the
late-morning light streaming through the window, cascading over a bouquet of flowers perched on a small side-table.

A quick scan of each bedroom proved them empty, and calling hoarsely did no good. There was no sign of any of them—not even Mrs. Hudson.

Sherlock’s chest constricted. Had they been taken?

“The library,” he said. “We need to check the library.”

The door squeaked, louder than a gunshot in the tomblike silence. Holding his breath, Sherlock stepped inside.

Twelve steps in, just past the desk, he saw them. Irene slumped over Kate, blood pooling around them, darker than the sangoire silk lining his Belstaff. Irene’s skull—

Whomever it was had only shot Irene and Kate only once each, a clear assassination.

Sherlock’s knees buckled and a sound escaped him. He reached out, but jerked his hand back to his chest.

They’d butted heads so much since Irene took him on, engaged in silent games of observation and will. Irene hadn’t been a teacher so much as a mentor, though Sherlock had never told her.

His nerves rattled through him then, shaking his hands and churning his stomach. From a thousand miles away, John murmured into his mobile.

A minute later, hands tugged at his arm, his lapel. John’s face swam above him, a tether to reality, dark blue eyes shining brighter than his blades.

“How Sherlock rose to his feet, he didn’t know, but he did, and he stumbled behind John, trailing him into the kitchen.

There in the kitchen’s centre stood the blonde woman, Jim’s attendant, clad in black, a black toboggan pulled up to reveal her face, her gun—suppressed Glock 17—aimed directly at his head.

John wasted no time with his daggers, drew his gun instead.

“Drop it,” the woman said sweetly, her eyes never leaving Sherlock’s. A bit of metal at her wrist glinted in the light, and she spoke again. Vambraces, much like John’s.

Cassiline, and trained in Cereus.

“Drop it, Brother Watson, unless you’d rather perform the Terminus?”

John didn’t move.

Sherlock couldn’t breathe, didn’t dare take his eyes away from the woman’s.
“Don’t do this, Mary.” John’s voice came quiet and steady, Sherlock’s anchor, this woman’s sure death.

“I won’t have to, John, if you’ll both just come with me.”

“John--” Sherlock started.

“I. Protect. And Serve,” John growled, his aim unswerving.

Sherlock blinked, and the gunshot deafened him.

Beside him, John flew backward with a cry.

“John!”

Mary darted forward, jabbed a syringe into his shoulder. “You’re coming with me. It’s as simple as that.”

“What--” but Sherlock’s head swam nearly instantly. His last thought before he saw black was John, John, John

His name echoed against the kitchen tile as Sherlock screamed it.

Sherlock woke sometime later, awash in pain. No pleasure trailed in its wake, however. This was brutal, raw and stark. Blood-red swam in his vision, and his arms screamed in pain, wrenched hard at the sockets, above his head. His still-sluggish pulse pounded deafening brass drums in his ears.

He was bound on an overhead suspension. An involuntary spasm set a chain rattling. Then his vision resolved, and the room became all too familiar.

“Good morning, pet!” Jim stepped into his line of sight, his face alight.

“How--”

It was a terrible dream, nothing more. He must have blacked out. This was the night of the Midwinter Masque; Irene and Kate and Mrs. Hudson were still alive.

“Pity we had to drug you,” Jim crooned, pulling an exaggerated frown. “I had hoped it would be easier than that.”

The illusion fell down around Sherlock’s ears--it had been no dream.

“Irene-- John --”

“Ah, yes. Unfortunate. But I still have you, which is more than consolation.”

“This--you had them killed.”

“You’re disappointing me, Sherlock. I thought you were more observant than that!” Jim clucked his tongue, then added, “Though, I suppose the sedative might be to blame.”

“But why?”
Jim frowned again. “I know you can work this out.”

“You want me for yourself?” Sherlock blurted, thinking hazily of the gift box.

Jim shook his head. “No, pet. Well, yes, but that’s not all of it.”

Sherlock couldn’t think. Frail bubbles of coherence swelled and popped before he could envision any grander scheme. The pain was too much. His vision swam as he choked on a sob.

Jim stepped close, his palm a flaming brand as it hovered over the bared skin of Sherlock’s back, over the still-raw marque. “Think, pet. I know what your brother sent you to do. Surely you’ve watched the news.”

The bombings. The Lies-Beyond Organisation.

“You--”

“A gift from Daddy. I’ll make D’Angeline blood pure again, just for you. You know, Daniel L’Envers is making a special trip to London, right on your birthday! I saved the London Embassy for last on purpose. I will topple empires, just for you.” Jim ghosted his lips across the stubble of Sherlock’s cheek, that damned spicy scent flooding his brain, nearly eclipsing the pain, the horror. "Honey, just wait 'til you see me in a crown."

Sherlock wanted to recoil. He wanted to vomit. And still, and still his body betrayed him, that damned curse of the blood.

Emile had been right in ways he could never have guessed.

“Jim--”


“Shhhh.” Jim stepped away, retreated to the cabinet inset in the wall, his eyes never leaving Sherlock’s. “I will spoil you rotten, pet. Just tell me you’re mine. Stay with me, and it'll all be fine. You’ll be my prince.”

“You’re going to kill me,” Sherlock gasped, his voice barely functioning. Tears welled and broke. "Elua, just do it."

Jim frowned, then turned to open the cabinet. Sherlock knew what he was after, even before he retrieved them.

The flechettes.

Another paroxysm rattled him, wrenching another animal-like noise loose from him.

Jim turned, his smile so soft it was obscene. “No. I’d no more murder you than I’d destroy a priceless vase.” He held one flechette to the light, examining its pristine gleam. “You are a rare and beautiful blessing sent to me. Our master Kushiel approves of my mission, and you are proof. He’s matched us. Just imagine what we can do together, here and out in the world.”

"No," Sherlock croaked, but he swayed on the chain, nothing but the sum of his pain, his fear, his budding desire even as Jim laid his monstrous nature bare.

“Even now your blood calls for me, pet. Can you feel it?”
What happened after--Sherlock lost track of everything. Time was nothing but the interval between orgasm and *signa*[l*]e*, given in protest, claimed as a victory. It didn’t stop for quite a while, not until Kushiel in his mercy granted him reprieve and Sherlock knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

F*uck*, this was hard to write. Hard enough that I'm still shaky and I haven't even run it past a beta yet, because I don't want to lose my nerve posting it. I know I've said and said it and said it, but I swear to you, there will be a happy ending. Please just hang in there. It's going to be okay just as soon as I can make it.

I loathe giving actual accurate chapter number predictions, but I'd estimate that we're about 2/3 of the way through. I know this thing has been ridiculously long, my darlings. But the light is coming. For those of you who've read the trilogy, you might have some ideas as to where this is going next.

On a much lighter note, I did do some research in my procrastination:

If I did my calculations correctly, then the cost of the fabric would be RIDICULOUS.

1. Fabric yardage estimates for pyjamas (3.5 is a modest number, since I used the measurements for womens’ PJs, to coincide with the garment being a bit closer to form-fitting.) (There are 31.5 sq ft in 3.5 sq yards)
2. The complete guess at having about a diamond about every two inches, staggered, which equates to 72 diamonds per square foot, which is approximately 2268 total. Again, this is for a full 3.5 square yards, and one can assume that a decent portion would be trimmed away, so I’m going to be generous and say that up to a third of it is trimmed away. So let’s say that leaves 1512ish diamonds.
3. A single flawless diamond (because lbrh, is JM going to go for less?) between ¼ and 1 carat is around $6875/diamond (again, this is very modest; I took the average price of each a ¼, ½, ¾, and 1 ct diamond--so everything from 1k, 4.5k, 7k, 15k average prices at retail). This would come out to $10,395,000; then there’s still the cost of someone inserting these diamonds into the fabric and creating this costume.
4. Now, let’s say the Bryony adept gets that value and an additional 5% from the buyer: that comes up to just shy of $11m.
5. Now, unfortunately, the GBP is worth more than the USD, which means the value of the fabric actually goes down, comparably speaking. So $10.3m - $11m would equal roughly £7.2m - £7.6m.

Oh god, I'm. I'm still shaking. Please forgive me for this one.
Hanging by Threads (John)

Chapter Notes

I hate that this chapter is so short, but I absolutely needed to make sure you knew as soon as possible. Think of the last chapter and this one as the last third of TRF. We get the fall, and some of the graveyard scene before the break.

You protect. You serve. You nurture. You still have time.

How long had passed before John woke, he had no idea. All he knew was the throb in his middle, in his head. The scent of apples and the ring of steel. Monitors beeped, spiking with John’s return to consciousness.

He was thankful he’d decided to wear his kevlar; it did nothing to prevent the mild concussion, though.

A nurse came quickly, checking as hastily as she might.

“Moriarty--” he croaked.

But his last thought was, Sherlock. Then he lost consciousness once more.
La Dolorosa (Sherlock)

Chapter Notes

Went into another language for dialogue in this chapter for reasons that'll make themselves apparent quite quickly. If you're reading via computer, the hover-text will work. If you're on a touchscreen and the context isn't enough for you to decipher, check the end notes for translations. I did attempt to build enough around the lines to give context, but I know sometimes it's still tricky (and since I'm the one writing it, I may make contextual leaps since I already know what everyone's saying).

I decided to run the dialogue this way because in the books, Phedre is a superhero at languages, but everything winds up being spoken in English for the sake of the reader--but for me, this always killed the exact enormity of the fact that she was crazy-good at picking up languages and knew ten or fifteen of them. Yes, I know, the limits of physical texts, but still. I saw this opportunity and had to take it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock woke sometime later, though when he did he wished to every last of Elua’s Companions that he hadn’t. Though the sedative hadn’t worn off entirely, it had eased off enough to let him wake, to let him feel every last bit of abuse he’d endured.

It was enough for him to collapse, slide from the seat he’d been positioned in and crumple onto the floor. Distantly he registered the noise, the quality of the light before his eyes squeezed shut and his own anguished voice cancelled out the drone of plane engines.

His stomach knotted and lurched, and his head, his body--he retched, but nothing came up.

A male voice floated above him, muddled and only barely comprehensible. A cold, gloved hand settled on his shoulder.

“...waking…”

A pinch in the meat of his shoulder, and the world slipped away.

When he woke again, it was to cold tile, the punishing buzz of fluorescent lights and the distant
roar of the ocean, the stink of bleach and seawater. Every muscle quivered, ached. His skin burned, scabs stretching and pulling open as he struggled to push himself from the floor, whose cold seeped straight into his bones.

He tried to call out, then to speak, then to whisper. His voice cracked, nearly nonexistent.

“Hello?” It was a brittle creak. No one would hear him.

After several minutes it became terrifyingly apparent no one was coming for him. He couldn’t even hear the shuffle of movement past his presumably locked door.

As the sedatives wore off, intelligent thought slowly crept back in, sank its tendrils into every part of him.

The torture, the murder cases, Irene and Kate and John. Had Mrs. Hudson gotten away?

Worse, the knowledge that Jim had pulled together the Lies Beyond Organisation, said it was his present to Sherlock. He’d offered him a world where D’Angeline purity reigned.

You know, Daniel L’Envers is making a special trip to London, right on your birthday! I saved the London Embassy for last on purpose. I will topple empires, just for you.

He only had a week, at best.

Minutes seeped into millennia, and as weak as he was, all Sherlock could do was lie still, in pain, his brain zipping along again in furious circles. From where he lay, the only information he could gather from his cell lay in the paint-peeling pipes along the rafters, the style of the bed bolted against the floor on the far side of the room. It looked like something from the sixties or seventies.

Abandoned hospital?

A thunderous knock sounded on the metal door, then a slot slid open near the floor, a tray with a covered dish slid through.

Sherlock hadn’t noticed the slot before, and another wave of fear gripped him.

Abandoned asylum?

A gruff voice came from the other side. “Ha detto che mi avresti capito. Mangiare il cibo. É tutto quello che stai ricevendo.”

Italian.

Sherlock’s Italian was rusty, the last thing on his mind, but still. He knew enough to get by.

Sherlock crawled to the tray, which contained a plate of some sort of greasy-looking casserole, two capsules that looked like antibiotics, a bottle of water.

His stomach turned at the thought of food, but who knew when he’d eat again?
"G-grazie," he croaked.

He pulled the tray away, forced himself to sit up, braced by the wall, and he tucked in. The casserole, bland and greasy, was better than nothing but only barely. What had been in it originally, aside from the faint taste of something that might have been turkey at one point, he couldn’t tell. But it didn’t matter—as he chewed, he thought.

Italian. Abandoned hospital or asylum, at least as old as the sixties or seventies. Near the ocean.

As a student, horrid places of crimes past had always caught his attention. Four locations came to mind: San Servolo, Lazzaretos Nuevo and Vecchio, and Poveglia. Of those, though, three held regular tours and museums dedicated to their gruesome pasts. The last, he knew with crushing certainty, was the one he’d been taken to: the island of Poveglia, off the coast of Venice, whose history and conditions were so dire it’d been sealed off from the outside world decades ago.

This meant no chance of alerting an outsider, no possibility of escape; from what he remembered there was only one bridge off the island, and who knew the state of repair it was in? He’d been flown in, he remembered that much.

Beneath the plate lay a note in Jim’s familiar hand:

_I won’t kill you, you know this—but that doesn’t mean these guards won’t. If you swear to Kushiel you’ll come back to me before your birthday and stay by my side, they won’t lay a finger on you. I didn’t dare tell them to kill you, but I certainly didn’t pay for them to care for you afterward. This one’s a no-brainer, pet. Daddy hopes you’ll make the right choice._

_xox JM_

Sherlock closed his eyes, crushed the note in his fist. If he swore to bind himself to Jim, he had a chance to escape, to find some desperate way to prevent the bombing, the assassination.

Then again, if he swore himself to Jim, it was binding eternally—and surely Kushiel wouldn’t spare him, not for entering an agreement whose outcome he knew beforehand. And surely he did—his days, his nights would be more of what he’d already been through: blissful tantalization, like the masque, and unspeakable horror, like the night he’d finished his marque, that he’d learned the truth. An accomplice to countless murders.

He had no one to go back to, not really. Mycroft? Certainly not. His parents, maybe, but they’d never really understood him, not before he’d discovered what he was, and certainly not afterward. His father only barely dealt with his service to Naamah; they hadn’t spoken since Sherlock had taken his vow. He didn’t have friends; patrons didn’t really count, and anyone that came close to being a true friend had died in a little townhouse in Belgravia only a few days ago. He was alone in the world. He could just let himself die.

No, no. Not with Jim’s plans still hanging in the balance; hundreds of lives, the leader of a nation.

If he could overpower the guards, maybe, he could find a boat, make his escape. But would he regain his strength before then?
The panic was enough to make him sick.

An hour later, the slot in the door opened, and the voice said, "Far scorrere il vassoio attraverso. Poi manderò l'infermiera."

He did, and discovered that the food, whatever it had been, did help, if only minimally. Crawling backwards to escape the door was somewhat less difficult than it had been before.

"Sul pavimento. Sulle tue ginocchia. Mani dietro la testa."

Sherlock did as ordered, shifting to kneel, lacing his fingers behind his head.

"Si s-signore." Sherlock croaked.

The door swung open with a protesting groan, revealing a hulking, stone-faced man in scrubs, when he spoke, his voice was different than the one from before. There was a guard, and then this nurse.

"Mi chiamo Luca. Togliersi i vestiti in modo da poter vedere il danno. Puoi stare?"

Sherlock gulped, began stripping down the scrubs he’d been dressed in, tiny blotches of blood from split scabs marring the sad green fabric. He stood, finished stripping, then lifted his hands once more to lace his fingers together behind his head.

To his credit, Luca couldn’t completely hide his reaction: there beneath the clinical calm trained into all medical professionals, Sherlock noted the rapid flutter of Luca’s eyes, the twitch of refrained recoil at the corner of his mouth.

For his part, Sherlock was too much Naamah’s servant and in too much pain to care about his nudity. What did that comfort matter if he was trapped here on an island a thousand miles from home, the lone survivor of a quadruple homicide? He shivered all the same, though, at the draft that now pricked goosebumps along undamaged skin.

"Cristo, ha fatto un numero su di voi." Luca leaned in, prodding gently in places with his nitrile-gloved fingers.

"Qu-questo è l'affetto di un pazzo." Sherlock shuddered. Some affection, this was.

"Ho visto la sua opera prima. Gli altri--"

Sherlock snapped to attention. There were others?

"Quali altri?" he asked. "Altri agenti di Naamah?"

It would make sense—the servants that went missing after murders connected to them. Frederique nó Bryony, Cecily Noualt... Was he too late to save them?

"Sono vivi?" Sherlock asked, scarce able to breathe. Was it too much to hope they were still alive?

Luca was quiet for a moment as he continued his inspection, pressing his fingers gently against
various lymph nodes. "Sì. Sono venuti da me in condizioni peggiori, ma sono stato in grado di salvarli."

Sherlock’s heart leapt. They were alive. They didn’t have Sherlock’s ability, not quite, to take the sort of damage he could, but Luca had managed to save them.

"Posso vederli?" It was a long shot, being able to meet them, but certainly it couldn’t hurt to ask.

Luca’s face softened, slipped free of its clinical mask. "Resto prima. Guarire. Poi si può incontrarli."

Sherlock felt a smile quiver at the corners of his mouth. Of course he’d rest first. There was no way in Kushiel’s hell he was able to get to them in the state he was currently in.

"Si signore. Grazie. Naamah vi benedica."

"Hai preso gli antibiotici?"

Sherlock nodded. He’d have been a fool not to take the antibiotic.

"Buona. Io vi porterà alcuni farmaci per il dolore. Sii paziente."

Pain medication? He would happily try to be patient enough to get that.

In all, it took three more days for Sherlock to recuperate enough. Each day, Luca visited him twice, sitting with him for an hour. It was easy to guess Luca had been press-ganged into Jim’s service; his compassion likely extended in this way to each of the servants here on the island. At first, Sherlock tried to draw useful information from him, such as the number of guards, when a supply shipment might arrive, anything that would be useful in getting free from that forsaken place.

But Luca, whether from loyalty or for his own safety, would either ignore the questions as if Sherlock’s Italian were not good enough, or else he’d shake his head, answer with a quiet, "Non posso dirlo."

In the meantime, Sherlock did whatever was necessary to keep his mind from the cancerous horror of the situation. He recited the verses that accompanied each position in Les Trois Milles Joies, counted through the periodic table backward. He sang through entire operas, if only in his mind.

Signore, ascolta, came Maria Callas’s cry from memory. He hadn’t listened to Puccini since the day he’d read the Ysandrine Cycle, more than ten years prior. How apt. Listen, my lord.

Ma se il tuo destino, doman, sarà deciso, noi morrem sulla strada dell’esilio.

A slave girl’s plea to her master to slow down, to think, before rash action decided his fate.

More than that, though, Sherlock found himself seeking comfort in his memories. Frequently they turned to Irene’s affectionate barbs, Mrs. Hudson’s motherly doting. The quiet satisfaction of earning one of John’s smiles.
John, oh, Elua.

His chest ached. The knowledge that John had died—died defending Sherlock from his own desires, if he were honest with himself—it crushed him like the weight of the sea. If he thought about that long enough, it would drown him.

And still, the faint scent of apples, the sound of his voice—those gave Sherlock strength. John, who had dedicated his life to service through protection; John, who had accepted his fate as the guard to a modern-day courtesan, who still found it in him to find joy and peace—

Sherlock thought then of finding John in Helen’s stables, talking sweetly to her horse, to the fierce light in his eyes as he sprang into action, the raw vulnerability in the wake of a child’s lullaby. The anemone, placed gently before him as he woke from the kitchen table one morning back in the summer.

It hadn’t just been a sign from Elua, had it?

If Sherlock let himself grieve, who was around to gainsay it? His pain—Kushiel, Naamah, and Elua himself understood, even if no one else might. Cassiel understood—John had given himself in Cassiel’s highest sacrifice. John, who’d been the only one to see the true danger Jim presented, who’d tried to keep him from that. John, who maintained Cassiel’s diligence to protect him, who’d given his life for Sherlock.

John’s eyes had always been bright with Azza’s pride and Anael’s tender encouragement for growth.

The scent of apples; a scion of Anael.

More than once, Sherlock found himself face-down in his cot, cursing himself that he’d been too stupid for Shemhazai to show him, for Naamah to encourage: he loved John Watson.

He loved John Watson, and it was too late.

At times, the revelation gave him strength—he would fight to his death to protect others; sometimes, though, it made him wish desperately that he could stop caring about the fate of hundreds of souls long enough to let the sea swallow him whole.

Chapter End Notes

Several things to address down here.

1.) For the translated conversation, please see La Dolorosa Translations in the Appendices.

2.) Linkage:

   • More information on Poveglia: wikipedia, and a tourism site.

3.) A final note, regarding something that happened in the last Sherlock chapter.
In Absentia (John)

Chapter Notes

Another short John chapter, but! But! The pace is picking up. There's even a tentative full chapter count! So much moving and shaking is about to come your way.

The first person to visit John when he regained consciousness and stayed that way, of course, was Mycroft. It counted as the first time John had ever been anywhere near pleased to see Sherlock’s brother. But now? Now he was possibly be the only one who could help.

John was close to crawling out of his skin, truth be told. There was the constant thought--one he couldn't allow himself to finish. One that started with the insidious curl of Jim Moriarty's snakelike smile and ended at the silenced barrel of Mary Morstan's gun. It was a fear that burned in his bones, that pounded in his head. You protect. You serve. You nurture. You still have time.

If he let himself believe it, the truth could be devastating. If he refused to believe it, there was no reason for him to continue. He wasn't sure which option was worse.

The only other thought that kept running through his mind, of course, was the echo of an older thought, one from the first time he'd ever defended Sherlock, in an alleyway, from would-be thugs. I failed. My first time properly defending Sherlock, and I failed him... I should've moved faster...

The way his thoughts shifted and chased one another was enough to drive a man mad.

It was bad enough to discover he wasn’t in a hospital, but rather in a guest bedroom of Mycroft’s own home, which had been kitted out with all the machinery needed to monitor John’s progress back to the land of the waking. The nurse had been kind, naturally, and more than competent in John’s assessment, but the only other face John had been allowed to see was Mycroft, when Mycroft finally visited.

“They tell me you’re quite lucky, Mr. Watson,” Mycroft drawled after a long minute. He stood just inside the closed doorway, hands in his pockets. He was far more casual than John had ever seen him: jacket, waistcoat, tie all missing, cufflinks traded for rolled sleeves. Dark circles under his eyes, hair just a fraction unkempt.

For all his own internal screaming, John felt a pang for Mycroft, then. Sherlock was his ward, but he was Mycroft’s brother. All sibling rivalry aside, that was what counted, and it was obviously a rare thing for Mycroft to be so unguarded.

“So they tell me,” John croaked. His voice was rough from disuse, and he cleared his throat. “Just a few bruised ribs, and I barely scraped by without a concussion or a cracked skull. I’d call that
more than lucky.”

The corner of Mycroft’s mouth twitched. He murmured, “Praise Elua.”

“Yeah.”

Silence stretched and lapsed. John could tell Mycroft was reining in his eagerness to ask questions, to press him for information.

“Out with it.”

Mycroft exhaled heavily, dragged a chair to John’s bedside. Closer, John could see the toll of the last however-many hours on him; Mycroft looked exhausted. Eyes bloodshot, lips chapped slightly, a fine tremor in his fingers.

“A few things,” Mycroft started. He drew in a deep breath, as if he needed to sort out where to start. “First, a quick update on the situation, and there’s no gentle way to put it, so I’ll be blunt: law enforcement believes that you are responsible for the murders of--your employer and her assistant. They list you and Sherlock both as suspects, and have assumed the two of you have eloped somewhere.”

John jolted up from the bed at that, a protest loud on his lips, but Mycroft held up an ineffectual finger to stall him. “But I’m--That’s bollocks! I’m here!”

“No officially. We thought it best to allow Moriarty and his people believe you were dead.”

“But still--”

“Look at it from the Yard’s perspective, Mr. Watson: a well-known servant of Naamah, a possibly-lapsed Cassiline Brother, both missing, the deaths of their employers left in their absence.”

John closed his eyes, and the anger twisted, morphed into something harder, colder. “What about the Brotherhood? Any word from them?”

Mycroft’s mouth turned down, pity. “The head, Brother Vincent, I believe, has vouched for you, but the Council is distancing themselves from you as best they can. They’re ready to rule you apostate in absence, and are voting on your status amongst the Brotherhood.”

John nodded, silent. He blinked quickly, ignoring the way his eyes burned. He’d given the Brotherhood his life, and they were ready to dispense with him, before he could be proven innocent or guilty. Some Brotherhood.

“The only person that hasn’t been accounted for,” Mycroft continued, “is your housekeeper, Mrs. Hudson. There’s evidence to support her having gone missing, as well.”

“She called us, but--” He recalled finding Irene and Kate, and having assumed Mary had gotten to Mrs. Hudson, too.

“Not as far as the authorities know, no,” Mycroft admits. “But off the record, I had some of my associates collect her. She is here as well, in secret, in case of another attack. She’d just pulled some clothes from the machine, and hid in a gap between the dryer and the wall in the laundry room.”

John sniffed, his chest contracting and expanding beyond his control, and it felt too close to a sob. “That’s--that’s something,” was all he could say. After an eternity, he asked the question he feared
the most: “What about Sherlock?”

Mycroft leaned forward, lifting his hand before thinking better of it and placing it back on his knee. “I believe he was abducted. We are doing what we can to discover any leads, but it’s been a fruitless search so far. Can you think of anything—anything—that might clue us in?”

John closed his eyes, racking his brain, trying to push past the chaos in his head, past the pain in his body. Eventually he opened them again, stared straight into Mycroft’s eyes. “We were at Mr. Ames’s studio. Sherlock had just finished his marque. We got the call from Mrs. Hudson. When we got home we found Irene and Kate—” his voice broke, and he coughed to keep from losing control completely.

“In the library,” Mycroft prompted.

“Yes--I dialled Lestrade’s number, gave them what I could but then I had to grab Sherlock, needed to get him away from the crime scene. We found Mary in the kitchen.”

Mycroft’s brows furrowed. “Mary?”

“Morstan. She--she started in the Brotherhood with me, but left. She was working for Moriarty. She was the one in the house.”

Mycroft nodded. “We’ll look into her. I don’t dare hope, though. If she was in the employ of James Moriarty, it is quite likely there will be no information on her current to the past several years, at the very least. Is there anything else you can recall?”

John closed his eyes again, but all that swam in his head was the sound of Sherlock’s voice, the deafening noise of the gun as it fired.

“If you happen to recall anything,” Mycroft said as he rose from the chair, “please let me know immediately.”

“Definitely,” John answered. Then he frowned, another question forming. "But I called Lestrade--he would've known--"

Mycroft nodded. "Lestrade knows the truth of the situation, but he's been sworn to secrecy. He, too, believes a marred reputation is worth yours and Sherlock's safety until we can get this matter settled."

John had nothing to say to that.

The door clicked open quietly, and John looked up to see Mycroft hovering in the doorway. “For what it's worth, John, I'm sorry it's come to this, that you had to experience this. Mrs. Hudson would like to see you. Shall I tell her to wait, or send her in?”

Everything hurt. He couldn’t stand to see Mrs. Hudson hurting, too. Not so soon. But alone, he’d be stuck with nothing but the roar of his own thoughts. He didn’t know which was worse.

“Send her in,” he croaked, before he realised he’d said it.
Okay, folks. Hopefully I'm not jinxing myself... but! I'm signed up for CampNaNoWriMo this month, which means a metric fuckton of writing both here at over on my original series. I'm literally going to start working on chapter 42 just as soon as I post this mammajam, so... yes! Wish me luck!

And as for this chapter?

Well, I added hover-titles for direct translations of the foreign language dialogue, but I also tried to provide as in-context an explanation as I could for anyone who can't access them. Let me know if you have questions.

All right, no more hemming or hawing. Just... gonna... put... this... here.

Waiting was hell. Absolute hell.

The room in which he convalesced quickly became a cell as oppressive as any in Pentonville. The drab walls offered no new clues, no secrets about the history of the room that Sherlock hadn’t already deduced a hundred times over, and the longer he sat, the longer the silence set in, the louder the ringing in his ears grew.

At first the distant noise of the sea, a constant violent roar on the rocks below, had been a break in the monotony. It quickly became the elusive cacophony his languishing brain latched onto, multiplied until it carried the moaning wind like the sound of some weak, ancient goddess wailing.

So what could he do? He built the story of this goddess he imagined: a bright and beautiful son, struck down by a jealous god, his mother mourned him eternally.

He thought, frequently, of his own mother and father. Did they mourn him? Did they know, yet, the dire situation he’d been thrust into?

And more importantly, where the hell was Mycroft? The shadow of the British government and Sherlock’s sometime interloping babysitter, Mycroft should have had this entire sodding situation figured out by now, surely.

No, no. Sherlock’s thoughts circled round to that question bitterly again and again but he already knew why: in absentia, it was very likely the murders were painted as the work of what anyone else would see them as: a Cassiline and a servant of Naamah, desperate to escape their obligations and elope, assuming Mary removed John’s body from the scene.

Sherlock’s gorge rose every time he considered that possibility. Surely no one who knew him would believe it. But he himself would likely suspect that, were it a case he investigated.

Whether Mycroft believed that or not, his attempts at tracking Sherlock down were likely hampered by Jim’s craftiness. He struck Sherlock as the sort of man who would not be found if he
did not wish to be. Sherlock and the others had been tucked away so remotely, rescue hadn’t occurred for them in a year and it was unlikely to come just because he’d joined their number.

And still the waves roared on in the dying goddess’s anguish. His own never joined it, or so he hoped.

Sherlock’s third day on Poveglia—less than twenty-four hours until the Gala, oh Elua!--after Luca had already come and gone with lunch and medicine and his quiet Non posso dirlo, Sherlock sat staring at his impossibly bereft walls, praying in an attempt to ignore the wail of that ancient goddess. But Sherlock was too far from home—if Elua or any of the Companions heard him, they were silent.

The lullabye, the very one he’d played on his violin so many months ago, sifted through his memory, now sung in the hush of a mother’s voice to a small child. His mother’s voice. He was far from home, exiled a world away.

There was no way, no possible way, that he’d make it anywhere near London in time to stop Jim’s plans.

An hour or so after he’d eaten, when the day’s cycle of panic began to build and his thoughts ran rabid, a quiet knock sounded, four hollow booms against the old metal door. A moment later, the click of the key in the lock, and Luca reappeared in the doorway.

Sherlock sat up from his coffin-like position on the thin mattress he’d been provided.

“Che è successo?”

Luca’s eyes flitted from one end of him to the other, as if he hadn’t just seen him an hour and a half before. “È necessario incontrare gli altri.”

Sherlock frowned. Not two hours ago, Luca had denied his request to meet the others. Why the change of heart?

“Perché?”

“Hai bisogno di sapere cosa si faccia.” Luca’s expression darkened. “Io non voglio che tu sia sorpreso.”

Sherlock’s stomach clenched uneasily around the remains of his lunch. “Cosa intendi?”

But Luca shook his head, then waved him in silent summons as he stepped away from the door. “Non si dispone di molto tempo.”

Sherlock followed on wobbling knees as they moved down the hall. The rest of the decrepit asylum was much worse for wear than his own cell, and he couldn’t help but wonder at that. Had Jim ordered his to be less severe, or had it simply been the luck of the draw? Chipped paint and the stink of sea air and mildew permeated the air beneath the weak stench of bleach. Someone had
tried valiantly and failed to reclaim this hellhole. Light mid-afternoon sunlight streamed in through the windows, weak even here in the Mediterranean, thanks to the oppressive January cold. A draft wafted down the corridor against them. Sherlock shivered beneath his thin, stained scrubs.

His eyes, starved for new stimuli, drank in his surroundings until his brain whirred at full speed.

*Barred and/or boarded windows in hallway; at least a two or three-storey drop. Supply closet four doors down from mine. Water damage along the wall at two feet, significant flooding less than five years ago. Stronger scent of deodorant--Luca showered recently means on-site housing for staff. Seven doors down from mine a small office, no computer. Unbarred window sealed with poorly-applied gaffer tape. Broken tube television from mid-sixties, at least. Five keys jangling from spiral-stretch wristband on Luca’s left hand. Three room keys and two--*

“*Qui.*” Luca indicated a smallish common room, which he paused and slipped one of the keys into.

The sight that greeted him was heartbreaking. The common room itself was worse even than the hallway. The wooden flooring along the far wall was discoloured and buckled so badly it looked ready to fall in at the drop of a straw. The rest of the room was littered thick with strips of peeled paint from brittle concrete walls like skinned birch trunks. The white, all antiseptic and bright once upon a time, varied in shades of yellow and brown, aged paper to coffee stain, depending on the damage.

In the centre stood a rust-marred table with four chairs. A guard and what could only be the other two servants of Naamah sat; they were as different from the guard and even from Sherlock as it was imaginable. The guard attending them, the same one that had brought Sherlock his first meal, was well-fed with a greasy, vicious air about him. The two servants, however--

*Significantly malnourished but obvious D’Angeline heritage. His posture suggests Bryony-Paris training, and old scarring on her face--Frédérique and Cecily.*

Sherlock frowned. There was one missing, by his count.

They had never gotten so much as even a name for the third murderer, the mysterious adept who’d killed Rachel Howells, the prison guard.

What had happened to her? Had he or she already succumbed to the lavish treatment here?

“You poor bastard,” Cecily murmured, interrupting his thoughts. “You’re his pet, aren’t you?”

*Severe bruising along Cecily’s knuckles but no corresponding damage to Luca or guard suggests she became aggressive alone in her cell.*

Frédérique’s overlarge Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. His voice came out in a creak drier than the rustle of the wind in the husk of a grasshopper. “Bonjour.”

*Screamed himself hoarse; possibly added to the wind noise if his cell was close enough.*

Sherlock’s eyes dropped to the floor. He couldn’t look at what had been done to them. He was afraid to hear whatever they had to say, but he couldn’t deny he knew French—all servants of Naamah were taught, if they did not already grow up bilingual. He was here because he was meant to know, and all knowledge was worth having, even when the telling and the hearing were a heavy burden.

“*Bonjour. Vous êtes Frédérique et Cecily?***
Frédérique nodded, his eyes darting to Cecily. It was apparent from the way they leaned away from one another that they weren’t much acquainted, despite their long captivity.

Sherlock fought the wave of terror that came at the prospect of spending a year or more in near-total isolation that way.

“You are one of us, now.” Cecily’s voice was still bell-clear, though her posture was the broken mirror of her proud Camellian training. Now her straight spine and squared shoulders screamed of the desperate stiffness of someone who’d never start moving again once they collapsed. A good stiff wind, and that would be the end of her. “But Luca tells us he is coming. He means to take you away.”

She could only mean Jim. Sherlock’s bile roiled even as electricity arced across his skin. Kushiel’s curse. Elua, how he hated his body.

Frédérique’s eyes shuttered, his expression haunted. “Ce sera la torture pour vous. Je suis sûr que vous le savez. Quoi qu’il offre, il est pas la peine.”

Elua, didn’t Sherlock know that. Whatever Jim might promise him, whatever draw might linger in his damned transport, he would resist Kushiel’s urge. He couldn’t go back to Jim, and he knew that as surely as he stood there.

Still.

The cost. Hundreds of lives? Two countries? Did his own safety, body and soul, outweigh that? Was it a guilt he could carry?

“Des centaines de vies sont en danger Si je ne vais pas--le sort de deux pays ou plus sera décidé.”

Cecily’s expression darkened. “That’s what he wants you to think! He seduces you with all the sweet things you want to hear, and when he’s done getting you to do his dirty work, he packs you off here, so you’re out of the way but no blood is on his hands.”

She jolted as if she were about to stand, but the guard lurched at her, and she aborted the movement, opting to merely spit on the ground.

“What happened?” Sherlock whispered.

Cecily had been the pride of Camellia House. She’d worked hard, certainly, and did her best to ignore the rumours--but who could turn an entirely blind ear, when everyone whispered you were likely to become the Dowayne’s second?

Sebastian Wilkes had been a regular, but never one Cecily would name her favourite. She’d as like press a lover’s token into his palm as she’d ever seek out his company, once her marque was made. He was a snobbish prat of simple but elegant pleasures, and Cecily knew how to work with that. Even still, she didn’t hate him. The spark of Elua, the blessing of Naamah, glowed even in him, and he was not wholly bad.

That changed, though, as he became a repeat customer--more frequently, and more insistently, he offered to buy her marque, to “free her up” if only she’d run away with him.
She was better than that--Cecily Noualt was no pony to be bought and sold.

Her refusals were polite at first. She had been taught the art in demurral as well as pride, after all, and it was an especial skill to turn down a client while having them think it flattery.

He never bought it, though. His attentions became soured, his words bitter. She and a few other servants had to lodge formal complaints in order to bar him from Camellia House, after a fashion.

She had hoped, oh, Elua she had hoped that would be the end of it.

Of course it wasn’t.

Sebastian Wilkes was a rich man born with a rich man’s understanding of the world, frightening as that was a prospect: everything was his for the taking, if only he were persistent enough, found the right price.

Cecily’s, it turned out, had been her future.

Many might think it a vain thing to hang the stars on a modeling career, one launched in a London pleasure-house. But it was a means, and for Cecily it was the only one. She had plans, so many plans, but all of them started right there in Camellia House.

She’d been walking home alone from a friend’s. It had been her night off. She didn’t think to keep her guard up once she’d gotten back to Knightsbridge. He’d grabbed her before she could scream, had carried her away.

He tried his best to get exactly what he wanted, since she would not freely give him a future with her at his side. He took far, far more in return. He violated Naamah’s blessing, and then he’d stolen the coin of her beauty. He’d carved it from her as ruthlessly as he wished.

The police hadn’t been any help. Of course they hadn’t. It hadn’t happened on House property, so it didn’t count in that way, and they all but said, Well, why do you work the job you do? Surely if you’d chosen something else, this wouldn’t have happened to you.

It burned Cecily to think this was likely the same sort of treatment any of her brothers and sisters working outside Naamah’s services might receive.

They compiled her testimony, what little evidence remained, and had left her stranded at the hospital.

Camellia House tried--they tried--but in the end there was only so much they could offer. Modelling was ruined. Her ability to take assignations was decimated. Every last option she’d accrued had been taken from her.

But then a kind woman had come. Her name had been Lorraine, she said. Lorraine had been trained in Camellia House-Paris, and she understood deeply how her London sister suffered.

“She told me a very good man would offer the price of my marque as a patron-gift, if only I did something she was certain I wouldn’t mind doing.” Cecily’s hands shook, and she couldn’t continue. She fought to breathe correctly, and the staccato rhythm of it made Sherlock want to hide, hide for a million years--and the rest of her story slotted into his own understanding of the
The victim of violence, given not only carte blanche but the hefty financial incentive to take revenge on her torturer.

A convenient arrangement from a man who needed an unsavory connection severed, who could pass along the good fortune by funding a woman who fancied herself an avenging angel of the servants of Naamah, the very one who could provide the means and mode for such a victim to regain her power.

He could imagine the haze that would've overtaken her, for her to leave all the damage he'd found.

Sherlock swallowed. He glanced over to Frédérique. "Et vous?"

His name was Jean-Julien Guitreau, the unnamed banker Sherlock had heard so much about, and he had been in Frédérique’s life as long as he could remember. They had fancied themselves in love, in school, well before Jean-Julien’s family discovered their secret. Next, Jean-Julien had been packed away overseas per the orders of his father, Jean-Marc Guitreau, a man tangled up in the French national banks so thoroughly he’d long since forgotten what it was like to be denied anything.

At seventeen, Frédérique had been forced to learn how to move on.

He hadn’t come to his decision to enter servanthood lightly. Jean-Julien had been his heart, Elua knew. But with time came numbness and the very real truth that Frédérique’s family was desperate for money. His family had moved to the U.S. when Frédérique entered l'université, and shortly before graduation, Frédérique’s father was diagnosed with cancer.

At twenty-two, Frédérique knew the best way to help quickly was to take his natural bent for maths and his pretty face, and follow Naamah’s grace to Bryony House-Paris. His father, deathbed-ridden though he was, disowned him; Frédérique was forced to renounce his family name and take the House’s name, instead. Frederique nó Bryony.

Three years passed. His father succumbed, but Frédérique still sent what money he could to his mère and petite-soeur. In time he grew to love the career he’d found. It didn’t replace what he’d felt before, when he’d been with Jean-Julien, but it opened him up to a new sort of love, a new sort of wholeness he’d been surprised to find in Naamah’s service.

Truth be told, it had given him reason to consider entering temple-service when he made his marque.

Then one day, shortly after his third anniversary in the service, he’d gathered with the adepts right in the centre of the Bryony House common room, ready to be selected by a new patron for the evening.

Frédérique saw the patron, and recognised Jean-Julien well before he was recognised in return. The way it made his heart thump!

And when Jean-Julien caught his eye? When he knew, he knew?

Frédérique prayed to Naamah, Elua, and every last of the Companions that Jean-Julien would
choose him. His prayers were answered.

That first night was hard, so hard. They fought bitterly in that terrible place between lovers and acquaintances, unsure of how to move forward. By the end of the night, though, Elua illuminated their path.

They agreed continue like this, as adept and patron, until Frédérique made his marque. Jean-Julien was no stranger to the concept of polyamory, and had loved Frédérique as fiercely as he’d been loved in return. He came quickly to trust that Frédérique did Naamah’s bidding, but that Jean-Julien was always the centre of his heart, and would be ever where Frédérique would return.

It had been a blessing, during that time, to rediscover one another, to learn how they had each grown. Each had their faults, and thankfully age and distance had made them easy to spot, easier to assess. They truly believed that with enough faith, enough love, they could overcome any of them.

Jean-Julien had been drawn into the bad habit of gambling, particularly on horses. It was a monumental debt from gambling, as it transpired, that had brought him home to the City of Elua, Paris herself. And for what it was worth, they both saw the irony in one being a very unfortunate gambler and the other a worker in the pleasure house best-known for the allure of a good wager. But they were working on that--Jean-Julien was getting the help he needed.

