

The World on His Wrist

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The World on His Wrist

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Summary

First, he is shot in Afghanistan. Second, he wakes to a phone call in Chelmsford, Essex. Third is pain, fourth is normalcy, fifth is agony and sixth is confusion. By the eighth, he's lost track. (John-centric AU)

- Translation into Русский available: [Мир на его запястье \(The World on His Wrist\)](#) by [EugeniaB](#)

Prologue

John Watson owns two watches. One is analogue, the band leather. The other is digital, a circle of metal around his wrist. Except to shower, he never removes them. There is a system to his watches, to the tan lines at the ends of his sleeves, but a careful observer would say he only wears the one.

A careful observer would be wrong.

The early days are hard. He has but one watch then and uses it only to tell the time. When it begins, it begins like this:

First, he is shot in Afghanistan.

Second, he wakes to a phone call in Chelmsford, Essex.

The call is urgent, a summons to Broomfield Hospital. Car accident on the motorway, massive. He responds in the affirmative, rising out of habit, dressing automatically. He knows the hospital, can't place this house, and accepts it as a dream. He has yet to realize he will never dream again.

Twenty hours later, focused past any danger of confusion, he settles down. Limbs were lost, lives were saved. Most lives. He drinks his coffee and opts for a nap before he drives home.

Third, he wakes to Bill's voice and face and more pain than he has ever known. He passes out.

Fourth, a new day begins. There was a firefight the day before, but he's unharmed. He has the wounded to check on and chalks up his nightmares to the PTSD he's already sure he has. Everyone who was alive that morning falls asleep peacefully that night and that makes it a good day.

Fifth, there's a knife in his shoulder, going after the bullet. He screams, Bill holds him down and

Sixth, it's time to drive home from Broomfield. Exhausted but frantic, he rushes to the toilet. Pulls off his scrubs and stares in the mirror at an untanned man with a perfectly good shoulder. His hair is too long, his muscles too small. He stares until he sighs, thinking *dream*, thinking *nightmare*, knowing he left Chelmsford and Broomfield Hospital for the

army years ago. He's still in Afghanistan, has to be. He returns to the house he has the keys to and searches through his CV and old appointment books. Finally, after hours of searching, he nods off while scouring the internet.

Seventh, he's screaming.

Eighth, he's still screaming, so it's around that point where he loses track.

Surgery and rehab are the worst parts, worse than even the confusion. The confusion is consistent, constant. His situation may vary but his thoughts keep themselves stable. As stable as they can be for any man so mad as to live like this. He keeps track of it as best he can, writing down every detail in his Chelmsford residence. With his unit in Afghanistan, he has other concerns, other people to fix and mend. Even crazy, he's still a good doctor, very good.

In hospital, he lives up to the cliché and is the worst patient known to creation. It's because of the escape, the possibility of it. He can fall asleep in pain and wake in health. Whenever he likes, he can have Essex clouds or Afghan sun. The painkillers help him along, keep him down and groggy, and it's ages before he realizes there's a reason why these bedridden days are endless.

"Could I have a book, please?" he asks. "Anything, I don't care what."

He gets his book, nods off with it, but when he cycles back through Afghanistan and Chelmsford, the book is gone.

"Did someone take my book?" he asks the nurse.

"What book?" the nurse replies.

John tells him the title. "I asked for it yesterday," he says.

"Pretty sure you didn't," the nurse tells him. "As chance has it, though, I just finished reading a copy of that."

The nurse furnishes him with a paperback with a crease down the cover, the pages curled and crinkled at the top by spilt water. It's unmistakably the same one he was reading.

"Thank you," he says weakly.

When he'd asked God to let him live, this isn't what he'd meant.

Rehab is always more draining the second time. Every painful step, every exercise inflicted upon his arm, every single motion must be repeated. He feels himself sliding back, and sliding back, and sliding back. The only changes between his days in hospital are the ones he creates himself. If he didn't have his other two lives to balance these out, he doesn't know what he'd do.

In Chelmsford, he relearns friendships, discovers an ex-girlfriend he'd known nothing about, and eats Thai food at every opportunity. He remembers finding Chelmsford immensely dull, remembers craving London with such an ache, but now he couldn't say why for the life of him. He takes up jogging and does press-ups until he shakes, weaker than he should be. He gets a haircut when he finally can't stand being confused by his own reflection.

Bill tells him he's getting jumpy. In Afghanistan, that is. Maybe he is, particularly as he doesn't want to be shot again, couldn't handle a third round of rehab on top of his double load. He doesn't think he is, though. He's just so much more *alive* here. The world is sand and camaraderie, anticipation and boredom, and it is the best damn thing he has ever had. He never realized that, before. In one day out of four, he still has his life, his real one. Here, he sleeps only when it is absolutely time to, when exhaustion pulls him down.

In that hospital bed, in that Chelmsford flat, he forces himself away from napping. Using up his good days only puts his boring ones on hold. He could delay them indefinitely, more or less, but what will he do when his tour is up? What when all of him is back in England and slowly going out of his skull?

He wonders, vaguely, in a way he would never think of mentioning to his therapist, what would happen if he were to commit suicide. He's going to find out, someday, what will happen when one of him dies, and it's that certainty that lets him put down the idea, tucking it away for later. He's a doctor with a gun: when he changes his mind, it won't be difficult.

In a very abstract sense, he thinks about getting married someday. Meeting a nice woman, determining the rules for cheating if life is split in four directions. Probably the same rules as normal life. Maybe he'll find a woman and pursue her in multiple lives, try not to be creepy about it. But then he'd muck up fatherhood so terribly if they had a child in one life and a different one in another. Or worse: the same child twice. No, if he ever has a family, it should only be in one reality. And what if this is contagious? What if it's genetic, simply unlocked by the trauma of a bullet wound? His mother died years ago and he won't ask his father.

Should he warn Harry about this? What if he's shot again, or hit by a car?

Is he going to be like this for the rest of his life – lives – life?

It's really no wonder he can't speak with his therapist.

In Afghanistan, he wears his watch as he always has, the leather strap around his right wrist.

In London, his first days limping about, he switches the watch to his other wrist. Feels odd, left-handed man that he is, but that's hardly the oddest piece of his day.

In London, he wakes up with his watch back on the right. He takes it off.

In Chelmsford, he scribbles down details, assigns nicknames to events, tries to find patterns that aren't there. He looks through his home and finds items he can only assume are his. This watch is digital without being plastic, metal without being clunky, sleek without being showy. Wishing he knew where it came from, he fastens it on his right, metal covering faint tan lines left by leather.

Days later in London, and searching online, he finds that same watch. He means to get a different one, a distinct one, but it's surprisingly cheap and he's tired of checking the time on his mobile. He receives it in the post five days (three weeks) later. He puts it on and it feels right, even around his left wrist. Left is for London.

John Watson owns two watches. One is analogue, the band leather. The other is digital, a circle of metal around his wrist. He looks so impatient, remarkably bored and harried at once. A careful observer would say he's always checking the time.

A careful observer would be wrong.

Chapter 2

Keeping his lives within a week of each other takes some effort. He spends some of his time in Chelmsford and almost all his time in London testing it out. Life in Afghanistan continues on as per usual, for which he is endlessly grateful. There's still no pattern to it, no rhyme or reason, but he's discovered that any sort of nap is enough to send him off and uses that to synchronize his calendars. Beyond that, he takes notes.

Having four Christmases a year is not at all the experience he dreamed of as a child. Enduring Harry for three of them is a trial in itself. Christmas in Afghanistan is wonderful beyond belief, the youngest sergeant turning to him and asking, laughing, "Think it'll snow, doc?" The gifts are small, some hand-me-downs, and it's somehow more satisfying than the Secret Santa at Broomfield.

He can't work out a conscious rotation of these lives, but if he could, he'd save Afghanistan for last, a reward.

What that says about the rest of his days, he tries not to think about.

He toys with the blog through January. It's the worst thing in the world, being settled in Essex, a capable man with two steady hands and two good legs, and then spending double-time in London, useless and crippled. Still, he'd rather be useless in London than useless in Chelmsford, if it's all the same to whatever deranged powers-that-be that have unwound his life. Useless in London is still in London, but useless in Chelmsford? Is in *Chelmsford*. Possibly forever. Shot in October, trudging through January, the last three months have taken a year.

It could be worse, he tells himself.

In Chelmsford he lives ahead a bit and tracks the market online. In London, either London, he makes a tiny investment here, a tiny investment there. It's cheating, but he feels as though it's owed to him. He's not stupid enough to go and win the lottery. The only changes between his Londons are the changes he makes for himself and being invalided is change enough, thanks.

He blogs about it here and there, largely in the digital life. Seems more fitting. Having tortured himself through rehab twice, he doesn't force himself to type it all back up in analogue London. It annoys him to no end, his inability to bring anything between his lives but the knowledge in his head. If he could wire himself some money, copy-paste a blog entry

or two, it would improve so much.

When he says nothing happens to him, he's not joking. He is living four lives in three locations, and the only one that's at all interesting, no one wants to hear about. Not that he can talk about it in the present tense without being considered crazy. Bill's tour finishes in Afghanistan, the man comes home and gets married, and John can't keep track of what he and Bill had been talking about before he'd been shot. It's a poor way to treat the man who saved his life – two of his lives? Or all four? – but he avoids Bill back in England out of sheer confusion.

Not to say he's entirely alone in London. He goes out for drinks with the rugby lads from Blackheath but feels as though he's watching a sitcom, stuck behind a screen and meant to be the laugh track. None of them mention his leg, he forgets his mobile there, and he'd much rather not go and get it back. When they call him up on the same day, digital-side, he says he has other plans. Two thirds of the time he has a telly, the world is on reruns; he doesn't need his social life to be the same.

He decides then and there that separation is key. He's thought it before, but now he means it. If he thinks about it correctly, he can use this to his advantage. Analogue London is slipping ahead of digital London, a bit, and he winds up asking out every woman he meets just for the hell of it. He makes a mental note where there's interest despite his poor delivery. Maybe he'll try again in digital, if he sees her again.

The effort required to fill his London days is the worst of it. Broomfield Hospital keeps him going at a reasonable clip when it's not working him into the ground. Afghanistan is a world of tedium, adrenaline and bad food. Between keeping his unit going and figuring out what the hell his pre-existing social life in Chelmsford is, he hasn't much time to stop and think in those lives.

He reminds himself he loves this city. He loves this city more than he's ever loved anywhere else and so, painfully, idiotically, he makes himself walk through it every day. Even with the investments, his pension can't hold up under London's strain. Maybe in time, but not now. At this rate, it's move or risk the lottery. He considers, maybe, using one life to experiment with. Analogue's running faster, so do the crazy things here. Learn from his mistakes. Make his life in digital London the best it can be.

With this in mind, he listens to Mike Stamford and thinks maybe a flatshare isn't so bad an idea after all.

He writes up a blog entry about the complete madman he met that day, a complete, extraordinary madman, and in the morning, he gets up and carools to Broomfield with Marta from down the lane. She's nice enough, paediatrics and all that, but he has the oddest

feeling about her, like they've shared a drunken snog at a Christmas party and have been steadfastly not talking about it ever since.

Still, nice enough. She asks him what's on his mind and he almost wants to say, but his yesterday and her yesterday are not the same, particularly as his yesterday was four days ago and his tomorrow will probably be the same day his yesterday was. He's grown to hate the ends of months. It's February in Chelmsford and Afghanistan, January in London.

Instead of trying to explain, he simply tells her he's tired. They drive on a bit in silence and he asks her, as if this is a sudden thought, if she remembers how they met. There's certain information facebook can't tell him.

That she has to think about it is somehow reassuring.

True to form, London is still in January, the day he left in analogue just beginning in digital. He wakes up thinking about flatmates. He thinks he'll get one here too. A sane one. With two madmen living under the same roof, he's certain 221b Baker Street will explode within the month, but maybe he'd stand a chance somewhere else.

It's something of a gamble, but he calls up the Blackheath lads. One of them has a cousin in London, a man a few years John's senior and fresh off a divorce. Derek, his name is, steadfastly determined to move on. Talking over the phone, he seems reasonable enough. John warns him about the limp and the PTSD, Derek tells him about the results of his custody battle, and this might not be so bad, actually. Derek's kid might be over for weekends, but for John, that's two days a month. The man is a librarian and he has a place in Wandsworth in mind, down near Clapham Junction. Grant Road, if he remembers correctly. They'll meet up to look at a flat the day after next (in a week).

Overall, he has to say he feels more optimistic about this than Sherlock "Left My Riding Crop in the Mortuary" Holmes.

The orderly who replaced Bill proves satisfyingly competent, Marta hands him a coffee before climbing into his car, and Sherlock Holmes blows them both out of the water.

Come the early hours of the 31st, he kips on Sherlock's sofa and wakes up on the 30th. Lying on the plain bed of his drab hotel room, he looks across the room to the desk, to the cane leaning there.

He's not sure how long it takes him. Slowly, gradually, reassuring himself of the utter lack of pain with each adjustment of his leg, he sits up in bed. He pulls the duvet back and swings his feet to the floor.

He licks his lip, bites it. He shot a man last night, calm and steady, and now he's too afraid to climb out of bed. To see if he can. Eyes closed, he thinks of running. Of cabs and chases. Of rooftops and madmen.

John Watson stands up, walks across the room, and puts away his cane where he'll never have to see it again.

It takes less than an hour to realize he has something of an issue on his hands. The only differences are the differences he makes and that means Sherlock is going to get himself killed tonight.

Then he realizes: Jennifer what-was-her-name. The pink lady. The pink lady is still alive.

Immediately, he goes for his mobile. Which, seeing as he never lost this one in a pub, isn't even the same mobile he texted the pink lady's phone with. Not that he would still have her number on it even if it were Harry's mobile.

Okay.

Be systematic about this.

She's from Cardiff, she's in the media. It's easy enough to google her. Only once he's sifted through bio page after bio page of the woman does he remember he knows her email address. She has her email on her phone, she always has her phone, so far so good. He knows she won't die until two hours after getting drenched in Cardiff rain and the storm is still hours off.

He realizes he still has the cabbie's plate number memorized, too. Even better.

It's easy enough to create a new email address for himself. Hopefully, she'll look at the londontravelwarnings and ignore the @gmail portion of the address. He looks at a couple of

old warnings online and types his email with care. Disgruntled taxi driver wanted for questioning by the police. Physical description of the man, the plate number of the cab, and instructions to call the police immediately if this cab is spotted. There is no cause for panic. Exercise reasonable caution and do not board this vehicle.

He edits it down, rearranges it a bit, and sends it off with a tagline about all email addresses being provided through the rail system for customer safety. He hopes she bought her train tickets online, a reasonable gamble.

All of this will mean nothing, of course, if he doesn't get the police to catch the cabbie. Time for an anonymous phone call.

That night, he sits on a table in an empty classroom, staring out through a window and in through a window, waiting for a light to turn on. His heart beats evenly, his left hand is steady, and his gun is a comfort against his back.

The light never turns on.

There's no giggling over crime scenes, no shooting a man in the chest, no crazy umbrella-wielding brother, but he does go all the way across London for Chinese. It's just as good as the first time.

Marta has a friend named Rachel who is very pretty and probably a bad idea. Dark hair with long, loose curls, pale blue eyes. Gorgeous smile, as well as other things. In light of recent events, the name warns him off. Both of the women are in paediatrics and it's Rachel's name that makes him think about it. He hasn't been following London news in February yet, not out in Chelmsford, and it's been February here for days.

When he asks, Marta isn't sure, but Rachel has followed the matter with interest. He asks about the three, the three linked suicides, and Rachel corrects him. It's five. As of the end of January, it's five victims. Two in one night, a first, though not near each other. A woman, then a man. The woman used to be on telly. The man had a funny name.

"Sherlock Holmes," he says.

Rachel agrees. It was that, or something like that. Clinched it as murder, though. Apparently, the man had been working with the police. Serial killer then, must be, and still at large, too. At that, Marta brings up something she saw on the local news a while back, some other story about people who didn't deserve it getting killed.

John doesn't pretend to listen.

He's days late. He's days late, and he couldn't have ever seen this coming. He works it out and discovers he'd met Sherlock in analogue London the day *after* Sherlock had died in digital Chelmsford.

There's literally nothing he could have done and it doesn't help one whit.

Certain but unable to check, he waits through a day in Afghanistan only to wake back up in Chelmsford. All his surgeries for today are planned, non-emergency affairs, and he tries to let the paperwork surround him once he's finished.

That night, for the second time, he googles Sherlock Holmes.

The pictures they use in the articles are strange. The eyes are flat, the mouth hard. He looks proud and aloof, probably on purpose. This isn't a man who laughs at gallows humour, or jumps and whirls with excitement, or tidies up his things to placate his potential flatmate. John looks at the picture, so still and lifeless, and all he can see is Sherlock eating rice with chopsticks in his pale hand, eyes grinning at John's pitiful attempts at emulation.

They've got him wrong. They've got him completely wrong and this is all the world will ever know of Sherlock now. They'll see a cold, humourless man who died in a police investigation. The only words of praise anyone had for him centre on his intelligence.

Anyone, but for one man. When John reads it, he's not surprised. Moved, yes. But not surprised.

He pulls out his credit card, looks up a florist, and arranges for a delivery. After giving the woman at the other end of the line a somewhat convoluted explanation, he gets a sympathy card included with his order. She writes down what he dictates. If she thinks it's strange, she doesn't say. Once she's done, she reads the plate number and physical description back to

him, then asks how he'd like the card to be signed.

"Just... a friend of Sherlock's. 'Putting my trust in you, a friend of Sherlock's,'" he says.
"That's all. Thanks. And yes, express delivery would really be best."

He has no idea what Lestrade thinks of lilies, but that's really not the point.

He wakes up and has about five hours before he has to meet Derek to look at their potential flat. His morning is a horrendous affair until he finds the news online. The news titles are worse than usual, pulling up puns in very poor taste – "insisted suicide," for one – but the content is very firm on certain key points.

The killer has been caught.

There have been no further deaths.

He feels a giggle well up and shoves it down. He shoves it down and he presses it down and, given enough time, it fades away. His head is light, dizzy, as if he were suffering from blood loss. It's just relief. God, it is *such* relief, and then it vanishes.

Two deaths out of four. He feels like he's been given a superpower, some mad ability meant to match Sherlock's, and if that feeling's right, if there is some sort of purpose or greater meaning behind this, it means he's failed.

Never again.

He'd love to be able to promise that.

It takes some consideration, but he gets that flat on Grant Road with Derek before the day is out. The man's all right, as far as random strangers go. Seems a bit dull. No rooftop chases here, but he doubts Derek would get himself killed out of pride, what with that daughter and all.

John's really not sure what happened to his standards.

The sofa is cosy, if a bit lumpy, and he has no idea where he is until he checks his watch.

Left wrist for London.

Analogue for a madman.

John lies there not quite able to breathe. He's on the sofa, curled up, back aching slightly. His coat is on the armchair he thinks will be his. His shoes have been kicked off somewhere, the exact location unimportant.

He hears a noise, a footstep, and he tries to speak. He tries, and fails, and tries again.

"Sherlock!"

