Maintenance and Repair

by patternofdefiance

Summary

John wants to explain the rush of sensation and data, which is just another form of sensation (or is it the other way around?). John wants to say:

Augmentation circuits report temperature, pressure, various forms of quantitative input. Sudden changes are reported as pain, since sudden changes are dangerous, and pain is the quickest way to encourage reflexive extraction.

But all John can manage is, “Nng.”

Because this sudden touch is not reporting as pain.

Notes

Sequel to ‘A Study in Reintegration’

Will eventually contain explicit violence and sex. Chapter specific warnings will be included.
John’s eyes snap open, and he jerks out of the clutch of his bed sheets.

Nightmares are better than this.

With a grunt, John swings his buzzing metal and polymer limb over the edge of the mattress. He groans – the connection has timed out. He can feel the numbness, the empty space where his awareness of his leg should be.

Shit.

John breathes through the tightness in his throat and the clench in his gut. After a few moments, he’s ready to think his way through this delightful new adventure.

Back in the days before cyberthetics, John remembers, back then amputees who reported phantom limb sensations had a higher success rate of incorporating their prosthetic limbs into their awareness of self. John remembers reading about subjects who explained the need to ‘wake up’ the phantom limb, to rekindle nervous system awareness so that proprioception could assist in balance and movement.

Slapping, John recalls. They slapped the end of the limb – the scar tissue.

John eyes his leg. That would be… difficult – especially considering his cyberthetic is implanted directly into his hip socket.

The grenade had collapsed the wall, all the dust and dried mud that held all the stones, broken bricks, and small boulders in place.

The grenade had collapsed the wall, and the wall had collapsed John’s leg.

His leg had been ruined up to the mid-thigh point, but he’d been counseled to allow a full graft. Apparently things got… complicated when joints were involved – something to do with natural wear and tear and the weight of obedient metal swinging with each step.

John had let the leg go.

Which makes finding a – a – a stump to slap awake that much more difficult. John peers at his leg, clenching his jaw muscle. (What he should be doing is calling down to Sherlock, who is probably already awake. He should ask for help in getting to the Clinic. He should call and schedule an emergency tech session.)

John grinds his teeth as the sizzle of neural silence wears down his patience. Maybe if he agitates the edges of his flesh where they feed into -

No.

Maybe if he jars the entire limb –

No.

Maybe a judicious application of electricity…

N – perhaps.

John takes apart his alarm clock, which is located within reach on his bedside table, which is convenient for his purposes. Although it might mean having to get a new clock. The wires pull easily from the plastic housing, and John peels the two leads apart with a small tug. He strips the wires with a small pair of scissors her keeps in his bedside drawer.

Maybe I can get an upgrade for my leg, and it can be my alarm clock, John thinks, almost delirious with the weirdness of the sensation. That blankness, that numbness, is pooling in his left hip socket. It’s making his teeth ache, making his fingers itch.

With the exposed wires carefully held in his quivering left hand, John regards his leg. He chooses the joining right below his actual, organic hipbone. He scoots the synthetic ‘skin’ sock down a few inches, exposing the dull gleam of metal and tubing. For a moment, John is motionless, his eyes caught on the juxtaposition of soft and hard.
With a shuddering breath, John focuses his attention on the skin – his skin. He spits, and the saliva lands to coat his skin. Before he can talk himself out of this (because, really, if this doesn’t work he has to call the Clinic anyway, and it won’t matter if he has a tiny bit of electrical damage, they’ll have to re-attune his leg anyway) John shoves the contact points against the conducting wetness against his skin –

The sharp jolt is unpleasant but not painful.

What is painful is the sensation of his leg coming back online. Sharp, electric pings and stubs writh through his flesh, and for a moment he actually forgets the metal and tubing beneath the flesh-patterned sock of ‘skin’ isn’t actually his, because the sensation is so overwhelmingly present.

Pins and needles, John thinks, hissing in his next few breaths, has absolutely nothing on this. The sensation dies away after about two minutes, at which point John realizes he’s actually rubbing his thigh to increase the fucking circulation.

John lifts his hands away as if burned – then lowers them slowly to touch the edge of the ‘skin.’ After a moment, he gives it a firm tug, settling its edge back into place, then pushing until he feels the little snaps take hold. Slowly, the patchy anathia shimmers away, his leg’s sense of touch returning like a warehouse full of fluorescent lights flickering on.

His leg, tingling and alive and present in his awareness once more, seems none the worse for the abuse. In fact, only his hip shows any evidence of what transpired: a little red patch is blossoming where John held the wires.

A few more moments, and John feels comfortable enough to swing both legs over, standing up. His cyberthetic functions perfectly, and John has no need of flailing or falling or asking to be taken to the Clinic.

Well then. Good.

John unplugs his makeshift shock-treatment from the wall for safety’s sake, then stands for a moment, thoughtful. All that, accomplished without the need or aid of a technician. Food for thought.

And speaking of food.

Breakfast.
Displacement

Sherlock is, as expected, installed on the couch, flat on his back, eyes open but fixed on the ceiling. Flexing his left hand, John moves into the kitchen, not bothering to tread lightly, not since the first days (“Stop sneaking, John, it’s distracting!”) and bangs his way through the process of breakfast.

Toast and tea accomplished, John takes stock of the flat:

It’s a right mess – papers and books and for some reason a variety of (left) shoes scattered haphazardly about. Sherlock has, by now, curled up on his side, back to the room, knees tucked close to his chest, like a child napping on the couch.

John makes a judgement call. He turns to fetch his coat.

“You’re going to the Clinic.”

John pauses halfway through shrugging on his coat. It is true – he had been considering it, was actually overdue for a check-in and a check-up, if this morning’s nonsense was any indication. But how did –

“Oh, and now you’re wondering how I knew that. Dull.”

John finishes donning his coat with a sharp tug. “You’re in a fine mood. Thought you had a case to distract you…?”

Sherlock turns around with a flop, sighing and rolling his eyes simultaneously.

With a frown, John nods at a nearby loafer. “Then why the shoes?” Learning to read Sherlock’s moods is like learning to navigate a minefield – you either manage it, or you don’t. Not much grey area. “Either you have a fetish you failed to disclose, beyond, you know, playing violin all bloody night,” John pats his pockets for his keys, “or you have a case.”

“Solved it,” Sherlock almost groans.

*Oh. John pauses. How long have you been lying there, thinking?*

“Eighteen hours.”

John hesitates at the doorway. He has things he needs to do today – their food-to-body parts ration in the fridge needs balancing, and John will need to go to the chemist – but before he can do any of that, John needs to go to the Clinic. “You could always fetch the shopping or pay the bills while I’m out.”

“Hm,” Sherlock hums, then unfolds into a sitting position.

“Or you could get rid of these shoes.”

Sherlock stands and floats over to his violin. His blue robe flutters open to reveal a ratty t-shirt and soft navy pajama bottoms.

“I’m not taking you with me,” John finally says in what he hopes is a firm tone.

Sherlock doesn’t even turn to look at him. “I don’t recall asking to go.” He’s turning pages of music and scrawled notes loudly now.

“Good.” John escapes before he can go back on his statement and invite the lunatic along.

Outside, the late morning air is fresh – it rained last night, and the streets are still painted dark from it. The sky has lightened though – still covered in a faraway haze of clouds and not the closer threat of storm grey. Just enough chill remains to burn the delicate tissues of his nose and throat with each inhale: perfect.

As John walks, arms swinging, hips swaying with each step, fabric rustling along his limbs, giving off all of the soft, subtle signs of belonging, of blending in. He knows it’s working, because people meet his eyes or don’t, nod and smile or don’t, make room or don’t, weaving a tapestry of motion and of miniscule reactions and indifferences.

The illusion lasts all the way to the Clinic, and then he turns and enters the doors, and it’s like someone cut a hole in the fabric of the day.
Inside the Clinic is cool and bland. John doesn’t have an appointment, so he checks in with the receptionist, gets on the waiting list (forty-five minutes) and takes a seat in the corner. Wall at his back, he scans the entrances (or exits, whispers the part of his brain that still populates the spaces around him with gunfire, falling debris, and fading cries), noting the (six) other patients waiting. Two are women, and John sneaks a peek at the closest, her bronze-brown skin beautiful and smooth where pale scarring hasn’t taken root. To his doctor’s eyes it is evident that she had most of her spinal assembly replaced, and the way her eyes move slowly and without hitches screams upgrade. Expensive work, and the eyes at least are voluntary.

Her face, lovely and soft, with almond shaped eyes (a favorite feature of John’s), is nevertheless closed off and wary. In fact, every other face here bears the same careful expression, revealing nothing. John realizes he must, yet again, be the odd one out, because no one is looking at anyone else. No curiosity, not even the morbid kind.

For a moment, John registers a speck of regret for not bringing Sherlock along – for the camouflage, true (Sherlock attracts attention like a lightning rod does lightning), but also for his ability to read people.

Since the late night (early morning, really) Chinese the night of the Shot, John has accompanied Sherlock to a number of restaurants, cafés, and eateries. The detective hardly ever participates in the actual eating, but he seems to gain a sort of vital energy from observing a room full of different people, a room full of different histories held captive by their appetites.

That same focus will, from time to time, alight upon John as he cuts, chews, swallows…but the blast of that laser focus doesn’t last long. There are so many others there, others to which Sherlock does not have constant access, and so he will spend the majority of these outings with his eyes turned elsewhere.

He does, however, only speak to John, although ‘at’ is probably a better choice of words. He will, without pause or consideration, fire off a muttering of deductions, never minding John’s initial embarrassment (the embarrassment didn’t last long, although it still flares up when Sherlock’s voice carries particularly clearly, especially when discussing intimate preferences, histories, and quirks).

Now, here, alone in a room full of people exactly like himself, John wishes he had Sherlock at his side to decipher their stories. With one look he can spot the surgeries, the recovery times, the work still needing finalization, but the wristwatch on the scruffy older fellow, the keychain charms of the other woman (fair, curvy, her face chewed up and replaced by science), and the nervous finger tapping of the sandy-haired lad… these scars are a mystery to him.

Forty-five minutes is a long time, and John finds himself staring absently at the young man with the sandy hair. He reminds John of someone he knew in the war, without even seeing his face – just the cut of his hair and the tilt to his head, and John wonders if he was a soldier, too, just younger and less nimble when it came to dodging bullets than John had been at that age.

God, it’s so easy, so insidious. One minute he’s sitting, waiting for his name to be called, and the next –

He’s remembering what it was like to lose men – what it took to keep moving, to make the choice that saved what (and who) could be saved.

He remembers how easy it was, how far away it seemed, and how much he hated himself for that distance and that ease. He hated himself for it because that was the human thing to do. He hated himself for it, because maybe that could absolve him of those effortless choices –

“Watson?”

John blinks. It’s been fifty-one minutes by his phone’s account. He shakes his head, stands, gets his breathing under control and isn’t surprised when his first few steps are stiff, reminiscent of a limp.

The tech is polite, calm, professionally distant – everything John needs right now, everything he always hates.

“If you’ll just lean back?”

John leans back.
“If you’ll just indicate the limb seam?”

John indicates.

“If you need to look away…”

There’s the sudden spacious feel of his ‘skin’ being disengaged, the sock of it being plucked loose from its moorings as it slides off. This second skin, made of complex layers of sensory relays and nanofoam, comes away smoothly under the tech's hands.

John looks away.

In the beginning he didn’t – he stared and stared and could not tear his eyes away, but then the shock wore off, the disbelief, and when the reality set in that this was him now, John found something else to look at. Ceilings, mostly.

John, ceiling connoisseur, fixes his eyes upwards.

The tech steps away to lay the sock in a UV drawer. Violet tinged light fills the room for a moment, then is shut away once more. Various metallic noises follow as the tech sets about selecting his tools. “Hmmm,” he says, and John clenches his jaw.

John wonders how many times he’s done this by now, just an inconvenient marriage between meat and machine, something to be adjusted and compromised into an equation that constantly needs to be rebalanced. He stopped counting after the 30th tune-up, and that was a while ago.

A moment later, a darker thought strikes home: how many more times will he have to make this pilgrimage to an indifferent god?

How long until you take matters into your own hands? the darker side of his thoughts whispers. About to crush the thought, wad it up into the space where he keeps the things he’s always meaning to tell his analyst (but never quite does), John pauses.

He takes that thought, instead, and smoothes out the wrinkles, holds it up, really examines it. What is stopping him from taking matters into his own hands? Literally?

John is (was) a doctor. A very good one at that – and he’ll stand by that self-assessment, thank you very much. Moreover, John is (was) an Army doctor, and that breed never wears just one hat (helmet). John had been far too curious, far too interested, and far too charismatic to keep from learning things. A smile and a willingness to listen had earned him quite a few mates (mostly dead now) and quite a few skills (mostly useless now).

“Bugger,” mutters the tech, and excuses himself for a moment (to track down a tool?), but John is busy remembering when MacConnal and DeShaw had roped him into the ‘fix our only goddamn transport truck’ committee.

“You’re a doc, Doc. Help us stitch her back up.”

And it had been a high heat day, but a low enemy fire day, and everyone was in camouflage to the waist and bare above that, and the sun had sizzled sweat from their shoulders, and John had laughed with the rest of them when he made things worse before he (somehow) managed to make them better, and after that he’d go and visit the motorpool or the repair shed and hand tools over, assisting in surgery where the blood was black and the cost of failure was a slower, hungrier death.

Somewhere in there, John had started being the extra hand, the last-second set of gripping fingers, his surgeon’s hands wriggling into the gear-filled belly of the patient where bigger, blunter hands could not.

When they were out on patrol, suddenly John was your man for a busted radio, for a quick diagnosis. “No, your manifold is cracked, but it should hold ‘til you can get back to FOB.”

John remembers trading blood for oil and oil for blood on the darker days – remembers the rig they cobbled together to get Davies lifted, remembers the –

The tech steps back in, triumphant, with what looks like a futuristic toothbrush in hand. “Sorry for the delay – we can begin now, if you don’t mind?”

John doesn’t mind at all – in fact, he takes a deep breath and hoists his body higher up on the slab. John is going to watch and John is going to listen and John is going to smile, because even if it kills him, John is going to learn.
As a massive Mass Effect fan, the title of this chapter makes me snort with self
derision and glee. It's not actually relevant, though. This has been a PSA.

Two hours later, John is back on the street, hands in pockets and shoulders hunched against the
sudden cold. Clouds have rolled in again, uniform slate, like charcoal paste being spread across
the sky.

It was easier than he expected to watch what was happening to his leg, and also more challenging.
Easy, because once he managed the trick of distancing himself from the contraption attached to his
body, focusing on the mechanics of ‘insert tool A into slot B’ were simple enough. Difficult,
because when he slipped up and looked at the hookup ports to his own flesh, when he eyes
brushed along the scarring that blurred the line between born this way and built this way… well.

The cold air outside is welcome indeed.

John nips into the Tesco on his way home, pays with some of the rapidly dwindling cash he still
has on him. He’s going to need a job soon, but no hospital would hire him, no family practice…
not in his condition. Fiscal aid from the military is only going to get him so far…

Sherlock is nowhere to be found when John arrives at the flat, so he stakes his claim in the
kitchen, designating cabinets and refrigerator shelves as he sees fit. There’s a bag with what
appears to be congealed blood on the top shelf – John nearly bins it, but manages to sigh and stay
his hand.

Instead, he relocates all experiments to the crisper drawers and the bottom shelf when those run
out of space. One absolutely thorough cleaning later, John feels safe reintroducing actual food into
the fridge. While there are some vegetables, John has always been a man of simple tastes, with a
preference for the savory. Tins of beans, bread, and an assortment soups will be his mainstays.

Finished, John stands back and tries to decide if he’s hungry. Adjustments always leave him
feeling a little disconnected from himself – especially when the tech engages the interface (the
suite of automatic and elective responses and programming that make the science fiction that is his
leg and shoulder into science fact. Science feasible). Usually John doesn’t allow interfacing, not
unless it’s absolutely vital (a new patch on a recognized error, an update to the running systems…) but he’d made an exception today, since he wasn’t planning on going back to the Clinic any time
soon – not as a patient, anyway.

Deciding against food, John retreats to his bedroom and sits on his bed. He needs a shower to
rinse the coldness from his limbs, but he also needs to do the mobility and balance exercises he’s
been neglecting. With a sigh, he strips down to pants, then shrugs on an old t-shirt and a pair of
jogging sweats before he can catch his own reflection.

Next, he balances first on one foot, then on the other, alternating as his body and his cyberthetic
processors calibrate. Each movement is slow and deliberate and seems to last an age. John’s
breathing is steady and deep, helping engage his left shoulder in the exercise.

Finally achieving a sort of stability, John puts his arms through slow range of motion stretches,
then repeats the process on his good leg. There are other exercises he should be aspiring to – more
difficult and strenuous ones (based on yoga, last he’d read), but John wasn’t that flexible even
before he had metal parts, and he is none too keen begin those.

So he sticks with the slow, the careful, the boring, losing himself in the breathing and the
stretching, and so it takes him quite a while to realize that he’s not alone. John cracks open an eye
to see Sherlock standing in his doorway. Leaning, really.

He drops his arms and leg into a normal standing position, half embarrassed and half peeved. “The
door was closed, you know,” he points out. *We’re going to need to discuss boundaries*, he thinks.

Sherlock shrugs. “Doors usually are.”

John waits.

Sherlock just keeps staring at him with those relentless eyes.

John sighs, caving. “What did you want, then?” He considers continuing his exercises, but decides
against it. He’s finally starting to feel himself again, and right now he feels hungry and sweaty.
Shower first. He grabs his towel from where he threw it over a door and heads for the doorway.

Sherlock steps out of the way at the last possible moment, then follows John down stairs. “You
cleaned the refrigerator.” There’s something petulant in his tone.
“Yes.”

“I need to know what you binned.” Petulance is bordering on sulking, now.

“Haven’t you looked inside the crispers? I didn’t chuck anything.”

“Of course I looked, I – what?” Sherlock pauses mid-step, then hurries to catch up to John just as he enters the bathroom. “Nothing?”

John snorts, laying his towel on the counter, and avoiding looking at the mirror, turns narrow eyes upon Sherlock. “Believe me, it was a near thing, but no. Not even that bag of… god, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I hope it’s old blood.” John moves forward and grips the door. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to shower.”

Sherlock looks like he wants to say something, but John manages to close the door. After a moment, he opens it to find Sherlock’s hand about to turn the handle. “And by the way, a closed door means ‘do not disturb.’ If I get out of the shower and you’re in here waiting to talk to me, I will be very disturbed.”

He closes the door. He starts the shower.

*Boundaries*, John thinks.
Showering is always an exercise in pretending – pretending the leg is his, pretending the leg is not his, pretending it will all be over soon.

At least it’s waterproof – earlier cyberthetic models had left something to be desired in the hygiene department.

John towels off briskly, pleased that the door had remained closed during his shower. A little more care goes into drying his shoulder and his leg (if he does it just right, the towel might soak up the synthetic-ness of his augmentations. If he does it just right, he’ll go back to being normal, being whole).

He shaves, careful to focus on the task and not his face, of the stubble and not the scarring that brushes at the base of his neck. When he’s done, John takes a step back and drops his eyes. (If he never looks at it, it can’t be real).

But John is about to take matters into his own hands, and he’s hardly even acknowledged his body as it currently exists. John is nothing if not practical, and he knows what needs to be done.

He just can’t do it now.

Sherlock’s muffled voice penetrates his sharp-edged stillness: “Are you going to hide in there all afternoon?”

With a sigh, John finishes dressing and opens the door. Cool air rushes in, clammy against his skin. One thigh ripples at the heat exchange, the other merely reports it. John grinds his teeth. “All yours.”

The line at the chemist’s is long and slow – it seems everyone has a hundred and one questions about how to combat colds and the flu – and John overhears more than one moronic parent demanding to know why they cannot have antibiotics for their children’s or their own flu symptoms.

Close to the front, his prescription ready in his hand, John notices the next line over contains a familiar face: the blonde from the Clinic waiting room. The unmarred side of her face is turned towards John, but he can see the faint etching of the graft work on her forehead and her chin, curling around the contours of her face like spidery tendrils of pale.

She notices him looking, and John can read the exact chain of reactionary thoughts as they play in her mind: why is this person looking at me? Oh, he’s noticed my condition. Wait, he looks familiar – ? Ah, the Clinic.

She visibly relaxes and actually gives him a small smile. John mirrors it back at her, then steps forward to conduct his pick up and purchase – broad-spectrum antibiotics as a precautionary measure, ‘soup’ (saline-suspended nano-guided nutrients formatted for the tissue-to-implant specific cells), and of course, antidepressants (standard for all those blessed with cyberthetics).

It had taken some talking and cajoling to get the scrip for the antibiotics (without an infection, why would he need them?) and the soup (techs were usually responsible for administering it), but John had prevailed.

Now the most difficult bit would be finding a place to store all of this where Sherlock wouldn’t find it and (inevitably) include it in his experiments.

When he leaves the chemist and turns to start his walk back to Baker Street, he’s weighing the pros and cons of different storage spots, and it takes him a moment to realize someone is walking behind him. He turns, and finds the blond almost beside him. She smiles, a lot more openly this time, showing teeth (half of which are real and half of which are too real-looking to be real).

“Hi,” she says, and from just this snippet of her voice, John knows her vocal chords are not her own. “Are you normally so distracted, or are you just thinking about someone special?”

John snorts, “Hardly.” He adjusts his walk so they can stroll together comfortably. She’s an inch or two taller than him, but he has no trouble matching her stride – he’s always been a marcher, a get-there-faster person.


“John.” He grins at her, and she grins back.
“How was it?” Sherlock barely even looks up from his laptop.

The plethora of shoes are nowhere to be seen, but John can smell Mrs. Hudson’s perfume, so he knows better than to thank his flatmate. “What?” he asks instead. “The chemist’s?”

“No, don’t be dull. The lines at the chemist are predictably long and traumatizingly boring. I was referring to your date.”

“My – what?”

“When you entered the room you removed your scrip package from your inner pocket – you don’t do that unless you’ve had cause to keep it out of sight, something you only do if you’re stopping elsewhere after your trip to the chemist’s. You’ve already done the shopping today, so that’s not where you went.”

Sherlock sits back against the couch and looks at John. “Furthermore, there are traces of pastry – flakes are easy to distinguish from bread crumbs – and while you have a selective sweet tooth, you don’t indulge it in an attempt to save money. If it had been an outing with a friend, you would have had a beer at a pub, not a pastry at a café. Furthermore, when you set your keys down just now, you still had your phone in hand – you keep your phone in your side front pocket, so you’ve had cause to keep your phone out – considering a number, reading a new text. It’s a simple thing to extrapolate your afternoon from there.”

“That’s…” Amazing, brilliant as usual. “…actually all very circumstantial.”

Sherlock smiles. “Yes, but you just failed to deny it. So, who is she?”
Mona is, it turns out, a survivor. She survived her birth, which killed her too-young mother, survived her father, who killed her too-soft brother, and then survived the foster care system. Then, during the height of the riots in Sedwic, she was caught in an IED blast – a homemade bomb, ball bearings, glass, and nails packed around the outside of it. She was 27 at the time.

Mona survived that too, although this time she had help – her torso and half her face had been shredded, although her skull had done an admirable job of protecting her brain. She was (as she later told John, lazily changing the hair colour on the right side of her head while they lay naked and sweaty and sated after the first and only time they had sex) a guilt victim. Sandrose Industies, the leader at the time in cyberthetics, had felt responsible for all the violence caused by their earliest patients, by their desperations (or malfunctions, if you listened to certain news outlets), and had volunteered life-saving (and changing) surgeries for those caught in the blasts (there had been seven).

Pity victim, she calls herself as well, brought back from death’s door by an overbearing caregiver, by Mother Science.

(Mona, with her curves and her vicious smile and her soft/hard body, her soft/hard face, and her brittle memories and steel thoughts – Mona, her fingers, her mouth, her nails, her warmth, her wetness, the heat of her – )

Mona, with her well-paying job as a Personal Assistant to Boothe & Boothe Law Firm’s head partner, Henry Boothe: while her brain had been shielded from the blast, the necessary reconstructive surgeries had been...invasive – but the silver lining is that Mona can upgrade her brain’s data tracking and storage at will – and change her hair colour, a cosmetic perk included by her boss (as a form of revenge, she pretends to lose control around him, adopting aggressive punk colouring to preclude his advances).

Her job and her internal mass storage mean that Mona is completely up to date with laws, policies, and propositions regarding cyberthetics and the individuals they augment – as well as how they are to be treated. As a result, Mona is angry like sunshine: it’s there even if unseen, and on days when it’s hardly visible it can still burn and damage.

She’s fascinated by John’s war-torn body and past, and for all that he doesn’t speak of it, the sharp interest of her eyes (one just a little too green to be normal) picks out his scars, lingers on hands when he (still still still) assumes parade rest out of habit. He can tell she thinks and dreams of violence, and is tasting death vicariously through his lips.

Right at the beginning, Mona makes an effort, John can tell, she really does – an effort at happiness and contentment. She probably tells her analyst about John, and John mentions her to his. John is certain both analysts smile that same, indulgent smile, “How wonderful, glad to see you reconnecting with the world.”

Translation: it won’t last.

It doesn’t last.

But then again, the reasons for it not lasting are beyond his analyst’s scope for creativity. Mona and he had found a balance (albeit a balance that included Not Talking about her rallies and his ‘normal’ flatmate), but the episode with that damn Chinese smuggling ring threw them so far out of equilibrium there really was no going back.

Their relationship, such as it was, is relegated to a sort of friendship, a collection of comfortable silences shared by comrades in arms.

But Mona leaves, having survived yet another catastrophe: a case with Sherlock Holmes.
“What are you writing?” Sherlock demands, suddenly looming over John’s shoulder. His whole body spasms with surprise. He had thought he’d be safe from the man’s scrutiny for a little while longer, seeing as he had tromped off to Bart’s for a fresh distraction (read: body parts).

Seems he thought wrong.

“Nothing,” John mutters, beginning to close the laptop, but Sherlock’s gloved hand stabs forward to block the movement.

“A Study in Pink? Two Left Feet? The Blind Banker?” Sherlock’s mouth opens and shuts with a snap. “This is not your regular blog,” he accuses.

“No, it’s not. It’s private,” John fumes, still trying to close the lid, but the man is unshakeable.

“How is it your private blog if it details our actions?” He huffs, almost seeming unbalanced for a moment. “Not that your regular blog is any good, mind you – dreadfully dull stuff.”

“Yes, thank you, I’m glad you have an opinion, now shove off.” John manages to extricate himself from his chair and his laptop from Sherlock’s grasp. He catches a glimpse of the kitchen wall clock. “Shit, I’m –”

“Late? For your pointless appointment with your pointless analyst? Yes. Spectacularly so. You’ll have to waste money on a cab.” Sherlock is still in his coat and scarf, and his body is angling towards the doorway. “Or you could come to a crime scene with me.”

“These sessions aren’t pointless,” John protests, shrugging on his coat, patting his pocket for cash – he might have enough. Maybe

Sherlock gives him his John, please look. “They are if you’re taking such pains to conceal your actual day-to-day life and activities.”

John bites back an angry response as he searches for his mobile, lightly flushed from how true Sherlock’s observation is. Here he is, trying to hide how insane his life is becoming from the one person who is tasked, employed to monitor his sanity. “My condition. My analyst. My problem.”


“She’s hardly your analyst if you don’t give her the raw data with which to perform her duties.”

John clenches his left hand. “Maybe I don’t need her to analyze my every move. Maybe I get enough of that from you.” The frustration and the ire in John’s words and tone are completely negated by the bright smile that radiates from Sherlock.

“Excellent, yes! So you’ll accompany me.”

John gapes at him like a fish. He knows Sherlock can be obtuse and oblivious when he likes, but this is pushing it. “I have an appointment,” he hisses.

“Not anymore.” Sherlock tosses John his mobile – the screen reads: Message Sent.

“What?”

“I’ve cancelled your session for today – come. Lestrade’s expecting us.” He turns at the doorway to look back at John, who is aware his face is a tapestry of exasperation and curiosity. Sherlock grins. “Let’s give you something to write about.”
Excellent news to share: the wonderful tiltedsyllogism has generously offered to beta this work - I cannot be more thrilled or thankful...expect periodic gushing and stammering of praises!

The crime scene isn’t far, a fifteen minute march at most. John is silent the whole way, walking just a little behind Sherlock, frustration stiffening his spine and his knees (although, technically only one knee is stiff from his emotions; the other is just playing copycat).

Sherlock, meanwhile, is alternately texting and beaming alarmingly at anyone who makes eye contact. For all John knows, he’s busy measuring response times to weird strangers, or herd behavior, or maybe even trying to spot a murderer by the way they twitch at being so bizarrely accosted.

“Sherlock,” John murmurs, exasperated as the detective smile-and-stares down a frail woman out for an evening stroll. “What…?”

“Hmm? Oh – looking at response variation across different age groups. Old case I’m toying with, evidence given included a number of witnesses’ uneasiness when the suspect smiled at them.” Sherlock sniffs. “Seems insubstantial.”

Johns snorts. “You are hardly the best subject or method to measure people’s normal reactions. Also, you’d need a control, or at least a second –” John nearly stops in his tracks as he realizes what he was just about to say. Sherlock’s suddenly predatory grin is proof he didn’t stop talking in time.

“That’s why you’ll be smiling at people on the way back.”

“No chance,” John shoots back as they approach the police cars parked outside a two-story, brick and mortar, combination shop and home. John actually finds himself hoping for a gruesome locked room scenario – anything to distract Sherlock from this data gathering spree. If there’s one thing John has learned about his flatmate (and friend? is that even possible?), it’s that he can wear down John’s resistance and overcome his reluctance with ruthless determination, especially if it’s for a case.

Sherlock takes the lead as they weave between the cars, their flashing lights briefly disorienting, and comes to a stop at the Do Not Cross tape. John joins him a moment later, having paused to peer into the empty ambulance they had passed.

Sally and Anderson are having a heated discussion over by the entrance to the building, and even though Sally’s back is to them, she turns around and spots them first. Anderson notices a moment later, and he falls into step behind Sally as she moves stiff-limbed over to the barricade.

“Oh look, if it isn’t the detective and the defective,” Anderson sneers. John’s hearing seems to cut out for a moment, leaving a sound like tinnitus, like the aftermath of a flashbang, roaring in his ears.

Sally’s eyes flick back at Anderson for a moment before she stares Sherlock down. “What are you doing here, freak?”

“We were cordially invited to come and do your jobs for you.” Sherlock’s eyes flicker over both their forms. “You should be grateful – now Anderson will finally have time to file for divorce. Perhaps then he’ll make a slightly less dishonest woman out of you, Sally. That is,” and he leans a little closer, “until he decides to cheat again, which is only a matter of –”

John moves with a speed he’d thought he left behind in rust-coloured sand. As a result, Anderson’s fist misses Sherlock’s nose by a scant two inches, overbalancing him, and John braces Sherlock’s stumble even as he moves to stand between the two men, adding the barrier of his body to the demarcating line of police tape.

“Settle down, you two,” he says, and doesn’t it feel right to be issuing a command again? And having it obeyed, well. Priceless. After a moment, John remembers to release Sherlock’s wrist where he’d grabbed it to yank him sideways.

Anderson is livid with anger and insult and embarrassment, and he (wisely) removes himself from the situation. Sally, however, seems rooted to the spot, shouldering her fury. Finally, her heated eyes find John’s, and her expression seems to be an ugly blend of loathing, confusion – and pity?

“I don’t understand how you can handle this – him – any of it,” she says softly, vehemently. “He’s not human.”

“Thank god my self-worth doesn’t hinge upon your approval,” Sherlock drawls, but she’s already turned, announcing their presence, and following Anderson’s retreat.
John releases the breath he’s been holding. “Why did you do that?” he asks, shaking his head, resigned to another awkward night of police scrutiny and dead bodies.

“I could ask you the same question,” Sherlock says, lifting the tape for them both.

“Sorry?”

“Anderson had the drop on me – didn’t think the little weed had it in him – and you intervened.” Sherlock pauses to look at John as he scrambles under the police tape, head tilted to the side almost comically. “Why did you stop him from punching me?”

John snorts. “Why, indeed?”

“As magical as my abilities must seem to the rest of the population, I cannot read minds, John.” It comes out almost petulant, as if Sherlock thinks it is actually unfair that there are things he cannot know.

“Good,” John huffs, and enters the building. The last thing he needs is Sherlock picking all his thoughts apart, finding that John doesn’t have a reason for what he just did, and that seems… oddly telling. With a soft sigh, John lets the frantic swirl of the crime scene wash over him.

No more than a few days later, the tentative calm shatters.
It starts with a gunshot. Several, actually. (It continues with an explosion.)

Later, tied up, head ringing from a solid blow to his occipital region, John will think of the first explosion, the second explosion, the ones in between that didn’t happen. He’ll remember running home from Mona’s flat, the sour taste of a night spent away from home in his mouth, the metallic flavor of fear when he first saw the news. He’ll think of Mycroft (with abortive hope; as far as he knows the man doesn’t give a shit about John or his kind).

He’ll think of pips, he’ll think of strangling bloody Molly’s bloody boyfriend. He’ll think of hairless cats and priceless paintings, and then he’ll think of Sherlock asking for his opinion, making him take Mycroft’s case, following his progress with it.

He’ll think of Sherlock, at home, shouting at the telly (and god, later still, this will make him livid).

He’ll think of Sherlock and stargazing.

He’ll think of –

It starts with several gunshots and doesn’t end with a bang.

When everything is happening, John is too caught up in the case, or more specifically, in Sherlock’s obsession with the case (and shouldn’t it be cases, plural? Is it one or many? Does it matter?), in Sherlock’s cold and calculated distance, in Sherlock’s pleasure in the chase, in –

Moments stand out, later, when he comes to and realizes what is happening. Moments stand out, later, before his brain comes all the way online. Moments like:

Sherlock talking about his internal hard drive, deleting unnecessary information, and for one instant, the space of one breath, really, John can finally understand why he’s put up with an augmented flatmate, because isn’t this just proof that Sherlock’s not all the way organic – but no.

Moments stand out, later, when he comes to and realizes what is happening. Moments stand out, later, before his brain comes all the way online. Moments like:

Sally telling him he should get a hobby, her voice quiet, her eyes sliding away from his, and his anger, his reply, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were invested in my wellbeing,” and the sudden flash of answering anger in her face. “You should be careful,” she’d said, voice cold, intense. “You don’t know him.” And John wanted to disagree, because he’d been living with the man for four months now, but he also wanted to agree, because what is four months?

And:

A man, a monster of a man, and how could be possibly be one hundred percent organic, but apparently he is, and those hands as big as shovels have their crushing grip on Sherlock’s face and throat, and the universe is spinning above them, around them, swirling, dancing, exploding, and John is standing at the edge of it, his gun in his hands, but in his mind his hands are wrapped around the monster’s throat – and apparently caring really can’t help you save someone, because John can’t shoot for fear of hitting Sherlock –

The mad struggle, followed by the feeling of his foot connecting with the Golem’s head. John had never been a kicker – always a brawler, a puncher – but with the gun off in the shadows and the Golem’s crushing paws so close, John had lashed out instinctively – the power of the blow and the unyielding nature of John’s left leg had taken both him and the Golem by surprise, although the assassin’s shock was short-lived. Second man John had killed for Sherlock Holmes – although the detective had the gall to be irked with John for (accidentally) dispensing with their lead.

And:

Pulling the gun on yet another man. Again because of Sherlock. Again for –

It started with gunshots and explosions, and it’s going to end in silence. All things do – that is the flavor, the essence of end.
John opens his eyes after a thirty-count of consciousness. It’s pointless, because all he can see is the inside of a black bag around his head. *This is getting ridiculous*, he thinks, feeling just a touch hysterical.

He tries to feel his body, and does, and is instantly sorry, because every nerve is singing with pain. The fuzzy dullness in his shoulder and left leg are simple mirror broadcasts, a lazy attempt to understand and match what the rest of his body already knows: he’s in trouble.

John’s hands are tied and his legs are tied and his mouth is gagged. He is on his side and thank god he still has his coat because it’s freezing. A heavy blanket of chlorine smell seems to be swaddling him. It’s in his eyes and his throat and his lungs –

John coughs, and a moment later, rough hands hoist him to his knees. His bound limbs are cut loose, and for a moment John thinks help has arrived, but then his coat is gone, leaving him to shudder in the sudden damp and chill.

He doesn’t make a sound, because there’s a gag in his mouth, so no one wants to hear what he has to say.

Something heavy and complicated (how does he know that? that doesn’t seem right) slides up his arms, and with a few tugs and snaps, the weight settles to hang from his shoulders and collar bones, like body armor, but it feels like exactly the opposite. Every time he breathes, his left shoulder assembly brushes against a section of…something. Wires, perhaps, and John gets a sense of something balanced, something quivering with poise, ready to –

John stops the shudder this time, but the little gasp gets out, and the owner of the rough hands shoving his jacket back up his arms chuckles darkly. “Hardware knows hardware,” a harsh voice says, and John swallows. “We should rip it.”

“Boss says to leave it as is.” This voice is smoother.

“If we don’t yank its interface, what’s to stop it from linking in and calling for help?”

“No need – it’s not on the link-up registry. Basic model implant only. But more important than that, the Boss said leave it. As Is.”

There’s no sound of a scuffle, no sound of violence beyond the malice in those words. There’s a grunt, and footsteps leave the – the room? This space? Wherever John’s being kept. A moment later, slightly gentler hands take hold of John’s head.

“You’ll have to forgive my friends – they have a strong prejudice against appliances.” There’s a quiet humour – an almost smile – to this voice. One hand braces the back of his skull, then slips forward to curl around the side of John’s face, thumb resting on his cheekbone, pinky curling under the tense line of his jaw to touch the soft skin of his throat, tense from the gag’s unwelcome presence. “Hold still.”

John shudders as something is inserted into his ear – an external relay, he realizes. The fingers placing the device are steady and delicate in their actions. The voice makes a shushing noise.

“Almost over – I know electronics can be a little…strange. You’ll get used to it.” The relay clicks to life, and John grunts, his body twitching, then slumping forward, only to be steadied by unseen arms. “Or you won’t,” that smiling voice says.

John’s good knee nearly gives out when he’s hauled up to stand, and he leans heavily on his cyberthetic leg, which is trembling at an uncomfortable frequency. His shoulder is buzzing angrily – static in his ear, a hornet swarm of wires around his chest. He fights nausea – and almost wins.

His unseen companion rips his gag off just in time, then pats him on the back. John feels it instantly when the man is no longer at his side, although his departure was as silent as a cat’s. “Don’t worry,” his voice drifts from the unchanging darkness, “I’ll be keeping my eye on you.”
The next voice John hears is in his head, in his goddamn head – the ear piece crackles and spits, interfering with John’s own internal relay. He can feel it in the way his implants are buzzing, the mirror protocols stuttering, making it difficult to think and move –

This new voice, soft and oily, almost sing song, is issuing commands, accented Irish, maybe, but it floats and drifts, and John can’t quite reach the end of a thou—

It would be so easy just to give in to that voice, lilting and—

The commands are simple: remove the blindfold, hands in pockets to hide the bomb, that’s it, walk down that hallway, go through the doorway, yes, yes; now say these words, there’s a good boy –

John is obeying, lulled by the overpowering static in his metal bones and his neural interface. Every thought that questions the orders, that tries to implement resistance, that threatens to penetrate that fog, seems to glance away from completion as if hitting a smooth, glassy shield. When he stops trying, he finds he can still see what’s happening, though he has no power to affect it.

John is completely unprepared for the reaction his scripted lines and actions wrench from Sherlock:

The absolute disbelief, the blatant shock so evident on those normally cool and composed features leaves John breathless for a moment. The despair that replaces his (carefully hidden once more) shock when John, on cue, reveals the coiled, crouching, seething mass of wires rooted in circuits and explosives – that despair travels the distance between them, and John feels it on his face as if he were a mirror circuit awaiting input.

His eyes flicker closed for a moment with the weight of it.

John had wondered why someone so clever would keep someone so damaged around. At first he’d assumed it was the danger – Sherlock was, after all, an addict, and the human body can produce delightful cocktails of endorphins and adrenaline when provided with the correct stimulus. Danger is a seductive thing, and John has sat at its table many times, negotiated its services, partaken in what was offered.

Next, John had assumed Sherlock enjoyed having someone around who was as enthralled by his deductions as the detective was by the puzzles that required them. Perhaps he wanted to seem more normal – and what better accessory than a hybrid of flesh and steel, the mangled leavings of violence and science?

But no. Shock and despair. Those two emotions John has never seen on Sherlock’s face undo his current understanding of the man and his importance to him. This thing that lives between them, tenuous and ill-defined, is no longer a creature of necessity, stopped being something of convenience some unknowable time ago (he should have been paying better attention; maybe his analyst was right about keeping a journal after all). The fact remains: whatever this thing is, it’s mutual.

Perhaps that’s why he does it, then – John has already killed for Sherlock, twice – instinctively, with no premeditation and very little danger to himself, but this time –

John can see Moriarty’s glee through the glaze of the interference, can, on a raw, primal level, read something in this dance that he normally wouldn’t see. His response is visceral and simple, and can be summed up in one word: No.

The relay in his ear is an angry hornet, or an entire ants’ nest, or thick-spun spider webs, or –

It doesn’t matter.

It’s like dragging his battered, aching body through the obstacle course at boot camp, and every muscle is milky with fatigue, and every fibre is screaming give up but there’s something obstinate that says no.

It’s like waking up after two hours of sleep after thirty two hours of surgery, because they’re under attack, and he has help to evacuate the wounded, and there’s a haze in his brain that says go to sleep but there’s something stronger that says no.

It’s like feeling the bullet puncture him, like clawing his way back to light, like grabbing Murray’s hand and nearly crushing it as blood and heat and strength sink into sand, and everything says die but there’s something defiant that remains, and it says no.
That something is roaring through John’s veins and nerves and muscles now, indiscriminate, and the buzzing in his ears is suddenly inconsequential –

This time his body is the weapon, his mind the killing trigger, interference relay forgotten. John rushes forward and wraps his arms around the mad man in front of him, the one who is toying with Sherlock, distracted by chucking the USB into the pool –

The Semtex and wires feel like a heat wave where they crush against John’s shoulder assembly, and he can feel his own pulse hammering in his throat, can feel the rhythmic nudge of Moriarty’s jugular against his palm. Telling Sherlock to run is fruitless, because he’s surprised them both, and it’s funny, because Sherlock can predict what shirt John will wear to a date that doesn’t even exist yet, but he cannot predict this.

Less than a breath passes before the relay in his ear hisses and spits anew, and instead of glass and compulsion, it sends pain ricocheting through John’s body. John tightens his arms grimly, clenching his jaw.

“Good, very good!” Moriarty crows, somehow pleased.

John grunts as the pain increases, but still doesn’t let go. “That’s not going to work.” He forces out the words between waves of pain. He spots a laser shifting upwards over Moriarty’s chest, seeking John’s flesh; he shifts his head behind the mad man’s. “If your sniper pulls that trigger, we both go.”

It doesn’t take long for those little lasers to dance and find the threat that will make John back away. His eyes track the laser sight on Sherlock’s head back up into the shadows of the viewing gallery, and John thinks of gentle hands and a smiling voice and a promise and finds he wants desperately, crimsonly, to snap those hands, to smother that voice, to rip out those eyes. John wants to have his revenge, but at this moment all he has is exhaustion and a renewed buzzing in his ear.

It gets harder to listen, then. Later, John finds that a lot of what happened and was said is clouded by the haze of pain, anger, and the simple yet powerful intensity of resisting the interference relay, and things John wishes he could remember he simply cannot recall.

He does, however, remember with cold clarity the moment Sherlock drops down in front of him and rips the snarling jumble of wires and primed death from him, remembers the concentration and the – the vulnerability on Sherlock’s face. That much remains clear.

He remembers his legs giving out unevenly as the extra electrical interference leaves his ear (torn out by his own hand), remembers crouching back against the wall for support. He vaguely recalls babbling – classic stress reaction, hopefully Sherlock can overlook anything silly that may have been uttered – although he remembers Sherlock is not immune to the situation either, if his verbal stumbling – “That, ah … thing that you, uh, that you did. That, um… you offered to do. That was… good” – is anything to go by.

And then that small, dark haired devil was back, and John remembers with absolute perfect detail the electricity that crawled up his spine when Sherlock sought out his eyes and his permission.

If that phone call hadn’t come, John would have unleashed the energy coiled in his legs, compressed in his thighs, amplified by adrenaline and engineering, and he would have collided with Sherlock as the bullet left the muzzle of the gun (as the bullets left the muzzles of the guns), and he would have coupled his momentum with Sherlock’s inertia (he could have shifted all of reality with the fulcrum of his will), and he would have propelled Sherlock’s long-limbed frame into the pool.

The explosion would have been interesting – John remembers what it’s like to be caught inside a blast radius. Outside the pain, outside the consequences, it is nothing if not enthralling. God he sounds like Sherlock –

The pool would have been dangerous. Too much water surrounding a leg that isn’t zoned for the wet pressure of total immersion, and besides that technicality, John has never been a keen swimmer, so one leg not knowing what to do would, through the (still recovering) mirror relay, become two.

If that phone call hadn’t come, there would have been shots and the dark pressure of sinking in chlorine and it all could have ended with a bang.

But the mad man was so changeable and still had at least half his mind, and someone called and changed it.

John remembers the police showing up rather suddenly. He remembers Mycroft being there, on the edges, and John had felt both calmer and more on edge for it. He remembers someone draping an orange blanket around his shoulders, and the weight of it had felt like a vest of wires and explosive intent, and he had nearly yelped at the kindness.

John remembers being halfway home before he realized he had walked off without giving an official statement. He made it another two blocks before he realized he wasn’t alone. He stopped,
turned, and waited for Sherlock to move to his side. Sherlock had his distant face on – and John knew the detective wasn’t here and now, was, in fact, mentally still back at the pool.

For once, they were in the same place.

John remembers they walked the rest of the way home in silence.
Sherlock doesn’t talk for days.

John would travel, if he could afford it, would put some distance between himself and the molecules of the London where he’d been abducted, his body and mind almost hijacked. God, nothing like this had ever happened in Afghanistan. The enemy came at you from the front, there, not sideways, not civilian, or at least not civil, certainly not in a fucking suit with a fucking Emerald Isle twang.

Sherlock doesn’t talk for days, and it’s not the first time he’s gone silent, but it is the first time he’s gone quiet. No experiments, no violin, no sulks. Just hours of not here, not now.

John needs to do something about the building tension inside himself, but he finds he isn’t talking either. His analyst asks and asks and asks and John just doesn’t answer. For once, he doesn’t want a deeper understanding. He doesn’t want to think about any of what happened, because it feels like he’ll lose his footing if he does.

When his mind catches on the snag of the events at the pool, little threads come loose. John sees red briefly, feels an urge in his hands and his feet and deep in the pit of his stomach. He wants to do something visceral.

Something primal.

John knows he needs relief from this, that talking will help – but he’s not up to answering, and there’s only one person in his life who doesn’t fill his ears with questions.

And Sherlock doesn’t talk for days.
John waited two months after the stimulation ban had been lifted from his activities before he let his hand fall casually to his stomach as he lay awake and far from sleep in his bedsit in the early morning flavor of dark.

The blockers had long since worn off – he had stopped taking the oral doses weeks ago, and the internal suspension network had dissolved according to schedule – but something in John had not thawed out. ‘It will take time,’ open, calm faces had explained, but John hadn’t ever been one to rely on time.

He hadn’t expected those two months of waiting to happen, but they did, one day at a time, and his tactile sense had slowly come back on line, after the numb sleep, the hibernation of medicine and necessity, of does it even matter anymore?

He hadn’t expected those two months, so when he lay awake one night, thinking, they caught him by surprise, sneaking up on him from behind. He hadn’t really thought he’d accrue more history…

John’s hand had fallen casually to his stomach before, but this time he engineered that nonchalance, executed its trajectory, flipping his hand over to press his palm against the pulse and heat of his abdominal flesh. After a moment, he let his palm move lower, passing over the hairs that started as a dusting of straight, golden strands, becoming thicker, denser, coarser, until they were a thicket that his fingers investigated. He didn’t want that touch to be so impersonal, so aloof, but it was written there in the curve of each knuckle.

The first few touches were clinical, critical – if he couldn’t have intimacy, he’d settle for familiarity, and in his time as a doctor his hands had handled all a manner of flesh (it was easy to imagine he was examining someone else, almost harder to think that this was his own touch seeking out his own response). John slid his fingers down and around, grasped his flaccid penis, tried to register something beyond the bland and expected heat of his palm. After a moment, he switched hands, trying, trying, trying.

Pulse remained stable if elevated; rate of respiration increased slightly. Meanwhile, John tightened his grip, desperate to glean something besides pressure from the press of skin on skin.

Moments later, biting his lip, he started a rhythmic chafing, tugging, and tried to remember a time when this had worked, when others had touched him, when his body had reveled in touch. Blood shifted sluggishly, erectile tissue stiffened, but an emptiness remained, and John, to this day, cannot remember if he achieved orgasm or not.

That had been the only New Year’s festivities for John Watson, Captain, Doctor, Remainder, dead to his only remaining family, uninterested in even his own touch, starting to panic at the thought of recovery – of staying.

Every day before him was queuing up in front of him, waiting to pass through the filter of him awake, him alive, to pass through the pinch of his continued existence, only to pool meaningless and indistinguishable behind him, filling him, somehow, with vertigo.

In less than a month, another 29 day-after-days, John was going to stop measuring time like that.

John had his first memorable orgasm a few months later, with the mess of flesh and technology that was Mona. That orgasm (the twist of her smoke afterwards, like desire, like a mirage) was memorable because it was no sweet release, no rekindling of self-affection, nor any sort of incentive to seek out more stimulus. It had, in a way, actually been unpleasant – an overwhelming of the senses and systems without any of the intangible fulfillment John had always associated with a lover’s touch.

The suddenness of it – the almost-pain of it, really – had left John gasping for oxygen, and Mona had laughed, all teeth and sharp eyes, lazy with her own pleasure/pain response, and had said, ‘It takes time, but you get used to it.’ And John had thought about how he didn’t want to get used to it, how he didn’t want to get used to any of it, and he’d excused himself and gone home, arriving home (home?) at four in the morning, and Sherlock bloody Sherlock had been awake still (already?) and –

And he hadn’t said anything – neither of them had. But that was the taste of their time together, the taste of silence, because there was nothing John could say that Sherlock had not already noticed, and there was nothing Sherlock would say.

And John could breathe.
And John could breathe.
It’s more than a week later. After (after the devil and the wires and the dancing lights), and John gasps out of the chlorine taste of his dreams and into the briny embrace of morning not-light. Thunder sounds outside, and it takes John a moment to connect the electrical disturbance in the sky to the tingling in his torso and leg.

Even now, the events of a week ago shift in his recall, the mirage of fear combining with a patina of adrenaline, leaving him seasick in his bed. Sweat has smudged his forehead, blurred the familiarity of his face when he reaches up to cover his eyes with his palms. Every muscle trembles, and as the sheets shift, John becomes aware of the sweat dewing across his chest, in the soft hollows of his throat, his hip bones, the backs of his knees –

With a frustrated grunt closer to animal than human, John kicks away the remaining covers – and instantly regrets it. He is nude except for pants, couldn’t bear the weight of clothing while he slept, the slow strangle of a t-shirt too reminiscent of the recent past. With a start, John goes still, his brain finally catching up: one knee is sweaty, the other is not. One knee is cold now, skin prickling, and the other is simply playing along. He lets out a slow breath, heart suddenly racing.

The morning chill wraps around him, its damp fingers finding the moist heat of John’s sweat and invading. He shivers, but doesn’t cover up, mostly because there’s no use – no more sleep for him, not now – and partly because this is one of the few times his body is receiving and responding to stimulus correctly as a unit: his skin tightens, forming gooseflesh, his muscles quiver, his nipples tighten, and a delicious tremor runs through the length of him.

Even the tingle of his implants recedes for a moment, and John lets out a little breath, reveling in the rightness of it –

But then the background hum of the implants is back, and John feels like conflicting pieces again, befores and afters and in-betweens.

John hoists himself up a little in bed, propping up his lower back with cushions. He is aware of what he is doing, what he is planning to do, obliquely – if he looks at it straight on, he’ll balk. He’ll rip the covers loose from their moorings in his haste to cover himself –

He’s looked, he’s looked, of course he’s looked (but, as Sherlock would say, he hasn’t seen). Quick, clinical glances, brief assessments, and of course, the memorable afternoon with the tech, watching and watching like it was some sort of tutorial vid –

“C’mon, Watson,” he mutters through his teeth, hands fistng in the sheets. God, that’s the first thing he’s said in days. He takes a shaky breath, nods at the ceiling, a farewell of sorts, and then lowers his chin to his chest.

Afer a moment, he even manages to crack open his eyes. For a moment, the sight that greets him is an overlapping of images, a layering of pasts: his pectorals in Uni, puffed up from athletics, from Rugby, from getting into fights; his chest, a mess of red, skin torn, arteries visible, exposed, coughing out blood almost apologetically, fading; and now.

After a moment, everything else recedes and just the current version of John Watson’s reality remains: pale skin, still a little sun-stained (he wonders if the degree to which the sun chewed him has left an indelible change in his skin’s melatonin production), smooth, not even a little translucent, currently hiding all the red inside his veins.

At least, that’s the right side. The left side is a little more…interesting (yes, go with interesting, it is the kindest word).

His skin meets up with the ‘skin’ in a tangle of paler scarring lines, lines which disappear abruptly under the outer, removable layer. If John were to place his fingertips over the seam and curl them slightly, his short nails would dig under and pry up the outer, leading edge. Enough pressure, and the whole skin can be removed, like peeling an orange.

Underneath the nanofoam rubber skin, smooth layers of sensory conductive plastics and metals weave into one another. The effect, visually, is that of muscle fibres seen without their covering. The practical effect is much the same – the layers can and do shift as required by the – user? wearer? bearer? subject, though technically accurate, has never sat well with John –

The layers can and do shift as required. (Leave it at that.)

The skin layer, once removed, can be seen for what it really is: a fleshy layer of camouflage. Although it is as adept at sensory data collection and transfer as the intricate layers beneath, it serves very little purpose beyond making John easier to look at.
John doesn’t remove it now, not yet, but he does loosen it and slide his fingers underneath the leading edge. A strangled sound escapes his throat as he experiences something he has, until now, associated with techs at the Clinic: the shudder-inducing sensation of being touched *beneath* his skin. Sensory data pours in from the outside of the skin, where the surface is distorted by the intrusion of fingers; from the underside, where the tiny snap fixtures are loose from their moorings, the signals slightly jumbled; and finally, from the surface of the pectoral augmentation itself, a cleaner, brighter flavor of sensation.

John lets his fingers curl and uncurl over/under his own flesh (*not* his own flesh). He can feel his heartbeat thudding through the casing of his augmentation – it is, after all, caged by layers of synthetic muscle fibre, artificial plasma transfer tubing, and the crux of it all, an intricate aortic integration, the gateway through which all his blood must flow. Simply imagining the plastic and the metal and the something-in-between that nests inside the boundaries of his body causes his heart rate to climb.

John withdraws his fingers, presses the ‘skin’ back in place, little sounds halfway between a *click* and a *pop* accompanying each successful fastening, and waits for his heart to calm down.

His analyst had warned him against exploration. *That’s not your job,* she’d said. *Let the techs keep you in one piece, and you focus on acclimating. Focus on accepting what you are.*

Well, John thinks as the last part of his ‘skin’ clicks into place, and the double-image sensory data solidifies into a unified theory of touch, *this is me trying.*

The leg is next, and with his heart back under control, and John spends longer than he thought he would need to (or want to) simply running his fingers along the seam of his leg ‘skin’ – his sock, as he prefers to think of it. For a moment, his vision layers again, or rather, it’s his sense of touch stacking tactile memories; his fingers are searching for a young boy’s pulse; his fingers are trailing over soft skin, eliciting a moan; his fingers are here, now, almost shy in their touching –

The dying boy fades from recall, but the softness and uncertainty remain, and John blinks, trying to reconcile what he sees with what he touches and feels and remembers. John wants to give in to his hesitation and stop this exploration, but he also knows he’s not going to.

He has had occasion to tamper with the edge of the sock before (self-electrocution comes to mind), but he has never removed the entire sheath by himself before. It can slide off, but John doesn’t have access to the specialized little volt gun that triggers it to release all its moorings at once, so he’ll have to work it off himself.

After a moment of struggle, John sits up and digs his fingers in, huffing as the first set of connections loosen. He bites down an almost groan and has to stop for a moment to wrap his brain around the bizarre feeling of the sock being removed without the aid of the volt gun, so close to pain and yet so close to something else –

John gets his breath back after a moment, almost (not really) surprised at the fresh sweat on his chest and face. His fingers finally find a rhythm and a reason to their movements, slowly peeling back the sock, rolling it down his leg like a fleshy legwarmer.

He has to stop twice more – once at the knee, and then again before he tackles the foot, getting his pounding heart and stubborn dizziness back in hand. Breathing works, thinking of sunlight works, stretching his fingers slowly works, and finally John is grounded enough to look down at his replacement leg on his own, unguided by Clinic hands, undisguised as a training exercise.

Like his shoulder assembly, the look of the leg belies the function of it; great chords of flexing fibres and motor aides bunch together like muscles, mimicking shape while they execute motion. John flexes and arches his foot, watching the whole package shift, contracting and releasing like an anatomy sketch in soft greys and whites come to life.

He regards his foot – the intricacy of it, the simplistic base design of an arch, the accoutrements of phalanges, the different connections and interactions needed to stand upright, never mind walk, run, jump… On a whim, John reaches out to tug on of the simple, stylistic toes – they are slightly more angular than his real toes, fitting together to form one smooth segment if he thinks about clenching them.

The whole foot is a sleek contraption, and John vaguely recalls some mention of a design award being won by the engineer who drafted the pedichassis that is now standard in almost all cyberthetics. The ankle that connects that segmented chassis to the lower leg is just as elegant – a smooth swoop of lines and interlinking plates and planes of flexible material, allowing for unimpeded range of motion.

After the tingling of his bare cyberthetic leg calms down a bit, John lifts his hands and lays them on the sensing exterior of his thigh. The intensity of the sensation is enough to make him hiss and retract his touch – techs wear special gloves for dust and static, which also serve to numb down local sensation, but John doesn’t have any.

For what he has in mind, dust and static won’t be a problem, but touch will be required. He wonders if a simple pair of nitrile gloves will do the trick, since skin-to-sensing surface seems to be creating a bit of a feedback loop.

John sighs. The theoretically simple tune-up he wanted to perform has just become complicated; he’s going to have to ask Sherlock where he keeps his stash of nitriles, and that’s not going to be a...
He shakes out the sock and begins the long process of covering up his cyberthetic again, hiding the shifting mass of pale silver human ingenuity once more.
There are voices filling up the living room when John comes down the stairs, and he slows his steps as he draws near the door. Both voices are muted, restrained – one is Sherlock’s, sounding a little rough from disuse, and the other is –

Mycroft.

John freezes in place for a moment. Technically the man hasn’t done anything to him – except abduct him, (almost) threaten him, and (offhandedly) insult him. Still, it takes John a moment to collect himself before he enters, a terse, “morning,” on his lips.

“Ah, John,” Mycroft greets him, indulgent smile replacing the look of extreme annoyance he’d been visiting upon Sherlock. “Now we can ask the man himself.”

Sherlock, apparently fixated on the tuning of his violin, glances up at John before narrowing his eyes, razor sharp, at his brother. “Leave John out of this.”

“I hardly see how I can,” Mycroft sighs. “You are being frightfully uncooperative.”

“I have nothing further to divulge upon the matter. You know what I know.” Sherlock’s hand tightens around the neck of the violin. “Now get out.”

John is positive he doesn’t want to know what this is all about, but he also knows that won’t stop his traitor mouth one bit. “What’s this all about?” it asks.

“My brother is exhibiting extreme recalcitrance of late and is refusing to assist the ongoing investigation into the affair at the natatorium.” Mycroft’s lips curl and brushes a speck from his lapel, but John is busy looking at Sherlock, who rolls his eyes at his brother’s smug needling. “I was rather hoping you would rise to the occasion and provide some much needed information.”

“Mycroft.” Sherlock’s voice is tense, a warning in it like a barb.

Mycroft gives no indication of hearing, continuing, “You have yet to give your account of events,” and with a glance at Sherlock he adds, “and I hear Detective Inspector Lestrade has been…unsuccessful at acquiring an audience.”

Sherlock huffs a sigh and stands, moving past John into the kitchen. He seems bored – face to body, every subtle cue is one uninteresting minute away from a sulk – but John isn’t fooled. Something has Sherlock on edge, and it’s more than his brother’s presence this time, as unappealing as that is all on its own.

“We are in the dark where the events at the pool are concerned. Sherlock has shared a few paltry observations, but nothing of any concrete use.”

Sherlock slams the fridge door, and John hides his mouth behind a hand, turning slightly so that neither Mycroft nor Sherlock has a clear look at his face.

“And what,” he finally says, turning back, as neutral an expression as he can currently manage in place, “you want me to give a statement? I’m sure I don’t have to remind you that I’m not up to either of your standards when it comes to observing. Not unless –”

Mycroft’s eyes are sharp above his tidy little smile.

The blood drains from John’s face. “No.” Behind him, Sherlock’s rummaging and rustling dies away. “I’m not letting you –” John heaves a shaky sigh, and is distantly surprised when a hand on his shoulder pushes him down into a somehow-close-by chair. His knees bend all at once, and he clenches his left fist to stop the shaking.

“It wouldn’t be for very long,” Mycroft points out, inspecting the nails of one hand.

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“Not the answer he wants,” John says tightly, and when he looks up at Mycroft, the man meets his gaze with a look like a scalpel. “He doesn’t want my permission, he wants my cooperation.” He spits out the words, “My blessing.” Mycroft beams at him, and John feels anger blossom inside him like an oil fire. “I don’t understand, that, though – it’s not like you need it –”

“Yes,” Mycroft says quietly, standing, “but after hearing a recounting of events at the pool, I’d greatly prefer it.” The look he levels at John now is full of an emotion John has not yet associated with the man standing in their living room. John breaks the look for a moment, overwhelmed, but also unsure. It could be meant as nothing more than manipulation.
“There has to be another option – are you telling me that between the pair of you geniuses you can’t sort it without –” John cuts himself off, grimacing. “I don’t remember much very clearly either way – they shoved an external relay in my ear.”

“The unfortunate fact remains that we don’t have much else to go on – the entire site was blacked out and meticulously stripped – even the vest and relay they outfitted you with are useless. But we do have something.” Mycroft’s eyes are on John, piercing and calculating. “The digital imprint left from the interference.” With a slight incline of the head, he adds, nonchalant as anything, “If you are willing, we can do a retrieval on your interface.”

For a moment John feels as if his shoulder assembly is shrinking, but it’s just the panic in his chest. He fights it down with another deep breath. When techs access an interface, often updates can be shared through contact transfer, much in the same way that the interference relay had broadcasted its interruption signal, although the sensation is less painful and more downright weird.

But for a full retrieval…

“John,” Mycroft says, suddenly a lot closer, “if we have nothing to go on, we cannot track Moriarty.” John hears the rest of what he isn’t saying, and it’s all about Sherlock.

John stands. He’s still in his goddamned pyjamas, hasn’t even had tea. He’s painfully aware of his leg and shoulder, their otherness after his morning’s exploratory touching. Every nerve seems to sizzle where it’s twining into its artificial counterpart. He briefly wonders if it’s nervous tension being communicated across the mirror relays, but finally decides it doesn’t really matter one way or another.

“Alright,” John grinds out, ignoring the abortive movement next to him, where Sherlock has stood sentinel this whole time. “But I’m having some bloody tea, first.”
This is not the Clinic John is used to, not by a long shot, from its gleaming presentation, the glory of having a budget evident in every spotless room, to the full team of retrieval techs, specialists, and other support staff, to the state of the art equipment. If only any of this served to comfort. If only John weren’t here as a subject.

A black car had been waiting for them when John had finished his tea (no toast, for very good reasons). Sherlock and John rode in silence, buildings and trees and people flashing by almost as fast as John’s thoughts.

“You have questions,” John had said, as the car slowed to navigate the entrance to Vauxhall.

Indeed Sherlock did, and John tried to answer them as fully as possible, not just because he needed somebody – anybody – (Sherlock in particular) to understand what he was about to do, to risk – but because Sherlock was, for once, riveted by John’s words.

This was not something most people knew a lot about – in fact, if John had not been both a doctor and an augmented individual himself, none of this knowledge would have been available to him. So he had shared what he could, because Sherlock craved the knowledge, and John needed the support, no matter what bizarre form it might take when Sherlock was involved.

