

Bakers with Benefits

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Bakers with Benefits

by [Raina_at](#)

Summary

Sherlock Holmes has a successful YouTube baking channel, but what he really wants is his own bakery.

When an old friend sends him a call for the very first Great British Bake Off, he seizes the opportunity to finally win a sponsor for his bakery.

Here's the plan: Win Bake Off, get the bakery, don't fall in love with the handsome Army doctor at the neighbouring station. Easy.

Notes

Disclaimer the first: The Great British Bake Off is not actually available where I live, so I've only ever seen one full episode plus some scenes on YouTube. Basically, I took what I liked of the format and discarded the rest, so this will not be an especially accurate depiction of Bake Off.

Disclaimer the second: I don't actually know that much about baking, but my excellent beta and all-around lifesaver bookgirlwithlove and my lovely wife Leandra both bake-picked it, so it should be ok. All remaining mistakes are my own.

Disclaimer the third: This isn't Brit-picked. I hope I made everything as British as possible, and I ask your indulgence for the rest. I am Austrian, however, and I have not one but two Austrian grandmothers, who were both excellent bakers, even if neither of them owned a bakery.

Disclaimer the fourth: I was deliberately vague as to when this fic takes place, since I can't for the life of me remember what YouTube was like ten years ago.

Thank you so much to bookgirlwithlove, who beta-read and bake-picked this for me, I'm more grateful than I can express.

Thank you to my darling wife Leandra, who read 81k of fic in a fandom she isn't in because she loves me. She also inspired some of the baking going on in this fic, and she especially claims credit for John's custard.

I wrote this story mostly during the endless, gloomy winter lockdown, so in contrast this story is full of light-hearted, bantery flirty sexy times and has very little angst. I credit this story with getting me through the worst of lockdown gloom. It's also the longest story I've ever written with 81k, and if anyone had told me a year ago that I'd write 81k about baking, I wouldn't have believed it, but here we are.

I've taken some liberties with John's canonical birthdate. His birthday cake, however, does actually exist, and yes, it does taste better if it collapses. And now that I've shared this family secret with you, I'm going to have to kill you ;-)

This story is completely written, I'm posting chapters as they come out of beta.

And now without further ado: On your mark, get set, bake.

- Translation into Français available: [Bakers with Benefits](#) by [How_about_me](#)

Prologue

“You know very well why I won’t give you the money,” Mycroft says, carefully letting the last drop of tea drip off his spoon before setting it down on the saucer. He reaches for another one of the miniscule, bite-sized scones - still warm - and dips it in the strawberry jam - homemade. “This is excellent, by the way.”

“I’m not asking you to *give* me any money, I’m asking you to *lend* me the money, that is a significant difference,” Sherlock points out, subtly pushing the plate with the scones even closer to Mycroft. “Try them with the raspberry-currant jam.”

Mycroft reaches for the jar Sherlock indicated and spreads a generous amount of the bright red jam on his scone. “Excellent,” he says with the air of a true connoisseur. “Lemon zest?”

Sherlock nods lazily. “Obviously.”

“As delicious as this is, Sherlock, it will not magically open my checkbook. The difference between lending and giving depends entirely on my confidence that you will be able to return this money to me, and I’m afraid, given your history, I have none,” Mycroft says, delicately wiping the edges of his mouth with the silk napkin.

“I’m serious about this, Mycroft. I know I’ve been... “

“Flighty? Capricious? Unable to focus your considerable talents on anything other than where to get your next hit?” Mycroft suggests.

Sherlock concedes all of the above with a slight grimace. “I’ve been clean for some time now, brother mine. And it’s not like I started this yesterday. I’ve been rather successful so far.”

“I would hardly term a moderately popular YouTube channel a success.” Mycroft puts the napkin down and finishes his tea with an air of finality. “I have no interest in supporting this frivolous hobby. Come to me with a serious business proposition, and I will reconsider.”

“This is a serious business proposition,” Sherlock points out, gesturing at the printed out Excel sheets and floor plans.

“Opening a bakery in central London is more akin to buying a lottery ticket. And I have no desire to invest in something you will sooner or later tire off, discard and walk away from, like you have done with everything else so far. School, University, any job you have ever had. You always get bored. Why should this be different?”

Sherlock looks down at the carefully put together business plan and wonders why he does this to himself, again and again. Why he gives Mycroft the chance to show him, again and again, that he will never be anything other than the screw up little brother, the second, the lesser.

Never again. He will never again give Mycroft the opportunity. He was going to ask Mycroft to at least co-sign a loan, if he wasn't going to lend Sherlock the money himself. He was going to point out that it's deeply unfair that Mycroft is sitting on Sherlock's trust fund and only doling out amounts Mycroft thinks are appropriate for Sherlock to live off. He knows Mycroft will say no to the first and will point out that if Sherlock had access to the entirety of his trust fund, he would have blown it all on drugs by now, which is - unfortunately - entirely true. It's also pointless to argue that the 150,000 pounds he needs is small change for Mycroft, because Mycroft will only point out that he has worked hard for his money and been careful with his investments, and if Sherlock deigned to do either, he would enjoy the same financial security as Mycroft. Another good point. A year in financial services would give Sherlock all the capital he needs. It would also drive Sherlock into a relapse, but Mycroft was always good at ignoring facts that don't suit his narrative.

So he says nothing, and watches in silence as Mycroft rises, takes his umbrella, smoothes the crumbs from his trousers.

"Phone Mummy, she worries," Mycroft says in lieu of goodbye, and walks out of Sherlock's flat.

Sherlock waits until he hears the street door close, then he gets up and slams the door to his flat closed. Hard.

It's an empty gesture, but oddly satisfying.

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The email comes on a rainy Wednesday. Sherlock is making raspberry jam, and he's experimenting with how much of the sugar he can replace with honey. He's got three batches going, and he's just measuring out the honey for batch three, spooning out the beautiful, golden syrup into the measuring glass. He adds it to the raspberries and sets the timer for the jam to simmer.

Then he checks his emails. Notifications of comments on his latest YouTube video on the properties of different types of sugar, melting points, reactions, colour and taste. Six more Instagram followers. No interaction on his blog. A bit disappointing, but not unusual. People find it easier to follow a video or like a picture than seriously exercising what little wit they have to really understand the chemistry behind baking. An email from Irene Adler.

He opens the email, wondering what she could possibly want. They met about a year ago in a tedious seminar about monetising social media accounts and both left an hour in, bored out of their minds. They went for coffee and had a somewhat decent conversation. That was their only face-to-face interaction, but he's kept up with her on social media and she's done the same with him. They've even exchanged the occasional comment, but that's as far as their relationship extends.

What he finds is preposterous. Irene has forwarded him a call for contestants in a new reality show called 'The Great British Bake Off'.

He hits reply and types *This is ridiculous - SH.*

Then he goes back to his raspberry jam.

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Irene calls him just as he's about to start his jam tasting.

"What?" Sherlock asks as he picks up.

"Charming as usual, darling."

"Get to the point, I don't have time to play your games."

"Fine. Do the show. It'll be more fun if I'm not the only moderately competent baker."

"Why on earth would I want to go on television with ten idiot home bakers who are probably overwhelmed by a simple yeast dough?"

"Attention, Sherlock," Irene says, and he can hear her predatory grin in her voice. "Instagram followers. YouTube followers. Sponsorship deals."

The last brings him up short. The show offers no cash prize, and he now sees his own idiocy of not having thought about the indirect profitability of the show. "I'll think about it," he says and hangs up.

Then he starts the test.

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That night he can't sleep. That in and of itself is not an unusual occurrence, he was always a bad sleeper, and he has somewhat cultivated bad sleep habits by leading an unscheduled life and having had a severe drug problem.

By 2 am, he gives it up as a lost cause and wanders down the rickety, narrow back stairs into his kitchen/studio/workroom. The tiles are cold under his bare feet, but he pays it no mind and switches on the oven to preheat.

He opens the ancient refrigerator and takes quick stock of ingredients. Eggs, butter. No milk.

Bread?

No. Needs too much time proofing.

Scones?

No milk.

The blackberries are going off. Fruit pie it is.

He takes out the butter and places it into the freezer to get it nice and cold.

Measure out the flour. Pinch of salt. Sugar, just a bit. Cut the butter into the flour, careful not to overwork.

Rest the dough in the refrigerator. Slice pears, some peaches, butter into the pan, add the fruit. Cinnamon stick. Muscovado sugar to get a nice caramel.

The room smells of cinnamon and softening pears, and Sherlock is no longer cold. While the fruit cooks, he opens the door to the cafe area of the property, and looks out at the dusty tables, the peeling paint, the dilapidated chairs, the ancient bar with the cracked glass. He thinks of what this place could be, with a bit of care, with a bit of work, with a bit of money.

Then he picks up his phone and sends off a single text. *I'll do it. - SH*

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“Screen test John Watson, British Bake Off, Take 1. So, John, tell us a bit about yourself.”

“Um... do I have to?”

“Sort of, yes.”

“Well, okay, I suppose I have to. I’m a doctor, I’m from London, and I love baking?”

“You were with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Afghanistan, weren’t you?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“Nothing. Just. You should mention that. People love veterans, you know.”

“I’d really rather not talk about it.”

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“So, Sherlock, tell us a bit about yourself.”

“Why?”

“Well, because our viewers want to get to know you.”

“And again I ask, why? I’m here to bake, anything else should be entirely irrelevant.”

“It never is, though. You want the judges and the audience to like you, makes things easier. So, Sherlock. Where are you from?”

“Sussex.”

“Um... anything else?”

“Like what?”

“Married, kids, profession?”

“All right. No, no, and no.”

“Glen? What am I supposed to do with him?”

“Leave him alone. People love his YouTube channel. He’ll be gold on the actual show.”

“If you say so...”

Week 1 - Family Favourites

Filming starts on a Saturday in September. The producers have told them to be there at 10 am.

Sherlock is there at 7 am.

The Berkshire mansion-turned-hotel that the producers have picked for this week of filming is surrounded by a lovely garden. Filming will take place in a large tent. Sherlock carefully picks his way over the mass of cables and equipment, carrying the plastic box with his utensils and special ingredients.

The crew is still setting up in the main tent, rigging lights and cameras and lugging around various equipment. The makeup/wardrobe/catering/green room tent is sitting a few metres away. Sherlock passes it by, ignoring the scents of bad coffee and cigarette smoke.

One of the crew - Emma, according to her name tag - greets him cheerfully and hands him a hotel room key. "If you want to, you can go freshen up. There's still a lot of time until you need to be on set."

"I'd like to start setting up, if you don't mind," Sherlock says, giving her a friendly smile that's one hundred percent fake.

Emma shrugs. "Sure. Just don't trip over any cables."

Sherlock nods his acknowledgement and picks up his box, entering the tent through one of the side entrances.

The twelve workstations have already been prepared. Oven, KitchenAid, two hot plates, workspace, fridge and freezer.

Sherlock sets down his box and goes to work. He tests the ovens, the draft, the distance to the next exit, the temperature of fridge and freezer units. Then he quickly weighs oven quality and temperature fluctuations and finally picks the workstation furthest from the tent entrance.

Then he starts setting up his equipment. He's brought a set of everything, measuring cups and spoons, spatulas, ladles, whisks of various sizes. Anything without a visible brand name. He's stretched this rule somewhat by taping over a part of his precision scale, but the BBC put their foot down on him bringing his own baking trays, and Sherlock grudgingly acquiesced, because it won't materially affect the quality of his bake. He did insist on bringing his own blowtorch, however, and the BBC agreed provided he always tells the camera crew when he's going to use it.

He sets out his ingredients and surveys his work with a satisfied nod. He's got much more space at home, but this will do.

Then he gets a cup of tea and waits for the crew to take a break.

They finally break for tea about two hours before filming is supposed to start, and Sherlock loses no time. He unplugs his fridge and rolls it towards the front of the room to the first workstation. He gets down on his knees to unplug the fridge from the first unit.

“Ahem... what are you doing?”

Sherlock jumps and looks around. A man is standing there, a mug in one hand, leaning on a NHS issued cane with the other. He looks mildly curious, and somewhat amused. He’s dressed in loose jeans and a plaid button-down, and his blond hair is short and military neat. He’s also obviously not one of the crew, so Sherlock guesses he’s met his first competitor. Not that he thinks of any of these amateurs as serious competition.

“I’m exchanging my fridge with this one,” Sherlock says, figuring that he might as well be honest, since it’s pretty obvious what he’s doing anyway.

“Um... why?”

Sherlock huffs an annoyed sigh. “Obviously, because this one is better.”

“Why don’t you take this workstation, then?” the man asks in the same mildly curious tone.

Sherlock ignores the question and finishes unplugging the fridge and exchanges it with the unit from his work station, and plugs it back in. He then rolls the now unplugged fridge to his work station.

The man follows him and looks around the room, obviously comparing the workstations. “They’re all the same,” he says, gesturing with his cane.

Interesting, Sherlock thinks, he doesn’t fall when he does that, why does he have a cane when he doesn’t really need it? Sympathy vote?

“They’re not all the same,” Sherlock says, getting up and brushing the lint from the floor from his trousers. He gestures at the work stations. “This one’s oven takes one entire minute longer to get to 180. These three are too close to the tent flaps. Every time somebody opens one, the temperature fluctuations will interfere with yeast dough. These are too close to the lights, ice cream will melt faster, as will anything chilled, or any delicate decoration. This station is the one with the least amount of temperature fluctuation, and the fastest heating oven. The only drawback was the fridge, and I’ve remedied that flaw. Now if you want to go tattle on me, you are free to do so, otherwise please leave me alone, I’ve got work to do.”

“That... was impressive,” the man says, and Sherlock looks up, surprised. The man is smiling ever so slightly, and Sherlock notices for the first time that he’s rather attractive.

“You’re not going to go rat me out?” Sherlock asks, slightly suspicious.

“Why would I?” the man says, moving to the work station next to Sherlock’s. “You took the trouble to get here first, you did reconnaissance and took advantage of the fact that the rest of us are lazy sods who slept in and had a cuppa before showing up here. So if anything, I commend your work ethic.”

The man sets down his cup of tea next to the hob and starts rummaging around in the drawers and cabinets of the work station next to Sherlock.

Sherlock is stunned into speechlessness for a second, which never happens, ever. “What... what are you doing?” he finally asks.

“Taking advantage of the intel you just shared with me by taking the work space with the second least amount of temperature fluctuations,” the man says, giving Sherlock a conspiratorial grin. “John Watson,” he adds, holding out his hand.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock automatically responds, shaking the offered hand. Strong and affirmative grip, interesting calluses. Guns, something else. Ex-military, obvious. Definitely not the type of person Sherlock expected to meet here. He thought he’d compete against bored housewives and middle-aged, pudgy men in the throes of a midlife crisis. This man is neither.

John Watson releases his hand and smiles, and Sherlock discovers that when John Watson smiles, it’s difficult not to smile back. “This is going to be fun.”

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The other contestants start trickling in. First is a dark-haired man who is actually wearing crisply pressed, immaculate chef whites, and Sherlock rolls his eyes. The man eyes Sherlock with badly concealed curiosity, and Sherlock catches the name embroidered on the chef whites. James Moriarty.

Surprised, Sherlock watches him a bit more closely. Moriarty is the name associated with a rather famous food blog called The Consultant Baker. It specialises on reviewing bakeries and restaurants, and posting pretentious recipes that all supposedly answer questions from readers, but never actually do. He always thought that Moriarty was a myth, that the blog was run by several people, because Moriarty is never in any of the food porn pictures he posts on Instagram. Apparently, though, there’s an actual man, and from the looks of it, he’s exactly as much of an ass as Sherlock always thought he was.

The next few contestants are the usual amateur bakers, nice, normal people, mostly in their thirties and a bit older. They come in and set up and chat and look nervously at the cameras and each other.

Irene is, predictably, the last to arrive, and she grins at Sherlock across the room. He nods politely back and she winks at him, then goes to take the last of the twelve workstations and starts setting up.

“You know her?” John asks, having noticed the interaction. He’s been perching on a bar stool at his station, quietly looking around and apparently enjoying the moment.

Sherlock nods. “Irene Adler. Her YouTube channel is infamous. She calls herself the Naked Baker.”

John almost snorts out the tea he was sipping. “Literally?”

Sherlock nods, and John pulls out his phone. “You’re taking the piss.”

Sherlock takes a sip of his own tea and shrugs. “Why would I do that?”

John’s eyes go wide as he looks at the Google search results on his phone, then looks up at Sherlock again. “So you know of her, or do you know her personally?”

Sherlock shrugs again. “We’ve met. We’re in the same business.”

“You cook naked on YouTube too?” John asks, looking Sherlock up and down in a speculative way that’s sort of flattering, and Sherlock has to bite down on a smile.

“Not as such, no.”

John grins and looks down on his phone again. “The Science of Baking,” he reads out. “How not to whisk egg whites. How not to make shortcrust pastry. So you’re telling people how *not* to bake?”

“Yes.”

John grins. “So you’re here to prove to people that you don’t only know how *not* to bake?”

“Something like that,” Sherlock says, not really paying attention to the conversation anymore, because Jim Moriarty is making his way towards his station.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Moriarty greets him. He smiles at Sherlock with his lips only, the rest of his face oddly and disconcertingly unaffected by the gesture. “Jim Moriarty. Hi.”

Sherlock smiles back just as falsely. “I didn’t know you actually existed, Mr Moriarty.”

“Oh, Jim, please. And I do very much exist.” Moriarty’s smile widens, but his eyes remain oddly dead. “I must admit I wasn’t looking forward to this show. Good for social media engagement, but not much of a challenge. Now that you’re here, though, that has changed. Winning against the rest of these imbecilic, talentless amateurs would have been meaningless. Winning against you, however, will be my crowning achievement.”

“Would,” Sherlock corrects, catching John grin out of the corner of his eye.

“What?”

“I was correcting your grammar. It *would* be your crowning achievement if you won against me. Since you won’t, however...” Sherlock trails off and shrugs.

Moriarty’s smile vanishes. “I always win, Sherlock Holmes.”

“Well, this time you won’t. But don’t worry, there’s a first time for everything.”

“We’ll see about that,” Moriarty says, glaring at Sherlock menacingly. He turns and walks away without another word.

“Charming chap,” John comments mildly, having watched the whole exchange with some interest. “Does he realise he looks like an arse in these chef whites?”

Sherlock can’t help the small laugh that escapes him. “Probably not.”

“And what does he do? Does he bake standing on his head?”

“He runs a food blog.”

John takes out his phone again. “Consulting Baker. Pretentious wanker, more likely.”

“I’ve always thought so,” Sherlock says, and then the conversation dies, because the hosts and judges are entering the tent, and a hush falls over the contestants.

The hosts are the two owners of the London Baking Emporium, former renowned pastry chefs Martha Hudson and Marie Turner. The judges are three professional bakers. There’s up-and-coming talent Sebastian Moran, the cool, judgemental pastry chef of the three star London restaurant Le Circ. The second member is the owner of the famous cafe and bakery Just Desserts Gregory Lestrade. The third is the queen of the pop-up pastry shops Sally Donovan. The hosts and judges mingle among the contestants, meeting and greeting everybody. When it’s his turn Sherlock has the impression that they’re all wildly curious about him, so he tries to be as mysterious as possible. He notices they all tip-toe a bit around John, and he wonders about the cane again.

The director, who introduces himself as Glen, gets up on a little box and claps his hands excitedly. “All right, ladies and gents. Let’s do this.”

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“Welcome to the first ever British Bake Off. With us here are 12 contestants fighting for the crown of Britain’s best amateur baker.”

“The rules are simple. Every week, our bakers will face a technical challenge, where each of them will prepare a classic recipe, and a showstopper challenge, where they can make whatever they like, as long as it fits with the week’s theme. Every week, the judges will name one Star Baker, and one baker will be sent home. The final three bakers will face each other in the great finale, where our jury will crown the Master Baker.”

“This week’s challenge: Family favourites. First up: The humble apple pie was voted Britain’s favorite dessert just a few weeks ago. Our bakers have been asked to prepare their own take on the British classic. Since it’s the first challenge, the bakers have a bit of leeway, as the judges want to get to know what kind of bakers our contestants are. They’ve got two hours to complete the task. Bakers: On your mark. Get set. Bake.”

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Sherlock works steadily, peeling and cutting apples into bite-sized pieces. The room is oddly quiet, only the hosts are moving from station to station, asking the bakers a bit about

themselves and what they're baking.

Sherlock is doing a classic apple-cranberry, but he's doing a crumble top and covering it with thin strips of a lattice lid, which he will caramelize once the pie is done baking.

The world fades away as Sherlock sinks into the deep concentration he only ever experienced with baking, and sometimes when he plays the violin. Mixing, silcing, tasting, more sugar, then the crust, beautiful flaked butter kneaded into the flour, careful not to overwork it.

The hosts startle him out of his baking trance. "So, Sherlock, many of our viewers probably know your YouTube channel and are dying to know what you're making," Mrs Hudson starts, looking around his workstation.

"Apple pie, obviously," Sherlock says, and he would have liked to leave it at that, but Mrs Hudson is looking at him expectantly, so he elaborates. "I'm doing a lattice crust and a crumble topping between the lattices."

"Well, it smells absolutely delicious," Mrs Turner enthuses. "But you do have a lot of work to do, so we'll leave you alone."

They move on to John, and Sherlock takes a second to look around the room.

Irene is working steadily, slicing apples. Moriarty is painting leaves cut out of pastry with red and green food colouring, and Sherlock rolls his eyes. Many of the bakers are making their filling now, pastry resting in the fridge. Some are nervous, some seem confident, and some are having fun, exchanging small smiles and a word or two. John is crushing walnuts, using a dish towel and a rolling pin instead of the KitchenAid right next to his elbow, which would give him a more even consistency. He's humming contentedly under his breath, and his station smells heavily of cinnamon. His workstation is also a mess, and he is covered in flour, in short he looks exactly like the kind of amateur Sherlock thought he would meet here. Sherlock turns away, already bored.

Then his pastry is ready to come out of the fridge and he loses himself in the baking again.

Roll out the pastry carefully, so carefully, the butter melts so quickly, get it into the form and press it tightly. Thin, but not so thin that the pie won't keep its form. Fillings in, cut the lattice.

"Forty-five minutes, folks," Mrs Turner calls out.

Sherlock gets his pie into the oven.

Most of the other bakers close oven doors roughly at the same time as him. John's is already in the oven. He smiles when Sherlock looks over, looking a little flushed, but there's a sparkle in his eyes that Sherlock recognises, it's the knowledge of a job well done.

Two people are still struggling with their pies. A man with a perpetually sneering, yet overwhelmed expression has torn his crust. Not enough butter. Classic mistake. A woman is near tears because her filling is leaking out of the pie form, complaining loudly about how

soggy her bottom is going to be. She's not the only one. He's heard worries about soggy bottoms from everybody in the room except John, Jim and Irene.

"Am I the only one who thinks all this talk about soggy bottoms is a bit..." John says under his breath to Sherlock, making a hand gesture that - Sherlock guesses - is supposed to denote the dubious nature of the comment.

The woman at the workstation on John's other side stifles a giggle, and John smiles brightly at her. She's blonde and calm and seems to be a moderately competent baker, judging by her orderly workstation and the fact that she's not watching every moment of her pie in the oven like some of the others. John isn't watching his pie either, apparently confident that he knows how long it needs to bake for.

Sherlock feels the sudden, unexpected urge to say something funny, to get John's attention back, to make him smile like that at him. "Could be worse," he says, and John's eyes snap to him. "Imagine if any of them actually knew they were talking about gay sex on national television."

John laughs, and Sherlock feels oddly like he just made a perfect souffle or got a tarte tatin exactly right, a small thrill of sweet, sweet victory. They look at each other for a moment, smiling. The entire room smells of cooked apples, sugar and cinnamon, and it reminds Sherlock that he hasn't really eaten all day. His stomach rumbles loudly, and John's smile widens.

Sherlock hates himself a bit for the heat that rises on his face, and he hopes he can blame it on the temperature, which has reached the boiling point.

"I could do with a sandwich myself," John says, nodding towards the catering tent. "Don't know about you, but baking always makes me crave pickles. Or salami. Or poppadoms with a good, hot chutney."

"You do realise the sandwiches in the catering tent will probably be soggy, nearly tasteless and salmonella-infested?"

John grins. "You're really a glass half full kind of chap, aren't you?"

Sherlock snorts, amused in spite of himself. "And you're probably used to worse, former army man like you."

John's smile slips off his face, and suddenly he looks defensive and a bit angry. "Did they say anything to you?"

Sherlock frowns, confused. "Who?"

"The producers. I told them not to mention it."

"They didn't," Sherlock says, gesturing at John with a negligent hand-wave. "It's just obvious. Posture, haircut, tanned face and hands but nowhere else, gun calluses on your

hands, cane.” He gestures at the parts of John he’s describing. “The only thing I couldn’t figure out is whether you were stationed in Afghanistan or Iraq.”

“Afghanistan,” John answers, looking at him with a vaguely stunned expression. Then he visibly shakes himself out of it and gives Sherlock a small smile. “That was pretty good. You’re very perceptive. Just don’t tell anyone, all right?”

“All right,” Sherlock agrees, wondering vaguely why John wouldn’t want anyone to know, but not caring enough to ask.

“I think I’ll risk the catering,” John says with a grin that looks a tiny bit forced. “See you in ten minutes. If you see smoke coming out of my oven, just pretend it’s supposed to do that.”

Sherlock bites down on an amused smile and pulls out his phone to check his emails and to signal an end to this conversation. But he finds himself watching John Watson as he walks away, leaning on his cane ever so slightly more heavily than before.

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Once all the pies are out, the crew send them out of the tent for what they call the ‘money shots’ or ‘food porn shots’.

Most of the contestants make their way towards the catering tent. Sherlock steps out for a bit of fresh air. He’s bored and restless and he would love a cigarette, but he doesn’t necessarily want to start smoking again on Day One of this endeavour. His phone buzzes. Mycroft. He hits ignore and takes a deep, cleansing breath of air. He knows what Mycroft wants, and he has zero interest in this conversation.

John is leaning against a nearby tree and reading something on his phone. When he sees Sherlock, he grins and gestures with his phone. “Listen to this little gem from Moriarty’s blog: This week’s question concerns the right consistency of whipped cream and how to flavour it. When I was a child in rural Ireland, my greatest pleasure was helping my mother milk the cows and enjoying a glass of still-warm fresh milk.”

“Please stop. If this gets any more cloyingly inane I might actually vomit a bit in my mouth.”

John laughs. “It goes on like this for another three paragraphs, then he talks about making meringues and never answers the question.”

Sherlock shrugs. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Your YouTube channel is all science, no stories, you’re a bit of the other extreme. No wonder you hated each other on sight,” John says with a grin, then he adds, “Well, that, and he’s clearly a wanker.”

Sherlock huffs a laugh and straightens from where he was leaning against the side of the catering tent. “Tea, I think.” He nods at John and walks away, and finds to his surprise that the need for a cigarette isn’t as pressing anymore.

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The judges move from station to station. The pies are mostly competently made, but with one glance, Sherlock already knows that only Irene's, Moriarty's and his stand out. Irene's is textbook perfect, brown, flaky crust, not a soggy bottom in sight. Her filling smells perfect as well, and the judges are thrilled.

Moriarty's done what he calls a "deconstructed" apple pie, he's cut pastry into the form of maple leaves and put the apple filling on top, then glazed it with maple syrup. He's looking very proud of himself, and Moran loves it, but it's clear from the looks on Lestrade's and Donovan's faces that they think it's stupid, though they only say it's off-topic and tastes a bit bland. Moriarty looks furious when the judges move on, and Sherlock smiles to himself.

Most of the others get criticism for their bottoms, or their fillings, or their crust, or all three. The woman whose filling oozed out of the pie form starts to cry.

Sherlock rolls his eyes and reaches for his phone. This is tedious.

Finally, the judges reach Sherlock's workstation.

"I was looking forward to this," Moran says, rubbing his hands. "I'm very curious whether you can live up to your reputation, Mr Holmes."

The other two agree, Lestrade enthusiastically, Donovan sceptically. They each take a plate and start tasting.

"Fantastic," Lestrade says. "Innovative, the crumble topping in between the lattice crust. I love it."

"You kept it classic, but with a twist, good showing," Moran adds.

"Really well done," Donovan adds, "But just for future reference, same note applies to you as to Jim. Nothing wrong with keeping it simple."

Sherlock smiles graciously and thanks all of them, then adds, "The line between simple and boring can be thin, and boring makes for bad television, don't you agree?"

Lestrade laughs, and Moran nods. "Yes, indeed."

Sally Donovan smiles at him sweetly, but he can see that she's not happy, and he makes a mental note to keep the snark to a minimum with her. However much he might disagree with her, he needs her to like him. "I bet you're never boring, Mr Holmes," she says, and everybody within hearing laughs.

"I do try," Sherlock says, giving her what he hopes is a genuine-looking smile.

The judges move on, and Sherlock just hopes this will end soon, because he's already bored out of his mind.

John is last, and he looks nervous and hot and miserable as the judges cut into his pie.

Sherlock looks at it critically. The bottom is a bit thick, and John seems to have glazed the top with something or other, but it looks utterly unimpressive. Sherlock dismisses the tasting from his notice and starts cleaning up.

“Absolutely delicious,” Sally Donovan says, and Sherlock’s eyes snap up from his worktop.

“I love the glaze, what is it?” Lestrade asks, taking another bite of his pie.

“Apricot jam, sugar and lemon juice,” John answers with a pleased smile. “Bit of a trick I picked up from my gran.”

“Your gran’s Austrian, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she was,” John says with a wistful smile.

“You can taste it. The filling tastes more like apple strudel than a classic English pie, and I love it,” Moran says. “The bottom is too thick, but oddly enough, I don’t mind so much.”

“Thank you,” John says, a pleased sparkle in his eyes and a light flush on his cheeks. Sherlock tries not to find him adorable, and fails.

“Well,” Mrs Hudson says, “who’s today’s winner, then?”

The three judges talk together quietly for a few minutes, then Sally says, “Technically, and from the sheer nerve of it, Sherlock has to take the prize home today. But I have to say, John’s pie was absolutely delicious, and a few others have done really well today, so Star Baker is still wide open for tomorrow.”

“You heard our judges,” Mrs Turner announces into the camera, “the competition is still wide open, though Sherlock has edged out a lead with his technical proficiency. Can John surprise again? Will Irene or Jim fight them for the top spots? I guess we’ll find out tomorrow.”

“And cut,” the director calls from his monitor. “Good job, guys.”

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“So, Sherlock, you won.”

“Yes.”

“Happy about it?”

“Obviously.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“Fine. Then. Off you go, I guess.”

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“So, John, you did really well on the first challenge.”

“Yes. I almost forgot how much fun baking can be.”

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?”

“God no. I mean, it’s just baking, right?”

“On national television.”

“Yes, but, I mean, nobody will die if my pie crust breaks. So…”

“All a matter of perspective, I suppose.”

“Exactly.”

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Sherlock is exhausted. Reaction interviews took forever, and all he wants now is a shower and some food.

The hotel’s dining room is packed when he enters. The crew sits together around a large table, the judges and hosts among them. Moriarty sits alone. The rest of the contestants are sitting around another large table, except Irene who’s nowhere to be seen. John waves him over when he sees Sherlock, but Sherlock waves him off. He’s not in the least in the mood. He grabs an inoffensive-looking sandwich and gets himself a cup of tea.

“Thinks he’s better than us, the arrogant sod,” a man gripes, loudly enough for Sherlock to hear.

“Come off it, Anderson,” John says, and from his tone it’s not the first time Anderson has annoyed him tonight. “Maybe he’s just tired. I talked to him, he’s nice enough.”

“He shouldn’t even be here,” Anderson says and gestures at Sherlock. “He makes money from his YouTube channel.”

There’s a short silence, then John says, “So? All that means is that he’s good enough at something he didn’t study at school that people give him money to watch him do it.” John looks at Anderson, and there’s something in his voice, something steely and yet velvety smooth, something that sends a shiver down Sherlock’s spine. “You’re just ticked off that he’s better at this than you are.”

Anderson looks for a moment like he wants to respond, but John lifts an eyebrow and Anderson shuts his mouth, picks up his plate and walks away.

“Well done, John,” the blonde woman next to him says, and there are nods from around the table.

“Thanks, Mary,” John says with a smile, and Sherlock walks out of the room with his sandwich and a cup of tea, a complicated knot of emotions in his stomach.

He's just hungry, he tells himself.

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Next morning, he avoids breakfast and succumbs to the temptation and has a cigarette instead, sitting outside on the steps for a moment, going through all the stages of his bake in his mind.

"You really shouldn't smoke."

He jumps and turns around, sees John Watson leaning heavily on his cane, looking tired but content. The last penny drops. "Royal Army Medical Corps, is it?"

John grimaces and looks down at his cane. "Not anymore," he says, and the wistful regret in his voice is hard to miss.

Sherlock decides the best course of action is to change the subject. "Are you going to lecture me on the many ways smoking kills?"

John snorts. "I was going to point out that smoking messes with the taste buds."

Sherlock looks at the cigarette and silently thinks to himself that John makes a good point. But putting out the cigarette would prove John right, and Sherlock hates it when people tell him what to do.

John looks at him with an amused smirk. "You really want to put out your cigarette right now but won't because that would mean I'm right, don't you?"

Sherlock looks down at his shoes and wonders what that feeling is, that warmth in the pit of his stomach, the odd fluttery feeling. Nicotine on an empty stomach, that must be it.

John sits down on the steps next to him. "Anderson is an idiot," he says conversationally.

"He has a point," Sherlock says, and gets up, dropping his cigarette and stamping it out. "I'll show you."

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It's just past seven, and the tent with the workstations is dark and cool.

Sherlock sweeps through the tent and John follows. "Black Forest Gateau, she's going to over-whip the cream," he says, gesturing at the workstation of the cryer from yesterday. "You know how I know? She used the KitchenAid for everything yesterday, she'll make the same mistake today. This one," he gestures at another workstation. "carrot cake, it's going to be soggy because she's going to use too many carrots. Anderson will over-bake his red velvet sponge because that oven is uneven and because he's an idiot who spends his time flirting with Miss Black Forest Gateau who will go home today because that is way, way beyond her means."

John watches him, following his gestures and his words with rapt attention. “Your point?” he asks when Sherlock’s done.

“I’m not an amateur,” Sherlock answers.

With that, he leaves John standing in the middle of the room, and walks to his station to start setting up.

“What about me?” John asks, walking after Sherlock slowly, leaning on his cane more heavily than before.

Sherlock sweeps a short gaze over John’s workstation. “Linzer cake.”

“What mistake am I going to make?” John asks, and to Sherlock’s surprise, he sounds genuinely curious, and there’s a small smile playing around his lips.

“I don’t know yet,” Sherlock admits. “But it’s probably going to be stupid.”

John huffs out a laugh, and nods. “Well, that’s most likely true. So I’m not going to worry about it and get myself a cup of tea. See you around.”

With that, he leaves Sherlock to gape after him in wordless surprise, and Sherlock isn’t entirely sure how they got here. He was trying to alienate John, not amuse him. He’s not sure whether he’s disappointed or relieved.

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The showstopper theme is ‘Your Family’s Favourite Cake’ and Sherlock had a hard time figuring out what to do for this one, because Mummy and Father don’t like sweets, and Mycroft will eat anything Sherlock sets in front of him. So he decided to let the group of homeless people who always eat his leftover bakes decide, and they settled on beetroot chocolate cake with a liquid center.

He works slowly and steadily, grateful to have four hours instead of two. He melts the dark, slightly bitter chocolate and carefully lets it cool a bit before stirring it into the egg mix, just a bit at the time, cool, another bit, cool. He did a video on this and showed the audience how easy it is to end up with scrambled eggs if one does this too quickly. It’s one of his most-watched videos.

He wants something fruity to offset the dark chocolate, so he dips some raspberries in chocolate for decoration.

Between beating his eggs and melting his chocolate and sieving in just a little flour, he looks around the room. The hosts are going from station to station again, and pretty much everything is going as he anticipated it. The Black Forest Gateau woman is completely overwhelmed. Anderson is neglecting his cake to comfort her. The carrot cake woman - whose name, he gleans, is Janine - looks undeservingly confident.

Moriarty’s family’s favourite seems to be a complicated-looking multilayered cheesecake, and he’s doing tiny individual cakes again. Irene is making something with lots of

strawberries and homemade jam.

John is also using bright red homemade jam and the spice blend he brought from home. He's glancing over at Sherlock occasionally, but they're both too busy to really talk. Linzer torte isn't that complicated, but it can be very dry, so getting it right is more difficult than it seems. John is also doing a complex lattice pattern with strips of dough of different widths, and Sherlock watches carefully to find John's mistake. John's workstation is messy and he's careless about measuring, but otherwise, he works with the self-assurance of someone who's done this often and well.

He does notice, though, that John doesn't use his cane consistently. Sometimes it's like he forgets about it and he leaves it leaning against the oven as he gets his dough out of the fridge and as he works on his lattice pattern.

The two hosts come over and Sherlock takes a few moments to explain what he's doing. When they ask him about whose favourite the cake is, he lies and tells them it's his mother's, which is sort of true, because she is the only member of his family to ever try it.

Then they move on to John.

"So, John," Mrs Hudson starts, "family favourites, which family member loves this cake the most?"

"My sister. She'd have it for every birthday. First my gran made it, and then when she passed on I did."

"So your gran taught you how to bake?"

John smiles wistfully. "I suppose you could say that. She had a small bakery, and my mum and dad were working a lot, so my sister and I spent a lot of time in the back room of her bakery, helping out. I was cutting out biscuits and making scones in primary school."

"Your sister signed you up for the competition, is that right?" Mrs Turner asks.

John nods, giving her a self-deprecating smile. "I suppose she thought I'd have fun here. I've always loved baking, even when we were little."

"And are you having fun?" Mrs Hudson asks, winking at him.

John darts a quick glance at Sherlock, who quickly busies himself with his cake again, a bit angry at himself for getting caught listening.

"Definitely having fun," John answers with a grin, and the hosts move on.

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"Now it's time for the contestants to take their bakes to the judges. One of them will be named Star Baker, and one of them will go home."

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The Black Forest Gateau is first, and it's a catastrophe. If Sherlock were so inclined, he would have material for ten videos about what went wrong in this bake, which was everything.

Anderson's Red Velvet isn't much better.

Irene's strawberry sponge cake looks fantastic, and the judges love it. She beams and returns to her station confidently.

Moriarty is next, and while his multilayered mini-cheesecakes are undoubtedly the most difficult bake in the room, the judges think there's too much going on in the taste department.

The next contestants have various problems. Janine's carrot cake is too moist, Mary's banoffee pie is delicious, but too simple. A chap named Mike's Sachertorte is too dry. A bloke John referred to as Dimmock earlier has made a slightly underbaked cheesecake. A young college student named Neela, apparently, made a simple chocolate sponge cake that's competently made but rather easy.

The insecure contestant - whose name Sherlock gleans to be Molly - is insecure for no good reason and actually a very competent baker, as it turns out, her pumpkin spice coffee cake is a hit with the judges, and it looks perfect.

And all the while, Sherlock is so bored he can barely keep a straight face.

John is next.

"Linzer torte, tricky," Moran says. "It's very difficult not to get it too dry."

The judges all taste, and for a moment, they're silent, stretching a dramatic pause.

Then Sally smiles. "It's perfect."

"It looks really lovely too, the latticework looks very intricate and very pretty," Lestrade adds.

Moran takes a second bite of the cake and looks thoughtful. "Can I have the recipe for the spice blend?" he finally asks, and everybody laughs as the tension in the room breaks.

"No, sorry, family secret," John says with a bright smile, looking not a bit relieved.

Sherlock is next to last.

"Lovely presentation," Lestrade says as Sherlock puts his cake down. It's topped with chocolate-glazed raspberries, drizzled with dark and white chocolate and small chocolate shavings.

The judges cut into it, and the chocolate center oozes out. "Oh, liquid center, I love those," Sally says, and all three judges taste.

“You know, I was sceptical about you prioritising showiness over taste, but that is one good cake,” Sally says.

The other two judges agree, and Sherlock thanks them graciously, carrying his cake back to his workstation, hoping that he can get out of here soon. There is no doubt in his mind that he’s going to win, because honestly, who else are they going to give it to. Now he just wants them to announce it so he can go home.

The crew mill between them and get a few reaction quotes, and then they’re all asked to assemble before the judges to hear who’s won and who’s out.

There’s little ceremony about who’s out, it’s too clear. Black Forest Gateau is out, and nobody’s surprised, she even looks a bit relieved.

Then to Star Baker. Everybody tenses. Sherlock can see Irene visibly straighten and tuck her clothing into place. Moriarty is trying not to show that he’s nervous, he’s standing still, but his fingers drum on the pants of his obnoxious chef whites. John is gripping his cane more tightly, but paradoxically he isn’t putting any weight on it at all. Most of the others, sure that they won’t win, look a mixture of bored, hungry and hot.

“Our first Star Baker.... is actually two Star Bakers. The judges couldn’t quite agree, therefore we’re awarding Star Baker to Sherlock Holmes and John Watson.”

John is surprised. Sherlock is stunned. Moriarty is furious and trying to hide it. The others are happily clapping John on the back, congratulating him.

John turns to Sherlock and grins at him. “Congratulations.”

“Likewise,” Sherlock says and wishes that John Watson’s attractiveness were in any way diminished by him being sweaty, covered in flour and wearing an ugly apron.

Later, when the director has dismissed them to a late lunch, and everybody’s dispersed, Sherlock goes back to John’s workstation and tastes his cake.

The sponge is delicately flavoured with an interesting spice blend Sherlock hasn’t tried in this combination before. The redcurrant jam is obviously homemade and there’s something else in there. Raspberry, maybe. It fits the sponge perfectly. The cake is not too sweet, not too tart, a perfect balance between the two, and the bite from the cinnamon and something he can’t place makes it one of the best mouthfuls of cake Sherlock has ever had.

Sherlock frowns at John’s workstation, in lieu of the actual man. Whatever else John Watson may be, he’s also a very competent baker.

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It's late when Sherlock's finally ready to go, after interviews and call sheets for next week, after packing up his things. He's the last of the contestants, the others have been gone for at last half an hour. The only people left in the tents are a few tired technicians who will be rolling up cables and packing up lights for another hour at least.

He's on his way to his car when he sees John sitting on a bench in the parking lot. He lost sight of John in the commotion after their joint victory. John looks tired, frustrated and sad rather than triumphant, and he's fidgeting with his cane and rubbing his leg, oblivious to Sherlock's presence. There's a duffle bag at John's feet that looks heavy.

Sherlock turns and starts walking towards his car. He's tired and frankly not in the mood to talk to anyone. John hasn't seen him. He can just walk away. He can just get into his car and drive back to London and ignore John Watson, who's sitting there like a forgotten child who didn't get picked up from school.

Damn it, Sherlock thinks as his feet slow and finally stop.

He turns around and sets his stuff down, then walks back the few steps towards the bench.

John looks up and smiles at him tiredly. "Hey. Congratulations, that cake was amazing. I tasted a bit and it was really delicious."

Sherlock nods his thanks. "Are you getting picked up?"

John shrugs and looks down at his somewhat battered-looking phone. "Well, my sister was supposed to pick me up half an hour ago, and she's not answering her phone, so I'm not holding my breath." He looks up at Sherlock and smiles, but it seems forced, and Sherlock can see the strain. "Well, there's a train station a few miles down the road, and some of the crew will be going that way, so I can catch a ride with them."

"Where do you live?" Sherlock asks before he can stop himself.

"London," John says, eyeing him suspiciously. "Why?"

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "Obviously, it's not because I have a car and wanted to offer you a lift, it's because I intend to murder you and grind down your corpse for pie fillings."

"You've watched Sweeney Todd one too many times."

"What?" Sherlock asks, confused.

John looks at him oddly. "Sweeney Todd? The Demon Barber of Fleet Street?"

"Never heard of it," Sherlock says and picks up his box again. "Do you want me to drop you off somewhere or not?"

John grins and struggles to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane. "Definitely. Right now I'd prefer a cannibalistic serial killer to my probably drunk sister."

Sherlock looks at the cane and decides he might as well ask. "It's psychosomatic, you know that, right?"

John follows Sherlock's gaze to the cane. "How would you know?" he asks, and he sounds just a touch defensive, but mostly genuinely curious.

"You sometimes forget about it when you bake."

John huffs a laugh and shakes his head. "No idea what that bloody means," he mutters and grabs his duffle bag. "So, axe murderer I've just met, where's your white van stocked with candy?"

Sherlock laughs and leads the way.

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The ride back to London is mostly silent, which Sherlock appreciates. The radio plays soft classical music and John doesn't try to switch the channel.

They're somewhere near Slough when John asks, out of nowhere, "So what was my mistake?"

"You didn't make one," Sherlock answers after a moment. "It happens. Rarely, but it happens. It probably won't happen again."

John snorts. "Thanks for the encouragement."

Sherlock shrugs as best he can with both hands on the wheel. "You did ask."

"I did, didn't I?" John says, and from the tone of his voice Sherlock can tell that he's smiling.

"See? I told you."

"Told me what?"

"That you'd make a mistake."

John laughs, and Sherlock feels it down to his toes. He doesn't remember the last time he made someone laugh. Deliberately. With him, not at him.

A short silence falls, and then John says, quietly, "You didn't give me the look."

"What look?" Sherlock asks, confused by the non-sequitur.

"When people find out I'm a vet, that I was shot, they usually get a look. Something between guilt and pity. You don't have that look."

Sherlock is glad that he's driving, because it gives him an excellent excuse not to look at John. "Pity is useless and insulting, and I don't feel guilty because you volunteered to go to war. Either emotion is stupid, and I don't indulge in stupidity. Or any emotion, for that matter."

John snorts, quietly amused. "Good to know."

Sherlock has no idea what to say to that, and silence falls. It's dark and quiet and the music is soothing, and Sherlock thinks that maybe John is asleep, and even though he hates driving in

London, he wants to drive all night, comfortably silent with John's breathing and Vivaldi on the radio.

Finally John says, "You can let me out here, I'll catch the tube from here."

Sherlock parks the car at a bus stop, and John gets out, grabs his duffle, hesitates with his hand on the car door. "Thank you," he finally says.

"Don't mention it," Sherlock answers, and John closes the door and Sherlock drives off towards home, and the strange feeling of peace that he normally only ever gets when he weighs ingredients or whisks egg whites or watches batter rise slowly dissipates with the faint smell of cinnamon, sugar and John's aftershave.

Week 2 - Tea Time

On Monday, they get an e-mail about the theme for next week: Tea time. Technical is Victoria Sponge, and showstopper is supposed to be a sweet and a savoury bake to the theme of afternoon tea, and either the sweet or the savoury has to be scones. This is going to be tedious in the extreme, especially the Victoria sponge.

Sherlock experiments with savoury and sweet scones, then decides on the cranberry-lime. For savouries he decides to do macarons, and spends a day trying out different flavour combinations.

As always, he posts a note on the door of his ground-floor studio that says *Free Food*, and ten minutes later, the homeless population of Marylebone and Belgravia are eating scones and macarons. He carefully records their criticisms and sends them on their way.

By Thursday, he's settled on his bakes and has already made a YouTube video on how not to make macarons. So he goes back to his current experiments of substituting honey for sugar while making jam and grouching about the inferior quality of his honey supply. Maybe once his bakery is up and running, he can finally look into getting a few beehives on the roof of his flat. In the meantime, he fills a few jam orders from nearby restaurants, goes on a long walk in Regent's Park to forage for rosehips, and posts some teasing Instagram pictures of his savoury macarons. He gets five texts from his brother that he deletes without reading and wonders how long he can ignore Mycroft before he finds his annoying brother in his kitchen.

On Friday, he packs for the competition with no doubt in his mind that he's going to win, it's just a question of getting through the days without crawling out of his skin with boredom.

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This time, the tent for filming is set up outside a mansion turned hotel in West Sussex.

When Sherlock arrives, he bypasses the hotel, where a few of the other contestants are already standing around waiting for check-in and heads straight to the tent.

John Watson is sitting outside of the tent, duffle bag at his feet, smiling as he sees Sherlock. "Good morning," he greets Sherlock cheerfully.

"That remains to be seen," Sherlock answers, hoping that if he's as rude as he can possibly be to John, he'll go away and leave Sherlock alone to concentrate on preparing.

No such luck, apparently, because when Sherlock walks into the tent, John follows closely.

Sherlock ignores him and starts examining the workstations for drafts, quality of ovens, fridge temperatures and so on. The crew pay no attention to them. John sits down on one of the crates and watches him carefully.

Finally, Sherlock can't ignore him anymore. "What are you doing?" he snaps.

"Waiting for you to pick the workstation with the optimal climate, obviously, so I can pick the one with the second-best climate," John says, calmly unfazed by Sherlock's rudeness.

"You mean you're sponging off my superior intellect to get a leg up over the competition," Sherlock says, eyebrows raised in challenge.

"Exactly," John says and grins. "Knew you'd catch on eventually."

Sherlock turns around and tries not to be amused, tries not to find John charming and funny and oh so very attractive with his soft button-down shirt and his well-fitting jeans and fails on all three counts.

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"Welcome to Week Two of British Bake Off!"

"This week's theme: Tea time! The first challenge is a classic: Victoria Sponge."

"Our eleven bakers will have two hours to make their delicious cakes for our judges to enjoy."

"Bakers, on your marks. Get set. Bake."

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Sherlock is bored, bored, bored. Victoria sponges are so ridiculously easy that he has to restrain himself not to add to the cake mixture. They won't be allowed much wiggle room, the judges have asked for a classic Victoria sponge, and there isn't much he can do to make that recipe more exciting. He uses his vanilla-infused sugar for the sponge and uses lime zest as well as lemon, and he adds a bit of the lime zest to the whipped cream filling. He uses his own raspberry-strawberry jam, but none of that makes baking two simple sponges and then popping them together with whipped cream in any way a challenge.

While his sponges are in the oven, he glances around the room. Many of the contestants seem relaxed, the very simple nature of the recipe seems to reassure them. Even Anderson doesn't seem to have much trouble, and his neighbour, a middle-aged, pouchy man named Mike, seems equally confident, even though he barely made it last week.

Sherlock tries his best to ignore John, which isn't easy, especially because he's so bored. John's got his sponges in the oven as well, and he looks over at Sherlock with a smile.

"Not much of a challenge for you, is it?" John asks, and Sherlock shrugs, since it was obviously a rhetorical question.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" John asks, obviously undeterred by Sherlock's silence.

Sherlock snorts. "Why would I tell you?"

"To show off, obviously," John says, and there it is again, that smile that John has managed to startle out of Sherlock, but he doesn't answer, even though he's dying to tell John what he's

making.

John leans in a bit. “What mistakes have they made?” he asks quietly, so only Sherlock can hear.

Before he can stop himself, Sherlock leans in and mutters, “Anderson, too much flour and he’s overworked the batter. Mike is over-whipping the cream even as we speak, Janine’s sponge is under-baked and will sag in the middle, Mary forgot the vanilla extract she wanted to put in.”

“And me?” John asks, eyes on Sherlock.

“What are you two conspiring about?” Mrs Hudson asks, accompanied by Mrs Turner and the steadicam, and Sherlock and John move apart automatically.

“We’re planning a heist, obviously,” John says, deadpan, and Sherlock bites down on a laugh.

Mrs Hudson looks between the two of them for a moment, scrutinising them with barely suppressed curiosity, then she apparently decides to act professionally and asks him about his bake.

Mrs Turner, meanwhile, has moved on to John.

“So, tell me, John, who do you bake for at home?”

John shrugs, and his smile fades a bit. “Nobody, really. Just me.”

Mrs Hudson all but abandons Sherlock and joins in the conversation. “Oh dear, are you telling me that a handsome doctor who can bake doesn’t have a girlfriend? What a waste.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend either, just for the record,” John says, darting a side glance at Sherlock.