It's a half-strangled yell, equal parts unnecessary and mortifying.

"Yes...?" As slowly as his drawled syllable, the man emerges from the kitchen, tea in hand. The tailored suit has been replaced by pyjama bottoms, a t-shirt and a blue dressing gown. His eyes pierce John over his mug as he drinks. Not even the floppy sleep-tousled hair can blunt the effect of that gaze.

John sits up, not sure how or what to explain.

Sherlock goes back into the kitchen.

There are a few noises that should probably be troubling.

Sherlock returns, a mug in each hand, and sits down next to him. He hands John the second mug. For reasons John can't fathom, his tea has just enough milk, just enough sugar. Trust Sherlock to know.

They drink in silence.

Once John's mouth is free of the taste of stale sleep, he asks, "Is this how it goes, then? I kill a serial killer and then you make me tea?"

"Ah." Sherlock pulls his legs up under him, somehow not tangling himself up on the blue length of his dressing gown. "You regret it."

"No," John says. "God no," he says and nearly laughs. Disbelief bubbles up inside him, all nervous giggles he can't let loose, and when he looks at Sherlock, he knows he shouldn't let himself keep smiling the way he is. "Not in the least."

Sherlock's lips twitch. "Do you want to do it again?"

This time he does laugh. Couldn't help it for the world. "I think it's been settled," he says, only to remember that the lilies won't arrive until the next time he wakes up in Essex. Even then, Lestrade has to take his information seriously. That very much hasn't been settled yet.

"If you're worried about getting caught, you needn't," Sherlock tells him. "I assume my brother already knows you acted in my defence and he approves of that sort of thing. I doubt you'll have any legal trouble for years."

"I'm not worried about that," he says. It's stupid but true. He has illegal possession of a firearm, he killed a man, and he's not worried about any of it. After what he's been through, the way he lives, there doesn't seem much point in worrying where only one life is concerned.

Sherlock shifts a bit, moving to sit crosslegged. Leaning forward, he sets his elbows on his knees, folds his hands and stares at him. Maybe John should mind, but he doesn't. After about a minute of this, Sherlock points his index fingers at John. "PSTD," he says. "Nightmare."

"Wrong again," John tells him.

"Oh?" Head tilting, eyes narrowing. Challenge accepted. "Something you thought of between last night and when you shouted. Something to do with me."

"Someone's got an ego."

"I do," Sherlock agrees, voice warm and pleased. "And someone's keeping secrets."

"You'd hate it if I told you," John says.

"I would." There's a liquid quality to his tone, spreading out, filling up. The man's like a purring tiger. Sherlock goes right on studying him, smiling in a way that would make most people run for safety.

John pretends to think about that. "I could tell you."

“Don’t. If it’s of any importance, I’ll work it out on my own.”

“Are you sure?” John glances at him, a sideways glance into the most intense gaze he’s ever held.

“Please,” Sherlock scoffs. “I’m always sure.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my brother that.”

Sherlock glares at him.

John smiles, more hope than innocence, and drinks his tea.

Part 2

“Thought you had a limp,” Derek says one morning. “You told me on the phone you had one.”

“Psychosomatic.” He pours his cornflakes, pours the milk and begins to eat with a spoon he knows has never been exposed to human remains. When John wants to do any decent cooking, he does it on his digital London days. Chelmsford is busy, Afghanistan impossible, and Sherlock creates biohazards wherever he goes. “Finally worked through that mental block, I guess.”

“You thought your way out of a limp?” The sharp scent of citrus bursts into their kitchen, Derek peeling through an orange rind. He’s a bit of a health nut, keeps asking John for advice. It got on John’s nerves before he realized the other man is diabetic. He doesn’t mind so much now.

John nods. “Got distracted and wound up running after a cab,” he says, which is true.

“Left something in it?”

“Yeah,” John lies. He grins his way into a joke. “My cane.”

Derek laughs and offers him a slice of his orange. “Any plans, then?”

“Plans?”

“A nice marathon, that sort of thing,” Derek says.

“No thanks,” John says and they both laugh. It feels like a preliminary, like they’re establishing boundaries and feeling out what kind of flatmates they’re going to be. Right now, they’re two men who have pleasant conversations and share food. Neither has much by way of social life, though, so they’ve begun to default to one another. The war and the reality-splitting have changed John, whereas Derek lost the mutual friends to his wife in the divorce. Both of them are left with the Blackheath rugby lads and, well-meaning as the lads are, they’re still the Blackheath rugby lads.

Derek’s not much taller than he is, but he’s stocky, the exact sort of bloke not to be tackled by on the rugby field. Or, in terms of flatmate comparison, he’s a bit shorter than Sherlock, but at least twice as thick, a mousy stump versus a dark-haired stick. Where Sherlock drops John a free meal here and there, Derek’s a consciously generous sort of bloke, which makes it awkward when John has so much less.

Their flat reflects that. It’s in the telly and furniture, and the space where John’s furniture was meant to go. It’s in the bookcases, the empty shelves Derek set aside for him. John’s a

military man, has been for years, and he doesn't have much in the way of personal belongings. He doesn't have the money to get more either. There's nothing he'd want even if he did.

There are no skulls or experiments or taxidermied animals with headphones on, but John can safely open the fridge and Derek loves a good movie reference. This should work out just fine.

When the report comes out in Chelmsford about the cabbie, it's to say that the man died of an aneurysm on the last day of January, less than twenty-four hours after killing his last victim. The police had been alerted to investigate Jeffery Hope, 67, by anonymous tip, and, among his remaining property, had discovered pills containing the same poison that each alleged suicide had self-administered.

It takes another day before the leak comes, when someone discovers what else the police must have found. After every murder, a large sum of money was deposited in an account for Mr. Hope's children. This man was an assassin, a sponsored serial killer.

John wonders about that aneurysm. He's followed the news of Hope's arrest in digital London, discussed it over brekkie with Derek, and the cabbie is still alive, stress of incarceration and all.

As far as John knows, he's the only instigator of change between his lives. His unwitting inaction killed Sherlock and the pink lady both, but it doesn't make sense that his inaction also killed the cabbie. No, it's the other way around. It doesn't make sense that his action in digital London *saved* the cabbie. Something else happened, one way or the other, something unrelated to John. Random chance? Except John has already looked into that, had stood outside his hotel and memorized the cars that drove by only to recognize them all the following (same) day.

This makes no sense, but that's hardly a surprise.

Life takes forever when it's been quadrupled. It rains for a week and, excepting his days in Afghanistan, he doesn't see the sun for a month. In three calendar months of abstinence, he had a year without sex.

When Harry calls, drunk and guilty, he sits through her slurring ramble about Clara three times. By the third time, he actually knows what to say. By the third time, he's promised himself twice he'll ignore the next reiteration of this call. He hates himself for breaking those promises even as he feels better for it.

Ladies and gentlemen: the guilt issues of John Watson.

On the positive side, even the strangest, most infuriating of Sherlock's behaviour becomes manageable when it's been spaced out. Sometimes, the breather is very much required. His other London flat is perfect for that. After a certain traumatizing bathtub incident, John winds up investigating diabetic-approved biscuits and buying Derek a tin. Technically, he leaves the tin out on the counter and explains the biscuits to his sane – well, saner – flatmate while eating a few with his tea, but Thank You For Being A Decent Human Being gifts can be misconstrued. Unlike Sherlock, Derek can go to a bar with him to play wingman and no one thinks they're dating. It's sort of perfect.

Normally, he doesn't follow the wingman mentality, but Marta keeps cockblocking him out of what he thinks is an honest attempt to help. He really doesn't want to know the undesirable qualities of every woman who catches his eye, but Marta knows them all and tells him. She's almost like Sherlock, except tactful. The one time she gives him the green light is with that cute x-ray technologist. Naturally, the technician shuts him down on the spot. It had been nice to hope.

Afghanistan remains the one location where he's absolutely sure he isn't getting any, but even his sexual frustration takes a backseat when he realizes he has access to so much information his men would love to know. He has a fresh stream of media three-fourths of the time. There are things he could say, moods he could lighten, but he doesn't know what he can share without looking crazy.

He starts listening in on conversations when they're about books or telly. The next day, he comes back having read or watched online. He's careful about what he lets on. He can't say he's only watched the first season of *The IT Crowd* one day and be making references to season four come the next bomb threat.

Not that things are remotely that relaxed or whimsical, not even close, but a coping mechanism that works is a coping mechanism to hang onto. He has six months left of his tour and it will take him two years to finish it.

He types up "A Study in Pink" in one London flat and learns how to cook risotto in another. Derek likes to cook when his daughter comes over for the weekends. Given the options of hiding in his room, helping, or enduring the none-too-subtle attentions of a twelve-year-old

girl, John gets to helping.

“Can I ask about the war?” the girl asks over dinner.

“Maggie,” her father warns lightly.

“I don’t mind,” John says.

Shy but growing bolder, Maggie gives him her questions, listens to his answers. She listens raptly to his explanations of trauma surgery procedure, how operating in the field affects the golden hour. John glances to Derek every so often, a careful check, and Derek begins to ask questions too.

Before the night is out, he’s speaking in Dari and writing out phonetic translations on scraps of paper. They break out the tin of sugar-free biscuits, drown them in tea, and Maggie is still running her fingertips across the delicate lines of her own name. John considers himself a lucky man that her father thinks it’s funny.

“She’s learning to aim high,” Derek reflects later, setting up the lilo while Maggie’s in the loo. “If she gets a taste for multilingual doctors, maybe I’ll wind up with a son-in-law I won’t want to punch in the face.”

“She’s twelve,” John says, drying his hands on the tea towel.

Derek sighs. “Give it a week and she’ll be eighteen. That’s how kids work, mate.”

John gives it a week and two days pass. He can’t be blamed for disagreeing.

Sometimes, he almost thinks Sherlock knows how his days work. It’s as if the man purposefully decides to cram his waking hours so full of activity that John won’t be able to stop thinking about it all, even days (the next day) later.

For instance, he’d thought his day would involve doing the shopping, avoiding his bills, and going to that interview at the surgery close by. His day does include these things, plus a dead body, plus an ASBO. Not to mention Chinatown, being hauled away from yet another late lunch, and a city-wide search for yellow graffiti. In between, there are a lot of taxis, which is probably why he’s finding life in analogue London so much more expensive than in digital. Looking at the positive side of things, his new boss seems quite nice.

But then he thinks there’s no possible way Sherlock understands his life. If he did, he’d let John sleep. Slumped at the table, John keeps trying to drift off. If John could just get to Chelmsford or switch Londons, he’d have a bit more time and a lot more energy. He could

actually be of some use. Sherlock refuses to give up on him, keeps prompting and pressing, thinking aloud and waiting for John to be unable to answer his questions.

This, apparently, is John being helpful.

It's already too late for John to save anyone from Chelmsford, probably too late for him to save Van Coon from the other London. And so, when it's time to wait for Soo Lin Yao to show herself, he takes a nap. Afghanistan, this time, which is annoying. He was aiming for Chelmsford, for a spot of news in advance. He goes to sleep and wakes in London, digital London, which is no good at all. He sets his alarm to go off in ten minutes and goes back to sleep.

He wakes up in London yet again, Sherlock's hand light on his good shoulder.

"Five more minutes," he says. That's all he needs. If he could check in Chelmsford, see how it'll turn out without them....

"Come *on*, John!"

Too late.

When Sherlock runs out, unarmed, to face the intruder, John nearly loses it. John's the one with the gun, the man with the ability to protect. Not to mention, he's fairly certain three of his lives are expendable. Fairly. Maybe, but now isn't the time to debate it.

He hides Soo Lin away as best he can, tells her to lock herself in, and runs out after his madman of a flatmate. His heart pounds, blood rushing past his ears, and when the shot fires, oh god, when it fires.

Surrounded by books, he refuses to sleep. The books are here, only here, so this is where he needs to be. He looks and sorts and stretches. He catalogues until his hand cramps. They alphabetize and see what matches, their methods sliding into each other.

He makes himself tea for the caffeine. He keeps forgetting that it's Derek who owns the coffeepot, not Sherlock. It's not really an issue, but it keeps taking him by surprise. Between the health nut and the madman, the coffeepot should really belong to Sherlock.

“Problem?” Sherlock asks. Half three in the morning, his voice is low. There’s no need for volume at this time of night.

“No,” John says. He returns to the table, sets down the mug, and Sherlock swipes it. One sip, two, then returned to him.

“You’re upset.”

“I’ll manage.”

The bookathon continues.

“I left her because I thought you were going to get yourself killed,” John says.

Sherlock doesn’t miss a beat. Doesn’t pause, doesn’t falter. “And yet you blame yourself, not me.”

“We’ll talk it out once this is done,” John tells him.

There’s a quick succession of pops and cracks, Sherlock twisting, stretching. “You can keep your guilt to yourself, thank you.”

John picks up the nearest paperback and chucks it at him. It’s a direct hit to the right shoulder.

Sherlock turns around.

“We knew he was after her,” John says, calm, reasonable. “We could have set a trap. Hid her away and let the killer walk in front of my gun. I can hit a moving target as well as a standing one.”

Sherlock returns to the books, quieter than before. Some of his silences suit him. This one doesn’t.

“I’m just saying, next time, don’t run off. I hardly expect you to make me tea *every* time I shoot a serial killer.”

John doesn’t actually see Sherlock’s smile, but that doesn’t mean he’s missed it.

When he dozes off his first day at the surgery, he wakes up in Chelmsford. Better late than never. The news about the girl murdered in the National Antiquities Museum isn’t exactly headline stuff, but it does merit a mention. He reads for information but gleans nothing he

doesn't already know.

What he does know is that Soo Lin Yao is going to die in digital London just as she did in analogue unless he intervenes. He knows Sherlock well enough to know the man wasn't thinking of anything but the chase when he ran out to face the killer. He's fairly sure he can count on Sherlock not thinking again.

With that in mind, he draws up a plan of attack. In digital London, he'll have two days until Soo Lin's death. He doesn't know where Soo Lin was hiding, can't expect her to trust him enough to come out, so he has to find a way into the National Antiquities Museum that second night. More importantly, he has to find a way in without Sherlock noticing. Coming to Sherlock's attention here is a kind of trouble John wants none of, there being no possible explanation for his actions that Sherlock would believe. Once Sherlock hares off, John will hide, will wait with Soo Lin, and then shoot the killer. Soo Lin will live, translate the note, and, hopefully, be put into some sort of protective custody until the Black Lotus forgets about her or is taken down.

He's had worse plans.

As luck would have it, he wakes up in digital London next. He eats his breakfast, hassles Derek good-naturedly about his caffeine intake, and then heads out to the National Antiquities Museum. He spends the day there, thinking.

He looks at the clay pots. Stares at them. Only one shiny now, not the two. Only one shiny *yet*.

Eventually, he makes himself move. He tries to find a place no one will check, a place no one will find him, and by closing time he has a few ideas.

At this point, he gives it a trial run.

He's found, which isn't exactly unexpected, but it's four hours after closing time, which is satisfying. When night security yells at him, he's sure to keep standing with his back mostly turned, sure not to move or speak. He keeps his breathing quick, shallow, keeps his eyes blank. When the guard touches him, he doesn't respond. To John's great and carefully hidden surprise, he finds himself gently taken by the hand and led to the nearest bench. He's brave enough to fake the limp, a slight limp, and the fear that it might return for real must show on his face. John decides to "wake up" before the man pulls out a phone.

After that, they have a nice chat about PTSD and flashbacks. John apologies a lot, puts his shaking left hand on display.

“My ol’ dad was a veteran,” the guard says. “RAF. Good man.”

“RAMC,” John replies.

The guard calls a taxi and shows him out, mum’s the word.

Ironically enough, John’s lies at the museum about his flatmate probably getting worried turn out to be true. Derek, that is. Sherlock barely notices when he’s gone.

“I’m fine,” he says. “Blew my chances with a nice blond, but besides that.” He shrugs.

If Derek doesn’t believe him, he doesn’t press, doesn’t pry. Derek accepts a lot of things that Sherlock would never let him get away with. Then again, Sherlock is happy to have John’s gun in the flat and John would put good odds on Derek reporting him to the police if he found the weapon.

It all evens out.

He wakes up slumped at his desk at his job, the one he’s probably about to be fired from. Giving the job up as a lost cause, he goes back to sleep. His body here needs it.

He spends the day in Afghanistan, an uneasy passenger on a long drive. It’s a day for thinking. He knows his body tires, but he never dreams anymore. He assumes he’s getting REM sleep, but it’s not REM that sends him off from life to life. If it were, he’d be able to take a quick nap and wake up in the same place. No, life-hopping isn’t a dream replacement.

Maybe being conscious in life after life simply means he can’t remember his dreams. People go insane when they don’t dream and while he knows he’s a short distance away from getting himself sectioned, he doesn’t feel mad. His lives are mad, but within them, he’s sane. He couldn’t have hallucinated Sherlock if he’d tried. Ergo, he probably dreams.

He wonders why he doesn't wake up with the memories of dreams, but he also wonders why he didn't wake up with memories of that life in Chelmsford.

Then there's a spot of shooting and no time left to think.

He wakes up in Chelmsford, so terribly grateful that it's his day off. He's still safe in Afghanistan, as close to safe as he could be, but Essex becomes a comforting place after a day like the one he's just had.

In between devising a better Soo Lin protection plan and helping Rachel move her brother Jacob into a new flat, John wonders what will happen if he's killed in his sleep.

Digital London today, and hours left to save Soo Lin. Between the nerves and, well, the sheer anticipation, he spends the day job searching. One for here, another one for analogue London.

He doesn't try to apply to the same surgery here as he did back in analogue; the overlap would be too confusing. Not to mention, different flats mean different commutes.

"Finally getting that job," he tells Derek. "You can stop worrying."

"Oh good," Derek says. "I'll let you know when I start."

That night, he hides successfully. Holding his shoes, walking in his socks, he manages to secrete himself away in the restoration room. He puts his shoes back on at that point, because once he kills the assassin, he'll need to make a run for it before Sherlock or Soo Lin can catch sight of him.

Not for the first time, he wonders what the hell his life has turned into.

All too soon, Sherlock surprises the girl, the girl gives her story, and then Sherlock runs off into the museum at the sound of an intruder. Stupid, *stupid* man.

Soo Lin is terrified, trembling, but doesn't give way to panic. Her breathing audibly worsens when her brother enters the room. Nevertheless, she stands her ground.

Matching his footsteps in time with the assassin's, John moves toward the door through the dark. The siblings are focused only on each other. John thinks maybe, just maybe, but that's when the assassin pulls out his gun.

Once again, a single shot pierces the night.

A body falls, Soo Lin cries, and John makes his retreat, escaping through the door he knows Sherlock entered by.

He stops to have a pint on his way home, mostly to look like he's been out doing something legal. Derek worries about him enough as it is.

He wakes up, checks his left wrist for the analogue time, and has no doubt he's about to be fired. When he isn't, when he's barely warned, barely rebuked, he can't help his moment of wild optimism. The cinema, he thinks. Marta's recommended a few films.

He grins the whole way back to Baker Street.

