

Momentum

by athens7 as Jack (font: Courier New)
and mazaher as Patrick (font: Verdana)
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A note from the Authors

The scrupulous biographer can't help feeling embarrassed when faced by the task of recounting this turning point in the joint lives of Patrick Moriarty and Jack Waszowski. Up to a certain time, the facts are clear enough-- but in the many years that have passed after that fateful winter night in 1896, nobody ever could ascertain what really happened in the dead hours before dawn, when even London falls silent.

Was it Dr. Waszowski who stepped out of the front door of the sandstone building in Kensington, or was it the more slender, tall frame of Mr. Moriarty? Did the step sounding on the pavement in the chill of deepest darkness mark the determined rhythm of someone who follows after his decision, however painful it may prove, or the hasty staccato of a man who runs from his ghosts?...

What is known is the outcome, and that is history.

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1. The Christmas ball at the Grevilles', and what happened after that

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Jack's POV

"Lady Greville, my most sincere congratulations for the magnificence of this ball. It is a honour for me to have been included in your invitation."

"Now, now, Doctor! I could have never invited the most remarkable piano talent in all England and exclude his dearest friend as well as personal physician, could I?"

"I am afraid you exaggerate my importance, Madam."

"And you are also modest! Such an intriguing quality, made even more so by the fact that an appalling multitude of gentlemen nowadays seem to be lacking in it."

"You will make my cheeks redden in a very unmanlike manner if you persist in this fashion, Madam."

Lady Violet Greville hides behind her elaborate fan and laughs delicately, exposing her jeweled neck and porcelain teeth.

She is an extraordinary woman, far ahead of our times, with a sharp mind and witty manners, and one of the most influential mediators in the geography of London's cultural clubs. It is crucial for Patrick to gain her favours, if he wants to nourish any hope that his career will advance as effortlessly as it deserves.

All the same, neither of us is able to bring himself to really appreciate the nuances and amenities of high society's etiquette. My love already knows how to move in this environment with lethal and insidious dexterity, to fascinate and manipulate his impotent audience: he has way more experience than me at this, but I am a fast learner, if the intrigued twinkle in the Lady's eyes is of any indication.

My subtly-teasing smile earns me a manicured hand on the forearm.

The clink of a goblet hastily placed down and an unmistakable voice muttering false apologies drive my eyes away, leading them to the figure of Patrick rushing out of the reception room.

"Is our beloved pianist feeling unwell?" the aristocrat at my elbow wonders in a feigned detached tone, following my gaze.

"Please forgive him, Madam. You know how unpredictable artists can be.

Instability is one of the basic ingredients of genius, after all" I reply, while I attempt to repress the impulse to run after him. I will not be able to resist for much longer.

"Believe me, I have my fair amount of experience to accept this fact".

She pauses. I hold my breath, while my heart tries to tear my ribcage down and go help him in my stead.

"Would you like to assure yourself that everything is indeed in order?" she asks at last, and for a crazy moment I believe I can detect compassion in the polite escape she's offering me.

"I would not blame either of you" she insists, fixing me with piercing amber eyes.

"I -- thank you, Lady Greville. Rest assured you will receive written amends for this small incident."

"Completely unnecessary."

"Nevertheless. Goodnight, Madam."

I kiss her hand and turn away.

Walking instead of running is a concession to manners I cannot afford. I pay the price anyway, having no other choice.

I don't even bother retrieving my coat. Without conscious awareness I am already outside, the humidity of thin rain just fallen clinging to my skin and filling my nostrils unpleasantly.

He is still here, the carriage having stopped only now in front of him.

He doesn't acknowledge my presence but the way his shoulders imperceptibly straighten at the staccato rhythm of my steps does not go unnoticed. I give the address to the driver then climb in after him.

"Now, would you just tell me what was that all about? You were the one who insisted on attending!" I snap once we are safely hidden behind the doors.

"You seemed to be enjoying the company though" he retorts in a deadly murmur, crouched defensively in a corner, eyes warily riveted on the floor.

The champagne must have been stronger than I thought because he could not possibly mean what my heart is timidly suggesting.