Mrs Hudson’s smile turns almost predatory. “Now, dear, *for the record*, don’t you have a girlfriend, or don’t you have a boyfriend.”

John blushes a bit, but apparently decides he might as well continue as he’s come so far and says, “I’ve got neither, Mrs Hudson.”

Mrs Turner turns to the camera and says, “You heard it here first, Britain. This handsome doctor star baker is still on the market. So, girls, and apparently boys, what are you waiting for?”

John blushes deeply and puts a hand over his face. “What was I thinking?” he mutters.

Sherlock looks down at his whipped cream and says nothing, but he can feel John’s eyes on him like a physical weight, and he would lie if he said he doesn’t hear the words *I don’t have a boyfriend either* on repeat in his head.

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The judging is so boring that Sherlock has a hard time stopping himself from fidgeting, and in the end it's a three-way tie between Sherlock, Irene and Jim, with John and Molly close behind.

Reaction interviews are quickly done, and then Sherlock goes to his room without a second glance to anyone. Especially not John.

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“So, Sherlock, congratulations for winning the technical.”

“Boring.”

“... he just walked away.”

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“Our showstopper challenge today is Afternoon Tea. Our contestants have four hours to prepare an afternoon tea spread for our judges. They need to do at least one sweet and one savoury bake, and they can do whatever they want. Bakers, on your mark, get set, bake.”

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Sherlock is glad that what he's doing is complicated. He feels truly challenged for the first time since he's been here.

Additionally to the scones and the macarons, he's making a simple strawberry jam from scratch. The savoury macarons will be filled with a thin layer of salmon mousse and cream-cheese-cucumber mousse respectively, and it's rather a lot of work for four hours, but he knows that if he pulls it off it will be spectacular.

John is doing something with yeast dough, poppy seeds and a thick, almost paste-like jam.

Sherlock is too busy to pay much attention to the rest of the room, but he can see a variety of scones, raisin, chocolate chip, plain, savoury.

He can feel Moriarty watching him, and once, Moriarty passes them on the way to the loo and says, voice dripping with fake sweetness, “That looks delicious, Sherlock.”

“Thank you,” Sherlock replies with an equally fake grin. “It will be.”

John snorts, and Sherlock looks at him for the first time since they've started filming. He's been doing his best to ignore John, and anyone else in the room. They're just distractions, especially John, who's wearing a blue shirt that sets off his eyes and jeans that hang off his narrow hips, showing where he's lost weight recently. *Wounded in action*, Sherlock deduces automatically. *Muscle mass loss means long stay at hospital, favours his right side but left-handed, probably shoulder.*

“So, Sherlock, tell us about your bake,” Mrs Hudson says and Sherlock comes back to the present, aware that he's been staring at John and hoping nobody else noticed.

“I’m making fairly classic cranberry-lime scones, and savoury macarons,” he says, and shows them the scone dough he’s just letting rest.

“Savoury macarons, that sounds fantastic,” Mrs Turner enthuses. “And why does it not surprise me that you’re pronouncing it scone instead of skon.”

Mrs Hudson groans. “Please, no scone-skön debate. It never leads anywhere.”

John huffs a laugh from the neighbouring station, and Mrs Turner rounds on him. “John, scone or skon?”

John grins directly into the camera. “I’m not sure if I want to risk alienating half the nation, but, well, skon.”

“Please,” Sherlock snorts. “First of all, you don’t count, you’ve got Scottish blood in you somewhere, so you’re biased. Second, skon is just completely illogical. The closest word to scone is pronounced cone, not con, what about the s changes the entirety of the rest of the word?”

“Oh, come on, language isn’t logical. Look at Worcestershire, and explain to me why we pronounce it any differently from Chester, even though it contains the exact same letters in the exact same order,” John retorts, clearly enjoying himself immensely.

“Well, the Norman French…” Sherlock starts, but Mrs Hudson interrupts him. “See what you started?” she says to Mrs Turner. “We’re a baking show, not a linguistics programme. We will never settle this debate. Now John,” she continues, turning her back to Sherlock and Mrs Turner. “Tell me what you’re baking.”

Mrs Turner shrugs and turns to the camera. “I think she should be glad I didn’t bring up the jam first or cream first debate.”

“Oh, I’m not touching that with a ten-foot pole,” John jokes and leads the conversation back to his bake. He’s making savoury scones and an Austrian pastry out of yeast dough with a poppy seed filling over a thin layer of something he calls Powidl, for which he says there’s no English word, because it’s not exactly plum jam, but not exactly not plum jam.

Sherlock watches out of the corner of his eyes the way John handles the yeast dough, and the competent surety with which he moves, the strength and precision of his hands, and the way he only leans on his cane very lightly, very occasionally. His workstation is a complete mess, and the way he just reaches into the flour to add it, instead of carefully measuring it, sets Sherlock’s teeth on edge, but there’s no question that John knows what he’s doing.

The room is relatively quiet as the bakers are working. With a glance, Sherlock sees many mistakes. Mike’s overworking his scones, they won’t rise. Anderson is putting too much baking powder into his savoury muffins. Janine’s ganache won’t set, and she’s frustratedly trying to fix it, but Sherlock already knows that she’s going to have to do something else. Mary is making savoury scones, and she’s grating the cheese on top, which will just make the scones greasy and the cheese will brown before the scones are done. She should have just put it in the batter.

Irene is doing something with a piping bag. Her scones are resting, ready to go into the oven, and of course they're perfect.

Moriarty is assembling strawberry shortcakes, and Sherlock isn't sure what he's doing for savoury, but Sherlock is sure it won't be better than his bake, and that's faintly disappointing.

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"Five minutes!"

Each of them has a three-tiered cake stand on a large table that they're supposed to fill with their bakes.

John is just placing the last of his scones on his cake stand. Sherlock has arranged his savoury macarons so they're aesthetically pleasing as well as delicious. When he returns with the scones and the small bowl of strawberry jam, his foot snags on a power cable that's somehow escaped from its gaffer-taped prison.

John darts forward and Sherlock tumbles right into him. John grabs his arms and holds him steady, and for a moment, they stay like this, John holding on to Sherlock's arms, Sherlock clutching the plate with his scones and the jam in a death grip. John's hands are strong and steady. He smells good, of sugar and sweat and a hint of his aftershave. There must be a word, he thinks, for the exact shade of blue of John Watson's eyes. He's got surprisingly fine lashes. There's flour on his nose, and a bit of Sherlock's strawberry jam has gotten on his shirt.

"All right?" John asks.

"There's flour on your nose," Sherlock says apropos of nothing, a spectacular example of his brain to mouth filter malfunctioning.

"Um... good to know?" John smiles at him.

Sherlock wants to kiss him. It comes out of nowhere and settles in his guts, a sort of hunger, to taste that smile, right now.

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock shakes himself out of it, meeting John's eyes.

"What?" Sherlock asks and hates himself a bit for the husk in his voice.

John nods at the floor. "Can you maybe hand me my cane? I'm a bit afraid I'll faceplant on the floor if you let me go now."

"Of course." Steadying John with one hand, Sherlock bends over and picks up the cane. He hands it to John handle first, and John takes it with a slight unhappy grimace.

"Thank you," Sherlock says, and John looks up at him again, smiling.

“Don’t mention it.”

“Two minutes,” Mrs Hudson yells, and Sherlock starts a bit.

He lets John go when John nods at him, and Sherlock arranges his scones and the jam on his cake stand in a sort of John-Watson-induced trance.

“Time!” Mrs Turner yells, and everybody seems relieved.

“Take ten, we’ll do food porn shots and then we’ll film the judging,” the director yells over the mutterings in the room.

John grins at Sherlock from his workstation, sweaty and floury and gorgeous. “Thank god, I’m starving.”

Tell me about it, Sherlock thinks, and goes to the bathroom to stare at himself in the small, dirty mirror over the sink.

Stop it, he tells himself. *This door is closed. Never again. I’ve put this behind me. I’ll never allow myself to be this weak again.*

He never does this. He doesn’t feel randomly attracted to near strangers and thinks about kissing them.

It must be sexual frustration. Maybe he needs to make the time and mental space to take care of his bodily needs better.

That must be it.

With that, he firmly reseals the door to the closed-off wing of his mind palace and nods at himself in the mirror. *And stay out.*

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Sherlock takes a deep drag of the cigarette he bummed from Janine and listens with half an ear as she complains to Irene about her ganache.

“It was so runny, and I thought it would be so nice to do a white chocolate ganache, and it just wouldn’t set,” she gripes.

“Did you use it?” Irene asks, cigarette poised between her lips. Sherlock absently wonders how her make-up is always so perfect.

“No, I just made a cream cheese topping for the cupcakes, bit of lemon, bit of sugar. It’s good, but it isn’t as good as the white chocolate would have been.” She makes an angry sort of stabbing gesture with her cigarette. “I just wish I knew why it didn’t work, it’s always worked with the dark chocolate.”

“Dark chocolate has entirely different properties than white chocolate,” Sherlock says automatically, before he’s even made a conscious decision to speak. “White chocolate has a

higher fat content and less starch. You probably used too much cream, and you didn't properly refrigerate it. Also, the white chocolate chips you used were of inferior quality. It's always a mistake to not try things at home before you do them in competition."

"I know." Janine sighs. "But some of us actually work for a living, Mr YouTuber, and I can't just tell my clients that they need to wait for their contracts because their solicitor needs to bake cupcakes."

"Then do the one you've tried before next time," Sherlock says. "Or spring for the more expensive white chocolate."

"Oh, fuck off," Janine says, but she's smiling at him a bit crookedly, as though she knows he's got a point.

"Guys, time for the judging," Emma the contestant wrangler calls from the tent entrance, and the three of them hastily put out their cigarettes and go back in.

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Yesterday's judging was boring. Today it's equally so. Sherlock tunes out Mike, Mary, Anderson, Janine, Dimmock and Neela, their bakes are all mediocre to bad, and they're no competition. Molly's bake is the first that gets praise from the judges. Her savoury pumpkin muffins seem to be delicious, and her raisin scones are nice, if a bit on the dry side.

Irene has the judges raving with her walnut and cheddar scones and her Vienna swirls, which are technically perfect and look gorgeous.

Moriarty wins high praise for his deconstructed strawberry shortcakes, which he's arranged in bite sized pieces on individual spoons, but his savoury scones with sun-dried tomatoes and basil get criticism for being under-seasoned, even though they look stunning.

John is next, and the judges are dismissive of his savoury scones, but when they all taste his poppy seed danish, silence falls.

"This is the best thing I've had in this competition so far," Sally says after a moment of silence.

"Poppy seeds are highly unusual for an English high tea, and I'm going to insist on calling it a pastry because I'm not sure I can pronounce the word you used to describe it," Lestrade adds. "But it's bloody delicious and I want the recipe."

Everybody laughs nervously, and John says, apparently not for the first time, "It's a Golatsche."

"Gesundheit," Moran says, and everybody laughs, except Moriarty, who is the only person in the room who doesn't seem to find John charming.

"Seriously, this is delicious. Somewhat makes up for the blandness of your scones," Moran adds, and John thanks them and moves back to his workstation. He exchanges a glance with Sherlock and shrugs good-naturedly, since it's pretty obvious that he won't win today.

The judges love the savoury macarons. “Brilliant idea, perfect execution,” Sally enthuses, and the other judges nod.

The scones are an equal success. “You made your own jam, as well, I hear?” Lestrade says, and Sherlock nods.

“So far you don’t disappoint, Sherlock,” Moran adds, and Sherlock smiles in what he hopes is a genuine way and hopefully not expressing what he’s thinking, which is, *Every time I order a dessert in your restaurant, it’s underwhelming, so you frequently do.*

The judges huddle for a moment, then they make the announcements. To absolutely nobody’s surprise, Dimmock, whose scones resembled coasters, is out. To absolutely nobody’s surprise, Sherlock wins.

John grins at Sherlock and congratulates him, and then goes to comfort Dimmock with the rest of the contestants, save Irene and Moriarty.

Moriarty glares at him and flounces out.

Irene walks over to him, as always she moves like a tigress on the prowl. “Congratulations, Sherlock. The savoury macarons were a stroke of genius.”

“Thank you. Your savoury scones looked delicious,” he returns the compliment, genuine as she was, because they’re professionals who respect each others’ skills, even if they’re competition.

She nods at him, a simple acknowledgement of fact. “Classic mistake. Cheese in the batter, not on top,” she says with a nod at Mary, who’s at that moment comforting a depressed Dimmock. She turns to John and lays a hand on his arm and Sherlock suppresses the urge to go over there and bat her hand away.

“Interesting, that one, isn’t he,” Irene muses, following Sherlock’s eyes to John. “Surprising depth, for all that he looks so entirely harmless. I wonder what he’s like in bed.”

Sherlock nearly flinches as Irene seems to almost speak his thoughts aloud. “I hope you don’t have any intention to find out,” he says, trying to sound idly curious, and as if it doesn’t bother him at all, the thought of Irene touching John. He hates himself a bit for it, but the mere thought makes his hackles rise.

Irene grins at him, saucy and indecent, like a cat that got the canary. “Don’t think my girlfriend would like that too much. But if you ever do find out, feel free to share.”

Sherlock decides to ignore that statement and starts packing up his workstation until Irene gets the hint and leaves, but not before throwing him a knowing smirk.

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“So, Sherlock, how do you feel about winning?”

“Good.”

“Anything else?”

“Very good.”

Sigh.

“How about your competition?”

“Let’s just say I’ve got a few new ideas for my YouTube channel.”

“Anything else? John saved you from dropping your bake today.”

“Yes. That was... good.”

Silence.

“Okay, thanks, Sherlock, I guess.”

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“So, Jim, what do you think?”

“Watson should have been disqualified. English High Tea and he serves something our judges can’t even pronounce.”

“What about Sherlock?”

“He’s a show pony without substance. His Victoria sponge was amateurish.”

“He won.”

“The judges fall for his flashy style, but they will soon see that there’s no substance behind it.”

“Any guesses yet who will win next week?”

“Me, of course.”

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“So, John, any thoughts?”

“Well deserved, Sherlock.”

“I have to ask, what’s it like baking right next to him?”

“I’m never bored.”

Laughter.

“Seriously, though, he’s... well, he’s a very good baker. And a nice bloke, which is even more important.”

“You saved his bake today.”

“That sounds vaguely dirty.”

Laughter.

“Thanks, John. That was brilliant.”

Week 3 - Roll Me Up

“Over-whipping cream is one of the mistakes that every single baker has made before. Well, except me,” Sherlock says to the camera with what he hopes is a self-deprecating smile.

“It’s simple chemistry. Over-whipping the cream causes the structure of the foam to collapse. The air you’ve whipped into the cream evaporates and the cream curdles into milk fat.”

He’s explaining the chemistry of it while the mixer turns the cream into curd. He turns the mixer off and looks into the camera again. “So, Rule One. Always, always whip cream by hand. It’s nearly impossible to over-whip it when you do it by hand. Rule Two: If you’ve already curdled your cream, don’t throw it away.”

He demonstrates how the whipped cream can be saved by adding some cold cream to the bowl and mixing it into the curdled cream. “The curdles will dissolve into the fresh cream, and by re-introducing air into the mixture, the foam structure reforms.” He turns off the mixer and shows the perfect, fluffy peaks to the camera. “See? Perfect. Now let’s turn this into a frosting you can use on cupcakes or even cakes.”

He decided to use Janine’s mistake as an inspiration and shows how to make a white chocolate frosting, using good quality white chocolate.

Sherlock cuts and posts the video, together with an announcement video that he’s going to be on The Great British Bake Off, which starts airing on Monday evening.

The producers have explained to them that they’re shooting two weeks in advance, but the finale will be shot on Saturday and aired on Sunday.

Then he goes back into his workshop and makes another batch of filo pastry. The challenge this week is called “Roll Me Up”. The technical challenge is a classic strawberry whipped cream roulade, and Sherlock has already done a video about how not to roll roulades, which he’s going to post after the episode airs.

He’s experimented with several fillings for his filo pastry and yesterday he finally settled on a butternut squash-pecan-cranberry filling that his homeless network went absolutely potty over. He’s not entirely sure how much he actually likes the filling himself, but the clear majority of test subjects liked it, therefore it doesn’t much matter that it’s not entirely to his taste.

It’s Thursday, and he’s bored, so he decides to go through the bake one more time, maybe he can figure out what isn’t quite working for him. So he makes the pastry and lets it rest, then gently pulls and stretches it so it’s thin enough. He spoons in the fragrant pumpkin filling, spiced with cinnamon and cardamom, the pecans finely chopped, the cranberries as small taste capsules, exploding in the mouth, giving tartness and sweetness. Into the oven.

Sherlock looks around his kitchen and notices for the first time that it’s grown dark outside, and that his phone is blinking with the light of a new message. Mycroft again, probably. He’s

rang and sent texts and Sherlock has been studiously ignoring him.

It's not Mycroft, though. It's a new comment on his YouTube video:

@johnwatsonsblog

And here I thought I was a control freak ;-). Now at least I know why you've yet to touch your KitchenAid. See you Saturday!

Sherlock smiles and sets his phone down. He walks back to his pastry and tests whether it's cooled yet. Still hot.

The phone chirps again.

@johnwatsonsblog

I bet Moriarty could curdle cream simply by looking at it.

Sherlock laughs and the sound echoes around his empty kitchen. Something curls tightly behind Sherlock's breastbone.

He presses "Answer".

@thesienceofbaking

It would probably still taste better than his savoury scones.

He hits 'send' and wishes for a moment that he could hear John's answering laugh, could see the little laugh lines crinkle around his eyes.

Before he can stop himself, he opens a browser and googles John Watson's blog.

It's a simple Wordpress site, generic, and nearly blank.

Three entries.

June 12th, 3:30 am

Nothing happens to me.

September 10th, 10:31 pm

So my sister signed me up for The Great British Bake Off, in an effort to, as she puts it so charmingly, "Get me out of the house."

Well. I suppose it's better than sitting around here feeling sorry for myself.

September 23rd, 11:45 pm

Just came back from the first two days of filming. Intense. But I hate to admit it, my sister was right. It's tremendous fun. I met this extremely interesting bloke, Sherlock Holmes. Check out his website, he's got great tips. And a YouTube channel. Links below.

I need to go to bed now, I'm knackered. From actually doing something, for a change.

Sherlock thinks about commenting for a second, but decides against it. This feels personal, somehow, in the way his YouTube videos definitely aren't, and he doesn't want John to know

that he's been here. Also, the last thing he needs is to spend more time than absolutely necessary thinking of John Watson.

He closes his browser and goes back to his bake.

The filo is crisp and browned perfectly, the filling is tasty. It's a perfect bake, surely good enough to win on Sunday.

But instead of his usual sense of accomplishment, he just feels oddly empty.

Probably hunger, he muses, and eats some more of his filo strudel.

There's a sound of keys scraping over a lock, and the bell over the door dings.

"Sherlock?"

"In here," Sherlock says and flicks the kettle on.

Mr Chatterjee, Sherlock's landlord and former owner of Speedy's cafe, walks in. Sherlock nods at him in greeting. "Tea?"

Mr Chatterjee sits down at the kitchen table and nods. "If it's not too much trouble."

Sherlock makes tea and slices off a piece of his filo strudel. He plates it up and takes the tea and the plate over to Mr Chatterjee. "Here, try this."

Mr Chatterjee smiles. "Is this for the show?"

Sherlock nods and watches as Mr Chatterjee tries the strudel. He's one of the few people whose opinion Sherlock respects. He made the best cheese toasties in London, and Sherlock used to visit Speedy's quite a lot when he first moved to the area, when he needed both cheap food and a distraction. Mr Chatterjee looks older these days, his dark hair shot through with white, but he's still a consummate professional, and Sherlock trusts his judgement.

"It's delicious," Mr Chatterjee says, then takes another sip of his tea. "Is it odd, baking on telly?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Not that different from baking on YouTube."

"Met any interesting people?"

Sherlock shrugs again and decides not to answer, because he doesn't want to lie, but he doesn't want to talk about John Watson either, who, among other things, definitely qualifies as 'interesting'.

So Sherlock asks about Mr Chatterjee's daughters, and settles in to listen with one ear while thinking about why he seems to be the only person who doesn't especially enjoy his latest bake.

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Saturday finds him in northern Shropshire. They're staying in a large, ugly wellness hotel that looks like it was built in the late sixties, but that's surrounded by a very large garden, where the producers have put up the now familiar tent.

Sherlock picks his workstation with the usual care, and then he hesitates. John isn't here yet. He could just let the other contestants pick their workstations and let chance decide whether the workstation next to him will be free for John.

Or....

After a moment's thought he gets a mug of tea - just milk, no sugar - from the cafeteria tent and sets it down next to the hot plates, just the way John did the last two shows.

Then he goes back to setting up his workstation, trying very very hard not to think about why he just did this. Experiment, he tells himself. See whether the mug is enough to make them assume the station is taken. Just an experiment. That's all it is.

The others start trickling in. Sherlock pretends to ignore them while subtly watching them whether one of them will take the workstation. They all pass it by, greeting him with varying degrees of friendliness.

Moriarty arrives and glares at Sherlock with open hostility. "This week you'll lose. My bake is spectacular."

Sherlock doesn't rise to the bait, he just shrugs. "We'll see."

Then he takes out his phone and proceeds to pointedly ignore him.

Sherlock is checking his emails on his phone when John arrives. He greets the other contestants cheerfully, then walks towards Sherlock. Halfway there he stops and sets down his duffle bag. "Oh, well, I guess that's what I get for taking the later train," he jokes and gestures at the workstation next to Sherlock's. "Somebody's on to my leeching off your superior intellect trick."

Sherlock looks up from his phone, confused. "What?" Then he realises that John thinks the workstation next to him is occupied, and he quickly says, "No, I...."

He trails off, aware that Mary, Molly and Irene, plus half the crew, are watching their interaction with interest, and that he has no idea how to finish that sentence.

"That's my tea," he finally says, lamely. "I... just... I wanted it out of the way."

John's lips twitch with a smile he can barely control, and he looks pointedly at the mug sitting next to Sherlock's elbow. "Well, that's good, then," he says and starts walking towards Sherlock again, leaning heavily on his cane. He sets down the duffle bag and hands Sherlock the mug that's sitting on his workstation. "Still warm enough to drink."

Sherlock shrugs. "Go ahead and take it, I'd forgotten about it and I got myself a new one," he says with just the right amount of indifferent nonchalance, gesturing at his mug.

“Don’t mind if I do.” John takes a sip of the tea with a smile that says he’s buying exactly none of Sherlock’s bollocks. “Just the way I like it. What a coincidence,” he says, smiling into his mug.

“The variance of tea preference is so low that the chances of ours overlapping are relatively high. Statistically speaking,” Sherlock observes dryly.

“And statistically speaking, how high are the chances that you’re full of it?” John asks, grinning at Sherlock.

Sherlock doesn’t blush. He doesn’t. Ever.

But he never brings other people tea, either. And he never ensures that good-looking, charming ex-army doctors have workstations next to him.

So his interactions with John are an entire gallery of firsts.

“Shut up, or I’ll never do it again,” Sherlock mutters.

John laughs and pretends to lock his lips with an invisible key. He turns to set up his equipment, and Sherlock lets out a long breath, wondering what he’s doing, and wondering whether he wants to know.

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“Our first challenge is the classic: Roulade with strawberry whipped cream.”

“It sounds easy, but the judges will look for details here.”

“Bakers, on your mark, get set, bake.”

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Sherlock’s sponge is in the oven and he’s crushing strawberries for the whipped cream when the hosts approach his workstation. “So, Sherlock, in your opinion: What’s the most important thing about a good roulade?” Mrs Hudson asks, while Mrs Turner checks out his sponge in the oven.

“I’m not going to give the entire room tips on how to beat me,” he answers with what he hopes is a charming smile.

He can hear some of the other contestants chuckle, mainly those who’d briefly stopped what they were doing to hear Sherlock’s answer.

“Fair enough,” Mrs Hudson says, patting his elbow. “I’m sure you’ll explain to us all what your competitors did wrong in another one of your delightful videos.”

“It’s already done, I’m posting it after the episode airs,” Sherlock says dryly, and there’s another smattering of chuckles from the room.

Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner move on to John, who's whipping cream with the air of somebody who's done little else in his life. "You're not going to over-whip that, are you?" Mrs Turner asks with a glance back at Sherlock.

John laughs. "I think Sherlock would be horribly disappointed in me if I did," he says, grinning at Sherlock.

Sherlock is aware that the camera is focusing on him, and that both hosts are watching him for a reaction.

"Good to know you watch my YouTube channel," he finally says, trying to sound offhand and dismissive.

"Religiously," John says with a teasing grin.

Sherlock doesn't say anything, but goes back to whipping his cream, but he knows he's smiling and he somehow can't bring himself to stop.

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The judging is excessively dreary. Irene, Moriarty, Sherlock, John and Molly all delivered perfect roulades that are virtually indistinguishable from each other. Mary's roulade is good, but it's cracked in several places, and so are Janine's and Neela's. Anderson's roulade is crumbly, tough and dry, he overbaked the sponge and there's no saving it. Nobody is looking at Anderson during the judging, and it's glaringly obvious that his showstopper bake tomorrow needs to be spectacular, or he will go home.

The judges declare the round winner-less, because most of the field delivered good to perfect bakes.

"Star Baker is wide open this week," Mrs Turner enthuses into the camera.

"Dull," Sherlock whispers to John.

John elbows him in the side, but he's trying not to smile, and Sherlock is deeply familiar with the feeling.

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"So, Sherlock, anything to say to the bake today?"

"Dull."

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"Jim, you did well."

"I'll win tomorrow, you'll see."

"Well, good luck."

“I don’t need luck. I’m not Sherlock.”

“Um... next contestant, please.”

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Sherlock skips the mediterranean buffet they were promised for dinner in favour of a few sandwiches he filched from the catering tent. He eats in his room, then writes up a few notes for a blog entry on how heat changes the molecular structure of the batter, and how to calculate optimal baking times.

It’s already dark when he feels like a cigarette. He knows he should resist; the sudden need to smoke again isn’t a good sign. It means his brain is understimulated, and that’s never a good thing. But cigarettes are better than other things, and he’s never had a problem with smoking just one, contrary to other substances, which he can’t use recreationally.

He goes down the stairs that lead to the back entrance of the hotel.

He literally stumbles over John, who’s sitting on the steps leading down to the garden, cane balanced on his lap. Sherlock’s foot snags on the cane, and John grabs him before he can face-plant on the gravel path.

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” John pants, still holding on to Sherlock tightly. “You all right?”

Sherlock nods and tries not to notice that John smells good. He apparently showered not long ago, his hair is still a bit damp and slightly mussed, and he’s changed into a soft, beige jumper that’s too baggy on him and frankly an abomination altogether.

He untangles himself from John’s grip and steadies himself.

John smiles at him, embarrassed and contrite. “Sorry about that.”

Sherlock shrugs. “If you wanted to kill me to eliminate me from the competition, you could have gone about it a bit more subtly.”

John laughs. “I’ll remember that for next time. Are you sneaking out to smoke again?”

“Problem?” Sherlock asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Your lungs, mate, and your taste buds.” John raises his hands in a disclaiming gesture. “If you.... what the hell...”

He trails off and squints into the darkness in the direction of the tent. “What’s that?”

Sherlock turns and looks. At first he can’t see what John is talking about, and then he can see a dim shadow slipping into the tent. “Only one way to find out,” he says, and sets off towards the tent.

John follows, astoundingly fleet-footed for a man with a limp, and together, they make their way towards the tent, quietly, avoiding the gravel path, ducking into the shadows. When they

reach the tent, Sherlock gestures at the side flap, and they creep along the sides, ducking under the windows.

At the flap, Sherlock kneels down and opens it a tiny bit, peeking into the tent.

It's dark inside, but there's definitely somebody in there, and that somebody is doing something at Moriarty's workstation. John wants to go in, but Sherlock motions for him to leave off. They need to know what's going on. He gestures at his eyes and at the front of the tent, and John seems to understand, because he follows Sherlock and together, they watch as Jim Moriarty makes his way back towards the house, strolling now as though out for an after-dinner-walk.

As soon as he's out of sight, Sherlock darts into the tent, closely followed by John.

"What do you think he was doing?" John whispers as they look around. There's a bit of disarray at Moriarty's workstation, and Sherlock looks into his fridge.

"He pre-made dough and is letting it rest overnight."

"Why?"

Sherlock shrugs and closes the fridge. "Apparently he thinks it's giving him an advantage. Stupid, really. It-" Sherlock falls silent as footsteps crunch on the gravel path outside the tent.

Sherlock and John look at each other and break into a run at the same time. They slip out of the back tent flap, then run over the grass. Quietly, smoothly, Sherlock leads the way along the garden, over the parking lot, through the deserted staff entrance. Sherlock pulls John behind the door into a dim, narrow hallway and gazes outside, making sure they weren't followed. Then he closes the door and leans against the wall, John opposite, near enough in the dark, narrow corridor that Sherlock can hear John breathing.

Then, suddenly, John starts giggling. "That was one of the more ridiculous things I've done," he hiccups between laughter, and Sherlock can't help himself, he chuckles.

"And you invaded Afghanistan," he says, and John laughs some more, body tipping forward until he leans against Sherlock.

Sherlock stills. John's body is warm, and heavy, and it feels amazing. John's laughter fades, and he looks up into Sherlock's eyes. They're very close, and very near, and from this distance Sherlock can fully appreciate the lovely shade of blue of John's eyes. He can feel his breath pick up against John's rib cage.

John kisses him.

It's just a quick, dry brush of lips against lips, but it makes Sherlock shiver, and of course John feels it, seeing as they're still pressed together.

John kisses him again, winding a demanding hand into Sherlock's hair, and Sherlock falls head-first into the kiss, fingers gripping John's jumper at his back, all the many reasons why this is a bad idea wiped from his mind by the sweep of John's tongue against his.

Sherlock surges forward and presses John against the opposite wall without breaking the kiss, stroking his tongue into John's mouth, pressing his entire body into John's.

John hooks a leg around Sherlock and starts to pull Sherlock's shirt out of his pants so he can dip his hands beneath it, sliding cool fingers up Sherlock's spine and down his backside. The touch sends shivers over Sherlock's body. He moves even closer and slots their bodies together so he can feel John's growing hardness against his thigh. It's insanely good and Sherlock wants more, now.

"Come back to my room," John pants into Sherlock's mouth.

"Yes," Sherlock agrees between hungry, greedy kisses. "Yes."

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The click the door makes as it shuts is unnaturally loud to Sherlock's ears. He looks at John, suddenly nervous, suddenly shy, alone in a room, silent but for the heavy beating of his heart.

John grins at him, predatory and wicked, and Sherlock swallows, desire making his skin tingle.

John takes a step closer, and for a moment, they just look at each other.

Then John moves in as Sherlock reaches out and they all but clash into each other, heads bumping. John chuckles, and Sherlock feels the vibrations in his body. It's heady, and entirely foreign. Sherlock doesn't remember the last time he felt another person's body so close, the last time he *wanted* another person's body this close. But he definitely wants John's body close, closer, much closer, all over him.

John kisses him again, slow, deep, hungry kisses that wipe Sherlock's brain clean of thought, the way only exquisitely expensive illicit substances can, and sometimes baking.

He snakes his hands along the waistband of John's jeans, along his hip bones, up his back underneath his jumper, seeking skin. John growls into his mouth, and starts unbuttoning Sherlock's dress shirt, not breaking the kiss. Sherlock shrugs out of his jacket and shirt when John is done with the buttons and tugs at John's hideous jumper. It lands on the floor, together with John's t-shirt.

John tumbles them down to the bed, and Sherlock loses track of time for a bit as John covers him with his body and grinds their hips together.

"Gorgeous," John whispers, biting kisses down Sherlock's neck. Sherlock runs his hands over every part of John he can reach, finally settling on his butt cheeks, pressing him down so the lovely, lovely friction will stay just where he wants it, needs it. He's so hard he can see stars, and he hasn't felt like this in ages, like his skin is too small to contain him.

John's hand on his belt buckle is the best thing ever, and John's fingers wrapping around his cock are cool and mind-numbingly, bone-meltingly good. John is nibbling on his neck while

slowly, deliberately and expertly taking Sherlock apart. In what seems no time at all, Sherlock is a panting, quivering mess, poised on the razor edge of a spectacular orgasm.

“Come for me,” John whispers, breath ghosting over the shell of Sherlock’s ear, and that’s it, Sherlock is lost, done, he tumbles over the edge, hard.

John is grinning at him smugly when he opens his eyes. “That was spectacular,” John says, and Sherlock rolls to his side, pulling John closer by his belt loops. John’s breath hitches, and his eyes go dark, and it’s fantastic.

“Just wait until I’m done with you,” Sherlock whispers against John’s lips, and sticks his hand down John’s pants.

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“Amazing,” John mutters against his chest, where he collapsed after returning from the bathroom with a wet towel to clean them up rudimentarily. The room is a mess, clothes haphazardly strewn all over the floor where they landed when they were tossed aside.

“Hm,” Sherlock hums in agreement, too tired to speak. He feels a bit like the room, messy, tossed around, upside down, inside out. His body is humming with a quiet satisfaction. Round two was even better than round one, with John’s mouth on him and then John’s fingers in his hair and John making absolutely divine noises as Sherlock swallowed him down.

He looks at John, who’s almost asleep, body pressed against Sherlock’s side, hand resting possessively on Sherlock’s hip bone. Even now, Sherlock has to resist the urge to roll John to his back and taste every inch of his body he hasn’t tasted yet, he’s sure there’s miles and miles of skin yet to discover, starting with the spectacular scar on his shoulder. John’s body is compact and strong, yet it’s easy to see where he lost the muscle mass he used to have before his injury. He’s a bit too thin, and his hip bones stick out enticingly, made for biting and holding on to. They fit in Sherlock’s hands like they were made for it, and Sherlock has to shake himself to stop this nonsensical way of thinking.

They had sex. The sex was good. No need to dwell on it. An itch was scratched. Nothing more, nothing less.

John is warm and he smells good, and his bed is comfortable. He’s also fast asleep, and Sherlock is severely tempted to close his eyes and let John’s even breathing, the warmth of him, lull him into sleep as well.

But if Sherlock hates one thing, it’s mornings after. Waking up first, being quiet, morning breath, using bathrooms, awkward goodbyes, painful negotiations about how to communicate that this was nice, yes, but a one-time-thing and not to be overrated, just biology, just a quick scraping over each others’ pleasure centers. There’s no difference between good sex and eating an especially good piece of cake, chemically speaking, after all. Just tickling the dopamine receptors.

Carefully, slowly, so as to not wake John, Sherlock slides out from under him. He lets John's hand slide from his hips to the mattress with a ridiculous pang of regret, and gets up carefully, rooting around for his clothes in the dark. He finds most of them, then slowly, carefully, clicks open the door. The corridor is cold and dimly lit by the light of the emergency exit sign.

He looks back at John, peacefully asleep and so temptingly warm. He turns in his sleep, and Sherlock can see the bumps of his spine as he curls up on his side, and he wants to trace them with lazy fingers, then press his entire body against John's and fall asleep like this.

Resolutely, he steps outside and closes the door with a very loud, very final sounding click.

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Sherlock rubs a hand over his face and closes his eyes, just for a moment. He takes a sip of his tea and lets himself sink into his mind palace, going over all the steps of his bake. He feels absolutely rotten.

He hasn't slept one minute in his empty, large, comfortable and entirely John-less bed. He showered and crawled into bed with the humming, heavy limbed satisfaction he felt when he was still in John's bed slowly draining out of him, replaced by a discomfort he can't exactly name, which left him with a conviction that the whole thing was a giant mistake.

He's here for a competition, not have sex with attractive ex-army-doctors with a wry sense of humor, a charming smile and hands that just wring any sense out of Sherlock...

Annoyed with himself, Sherlock snaps his eyes open and mentally shakes himself. This isn't like him. He doesn't do this. He's learned his lesson. Sex is messy and distracting and it distorts its own importance. It also invariably involves dealing with another human being far too closely, and that's something else Sherlock has sworn off. Giving other people power over your happiness is always a mistake.

He just needs to get through this day. Concentrate on the bake, win, go home, and put some distance between himself and this rather embarrassing encounter.

"So that's where you're hiding," John suddenly says from behind him, and Sherlock starts visibly.

Sherlock turns around. It's far, far too early for John to be here, it's barely light outside. The tent is dark, empty and cold. John is wearing a striped jumper, jeans and an expression that is somewhere between amused and wary.

"I'm not hiding, I'm preparing," Sherlock says, but he knows he's lying through his teeth. He's here because he thought it would be the one place where John Watson isn't.

"At six in the morning?" John's tone denotes his scepticism.

Sherlock shrugs. "What are you doing here?" he asks, in the spirit of attack being the best defence.

John looks down at the ground, apparently a bit embarrassed. "I'm looking for my cane," he says, and there's something in his voice that dares Sherlock to mock him.

Sherlock curses himself for being an unobservant idiot, because he didn't notice John didn't have his cane last night, and he didn't notice it now. He puts down his tea. "I'll help."

John gives him a small, grateful smile, as if thanking him for not being an asshole about this, and Sherlock feels a powerful urge to break every bone in the bodies of all the people who have ever been assholes to John, ever. "Don't do that," he snaps.

"Do what?" John asks, confused.

"Be grateful for my not being an asshole. I very much am, you're just catching me at an odd time."

John snorts a laugh and shakes his head a bit. "No, you're not," he answers, and there's a teasing warmth in his voice that Sherlock hasn't heard directed at him, ever. People don't usually like him. It's... unusual, even more than the sex.

"Yes, I am, I just haven't had the chance to prove it to you yet."

"Fine, consider me warned. Now will you help me look for my cane?"

Sherlock nods and decides to let the argument go for now.

They look around the tent, and then retrace their steps along the path they took to the house yesterday. Sherlock notes that John's limp is almost unnoticeable this morning, and he wonders what that means. They find the cane about halfway to the back entrance, lying in the grass, abandoned and forgotten by John as he ran after Sherlock.

Sherlock picks it up and holds it out to John, handle first. John hesitates, an unreadable expression on his face, then he takes the cane from Sherlock, but doesn't lean on it, just holds it in his hands, looking at it like it holds the answers to anything. "You snuck out last night," he finally says, still addressing the cane.

"I didn't sneak out, I left," Sherlock says, and he doesn't know why he's arguing semantics with John, here, because he very much did sneak out.

He starts walking towards the house. Maybe he can get a breakfast scone before filming, maybe another cup of tea, maybe even coffee, if it's decent, which it very probably won't be.

John catches up to him and walks easily beside him, cane forgotten again. "No, you snuck out. Leaving is when you're waiting for the other person to wake up, and you say goodbye, and give some indication whether proceedings were satisfactory and whether this sort of thing is likely to repeat itself. Sneaking out is waiting until the other person is asleep and then leaving without waking them."

Sherlock stops and turns around. "Your point?"

John sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “My own fault for having a conversation like this before breakfast,” he mutters, more to himself than to Sherlock. “My point, Sherlock, is this,” he says, slowly and with exaggerated patience, “We had what I thought of as very, very good sex. After which you left. And I would like to know why. I was under the impression that you had a good time last night?”

“Yes. It was...you are....” Sherlock trails off because he has no idea how to finish that sentence. John Watson is a whole lot of things he doesn’t even want to begin to articulate, funny, for one, handsome, good company, a competent baker, a brilliant shag. However. “Look. I don’t believe in tiptoeing around things, so here’s the blunt truth. We had sex. It was good. But I don’t usually have sex with strangers and I don’t intend to make a habit of it.”

John takes that in, then he looks at Sherlock speculatively. “Who do you usually have sex with?”

Sherlock’s lips twitch in spite of himself. “If you’re trying to find out whether I’m single or not, you’re not being subtle about it.”

John grins. “Wasn’t trying to be. So. Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Both? Husband, wife, three adorable kids?”

“No, and the point is that I like it that way, so last night was good, and I don’t regret it, and it won’t happen again. All right?”

John nods, and he looks a bit disappointed, but not overly so. “Fair enough. So, breakfast?”

Sherlock shrugs, relieved that there won’t be any drama. “Why not.”

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During setup, Moriarty strolls by. “Good luck, Sherlock,” he grins. “You’re going to need it.”

John turns around and is about to say something, but Sherlock just smirks. “I don’t need luck, Jim. So why don’t you just let it *rest*?”

He can see that Moriarty understands him exactly. He takes a step closer to Sherlock, but so does John. It’s a decisive sort of step, one that makes a point. He’s not doing much of anything, really, just leans casually on his cane, and the expression on his face is deceptively mild, but there’s a flinty coolness in his eyes that visibly makes Moriarty pause.

Then Jim grins, and it’s not a pleasant sight.

“Interesting,” he says, wagging a finger between the two of them, then settles a deeply unpleasant gaze on John. “I never thought you’d be his type.” His eyes linger on John’s cane long enough to make a distinct point.

“Yes, well, I never thought I’d see someone on a baking show wear chef whites unironically, so there you go,” John says in a deceptively neutral tone, but there’s an underlying steel in his voice that is, frankly speaking, hot.

Sherlock smirks and makes a shooing motion. "Run along now, we're very busy."

"Just be sure to keep your eye on the ball, Sherlock. It wouldn't do to get... distracted," Moriarty says before walking away with another chilly grin.

John relaxes visibly. "I've had friendlier exchanges with the Taliban," he mutters, and Sherlock snorts in amusement before he can help himself.

John looks at him sideways and smiles. "Good luck with your bake, Sherlock," he says gently and moves back to his workstation.

Sherlock swallows and tries to pretend he isn't watching John walk away.

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"Our showstopper challenge today has the motto "Roll me Up"."

"One rule only: Filo pastry must be used. The bakes can be sweet, savoury, pasties, pies, strudels, whatever. As always, they have four hours to complete their bakes."

"After yesterday's bake, the field is wide open. Bakers, on your mark, get set, bake."

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The room is eerily quiet as the bakers all concentrate on stretching their pastry as thinly as they possibly can. Some of them, like Moriarty and Irene, have no problem, but Anderson's has torn twice already. Of course he made the crucial mistake of using his KitchenAid, and Sherlock is writing another video in his head about how not to use a KitchenAid.

Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner are wandering between the contestants with the steadycam in tow and are watching the contestants struggling - or not - with their dough. They're at John's workstation right now, watching him as he stretches his dough out with his competent surgeon's hands, which Sherlock is very much not imagining all over his body again, thank you very much.

"You look like you've done this once or twice before," Mrs Turner remarks, sounding fondly amused.

John grins and shrugs while he stretches his dough out further. "Only every single Sunday of my childhood. My gran used to clear the dining room table and make strudel dough for apple strudel, and this is pretty much exactly the same. I helped her as soon as I could reach the table. She always said you need to be able to read a newspaper through it."

Mrs Hudson looks over to Sherlock, who's concentrating on his own dough. "And you, Sherlock? How are you doing?"

"Perfectly, obviously," Sherlock says, and he can hear a few chuckles from the crew and the other contestants.

“No ego problems here,” Mrs Turner says into the camera, and Sherlock can hear John huff a little laugh in amusement.

John looks up and meets Sherlock’s eyes for a second, and Sherlock gives him a little self-deprecating smirk. John smiles back, brief and sharp but real, and they both go back to work.

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“Fifteen minutes, bakers.”

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The room smells of vanilla, cinnamon, honey and nuts. Many bakers are doing baklava-style pastries. Some, like Janine and Mary, are making savoury pies. Irene made a spanakopita that looks stunningly perfect. Moriarty is doing his deconstructed thing again, he’s made small filo pastry rolls and is currently soaking them in syrup.

Sherlock has no idea what John is doing. He’s made what looks a bit like a cream cheese filling, and Sherlock wasn’t sure if it’s savoury or sweet until he started making custard.

Sherlock’s own bake is in the oven. The pumpkin-pistachio filling smells amazing, and the filo is browning perfectly.

John is scraping the insides of a vanilla pod into the milk, and the smell of vanilla and saffron makes Sherlock’s stomach growl, reminding him that he hasn’t eaten since a very early breakfast.

He takes a sip of his mug and gives up all pretense that he isn’t watching John carefully introduce an egg yolk into the custard. John is concentrating hard on not making scrambled eggs out of his custard, and his tongue is sticking out a little between his teeth. He’s sweaty and absorbed and dusted with flour from head to toe and Sherlock wants to muss him up even more.

John’s eyes flick to him briefly, and Sherlock immediately looks away, busying himself with cleaning up his workspace. John turns his head a little and rakes his eyes slowly over Sherlock’s frame in a way that leaves Sherlock in no doubt what he’s thinking about. Then he turns back to his custard and stirs, and Sherlock feels weak in the knees and slightly hot, and he definitely knows it has little to do with the actual room temperature.

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The judging goes quickly, this time. Anderson is a mess. Irene, Molly and Moriarty are competent and get lots of praise. Mary and Janine aren’t as bad as Anderson, but neither of their bakes is spectacular.

Sherlock gets praise for originality and taste.

John wins. Easily. His cream cheese strudel (or topfenstrudel as he calls it) is, according to the judges, light, lemony, sweet, perfect, his filo is crispy and thin, and his custard is, according to Sally, “Good enough to drink.”

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Sherlock smokes his second cigarette in a row, and he's still feeling oddly unsettled.

He should have won. Why didn't he win? His bake was objectively perfect. There was nothing he could have done better.

John is competent, yes, but he's messy, he barely ever measures anything and he's clearly not even really trying to do something innovative.

And yet.

And yet, the easy confidence with which he stretched out his filo and the quality of his custard tell a completely different story.

Is Moriarty right? Is he taking his eye off the ball?

Frustrated, Sherlock grinds his half-smoked cigarette into the gravel with his heel and picks up his equipment. Time to go home.

John is waiting in the parking lot, duffel bag by his feet, carrying his cane but not leaning on it. He smiles at Sherlock. "Hey you. Everything all right? You went off rather quickly there, didn't have a chance to talk to you."

"What is there to say?" Sherlock walks past John and starts packing up his car.

John follows him, watching him stack his boxes in his boot for several moments. "You know, snogging me into the wall and giving me an impressive cold shoulder not 24 hours later is the sort of thing that might confuse a chap somewhat."

Sherlock turns around and gestures between them. "I told you, nothing happening here. It was fun, it's over. You're just a distraction I can't afford. Case in point, I lost today, and I really shouldn't have. So go away, and leave me alone."

For a moment, John is silent, scrutinising Sherlock with an unreadable expression. There's something in his eyes, some of the steel he briefly showed to Moriarty earlier. "So what was your mistake?"

"What?" Sherlock frowns, thrown by the question.

"If I distracted you, and that's why you lost, you must have made a mistake, because of the distraction. So what was it?"

Sherlock blinks, and John presses on. "What was the mistake, Sherlock? Because from what I saw, your bake was bloody perfect. So could it be, Mr Consulting Baker Genius, that my bake was just better than yours, and that the sex we had last night was unrelated to the fact that I kicked your arse in competition today? Could it be that we're not just a group of amateurs, that some of us actually know what we're bloody doing? I've been baking since I was five years old, Sherlock, so get off your bloody high horse and acknowledge that you're not the only person who can bake here."

Sherlock opens his mouth to answer, then closes it again when he realises he has nothing whatsoever to say.

“John!” Janine calls from behind them.

John smirks at Sherlock. “That’s my lift. See you on Saturday.”

With that, he turns and walks away and Sherlock is left there in the parking lot, still dumbstruck. Half of him is seething, and the other half thinks the same thing he thinks every time he sees John. *That was bloody spectacular.*

Week 4- Nostalgia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sherlock looks up from his microscope and stretches out his back.

It's Tuesday, and he's oddly dissatisfied with life in general. He shouldn't be. The first episode aired yesterday. He watched it, and he's satisfied with his baking performance. It led to his brother's calls escalating to daily instead of three times a week, and to the deduction that Mycroft must be out of the country, since he has yet to appear unannounced in Sherlock's kitchen. It also led to the predicted surge of popularity for both his and Irene's YouTube channels, with his having a slight edge because he won. His hits have quadrupled and his subscribers have doubled. He could quit today, and this entire exercise would have already served most of its purpose.

He admits to himself that it's tempting to not bother with this boring mess of a show anymore. The theme for next week is nostalgia, which is so trite that Sherlock was glad that nobody saw his impressive eye-roll when he opened the email. The technical is Battenberg cake, and the mere thought of that bake is enough to make quitting seem like an excellent idea. He also has no idea what to do for the showstopper, since nostalgia is a feeling that he never indulges in, and that no period of his life remotely instills in him.

If he continues to make good content, he can translate the surge in popularity into the increase in revenue he needs without having to go through another tedious weekend. He posted a new video today in response to the surge, about how not to use a KitchenAid, and he already has more hits and comments in a few hours than he normally gets on videos in weeks.

His phone dings again, and he sees that he's got another like for the video. From John Watson.

A like, but not a comment. Just for a tiny moment, Sherlock allows himself to wonder what that might mean. Then he shakes himself out of it. *Get a grip. It was sex. It was good sex.*

Good sex, which he has been thinking about more than he would like to admit. He's also been thinking about John in the parking lot, cutting him down to size, and Sherlock genuinely can't remember the last time that happened, and he can't believe how little he minds.

Without letting him think about it too much, he opens John's blog on his phone, and hates himself a little for the thrill that goes through him when he sees a new entry.

Wow. Hello to my new followers. I suppose you saw the show and googled me?

So. Welcome.

Hate to say it, but there's nothing much to see here. I mean, if you want to I can share my trial bakes for the show for you? If that's content you would care to see? I mean, it sort of spoils the show, I suppose, but I could artfully disguise it so you can't guess what it is?

Here's the first one, let's see whether you enjoy this. If any of you can guess what it is, I will... be very impressed. No other prize to offer, I'm afraid.

Sherlock looks critically at the picture. A simple sponge, cut into squares. A bowl with something that looks like a darker cake batter soaking in something or other, and a small pot with something pink in it. And all of it crowded together on a small, ugly, brown workspace. He can see a small oven in the background, and two hotplates.

He opens the comment window before he can talk himself out of it.

@thescienceofbaking.co.uk

You're making something disturbingly pink.

He goes back to his experiment, but when his phone chimes five minutes later, he has no memory of what he was even looking at through the microscope.

@johnwatsonsblog.co.uk

You're going to need to be more precise than that.

Sherlock's fingers hover over the keys, and then he types out what he really wants to say.

@thescienceofbaking.co.uk

You were right.

The reply comes almost instantly.

@johnwatsonsblog.co.uk

Apology accepted.

@thescienceofbaking.co.uk

I wasn't apologising.

@johnwatsonsblog.co.uk

Weren't you?

Sherlock smiles.

@thescienceofbaking.co.uk

Your kitchen is a sixties disaster.

@johnwatsonsblog.co.uk

Fits well with this week's theme, though, right? Nothing says nostalgia quite like formica worktops and brown kitchen tiles.

And suddenly, Sherlock is five years old, running his fingers over the cracked formica table top in their giant, cavernous kitchen. He's mixing eggs and sugar with a hand mixer, and his nanny - her name was Peggy and Sherlock adored her - helps him crack in the eggs. Cinnamon, sharp and somehow still sweet. Nutmeg, Peggy lets him grate it, telling him to watch out for his fingers. Flour, he gets to spoon it in while Peggy folds. Into the oven, and he sits and watches it rise while the smell of caramel fills the kitchen. They eat the sticky

toffee pudding out of the tin, still warm, dipping the chunks of the sponge into the sauce. It's delicious and altogether forbidden and they grin at each other over the breakfast counter, co-conspirators.

Peggy always let him help with the cooking and the baking, until his mother discovered it, and got Sherlock his first chemistry set so he could, in her words, "learn something useful while messing around". Sherlock loved the chemistry set, but he didn't understand, and still doesn't to this day, why he wasn't allowed to view the same principles at work because the results were edible.

He pulls his notebook closer. Now how to make sticky toffee pudding interesting enough for television...