Sherlock had asked, and John had answered, and all the while a bevy of nurses and support staff had prepped him for the retrieval. By the third time that someone swiped and punctured John’s neck, he’d stopped twitching. He had, however, been very aware of Sherlock’s relentless scrutiny – of him, of the staff, of every tool and implement and concoction visited upon John’s flesh.

Now they just have to wait for all those injections to take effect. Sherlock has, by now, managed to run off the hovering support staff – even the most resilient of the nurses left after Sherlock pointed out that his erectile dysfunction was a symptom of his guilt over his current affair and not medical in origin.

The silence that follows the nurse’s abrupt departure starts awkward, but soon dissolves into a shaky chuckle from John and self-satisfied huff from Sherlock.

John leans back in his chair – he’d avoided the exam table earlier, preferring not to lie down until absolutely necessary. “So…Did I answer everything?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow as he watches John fidget in his sterile jumpsuit. “I take it when you say ‘data corruption’ you don’t just mean the files native to the implants and their protocols. You mean you.”

John blinks at Sherlock. “That’s one way to describe it,” he says flatly, then huffs out a sigh. There are scant minutes left before the procedure. No need to spend them arguing.

“Now,” Sherlock continues, oblivious (or at least unapologetic) to John’s reaction, “this can’t be the first time a physical exchange has occurred with you – they do these all the time for patch ups and updates…Upgrades. Routine, almost.”

John shakes his head. “Most of that is contact or wireless transfer – non-penetrative insertion. This will be different.” He clenches his hands, flexes both feet. “But you’re right – this won’t be my first time.”

Sherlock blinks, then realization dawns. “Ah, yes. When you first came online with your augmentations.” He leans forward to peer closely at John’s eyes, first one, then the other, with absolutely no regard for personal space. “So you’re saying you may have lost memories – bits of your self, or ‘soul,’ or whatever the romantics insist on calling it – already. Intriguing.”

Sherlock steeples his fingers and sits back out of John’s space, and John finds he can breathe again. “And have you?” he asks suddenly.

“Well I wouldn’t know if I had, would I?” John asks tetchily. Bloody Harry and her bloody views – she hadn’t even been willing to talk with him, take a sounding, see if John’s interface insertion had achieved a complete capture. It hadn’t mattered, she’d said, not to her. But it’s far too late to do anything about it now, and at least he no longer feels like climbing the walls or passing out.
Instead he feels vexed and tired – talking (read: arguing) with Sherlock can have that effect.

“How could you not notice...”

“You can’t see something that’s not there anymore. Or rather, that seems never to have been there in the first place.”

“I see things like that all the time; it happens to be my job.”

“Yes well, we can’t all be you. And this is... different.”

Sherlock’s pensive again for a moment, caught up in the shininess of this new idea. “And what about memory alteration? Or even insertion? How much of what you remember is actually yours? How can you be sure?”

John sighs, running his hands through his hair, careful not to let his fingers near the base of his skull. “I can’t. Not really. It’s all a bit Bladerunner, I’m afraid,” John says with a halfhearted laugh. “We’ll add that to the list of things I need to introduce you to.”

Sherlock’s face takes on a sulky edge – then immediately clears. “Unless you forget about it.”

“Berk.” John fiddles with the cuff of his sleeve. “There’s a lot I might lose, if this goes badly,” he says softly.

Sherlock’s eyes are on the door watching the staff prepare the chamber beyond. “If you come back different, I could... I could not tell you,” he offers. There’s something unfamiliar in his voice, and it takes John a moment to parse it: doubt.

“Oh god, no, you git, don’t you dare...” A sudden wave of nausea cuts him off midsentence, and John has to fight a sudden wash of tremors. The interrupters are starting to come online. A moment later, John regains his composure, swallowing reflexively. “If something’s off about me, please tell me.”

Sherlock seems relieved, but hesitation creeps into the lines of his face. “I thought not telling you would be... kinder.”

John purses his lips for a moment before saying, “Yes, yes it would.” There’s a confusing mess of cold and warmth building inside his chest, fear and something else, but John doesn’t try to analyze it – none of this will matter anyway, if something goes wrong with the retrieval. He can’t stop a sudden grin, though – and isn’t that unexpected, looking down the barrel of oblivion? – and says, “If I wanted ‘kind’ I wouldn’t be living with you, now would I?” John lifts his gaze to find Sherlock staring at him. They lock eyes. “Besides, you couldn’t keep your observations to yourself even if you tried.”

The doors clack open, and a nurse enters, her grey uniform spotless. She’s carrying a portable scanner. “We’re ready for you now.” She passes the scanner along John’s neck and glances at the results. “And you’re ready for us.”

John nods at her, then turns back to his flatmate and friend. This could be the last time he recognizes him as such. “Sherlock...”

Pressure on his hand – Sherlock crushing John’s clenched fist in his own grip, and he nods at John – a quick slash of motion. Then he’s gone, leaving John with just the after-image of a pale face full of conflict and the ghost of a squeeze on his left hand.
They’re called daptic dreams, and they are rare. Especially as they exist in theory only, since they supposedly occur during times when the brain is incapable of forming memories, so no one can confirm their existence, report on their duration, or discuss their content.

John’s analyst, his supervising surgeon, his techs…they’d all warned him of his dubious fortune to be in the small section of the augmented population hypothetically prone to them – the traumatic nature of his injury and the accompanying PTSD mark him as a prime candidate for daptic spells.

How right those people were, John thinks as he slowly becomes aware of himself in dream space. Here, everything is clear but nothing is interesting. John can minutely examine any memory or stream of data, understand it fully and irrevocably, if only he wants to.

He watches the bullet take apart his shoulder and the first time he had sex with the same level of disinterest before letting his mind’s eye drag over to the buzz of data being copied, loaded, transferred. This could be the first time it happened almost a year ago in the waking world, or maybe it’s current events: maybe Mycroft’s people are in there, recording his memories, analyzing them, pulling them apart to see what makes him tick.

Maybe they’ll put him back together, maybe they won’t. Maybe they’ll put him back together better, no PTSD, no constant battle to be at ease with himself and this softer world that can’t stomach him. Maybe they’ll put him back together wrong and all he’ll have left is the memory of that oily voice controlling him.

Doesn’t matter.

Nearby, all the colours and all their shades blossom, lotus-like, unfolding Venn diagram of hue, and John finds that each one has a sound and each one has a texture and all of this might be terribly important.

Another layer comes to notice, and all it is, is maths – the scripture of the universe, swaying, spinning, orbiting, and all of it is gravity and attraction and the unseen tether, and also, it is his mother crying gin tears and also, it is his sister not crying, and also, it is the gravestone with his name on it, the expiration date matching that of his augmentation surgery, and also –

In the background, behind the buzz, John has his hands inside a young man’s belly, trying to clamp a bleeder. He’s going to fail. Heat is washing over his hands like golden yellow and purple, the colours of royalty swathing his skin like a blessing, like a luxury. Saffron and crocus and ermine intent.

Sound is unzipping into his mouth, and it could be the whistle of his gasps, or it could be the cries of the man he’s touching, or it be the wind that ruffles his hair fondly, stroking him like a favored possession, yes, my pet, do keep trying, it amuses me so, and the desert knows he’s trying to save this man, but the desert knows he’s failing.

Nearby, John has his hand up Felicia Harsby’s skirt, fingers slick and warm, mouth obsessed with her neck, other hand gripping her a touch too roughly by the waist. Her hands are under his shirt, but traveling lower. He’s going to make her come – a first for him. It’s going to be honey and lightning and the plosive sound of air escaping from water, success erupting from effort.

Everything is blending at the edges, heated by blood and the clear slide of desire, and all the little cracks of difference are fading, and somehow that is wrong, or it would be if only it mattered –

John remembers being so unaware of that impending failure and success, unaware and unprepared in equal measures, but here, now, suspended in the detailed recall of daptic dreams, it is so painfully obvious that boy will groan and spasm and die with John’s hands inside him, and that the girl will moan and clench and come with John’s fingers inside her.

For a moment, it is just as obvious that John’s fingers are covered with Felicia’s blood, her muscle contractions forcing air from her lungs as she grasps his arm roughly, asks him to tell her mother good bye, says don’t worry, says it’s alright, says the words that haunt him in nightmares still – and all the while, nearby, a rhythmic grunting is growing louder, and a young man’s voice rises into ecstasy as John thrusts into him, into his wound, and the cadence of their rutting is a heartbeat and an oscillation and a waveform frequency function, painted in reds and purples and yellows.
and clarity –

John idly wonders if Sherlock sees this clearly all the time, every detail crystalline, a glassy slice of simple yet profound. He considers giving it serious thought, perhaps achieving a conclusive answer on the matter, but why bother?

Nearby, data streams and dances, numbers pure and simple, and it all makes sense. The lotus of colour slides apart, becomes a veil of sensation, obscuring and enhancing everything. Everything makes sense and nothing matters. All the colours slide apart, taut with separation, and then they are shattering into slivers of silver and gray and absence –

Heat coats his hands like blood, and his lips, and his thighs, and his arousal, and the –

Sound slides down his throat, languid mercury, smug asphyxiation of thought –

It’s all too much, and John lets it wash over him, pulling his disinterested attention in all directions until it pulls it – and him – apart, unspins him and scatters every last bit of him and all he has is *distance, distance, distance* and then he doesn’t even have that anymore –
Waking up is complicated.

The easy part is the interface coming online, clicking to life like a fluorescent light, flickering more and more until it reaches its (hopefully) optimal processing frequency. And this part of consciousness is simple, at least. There are no shades of grey here.

The sticky, sloppy, slippery, uncertain part is his actual brain trying to slide back into its state of consciousness when there’s already an artificial (and foreign) presence taking up space. John has read cases of augmentations gone wrong, where the people never wake up again, but the interface is functioning, and so the eyes blink and the limbs twitch and if the mirror relays are advanced enough, the husk will imitate any facial expressions it sees.

However, that doesn’t happen this time: John’s brain oozes back to wakefulness, shouldering its way back into the lead, and the interface resettles at the back of John’s thoughts, taking care of his leg and his shoulder. But that doesn’t make that uncertain minute during the transition any less appalling.

John’s eyes open during that same minute, and for the space of that transition, nothing makes sense. Agnosia: his memory supplies the concept, rather than the word. There are people moving around him, but in that moment, he cannot recognize any of them. Prosopagnosia, his mind specifies. Part of John wonders what that means, exactly.

When he opens his mouth to inform a stranger that is hopefully a supervising doctor, he cannot make sense of his mouth or the sounds coming out. Aphasia, too. Wonderful. There’s a lot of noise, and some of it must mean something – one sound being repeated at intervals must be his name –

Suddenly, painfully, everything lurches into focus – or rather, into recognition. Understanding. Processing. John flops back with a grunt. His hands come up to his face, and he groans into them.

“John?” There’s something tight about that voice, or maybe John’s not receiving and reporting sounds correctly.

“Yeah, I’m here.” Words. Thank god. John holds his hands in front of his eyes and regards them blearily. “I think.” Were his hands always this small? No. Oh god, they’ve shrunk –

Wait. That’s not how this works. That wouldn’t have changed – physical change isn’t a result, but the perception of physicality is subject to alteration – “My logic just switched on,” he blurts out.

“Thank god,” someone says dryly. “It only took a few months.” The words are sardonic, but the relief in that voice is almost palpable.


He looks at Mycroft, who’s perched with all possible aplomb on a nearby stool. John squints at him. “Did I just insult you?”

Mycroft lifts an eyebrow. “No.”

“Good, then I’m no longer speaking my mind.” John hoists himself into a sitting position. Two new faces rush forward to assist, but he waves them away. “No, wait, I have to –” He snatches a nearby bowl and vomits messily into it. “If I can just –” He vomits again.

After the third set of heaves, John sets the container aside. A nurse picks it up, favouring John with a critical look as she does. For a moment, John wishes he was still blurting whatever came to mind. Instead of venting his anger on the nurse, however, John turns his attention to Mycroft. “Get what you needed?”

Mycroft stands. “Already in analysis. I hear there are voice captures – potentially very useful.” He nods at John. “Good day.” And then he’s gone, and John and Sherlock are left alone in the room.

John wants to seethe about – something. Could be the ungrateful nature of the man who just departed. It could be the nurse who’s just entered with his clothes tucked under her arm and a businesslike look in her eye. Before he can say anything though, Sherlock steps forward to meet her.

“Leave,” the detective growls, snatching John’s things from her hands. She hesitates, then nods and does just that – she must’ve heard about him from the others. The clothes land in an untidy heap next John. Sherlock goes to stand by the door and watch the staff scurry about.
John dresses, grateful for the privacy, for the lack of pointed looks at his cyberthetics and accompanying scarring. He gets his trousers up over legs and hips, ditches the hospital garb, and pulls on an undershirt before sliding into the soft gray shirt he’d worn on the way here. “How long was I gone?”

“How three hours.” Sherlock looks over, nods and opens the door. “Let’s go.”

They refuse the offer of an arranged car, instead walking a short way in silence before Sherlock signals a cab for them both. Once inside, Sherlock settles in his corner to stare at John, who eventually gives in and stares right back.

“I watched the procedure,” Sherlock says once John’s attention is on him. He purses his lips. “Everything checked out.”

“And?” John prompts.

Sherlock’s hands twitch in his lap, but he stills them, looks out the window instead of answering.

“Am I back?”

Sherlock’s eyes snap to his, and for a moment their gazes hook. But then Sherlock blinks and turns away. “Too early to tell, isn’t it?”

John’s stomach clenches, but before he can say anything else, the cab slows down, and it’s time to get out. He lets Sherlock pay while he walks up to the entrance of 221, his eyes tracking and catching everywhere, looking for patches of unfamiliarity.

None so far.

Good.

Unless there are things that should be unfamiliar, and his mind’s covering them up in an attempt to feel whole –

John shakes his head, and by now Sherlock has the door open, and he follows his flatmate inside.
It’s dark inside, musty and musky, and John goes looking for memories and finds them. He touches the hallway wall, glances up the stairs. Everything seems to be in order, but maybe it isn’t.

Upstairs, the flat is a mess. John doesn’t even bother suppressing a sigh, then immediately wonders if that’s a marked change, if before the interface session he would have covered up his frustration. And now he’s getting a headache from all this introspection.

He catches sight of Sherlock watching him warily. Shit, something’s off. Or is it?

“What?” he asks Sherlock finally. It’s late, and dusk is claiming the edge of the sky, and the back of his head is pounding. If he could, he would shove his head into a bank of snow or a block of ice, but he doesn’t even try to rub at his neck or scalp, because if there’s one spot on John’s body that he will never, ever touch again, it’s right there. “What?” he repeats tiredly. “Sherlock… stop staring at me like that. Just, tell me what’s different and…”

Sherlock simply keeps looking at him as if this is the first time he’s really seeing John. His eyes are roving, taking in every detail, but they keep returning to John’s face – his head. Looking through to the back of his head. John swallows a curse – Sherlock’s done a stand-up job of coping with his augmented presence, but having seen what he saw today – it would have been too much for anybody. John realizes he will probably have to find a new flat soon, but he can’t bring himself to voice that thought out loud. Instead, he just says, “Please.”

“Nothing seems to have changed,” Sherlock says, but there’s… something in his voice.

“Like hell it hasn’t – stop staring at me.” John wants to shout, wants to scream, wants to say, ‘You knew what I was from the start, why does it matter now?’ but he doesn’t. Part of him wonders if this is normal behavior for him.

“Don’t be stupid,” Sherlock snaps. “You asked me to watch, to see if anything would change, and yet now when I watch and tell you it hasn’t, you doubt my observational skills and then tell me to stop observing you. If anything proves your unchanged nature, it should be this classic example of stubborn idiocy!”

“Then why are you still looking at me like – like –”

“Like I watched my brother’s people shove cables into your skull and extract actual memories? Like I watched you wake up with half of your cognitive functions missing?” His words are crime-scene deduction fast, his voice a rumble, urgent, tight. John has heard that voice list other atrocities before, but he is unprepared for how it feels to have his own condition fall into that category.

John fists his hands. “Well, now you know,” he says harshly.

“Now I know what?”

“What this – I – what augmentation is really like,” John snarls. “It’s not clean, and it’s not pretty, and it’s not normal.”

“No, it isn’t.” Sherlock’s voice is low, but the words carry like a klaxon in the sudden quiet, then linger like smoke. John’s eyes snap up to meet Sherlock’s. His gaze is dark and intense, and something about it reminds John of Sally Donovan’s warning. “It’s far better than any of those things – those things are boring.”

John blinks. “You – I –”

Sherlock moves to stand closer, and John can feel him trying to get a look at the sani-patch the nurses placed on his interface socket after they were done with the retrieval. He doesn’t know what he hates more in that moment – the itchy reminder clinging to the nape of his neck, or Sherlock’s blatant disregard for what it means.

“This isn’t a game, Sherlock –” he begins, and Sherlock tries to cut him off with a wave of his hand, but he continues, “you saw what can be done at the pool. That interference relay – if they had made me – forced me to –” John grimaces and stops himself. “I’m not safe.”
“No, you’re interesting.”

“Dammit, Sherlock, you’re not listening. They could have made me kill you.”

“You resisted control well enough from what I remember,” Sherlock says coolly, but John shakes his head.

“If they had had the foresight or the time to plug into my interface, I couldn’t have. The thought wouldn’t even have occurred to me. A skilled tech could have inserted ideas, memories, associations... they could have made me want to hurt you. And I would have.”

Sherlock sneers. “Is this why you agreed to the retrieval? Guilt over something that didn’t even happen?” He scoffs, but his sneer is almost instantly replaced by a thoughtful look. “I wonder which came online first – sentiment, or logic?”

“Oh god,” John all but moans. “You are an absolute nutter.” John runs a hand through his hair absentmindedly, and his fingers brush the edge of the patch – with a start, he drops his hand.

Sherlock’s eyes snap to the where the patch would be visible if John were to turn his back. “No,” he says preemptively, but Sherlock grins.

“That’s going to have to come off, and you don’t seem to want to touch it.”

“Fuck you.” John lifts his hand to rip the patch away, but just the thought of accidentally touching the port sends a spasm of nausea through him, right down to the marrow. “Fuck you,” he breathes, shuddering, dropping his hand and his gaze.

He starts when he feels Sherlock’s hands on his shoulders. He looks up, and Sherlock is giving him a wry grin. “You haven’t changed at all, John Watson,” he says, almost softly, “So you can stop worrying that you’re a danger to me or any other such nonsense.”

John heaves a sigh. He can feel himself swaying, exhausted from a day he was hardly even conscious to experience. He wants the man in front of him to be right. Just a few months together, but if anyone is going to know if John has changed, it’s this man – detective, flatmate, friend.

“Sherlock –”

“And while you’re at it, turn around and let me take off that patch for you.”

John shakes his head, swallowing a laugh. “You are insufferable, do you know that?” But he turns slowly all the same. He can feel little shivers of tension running up and down his spine as he exposes this final bit of his – well, call it what it is: non-humanity. “And selfish, too.”

Gentle fingers coax the edges of the patch loose from the short hair at the base of John’s skull. John fights the tingle that wriggles through the pain of his headache, tries to keep from shivering. “Just – don’t touch anything.”

Sherlock huffs behind him, but otherwise remains silent. John lets his eyes fall closed, but tenses all the same when the room’s cool, dry air hits his exposed interface port. With a final tug, the patch comes away, and John hears Sherlock catch his breath. He feels the shift of the detective’s weight, but no prying fingers. For once, Sherlock seems to be taking his preferences into account.

“Thank you,” John says when Sherlock finally takes a step back.

“Not at all, John.”
John runs into Shelly purely by chance – a face from his past, when they were both scrappy kids, all scraped elbows and knees, hiding from their parents and siblings and problems.

He runs into her purely by chance, and for a while it feels like good luck.

Shelly smiles at John with her whole face. She touches John with her whole hands. She loves John with her whole body. For a while it feels like a blessing, and when she whispers her affection for him after the third time they make love, it feels like a benediction.

John can’t quite wrap his brain around his fortune that such a kind, caring, beautiful person should want what’s left of him. By all rights, she should run from him – she’s no Mona, not a sharp edge on her. Hardly a scar, if you discount childhood.

Shelly’s a nurse, and her short black hair makes her brown eyes seem mischievous and her dimpled smile all the more impish. She’s a proper nurse, too – not a Clinic tech, and when she tells John about her day, he listens, rapt. He never thought he could be this hungry for a world he once considered boring, so boring in fact, that when the opportunity arose, John went off to make a few wounds of his own. He listens and pictures putting people back together again.

Shelly asks about his nightmares and PTSD and his army days, and sometimes it feels like she’s drawing poison from his body, but sometimes it doesn’t. He tries to explain how much blood there is in a soldier’s body, so much more than he ever thought possible, so much more than a text book number, but maybe he doesn’t say it right, because Shelly just nods her calmly not-horrified face and says she understands, even though she can’t.

John tries to convince himself that he’s lucky she cares enough to ask (Sherlock never does).

He tries to believe her attention is preferable.

Shelly understands John’s friendship with Sherlock. She tells him so herself, like she’s figured something out, like it’s another war story for her to accept.

She talks about his friendship with the mad detective, and it feels like she’s somehow forgiving him for it, and John – well.

It’s the beginning of the end.

You have to stop coming when he calls, Shelly says.

You have to stop bringing him into this, John retorts.

I can’t, he’s always here, in between us. He’s worse than the war. Shelly says, I can only understand so much.

John says, You mean you can only tolerate so much.

Sherlock looks up from where he’s idly plucking at his violin. With one sweep, he takes in John’s current state, where he’s been, what he’s done. He murmurs something that may have been, “Finally,” but John isn’t quite listening.

John feels exposed, but he also doesn’t feel like he has to explain himself. He heads upstairs, lies down on his bed, and just breathes.

For a long time, he lies awake, wondering what’s wrong with him – beyond the obvious, anyway. It takes a while, but then John realizes the silence from downstairs has changed texture, is becoming patterned with music as delicate and subtle as the shifting patterns of leaf shadow on the ground.

It’s not a song he’s heard Sherlock play before – it’s not a vicious auditory attack on Mycroft’s presence, not an arrogant victory march, not a sulky mood swing given musical reign. In fact, it
doesn’t sound like a song at all – just a gentle whisper of notes that go together like a breeze and chimes.

Before John can quite decide what it is and how it makes him feel, he drifts off, lulled by soft sounds from fingertips faraway downstairs.
It’s been too long.

That’s the first thought John has upon waking, even though for a moment it disorients him. He’s not sure he knows what he’s referring to—

Ah, there it is: the not-pain in his not-leg.

John frowns and sits up. These past few weeks since the retrieval had been quiet in terms of cyberthetic chatter—and rightly so; those techs had done a full defragmentation run on his interface after the retrieval, he’d later been told. While it wasn’t something he’d normally have allowed, he can’t deny it’s had its benefits; it would’ve been messy to deal with his jittery leg protocols and Shelly’s overwhelming concern at the same time.

Just the thought makes him grimace.

But now, back to normal (and when did his life develop a ‘normal’ setting?) John can focus on the task at hand: namely, a physical tune up on his cyberthetic leg.

While technically his shoulder assembly is more complicated, and should therefore theoretically require more attention, it is also a more advanced piece of engineering. In many ways it is self-monitoring and self-adjusting, with a refraction processor that computes micro-adjustments as fast as his body-brain connection can demand them. It is also more thoroughly incorporated into his body—his blood flows through arteries, veins, and oxygen-conductive plastic alike, artificial aortic set up cooperating (almost) flawlessly with his home-grown heart.

Not so with the leg—it is a closed unit, barely requiring any contact with his blood. A few major artificial arteries loop blood into the cavity of his thigh where the necessary liquid communication of molecules is the best solution. Heat is also pulled from his blood, serving as a source of information for the cyberthetic as well as a catalyst for some of its internal metabolic processes—heat and site-specific amino chains snatched from the blood to be synthesized into more complex compounds with the addition of externally supplied ‘micro-nutrients’.

The whole mix has something to do with nerve to artificial nerve communication, as well as allowing the limited self-repair that his leg model is capable of. Nothing major—just the ability to prevent internal decay. But that means that John’s leg needs external attention—it cannot obtain everything it needs directly from his body. (Neither can the shoulder assembly, but it’s so much more efficient that it’s hardly a consideration.)

Basically, John’s leg…is hungry.

John sighs.

Now comes the nitrile conversation with Sherlock. John had actually attempted to dig up the stash of gloves for himself, but Sherlock, it seems, is far more adept at hiding things than John, if the bullet holes in the wall are any indication.

John throws on some sweats and a t-shirt from the days before his discharge. It hardly counts as combat gear, but John feels battle ready nonetheless as he descends the stairs in search of Sherlock and what is certain to be quite a conversation.
Sherlock is seated at the kitchen table, which is covered in moldy newspapers and phone books in different states of decay. John stops in his tracks, mouth open, words forgotten. Sherlock is paging through one of the old newspapers almost daintily, as if he might lick his finger to turn a page at any moment.

Luckily, he doesn’t. John suppresses a shiver and moves to stand where Sherlock can see him. The detective doesn’t look up, but he does point at a stack of papers near John. “Bottom one.”

John crosses his arms.

“And tea, thanks,” Sherlock continues, ignoring John’s posture. After a minute of silence, he glances up. “What?”

John raises his eyebrows.

Sherlock blinks at John. “Oh. I see.” He considers for a moment, then nods. “Please.”

John snorts but moves to turn on the kettle. While the water’s heating, he wiggles the bottom newspaper out from under its stackfellows and thumps it down in front of Sherlock. “What’s this all about?”

“Studying the degradation of newsprint and paper-grade cellulose fibre over time. Tea.”

The kettle clicks, and John huffs as he moves to pour two cups of hot water. “Sherlock –”

“You’re going to ask for something. It’s not money, and it’s not advice.” Sherlock accepts the cup of tea and pours it out over three different batches of newspaper. “I know, because you’re being rather…permissive.” He grins at the look on John’s face. “And I know it’s not money or advice, because you never accept those things from me.”

“That’s not true – I’ve borrowed cash from you before, and gotten plenty of advice from you.”

“Ah borrowing. That’s different – at least, that’s what you tell yourself, and as for advice, well. You never follow any of it.”

John snorts. “If you tried giving me real advice, maybe I would – and before you argue, telling me to dump my girlfriend twenty seven times during a period of twenty four hours is not advice.”

“Ah yes. Whatever did happen to Sheryl?”

“Shelly.”

“Whatever.” Sherlock twiddles his thumbs innocently. “She still around, then? Seeing her later?”

“Berk.” John pinches the bridge of his nose. “Goddammit, Sherlock, I didn’t come down here to argue with you.”

“No, you came down here to ask for help with your cyberthetic tune-up.”

John doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to – to this. To Sherlock. To having a mind reader for a flatmate and friend. “How could you possibly –”

Sherlock smirks and leans back in his seat. “You haven’t been to the Clinic since before the retrieval – and I’ve been doing a bit of research.” He waves a hand over to the couch and coffee table, where both their laptops are perched. “You need regular maintenance on that leg – a session every few weeks if nothing goes awry.”

His mercurial eyes slide from John’s face down his torso, to rest on the cyberthetic leg. “You hate the Clinic – that much is obvious. Besides, the man before me is nothing if not stubborn and willfully self-reliant. I suspected what you were planning, and I’ve been… preparing. Acquiring a few necessary tools.”

At John’s look of concern and skepticism, Sherlock almost smiles. “Bart’s has always had less than adequate security measures when it comes to their trinkets – it was not a challenge to get some of the equipment you need.”

“You…” John shakes his head. “Alright, what’s the catch?”

“I would like to observe the process.”

John’s face betrays his instant discomfort, and he feels a pinch of guilt. Sherlock has been nothing but a friend to him (albeit one that has gotten him abducted several times) and now the offer of
As if Sherlock can see John’s internal balance tipping in his favour, he says, “Come now – tools, an extra pair of hands and eyes – there is no downside.” His eyes are bright and his face is uncharacteristically open. He looks young and interested – free of the distance and disdain John knows he wears as purposefully as his heavy coat.


Sherlock doesn’t bother hiding his smirk, but he does hold up both hands in a show of peace. “Noted, Doctor.” He quirks an eyebrow at John’s twitch of surprise. “When shall we begin?”

John blinks. “Now.” He tries to ignore the prickle of sweat and raised hairs at the nape of his neck. “Let’s get set up.”
The kitchen is a right mess and a biohazard to boot, so John chooses to shift the furniture in the living room to the sides a bit so that they have space to move about. He had planned to work in the privacy and comfort of his room, but now, with Sherlock’s watchful gaze on him, that seems wrong somehow. Or not wrong, just uncomfortable.

Not uncomfortable – just – Confusing.

No time for that now. John clears his mind and tries to focus on what he’s about to do – then immediately wishes he hadn’t. Sherlock’s seen just about the worst parts of augmentation already, but John doubts he’s seen bare cyrberthetics before. It’s an intensely private matter – even Mona hadn’t seen John without his skins.

Even Shelly, who’d begged for a look, who’d wanted to see all of what John was, had not been allowed to glimpse the inner workings of John’s chest assembly or cyberthetic leg.

Sherlock returns from his room with a case – it looks like an old instrument case (maybe an accordion?) but when he flips the clasps and the lid lifts, gleaming surgical steel greets the eye, not soft brass, not ivory keys. Sherlock snirks at his surprise, and John finds a wry smile twisting his lips. Sneaky bastard.

John crouches, barefoot, on the clean towels he’d laid down on the floor. “My turn, I suppose.” He grabs his bag of supplies and opens the folds to reveal antibiotics, ‘soup,’ and anti-depressants.

“I’ve never seen you take these,” Sherlock murmurs, reaching to take the bottle of pills before stopping himself.

“I don’t,” John says grimly. “They…disconnect me.” He breathes sharply. “I’d rather be here.”

“Yes.”

John wants to glance at Sherlock’s face. He wants to search out what that ‘yes’ means in Sherlock’s eyes, because that ‘yes’ was so much more than simple agreement. But he doesn’t. Instead, he hands over the bottle for Sherlock to inspect, and the detective grunts as he notes dosage, active agents, directions.

“They’re certainly…worried about you.”

This time it’s John’s turn to simply say, “Yes,” and Sherlock sets the bottle down on the coffee table without comment, although his eyes do dart to take in John’s face as he says it. The suicide hotline number printed in large blue text on the side of the bottle stares at them both.

“Right,” John says tightly. He lifts out the antibiotics next – a small brown bottle with accompanying syringes.

“Broad-spectrum,” Sherlock notes. “Injections at the site of the – the –”

“Ports. Connections. Attachment.” John shrugs – the names of things don’t always matter to him, but the thought that Sherlock had perhaps hesitated lest he use the wrong word was… well. It was –

Complicated.

“Any of those is fine.”

Sherlock nods, eyes serious and focused.

Finally, John takes out the soup and its specialized syringes, the needles much larger. His hands quiver as he looks down at the needles. Sherlock lifts a brow again, then takes the packet of syringes in hand. He peers closely at them before laying them down.

John tries to take advantage of Sherlock’s distraction to calm down, but that’s not happening. Sherlock looks up at him, but is silent.

A few deep breaths later, and John knows he’s got to get this started. Once it’s started, the momentum of the situation will drag him (and Sherlock) along, but staring over the edge of this precipice is derailing his nerve.
With a deep breath and an almost-nod, John sits down properly, only to realize he still needs to –

“Um.” He stands. Sherlock, seated as he is on the ground, looks up at him impassively. “I’m going to need to. Yes. Right.” Sherlock tilts his head to the side as John starts hitching his sweats over his hips and down. “Oh, shut up.” He keeps his boxers and kicks the sweats to the side before sitting down once more. He curls his right leg towards his body but stretches the left out straight. He’s so preoccupied with what he’s about to do that he almost doesn’t see Sherlock’s hands twitch – but see it he does. “Don’t.”

Sherlock snorts and rolls his eyes, a nonverbal *John, stop worrying*, but John keeps a steady gaze on him until, with a quirk of his eyebrow Sherlock lays his hands flat against his own thighs. His eyes track down from John’s face to his cyberthetic leg.

Satisfied that Sherlock won’t be getting handsy, John slides the left leg of his pants up until the seam is exposed. His pulse is fluttering in his throat and temples. John places his fingers at the edge of the fleshy sock. He pauses. “You don’t happen to have a volt gun, do you?”

“No.” Sherlock’s voice is soft, almost a whisper.

Shit. John had not thought this through. This had been intense on his own, in his bed – but now? Here? John isn’t sure how he’s going to manage all the sensation with all this attention. How the hell did he get himself into this situation?

Well, he decides at last. *Here goes nothing.*

With a slide that’s getting easier every time, John gets his fingers in under the edge of his skin sock. He’s so focused on doing this right and smoothly that he almost doesn’t hear the hitch in Sherlock’s breathing, but it registers, and John pauses, hands trembling as sensory data starts to pool in his nerve endings. “Do you need a moment? Is this too much?”

“What? No, of course not.”

Alright then. John’s mouth pulls into a grim line as he continues inching the sock lower until it can bunch and roll and slide off like a tight trouser leg. His fingers are jittery as he guides the slide over the knee, his wrists feel hollow as he swivels the ankle to dislodge the thin, fleshy sheath. The foot-cover pops free with a crackle of dislodging moorings and a feeling like a minor electrical disturbance – John imagines it might have felt like being tickled if only his brain knew what to do with that data rush.

He doesn’t have skin anymore, but the sudden loss of the sock and the ceaseless roving of Sherlock’s gaze make John feel as if his skin were prickling. In fact, he can feel his real leg’s skin raising into bumps out of sympathy, nature’s own attempt at mirror relays.

Naked steel, gleaming cable and cord, detailed and almost organic in appearance – John tries to see his leg as Sherlock might, as if it’s the first time, as if it’s not attached to him. It doesn’t quite work. He flexes his pedichassis, takes in the shifting glow and gleam in Sherlock’s eyes, reflected shine from the shifting of his cyberthetic muscles. Sherlock seems entranced, captivated, mesmerized.

John shudders and lays the sock down beside his right leg, then closes his eyes, needing a moment of solitude – not that he gets it, because when he opens his eyes, Sherlock is still staring at him with his impossible eyes, unblinking. “Sherlock –” John clears hoarseness from his throat, “Sherlock. Stop staring at me like that.”

“You said I could observe.”

“Well, it’s research, isn’t it?” John holds out his hands for the nitrile gloves, and Sherlock fishes in his case for the box and hands them over. “For a case – old or new – it doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s for the work.”

Sherlock doesn’t say anything, but from the way his gaze breaks and darts away for a moment John gets the feeling that what he isn’t saying could fill a book. A series of books. A library. All
of it about John Watson’s stupidity or obliviousness or somesuch disdain. He sighs. “Let’s just finish this, and then you can tell me all the ways I’m being dense, alright?” He glances up in time to see Sherlock fail to suppress a small smile.

“That could take all day.”

“Prat.”

“Idiot.”

“Retractor.” John holds his hand out, and Sherlock passes over the gleaming steel. John lays a gloved hand down on his cyberthetic thigh and twitches – but the feedback of sensory data is muted by the nitrile latex, and John grins, elated at this small victory.

“What does it feel like?” Sherlock wants to know. He scoots a little closer, but his hands don’t reach out. John’s cyberthetic musculature reflects in Sherlock’s eyes and is surely the source of the brightness and sparkling interest in his face.

“Smooth, I suppose.” John slides a hand along the quadriceps substitute. He’s never really just felt it before.

“I was referring to your own internal perception of sensory data pertaining to your leg, not information gathered externally through palpation.”

John blinks. “Oh.” He worries at his lower lip with his teeth for a moment. “Without gloves? ...Intense. A bit like being electrocuted, but slowly? I don’t – it gets all jumbled up.”

“So it registers as pain?”

With a shrug, John tries not to be worried by the suddenly thoughtful look that flashes across Sherlock’s features. He has other concerns now, though – he has to get into the leg itself, into the docking ports for the syringe, so that he can administer the nutrient injections. It’s going to take some effort – without the volt gun to relax all the contraction protocols, John will have to exert his will upon the cyberthetic directly.

Carefully, so carefully, John uses his fingers to shift aside the folds of artificial muscle, pushing past the sensing layers with a long, stuttering shudder. Every breath, every inch deeper in, is a fight to keep the ‘muscle’ relaxed. His real leg spams once – twice – as he digs his fingers down to the ‘bone,’ then turns his hand sideways to create a crevice for the retractor to slide in. His whole leg shakes as he positions the foreign steel just so, and then he releases the rebelling muscles to press against the immovable device.

With a huff, John bends low over his leg, almost cradling it in his arms as he tries to breathe through the – the intensity of it. It’s like electricity scratching the insides of his bones – not that he has bones in that leg at all, just hollow titanium tunnels that store tech: metabolic centers, reactive processors, and long coils of blood tubing. His primary somatosensory cortex is desperately trying to make sense of it all, he knows. It’s not real, John reminds himself. It’s not, it’s not.

“What are you thinking?”

Sherlock. Still watching, of course – for a moment he’d forgotten –

“I’m – the feeling is like – pain? If you’ve ever had a really thorough deep tissue massage, it’s sort of like that. Like fascia clumps being forced apart.” John breathes as the almost-nausea in his bones recedes.

“Yes, but what were you thinking?”

John sits back up huffing a breath. “I was reminding myself that it’s not real. It’s just a series of measurements converted into electrical pulses and conveyed by circuitry.”

Sherlock stares at him impassively, but then his lips twitch. “You could say the same of any sensory experience.”

“Yes, well, this is different.” John shifts under the scrutiny, not really wanting to think about how right Sherlock might be.

“Why?”

“Sherlock.” John begins, exasperated, before he casts about for a way to explain. “If I cut off your hands and replaced them with cyberthetic copies, would you still enjoy playing the violin?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

Sherlock doesn’t even hesitate. “Because I play the violin with my mind, not my hands. They are simply accessories to function.”

John considers. “Alright, and if I replaced your ears, your hearing centers with implants? And you could still hear, but now it was being filtered by something external? Something not you?”

Sherlock blinks. “I would work to restore anything that might have been lost. And I would
continue to play.” He tilts his head, regarding John’s leg.

“Yes, but...”

“John, it’s just a body. It’s just transport. Even a brain is just a complicated suspension of lipids in fluid with electricity running through it. It’s the mind that counts.”

And that – John doesn’t know what to do with that. It’s almost poetic, except this is Sherlock, and the man doesn’t do poetry – or sentiment, come to that. “It’s still different – it’s still not mine.”

“But that’s what you’re attempting to rectify now.” Sherlock peers into the cavern of John’s cyberthetic. “Integration.”

“It’ll never be one hundred percent, though.” John runs a finger along the surface of the leg again and shivers. “It doesn’t feel like I do, it doesn’t respond like I would – at least not instinctively. I can’t even touch it directly without a feedback loop,” he says bitterly, and it feels like a confession. He stares at the gaping chasm in between the thigh cords and sighs. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Sherlock sighs, but otherwise remains still.

A touch more tinkering and wedging, and John can feel the injection ports, brushing his fingertips along their raised seals. “Found them.”

Sherlock wordlessly takes the special syringe from its packet and picks up the bottle of ‘soup’ in the other. “Serving size?”

John pulls his mouth sideways, but says, “45 ccs.”

The prepped syringe slips into John’s waiting hand, and he nods his thanks. The nutrient fluid is a thick, syrupy yellow, like amniotic fluid in function and appearance. John finds his hand is shaking suddenly, but he stills it after a moment, steeling himself, and then slides the needle tip home into its mooring.

His real leg jerks, which makes his cyberthetic leg twitch, and John nearly botches the whole thing, but Sherlock’s hands are there suddenly, one pressing firmly down on his right leg, his palm warm and solid and immovable, and the other steadying John’s grip on the syringe.

“Here,” he murmurs, shifting to hold the syringe so that John can push the plunger. He does, and only once the cool pressure in his leg fades does John begin to breathe again. Sherlock seems to come back to himself from far away, and he removes his hands from John slowly, eyes on John’s face as if fearing his reaction.

John tries to smile, but he can feel it doesn’t quite work, so he says, “Thank you,” instead and hopes his voice sounds sincere.

Sherlock nods, sliding back to where he had been sitting and watching, back braced by the coffee table.

John pulls the syringe from the port when he registers the seal re-engaging, something that arrives as information rather than sensation via his interface. He blinks as the notice fades from his mind, and then stares at the empty syringe in his hand. The world tilts, but he breathes and breathes, and breathing must be ballast, because everything rights itself. Oxygen, the best drug, John thinks. He flops back against the ground and pulls in great lungfuls of it, painkiller and euphoria inducer all in one.

“John.”

John nods and sits up. “I know.” He preps the antibiotics himself, finds the appropriate port, and administers the injection without a hitch – then prepares a second injection. He hitches his pants a little lower over his left buttock, swabs a patch of skin, and plunges the needle home into the fatty tissue, before easing the fluid into his body.

Sherlock is staring oddly, and for a moment John thinks it might be his state of undress – but the detective wanders about the flat in whatever he pleases most of the time, so John decides that can’t be it and lets it go.

The used syringes go back in their disposable containers. The bottles of nutrients and antibiotics go back in the bag.

John sits back and scratches the back of his head, careful to avoid his interface plug. “Done,” he sighs. He reaches forward and disengages the retractor, slowly letting the slide of not-muscle reclaim shape and sensitivity. He lays a nitrile covered palm against the recently parted not-flesh and almost pats it as if it were a good horse or a faithful dog.

“Well,” John begins, “that was...”

“John –” Sherlock says at the same time.

John winces. “No.”

“You say the discomfort comes from a feedback loop,” he continues despite John’s tone. “If I were to...”
“No.”
—there wouldn’t be a completed circuit, as it were –
“—and it would be –”

“Are you listening to me, Sherlock? No.”
Sherlock shuts his mouth with a snap, and there’s something bruised about his expression.
John realizes he’s never heard Sherlock ask for something so persistently without devolving into threats, a strop, or ugly deductions (or, that one memorable afternoon, all three at the same time). And while what he says is probably true, John finds it hard to reconcile allowing someone to handle his person so impersonally. “Sherlock, this is the whole reason I’m trying to get away from the Clinic – I don’t like – this –” he gestures vaguely, trying to encompass his cyberthetic leg, the entire idea of touching, or being touched by strangers.

“I’m not some random tech, and you can tell me if it’s intolerable.”
“I’m trying to tell you precisely that, right now.”

“You aren’t even curious?” Sherlock asks, and damn him, because there it is. “You –” John covers his eyes with his palms and just presses for a moment. “Goddammit.” He opens his eyes, and Sherlock isn’t grinning, but there is victorious mirth in his eyes if you know where to look.
John realizes with a start that he does.
He looks down at the gleaming silver and translucency of his leg and then back up at Sherlock, who is rolling up his shirt sleeves in anticipation. John scowls, but doesn’t stop him as he scoots forward.
Sherlock reaches out, then stops himself and looks at John. “May I?”
With a sigh, John nods.
“I can touch your leg?”
“Yes, Sherlock.”

“I have your permission to touch your cyberthetic leg?”
“Yes, I said yes, already!” John grumbles, “What, do you need it in writing or something?”
Sherlock smirks. “That’s three times you consented – remember that.” His smirk becomes a grin. “Although a written copy would be much appreciated –”
John chuckles at Sherlock, who simply catches it and continues grinning infuriatingly at John. “Hold still now –”
And then Sherlock’s hands are hovering above John’s cyberthetic, and he can feel the heat of them before they’re even close to touching. For a moment, John’s consumed by the look on Sherlock’s face, as if he has just encountered a perfect puzzle, complete with its own solution, ripe for the touching, within his reach.
It’s the thrill of the new, John realizes, and he feels instantly better, because novelty wears off eventually – and then just as suddenly he feels hollowed out by that truth.
But then Sherlock’s fingers brush along John’s leg, and he can’t examine his previous train of thought, because he cannot remember it at all.
Instead, his cyberthetic spasms under the sudden presence and pressure – the first skin-to-sensing-surface contact besides John’s own hands since installation – and John is overwhelmed by the realization that no one has ever looked at his leg (or any part of him, really) like Sherlock is busy doing – and there’s a heat pooling – an electricity, and it’s unbearable, irresistible like a tide –

“Stop,” John croaks out, and Sherlock snatches his hand away – no wait, Sherlock has already snatched his hand away, a look of genuine surprise colouring his features.
“It’s – it’s warm.” It sounds like an accusation, as if John had imparted body heat to the limb to spite his friend.
John gets his breathing mostly under control – it’s becoming instinctive, now – and quirks a brow. “I should bloody hope so – would it have been better if it were cold?” He’s almost giddy with relief that the sensation has stopped, that Sherlock isn’t pressing in for another inspection, and can almost ignore the part of him that feels that should have gone differently, somehow.

“Yes,” Sherlock says instantly, harshly. “It wouldn’t have been so –” He doesn’t finish the sentence, but then again he doesn’t have to.
Intimate, John’s brain supplies. He nearly says it out loud, too, but stops himself, and all that escapes him is a hitch in his breathing. Sherlock is staring at him, and if John had thought previously that the detective’s gaze was intense, it is now ruthlessly so.

Without a word, John slides the ‘sock’ back on, tugging and adjusting until the fleshy tube sits just right, before clicking it into place. Each snap sliding home sounds like bubblewrap popping, especially the pad, heel, and arch of his foot, where so many fastenings are clustered so close. After the intricate lines and curves of gleaming engineering, the ‘skin’ looks even blander and safer than usual.

“See?” John asks, anxious for Sherlock to stop staring. “All better.”

That causes a flicker of—something to cross Sherlock’s features, but it is almost instantly hidden, and John is too exhausted to try and parse that tiny glimpse. Perhaps Sherlock, so used to touching cadavers, flesh left empty and behind by murder, had not been prepared for the warmth and pseudo life of the leg? If it had been cool, it would’ve been corpse-like, ironically familiar and safe. But it had not been so.

“What did it feel like?” Sherlock asks, that little flicker tucked away, his face a mask of detached (if intense) interest once more.

Warm. John wants to say, but doesn’t. The techs at the clinic all have anti-static and dust-repellant gloves on, and the tools, before they breach the sensing layer into the non-sensing layer, are sharply cold. Coldly sharp. It gets…confusing. But this had been different. “Complicated,” John answers instead.

In a moment, this stare will have gone on too long—it will take on some new depth, meaning, charge, and John doesn’t know how to respond if that happens—

His phone rings—buzzing sideways with each tone until it falls off the coffee table. John’s eyes snap to it, then hastily refocus on Sherlock, who’s still watching John. John’s phone beeps and goes to voicemail.

Sherlock’s phone rings. Without any extraneous motion, he reaches into a pocket, extracts it, and answers, “Why did you call John first?”
Lestrade is waiting for them at the entrance to the morgue. His face is grim, his skin grey from exhaustion. “Alright?” he asks, and John nods while Sherlock ignores the question.

“Show us the body.”

“I really do just need John –”

Sherlock snorts and pushes past Lestrade, who turns to look at John, who just shrugs. If he ever manages to figure the man out, John will be supremely disappointed.

“Caucasian female, appears to be mid-thirties. Facial cyberthetic surgeries evident – seems the brain was heavily augmented as well.” Lestrade turns serious eyes on John. “We were hoping if you could identify the body.”

John has a sinking feeling he already has, but he says, “What makes you think I can?”

Lestrade blinks at him. “Well…”

“You think because I’m augmented I know all the others?” The question comes out a little terser than John intended, but he doesn’t back pedal on it.

With a sigh, Lestrade comes to a stop. “Look,” he begins, “most augmented people are pretty private about it, yeah? But I know you’ve been at the rallies –”

“What?” John gapes.

Sherlock sneers. “Mycroft,” he says, and it’s a four letter word. “Still begging for scraps from the table, Lestrade?”

“Sherlock – if you must know, I went to your brother with this because it seemed…off.” Lestrade shrugs. “He mentioned John’s recent involvement – and well.” He looks at John with a kind of hopeless desperation. “I…it would mean a lot to me if you could take a look, John.”

“Yes, yes, fine. Alright.” John follows Lestrade as he leads the way once more. “But you should know it wasn’t that recent and it wasn’t that involved.”

The fluorescent lights in the ceiling paint everyone in shades of cadaver, and even Lestrade who looks so solid and wholesome takes on a shade of the undead. Sherlock, strange creature of angles and alabaster, fits right in.

Lestrade pulls back the sheet to reveal the remains.

God.

The face is a complete mess – scratched off, or chewed off, or ripped off – exposing empty eye sockets and the pinking pale of cheek bones and the roots of teeth. Exposed like this, it’s easy to see where the human ends and the lies begin. Grafting comprises most of the right side of the face, tendrils of technology snaking along artful mimicry of nature, carrying data, protocols, response directives.

Most of the spine is metal and cable, but what bones remain are pitted and mangled where they connect into the manmade frame, exposing the hidden architecture of science and evolution, both trying to inhabit the same space, to do the same thing, and both now having failed.

John steadies his breathing. He realizes that he was expecting a gunshot to the head, or lacerations on the arms, some form of self-destruction. That’s normally how augmented corpses happen, after all. When John looks at Lestrade, the Detective Inspector slides the sheet lower. The rest of the body is in pristine condition, not a scrape or a blemish on the very white skin.

For a moment, all that pale, still skin, taut over ribs and long limbs, seems foreign and familiar all at once –

“We found her mobile,” the Detective Inspector interrupts John’s confusing reverie, “but it’s been scrubbed of its original data. All it had were these.” Lestrade hands over a file – inside, there are seven glossy printouts. Seven glossy images of seven very different people: a brunette, a young black man, a woman, her face partially obscured by an insane storm of punk hair, an older man with obvious German ancestry, a thickset man with a beard, an Indian man with graying hair, and an older woman, frail and disheveled.
Unease worms its way into John, and he finds himself scanning the pictures once again, this time detail-oriented. He reaches the third picture; he feels the blood leave his face. “This one.” His fingers tighten their hold on the third page. “I know her.”

Lestrade and Sherlock crowd over his shoulders to peer at the page he’s clutching, knuckles tight. It’s a recent image of Mona – he knows, because her hair is coloured crazy like a rave, and that upgrade was only a few months old.

Sherlock huffs. “Mona?”
“Yes.”
Sherlock peers at the cadaver again. “So, not her on the slab, then. Hmm.” He sounds like he thinks it’s a pity, a shameful waste of a good plot twist.

“No,” John breathes out his relief, and isn’t it strange to be happy that someone else is dead? “Mona’s cybertheletics are similar, but her facial implants were only a partial graft.”

Sherlock leans close to the corpse, not a speck of decency in sight. He sniffs, although whether it’s for data-gathering or for emphasis is anyone’s guess. “What about the interface – did you get a capture from it?”

“Ripped. Completely empty – might as well have been a fistful of scrap circuits in her skull. Who is she, John?” Lestrade asks, looking at the photo John indicated.

Former girlfriend, his sole connection to the rallies my brother informed you of,” Sherlock says absently. “More importantly, she’s third in that lineup, assuming you’ve intelligence enough to preserve the original order of those images…?”

“Yes, yes,” Lestrade mutters, his usual tone of being trapped halfway between frustration and desperation evident.

“Now this one,” Sherlock says with relish, whipping out his pocket magnifier and getting almost inside the skull assembly in his eagerness to observe, “this one is the first woman.”

“How –?”

Sherlock and John start and look at each other. Lestrade nods, and John continues, “How do you reckon that?”

“The scarring pattern is a good match, despite being damaged from this over-enthusiastic rhinoplasty,” he waves a hand at the face. “Also, body proportions are a good fit, the hair –”

“Doesn’t match at all,” Lestrade interjects. “The one in the picture has short brown hair. It’s a recent picture, too – less than 6 months.” He points out the promotional films posters in the background of the photo. There’s a hint of pride in the gesture.

Sherlock purses his lips for a moment, eyes darting back and forth. “A wig, perhaps, or –”

“Not a wig,” John interrupts. “Her scarring and implants seem consistent with what Mona has – and she can change her hair at will. It’s a very recent patch update, an add-on perk.” He grimaces. “When she slept it would switch back to its default setting – long and blond. Exactly like this.”

Sherlock stares at John for a moment before turning a smug smile on Lestrade. “Even better.” He snatches the photos from John’s hands. “Any facts you care to impart concerning these others?”

With a shake of his head, Lestrade leans back against a counter. “No clue. We’re running these now, but haven’t come up with anything.” Sherlock snorts, still cataloguing details about the corpse.

“Mona Shaw,” John offers, sliding a hand through his hair. “Works for Boothe & Boothe.” He glances at the body again, and it could have been Mona. But it wasn’t and it isn’t.

Lestrade’s face splits into a genuine smile, and John’s tempted to look behind himself in case the expression is meant for someone behind him. “Thank you.”

Sherlock grants from where he’s bent over the corpse, consumed by each new sliver of damage. He has his hands inside the corpse, examining, cataloguing, touching – and John tries not to think of maintenance he so recently (they so recently) did.

Mona’s phone rings through and clicks to voicemail. John looks at Sherlock where he’s crouched in his chair, a tangle of energy contained in what John considers his ‘thinking pose.’ John waits for the beep of the voicemail, then says, “Mona – It’s John. Just wanted to see if – well – can you give me a call back? Ta,” and hangs up. He shrugs at Sherlock and just barely stops himself from
saying, ‘No answer,’ which would have earned him an eye roll and an ‘Obviously.’ Instead he asks, “Now what?”

“We wait to see what Lestrade’s search turns up. And when I say Lestrade’s search, I mean Mycroft’s.” He frowns. “This is not his usual M.O."

“Am I correct in thinking you’re more interested in your brother’s behavior than in finding the killer?”

Sherlock scoffs. "My brother is not interesting, therefore he cannot interest me. I’m simply wondering what he isn’t telling me."

“But, Sherlock, he hasn’t told you anything.”

“Exactly.”

John throws his hands in the air. "You know you’re impossible, right?"

Later that night, John tries Mona’s number again. Still no answer, but this time he leaves a proper message, because he acquired caution as a child but only learned to appreciate it in the war:

“Mona, it’s John again. New case with Sherlock, and it’s a bad one. There may be someone – a killer – after you – you should contact the police immediately. Please be careful.”

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the long pause between updates - I was (and still am!) moving, and that turned into a total time drain. Also my work schedule changed. Also I had no internet for a while.

Those piffling obstacles are mostly faded away, so more regular (and frequent!) updates will be making a comeback - thank you for your continued patience and support!

TLDR: life happened, sorry!
Two days later, Lestrade calls. Body number two.

“Right this way,” Lestrade says as Sherlock and John enter New Scotland Yard. Sherlock and John barely pause in their walk, and then they are following The Detective Inspector. Their steps echo hollowly through the halls – it’s only past 10, but with the offices and conference rooms so empty, it feels like it’s well past midnight.

The body is that of a man this time – or rather, a young man, his dark skin sallowed by death and fluorescent light. Half his body is a cyberthetic mess, coils of cable and cord snarled and tangled, hollow metal bones snapped and shattered, jagged, poking through the skin sheath, leaking blue and white and the brown of dried blood.

John tightens his jaw and moves forward before Sherlock can, drawn to the mangled mess of cyberthetics. He reaches out to touch, then stops himself. Blue at the edge of his vision startles him – Sherlock, by his side, offering a pair of nitrile gloves mutely. John accepts, pulls them on, and then reaches forward to run a finger along the smooth line of a metal clavicle. It ends in a sharp break.

Sherlock is flitting here and there, magnifier out, but John simply raises his finger to his nose and sniffs delicately. “Soup,” he says, and his voice is harsh even to his ears. “Whoever did this managed to crack the titanium casing.”

Sherlock nods. “Evidence of blunt force trauma even on the human side – here and here,” he says, indicating bruising on the shoulder and head. John peers at the marks, deciding to let the ‘human side’ comment slide. If Sherlock had meant to insult him with his choice of words, he would know.

“Same killer,” Sherlock murmurs.

“You’re sure?” Lestrade crosses his arms, shifts his weight. John watches Sherlock watch the DI. “Last time there was no damage to the human side.”

“This damage is accidental,” Sherlock waves his hand. “Note the after-care – these bruises were rubbed, as if to increase circulation, to make them fade. The skin is clean – cleansed I would say. This all seems highly ritualistic. Destruction of the mechanical, elevation of the organic.” As he speaks, his eyes light up, and John suppresses a sigh. “We have a serial killer on our hands.”

John and Lestrade share a look (this seems to be a thing they do now), and Lestrade asks, “What can you tell us?”

“We know the future victims’ faces. Those photographs – what did they turn up?”

John feels his stomach clench – Mona. Her picture had been third in the lineup – and she had yet to get in touch. Cold settles in his stomach – they’d parted on friendly terms, as unlikely as that had seemed at the time.

“Where were the bodies found?”

John zones out as Sherlock pulls the particulars from Lestrade, asking question after the question, agitated when the answer is short, impatient when the answer is long. Instead he stares down at the face of the victim – the half that remains at least. Chin length dreadlocks, brow relaxed, lips parted as if in slumber. Young skin, young face, young frame. Not even twenty years old.

“What was his name?” John wants to know.

“Zane Haroldson.” Lestrade walks over to look down at the body.

Sherlock lifts both the boy’s hands and peers at them. “Now this is interesting.”

“What?” Lestrade asks sharply.

Sherlock holds up both hands. One is the hand of a very young man – thinnish wrist, too large hand, fingers long and slender, the awkward angles of youth written in the swivel of wrist. The other hand is metal and cable and polymer-bound carbonite. Sherlock points at the wrist assembly. “This is not his first hand – it’s not even his second.” He points out the different grooves for attaching the hand. “Each time a hand is swapped out, a new fit-mold has to be cast. This has
happened 4 – no, 5 times.” His lifts an eyebrow, adding, “Logically, there are few reasons to justify such regular and frequent upgrades. So, not upgrades then, not as such.” He lifts the forearm next, and with the outer layers stripped and ripped away, it’s easy to see the telescopic design of the metal bones. “And here – designed to adjust as he grew and endured growth spurts.” Sherlock frowns. “He’s had his cyberthetics for five years.”

It’s all John can do not to gape at the detective. Sherlock had said he’d been researching cyberthetics, but…well. Perhaps John shouldn’t be surprised at his friend’s almost instant expert status. The man could compile information like a search engine.

“Impossible,” Lestrade scoffs. “Everyone knows they don’t last that lo—”

John feels himself stiffen, but before he can make up his mind about voicing his mind, Lestrade stops. John looks up in time to see Sherlock’s face, disdain overwriting every feature, and it’s aimed at Lestrade, effectively silencing him. “It’s not unheard of,” Sherlock says.

“Sorry, John,” Lestrade says, a quick apologetic glance tossed his way. “Still, statistically it’s unlikely, and you like statistics, don’t you Sherlock?”

“I prefer facts,” Sherlock says coolly. “And there’s no reason for a young man to have had so many re-fit cyberthetic hands. But an adolescent experiencing rapid growth would need frequent re-fitting.”

John blinks, and something clicks in his recall. “Mona got her augmentations five years ago, too.” When both men turn to look at John, he adds, “She told me herself.”

“Perfect,” Sherlock almost purrs. “We have our connection. Lestrade, all the victims, current and future, are likely older surviving cyberthetics recipients – you need to find out who did their surgeries, could be the same disgruntled surgeon –”

“Sandrose Industries,” John says. Sherlock blinks at him. “Sandrose felt guilty over the whole ‘malfunctioning implant’ madness that led to those riots and attacks at Sedwic, so they offered augmentation surgery to the surviving wounded.” Seven blasts: seven chances at redemption and absolution, or so Sandrose had tried to spin it.

“The Sedwic Seven,” Lestrade breathes. “God, the papers had a field day with that.”

Sherlock sneers. “And will again if it gets out they’re being systematically dismantled.”

“Why didn’t any of this show up on the initial checks?” Lestrade demands, running both hands through his graying hair.

Sherlock turns away from the body. “Because they were assigned new identities – for their protection from the unscrupulous media and a terrified public. And now that protection is failing – which explains Mycroft’s nosiness. He’s worried it’s a leak on his side.” Sherlock presses his steeped fingertips to his bottom lip as he paces. He frowns. “Possible, but not likely.”

“So now we can find them – warn them?” John asks Lestrade, but his eyes are on Sherlock who answers:

“That’s what the police force is for. We, on the other hand, are done here. Good day,” he nods curtly at Lestrade, and then John has to scramble to catch up to his friend.

“What was that all about?” he hisses at Sherlock when he catches him up. “Are you walking out on this case? This case?” Sherlock doesn’t answer, doesn’t slow, and that has the effect of making John speed up, try to get in front of Sherlock as he asks, “How on earth are you saying no to a case like this?!”

With a hitch of his shoulders, Sherlock scoffs, “If Mycroft wants me to find the leak in his security, he can ask me himself – not string Lestrade along with murder and tidbits in the hope I’ll follow.” Sherlock’s long strides have led them outside already, into the flow of pedestrians.

“But if he asked you himself –”

“I’d still say no.” Sherlock thrusts his gloved hands into his pockets, and John can see the fury in the lines of his shoulders and the narrowing of his eyes. “He thinks he can manufacture my compliance? Simply by involving my work?”

John stops in his tracks – another passerby bumps into him before the flow of people deviates to allow for the obstacle that is John Watson. “People. Are. Dying.” Sherlock opens his mouth to counter, and John grabs his arm, cuts him off, “And if you tell me that’s what people do, if you quote him just to be clever or funny, or because you think he’s right, or that it’s even alright to say that –”

“Then what?” Sherlock challenges.

John doesn’t say anything, because his options are terribly schoolyard – I’ll leave, I’ll stop being your friend, I won’t like you anymore. He doesn’t say anything, and in the end he doesn’t have to, because he sees Sherlock studying his face, and something in the man softens and he looks away.

“I wasn’t about to – he’s not…” Sherlock’s words, usually so quickfire and sure, halt. His eyes seek out John’s, his fingers make an abortive movement towards where John still grips him.
Startled, John releases his hold on Sherlock’s arm. People are walking by, still, but they are definitely staring by now.

“We’re going to draw a crowd,” John says, flexing his hand, and he almost feels like laughing, but instead just flushes slightly when Sherlock grins at him, inappropriate and unfathomable and –

“Yes, I rather feel this is a discussion best conducted in private.”

John doesn’t really have time to process the words or tone that just escaped Sherlock before the man turns and strides off through the crowds. John follows, glad for once to be trailing behind, because he can feel the patchwork of confusion and doubt and worry etched into his face, the corners of his eyes, the tight line of his lips, the frown between his brows, made all the worse by his own awareness of it.

Chief in the maelstrom of his thoughts is Sherlock’s about-face attitude to this case. Why drop it? Why? Then, his switch from strident and confrontational to subdued, uncertain, all in the blink of an eye. First he’s comfortable arguing about a sensitive case in public, then suddenly he’s suggesting they seek the privacy of home? How is that rational, logical, normal (ha!) Sherlock behavior?

John tries to stow the worst of it before Sherlock reaches their front door, and maybe he manages it, because Sherlock doesn’t say anything, but then again, Sherlock doesn’t always comment on the painfully obvious, so maybe he doesn’t manage it at all.

The living room feels like a crime scene when John enters behind Sherlock, who is a flurry of motion, removing his coat, draping his scarf, rolling up his shirt sleeves, and John can only stand still and wait. It feels like they’re about to expose a plot, a motive, a reason, and John feels the tingle of adrenaline in his fingertips and the thin skin of his wrists.

“Sherlock?” John needs to understand what just happened. The sooner, the better – while feeling unbalanced around Sherlock is nothing new, he’s never felt this…discounted.

The flurry of movement stills. “John.”


“Oh. That.”

“Yes, ‘that’ – whatever ‘that’ is – what is it exactly?” John’s glad his voice is calm and even, although he notes there are more words than necessary exiting his mouth.

Sherlock frowns at him, obviously miles deep inside his own mind already, and sinking further. “What are you going on about?”

“I…” John blinks. “I was talking about you not taking the case.”


“…What?”

“You heard me. Really, John, you know I hate repeating myself.”

“So you’re staying on the case, then?” John can feel his irritation mounting.

“Yes, John.”

“Then why –”

“Why the public exchange in front of Lestrade and at least two CCTV cameras? Really John, do keep up.”

John huffs his surprised insight. Any louder and it would have been a gasp. “Mycroft.”

Sherlock’s eyes are twin points of brightness. “Precisely.” He strides over to John. “Now if he wants my assistance, he will come to me directly. If he does so, it will be an act of desperation. And desperate people say such interesting things, sometimes.” There’s the beginnings of a smile in the corners of his mouth, the smile that happens when John is in on the plan, when, against all odds, it’s them against everyone else.

Except this time, John wasn’t in on it.

He’s not sure why that realization chafes as much as it does, but after a day of mangled corpses and public confrontations, John isn’t looking too closely at causes.