Life had been wonderful, if only for a few short months. Better than Frédérique had ever hoped it could be, right until a couple darkened his door: a Mme. Carver and her foster-brother, a slight, dark-haired man who never shared his name.

“... Ils me montrèrent une licence de mariage de la Suisse - il avait épousé une femme alors qu'il était parti. Ils ont eu un enfant. Il les avait caché de moi entièrement, permettez-moi de penser que nous avions un future--” Frédérique broke off with a sob.

Before Sherlock could ask any more about this marriage certificate Amelia and Jim produced, about Jean-Julien’s secret wife and child, Frédérique continued: “On m'a dit que son père était d'apprendre une leçon, et ils quitter ma famille seule, ils paieraient ma marque.”

Something twisted in Sherlock’s middle. Jean-Julien Guitreau, a son used as an example for a father tangled up in bad business. Frederique nó Bryony, a twice-spurned lover, approached by a powerful stranger who could twitch the strands of a web, offering him a marque with blood-money.

Frédérique dropped his forehead onto his folded arms, and the scythe-like curve of his spine spasmed. “Si je ne le fais pas, ils feraient pire à ma famille Ils avaient des photos et des informations. Ma sœur--”

Of course, of course that bastard would threaten Frédérique’s family. Just because he hadn’t spoken to them since he’d taken his vow, just because he’d taken the House’s name--it didn’t stop his love, his desire to protect his sister and mother.

The look on Luca’s face didn’t suggest that he understood a single word of Frédérique’s story, but he leaned forward all the same, laid a light hand across that nobby, arched spine and rubbed in slow circles, whispering the nonsense that supersedes all languages, that unintelligible wish for
peace.

“Jean-Julien aimait les chevaux. Nous sommes souvent allés à cheval. Tout ce que je devais faire a été coupé la sangle de sa selle sur notre prochaine sortie.”

A cut saddle-strap. The rest was out of Frédérique’s hands.

Sherlock swallowed hard. Amelia had come to both of these servants. She’d used her mother’s maiden name. Jim had funded it, and it worked to take care of two of his own connections.

*This* was his benevolence toward Naamah’s servants. This was the--the gift he was building, this empire of death just to rule with Sherlock at his knee.

A walkie-talkie on the guard’s belt belched static. Even if Sherlock hadn’t understood the Italian garbled by the cheap communicator, he couldn’t have mistaken that voice anywhere.

“Papà è qui,” came a nasty-sweet drawl.

Jim had arrived.

Sherlock shuddered. He stood before anyone else even reacted to the message, though the guard lurched up, grabbed him by the arm, misinterpreting the movement as an attempt to flee.

Sherlock didn’t have the heart to flee, not anymore.

Their stories--Frédérique’s and Cecily’s--spun in his head. Two people who’d had their entire world tangled up and ripped away. It burned in him like a brand, a truth too immense to ignore.

Everyone he’d come to care for either thought he was a murderer, or they were dead.

*Mrs.HudsonIreneKateJohn*

*John*

*John*

Sherlock had nothing left, either.

Sherlock was led back to his room, stripped and given a simple sponge, towel, and bucket to clean himself with. Fresh scrubs were laid out on his bed, and the guard looked as nonplussed as Luca looked apologetic.

“Si dispone di un quarto d’ora,” the guard grunted, and then the door boomed shut behind, locking Sherlock in once more.

Fifteen minutes to ready himself for a battle in which he could only lose.
In the end, it wasn’t nearly long enough. No amount of time would ever be long enough, not to prepare for the way Jim sucked all the air from any room he entered.

Still, Sherlock drew himself up, standing as straight and as strong as he could, despite his lingering injuries.

The way Jim strolled in--! Fresh suit, relaxed smile, as if they were meeting for a coffee rather than as prisoner and warden. His hair oil and that spicy cologne he favoured mingled with the decay of the asylum, and even if Jim hadn’t the ability to draw all the air out, all on his own, Sherlock still wouldn’t have been able to breathe for the smell.

Jim’s smile was wide, and for the first time, what Sherlock had always thought before was charm felt like a grinning shark circling, scenting for blood.

“Ah, pet, how are you enjoying your stay? Daddy’s heard you’ve made some new friends here.”

Sherlock swallowed. Fought the dizziness of his exertions and Jim’s very presence. His heart hammered in his chest, and he could only pray to Elua that his hands didn’t tremor.

“What, no hello kiss?” Jim drew closer, and the guard slid the door shut behind.

Locked in. Alone. Alone like they’d been, the night--

Sherlock blinked, forced himself to stay in the moment, to stay away from those memories, any of them.

“I’ve missed you, pet. Did you miss me?”

Sherlock breathed in deep, breathed out slow. He was the incessant howl of the wind, the roar of the waves. He was not Sherlock Holmes, anguish and detective, captive, survivor.

“Not talkative, I see.” Jim stopped, only a few feet away, and fell into a studied pose of indulgence, hands in pockets, hip canted to one side as he popped his gum and took Sherlock in.

“Why are you here?” Sherlock snapped, and he hated himself for it. Hated the way he couldn’t help but respond, the way he let Jim pique his ire. He hated himself for asking a question to which they both so obviously knew the answer.

It was proof he was weak, that Jim had pushed him onto the back foot again, kept him off-balance.

It was just the prompt he’d been waiting for, Jim. The facade fell away, leaving a bare-skinned predator, unconcerned with sheep’s clothing any longer.

“Come back. Swear yourself to me. Help me rule the world.”

“This is madness. It won’t work.”

Jim giggle. Giggled. “It already has, pet. I organised an entire party for your birthday. We’ll have the party with or without you, but it just wouldn’t be the same without the guest of honour.”

Sherlock glowered. “I didn’t realise Daniel L’Envers might not be there.”

Jim rolled his eyes, but all the sweetness fell away, leaving his words razor-sharp. “Don’t be stupid. It doesn’t look good on you.”

Sherlock fought with every ounce of his energy to remain upright, to keep his mind whirring fast
enough to stay apace. It was only the faint beat of a distant drum that gave him strength.

“What would you have me do, hm? Either option is madness.”

“Sherlock,” Jim intoned. “Sherlock. You insult me. We could do such wonderful things—”

“Hundreds of British lives, Jim. Hundreds of D’Angelies. I can’t—”

“You certainly don’t mean to stay here, then, do you? Either way their lives are on your head. So the choice remains—will you stay here in the back of beyond and rot? Or come home?” Jim slipped forward so close that his breath puffed against Sherlock’s cheek, faintly minty. “You know how good you’d have it.”

Sherlock’s body was the worst sort of war zone—equal parts horror and temptation that would rip him to shreds. He wished he could just die.

If he stayed, he’d have no hope of stopping the bombing at the British Embassy. If he went, he’d be sworn to Jim Moriarty, and regardless of the intention or the fallout, that was a binding oath, one for which Kushiel and Elua alike would hold his soul accountable. If he went, there was nothing left for him, even if he succeeded in stopping the bombing. Only hell.

“False dichotomy,” Sherlock whispered. “This is all your doing. Your hands. Their blood, regardless of my choice. If I stay, it’s my blood, too. Tell yourself what you’d like about finding loopholes around Kushiel’s tender mercies. If I die here, he will punish you for it.”

Jim pursed his lips. The muscles in his jaw twitched.

That miniscule tell—Sherlock clung to it. Jim could say what he wanted, but he believed it. He could say it wouldn’t be his doing, if he left Sherlock to die here, but they both knew the truth.

Be still, came like a breath, like a prayer in Sherlock’s mind. The whisper of a grief-stricken goddess, or his own panic? Still.

He couldn’t choose.

False dichotomies.

Then a beautiful, terrible breath of relief came, a desperate third option.

Sherlock straightened, took a deep breath. Kushiel wouldn’t forgive him this third option, either, but it was still far better than his other choices. Of all the ways he thought it would happen, this was never it.

“Wishful thinking,” Jim growled, the nerve obviously struck. “So be it. I’ll come back for you, just as soon as I’ve toppled two empires. We’ll see what you think then.”

Sherlock met his gaze unflinching. Stared unblinking into dark brown eyes. “I don’t think so.”

Sherlock moved before he could think twice. He pitched forward and slammed himself back against the cement wall with all his might: the shock of his head cracking against the unforgiving concrete sounded like a gun. The stricken goddess’s roaring waves and screaming wind howled in his brain, his vision swam red. He didn’t even register pain as he fell nerveless to the ground, only the look of sincere panic on Jim’s face as he rushed forward.

Something jarred; his knees hitting the ground. Jim caught him by the shoulders before he pitched forward, slapped his cheek hard.
“This is not on me, pet. This one is yours.”

*Good*, Sherlock thought distantly as the darkness closed in. It was the first time he’d ever heard anything raw, anything true in Jim Moriarty’s voice, and it was as terrible as it was honest.

Sherlock woke to full darkness; this wasn’t death, nor hell. It was a night-stained cell in an abandoned insane asylum off the coast of Venice. Sherlock wasn’t even granted the haze of anterograde amnesia, as small a reprieve it might bring.

His skull—well. He’d tried to split it open, and it felt exactly like that. Pain blocked out everything save the drum-pound of his pulse, the roaring roil of nausea.

He lifted a heavy hand, prodded the tender flesh where his head had met the wall—hair, sticky with something viscous—petroleum jelly?—and gauze. Likely protecting sutures.

*Mild concussion*, he thought. *He’ll be back in a few days.*

Which really only meant, *I have to find a way to do it correctly before he gets back.*

Without a warning knock, the lock on his door rolled back, clicking into place, and the door swung in. It was Luca.

“Sei coraggioso, o stupido. Ho quasi perso te.”

Sherlock groaned, but managed real words. “Call me stupid, then, if you like. It would have been courage, had it worked.”

A flicker of confusion crossed Luca’s face, and Sherlock realised he’d spoken in English. Just as well. He couldn’t be arsed to repeat himself, even for language barriers.

Luca picked up on that, too, and instead gave him an appraisal of the current situation. “Se n’è andato. Ha lasciato ore fa. Ho alcuni farmaci per voi.”

“Those are the first good things I’ve heard this whole time,” Sherlock managed.

Luca huffed another breath, busied himself with the small tray he’d brought, and Sherlock allowed himself just to watch.

Distantly, he wondered how quickly he might recover, and if he could cobble together some sort of plan to overcome Luca and throw himself from the broken window in the office just a few doors down. The rocks would be sharp, and the drop steep.

Before the thought could get much further, though, a klaxon rang out, merciless and deafening, and Luca jerked back. He flashed fearful eyes at Sherlock before he snatched the walkie-talkie from his belt, which crackled to life.

Sherlock couldn’t understand it, though, couldn’t register anything beyond the skull-rending noise. All he could identify was a tangle of urgent Italian shouting. Maybe it was the concussion, but the only word he caught as Luca dashed into the hall didn’t make a single bit of sense.

"*--intrusi!*"
Three days.

John was never been a man to sit and wait. It took years of training to mold him into a man of planning and patience when it was needed, but he was always better at thinking on his feet, nanoseconds of preparation before the attack. That was the nature of his calling, the essence of Cassiel’s gifts; a Cassiline warrior-priest was foremost a swift, intuitive blade in the chaos of combat.

Despite all Mycroft’s manpower, three whole days had passed.

Whether John’s recovery was luck or divine providence wasn’t his call to make, but he thanked Elua, Cassiel, and Eisheth all the same. After Mrs. Hudson left him alone with his thoughts that first day, John pushed himself up, struggling against the dizziness, the pain. He started with the most basic forms in the Counting of the Hours. While he moved, he prayed: every line of his body, every breath, every thought devoted to Cassiel, to Elua, to Sherlock.

It was the only thing that kept him from crawling out of his own skin. The thought of Sherlock, trapped Elua only knew where; he was made to take pain, yes, but would Moriarty and Sherlock’s captors exploit that?

His head was a constant storm; the cruel coil in Moriarty’s voice, the taunts and promises from street thugs, a hundred thousand images of abuse after abuse--Sherlock was not made for that. For all that Sherlock lifted his chin, stoic to the rest of the world, for all that he went soft before a patron, he was so much more. He was brilliant, and funny, and so much more human than any god-touched person had any right to be. And now, for the last three days, who knew what was happening? What would this do to the man John knew? Each thought, each image, was a crushing weight, and John knew it was only Elua’s grace that kept him from destruction.

It was hell.

So he forced his body harder than his mind could compete with.

The third morning was particularly grueling. Sunrise was watery and bleak, and the floorspace in his convalescence room not nearly adequate, but he persisted. Sweat beaded quickly and his muscles stretched from stiff, to loose, to sore. His head swam, ached, but he channeled that, let the disequilibrium lead him to a new centre of gravity. This might be a possibility in a fight, if given the chance to save his ward. He had to prepare for that eventuality--it was far better than preparing for darker, more probable fate.

A knock interrupted his progress when he was nearly done.

“Come in.” John grabbed a towel, reached for the vest he’d abandoned before he began.

Rather than Mycroft or the nurse, come to fuss at him, or Mrs. Hudson, to seek solace, a new face
stood in his doorway. He scrambled for the shirt, pushed his sweat-slick hair back to make himself somewhat presentable.

“Oh! I’m sorry--”

But the woman smiled, her blue eyes crinkling at the corners. She slid back her hood, deep black and red satin—a Kusheline priestess. Mid-forties, her dark hair delicately twisted in a low chignon, and trussed with an ivory hairpin. Her eyes as flashed sharp as Sherlock’s, as Irene’s. She leaned forward, a bow in greeting.

Of course, John was a priest, and could only respond in kind. Arms crossed over his chest, he gave a low bow in return. He slid his shirt on, gave her his back only long enough to reach for the button-down Mycroft had given him; his uniform had been destroyed, and until the Brotherhood ruled in his favour, procuring another set would be sacrilege. His eyes darted for the cabinet where he’d stored his daggers, his vambraces and his SIG.

When he turned back he chose his words carefully: “I wasn’t aware I could have visitors.”

“Mr. Holmes doesn’t know I’m here, so he can’t refuse me,” she replied. She was more enigmatic than Sherlock at his worst, and John’s teeth itched with it.

His words were benign but his tone made his warning plain: “Then colour me impressed. Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

“Forgive me—I’m Sister Roberts. I know your ward is alive, and I know for a fact that your Brotherhood is wrong about you.”

Anger tightened his chest, and he couldn’t hide it. “Tell that to the Brotherhood.”

“I’d rather help you recover our anguisset.”

That gave John pause; he forgot entirely about the buttons he’d been fastening only a second before. “How on earth can you do what Mycroft team and half the British sodding government hasn’t been able to accomplish?”

Sister Roberts gestured toward a chair beside the window, one John had pushed out of the way in order to practice. “May I?”

She didn’t wait for John to agree, and sat down, studying him. “I’m here to make you an offer, Brother Watson, but I will give you what I can first.” She reached into a pocket beneath her shadow-black scapular. John tensed, but she only produced a little bronze medallion on a leather strap, meant as a necklace, and a plain little flash drive.

He took them both, and turned the flash drive in his free hand; on the reverse side the letters A-G-R-A were written in permanent marker. The medallion looked rather old, stamped on both sides with the image of a lantern that was nearly worn flat from countless thumbs.

“What are these?”

His mind whirred, though. She was offering information—the flash drive made that obvious. Was it a map of some sort? Whether a data trail, or literal, it would be something. It hurt to hope it was more than Mycroft had yet flushed out.

Sister Roberts lifted the medallion from his hand, stretching its cord. “Allow me.” John frowned but leaned forward, and she explained as she fastened it around his neck. “This is a token. Think of it as a good luck charm, but don’t you dare lose it. You’ll answer to my Lord Kushiel if you
do.”

Her words were light, in the way that titanium was light: absolutely rigid in its weightlessness.

John caught it between thumb and forefinger. The cold metal leached heat from the pads of index finger and thumb. A little token from a Kusheline priest—maybe it was some sort of sacred thing. “What’s your offer?”

She stood headed for the door. “I’ll extend it properly when you get back safe with our *anguisset*. In the meantime, two things: First,” and here a small smile flashed, the rebellion a glint in her eyes, “tell Mr. Holmes I say *hello*. Second, my wish for you: may you move with blessings unseen. I pray Elua keep you, Cassiel lend you strength, and Kushiel sharpen the absolution in your blades.”

John stood blinking in her wake as she turned and left, only the flash drive in hand and medallion at his neck as proof of her visit.

John wasted no time seeking Mycroft out.

Mycroft stared at the flash drive for a long while before turning his attention back to John. Before John could explain anything, before he could even mention his surprise visitor, Mycroft’s gaze lighted to the base of John’s throat, the little medallion that hung there. He made a noise deep in his throat.

“She came here, didn’t she?”

But the question was obviously rhetorical; Mycroft turned on his heel and stalked out the door.

Within the hour, Mycroft returned, thunder in his wake. This time, however, it wasn’t the rumble of foreboding it had been, it was the crack of action, of accomplishment.

John had been pacing Mycroft’s ample study, torn between ringing up Mycroft, stampeding Kushiel’s temple, and returning to his practice to clear the noise in his head.

“What did you find?”

If Sherlock on the heels of flushed game was a hound straining at his lead, ready to give chase, Mycroft was a pointer, rigid and sure.

“The data Sister Roberts passed along was invaluable. It seems your would-be assassin, Ms. Morstan, was a cadet in the Brotherhood before she abandoned it for Cereus’s training, as you said. As it happens, also spent a year abroad in Italy about four years ago, where we know she had contact with a Rachel Howells.”

Mycroft flicked through a file he held between John and him, highlighted printouts of transcripts and a black-and-white photo, grainy street-cam shot, of a younger Mary walking with a woman
John didn’t recognise.

He frowned. That name, though, sounded horribly familiar. He closed his eyes, tried to remember. Had she been a patron? An acquaintance?

Then he was jolted with the memory of hearing her name in Sherlock’s voice, and he remembered: Rachel Howells was the prison guard, the one who’d been murdered just before they caught Amelia. They’d never found her killer, however.

John shuddered, wondering if it had been Mary who’d done it, instead. She had the daggers for it.

“We also have records of Ms. Howells having returned to Italy for some time last year. However, she is recorded in a flight-log leaving Gatwick, she’s unlisted in the corresponding log in Venice.”

“So we start there?”

Mycroft nodded. “I have a team on standby, ready to mobilise within the half-hour. As speed and subtlety are of the essence, I am keeping it as bare-bones as possible. Likely no more than the transport staff, a tactician, and a sole agent. If you feel up to it, I am offering you that place on the team.”

John froze, staring at him.

Mycroft, a man of condescending reticence, who prided himself on his ability to twitch the puppet-strings of others, was suddenly human. A tired brother. The look he gave John was loaded.

“I trust no one else, John.”

The words were worse than a fist around his throat, crushing his windpipe. How could Mycroft say that, given their situation? John had failed, horribly so. It was merely his own dogged stubbornness that kept him hoping he could rectify this horrifying situation before he was sacked, and worse, damned by Cassiel himself.

“Mycroft, I--”

“John, let me be frank. I have never met anyone as dedicated to my brother’s wellbeing the way you have been. Before you demur cite your oath, I will remind you of your emails to Brother Vincent.”

“My--how--?” But it was a question that didn’t bear asking. Of course Mycroft would’ve dug those up.

“I began to understand some of what you taught me of Elua’s blessings and Cassiel’s devotion,” Mycroft recited from memory, and John wanted to squirm with it. “I discovered I carried that spark in me, though I didn’t recognize the name to call it by until that night. Before, I had foolishly mistaken it for piqued pride, for anger at his assailants, at any number of things. But I have found it, Brother, that sacrificial devotion.”

John stared at him, knowing his mouth opened and closed helplessly, a fish gasping for breath. Mycroft was at least as intuitive as Sherlock; surely he’d already read between the lines. John squeezed his fists tight at his sides, praying the tremor didn’t show. Did Mycroft know, then, about what John hadn’t mentioned to Brother Vincent? The selfish daydreams that sometimes spooled out in mind’s eye?

“I understand your devotion to Cassiel and to my brother. I won’t gainsay it. Please, Brother
In the silence of his room, John lifted his ruined uniform. Mary’s bullet had ripped through the fine suit material, had dented the plate-armour vest that lay beside it on the bed. Absently he brushed the heel of his palm across the still-dark bruise on his sternum. He dropped the uniform onto the duvet, pushed it aside in favour of the one Mycroft gave him; it was what he was most accustomed to fighting in, as little sense as that might have made. It was a source of familiarity, which was its own power.

Beside the ruined kevlar sat a brand new one, also courtesy of Mycroft. That was the other reason for the suit—it hid the lines of the compact armour with surprising ease.

Fully suited, John stared himself down. A tight jaw, a near-black suit, the familiar weight of concealed armour and daggers, the heft of his SIG at his belt.

Wearing the uniform would’ve been sacrilege. Technically, so was using his weapons, but there was no way in hell he was heading into this without them; he was sure Cassiel would understand.

The flight over the continent in the Cessna Mycroft had commandeered was painfully long, for the torturous hour-and-a-half it lasted. John listened to the tactician with half an ear, more mindful of the hilt of his daggers between thumb and forefinger, meditating on his own resolve.

*May my daggers be sharp, and Elua please don’t let me be too late.*

Venice in the late-afternoon light was miserable. Clouds obscured the meagre remaining sunlight and the wind shredded razor-sharp against exposed skin. John fought not to think of meditating on The Longest Night outside Moriarty’s penthouse suite. That felt like ages ago.

He was approached by their contact before he’d completely exited the aircraft.

“Bianca Dandi.” She held out her hand, the other clutching a clipboard to her chest. She reminded John painfully of Kate, her no-nonsense air when she was on, professionally.

“John Watson.”

Bianca blinked, catching sight of the medallion at his neck, peeking halfway above the collar of his shirt. Were he not accustomed to the way Sherlock schooled his expression in before patrons and visitors to Maison Adler, he would’ve missed the glimpse of Bianca’s recognition.
John fought the urge to reach up and cover the offending piece of metal with his hand. What was this sort of good-luck symbol, that others recognised it before he did?

Once they reached a small office within the small airport, she dropped the file to the desk, all professionalism gone.

“How did you get that?” she asked, pointing at the necklace.

This time, John did let his confusion show. “A-a Kusheline priestess. Literally hours ago.”

“And what did she tell you?”

John recalled Sister Roberts’ parting shots: “Tell Mycroft I said hello. May you move with blessings unseen--”

Bianca’s hand went for her hip, and John’s daggers were in hand before he could recall drawing them. She leveled her gun at him, an unforgiving straight line from shoulder to muzzle.

“What do you know of the Unseen Guild?”

“The what?”

“The Unseen Guild, Brother Watson. Don’t play stupid.”

John shook his head frantically, the split-frisson of fear budding into anger, into the will to fight.

“I have no idea what you’re on about. It’s a sodding luck-charm a complete stranger with rather unlikely information dropped in my lap earlier this afternoon.”

Bianca’s lips twitched into a smile, though the threat was still clear. “And that’s all? You swear it on your ward’s head?”

John gritted his teeth. Was this a threat?

“You will not speak of the Guild. If anyone asks you about the necklace, you will tell them you picked it up somewhere. A secondhand shop, I don’t care. You will not allude to anyone.”

“What are you, some sort of bloody spy?”

The glare Bianca pinned him with was all the answer he needed. “We trade information.”

“Is this what Sist--erm, my contact meant when she said she had an offer for me?”

Bianca lowered her gun a fraction. “Consider yourself invited. This is your trial.”

*I’ll extend it properly when you get back safe with our anguisset.*

“I see.” John didn’t flinch, his poise still held, his daggers at the ready. “I’m only here for Sherlock. I could care less about your little club. Your secret stays with me. I swear it.”

Bianca lowered her gun. “Then have a seat. I’ve got more to show you. I pray you’re up for the challenge.”
Whatever else she was, Bianca was seamless in her efficiency. Their posturing abandoned, she spelled out what she knew rather bluntly.

“We believe Moriarty’s set himself up a little fortress right off the coast of Lido, on the island of La Poveglia. Particularly brazen, as it’s less than two kilometres off the coast at its closest point. There has been reported activity to and from the island, which was deemed off-limits by the Italian government decades ago. It was formerly the site of an insane asylum, so assuming enough of the abandoned facility is in working order, it is likely this is our place.

“We’ll be sending you with one of our men, but approach will not be easy. We discovered the activity thanks to an anonymous source, but we don’t know how many people may be on Poveglia. Supervision on their end would be terribly easy from the lighthouse on the southern coast. That’s why it’s your priority to get in and get out as quickly as your god allows. No evidence. We don’t want to spook Moriarty too soon, and I’m sure you do not want an international incident on your hands.”

John nodded.

“Regardless of whoever else you find there, under no circumstances are you to attempt rescue. Your ward, in and out. Your intel will allow us to go in after the rest. We have the manpower—you may be a Cassiline, but you’re just one man.” She softened the last part with a smile, but the point was a hard one nonetheless.

Choppy water rocked the small craft in a way that distressed John, made him queasier than he had anticipated. He’d never been in many boats, and if he never had to again after this, he would be thankful.

Their “man” wound up being a petite woman called Felippa, a thickly-accented taciturn type who navigated their meagre boat between rotting wooden *bricole*, guideposts to avoid the mudflats that littered the laguna. Closer to the larger islands, San Marco and Canneregio, the brilliant lights of the city dazzled, though they did their best to stay as far away as they dared. Past the southwestern cluster of Guidecca, though, things got trickier. Their path twined between smaller islands and the lights of San Marco receded. Worse, as they neared Poveglia, they had to cut off their lights, slow to a crawl, and rely on moonlight and Felippa’s sharp eyes. Of the entire journey, that was the worst part thus far. Each time they brushed a *bricole*, John was certain he would come right out of his skin.

After nearly two hours, a the shadow of Poveglia grew before them, a desolate outcrop of rocks and trees from their advance to the northern end of the island.

The closer they drew, the calmer John drew; the reckless jittering that destroyed his concentration while they navigated under darkness all bled away, leaving a tranquil core that settled in his bones. He was doing, finally, what *he* was made to do: to act, to protect, to serve his ward body and soul.

They anchored beneath an overhang of trees that spilled over the rocks and nearly into the sea, and by then he could swear that Cassiel himself carved a space behind his sternum and filled it with a measure of his presence. It was unlikely, he knew—the gods may have touched Sherlock, but who was John, a plain man, only a supplicant bent on the anvil of his own devotion?
The first portion of their trek across the island, barely more than a tenth of a kilometre, they stole through the trees across what Felippa had called *il terreno bruciante*, the burning grounds. John was certain he had no desire to learn why they were called that.

Minutes later they reached a narrow canal. Crossing the low footbridge would be somewhat trickier; a lone guard stood sentry on the far end, which sat at the foot of a rotting church. John was certain that if it weren’t for the AR-15 the guard carried, they’d have made short work of him before he had a chance to reach for his walkie-talkie.

From their position in the trees, John squatted, calculating his best course of action. The AR-15 fired armour-piercing rounds, he knew that much. His daggers would be useless. His SIG, however, was a sacred thing, only drawn as a last resort to protect his ward. It was only drawn to kill.

He had no question in his mind as he slipped it from its holster.

“Ready?” he whispered, thumbing off the safety.

“I will follow your lead and provide support.” Felippa grinned, her teeth flashing in the moonlight. “They will hear this. After this point, you must be ruthless.”

Cassiel’s fierce flame burned bright within him, an incendiary thing.

Together they stormed the bridge and John’s shots landed true, one to the head and the other to the heart. They broke into a flat-out run down a dirt path to the closest building, the asylum nestled in the centre of the island.

By the time they reached it, shouts called out in the darkness, and the thud of feet pounding the winter-frozen earth brought four more guards from the barracks a few hundred yards south. John and Felippa fired as best they could; she dropped one with a clean shot to the knee, he another with a shot to the shoulder, just above where the last plate in his own armour would protect. It was a lucky guess; the guard screamed and John could see the spray as the bullet ripped right through.

The remaining two sent bursts of gunfire erratically into the night, and John was absolutely certain it was only Cassiel’s blessing that swung their bullets wide.

“Go!” Felippa shouted, waving to the asylum. Then she shouted something in angry Italian as she squeezed off two more rounds.

John dashed for the darkened building, kicking open the door as he went.

He snatched a torch free from his coat and the beam sliced through the dark to reveal in puddled light the derelict remains of a building truly succumbing to time. Just in the lobby, the staircase before him had rotted through, half-collapsed at the base. Graffiti decorated the walls where the plaster wasn’t crumbling from water-damage. The floor buckled dangerously.

“Sherlock!” he called, and yelled it again. His voice echoed back at him, a mockery.
Just then Felippa called through the open door: “I see lights at the hospital!”

The distance between the asylum and the hospital was a blur. Every footfall, every breath, every person he took down between him and the ward he was trusted with… He was terrified to find Sherlock, honestly, to know what condition he would be in, but more important was finding him, doing everything in his power again to protect his ward.

Inside, surprisingly, only one guard remained.

The man tripped and scrabbled backward, a garble of panicked Italian on his lips. John lunged forward, his gun at the ready when Filippa cried out, “John, no!”

John stumbled, but didn’t lower his gun.

“He was our informant--don’t--”

“Per favore non - I'll ti fa lui!” the guard cried out.

Filippa waved him on. “John, go with him. I’ll stay here and keep the building secure. Go!”

The guard pushed himself up and waved as he took off down the hall.

Part of the way there, they found Sherlock pelting down the hall so hard he nearly crashed into John, who caught him by the shoulders.

“Elua, Sherlock--”

Before he knew what he was doing, he grasped Sherlock tight. Pulled him in, kissed him.

It was an awakening, a dam breaking, a demolition John lost himself to.

It overrode everything—the anger, the disappointment, confusion and shame he’d felt since he was assigned to Sherlock. None of that mattered now. Sherlock, here and alive and pressed against him, more important than the damn Brotherhood, more important than Sherlock’s service.

Sherlock made a strangled noise, stunned into stillness before he surged forward, grasping John, fingers in his hair, locking him in place as he returned the kiss.

When they broke apart, John clung to him, his only thought a prayer pressed against Sherlock’s chest.

“You’re here, oh Elua, you’re here--” His voice was wrecked, he knew, but knowing this new truth shook him to the marrow, a revelation he couldn’t unlearn.

Gunshots exploded near the entrance, jerking them from the moment. He jerked his head up—they were alone in the hallway. John could only hope the guard had turned back to help Filippa.

“Are you hurt? Can you run?”

Belatedly he remembered that Sherlock had been running down the hall. He grabbed Sherlock’s hand and ran.
Oh god, I have wanted this exact chapter since the very beginning. I am so excited to post it I couldn't wait for beta. It'll likely happen over the next few days, but it'll all be tiny things like word choice and whatnot. This is it, this is fucking it.

There *is* one more climax to go, the chapters leading up to it and the final unravelling. We're not quite done yet. ;D

If you're curious, this is Poveglia
Oh my gosh--I was sitting here faffing about with some other notes on this story, and I realised that this month, July 2016, marks the **two-year anniversary** of this leviathan being struck by lightning, given that spark of life. I've mentioned it before, but when MLC inspired all this, I don't think either of us had any idea it was going to spiral this far out of control, lol.

My sincerest hugs and kisses to all you nerds who've been here since the beginning, and many more thank-yous to everyone that's climbed on board this train, determined to ride it all the way to the station. We're almost there.

Two years. Holy cow.

The door hung open: an invitation, a warning.

Luca’s feet slapped the tile as he took off down the corridor, leaving Sherlock standing, bewildered, in an empty cell.

*Intrusi*. Intruders.

The klaxon did his head in, made it impossible to think, to analyse. Every thought of how he might kill himself to escape this hell fled, leaving in its place a trembling hope, a chance to **live**.

Luca’s feet had carried him away, down toward the back stairwell, likely a rear entrance to bring him to the action with limited visibility.

*Sod it*, Sherlock thought, and pelted for the main entrance, which surely had to be the same direction Luca had led him earlier, toward the common room.

His heart jackhammered in his chest until he was certain it would burst. His body drove onward by pure instinct. It didn’t matter how many guards were outside, or who was intruding. If he could get to a boat, he might escape before anyone noticed in the chaos.

Blood sang in his ears and his head throbbed with it. Surely the stitches were pulled taut, ready to rip free from his scalp, but none of that mattered, not now. The floor dipped and swayed, and Sherlock fought to keep himself steady as he ran, nearly colliding with the walls as he thundered down the hallway.

But then he rounded a corner, nearly fell trying to stop.

Luca stood before him, a handgun leveled right at Sherlock’s face.

“Non posso lasciare a fuggire, Sherlock.”

“Luca--!”

“Tu non capisci. Sei troppo prezioso e lui è un mostro. Ci ucciderà entrambi.”
“I don’t care!” Sherlock bellowed. “Let him kill us!”

It didn’t matter that his words were in English. Luca understood his tone well enough.

“Ti ammazzo prima,” Luca growled. “Digli una guardia ti ha sparato per sbaglio. Non ho intenzione di morire per voi.”

“Then do it!” Sherlock’s voice was scraped raw and bloody, and the air couldn’t fill his lungs fast enough.

Luca’s hand trembled, and the gun quivered. Hesitation. Luca wasn’t a killer. He was a healer—he might do it, but every fibre of him would fight it.

Drums. Deep drums, the sound of an ancient heartbeat, Kushiel’s terrible mercy, the wail of the klaxon and the roar of a long-forgotten goddess screaming her sorrows. Sherlock was these, he was nothing, he was pure kinetic energy. He dove forward, equilibrium thankfully pulling him to one side as he swiveled his head away from the line of fire, pivoted and drove his shoulder into Luca’s stomach.

Luca flew back, his finger tightening reflexively on the trigger; the gunshot deafened Sherlock. The shot went wide, the bullet burrowing into a wall. The explosion of concrete knocked chunks loose, debris like shrapnel flying into Sherlock, a scattered buckshot of pain.

It wasn’t pain-as-pleasure, none of it was; but it was the pain that blazed, proved he was alive, that he could survive.

Sherlock snatched the gun from Luca before his nurse could regain composure, and he jerked back to aim.

“Rinchiodervi dentro o ti sparò in testa,” Sherlock snarled, jerking his head toward a nearby office. “Io ti mando al mio signore Kushiel per la punizione.”

Luca blinked. Sherlock twitched, squeezed off two rounds right beside Luca into the floor. Luca screamed and scrabbled back, pushed to his feet. He nearly dove into the office, and the lock thunked as he flipped it in place.

Sherlock didn’t waste a single moment breathing a sigh of relief, he merely took off down the hall once more.

He was barrelling down another corridor when he heard shouting coming from what must’ve been in the lobby. The drums pounded in his ears once more.

“--no!” a woman-- a woman? --cried out.

“Per favore non - Io vi condurrò a lui!”

It was the guard who’d brought Sherlock his food, who’d sat sentinel at the table while the others gave Sherlock their stories.

Whoever it was he cried out to, they definitely wanted Sherlock, and the guard was willing to cooperate. Whether that bode well or ill, Sherlock was ready to face that challenge.
It would’ve been easier to face, with John at his side.

No.

*He’s dead.*

Sherlock couldn’t let himself think of the one person who might’ve be mad enough to take on an island of guards just to save him, *before*.

*He’s not here to save you. He can not save you.*

John, face drawn in a rictus of rage as he fought his way to Sherlock tooth and nail. Tears blinded Sherlock as he dashed on, and try as he might he couldn’t push the thought of John away—he was dead, but Sherlock could *live*, damn it. He would live, for John.

*John, daggers flashing as they sliced through the air, the grunts of determination as he dispatched those chavs in a London back-alley; John, whose every movement was a prayer to Cassiel on Sherlock’s behalf.*

*John, who--*

John.

John crashed into him, grabbed him by the shoulders, and still Sherlock could not let himself believe, no—this was a cruel, *cruel* trick, why would Kushiel do this—

“Elua, Sherlock—” this not-John gasped, before yanking Sherlock down to devour him, consume him with a kiss.

Reality, Elua, this blessing, crashed in upon him then. This was John. His John, alive and here and holding him, come to rescue him from this hell. His John, his John, *his John*—

Sherlock sobbed once into the kiss and clutched at John, fingers sliding through sweat-slick blonde hair as he poured every ounce of terror, of love, of *everything* into this kiss, terrified that if his hold loosened even for a second it would all disappear.

John, alive, against every odd, alive and proving his devotion—if this wasn’t real then it was the most hateful thing—Sherlock would surely die—or maybe this was Sherlock’s dying dream, his final thoughts before Kushiel’s mercy at last pulled him under.

*Elua*, Sherlock prayed, *please Elua don’t let this be a dream. Don’t let me wake back up in that room, please oh Elua*—

His face was wet when John pulled away; his eyes burned and his throat tightened around his words. There was too much to say, too much to process.

John buried his face into Sherlock’s chest, his voice shredded. “You’re here, oh Elua, you’re here—”

Then more gunfire rang out from the lobby—the woman, surely more guards, certainly the one that had led John to him.

“Are you hurt?” John asked, his eyes frantically scanning Sherlock’s face. “Can you run?” Then he shook his head, a twitch really, and he grabbed Sherlock’s hand, dragging him down the hall.
Sherlock, in his daze, lifted the gun in his hand as they pelted down the hallway. “I have a gun, I can--”

“Then use it and I swear to every last of Elua’s companions if you get killed I will find some way to raise you from the dead and I will murder you myself!”

In his delirium, Sherlock recognised it as the same threat John had given the night they chased Marcus Smith, the first night they’d ever fought side by side, the first time he saw something other than hate in John Watson’s eyes.

“I swear,” Sherlock huffed, the hallway still swimming in the aftermath of a head injury and the fulfillment of every last prayer he could’ve ever had.

They reached the lobby to find the guard and a woman in sleek black tactical gear dispatching the last of the guards who’d charged the asylum.

“Filippa, I’ve got him--how many--?”

“Lorenzo?” she asked.

The guard replied, “Quindici, me compreso.”

“Fifteen?” Sherlock said.

“We’ve taken down eight, and Lorenzo, you make nine,” John replied.

“Okay--” Felippa closed her eyes in thought. “I’m guessing they’ve got a few covering the hospital still, waiting for us to come out. And the rest are probably at the cavana.”

The lights all blacked out—the power was cut. It killed the deafening wail of the klaxon, too, and Sherlock’s ears rang in the new silence. Night-blind, Sherlock reached out, grabbed John’s hand. Despite the cold, despite the darkness and the dire situation, John gave him strength.

“Shit. Lorenzo, what’s the way out?” John whispered, and waited for Felippa to translate.


“It’s in the chapel,” Felippa said for John’s sake. “There’s a hidden tunnel.”

“The others--” Sherlock blurted, belatedly remembering Cecily and Frédérique. “There are two other servants of Naamah--”

Felippa shook her head. “No. In and out. Only you.”

It took everything in Sherlock’s willpower not to charge her, to raise his voice above the harried whisper they all shared. “The power is out. It’s sodding January. Those guards are ready to kill. What makes you think those two prisoners are going to survive? We can’t leave them.”

“Servants?” John asked.

“Cecily Noualt and Frédérique nó Bryony,” Sherlock answered. “The only other two people who can help us hang Moriarty for what he’s done.”
John’s eyes flashed as he glanced to Felippa, his jaw set in stone. “Lorenzo, take us there.”

“You’re sure about this, John?” Felippa asked. "Our orders--"

John glanced back to Sherlock, doubt and determination in equal measure flashing in his eyes.

“Shut up and let’s go,” Sherlock snapped, and it got his desired effect.

“Didn’t say a word.” John smiled just a little, his bare teeth catching the smallest hint of light from the moon shining through a nearby window. “But I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth.” He looked to Felippa and Lorenzo. “Let’s go.”

The other thing, the thing that hung between them unsaid, was enough to give Sherlock strength for ten lifetimes.

In time, though, Lorenzo led them faithfully to first Cecily’s cell and then Frédérique’s. Whatever John and Felippa thought of their state, they never said. The only words exchanged were a quick assessment and the command to follow.

Both the prisoners in turn eyed Sherlock with something bordering on suspicion and hope.

The path through the hospital—for indeed, as John explained in a whisper as they navigated crumbling hallways, they were in the hospital rather than the asylum as Sherlock had assumed—was nerve-wracking in its own way. As they ventured further into the building’s darkened bowels, every footfall, every rustle of fabric and creak of wood as they pushed past some part of a fallen staircase or rotting furniture was a deafening boom as they strained their ears for the sounds of the six remaining guards.

They couldn’t use torches, for fear that the light might be seen. So they trekked on, praying no floor would give way, no ceilings would collapse.

All the way down the treacherous corridors, echoes and the noise of a building slowly succumbing to nature creaked around them, playing tricks on the ear. There were half a dozen times their little group froze, absolutely certain the guards were already tailing them.

Sherlock’s heart stayed in his throat, but it didn’t matter. John was alive. John was with him on Poveglia, his faithful guardian, a warrior-priest who held Sherlock’s heart gently in one palm while mercilessly clutching a ready handgun in the other.

Within the chapel, the windows were all shattered, allowing all manner of creeping vines, winter-bare like gnarled wooden fingers, to overrun the area. A razor-sharp January wind sliced through, and Sherlock in his thin scrubs felt it all the way to his bones. He shivered convulsively.

“Oh, hell--” John hissed as he stripped his blazer off, forced it onto Sherlock. The sleeves were
comically short, but the thick wool blend was blazing hot from the heat of John’s body during the fight. The crisp tang of fresh sweat, bitter stink of gunfire, the perfume of sun-sweet apples. It smelt of John, and of home.

Lorenzo and Felippa did the same, shedding their coats to give to Cecily and Frédérique, before Lorenzo nodded toward the back, toward a tiny sacristy, the once-ornate door hanging crooked and desolate on rusted hinges in a rotting doorframe.

Lorenzo entered first and stumbled on an overturned chair. The noise as it knocked against the matching desk was enough for Sherlock to catch his breath, head swimming and eyes squeezed shut against the inevitable volley of gunfire; surely the guards heard.