He takes out his phone and taps out a quick last message.

@thescienceofbaking.co.uk
See you Saturday. And thank you.

The reply comes much later, when he's already in his studio kitchen, working on his first batch of sticky toffee puddings, all thoughts of quitting abandoned for now.

@johnwatsonsblog.co.uk
Not sure what I did, but you're welcome.

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On Saturday, he's the first one to arrive as always. They're filming in Essex, this time, and the tent has been pitched in the large park of another historic mansion. Sherlock gropes his way to the tent through mud and driving rain, and when he finally finds the entrance, he's wet and miserable. The tent is dimly lit. It's an hour past dawn, clouds obscure the sky, and Sherlock for once looks forward to the warmth of nine ovens and the headlights.

The crew ignore him while he checks the workstations, they're used to him doing it by now. Emma the contestant wrangler greets him cheerfully and hands him the key and directions to their accomodation. He thanks her with a dismissive hand wave and starts setting up his equipment.

When he's done, he gets himself a cup of tea, and a second one for John, then sets the tea down at the workstation next to his. He doesn't allow himself to think about why he did this, he tells himself he's just being polite, though he knows it's not true.

Molly's already there, setting up, and she greets him with a cheerful wave. He nods at her and sits down on the barstool at his workstation to mentally go through his bake.

The other contestants start arriving, and by now he recognises them by their tread. Irene's clicking heels, Janine stepping over the cables. Moriarty, firm and heavy-booted. Neela's rubber-soled trainers barely make a sound. Mike, heavy tread in soft brown loafers. John, cane an odd counterpoint to his careful steps.

He opens his eyes. John is standing by the workstation and unpacks. He looks over at Sherlock and smiles, lifting his tea in wordless thanks.

Sherlock nods slightly in acknowledgement and goes back to answering YouTube comments.

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“Our technical challenge this week is a British classic: Battenberg cake.”

“Our bakers will have two hours to assemble a perfect cake. Bakers, on your mark, get set, bake.”

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Sherlock dislikes pink. He dislikes food colouring, and he dislikes marzipan. He dislikes this challenge, period. Two hours aren't enough to properly cool down the sponges. He would like to make his own marzipan, but there isn't time and he wasn't allowed to bring it. Apricot jam is boring. His socks are still drying from wading to the tent in the rain.

He is doing his utmost to restrain himself from snapping at anyone, but apparently he isn't doing a very good job of it, because when the sponges are in the oven, John returns from the catering tent with a second mug for him.

“Here, drink before you murder someone.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes but takes the offered cup. “I seriously hope the challenges are going to get a bit less tedious when the field narrows down somewhat.”

“Mistakes?” John asks quietly, leaning next to Sherlock on his workstation.

Sherlock looks around the room. “Janine's used too much food colouring, Mary overmixed her batter. Neither of them have yet sieved their jam, but they might still do that. Neela's sponges won't rise, they will be dry and she'll have trouble getting them all into the same shape”

“Molly?”

“Nice batter, good height, not too much food colouring, and she's letting the marzipan sit at room temperature, that's wise.”

“Irene and Moriarty?”

“No mistakes so far,” Sherlock grits out through his teeth.

“Me?” John asks, giving Sherlock a teasing grin.

Sherlock looks down into his tea. “Perfect.”

“Oh, high praise from the master,” John teases, but Sherlock can hear the warmth of his smile in his voice.

John's oven clock dings and John goes to get out his cakes, one pale yellow, one just the right shade of blushing pink.

Sherlock hates pink.

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They're sent out of the tent for the usual money shots of the bakes, and usually Sherlock would go outside for a cigarette, but it's still raining, so the contestants all huddle together around the tea urn.

"Did you watch it on Monday?" Mary asks, and everybody nods.

"Camera does add a bit," Mike says with a grin, rubbing his ample stomach.

The others all chuckle, except Moriarty, who snorts, unamused. He opens his mouth, but then John looks at him pointedly and he closes his mouth again. He turns and walks away, muttering something about imbecilic amateurs and tedious and boring. Sherlock tends to agree with him, but he's not stupid enough to voice these thoughts aloud.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Molly asks, fiddling with her apron. "I think my bake might be shit."

"It won't be," Sherlock says, just as his phone buzzes. He takes it out of his trouser pocket. YouTube comment, a stupid question about how much baking powder is too much. How do some people survive day in, day out without tripping over their own shoelaces?

"How do you know?" Molly asks.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "You're a competent baker. You've done very well so far, so the chances of your bake tomorrow being adequate at least are high. Stop being insecure, you have no reason for it."

A short silence falls, and Sherlock becomes aware that everybody is looking at him. Molly's near tears. "Oh, thank you, Sherlock," she says, and takes an abortive step towards him, but seems to think better of it.

"Softie," John mutters under his breath, an amused half-smile curling in the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, shut up," Sherlock answers, and everybody laughs, then John asks Mike a question about his job and Sherlock tunes out the rest of the conversation to answer this incredibly stupid YouTube comment. But he's entirely aware that John is standing a bit too close to him, and that their arms brush whenever either of them shifts. He doesn't move away. John doesn't, either.

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The judging is so boring that Sherlock almost falls asleep. None of the cakes are horrible, and most are competently made. Janine's is too pink, and Neela's is a bit on the flat side, but

neither is a catastrophe. Moriarty's is a textbook example of mathematical precision, but the judges award the prize to Irene, because hers tastes the best. Sherlock is pretty sure Irene must have done something to improve the classic recipe, and when he tastes her cake, he can tell that she added some lemon zest to the recipe and spiked the apricot jam with rum. It's subtle, but he can taste traces of it.

It's brilliant, and he hates that he didn't think of it. He needs to step up his game. Fortunately, the technical doesn't count for much, and his showstopper is going to be fantastic, so he can still win this round.

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The contestants are staying in a large, cozy house with several guest rooms and a shared kitchen and dining area. The contestants all scatter on arriving, and Sherlock goes to have a much-needed shower. He peels off his disgusting socks with a deep sigh of relief and washes off the sweat and flour and rain.

He checks his emails and is writing a new blog entry on the chemistry of marzipan when someone knocks on his door.

He gets off the bed and opens it. Molly's on the other side, smiling at him shyly. "We've got pizza. John said to get you."

For a moment, Sherlock hesitates. He dislikes having to make conversation with people he barely knows. On the other hand, he is hungry, and it's still raining, so he has to either brace the rain or order something on his own, and both seem too much trouble right now. So he nods and follows her downstairs.

The contestants minus Moriarty are sitting around the dining table, most of them in various states of undress. Mary's wearing a revealing tank top and yoga leggings, Janine is in a grubby jumper and worn jeans. Irene looks perfect as always, she even renewed her make-up, offering a sharp contrast to Molly, who's in pyjama pants, slippers and a thigh-length jumper. Mike and Neela are both wearing sweatpants and giant hoodies. John is wearing the oatmeal-coloured atrocity that Sherlock peeled off him last week, and Sherlock tries not to think about how the wool felt when he fisted his hands into it.

John is distributing pizza slices from a few open boxes on the kitchen counter. He smiles at Sherlock when he enters the kitchen. "Salami, mushroom, ham or double cheese?"

"Surprise me."

John snorts a laugh and hands Sherlock a plate with a variety of slices. Sherlock takes the plate into the dining room, where the others have gathered around the table. Janine is passing a bottle of red wine around and most of the others fill their wine glasses at least half full.

For a moment, silence falls as everybody eats their pizza. It's mediocre, but it's warm and the garlicky bite is a welcome relief from the smell of sugar and cinnamon from earlier today.

"I'm starting to hate cake," John says, taking a swig of his wine.

“Oh god, yes,” Mary agrees, gesturing with her pizza slice. “Today at lunch I had a strong urge to eat just pickles.”

That earns her knowing laughs from the other participants.

“My coworkers are sick of me bringing bakes into chambers,” Janine says. “I never thought this day would come.”

“One good thing about working in a morgue, I don’t have that problem,” Molly observes dryly, earning a round of laughs.

“Don’t complain about cakes, people. Sooner or later we’ll get a savoury challenge, and you will all wish you could just bake a goddamned cake again.”

Irene’s pronouncement is met with audible groans.

“Oh god, Irene, why would you say that?” Janine points her pizza slice at her accusingly. “I’m just trying to get through this week without having a nervous breakdown.”

“Can anyone here actually cook?” John asks, looking around the table.

His question is greeted with headshakes all around and somewhat horrified expressions.

Sherlock snorts. “I can’t imagine what possible difference there is between cooking and baking. If anything, baking is much harder, because you need to be more precise. It’s just chemistry, both of it. A plus B equals C. Easy.”

“I see your point, but I don’t agree,” John says.

“Cooking is a lot more varied than baking, after all,” Molly jumps in, “Spices, meats, veggies, different textures and flavours, varying cooking times. Give me a nice, simple, straightforward Battenberg cake any day.”

“Baking is easier because it’s more precise,” Neela agrees.

“But both processes are essentially the same. Raw products combined in a certain fixed way, heat, eat. Science.” Sherlock makes a ‘there you have it’ gesture with his pizza slice.

John shakes his head. “Sure, that’s the way you prepare food. But that’s not what food *is*. If food were a mere ‘A+B, heat, eat’, then baking wouldn’t exist. The mere existence of baking means that food is more than just chemistry.”

“What do you mean by more?” Mary asks, leaning in. Sherlock figures that John must have an excellent view of her cleavage from where he’s sitting. To his credit, he ignores it and answers her question.

“Food is pleasure. And emotion. And memories. Why is this week’s challenge nostalgia? Because food is culture, not just science. Food is art, emotion, it’s a way we differentiate ourselves from animals. If it were just ‘A+B, heat, eat’, we’d still be roasting wild boar over the fire.”

“I love wild boar,” Janine says and everybody laughs.

“Attaching emotional value to food is the reason we’re all overfed,” Sherlock points out, waving his greasy, deeply unhealthy but delicious pizza around as illustration. “The food industry has found ways to ensure our food is filled with salt and sugar, the very chemicals that tickle our brain’s pleasure centres and trick us into feeling good when we eat. Therefore, we eat more to feel good more.”

“You never got any lollipops after you had your flu shots as a kid, did you?” John asks with a teasing grin, and Sherlock smiles back, caught in the easy, friendly teasing. He can’t remember the last time anyone smiled at him like this. He feels warm all over. Must be the wine.

“You’re both right,” Irene says, getting up. “And speaking of food that makes us feel good: Who wants chocolate?”

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Sherlock can’t sleep. He’s only had half a glass of wine, but he feels it sloshing around in his stomach, in his head, his veins. The bed is deeply uncomfortable and he’s thirsty from the alcohol and the over-spiced pizza.

He gets up and makes his way down to the kitchen for a glass of water. Maybe he’ll see what teas they’ve got.

He smells it on the stairs. Sugar, butter, flour. Baking powder. Vanilla. Someone is baking scones.

Quietly, he makes his way down the stairs, craning his head around the open doorway to the kitchen to see who it is, because he would put it past exactly nobody in this house to bake scones at one in the morning. But there are some he would mind bumping into less than others.

Unsurprisingly, it’s John.

Sherlock steps out of his hiding place and leans in the doorway. John has his back to him, and for a moment, Sherlock is tempted to say something, but somehow he doesn’t want to, just wants to have a quiet moment to himself to unabashedly watch John be good at this.

John is measuring out flour - well, for a certain value of measuring. He’s tipping a quantity into a bowl and he stops at some point that looks entirely random from where Sherlock is standing. He adds small chunks of butter and a bit of milk, all without touching a scale or any measuring instrument. He doesn’t even use a blasted cup.

There’s no hesitation in his movements, no false starts, and from what little Sherlock can see of his face, he has a look of deep concentration yet deep abstraction, like he’s letting his hands perform an action he’s done a million times before without conscious thought.

“Um.”

Sherlock looks up and meets John's eyes in the glass of the kitchen cabinet.

"How long were you planning on standing there?" John inquires mildly.

Sherlock shrugs, still holding John's eyes in the reflection. "I didn't want to startle you."

"Well, come in and sit down, or leave, but don't hover, Sherlock, it makes me nervous."

"Fine, fine." Sherlock raises his hands in a disclaiming gesture.

He goes over to the kettle and flips through the assortment of tea bags arranged in a neat little bowl. "Tea?"

"Yes, please."

Sherlock flips the kettle on and watches John knead the scone dough. "You never measure," he points out, and it comes out vaguely accusing.

John snorts in amusement. "Of course I measure. Look," he holds up the bag of flour. "This is a kilo bag, and it was full. Now it's about half full, that's approximately 500 grams of flour. A packet of butter has 250 grams, half of that is about 125. If I've got it a bit wrong, I just add more flour or butter or milk. I know the consistency I want, and it doesn't really matter whether I'm going to end up with 12 scones, or 10, or 11. Tomorrow, when I'm baking for a national audience, I'll use a scale again. But for now, for me, this is good enough."

Sherlock concedes the point with a shrug. "But they will never be exactly the same if you don't measure."

"Ah," John says and smiles. "Yes. That's completely true, of course. It's the thing that truly separates amateurs from professionals. Consistent quality." He carefully rolls out his scone dough and takes a knife out of a drawer to cut it into squares.

The kettle clicks off and Sherlock pours hot water over the tea bags. He notices the cane hanging from the oven door when John opens it and puts the scones in to bake. John sets the timer and accepts the tea from Sherlock.

Sherlock sits down at the kitchen table and John sits opposite him. The only light comes from the dim lamp over the kitchen sink. It's oddly cozy, for all that the tiles are cold against Sherlock's naked feet and he's dressed only in a thin sleep shirt and pyjama bottoms.

John is watching him, half wary, half curious. "Couldn't sleep?" he finally asks, and Sherlock recognises that it's a rhetorical question.

"Obviously."

John's lips twitch in a brief smile. "Granted, not the most original question to ask someone you meet in a kitchen at one in the morning."

Sherlock shrugs and takes a sip of his tea. It's a very nice herbal chai blend, and Sherlock enjoys the smell and the heat of the spices blooming behind his nose.

“You know, this is probably the only house in Britain where nobody will think I’m crazy for making scones in the middle of the night,” John says, gesturing with his tea and nearly spilling a bit.

“No, they’ll only criticise the way you did it and point out a thousand ways you might have done these scones differently.”

John huffs a laugh. “So, genius. How might I have done the scones differently?”

“I’ll know that when I taste them.”

John looks at him speculatively. “Do we have any jam?”

Sherlock feels his lips stretch into a smug smile. “Wait here.”

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“Try this.”

“Oh my god. What is this, raspberry?”

Sherlock grins. “Guess.”

John takes another spoonful and looks thoughtfully at the colour. “Definitely raspberry. And something else. I’d say mint?”

“Very good. Almost nobody guesses the mint.”

John smiles, obviously pleased with the compliment. He gestures at the other glass. “What’s this one?”

“You’ll never guess,” Sherlock says with a confident smile.

The oven dings and John gets up to get the scones out. They’re fluffy and gorgeous, and John plates up two and fetches the butter from the fridge.

Sherlock breaks his scone in half and inhales the warm, homey smell. He breaks off a piece and spreads a bit of butter on it, which starts to melt into the scone. He puts it into his mouth, and closes his eyes for a moment.

There are twenty ways he could make these scones more interesting. Cranberries, lemon zest, cinnamon, chocolate, poppy seeds, the permutations are endless.

But sometimes simplicity is terribly underrated. “Perfect,” he says, opening his eyes to catch John smiling at him, fond and warm and heady in this semi-dark kitchen, the smell of baked goods in the air.

“Try the jam,” Sherlock says, pushing the jar over to John.

John dips a spoon into the nearly black jam, and spreads a bit on his scone. He takes a bite and chews thoughtfully. “Blueberries, obviously. Something else, I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“Elderberries,” Sherlock supplies.

“Oh, of course!” John takes another spoonful and spreads it over his scone. “It’s bloody delicious.”

He takes another bite of his scone and gestures at the jam. “Reminds me of the elderberry jelly my gran used to make. She never wrote that recipe down, so it sort of died with her. No one in the family knew how to do it quite like her.”

“It should be possible to reconstruct the recipe, you can probably do it from memory if you try a few times.”

John shrugs and gives Sherlock a sad little half-smile. “Not the same, though. I think half the point of being nostalgic for food my gran used to make is the fact that she was the one making it.”

“Probably,” Sherlock agrees. “I’ve observed that many people confuse nostalgia for their childhood with a general belief that life was simpler or easier or better then, simply because they were children and had all their needs catered to by adults whose job it was to look after them. Stupid, really.”

“What are you nostalgic for, then?” John asks, taking a sip of his tea. He’s looking at Sherlock with a genuine, open curiosity that makes Sherlock feel warm all over. He isn’t used to having someone’s undivided and non-judgemental attention. Most people are put off by his bluntness, but John seems to enjoy it somehow.

So Sherlock doesn’t sugarcoat his next answer, either. “Nothing. I hated being a child, and no episode of my life has yet lent itself to over-romanticised remembrance.”

“Wow, your childhood sounds... not much fun,” John observes, and there’s a note of sympathy there that tells Sherlock all he needs to know about John Watson’s childhood, namely that it was brief, and rough, and not especially enjoyable.

“Oh, there was nothing wrong with my childhood as such, I suppose,” Sherlock says with a shrug. “My parents were nice, my home was comfortable. I just disliked being a child, generally. Constantly being told to eat, sleep, get dressed, wash, comb your hair, do your homework, don’t do this, don’t do that, and nobody takes you seriously in an intellectual discussion.” *Especially not your big brother who thinks you’re a bit slow because you only skipped Year 1, not Year 2 and 3 as well,* Sherlock adds silently.

“Yes, I see how that must have been annoying for a stubborn genius like you.” John is wearing that teasing grin again, the one that makes Sherlock want to taste it.

“What are you nostalgic for?” he asks, anything to prolong this quiet midnight interlude, just the two of them in the dark, eating scones, enveloped in the lovely smell of freshly baked

goods.

John rubs a hand over the back of his neck and looks into his tea as if it holds the answer to anything. He's silent for so long that Sherlock is sure he won't answer. But then he sighs and seems to come to a decision. "Honestly?" He looks up and meets Sherlock's curious gaze with a small self-deprecating smile. "This is something I will never say on tv. But. Afghanistan."

"You miss the war?" Sherlock asks, keeping his tone carefully neutral.

John smirks at him humorlessly. "No. War is a fucking mess, and good people die. On both sides. But when I was there, I knew what I was supposed to do. I had a place. I belonged. And sure, I hated it sometimes. Many times. But I knew what I was. Knew who I was. And that's not something you can easily replace."

For a moment, they just look at each other quietly, and Sherlock feels at once enormously privileged and intimidated by John's raw honesty. "You definitely shouldn't say that on telly."

John laughs quietly, and some of the sadness leaves him. "No, I'll just tell a sappy story about my gran. People love sappy gran stories."

"Good plan."

John smiles at him and gets up. "Right. Time for bed. I might even be able to sleep now."

Sherlock gets up too and helps John put away the leftovers from their midnight snack.

"So," John says, smiling at him, standing facing him in front of the stainless steel fridge, the dim light from above the sink picking out the gold strands in his hair. "Good night, then."

Sherlock kisses him. It's an instinctive, knee-jerk reaction, his body overriding his mind with a longing for warm-more-closer-now.

John hesitates for a second, then he parts his lips and kisses Sherlock back. John tastes of scones and tea and melted butter. One of his hands winds into the hair on the back of Sherlock's neck, the other is gripping at his waist, teasing at the drawstrings of his pyjama pants. It's insanely arousing and Sherlock grinds his hips into John's instinctively.

"You are the most confusing man on the planet," John gasps against Sherlock's mouth.

"Problem?" Sherlock asks, hands drifting down to grab John's arse cheeks with both hands.

"God, no," John mutters and reels Sherlock in for another kiss.

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As soon as the door closes behind them, Sherlock backs John up against it and gets his hands under his dressing gown, peeling it off. John reels him in for an open-mouthed, hungry kiss, curling his tongue around Sherlock's in a way that goes straight to Sherlock's cock and makes it twitch. Since there's nothing separating them except the thin fabric of threadbare

pyjama bottoms, John can surely feel Sherlock's reaction, if the smug grin he smiles against Sherlock's lips is any indication.

Sherlock thinks he needs to wipe that grin off John's face and sinks to his knees, mouthing John's cock through the thin cotton. John makes a delicious sound, half moan, half bitten-off curse, and Sherlock decides that he wants to hear it again. So he mouths along John's length, teasing at his hardness through the fabric, and it's strangely erotic, the way he's not-quite-tasting John. He blows hot air on John's erection and scrapes over it with just a hint of teeth, and John's head hits the door with an audible thump.

"Quiet," Sherlock says, lips moving against John's crotch.

John snorts. "You've got to be kidding. How am I supposed to be quiet with you doing that?"

"Do you want me to stop?" Sherlock says, teasing along the rigid length.

"Do you want me to die of frustration?" John answers, gasping when Sherlock teases his tongue along the edges of John's pyjama pants.

"That would be a tremendous waste," Sherlock says and pulls John's pyjama pants down to get down to business.

John isn't quiet. Sherlock doesn't mind.

And later, when John takes Sherlock apart with his fingers inside Sherlock and his mouth around Sherlock's cock, Sherlock isn't quiet either.

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"So," John says, quietly, his breath ghosting against Sherlock's sweat-damp skin. "That happened. Again." He sounds equally amused and confused.

Sherlock rolls to his side to face John and props his head on his elbow to look at John, naked and tousled and sweaty, the light from the lone bedside lamp picking out the gold in the fine hairs on his arms and legs. He looks good enough to eat like this, and even though Sherlock has already tasted his fill, he's still hungry.

"Problem?" he echoes his question from before.

John smirks at him, resting a hand casually on Sherlock's hip and pulling him closer, tangling their legs together until they're thoroughly entwined. "No, but I'm not the one whose knickers got into a twist the first time this happened."

Sherlock rolls them so he's lying on top of John, covering his body with his own. John shivers and hooks a leg around Sherlock's hip, drawing him even closer. "You were right. My bake was perfect," Sherlock says, nosing along John's neck. "Yours was perfect too." He bites down on the sensitive skin under John's ear.

John gasps, and his entire body arches against Sherlock's. "Do that again."

Sherlock smirks. "My pleasure."

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It's six in the morning, and Sherlock is woken by the sounds of activity in the house. For a moment, he lies still, listens to the others moving around, bathroom doors opening and closing, the grinding of coffee beans from the kitchen, accompanied by the smell of fresh coffee floating upstairs. He turns his head and buries his nose in John's hair. John smells of sweat and cheap shampoo and vanilla. Sherlock is filled with a drowsy sort of contentment, lying here listening to the house wake up, feeling John's chest rise and fall against his own.

It's not a feeling he's especially used to. His normal restless energy seems to have expended itself last night, leaving an odd sort of stillness in its wake.

He looks down at John and meets John's drowsy eyes. For a moment, they just look at each other quietly. Then John smiles and rolls on top of Sherlock. "Good morning," he mutters against Sherlock's lips, before leaning down for a long, deep, breathtaking kiss.

"We need to get up," Sherlock gets out between kisses, but he knows he isn't being very consistent, because he's wrapping his legs around John to drag him closer.

John laughs against Sherlock's lips, and Sherlock can feel the vibrations of John's laugh in his own body. It's incredibly arousing, and Sherlock kisses John back with renewed vigour, letting his hands roam all over John's body.

A knock on the door makes them break apart hastily. "Yes?" John says, then looks at Sherlock, brow adorably wrinkled in confusion. "Wait, is this your room or mine?" he whispers.

Sherlock hides his face in his pillow to muffle his laughter. "Yours," he finally gasps out. "I think."

Truth is, he isn't entirely certain. The rooms all look pretty much identical, and both he and John apparently stuck their overnight cases in their closets. And last night, as they stumbled upstairs, unwilling to let go of each other for longer than absolutely necessary, he wasn't paying attention to whatever room they stumbled into. Apparently, neither did John, which means they were lucky that they didn't end up in another contestant's room.

"John, you want to join us for breakfast?" Molly says from the other side of the door, and both Sherlock and John exhale in relief.

"Yeah, thanks, Molly, I'll be right out."

"I'll go get Sherlock, too."

"Don't bother, I'll tell him," John says, clamping a hand over Sherlock's mouth to keep Molly from hearing him giggle.

Sherlock bites at John's hand, and John's eyes go dark. Sherlock smirks against his palm. Good to know.

“Okay, well, see you in a few, then.”

“Yes, thank you,” John says and Sherlock pulls him in to stifle John’s giggles against his lips.

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Fifteen minutes later, they’ve both pulled themselves together enough to sneak Sherlock back into his room. Sherlock takes a quick shower and dresses, then goes downstairs to breakfast. He’s ravenously hungry and his entire body is thrumming with satisfaction, something he is very much not used to.

Irene, Janine, and Molly are at the second cup of tea stage of breakfast when he joins them in the dining room.

Molly hands him a plate with the scones John baked last night. “Here, have one. They’re excellent.”

“I know.” Sherlock takes one and notes with pleasure that Molly warmed them up again for breakfast.

“Who made them, anyway?” Molly asks.

“Watson,” Irene answers with a knowing smirk at Sherlock.

“How do you know?” Molly asks.

Irene holds out John’s cane. “Found this hanging from the oven door.”

Janine leans in and drops her voice. “What’s going on with the cane, anyway? Sometimes it seems like he needs it; sometimes he’s fine.”

“That’s absolutely none of your business, so leave him alone,” Sherlock snaps, feeling an entirely irrational surge of quick, defensive anger.

“I wasn’t going to ask him,” Janine says, rolling her eyes.

“Still, he’s so cool during filming, I never thought he’d be the type to stress-bake,” Irene says, ladling some of Sherlock’s home-made jam onto her scone.

Janine helps herself to more tea. “Well, who in this house doesn’t stress-bake?”

“Oh god, before my final exams, I stayed up all night and baked five batches of brownies,” Molly groans.

“Special brownies or regular?” Irene inquires and bites into her scone.

Molly grins. “Regular. I made the special kind after the exam.”

“I almost made special brownies for my sister’s hen party, then thought better of it. Her friends are stupid enough without getting them high,” Janine says, reaching for the teapot.

“What did you make instead?” Molly asks.

Janine shrugs and pours herself another cup. “Cupcakes.”

“I’d love a cupcake challenge.” Molly sighs and holds out her teacup to Janine for a refill.

“Oh yes, that would be absolutely lovely.”

“What would be lovely?” John asks as he enters the room. He takes the vacant place next to Sherlock and helps himself to tea and a scone.

“Cupcake challenge,” Sherlock says, then bites into his scone, mostly to stop himself from staring at John. He’s wearing well-fitting jeans and a blue button-down that brings out his eyes, and Sherlock has the ridiculous urge to touch him.

“I don’t know,” John says, putting milk into his tea. “Anything but puff pastry, and I’m fine.”

“Oh god, puff pastry, anything but that,” Janine agrees with a groan.

“We won’t get a puff pastry challenge until the final,” Sherlock points out, tearing his gaze away from the crumbs on John’s lips. “It needs to rest for too long.”

“From your lips to the producers’ ears,” Janine says. “Well, speaking of, the bus will pick us up in 20 minutes.”

Molly follows Janine out of the room, but Irene stays and looks between them. “The jam is really nice, Sherlock,” she says, then hands John his cane, who takes it with a slightly embarrassed frown.

Irene smirks at Sherlock like a cat that caught a canary. “Well, gents, see you on the bus.”

John looks after her. “What was that all about?”

Sherlock shrugs and tries valiantly not to blush. “Nothing. Irene likes to think she’s very clever.”

“Pot-kettle,” John says, smiling fondly at Sherlock. “So. Last night.”

“Can we skip the relationship talk? Yes, we had sex. Again. Yes, it was nice. Again.”

“Nice?” John raises his eyebrows and smirks, leaning in to mutter, “The noises you made sounded a hell of a lot better than nice.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but he smiles back at John almost automatically. “All right, it was good.”

John grins. “Right, then. So. Do you maybe want to go to dinner with me sometime?”

“I don’t do dinner,” Sherlock says and takes a bite of his scone.

“Oh.” John looks a bit deflated, but he rallies quickly and pours himself some more tea, an obvious ploy to have something to do other than fidget.

“Doesn’t mean we can’t have dessert,” Sherlock says, hoping to get that expression off John’s face, that deflated, slightly self-conscious look.

John frowns, the disappointment on his face replaced with confusion. “Explain to me how this only dessert thing is supposed to work.”

“Look. Our association has a clear end date. Once either of us is off the show, we’ll never see each other again. So let’s not make this any more complicated than it is,” Sherlock says, gesturing at John with his scone. “Chemically speaking, sex isn’t any different from a good piece of cake. It’s a mistake to attach any particular feeling to either a piece of cake, or to sex. It’s just dopamine, John. You should know that. Chemical reactions in the brain’s pleasure center.”

“So what you’re saying is,” John summarises around a bite of scone, “that last night’s cake was good, and that we might share a slice again, but that’s no reason to buy the bakery?”

“I think we’ve stretched this metaphor about as far as it will go,” Sherlock says, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice.

“I agree. Well then, off to bake some actual cake, then.”

Sherlock nods and finishes his tea. “Let’s go.”

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“The theme for our showstopper this week is nostalgia, and I for one can’t wait to see what our bakers come up with.”

“They have the customary four hours to complete their bake. Bakers, on your mark, get set, bake.”

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“So, Sherlock,” Mrs Hudson says as she appears at his elbow with the steadicam. “Talk to us. I see you’re making sticky toffee pudding, but what is this?”

“Dates soaked in tea,” Sherlock answers, then grins at Mrs Hudson. “Come back later when I flame the toffee sauce for a really spectacular shot.”

“Show-off,” John mutters fondly from the next station, and Mrs Hudson chuckles.

“You two seem to have hit it off splendidly,” she says, apparently hoping for a bit of gossip for the cameras.

Sherlock shrugs. “He’s all right,” he mutters, not taking his eyes off his batter, but he knows there’s a smile tugging at his lips and he doesn’t especially mind.

“All this flattery will go to my head,” John remarks dryly, and Mrs Hudson laughs.

“What are you baking today, John?” she asks, and the camera moves on.

“Punschkrapfen.” John holds up his mobile and shows a picture. From what Sherlock can see, there’s a lot of pink.

“They’re little, pink - well, I guess, Petits Fours, and they’re layered. Sponge on the bottom, then a mixture of sponge, orange juice or rum, and jam, and then another layer of sponge, and then they’re glazed with a pink sugar icing.”

“Another recipe from your gran, I suppose?” Mrs Hudson guesses.

John nods. “Yep. This is a great way of using up stale cake. We had a lot of that at the bakery. They’re a bit of an acquired taste, but I love them. Maybe because I wasn’t allowed to have any as a kid. Too much rum. I’m doing two other Petits Fours as well, but the punschkrapfen are the main event.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

She turns back to Sherlock. “And where’s your recipe from?”

“It’s mine.” He hesitates when Mrs Hudson frowns a bit. “My nanny used to make sticky toffee pudding. She was the only one who could cook - or bake for that matter - in my family.”

“No baking grandmothers in your family?” Mrs Turner asks teasingly.

“We can’t all have quaint Austrian grandmothers who bake unpronounceable pastries,” Sherlock says dryly.

John laughs, grinning widely at Sherlock, one of those smiles that make him look ten years younger, and Sherlock thinks, even as his heartbeat picks up and he can’t help smiling back, *Dopamine. All just dopamine.*

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The judging is long and tedious. Donovan and Lestrade love John’s punschkrapfen, but Moran hates them and has a hard time even acknowledging that they’re competently made. All three of them criticise John for being a bit unimaginative, which John acknowledges with a self-deprecating smile.

Mary and Janine made variations of fruit cakes with loads of jelly, and while they’re competently made, it’s becoming increasingly clear that neither Mary nor Janine has what it takes to win this competition. Neela’s coconut cake is solid. Mike had a problem with his bread pudding, it’s overbaked and bone dry. Molly’s pineapple upside down cake gets full marks for taste, and it looks good as well. Irene made a lemon meringue pie that looks stunning and the judges love it. They all accompany their bake with a bit of a story about why the dish makes them feel nostalgic. Most of the stories are sentimental hogwash the audience will eat up. John talks about his gran, predictably, and so does Molly. Neela tells a

nice story about college dorm baking, Janine, Mike, and Mary talk about their mothers, and Irene's story about her French aunt is almost certainly complete fiction, but at least it's funny.

Moriarty made bite-sized Baked Alaskas, and they look perfect. When asked about his inspiration, he just says they remind him of the first time he went to America. The judges taste the bake, and they all make appreciative noises.

But then Donovan says, "You know, these are perfect and all, but I can't see how these make you nostalgic for anything. Nostalgia is supposed to make you think of your grandma's kitchen, or Christmas mornings, but this is just a very good dessert I would get in a high-class restaurant. This isn't what the show is, Jim. So I give you full marks for technical, but I'm afraid this isn't at all on topic."

"It's a perfect bake, what more do we want?" Moran asks, gesturing at the little spoons.

"Nostalgia is a warm hug. This is a very competently made handshake," Lestrade says, and grimaces at Moriarty, obviously thinking he's been too harsh. "No offence."

Moriarty gives the fakest smile Sherlock has ever seen. "None taken."

Sherlock is last. He puts his sticky toffee pudding on the table. He made a batch of caramel-hazelnut ice cream to go with it, and he hopes the judges will get on to the tasting before too much of it melts.

"Now, Sherlock, what's your inspiration?" Donovan asks, and he can tell that she's sceptical about his bake. "This seems very simple for you."

Sherlock shrugs. "My mother is a mathematician and my father is rarely home in time for dinner. Food was a secondary consideration for the entire family. My parents fed us regularly, but neither of them cared much about cooking, or baking. The only person in our house who could cook was my nanny. She used to let me help her with baking. Sticky toffee pudding was my favourite recipe of hers. We often had dessert for dinner when she was alone with us children, when my parents were away. She's mostly to blame for my brother's sweet tooth, I suppose."

The judges chuckle, and then they try the pudding.

Silence falls, then Donovan says, "I have to say, that's your best bake yet. And that's saying something. Last week I felt your bake was good, but it wasn't anything special at all, nothing that told me anything about you as a person. But this? This makes me think I got to know you a bit better."

Sherlock hides his eye-roll and gives her a grateful smile. Anything to win, even if she's spouting sentimental nonsense.

"This is the warm hug I was talking about," Lestrade adds. "Great job."

"It's delicious, no doubt. But it's far easier than some of the other bakes we've seen today," Moran says, frowning with obvious scepticism.

“Making something simple and elevating it is difficult in its own right.” Donovan gestures at the pudding. “The spice blend, the bite of the alcohol in the sauce, and the ice cream are all fantastic.” She smiles at Sherlock, and Sherlock has no trouble smiling back, because he’s pretty sure he’ll win.

The judges withdraw, and the contestants mill about. John vanishes and comes back with a few sandwiches, which he distributes to the contestants. Finally, he comes over to Sherlock. “I’ve got plastic cheese, dodgy tuna and something that I think might be radioactive ham left. You want one?”

Sherlock looks up from checking his email at the less-than-inviting spread. But he knows he needs to eat; this day is far from over. “Which one do you think has the least chance of giving me food poisoning?”

John grins and hands him the cheese. He eats a few bites of his sandwich, then he nudges Sherlock with his elbow. “Look at Moriarty.”

Moriarty is sitting in a corner, sulking. He’s obviously either texting or writing an angry email, if the way his fingers are stabbing at his phone is anything to go by. Occasionally, he gives Sherlock a withering glance

Sherlock smirks, enjoying Moriarty’s bad mood, and John nudges him. “Told you. Sappy gran stories.”

“You should have your own YouTube channel. “Baking unpronounceable Austrian oddities with a side of sappy gran stories”.”

John laughs. “Would you watch?”

Sherlock shrugs and pretends not to smile. “Possibly.”

The judges come back in, and all conversation ceases as the director calls them to order.

Sherlock leans closer to John. “Purely objectively speaking, Moran is right. His bake was perfect,” he says quietly.

“It’s not about perfection, Sherlock. If they were looking for Britain’s most perfect baker, none of us would be here. I’m sure there are dozens of patisserie chefs in Britain who make perfect petit fours and never split their whipped cream and never underbake anything. But if most people had the choice between home-made and store-bought, they’d take home-made every time. Not because it’s perfect, it very often isn’t, but it’s real. Genuine.”

“Sometimes a scone is just a scone, John. Not everything we eat needs to have a fond memory attached.”

“Why do you bake, Sherlock?” John asks, giving him a knowing look. “Honestly. Why? Why do any of us here bake?”

The director yelling for them to be quiet saves Sherlock from answering, because there is no way he is talking about this. Not now. Possibly not ever. And certainly not in a room with

cameras and microphones.

“This week was tough, I’ll be honest,” Lestrade starts the announcements. “We argued for a long time. In the end, it came down to what each of us thought was more important, the difficulty and technical proficiency of the bake, or the fit for the theme of the episode.”

“I want to state that I’m the dissenting voice this week,” Moran states. “I see Sally and Greg’s point, but I disagree with their conclusion.”

“That is why we have two Star Bakers this week,” Sally says, giving Moran a look that does nothing to hide her annoyance with him. “Sherlock Holmes and Jim Moriarty.”

Sherlock smiles for the reaction shot and gives Jim an exaggeratedly friendly nod, and Jim smiles back, just as fake.

The jurors then grow serious again and eliminate Mike, which surprises nobody except Janine, who clearly thought she was going home today.

The director yells, “Cut!”, and everybody mills around, saying goodbye to Mike, or congratulating Sherlock.

Sherlock sneaks out and has a cigarette so he won’t murder anyone during reaction interviews.

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“Sherlock, another double win. Congratulations, you’re shaping up to be a favourite.”

“Thank you.”

“Anything to add?”

“No.”

Sigh. “All right, off you go.”

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“Jim, you won, congratulations.”

“Thank you, but it’s ridiculous that I co-won with Sherlock. My bake was perfect, and much more difficult than Sherlock’s. His bake shouldn’t have been classed together with mine.”

“But still, you won. That must have felt nice.”

“It was satisfying. Next time I’ll win alone, and then it will be more satisfying.”

“Jim? Jim?... He just walked away. Should we cut this so viewers don’t hate him, or leave it in?”

“Leave it in. Viewers love a good villain.”

Chapter End Notes

From this chapter on, as per request, I will share inspirations and recipes. Since many of the recipes I drew inspiration from are in German, I tried to find English equivalents, which sometimes wasn't that easy.

Sherlock's sticky toffee pudding is inspired by Jamie Oliver

John's Punschkrapfen

The most important thing about Punschkrapfen: NEVER, EVER use the store-bought icing, it's DISGUSTING. Also, disclaimer: The only time I tried to make Punschkrapfen, it was a disaster, so they're not as easy as they look. Though, to be fair, I just went with my gut, instead of, you know, following an actual recipe, and that was a BIG mistake. I can improvise while cooking, but never while baking.

Tip: Make sure the icing isn't too runny, otherwise it won't stick to the sides of the Punschkrapfen. If you're making them with alcohol, add two teaspoons of rum to the icing. Also, the icing should be really thick. The best thing about Punschkrapfen is that first bite and cracking the icing.

I've never had home-made Punschkrapfen before, come to think of it. We all just buy them. But never, NEVER pre-packaged in a supermarket, because these don't have a sugar icing, they just sort of dunk them in a fat-based red glaze, and that's not what it's about at all.

I'm not sure whether the connection between nostalgia and Punschkrapfen is immediately apparent to a non-Austrian, but to me they're almost inseparable from the idea of sixties decor and formica tables and being a kid and only ever wanting to eat the pink icing. The chain that's famous for its Punschkrapfen, Aida, is leaning heavily into the fact that they haven't re-decorated since the early Sixties, and you can tell; it's all formica tabletops, dark panelling and cracked leather. Also, the pink of their logo is the perfect Punschkrapfen pink.

On a somewhat related note, there's actually a word in German that describes the process of glazing a bake with apricot jam, it's 'aprikotieren', which translates to 'to apricot', so if you ever want to use a fruit name as a verb, you now know how to do it. You're welcome.

Week 5 - Bread Week

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sherlock arrives at another mansion turned hotel with a giant park, in rural Berkshire. The drive up from London was uneventful, and it's so early that it's barely light.

He parks his car and unloads his equipment. The fog hangs low in the trees, and the grass and ground are wet with dew and mist. It's cold, and he knows the chances of them seeing any sun today are almost nonexistent. It doesn't matter, though, because Sherlock will spend all day in a tent heated by headlights and ovens.

When he enters the tent, the crew greet him with nods and the occasional good mornings. Emma, the contestant wrangler, moves towards him with her ubiquitous clipboard.

"Morning," she says brightly, handing him his hotel room key. "We've changed the setup slightly. We've had some complaints about you all being able to choose workstations, so from now on, you're assigned one."

"Some complaints?" Sherlock asks, scanning the room for the workstation with his name on it. "Or was it just Jim and he was really loud?"

Emma smirks and makes a gesture of locking her lips with a little key, but from her little shrug, he knows he hit the nail on the head. She leans closer and mutters, "We've put Watson next to you, don't worry."

Startled, Sherlock glares at her to cover his surprise. "Why would I care about that?"

Emma grins at him cheekily. "You might not care, but we do. You two've got a bit of a dynamic duo vibe going on, the audience loves it. Good for ratings. You don't want to know how much mail we got after Monday's episode when John said he was bi and single. And the social media interaction has been insane."

Sherlock nods absently. He's noticed that himself. His YouTube channel is growing exponentially, he's doubled his subscriptions and his hits have quadrupled. He's also noticed that John's blog's following has vastly expanded and that John is posting more baking content as well. He also noticed that many of the comments on John's blog range from subtly to overtly sexual, and he doesn't want to think about why that makes him uncomfortable.

"I need to go set up," he says to Emma, and she shoos him away to welcome Janine and Molly who have arrived together.

They greet him cheerfully and start setting up at their stations.

Sherlock lays out his equipment and ingredients and goes through the bake for today. It's Bread Week, and Sherlock is already bored.

The contestants trickle in one by one, and Sherlock pretends that he isn't looking for John every time the tent flap opens. He ignores both friendly greetings from Irene and Molly, and Moriarty's death glare. His heart is doing something odd, beating and tripping in his chest. One could almost call it nerves. Or better, anticipation.

He remembers the last time he saw John, Sunday evening after dropping him off at a convenient tube station. He offered to take John all the way home, but he said it wasn't necessary. John just told him to pull over, and got out of the car, nodded at him in thanks and walked off, cane tucked under his arm.

John has been dropping likes and comments on his videos, though, and Sherlock has responded to every one. Apparently some of Sherlock's YouTube followers are watching the show, and they've been flirting with John in the comment section of his video about puff pastry, and Sherlock finds this oddly frustrating.

John finally enters the tent about half an hour before shooting commences, looking stressed. Mary enters directly behind him, looking equally stressed.

When he sees Sherlock, John smiles at him brightly, annoyance apparently forgotten. "Hey," he greets Sherlock, then looks around his workstation. "No tea?"

"It was getting cold so I drank it myself," Sherlock lies, but he feels his lips tug up into a smile. "That's what you get for being late."

John shrugs and starts unpacking his gear. "Couldn't be helped. Mary picked me up from the Swindon train station, and her car broke down halfway. I'm just glad she knows how to change a tire, I'm completely useless about cars."

Sherlock looks over at Mary, who's busy setting up her station, but darts an occasional look at John. He wonders whether she's one of the anonymous commenters on John's blog. "You know, if you needed a lift, you could have asked me. We live in the same city."

John looks at him oddly, then grins. "I don't have your phone number, genius."

"Easily remedied," Sherlock says and holds out his hand. John drops his phone into it, and Sherlock programs his number into John's contacts.

When he hands it back, John is giving him that oddly soft look again. Then he grins and fires off a quick text.

Sherlock's phone vibrates.

You look sexy in those trousers

Sherlock sets his phone down and busies himself with his equipment to stop himself from blushing.

When he's sure John isn't watching him anymore, he takes out his phone.

Likewise. -SH

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“It’s bread week, everyone!”

“First challenge: Eight-strand plaited loaves are difficult to do, and our bakers will need all their concentration for this one.”

“Bakers, on your mark, get set, bake.”

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“This is riveting telly,” John remarks as he looks around the room of bakers, lounging around, waiting for their dough to prove.

There’s a stripe of flour on the side of his face, and Sherlock can’t take his eyes off it. He’s been thinking of reaching over and wiping it off with his thumb for about ten minutes now.

He looks around briefly. Most bakers are either passing the time by looking at their phones or have gone to the catering tent for a cup of tea. The camera crew is filming outside with the judges, and nobody is paying them the least attention. So Sherlock beckons John over with a crook of his finger.

John steps closer and leans over his workstation, until he’s very close to Sherlock, amusement clear on his face. “Yes?”

Sherlock says nothing, he just reaches out and trails his thumb over John’s cheekbone and down his jawline, feeling the slight rasp of stubble. John’s eyes dart to his and Sherlock can see them darken. “Flour,” he says quietly.

John licks his lips. Sherlock’s eyes follow the movement, then snap back to John’s. “You know,” John mutters, leaning closer to Sherlock. “We’ve got thirty-five minutes more of this.”

“Ambitious,” Sherlock answers equally quietly, instantly catching the thinly veiled suggestion. “Tempting. But no. People are already talking.”

John draws back a bit, looking equally bewildered and amused. “They are? Really?”

Sherlock nods. “Emma told me we’re good for ratings.”

John laughs. “All right, then.” He drops his voice again and looks at Sherlock, all amusement gone from his face. “Later?”

Sherlock swallows, mouth suddenly dry and an odd tight heat in his belly. “Later.”

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Bread week is objectively boring. Kneading, braiding the eight strands together, then proofing it again for another thirty minutes, then baking. Listening to complaints from co-contestants who can’t even braid eight strands of dough together, who moan about their

dough not having risen properly. Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner making smalltalk with the struggling contestants. And in between John, with his competent hands kneading and weaving with ease, with his well-fitting jeans and his eyes on Sherlock, with his teasing grins and the small, flirtatious smiles.

And always John's voice, low and promising in his ear. *Later.*

Bread week isn't nearly as boring as Sherlock thought it would be.

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Second proofing time, and Sherlock is having a hard time keeping his annoyance at bay. He's sitting in the catering tent, scrolling through his emails, listening with half an ear to the other contestants moaning about their bakes.

Neela is complaining loudly about her loaf not rising. "Why isn't it rising? Why?"

"Ask him," Janine says, and it's only after Neela has wailed his name and repeated the question that he realises Janine was referring to him.

"I don't know why your loaf didn't rise, I'm not psychic," Sherlock says, not looking up from his phone. "Temperature fluctuations, bad yeast, overworking, it could be any or all of the above."

"Yeast goes bad?" Mary asks, and everybody laughs at her shocked tone.

"Not food poisoning bad, but when it's old it doesn't do what it's supposed to anymore," John inserts. "As I learned the hard way when I was trying to impress my school dance date. I promised her home-made croissants, and I used yeast from our cupboard that might as well have been there since World War II. They didn't rise, so they were tough and dry as dust. Which significantly set back my plan of getting into her knickers."

"Did you manage eventually?" Irene asks, giving him a saucy grin.

John grins back. "Unfortunately no, but I'm not sure how much the croissants really had to do with it, since she eventually went out with my sister."

Laughter all around, and then everybody leaves to get back to their bakes. Sherlock lingers and taps out a quick text. *Just so you know: Croissants do nothing for me. - SH*

Noted. How do you feel about bread knobs?

Sherlock winces. *One more pun like this and I'm never having sex with you again. - SH*

My lips are sealed. Not literally, though, so don't worry ;-)

Sherlock snorts and rolls his eyes, wishing he didn't find John's bad puns as adorable as the rest of him.

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Sherlock takes a deep drag from his cigarette. It's the first one today and he's proud of himself for making it through two proofing periods and the tedious, boring judging without nicotine.

Molly won this round, her first win, to her great surprise and nobody else's. Her loaf was perfect. Sherlock's, Irene's and Moriarty's were perfect too, but the others all had issues. John's was decent but not perfect, Janine's was underbaked, Neela's didn't rise properly, and Mary's was an unmitigated disaster. If she doesn't shape up for the showstopper, she's going home tomorrow, and Sherlock won't be sorry to see the last of her. She's subtly flirting with John, and it sets Sherlock's teeth on edge, even though a) John has so far shown zero interest in her and b) it's not like he's in a position to complain even if John did flirt back. The irrationality of the sentiment doesn't stop it from existing, however, and it's one of the reasons why Sherlock avoids emotional entanglements.

Now he's leaning against the back wall of the mansion turned hotel, key in his coat pocket and his little overnight suitcase by his feet, having a smoke before he goes in to dinner.

Well, if he's entirely honest with himself, he's having a smoke because he wanted to stop himself from going to look for John right away. And because he's nervous about going to look for John at all. Flirting in the tent is one thing, deliberately seeking out someone for what can only be described as a booty call is something entirely different.

It's nearly dark outside, and it's cold. He finishes his cigarette and grinds it into the gravel with his heel. Still he hesitates. This is getting ridiculous, it's cold and wet and disgusting out here, the rubbish bins smell and the wall he's leaning against is damp.

He pushes himself off the wall, grabs his case and goes inside. He'll just go up to his room, maybe have a shower, get something to eat. If he runs into John, fine. If not, also fine.

But first, he pops a breath mint into his mouth and doesn't allow himself to question why.

His room is on the first floor, and he's just making his way down the corridor to look for his room number when a door opens. John steps out, obviously surprised to see him there. "Hey," he says with a slightly nervous smile. The door to his room swings shut behind him and bounces back without closing.

Sherlock doesn't know what to say. John has obviously showered and changed, he's wearing a well-fitting t-shirt and a cardigan that's an affront to the human eye, and Sherlock wants to peel it off John right this very second.

Their eyes meet and suddenly the tension that was there most of the day is back, and Sherlock is aware that they're alone, and there's nobody watching them. He takes a step closer to John, and John backs up and pushes the door of his room open with his heel. Sherlock follows, dragging his small carry-on suitcase with him.

The door closes with a very audible click, and Sherlock has no time to process anything because John is backing him against the door and kissing him like it's going out of fashion. Sherlock immediately escalates by pushing that bloody cardigan off John's well-muscled shoulders and running greedy hands under his t-shirt.

John groans into his mouth and pushes his hands under Sherlock's jacket to get him out of it. Sherlock shrugs off his coat and jacket and lets them fall to the floor, all the while doing his best not to break the kiss. John hooks his fingers into Sherlock's belt loops and walks them back in the direction of the bed. They fall down onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs and eager fingers trying to get through clothing to touch skin. John's T-shirt goes flying and one of Sherlock's shirt buttons rips, and he doesn't care. He lets his hands wander greedily over John's warm, compact body, lets himself enjoy the weight of John on top of him pressing him into the mattress.

John sits up, straddling his hips, arse shifting against Sherlock's erection which is pressing almost painfully against his trousers. Sherlock tries to pull him down again, but John traps his hands and grins. "Just a second. Get naked, I'll be right back."

He gets off Sherlock and goes into the bathroom. Sherlock does as he's told, shedding the rest of his clothing, all the while wondering what John is doing. When John comes back, he's equally naked and hiding something behind his back.

"Come back here," Sherlock snaps, and John grins.

"Bossy," he says and unceremoniously sits on top of Sherlock, making a low sound of pleasure that Sherlock echoes. "I like it." He moves back in for a kiss, and all that naked skin against Sherlock's feels insanely good. He can feel John's erection slide against his, trapped between their bodies. He thrusts up blindly, and John grins against his lips and moves back a bit.

He sits up and reaches for something he tossed on the bed just a moment ago. "I used to be a boy scout," he says, grinning wickedly.

Sherlock frowns. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Um... you know, the boy scout motto?" John asks, and there's a slight embarrassed edge to his voice.