“And I suppose they make promises they later regret? Bargains. Concessions,” John asks, crossing his arms, and while part of him can appreciate how clever the play was, and how useful (for Sherlock at least) and how harmless it is in the long run, that part isn’t very big right now. (There’s another part that wants to know why Sherlock moved their – no his – little display inside so abruptly, but that part isn’t speaking up right now).

A wave of sourness swamps him, mouth, throat, and mind when he recalls needing Sherlock’s help with his tune up, giving in and letting Sherlock examine (touch) his leg. Had that been a play, too? A carefully executed bid for privilege, successful arrangement of outcomes?
Sherlock’s smile falters, and then it’s like it was never there, hidden under a mask of bland indifference as he turns and waves a hand. “…I’ve upset you.”

“Brilliant observation. Really in rare form today, aren’t you.” John’s practically vibrating with – anger. It must be. It’s intense and internal and consuming, familiar and alien at once. He’s been manipulated by Sherlock before, probably more times than he actually knows, but this time… being played, maneuvered emotionally, in front of carefully placed witnesses, cameras… it casts a hue of meaning backwards through their days together, shading their interactions, their (too) easy dynamic with something a little more planned, a little more contrived.

John feels chilled, hollowed out, used. Worse, he feels betrayed, tiny filaments of uncertainty twining into a cord of sudden, taut distrust.

The metal in his shoulder grinds against the meat of him, and his hip feels stiff where it supports the cyberthetic leg. With another flex of his hand and a terse nod, John turns and heads out again, ignoring Sherlock’s startled “John?” as he descends the stairs and puts the whole mess at his back.
Days pass, and silence stays and stains like damp, grows like the mold underneath the kitchen sink (the one Sherlock may or may not be studying, depending on whether John has asked him to get rid of it recently).

221B contained (and still contains) two occupants and their two very different histories and their entwining lives, but now it also holds an unfamiliar silence, one that stretches the seams of the place in a way no previous silence did.

At the start, both of them are so obviously aware of it, and also so pointedly not going to be the one to break it. It doesn’t take long for the silence to shift gear, to become a familiar presence, and sometimes it is even the mundane flavor of sound-not-happening, but most of the time it is the high tensile thrum of communication-not-happening.

John dreams of his bedsit, of the days he was newly back in London, freshly minted. (Ha.)

In this void, John finds himself counting what he doesn’t have. Left leg. Decent life expectancy. Much hope for a normal life (or remnant thereof) at that.

He no longer has Shelly (but realizes by now that this preferable to the alternative), and he doesn’t have Mona (although he wonders if they ever stood a chance).

Unlike Shelly, he does hope to see Mona again, around, some day – who knows. But this case, this killer, this ugliness, and her failure to return his two calls may cut that from his days to come as well. On the other hand, he also hasn’t been called in to identify the body, so he can handle that for now. He can look ahead and hope, and if he never sees her face again, at least that includes not seeing it stripped and bloody on a slab of marble, waiting to be identified.

John certainly doesn’t have Sherlock. There are no chases, no crime scenes – this case has absorbed his friend (still? ever?) – and who could have predicted how quickly the detective would come to fill the chinks in John’s days with his moods (and surprising deductions) and sneers (and unexpected laughter) and –

Who could have predicted how quickly John would miss that?

Sherlock, meanwhile, obviously has something to fill his days, to occupy his mind, distract his thoughts: hours of research and sulks and breakthroughs that lead to more sulks when they fail to be the epiphanies they at first claimed to be, the undiluted challenge of untangling the puzzle of a serial killer who covers their tracks with impeccable attention to detail, whose victims have been named but not found (alive? dead?) and whose activities have the elder Holmes brother actually manipulating/cajoling/and by now almost pleading for help. This perfect mixture, challenging Sherlock’s brain while allowing him to thwart his brother’s machinations…John certainly knows what to get Sherlock for Christmas. That is, maybe – if…

Well.

Maybe he never really had Sherlock. And now whatever it was that they did have, whatever it was they were has been…strained. Their interactions are stilled, their shared glances shorter, more furtive, less of a secret language and more of a threat analysis. It feels like they’re new flatmates again, strangers under the same roof, although it felt nothing like this in the beginning, not at all. They somehow skipped this stage initially.

Now, though, there is a subtle thread of tension, and it could be cut so easily with an apology, but John has no reason to be sorry, and he knows of no reason to believe Sherlock would ever stack “I’m” and “sorry” together and deem it a sentence worth saying.

So John escapes the flat when he can – goes for walks as often as weather permits. Evening strolls through the city, enjoying his mobility, his anonymity, and a little bit of distance between the detective’s thunderclouds and himself.

He develops a bit of a routine, over the next few weeks – a stroll or two to get through the middle of the week, and then on Fridays he goes round the pub, or perhaps even somewhere more boisterous and loud, and soaks in human interaction – noise and alcohol and casual brushes of skin.

Sherlock, if he notices, doesn’t seem to care, although sometimes he fixes John with a stare as he gets ready to leave, a look with so many layers of blandness on top that whatever is hiding at the bottom must be unbearably fragile or telling.

John wonders if it’s guilt.
Resilience

Chapter Notes

As always, much credit and love to tiltedsyllogism for being the best beta ever.

It’s almost six weeks after the discovery of Zane Haroldson’s body that Mycroft finally approaches Sherlock. John sees the black car parked outside their building and stops in his tracks, wondering if he’s about to be abducted by a comely woman once more, in the name of a minor government official’s inability to simply pick up a phone.

After a moment, the weight of Tesco bags cutting into the creases of his fingers, John continues towards 221B. If there’s to be haring about, he will damn well pack away the perishables first.

Inside, Mycroft is standing and Sherlock is seated. Both men are taking turns ignoring each other. John’s appearance seems to tip some precarious balance, and Sherlock draws a breath just as Mycroft moves to take a seat.

Nodding his greetings, John moves through to the kitchen and begins the (by now comforting) ritual of reclaiming the kitchen for future meals: the fridge is always the first casualty in the fluctuation of the frontline in the war between the Work and hygiene. John plants his flag with careful re-ordering and labeling and cleaning. If he’s honest with himself, though, it’s not really a war.

For one thing, he still doesn’t bin a single experiment.

He likes the efficiency and the practicality and the order of it all. It seems like ticking gears, each little motion leading to the next movement, completion of action, execution of intent.

The finishing blow of domesticity is the preparing of tea, all cups now divested of dirty pipettes and smudged slides, and the warm breath of the kettle slides into the cooler space of the flat and makes it smell like home.

“Tea, Mycroft?”

“Thank you.” The older Holmes’ eyes don’t leave Sherlock, not even when John hands him a mug of tea.

Sherlock, however, breaks away from his brother’s gaze to look at John as he places a mug beside Sherlock, and there’s a twitch in his mouth that is almost a scream in the blank of his face. It’s surprise and gratitude and puzzlement, and after such a long and distant spell between them, it may as well be written for John to see. Things are still a touch quiet, a bit tentative between them, and frequently John gets the feeling that Sherlock is hesitant to interrupt the quiet lest he makes things worse.

John wonders what it is about him that makes Sherlock so careful – he’s never exhibited this kind of caution with anyone that John knows of.

With Mycroft in the room however, the careful quiet between Sherlock and John is superseded by the aggressive charge between the younger and elder Holmeses. Briefly, John considers leaving the brothers to it, but one glance at Sherlock’s face is enough to decide him. That silence is a tensile web spun between the two men, taut with dislike, distrust, rebuke – complex and years in the spinning, so unlike the thread of doubt and misunderstanding hanging between Sherlock and himself.

Mycroft is sitting in John’s chair, so John takes the sofa, and looks from one man to the next. He didn’t quite intend it, but nevertheless he ends up sitting closer to Sherlock than Mycroft, and some impalpable balance shifts inside the room.

“A sip of tea curls hot and fortifying down John’s throat, in his stomach, into the center of him. Again, some subtle film seems to burst, and Sherlock says, “Do continue, brother dearest. Enlighten us.”

Mycroft doesn’t grimace, but the sudden stillness around his eyes and mouth belies the urge and is just as noticeable. “I’ve had my people make inquiries into the whereabouts of the Sedwic survivors.” His lips curl around the last word, as if it is bitter in its inaccuracy. “Preliminary searches have been informative – file images closely match the seven images extracted from the first woman’s phone.”

Sherlock slurs his tea, and John watches him watch Mycroft suppress a wince, and he finds he cannot suppress a grin when his friend’s lips quirk again. “And?” Mycroft frowns, and Sherlock’s smirk grows wider. “You haven’t found them.”

With a sigh, Mycroft sets his mug aside half drunk (John wonders if he would have finished the tea if it had been presented in a proper cup). “After the initial media interest and public outcry subsided, they were no longer a priority. They have dropped off of all prior monitor lists. The
three most traceable people on that list are, in fact, the first three in the list – until recently. The first two are dead, and the third has disappeared.”

For a moment, John’s blood is confused – it drains from his face, then rushes back. All this time, John has been quietly dreading being called in to identify Mona’s corpse, but it seems the killer is truly committed to the order of the victims, because the police haven’t yet come across any other augmented bodies, so damaged and yet so cossetted.

Mycroft continues without interruption, something about tracking down the remaining targets, but John doesn’t miss the way Sherlock’s gaze flickers to him, takes in his momentary turmoil and then settles back on Mycroft, and if John isn’t imagining things, he seems momentarily…affected.

Another intangible shift happens, but this time it takes place inside John’s chest. It feels looser, for a moment, not wound up in quiet and questions.

That momentary distraction burns away as Sherlock’s laser focus snaps to his brother’s face, as Mycroft says, “Sherlock,” and finally looks at John, albeit briefly.

Sherlock blinks.

Mycroft lifts an eyebrow.

John sighs. “Can you have this conversation out loud? Please?”

“Sherlock is going to assist my staff’s efforts to follow the information trail with regards to the remaining targeted individuals.”

“Mycroft is going to leave here disappointed.”

John rolls his eyes, and Sherlock stands, tea hardly touched, to take up the violin and his usual brooding place by the window. Mycroft draws breath to speak, and the violin and bow in Sherlock’s hands leap to drown him out.

Instead of raising his voice to reach Sherlock over the wailing of the violin, the older Holmes turns to John and gives him a look, eyebrows slightly raised, expression slightly chiding, so many careful omissions of expression slotted into the blankness of his features. John is impressed but not fooled; living with Sherlock, John has seen enough faces and facets of contrived emotion to recognize that same skilled artistry in Mycroft’s features. John continues sipping his tea and gives Mycroft a small smile, waiting for the other man to break the silence.

With a sigh, Mycroft does, and John doesn’t miss the sudden flurry in Sherlock’s playing as his brother is forced to speak first: “John, can I count on you to be more reasonable?”

“I don’t know – can you?” It’s childish but irresistible, and John thinks Sherlock must feel this way, always, the heady sense of power, a precarious balancing of words and intentions. It’s not always Mycroft asks or breaks first. Sherlock was right – the man is desperate. “It seems to me you don’t care about stopping the killer.”

Mycroft frowns almost imperceptibly. “My brother’s been a bad influence on you.”

John raises his eyebrows, but doesn’t give voice to any of the half-formed responses that want to surge forward to do battle with Mycroft’s assessment (assumption). John remembers well enough what Sherlock had said about Mycroft’s manipulations, the careful baiting to get Sherlock to find a security leak. His lips tighten – he’ll be damned if he’s going to be an accessory to that! Another sip of tea dulls the edge of his anger but doesn’t diminish it, and it occurs to John, briefly, that the entire empire was negotiated over cups of the stuff, over carefully timed sips, the future in the dregs of each cup swirling and swirling and swirling.

Eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, Mycroft places a file on the table between their knees. He slides it over, his gaze fixed on Sherlock’s swaying shoulders. John doesn’t touch the file, but Mycroft speaks as if he has: “Inside you see the images retrieved paired with more current photos, as well as the relevant data – ages, occupations, the like.” He adds, “Case histories, if you will,” and allows a smirk to colour the addendum.

“No locations, though,” John cannot resist noting, still not touching the file. Mycroft inclines his head in acknowledgement, eyes still on his younger brother.

“No, indeed.” Mycroft stands, finally looks at John. “Five bodies unaccounted for.” It’s not so much a jab as a scalpellic incision, and John tries not to wince as it slices true. Mycroft’s out the door in three long strides, umbrella swinging in his grasp, coat in his hands.

Sherlock continues to play until the front door shuts, no excess force employed, and then turns to grin at John, his eyes alight. It’s the happiest John has ever seen Sherlock post-visit from Mycroft – but Sherlock’s eyes aren’t on the file, aren’t even following Mycroft’s progress to his waiting car.

Instead his eyes are on John’s eyes, and his smile is incandescent.

“You proved me correct, John.”

John blink. “What?”

“Mycroft.”
After a moment, John remembers. “He left disappointed.” Of course – Mycroft had wanted Sherlock’s obedience and John’s assistance in getting it.

Sherlock grins. “Yes.” Everything about him, after somber weeks, seems buoyant and light. It occurs to John in that moment, that the opening bets, the following discussion (nonverbal war, really), and the huff in which Mycroft departed were as much about John as the case. The thought leaves him feeling…peculiar. Unbalanced. Does Mycroft still think John would betray Sherlock so easily?

Does Sherlock?

Suddenly the weeks-long silence and the cause of it all seems petty. Small. It sits inside John’s chest, a cramping jumble of unnecessary – but how to communicate that to a man who doesn’t do sentiment?

Something of the turmoil inside John must leak into his features, because moments later the brightness in Sherlock’s face dims, the light in his eyes flickering uncertain. “John…I –” Sherlock clears his throat and looks away for a moment, before his eyes return to John’s as though compelled. “I realize it’s been…”

John can see Sherlock’s throat work around the word before it passes his lips: “Difficult.”

His throat works again, and then Sherlock says, voice low, “Thank you.” It resonates heavy and many-layered, and John feels that weeks-long tightness inside him subside, that invisible thread cut and fallen slack.

There’s something fragile smoothing the harsh lines from Sherlock’s face, and then there’s a smile, and John doesn’t know who starts first, but there they are, mirror-grinning at one another, and instead of being strangers in a shared space, they are more than flatmates once more, friends again (still!), a closeness gone dormant unfolding in the space of one moment and two reciprocal smiles.

And while this case and Mycroft’s interfering are what caused the isolation, somehow they’ve inverted, resulting now instead in resolution. It’s not simple, and it’s not over, but it’s healing, and John is grateful in away that doesn’t make sense to him, but he’s not looking for something as quantifiable as an explanation.

As unlikely and unlooked-for as this is, it seems he may have found it.
Sherlock loses himself in names and numbers and lists, although after a cursory glance he never touches the file Mycroft brought, declaring it “Useless! A waste of time and analysis.” Still, somehow, the pages and pages of numbers and cyphers (bank accounts? travel itineraries? rates of decay?) that he digs up mean something to the detective, but to John’s eyes it’s all so much visual noise, grey and striping like static.

Sometimes he wishes he could make sense of it all and be useful.

Days pass, and John falls even deeper into his routines – writing, sporadic outings, and following Sherlock on the days he deigns to leave the flat. He’s researching and searching, lost in the case and the uncovering of information, and John knows better than to complain.

He can’t always stop it from happening, though, so John perfects a two part apology – actually saying sorry and disappearing for a few hours (although not usually in that order). A park, a pub, a crowded place. He figures they both need the space, although John is aware that’s a half-truth at best. Sherlock doesn’t value personal space – frequently invading John’s – and while a barrage of questions can set him off, John’s proximity doesn’t seem to be a trigger. That, and a lifetime of distance, practice at not being touched, has suited Sherlock to his work, his ways, his lot. John does not share this dubious advantage – and it’s unlikely he’ll have the time to cultivate a taste for it.

So he gets out of Sherlock’s space, out of the way of the detective’s focus, away from a quiet he wants, inexplicably, to shatter, and John knows better than to complain.

One of those days, after too much quiet, tension crafted from one word questions and impatient, grunted answers, John escapes into the tepid, soupy light of day. Outside noise is a skin the day wears without thinking: buses and taxis and vespas, pedestrians running errands, school kids skiving off, couples holding hands and gazes, chill wind and shivering leaves and gravel underfoot.

It’s what John needed, but not what he wanted, but since that’s not resolving (or revealing) itself anytime soon, he takes what he can get as long as he can stand it, and then he heads back home, ready to accept being ignored in favor of the case.

The walk home is brisk now the day’s light is waning, and John comes back from the park, cheeks flushed from late afternoon sun and early evening chill, and Sherlock is lying on the sofa, limp with sleep.

Startled, John freezes in the act of stripping off his jacket.

John knows better than to try to cover the noise his arrival includes (“Stop sneaking, John,” a distant memory echoes), but he still feels a twinge of guilt when Sherlock’s eyes open – the man sleeps little enough as it is. And perhaps that’s why, for a moment, the brain that drives those eyes is not fully engaged, and Sherlock’s eyes land on John, his gaze almost fevered, the lines of his face soft with sleep-flush and light perspiration, lips parted only just, hips shifting to cant slightly – “John.”

The twinge of guilt is instantly transmuted into a lightning strike – for catching Sherlock in repose (the hated vulnerability of it), for looking, for staring as he – “John?”

And then that face is frowning, those eyes are blinking, those limbs are stretching as the mind comes online, slips into the driver’s seat, first gear, and takes stock. And now those eyes are looking at John, confusion mounting.

John shakes off his coat from where it had hitched halfway down his arms, before he’d been trapped by a sight that shouldn’t have affected him at all. He hangs his coat, and then murmurs part two of his 221B patented apology over his shoulder, before escaping upstairs.
It’s almost two weeks later when Sherlock looks up from his contemplative sprawl on the couch and fixes John with a calculating look. “You are perplexing.”

“Um. Thank you? Maybe?” John frowns at Sherlock, waiting for part B of the conversation to happen.

He doesn’t have to wait long.

“You go to the pub. You imbibe alcohol. You chat up strangers, but you never bring one home, and you never spend the night away. Not since what’s-her-name, anyway.”

John blinks. After the last walk he’d taken, or more specifically, after the bizarre (startling? complicated?) moment with Sherlock upon returning, they hadn’t spoken for almost a week – not because of a fight or a strop or a disagreement, but because Sherlock is (un)naturally quiet and John was being awkward and evasive. Not that he would ever admit to that, least of all to Sherlock.

“Shelly,” he says instead, automatically correcting Sherlock.

“That one, yes. So. You, at the expense of time and money to yourself, spend one evening per week mingling,” and that word is imbued with a heavy distaste, “at pubs and the occasional club, without acquiring sex or friendship for you troubles.”

“Are you following me?”

“Why bother at all?” Sherlock continues, ignoring John’s query.

John shrugs. I get to feel normal doesn’t seem like a good enough reason for Sherlock who has so little concern for the trivialities of fitting in. I attach worth to my physical self through the desires of others is a little too close to what his analyst had pointed out. However right (or unhealthy) that may or may not be, it doesn’t preclude the warm rush John feels when a stranger mistakes him for whole, worthy of pursuit and attention, when her attraction to him sparks in the form of long looks and hesitant touches. Subject craves acceptance, John remembers reading, snooping when his analyst had left the room (and probably failing some test about trust in the process). John grimaces at the memory.

“It’s not like sex is off the table for you,” Sherlock continues unaware of the scatter-pattern of memories ricocheting inside John, “after all, there was the one time with Mona, and at least three times with Sharron –”

“Shelly.”

“ – same thing, so it’s not that you’re not capable. Perhaps not interested? Or is it the grind of having to explain why the contents don’t match the packaging?”

John clenches a hand. “Sherlock –”

“Just another reason why your persistence in self-camouflage is perplexing – why hide what you are? Sooner or later, the idiots will figure it out, and then all you’ve done is delay the inevitable.”

“Sherlock –”

“Besides, it’s not like you have anything that actually needs concealing. Your body is well proportioned, you form is highly symmetrical, and over all you maintain above average muscle tone. Balanced for aesthetics, despite your height, which nevertheless serves you in brawling by lowering your centre of gravity. In short, your form is efficient, functional, and if the attentions of strangers and acquaintances alike are to be taken into account, pleasing to the eye.”

John blinks, momentarily derailed. After a moment of tracing his way back to the starting point of this – compliment? really? – he finds the original question.

John sighs and looks away. “Because people fear what they don’t understand.”

“People are stupid. Hardly a new observation or conclusion.”

John looks up at the unexpected fervor of that response – Sherlock will rant at length about the idiocy of the population in general with great disdain and frustration, but this had seemed warm and personal. Sherlock meets John’s look with his usual intensity, but there’s a hint of something underneath the smoothness of his face. It could be a smile.

John finds himself grinning, just a little, in response to that almost smile. “Obviously,” he teases,
trying to affect Sherlock’s tone, and has the undiluted pleasure of seeing Sherlock’s eyes light up. John’s grin becomes a smile as he turns to fetch his coat. “I’m still going out,” he says, but before Sherlock can switch into sulk-mode, he finds himself adding, “but now I’m thinking you could come, too. With me. If you want.”
John had thought to go for a quiet pint and a bit of flirtatious chatter at one of the three pubs he frequented for this weekly ritual, but with Sherlock tagging along under the guise of ‘observation,’ he had guided their footsteps to one of the few night clubs he had ever found tolerable.

“Never took you for a clubber, John,” Sherlock murmurs as they approach the establishment. There’s a reproachful tone to his words, as if John isn’t allowed to be things Sherlock hasn’t guessed at.

Biting back a chuckle, John says, “I’m not.” John never was, and still isn’t, a natural dancer. Some men have the sway in their hips, an awareness of rhythm and how to make their bodies obey its orders. John is not one of those men – especially not with his implant – but he always could enjoy the atmosphere of others dancing, drinking, gyrating their way to a good (and sometimes better than good) time. “Doesn’t mean I can’t have a drink and see who else is out tonight.”

Sherlock nods thoughtfully and follows John as they show their IDs, check their coats, and move into the main dance area.

The music is loud, the conversation is loud, the outfits are loud. John grins as Sherlock takes it all in with just a sniff of distaste, oblivious (or at least pretending to be) to the appreciative glances being tossed his way. If John were actually out to pull someone, he would have been miffed at being the shorter, less noticeable friend, but since he’s here for a drink, some anonymous and very superficial chatter, he cannot be arsed to care.

In fact, he feels buoyant, freed of the expectations of attention.

John insinuates himself into the crush at the bar, manages to open a tab, and returns to the dark corner where he left Sherlock. The man is still there, hands in the pockets of his dark trousers, his black shirt tight against his chest and arms, calling attention to his pale skin, eyes seeming to shimmer in the sporadic lights of the club as he scans the crowds. He says something to John, but John can’t quite hear him. He points at his ear and shakes his head, and this time the word that escapes Sherlock’s lips is easy to read: Dull.

John smirks at him, mouths the words ‘one hour’ at him, exaggerating each syllable to tease Sherlock, who could have read his lips even if he mumbled, and is rewarded with a scowl and eye roll.

“Hi!” someone shouts in his ear, and John turns to take in a short, curvy brunette. He’s surprised – normally women don’t make the first move with him – and turns to see if Sherlock is perhaps the reason for her attention –

But Sherlock has disappeared. Perhaps he’s gone home, his short attention span for frivolity already exhausted, or perhaps he’s poking around looking for suspicious activity. Either way, not John’s problem.

Really not his concern.

He shrugs it off and turns his attention back to the brunette.

“She was rather persistent,” Sherlock’s voice is a rumble by John’s ear. He jumps – he’d been leaning against a pillar in one of the side rooms where it was a little easier to talk. He felt like he’d only just escaped the blonde he’d been talking to, who had finally moved on the greener pastures after John had refused to act on her not so subtle hints that they take their flirtation to closest unoccupied bathroom stall.

“Jesus, Sherlock! I thought you’d left,” John does a quick check, but his half-drunk beer has managed to stay in the bottle after all. “A little warning, next time, yeah?”

Sherlock smirks at him. “You passed up a good shot at intercourse,” he notes. “And while the location would have left something to be desired in the realms of romance and tenderness, you could have remained almost completely covered and clothed for the duration of the act. No explaining your augmentations, no awkward questions.”

John drains the last of his beer rather than answer the implied question.

“Furthermore –”

“Give it a rest, alright?”

“I'm simply trying to understand –”
“Yeah?” It’s the heat in John’s stomach and the turmoil in his blood that snaps out and cuts off Sherlock’s reply. “Go under the knife yourself, then.” He regrets the words, and the tone even more, the moment they escape his lips. John flexes his hand, closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. “Sherlock –”

The space beside him is empty.

“Bollocks,” John mutters, turning in place to scan the room. No sign of the infuriating, nosy git, and John’s stomach clenches hard. He glances at his watch, and goes to close the tab. Might as well see if he can catch Sherlock on the way home, maybe smooth over this spat.

He nearly walks past Sherlock where he’s chatting intimately with a woman, body angled down and forward and aggressively sexual. He stares for a moment, utterly flabbergasted by the tableau before him, because Sherlock has never once indicated any interest in anything remotely to do with – and she is ‘not his area’ – and –

His confusion must be audible, because Sherlock’s attention switches to him a moment later, apparently oblivious to the woman sliding an appreciative hand up his chest. There’s a lot being communicated in the look Sherlock gives him, and John wishes fervently he were privy to it.

Without another word to the woman touching him, Sherlock walks over to John, ignoring his previous conversation partner’s flustered surprise. “Shall we?”

Still dumbstruck, John nods and follows him outside after retrieving their effects from the coat check.

The walk home starts out silent and contemplative. Sherlock, surprisingly enough, is the first to break it. “While I have no intention of enduring augmentative surgery simply for the benefit of grasping your motives more clearly, I do believe I can understand why you weren’t interested in relations with those specimens. ‘Dull’ doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“You don’t pull someone for good conversation, or intellectually stimulating murders, Sherlock.”

John sighs, walking thoughtfully beside Sherlock. “Or at least, most people don’t. And it’s not that I’m not willing,” he finds himself saying. “But, it’s not… it wouldn’t – it doesn’t feel like it should.”

“Why did you try with Shelly?” Sherlock asks, and John’s feet falter, catch in their swing for a moment. John is silent for many measures of their tread. It’s not that John doesn’t know the answer, because he does, but this is not the kind of thing he talks about, ever. He doesn’t even write about these parts of his life – he keeps the banalities of his day-to-day listed for his analyst, and he chronicles the madness of his life in his personal blog.

But Sherlock so rarely asks questions; there’s no real need, ever – one glance and Sherlock knows every detail of John’s activities. A question like this, an open request for more, leaves John feeling tight-chested and a little breathless, leaves him feeling as if he could do damage by refusing to answer, could, actually, hurt either of them with silence.

John worries at his bottom lip, then huffs out a sigh. “I thought….I thought maybe I could feel like a real person, again. With her,” he mumbles at last. He avoids Sherlock’s eyes, because he knows that scorn is waiting there, because Sherlock is a realist, and John is too, and whatever else he had hoped for with Shelly, the wish he just gave voice to is the least attainable, and they both know it.

But then Sherlock’s knuckles just brush along the sleeve of John’s jacket, so light as to be accidental, unintentional, but John’s eyes snap to the point of contact then slide upwards – Sherlock is looking straight ahead, staring intensely away from John, and there’s scorn in those eyes, but not the shade John had been expecting, and certainly not for him.

John looks away, sharply, and his breath snags in his chest, and they don’t say anything else as they trudge home through the shared cadence of their footsteps.
Later that night, awake and trapped in the circle of his thoughts – the night, the women, the detective; this night, those women, his friend; darkness, his exes – John thinks back to Sherlock’s question.

Shelly had been sweet and caring and a nurse, and she’d seen cases like his before, and she’d said he was so much better at coping, and she’d smiled at him with her lips and her eyes and her dimples and had treated him like a human being and not some collection of surgery and bad luck.

Before her, Mona – Mona with her sharp edges and soft curves, with a basket of issues to rival John’s, caught in a terrorism attack, pulled apart by shrapnel, stitched together by science… Her anger had been a smoldering heat inside her eyes, the corners of her mouth, the way she bared her teeth when she laughed. She’d treated John like a comrade, not a countdown, and it had been like being back with his men in stained sand.

They had been so different, but now John was beginning to see what they had both had in common:

Mona had looked at John with hunger; she’d wanted anger, rebellion, any kind of reaction from him.

Shelly had looked at John with forgiveness, and had wanted him to accept that – that somehow, he needed forgiving, and she could – and would – be the one to do it.

Their needs, so dissimilar, touched upon the same issue. John, if he wanted to find someone to wait out his life expectancy with, was going to have to change, to compromise himself.

John, the more he thinks about it now, finds himself stubbornly deciding he has changed enough.
There’s a hand on John’s shoulder: it’s time to go.

Thrumming in the air: wounded arriving.

There’s a hand on John’s shoulder. It is his own hand. It is bathed in hot, in wet, in –

Vibrations in the ground: enemy approaching.

There’s a hand on John’s shoulder, the most important hand in the world, because it’s applying pressure and field dressing and procedure –

Words in his ears: “Wake up John –”

It’s just morning, and light is slipping past the edges of the blackout blinds in John’s room, and John’s hands are wrapped around Sherlock’s neck and skull, cupping and pinning, immobilizing.


John shoves and the detective stumbles back, just barely, and there’s a catlike grace even in this.

John’s shoulder assembly tingles where Sherlock’s hand had so recently gripped him. John can feel his hands, his palms, the skin in the creases and folds, stinging with how hard and fast he had connected with Sherlock, and the pinking skin on that pale neck confirms it.

This is why we don’t keep the gun within arm’s reach, John thinks, sing-song and dizzy with shock.

John takes a deep breath. “Shit.” He runs his right hand across his face, flexes his left, cannot look at Sherlock, who stands impassive and yet somehow impatient in the middle of his darkened room. “Shit,” he says again, because recent events call for it.

When he finally looks up at Sherlock, his friend (still?) is giving him his John, really look. What he says out loud is, “Are you alright?”

Rage and grief and reaction drain from John and he simply falls back against his bed, pulling in air, working his diaphragm like a bellows, slowly, evenly, feeding oxygen and calm and safe into himself. Thirty breaths later he’s ready to answer. “Yes.”

Sherlock nods. “Good. Get ready – it’s time to go.” He’s already headed for the door. His face and limbs and everything are so calm, but John’s never known him to retreat so quickly.

“Sherlock – I – did I hurt you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous –”

“Please.” John can hear the ragged edges in his own voice, but he can’t tell if Sherlock’s voice is raw, doesn’t know how long he gripped that proud neck.

Sherlock sighs. “I’m fine, John. In my haste to wake you I neglected to approach you with care despite your clear REM markers.”

Blinking, John props himself up on his elbows. “Is ‘neglected to’ code for ‘couldn’t be arsed to’?” The quick glimmer of wry humour in Sherlock’s eyes and mouth provide the answer.

“I assure you it won’t happen again.”

John sits up properly. “Why don’t I believe that?” He grips his shoulder, where meat becomes metal, and rotates his joint to speed the dissipation of the sense memory of hands hands hands touching there.

Sherlock stands in the doorway, poised to leave, but unmoving, and John, after a moment, swings his legs out of bed despite the audience. Sherlock said they had somewhere to be, and if he doesn’t move now, the mad man might get impatient at him. He tries not to look, but he doesn’t miss the way Sherlock’s eyes dip to take in his cyberthetic. The boxers John slept in last night hide the seam, but end mid-thigh.

Those eyes themselves are unreadable, and John wonders what they are seeing, what detail of his condition is catching Sherlock’s attention, what bit of backstory is revealed through that guarded scrutiny.

“Where are we going?” John asks, trying to crack the silence and his sudden nerves and Sherlock’s staring all at once.
Sherlock blinks and seems to come back to himself. “Donald Hersch.”

John pauses in the middle of pulling on a pair of jeans – over the boxers, thank you very much. “….Say again?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer, and when John turns to look, he’s alone in his room. He huffs, not sure if he’s amused or…or what? He frowns as he finishes tugging the denim up over his hips, then removes the old t-shirt he’d slept in. There are no mirrors in his room, so it’s safe to be without a shirt for a moment, and he can keep from looking at his shoulder assembly long enough to cover it with a fresh shirt.

Downstairs, Sherlock’s already in his coat, pulling on his gloves, scarf draped around his neck, not yet tied and arranged. John cannot be sure, but he thinks Sherlock is avoiding making eye contact – which works out to his advantage, because it lets him grab a quick bite of breakfast unrushed, unhurried, unperused.

It feels strange – no, empty – to be out from under that all-seeing regard, and John is glad when he’s done, and then he’s ready, and Sherlock is leading the way, and they are out on the street away from whatever the hell that awkwardness was in the flat.

“Donald Hersch,” Sherlock says then, “is a rarity.”

John lifts his eyebrows: Oh?

Sherlock quirks his lips into a half smirk. “He’s a man my brother can neither hide nor find.”
Of course Sherlock speaks German, John groused to himself. The coffee in his take-away cup is thick and bitter, potent but acrid to his tongue. He drains it anyway, willing the caffeine to absorb through the lining of his stomach, or better yet, his throat. His mouth, even, sublingual – best not to involve taste buds.

He’s heard that proper German coffee is some sort of rite of passage, but he doubts the charcoal sludge they served at the station and in the hospital cafeteria counts.

The train ride was hell – starting, actually, with the taxi ride to the station itself.

Because Sherlock, split-second decision maker, connoisseur of the bigger picture, hadn’t packed, or even hinted at the need to do so, and certainly hadn’t clued John in on the master plan.

If Sherlock had, John would have brought along a scarf like he always does when relying on public transit, since the scarring on his neck can and does attract unwanted attention – especially from implant-phobic arses like their cabbie.

If Sherlock had, they could have planned for the fiasco with security at St. Pancras station (chest and leg assembly setting off the detectors), although fortunately Sherlock had procured (pilfered?) a travel permit for John (restrictions on augmented subjects’ travel were a result of the early riots and violence and malfunctions) from Mycroft, and then they wouldn’t have needed to sprint to catch their train.

(“Hang onto this,” Sherlock had muttered to a red-faced and tight-lipped John as he strode through the gates to the train platforms. “Altering the expiration date will be easier than acquiring another in the future.”)

If Sherlock had, John would have eaten before the trip – hours on a train with a by-turns bored and intensely-intrigued detective were hell even before factoring in hunger (a slice of toast doesn’t keep the needle above empty for long), fatigue (nightmare-filled dreams can hardly be considered restful), and the grimmness that comes from dashing out of the flat after waking from said nightmares and neglecting to shower, because some over-eager git hadn’t told him they’d be travelling.

In short, for once John had been the one to sulk, while Sherlock was placidly silent, occupied by the world blurring past their compartment window when he wasn’t rattling off deductions and observations about the man they were traveling to find, the people they’d seen on the way to their seats, and the ticketing agent who’d demanded to see John’s permit and thoroughly checked it for signs of forgery.

Two stops – one in Bruxelles-Midi, and then another in Cologne (or Köln, as Sherlock unfailingly pronounced it). They had to run to catch the final train, and for the first time that day, things had felt normal. The last leg of the journey was northbound and short, and slightly more bearable.

Their destination was Düsseldorf. At first glance it was clean and orderly as the inside of a watch, but once they exited the station (“Hauptbahnhof,” Sherlock insisted), the grubbiness of humanity reasserted itself. The skyline looked modern, but closer to ground level stone buildings hunkered against the march of time.

Still hungry, John kept his eyes open, but the fast food options available were uninspiring.

Sherlock set off at a brisk, confident pace, obtained a cup of coffee for a very startled John, and then led him to the hospital as if he walked these foreign streets every day. The sign announcing the hospital, stainless steel in bland, corporate signage concrete, read: KLINIK and then, in subscript: für Anästhesie, operative Intensiv- und Schmerztherapie.

Schmerz, John thought, and then remembered: pain.

Inside, Sherlock navigated the over-busy and understaffed reception with flawless German, and then, seemingly telepathic, secured a second and somehow even worse cup of coffee for John. Apparently it was free of charge. Certainly tasted like it.

And now, John is nursing the aftertaste while Sherlock sits and speaks with a man in a hospital bed, a man John has been resolutely ignoring, because if he doesn’t, if he looks, then it’s like looking into the future.

And John doesn’t want that future.

From where he’s sitting, though, there’s no avoiding the patient chart, which, while in German, includes numbers that are universally understood, communicating information that makes John curl his feet inside his shoes.
The IV dripping into Mr. Hersch’s veins contains a very specific solution – something for pain, something for neural degradation, something for rejection.

Donald’s body (at the ripe age of 56) is rejecting his cyberthetic implants. If losing both his replacement legs were the worst of it, something could be done – upgrades, newer models, hell, even a wheelchair would be possible.

But it’s not.

Donald’s body (at the ripe age of 56) is rejecting his interface, a device so woven into the matter of his cortex that his body is, in effect, rejecting a substantial portion of his own brain.

His constant bloody nose, a slow drip he wipes with a by-now rust coloured cloth, is proof positive of his very real and very present danger.

His voice is a dry leaf whisper, scraping along to the repetitive chorus of machine beeping that fills the white and blue room. Sherlock leans close to catch what he is saying, speaks urgently in low tones, German clipped and precise, the same as his English, and John catches himself straining to hear that familiar voice in this unfamiliar place, in this place that could one day be all too familiar to him.

John cannot understand the words Sherlock utters, but he hears the intensity behind them. He’s certain Sherlock is exhibiting zero tact and even less bedside manner, but that driven baritone is comforting as a lullaby to John. He closes his eyes and breathes. He lets the room and the man and the future recede, lets himself drift.

He opens his eyes in time to see Sherlock nod at Donald, standing and turning to leave. John stands, sees Donald notice him for the first time (happens all the time when Sherlock’s in the room), then sees Donald notice his neck, where the scarring is just visible.

“Es tut mir leid,” Donald says, and John doesn’t need a phrase book to hear the pity and the grim empathy in that pain-riddled face.

Maybe John says something, maybe he doesn’t, maybe it’s a mumble, but when he leaves the room it feels like he’s clawing his way out of a nightmare, fighting free of a tangle of bedsheets and bedclothes and the paralyzing fear memory can inspire.

Sherlock leads them to a quiet café, a proper one, and another coffee appears in front of John. He blinks – that’s three times, now – but even if this coffee is obviously better than the last two, he cannot taste it.

He’s surprised at how steady his hands are, but then again, days of sand and sun and heat have seen some of the calmest versions of John Watson.

“Did you get what you need?” he asks Sherlock, and Sherlock switches his gaze to John’s face – he had been watching the couple two tables over.

“Hmm?”

“I hope you got what you needed,” John rephrases. He inhales, exhales, takes a brutally hot swallow of coffee. “Because Hersch doesn’t have long left.”

“I know,” Sherlock murmurs. “And yes.” He purses his lips. “It seems he, at least, will escape the attentions of our serial killer.”

“Oh, that’s a relief, then.” John can feel the first coffee of the day in the back of his throat, thin, sour. He swallows thickly against that bile.

Two long fingers, ungloved, brush against his knuckles where they curve around the mug in front of him, bringing John’s eyes down to that movement. For a moment his thoughts focus on that touch: here, now, and not a hypothetical future filled with the loneliness of a rejection death.

Sherlock opens his mouth and John cuts in, “If you tell me that rejection presents in less than 30% of augmentation cases with cerebral interfacing –”

“I wasn’t going to quote statistics at you, John. Statistics aren’t the reason you won’t end up like Hersch.”

John looks up from where long fingers are just shy of actually curling to cover his hand, rooting him to the present the way the familiar voice had earlier, and is trapped by a stare that has become such a part of his life that John forgets to think how this must look from the outside – the touching hands, the locked gazes, John’s pulse still fluttering in his throat from his earlier brush with panic –

“Oh?” he manages, and Sherlock smiles a small, private smile, one he seems to keep just for moments like these, although they number few and far between.

“Yes,” Sherlock says, with the same conviction of having deduced killer, means, and motive from an errant footprint. For a moment it looks like he might say something else, but then those lips close and press against each other, a flat line, and then he’s standing and heading for the door.

“Our train leaves in 30 minutes.”

John breathes once, deeply, needling it, and then downs the rest of his coffee and follows Sherlock
out into the streets of Düsseldorf, and even when he falls into step at his friend’s side, it still feels as if he hasn’t yet caught up to the man.
It takes a day to recover from the trip – or at least, it does for John. He’s still not sure what Sherlock’s processing and deriving from their trek to and chat with Donald Hersch – beyond of course, tracking down another victim and taking their history.

Sherlock hadn’t said much on the return trip, and hadn’t contacted anyone upon their return to 221B. Maybe he’s not going to bother letting Mycroft or Lestrade know about Hersch, John thinks. Normally this would irk or worry him, but for once Sherlock’s breezy disregard for procedure and authority wouldn’t bother John: if Hersch has to die a rejection death, at least he won’t be bothered by Lestrade’s insensitive staff or Mycroft’s domineering interrogations.

It’s the next night before Sherlock speaks again, and when he does, it’s like he’s continuing a conversation rather than starting one:

“Of course, he could afford it.”

John starts. “Who could afford what?” He checks the wall clock – it’s gone midnight, and he’s been tapping listlessly at the blog he keeps for his analyst, wondering if he should mention the foray into foreign lands.

Probably not.

He deletes the block paragraph line by line until a blank page stares back at him, accusingly.


“What?”

“Oh come now, honestly John. The Clinic we visited was one of the few in Europe specializing in rejection therapy – it costs a staggering amount of money to be admitted, diagnosed, treated, and kept. Costs even more when they fail – those pain and rejection suppressors they had him on come at a high price.”

Sherlock swings his legs down off the couch – he had been lying on his back, supine and supple while he drifted in thought. Now, feet braced on the ground, the live wire crackle of energy blazes through his limbs, leaving John just a little breathless. It feels like they’re about to hare off on some grand chase through London.

“His money, his connections - he said he’d kept tabs on the others, at first, the other six Sedwic survivors, I mean,” Sherlock clarifies for John with a chastising squint. “That is, until they’d been placed under witness protection. Smart man, Hersch – expected he might need to know the long term effects on the others in order to better understand his own situation. He knows all about the first victim, Gilda, and Zane and Mona, as well. Said they were the easiest to track down after the protection.” Sherlock stands and runs his hands through his hair. “I imagine our killer found it similarly simple.”

John gasps softly. “That explains the order.”

The corners of Sherlock’s eyes crinkle for a moment. “Yes. Donald’s fourth on the list – but seeing as Mona has yet to turn up, dead or alive – oh hush, John – it seems our killer is running out of time with Donald. Interesting that the order seems so important.”

“Part of the ritual?”

“Hmm.” He taps his chin with his steepled fingers. “There’s another question you should be asking.”

John frowns. “What...about...the others?”

“Yes, John! The others – why are they so much harder to find? What made them so difficult to track?” He paces about the room. “Donald said the other two males were Artuan and Ernest – he said Artuan was foreign, Indian or Pakistani by birth. I think he skipped the country before the travel restrictions became widespread, before it became routine to track augmentation recipients... perhaps back to his home country, where technology would have a harder time keeping up with his whereabouts.”

And his implant after-care. “Why would he run, though?” John wants to know.

“Hersch said the weeks after they became the Sedwic Seven were challenging – everyone felt tracked, watched. Threats, real or imagined, seem to have been a large part of their recovery time. I imagine that would be enough to send a young man packing his bags for the homeland he never
knew.”

“And this Ernest fellow?”

“Homeless. I already have my people looking for him. Five years on the street – someone will know of his condition by now. Of course, without my contacts, it would be impossible to find him.” The smugness in Sherlock’s voice is warranted, but John manages to keep his admiration down to a toothy grin. The man is unbelievable – but he can just as easily be insufferable.

“So now what?” he asks instead.

Sherlock grins, mirroring John’s suppressed mirth. “I…acquired something interesting from Donald’s Clinic, and I need to examine it more closely.”

“To Bart’s?” John suggests.

Sherlock’s grin is incandescent for a moment. “To Bart’s.”
They come back from Bart’s. They’d whiled away hours there: Sherlock caught up in the slides he’d stolen from the Clinic, and then Molly had earned a rare (genuine!) compliment when she’d presented him with a sample of nerve-to relay integrated tissue.

Molly had fawned, and Sherlock had manipulated, and John had watched it all from his corner seat, thumbing through a procedural text on augmented cadaver autopsies he’d found. (John wonders if either of them realize how obvious they’re being – at least to him.)

Of course, eventually Molly noticed someone besides Sherlock was in the room (again, it happens) and actually chatted with John a bit; John decided she was an alright sort when she said, “Oh – Oh! You’re his – um?”

“Flatmate,” he’d supplied, and she’d flushed fetchingly, but her eyes had wandered back to gaze at Sherlock over John’s shoulder every few moments.

“You’re augmented,” she’d said, and then explained, “– he said?”

And John had nodded, and she’d smiled a little and asked if it hurt, and John had actually smiled in return, because no one ever asked that, not techs or analysts or even Sherlock. Sherlock was curious, not concerned, but Molly, it seemed, was both.

“Come along, John,” Sherlock had commanded then, disrupting their conversation; apparently he’d learnt what he could, and John was famished, so they left.

The cab ride home had been quiet but not distant.

And now, having come home from Bart’s, something in the flat feels…wrong. The air seems full of some energy, invisible opacity, a low level vibration that sets every bone, calcium and metal, on edge. He catches himself waiting for thunder to roll, an answer to the lightning only he can sense striking.

John had been the one to open the door since Sherlock’s hands were full (the berk tried to get him to carry his parcel of dubious parts, but John had dodged that attempt), so John had been behind Sherlock on the landing.

Upon entering though, upon feeling the difference in the air, John gets in front of the detective, raises his hand to quiet his indignant huff, and slips up the stairs, catlike.

It’s not something new, John realizes, almost sniffing the air. There’s no scent out of place to tell – if there were, Sherlock would have noticed it before John, he’s sure of it. No…this is something else. It’s oddly familiar, and it sets his nerves tingling. The base of his skull crawls with it.

The flat is empty, but John doesn’t linger – instead he is already heading up the stairs to his room, tugged along by this phantom awareness. Sherlock following behind, silent as a ghost, having set his package in the kitchen. “What is it?” he breathes into John’s ear, his words a warm hush, his exhale given shape against John’s skin.

The shiver that runs down John’s spine is entirely because of the strangeness in the air. Entirely.

John presses a hand to the floorboards outside his room and feels for vibrations.

None.

He eases open the door an inch, then another, and then it is open, and –

There’s someone in his bed. On the covers, asleep, or so the rhythm of their rising and falling torso would suggest.

John doesn’t keep his gun in his bedside table, not because it’s too easy for Sherlock to find, but because it’s too easy for his nightmares to find. Instead, the Browning lives behind some books on a shelf on John’s dresser, where he has to strain to reach it.

He does so now, and with that familiar weight in his hand, he approaches his bed while Sherlock
observes from the doorway.

For a moment, John doesn’t recognize the face or the hair, because the hair (dark curls, a little wild) doesn’t belong with that face –

“Mona?”

Chapter End Notes

A rapid-fire update, wow! (not really)

Actually, I just wanted to take a moment to thank everyone who is reading, subscribing, commenting, kudos'ing and generally acknowledging this story's existence. You guys make my day, and I am so grateful to you for your continued interest/support. Hugs to you all <3

And seriously, just a massive amount of appreciation to tiltedsyllogism, who is the best and wins all the awards.
John climbs out the attic window to join Mona where she sits on the roof, smoke rising from the chimney of her throat.

“So what exactly were you doing in my bed?”

She grins at him, as if that answers the question.

“You weren’t sleeping.” John fixes her with a stern look.

Mona repeats and holds the grin. “How could you tell?” Her eyes widen. “Wait, did you feel it? The link-up? You did, didn’t you?”

John grimaces, but doesn’t answer her excited questions, saying instead, “Your hair is blond when you sleep, and it wasn’t, so you weren’t.” Enough time to worry about her questions later. Instead, as he speaks, he tries to (surreptitiously) catalogue her scars. They seem…different.

With a last drag of her cigarette, Mona stands. “I was linked in,” she explains as she pinches the glow of the butt dead between two fingers. “Not to the NHS net or the government registry, mind you. There are much more interesting places to go for a swim.” Her eyes gleam. “And besides, I needed somewhere safe to finish installing a new patch – cyOS just released a new protocol upgrade. Combat ready.”

“Jesus, Mona.” The difference in her scars is obvious now – some are fresh, raised almost a quarter inch from her pale skin – and much more aggressive, somehow. As if weeds had been invited into the rose garden and planned to make the most of their stay. “Is that why you disappeared? Is that why you never contacted me?”

“Your message – well.” Mona stretches. “Let’s just say I got it just in time.” She blinks her eyes, and the colour in the synthetic one changes, green to black to a dull red-brown for a moment. She grins. “I’d been meaning to make a few…adjustments for a while, and when I got your message I decided it was time.” Another blink, and the green is back, but there’s a sharpness to the eye’s movements that reminds John of a targeting system.

Cybernetics upgrade. John can only stare for a moment, lost in what it means. Mona hadn’t needed new parts, but she’d gotten them anyway, and then she’d upgraded to a full cybernetic link up for her brain. That meant unregistered surgeons and engineers. And now she was linking to unmonitored nets, downloading combat patches made by unregistered users and programmers. The risks and costs involved are beyond John’s reckoning.

“Why not go to the police? Why further augment yourself?”

Mona blinks at him like he’s missed something obvious, and if she’d still had her dark curls, the resemblance to Sherlock would have been uncanny. Actually, even with her blood red hair, massive and unruly, her expression is enough to drag John’s thoughts back through the window, down the stairs, and into the flat where the detective is lost in thought on the couch (having an untrackable, untraceable future victim of a serial killer can do that to a man – or to that man, anyway).

“You think I shouldn’t have? John, someone had been following me for days when I got your message. Watching. I hadn’t been able to pinpoint how, and I thought maybe I was just being paranoid, but then I heard your message – and, well…” She blinks, slow like cats do. “I decided to take matters into my own hands – and I knew where to find the right people for the job, after all.” Mona smiles, and it almost seems like there’s an offer in the way she dips her eyes to take him in.

“After I got back from the upgrade, I thought I was in the clear. My new OS suite didn’t detect anyone hacking, tracking, or monitoring me, so I went home.” She exhales a cloud of smoke in one smooth plume. “Today my apartment exploded with me in it. Someone tried to kill me, and my upgrades are the only reason you’re not ogling my smashed up tubes right now.” Mona rolls the butt of the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger. “This is my body, John. It’s the only one I have, my only defense, my only weapon – and it will be the best I can make it. This is my choice.” The fury in her voice couples with something like arousal, and John recalls how she had hungered after the few words of the war he’d shared. He wonders if she was like this before the surgery. He wonders if these new patches and upgrades will exacerbate her already aggressive nature.

She snorts, watching him. “You’re thinking this – my personality – is a symptom? Maybe you’re right. But if it’s a sign of disease, then the affliction must be life itself.”

“That’s Rally talk,” John points out.
Her grin is sharp toothed. “And if it is? Doesn’t change how true it is.”

John purses his lips for a moment, rather than say anything. When they’d been…together, these conversations had always led to arguments.

He can’t quite wrap his mind or mouth around a sentence that will see him safely beyond this minefield of old patterns, but in the next moment, he doesn’t have to: his phone buzzes in his pocket.

*Ready.*

*SH*

Apparently Sherlock is back from his Mind Palace (god John can *hear* the capitalization whenever Sherlock explains it), and instead of some contrived platitude, another sentence springs full formed from John’s lips: “Can you tell us anything about the attacker?” He grimaces as he says it. God, he sounds like Sherlock, and he said ‘us’ even though the detective is downstairs and distant. This is getting out of hand, whatever ‘this’ is. Is there a ‘this’? What does ‘this’ even mean? John shakes his head once, sharply, to clear out that thought.

Mona’s answer, a clear and simple “Nope,” yanks John back to the here and now. She doesn’t seem fazed by her own unhelpful answer, or by John’s distracted demeanor as he turns, heading downstairs, summoned by one word and initials.

Mona follows him, and John is intensely aware of every step she takes behind him – how simultaneously fluid and calculated every movement is. For one blazing moment, he feels a flare of jealousy, remembering how he had struggled (how he still does) with his implants. It doesn’t seem that Mona had the same difficulties he did – she certainly doesn’t, now.

Behind him, Mona continues, “I can’t *tell* you,” and there’s a bubbling eagerness in her voice – and in her face when John turns to look at her. He wonders if this is what Sherlock sees in his face when the thrill of danger outweighs the ballast of common sense. “But I can show you.”
Mona takes the proffered seat at the couch and then accepts the offered transfer cable from Sherlock with a smug look. Her hands lift into the mass of her hair to dig their way to the base of her skull, trailing the cable and its plug end. There’s a soft click, repulsively normal, and then she says, “I had them set me up with a USB-ready port,” cheerily, as if she hasn’t just rammed a foreign piece of tech into the base of her skull. “In case I wanted to download course seminars, take hi-res photos with my eyes, or analyze my memories so I can find and dispatch my stalker. You know, fun stuff.” There’s another click and a minor spasm twitches both her eyes side to side, once. She blinks. “Ready?”

Sherlock passes over his laptop (not John’s, for once) and Mona inserts the other end of the transfer into the laptop’s USB port. “Ganh,” Mona’s throat works, and she swallows convulsively. “System has detected a new device.” Her voice sounds strange, emotionless. “Connection status: Good.” Her eyelids close and her eyes twitch rapidly behind them. “O-kay,” she says breathlessly a moment later. While the on-screen dialogue boxes are delivered clearly, it seems to strain Mona to formulate her own words. “Watch.”

The screen in her hands flickers, and all the open documents and internet tabs minimize. An image-viewing programme opens. Bizarre blocks of black and grayscale pixilation fill the screen.

“How very useful,” Sherlock quips, although John can hear the smallest bit of tightness in his voice – fear? Distaste? Maybe grudging respect?

Mona blinks open her eyes. “Oops!” The image flickers and loses quality. “That made more sense in my head. Hang on a tick– ” She shuts her eyes again and the programme closes; she opens a different one: a media player this time. “Yes yes yes,” she mutters impatiently as an hourglass spins. “God machines are so slow.”

“You should see John type.” Sherlock and John share a glance. John means for it to be a scowl, but he can feel the snort of laughter they both want to share in that look. Something crystalline lights up inside John, ignites a tightness in his chest and throat, tangling up whatever sounds could have emerged. They end up grinning at each other instead.

“There,” Mona says, her monotone voice layering over itself: her lips and the speakers of the laptop broadcast at the same time. The strain is back in her voice, greater this time, her throat working to push out the words. “Watch.”

The pixilation returns, then scales smaller and smaller until it’s clear she’s zooming out. A moment later, the image begins to play, and as it does, Mona frowns, facial muscles clenching tighter and tighter. The image on the screen clears up: lines sharpen, motion de-blurs, some colour leaches back in.

“Useful,” Sherlock says again, although this time it’s thoughtful, and there’s nothing grudging about the delight in his voice.

It takes John a moment longer to realize that they are watching a street – people, cars, pavement – slipping by from Mona’s perspective.

“Time stamp,” Mona says, and a moment later a dark van enters the frame – the image starts to jostle as Mona runs. The street is narrow and almost deserted, and the field of vision shakes and jerks for 30 seconds, hard, before pitching sideways as Mona flings herself into some darker side street; the view changes to show the van barreling past. The horizon line wobbles and shifts as she stands, and then runs in the opposite direction, ducking into an alleyway, scrambling through a garage park, and then slipping down a tube entrance. “End time stamp,” Mona says, her voice falsely fluid, buoyed as it is by the command-language of the programme. “Title: Encounter 1. Save to desktop.”

A couple of hourglasses later, Mona adds in her own forced voice: “Here. Watch.”

A new scene this time, and the video quality is very different. Colours are bold, details are sharp, and this time there’s sound, crisp and clean.

“Why - ?” John begins, but Sherlock interrupts:

“Post operation audio-video capture is superior because it’s a direct feed to the new memory bank. No need to transfer the imperfect recall of the brain or the inferior cataloguing of the previous interface to the perfect scribing of the new RAM.” Sherlock leans forward. “The perfect witness.”

Mona nods stiffly. “New systems. No memory transfer; no data degradation. Here. Watch.”

This new HD POV sweeps the street twice before hurrying to enter a very nice brownstone. One
doorman, two flights of stairs, and what looks like a fire escape later, Mona enters what must be her flat through the window.

A moment later, a knock sounds on the door. “Miss Shaw? The doorman said you were home – we’ve been so worried – did you know the police were looking for you?” Another knock – then a hand jostles the doorknob.

Mona’s voice filters through the laptop speakers: “Fuck.”

The explosion rattles the laptop speakers and flings Mona’s memory-self backwards through the window, head over heels –

“Rewind. Stop. Time stamp. March forward quarter speed.”

Mona looks around the flat. The low bass of the door knock sounds, the voice of the knocker seems endless. Mona’s vision lands on a tangle of wires by her door. The doorknob twitches. A little red light switches on. Mona’s voice, low and stretched, grinds out slow motion profanity. A spark, a bright flare by her door, and then flames, a concussive wave of air moving towards Mona –

Just before it reaches her, she throws herself backwards, leaping through the window into a handspring on the edge of the fire escape that she turns into a swinging grip as the wave hits her.

Within moments she’s descended the fire escaped, landed in a crouch next to a stack of bins, then she darts down an alley. A quick glance over her shoulder shows flames and smoke and wreckage.

“End time stamp,” Mona says, “Title: Encounter 2. Save to desktop.” She reaches up a hand to the cable emerging from her hair. “Disengage all exterior devices. It is now safe to remove the devic – Hng –”

She slumps back against the sofa, breathing hard. “How’s that for a witness statement?”
They’d left Sherlock to it – he was going through Mona’s memories frame by frame, collecting details about the van, about the bomb, about Mona’s flat, stockpiling them in the endless cavern of his mind, combining and recombining them just as endlessly. John’s seen it happen many times by now, the process, Sherlock’s method, and it never gets old.

The only break in Sherlock’s focus had come in the form of a text, which buzzed through after Sherlock ignored a phone call from Lestrade. The text, when Sherlock had shown it to John, said:

*Explosion at Mona Shaw’s flat this afternoon. Presumed dead.*

A moment later, a second buzz had brought:

*For gods sake have some tact when you tell John. Don’t just show him that bloody text.*

After quirking an eyebrow at John – who sighed and shook his head, not knowing whether to be amused or exasperated (no doubt in his mind that Sherlock would still simply have shown him the text even if Mona were not alive and well under their roof) – Sherlock had said to Mona, “It appears that you died in that explosion.”

She’d snorted, self-satisfied in her survival.

But that was hours ago, and normal people get tired and hungry, and John’s since had to keep Mona away from the detective, because she interrupts with questions and stares at Sherlock like he’s an oddity – and while that happens every day out in the world, at crime scenes, at Bart’s, and even just on the street, John won’t stand for it in the flat. Sherlock deserves – John seems to have decided a long time ago – to have a safe haven where he can not be the odd man out. (If John avoids thinking about the odd fierceness behind that decision, it’s not like it matters.)

And now, nearing midnight, with a chill rain sinking out of the sky, John leans against the roof-wall next to Mona, who’s perched half in and half out of the attic window, smoking again. John is wondering about going back down and seeing if there’s anything he can do to help. He knows better than to suggest sleep or even food – but Sherlock’s never said no to a cup of tea to ignore, or maybe even sip absentmindedly.

He’s been explaining Sherlock to Mona – the process, the palace, the Work. She may be the first client who isn’t offended that Sherlock doesn’t care about her plight, and is interested only in the challenge and the puzzle.

She snorts and says, “As long as he finds out who is behind this and lets me tag along to the showdown, I don’t care if he cries his eyes out or laughs like a loon while listening to my story.” She grins. “Mind you, he did kind of glare at me when I followed you up here.”

He’s been explaining Sherlock to Mona – the process, the palace, the Work. She may be the first client who isn’t offended that Sherlock doesn’t care about her plight, and is interested only in the challenge and the puzzle.

John rolls his eyes. “Don’t take offense – he glares at everyone.” John privately believes the detective probably glares at walls and empty rooms when there’s no one around to target.

“Everyone? Or just every one of your girlfriends?”

“Oh stop it, Mona.” John shakes his head. “It’s not like he cares about my relationships. Besides, he knows we’re over.” Knew before I knew, actually.

“I’m not so sure… I’d say he thinks I’m here to recharge. Plug right back in.” Her wink is as vicious as her smile. The rain outside is fine enough that even the softest swirl in the breeze carries fine droplets to John’s face, neck, and crossed arms.

John scoffs, leaning against the window sill despite the chill. As if Sherlock even bothers with such thoughts. “Why would I even want to?”

Mona grins. “That bad, is it?”

John’s silence is enough.

Mona sighs out fumes, but doesn’t seem offended. “It does get better – the more you synce up with it, the less it’s this other thing, or this event that happened to or at you. It becomes your body, it becomes you.”

“What if I don’t want that?”

“Don’t be absurd, everyone wants to feel whole.”

John thinks about the bizarre slide of skin against ‘skin,’ realness pushing against lies, an overload of data lancing through his nerves, his thoughts, the hated interface. He remembers feeling
piecemeal, jumbled, a jigsaw ill-assembled, climax signaling completion rather than desired release. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

She throws her head back and laughs, like a hyena, an unapologetic survivor. “It is not my job to fix you, John Watson. And I couldn’t even if I felt like wearing myself down to the bone trying – that’s your job.” She takes one last puff, almost ripping the smoke from the tobacco with the force of her inhale, then tosses the butt away into the rain. It bounces down the roof, glow gone almost instantly, then washes away into the gutter.

Mona stands. “I mean it,” she says. “You fix your own self, or it won’t stick. Trust me.” And with that, she’s gone, back up to John’s bed – the only one in the flat capable of sleeping, it seems – and he’s here at the window pulling storm air into his lungs, feeling lightning inside and out.
When John steps into the living room, Sherlock is pacing already – or is it still? John may not be the world’s only consulting detective, but he’s lived with Sherlock long enough to pick up on the disheveled hair and rumpled aubergine shirt, top two buttons undone, exposing a pale column of neck. Combined with the slight flush to his skin, all signs point to rapid pacing for at least twenty minutes.

“Mona’s ‘death’ frees the killer to continue on down the list.” Sherlock’s voice is quiet, his words rapid-fire.

John wonders if the detective has only just begun this soliloquy or if he’s been talking to an empty room in John’s absence. With a hum of assent, John moves through to the kitchen, side-stepping Sherlock’s continued pacing. He opens the fridge, grimaces, then closes it. *Tea*, he decides. Partly because that’s the safest choice, and partly because if he has some, maybe he can get some into Sherlock.

“So, will it be Hersch next?” John asks, and he doesn’t need Sherlock’s head shake to know the answer. Natural or not, it had been inevitable.

“Died yesterday –” Sherlock’s eyes dart up to focus on John for a moment, a quick assessing scan, “– in his sleep, apparently.”

John blinks, nonplussed. Had Sherlock included that detail for his benefit? Surely not – it’s probably just tangentially important to what Sherlock had been thinking, a point of data in the timeline of deaths and events.

“That leaves us with Ernest, Artuan, and Effie – Ernest is next, and there’s been some interesting chatter from the homeless network. Several of my contacts have reported being followed. Observed.” Sherlock frowns, his feet carrying him to the window and stopping there. He stares out at the dying darkness beyond the glass. “Obvious and inefficient attempts at discovering Ernest’s whereabouts.”

The kettle clicks, and John pours, inhaling as steam rises to cling to his rain-cooled cheeks. He carries both mugs through to the living room, and settles back into the welcome softness of the couch with a sigh. “Do your contacts know where he is?” He drinks down the freshly hot tea, warming his hands, his lips, his throat, his core. As the heat settles, he feels his muscles slacken, his eyelids droop. With a shake, he sits upright – he’ll be even less use like this, he chides himself.

When Sherlock glances over at his shifting, John lifts the second mug of tea and his eyebrows. Sherlock huffs what could be a snort or a scoff, but moves forward to take the offering – and a seat on the couch. He pulls his legs up and wraps his arms around his knees, holding the steaming mug between his broad palms and wrapping it up in his long fingers. “They don’t,” he answers at last, seemingly unperturbed, offering no further insight or explanation, and John doesn’t demand any. Instead, he watches as Sherlock brings the tea to his lips, his throat working as he swallows.

John blinks and looks away.

Silence spreads and pools between them, and John finds his eyes drawn once more to a study of the man beside him. Seated as he is, eyes distant as they tick through his myriad thoughts, Sherlock looks both young and world-worn. The half-light softens his features, like the silver-and-shadow flicker of an old movie, and John blinks at the thought, but doesn’t look away this time as Sherlock drinks again.

He realizes how close they are – he had not expected Sherlock to sit when selecting his own seat, and Sherlock has never been one for observing rules regarding personal space. Still, the detective looks straight ahead, lost in his thoughts or perhaps the steam of the tea he holds so close to his lips.