Lorenzo pushed up and reached for the small cubby on the side wall, which was surprisingly intact. He tugged on a coat-hook and the entire cubby swung forward, revealing a cramped tunnel. The smell of damp earth and mildew billowed out to greet them, and even the warmth from John’s coat couldn’t dispel the icy fear that froze thicker inside Sherlock’s ribcage.

“Essa conduce alla vecchia chiesa,” Lorenzo explained.

John, though, didn’t hesitate. He squeezed Sherlock’s hand just once and plunged into the tunnel, and the darkness swallowed him whole. Compared to its pitch-black maw, the sacristy glowed nearly as bright as the full moon itself. Sherlock hovered right on the threshold, his breath rattling in his chest.

“Prima di andare,” Lorenzo whispered, “ho bisogno di voi per attaccare me. Ho bisogno di dire loro che mi ha superato.”

“What?” Frédérique asked.

“He wants us to leave him with something to show the guards. He needs to explain how we got away,” Felippa answered.

“Should one of us shoot you, in the foot or the shoulder?” Sherlock asked before he really considered his words.

Cecily shook her head. “Too loud. We could--”

But before she could finish her thought, a single gunshot exploded from the chapel, and with a strangled cry, Lorenzo dropped to the ground. Frédérique screamed and Cecily grabbed him to cover his mouth with her hand.

“Ti ho detto che non posso lasciarti scappare.”

Luca.

The memory of their earlier encounter rang through Sherlock’s mind: *I can’t let you escape. I’m not going to die for you.*

“Dobbiamo andare,” Sherlock said. “Tu non sai cosa--”

“Silenzioso!” Luca barked, and a fraction of a second later, static from a walkie-talkie crackled. His voice was hard as he said, “Io li ho nella cappella.”
The guards. Luca was telling them to come to the chapel.

“Sherlock!” John hissed as he surged forward, and he didn’t hesitate to shoot.

Luca, the first person Sherlock thought of as an ally here on Poveglia, fell dead to the ground, but the damage was done.

The response was near-instant: “La cappella? Stavando arrivando.”

“They’re coming.” Felippa dashed forward, nearly tripping on the same chair Lorenzo had only moments before, and snatched up the walkie-talkie. “We can track them this way.”

Without further hesitation, they plunged into the tunnel and Felippa tugged on the cubby-door, sealing them within the tomb-like escape.

They ran as fast as they dared--thankfully there was little debris, and the ground was bricked, but tree roots gnarled the path. Felippa and John both unleashed their torches, whose beams sliced through the dark, spasmodically bouncing off the earthen walls. In a few spots they splashed blindly into puddles of freezing ground water, so that every step was a torturous pound of painfully frigid extremities. Eventually they could make out light up ahead; the outlined cracks of another set of doors that led up above.

Felippa pushed ahead of them, gun at the ready as she mounted the incline and burst through the doorway.

“It’s clear,” she whispered, “but I don’t know if anyone was close enough to hear that noise. Let’s go.”

They climbed back out into the moonlit night, and Sherlock couldn’t help but feel horribly exposed. Any moment the gunfire would start again. They would get this far, just to be killed.

The other entrance wound up being at the base of an abandoned clock tower, long since converted into a lighthouse and then into the same mouldering disuse as everything else on the island.

Across the way, Felippa signaled the forward advance, and they crept cautiously out. Sherlock tried to steady his breathing, but his lungs burned from the freezing air. It took all his concentration just to keep his gun steady as they each swung about, scanning their surroundings.

“This way,” Felippa whispered, leading them down a small footpath choked with more of those gnarled vines. “We can steal one of their boats from the cavana.” John paused to look up into his eyes. “They’ve likely got some of their men posted at the docks. Swear to me you’ll take the others and follow Felippa if anything happens to me.”

“John--”

“Swear to me,” John growled.

Sherlock’s throat tightened, threatened to close entirely. He couldn’t, and surely John knew it. He swooped down, his free hand grasping the back of John’s neck as he pulled him in for another kiss. It was not a goodbye, not a promise.
“Let’s hurry,” Sherlock whispered when he pulled back, his words a puff of steam between them.

Down in the cavana, the murky waters of the Venetian Lagoon lapped at the docks, echoing loudly off the stone walls, scattering the reflection of hastily-installed halogen work-lamps. Sherlock breathed a silent prayer that the stairwell itself was still shrouded in shadow, allowing them to creep down the worn granite steps as silently as they could.

Two more guardsmen, at least from what Sherlock could see, stood sentinel before the boats, AR-15s clutched across their chest at the ready. The one to the left of them liftied a walkie-talkie to his mouth.

“Qual è la sua posizione, Rizzo?”

As he spoke, its twin crackled to life in Felippa’s hand, echoing back the question.

“Fanculo!” the other guard cried, and a spray of gunfire arced over their heads.

Felippa ducked and John yanked Sherlock down, and the three of them fired as quickly as they could. Sherlock prayed any of his shots landed true. The noise was deafening inside the small cavana, and Sherlock’s ears rang with it.

Beside him, he heard John grunt, “I--protect--and serve.” Three shots, one guard down.

Sherlock managed to catch the remaining guard in the knee, who went down with another arc of gunfire erupting from his semi-automatic. The walkie-talkies came to life, any remaining guards shouting questions in garbled, staticky Italian.

“Quick!”

The five of them leapt from the stairs and dashed for the boat closest to them. Felippa attacked the motor with the speed only one who’d done it their whole life could possess.

“Cover me, John!”

Just as the boat roared to life and they whipped it free from the slip, the final knot of guards stormed the cavana, their shots and shouts like thunder. A moment later their boat broke free of the cavana and the narrow mouth of the canal, out into open water.

Just behind, the other motorboat came to life, and Felippa threw the throttle open, the last four guards trailing close enough behind that Sherlock could hear their shouts over the roar of water and engines.

“We can lose them in Lido!” Felippa called, and ducked as another spray of gunfire ripped across the water, splintering the stern. It only barely missed the engine.

“How far?” John called.

“Half a kilometer!”

Their boat sliced recklessly through the water, but the guards’ boat only drew closer, coming alongside them; one of the guards jumped onto their boat, diving for Sherlock.
Somehow, Sherlock managed to whip his gun up in time, sinking a his shots right into the bastard’s stomach. Cecily lurched forward, shoving the guard into the freezing water before ducking down again to tuck herself around Frédérique. Beside them, John was busy with his own guard, who traded out his AR for a handgun. How the guard’s shots missed them, Sherlock would never know.

From the helm, Felippa whipped out her own, firing at the other boat’s driver. Just before they closed in on the closest canal into Lido she caught the man between the eyes, and his boat--and the remaining guard--went careening into a docked gondola with a devastating crash.

When they drew close enough, they didn’t so much anchor the boat as they merely killed the engine and scrambled onto the dock, salt-slick wood splintering beneath their hands.

“We can’t slow down,” Felippa huffed, trying to catch her breath. “If he has any more men here in the city--”

“Of course he would,” Frédérique snapped.

“Come on,” John said, gripping Sherlock by the sleeve.

Confused onlookers had already begun piling out into the street, alarmed at the explosion. In the distance, the wails of sirens from police boats sliced through the night air.

They elbowed past civilians, some of whom tried to stop them. Sherlock was fairly certain he broke one larger man’s nose in their escape.

As soon as they could, the five of them ducked into a narrow alley, struggling to catch their breath. Felippa whipped out her mobile, thumbing the contact as it came up to her face.

“Bianca? We need extraction.”

Extraction came in the form of a police boat, sirens wailing. Sherlock, John, and Felippa all surrendered when a stern-faced brunette in plainclothes thundered toward them.

“Mi chiamo Capitana Dandi--Sono qui per arrestarti.”

Chapter End Notes

For another write-up on the actual island of Poveglia, swing by here!

I have had *so* much fun researching Venice, and especially Poveglia... I hope that translated, even in spots where I had to take a bit of artistic license.
On another note: some alternate titles for this chapter were:

- "Holy Fuck It's An Italian Kill Bill Basically."
- "Shoot ALL the Guards??"
- "Everything Sounds Scarier When You Don't Understand Italian"
- "What Did Sherlock Think of That Kiss?"
- "Sherlock May Be a Slightly Concussed Damsel in Distress But He Ain't No Wilting Flower"
- "In Which There is Lots of Handwaving About How Physically Active Someone with Extensive Injuries Can Be"

and my favorite...

- "Goddamn It Luca We Liked You!"

...but "Fight and Flight" sounded catchier.
John was beyond exhausted.

After being read their rights, getting cuffed before half the island of Lido, Bianca Dandi had shunted them off to the speedboat she’d arrived on, bright blue Polizia emblazoned on its side. Even still, he could’ve stretched out while Bianca hauled them off to wherever she saw fit to take them. He could’ve slept like the dead. It didn’t matter that freezing metal handcuffs cinched his wrists together behind his back. He would’ve slept on his stomach.

He was just thankful none of them were dead, and he was painfully aware of how close they still were to that fate. The city of Venice was stirring slowly with the dawn, and already early-morning boats slid through the canals. Any one of them could carry another of Moriarty’s men. All it would take was a few well-aimed shots.

And Bianca herself—she’d helped them, yes, but what did this Unseen Guild want with John, with any of them? Were their intentions aligned with his own?

So, despite his bone-deep fatigue, he kept vigilance, clung to the last shreds of strength he possessed.

Beside him, Sherlock maintained a careful distance, and while John understood the necessity, it still stung. Cecily and Frédérique put on their bravest faces even as they huddled under their borrowed coats. They both looked ragged, gaunt and sagging beneath the weight of the terror they’d all fled, and John had to force himself to look away from Cecily’s damaged face. It was a superficial thing, but it symbolised so much more, and that’s what made his chest ache. Someone had taken something as simple yet powerful as her very complexion away from her; it was a destruction of identity she could never hide and never escape. Was it any wonder she’d been ready to commit murder? If they’d damaged her that way, what else had they done?

John shivered with the thought as much as the cold; the adrenaline and the fight had kept his blood pumping hot before they’d gotten to Lido. Now, in the aftermath, sitting still in a speeding boat that sliced through January wind and water, his sweat-soaked suit wasn’t nearly enough to keep the cold away. He sucked in a breath that burned his lungs, and scuffed his shivering hands over his arms. All it did was press the wet cloth against his skin more.

Ahead of him, at the bow, Felippa sat just behind Bianca, cuffed with the rest of them. It made sense; her involvement with John’s little escapade was obviously more public than whatever her
connection was to Bianca. Felippa stared straight ahead, and John got the impression she was holding the same vigil he was.

Bianca didn’t deign to speak to any of them; she was the stern officer transporting dangerous criminals and fugitives. John could only pray it was part of some act, rather than the truth.

He glanced over to see Sherlock’s stare had finally swung his way. He ached with the need to reach out, to squeeze his hand. Now that he had a still moment in the dawning light, he could see that despite his far-shorter stay, Sherlock had already begun to grow sallow-cheeked during his time on La Poveglia. His cheekbones were far sharper than they aught, and the sleepless bruises had formed beneath his eyes, as if night had smeared the color there with its thumb.

John attempted to give a bracing smile; what Sherlock made of it as he wrenched his gaze away, John couldn’t say.

Sherlock. Oh, Elua.

As much as he kept his eyes sharp for potential threats, his mind swam with the smaller moments that had occurred on Poveglia. That moment he’d laid eyes on Sherlock, whole and alive. The avalanche of love and fear that crashed down, blanketing every last bastion of pride, each stone-walled prejudice he’d come to fence Sherlock into. The kiss he’d stolen, a wounded man at the altar of his own heart. His love wasn’t just that of a guard for his ward, he knew that now. It was as a guard for a ward, a servant for a master, a man for a man. He was a devotee to the object of his worship, and something within him twinged with guilt at that—he knew Elua would approve, would smile on any connection made with love, but would Cassiel ever forgive him?

If he gave his heart to Sherlock, would it save his soul from Cassiel’s damnation?

Surely he’d be sacked, cast from the Brotherhood, and Elua, that was a terrifying thought. It was the closest thing he’d had to family for most of his life. They’d already assumed he’d murdered Irene and Kate and eloped with Sherlock; even once that was proven untrue, when they learned the nature of his regard for his ward, they’d declare him apostate. How could they not?

His chest ached with the thought. How could he choose Sherlock or his service? How could he abandon his Lord Cassiel for the one man he loved best?

John let his gaze trace over Sherlock’s outline again. Sherlock’s red-flecked gaze darted over the waters, catching the lights of the city in the dawn, a whites and yellows on a sea of greens and blues.

What did Sherlock make of it?

Was the way Sherlock had clung to him, had deepened the kiss, merely the reaction of a man who’d assumed himself left for dead? The desperation of a victim of untold trauma finding a familiar trusted face?

What would happen when they got home, when the tangles of danger and intrigue were unwoven, and life went back to normal?

The thought of Sherlock going back to his assignations, of that haughty gaze to and the punch-drunk expression from patrons’ houses, slipped like a dagger between John’s ribs.

Even if Sherlock returned John’s feelings, unlikely as that was, John could never take him away from Naamah’s service. But if Sherlock continued, how could John possibly stand it?

John closed his eyes, wished his hands were free, so he might pinch the bridge of his nose until he
saw white and black spots. Something, anything to stop this train of thought.

They still weren’t out of danger, he knew. He couldn’t afford to be distracted like this.

Surely this is why Cassiel forbid his servants from this sort of entanglement.

Once back to the police station on the mainland part of Venice, such as it was, they were processed, given dry inmate coveralls, and led to separate holding areas. The brain-numbing exhaustion converted itself back into an on-edge discomfort like aluminum foil against John’s teeth--he needed to be with Felippa and the servants of Naamah he’d rescued. He needed to protect Sherlock.

Bianca may have been on his side, but could he say the same of other officers there in the station? How deep had Moriarty’s tendrils sunk into the city itself?

Thank Elua, he didn’t have to wait long--inside a half-hour he was shunted from his cell to a conference room with the group. Bianca stood before them, Felippa at her side.

“Your way has been cleared back to London. We’ll do what we can here to erase your involvement with the events from today. I cannot guarantee your safety, but you will be taken via police escort by Felippa and myself back to the airport, where your extraction is prepared. The only thing we require from any of you--you are banned from the city of Venice. We can say you escaped, and it will hold. Given time we can claim our hands are tied on the matter. But if you set foot in this city again, you will be detained on sight. I can’t guarantee what will happen should that occur.”

John swallowed hard, glanced at the other D’Angeline Londoners; they each nodded with varying levels of emphasis. Likely none of them wished to return. What reason could they possibly have?

John knew he never wanted to see Bianca or the city of Venice again in his life.

Bianca studied each of them, looking for understanding. When she found it, she cleared her throat, straightened.

“Well then. Let’s get you to that airport. The sooner you’re out of my hands, the sooner I can get this disaster cleaned up.”

In the end, they were each cuffed again and led, heads covered, through the station to an intimidating black SUV waiting in the car park. Once inside, Felippa uncuffed them as they stumbled their way into the vehicle, and they pulled their heads free from the burlap coverings. John was thankful for it--the closeness of the black fabric over his head had been claustrophobic. He’d felt like he could hardly breathe, like a lamb being led to the slaughter.
Frédérique and Cecily took the back row of the SUV, and he and Sherlock sat in the middle row, just behind the drivers. Felippa tossed bags with their belongings into their laps and climbed in the passenger seat. She gave an authoritative nod to the driver, a policeman John had not yet seen, who slipped the vehicle into gear and drove them away.

Once free of the carpark, John found himself looking over to Sherlock again. He hoped absently that Mycroft had thought to stock the plane with food, water, something to give them. Elua knew Sherlock, Cecily, and Frédérique needed it.

If John remembered correctly, they were only a few minutes from the airport, a short few streets. He breathed deep, just ready in his bones to be on his way home, praying he’d have the will to face whatever awaited them.

Traffic wasn’t terrible, for morning rush in a city. They slowed to a stop at a traffic light, and John let out the breath. The sooner they were home, the sooner he could talk to Sherlock.

It was just as the traffic from the intersecting street began to cross the intersection that John looked out the window. Another SUV drew alongside them, one that likely matched the one that carried them. Bianca had mentioned a police escort; apparently she took no chances.

Then a glint caught his eye. He barely saw it, as it came through two sets of tinted windows--a flash of metal. In an instant he knew with grave certainty what it was.

He lurched, grasped the back of Sherlock’s head and shoved it down, ducking as he did it.

“Everybody d--”

Before he could even finish, a shot blew through the window, an explosion of glass and sound that whizzed just over his and Sherlock’s head. Shards of safety glass rained down, slicing into skin and cloth. John felt a chunk punch against the outer rim of his right ear, the one closest to the window, but couldn’t assess the damage--he only barely felt it.

“Fanculo!” the driver and Felippa shouted in tandem.

“Is everyone okay?” John called, and the three servants of Naamah all made unintelligible noises of acknowledgement.

Thank Elua.

She and John grabbed for their guns as the driver gunned it, barely speeding between two cars rolling across the intersection. Horns blared and the world narrowed down to the pinpoint awareness of Sherlock at one side, their attacker at the other.

“Stay down!” he barked, darting up long enough to see that the other SUV had followed the, barely dodging a lorry to catch up to them. More shots fired out.

John pointed his gun out the window, was just about to squeeze the trigger, when Felippa snapped, “John, don’t!”

“What?”
“We’re in the city. You cannot risk a stray bullet!”

“But they’re firing on us!”

“It doesn’t matter,” she shouted back. “Just keep down. We’ll be there soon. We can’t risk it!”

Their SUV careened through traffic, swerving between slower cars in jerking moves that threatened to tip the top-heavy vehicle. Their pursuers stayed on their tail. More shots fired, each eliciting a scream from Cecily and Frédérique.

The driver laid on his horn, blaring it without cease as they did their best to avoid the shots until it cut a hard left and whipped into another carpark. It sped across, skidding to a stop into the offload lane right before the airport proper.

“Now get your gun!” Felippa ordered before bolting from the SUV, squeezing off two shots as soon as her feet hit the pavement.

John grabbed the sleeve of Sherlock’s bright orange coveralls, flecked with blood on the shoulders same as John’s, as he threw open the door and jumped free. He, too, fired off two rounds as the shooters slammed into the side of their vehicle, nearly flipping it to smash into the front of the airport building. Sherlock was thrown to the pavement and scrambled up.

“Get inside!” John shouted as he and Felippa fired again.

Frédérique and Cecily scurried out, terror plain on their faces as they darted for the doorway.

Beyond them, civilians screamed, fleeing the epicentre of this disaster; John spared half a thought to pray none were injured.

“Go!” Felippa ordered, and John jerked his head in a nod once, closing the gap between himself and Frédérique, who tailed Cecily.

They ran forward, and belatedly John realised he had absolutely no idea what gate to make for.

“This way,” Sherlock announced from the head of the group. How he’d know, John wasn’t sure, but he trusted his madman beyond life itself. If Sherlock could deduce it, John would follow where he led.

Frédérique stumbled and John caught him, slowed just enough to help push him forward. Their feet pounded across the thin carpeting and tile as more civilians screamed, hurrying for safety. Security guards rushed them, but Sherlock merely shouted, “We’re being pursued--please--”

He elbowed one guard in the cheekbone as they passed, which did nothing to help their case until the gunmen exploded into the airport half a second later, guns blazing.

John returned fire, praying his bullets landed true, but he did not slow.

They broke through the gate, out into the January air again as they flew across the tarmac toward Mycroft’s private plane.

The pilot stood outside, engines already roaring, ready for them. He had just lit a fag, had taken his first deep draw when he glanced up at them, startled into motion.

“In! In!” he shouted, as he threw the cigarette down, waving them up the stairs and into the plane. He clambered in with them. “All here?”
“Get us out!” John shouted, and the pilot wasted no time slamming the door shut, securing it.

Through the window, John saw a single gunman speeding toward the plane, gun still drawn. Felippa must’ve taken care of the others; he didn’t see her.

*Cassiel, protect her*, he prayed.

Just then the engine lurched, the engine revving higher as it rolled forward, gaining speed.

Moments later they were halfway down the tarmac, the Cessna’s nose lifting skyward.

Chapter End Notes

I hope all y'all involved in the school system, either as faculty and staff, or as students, or parents and friends of those within have had a good time, and that the transition from summer back into the grind goes well. Don't forget to check out the links in the end-end notes, for more info about the other junk I get up to around the web, if you're into those sorts of things. I love you all, and I'll see you soon!
Preparations - Sherlock

Oh my gosh, we're getting close to the climax, y'all... I can't tell you how excited I am. Thank you, to the probably ten people (maybe, if I'm lucky, ha) that are still reading this beast. The fact that you come back after one and two-month lapses... I can't tell you how much that means to me. I love you all. <3

Sherlock felt trapped, pressed into the window seat and staring over the continent stretching below them.

Fifteen minutes in the air, and Sherlock was ready to crawl the walls of the small aircraft ferrying John, the two missing servants of Naamah, and himself back home. After all the madness, they would have to stay still, to think and plan. That much quiet after escaping an island of guards, surviving a car chase was just unthinkable. Adrenaline careened through his veins, left him skittery and irritable.

It certainly didn’t help that Sherlock’s head still pounded mercilessly; he had tried to bash in his own skull less than twelve hours ago, after all. He fought the urge to press his fingertips to the gauze protecting the stitches on the back of his head. Luca had been a traitor in the end, but he’d done that much for Sherlock before trying to kill him.

Every heartbeat was a mallet against the inside of his head. It wasn’t like the powerful clamour of bronze drums, that sacred noise that filled his ears sometimes, as Kushiel’s chosen. It wasn’t the wild thunder of the surf, a memory from La Poveglia he knew he’d carry to the end of his days. No. It was merely the excruciating punishment his body meted out for his rash actions.

“Sherlock,” John murmured from the seat beside him, his voice only just audible over the noise of the jet’s engines.

Sherlock’s head swiveled quickly to face John, and he dearly regretted the action. The pain flared worse still, before settling back into its previous throb.

“Sherlock, what happened to your head?” John leaned closer, looking startled.

Had he not noticed the wad of gauze, during all of this? Sherlock supposed it was possible; it had been night and there had been people shooting at them for much of it.

“It’s nothing,” Sherlock answered; the shame of the truth felt too heavy. Elua, what if Sherlock had succeeded in bashing his own brains in, only for John to arrive too little too late? He’d only just awoken when the klaxon had heralded John’s arrival.

What if John had found him dead in the cell, a broken heap in a dark room, after having come so far, having fought so hard?

He shuddered with the thought.
“It’s nothing,” he said again. He willed John to believe it.

John, though it was obvious from his expression that he did not believe it, didn’t press the issue. Sherlock pretended not to notice that.

John shifted in his seat, undid the belt. “Hang on, I’ve just thought of something.”

It was a true credit to the measure of his pain that Sherlock only frowned at him, watched him rise and move toward the cockpit. John returned a moment later, having retrieved a few bundles.

“Mycroft planned ahead,” he answered by way of explanation.

Indeed, John offered small pre-wrapped trays of food to Cecily, Frédérique, and Sherlock, and put one aside for himself. Then he disappeared again, and produced two suit bags, one for Sherlock and one for himself. Those, he stretched on an empty seat nearby. Then he disappeared a third time and returned with a simple first-aid kit.

Sherlock watched him through all of this; John’s face betrayed nothing but the economy of expression that always came when John lost himself to a course of action. His face was blank, his eyes sharp, as he stooped beside Cecily and Frédérique.

“Are you injured?”

Cecily and Frédérique, who looked up from their food, halted their chewing long enough to consider, but they both shook their heads.

“You’re sure?”

Cecily nodded for them both, and John rose, faced Sherlock.

“Let me see your head, Sherlock.”

“It’s fine, John,” Sherlock found himself saying. “There’s no need--”

But John had already knelt in the seat beside him and was reaching for the gauze.

“I said--”

“Shut it,” John said mildly. “I may not be a doctor, but I’m not an idiot. Just let me make sure whatever’s under there doesn’t need tending to.”

Sherlock huffed; clearly he wasn’t going to escape this.

Instead he closed his eyes, tried not to wince as John peeled the narrow strips of adhesive from his hair. A second later, the bandages were free and John sucked in a small, aborted gasp.

“What happened?” he asked again, his voice harder. So much for choosing not to ask. For all that it was a whisper, it may as well have been a bellow. “Did he do this to you?”

“But you don’t as such,” Sherlock answered. “Just leave it.”

Sherlock didn’t have to open his eyes to see the expression he was sure John wore: the stone-hardened blankness he always took when he was too angry for words. Sherlock had seen a lot of that expression in their early days. He had also seen it more recently, any time Sherlock had so much as mentioned Jim Moriarty.

Sherlock’s stomach knotted. John had hated him from the outset; did his Cassiline have some sort
of sixth sense for this sort of thing, or had it been a coincidence?

_Is he a little bit in love with you, do you think?_

That question, Moriarty’s coy tone, echoed back from a thousand years ago, a scant two weeks ago.

The image that accompanied it, however, was only hours old: John pulling him down, each millisecond freeze-framed until they lasted an age as they kissed.

If there was one single moment in his life he could encapsulate, tuck away in a little tin box beneath a hidden nook beneath a floorboard in his mind palace, it was that kiss. That absolute absence of thought and rush of _rightness_. It meant more to him than anything—more than his intelligence or pride, the consolation he took from his deductions in the face of his friendless childhood and adolescence. More than discovering he was an anguisset, more than a thousand moments with patrons for whom he’d always hold some small affection.

This was John, _his_ John, the core of the man hidden behind the stalwart Cassiline, human and beautiful.

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut as John finished his inspection, swallowing down that thought. It didn’t matter what either of them felt, if John even felt the same way he did. John was a Cassiline, dedicated through and through to his brotherhood, to the one angel to abandon all earthly enjoyment to stay by Elua’s side, content only in service.

John wasn’t _his_, no matter how Sherlock wished it could be true. John was Cassiel’s.

Since they’d been picked up by the Venetian police, John had kept his distance, nearly as cold as he’d been when they first met. Sherlock had been too busy at the time, recovering his wits and recalling what had befallen them.

Even the way he handled Sherlock now was distant, nearly robotic. His touch was clinical, his attention divided.

After a few more minutes John had finished his inspection, cleaned and re-dressed the wound on Sherlock’s head. Sherlock heard that characteristic sniff; John was still angry.

Was he angry at Sherlock? Had John inferred what Sherlock had tried to conceal?

John rose, and Sherlock fought not to follow him with his eyes. John crossed the cabin, took up the phone installed on the wall there.

“You’re going to need to talk to Mycroft. We’ll need to move as quickly when we can when we touch down.”

Sherlock nodded once, pushed to his feet. When he spoke, his voice creaked from strain and disuse. He ignored the ache in his chest, which hurt worse than his body by far.

“Let me get dressed, then we’ll talk.”

Sherlock considered stripping unceremoniously right there—after all, neither Cecily nor Frédérique would care, and John… well. That was what it was. But Sherlock thought better of it. He didn’t need to fuel John’s anger, not from that Cassiline sense of indecency or from letting him see what damage Sherlock had suffered since last they’d seen one another. So he retreated to the plane’s cramped little water closet, the suit bag draped over the crook of his elbow.
It didn’t occur to him until he’d shucked his miserable scrubs and he’d donned the suit that there was something missing from the ensemble.

The Belstaff with the silk sangoire lining.

His throat tightened, hurt nearly as much as his head. Understandably, the coat he wore like a cloak, like a shield, oddly, like a set-in-stone fragment of his identity, would have been lost in all the chaos.

He checked his reflection in the mirror. His skin sallow, eyes bloodshot. He closed them against the burn.

Back in the cabin, Sherlock made his way down the aisle, soaking up the stillness, the drone of the engines. The dregs of adrenaline still burned along his nerves; otherwise, this would be enough to lull him into a deep crash.

Indeed, Cecily and Frédérique had already succumbed, slumped together in their seats. Sherlock studied them a second; their own roads home would be painful, difficult, but they would survive.

John glanced to him. “Do you want to eat first, or get it over with?”

Sherlock nodded to the phone, a slight tic. That was all he could manage. The flight wouldn’t be long, an hour or two at best, but if he could manage, he desperately needed a nap.

John dialed the number for him, handed the receiver over. The only ring droned twice.

“John, or Sherlock?” Mycroft asked by way of greeting. The slightest undertone of worry tinged his voice, imperceptible to probably anyone who wasn’t as familiar with his brother as Sherlock was.

“It’s me,” Sherlock answered. He didn’t have the energy for his usual barbs; especially not if Mycroft had orchestrated his rescue, of which he had absolutely no doubt.

Mycroft’s relief gusted into Sherlock’s ear, made static by the phones. “And John?”

“John is here,” Sherlock replied. “We also managed to rescue two additional servants of Naamah.”

“The other two murder suspects.” Mycroft let out a soft hum. “Yes. I had imagined they might be a possibility. I wasn’t sure, though, and John had his orders.”

“His orders?”

“I’m sure he’ll explain in due time. You two will have a respectable amount to recount.”

Sherlock couldn’t agree more, but he said nothing. Dark spots danced on the insides of his eyelids.

“Yes, well. More to the point. I’ve been coordinating with your… associate, Detective Lestrade, as well as certain agents of my own. Moriarty has re-entered the country, but he evaded our pursuit. We don’t know his whereabouts, at current.

Of course, Sherlock thought.

“I don’t intend to suppose too much, brother mine, but what information can you add to our
resources?"

Sherlock was only too glad to oblige. “He spoke of a benefit at the Embassy. The French PM will be there.”

A birthday present, Jim had called it.

*Today is my birthday*, Sherlock realised. Not that it mattered.

“I believe he’s going to bomb the Embassy. He intends to kill Daniel L’Envers.”

Mycroft cursed, more a rueful acceptance than surprise. “We had considered that possibility.” A long pause, then, the silence a multitude of all the things neither brother could say to one another. “I have made arrangements for your arrival. Moriarty will have you under surveillance, I’m sure.”

Sherlock’s mind, screaming-tired as it was, whirred into action. Where could Mycroft hide him, that Moriarty wouldn’t already know about? *Maison* Adler was certainly off-limits, as was Mycroft’s home. The Kusheline temple? No, that was out--his arrival there would be only too easily observed.

There was one place, though, where Sherlock knew he’d have an ally.

“Much appreciated,” Sherlock said instead.

Sherlock knew the nap wouldn’t be nearly long enough. As it was, it left him feeling heavy and weak, but he dragged himself from the plane. They’d touched down at a small, obscure airfield, and were met by two of Mycroft’s ubiquitous black cars. One for Cecily and Frédérique, shunting off wherever Mycroft intended to take them, and the other for John and Sherlock.

They disembarked last, and as they touched the tarmac, Sherlock caught John’s elbow.

“Don’t,” he whispered. Scanning the tarmac. He watched the saloon intended for them, hoping his little plan had worked.

“Sherlock?” John asked, but didn’t hesitate to comply.

“I’ve made other arrangements.”

“What in Elua’s name are you talking about?” John hissed.

Then, as scheduled, a familiar face appeared as the driver stepped from their car. Dark curls squashed beneath a uniform cap, a broad smile in a dark tan face. Emile.

John let out a noise then, a huff of amusement. “I see.”

Emile tipped his hat to them. “Gentlemen, right this way.”
To Protect and Serve (John)

Chapter Notes

Happy NaNo, folks! <3 No real news to report over this way, really. Just that I'm doing **NaNoWriMo**, and that when I'm not working on this story here, I'm probably slaving away in the **Under-London 'verse**, which updates weekly/biweekly. Please come give it a try. It'd make my whole day better!

Oh! And yeah, I sort of turn 30 in two more days. Wtf???

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ride back to London, in Elua’s infinite grace, was quiet, calm. It had been a pleasant surprise to find that Sherlock had somehow gotten Emile to retrieve them; John was more than certain Emile might be the one person Sherlock knew he could trust that neither Moriarty nor Mycroft knew about.

Sherlock, who had tried valiantly to stay awake once they’d climbed in, didn’t make it past the gates of the airfield before he was unconscious once more, sucked under in the inescapable toll of the last few hours. In a bewildering display of--of vulnerability, of trust, of what John wasn’t sure-Sherlock had slid down, rested his head in John’s lap before he fell asleep.

John watched him breathing deep and sure, more alive than John could have hoped for only yesterday. His throat tightened, something odd and warm constricting in his chest. Sherlock was so far gone that his face smashed inelegantly against John’s thigh, a small fleck of saliva darkening John’s trousers where Sherlock’s mouth had gone slack.

John smiled. Sherlock Holmes, human and whole.

He lifted a hand, carded gentle fingers through Sherlock’s hair, which was slick from need of a good need of a shower. He was sure to avoid the stitches as best he could--and Elua knew that however Moriarty had put them on Sherlock, John would be damned if he didn’t do worse to Moriarty for the trouble. John grit his teeth as he slid to trace his fingers around the backside of Sherlock’s exposed ear, to skate across the curve at the nape of his neck.

John closed his eyes, let himself focus on the huff of Sherlock’s exhalations. This--this tiny moment felt foreign, far too intimate, but he couldn’t help himself. It was an alien comfort. He hadn’t touched or been touched like this since before his parents died.

This was what his mum did, he remembered with jarring clarity, when he was younger. She would brush her fingers through his hair and tell him that she--

“John?” Sherlock slurred, still asleep.

John jerked his hand away. This--this wasn’t okay. He wasn’t allowed to just touch Sherlock, no matter how innocent-- He screwed his eyes shut, clenched his fist to keep his fingers from Sherlock’s hair.

“S’nothing, Sherlock,” he murmured. “Go back to sleep.”
John woke with a start as the car cut off. His hand lay heavy on Sherlock’s shoulder, and every muscle in him was officially protesting the last twenty-four hours’ abuse.

“Brother Watson?” Emile asked from the driver’s seat. “We’re here.”

Where here was, John wasn’t quite certain, save that they were in London again. The wide estate car was parked in the narrow alley between two buildings. Midday sun made tepid and freezing with January slurry rendered everything icy-grey and dreary.

Emile climbed out of the car, came around to open the door for them.

John squeezed Sherlock’s shoulder. “Sherlock, we’re here. Let’s get inside.”

Emile led them through back corridors, and it slowly dawned on John where they’d been brought: they were back at the Berkeley, of all places. He and Sherlock followed dutifully as Emile apologised for the stairwell they slogged up two floors, until Emile led them out into a public hallway and over to a door to one of the rooms.

Emile flashed a smile and slipped his key-card into the door. It unlocked with a heavy thunk.

“It was the best I could do under such short notice,” he explained to John as they stepped inside. “But I am more than happy to be of service to you and to Mr. Holmes.”

“Mr. Didikani,” Sherlock said, and from where John stood, it looked like his brain was working overtime just to make simple sentences work together. “Thank you. For everything.”

But Emile just winked. “Not a problem, chavo, not for you. I told you the day we met. Whatever you need. If it’s in my power, the answer is yes.”

“I fail to see how I’ve brought you anything like good luck,” Sherlock responded. “I feel like I owe your grandmother thanks, too. Were it not for her, you would’ve never looked twice.”

John frowned; that must have been some conversation he missed.

Emile laughed. “That’s where you’re wrong, rinkeni chavo. Just seeing your pretty face is lucky enough for me.”

“Still,” Sherlock replied, settling heavily on the small sofa in the suite’s sitting room, “You’ve gone to a great deal of trouble today. Thank you for it.”
It seemed Emile had only just left when someone else knocked at the door to their suite. Sherlock was still in the shower, cleaning off the last of La poveglia; John had only just let himself sag enough to sit at the end of the bed--the one bed--to text Mycroft and Lestrade their whereabouts.

“Well, that was awfully good timing,” John said as he opened the door to find Mycroft himself standing in the hallway. Just as he said it, Mycroft’s phone pinged discreetly, and Mycroft frowned.

John stepped back, letting him in but making no effort to hide his confusion. “How did you--”

“My brother was gracious enough to think of me,” Mycroft explained. “He had Mr. Didikani call me as soon as you’d safely arrived.”

With the door shut firmly behind him, Mycroft hesitated before stepping further into the room. He couldn’t quite meet John’s eye as he dropped his voice low. “Thank you Mr. Watson--John. I can’t express--”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t,” came Sherlock’s voice from the hallway on the far side of the suite.

“Ah, brother. You’ve made it home mostly in one piece.”

“Much to your chagrin, I’m sure.” Sherlock said it, but there was no venom in it for once.

Sherlock strode forward, plucking at the buttondown John had given him on the plane to relieve himself from the temptation of doing anything as untoward as showing emotion. He made to brush past John and Mycroft, but Mycroft reached out, caught his elbow. Before Sherlock could protest, Mycroft pulled him into a long hug.

From where John stood, he could see both their faces; it was possibly the most bizarre thing he’d ever seen. Mycroft’s expression was one of stilted mortification at having hugged his brother, and Sherlock’s started in the realm of appall and softened into embarrassed bewilderment.

John cleared his throat, and the brothers jerked back as if jolted.

“Yes, well.” Sherlock said, and flailed gently in the direction of the sitting room. “The others should be here soon. Have a seat.”

In time, Lestrade and Sally arrived, ducking into the suite together. John welcomed them in, answered their hushed questions about everything. Lestrade just stared between John and Sherlock, something like mourning writ on his face. Sally’s expression was somewhat more opaque. Whatever she saw, she didn’t speak of it.

John pretended he didn’t notice, either way. It was the same look the people around him wore after his parents died. He hated it.
For two hours, the awkwardness melted away until the business of plotting their next course of action bubbled, threatened to boil over.

“It’s not as simple as marching up to Jim Moriarty and clapping on the cuffs!” Sherlock half-shouted. “You cannot simply invade the D’Angeline Embassy and expect him to go quietly.”

“I don’t see why we haven’t just sent for him directly,” John snapped. “Lestrade, that is what the Yard is for, isn’t it?”

Lestrade shook his head. “It’s not entirely in our hands. We can’t reveal just yet that we have your two missing servants of Naamah, not without exposing them unnecessarily. And you know just as well that we can’t be certain there aren’t any of Moriarty’s men in the force—not after Amelia’s death.”

John sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Our best course of action,” Mycroft said quietly, “would be to confront him directly. I think, Sherlock, that we are agreed on that point.”

“Not in Kushiel’s hell you don’t—” John started before biting his words off. He breathed deep. “Sherlock. I’m not letting you face him again. Not after—”

“That’s not your call,” Sherlock grated. “I will see him, and it’ll be my hand holding the sword he falls on, literally or figuratively.”

“Greg and I can be backup,” Sally offered. “You two won’t be in there alone, John.”

“What about MI bloody 6?” John asks, pinning Mycroft with a hard stare. “What about the sodding Unsee—”

“John,” Mycroft says darkly. “You and Sherlock are our best option. You two know best what Mr. Moriarty and Ms. Morstan are capable of. I would not support putting you two in continued danger if that were not the case.”

From the corner of his eye, John sees Sherlock glance about the room and then slip out onto the balcony into the freezing January air.

With Sherlock out of the room, John feels somewhat freer to speak, to explain. “I want to go after the bastard. Don’t get me wrong. I’d love to run him through with my daggers. I don’t feel like it’s the most sane or appropriate thing, however, to subject Sherlock—”

“—my brother is rather headstrong—”

“—a likely rape survivor, to his abuser!”

A thick hush fell, and John loathed it.

“Do we know that’s what happened?” Lestrade asked, his voice strained.

“The statistics—” Sally said, blanching. “I didn’t even think—”

Mycroft said nothing for a long while. John was sure that the probability had not escaped him; he was far too smart for that. But why he’d choose to ignore it, John couldn’t fathom.
“Well?” John asked.

Mycroft studied him for a long, long time, the perpetual pinch in his mouth softening. He looked years older, just tired.

“We’ll save the final decision for Sherlock, John. We will not force him to do anything. No matter what he chooses, will you support his action?”

John swallowed hard, grinding his teeth until his jaw ached. “You already know the answer to that.”

“Do you?” Mycroft asked simply.

Anger burned incandescent in John’s chest at that. “You know damn well I do.”

“That’s not the question I was asking.”

“What?” Lestrade and Sally asked.

It was too much. It was none of Mycroft’s business, none of any of their business. He knew the choice he would make, the choice he’d always make.

_Cassiel stop me before I punch him in his teeth_ , John thought, and then winced internally.

Could he even _pray_ to Cassiel, anymore?

Before he knew what he was doing, he’d stormed through the suite’s sitting area and out onto the balcony where Sherlock stood, peering over the railing. Freezing air bit into his skin, and he registered Sherlock pulling John’s mobile from his ear, fixing John with grey-green-blue eyes, one of which blazed with a point of scarlet.

“John?”

John shook his head, leaned forward against the balcony railing to stare down at the pavement below. People traversed carelessly, completely unaware, and it made John think of the day his parents were buried, the day before he went to the brotherhood. There were people in the world who didn’t know what he felt, didn’t know any of the troubles he’d just lived through.

There were people just in the next sodding _room_ that didn’t know what Sherlock had been through, or him. _He_ wasn’t even certain, really, what Sherlock had endured on La Poveglia. But whatever had happened, John wanted to keep him miles away from it, wanted to stand between Sherlock and the rest of the world, gun drawn and teeth bared.

“John?”

When John realised Sherlock had been saying his name softly, he blinked hard, eyes burning.

“John.” Sherlock grasped his shoulders, forcing him to make eye contact. “What on earth--”

“None of this should have ever happened to you, Sherlock. I won’t make you face him again. I failed you once, and I won’t fail you again.”

Whatever John expected, it wasn’t the way Sherlock’s face hardened. “You have yet to fail me.”

“Sherlock--”

“I _will_ face him, John. I will be the one to hand Jim Moriarty the keys to hell and let him see for
himself *that which yields is not weak.*”

“I--you’re not weak, Sherlock.”

Sherlock stared at him, the expression of *well obviously* so plainly written on his face, it was bittersweet, familiar.