"Well, what would you have wanted me to do? I was just sticking to the handbook of the perfect English gentleman!" I counter, more for the need to banish that disturbing train of thought than anything else.

"I want nothing from you."

"You are exasperating, have I ever told you that? Will you at least bestow me the privilege of looking at me while racking my brains?"

He whispers something in answer, words too low to be intelligible but that anyway sound suspiciously like "I can't".

"Excuse me?" I prod him, too tired and upset to really care about how thin the ice is right now.

"If you really are so curious, then know that I left because I could no longer stand your sight. You are ridiculous in that outfit, you look like a butler." An harsh laugh escapes me, in spite of myself and my misery and the dull pain constantly stinging in my chest.

"Come on, my dear fellow, we both know you can do better than that."

"I do not expect you to understand."

We spend the rest of the trip engaged in a sterile, mannered verbal sparring, and it is not until we arrive and he rushes out of the cab in mid-sentence that I realise it was all a strategy aimed at distracting me. What a fool. I walked right into his diversive.

I pay the driver, don't collect the change and again I run after him. He has some advantage, but he can do nothing against my slightly longer legs.

I catch up with him right at the entrance, my foot shooting out to prevent the door from closing.

He doesn't even protest, just keeps advancing further and further into the room, aware of having no escape but at the same time unable to repress his well-oiled mechanisms of self-preservation.

I back him against the far wall of the living room, bracing my arms so that my hands are at both sides of his face.

"Look at me. I beg you."

All stands still.

He takes a deep breath, quiet and defeated like an admission of guilt; he raises his eyes, and I slip out of my mind.

Because I recognize at once what I see there. Because it's the same thing I acknowledge in the mirror every night after wishing him goodnight.

I can only stare at him, trembling on the edge of perfection, tight as a tourniquet, my mouth open in amazement, only a breath dividing completion from destruction.

I will never know where I find the strength, the courage. It doesn't matter. It matters that I do.

"Patrick," I whisper, happiness already running in heady spurts through my veins like cocaine.

"God damn you, Waszowski" grits he through clenched teeth, and kisses me.

I should stop us, right now. I should have never hunted him down in the first place.

It should not happen like this, with our emotions enhanced and distorted by alcohol and jealousy.

Right.

Feel this man's lips on your skin, ravishing you, sucking your soul out of you with his fearful passion, while his agile fingers fumble with your belt, and tell me that you would stop, leave him there and go to sleep.

Yes, my answer exactly.

But then, a dark, guarded corner of my mind lights up and I realise: if not now, when? Yes, it is not the right moment, but probably there will never be one, and every occasion I have left unfulfilled was a lost opportunity because this just has to happen. Only now I can see it.

So I kiss him back, let myself feel how much I want it, how much I need it, and our free fall gathers momentum.

I cover his body with mine, crush him against the wall, while my hands find his hips and then go lower, to explore avidly his lithe form.

He sucks in a breath, fumbles with my clothes, then with his own, and finally takes me in the curve of his palm.

The touch of skin on skin is so unexpectedly powerful that I have to release his mouth for a moment, smash my face against the panel; I must regain some semblance of control if I want to prevent us from killing each other.

"Take me" he breathes, licking languidly the tender patch behind my earlobe.

"Sweet heaven, give us a minute I can't just -- "

"Yes you can" he growls, and with a clench of his abs he raises and curls his legs over my hips; smears my cock with his own spit, then begins to push down.

"Please" he pleads to the ceiling with half-lidded eyes, holding on with shivering hands to my shoulders.

So I rise to meet him, wrap my arms around his slender torso and move, and once I start I am not able to stop.

I peel away the last shred of uncertainty and then there's nothing but our warmth against the winter of the city, the silence of the room filled with the slick slide of flesh and the counter-melody of groans.

We mate desperately and needingly, oblivious to the world and ourselves; no one outside would ever understand, this desperate reaffirmation of life and lust, and the certainty fills me with pride and protectiveness and sheer joy.

This, this is what we are and it feels so good, so right; and it's only the beginning: everything before was just a pantomime, a premise to greater, brighter times.