"Spend unnecessary amounts of time outdoors?"

John huffs a laugh and shakes his head. "Be prepared." He holds up his hands. There's a packet of lube in one hand, and a condom in the other. "So." John looks at Sherlock and smirks. "Pick one."

Sherlock hesitates. He wants... well, he wants everything. He wants John to take him apart with his hands and then fuck him until he can't walk anymore, and he wants John on his hands and knees and begging, and he wants everything in between. Right now, though, he wants John to stay where he is, right on top of Sherlock and grinning down at him, eating him up with his eyes. He wants more kissing, more skin, more heat, more friction.

"Hey," John says gently, taking Sherlock's chin in his hand and turning Sherlock's head so he has to look at John. "This isn't a trick question. There are no wrong answers here. If the answer is no thank you, how about you suck me off with that pretty mouth of yours, then that's also fine." John grinds back against Sherlock, rubbing their cocks together, and

Sherlock gasps. “More than fine,” John breathes, voice not entirely steady. He leans down and kisses Sherlock, deep and dirty. “Tell me what you want,” he whispers against Sherlock’s lips. “Tell me how to make you feel good, you absolutely gorgeous bastard.”

Sherlock swallows against an unnameable emotion clogging up his throat. “I want ...” he mutters into John’s hair. “I want you to ride me. And I want you to kiss me while you do it.”

John grins wickedly. “My pleasure.”

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By the time John sinks down on Sherlock’s cock, they’re both trembling with anticipation. If he’s ever experienced something hotter than John finger-fucking himself before rolling a condom on Sherlock’s cock and slicking it with lube, he can’t remember it.

John moves gently, slowly, and Sherlock can feel John’s body adjust around his cock, and it’s so good he nearly comes right away. He runs his hands over John’s thighs, his chest. John traps his roaming hands and just breathes for a moment, adjusting to having Sherlock inside of him. Sherlock holds completely still, fingers interlaced with John’s, and waits, even though he wants nothing more than to thrust up onto the tight heat of John’s body.

Finally, John opens his eyes and looks down at him, hair mussed and pupils blown wide, and when he rocks his hips for the first time, both of them gasp. John leans down and kisses Sherlock, open-mouthed and sloppy. “You can move,” he whispers against Sherlock’s lips. “God, fuck, Sherlock, move.”

Sherlock doesn’t need to be told twice. He thrusts up, and John pushes down, and together they find a rhythm, John bracing himself against Sherlock’s hands. It’s slow, and languid, and then it’s fast and urgent, and Sherlock can barely breathe, can barely form a coherent thought except ‘this, more, now’. He comes with a bitten-off shout, and watches, dazed, as John wraps his hand around his cock and comes all over Sherlock’s chest.

John collapses against him, sticky and sweaty and disgusting, and Sherlock wants to never move again.

“Fuck,” John mutters against his shoulder, voice gravelly and rough. He looks well-fucked and absolutely debauched, and Sherlock’s heart does a traitorous little stutter when John smiles at him, loose and warm and sated.

“Fuck indeed,” Sherlock agrees, and John snorts a laugh, an unattractive sound that’s ridiculously endearing.

Dopamine, Sherlock thinks, running his fingers over the bumps of John’s spine. *Just dopamine.*

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“Oh my god, listen to this: From user - I kid you not - bigcuckenergy: You’re (spelled y-o-u-r of course) really hot (really spelled with one l) how about a threesome.”

“You’re making these up,” Sherlock says, grabbing the phone from John. They’re lounging on John’s bed, the leftovers from dinner taking up space on the mattress. John is dressed in jeans and a jumper and nothing else, and Sherlock is completely naked. John went to the dining room about an hour ago to get them something to eat (‘To get the energy up for round two’, according to John). They’ve been reading the worst comments on their respective social media channels to each other, after Sherlock got an especially aggravating YouTube comment while John was getting the food.

As it turns out, John wasn’t making it up, bad grammar and all. “I have so many questions about this comment. First, what do you think is user bigcuckenergy’s gender? Is the misspelling of cock intentional, ironic or just a stupid typo? Are you supposed to provide the third person for the threesome, or will bigcuckenergy bring a third person?”

John laughs and shrugs. “I have no idea.”

Sherlock scrolls down. “Oh, this is even better. purtybitches would like you to know that they’re ‘up to anything, will travel. Bring whipped cream.’ You were right, your comments are worse than mine.”

John grins at him smugly. “Told you. Although, I like whipped cream, and if purtybitches is willing to travel...”

Sherlock feels a possessive urge to wipe that smug grin from John’s face. He grabs John and tackles him to the bed. “If you like whipped cream, I’m more than willing to provide some,” he all but growls and pins John’s hands to the bed on either side of his head. John’s laughter fades into a gasp as Sherlock grinds their hips together demandingly.

“Are you now?” John asks huskily, his eyes going dark.

“Yes,” Sherlock says and unceremoniously strips John of his jumper and his jeans, then straddles him and pushes his hands down into the mattress again. He looks down at John, whose half-hard cock is pressing against Sherlock’s arse, all mussed hair and wiry strength, and thinks about all the things he wants to do to John, all the ways he wants to have him. He starts by pressing his mouth to that magnificent scar on John’s shoulder.

John squirms under him, and when Sherlock looks up he notes that John looks deeply uncomfortable. Sherlock stops immediately. “Does it hurt?”

“No.” John shakes his head and doesn’t meet Sherlock’s searching eyes. “It’s just... ugly.”

“No it’s not,” Sherlock says, trying to sound as matter-of-fact as possible while at the same time ignoring the way John’s tone - sad and defeated - makes something behind his breastbone twinge. “It’s interesting.” He moves up until he can meet John’s eyes. “*You’re interesting.*”

John gazes up at him and twines his fingers in Sherlock’s hair. “That’s probably the nicest thing I’ve heard in ages.” He pulls Sherlock down for a kiss, then mutters against his lips, “You probably don’t need to be told this, given that you’re you, but you’re interesting too. You’re fascinating, in fact.”

Sherlock doesn't quite know how to answer that, and he doesn't quite know whether he wants to answer that. The place behind his breastbone is burning and knotting and doing a very impressive flip, and he has trouble breathing suddenly, so he just kisses John and grinds their hips together, and everything he doesn't want to say gets lost in the heat of skin on skin.

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Sherlock returns the key to his hotel room before he heads to the tent, wondering if anyone will notice that he didn't set one foot in his room. He spent the night in John's bed, again. He slept well and late, again. There was ridiculously good morning sex in the shower, and Sherlock feels a bit unsettled by all of it. He enjoyed all of it. The sex, the eating cold antipasti with their fingers while reading stupid internet comments, the sleeping in John's bed, the showering together.

And now it's morning, and John has gone off in search of coffee, and Sherlock is having trouble remembering what he wanted to do for his bake today. Bread is boring at the best of times, but right now he has no desire to stand around an overheated tent literally waiting for bread to prove for four hours.

John appears by his side and hands him coffee and a scone. He hands over his key to the receptionist and nods at Sherlock. "Ready?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Do I have a choice?"

John laughs. "That's the spirit," he says and herds Sherlock out of the door in the direction of the tent.

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"Bread week part two, ladies and gentlemen. This week's challenge: Sweet and savoury loaves."

"Our contestants have four hours as usual. Bakers, on your mark, get set, go."

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The loaves don't need to prove, thank god, otherwise Sherlock might die from boredom. It's bad enough that they need to bake for an hour. The bakers all scatter after the loaves are in the oven, and Sherlock goes outside for a much-needed breather, while the rest of the bakers all make their way to the catering tent for a bite to eat.

Sherlock isn't hungry, but he does want a cigarette. Badly. So he bums one from a sound tech and smokes it behind the catering tent. The nicotine settles him, and the familiar bite of the smoke and the feel of the cigarette against his lips grounds him and brings him back to himself a bit. He's felt oddly outside of himself since he woke up in John's bed this morning and discovered that he had no desire to leave.

It's dangerous. He knows this. Sex is one thing, but feelings? Feelings unsettle him, cloud his judgement and sow chaos in the orderly corridors of his mind palace. It took him years to

rebuild his life after his second time in rehab. These days, he is rigidly focused and in control. He is the only person in charge of his contentment. And that cannot change, ever again.

He watches John come out of the catering tent with Mary, Janine and Molly. They're standing around, getting some fresh air. Molly checks her oven timer obsessively, and Janine and John tease her about it. Their laughter is carried to Sherlock by the wind, and he feels odd, standing aloof, listening to them and not joining them. None of them has spotted him yet, standing there, watching them.

John is obviously in a good mood; he's relaxed and smiling, joking; his posture is casual and comfortable, and there is no sign of his cane. He didn't have it yesterday, either, Sherlock recalls. Odd that he should only notice now. John tells a funny story about murdering his gran's sourdough starter, and Sherlock watches him, forcing himself into the detachment he normally achieves so easily.

Objectively speaking, John is nothing special. No one characteristic sets him apart. He's neither especially good-looking nor brilliant nor talented. He is, in fact, a washed-out army doctor with a bad shoulder and a psychosomatic limp. John provides nothing that Sherlock can't get somewhere else. The fact that he doesn't want to get it anywhere else right now is irrelevant, it's more about convenience than anything else. Why would he go anywhere else to scratch an obvious itch if John is right there, willing and extremely competent?

Four weeks, six weeks at the most, then John Watson will be out of his life for good. He can indulge this, whatever it is, for six weeks.

John turns around and spots him, and his face breaks into a brilliant, yet oddly private, smile. Sherlock ignores the unhelpful fluttering in his stomach and the inconvenient ache in his chest and goes over to join the other contestants.

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The judging goes swiftly for once. Most of the loaves are competently made, but few stand out. The sweet loaves almost all contain some sort of dried fruit, except for his and Molly's. Molly grated marzipan into her dough and Sherlock used honey-glazed hazelnuts. The judges love both, but Molly's sage, sun-dried tomato and Buffalo mozzarella is just that bit better than Sherlock's goat cheese and plums, so Molly wins.

Mary's loaves are tough and nearly inedible, so she goes home. She seems vaguely relieved, and after filming they all hang around the tent, waiting for their reaction interviews. Except Moriarty, who exits the tent with a huff and loudly insists that his reaction interview be filmed first so he can leave.

The crew and bakers eat the leftover loaves while John reads out especially flowery excerpts from Moriarty's blog. Sherlock laughs along with the rest at gems like 'the milk tasted faintly of the sweet-smelling herbs I had seen the cows eat on our neighbours' fields' and 'among my earliest memories standing in my grandmother's low-ceilinged simple farm kitchen and helping her make cream cheese is one of my fondest'.

Emma the contestant handler is stuffing her face with Molly's loaf. "He was born and raised in a council estate in Belfast," she says, voice muffled by bread. "This is excellent, Molly."

Everybody in the tent agrees.

Molly blushes a bit and beams. "Thank you, you're all too kind."

"Stop simpering. People aren't doing you any favours; they're just stating empirically observable facts," Sherlock snaps.

"Aw, Sherlock, you softie," Janine teases him, nudging his elbow.

John gives him a smile that is so blindingly fond that something complicated twists in Sherlock's stomach. He turns away to hide his answering smile and for the first time he's actually relieved when he's called to do a reaction interview.

Chapter End Notes

[The technical is based on this episode of the actual Bake-Off](#)

Nothing further to add this week, I'm afraid. Next week will get more interesting again with the baking, I promise, with the recipe for John's winning Topfenstrudel, among other things.

Week 6 - Fillings - Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's Tuesday, and Sherlock is making a large batch of rosehip-currant jam. He has an order for ten kilos from Angelo's, who's using it as filling for bomboloni, and he's stirring the large vat in his kitchen.

He's also thinking hard about what to do about the next Bake Off challenge. The theme is "Fill me", and the Profiteroles for the technical are easy. But the showstopper calls for sweet and savoury filled pastries, and he doesn't know what to do. It's not especially interesting, and he's annoyed that he needs to come up with a savoury dish for the third time.

His phone alert dings just as his batch of jam is cooling, and he goes to check it. New entry on John's blog.

By popular demand, here the recipe for the winning Topfenstrudel.

John describes the recipe in some detail, and he includes a lot of pictures he obviously didn't take himself, because he's in a lot of them.

Sherlock scrolls to the end of the post and types.

@thescienceofbaking

You wrote 'Add raisins'. How many raisins per gram cream cheese? What sort of raisins? How can you function like this?

It's mostly to stop himself from asking *How can you work in this nightmare of a kitchen?*

Because the photos, aside from revealing that John has shitty baking equipment, also demonstrate that his kitchen is not only old and ugly, but tiny.

His phone dings with a reply notification.

@Johnwatsonsblog

Have you ever heard of the phrase 'Add to taste'?

@thescienceofbaking

You did not specify this. You just wrote 'Add raisins'. And your ingredient list just says 'raisins'.

@johnwatsonsblog

Would it be better if I said 'Add however many raisins you would like to eat'? How about 'a handful'? Or do you want me to specify an exact measurement? 6,55 grams of raisins? 56 raisins? 37 and three quarter raisins?

@thescienceofbaking

I know it's too much to ask for you to actually weigh your ingredients, but a ballpark figure would help your readers immensely. Even 'a handful', however imprecise, would be better than just 'add raisins'. I'm performing a public service here, standing up for the confused multitude of your followers.

@johnwatsonsblog

I wasn't aware that you were the official spokesperson of my "followers". Was there an election? Or did you just appoint yourself?

@thescienceofbaking

One does not need to hold public office to feel a sense of public responsibility. There is such a thing as a citizen's arrest, after all.

@johnwatsonsblog

Are you going to arrest me for not measuring my raisins? The thing is, I wouldn't put it past you.

Sherlock restrains himself from making a sexually suggestive comment about handcuffs. They are sort of in public, after all. Instead, he looks at the pictures again. Tiny workspace, tiny oven, ancient equipment. No wonder John crushes walnuts with a rolling pin. He has no other equipment at home.

Before he can talk himself out of it, he opens his text program and writes *221 Baker Street, 7 pm tonight. - SH*

He hits send and then goes back to his jam. His phone dings with an incoming text ten minutes later. *Is this still about the raisins?*

Sherlock grins. *You will need to show up to find out. - SH*

Mysterious. I like it

Sherlock restrains himself from asking whether that means John will come, instead he goes back to sieving his jam.

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It's 7:02 pm and Sherlock is standing on the pavement in front of his house and is smoking his second cigarette in a row. He isn't nervous, because it would be stupid to be nervous and Sherlock is never stupid, therefore he isn't nervous. He does, however, experience a certain amount of restlessness, but that's just because he hates waiting, and he dislikes uncertainty.

He hasn't heard from John since that last text. He read that text as accepting his invitation, but he isn't sure and he would never stoop to asking.

7:03 pm.

He's not going to come. Why would he? It's not like Sherlock has given him a good reason to.

7:04 pm.

Not that it matters whether John shows up or not. It's better if he doesn't, then Sherlock won't have to deal with the repercussions of his possibly very stupid idea after all. Better to not have anything more to do with John than he has to. Better to put a bit of distance between them, no matter how good the sex is. He can get good sex anywhere; he doesn't need John for it.

7:05 pm.

It is a bit rude just not to come, though. John might have texted. Sherlock frowns, a bit put out now. It doesn't seem like John to stand him up without so much as a word.

"Sherlock!" John calls out just as he's about to turn around and go back inside.

Sherlock bites down on the relief that swamps him and deliberately doesn't smile when he turns around to meet John, who's walking towards him looking a little winded.

"Sorry I'm late, it took me longer than I thought to get here from work," John says, wiping obviously sweaty palms on his pants. His cane is still conspicuously absent, and Sherlock wonders again what that means.

Sherlock dismisses the apology, entirely at ease again now that John is here. "Doesn't matter. Let's just get started."

He opens the door to Speedy's, and the familiar dinging of the bell over the door echoes through the empty room.

"What is this?" John asks, stepping into the room behind Sherlock. He looks around curiously, taking in the ancient chairs and tables, the cracked glass of the display case, the cash register, the writing in the window, the dust everywhere. "Speedy's cafe?"

"My landlord used to run this cafe. It closed a few months ago. He's letting me use his kitchen," Sherlock says, pointing at the door behind him, motioning for John to follow.

Sherlock holds open the door and John steps through. The kitchen is much better lit, and Sherlock keeps it spotless, so he knows the contrast must be jarring. The dusty, broken cafe and the warm, well-kept kitchen, the old but large baking oven, the gleaming surfaces.

"Wow," John breathes and looks around the room. Sherlock watches him as he walks around, checks out the large refrigerator, the shelves and shelves of home-made jams and marmalades, of different types of sugar and flour, spices and condiments.

He turns around and leans against the counter, looking at Sherlock with a carefully neutral expression. "Nice kitchen."

There's a question in the statement. Sherlock swallows around the fluttering in his stomach and answers the unspoken 'What am I doing here'. "I was wondering whether you might want to use it to prepare for the show. Your kitchen is..."

"A nightmare," John supplies, lips twitching into a small smile.

“Inadequate,” Sherlock agrees. “And there will be challenges you need to prepare for.”

John takes a step closer. “That’s a very generous offer.” He takes another step closer. “Just so we’re absolutely clear here, what does this,” he gestures at the kitchen, “have to do with this?” he gestures between them.

“Nothing,” Sherlock answers, even though he isn’t entirely sure that’s true, because he would never have invited John into his kitchen if they weren’t... whatever they are. Temporary sex mates? Acquaintances who fuck? Bakers with benefits?

Fortunately, John seems to accept what he’s saying at face value. “All right. Fair enough.” He gestures around the kitchen. “So if it’s okay with you I’ll come around tomorrow afternoon and start baking?”

It occurs to Sherlock that he doesn’t want John to leave. It’s not a sentiment he is at all used to. Normally he can’t wait to get rid of people, but John is apparently an exception in more ways than one.

It also occurs to him that he should have thought this through more. He has no idea what to do. He only thought as far as getting John here; he didn’t consider what would happen after.

John’s stomach rumbles, loudly. John rubs the back of his neck, embarrassed, grinning ruefully at Sherlock.

Sherlock tries not to find John adorable, and fails. “Hungry?” he asks, voice low and teasing.

John nods, still grinning self-consciously. “All I had since breakfast was a dodgy ham sandwich.”

Sherlock gestures at the kitchen. “Do you want to start baking now? I’ve got everything that you could possibly need.”

John cocks his head to his side and watches Sherlock, an unreadable expression on his face. Then he seems to come to a decision and nods. “Why not.”

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“So what’s the story with this place?” John asks as both their doughs are resting in the fridge.

They’ve both decided to do Cornish pasties to try them out for the show. Sherlock is stirring the mince he pressed out of two pork sausages in a pan with two cloves of garlic and a medium-sized onion. He shrugs and gives the pan a practiced toss. “I’m renting the flat upstairs. When the cafe went out of business, my landlord had a hard time finding a new tenant, so he’s letting me rent the space for about a third of what he’d get if he could get a business in here, but it’s better than nothing, because I heat the place and look after it.”

John sticks a knife into the potatoes he’s boiling to see whether they’re cooked. Apparently they are, so he goes to the sink and pours out the hot water and replaces it with cold water from the tap. He comes back with the pot and starts peeling. “So you’re using this space for your videos and your jam-making?”

Sherlock adds a few sage leaves to the pan, enjoying the way the sage aromatises the entire kitchen. “Yes.” He hesitates. He never told anyone about this, except Mycroft. “I was actually thinking of opening a bakery.”

John looks up from the potatoes he’s peeling. “That sounds like a great idea. What’s stopping you?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer immediately, he’s looking down at his pan and experiences an odd warmth from the matter-of-fact tone with which John accepts the reasonableness of Sherlock’s greatest ambition. Everybody else in his life has always reacted with surprised disbelief when Sherlock told them of his plan. John is the first person who seems to be taking this 100% seriously, and who seems to have no doubt that Sherlock is both capable of making this choice and has the ability to see it through. “Money,” he finally answers, after making sure he has his voice under control. “I need capital, and I have very little.”

“Can’t you get a bank loan?” John asks, dumping the potatoes he’s peeled into a mixing bowl. “You got a potato masher?”

Sherlock grabs the masher from a nearby drawer and hands it to John. “Believe it or not, it had actually occurred to me to try for a bank loan, given that I know that banks exist and what their business model is. Unfortunately, their business model isn’t giving money to people with no credit and no securities.”

John grimaces sympathetically. “Banks are the worst. Hand me the butter?”

Sherlock hands over the butter.

“Have you ever had hot potatoes with salt and butter?”

“What?” Sherlock asks. He takes an apple from the fridge and almost runs into John, who’s standing behind him with a piece of potato. It’s still hot, the steam rising from the piece. John has put a wedge of butter and a bit of salt on it, and the butter is slowly melting into the potato.

“Open your mouth,” John says, and takes a - wholly gratuitous - step closer to Sherlock.

Sherlock shivers a bit at the tone of John’s voice and the sudden nearness of his body. He opens his mouth and John feeds him the bite-sized piece of potato. It’s a perfect mouthful of food, the warm mealiness of the potato turned creamy by the melted butter, the salt a perfect tickling on his tongue. He looks down at John, who’s smiling at him in a way that makes Sherlock’s stomach flutter. John is standing very close, and suddenly the room is very small.

“That was...good.” Sherlock hates himself a bit for the slight tremor in his voice.

John grins and steps back to let him pass, and Sherlock goes back to his frying pan.

“Another?” John asks, holding up a potato.

Sherlock hesitates briefly, thinking, *Only if you feed it to me again*, but he doesn’t articulate the thought. “No.”

“Suit yourself.” John eats a whole potato with butter and salt, and then starts mashing the rest of them, adding big knobs of butter. He mixes in the cream cheese and the leeks he’s chopped before, and goes to check on his dough in the fridge.

“That still needs to rest for a bit,” John says, then turns to Sherlock, letting his eyes wander appreciatively over Sherlock’s body.

Sherlock feels his face heat and his skin tingle, as if John’s eyes on him were a physical weight, dragging over his skin. He turns off the heat under his filling and turns to John. “What do you suggest we do in the meantime?”

John grins and invades his personal space. “I have one or two ideas.”

“Me first,” Sherlock breathes, suddenly hungry and hot and wanting, and walks towards John. He grabs John’s hips and walks him back until John’s knees hit a chair and he sits down in it. Sherlock sits in John’s lap. John looks at him for a moment, clearly surprised, but when Sherlock kisses him, he kisses back, deep and greedy, running his hands up Sherlock’s thighs, over his arse, pulling him in, closer. It feels insanely good, John’s hands on his back, on his sides, John untucking his shirt and sliding his hands along Sherlock’s waist. Sherlock grinds down his hips against John’s, and John gasps into Sherlock’s mouth, and Sherlock can feel John grow hard against him, can feel his own erection straining against his trousers. *Later*, he thinks. Now he wants to taste.

He sinks down to his knees between John’s thighs and leans down to mouth at John’s cock through his clothes. John makes an absolutely divine sound, something between a moan and a growl. John’s fingers wind in Sherlock’s hair, and John pushes his hips up to meet Sherlock’s teasing exploration. “Oh god yes,” he moans, and Sherlock grins.

There’s no finesse involved when he unceremoniously unzips John’s trousers and frees John’s cock. It’s hot and hard in his hand and Sherlock keeps his eyes on John as he leans down and licks a long stripe up the length of it.

“Fuck,” John breathes. “You’re ridiculously hot, do you even know that?”

Sherlock just grins and sets to work reducing John to a writhing mess of moans and whispered encouragement. He uses his hands and tongue and a tiny bit of teeth and John curses and wraps his hands in Sherlock’s hair and chases his pleasure with his hips, until Sherlock has to pin him down to the chair with strong hands on his hips and just *hold him still* so Sherlock can take him apart at his leisure. It doesn’t quite work out that way, because John drags him off and up with a curse muffled between their lips and kisses Sherlock even as he unzips Sherlock’s trousers and sticks a hand down his pants, freeing Sherlock’s leaking cock. He drags Sherlock in until he’s sprawled on John’s lap, then John takes hold of both their cocks with a strong grip, and Sherlock is flooded by sensation. John is kissing him like the world is ending and tossing them off like there’s no tomorrow, and between the heat of John’s mouth and the insanely good, just the right amount of too rough friction as their cocks rub together, Sherlock’s mind is wiped blank of thought as he succumbs to pure pleasure.

John’s entire body goes rigid, and he comes with a beautiful moan against Sherlock’s half-open mouth, and Sherlock feels his own orgasm hit him like a freight train as he shakes apart

on top of John.

He collapses in a graceless heap on top of John, who's sprawled bonelessly over the uncomfortable chair. John's hands travel over Sherlock's body, long, slow, almost petting touches that feel insanely good without being the least arousing. It should worry Sherlock, this fuzzy warmth, but right now he can't be bothered. Right now the dopamine is in charge.

"Fuck," John breathes into Sherlock's ear. "The mouth on you..."

"Good?"

"Insanely good."

Sherlock grins into John's shoulder. John's post-coital voice is divine, deep and rough, and his vocabulary during and after sex is delightfully flithy.

He lifts his head. "Invigorating, if not very sanitary."

John laughs. "I'm starving for real now. Come on, let's finish the pasties."

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"This is really good," John says as he blows on the half-eaten pasty in his hand. They're really still too hot to eat, but neither of them wanted to wait any longer. John is wearing one of Sherlock's aprons after taking off his sex-stained shirt. It's currently drying over the radiator, and Sherlock is sort of dreading the moment it will be dry enough to wear, because then John will probably leave.

Sherlock shrugs. John's pasties are... well, they're edible. The pastry is good, they're crimped adequately, and they're baked to perfection, but the filling is...

"Too salty," John says as he bites into his pasty after finishing one of Sherlock's. "And the cream cheese is all wrong, the consistency isn't supposed to be like this."

"The coriander is too dominant as well," Sherlock adds, glad that John is open to criticism. "What is it supposed to be like?"

John shrugs. "It's a weird mixture of Austrian Kasnudeln and Afghan Bolani. You know, the judges said to mix it up, so I'm trying to. But it won't work if I don't get the crumbly kind of cream cheese. Maybe I should scrap the cream cheese and do it with just the potatoes."

"Just potatoes sounds dry as dust," Sherlock says, taking a sip of his tea. "What about mine?"

John finishes his pasty and then cocks his head to the side, considering. "I couldn't really taste the apple. Maybe more? And it was a bit dry. Adding more apples should take care of that as well."

Sherlock draws his notebook closer and jots down a few notes. "Any thoughts on what you'll do for sweet?"

“I was thinking apple and poppy seed; my gran has a recipe for something similar. You?”

“I was thinking of doing something with rosehip syrup. Maybe an apple-blackberry filling, sweetened with the syrup.” Sherlock leans back in his chair and ignores his half-finished pasties. He reaches for his cup of tea and drinks deeply. It’s oddly comfortable, sitting here with John. It almost feels like they’ve done this before, like this is a deeply familiar ritual and not a first time at all. Of course, the opposite is true, Sherlock has not only never had dinner with John in this kitchen, he has in fact never had dinner with anyone in this kitchen, nor in the kitchen upstairs, for that matter.

“Sounds good.” John yawns and drains his tea cup. “All right, I’d better get going.”

Sherlock doesn’t allow himself to think about what he does next. All he knows is that he doesn’t want John to leave. So he gets up and grabs John’s wrist.

John looks at him, a bit startled. But he says nothing as Sherlock pulls him in and kisses him, deep and dirty and suggestive.

When he lets John go, John looks dazed, he’s breathing hard and his eyes are dark and hungry.

“Weren’t you going?” Sherlock asks, grinning smugly.

John stands on his tiptoes and mouths at Sherlock’s ear, making him gasp. “You live upstairs?” John mutters, hot breath tickling the shell of Sherlock’s ear. It’s ridiculously arousing.

Sherlock nods, shivering when John’s mouth closes around his earlobe.

“Take me to bed,” John whispers into his ear, and Sherlock nods again.

“Yes,” he whispers, tilting his head so John can bite at his neck. “Yes.”

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“What’s funny?” Sherlock asks when he comes back into the bedroom. He hands John a glass of water.

The bedside lamp is on, casting a warm glow over the bed, leaving the rest of the room dim and dark. John is sprawled on Sherlock’s bed, completely naked, and he’s reading something on his phone and chuckling. It’s been vibrating all through their second round of sex, but John didn’t seem to even notice.

John holds out the phone. “Read for yourself.”

It’s John’s blog, specifically the comment thread about the raisins, and he notices it’s quite a bit longer than it was when he stopped commenting.

He starts to read the comments with increasing dread.

@janine_lawyered

Stop flirting, you two, you're in public. It's bad enough in the tent.

@thenakedbaker

Thank you, Janine, I was about to say something.

@harrywatson

John, is that the chap from the show? The one you said was 'complicated'?

@bakinglover212

Wait, is that Sherlock Holmes? From the show? Are you two dating? Oh my god, you are, aren't you? Tell us everything! Take pictures!

@bigcuckenergy

How bout tat threesome

@lovelybakerenthusiast

You could do better, John. Srsly. Hit me up.

Below that are several anonymous comments with varying degrees of pornographic speculation about their respective penis size and sexual preferences.

Sherlock puts the phone down. "Your followers are awful."

John grins ruefully. "I think I need to delete the entire thread. Maybe the entire blog."

"Probably best to delete the thread at least," Sherlock says and crawls back into bed.

John looks at him searchingly for a moment, then apparently decides to be direct. "Should I go?"

Sherlock hesitates. He should tell John to go. They had sex. There's no good reason for John to stay the night.

On the other hand, it's raining, and it's not like they've never shared a bed before. John didn't kick Sherlock out of his hotel room, and all he had to do was walk across the hall, not trek across the city in the rain. "Don't be ridiculous," Sherlock finally says. "You'd get soaked through and you'd probably blame the resulting pneumonia on me."

John grins, relaxing back into the pillows. "Are you sure? This would be the perfect opportunity to get rid of a competitor, after all."

Sherlock snorts. "Thank you, but I'm fully confident in my ability to out-bake you, I don't need to resort to sabotage."

John laughs and pulls the duvet over himself. Sherlock turns off the lights, and arranges himself on his side, so he's looking at John but not touching him. John rolls so they're facing each other.

"You know what you should do?" John says after a bit of silence.

“What?” Sherlock mutters drowsily.

“Crowdfund.”

“What?” Sherlock asks again, considerably more alert now.

“Make a GoFundMe page. For your bakery. Like that chap who invented that machine that gets plastic out of the ocean?”

Sherlock stares at him in disbelief. “You mean ask total strangers on the internet for money.”

John nods and closes his eyes. His voice sounds drowsy when he says, “Why not? I’ve heard crazier ideas.”

Sherlock is quiet for a bit as he thinks about it. It’s... not a completely terrible idea. Especially given the platform he has right now. Bake Off is astonishingly popular, apparently.

“Who would give me money?” he asks finally, quietly, into the darkness.

John reaches out his hand and grabs Sherlock’s in the dark without opening his eyes. “I would.” John squeezes his fingers tightly, then lets go. “You’re a wonderful baker. I would consider it a very sound investment.”

Sherlock can’t answer, because something seems to have happened to his voice. There’s a lump in his throat and a knot in his chest, and somewhere between his voice is trapped. Finally, the pressure eases and he mutters, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” John says over a gigantic yawn.

Silence falls, and Sherlock feels this odd sense of déjà vu again, like this unprecedented situation is deeply familiar, like someone sleeping in his bed isn’t reckless and unheard of but natural and logical and safe. Maybe he should have asked John to leave. Maybe it would have been better. But it’s too late now; John’s small snore tells Sherlock that he’s fallen asleep.

Sherlock lies awake and watches John sleep for an entirely too long time, then gets up and finds his laptop.

He has work to do.

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Sherlock is woken up by the sun shining into his bedroom window. He turns to his side and contemplates the sleeping John Watson in his bed. John is curled on his side, hand under his pillow, the other hand resting casually on Sherlock’s arm. Finally, he decides against waking John up by rolling him onto his back and kissing down his chest and following that enticing, almost irresistible trail of hair from his navel down to where his morning erection is straining his boxers.

It feels a bit like resisting having a cigarette, and he is proud of himself for managing it. Oddly, the fact that he resisted sex with John makes him crave an actual cigarette, anything to

calm the itch in his fingers and the butterflies in his stomach at the very thought what John's skin would taste like, how he would wind his fingers into Sherlock's hair and make those divine noises that go straight to Sherlock's....

No.

Coffee. Maybe scones.

Yes. Good plan.

He picks up his dressing gown from the floor and puts it on, then goes into the kitchen to find coffee.

Instead, he finds Mycroft, sitting on a chair, having a cup of tea and a pasty. "I must say, Sherlock, these are not up to your usual standard," he says, gesturing at one of John's pasties.

Sherlock doesn't deign to reply. He starts his coffee grinder, and dusts off his Italian espresso maker. The grinder makes a hideous noise that drowns out whatever Mycroft might say next, and Sherlock contemplates just recording the sound and playing it whenever Mycroft talks to him in the future.

Unfortunately, the grinder stops once the coffee is ground, and silence falls as Sherlock fills the espresso maker and puts it on the hob.

"Was there anything in particular you wanted?" Sherlock finally stoops to asking, after letting the silence sit for as long as he can bear it. Which is always shorter than Mycroft, god damn him.

Mycroft sets down his cup in the saucer and sighs. "Reality television, Sherlock? Really? Why?"

"Why do you think?" Sherlock snaps. "Why do you think I endure this boring, hellish nightmare of a show? Do you know how much time we spend actually baking on this baking show? I did the calculations. It's less than a third. The challenges are asinine, the judging is entirely random, and the waiting around for the cameras and crew and judges and hosts is excruciating. So why do you think I put myself through this?"

"I was hoping you would enlighten me," Mycroft observes mildly. "Might I trouble you for a cup of that espresso? It smells very good."

"No, you may not. You *may* leave."

Mycroft sighs. "I refuse to stand idly by while you throw your considerable talents away on a childish fantasy. Baking is for nannies, Sherlock. Baking is for housewives, for ordinary people with little minds and little talents. You could do anything you want. You could rule a small country, or run the Bank of England. Or, if you want to follow Mummy's footsteps, you could earn a Nobel laureate in Chemistry. Or physics, or mathematics, philosophy. Why would you waste your time mixing sugar with flour?"

Because I love it, Sherlock doesn't say. Because it calms me, because it stills my mind. Because it is predictable, and yet not. Because there are a million combinations of flavours and textures and spices and because I haven't tried nearly enough of them. Because I'm good at it and because I want to do it.

He can't say any of this to Mycroft. None of it would be considered a good enough reason to bake even as a hobby, let alone professionally.

A noise comes from the bedroom, and then a bleary-eyed, but thankfully not entirely naked, John Watson stumbles into his kitchen, barely awake. "Do I smell coffee?" he asks, yawning and stretching. He freezes when he sees Mycroft sitting at the kitchen table, staring at him as if he's an otherworldly apparition instead of a very normal-looking half-naked man.

Sherlock is torn between embarrassment, amusement at Mycroft's shock, and something in his chest that he refuses to name, that reacts to John's mussed hair and the rumpled t-shirt that is obviously Sherlock's, the way he blinks and looks at Mycroft, and then at Sherlock. "Am I interrupting something?" John asks, looking and sounding a bit confused.

"My brother was just leaving," Sherlock says, glaring at Mycroft. "Weren't you?"

"Yes." Mycroft rises from his seat and inclines his head at John. "Dr Watson. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

John accepts a cup of coffee from Sherlock and nods at Mycroft. "Likewise, Mr Holmes."

Mycroft turns to Sherlock, and there's an unpleasantly superior smile playing around Mycroft's smug face. "This development certainly explains a lot."

"It explains absolutely nothing. Now leave," Sherlock bites out.

Mycroft gives Sherlock another infuriatingly superior smile. "I will speak to you later, Sherlock. Dr Watson." He inclines his head in John's direction and leaves without another word.

John comes to stand next to Sherlock and gazes after Mycroft. He looks a bit shell-shocked, which in Sherlock's experience is a normal reaction to meeting his brother. "Charming chap, your brother," John observes, then takes a sip of his coffee. He makes an appreciative noise and takes another sip.

"He is what happens when all the accumulated Whitehall stuffiness assumes human form," Sherlock bites out.

John laughs and drains his cup. "Sounds about right." He scratches the back of his head, and his smile takes on an embarrassed note. "Listen, I need to go. I've got work in two hours, and I need to shower and change. Do you have any idea where my trousers are?"

Sherlock looks at John, the half-naked morning glory of him, the way the sun coming in through the kitchen window makes him almost glow with warmth, the way he smells of bed and coffee and sweat. He backs John up against the fridge and leans in for a kiss. John kisses

back enthusiastically. Sherlock draws back a bit and mutters, "If you think for one second that you can walk out of here without a morning shag, you're completely delusional."

John grins against Sherlock's lips. "I'm going to be late."

"You hate your job," Sherlock mutters, nosing along John's throat.

"Hate is a strong word." John winds his fingers into Sherlock's hair and nudges his head up to meet his eyes. "How did you know?"

Sherlock draws back and looks at John critically, at the many data points that make up John Watson. "First, you're obviously bored, you even admitted it on your blog. Second, you've been back from Afghanistan for about a year now, and your limp only improved when you were on Bake Off, so something about Bake Off made you better. I'm guessing you respond well to adrenaline and pressure, and given that you were limping badly when Bake Off started, your daily life provides little of both. Locum work?"

John nods, looking slightly stunned.

"Small family surgeries? Sniffles and strep and old ladies with UTIs?"

John nods again, and Sherlock can almost see him retreat more deeply into his mind as he physically moves away from Sherlock. Sherlock knows he should stop talking now, but somehow he can't. "You volunteered for the Army, meaning you thrive on danger and high-pressure environments, so no wonder you're understimulated at a surgery that caters to the small, day-to-day illnesses of people who, 90% of the time, don't even need a doctor. You should be working at a busy inner-city A+E, you should do triage and save lives. So why don't you?"

John swallows, and there's something in his voice when he answers, that seems to come from far away, from far inside his head. "I have an intermittent tremor in my left hand. I can't... " he looks down and licks his lips. He balls his left hand to a fist briefly, an automatic, nervous gesture that Sherlock has noticed a thousand times but only now understands. "I can't perform procedures anymore. I can't even do any bloody stitches."

"Your hands don't shake when you bake," Sherlock points out gently.

"Well, if I spill the sugar, nobody fucking bleeds out," John snaps. He rubs a hand over his face and sighs. "Sorry. I..." he looks at Sherlock and away again, and Sherlock knows he pushed too far. The flirty, bantering mood between them is gone, and the man standing in Sherlock's kitchen is essentially a stranger, the carefully hidden side of John Watson Sherlock suspects very few people ever get to see.

"I should go," John finally says. He picks up his trousers from the back of one of the armchairs in Sherlock's sitting room and pulls them on.

"All right." Sherlock steps back and lets John go into the bedroom to collect the rest of his clothing. When he comes out he's fully dressed, and Sherlock thinks of soldiers putting on battle fatigues, because John looks like a different person, dressed and in control again.

But the smile he gives Sherlock is brittle. “Well. I’ll just.” He gestures at the door.

Sherlock nods, feeling oddly formal and awkward. “Yes. Well.”

John turns and walks down the stairs towards the front door.

“John!” Sherlock calls after him before he can stop himself.

John turns around on the bottom step. “Yes?”

“Do you want to come around tomorrow? Have another go at that bake?”

John hesitates, and Sherlock feels a bit like he’s on the edge of a cliff, and suddenly John’s answer matters much more than it should.

Then John nods, and Sherlock feels an odd sense of relief, and wonders why relief and falling feel so very similar, the swooping intensity of it. “Yes,” John says, and the smile he gives Sherlock is small, but real, and it makes Sherlock’s lips tug up into an answer. “Yes.”

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It’s Thursday, and Sherlock has just distributed the leftovers from both his and John’s bakes from yesterday to his homeless network when his mobile rings.

Annoyed, Sherlock checks caller ID. It’s Mr Chatterjee, and Sherlock picks up with a sense of impending dread, because Mr Chatterjee only rings Sherlock for bad news, anything else he usually delivers by text or in person.

“Hello?”

“Sherlock, hello. How are you? How is the TV show going? I watched the latest episode, you’re doing well.”

“Thank you,” Sherlock answers, and congratulates himself for not snapping at Mr Chatterjee to get to the point. He despises small talk, and his landlord is entirely aware of it. “What can I do for you? Do you need me to let in the plumber again?”

“Well, you see, Sherlock, I...” Mr Chatterjee gives an audible sigh on the other end of the line. “This is difficult. I like you. You’re a nice boy, and I respect you as a baker. You would have done great things with my cafe.”

Sherlock’s stomach drops at the words. *Would have? What’s that supposed to mean?* “What happened?”

“I got an offer. From one of the big chains. They want the space for a franchisee.”

Sherlock swallows and tries not to panic as everything he’s worked for goes up in smoke. “When?” he asks, proud that his voice isn’t shaking nearly as much as the rest of him is.

“Early next year, they haven’t set a date yet. They want to sign the contract by the first of January, though.”

So there’s still a smidgeon of hope. If he can get the capital. “Don’t sign the contract before talking to me first.”

“I don’t know, Sherlock.”

“Please,” Sherlock says, putting as much weight into the word as he possibly can.

Mr Chatterjee sighs heavily. “Fine. But I can’t hold on to the property forever. I’ve got mortgage payments, and my daughters to put through Uni.”

“I completely understand,” Sherlock answers, and he does. Mr Chatterjee needs the money, Sherlock understands that. Sherlock just needs to get it first.

“Well. Good luck with the show, Sherlock,” Mr Chatterjee says and rings off.

Sherlock bites off a curse and barely restrains himself from flinging the phone at the wall.

What now?

Three options.

One, Mycroft, again.

Sherlock thinks of the text he got from his brother after the scene with John, one line that just read, *I hope you know what you are doing, but knowing you, I doubt it.*

Mycroft will never lend Sherlock the money. This hasn’t changed, and it will not change.

Second, the GoFundMe page.

Chances of success at this venture are low, because he probably won’t be able to accumulate the amount of money he needs from strangers on the Internet in the two months he has to make Mr Chatterjee a lucrative counteroffer.

Third, he needs to find a sponsor.

This might actually be achievable, especially if his social media interactions increase.

Sherlock reaches for his laptop and goes to work.

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“Sherlock?”

Something hurts. Something that is sitting between Sherlock’s shoulder blades.

“Sherlock!” Warm hands on his shoulder, shaking him gently.

“Hey. Wake up.” Gentle hands, gentle voice.

John.

Sherlock slowly blinks his eyes open and straightens with a groan. He's definitely getting too old for falling asleep over his kitchen table. "What time is it?" he mutters, rubbing at his eyes.

"Nine-thirty."

"AM or PM?" Sherlock asks, turning to look at John, who gazes at him with obvious worry.

"AM. Friday. Remember, you invited me over to bake?"

Sherlock rubs a hand over his face and tries to get reoriented in space and time. He's in the kitchen at Speedy's, and apparently he didn't clean up after himself last night, because the kitchen is a mess. He worked until the small hours of the morning, making a new video about how not to make cupcake frosting, and researching how he might lure a sponsor.

He didn't mean to fall asleep. Shooting and cutting the video took longer than anticipated, and he hasn't yet uploaded it. Producing new content is vital now, he needs as many social media interactions as possible if he wants to attract serious attention.

"Are you all right?" John asks, looking around the kitchen with a palpable air of concern.

"Yes, yes," Sherlock dismisses John's concern with a wave of his hand. He gets up and starts cleaning up, more than a bit irritated when John starts helping him.

"I don't have time for amateur baking hour, John, so kindly get out," he snaps.

John sets down the mug he was about to put into the dishwasher and frowns. "Okay, out with it. What's wrong?"

Sherlock runs a hand through his hair and all but snarls in frustration. "None of your bloody business, get *out*. I have serious work to do. Some of us aren't just in this for the fun of it, you know, some of us actually *live off this*."

"Okay," John says, and there's something in his voice, a steely determination that Sherlock finds extremely aggravating and deeply reassuring at the same time. "You need coffee. And breakfast. Come on."

"I don't have *time*, John," Sherlock bites out. "I've got two months to come up with a hundred thousand pounds, otherwise this place will be *gone*, just another Pret or Costa or any one of a thousand faceless, soulless factories that keep levelling people's expectations of what a good croissant is like down until everybody will think croissants are supposed to taste like dried up toilet paper."

"Right." John grabs Sherlock's coat from the hook by the door and all but shoves him in the direction of the door. "Coffee. Breakfast. Now."

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Ten minutes later, they're walking in Regent's Park with coffee and appallingly awful chocolate muffins. The sun is shining and it's an objectively lovely day out, but Sherlock

feels nothing of it. His head feels like it's been stuffed with wool, and the coffee does little to dispel his exhaustion.

John is walking next to him, steady and calm and mostly quiet since Sherlock told him what happened.

"So you need money," John finally says.

"Obviously."

"What about your posh git brother?"

"Not an option."

John snorts. "I guess your relationship with your sibling is about as constructive as mine."

Sherlock shrugs, and doesn't tell John everything he deduced about John's relationship with his sister. Judging from the phone she gifted him with, and the comments she leaves on his blog, she's a drunk who's getting a divorce, who loves John and resents him about equally, whose relationship to John is close but contentious, as it would be between addict and sober sibling. He doesn't tell John how right he is, because he and Mycroft used to be the addict and the sober sibling, and in a way they very much still are.

"You could ask Emma about sponsoring. The show must have sponsoring partners. Product placement, that sort of thing. Maybe the BBC could get you in touch with some of them," John ventures. "These muffins are appalling, by the way."

Sherlock snorts. "It was your idea to get breakfast."

John looks at him from the side, and the smile he gives Sherlock is both fond and understanding. "It looked like you needed some fresh air."

Sherlock concedes the point with a dismissive hand wave. "I'll make you some chocolate chip scones back at the bakery. But you make a good point about the BBC."

"You should talk to Janine. She can probably help you with the paperwork," John says, shielding his eyes against the sun. "Do you think I'll poison the ducks if I feed them this muffin?"

Sherlock huffs a laugh and resists the urge to take John's hand and wind their fingers together as they walk through the autumn sunshine. "Let's risk it."

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"Just how many layers of clothes are you wearing?" Sherlock demands impatiently, shoving John's jumper aside to get to skin only to be met with a t-shirt and a vest.

"It's cold," John pants, winding his fingers into Sherlock's hair and tugging him down for a mind-melting kiss.

Sherlock backs John up against the counter, and all but lifts him up until John is sitting on it. Sherlock steps between his legs, and John hooks both legs around Sherlock's and drags him in, slotting their hips together. They're snogging and rubbing against each other like teenagers, sloppy and messy and oh so perfect. Sherlock finally gets John's jumper off and tosses it aside, then drags greedy hands over John's skin under his vest.

"I want..." he pants into John's ear, biting at his neck.

"Then take," John mutters, grinding their hips together.

Sherlock spares a brief thought for the pastries in the oven and his as of yet still unposted YouTube video. After he made them chocolate chip scones for breakfast that turned out to be closer to lunch, he contacted the BBC about the sponsoring, and watched John make pasties with an easy competence that is sexier than anything else about him. John as a baker is amazing. He's messy, and sloppy, and he uses Sherlock's precision scale with ironic amusement, but his every movement speaks of a comfortable joy that Sherlock has rarely seen before. He was glad when the pasties were in the oven so he could freely molest John.

Now he's thinking of what he wants. Fucking John right here on the counter seems an excellent option. They're already perfectly aligned like this. The only problem is a logistical one, because he has neither lube or condoms. So taking John upstairs and bending him over Sherlock's kitchen table seems more doable, and he's certain that John will be amenable.

He's just about to unglue his lips from John's for long enough to suggest it when John's phone rings.

"Leave it," Sherlock mutters into John's mouth, but John draws back.

"Can't," he pants. "Could be work."

"Fine," Sherlock growls and takes a step back to let John get off the counter to grab his mobile from the kitchen table.

John checks caller ID with a frown and answers. "John Watson speaking."

Sherlock's thoughts are still on the kitchen table upstairs and on his hands on John's hips pulling John back onto Sherlock's cock, so it takes him a moment to notice that John's gone pale.

"How much blood has she lost?" John asks in a tone of voice that shocks Sherlock out of his arousal as efficiently as a cold shower would. "Are you transfusing her? We're the same blood type."

Silence. The only sounds in the kitchen are the oven and the tinny sound of someone speaking on the other end of a phone line. John has turned his back to Sherlock and is looking for his jumper.

"I'll be right there," he finally says and hangs up.

He turns to Sherlock, and he looks so lost for a moment that Sherlock wants to press their bodies together and hold onto John until he feels better, and it's so far removed from the dizzying lust he felt not five minutes ago that he experiences something not unlike emotional whiplash.

"I need to go," John says in a voice Sherlock barely recognises. "My sister. She had an accident."

"Of course," Sherlock says. "Do you need me to drive you?"

John shakes his head. "No. Thank you. I'll just..." he gestures vaguely at the door.

He walks out without another word.

The oven dings, and Sherlock is left alone in his kitchen with apple-poppy seed pastries and John's jumper, flung haphazardly over the KitchenAid.

Chapter End Notes

[John's winning Topfenstrudel](#)

This is the best English recipe I could find, but if you want a truly light and fluffy filling, you should beat the egg whites and fold them into the filling. Also, add raisins to taste (hides from Sherlock).

You can serve it warm with custard, or cold with icing sugar on top. This is one of THE Viennese classics, together with apple strudel, and you can get this anywhere, pretty much. With varying degrees of raisins ;-)

[Mary Berry's custard](#) for reference. It's close to the one my wife makes, which inspired John's. It's absolutely delicious, only she uses a vanilla pod instead of vanilla extract.

Week 6 - Fillings - Part 2: In the Tent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Welcome to week six of The Great British Bake Off. This week: fillings.”

“The technical challenge: The humble Profiterole. A delicate pastry with a cream filling and a rich chocolate sauce.”

“Bakers, you have two hours. On your mark, get set, bake.”

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Sherlock carefully folds in the flour to the butter-milk-water-sugar mixture. He’s added half a tablespoon of salt for contrast, and he can feel the dough come together as he stirs it vigorously.

The room is quiet, the only sounds coming from Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner, who go from baker to baker and ask them about their bakes.

There’s an agonised sound from Neela, and Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner go over to her. Apparently, her dough is too runny, and she made the mistake of adding more flour, which just made it lumpy.

Sherlock ignores her and takes his dough off the heat. He slowly and methodically adds the eggs, stirs them in with practiced ease. He turns off the stove and lets the dough sit to cool.

John’s working steadily, introducing the eggs into the dough one at the time. He works with a concentrated frown that is very much unlike his usual ease. He’s got bags under his eyes, and every line of his body screams exhaustion.

Sherlock watches him covertly, trying not to seem too obvious about it. He spent all of yesterday evening pacing his kitchen, waiting for... something. For John to come back, for John to contact him in some way. And at the same time as he was checking his phone every five minutes, he was cursing his own stupidity for letting himself care about his casual shag’s sister’s health. Finally, he broke and sent a two word text. *All right? - SH*

The answer came at 2 am. *Yes. Home now. Need to sleep. See you tomorrow*

When Sherlock picked John up this morning around six, he didn’t look like he’d slept at all. He fell asleep in the car and slept all the way through to Bath.

Now he’s working steadily, and he even gives Sherlock an occasional small smile when he catches his eye, but he’s far from his usual cheery self.

When Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner stroll over with the steadicam, John tells a funny story about his gran and how he nearly burned down the bakery making choux pastry once and

forgetting it on the stove, and everybody within hearing laughs, but Sherlock can tell John's heart isn't in it.

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The food porn shots take longer than usual today, and they're all standing around outside the catering tent, hungry and cranky and cold.

"Mine are ruined, I'm sure," Neela complains, leaning her head on Molly's shoulder.

"What happened?" John asks compassionately.

"The dough was too runny, so I added some flour."