A pained laugh escaped John then, and he shook his head. The feeling that tightened his chest then, the same that had gripped him breathless in the car ride here, the one that ripped the words from his mouth and the thought from his head when he fought for Sherlock, was becoming all too familiar.

“Who were you talking to?” John asked, desperate to ignore it.

“Calling in another favour,” Sherlock answered. His hands, large and cold in the winter air, slipped up to cradle John’s jaw, hold him in place. “I know what we need to do. Can I trust you to stay at my side?”

“Sherlock,” John said simply, willing himself not to squirm. Here he was, trapped beneath the microscope lens, flayed to his marrow for Sherlock to see. There was so much more he wished he could say, so much he needed to say, but all he could say was, “I protect and serve.”

Sherlock’s eyes flitted from John’s eyes to mouth and back. For a moment, Sherlock looked like he was going to say something more, but he only gave a curt nod, released John to slip back into the house without another word.

John sagged against the balcony rail, and prayed to whoever would listen.

Chapter End Notes

I’m also also working on a few more prompts for people, as gifts from the Spoilersauce Love-Fest, so expect some more completely unrelated fics & drabbles to start popping up in the next few as I knock them out. :D
Chapter Notes

Bless the NaNoWriMo PTB! I've got 47-49 done, y'all! I'm currently revising the lot, so expect chapter 48 by next Wednesday, at the latest. (As excited as I am to get them to you ASAP, I'm also a cruel person... bwahahaha. Honestly I've wanted to do a weekly schedule this whole time, but life, you know?

As ever, thank you so much for staying on the ride so far. Comments and kudos give me life, and I am shameless enough to ask for moar. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The lights of London, the place his heart loved best, slid past his window as the limousine traversed the Knightsbridge streets with Emile once more at the wheel. Beside him, he could just feel John trying not to fidget. John, who could hold Elua’s vigil on The Longest Night without shifting once, was struggling to sit still just now. He would huff periodically, ball his fists, tug at the cuffs of his tuxedo. Sherlock understood that, though. He did his best, and was sure John was doing the same, to focus on the plan, to breathe deep and clear the mind.

“Are you alright?”

Victor Trevor, seated across from them, leaned forward.

When Victor had arrived at the hotel, he hadn’t been able to meet Sherlock’s eyes; was only just now getting closer to looking at Sherlock’s face. Knowing now what Sherlock did, though, he couldn’t exactly blame him.

Victor had loved Irene, once upon a time.

Sherlock only nodded and ran his fingers lightly over his hair, slicked back to obscure his profile and hide his stitches, the gauze from which had been removed for the night. He returned his glance to the window, to the world beyond. The heavy lingering mist, the wintry fog that settled on the streets, obscured the shop lights, cast the city around them in a ghostly glow with the plodding shadows of people on the pavements hidden within.

He closed his eyes, tried to breathe in deep enough to calm his heart, the flutter of anxiety that quivered in his pulse.

*Elua, please,* Sherlock started, but he didn’t know what. He didn’t know what to ask for. For safety, his and John’s? That part—he was beyond that now. For justice? That was the best he could ask for, he supposed.

*Elua, Lord Kushiel, no matter the outcome, let some good come of this. Cassiel, if you’re listening, keep John safe.*
The ride to the Embassy was far too short. Before he knew it, the limousine pulled to the kerb and Emile hopped out, ready to usher them out of the car. John stepped out first, then Victor, and finally Sherlock was freed from the limo.

The anxiety ratcheted just a little higher.

Here he was, wading back into the London and D’Angeline elite, and while he was not here as a servant of Naamah, he was still separate from them, still other. He was not here as a guest. He was here as a spy, as an agent come to deliver Kushiel’s justice.

The doorman welcomed them in; at coat-check, Sally, dressed in a patrol uniform rather than her usual plain-clothes and badge, hardly gave them a second glance as she patted them down, casually ignoring John’s weapons and vambraces, which had been carefully concealed within the tux. Victor and John done, Sherlock had his turn; Sally’s work was quick, perfunctory, but just before she was finished, she glanced up to meet Sherlock’s eyes. She didn’t say anything, her expression didn’t change, but in the split-second that she held his gaze, he could nearly feel what she was trying to impart.

*Stay safe, Freak. Don’t let us down.*

Sherlock lowered his eyelids a fraction, could only hope she saw it for the assenting nod he meant it to be.

“All clear,” she said, glancing to the woman at the counter. “Let ‘em through.”

Once inside, they followed the stream of guests toward the ballroom, but stopped short before that final door. The three men slipped into a small alcove, half-hidden in the dimmed light.

“You sure you’re good?” Victor asked. “I can go with--”

“Thank you, no,” John interjected. “We’ll--don’t worry about it.”

Sherlock bit off a smirk; of course, some of what John said was rooted in practicality. Although trained in completely different things, he and John were both far better suited for this work than Victor. He could also tell that John was getting testy just because it was Victor. John hadn’t so much as protested since Victor had arrived at their hotel room, but Sherlock could see that it sat ill with John.

“Much appreciated,” Sherlock said, laying a gentle hand on Victor’s shoulder. “This was help enough. Go, enjoy yourself. If we do this correctly, no one needs ever know about the bomb.”

Victor nodded, the muscles in his sharp jawline flexing just slightly. His brass-blonde hair nearly glowed in the low light. Concerned blue eyes pinned Sherlock for half a second, before Victor straightened, flashed them both a wide, clearly put-on smile.

“Go,” he said. “Bring that bastard down. For her.”

And with that he retreated, slipped free from the alcove to go wade into the party.
John cleared his throat and whispered, “What was that about?”

“I’ll explain it later, once we save the day.”

John grunted, and they slipped free of the alcove, made for the closest staff door.

Once the door shut behind them, they were engulfed by sickly fluorescent light bouncing harsh and blue-white from the white cement-brick walls.

“All right, Sherlock. What do we do?” John whispered.

Sherlock closed his eyes, called up a mental image of the building’s layout. Basement, ground level, three storeys. Five floors total. It could be anywhere, really. Then again--

“The greatest chance at major structural damage would come from the basement or first floor. We should start there. We don’t know what he has planned, what time he’s got them set for. We must hurry. He’s not likely to have it detonate until after the speeches, when he has a chance to escape, but I’d much rather have it out the way.”

John nodded, his face a grim mask.

It took them the better part of thirty minutes to scavenge the basement, which consisted of a few rooms, like a caterer’s kitchenette or a smattering of offices, and then the rest of it being open storage. It was a frustrating underground vault, really, of all manner of unused chairs and decor, anything that had needed stashing in probably the last fifty years.

Sherlock knew better than to assume that the bomb would look like a bomb; it was far too practical simply to load up a completely innocuous-looking container for the purpose, and the luck of finding something that ticked ominously wasn’t terribly forthcoming.

“It’s got to be around here somewhere--” Sherlock growled, raising up from being on hands and knees, peering beneath a towering stack of chairs. He stood, brushing the dust from the bare cement floor from his tuxedo.

“Sherlock, you said it yourself. It may not be here. We should try somewhere else. We can come back.” John batted at his own jacket, dusty from having crawled up a ladder against the far wall to peer into the odd loft that held Christmas decor.

Sherlock let loose another frustrated noise, assented. He drew a deep breath, tried his best to clear his mind. Faintly he could hear the noise of the gala above, and then a faint rumbling below his feet; just a train rattling down the Piccadilly line. The building must be right over top of it.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. If he only knew where the other bombs in the other embassies had likely been hidden, this would have been a thousand times easier. Then again, there carried
the likelihood that it was a different agent in each city; no two people would have the same M.O., unless Moriarty had specifically directed them.

What did he know, really, about any of that? His concern had just been sussing out a connection between Lies-Beyond and Moriarty, not investigating bombings in foreign cities. Even his curiosity had limits, sometimes.

It didn’t help that at the time, he’d been more interested in proving Moriarty’s innocence, either.

That thought made his stomach turn, cramp. He felt sick to his marrow, knowing what he knew now.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock’s eyes snapped open, fell on John staring at him from across the way in the poorly-lit storage room.

“We should get moving. Where next?”

On the ground floor, navigation was somewhat trickier. There were more people about, for one, and security cameras dotted the walls and corners periodically. Surely, if Moriarty had men in place anywhere, they would be on the security staff. They’d have to be damn careful to be certain that two dusty guests didn’t appear out of place.

The first floor was given purely to day-to-day administrative purposes; the offices here weren’t likely to hold anything, but it was worth it just to give them a quick run-through.

“Anything, John. Anything that looks out of place.”

In the end, there was nothing, and they moved on to the first storey.

Skirting the gala, they made their way down another main hallway, Sherlock doing his best not to break into a sprint, just willing himself to let his instinct take over. What logic could he use, when he had no M.O. for a bomber, and nothing to go on save that Moriarty would want to make as flashy a statement as possible?

Just as he passed an office door, the brass name plate caught his eye. Roxanne D’Arbos. The D’Angeline ambassador.

“John,” Sherlock said, motioning him over.

Picking the lock didn’t take long; once they were inside, the dark expanse of Mme. D’Arbos’s office drew a hush around them. The room held deep plush carpet, a heavy hardwood bookcases,
lined with antique tomes, and an equally heavy and impressive-looking desk. Not a stray paper, nothing out of place. It wasn’t terribly likely, then, unless it had been secreted after hours. Possibly a cleaning crew.

The doorknob jiggled, a thunderous sound in the near-silence. Sherlock froze, his eyes sweeping to find John. John glanced about, then jerked his head over to a door. A closet, of course. Stupidly simple, and Sherlock could bless him forever for it.

How they managed to squeeze into the shallow coat closet and get the door shut silently before the intruders flipped on the lightswitch and came in, Sherlock didn’t know. It had to be a blessing from Elua himself; there simply was no other way.

“Now, Madame Ambassador,” came an oily voice, male and hatefully familiar.

Sherlock’s heart stopped beating in his chest. It was Jim.

All he could think of was their first meeting, kneeling and being held in place by a firm fist knotted in his hair, the promise of wonderful things to come. Then it was replaced with the last time he’d been in Jim’s penthouse, trapped and violated. Image after image, an all-consuming panic clutched him hard.

An insidious tremor ran through him, one he didn’t realise until John’s hands, warm and firm, clasped his shoulders. John, his devoted John, a safe place. Could John be enough to ever really protect Sherlock from his own mind?

John didn’t make a noise, but one of his hands slid up and caught Sherlock’s jaw. The scent of apples, of gun oil and everything Sherlock could trust in the world, enveloped him. He shook his head slightly, just once, and that was all Sherlock needed.

John’s actions, his expression showed his thoughts as plain as anything. We have to remain absolutely silent.

Sherlock nodded in response, mouthed, I know.

Beyond the closet door, the conversation carried on.

“Mr. Moriarty, I absolutely cannot--”

“No, here’s what you can do, Roxanne, what you will do. You will inform everyone tonight that the trade agreements are going through, or I will solve this problem for us. You saw what I did in Germany, in America, in Italy.”

“No, I--”

“Do you hear me? Daddy’s talking.” Jim snapped. “You’ll give the orders, or I’ll do it for you.”

John’s hands tensed around Sherlock’s shoulder and jaw, near-enough to bruise. Roxanne D’Arbos. Of course he would make her complicit in this.

“I--” but Roxanne fell silent. After a thunderous silence, she murmured. “Yes, I see.”

“Excellent.” Jim’s feet turned then, started coming closer to them as he approached the door back out into the hallway. The doorknob clicked and the door squeaked quietly as he opened it. “And don’t forget, Madame. Daddy has his snipers set up. Don’t go changing your mind!”

With that the door shut again, and with it, Sherlock’s breath returned.
Just beyond, still in her office, Roxanne D’Arbos let out a shuddering sob.

John let go of Sherlock but stayed close, unable to turn away or give him any more space, lest the shuffling noise be heard.

“What do we do?” John asked in a voiceless whisper.

Sherlock chewed his lip a moment. If they revealed themselves to her, they could either find an ally or a liability. If she cooperated, it would mean the difference between scrambling to find the bomb in time and being able to send for Lestrade or having time run out. If she didn’t, their presence would be known, and they were as good as dead in the water. Would her fear of Moriarty supercede her need to do the right thing? Would her knowing about their presence save or squander hundreds of lives, including those of the French Prime Minister and half of Britain’s governing body?

“Just wait,” Sherlock replied, equally voiceless, and closed his eyes. He prayed it was the right choice.

Out in the office, near-inaudible beeps heralded a phone call. Roxanne D’Arbos said, “Yes. It’s me. We’ve got thirty minutes.” Another long, broken sigh, the soft clatter as she put the mobile on the desk.

Thirty minutes. They had thirty minutes, until--until what, the bomb went off? Until she left, well in time to miss it?

It felt like an eternity that they hid in the small coat closet, the noise of their own breath, the slither of fabric as they tried their best not to shuffle against one another, but eventually Roxanne D’Arbos cleared her throat, collected her mobile. The soft pad of her heels over the plush rug could’ve well been thunder as she came closer. Then the light, and the door.

After another solid minute had passed, Sherlock slid the door open, lifting it just slightly to keep it from squeaking on its hinges. The clean air that flooded the closet then, cool and freeing, wasn’t much consolation. They now knew their timeline, and at a guess, Sherlock would shave five minutes from it, just to allow for what had passed since her phone call.

John hovered by the door, his expression dark and steely. “Where do we go?”

Sherlock breathed deep, tried to corral his careening thoughts.

The memory came to him, a snatch of conversation from two months before they’d found Madeleine D’Arbos’s body.

“You think D’Arbos’s wheedling would hurt your business, pet?” Jim had asked.

Irene’s laughter, dismissive but pleased. “Not in the slightest. I only worry that these measures will cause even more of the native non-D’Angeline masses to equate our devotion with something they consider dirty and taboo. So in that way, I suppose I do. But certainly not in the way you mean.”

Jim himself had been leveraging D’Arbos’s own daughter as collateral. The trade agreements--they must have had something to do with limiting access to Servants of Naamah, of forcing a more elitist view of them, in some way, which benefitted France. The French temples and the head Houses for each branch of Naamah’s servants would benefit from his meddling. Jim’s entire goal had revolved around “purifying” the D’Angeline culture and heritage once more. What better way to start than by dialing back its presence abroad?
Had Jim done similar in the other countries whose embassies had been bombed?

The aim was likely to push for inflation of the base rate for marques, at the very least. Or possibly send out a requirement that all adepts train in the City of Elua, Paris herself. It would certainly centralise and bolster French influence, while simultaneously devaluing British opinion of the servants; it would remake them into something wholly untouchable for the middle and working classes. It would decrease the likelihood that British servants enlisted, that D’Angeline blood be weakened even further when British D’Angeline inevitably married native Brits, should they train in London rather than the City of Elua.

Then targeting Daniel L’Envers, the French Prime Minister, a man heralded as much for his progressive work as for his long lineage from royalty and thereby ties to D’Angeline divinity itself--what better way to ensure Jim would destabilise the French government and sink his claws in deeper?

Was this a bid, slowly but surely, to strengthen D’Angeline peerage and the trace of Elua’s divinity in the Companions’ scions? It might be a long-reaching goal in its prospective spectrum. Elua forbid the sort of death toll that would entail.

Sherlock could just imagine a France where Jim Moriarty tugged the strings behind the scenes, ensured some desperate fate where D’Angelines themselves were targeted, all for love of power and some antiquated, insular notion of the D’Angeline way.

Bronze drumbeats rang distant in his pulse, in his ears. If it was true, Elua, what a divine fate to be put to. Wasn’t that the case for Kushiel’s dart-marked, in anguisses past?

Something heavy and dire tugged at Sherlock’s heart; he sprung into motion, pacing.

“Thirty minutes. Ji--Moriarty,” he winced, and felt more than saw John’s mirrored reaction. There was a difference in a name. Jim was familiar, intimate. That was something Sherlock could never allow himself to be, ever again.

“Moriarty,” he started again, “gave her that long. So it’s safest if we assume that’s when it detonates. We need to find it. If she’s making an announcement, he’s not going to want that to be interrupted. We need to go back into the party.”

Wordless, John drew his SIG and opened the door, did a quick scan of the hall before waving Sherlock out.

It didn’t take them long to catch up to Roxanne D’Arbos; they only barely avoided coming too close and ruining their stealth when Roxanne halted abruptly, stopping to talk to Helen Belfours.

“Mme. D’Arbos?” Helen asked, her green eyes furrowing. “Is it--”

Roxanne slumped, nodding. “Go, take care of it.”

Helen stiffened, mouth tightening. She gave a sharp nod. “Oui madame.”

The two went their separate ways.
If Sherlock were fit for Bryony house, if he were the wagering sort, he would put all odds on Helen being the one to actually go arm the bomb; it hurt with a sharp pang. She had been one of his very first patrons.

He turned to John. “You go with Helen.”

“I’m not leaving your side, Sherlock.”

“We don’t have time, John. You heard him. There are snipers as a failsafe. You go stop Helen, and get back to me in the ballroom as fast as Elua can carry you.”

“Sherlock, I won’t--”

“Dammit, John! Go.” He grabbed John hard by the shoulder, shook him once. “We don’t have time. Go. The faster you get that done, the faster you can come back to my side. But for now, I must do whatever it takes to make sure at least one of us is there to stop whatever’s about to happen in the ballroom.”

“Fine,” John growled. “Elua keep you until I can again.”

Sherlock shoved him onward before he could say something rash, an admission at the tip of his tongue. “Go.”

Chapter End Notes

As much as I've tried to tie up loose ends, I am aware that it's been long enough that referencing events posted what, like, a year and a fafillion chapters ago may need better context built here to really do that justice. Let me know if that's the case, and where, so's I can fix it.

Also, one of the thoughts I've been toying with is trying my hand at podficcing this motha. Two things are holding me up from making a definite decision, though. The first being my American accent. I could probably shoot for doing something approximating their accent without getting too My-Fair-Lady-and-Dick-Van-Dyke-From-Mary-Poppins Cockney, but I'm curious what the consensus is there. Also, the sheer size. Like, whoa. If there's demand for it, I'll give it a go, but otherwise, I won't bother. What do y'all think?

<3 Chuck
Okay, okay, *okay*. I knoooow I said I was going to wait a week, but let's face it, self-control is probably not one of my strong suits. So here it is! I got the title from a Beatles song, because I'm just that lame. Reminds me of the kind of craziness here, though.

I go back to the top of the slide
Where I stop and I turn
and I go for a ride
Till I get to the bottom and I see you again."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---

When I am in the centre surrounded by enemies...

Pierce the flowers and strike the willow freely from the west or east--

No matter how the wind and clouds may change in the eight directions--

Don’t remain in one place and don’t step without purpose--

John’s blood beat in his ears, the eerie calm of Cassiel’s mantle settling over him, determination in the wake of tumult. The ring of steel whispered in the back of his mind, and he could have trembled with that blessing, or at least its memory, if he didn’t have something to give himself wholly to. He had allowed himself a prayer on Sherlock’s behalf, and had to trust implicitly it would be heard.

*Elua, protect him. Cassiel, speed my return. Naamah hold your servant in your love, and Kushiel keep your chosen. He goes in your name, has never faulted from your bidding.*

*Cassiel, forgive me.*

What he did, he did in love, and he knew that in his bones. Elua understood, and he could only hope Cassiel did, too.

Helen Belfours all but ran, making a steady beat for the basement, and staying on her tail, undetected, took all of his concentration. He had not been trained in stealth the way Sherlock had. His power resided in bold action. He knew, though, that he could not act until he knew for sure
that Helen did what he anticipated. He could not act without true cause.

When she plunged into the darkness of the cellar’s storage space, John managed to stay just close enough that he could catch the door before it slammed shut, delay it only slightly as he stepped in and to the side, behind a still-assembled Christmas tree, which could’ve easily been six feet or more across, such was its size.

He watched as she weaved through the heaped and cluttered maze, moving forward as best he could. At about 20 feet in, she had to duck beneath the legs of a desk turned on its side and a stack of old reference books; it was the only opening in the path she’d taken toward the back.

When he got to that same spot, John nearly cursed: the width of the filing cabinet drawers on the desk, combined with the space for the desk chair, made the opening much smaller than comfortable. Helen, petite as she was, could’ve easily fit through it, but he was somewhat bigger. He crouched and slid through, leaning back to contort his shoulders and head away from the drawers, the gap of which was so narrow he had to keep his head turned to the side. Unfortunately, this meant he had to grip that part of the desk, which shifted just the slightest bit, throwing off his balance. He bumped, just barely, into the stack of books and froze, watched them wobble precariously. Even the slightest noise—let alone the calamity of heavy books crashing, which would invariably topple against the stack of boxes on the other side, sending them over like dominoes—would have bollixed the whole thing.

When the books didn’t fall, he let out a breath of thanks and kept moving.

Helen glanced to each side, halfway across the room along an outer wall, hugging her arms against the biting damp cold of the cellar, when she stopped before an old armoire. John froze again, intent. She opened the full-length doors, which creaked in echo around the storage space, and stepped inside.

John frowned, staring at what he’d just witnessed. She’d… stepped inside. What was this, sodding Narnia?

He made his way along the last little stretch and stood before the open armoire, which didn’t look terribly out of place, even open as it was, in the disaster that was this room. Inside the thing, though, was room to crouch and slip through a hole in the wall.

John hunched down, peered in. It was low enough he’d have to crawl on hands and knees, but he’d fit. Up ahead, her torch bounced along the stone walls. Where she’d hidden it before now, he wasn’t really sure.

He grit his teeth and shut his eyes. This was the second bloody tunnel in twenty-four hours. At least this time he wasn’t beset by who-knew-how-many enemies and putting his body between an attacker and Sherlock.

Sherlock.

John prayed then that whatever was happening in the ballroom, nothing had happened quite yet. If all hell broke loose before John could get back and do his duty, he’d never forgive himself. Neither would Cassiel, if there was anything left worth forgiving.

Pushing the thought away, he crawled in and found the tunnel itself was high enough to stand comfortably in, and then some. He trailed along behind her, praying his footsteps didn’t echo too
loudly against the stone and cement. How far down this tunnel sloped, he wasn’t sure. It was obvious the passage was old and well-planned; this wasn’t some last minute thing dug from the earth, but a proper passageway, like the builders who’d designed and constructed the embassy had installed this, too.

Distantly he heard the rattle and clatter of… a train going by.

He closed his eyes and paused a moment. They were close to the Piccadilly line. Maybe this was some sort of… of escape that an ambassador might use if some disaster happened?

Like a bombing, he thought darkly.

Helen turned and her light disappeared, except for the faint glow of a far wall; she’d reached a main track tunnel. John shuddered as the darkness pressed in around him, save for the dim light ahead. He ran as quickly as he dared to catch up.

When he rounded the corner, there was indeed a narrow platform. There was also a single-car train. This was an escape for government officials.

Just before Helen could reach the doorway of the train car and pry it open, she paused. In the dim light of her flashlight pointed down, the grey-blue illuminated tunnel shadows notching every curve, the conflict was clear in her profile. Mouth set, fists balled, shoulders forced straight.

“Elua forgive me,” she whispered.

John ducked back around the corner. He drew his gun, thumbed the safety off. The little click sounded like the loud, sharp snap of bone in his ears. He came back around the corner and leveled his gun at her.

“Helen,” John called softly, scared to spook her. “Stop right there.”

Helen whipped around, startled, and when she registered his SIG, the terrible instrument of Cassiel’s intervention, her eyes went wide as the moon.

Her mouth settled into a grim line, desperate determination gripping her. “I have to.”

“You don’t,” he replied. “You have a choice. You always have a choice.”

“You saw!” she half-shouted. “You saw what he did to Roxanne’s daughter. I don’t have children, but I have loved ones. It’s as good as done, if he doesn’t get what he wants.”

“But the cost.” John steadied his gun, his whole body hardened steel that cooled in the tunnel’s damp freeze. “How many people will it cost?”

“I can’t protect them, but I can protect my own.”

A moment’s hesitation. That’s all she needed.

Helen broke for the far end of the train car’s door and scrabbled to pry it open, undoubtedly counting on Cassiline discipline to stay his hand.

And really, she was right. John had too many names in his list; he needed to prevent more.

He holstered his gun and sped after her, catching her just as she got it open, tackling her to the slick cement.

She twisted beneath him, quick enough to elbow him in the nose before he could catch her hands.
He felt the solid crunch as his nose broke, the scream of his still-healing body as he wrestled her into submission. Warmth blossomed with the pain, but John hardly registered it. She gave more of a fight than he would have anticipated for a servant of Naamah.

“No!” she shouted. “No, please!”

“I can’t let you do this,” he growled thickly through the swelling. “You don’t want to be a murderer.”

She let out a sob then, arching up, trying to buck him off, but to no avail.

“What’s your signal?” he asked, a new realisation hitting him. There had to be some way to ensure to Roxanne D’Arbos that she’d completed her task.

“I’ll never give you my signale.” She replied through clenched teeth. She tried to spit at him and failed.


A chime sounded in her pocket as her mobile slipped free to clatter against the gravel. The screen was bright, the preview of its incoming message plain.

Are we ready?

John ignored it momentarily, enough to wrestle her onto her stomach, pin her arms to her sides with his knees. With one hand he slid his gun free, pressed it to her spine, and with the other he snatched up the phone.

He gave a silent Thanks to whoever was listening that Helen didn’t have a passcode to her phone as he slid his thumb across the screen.

All ready, he typed. Then he tossed the phone away.

“We’re going to keep all this from happening. I swear to you.”

She let out another sob.

John’s brain scrambled to think how he should progress. If he got up to retrieve the bomb from the train or make a hasty retreat, she’d be up again, free to do what she wanted.

Oh.

He fumbled to undo his belt, ripped it free from his pants, before wrapping it as best he could around her wrists. He could only hope that Mandrake training didn’t include slipping free from the sort of restraints it they might use on their patrons.

The fight went out of her then, and all she could do was cry, plead.

But that—he still couldn’t leave her like this.

Please forgive me, he begged to anyone who might be listening.

Aloud he said, “I am so, so sorry for this.” And then he brought the butt of his SIG down against her head, knocking her out cold. He looked at her a moment, then checked her pulse. She was alive, and unconscious. Hopefully it would buy him enough time to sound some sort of alarm.
He rose then, hauled her to her feet and dragged her stumbling after him as he clambered into the train. An innocuous-looking backpack sat abandoned in the very back. He dashed for it, then dropped to his knees and gingerly opened it. Surely enough, there sat a small digital timer and enough plastic explosives to level a city block.

He stood, backing up and fisting his fingers in his hair. He had to think. Think. What would Sherlock do? How did he keep the bomb from exploding down here and destroying the whole building?

*I could bring it back with me*, he thought desperately. Then, try as he might, he couldn’t think of any better plan. He was loath to bring it closer to its target, but what other proof might he have? What other way could he help make sure that Moriarty didn’t find some way to escape and detonate it remotely. If the threat was in the room and Moriarty was trapped, there had to be a better chance they’d make it out of this alive.

*Cassiel, please, please don’t let there be a remote.*

He thought again of the text message Helen Belfours had received, and pulled his own phone from his pocket. Inspired by Helen’s words, he typed the only message he could think of that might pass unnoticed if someone happened to see it.

**Redbeard**

His feet thundered on the stairs as he raced back. There was no thought in his mind as he pelted down the maze of hallways that led back to the ballroom. When he reached the last little turn and stopped short before the door, Sally stepped aside, startled.

“John!”

He ignored her and threw the door open just in time to hear a dire proclamation.

His timing couldn’t have been more perfect if Elua himself had shoved him on his way. Although he couldn’t see him in the centre of the thick crowd, he heard Sherlock cry out, “Jim Moriarty!”

Chapter End Notes

*NGL, the alternate name for this chapter was, ”This Ain’t A Scene, It's A Goddamn Arms Race.”* 

Also worth noting:
1 -- The first stanza of Les Chant des Quarante-huit Heures, the songs and methods Cassilines are taught to accompany specific combat forms in The Counting of the Hours.
Jeez Louise, I've been waiting a long-ass time for this chapter. Hopefully this will bring some relief. A little. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock dusted himself again before stepping out fully into the corridor once more. He stuck near the wall, but maintained a steady gait, walking with his chin parallel to the ground, trailing at an even pace behind Roxanne D’Arbos.

Confidence is essential when moving in plain sight.

Indeed, the few gala guests he passed paid him no mind.

When Roxanne disappeared into the ballroom, Sherlock gave a nonchalant smile to the guard outside--Sally again, thank Elua. She returned it, held the door for him.

“How’d it go? Please tell me some good news, Freak.”

“Not out of the woods yet,” he whispered. “We can go ahead and call reinforcements, though.”

She gave a sharp nod. “Glad to hear it.”

Sherlock wove his way through the crowd. When he found Victor, who stood near the edge of the room, Victor flashed him a tense, questioning look.

Sherlock merely made eye contact, unwilling to say more until he knew for sure that John had succeeded.

Up ahead, with his back to Sherlock, thank Elua, Jim Moriarty stood talking to Daniel L’Envers. Despite everything, despite the hell and the atrocity, Sherlock felt that familiar flutter of magnetism, the call of Kushiel’s scion to his chosen. It made Sherlock sick to his stomach. Damn this aspect of Kushiel’s favour.

At the front of the room, Roxanne D’Arbos mounted the stage, approached a podium offset to one side.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?”
The crowd quieted, all eyes lifted to the stage. From his periphery, Sherlock could see Moriarty and Daniel L’Envers move closer to the stage, ready to mount it in turn. Roxanne glanced at them, then turned back to the crowd.

“First, I’d like to thank you all for being here tonight. It’s been a lovely turnout, and I’m proud to count myself as a D’Angeline in London to see so many of us here to support the Prime Minister of our sister nation. There are a good many announcements we’ll be making tonight, but we’ll get back to those in a moment. For now, I’d like to welcome a man we all know, someone who’s had his elbows deep in the city for years now, working tirelessly to improve our way of life. Please, give a warm welcome to Mr. Jim Moriarty!”

Sherlock’s heart surged into his throat. His phone buzzed in his jacket pocket.

_Secured the bomb._

John.

Sherlock let out a silent thanks, then drew in a deep breath. It was now or never.

He moved as subtly as he could, slowly and politely making his way to the centre of the crowd as Moriarty took the stage; it was lucky that the applause was raucous. Sherlock clapped along with them, willing his anonymity to stay intact just a little bit longer.

Moriarty smiled, waved, the perfect image of a charming figure, and when he laid a hand on the podium, the room fell to an attentive hush.

“My friends.” His smile was warm, magnanimous. It was the same facade he’d used the first time he’d met Sherlock.

Sherlock shuddered, an undercurrent of anger skimming along his bones.

“Thank you all so very much. It’s an honour to stand before you tonight. It’s been a pleasure to finally put faces to the names of some of you, with whom I’ve been partnered with for quite a while!”

The audience let out a polite titter at that. Sherlock stood rooted, his breath caught in his lungs.

It was odd—Sherlock knew himself, and he had no doubt about that. He had a flair for the dramatic, a penchant for shining before anyone who paid him attention. It was the quality that had shaped his life, had driven him to unflinching deduction even in the face of making schoolyard enemies, had later led to his popularity among his patrons. And here he was, about to disrupt an entire room to stop a catastrophe from happening, and all he wanted to do was run away from all of this; only Elua knew what sort of hell would break loose once he opened his mouth.

The bomb was diverted. John had made certain. Why couldn’t he just approach Ji--Moriarty in private, away from the public eye, take him down outside the spotlight?

No. He knew better. It had to be this way. He needed to confront him, and needed to destroy him publicly as he did it. It was the only way to begin to sever Jim Moriarty’s influence among the London and D’Angeline circles that helped him climb to such unseen power.

Sherlock tightened his fists at his side, for a moment just wishing he could channel the sort of determined calm John possessed. This would be so much easier with John at his side.
No, Sherlock thought. *I can’t wait for John to get back. It has to be now.*

“Jim Moriarty!” he cried out, his voice cracking, interrupting whatever dripping schmooze Moriarty was spouting at the podium. “Jim Moriarty.”

He could feel the moment all heads turned, all eyes upon him. Moriarty himself zeroed in on Sherlock immediately, his face the picture of complete surprise. To his credit, he schooled it quickly, hid it behind a polite facade, and Sherlock could swear that it would be perfect to anyone else; but when Moriarty spoke, Sherlock could hear the real man, the evil thing beneath.

“Ah, yes? We seem to have an unexpected guest!” The lilt was forced bemusement, the sort that always heralded bad things to come.

Sherlock wanted to close his eyes, to retreat, but he’d come this far, and there was no turning back now. He kept his gaze unwavering, boring right into Moriarty’s. “Everyone, Jim Moriarty is a fraud, a murderer, a terrorist.”

A ripple of dissent and surprise flowed through the crowd. The whispers began as a faint susurrus, confusion and outrage in equal measure.

“This man,” Sherlock continued, “is the head of the Lies-Beyond organization, responsible for the embassy bombings in Germany, America, and Italy. More personally, he’s orchestrated the murders of several individuals, including my mentor, Irene Adler. He had several servants of Naamah and myself kidnapped, and attempted to kill my guard.”

Roxanne D’Arbos blanched, and Moriarty just laughed indulgently.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Jim replied, his voice cutting through the uproar over the microphone. “I would certainly be alarmed at the allegations laid at my feet, if they didn’t come from a servant of Naamah wanted for murder, who has seduced his Cassiline attendant and disappeared!”

Sherlock grit his teeth. “It was not me, nor--”

“It was Mary Morstan,” another voice cried from the back. “Your bodyguard.”

John.

John weaved through the crowd, came to stand at Sherlock’s side. He lifted a backpack high enough for most of the people nearby to see it.

“Your bodyguard murdered the members of our household and attempted to kill me. You kidnapped Sherlock the way you did two other servants of Naamah, locked them away on a little island to keep them out of your way. I’d know. I was the one to fight through all that.” His words were steel and fire and ice-cold rage.

Then another detail caught Sherlock’s attention and all that admiration wavered. He hoped his eyes weren’t bulging--how on earth could John be stupid enough to bring the sodding bomb itself into the very crowd they were trying to protect?

“This is a lie!” Moriarty snarled. “And what’s that in your hand, hm?”

“It’s the bomb you wanted to destroy this embassy the way you did the others,” Sherlock called out. “The one you coerced Roxanne D’Arbos into planting, and had arranged for Helen Belfours to detonate on your command, right in this embassy. Not only have you accomplished all I’ve accused you of, but you were intending the assassination of Daniel L’Envers.”
The crowd exploded then, shrieks of fear, and several pushed for the door.

“What in the world--” Daniel L’Envers protested.

“This is completely absurd,” Moriarty growled and stepped back from the podium. He started for the stairs of the stage. “I don’t have to sit here while you--”

“Stop right where you are,” John said, his deadly calm voice ringing through the panic, his SIG pointed at Moriarty’s chest. “Don’t take another step.”

“MARY!” Moriarty’s bellow was rage unhinged.

Mary Morstan, who had been stationed to the side, in the shadows, stepped forward, pushing her way through the crowd until she stood before Sherlock and John. Her own gun was levelled right at Sherlock’s head. “I wouldn’t do that, John.”

All around them, pandemonium raged, people screaming and surging for the door. Sherlock prayed they got out safely, that Sally and the others were able to get them far away as the room emptied. On the stage, Roxanne D’Arbos cowered by a column against the wall, and Daniel L’Envers, his face bloodless, just stood dumbstruck.

“Mr. Prime Minister,” Sherlock said quietly in the thundering quiet as the last of the guests escaped. “I think it would be in your best interest to leave.”

“NO ONE MOVE,” Moriarty roared. “I don’t know how you’ve done this, Sherlock, but it’s too late. The bomb’s still here, and I’ve got snipers--”

“Not anymore you don’t!” Sally cried out from the door and all eyes landed on her. “We took those down while you were in here sipping champagne.” She, too, had a gun trained on Moriarty.

It must’ve been just the distraction he needed, because John tossed the backpack to Sherlock and dove for Mary. Her gun went off, firing wide; plaster exploded from the back wall.

“Sir!” Sally shouted, and Daniel bolted for the door.

Another flurry of movement, as Moriarty snatched Roxanne D’Arbos up; she screamed as his fist tangled in her hair.

“Jim, no!” Sherlock raced forward, dropping the backpack as roughly as he dared.

Behind him, John and Mary scuffled, the blunt noise of punches and vambraces slamming against vambraces filling the room. Distantly Sherlock could hear the noise of daggers, and he glanced turned to see both guns had been knocked away from where they wrestled. Mary, who’d gotten the advantage and now straddled John, had both daggers free. She slashed viciously, and John only barely brought his arms up in time to protect his face.

Sherlock was trapped—he was too afraid to look away, somehow sure that if he didn’t watch, Mary would kill John. And yet, he needed to get Roxanne from Moriarty, had to find a way to catch Jim before he could get away.

There was nothing for it. All he could do was send a frenzied prayer that Cassiel would keep John.

“Let her go!”

He fumbled, clawing at Jim’s hands to release their hold. Roxanne sobbed, fought against
Moriarty, and gave Sherlock just enough room to land a sucker-punch.

The sharp bite of Moriarty’s teeth going through his own lip and into Sherlock’s knuckles sang with pain, blood blossoming around the sickening crunch. Moriarty howled, releasing Roxanne, who fell and scrambled to get away.

“Sally!” Sherlock called, not daring to look away from Moriarty as he struggled with him. “Stop her!”

“On it!” Sally replied, and Sherlock had to trust that she would succeed.

Sherlock threw his weight forward, pinning Moriarty against the wall. Rather than fight him, Moriarty sagged, then bucked forward, pressing his body against Sherlock’s, an unmoored laugh ripped free.

“Good work!” Moriarty crowed, his words slurred through busted lip and blood. “I don’t know how you did it, pet, but Daddy’s proud!”

Sherlock ignored him, ignored the sick twist in his gut as his body responded once more, the kaleidoscope daze of Moriarty’s spicy cologne, the copper tang of blood, the memory of pain and terror and freezing cold and blazing heat, the excruciating pull of desire. His body shook with it, and bronze drums thundered in his ears until he could hear nothing else.

“You can’t do this,” Sherlock growled, willing his body to just stop, to stop betraying him like this. “You can’t--”

But Moriarty elbowed him in the sternum, spun to pin him against the wall. He grasped Sherlock by the jaw, gripping mercilessly until Sherlock was half-certain his jaw would break. Moriarty leaned in then, a grotesque kiss, grinding his pelvis against Sherlock’s thigh.

Sherlock struggled, horror overcoming all else, and when Moriarty pulled back, Sherlock spat Moriarty’s blood back into his own face.

“Look at that, pet,” he rumbled. “Even now, you can’t help yourself. We could have toppled empires, you and I.”

And suddenly he drew back. Belatedly Sherlock registered that Sally and Lestrade had both grabbed him, hauled him off of Sherlock.

A wild, delirious laugh ripped free from him as they hauled him back, threw him to the ground. Lestrade dropped, his knee landing ungently on Moriarty’s spine to pin him in place as he went for his cuffs.

“Police brutality!” Moriarty cried, utterly delighted. The sick derision in his voice threatened to choke Sherlock with fear.

“Shut it!” Sally snarled.

They hauled him to his feet, and Sherlock turned, just in time to see exactly how John fared.

To see a Cassiline train, to watch them flow like water around the circular forms of the Counting of the Hours is a beautiful thing. It is an art, as so much about D’Angeline life is. But this, two Cassiline-trained warrior priests locked in a duel, was a terrible sort of beauty.

Both of them had gained their feet, their daggers free as they parried, lunged, steel flashing in the light, clashing together as attack met defence, until Sherlock could scarce see who held what. He
was utterly unable to see if either of them had pressed a clear advantage.

Sherlock only barely stopped himself from shouting out, frozen in terror.

And still they fought, a lethal dance that clearly wouldn’t end until one of them died.

Belatedly, Sherlock dove into action, praying it wasn’t too late. The gun, only yards away from him, the SIG he’d recognise anywhere as an extension of John, fit into his hand, sure as anything.

Time slowed to a crawl, then, and the noise of the fight fell away. Sherlock felt the heft of the gun, its cold metal pressing into his quaking palms.

“John!”

Frame-by-frame, John glanced and then ducked, leaving Sherlock a clear shot.

But Mary was faster.

She ducked, too, diving for her own gun, which lay closer to where they were.

She landed on her shoulder, came half-up with her gun unwavering. The gunshot was deafening.

John screamed, falling, and this time she’d hit where the vest didn’t protect him. Sherlock didn’t have time to see, only screamed in a desperate rage and fired again at her, squeezing shot after shot until he saw—

He’d hit her. Several times.

Mary Morstan was dead.

John cried out again, crumpled in a pool of his own blood. Sherlock nearly dropped the gun, rushing to his side.

“John—” the noise was strangled in his throat as he identified where Mary’s bullet had hit him. Upper chest, maybe his left shoulder.

_Elua, please, let it be his shoulder_, Sherlock prayed.

He pressed shaking hands to the wound, trying to staunch the flow. If it nicked the artery--

“Someone, please!” Sherlock cried. His voice echoed back to him from the empty ballroom, high and wild in his own ears.

“Sherlock,” John croaked. “Sherlock, I--”

“John, no--no--”

John went limp, his eyes fluttering shut. A noise escaped Sherlock, who could only pray it wasn’t shock, it wasn’t death.

Heedless of the blood, Sherlock leant his full weight to the one hand, still pressing against the wound, used the other to grasp at John’s face. “John--John--”

In his own terror, the sound of the world all muffled down to the desperate wheeze of his own lungs, the noise of his own bewilderment. He didn’t register the sirens wailing, the cries of the emergency team as they came thundering in.
Sherlock, later, would swear he wasn’t in his own brain, his own body, as the paramedics pulled him off of John, as they worked quickly to plug the wound and load him onto a stretcher.

What noises he made, he didn’t know. Nothing was coherent, not until he felt solid hands catch him as he tried to scramble to his feet.

“Sherlock,” a voice called. “Sherlock!”

Sally was there suddenly. She dropped to her knees, clutching at Sherlock.