The wave throws me down first; Patrick follows a few seconds later, undone by my shout and my final thrust, trying desperately to hold something fundamental back. His back arches in shattering spasms, his head thrown back so that I can't see his eyes.

Slowly, so slowly, we collapse to the floor, a rumpled tangle of clothes and legs and kisses.

In a final moment of weakness, I let my mind utterly free to wander: and I imagine myself growing old beside this impossible, irresistible man, living and laughing together in the streets of London until the time we will retire in some cottage on the edge of Scotland and spend our best days reading books and sipping wine and horse-riding and just being in each other's company without the need for words or fear of misunderstandings.

For this infinitesimal fraction of time outside reality, while he cannot think and I can hold him in my arms, the dream is so tangible and true that it feels almost like a concrete possibility.

But then he touches my shoulder, his fingers first flexing in absent-minded relaxation then squeezing with increasing awareness, and my stomach sinks with too well-known foreboding.

Fool. I should have known.

It is at this point that our lives splinter and time takes different, parallel courses.

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Patrick's POV

There he is, chatting up Lady Greville. He said he would rather stay at home tonight, yet he's basking in her interest and lavishing her with attentions. I shouldn't mind-- not my business, is it? I ought to go and discuss the list of my possible engagements for the next concert season with Mr. Lloyd in the next room. In a little while I'll go. What is she saying now... She's hiding behind her fan, that oversized lace monstrosity. She likes to play Carmen... I need another glass of hock and seltzer. What now: her hand on his arm... No! He's mine! Mine! I will... I can't.

I put down my glass before it slips my numb fingers, manage to remember just enough of my manners to lie to my host about a sudden malaise, and run out of the room, out of the building, out on the street before I dishonour myself and him by claiming my Jack from her clutches and from his own philandering.

The cold, damp air outside chills me to the bone. Or is it the chill of panic seizing me from within? A carriage clatters around the corner, answers my raised hand. Soon I'll be away from here, I'll be home, I'll close the door and curl up on the sofa and die, because there is nothing else I can do.

Soon...

But no, that's his step coming, he's followed me, and a layer of shame settles over my desperate jealousy. I should have known. I am in horrible pain, and it's all of my own doing, and I am stupid enough that I ruined at once my standing with Lord Greville, my career as a pianist, and his evening out. I don't care a damn for the Grevilles, or my career. But I can't stand the thought that I displeased him out of a childish pique, while here he comes, following me as he promised, my faithful, his cool low voice giving the address --my address-- to the cabman.

I am ashamed, and so I attack him. If you want to hide a leaf, plant a forest. The annoyance in his words as he asks me what my abrupt flight was about is enough to set me biting at him in short sharp retorts. No, I can't look at him and allow him to see my humiliation, so I deflect his attention by insulting his appearance.

"You look like a butler," I say, when what I really think is, "You look too good for Lady Greville... you look too good for me".

As soon as the carriage comes to a standstill in front of my door, I bolt out, jump the steps, hastily press and turn the key in the doorlatch, trying to leave him behind. But again he follows, damn him to hell, he follows and sticks a boot between the jamb and the door I'm trying to slam shut in his face. I'm sure I've hurt his foot, but still he won't leave me, he follows me inside, pressing me, until I turn to face him and still he advances, and I step back, and now my back is to the wall and he frames my face between his arms, and I am trapped. Perhaps I want to be.

"Look at me," he says, words quiet and clear.

I am his, and I can't but obey.

Now he will see. He will see me, and I will be ruined, and he with me.

"Patrick," he breathes, and I know at once that the worst has happened. He lights up, flooded with innocent joy, as though the orphan he is had been invited, for this once in his life, to a Christmas family dinner. I am his joy, and so I am his destruction. The plague devouring me is catching, he is damned, he is lost, we are lost.

Hell begins right here.

So I kiss him.

Fiercely I kiss him, ravenously, as I work on his belt, his trouser buttons, his coat and waistcoat buttons, his shirt's tiny buttons, the hard button of his collar, all those exasperating buttons lined up on a gentleman's outfit, and finally get to the string, blissfully easier to pull free, because I need to feel his skin on mine, and as soon as I have freed his belly and hips and he shudders at the cool air licking at him, I busy myself with my own clothes until the centre of us, the core of us, the place without words and without thoughts of us, is open and naked and touching.