"Next time, just stick it in the freezer," Molly advises, and Sherlock looks up from his phone, surprised, because that's just about the only way to 'fix' runny choux pastry without completely ruining it. In fact, Sherlock made a video this week on the chemistry behind choux pastry, and he recommended this tactic of fixing them.

Neela looks at Sherlock. "Any other tips?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Bin it and start again?"

To his surprise, his co-contestants laugh, and talk switches from baking to weird social media comments. Neither Irene nor Janine bring up the comments they left on John's blog, but he can feel both of them watching him as John absently leans his head on Sherlock's arm when he gets tired.

John excuses himself to get some coffee, and Neela wanders off to text her boyfriend.

"Is he all right?" Molly asks, nodding in John's general direction.

Sherlock doesn't say *I wish I knew*, instead he just shrugs. "Of course."

"So, are you two sleeping together?" Irene asks, bluntly as ever.

"Irene," Molly hisses, turning bright red. "It's none of our business."

"Of course it isn't," Janine says, grinning broadly. "We're just curious."

"Well, your curiosity must remain unsatisfied," Sherlock says and turns on his heels to go looking for a cigarette before he verbally eviscerates Irene or any of the others. He would love to, but it would make the coming weeks awkward, and John wouldn't like it. Why it should matter what John thinks is beyond Sherlock, but somehow, it does.

Unbidden, he can hear Mycroft's voice in his memory. *Caring is what got you here, Sherlock. Caring gives other people power over your happiness. You can't give that power away. Ever.*

The memory brings with it a flash of sensory associations. The smell of old sweat. Daylight filtering in through lacy curtains and a window streaked with dirt. A well-known voice,

slurring hateful words. *Fine, fuck off, then. See if I care.*

He doesn't look where he's going, so he almost runs into John, who's as lost in thought as he is. John barely manages not to spill his coffee over Sherlock, but only because he's holding on to it with the death grip of the fatigued.

Sherlock grabs John to steady him, and his hands linger on John's hips for a few seconds too long. Their eyes meet, and the smile John gives him seems actually genuine.

"All right?" Sherlock asks, echoing the question from his text the night before.

John grimaces. "Not really. But. You know. Conscious. Still." He holds up the cup of bad coffee. "This has got to do me for now."

Sherlock nods and lets John go, painfully aware of his own reluctance. "Come on, they're filming the judging."

"That won't put me to sleep at all," John mutters, and Sherlock laughs. He holds the tent flap open for John, ignoring the flutter in his stomach when John's body brushes past his as they enter the tent.

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John was right about the judging, it nearly puts Sherlock to sleep, and he isn't sleep-deprived. Well, not any more than he normally is.

Sherlock's chocolate sauce gets high praise, and his profiteroles are the fluffiest, and the ones with the most perfect hollow inside. Irene, John and Molly all delivered perfect batches as well. Neela's are doughy, and Janine's collapsed in the oven. Moriarty takes the win for the best overall combination of taste, texture and sauce. He's incredibly smug about it, grinning at Sherlock in an infuriatingly superior way, but John grabs his sleeve and says, "Come on, I'm hungry, let's go have dinner."

Moriarty gives him a raised eyebrow and lets his eyes drop to John's hand on Sherlock's sleeve, his smirk taking on a condescending edge, but Sherlock doesn't have it in him to care, so he lets John pull him along, relegating Moriarty to insignificance again.

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The pub where they're staying is just across a very busy country road, and they trek over with their overnight suitcases, all of them sweaty and grumpy.

Sherlock showers and opens his laptop. Keeping up with his social media channels is more difficult these days, his subscribers and interactions have quadrupled, and are still rising. He gets comments and likes and questions, and he tries to answer as many reasonable ones as he can. He also posts some deliberately vague pictures from today's filming, a very good close-up of the chocolate sauce he made, a whisk with a whipped cream peak hanging from it.

There's a knock on his door. "Dinner!" Molly yells, and Sherlock sighs. Then he thinks of John, who's probably already downstairs, waiting for him, and Sherlock closes his laptop.

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Dinner is chicken pie, and they all critique the pastry. It has a terribly soggy bottom, but it's still delicious. Janine, Molly, Irene and Neela keep up a friendly chatter about their lives and their jobs, and Sherlock tunes most of it out as he watches John. He appears to be listening attentively, but Sherlock can see that he's miles away, and he eats mechanically without seeming to care what it is. He doesn't look at Sherlock once during the meal, and when Sherlock comes back from sneaking a cigarette outside with Janine, he's gone.

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Sherlock finds him at the bar, having a staring contest with two fingers of whisky. Sherlock sits down next to him and gestures to the landlord for the same. John doesn't acknowledge him with words, but his body shifts ever so slightly, angling a bit towards Sherlock. It's a tacit permission to stay, and Sherlock is grateful for it, because he's a bit worried about John. The look in John's eyes as he stares at the whisky is deeply familiar to Sherlock, and the last thing he wants now is for John to face whatever is at the bottom of that glass alone.

For a while, they just sit there quietly. The ambient noise - football on the telly, locals talking quietly over a pint - doesn't make the silence any more comfortable.

"Do you ever have the urge to do something stupid?" John asks after a while. "Not a bit stupid, or slightly silly, but something explosively, destructively stupid?"

"Yes," Sherlock says without hesitation. He is all too familiar with the siren call of self-destruction.

John finally, finally looks over at him as if only now becoming aware that he's there. He smiles a bit, a humourless smirk of the fellow creature. "What do you do, when you get that urge?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Bake, mostly."

John's smile is more genuinely amused, now. "Tried that. What do you do when baking doesn't work?"

Sherlock thinks of cigarettes at three in the morning, when even the visceral comfort of soft, warm dough under his hands can't calm the racing thoughts in his skull, when even Locatelli or Bach or Paganini can't soothe the savage hollowness behind his breastbone, thinks of walking Regent's Park in the middle of the night to forage for rosehips, thinks of smoking a cigarette sitting on the edge of the roof of 221 Baker Street. "I do something slightly less stupid."

John looks at him speculatively. "Got any ideas?"

Sherlock grins. "Yes."

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“This is completely insane,” John says, but he’s smiling, genuinely smiling, and he follows Sherlock, sure-footed and without hesitation.

The tent is big and white, reflecting the moonlight, making it easy to see in the darkness of the surrounding park.

They sneak in from the back, through one of the tied-down ‘windows’.

Quietly, they make their way to Moriarty’s workstation.

“What exactly are we doing here?” John asks, slightly out of breath from climbing through the window.

“Something stupid,” Sherlock answers with a grin. He opens Moriarty’s fridge, and the light that spills out illuminates John’s face. There’s something in his face that Sherlock recognises, adrenaline and excitement pushing down other, more complicated emotions.

“What’s the goal here?” John asks, and the slightly dangerous excitement is in his voice as well.

“Mild inconvenience?” Sherlock suggests; he knows he needs to be the responsible one right now, because in this mood, John would probably go for full-on sabotage, and Sherlock doesn’t want either of them thrown out of the competition. Moriarty just isn’t worth it, even though he is a comprehensive git with his smugness, his chef whites and his condescending side-eyes.

John grins, and the glint in his eyes slowly takes on a more mischievous note. “I’ve got an idea.”

Together, they rig the eggs so they’ll fall out and break on Moriarty’s shoes when he opens the fridge tomorrow. It’s going to annoy him, but won’t seriously interfere with his bake, because he can just get new eggs from the contestant store room where the BBC supplies them with staples like milk, eggs, butter, and flour.

They’re both grinning when they walk back to the hotel. The night is lovely, cold but cloudless, and the sky is a stunning tapestry of stars. The moon is nearly full, and Sherlock feels like walking for a bit, so he leads John past the pub. John follows, and they walk for a bit in silence.

They stop at a crossroad. The road leads slightly downwards, and they’re standing on a bit of a precipice. The silence is absolute. Occasionally, a car drives by, but then it’s quiet again. They stand there and look out into the night for a few quiet minutes. Then John reaches out without looking at Sherlock and winds their fingers together. Sherlock’s heart does a curious little flip, and his breath catches in his throat, just for a tiny moment.

“Sherlock,” John says into the quiet of the night.

“Yes?”

“Let’s go back.” There’s something in John’s voice, dark and intense, and Sherlock shivers a bit, and not from the cold.

“Yes.”

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John’s lips are on his before the door is even fully closed behind them. He’s peeling Sherlock’s coat off and kissing him with a single-minded intensity that makes Sherlock’s knees weak. John’s lips are cold and his hands are cold, but Sherlock minds neither as he struggles to get John out of as many clothes as quickly as he can.

John trails kisses down Sherlock’s neck, hands already at his belt buckle. He bites at Sherlock’s throat, and Sherlock wants more, now, now.

“I want to fuck you,” John mutters against Sherlock’s carotid, punctuating the statement with a teasing bite. “Tell me I can fuck you.”

“Anything,” Sherlock breathes, and the part of him that can still think is scared of the absolute nature of that statement, because he means it, right this very moment, John can have *anything* he wants from Sherlock. “Anything.”

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He thinks it’s going to be fast and rough. He’s wrong. John takes his time. John is *thorough*.

By the time John has two fingers inside him, Sherlock is beyond rational thought.

“Please,” he breathes, beyond shame, beyond embarrassment. “Just... please.”

“In a minute,” John pants, voice unsteady with desire, eyes dark, hair mussed from Sherlock’s kneading hands.

A third finger, and Sherlock is a writhing, squirming mess of nerve endings. His cock is painfully hard and leaking, and he just wants *more, now*.

When John finally pushes in, it’s all too much for a moment. Sherlock closes his eyes and breathes, and John says, gently, “Sherlock. Look at me.”

Sherlock opens his eyes and looks into John’s, dark blue and open and so beautiful, and Sherlock can’t help himself, he yanks John down for a kiss, and they’re kissing sloppily, panting into each others’ mouths as John pushes all the way in.

Everything dissolves, then, into heat and sweat and the slapping of flesh and grunts and moans traded between their lips, and when John’s hand closes around Sherlock’s erection, he comes with a loud moan that John tries to swallow from his lips. John follows closely after, then collapses half on top of Sherlock. Sherlock closes his eyes and wraps his arms around John, and they just lie there, sweat and come cooling on their skins, sticky and disgusting, and utterly perfect, for now.

Eventually, John moves, sliding out of Sherlock's body. Sherlock winces a bit, the feeling is always odd and a bit uncomfortable. John disposes of the condom and comes back with a wet towel for Sherlock. Sherlock cleans himself off and throws the towel in the direction of the bathroom. John slides back into bed, and Sherlock pulls him in, arranging them so John's head is pillowed on Sherlock's chest, their legs entwined.

It's pleasant, and peaceful, and Sherlock lets himself enjoy the moment; for once his brain feels placid and sated.

"My sister is an alcoholic," John says, quietly, into the darkness. Sherlock can feel his voice rumble in his chest that is pressed against Sherlock's side, feels the breath ghost over his skin. "Has been since... I don't even know. A long time. She's been dry and not and dry and not so many times. In and out of rehab so many times."

John pauses, and Sherlock wonders whether he should say something. But John continues before he can make up his mind. "Last night..." Sherlock can feel John press his lips together against Sherlock's skin, can feel the tremor of emotion that runs through his body. "She said she wasn't drunk. She said she slipped. Fell into her glass couch table. She needed thirty-nine stitches." John sighs, and Sherlock can feel his exhaustion in every movement of his body. "It wasn't the first time she hurt herself while drunk. But it was the worst, so far. And I...I just. I can't do this anymore. But I can't not do it either."

Sherlock has no idea what to say to that, because he's been on the other end of what John is describing, he's been the addict who drove every member of his family to this exact weary exhaustion. He can't honestly give John any comfort, because he knows how hollow any words would be. So he tightens his arms around John and cards his fingers through his hair and stays silent.

"Maybe I'm being too hard on her," John muses, his voice quiet and contemplative.

"In what way?"

"My dad was a drunk, you know. Not the violent kind, the quiet depressed kind. And I'm a doctor, I know a lot about addiction, I know it's got a genetic component, so I'm thinking maybe this is a there but for the grace of god go I situation, that I just won the genetic lottery and should get off my high horse." John pauses briefly and Sherlock can feel him take a deep breath. "It's just... so exhausting. And it's hard, knowing I can't help her."

"You are helping her," Sherlock says before he can think better of it. "You're there for her. That is the most valuable thing you can do for her."

John raises his head to look at Sherlock, and Sherlock has the feeling that John knows he's speaking from personal experience. Track marks scar, after all, and John has had his hands over every inch of Sherlock's body. Oddly, that knowledge doesn't scare Sherlock nearly as much as it should. "I guess I just wish it could ever be enough, but I know it doesn't work that way."

Sherlock pulls him down again and resumes carding his hands through John's hair. "There are no addicts in my family," he muses quietly, glad that John isn't looking at him anymore.

There's a noticeable pause, then John says, voice kept carefully neutral, "That you know of. Don't forget, cocaine was considered healthy just a hundred years ago. And laudanum addiction was common in the upper classes as well."

"My great-uncle was quite a character. Maybe he was a raging cocaine addict. Would be fitting, I was named after him."

John raises his head and gives Sherlock a fond smile. "I wondered where Sherlock comes from. It's a highly unusual name. But then again, you are a highly unusual person."

Sherlock doesn't know what to say to this, because highly unusual could be interpreted in several ways. "I'm not boring, at least."

John's smile broadens, and it does something to Sherlock, makes his stomach flutter and his heart beat faster. "No, you're not boring. Not even a little bit."

"Neither are you," Sherlock mutters, voice barely more than a whisper, because it's difficult to speak around the emotion clogging up his throat.

John lies back down with his head pillowed on Sherlock's chest. "I don't have many friends," John says quietly, and it seems like a non sequitur, but it really isn't. "The people I knew from before... do you know what it's like, when you know people, and then something happens, something that changes you so profoundly that the person you used to be doesn't exist anymore? And the people you knew before still think you're that person, and you can't bear it when they find out you're not?"

Sherlock nods, because he knows this intimately and perfectly. It's the reason Sherlock has no friends at all.

"What I'm trying to say," John says, a bit impatient, but Sherlock gets the impression the impatience is self-directed. "Thank you."

Sherlock swallows around the lump in his throat, because he isn't sure what he's being thanked for. "You're welcome."

Chapter End Notes

[Afghan Bolani](#)

[Kärntner Kasnudeln](#)

John's pastry is neither of these things, but he's inspired by both.

Also, his poppyseed-apple pastry is inspired by [this](#).

My grandmother made a version of this for Christmas Eve when I was a kid.

A word about Viennese food, especially Viennese baking. It's heavily influenced by Jewish, Hungarian and Bohemian food traditions, because Vienna used to be the capital city of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a giant melting pot for all the cultures of the Empire. So there's a lot of popowidl and poppy seeds and potato dough.

There's also a lot of bakeries in Vienna. Like, on every second corner. Many of them are chains, but they've got good stuff. And there's plenty of coffee houses where they make their own cakes. So do yourself a favour: If you're in Vienna, skip the Starbucks ;-)

Week 7- Biscuit Week - Part 1

“So, Sherlock, tell us a bit about why you bake.”

Emma the contestant wrangler is standing next to the camera, which is placed in his studio kitchen. The crew arrived far too early in the morning and they’ve already done a shot of him walking down the street, and one entering Speedy’s, and now they’re sitting here and he has to endure inane questions. John told him they did something rather similar with him on Monday, only they didn’t come to his flat for the simple reason that they wouldn’t all fit into his kitchen.

“I’m a chemist. Baking is chemistry.”

Emma looks at him expectantly.

Sherlock glares back. “That’s it.”

“Any more stories about your nanny, maybe, how she taught you to bake? The judges loved that, and the audience did too.” Emma smiles at him encouragingly. She’s one of these annoying people on whom his death glares seem to have no effect, and his most barbed comments just glide off her like she’s made of teflon.

“Fine.” Sherlock schools his features into something resembling thoughtful nostalgia. “I liked baking as a child with my nanny, and after getting a Master’s in chemistry, I began studying the chemical process behind baking. When I discovered that people know next to nothing about the chemical reactions behind the simplest of recipes, I started my YouTube channel.” He turns to Emma. “Is that enough?”

She gives him a thumbs-up. “Great. Now let’s see, I want to get a bit more for Glen, so he has a choice of what he’s going to use. Why did you decide to enter the Great British Bake Off?”

“To get more followers for my YouTube channel.”

Emma makes a face. “People don’t want to hear that, even if it’s the truth. Try ‘it sounded like fun’?”

“It sounded like a tedious mess,” Sherlock snaps, but when Emma just looks at her watch and makes a move for him to get on with it, he sighs and says, “I thought it would be a good opportunity to get more people to care about baking.”

“Perfect. Now. To your fellow contestants. Janine had to go last week, what did you think of that?”

Sherlock shrugs. “It was a fair decision. Her pastries were dry and tough, and by far the worst of the bunch. I like Janine personally, but Neela deserved to stay. Her samosa-inspired pasties were much better.”

“How about Moriarty? He blamed you for the accident with the eggs, and said the way you and John sniggered you must have had something to do with it.”

“We were on the other side of the tent.” Sherlock rolls his eyes and tries not to smile as he remembers how John giggled at the sight of Moriarty stomping towards the catering tent, egg all over his pants and shoes. “He’s overdramatic.”

“He won the challenge.”

Sherlock shrugs again. “His pasties were good. Pretentious, but good. It’s intricate work, making pastry dough look like ravioli, and I suppose he deserved to win for that.”

“What about John?”

“What about John?” Sherlock echoes the question, trying very hard not to sound defensive, and realising that he absolutely does.

“Well, seems like you two get along really well?” Emma wiggles her eyebrows in a suggestive way.

“You don’t actually expect me to comment on that, do you?” Sherlock says, and fervently hopes that the camera doesn’t pick up on the heat he can feel rising in his cheeks.

Emma laughs. “No. Worth a try, though. So, two last questions, then we should have enough material. First, who’s going to win, and who’s going to be in the final three?”

“I’m going to win. Final three, John, Molly and me.”

“Perfect.”

After that, the crew film him baking scones, and manage to linger until they’re done, and Sherlock sends them off with a scone each and a sigh of relief.

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“What’s all this, then?” John asks later that night, as they’re eating the leftover scones at the kitchen table of Sherlock’s studio kitchen. It’s already dark outside, and John is dressed in grey wool trousers, a button-down shirt and a jumper that’s slightly less awful than his usual ones. The trousers cling enticingly to his arse every time he gets off his chair. Sherlock is a bit distracted by them.

Sherlock tries to refocus on John’s question, and looks at the intricate drawings and calculations littering the table. “Gingerbread house. This week’s showstopper?”

John grimaces around another bite of scone. “Oh god. I’m bad at arts and crafts. But I have a delicious gingerbread recipe.” He taps the cover of the black notebook he brought with him.

Sherlock holds out his hand for the book, and John flips the pages, fragile and yellowed with age, until he reaches it, then slides the open book over to Sherlock. “Fair warning, it’s mostly in German.”

“So what?” Sherlock asks and reaches for the book.

“You speak German?” John asks, eyebrows going up in surprise.

“Among other things. Well enough to read a recipe book, anyway.”

He dismisses the question with a wave of his hand and scans the recipe, drawing a few obvious conclusions. *Handwriting barely legible, the person who wrote this was a German native speaker who learned a different alphabet in school and had to retrain themselves to write latin script. Pages were touched often with greased or sticky fingers. Written by a person who bakes well and often, jotted down quickly, for home use.*

The gingerbread recipe seems fine at first glance. He leafs through the book and stops here and there to read recipes of things he’s never heard of. Buchteln. Powidl, yeast dough, custard. Sounds delicious. He grabs his notebook and starts jotting down a few ideas as he continues to leaf through the book. He finds the recipe for the Punschkrופן John made, sees where John modified it (mostly by using far less rum). The apple and poppy seed pasties he made on Sunday are also in here, but as a sort of cake. The judges loved the combination of Austrian and Afghan flavours and influences, and Sherlock thinks privately that John should have won last week. He didn’t because of Moran, because Moran loved Moriarty’s pretentious little bite-sized pastries. But they weren’t nearly as interesting as John’s. The combination of poppy seed and apple is delicious, and Sherlock thinks he might try making little mini-pies for when he finally has his bakery, with interesting latticework.

He starts out of his thoughts when John touches his shoulder. “I need the loo, can I go upstairs?”

Sherlock looks up and realises that he has no idea how much time has passed. John has finished his scone and put his plate and cup away in the dishwasher. His phone is on the table, and it looks like he’s been checking his emails. “Of course you can go upstairs, what a stupid question.”

John smiles at him, looking fondly amused. “Shall I leave you two alone for the night?” he asks, gesturing at the recipe book.

Sherlock looks up at him, at his fond smile and the laugh lines around his eyes, at the soft blue jumper and the way it’s going to feel under his hands. “You said something about the loo?”

John huffs a small laugh and makes his way upstairs. Sherlock watches the fabric of the grey slacks stretch over his arse. Then he closes John’s recipe book and follows him upstairs.

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Later, after Sherlock all but pounced on John as he came out of the loo, after a playful wrestling match that turned into passionate snogging that turned into Sherlock fucking John from behind with John’s filthy, wanton moans muffled into Sherlock’s pillow, after John fell asleep, fucked out and spent and relaxed, Sherlock shrugs into his dressing gown and goes downstairs on shaky legs and bare feet. He retrieves the recipe book and sits in his dimly lit

kitchen, leafing through the recipes. Sachertorte with jam in the middle - completely unnecessary - the Linzertorte recipe from John's first showstopper. Vague about jam and flour, but the spice blend is in there, and with precise quantities for once. Sherlock memorises the exact recipe and stores it in the vast recesses of his mind palace, then starts turning the pages again.

He stops at a page with a poppy seed cake that's titled John's Birthday Cake. There's a drawing on the page. A birthday cake with six candles. Yellow crayon, very rough. Next to the drawing, a faded thumbprint. Child-sized.

As Sherlock leafs through the book again, he realises that what he holds in his hands isn't just a recipe book. It's a slice of John's childhood. A few recipes were amended in English, substituting ingredients and correcting baking times. Nearly every page is decorated in some way. Stickers of dogs, of cars. Crayon drawings, mostly of cakes. A few recipes that were clumsily torn out of magazines and glued lopsidedly onto empty pages. A picture, used as a bookmark. It's a faded snapshot of an elderly woman and two children sitting in front of a birthday cake, lit with seven candles. One of these children is obviously John, he's grinning broadly into the camera, showing an impressive tooth gap. The other child must be John's sister, she looks about three years older, and from the resentful boredom on her face, it's obviously not her birthday. The elderly woman is also smiling into the camera, and she's got an arm around each of the children. She's a small woman, but her wiry frame speaks of a lifetime of hard work. The three of them are sitting in front of a small formica table in a drab little kitchen. The entire decor and the faded, brownish quality of the photo dates easily into the seventies.

Sherlock looks at the picture for a long time. John's grandmother looks very little like him, except for her eyes. They're similarly shaped and seem to be the same dark blue as John's. She's wearing a simple house dress. Both children are in sharply pressed button-down shirts, apparently dressed up for the photo. Sherlock wonders whether there is another picture in this series, one without the grandmother, one where the children are looking into the camera and smiling formally, a picture for framing, not tucking carelessly into a recipe book. But the picture looks like it's been handled many times, looked at many times. It looks like a peaceful moment in a hard life. It looks like something you take out and gaze at when things are tough, to remind yourself that if things were this good once, they can be this good again.

Slowly, Sherlock becomes aware of what exactly he is doing. He becomes aware of his body, of the stiffness of his limbs, that he's thirsty, and freezing. He places the photo back where he found it, between the well-worn pages, and carefully closes the book. He drinks a glass of water and goes back to bed, trying to ignore the warmth in his chest and the smile that tucks into the corner of his mouth.

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"Let me show you why weighing and measuring your ingredients properly is so very important," Sherlock says into the camera.

He reaches for his bowl. "The most common mistake in baking is reading recipes wrong. Especially when recipes are written in measuring units you're not overly familiar with. The most common errors happen when converting pounds into kilos, or cups into grams and

liters. Let me show you what happens. I've combined butter, sugar and flour into a simple biscuit dough, and I'm kneading it, but it won't come together properly. That's because I've added seven grams of sugar instead of 70, like the recipe calls for."

He adds the rest of the sugar and shows how the dough now comes together perfectly. He then demonstrates how adding sugar helps yeast dough to rise, and explains how ingredients all react to one another.

The oven dings, and he takes out his first try of the mini-pies with apple and poppy seed filling. He sets them down to cool and cuts and posts the video.

His stomach growls and it occurs to him that he hasn't eaten all day.

He checks his watch. Five pm. John should be here any minute.

Maybe they should go out to dinner. Angelo's, maybe. Or that Chinese at the end of Baker Street with the good dim sum. Or the new Indian place around the corner; Sherlock would very much like to see their Tandoori oven. They could walk through Regent's park first, and Sherlock could show John some of his favourite places to forage for wild blackberries and rosehips. Then dinner. Then maybe ice cream, there's a lovely new place down by the Thames that Sherlock has been dying to try out and...

No. What the hell does he think he's doing? He and John are not, *are not* like that, they don't *have dinner*, they don't stroll through Regent's Park at dusk. They bake, and they have sex. That's it.

Sherlock closes his eyes and thinks of last night. John came over around three in the afternoon, and they spent hours in the kitchen, baking biscuits, tasting, refining recipes. John is terrible at constructing a gingerbread house, and Sherlock helped him, and by the end they were both sticky and covered in icing sugar because John dropped the bowl. They ended up having sex against the wall of Sherlock's shower, Sherlock's soapy fingers teasing at John's arse while John was wanking them off with one hand twisted in Sherlock's hair. Afterwards, John borrowed Sherlock's dressing gown and Sherlock made them simple breakfast muffins with a sourdough base, rashers of bacon and a sunny-side up egg in the middle. They ate the muffins and drank tea sitting on Sherlock's sofa. John switched on the telly to some movie and they watched it in comfortable silence. John fell asleep right there on the sofa, and Sherlock tucked a blanket around him, and then curled his body around John's and felt a heavy-limbed, quiet contentment that should have alarmed him but somehow didn't.

It alarms him now. It alarms him that he knows John's work schedule. It alarms him that he recognises John's handwriting from his gran's recipe book. John's walk, his smell, his humming while he bakes, the way he favours his left leg, the way he clenches and unclenches his hand to hide the tremors, it's all deeply familiar now.

Five weeks. At the most. If John gets to the finale - which he should - they'll have five weeks left. And then John will be out of Sherlock's life again. So best not to get used to him, to his presence, the way he shapes himself around Sherlock, the way he seems to fill all the hollowed-out places in Sherlock's life.

There's a room in Sherlock's mind palace he never enters. He can't quite bring himself to delete it. He sometimes walks the perimeter, gazes through the windows. He knows the room is small, dingy, dimly lit. It smells of urine and sweat and human misery. He remembers hollowed-out cheeks and dark brown eyes and angry, infected track marks. He remembers how hard it was to leave, how difficult it was to realise that if he wanted to live, he had to get out, even if he had to leave behind everything he cared about.

Caring won't save you, Sherlock. Caring won't save him. All you do by caring about other people is endanger your own sobriety.

The front door of Speedy's opens and John steps into the kitchen a few moments later. He smiles at Sherlock, obviously in a good mood. "Hey. What are you up to, you look like you were miles away."

Sherlock shrugs and closes the door to the corridor of his mind palace where he hides the things he doesn't want to think about anymore. "The usual. Baking."

"More biscuits?"

"Boring. Try this." He thrusts one of the mini-quiches into John's hand.

John takes a bite and cocks his head. "It's good. Did you use my gran's Fladen recipe as an inspiration?"

Sherlock nods and grabs his notebook. "I need more detailed feedback than 'good'."

John rolls his eyes, but he takes another bite. "The poppy seed base is a bit too dry. And something is missing, I'm not sure what. There aren't any raisins in this, are there?"

Sherlock shakes his head. "Raisins and poppy seeds don't go together."

"We'll have to agree to disagree about that one," John muses and sits down to eat another mini-quiche.

"Tea?" Sherlock asks and flicks the kettle on. "I'll add some lemon juice to the poppy seeds for the next batch."

"Good idea, and yes please."

Sherlock makes a few notes in his notebook. The kettle clicks off and John gets up to pour the water over the bags of PG Tips Sherlock already dumped into two mugs.

Then John rolls up his sleeves and starts making biscuits. Sherlock joins him at the counter a few minutes later, starting on his second batch of the mini-quiches.

They bake side by side in a comfortable, companionable silence, both obviously lost in their own thoughts and not minding one bit.

John's cookie dough needs to rest, so he says something about getting them dinner, and Sherlock nods absently as he squeezes the lemon juice into the poppy seeds, then makes

careful notes of how many grams of poppy seeds he added.

His phone dings. YouTube comment notification on the weighing and measuring video.

@johnwatsonsblog

This feels a bit personal. Also, for the record, I do weigh and measure.

Sherlock grins. He can almost picture John standing in line wherever he's getting dinner from.

@thescienceofbaking

You barely weigh and measure. I'm not disputing that it works for you. But less experienced bakers would fall flat on their faces if they baked like you. Though, to be fair, now that I've seen your gran's recipe book, I know where you get it from.

@Johnwatsonsblog

Thank you? I guess? And don't slag off my gran's recipe book.

@thescienceofbaking

I'm not slagging off your gran's recipe book. It's quite brilliant. Even though her Sachertorte recipe is extremely questionable.

@hyperfixatedbaker

Just out of curiosity, Sherlock, where did you see that recipe book? At John Watson's flat maybe? From his bed?

@johnwatsonsblog

Are you honestly slagging off my Viennese gran's recipe for THE Viennese classic?

@thescienceofbaking

Jam in the middle, John. Really. It's just not original.

@thehotdude

You two are adorable.

@johnwatsonsblog

The bloody hotel Sacher has the jam layer in the middle, Sherlock.

@thescienceofbaking

Entirely unnecessary. Also, the Sacher isn't the original, as you know very well.

@janinelawyered

Oh my god, you two. Get a room.

@johnwatsonsblog

Ok. Thats it. Mini-Bake Off. You. Me. Sachertorte.

@hyperfixatedbaker

I'd pay good money to see that.

@thesexyguy
Pics or it didn't happen.

@thenakedbaker
I'll be a judge. No, seriously, Neela, Molly and I can be the judges.

@janinelawyered
That's a fantastic idea

@messybaker
Totally do it

@robinsparkles
I WANNA SEE THIS SO BAD

@randodude
BAKE OFF BAKE OFF

@harrywatson
Kick his arse, John.

The door dings, and John comes in with a plastic take-out bag. Sherlock looks up from the phone, and John grins at him.

Sherlock grins back. "You're on."

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"So this mini Bake Off between Sherlock and myself is about a philosophical difference on the subject of Sachertorte," John explains while Sherlock is filming him. "Sachertorte was invented in the 19th century by a young man named Sacher, who was working for a very famous bakery in Vienna called Demel. So Demel claims their Sachertorte is the original, but Sacher left Demel to found his own business, the Cafe Sacher, and they claim that he took the original recipe with him, therefore theirs is the original. The difference being of course that the Sacher recipe has a layer of apricot jam in the middle, and the Demel recipe doesn't. So Sherlock and I will make a Sachertorte. He'll use the Demel recipe, the boring one with jam only under the chocolate icing. I will use the original, classic and obviously superior method with a layer of jam in the middle."

"Will you stick to the script," Sherlock says from off-camera.

John grins at him in a way that Sherlock thinks he might have to edit out later, or nobody in their right mind will ever believe they're not shagging. Not that Sherlock necessarily cares what people think.

"Yes, Mr DeMille," John says with an audible eye-roll. "We will both take our cakes with us on Saturday and let the remaining contestants on Bake Off decide which of the cakes is better. The video will be posted in full, with recipes and all, on Sherlock's YouTube channel,

so subscribe if you want to get notified when Sherlock posts the video. Comments and questions below.” He looks at Sherlock. “Good?”

Sherlock nods and turns off the camera. “Well done.”

John grins. “They call me One-Take-Watson.”

“Who calls you that?” Sherlock asks, and he doesn’t mind that his amusement is clearly audible in his voice.

“People.” John shrugs and saunters over to where Sherlock is standing, mock-casually stepping into his space. He smiles up at Sherlock and hooks his index fingers into the belt loops of Sherlock’s belt. “So, what are your plans for the rest of the evening?”

Sherlock smiles back, heartbeat picking up noticeably. “Oh, I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

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“So I’ve creamed the butter and the sugar with the vanilla,” John says into the camera, holding the bowl up. “Now I’m adding the chocolate, and obviously I’ve let this cool a bit, otherwise the butter and the sugar will melt into the chocolate, and we don’t want that. At least not now. So. Next step, eggs. Five eggs, and if you’re thinking, gosh, that’s a lot of eggs, well, yes, it is.”

Sherlock smiles to himself and watches John bake. He’s good at this, a natural, really. He’s photogenic and charming and self-deprecating.

He separates the eggs and smiles into the camera. “Never got the hang of the thing where the chefs crack the eggs with one hand.” He looks at Sherlock. “Can you do that?”

“Yes. But then, my hands are bigger than yours.”

John gives Sherlock a suggestive smirk. “Are they, now.”

“Can we stick to the baking please?”

“Hey, you started it.”

“I just pointed out that my hands are bigger, after you asked me a question. I started absolutely nothing. And you realise I’m going to have to edit this out, meaning more work for me, so please just stick to the baking.”

John rolls his eyes and reaches for the hand mixer again. “So. Eggs into the butter-sugar-mix. Add one at a time, or all of them at the same time, I think it doesn’t make that much of a difference. And by the way, if you have a really large tin, add more flour and an additional egg, because you don’t want the cake to be too flat.”

“What are the measurements for a large tin, and how much flour is more flour?” Sherlock asks. “Be precise, John. For once in your life, be precise.”

In response, John flings a handful of flour in Sherlock's face.

"Did you just throw flour at me?" Sherlock asks, torn between outrage and laughter.

John grins unrepentantly. "You deserved it for being an incurable smartarse."

Sherlock's lips twitch, and John grins at him. Then they both start laughing, and John steps around the counter and behind the camera. He starts brushing the flour out of Sherlock's hair, and Sherlock's amusement fades when John all but cards his hands through his hair. "Sorry about that," John says, lips still twitching with amusement.

"No you're not," Sherlock mutters, trying to sound put out, but he knows he's failing.

John smiles at him, and there's something in that smile, something *more*, something soft and serious. "You have the best laugh," John says quietly. "You should laugh more often."

Sherlock has nothing to say to that. He hasn't laughed as much as he has since he met John in years. There was nobody around to care whether he did. He swallows, and John pulls him in for a kiss that's as demanding as it is gentle, and Sherlock opens up to it, lets John kiss him and kiss him and kiss him until he forgets everything outside of them.

He's vaguely aware that John has turned off the camera, that John is walking him back until he's sitting on the kitchen table, that his legs are wrapping around John to keep him close and pull him closer. *Stay*, his body is saying. *Stay* the small treacherous voice inside his head mutters, the one that speaks for his heart.

It's apparent that John has no intention of going anywhere right now, if the way he's kissing Sherlock is any way to go by. Sherlock kisses back and loses himself once again in the simplicity of the body.

Week 7- Biscuit Week - Part 2: In the Tent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“It’s biscuit week in the tent, and the technical challenge for this week: American style chocolate chip cookies. The judges want twelve indential beautiful chocolate chip cookies, but this time, the contestants are allowed to add a bit of a personal touch, like nuts.”

“Bakers, you have two hours for the challenge. On your mark, get set, bake.”

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“So, John, this looks good.”

“Yes, but I'm afraid I miscalculated somewhat, so I’m going to have thirteen identical cookies.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Eat one?”

Laughter.

“Tell us about your little side Bake Off with Sherlock.”

“Well, we’ve both made a Sachertorte, and when we wrap here today, we’re going to have a taste-off.”

“Oh, can we be on the jury?”

“Absolutely, Mrs Turner. Right, Sherlock?”

“As long as we can count on you both to be impartial.”

“It’s our job, darling.”

“We’re Switzerland.”

“Fine, fine, you can eat Sachertorte and ignore your diabetes, it’s your health.”

“How did you...”

“Don’t ask him, he’ll actually tell you.”

“Can we please concentrate on the bake we’re actually doing right now? Or do you want us both to be eliminated today for burning our cookies?”

“Fine, we’ll leave you to it.”

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“It was difficult to decide between Sherlock’s honey-glazed nuts and delicate dark chocolate and Molly’s caramel-peanut-crunch, but we’ll give it to Sherlock for this round, because his cookies had the best consistency all out.”

“I have to say, though, that every single batch of cookies was very good. We’re nearing the final, and all the remaining bakers are extremely talented. So Star Baker this week is wide open, and I can’t predict who’s going home either.”

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, it seems the competition is getting tighter and the air on top is getting thinner.”

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“So all I have to do is taste cake and decide which one I like best?” Neela asks, looking sceptically between the two slices of cake and Sherlock, who’s pointing the camera at her.

“Yes.”

“This is a farce,” Moriarty presses out between gritted teeth. He’s standing next to Emma the contestant wrangler and he’s been complaining loudly about their side-shoot for the entire day. “How can you let them film in the tent? This isn’t fair.”

“Our Twitter interactions are through the roof, mostly because of those two,” Emma points out. “Our market share is increasing by the week. The show is a hit, and while I’m sure it would have been successful without the two of them, this is still good for all of us.”

“I’m not staying to watch this,” Moriarty huffs and leaves the tent, to everyone’s noticeable relief.

“You think he’s pissed that we didn’t ask him to be a judge?” John asks, and the tension dissipates as some people chuckle.

“Can we get on with this? Some of us have lives,” Irene says, gesturing at the cakes.

“Don’t pretend you’re not Instagramming every moment of this,” Sherlock poits out as he positions his own camera perfectly.

Irene grins and holds up her phone. “Smile, Sherlock.”

Sherlock gives her an insincere grin, then flips her the bird. Everybody laughs, and then John claps his hands. “Point well taken, though, Irene, let’s get on with this before we lose the light.”

“Good point, John. Ladies. Please take your places.”

Five place settings have been put before five chairs. The settings contain two slices of Sachertorte on dessert plates, two dessert forks and a glass of water, to cleanse the palate between tastings.

“Can I get a cup of tea?” Mrs Turner asks.

“No, it will interfere with your taste buds.”

Mrs Hudson rolls her eyes. “Well, then, let’s get on with it.”

Irene, Molly, Neela, Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner all take their places. Sherlock turns the camera on. “Action.”

The “judges” start tasting the cakes.

“You used the same recipe for the sponge?” Irene asks, and Sherlock nods.

“They’re both very good.” Molly takes a sip of water and tastes both cakes a second time.

The rest of the judges make agreeing sounds as they taste the cakes.

“Are you ready to reach a verdict?” John asks, and he sounds both slightly nervous and vastly amused. He looks at Sherlock and flashes him a smile, and Sherlock suddenly wants to get this over with and be alone with John to lick that smile off his face.

Something of this must show on his face, because John’s eyes flick to his lips, then meet his gaze, darkening with implicit promise.

Sherlock looks away and focuses on the camera to reduce the temptation of John’s smile.

“So. Verdict. Are you ready?”

“Absolutely,” Mrs Turner says, taking another bite of cake. John’s, Sherlock notices.

“Irene, would you start?”

Irene looks directly into the camera. “These are both good cakes, but Sherlock’s is less sweet, and I like that better, so I vote for Sherlock’s cake.”

“Neela?”

“John’s, definitely. It’s too dry without the jam.”

“Molly?”

Molly visibly hesitates, then lowers her eyes to the two cakes. “John’s.” She looks at Sherlock. “Sorry. The jam does make the cake more moist, and I really like it.”

“No need to apologise for your unbiased opinion.” Sherlock dismisses her apology with a wave of his hand. “Mrs Hudson?”

“My vote goes to Sherlock. I agree with Irene, I like that it’s not as sweet.”

“That gives you the deciding vote, Mrs Turner,” John tells her.

Mrs Turner grins into the camera. “Oh, I like that. I need to be careful not to get drunk on power.”

Chuckles all around, and Sherlock bites his tongue, because he really just wants to get this over with. He needs to cut and upload this video, and he would like to get this done as soon as possible, because he has plans with John before the night is up.

Mrs Turner is enjoying the moment, though, and is taking her sweet time. “Well, I love Sachertorte. I lived in Vienna for two years after culinary school, and I worked in this charming Cafe in the first district, a smoke-filled hole in the wall with cheap coffee and good cake. Our regulars were nearly all students, who’d stretch out a coffee to last them the afternoon, and who chain-smoked while waving around Mao’s Red Book and talking about a revolution.”

“At this rate, the cake will go stale, and neither of us will win,” Sherlock mutters under his breath, but loudly enough that Mrs Turner can hear him.

“My point, young man,” she says, mock-glaring at him over her reading glasses, “is that I know something about Sachertorte. In Austria, the jam in the middle variant is more popular, and I have to say that I agree. The jam in the middle makes a rather dull chocolate cake spark. So my vote goes to John.”

The jury and some of the crew cheer, and John pumps his fist in the air and grins. “Told you so,” he says to Sherlock, eyes sparkling. “Gran’s recipes never fail.”

“Yes, yes, fine, you won,” Sherlock says, trying to sound bad-tempered about it, but John’s obvious joy and the promise in his grin are tugging at his lips for an answer, and he knows he’s smiling when John goes to get congratulatory hugs and high-fives from the crew and their “judges”.

He busies himself with packing up his camera when Irene walks over to his side. “Well, you win some, you lose some.”

Sherlock shrugs. He doesn’t actually care, five random people’s opinion on the nuances between two very similar recipes won’t lose him a second of sleep. What he won’t admit even under torture is that the entire thing, from the challenge to filming John bake, to John filming him while baking, to this judging thing, was the most fun he’s had in literally years, and probably ever while completely stone-cold sober.

He doesn’t feel sober, though. He feels slightly punch-drunk with a soft, heart-tugging joy and a tingling want under his skin for John’s hands all over him, and it’s as exhilarating as it is scary. He keeps telling himself it’s just for another few weeks, and then it will be over, there’s no reason to be alarmed. But as he glances over at John, who’s getting hugged by Molly a bit too tightly if the pained smile on his face is anything to go by, he knows he’s kidding himself.

“You like him, don’t you,” Irene states quietly, having followed his gaze to John. “I thought you were just shagging, but you like him.” She looks at him and shakes her head, and her tone softens even more. “You poor sod, you’re completely besotted.”

“Shut up,” Sherlock snaps. “I’m not besotted. I’ve never been besotted in my life.”

“I believe you,” she says and pats his shoulder in a gesture that’s both compassionate and condescending. “Makes it worse, doesn’t it?”

“Sod off, Irene.”

She smirks at him and holds up her hands in a disclaiming gesture. “Fine, I won’t say anything else.” She looks over at John again and her smile softens. “You’re lucky,” she says, and her tone is a bit wistful. “He’s a good one.”

Sherlock swallows against a lump of diffuse sadness that sits on his chest. “I know.”

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“Are you done yet?”

“You asking me every five minutes whether I’m done is not contributing to my working speed.”

“Well, let me rephrase. Do you *have* to do this *now*?”

“If you mean that in a ‘Will reality collapse into a black hole of nothingness if I don’t do this now’ way, no. If you mean it in a ‘Is this something that needs to get done as soon as possible’ way, then yes.”

“I like it when you use big words.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes and turns around, facing John, who’s lying on the bed of Sherlock’s hotel room. John is grinning at him suggestively, and his tone has switched from bored to teasing to flirtatious very quickly. He’s angling his hips towards Sherlock and spreading his legs a bit. “Might have to start without you,” he mutters, voice low and seductive, as he starts to trail his hand slowly over his body and traces the outline of his cock in his well-cut jeans.

Sherlock’s heartbeat picks up noticeably, and arousal spikes all over his body. “Please do,” he says, his own voice matching the tone of John’s, low and raw and wanting.

“Fuck,” John whispers as their eyes lock, and Sherlock can practically see John’s pupils dilate. “You should come with a warning label. ‘Kinky fucker’, or something.”

Sherlock smirks. “You love it,” he mutters.

John’s eyes go soft, and it sends a shiver of *something* through Sherlock’s body. “I do,” John says, voice trapped somewhere between tender and aroused.

“Go on, then,” Sherlock says, desperate to get back to the safe ground of arousal. “Start without me.”

John grins wickedly. “Careful what you wish for.”

He strips off his t-shirt and Sherlock watches greedily as John's hand teases over a nipple, then his fingers follow the trail of hair leading to John's groin. Sherlock loves tracing that trail with his tongue, loves the softness of John's skin, the coarse hair against his tongue, the smell of John, arousal and sweat.

Sherlock's fingers itch to touch, but he holds still on the uncomfortable desk chair, ignoring the way his half-hard cock strains against his trousers.

John doesn't bother with taking off his jeans, he just unbuckles the belt and unzips his fly, and the way he unceremoniously bares his erection to Sherlock's hungry gaze is incredibly arousing. He wraps his hand around himself and gives his cock a long, languid stroke.

Sherlock bites down on an undignified wanting noise threatening to escape as he feels his own cock twitch with the slow, languid motions of John's hand.

John's eyes slip closed as he strokes himself. "Look at me," Sherlock says, barely recognising his own voice. "John, look at me."

John's eyes snap open and his gaze locks on Sherlock's. "You like that?" he asks, voice husky with arousal, as he strokes his cock in a leisurely, all-the-time-in-the-world way.

Sherlock nods and greedily watches John's every expression, every stroke and flick and twist of his hand, every shudder and bitten-off moan until he can't take it anymore and all but pounces on John.

John's breath hitches when Sherlock settles on him, and the brush of John's naked cock over Sherlock's clothes makes them both shudder. "Let me," Sherlock mutters into John's mouth as he leans down and kisses the smug smile from John's lips. "Let me."

"Anything," John whispers, kissing him back fiercely and intently, fingers winding into Sherlock's hair. "Anything."

Sherlock has to close his eyes against the complicated emotion twisting through his entire body, then moves down John's body and loses himself in lust once more.

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"Day Two of Biscuit Week, and our contestants are making gingerbread houses."

"Half of the customary four hours have already elapsed, let's check on progress."

"John, what's your house supposed to be?"

"It's a hospital, see the red cross shape on the wafer?"

"Food colouring?"

"Yes, I made a stencil."

"Sherlock, your house looks very traditional. What are these?"

“I made gingerbread frames and melted sugar in between to get a window. My house is a bakery.”

“Are these little gingerbread croissants in the window?”

“Obviously.”

“Impressive.”

“Well, this looks like a lot of work, we’ll leave you to it.”

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“Sherlock, how do you feel about your win at this crucial stage in the competition?”

“Good. It’s good.”

“Neela’s out, any reaction to that?”

“Predictable. She’s a solid baker, but the time for solid baking has passed.”

“She certainly wasn’t surprised.”

“She’s not a complete idiot.”

“I think we’ll cut that. Thanks, Sherlock.”

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“Jim, strong second place.”

“This is ridiculous, the judges are clearly letting Sherlock win because they think people like him more because he’s shagging Watson. They’re just doing it for the attention, can’t you see this? And you’re playing right into their hands. This is a baking show, and you leave in all their ridiculous flirting, and cut away from people actually bloody baking.”

“Um, Jim. You realise we won’t air any of this, right?”

“I didn’t think you would. It’s a disgrace. I’ll complain to your superiors.”

“You do that.”

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“Sherlock, do you have a minute?” Emma the contestant wrangler asks as he’s finished clearing his workstation.

Behind her, John stops working and looks up curiously.

Sherlock nods. “Of course, what’s going on?”

“I’ve been told to let you know that one of our sponsors want to have a chat with you. They’re impressed with your social media numbers, and they expect interaction to go up after the mini-Bake Off you did with John.”

Sherlock feels himself go cold, then hot, then cold again. “Thank you,” he says, trying to keep his voice steady and succeeding so well that he knows he’s almost completely hiding how nervous he actually is.

Behind him, John gives him a giant grin and two enthusiastic thumbs up. It makes Sherlock smile, and he’s much calmer when he says, “Email me the details?”

Emma promises to do so and leaves. John drops his box of equipment and all but runs over to Sherlock. They’re the last of the contestants, but the crew has only just started taking the tent apart, so they’re far from alone, and John keeps his voice carefully down when he says, “Sherlock, that’s absolutely fantastic!”

“Let’s not get over-excited, I don’t know what they’ll offer yet,” Sherlock cautions, going back to packing up his equipment, mostly to hide how much his hands are shaking.

“Right, of course, but this is a real chance! A real, actual chance to get what you always wanted.”

Sherlock gets his jams out of the fridge and uses the moment his face is hidden to breathe deeply. John is right. This is real, and he needs to manage his expectations. It’s difficult, though, because hope is singing through his veins, stronger and more potent than any drug.

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They’re halfway to London when John says, “You should phone Janine. You need a solicitor for this.”

“I know, I’m not a complete idiot.”

There’s a noticeable pause before John answers, all exasperated fondness, “No, but you are exactly the type to think you need to do everything by yourself, and I just wanted to remind you that you don’t.”

Sherlock is glad he has to concentrate on traffic, because he can’t see John’s expression and he isn’t sure he wants to. “You don’t know me half as well as you think you do.” He tries for harsh, but somehow he sounds wistful.

“Oh,” John says, and the smile is audible in his voice, “I think I do.”

There’s nothing to say to that, at least nothing Sherlock would ever consider saying out loud, so he lets a comfortable silence sink and concentrates on driving them back home.

[The Sacher-Demel controversy, also known as the Cake War](#)

Essentially, two of Vienna's most famous cafes fighting over who has the right to call their Sachertorte the "Original". The story is a lot more complicated than John let on, but long story short, Sacher won, and if you think that this doesn't matter, they outsell Demel 2:1 when it comes to Sachertorte. But I do think the jam in the middle version is better, so good for Cafe Sacher, I suppose. (Full disclosure: I have never been to either Cafe Sacher or Cafe Demel, because they're super expensive, plus Cafe Demel is really *weird*, but a friend of mine worked at Cafe Demel for a while, and their baked goods are excellent)

There's a series of Actual Original Great British Bake Off YouTube videos where Mary Berry teaches you how to make a Sachertorte, but she, too, omits the jam in the middle, which, as we now know, is not the correct way to make a Sachertorte, and John would be very disappointed in her ;-). Also I've never used cream to make chocolate icing in my life, you can make it with a bit of milk and a knob of butter, and I'm sure it's just as good.

[Here's the link to the first part.](#)

Week 8 - Hidden - Part 1

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay, both my beta and I were on vacation in hotels without WiFi - or very unreliable WiFi.

“Sherlock, I’m surprised to hear from you.” Janine’s voice sounds tinny over the speakerphone, and he can hear her typing in the background.

“I need your help.”

“Legal or baking?”

“Legal. Forgive me, but you wouldn't be my first choice for baking advice.” Sherlock pauses. “No offence.”

“I’m crushed,” she deadpans. “What seems to be the problem?”

Sherlock hesitates and debates with himself whether this was a good idea. “I’ve got a meeting with the BBC about a sponsoring contract.”

“When? Where?”

Sherlock tells her and he can hear a pen scratching over paper. “Lunch before to strategize?” Janine asks.

Sherlock accedes and rings off, feeling oddly relieved. Maybe John is right. Maybe he doesn’t have to do this alone.

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"I'm not crazy about this contract," Janine says as she stirs sugar into her latte.

Sherlock watches the foam slowly collapse as Janine stirs it into the coffee. His own coffee sits there, untouched, and both he and Janine waved away any offer of baked goods. They're sitting at a Costa's in central London, surrounded by tourists and university students. The air is filled with a dozen languages and a few arguments about whose turn it is to do the assignment this week.

The meeting with the BBC and their sponsor was.... disappointing. The sponsorship would extend to Sherlock using the products in his YouTube videos and featuring them at the beginning or end of every video. Since the quality of the baking equipment is adequate, this

would not be a problem, but the arrangement doesn't get him any nearer to what he actually needs, which is loads of money. Now.