“No, no--”

“John!”

“Sherlock--”

“Let me go, please, he’s my--”

“We’re going to follow them,” Sally promised. “We’re going to follow them, but you’ve got to calm down--”

Sherlock broke free then, scrambling to his feet as he chased after John’s stretcher. It was being loaded into the back of the closest ambulance.

“Wait!” he cried out. “NO--I--let me--!”

He took off running, and didn’t take no for an answer until he was in the ambulance, too. The doors slammed shut, and the sirens wailed into the night.

There in the pallor of the ambulance lighting, John was grey, nearly the colour of his now-ruined dress shirt.

The paramedics worked around them, and all Sherlock could do was clutch John’s hand. He prayed to Elua and every last one of his Companions.

Chapter End Notes

... I said *some* relief. I didn't mean total relief. Don't tell me I fooled you. -__~
As you may have noticed, we now have a tentative final chapter count! Huzzah!

I should have the next chapter up in the next day or so--I already have 2/3 of it drafted, so look for that, hopefully by Wednesday.

The Temple of Elua was not freezing, as it should have been in the early January air. It was unbearably hot, the air so humid it was nearly thick enough to clog the lungs, suffocate John. Fire raced in his bones, radiating out from his shoulder to course through every nerve and synapse, and all he could do was plead with the ever-smiling statue of Elua in his agony for an eternity. His prayers fell on stone ears.

Then came the sensation of falling, the distant mangle of unfamiliar voices snapping out commands.

"--we’ll have to increase his antibiotics--"

“John, if you can hear me--”

“--sir, you’ll have to step back--”

“John!”

He sank back into the Temple that stood around him, still as death. The the pain receded as he curled at blessed Elua’s feet. Eventually the air thinned, became cooler and breathable. A few moments more and the temple’s bare earth floor blossomed into a riot of wildflowers. John sat up and watched, and the voices from before were easily forgotten. They were replaced with laughter that filled him up, golden and brimming.

A weight settled into John’s palm as he sat there, his back suddenly leaning against the statue, and he looked down to find his fist curled around a fat acorn, brown and shiny.

He tried to speak, tried to ask, What am I doing here? or Why do I have this? but his mouth didn’t know how to form the words and his voice caught in his throat.

Instead all he could do was stare at the acorn, until it shook once, and a tender sprout cracked through its shell. In his surprise, John dropped the acorn, which hit the soft black earth and sank immediately. Moments later a sapling sprouted at his feet, time-lapsed growth that reached his waist, his shoulder, far above his head. The branches grew wide, the leaves thick and green until white blossoms burst forth, and in another second those opened wide until the petals fell, the branches growing heavy with apples.

It was an apple tree, growing from an acorn, but it made perfect sense to John.

When John looked away from the tree, he realised Elua’s temple had fallen away, though the statue and the tree remained with him at the centre of a crossroads. Now when he looked down,
he held his daggers, and barren dusty road stretched beneath his feet. John scanned the horizon, not nervous or confused, only aware that he’d come a long way from the temple. In the cardinal directions the dirt roads stretched, and the overcast sky hung dove-grey and heavy above him.

On the road to his right, his parents waved at him. His mother looked exactly the way she had when last John saw her—dishwater blonde hair tucked behind her ears, modest dress-clothes. His father stood beside her, his smile more open than anything John could remember from the pictures. John’s throat tightened painfully.

*Come on, Johnny!* they beckoned, voices silent but intention plain.

*Brother Watson*, came another not-voice, and when he spun to face the opposite direction, Brother Gavin Vincent waited for him there, familiar and relaxed, the closest thing to a father figure John had known since his parents died.

*East and West*, John thought. One sunrise, one sunset.

To the north, Sherlock stood impatiently, rolling his eyes in a way that did funny things to John’s chest until he could feel his face stretch in a smile.

To the south, the road was empty, save for the weight of invisible eyes, a divine command to choose a path.

John looked down at the dagger in his hand—there was only one now, though where the other had gone, he could’ve fathom. Then, watching distantly, his hand brought the blade across his free palm until blood welled up around it; then he reached out, plucked an apple from the tree. His blood smeared stark, vivid red against the apple’s golden-green skin.

John woke to the soft and steady beeps of various monitors, felt the icy chill of fluids from an IV coursing gently through his veins. Everything hurt, and that had happened too much recently, too. When would he wake up *in his own bed*, and not feel like he’d been hit by a lorry?

His face, every muscle and joint throbbed. His shoulder, though, that was the worst of it.

*I was shot*, he thought fuzzily.

Then the ghost of a wicked gash tingled in his right palm, though he couldn’t remember why.

He was thankful there was enough morphine in his system to keep him from really registering these things on more than a clinical level.

He cracked an eye to find the lights dimmed low, and that was about the time he felt the warm weight of something at his feet. It put him in mind of a puppy, though he’d never had one of those. They didn’t really allow for those in the Brotherhood. It was a shame.

Mustering what little energy he had, he lifted his head to find Sherlock crumpled over him, folded arms for his pillow, his face turned away.

John’s chest did something funny, but before he could really examine it, the morphine regulator gave an insistent beep, dosing him another few drips. The low lights bent and brightened until they went black.
The next time he could remember being conscious, when asked later, was to the sound of Sherlock warming up for a full-force tirade.

“You can’t be serious. After all we’ve been through--you’re really going to do this?” His voice was tight, sharp enough to slice through steel.

Something that sounded like a sheaf of papers smacked against the rail at the foot of his bed.

“My hands are tied.” Lestrade snapped, his gruff voice just as sharp. “There’s a process to these things. You and I know both that. Do the paperwork. Testify against the bloody arsehole, and prove that the safety of the D’Angeline people still relies on the sodding system.”

“Brother mine, you must see reason on this matter.” Mycroft’s voice, then, cool and smooth. “There were too many witnesses to simply do otherwise. We must bring as much evidence against Mr. Moriarty as we can. The only way to have such is your cooperation and John’s, once he is well.”

“We brought you the two missing servants of Naamah and a room full of witnesses as we produced the bomb. Isn’t that evidence enough?” Sherlock scowled then, a barely contained roar of frustration. In his haze, John could just imagine him pacing, tearing at his hair. “Mycroft, I’d have a word with you. Lestrade, get out.”

Lestrade muttered something unintelligible that most likely involved a string of curses, but the door opened and shut.

Sherlock let out a breath. “I will not lay out everything that happened in triplicate form, just to go before a grand jury and give a sob story. I will not be remembered as a victim. That is not how I want this, and I know you bloody well agree. You would have pushed much harder, if that were not the case.”

Mycroft sighed, nothing but resignation. “Murders, Sherlock. International incidents. Public use of a firearm resulting in a very thorough death by someone other than the Cassiline to which it was assigned. Shall I go on? As much as we need to condemn Mr. Moriarty, we need to clear both John’s name and yours in the public eye.”

A long pause, and John debated whether or not to let them know he was conscious. Before he could decide, Sherlock spoke again, and his words were venom and nothing John could make sense of.

“By the burning river, Brother, and the joy of discovery. Make. This. Go. Away.”

John cracked an eye open. Mycroft, red in the face in a show of anger John had never seen. His jaw flexed, his hand white-knuckling the ever-present umbrella.

“You would force my hand in this, Sherlock?”

“You know damn well I will.”

Chapter End Notes
**Announcement** When this is all said and done, I think *may* be able to order a few physical, fancy book-bound copies of this beastie, and if that's the case, I'm going to host a drawing for them (mainly because I've worked so hard on this that *I* want a copy!). I'll let you know more as I gather details, but be on the lookout for that! If it's something you're interested in, let me know in the comments below!
Liminal Grace and the Joy of Discovery (Sherlock)

Chapter Notes

You know, I think that every time I make a prediction about when I can get a chapter up, *something* happens to prevent that. Anyhow, I know this is a shortish chapter, but John's will be a longer one, most likely (at least, a heavier one)... So until then, my darlings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“B Y the burning river, Brother, and the joy of discovery. Make. This. Go. Away.”

It had taken some puzzling, but it was the one thing on which Sherlock could safely concentrate after the ambulance and the terror of waiting helplessly while John was rushed to surgery.

Sherlock knew full well, once the shock had settled into numbness, that the bureaucracy would swallow them whole, just as soon as it could. He also knew that his story was his alone, not something he’d easily allow publicly traded, not when there was so much else with which to condemn Moriarty.

Worse, it would drag John into the mire. As much as Sherlock wanted to keep himself from the public eye, he wanted that a hundredfold times more for his Cassiline. John, who was not modest, but nonetheless was content to recede into the periphery until he was needed, who remained quiet and still before others right up until his daggers rang free and he shined brighter than the sun. The same John who traversed half of Europe and fought his way through a garrison to bring him home.

If he could do this one thing, if Sherlock could keep their story away from public consumption, it would be the least of the gifts he wanted to give to John.

It had been in the liminal grace of half-sleep that he’d recalled the pledge his brother swore by, back when all the mess with *Lies-Beyond* had begun. Oaths were a binding thing that carried divine implications, should they be broken, and the one Mycroft had spoken some months ago had been no less potent.
In his half-awake state, he realised, finally, where the first portion of Mycroft’s promise had come from. The latter half, *The Joy of Discovery*, was one most Siovalese-descended families knew, a promise sworn by their own intellect; their own mother had used it just once, when they were both boys.

*By the Burning River*, however, carried a much higher authority—the very Queen herself.

Sherlock could only bless Irene’s name for having required him to learn the lineage of several royal families in Great Britain and abroad into their blinding minutiae.

Queen Elizabeth was not D’Angeline, but it was no stretch of logic to assume it could be passed along the family line from a time when there *had* been a direct connection to D’Angeline parentage.

The once-styled Cruarch of Alba—or modern-day Scotland—had married a D’Angeline queen around the time of the last *anguissette*.

That queen had been Ysandre de la Courcel, the namesake of the *Ysandrine Cycle* and the very first clue in discovering the truth of the mote in Sherlock’s eye. House Courcel had carried the insignia of a swan, the very bird sacred to the British Queen.

Ysandre de la Courcel’s mother had been from House L’Envers—the line Daniel L’Envers himself, the French Prime Minister, had come from.

Around the time of Ysandre’s ascendency, the L’Envers insignia had been a bridge over the river to hell.

It was only natural that Mycroft, who was essentially the British government, might learn of this vow. And this little chestnut—Mycroft had given it freely, a testament of his urgency.

For Sherlock to use it now was not only a call to Mycroft’s divinely accountable promise, one Sherlock could very well carry to the Queen if he liked, but more importantly it was salt in the wound any older brother would carry for leading a younger brother into a disaster like this. Even a brother as cold as Mycroft.

It was cruel, but it made it no less necessary.

“You would force my hand in this, Sherlock?” Mycroft’s eyes narrowed, jaw set and body rigid.

“You know damn well I will.”

Without a word, Mycroft twitched his eyebrows upward once, an acknowledgement, before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

In his wake, Sherlock sagged, some measure of relief finally settling in his bones.

He stumbled over to John’s side, dragging a chair from nearby to drop into. With the bed-rail in place it wasn’t the most comfortable arrangement, but it allowed Sherlock to prop his arm there and rest his head, taking John in.
John, with his broken nose and matching black eyes from sometime at the embassy, a myriad of scrapes and bruises from the fight on La Poveglia. With his heavily-bandaged shoulder from a gunshot he took for Sherlock, for all of them. With his limp hands, IVs taped in place.

The more Sherlock studied him, though, he picked up on another fact: John’s breathing wasn’t the typical pattern for someone who should be asleep.

“John?” he asked softly, hoping that if he was wrong, he wasn’t going to wake John.

John cracked one swollen eye, his face twitching back to life after its imposed lassitude. “I’m here.”

Sherlock’s hand darted forward, stopping just shy of taking John’s hand to squeeze it, but he thought better of it. The IVs, of course. It had nothing to do with Cassiline rejection.

“It’s been a few days,” he said instead.

John hummed in acknowledgement.

“There was sepsis. In the gunshot wound. You nearly died.”

John huffed a breath that could possibly be counted as a chuckle before croaking, “Wouldn’t have been ideal.”

The pain of that very real prospect twisted Sherlock’s mouth, half grimace, half smile. “I’m inclined to agree. Though I’m sure it’d be more relaxing for you, not having to chase after me.”

“About as relaxed as one could get.”

“If you’d died, I’d have found some way to raise you from the dead.” Sherlock’s throat was tight, remembering the words John had told him twice now. It was either talk or stop breathing.

“Just so you could kill me yourself?” John smiled as he played along. He struggled to sit up.

Sherlock jumped up from his chair, eager to help John or else force him to lie back down.

No, he wanted to say. So I could keep you with me. But that was just too close to the quick. It was only too true.

“It’s been three days,” Sherlock said instead. “They’ve taken D’Arbos, Belfours, and Moriarty in. All of them. It’s over.”

John fell quiet a long while, his lips pursed and his eyes far away.

The proof of Mycroft’s intervention came shortly the day after. The whole affair was overly sensationalised—the near-assassination, the narrow escape from a bombing. The news said nothing of their involvement, which Sherlock could only count as a blessing.
Also CAN I JUST SAY. That research to make sure I could use *By the Burning River* took like, an entire day just to make sure I could connect those exact dots and use it logically. I've been sitting on that for what, like twenty million chapters? SO GOOD TO FINALLY EXPLAIN MY BRILLIANCE, lol.
The Casseline Brotherhood was kind enough to wait another month, until John was discharged from the hospital, before calling him to a joint D’Angeline and London enclave. It didn’t matter that months of physical and mental therapy would be forthcoming, nor that an added gift from the trauma had manifested in his knee, a psychosomatic response that left him cane-bound and aching.

It didn’t matter that Sherlock and he had been legally cleared thanks to Mycroft. Nor that he’d been an integral part of capturing a terrorist. As soon as he was released from the hospital, he’d been given summons to the head temple in Paris, the City of Elua.

Sherlock, in the meantime, had been forced into staying with Mycroft, a confinement whose chafe John understood completely. Maison Adler seized, and his sole source of income in Naamah’s service decimated in the wake of all that had happened, it was the only place he could turn.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t until John had received his summons that Sherlock even attempted to leave the house, and did everything in his power to come along with John. John wasn’t sure if he was glad for the company or not.

When Sherlock had been barred from entering the Casseline wing of Elua’s temple, John was doubly surprised to see his ward accept this verdict with nothing more than a clenched jaw and a sharp nod.

“This--this is bollocks,” John seethed, pacing the foyer of the boardroom, waiting for the elders to assemble.

Brother Vincent, who sat on a bench nearby, sighed audibly. “Calm down, John. These things are standard. Your SIG has seen far more action than any other brother or sister’s gun in Elua knows how long. There has to be a cursory hearing to keep the accountability channels open. This is how we’re permitted to keep our arms when we’re outside these temple walls.”

John stopped pacing, staring instead out of the window, which overlooked Elua’s open-roof sanctuary. He looked down upon the statue in the centre, its worn facade even more ancient than that of London’s Eluine temple. Few of the features were really discernible from overhead, but John couldn’t help but stare at Elua’s upturned palm, the one he’d taken Cassiel’s knife to.

At his side, one hand fisted and flexed, the ghost-like sensation of such a mark mirrored in his own hand.

It wasn’t the hearing itself that upset John. Not exactly. Sure, that was nerve-wracking, but he knew it was only an externalisation of the problem he carried within himself.
He’d gone so far from Cassiel’s path, Cassiel’s purity… was there any redeeming that?

Before he could flagellate himself any further, his phone pinged.

*[This guard I’ve been assigned is a mind-numbing prat. Were you all trained to have sticks up your arses? x -- SH]*

John frowned at that little x there at the end. Yes, what had happened on la Poveglia had really happened. It paled in comparison to the truth of his own feelings. Neither he nor Sherlock spoke of it, which was probably for the best. It didn’t need--it wasn’t--

In any event, this seemed far more sentimental than Sherlock was typically prone to. This--this was dangerous. This was tempting a fate John wasn’t sure he was ready to face.

*[Behave.]*

*[I’ll force him to play tour guide. That should go over well. -- SH]*

“Brother Watson,” Brother Rocaille started, “are you aware of why you have been called here today?”

Brother Rocaille, head of the D’Angeline Brotherhood, leaned forward from the long table at which he and the other senior members of both temples had been arranged. Brother Vincent, the head of the English temple, sat to Brother Rocaille’s right, with the British elders arrayed beyond him: one each from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. All the D’Angelines were arranged along the left from Brother Rocaille, who was acting as head in L’Agnace, in which the City of Elua resided; representatives from Kusheth, Namarre, Eisande, Camlach, Azzalle, and Siovale. Behind them, at the back wall, sat the London and D’Angeline heads of the Temples of Elua, meant only to observe and provide additional judgement. Thirteen souls as judges and jury.

Each Cassiline fixed John with a stare worthy of Cassiel’s dour sternness, their dove-grey uniforms pressed and pristine, their daggers arranged before each of them in a gleaming X.

“I believe so,” John answered.

He felt naked as he stood before them, leaning heavily on his cane. He’d come in a simple suit, darker grey than the Cassiline wont, sans vambraces or weapons. Those rested on the table, right between Brother Rocaille and Brother Vincent.

It was sacrilege to wear them until his name was clear; the fights on La Poveglia and at the embassy had been worth it to risk heresy, John felt.

“Brother John Watson, you are formally charged with willful disregard to our sacred laws for the following: knowingly discharging your gun to murder before knowing whether or not your ward was even alive, allowing your gun to be obtained by anyone other than another Cassiline, and violating your chastity, leading to the deaths of your ward’s household.”

John gaped at them, unable to hide the shock. He’d expected the first two, but the third-- “How could you possibly know, or assume that one kiss culminated as some sort of divine punishment--?”

“So you admit to the questionable murders of the guards on La Poveglia, allowing your ward to murder a former Cassiline adept, and trading damning emails of your inappropriate relationship
with your ward?”

“I don’t—” John sputtered. “Emails?”

Brother Rocaille rose, pulled several printouts from a manila folder before him. “We have evidence of your relationship with Mr. Sherlock Holmes becoming both romantic and sexual.” He looked down at one of the printouts and read, “To wit: ‘I know what we’re doing is wrong, but last night... I never knew what a servant of Naamah could do. It will be all I can think of today.’”

Brother Rocaille fixed him with a hard stare as the other elders, save Brother Vincent, murmured in dissent. “Do you deny this?”

John trembled with rage, understanding exactly where these had come from. “Of course I deny them. Those were forged by Jim Moriarty, a known terrorist and murderer—”

Brother Rocaille laughed, short and humourless. “It’s easy to pin your sins on a villain, isn’t it?”

“Brother Rocaille—” Brother Vincent started. “John did contact me several times, at least one of which concerned worries over Mr. Moriarty’s presence. This was months before the events that have recently unfolded. It is very possible—”

“It’s nonsense!” one of the D’Angeline elders interjected. “Your friendship with Brother Watson is well-known. Can the British elders contest this?”

The three other British elders made no effort to refute the statement.

Brother Rocaille grinned then, his glare still fixed on John. “Top of your class, questionably close friendship with the head of the London Brotherhood, and assigned, most unconventionally, to a servant of the worst of The Misguided.”

John trembled, the rage blotting out all else. “Don’t you dare implicate Brother Vincent in this.”

“Brother Rocaille, if I may?” a wizened D’Angeline elder interjected, her voice soft and thoughtful. “Your record in Mandrake House and his ample connections both in London and abroad, but there was something about him—I couldn’t tell you. I can tell you that he forced my hand when it came to observing Elua’s vigil this past Midwinter. He threatened me with these exact fake emails.”

John pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. “He was powerful enough that it was easy to believe he could have something like that fabricated, although I did not know why exactly he would want me out of the way for the evening. I did not want to call my employer, my ward, or myself into any possible scandal without clear cause. And he did point out he would be in a very public venue for the duration my time away from Sherlock. It’s still my word against a terrorist’s though, isn’t it?”

Sister Verreuil nodded thoughtfully, but at this point the Scottish elder, Brother Verdin spoke up. “So you were prepared to knowingly abandon Elua’s vigil?”
“I was at an impasse, wasn’t I?” John asked, the frustration seeping back through. “I was assigned a ward whose primary occupation puts him into danger on the exact night we are supposed to hold our vigil. I was forced to choose which oath was more important. Which was exactly the problem I faced in Venice when I had reason to believe Sherlock was alive, and again in the embassy. I was busy defending him and everyone else from a sodding ex-Cassiline and a lunatic.”

“Language,” Brother Rocaille snapped.

Brother Vincent rose, jabbed his finger in John’s direction, but the fire in his eyes was aimed right at Brother Rocaille. “He was faced with impossible choices our members do not face even in exceptional situations. He made the call that his ward came above all else. How in Elua’s name does that condemn him to allegations like this? Those emails have been called into reasonable question, and he’s proven a hundredfold his primary concern is doing exactly what our Lord Cassiel called us to do.”

“I agree,” Sister Verreuil said.

“This is ridiculous,” Brother Rocaille snapped. “I say we take this to our chambers to deliberate. In the meantime, Watson, you would be well advised to pray long and hard to Elua until we have come to our decision.”

John had just enough time to glance toward Brother Vincent, then Sister Verreuil before nodding and turning on his heel: Brother Vincent, stricken, and Sister Verreuil, curiously intent.

John prayed. He prayed for clarity, for strength, for peace. If at any time before in his life he’d felt the presence of the gods he served, they were silent now.

The sun had sunk low and John was fighting valiantly not to shiver in the February freeze before a D’Angeline acolyte approached him, tapped him gently on the shoulder.

“They have reached their decision,” she said, no indication that her bare feet or modest robes left her susceptible to the biting cold. “I’m to take you back in.”

When he entered the council room, the eleven elders from the Brotherhood stared straight ahead, and the two Eluine priests stood before them, hands clasped serenely. Even Brother Vincent’s face was completely devoid of expression.

A frisson ran through John. His fate rested in the hands of these people. They were strangers, and his second family. The arms that held him close, in their way, when his family had died.

Whether he was fated for damnation or exoneration, it lay at their feet.

“Brother Watson,” the D’Angeline Eluine began, “we have deliberated thoroughly in the case presented to us, regarding your actions since your appointment with Mr. Sherlock Holmes.”

Then the London priest stepped forward and spoke, his voice even. “Brother John Hamish Watson, the council of Cassiline elders, against the guidance of both Temples of Elua, have voted by majority that you will be found guilty of the crimes with which you have been charged.”
It was a hateful gut punch. John blinked rapidly, his vision blurring, the air escaping in a rush until he couldn’t breathe. The solace he’d found and been held in for ten years--gone.

“Moving forward, you will be given a choice. Renounce Mr. Sherlock Holmes as your ward and accept relocation as a novice adept in the D’Angeline Brotherhood, understanding that your actions merit undertaking your training from the beginning, or else be dismissed entirely from the Brotherhood, stripped of all titles and privileges. In either case you are equally damned--you are forsworn of one sacred oath or another.”

Were it not for his cane and likely the sheer will of his unbending spine, John would have sunk then to the ground. He could abandon his ward to remain a part of this sacred family, or choose the life of a civilian.

A crippled civilian who could protect Sherlock no better than a commoner, thanks to a ruined shoulder and a defect in his brain. Sherlock would have absolutely no use for him, then. He’d be dismissed, and utterly alone.

John sniffed hard, just a single intake of air, his heart in his ever-constricting throat. His blood pounded now, deafening in his ears, his head buzzing.

And the Brotherhood? If he chose to remain, he was faced with a lifetime of doubt from his superiors and peers, of unbearable scrutiny. Everything he’d been taught, everything he’d worked for: the entirety of the future he’d always envisioned--gone. The very things that had ever defined him, given him purpose. He would lose those.

Either way, his soul was forfeit in the bargain. Damned if he did, damned if he didn’t.

His breath hitched, the tipping point. He fought and failed to prevent the tears that spilled of their own volition as steel rang in his ears, a crash that drowned out his pulse. He thought then of his dreams, standing ever at a crossroad, unsure of the way forward. This--it was all leading to this moment, wasn’t it?

It was a cruel fate the gods had chosen. Every moment, every choice, every breath led to this inescapable crossroad. A sunrise, a sunset, the forever twilit North, and Cassiel at his back, urging him to choose.

The bloody slash, so similar to Elua’s, the way the crimson smeared bright against the apple.

Only True North stretched ahead of him.

His heart stopped beating. His voice sounded miles away when he spoke.

“I--I choose to leave the Brotherhood.”

Beyond the Eluine priests, triumph brightened Brother Rocaille’s face at the exact same moment that Brother Vincent’s heart visibly broke.

Both Eluine priests nodded in unison, and the D’Angeline priest spoke. “So be it. You are stripped of your priesthood and the sacred accoutrements of your position will be forfeit. You are relieved of your duties to Sherlock Holmes, who will be henceforth barred for application of any other Cassiline priest. You are excommunicated from the Brotherhood and declared anathema.”

The D’Angeline priest stepped forward then and took his hands, and John registered a hint of sadness there. His face, weathered with age but as but smooth-jawed as a youth, was impossibly kind. His eyes, hazel and keen, held John’s gaze. It felt like an apology.
John’s face contorted to keep from spilling any more tears.

This was a death.

The D’Angeline priest stepped back, joined the London priest. Together they gave the binding declaration.

“You are dismissed, John Hamish Watson, on this day, the seventeenth of February, the two-thousand and tenth year of Elua. It is witnessed by the joint collectives of the British and D’Angeline Cassiline Brotherhoods and the heads of both the British and D’Angeline Temples of Elua. May Cassiel and Elua have mercy on your soul.”

John made his way out into the foyer, stumbling back into the world. He registered nothing, only the numbness that insulated him. At some point he found himself at the same window he’d peered from earlier, staring down into Elua’s sanctuary. Moonlight made the statue gleam grey-white, the only point of light save for the city beyond. He’d been at the crossroads for a year, no longer a dream but a living nightmare. Now, just now, he’d finally chosen. It wasn’t an answer he would have ever imagined he’d give.

“Brother Watson?”

John turned to see Sister Verreuil standing there, her chisel-fine features still regarding him intently.

“I’m no longer a Brother.”

Sister Verreuil’s smile was sombre. “Be that as it may. Walk with me?”

John trailed along in silence through the winding stone corridors, registering none of his surroundings until at last she led him into what he could only guess were her private quarters.

His training far too ingrained into him, John stood at parade rest, staring straight ahead, as Sister Verreuil rummaged through a wardrobe holding her belongings. When she stood, she held two parcels. One was small enough to cradle in her arms, the other one long enough to rest against her hip as she stood there.

“You may call me Liliane. Please, sit.”

John took a chair by her desk, hands folded in his lap, and she crossed the modest space. She offered the first parcel to him. John frowned up at her, his confusion plain.

“I had hoped to give these to you under better circumstances,” she explained, “but I feel that it bears far too much history to keep, either way.”

John tugged at the plain twine that tied it together, unfolded the brown wrapping paper with an odd reverence. He lifted the lid to find that inside, nestled in soft green cloth the colour of a summer meadow, lay a shining pair of daggers in impossibly old leather sheaths. Beneath that were a pair of vambraces, equally as ancient and far more ornate than anything John had ever seen. Intricate designs were tooled into the leather, along with the scars of long-ago battles. They gleamed with warmth, oils having been freshly rubbed in to condition them.

“What is this?” he murmured.
“I am the head of the Siovalese Brotherhood,” she said significantly, and when he let his confusion show, she continued. “These have been in my family for generations. Five hundred years, and many more besides.”

“Why would you--”

“These belonged to the last Cassiline to be paired with an anguissette, my ancestor on my father’s side.”

Her name itched at a memory that stayed just beyond his grasp.

“His name was Joscelin Verreuil. And he chose, as you did. What he did--what you have just done--has been called making Cassiel’s Choice.”

A low buzz simmered in John’s head again, and he found himself speechless. Only one question forced its way out. “But if he was a Cassiline, how could he possibly be your ancestor?”

Liliane snorted and gave him the same sort of look Sherlock did when he was being especially dense. “He had brothers, you know. You miss the point. Cassiel’s Choice means to follow your heart and your ward rather than your superiors.”

John looked down at the ancient vambraces, tracing along the arching line of a wheat stalk. A fine tremor kept his hand unsteady.

“Cassiel chose Elua in favour of his own heavenly father, Adonai. He abandoned Heaven to remain on earth, ever at Elua’s side. He chose to damn his own soul to hell by handing his knife to Elua. Who is to say that Cassiel’s love was only that of a protector for a ward?” She breathed deep, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “What I believe--what we teach in Siovale--is that Cassiel’s love was pure because he loved him with his whole heart, with every fibre. We believe that Elua and the other Companions were not The Misguided, the way Cassilines think. It’s arrogant for us to suppose we know better than the gods.” Her smile was sweet as she said it, gentle. “The other Companions shared their love with any that would share their bed, but Cassiel was content to devote himself only to Elua. All we know for certain is that the nature of that devotion was never commented upon in our holy books.”

John frowned. “So you’re saying that you Siovalese Cassilines teach that Cassiel had a… romantic relationship with Elua?”

Liliane shook her head. “No, we only teach that it’s a possibility, that we are to stay humble in the face of what we don’t know, and not to suppose one type of love is superior to another. Our brothers and sisters still take the vow of celibacy, as that is a matter of the church at large.”

“Then what difference does it make?”

“What you did--there is only one higher sacrifice a Cassiline priest can make.”

“The Terminus,” John murmured.

The final maneuver a Cassiline could make, killing both himself and his ward in the face of insurmountable danger.

Liliane leaned forward, cupped his jaw in her soft palms, forcing him to look her in the eye. “You have done exactly as Cassiel did, as Elua bid us all.”

“Love as thou wilt,” John whispered.
“Exactly,” Liliane replied. “And as long as you live, you will find yourself at crossroads. We all do, but the stakes may be much higher for you.”

With that she reached for the other parcel, placed it across his lap. Something tremored behind John’s breastbone as he undid its wrappings.

Inside lay a sword in its scabbard. When he pulled out free it shone brilliantly in the light, its etchings a match for the daggers and the vambraces.

“This was his, too. We’ve kept these things in our family, as an honour. In accordance with the old customs, our family has still sent the second-born to Cassiel’s service, a tribute to his dedication.”

“But why would you give me these?” John asked, voiceless.

“Our family kept the story alive, but I can think of no more worthy owner. You have sacrificed the same way he did. I want you to keep this as a token of respect.”

John shook his head. “I can’t accept this. It’s a family heirloom.”

Liliane smiled, nearly a grin. “Then you’d better take care of it. I’m far too old, and the Verreuil name dies with me. I have no sisters or brothers, or even cousins who carry the name. I will never marry, nor have children. Who better to keep the memory alive?”

John sat back in the chair, utterly flummoxed. These artefacts resting in his lap--they were proof of the last man to make this impossible choice. He was not alone.

His throat constricted again, and he nodded. “I’m honoured.”

“As well you should be. You have done a noble thing today. May you make every choice with love.” She leaned down, pulled him into a tight embrace. “Now, I’ll have these sent back to your hotel room before I change my mind. You carrying them out of here would be quite noticeable.”

John wasn’t sure what to make of his own head as he navigated back to the main entrance; he’d been damned and honoured, cut loose and bound to a fate that had been a long time coming. And that was all with the assumption that what he was doing was, in some part, the right thing to do.

Even if it was, what would Sherlock think of it, if he thought anything at all?

With a sinking, twisting feeling in his gut, John realised that despite all his proclamations back in the council-room, that didn’t make Sherlock’s choice for him. It could all still come to naught, and all it would take would be one word of rejection.

It wouldn’t matter that he’d made Cassiel’s Choice, or that he’d just been gifted centuries-old Cassiline battle gear because a complete stranger thought him worthy. Sherlock could take one look at John, read him like a primary school book and see just what had happened. He’d see that John had chosen Sherlock over his life’s work. Sherlock would see a broken, failed warrior limping back like a wounded puppy, desperate for a gentle voice and a warm hand. All for a desperate kiss on an abandoned island during the middle of a firefight.

Sherlock had told him once, months ago, that he loved each of his patrons, just a little. Would he understand that the same had happened to John, but unlike the fractions of Sherlock’s heart each person might keep, Sherlock held the entirety of John’s damned heart on a silver platter?
So deep was he in thought that he completely missed Brother Vincent’s approach until his mentor clapped him on the shoulder, startling him out of his sombre trek out of the winding corridors leading from the Cassiline wing of the temple back to the main building.

“Did you speak with Liliane?” Brother Vincent asked.

John couldn’t look him in the eye. All he could think of was the heartbreak he’d seen there, when he’d made his choice.

*I let him down,* John thought. *He believed in me, and I failed that.*

“John?”

John cleared his throat, forced himself to lift his gaze, to submit to inspection. “She spoke with me.”

Brother Vincent made a thoughtful noise, and then jerked his head. “Come with me.”

Again, John found himself trailing in the wake of an elder, unsure of what lay ahead.

Out in the sanctuary, beneath the stars and Elua’s stone gaze, John and Brother Vincent hung back, stayed under the covered perimeter, shoes on.

“Why did you bring me here?” John asked, letting every ounce of his exhaustion bleed through.

Brother Vincent’s mouth ticked in an apologetic grimace and his stare stayed on Elua. He didn’t speak for a long minute.

John was content to stand there and wait. He didn’t want to be there, but he wanted to face Sherlock and his fate even less.

“I--I want to apologise,” Brother Vincent said eventually. His deep voice was small in the meagre light. “You asked me, back when this all began, if I was going to throw you under the bus. Do you remember that?”

John’s throat tightened. Just like that, tears pricked once more at his eyes. “I do.”

He’d been naive, *so* naive, only a short year ago. He had *no* way of knowing--

“And I told you were were made of spit and nails. That you’d come out of this unscathed.”

John clenched his jaw, let his gaze slide out into the sanctuary, to Elua’s ever-smiling face. “I recall.”

“I let you down.”

John frowned, glanced back at Brother Vincent. His mentor’s head was dipped, salt-and-pepper hair barely visible in the shadow of the eaves. A long gust of breath escaped Brother Vincent, the weight of his transgression bourne on steam in the night air.
I really believed—you have to understand, John. You were—you are my favourite pupil. You have so much—” Brother Vincent cleared his throat, his face twisting in an all-too-familiar attempt to push weaker emotions away. “I never really thought you were the same as the other young men and women that come through our doors.”

John stepped back, the words sharper than a slap. “What are you saying—you didn’t think I was good at—”

”Not that.” Brother Vincent shook his head, a rueful breath escaping him. “Not that.”

Brother Vincent clasped his hands behind his back, walked out a little way beneath the stars, and John followed. The winter-dead grasses crunched beneath their boots, the flowers long-gone.

“Then just what do you mean?” John grated out.

“We all feel, John. We all--everyone contains the capacity to love or hate, to feel fear or joy or anything else. But with you—” He smiled, but it was weighed by a sadness that tugged downward at the corners of his eyes. “I have never known someone who feels things as deeply as you, John Watson. You came to my doorstep on the heels of possibly the worst tragedy that can happen to a sixteen-year-old kid. Do you remember that?”

John looked away. Sullen, prone to fits of rage. He’d scared his bunkmates, those first few months. No one wanted to be partnered with him. Not John Watson, who pulled no punches and let all that rage flow through him and right into the flesh of his sparring partners.

John cleared his throat.

“You were in pain,” Brother Vincent explained, ”which you turned into anger to protect yourself. Your grief was too great. Anybody would feel that, I think. But you--the way you channeled it-- Sometimes I would watch you as I made my rounds.”

John raised an eyebrow at that. Where in the world was his mentor’s rambling apology going?

“The way you fought, the way you prayed, the way you did every last thing, John. You carried so much conviction it filled you right up. When you fought, I could almost imagine Cassiel being less fierce.”

John huffed a laugh at that. Brother Vincent had always said his temper got the best of him.

“That’s the real reason I chose you, John.”

John fell silent, looked away again. Smiling Elua’s eyes always on him, no matter where in the sanctuary they stood.

“When I began researching Mr. Holmes, the one thing that became most apparent was that this--this whole business with being god-touched… it’s not the same. It’s one thing to feel the influence of Elua and the Blessed Companions, when we dedicate ourselves to their service. It’s another to be anointed before we’re even born.” He lifted a calloused hand, dropped it heavily on John’s shoulder. “I knew if anyone could meet that challenge, it would be you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Just like that, his throat was too tight again, constricting painfully around his words.

“I had to convince myself that I wasn’t condemning you. I told myself that the same thing wouldn’t happen to you as happened to the last one. I never wanted that for you.”
John’s face twisted then, and for the second time that day, the tears streaked in white-hot trails over his cheeks. His voice stopped working, so he pushed his next question through as nothing more than a whisper of air. “So you knowingly sent me into damnation?”

“I’m sorry,” Brother Vincent whispered. “I never meant--”

John stumbled forward until he stood at Elua’s statue. He laid his palm against the freezing marble rendering of Elua’s robed shin. Brother Vincent stayed back, and if John trusted his gut, he had the inkling that Brother Vincent had brought John to the sanctuary to prevent a blazing row.

John thought again of his dreams. The crossroads, always the crossroads.

“I don’t hold it against you,” John said, surprising himself. “I think it was always meant to happen this way. You made a choice, and you did it with love.”

Brother Vincent, the man John had considered his second father, strong and witty and fiercely intelligent, let out just one hiccup of his grief, which echoed around the sanctuary before he could clamp his hand over his face. Here he was, the strongest man John knew, crying.

No, John wasn’t angry. His soul ached, his body ached, everything was just too much. But he wasn’t angry. How could he be, if he’d always been at these crossroads?

Even still, he found he had nothing else he could say. He knew Brother Vincent was awaiting whatever forgiveness or censure John wished to dole out. John was just empty.

Without a word, John dropped his hand, pressed his fingertips to the worn line of Elua’s foot, thinking only of anemones. Then he turned, escaped, with nothing more than a similar tap on Brother Vincent’s shoulder, a parting gesture whose meaning John didn’t entirely understand.

Chapter End Notes

Three things...

1.) Hey look, y'all! We have a chapter count! Well, I'm pretty sure that's the final chapter count. But hey!

2.) DOES ANYONE UNDERSTAND HOW HARD IT IS TO MAKE JOHN WATSON HAVE FRAGILE EMOTIONS?? Eugh. If I overdid it and he's OOC, just tap me on the back of the head. It was haaaaard, lol.

3.) Love-Note to Anyone Who's Read the Books:
Okay, I'll be honest. I included Liliane Verreuil and her gift as pure fanservice. Which, okay, I guess this whole thing is, but yeah. If it seemed too contrived or whatever, I just really wanted this thing to happen and I'm the boss, lol.

(Plus ten points if anyone picked up on her name reference...)

Love you guys! See you soon with 53!
Truly, the Cassiline assigned to Sherlock for the duration of the trial was unbearable. A dried up old stick of a man who spoke nothing but French, when he deigned speak at all. Mainly his job consisted of standing silent sentinel by the door leading up to the Cassiline quarters--likely to prevent Sherlock from intruding where he was certainly not wanted--or else staying two steps off of Sherlock’s arse whenever he went somewhere.

So Sherlock did exactly that. He roamed the city of Elua. He’d been there once, as a young boy, when his parents brought Mycroft and him there on holiday.

Unfortunately, it didn’t make the most picturesque stroll, not in February. The same sort of slush lined Paris’s streets as did London’s. People tucked into layers and hunched til their ears met their shoulders looked the same in any country.

For the first little while, Sherlock shot off deductions about his guard, about the other D’Angelines nearby, all only within the Cassiline’s earshot. Eventually he’d spark some kind of reaction, surely.

Nothing.

He couldn’t help, as he walked, to think of what it might be like if John were the one trailing him. The conversation would be a vast improvement, for one.

Just like that Sherlock found himself wading once more into the bewildering quagmire that surrounded John Watson. The most obvious thoughts were the simple things that came first: John snorting as Sherlock shot off some of his deductions, or the comfortable silence they could travel in. That was the John he’d come to know in the months after the Chamberlain case. Quick-witted without any need to draw attention to himself or dominate a conversation. Steady.

It was such a vast improvement upon the John he’d first met, the man who’d been nothing but anger in a grey suit. The same explosive force came through in a mug of tea set ungently on the counter, as did when he went through his morning exercises. Sherlock had been able to taste that John’s abhorrence, back then.

No, the John he’d come to know since July had been...lovely.

Before he could really stop and think, he shot off a text: [This guard I’ve been assigned is a mind-numbing prat. Were you all trained to have sticks up your arses? x -- SH]

After the message sent, he registered his mistake. His thumb hovered over the screen as he stood, unable to decide if he should correct or not.

A note of affection. More-than-friendly. The only other person with whom he’d shared that in a text had been Sally, and that had been awkward enough, hadn’t it? He’d never repeated that
again.

But John?

It was different, although in what way, even the great Sherlock Holmes couldn’t quantify. There had been la Poveglia, but since then… hardly so much as glancing eye contact. This was a new John, who avoided Sherlock the more he healed. He spoke less, smiled less.

Sherlock knew where he wasn’t wanted. He wasn’t going to inflict his presence on John.

John had finally come to his senses, then.

All his life, this had been the case. Every last person had avoided him in school, or teased and bullied him. Some of them had tried to be friends, in the beginning. Or else, circumstances beyond his control—the mote in his eye and pressure from their peers, the intimidation tactics his brother saw fit to employ—ran off the ones that might have stayed. That had been the case with John, hadn’t it?

Not the mote, nor Mycroft’s meddling, but uncontrollable circumstances nonetheless.

Thanks to Sherlock, John’s career, his life, had come completely derailed. It was Sherlock’s fault John was in the temple, under trial, while Sherlock wandered the streets of Paris.

John might not have wanted Sherlock to come—he didn’t say, one way or the other. Sherlock knew he needed to try to give a testimony. If it cleared John’s name, it didn’t matter what came next.

It had felt like the most bitter absolution when he’d been denied entry. If there had been one thing he’d learned from John, it was that there was no persuading a Cassiline once their mind was set. He was certain that if he tried to force his way in he’d be met with the same sort of discipline with which he’d seen John dispatch attackers.