Except for the attempted murder aspect of that circus, Sherlock's dating advice is probably better than Marta's. Sadly, his cockblocking skills are better as well.

It makes Sarah all the more remarkable for staying with him that evening. Much to Sherlock's irritation, she insists on remaining long after she's served her purpose as a witness to Dimmock, and John rather likes her for that.

She copes with their sitting room, she copes with their kitchen, she copes with Sherlock being Sherlock, and John is nothing short of amazed. They order Chinese take-away as a bad joke to themselves. Quick delivery, though.

John opens the door, wakes up in Afghanistan, and realizes something has gone a bit wrong.

Driving into work the next morning, he annoys Marta to no end and doesn't particularly care. She thinks *this* is moody? She doesn't know a *thing* about moody. She's never met Sherlock goddamn cockblocker Holmes, a circus act of death, and the worst first date in the history of humanity. And it's fully possible John just died. Waiting to check makes him anxious. Will he simply skip over those days from now on? Is he going to try to wake up into his own corpse and die from the process?

God, what is his *life*?

He wakes up in pain and tied to a chair. He groans, a low, unintentional sound, as he flexes his wrists against their binding. His watch is on his left wrist. A hostage in London, then, not Afghanistan.

Tied to that chair, fighting his way across the ground, his mind narrows to two things.

First, the arrow.

Second, that he has one try, just the one, to save Sarah.

When the assassin returns, that human spider from the circus, John sees a ghost. A mortal ghost, one he kills a second time. Sherlock unties Sarah and her tears shine in the firelight. John knows, then and there, that he'll never feel guilty for that arrow-pierced corpse, for anything beyond what he's put her through.

He walks her home, hugs her goodnight, and apologizes as he has never apologized before.

He wakes up in London and groans.

It's the day of the circus and Sherlock is still an idiot.

He goes to his job interview and solidly lands the position. Like Sarah, Dr. Brendan Cooper is concerned he'll be bored. Like Sarah, Brendan is assured that this will not be a problem. Unlike Sarah, Brendan will never be asked to the circus, and not simply because John doesn't fancy blokes.

John plans to keep this job.

Without their human spider, the circus doesn't have its full share of acts, but the show must go on.

John buys his ticket over the phone, queues at the desk and picks it up, pleased to see his own name on this one. He keeps by the bottom of the stairs, idly texting Harry. Pretending to text seems like too obvious of a tip-off, too fake to go unnoticed by a consulting detective. He doesn't have long to wait.

"One by the name of Holmes," a rich baritone says behind him.

His entire body tenses, terribly on alert without his gun. He'd never be able to fire it here, but he misses its weight.

John doesn't look up from his mobile as Sherlock sweeps past him up the stairs, all coat and scarf and very much alone. Doesn't that idiot have someone for back-up? Anyone?

Just John, then.

He keeps a bit behind Sherlock, behind and to the side. Makes it easier to glance at him, to keep an eye on him. Sherlock doesn't explain the act to anyone, no mention of the mechanism behind the arrow or the tradition behind the escape attempt. Sherlock is quiet, all eyes.

Without warning, those eyes flick to John. They assess, weigh, dismiss. Sherlock looks back to the finished escape attempt, the bowing warrior and the applauding crowd. John can't breathe.

Shaken, John forces his gaze back on the circle of candles, on the replacement act. When he's

sure Sherlock has snuck off, he glances to check.

Gone again.

The replacement act goes on but John sees none of it. He focuses in on the discarded arrow, the one Sarah had hit the warrior with on their date. A short man clearly in need of a better view, John walks around the circle, setting himself ever closer to that arrow. His eyes remain on the curtain, waiting for Sherlock to fall through.

When Sherlock does, he's ready. He charges forward, this time properly disarming the man with the sword. The weapon goes skittering across the floor, the man kicks him in the *chest*, and John goes skittering after it, winded.

The man pulls out a knife – when did *that* happen? – and Sherlock lets go of John's dropped arrow.

"I know where the pin is," Sherlock says, voice strong and steady.

John climbs to his hands and knees, sees the blade above blue folds of scarf, and knows terror. Kneeling, hair cruelly pulled to bare his throat, Sherlock seems utterly unaware of the danger he's in.

"I will give it to you in exchange for the life of Soo Lin Yao."

"And us," John half-coughs, half-wheezes. He's very aware of General Shan and her gun in the emptied room. "Ours too."

"Ours as well," Sherlock agrees, eyes never wavering from the warrior's mask.

The mask shifts, the man behind it looking to his general.

Shan nods.

As calmly as he dares, John walks out of that building. Like Orpheus leading Eurydice, he listens to the footsteps behind him, begging for life and so terribly certain of death. He refuses to turn around, refuses to speak or look or check.

He stops at the edge of the pavement and hails an occupied taxi. No escape there. Sherlock's staring at the back of his head, John knows he is, but he can't turn around. He can't look a second time into eyes that see everything, everything but him.

Sherlock clears his throat. More awkward than arrogant. "Thank you," says the man who is not his flatmate.

"You're, uh, welcome." John glances over his shoulder and, no, looking is a bad idea. The utter lack of recognition in those eyes was bad enough the first time. John stares for longer than he should before realizing he's playing ignorant very poorly. "What, just, um?"

“Doesn’t concern you.” Very abruptly, the usual Sherlock is back. It’s even more unnerving than Sherlock being awkward.

“Okay,” John says slowly. “That, um. Soo Lin Yao, is she going to be safe? I mean, those people- that woman, she had a gun.”

“I have a good bargaining position,” Sherlock begins to say.

“No you don’t,” John interrupts, incredulity overcoming caution. “Not in there, you didn’t. He had a knife to your throat.”

Sherlock pauses. Smiles faintly. “I’ll be more careful next time.” As if telling a private joke.

This time hailing an unoccupied cab, John snorts a laugh. “No you won’t.”

Sherlock blinks and John realizes his mistake immediately. This isn’t at all the way to stay under Sherlock’s radar, not by acting familiar. He needs to leave, right now, in this cab, and he needs Sherlock to want him to leave more than Sherlock wants him to be a witness for Dimmock. He needs Sherlock to want him gone, forever.

John feels himself smile and hears himself ask, “Would you like to go out for a drink sometime?” He nods toward the taxi.

Sherlock’s loss of interest is immediate. His expression freezes and the light behind his eyes visibly dims. “No,” he says bluntly.

John shrugs and climbs into the taxi with a cocky “Your loss, mate!” A tight weight settling under his stomach, he closes the door before he gives his address.

As the car pulls away from the pavement, he’s careful to never look back.

Part 3

John doesn't mean to, but he does the math.

If he doesn't get killed anywhere, have any accidents, or die prematurely of illness, he'll live to be two hundred.

At least.

"If I go senile, will you kill me?" John asks Sherlock over breakfast.

Buttering his toast, Sherlock huffs and says, "Fine."

Very agreeable, this one, particularly for a bloke who can't be arsed to take out the bins.

"I assume you mean actual senility, not your PTSD," Sherlock continues after a short moment of quiet.

"Yeah," John says.

Sherlock chews slowly and his eyes rest on John's face as if they belong there. He swallows, frowning. "Is your family prone to early-onset Alzheimer's?"

John shakes his head, eating his bacon. Derek always looks at him like he's a terrible person when he eats it and he never has time in Chelmsford mornings, so he only has it here.

"The median age for the onset of dementia in men is approximately eighty-three," Sherlock tells him. "You have forty-four years left."

Divide that by four.... "Check back in a decade or so and we'll see," John says.

Somehow delicate without looking prissy, Sherlock gives his toast a nibble, eyes still on John. He makes a thoughtful noise then, holding the toast between his teeth, starts texting under the table.

John doesn't mind. Sherlock is sort of a joy to watch like this.

Sherlock doesn't seem to mind being watched either. When he glances up at John, he smiles, getting butter on his upper lip.

John smiles back and shakes his head, not sure what about.

He thinks he likes these mornings best.

It's another weekend in digital London and that means Maggie's at the flat. Because Derek is a terrible yet crafty father, weekends are chore days for John, which means Maggie is overeager to help.

"It's like she's five again," Derek tells him gleefully. "Call her a 'young lady' every so often, all right? She fell for the 'big girl' treatment until she was six."

"You are a terrible father," John answers, amazed and amused despite himself.

"Yes, and our kitchen is *spotless*."

John laughs, wishing he could tell Sherlock about this.

The new supplies *finally* arrive. John encounters a new level of relief, all at such basic things. Bandages, saline, disinfectant. It's a far cry from Broomfield, but he does the best he can.

He gets a lot of his personal history out of Marta by complaining. It only takes so much "nothing ever happens to me" before Marta feels the need to shut him up. It's not a tactic John would have considered before Sherlock, but it's certainly effective. John falls for it enough with Sherlock's cries for entertainment to know.

For some reason, he never joined the army in this life. When he brings it up, Marta stares at him like he's grown another head, so he must not have mentioned it in the three years Marta's said they've known each other. Except he joined the army more than three years ago, far more, so she wouldn't have been around to see his decision process veer away from the

RAMC.

As it is, she knows him well enough to know his moods lately have been strange. Distracted, mostly, but also a bit depressed.

“Something the matter?” she asks. “It’s not Harry again, is it?”

“Only the ongoing madness of the divorce,” he answers.

Marta makes an exasperated noise. “Your sister,” she says, rolling her eyes in a way that abruptly clarifies the basis of their friendship.

“Could be worse,” he says, waiting for confirmation of his theory.

“Could be mine,” she agrees and yes, there they have it. Sibling consolation.

They meet up for lunch, the two of them and Rachel, plus a few more of Rachel’s friends. That’s normal now, and no small source of frustration. There’s nothing quite like socializing with a mob of women and having a chance with absolutely none of them.

Listening to the latest hospital gossip, he reminds himself that Sarah hasn’t kicked him to the curb yet. Neither has she kissed him, but then, for all he’s known her a month, she’s only known him the week. Not to mention, he almost got her killed. Something of an issue, that.

“...will you, John?”

“Hm?” He shakes out of his thoughts. “Sorry. Rachel, you were saying?”

Rachel smiles prettily, somewhere between forgiveness and exasperation. She does that quite often. It goes well with her long, dark curls. “Jacob wants to say thanks. For your help with his furniture and all that,” she clarifies.

“Oh, that was ages ago,” John says, not sure when was the first and last time he’d seen Rachel’s brother.

“Two weeks isn’t ages,” Rachel says. “And I meant to mention this sooner, but I kept forgetting. He hasn’t managed to find a good place for a pint out and you two have pretty similar tastes.”

“Well,” John hedges. When two weeks is nearly two months, that’s ages.

“He doesn’t know anyone else,” Rachel goes on and, sod it, he’d better cut this off before a guilt trip starts up.

“All right,” he says. “You’ve got my number, don’t you?”

She doesn’t, so he gives it to her. He takes care that it’s the right one, and Rachel smiles very prettily indeed.

Yeah, this might be worthwhile.

Sherlock flies off to Minsk. The night he goes, John types up another blog post. Nothing case related, not really. Just to say he's happy.

He cycles through his other lives, comes back, and Sherlock is still gone. It's not like he spends his day waiting for the man to come back, but he does feel ever so slightly miffed. Which is ridiculous and probably means Sherlock is rubbing off on him far more than can be healthy. Not that any amount of Sherlock rub-off could be healthy, but that's beside the point.

The point is, though Sherlock left yesterday, he hasn't seen him in five days now. With anyone else, with *everyone* else, John can't talk about his life. With Sherlock, John is so accustomed to having his life read off his face and clothing and movements, he doesn't need to speak. Simply looking Sherlock in the eyes is like confiding in the man.

He knows when Sherlock's flight is, knows how long it should take Sherlock and his overnight bag to return to 221b. He spends the night out on purpose, making sure he's not waiting at the flat like a lonely dog, and when he gets home, Sherlock is shooting holes in the wall.

There's spot of yelling, a head in the fridge – when did Sherlock have time to get that? – and John storms back out once Sherlock insults him past endurance, possibly frightening Mrs. Hudson on his way.

When he shows up at Sarah's, she lets him kip on her couch, more amused than affectionate. There's a moment where he's vaguely confused about Rachel, whether this means it's all right to make a try with her, but mostly, he's annoyed at Sherlock.

He fires off a text, detailing the benefits of not having the police throw him in jail for a decade on illegal firearm possession. He sends off another, explaining his limited ammo supply. He waits a while longer, unable to sleep on that small sofa – should've gone with the lilo, he can already feel it, but he'll never say – and then he sends yet another. Regardless of Mycroft's ability to wave the ASBO away, the gun would definitely be an issue. A ballistics check of the bullets in the wall would match the one he put into the cabbie.

Not that he's stupid enough to type out any of that plainly, but he's sure Sherlock will know what he's saying. There aren't that many ways to read *Leave my things alone* and *You DO realize there are consequences?*

He falls asleep, still waiting for Sherlock to text him back.

“I made omelettes!” Maggie announces. There is also tea.

“I take back everything I’ve ever said about irresponsible teenagers,” John says, shuffling into the kitchen. “You’re a wonder.”

“I’m twelve,” she says.

He’s sure to blink sleepily at her. Cock his head to the side. “Weren’t you fourteen?”

“Twelve,” she repeats, blushing hard and looking closer to eleven.

When he sits down at the table, Derek gives him a thumbs-up from behind his newspaper.

He thinks he might like these mornings best, too.

It is a particularly not-good day in Afghanistan. There is shrapnel and shouting. There’s dust in his eyes and sand in the blood, and he’s glad he’s already taken back what he’s said about teenagers as he helps ease one into death. This man was a boy, nineteen, and with three shots into his lower abdomen, there’s nothing John can do.

Blue eyes stare up at him, fighting back the haze. “What’s gonna happen?” the boy strains to say.

He’s all fear, no acceptance, and that’s why John says, “You’ll wake up in Essex.”

The boy nods weakly and dies.

“How’d you know he was from Essex?” Lieutenant Matthews asks him, later, after John’s washed the boy’s blood off his hands.

“Was he really?” John asks. The accent had been more northern than that.

Matthews nods. “Brentwood. Moved down during his teens.” A pause. “Early teens.”

John goes quiet, then says, “Lucky guess.”

John wakes up in Essex and cries.

He sobs into his pillow, huge shaking tears, and they don't stop until he's run dry. His eyes are raw, his cheeks feel strange, and he has a headache like none other.

A shower, some paracetamol and several glasses of water later, he almost feels like himself. Whatever that feels like.

He endures another day at Broomfield and when Jacob rings him up, it's the pint rather than the company that makes him say yes.

A brave face is an easy thing to put on, easier still in front of an almost complete stranger. They spend the first pint pretending to care about sport and by the end of the second, they're taking the piss out of each other.

John's laughing and it feels great. He's laughing and exhausted, and three pints after a day without an appetite means he's none too steady. Curse his tiny, lightweight body.

"Careful," Jacob tells him, laughing a bit himself. He catches the door for them on their way out. He catches John too, an arm across his back, hand fisted in the side of his coat. Stabilizing.

"I'm very careful," John replies, seeing as this is true. It is suddenly and extremely important that Jacob understands this. "You have no idea how careful I am. I'm *always* careful." He's so careful that they even keep on the pavement where it gets cracked and narrow. It's Jacob who nearly sends them slipping to a death of scraped hands and knees.

Jacob starts giggling, John starts giggling too, and Jacob says, "We should do this again. Wouldn't that be fun? That would be fun."

"*Yeah*," John agrees, grin wide and blissful, lolling his head onto Jacob's warm shoulder as they walk. It's the best idea he's heard all day. Except. *Except*. He misses Sherlock. Which means, which means London. He wants to eat toast and watch Sherlock with butter on his lip. Which means sleep. "Wanna go to bed first," he tells Jacob. "We, later, later we go to the pub again."

“What?” Jacob asks, still propping John up against his side. It’s not a bad way of walking, this.

“We’ll go to the pub again,” John repeats. “But later.”

“No,” Jacob says. “The other bit.”

John blinks in confusion, trying to remember. “Wanna go to bed?” he guesses.

“Okay,” Jacob says.

John says, “what,” and then the arm around his back is replaced by a brick wall. It’s definitely a brick wall. He knows because his hands go flat against it, his body straightening up, jerking the once, as if Jacob were a defibrillator, his lips the paddles.

Jacob tastes like beer, like something John ought to drink down and be glad for, which is the only reason he starts sucking on that tongue. Anyway, it’s already in his mouth. It’s warm too, like the hand on his neck, angling his head up. He has to strain, has to reach, and Jacob stoops down for him, all crushing lips and scraping stubble.

Leaning back for balance, hands holding to Jake’s coat for more balance, John pants at the hot mouth attacking his ear. He bucks forward, because *good*, because *more*, and Jake sucks on his skin and does this tongue thing, pressing back against him, pressing John into the wall, and it’s been ages, it’s been two fucking *years*, sort of, and no sex, none, even with the PTSD relinquishing its stranglehold on John’s prick.

John’s prick likes heat, likes pressure and friction and, *fuck*, a thigh, a thigh like that, grinding up, a thigh to thrust into and there’s, there’s something hot, there’s something very hot. Below his navel, off-centre, almost at his hip, hot and nudging and hard, it, fuck, that’s a *cock*.

Jerking back, he cracks his head on the wall. He groans, purely from pain, entirely from pain, and Jake’s hands are in his hair, smoothing it down, before Jake laughs into his mouth.

John turns his head, thwacking Jake on the back as Jake licks his neck. “Jacob,” he says, voice deep and strange. “Wait.”

“Public sex bad,” Jake murmurs, as if reciting something that someone’s had to drill into him. Which, yes, public sex bad, or, well, public sex illegal, because, apparently, public sex *good*. Any sex, yes, with a cock in a pussy, *that*, John wants *that*.

“Jacob,” he says again, because Jake’s missed the point of all this. “Jake. We’re *blokes*.”

“I *know*,” Jake agrees, and bites his lip. It’s sloppy but kind of brilliant. His teeth tug at John’s bottom lip, his chin by extension, and John’s face lifts of its own accord. John opens his eyes, looking up, looking into dark eyes beneath dark curls, a face framed by yellow streetlight, and he is either much too drunk or not drunk enough.

“Oh fuck,” John says.

Listening to tone more than content, Jake pulls back. Looks at him. He’s wobbling a bit, has to put his hands on the wall to stay stable. His forearms frame John’s head and it does terrible things to John’s insides.

“Were you straight?” asks Jake.

“Uh,” says John.

“John?” Jake leans forward as he waits, sort of tilting. Not controlled. Faces close and then hips touch and then there are circles. The hot drag of tented trousers.

John closes his eyes. Lets his head rest back against the brick. His hands tug Jake’s hips closer, harder. “I’m still straight.”

“Be straight in the morning,” Jake urges, breath hot on his cheek.

That... should not sound like such a good idea.

They snog a bit more. Jake does this thing, this thing with his cock, and John’s cock, their cocks line up, and then Jake *presses*. John groans and clutches at him, because *yes*, and then Jake pulls back, the bastard.

“Can’t here,” Jake says.

“I have a bed,” John says, because *sex*, and tries to snog him again.