"We need to renegotiate several passages," Janine continues, ignoring his pointed silence, and takes a long sip of her coffee. She sighs in pleasure and grins. "Bad pastries, good coffee."

Sherlock shrugs and finally takes a sip of his own beverage. "Tolerable."

"Listen." Janine leans in and drops her voice. "I know this isn't what you wanted, or what you need right now, but it's still a good thing that will help you pay your rent every month."

Sherlock acknowledges the point with a grimace. "What now?"

"Three options. One, forget about the bakery idea and rely on the business you already have, which would be the most financially sound advice" she says, enumerating points on her fingers. "Two, bide your time and look for another location until you've saved enough money to open your bakery, even if it isn't on the premises you want. Third, I could try to get you a bank loan."

Sherlock looks up at the last suggestion. "I've already tried that."

Janine smirks. "Yes, and first, you're in a good financial situation right now, second, I know how banks think, and third, you can absolutely use your trust fund as collateral, because I'm pretty sure we can get your brother to give up control over it."

Sherlock stares at her, momentarily speechless. "How?" he asks, and if his voice isn't entirely steady, Janine pretends not to notice.

"We threaten to sue him. You're a grown man, and you've been sober for six years. Your brother's financial control over your life is ridiculous."

Sherlock swallows, and slowly, slowly, he can feel his face stretch into a grin. "Janine. I love you."

Janine grins. "Oh no, darling. You pay me."

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On his way home, Sherlock gets a text from John.

On my way. How did it go?

Also what the hell is a hidden design cake?

Sherlock smiles at nothing in particular, glad that the social contract in public transport forbids eye contact. He checks his emails and sees that the Bake Off producers have sent them the information for next week's theme. "Hidden". The technical challenge is filled and unfilled doughnuts, and the showstopper is hidden design cakes.

Google is your friend. I'll be home in 20 minutes. - SH

How did it go with the BBC?

Middling. Details later. -SH

A pause, then John replies. *You do know how to keep your audience engaged, I'll give you that*

First rule of the Influencer. Always leave them wanting more. - SH

Oh, I want more

Sherlock feels his cheeks stretch into what he's sure is a slightly silly grin, but he can't seem to stop smiling. He might get out from under his brother's thumb and John is waiting for him at home. A good day.

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Sherlock's mood sours somewhat when he notices John isn't waiting for him in front of 221, and his mood goes completely to shit when he notices the knocker on 221 is as straight as an arrow. That can only mean one thing. So he fortifies himself with a deep breath and goes upstairs to meet his brother.

He's unpleasantly surprised when he finds both his brother and John in the kitchen, having a rather serious staring competition.

Sherlock glares at his brother and smiles at John, who gives him an absent smile in return. It seems John brought dinner, judging from the smell of Chinese food that fills the kitchen. Sherlock sits down on the third kitchen chair and looks pointedly at Mycroft. "You do realise that I own a mobile phone?"

Mycroft smirks at him. "Would you have picked up?"

It's a rhetorical question, and they both know it, so Sherlock doesn't bother answering. "Please tell me what you want, our dinner is getting cold."

Mycroft darts a glance at John, and John, well-bred as he is, immediately starts getting up. "If you two have something private to discuss...."

"Sit back down," Sherlock snaps. "If he has anything to say to me you're not supposed to hear, he's welcome to come back when he's actually invited."

John sits back down and looks at his hands, and Sherlock knows that he's trying not to smile, and that in turn makes it difficult for Sherlock not to smile.

"Very well," Mycroft says, rolling his eyes at Sherlock's 'antics'. "You went to see a solicitor."

"Your point?" Sherlock asks, staring at Mycroft levelly.

"Don't do anything rash, Sherlock."

Sherlock smirks. "I won't. Is that it?"

Mycroft gives him a long look, which Sherlock returns without blinking. Then Mycroft sighs his long-suffering elder brother sigh and gets up. "Call Mummy."

Sherlock ignores him until he's out of the door, then closes and locks the door to his flat. "I should change the locks."

John lets out a sigh of relief. "Your brother is... intense."

"That's one word for it." He turns around and watches John as he gets up and takes out the containers of Chinese food he brought.

"Hungry?" John asks.

Sherlock smirks and stalks toward John, his focus narrowing on the spot on his neck that John missed when he was shaving this morning. "Ravenous," he says and slings his arms around John, biting at his neck.

John turns around and winds his hands into Sherlock's hair, kissing him, dirty and open-mouthed and single-minded, and the food gets very cold indeed.

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"What's this, then?" John asks, reaching for the container with the shrimp noodles and gesturing at the wall behind the couch.

"The bakes for the show," Sherlock answers.

They're lounging in the armchairs before the fireplace, and it's odd, because Sherlock has this sense of déjà vu again, just seeing John sitting in the squishy red armchair Sherlock never especially liked. The fire is lit, the room is dim and cozy in a way Sherlock didn't know it could be. John is half-dressed in a t-shirt, pants and one of Sherlock's ancient dressing gowns. The fine hair on his bare legs catches the firelight. It's oddly distracting.

"Why are some marked in yellow?"

Sherlock needs a second to remember what they were talking about; he was focused on John's naked knee just now. "The ones I lost are yellow. I wanted to figure out why I lost these, but there's no rhyme or reason to it, really."

John snorts. "Of course there isn't. It's all about the individual taste of three people, after all. I suppose it's inevitable, really. Food can never be judged really objectively."

"It should be possible," Sherlock points out. "There are, after all, objective criteria to what constitutes a good bake."

"Yes, but how do you judge between two equally good bakes? Personal taste. Take your filo strudel and my topfenstrudel. Both perfect bakes. The judges picked mine because they liked it more."

“But that’s completely unfair.”

John shrugs. “But unavoidable. You can’t be truly objective about food. You’ll always like some things better than others, for no discernable reason. It’s called taste.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “That’s why the show is completely ridiculous, of course. You’d need a bigger sample size for the show to be truly representative. If the jury consisted of a hundred people, individual taste would matter less.”

“True, but I have no desire to make topfenstrudel for 100 people,” John answers, then sets down his container of noodles and straddles Sherlock’s lap on his chair. He smiles down at him, and Sherlock smiles back, feeling that thing tugging at his chest again, that thing he refuses to name, that makes warmth spread through his entire body down to his toes.

“Let’s change the subject,” John whispers against his lips and kisses him, and Sherlock falls into the kiss, lost once more.

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“This is bloody frustrating,” John says as he assembles his third hidden design cake. His first and second were solid, but not good enough for competition.

Sherlock looks up from the kitchen table, where he’s lazily leafing through John’s gran’s recipe book, waiting for inspiration to strike. “It requires a great amount of precision, not something you excel in when it comes to baking.”

John rolls his eyes. “Yes, thank you, Captain Obvious, this is enormously helpful. Forgive me if I’m not good at baking little rainbow hearts into an otherwise boring sponge cake.”

“Well, if you’re not about to transform into a fifteen-year-old baking a cake to tell your crush you like them, I doubt that the quality of your life will be affected by your lack of this skill.” Though he’s heard worse ideas than little rainbow hearts for hidden design cakes, it has to be said. It’s difficult, requiring differently coloured sponges and geometric precision. Intriguing. But definitely not something John should even attempt.

“You’re not going to be any help at all about this, are you?” John asks, but it’s a rhetorical question and Sherlock doesn’t bother answering.

Sherlock turns his attention back to the book as John mutters under his breath grumpily and continues putting together his cake. He’s reading the baking instructions for what apparently used to be John’s birthday cake. It’s a relatively simple poppy seed cake with a jam filling and a chocolate icing, but the baking instructions are odd, because if one follows these instructions, the cake will rise and then collapse again.

“Done.”

John puts a cake in front of Sherlock, and it looks nice, white roll-out icing and blue flowers. Sherlock cuts the cake in half, and the inside is a nice chocolate sponge and two yellow

circles that will show up in every slice. Sherlock tastes the cake. It's light, chocolatey and fruity. "It's not perfect, but I think it's as close as you'll get."

"Thank you, I think." John smiles at him, openly fond and obviously amused. It should be illegal, that smile. It does things to Sherlock, to his pulse, his breath, his stomach.

"Where's your cake?" John asks, sitting down opposite Sherlock at the kitchen table. It's late afternoon, and John hasn't been at work today, they've been puttering around the kitchen since before lunch.

Sherlock shrugs. "I made one yesterday. While you were at your boring job."

"Not everybody has a trust fund, you know," John points out a bit grumpily.

"Please, I barely have a trust fund. My brother sits on it like a vulture waiting for a fresh corpse."

"Oddly specific, but somehow fitting." John hesitates briefly before he continues, "You know, he said something odd to me the other day."

Sherlock looks up sharply, all his quiet contentment gone. "What did he say?" he asks, and he doesn't care that his tone reflects his annoyance. "Whatever it is, ignore him, he's an unmitigated arsehole."

John snorts. "Yes, well, that's abundantly clear to me. But what he said wasn't actually so bad, he just said that he might have to get used to me after all."

Sherlock's heart does a complicated little stutter at the wistful tone of John's voice. Their eyes meet, and John looks at him like he expects Sherlock to say something, but Sherlock has no idea what that might be. He can't say what he's thinking, which is *I never thought it would be this way when we first started this, I never thought I'd like you this much, I never thought you'd be this dangerous, and that means I can never ask you to stay, however much I might want you to.*

John seems to have read some of this off his face, because he drops his eyes to his hands and smiles a little sadly. "I should go, I haven't been home in three days, and I can't steal your clothes forever."

Sherlock starts a bit at that, because he realises John is right. Sherlock drove them to Baker Street on Sunday, and John went home briefly on Monday, but came to Baker Street directly after work, and today is Thursday, and he's been here ever since. And the smart part of him, the reasonable part, is saying *Let him go. And make sure he doesn't come back.*

But the part of him that was never good at saying no to just one more hit is stronger, so he gets up and drops to his knees before John's chair, and kisses him, at the same time as he's fiddling with the belt of John's jeans. "One more day won't make a difference," Sherlock mutters against John's lips. "And I've got plenty more underwear for you to borrow."

John winds his hands into Sherlock's hair and pulls him back so he can look Sherlock in the eyes. He's searching Sherlock's face like he's looking at something, but when Sherlock's fingers trail over his cock through his jeans, his eyes darken and he says, "Fuck it. Can't get any worse," and kisses Sherlock until Sherlock forgets to ask what he meant by that.

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Sherlock wakes to darkness and an empty bed. He reaches over and the sheets are rumpled, but cold, so John must have gotten up some time ago. Still half asleep, he stumbles out of bed and into the loo and wonders whether John left, and whether he's relieved or disappointed about that.

But then he hears the unmistakable sound of a hand mixer scraping over the bottom of a plastic bowl and suddenly he knows where John is and what he's doing.

Silently, he goes downstairs and hovers in the door, watching John as he beats egg whites until they stiffen and then folds them carefully into his sponge mix. He sieves in the flour, all the while not looking up, though Sherlock is absolutely sure that John knows he's there.

John separates the sponge into three different tins, and adds food colouring to one of them. Then he puts them into the oven and sets the timer.

Silence falls, and they both listen to the ticking egg timer counting down the seconds.

Finally, Sherlock can't take it anymore, and even though it's the most obvious thing to say, he asks, "Can't sleep?"

John turns around and looks at Sherlock, and there's something in his body language, something contained and cautious, that tells Sherlock this is more than not being able to sleep.

"Nightmare," Sherlock deduces before John can open his mouth.

John's mouth twists, sharp and bitter and sad. He nods, and reaches for the kettle. "Tea?"

Sherlock nods, and John starts preparing tea with the determined gestures of a man who needs something to do with his hands that moment. Anything.

"What do you dream about?" Sherlock asks, not because he necessarily needs to know - obvious, really - but because he wants to get John to talk, to pull him out of that headspace where you're so alone you doubt other people exist, even if they're right next to you.

John shrugs and goes to the fridge for milk. "Getting shot." He comes back and adds a splash of milk to Sherlock's tea. "Boring, really," he adds with a self-deprecating smile that doesn't reach his eyes as he hands Sherlock his tea.

"Getting shot is boring?"

John huffs a laugh, and it's closer to the real thing than the smile was. "No. But the aftermath. Hospital. Physio. You know." He gestures vaguely at his own head and shrugs. "Head stuff."

Sherlock has to smile at that. “Head stuff? You are a doctor, right? I may have to ask to see your medical license.”

John smiles back, and this time he seems to be actually here, in this kitchen at 2 am. “You know. Nightmares. Psychosomatic limps. All that shit. The things psychologists charge you a lot of money for talking about it.”

“Never saw the point of that, myself,” Sherlock muses and takes a sip of his tea. It’s perfect, just the way he likes it, and the comfort of it settles into Sherlock’s stomach and warms him from the inside in the cold kitchen. He leans against the counter and watches as John, dressed in Sherlock’s clothes from head to toe, boxers, t-shirt, dressing gown, wraps his hands around the mug and breathes in the steam of his tea as if he needs the visceral comfort of a hot beverage. “I never had anything much to say to therapists.”

John lifts the corner of his mouth in a half-smile and takes a sip of his tea. He closes his eyes for a moment and just breathes, then he shrugs and looks at Sherlock again. “Me neither. The questions they ask. What was it like, getting shot? Well, it fucking hurts, that’s what it’s like.” John rubs at his shoulder, right over his scar, with a deeply frustrated gesture.

Sherlock carefully says nothing, but he puts down his tea and steps behind John, lets his fingers sink into the tense muscles around John’s shoulder blades. John stiffens for a moment, but then he sways a bit towards Sherlock, and Sherlock slowly kneads the stiff muscles.

John groans. “You’re good at that,” he mutters, voice barely audible.

“Like kneading dough, really.”

John laughs a bit, more breath than sound, but it’s a real laugh, and Sherlock smiles, because John is back from wherever he went, back in this kitchen, in his body, in the here and now.

Sherlock rubs his fingers around the knotted scar tissue and says, keeping his voice low, “I started baking in rehab.”

John’s body tenses under Sherlock’s fingers, but he says nothing, so Sherlock continues, “The second time around, in fact. First time -” He hesitates briefly, deciding how to put this. “- didn’t stick. The second time I joined a small therapy group in an old mansion; it was a sort of get clean camp situation. Our therapist strongly believed in teaching us to be self-sufficient and getting us to work with our hands to keep us clean. Many of us had issues with our appetites after detoxing, so she taught us how to cook. And bake. I’d always had trouble with boredom, I needed to keep busy at all times so my brain wouldn’t eat itself, and I started making scones. My first batch was horrible, even though I followed the recipe to the letter. So I made another batch. And another. And another. Until they were perfect. Then I started experimenting, and before I knew it, I was baking for the entire house. I was good at it. It kept me busy. It occupied my hands, grounded me in my body.”

John nods, and Sherlock feels the muscles in his shoulders move under his hands. “Me too.”

“Can I ask you something?” Sherlock mutters, quietly, still gently massaging John’s shoulders.

John hums and makes a 'go ahead' sort of motion with his right hand.

"Why the leg?"

John snorts, but doesn't answer immediately. "I'm not completely sure myself," he finally says, and his tone is thoughtful and quiet. "I think it was because my leg was trapped under a boulder when we were ambushed, and it fell asleep, and when they removed the boulder, my leg hurt worse than my shoulder for a bit, and when I was in the hospital I was so out of it with fever that I thought they'd had to amputate it, so I guess that's why."

Sherlock's hands still, but he leaves his palms pressed to John's shoulders, fingers digging into the soft material of his dressing gown, warmed by John's skin. "How did you finally convince yourself that your leg was fine?"

John's shoulders tense up a bit again, but relax when Sherlock rubs his palms over them ever so slightly. "I don't know that I have, completely, it still hurts sometimes." John turns around and looks at Sherlock, and the expression on his face is both fond and sad. "I guess I just remembered that there's a part of me that's not a doctor, and not a soldier, and not broken."

Sherlock doesn't know what to say to that, so he leans down and kisses John, soft and sweet, and after a moment's hesitation, John kisses back.

"Come back to bed," Sherlock mutters. "I'm freezing my bollocks off."

"The cake," John protests, but he follows willingly when Sherlock tugs at his lapels and drags him along.

Sherlock sighs dramatically and turns off the oven. "Fuck the cake."

John's lips twitch. "I'd really rather not, if it's all the same to you."

They're looking at each other for a moment, and then they both burst out laughing, and Sherlock feels something inside of him unspool as John reaches for him and kisses the laugh from his lips, and Sherlock wonders whether this is what being in love feels like, before John wipes all thought from him again.

Week 8 - Hidden -Part 2: In the Tent

Chapter Notes

[Here's a good Krapfen recipe](#)

The only acceptable filling for Krapfen is apricot jam. Get out of here with your vanilla and Powidl and chocolate and all of that new-fangled crap. Apricot jam. Icing sugar. The end.

“Welcome back, bakers. Only two weeks to go before the grand finale.”

“Today’s challenge: Doughnuts. Filled and glazed. You have two hours. On your mark, get set, bake.”

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“Oh my god, I hate these challenges,” Irene groans and checks her watch. They’re lounging around the catering tent while their yeast dough proofs.

Irene nudges Sherlock with her foot. Sherlock looks up from his phone and raises his eyebrows in a silent question. “Good job with the video. If John ever decides to start his own YouTube channel, we’re both fucked.”

John, who’s sitting on the other side of Sherlock and is leafing through an issue of the Sun someone from the crew left lying around, looks up at that and grins. “Thank you, Irene. Maybe I will, someone’s got to ensure Sherlock’s followers have somewhere to go when he’s too busy with his bakery to keep up with the YouTube channel.”

“That will never happen,” Sherlock vows. “Keep your grubby hands off my followers.”

John makes a deeply unattractive sound that’s somewhere between a snort and a laugh, and Sherlock should find him ridiculous, and the tragedy is that he finds him charming.

“You do know that owning a bakery means you need to get up at four every morning to ensure that the croissants are still warm for the morning crowd?”

Sherlock shrugs. “Sleep is for the weak.”

“Hate to break it to you, but you actually sleep a relatively normal amount,” John points out, leisurely flipping the page of his paper.

“And you know this how?” Molly asks, sweetly innocent but with a wicked grin.

John blushes violently and mutters something unintelligible under his breath, holding up his newspaper to hide his face.

Moriarty, who's sitting at another table, is making a gagging sound. The other contestants ignore him. He's been unpleasant to everyone today, but especially to John. Sherlock has been keeping a keen eye on him, but Moriarty wouldn't dare to try to sabotage either of them in a room full of cameras. The producers have also stressed that anyone caught playing "practical jokes" on other contestants would be instantly disqualified, clearly a reaction to Sherlock and John's little prank on Moriarty. Moriarty was smug about it, but it's also clearly kept him from retaliating.

"You two are adorable," Molly states, and Sherlock is about to snap at her, but then all of their oven timers announce the end of proofing time, and Sherlock is relieved to be able to go back to baking.

But all the way back to the tent, he feels John's eyes on him, and when he looks at him out of the corner of his eye, the expression on John's face is wistful, almost sad.

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"So, John, your doughnut filling is apricot jam."

"Absolutely the only filling I will accept for a doughnut."

"Your gran's recipe?"

"Yep. Of course she had no idea what a doughnut was, she sold these as Krapfen to the day she died."

"These are sold during carnival, aren't they?"

"Well, they're supposed to be, but you get them all year 'round nowadays."

"Fond childhood memories?"

"To be honest, no. I once dropped one into the oil too energetically and got burned pretty badly on my arm. You can still see the scar, here."

"Ouch. How old were you?"

"Dunno. Nine, maybe?"

"Your parents must have been furious with your gran that she let you do this."

"I need to get back to this, otherwise I'll make the same mistake again."

"Of course, we'll leave you to it."

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“Have to say, John’s doughnuts were very good - fluffy, light, sweet, but Sherlock’s home-made cranberry-currant jelly was just that bit better, so he takes the prize.”

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“Congratulations on the win, Sherlock.”

“Thank you.”

“Feeling good about tomorrow?”

“Obviously.”

“Anything to add?”

“No.”

“Fine, off you go.”

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“John, so close, you nearly won today.”

“Well, win some, lose some.”

“How do you feel about tomorrow?”

“Let’s just say if I didn’t win today, I’m not going to win tomorrow.”

“Are you scared that you might be going home tomorrow? John?”

“Sorry. I hope I can stay, but at this point, nothing is certain.”

“So, any tips on who’s going to win tomorrow?”

“Sherlock, of course.”

“You have a lot of faith in him.” Pause. “John?”

“What?”

“You don’t look so good.”

“Just tired.”

“I’ll let you go.”

_

Sherlock is leaning against the back wall of the Shropshire hotel they’re staying at this week, a charmless fifties building without redeeming qualities.

He's smoking his second cigarette of the day and he's unabashedly waiting for John. He's got his hotel key in his pocket, but he knows the chances of him actually making it to his room tonight are less than fifty-fifty.

Finally, he sees John walk over from the tent. He took ages to clear his workstation for tomorrow, and Sherlock has been waiting for him for long enough that his hands are freezing and his ears are red.

He takes another drag of his cigarette as he watches John approach him. There's something going on behind John's eyes he can't quite parse.

But when John reaches him, he doesn't hesitate; he takes the cigarette Sherlock was just about to guide to his mouth out of his hand, throws it away, then fists his hands into Sherlock's coat and pulls him in for a kiss, hard and demanding, and Sherlock doesn't know what's going on, but he definitely likes it.

John crowds him against the wall, hands finding their way unerringly under Sherlock's coat and his suit jacket, a demanding thigh pressed between his. "You need a mint," John whispers against his throat, and when Sherlock tilts his head back in invitation, John bites him there, ever so slightly.

"My room," Sherlock pants.

"Now," John all but growls.

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Clothes fly as soon as Sherlock's door closes behind them. John's hands on Sherlock are insistent and almost rough, tearing at his clothes in a haste to get to skin.

Sherlock doesn't know what the rush is, but John's not letting him up for air and he likes it, this demanding, unleashed version of John.

He half expects to end up on his stomach, John behind him, fucking into him hard and insistent, pulling Sherlock's hips back against his cock.

That's not what happens.

Instead, John pushes him down into the mattress and holds Sherlock's hands firmly over his head as he grinds their hips together. He tears the condom open with his teeth and prepares himself with shaking fingers, then takes Sherlock's cock deep inside his body.

And all the while there's this expression on his face, greedy, insatiable, watching Sherlock's face like he wants to preserve the memory of every reaction, every moan, whispered word, every twitch of his face, every inch of his body.

And all the while Sherlock is dumbstruck, lost for words, lost for thought, as John takes him apart and takes something from Sherlock he obviously needs, and Sherlock lets him, lets him have it all. Whatever John wants, he can take it and welcome to it, and Sherlock tries to say this without words by meeting John's rolling hips with his own, by kissing him back like the

world is ending, by biting his neck and panting into his ear and running reverent, greedy hands over John's body.

It lasts forever and it's over too fast. John collapses on Sherlock, and kisses his shoulder, and mutters "Fuck," and "so hot" but won't look at Sherlock at all, and Sherlock lets him do this too, lets John hide his face in Sherlock's shoulder, and he drops a soft kiss on John's hair and wonders why this feels like a last time, like goodbye, like John isn't even here anymore even though five minutes ago Sherlock was literally inside him.

John lifts his head and smiles a smile he doesn't mean. "I'm going to shower. Want some dinner?"

Sherlock shakes his head. He lets John go, and John goes to shower, and then John gets dressed, and then John goes for dinner, and he doesn't come back, and Sherlock doesn't go after him.

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It's two in the morning, and the fire escape door on their floor isn't locked.

Sherlock steps out for his third cigarette in the last 24 hours. He hasn't smoked this much in a while, and he can tell by the way the smoke scratches at his throat. He relishes it, though.

"This is deeply unhealthy, I hope you know that."

Sherlock just manages not to flinch, but it's a herculean effort. He turns slightly to see John sitting on the second step of the stairs that go up to the next level. "Says the man sitting on metal stairs in the middle of the night in his pyjamas. In November."

John shrugs, but says nothing. He's obviously freezing, but at least he's wearing a jumper over his pyjamas and took the time to put on shoes.

Neither of them says anything as they both look out over the car park towards the tent and beyond. The landscape is dark, the trees, empty of leaves, weave their skeletal arms into the cloudless sky.

Sherlock finishes his cigarette and throws it into the darkness, a glowing ember trail until it falls to the earth and extinguishes.

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock closes his eyes for a moment and nods, once, briefly, a sign that he's listening, even though he wants nothing more than to leave, and let the words between them remain forever unspoken.

John gets up from his perch on the stairs and steps towards Sherlock, next to him, puts his hands on the banister and looks out into the night.

"There's a decent chance that I won't be coming back next week."

Sherlock makes a vague humming sound in the back of his throat that could be enquiry, or could be agreement, as you choose to take it.

“The air is getting thin. All my cake has to be is the worst of a good lot. And that’s not difficult at all.”

Sherlock hums again, and he wishes he could say something, but there seems to be something lodged in his throat, and something else in his chest, because he feels constricted.

John looks at him as though he expects Sherlock to say something, and when he doesn’t, he continues, soldiering on, body tense and straight and very nearly at parade rest. “This could be our last night together.”

“And yet somehow we’re spending it out here, having a pointless conversation, instead of in my bed, where we could do more interesting things that would also be much warmer,” Sherlock says, and he hopes his tone is biting enough to discourage John from having this conversation, even though they both know it’s long overdue.

John rubs a hand over his face and sighs. “Fucking hell, I hate this,” he mutters and turns to Sherlock, obviously not deterred from having this out, no matter how deeply uncomfortable it makes both of them. “Sherlock. How serious were you about this whole ‘no dinner’ thing?”

There it is. Now Sherlock has to actually say it.

He doesn’t want to say it. It hurts to say it. But he says it anyway. “Completely serious.”

There’s a pause, and John takes a deep breath, obviously a calming technique. Sherlock noticed he does that a lot. “Why? It’s obvious that you like me. Well, I like you too. Why don’t we just see where this is going and don’t preemptively throw something away that could be really great?”

“Because I don’t want it,” Sherlock says, and even as he says it, he knows he’s lying through his teeth, but he hopes that John can’t tell.

John is silent for so long that Sherlock thinks he’ll just leave now, and Sherlock simultaneously wants him to and wants John to see through his bullshit and just kiss him until he relents and says what he wants to say, which is *Yes, take me, take everything, ruin me for other people, because I think you already have.*

“Sherlock. Look at me.” Gentle hands push at his shoulder, until Sherlock faces John and looks at him.

John looks tired and sad. “I know we said that this was just a bit of fun. But we get on like a house on fire. I’ve been having the best time with you, and not just the sex. Just waking up with you, or arguing with you over YouTube, or baking next to you while neither of us talks for three hours. Being woken up at two in the morning from you playing the violin. All of it, it’s been so much fun, and I haven’t felt alive like this in such a long time. And I don’t want it to end. No matter if I’m going home tomorrow, I want to see you on Monday, and as many Mondays as you’ll let me have.”

Nobody makes me laugh like you, Sherlock doesn't say. Just waking up next to you was the most peaceful I've ever felt in my life, he doesn't say. I never thought we'd fit together like two oddly-shaped puzzle pieces, seamless and perfect.

“No,” is what he finally says after what feels like an eternity of silence. “I’m... I don’t want that. Clean break, we agreed.”

John sighs, and he looks at Sherlock with a wistful sadness that makes Sherlock want to take everything back and just forget this conversation ever happened. “Yes, we agreed.”

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock finally gets out around the lump in his throat, and it’s the truest thing he’s said all night.

John shrugs, tries for a smile and fails. “Well. You told me from the start. My own fault.”

Sherlock makes a helpless gesture with his shoulders, and can’t think of anything to say.

John searches his face with his eyes for a second, then, apparently dissatisfied with what he’s found, he nods, turns and walks away without another word.

Sherlock stays on the fire escape until his fingers are numb, and he wishes the cold could numb that aching emptiness behind his breastbone as well.

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“Our showstopper challenge today: Hidden design cakes.”

“Our bakers have four hours as usual.”

“Bakers, on your marks, get set, bake.”

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“So, John, what are you doing?”

“Well, I’m going to be honest here, I’m not really good at this, so I’m doing a chocolate sponge with a sun in the middle.”

“Sounds nice. We’ll let you get on with it.”

_

“Sherlock, what are you doing?”

“Wait and see.”

“Seems complex, are you sure you can pull this off?”

“It’s just math, Mrs Hudson. Easiest thing in the world.”

“Well, millions of school children would disagree with you about that, but I can see you’re very busy so we’ll leave you to it.”

_

Sherlock walks out of the tent as soon as Glen yells cut and calls a break to set up for the food porn shots. He keeps walking until he can’t see the tent anymore and leans against a tree for a much-needed cigarette.

To say that the last four hours were gruelling would be an understatement. He hasn’t slept at all, and from the look of him, neither has John. The fun, light, joking atmosphere in the tent is gone, suffocated under the silence between their two workstations. John hasn’t looked at him once the entire day, and it’s glaringly obvious to anyone that something has shifted between them. The only person who seems to be unaffected by this is Moriarty, who’s been smirking smugly into his bake every time Sherlock has glanced in his direction. Sherlock almost wishes he cared, but Moriarty’s smugness is like a pinprick compared to the silence from John’s workstation.

Sherlock closes his eyes and allows himself to sink into his mind palace for a few minutes. Locatelli’s violin concerto in D major is an excellent distraction, so he plays the first movement in his mind, imagining the strings of his violin cutting into his fingertips, the bow moving strong and subtle. It’s notoriously difficult to play, and he loves the ‘harmonic labyrinth’, as the title calls the piece so tellingly.

The distraction is so effective that he doesn’t notice someone approaching until he feels a hand on his arm.

“Sherlock.”

Irene. Sherlock cracks one eye open and glares at her. “What?”

“They’re ready to film the judging.”

Sherlock sighs and drops the cigarette butt he was still holding between his fingers.

Irene looks at him, and he can tell that she’s worried. “Are you all right?”

He shrugs, because not really, but he doesn’t want to explain. He only has himself to blame, after all. “Let’s go.”

She gives him another scrutinising once-over, but when he just meets her eyes squarely, she holds up her hands in defeat. “Fine. You don’t want to talk about it. Let’s go and be judged on how well we play 3D puzzle games with cake.”

“Your bake didn’t go so well, did it?” Sherlock asks, a bit surprised that he didn’t notice.

“I’ve got rubbish spatial perception, that’s why I’m shit at parallel parking. But I’ve gotten just about everything I wanted out of this competition, and baking is starting to bore me. Maybe I’ll move on to other things after this.”

Sherlock is barely listening to her, because what he's thinking is, *If her bake is shit, then maybe John will stay another week, and I'm not sure if that's the best or the worst thing that can happen to me right now.*

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One good thing about having so few contestants left is that the judgings are thankfully short.

Moriarty's cake is objectively stunning. The outside is a beautiful watery blue and the inside shows several multicoloured fish. The judges think it tastes bland - Donovan especially criticises the lack of strong flavour - but they still praise his design. Moriarty walks away looking even more smug than he already did.

The judges don't especially love the design of John's cake, but they praise the taste.

Molly's cake is lovely, her hidden design is a butterfly, and her cake is decorated beautifully. The judges praise her design and the taste.

Irene's cake is all right taste-wise, but her flower design is lopsided and her food-coloured sponge is overbaked.

Sherlock is last, and when the judges cut his cake in half, Sherlock can hear John's sharply drawn breath at the small rainbow-coloured hearts decorating the inside of Sherlock's hidden design cake.

"That's beautiful," Donovan says, "bit playful for you, but beautifully executed."

Lestrade and Moran praise the taste and the whole effect, but Sherlock can barely hear them over the rushing in his ears, because he meant to make John smile with the little winking inside joke, but John doesn't look amused and charmed, he looks sad and a bit ill, and Sherlock realises that he made an *I like you* cake 12 hours after he said the exact opposite, and that it's a bit not good.

As soon as Glen yells cut, John walks out without looking at anyone, and Sherlock can feel the entire tent glancing at him with badly suppressed curiosity.

John comes back for the judging and doesn't look at Sherlock, doesn't even glance in his direction, he stares straight ahead and the *Let's just get this over with* air he exudes transmits itself to the entire tent, because the judges are unusually brisk. Molly wins, Irene is out. Irene takes it stoically.

Sherlock wishes the Earth would swallow him whole. It does no such thing.

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"So, Sherlock. That was one stunning looking cake."

"Sherlock?"

"Sherlock."

“Are you going to say anything?”

“Molly won. Good for her. Now can I go?”

“Yes.”

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“So. John. You’re still in the competition.”

“I suppose so.”

“You don’t look so good.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel so good. Can we wrap this up?”

“Sure. Off you go.”

_

Sherlock is the last contestant in the tent. He waited until everyone else was gone and packed up his things as quickly as possible, eager to leave this battlefield of a day behind him.

He walks towards his car when he notices John sitting at the bus stop across the road.

And the thing is, he knows he should just get into his car and drive, but he can’t just let John sit there, waiting for a bus that might run twice a week.

So he walks over, slowly, approaching John like he would a hostile dog.

John doesn’t look up, but from the way his hand clenches and his jaw tightens, Sherlock knows John noticed him. He stops three steps away and waits.

“What could you *possibly* want?” John finally asks, after what might have been minutes or hours of silence, Sherlock honestly isn’t sure.

“Do you want a ride to the train station?”

John looks at him like he’s crazy, and not in the good, stomach-tingling way. “No.” He leaves the *Obviously, idiot* unsaid, but it’s heavily implied in his tone.

Sherlock nods, once, and he knows that this is his cue to leave, but somehow, he can’t bring himself to walk away.

John rubs a hand over his face and looks at him, and Sherlock can see the bone-deep tiredness he barely concealed all day. “I’m giving you every benefit of the doubt right now and assuming that you’re not *trying* to mess with my head, but Sherlock, for the love of god, stop it.”

“I’m sorry about the cake. That was bad timing.”

John snorts a humorless laugh. “Yep. Definitely. I’m sure I would have found it incredibly sweet if you hadn’t broken up with me 12 hours earlier.” He looks at Sherlock, and there’s something in his eyes, something sharp and discerning. “Begg the question, though, why you baked it in the first place.”

John gets up from the bench and takes a step closer to Sherlock. “You do this to me all the time. Push me away and pull me back in. You say it’s just a bit of fun, but you invite me into your kitchen, you make me stay the night, you massage my shoulder and you tell me secrets, you bake a cake for me on national telly.”

“I told you from the start,” Sherlock says, trying to keep the exasperation out of his voice. “I told you I wasn’t interested in a relationship.”

“But you didn’t *act* like it. You *act* like you want me to stay. So why push me away?” John asks, sharp and angry.

Sherlock runs a hand through his hair. “You know what I am? Deep down?” he asks, and he can hear the anger in his voice, only it’s not necessarily directed at John. “I’m a junkie, John, always looking for the next hit. So the fact that I *want* you means *nothing*. It’s just brain chemistry, one more dopamine hit. I can’t make decisions based on what I want, John. Because what I *want* is to get high. Always. So I can’t trust what I want. I have to make decisions based on cold, hard facts. Fact: I barely know you.” He ticks off points with his fingers. “Fact: I’m perfectly fine on my own. Fact: I will need all my time and attention for my new business, when I finally get it off the ground. Fact: I don’t need you for anything of objective, practical value. So the smart thing, the logical thing, is to just walk away.”

John snorts. “Fine. Fine. I’m done here.” He turns and walks away, but turns around after a few steps. “You know everything you just said is bullshit, right?” he asks, and his voice is filled with a quiet anger that’s harder to bear than shouting. “If this whole logic shit is what you need to tell yourself, fine. But what you really are is scared that this got real. That I see through the caustic arsehole facade you put up to the real, actual, human, feeling, lonely person you are beneath all of your bullshit. And the sad thing is that I think you see me too, all the ways I hide that I’m just as fucked up and just as lonely as you are. So this, here,” he gestures between them once more, “is a giant fucking wasted opportunity, when all is said and done. How’s that for logic.” With that, he turns and walks away, and Sherlock watches him, and with every step John takes away from him, the hollow feeling under his breastbone gets worse.

It would be so easy. Run after him. Hand on his shoulder, apologise for the words he didn’t mean. Kiss him. Ask him to stay.

But John was right. Sherlock isn’t being logical. He’s terrified. Caring isn’t an advantage. Caring destroys people. Caring is trusting another person with your happiness. Caring means you can’t walk away.

So he does the opposite of what he wants. He turns and he walks away from John in the opposite direction, while he still can.

Week 9 - Desserts - Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sherlock lets his violin sink down, away from his neck, and closes his eyes.

The music helps. Not always, but many times.

Tonight it doesn't.

Tonight, all he can think about is how he always sees his mistakes in perfect clarity - after he made them.

And he made so many with John. Giving into that strange magnetic pull between them. Then coming back for more after that first time. Inviting John into his kitchen. His sitting room, his bed, his YouTube channel, his life. His heart.

In hindsight, he doesn't know what he was thinking.

Only that's not true, because he knows exactly what he was thinking. *One more hit. Just one more. One more won't make a difference.*

Will he never learn?

And there are two things that make all of this worse. First is that he hurt John with his idiocy. And second that he's having a hard time regretting anything, which is bad for a number of reasons.

When he thinks back to all the forks in the road that led him here, he knows he would take the exact same path again, that he would find a way to rationalise all of his choices again just to have one more of anything with John.

He runs a frustrated hand through his already messy hair and decides it's time to bake.

The kitchen is cool and dark, but Sherlock turns on the light and the oven, and soon he's hands-deep in flour, kneading bread dough.

Working with his hands, the dough between his fingers, does wonders for his nerves. It tethers his body and focuses his mind on the here and now, on the immediacy of the moment.

He sets the bread to prove and feeds up his sourdough starter before putting it back into the fridge.

Then he makes a souffle.

The challenge for next week is desserts, and Sherlock has decided on a creme brulee souffle.

He has to be spectacular this week. It's the last show before the final, and every week he's on television drives up his YouTube followers.

Slowly, carefully, he separates the eggs and makes a vanilla base. He caramelises some sugar and crumbles it into the souffle base, then he slowly, gently, carefully folds in the stiffened egg whites. He should do a video about what happens when you stir egg whites too much.

The souffles go in the oven, and Sherlock is alone with his thoughts again.

It's been two days since he spoke to John. It's been two days since he's spoken to anyone, really.

He sits down heavily at the kitchen table, and that's when he notices it.

The recipe book.

John's recipe book.

John left it here, and Sherlock feels like an absolute asshole, because it's entirely clear to him that John was so sure he'd be back here that he saw no reason to take the book along.

Sherlock takes out his phone and looks at it for too long. Then he takes a deep breath and berates himself for the mixture of elation and fear welling up in him.

You left your gran's recipe book at Baker Street. - SH

It's after midnight. John won't respond right away.

Sherlock gets up to check on his souffle, which is rising nicely.

His phone dings. He flinches.

John.

I know

Do you need it? Should I bring it to you? - SH Sherlock types, eager fingers stabbing at the tiny keyboard of his phone.

No. It's fine. Just give it to me on Saturday?

Of course. - SH

Sherlock puts down the phone and wonders why John isn't sleeping, whether he's had a nightmare, whether he's antsy and lonely like Sherlock, whether he's also baking.

He can't help himself. *Are you baking? - SH*

He doesn't expect an answer, and yet he stares at his phone as if it holds the secrets to eternal life.

Ding. Text.

No I'm trying to sleep actually

But that reminds me: Can you take a pic of the Powidltascherl page and send it to me? I need that for Saturday

Sherlock leafs through the book, finds the page, takes a picture and sends it to John.

His eyes snag on the opposite page. The one with John's birthday cake on it. He thinks about asking John about the baking instructions that make no sense, but decides against it because the last thing they need is an argument about baking.

Ding. Text.

Thanks. Good night, Sherlock

It feels like goodbye.

It probably is.

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On Wednesday, just after he gave away the loaves of bread and the souffles to his homeless network and got some first reactions from them, his phone rings.

"Bad news from the bank," Janine says as soon as he picks up. "They're worried about your lack of employment history and business experience."

"I did tell you all of this," Sherlock answers, not even trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"Telling me that you told me so isn't going to actually get you anywhere," Janine points out, unfazed by his bad mood. "You need to talk to your brother. Tell him to give you control over your trust fund or we'll drag him to court."

"Fine. Anything else?"

"Yes. Are you taking a cab tomorrow or going by tube? Because if you're taking a cab we could share."

"What are you on about?" Sherlock asks, wondering if she made an appointment for them somewhere and he missed it because he was filtering her out. It happened to him before.

"The surprise party? For John's birthday?" Janine pauses for a few seconds. "Wait, are you not in the group chat?"

"What group chat?" Sherlock asks, entirely confused now.

There's an audible pause and Sherlock can hear Janine pressing buttons on her mobile. "Added you to the contestant group chat and the extra one for John's birthday. Tomorrow from eight at the Anchor, it's a pub in Camden. Neela and Mary are coming up from Bristol especially, and Molly's in town as well."

Sherlock hesitates. He knows his silence is lasting for too long to be polite.

Apparently, Janine picks up on his uncertainty, because her tone shifts from briskly businesslike to warmer. "Look. Whatever is going on between you, I know one thing for sure. You're by far his favourite person in that tent."

That's the problem, Sherlock doesn't say, and then it occurs to him that he's probably the only person currently in John's life who knows how to bake his birthday cake. And whatever else might be going on between them, John deserves a birthday cake. "I'll be there," Sherlock finally says even though he's sure it's a bad idea. "I'm making the cake."

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Sherlock's estimation of just how bad an idea this is goes up from slightly to profoundly the second he enters the pub, portable cake dome in hand, and sees John's face as he notices Sherlock. The multitude of complicated emotions that filter over his face is difficult to parse, and Sherlock realises that having him here is probably the last thing John needs right now.

He approaches the table hesitantly. Everyone else is already there, including a petite blonde woman Sherlock doesn't know but who's so obviously related to John that it can only really be Harry. She looks very little like her childhood self he remembers from the picture in John's recipe book, but the resemblance between her and John is still strong enough to mark them as siblings.

The other bakers greet him cheerfully as he approaches the table. Sherlock nods at the others, then he locks eyes with John, who's looking at him like he's simultaneously the person he wants to see most and least, and it tugs at something in Sherlock's heart, something painful and real.

He sets down the cake and there's a noticeable pause, where they hold each others' eyes, and then John gives an almost imperceptible nod. Sherlock sits down in an empty chair next to Janine, and conversation resumes, but Sherlock can't listen to a word, because his ears are buzzing with a sound like the ocean and the errant pounding of his heart.

Slowly but surely the buzzing in his ears fades and his heartbeat calms down and he's able to focus on the conversation around the table, which, to put it mildly, is inane to the point of meaninglessness. Irene and Molly are regaling the table with anecdotes about their cats, which everyone at the table seems to find hilarious, for reasons completely beyond him.

So Sherlock says very little, but he's aware that John is watching him quite a lot, eyes flicking over to Sherlock and then away again several times. He's also aware of a low-level interest in all of their interactions from the rest of the table, especially John's sister and Mary. Every time John and Sherlock speak to each other - and they're only exchanging the most inane comments - heads noticeably turn and everyone is trying to parse what exactly is going

on between them. Because even a week ago, they would probably have arrived at this thing together, and Sherlock would be sitting too close to John, and John would probably have a casually possessive hand on Sherlock's thigh. But now there's a palpable distance between them, and even though Sherlock knows why it's there, and that it's entirely his fault, it's still highly unpleasant, and he would give nearly everything to be sitting too close to John and to feel his fingers dig into Sherlock's thigh. But Sherlock knows that if he wants that, he has to take everything, the good nights and the bad, a bed that contains nightmares as well as sex, the strings attached, the commitment as well as the intimacy, the ugly fights as well as the sleepy mornings. He isn't remotely ready for that, and he very much doubts that John will just wait around for him until he is.

The night progresses, with lots of beer and wine and talk about cats and half an hour of the doctors around the table - John, Mike and Molly - giving Neela tips about specialising, which puts the other half of the table nearly to sleep, except Sherlock, who has nothing whatsoever to add but loves every second of John reminiscing about his early days as a junior doctor at Bart's in London.

Finally, it's Harry, who's obviously drunk, who speaks up for the non-physicians at the table by yelling, "Enough already! Let's cut the bloody cake before the rest of us fall asleep!"

Sherlock is suddenly seized by nerves, because he isn't sure whether he crossed a line here. But John smiles at Sherlock, hesitant and subdued, and just says, "Thank you for the cake."

Sherlock says nothing, mostly because he can't think of anything to say, he only thinks that it speaks to his state of mind that he's more nervous about this bake than any of the bakes he did on national television.

And it must show, because Irene quips, "You look like you're afraid John is going to send you home this week."

The entire table laughs, including John. "I'll try not to be too harsh," John says, and when he smiles at Sherlock this time, it's small and private and reassuring, and Sherlock stops being nervous, because it's very much the thought that counts, and he knows John gets that Sherlock was trying to do something nice for him, however ineptly.

Molly sticks a candle into the cake, and they all sing the obligatory birthday song, most of them falsely. John blows out the candle, everybody claps. Then John cuts into the cake and goes quiet.

He looks at Sherlock, and there's an expression in his eyes that makes Sherlock's breath catch. "You used my gran's recipe."

Sherlock nods.

"Let me see." Harry all but elbows John out of the way, nearly lurching from her chair. John grimaces and hands her a slice of cake.

"Oh, the poppy seed, I love that one," Harry says, taking the plate from John and digging in.

John distributes slices of cake and everybody grabs a fork and starts eating. John hands Sherlock a plate with a small private smile that makes Sherlock wish they were still... whatever they were, because he very much wants to drag John into the loo and taste that smile. Their fingers brush when Sherlock takes the cake from John and their eyes meet, and Sherlock can tell that they're thinking about the same thing just now. Then John hastily looks away and Sherlock sits down to eat his cake.

It's good. Light, airy, lemony yet still sweet with the chocolate icing and the raspberry jam filling. The assembled bakers around the table all nod in approval, except Harry, who frowns at the cake. "It doesn't taste like I remember it," she muses, frowning at the cake. She looks at Sherlock suspiciously. "Are you sure you followed gran's recipe?"

Sherlock takes out the recipe book he brought to return to John. "Yes. Look."

He slides the book over to Harry, who's expression goes from slightly surly to almost awed as she takes the book, and suddenly Sherlock remembers that this is her grandmother's book, too. Harry leafs through the book and seems to forget that anything else exists.

John looks from the book to Sherlock and his lips twitch with suppressed amusement. "You 'fixed' the baking instructions, didn't you?"

"They didn't make any sense, I assumed your grandmother made a mistake," Sherlock says, feeling a bit defensive. "If I'd adhered to her instructions, the cake would have collapsed in the oven."

"That's sort of the point," John answers, and the amusement is in his voice as well now.

"How is making a cake collapse the point?" Irene asks.

"Collapsed cake doesn't sound good at all, isn't it mushy?" Molly adds.

Sherlock gestures between them and back at John. "Exactly."

John shrugs. "You'd have to taste it. I can't explain it rationally either. It's more moist that way, and the ratio of cake and chocolate icing is better."

"But that makes no sense. How can a worse bake be the better cake?" Sherlock asks, mostly because he's trying to hide his disappointment with making a birthday cake for John he didn't like.

"Taste isn't rational, Sherlock," John answers, and Sherlock knows he's not talking only about the cake anymore. "Not everything has to make logical sense." He smiles at Sherlock and takes another bite of his cake. "This is still delicious, you know."

"You know what my favourite cake is?" Molly asks, and she sounds like she's a bit embarrassed to admit it.

"What?" Mary asks, leaning forward to get another piece of the poppy seed cake.

“If you asked me to make one for telly, then I’d go for the pumpkin spice I made for the first challenge. But the one I love to eat the most, when I don’t want to impress anyone? Chocolate sponge, strawberry jam, chocolate icing with chocolate M+M decoration.” She grins when the table breaks into friendly chuckles. “My mum makes it every year on my birthday.”

“Mine’s even worse,” Irene says with a self-deprecating grin. “Store-bought sponge, strawberries, jelly. Five minutes to deliciousness. My parents can’t bake for shit, so that was my birthday cake until I was sixteen and made my own.”

“My granny used to make this extremely heavy coconut cake for all our birthdays, and last year I made it for my cousin’s wedding and she bloody cried.” Neela takes a sip of her pint and grins. “It was embarrassing.”

“You’re all too young to remember the good old upside down jelly cakes,” Mike reminisces with a far-away smile on his face. “My mum made one with tinned peach halves and pineapple, and it was objectively disgusting, but I make that cake every year for my oldest’s birthday, she won’t have anything else.”

“What’s your birthday cake like?” Irene asks Sherlock, who’s been listening to his fellow bakers with a mixture of disgust and an odd nostalgic longing he can’t exactly parse.

Sherlock shrugs. “Nobody in my family bakes. My parents always bought a cake, and it was rarely the same cake two years in a row.”

There’s a shocked silence that would almost be funny if it wasn’t for the expression on John’s face, all indignant horror. “Nobody killed my puppy, my parents just store-bought my cake,” Sherlock snaps.

Most of the contestants laugh, but John’s lips just quirk into a small apologetic smile. “What cake would you have, then?” he asks. “If you could pick one.”

“I’ve never given it a moment’s thought, to be honest,” Sherlock says, altogether more defensive than is warranted. He doesn’t add that it’s been years since he even celebrated his birthday, years since he thought about it, years since he wanted to. Years since anyone even asked.

“When’s your birthday?” John asks, predictably, looking at him with a small frown like between his eyes, looking slightly put out, like the worst thing he’s heard all night is that Sherlock Holmes never had a birthday cake. It’s so completely like John, and Sherlock’s heart does a traitorous little John Watson induced twist.

“January sixth,” he answers, tone as nonchalant as he can make it while his heart is still stuttering. “Just after Christmas. Probably the reason we never really celebrated all that much. Everybody’s still exhausted from another arbitrarily culturally significant date that’s entirely meaningless.”

There are a few stray chuckles from the other people around the table, and Irene starts talking to Molly about her bake for the last show before the final. But John’s eyes stay on Sherlock

and he gives him that look, that *I see you* look that says John believes absolutely nothing Sherlock just said, and Sherlock can't take another second of this.

He gets up abruptly and mutters something about bathrooms before he all but flees in the direction of the loo.

The bathrooms are in the basement, at the end of a long, dark, dingy corridor, and all in all, Sherlock shouldn't be surprised when he hears footsteps behind him, when someone calls his name.

He turns around just as John reaches the bottom of the stairs and turns into the corridor.

"Are you all right?" John asks, looking genuinely concerned.

No, because coming here was a massive mistake, because you look at me like you love me and I can't pretend not to any longer, Sherlock thinks.

"Of course," he says and turns to head into the loo.

Cool, callused fingers grab his wrist and stop him. He turns again and meets John's eyes, and suddenly he can't breathe, and John is in his space and his hands are in John's hair and they're kissing as if the world would end if they didn't, and Sherlock isn't sure that it wouldn't.

With a herculean effort, Sherlock draws back, rests their foreheads together, and they both just breathe for a while. Sherlock's hands are still resting on John's hips, and John's fingers are still gently brushing over Sherlock's back, his arms, his sides. It feels insanely good.

Sherlock takes a few full breaths and finally, finally lets go of pretending he isn't in love with John. It's oddly freeing.

"Sorry," Sherlock finally says as he pulls back, taking a painful step out of John's personal space.

John shakes his head and gives him an embarrassed smile. "Hey, it takes two to snog. So. You know. I'm sorry too."

"You don't have to apologise for anything," Sherlock answers, and he hates himself a bit for the quiver in his voice that mirrors the tremor in his knees.

"I don't know about that." John gestures uncertainly between the two of them. "I never really thought this whole just sex thing would work, and I got into it anyway. So. That's on me."