That was an intriguing prospect, damn his anguisset nature, but not one he’d explore willingly.

[Behave.]

Sherlock frowned. John had reverted into the tacit, recalcitrant man Sherlock had met in the very beginning. Being back among his peers, under investigation like this… it was inevitable.

Still, it didn’t stop the realisation from stinging. With pursed lips, he fired back, hoping it would annoy John, just a little.

[I’ll force him to play tour guide. That should go over well. -- SH]

Sherlock breathed in deep, awaited whatever John might sling at him next. Maybe if he picked the argument, he could win the battle. Maybe it would hurt less, when John inevitably left him.

Before he could wonder too long, Mycroft’s name lit up his phone.

“Yes?”

“Brother,” Mycroft said, surprisingly warm. “Enjoying Paris?”

“Couldn’t be happier,” Sherlock said, but he said it too quickly and they both knew it.

In return, Mycroft’s answer was inversely blase: “I couldn’t care in the slightest. But I did call to
apprise you of a few… ah, developments.”

Sherlock grunted, looked back at his guard. The Cassiline stood, arms crossed over his chest, a few feet behind Sherlock.

Sherlock spotted a bench nearby, dropped onto it, and made a face at the Cassiline, shooing him away. The Cassiline rolled his eyes and took a single step further away.

It would have to do.

“What sort of developments?”

“Well, the more pressing of the two involves your schedule while you’re in Paris, I’m afraid.”

Sherlock scowled but didn’t say anything else. Either he was going to come under the same kind of fire from the Temples of Naamah, or else the Prime Minister wanted round him for tea. He wilted just a little, then. What sort of investigation did his actions warrant?

If it were anything like John’s trial, though…

“Please, do elaborate,” Sherlock said flatly.

“I’ve received word that Daniel L’Envers wants to meet with John and you.”

Sherlock jerked his head away from his mobile, as if it were possible to send his incredulous expression over the line by sheer force of will. “For what, exactly?”

Mycroft made a noncommittal noise. “I didn’t ask.”

“I find that highly unlikely.”

“Then you’d be correct,” Mycroft shot back. “But I still have no desire to tell you. Let the man explain himself.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow, late lunch. I’ll be there by breakfast, and we three can go in together.”

“I think I’d rather spend the time in Kushiel’s temple, getting flogged senseless for whatever crimes L’Envers is going to try to pin on us.”

“Of course you would, Sherlock.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to say something, but found he couldn’t. Had Mycroft made a joke?

“Why else did you call?” Sherlock asked instead.

“The other is a matter of your assets, which were frozen and seized upon the discovery that--”

“That Irene and Kate were murdered?” It was easier to say it than let someone else do.

“Ah, yes. I have been informed that there are several legal matters to discuss, but now that your names have been cleared, at the very least, you have access to your funds again.”

“That’s nice, but I still plan on being in Paris on your dime, brother mine.”

Mycroft sighed noisily.
An uncomfortable silence crackled in the crystal-clear reception, and Sherlock cast about, staring again at his temporary guard. Thought of John.

As if Mycroft could read his thoughts all the way back in London, he said, “You will let me know how the proceedings go?”

“As if you don’t already know,” Sherlock snapped, his ire irrationally piqued. He knew Mycroft was trying—maybe poorly, but trying nonetheless—to be kind.

“I have my theories.”

“Then I have no reason to call you.” Sherlock pulled his mobile from his ear, thumb nearly on the end call button before he heard Mycroft.

"Sherlock."

He put the phone back to his ear, made a non-committal hum.

“The sooner this mess is sorted,” Mycroft said, something close to bracing fraternal concern in his voice, “the sooner you can come home, and focus on what’s important.”

Sherlock cut the call before his brother could say anything else.

Paris sprawled around him, tugging the winter night over its shoulder in a dark, frozen blanket that sent tourists and locals back to the homes and hotels from which they’d ventured. Even his own guard finally snapped a gruff command to return to the temple, and Sherlock found he didn’t have it in him to protest.

When they arrived, a soft-faced acolyte offered him dinner. Sherlock was surprised to find that he actually was hungry, but still. He didn’t want to be here, surrounded by serene smiles or the stern, judgemental glares of Cassiline guardsmen. He just wanted solitude.

Sherlock could just make the Cassiline follow him back to his hotel, deposit him safely for the night. He could even keep the door between his room and the suite locked so John would have no reason to interact with him, when he inevitably didn’t.

“No, I--”

“Mr. Holmes?” Another woman approached, a priestess in Elua’s light blue robes, but her accent was English. Most likely she’d come with the London priest to this farce of an inquisition.

He leveled a barbed gaze at her. Whatever this mousy little woman had to say, he had absolutely no care to hear it.

Her smile persisted, lopsided and shy. “Mr. Holmes, I’d like to talk to you. Please, walk with me.”

He was entirely prepared to tell her no, to storm off to his hotel, damn them all, but her hand, light on the sleeve of his blazer, and the earnest depth in her brown eyes, stopped the words in his throat. He lowered his gaze, nodded in assent.

She took his elbow, her pleased smile better-suited to a schoolgirl. Surely this young woman couldn’t be much older, maybe twenty at best. “I appreciate it, Mr. Holmes. It’s lovely to meet you at last. I’m Sister Molly, from--”
“From the London Temple of Elua,” Sherlock interrupted.

“I--yeah. Good guess.” She made a noise that sounded obscenely like a giggle.

“I don’t guess. I observe.” Sherlock didn’t hide his testiness. “What do you want?”

Sister Molly studied him pointedly a moment, and then tugged his elbow. She led him to the Sanctuary, but did not draw him out under the night sky. Sherlock quickly saw why.

There before the ancient statue of Elua, John knelt, forehead cradled on his fingertips on the stone plinth. He shivered, his murmured prayers unintelligible in the still night air.

“He’s been there for two hours,” Sister Molly whispered. To her credit, her voice was so soft Sherlock barely heard it, standing right beside her.

“Why are you--”

“He’s waiting their decision. Your--friend--he’s troubled. I think you’d do well to pray for him, too.”

An icy stone lodged itself into Sherlock’s chest as he recalled the night he’d stumbled upon John’s prayers, months ago. Cassiel, give me strength. He’d put in for a transfer, too. John wanted to leave, even then.

Here he was now, begging to Cassiel to take him back into the fold. Relieve him of the nuisance Sherlock had always been.

“I think he’s doing just fine without me,” Sherlock hissed. He wrenched his elbow free and stalked as quickly as he dared away from the sanctuary, unwilling to disturb John or anyone in a nearby alcove.

Sister Molly was not dissuaded so easily. She caught up with him in the main foyer, and the look on her face landed sharp as a blow.

“Mr. Holmes, your friend is hurting. He is afraid and he is alone. I don’t care one way or the other about the allegations he’s facing. I only know that what he’s done, it’s been with love of one kind or another. If you have even a shred of decency, you’ll honour his actions and you’ll do what you can to help him.”

Sherlock staggered back, let the wall take his weight. She was right. It was a hateful, undeniable truth. John had risked himself more times than even Sherlock could count. John had put his soul on the chopping block, all for Sherlock’s safety. Now he stood on the firing line for it, awaiting the parting shots.

For what? For Sherlock to waffle like a child, half-hoping John might stay, might abandon his duties to—to what? Pretend at some sort of domestic bliss?

That would never be the nature of their relationship, and he knew it in his bones. He was a servant of Naamah. Even now that he was finished with his marque, he could stay in her service. He had it in him to give and take from any number of patrons. But John--John was his polar opposite. He was loyal to one patron only--his ward.

If Sherlock loved John--and he wasn’t foolish enough to think anymore that he didn’t--he couldn’t do that to him.

If the Cassiline Brotherhood didn’t excommunicate John outright, they would certainly take him
off Sherlock’s case. Just what John had wanted, the first night Sherlock laid eyes on him.

If there was nothing else Sherlock could do, he could pray for that. He could pray John got back the life he’d wanted.

He’d be tearing out half his own soul in the process, but if it meant John could have a chance at being happy--

Sherlock sucked in a deep breath, eyelids fluttering. He could dissemble, but he was in Elua’s temple. Sister Molly was far smarter than he’d have given her credit for.

“I--I will,” he answered, his voice thick in his throat.

Sister Molly lifted cool fingertips to press against his cheek, her expression at once light and sad. Her hand slid back, a gentle indication he should bend toward her, and he acceded.

“Love as thou wilt.” She pressed a chaste kiss on his forehead. “May Elua keep you always.”

Sherlock stood, forced himself into stony neutrality. If he could just fortify his exterior enough to keep all the destruction inside… he’d be able to do this.

Sister Molly led Sherlock to a sheltered alcove on the perimeter of the sanctuary, one of the dozens of cubicles one might use if the weather was inclement. In either mercy or else pointed cruelty, she settled him into one that afforded him a glimpse of the statue of Elua, where he might see John as they both prayed, but where it was unlikely John would see him, unless he were looking directly at Sherlock’s alcove.

Once she left, he did watch John for the first little while: prostrate in his suit, unheeding the dirt on the knees or what surely had to be freezing earth against bare feet, icy marble against his fingers.

John was… John was everything Sherlock understood about strength. Even now, even humbled in a begging prayer, the unwavering solidity of him took Sherlock’s breath and held it captive.

Sherlock clenched his teeth together, only somewhat more sheltered from the wind and cold, and hunched as close to the arch of votives, one for Elua and each Companion. He took warmth from it, strength from it, and bared his soul in prayer.

After some time, he heard the quiet footsteps of the young acolyte that had offered him dinner, as she picked her way across the crinkling grass floor. Sherlock watched as she tapped John on the shoulder, led him half-stumbling back into the building.

Sherlock prayed. He prayed for John, and for Irene and Kate; innocents that had been caught in the crossfire between Moriarty and him. He prayed for Cecily and Frédérique, and even Luca. If he’d paid attention sooner, if he’d only connected the dots faster, looked past his own bias to consider the possibility that Jim Moriarty was exactly what Mycroft had said he was, maybe--

Bronze drums thundered, and when he blinked his eyes open, his vision swam red. Elua was
ready to embrace him in love, but he knew the weight on his soul was best taken to Kushiel.

He straightened his aching spine, looked to his shaking hands in the guttering light of the near-spent votives.

Yes, this guilt was best taken to Kushiel. He’d never get anything done, if he didn’t lay his burdens there and take the punishment his pride deserved. It would serve far better than the tail-chasing he’d done all day. It would give him exactly the resolve he needed to let John go.

He rose from the kneeling cushion, already considering the best way to slip through the front foyer. More than anything, he did not want to meet Sister Molly or anyone else in the process. Just as he stepped out into the corridor between the alcoves and the bare earth, he heard John’s voice and froze.

“Why did you bring me here?”

Had Sherlock been any sooner in leaving he would’ve run directly into them.

Another man spoke, his voice older, a barely-noticeable D’Angeline lilt to his accent. “I—I want to apologise. You asked me, back when this all began, if I was going to throw you under the bus. Do you remember that?”

“I do.”

“And I told you were were made of spit and nails. That you’d come out of this unscathed.”

“I recall.” Tacit John, tempered by grief. Sherlock’s throat constricted and refused to loosen.

“I let you down.”

Sherlock leaned out as far as he dared, trying to find their forms in the dark. Who was this, talking to John?

“I really believed—you have to understand, John. You were—you are my favourite pupil. You have so much—I never really thought you were the same as the other young men and women that come through our doors.”

Ah, John’s mentor then. Likely the man John had written to, in order to beg for re-assignment. Now obviously apologising for not having done as John asked.

Nothing like the guilt of hindsight, Sherlock thought ruefully.

“What are you saying—you didn’t think I was good at—”

“Not that. Not that.”

Sherlock ducked back into his little cubby right as John’s mentor walked out into the open. Fifties, salt-and-pepper hair, Cassiline uniform and London accent.

John followed a few paces behind. In the moonlight, he was as beautiful as ever, although tonight it was sculpted from pain. Sherlock felt it, a knife between his ribs.

“Then just what do you mean?”

“We all feel, John. We all—everyone contains the capacity to love or hate, to feel fear or joy or anything else. But with you—I have never known someone who feels things as deeply as you, John Watson. You came to my doorstep on the heels of possibly the worst tragedy that can happen to a
sixteen-year-old kid. Do you remember that?”

Sherlock shrank back, pulled his teeth between his lips. He’d never asked, had never even wondered what sent John into service--

He shook his head, realising he hadn’t heard half of what either man said after that, and focused again on listening.

“I had to convince myself that I wasn’t condemning you,” his mentor was saying. “I told myself that the same thing wouldn’t happen to you as happened to the last one. I never wanted that for you.”

“So you knowingly sent me into damnation?”

Damnation. This man, John believed, had been the one to--

John’s soul was--

John had been excommunicated.

“I’m sorry. I never meant--”

Sherlock watched, aching for John, as John moved forward, placed his palm on Elua’s shin. His mentor watched John too, a genuinely bereft expression on his face.

John spoke, and the hollowness in his voice stabbed Sherlock right through the middle. “I don’t hold it against you. I think it was always meant to happen this way. You made a choice, and you did it with love.”

John’s mentor made a noise, covered his face to contain his pain, and John walked away, not once hesitating or looking back.

Sherlock’s head spun as he watched John leave. He covered his mouth, a silent mirror to the man still standing by the statue.

John, possibly the most well-intentioned person Sherlock had ever met in his life, put to this kind of fate--nothing was more wrong, more unjust than that.

Sherlock’s footsteps must have been too noisy in his haste to escape, because the man called out to him.

“Hello?” The Cassiline’s voice was hoarse, tight.

Sherlock froze, glanced down the corridor by which John had left. He was gone. Sherlock turned to face the Cassiline. Gave him a single nod.

The Cassiline made his way forward, until at last he was close enough to clasp Sherlock’s shoulders in his heavy, calloused hands. He studied Sherlock, lip quivering, and his gaze lingered longest on the mote in Sherlock’s eye, surely only barely visible in the low light.

“Brother--” Sherlock started, unsure of what to say.

“Brother Vincent,” he said. “You’re the anguisset.”
Sherlock nodded again.

“Do the right thing, lad.”

Sherlock drew in a sharp breath. It was one thing for Mycroft to imply--another thing entirely for Sherlock to decide, and a wholly separate thing altogether for this stranger to tell him to leave John be. He wouldn’t be ordered by some--

“He chose you,” Brother Vincent said, his voice catching and crumbling again. “He chose you.”

“I--” Sherlock stammered, recoiling.

But Brother Vincent hauled him in, wrapped him into a spine-crushing hug. “The Brotherhood gave him a choice. Stay with the Brotherhood, or stay with you. He chose you.”

Sherlock’s ears rang and his knees went liquid. For the first time in his life, his brain couldn’t keep up. “I--what??”

“Go to him.” Brother Vincent released him, gave him a slight shove back. “Elua keep you both.”

Sherlock didn’t have to be told twice.

Sherlock’s shoes slapped against the tile and stone, carried him blindly down the corridor and out into the night air, searching for John.

Each noise, each movement, filtered through golden syrup until time stood infuriatingly still. The white and red lights of nearby traffic, the distant chatter of people, all barely discernible. He craned his neck, looking in each direction along the pavement, trying to discern which route John had taken.

“Sherlock?”

John leaned stiffly on his cane before a great old oak, maybe a few metres away.

“John!”

Time crawled just enough that even though he sprinted down the wide temple steps, he watched every minute change in John’s face as it morphed from anguish to open confusion, a flower opening to half-bloom.

“Sherlock, what--?” John asked, and time crashed back together again.

“He told me,” Sherlock tried to explain as he closed the gap. “He told me what you did.”

John looked at the ground, tapped his cane once. He nodded without looking up.

“John, I--” But what could Sherlock say, really? John had chosen him. Him. Everything around him was chaos, but this moment, John, his John, his Cassiline, was one fixed point, and Elua but Sherlock’s whole world revolved around him.

“Sherlock you don’t have to--I don’t expect you’ll--”

“I love you.”
“What?” John went wide-eyed, clearly expecting something far different.

“I do hate repeating myself,” Sherlock said, but he couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his face. “Then again, I don’t get to say this very often.”

“Sherlock--”

“I love you, John Watson.” Sherlock clenched one hand into a fist at his side, willing his voice to stay strong, his body not to tremble as he let the words fall from his mouth. Once he started, he couldn’t stop. “I have been arrogant and petty. I was an idiot, John. An arse. I never deserved you, but you stayed.” Sherlock was certain he was babbling incoherently, but he couldn’t care less. It was freeing. Each true word tasted like honey. “I love you.”

John looked stricken, shaking his head, lifting his free hand to stop Sherlock. “Don’t--don’t say that, not if you don’t mean it. I can’t. You don’t owe me anything, so really, you don’t have to say it.”

John was even more spectacularly dense than Sherlock could have ever imagined, and Sherlock loved him even more for it. He growled in frustration, grabbed John by the lapels, and pressed him to the massive oak, telling John how much he loved him in the only language Sherlock had left in him.

Startled, John yielded with a noise lost between them, a cry for help and a prayer answered. His cane clattered to the frozen ground as he clung to Sherlock. Sherlock pressed his lips to John’s, soft and chilly from the air, hiding a furnace of heat within. He ran his tongue along the seam, until with a punch-drunk exhalation John opened to him.

It filled Sherlock with warmth, sunlight bursting through a thunderhead, a sharp thrill like beach glass after a lightning strike. He breathed John in, sweet and comfortable like the scent of apples, of home.

“Whooo!” a feminine voice cheered, and when Sherlock pulled back, Sister Molly and an elderly Cassiline woman were grinning from a second-storey window. The elderly woman winked at them, and Sherlock couldn’t possibly fathom why.

“But you’re a Cassiline--” Sherlock started to say.

John made a noise, burying his face in Sherlock’s shoulder to suppress a fit of giggling, which made Sherlock laugh, too. They stayed together like that a moment, clinging together in adrenaline-soaked mirth, and Elua Sherlock thought he would burst from it.

When they caught their breath, and John found the temerity to extricate himself from between Sherlock and the tree, Sherlock still found himself grinning stupidly. John mirrored it right back at him.

“It seems we have a lot to talk about,” John murmured, resting his forehead against Sherlock’s.

Sherlock let his freezing fingertips card through John’s hair from ear to nape. For the first time in what felt like ages, he finally felt right. “I believe we do.”


“What?” John blinked, glimpsing up at the bare branches.

“Did you not see the plaque?” Sherlock asked, but couldn’t keep the levity from his voice. Already, he was slipping back into a memory: the last time he’d been to Paris, as a boy.

Sherlock bent down to pick up John’s cane, and a little oblong object caught his eye. Grinning, he picked that up, too.

Chapter End Notes

IS ANYONE AS RELIEVED AS I AM THAT THESE TWO ARE FINALLY AUGH.
The ride back to their hotel was interminable. Eye contact connected and skittered, landing momentarily before dancing away. It was the irresistible draw of one to one, and the bewildering urge to keep from being caught, even though permission had been freely given.

When the hotel door closed behind them, John found himself at a complete loss. All he could do was stare at Sherlock in a way he hadn’t let himself the whole time he’d served Sherlock. It was remarkable: Sherlock was exactly the same, and yet he was more. The part of his full lips begged to be explored. The lean strength of his frame demanded John’s immediate attention— the urge to run his palms over Sherlock’s chest, or grasp along his sides and hips was overwhelming.

Sherlock cleared his throat, standing in the centre of the suite lounge. He looked apprehensive and lost—John had never seen him this way, not even on La Poveglia, or at the embassy. Dread curled in John’s stomach. Sherlock was having second thoughts about all of his hasty declarations, he was sure of it. As much as the thought hurt, it made sense. Why would an impeccably-trained servant of Naamah want an inexperienced, mediocre ex-Cassiline? Was it a sense of debt or obligation?

Just before John mustered the courage to say something, anything, Sherlock turned away. He busied himself at the modest bar off to one side, and brought them back each two fingers of Scotch in crystal tumblers.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice was soft as he dropped to the sofa gently, and John couldn’t help but follow.

“I--” John shook his head. "I don't know where to begin."

“I’ve wanted you for a long time, John Watson. I didn’t realise at first. I was in the middle before I knew I had begun.” His laugh was quiet, self-deprecating.

Vulnerable. Elua, so vulnerable. John’s chest ached and swelled, and he had nothing to say to that but the truth, bald-faced and open.

“You’re not the only one,” John admitted. “I’ve struggled with it for ages.”

He tried not to think of the anger, the guilt, but there it was. Oddly, it made him smile. Sister Verreuil’s words came back to him, the belief the Siovalese held about the nature of never presuming to know the minds of the gods. Elua, if that wasn’t the truth he’d learned firsthand.

Sherlock shifted, looked up to study John again. “I’m not surprised very often. Well done.”

John grinned. “I need a recording of that.”
John grinned. “I need a recording of that.”

Silence cascaded to settle between them, uncertainty shifting in the fog. John lifted his Scotch, inspected it. The amber liquor sloshed, but wasn’t distracting enough to break the awkwardness. John knew what he wanted to ask, what he needed to ask, but this—all this had been so sudden. He was a man who thought quickly in battle, not so much in matters of the heart.

*Fortune favours the bold, Watson.*

John took a sip of the Scotch. It burned smoky and clean.

“What--what are we doing, Sherlock? What happens now? Are we in a--” he faltered, the concept of this word applying to him completely a foreign notion, “--a relationship?”

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, John. I have no expectations, no agenda.” The raw sincerity on Sherlock’s face was something John hadn’t seen since the night he’d heard Sherlock play the lullabye.

John didn’t doubt this was the truth.

Sherlock took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. “I’m yours however you want. I just need you to tell me.”

“I don’t know,” John admitted, and took a long sip at the Scotch. The warmth of it settled comfortably in his stomach.

Sherlock did the same, a long moment drawing out. When he glanced over to John again, his lips twisted into a smirk. “I propose a compromise.”

John raised an eyebrow.

“If you’re amenable, why don’t we start by talking?”

*That’s the last thing I want,* John thought. Aloud he only said, “Talking how?”

“How about where your boundaries are,” Sherlock answered as if this wasn’t a tectonic shift in John’s entire world. “What we each want, at least for here and now.”

John studied Sherlock for another long moment, looking for some familiarity, and finally he realised what he searched for. He’d seen Sherlock slide into a--a different sort of personality, a different headspace as he went to his patrons. He would become a doe-eyed treat, a submissive temptation. Relief washed over John when he saw none of that now: Sherlock was only a man, one hand fisted on his knee, as nervous as John.

Heart in his throat, all too aware of the blazing point of contact where Sherlock’s knee brushed his, John nodded.

Sherlock drew his lips between his teeth and took a deep breath. When their eyes met, John’s lungs refused to work. John fought not to look away. Instead he saw--and let himself be seen by--blue-green-gold eyes, the left marred by a brilliant red speck, a petal on sunlit waters.

Sherlock stretched a hand out, hovering over John’s glass, which rested on his knee. “May I?” John, still wordless, nodded.
Sherlock stood, pulling John to his feet. “I propose, for now, we… get acquainted. I would very much like to relax with you. It’s late, and I know we’re both exhausted. Do you feel comfortable coming to lie down in my bed?”

John paused for a moment. A bewildering new part of him wanted much much more than lying down, but Sherlock was right. Too much too soon, and Elua only knew how that might fall out. And, now that it had been pointed out, his body was run as ragged as his mind was wired. He could do with some calm.

“If that’s too much--we don’t have to,” Sherlock added, uncertainty creeping into his voice. “I refuse to rush you.”

John smiled and nodded toward Sherlock’s door. “That sounds wonderful.”

“Would you prefer to get on your sleeping clothes first? I could do with a shower.”

Leave it to Sherlock Holmes, of all people, to be practical.

After respective showers and pyjamas, John found himself standing at Sherlock’s door, hand poised to knock.

If he did this, if he went into that room and into Sherlock’s bed, he would be burning the bridge, officially and irrevocably. His oath to Cassiel would be abandoned in a way that went beyond words or decisions made in a moment of anger before the tribunal. He would be going in there under the full knowledge that his last remaining oath would be one he made to Sherlock, to protect and serve, to never leave his side.

*We call it Cassiel’s Choice*, Sister Liliane had said.

Was his heart’s desire worth more than his oath to Cassiel? Had he been right to choose as he did in the Tribunal?

Was he acting on lust, or on Elua’s precept to honour love before all else?

John chewed his lip, thinking of the terror in the days leading up to going to La Poveglia. He knew it would be years before he forgot the grim determination to walk into certain death for Sherlock there on an island swarming with enemies who wouldn’t hesitate to kill him, all on the off chance that Sherlock was even alive.

He thought of the relief and joy that blotted out all else when he found Sherlock, the rash action of kissing him then and there.

He knew his answer. He stumbled upon it on La Poveglia, and declared it to the tribunal here in Paris. Sherlock… He had known, even then, that a life without Sherlock was meaningless. Sherlock was worth more than his own soul. Sherlock was true north, and John would surrender to that wholly.

He closed his eyes and knocked.

When Sherlock called John in, John found him sitting on the bed, hair still damp from his shower.
His pyjamas were the familiar loose, soft ones John recognised from countless mornings in Maison Adler. It stirred something bittersweet in John’s chest.

He focused on Sherlock’s hands, which fidgeted with the cuff of his pyjamas. Sherlock sat in the centre of the overlarge bed, cross-legged and anxious. It made him seem so much younger. This was the Sherlock that John wanted to protect the most.

“Hey,” he said, and could hear his own bashfulness; Elua it was embarrassing. Heat prickled at the tops of his ears. His heart beat harder than he thought possible.

“You were outside the door a full thirty seconds before knocking,” Sherlock said. He was in filter-free deduction mode, his voice tight. He was as nervous as John. “You were considering your options. You have doubts. I wager it’s even-odds you’ve come in here because you--”

John lifted a hand and cut him off before he said anything stupid. “I stood there, yes, thinking of what it would mean to come in here. I am making this choice freely.”

“That’s most certainly a terrible idea,” Sherlock said, and John could tell he was only half-joking.

John ignored him and sat down on the bed.

“I’ve been known to make worse ones,” he allowed.

John felt the urge to reach out to Sherlock, to take this ridiculous man into his arms, or something, but he wasn’t sure how. He’d never done this, had never been one for physical affection even before the Brotherhood. Instead, he went out on a limb and laid his upturned palm on the bed by Sherlock’s knee. Sherlock could take it if he wanted, or he could ignore it.

Sherlock took his hand. “If you’re sure.”

John swallowed hard and nodded.

Sherlock lifted their joined hands, turned them over and studied them more carefully than he might a butterfly having alighted on his hand.

John supposed that was fair. This was something new, something fragile.

“What did you choose me over the Brotherhood?” Sherlock asked, as if he’d already deduced the answer but still couldn’t wrap his head around it.

John squeezed Sherlock’s hand, once and then once again. “It took standing before them to realise that I’ve chosen you again and again since I was first assigned to you. At every turn, my path has always led me to your side.”

Whatever Sherlock had expected, it didn’t look like that admission was it. He didn’t meet John’s eye, but a quiet surprise lifted his eyebrows a hair’s breadth. His head ducked, a single aborted nod, as he absorbed the information.

“I’ve been miserable most of today,” Sherlock admitted in return. “It was easy to deduce what choices they would give you. I was certain you would choose their terms of re-admission. Until Venice I was certain you despised me.”

John huffed ruefully. “For the longest time, so did I.”

Sherlock smiled softly at that. When he spoke again his voice was small, strained. “What changed?”
John glanced away, searching for a definitive turning point. Any turning point.

“You invited me to dinner,” he answered. “You played the violin.”

In his periphery, he could see Sherlock tilt his head in confusion. “I...playing the violin made you stop hating me?”

“It was a thousand things.”

Sherlock made a soft, noncommittal noise at that. After another eternal silence, the thump of John’s heart and the acute awareness of Sherlock’s hand in his own, Sherlock spoke again. “I’m glad.”

John glanced up to his face again. “You and me both.”

Then, in the span of one blink, of three, Sherlock’s shoulders twisted. John’s breath caught, and in unspoken agreement they met in the middle.

Their foreheads pressed together a millisecond before John whispered, “Kiss me, please.”

Sherlock obliged, his free hand lifting to tilt John’s chin just so, his breath a warm puff against John’s lips before connection. John’s heart was likely to pound right out of his chest. It was a chaste thing, a gentle slide of lips that left John dizzy. Some instinct guided him; he caught Sherlock’s bottom lip between his teeth. The noise Sherlock made went straight to his groin. Boldened, John did it again. His breath left his lungs in a rush as he pressed forward, rewarded with another soft noise before the tip of Sherlock’s tongue ran along the crease where their lips met.

John was so keyed up that a distant part of his mind wondered how he would ever manage anything more than a simple kiss, but then he tasted honey and he found he didn’t care.

“That’s it,” Sherlock coaxed breathlessly against his lips. “Just let go.”

“What is this?” John asked, the sudden foolish feeling that his brain was tricking him--

“It’s Naamah’s blessing. I can taste it on you.”

John couldn’t say a word to that, instead found himself hungry: he needed to taste more. He pushed forward, kissing Sherlock deeper this time. Sherlock responded in kind, then reluctantly pulled back.

“Slow, John, slow. We shouldn’t rush.”

John fought back a small wave of embarrassment--had he been that subpar?

“I can tell what you’re thinking, and no,” Sherlock answered. “You’re--I worry that I may not be able to help myself.”

That did nothing to cool the fire in John’s veins.

"We were meant to be sleeping," Sherlock chided, but his tone betrayed how far he was from enforcing that agreement.

"I'm wide awake."

Sherlock lifted his palm up to face John, and John mirrored the gesture. Sherlock let out a
wavering breath. He let his fingertips trace along John’s, a barely-there suggestion of pressure, warm skin leaving a tingling chill in their wake. It coursed electric along each nerve.

John’s hand trembled as he rotated it and let his knuckles brush Sherlock’s palm.

It was a minute gesture, this give-and-take of fingertips and hands in delicate caresses. Such a small thing. Still, like kissing, this was taking a liberty he’d never had before. He was allowed to act with the intent to arouse and chase pleasure. It was beyond his ken.

“Saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,” Sherlock murmured, his fingers lowered to encircle John’s wrist. For a moment, the light in his eyes was playful. “And hand to hand is holy palmers’ kiss.” He lowered his lips to brush against the delicate skin at John’s pulse point. It was nothing more than a ghost of warmth and the softness of smooth skin.

Desire, the intoxicating rush of Naamah’s blessing, effervesced in John’s veins, a sweet and heavy weight low in his abdomen. It was as heady as the heavy kiss only moments ago in a new, completely different way John couldn’t quantify. If the kiss had been a race, this was a ballet.

“Is this okay?” Sherlock asked.

John’s lips curled into a rueful smile. “Wouldn’t be the first time you’ve kissed me now, would it?”

Sherlock let out an amused hum. “A different question, then. Would you like to reciprocate each time I do something new?”

“You are--that’s--brilliant. Yes.”

Sherlock’s smile deepened and he lifted the wrist of his free hand for John to catch.

For his part, John prayed Sherlock couldn’t tell how much his hand was shaking as he cradled and lifted Sherlock’s wrist to his lips. He knew it was a useless prayer--Sherlock could read him like a message in the sky.

A faint trace of Sherlock’s cologne hid at his pulse point, ephemeral--something musky and floral and woody, just enough to catch the nose before disappearing again. John breathed deeper, chasing the scent, unable to find it before pressing his mouth to the point at which Sherlock’s pulse beat the boldest. If John had any doubt about how this affected Sherlock, it was gone, laid bare in the tell-tale thump of Sherlock’s pulse, hot and strong against John’s lips.

Sherlock let out a heavy breath, and at this point even breathing stoked the fire.

Braver now, John parted his lips, let his tongue run across the spot. Sherlock made a noise, took the hand he held earlier, and did the same to John.

Sherlock’s mouth was molten heat and John needed. John swallowed hard and realised Sherlock watched him: Sherlock studied his face and nibbled at the tendon standing out. Already a rosy flush rode Sherlock’s high cheekbones, eyes blown wide and dark.

“Oh, hell,” John breathed.

Sherlock soothed the spot with another kiss before straightening and shifting, pulling John close again. John was more than pleased to note the fine tremor in Sherlock’s hands as he skimmed his palms up John’s forearms along his biceps. John mirrored the motion, certain the anticipatory banging in his chest was audible.
“Do you know,” Sherlock whispered, “how many mornings I watched you go through The Counting of the Hours? I wanted to taste the salt on your skin.”

Heat raced through John, diving low and twisting deep in him. There was no hiding his arousal, not through thin, loose pyjama pants. He fought the new instinct to press Sherlock to the bed and rut—he knew Sherlock was right. They had to proceed with care.

This was too new, too fragile, no matter how much they both wanted it.

Instead he opened his mouth to speak, unsure of whether Sherlock’s confession warranted reaction or equal admission. Then a single memory floated to the surface, the very beginning of his fall.

He found himself at once embarrassed and brave, made brash by the slight, sharp edge of jealousy. “I—I heard you. That first night, at Victor’s. It drove me mad.”

Sherlock made a noise, coy and curious.

With a flutter of panic John was sure he’d overstepped, that it was the most monumentally wrong thing to say. It wasn’t on to mention eavesdropping while his partner had sex with someone else. How could he be so stupid?

“I mean—I—” He wanted to take it back, but that was it. Sherlock knew his dirty secret, the first of a few.

“I’d wondered.” Sherlock let out a shaky breath, dark and sinful. “Part of me was hoping you’d hear me.”

At that John’s brain whited out. Sherlock thought about him during assignations?

“I couldn’t help but think about you sometimes,” Sherlock continued. “What you might hear, what you would see if you misunderstood and barged in… Part of me wanted you to see.”

How perverse was this, John wondered. How blasphemous?

He understood the jealousy that flared in him. This was a blunt acknowledgement of Sherlock’s experience, of the pleasure Sherlock had taken with others. Still, the knowledge hit him so hard he that he was sure it wasn’t physically possible to be more aroused. He ignored the near-overwhelming urge to conquer and claim, to erase any memory of lovers who’d come before. Fighting the temptation to ruin the game with hasty action was monumental.

“May I take off my shirt?”

John’s mouth went dry and he nodded. He could only stare as Sherlock took his hand back from John so he could peel off his t-shirt. Every new inch revealed gently-toned muscle and pale skin: a show-and-tell game with deliberate aim.

“Do you want me to, erm—” John gestured at his own shirt.

“If you’re comfortable with that.” The heat in Sherlock’s eyes was unmistakable. “Can I do it?”

“Again with the brilliant ideas.”

Sherlock leaned in, planted a chaste kiss at the top of John’s sternum, barred from bare skin by thin cotton.
“Is this alright?”

“Very much.” John’s eyes closed, relishing the sensation. “Please.”

Sherlock tugged at the hem of John’s vest, revealing the firm expanse of John’s stomach and chest. John lifted his arms to assist, but the motion was aborted when his bad shoulder ached sharply in protest.

John couldn’t stop the pained noise that escaped him as he jerked back. He moved his shoulder with care, trying to push past the ache, the tight clench of the injured muscles surrounding the wound. It felt like his ligaments and tendons threatened to revolt. John closed his eyes, tried to steady his breath.

He tried to ignore the sharp bite of disappointment: his damned injury spoiled the mood. The stab of pain and the flare of embarrassment doused every last ember of desire in him. If this was Naamah’s way of slowing John down to make sure he didn’t rush anything tonight, she had a sadistic way of going about it.

He shook his head. “I’ve got to do this part myself.”

After a little struggling, John worked himself free. He hugged the arm of his bad shoulder to his side, willing the pain to abate. When he finished he found Sherlock regarding him, the gears turning.

This was it--it was one thing for Sherlock to have seen his injury while John convalesced. It must be another thing entirely to be put face-to-face with it in the heat of the moment, to have it ruin everything. Sherlock would be disgusted. John found it even harder to ignore the way that clenched his stomach.

Sherlock stroked light fingers along the edge of the bad shoulder, and when he met John’s eyes there was something soft there. “I meant it when I said I would like to stretch out with you, get a little more comfortable. Is that okay?”

John nodded, and moved to the centre of the bed. “You don’t have to keep asking if something’s okay. I’m not a wilting damsel. I promise I’ll let you know if anything’s uncomfortable.”

But Sherlock shook his head before following John. He pillowed his head on John’s good shoulder and splayed tentative fingers over John’s heart.

“This is as new to you as it is to me.”

John frowned and craned his neck to glance down at him. “But you’re--you. You’re a servant of Naamah.”

Sherlock let out a breath and traced his fingertips in swirling loops along John’s chest. This, too, was an aspect John would have never guessed at. It was miles and leagues away from the Sherlock he’d first met, headstrong and arrogant. This Sherlock was pliable, conscientious. Affectionate.

“I am a servant of Naamah, yes,” Sherlock said cautiously. “I have always gone willingly and consensually to my assignations, but I have never had the pleasure of choosing someone with no ulterior motive. I have never been in this position, as an equal rather than a submissive, and I’ve certainly never been with someone who’s--”

John snorted. “A virgin.”
Sherlock tipped his head at that. “I don’t dare presume your comfort level. As antiquated as the
notion of virginity is, I respect it. Right now I am in a position of power, of a sort. I will not take
advantage of that.”

There was something in his tone, something John couldn’t quite place. It bore examination, but
since Sherlock didn’t seem like it was a pressing matter, John shelved it for later. Instead he flexed
his shoulder absently, trying to ignore the way it ached and twinged.

“You’ve never been… not submissive?”

“Submission isn’t the only thing I am capable of, but it’s one of the finer… selling points.”

“Like the--pain?” John tried not to think of that, now that it was sitting there in front of him.
Shortly after his first trip with Sherlock to Victor Trevor’s, he’d done a bit of research in his free
time. He had tried to convince himself it was only to prepare himself. Even back then a part of him
knew it was a lie.

He wasn’t sure he could do those sorts of things, and suppressed a moment of doubt. If Sherlock
needed what John couldn’t give, how could they ever make this work?

Sherlock spoke, breaking John’s niggling panic. “Naamah’s gifts come in many forms. Pain is an
aspect of it in my experience, and I won’t deny that I enjoy that. But this… It’s different. You are
a gift.”

A gift. John, of all people. He didn’t know what to say to that. Instead, he improvised.

“In that case, I am honoured to have you ask for consent. I trust you.”

“Kiss me again. If you want.”

“Of course I want, you berk.”

But John obliged, sliding down lower, kissing Sherlock once more. Sherlock cupped the back of
his head and worried at his lip with his teeth. John’s breath left him in a rush and the first stirrings
of desire returned.

Sherlock’s skin burned hot where it pressed against John’s side. John groaned into his mouth,
tugged at Sherlock’s side until Sherlock slid onto him, pressing him into the mattress but mindful
of his bad shoulder. Sherlock kissed him, languid and sure in a way that they hadn’t done earlier,
no less heated for its lack of urgency. Sherlock kept him there like that, until John could feel his
growing erection pressed between their stomachs. He arched up against Sherlock, the need for
friction a sudden priority.

“Less clothes,” John muttered, his lower lip still caught between Sherlock’s teeth. “Please,
Sherlock. Less clothes.”

The low growl Sherlock made went straight to John’s cock, and he rolled his hips up again.
Sherlock arched to meet him in it before sitting up. They parted long enough to finish stripping,
and when they got down to their pants, Sherlock hooked his thumbs into the waist of his own
boxer briefs, stretching them just so.

“These too? Is this okay?” Sherlock asked, and while it was still the same sought permission as
before, it held a playful note in reserve.

In response John laughed and tugged them down for him until they reached his knees, at which
point Sherlock lost his balance and toppled onto the bed and laughed with him.
John had no idea intimacy could be like this—he knew enough to know about the heat and friction, desperate and emphatic. John chuckled as he collapsed back onto the bed, his heart full to the point of giddiness, and he wondered at feeling that as imperatively as the desire that held him in its clutches. It made him think of ever-smiling Elua, and his message to *Love as Thou Wilt*.

“First you knock me over, and now you’re laughing at me,” Sherlock commented in feigned disdain as he finished wriggling from his pants. His smirk shouldn’t have been half as charming as John found it.

Sherlock settled back onto him and trailed kisses along his neck, his collarbone, until John writhed with it. He paused long enough to lick a firm swathe across John’s nipple, which surprised John enough he let out an emphatic noise. Sherlock’s eyes darted up, a silent check-in. John hummed a short note, an unspoken request for more. Sherlock obliged, licking and nibbling, his hand coming up to make sure the other one wasn’t left unattended.

“Elua,” John panted and rolled his hips up. The way his cock slid along the narrow crease between Sherlock’s hip and groin sent sparks through him. It should’ve been illegal. “Shit.”

Satisfied at a job well-done, Sherlock’s kisses moved further down until he was low enough to swirl his tongue into John’s belly button. At that John jerked, his stomach fluttering in recoil.

“Ack!”

“Ticklish.” Sherlock chuckled. “Not that one, then.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Sherlock replied pragmatically. “We’re all different.”

With that he licked a long line across the underside of the small ridge along John’s lower abdomen where the sparse trail of hair spread and led further down.

The noise John made then was completely undignified.

“And this, is this okay?” Sherlock asked when he edged a bit lower.

He didn’t have to elaborate.

John nodded hungrily. He would’ve sworn he was dreaming as he watched Sherlock trail lazy, open-mouthed kisses along the side of his cock. The heat and slickness was absolutely intoxicating. Sherlock held his gaze the whole time, and even if he’d wanted to, John would’ve been unable to look away, the sight was so mesmerising. Sherlock’s tongue swirled around the head of John’s cock, and that was all the warning John got before Sherlock slid down, taking John to the root.

“Ah, Elua, fuck!” John gasped, his hips jerking up in surprise.

Sherlock made a noise of encouragement and if John didn’t know any better, he’d almost guess Sherlock was smiling, even with his mouth otherwise currently occupied.

And then Sherlock picked up a slow and steady rhythm.