Jake goes quiet, and sighs, and John is bewildered to find himself hauled back off the wall. “You live by Marta, yeah?”

“Mmhm,” he hums into Jake’s shoulder. Smells nice. Night air and beer and warmth. “Mmmmmhmmm.”

Jake hauls him home, they fumble over the keys, and John is carefully lowered onto his sofa. He looks up at Jake in the light of his flat and Jake doesn’t really look that much like Sherlock anymore, which is a bit sad. Also, John’s face is more or less on level with Jake’s crotch now and it kind of makes him want to open his mouth.

“Essex made me *gay*,” John laments.

“No,” Jake says, trying to put John’s keys back into John’s coat. John’s still wearing it, so it makes the process all squirmy. “Credit where credit is due.”

“Sherlock,” John agrees mournfully, slurring the name something terrible.

“What?” Jake makes a funny face, the same one he used when John started slipping Dari phrases into the conversation for the hell of it.

“What?” John asks.

Jake blinks at him for a moment, like thinking hurts. Now he doesn’t look like Sherlock at *all*. More than a bit rubbish, that.

“Are we not having sex anymore?” John asks, just to be sure. “Because I thought we were.” It’s less interesting than it was a minute ago, but it’s still sex.

“I don’t,” Jake says, swaying a bit, hand on John’s shoulder, “I don’t pop drunk.”

“What?”

“Cherries,” Jake says.

“Oh,” John says. “Because I’m straight.”

Jake snickers.

John attempts and fails to kick him in the shins.

Jake laughs until he falls on the floor.

“Shhh,” John hushes. “Neighbours.”

Jake shuts up, clapping a hand over his mouth, so wide-eyed and ridiculous that John starts giggling. That sets Jake off again. They sit there on sofa and floor, giggling as silently as they can.

“I’ll call you a cab,” John decides.

“That sounds nice,” Jake says.

It takes a bit of effort, but he manages it. They wait for the cab to arrive, mellowing out. It’s kind of nice even without sex, sort of like the rest of John’s life. When they get a ring from the cab, telling them it’s outside, John hands Jake a tenner. “Bye,” he says.

Back on his feet, almost steady about it, Jake puts his hands on John’s shoulders. “No shame,” he says. He leans down, kisses the top of John’s head. “No shame. Okay?”

“Okay,” John says.

“Okay,” Jake says and shuffles off into the night, forgetting the tenner.

John gets up, stumbles to his bed, and collapses on it.

He wakes up in Sarah's flat.

His first thought is that he doesn't have a hangover.

His second thought is a great deal of profanity.

Harry can never find out about this. Any of her.

Really, there are two ways he could go about this. He could go on lying here, curled up on the sofa and trying not to think, or he could man up and blame it on alcohol and loneliness.

No contest, really.

Sarah has excellent timing, entering with a smile and fishing the telly remote out from behind him. Her smile is lovely and he likes it, feels grateful for this. It's so very good to flirt with a woman right now, someone hiding smooth skin beneath a blue dressing gown.

He focuses on that. Wonders vaguely if the shower comment was mere remark or veiled invitation. He errs on the side of caution for the few seconds it takes him to be distracted.

The news is on the telly and, suddenly, without warning, his world tries to end.

He yells to Sarah that he's leaving and is out the door before he gets a response. He's out the door and out of the building and down the block and down another block and on the tube and he's shaking inside his own skin. Copies of the *Metro* already litter all the seats, or close to it, but he doesn't want to read about some painting, he wants to read about the gas explosion, but he can't find the article. He looks for it, hands shaking, both of his hands shaking since when do both of his hands shake?

At Baker Street, he runs up the escalator, slams his Oyster card against the reader and charges through the barrier. He runs and he rounds the corner. He sees the crowd and the emergency vehicles. He sees the damage and he jogs to his flat, walks briskly past the police, and he runs up the stairs.

Sherlock is wielding his violin.

Mycroft is in John's chair.

John slides into autopilot, mind numb, mouth moving. The Holmes brothers talk and deduce, and John gapes at him, at Sherlock. Perfectly alive in the shattered flat, perfectly all right, and not a word, not a text. Two of them, the two of them looking and knowing, talking about John's night on a sofa but having no fucking clue what else John almost did last night.

He sits down on Sherlock's sofa. He likes it more than his own sofa in Chelmsford, more than Derek's sofa halfway across London. He likes it better than Sarah's, too. There's room to stretch out, not that Sherlock ever lets him.

Mycroft hands him papers and shakes his hand and John's waiting to be called out on it. To be called out on anything, everything. But Mycroft and his umbrella leave as Sherlock murders his violin and John is left in something he would very much like to call peace.

For the first time in days, he and Sherlock talk. Just a little, just a bit, and Sherlock gets that phone call from Lestrade. Off he goes again, of course, obviously, off he goes again.

Except, this time, instead of telling John to buy him a ticket to Minsk, Sherlock turns around and asks if he's coming along.

"I dug the mess out of the wall," Sherlock says in the cab. "I'll find a way to replace your supplies, provided I can find the correct size."

It takes John a moment to determine what he's talking about. His gun, the bullets. Nothing explicit where the cabbie can hear.

“Oh,” John says. “Thanks.”

Sherlock straightens his gloves, dark leather sheathing pale fingers. “You’re not still mad about that, are you?”

“What? No.” That was days ago. Feels like it, anyway. “Is Mrs. Hudson okay?” he asks rather than explain his quick forgiveness. “Where was she during the explosion?”

“On the stairs,” Sherlock says. “Don’t worry, she didn’t fall.”

“Were you...?”

“Between the windows,” Sherlock supplied. “The glass missed me, for the most part.”

“You didn’t treat the cuts, did you?” John asks, sighing pre-emptively.

“I put a plaster on where I needed one.”

“Let me guess, you washed them with water, no soap, no disinfectant.”

Sherlock keeps quiet.

“Sherlock,” John says.

“Yes, *doctor*. You can fuss at me when the case is finished.” For all the bite in his words, his eyes are soft.

John wonders, vaguely, if anyone besides Mycroft or Mummy has ever tried to take care of this madman. Probably not. Definitely not. He thinks it’s long overdue.

“I’m holding you to that,” John tells him.

And Sherlock, his smile slow and small, his voice as low as thunder: “Of course you are.”

Part 4

This, John thinks, is going to be hell to repeat.

What puzzles him, though, what really gets him, is that he didn't see this coming. He keeps a close eye on London news from Chelmsford. He keeps a particularly close eye on anything that might have to do with Sherlock.

There is no possible way he missed this. It's in all the papers, it's on all the news stations, it's absolutely everywhere and John paces back and forth, useless and clueless both. Sarah's given him the day off, citing home explosion as a very reasonable cause for sick leave, and all it means is he has nothing to do until Sherlock deduces the mystery of the trainers. John's left alone with his thoughts and his admittedly hazy memories of last night. He's almost glad when Sherlock decides to toy with him.

When Sherlock realizes, when Sherlock says the name of the shoes' owner, John watches him leave. Physically, Sherlock remains next to him, but mentally, he's away, far away. His eyes grow distant, flicking across sights within his own head, and if John reached out and touched him, he doubts Sherlock would feel it. If John recorded himself sleeping, would he look like this as well?

"Cab," Sherlock says and John can see it, the effort to pull himself back, to say even that much. Sherlock packs up, the graceful sweeping of his hands transformed into robotic motion, swift and harsh and efficient. He's amazing to watch like this, and a little terrifying.

John knows to lead the way out, to let Sherlock trail after him with long legs and slow steps. He gets them a taxi, Sherlock says "Home," and John translates that into an address, his eyes never leaving his friend's pale face.

The cabbie asks if Sherlock is okay, Sherlock makes a noise, a pained noise, and John says, "He's fine, he gets like this – he needs quiet, could you turn your radio off, please?"

They ride in silence.

John wonders if this is what the guard at the National Antiquities Museum saw in him that night. If John had looked so lost and statue-still. He thinks about that gentle guiding touch, such a simple grounding technique, and he wonders if he should take Sherlock's hand.

Not like, not like that. Not like *Jake*. But John wonders if it would help.

It's made him push a bit, this Jake thing. When Sherlock activated his gaydar on that Jim bloke, John had to chime in. Yes, that was a flamboyantly gay man, but John couldn't help testing the waters with an argument. "*I put product in my hair*" led directly to "*You wash your hair,*" a complete dismissal.

Sherlock doesn't think John is gay. Well, excepting that one time at Angelo's, but that had been an awkward getting-to-you-know conversation twisted around by Angelo and the candle and Mrs. Hudson's earlier assumptions. That one time doesn't count. Sherlock doesn't think John is gay, and that's good enough for John.

"1989, young kid, champion swimmer," Sherlock says without warning, speaking to him, focusing on him, into him, and John lets go of his worries. He has more important things to think about.

Except apparently he doesn't, because Sherlock doesn't need him. John goes to use the toilet and by the time he comes back, not only does Sherlock have the skull out, he's chattering to it. It's not as if John pees like a girl, either. He was gone barely a minute.

He goes downstairs, watches crap telly with Mrs. Hudson. If she's shaken from the explosion last night, she doesn't show it. As much of a comfort as her company is, it's not long before John's back up in his own flat, pacing once more. Sherlock's closed the door to the kitchen and when John tries to help, he's sent away to Mycroft's Twilight Zone office, a dim room with the lamps too far apart, a clock that ticks like vengeance, and a red telephone on the desk. It makes him glad he changed into a suit.

He suffers through, suffers home, and when he arrives, Sherlock's solved it.

The woman is rescued from a car, from a car park, and John memorizes the location along with her name. He lies awake long into the night, unsure of what to do.

"Explosion on Baker Street last night," Derek says by way of greeting, buried behind his newspaper. "Some injuries, no deaths."

John closes the fridge, not hungry.

If he'd helped that woman, tried to step in, someone else would have been taken hostage. He knows Sherlock can do this without him, has already seen him do it. Nothing to worry about.

He keeps an eye on it, just in case. Work at the surgery goes well enough, though it does take him a moment to remember which surgery he's meant to be working at. Mostly hypochondriacs with too much access to the internet, today. Could be a lot worse.

That night, he watches telly with Derek over the screen of his laptop, rhythmically pressing F5 until Sherlock's solution pops up on the Science of Deduction. He goes to bed exhausted from a day of doing nothing.

He wakes up to a hangover.

It takes some doing, but he manages to piece himself together enough to stagger to his laptop and get his journalling out. He updates his Chelmsford journal and then does the same for his daylist, writing out the order he'd had his days in. It's a good use of time as he waits for the paracetamol to kick in and when he finishes, there's nothing else for it.

He looks through London news with a sense of dread. Only Sherlock could have solved that case. Only Sherlock would know or care about Carl Powers.

Which is how John realizes. Because the explosion isn't there, because no one blasted Baker Street in this world without Sherlock. No one faked a gas explosion to draw Sherlock out to play.

Until now, John's lives may have been different, but his worlds have been the same. John's actions don't mean much, have barely any weight, almost negligible change. He saves lives, yes, but he's yet to truly change events. He's not big enough, nothing special.

Sherlock, on the other hand....

John's thoughts are interrupted by a knock at the door. He answers it and there's Marta, ready for work. John... isn't.

She grins at him. "Late night last night?"

Something drops inside John's head and he thinks he knows what. It's the other shoe.

"You knew," he says. His voice sounds blank, but that's not because he's numb. He's anything but. "You let me walk right into that."

Marta blinks, her grin falling away. “Thought you were tired of being single.”

“Girlfriend!” John yells. “What part of ‘get a girlfriend’ involves a gay bloke?”

She peers at him like he’s gone mental. “Are you having some sort of sexual crisis?”

“No,” he snaps. “Yes. I don’t know. I probably shouldn’t have it in the garden.”

She follows him inside and hops up on the counter of his kitchen, ignoring some perfectly serviceable chairs. Her movements are a bit like Sherlock’s for all her hair and face are much like Molly’s, and John has this strange moment of picturing those two having Marta as their kid. It doesn’t calm John in the slightest.

“You okay?” she asks.

“I don’t want to date Jake,” John says. He can’t seem to unclench his fists. “I don’t want to be set up on random dates with random blokes.”

Marta sighs. “I tried to tell Rache’.”

And there it is, that’s the mortifying bit. The insult to hangover injury. The woman John was considering tried to set him up with her brother. “What’d you tell her?”

“That blokes being gay doesn’t mean they’ll like each other.”

“I’m not gay.”

She makes a face. “Bi, sorry.”

John gapes at her.

He gapes at her, and this is not his life. There’s no London, no army, no Sherlock. This is not his life. He barely knows this woman and she certainly doesn’t know him.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asks.

It’s the most ridiculous question he’s ever heard. He swallows back his first answer, and the second, and particularly the third, and says, “I’m fine.”

She clearly doesn’t believe him.

“I’m- I’ll hurry up so we won’t be late,” he tells her. “You....” He gestures vaguely at nothing in particular.

“I’ll make toast, you shower,” she says. “Shoo.” She flaps her hands at him.

Not only does she make and butter the toast, she spreads on just the perfect amount of Marmite and holds the toast for him while he drives. His body surprises him with its

automatic reactions, knowing how to eat toast out of Marta's hands while driving. It feels almost practiced.

"We do this much too often," he can only conclude. "Why aren't we dating? It would be so much easier than the rest of all... this." It's an idle, joking question and he gestures vaguely, one hand on the wheel.

"Well, you did shag my brother," she says.

"For which I apologize," John says, tone still half-joking. Much like his driving instincts, it's an automatic response, which is fortunate. Otherwise he probably would have choked immediately before crashing the car. Then he adds, "How long have I been apologizing for that, anyway?"

"Not long enough," Marta says, unhelpful.

They get to the hospital and John spends the day avoiding Rachel between surgeries and surviving the aneurysm Jake's texts threaten to give him. It's not too difficult.

The avoiding Rachel part, anyway.

In Afghanistan, there are men everywhere. There are women, yes, but it's mostly men, and he isn't attracted to a single one of them. Not even the women, come to think of it, presumably because he's mentally marked off everyone as a patient.

Not gay.

He wakes up to another morning in Chelmsford and is immediately in a terrible mood. He needs to get back to Sherlock. There's a bomber on the loose.

There's also a raging Rachel on the loose, which is somehow more immediately terrifying than Semtex-coated hostages. Probably because he's the hostage now, hauled away to a side hall for her to hiss at him.

"You told my brother you were *straight*?"

“No idea,” John says, because hell if he knows the right answer to that question. “I was pretty drunk.”

“Fine,” she snaps. “Just call him back. He thinks you hate him or something.”

She lets him return to the canteen and his lunch at that point, but she sits there glaring at him until he takes out his mobile.

Sorry, he types. Have stuff going on at the moment. No time for a relationship.

After he sends it, Rachel swipes his mobile, reads his sent message, and seems to want to kill him only slightly less.

The text is answered later that night, the buzz of John’s mobile making him jump.

Is that an opening for fuckbuddies or a serious rejection? because im a better kisser sober.

Rejection, John types back, which looks harsh and blunt, largely because it is. That’s the reason why he adds, but youre already a fantastic kisser drunk.

<3, Jake answers.

First thing in the morning, he and Sherlock go to New Scotland Yard. Then there’s a car, the obligatory gay joke from Donovan, and John would much rather focus on the mystery of the day. Once again, Sherlock decidedly doesn’t need him, but he does haul John about. John knows his role well, leading conversations until Sherlock finds a direction to take charge in.

He goes back to the surgery, assures Sarah he’s all right, and neglects to mention that he may have drunkenly cheated on her with a bloke in a parallel universe.

Sherlock calls him just as his shift is up, and they meet Lestrade so Sherlock can show off the neat solution he’s found to the bomber’s second puzzle.

They go home, Sherlock enters the answer on John’s laptop, and that’s that. They don’t relax that evening, not really, Sherlock ruffling up his hair as if he could shake the answers out of his skull. Heating up the remains of two-day-old take-away, John watches his flatmate, watches this hectic, remarkable man, and feels helpless in more ways than he could ever define.

He thinks, at first, desperately, that he's finally begun to have nightmares again.

It's a long day in Afghanistan.

Derek and his ex-wife have a shouting match over the phone. It's long and involved, petty and stupid. Regardless of where John goes in the flat, how many doors they shut between them, he can hear it. Save for Derek's sobriety, it reminds John of his parents.

There's a lot of "My daughter" being flung about too, but in this case, no one yells anything about anyone being gay.

John goes outside, calls Harry to say he loves her, and spends the next half-hour convincing her he isn't dying. He winds up hating her more than a bit, because – and here is the important bit – she's still his stupid little sister. She makes Sherlock look like an absolute saint sometimes. Terrifying, but true. He has no idea how Clara managed.

That night, Derek yells at him for his incessant keyboard tapping. John merely does it louder, wearing out F5 until Sherlock posts.

They spend the night fuming at opposite ends of the flat.

John opens the fridge, stares into a dead man's closed eyes, and loses it.

Sherlock just stands there, all floppy hair and weighing eyes, pale fingers endlessly turning over that blasted pink phone. All the abuse John can shout at him, Sherlock endures. No, not endures. He considers it, parses it. He splits the shouting apart into its component pieces and assembles it back together. He makes John feel stupid, which is absurd, which is inevitable, because Sherlock makes everyone feel stupid. Sherlock *delights* in making everyone feel stupid, except, no, he doesn't, and now John feels vicious and cruel, as well as like an idiot.

He shouts anyway. There is a *head* in their fridge. There is a head in their *fridge*. It's been there forever and John wants it gone.

Eventually, John runs out of air.

He stands there, shaking, so confused and enraged, and Sherlock says, “Three days.” He says it simply, not gently. He’s blunt and unchanged, entirely unaffected by John’s ranting and obscenities.

John says, “What.” Irritation chokes his throat, won’t let him say more.

“The head has been in the refrigerator for three days,” Sherlock tells him. “I was going to dispose of it two days ago, before you came home from Sarah’s, but after the explosion, Mycroft wouldn’t stop badgering me. Since then-” he holds up the pink phone, demonstration, not accusation “-I have been busy.”

It hurts not to fight. To be ready for it, to fist his hands or load his gun, to engage and discover nothing to engage with. It hurts not to fight, to surrender, but this is something else. This isn’t backing down. It’s nothing like accepting the inevitable either, although of course Sherlock is right. This is the opposite of pain.

Sherlock speaks and something goes out of John. Something leaves him, and though John doesn’t know what it is, he’s glad to be rid of it.

He sags back against the counter, tired and drained, and for the first time in days, he can breathe.

He closes his eyes, gulping in air. His chapped lips burn. His chest heaves.

“John?” The first hint of emotion, such terribly slight concern.

“Afghanistan,” John says and can say no more.

“Ah,” Sherlock says, as if he knows, as if he *knows*. “Bombs.”

He nods, eyes tight shut. He swallows thickly, struggling for a moment, just for a moment, with memory. The explosions, the shrapnel, the wreckage. He’d cut his hand, had fumbled where no fumbling was allowed, clumsy around his own bandage. He could have done better. He should have done better.

When he stops shaking, he opens his eyes.

Sherlock hasn’t moved.