I kiss him, I eat him up, and he kisses me back. He strokes my hips, then grasps me, pushing me harder up the wall, and I curl my spine and raise my legs to wrap them around his strong taut waist. I stretch a hand down and take him in hand...

He gasps, he trembles, and I moan in delight for the feel of him in my hand. He pulls back, trying to regain breath, but if he breathes he will come to his senses and leave, so,

"Take me," I growl.

"I can't!"

"Yes, you can," and quickly I spit on my hand already fragrant with his scent, and coat his prick, and guide him in.

This is forbidden, I'm stealing, I'm damned, but like a starving dog grabs a bone from the table even if it knows it will be whipped, I cannot stop. I push through pain, and I don't care. Pain is what I deserve, for wanting him, for daring to believe he's mine, for wanting this gemlike moment to last forever; pain is what he deserves, for daring... for daring to love me.

By force he is inside, filling me, and still it's not enough.

"Please," I pray, and may the Devil bless him, for he begins to move.

All thought leaves me. I slide beyond pain into a pleasure that dissolves me. I cease to be, I return to the not-space-not-time when I did not yet exist, and nothing had yet been cursed by ruin. I float there safe, neither alone nor in his company, no duty no honour no sin no damnation, until I hear him shout his pleasure and his spasm brings me back to here-and-now, the molecules of my self coalescing into unity only to be shattered into pieces by my own climax.

I feel us slipping down on the carpet, I feel his shoulder under my fingertips. I grasp him tight, and shame returns in a giant wave, sweeping me away and separating us.

What have I done? What have I done to him?

It is at this point that our lives splinter and time takes different, parallel courses.

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2. Separation

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Jack leaves (Jack's POV)

I look at him, I think I recognise once again what his eyes are telling me, and I retreat.

You idiotic, love-sick, touch-starved godchild, my brain shouts lashing out at me.

What demon possessed me?

I know, with a certainty that makes me shake with nausea, that the alcohol is not to blame, not even in the slightest.

Instincts are misleading. You should not think what you're feeling. And yet.

Here I am, my lips still tingling with the searing hunger of his kisses, my hands itching to touch him once more.

I pushed too far, overstepped my bounds, abused of privileges so arduously obtained, and now I have to make amends.

I stand on trembling legs, carelessly gather my clothes scattered on the floor around us, whisper "Forgive me" (but, God help me, without looking him in the eyes) and leave.

And while I step out of the black door with the polished brass knocker shaped like a feminine hand holding a ball, all that is left to me is the hope -- *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas* - that some day, one day we will manage to go back to our old, reassuring pantomime.

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Jack leaves (Patrick's POV)

It is too much. I am disassociating. I am reliving one evening in November, four days after he had moved in next door.

We meet for dinner, at my place as he's not yet found a cook. We talk about a hundred things on cigars and cognac-- G.B. Shaw's new play, whose title is rumoured to be The Devil's Disciple; the way Joseph Joachim plays the final fifteen notes in Mendelssohn's violin concert on his Cuypers violin; developments of immunology after the death of Louis Pasteur. We fall silent. He stands up to go, stretches his hand in a final goodnight. I want to catch his arms, pull him to me, kiss him fiercely. I don't, the sudden taste of tears up my nose.

The gaping precipice of hell was but one step ahead, lethal and luring. How can hell feel so much like heaven?

But hell it is, and now I've plunged us both in its eternal jaws.

I *raped* him.

I destroyed us.

Is there a way to turn time back on its axis, and stop myself before I do this to him?

There must be a way. There must be!

But no.

"Forgive me," he murmurs, and like that, he's gone.

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Patrick leaves (Jack's POV)

His slender hand grips my shoulder, one single time, and then lets go. And I feel like he has just pushed me down a cliff, or left me sinking in a lake without bottom nor border.