For all that, John couldn’t figure out where to focus, not exactly. The sensation felt—well, fucking amazing—but John wasn’t sure if he should focus about how good he felt, or if he was supposed to be simultaneously finding some way to make Sherlock feel like this, or if that would be rude, since he wouldn’t be paying as much attention as he should be--
The sudden departure of Sherlock’s mouth was jarring.

“You’re thinking too much,” Sherlock chided, his tone fond.

The incongruity of Sherlock’s warm affection and John’s cock at attention right beside his cheekbone made John giggle. “Sherlock Holmes, telling me I’m thinking too much?”

Sherlock nudged his nose against it. “Relax, John. Naamah will guide you.”

“I need to kiss you,” John said plainly.

John’s heart fluttered like doves’ wings, and when he kissed Sherlock again he tasted the lingering sweetness of honey: Naamah’s blessing, once more. The heat of Sherlock’s body pressed along his was gorgeous, and he couldn’t ignore Sherlock’s cock against his thigh. Sherlock shifted his hips just so, rocking against John, and John responded in kind.

“May I--,” Sherlock panted when they broke apart again. He gestured between them, and while John wasn’t exactly sure what Sherlock meant, he was more than willing to find out.

“Yes,” he moaned.

Sherlock shifted to line his cock beside John’s, grasped them both loosely in his large hand.

“Oh, hell, that’s a brilliant idea,” John managed.

Sherlock tipped forward, caught John’s bottom lip between his, a quick kiss as he stroked them slow and dirty. He rested his forehead against John’s brow. “Tell me to stop if you feel uncomfortable. You mean more to me than anything.”

“Elua, I love you.”

Sherlock’s gaze bore into John, and with their foreheads touching, there was no escaping it. John understood what it felt like to have his soul stared directly into. Everything receded for a moment, the best kind of background noise as he let his heart be laid bare.

This was--he’d never experienced anything this powerful. Not with any god, Elua forgive him, and never with another person. Yet here he was, unflinching and calm. How was it possible to feel this way, and be unafraid of it?

“Say it again,” Sherlock whispered, his grip tightening a fraction until John saw stars.

“I love you,” John breathed, his body suddenly too small to contain the magnitude within him.

Sherlock’s eyes crinkled and when he kissed John again, and John could taste his smile.

“Now please, please, have your wicked way with me.”

“Happy to oblige,” Sherlock replied, and used his free hand to pull John’s hand down to where they were joined. He let go long enough to wrap John’s hand around their cocks before covering it again with his hand. “Together.”

It was halting at first, finding the right angle to move their hands, to rock their hips. They found their way until nothing but their heavy breathing filled the air, until John’s toes flexed and curled in the bedsheets, as sweat sprang to cool flushed skin.

Of all the things John had ever guessed for his life, being held in place beneath Sherlock Holmes,
bodies working together to chase a high John had never willingly sought before, was never one of them. But here he was, and it was right. With his free hand he gripped at Sherlock’s sweat-slick shoulder, slid up to grasp the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“Sherlock,” he panted. “Oh, Elua--” and kissed him deep as he came.

That was all it took for Sherlock, who came in the wake of John’s orgasm, riding out the aftershocks.

There in the afterglow, after they’d cleaned and rearranged themselves more comfortably, they curled into one another in comfortable silence. John breathed deep, the haphazardly-dried wildness of Sherlock’s curls tickling his nose. He let himself study Sherlock half-lidded in the gloaming of the dark hotel room, only the lights streaming in from Paris herself illuminating Sherlock’s pale skin.

He’d just--they’d just--

They had made love.

John gave himself the luxury of rolling this new truth around in his mind. It had been everything and nothing like what he might have anticipated: in turns tender and frenetic, lighthearted and serious, and every doubt met with love. There was a sense of wholeness, of rightness that John didn’t even know he’d been without. Being with Sherlock had done that.

Elua had given him this gift, and though it had damn well taken him long enough, John had accepted it.

He was surprised to find that no guilt eddied in its wake. If Cassiel still held John close despite the excommunication, he hadn’t yet voiced disapproval. Maybe Sister Verreuil was in the right; maybe the whole of Cassiel’s devotion was left unrecorded, and had involved this sort of pleasure. Maybe Cassiel had given himself to Elua, and Elua alone.

“You’re thinking very loudly again,” Sherlock mumbled, his face mashed comfortably against John’s good shoulder.

“All good things, I swear.”

Sherlock lifted his head and studied him, brows creased slightly.

“You’re sure?”

“I swear it.”

“You do a lot of swearing.”

John smiled, gentle and fond. “I may not be a Cassiline brother anymore, but I don’t think I’ll ever be rid of that particular flaw.”

“You left them for me.” Sherlock fell silent at that, and then glanced at the gauze-packed gunshot wound on John’s shoulder. “This--you took this for me.”

John nodded, unsure of what to say to that. Of course he had. He would honour that last remaining part of his oath until his very last breath.
Sherlock’s expression was unreadable, but he leaned in, dropped a kiss on John's jaw. His voice was surprisingly small, innocent when he spoke. “I was certain that you’d leave me behind. So many times.”

John let out a long breath, ignoring the guilt of the truth in those times he’d plead with Brother Vincent to be released from his assignment.

"I wasn't always sure of that," he admitted, and prayed Sherlock would understand.

Sherlock nodded. "I hypothesised months ago that you'd applied for reassignment and been turned down." 

"I'm sorry," John breathed. His eyes squeezed shut. "I didn't know. Now I do. Now I know how I feel."

"It's done," Sherlock said, his voice even and sure. "I don't doubt you."

He cupped John’s jaw in his palms and kissed him delicately. John was sure the sweetness of it would make his heart burst.

“I’m not leaving,” John promised. “I’ll never leave you.”

A tangle of emotion wrote itself on Sherlock’s face, and for the longest time he said nothing. John wasn’t sure what to make of it, but he let it be when Sherlock rested his head once more on John’s shoulder.

Neither spoke for a few minutes. When Sherlock broke the silence it felt like a change of subject, but not a bad one. “I hope we didn’t strain your shoulder more than it was already.”

“It hurts, but I get the feeling it’s going to do that for a good while,” John admitted.

“Even still. I’m--thank you. It’s late, and I believe sleep was the original agreement. I hadn’t entirely planned on, what did you call it? ‘Having my wicked way with you’?” Sherlock’s voice curled warm and amused.

John smiled, something soft pressing against the inside of his sternum. “I didn’t disappoint too terribly, I hope.”

“Not at all.”

“Maybe you can teach me,” John said, and even after everything, he felt himself blushing again. “Erm. More about those wicked ways, as it were.”

Sherlock laughed, a heavy sound as sleep finally began edging its way in. “If you like. We have time.”

That in itself was a prospect whose wide horizons left John stunned at the view. They had time, all the time in the world.

“That sounds good,” John murmured. He craned his neck, gave Sherlock a light kiss.

Chapter End Notes
Hooooo boy this chapter kicked my ass. If any of y'all follow my fandom social media junk, you may have seen the screenshots of me crying at a_cumberbatch_of_cookies over how to make this chapter work correctly, lol. (If you want to see them, my insta is chucksauce221)

Alternate titles for this chapter:

- A literal sound clip of Etta James singing "At Last"
- "I Totes Used To Be An Ascetic Puritan Monk Dude For the Last Ten Years Until Like an Hour Ago, and Basically You Are A Prostitute, BUT DUDE I TOTES WANT TO DO THE DO WITH YOU HOW COOL IS THAT NBD."
- "I JUST WANT TO MAKE READERS AND ALSO JOHN & SHERLOCK HAPPY AND IDK HOW TO DO THAT UNLESS IT'S ULTRAVIOLENCE OR ANGST OR ELSE 50 SHADES OF FUCKING cries forever"
- "Chuck, Much Like Sherlock, Doesn't Know How to Feelings, but is Certainly Giving It A Whirl."
- "Even as a Blushing Virgin John Can't Help But Be A Little Take-Charge"
- "John and Sherlock Admit to Basically Having Sung The Divinyls About One Another"
- "Holy Shit How Did This Get 6k Words Strong"

Other things to note:

1. Y’all, I know there probably should've been more jealousy/insecurity on John's side. I just. I'm not a jealous person, and jealousy as a kink or a thing is one of the few things that is completely not in my wheelhouse, so... sorry if that was a disappointment. Like, what does it say that I'd rather write sounding and daddy kink than realistically explore jealousy? Hahahaha
2. Sherlock's line, "I was in the middle before I knew I had begun," is totally a ripoff from Elizabeth Bennett, when her sister Jane asked her about falling in love with Mr. Darcy: "I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look or the words, which laid the foundation. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun." As with basically any rivals-to-lovers or hate-to-love story, if the relationship doesn't sit this way as far as the character can see, then it's not being done right, lol. It's the *perfect* explanation for that kind of relationship arc.
3. Oh my god, I know the whole quote from Romeo & Juliet is cheesy af, but I couldn't resist. We'll just handwave over the original context of that conversation, lol.
4. I've got a proper playlist put together that I've been using basically since the beginning, and as soon as I can get my life together, I'll probably add a section in the Appendices for it with a link each to spotify, youtube, soundcloud, and 8tracks for the people who are into that sort of thing. Because I am a thorough freak.
5. **Update On The Possible Drawing/Contest/Thing:** I'm almost done; once I get the final chapter completed and posted on here, I'll be able to get the final physical copy price, and will then be able to arrange for the drawing. It's looking more and more like it will happen, but still--I make no promises yet!

Most importantly: I hope to see you back for chapter 55!

<3Chuck
Sunlight warmed Sherlock’s face, illuminating the darkness behind each eyelid with its gold-orange glow. As his mind warmed up to running speed, he realised he was more comfortable than he’d been in a long time. He had the pleasure of a plush bed, ridiculously-high thread-count sheets, the pleasant smooth warmth of skin against his. Before he could bring himself to open his eyes, he breathed in deep, making his assessment the situation even better. The skin he felt was John’s. His nose was pressed into the crook of John’s neck. Sherlock could smell sun-ripe apples and the pleasant tang of sleep-sweat. He was curled behind John, one knee tucked between John’s, one arm thrown over him.

He slid his palm along the flat plane of John’s chest, through the sparse patch of golden hair, and pressed a kiss behind John’s ear. The low buzz of arousal stirred, but it was negligible. Here was John. His John. Right where he belonged. Instead he breathed deep, pulling the scent of apples deep in him, writing it into his DNA, committing it to memory. Cracking his eyes open, he leaned back just enough to duck and press a kiss to the knob at the top of John’s spine.

John inhaled, long and lazy, also waking up. He stiffened for a moment, and Sherlock walled off a sharp pang of worry--would John regret what they’d done, now in the daylight? But no, John relaxed, made a soft, pleased noise as he pressed his hand against Sherlock’s against his chest.

“Good morning,” John rumbled.

Sherlock hummed in greeting and squeezed him lightly. “All right?”

John nodded, and rolled over to face Sherlock. His smile was still sleep-soft, his eyes only barely opened. “Very.”

“Good,” Sherlock murmured, and kissed him.

“Even better,” John said, amusement suffusing his voice.

The moment was ruined before Sherlock could say anything more, though, by three sharp raps at their bedroom door.

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut and groaned. Of sodding course. Mycroft had said he was coming for breakfast.

Sherlock felt for John, who didn’t have the luxury of getting dressed for the day in Sherlock’s room, as his was across on the other end of the suite. So John shuffled into his pyjamas as Sherlock suited up. He heard Mycroft make a speculative noise as John darted past him, across the front room.
Sherlock himself was in the middle of buttoning his shirt when Mycroft peeked his head in the doorway. Mycroft scrutinised his surroundings, and Sherlock sighed inwardly. Of course Mycroft would be the first to know of the change in his relationship with John.

“It seems congratulations are in order,” he drawled. “Mummy and Daddy will be so pleased.”

“Piss off,” Sherlock groused.

“None of that,” Mycroft replied, but his tone was amused, smug. It itched along Sherlock’s skin. “I’ve taken the liberty of calling up room service. Our business this morning can be conducted right here.”

“What is it, that you couldn’t have told me over the phone and been done with it? Instead you saw fit to come all the way to Paris to have breakfast with us?”

But Mycroft, infuriating prat that he was, only tipped his head and retreated back to the sitting room.

His brother didn’t skimp on breakfast, that much was certain. When their cart arrived, there were two pots of tea and a generous carafe of still-steaming coffee, and enough food for three full Engishes, if everyone was inclined. Sherlock opted only for tea and a couple of toast points, smeared with butter and a drizzle of honey.

John was content to tuck in, but Sherlock was impatient for Mycroft to divulge his reason for visiting.

“Spit it out,” Sherlock said, taking a bite of one of his toast points. “Let’s get this over with, if you don’t mind.”

Mycroft sighed, glancing down at his own breakfast of scrambled egg whites and a toasted crumpet, halved and spread lightly with bright red strawberry jam. “When we spoke yesterday, I mentioned that your personal assets have been unfrozen.” He paused, took a sip of his tea in a dainty manner that let Sherlock know he was drawing this out on purpose. “Along with that comes the matter of Ms. Adler’s own affairs. When you were assumed guilty, her property and finances were seized. In light of events, I’ve been given clearance from her lawyers to execute her will.”

Something fluttered behind Sherlock’s breastbone, and he put down his half-eaten toast. He hadn’t even considered what would happen to Irene’s property since—since her murder.

“I don’t want Maison Adler,” he heard himself say.

Mycroft dipped his head in concession. “I thought that might be the case; you are free to sell it in favour of investing in a home of your own. I took the liberty of building a dossier of other suitable accommodations, if you were interested. I’ll leave those for you to peruse. There is no need to rush in your decisions, although I will remind you of what a terrible roommate you are, so I’d rather have you settled sooner rather than later.” There was the ghost of a joke in there, which...
Sherlock ignored.

“Such brotherly concern,” Sherlock sniped, but there was no heat in it.

Mycroft’s mouth stretched in the sort of smile he reserved for Sherlock, half indulgent older brother and half grimace, like he could still recall the more egregious odours of some of Sherlock’s childhood science experiments. “As ever.”

John let out a hefty gust and placed his fork gingerly on his plate. “How long have you been sitting on this?”

“Since the two of you ostensibly eloped. I contacted her lawyers outright, to see what might be done before the government seized everything for good.”

John’s lips pursed, and his words came out sharp. “And you didn’t see fit to mention that at all before now?”

Mycroft blinked at him, bland and neutral. “There was no point in bringing the matter up until things settled. As they have drawn to a natural conclusion, it felt appropriate to let you both know.”

John made a sceptical noise, but let it drop. Instead he looked at Sherlock. “What do you want to do?”

Sherlock leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table to lace his fingers together in thought. Whatever the outcome, he had John, and wherever John was, there too was home. He knew he couldn’t go back to Maison Adler. He would never be able to separate it from the last time he’d been in there, before everything fell apart. Selling the property and finding his own made the most sense. The thought of retreating to a country estate was tempting, at least for a little while, but he knew himself, and he knew John. When it was time, London’s heartbeat would call them back.

The matter of Irene’s seat in the Guild was an intriguing notion; there were certain injustices he could strive to correct—he couldn’t help but think of Cecily Noualt, of Lorraine Carver, of untold others who could and had still slipped through the cracks. There was good to be done there.

As far as the money was concerned—aside from what it took to get by in reasonable comfort, Sherlock was not swayed into a fortune’s thrall. They would find uses for the excess, he was sure.

He let out a breath, licked his lips. “I believe I have some ideas, but we should discuss our options before we come to any decisions. This is your future, too. You have just as much say as I do.”

John’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, and he jerked back a fraction. “But I—I’m not—”

“Nonsense, John,” Mycroft interjected. “For once my brother is right. Take your time. You need not come to a decision today.”

John blinked rapidly, opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. Sherlock tried not to smile at the warmth that suffused him then. John was speechless. It was unbearably endearing.

Mycroft took another sip of his tea and then cleared his throat politely. “There was one other matter that needs explanation, Sherlock.”

Sherlock dragged his gaze back to his brother, who shifted in his seat. In anyone else, it would’ve looked like discomfort.

“You’ve asked me over the years--how I managed to find the clues about your nature as Kushiel’s
chosen.”

Sherlock made a noise at that. “A point on which you’ve been infuriatingly tacit, yes.”

Mycroft nodded, a quick jerk of the chin. “I came across it in Uni, as you know. I’d been doing a bit of research on the beginning of the D’Angeline-British relationship, which is when I ran across De Mornay’s work.”

Thelesis De Mornay, Sherlock recalled. The author of the *Ysandrine Cycle*, that singular poem that had set Sherlock on the path to where he was today.

“When I found it, I couldn’t help but think of the torment you endured in school, in part due to the mark in your eye. I had hoped, and rightly so, that it might give you some hope, some purpose. I had hoped it would give you strength.”

Sherlock’s throat tightened, and he fought to ignore it. This was not the sort of thing shared between Holmes brothers. Sherlock had no experience to fall back on.

Mycroft spared him the trouble, continuing with a similar constriction in his voice. “I won’t be so sentimental as to employ rose-coloured hindsight and say something as erroneous as, ‘I’ve always believed you were destined for great things.’ We both know that’s a fallacious assertion.”

Sherlock let out a *humph* of agreement. Here was familiar territory.

“I do wish to say, though, brother mine, that I am proud of the man you’ve become. Not everyone could make the choices you have made. You or John, all told. I very much wish the best for you. All the blessings Elua can heap on you. You two deserve them.”

Sherlock coughed and looked away. He swallowed hard against the painful lump in his throat. He risked a glance at John, who looked gobsmacked. “Yes, well.”

“Yes.” Mycroft rose with a perfunctory sniff, his breakfast abandoned. “Well. I will leave you two to the rest of your morning. My car will be around to pick you up for our meeting with Prime Minister L’Envers at half past one.”

Hôtel Matignon was an opulent mansion littered with plush rugs on reflection-shiny hardwood floors, all white and gold gilding. Mycroft led Sherlock and John to a comfortable, modestly-sized drawing room where Daniel L’Envers sat waiting.

The L’Envers rose at once and offered them a firm handshake. From the creases at the corners of his blue-violet eyes, Sherlock could tell his enthusiasm was genuine. He cut a reasonable, open figure in a grey suit and no tie, and gestured for them to take a seat.

“C’est un plaisir, monsieur Président,” Sherlock said as he sat. *It’s a pleasure, Mr. President.*

L’Envers grinned. “Let us speak English. It’s always good practice for me.”

From the corner of Sherlock’s eye he caught John’s head bob to hide his smirk.

“Gladly, sir,” Sherlock said.

It was odd, being at the centre of this complete stranger’s attention, even if he had saved the man from assassination. This level of elbow-rubbing was completely undesirable.
“How have you found the City of Elua, my friends?” L’Envers asked.

Sherlock made some sort of vague affirmative, ready to skip the small-talk, but he was here at the behest of a head of state, and his training was too ingrained to recognise those superior to him, no matter how much it may chafe.

They exchanged pleasantries for some little time more, until L’Envers had his fill. He leaned back and clapped his hands briskly.

“I’m sure you are wondering why I may have called you here, monsieurs Holmes and Watson--”

“You wish to thank us for preventing your assassination and a possible chain reaction of wars,” Sherlock surmised, having reached even his limits for politeness.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft hissed as John cleared his throat pointedly in further chastisement.

Sherlock only met L’Envers’s gaze head-on until L’Envers let out a laugh. “So I have. I proposed to your brother the possibility of throwing a fête in your honour, but he assured me you’d rather not endure it. Still, I would like to put the question to you. After all, it is for you two.”

Sherlock glanced to John, and bless John, he read Sherlock’s quirked brow and straight-lined mouth succinctly.

“I believe Mycroft guessed correctly,” John answered. “I was only doing my job. Sherlock was doing the same.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock added. “I’d say it was nothing, but we went to an extraordinary amount of trouble--”

“Elua, Sherlock!” Mycroft interjected.

“All the same, we’d much rather be out of the spotlight, thanks.”

L’Envers gave a theatrical, good-natured sigh. “Ah, well. I suppose I’d best do this in private, then.”

Sherlock let himself frown fully at that.

L’Envers turned, slid a smallish flat box from beneath his thigh, tucked between it and the arm of the red-and-gold brocade sofa. Sherlock bit back a groan. Whatever this was was completely supercilious, and would likely take up space at the bottom of his sodding sock drawer.

L’Envers stood, and his three guests followed suit. He lifted the lid to the ornate wooden box to reveal a large golden pin: it was styled as a many-pointed star, a large diamond set in its centre with a prominent sigil of Elua cut into it.

“Monsieur Holmes, I would like to present to you the Companion’s Star for this service. I believe grand things will come of your appointment as Kushiel’s chosen, and for which you have my trust. You have proven your dedication to his will.”

Sherlock gaped, a heavy crease in his brow. “There’s no need--”

But L’Envers ignored his protest, moving forward to pin the medal on Sherlock’s lapel. “With this honour come a few a privileges. You have access to me at your whim--show it to any of my staff and they will present you to me. Also, it confers a single favour. If it is in my power to grant it, your wish is my command.”
“This is ludicrous,” Sherlock sputtered, grasping at straws so desperately he wasn’t really paying
attention to his own excuses. “I stopped a bomber, not a war--”

“You just said yourself that you prevented a potential war,” John interjected. Sherlock could
throttle him for the amusement in his voice. “You deserve this, Sherlock. I’m happy to follow you-
that’s enough honour for me.”

“You deserve it as much as I do.” Sherlock flapped his hand at John, his tone nearly accusatory.
“This is ridiculous. I don’t need this.”

“Of course you don’t need it, brother mine,” Mycroft said. “It is an honour. Now shut up and take
it.”

L’Envers laughed again, a proper belly laugh. “Oh, you lot are wonderful. Are you sure I can’t
tempt you into our cabinet here?”

Sherlock made a disgusted noise, which pleased L’Envers more.

“Ah, well. More’s the pity. I’ve heard tell of your genius. If you change your mind…”

“Absolutely not,” Sherlock answered. “Thanks but no.”

“Well, then. I suppose our business here is done. Won’t you stay for lunch?”

In the end, Sherlock may have refused a place on the French President’s staff, but neither John nor
Mycroft would let him refuse dining with the man.

Chapter End Notes

You guys. My face-cast for L’Envers is totally Justin Trudeau. Don’t judge me, lol.
Holy shit, it seems like the harder I try to crack down and get this beastie done, the more the real world intervenes! What the heck. Anyway, if you need a refresher:

1.) John was able to find Sherlock thanks to some help from Sister Roberts and a shady organisation called the Unseen Guild.
2.) Sherlock and John have successfully thwarted Moriarty bombing the UK's D'Angeline embassy
3.) John was excommunicated from the Cassiline Brotherhood and declared anathema, but then he and Sherlock FINALLY talked about all their special feelings, right under Elua's tree in the center of Paris
4.) Mycroft told them that hey, their assets have been unfrozen and Sherlock's inheriting Irene's stuff, too.
5.) The President of France, Daniel L'Envers, gave Sherlock a medal called the Companion's Star, which gives him access to the president at any time, and confers one favour of Sherlock's choosing.

Okay, that gets you all caught up, I think. n.n

T HEIR time in Paris gave way to an extended stay at Mycroft’s townhouse in Belgravia, as they searched for a place of their own, and finished settling their affairs. In the end, a quaint little building in central London suited them; a townhouse on Baker Street that had been converted into three separate flats decades before. When Sherlock extended the offer for Mrs. Hudson to come and live with them, rather than stay at her sister’s, she cried and gathered them into her arms, thin but strong. Sherlock and John were susceptible to her display. There wasn't between the three of them.

“Just mind you,” she said, still watery but now light and playful, “I’m not your maid.”

They had chuckled at that and hugged her again.

They had agreed it was best that a moving company, one vouched for by Mycroft, would retrieve their belongings from Maison Adler, as even the thought of going back to do as much pierced John to the core and left Sherlock silent and on the verge of tremors. John could see as much, and fought to give him the comfort John knew he’d only shy away from. They may have been lovers now, but that much didn’t change. Sherlock needed space to grieve, and John knew he’d always give Sherlock whatever he needed.
Still, it had given John a certain pleasure when Sherlock insisted on bringing Irene’s library with them, although where they might store it in their modest flat was a question for another day.

On the matter of Irene’s country estate, they both agreed that at the beginning of the next month, they would take Mrs. Hudson with them and stay in there in Sussex for the summer. It was a trip John heartily looked forward to--he could envision a small garden to tend, free to use what small gifts Anael bestowed. He could only pray the seaside and rolling hills of green pasture would ease the knot of tension that had been in Sherlock’s breast since their nightmare had begun.

It was an odd month of adjusting to their newfound domesticity, imperfect and coloured with the clashes that two headstrong people will inevitably have, but it was good. It was happy. The mere thought of all that they had built, in the time since they’d met, that had ignited on a cursed little island on the fringes of Venice--it suffused John with a warmth that let him indulge in the tender words and soft caresses Naamah drove him to and Elua always smiled upon.

Toward the end of that month, they received a summons John had somewhat dreaded, but expected nonetheless: they were to come to the Temple of Kushiel, to meet with Sister Roberts. John wasn’t sure why Sherlock had been included, but he knew exactly the reason he’d been called.

As they made their way to the temple, John was surprised to realise he’d never been to Kushiel’s Temple. He’d lived in Elua’s, being a Cassiline, but that had been it. As they approached the ancient stone facade, he vowed to visit them each; he was certain each of the Companions had a hand in their survival and success.

The ancient wooden doors slid smoothly on their hinges, and John couldn’t help but feel Sherlock’s tension radiate in waves as they were received by a novice, clad in black robes and a stern bronze mask, its features echoing Kushiel’s.

“Be welcome, brothers,” came a young male voice. The boy couldn’t be more than eighteen.

Ha, John thought. Here he was, only twenty-seven himself, but after everything, he felt as old as the building in which they stood.

An imposing bronze statue of Kushiel filled the lobby, rod in one hand and flail in the other, the devices of his absolution. The lazy blue smoke of strong, spicy incense curled as it rose upward, haloing Kushiel’s head.

“We have an appointment with Sister Roberts,” Sherlock told the novice.

The novice gave a slow half-bow and led them in silence.
John was surprised to find that the atmospheric, dark and warm temple lobby gave way to modern office space as the novice led them down a utilitarian corridor to its very end. The door was open, and John watched in mild amusement as Sherlock abandoned ceremony to lean his head into her office uninvited.

“Sherlock Holmes,” came Sister Roberts’s warm voice, “and John Watson. I’m glad to find you both safe and whole.” She rose and rounded the desk to greet them, a chaste kiss on each cheek. “John, why don’t you have a seat? I need to speak Sherlock for a moment, just out here.”

John took one of the two plain office chairs before her wide, organised desk, and Sherlock remained in the hall, the door swinging shut with a quiet click behind Sister Roberts. He closed his eyes, his questions, his determination, stilling into a blessed calm as he waited. After a moment she returned, though Sherlock was gone.

Sister Roberts must have seen the way he stiffened to find Sherlock’s absence, but she rose a hand, palm out in placation.

“He has other matters to attend to, by happy coincidence. But you and I,” she said as she stood over his chair, “have another matter to discuss.”

*Here it comes,* John thought, and lifted his hand to pluck a nearly-smooth old coin from his breast pocket. He’d taken the coin on its little leather thong from his neck and kept it hidden ever since they’d finished the business at the embassy. Having sworn on secrecy, he couldn’t afford Sherlock’s having noticed it. Just now, the coin was warm between his fingers.

She saw it and smiled, all business, but did not take the coin from his hand. “Indeed. Well, John, I believe I told you at our last meeting that I have an offer you, if you succeeded in your mission. You have done it, so much more completely than I had hoped.”

John blinked at her, still holding it extended between them.

“Keep it.” She laid a hand a hand on his shoulder and turned away to take her seat behind her desk as John dropped his own hands to the armrests of his chair. She leaned forward on her elbows, lacing her fingers together. “John, with the blessing of the Unseen Guild, I am honoured to invite you to join our order.”

“You’re quick to turn it down. Please, consider our offer. I’ll give you forty-eight hours.”

“I’ll tell you now,” and at this point, John couldn’t keep a twinge of anger from his voice. “I’m not doing it. Thanks, but no.”
Sister Roberts sighed. “This is disappointing. I can’t say I’m completely surprised, but I do wish you’d reconsider. For the safety of your ward.”

Oh, that was a button she did not want to press. “You’re not going to use Sherlock to manipulate me. I’m not playing your little games.”

“No games,” she agreed with a sigh. “In that case, once you walk out of this office, you can’t change your mind. There’s no coming back to beg your case.”

“I don’t beg,” John ground out.

Sister Roberts grinned at that. “May it be ever so.”

John stared at her a long minute, and she let him, relaxed in her chair, meeting his gaze with equanimity. “Are we done here?”

“If that’s what you choose. Thanks to Sherlock and you, it’s still a free country.”

John rose and gave her a sharp nod.

Just as he made it to the door, Sister Roberts spoke softly, a parting shot. “Swear to whatever oath you hold dearest that you won’t breathe a word of this to anyone. Not even if you have to beg for clemency, should it come to that.”

John fought the urge to curse at her, but instead he gave his oath. Then, remembering the coin cutting into its hands from how hard he clenched it, he tossed it onto her desk, where it landed on its thin edge, spun once, and fell with a sharp clink. John could just barely make out the remains of the lantern sigil raised in relief and rubbed near-smooth with time.

“I was hoping you’d keep it. It would have afforded just one favour from us, after all.”

“Sod your favours.” And with that, he left her office and her heavy gaze.

Sherlock was another hour off wherever he’d gone, before reappearing through the sanctuary doors while John paced the lobby. When he drew closer, John could see a change in him. Sherlock laid a light hand on John’s jaw, but went no further, just drinking in the sight of him. John allowed himself to still under the inspection, but he realised what difference he felt in Sherlock’s presence: the weight, the ghosts that had haunted Sherlock since La Poveglia, were gone. Whatever had transpired in the temple proper, it left a serenity that clung to Sherlock. The only clue John had to whatever Sherlock had done lay in the red rims of his eyes, which shone as if Sherlock was only seeing John for the first time, wondrous and rare.

Whatever it was, John didn’t ask. It had transpired between Sherlock and his lord Kushiel, that much he could tell.

Sherlock, in a rare display of circumspection, gave John the courtesy of the same, regarding his meeting with Sister Roberts: no questions.
That night, after dinner things were cleared away, John stared into the fire, rather than break the silence in which Sherlock still contemplated whatever had transpired at the temple. For his own part, the conversation, the turn the last few months had taken, played in a spiralling circle in John’s mind. He had refused the Unseen Guild’s offer, and with it, the support of unknown faces. What if they did need it?

What if Sherlock uncovered some other plot that sent them into the darkness, with nothing more than the grace of the gods to bring them through it?

Had John just done a grave disservice to Sherlock? Had he denied him a source of salvation, one John may not be able to provide? Had John, with one moment, one decision, broken his last sacred oath, the promise to protect Sherlock at all costs?

He had been ready to die for Sherlock, he thought, before Moriarty.

He had been dead-set on it, he knew, on La Poveglia.

He had sworn it, again and again, and he prayed he would never fail, now. He had nothing worth living for, if not for Sherlock’s safety.

It was late enough John was considering calling Sherlock to bed, when Sherlock finally spoke, his voice soft and low.

“I’ve come to a decision, John.”

John turned to him, gave him the gift of his silence while Sherlock put together the words he needed to express.

“I have decided to give up Naamah’s service. I have no desire to take patrons, and nothing to gain as far as I can see, in continuing. Besides, I have finished my marque and the person who held it in trust is no longer around to recognise the debt paid.”

John swallowed hard, a hot and tight lump swelling in his throat. They hadn’t discussed it, nothing of the subject, since the chaos had settled into somewhat of a routine.

"Are you sure?"

John didn't quite know how he felt on the matter. He had known that accepting Sherlock meant accepting Sherlock's service to Naamah. Before Sherlock, John had never imagined himself in a polyamourous situation--but then he'd never imagined himself in any sort of amourous situation at all. Part of him did want Sherlock's monogamy, and couldn't imagine having any urge to explore his own possibilities in that direction: he was devoted, body and soul, to Sherlock. That was enough of a full-time job. But still--

"If you're only doing it for my sake--" John started.

"I'm not, no."

John gave him the silence to fill. This was Sherlock's declaration, after all.

"I cannot promise that in the future it will always remain this way--but for now, this is what I
want, John. I want you to have my undivided attention. If need arises, I trust we can discuss that down the road."

John nodded. There was a certain amount of relief in that amendment. Sherlock wasn't abandoning Naamah's calling on some misguided attempt to secure John's happiness. He was doing it on his own terms, and allowing for the possibility that Naamah may yet call him again.

He could agree to that. As much as John couldn't deny his own nature in certain things, he couldn't deny Sherlock's either.

John rose, and crossed to the couch where Sherlock stretched in repose. He sank to his knees, bringing himself face to face with Sherlock.

"I can support that. As long as it's not you doing this just because you think it'll make me happy."

Sherlock smiled softly, and in his gaze, the red mote dazzled. "But you will be, I think."

"You make me happy." John dropped his forehead to Sherlock's, breathed in his air. "Elua, you make me happy."

"I can say the same," Sherlock replied, and kissed him.

They stayed like that for just a little while, John crouched and Sherlock still stretched on the couch, the only point of contact in the softness of lips, tender and small kisses, a shared expression of a sentiment each of them found hard to put into words. It tasted like devotion, like honey, like a kind of contentment John had never known. When they broke apart, John's smile was mirrored in Sherlock's knowing smirk.

"Bed?" John asked.

"After you."

And when they curled together there in the darkness of the downstairs bedroom, they took their pleasure, unhurried and blessed.

Chapter End Notes

I'm still fleshing out the final details of the giveaway, so bear with me, but I *should* have that all nailed down by the time I post the next chapter... the LAST chapter. See you in 57! <3 <3 <3
Sherlock trembled as he knelt, wrists bound in leather thongs to the rough wooden post at the altar. The priests of Kushiel’s temple had led him already through the ritual bath, the simple prayer. All that stood between himself and peace of mind now was the space between his skin and the flog. The anticipation was the worst of it; he knew he was here to seek atonement. It was nothing he had been able to say aloud, nothing he’d even been able to formulate in his own mind, the guilt he carried, until Sister Roberts had given him the suggestion. It was true, though. He did carry guilt, and whether he was really to blame for any of it was tucked in a logic he couldn’t access, not yet, not for the weight he carried.

“Sherlock Holmes,” the priest intoned. “You bow at Kushiel’s altar. Do you accept his mercy?”

His voice quivered as he spoke. “I do.”

The first blow fell, scalding hot across the breadth of his shoulders where the flog’s metal-tipped strips snapped against his skin. He tensed. Brass thunder sounded in his ears, louder than he’d ever heard it before. Bloody-red haze washed his vision. He squeezed his eyes shut, breath captive in his lungs. He’d had flogs used on him before, of course he had, and had endured a great many other implements in the course of Naamah’s calling, but this was pain, pure and raw, and with each blow, it spread like fire in his veins. It roared in the hollow place behind his breastbone, combusting hardwood logs of anguish until they were ash. This was Kushiel’s absolution, flesh and blood offered to the keeper of Hell’s gates.

He wept as the blows fell; he wept from the pain in his body and for other pain: for Irene’s death, and Kate’s, for the fear his parents must have felt, and even for Mycroft’s. He wept for John. Not for finding love where neither would have ever expected it, but for all John had lost by choosing Sherlock over the Brotherhood. He wept for the guilt of not feeling worthy of that sort of devotion at all.

Surprisingly, he wept for himself, too. For the things he’d experienced at Jim Moriarty’s hands, the torment of being torn between lust and loathing. He knew there should be no question, there should be no what if, but that was the worst of his curse, and it would always be inside him.

The priest whipped him until he sagged, weak and hoarse, his back so aflame he only distantly felt the sharpest of the pain where the metal had eventually cut his skin, the slick of blood a bizarre balm.

He quaked, every muscle in his body a juddering mess, breath ragged and erratic as the last of that grief and guilt escaped him. It wasn’t until he grew quiet, until he grew still, that the priest touched the back of his head.
“Brother Holmes,” the priest’s stern voice now held tenderness, iron wrapped in velvet, and Sherlock thought he might sob again just from its timbre. “Kushiel absolves you. Come.”

With that, the priest untied Sherlock’s bound wrists, cool fingers delicately palpating the abraded skin. He stooped and Sherlock lifted an impossibly heavy arm to drape over his shoulder. The priest helped him up onto coltish, wobbling knees.

The priest led him back to the baths, where Sherlock had come from. Attendants gently sponged his wounds clean, saltwater its own antiseptic burn that left Sherlock feeling a little more present-minded, and they dressed his wounds with care, using what it took to help to mend the wounds but nothing for the pain--no, that was the price, that was the whole point for coming to this sacred place. Kushiel’s graces were wasted, if one did not feel the act upon their skin beyond the temple walls.

Throughout all of it, Sherlock could only blink and take in the world around him, a calm having settled inside him like he’d never known.

Once he was dressed and settled at a nearby table to eat, a discreet knock at the door heralded Sister Roberts’ entry.

“Mr. Holmes,” she said, and her tone held much the same tenderness as the priest who’d seen to Sherlock’s atonement. “May I join you?”

Sherlock watched her move, smooth steps imperceptible within her flowing black robe. She took the chair opposite his, covered his free hand on the table. He looked down at where they touched, but didn’t feel the urge to pull away. She was here, he knew, as Kushiel’s priestess as much as he was there as Kushiel’s whipping-boy.

“Sherlock, are you well?”

He smiled, just a twitch at the corner of his mouth, but she nodded.

“Well, for a given quantity…” she amended. “Do you feel better?”

At that he could only nod.

“Please, don’t let me interrupt. Eat. I only wanted to say a few things before you go.”

With that Sherlock dropped his eyes to his plate, a cooling pot roast with carrots and potatoes. It was simple and hearty, and likely what the priests and priestesses were having for the day. When he took his first bite, flavour exploded across his tastebuds, a greedy enthusiasm for sustenance after what he’d been through.

“Sherlock, I wanted to speak with you about the nature of your time with us today. Many people come to us when they know they’ve done wrong--cheated on a spouse, or hurt a friend intentionally, for example. But you--I imagine your reasons are different.”

Sherlock pursed his lips, making it abundantly clear just how much he did not want to bare his soul to her. She put a hand up in placation.
“You may tell me about them, if you like, but you don’t have to. I imagine that it concerns the events that took place in January?”

*Hah*, Sherlock thought. It was such a small, innocuous phrase, to cover so much.

“I understand, if only in a small portion, what you’re going through. You’ve heard of survivor’s guilt?”

Sherlock clenched his jaw, pushed the plate away. “Obviously, Sister Roberts. I’m not a complete imbecile.”

“Then you’re also likely aware of the term, ‘post-traumatic stress disorder.’”

“You don’t mean to suggest--”

“Don’t I?” she asked. “What you’ve experienced… you have survived *several* kinds of trauma. Kushiel can help you find peace, yes, in ways that Elua and the others may not attend, but there is still much work *you* will need to do, right here on Elua’s green earth, if you hope to learn how to better cope with what you’ve come through and the way it’s changed you.”

“This is ridiculous. Of course I have survived something terrible, but that doesn’t mean--”

“You may be able to work a great deal of this out in time with your own logic,” she said. When she met his eyes, her smile was soft, but her gaze was sharp. “We cognitive types are excellent at that, when we know how to do it in a healthy way. But your body… you more than most--”

“This is--”

“--you understand what it means for your body to undergo unexpected physiological responses. And *given* your particular wiring, it might be incredibly beneficial to that massive brain of yours to make sure nothing else gets mixed up in the process.”

Sherlock’s mouth gaped at that. It was one thing to assume he might like to talk to some therapist, just because of a nasty situation he’d begun to put behind him, but another thing entirely to suggest doing it because of him being an *anguiset*.

It was clear she could read as much in his body language: in the jut of his jaw, the stiffness of his upper body.

“I believe you would benefit greatly by seeking out therapy. I can refer you to several good professionals.”

“I don’t need to belabour all this and cry on some therapist’s sofa,” Sherlock said, words sharp and cold. He pushed up from the table.

“I never said you did--”

“I only needed to clear my head, and I’ve done that.”

“But they have other methods,” Sister Roberts persisted, “ones that don’t have anything to do with ‘belaboring’ the experiences. And maybe you are lucky, maybe you have been blessed enough by Elua and all his Companions, to never need set foot in a professional therapist’s office. Maybe this was it for you. But I need you to know it’s available. I’m saying this as someone who practiced for the better part of a decade before joining the Kusheline priesthood.”

That stopped him, and he looked at her again.
“I would be willing to provide this service for you,” she said. “But that would likely conflict with… well. There would be personal conflict of interest.”

Sherlock frowned at that, but for once in his life, he didn’t have the energy to pursue it.

She sighed and reached into a hidden pocket of her robe, producing a folded print-out, which held several names, numbers, email addresses, and physical addresses. “I highly recommend any of these practitioners here. And they may have other suggestions, but I believe you’d benefit greatly from a process called somatic experiencing. Feel free to look that up— you’d likely have a field day with the interaction between cognitive processes and sympathetic reactions, and hypothesising on the way that would intersect with your being anguiset.”

Sherlock stared at her a moment longer, then snatched the paper. He didn’t say a word. Didn’t know what to say, except that John would likely agree with her, if he caught wind of it. Well. That could be conversation for a different day.

“I’ll walk you out. Should we send the roast with you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Just as well. Make sure you drink plenty of water and eat good protein. Will Brother Watson—”

“He’s no longer a Cassiline,” Sherlock interjected

“—be seeing to your aftercare?” Sister Roberts finished smoothly.

Sherlock nodded, and Sister Roberts rose from her chair, looped her arm through his, and led him back toward the lobby.