“You should sleep,” Sherlock breaks the silence. “You know how you get when you’re tired.”

John’s lips quirks sideways. “Tired?” he suggests.

Sherlock snorts and drains the last of his tea. John looks down and realizes he’s finished his as well.

“Anyway,” John says, “seems unlikely I’ll get to. You’ll be up all night, I suppose?”

Sherlock tilts his head and a small line appears between his brows. “Yes, but why should that stop you sleeping?”
"My, ah – bed is occupied."

"And?"

"Christ, Sherlock, I’m not – Mona and I aren’t –"

"John. John, stop before you hurt yourself." Sherlock finally moves his eyes to regard John. "I simply meant that your bed is not the only option for sleep in the flat."

"Yes, well," John says, feeling a bit of a twat, "the only other option’s the sofa, and I don’t think I could sleep with you pacing up a storm and muttering."

Sherlock’s face is a caricature of confusion. “You have before.”

"No, actually, I haven’t.” John sighs. “You just don’t notice when I leave the room, sometimes.”

"Oh."

The pause, John decides, could be more awkward. At least, it seems awkward to him, and he’s aware it could be more so (Sherlock could be staring or asking probing questions, for starters), but he doesn’t know if it feels like that for the man lost in realization next to him.

"Have my bed, then," Sherlock says, as if no awkward pause had happened. As if that sentence isn’t a fair bit worse than the pause before it.

"Sherlock – no."

"Why not?" He shrugs. “It’s a room, with a bed, going to waste.”

"Why don’t you go pace in it then, and I’ll sleep here.”

"I can’t think in my room, John, or I would. I function much more efficiently out here.”

John sighs. He feels like arguing, and he thinks he should, at least for a little while longer, but he’s tired, and the chill in his limbs has been replaced by the heat of the tea, and a bed sounds lovely right now, never mind that it’s Sherlock’s. “And what about you?”

Sherlock flaps a hand, somehow making it an elegant and eloquent articulation of his wrist. “Like you so astutely observed just now, I’ll be up all night. Plenty of brainwork left to do.” His lips twitch, a small smile flashing and fading in the dim light.

John hesitates, and it must last a moment too long for Sherlock, because he twists in his seat and fixes John with a pointed stare. “Honestly John, do us both a favour and get some rest. You’ll be insufferable come morning otherwise.”

John lifts both eyebrows. "I’ll be insufferable?"

There’s a playful spark to Sherlock’s face, although it takes John a moment to find where it hides: it’s in the eyes. “Quite so.” The posh words and the smirk don’t undo the hint of good humour, and John finds its own mouth shaping something like a grin.

He stands and runs a hand through his hair. “Alright. Alright then.” He looks down at Sherlock, still perched on the sofa. “Thanks.”

“Yes, yes,” comes the reply, accompanied with another swivel of the wrist, dismissive flap of the hand. The man’s already sinking into contemplation once more, leaving John stranded in their living room.

He puts off entering Sherlock’s room – tidying the plates from earlier, the mugs from now, before finally giving in to his fatigue.

Sherlock’s room is dark and bare – almost Spartan in its lack of furnishings. The bed is rather larger than what John’s used to, and the blank walls remind him uncomfortably of his bedsit back before he made Sherlock’s acquaintance.

Naked floorboards creak under foot, except where an old rug lies by the bed. The wardrobe hunkers against the wall, tall, dark, and slightly menacing in the gloom. Another door leads through to the bathroom, and John passes through and completes the checklist of his bedtime routine before returning and surveying the bed as if it were enemy territory.

The sheets are a crisp white, but almost achingly smooth, soft and inviting. Even turning them down over the dark navy coverings makes John’s fingers itch for more contact. He removes his jumper and shirt, leaving only his vest. Jeans and socks join the almost neat pile of discards and then John, clad in pants, is climbing almost cautiously into white folds of softness.

It takes a minute for John to realize that, under the clean smell of detergent, there lingers something like a storm, a whiff of ozone. At first it’s faint, but with each passing breath it grows in potency, until it’s this other presence, pressing close and familiar, almost tangible as the sheets slide against his skin, but not intrusive. John exhaled deeply, fatigue becoming a pleasant weight in his bones. Even the twinned report from the ‘skin’ on his cyberthetic leg has nothing but smoothness and softness to relay, a blessing so late at night when John is exhausted in mind and body and interface and wants nothing more than to give in to the comfort of his surroundings and surrender to sleep.
John’s eyes close, his breathing evens out, senses growing pleasantly unfocused –

Through the closed door, he hears the telltale creaking of a detective resuming his pacing, and John sighs. He half sits up, then turns to face away from the door, his head finding a different pillow as he flops down.

A moment later, John’s eyes snap open as that nameless scent cocooning him so completely snaps into place. The scent of the sheets, blankets, and pillows is overwhelmingly that of Sherlock – not his shampoo or any of the other chemical cleaners or contaminants he comes into contact with from day to day, but the scent of the man himself. It’s surprisingly clean for someone who frequents morgues and keeps the kitchen in a constant State, but there’s also a darker, earthier undertone, clay after rain, tinted with something just one shade sweeter than salt.

John realizes with a start that his mind is suddenly wide awake, caught afresh in the newness of its location, the assault on its senses. Undecided on whether to laugh in defeat or groan in frustration, John runs his hands over his face and flops onto his back, not sure when his mind will be ready to start cycling down to rest again.

John sighs again: it is going to be a long night.
“And that’s your brilliant plan?” Mona’s voice cuts through the morning quiet, even but incredulous.

After a night spent tossing and turning, John isn’t particularly keen to see how this line of questioning plays out. Even after a morning shower, he still haphazardly catches a snatch of scent, leftover from dozing fitfully in Sherlock’s bed, and it catches at his thoughts like a loose thread. It’s not unpleasant – more un-balancing, leaving John feeling off-kilter and ill-equipped to deal with a strop, whether it be Mona’s or Sherlock’s.

Mona continues, getting into the swing of a rant, “You want to stuff a bunch of random data into my head and wait for an answer to pop out – you said this bloke was a genius!” The last bit is directed at John, who lifts his eyebrows at Mona.

“Facial recognition,” Sherlock says, as if that solves anything. He’d still been awake when John had emerged this morning, rumpled from the night and damp from the shower. They hadn’t said anything about the sleeping arrangement of the night before, just nodding their ‘good mornings.’ John was glad of the silence, not sure what he would’ve have said if asked to evaluate his night’s (un)rest.

Mona switches her attention back to the detective and blinks. “What?”

“Facial recognition,” the detective repeats, his face betraying his loathing of repetition. “I’m not going to shove ‘random data’ into your skull – we’ll be feeding your interface a series of specific schematics to search and flag. CCTV should give us plenty of raw to match up against, and from that we can extrapolate – ”

“But you saw the memory footage – I didn’t see any faces! So what good would that do?” Mona twirls and tugs a snarled strand of her red hair, the way she used to when she was getting ready to fight or push John on some subject he didn’t feel like discussing. Those had not been good days.

Sherlock sighs. “You didn’t see faces, but you did see the tinted windows of that van. Last night I ran screen captures through a clean-up programme. Didn’t get enough for features, but we now have baseline profiles to work with.”

Mona snaps her mouth shut, tilts her head as she considers, eyes slowly lighting up as the logic and the neatness of it sinks in.

John shakes his head. “Fantastic.” He may be tired, but he knows brilliance when he sees – or hears – it. Sherlock doesn’t beam or look at him or anything so obvious – but John knows to watch for the subtle flush of the detective preening. He doesn’t have to wait long: the barest tint of colour blooms its way into pale neck and cheeks, brightening the greens of Sherlock’s eyes.

With a delicate cough, Sherlock flips the laptop around and begins to explain the process – namely the distillation of data into its most tractable, abstract form: mathematics. He picks up where Mona interrupted: “With these rough profiles matched up against the CCTV databanks, we can extrapolate hot spots for matches, narrow the city down to a likely theater of operation.”

John listens while Mona bombards Sherlock with questions – more like demands – to prove the accuracy of his work. She wants to see the programmes he used, the equations employed, the extrapolations achieved… it gets too technical for John, and he finds his eyelids tipping down more than once. With shake, he refocuses on the conversation – and just in time, too, it seems: Sherlock’s face is a grim promise of fast approaching temper.

Obviously, Mona has started to repeat herself, another relic of arguments past, when she would repeatedly question John’s reasons for not wanting to commit to Rally events. John decides it’s time to cut in.

“And just how are we going to get a hold of the CCTV footage for cross-referencing?” John asks, tired, frustrated, exasperated – and trying not to let it show. A room full of Sherlock (even – or especially – when brilliant) can lead to any one of those conditions, but John is finding the addition of a souped up Mona, headstrong and relentless and aggressively eager, to be a bit too much.

A flicker of longing for a simple afternoon spent in companionable silence breezes through John’s thoughts, ruffling and settling them equally. The image of it – quiet hours, occasional comments, shared takeout, the downswing of their shared rhythms – is at once comforting and confusing. John hadn’t realized he could crave the life he was currently living. He binks, dislodging the picture from his mind’s eye, but a calmness lingers.

It’s not a feeling he’s used to.
John sets it aside for later inspection, makes an effort to be present in the conversation once more.

“We could steal it,” Mona is saying, attention redirected, eyes glinting at a chance for mayhem and not-so-civil disobedience. “I know some people who – ”

Sherlock interrupts with a snort: “Tedious. And unnecessary.” His eyes are on his laptop as his fingers flurry and flutter across the keys — but John doesn’t miss Sherlock’s quick, considering glance his way. The detective hits the enter key with a small, self-congratulating flourish. “I have just acquired access and am currently pulling the feeds we’ll need. Shouldn’t be long.”

John’s mouth drops open, and it’s embarrassing that he’s gaping at Sherlock (should any of what he does really be a surprise by now), but he doesn’t try to hide his wonder. Mona’s face snaps from a frown into a devious grin. A progress bar chews its way towards 100% across the screen.

“How did you do that?” she demands. “You’re not hiding a hacking programme in that skull of yours, are you?”

Sherlock scoffs, “Please.” His eyes flicker up to catch John’s dumbfounded look. He smirks, but his eyes ruin it and it becomes more of a smile. After a moment, he breaks their tenuous connection to stare at the digital download bar on his programme window. “We’ll have what we need for the programme to work. We just need some way to install it.” He shrugs one shoulder. “And a facial recognition programme, of course.” He frowns. “Not something I can snatch from My — ” he clears his throat and tosses an amused look John’s way, “ — my usual sources.”

Mona tucks her hands in the pockets of her jacket. “There’s a hacker I know — I trust him to upload something quality.”

John frowns. “You do?” He frowns. “If you have access to all the tools you need, why come to us at all?” If what Mona’s saying is true, then she could have stolen the footage, uploaded a programme, and run this entire operation solo from that point — something Mona, John recalls, had a fondness for.

Sherlock snorts. “Every human on the planet has a brain — and yet most fail to make use of theirs fully or correctly.”

“You are unbelievable, you know that?” John can hear the exasperation in his voice again, but by the way Mona grins at him, he thinks maybe she hears something else. He frowns at her, opens his mouth to say something (ill advised, most likely) but she jumps in before he can.

All she says though, is: “It’s true, though. It would never have occurred to me to construct a baseline profile from the outline of the driver’s shadow.”

“All that software and still stupid. What good are you?” Sherlock sniffs.

“Careful, or I’ll show you,” Mona stands. “I’ll make some calls. Be ready at three.” And with that, she leaves the room, hips canting, powerful strides carrying her away.
At three, the trio steps out of the safety of 221B and into the exposed terrain of the street. Mona glances about herself, then nods and leads the way down the street. When Sherlock makes as if to hail a taxi, she pushes his arm down with a roll of her eyes. “Really?” she asks, before setting off again at a ground-eating pace.

Sherlock lifts an eyebrow at John, who shrugs, but follows after Mona nonetheless.

It’s a hard march through the streets, and then Mona ducks down a tube station entrance. Sherlock and John follow. Mona grins up at them from the bottom of the stairs. “Keep up, will you?”

They slip onto the train just as the doors ding before closing. Sherlock leans forward, murmurs, “Surely you are aware the trains are under CCTV surveillance?”

Mona smirks at him, winks at John. “We’re going to an… area of interest. Taxi services keep records of all their pickup and drop-off points, and we don’t want that. Nobody will look at this footage unless something goes wrong, but our destination will be reported if we use taxi service.” There is just a touch of exultation in her words, a hint of triumph in her face – Mona had always liked operating outside expected parameters, reveled in out-thinking ‘the system.’

Sherlock’s mouth twitches, and John covers his own. Mona, of course, doesn’t know about Mycroft, who is probably watching them as they speak.

Of course, no black cars have pulled up to them and demanded they get in, so perhaps Mycroft is otherwise occupied – or perhaps he’s trusting Sherlock to operate as he sees fit. John’s lips twist into a sour line – he has a hard time believing Mycroft would refrain from meddling in this instance.

John turns so that his mouth angles up to Sherlock’s ear and away from Mona. With a slightly bemused expression, the detective tilts his head closer. “Do you think he’ll – you know?” He watches as Sherlock’s eyelids flutter shut for a moment – probably running likely Mycroft Overreaction scenarios through the engine of his mind.

“No,” he murmurs, dipping his head to deliver the answer, for John’s ears only. That word is warm against the curve of his ear and the skin of his neck. John shivers and nods, trying to shake off the almost ticklish after-sense of that whisper.

“What are you two whispering about over there?” Mona asks, and her grin assumes an answer, but the train surges around a curve and comes to a halt before Sherlock can open his mouth, before John opens his to stop the detective from saying something atrocious.

When they’ve regained their footing and equilibrium, Mona is already out the train car, opening hiss of the doors barely fading.

“Come on,” Sherlock says, a familiar hand between John’s shoulder blades propelling him forward ahead of the detective. John doesn’t recall that touch landing, but now its guiding force is impossible to ignore or resist, and he’s halfway up the stairs before he manages to shake it off with a laugh.

“We’re not going to lose her – she isn’t a suspect on the run, you know.”

“No, she’s our only witness and the next victim.” Sherlock scans the crowds at the turnstiles. “Lovely. She’s vanished.” His sigh is long-suffering.

John snorts. “Welcome to the club.”

Sherlock spins to look at John. “What?”

With a shrug, John moves towards the exit. “Nothing. Just. Sometimes you need looking after, and then you go and disappear.” He pushes through the exit and feels rather than sees Sherlock hesitate before following. “Not very relaxing.” He turns to look at Sherlock and is surprised by the thoughtful look on those familiar features. He’s about to add something – though John doesn’t know what, even as he opens his mouth – but then he spots an equally familiar snarl of black curls. “Got her.”

Sherlock whips around to stare at Mona. “She changed her hair.”

“Told you she could, remember?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow, obviously recognizing the dark curls she’s selected. “Fascinating.”
They walk towards the exit, and Mona slips into their wake, hands in pockets of her short jacket, impish grin in place. “What do you think, John?” she asks, voice light and teasing. John would say ‘flirtatious’ if he didn’t know her better; she’s less of a flirt, more of a homing missile. He snorts in answer to her question and asks, “Trying out for the ‘Who Wears It Best’ column?”

Mona beams a cheerfully vicious grin at John. “You should look into getting a ‘do like mine,” she says, running her fingers along her scalp implant lines and then the tumble of dark hair. Her fingers curl into curls, disappearing and reappearing almost hypnotically.

“Think I’ll pass.” He watches with interest as Mona removes her coat, turns it inside out, and then puts it on again. Her hair writhes as it shortens and shades itself to ashen blonde. If he had blinked he would have missed it.

“Oh, I can see why,” Mona says, running her hands through her own copy of John’s hair. On her face it makes her look impish and a little punk, especially with the inside-out coat. She scratches her fingers through the short strands of blonde. “Feels just as nice as I remember.”

John rolls his eyes, which is how he catches a glimpse of Sherlock, whose face is a study in impassivity, so much so that John can almost feel the complicated happening behind that veil of disinterest. Sherlock’s eyes squint for a moment, and it could be due to glare from a passing car windshield, or it could be from something else, something that warrants that level of intensity.

“Hey,” John says, and bumps Sherlock with a shoulder. He shoots him a glance that asks, ‘Alright there?’ and Sherlock blinks and looks at him with a slight frown that says, ‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ John doesn’t quite miss the moment before Sherlock turns that question outward, when it glanced sharply inward, but he decides to let it go. Mona and her assumptions would not make that line of inquiry very productive or comfortable right now.

“So.” John turns to engage Mona before she can try to grab attention by force again. “Why the Many Faces of Mona today?”

“Being difficult to follow has kept me alive through recent events. It pays to swap looks every now and then, and I plan to keep doing so,” she says, pointing at a nearby CCTV assembly. “After all, Big Brother is watching.”

John manages to catch Sherlock’s face just as he parses Mona’s words. The sneer that becomes a snort that becomes a choked-off laugh is the icing on the cake. “You have no idea,” he murmurs a moment later, more for John’s ears than Mona’s, and John doesn’t even try to wipe the resultant grin from his face for some time.

Chapter End Notes

Life currently consists of much traveling (I post this from Not My Own City). Soon my travels will end (for a while) and more regular updates will be an attainable goal. Thanks for your patience and lovely responses so far - they are a most invaluable fuel!

<3
Reception

Chapter Notes

beta’d by the tireless and ever-perfect tiltedsyllogism.

Also, my thanks to the good folks of the Anti-Diogenes Club for general inspiration, commiseration, and the bottomless camaraderie that makes the solitary pursuit of writing just a little less so. <3

The building Mona takes them to is uninspiring, to say the least. It seems to have been abandoned half-way through remodeling, thick layers of plaster dust and spackle spills coating the floors. Just to the left, tucked into the side of that building, a tattoo parlor squats, only half of its neon sign managing to advertise the shop’s services.

Mona had been angling towards the building, but Sherlock breaks away from her trajectory to approach the parlour directly. It takes John a moment, but he manages to intercept the detective, grasping his forearm and stopping him.

“What?” Sherlock rolls his eyes. “It’s painfully obvious we are headed to –” Sherlock starts, but John cuts him off:

“I don’t care.” John wants to explain that this is new for him, but also not new. “This is not your – our –” John fumbles for an explanation. “We are strangers here. Intruders,” he decides at last. “Follow Mona’s lead, alright?”

Mona had dragged him along to a couple of rights rallies, forced him to endure lectures and meet-ups. While those experiences as a whole had left him feeling wrong and somehow guilty (he didn’t hate normal people for fearing him, not like the Rally members did), it had taught him to respect the conventions of this – their – his? – emergent culture.

The first priority of augmented existence is safety: in this day and age, violence still finds augmented victims and leaves horrible marks, and if their current case isn’t enough proof, the non-augmentation scarring on cyberthetics recipients provides the rest of the evidence.

John grimaces, swallowing back the memory of Mona’s bitter rants, her recounting of attacks she and her friends had suffered. Mona, survivor to the bone, to the metal marrow, has lived through so much cruelty, so much violence – and perhaps that’s why she seeks out confrontation and cataclysm. Perhaps that had become the norm, and doesn’t everyone crave normality?

John shivers, thinking of the war, his war, his nightmares and his perplexing, guilty longing, so frequently pushed aside simply so that the day can get started, so that he can muddle his way through being different and an outsider in his own country. A moment later, memories of midnight chases and his Browning kicking back against his tremor-less palm trip his heart, and it kicks back into a flutter.

‘They don’t even have the decency to call it what it is,’ Mona used to say to him, when the papers reported an attack. If they reported it at all. ‘Hate crime.’

John Watson may have signed up for the war, but he was never any good with the Us vs. Them mentality. He still dreams in shades of indistinguishable red – but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t see the differences in people. He knows now, as he learned then, to trust the local guide, to let go of superior training and rely on native cultural familiarity.

Sherlock obviously hasn’t – and his current expression, a pout on the stubborn side of petulance – showcases it thoroughly. “John, this is patently unmerited over-precaution. The street is empty, and even if it weren’t, no one would care about or notice us entering that establishment.” He nods at the little parlour, gray bricks and bright splashes of graffiti. “And the ones who might would not be fooled by a slightly oblique approach –”

“I don’t care,” John repeats, a preemptive reiteration. “This is Mona’s territory, this is her show. We take our cues from her.”

“It’s unnecessary –”

“It’s respect. We are not vETTED to these people, and she’s bringing us in. There’s risk in that.”

Sherlock grumbles but stops trying to yank his arm from John’s grip. With a huff, he stalks back along to where Mona is, waiting in the shadow of the building. Her hair is coal black and straight, her features schooled to disinterest, but when she looks past Sherlock to John, her eyes soften for a moment, a quiet gratitude.

Sherlock comes to stand beside her, and then John, and then she looks at them both and sighs. “I didn’t think I needed to spell out the obvious for you, but here it is: don’t make me regret bringing you here. Don’t do anything stupid, and don’t touch anything.” She snorts, then looks directly at Sherlock. “And for god’s sake don’t mouth off at anyone.”
Sherlock’s lips pull sideways. “I’ll just be myself.”

“Oh god,” John mutters as they set off again.

They walk along the line of the rotting building, and Mona reaches out to run her fingers along the edges of a worn window sill, her thumb just curling underneath the formerly posh scroll-work –

And then they are passing the building by and coming to the tattoo shop, and Mona is knocking, and the door is opening, and the humid darkness swallows the three of them whole.

It takes a bit for John’s eyes to adjust to the gloom of the interior. Of course, while he stands blinking, Sherlock looks around with interest, no doubt cataloguing the stains and the scuff marks and the tattoo samples on display.

John frequently wonders what it looks like inside Sherlock’s mind, and right now, his sight blurred and spotty while he waits, is one of those times. He’s so caught up in trying to map out the bizarre mess of a flow-chart that is his current half-joking theory that it takes him a minute to realize that Mona is not with them in the front room.

“Where –?” he asks, but Sherlock cuts in:

“She’s in the next room, probably trying to convince them not to dispose of us.”

That doesn’t sound promising, not to John.

“If she’d included us in the discussion, I could have sped things along.”

“Don’t start, Sherlock.” John’s eyes have finally adjusted, and the visual noise of the graffiti on the walls and the art samples and the photos of before and after are making him wish they hadn’t.

“This is her scene, her people,” he says, beginning to feel like a broken record. “Just let her do the talking.”

Sherlock is unsettlingly quiet for a moment. “Your people, too, I should think.”

John feels his body stiffen, as if expecting an attack, which is silly, but for a moment the urge to duck behind cover is at war with the need to function like a normal human being who doesn’t have those reflexes, those permanent stains. And it’s not like John ever forgets what he is, so it seems unfair that such a simple, innocuous reminder of himself, his status, his condition, should set his muscles quaking and shake the foundations of his calm.

He’s only vaguely aware that Sherlock turns to look at him, his face just a little softer than expected. John shakes his head before Sherlock can open his mouth to say whatever it is a face like that might say.

“Just – don’t,” he grinds out. He feels his heart cycle down, a jet engine whining to a stop, a turbine whirring to a standstill. The stampede in his veins recedes, and his chest assembly no longer feels like an anvil pressing down on the cage of his ribs – what ribs remain, that is.

A door clicks somewhere ahead of him, and a slab of ink-slathered muscle steps through, dark lines tribal against dark skin. The man looks like a war god. He stares at them over crossed arms.

“No,” he says. His voice is deep, smooth, and almost posh.

Mona yanks on his arm until he leans down to hear out her furious whispering. He grunts. “The short one, then – but the normal will have to stay.”

For a moment John and Sherlock share the exact same expression: bemused surprise. John knows Sherlock’s comes from this man’s presumption that he can stop Sherlock from going exactly where he wants to go.

John’s comes from hearing someone label and exclude Sherlock for being normal. He almost wants to laugh. Instead he says, “Not a chance. I’m with her and he’s with me. He’s coming with.”

“And why should that matter?” the man counters. “He still isn’t one of us.”

The man is shaking his head, but John has been staring at him, and he steps forward out of his habitual parade rest, to stand tall as he can and challenging in the man’s space. “He’s a friendly.”

John watches the term slip into the tumblers of the man’s ‘no’ and turn them just a bit.

Ex-military, then.

The stare lengthens between them, but at last the man’s chin dips in a curt nod, a nod so familiar to John’s muscles that he finds himself mirroring it back. The man’s full lips purse for a moment longer.

“And why should that matter?” the man counters. “He still isn’t one of us.”

The man is shaking his head, and John has been staring at him, and he steps forward out of his habitual parade rest, to stand tall as he can and challenging in the man’s space. “He’s a friendly.”

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“A fright then – but it’s on you if he gets into trouble, or brings it down on us.”

Sherlock sniffs and moves forward, brushing past John. “As if I don’t have anything better to do with my time.”
John sighs, then holds his breath as Sherlock moves up to regard the man through narrowed eyes. “Sherlock,” he warns.

“John,” Sherlock retorts, mimicking his tone of voice, and then he’s past the man and following Mona down the hallway.

John exhales in a huff. “Sorry about that. He’s a prat.”

The booming laugh is unexpected, but it drains the tension from the room. “Come on, then,” the man says, “let’s go.”

John follows him down the hallway, which has black and white graffiti exclusively. It’s geometric and disorienting, but John can see Sherlock and Mona ahead, waiting impatiently by a door. She’s wearing the detective’s curls again, and the twin expressions of done waiting complete the illusion. John swallows a chuckle, but his companion doesn’t subdue a snort.

“Mona,” he says, “never one for patience. Found yourself a match, I see.” Mona and Sherlock jerk and look at each other, looking for all the world like siblings who’d been called twins by mistake.

After a moment, Sherlock’s eyes tighten and he looks away from Mona’s smirk as she says, “Not even a little bit, Leicester.”

Leicester booms a laugh again, but turns serious as he keys open the door between Mona and Sherlock. He turns solemn eyes on Sherlock. “Do not upset Magpie.” His level stare holds Sherlock’s for a moment. “I’m warning you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sherlock replies, and for once he manages to keep the acid from his tongue.

The door swings open, and Mona flounces in and down the immediate set of stairs. Sherlock follows and John brings up the rear. The door closes behind them.
Behind the door, down the stairs, below the tattoo parlour sprawls a set of three subterranean storage rooms with cement floors overlaid with drainage grating.

The first is a wreck, an explosion of clutter and office supplies and casualties of poor file-keeping, but at least it’s clean – or at least free of ominous stains and overpowering smells.

The other two are not so inviting.

John covers his mouth at the smell of an unfamiliar sterilizer agent, harsh and prickling in his sinuses, that still doesn’t quite manage to eradicate the lingering odour of blood and marrow and grey matter – but it’s the underlying note of filth that pushes him against a wall, for a moment overcome by the sand in his eyes and the cooling life beneath his hands –

Sherlock’s hand on his back supports him, for a moment, and then John’s back and standing in a basement somewhere in London and not radio’ing for evac from a sandy pit stained red.

John flicks his eyes up to acknowledge the assist, but Sherlock’s gaze is focused elsewhere, his body positioned to screen John from the room – or perhaps it’s the screen the room from John, an attempt to remove the catalyst to this reaction? Whatever it is, John is grateful for the privacy, the stare-less air to pull into his body through a suddenly dry throat and unexpectedly wet eyes.

Shit.

“Mona!”

“Maggie!”

Beyond the Great Wall of Coat, a sickly sliver of a man comes dashing into the room, Irish brogue thick on his tongue, his arms wide for a hug. His clothes are disheveled, his person filthy, but Mona still gives him a fierce hug. As his body curves to match hers, John spots the scarring along his neck and at his nape, obscured though it is by a bedraggled brown mane. When they part, the rimless glasses on his nose are askew, matching his crooked grin. “Back so soon, love?” he laughs. “You know we don’t have no frequent flier program!”

“You couldn’t keep me away if you tried.” Mona beams at him and then steps aside. “Allow me to introduce my ex John and his friend Sherlock. John, Sherlock: Magpie. Maggie: some twats I know.”

The lanky man chortles, despite his uncomfortable body language. “Mona, Mona, this is far too many people for me.”

“It’s alright – the tall one doesn’t count as people.”

The whip-crack of fury and anguish that snaps through John at that sentence leaves him dazed and dazzled. For a moment, he’s breathless with it, but before he can unleash his opinion of that collection of words on the world, Magpie has his own very visible reaction.

His cheerful face crumples into fear. “You brought a normal down here?” he hisses. “I’ll wipe your bloody hard drive!”

Mona is unfazed. “Settle down. He’s barely normal, and he doesn’t give a shit about your brain-hacking. In fact, you two might hit it off – he displayed some serious pirating proficiency yesterday. Got us into the CCTV feeds and everything.”

Fear becomes suspicion then grudging curiosity. “How?” Magpie wants to know, fixing Sherlock with a stare.

The detective, for his part, is wearing an expression that very clearly displays what he thinks of Mona’s presumption that he and the straggly young man might ‘hit it off.’ “I cracked the password.” He doesn’t make eye contact as he speaks, instead moving forward into the room, his eyes darting about from clutter to desk to massive computer array. His hands are clasped behind his back, as if he normally strolls through unregistered, underground augmentation setups.

“How?” Magpie insists.

Sherlock sighs. “We don’t have time for this – conduct your business Mona, and let’s be off. The fumes in here are beginning to affect me, and certainly not in a way that I would categorize as recreational.”

John shoots Sherlock a sharp look, but moves past him into the room, feet ready at last. Beyond the haphazard office, John spots the other two rooms in all their bio-hazardous glory, plastic
sheeting hanging in the doorways as barriers. “Jesus Christ,” he murmurs, peeking through the first, a careful hand lifting a transparent flap. After a moment, John turns back to regard Magpie. “You operate in this mess?”

Magpie shoots a look over his shoulder at the steel autopsy tables that seem to serve as operating tables. “Not me, mate.”

“Then who does all the surgery?” John wants to know. “Who is responsible for that complete tip of an operating room?” is a question he diplomatically elects to keep to himself.

Magpie grins, teeth yellow, eyes watery, skin a dishwater pale. “We got ourselves a couple of cutters – kids in Uni with the know-how and a bit of practice, and one bloke what does brains.” He shrugs one shoulder and adds as an after-thought: “Brain room’s in the back.”

With every word, John winces more. “So, a couple of kids and a bloke.” He shares a look with Sherlock, who snorts:

“Inspiring.”

“Yeah, well,” Magpie says, defensive, “it’s not like we got proper surgeons queuing for the privilege, now, innit?”

“What’s your rate of infection?” John isn’t sure he wants to know.

The blank look on the man’s face is worse than any number he could have said.

John rounds on Mona. “And you trust these people?!”

“Not with my surgery, I don’t. But Magpie here is a wizard with code and installation. Can’t find the soap to wash his hands, but his fingers don’t have to be clean to poke around on a keyboard.” Magpie grins, unashamed at the mixed praise – it’s obvious he values his skill over his hygiene.

“Shit,” John mutters, but then sighs and says, “fair enough. How do we do this?”
Once Sherlock and Magpie are ensconced in the two computer chairs by the mad array of machinery on the desk, John walks with Mona to the make-shift coding rig – an old and battered dentist’s chair. A wide selection of tools glints in trays nearby, the tubs submersed in sanitizer and washed a weak purple by UV lights above them.

John had been relieved, once the initial shock of the operating theater’s horrendous conditions wore off, to find that Magpie’s tune-up and interfacing stations were a little more in keeping with medical standards. As a Barts-trained doctor he still had strong feelings about the grime and stains underfoot, but as a highly experienced field surgeon he had long ago learned to recognize workable conditions when they are the only option.

“I see you’ve started taking care of your cyberthetic needs yourself.”

John looks up from his familiar handling and examination of the tools of the trade to find Mona has already reclined, her interface port bare and awaiting connection. He lifts a bottle of soup whose ingredients he’d been perusing and holds it in her direction. “You, too, I’m guessing?”

Mona nods. “Been doing my own tune-ups for three years now. Here, help me with these?” She indicates straps that are meant to immobilize – an unnecessary precaution with interrupters for the neural relays, but John can see the value of having multiple redundancies in place. Especially in this place. Mona watches him tighten the straps, effectively securing her to the interfacing array.

“The day we met was my first Clinic visit in ages,” she adds. “Had to restock.” She waggles her eyebrows, and John realizes what she’s implying: theft, or something like it.

“God, that should surprise me.” He wonders if that’s how she paid for all her mods. John stands back to check his handiwork and thinks of the almost shy girl who shared a smile with him in line at the chemist’s. She’d seemed so soft, and safe, and vulnerable. Non-threatening. He’d never have imagined her capable of the things he’s since seen and heard tell of her doing.

“We’re quite a pair,” he realizes. Both of them had so successfully worn the skin of ‘harmless,’ had fooled each other at the start, confused each other when the façade cracked, and now found one another again as equals, more or less, pretense peeled away.

Mona winks at him, cheeky despite the restraints. “Don’t worry your noble self too much – the Clinic only sees me when I can’t get my ‘scrips updated or refilled through other channels. Places like this aren’t always restocked on time, or at all.” For a moment, a shadow of concern flashes across her features, but then she grins as some new lighting strike of a thought takes hold. “Have you ditched your analyst yet?”

“…No?” John looks at Mona, really looks at her, and there’s a shivering edge to her, some sort of anticipation. “Why?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve stopped letting them tinker with your implants only to continue to let them fuck with your mind.” The look she gives him is disparaging, disappointed. “If you keep letting them define progress and adaptation for you as fitting in with everyone else, you’ll never make it.”

John thinks about how his analyst asks him about women, about dating, about fitting in, settling down. He thinks about how she doesn’t really seem interested, and why should she be? After all, John’s nearing the end of his allotted counselling. Time and statistics are catching up to him.

“You survived something they cannot even begin to comprehend, John.” Mona’s words are strident as ever, but her tone is a little softer. “They didn’t know you before, and they sure as hell can’t understand you now. So what if it’s changed you? So what if you have changed yourself? This is who you are, and if you keep letting them pass judgement on how successful you are at being yourself, you’ll end up justifying all their predictions and assumptions – with a bullet or a knife or a bottle of pills, it doesn’t matter.” Mona takes a steadying breath, and John takes a moment to admire the light in her eyes, the passion in her modified voice, the fire almost visible...
just beneath the surface of her skin and ‘skin’.

“Ready?” Maggie is there suddenly, the question mark of his bad posture looming over them both. His dirty hands are hidden away in Nitriles, and he’s holding a sturdy cable with precision prong endings in his left hand.

Mona clenches her hands into fists. “Ready.”

“Hang on, don’t you need interrupters —” but John’s words are ignored or too late as Magpie slides a leather strap between Mona’s teeth at the same time as he pushes the connecting cable home into the base of Mona’s skull.

With a grunt and a gasp, Mona’s eyes roll back in their sockets, her body straining with tremors but held immobile by the straps.

“What are you doing!?” John lurches forward on instinct to cradle Mona’s head and check her vitals. “You’re going to burn out her relays!”

Magpie scoffs and moves over behind the headrest of the chair and flicks a couple of switches.

“Relax – Mona’s a pro at this. There’s no need for worry when it’s Mona. Or when it’s me.”

“If you destroy her brain, we’ll have nothing to work with,” Sherlock adds from his slouch near the computer array. He’s squinting at the streaming lines of code, obviously absorbed.

John wants to punch one of the two other men in the room, but he can’t decide which. Also, his hands are full of Mona’s vital signs – rapidly climbing heart rate and respiration. “She’s going to slip,” he warns, and he can feel the desert creep into his voice.

“Relax,” Magpie says again, types a few lines of code, and then flips what looks like a breaker in the set up. The screens in front of him flicker, and Mona goes limp. “What’s a good resting heart rate, doc?” He grins and types in ‘50bpm’ in an empty field and hits enter without waiting for an answer.

The sudden drop in pulse rate feels like cardiac arrest to John’s fingers, but a moment later he feels the metronome-steady pulse of deep rest beneath his touch. He removes his hands and watches in fascination as Mona’s eyes relax from their white rolling, her eyelids drooping as REM settles in. “She’s gone daptic,” he murmurs.

“Yeah,” Magpie mutters around a sip of tea. “Some of ‘em do that.” He sets the mug down. “It’s strange, sometimes their brains’ll spit code back at me when they’re like this.”

John’s curiosity loosens the angry clench of his jaws, and he asks, “What do they say – how does it translate?” Besides, now that Mona isn’t about to flatline or slip into a coma, he feels slightly less murderous towards Magpie. Slightly.

Magpie shakes his head, cracks his knuckles. “Nothing. It’s jibberish.” He turns to regard John. “I can show you some if you’d like? It’s beautiful nonsense –”

John shakes his head with a shiver.

Sherlock looms forward into Magpie’s space. “Stop wasting time.” The detective pulls a flash drive from his inner coat pocket. “This is the set of match points for the recognition field.”

Magpie snatches it from Sherlock’s gloved fingers and plugs it into another drive reader. A new screen flickers with information and he watches the information stream for a moment. He makes an impressed noise. “That’s tight work, very nice.” Another sip of tea, and then his hands dance across the master keyboard in front of him. “Well, seeing as you’ve shown me yours,” and there’s a leery, self-satisfied wink in the way he trails off the end of that sentence.

John catches Sherlock rolling his eyes, and Sherlock catches him watching, his lips twitching sideways in bemusement.

Magpie slips a disk into his set-up, and somewhere inside the crow’s nest of wires and equipment, a driver whirs to life. “Voila!” he proclaims. Lines of green and white accumulate and march up the screen, new chunks of programme loading at the bottom.

“How did you get this?” Sherlock asks, voice low, but the perverse grin just starting on his face tells John where the programme originated – and who it was stolen from. “Don’t answer that,” Sherlock says in the next instant as Magpie takes breath to gloat.

Magpie mutters under his breath, but still glows at the bizarre praise of his skills. His fingers assault the main keyboard, darting now and then to another nearby set of keys, at least once hunting down a particular mouse to manipulate a set of numbers.

It doesn’t make much sense to John, but when Magpie mutters, “Ok, translating now,” he can guess that Sherlock’s data is being reformatted for the facial recognition programme. “Okay, FRP is loaded,” Magpie says with a few clicks and a set of quick taps. “Let’s pull the trigger.”

John watches as a graphic of a brain comes onscreen, rotating slowly, patches and parts lighting up as information shunts back and forth. He can see where the interface feeds into Mona’s cerebellum, how tendrils of it are wormed deep into her brain and the new additions she’d recently acquired.
A progress bar pops up, flickers at zero, then starts ticking along to the other end of complete. Sherlock stands behind Magpie, his eyes on the screens, his expression indifferent if absorbed. Only the flickering screens and humming machines imbue the room with any motion or sound.

“How much longer?” John asks. He’s still seated near Mona, close enough to physically monitor her vitals, close enough to see through the doorway into the surgery and brain rooms beyond. His stomach clenches like a fist.

“We’re at 60 – relax.”

If Magpie tells him to relax one more time –

John takes a deep breath. He runs facts as he inhales: Mona has done this before, she has done this with Magpie before, and Magpie has obviously done this many times before. He exhales, deciding he can’t change anything and that doesn’t mean he has to like it, but he can let it go.

One of the programmes flickers and beeps twice, nearly giving John a heart attack.

“All done,” Magpie sing-songs, and his fingers follow a routine dance of taps and stabs as he disconnects the software. “Man, that new processor of hers is lightning.” A hand drifts up to his own scalp. “Might be time for another upgrade.” He pats his own head, and John wonders if he’s thinking of his organic or artificial brain as he lets his fingers trail away from his skull as if a favorite pet is crouched inside.

He grins over at John, whose fingers find Mona’s pulse again.

Another computer chirps, and Mona’s heart rate starts to climb, albeit less rapidly than at the outset. Magpie is suddenly near, flipping switches and hitting a pneumatic pump to raise Mona into a recovery angle. There’s a whine of slowing machinery as he yanks the interface cable.

Immediately Mona’s REM state turns violent, and if it weren’t for the straps securing her, she would be convulsing right off the chair. John freezes for a moment, his eyes hooked on the repetitive jerking of Mona’s body, the movements strangely ordered, as if her motor cortex is stuck, desperately firing the same neurons again, and again, and again –

Magpie makes a tut-tut noise and fumbles in a refrigerated drawer behind a stack of plastic tubs filled with circuit boards. “I keep telling her to hydrate before sessions.” He re-emerges from the drawer with a clear pouch and an IV drip attachment. “Do the honours?” He chucks it to John, who catches it.

“Contents?” John wants to know.

“It’s just a pick-me up – saline and some vitamins, heavy on the B12.” Magpie grins. “Great for hangovers and numbskulls who don’t hydrate before interfacing.”

John rummages about and finds what he needs to sterilize the entry point, then sets Mona up with the bag of saline. There’s another minute of rhythmic thrashing, and then the fight seeps out of Mona’s muscles.

There’s a soft sigh, and then she opens her eyes. “Fuck.”

“Fuck is right, sweetheart,” Magpie quips at her, crossing his arms. Behind him, Sherlock reclaims his thumb drive and pockets it.

“Don’t give me shit, Maggie,” Mona groans. “I’ve been on the run. Haven’t had bloody time for bloody fluids.”

“If I ever have to kill you, I’m going to drown you, just for the irony,” Magpie says, but his voice is soothing, and there’s warmth to match in his eyes. “How’s the new learning taking?”

Mona closes and her eyes twitch back and forth, not erratic as with dreaming, more like reading fast-moving type. She frowns. “There is a metric shit-ton of data. Urgh –” she swallows, hard. “Unstrap me, please.” Her throat moves convulsively. “Now.”

John and Magpie get her loose, and when she sits up, Magpie gets the dirty plastic tub to her just in time. “Too much in my head,” she moans, coughing and then retching again.

“You do realize that you cannot vomit out data,” Sherlock points out helpfully.

“You couldn’t be bothered to create subfiles for this shit, could you –” Mona glares at Sherlock, “– you just dumped it straight in – ugh – I have to defrag –” she slumps back, breathing hard, eyes closed, deaf to John’s attempts to rouse her.

John calms down a bit once he gets his fingers on her pulse: an even 70 bpm.

A minute passes, and it’s obvious Mona won’t be waking any time soon.

“Now what?” John asks.

Magpie shrugs. “Now you wait. She needs time to process the data anyway – uploading programmes for capturing and storing information is easier than dumping in a chunk of foreign memory – at least for the host brain. It’s trying to figure out where all these new memories came from, trying to tell itself stories so it all makes sense.” He shakes his head. “Organics – so
inefficient."

Sherlock frowns, but curiosity replaces that reaction to what must have seemed a slight. “Why would it need a story beyond the obvious, that the data was made available?” Sherlock wants to know, a petulant note in his voice.

Magpie shrugs. “That’s not how brains work, mate. Sorry.” John coughs to cover a chuckle – he doubts Sherlock’s mind would need to fabricate a tale to cope with a data upload just as much as he doubts anyone who knew Sherlock’s methods and results would still consider organics inefficient.

“How long?” asks Sherlock.

“For the cerebits we just shifted?” Magpie’s face scrunches up. “A day at most. Mona’s tough, and she’s fast – make it twenty hours.”

Sherlock sighs. John knows he’s thinking of how difficult it will be to transport Mona, how dangerous it could be to leave her here – at least, John hopes Sherlock’s pragmatic mind would take the time to account for her safety, even if it is in selfish terms of convenience.

Not that John is looking forward to the decision, either.

“So what do we – ” John begins, but Sherlock talks over him:

“We’ll leave her here.”

Magpie snorts. “Of course you bloody will! No way in hell are we letting you drag an incapacitated upgrader out of this place in broad fuckin’ daylight, are you mad?” He runs a hand through his hair. “I mean, we chose this location because we’d like to not attract attention, you know? It isn’t safe for her to be lolling around unconscious if you get spotted.”

John shivers, just once. He’s never been at the mercy of a mob of scared, angry people before – if you discount the war, where that mob had been trained to handle firearms. Still, it’s a little different when it’s your own people, on your own city’s soil.

Magpie frowns. “‘ere – you’re not thinking of leaving, are you? That’s mad! Bunk up here for the night.”

Sherlock sighs again. Inconvenience. “We are certainly not wasting twenty hours of time here.”

John would like to argue, but he knows it’s useless: Sherlock will go with or without him, and John’s never seen a more determined escaper of good intentions. Magpie and Leicester would not thank John for subjecting them to an antsy, bored, stubborn Sherlock Holmes. Nor is John too keen to spend the night in this unfamiliar and noisome place, himself.

“How do you get in and out unnoticed? Do you have a safe route?” John asks. Magpie chafes him the wrong way with his familiar ways concerning interfacing, but while his concern and closeness with Mona seem to manifest in strange ways, they are undeniable. “Will you show us?”

“This place has only one way in, but a number of ways out.” Magpie looks slightly affronted at John’s last question. “We take care of our own.”
It goes without saying that I owe tiltedsyllogism so much for beta'ing this story, but I'll say it again and keep saying it, too, because without her this story would not have been the same. I'll spare you the 20 page dissertation on how flawless she is (or at least save it for the end credits and acknowledgements) but it totally exists, and it grows in length every day. <3

My thanks also to the Antidiogenes gang, because really, because reasons. ;)

It isn’t broad daylight when Leicester ushers them out a back entrance, not by a long shot. Leicester’s and Magpie’s joint lectures on not being on the street this close to nightfall had, unfortunately, ensured that they would be traveling much closer to dark than they’d originally intended. With dusk fast approaching, John’s instincts kick in: night means enemy territory. Doesn’t matter where – if night falls, it is not your friend.

“Trust me,” Leicester says when John questions the choice of ‘alleyway at dusk’ as the safest route, “you would not have liked the other options right now either.” The door closes, almost invisible against the wall.

John shivers and glances around the back alley they’d been deposited in. “Let’s hurry, Sherlock,” he says, trying to break the detective’s focus on figuring out where the hidden door latches. Sherlock looks around at John, his eyes catching on his face, and nods.

The main street is not deserted, and now John knows exactly what part of town they are in: the wrong one.

The streets are empty of traffic, but two rusted and dilapidated motors hunker by the curbside. A couple of people – two woman and one man – loiter underneath a street lamp, its sodium glow illuminating their broad displays of bare skin.

In the shadows nearby, other sorts of people are watching.

It’s night, and John does not have his gun on him.

Shit.

“Calm down, would you?” Sherlock says. “They’re not going to bother us.” And the mad man sets off, walking like he always does, as if he owns the pavement under his feet, and John knows it’s a bad idea before he knows why.

“No, but they are,” he counters, catching Sherlock up and stopping him short, nodding with his head at a cluster of four youths that have claimed another patch of early lamplight. They don’t have skin for sale – it looks like they are in the taking business.

Shit.

Too late to change direction, too, John decides, taking up station right next to Sherlock. They’ve been spotted, and the pack of them – three young men and younger girl – start moving towards them.

“What’s this?” the largest asks, his teeth sharp and oddly white in his sallow face. He must be in his early twenties – fit and full to the brim with chemicals, natural and imbibed. The others stop short, but their towering leader continues forward to stare Sherlock in the face, his crooked nose just inches from Sherlock’s.

“Hi,” he says, pushing his breath into Sherlock’s face with an obnoxious grin. “I see you’ve got a tin man with you.” He tilts his head in John’s direction without breaking eye contact. “How about you go home safe and sound Dorothy, while we strip this clunker for parts and scrap. Sound fair?”

One of the men behind the leader takes out a serrated knife. There’s a hook at the end for gutting – no, for hooking relay cabling.

John can see Sherlock doing complicated calculations inside that brain of his, but John’s maths are much more simple: I can take two, he thinks. Maybe three – if they don’t come all at once. Doesn’t look like the girl will run. His eyes pick out the silhouettes of knives, the glint of brass knuckles, adding their observations to the tally of his thoughts. “Sounds fair,” he says. “You should go,” he tells Sherlock.

The detective spares a moment to stare at John, confusion etched into every feature, before turning and head-butting the man in front of him with stunning force.

John feels, for a moment, as if he were the one struck in the head – and then he’s moving forward,
because another attack is coming, knife slicing the air, John’s legs pumping, surging forward to get at Sherlock –

John’s hands grip then slide and curve around the attacking arm; he feels the twist and his body remembers, and then his voice is cold as it asks, “Anyone else want to try?”

The young man – a kid really, a stupid, ugly, hate-filled child – in John’s hold squirms. The knife against his throat is insistent but not biting in, not yet. The girl steps forward. “That’s my mate you got there.”

The leader is scrambling back to join his unbloodied troops. His face is ugly in defeat, twisted with fury, darkening where Sherlock struck him. “We take them both, all together now,” he growls.

“My friend here is a surgeon,” Sherlock says, voice cool and collected as if that mad scramble hadn’t nearly gutted him. There’s a trickle of blood from just beyond his hairline where the knife had managed to score a touch. There will be swelling from where he struck the leader, as well, John knows. “Tell me, Doctor, how much could we get for the organs in the one you’re holding?”

Adrenaline roars and rattles through John’s veins, a sandstorm blast. “Not much.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agrees. “Liver’s not worth the effort, kidneys are most likely already crystallizing on the inside. Yellowing of the eyes – pity; lackluster skin – meth and heroin are such efficient forms of self-destruction.” Sherlock takes a step forward. “Still, once we harvest the others – ”

He doesn’t have to finish the sentence; the other three fade backwards then flee into the side streets.

“So much for ‘mates,’” Sherlock notes.

John grunts and releases the youth in his hold, keeping the knife. He doesn’t even have to tell him what to do – the chav nearly goes sprawling in his haste to make his getaway.

There’s a moment directly after those frantic footsteps die away that’s filled with breathing and breathing alone.

“Let’s go,” John says at last, voice harsh with about fifty things he’d rather say. ‘I told you so’ would be lie – John had known better than to bother trying.

“John – ”

“We need to get you home and clean that scrape,” John says. The knife gleams in the light, but looking clean is easy. Sherlock lifts a curious hand to touch the blood on his temple, somehow bemused by its presence. John’s already marching away, movements stiff (one knee from adrenaline, the other from mimicry), when he feels Sherlock’s gloved hand on his shoulder, slowing him.

He turns John to face him, seems about to say or ask something – but after a moment he purses his lips and nods, letting John lead them to brighter streets.
The cut is shallow, but bleeds a fair while – normal for scalp injuries, and good in this case, since John wants every speck of possible contaminant to be flushed out.

Aside from the bleeding, the minor nature of the wound means it should be quick to clean – but that fails to account for Sherlock’s twitching impatience. The detective, shorter for once in his seat on the tub rim while John flushes and cleans the scrape with antiseptic, is a collection of fidgeting limbs and over-emphatic sighs.

“Sit still,” John says yet again as Sherlock turns his head to try to see what John is doing. “You’ve cleaned it, it’s finished,” Sherlock snaps.

“You didn’t even know you were cut – let me check for anything else, and then we can ice that bump on your forehead.”

Sherlock makes the sound that most frequently accompanies his eyes rolling, and John fights back the impulse to give him a thorough upbraiding – or an extra bump on the head. He can’t quite resist asking, “What possessed you to head butt him in the first place?”

“Element of surprise,” Sherlock grumbles after a moment and a wince – John’s fingers brush just beyond the borders of the damage, looking for anything missed. “Very effective in combat situations.”

John huffs a laugh. “Ever occur to you to do as I said and get out of the line of fire? I can take care of myself, you know.”

“And I can hold my own,” Sherlock retorts. “And please, ‘line of fire?’ You act like you’re still a soldier and I’m some sniveling, useless civilian.”


“Yes. Well.” Sherlock flaps a hand, nearly upsetting the bottle of antiseptic. “Knew you’d step in, even if you did stand there gaping like a fish for the first half of the fight.”

John realizes he’s crouched back against the wall, laughing, after several moments. “The first half of the fight? – my God – you must have hit your head pretty damn hard! You got in one blow – and then just – stood there – ” John gasps for air, looks up to see Sherlock’s cheeks flushed ever so slightly, his eyes bright, and an unrestrained grin taking over his would-be-sulk.

“Please, don’t exaggerate, John.” He’s smiling, the rush of the fight and the somewhat unlikely victory colouring his face bright and alive. John feels his own colour shift a little, chalks it up to high spirits, swats Sherlock on the shoulder, lightly, as he rights himself and settles in to keep checking over Sherlock’s more or less self-inflicted injuries.

“That bit at the end was clever, mind you,” John says for something to say. “Sick, but brilliant.”

Sherlock snorts. “You sound like my old headmaster’s end-of-term remarks.” Before John has a chance to process the crack those words etch into him, Sherlock adds, “It worked though. And besides, they were threatening you with the same.”

John makes a non-committal sound, tilting Sherlock’s head this way and that, trying to distract himself from what he just heard.

“I’m certain you’ve seen every inch of my scalp by now, John.”

John lifts his hands away. “Yes. Right.” He busies himself with tidiying away the first aid kit, his mind whirring away like one of Magpie’s machines, chugging along and then hitching on the nightmare of being held down and disassembled like a faulty blender, the thought of a young boy with raven hair bringing home blunt, cruel, wrong words, the feel of pale, broken skin marred by tacky dried blood. “I’m touched you didn’t leave,” John says before he can stop himself, “but you should have run when I said.”

“I’m insulted you thought I would.” Sherlock scoffs, standing and stretching, as if fifteen minutes
of having his wounds tended were a lifetime imprisonment. For a moment after, Sherlock is motionless in the space carved by exchanges of touch and words. John finds he is caught in the amber of Sherlock’s pausing.

The night has been strange, a series of lows and highs and panics, interspersed and capped off with something that feels strangely tender, and this moment they share before Sherlock leaves to apply nicotine patches and sprawl on the couch for a sleepless night of thinking, before John tidies and prepares for bed, is no different. Something inside John swoops and plunges as Sherlock looks at him before exiting. “Good night, John,” he says then, simply.

Sleep is slow to invade, that night, but when it finds John in his own bed, the linen a shade rougher and empty of scent, it spares him from dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Also, for those of you on tumblr, I am there under the same username: patternofdefiance
Feel free to drop by for a chat and/or to keep up with the follower ficlets <3
Performance

Chapter Notes

I come bearing chapter updates! ...and also an explanation for the lengthy wait. Real Life woke up one morning and decided to dump everything on me at once, including the need to move sort of unexpectedly. Which I have now done, and as I settle, chapters should come your way at a much more reasonable rate.

A thousand apologies to everyone who is reading this, and a zillion thanks for sticking with me despite the nonsense that is real life :) As always, the impeccable and tireless tinhedysyllogism has graced my writing with her beta skills of wondrous magnitude.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John wakes late the next morning, to an empty flat. He potters about, making breakfast and eating it, preparing tea and drinking it.

In the loo, he finds puddles from a poorly placed shower curtain. The adhesive patch he’d affixed to Sherlock’s scrape lies abandoned in a patch of damp, a tea-coloured stain of antiseptic and old blood marking the inside. John’s not surprised to find that his friend left it on the side of the washbasin rather than disposing of it – in fact, if anything, John is surprised it’s not in the refrigerator, or in a petri dish, or under the microscope already. John bins it before it can become an experiment.

Like a born bachelor, he decides the puddles can evaporate themselves.

The door to Sherlock’s room is open – just an inch or two – but John blinks at the unexpected evidence of a night spent in bed: rumpled sheets, pillows in disarray. He frowns – not unhappy that Sherlock had elected to get some sleep after sustaining what injuries he did, but rather puzzled. Perhaps he had spent the night in bed, thinking – but then, he’d told John himself he did his best thinking outside his room.

John shakes his head and moves on to less perplexing territory – namely, his own morning routine, followed by making the most of his free morning.

221B feels strange without Sherlock’s near-maniac or near-comatose presence, John decides. It’s not the first time he’s experienced or decided this. Soon he’s read the paper, typed up an entry for his analyst and a proper record for himself, and watched a bit of telly, all sans interruption, scathing deduction, or bemused tolerance. Really, it should be nice – calm, cozy, relaxing after an evening of high strain and more.

Instead, John finds himself flipping his phone over and over while he sits and stares at nothing, until finally he catches it, flips it open, and texts:

Where are you?

He doesn’t have to wait long. Sherlock’s response buzzes through moments later:

Out.

John snorts in disbelief. He’s halfway through composing a sarcastic reply (Oh, thanks for letting me know YET ANOTHER CASE CRACKED) but then he backspaces through each letter as he thinks about Sherlock’s response.

If his friend had been at any of his other usual daytime haunts – the morgue or the Yard – he would have texted a very different one word answer. Instead, John gets this: Out.

John sits and thinks about that answer, and the more he does, the more he realizes that it means Sherlock is out somewhere he doesn’t want to be. Not in danger, but probably in a Mood.

On a hunch, John types and sends:

Say hello to Mycroft for me.

The three minute wait for a reply is torture, but then John’s phone buzzes, and displays:

Tell him yourself.

S.H.

John grins, pleased – then freezes. Slowly, he stands and moves over to the window and peers down at the street below. A black car is pulling up along the curb. The door opens and, one long,
pale leg at a time, Sherlock emerges. It takes John a moment to parse what his eyes are reporting: Sherlock is in his blue robe and not much besides.

Sherlock straightens and then stares up at the street-facing windows of 221B – and something complicated happens in his expression. Even John can see at this distance the almost instantly suppressed grin, the way brightness lingers in those eyes.

It’s completely gone a moment later when he whirls about to respond to someone (Mycroft, John is sure), his face all harsh planes and rigid lines. And then he’s stalking away from the open car door – a driver emerges to shut it – and John can hear the rattle of 221’s entry door, the softer thumps of bare feet as Sherlock scales the stairs to apartment B.

“I’m impressed, John,” Sherlock says as he enters, as if his hair isn’t wet and he isn’t in a bathrobe. John gapes, and the detective adds: “Two correct deductions, and it’s not even noon!”


“Oh John, and you were doing so well – although it did take you about three times as long as necessary –”

“Hang on – did Mycroft – did he fetch you out of the actual bloody shower to go for a ride in his – his abduction-mobile?” John doesn’t know if it’s the thought of him asleep while someone barges into the flat, or the thought that Mycroft would be tactless enough to bundle Sherlock off without any say-so in the timing of the matter, or maybe something else altogether, but he feels his hackles rising.

Sherlock scoffs. “Of course not.” John calms a touch. “He had two of his trained goons do it.” Sherlock’s eyes widen and round as he draws out the sound of ‘goons.’ The effect is humorous, but the rest of Sherlock is so serious that laughter isn’t really an option. Not that John feels much like laughing after that sentence. “Honestly, John, you know how he is about doing anything himself.”

“Like fetching a phone out of a coat pocket?” John quips weakly, not sure what to do with the mess of emotional responses he’s feeling at the moment. He knows he’s been asleep when Mycroft has been in the flat before. He supposes Mycroft’s men have been inside the flat without his knowledge as well, at some point. However, the fact that they snatched the other occupant of 221B while he slept upstairs...chafes.

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Sherlock snorts and heads for the bathroom. A moment later, John hears the shower start. Though the door is shut, it’s far from noise or air-flow proof, and John can hear each shift in weight, the lifting and placing of bottles and shaver, a percussive medley leaking out with the steam.

John realizes after a moment that he is simply standing, staring at the bathroom door while his flatmate takes a shower. A frown hitches into place, and with a slight headshake, he sets himself down at the kitchen table, which after his productive morning is no longer purely an altar to chemistry.

The shower stops, there are a few muffled thumps, and then silence.

John realizes he is staring at nothing while listening for his flatmate’s movements, which is mad – and maddening.

“What did Mycroft want?” John asks, perhaps in a slightly higher register than normal.

“To be insufferable, as usual.” Sherlock glides into the room, dressed in his going-out finery. No lazy experimenting today, then, John decides. Still, he reckons they still have four hours before Mona boots up all the way.

“Curious about our comings and goings?” John translates.

Sherlock snorts his disdain, which John takes as an affirmative, lifting his elbow out of the way as Sherlock steals the mug of tea John had made for himself earlier. It’s lukewarm by now, but his friend doesn’t seem to notice.

John waits to see if Sherlock will add anything, before continuing, “Probably worried about all that unauthorized accessing of the CCTV feeds – not to mention the disc Magpie had on hand.” A grin reshapes his serious mouth. “Next time he asks if you’ll help him find the leak in his department, you should ask him which one –”

John’s head snaps up at the choking sound from Sherlock who, it seems, is in fact choking on a mouthful of stolen tea. A strange sort of hiccup-cough later, and Sherlock sputters into breathing and laughter, the corners of his eyes wet. “John,” he says hoarsely, still bent double, “John –”

“What is it?” John asks, caught between urgency and the desire to give in and laugh as well.

“I know it’s pointless, but oh – ” he coughs and clears his throat, his laughter calming as John gives in to his giggles, “ – how I wish you had been there this morning.”

“What? You in your soap and robe and me in my unmentionables?”

They look at each other, faces solemn for one shining moment, then collapse into a renewed fit of laughter – John doubled over in his seat, palms flat on the table, and Sherlock bracing his back
against the refrigerator, losing the battle against gravity and trying valiantly not to jostle the dubious contents of the fridge. They both end up slumped and breathless, colour in their cheeks, joints weak.

“Oh, god, I needed that,” John says at last, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “Bloody Mycroft.”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, righting himself, and there’s a lot of history in that one syllable.

John stands and brushes past a recovering Sherlock to inspect the contents of the fridge. While nothing atrocious has tipped over or leaked, they have also failed to spontaneously transform into any sort of comestibles. “Fancy going for lunch?” he asks Sherlock.

“Not when I’m on a case, John,” Sherlock chides, then cocks his head at John’s answering grin.

“You’re not on a case,” John reminds him. “You’re not doing this for Lestrade, because you walked out on him, I doubt Mona’s going to pay you for your services, and you’re certainly not doing this for Mycroft, because sod him.” John wonders how big of a fit Mycroft would pitch if he found out his brother was so blasé about his information leak that he’d gone to lunch. It’s not that thought, though, that’s bubbling inside him like barely contained laughter.

John’s not quite sure where that effervescence is coming from.

“If it’s not officially a case, then what is this?” Sherlock asks, challenging, but there’s a would-be smile in the lines of his mouth and the focus of his eyes. John gets the feeling that Sherlock would be alright with being convinced, just this once. He casts about for a suitable response:

Independent inquiry? Pro bono work? Community service?

John gives in to the urge to smile and settles on: “Showing off.”

Sherlock makes as if to reply, then stops and tilts his head, his own smile growing easy and wide in the fertile landscape of their recent mirth. “I’ll fetch my coat.”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on tumblr if you are curious about me, my writing, or the bizarre stuff I reblog on a whim: patternofdefiance (same as here) Come say hi, chat a bit, have some internet tea with me <3
Nothing about their morning out should feel normal, John knows.

Sherlock was abducted and returned, and they still have a serial killer to apprehend, but right now there’s nothing for it but to wait until it’s time to collect Mona.

They walk to a nearby Chinese restaurant for lunch. Silence, when it happens, is easy and amiable, and talk, when it happens, is light and natural. They eat (although Sherlock predictably only has a few bites, and those all stolen from John’s plate) but it’s unhurried like few of their meals together are. The morning is simple in a way that shouldn’t be normal for either of them, yet feels right.

John knows that if he told his analyst about any of this – the morning’s kidnapping, the afternoon’s task list, even last night’s excitement – she’d have a lot to say, none of it amused or pleased. She’d lecture John on normalcy, the thing he was supposed to be striving for. She’d define it for him and set a rubric of expectations – none of which would include running after Sherlock. Her plans for him would have far fewer late night knife fights, serial killers to catch, and mad flatmates. She’d want him to blend in – settle in and down.

“She wants you invisible,” Mona whispers in his thoughts. “That way no one will notice when you’re gone.”

John looks over at the man sitting opposite him, chopsticks poised to pillage, and wonders if Sherlock will one day keep talking to an empty room and never notice John’s absence.

A moment later, Sherlock looks up and with his mouth full of purloined pork, asks, “Problem?”

“What?”

He nods at John’s chest. “Your chest.”

John hastily lowers his hand from where he’d been pressing it to the implant in his chest, or more precisely, the tightness growing there. “No. Nothing.” He clears his throat, tries to find something to say to turn them away from this topic, from him – and is delighted by the opportunity to fend off Sherlock’s thieving of the final morsel of meat from his plate. “Hey – stop trying to distract me so you can steal my food!”

The mood shifts, and the meal ends, and everything is fine.

After lunch, it’s time to pick up a (John hopes) fully operational Mona. They follow the same route as the day before, although Sherlock leads them on a slightly circuitous approach. John thinks it might be an apology for his behavior on the first trip, but says nothing. His friend speaks his own language when it comes to interactions, and John fancies he’s getting better at translating it.

As they approach the crumbling face of the building, Sherlock slides his hand along the window sill as Mona had the day before, dips his fingers under, and then the curl of his lips catches John’s attention. The curl becomes a grin as John watches. “Hidden buzzer – a doorbell for approved visitors,” Sherlock murmurs, self-satisfied.

“Well, they are a picky bunch.”