"No, I was giving you mixed signals the entire time—"

John holds up a hand to stop him. "Let's just agree that we both ignored an inconvenient truth when we really shouldn't have."

Sherlock quirks a humorless smirk. "Well put."

John smiles back, small but genuine. "Thank you."

He finally lets go of Sherlock and turns to leave.

Sherlock calls after him before he can stop himself. "John."

John turns and looks at Sherlock with an eyebrow raised questioningly, and Sherlock has no idea what he wanted to say other than *I love you*, which is true, but spectacularly unfair. "Happy birthday," he finally says, lamely.

John manages a small, sad smile. "Thank you."

Then he turns and walks away, and this time Sherlock lets him go.

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Sherlock has rarely needed a cigarette more than he does right now, so he bypasses the busy pub and goes straight outside, where he's sure he will find a smoker he can bum one from.

He's somewhat surprised to see Harry Watson light up a cigarette with slightly shaking hands, cupping the flame of the lighter with her hands against the wind.

She eyes him suspiciously and slightly belligerently. "You here because John sent you?"

Sherlock shakes his head. "Could I trouble you for a cigarette?"

Harry snorts in amusement and rummages around in her pockets for a badly crumpled pack and a lighter. Her hands are still trembling slightly, and she's not too steady on her feet. "Help yourself."

He takes one and lights up, then hands the entire outfit back to her.

They smoke in silence for a while, but he can feel her staring at him. "You're different on telly," Harry finally says. "More glamorous. On telly I could sort of see why John's in love with you. Now, not so much."

Sherlock shrugs, because he agrees with Harry on one point: He can't quite see why John is in love with him either.

"Guess he's different on telly too. The way he romanticises our childhood. He ever tell you why we spent so much time hanging around gran's? Not because I wanted to wash dishes and fry Krapfen after school. We didn't want to go home, that's why we hid out at gran's so much." Harry gestures with her cigarette as she talks, and Sherlock moves a bit back so she won't accidentally burn him. "Our dad was a drunk. Bet he never told you that." There's something vaguely triumphant about her.

"He told me," Sherlock says, and from the honest surprise on her face he realises that he should have known they were getting in too deep even back then.

“Wow. Didn’t think he even remembered, sometimes, the way he talks on telly.” She sighs, looking at her cigarette, watching the embers eat at it. “course it was easier for him. He liked it. I didn’t. But I was expected to help, because I was the girl. He wanted to, and gran doted on him so much because of it. Little Johnny, so helpful, so clever, such a good boy.” There’s bitterness in her voice, but affection, too.

“Why didn’t he take over the bakery?” Sherlock asks, because this is a point he was always curious about and never asked.

Harry shrugs and looks out at the slow-moving traffic. “She didn’t want him to. She always said he was the one who had the brains to be anything, do anything. She said he’d finally be the one to get out of the fucking council estate.” Harry snorts a humorless laugh. “Well. He got out all right.” She shrugs, and when she speaks again, Sherlock can hear the sadness in her voice, “She died when he was sitting his GCSEs. Hit us all pretty hard, but he was devastated. Dad sold off every moveable piece of the bakery and let the lease lapse. It’s a fucking Tesco now.” There are tears in her eyes, and she wipes at them angrily. “Fucking hell.”

The door to the pub opens, and John steps out, looking from Sherlock to Harry and back again. “You all right?” he finally asks.

Harry shrugs. “course. Smoke stinging my eyes.”

John looks extremely sceptical, but he takes a few steps closer and puts an arm around Harry’s shoulder. “I thought you’d quit,” he admonishes, but there’s no heat in his voice.

Harry snorts into John’s shoulder and turns her head to look at Sherlock. “He’s such a bloody hypocrite sometimes,” she says, and there’s the same mixture of bitterness and affection in her voice as before. “He can go to Afghanistan and get actually shot, but I can’t have a pint or a fag, otherwise I’m killing myself.”

John rolls his eyes and gives Sherlock an apologetic look. Sherlock quirks a humourless smile. “Both these things can be true at the same time,” he says.

Harry hiccups a laugh, and Sherlock can see now that she’s far more drunk than he realised before, because she’s leaning on John with most of her weight. She looks at Sherlock as if she’s re-appraising him and gives him a lopsided smile. “Maybe I do see it,” she says softly, and Sherlock swallows around the sudden lump in his throat.

“How about we get you home?” John says, gently, glancing at Sherlock as if he’s simultaneously glad and embarrassed by his presence. “Can you tell them?” he nods in the direction of the pub.

Sherlock nods. “Of course. Anything left in there you need to get?”

“No.” John pauses for a moment and then grabs at Sherlock’s arm, patting it awkwardly. “Thank you. You know. For the cake.”

Sherlock nods again, an acknowledgement of the thanks and a dismissal of its necessity at the same time. "I'll help you get her into a cab."

He flags down a cab, and helps John get Harry into it, then watches as John gets in as well. Their eyes meet as Sherlock gently closes the door behind them, and Sherlock can't even begin to identify the emotions squeezing at his heart, bittersweet and rich like the best kind of chocolate.

He watches the cab drive away, wishing he could have gone with them, wishing there was something he could do to spare John this, but he knows that he can't.

So he takes his cake and makes excuses for John and Harry, earning a lot of knowing looks from the other bakers, and then he goes home and doesn't sleep.

Instead he bakes another cake, and this time he watches it collapse in the oven, and when he tastes it, he wonders how something so imperfect can be so good.

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It's Friday by the time Sherlock has a perfect creme brulee souffle. He didn't realise it, but he's sort of neglected his homeless network over the last few weeks, because he'd just let John taste everything. It's entirely unscientific, of course, but he now finds that having a multitude of opinions isn't helping him like it used to. It doesn't help that his homeless network are amateurs. John is very much not, and getting feedback like, "I dunno, that other thing you did the other day was better" isn't as helpful as, "More lemon zest."

So Sherlock isn't in the best mood when Mr Chatterjee comes to call.

Sherlock is in the kitchen, cleaning up from his latest batch, when the bell on the front door to Speedy's dings.

Sherlock frowns, because he was pretty sure he'd locked that door behind Wiggins. He cautiously peers out through a small gap in the swing doors that lead to the kitchen.

Mr Chatterjee is locking the door behind him, then turns and looks around with a nostalgic sadness on his face that Sherlock can empathise with.

"Tea?" Sherlock asks, holding the door open.

Mr Chatterjee smiles sadly. "Yes. Please."

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"What are you baking? It smells amazing." Mr Chatterjee puts down his mug and looks around curiously.

"Souffles. For the competition."

Mr Chatterjee nods in acknowledgement. "Yes. I've been watching. You do good things." He tilts his head. "Is it any good?"

Sherlock doesn't even think about it. "Should I make it for you?"

Mr Chatterjee smiles. "I would love that."

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Sherlock separates eggs and hands the egg whites to Mr Chatterjee, who's been watching him bake with badly concealed nostalgia. "Could you beat these? That would be very helpful."

Mr Chatterjee grabs the whisk and starts beating the eggs like the professional he is, while Sherlock introduces the egg yolks into the milk-flour-vanilla base.

When the souffles are in the oven, Mr Chatterjee smiles at Sherlock, suddenly, and it takes twenty years off his face. "I've forgotten how much fun baking can be." He makes a face. "I was just never that good at it."

"Your sandwiches were amazing," Sherlock points out. "Your cheese toasties were the best in London." It's difficult to keep the nostalgia out of his voice, and he knows as Mr Chatterjee watches him that they're both thinking of the many times Sherlock came into Speedy's, as a lanky university student, a strung-out junkie, a recovering addict trying to hide his shakes, and how Mr Chatterjee never asked for Sherlock's order, just made him a toastie and very rarely let him pay.

Mr Chatterjee sighs. "Nowadays, if you're not part of a chain, you have to be exceptional, otherwise the tourists will just go into a Costa's or a Starbucks because they know the taste from back home." He sighs. "It breaks my heart to think that this place might soon be one of these soulless sameness machines. But I need the money."

There's a cold pit forming in Sherlock's stomach. "Is that why you're here? To tell me that you signed the contract?"

"No," Mr Chatterjee says, shaking his head. "I was meeting the plumber, there's another water leak in 221C."

Sherlock grimaces. The other two flats in the building have been empty for a while now. Mr Chatterjee keeps the ground floor flat for his daughter Nyra, who's doing an Erasmus year in Rotterdam, and 221c has a mould problem.

"Please give me a chance," Sherlock says, and he knows he's pleading, but he can't help himself.

"Believe me, I'd much prefer it if you took over the place. There are so many memories here, and I know you'd preserve some of that," Mr Chatterjee answers, shaking his head sadly. He gestures at the swinging door to the cafe proper. "I used to measure my daughters against this post over there, you know."

Sherlock looks where he's pointing, and he can see the faint pencil marks on the white post. He never paid much attention to them, but now he can imagine what this kitchen must have been like when Speedy's was still busy, and when Mr Chatterjee's family still lived upstairs.

He can picture Nyra sitting at the table doing her homework, and Prisha helping Mr Chatterjee bake, just like John used to help his grandmother.

He swallows. "I'll do my best, I promise."

"Do you think you'll get the money together?" Mr Chatterjee asks.

"I'm not sure," Sherlock admits.

Janine phoned him this morning about an appointment with the bank manager early next week, but she was somber about his chances if he doesn't get a hold of his trust fund. The money coming in from sponsoring and YouTube is a nice supplement, but it's not enough, not by a long shot. It looks like his only way forward is to actually threaten to haul Mycroft into court, and he isn't looking forward to this nearly as much as he should.

Mr Chatterjee pats his shoulder in a grandfatherly sort of way. "Well, I hope you do."

The oven dings, and Sherlock gets up and brings the souffles to the table.

Mr Chatterjee grabs his tea spoon and taps it on the crust, and the souffle wobbles. "Nice," he says with a smile. Then he takes a bite, and his smile widens. "Very good. A nice touch, the crunch from the caramelised sugar." He takes another bite and tilts his head to the side. "Maybe you need a bit of acidity? Maybe some lemon zest?"

Sherlock smiles, and there's an odd warmth lodged in his chest. "Just what I was thinking."

Chapter End Notes

So, this is the point where you get an actual recipe for an actual cake that actually exists.

John's Birthday Cake:

150 grams butter

150 grams sugar

150 grams poppy seeds

6 eggs

1 lemon

50 grams citronat finely chopped

Separate the eggs, then cream the butter, the sugar and the egg yolks. Mix the poppy seeds with the citronat, add the juice and zest of one lemon, and then carefully fold into the butter-sugar-yolk mix. Then beat the egg whites until stiff and carefully fold in.

And now for the important bit: Pre-heat the oven to 200 celsius, then once you put the cake in, turn it down to 100 for 20 minutes, then go up to 120 and bake the cake for another hour. (I know. It's weird. But it bloody works. I also have no idea how to

"properly" bake this cake, because my grandmother lost the original recipe somewhere along the way. The cake just collapsed in the oven one time she made it and everybody liked it better, so she figured out how to do it on purpose.)

Take the cake out of the oven, fill it with raspberry jam and ice with a simple chocolate icing.

And now that I've told you my grandmother's secret cake recipe, I'm going to have to kill you ;-)

Now for some family history: John's gran is based very loosely on my great-aunt, who went to England in the mid-thirties to work there as a maid for a rich family on their country estate (think Downton Abbey). When the war broke out, she returned to Austria, because the British government wanted to put her into a detention camp for Axis power citizens. The entire family was like, 'Are you crazy? You're coming BACK to Nazi-occupied Austria?' and agreed that she should have stayed where she was, and who knows what would have happened if she had. Maybe she would have met a handsome, charming Scot in London, and maybe she would've opened a bakery that leaned heavily into her Viennese heritage. Who knows...

Week 9- Desserts - Part 2: In the Tent

Chapter Notes

Rest in peace, Una Stubbs. 221 Baker Street will never be the same.

This chapter contains a frank discussion about past drug use.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sherlock looks around the tent, this time placed in a lovely - though winterly bare - garden in Norfolk, and it hits him that this is the last time he's going to be here. The final will be filmed in a studio in London, and there's something oddly poignant about entering this tent for the last time. It's been tedious at times, and outright unbearably stupid at others, but he oddly felt more at home here, with this group of people who love everything about baking, than he has in a long time. Maybe ever.

Molly comes in, carrying her ingredients and implements in a red cardboard box decorated with flowers. She gives him a nervous smile, which he returns, then goes to set up, as ever a contrast between fluttery nerves and easy competence.

Moriarty is next, glaring at Sherlock, openly hostile as usual. Sherlock ignores him and starts unpacking at his workstation.

He's done setting up when John walks in, carrying his usual duffle bag. He pauses at the entrance, and the tent falls silent as everybody pauses their work to quite openly watch as John walks over to his workstation next to Sherlock's.

Their eyes meet and Sherlock has no earthly idea what to say.

John gives him a small, embarrassed smile. "Good morning."

Sherlock huffs a laugh under his breath and feels some of the tension dissipate. "That remains to be seen."

"You do realise it's a wish, not a statement of fact, right?" John asks, and sets down the duffle bag at his feet.

There's an almost audible release of tension in the tent as everybody goes back to work.

Sherlock shrugs and tries to find the rhythm of their easy banter again, but it's a struggle. John has apparently decided that the best way to get through this is to try to act normal, and Sherlock is both relieved and somewhat uncertain what that normal is, and where the line between bantering, flirting and leading John on is supposed to be.

John apparently doesn't really expect an answer, he turns to his workstation and starts unpacking.

Sherlock releases a breath he wasn't aware he was holding and decides he needs a cup of tea. Now.

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He nearly runs into John when he comes out of the catering tent and barely manages to avoid scalding either John or himself with hot tea.

"God, sorry, sorry," John says and winces. "Wasn't looking where I was going." He looks over Sherlock critically. "You got anything on you?"

"No, I'm fine," Sherlock says, and it's difficult not to reach out and touch John, rest a reassuring hand on his arm or his shoulder, and he realises how used he is to touching John by now.

John nods, obviously embarrassed, and he gives Sherlock a half-smile. "Good. Second degree tea burns aren't fun."

Their eyes meet and lock and Sherlock has no idea what to say once more. John doesn't seem to have any idea, either, so they're staring at each other in silence for a few seconds.

Then John visibly shakes himself out of it and points at the tent. "Right. Tea."

Sherlock nods and watches as John walks away before he returns to the tent.

John comes back and wordlessly sets a cup of tea next to Sherlock's hot plates before going back to setting up his workstation.

Sherlock takes the tea and sips it, and of course it's perfect, just the way he likes it, and he accepts it for the truce offer it is.

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"So, John, another win for Molly, who do you think will get to the final?"

"Well, Sherlock and Molly for sure, guess I'll have to battle it out with Jim."

"Are you worried?"

"Honestly, I think if I survived the arts and crafts nightmares of the last two challenges, I'm good now."

"You sound confident."

"Well, I can only say that this recipe made my granddad propose to my gran, so it's definitely a winner."

“Let’s hope none of the judges follow suit.”

“I don't know, I could do worse. At least they can all bake.”

“Yes, but come on, if you were angling for a proposal here, it wouldn’t be from the judges.”

“I think the less I say to that, the better.”

“Fine. Got the message. Well, good luck tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

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Sherlock looks down into the glass of whisky, sloshing the amber liquid around. The bottom of the glass is thick and heavy, there’s a drop of air trapped in the glass, an obvious design effect, not a fault. Odd, how flaws can sometimes make something more beautiful.

He doesn’t exactly know why he’s sitting here, at the sleek, modern, entirely soulless bar of this sleek, modern, entirely soulless wellness hotel. Mostly, it’s because he doesn’t know what else to do. Oh, he could go up to his room and answer YouTube or Instagram comments, or write a blog post. But he’s feeling a bit antsy, like there’s a surplus of energy running through his body right under his skin, and he doesn’t know how to get rid of it. Or he does know, but that door has closed firmly behind him.

Today was oddly anticlimactic. After initial awkwardness, John apparently decided to do his best to act normally, and if their interaction was more formal and less obviously flirty than before, nobody commented on it.

The challenge was boring, or would have been if it hadn’t been for the time constraint. Trifle isn’t something he usually makes, but baking a sponge, making custard, doing something interesting with fruit and stacking it all up in two hours was, well, not challenging, exactly, but it absorbed enough of his attention to make the time pass quickly. Molly won, with a well-balanced combination of berries and a delicious chocolate sponge. But the judges have made it clear that it’s going to be close tomorrow, because all of their trifles were well done.

Sherlock supposes he should feel some way or another about this, should care about winning or even staying in the competition. He’s never been good at doing things as he should, though, and his apparent difficulty with regulating what he cares and doesn’t care about is pretty much the reason why he’s sitting alone at this bar, staring into a glass of whisky.

“Are you winning or losing?”

Sherlock flinches and turns to see John standing next to him, leaning against the bar, looking from him to the glass of whisky with an expression that’s caught somewhere between amused and worried.

“Winning or losing what?” he asks, and it’s unfair, how John can just step into his head like that, with his fluffy jumper and his very blue eyes and center all of Sherlock’s thoughts on him.

"The fight against temptation?" John points at the whiskey glass. "Though admittedly this doesn't seem to be your usual brand of stupid. I don't think I saw any alcohol at all at your flat. Not even a beer in the fridge."

Sherlock shrugs. "My usual brand of stupid is difficult to get in rural Norfolk with no notice." He pauses briefly. "Or so I would imagine."

"So you're not tempted to try?"

"I'm an addict, John. I'm always tempted." Sherlock shrugs again. "But I'm not unusually tempted tonight, if that's what you mean."

John flashes him a small, self-deprecating smile. "I suppose it was. Sorry, I'm pants at this."

"No more or less than most people, I'd imagine," Sherlock notes.

"Conjecture or experience?" John asks. He gestures at the bartender for a half-pint, and Sherlock is both glad for the company and frustrated that this company has limits.

"Extrapolation." Sherlock looks at John, who's taking a drag from his pint and seems to be waiting for something. "What?" he snaps.

John shrugs. "You want to talk about it?"

"No."

John huffs a laugh. "Didn't expect you to." He drains his beer and sets it down. "I'm going for a walk." He looks at Sherlock with a slightly embarrassed smile. "Care to join me?"

There are a million reasons why Sherlock should say no. So of course he says yes.

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"How's the fundraising going?" John asks after they've walked a bit in silence.

It's a lovely night. The moon is out, and the stars are an awe-inspiring spectacle, especially for Londoners who aren't used to seeing the Milky Way stretch over the sky.

Sherlock shrugs, even though he knows John isn't looking at him. They're keeping a carefully polite distance between their bodies, no sleeves brushing or shoulders bumping. It's oddly unnatural, given the shortness of time they've actually known each other. "It's fine, but it won't get me the money I need in time. I'm going to have to get my trust fund from out of Mycroft's clutches somehow."

"Are you actually going to drag him into court?"

"I probably won't have a choice. He will never let me be in charge of my own life, no matter how many years I've been sober."

John hums a vague acknowledgement, and it irritates Sherlock, because he knows it means John has something to say he's not sure Sherlock will want to hear. "What?" he snaps.

John turns his head to give him a small self-deprecating smile. "I was just thinking of what it would take for me to trust Harry again. If she stopped drinking right now. How long she would have to be sober for me to believe it."

"Surely six years would be enough," Sherlock points out a bit more sharply than he meant to.

"Probably," John says with a shrug. He gives Sherlock a small smile. "I hope I'll find out one of these days."

Sherlock looks away from John, because that smile does things to Sherlock he doesn't want to think about.

They walk in silence for a bit. The park is beautiful in the moonlight, even though it's November and all the trees and bushes are bare and throw skeletal shadows in the moonlight.

"What *would* it take for you to trust Harry again?" Sherlock asks, glad of the darkness, glad that they're walking side by side so he doesn't have to look at John.

John visibly hesitates and lets out a long breath. "God, I don't even know." He pauses and Sherlock glances over at John, who's frowning, and obviously deep in thought. "I guess... I don't know, maybe, for her to acknowledge that she has a problem? And that it affects people other than her? I mean... the amount of shit she put her ex-wife through, it's even worse than what she's put me through. But it would be nice to hear that she's aware that she fucked up, and that she's aware that some of the shit she did was really not on at all." John shrugs. "I don't know if it would make a difference, in the long run. But it'd go a long way to make me feel that she's serious about getting her shit together. Maybe she would fail again, but at least I'd believe that she's honestly trying, and I guess I could forgive her a lot of the other stuff if I thought she was actually, really trying."

Sherlock has nothing whatsoever to say to that, but he's grateful for John's honesty, and his unthinking generosity of sharing this with Sherlock, who, in the grand scheme of things, has done nothing to deserve it.

They walk on in companionable silence. John leads them down a path that ends them up by a small lake. They stop at the water's edge and look out at the lake, without speaking, and Sherlock feels oddly peaceful, oddly content in the moment. John picks up a few small stones and starts chucking them into the lake.

Sherlock bends down, letting his fingers drift over the cold stones to find the flat, round edged ones, the ones that are perfect for skipping. He finds a few, and throws one with the sharp, clear edged slicing throw he remembers from being a boy. The stone skips, once, twice, three, four, five times, then sinks under the water.

Next to him, John whistles. "Nice one. Let me try."

Sherlock hands John one of the stones, and if their fingers brush for longer than they have to, neither of them mentions it.

It turns a bit competitive, the way these things often do. It's obvious that Sherlock has had more practice, but John is a fast learner and he's surprisingly good at this, the way he is surprisingly good at a number of things one would never expect just from looking at him. And at a few that are immediately obvious.

John grins at Sherlock in that heart-stopping way he has and says, "First one to reach ten?"

Sherlock weighs a stone in his hand and just so stops himself from grinning back. "Well, fine."

Sherlock throws his stone. Seven.

John nods in appreciation. "Not bad."

He throws his stone. It skips over the lake in beautiful arches, dipping in and creating little shock waves that ripple out over the still water. Eight.

Sherlock bends to pick up another stone and lets his fingers carefully drift over several candidates. Too light. Too heavy. Too thick. Just right. He gets up and flings the stone at the water. Eight. "There's a lot of wind tonight," he observes, even though not a leaf is stirring.

John chuckles. Sherlock feels warm all over. "You keep telling yourself that," John mutters, obviously amused. His voice has hit that register that goes straight to Sherlock's groin, and he realises that they're tethering on a dangerous precipice here, playing at keeping their footing on an extremely slippery slope.

John throws his last stone. It skips, and Sherlock can tell from the first skip that he'll reach ten.

He reaches eleven. He turns around to face Sherlock and grins, boyish and so beautiful. "Yes! I win!"

Sherlock smiles at him, can't help himself, and he's sure it's somewhere between deeply fond and unbearably besotted, because that's how he feels. "That was pure luck, but fine. You win." He takes an unconscious step closer to John. "We didn't set a prize. So what do you want?"

John looks at him, a hungry gleam in his eyes. He licks his lips, an unconscious gesture, but Sherlock's eyes are drawn to the movement anyway. His eyes snap back to John's, and then John reaches out and fists his hands into Sherlock's coat lapels and reels him in for a kiss.

It's hot and hard and immediate, no hesitation, no false starts. Sherlock's hands are on John's arse and John is crowding him against a nearby tree. Sherlock leans against the rough bark and pulls John in, hooking a leg over his and bringing their hips together. He's hard enough for it to be painful, and he wants John's hands all over him, he's starving for it.

They're kissing like the world is ending and greedy hands pull on clothing to get to skin. Sherlock shivers when John's cold hands ruck up his shirt to dip under it, and it's only partly from the cold.

Sherlock bites at John's neck, and John's hands grab Sherlock's arse. Sherlock moans when John's fingers brush along the hem of his pants, and he thrusts against John mindlessly, seeking heat, seeking friction.

John steps back for a moment, and Sherlock has no time to wonder what John is doing because he drops to his knees right there on the grass, hands working quickly to free Sherlock's straining cock from his trousers. The cold air hits him and he shivers for a moment, but then John swallows his cock down to the root with no warning, and Sherlock makes a noise like he's dying, because he thinks he might be, and oh what a lovely way to go.

John takes Sherlock apart with ruthless efficiency, hands on Sherlock's hips to draw him closer, and all the while he makes these incredibly erotic greedy little sounds, and Sherlock's brain is wiped blank of thought, time loses all meaning, his entire awareness centers on John's mouth, and his hands, and his eyes, boring into Sherlock's like he's trying to consume him through sheer will alone. And the thing is, right now, Sherlock would let him, and thank him for it.

It takes no time at all for Sherlock's legs to tremble and his balls to draw up, and he tugs at John's head, but John stays right where he is, cocking an eyebrow as if to say, *Come on, show me what you've got.* Sherlock comes so hard his knees buckle.

He slides down the bark and John catches him, arranges them so he's leaning against the tree. Sherlock pulls John in and kisses him, tasting himself on John's tongue and if he hadn't just had one of the best orgasms of his life, he would want another round immediately. As it is, he sticks his hand down John's pants and jerks him off with the same ruthless intensity with which John took him apart just now, all the while kissing him like a starving man. John holds on and kisses back until he can't anymore, until he deteriorates to panting against Sherlock's mouth, blown wide open and gorgeous as he comes apart on top of Sherlock.

John collapses against Sherlock, and for long minutes, they're just sitting there, cold earth beneath them forgotten, breathing hard and trying to catch their breath.

Slowly, sanity returns, and John draws back to look at Sherlock, torn between embarrassment and amusement. "Yeah, that was stupid."

Sherlock shrugs, because yes it was, but it doesn't make anything worse, because it didn't reveal anything they both didn't know before. "But only very moderately self-destructive."

John huffs a laugh and some of his amusement fades. "This changes nothing."

It's not a question, but Sherlock answers it anyway. "No."

John looks at Sherlock for a long time, searching, letting his eyes trace over Sherlock's face as if looking for something. "You're so lovely," John finally says, voice soft and fond. He tucks a curl from Sherlock's face and it's almost physically painful, how obvious it is that

John loves him. It twists through Sherlock like a corkscrew, trying to extract something essential.

“When I was 26, I overdosed,” Sherlock blurts, out of absolutely nowhere.

John goes completely still, and for a moment it seems like he’s stopped breathing as well, and Sherlock looks away from him, over the lake, because he can’t say any of this while looking at John watching him.

“I’d been to rehab once before. It didn’t stick. Mainly because of my boyfriend at the time.” Sherlock swallows. He’s never talked about this to anyone, never mentioned Victor’s name after he walked away. “We met at Uni. We got along well, and had similar interests. Got a flat together in our second year. Uni was boring. Life was boring. I was reading chemistry, so I started experimenting with drugs. Drugs weren’t boring, at least. Victor was curious, so I shared some of my experiments, and we escalated pretty quickly. LSD, meth. Heroin. We weren’t picky. We were both of us from independently wealthy backgrounds, so we went through our respective trust funds rather quickly. That was when Mycroft came along and put both of us in rehab.”

Sherlock pauses, and starts a bit when he feels John’s fingers entwine with his. He doesn’t say anything, but the squeeze of his hands encourages Sherlock to go on. “Victor started backsliding almost immediately, and he sort of pulled me along, and we went right back to it as if nothing had happened. Most of our friends were junkies. We lived in a bad neighbourhood. Neither of us had a job or were especially close with our parents. No structure, no goals. Just overactive brains screaming how boring life is, both unable to find a more constructive outlet. It made it worse, in a way. That he understood so perfectly how boring everything was.” He pauses again, and John’s fingers tighten around his. The silence stretches, and Sherlock isn’t sure whether he wants to continue.

“You don’t have to tell me any of this, if you don’t want to,” John finally says.

Sherlock shakes his head. “I know. But I want to…” he trails off and looks at John. “I want you to understand…” he gestures helplessly between them.

“You don’t owe me an explanation.” John’s voice is gentle and kind, and Sherlock is sure that he doesn’t deserve any of this.

“I know.”

John nods, and silence falls again.

“It never occurred to me that I was risking my life,” Sherlock finally continues. “You know how indestructible it feels to be young. And we were so careful. Only bought from dealers we trusted. Never mixed substances. Always monitored dosages. We were both chemists, after all, what could go wrong? But one day it happened anyway.” Sherlock looks out at the lake again, at the waning moon and the lights it throws on the still water. “I don’t know who called the ambulance. It wasn’t Victor, he was too out of it to notice. When I woke up in the hospital, my chest hurt. They shocked me to restart my heart. It was then that I realised that I was killing myself, and that I was going to die in a dingy, run down drug den if I continued

like that. Victor... he didn't see it that way. Said I'd made a mistake, it wouldn't happen again. We'd spot each other." Sherlock swallows. John wordlessly squeezes his hand. "I walked away. I left him there. In that squalid hole in the wall we called a flat. It was more difficult than heroin withdrawal, to stay away from him, afterwards. When I was clean. But I did it. And I made myself a promise, then. I wouldn't get involved again, wouldn't let myself get involved again. Caring isn't an advantage. Caring made Victor a drug addict, and caring made me stay one for long enough that I nearly killed myself. Caring ties you down and clouds your judgement and makes it more difficult to walk away."

"But you did," John says, quietly, and Sherlock starts a bit, because he'd almost forgotten that John is still there, still sitting nearly in his lap, still holding his hand. "You walked away even though you cared. And you don't need me to tell you that it was the right thing to do because you already know that."

Sherlock looks at John and nods. "I did. And I'm not sure I could do it again. So best not to tempt fate." His tone is gentle, but firm.

John looks at him for a long time, then he nods, just once, but somehow the finality of the gesture makes Sherlock equally sad and relieved.

John gets up from his lap and pulls Sherlock to his feet. Slowly, they put themselves back together, straighten clothes, swiping ineffectually at shirts and pants to clean away some of the mess they made.

Wordlessly, they walk back to the hotel. They go back in, the warmth of the lobby stifling after the crisp, cold night air outside. They ride the lift in silence. Second floor. The lift doors slide open.

John looks at Sherlock and gives him a small, sad smile. "Good night, Sherlock."

"Good night, John," Sherlock answers around the lump in his throat, and he is so very, very tempted to forget all of his good intentions and pull John in, kiss him, take him back to Sherlock's cold, empty hotel room, mess his sheets up as thoroughly as they've messed up each other, fall asleep with a warm, constant weight at his back. Wake up in the early morning, look over at John, say the words, finally. *I love you. Stay.*

But the door closes and he hasn't moved, hasn't spoken, and he goes to sleep alone.

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"Our last showstopper challenge, I can't believe it. How quickly time passes. Seems to me we started only yesterday, but the trees are bare, and the air is cold, and there's only four of you lot left."

"Now, dear, don't get sentimental, we've got a show to host. This week's challenge is dessert, and the last showstopper is also the last opportunity of our bakers to impress the judges with a mouth-watering dessert good enough to get them into the final."

"Bakers, you have four hours. On your mark, get set, bake."

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“So, John, I see you’re making a potato dough,” Mrs Hudson leans over his dough.

“Yes, well, I’m making an Austrian specialty, Powidltascherln, it’s like Tortellini, only sweet, and I’m doing three different fillings.”

“And you, Sherlock? Soufflé, a bold choice.”

“You know me, I’m never boring.”

Mrs Turner turns to the camera. “Can’t argue with that.”

John huffs a laugh from the station next to Sherlock’s, and the two hosts move on to Molly.

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Normally, there’s a sense of controlled boredom in the room during the food porn shots.

Today, they’re all nervous, even Sherlock. It shouldn’t matter whether he wins or loses, his social media interactions are stagnating on a high level right now. But he doesn’t want it to end. Or more precisely, he wants to stand in a room with too many people and too many lights and ovens while he watches John Watson bake just one more time. He wants one more time of bad baking banter, of awkward sexual tension and a constant reminder that he isn’t supposed to touch John anymore. In a way, he should want it to end. He should want to rip off the band-aid, not peel it off inch by excruciating inch. But once this show ends, he’ll never see John again. And even though that’s entirely his choice, Sherlock is irrationally sad about it.

Sherlock, Molly and John are sitting around a table in the catering tent, each of them silently sipping tea. Molly is tapping her foot. John looks cool as a cucumber, but he’s rubbing his hand over his thigh repeatedly, and Sherlock recognises it as the tell it is. He’s trying not to fidget himself, but he’s not entirely successful.

It’s been raining since the early morning hours, and the sounds of drops striking the tent roof are oddly loud, creating a sort of white noise blanket that should be calming but isn’t.

Moriarty is pacing back and forth, occasionally throwing a hostile glance at them. Finally, he stops by their table and glares. “I notice you two aren’t as *cozy* as you used to be,” he bites out between clenched teeth. “Got all the attention out of it you were going to get and then decided it wasn’t worth it?”

Sherlock exchanges a quick glance with John, whose fingers have tightened around his tea cup, and subtly shakes his head. *Don’t engage, it’s not worth it.* John gives him a quick, barely perceptible nod and takes a sip of his tea, leaning back in his chair. He’s trying to look relaxed, but his body language is tense.

Moriarty leans down and lowers his voice, nearly whispering into John’s ear. “What does it feel like, being used and tossed aside by the world’s most mediocre baking influencer? How does it feel, getting shagged as clickbait?”

Sherlock wants to hit him. Right in the middle of his stupid, smug face. He's never experienced quite such an urge to punch someone before. He imagines it in glorious detail, fist connecting with Moriarty's nose in a satisfying crunch, blood spraying. He catches John's eyes again, and this time it's John who's shaking his head. A muscle in John's jaw twitches and the grip on his teacup tightens. But he resolutely says nothing and looks down at his tea.

To all of their surprise, it's Molly who breaks the silence. "Sod off, Jim. You're just jealous that we're all outbaking you," she says, voice dripping with nonchalant disdain.

Moriarty opens his mouth, but Molly just looks at him, eyebrow cocked, daring him to say something more.

John's lips twitch, and Sherlock gives Molly an appreciative nod.

Moriarty glares at all of them. "We'll see how funny you find all of this when I win without fucking a co-contestant."

"Oh, Jim," Sherlock says, grinning openly now. "Who would have you?"

John and Molly both snort with amusement, and Jim just glares at them and walks away.

"Wouldn't wonder if he starts spewing poison on social media if he loses," Molly muses.

John shrugs. "Let him." He looks steadily at Sherlock, and Sherlock feels this entirely unfair warmth in his stomach. "We know the truth."

Sherlock finds that he has nothing to say to that, and he's saved from having to come up with an answer by Emma calling them into the tent to film the judging.

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Sherlock goes first because he's serving his creme brulee souffle with a caramel ice cream.

"Combining two classic desserts into one like this is genius," Moran says, licking his spoon. "I love the caramel crunch in the souffle."

Donovan and Lestrade agree. "Very original, very well done."

Molly is next. Her eclairs are perfect, crunchy and fluffy and her pastry cream is light and lemony. The judges love the dark chocolate icing.

Moriarty has made a Croquembouche, and it looks impressive, tiny pastry balls held together with spun caramel sugar. Moran raves about the technical difficulty, but neither Donovan nor Lestrade like it much.

Moran frowns. "You know how difficult this is to do?"

"I know, and if he'd pulled it off, I would name him star baker right now," Donovan says, turning to Moran. "But do you honestly like it? Does it taste good?"

Moran shrugs and carefully doesn't look at Moriarty, who is clearly seething.

"The filling is bland, and the dough is far too chewy," Donovan continues, gesturing at the bake.

"Have to agree with Donovan, here," Lestrade says, scratching the back of his head, clearly uncomfortable. He shrugs. "But let's move on, right?"

Moriarty smiles politely, but he looks like he's about to murder someone when he walks back to his station.

Sherlock exchanges a look with both Molly and John and they all do their best to hide their smirks.

John's last.

Each of the judges has a plate with three small flat turnovers.

"This one is powidl," John explains when he points at the one coated with poppy seeds and sugar. "This one is rhubarb-strawberry," he gestures at the one coated with breadcrumbs and more sugar. "And this is dried pears." The last one is coated with cinnamon and sugar. All three turnovers are covered in icing sugar. John has poured a liberal amount of melted butter over the lot.

"One of your gran's again?" Lestrade asks.

John nods. "Well, the powidl is a classic, the others are sort of my twist."

"Well." Moran cocks his head to his side. "That's about the best goddamned thing I've ever eaten in my life."

"The poppy seed-sugar-butter mix is spectacular, and I love the fruitiness of the rhubarb-strawberry," Donovan adds, taking another bite.

"You've taken our criticism to heart, John, and this is both delicious and inventive. Well done." Lestrade nods at John.

John blushes a bit and rubs the back of his neck, an obviously embarrassed gesture that makes Sherlock think entirely inappropriate things, like what John smells and tastes like exactly there. "Thanks."

The judges withdraw to think, and Molly walks over to John to try the turnovers. Sherlock starts cleaning up and listens with one ear as Molly praises John's dessert, watching John as he leans against his workstation and explains the recipe to Molly. He's wearing soft-looking jeans and a checkered button-down that Sherlock has seen him wear often enough that he considers it a favourite. It's cotton, but the fabric is worn and soft and feels almost like flanel, and Sherlock knows this because he's peeled John out of that shirt on several separate occasions. And he's probably never going to do that again.

The realisation twists something bitter and complicated in Sherlock's stomach, and he looks away, trying to banish the thought from his mind.

The judges return and the four of them line up to hear their verdict. Sherlock tells himself that he isn't nervous. It only works a little bit.

Donovan starts. "For this week's decision, since it's about who's getting into the final, we looked not only at this week's bake, but at the previous bakes as well."

"Let's start with Molly." Lestrade turns to her and gives her a warm smile. "Molly, you've been incredibly consistent. You haven't always been spectacular, but I can't recall a bad bake from you. You've got your own style, and you're innovative without pushing the boat out too far. Your eclairs today were perfect, and we loved your trifle, you really elevated it to something special. So without further ado: Molly, you're in the final!"

Molly squeals and hugs John tightly, then turns and hugs Sherlock as well, and Sherlock finds that he doesn't mind one bit.

"Sherlock, as for you," Moran continues, and a hush falls over the tent once more, "I don't think anyone has to tell you that you're a spectacular baker. You're the baker I was looking forward to most every week, you always came up with something interesting. I think it was clear you'd make it to the final in the first episode, so I don't think anyone will be surprised that you're in the final."

Sherlock smiles, trying to appear relieved, when in fact he's more tense than before, because now it's down to John or Moriarty, and at least Moran is heavily biased towards Moriarty. Molly hugs him again, and he catches John's eyes over Moriarty's head, and John gives him a brilliant smile and a thumbs-up, but he looks about as apprehensive and sad as Sherlock feels.

This could be it, right here and now. This could be the last time they see each other. And even though Sherlock knows that if he said to John, right now, *Forget everything I said, let's move in together*, John would probably say yes, Sherlock knows he's not remotely ready for that.

"This leaves Jim and John," Donovan says, giving them all a tight smile. "You're both wonderful bakers, otherwise you wouldn't be here. John, you've wowed us with your gran's recipes, and we can all tell that you're an incredibly skilled baker. These last two weeks weren't your most stellar ones, though, and while your bakes are always delicious, they're not always technically perfect, and you've lacked imagination in the past. Jim, I think the opposite is true for you. Your bakes are always technically perfect, and your ideas are original and well-executed, they're sometimes not quite as delicious as they could be."

"We argued this point in the past, and I for one am always inclined to favour technical perfection over taste, because you can always add more sugar, but making a good Croqueamanche is on an entirely different level," Moran adds.

Jim glances over at John and gives him a tiny, smug smirk.

"However," Moran continues, and Jim's smirk vanishes as quickly as it appeared, "I have to say, after today... let's just say that John actually took our criticism to heart and made a

wonderful, inventive, incredibly tasty dessert today.”

“So. Long story short,” Lestrade finishes, smiling broadly. “John, you’re in the final.”

Sherlock feels an entirely irrational relief, and when Molly draws him into a three-way hug with her and John, he goes willingly, closing his eyes for a moment to enjoy the way John’s fingers are gripping at his back.

The three of them break apart, and Molly moves away, but Sherlock has a hard time letting go of John, hand lingering on his arm. John smiles at him a bit sadly. “Congratulations.”

Sherlock swallows heavily and somehow can’t bring himself to look away from John’s eyes. They always look even bluer under the headlights in the tent.

“This is absurd.”

John and Sherlock turn as one to Moriarty, who’s standing in front of the judges and is practically vibrating with fury. “I’m a better baker than John Watson even when I’m sleepwalking. You’re letting your obsession with their stupid flirting cloud your judgement.”

John catches Sherlock’s gaze and rolls his eyes. Sherlock gives him a tiny shrug.

The judges all stare at Moriarty as if he’s lost his mind, and most of the crew start shifting uncomfortably. “Are you honestly suggesting,” Moran starts, and his voice is deceptively calm, but anyone can see a tell-tale vein throb on his forehead, “that this panel is influenced by anything other than the quality of the baking presented to them?”

“The fact is, Jim,” Donovan continues, and she does a far worse job of masking her annoyance than Moran, probably because she likes Moriarty less, “your very difficult bake didn’t work. John’s easier one did. You overstretched your abilities. John didn’t. John knows his limitations and works well within them, whereas you went for the showiest, most complicated bake you could think of every time, and it often didn’t pay off. We told you this, time and again, but you wouldn’t listen, while John took our criticism to heart and improved. So what is it exactly that you’re accusing us of? Because quite frankly, I don’t give a shit about what these two,” she gestures at Sherlock and John, “do when the cameras are off.”

Silence descends in the tent. Moriarty looks around, and apparently only now becomes aware of the cameras that are still rolling and the crew standing around with looks on their faces that range from bored to annoyed to outright hostile. Molly is glaring daggers at him, while John is apparently trying to hide his amusement. Sherlock tries to keep his own mix of boredom and annoyance off his face, and just stares back at Moriarty when his eyes are drawn to Sherlock.

“This isn’t over,” Moriarty growls, and Sherlock knows Moriarty is talking mostly to him. Then he turns and storms out.

“Cut!” Glen yells from the director’s chair, and everyone in the tent lets out a big breath of relief.

“Was he trying to get free footage for his supervillain audition?” John mutters under his breath at Sherlock.

Sherlock snorts a laugh. “It looked suspiciously like it.”

Emma rolls her eyes. “Don’t worry, he’s all bark and no bite. He won’t say anything, it won’t be a good look for him either if he goes after you.”

Sherlock looks after where Moriarty just left. “I hope so.”

Molly turns to them, and she looks a bit shaken. “I need a cuppa,” she mutters and vanishes in the direction of the catering tent.

John lets out a deep breath. “That was a lot more drama than I ever thought a baking show could have.”

“You obviously haven’t seen the video where I made a bottle explode using only baking soda and vinegar,” Sherlock observes dryly.

John laughs. “I didn’t know your channel was this action-packed.”

“I’ll send you the link.”

John nods, and his amusement fades. When he looks back at Sherlock, his smile has turned wistful and a bit melancholy. “You do that.”

_

Sherlock waits until John is busy talking to Molly, then he slips out of the tent and goes looking for Moriarty.

Oddly enough, Moriarty seems to be waiting for him, leaning casually against the back of the catering tent.

Sherlock jerks his head outside, and Moriarty gives him a little smirk and a nod.

The crew has put a canvas roof over the loos today, and Sherlock ducks under the shelter it provides, checking that nobody is watching them as he steps behind the blue plastic portable toilets. The smell is less than pleasant, but that is of minor consideration.

“You know, we were supposed to have a grand rivalry, you and me,” Moriarty says from behind him. “A Bake Off for the ages. Instead the entire series has focused on your boring fling with that insignificant little man. I’m glad you dumped him, at least.”

Sherlock turns and straightens to his full height, looming over Moriarty. “You listen to me,” he says, trying to make his tone as menacing as he can, “I don’t care what kind of fantasies you’ve concocted in your twisted brain about you and me. And I don’t care how much dirt you fling at me on the Internet. But if you go after John Watson, I will destroy you. Total war, scorched earth, no survivors. Are we clear?”

Moriarty smirks. “You’ve kind of shown your hand there, Sherlock. Now I’m doubly motivated.”

Sherlock takes a step towards Moriarty and lowers his voice, not even trying to conceal his anger. He’d like nothing more than to slam his fist into that smirking visage, but he knows there are other ways to hurt. “Try it and see what happens. Final warning. If you so much as mention his name online, I will erase you from the Internet. I will make you want to change your name and move to another country. You think you know what I can do? Believe me, you have no idea.”

With that, he turns and walks away, not caring about the rain.

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It’s still raining when Sherlock is done with reactions and packing up. The crew are already dismantling the workstations, and Sherlock walks the short stretch to the hotel to get his overnight bag from storage.

When he comes out again with his bag, he meets John, who’s standing under the awning of the hotel’s front entrance, duffle bag at his feet, hands jammed into the pockets of his jacket, looking unhappily at the dark sky.

Sherlock stops next to him, and together, they watch the rain in silence for a while.

“Let me drive you home,” Sherlock finally says, deliberately not looking at John.

John’s hesitation is obvious as he shifts from one foot to another and clenches his left hand reflexively.

Sherlock says nothing and waits for John to get over his inherent stubbornness to realise that Sherlock is making a common sense suggestion.

Finally, John relents and nods. “Yeah, all right.”

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Three hours of night driving through pouring rain might not have been the amount of time Sherlock would normally enjoy spending with anyone.

With John, it’s... fine. Still annoying, but not unbearably so.

They spend the first hour in silence. The rain is loud, and the radio is on, but they don’t talk, and it’s oddly comfortable.

Around Ely, John gets hungry, so they stop at a small service station for mediocre sandwiches and bad coffee.

“What do you think Moriarty will do?” John asks, then takes a bite of his cheese toastie.

Sherlock shrugs and eyes his sandwich suspiciously before he tastes it. He's surprised that it's not half bad. "He's a food blogger. What can he do? My best guess is that he'll bitch about us on Twitter."

John snorts a laugh. "And what should we do about that?"

"Nothing. Don't engage, otherwise he'll never stop. He just wants attention, and if we react, he'll get more of it."

John nods. "All right. So we say nothing? No matter what he does?"

"Exactly. Never feed the troll."

John nods absently and they finish their sandwiches and their coffee in comfortable silence.

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Sherlock takes John all the way home this time. It's still raining cats and dogs when they reach London, and John gives Sherlock directions to the block of flats his bedsit is in.

"Turn left" and "Straight on" are the only words spoken between them, but Sherlock feels that they've reached a point where words just don't matter anymore, and they've said everything they wanted to say to each other.

When the car finally stops in front of John's block of flats, he visibly hesitates.

Finally, he turns to Sherlock. "You really don't have a birthday cake?"

Sherlock is pretty sure it's not what John actually wanted to say, but it's definitely the saner choice. "No. Are you still hung up on that?"

John smiles at him wistfully. "Just seems odd."

Sherlock shrugs, and John gives him a last nod and smile and says good night. He opens the door and the rain swallows him from Sherlock's sight almost immediately, and Sherlock wants to follow him inside and strip off his rain-soaked clothes and make a cup of tea and sit on the sofa with the telly on, eat Chinese take-out and have a conversation about anything at all that John Watson wants to say to him.

Instead he goes back to his empty flat and goes to bed alone, wondering which of his bad decisions will haunt him this time.

Chapter End Notes

[Powidltascherln](#)

A few words about this recipe: You don't need butter for the dough. And you don't need to do anything to the Powidl, just put a spoonful into the center of the dough and you're

fine. You don't need to add sugar or cinnamon, it's a waste of time, the Powidl is good enough on its own.

The next bit is actually controversial, because a lot of Austrians eat their Powidltascherln with breadcrumbs, and even in my own family some people prefer them with breadcrumbs, but trust me:

Don't serve them with breadcrumbs, mix poppy seeds with icing sugar, warm them up in a pan with a bit of butter, coat the Powidltascherln with it, drench in melted butter, die happy.

BTW, if you want a quick dessert that will send you straight to heaven: make a crepe, fill it with Powidl, coat with the poppy seed-butter-sugar mix from above. It's called Bohemian Palatschinke, and it's to die for. The poppy seeds and the Powidl are divine together.

Final - Part 1

It's the first week of December and London is a foggy nightmare lit by garish Christmas decorations. Tinny speakers blare poppy versions of Christmas carols, and Sherlock is awfully close to snapping at the next person wishing him happy holidays a full three weeks before Christmas.

His mood is further soured by the multitude of YouTube comment threads clamouring for more content with John and another, smaller number of comment threads calling him any number of homophobic slurs plus people being outraged on his behalf, and an increasing number of comment threads arguing over whether he and John are shagging or not. Moriarty has so far been astonishingly quiet, but Sherlock thinks he's just timing his attack to be closer to the final to get maximum attention.

Additionally, the theme for the Bake Off final is Christmas. How bloody original.

He's done a complete spread and run it by his homeless network, and they were all enthusiastic, but Sherlock is oddly dissatisfied. Every single piece of baked goods he made is objectively perfect, but something is missing, and he doesn't know what it is.

He also got an envelope in the post that further soured his mood.

Apparently, the Bake Off final is filmed in front of a small studio audience, consisting of a few randomly selected fans, all the eliminated contestants and one person the three finalists can bring along, if they want to. Sherlock's ticket arrived yesterday, and he doesn't know what to do with it.

His phone dings with a missed text. Mummy. Again. Asking when he's coming down to Sussex for Christmas.

He's sorely tempted to tell her that he will come down for Christmas shortly before hell freezes over, but he knows when the day comes, he'll make the trip because he'd feel guilty if he didn't, and his parents may be benevolently neglectful, but they didn't deserve anything of what he put them through over the years.

But it would be nice to hear that she's aware that she fucked up, and that she's aware that some of the shit she did was really not on at all.

John Watson again, commenting from the wings of his mind palace. He waves the intrusion away, like swatting at a fly, but then his eyes land on the Bake Off ticket, and suddenly he knows what to do.

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"This is a surprise, I must say," Mycroft says after they've been led, silently of course, into the guest room of the Diogenes Club. Sherlock hasn't been here in years, and it's still as

pompously over-ostentatious as he remembers, but he does understand the need for absolute silence for a mind like Mycroft's.

The waiter brings tea and an assortment of refreshments on a three-tiered cake stand and leaves, silently of course.

Sherlock helps himself to a cucumber sandwich and a scone, and silently scoffs at the poor quality of both.

Mycroft seems to be able to read his thoughts, because he gives Sherlock a smirk. "Your scones are better, no doubt. You could still bake good scones while doing something worthwhile with the other 23 and a half hours of your day."

"I'm not here to argue with you about the validity of my choice of occupation," Sherlock says and pulls out the ticket for the Bake Off final. "I'm here to offer you a front row seat."

Mycroft takes the ticket, and Sherlock hides a smirk because he thinks this is the first time in his life that he actually managed to surprise Mycroft.

"You - why did you give me this?" Mycroft asks, and there's something unsteady in his voice, something almost like emotion.

Sherlock takes a sip of his tea and takes a deep breath. Then he decides to speak honestly and directly to his brother for maybe the first time since the onset of his adolescence. "Mycroft, I think it's past time that I acknowledge that I put you through hell. And I am sorry. I'm sorry for the lies, for stealing money from you, for making you watch me nearly kill myself. But you need to see me for who I am now, not the junkie I was. I've been clean for six years, Mycroft. And I put in the work. I pulled myself together, built a business, made a life for myself." He looks at Mycroft, meets his eyes, wills his brother for once in his life to actually *see* Sherlock, as he is, not as Mycroft thinks he should be.

"I do see how much you have changed," Mycroft answers, holding his gaze, his voice unusually gentle, "but I also see how little. Your continued sobriety is commendable. But you still seem to think that I'm morally obligated to fix your problems for you, and that anything you want should be instantly yours without you having to do the work to earn it. If you want to own a bakery, work in one. Wait for the owner to retire, and take over. You can't have everything you want the second you want it."

Sherlock is about to snap that he doesn't know any bakery owners about to retire when it hits him that this isn't entirely true.