The man is a statue. His grey gaze never falters, never strays. When he speaks, it’s almost startling. “Let’s go out for breakfast,” Sherlock says.

“Not hungry,” John replies, voice rough.

“That’s really too bad,” Sherlock tells him, pocketing the pink phone. “One of us ought to eat and it’s not going to be me.”

John lets himself be carried away in Sherlock's rising tide. In that moment, he'd let himself be pulled under, would gladly drown. Sherlock holds his jacket for him, a gesture of impatience, not assistance. Jacket on, those hands settle momentarily upon his shoulders, and the feeling tears through John, worse than a gunshot, worse than any wound, worth any wound.

He's lightheaded with gratitude, numb except for that one feeling. It twists into him, sends his nerves tingling as he walks after Sherlock, trailing that tall figure down streets and through doors. They sit, Sherlock speaks, and all John's tired mind can understand is baritone safety.

There's a plate in front of him. John picks up a fork to see Sherlock smile, faintly, the sight perhaps nothing more than hopeful illusion. He eats and the illusion strengthens until Sherlock goes back to playing with that damn phone.

"Feeling better?" Sherlock asks when the bomber doesn't text.

John blames it on the pacing of their days, on two challenges and not stopping for breath. It may be Sherlock who does the work, but it's still John who can't breathe.

He even tells Sherlock why, in a way. Because the bomber is doing this all for Sherlock, only for Sherlock. Everything has been geared toward him, and none of it happens without him. Somewhere out there, two somewheres out there, a mad bomber is sitting on his plots with no one to toy with, no Sherlock to stop him. It's always the brilliant ones who are desperate to be caught, or so Sherlock says. What does that make their bomber?

Besides a sick bastard, of course. John watches Sherlock, phone held up to his ear, grey eyes locked on John's blue as the newest hostage speaks. He doesn't know what's being said, only how it changes Sherlock's face, how Sherlock glances away from him in the end, eyes wide with horror.

That helplessness returns, slinks its way into John's chest only to be clawed out by sheer bloody-mindedness. John looks at him and knows, whatever it could be, whatever is asked, there is nothing he wouldn't do for this man, nothing he wouldn't attempt.

If it's not enough, that's really too bad. John hasn't played by reality's rules in ages and isn't about to start now.

There is something exceptionally skeezy about this man. John immediately decides that while Jacob Brown might have gotten away with quite a few liberties, Kenny Prince is getting none whatsoever.

Is there a sign on John's back? Gay Men, Molest Here? Because this is absurd.

He leaves laughing, really laughing, feeling brilliant, and even if Sherlock soon puts a stop to that, John doesn't care. That was *hilarious*.

Standing next to him, watching the side of his face, John knows when the call goes wrong. He knows when the call cuts out.

Lestrade receives the report almost immediately, tells them where before he knows the who. The woman in the flat was transplanted there, not a resident. The remains aren't enough to guess at a name. Lestrade tells them to go home, tells Sherlock it wasn't his fault.

The closer they get to Baker Street, the further Sherlock retreats into himself. The man walks right past Mrs. Hudson, leaving John to explain, and when John gets up to the flat, Sherlock's searching through the kitchen.

"What have you done with the bin bags?" he asks John, crouching down, staring into a cabinet beneath the counter. He's not even close to where the bin bags go.

It takes John a second to remember the head. "Leave it," John says.

"But--"

"Leave it." His hand fits neatly on Sherlock's thin shoulder. "It's fine."

Sherlock holds very still, then sighs. He remains on the floor, not quite steady, leaning toward John's leg. "It's possible I need to eat," Sherlock says.

"It has been three days," John agrees, thumb brushing over tight fabric. He waits for Sherlock to move, to brush him off and walk away, but Sherlock never does. It's not hard to guess why. "If you stand up, are you going to fall over?"

"Most likely," Sherlock agrees.

"Okay," John says. "You stay down there, I'll make risotto."

Sherlock looks up at him at that, his entire face narrowed in confusion. “Since when do you make risotto?”

“Since remembering we have rice and Oxo cubes,” John answers, unable to say *Since Derek taught me*. There’s also cheese for it and he thinks they might still have some frozen veg in the freezer, next to the frozen raccoon John has steadfastly not inquired into. “Poor man’s risotto. Give me twenty minutes.”

They eat sitting on the floor of the kitchen, their backs against the counter.

“This is good,” Sherlock says with some surprise. “Simple, but good.”

“Not the healthiest,” John feels obligated to say, Derek’s recipe not complete without Derek’s tagline.

Watching Sherlock eat isn’t quite as strange as watching him produce crocodile tears, but it is close. Less unnerving, though, and so John has no qualms about how he might be staring. Steam curls from his fork, a last-moment escape from Sherlock’s mouth. It makes John wonder about Sherlock smoking, the ruined air from his lungs painted visible, grey as his eyes and rising from pink lips. He’s glad the man’s on nicotine patches now, but the image remains, an adaptation of Sherlock’s white winter breaths.

“If I have to eat, so do you,” Sherlock reminds him.

“Unlike some idiots, I choose not to burn my tongue off,” John replies.

Sherlock finishes eating first, actually finishes. He prods at John’s arm with his empty bowl. “More.”

It takes John a moment to recover from sheer confusion. Then he says, “Get it yourself.”

“I’ll fall over, remember?”

“Lazy bastard.”

“Always.”

John rolls his eyes, takes the bowl and stands up. “Honestly,” he says. He spoons a bit more into Sherlock’s bowl, keeping the portion small. Sitting back down, legs crossed rather than stretched out before him, his knee settles against Sherlock’s thigh. He hands the bowl over, warning, “Keep going on like this and you’ll end up like Mycroft.”

“Never,” Sherlock swears. “If I have to kill you if you go senile, then you have to kill me if that happens.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Fine,” Sherlock huffs. “I’ll work out something else.” He eats slowly now, small forkfuls of

rice and peas. He chews deliberately, eyes fixed straight ahead at their kitchen table. "Ask it," he says abruptly. "Whatever you're staring at me for, ask it."

"Was there any way to save her?"

"No," Sherlock says, the answer immediate. "She thought she was helping me by telling me about his voice. I didn't have time to convince her otherwise, I did try."

"I know," John says. "I know you tried, I was there. I just meant.... I don't know. For next time. Tomorrow, I mean. If we can trace the call, find out where the hostage is..."

Sherlock looks at him.

"...then the hostage is detonated," John finishes for himself.

"Yes," Sherlock agrees.

Silence trickles in between them, fills them up and is filled up in turn. Downstairs, through the floorboards, he can hear Mrs. Hudson bustle about. The fridge makes its noises, the plumbing its natural company. Cars pass by below their broken windows. Sherlock's breaths disappear into his, their breathing synced.

"I didn't know you could cook," Sherlock says.

"I can cook."

"Yes, but I didn't know." As if insulted, as if John has willingly withheld the secrets of the universe from him.

Which, John supposes, he sort of has. "I just don't cook in your lab area, that's all."

"Half of it is still your kitchen."

"It's not my half that stops me, it's the half you keep on top of it."

Sherlock smiles a little, just a little, but that soon stops. Looking down, he begins to roll the peas out of the rice, piling them on the side.

John watches, chewing slowly, needing this to last. "You're not going to eat those, are you?"

"No," Sherlock agrees.

"Eat your veg." Not much of a command, not at all. Watching Sherlock sort peas and rice is oddly hypnotic.

Once Sherlock has all the peas separated out, he lifts his bowl over John's and proceeds to scrape every remaining trace of veg onto John's dinner. "Can't. Now it's yours."

“Prat.”

“Eat your veg, John.”

John laughs, but obeys. Halfway through a mouthful, a yawn takes him, tries to crack his jaw.

“Very attractive,” Sherlock drawls.

John snaps his mouth shut. He soldiers on through the remainder of his meal only to have Sherlock swap bowls with him, room temperature rice bound in cheese, soaked in sodium and artificial chicken flavouring. John eats on. Without meaning to, he yawns again, tries to grit his teeth through it.

“I don’t mind,” Sherlock says.

“Hm?”

“If you want to rest,” Sherlock clarifies. “I don’t mind.”

“Well, I do,” John replies and he forks the remainder of the risotto in his mouth. Sherlock watches him. Which is fine, turnabout being fair game.

Finished, John stacks the bowls and leaves them on the floor, forks settled on top. The silence returns, soft and slow. They’re in the eye of the storm, the damage done and more yet to come. John keeps yawning however hard he tries to bite his lip.

“You need sleep,” Sherlock tells him, his voice the same as it was this morning. This time, instead of drawing out the pain, it saturates him with it. It hurts so bright, a white flash behind the rush of red.

“You’ve never cared before,” John replies, more truthful than cruel. More wondering.

“I’ll need you tomorrow,” Sherlock explains.

John accepts that, more hope than belief. “I know.”

“If it will help,” Sherlock begins, speaking with stolen hesitancy, tentative as a stranger, “I could keep an eye on you. Wake you if there’s a repeat of last night.”

“It doesn’t work that way.” Premature waking has never interrupted his days. To wake, he must first sleep. “I know that doesn’t make sense, but that’s how it is.”

“All the same,” Sherlock says.

John picks up the bowls and stands. He puts them in the sink.

Sherlock’s hand touches his knee. “John,” he says.

Helping him stand is the most natural thing in the world, a practised motion for all its novelty. For a moment, a mere instant, Sherlock sways, eyes wide and fighting to focus. He holds onto John and John holds onto him, because he knows exactly how it feels.

“I don’t want to sleep,” John says, watching the fog clear away from Sherlock’s eyes. “I want to be awake, all the time, right here.”

“A compelling thought, isn’t it?” Sherlock muses, dizzy, breathless from it. His grip on John’s arms is a hard one. It slackens only to tighten, harder than before.

“I think about it all the time,” John confesses. “Every day. You’ve no idea.”

“I think I might.” He doesn’t, but he means it. There in his eyes, focused on John’s, on John, he means it.

“I don’t want to go away anymore.” He wants this, just *this*, because this is more than enough and he’s tired of waiting for it. This is the best of all worlds. He’s seen them, he knows. “No more.”

Sherlock’s fingers curl around his elbows, grip him to the bone. “Afghanistan is over,” Sherlock tells him, and John laughs to keep from crying.

“You’re wrong.” He shouldn’t be grinning, but he is.

“I’m not.”

“You are,” John insists, “but that’s all right.”

Sherlock says nothing, mouth open and awaiting words. John can see his teeth, a flicker of his tongue. John can hear his silence.

“It’s fine,” John says. “I’m fine.”

“You’re lying,” Sherlock says.

“Yes, and?”

Sherlock sighs at him, as if John is the difficult one. His hands drift down from John’s arms, fall away like pale autumn leaves. “And when you wake,” Sherlock says, “I’ll still be here. If that helps.”

“It would,” John admits, releasing him in return. Sherlock’s arms are so thin, fit so easily in John’s small hands. Letting go is like disassembling a puzzle, removing curves and edges from edges and curves, like ruining something painstakingly repaired.

“All right then,” Sherlock says.

John goes to bed, still wrapped in baritone safety.

He wakes touching his fingers to his wrists, arms folded across his chest. Fingertips touch leather, touch an analogue watch, and John's heart soars before it breaks, before he discovers the band is closed around his right wrist, not the left. Afghanistan, Afghanistan again, a warzone in a world where Sherlock Holmes is dead.

That perfect, beautiful liar.

Part 5

He keeps soaking the bandage on his hand with other people's blood. It's not sanitary and it worries him a bit, checking on his cut each time he unwinds the fabric from his hand.

The cut impairs him more than it harms, but an impaired doctor is harmful on his own. His hand doesn't shake, he knows his shoulder is smooth skin over unbroken bone and undamaged muscle, but that's still not enough. It's not going to be enough, not here, not now, not like this, but it won't make him panic either.

John does what he always does.

He makes do.

Chelmsford is an ill fit after the bloody days. His body follows the habits of his mind, assumes military bearing without military training. These hands have never held a gun and yet they're still meant to be his hands.

He doesn't speak Dari, he's never set foot in the Middle East, and his body has never known true agony. He's lost patients, but he's never killed. He loves London, but he's never tried to live there.

Whoever he's meant to be here, it's not John Watson.

He falls asleep as soon as he can that night, thinking, *Sherlock. Sherlock.*

There exists a very good reason that Derek is so resistant to conflict. It's because he's such crap at resolving it.

Fortunately, somewhere between his mother, his sister and now Sherlock, John has become something of an expert.

John makes his breakfast quietly, sits at his own side of the table. He does not put his plate on Derek's newspaper, nor his mug. He becomes quiet, unobtrusive.

When Derek finishes with a section, folding it back up and setting it aside, John asks, "Can I...?" He doesn't quite reach, merely gestures.

Derek hands it to him.

They both read.

Derek hands him the next section as well.

John's not after the business section, but he reads anyway.

They are friends again.

The matter with the old woman isn't so simple. John may not know who the old woman was (is), but he does know where she died (will die). He knows which flats are primed to explode, to collapse in a tumble of blood and concrete.

John tries not to think about blood and concrete. Or explosions. Or dust.

It's possible he should go back to therapy, but that will have to wait.

He spends the entire day thinking about it. His shift at the surgery under Dr. Cooper is a short one and the remainder of his time is spent trying to get hold of the mobile numbers or email addresses of the flat residents. Them, at least, he can get out. Maybe. It takes him ages, much too long, and once he has them, he doesn't have the next step of the plan. He can't do this, can't risk it.

But then he thinks: they're going to die anyway.

Warning, gas leak?

No, that's the bomber's strategy. If John helps to disguise the explosion as a gas leak, that's little help and one hell of a tip-off to their bomber.

What John needs is a way to get everyone out of the flats. He needs to evacuate the building before the explosion. He has three hours left to think. Calling or emailing would reveal his number and IP address to the police. A payphone or library is far too public when Mycroft may be watching behind any CCTV camera, but John can't let that possibility stop him. There are innocent people in the balance.

When he realizes what he has to do, it's absurdly simple.

First, John goes to the flats.

Second, he uses Sherlock's new-neighbour-forgot-my-keys trick to be buzzed into the building.

Third, he trips over his own feet, slaps his hand onto the fire alarm and ducks out of the building, feigning embarrassment in the hunch of his shoulders and the duck of his head.

In no great hurry, people start to come out, all looking more cross than concerned.

The building explodes.

John has no proper reason for being there, but fortunately, no one asks that question. No one wants to interrupt a man performing chest compressions.

"Derek?" John asks into his mobile.

"Yep?" Derek answers, stretching the syllable.

"I know it's a bit late," John says, "but I need to ask a favour."

"Yes?" Derek asks, stretching this syllable to even greater lengths.

"I need a change of clothes. Just jeans and a shirt. Nothing I need a belt for, I lost my belt. Oh, and a jacket."

"Did a woman just throw you out of her flat?"

“No,” John says, “I am not naked.”

“Well, I assumed you had your pants and shoes. You’re too calm for a man without pants and shoes.”

“I have those, yes. If you can’t come down, I’ll manage, I just wanted to ask.”

“No, it’s fine,” Derek says. “Where are you?”

He gives the address, includes directions from the tube.

“But you don’t work at the hospital.”

“I work in emergencies,” John says, which is probably the truest thing he’s said all day.

“John, that gas explosion-”

“I’m fine. The flats collapsed inward, not outward, they were old, you know how they collapse down on each other-”

“Oh my god.”

“I’m fine. Really, I’m fine. I was passing by, had to help, and it went from there. I’m *fine*.”

Derek takes some reassuring, but John does eventually get his change of clothes.

Derek makes him tea and tries to talk with him. It shouldn’t be possible for a thoughtful, generous librarian to be more annoying than a moody consulting detective, but there it is. For all Derek is willing to listen, it’s beyond him to understand.

Sherlock would have made tea, left it somewhere near John and then walked away, leaving John to decide if this meant it was for him. Once he had, Sherlock would have come back, nibbling on a Hobnob, and dunked his biscuit into John’s cuppa, getting crumbs everywhere and leaving mush among the dregs. John would have been irritated, mildly, before Sherlock said something droll and ridiculous. They might smile, then, for an instant, and move on.

As melodramatic as the man is, his gestures are small. Temporary without being fragile. Not glass, but folded paper, tiny figurines to be unfolded and tucked away flat after admiring. To be studied in quiet moments, each crease and every fold, and wondered at, knowing their complex shapes to be forever lost. Not a black lotus heralding death, not a flower, nothing so delicate.

Paper cranes, John finds himself thinking. Paper cranes in black and blue and grey. Hung on a string, suspended in flight, suggesting the sweeping movements of long fingers, the flow and flick of pale wrists.

John drinks his tea and admits to himself, just a little, that he's in over his head.

He wakes with his cheek on a striped blue-and-white pillow. He's shivering, his window broken.

Baker Street.

Sherlock.

Digging through his closet, he puts on a dark shirt, pulls on the tan jumper, the one he'd worn the first time he'd killed a man in London. His heart beats against the top button of his shirt, threatening to rise or fall, and John walks the fine line between swallowing it down or coughing it out. He may yet choke, but he doubts it.

Downstairs, Sherlock is already dressed, or possibly still dressed. No, different shirt today. Blue, almost like his eyes. His gaze aimed through their blank and silent telly, he has the pink mobile on the arm of his chair. He's distant, unresponsive. His steepled fingers rest against his lips.

John makes and eats brekkie. Instead of noting buttered toast and jam, his mouth reports the taste of army food, the well-known, little-liked flavours he experiences twice or so each week. He has no problem stomaching it.

Plate into the sink, empty cup atop it, and John refuses to hesitate. Now is not the time for action, but neither is it the time for inaction. Everything is normal. Nothing has changed. Nothing is different.

Picking up the remote, he turns on the telly. News station, yes, currently an advert. Watching for it, he sees Sherlock blink.

John hands him the remote and sits.

Sherlock shifts, crossing his legs. The remote on one arm of the chair, the mobile on the other, it's clear where Sherlock's focus is fixed, is bent. The mobile has yet to ring.

They wait for the news hour to begin.

He lets the familiar sounds of the BBC wash over him, listens to the familiar voice of a familiar newscaster, and sees a familiar sight. It looks different, sunlit on telly the day after. Collapsed but calm. No airborne concrete. The dust has settled and John tries not to think about the rest of it. The toast sits poorly now, the lingering taste of strawberry jam turned cloying and thick.

"...ripped through several floors, killing twelve people-"

"Old block of flats," John notes a second time in as many days, mind distant, voice soft. He glances to Sherlock, the man unmoving. How many people? Of those he'd brought out to the street, how many of those people were in this dozen?

"-is said to have been caused by a faulty gas main."

"He certainly gets about," John sighs. He'd been there, smelled the air. Seen it. What a blatant lie.

"Well, obviously I lost that round." Sherlock clicks the telly to another station. "Although technically, I did solve the case."

Lost that round, John thinks. *Lost* that round. His hand falls from his cheek as he looks to his flatmate.

Sherlock goes on. Explains. Does what he does best. He fixates. His eyes remain distant, his voice soft. His left hand gestures, held aloft, pointing here and there, his palm bidding John to be silent.

"So, people come to him wanting their crimes fixed up," John asks anyway, "like booking a holiday?"