“Just so.” Sherlock regards John with a tilt to his head. “You’re not surprised.”

“Well, they have to be careful –”

“Not that. By the buzzer. You noticed Mona’s furtive fondling,” and his eyes light up with just a hint of humour, “yesterday as well.”

“Didn’t think it was a doorbell, but yeah. I saw her go for it.” He grins up at Sherlock, easy and relaxed after their what could only be described as lovely morning. “Going to tell me I ‘see but
don’t observe’ again?”

Sherlock snorts, but his eyes dance green and lively above cheek bones that aren’t quite as pale as usual, and John knows he won’t mention any of this to his analyst.

The door chimes as they enter the tattoo parlour and Leicester is waiting for them. “Any trouble getting home last night?”

“No,” Sherlock says, sounding bored.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” John amends, his eyes ticking over to Sherlock’s hairline, to the scrape could have been much worse.

“Warned you,” Leicester says, sing-song but good natured.

“Delayed us, more like,” Sherlock sniffs. “Which you are doing now, again. Take us to see Mona.”

Leicester lifts both eyebrows at the imperious tone as Sherlock swans past. John shakes his head and mutters, “Warned you. Prat, remember?”

Leicester booms a laugh and escorts them down the hall.

Below, Magpie is perched on his battered computer chair right next to Mona, who’s sitting up and taking tiny sips of tea.

“Urgh,” she says in greeting.

“Are you ready to go?” Sherlock asks.

John elbows him in the side and asks, “Are you alright?”

Mona nods, her eyes bleary. “Yes and yes,” she says, her voice a croak. “Just, urh, really bloated. In here.” She taps her head.

A circle saw whines into action one room over, and John whips up to see a slim-framed youth, genderless in surgery whites two sizes too big, bend over another person’s leg. The pitch of the whine changes as contact is made, and John clenches his teeth.

Magpie notices and grins, rueful. “Don’t worry – it’s just a refit. Nothing serious.”

John presses his lips into a thin line. “How do you define serious?” He’s keeping one eye on where Sherlock is talking to Mona – perhaps checking on the finer points of her upload integration? – but John’s mostly focused on Magpie, needing something to balance out the horrible ballast of his own experiences and extrapolations, the dark thoughts he’s carried since seeing the plastic and the steel and the stains of those other two rooms.

Magpie crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. “You know, the implants aren’t that complicated to do – not the big work, mind you. It’s a lot of following directions, they tell me: Insert tab A into slot B and such.” He scratches his scruffy chin with a nicotine stained thumbnail.

“The complicated bits are the interfaces and establishing the actual connections – those layers under your organic skin? The ‘scarring’? Intricate stuff. We don’t see those here, not really.” He shrugs. “People find us after the NHS drops their cases and rescinds their assistance. By then, the tough stuff’s done, the groundwork laid in. We just pick up the pieces and sometimes add a few new ones.” He smiles, and there’s a proud edge to it, a satisfied glow.

John tilts his head as he listens. In the background, under the sound of the saw, he hears chatter – and, unexpectedly: laughter. He blinks.

Magpie grins at the change he sees on John’s face. “As long as we’re expecting someone, we can have everything we need, even references for tricky bits. And our cutter-kids are sharp, what with all that book learning they do most days.”

“And the brain bloke?” John can’t think of the man as a neurosurgeon, not after how Magpie initially referred to him.

Magpie flaps a hand. “He’s a treat – barely speaks at all unless he’s wrist deep inside someone’s grey bits. He’s alright though – he’s tweaked my thinking cap a few times, and I’ve had no reason to complain.”

John makes a face and doesn’t argue. He does, however, ask: “You said ‘if you’re expecting someone.’ What happens when someone or something unexpected comes along?”

“We – well,” Magpie looks uncomfortable. “That doesn’t normally happen – unless someone comes in injured, you know. Folks topside can be a bit...” The way he glances away tells John a lot about why Magpie avoids crowds and fears normals. It tells him a lot about the hacker’s stained fingers and painfully sun-deprived skin.

“I’m sorry,” John says.

Magpie shrugs one shoulder, and it occurs to John that he’s never seen him shrug both, and then
he realizes that perhaps Magpie's bad posture is from long-ago damage and not from slouching at
a computer. "No worries," Magpie says, but John’s already there. Magpie chews a chapped lip.
"The unexpected ones," he begins, but then he looks away to the rooms beyond the plastic
sheeting. "We do what we can," he says, and John feels the hollow ache in those words, feels it
echo back into his past where scorching light and blistering heat couldn’t stop bodies and blood
from cooling, and John couldn’t always stop people from becoming bodies and blood.

The memory bruises John as it unfolds, not yet faded, but it helps him make a decision.

It’s not long after Mona rises that Sherlock not so diplomatically puts his foot down: “We have
wasted enough time in this hole,” he seethes when John tries to calm him.

Mona hoists herself off her recovery seat. “I’m ready.”

John glares at them both. “You aren’t,” he tells Mona, but he doesn’t try to stop her as she makes
for the exit – a different route this time – something that becomes an underground parking exit
onto street level. When Sherlock moves past him, taking breath to speak, John cuts him off: “Shut
it.”

Leicester is there to close the way behind them, and Magpie, too, looking uneasy so near the
surface. As Mona and Sherlock try to out-stride one another into the afternoon light, John hangs
back and hands Magpie the (no longer) blank index card he’d managed to snap up earlier. “Listen,
I am – was – a surgeon and a doctor. And I served in Kandahar. Got pretty good at ‘unexpected.’”
He smiles a tight smile, trying to keep it from becoming a grimace. “If you ever need someone
who can handle that sort of thing – give me a ring.”

Magpie’s mouth falls open, his cigarette nearly plummeting to a grimy death on the concrete floor.
“I – yeah – definitely.” He grins madly and seizes John’s hand in both of his, shakes it twice and
lets go.

John catches up to the other two, wiping his hand surreptitiously on the side of his jeans.
Sherlock reveals the next step of the plan once they’re safely back at 221B. He paces the length of the living room while John makes tea, and Mona sinks into the couch’s soft embrace.

The plan itself, once all the technical malarkey is over and done with, is extremely routine and not at all thrilling or exciting. Most of the time, when John and Sherlock have to stake out a location, that part of the adventure barely merits a passing mention in the blog entry. That’s because sitting and staring and waiting for chance and happenstance to bring you a familiar, unfriendly face isn’t very exciting.

Mona complains, of course – she’d obviously been expecting something a little more exciting.

“See?” Sherlock asks, his lips twisted close to disdain as his pacing takes him closer to where John is fixing three mugs of tea. “Your sensationalist drivel is creating unrealistic expectations. If you would just stick to the facts and methods – ”

“Then I’d fall asleep writing it and nothing would ever get posted.”

“Hmph,” Sherlock turns and stomps away, close to a strop. Between the brainwork and the legwork, he’s been distracted enough, but John knows Sherlock detests sitting around and waiting just as much as he does, and the prospect of looking for a face based on calculations based on shadows based on memories is daunting. Likely, this will be the most time consuming and trying part of the whole thing.

Middles are like that, John supposes. Beginnings are fresh and spontaneous and new by definition – and endings are full of adrenaline and their originating thrills. But middles are slogging and plodding and just not giving up or into boredom – or distraction.

“When do we start?” John asks, hoping to divert the Oncoming Sulk as long as possible.

Sherlock continues pacing about, limbs taut, motions tight. “Tomorrow. No sense starting today with Mona barely able to keep her eyes open.” He glares at the slumped over figure of Mona. Barely contained energy and reaction just waiting to happen has given way to loose muscles and lolling neck. Her eyes blink slowly. She manages to raise two fingers at Sherlock, but lets the salute fall back to the sofa cushions a moment later.

John is by her side a moment later, taking her pulse. She bats his hand away after moment. “Just tired,” she mumbles. “It’s like all the information is just repeating itself at me over and over.” She grimaces. “I’ll have to purge as soon as we’re finished with it. I can barely think straight.”

Sherlock scoffs – although whether it’s in regards to Mona’s data overload or her general ability to think straight is not clear. John frowns at him.

Meanwhile, Mona has pitched sideways and is now snoring softly.

“Sherlock – how safe is this for Mona?”

“Your question is irrelevant. Mona procured my services, I presented her with a plan of action, and she has enthusiastically consented to every facet of its execution.” Sherlock shrugs, even though he’s still facing away from John. “Whether it’s safe or not is a question she might have asked – and didn’t, which tells us a lot about her mental state, as well as her drive to see this endeavour through to the end. Your concern is misplaced and a waste of time – both yours and mine.”

John stands abruptly. “Right. Because me worrying about another person’s risk-taking behavior, that’s not benefitted you at all, has it.”

“Acting scandalized by my risk/benefit analysis is a bit rich, coming from the man who made a career out of running towards gunfire – and how exactly did that turn out for you?” Sherlock’s curls shift as his head tilts to the side, just slightly, mild curiosity written in his body and the flatness of his voice. It comes across as a bored challenge.

John feels his face lock into a cold mask. “I don’t know – I’m not dead yet.” Sherlock finally turns around and looks at John, startled. Then John, his mouth getting away from him, says: “Worked
out alright for you, though, didn’t it? You’d have killed yourself if it weren’t for me.”

Those words linger in the air between them, and maybe John would wish he could unsay them if he was thinking instead of feeling, instead of aching from Sherlock’s question. John holds his breath as Sherlock takes one to speak:

“I consider us even on that front.”

Silence detonates in the room, a mushroom cloud of things unsaid. Sherlock isn’t as close as he normally is, not quite looming into John’s space, but his intense stare decimates the distance between them. John can only hold it for so long before the surge of anger and hurt turns inward and to loathing. His glare lists sideways and he feels his eyes unfocus before he blinks hard. He flexes his left hand and then manages to lift his gaze back to Sherlock’s.

Sherlock, damn him, is (probably) right.

That doesn’t make it sit any better, any softer, and John has to force his jaw to unclench, and Sherlock’s self-satisfied smirk is not helping.

“Or are we not keeping score?” Sherlock asks, his eyes locked on John’s, and that’s it, that’s the final word pushed into the already crowded air, and there’s no room for John in the flat. Not right now.

He’s outside before he even has his arms through his coat, and walking hard.

When John comes back, the flat is dark and chill, and every step feels like an ache waiting to unfold.

221 B feels deserted, although a faint tingle at the back of John’s skull tells him that Mona is upstairs and linked in, probably trying to process the data dump still.

The living area looks like Sherlock tore it apart and then departed, and John shoves his hand in his pocket to see if Sherlock had texted him without his noticing – when he sees his phone lying on his chair’s stuffed armrest. When he picks it up, he sees he has one new message – but before he can think to check it, the creak of a shifting floorboard steals his attention, and he turns around.

Sherlock stands behind him in his bedroom’s doorway, clad in threadbare pajama bottoms and wash-faded shirt and the almost artful rumple-drape of his blue robe.

“John.” Sherlock seems to sway forward, but he lifts his hand to the doorframe and halts any potential motion.

For a moment, for that moment in particular, John thinks his name is uttered with emotion instead of purpose, a soft reverberation of something other than Sherlock’s normal efficiency – but then he sees those eyes dip down to the phone in John’s hands, and Sherlock’s face shutter blank and cool and empty as the flat had felt when John returned.

“Give me your phone.”

John lifts an eyebrow at the tone and tucks his phone away instead. Then, before the cold snap of Sherlock’s eyes can stop him, John takes a deep breath and says what his icy and angry walk in the quiet, empty streets of London had led him to: “I’m sorry.”

Sherlock doesn’t move a muscle, but hesitation enters his eyes, and John can see that thaw clearly as those eyes start to scan John’s face, at first slowly, then almost frantic, seeking understanding.

“We both know I – what would have…without…you know.” John isn’t one for declarations. He tries again. “Without.” His throat clamps down, and John swallows and looks anywhere but Sherlock. “So. You were right. About being even, and I –” John heaves out a buzzing, hot, uncomfortable breath, says, “There’s no need to score – to keep score, rather.” John’s chest is a tight clench of metal, but he pushes out the last words after all: “I mean, that’s not us.”

Sherlock doesn’t move a muscle, but hesitation enters his eyes, and John can see that thaw clearly as those eyes start to scan John’s face, at first slowly, then almost frantic, seeking understanding.

The moment hangs, taut and almost singing with the weight of the words between them – the evening’s argument and distance and –

John realizes Sherlock is still watching him, expectant, and he has to struggle back through the minefield of his thoughts to remember his original train of thought. He blinks. “I suppose that’s it,” he finishes lamely, not wanting to delve too deep, but the thoughtful look on Sherlock’s face shows he may have done so already.

John can breathe again as Sherlock brushes past, on his way into the kitchen. After a moment, he follows, asks, “Tea?” and doesn’t wait for the answer.

Sherlock rummages in the fridge while John clicks and clinks his way through the steps for a
cuppa – or two in this case. When he turns around with two mugs, Sherlock is jotting down notes, a vial of mostly clear fluid held up to the light.

John raises his eyebrows in query, and after a moment Sherlock says, distracted, “Saliva – rates of decomposition, discoloration, with various additives. Thank you.” The last is a murmur as John places tea next to Sherlock’s pad of elegant yet indecipherable scribbles.

John doesn’t dawdle with his tea, needing the warmth after his walk, and soon he’s draining his cup. Sherlock’s barely touched his, but he’s quick to look up when John drinks his last, his eyes tacking along the lines of John’s body and face, seeing god knows what.

“Sherlock –”

“Go to bed, John.” Sherlock’s eyes dip back down to his notes. “I will be sleeping tonight as well, so you’ll have to make do with the sofa.”

“Of course,” John manages.

When John comes back down, showered, teeth clean, the living area is deserted once more. He punches the sofa cushions into a familiar scoop, curls up with a spare blanket and pillow, and shuts his eyes.

He nearly drifts off before he remembers to check his unread messages, and there, lying in the darkness and quiet of the night, he at last sees the message Sherlock had sent. It says simply:

Come back.

-SH

The afterimage of those simple words lingers long into his dreams.
Anticipation

Chapter Notes

As always, a million thanks to the rare tiltedsyllogism for beta’ing this beast.

Love also to the AD gang for cheer leading and whip cracking, the two of which are of equal importance...

Special thanks to Persiflager for answering many oddly phrased and detailed questions, thus providing me with a starting point for picking an area/tube station to fit my needs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day the waiting begins, and there’s no time to talk to Sherlock of the night before or the text. John isn’t sure what he’d even say, given an opportunity.

There are two vantage points, selected about the intersection in front of the Elephant & Castle tube station, the streets there having flagged the highest yield of pings after the facial recognition programme had sorted through the CCTV footage. Mona’s stationed on the roof of the nearby University of the Arts and Communication with a pair of binoculars for when she gets eyestrain from running her HD vision field augmentation.

Sherlock puts himself on ground level, at a bus stop around the corner from the E&C and the College, where his sharp eyes and mind can pick people apart by their stains and loose threads, their tapping fingers and restless feet.

And usually, John would be by Sherlock’s side or manning a post of his own – but not this time. It’s obvious that Sherlock and Mona are the key players; Sherlock knows what he’s looking for, and those specific parameters have been uploaded into Mona’s interface. John, however, feels useless: vestigial, present but not needed.

In an effort to feel less redundant, he divides his time (albeit unevenly) between the two of them.

He starts his days with Sherlock. They share the bus stop bench, sometimes sitting at opposite ends, sometimes closer together, Sherlock adamant about the need to disrupt visual patterned behaviour. To that end, he will stand and loom at one end or another, slouch against the sign pole, phone out, pretending to check the bus schedule as he watches the passersby.

With Sherlock, he’s frequently subject to hours of silence and rude orders to hush when he tries to talk (although really he should know better by now, previous cases having taught him a thing or two about the detective’s unending focus). Unless John’s question is about the case at hand or to point out a passerby, he might as well not speak.

He escapes to Mona’s post when the silence becomes too much – she’s willing enough to trade banter, although every now and then a darkness slides across her features, and she rails against the system, her words riding over John’s presence. After one of those rants, John will spend a full day in Sherlock’s silence to rinse the taste from his memories – not because he disagrees with what she’s saying, but because it stings to think how real and true her words, experiences, and extrapolations are.

The watching and the waiting are slow, a tedious affair, and John can always appreciate (or at least understand) Sherlock’s black moods a bit more after this sort of case. He can feel the destructive seeds of boredom within himself, finds himself daydreaming of the days before London-again, when life had been anything but safe, anything but dull, although it had its own distinct flavour of waiting.

Still, at least Sherlock and John are accustomed to this sort of dragging tension with its nebulous and unguaranteed pay off. Mona has no such experience, and day after day her distraction grows, a twitching impatience that can only build and build until it’s bled off with an angry slew of words that can last longer than John cares to find out.

On the fifth day of waiting under the unchanging grey of London’s sky, of watching people shuffle along their routines, John is taking a much needed break from Sherlock’s tense silence (overbearing and distant all at once, how does he do that?) by sitting with Mona, hoping for some companionable chatter.

But no – it seems today is a rant day.

John is coming to terms with this as dusk settles into a proper evening haze, a city-wide blanket of soot. Mona grows about the system and society as she lowers her binoculars to keep from catching the last of the evening glow with them. She’s saved her eyesight for this; John watches her blink through her vision menus before her nuchal assembly stiffens to steady her scanning.

Mona takes a deep breath to continue where she’d left off, her eyes sliding along the field of
observation Sherlock had established days prior. She vents:

“They focused on making us functional and invisible, anything to keep society from being disrupted. They never focused on fixing us. They didn’t think it was a possibility.”

John would love to disagree, but instead he considers how analyst sessions don’t last more than two years. Telling, that.

Mona chuckles, low and glowing like coals, as if she can hear his thoughts. “They never bothered fixing our brains or our thinking because the interface was supposed to handle all that. They didn’t think our brains would kick in and take over and learn, change, adapt. And if not…well. We’re the test subjects, the ones who had no choice but to choose this, willing to do anything to survive – and somehow they forgot that. They didn’t think we’d want to outlast their predictions. They underestimated us.”

John thinks of everything Mona has endured and outlived – explosions and surgeries and expectations. Estimates and expiration dates.

“All of us.” Mona emphasizes. Her eyes are a bright point in the shadows as she inhales, and the last light of the day illuminates the scarring of her face, a tapestry of triumphs. “We are the survivors of their assumptions, John. Every single one of us. Whether they like it or not, we have a future, not a time limit.”

John shudders. “Not sure I want to know what that future looks like.” In his mind, syringes and ‘skins’ and bottles with blue text stack into the obscurity of tomorrow, next week, next month. An expiration date according to everyone, the calendar, his analyst’s schedule, approaching – and past that? How long until everyone else is right? Next year, maybe? The statistics are not that kind.

He sees an old man dying piece by piece in a Clinic specializing in pain management. He sees a constant bloody nose.

His mobile buzzes, and he checks it like breathing, like blinking, reflexive and necessary. The glowing screen reports:

Stop flirting and pay attention.

SH

John rolls his eyes (it figures Sherlock would only want to talk now that John has exiled himself to Mona’s opinionated company) and responds:

Not flirting. Mona has been scanning just as you asked.

The reply is almost instantaneous.

Keep me posted. 10 minute intervals.

SH

John rolls his eyes again.

Of course.

Six minutes later:

Make it 5 minute intervals.

SH

John barely suppresses a snort of laughter, texting back:

Bored?

This time the reply may as well be instantaneous:

Exceedingly.

SH

John quirks his lips sideways.

Shouldn’t have chased me off, then.

A moment later his phone dings:

No, I suppose not.

SH

Mona looks over for a split second. “Oi, you two, stop flirting and pay attention.”

John laughs and sends:

Mona says you and I need to stop flirting and pay attention. What’s that they say about great
minds?

He can almost hear the scoff in Sherlock’s reply:

‘They’ also say broken clocks are right twice a day.

SH

John blinks, and without really stopping to consider, sends:

Wait – you’re agreeing with her?

When a reply doesn’t appear a moment later, John wonders if Sherlock is trying to decide how to type out ‘Don’t be ridiculous’ with as much eye-roll as he can muster. He also starts wondering about the wording of Sherlock’s last text. Taken out of context, it reads almost exactly like something Sherlock would tear to shreds if it had been written by anyone else. John can practically hear him muttering about ‘prepubescent mating overtures.’

He scrolls through their exchange, and gets stuck looking at the text Sherlock had sent while John had been away from the flat the night before the waiting began. When five minutes pass, however, John finds his thoughts caught on Sherlock’s silence rather than his words. He taps Mona on the shoulder. “Any sign?”

“Lots of 3 and 5% blips, a 20% trigger, and a 45% flag, but nothing above the 60% mark he specified.” Mona doesn’t break her stare at the street beyond the window, but shrugs one shoulder. “Why?”

“Where was that 45?”

“Through there.” Her pointed finger indicates the tube entrance.

“Let’s go,” John says quietly, calm down to his metal despite the sudden fire in his nerves, bones, blood. “Sherlock’s in trouble.”

The tube station is sickly sodium yellow after the velveteen night sky. John squints his eyes against the harshness as he glances around the decrepit platform. After a moment he thinks to check for cameras and sets off in the direction less populated by watchful electronics.

“Who did the 45 ID, by the way?” he asks, making his way to the very-most edge of the landing. Graffiti layered over torn posters layered over decades of grime makes the platform a visual jumble in the moment before John’s eyes catch up, finding corners and curves. In those dank corners and on precarious ledges, people huddle in rags and try for sleep or rest. All eyes are closed. The message is clear: we saw nothing, don’t ask. The air is pungent with the sour smells of badly-cared-for bodies.

“Effie,” Mona answers when she steps up beside him.

John ransacks his memory. “One of the victims-to-be?”

“The last one,” Mona confirms.

Odd, that – it doesn’t follow the order, John thinks, but now is not the time for odd thoughts; it’s the time for guns in grips and steady steps into the buzzing darkness ahead.

“Got anything for heat signatures in there?” he asks Mona. He turns his head to look up along the track way, then shuffles back, his nerves getting the better of him. He blinks. That’s... unusual. He’s a veteran of the underground system, knows the vibrations of approaching trains, whether they’ll slow or not, information he can feel even through the thickest of boot soles.

He holds up his left hand and looks at it.

“Not really,” Mona starts, “nothing for tracking in here, I’m afraid –”

“Wait.” John is watching his hand tremble; it’s the slightest of quivers. He closes his eyes and tries to tap into the part of him that wasn’t always part of him. He tries to feel through it, the way he felt Mona’s presence in the flat before this whole mess gained momentum. After a moment, he asks, voice hushed: “Do you feel that?”

“I…Yeah. There’s definitely – something…there.” Mona’s eyes narrow then slip closed. John watches as a rapid eye quiver sets in – scanning for that elusive something. At last her eyes snap open, and she says, voice flat: “Interference field.” She glances at John. “You should stay here.”

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“Like hell,” John shoots back. He takes a very deliberate step forward, toward the sense of wrong, that sense of go back. The floor beneath his feet is still, and the platform is empty. It’s late, and the trains have cut down to their late night runs. John doesn’t like the idea of haring off into a live tunnel, but what he likes even less is the idea that Sherlock is down here without any backup.

“John, this is going to play hob with your systems –”

But John already has his phone out, is already hitting send on a text he’s been keeping ready for moments like this, is saying, “I don’t care,” because he doesn’t. He’s had a bullet in his chest, he’s
had a madman in his head, and he knows what it’s like to wake up with a part of himself missing. He doesn’t care to repeat any of those experiences.

John moves forward along the wall, his entire being alive with sensation – the electric crackle in the air along his skins, the adrenaline beneath. “Come on, Sherlock is down here somewhere…the idiot.” That last is a murmur for his own ears, a prayer. It’s words he won’t speak, won’t acknowledge, a fear refused form.

“Alright,” Mona says, and sidles along next to him. “Lead the way.”

They head south.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading (and being patient while me life tries to recalibrate). If you feel like looking me up on tumblr, my username is the same there: patternofdefiance

<3
Once John and Mona are out of sight of the station cameras, he reaches back and tugs his Browning from the waist of his jeans. In his palm, the grip warms and settles quickly, doing quite a bit to calm the itch of shouldn’t be here from the interference field, somehow more comforting even than the splashes of light from their torches.

Gravel crunches underfoot, and he and Mona step light and quick down the clear centers of the tracks. With each step, the interference grows, until a thin, cold sheen of sweat coats John’s skin. He can feel the hum of current from the lines, a different song, lower and smoother than the scratch and chafe and resistance of the field broadcasting through the air, but that isn’t exactly a comfort.

He remembers the shock to his system when he’d needed to jumpstart his leg that morning, so long ago. He’s not keen to see what a rail can deliver, doesn’t want to test it against his flesh or his implants.

“Getting harder,” Mona murmurs, and John grunts in agreement, words a little beyond him as buzz and static pour into him, insistent, invading. He can barely think through the haze-inducing interference in the air, never mind talk. He wonders how Mona is combatting it – but that’s the trick, isn’t it? Combat ready, cyOS upgrades, state of the (unregistered) art interface. None of which John has.

Bollocks.

His left hand trembles, a feedback loop from his chest plate rattling his nerves. His gun is steady in his right hand but for a small sympathy tremor. He can hear the frown in Mona’s voice as she tries to amend her answer, saying, “Getting more.”

He can’t even manage a grunt this time. All his focus is in his steps, his hands, pushing along through the crowded air, following the path of greatest resistance, and if he could he’d laugh because isn’t that the way of everything lately?

And then, the interference field stops.

Both John and Mona nearly fall forward, no longer needing to strain against their own cyberthetics, implants, and relays. John bites down on his left wrist to keep from shouting in surprise, and Mona muffles her own cry of shock.

“What the –?” John breathes, but swallows the rest of his words.

“Deterrent field,” Mona whispers.

John shivers. Something to keep augmented people out – or in.

And, in that sudden stillness, in the absence of relay overload, John hears garbled voices bouncing and clattering against the narrow walls of the tunnel. John has to smother a groan of despair and frustration when he recognizes a deep, arrogant register slipping through the air.

Of course Sherlock would confront the killer. Of course.

No weapons, no back up. Of bloody course.

John hurries forward, feet steady now, steps determined against the slide and shuffle of gravel. Up ahead, a cavernous darkness looms to his left – it looks like a tunnel continuation, but without any track laid.

He takes that fork without even pausing – no time to dawdle or doubt. When he next hears Sherlock’s voice, clearer, closer, he knows he chose the right path.

A narrow little passage to the right seems to be the main source of sound, so John aims that way. Ahead, harsh fluorescence slices into the darkness, so John clicks off and pockets his torch, motions for Mona to do the same, before continuing forward. He can just hear –
“Who’s been helping you?” Sherlock sounds demanding and arrogant and all the things John has asked him not to sound when dealing with killers. John can’t help the twitch in the corner of his mouth, even as he speeds up his steps.

Ahead of John, the cutting light illuminates the way forward, the broadening passage, not quite a vaulted hall, but definitely a step up from the cramped quarters so far.

The maintenance shaft, a dirty little channel leading away from the main passage, finally ends at a hollowed-out den of a chamber. An abandoned storage area, perhaps, or some place from which to mount construction or repair expeditions, but obviously in disuse.

In the center of the room, surrounded by rigs of bright lights, a space has been cleared of construction rubble and litter, metal grating has been laid: a make-shift operating surface. Upon it, a large man lies very still. John can’t quite see his face from where he is, but going by the order of things, it must be Ernest, the next victim in the line-up.

The air is rich with the smell of blood, fresh and old and ancient, the air is cloying and cool and close, but none of that matters, because Sherlock is standing less than arm’s length away from an older woman in shreds. It’s not her state of dress or too-thin body that make John want a weapon, though – it’s the curl of her fingers and the shadows of her face.

John’s just close enough that he can see her dull gunmetal eyes as they lift in stutters to meet Sherlock’s. Her lips part, and harsh breaths pant in and out, a thin chest jerking with each inhale. Her whole frame twitches as she looks between Sherlock and the man on the metal grating. “No one. No one is helping me.”

Sherlock tilts his head, then asks, “Who hasn’t been helping you, Effie?”

At that question, her hands shake – they are a mess, bloody, scratched, ripped, gouged. Rot has set in, decay at the edges of deeper damage. John can’t quite tear his eyes away from them.

“He said he’d help,” she chokes out. Her voice is the cracks left in sun-baked dust. “They said they could fix me. Make me real. They didn’t. They didn’t help, and I did – I did what they – they didn’t.” She heaves a breath, and John’s heaved breaths like that, breaths that feel like last breaths, each of them, one after the other. Just listening to her now quickens his pulse and constricts his chest.

“I can’t – I can’t – not anymore –” Effie is saying, slight shoulders hitching. Her sobs are dry and sound like they’re doing damage on the way out. “I’m trying and I can’t, I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Order?” Effie asks, bewildered, her shineless eyes wide. “What order?”

“That…that’s just…I didn’t plan it, it just felt… right.” A shudder shakes her frame.

“You never wondered why?” Sherlock asks, and John wishes the detective wouldn’t, that he could just let the girl calm down. “Did they give you the order, too?”

“Order?” Effie asks, bewildered, her shineless eyes wide. “What order?”

“The order of attacks.”

“That…that’s just…I didn’t plan it, it just felt… right.” A shudder shakes her frame.

“Stay back,” John hisses at Mona as she tenses just behind him and to the side. “Don’t let her see you.” They can still maybe talk her down, coax her back from this madness. If they can calm her, they can get her into treatment. They can get that programming in her interface wiped.

“No, I think you’ll find there are three.” Sherlock’s face as he speaks is the face he wears as he adds a drop of something unexpected to his careful chemical equations in their kitchen. “Your name is on that list.”

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“Who is ‘they’?” Sherlock asks, and John wishes there was kindness or mercy in that question, but no. “You mean you don’t know,” Sherlock says after a long pause, a silence Effie fails to fill. Her fingers curl and uncurl, and she shakes her head. John clenches his own hands, because someone took her and put words inside her, wrote code and execution, and then set her loose – except they didn’t, because the trap was inside her, a noose for her mind.

John feels sick to his stomach.

Effie’s head tics to the side, shoulders shifting to follow. “I…sometimes things are clear. Sometimes they aren’t.”

“Things have been getting clearer longer, I would say. Your mind is fighting the programming.”

Sherlock tilts his head again, and this time John knows it’s a signal: I know you’re there. All in the tilt of that jaw, the quick glance out of the corner of his eyes. “That’s why the time between victims has been increasing.”

“I –” Effie shakes her head. “It’s getting harder –” and the strength of her voice is wavering – or rather the quality. “After the last woman –”

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“There’s just two left.” Effie’s eyes waver, flickering between Sherlock and Ernest’s supine form.

“No, I think you’ll find there are three.” Sherlock’s face as he speaks is the face he wears as he adds a drop of something unexpected to his careful chemical equations in their kitchen. “Your name is on that list.”

“That’s not –” Effie frowns, muted by confusion. “No.” Her eyes slip closed, and her body quivers, a fine, unending tremor. “You should leave,” she whispers, eyes still closed.

“And if I don’t?” The challenge in Sherlock’s voice is the second drop – his face betrays his
fascination in the face of impending reaction.

Effie twitches, and her hands press to her thighs. “It comes in waves.” Her speech is different all of a sudden, almost sing-song, familiar in a way John wishes it weren’t. She seems feral now, not frail in the least. Her hands lift from her thighs, no longer shaking. “I am so sorry,” she says, voice teetering between a croon and a cry. Effie looks down at her hands, then back up. Her neck moves like a viper’s as she turns to face Ernest. “And he’s next.” Her words are a sudden lash, a hissing whip-crack. The change in her voice is eerie and uneven, and John knows he’ll hear it again some night before he jerks awake.

It’s like a switch flips, and Effie is focused wholly on the form of Ernest where he lies. She takes a step forward, no longer shivering and twitching, programming overpowering her body’s own sense and responses. Sherlock turns to look at John, his hand lifting, perhaps finally requesting back up, and what then? Does he expect John to shoot this woman who has been shaped into a killing implement against her will, without her knowledge?

But before John can respond to that hand and its implied request, Mona steps forward.

“Forgetting something?” Mona asks, speaking for the first time. “What about your precious little plan?” She sidesteps John’s knee-jerk effort to pull her back. Every line and joint of her vibrates with anger – John can almost sense it like an interference field. “What about me?” Mona sneers.

Effie’s spine goes rigid, and when she turns, her eyes are wide. Her body drops to a crouch, low and predatory, and it must hurt, as torn up as Effie is, but she gives no sign of suffering. Whatever is driving her body now is obviously not wasting time on pain. Effie sways forward onto the balls of her bloody feet, and it looks unnatural somehow, but no less lethal. Her jaw hinges open, and John expects a snarl or a hiss, but no sound emerges, and her fingers flex in the sudden silence, fingers crooking once, twice –

She lunges for Mona, and Mona lunges for her.

They make contact with a clang, and Mona grunts as her chest compresses. Her arms tangle into Effie’s, and they tumble to the ground, a thrashing maelstrom of metal and skin.

“John, come on!” Sherlock urges, but it’s not necessary; John is already darting out of cover, driven by instinct and old habits towards the downed civilian – Ernest’s supine form – while still giving the frenzied struggle a wide berth. Mona’s voice is easily discernible, a series of cries and growls, her movements fierce and furious. Effie’s attacks and blocks are silent, only small huffing breaths escaping as blows are exchanged.

John skids to a halt by Ernest, and a moment later Sherlock slides into place next to him on his knees.

“Drugged probably, judging by the laboured breathing–” Sherlock begins, but John’s fingers go first to Ernest’s ears – and yes, his fingers find a metallic sharpness. He swallows a cry of triumph and pulls free the external relay, only to choke on a gasp as he feels its numbness crawl up his own arm, into his chest, a paralytic vice leaching its numbing touch into his aortic assembly –

Sherlock yanks the device from John’s hand with a hiss, a hideous mask of fury distorting his features for a moment, but then Ernest is jerking and trying to sit up, his mistreated systems failing to sync.

John grabs Ernest’s shoulders and holds him steady as the man’s diaphragm kicks and clenches for air, his lungs and throat choking for it. Something must go right, because in the next moment, Ernest is vertical – but then his eyes are rolling in their sockets, a mad, noiseless scream contorting his face.

The look is reminiscent of Effie’s silent hiss, and John jerks back instinctively, bowling Sherlock over with the force of his reaction. Ernest is up and staggering away, great tree trunk legs shaking the ground as he lumbers past where Mona has Effie in a headlock.

When Effie seems to realize that her prey is escaping however, adrenaline – or perhaps some sort of synthetic stimulant – kicks in; she knocks Mona backwards and lurches for Ernest, opening up enough distance that John can bring the Browning up and into play with little more than a thought and a touch to the trigger.

In the confined space, concrete bare and flat and angular in slabs around them, the noise is deafening, bringing pain after taking sound. Everyone’s hands fly up to cover their ears – everyone save Effie.

Effie’s head, snapped to one side by the strike of the bullet, pivots on her neck to stare back at John.

The bullet had caught her in the cheek, squarely on the zygomatic arch. It should have shattered her jaw, decimated her face. John has seen shots like that up close before.

Instead, there is a hole, a metal impact crater of sorts, but what’s worst is Effie’s eyes: both are present, but one has switched off, gone dark and still. The other is fixed on John.

The scream, wet from coolant leaking into her throat and coating her vocal chords, is the only warning John gets.
Effie hits him like a bullet once did, and then he’s on his back, scrabbling for purchase as her hands try to find his vulnerable tissues. She’s lost even more flesh by now, skin and ‘skin’ rent away during her fight with Mona; her fingers, sharp metal exposed from weeks of clawing at victims, freshly edged by her struggles against the concrete, swipe at him, and each attempt is a near miss as John struggles, barely managing to block the attempts in time. Effie rears back, hisses, and her sharp digits swap tactics, like a school of fish changing direction, and aim for his chest implant instead.

Dread drenches John, but anger ignites inside him, incendiary incentive, and he manages to trap her hands in the clutch of his arms, pinning their backs against his implant, those sharp fingers splayed immobile in his grip.

The next moment, Effie careens to the side, and John becomes aware of noise again, aware of sounds, the multitudinous, many-faceted layering of cacophony, and that’s when he sees Sherlock wield a serrated knife in a return arc, curved at the tip in a familiar and gut-wrenching way, and –

Effie kicks out at Sherlock and he lands harder and further away than John would have thought possible, and he doesn’t get up.

The knife lies glittering between Sherlock and Effie, closer to John than anyone else.

Mona’s already moving again, shouting about something, but John’s muscles know what to do without needing words, and so his mirror relays do as well. Effie is stalking towards Sherlock now, most recent contact perhaps marking him as a target, and John is moving faster – but Mona is moving fastest.

She plows into Effie, arms wide, then wraps and rolls, ending up under Effie, Mona’s back pressed against the blood-soaked concrete as Effie’s sharp, exposed spine cuts into her front.

“NOW!” Mona bellows, and John has the knife in his hand, an awkward, unwelcome weight, but not so unfamiliar, and Effie is digging her way out of Mona’s hold, her metal fingers scraping and scrabbling against the ground in a bid for freedom.

They roll again, closer to Sherlock, and John wades in, tries to subdue, tries to control, and Sherlock is coughing weakly, close by now, and Effie seems fixated, one hand snapping out to grab at Sherlock’s ankle –

John feels the shock as the knife impacts Effie’s nape, feels it as he severs Effie’s spinal column, cabling and nervous tissue and vertebral artery, feels the vibrations carry up along his own tissues and sinews, almost as if he were holding a corrupting interference relay again, until it seems his arm will grow numb from the buzzing overflow.

For a moment, John is gripped by a mad and dizzying panic as Effie simply keeps struggling, fears born of horror films and the sickening lurch of loathing he feels in this moment overriding his rational mind. Her body thrashes and jerks, and finally John sees the pattern for what it is, a mirror relay system caught in a feedback loop with no original data pulses from the interface to guide it.

Mona makes a raw, horrified sound and clambers out from under the convulsing mess of Effie’s body, only to dive back in, snatching the blade from John’s suddenly weak hand and driving it into Effie’s lower back.

There’s a sharp crack as Mona severs the lumbar relay, and Effie’s body seems to wilt, lax in the aftermath.

John feels as if he’s trapped in the moment after a flashbang, sound and colour tinny and distant, but he turns and makes his way to Sherlock, pushing through the miasma of the ringing in his ears to get to where his friend has fallen, is shifting feebly, coming back to himself as John kneels by his side.

In the background, he is aware that Mona is retching, although he doesn’t know how he knows this, since he can barely hear and he isn’t looking.

“Sherlock,” he says, and then he says it again, and again, maybe four times, and then, “Are you alright?” and Sherlock isn’t answering, so John keeps asking, and his hands know what to do, thank god, because in this moment all John can do is ask again, “Are you alright?” and “Are you alright?” and –

Hands come up to hold his, calming not trapping, and one is guided to a pulse point (jugular, already checked, Sherlock are you alright?) and the other is pressed against the rise and fall of a chest (breathing, of course, of course, but is he?) and –

“John.”

John blinks. He exhales. He swallows. “Sherlock. You may have suffered a head or neck injury, don’t move yet, let me –”

Of course the man sits up right away. Of course he shakes his bloody head. “No head or neck injury,” he says, as if he knows. Of course.

“You were unconscious –” John begins, and if his voice is shaking, it’s because of adrenaline, or frustration, and not because he thought he lost him. His friend – his best friend – Sherlock –
“I had the air knocked out of my lungs when I hit the wall. Possibly again when I hit the ground.” He gasps, and it does sound like the gasp of a man relieved to discover he can still do so. “No loss of consciousness. Just stunned. I was aware the entire time.”

“Oh.” John realizes his hands are still cradling Sherlock’s heart beat and breathing. Signs of life. Sherlock. “Oh.” He reclaims his hands. Doesn’t know what to do with them. Stands. He offers a hand and Sherlock takes it, and they both turn to face Mona where she is leaning against a wall, turned away from Effie’s corpse.

“Secondary interface,” Mona rasps without turning around. Her one hand indicates her own lower back. “Something us older models have. No fancy processors back then. Vestigial, mostly. But,” and she retches again, dry heaves, shaking her frame.

In the distance, the sounds of voices and footsteps reverberating through the tunnels finally clicks into place.

“You texted Lestrade,” Sherlock says, voice scratchy.

“Someone had to,” John notes. His hands are empty.

Mona coughs and wipes her mouth. “Now what?”

Chapter End Notes

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Mona makes herself scarce, and John stands quietly and lets Sherlock explain away the big details and minor inconsistencies alike while Lestrade writes it all down. The DI’s expression as he does so is one of acute disbelief, though, and John doesn’t fault him for it; Sherlock’s statement does come across as utterly unbelievable – hell, even the unedited version seems impossible to John and he’d lived it.

Of course, Lestrade is not (always) as incompetent as Sherlock makes him out to be, and the DI’s mouth tightens the longer Sherlock talks. John feels his heart sink; the DI’s dander is up, and they’ll be stuck answering questions until he is satisfied.

John takes breath for a sigh as Sherlock finishes his version of events (the one that conveniently doesn’t include the ‘recently deceased’ Ms. Shaw), and Lestrade’s mouth opens, his eyes full of the questions he’s about to unleash – when a bright light washes over all three men where they stand. Headlights, John realises as the lights sweep across the front of the station. When the spots clear, John sees that a sleek, black car has pulled up past the police line.

It’s the first time John’s ever felt relief at the sight of Mycroft’s obvious influence. He watches Lestrade’s mouth click shut and his eyes narrow, and he knows there must have been times before now that the older Holmes intervened (interfered). An accompanying van pulls up and a team kitted out in grey emerges – a sweeper team, cyberthetics division.

Sherlock’s already turning to walk to the waiting car when he turns back and says to the unamused Lestrade, “You’ll want to search the tunnels for the victim. He ran off during the fight. Probably holed up in a corner somewhere.”

“Ernest,” John adds then. “His name’s Ernest.”

Lestrade nods his acknowledgement, but John’s already following Sherlock, who’s making for the car. The doors open as they approach, and then they’re sliding into the dim interior. Everything seems oddly clean and soft to John, his nerves still fizzing, his head still ringing.

“... You have something for me,” Mycroft says as the car pulls away. Only the slightest inflection on the last syllable turns that sentence into a question.

Sherlock locks eyes with Mycroft for a long moment, then takes the still active external relay from his pocket and deposits it in Mycroft’s gloved palm with a smirk. “For your collection.” He seems to have recovered fully so far, and had barely deigned to let the paramedics check his scalp and neck. Only John’s stern gaze had pinned him in place while they’d checked him over, it seemed.

John had allowed the paramedics to clean his scrapes and check his reflexes as well, but had declined any interface assessment. The thought of anyone touching any of his implants was unbearable at the moment – especially these strangers with their dispassionate eyes and impersonal hands.

Now John watches Mycroft’s hands, the relay turned over and over by examining fingers.

“Careful where you stick that,” Sherlock suggests.

Mycroft doesn’t do anything so uncultured as to snort, but his face does twist into a sour superiority for a moment. The rest of the ride is quiet – or at least, if the Holmes brothers argue, they do it in glances and gestures and John doesn’t hear.

The city outside is wet, and lamp lights blur across the windows and the tarmac, greasy smears of brightness against the dark sky and John’s eyes, even when he closes them.

John wants nothing more than to be clean and unconscious, but when they arrive at 221B, Mona is in John’s room again. He can feel her familiar, linked-in buzz from downstairs, almost as soon as he sets foot inside 221 Baker Street.

John doesn’t even stop to take off his jacket, just jogs his tired body up the stairs.
“That was mad,” Mona says without turning when John pauses in his bedroom doorway. There’s a breathless quality to her voice – could be that she’s in a hurry, could be the adrenaline still rocketing through her system. Her duffel is half full, and she’s stuffing a few odds and ends in at the side. “I’m borrowing three of your uglier shirts, and that jumper I only ever saw you wear once. I’ve had a ask, but I normally don’t ask permission when doing somebody a favour, so.”

She’s pale when she turns, and her hair is blond, but her lips quirk to the side, humour perking up.

“’Borrowing’ may not be the word you’re looking for, then.” John lets his arms cross across his chest and feels better for it.

“Ha. Ha.” Mona zips the bag and stands back. She swings the bag up onto her shoulder, her coat tucked into the handles, and marches past John. He follows her down the stairs. Sherlock looks up from his phone where he’s standing in the middle of the living room.

With a glance at his friend – who looks pale, a pinched quality to the set of his mouth and eyes – John follows Mona down and out of 221B. Whatever it is that has Sherlock in a state, John can deal with it after he’s spoken to the officially dead and off-the-record accomplice to the many laws broken, smashed, and burnt to the ground tonight.

Outside, Mona stops beside Mrs. Hudson’s bins. The shadows are deepest there.

John thinks of all the programming stuffed into Effie’s head, and asks, “Purged the clutter yet?”

“Oh yeah. Easier out than in.” Her half-leer seems closer to normal, and John can feel himself wanting to relax, but he can’t, not yet.

“Effie –” John begins, but Mona cuts in:

“Had her implants as long as I have. Same year, same make, same initial access to upgrades. Ernest’s shit was ancient and shoddy. And yet.” Mona shakes her head.

John is lost. “What?”

Mona rounds on him. “It just – it proves it’s not the gear that leads to madness or ‘malfunctions.’ It was sabotage all the way. And I doubt this story will make it to the papers, never mind the nine o’ clock broadcast. And it should.”

“Is that where you’re off to, then? Fighting the good fight for truth and justice?”

Mona grins. “Not sure yet.”

A minute of silence grates past, heavy with fresh memories of Effie dying, Effie twitching, Effie switching from person to weapon. Could have been anyone – or had she been predisposed? “One out of seven,” John says, weighing each word before he lets it go. “Not bad as odds go.”

Mona snorts. “Course not. And that’s with us being off the grid, not tied into any of that oversight committee bullshit. All of us have been off the official grid in one way or another, finding our own ways, our own healing – and only one of us went off the deep end. And she was pushed.”

John doesn’t mention that maybe Effie would still be alive if Mona had stayed in the shadows, that maybe her programming wouldn’t have kicked in quite so violently if Mona hadn’t made it so obvious she still needed to be killed. But then Ernest might have died. It might have been any of them in that room, honestly, but poor Effie had pulled that straw too.

“Why don’t they tell us any of this in analysis? Why keep telling us to rely on them?”

“Because they don’t care or they don’t know, and they definitely don’t think we’ll get better. Oh, we’re convenient, we serve a purpose; they plant their latest tech, then harvest their data, and when that’s done, they’re done – with us, with caring.” Mona’s fingers curl into the handle of the duffle. “We’re life-threatening trauma victims with barely consensual, life-altering surgeries piled on; they think we all blow our fuses 18 months in, that scheduling two years of ‘counseling’ is excessive. They think we all go crazy, and if they play their cards just right, the only lives we take are our own, and they go to bed feeling like heroes for that.”

John is silent.

“They don’t think we’re worth keeping,” Mona continues. “Mostly they’re right.” She looks down the street, her bag slung across her shoulder, her face a patchwork of survival, and her anger has the edge of pride to it. “How many old ones have you seen?”

The answer isn’t comforting, because the answer is none. John looks away. “That’s not fair. There were complications with the procedures at first –”

“There will always be complications; it will never be fair. You want advice? Get what upgrades you can, what you feel safe with, and keep doing your own maintenance and repair. Hell, your mate’s a genius –” she jerks a thumb back up to the front window, where music and shouts and sometimes explosions drift through to the street, depending on the day and the case, “– use that resource.” She reaches out to grasp his forearm, then pulls him into a crushing hug. It’s fierce and unapologetic.

John returns it, then says, “You could have told me, Sooner. All of this, I mean.”
She shakes her head. “I thought you’d get there on your own. Thought you needed to – I sure as hell did. You’re so close now, but not in a way I ever thought to do it.” She grins at him. “Maybe I thought – if you got yourself there, we could go off together. We could work.” She purses her lips. “But that was never in the cards, was it?”

John blinks, slightly taken aback – not at the idea of going off with Mona, but at the sudden realization he hadn’t even thought to consider it. Not properly. The idea of running off to ‘fight the good fight,’ or even the necessary fight – or any fight at all – would once have held a mighty appeal for John. Up until his invalidation, he’d lived his life and made his choices along those lines. Up until recently, missing that thrill had left an unmending void in John – but now...

John tries to keep his face from cringing. “We were…good together.” John can taste his own polite lie, doesn’t need Mona’s quirked eyebrow to point it out to him.

“Oh? Depends on what you mean by ‘good.’ How do you count getting kidnapped?” She grins, and John realises with a start that what had bothered her most about that misadventure had been the helplessness, not the danger. And right after that they’d split, and it hadn’t been so bad, and Sherlock had been so quietly smug. “But I was never going to fit into your life,” Mona adds, “and you were never going to catch up to mine.”

John glances away. He’d never wanted to. It seems he’s not quite done feeling guilty about that.

“See?” Mona says. “There it is.” John blinks, realizes his gaze had drifted to the beacon of the window, to Sherlock, who is staring out into the night, forearm propped against the top of the frame. John has just a moment to wonder if he’s ever seen Sherlock look so tired before he jerks his eyes back to the blood-haired, red-smeared woman in front of him. She still reeks of the underground.

“Where will you go?” he asks one last time, but he knows she doesn’t know. Not one to fuss over a plan or schedule, Mona. She smiles, and her edges soften for just a moment. “There’s a lot I haven’t seen yet, and I’m going to go and see it.” Mona turns and walks away before pausing and turning back. “Hey, if you ever want to see the future, go find a mirror.” She grins, harsh but full of good humour, before turning to go once more.

John watches her stride into the night, and feels a pang of emotion inside his ribcage. It isn’t sadness, and it isn’t joy. It’s simply watching a friend walk away.

Chapter End Notes

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Complication

Chapter Notes

beta'd - as always - by the dauntless tiltedsyllogism, who has helped me reword and rework this chapter tirelessly.

Thanks also to everyone who's waited so patiently while I recovered from Real Life Shenanigans (moving, extended illness, surgery, sheesh!). Hope this makes up for the wait ;)

Also, I would be remiss if I did not mention the AntiDiogenes gang, who are quite possibly the best and most encouraging (and inspiring!) group of creative people I am fortunate enough to know.

**ALSO: I did make a minor change to the previous chapter, nothing major, but for those so inclined, it's worth a quick reread**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John watches Mona until she's out of sight, obscured by buildings and darkness and distance.

Then her buzz is gone from his head, her voice no longer filling his ears, and John has a moment to feel the layer of grime caked on his trousers and shirt. He looks down even as he goes back into 221B, at the pace sludge that sits half an inch thick in the hems of his jeans. The rind of it crumbles and leaves a trail with each step, but John’s too tired to care about the mess right now. Mrs. Hudson will probably have a field day next time she comes up to do a spot of cleaning, 'not your housekeeper' notwithstanding.

Shower, he decides. Sherlock, fastidious creature that he can be, will probably already have had one himself, so it should be free.

He makes it to the bathroom, which is damp from recent use, without running into Sherlock, for which he is, frankly, grateful. He doesn’t want to answer a thousand questions right now, nor does he want to hear anything else about this case. Not tonight. No, tonight an ache is building in his chest, and more than anything he wants to stop feeling empty. He doesn’t want to see Effie shake behind his eyelids, doesn’t want to feel her convulse when his hands are still, when they have nothing to touch.

John removes trousers, jacket, and button down, then washes his hands and forearms thoroughly, not wanting to spread the slime of old blood and dust and implant coolant that he can feel in the creases of his palms and fingers. Then he washes his face, because maybe that will get rid of some of this night, this case, the sight of –

No.

Stop.

Breathe.

John closes his eyes, opens them. Sees the pile of his clothes, has an urge to bin them, but that would mean touching them again.

He starts shivering, and it takes quite a bit of that to notice that he is standing very still in very little, has perhaps been staring holes into the taps to avoid the mirror.

"John?"

Sherlock.

Sherlock sounding – John isn’t sure what he sounds like, but it’s not quite the usual way in which he addresses John.

John wants to answer, to say something, anything, but he finds he can’t. Everything feels like it’s locking up; his throat, his joints, his implants, his thoughts.

Shock, his mind supplies.

“John, I’m coming in.”

What? No – but then the door is open, and John cannot recall if he’d locked it or not, and that’s neither here nor there, because Sherlock is beside him, taking a wrist, taking his pulse, turning off the tap – had it been running? – and turning John so he isn’t facing the mirror.

“John, focus.”

John huffs a weak laugh, but feels better for the stray note of worry that Sherlock probably doesn’t realise slipped out. After a minute or so, John’s breaths even out – had they needed to? – but
Sherlock doesn’t let go of his wrist.

“What are you doing in here?” John asks, because if just one thing tonight could make sense, that would be lovely.

Sherlock frowns. “I asked you a question, and you didn’t answer. You were non-responsive for five minutes, John.”

“Oh.” What else? What else do people say at moments like this? “Sorry.” Probably. Actually not sorry, just empty. Drained. His thoughts skitter back along the conversation so far, happy to have something to occupy them aside from avoiding the mirror. “What did you want to ask me?”

Sherlock looks away, purses his lips, then looks back, as if he’d needed to fetch an expression off to the side to deal with this mad moment – at least, John thinks it must be mad. Maybe it isn’t. Maybe this is what normal feels like and he never noticed before.

Breathe.

“I don’t – I wasn’t –” the words seem to stick, sour and unwilling in Sherlock’s throat. “I wasn’t expecting you back. I –” Sherlock clears his throat, and it sounds so desperately nonchalant. “I don’t understand why you’re here. Still here,” he amends. “Why not join Mona?”

Something in his voice pulls John forward and into the now, and the space between them, so far from dark tunnels and deeds. John blinks and finds he feels more real somehow, as if such a thing is possible. It makes breathing easier, though, so John will take it.

Sherlock, for his part, doesn’t seem to notice or care that John is in pants and vest, his filthy things in a sodden heap on the floor. His slim fingers are warm and dry against the thin skin of John’s wrist, and his eyes upon John’s, waiting for an answer, his gazed fixed and intense, as if he could will the answer from John’s lips, pluck it from the air between them.

Now firmly in the calm on the other side of shock, John considers breaking this moment, shooing him out, but there’s something in Sherlock’s voice that speaks to need – for a reason, for clarity, for assurance. It pulls at John, and he finds he doesn’t care that he’s in his pants either, or that Sherlock’s in his space, ignoring boundaries set so long ago. It’s obvious that this is important, that this cannot wait.

John frowns. How to explain this, why he isn’t going with Mona?

John is quiet in his search for an answer that will provide what the unspoken vulnerability in his friend’s voice and questions demands. Because Sherlock’s question isn’t groundless – John had a very different sort of life before everything (injury, invalidation, augmentation) happened, and going with Mona would have been a step in a more familiar direction.

And yet it had never felt like an option, not to John – but whereas Sherlock wants to know why John isn’t going, John has been thinking about why he is staying.

It’s a question that has been growing in John’s mind, but he’s too exhausted for urgency, only too willing to let it simmer until understanding of some kind emerges. Of course Sherlock would need to know immediately. Motive – the one facet of every case (and everything, anything, can be a case) that poses the most difficulty, the most mystery. ‘The how is easy,’ Sherlock had told him once as they walked away from a crime scene. ‘The man jumps; the man dies. But the reason for it...’ Sherlock had trailed off, magnificent mind already formulating and rejecting myriad theories. John remembers that it had not been a suicide, as everyone suspected – everyone except Sherlock, who always wanted to know the whole of it. Of everything.

Apparently of John as well.

“That day,” John begins at last, clawing his way back out of his thoughts. And now he’s thinking of a different day: “The first day. When you said that – that ‘potential flatmates should know the worst about one another’ bit... you thought you had the worst cards to show. You have no idea how good that... Other people see this one thing about me and assume the worst. But you saw – you knew everything about me, and you still thought you would be the worse flatmate.”

“I was right.”

That reply, so complex in its brevity, compels John to seek out Sherlock’s eyes. When he finally works up the nerve to do so, the mercurial light there arrests his breath, and somewhere, behind his shoulder assembly, muscle clenches hard.

John looks down, suddenly distracted, and finds his right hand is curled protectively over his chest plate.

Shit. Perhaps Effie had damaged him after all?

A closer look reveals his vest is slashed ragged. He doesn’t even realize that he’s pressing his palm hard to the edge of his implant – situated right under the torn fabric until another hand – fingers long, steady, inquisitive – pushes his aside. “Are you hurt?”

John’s breath catches in his throat. That touch is so close to the surface – the sensing surface – and that voice is so close – ‘That’s not what most people would ask,” he finally manages to gasp past the tightness in his chest, the flutter in his throat. He wonders if there’s an incipient malfunction in
his chest plate.

Those unblinking eyes are on him, and while they don’t move, a change does steal into them, from the corners, along edges, to their darkened centers. “Fortunately for you, I am not most people.” He huffs in amusement at John’s eye-roll response. “You seem alright.” Sherlock glances up at John, his chinucked down, so that his eyes are peering up at John through a thick fan on lashes. His fingers are hesitant against John’s chest, not quite resting their full weight against him. Warmth bridges the space between them. “…Allow me?”

John’s hand is shaking so that even he can see how useless he would be at inspecting the damage. He swallows past the sudden dryness in his throat. “Alright.”

Sherlock catches his breath in his throat, audibly, and John looks away.

Deft fingers peel back the ruined collar and fabric of his vest, revealing just enough skin to see the contrast where the scarring begins, growing thicker up to the edge of the ‘skin,’ where it abruptly stops. Sharp fingers had indeed caught John across the chest plate, slicing into the ‘skin,’ but not breaching past. Remembering how even the lightest of touches felt on the sensing surface of his cyberthetic leg when the skin was peeled back, John shudders to think what a slash against his chest assembly would have felt like.

What he feels now is hesitation in the exploratory efforts of the fingers ghosting over the surface of the damage. “No blood,” Sherlock murmurs, sounding entranced. “No stitches for this wound.”

John blinks to hear that word, so unexpected. The detective’s fingers grow bolder, slide up to part the edges of the gash and allow curious eyes to peer in. God it feels strange, an electric squirm of sensation through his ‘skin’. “No breach,” Sherlock says, confirming John’s initial assessment (more of a hope, if he’s being honest). “Though it was a close thing. Did it hurt?” he asks, and John can feel the feather light touch of his index finger cataloguing the change in texture between the ‘skin,’ John’s real (albeit scarred) skin, and the implant edge underneath. “Does it hurt?”

John nods stiffly. “Yes.” He swallows. “And – sometimes.” What’s hurting now, however, is the care in Sherlock’s voice – the softness, the concern. It’s unlooked-for, unbidden, unfamiliar. Sherlock has shown curiosity, interest, and even a patient regard for John’s condition before – but not this. (Right?)

He’s probably reading too much into it. It’s been a long case.

There’s a tightness growing in John’s chest, behind the implant. “It’s not as flexible as muscle and skin, or even ribs.” He swallows as Sherlock lifts the southern edge of the ‘skin,’ his eyes darting up at John, his chin ducked down, so that his eyes are peering up at John through a thick fan on lashes. “I can feel your heart beat through the metal and its covering.”

“Like now.” Sherlock’s eyes are fixed on John’s. His words are not a question.

John closes his eyes and pants, willing his heart to slow, his breathing to even out. A tremor runs along the edge of his nerves as he doesn’t quite succeed.

Sherlock’s palm settles flat against John’s chest plate, torn ‘skin’ causing a ripple of confusion where the edges fold and fail to report sensory data correctly. There’s just a bit of awe tucked behind Sherlock’s calm observations as he adds: “I can feel your heart beat through the metal and its covering.”

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Sherlock’s palm settles flat against John’s chest plate, torn ‘skin’ causing a ripple of confusion where the edges fold and fail to report sensory data correctly. There’s just a bit of awe tucked behind Sherlock’s calm observations as he adds: “I can feel your heart beat through the metal and its covering.”

John nods, not surprised. After all, he can feel the vibrations transfer all the way through the assembly’s plates, spreading the sensation of his runaway heartbeat throughout the tissue of his torso, crowding out every other thought and feeling.

All at once, it’s all too much – the breathing, the tremor, the vibrations – the night, his body, the sum and its parts -

Panic attack, John thinks, resigned, because at least that makes sense – but then steady pressure builds, a weight pushing against his chest plate, and the vibrations die down just enough for John to find his balance. Sherlock huffs from the exertion, and his breath moves the fine hairs on John’s face. For a moment, John sees him lying unmoving in the detritus of the tunnel, no rhythmic rise to find his balance. Sherlock huffs from the exertion, and his breath moves the fine hairs on John’s face. For a moment, John sees him lying unmoving in the detritus of the tunnel, no rhythmic rise to find his balance. John shudders to think what a slash against his chest assembly would have felt like.

There’s a long moment before John thinks to move his hands, and a longer moment still before he does lift them away, starting with the his right, releasing Sherlock’s hold on his shoulder first. Underneath his withdrawing hand, Sherlock’s turns, and his fingers still John’s retreat. Sherlock shifts his hands where they lie against John’s chest plate, doesn’t quite lift away that hand, instead rotating his wrist so that the backs of his fingers trail lightly along the line of the cut underneath the tatters of his clothes.

John twitches at the touch – at first because it feels so odd, and then because the rest of his body doesn’t seem to find it odd at all: he sways forward, just a little, chasing that connection – then immediately tries to quell that urge, skin warming as he realises how close they are.
When he looks up, he sees Sherlock watching him, and there’s the beginnings of a question and something soft tempering his piercing stare. It looks like wonder, although John cannot parse whether it’s aimed at the cut in his ‘skin’ or what lies beneath.

Whichever it is, Sherlock leans closer, and to his shock, John feels a stirring in his groin, a shift of heat and electricity. His heart kicks up again as he realises what his body must have known for some time. John’s throat clamps shut for a moment; he’s caught between wanting Sherlock closer and putting some distance between them, unsure where either of those impulses originate. There’s no denying the incandescence he feels with Sherlock so close – but there’s also a trapped, cramped feeling, his body constrained by metal, his thoughts caught up in his body, and unease, a feeling that some sort of precipice is approaching.

John breathes, tries to think. He needs to stop whatever train of thought Sherlock is currently indulging – experimentation, exploration – it doesn’t matter. The last time Sherlock came into contact with John’s altered nature, there had been…turbulence. First with Sherlock’s reaction to the touch (not to mention John’s), and then with the time of silence and strain that followed. Had those days been tainted – or somehow even spawned – by that brief moment of contact? John still isn’t quite sure.

All John knows now is that he doesn’t want it to happen again, that distance, especially now they’d managed a closeness John had never even thought to look for, a way of being he’d never imagined. Certainly no one else had told him it was possible to be so at ease near somebody – despite (or because of?) the danger – and certainly not with his condition. He fights with the words in his chest and his throat and his suddenly dry mouth: “Sherlock – don’t –” His breathing is harsh even to his own ears, and he can’t tell if that’s a good sign or bad news, desirable or not.

“Don’t what?” Sherlock lifts his hand from its too-light touching but crowds closer, and John is blazingly aware of every point of contact connecting them, and just as achingly aware of all the space between them as well. Sherlock’s eyes narrow. “You’re worried about something – more than that – about what, though?” He frowns, then flexes his hand where it hovers between them.

“Well, this? Touch?” John is silent, and Sherlock presses on, “Why?”

Those eyes pierce into John’s, pinning him in place, the heat radiating from his too-close and yet not close enough hand almost unbearable against his skin – or is it ‘skin’? – or is it – “Sherlock, I – that’s not – I mean, I can’t. This – whatever this is, it won’t work. It can’t.”

Sherlock frowns. “Why not?” His hand doesn’t move one millimeter closer, but John feels as if all space is contracting between them. “Your skin still possesses nerve endings, your covering is similarly seeded with sensing fibres, and everything reports to your brain via neurons or neural relays – it’s touch. John. It’s designed to work.” Sherlock regards him, and John’s misgivings must be written all over his face. Sherlock blinks at John. “That’s not it – what is it you fear, then?” Sherlock asks, and the way he asks, with smallest of tilts to his head, softens that bluntness. “John?”

John looks away – to the side – up – anywhere but at the man pressing him for answers, answers he doesn’t have to questions he doesn’t want to think about. “It’s just – it won’t feel right. Sherlock.” His tongue blunders around, trying to find words that fit, the words that will make sense of it all. “It won’t be real.”

Sherlock’s eyes are on John, wide as they are at crime scene, unblinking. “Care to test that hypothesis?”

“What? No!”

“Has anyone ever done a thorough mapping of your sensory reporting?” Sherlock wants to know. He presses on at John’s telling silence. “Aren’t you even curious?”

John is barely breathing, his muscles clenched throughout his body, strain and stress and the fading grip of panic still stringing him bow-tight. But dammit, Sherlock is right, as usual. John hasn’t let anyone really engage with his implants, hasn’t even handled them himself much. He doesn’t want to – didn’t want to, until now, with Sherlock standing there, a question in his eyes and danger on offer. Curiosity and cuts, John thinks, and Sherlock must read some of his teetering conviction on his face, because he adds: “I’ll know what to expect, it won’t be like last time.”