There's a spark in Sherlock's mind that travels through his synapses and sets off a cascade of connections and suddenly a plan crystallises in perfect clarity before his mental eye. "Mycroft," he breathes. "Don't lend the money to me. Lend it to Mr Chatterjee."

"Why would I lend your bankrupt landlord any money?"

"So he can re-open Speedy's, but this time as a bakery."

“He failed once, what makes you think he won’t fail again?”

Sherlock grins. “This time, he’ll have me, and all the publicity a top-rated BBC programme can offer.”

Mycroft looks at him, deeply sceptical. “Have you discussed this with him?”

Sherlock waves away the question as an irrelevant detail. Mr Chatterjee will say yes, he’s sure of it. He was devastated when he had to close, he’d gladly re-open, especially if Sherlock promises to do half the work. “Use my trust fund as collateral.”

“Are you sure?” Mycroft asks, scrutinising him carefully.

Sherlock meets his brother’s inquiring eye square on. “Yes.”

Mycroft sighs. “Have your solicitor phone me with details.”

Sherlock gets up when Mycroft does and holds out his hand, nearly trembling with nerves and suppressed joy. “You won’t regret this, Mycroft.”

Mycroft looks at his hand for a long time, then takes it and shakes it, firmly and sure. “I know I won’t.” He hesitates briefly. “What are you going to do about John Watson?”

Sherlock looks away. “Don’t worry. I remember. Caring isn’t an advantage.”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock looks up to meet Mycroft’s eyes and discovers that his brother is smiling, just a hint of it around his mouth, but still genuinely smiling. “If you want me to stop treating you like a junkie, it’s time to stop acting like one. You were right to be wary of emotional entanglements after you came out of rehab, but as you just pointed out, you are no longer that person. You need to stop punishing yourself for a decision you needed to make to stay alive.”

Sherlock lets Mycroft’s words sink in and gives him a half smirk to acknowledge that his brother has a point. “I don’t know about you, but all this sharing and caring business makes me deeply uncomfortable,” Sherlock says, but he knows Mycroft can see that he’s at least half joking.

“Agreed. Let’s go back to resentment and badly veiled insults, it suits us much better,” Mycroft replies in his usual acerbic tone, but the small smile that flits over his face doesn’t go unnoticed by Sherlock.

“Your diet isn’t working.”

“Your flat is a pigsty, and your chosen profession is silly.”

Sherlock suddenly finds himself grinning at his brother, and he feels an old weight he wasn’t even aware of anymore lifted from his shoulders as Mycroft grins back. “Much better.”

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Sherlock goes home in a daze. His hands are trembling ever so slightly, and his stomach is behaving like he just rode a rollercoaster.

He'll get his bakery.

Trembling hands reach for his phone, automatically, and his text program is open before he knows it.

My brother said yes. - SH

He hits send without thinking, because whatever else is going on, John deserves to know. Moreover, he wants John to know. John will be happy for him, genuinely, for no other reason than that John cares about him and wants good things for him, no matter if these good things include John or not.

Oh my god that is fantastic! Congratulations! I'm so happy for you

Sherlock smiles wistfully at his phone and types a quick *Thank you. - SH* before putting the phone away. What he really wants is to phone John and celebrate, but he knows there's zero chance that they won't end up in bed together, and that's the last thing they both need right now.

So he goes home alone, and opens a small bottle of champagne, and after he's drunk most of it, he gets the box with his Uni things from the attic. It's dusty and a bit warped by damp, but the contents of the box are still in good condition, such as they are.

Sherlock isn't a hoarder, he has few keepsakes. The box is small, and half empty. A chemistry textbook, admission paperwork, insurance, some letters. Two dog-eared photographs of him and Victor, the only ones in existence, as far as he knows. One on their first day in their new flat, a dingy hole in the wall with a closet-sized bedroom and two hotplates as a kitchen. But they both look happy and proud, splattered with paint, arms slung around each others' shoulders somewhat awkwardly, uncomfortable with the public display of affection. The second, two years later, more comfortably leaning against each other, but they both look worse for wear, and Sherlock can see the unhealthy gleam in his eyes. He was high when this picture was taken, he's almost sure of it, mainly because he has no recollection of it happening.

He looks at Victor's face in the second picture and it occurs to him that he doesn't know anything about the man this boy has become in the six years since he last saw him, shooting up on a dingy mattress in their awful, messy sitting room.

That image is burned into his retinas. Victor's pale skin, his wide, glassy eyes, the hurt in his voice when he cursed Sherlock for leaving. It's been haunting him like a ghost of his past mistakes, and he's been letting this spectre make his decisions for him.

Maybe it's time to lay that ghost to rest.

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The cafe is brightly lit, a watery late autumn sun streaming in through the windows, throwing shadows of advertisements on the windows over Sherlock's table.

His coffee is sitting there, beautifully foamed, untouched. It's getting cold.

The door dings. Sherlock looks up, heart beating too fast.

Victor hasn't changed much. He's still tall and blond and handsome and broad-shouldered. The only difference that six years have made is that his eyes are clear and his skin is glowing.

He's smiling at Sherlock a bit awkwardly, and Sherlock gets up, and one of these pauses ensues where it's entirely unclear how they're supposed to greet each other. Handshake? Hug? Nothing at all?

Sherlock should have researched this. He picked the cafe carefully, right in the middle between Victor's place of employment and Baker Street. Neutral, new. He should also have googled how you greet an awkward ex.

Victor finally settles on a friendly nod, and a subdued, "Hello, Sherlock," and Sherlock sits down, relieved.

There's a bit of an awkward shuffle with the menu, ordering, and then the waitress leaves them alone with Sherlock's cooling coffee, and Sherlock has no idea what to say.

"I was surprised to hear from you," Victor finally says. He's always been a talker, unable to let a silence sit. Sherlock never especially liked that about him, but he appreciates it now. "How are you?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Clean." There's really little else to say.

Victor gives him a small, self-deprecating smile. "Yeah. Me too."

"How long?" Sherlock asks, as if it mattered. But it does, and they both know it.

"Coming up on five years now," Victor answers, wistful and proud at the same time. "You?"

"Since...." Sherlock makes a gesture between them. "You know."

Victor winces a bit. "Um. About that."

He pauses briefly when the waitress deposits his coffee, then busies himself with stirring in too much sugar. Sherlock smirks a bit, because apparently, some things never change, and Victor is still trying to give himself a side of diabetes with his coffee.

When there's really no earthly excuse to stir his coffee anymore, Victor sighs. "I think I owe you an apology."

Sherlock looks up from where he's been watching the patterned swirl of Victor's latte. "I rather think it should be the other way around."

Victor gazes at him like he's lost his marbles. "What would you have to apologise for?"

Sherlock swallows, and he can't look at Victor, can't say it without his throat closing up. "I left you there," he finally gets out.

"Sherlock."

Sherlock lifts his gaze from the tabletop at the tone in Victor's voice, incredulous and kind.

"You stopped breathing," Victor says, gently, but firmly. "And I didn't *fucking* notice, because I was high out of my mind. If it weren't for our crackpot dealer, you would be dead."

Sherlock shrugs and tries to pretend he's not shaking a tiny bit. "It was a complete coincidence that it wasn't the other way around."

"And if you'd stayed, who knows if either of us would be sitting here today," Victor points out, still gentle, but still firm. "I wasn't ready to get sober. You were."

Sherlock doesn't know what to say to that, so he takes a sip of his stone-cold coffee. It's still better than the aftertaste of this conversation.

"You did what you had to do," Victor continues, never one to let a silence sit. "And I can't say that I didn't resent it at the time, but on some level I understood even then. Part of me would have given anything to walk away, but I wasn't ready. But somehow we both survived, and that's the thing that matters now."

Sherlock nods, a tiny gesture of acknowledgement, because Victor is right, of course. It still feels odd, sitting here, both of them sober, finally grown up in a way they never were before. It's odd, looking at Victor and realising that he doesn't precisely recall how they even began, even though he remembers how they ended. "It's good seeing that you're doing well," he finally says, because he feels he has to say something, and also because it's true. He finally allows himself to really *look* at Victor.

Shoes high quality but two years out of date, same for the suit, overdue for a haircut, wedding ring - still shiny - married last year - no watch - cut himself shaving - bags under his eyes - tired but not exhausted - spot on his tie

"Congratulations," he says. "Fatherhood suits you."

Victor smiles. "Got it in one. Funny, I nearly forgot that you do that." He pulls out his phone and shows Sherlock a picture of a classically handsome if somewhat boring-looking man holding a baby that can't be more than one month old. "This is Mark. And Stella. She's six months old, and she's got a good pair of lungs on her."

Sherlock smiles politely and lets Victor ramble on about the adoption process and how nerve-racking it was, and he suddenly wishes he'd done this years ago, because he feels relief, and very little of anything else. Victor is happy, and sober, and Sherlock knows with a certainty he never had before that if Victor had left with him six years ago, they would still never have made it as a couple.

They chat for a bit longer, and Victor teases him about being on telly, and they part with a warm hug and a promise to stay in touch which Sherlock has no intention of keeping.

He walks home to Baker Street, deep in thought about how to make the goddamned mince pies more interesting, and about the ten different ways his meeting with Mr Chatterjee could go wrong.

When he gets home, it's still three hours until Mr Chatterjee and Janine are due.

So Sherlock does what he always does.

He bakes.

_

Mr Chatterjee is late, but Sherlock doesn't mind, because he has to finish the last touches on his pies.

Janine is watching him from the kitchen table, cup of tea in front of her, occasionally glancing at her phone. "What are you doing, exactly?"

"Experiment."

"Well, don't overwhelm me with details," Janine mutters.

Sherlock snorts with amusement. "If I tell you what I'm doing, it will spoil the outcome."

Janine rolls her eyes. "It's mince pies, Sherlock, you're not curing cancer."

"The scientific principle is the same."

"If you say so." Janine sips her tea and goes back to checking her emails on her phone.

Sherlock is done with the pies just as Mr Chatterjee arrives.

Sherlock introduces Janine, offers tea and plays host with the odd self-awareness that the kitchen he's standing in technically belongs to his guest.

When they're all seated around the kitchen table, Sherlock gets out the pies. "Before we get down to business, I've got something for you to taste."

"You brought me here to eat mince pies?" Mr Chatterjee asks, and Sherlock shakes his head.

"No, but I need an unbiased opinion, and you two are the perfect test subjects."

He serves the mince pies to Janine and Mr Chatterjee.

"What are we supposed to test?" Janine asks, sinking her fork into the pie.

"There's something wrong with it. I need you to tell me what it is."

Mr Chatterjee and Janine both taste their mince pies, and both chew thoughtfully.

Janine asks for a glass of water and takes a sip before tasting again.

“What exactly are you looking for, here?” Janine finally asks, frowning at the pie. “I can’t taste anything wrong with it at all.”

“Me neither,” Mr Chatterjee says, nodding at the pie. “It’s a perfectly normal, perfectly fine mince pie.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, annoyed at the general uselessness of other people. He suddenly and viscerally misses John, who, Sherlock is sure, would know exactly what he’s missing here, and even if he didn’t, would distract Sherlock until he didn’t care anymore.

Janine clears her throat, and Sherlock is suddenly aware that he’s been sitting here staring at the mince pies for too long to be socially acceptable. Another thing he misses about John, his ability to let a silence sit, to leave him to his own thoughts for as long as Sherlock needs it.

“Shall we get down to business, then?” Janine asks, checking her watch. “You’re paying me by the hour, after all, and I do have other clients.”

Mr Chatterjee looks vaguely scandalised. “Why have you brought me here, Sherlock?” he asks, eyeing Janine suspiciously.

“She’s a solicitor, Mr Chatterjee,” Sherlock says over Janine’s amused snort. “I have a business proposition for you.”

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It’s three days to the final, and Sherlock isn’t any closer to figuring out what’s wrong with his mince pies. It’s frustrating in the extreme.

It’s noon, and he’s just baked another batch of them and is seriously thinking of just flinging them at the wall to see if they’ll stick.

His phone vibrates with a text. It’s the Bake Off group chat. Irene has posted a link to Moriarty’s blog.

Sherlock pulls it up and starts reading.

From the moment I entered The Great British Bake Off, I was never given a true chance of winning.

Sherlock rolls his eyes as he reads through what must be a thousand words of vitriol directed mostly at the BBC for “turning a baking competition into a badly veiled popularity contest, and allowing contestants to hog the spotlight without any consideration of talent and quality of bakes”.

The entire piece is oozing self-pity and a childish need for attention, and it fits perfectly with his opinion of Moriarty.

He mentions Sherlock by name twice, but he only implies that the baker he thinks is inferior is John.

His phone vibrates with another text. This time it's from John. *What are we going to do?*

Sherlock smirks. *Moriarty is doing what he's done for the entire competition, he's jumping up and down to get more attention. So what is the worst thing we could do to him? - SH*

Ignore him ;-)

Exactly. I wonder if he realises that all he's doing is ensuring that more people will tune in for the final and making my social media interactions go up? - SH

Probably not. Self involved wanker

Sherlock smiles and puts down his phone.

He stares at his mince pies and sighs.

Another try, then.

_

Sherlock puts down the violin, and the silence reverberates through the entire flat.

Silence, Sherlock notices, is an odd thing. He never noticed how silence can be active, the absence of specific sounds. Like loneliness, as opposed to being alone. Being alone never bothered Sherlock, he considered it to be natural, restful, a state of being. Loneliness, however, is an active absence.

And right now Sherlock feels the active absence acutely, like a tiny hole somewhere in his chest cavity, bleeding silence into his body.

The oven is cold; he doesn't feel like baking. For once, his mind isn't quieted by the process at all, and he can't spend a minute longer in the kitchen with twelve perfect mince pies mocking him from the counter.

The violin is better, but though the music keeps the silence at bay, when he stops playing it comes back full force, somehow even louder than before.

He needs some air. He needs to walk this off, whatever it is, so he can finally sleep. The Bake Off final is in two days, and he doesn't want to go on national television with bags under his eyes. Before he goes, he puts one of the mince pies into a plastic bag and puts it into his coat pocket. He doesn't let himself think of why.

The cold air hits him like a welcome slap in the face. It's good to be moving, good to be outside, where no empty spaces mock Sherlock with a well-defined absence.

It's despicable how illogical this is. He's finally getting what he always wanted. Everything important in his life is coalescing into a shape that will set his life on the course he wanted it

to take. He's getting his loan, he's getting his bakery.

And all he can think about are twelve perfect mince pies he hates for no discernable reason. And a poppy seed cake that is perfect only when it is entirely imperfect.

He walks and walks, letting his feet carry him through the streets he knows so well, streets he walked so many times. When he got out of rehab the second time, he used to play this game, to keep his thoughts occupied. He'd ride the tube to a random station, never letting himself look, and then he'd figure out where he was and take a way home that would take him by randomly selected checkpoints. One night, he'd challenge himself to walk by at least ten Tescos on his way home. Another night, Indian restaurants. Chippies, tobacconists, Marks+Spencers, McDonald's. Pubs with a shamrock in their logo. Anything to focus his brain on something other than where to get his next hit.

Tonight, he doesn't pay attention to where he's going at all.

Or, he doesn't let himself pay attention. He doesn't let himself think about it.

Traffic decreases, and pedestrians are few and far between when he finally allows himself to acknowledge where he ended up.

The block of flats is painted a brownish grey. A few lightbulbs supposed to be illuminating door numbers have burnt out. The staircase smells vaguely of frying oil and old cigarette smoke.

Sherlock rings the bell before he can talk himself out of it.

The door opens.

John is wearing loose pyjama pants and a ratty t-shirt. His hair is sticking up in unruly tufts. There's a pillow crease over his face.

Sherlock takes what he feels like is his first real breath today.

John just stands there, a small frown line between his eyes, looking at Sherlock expectantly. He doesn't point out that it's the middle of the night, and he doesn't ask what Sherlock wants and he doesn't complain about Sherlock waking him up. He just stands there and waits for Sherlock to say whatever he wants to say.

"Try this," Sherlock finally says, holding the mince pie out to John.

John raises a sceptical eyebrow. "You are aware that it's after midnight, right?"

Sherlock shrugs, because he is, and he feels slightly guilty about it, but he also knows that John doesn't really mind.

John looks at the mince pie critically, and admittedly it's not much to look at, having been squashed in Sherlock's coat pocket for the hour it took Sherlock to walk here. But he takes it and bites into it, making an approving sound.

“It’s good,” John says, then takes another bite of the mince pie, scrutinising Sherlock closely. “But you don’t like it.”

“Obviously.” Sherlock rolls his eyes. “I didn’t walk here in the middle of the night because I think they’re fine.”

“What don’t you like about it?” John asks.

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be here.” He runs a frustrated hand through his already unruly hair. “I can’t put my finger on it, and it’s driving me crazy.”

John nods sympathetically, and takes a final bite, finishing the pie. “Maybe a bit on the mushy side? But that could just be because you carried it around in your pocket?”

And just like that, Sherlock knows what he was missing. Crunch. Texture. He nods silently to himself and thinks of how he can get a bit of crunch. And then it occurs to him. Filo pastry instead of shortcrust or puff pastry.

“Figured it out?” John asks, smiling fondly at him.

Sherlock nods, at a loss for words again.

“Congratulations on getting your bakery,” John says quietly.

Sherlock nods again, still with no earthly clue what to say.

And John just waits him out, lets him arrive at what he still needs to say in his own time, patiently leaning against the doorframe.

“You’re wrong,” he finally says, and it’s not exactly what he wants to say, but it will have to do for now.

The small frown line on John’s forehead deepens. “Happens to the best of us sometimes,” he says with a small smile, his voice rough with sleep. “But just so I know, what am I wrong about?”

“There *has to be* an objective way to say whether something is good or not,” Sherlock answers. “There are objective criteria to measure the quality of anything, there have to be, otherwise science as we know it would not be possible.”

“I’m not sure that was my point,” John says, rubbing a hand over his face, a tired, resigned gesture. “Of course there are objective criteria, but there are some things that can’t be measured and evaluated objectively, they are just totally and entirely subjective.”

“How can you ever make decisions, then?” Sherlock asks, and there’s an edge of desperation in his voice.

John’s entire face softens as he finally, finally understands what Sherlock is trying to say. “You stop thinking, and you just do.”

“I can’t stop thinking,” Sherlock all but growls, suddenly so tired of thinking, just wanting to be closer, wanting John to wipe his mind clear of thought just for a bit, so he can rest. “I can’t stop thinking about you. You’re in my head every day.” He advances on John, kicking the door shut with a foot, and John moves back until he’s pressed against the nearest wall and Sherlock is looming over him. “You’re there when I bake, and you’re there when I talk to my annoying brother, and you’re there when I play my violin, you’re always, always there and I can’t get you out.”

They’re both breathing hard, and John looks up at Sherlock, pupils dilated wide. Sherlock’s heart is pounding like he just ran a marathon.

Then John growls, low in his throat, and their mouths meet in a hungry, desperate, all-consuming kiss.

“You think it’s just you?” John pants against Sherlock’s lips between sips of increasingly feral kisses. “Fuck, I think of you every fucking second of every day. Baking, working, walking, going to sleep.”

He grabs Sherlock’s coat lapels and spins him around, walking him back until they’re tumbling onto John’s too-narrow bed.

As soon as they’re horizontal, Sherlock starts pulling on John’s clothes, even as John peels his layers off, coat, jacket, shirt.

John bites at his neck. “I think about you when I’m bored at work, I think about what you do to me, what I want to do to you,” he whispers into Sherlock’s ear before taking the lobe into his mouth. “I miss you so fucking much, I miss your stupid violin and your silences and the way you dissect every bloody thing I do.”

Sherlock moans and bucks up against John, already hard and desperate and wanting. “Touch me,” he whispers. “Please.”

John’s grin is feral and possessive. “I think about you when I touch myself.”

His hands wander down Sherlock’s skin, tracing the outline of his erection against his trousers. Clever fingers open Sherlock’s trousers and slide in, wrapping around his cock.

“I think about you when I get myself off,” John breathes into Sherlock’s ear as he slowly starts to move his hand on Sherlock’s erection.

Sherlock can’t breathe, can’t think, can’t keep his eyes open, he’s drowning in sensation, John’s voice, his breath in Sherlock’s ear, his hand on Sherlock. Sherlock moans and John swallows the sound with his lips, kissing Sherlock like he’s dying, like they’re both dying, and Sherlock’s entire being is reduced to one thought: *More of this. Give me everything. And take everything in return.*

He comes with a strangled moan, and wastes no time sliding down John’s body and all but yanking his pants down to swallow down his cock with hungry desperation. He greedily

takes in John's cock, the noises he makes, the way he yanks on Sherlock's hair, the stutter of his hips, the taste of him when he comes with a strangled moan down Sherlock's throat.

Afterwards, Sherlock crawls back up and they just lie there, limbs entwined, half-dressed, messed up and breathing hard. Sherlock shifts them so John's head rests on his shoulder and he can card his fingers through his hair. The silence in his mind is blissfully absolute for once, and Sherlock can just breathe, and rest.

"What now?" John finally asks, face pressed against Sherlock's chest.

"I don't know," Sherlock admits into the darkness, not looking at John.

John props himself up on one elbow and turns Sherlock's head with a gentle finger under his chin, so Sherlock has to look at him. "I know you want some sort of certificate that says, 'This is a good idea', but that's not how things work in life, Sherlock. I can't guarantee that we won't hurt each other horribly, you certainly have the capacity to, and I can be a right dickhead sometimes, just ask my sister. And if you think I'm not bloody terrified of this, then you're wrong."

"Then why?" Sherlock asks, gesturing between the two of them.

John looks at him fondly. "You know why. Because it's bloody worth it."

Sherlock swallows hard and pulls at John until he's sprawled against Sherlock's chest again.

John shifts, settling in. "Are you staying? At least until I fall asleep?" he mutters, sleepy and warm against Sherlock.

"That wouldn't be very smart," Sherlock points out, but he's not moving, and he feels his eyes grow heavy.

John snorts. "We're way past smart at this point."

Sherlock admits that John has a point and lets his body relax. John's bed is small and uncomfortable, but Sherlock is warm and sated and tired, and incongruently happy.

"All right," Sherlock mutters, and John's arm tightens around him. "I'll stay."

He falls asleep with John's even breathing against his ribs. When he wakes up, it's just before dawn and John is still deeply asleep. He slides out from under John's body, gets dressed and leaves.

He has mince pies to bake.

And he has a decision to make.

Final - Part 2 - Filming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's ridiculously early when Sherlock steps onto the soundstage that will house the Bake Off final.

Three workstations have been erected, identical to those in the tent, but with an extra kitchen block to give them more space. Sherlock can see even from a distance that his is in the centre, John's to the left and Molly's to the right.

The crew ignore him as they set up, leisurely laying cables and fixing lights. There's a small area with a few rows of seats for the audience, such as it is.

The heavy stage door opens and closes, and two sets of footsteps follow the path he has taken.

Molly and John, early like him, both stop next to him, taking in the set.

"It's freezing in here," John says, nudging Sherlock with his arm in greeting.

"Enjoy it while it lasts. Three ovens, plus the headlights, and we'll be able to melt chocolate at room temperature."

John chuckles.

Molly doesn't react, she just stands stock-still, eyes flicking from the cameras to the lights to the audience. "I think I'm going to be sick," she whispers.

"Don't be absurd, Molly, you'll be completely fine," Sherlock says, patting her shoulder, knowing he looks awkward and unpracticed.

John flashes him a quick smile and takes Molly's hand. "No different than the tent."

Molly nods vaguely, still staring at the set. "I was sick in the tent, too. Every single time." She looks at John, almost accusingly. "How are you so calm?"

John snorts in amusement. "When you've pinched an artery closed while getting shelled, everything else is relative."

"I've pinched arteries, for god's sake, I'm a doctor," Molly replies, her frown deepening.

"I think it's the getting shelled part that sets John apart from us mere mortals," Sherlock quips, and both Molly and John laugh, Molly's shoulders relaxing a bit.

John meets Sherlock's eyes over Molly's head and gives him a smile that reaches right down into Sherlock's heart and makes it stutter pleasantly.

“Once more into the breach, then?” John asks, and his tone is both fondly amused and vaguely sad, making Sherlock painfully aware that this is indeed the last time they’re doing this.

Together, the three of them enter the set for the last time.

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The other contestants and the finalists’ guests start arriving. Molly’s fiance is hovering in the background, looking uncomfortable, but Irene scoops him up and soon he’s chatting away with the other bakers. Anderson, Dimmock and Black Forest Gateau are standing awkwardly together. Sherlock barely remembers them, and it brings starkly into relief how much has happened in the last few weeks. They seem to be from another lifetime, another him.

Sherlock notes that Moriarty is nowhere to be seen. Sherlock is deleting ten comments a day calling him a fraud and a shill for the BBC, some even going so far to surmise that he’s an actor just playing a baker, hired by the BBC. He’s noticed that John’s blog has had a few of those, too, but most of the vitriol has so far been directed at either him or the Bake Off social media accounts themselves, and Sherlock couldn’t care less about random people on the internet yelling at him on YouTube. It’s ratcheted up his views, so if anything his channel is now even more popular than before.

So far, the Bake Off social media accounts have also ignored Moriarty and his trolls, and Sherlock doesn’t think that will change any time soon. But the controversy has driven up social media engagement for all involved, and so Sherlock thinks the BBC probably loves the drama. Sherlock can only imagine how absolutely livid Moriarty must be at being ignored, and it fills him with satisfaction, in the brief moments he can bring himself to care.

Sherlock looks over to his brother, who’s taken his seat and is checking his emails on his phone. Harry Watson is standing around, a bit aloof from the other bakers, who are clustering around John and Molly, wishing them luck and asking about their bakes.

John looks over and beckons him with a nod of his head, and Sherlock goes over to join the group with surprisingly little reluctance.

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“Welcome to the first Great British Bake Off Final!”

“What a season it has been. Amazing bakes, not so amazing bakes, drama, tension, maybe even a bit of romance, if you listen to some of the rumours flying around, which we don’t of course.”

“And now our three finalists are fighting it out for the metaphorical crown. Who will be named Britain’s greatest home baker?”

“What do you think, Martha?”

“Well, Marie, I think they’ve all got an excellent shot. Sherlock always surprises, but both Molly and John will surely give him a run for his money.”

“So without further ado, the overall theme for the final is, you guessed it from the decoration, Christmas.”

“Our bakers have five challenges to prepare. First, two kinds of biscuits. Second, twelve mince pies. Third, Christmas pudding. Fourth, a savoury Christmas pie, and last but not least, a perfect Christmas dessert.”

“They have six hours, at the end of which all five dishes have to be done. So timing is everything.”

“Bakers, on your mark, get set, bake.”

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“So, John, what are you doing first?” Mrs Hudson peers at his list.

“Biscuit doughs, pie crust for the mince pies and the savoury, then while they’re resting I’m making the Christmas pudding, then the ice cream for the dessert, then on to the savoury pie.” John grins at her, hands already covered in flour.

Mrs Turner looks at his notes, messy handwriting on paper already sprinkled with flour and butter. “This looks like a lot of work.”

John shrugs. “Five bakes in six hours. One of these will probably go wrong.”

“Any bets?”

John gives her a wink. “Come back in an hour, and I’ll be able to tell.”

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“Sherlock, this looks incredibly precise.” Mrs Turner points to his spreadsheet. “What are you doing right now?”

“I want to get the Christmas pudding out of the way, it needs to steam for four hours, so I’m making it now.”

“I see dates. Is that Earl Grey you’re soaking them in?” Mrs Hudson asks, inhaling the steam.

Sherlock nods and carefully sieves the flour into his dough.

“I see you’re using candied ginger as well?” Mrs Turner picks up a piece, but sets it back down when Sherlock glares at her.

“Careful, I’ve measured the exact amount I need,” Sherlock says, trying his best not to snap at her, and not sure he’s succeeding.

Mrs Turner draws her hand back with exaggerated care and grins at him. “We’ll just leave you to it, shall we?”

Sherlock restrains himself from growling at her, but they take the hint and move along.

He concentrates on his dough, but the deep zen feeling of baking refuses to slip over him today. Maybe it’s the heat of the headlights. Maybe it’s the cramped studio. Maybe it’s the pressure of making five perfect bakes in six hours.

And maybe it’s none of that, maybe it’s the ticking clock in his head, counting down the last minutes he gets to spend in the same room as John Watson.

John is two metres away from him right now, covered in flour and working at his Christmas pudding with a small frown of concentration between his brows. And it might be the last time Sherlock sees him sloppily weigh his ingredients and shrug at them with a ‘good enough’ sort of air, sweaty and covered in flour, smiling inanely, humming out of tune while he works. It’s painful, how much Sherlock loves every imperfect inch of him. It’s also distracting, and Sherlock forces himself to focus back on his bake, when all he really wants to do is soak up as much of John as he can, fix him into his mind palace so he has a place to visit him when it inevitably ends.

John looks up and their eyes meet. John frowns at him, mouthing, “All right?”

Sherlock nods and forces his attention back to his bake.

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“So, Molly, how is it going?” Mrs Turner takes a tiny spoon and dips it into the filling for Molly’s mince pies. “This is delicious.”

Molly looks up from re-folding her puff pastry for the third time and smiles at Mrs Turner. “Thank you. It’s going well, though I’m hating myself a bit for the puff pastry.”

“John is doing his mince pies with shortcrust,” Mrs Hudson points out and also tastes from the mince pie filling.

Molly shrugs. “Well, he made a better life decision for once.”

Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner chuckle, and John calls over, “Oi! What do you mean for once? I always make excellent life decisions.”

Everybody laughs, and the cameras move on to Sherlock, who can’t be bothered to look up from where he’s stretching out his filo pastry. “Filo for mince pies, very interesting,” Mrs Turner muses. “Do you also regret your life decisions?”

Sherlock hums noncommittally. “Well. Not about the filo,” he says, eyes flicking automatically to John, who’s currently forming little crescents out of biscuit dough with a concentrated frown.

“Why did you pick the filo?” Mrs Hudson asks, dipping her tasting spoon into his mince filling.

Sherlock shrugs. “I wanted a bit of crunch.”

“Are you going to sell these in your new bakery?”

Sherlock looks directly into the camera and smiles. “Come by and find out. And follow me on Instagram for updates on the opening date.”

Mrs Hudson turns to the camera. “I don’t know about you, but I’ll definitely be there.”

Sherlock swallows around a sudden lump in his throat, because somehow, that simple statement means a lot to him. Their two hosts have been perfect throughout, lightening the mood, showcasing their strengths, glossing over their weaknesses, mothering all of them indiscriminately, and being consummate professionals all the way through.

But he knows he could never express any of the appreciation he feels for them in words, so he turns back to stretching his dough, and the two hosts leave him to it.

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Mince pies, Christmas puddings and biscuits are in the oven when Glen calls lunch break.

“So which of yours is shit?” Molly says casually as she bites into her sandwich.

“My ice cream won’t set,” John answers without a second’s hesitation. “So that’s going to be my shit one. Yours?”

“My ginger nuts are too thin, they’ll probably be dry as dust.” Molly and John turn to Sherlock.

Sherlock takes a sip of his tea and shrugs. “Savoury. I might have ever so slightly overseasoned my pie filling.”

“How slightly?” John asks, lips twitching in suppressed amusement.

Sherlock feels himself smiling back almost automatically. “Let’s say the line to inedible remains firmly uncrossed.”

John and Molly laugh, and spontaneously, John holds out his tea mug. “Here’s to our bakes being edible!”

“Edible!” Molly and Sherlock echo and the three of them clink their mugs together.

Then their oven timers go off, and they all abandon half-eaten sandwiches to ensure that their bakes remain edible.

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“So, Molly,” Mrs Turner asks, watching as Molly carefully slides her savoury pie into the oven, “what do you think is the most important quality a good baker should possess?”

Molly wipes her sweaty forehead on the sleeve of her t-shirt and doesn't answer for a moment, stepping back to her workstation. “Hm. I'd say creativity. You have to be willing to try things out. If it fails, it fails, but if you never try, you never learn.”

“Sherlock, what do you think?” Mrs Hudson asks, stepping aside to let Sherlock check his biscuits in the oven.

Sherlock thinks for a moment, then he says, “Creativity is important, but so is precision. Baking is a delicate balance; truly perfect bakes need perfect control.”

John catches his eyes and gives him a lopsided grin, and Sherlock shrugs.

“And you, John, what do you think is the most important quality a good baker has to possess?” Mrs Turner asks, having caught their interaction.

John looks down at his pie crust. “Patience,” he finally says with a self-deprecating grin. “Not something that comes naturally to me, admittedly, but sometimes, the most important thing you can do for a bake is just to give it time. Time to rest, to prove, to bake. Sometimes, when you've done all you can do, added all your ingredients, you just need to be patient and give the bake the time it needs to come together. And that's how you get a perfect bake.”

Sherlock swallows and meets John's eyes, and when John smiles at him, it would have been physically impossible for Sherlock not to smile back.

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“So, Sherlock, your last reaction interview. I know you've always hated them.”

“It's fine.”

“Looking back on your time on the Great British Bake Off, what's your resume?”

“All in all it's been a far more rewarding experience than I ever thought it would be. I thought I didn't have anything left to learn when it comes to baking, but it turns out I was wrong. It was tedious and stressful at times, but I... I loved it.”

“Wow, Sherlock, you're making me teary-eyed. Didn't think you had it in you.”

“Well. Neither did I.”

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“Molly, your final words before we go into the judging?”

“I think that whoever wins will deserve it, and I'll be happy with any outcome the judges will deliver. It's been a joy to bake with these people, and I think I've found some friends for life here.”

“Thank you, Molly, and good luck.”

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“John, anything to say in your last reaction interview?”

“What a ride. I can’t believe it’s only been three months since we first walked into that tent in September. I can safely say that I’ve never had this much fun in my life.”

“And who knows what might come of it.”

“You know, sometimes it’s the journey that matters, not the destination.”

“Wise words, and I think the perfect conclusion. Good luck.”

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The last decorations are done, the Christmas puddings have been lit, and the crew sends them out for the food porn shots.

Sherlock, Molly and John make their way into the green room, all three of them on wobbly knees with exhaustion and fading adrenaline.

They sink down on various couches and enjoy the silence for a few moments.

The door bangs open and the other bakers stream in, followed by Mycroft, Harry and Molly's fiancé. There's a commotion around the table, but Sherlock can't see what they're doing, and he doesn't especially care.

“Well done, all of you,” Irene says. “No matter who wins, that was one hell of an achievement.”

Sherlock lifts his head from where it's resting on the back of the uncomfortable green room sofa, and catches Mycroft's eye. His brother looks bored and out of place, but he's here, and Sherlock gives him an appreciative nod, which Mycroft returns.

Irene goes over to John and nudges him with her foot.

“What, now?” John asks wearily, and Sherlock has no idea what he's talking about.

“Yes, now,” Irene says, giving John a hand and helping him up from the other sofa.

“Fine.” John groans and wipes his hands on his jeans, a nervous, uncertain gesture.

John walks towards him, and the other bakers form a half circle around the couch where Sherlock is still seated.

“Um,” John starts, scratching the back of his neck, but trying not to smile. “We... well, we've sort of got something for you.”

“For me?” Sherlock sits up, utterly surprised. “All of you?”

“Well, some of us.” John pauses for a second. Then he steps back and gestures at the table. “We all thought it was completely unacceptable that you don’t have a birthday cake, so we, um, kind of, made you some?”

John gestures at the table, and the bakers all step aside to reveal seven different birthday cakes.

Sherlock gets up and walks towards the table, unable to speak around the lump in his throat.

He turns to John, who’s filming on his phone. “So, rules of the mini-Bake Off,” John explains. “Mike, Neela, Irene, Janine, Mary, Molly and I each made Sherlock a birthday cake. Now Sherlock has to decide on a winner. There are only two rules. One, he only gets to know who made which cake after he’s picked the winner, and two, it’s not about the quality of the bake,” John says, and with the last words, he looks directly at Sherlock. “You need to decide which one you *like* the most.”

“I’ll like the one that’s made the most competently the most,” Sherlock says, and he can see John’s small smile.

“We’ll see.”

Sherlock is manhandled behind the table and Irene busies herself with cutting the cakes.

The first is dark chocolate with a raspberry jam filling and a thick chocolate ganache icing. It’s very good, and Sherlock thinks it’s probably Irene’s.

Next, a light coffee cake with a slightly spicy bite, probably Molly’s. The lemon yogurt sponge with kiwi is probably Mary’s, and is honestly not Sherlock’s taste at all. Mike’s offering is a liquid center chocolate cake with a Sacher style chocolate icing, very heavy and far too sweet for Sherlock’s taste. The light cheesecake almost has to be Janine’s, and the hazelnut-caramel is almost certainly Neela’s.

Sherlock is absolutely sure the last one is John’s. He couldn’t say how he knows, but it’s obvious. It’s a sticky toffee cake, and it’s immediate perfection.

He looks over the cakes, all competently and expertly made, and acknowledges that Molly’s coffee cake and Irene’s dark chocolate are the superior bakes. They’re lighter, more professional, better balanced, more difficult.

He’d still choose John’s over them every single time.

“Before I make my decision,” Sherlock says, looking out at these seven people who all baked a cake, just for him. “I want to say thank you.” He looks at all of them in turn, and then his eyes settle on John. “These are all fantastic cakes, and you’re all amazing people, and if I win this, knowing that I’ve beaten all of you will make this mean even more.”

Everybody chuckles good-naturedly, and John nudges him to go on with a slight movement of his chin. “So. Which one do you choose?”

Sherlock points at John's cake, not taking his eyes off John's for a second. "That one." He pauses. "Obviously."

Everybody cheers, and John gets clapped on the back. Irene takes over the filming and asks John, "How does it feel to have won both mini-Bake Offs?"

John grins, locking eyes with Sherlock. "Like I don't care whether I win the actual one."

Sherlock smiles back and realises he also doesn't care.

Irene turns off the camera, and John makes his way over to Sherlock. He's holding something behind his back. "I've got something else for you," he says quietly.

The other bakers all congregate over by the cakes and help themselves to slices of Sherlock's birthday cakes.

John holds out something for Sherlock to take. It's a black soft-cover notebook. Sherlock opens it, and sees that the first few pages have been filled with the recipes for his seven birthday cakes. The recipes are extremely detailed, especially John's. All the ingredients are listed with exact quantities, down to the number of tea bags John used to soak the dates.

There's a polaroid tucked into the last written on page, with all the bakers grinning into the camera, holding up their cakes.

He turns back to the first page and sees that John has written something there. *To the very best of times - J*

Sherlock looks up at John, who's watching him with an expression that's half wary and half fond.

"You soaked your dates in tea," Sherlock says. He's having a hard time getting the words out over the lump in his throat.

John shrugs, half embarrassed, half defiant. "I saw it on YouTube. There's this chap who's got a baking channel. Bit of a posh git, but he's got some good ideas about baking."

"He's a bit of an idiot, don't you think?" Sherlock answers, voice still a bit unsteady.

"I don't know," John says with a smile that's openly and unabashedly fond. "I sort of like him."

Sherlock smiles back automatically, thinking, *I love you so much I can't breathe with it sometimes*, and all at once, Sherlock realises that John is right. No matter what happens, this is already worth the risk.

"John," he says, quietly, barely audibly over the chattering of the other bakers congratulating each other on their respective birthday cakes.

John looks at him expectantly and waits.

Out with it, Sherlock says to himself. *You'll never forgive yourself for being a coward right now.*

“There’s a very nice Italian restaurant about five minutes’ walk from Baker Street,” he says, aware that his voice still isn’t entirely steady.

John raises his eyebrows, but says nothing, waiting for Sherlock to get his point out.

“Would you like to have a celebratory dinner with me there afterwards?” Sherlock says, as quickly as he can, before he can think himself out of this, his heart fully in charge for once.

John’s face breaks out into the loveliest smile Sherlock has ever seen in his life. “I would absolutely love to,” he says, and the joy in his smile is fully apparent in his voice as well. “But don’t you want to wait until you’re sure you’ve got something to celebrate?” he adds, teasing.

Sherlock reaches out and entwines nervously trembling fingers with John’s. John gives his hand a reassuring squeeze, and Sherlock knows, in that moment, that he made the right decision. “Oh,” he says with an irrepressible smile. “I think I’ve already won.”

Chapter End Notes

[Mince pies, courtesy of Jamie Oliver](#)

[The sticky toffee cake](#) (though John’s version is a bit more “rustic”)

[Vanillekipferln - Vanilla Crescent Cookies](#)

These are THE Austrian Christmas cookies, and I don’t know anyone who makes Christmas cookies who doesn’t make them. My mom’s are the best, but I have no idea why, because she uses the same recipe as pretty much everyone else. They just are. And about the recipe, absolutely do skip the egg yolks, you won’t get the texture for a Vanillekipferl. Also, if they have the right consistency, about a third of them will break when you roll them in icing sugar, but that’s how you know you’ve gotten them right. You want the crescents to be large and thin. That’s how you get maximum icing sugar to cookie ratio, and they’ll have the perfect consistency.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

So this is it, you guys. We've reached the end.

So before I release you and our boys into the sunset, I want to say thank you.

Thank you to my wonderful beta BookGirlWithLove for her hard work and her patience.

And to hotshoeagain who beta-read some of the chapters.

To my darling wife, who listened to me ramble, complain, gush and be insecure about this story for the better part of a year.

And to you all, who made sharing this story with you such a joy. Thank you so much for caring about these two idiot bakers as much as I do. I will never forget the feeling of having all of you yell variations of 'Sherlock, you IDIOT' in the comments.

This story got me through a tough, cold, long winter, sitting at home in lockdown. I am immensely grateful for the warm, loving welcome it has received. I love fandom, and fandom absolutely got me through the worst of the last year and a half, if only by giving me a way to escape my own thoughts and my own four walls for a while. So thank you all.

[And come say hi on tumblr](#)

The sky is just beginning to lighten when Sherlock gets up.

He never understood the aversion people have to rising early. It's so quiet, so peaceful. When most of the world is still asleep, there are no distractions, no clutter, no noisy commotions. The people you do meet are subdued, tired after a long night's work, or not quite yet awake enough.

He rolls over to his side and enjoys the cool sheets against his skin for a moment. It's August, and the days are endless and hot, and he enjoys these mornings for the cool, fresh air as much as for the quiet.

He gets up, pours himself coffee and checks his emails. He deletes the ten obligatory slur-filled comments from Moriarty's troll army. They've been more active lately since Moriarty ripped his bakery to shreds on his blog. Ironically, it's been rather good for business, driving people to their doorstep to find out whether they're really that bad. As always, he refuses to engage with the trolls, or with Moriarty himself. He knows it drives Moriarty nuts that Sherlock never engages with him, but Sherlock doesn't want to reward Moriarty's behaviour by contributing to his social media engagements. He also has better things to do with his life.

Comments deleted, coffee empty, Sherlock goes downstairs. There's a note on the fridge in Mr Chatterjee's handwriting. *Please use up the egg whites.*

Sherlock nods to himself. Mr Chatterjee is always on his case about leftovers, and he's right. They can't afford to bin half their ingredients. They've yet to break even at the end of the month, though Sherlock is confident that this month they will finally achieve it. The revenue from his sponsorships and the YouTube channel are enough to stop the gap for now, but if everything goes according to his business plan, they won't need the help much longer.

He contemplates the egg whites and thinks about meringues.

But first, bread.

The loaves are resting on the workbench and the scones are in the oven by the time the front door is unlocked. Sherlock can hear the familiar sound of the shutters opening. The bell over the door dings.

John walks in, still wearing scrubs. He gives Sherlock a tired smile and comes over to the workbench. "Morning," he says, voice gravelly from lack of sleep.

Sherlock leans down for a quick kiss, hands deep in a vat of dough. "Scones should be done in five minutes, if you want to wait around."

John shrugs and looks into the oven. "They smell good, but I think I'll head right to bed. It was a long night."

Sherlock looks at John critically. "Bad night?"

"Not really, it was mostly quiet. I even got to sleep a bit, but around three we got this car accident in. Chap wrapped himself around a lamp post. We spent an hour trying to stabilise him enough so he'd survive the lift ride up to the OR." John rubs a hand over his face and goes to the fridge to check on the apple strudels they made together last night. Five of them, resting beneath a tablecloth, waiting for the oven. The strudel is the second-best seller of their Watson specials, right after the Punschkräpfen.

"You need to really slather them with melted butter before they bake," John says, turning back to Sherlock, biting down on a huge yawn.

"Yes, John, I know. You already told me twice."

John checks his watch. "When do we need to leave?"

"Around noon."

John smiles at him and pecks another kiss on his cheek. "Wake me at eleven? And save me some strudel."

Sherlock nods absently, and John wanders up the creaky stairs to 221B to fall into bed.

Sherlock briefly admires the way the scrubs hug John's arse and accentuate his shoulders, then he focuses back on his dough.

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Around eleven, Sherlock takes off his apron and cracks the door open to the bakery proper.

“Amit, I’m off,” he calls out into the shop.

“Have fun,” Mr Chatterjee calls back from behind the counter before continuing to serve the line of customers. He turns to Sherlock between serving two customers. “Can you just push another tray of the croissants into the oven before you go?”

Sherlock nods and sets the oven timer before taking a tray of freshly thawed croissants and putting them into the hot oven.

Then he goes upstairs, carrying a plate with a piece of the still warm strudel. It’s the last piece, they sold out thirty minutes ago.

John is fast asleep in the darkened bedroom. Sherlock slowly undresses and crawls into bed. He fits his body to John’s and starts kissing his neck. “Time to get up,” he mutters against the shell of John’s ear.

John shudders and turns, pulling Sherlock into a sleepy, languid kiss. John’s sweaty and his morning breath is sour, but Sherlock doesn’t care, he kisses back with enthusiasm.

“Mhmmm... can you wake me like this every day?” John mutters between slow, sweet kisses that are still demanding and pushy enough for Sherlock to know that John has a destination in mind.

John’s hands travel languidly over his body, curve over his arse.

“None of that, or we’ll be late,” Sherlock says with a laugh, moving away.

John makes a protesting sound and cracks one eye open. “Sod being late.” He grabs Sherlock’s arm and pulls until Sherlock’s sprawled over him.

“How about this,” Sherlock says, evading John’s mouth, which lands on his neck instead. John bites down on his neck and he gasps as John’s teeth graze over sensitive skin. “I was about to take a shower. How about you join me?”

John draws back and grins. “Best offer I’ve had all day.”

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Mid-day traffic isn’t too bad, and they’re out of London in good time. John falls asleep against the door before they even reach the end of Baker Street, hopelessly wrinkling his shirt, but Sherlock doesn’t have the heart to wake him. The shower, coffee and strudel somewhat revived John, but a 12-hour shift is a 12-hour shift and John often complains about how he’s really too old for A+E night shifts. But there’s a spring in his step when he goes to work, so Sherlock doesn’t take his griping too seriously.

Sherlock wakes John reluctantly about ten minutes before they reach their destination.

They get out of the car, and Sherlock takes a moment to help John straighten his suit, and drags his fingers through John's hair to make him more presentable. John's eyes darken with promise as Sherlock runs his fingers through John's hair, and John pulls him in for a kiss, deep and dirty and hungry.

“Oi!”

They break apart and turn around to see Janine standing behind them, dressed to the nines. “You've been here twenty seconds, and you're already snogging. Disgusting!”

Then she pulls them both into a three-way hug and plants loud, wet, wholly unnecessary kisses on their cheeks. “Hello boys.”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock says, removing her from both himself and John. “We need to get the cake.”

“Changing the subject from your blatant public display of affection, I see,” Janine grouses, but she gets out of the way, letting John help her over the uneven, gravelly terrain of the car park which her stiletto heels make difficult to navigate.

John turns back to Sherlock. “Need help?”

Sherlock points at the box. “No, no, you go ahead and play gentleman, I'll just drop the cake and ruin Molly's wedding.”

John rolls his eyes, but he's smiling as he steps up to help Sherlock, and together, they carry the cake to the tent.

“Deja vu,” Janine mutters as she walks behind them.

Sherlock snorts in amusement, though he does see Janine's point. The tent looks almost exactly like the one they filmed Bake Off in.

“I think she used the same tent company,” John says, nudging Sherlock with his foot. “Where to with the cake, Maestro?”

Sherlock huffs a laugh and leads the way to the caterers. They deliver the cake, then make their way over to an outdoor area where about sixty folding chairs have been put up.

Guests are already milling about, greeting friends and family. Irene, Neela, Mary and Mike are standing in the shade under a nearby tree, with Mike's wife and Irene's girlfriend. Irene calls their names and they make their way over to join them.

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Weddings, Sherlock concludes after four tedious hours, are boring. The ceremony was thankfully short, but afterwards, they all stood around the lawn, sipping champagne and munching on mediocre canapes while the bride and groom were whisked off somewhere to take pictures.

Then, after too many hours of bad champagne and tedious small-talk, they finally go into dinner. It's hot in the tent. The food is fine but a bit on the boring side, but at least they're seated with the Bake Off crowd, so the conversation isn't quite as inane as it could be.

"Can we go yet?" Sherlock groans into John's ear as hour six begins with speeches from assorted friends and relatives of the bride and groom.

"We have to wait until they cut the cake," John answers, voice as low as Sherlock's.

"I still can't believe she let you make the cake," Irene complains.

"He won the mini-Bake Off, stop complaining," John says, reaching for his wine glass.

"You should talk, you were the grumpiest when he won." Neela points at John with her dessert fork.

"Because I knew he was going to be unbearably smug about it. He was happier when he won the mini-Bake Off than when he won the actual Bake Off." John grins at Sherlock, soft and fond. He's shed his jacket and has rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, and he's looking just about good enough to eat. Sherlock has to restrain himself from dragging John off somewhere for a shag; there has to be a secret corner around here somewhere, a good snog at least might get some of the antsy energy out of his system.

Sherlock leans closer and drapes his arm around the back of John's chair. "Want to find a quiet corner and snog?" Sherlock murmurs, making sure to ghost his breath over John's sensitive ears.

John turns his head to look at Sherlock, and there's so much heat in his deep blue eyes that Sherlock's knees go weak. John grins. "Yeah, all right."

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Hour eight, and still no sign of the cake.

Janine is complaining about the dearth of handsome men at the wedding. "So unfair," she sighs. "The two most good-looking men came here together." She gestures at Sherlock and John.

John grins. "Thanks for the compliment. If I were here alone, I'd totally go home with you."

"Hey!" Sherlock swats John's arm.

"I said 'if'," John says, returning the swat.

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

They all turn to face the front of the tent, where Molly and her husband - Sherlock thinks his name is Geoff or thereabouts - are making their way to the small dance floor.

"Oh god," Sherlock groans. "Another cliché."

Neela smirks at him over her coffee cup. "I'm looking forward to mocking everything at your wedding."

"And I'm looking forward to winning the mini Bake Off," Irene adds with a grin.

John, who's been leaning against Sherlock, sleepy and content, perks up at that. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here, okay? We haven't been together for a year." He turns his head and looks at Sherlock, obviously alarmed and half afraid that an off-hand comment like that might spook Sherlock. But Sherlock is done being afraid, so he only tightens his arm around John, giving him a reassuring squeeze.

John relaxes back against him, warm and trusting and sure, and suddenly Sherlock can see it perfectly. Small ceremony. Expensive suits. No jumpers in sight. Canapes, good champagne. Rings, worn on thin silver chains around their necks when they're working with their hands all day. Promises that no longer scare him, that say *I trust you with my heart, because you've proved that you deserve it.*

Sherlock smiles. "If you think I'd let anyone else make our wedding cake, you're certifiably insane."

John snorts and turns to look at Sherlock again. "You already know exactly what our wedding cake will be like, don't you?"

Sherlock hesitates, because of course he does. Dark chocolate, cranberry jelly for the bottom cake, vanilla and raspberries for the middle cake. On top, a small cake, just for the two of them, poppy seed, raspberry jam, sloppily baked, entirely perfectly imperfect. "If I did, would that be a problem?"

John smiles at him softly and leans in for a kiss. "Absolutely not."

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