Sherlock's hand curls shut. He goes away again and John's trained eye knows this is farther than before. "Novel," Sherlock whispers and John's stomach clenches in all the wrong ways at the feeling behind the word.

Admiration.

It is. This look that John has never seen before, that's what this is. He looks away, makes a noise to keep from speaking.

Because John can still feel it. The heat. The sound of it. Nothing like Afghanistan, no, nowhere near as bad, but in London. In *his* London. Flying debris and screaming civilians and a man's chest cracking under the heel of John's palm, a man who'd coughed blood into John's mouth with the breath that might have saved him. John had endured long waits with the practised patience of a soldier, after, had undergone the tests to clear him. He'd lost his belt to a woman who would likely lose her lower leg, that scrap of metal piping more like a bullet than debris as it ripped through her calf. His belt turned bloody tourniquet as her shocked face ran with tears.

She'd kept asking, "Where's my daughter?"

John had said, "I'm sure she's all right, I need you to keep pulling this closed, stay with me, look at me. *For your daughter's sake, look at me.*"

He watches Kenny Prince's houseboy on the telly, a murderer on such a small scale. He focuses on that, on that obsessively clean kitchen, and there. There.

John's calm again.

He risks looking back to Sherlock. Sherlock, who isn't looking at the phone, who isn't watching it or studying it, but *hungering*. "Taking his time this time." His voice is low, all frustration and impatience. John refuses to call it need, refuses to look any longer.

He pulls the conversation to the side, as much as he can. Sherlock cares about the Powers case. If Sherlock cares about anything, he must care about that. But that's it, then, isn't it? This connection is old, between Sherlock and the bomber. Unknowingly then, knowingly now, Sherlock has been after this killer his entire life.

Small wonder there's nothing else in his head. John thinks, you never do forget your first, do you? And everything within him tries, tries so desperately, to rebel.

John controls himself. He's good at that. "So why's he doing this, then?" he asks. "Playing this game with you. Do you think he wants to be caught?" If the bomber wanted to show off his brilliance, he's found his perfect audience, his perfect, enraptured audience.

Sherlock's not even looking at him anymore. Palms apart and fingertips touching, as always, before his lips, Sherlock says, "I think he wants to be distracted." As if this is logical. Understandable.

As if those people aren't dead.

If the sound John makes is anything like a laugh, even the bitterest of laughs, it's mere coincidence. "I hope you'll be very happy together," he says, and stands, and turns away. Walks away begging to be numb.

He's almost in the kitchen before Sherlock asks, "Sorry, what?"

Sherlock hadn't heard him. The man who notices everything hadn't heard him.

"There are lives at stake, Sherlock," he comes close to yelling, turning back to him, always turning back to him, going back to him, damn that man, *damn him*. The name pulls free of his throat roughly, strangely, the opposite of choking. "Actual *human* lives!"

Sherlock doesn't move, doesn't blink.

"Just-just so I know," John demands, "do you care about that at all?"

“Will caring about them help save them?”

“Nope.”

“Then I’ll continue *not* to make that mistake.”

“And you find that easy, do you?”

“Yes, *very*,” Sherlock snaps. His eyebrows furrow, his first change of expression. “Is that news to you?”

“N- No.” The false start hurts his throat, the lining of his oesophagus aching.

Sherlock stares at him, into him, through him. He lifts his chin. “I’ve disappointed you,” he says without inflection, without connection, without anything at all.

“That’s good, that’s a good deduction, yeah,” John tells him.

“*Don’t* make people into heroes, John. Heroes don’t exist and if they did, I wouldn’t be one of them.” Irritation now, under his voice. Under his voice but not under his skin, not like the bomber, not like that mass-murdering man.

As soon as John thinks it, the mobile beeps.

Just like that, the argument finishes. John vanishes. Sherlock’s entire attention bends to the mobile. “Excellent.” He snatches it up, looks at the newest image with more intensity than John has ever known him to direct at a living person, and John can’t watch this.

“A view of the Thames,” Sherlock says, and rattles on. John hears, can’t help but hear what Sherlock tells him to do, but he can choose not to look. He can choose not to move. He can go on standing here, hands pressed into the back of his armchair, feeling the coarseness of the blanket draped across it. He’ll stare down at it as long as he likes.

Hero worship. That was it, that was all.

Gone now.

Good riddance to it.

“Oh, you’re angry with me, so you won’t help,” Sherlock goads him, and there John goes, looking at him again. Watching the madman on his mobile, his own mobile this time, not that accursed pink monstrosity. “Not much cop, this caring lark.”

It’s not a lark.

It’s not an option.

There’s a lump in John’s throat. He’s not sure what it’s made of, but he swallows it down all

the same.

Sociopath.

He knows what the word means. No remorse, little restraint, lots of lying and one hell of an ego. Callous and charming and manipulative as hell. They control and dominate, never thinking they might be wrong. It's what Donovan warns him at every opportunity: sociopaths do not have friends. They have dupes. They look for willing targets.

Maybe she's right. Maybe Sherlock is what he claims to be. It's fully possible that expecting Sherlock to care about other people is as foolish as expecting Derek to produce his own insulin. It's in Sherlock's wiring, not in the software, and even if it weren't, there is nothing John can do to give that man an update.

But last night. It was only last night, for Sherlock. Was that fake? All of it? Every piece of it, from *eat your veg* to *if it will help*, Sherlock trying to throw out the head that is *still* in their fridge, was that nothing more than manipulation?

Lost without his blogger.

Laughable.

True, partially, in some ways, but laughable all the same.

John thinks of the Sherlock without him, that madman in another London, and everything John's done for him. Emailing the pink lady and anonymous calls to the police. Sneaking into the museum twice, once to test and once to kill. The circus. Sherlock thrown to his knees, a blade at his throat.

Asking, calmly, fearlessly, for the life of Soo Lin Yao. Handing over nine million pounds and almost his own life in the process, unflinching.

Following John outside, after, and a hesitant word of thanks by the road. Almost a question. As if John were something beyond comprehension, this small, simple man trying to save a man trying to save a woman.

They're the same person, this Sherlock and that. More or less, or close enough. They could be. They ought to be.

John doesn't know what to think.

They climb into the cab.

Whatever mood they're projecting, it's enough to keep the cabbie from chitchat, from any sort of intrusion into their uncomfortable silence. It stretches and grows, elongating past all reason. Minutes are not this long, seconds not so agonizing.

"How did you sleep?"

John's heart stumbles. It'll stand back up in a minute. Brush off the dust, an organ more of bruise than blood.

"How are you one person?" John demands. "I mean, really, what the buggery *fuck* goes on in your head?"

The silence that follows is worse than the first.

"Are those serious questions?" Sherlock asks this the same way he'd inquired after John's sleep, with a probing curiosity that John knows better than to call concern. He wants to know better.

"Yes. Yes, Sherlock, those are serious questions."

"You find my actions contradictory."

"One word for it."

"The wrong one."

John stares out the window. It's the only safe place to look.

"Do you really want to know?" Sherlock asks.

He won't look at him. He's learned that lesson. "Know what?"

"What the buggery fuck goes on in my head," Sherlock says simply, milk mild. The tone is enough to surprise John into breaking that fragile promise to himself, to bring his eyes to that ever-watching gaze.

John nods.

"In the last eleven minutes of this cab ride, we have passed thirteen sets of stoplights and stopped at seven of them. On the left hand side, there have been nine dogs. On the right, four. Between the fifth dog and the eighth stoplight, the cabbie sneezed – allergies, not a cold. You

realized you hadn't said 'bless you' before stoplight nine and finished feeling awkward over it by stoplight ten. We've passed fourteen tour buses, been passed by nine and have been in front of that one there for the past six minutes."

The great ruddy list goes on and on, Sherlock speeding through his words faster than the cabbie through traffic. Sherlock speaks faster and faster still, nothing like the clear monologue of explanation he'd treated John to during their first cab ride. He swerves and turns, leaps and backtracks through a disordered jumble. Annoyance and sarcasm flit out as he gestures, punctuate his unending ramble without providing even the semblance of order. It's rubbish bins and red hats; cars listed by make and year and colour; pedestrians, couples, families, single figures comprising quickly passed crowds; restaurants, the signs, the dishes, the prices. Sherlock's eyes flick back and forth from window to window, the sweeping motions of his hands unable to follow such a speed.

John listens, and listens, and listens, and he thinks Sherlock might list all of London before he's finished.

"-and you're still paying attention, how are you still paying attention?" Sherlock's eyes narrow, fix on him.

"Why are you paying attention to rubbish bins?" John counters.

"I'm not," Sherlock snaps. "They're there, I see them, and it wastes so much space, don't you see that?" His chest rises and falls rapidly, his scarf the blue fluttering breast of some chased and weary bird. "No," he corrects himself. "You do see, you just don't observe. It's like you're *blind*, even when it's all there. You block it out with *drivel*."

"Is that really what it's like?" John asks. "In your head, all the time."

"Not with the work," Sherlock says, looking away from John at last.

"Is that why you don't care?"

"Why should I?" Sherlock's gaze snaps back to his face. "You've admitted it won't help, so why should I? Twelve people I know next to nothing about, who knew nothing about me, why should I care?"

"She died trying to help you," John says.

"I told her not to."

"I know. But all the same."

Sherlock looks at his own knees. His mouth twists, souring his profile. "There's only so much space, John."

"I know," John tells him.

“You don’t *know*.” Dismissive, a huff and a roll of the eyes.

John folds his hands, forearms pressed against his knees. He bends his back and turns his head, talking to the door handle. “Sometimes you can’t keep track,” he says. “Even if you can’t, you have to fake it, because otherwise, there’s no point. There’s too much to process, but you have to live with it anyway. As long as you don’t have to think about what you’re thinking about, you cope. That’s why the cases. The experiments, the wall, all of it, and then you have to exclude everything else. You don’t know how to focus, otherwise. Your brain doesn’t rot with boredom, it eats itself.”

He looks down at his shoes, brown between the black of his jacket. A second of that, a moment only. He fakes a smile and looks to the man beside him. “How’d I do this time?”

The back of Sherlock’s head makes no reply, his face turned away. The reflection in the window isn’t much, but it doesn’t need to be.

“Let me guess,” John says. “This is where you tell me to piss off.”

Sherlock laughs, laughs again in surprise at the sound. His eyes return to view, flicking to John’s face. “You did miss everything of substance.”

“I’m sure I did.”

“Of course you did.”

“I don’t know why you bother with me,” John concurs. “Couldn’t deduce it if I tried.”

“I’m sure you couldn’t.”

“Yeah, well, that’s why you’re the clever one.”

There’s an unidentified body which Sherlock names within five minutes. There’s a painting and an assassin, a trip beneath a bridge, and yet more abuse to John’s poor bank account as the taxi costs mount. He speaks to two bereaved women, climbs into another cab, and will never stop marvelling at the strange feats Sherlock pulls.

His pulse is racing even before Sherlock presses his gun into his hand.

The Golem flings him off and, for one desperate moment, John nearly loses consciousness, head cracked against the floor. He staggers up, lunges forward, and his arms around the Golem's wind pipe have to be faster than the Golem's hands on Sherlock's throat, *they have to be*.

He clings, climbing and strangling at once, but the Golem shakes him off once more. John exhales before he hits the ground, lands without any wind left to be knocked out of him. He lands hard all the same, hard on his back, on his *shoulder*, arm wrenched with the Golem's throw. His head hits the floor a second time. The projector light is in his eyes, so much noise flooding his ears. Gunshots, there are gunshot.

John flops onto his stomach, crawls, and he sees Sherlock punch the floor as the wall supernovas behind him. He lets himself collapse, arm half-numb and not numb enough. The floor is better beneath his cheek than it is against the back of his head, but that's a slight improvement, negligible. His arm is beneath him. He'd rather have it cut off.

Under the music and narration, he hears movement, hears a voice low in pitch and higher in volume. Fingers touch his lips without warning. John jerks away only to groan.

The fingertips vanish. "Where are you hurt? *Tell me.*" Urgent and low, into his ear, those dark curls a phantom brush against his cheek.

"Shoulder," John gasps. "Bloody thing."

No phantom touch now, no illusion, Sherlock's hair against his cheek, his nose, Sherlock's ear above John's lips. "You're bleeding?"

"I'm swearing," John corrects.

"Oh good," Sherlock says.

John starts giggling. It hurts that damn much, it's giggle or cry. Sherlock is too close not to see the one for the other, but John will laugh all the same. "Get me off the floor," he begs, hiccupping through the words.

Sherlock does, partially. Enough. He's gentle, so careful, as if he knows John might break. Of course he knows.

When John finally stops giggling, stops shaking, there are tears on his face, but at least Sherlock can't see. The show has played itself to its finish and now the planetarium ceiling is a pretence of sky, an artificial shine of stars, linked and labelled into constellations.

"John?" Sherlock asks into the quiet, into his ear. The man has no idea, cannot possibly have any idea of what he's done, the intimacy of tucking John up in the capital V of his endless legs. There's sense in it, Sherlock turning himself into a chair, keeping John upright and gently restrained, but now John may never move again.

“Gun,” John requests, biting the syllable through his pain.

Sherlock presses it into his hand, his right hand, the one with fingers he can still control.

John grips it hard and sighs.

“Better?” Right arm returning to press across John’s stomach, securing him upright, spine nestled against Sherlock’s ribs.

He nods. Swallows. “Let go,” he says.

Because Sherlock does this, Sherlock keeps on doing this, turning himself into a chasm for John to fall into, and until John hits the bottom, he always thinks he’s flying.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Sherlock asks. The only piece of him that moves is his chest against John’s back. He’s staggeringly warm.

John’s eyes close against the false sky above them. “Oh, now he cares. Wondered when you’d grow a heart. Great timing on that one, Sherlock, really.”

“Zero multiplied by twelve is still zero, John.”

“I do know my basic maths, thanks.”

“I didn’t know those people,” Sherlock continues, his low rumble undercutting John’s interruption. “If they were alive, I wouldn’t care about them. You wouldn’t either, not on an individual basis.”

“There’s a dead woman behind the podium over there,” John says. “How do you feel about that?”

“Frustrated. You?”

John thinks about it. “Frustrated,” he agrees. “Regretful. Bit useless.”

There’s no consolation from Sherlock, no words of sympathy or false wisdom. No reminder that neither doctors nor soldiers can prevent all death, no telling him what he already knows. There’s only light breath against the side of his face, a strong arm across his stomach. John’s pulse pounds in his shoulder, tingles into his fingers. The vascular system is the body’s designated route for bleeding, only that.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock asks.

“I can handle it.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“I don’t even know what all right means anymore,” John admits, “but I can handle it.”

“I’m going to dig the bullets out of the wall before I call Lestrade,” Sherlock tells him. “I didn’t hit any of the seats, so it’s likely no one will notice.”

“Even if they do, we hardly know anything about it.”

“Anything at all,” Sherlock agrees, letting go at last. He stands and helps John do the same.

The only explosion that morning is a referenced supernova. Mycroft keeps texting him, filling up an absurd proportion of his mobile’s inbox. John doesn’t risk a nap while Sherlock and Lestrade take the museum director back to New Scotland Yard, instead taking a shower and changing his clothes before heading off to inspect train tracks.

He keeps his gun on him.

Sherlock comes to fetch him, makes it clear he’s already solved the case. John ought to feel more annoyed than he does, being directed here and there by both Holmes brothers to discover what the two must already know. Instead, it’s something else in his chest, something no less sharp for its smooth ease down his throat and across his heart, the ache whiskey-warm. It’s a bit like his shoulder, the pain of Sherlock’s pressing hands and biting tongue, a temporary treatment before the pounding heat of John’s shower.

They do a spot of breaking and entering, some threatening, and that’s the missile defence plans recovered. John hands his gun to Sherlock and makes it to the surgery in time for his afternoon shift. He keeps his mobile on vibrate, waiting for a text about the next pip, but it seems they’ve already completed the challenge of the day with the painting this morning. There ought to be nothing more until tomorrow.

Coming home, John notes the familiar scent of disinfectant. He checks the fridge while Sherlock yells at their telly. The head is gone.

They keep their coats on as night falls, sharp air slipping through the coverings over their broken windows. John asks the important questions for his coming days in digital London, learns how to tell when a house is unoccupied or a door easy for entry. Sherlock’s responses are quick, not dismissive. They shiver in their flat together as John pecks his way through emails. John approaches his forty-hour limit, knows it’s time to sleep or be useless tomorrow, and if his room weren’t absolutely freezing, he’d go to bed here and now.

“I won’t be in for tea,” he says, closing his laptop and getting up, getting the circulation going again. “I’m going to Sarah’s.” At Sherlock’s vague gesture, John adds, “There’s still some of that risotto left in the fridge.”

Sherlock makes a noise of approval and John says, more or less as a reminder to himself, “Milk, we need milk.” He’ll pick it up on his way back in the morning.

“I’ll get some.”

John turns around in the doorway, fighting down a laugh. “Really?”

“Really.”

He-

What?

“And some beans, then?” John asks, pressing his luck.

“Mm,” Sherlock confirms, eyes still on the telly.

Wide-eyed and bewildered, John leaves the flat.

He should probably break up with Sarah. The timing is awkward, though. They’ve got a date scheduled for tomorrow night – the case ought to be finished by tomorrow night – and she’s letting him kip on her sofa. She offered at the surgery today when he’d mentioned the broken windows and the chill of the flat.

Very little kissing, so far, between the two of them. It’s been nice, what little they’ve had, though neither of them has pressed for more. They’ve flirted about it, joked. They’ve looked down that path without more than a step or two toward it.

It’s nothing like that night in Chelmsford, near strangers close to public indecency. Dark curls in the streetlight, the rasp of stubble leaving his lips tingling. The disappointment back in his flat, this tall, gorgeous man who was only Jake. A bloke who knows what affection looks like, who would buy milk and beans without prompting, who would never remove a severed head from a fridge at John’s request.

He should really break up with Sarah.

Walking out of the tube station, lost in thought, he never sees the car coming.

The little bastard is all maniacal giggles and John wants to claw his laughing face off. John had felt sorry for him, for poor Jim from IT, flamboyant and awkward, flinging himself at Sherlock for all to see, desperate for an ounce of Sherlock's attention.

Somewhere between the murders and the destruction, between breaking into Mrs. Hudson's home and abducting John off the street, all sympathies are destroyed without a trace. The hostages, the explosions, the unrelenting, deadly fixation on Sherlock: for all of this, Jim Moriarty must die.

His hands cuffed to the back of the front passenger's seat, there's nothing John can do at the moment. Moriarty knows, has ensured it, but he gloats rather than taunt.

"I wasn't sure, you know," Moriarty tells him, his feigned modesty worse than any arrogance. "The flatmate or the landlady, which would it be? I just *couldn't* make up my mind. The landlady would have been so much simpler. So much less *fuss*, fewer black eyes all around."

"I've a few more to give out, if you'd like one." His knuckles aren't so scraped that he'd turn down the opportunity.

Moriarty laughs, this high tittering giggle, all affectation. "So *feisty*! Is *that* what he sees in you? His little yipping dog," the man mocks, a Chihuahua baiting a terrier.