And then, after John’s breathed through the silence, Sherlock asks, “May I?”

John feels overwhelmed, but also hollow, empty, like everything inside him is an echo. He closes his eyes, and the night is rattling inside him like a dying breath, and Sherlock – Sherlock is lying in the muck, but he’s also standing here, in the light, and John isn’t taking his pulse or feeling his breath, but maybe his hands still want to, craving that connection, that anchor. That touch. John swallows. “I – fine, alright.”

“Yes?”

“…Yes.” John braces himself. “Alright.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “Do it.” His bones feel hollow as metal tubing, and there’s a pang of something bittersweet, like regret, ringing through him, already. Preemptive.

“That’s three times,” Sherlock says softly, and it surprises John enough that he looks up at him. There’s a sad little upturn to the one corner of Sherlock’s mouth. “I’m going to touch you now.” That sad little upturn firms into a bit of mischief, roguish, daring. “Let’s see if we can’t get an
independent sensory report going."

“It won’t – that’s not how – ah!” John gasps, cut off by sudden sensation. Sherlock has grasped his thigh where it connects to his glute, broad palm flush against the skin and the scarring, long fingers aggressively clutching, digging into his flesh – except it’s not his flesh – except it is –

Sherlock’s eyes, vivid and sharp, are on John’s face when he manages to open his eyes. “I’d say this feels real,” he says, and there’s smugness in there, but a breathless haze softens his superiority.

“I –” John wants to explain the rush of sensation and data, which is just another form of sensation, or is it the other way around? John wants to say:

‘Augmentation circuits report temperature, pressure, texture – various forms of quantitative input. Sudden changes are reported as pain, since sudden changes are dangerous, and pain is the quickest way to encourage reflexive extraction.’

But all John can manage is: “Nng.”

Because this sudden touch is not reporting as pain.

John’s eyes are closed, and his voice is trapped behind his teeth, behind the hissing of his breath. Sherlock’s hands are a firm presence, one on his left hip, grasping cable and casing covered in ‘skin’ – the other grabbing muscle and fat layered under skin. The twin sensations are – they’re –

Too much, John thinks, but also, not enough, and he doesn’t know what to do with that. They’re vastly different, and yet perfectly symmetrical and similar, mirror grips on the disparate segments of his anatomy, and he can almost feel his brain switch gears and pick up speed. Making connections.

Sherlock is talking when John’s mind stutters back to clarity: “–eally remarkable how plastic the human brain is, how moldable. Sometimes, however, when a sensation is new, the brain gets confused and classifies it as pain. With some practice, careful and calculated reintroduction of a sensation can be accomplished.” Sherlock’s eyes blaze dark above the sharpness of his cheekbones. “The brain can be reprogrammed. What was a new and startling experience becomes rearranged, reinterpreted. It can become tolerable.”

His hand shifts and deepens the squeeze, crushing what softness is to be found in John’s thigh. “It can become pleasurable.”

John hisses at the slow slide of violin string callouses against the skin of his right hip. On his left, he can feel rough-edged fingers catching against the pliancy of the ‘skin.’ On a real leg the skin would have been thinner, more delicate, more sensitive just there – and yet, his ‘skin’ doesn’t seem to be having too much trouble reporting the subtleties of this touch, seems to be responding and responsive.

“Heel this,” Sherlock says, voice low and rough, his nails digging into the fleshy skin slip covering John’s leg, and in turn it does John the favour of reporting the sharpness and insistence of those nails. “Can you? Do you?”

“Yes,” John breathed, then louder, harsher, “yes.”

“Tell me,” Sherlock says, voice unfairly steady, “tell me to stop, and I will.”

John breathes and breathes in the sudden stillness, the space of Sherlock waiting, and tries to think, tries to see how this can go, one way or the other.

“John, do you want me to stop?” Sherlock asks again, and his voice is closer to a whisper, skirting the edge of unsure, and it’s more than John can bear.

He bites his lower lip, squeezes his eyelids shut, shakes his head twice, hard – and then Sherlock, having seen John do this but once, flawlessly slides his fingers into the seam at the top of John’s thigh, under his skin, over his cyberthetic leg –

“Ah!” John’s leg convulses, and his abdomen clenches. His cock gives a fierce twitch. Not possible, John thinks deliriously. Doesn’t matter. “Oh, god.” His toes are curling against the tile. John can feel his breath catching in his throat, like the beginning of a panic attack but without the actual panic. It’s like remembering an explosion but without the inherent cataclysm.

Sherlock is replicating the touches on John’s real leg near-flawlessly on his cyberthetic leg – the crossover, the mirror relay, the twin sensations blurring, blending, guiding – and John can almost feel the rewrite as it begins to take.

It hasn’t felt like this, touching hasn’t felt like this, since before John’s injury and surgeries and implants. The touches and caresses had sat limply upon his skin, or snarled down to the bone, a feeling of being fondled or groped by strangers even as he tried desperately to register pleasure. Now though, with Sherlock’s fingers pressing up against his sensing surface, there is light and heat, touch soaking deep, expanding upon the taste John had gotten when Sherlock touched his leg all those days ago.

It’s better, John realizes, because he knows Sherlock.

It’s terrifying for the same reason.
Muscles quivering, John lets go and slumps back against the wall. Both his legs are trembling for the exact same reason and that never happens, and – and –

And Sherlock is speaking. Sherlock is saying: “—responsive.” John wishes he could’ve heard the beginning of that sentence, but right now, Sherlock is looking at him strangely. For all the aggression and the certainty in his hands – his fingers – there is hesitation in his eyes. “You’ve been worried about this – this type of touch. Why?”

“This –” John breathes a shaky breath, “—doesn’t normally feel like this.”

“How does normally it feel?”

John gasps out a lungful of air. “Wrong.”

“How does normally it feel?”

John gasps out a lungful of air. “Wrong.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock says, and then ruins John’s coherency with another slide of fingers against sensing surface. His left hand is a warm presence against John’s whole side. “What’s changed, I wonder?” Sherlock is close enough that each exhale paints John’s lips with damp heat, achingly intimate even as Sherlock continues his scientific dissection of the moment: “If this normally feels wrong, then does it mean that this, right now,” Sherlock’s grip is white heat singing in John’s blood, “feels right?”

John’s nodding before he can think twice, drunk on touch, on rediscovery, on relief. He feels shattered, torn, cracked open.

He feels less broken than he has in a long time, and it’s dizzying.

“We should reinforce these neural pathways, then,” Sherlock murmurs, peering into John’s eyes as if he could see the interface if he could just catch it at the right angle. “Make sure this type of stimulus gets classified correctly.”

Inside – inside – John’s ‘skin’, Sherlock’s fingers are curling and uncurling, as if he were scratching a cat behind the ears, absentmindedly, and each scrape of nail over sensing surface sends a frisson of electricity cascading through John. He tries to think of how it is sensation interpreted as numbers, reported as data, translated back into sensation –

But he can’t. Not right now, not like this.

It simply feels – it feels –

John can’t stop the groan as Sherlock’s fingers slide deeper, down against his thigh, wriggling to move despite the ‘skin’s grip. Each brush of fingertips and callouses sets off a flashbang behind John’s eyes, at the base of his spine, along the knife edge of desire.

“Will you let me, John? I can do this, provide external stimulus without efferent copy. Nothing to confuse the interface.” His other hand is pressing warmth against John’s abdomen now, fingers just touching the button of his jeans. “Well…no more than necessary, anyway.” There’s that wry and daring note in his voice again, that familiar glint of risk-taking in Sherlock’s eyes in this decidedly unfamiliar situation. Wildness masking uncertainty.

John’s mind catches up with what he’d intended originally, and with what’s actually happening, about to happen. “Sherlock – Sherlock, stop,” John grinds out. “Stop!”

Sherlock halts immediately, then begins to withdraw his hand –

“Stop. Moving. Now,” John manages. His breathing is labored, his heart beat frantic. His skin shivers delicately under a growing sheen of sweat. “Please.”

Sherlock freezes, palm pressing against John’s hip, fingers still inside his ‘skin.’ “John—?”

“Don’t.” John shakes his head, trying to clear it. “This can’t – it – I can’t. I –” He sucks in a shuddering breath. The look on Sherlock’s face – one-sided quirk of the lips and raised eyebrow – catches him off guard. “What?”

“Stop worrying about can and can’t. What do you want, John? I say plainly now, what you want, I will give.” His breath is a ghosting warmth, his proximity a thunderstorm waiting to happen. “Should I list the obvious, all the seemingly inconsequential layers of details that negate your assumptions and undermine your unnecessary resolve?”

“No.” John can taste the sharpness in that word. Denial lies metallic and thick in his mouth and thoughts. This isn’t about what he wants. It can’t be. “That’s not –” John’s breath hitches. Oh god. His eyes close. Wants. This is not just about his body reacting – or if it was, it isn’t any longer.

John’s tempted to shake his head at this madness. It figures that right here and now, he would learn something about himself.He feels Sherlock watching him in the eternity of that moment before he starts breathing again.

John feels he should be more surprised – more shocked, but if he is, it’s a distant feeling, a diluted sense of “…Huh.” He’d never really bothered exploring his sexuality, and he’d never expected to have any reason – not before the war, when girls were the simple and delightful option, the non-confrontational choice, and definitely not after the war, because his condition comes with a personal expiration date. And therein lies the cutting edge of reality. John huffs out a breath, and if it’s a sigh, resigned and beaten, then what of it?
“It’s not about wanting,” John says with conviction. It’s about not being able to have. John swallows down the bitterness of that thought.

Sherlock snorts.

John frowns at him in question.

“I’m wondering,” Sherlock says, “just how long you’re going to keep grasping at excuses to keep from giving into what you so obviously need.” Although his fingers remain still against John’s not-flesh, the mounting heat trapped between palm and cyberthetic nerves threatens to swamp John’s focus.

He looks up, meets Sherlock’s eyes, and there’s a steadiness in them, something careful and considerate, for all that his words are full of disregard. It’s harder to think past now, caught like that, harder to avoid making the decision that chafes at reality’s restrictions. John doesn’t get to want anything – that way lies disappointment at the very least, heart break, or despair.

The truth remains – this can’t be about wanting. But needing…need’s a different story. The way Sherlock phrased it, John realises, opens up everything. This isn’t about Sherlock or even John’s wants – it’s a simple transaction comprised of need, of necessity.

John is merely experiencing a technical difficulty with his implants, and Sherlock is offering assistance – and that’s gotten the job done before – right? This will be no different, John tells himself, the decision at the tipping point within him.

It’s a risk, and a stretch, but –

Whatever reasons are queuing up to be listed, waiting to be weighed and spoken – those negations pale and fall away as John’s fingers twitch against the wall behind him, pulling him from the circles his mind is tracing even as it reminds him of the gruesome roots of this moment: the gasping, the running, the struggling. The buzzing air. Bodies twitching and lying still. Effie falling and Sherlock beneath John’s hands, the rising panic as his fingers search for a pulse, for breathing, for any signs of life. John can’t stop the shudder.

“John?”

John shakes his head. It is about need, now, and what John needs is distance – from the snarl of his memory, the tingling in his palms, the hollow worries within himself. There’s a darkness at the edges of this moment, at the edges of John, and it’s waiting for quiet, for calm, for opportunity.

John doesn’t want that stillness, that ambush, needs something to forestall it.

He needs to know: “You’ve never – have you? Are you?” His words are mess, but he has Sherlock’s attention.

“I haven’t had a reason to. Not in a very long time.” There’s a fierceness in the lines of his face, but with a measure of softness in his darkened eyes and parted lips. It’s surprise and hesitation and vulnerability, and it suddenly occurs to John that maybe Sherlock wasn’t expecting this either. Maybe the night and the madness caught him off guard, too. Whatever the cause, the leading steps, right now he’s saying: “But now I do, and you’d best decide if attempting to maintain the status quo is really worth all the effort.”

Reasons to say no are eroding, withering to dust even as John tries to seize them, a token attempt at protection – for who, he is not sure – but even that falls away as John realises: he needs, somewhat selfishly, to feel Sherlock shift and breathe and live beneath his hands, needs tangible proof that they are both alive so the world can continue to spin, horizons somersaulting through dark and light. And if John’s analyst is right, if her timetable is right – well, then John doesn’t have much time left, so what does any of this matter?

John thinks of late mornings, mumbled requests for toast, imperious demands for tea, of two sets of clicking keyboard keys as they both work through an evening. Easy, comfortable, a gentle rinse of time, warm, companionable.

“This could ruin everything.” John looks Sherlock square in the eyes. He’s aware, as he says it, that Sherlock has spent his life hating caution, injecting distraction, chasing catastrophe. Fleeing boredom down every avenue, no matter how dark and dangerous the path became. John wonders where he falls on that spectrum –

“How melodramatic, John,” Sherlock chides –

-- But John finds he doesn’t care. Not right now, anyway, not with those thoughts filling his mind with the inevitable darkness of the end, and right here, right now, a lazy surge of lightning is threatening, ready to twine around him, around them both perhaps, and –

And Sherlock’s face lights with triumph, because the damn man can read John’s face like an owner’s manual, and –

Sherlock’s hand slides just a little deeper, and John bites his lip again and meets the quicksilver eyes staring him down, and has to swallow back the surprise he feels at the question in those eyes, and then that question is slipping from that mouth, soft, so soft:

“John, can – will you let me?”
And John nods and closes his eyes and says, “Yes,” and says again, “yes, Sherlock,” because it seems so important, and then adds, “oh god, yes,” as those fingers slip lower –

And then both hands are claiming him, one pushing through the complicated mess of sensation that is his leg, mirror relay lighting up like a midnight lightning storm, and the other seeking, finding, and pressing against the growing hardness in John’s pants. That seems to cut loose John’s hands from where they’ve been anchored against the wall, and they come up, one sliding up Sherlock’s left pectoral to clasp his shoulder, and the other hovering uncertainly near his waist.

Grasping fingers against John’s thigh seem to cue his own fingers, and John finds he’s suddenly gripping Sherlock’s waist, lean and tense, and his other hand is sliding up to curl around the pale skin of his neck, and then those fingers are twining into the hair there, and the hand on Sherlock’s waist is slipping down to cover a sharp hip bone.

Everything is different, and because everything is different, nothing is getting filtered by body, brain, or interface – certainly not by prior experience. The lay of Sherlock’s abdominals, the Adonis line that’s more bone than muscle, the absence of breasts and soft curves – differences impossible to numerate, impossible to ignore, and compounding with each touch –

John’s breath stutters in his throat, he’s already gasping for air, as if his brain in overdrive burns through oxygen that much faster. Sherlock’s fingers, intimate as they are on his thigh, are almost shy to part the layers of cloth that separate his fingers from John’s mounting arousal.

With a start, John realizes his own fingers are skimming over the fabric of Sherlock’s trousers, and he’s almost proud that he’s managing to move his hands at all through the overwhelming sensation of unfiltered contact – but then Sherlock twitches his hips to the side, dislodging John’s touch while also managing to get both hands on target; Sherlock’s right hand slides low down the back of his cyberthetic thigh, curling his fingers to clench into the inner thigh, and simultaneously insinuating his left inside John’s pants, wrapping long fingers around John’s cock, at first just holding it firmly, then slowly starting to stroke. Not shy. Not hesitant. Not complicated, just –

John’s head snaps back and what should have been a low, guttural groan hitches in his throat before emerging as keening, high pitched and animal. He feels his legs tense, and a spasm turns into an aborted kick, his leg thrashing a bit. Sherlock’s hand tightens on his thigh, crushing him against the wall, compounding sensation –

And it’s too much; it’s threatening like thunder to strike and become pain, blossom into burning, but then Sherlock’s fingers pull pleasure forth from him, deft touches and confident pressure, swelling his thoughts, the rising panic, and keeping him balanced there, on the razor between pain and ecstasy, confusion between conflicting signals multiplying. A calculated flood. He can almost feel his limbic system ignite, can almost taste the sudden surge in endorphin saturation, and then the bizarre, sharp, electric pain that John’s leg is trying to report becomes muddled and fuzzy and vague, shifting through the spectrum to become something totally unexpected.

“Oh, god –”

John’s breathing is harsh and shallow, his eyes clenched shut, pinned to the wall by the lightning that is Sherlock’s touch, buoyed up by the heat that sinks into his bones even as it radiates from his skin, and those sensations meet and mix and meld.

It starts on the edge of perception, like a bass note vibrating, until it rises like a wave inside John’s body, a frequency function of his pulse and Sherlock’s touches, igniting nerve endings, swamping relays, and everything is reporting the same sense of overwhelming, of being overwhelmed.

It’s an ache at the base of his spine, a sharpness in his flesh, a bright surge of too much that shifts along the base of him, down to the core of him, a lightning tree rooting down his thighs, branching up his back, into his ribcage, twining through muscles and blood vessels and nerve endings, winding him tighter and tighter and tighter –

And then he’s expanding, his atoms are scattering, and he arches until his shoulder blades and his tail bone are the only points of contact with the wall, body a taut line of sensation, pulsar fire igniting as his pelvis twists and writhes, hips jerking against the press of Sherlock’s body and firm hands – until John slumps back against it and then forward into Sherlock’s arms, and finally down into gravity’s cradle. John can’t control his breathing, can feel his chest assembly ache with the unrelenting pace, but it doesn’t feel wrong, doesn’t feel like a limit reached, but like a limit exceeded and proven inaccurate.

His fingers are numb, and it takes him a moment to realize he’s fisted his hands in Sherlock’s shirt and hair. He can feel the man’s breathing and pulse. There’s a warmth on John’s belly, rapidly cooling. His face is warm and sheened with sweat, his mouth cold and parched with his harsh inhaling.

He releases his grip on Sherlock, only then realizing how shaky his arms are, how much his leg muscles are trembling in his sloppy crouch. In fact, now that he looks for it he finds all his muscles are quivering, from overload, from the taxation of intensity, and it feels like his nerve endings are singing, effervescent in his skin.

He slumps sideways, blinking blearily. “Sherlock –” he tries to say, but it’s a jumbled mess of sounds that escapes his lips.
He wants to say something. He should. He should be doing something, but his arms are nonresponsive to his commands. Even his lips stumble and fall silent, and all John can do is breathe and float and wait to sink back down, to settle into his trembling body.

It feels like a fever dream, and maybe it is, because how could this possibly have happened?

Maybe something has gone wrong, he thinks in the silence. Maybe that was too much.

His breathing kicks up a notch.

“John, it’s alright.”

That deep voice is closer (and rougher, perhaps?) than expected – Sherlock has crouched to look at John. Warm fingers delicately lift first one eyelid, then another, and John’s trapped by Sherlock’s inquisitive touches and thorough inspection. After a moment, Sherlock takes his pulse, lays a hand on his forehead. “Pupil dilation, temperature, and perspiration all fall within acceptable ranges, for the given situation and stimulation.” There’s a rustle as Sherlock’s weight shifts. “It’s alright,” he repeats.

John’s not arguing differently. Possibly, if he could get his breath back, he would. Probably not, though.

“John, are you alright?”

Arms hoist him up, hands grip his waist and shoulder, and then he’s stumbling as Sherlock guides his shaky steps to the living room and then settles him on the couch.

“Mmgh,” John manages. “M’fine,” he adds. Sherlock lets go and he collapses in an ungainly pile of muscles, bones, and augmentations, not knowing where he begins and ends in that mess. His heart is still pounding against metal and his ribs, but his breathing is more even now. A few mumbles escape him again, and then he says, “I’m sorry,” and he’s not sure why.

John gives in and sleeps.

If he dreams, he doesn’t remember.

Chapter End Notes

As always, you are welcome to come say hi on tumblr!

patternofdefiance
I'm back lovelies, and so are updates! No set schedule for them yet, but I doubt very much I'll go another year without updating (good lord my eyes were saucers when I saw the timestamping on that last one XI)

And of course the rest of this comment was eaten during posting: adding back the love on the fly:

Thank you everyone who has read or reread this during this last dryspell of a year - your kind words and lovely messages have helped me stay motivated while trying to get the whole of this beast done - which was a success, by the way! The rest of MaR now exists and is being beta'd in chunks of varying sizes ^_^

This work continues to be beta'd - as I continue to be so fortunate to say - by the peerless tiltedsyllogism, who is a guide and and inspiration and a driving font of excellence.

Endless thanks also to the AntiDiogenes gang, who are a safety net even when I am absent, distant in my mind and balancing on the tightwire that is the stress and uncertainty of Real Life. Y'all are tops <3<3<3

And finally, a heads up: tags will be added from time to time as new chapters/material go up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John wakes to an empty flat. It’s quiet – in an unnerving way. It feels like some background constant has switched off while he wasn’t paying attention. His eyes gum and blink open, and light is a sharp greyness. There’s a jumble of knife-edged thoughts and memory shrapnel, and John avoids looking at them directly.

First thing he does is take a shower. The water helps, the rush of it, the drumming sound of it, the feel of it sluicing across and over and down his skin. Skins. Skin and ‘skin.’ John winces, veers away from that sense, from the complication of that recall (hands on skin, not his hands, not his skin, but ‘skin’).

He stands and stands under the hot rinse. He picks up the soap, and it feels strange in his hands, much more present, somehow much more three dimensional than it has before. Odd. He soaps his body, his leg (but not his other leg), his armpits, his chest, his belly – and lower, lower.

He stops, and the water pours over him, pours away the suds and the sweat and the night.

He doesn’t feel like sinking to the floor, he doesn’t feel like scrubbing until his skin is red, he doesn’t feel like sitting under the spray until it runs too cold to stand.

He doesn’t feel like falling apart.

That would have been simpler than what he feels.

Outside, there is a rare and blessed towel, both clean and dry. There’s also a patch of grime on the tiles, and it takes John a minute to realise why it’s there, what’s not there anymore (crusted denim, grimed shirt, remnants of the night before), and he doesn’t know how to feel about that at all. He tries to hold the innocuous moments of the night before in the scoop of his mind, but cannot, not without inviting the other parts along. He shudders and looks away, tries to think of something, anything, else.

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Outside, there is a rare and blessed towel, both clean and dry. There’s also a patch of grime on the tiles, and it takes John a minute to realise why it’s there, what’s not there anymore (crusted denim, grimed shirt, remnants of the night before), and he doesn’t know how to feel about that at all. He tries to hold the innocuous moments of the night before in the scoop of his mind, but cannot, not without inviting the other parts along. He shudders and looks away, tries to think of something, anything, else.

Where is Sherlo – No.

John spares a glance for his mobile – no waiting messages. He puts it down after a moment.

Breakfast happens next, on autopilot, and if it weren’t for the bright flare of cheddar, unexpectedly sharp in flavour, John would wonder if it had happened at all. But crumbs and aftertaste exist: evidence.

He washes his dishes, dries his hands, and is then once more faced with the silence of the flat.

John stands in the middle of all the space and tries to think what needs doing next. The flat’s reasonably clean, so he decides to find his laptop where it’d been left last (under the sofa, behind an orphaned left shoe). He might as well type up the case notes while he waits for the world to click back into place.

He might as well check his blog, too, and email while he’s at it, and so he pulls those tabs up while he waits for the case details to trickle back to him.

His mobile is a magnet for his eyes, perched so close on the arm of his chair. Should he send a
text? And ask what? Where are you, Why are you out – much too… needy. What exactly happened last night?

What did last night mean?

John wrenches his thoughts away. He wonders what time it is.

And that’s why John notices the calendar, glancing to check how long he was asleep, and that’s why John notices the date.

The breath punches out of his chest, and then his email finishes loading, and there’s an email confirming exactly what he’s just realised:

J. H. Watson,

Your terminal session for Augmentation Adjustment Therapy and Analysis is scheduled for this coming Thursday. There will be a full review and case closure at this time.

Should you seek to extend analysis or observation, there will be time for discussion.

Please confirm your attendance. Cancellations must give at least 24 hours’ notice.

--E. Thompson

John blinks, hands hovering over the keys, a drumskin tightness keeping them in place even as he flexes the left.

Oh, he thinks – and before he can get much further, before the next word – the next thought – can slot into place, the slamming of the downstairs front door rattles through 221B, through the floorboards beneath his socked feet, through John’s bones.

Accompanied by a blast radius of coat and scarf and agitated muttering, Sherlock is just suddenly in the flat again. John barely catches ‘Lestrade’ and ‘Mycroft’ amidst sneers of ‘utter incompetence’ and ‘cannot fathom’ –

And then he’s out again, a thick file from a stack on the desk in his gloved hand. John stands – no; is standing – everything about him ready to follow, it seems, except his thoughts, thoughts lagging behind, always it seems, this time caught on ‘Oh,’ when Sherlock calls up the stair well, “You’re not coming. Stay here, John!”

The door slams shut. If it rattles inside John, he doesn’t notice, numb to it. His socked feet carry him to the window, and he watches a black car pull up to the curb just as Sherlock reaches it. Sherlock gets in without a glance back at 221B. It pulls away.

John rocks back from the window.

The flat is empty, the flat is quiet.

Oh, John thinks, and: Stay here.

The flat isn’t quiet: the empty refrigerator hums, Mrs. Hudson’s radio is on downstairs, and the wall clock ticks (unevenly since Sherlock got a-hold of it that once) –

Sod this, John decides. Distantly, distantly aware of the edges of his shock, his anger, his hurt if he’s being honest.

He goes for a walk.

Chapter End Notes

It looks like I’ll be around a bit more frequently in fanspace again, so feel free to come say hi on tumblr! My username is, of course: patternofdefiance
Contemplation

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies, here as promised, another update without having to wait a whole year! Huzzah!

As always, my thanks to tiltedsyllogism for her sterling guidance and cheerleading, and to the AD crew even though I hardly have time to pop in as much as I'd like.

The world outside is jagged, sharp edges to light, to sound, and John’s steps are closer to a march, his elbows sharp angles as they swing. His mind’s not much better, thoughts a mixture of bruised and looking for something to break.

John can’t even find words for the maelstrom of thoughts within him. There are only the momentary flashes of anger, humiliation, hurt – but no way to make sense of where they begin and end, chasing themselves relentlessly behind John’s frown and set grimace. A sharpness stabs into John, lancets through his softer tissues each time his mind circles around to Sherlock – but thinking of his analyst, of her auto-sent email notification, that spreads like a numbing frost through John’s chest, until he’s sure each of his breaths must cloud into the damp air in front of him.

Slowly though, the medicine of walking seeps into John, softens his sharpness, softens the world as it passes him by, and after a minute or so the tightness in his chest and throat recedes. That’s when John notices how quiet his body feels, how calm, underneath the anger. No buzzing, no feedback, no pops as delays are rectified.

John nearly stops dead in his tracks, but his legs keep swinging, know how to walk better than he does, and his hands tuck themselves into his jacket pockets, and with his head tucked down against the chill breeze, John sinks into the foot traffic and just goes.

Walking is suddenly both strange and familiar – he’s constantly aware of the noiseless quality of his body, of his implant-to-flesh interface. He spends so much time focusing on the silence that it takes a bit before he notices the little brushes of sensation as he passes along, tingling at the base of his neck, a fizzy effervescence in his cerebellum.

It gets harder to ignore, and then he finds the pattern, and it’s impossible to deny: John can sense the interface fields around him. When it had happened with Mona, he’d assumed it was because they’d spent so much time together at one point that he was somehow attuned to her. With the situation in the tunnel, his jangling awareness hadn’t been about him, or his particular senses: it was because someone had cranked up the signals and was broadcasting at a frequency to affect all augmentation recipients.

But this is different. He’s aware of the links and fields around him like he would be of the sound of running water, the push of a breeze.

It’s annoying at first, like becoming aware of a ticking clock in a room after several minutes of not hearing it, but he finds he can tune out the extra stimulus if he wants. He also finds that he doesn’t want to – knowing exactly how many others there are in the vicinity makes him feel just a little less different – although that doesn’t stop the ache inside John as the morning roars and echoes between his ribs.

But, however John feels about last night and what seem to be its repercussions, he has to admit: there’s a wholeness inside him that wasn’t there before, as if his brain-to-implant information relay is performing at greater than normal capacity. He doesn’t know how that could be, it’s not like the relay is a muscle; flexing it, working it, doesn’t improve it.

Shouldn’t improve it, at any rate.

And yet, something has changed. His body and its accoutrements are…quieter. Reaching with his sense to feel where the interference had been strongest had felt right. Strange, yes, and god he could have gone his whole life without needing that skill, but it had worked. He’d willed it, and it had happened.

That must be the key, John decides. While the information systems are not capable of adjustment, the mirror relays are, so his own brain must have restructured the way it receives sensation from his implants. The whole assembly feels responsive, alive in a way that is new and would be unsettling if it didn’t feel so integrated. So normal. In fact, the limb itself is so sensitive that the ‘skin’ around it feels cloying, unnatural, stifling if John focuses on it – something he’d never tried before. Never wanted to before.

Not since –

Well.

Had Sherlock known this would happen? Is this why he’d – done what he’d done last night? Was
it some sort of bizarre, boundary-ignoring gift?

The more John thinks of the results, the more he considers the original conditions behind this catalyst. This sort of experimentation, at least at clinical level, would very much appeal to Sherlock, wouldn’t it? The chance to play with a brain’s perception of reality – what a perfect diversion that mus’t’ve been for him, and so soon after the last case, too. Granted, it normally took Sherlock a few days post-case to work up the level of boredom necessary for him to indulge in his more-than-just-a-bit-not-good experiments…

As for the messy, physical component to this information gathering endeavour, perhaps Sherlock had managed to overcome his revulsion of all things pedestrian (like human contact) for the sake of the data. After all, Sherlock had never been very tactile (right?) – but for results, Sherlock had always been willing to forgo all sorts of things: meals, hygiene, social niceties, fitting in – to name just a few.

Heat rises in John’s neck, an angry shame colouring his cheeks as he stares away from the crowd into emptiness. Sherlock hadn’t climaxed – of that John was sure; the man had barely allowed John to hang on for dear life, never mind reciprocate those intimate touches. He’d coaxed John through different stages of feeling, through the many levels of sensation warring within him, and when John had sagged, wrecked, rewritten, undone to the floor, Sherlock had left.

Exhaustion and pleasure are hazy filters in John’s memory, and he finds he cannot recall, exactly, Sherlock’s expressions during or after. The more he tries and fails, the more he thinks it might be a kindness not to remember. He finds he can picture the intensity before clearly enough, the sharp interest and vital high that was Sherlock facing down a puzzle and a challenge.

The next clear recollection is waking up on the couch, alone, feeling worse than he had in a long time. If only he hadn’t also felt better than he had in a long time.

God.

John fists his hands in his pockets. Not such a challenging puzzle after all.

John’s feet carry him along his usual cool-down path, a meandering, circuitous loop of the various gardens and greens – but today he runs out of steam halfway across the first of the Hanover foot bridges in Regent’s Park. He slows down, feels formless despondency settle like silt into his joints, his veins.

After a second jogger nearly plows into him, John turns to face the shallow stream, forearms on the railing. He’s tucked just close enough to the railing that he can see his blurred and muddied reflection below himself in the water, a lackluster shadow staring back up at him, too shapeless to properly judge him.

Footsteps pass along behind him – trainers in quicktime, brogues in a shuffle, and one or two sets of impractical heels clicking along. Regular people going about their regular days while John stares down, cannot see his own eyes clearly enough to meet or avoid them.

John heaves a sigh, sniffs in a breath, his hands clasped in front of him, his thumbs worrying each other’s edges. His neck aches, his eyes squint through the meager daylight. A fine set of interlinking ripples distort the water’s surface even more, briefly – and then they, too, are gone.

John’s fingers tighten against each other suddenly, a flash of anger – at Sherlock, at the email, at himself – and then, just as quickly, the anger dissolves into something acid and crumbling. John let’s his head hang low for a bit, knows none of this is helping, not the stewing, not the seething, not the doubt – but what else is there?

How could he find the words to explain this to someone? And who could he trust enough to tell it to? Anger slices through again, chased off by a feeling of stark helplessness yet again.

There’s a lull in foot traffic, and John sighs. He’s treading water in his thoughts, and he knows it. He’s solving nothing here, and he should be taking steps to at least talk to Sherlock about all this. There’s not much he can do to sort or solve the rest of his life – or what’s statistically left of it, at any rate – but this one thing, what’s between him and Sherlock – this John will try.

Whatever happened to bollocks it up – whatever he might have done to make it worse – he’ll try to put it to rights.

John shrugs against the snug of his jacket, resettles his hands in the pockets, and then sets a course for Baker Street.

Chapter End Notes

Want to find me on tumblr? My name is patternofdefiance there, too - come say hi!
Chapter Summary

As always, my thanks to tiltedsyllogism for her endless help, to consultingsmartarse for holding my hand as I edited this chapter in particular, and to everyone still reading and commenting. <3<3<3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He’s only just reached the roadways again, is making his way steadily along Park Road, when a dark car with tinted windows pulls up beside him.

John sighs as he comes to a stop. He’s really not in the mood.

When the door opens, Mycroft’s unctuousness almost radiates from the open doorway, and John has to steel himself from reeling back.

“John,” Mycroft says, “I just so happen to be going your way. Care for a lift?”

John doubts it’s an offer, and doesn’t like the odds of refusing. “Ta,” he says tightly, sliding into the seat opposite the British Government. “Just as long as you haven’t forgotten where I live. I’ll give you a hint – it isn’t an abandoned warehouse.”

Mycroft bestows one of his little smiles, and the door closes. The car drives on.

This can’t last too long, John reasons; after all, Baker Street is only two blocks away.

“So John,” Mycroft begins, leaning back in his seat with his hands folded just so across his stomach, and John instantly realises his mistake: this will last exactly as long as Mycroft wants it to. “We haven’t had a moment to catch up about the other night.”

John says nothing, but he feels his eyes tighten. God, it wouldn’t solve anything, but the urge to lash out at something, anything, seems to crystallise into a much more specific need to punch the man opposite him.

“Sherlock, of course, is not especially forthcoming on the subject,” Mycroft continues, either unaware of or unaffected by John’s mood. “Of course, it’s not enough to keep me from knowing the general shape of things, but there are details missing, naturally.” Mycroft’s fingers flick at a speck of dust on his trouser leg. “Important details.” Mycroft’s eyes are steel behind his diplomat’s mask.

John sits ramrod straight. He knows where this is leading. “No,” he says. It’s flat, uninflected, and seems to hang in the air after he says it. His knuckles creak as his hands flirt with balling into fists.

“Be reasonable. You neglected to allow the response team technicians to run their diagnostics – had you done so then, this conversation wouldn’t be necessary. Had you or Sherlock given us access to whoever it is that’s been third-wheeling on this case, none of this would be necessary.”

Mycroft’s mouth tightens into a complicated little moue. “But you didn’t.”

“Stating the obvious,” John notes. “You must be desperate.”

“Come now, John, don’t be blind. Interference relays, coercing augmentation recipients for nefarious purposes, a certain lingering madness, don’t tell me you don’t see the pattern.”

“I see it,” John says. He doesn’t add that he saw it that night, that he knows he’ll see it, that mad snake of a man, in his dreams in nights to come – but the momentary triumph in Mycroft’s gaze tells him the man saw it for himself in John’s eyes.

Mycroft inspects his fingernails, making a show of how relaxed his hands are. “Retrieval from your interface will give us a clearer picture of events as they transpired that evening. I’ll even have the techs work within a certain timestamp to allow you what little privacy you imagine yourself to have.”

John flushes hot then cold. He clenches his left hand tighter. “I said no.”

Mycroft frowns, a momentary thing. “Your stubbornness is aiding the enemy.”

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John takes a breath, and all but snarls, “Oh yes, because the last retrieval you did yielded amazing results. Stopped all this from happening, did it? The killings, the damage? Thank god you managed to prevent all that, then.” He can feel his face twisting, showing Mycroft how deep this goes, how deep it cuts, and that’s so far from wise, but John cannot help it, not now.

“‘A minor miscalculation—’”

“A minor – a minor miscalculation? That’s what this was to you?” John shifts forward in his seat.
“You aren’t even concerned in the slightest about the people who were used, who died. This is still about that leak.”

Mycroft says nothing, simply regards John.

“Stop the car, we’re done,” John says.

“John, see reason –”

“The answer is no, Mycroft, and it will continue to be no. So,” he says, throat tight from suppressed rage, “where does that leave us?”

Mycroft straightens his cuffs, but John can see the barely suppressed huff of a sigh behind the gesture. “Pull up,” Mycroft instructs, and then the car is stopping, and the door is opening. Speedy’s sandwich shop and the brass letters of 221 Baker Street beckon.

“Ta very much,” John says curtly, and then he’s out.

John is very much not expecting Sherlock to be home, but then if Mycroft had time for him, he must not have been harrying his brother.

“John, where were you?” Sherlock demands upon John’s entry. His voice is sharp, nearly a hiss. “And what is the point of a mobile phone if you’re going to leave it here every time you storm off?!” He flings the mobile in question at John, who catches it out of reflex, snagging it neatly from the air without thought, leaving John free to focus on his sudden abundance of anger:

“Feel like talking now, do you?” John asks, and he’s still keyed up from Mycroft, from the unsettling walk, from the morning and the night preceding.

“What?” Sherlock asks.

“Sure you don’t have someplace else to be right now?” John’s fingers tighten around the mobile in his grasp.

Sherlock’s brow furrows. “John, I am neither responsible for Mycroft’s comings or goings, nor his insistence on my involvement.”

“Oh, that’s right, you fought back! I completely forgot!” John snorts. “We’ll have to wax the floor to cover the scrapes where they dragged you kicking and screaming to that car!”

Sherlock blinks into a deeper frown and shakes his head, his curls shuffling in his hands. “What?”

“And another thing: why even go if you’re not going to tell him what he’s after?”

Stillness flashes into Sherlock, the result as obvious and dramatic as if he’d shouted or dropped a glass. “Mycroft spoke to you – you were with Mycroft right now – and he asked you about last night.”

John pulls in a breath. “He’s after another retrieval.”

Sherlock’s eyes are ice, suddenly, colder and sharper than Mycroft’s had been. “No,” he says.

“John – you didn’t –” There’s a cutting edge of despair to Sherlock’s tone, and it kills the cold of John’s previous words, has him reaching for a more familiar tone – exasperation instead of fury:

“No of course not, you sod, but that didn’t stop him from trailing me and trying and –”

“You were supposed to stay home!” The wild look in Sherlock’s eyes stops John short as much as the interruption.

“Oh, really?” John asks, and with each moment his voice gains momentum, pitch. “Why? Because you asked me to and explained that Mycroft might be on the prowl? Or because you ordered me to and then disappeared?”

Sherlock’s eyes widen. “John –”

“Seriously, Sherlock, what the hell?” John struggles to take a deep breath. “After last night –” and that’s as far as John gets before his words run out, the end skittering off into a steadily lengthening silence.

“I thought you wanted – that.” Sherlock almost seems defensive as he says it, and also disappointed, but mostly he’s keeping his voice even and his face still. Lock down mode.

And just like that John realises: last night felt off because it was. John had spent his day frustrated and upset – god, what had been going through Sherlock’s mind? Now it makes sense, and god how John wishes it didn’t: Sherlock hadn’t let John reciprocate, because he hadn’t wanted –

John fights back a sudden wash of nausea, images from last night roiling in his mind, his stomach sour in sick empathy. So Sherlock hadn’t – it hadn’t – been mutual.
Oh god.

John groggs for words – any words that could help, or at least end this churning silence. “That –” he tries, clears his throat, then persists, “that shouldn’t have been about –.” John can’t, he cannot say himself into this sentence, swallows, amends, “– one person wanting something, Sherlock –” John tastes bitter bile, remembering Sherlock’s evasion of his reciprocal touch, “just one person getting his fill of – of touch – and –” John breaks off, because god, he can’t – it can’t be like this.

He feels hollow to the bones, feels like a film of filth suspended over nothing. John knows he can’t quite keep the revulsion from his features, knows Sherlock sees when his eyes dart away from John’s face, his shoulders hunched protectively.

Is this how it begins? John wonders. Is this how malfunction creeps in? He pinches his eyes shut, feels the rest of his words pile up in his throat, choking him. He swallows, and his throat aches with it, but he can’t get anything out.

Into the silence, Sherlock clears his throat. He sounds as unbalanced and unsure as John’s ever heard him, and that’s his doing, his fault.

“I’m – ah – going to Tokyo for a few days,” Sherlock says after another long strangle of silence. His voice is muted, somehow, as if the hush of his words are fighting to push into the room. “To answer your earlier question.” He clears his throat again.

The shock hits John like a wave, even through the crust of his self-disgust, and after a moment of absolute tumult and disorientation, he feels strangely calm. That’s a bit extreme, isn’t it? he thinks, even as part of him thinks in mute horror. But it makes perfect sense. He doesn’t say anything though – at least he doesn’t think he does. He just stands and stares at Sherlock, who isn’t looking at him. He has a feeling that somewhere up on the surface something mad is happening, but he’s too deep to react or respond.

“Oh,” he says, finally, and by then Sherlock has already grabbed a carry-all and is halfway to the door. Right now, John thinks. He meant right now. After a moment, John realises he must have heard and not registered the honk of the car waiting outside. Sherlock pauses in the doorway, actually looks back, mouth open, and then stops himself.

John can’t help it, himself, the moment – he meets Sherlock’s eyes. He feels as if he’s swallowed too much water, salt burning at the corners of his mouth, his nostrils, his eyes.

He doesn’t understand, and Sherlock doesn’t speak, and then Sherlock is gone.

It isn’t until a few hours and three texts later that John realises Sherlock left his mobile behind.

Chapter End Notes

As always, you can find me on tumbl under the same user name!
If John thought waking up to an empty 221B had been eerily quiet, it’s nothing compared to feeling the stillness steal over the flat in the minutes after Sherlock’s departure. Nothing changes, but it’s as if the walls settle just a little closer, and some of the warmth seeps out through the seams of the flat.

Outside, the day settles into being coldly bland, damp chill blown in thoroughly with the wind. John shivers, realises that he’s not yet warmed up from his walk, that the heating isn’t on, and Mrs. Hudson doesn’t seem to be baking today, or home at all for that matter.

John shifts his weight, and a creak sounds through the flat like a hollow cough.

Well, John thinks, with a dip of his chin and a clench of his fist. First things first: he sets the kettle to boil, then goes about getting the fiddly heating to actually do its job. It takes less time than usual, than he expected – than he was hoping, to be honest.

It’s barely afternoon, and John is at loose ends.

He lets his indecision sink him down into his chair. His laptop is on the side table, still open where he’d left it, but powered down and auto-locked. Might as well answer emails now that the major shocks of the day have happened, he decides, and sends out the confirmation email to his analyst. He answers a few questions from his blog, fetches the post, and has a look through it. Some bills – none overdue, that has’t happened in a while, thanks to John and Mrs. H keeping an eye on Sherlock’s habit of picking up letters, walking around with them a bit, and then dropping them in obscure locations when some great idea steals his attention away – and a few pieces of correspondence for Sherlock.

Two seem like private clients’ inquiries (Please, Mr. Holmes, you’re the only one that can help me… – or something along those lines), but one is a very official-looking packet, designed to pad whatever documents it’s transporting. It seems awfully heavy and full, and the writing on it is in German and messily angular. John raises his eyebrows, but sets it aside after checking it doesn’t need to be stored in any specific way.

He drops the letters for Sherlock on the desk and turns his back, trying to quell a wince, then retreats to his chair once more to pay bills and write out an invoice for Mrs. H’s records. Her immaculate and detailed financial files had surprised John the first time he’d seen her whip out her ledger to tally up the damages to add to their rent after one of Sherlock’s more flamboyant forays into explosives, but John can’t fault her for the habit – apparently her husband’s trial had hinged upon proving that he cooked his books. Mrs. Hudson’s careful and hard-won note-keeping and reckoning had exposed her husband’s illicit expenditures for all to see. The way Sherlock had explained it –

John stops that train of thought before it can get much further along. The pang that accompanies the memory of Sherlock’s offhanded explanation of facts and procedure, while his fondness of Mrs. Hudson was full on display, is too much for John in this confused space after – after what happened.

And didn’t happen.

John closes his eyes, tries not to drown under the weight of the apology he’d failed to give.

He tries to distract himself from himself for the rest of the afternoon with varying levels of success – he cleans, he tidies, he orders take out. He eats while watching telly, uninterrupted by deductions and scoffing sighs. He cannot remember what he watches or eats. Everything seems hollow and mechanical.

He goes to bed much earlier than he normally would.

Going to bed early is a mistake.

Effie is a lot more talkative, in the darkness behind John’s eyelids, which is also the darkness of his room, which is also the darkness of the abandoned tunnel.

“Go to him,” she says, voice like oil, like decay. “There’s a good boy, go to him.”

John doesn’t want to – he doesn’t even want to listen, doesn’t want to hear this voice, tries
desperately to distract himself from its slick insertion into his skull. John hadn’t particularly been paying attention to how the ground and walls felt, but now he feels everything like a sting against his palms, like a rough ache against his fingers. He holds tight to that – it’s better than the miasma of that voice.

“Go,” Effie whispers. It sounds wet and raw.

John can feel the weight against his chest, the static buzz against his ears, his eyes, his thoughts. Sharpness crawls along him, along his skin, his edges, mechanical, organic, decomposing.

“Go to him,” Effie says, a sharp tilt to her chin as her voice lilts upwards, singsong sinister, and when she smiles, it’s with his teeth, his eyes, black and deader than when the bullet had disassembled half her face.

John doesn’t say anything, mute with the weight of the explosives restricting his movement, his breath. His hands are clenched so tightly he cannot seem to let go of the grit and the ache he’s clutching – but then the grit and the ache change, and there’s the scratch of heavy wool against his palms, between his fingers, and John still cannot say anything, can only cling to wool lapels and feel as if some important moment is seeping away.

He cannot look away from Effie’s borrowed eyes, the forced surgery of her smile, even though those eyes flick down and that smile widens.

“He’s waiting,” she says, and then she’s closer, the fetid smell of her reaching out, her flesh about to touch John, and he can just barely keep from saying yes, from following her where she wants, and if she touches him, it’ll be done, John will be lost, and he has to stay here, has to hold this cloth in his hands, or nothing will matter –

“John,” Effie says, and it’s his voice –

John jerks awake with a shout, his stomach cramping from tightened muscles, his jaw aching from clenching. He’s sweaty, and for a moment everything feels wrong. The sheets are too rough, his skin is too clammy, the night darkness is gritty against his eyes.

With a frustrated noise just this side of a sob, John falls back, waits for his breathing to even out, for his heart to stop hammering in the tin drum of his chest. He can feel the polymer tubing of his replacement aorta creak as his heart thrashes. His fingers struggle to let go of where they’ve locked onto and into his sheets.

Christ, what a night.

John finally disengages his grip, runs his hands over his face, sips air through the sieve of his fingers, just so he can hear proof that he’s actually breathing.

Aside from his strained panting and the hollow echoes of his chest, everything is quiet.

It takes John a moment to realise there’s no violin music filling up the flat from below. There’s no simmering experiment, there’s no shuffle and rustle of blue-robed madman pacing and muttering.

John should relish the silence, the caress of soundless air. The peace and the quiet.

He doesn’t. It’s hateful. It feels like the blankness of reality after a pleasant dream, somehow worse than the nightmare that had woken John. It feels like an inevitable void, arrived ahead of schedule.

John turns on his side, punches his pillow into submission, and uses it to block out the nothing.

Won’t last more than a few days, John consoles himself. It can’t. On the heels of that thought comes another: What if it does?

Sleep is slow to return that night.

Chapter End Notes

I am once more slightly active on my tumblr, which is under the same user name, so feel free to say hi there ^_^
Hello all! Thank you for your patience as my busy-ness tides wax and wane. As they are currently (sort of) waning, here: an update!

My thanks, as always, to tiltedsylllogism for her ability to save me from my many faux pas habits, and forever to consultingsmartarse for lighting a (loving, supportive) fire under my arse — in other words: the STATIC series is going to be podfic’d by the illustrious and spectacular consultingsmartarse, and I am /beside myself/ with excitement! :D

I cannot overstate how much I appreciate everyone's support and patience in this - y'all rock!

<3<3<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John realizes the next day that he doesn’t know how long Sherlock will be gone, which – well, that puts a damper on his half-hearted attempts at optimism of the night before.

He checks Sherlock’s phone after it buzzes demandingly for the fourth time – it’s Lestrade, leaving text after text. He’s just about to respond to one of the texts (all of them along the lines of Where are you, we need your help with increasing amounts of urgency and frustration) when his own phone rings.

He picks it up: Lestrade. He answers:

“Hello?”

“John, Christ, thanks for answering – can you hand me over to Sherlock?”

John fights his jaw loose. “He’s not here.”

“No? Then where the hell is he?” There’s a huff as Lestrade sighs. “I’ve got a hell of a situation here, and, god help me, I need him.”

“Well, he’s not available,” John says at last. He doesn’t know how much of Sherlock’s trip is supposed to be public knowledge, so he settles for clarifying: “He’s out of the country.”

“Sorry – he’s what?”

“Travelling, Greg. He’s not in. He won’t be in. God knows when he’ll be back.”

“…Well, shit.”

Yes, John thinks, but doesn’t say anything.

John carries that conversation, the silence after they rung off, with him up into his room. He feels it acutely, the lack of answers – for Lestrade, for himself – even as he pulls on track pants and a vest, the motions smooth, an odd counterpoint to his jagged thoughts.

He has stretches to do, has been meaning to do, but there’s hardly been a moment until now. John sighs and shuts his bedroom door for privacy, before realizing how unnecessary that is, and then wondering if he should do them downstairs, where there is more room and light – but no.

Bringing his body and its needs into shared space of the living room right now seems…wrong. Unsavoury.

John takes a deep breath and tries to move past that feeling and the ghosting memories it tries to raise. He begins his warm up, rotating through shoulders and hips, feeling his way through his range of motion. There’s less noise in the sensory feedback, and John realises that he’s still waiting for that silver lining to fade – but it doesn’t seem to be.

It seems unfair that he should feel so much better because of an event that drove Sherlock to flee halfway around the world on the fumes of his own discomfort.

John shakes his head and tries the next set of exercises: balancing on his foot and then on his cybtherapy, letting the relays do their job – and this, too, feels better. More natural. John keeps expecting it to disappear, to regress, and that means that every time it doesn’t, he is caught slightly off guard. Overwhelmed and confused.

John swallows past the tightness in his throat, his breath coming just a hair shorter than the exercise would necessitate.
There’s a touch of panic, of apprehension – surely this cannot last? – and also guilt and gratitude – and guilt specifically for feeling the gratitude, because what John really owes Sherlock is an apology. For everything – for inflicting his particularities on him and his life, for daring to reach for the companionship he knows, statistically and societally, is not feasible, for what happened last night, for what didn’t.

Boundaries, he remembers. Their discussion about boundaries could probably have stood to be slightly more in depth – after all, John had set his – rudimentary as they may have been at the time – had been adamant that Sherlock hear him out, but had he extended the same to Sherlock? What lines had John crossed, never knowing, never prompting Sherlock to clarify? They should have talked – how or about what, John isn’t sure, but he knows they should have – long before now, before last night, before too late.

John finishes his exercises, finishes his day with leftover takeout and another dose of mind-numbing crap telly.

He tries not to think about Sherlock, tries not to feel any of the thousand ways he does, and goes to bed exhausted – but he mostly manages it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on (a sporadically active) tumblr under the same user name - anyone who wants to can drop by and say hello!
Glory be, another update!

As always, thanks to tiltedsyllogism for beta'ing this beast, and consultingsmartarse for cheering me along.
Thank you to everyone who is reading and commenting!

John wakes up less than four hours later, groggy and disoriented, his eyelids sliding like sandpaper across his eyes with each confused blink.

His hand is reaching for his mobile before he consciously puts together the light and the buzzing noise that woke him – and then his throat is one big, unresponsive lump, because it’s –

Unknown Caller

John blinks, swallows. Sherlock left his phone at Baker Street when he left, so maybe, just maybe –

Just when he gets it to his ear, the silence there convinces him he’s missed the call, that it’s gone to voicemail, to a message box he never checks and cannot remember the password to – but then there’s a shaky breath and a voice:

“Uh– John Watson? Doc?”

John sits up straight in bed, his hand tightening around the phone. “Magpie?”

“You said I – we –” Magpie gulps. “We – we could use your help right about now. Please.”

It’s very late – or very early, depending – and the trains aren’t running. Not the ones John needs, anyway. Instead, he orders a cab and takes it as far as he dares, before telling the cabby to drop him five blocks away, paying and tipping, and then walking in the wrong direction until the cab disappears around a corner.

When the taillights disappear, John takes off at a run towards the tattoo parlour, throwing glances back along the way he came, half-wishing for some of Mona’s upgraded eyesight. If any scrapper gangs see him, the determined set of his jaw must warn them off – or perhaps they know how to spot a man with a gun tucked in the back of his jeans, under the hem of his jacket.

John curves his path to run along the dilapidated shop front, lets his fingers slide along under the ledge – and there it is, a little dent, a button nestled inside. He presses it as he passes.

Leicester is already opening the door when John pounds up to it, and he’s ushered inside then almost pushed through to the back of the shop.

“Who – what?” John asks, but Leicester shakes his head.

“Maggie’ll fill you in – I’m monitoring our perimeter.”

And with that, John is just about chucked down the stairs to Maggie’s domain, as Leicester turns abruptly to dart back to the front of the parlour. Perimeter? John wonders, but puts the thought aside to focus on getting down the stairs in the semi dark without adding himself to the casualty list.

Maggie is frantic when John finally stumbles into the grimy, cable-strewn room.

“John – thank you for coming – here. This is Gina.”

Gina is skin and bones, except where she’s metal and polymer. She can’t be more than eighteen.

The kid’s visible injuries tell John more than he wants to know. Bruises, torn skin, ripped fingernails – Gina looks like she got run over by a stampede of fists, but from the heat in her eyes and the blood under her nails, it looks like she fought back all the way.

“Hey, dove,” Maggie says, sinking into a crouch by Gina, her pain-glazed expression sharpening to focus on him, and then on John. She frowns, seems to just stop herself from drawing into a small ball. “Hey come on, no worries here, no normals – just me and my doctor friend here to help – you gotta give us permission to help, though. Will you let us help you?”

A nod – and then a coughed “Yes.”

“Alright – to do that we need to touch you – is that okay?”
“Yes,” again, this time a little louder, but a wince betrays the pain that causes.

“You give me and the Doctor here permission to do what needs doing?”

“Yeah – do it – just…Do it, please.”

“All right,” Magpie says briskly, standing. “Consent in triplicate,” he says when he notices John’s confused frown. “It’s standard when paper releases aren’t an option,” he explains – and that helps some of John’s confusion, but doesn’t erase it entirely.

The whole exchange seems somehow…familiar. But all John’s releases had been handled by the Exagon’s instalment facility where he’d been augmented, then later by his analyst and Clinic technicians, so there wouldn’t have been a need for verbal triplicate in any of his official handlings.

John shakes his head clear. Now is not the time to chase a phantom memory trail. Right now, cracked ribs and a dislocated arm need tending – and what looks like a whole slew of dirty cuts and grime-filled abrasions.

John nods, his mouth a grim line, but his voice is calm, his hands are steady as he says, “I need to wash up,” rolling up his sleeves.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on tumblr under the same name, if you're the tumblring sort
Thanks to tiltedsyllogism for spot-on beta advice as usual, and to consultingsmartarse for being a cheerleading dear <3
Thanks, as well, to everyone reading <3

Maggie’s basement is not quite a battlefield set up – there’s a roof and a floor and four standing walls, for starters – but it’s nowhere near as clean as John likes his surroundings to be when he has to stitch skin shut. The bathroom at 221B has this place beat, hands down.

But setting the shoulder is quick and simple (though not painless), and wrapping the cracked ribs is a repetitive action, and even cleaning and stitching the many cuts is somehow calming for John, a familiar ritual of assessment and care.

For her part, Gina sits or slumps stoic throughout the most of John’s ministrations, yelping once when her shoulder socket realigns, hissing when her ribs creak, only shivering when the stitches pull tight. John wonders at her almost blasé handling of the pain.

“This happen often, does it?” John asks, and Gina stares him down with bloodshot eyes, her tears (what few there had been) dried up long ago.

After a moment, her eyes dip down to where John’s neck sports its own scarring, and she says, “Like you don’t know.”

John opens his mouth, but closes it, feels the depth of difference between their situations like a blow to his sternum. He’s quiet as he finishes his work, the smell of disinfectant sharp in the air, not quite covering the organic slick of blood and filth.

He wonders what her wounds can tell the trained eye – how many attackers, the duration of the fight, the exact location, maybe. He wonders if they hold the clues as to what to say, or not say – as if the words exist that could un-happen the night, or Gina’s night at least.

Maggie watches from a grimy office chair, perched like his namesake, all anxious angles, until John nears the end of what he can do for Gina and her injures. As if cued by John snipping the last thread, he unfolds and scurries to the back of the cement and plastic sheeting cave. He re-emerges moments later and hands John a packet of three syringes – antibiotics, a nutrient booster, and ‘soup’ for Gina’s different traumatised components.

John accepts with a nod, sterilises the flesh-and-blood injection site, administers those shots, and then asks, “Where are your implant ports?”

Gina winces as she twists and points: her ports are located in her lower lumbar assembly. John and Maggie exchange a look; an implant design with an access point that requires another person’s help to access it is either intentional cruelty or oblivious neglect, each worse than the last.

“Brace yourself,” John says as he and Maggie slot spreaders into place. They wait for Gina’s tight-lipped nod, then push and pull against her rigid cabling. It takes a good fifteen minutes, but between the three of them they manage to pry open the cabling long enough to administer the dose. John watches as Gina sighs through the assimilation of the nutrients, limp in the aftermath of pain and exertion. Her eyes slip closed.

“Best you’ve eaten in a while?” Magpie asks, a sort of gentle tease in his voice, so different to his manner with Mona not even a week before.

Gina snorts, her shoulders hitching. “Do you do takeaway?”

“We can brown-bag you a little something, sure dove,” Magpie says with a smile.

John steps away to wash up again, and also to sterilise the few instruments he’d used. He bins the syringes in a battered sharps container as well, its official warnings faded and traced over in permanent marker, now with a jolly skull and crossbones saying ‘NO TOUCHIE’ in a large, squiggly word bubble.

He comes back in time to see Gina wince her way off the table. John frowns. “Got somewhere safe for the night?” he asks.

“It’s morning already,” Gina says, a bit defensively.

“You should give your body a chance to rest, to heal,” John points out.

“We have safe rooms upstairs,” Magpie says. “If you have nowhere else to rest safely.”

Gina visibly hesitates – but John can see the pain and the fatigue winning, compressing her body underneath their combined weights – and eventually she lets herself be directed up the stairs to where Leicester can get her set up.
John sets about wiping down the table they’d worked on, his own exhaustion catching up with him – but the ingrained need to finish the job properly is stronger. He looks up when he’s finished to see Magpie watching him.

“Thank you,” Magpie says. “For coming – I know it was a little…”

“Unexpected?” John quirks one side of his mouth. “Well, I did say to call me.”

Magpie gives him a look – a sort of sideways smile that somehow adds to his overall hunched appearance. “Well then.” Magpie fiddles with a paper bag he’s holding, not unlike the one Gina had been sent upstairs with. “Thank you for answering.”

“You’re welcome. Glad I could help…”

“We can’t exactly pay you,” Magpie blurts. “But, uhm –” he holds out the paper bag he’d been toying with, “here.”

John huffs a laugh even as he takes the proffered bag. “Wasn’t going to bill you, Magpie, this isn’t necessary – ” John’s breath catches as he sees what’s inside. It’s the doses he’ll be due for soon, himself – Exagon brand ‘soup,’ better than the generic slop John normally settles for, and two different antibiotic boosters. “This is –” John swallows. “How did you get this?”

Magpie grins. “Ways and means, my friend, ways and means,” he says with quick waggle of his eyebrows. John lifts his eyebrows in response, and Magpie seems bashful as he adds, “that and Mona.” He tips his head to the side. “Mostly Mona, actually. She runs restocking – ah – forays for us, whenever she’s in town.”

John sighs, and closes the paper bag and its boon again. “Mona – uh she might be out of town… for a while.” He holds the bag back out to Magpie. “I can get mine through the Clinic – you may want to save this for someone who can’t.”

Magpie holds his hands up by his shoulders, refusing to take the bag back. “It’s yours – please. Besides, Mona may be the best, but she isn’t the only source of inventory we have. Please.”

John hesitates, then wraps the bundle up in his jacket. “Thank you,” he says.

Magpie shrugs. “If you need, you can kip in one of the bunks upstairs, too, if you want?” Magpie offers.

John shakes his head. “It’s almost daylight – I should be fine, getting myself home.”

Leicester claps him on the shoulder and thanks him before guiding John to yet another exit he hadn’t known existed. A few meters beyond the entrance, break of day foot traffic is getting its start, and John slips seamlessly into the ranks of early morning commuters.

John goes straight home, and slumps into his chair, trying to decide between getting a few more hours of sleep and making himself a cuppa, just soldiering on.

John settles on starting his day proper, and he does the shopping, the paperwork, and a few quick jobs for Mrs. Hudson.

He keeps busy that day, and keeps it well.

It isn’t until he’s about to fall sleep that night that he has to stop himself thinking why that might be – but manage it he does.
Three nights later, John can no longer manage it.

Tonight, John is alone in his bed, in his thoughts, and he hates every empty echo of every empty breath, hates how his chest moves smoothly with each breath. He feels wretched at the almost-intoxicating comfort he feels, his chest implant riding smoothly in his expanding ribcage, part of him and not part of him – and it doesn’t end there.

He’s aware of his body, more settled in it each and every day it seems, and doing his exercises is only cementing that feeling of presence. His skin feels warm, its reports cohesive, its touch coherent. The sheet’s smooth glide over his hip doesn’t shatter into static once it crests over his attachment seam. His right foot bumps against his left ankle, no longer keeping its distance from the foreign object taking up space next to it on the mattress.

His parts – fingers, forearms, pelvis, penis – feel part of something. He feels part of something.

There’s light and warmth where previously there was… well, something worse than cold darkness, numbness and inconsistency. It isn’t soft, it isn’t inviting, but it isn’t active repulsion, and after so many months of that, it might as well be a magnet, a gravity well, and John feels himself tipping over and along, down old, once familiar channels.

His hands give in before he’s even decided he’s going to do this, but it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t –

His hands shift his pyjamas lower, his pants, and he’s more than half-way hard, and that alone makes his breath hitch, as if his body is plotting against him, hands and skin and blood vessels, nerve endings united against his self-restraint, his better judgement –

His fingers wrap around himself, and John sucks a breath in through his teeth, then sighs it out. Heat blooms up his chest, prickles along his belly and throat, and he feels the skin over his cheeks dampen with sweat, pheromones, salts – musk.

Another deep breath.

God, he’s barely touched himself and the room already reeks of it.

John pushes into his own fist, his fingers a loose caress to begin, but his hips canting up, twitching, nerves singing – John’s fingers tighten and begin to move in earnest.

The feel of it is dry and almost uncomfortable, but it still takes John an eternity to stop and wet his palm, at first jerking with impatience, and then –

Then not, then mesmerised by how warm his tongue is against his skin, how cool the saliva. He finds himself licking his fingers with indulgent licks, caught up in wonder at texture, at taste, at form, at possibilities – and then those fingers are touching just beneath his lower lip, the edge of his chin, dropping to suprasternal notching. They find their own way, it seems, exploring ever further south, and leave cooling trails and light touches, nipples to rib cage to navel to –

And oh, now that is better, because it’s smoother, and the slip and slide are very different from the touches Sherlock had bestowed –

Oh, god.

John almost laughs. What was that – 2 minutes? But it’s too late now, and Sherlock’s in his head with him, in bed with him, naked and involved like he hadn’t been that day.

It’s Sherlock sliding a hand skillfully up John’s shaft, thumb trailing along the underside, twisting lightly at the top, teasing, combing through his dark blond curls, brushing against his scrotum, slipping lower to put pressure on his perineum, and –

It’s Sherlock sliding along his front, body slick with exertion, muscles quivering with desire, and it’s raw and captivating, and so very different from the very clothed wank they (hadn’t) shared in the living room, and John could almost choke from the tightness in his throat, but he settles for shuddering and gasping, his nerves beginning to catch fire.

John’s strung breathless with relief as much as pleasure – relief at discovering that this feels like he remembers, back before the operations and augmentations made a jumble of his parts, of him. This feels right and good. And whatever it is that Sherlock did – reprogramming, reshaping – it doesn’t
seem as if his touch or presence are necessary –

That doesn’t stop the want from welling up along the aching channel of John’s throat. Longing, John realizes. It’s much further along than mere wanting.

Fuck.