He's looking at me, his pupils reduced to pins so that everything is swallowed in blinding blue, and I feel - like a shiver I feel - that all he sees is his mother, dying because of a man who cared only about himself and his higher plans - pointing her noble, unforgiving finger at him - accusing him of daring to be free, if only for a moment.

He must think he has violated me somehow, me and the equilibrium he fought so hard to achieve in my presence.

So he touches my cheek, and before I can say anything to stop him, to correct his skewed assumptions, he leaves, taking his ghosts with him, the rustle of his clothes an ominous sound in the stillness of this unending night.

All that is left to me is wondering if I will ever see him again.

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Patrick leaves (Patrick's POV)

I roll on my side, curl on the carpet, my back to him, and violent dry sobs shake me. Is this the retribution for my guilt? is the Devil already at my heels?

I must go, I won't let the Devil take my Jack also. I rise, I stand, I pull my clothes back on my wretched frame in haste as best I can, I wrap my cape around myself, push my hat on my head, and I run out.

The door slams on Jack's blank face. I run.

When at last I feel breathless and slow down to a walk, I'm already deep into Bloomsbury, and a few reluctant snowflakes are beginning to fall. I stop for a moment in a dark corner off Woborn Square to button up, more to avoid the curiosity of any passers-by than to better shield myself against the cold.

I am shivering, but the chill comes from within.

Keeping my hands busy in tidying myself to a presentable state floats me nearer once again to that blessed state of nothingness in which not a single thing has any importance, and the only reality is made of night, snow, and the scent of London: coal, and steel, and bleak wet winter gardens.

I walk on, and the sight of the church of Christ the King calls at me like the summons from an angel. Gothic architecture, even this thirty years old neo-Gothic fake, always makes my heart leap in happiness... but not tonight. Tonight I feel like I am called to last judgment. Short has been my respite: the hard truth of facts has caught up with me, calls me back to the cold wet stone of this city of joys and of sins, and I must respond for my actions-- if not to God, then to myself.

Again I ask, *What have I done?* and my inner voice answers, *You have raped him.*

Have I? Was it rape if Jack, my Jack, gave himself to me willingly, oh so willingly, as he always does? I know him well, he never denies me anything... Surely taking what is freely offered is not rape?

But no, he *did* try to stop me, and I forced him.

I forced him!

Perhaps I hurt him.

Certainly I took no notice of his feelings, selfish bastard that I am, wrapped in my fit of jealousy and caring for nothing else than taking back what's mine, by violence if necessary.

Was it, was it necessary? Would he still have denied me if I had waited as he begged me to? I assume that I know him, but I don't... I do not.

Who is he, this man who had the magnificent nerve of saying to me "I come to serve"?

He is a mystery of nature, wonderful and secretive like the phases of the moon, or the way the sky clears up after a storm, or the excruciatingly sexual vibration of my diaphragm when I listen to Eugène Ysaÿe playing Paganini's *La campanella*. I do not *know* him; I recognize him -- God, I'd recognize him anywhere, I recognize everything of him, the scent of his cologne, the flower he will choose for his buttonhole, the way he says goodnight after an evening passed talking and smoking and drinking port in my library. I can tell which cigar butt has been between his lips before he discarded it in one of the Athenaeum's ashtrays -- but I don't know a damn of what he feels, or thinks, or *wants*, for Heaven's sake.

No, I can't call out to Heaven, not in front of this tall ornate rose window through which the faintest glimmer of candlelight transpires.

I am of Hell, I am in Hell, I am damned, and all I can hope is not to draw him down with me.
I must leave him.

I must forget that he is mine, because I cannot be his.

I will not steal him from his life in the light, a life of science and dedication to the health of his patients, and tie him to my life which is cursed, to this dark existence of mine, haunted by ghosts.

They own me, they possess me; I don't own myself, I'm not my own to give. How willingly would I...

No, no, I can't, I must leave, I must give him space to forget me. It's the only thing I can do to compensate in part the gift he made of himself. He never tried to hold me. I must let him go.