That night, in the safe cocoon of their bed, John asked him about the weals and cuts, and Sherlock told him. They talked for a long time, about what the experience had been like, what Sherlock felt now… and the whole thing, on every level, was so bizarrely novel to Sherlock. He had never, never willingly bared himself to another human the way he did with John. The process was halting, but he found himself wanting to share.

Still, he never mentioned Sister Roberts’ suggestion, her list. In return for which, he’d stay his own curiosity about John’s visit with Sister Roberts.

Weeks passed, and they prepared to travel to Sherlock’s inherited property down in Sussex.
Norton Cottage, Sherlock felt, was more akin to a country manor than anything like the cottage-home in which he’d spent his childhood. Leave it to posh, idiosyncratic nomenclature to downplay wealth, Sherlock decided.

The Sussex property, though its borders were within five miles of the coast, was large enough it hosted a modestly-sized working sheep and fruit farm. The main house was at least twice the size Irene’s Belgravian townhome, a Tudor affair many might find charming, but Sherlock found just shy of dreadful. It was well-maintained, yes, but it was too far a departure from the comforts of his childhood home or the modern buzz of London and the domestic familiarity of Baker Street. It was too old, too cold, too foreign.

They’d been at Norton cottage for roughly a week before that realisation fully crystalised. He didn’t like the place, largely because he now owned this piece of his former mentor’s life that held no proof of her in it.

He spent the better part of one sunny Saturday puttering around the immense house, largely ignoring Mrs. Hudson’s advice on making a trip to the shops for food and other trivial necessities. He was too lazy to properly explore, and too restless to delve into studying any of the heavier tomes he’d brought from Irene’s collection. She’d owned several antique history books in various languages that he was drawn to, but they just weren’t holding his attention the way he’d hoped. Unrest itched at his skin, kept him on edge. He couldn’t even put all that reckless energy to good use tempting John into their bedroom, as John had disappeared off onto the grounds, curious to speak with the groundskeeper about the garden, of all things.

The thing that bothered Sherlock most about the house was that it felt… lifeless. Unreal. It had been stripped of nearly any sort of trace of the family that had once lived here, Irene’s family. It would have been unrealistic to expect aged finger-paintings to still be hanging on the fridge or some such nonsense, but in every aspect, the home was a bland, blank slate, kitted just so with the sort of furniture and decor to appeal to anyone and no one. Sherlock thought of Maison Adler, with Irene’s huge kitchen windows overlooking a summer-vibrant back garden. He thought of her library, the thick plush carpeting and heavy dark wood of it, winter-grey sunlight spilling over his shoulder as a fire crackled near his feet in the fireplace. He thought of her affinity for understated floral patterns and the way she’d sneak Kate’s favourite colour into things, little splashes of sunny yellow in a vase or as the focal point in a piece of art she might hang from her walls.

He may not have been overwhelmed, the way he was before visiting Kushiel’s temple, but her absence would always hurt terribly.

So went his thoughts, a ceaseless feedback loop that bordered on discomfort, as he wandered, until he found himself staring at a series of painted-over marks etched into a doorframe between the mudroom and the kitchen. His curiosity landed firmly on them, as their spacing didn’t occur in logical increments. One set of scratches might be an inch apart, another only a quarter an inch; they started at roughly three feet from the floor and ended just above five feet. Sherlock frowned at the scratches—they’d been painted over, but not sanded from the wood. There were thirteen marks in all, from knee-height, to roughly shoulder height.

“Sherlock?” Mrs. Hudson called quietly as she entered the kitchen. “What’s wrong?”

“In this whole house--everything is perfect. Except this. Why wasn’t this damage repaired?”
Mrs. Hudson joined him, staring a moment before she rested light fingertips against the topmost scratch. She let out a thoughtful hum. “You really don’t recognise this?”

“What are you on about?” Sherlock asked, and in his focus he hadn’t bothered with making his tone softer, but Mrs. Hudson only snorted at the sharpness of his words.

“Children, Sherlock. As they grow. Each birthday you stand them at the door frame and mark their height.”

“Mark… height,” Sherlock said, and that old grief crushed his throat in its grasp again. “Irene’s-- as she--”

Mrs. Hudson smiled softly and pulled her hand away from the mark on the doorframe. She turned, and patted his shoulder. “More than likely, love.”

And he could see it then--the Irene Adler he knew, but younger: maybe fifteen or so at the last marking, likely about the time the growth spurts settled into a more stable plateau. His own mother had done that to Mycroft and him, now that he thought of it. He’d forgotten that. He could imagine her even younger; a faceless mother or father carefully swiping a pencil across the beam, right at the top of her head, and taking a pocket knife to the wood once she’d moved.

His mentor, a small only child, the spoiled-rotten daughter of an old-money line. Back before Moriarty, before Victor and Mandrake, when she was just Irene Adler Norton, a bossy, sharp-witted girl with a biting sense of humor and a soft streak a mile wide.

Mrs. Hudson tore Sherlock’s attention from the slashes, gathering him into a hug as they stood there in the doorway. The jasmine notes of her perfume and the faint camphor smell of her liniment enveloped him, and he let out a slow breath. Haltingly, he rose his arms to wrap them around her, to return the hug.

“We all miss them,” Mrs. Hudson said, her voice soft and watery.

Just then the door leading outside creaked open, and John appeared in the doorway, his skin flushed from exertion.

“What’s this?” John asked, taking in the sight of Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson hugging. “Is everything okay?”

Sherlock freed himself from Mrs. Hudson’s embrace and simply pointed at the door. “I found this. They marked her height.”

John’s blossoming worry softened as he followed Sherlock’s finger. “Ah.”

This was ridiculous. He was Sherlock Holmes, a grown man, chosen by a god. He was a recent survivor of several few murder plots by possibly the smartest man Europe had known, save Sherlock himself. And here he was, getting wobbly over some scratches in the wood.

So, instead of embarrassing himself further, he raked over John’s appearance. It was always safe to ground oneself in logic.

“You’ve a bit of wetness on your shoes, but not mud. You went walking, and there hasn’t been rain in the past seventy-two hours, so you must have been someplace that retains water. We do happen to be at a farm, of all things, so it’s possible this has something to do with an irrigation system of some sort, but you also have--” Sherlock leaned forward and caught a bit of fluff clinging to the fabric of John’s shirted elbow-- “this on your sleeve. One would assume it to be a bit of loose wool from one of the sheep, but it’s the wrong makeup entirely and you don’t smell
like a sheep, so it can’t be that. It’s from the seed head from a bulrush blossom; seeing as it’s late springtime now, and this particular bit is rather brown, it must be from last season, caught upon some of the thick vegetation around the pond you’ve almost certainly come to tell me about.”

John nodded. “And is that all you see?”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, focusing further. “You also have a smear of green, a grass stain, on one knee, and a few reddish spots on your index and thumb, just there—” Sherlock pointed at John’s hand, braced against the mud-room’s exterior doorframe. He stepped in closer, drew in a lungful of John’s scent, mingled with something new. “You came back through the garden. You smell of apples—you always smell of apples—but now you also smell of flowers, especially—” Sherlock took another loud whiff. “Roses. Explains the state of your fingers.”

John laughed, and the sound of it swept the shadows in Sherlock’s thoughts further away. John revealed his other hand, which had been hidden behind his back—and offered Sherlock a small wild rose, pink and fully bloomed. He held Sherlock’s gaze as he pushed it through and secured it at the buttonhole on the lapel of Sherlock’s blazer. It was silly, and it should’ve embarrassed Sherlock into his grave on the spot, but it made his heart swell instead. Elua’s blessings were unlike anything he’d ever expected.

John leaned up and kissed his cheek, then said wryly, “Eventually I’ll find something to surprise you with.”

Sherlock smiled at that. *You surprise me constantly*, he thought, but aloud he only said, “Not likely.”

“Sherlock!” Mrs. Hudson chimed in, but her scold was without barb.

“Show me this pond,” Sherlock demanded, eager to put as much distance between himself and the doorway into the kitchen, that proof of a much more innocent version of his murdered friend, for just a little while. “Wait just a moment, though. I need to get something.”

John frowned but stayed, and spoke with Mrs. Hudson.

A pleasant anxiety fluttered in Sherlock’s chest as he thundered through house on long legs, up to their bedroom. He only needed one little thing from one of his bags, something he’d kept hidden. Out by the pond, he knew. The time would be absolutely right. His hand closed around the little box, and he closed his eyes as he drew it out.

*Thank you for this, Elua*, he thought as he turned to head back downstairs.

Sherlock pretended not to notice the way John smiled in polite curiosity at his return. Instead he gave a sharp nod and swept past John out the back door.

“You might want to sit this one out, Mrs. Hudson,” John explained. “It’s a bit of a hike, and I’d hate for you to make your hip worse.”

She waved her hand. “You two go on. I’ll hunt someone down to sort out dinner.”
“No need,” John replied. “I’ll figure something out for us, later, if you’re hungry now. Don’t wait around for us.”

There was something in those words that perked Sherlock’s ear and made Mrs. Hudson titter.

“Just be careful of sunburn,” she called after them playfully as they set off.

John and Sherlock strolled arm-in-arm out to the far edge of the property, where this promised pond sat in quiet reflection of the late afternoon sky. Indeed, thick brakes of bulrushes obscured the far shore of the little retention pond; it was just large enough to support a small dock one might sit upon and fish. Further off, a few sheep bleated in boredom from across a paddock fence.

“This… is certainly a pond, John.” Sherlock tried not to wince at how condescending he sounded, even to his own ear. “Erm--”

John chuckled. “You’re right. I didn’t honestly think you’d get that excited about it. But, bear with me a bit longer?”

Sherlock frowned but nodded, and John took his hand. They walked, just a bit faster now, skirting the edge of the pond, until they reached the far side. There, hidden from view by the the vegetation, a thick blanket the color of hay lay stretched on the ground. Roses, still on the stem, were strewn all over. A low, flat stone nearby held a candle to Naamah, already flickering lazily in the open air. The first of the wax rolled down its deep pink pillar, a shade shy of the colour of Elua’s anemones. Sherlock drew in a breath. His blood beat faster in his veins.

“John…”

“Have I surprised you yet?” John asked, an uncharacteristic shyness beneath his playful tone.

Sherlock couldn’t help but tug him close, feel the heat and firmness of muscle. He laid his palm against John’s chest, over his heart. “You will always surprise me, John Watson. Every day I have with you. You conduct light right into my darkest places, and you do it selflessly.”

John swallowed, covered Sherlock’s hand and squeezed. “I do what I can. Sometimes you even make it easy.”

Sherlock couldn’t help but laugh just a little as he leaned in to kiss John, to slide his hand down the length of John’s torso and sweep it around to meet the other at the small of his back. John pulled him closer, let out a gust of breath that went straight to Sherlock’s cock, started nibbling his lower lip. Sherlock’s eyes fluttered closed.

“Want you,” John muttered in the space between their mouths.

Sherlock loved that John had grown bolder since their first night in Paris: their encounters hadn’t been many, exactly, but each time they came together, John had been more confident, easier in his own skin as he let Sherlock know exactly what he wanted. Still, this was the first time, if Sherlock guessed correctly, that John had found some way to incorporate Sherlock’s needs as an anguiset into their time alone. The anticipation thrilled in Sherlock’s veins.
Sherlock began undoing the buttons of John’s shirt, dove-grey but summer-thin, hand sliding between the placket so his fingers could trace along John’s chest as he went. It was one of the first lessons in the *Trois Milles Joies*, and one Sherlock loved to employ with John. Just as desired, John shuddered at the contact, his own fingers fumbling somewhat as he worked at the buttons of Sherlock’s shirt. Soon enough they were shirtless, and John leaned in to drop kisses in a scatter pattern on Sherlock’s shoulder and chest, to nip at the delicate skin of Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock’s heart thundered in his ears--nothing supernatural, just the rise of his body as Naamah’s desire descended on them both.

“Do you want to lie down?” John whispered, gesturing at the blanket and the roses. “Did I guess correctly?”

Sherlock let his voice rumble, no words needed, as he stepped back and knelt on the bare earth, heedless of his trousers, and lowered himself down. Thorns pricked his skin as he stretched out on his back, each a tiny pinpoint of light, a bright spot that danced behind his eyelids. John knelt between his splayed knees, mindful of the roses, and gently untied Sherlock’s shoes. John slid them off, and Sherlock’s socks. He gave each foot a massaging squeeze, a sweep of the thumb across the arches before he came back up to undo Sherlock’s trousers.

“Good?” John asked.

“Very,” Sherlock answered, voiceless.

A soft breeze whispered across Sherlock’s skin, and he watched as it tightened John’s nipples and ruffled John’s hair, which he’d let grow a bit shaggy since his departure from the Brotherhood. Sherlock ignored the urge to reach up, to lick his way up to one nipple, in favour of lifting his hips for John to divest him of the remainder of his clothes. Sherlock revelled at the warmth of the sun on his skin, the bite of the roses. Now fully erect, his cock bobbed of its own will, and that too was a unique sensation out in the open air. John stood then, and stripped himself quickly. He’d picked up some little measure of Sherlock’s technique, always a quick study, but this he did gracelessly in his enthusiasm, and Sherlock loved him just a little more for it. That was his favourite thing about making love with John: it had nothing, really nothing, to do with the arts and skills he’d learned, and everything to do with baring himself, no pretense, no exchange other than pleasure for its own sake.

John lowered himself back to their makeshift pallet, one hand carefully holding himself up as his knee slotted between Sherlock’s. Sherlock rocked against him. The friction from only the slightest sheen of sweat making that motion smoother sent sparks along Sherlock’s spine. John’s thighs may have lost some of their tone since his injuries hampered his ability to perform his morning routine, but they had lost none of their strength. Sherlock whined at the sensation.

John’s grin grew devilish. “All right now, slow down. I’m taking my time with you.”

Sherlock huffed a laugh. “Can you take your time a bit faster, please?”

John laughed properly at that, and leaned down, kissed him thoroughly. “Better?”

“Getting there,” Sherlock retorted, unable to keep the full breadth of his heart from echoing in every syllable.

“So impatient,” John noted. Then his tone slid into something more… Sherlock-like, actually. “So, in the course of all your time as a Servant of Naamah, I’m sure most of your patrons were pretty well-versed at seeing how far they could push you, yeah? How much pain you could take?”

Something new lurked in his voice, and it grabbed Sherlock’s attention in a chokehold. He
swallowed thickly and nodded, unsure of what John was driving towards: there was nothing out here but themselves, their clothes, the blanket and the roses. And the single candle, an offering to Naamah.

“I wonder if sweetness can be just as painful,” John mused.

Sherlock stared transfixed as John rose, kneeling above him. It was easy to see the way John drank in the sight of him, eyes tracing the edges and outlines of Sherlock’s body.

“Roll over,” John said. “Get comfortable.”

A sharp pang of arousal shot through Sherlock as he realised at least a little bit of what had just been asked of him. He shifted, thorns biting into his forearms as he rolled over. Anticipation robbed him of his breath as he lowered his front side down onto the scattered thorns. Each point, now on front and back, was a white-hot star in his universe. He was particularly aware of one that pricked the skin at the crease of groin and thigh, and another frighteningly close to where his cock was trapped between his stomach and the blanket.

“Good so far?” John asked, smoothing a hand down Sherlock’s spine. Then came the peculiar relief as John’s fingers brushed along his back in random places, picking away bits of thorn that had gotten stuck in the shallows of Sherlock’s skin.

Sherlock let out a heavy sigh, pleased but tense with desire. Oh, he was very good.

“Didn’t hear that, love,” John teased. “Speak up for me.”

Sherlock grinned hard. Leave it to John to turn everything about being dominant into something malleable and sweet even as he gave Sherlock a command.

“Yes, John,” Sherlock answered. “Very much so.”

John gave his arse a playful smack. “Excellent. Now, just relax. Well, as best you can, anyway.”

Sherlock breathed deep, let his bones settle, let his muscles slack where he could manage. He felt John shift behind him, likely grabbing something from his coat. Lubricant, maybe?

He was not, however, prepared for John’s pleased little huff of laughter, nor the sudden, sharp pain of a hot liquid dripping once, twice against his skin.

The candle, Sherlock thought. Oh, that’s—that’s brilliant. Aloud, he twitched against the sensation, let out a low groan.

“Good?” John asked.

“Yes, John,” he managed.

John let out a hum and then the hot wax spilled once more onto Sherlock’s skin: a long spattering over one shoulder, a molten line along the divot in the muscles over his spine. The heat scalded, the pain of it warping into a sharp pang of arousal with each drop. Then, John shifted again, and the cooler gust of his breath helping cool the wax sent a shiver through Sherlock. Pain, and relief, in gentle measure.

John had expressed his worries, once, early on in their romantic relationship, about being able to provide Sherlock with the full spectrum of what Sherlock needed. John may never be the whips and chains type, but Sherlock knew better even then, than to assume John wouldn’t find ways to meet him in the middle.
“You look beautiful like this,” John murmured, sliding his palm over the now cool wax, the pressure of which was a ghost-like sensation over Sherlock’s spine. “The way the wax slides over your skin. Does it feel good?”

“You are a genius,” Sherlock whispered, hips dipping to roll against the blanket of their own volition.

“I wish someone else was around to witness you saying that. No one will ever believe me.” John chuckled, low and intimate.

“I didn’t know you wanted anyone else watching?” Sherlock rejoined.

John shifted again, and Sherlock felt the soft scratch of John’s early stubble between his shoulderblades, right at the point of the arrow on his *marque*, as John pressed a kiss there. “You’re right about that. When you’re here with me, you’re for my eyes only. I’m willing to share you, but not when we’re alone.”

The darker edge of John’s tone, there at the end, loving and possessive, sent another wave rippling through Sherlock. As his hips rocked against the blanket again, the movement was enough to shift one of the thorns dangerously closer to Sherlock’s cock, and the thrill of that only drove him further.

“Spread your legs for me, love,” John said gently. Sherlock could imagine the intent look on John’s face, the one he usually wore when he was concentrating on getting it just right.

Sherlock did, and was rewarded with another splash of the hot wax, winding from his sacrum, along one arsecheek, down to the crease where arse met hamstring. Beads of it rolled down toward the centre, dangerously close to far more sensitive areas, and the noises Sherlock made… well. He hoped the sheep wouldn’t be too scandalised.

When that, too, cooled, John started at Sherlock’s shoulder, scraping and peeling the thin layer of cold wax with blunt nails. The scratch on the over-sensitive skin was its own brand of delightful, and Sherlock relaxed into it. The sensation of it peeling up was almost ticklish, John’s fingertips warm and light. John worked his way down from shoulder, along spine, over arse and thigh. When he’d removed all the wax, Sherlock breathed deep, prepared for another round, but instead a feather-light touch, foreign in texture, trailed along the still-reddened skin.

He tensed, breath filling and leaving him in a rush; this was too slight, too delicate to be John’s fingertips, but Sherlock couldn’t think straight long enough to deduce what it might be.

“Hnn?” was the best he could do to ask.

“One of the roses,” John answered, his voice even and soft, trancelike. “I know the thorns do their damage, but I don’t want you to forget about the soft petals, either. I don’t want you to be able to think of one without the other, and neither of them without me.”

Sherlock moaned a little helplessly, arching his spine to follow the rose’s path, his body aching and hungry for more: more sensation, more heat or pressure, anything. But this was another way in which his Cassilines was a bloody genius: John knew that denial was just another way to inflict a delicate sort of pain to drive Sherlock right round the bend.

And it worked: Sherlock’s breath grew ragged as the rose blossom drifted the breadth of his shoulders over the dark arch of the bow inked there. His body writhed against the blanket and the thorns as it begged for the light touch of the petals, muscles tensing and flexing in arms and arse and thighs. He lost track of the time, of the noises he was making, of anything but the slow, loving
torture John gave him. Sweat sprang and cooled in the light breeze on sun-warmed skin. His muscles began to ache, and still John kept on, until Sherlock found himself begging.

“John, please--please, please…”

The blossom traced right along the curving crease between arse and thigh, stilled just against the barest bit of exposed bollocks. Sherlock whined.

John’s voice was right in his ear, a rough whisper. “What do you need?”

“You,” Sherlock begged. “Please, John.”

“You’ve got me.”

Tears, from frustration and arousal alike, pricked behind Sherlock’s eyelids. “Touch me John, kiss me, fuck me, anything, Elua I need you--”

“That’s a wide variety,” John whispered. “Which one do you need most?”

Sherlock grit his teeth, because if there was anything that was both wonderful and infuriating about John Watson, it was the level to which he could obstinately feign ignorance just to get his own way. Making Sherlock choose, in the state he was in, when anything, anything would be enough to tip Sherlock over the edge, was dastardly brilliant.

“What if I want to make you come just like this?” John asked. “You’re close, I can see that myself.”

With that, the rose petals disappeared completely, and half a second later, the sharp tip of one thorn, still attached to the stem, ghosted against the thin skin of Sherlock’s scrotum. Sherlock gasped, his whole body twitching hard.

“John--” The word was a breath on Sherlock’s lips, his fingers gripping the blanket into a vicious fist.

“Tell me Sherlock…”

Then a lightning-strike moment of clarity; to some extent, this was a scene. More wonderfully, though, was the truth that with John, they were equals. And John would never deny him that or begrudge it. With a pleased growl, Sherlock rolled over and grabbed onto John’s shoulders, tugging him down for a rough kiss. John’s response was immediate, enthusiastic, as he dropped his weight onto Sherlock, pressing him harder against the rose thorns. Sherlock moaned aloud and wrapped his legs around John: one around his waist, the other hooking behind John’s knee. John rocked against him again until they found a rhythm. Each thrust drove the thorns deeper, until Sherlock was delightfully certain his back would be a mess. It was glorious.

John’s fingers tangled tightly in Sherlock’s hair and he bit Sherlock’s bottom lip just a little rougher. Sherlock’s head swam.

“Want to taste you,” John murmured, voice ragged.

Without waiting, he shifted, slid lower until his face could graze Sherlock’s cock. The abrasion of slight stubble against such delicate skin ripped another moan, louder, from Sherlock, and John gently pinned Sherlock’s cock in the crease where neck met shoulder, and drew his cheek along it again.

“John,” he breathed. “John!”
“Say it again,” John intoned. “I love to hear you.”

“John, oh, Naamah—”

And then John shifted again, and with no preamble he took Sherlock’s cock in his mouth, tongue lapping at the frenulum before he slid down further to take in as much of it as he could. He wasted no time in setting the pace, occasionally glancing up to meet Sherlock’s eyes.

The sight alone—ah, Elua!—it made Sherlock dizzy to watch as John bobbed, lips stretched around his cock. Then John slipped one hand down to press against Sherlock’s perineum while the other groped blindly for his abandoned trousers nearby.

He produced a small tube of gel lube and withdrew his mouth from Sherlock’s cock. A thick strand of saliva and precome stretched between his lower lip and Sherlock’s glans, snapping as John’s movement pulled it thin. He quickly slicked his fingers and lowered his hand to circle Sherlock’s hole. He took Sherlock’s cock into his mouth again, and worked it even faster than before. Heat, sweet and tense, built in Sherlock’s pelvis, in his bollocks, and he thrust in counterpoint. John moaned around him and pressed his fingertip in just a little.

The burn was sweet. Sherlock lifted his hips, which pressed his shoulders harder against the ground and the rose thorns. He slipped away, until he was nothing more than the glorious vibration of every nerve as it raced to the pleasure centre of his brain. What noises he made, he neither knew nor cared. All that mattered was John, and the imperative that he absolutely not stop this brilliant combination of skills, especially when John paused long enough to add another finger, and then another.

Just before he tipped over the edge, John retreated all at once. Sherlock groaned long and loud in his frustration, knowing that John had done it on purpose. John had picked up on Sherlock’s tells fairly early on, the bastard.

“Patience, patience!” John said playfully. He leaned back, squeezed more of the gel lube in a thick line along the shaft of his cock, and after few quick strokes to spread it around, he lined himself up at Sherlock’s entrance.

“This what you needed?” John asked, his smile brighter than the sun. How one person could shift from dark and sexy to playful and sweet and back so seamlessly left Sherlock breathless and starry-eyed.

“Yes, it is and you need it too,” Sherlock retorted.

“You’re not wrong there,” John conceded. He began pushing himself in.

Sherlock’s head dropped back against the blanket, a nearby stem grazing his ear but not enough to distract him from the sensation of John filling him slowly. Once John was done, their hips pressed flush, Sherlock opened his eyes again and tugged John down for another kiss. This one was sweet, unhurried, where before there had been desperate frenzy.

“No, move, John Watson,” Sherlock said between kisses.

“I’m more than happy to protect and serve,” John murmured, and Sherlock kissed his grin.

“You are definitely going to hell for that one,” Sherlock giggled into the space between them as John rolled his hips that first time.

“You’re worth it, Sherlock,” John whispered, all joking stripped away. “You’re worth it a
thousand times, and then a thousand more.”

“Elua, I love you,” Sherlock whispered, and kissed him again.

They lay there for some time after they’d finished, just enjoying one another's company and talking idly of everything and nothing. John had even had the forethought to have a stash of disposable wipes to clean themselves off with. Then, fully dressed, John stooped to grab a corner of the blanket just as Sherlock remembered the small box he’d retrieved from their room before they’d come out here. He ran his fingers over it, still hidden in his pocket, and a sudden rush of nervousness came over him.

This was such a silly, sentimental thing. Elua, it was ridiculous. Well, never let it be said that love made one behave logically.


John paused, still holding the corner of the blanket. He dropped it and drew closer, and all the eloquent things Sherlock had planned to say fell right out of his head. Instead he withdrew the box from his pocket and thrust it at John. John accepted it and frowned, and Sherlock could very easily guess why: it was a plain little ring box.

“Sherlock, we talked about this--it’s not a good idea--our vows--”

“Shut up and open it,” Sherlock interjected.

John huffed a laugh and said under his breath, “Bloody romantic, you are.”

Inside the little box, rather than a gold band or some other meaningless piece of jewelry, was a fat acorn, roughly the size of Sherlock’s thumb.

“What the--” John broke off, and then he looked up at Sherlock in surprise. “It’s from Elua’s oak, isn’t it?”

Sherlock nodded. “It is.”

“Isn’t that sacrilege?”

“I doubt it. Well, I mean, legally, yes. But I don’t think Elua would see it that way.”

John laughed and plucked the acorn from the box to hold it up between thumb and forefinger. “So, not a wedding proposal.”

“No, of course not,” Sherlock answered. “We’ve talked about that, and I very much agree--you may no longer be a Cassiline brother, but getting legally wed would be a mockery of the vows you broke. You’ve sworn yourself to me, and that’s enough for me to be going on.”

John nodded slowly. “Yes, okay, but that doesn’t explain the acorn.”

“This is--this is my vow to you. You’re my point zero. No matter what, you are the centre of my whole world. Every path and crossroad leads to you. I will do everything in my power to prove
that to you for as long as you’ll have me.” Sherlock closed his eyes, prayed it didn’t sound as ridiculous to John as it suddenly did to him. He meant every word of it, but that didn’t stop it from sounding silly.

Rather than say anything at all, John leaned forward, caught him in a crushing hug. Sherlock swallowed thickly. Well, no matter how trite it sounded, Sherlock thought, John seems to be on board.


They stood like that a long while, until Sherlock cleared his throat and drew back.

“Well, erm, if you accept--”

“Oh of course I accept, you berk,” John chuckled.

“--then look beneath the padding on the bottom of the box.”

John did so, and lifted the silver chain hidden beneath. A small silver acorn pendant swung lazily from its length. John grinned at him. “This is perfect. I accept.”

It was, as far as Sherlock’s days went, idyllic.

By the time they returned back to the house, darkness threatened to fall entirely.

“I thought maybe you’d both drowned!” Mrs. Hudson teased them as they trudged back into the mudroom.

When Sherlock stepped fully into the kitchen, he saw that Mrs. Hudson was not alone at the kitchen table. There were two teeming tea mugs, and the other held aloft by darker-skinned fingers, perched at the lips of a familiar face Sherlock was surprisingly glad to see.

“Emile!”

Emile grinned and rose, embracing them each in a quick hug. “Two rinkeni chavos, done rolling in the hay?”

John snorted while Sherlock suppressed a grin and felt his cheeks warm. Then he felt John’s fingers tugging something free from his hair. It was a little cluster of leaves from one of the rose stems.

“Sherlock, erm, got tangled in one of the rose bushes,” John explained in mock-seriousness. “Dreadful business, you know.”
“Very dreadful!” Emile replied with equal false severity.

Mrs. Hudson piped up, “Well. I suppose you should take better care of those rosebushes, John.”

John gave her a wink. “I certainly plan on it.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, fighting the urge to laugh, and forced himself to scowl instead. “You three are impossible.”

That only made them laugh harder, until Mrs. Hudson was dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief and even Sherlock had to give up the pretence.

They caught up over dinner; since the embassy, Emile had promoted in his job at The Berkeley. He was now the head liaison between the hotel and the thirteen houses of The Night Court. Any assignations that took place in The Berkeley were now facilitated by him.

“Why can’t all the night-blooming flowers be as handsome as you, Sherlock?” Emile joked at one point as they relocated to the sitting room, and then slid his gaze over to John. “Or as well protected?”

“That is how you talk to all the servants of Naamah?” John asked, laughing as he placed his coffee mug on the low table and dropped beside Sherlock on the sofa. “I’m amazed you don’t get fired.”

“I’ve got the luck of a certain anguiset on my side,” Emile replied. His tone was only half-joking.

“Why in the world?” Sherlock asked, remembering one of the first things Emile ever said to him. “A curse in the blood. What did you mean by that?”

From the corner of his eye, Sherlock saw John cock his head in polite interest; he’d never bothered mentioning that first interaction.

Emile laughed. “I did tell you I’d explain whenever you weren’t on Naamah’s business, didn’t I?” Then Emile started, his voice dropping into that of a first-rate raconteur, “So the story I heard was that a wise woman with the red spot in her eye was childhood friends with the old Tsingan Kralis’s grandson. He spoke of his visions to save her life, and she traveled to the ends of the earth to free him from an angry old sea god. Whenever she had the chance, she defended the Romani people, and some vowed to always speak her name at the crossroads. That’s the legend, anyway. I can’t say I’ve ever believed any of it, but it’s a story that’s stayed in my family for longer than I care to ask about.”

“So do all D’Angeline Roma tell this story?” John asked, leaning forward to reclaim his mug.

Emile shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard anyone else talk about it. I thought my grandmother was telling me crazy things. Never gave it a second thought, ‘til I saw your eyes, William nó Jasmine.” He grinned as he said cited their little in-joke.

Sherlock smiled at that, even as John made a confused noise. “William nó--?”

“False name,” Sherlock explained. “The day I went and made friends with Emile. That was the night we got into Amelia Chamberlain’s suite. He knew my real name, after Lestrade and his men were done.”

“Ah,” John drawled, and he shook his head in silent amusement as he took a sip. “Well, I’m glad
for it. Even if you’re a bloody awful driver.”

Emile laughed at that, and it dealt Sherlock’s heart a great measure of warmth to know that John was able now to joke about that horrible day, the return from La Poveglia.

Silence filtered in, slow and comfortable, before Emile spoke again, and this time his tone was genuine. “But you two—you’re good now? Everything’s settled?”

Sherlock thought a moment, really weighing the new future stretching before John and himself, all the possibilities it promised. There would likely be intrigue, he was certain, and danger too—they’d already decided to continue the detective work—but still, they would be together, with no dire plots, no government-toppling intrigue. They could make a home for themselves, a life together. He would never have guessed that something like that would be his for the taking.

“Yes,” he answered quietly, and couldn’t help his smile.

John returned it, laying a hand on his and giving it a squeeze.

“I’m happy for you both,” Emile replied.

John cleared his throat, a faint blush colouring his cheeks. He turned a brighter smile to Emile. “We’ve been terrible hosts. We don’t see or hear from you for several months, and then suddenly you show up out in the middle of Sussex just to see us—what brings you by?”

Sherlock made a thoughtful noise at that. “*How*, is my question?”

Emile’s expression, usually open and good-humored, slid away into something more inquisitive. “I’m here on something of an errand, actually. Excuse me a moment?”

Sherlock nodded and frowned, watching as Emile rose from his chair and exited toward the foyer. A moment later he returned, a large, flat box wrapped in brown paper in hand. A low thrum echoed in Sherlock’s head, in his nerves.

Distantly he heard John ask, “What’s this?”

Emile answered as he placed the package on Sherlock’s lap. “Came in to work this afternoon. It had your name, this address, but no sender. I wasn’t sure what else to do but bring it.”

The taped edges of the plain brown wrapping paper parted easily with the slide of Sherlock’s fingers to reveal an overstuffed white shirt box, like one might find at Christmas. Sherlock’s breath quivered in his chest. A large box from a mysterious sender—nothing about this felt right.

“What’s the matter?” John asked, and when Sherlock met his eye, he was sure there was no hiding the fear banked in his heart. “Sherlock?”

John took the package from him, finished opening it. He let out a loud, vehement curse.

Inside the box lay his Sangoire Belstaff, a black velvet choker with a diamond pendant that once sat at the hollow of his throat, and a quickly-scrawled note on Berkeley Hotel stationary that simply read, “*Miss Me?”*

Kushiel’s bronze drums thundered in Sherlock’s ears, deafening him. With grim satisfaction he knew in his bones, his lord was not done with him yet. Not when Jim Moriarty had sent him what had to be an opening move in a brand new game of chess.

Just then, Sherlock’s mobile rang, and John’s almost instantly after.
Sherlock rose quickly to answer his, upsetting the box from where it still halfway sat on his knee and knocking it into the floor. The heavy diamond clattered on the hardwood and rolled a few feet away.

Mycroft greeted him tersely, “We have a situation--”

“I know,” Sherlock answered. “I’ve just received a package. He’s escaped, hasn’t he?”

“Yes--”

“I’ll call you back.”

He thumbed his phone off and registered Emile’s confused, concerned expression, and shook his head to forestall any questions.

“Elua’s balls,” John muttered into his mobile. “Yeah, can’t say I’m surprised. We’re staring at--”

“Is that Lestrade?” Sherlock asked.

John nodded quickly, meeting his eye. “Moriarty’s just been discovered missing from his cell.”

Sherlock snatched the phone from John’s hand, in time to catch Lestrade’s gravelly voice, “--we just got the call in ourselves. I just went behind my superiors’ backs to tell you this, John.”

“John and I have just received… a care package.” Sherlock drew in a deep breath, praying he was wrong about all of this and knowing just as surely that he wasn’t. “We’ll be back in London first thing tomorrow morning. Seems we have a lot to discuss.”

“Christ,” Lestrade groaned. “All right. You two be safe, yeah?”

“Certainly. And yourself.”

Sherlock rung off, handed the phone back to John.

“I--” he started, but had nothing to follow, his thoughts already spinning and tangled.

Emile cleared his throat, looking stricken. After another moment he said, “I believe that might be my cue. I hate to have been the bringer of bad news.”

Sherlock waved him off. “No. It’s—you’re fine. Moriarty knew you’d come, and we’re still glad to have seen you. Don’t trouble yourself over it too much.”

“Well, still. I think this might be a good time to call it a night.”

Sherlock nodded. He was eager to escape, to be alone with his thoughts, at least for a little while.

Once Emile had gone, Sherlock sequestered himself in the Norton family library with his violin, letting his thoughts spin out while his bow drew out the notes his fingers played of their own volition.
Moriarty, escaped from detainment where he’d been awaiting trial. The return of Sherlock’s Belstaff, of that damn diamond—neither of which he’d seen or really thought of since La Poveglia. They were an invitation, a gauntlet. There was no denying that. It was a call to play the game as equals. That’s certainly what they were now, though it was in a way that Sherlock would never have fathomed only a year ago. Kushiel’s Scion versus Kushiel’s Dart, with all the world as their chessboard.

“So I’m going to wind up preventing the end of the world, or something? I didn’t ask for this.”

He’d only been fifteen when Sister Roberts named him Kushiel’s Dart, this embodiment of his justice.

Sister Roberts’s words came to mind, then: “Just because Kushiel has chosen you does not mean you need to live in fear of his calling. You will always be free to choose.”

Sherlock swallowed hard, ignoring the way his eyes burned as he continued to play. He’d only just found a calm new equilibrium, a home and family, a bright future He’d only just found his place by John’s side.

*John.*

John was everything Sherlock held dearest; he’d gone from stranger, to begrudging companion, to the brightest star in Sherlock’s sky. His assignment had been a lark, a joke only Irene had found funny. And now…

Unraveling Moriarty’s new scheme would mean going back into Naamah’s service, of that Sherlock was fairly certain. He’d do it now under his own power, on his own terms, but that would be the only way to tease out the leads he’d need to stop whatever Moriarty was planning next.

For his own part, Sherlock dreaded the necessity. He’d hoped that if he’d ever felt Naamah’s calling again, it would be for the joy of it. He’d certainly still find that in her service, it was just the impetus that bothered him. He just didn’t think it would be so soon.

And how would John take that? He’d insisted that he accepted Sherlock’s service, that he’d be okay with that, but it would be something else entirely to accompany Sherlock now, to wait and *know*, especially with their relationship being so new. It would be different for Sherlock, too, knowing what he knew now.

*Deep breath*, he told himself. He’d do nothing without John’s input. They were partners. Whatever came next, they’d face it together. All he could do was to trust that Kushiel would keep them safe, and that Elua would light their path.

A knock at the door tore Sherlock from his thoughts, and the violin squeaked in protest. John grimaced as he poked his head in the door.

“Alright?”

Sherlock nodded, and John came forward. Sherlock placed the violin on the desk, then turned to embrace John. John wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s waist, held him tightly. His solidity, his warmth, grounded Sherlock.

“So,” John stated, muffled against Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Indeed.”
“We’re all packed and ready to head back to London in the morning. What’s the plan?”

“I’ll tell you,” Sherlock said, drawing a deep breath, “tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

So, that final line is almost a direct pull from Kushiel's Dart. I love it so much, and I think it's the most perfect way to end it.

Speaking of: I know this is a great set-up for more to come, and very much mirrors the final few scenes of the book with this, but as of right now I have zero plan of continuing this universe. If someone wants to pick up from here, please feel free to do so--and let me know so I can read along, too! :D

Anyhow...

You guys, it's been a WILD past three years. And I mean that literally--I got the prompt for this story on the way down to DashCon (yeah, that one) back in July 2014. Since the con ran from 7/14 - 7/16, that's what I count as this fic's birthday. So it's a bit fitting that I'm posting it today. It's... this whole thing has been such a huge part of my life for the past three years, that it's kind of unbelievable that I'm sitting here right now, about to hit 'post' on the very last chapter. When I finished writing it, I actually got kind of teary. I never thought this thing would be finished, and sometimes that was a great thing, but sometimes it was a nearly-overwhelming prospect. I'm thankful I stuck with it, and I know I wouldn't have been able to without you guys... without every single comment and kudos and bookmark that kept me going. So... thank all of y'all for that.

I wouldn't have done this if it weren’t for MLC (MapeLeafCameo) feeding a plot-bunny. Those plot-bunnies wound up being more like Tribbles. Sorrrynotsorry. ;D

So with that in mind, I need to thank the nerds that provided so much insight, especially when I first got started: a-cumberbatch-of-cookies and hollowforest. Cookies always made sure I wasn’t speeding off into an ether where things only made sense to me, and HF was always there to red-pen the hell out of things when I got too bombastic and flowery. Plus, y’all are just excellent fucking friends. Thanks for that, too. Any typos or misplaced commas that remain after their stellar beta are mine alone.

I wouldn’t have had the temerity to keep going, save for infidusfiles, who apparently would’ve squealed at me when we met at 221bCon 2016 Had We Only Known, and ducky_one, who Did A Very Special Thing right after the first time I got left a less-than-loving comment. That--that thing you did. That was good.

Just this past April, I got to meet more of the faces that belong to the names that frequently left love for me, including beltainefaerie and theartstudentyouhate at 221BCon 2017. Beltaine gave me the cutest little felted bee patch, and theartstudentyouhate was there for a conversation so funny I nearly peed my pants on
multiple occasions.

A VERY special shout-out also needs to go to Garrett and Nate from the Starbucks by my house for hooking me up with far too much free coffee any time my internet went to shit at home. Garrett, it was always nice to take a break and talk music with you. Nate, you were hilarious, attractive, and helped form a small part of my headcanon for Victor’s appearance. Y’all will probably never read this, which is for the best. I dunno if you’d give me any more free coffee if you knew what I was getting up to while hunched over this laptop at my table.

I know we talked about it down in the comments of previous chapters, but I am definitely going through with the giveaway for a physical copy of this thing. If you're interested, check out this post here for more info.

COMING UP:
Since this one is done, I’m taking a break from Sherlock for just a little bit and working on some other fandoms' projects that have caught my eye. I hope that you're still willing to give those things a try, even if it's a new fandom for you!

There'll be a bit of Stucky, a bit of Arthur/Eames, a Kharthur (co-written by the lovely GuixonLove!) but first I'll be posting a short miniseries of phone sex pwp based on an otome (a dating-sim game) called Mystic Messenger that's recently ruined my life. If you're not familiar with it, go check it out on whatever app store you use. It's free and it's just... fucking brilliant.

All right... I love you guys! See you soon~~
--chuck

End Notes

As ever, for further reference on all things D'Angeline, check out part 2 of this series, the Appendices.

My eternal thanks go to a-cumberbatch-of-cookies and hollowforest for their excellent beta & editing. Without them, this story wouldn't be nearly as coherent. Any remaining errors are all mine.

I cannot express how much it means to me that you have read this story, that there have been so many to show their love and support via kudos & comments. Special thanks go to duckyone for their generosity.

I really enjoy making friends with strangers on the internet. Come by and say hi!
- **My Fandom Tumblr** for all manner of crying about fictional characters and laughing at shitposts
- **My Fic Rec Blog**, if you're into multifandom recs.
- **Under-London**, the original serialized novel I'm working on for cheap-as-free!
- **My Twitter**, where I basically live when I'm not writing...

Works inspired by this one: A Wound Unheal'd - Cover Art by a-cumberbatch-of-cookies (tishy19), chucksauce

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!