It’s all coming together. Pleasure is building, spiking with each stroke, each inhale, each beat of his heart rushing blood along his veins, blood rich in oxygen and endorphins, and whatever thoughts (thoughts be damned) are goading this, it’s the slide of John’s own hand over his eager cock (friction drawing blood forth) that’s accomplishing this.

Instead of the expected bright sear of too much, of not right, John feels the sizzle and growing ache of more, please more, and when John comes, it’s hard and sudden and fast, and he arches into it, gasping, swallowing back a cry, because this is not about Sherlock, it isn’t, it can’t be, and then he’s slumping back into the sweaty embrace of his sheets, wishing with an ache that hollows him out, marrow and core, wishing it could be another embrace altogether.

Guilt follows that wish, and John swallows thickly against the sound that wants to escape. His sheets are chill and damp, and clean-up is clumsy and half-hearted and then John is turning onto his side and rolling over into darkness and exhaustion and the chemical drenched sleep of the almost-sated.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'm on tumblr under the same name, for those so-inclined!
My eternal thanks to tiltedsylogism, for rock solid advice and questions, and to consultingsmartarse, for answering my sporadic texts and *sending energies* at the end of rough days <3
My thanks also, to all y'all who are still reading and being patient with the unpredictable circus that is my life <3<3<3

When John comes downstairs the next morning, still sleep rumpled and only half awake, he almost doesn’t notice the shape in Sherlock’s chair. Then the angles and the curves and the curls resolve into the familiar form of Sherlock: Sherlock with his arms crossed around and over his pulled-up knees, his chin pressed into the folds of his creased coat, eyes open and watching, always watching.

In this case, watching John, unblinking.

To his credit, John doesn’t startle (visibly) – but his heart rate does spike, banging against his implant, rapping like a tin drum in his torso. John feels his surprise like a hot hand gripping him by the back of his neck, fingers sliding up and around his throat.

“Sherlock –” he starts, and it’s breathless, and oh god he hasn’t had a shower since last night, and he’s sure there must be some tell on his skin, some mark that will show Sherlock what John got up to last night, what he thought, let himself explore – want – in bed last night – “you’re back.” John winces even before Sherlock quirks and eyebrow and says:

“Obviously.” Sherlock lifts his head, blinks as his eyes tick down from John’s face –

John just about teleports into the bathroom, shutting the door, locking it, and leaning back against it for good measure. He’s not sure, but he might hear a muffled ‘…John?’ between his stifled breaths, and a moment later it occurs to him to turn the tap on.

Can’t have Sherlock coming in again, interrupting what might sound like – hell, what might actually be – another panic attack.

John fights for breath, for control, mortified, his thoughts a muddled mess, elation clashing with disgust – because after all, Sherlock is home, and part of him had started to worry that might never happen, but that also means he has to face what happened, what he did and did not do, say, understand – and now Sherlock has seen him, has probably read the whole story in that first glance, and –

A knock on the door – not as demanding as it could have been – and then: “John?”

John stills his breath.

“John, don’t insult my intelligence. You can turn off the tap, I know perfectly well you’re just standing there.”

John keeps holding his breath.

“For god’s sake, John, breathe.”

John shakes his head. This is not happening again. He is not having a panic attack, and Sherlock is not going to talk or touch or whatever him down from it. He isn’t.

The door handle rattles, and John hears Sherlock sigh and say something sharp under his breath before following it with, “John, let me in.”

“We’ve talked about what a closed door means, Sherlock,” John croaks, his throat aching. He finally takes a breath, holds it, then releases it slowly, hands clenching all the while. This is not how he’d meant to talk about – about this. Doors, boundaries, that night – but maybe this is the only chance they’ll get.

John opens his mouth to say – something. Some amalgam of any of the things he hasn’t said, that maybe should have been said before now – but the silence behind the door is suddenly different.

It’s bookended by the creak of the floor as Sherlock shifts his weight back, by the stiffness of the pause that follows, and then –

Footsteps.

Sherlock gone.

John’s breath escapes him in a rush, formless, words decomposed into exhale.
It feels like a waste to have found his way to the brink of speaking, only to step back now into unexpected (if demanded) space. The urge to rush out and force a confrontation, to continue its angry script, is almost overwhelming. But the tap is still running, and pivoting to turn it off forces John to consider the mirror for a moment.

His hair’s a sweaty, rumpled mess, and there are shadows underneath his eyes. His sleep shirt looks well used, and while there’s no visible residue, John’s certain he must smell of the night before.

John rocks forward on his toes, feeling out this electric urge.

With a great exhale, he lets go of that urge. A few more deep breaths and something underneath that urge unravels, just a little, enough that he can think to turn on the shower and strip down. He gets in while the water is still shockingly cold and does his best to have a quick, no-real-need—certainly-nothing-to-be-suspicious-of shower.

John feels a bit more himself, after, too – still keyed up, some sort of uncertain mixture of doubt and anger and trepidation simmering in his gut and chest – but he’s definitely breathing normally once more.

He dries off and – having neglected to bring a change of clothes down – slips on his terrycloth robe and ties it firmly shut.

Outside the damp sanctuary of the bathroom, the flat is quiet. John feels that quiet climb into his throat – until he hears Sherlock emerge from his room. He’s not quite quick enough to avoid painting the picture he does: just standing there, assessing, uncertain.

Sherlock’s face seems carefully blank as he glances at John and then continues into the living room. He’s wearing a fresh suit jacket.

John’s mouth tightens into a line, momentarily. “You’re leaving,” slips out, when John had actually meant to say, “Where are you off to?” or something similar, something less…gutted.

“Lestrade wants something, I am going to see what it is.” Sherlock’s tone seems crafted to be perfectly neutral, and John wonders whether it’s the night — that night — still affecting him, them — or whether it’s the latest episode of the closed bathroom door.

Whatever it is, the result is the same: confirmation that Sherlock is leaving again. He’s barely been home for an hour that John knows, and he’s already leaving again. John’s managed to chase him off again.

Right, John thinks. “Right,” he says, hand clenching in his robe pocket.

Sherlock pauses in his purposeful movements about the living room (gathering phone and wallet from the side table) and blinks at John. “Right?” he asks.

John shrugs, shakes his head. He feels like there’s no right way to move forward in this. “Just —” John swallows, but Sherlock’s expectant silence pulls the words from him: “It makes sense, I suppose.”

Sherlock straightens from where he’d bent to glance at the small stack of correspondence John had arranged on his side of the desk. “What makes sense?”

John barely keeps from sighing. “Nothing,” he says, moving through to the kitchen. Tea, he decides.

Sherlock, champion of not letting anything go, follows and watches John move agitatedly about the kitchen. “Nothing makes sense?” he says, and the almost comedic level of confusion just beneath the carefully bland surface of that sentence makes John want to shake his head.

He tries to iron out the wrinkle of a wry half-smile – now is not the time to find this – anything – amusing. Sherlock doesn’t deserve it, and John certainly hasn’t earned it.

“John?” Sherlock prompts, and now the doubt in his voice is as far from funny as John could imagine; there’s something soft and worried about Sherlock’s voice, and when John looks up from where he’s put one cup down on the counter, he sees the same quality in Sherlock’s eyes.

John turns to lean against the counter, suddenly tired, and sighs. “It’s nothing – it’s just —”

“Either it’s nothing or it’s something,” Sherlock cuts in, and there’s a bit of petulance to his tone, but also impatience, vexation.

John glowers at Sherlock, his own ire suddenly rising to the surface in a boil. “You’re on your way out – don’t let me keep you.” Sherlock makes a frustrated noise and rakes his hands through his hair, and the sudden flurry of motion, startles a twitch out of John, and he can’t keep from biting, from asking: “What’s that all about?”

“This – you – just say it, say whatever it is you’re tiptoeing around, John, and then I can —”

“You can what?”

Sherlock heaves a breath and silence descends on the kitchen, the space between them.
Into that quiet, into the spaces between their breaths, John finally says one of the things that’s been tumbling inside him like glass: “I’m sorry.”

He’s not sure what he was expecting in answer to that – maybe a nod of acceptance, maybe a dry scoff – but it definitely isn’t the almost-affronted look of perplexity that wrinkles Sherlock’s nose and forehead.

“What?” he asks with a little shake to his head that sets his curls bobbing.

John blinks. “I said – I’m sorry…?”

“Whatsoever for?” Sherlock asks, and he seems genuinely baffled. It gives John pause.

“For… the other night? Before you – you left?” John swallows. “I shouldn’t have – I wasn’t – it wasn’t my intention to –”

“John, what on earth are you on about?”

John feels a crack of panic run through him, like a glass sheet splintering. Oh god – could it be – had he gotten it wrong? Had his mind fabricated the events of that night? Was he beginning to slip? But then Sherlock adds:

“Why should you apologise for that night?”

Behind John the teakettle clicks off, the water inside roiling and then quieting.

“Because –” John frowns, “because obviously something happened to make you – uncomfortable enough. To leave.”

Sherlock blinks at him. “John,” he begins, but John’s already speaking:

“Don’t – you don’t have to make it alright. Or something.” John heaves a sigh. “I just – I wanted to say sorry, and I didn’t get a chance, and now I have one, I’m saying it. That.” John swallows. Sherlock waits until John’s mouth is clenched shut, and then says, “The trip to Tokyo had been in the works for weeks, John. It wasn’t –” Sherlock frowns, “why would it be a reaction to…?”

John gapes at Sherlock. “Then why did you leave so suddenly?” There’s bewilderment – and also just the spark of something like hope – tumbling madly through John’s mind as he asks.

“The final arrangement falling into place and my subsequent departure were sudden,” Sherlock admits, his tone cautious, “I’ll give you that. But it wasn’t a direct result of anything we – that happened.”

“Oh,” John says, and blinks.

Sherlock tips his head to the side. “Of course, the morning after – the morning I left, there was some indication that perhaps the timing was convenient as it seemed… space was required. Preferred.” Sherlock clears his throat.

“…What,” John says flatly.

“I thought it would be best – if I didn’t – if I wasn’t here.” Sherlock continues, and it seems he might be avoiding John’s eyes: “You were obviously upset with me, and I thought only to give you the space you so frequently seek out for yourself.”

John’s thoughts skitter wildly before he settles on: “By going to Tokyo?”

Sherlock shrugs, playing for blasé, but the tension in his neck and shoulders give the sham away.

“There was something I needed to do, and the added bonus of allowing you the space you needed.”

“Why?” John asks, his hands fidgeting with his gloves.

“I don’t understand,” Sherlock says, and it sounds almost stroppy. “You’re always ‘off out’ whenever you’re upset, I was simply trying to accommodate your need for time away from –”

John raises his hands placatingly. “I know,” he says, because it’s the truth, and now he sees how it must read from outside. “I know.”

“I just thought – I’d remove the source, I’d be gone, and that – that would blow over, and I am not a mind reader, John.” Sherlock stands and stalks stiffly back and forth across the kitchen, his hands raised as if demanding answers from the very air. “I can only conclude that this atypical, distant and distressing behaviour, is a result of our –” and here his words fail him for a moment, “– the – that uncharacteristic interaction after that – that case.”

That’s right – they haven’t really had time to talk about everything that happened before, with Mona in those dark and fetid tunnels, or with Mycroft directly after, and now –
John feels as if the world is turning around his head, around this moment, and he wants to sort this out, straighten every cause and effect out and understand them, but –

“At the time,” Sherlock continues, his face twisted by a grimace, “I had concluded that the experience was a success, on the basis of your immediate reaction. And even in the what, perhaps fifteen minutes total I’ve spent in your company since, I’ve noticed marked improvements in your subconscious interactions regarding your cyberthetic leg. I’d thought, at least – you’d perhaps –”

He stops and just stares at John for a moment. There’s a question in his eyes, and it slowly arranges his whole face into softer, more vulnerable lines, before a tight-lipped expression wipes it away. “But you’re upset,” Sherlock says, and he says it like he’s disappointed – but with who? For a moment it seems directed inward – but Sherlock’s never come across as the type to be disappointed in himself – and that just leaves John.

John drops his hands, stung – not much, but frustrated enough that he says, “What the hell am I supposed to be, then? Happy?”

Sherlock flinches.

John could kick himself, but he can’t stop himself from saying, “You – you did that, you touched – you took me apart, and then you just… left, and – what the hell was I supposed to think about that, to feel about that?”

“Well,” Sherlock says, looking away, his mouth set and unhappy – and that shouldn’t cut so deeply into John, but it does. “I suppose I can see how your anger was justified.”

It’s John’s turn to make a frustrated sound and throw his hands into the air. “No, Sherlock, I didn’t feel angry, I was scared – I was terrified,” John forces out. His throat clicks as he swallows past the tight ache. “I thought you didn’t – I thought I’d –”

Understanding floods across Sherlock’s features, and the soft ‘o’ of his mouth shuts with a surprised little snap. It’s followed almost immediately by confusion and the peculiar wrinkling of Sherlock’s brow that indicates how very out of his depth he is when it comes to sentiment. “I didn’t – that’s not what – I…” Sherlock swallows and falls silent, watching John breathe shallowly. “John?”

John grunts, scrubbing a shaking hand over his face.

“You say you are not angry – but you obviously are.”

“I’m not, I’m just… jesus, Sherlock. I’m so fucking relieved I don’t know what to do with myself.” The words escape in a rush, and if John doesn’t look too closely at how much they give away, then he can focus on how good it feels to say them, to be able to say them. “I’ve been… shit. What a mess.”

John moves to sit in a chair at the table, and after a moment Sherlock steps around him to switch the kettle back on, but the water must still be warm enough, because instead there’s the sound of pouring water.

“John,” Sherlock says, and then pauses long enough that John thinks he may have re-thought what he was going to say, but then he says: “Sorry. I’m sorry. As well.” Another pause. “I was trying to anticipate your needs.” He makes a bit of a face at his own words.

John feels like he could laugh, or cry, or both, so he settles for grimacing a smile and shaking his head, his shoulders shaking as he huffs his way through whichever option his body settled on. “Just… ask me next time, yeah?” he husks, his voice tight with whatever is happening to the rest of him.

“Of course,” Sherlock replies stiffly, and it sounds like he usually does when he’s caught off guard by the rest of humanity and its emotions. “…Tea?” he offers, cautious as anything, and John can only close his eyes for a moment and exhale through his nose.

“Yes. Please. Thank you,” he says, and it’s a silly amount of formality, not something they normally bother with, but John’s finding himself almost as overwhelmed by what happened as Sherlock must be. The sounds of a cuppa being assembled play out behind John, and then there’s the thank of a cup full of liquid being set against the wood of the table in front of John. He opens his eyes to see his tea, made the way he takes it – just enough milk to bring a pale blush to the cup – and he looks up to where Sherlock is pretending not to be anxious about John approving of a bloody cup of tea.

“Thank you,” he says again, and Sherlock nods, and his hands begin to pull on his gloves, as if John’s approval set them free from a cage of useless fidgeting. John takes a sip as Sherlock runs through a check of his pockets with his gloved hands, and the tea really is spot on, but he can’t keep from asking: “So… Lestrade, huh?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says absentmindedly, then seems to rally his thoughts. “Surely you must have seen all the texts he’s sent?”

“Yeah.” John takes another sip. “He called. Told him you were – abroad.” John lifts an eyebrow. “He wasn’t too happy to hear it.”

Sherlock snorts. “Well, seeing as he hasn’t capped off his begging for help with boastful gloating over how he solved it without me, I’m going to go and have a look.”
“Very gracious of you.” John’s mouth tugs to the side, and he watches Sherlock’s follow suit. They both look away after a moment – Sherlock to his phone, and John to his tea. He clears his throat.

“So –

“Would y–”

They both start and stop at the same time.

“If you’ve nothing on…?” Sherlock says at last, right as John says: “You wouldn’t mind?” Sherlock grins, and John takes a gulp of tea to keep from saying anything else embarrassingly obvious.

“How long before you’re ready?” Sherlock asks, and John stands from the table.

Seven minutes later they’re out the door, a full half of John’s tea left behind to cool on the table.

Chapter End Notes

patternofdefiance on tumblr, for those so inclined <3
It was the butler.

It was also a mistake for John to come along.

The scene is gruesome – or it certainly had been, the first day the Lestrade texted. When John and Sherlock are shown into the room, however, the bodies are gone, removed for evidence processing days before. Instead, dark stains and bright chalk mark the carpet of the well-appointed home office, more a gentleman’s study than a working man’s domain.

The carpet is plush and pale – where blood hasn’t matted it dark and stiff, at least.

“Here,” Lestrade says, handing over a file of photos. “Owner of the house, Leonard Ashton, found dead alongside the head of his house staff, Gerald Whittaker.”

Sherlock’s eyes dart back and forth across the file pages as Lestrade speaks. John finds himself alternating between staring at the photo-bedecked walls of the study and the usual crime scene officers. While Sherlock only has eyes for the evidence, John can see the resentment in Anderson’s frown and crossed arms. His eyes slide back to where Sally is watching him, her face unreadable.

“So –” Sherlock begins, only to be cut off by Anderson:

“For godssake it’s obvious, I don’t know why he’s even here.”

Sherlock’s eyes snap to Anderson’s face, and he does a good show of pretending to be surprised by his presence, as if he hadn’t noticed the man glaring holes into the side of his head. John works to hide a smirk.

“Anderson,” Lestrade begins, but Sherlock holds up a hand.

“No, no, let’s hear it, then, your theory.” He pauses so that Anderson can speak; when Anderson’s mouth forms a tight line instead, Sherlock smiles. “Go on.”

“Well it’s a double murder. Probably a hate crime – the servant was augmented, more tin than flesh in places –” Anderson’s eyes slip to John, who’s not quite sure what his face is doing, but whatever it is, it makes Anderson shut his mouth with a click.

Sally steps forward. “A hate crime is likely – one augmented victim, and another his employer and friend.”

John feels a clammy chill across the back of his neck, where his interface port is in the final stages of healing over once more. He resists the urge to scrub a hand across it, instead crossing his arms tightly across his chest.

“You can tell they were close,” Sally continues, raising a hand to indicate the office walls. The photos are the usual nostalgia fodder – friends hugging, several wedding photos from different weddings, and quite a few showcasing the owner of the house and his manservant together: a safari shot replete with khaki outfits, another with Snowy Alps looming behind their Gore-tex-clad forms, and below those, a shot of both of them smoking cigars and toasting each other, New Year hats askew and a harbour view behind them.

“And – and besides,” Anderson buts back in, “look at the damage to the servant. Hate crime,” he says, as if that sums it up neatly, nicely.

All attention turns to Sherlock, who quirks an eyebrow at the attention. “Well, not a terrible theory, some actual reasoning to support it –”

“Sherlock,” Lestrade says, his voice stern.

“And while I agree that this is a hate crime –”

“Ha! See?” Anderson interjects. “I was right!”

“– your conclusions are, as usual, completely wrong.” Sherlock’s got that small, smug upturn to the corners of his mouth, and John feels his stomach swoop, although he chalks it up to the fact that they are yet again standing around the leftovers of the death of an augmentation recipient.

John’s stomach follows that thought with a sour clench, and he represses a shiver.

“Ashton and Whittaker were friends, it’s true, closer than one would expect from an employer and a domestic servant – and yet, the photos. Why?” Sherlock holds a hand up and turns so that the sweep of his arm indicates the many photos of the odd couple on trips and adventures. “You’ll note that there are no photos newer than about two and a half years ago. Why do you suppose such a change would have occurred in their easy camaraderie?”

John tightens his mouth into a grimace. “Augmentation.”

Sherlock’s eyes remain fixed to the walls, but he nods, his lips quirking minutely. “Quite so. In the finance records in this file, there exists a regular charge that goes back over two years: augmentation maintenance fees. Ashton was footing the bill for his employee’s luxury upkeep. Unfortunately for both of them, it seems their arrangement was not stable.”

John sucks in a breath.

“Rather the opposite, in fact,” Sherlock continues. “You can see from the angle of this spatter here, in relation to the others, that it was an attack. No weapons found at the scene of the crime doesn’t always indicate that someone else committed the murder and carted them off after – sometimes it just means there were no weapons to begin with.”

“You mean he – with his bare hands?” Lestrade asks.

“Blood and skin under the fingernails is common in assault victims, but have your coroner check for muscle fibres. You’ll likely find bits of skin and flesh from Ashton embedded deep in the thoracic cavity of his servant-turned-assailant, since once Whittaker had finished with Ashton he then obviously turned on himself.”

“Obviously?” Lestrade asks.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “How many mutilated bodies were there again?”

“God,” Lestrade said. “When the paperwork seemed to indicate they’d made it past the two year mark, I’d thought – maybe –”

“Bit late,” Anderson says with wry jocularity, “but they all get there in the end.”

The room goes quiet, and John can feel the eyes of everyone present on him – everyone except Sherlock, who’s bent over to laser his eyes over a particular spray of blood drops.

John’s blood drains from his face. He can feel every part of himself that isn’t himself, feels trapped in a cage of parts, not a sum of them, but a mixed bag.

The scene had been bad enough with the pall of a hate-killing hanging over the crime scene, but now – knowing that it had been a direct result of post 2-year mark derangement… John swallows, composes himself for a moment: before him, Sherlock is in his element, delineating what happened and how, pulling order from the chaos, reasons from the unreasonable.

He’s glowing, backlit by the light from the grand window behind him, haloed by sunlight – and John will be damned if he lets that become a chalk outline.

John does the only thing he can, then.

As he slips away through the doorway, Met officers parting to let him through, some more hastily than others, John thinks he might hear a confused “John?” in a startled baritone – but that’s too far away from his thoughts right now. That turmoil of that voice has no place in the sudden clarity of John’s mind.

He’s thinking of Mona, of Hersch, of the others. Suddenly he sees the parallels where before they had been hidden. They’d all been living solitary lives, are still living solitary lives, if they are alive still. Maybe it’s choice, and maybe it’s instinct. Maybe it’s the intrinsic knowledge that distance is a necessity, is more than a precaution: it’s a failsafe.

John wonders if the butler and his employer were more than that – wonders if the butler was so desperate for human interaction that he ignored his own gut feeling – and to what end?

Two dark stains on an otherwise spotless carpet.

John’s phone buzzes in his pocket – a text. He ignores it. Another buzz a moment later – he ignores that one, too.

Rhythmic buzzing this time – a phone call. John thumbs his phone to ‘silent’ in his pocket without looking.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on tumblr under the same user name!
John walks until the night slices across the streets in broad swaths of shadow, his feet wandering until a chill wind threads its way ceaselessly through the seams of his clothes. He falls away from active thought, just lets everything drift a little further away.

He does notice his feet carrying him towards Baker Street – towards safety and home – but whose safety and whose home? If it’s John’s, it cannot be Sherlock’s – and Sherlock deserves better than to live with a ticking time bomb.

John is approaching the brink the butler ignored – but he doesn’t have to fall in that same trap. He can begin to garner what distance he can. He can look for a new place, even spend as much time away from Sherlock as possible. Protect him from John’s inevitability.

With a sigh, John sets himself on a new course, wondering if he should let his sorry collection of parts guide him to the tattoo parlour, to the saferooms up above ground.

_Maybe Magpie and Leicester have contingencies for violent, end of term augmented people._ He can’t decide whether the idea chills him or comforts him, and his steps are alternately hurried and hesitant, his body and its accoutrements joining the debate.

John makes it almost all the way there, but a pervasive feeling of wrongness creeps over him as he closes the final distance. His fingers ghost over the hidden button and then stop, not pressing yet, unsure.

John closes his eyes, catches himself thinking simply: _Baker Street._ His eyes blink open, and the thought becomes a decision. He’ll have tonight, a final stolen moment of choice, and keep it as a comfort against a future devoid of the things he’d rather choose.

It’s quiet as he makes his way back – the late hour and the chill wind conspire to keep people from their pedestrian pursuits, and John can cut his careful course home without any witnesses, each step feeling like theft, along the street to the door to his home.

Home.

John clenches his left fist, squeezes his eyes shut against the swelling ache of loss. A moment later, the breath punches from his lungs, and guilt pours through him, emptying him even as it fills him. John’s only got himself to blame, after all. Literally everyone else had seen, had understood – his physicians, clinic technicians, his analyst. Christ, even bloody Harry had known.

_Dead man walking._

John sniffs, and the air is sharp against his nose, stinging at the corners of his eyes when he blinks them open.

He’s come to a standstill in front of Speedie’s. He looks up, long and still – at the dark windows of 221, at the darkly hazy London sky, not a star in sight.

Tonight, he’ll creep in – allow himself a last night of solace and relative safety, of feeling more than tolerated – and tomorrow he’ll take what money he has and find a bedsit. Maybe his old one will have him back – he has cash up front – the owner would like that.

The key turns smoothly in its seat, but there’s a stiffness to John’s joints, as if he’s having to push harder, resist some sort of static quality, as if the very air wishes not to part for him.

Seventeen steps up the staircase never felt like an impossibility before.

John squares his shoulders and begins his ascent, his hesitation only partly due to the unpredictable propensity for creaks that seem to have been engineered into the steps themselves. Nevertheless, John hasn’t lived at 221B without picking some of Sherlock’s sneaking habits, and the stairs remain almost completely quiet under him.

John’s not out of breath by the last one, but there’s an airless tightness to his chest when he finally reaches the landing all the same. He catches himself almost disappointed that the steps hadn’t betrayed his presence, hadn’t summoned Sherlock to investigate – but that’s a selfish thought, and John’s indulged in that side of his existence too much of late.
He intends to go straight up to his room, to further minimise potential contact with Sherlock, but he pauses on the stair, plucked by the urge to know that Sherlock is indeed home safe and not off getting himself into a Situation. After a minute of internal wrestling, he gives up on himself again and crosses the room.

John stands outside Sherlock’s bedroom for a long moment, breath stilled, but yes the signs are there: a sliver of light under the door, the sigh of a genius detective sleeping off the last lingerings of jet lag and a case’s brief adrenaline burst.

John lifts a hand, but doesn’t touch Sherlock’s door, even though he wants to – wants to knock or push it open, wants to explain, as best he can. He doesn’t want Sherlock to assume John wants this space between them, not when they’d just bloody mended it not even twenty-four hours ago, but this – this is safer. Saner.

John lets his hand swing down to his side, and takes a deep, steadying breath.

After checking that Sherlock is home safe, it’s only the most natural thing to go to the kitchen – and yes, there are signs that Sherlock ate – and the faint smells of that meal set John’s mouth to watering.

There’s a second set of boxes in the fridge – John’s usual order. That fact sinks into John’s chest and throat and gut and twists. He almost closes the fridge and leaves – anything to stop this feeling, its acidic intensity, the overwhelming flood –

But hunger rears its pragmatic head, and John caves to its demands. He opens the containers Sherlock had bought and packed away – on shelves devoid of hazardous materials, no less – and uses one of the disposable forks that came inside that plastic that to shovel food into his mouth, into his body, trying to ignore how pointless it feels – almost wasteful…

John only manages about half a portion before sourness gets its claws in deep, sets into his mouth, his stomach, his thoughts. God, John could kick himself. For ignoring everyone’s advice, for – for hoping.

But whatever he’d hoped, whatever he’d seen glances of possibility for – none of that had ever really been a possibility, had it? Neither friendship nor…nor anything else – none of it could be, because none of it would be sustainable. John himself isn’t sustainable. John is what he is, and what he is comes with a time limit.

He lets his hands drop to the table surface. He’s not even sitting to eat, and his heel aches, and his knee aches, but his cyberthetic limb feels fine, and that seems backwards and wrong.

John grips the edge of the table, and breathes, trying to focus past the maelstrom of his thoughts, of his senses, the mad mixture of his nerves. This is why – this is exactly why he has to remove himself.

The two year mark is creeping closer, and here he is, having trouble swallowing a mouthful of rice while his fingernails dig into the table-top. What could he possibly have to offer – anyone? Just because his implants are quieter now doesn’t mean the rest of him is sorted; he’s still – this.

John wonders, not for the first time, how much of this is him, and how much is augmentation trauma. He wonders what Harry could have told him, if only she’d chosen to see him before she buried him. Wonders what Sherlock would have thought of him before his procedures. Wonders what the world – his world – would have been like, if he’d faced it on his own two feet.

John grimaces bitterly, hands clenching tighter against the table-top to keep from shaking.

He finally manages to swallow the reluctant last mouthful he’s been fighting. His hands come away from their death grip, eager for the task of closing up everything and packing it back into the fridge. It’s only when the cold of the open fridge hits John in the face that he realises that he’d eaten all of what he’d managed ice cold. Rice and dumpling and veg sit like a chill lump inside him, like another foreign body lodged in his chest.

John grimaces, chucks his fork into a mug filled with (hopefully) water, remembers that it’s plastic, then decides to leave it anyway. It’s not like Sherlock won’t know he’s been in here at a glance. God, he’ll probably know how far John is from the two year mark by the grease smears on the fork and the crescent dents in the wood’s surface.

John hauls himself up to his room as quietly as he can manage. He collapses onto his bed fully clothed, on his back, and heaves a sigh he barely feels.
John pulls away from sleep slowly, eager to leave behind what he’s almost sure is a dream, but just as eager to remain in its cocoon of dubious comfort.

There’s the very real feeling that once he wakes up properly, there will be some unpleasant fact waiting for him, and he wants desperately not to have to face it.

Of course, his treacherous brain fetches the fact for him all the same, and John squeezes his eyes shut against it. *I have to leave Baker Street today,* John thinks, but that thought doesn’t hurt nearly as much as the one behind it, the one that tastes like loneliness and hurt.

Eventually John forces himself up. None of this will get easier with time – in fact, if he hurries, he may be able to duck out before Sherlock wakes from his crashed-out sleep. The less they interact, the better, John thinks grimly, willing himself to accept it.

He’s just dressed in fresh clothes and begun his journey downstairs when he hears movement: Sherlock.

Sherlock up and about after no doubt too little sleep. John feels his mouth tugging into a familiar disapproving slant – but now, now that he knows how little time he has left to wear that particular expression, now he feels the fondness in it, the delighted exasperation.

It cuts him to the marrow, and for a moment John’s resolve wavers. He’s downstairs, in the living room before he can think twice. In a flash he takes in Sherlock’s movements: phone flipped and caught in one hand, coat slung over his shoulders by the other, curls shifting as his gaze snaps up from whatever text he’s reading or sending to see John standing there.

“Sher lock,” John begins, but Sherlock’s gaze jerks back down to his phone screen.

“They’re processing the bodies today,” Sherlock says. “I’m going to go have a look.”

“I – ” John begins, and he knows what he would have said next, because it’s always what he says next even though he shouldn’t, after Sherlock alerts him to a case, an outing, an excuse to run through the city together – but this time Sherlock’s already moving past him to the staircase, not waiting.

“No, not this time,” he’s saying. He’s already halfway down the stairs when he interjects into John’s pensive silence: “Your appointment, John.” And then the door has shut, and John stands, listening to the sound of a cab slowing, stopping, pulling away.

John is, after a moment of echoing stillness, rocked backwards by a feeling of unwanted familiarity. This is beginning to be a bit of a pattern – Sherlock leaving John behind.

John finds he doesn’t care for it – never mind that Sherlock is right: John has his morning full of things that need to be done, one of which is staying away from Sherlock, not the least of which is getting ready for and attending the appointment with his analyst.

The last appointment.

John swallows against the sour flash that sends through him, but icy calm settles into him, and his hands are steady as he sets about preparing for the day: breakfast, stretches, a shower, a change of clothes, a shave…

The soothing routine is over far too soon, leaving John to pace or sit in his chair. He opts for the latter, grabs his laptop and tries searching for a new flat, but doesn’t get far. Nothing looks right, looks good – and no matter how many times he tries to remind himself those things don’t matter, won’t matter, he cannot seem to force himself to do more than a surface skim of the available housing.

As the time for his session ticks closer, John whittles minutes away remembering that Sherlock once cancelled John’s appointment for him, unbidden, to drag John along to a crime scene. The memory leaves an ache in his chest and throat.

At last, John can leave for his appointment without feeling like he is fleeing 221B.
Determination

Chapter Notes

Thanks to tiltedsyllogism for guiding me away from (most) run-ons, and to consultingsmartarse for riding along in my head and reminding me to get on with it <3
And to all of you who are reading and following along - thank you for continuing on this trek with me <3

After his appointment, John walks and walks.

Despite his best efforts, he ends up ticking days off in his mental calendar, like a countdown, calculating.

Wednesday, John realises. The pang of that realization drops like a stone into his hollow depths. This ends on a Wednesday.

“You’re approaching the threshold,” his analyst had said, matter-of-factly. “You are in a pivotal time and place – and situation – to proceed with prudence. I know you’ve seen what can happen to those in similar situations.” Her pen scratched across her notepad as she observed him.

John had remained silent, Mona’s words threading through his memories of bloodstains on carpet: “They think we all go crazy, and if they play their cards just right, the only lives we take are our own, and they go to bed feeling like heroes for that.”

“You may have neglected to follow most of the suggested guidelines for augmentation recipients, but that does not mean you cannot still make it a clean transition,” his analyst had pointed out then, interrupting his recall. Her pen had stopped scratching. “It would be… kinder.”

John’s breath had caught in his throat, molecules trapped in the fringes of his lungs, capillaries swollen.

John blinks back the memory, the chill of those words, and his thoughts shift, sifting through the less immediate past. These last two years, his analyst had wanted so much from him. Adjustment, adaptation. She’d pushed him to hash out some form of order, of settling into his life post-augmentation.

But she’d also cautioned him against forming any sort of deep emotional attachment, letting others too close. She’d encouraged relationships that stabilised him, but hadn’t seemed in favour of anything that could offer longevity. Hell, she’d only just barely approved of Shelly, and look how long that had lasted – and not to his analyst’s disapproval, either. She’d discounted not long after the start – and, well… she’d disapproved of Sherlock from day one.

John had thought it was because Sherlock didn’t provide the ‘structure of normalising interactions’ that he’d been counselled to seek out for himself – but perhaps she had been thinking of the other party in the unpredictable equation they’d formed.

“You’re not a sure thing, she might as well have said. Who knows how long you’ll last – or how you’ll go, come the time. Could be messy.

Maybe that’s why John had been so captivated by Sherlock, so captured, even. Order in the chaos, madness in the method, companionship without attachment.

Well, John thinks, how long did that last?

The true answer lies in that long-ago twitch of his trigger finger, the steely cold and gear-smooth lift and aim of his arm, his gun, the fall of shards of glass and a cabby, not even 24 hours after having met the mad man.

John swallows a bitter laugh. Not long at all, then. He lets his eyes close against the memory, the feeling that wells up. Laughter and their first dinner as flatmates, as friends. The memory of their huffing laughter shifts, becomes something much more recent and raw. John’s gaze drifts down, his shoulders curve forward. He wonders just how badly everything’s been bollocksed up between them, now.

All around him, other people’s footsteps are a complex metronome, hurrying back and forth and on while John trudges on and stares into unfathomable space.

His feet have carried him along the familiar curves of Regents’ Park’s pathways, and now he moves forward to the bridge, his bridge now it seems, where he can prop up his elbows and have a good run at the windmills in his mind.

“Bad day, huh?”

John blinks, not even midway into his first charge. It takes him a moment to notice the woman standing next to him by the bridge, and when he does, he huffs a breath. He’s not particularly
inclined to talk to a stranger at the moment – even if she is the sort of woman he might have made an exception for in bygone days.

They stand side by side for a minute, silence between them like an ice sheet over water.

"I just got fired," she says after a long while.

That sounds awful, or it should, so John says, "That’s awful." It’s reflexive, and he hates that he spoke before he even finishes speaking – and then he feels guilty, because this is what he’s supposed to do, right? Blend in, become a useful (or at least not intolerable) part of society until – well, until Wednesday, to be exact.

The woman barks out a laugh. “Could be worse,” she says, and her one-shoulder shrug moves her dark waves of hair so they catch what light the grey sky can part with. “I’m Felicity, by the way.”

John makes a noncommittal noise, because people respond when other people talk to them. Then he realises what she said, and amends his grunt: “John.” Just that one syllable feels exhausting.

“Still, could use a drink,” she continues. There’s a hopeful note in her voice as she says it, but John’s not interested enough to parse what it could mean, but he does tip his head in acknowledgement – because, yes, that sounds like something someone might need after getting fired.

“How about you?” she asks. The note’s there again, less questioning and more assertive now.

John frowns. He settles on: “Bit early for me.” He winces, feels like a right tit, adds: “Not that I’m saying you shouldn’t –”

She laughs, and John notices her mouth, expressive, and her throat, as she tips her head back into the laugh. Her face is bright as she turns to him. “No offense taken, promise,” she says with a lopsided smile. “How about a coffee, then?”

“I don’t fancy drinking alone, anyway,” she adds, not waiting for John to find his words. Her voice and eyes are still full of her recent laughter.

“Hey, it’s alright. Sorry I barged in on your pensive moment.” She bites at her lower lip for a moment. “But not too sorry.” She winks at him.

That startles a half-laugh out of John, and he finds himself feeling a touch more generous towards this sudden woman and her blunt invitation. “Don’t beat yourself up about it,” John offers, and she laughs again. Lifting, light, lovely, he realises, but he finds himself just a touch hesitant to join.

“Or did you need some time to think it over?” Her eyes are lively as she says it, on the friendly side of teasing, the interested side, and for a brief moment John is envious of her ease and easy-going way. He remembers being that way himself, long ago, before he went to war, before so many little branches of fate split off and carved his path away from where it seems everyone else managed to end up, comfortable and connected and complete.

“Not as such,” he admits, but he finds himself turning to face her. Distraction, he knows, and he wants. Whatever’s inside him has his stomach churning, and he wants desperately to look elsewhere, even if it only lasts a minute. “But I’m open to being persuaded.” He feels his face shift, lighting up and away from the grey weight of his thoughts, and that’s something he’s always managed to be: charming under fire, disarming under duress, one way or another.

"Criterion’s not great, but it’s close?" Felicity offers, her own face shifting to match John’s – and for a moment he wonders why hers doesn’t feel false like his. How can she mirror him and not see?

Sherlock would see, John knows. He would read John like a book from the first glance, scoff at the falsehood, declare it for all to see –

And just like that, the blessing turns sour. John feels his eyes shutter a bit despite his mask. Felicity doesn’t notice, and her warm smile seems paltry all of a sudden, meant for someone John isn’t. Someone John cannot possibly be. Someone who doesn’t have a shadow to notice.
It isn’t Felicity’s fault, either. John feels his first flare of irritation fizzling almost immediately to a dull glow of fatigue. It’s no one else’s fault he’s this tangled mess – and that brings him right back to his analyst: his mess shouldn’t be anyone else’s responsibility.

John walks beside Felicity out of politeness, all the same – too aware of himself to sink into the moment. While they wait in line, she cajoles him into ordering a coffee as well, and John doesn’t fight back all that hard, acutely aware that he’ll need something to hold to steady his hands and occupy his mouth as he waits out this encounter. After, they sit at the window bar. Felicity’s chatter is sweet, just flirtatious enough that John knows he could kindle that spark into something more – maybe something even longer than a flash in the pan –

But no; even as his mind spins the idle speculation of it, none of it is appealing. It seems like work, like effort, and all he wants, suddenly, desperately, is to be home, at 221B Baker Street with –

John huffs a laugh, and if Felicity thinks it’s a response to the anecdote she’s just told, that’s alright – but it isn’t. It’s for the thought of going home to Sherlock. For the thought of how much that matters, how it sets his right foot to jittering, as if it’s eager for those steps. Maybe, between his flesh and blood leg and his metal and polymer one, they’ve counted and memorized the number of steps.

Maybe every walk home is part of that countdown.

“So how about it?” Felicity asks, and John blinks back to the present.

“I –?”

“This weekend? My plus one? Should be a good time,” Felicity says with an impish smile.

John smiles. “I’m not sure –”

“Well.” Felicity says, sounding determined, “have a think – and when you’re sure, call me.” She puts a card in front of John. It has her name and her number.

“Right. Ta,” John says, standing, and they say goodbye. John dips his head, as gracious as he can be as unbalanced as he is, and he watches her walk away.

Doing that a lot, lately, he thinks, but then he shakes his head. He’s pretty sure Felicity winks at him just as she leaves the café, but whatever she’d intended with that, all it accomplishes is to remind John of the last time someone had winked at him.

John feels the corner of his mouth twitch sideways – not quite a smile, but something nostalgic and fond, a bittersweet dilution.

The last swig of coffee is cool, unpleasant, but John drains it anyway, then goes on his way. Outside, the quality of the day has changed, afternoon settling into evening.

John finds his stride, his flesh and metal feet carrying him forward into the first blush of dusk. He drops Felicity’s card in the first trash bin he passes. He feels strangely buoyant after that, as if the decision has unmuddied some of the air around him, in his lungs.

He’s still walking, aimless, still undecided, not giving into the route his feet want to take, when a dark car pulls up beside him and slows. John heaves a sigh. Of course. Can’t take a bloody walk without the British government taking an interest. Aside from the sigh he doesn’t acknowledge his new shadow – doesn’t turn to look, doesn’t slow down.

The car continues to glide along beside John, and John notices a young man pushing a stroller staring in confusion. John gives him a serene smile and a nod, continuing on his way.

At last, when the sinister forces at work inside the car decide enough is enough, the window rolls down.

“Good evening, John,” Mycroft says, an air of the long-suffering heavy about his words.

“Evening Mycroft. Sod off.” John keeps his hands in his pockets instead of flipping Mycroft a choice salute, but it’s a close thing.

“Do be reasonable,” Mycroft begins, but John’s snort cuts him short.

“I’m saving us both time by not having the same conversation again – how much more reasonable do you want me to be?”

“Would you believe me if I said that was not my intended topic of conversation?”

John huffs his disbelief. “Not bloody likely.”

They’re still keeping pace down the road, and now John crosses the street, making use of a signal in his favour. Mycroft’s driver pushes through a red light to stay beside John. John feels his eyes give a massive roll. The road is by no means busy – but that minor transgression irks John to his core. “What’s it like, being that special?”

John swears he can hear a deep sigh from inside the car. “John –”

“What’s this about, Mycroft? I’m busy.”
“Are you, really?” Mycroft says in his How Intriguing voice.

John shoves his hands deeper into his pockets, then turns to face Mycroft’s open window. The car comes to a stop, and the door opens.

John takes a step back, raising an eyebrow. “Not happening.”

“You wish to have this discussion in public?” Mycroft is sitting with his hands folded primly in his lap, his face blandly blank.

“What discussion would that be, then?” John sniffs.

“You had your final analysis today, and your two year mark is fast approaching. You are currently considering what steps to take to protect Sherlock from yourself. Please, John, allow me to assist.”

“Fuck you,” John all but snarls, taking a step towards the open door. His hands are bulging into fists in his jacket pockets.

Mycroft raises both eyebrows and stares John down, who’s becoming more and more aware of the other foot traffic behind him, slowing down to take in the show.

“John, we are on the same side in this.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Nevertheless, John gets into the car, and the door closes. The car pulls into road and continues on its way at speed.

“This is not about you, John,” Mycroft cuts into the fuming silence John’s pulled tight around himself. “Sherlock is my younger brother. Must I repeat myself for you to understand? I worry.”

Mycroft’s face is as close to sincere as John’s ever seen it. “Incessantly.”

“What would you have me do?” John asks, curious despite himself.

“I have access to a safe facility,” Mycroft begins, and John reels back from those words, from the images they conjure, as if struck. Mycroft continues: “You would be monitored and unable to do harm to yourself or others –”

“I – that’s –” John swallows his panic. “That’s not what –”

“What you want?” Mycroft leans forward. “What exactly is it that you want?”

“I –” John considers it, then: disappearing, only to be locked away somewhere, safely out of reach, out of range. There’s a bitter pang as he imagines Sherlock learning of his choice – what would he think of it? Of John? Or would John’s disappearance remain a mystery to Sherlock, a loose end never to be tied up neatly in answers. Just an unsolved oddity – and he’d never know –

John swallows. “Not that.” He hardens the line of his mouth, but he feels Mycroft’s already spied the softness there, the vulnerability.

“Hmm,” Mycroft remarks, and they ride in silence for a spell. London flashes past in concrete greys and streetlight yellows. John feels some indefinable kinship with the muddled blur of it all, and the darker shadows that outline each patch of light.

The car slows, and John looks out the window for a moment before recognising 221B Baker Street in the deepening dusk. He nearly does a double take, before turning to stare at Mycroft.

“The time left to make decisions is dwindling. Nothing is certain, John, in this. No way to know how much time you have left – but then again, who does?”

The car door opens, and Mycroft nods to it, a clear dismissal.

John exits in a daze, turns to look at Mycroft.

“You will call, of course, if you change your mind about…circumstances,” Mycroft says, and it’s not a question – and with that, the door is closed, and the car slips into traffic and darkness and distance, and John stands watching it for a long time, stands watching the lights and people flow through the steel and concrete channel of the city.

Lights flicker on all along the street, along the flats and shops.

John turns sharply on his heel when he feels the lights behind him, the lights in 221B turn on. He looks up into that yellow glow, clenches his fist and nods his chin down to his chest, gathering himself before he moves.

He marches forward, and opens the door.
This 8500+ word chapter made possible in part due to tireless beta’ing by tiltedsyllogism and late night, pun-induced eye rolls from consultingsmartarse (pun-induced eye rolls sustain me). I’d like to direct y’all’s attention to the rating for this work as a small heads-up regarding this particular chapter.

<3 thanks for reading, as always!

John mounts the stairs without bothering to disguise the sound of his footsteps – there’s very little chance that he could keep Sherlock from hearing his approach, and besides, there’s no need. One way or another, John needs to talk to Sherlock – about what needs to be done, about everything.

When he enters the living room, John expects Sherlock to be at his microscope, or perhaps sitting in his chair, fingers steepled in thought. Sherlock, however, is standing a few feet back from the window, his violin clasped loosely in one hand, his bow hanging low in the other.

John is searching, grasping at a beginning, an opening, something, when Sherlock says:

“You’re hesitating – delaying doing something.” Sherlock lowers his eyes from their stare out past the windows’ reflections. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

It lands like a slap, Sherlock’s emotionless voice an unkind counterpoint to the miasma John wishes he could sort out. He settles on saying something obliquely adjacent to that mess, just so that he can say something. “I just had a conversation with your brother. Again.”

Sherlock makes a face, and John doesn’t miss the way his hands tighten around his violin’s neck and his bow’s grip. After a moment, Sherlock sighs, and it looks like the fight drains out of him, his shoulders sloping down on the exhale.

“When will you be leaving?” he asks.

It’s quiet in 221B, still in a way it hardly ever is when both of them are home. The small sounds of their cohabitation are absent, the creaks of their routines and the ease with which they fit their lives together.

But Sherlock is standing there, breathing, not leaving, and his respiration colours the silence, filling in the spaces left by John’s own breaths – and that’s enough, enough to be getting on with, anyway.

John sidesteps Sherlock’s question, can’t face it head on right now. “So you knew he’d be after me again?”

Sherlock huffs a breath, humourless. “My brother, lazy arse that he is, can be rather tenacious.”

“Careful,” John quips, “that sounds like praise.”

Sherlock’s mouth twitches, quirks to the side, and John knows exactly what that feels like, because he wore that exact same bittersweet expression not too long ago. Seeing that, recognising that, sets John free.

It’s the calmest John has felt in some time. The clarity that comes with decision, that comes with a battle plan – no matter that it may have to be modified on the fly – it’s something that’s been lacking for a long time, missing in a subtle, un-pinpointable way from John’s days.

John needs to talk to Sherlock, and so he will. Now.

“John?” Sherlock says into the waiting air, and hearing his name in that question twists into John with a pale urgency.

“I – just let me – let me speak.” John dips his chin to his chest and gathers his thoughts and what words he can.

Sherlock watches him, shifts where he stands, but says nothing.

“I need to say – I need to tell you,” John begins, and winces, hating this. He clenches his hands, straightens his back as he exhales harshly. “I’m no good at this sort of thing. I’m sorry.”

John looks away, down, and when he looks up at Sherlock, his face is white and terribly young looking – but then every feature tightens and pinches with cold anger, and for a moment John thinks Mycroft must be standing behind him – but no. That anger is all for him.

“Sherlock?” he asks.
Sherlock’s eyes narrow. “Stop this,” he says, and the glassy violence in that sibilant hiss surprises them both, John can tell, though Sherlock is better at hiding it. “Whatever it is you’re waiting for, waiting to do, just get on with it.”

“I’m trying to, actually –”

“Oh? Shall I help you then? I’ve had a good think, Sherlock, and after consulting with your interfering brother I’ve decided to pack it in and leave. Ta for the memories! How’s that? Did I get the general gist of it?”

“What? No – I mean –”

“Not good enough?” Sherlock’s normally pale skin is reddening, unevenly, his breathing rapid and shallow. “Because I can get more specific if you want: ‘I can’t put up with it anymore, Sherlock, living with you and having you hovering around observing me – I don’t need you and I don’t need your assistance when it comes to anything, and you crossed a line with that – that contact the other night and –’”

Oh god. John reels back, the wall behind him keeping him from going further.

“So I was right,” John says, cutting in. Sherlock, interrupted, just stares blankly at him. “About that night – about your – about our –” John shuts his mouth. He’s lost track of what he was going to say, and now these words are bubbling up and out, and he doesn’t want them to. Doesn’t want to define that night as some momentary Scientific Inquiry, even if it’s true. Saying it out loud will only make this more painful, sully what’s left between them even more. Whatever it is that could possibly be left after this exchange.

Sherlock blinks, seemingly as derailed from his diatribe as John is. “What do you mean, ‘right’?” Sherlock steps closer to John, his brow furrowing as he scrutinises John’s face. “About what, exactly?”

John cannot meet those eyes, but apparently that doesn’t matter, because a moment later Sherlock pulls sharply away, a silent gasp transforming his face. He looks away, to the side, down, eyes darting side to side as he considers, and John isn’t watching this happen, but he knows how Sherlock’s revelations play across his features, and his mind supplies the image and the bitter ache to accompany it.

“John.”

He doesn’t respond.

“John.”

Hands slide on either side of his face, hesitate, then firm their guiding grip to redirect John’s gaze – and then Sherlock’s eyes are inescapable in front of him, unblinking.

“As always, John, I must commend you for attempting to analyse what little data you manage to collect through your frankly abysmal observational methods, but I should point out that you are, yet again, drawing false conclusions from insufficient evidence.”

John blinks and frowns. “…What?”

Sherlock sighs and says, “You’re wrong, John.”

John shakes his head, tries to pull away from that unflinching gaze. “But –”

“You were never in full possession of the facts. Admittedly, a result of omission on my part, partly intentional to keep from emotionally colouring your processing of that night’s – the, ah, touching, and partly because, because –” Sherlock hesitates, swallows, and John holds his breath as he continues: “That day – when I came back – you…intimated that you had been under the impression that you had somehow….overstepped.” Sherlock clears his throat. “The truth is, you weren’t the only one…I had thought – that is – been….concerned – that I might’ve –”

“Overstepped?” John is frowning, half-shaking his head – because no, this is not the issue here.

“– With you. Ahem. Yes.”

John shakes his head, harder this time. “Sherlock – no. Stop. Listen, it’s ok.” He sighs and closes his eyes for a moment. “I have no illusions about what I am. I get that you were – curious,” he can’t quite hide the wince, “but it’s okay. Really. And I don’t expect anything from you. How can I? I’m less than a week away from the two-year mark –”

John gasps as those words cut their way out, through his chest, through his throat. He hadn’t intended to say them, to dump them on anyone else, especially not Sherlock.

Sherlock’s reaction is obvious in its absence – instead of words or actions, he freezes, inch by inch, becoming still as stone. Only his eyes are alive in the marble planes of his face.

John is struck by that image, verdigris eyes suspended in stone cut into unearthly beauty – and that thought slides in, surprising and not surprising at all, a painful bloom of confirmation.

“John,” Sherlock begins, but then he stops. After a long moment, he asks, “How many days?”
“Five,” John exhales, and it feels like being shot again, but it also feels like waking up afterwards. “Five days,” he breathes. “I thought – I thought you knew? You must have known it was getting close, I mean, you sent me on my way today –”

Sherlock’s words are as close to panic as John’s ever heard them: “The case today was – you wouldn’t have – after the other day, I – and you’ve been in a state ever since – since – and I thought perhaps – and –”

Understanding dawns for John. Oh. “She’s an analyst, Sherlock, not a therapist. Her job is to make sure I fit in after my augmentations – and to make sure I don’t off anyone else when my time comes.”

“John –” Sherlock’s face is a study in stricken, and seeing his expression frozen so open pulls words from John, more words he hadn’t planned to share or inflict on anyone else:

“Today she counselled me on making a clean transition from – anyway, she suggested I –” Leave, John means to say, but his throat clicks on silence. He wants to laugh at how he can’t even say the word out loud. Not now he’s standing in front of Sherlock, who’s got a crackling energy snapping through every joint, his hands flying up to his hair to rake through it.

“No,” Sherlock says before John can actually manage to finish his sentence.

John chokes on a familiar feeling, exasperation and affection tripping up his breathing. “Not your choice, Sherlock.”

Sherlock makes a sound, guttural, frustrated, overcome. “But I don’t want you to – and you don’t want to – do you?” Sherlock’s eyes take on a wildness, a wide-openness. “John?”

John sniffs, his throat tight. “No, of course not – but –”

“Then why would you even –?”

John shakes his head, closes his eyes, can’t even begin to explain, not past the tightness in his throat. “I didn’t want to – I don’t –”

“If you say something ridiculous about leaving ‘for my safety’ –”

“Is that so unbelievable – Sherlock, you’ve seen what happens with the others –?”

“Don’t be tiresome – as if there aren’t perfectly good reasons for augmentation recipients to want to commit homicide – ah,” Sherlock stops himself upon seeing John’s face. “I haven’t explained about Ashton and Whittaker, have I?” At John’s wince, Sherlock has the grace to keep from launching headlong into a no-doubt fascinating examination of reasons for an augmented person to tear his friend and then himself limb from limb. “Unless, perhaps….not now?”

The consideration in Sherlock’s words, his voice – so far from the paltry sham of caring he wears when he needs something from someone – has John huffing a defeated laugh. “Go on, then,” John, curious in spite of himself, hopeful despite everything he knows he should know by now.

“I went to supervise the autopsy – I was right about the muscle fibres, of course – and while I was there, Lestrade made the full medical records for pre-, during, and post-augmentation procedures available to me.”

“And?” John prompts when Sherlock pauses in his retelling, his brow creased in thought.

“Anderson may have been right after all – the courts may yet rule this a double homicide, due to lack of consent.”

“Broken clocks, and all that.”

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“Broken clocks, and all that.”

John’s brow furrows. “Lack of consent?”

“Ashton was head of the London RePro facility – they specialise in augmentation R&D – which explains the finances and the procedure records for Whittaker.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” John says, absolutely certain that he doesn’t.

Sherlock gives him a look that says ‘keep up, will you?’ then launches into explanation:

“Whittaker was an abundantly outgoing and personable man – his social circles far exceeded the normal reach of someone in his socio-economic position. He even established a firm friendship with his employer, Ashton – to the point that they went on all sorts of trips together. You recall the photos on the study wall? Those were merely curated highlights of their adventures together across the globe.”

“Oh.” John blinks. “So?”

“So,” Sherlock says with a vexed little sigh, “that photograph taken at the docks? It was the last of their outings documented. During it, Whittaker suffered a life-threatening injury, for which Ashton likely, if not rightly, felt responsible. You see where this is going.”

John’s mouth had already tightened into a grim line. “Oh god. He –”

“Ashton had Whittaker processed through his facility and privileges, without seeking consent first. There are no records of informational documents being signed, and as Whittaker was in dire
strait, there wouldn't have been any way to confirm his preferences prior to the no doubt lengthy and time sensitive operations.”

“‘They could have stabilised him and talked with him then,’” John points out, his stomach turning. It had been the path his own doctors and techs had followed – although the understanding that they could very well have chosen not to confer with him, could have instead made all the decisions without him – it’s a chilling, nauseating thought, a what if and an almost. For all that John had struggled post-augmentation, he had been given a choice. He had made his own decisions and sacrifices.

“Records indicate they didn’t,” Sherlock says, the grimmness in his tone matching that of John’s own thoughts.

“And after?”

“Analyst and clinic appointments and care, all paid for out the Ashton’s pocket.” Sherlock purses his lips for a moment. “The very best Whittaker could have asked for, but –”

“But he didn’t ask for it,” John finishes. “Did anyone know?”

“In Ashton’s household? Most certainly. All of Whittaker’s friends and coworkers would have been aware of his augmentation status. His were not easily disguised implants.”

John shivers, thinking of Harry’s reaction when she’d found out about his status. He wonders how many similar small funerals had been held for Whittaker, former friends and family saying their good byes to a man who had previously defined himself through those connections. How all those cherished anchors would have faded, slipped, and failed.

“Of course,” Sherlock continues, “Whittaker would have tried to make the best of his situation – but the man he was before, the life that man led, was beyond his grasp now. The suddenness of the isolation, the totality of it, aside from interaction with the person responsible for it…” Sherlock’s mouth twists sideways and down, as if he had personally tasted something similar in his life. With a shake of his head, he continues: “Inevitably, there was friction, tension, growing tighter with each passing day, until it came to a boiling point. Possibly passing the two-year mark without incident proved too much – a promised end-point turned false hope. Whatever the catalyst, Whittaker’s anger apparently caused him to snap, to vent the suffering he’d been forced to keep inside under the pressure to be grateful.

“It turned violent, and then it turned self-destructive, and there we are.”

John clicks his mouth close, frowns, then opens it again: “What do you mean, ‘there we are?’”

Sherlock mirrors John’s frown. “Perfectly sound – or rather, unsound – reason for the two deaths. Handiwork of an augmented person, not the result of malfunction, but rather the outcome of everyone else’s over or under-involvement with the augmentation recipient.”

“And Anderson?” John asks weakly, numbly, a little at a loss for what to say or ask next.

“His idea that it was a hate crime.” Sherlock smirked. “In the end, Whittaker hated himself as much as the people around him hated what he’d become – or rather, had been made. Double homicide as a result of a lack of consent: not having a say in his future led him down the path he followed. Having that isolation and estrangement – aside from the person responsible for his condition, of course – forced upon him must have preyed upon his every waking moment.”

Sherlock tips his head to the side, considering. “He made it pretty far, all things considered. Those with the best odds do seem to share some common factors. Take the Sedwic seven, for instance: because their identities were protected, they were able to control how they were viewed by society, could choose to share their stories or not, which allowed them to build lives worth continuing. They weren’t instructed to plan for a drastically shortened lifespan – which in and of itself is a self-fulfilling prophecy –” Sherlock’s words cut off.

John feels deafened by the abrupt silence, the timing of it, what’s being said through both. He wonders what Sherlock will say as he breaks the moment, as he breaks away, because that’s what comes next, what has to follow.

Instead however, Sherlock nods. Then, instead of pulling away, he leans closer, crowding John until their foreheads are touching and they’re staring straight into one another. John’s breathless with the sudden closeness. Time expands as his heart, veins, nerves hang suspended in this moment of connection.

“You’ve been doing this alone,” Sherlock murmurs into the quiet.

John laughs out a gasp, intends to pull back, but instead just clutches at Sherlock’s shoulders. “What other choice did I have?” A lie – John knows there’s always been another option, one he had kept close to hand, stored in a drawer at his bedsit, tucked into the waist of his jeans. One he had, time after time, staunchly refused.

Sherlock must see – or rather deduce – John’s thoughts, his other option: he twitches slightly – on anyone else it would have been a full body flinch.

“It’s alright,” John says, although it shouldn’t be.
“You wouldn’t, though,” Sherlock says, and it’s not a question, not even a deduction. There’s something like faith in his hoarse whisper, and it sets John to shivering.

John huffs out a breath that tastes surprisingly like laughter. “No.” The steadiness in his voice surprises him, but not that word, that idea he’s felt and expressed so many times in the face of danger, of certain death.

Sherlock exhales long and slow. He nods once, slowly – then blinks. “This is not what upset you originally.”

John breathes in. He begins before the sentence is ready, ripe for the saying: “What we – what you – what happened…” and then pauses, because the pain was expected, but not this growing gasp of relief, like lancing an infection. It spurs the next sentence: “That only happened because of my – condition. It made it clear – that I am only interesting to you because of the cyberthetics.”

Those last words are a bitter exhale, followed by an ache in the void left behind.

Another breath, huffed in this time, Sherlock’s throat working against itself. “Not true.” He swallows again. “Lots people have scars and missing body parts and, yes, even cyberthetic replacements. None of them are as fascinating as you. As vital as you.”

John can feel himself frowning, his forehead wrinkling against Sherlock’s. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Sherlock makes a noise, low, in the back of his throat, as he searches for the words. “Even if you never… it’s not the changes that made you, you. It’s how you’ve responded to them. Overcome them. Endured them.” He pauses, eyes darting away before returning to look at John. “I’m not sure I could’ve – would’ve held up quite as …well as you. There’s something to be admired in that. There’s something to be kept.”

John’s pulse jumps, his lungs falter. “I –”

“And the night – the day after – I think I understand now what you – that you felt – you were worried…that the experience had been one-sided. That the wanting had been… I should’ve said then, but circumstances –” Sherlock clears his throat. “You should know it wasn’t.”

“Sherlock –” John can feel his heart knocking against the metal of his chest implant. Hope is a swelling ache, a reminder of pain, a tether to caution and doubt. “But you didn’t even let me touch you –”

“Not for a lack of wanting, John.” Sherlock swallows, and the awkward way of his words does as much to convince John of the truth of that statement as the shy way in which he can’t quite hold John’s questioning gaze does. “I confess I needed to – wanted very much to focus on you. It was supposed to be about what you needed…And your touch was distracting in the extreme.”

“Oh.” John feels a flush heat his skin, a sort of pleased rinse of self-satisfaction running through him.

“In general, you are very distracting,” Sherlock adds, and John can’t help the way those words land.

Everything is wrong – the timing, the lead up, the five days left – but John finds he’s feeling less caught up in that and more in this moment, with Sherlock looking at him like that, pressing close like that, as if he needs this diminishing space between them as much as John does.

“I –” John doesn’t know what words come next, draws a blank –

“John?”

If there is a question in Sherlock’s eyes, there must be an answer in John’s, because some new gravity tilts their faces, until their lips are touching, barely brushing, electric warmth building.

Sherlock pulls away, the barest hints of a flush high on his cheeks, and his eyes looking searchingly into John, who cannot tear his eyes away from the colour in the pale.

“You –” John’s hands latch onto Sherlock’s forearms, stop his retreat, and then John’s lips are on Sherlock’s, soft and then firm, tentative and then much bolder.

Sherlock makes a small noise in the back of his throat, and this time John is listening, unclouded by his own sensory rewiring and overload, and he hears it, and it coaxes a similar sound from his vocal cords.

Mirror relays, he thinks, delirious.

Sherlock’s whole body, at first rigid with tension, goes pliant as John maintains the kiss. Twisting to get his own back against the wall properly, John lets his hands slide up from their grip on Sherlock’s forearms until they are curling around the man’s too sharp shoulder blades. His left hand continues on up, to tangle itself in dark locks. His fingers, his shoulder blades, his legs become leverage, and now he has Sherlock against the wall, Sherlock’s low, almost broken sounds caged by his lips.
Oxygen becomes necessary, and John pulls away, madly remembering (and agreeing with) Sherlock’s opinion of breathing. “Alright?” he asks, and then waits for Sherlock to gasp in air. He’s vaguely aware of his own laboured breathing as a counterpoint to Sherlock’s. He feels one heaved breath away from horizontal; the wall keeping them upright seems a blessing – and an injustice.

Sherlock nods, eyes closed, eyelashes fluttering, dark crescents against the pale of his cheekbones. “I’ve wanted –” he swallows breathlessly, tries again: “John –”

“Yes.” John takes a breath and pushes in again, for a kiss, for contact, for a taste of skin. He feels he could drown in closeness. After days spent distant, he wants to – and it seems the same is true for Sherlock. He presses in close, mouth a harsh slant of pressure against John’s lips, against his jaw, against his neck – Oh god that feels electric –

John finds himself arching, his spine extending then curling, and then Sherlock’s kissing him again, or maybe John managed to get their mouths together, hot, damp breaths baffling the scant air between them, a turbulent and ever-decreasing distance.

Sherlock makes a frustrated noise and moves closer, and John agrees, although that hasty shove leaves John breathless for a moment. He wants more – but not while standing. “We should – oh, we should –” John gasps, hands gliding down to clutch at Sherlock’s waist, hesitant to go lower – because what if those hips twitch away once more, repudiate his touch?

“Bed?” Sherlock suggests, and it seems he’s had the same thought.

John stutters in a breath, his muscles tight, because – oh god, this is happening.

Just this morning the future had seemed so much colder – and infinitely lonelier – but here, now, Sherlock slips both hands up to cup his neck and jaw and kiss John, sounding overcome and as close to frantic as John’s ever heard him – as if that desolate future had coiled around Sherlock’s chest and throat as well.