John's jaw clenches. Remains that way.

"Do you think he'll regret never fucking you?" Moriarty asks. He wrinkles his nose, pulling a face in disgust. "I'd love it if he did, but it doesn't seem terribly likely, does it? After your little cuddle at the planetarium, I'd say he's had more than enough of you."

John has never seen more blatant jealousy. He holds onto that with both hands. This man wants Sherlock, desperately, and he wants him alive.

"If you kill me, he'll never want you."

Moriarty stares at him, then laughs and laughs and *laughs*. He convulses with it, cackling like some sort of storybook evil queen. Moriarty laughs until he laughs himself out, sighing to a finish, languid and relaxed where he reclines against the leather seat.

"Oh, no," Moriarty sighs with amusement. "Oh, no no no no." He leans forward, elbows on his knees, chin cupped between his palms, fingers curled against his cheeks. He smiles, so

terribly, terribly pleased. “You’re so stupid. Look at you, all *brave*. Trying to make me see *reason*. I’m the one who sees it, not you, you stupid thing.”

Moriarty folds his arms across his knees and grins his widest.

“Once I kill you, he’ll never stop following me again.”

“Go on, Johnny, put on the vest.”

“No.”

“Maybe you’re blinded by the red lights in your face, but those are guns pointed at your head. Put on the vest.”

“No.”

“I would prefer not to kill you just yet. I do need you to walk, but you have arms. How about a shoulder wound on the right, some nice symmetry?”

John says nothing.

“Or – oh well! – I *could* kill you here and now. And then I could go *all* the long way to Baker Street and pick up nice old Mrs. Hudson. I’m sure she’s already taken her evening soother, she’ll be no trouble at all.”

John puts on the vest.

There’s a coat to hide the vest, gloves to hide the scrapes on his knuckles. There’s a voice in his ear and explosives on his chest.

Tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that, he’ll wake up and save Mrs. Hudson from this.

He’s not sure how, or how well, but he will.

Sherlock walks into the pool, calling out, calling for Moriarty, there of his own volition.

John walks out, silent, controlled and compelled.

Sherlock sees him. Freezes, hand raised and outstretched, holding something suspiciously small.

“Evening,” John echoes. Voice stolen, he has his eyes, has Sherlock’s eyes on his. He blinks, fast and slow and fast. SOS, Sherlock. Look, don’t listen. Look and run. Just *run*. Leave him and *go*.

But Sherlock doesn’t see, doesn’t move. He’s stunned and silent, a shocked statue.

“This is a turn-up, isn’t it, Sherlock?” Moriarty dictates and John repeats.

“*John*.” Winded, hurt, moving at last. Toward John, not away. “What the hell...?”

John’s voice breaks while Moriarty snickers into his ear, feeding him words and bidding him to open the coat. The red light returns to his chest and as John speaks, he thinks: memorize this. See the angle, find the sniper. Here is Sherlock, where did Sherlock enter. There is Moriarty, he was in that hallway, that one there. John was caught, was transported, was arranged like so.

Memorize. Learn everything, *everything*, so that even when he dies, he won’t be stopped. He harbours no illusions about leaving this room alive, but if he learns, if he can do this right, he can kill another man with Moriarty’s face.

It’s not death John’s facing, not true death, maybe, and even if he is, that doesn’t matter. It’s Sherlock that matters. It’s letting Moriarty take his flatmate, his madman, *John’s* madman and making run him to death, puzzle by puzzle, one explosion at a time. Sherlock wouldn’t hold back, wouldn’t hesitate, would never stop throwing himself at that wall no matter the injury sustained.

If John’s going to leave this life, he’ll take Moriarty with him.

He waits for his chance, for any chance. He endures the conversation, the *banter*, holding still and silent. He can hear, just barely, Moriarty’s footsteps over the sound of lapping water. Moriarty draws even with him. Moriarty walks in front of him, practically offering his back as he throws the missile defence plans into the pool. John grabs him.

“Sherlock, run!” he yells, aloud at last, arm around Moriarty’s throat. Right arm, his left arm still weak from the Golem. He’s strong enough all the same, has to be. He’s strong enough to let Sherlock go, if only the man would *run*.

Sherlock never gets the chance.

A distant thought, barely heard through the rushing in his ears: so that's where the second sniper is. Sherlock stands here, the sniper must stand there, up and back.

Moriarty baits and taunts and, ultimately, walks away.

Gun in hand and strapped with explosives, they stand there, waiting.

The door clicks shut.

Sherlock looks at him, eyes flicking from chest to face before he drops the gun and lunges to him. "All right? Are you all right?" Unzipping, unclipping, knee against the tile, a man of frantic motion.

"Yeah- Yeah, I'm fine. I'm fine," and Sherlock rips coat and vest both from him, "Sherlock- *Sherlock!*", and flings them away, the explosives sliding across tile toward the deep end.

"Jesus," John gasps, and pants, "Oh Christ," and falls, stumbling to the floor. Without the vest, his body feels too light. He's drifting away, shaking.

Sherlock hasn't finished yet, frantic, still frantic. John speaks to him, listens to a flustered, wandering thank-you. He knows this thank-you, has heard it before, if never quite so strongly, so shaken.

"I'm glad no one saw that," John jokes, trying to calm him before Sherlock shoots himself in the head.

"Mm?" Leaning down, peering at him. Absolute focus, absolute.

"You ripping my clothes off in a darkened swimming pool. People might talk."

"People do little else," Sherlock says, and smiles, and John's heart leaps in his chest.

It falls when he looks down, eye caught by a flicker of light. The angle's different, the angle's wrong, which means more than two, "Oh," of *course* there are more than two. As Moriarty bursts back in, John realizes there must have been an entire other car, a truck full of these snipers and their rifles.

The snipers are across the pool, they're above the shallow end, they're above the deep end, and John knows he's the one who's going to die. He's always been the one. Sherlock's alive and John is alive and Moriarty would like one of those things not to be true. He's still playing with Sherlock, playing even now, he'll never stop, and when Sherlock looks to John, John nods, because they can all go down together, henchmen, mastermind and all.

Sherlock turns and aims John's gun, and John tackles him as he fires.

He twists in midair, in mid-moment, his body before Sherlock's, his body before the bomb.

Water hurts like concrete, a solid slap as they land, as he lands, a blow to the left shoulder. Water strikes his face as the pain strikes his nerves. There's a terrible roar as his hearing fails and the last thing John feels before it ends is Sherlock's thin frame, shielded in his arms.

He wakes up in Essex, clutching a pillow, unable to breathe. Essex, where people go when they die.

Sherlock, he thinks.

Sherlock.

Part 6

John is going to kill Jim Moriarty. He is going to kill him in triplicate.

He doesn't have a gun in Essex, but he's sure he could find a way around that.

John washes his face, calls in sick and passes his car keys off to Marta.

"You look terrible," she tells him at his door, eyes full of concern as he fakes a series of coughs. "You should really go back to bed."

"I think I will," he says.

A brisk walk, a pair of tenners, and forty minutes by train later, John walks out of Liverpool Street Station, London. He adjusts his watch on his right wrist, the metal band making his mind bend. This isn't either of his Londons, never will be, but he'll bear it while he must.

His London, he corrects himself. Singular.

He only has the one, now.

A nice touch this, the pool, Moriarty had made him say, where little Carl died.

John hadn't learned the address last night, but that's fine. He knows enough to have tracked it down on his laptop this morning. Not many twelve-year-old kids had drowned in 1989 London swimming competitions.

He buys a drawing pad, a small one, and goes in with pencil in hand. He looks a bit odd, he knows, standing there fully dressed, drawing the dimensions of the room, craning his neck to see the bleachers up above.

A member of staff approaches him, looking politely concerned, and John greets her before she can say a word. He's researching for a film set, would she mind answering a few questions about the building?

He gets a bit of a tour after that, explaining to the woman what the film would need in its pool scene. Snipers up here, the victims down there, he needs to see how all the hallways connect. Blocking, very important. He needs to see for himself to check the light levels.

He's focused, charming if brisk, and only halfway through does he realise he's doing an impression of Sherlock.

John doesn't break character, but it's a close thing.

Sitting in a Costa down the street, nursing a latte he doesn't particularly want, he works out his plan of counterattack.

Mrs. Hudson will be positioned there, covered in explosives. Sherlock enters here, this time without a gun.

Moriarty will be in these hallways here.

Where will the snipers be?

Three hours later, what John has is a list of ways to get them all killed.

Chess is not John's forte. Having once let Sherlock bully him into a game, John knows this very well. Maybe a master tactician would be able to get Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson out alive, but John is one man with one gun and limited ammunition. There is no way for John to handle this on his own and that's....

Sane.

Of course John can't do this on his own. What chance does an ex-army doctor stand against almost a dozen trained snipers? No chance at all, that's what.

He looks down at his notes and plans, all of his considerations for ambush after ambush, and fights down a hysterical laugh. What the hell is he doing? This won't save Sherlock.

Even if it does, it won't be *his* Sherlock.

The loos in this Costa are single rooms, not stalls. Which is fortunate, particularly as it pertains to crying in the men's toilet.

He can't win at the pool. There's no way to win.

He'll have to do something else.

Oh.

Oh.

"Obvious," John whispers to himself.

He walks back to Liverpool Street Station, needing to get the energy out. The entire train journey is spent fidgeting, more than the first was.

Back home, back into his jimjams, John settles down in front of the telly just before Marta comes by to check on him. She makes him soup but refuses to comfort him, berating him instead for his low fluid intake.

“If I die,” John says, “you can have my car.”

Marta sets down the soup on the coffee table and touches the back of her hand to his forehead. “No fever,” she reports. “Looks like a case of chronic idiocy.”

“I mean it,” he says. He doesn’t know what will happen when next his body – his mind? – attempts to wake in analogue London. Will he skip over those days? Will he simply die? Will he return for a split second of consciousness, before he goes? There must be more time left there, there’s always more time left. That can’t really be it.

He didn’t get to say goodbye.

Humming her sympathy, Marta sits down on the arm of the sofa. Pets his hair. John closes his eyes against the touch. “Doctors really are the worst patients,” Marta tells him. “Stop being such a cliché.”

John does Sherlock’s best sullen huff and flop combination, curling in on himself and making Marta laugh. Once in position, he stays that way.

“Want me to leave you to sleep, then?” she asks.

He nods. “Check in on me in the morning, okay?”

“Course,” she says. “Eat your soup.”

“Thanks.”

She leaves, he eats, and the layout of the pool is pressed into his memory. That can be Plan C.

There’s a one-in-three chance John might wake up dead, but he goes to bed all the same.

Afghanistan.

Thank god, Afghanistan.

For all Plan C must be avoided at all costs, he fleshes it out all the same. If he can make a functioning strategy in advance, the risk level ought to be reduced. Somewhat. Maybe enough.

It's a good thing John has help.

"All right, lads," he says over breakfast, the lot of them crowded together in the mess at base. "I've got a hypothetical hostage scenario I bet you can't solve."

Surrounded by soldiers, John becomes the object of everyone's focus.

He spells it out, draws it out, gives them the specifics of the encounter. Today's game is set in London, in a pool. Here is the woman as the bait, here is her grown son as the targeted victim. The son tries for an exchange that is ultimately rejected. The enemy toys with his victim in this manner. The snipers have this area to operate within and this timing to follow. The rescue team is from the Met, New Scotland Yard having been tipped off. Assuming the enemy is led by a complete nutter – dangerously brilliant, but still a complete nutter – how can the family be saved?

By the end of the day, they have some pretty good ideas.

When John can't fall asleep that night, it has very little to do with the sounds of Afghanistan. He's more acclimatized to those sounds than he is to the noises outside his flats. He's more used to this life, really, than he is to his other ones.

Here, he's never doubted who he is. John H. Watson is Dr. Watson is Captain Watson. He is a doctor and a soldier, a surgeon and a fighter. He is a straight man who will someday marry, have children, and take his family on holiday to Devon in the summers. He will not be an alcoholic. He will not hit his wife or curse his daughter or alienate his son. This is the life he'd chosen, so very long ago when he'd had but one life to choose. He'd chosen this life, trained for it. It's not everything he's ever wanted, but no life is. No one life can be.

Tomorrow, John may wake in London. With yesterday in Chelmsford, a return to Essex is unlikely, a long shot in the extreme. Even if it weren't, it's not where he wants to go.

Tomorrow, John may wake in London.

Tomorrow, John may be dead.

He died with Sherlock Holmes in his arms and that, that is satisfying. In a way, it's the most satisfying way he could have gone, dying to save his idiot of a best friend. He's annoyed, he's absolutely furious at the man, but John doesn't regret his choice. It hurts, it hurts so damn much, more than he's letting himself feel.

He'll never know if Sherlock lived.

He thinks Moriarty must have died, though, can't imagine him surviving so close to the blast.

Underwater, with John's body to shield him, it's theoretically possible for Sherlock to have lived. Maybe the building fell down a bit around them, maybe the snipers fired, but bullets can bounce off water and fire can't penetrate it. Debris might have fallen, but as long as Sherlock could still get to air, a nice coating of concrete and iron is safety in disguise.

Moriarty died, Sherlock lived, and John has already been avenged.

He doesn't know if that's true, but once he decides to believe it, he sleeps.

The alarm of his digital watch beeps and John sits up, turning it off. The old woman was last night, the Golem is tonight, and the pool will be tomorrow night. There's no time to waste.

He dresses, grabs his laptop and his gun, and is out the door before Derek notices he's woken.

"Molly, hi," John greets, all easy smiles, desperately trying for that weird Sherlock version of charm that will make Molly do anything. "You're dating that IT bloke, right?"

Molly's too surprised to blink at him, her eyes stuck wide. "Um, who-"

"Jim, right?" John asks. "He said he'd take a look at my laptop, but I haven't seen him in days." He holds up the laptop in a put-upon fashion, indicating it with light annoyance. "Do you know where he's off to?"

"Oh, um," Molly says. She's gotten around to the blinking now. By the look on her face, she's desperately trying to remember where she's met John before, which is perfect, seeing as she hasn't.

“I wouldn’t make a fuss, but it’s getting to be an issue.”

“Oh, sure, right,” she replies. “I think I know where he is.”

“Can you come lure him out for me?” John asks and smiles. “I think he might be hiding.”

Molly laughs a little. She shows him to where Jim from IT ought to be, if Jim from IT were a real person. “That’s strange,” she says. She pulls out her mobile and sends off a text. “He’s probably seeing to someone else. He’s been really busy lately.”

“I don’t mind waiting,” John says. “Oh, but could I have his number, just in case? He wrote it down for me before, but I forgot it.”

Something in Molly freezes at that.

John makes an expression of polite concern.

“When you say he wrote down his number,” Molly says.

“I couldn’t exactly look up the IT helpline on my computer,” John says, because *no*. Ten thousand times no. Sherlock has clearly been here, making Molly paranoid about her fake-boyfriend being gay.

Molly smiles, relieved, and John feels like a heel. How to warn her, he wonders. Is there any way, any good way she would believe and not be hurt by? Probably not.

He gets that phone number and waits until his stomach demands a lunch to compensate for his missing breakfast. For all Moriarty has no reason to suspect a mild-mannered man in a tan jumper, he doesn’t seem to be coming back. If he was even here today. John can’t imagine Moriarty used this persona for more than that single look at Sherlock.

Time for a change of tactics.

He asks around, using his brisk, calm manner to look like he belongs there. He has to backpedal in a hurry when Mike Stamford rounds the corner, but it’s too late. They take a quick lunch together, catching up on old times. John confirms along the way that Jim from IT hasn’t been seen at his job in days.

So much for Plan A.

One of the benefits to having interviewed Adam West’s fiancée is knowing when her brother came to her house. Will come to her house.

He has a bit of time before his window of opportunity, so he makes a vain attempt to shop for a new jacket. His old one with the epaulettes is a bit past the point of recovery from last night (four, five nights ago?) in the street. Too much blood and dust. He's been wearing the black one with the patches since then, but it confuses him. Much like the tan jumper, he associates the patched jacket with Sherlock, ever since he wore it while shooting a cabbie.

He doesn't make much progress on the new jacket, but then, he doesn't expect to. He's hardly about to bring along an extra jacket as he goes housebreaking. The carrier bag with the gun and laptop in it is already plenty. He does buy a pair of gloves, though.

There are more than a few skills John has picked up from life with Sherlock. The lock-picking is particularly nice. He could always kick it down, of course, but that? A bit suspicious.

On the other hand, more suspicious than a broken door?

Police tape.

John stops on the pavement, checking his watch for the digital date. This is wrong. Sherlock doesn't solve this until tomorrow.

No, wait. That's wrong. Sherlock had solved it long before John had gone to the tracks. Meaning Sherlock had delayed in recovering the missile plans because of John, for some strange reason.

This Sherlock hadn't delayed.

Oh *Christ*.

John lets himself in anyway, stepping carefully. He goes straight to the drawer where he knows the plans were being kept. Gloves on, he sorts through its contents and finds no sign of his goal. He looks around a bit more, already knowing he won't find anything. He bites his lip, keeps down a groan.

The contents of the drawer are returned in order, or close enough to it for most people. He shuts the drawer and keeps his hand on it, pressing it in even once it can go no further.

There goes Plan B.

He has a choice.

Very likely, Plan C will change the course of his life in this London, the last London he has. Once he comes to Sherlock's – this Sherlock's – attention, everything will change. John might be deemed insane. John might be arrested for illegal firearm possession and sentenced to ten years. John might be kidnapped by Mycroft for real this time. At the very least, he'll probably have to make his goodbyes to Derek and Maggie.

If he stands down, does nothing, he doesn't know what will happen. Moriarty won't kill Sherlock tomorrow night. No matter how the man taunts, John's sure of it. He wanted to scare Sherlock, to make things personal, and then he was going to kill John to seal it. Armed with John's gun, Sherlock foiled the plan, killing Moriarty and John, and possibly himself as well.

Tomorrow night, Sherlock won't have that gun. He'll walk in with the missile defence plans, hand them over, and watch Moriarty throw them into the pool. He'll have the chance to remove the bombs from Mrs. Hudson before Moriarty returns and-

Oh.

That was why Moriarty had left. Coming back, that hadn't been a change of plan. He had left, fully knowing that doing so would allow Sherlock to remove the explosives, turning John into a safe target to shoot.

Sherlock tries to save him, then John dies anyway. Making it about more than John, making it about failure, Sherlock failing. Sherlock would have been furious beyond measure.

This is the ploy Moriarty will use. Tomorrow night, unless John does something to stop it, Moriarty will kill Mrs. Hudson.

John doesn't have a choice after all.

On his way out of Joe Harrison's flat, he spies a mobile charging on the counter.

Maybe he doesn't have a choice, but suddenly, he has options.

He goes back to his flat, puts the mobile and laptop away, and rests for a bit. Rests, doesn't sleep. The next time he sleeps, he may wake up dead, which is why there can be no sleep

tonight. He has too much left to do here. He takes a shower to keep up his energy and changes into dark clothing.

He heats up some of the leftovers in the fridge, filling his plate and using a cover in the microwave the way Derek asks him to do. The man's still out, can't catch him misbehaving, but it's habit by now. He sits down in front of the telly and watches the news.