“John?” Sherlock pulls back, then asks, “Yes?”

And John is nodding yes, saying: “Yes,” taking the first step away from the wall, from that other future, and taking Sherlock’s hand, because John can feel his body, feel its response, its want, and it all matches up with his desires, perfectly synchronised. It’s exhilarating – and absolutely foreign. After almost two years of feeling disjointed, of living that way, John has no idea what to do with it.

Sherlock’s room is closest, and they turn to head that way, no discussion needed.

Pale fingers fiddle with the hem of John’s jumper before lifting away, as if skittish. John turns to face Sherlock once inside his room, thinks they might linger here, but Sherlock crowds close, his arms and hips and thighs ushering John backwards towards the bed, almost shy in his insistence, as if expecting resistance at any moment.

Instead, John lets Sherlock steer them – and then he lets himself topple back against the bed, sheets as soft as his skin remembers, and his impact stirs the air just enough that his first inhale is clouded through with ozone and dark earth, a musk that lingers salt-sweet.

John closes his eyes, breathes deeply, and when he opens his eyes, catches the edge of caution in Sherlock’s face before it’s hidden.

Words catch in his throat, so instead he reaches for Sherlock, for his shirt buttons, his eyes on Sherlock’s as he undoes the bottom-most button. Sherlock watches him, his face inscrutable, but lets him, leaning forward over John to bring the higher buttons within reach.

When his shirt falls open, John’s hands hover, momentarily out of things to do, before settling lower on Sherlock’s trouser closure. Sherlock holds very still as John’s fingers begin to move again, but when his trousers are open he sits back, slightly out of reach, and then bends to open John’s jeans.

John swallows when those fingers grip the top of his jeans, but even as his stomach muscles clench with nerves, he hitches his hips up, as clear an invitation as he can manage –and Sherlock takes it, dragging his jeans down, and also his pants, which, oh god –

He’s half hard and half naked, and Sherlock is bare-chested above him, breathing audible and shallow as he divests John of his denims. John kicks his own shoes off, toes off his socks, skin touching ‘skin’, and then his legs are bare. When Sherlock looms over him again, John pushes his shirt down his arms as far as it’ll go. Sherlock sits up to shrug it off, and John gets his fingers in between trousers and skin, looks up and waits for the miniscule nod, then tugs everything lower.

Sherlock is completely naked above him now, and leaning in, his legs kicking away his trousers and pants and socks before bracketing John’s, his arms sliding in under John’s jumper, fingers dragging lines of sensation up along his waist, his ribcage.

John’s breath hitches and his back arches, and for a moment, his cock presses firmly against the warm skin of the man over him, and John cannot contain the surprised and wanting sound that slips free. Sherlock rucks up his jumper and vest, keeps his eyes on John as he lowers his face to John’s exposed stomach and inhales. He shudders, still pressed close to John, and that sends a thrill of friction along John’s nerves. His skin lifts into bumps.
Sherlock keeps sliding his jumper up, and for a moment John feels panic – Sherlock will see all of him, all the edges and scars and ‘skins’ and –

John lifts his arms, lets Sherlock remove the last of his clothing, because the other option is stopping, and if John is perfectly honest with himself, he’d rather feel the press and heat of Sherlock without the barrier of wool and cotton.

There’s a soft rumble of a sound as Sherlock drops John’s clothes over the edge of the mattress, and John is completely naked, under Sherlock, who is also completely naked, who is pressing his bare skin against John’s mismatched and marred skins as he moves up.

“Sherlock –”

Sherlock lips are on his before he can apologise for or explain his appearance, or say anything for that matter. Sherlock’s tongue slips past his open lips, deep, indulgent licks coaxing John’s tongue forward, pulling his voice from his throat, and when John moans into the kiss, Sherlock hums in response, eyes closed and fluttering when John manages to pry his own eyelids apart.

They part, panting, press closer, gasping. Mouths no longer touching, each broad swath of skin against skin lights up, a smear of heat and sensation, the barest beginnings of sweat easing the way.

Sherlock trembles, arches above John, against him, and John watches the notch of shadow at the base of the pale column of Sherlock’s throat lift away then come closer, towards the dip of John’s clavicle, transfixed.

It’s not a conscious decision, but John isn’t surprised when he fixes his mouth to that notch, then licks and suck where Sherlock’s jawline meets his ear, the skin there jumping as Sherlock’s harsh breaths work his jaw. John works his way back down, finds he wants to put teeth to flesh, and he does it, giving in to the ache of want, biting firmly into the crook of Sherlock’s neck.

As Sherlock shifts against him, he feels Sherlock’s erection against his thigh, brushing up along as Sherlock resettles higher. John lets the hand at Sherlock’s nape slide lower at the same time as the hand at his waist, fingers trailing down and over one sharp-boned hip, slipping in along the inner thigh. He goes by touch, springy curls parting as his fingers card towards Sherlock’s cock. Fingertips bump up against tight, soft skin, and John lets his hand slip around, until his palm is flush against Sherlock, who doesn’t move away this time.

Sherlock stutters out a breath, his long limbs shifting against John’s, hands traveling – one to cup John’s testicles, and the other to grip his cyberthetic thigh, the way he did the first time, and he asks, “Is this alright?” his words a coal haze murmur, and when John nods, wordless, Sherlock’s fingers dig in for purchase before sliding up and dipping in beyond the ‘skin.’

John gasps, almost convulsing at that touch, at the commingling of sensations, like electricity and damp fire unfurling inside him. His back arches, and their hips knock together, hands suddenly in the way, and John groans, and Sherlock echoes, still working John’s body, settling into a rhythm of syncopated touches and John feels his heart hammer and knock inside his thoracic cavity and it’s too –

“Sherlock – I –”

“John?” Sherlock stills his touching, and tilts his head to meet John’s unfocused gaze. Sherlock’s lips are wet and flushed from their kissing. His one hand lifts slowly from where it cups John’s arousal. John’s own hands falter and fall back from their exploration, moving from groin to find Sherlock’s shoulders and clutch.

Sherlock’s fingers pull back to splay over hip and thigh, curling in lazy, grasping scratches. His short nails drag against the circuit-scarring on John’s hip, and god it feels odd, so unfamiliar to have a touch land there – and not even a medical one at that.

“I – everything –” John’s words stagger out, interrupted by panting breaths.

“Too much?” Sherlock’s voice is whisper-low yet somehow deeper than ever before.

John groans and tips his head back. He decides: “No.” Sherlock’s fingers hesitate against him. He struggles to find the right words, to shape them. “Not enough.”

Sherlock’s breathing hitches, his body caught in the frame of surprise. A moment later, his lungs
Sherlock's breathing hitches, his body caught in the frame of surprise. A moment later, his lungs hush out their air, and he bends forward at the waist to nuzzle into the crease between John's thigh and groin. Blond curls ruffle and shift as dark eyelashes flutter shut, and cool air drags over sweat and musk damp skin as Sherlock inhales, deep, quivering lungfuls of air.

John whimpers as Sherlock shifts, and then hot breath is washing over the taut skin of John’s cock. If the hard twitch doesn’t betray his response, the moan that slips honeyed and sweet from his throat surely must.

Wet heat envelops him, sliding down to take almost all of him, and his hips jerk, out of his control. The hand against his left thigh clutches and presses, immobilizing him. With that comes the feeling of skin against ‘skin’, ‘skin’ shifting against sensing surface, cyberthetic muscles contracting, clenching from contact.

“Oh god.”

Sherlock’s lips and tongue move up and down along his shaft, pressure varying, hand moving to caress lower and lower, his eyes fixed on John’s face every time he manages to tilt down and look.

Pressure increases steadily, and John keens, and it feels like lightning is clawing its way around inside him, confused, trapped, ricocheting from nerve to nerve. His skin is fire and flash, his muscles are a collection of tremors.

It’s still not enough – John can feel it like a chasm opening wider with each caress. For all the touch and stimulus Sherlock is pouring into him, there’s more to need, more to want. John doesn’t realize he’s speaking breathy and half-formed words until Sherlock pulls his mouth from John’s cock with one last, lingering lick.

“More?” he asks, and his voice is raw – John wonders why for one bewildered moment. With each breath and touch, thought abandons him a little more, retreating like the tide. Logic feels like a hazy obligation, far away in blue-tinged distance.

“I – yes.” John swallows, and his throat is dry. “I want – ” He’s not sure. He lets his hands find Sherlock’s hair, and then guides him up for a kiss, a blaze of friction, lips and tongues sliding against one another.

With a jolt that clutches his pelvic muscles and cant his hips upwards, John realizes he can taste his own musk in Sherlock’s mouth, can discern the barest hints of slick and salt. He groans into Sherlock’s mouth, past lips and into throat and lungs – Sherlock’s inhaling as he moans, pulling John’s breath and sound into himself.

John breaks away. “Fuck.”

Sherlock leans forward, panting hard. His eyes are dark, pupils blown, cheeks coloured like high fever, but the presence and alert interest displayed by body and mind buoy the sight from sickly to seductive.

“I –” Sherlock begins, but John interrupts:

“Yes.”

The lifted eyebrow is so familiar John has to grin, but a moment later it dissolves into shaking desire as Sherlock slips his hand low, sliding along their cocks and pausing there, then continuing lower to push against the sensitive skin of John’s perineum.

John’s response catches in his throat.

“Yes?” Sherlock asks, more breath than sound, and it takes John a moment to gather himself and realize that those long fingers have stilled, giving John time to feel, to decide.

John’s back is arching, pushing his hips in response to that touch, and then he’s nodding, because whatever comes next, he wants more. The massive neural tree inside him shimmers in sections, and he finds he’s desperate to see it (or rather, feel it) all lit up, consumed by light, consummated in the strobe of desire and... Whatever Sherlock can give, will give, John wants that. “Yes,” he manages breathlessly. “But don’t we – you – need – ?”

“Do you have –?”

“Upstairs in my –”

“Wait here,” and Sherlock is gone before John can ask ‘Where would I go?’, his absence cold against John’s skin. He breathes deeply, staring up at Sherlock’s ceiling, tries to find his balance, tries to wrap his mind around this new reality –

He hasn’t quite managed it by the time Sherlock returns, less than a minute later, and John fears for the state of his bedside table’s contents after such a whirlwind plundering. Sherlock is back over him, slightly out of breath, his skin chilled by his mad dash. “Am I going to be upset by the state of my –?” John begins, but the click of a plastic cap cuts him off – when had Sherlock moved his other hand? – and the man above him is grinning like a rogue, but it’s coloured and shaded with something like disbelief. The way Sherlock swoops in to kiss him hard and fast says he’s trying to hide what his face is showing so clearly.
John wants to hold onto that sight, that memory, that sentiment – but a cool, slippery touch starting at his perineum and moving lower disrupts all thought. The lightest of grazes across the most sensitive of skin tightens his whole body, nerves taught and vibrating with sensation. The huff of breath from his lungs emerges as a startled grunt.

“Alright?” Sherlock asks.

“Yeah, just –”

“I know. Relax,” Sherlock advises. John nods and breathes and makes the mistake of looking down to where Sherlock’s arousal hangs heavy and flushed between his legs, renewed after his return to the bed.

“Oh god,” John manages just as Sherlock’s finger presses inside, and he clenches in surprise and no small amount of trepidation. If a finger is that intense… “I’ve never –” John blurs, and then shuts up as Sherlock’s head snaps up from where he’d been watching his finger press into John. Sherlock’s face – brows pinched together, lower lip caught between his teeth – has John wondering: is this as new for Sherlock as it is for John?

“Would you rather not –?” Sherlock asks, and he seems coltish and young in that moment, and John thinks he might have his answer. “Or you could –”

“New?”

John squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, his cheeks aflame. “Yeah.”

Sherlock grins his peculiar, lopsided grin, the real one. “Don’t worry John –” he begins, but John cuts him off with half a laugh: “If you say you’ll ‘be gentle’ or some other rot –” John begins, tensing up.

Sherlock’s huffed laughter catches John by surprise, and then the kiss catches him just the same. Sherlock leaning forward to capture John’s lips shifts his finger a scant inch deeper into John, and god, it feels strange. When he pulls back he says, “I was going to say relax, John.” Sherlock leans forward and kisses him again, then sits up and back, only to lean forward and kiss a very different part of John.

“Hnh –” John’s throat clamps shut on all sound as hot tongue and wet lips glide along his shaft. He pants, then stills in shock as he feels Sherlock’s finger slide deeper, pulled along by the tightening of John’s muscles. Hepants raggedly, squirming, and Sherlock’s right hand resumes hip hold duty, stilling his twitches and aborting his thrusts. “Oh –” John tries, “I – I – Sherlock?”

“More.” John closes his eyes and tries to calm his breathing, not sure what to make of feeling this mortified and this aroused all at once. He’s never been this demanding in bed before – has never needed and wanted so intensely, and it’s embarrassing and exulting all at once. When he looks down at Sherlock, those lips swollen and cheeks flushed, there’s a look of wonder buried under the self-satisfied gleam in his eyes.

John wonders if it’s what they are doing, or who he is doing it with, that is having such a profound effect on him.

The second finger increases the stretch, but that mutable sensation shades from pain into a burn, which becomes a sort of yearning. All the nerves in that area are jumbled peripherally with his implant’s relay, and for a confusing moment, it feels like Sherlock has sunk his fingers into John’s hip socket, tangled into the cabling –

But where the interface gets it wrong, John’s brain and body sort it out, and John can feel his nerves adjusting, editing the neural report, a double image resolving into clarity just as smoothly and surely as the stretch becomes a burn, becomes an ache, becomes an unmitigated want.

Sherlock doesn’t need to be told – he adds a third finger almost as soon as John wants it, and it’s terrifying that he can go from not wanting to considering, from fearing to craving something in such a mind-bendingly short period of time – but Sherlock had been right (as usual): it’s amazing how moldable the brain can be. Especially given the right incentive.

John groans as Sherlock’s fingers slip free. He feels open and empty and his hips are shifting as if searching, and his heart is pounding so he can feel it in his wrists, the curls of his fingers, the stirring of his cock. “Sherlock,” he finds his voice, buried behind a heap of tattered breaths. “Sherlock, please –”

There’s a quiver to Sherlock’s voice as he responds to John, as he stumbles over his reply, “Oh god, John – yes. Yes?”

“Yes.”
The sound of foil tearing, another click, and then the heat and humidity of Sherlock’s body is back between John’s legs. “Do I need to –?” John asks, making as if to turn over, but Sherlock’s hand on his scarred hip holds him in place.

“No, like this. I want –” and Sherlock’s voice hitches as John simply nods. He wants this, too. “Tell me if I –”

“Yes.”

The condom is opaque against the flush of Sherlock’s cock, already pale against a bed of dark curls. John finds he cannot take his eyes from the sight of Sherlock slicking himself, then using that hand to guide himself to the ready heat of John.

The blunt pressure is surprising and too much, and John finds himself tensing despite his earlier and desperate want, but then warm, wet fingers wrap around him, pulling at his foreskin, sliding up and down and John groans and feels all his muscles clench then

He gasps as Sherlock slips inside him, tightens and keens at the pressure and the stretch, overwhelmed as the slow push inward begins, halting and continuing as John’s whimpers and groans dictate. He may be babbiling, but now is not a moment for reflection. His left leg twitches once, twice, hard, and Sherlock’s hand comes to rest against the ‘skin,’ soothing, grounding, even as he shudders his way closer and closer to John, skin twitching and rippling.

It takes longer than John would have expected, and Sherlock sweats and strains above him, his breaths deep and gusting sighs of restraint. When John looks away from where Sherlock disappears inside him (oh god, inside him), he’s caught in the tempting trap of Sherlock’s expression, which sways between closed-eyes focus and wonderment as he looks down at their joining.

Sherlock shivers as he sinks the final two inches of himself into John, and that little tremor carries into John and rattles his nerves, his joints, his muscles. Mirror synchronicity.

Curls dishevelled, arms shaking, Sherlock lowers himself to lie flush along John’s chest for a moment, and their breaths and heartbeats knock against one another. “Alright?” John asks.

Sherlock cracks a laugh and nods. “You?”

Their voices are almost indistinguishable for roughness and stoked fire. John nods. “Move?” he suggests, and the pleasure of surprising a huffed breath from Sherlock is well worth the achy sting of that first thrust. He hisses and breathes through it. “Slower. Just – yeah – oh like that –”

“I’m barely moving,” Sherlock mutters. It would sound like whining if it weren’t for the breathy quality to his voice.

“Just – oh – let me oh god wait – let me,” John can barely finish his thought, never mind his sentence. His hands hook around Sherlock’s shoulders, and he uses that leverage to scoop down a bit, stopping to gasp as that shoves Sherlock deeper than before (if the petulant detective gasps as well, good), and then he manages to hook his legs up over the crests of Sherlock’s hips.

Everything changes: proximity, pressure, angle.

Sherlock recovers first, the twitch of his body stilling into resolve, and he leans into his next slow thrust, and the next, building up a relentless rhythm of advance and retreat, and something molten starts to gather and glow in John’s abdomen. It isn’t steady, not yet, flickering and fading as Sherlock’s efforts shift and search –

John cries out as Sherlock’s next thrust grazes his prostate, and he barely has time to draw breath before it happens again – and then a scant few thrusts later again – each time slightly different, each time layering heat and friction and –

“God, Sherlock, oh, fuck,” John groans. Everywhere they touch is blazing heat, every movement slick and potent. It feels like he’ll never have enough air to breathe again, it feels like all his blood has left his head, hands and feet, and he can feel his heart hammering within the artificial confines of his chest.

“John.”

John’s throat clenches at the sound of his name, small and breathless and hopeless as it falls from the lips above him.

“John, oh –”

A shaking hand finds John’s erection where it shifts against his stomach, stiff and aching, and long fingers wrap around and start to pull in time with full, deep thrusts. It’s a confusing whorl of sensation, inside and outside and around, as if no part of John is left untouched, unstimulated. He keens with it, soft noises escaping his throat with each clash, and those noises grow louder, blend and blur together to become a wavering moan.

John’s throat clenches, cutting off all sound and breath for a moment, tipping point reached. He gasps, balanced on a cruel edge, waiting, wanting –

Sherlock lunges forward to kiss John as his breathing changes, cycling up into hyperventilation,
his body growing into one taut bow. The feeling of trapped lightning shatters – it’s a wave now, and it crashes over John, overwhelming him with heat and light, a white hot pour into the crucible of his body, until every filament glows from heat transfer.

He feels his pelvic muscles judder into action and out of his control, clamping and clutching again and again as Sherlock stills in shock, and John finds his voice and cries out, “Sherlock?” helpless in the flood, and adds, “Don’t – oh god don’t stop – Sherlock –!”

It’s enough, and Sherlock moves again, surges forward again and again, his own need bleeding into his face, the arch of his back, the tension in his arms, the flex of his fingers. His thrusts stoke the blaze inside John, prolonging it just a bit, coaxing a few more clenching spasms from his overworked body.

Wrecked and wrung out as he feels, John doesn’t expect to feel Sherlock’s shuddering finish, but every nerve ending is on fire, or drowning, or swamped – a miasma of light and electricity and heat – and he feels it keenly when Sherlock falls victim to friction and pressure and pleasure, near-mindless rutting stilled as if in rictus, head thrown back, mouth open and eyes clenched shut in a bid for control before it fractures and fails, his breathing cracking into a hoarse shout.

Sherlock’s heaving breaths, his choked whimper, and his trembling collapse are the end parentheses, and suddenly they are in the space beyond what just happened, and John feels hot and trapped underneath –

Sherlock rolls off, and they both wince at the abrupt disconnect, and he mumbles something that may have been an apology. John decides he might as well take it as one as he shivers beside the dazed form of Sherlock. John pants shallowly, fingers clutching at nothing, then startles as soft sheets flutter down to touch and drape across his bare skin.

Sherlock is suddenly much closer than John expected, curling around John, a long arm snaking around his middle and pulling him back against his chest, chill with perspiration.

“Sherlock?”

“Stay out of your leg,” the detective mumbles against his neck. His breathing is still shaky where it ruffles John’s hair.

John’s not sure what that means, but at the moment he isn’t sure about much of anything. The room, when he opens his eyes, is a flat image lacking depth, leaving John feeling dizzy and disoriented, as if he could break through the thin film of what he sees. There’s a steady press, a grounding pressure around his middle. “What is this, Sherlock?” John asks, but even as he does, he registers his body-brain connection coming back on line.

Focus snaps back into action, and John shifts, feeling his limbs move through space.

“Was that too much.” Sherlock says after a moment, and the way he says it, it sounds like he’s answering himself.


The weight of what they’ve done settles and shifts, becoming something comfortable rather than something tremendous and important. It becomes a thing that happened. John is acutely aware of his skin and what it holds, circuity and circulatory systems, and right now they don’t seem so different. Muscles relax, and their compositions don’t matter.

John’s breathing settles, and he feels himself sinking into what exhaustion has to offer. “For a minute there, I thought I had two feet,” he mumbles, half asleep and letting himself slip further.

“You do,” Sherlock counters, and it’s the last thing that registers before the world cants to the side and John falls all the way.
When John finally realizes he’s awake, his eyes have been open for a while. He can tell from the feeling of each slow blink, from the way light slips in easily, unblurred, not stinging or scratching at sleep-fresh eyes.

Floorboards creak by the doorway, and John tilts his head to see Sherlock standing in the doorway. No, not standing – hesitating.

His body is a pale line between the open panels of his blue robe, beauty and uncertainty in the tilt of his hips and the twitch of his hands. While John normally finds an unsure Sherlock amusing or endearing or vindicating, this instance of doubt makes him want to erase that tell-tale crease between dark brows.

He has to clear his throat before he can say, “Hey,” and then he sits up, rubbing at his eyes, trying for normal, for easy, for it’s all fine.

Sitting up allows the sheet slip and pool in his lap, except where it’s stuck to his skin by the dried mess of come and lubricant. He makes a face at it, then hopes Sherlock won’t misconstrue that grimace – but when he looks up, Sherlock has shifted inside the room to lean back against the doorway, arms crossed, an almost smile belying his smugness.

“Prat,” John mutters, but he feels an answering tug at the corners of his mouth. He pulls the sheet away from his skin. “Ugh.”

A wet washcloth slaps against his chest, then slops into his lap. He’s not sure whether to flip Sherlock off or thank him, so he bites his lip and focuses on cleaning himself off. It doesn’t take too long, but with each new twist of his torso, John feels proof of what they did written in faint aches and forming bruises.

He traces a fingertip-sized shadow on his right hip, then fits his left thumb to it, awkwardly rotating his arm and hand to try to match the splay of gripping bruises. He looks at his left hip next, and almost blinks in surprise – no bruises. Of course no bruises – no real skin to bruise, but still.

John shakes his head and looks up at Sherlock, who is now staring back at him in open amusement, his eyes just about sparking with it. “Do you need me to interpret those for you?”

John snorts. He chuckers the dirty cloth at Sherlock, who ducks and leaves it where it splats to the floor. He takes a step forward, and then another, and John is almost painfully aware of how naked he is, and how worried Sherlock is pretending not to be.

The bed doesn’t dip beneath Sherlock’s weight, because halfway to it he changes direction and walks to his wardrobe instead. John opens his mouth, but then doesn’t tell him to come back to bed, words defeated by nerves, uncertainty.

John sighs and runs his hands through his hair, over his face, and when he inhales, the alluring scent of Sherlock’s bed blends with the very domestic scent of the wet washcloth. Underneath it all, the cloy of sex still clings, elusive and persistent all at once.

His hands fall to his lap, and when he shifts his hips, he notices how loose his ‘skin’ is sitting – it must have slipped some of the moorings during – during –

To his utter horror, John blushes.

He’s not sure if he makes a noise or if Sherlock can somehow identify fatal mortification by sound alone, but he chooses that exact moment to peer back at John from the recesses of his wardrobe. John can see the moment Sherlock’s eyes begin to shutter, but that doesn’t mean he can stop the strangled sound of self-deprecation as he falls back against the bed.

It escapes, even between his fingers as they cover his mouth, and then it twists into a hiccup of a laugh.

“What?” Sherlock’s eyes are narrowed when John manages to look at him from behind the ineffective screen of his hands.

John lowers his hands to try and get a grip on himself – and apparently that’s the right thing to do, because Sherlock’s eyes dart all over his form, coming back to his face after each foray, and he steps cautiously towards the bed. “John?”
“We, um.” The blush intensifies, and John can’t help the (nervous) giggle. He bites his lip. “We –”

“Out with it, John!” Sherlock sounds almost panicked with not knowing. He looks it, too, but it’s a good look on him this time, not his usual arrogant impatience.

John fully intends to prolong the effect, but the words just fall out: “We fucked my leg loose.”

Sherlock’s eyes are wide, his face is still. A tiny sound escapes him, like a little cough of surprise. It’s the proverbial pebble, and John is gasping for breath before the end of the laughter is even in sight. Sherlock leans against the wall by the wardrobe, his face lined with mirth, eyes crinkled closed as his laughter spills from him. Each peal of laughter seems to wash away a layer of tension.

“Really?” Sherlock finally manages.

John yawns around the end of his fit, still, technically, at the edge of having slept. “Not the socket – just the sock.”

“Oh good,” Sherlock says faintly, and it’s the first time John has ever heard him sound so out of his depth and relieved, and at the same time at that.

John sits up, huffing a sigh, and grips the edges of the ‘skin’ – now that he’s tugging at it, he can feel how much of it has loosened, how much it has shifted out of alignment. His good mood doesn’t quite vanish, but it does shift into muttering as he tries to reposition the sock without undoing it completely – with no success.

He straightens with a huff of annoyance and sees Sherlock’s eyes fixed on him. They are wary again, and John finally recognizes that Sherlock isn’t doubting his own decisions and actions last night. He’s doubting John’s.

The unmitigated fondness that accompanies this realization seems to rattle through John, shaking everything back into place, and he finds he can smile at Sherlock and say, “Here, give me a hand?”

The bed dips this time as Sherlock settles beside John, not touching yet, his eyes still searching John for signs of – what? revulsion? rejection?

“John? You’re sure?”

“Of course –”

Sherlock purses his lips. “You want me to –”

“You know, I helped out with a cyberthetic procedure recently…three times verbal consent – is that what you’re doing right now?”

Sherlock flushes. “I –”

“Because you should know, Sherlock, medical formality is the last thing I want from you,” John says. He lays his hands on Sherlock’s.

Sherlock keeps his face tilted down. “I didn’t want to assume – and the only times you’ve let me touch you have been in a medical context… well, until very recently,” he amends, cheeks reddening slightly further. “So… I had thought that those were the only acceptable parameters. And of course, you did not touch me during the previous … encounter.”

John snorts. “Well, I am telling you now, yes? Checking with me is fine, but consent in triplicate is probably overkill, okay? And besides, it was hardly my fault you didn’t let me touch you in return!”

Sherlock still looks unsure, hesitation curled into his fingers and wrists, and that concern pierces John down to the hollow metal.

“Here,” John murmurs, taking Sherlock’s hands and positioning them at the hip seam. “Hold this steady while I try –” but even with the assistance, John can’t get the sock to settle right. He sighs and lets his hands fall away.

“Down?” Sherlock suggests, and it’s just above a whisper.

“Down,” John says firmly to make up for the tremor he can feel threatening, and he makes a little urging motion to get Sherlock started. He pops the last few seals, then joins Sherlock in shimmying the ‘skin’ southward. With two pairs of hands, it goes quickly, and John savours the fact that the clinging skin falls away without the buzzing, over-much sensation he had come to associate with any sort of maintenance.

He’ll worry about the why of that later.

His leg lies softly gleaming against the pale of the sheets, the curves of the design and the muscles mimicking the softness of flesh even as it dents and rumples the folds of cotton beneath it. Where it seams up to his body, John’s intricate scars feather away from the join, softening the abrupt line, the changeover from organic to inorganic.
John watches Sherlock drink the sight in, the empty folds of the ‘skin’ forgotten in his hands.

“John?”

“Go ahead.”

There’s a little thrill as John says it, followed but not eclipsed by another as Sherlock’s hands carefully settle onto his cyberthetic. After a moment, they glide along the sensing surface, and Sherlock’s eyes flicker shut for a moment.

For his part, John finally remembers to breathe again, and the accompanying gasp startles Sherlock’s hands up and away.

“I—” Sherlock begins, but John interrupts him by taking hold his hands and laying them against his leg again, eyes closed, breathing through the contact. After a moment, he lets go of Sherlock and lies back against the bed, pushing his palms against the bedding. “John?”

“It’s alright.” He considers. “I’m alright.”

He feels it the moment Sherlock relaxes, gives into his tactile curiosity. His fingers trail up and down and along lines of design and flexing, and John realizes it might tickle a moment before his body does, and almost manages not to squirm.

Sherlock looks up at him sharply, then repeats the experiment. This time, John’s whole leg twitches, which is insane because unless it gets translated as pain, that sort of reflexive sensation is supposed to be a mirror-relay reaction. Sherlock is touching the wrong leg for that to work.

“Oh,” John comments. He slumps back and tries not to let this be too much. “That’s not supposed to happen.”

“Says who?” Sherlock asks, trailing a thumb up along what would have been the ischiatic nerve line. The leg twitches again. John can feel it, can feel his brain filling in the blanks, as if a new reality is being painted over a connect-the-dots sense reporting of before.

“The operations manual.”

“Well, it’s wrong.”

Those words are a distant, yet potent shock as they land, like a kick to John’s sternum but only with a hollow echo of sensation.

John wonders just how much of his recovery and adjustment have been constructed around poorly informed patient care refracted through hopelessness. He wonders how many of his own interactions have been skewed by ‘knowing’ that it would never get better, that recovery would plateau at a hopefully tolerable point.

He suspects the answer is ‘a lot,’ if not ‘most.’ If not ‘all.’

He doesn’t want to think about how many others have the same prognosis, the same methods prescribed, following them unthinkingly. Exercises that barely scratch the surface of interconnection. Prescriptions that hurt and help in equal measure, less about healing and more about concealing. Deadlines that steal the light from every day, until time is a countdown to a flatline.

He doesn’t realize his breathing has changed, caught and hooked in his throat, until Sherlock’s hands still against his not-flesh. He swallows against the heat in his chest, the ache in his throat, the sting behind his eyes. Repeated blinking helps a bit.

When he finally looks at Sherlock, his hands are tucked in his lap, pale fingers pressed against one another, and the look on his face is so much easier to sort out than the one John is desperately trying to keep from his own.

“I—” He begins, then stops because he doesn’t know how to say any of the riot of things that is swirling inside him, beginning with grief and anger and resentment and finishing with anguished hope, aching gratitude, paralyzing relief. He doesn’t know how to tell Sherlock it’s not his fault he’s gone and causally proven every tenet of John’s augmented existence wrong, and in usual Sherlock style, he’s done it so simply, so matter-of-factly, that the aftermath of it has left John quaking with the hateful, fearful, soul-rending thought, What if he hadn’t?

John has spent so much time looking death in the eye and calmly deciding, not today – and how much of that had been necessary?

Sherlock’s face is not the blank mask he’s obviously trying for as he says, “John, I—if I did or said something to—I am sorry.” The misery in those words lights a flare inside John, snaps something inside him, and his next words thrash to their escape in a harsh growl:

“For god’s sake don’t apologize,” and John is crushing their mouths together, his arms having gathered Sherlock to him, pulling that collection of pale limbs and dark curls down on top of himself with rough efficiency.

The note of surprise that escapes Sherlock is quickly joined by one of pleasure. He pulls back, and John decides that kiss-dazed is the best look for Sherlock. With added confusion for good
“John?”

“I’m not upset at you, Sherlock – I’m upset at just about everyone else.” Pleased confidence rolls across Sherlock’s features, turning predatory fast enough to still John’s breathing.

“Idiots, all of them,” Sherlock says with such conviction his voice darkens. His eyes darken, too, and then he’s kissing John again, ruthless and demanding and not one bit gentle. Surprise gasps past his lips again as John bucks up against him, then uses that to get over Sherlock. His left hand homes in on those curls at the nape of Sherlock’s neck again, his right finds a nipple, and then his lips are traveling, kissing their way along Sherlock’s jaw, finding an ear, sucking, nipping, and then slipping down to worry at his neck. There’s a mark there already (still), a lingering redness from earlier.

Sherlock cries out when John bites down, gripping the thicker muscle at the crook of his neck, and the sound is one of shocked bliss. It sounds helpless, unplanned, reflexive, and it pierces John to the core with want.

John moves his mouth, and Sherlock says, “Oh god,” and then John places his mouth over a nipple and sucks, and Sherlock’s whole body convulses. “Ungh,” Sherlock manages, and it sounds like a lot of effort.

At this point the robe becomes an issue, and John pushes it back and down. It constrains Sherlock’s arms just a bit, which is convenient, because John knows how distracting those hands can be, and right now he wants to focus on this body beneath him, Sherlock beneath him, on touching, touching. He has a sudden, all-consuming urge to be this – a body causing another body pleasure, to use this body to achieve that end.

John hasn’t felt this way since Before – and never this intensely. He’s never felt the drive build and build, like a bolt of lightning that needs, that must strike. John feels like he’s humming inside his casings, like he’s ready to overflow.

He reaches down, and his fingertips bump against Sherlock’s renewed arousal – and Sherlock whimpers. John shifts his hand down and lets his fingers wrap around the shaft, snug, the way John likes it, because that is his only experience with this, and that is terrifying.

“John,” Sherlock breathes, and John feels a little rush of triumph and a little nameless ache that Sherlock should sound so awed and surprised at this giving touch. “You don’t have to – if you don’t want –”

“And if I do?”

Sherlock’s face is a portrait of surprised disbelief, and that sorts it. John shifts down and puts his mouth on Sherlock’s cock. The next noise out of Sherlock’s mouth sounds like it raws his throat on the way out before it becomes a gasping stutter, “I – I –”

Sherlock is warm, clean, and a little salty in John’s mouth. The whole business is sloppy, wet, inexpert, but John maneuvers diligently until he gets just over half of Sherlock’s length in his mouth, then, thinking back to what Sherlock had done for him, to times before the war when pleasure had been plentiful, he works his tongue against the head. After a moment, he sucks, and immediately has to pull back as Sherlock’s hips jerk up.

“Yeah?” he rasps, and Sherlock makes a choked noise that lances hotly into John, sets his skin to tingling. Holding Sherlock’s sharp hipbones down firmly, John heeds the plea in that wordless cry, takes Sherlock into his mouth again, and again, and again as Sherlock gasps and gasps and –

“John …”

Robe-tangled hands urge John upwards, and then he’s being kissed ravenously, and he’s breathless from his efforts, from touch, delirious with it. Their hips shift, and they both gasp as their cocks slide into alignment. Between sweat and saliva and pre-come, there is just enough slickness to keep their friction from becoming chafing.

John kisses Sherlock, then tips their foreheads together as he hitches his hips up, then thrusts down, slowly – and god, that feels amazing, that feels so good – and Sherlock groans and thrashes against the restriction of his robe with renewed vigour, only to shudder to a stop as John repeats the thrust, angling his hips to prolong the drag against Sherlock’s most sensitive skin, wanting to give, wanting to show the man beneath him what he can do, what he wants to do, what Sherlock inspires him to want and do.

John manages another three thrusts before Sherlock tries again and finally gets an arm free – then long fingers licked wet are wrapping around both their erections, and the friction becomes a glow of more. With this new angle, with each minute movement, John can feel his bare cyberthetic leg ride up against Sherlock’s leg, pressing close, and the feeling is stupendous, confusing, amazing, almost distracting –

Sherlock comes with an aborted shout, the muscles of his abdomen clenching, head curling forward then tipping back, like whiplash, his breathing out of control. The heat and sudden slick of come coupled with Sherlock’s hitching moan pulls John over, and his hips push forward one last time as he adds to the mess between their bellies.
The heat and brilliance of it doesn’t drown John this time, and he rocks his hips against Sherlock’s, riding the end of sensation, chasing that last edge of pleasure. Sherlock pushes up against him, keeping rhythm, his voice straining deep and guttural until it subsides with their whirring.

As their breathing calms, another kiss happens. Soft, but not tentative, deep but not frantic; it’s simply a joining, a push and pull of lips and tongues. They part on a sigh, and John rolls off Sherlock.

“My turn?” he asks, and Sherlock nods dazedly. John can’t quite help the smirk on his lips as he heads to the bathroom (stooping to pick up the old washcloth on his way) to fetch a clean one for Sherlock. He chuckles at Sherlock, who catches it without looking. “Show off,” he mutters, but he can hear the smile on his face turn it into glowing praise.

He watches as Sherlock cleans himself, making more of a mess by trailing his fingers through their spill on his belly before wiping it all up. He seems contemplative of the act, of the texture. Silver eyes glance up at John before he steals a quick taste – he makes a face and wipes his hand clean.

John snorts and catches the soiled cloth when Sherlock chucks it at him. “Never tasted your own?”

Sherlock wrinkles his nose in answer, then adds, “Mixing does nothing to improve the flavour.”

John moves to drop the used clothes in Sherlock’s hamper. “What time is it?” he asks.

“Late. Or early.” Sherlock’s still lying on his side, an elegant twist of long limbs and pale skin. He shrugs one shoulder, sliding the last remnant of robe from where it covers him.

John grins. “You have no idea, do you?”

Sherlock snorts. “As if it matters. You’re normally asleep at this hour, so whether it’s classified as late or early hardly merits distinction.”

John moves to turn off the bathroom light, and behind him, Sherlock’s voice is soft: “John.”

John stills, then turns around, and he knows his face is covered in questions as he does. Not much he can do about it. “Sherlock?” his voice adds another.

“You could sleep. Here. If you wanted.” Just above Sherlock’s collarbone, a bruise the size and shape of John’s mouth is taking form. “It’s not required, of course, it’s – I just – unless you don’t –”

Sherlock’s mouth shuts with a click as John finishes turning out the lights. He shuffles over in the near darkness, wary of the floor and its clothing and ‘skin’ traps. When his hip brushes up against Sherlock’s bed, he sits. Sherlock is very still next to him, hardly breathing. “Budge up,” John urges, then lies down in the newly empty space beside Sherlock – who is now not close enough.

“C’mere.”

“Make up your mind,” Sherlock grumbles, but John turns to face him and holds up his arm, and Sherlock pushes forward into his embrace. Everything seems simple now, just this moment, two bodies shuffling close, exertion-damp, sex-fatigued. It won’t be like this in the morning, John thinks. The simplicity will clutter itself up with questions, will become reality and deadlines and –

“You’re too hot,” Sherlock huffs.

John laughs, pulled back from tomorrow, and right now in this moment, he only has one question: “Do you ever stop squirming?”

Sherlock snorts, then shifts so that he’s facing away from John, who lets his arm fall and tighten around Sherlock’s waist.

Five days. John thinks, and holds Sherlock just a little more tightly.

“Stop thinking,” comes the petulant command, and John rolls his eyes.

They sleep.
Distraction

Chapter Notes

Goodness, if you only knew the amount of thanks and hugs and more thanks I owe tiltedsyllogism and consultingsmartarse at this point....

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Five days left, and John feels each minute. So much of his guidance and preparation has been tied up in timetables and limits, and even though he mentally holds a two finger salute up to it all, the undercurrent of trepidation is still there, a lurking presence.

Sherlock, of course, still drags John to crime scenes. They solve three rather minor cases in the space of four days – two thefts (car and family heirloom) and one disappearance (actually a kidnapping) of a young man.

Even by John’s measure they rate as threes and a four (respectively) on the Sherlock Might Actually Get Dressed For This Scale.

He’s not sure how he feels about this, about Sherlock signing on for what boils down to busywork, about being brought along for the ride. Part of John desperately wants those hours to himself – to think, to process, to (if he’s being honest) wallow a bit. The rest of John is achingly grateful for the distraction, for Sherlock’s endless stream of deductions, his unpredictability, the micro-spikes of adrenaline and endorphins as clues and chases and scuffles yield results.

There’s a different kind of adrenaline on nights not spent on the chase.

It’s still new, this thing between them, but despite the awkward moments spent waiting for the other to ask or say or move first, they manage. Eyes and hands catch at one another, and John doesn’t spend those nights knocking about in the hollow behind his eyes.

It should be odd, not knowing where he’ll sleep at night, to go on not knowing until Sherlock’s voice or eyes stay him from the stairs, and then it just is – no debate, no discussion. John doesn’t fight it, a myriad of reasons (better sheets, no stairs, closer to tea in the morning) not really doing much to cover up the only one that matters.

Sherlock joins John each of those nights, slipping in quietly after he falls asleep, or going to bed at the same time, or simply relocating his typing, reading, texting, or thinking to the empty side of the bed next to John.

Surprisingly, it works – even more surprisingly, it continues to do so. John, tuned to a deadline, to the swaying blade of the future inching closer, feels thin and tight as a wineglass, ready to shatter. This thing between them seems fragile as a soap bubble, ready to flicker and fly apart at a moment’s notice –

But it doesn’t.

It doesn’t, and John feels off-kilter in a way that grows more and more familiar.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on the tumblrs and the twitters under the same name, for those inclined to sleuth me down.
I'll also be at 221bcon this year! :D
John lies panting on his back; Sherlock is a damp heat beside him, sides still expanding like a bellows as his breathing gusts. Sweat makes every touch like a kiss between skins.

His heart cycles down, and John lifts up onto his elbows. It’s barely noon. He doesn’t know what he expected out of this – relationship? – with Sherlock, (hadn’t really expected anything like this to happen, to be honest), but if he had, lazy morning glances leading to lingering midmorning touches leading to frantic late-morning sex wouldn’t have made the list. Doesn’t stop it from happening, though – easy as sinking into gravity – and John’s never had anything like this, with anyone.

Caught up in the dizzy of that feeling, John can’t quite stop himself from grinning –

Until he sits up, that is, and feels the fast-becoming-familiar hitch of his ‘skin’ wrinkling against his cyberthetic leg’s sensing surface. Uncomfortable, is what it is, and a bother, and a reminder.

John grumbles, tugging his sock back into alignment. Now that he’s doing more with his leg than walking, sitting, or sleeping (the occasional mad dash through London notwithstanding), the covering is becoming more and more of a nuisance to maintain.

“Is it all that necessary?” Sherlock asks as John smooths it back into place. Thankfully, this time they hadn’t managed to dislodge all of the seating joins.

John doesn’t really have an answer for that.

“I hope,” Sherlock continues, as if he hadn’t expected an answer, “that you’re not doing that on my account, John. While a thin layer of flesh-tone synthetic ‘skin’ may be enough to fool the general population at a glance, it’s hardly a successful ruse at any lesser distance or greater inspection. Aside from the camouflage it barely provides, it doesn’t accomplish much, except perhaps dull your reflexes in your left leg and provide a source of post-coital annoyance.”

John stares at Sherlock. Post-coital. Right.

“I at least prefer the limb beneath the covering.”

“Well, that’s settled, then. If it’s what you want,” John bites out, but Sherlock does a complicated little half-shrug and nod combo and says:

“Surely we’ve been intimate with one another –” John’s eyebrows lift of their own accord – first post-coitus, now intimate – “enough times that I am entitled to voice my preferences? Especially if it might serve to provide you with a reason to allow yourself to be rid of a prosthetic covering you no longer fully require or want.”

“I…” John closes his mouth, swallows, tilts his head. “Is that what this is, then? You being selflessly opinionated?” John carefully lilts his voice to offer the retort as an opportunity to deflect with humour.

For once in his bloody life, Sherlock Holmes notices and takes a cue to step back from a conversation, accepts John’s lead.

“That’s what I always do.”

John isn’t quite prepared for the smile that accompanies the joking self-deprecating tone, however – it’s genuine, for starters, and that means Sherlock’s face loses all of its poised perfection. His nose crinkles, the corners of his eyes bunch into crows’ feet, emotion creasing its way into his face.

Overall, the look is one of fondness.

Through that expression, John catches a glimpse of a future beyond what they have now, catches his breath at the thought of Sherlock wanting that with him.

Snatching his own thoughts away from the brink of wishing, John swallows again and looks away from Sherlock. It’s all too easy to see what could – statistically, will – replace that hope.

“John?” Sherlock asks, and then his lips are close, just barely brushing against John’s temple, as if unsure if they are trespassing, and then Sherlock is standing, walking through to the bathroom, and John can breathe through – this, whatever this is.

His hands, later, take some unclenching from the seam at his hip, and his movements about the bathroom are a bit stiff, but John can breathe through that as well. He just never expected any of this.
Expiration

Chapter Notes

The final chapter - epilogue coming next!

I'll do a longer more flaily thanks at the epilogue, but have to say, as always: tiltedsyllologism and consultingsmartarse are treasures <3

Mark day, and John wakes before Sherlock.

It’s a first – Sherlock has been awake, up and about on every other morning they’ve shared a bed, long before John struggles into wakefulness.

It’s not as if John’s a late sleeper – residency and the Army cured him of that – but Sherlock doesn’t ever seem to sleep past 5 am, if he’s getting what passes for regular sleep where he’s concerned.

It’s 7:30 now, and John sits up, a bit groggy, but also instantly aware of what day it is.

Beside him, Sherlock shifts and seems to try to dig his head in under his arm and John’s pillow. He stills, breathes, and manages to steal John’s thoughts away from the day for just a moment.

John hadn’t thought to start the day with a smile, but it seems that’s the way it’s going to be all the same, and John just lets it be, for a moment, sitting up and watching Sherlock in a way he rarely gets to. He can feel the softness around his mouth and eyes, and it feels odd and fitting all at once, and John finds himself thinking – as he has been more and more, of late – that he could get used to this.

He leaves Sherlock to sleep – he’s actually snuffling and sort of softly snoring in his bizarre arrangement of limbs and self-asphyxiation – and John doesn’t have the heart to wake him.

In the kitchen, tea and toast seem to appear as if by magic, the routine so ingrained John could probably manage it blind, if only Sherlock wouldn’t commandeer food-preparation spaces for his experiments of dubious sanitation, or at least would do so in a more predictable fashion. They disappear in much the same manner, and all John has to show for it is crumbs and a last few millimetres of tepid tea, his distantly churning thoughts having stolen his attention.

The kettle’s just boiled again as Sherlock shuffles in wearing a sheet.

They don’t say good morning, but John can feel Sherlock’s eyes on him, assessing, answering his own questions with glance-gleaned details.

John stirs his tea and doesn’t worry about it, the question he can feel coming, because there are things Sherlock can read but still not understand. He doesn’t have to wait long.

“You’re not upset,” Sherlock says, and it feels like a question even if it spares him the indignity of actually being one.

John almost smiles at that. “No, not in particular.”

“You’ve been anxious and preoccupied all week.” Sherlock exhales through his nose. “About this day.”

“When have you known me to wait well, Sherlock?” John asks, and even as he asks it, his mouth quirking into a bit of a grin, he’s realising something about himself. It’s half formed, but it feels like a truth found in dreaming, that malleable space just before waking, and John tries to clutch at it without chasing it away.

“Well,” Sherlock says after John’s been silent a full minute, “if I’d known you weren’t going to react at all, I might not have wasted our time with those piddling cases.” He sniffs, but John hears the humour and the warmth in his words and his voice, and he feels some heat inside him rise to mirror that.

Our time, John thinks, and he turns to face Sherlock, whose back is against the counter, watching John.

“John?” Sherlock asks, a note of uncertainty in his voice as John approaches, but his arms come up as John’s do, and then they are holding one another, and Sherlock is quiet, and John feels calm in a way he hasn’t for two years.

Seconds creep or fly by, uncountable either way, and John just breathes. He savours the sentence that’s forming in his mouth, holding it in as long as he can, pinned to the tip of his tongue, rolling it around his soft palate. “It’s done,” John says at last, when it’s ready. He feels giddy, almost, as he adds, “No two year malfunctions manifested – if you were worried about that sort of thing.”

“I wasn’t.”
That response gives John pause – and his first reaction is to open his mouth, to demand why not, because John had been. Worried. He might still be: he hasn’t had room yet to feel that out, too caught up in passing the line in the sand at the bottom of his own hourglass.

John frowns. Looks up at Sherlock.

Sherlock is watching him, intense focus completely on John, as if awaiting some great reaction.

“Oh.” It’s the best he can manage while coming to terms with the fact that Sherlock meant what he said. His frown deepens.

“Well, now I know you won’t need a fainting couch, I suppose I can show you what I’ve been working on,” Sherlock says, with just a hint of long-suffering. “Although the whole point was to help you come to terms with making it past the two year mark.” Sherlock gives a sniff. “Not sure how useful it will be now.”

“That sure of me, were you?” John asks, lifting an eyebrow and crossing his arms, but wry, not bitter.

Sherlock blinks at him. “Of course.”

John’s mouth clicks shut, and he watches silently as Sherlock shuffles over to his side of their shared desk table. He moves a few piles of paper around, then extracts a large brown envelope. It’s obviously been opened and reused a few times – and now Sherlock extracts a thick, bound document from its protection. He also shakes a small object from it into his palm.

“This,” he says, turning to face John and holding up the small object – a USB drive, it looks like, “this is the mapping Mycroft’s people took off you when they did the retrieval.”

John gapes and stares at the drive Sherlock’s holding out to him.

“I didn’t authorize a mapping,” John protests numbly.

“Yes, well, Mycroft.” Sherlock says, as if that explains it, and it does. “Anyway, I expected he’d do something like that, so I made a deal with him.” Sherlock makes an impatient face at John and shakes the drive in his direction.

John takes it in careful fingers just as his brain catches up with what his ears just heard. “You… made a deal… with Mycroft?”

Sherlock looks away, shrugs one shoulder, the sheet shifting at the motion.

John’s eyes widen. “The relay from Ernest – the case – the leak. Oh my god, you actually took his case.” John remembers Sherlock handing over the relay, immediately after – but his attention had been caught on Mona, on the end of the ordeal, and then on what happened after Mona left that night.

Sherlock’s mouth twitches to the side. “Well, once there was sufficient motivation…”


Sherlock sighs. “Because it seemed like a good way to prove – to show you –” Sherlock huffs, words obviously giving him the run around. As usual (John is learning), Sherlock retreats to facts in the face of being flustered: “The statistics for long-term survival of trauma-necessitated cyberthetic augmentation and implanting recipients are not favourable.”

John grimaces. “You don’t have to tell me that.”

“Apparently I do. The statistics, John, the average – these do very little to account for outliers. Outliers like Mona, like Magpie and his pet mountain. Like the rest of the Sedwic Seven.”

“What does that have to do with me?” John wants to know.

“Everything. Don’t be obtuse – you, John, defy the norm.” Sherlock gives him a hard look. “You are an anomaly, John Watson, so stop trying to match the curve.”

John gapes at Sherlock.

Sherlock clears his throat, looks away, then moves to hand John the thick file he’s been holding.

“Here,” he says, voice lower now. “This is your personal data analysis. Genetic, cyberthetic, interface – everything.” He holds it out, and John takes it.

The front page says: “Cpt. John H. Watson, M.D.: Cyberthetics Integration Overview and Analysis”

John swallows against the dryness of his throat and opens the report. Sherlock doesn’t lean over his shoulder or even move closer, but John has the feeling that he’s following along all the same.

John’s eyes travel over page after page of stacked tables – recovery rates of different types of tissue (muscle, neural, skeletal), integration rates (scar topography, mirror relay settling), and even early stage rejection projections, mid stage rejection likelihoods, late stage rejection chances. Here and there, grayscale or colour photos accompany numerical conclusions. Blood or bone or neural tissues tinted for easier viewing.
John cannot fathom the time and money such a report would have required, but before he can ask how this was possible, Sherlock clears his throat. John looks up.

“I compiled it myself,” Sherlock says, “before you worry about a bill or other such nonsense.”

“Sherlock –”

“And I included comparative data sets where applicable – when available –” Sherlock continues, and John can hear the anxiousness behind his verbal steamroll. He lets it wash over him, scanning page after page of careful analysis and diagrams.

John draws a quiet breath as he turns the page to a full colour photo of severe late-stage rejection. “This is – this is from Hersch.” John recognises the cell wall death, advanced necrosis sprawling across the cross-section.

Sherlock grins. “Yes.” It’s his pleased grin, the one he wears when John picked up on something Sherlock was hoping he would.

John frowns. “…Wait – is that why we went to Bart’s that day? After the hospital?”

“Well, yes, meeting with Hersch would not have been useful without a trip to the laboratories –”

“I thought we went to talk to him for the case.”

“John, please. That interview could have been conducted via telephone, or skype, or any number of channels that don’t involve extensive traveling. But in order to acquire a fresh tissue sample and arrange for a post-mortem sample – well, if you’ll look on page 42 –”

“What?”

“– to be delivered for analysis and comparison…that necessitated a more personal touch. Which is, of course, where you came in.”

John’s brow snaps into a bewildered frown. “But I just sat there –”

“Yes,” Sherlock says patiently, “and looked horrified and miserable, absolutely terrified at that vision of the future.” Sherlock’s face softens for a moment, clouded by concern. John can hardly keep up. “Even Hersch, far gone on his own pain and suffering, was moved to help you. Well done!”

“I –” John looks down at the report in his hands. “I don’t know what to make of this.”

“And here I thought you were a medical man.”

John pinches his mouth and eyebrows into a peeved frown. Sherlock fidgets as he keeps paging through – there are colour and high contrast images of his own connection sites, still stable. He comes to the end, and instead of a set of summary conclusions, including projected life expectancy, there’s a block of blank pages. “I mean – what am I supposed to get from this, Sherlock?”

Sherlock reaches out and takes the thick packet from John’s unresisting hands. “Not much, I’m afraid. At this point it’s a highly personalized set of data extrapolation, but it’s still just statistics. A plan I put together before I realized how little numbers matter when it comes to you.” He purses his lips. “And, I must confess, in the – ah – excitement of this last week, I didn’t get a chance to finish it properly.”

John tries and fails to keep from flushing at Sherlock’s mention of their ‘exciting week’ and its distractions.

Sherlock watches him with pursed mouth, then adds, “I could, if you wanted –?”

“No,” John says immediately. His hazy thought has crystallized at last, in the space offered by those blank pages – and he knows suddenly that the last thing he needs is another date, no matter how close or far ahead it lurks.

“Good,” Sherlock says. “Like I said,” he adds when he meets John’s questioning gaze – he’s never known the man to leave a project of this size unfinished, “it’s still just statistics. A plan I put together before I realized how little numbers matter when it comes to you.” He purses his lips. “And, I must confess, in the – ah – excitement of this last week, I didn’t get a chance to finish it properly.”

John swallows again, looks away, overcome. He doesn’t know what to do with the shock, the confusion, or the most bizarre of the lot: hope.

Sherlock’s eyes snap back to focus on John. He smiles brightly again. “Of course, the one useful outcome of this was that I did manage to isolate your long-chain protein formations as applicable to interface and neural networks. No signs of anti-body build-up: no rejection.”

John coughs out a choked sound. It could be a laugh, but it isn’t.

“Whatever happens, chances are, you’re going to outlive your parts – John!”

John collapses back into his chair, palms of his hands covering his eyes, and Sherlock rushing forward just a second too late to keep either of those things from happening.
“John?” he asks, and keeps asking.

After John gets his breathing back together, he lets Sherlock pull his hands away from his face. “You’re a right bastard, sometimes, you know?” John says, but there’s no sting to it, just a watery fondness.

Sherlock frowns at him, almost a caricature of perplexity. “John, you are very confusing.”

John laughs and laughs, and slowly it begins to sound like one.

That night, Sherlock follows John to bed – to his bed, their bed, the one that smells of thunderstorms and ozone and sea salt – except it smells different now John sleeps there, too. Warmer. Sherlock gets into bed with John, lies beside him, and when John turns out the light, he moves to be closer, sneaking an arm to wrap around John, guide him to lie closer to Sherlock.

John lets him.

They are quiet in the darkness, but John knows Sherlock isn’t asleep.

“So,” John begins, and he feels Sherlock still his breath to listen. “What happens now?”

“Now?”

“It looks like I’ll be around quite a bit longer than advertised.” John clears his throat. He wonders if that’s occurred to Sherlock. Of course, it has to have done – but John’s only just coming to terms with it himself.

“John, stop repeating facts as if they are new or surprising.”

John snorts, knocks his knuckles against where Sherlock is holding him. “I just – I mean –”

“I know what you mean.” Sherlock’s eyes are just barely visible in the low light. John watches them blink. “I’ve spent a not inconsiderable amount of time researching that very eventuality, just so I could prove its existence to you. What does that say to you?”

John’s breath catches in his throat. “I – it won’t be easy, Sherlock.”

Sherlock huffs a sigh, and John can almost hear the implied ’Boring!’

John’s hand tightens where it lies across Sherlock’s. “And later? When I start to break down?”

“You won’t,” Sherlock insists. “Not irreparably, anyway,” he adds with a huff that sounds half-way like laughter.

John would take offense, but Sherlock shifts closer until they’re flush against one another.

With another laugh, Sherlock rolls over onto John, kisses him. Even now after five days of such displays, it still catches John by surprise when Sherlock does this – and judging by the look in Sherlock’s eyes, he’s not the only one. “We’ll have to get spares,” Sherlock says, light, teasingly, and after another kiss, too intense to match his playful words, “because we’ll wear them out – running, fighting. Solving cases. The thrill of the chase –” one hand grips John’s left thigh, warm against the ‘skin’, “the blood pumping in our veins.” The other hand presses against John’s chest plate. Just beyond that barrier, John’s heart beats fast and steady, metal and muscle and the halfway melding of the two. “The two of us against the rest of the world.” Sherlock looks unyieldingly into John’s eyes. “What do you say, John?”

John catches sight of the earnestness in Sherlock’s face, then, not a stolen moment of it, but an unending display, and maybe John’s done fighting this, fighting any of it. He swallows around the tight lump his throat seems hell-bent on forming, sniffs in a breath. “Sounds good.”

Less than a week ago, today was supposed to be the end. And now, with the clock run down, with the future open and unknowable before him – before them – John finds there’s just one thing he could stand being certain about. He tangles his fingers with Sherlock’s where they rest against his chest plate.

“Especially the last part.”
EPILOGUE: Volition

Chapter Notes

Final notes at the end, y’all <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the weeks after that Wednesday, John finds a new rhythm – or rather, he works to create one. Now that every day is not a detraction from the time he has left, but rather an addition, John is learning to add things to his schedule as well.

He sets up something a bit more regular with Magpie: a loosely formed schedule of doctor’s hours evolves, during which John does what he can for those who have no recourse to more official assistance. Sherlock fusses about having to ‘make do’ without John roughly twice a week, but never actually demands that he cease his own brand of locum work. In exchange, John receives more brown goodie bags from Magpie – grudgingly at first, but he has to admit finally, the prospect of never having to go to another Clinic is too appealing to forswear. With that last bit of acceptance, and now out from under his analyst’s judgemental eye, John exits the post-augmentation grid: self-sufficient and without externally imposed timelines or deadlines chopping his time up into other people’s property or business.

John also begins the search, after the fourth week, for an actual therapist. He makes progress in fits and starts – finding someone willing to work outside analyst bounds with post-two-year-mark augmentation recipients proves difficult – but Leicester knows someone, who knows someone, so John thinks it might come together at some point.

And of course, John still accompanies Sherlock on cases, an ‘indispensable’ part of the process, according to Sherlock. It is there, amongst the yellow tape and red blood and murky motivations that John continues to discover, day to day, how life and the living of it can change.

There are days that Sherlock is the weird one, the freak, the intolerable presence amongst the remnants of death and dismemberment – and John is simply the victim, the collateral, the bystander in the slow motion catastrophe that is the consulting detective in a Met-induced Mood. Some days he’s even seen as the calming handler to a deranged beast, and he can see the thanks and surprised gratitude in the eyes of the officers on duty.

And then, in balance, there are the days that John, with his metal bones and his polymer muscle, with his difference, is the threat and the unwanted. He’s the feral unknown, and all he can find in the others’ eyes is guarded caution and tolerance, and barely even that.

It’s not perfect – but it works, and John will take that for as long as he can.

It’s after a particularly harrowing case one week – a case that had them running all over town, slipping and sliding through muddy alleys and clambering through a series of refineries – that John comes to a decision.

He’s just finished his third shower, finally having gotten the stink out of his different skins, when he looks up at the fogged mirror. He hasn’t properly looked in – well, in far too long, actually.

With a deathly calm hand, he reaches out and wipes away the condensation, and meets his own eyes – or tries to. Instead, he finds himself staring at his chest plate’s ‘skin’ covering. The colour of it doesn’t quite match the rest of his skin, which is now slightly less tanned after his long absence from the Afghan sun.

John reaches up a hand and pulls at the securing edge, slips his finger in and under, careful not to put too much strain on the area that had been damaged by Effie all those weeks ago. The ‘skin’ finally pops loose, flops into John’s left hand like some sort of oddly coloured rubber chicken.

John swallows the odd laugh that wants to burble up. This is part of me, he thinks – then frowns. But only if I want it to be.

He looks up at himself again – then wipes away the renewed condensation and really looks.

His face is the same – older, more lined, but still his eyes, his mouth, his shaggy civilian hair. His chest is his chest – except for the metal plate imbedded in his chest and surrounded by delicately scarred and textured skin, a maintenance and repair window into his thoracic cavity, behind which his heart beats, aided by a network of plastics and metals.

John places a hand over it, over the sensing surface, and breathes. This is his chest – has been for a while, but right now feels potent.

He looks down at his cyberthetic leg. It doesn’t take him long to remove the ‘skin’ – he’s had plenty of practise lately, thanks to a certain somebody.
With all his ‘skins’ removed, John works up his courage, then looks up at the mirror again – only to have to wipe the fog from the mirror yet again, this time with a bit more irritation.

But when he’s done, his eyes meet their own reflection before taking in his chest and then lingering on his leg. His legs. His – well, yes, his legs.

One flesh and blood, the other metal and mesh and all sorts of cutting edge fibres. Or at least, it had all been cutting edge tech over two years ago. John is certain Exagon will have moved on to better and more sophisticated designs since he was released from their tender post-operative mercies.

John runs a hand over his left thigh.

It’s still a sensitive limb, exceptionally good at relaying tactile information – but it no longer blares its signals at one frequency, a jarring discomfort no matter the touch. With Sherlock’s sometimes clumsy help, John has settled into it, has learned to interpret what his leg relays.

John looks down to where he’d set his ‘skin’s down on the counter. Steam has dampened them, and John suddenly has absolutely no desire to put them back on – and no need. Carefully, John uses a clean towel to dry them, and instead of putting them back on, he carefully folds them. He’ll store them somewhere safe – upstairs in his old bedroom, where they’ll be out of the way – but nothing as dramatic as binning them or rending them seam from seam.

After all, who knows? John may need them as part of a disguise or something one day – but that’s all they will ever be: a disguise, an eloquently wordless lie.

John wraps the towel around himself, then tucks the skins under his arm.

With a final glance at the finally defogged mirror showing him his own skin glowing – or gleaming, now, as the case may be – John nods.

He walks out into the world.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all, this story has been five year in the making, in the developing, in the writing, in the editing, in the resurrecting, in the returning, in the finishing.
Five years.
It spans so much of me, so many experiences I will carry with me forever.
It’s influenced the way I interact with technology, with media, with my original writing.
I never meant to start a five year journey when I began MaR (it was truly supposed to be a one-shot). Instead, here this thing exists instead.
Writing MaR has had a marked and profound effect on me as a person -- but it has nothing on the effect you all have had on me as a human.

My ever-expanding gratitude belongs to the entire writing and creating community of this fandom, the people who make up this joyous and self-perpetuating monster of making.
You are, each and every one you, an inspiration, a drive, and a reminder to keep making things, however and whenever possible.

To the AntiDiogenes cadre, my endless thanks. Late nights writing together, word-warring alongside one another, and giving lightning rounds of feedback made what could have been a thankless, isolated experience into something to share and revel in, together. even when I’ve been scarce in the chats, you’ve all been in my thoughts, a remembered presence, like a ghost of encouragement. My love to you all.

To ConsultingSmartarse: If not for you, MaR might still be languishing, mostly done, but not yet edited, not yet shared, in a folder on my laptop somewhere. Late nights writing together are some of my fondest memories of the last five years, and I hope to keep adding to them. Thank you for your encouragement, for your support, for your commiseration, for your understanding. Thank you for being excited with me. Thank you for your friendship. Thank you for existing. Thank you.

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To everyone reading this, to everyone who kudos’d, commented, subscribed, reached
out on tumblr, lurked, said hi, hugged me at cons, talked to me about writing, vented with me about writing, rejoiced with me about writing: thank you. Nothing is created in a vacuum, but I never thought to find so much love, support, and excitement surrounding me as this work unfolded. Whether we know each other or not, whether we’ve spoken or not: thank you for being here, and for being part of this crazy ride.

You are all amazing, and I cannot wait to hug/high five/nod solemnly across a reasonable distance at you.

<3 pattern

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