It takes some time for it to be mentioned, this late in the day, but there's a report on it eventually. Eight people killed in an explosion last night, the old flats collapsing downwards. Eight, not twelve. The names of the deceased are disclosed, followed by a video taken on a mobile phone. The picture is low quality, the street dark but for streetlights and fire, and John can barely identify himself as the black-jacketed man doing chest compressions. He hopes no one else can either. He did ask to be kept anonymous.

John clears his entire plate and doesn't taste a thing.

It's very easy to kill a man, knowing his location in advance.

The Golem is flesh, not clay, but John shatters him all the same. Hiding in the planetarium is a simple matter after the Antiquities Museum.

He runs out the way Sherlock had once let him in, so very long (five days) ago.

Killing a man in London always leaves John with a strange feeling. It's not regret, never that, because John doesn't kill unless he's sure. He shoots killers who are about to end innocent lives and he does so in the moment before the victim becomes a casualty.

If anything, it reminds him of having sex – specifically the walk of shame. Feeling as if his actions are blatant, there for the world to see and disapprove of. Feeling as if, should anyone ask, he wouldn't so much as try to deny it.

Yes, I shot him.

He was about to kill my friend, kill his sister, kill that professor.

Yes, I shot him. I shot him cleanly and well. Could you have done better?

There's something wrong with John, something besides the obvious. Sometimes, he thinks he should be more worried about it than he is. Other times, this time, he knows who's been sending these men, the mastermind behind this chain of assassins.

John Watson has yet to kill Jim Moriarty in triplicate, but three henchmen isn't a bad start.

He spends the night writing. Careful compositions, all of them, concise and short and blunt. Capitalize. Punctuate. Brisk and deliberate.

All to be signed *SH*.

Come morning, John has developed a new and unending love for Derek's coffeepot.

"Caffeinated much?" Derek asks, watching him twitch his way through breakfast.

"Couldn't sleep," he says. "Explosions and PTSD don't mix. But I've work today, so."

"Sure you're up to it?"

"I'll steady out," John replies, knowing that he will. Once he's up and active, the adrenaline will properly kick back in. He checks his watch, keeps checking it, waiting for the time of the fourth call. He remembers the time exactly – Mycroft had texted him immediately after, saving the time to John's mobile. "I think I'll watch the news," he says, a minute to go.

He sits down on their sofa, fidgeting with his hands to keep himself awake.

Ten minutes later, the news report comes in. John stares in disbelief.

Sherlock didn't solve it.

Distantly, he registers Derek sitting down next to him, registers the man swearing. "An orphanage," Derek says. "A fucking *orphanage*."

John hears himself make a sound, something carefully restrained away from the realm of articulate meaning.

If Sherlock didn't solve it, he hadn't learned about the supernova. Because he'd never been to the planetarium. Because he'd never sent John to check the dead museum attendant's flat, to find the message from Professor Kannes.

Or, or Sherlock had been right about solving Moriarty's challenges. It only counted if Sherlock figured it out, and with Professor Kannes alive to hand Sherlock the answer, Moriarty had called foul play.

Whichever way it had happened:

Boom.

"You all right, mate?" Derek asks. Knows better to touch John when he's like this, not so much as a hand on the shoulder. Derek shuts the telly off.

"Fine," John says.

"I'll get you a bin, all right? Don't be sick until I get back."

"Fine," John repeats.

Derek gets him that bin. John doesn't have to use it. Feeling sick doesn't end in vomit for him, not feeling sick like this. He's never had any issues keeping his food down. He holds the bin all the same, grounding himself with his focus on the plastic container.

"All right, mate?"

"Fine."

"Please stop saying that."

John remains silent for a long moment, then says, "I think I'll call in sick."

"I think that's for the best," Derek confirms. "You need to get some sleep."

"No."

Whatever Derek sees in his face, hears in his voice, it's enough to convince him. "Okay," Derek says. "Okay, sure. Whatever you like."

John takes a deep breath. Sitting on the sofa, he folds in half, hands covering the back of his neck. "Sorry," he says. "Sorry, I'm just- I don't know. This is too much."

"Three explosions," Derek says. "No way this isn't intentional. You saw that at the second one, didn't you?"

John nods, head bent, eyes closed, elbows on his knees. It takes him a moment, but he

straightens. Breathes normally again.

“Now what happens?” Derek asks. Derek might be the older one, but it’s still John who’s expected to know. For all John’s smaller, he’s stronger.

“Now,” John says, “we trust in the police and the British government.”

There’s a bit of a pause.

“Oh great,” Derek says. “I feel so safe.”

If John laughs a bit more than is appropriate, neither of them mentions it.

That morning, John does something he’d promised himself he’d never do again.

He eats at Speedy’s.

It’s the restaurant’s first day open since the initial explosion, a fortunate thing, and there are no chairs set outside today. All the better. John sits inside, looking out, waiting for a cab to pull up. He has a newspaper spread out before him on one of the few small tables and he keeps drinking the coffee so they don’t kick him out. He doesn’t need to read the headlines to know tensions are running high. Three explosions in a week and London is understandably on-edge.

Every cab that passes by snags his attention. When one finally stops, John fixates instantly.

The man who climbs out is tall and sullen, a cold twin to John’s flatmate. He’s exhausted but not defeated, and it makes John wonder. His Sherlock wasn’t so tired. The orphanage then, the explosion? Is zero multiplied by children still zero?

This man with Sherlock’s face takes out Sherlock’s key and goes up into Sherlock’s flat. John wonders, then, for the first time, if this Sherlock has a flatmate. He must. Who does Sherlock split the cost with in this world? Will John get to see this man, some bloke who couldn’t be arsed to follow Sherlock to the circus? Maybe he’ll be kidnapped instead of Mrs. Hudson.

John waits to see if another car will pull up, if Lestrade is going to follow. No car, no copper. Good. John hadn’t thought that would be an issue, but the changes make him leery. Still, having already caught Joe Harrison for the death of Adam West and the theft of the missile plans, Sherlock has no cause to go anywhere or do anything but watch crap telly before his midnight rendezvous.

Plan C, revised edition, is ready to go. On the stolen mobile, the drafts folder is full of last

night's work. All he has to do now is to send them in the correct order.

John sends the first text.

Lost my charger in the explosion. Battery just died, using Mrs. Hudson's phone. Contact me at this number until I say otherwise. SH

Two tense minutes later, he receives Lestrade's reply.

Fine. You'll tell me when he texts again.

For all John has to respond to this on the spot, the answer is simple.

Obviously. SH

Lestrade doesn't text back. As far as John can tell, the man finds nothing amiss.

Contact established.

From there, it's a matter of timing.

He's approaching his forty hour mark again, which is a bit not good. There are certain things every surgeon discovers, first among them being how long they can remain awake and fully functional. Second is how long they can remain awake before needing to effectively hibernate.

John can remain awake without ill effect for forty hours. Sometimes thirty-nine, sometimes forty-two, typically forty. After forty hours, once he sleeps, he'll hibernate. After forty hours, the only thing for it is to stay up as long as possible, because once he drops, he *drops*. Properly fed, paced and caffeinated, John can handle fifty or so hours of continuous consciousness without giggling or falling over, but only just.

As it happens, waking up at eight yesterday morning means the forty hour mark falls at midnight tonight. Ten hours from that will get John well into morning, when he'll check the news or go to the pool or go to Baker Street. He'll be a zombie by that point, but there's no alternative. Until then, there's nothing to do.

With all of the texts sent, there's no reason for John to remain awake, save the possibility that he'll never wake again.

He has to see this through first.

At the thirty-eight hour mark, ten at night, he receives a call. Not on his mobile, on the stolen one.

John lets it ring out, grunting at Derek when his flatmate tries to prompt him into picking up.

He checks caller ID. Lestrade.

The mobile vibrates in his hands, receiving a text.

Who is this? Lestrade asks. *If you want to stop Moriarty, come forward.*

John types out a recently memorized phone number into the body of a text and sends that in reply.

I already followed your instructions to contact Mycroft Holmes, Lestrade answers.

Which John knows, or at least suspected. He doesn't doubt Mycroft was the one to see through John's textual Sherlock impression.

He picks up the mobile, says goodnight to Derek, and holes up in his bedroom. It's warm in there, at least, none of the windows broken. He sits on the floor, nice and uncomfortable. It's not his room in Baker Street, doesn't particularly feel like it's his at all. He misses his home.

At eleven-thirty, Lestrade texts again.

I'm sure you already know he's taken Mrs. Hudson. What I need to know is whether I can depend on your information. You can't possibly know all those details. Why should I trust you?

There's a gamble John could make, a slight reveal, a small one. He'd called in the anonymous tip on the cabbie, all that time ago, and he'd had the sense to do it from a payphone, but that would give the police his voice. He's not sure Lestrade would even believe him, not without evidence. Too much time to check John's claim, time they don't have.

Lacking that or a plausible lie, John will simply have to tell the truth.

Jim Moriarty once strapped a bomb to me. He kidnapped me off the street and threatened the people I love most. He is evil or insane or both. Whatever I can do to help you, I will. Please, let me.

After much too long, Lestrade replies, *You'd better be right about this, "SH".*

I am, John answers.

He hasn't prayed since he was shot, but it comes back to him easily enough.

Please, god. Let them live.

Some point around three in the morning, Derek must hear him pacing.

There's a knock at John's door, his flatmate holding a mug of coffee, and Derek's ever-present warning of "I'm sure you know, but this isn't remotely healthy." The mug is pressed into John's hands. "You look like shit," Derek adds.

"Knew that too," John replies.

They go into the kitchen, sit down, and Derek pours himself a coffee as well. John watches him tinker with milk and artificial sweetener. Contained motions make the other man look smaller than he is. It's something to focus on as his mind cries out for rest.

"Would you like me to not sleep with you?" Derek asks after a bit.

"I would prefer not to sleep with you," John replies.

It's three a.m. humour, stupid but amusing all the same. John's not up for more than that. They sit there for long drooping minutes.

"I'm tired," John admits.

"Hadn't guessed."

John's watch doesn't tick, not in this London, but he can almost hear the sound anyway.

Dawn crawls closer.

Derek goes back to bed eventually, leaving John at the table with mug and mobile, emptying the one and waiting on the other.

When it rings, he nearly answers.

It's in his hand in an instant, stopped only by desperate, ingrained restraint. Being beneficial to the police doesn't make police attention beneficial to him. They want him to slip, to reveal himself and expose his sources. John must look like a goldmine of information, he knows he must. If they find him, they'll never believe him.

This time, Lestrade doesn't follow the call with a text.

John waits, the way only a soldier can.

Lestrade calls again in an hour.

Again, no text.

John takes the mobile back into his hands and types, *Is there something you'd care to tell me, DI Lestrade?*

Pick up your phone, Lestrade answers.

I'm holding it right now. Being overtired does poor things to John's personality, he knows, but he's sick of being tested.

Lestrade calls yet again.

John refuses to answer.

He waits another hour, but that's the last call.

Standing by the side of the Thames, John makes one last attempt. It's simple enough to work.

Are you and your landlady all right?

He waits, arms folded on stone, head bowing forward. Forty-nine hours is a long time. He knows Sherlock can – could? – *can* handle fifty-six, but that's borderline inhuman.

Yes. Is this my Good Samaritan? SH

A giddy rush of blood floods through his head. He leans forward, hard, almost losing his balance.

I prefer Great, thanks.

He sends the message and presses the mobile to his lips, trying to keep his laughter in, his tears, his everything. He's reaching his breaking point.

Of course. I will find you, you realize. SH

It sends a shiver through him. He lets himself enjoy it.

I'd rather you didn't, John replies all the same.

Why not? Moriarty may be dead, but his network is vast. We've killed the spider. Help me destroy the web. SH

His knees almost buckle. Moriarty, Moriarty dead. One out of three, dead.

By the time he's digested this, he's pushing at hour fifty.

You don't need my help.

True, but I've never had a partner before. I think I would enjoy it, if it were someone as clever as you. SH

John presses his lips against the mobile, presses hard. This time, it's not to keep from crying or from laughing, or maybe it is.

I'll consider it, John lies. Give me a week to decide.

Granted. Either way, I will find you. SH

Something shakes inside John's chest and it's nothing close to fear.

In that case, John types, I look forward to meeting you again.

He sends the text, erases every message in the inbox and sent file, and pulls out the battery. He puts on his gloves to wipe the electronics free of fingerprints, holding them out of sight between his body and the short wall before him. He leans on the barrier, elbows on stone, and lets phone and battery fall into the Thames.

That done, he walks away.

After fifty-one hours awake, John feels the crash coming. He makes himself sit down first, take care of things.

A short note to Derek, explaining the gun in John's desk drawer and how to report it to the police. He thanks Derek for sitting up with him. He considers adding a short request to the note, asking for a text to be sent to this number to identify Dr. John H. Watson as the Great Samaritan. He considers, decides against it. Who is he to deprive Sherlock of the pleasure of that chase?

He folds the note and places it into the breast pocket of his shirt. He writes a second note, this one to Harry, and he leaves it in his desk drawer with the gun. He kicks off his shoes, calls in sick to work yet again, and goes to bed fully dressed.

It's almost noon, hour fifty-two. His pillow is soft.

John sleeps.

Epilogue

He recognizes the hospital by scent and sound and the drugs shot through his veins. His shoulder throbs with his pulse, his pain merely wounded by the chemicals rather than killed. Shifting his arms ever so slightly against the sheets, he knows his wrists are bare.

Yet again, twice within two days, John Watson prays.

He doesn't want to start over.

He doesn't want to be back to this, a bullet through his shoulder, a life in London yet to come. He can't start over. He can't do it all again.

When he forces open his eyes, the hospital ceiling is unfamiliar.

A deep gasp of a breath rushes into him, holds his mouth open, and then sighs out.

"How good of you to join us, Dr. Watson," says a familiar voice.

John turns his head.

Between the two beds in the hospital room, there is a chair. In this chair sits Mycroft Holmes, umbrella leaning against his leg. In his right hand, Mycroft holds a book. In his left, he cradles a limp, pale hand. Also between the beds is a table. On this table, there are flowers and cards, blocking John's view of what he most wants, most needs to see.

"How?" John asks. His voice is a dry croak.

"How very good," Mycroft amends and it takes John a moment to sort out what in the world the older Holmes is saying. As John wonders, Mycroft snaps his book shut one-handed, sets it down, and hands him a small plastic cup of water from the table.

John's right hand rises to take it, having little difficulty in doing so. Confused and grateful, he drinks. Much of it pours down the side of his face, pools on his pillow against his cheek. He doesn't care.

"Sherlock shot the bomb," he says, after.

"He missed," Mycroft tells him. "Fortunately for you both. I must applaud you on your tackle, very well timed."

John blinks at him slowly.

Mycroft sighs. In that moment, he's every inch Sherlock's brother. "As I understand it, the flashbombs were enough to disorient most of the snipers at the time--"

“Flashbombs?” John interrupts.

“Yes, of course,” Mycroft says, as if John is being mystifyingly, purposefully obtuse. “Now, although the-”

“Who had flashbombs?”

The look Mycroft gives him would make a saner man crawl beneath a rock to die, but John barely registers it.

“I’m confused and on painkillers,” John says.

“So I’ve noticed,” Mycroft replies, but has the decency to explain properly after mocking him. Mycroft monitors his younger brother’s website, naturally. When Sherlock had set the time and location for his rendezvous with Moriarty through the Science of Deduction forum, Mycroft had been apprised of it instantly. He had responded accordingly with the information he’d possessed at the time. Had Mycroft been forewarned further in advance, Moriarty might not have escaped.

“Oh,” says John.

“Admittedly,” Mycroft adds, “I didn’t foresee your abduction. For that, I do apologize. The lapse will not be repeated.” This is less an apology and more a statement of extreme arrogance. It’s the first piece of this conversation John isn’t remotely surprised by.

“Thank you,” John says, because he ought to say something and nothing else seems to fit.

Mycroft does something dismissive with his eyes. If Sherlock turns out like him, John is going to be in a heap of trouble.

As if reading his mind – it’s fully within the realm of possibility – Mycroft comes a breath short of sighing. John has no idea how he manages it. “Take care not to exacerbate that shoulder wound in the future, won’t you. That was quite a fright you gave my brother in the pool. Any deeper in the water and you might have drowned beyond recovering.”

“I didn’t mean to pass out,” John says defensively, perhaps the truest words he has ever spoken. “I thought the bomb had gone off. The semtex one.”

“And as I said,” Mycroft replies: “Sherlock missed.”

John says nothing, gazing at the hand Mycroft so effortlessly holds. There’s no question of Sherlock being unconscious, very much so.

“He was shot in the leg,” Mycroft says. “Not very badly, but perhaps he’ll learn from it.”

John makes a doubtful noise.

Mycroft smiles, a sad, taunting smile. "I quite agree. He's always been uncommonly lucky." The conversation now over, Mycroft opens his book and returns to his reading.

"Two things," John says.

Mycroft looks at him mildly.

"I can't see him. Move the flowers."

Mycroft does so, setting them on the floor, his expression unreadable. He sets down all of the cards as well. There's nowhere else John can look but at the occupant of the bed beside his. The dark, tousled hair. The pale, impossible cheeks, long eyelashes stark against them. The narrow chest rises and falls, steady. Alive.

"It upset him," Mycroft says softly.

"Watching me sleep?"

"Thinking you dead."

John's eyes never leave Sherlock's face. "It upset me too," he says.

Mycroft says nothing, sees everything.

Let him. John won't spare him a glance.

As much as John looks, he can't look his fill. He'll lie here awake, as long as he can, as long as it takes, looking. When Sherlock wakes, John will yell at him, and the world will be perfect.

"Two things, you said," Mycroft prompts.

"What? Oh. I need my watch back," John says. "Analogue, left wrist. I need it before I sleep." He can feel the painkillers trying to pull him back down. He's drained and exhausted and long past questioning the madness his life has become. He refuses to feel cheated he didn't die, for the pain and mourning he'd put himself through. He's back. He's here.

"I imagine it's in your old room, with the rest of your personal effects."

"'Old room'?" John echoes.

"Yes," Mycroft confirms, his tone indicating the level to which Sherlock must have been a nuisance. "Sherlock insisted. So very adamant you would need him present when you woke, only to fall asleep for it." Mycroft does not seem at all surprised.

When Sherlock wakes, John decides, he will yell at his madman slightly less.

"I would like my watch, please," John says.

Mycroft makes no effort to move.

“I would like *a* watch, please.”

There's a pause before Mycroft stands, before he walks across the room and opens a drawer. He returns and hands John Sherlock's watch. Analogue, black leather band, round face. John puts it on, clumsy with painkillers, attempting care with his injured, IV-sporting arm.

Mycroft settles down once more. He holds his brother's hand, opens his book, and reads.

Sherlock sleeps, won't stop sleeping, but that's fine. That's fine.

For a man constantly checking the time, John Watson knows how to wait.

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[Infograph for 'The World on His Wrist'](#) by [Shipping-by-Numbers \(BronzedViolets\)](#), [superblue](#)

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