I turn my back to the church where I am unworthy to sit, and walk down Long Acre. The light snow has ceased, and an uncertain dawn is greying the sky. A sleepy starling chirps, and suddenly I want to see flowers. Life is too short, and I can't bear my pain, and I'm going to Hell-- no, I'm in Hell already, so it's as well that I get acquainted with my fellow convicts.

So beautiful, so innocent: "Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these".

But "God so clothes the grass, which is today in the field, and tomorrow is cast into the oven"¹.

I burn, they'll burn; I deserve it, they don't, but neither shall be saved.

The dusky bulk of Covent Garden raises in front of me. A cartman unloads baskets of hyacinths on the pavement on the other side of the road, and the fragrance wafts to me on the cold faint breeze.

I am tired to think.

I close my eyes, and I am ready to die.

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¹ *King James' Bible*, Luke, 12:27-28.

3. Needing, wanting, searching

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Jack leaves, Jack goes to Patrick (Jack's POV)

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I stand. I walk out. The heavy door closes on my back and sheer panic sets upon me, as if the quiet creaking of the hinges rotating upon themselves released a catch in my mind, and the significance of everything that happened this night rushes out, hitting me so hard that my lungs feel constricted.

What shall I do? What will become of me?

But, on second thought, who cares? The real question is (is it not), what will he do?

I can't think about it, not now. I feel tired. I need to sleep.

Dawn feels so unnatural and eerie, here in London. This silence is not a natural state, and it scares me. I want to see people, I need to hear voices. I need to know that, despite everything, life carries on.

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I can't let him go. I can't. There must be a way to make him accept me again. He must take me back, for both of our sakes.

Why all these doubts, then? What is this fear of failure?

I have always prided myself on the fact that I know him, I know him, like no-one else in this world. Even during all those years spent apart, the almost religious certainty that I had done the right thing, letting him leave, because I understood what he wanted, needed, better than he did himself, was the only thing that actually kept my mind functioning and my body moving along its pre-established patterns.

As long as I know that he is safe, I can take everything.

But now, to have this sense of doubt growing inside me, that maybe my actions have hurt him or worst, have contributed to his isolation... Oh Lord no, don't make me think about these things. It is too much. I'll go mad if I think about it. I can't. I can't.

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January ends and February arrives, and Spring feels closer. It is time to stand in the light again.

I'm engaged in my daily shaving routine, when I see something flicker in my reflected eyes. And it's that fateful night all over again, and Patrick is looking at me, and I know. I remember.

The hand holding the sharp blade hesitates, stops, and for today the lonely tuft of hair under my lower lip is spared.

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"Sir, I must protest! You know as well as I do that this is highly irregu - " By the time the attendant at the Diogenes Club manages to finish his protest I'm already in the reading room.²

²In Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Greek Interpreter* (1893), the Diogenes Club is described by Sherlock Holmes to Dr. John Watson as containing the "most unsociable and unclubbable men in town", with the further caveat that "no member is permitted to take the least notice of any other one. Save in the Strangers' Room, no talking is, under any circumstances, allowed, and three offences, if

Insolently ignoring the murderous glares addressed in my direction from the almost entirety of the occupants, I hastily scan the hall, searching for the only pair of eyes that could ever have any chance to kill me.

A-ha. There he is.

He most probably did not notice a thing, as his chair faces the wall opposite the entrance.

I cross the few feet between us, and lean over the back of the seat until my mouth almost brushes his hair.

(Contrary to the poor butler's beliefs, I'm totally able to recall the rules of this place, especially when they provide me with a perfect excuse for stealing a caress without suspicion.)

"Sir, I am mortified for interrupting your readings, but your presence is urgently requested elsewhere" I murmur.

I'm positive there would never be enough pounds in all the Empire to buy a photograph of his expression when he hears the words and realises who is speaking them.

He straightens from his languid sprawl with a jerk that could be described only as comical (yes, I'm talking about my Patrick!), almost dropping his journal to the floor; he turns around, and the catch in his breath is a sound sweeter than any greeting or melody.

A lifetime would not suffice to analyse the mercurial behaviour of his eyes. When he's angry or focused or simply in one of his meditative moods, they deepen until reaching the same soul-shattering, promising shade of the sky right before dawn. But on those rarest times when he allows himself to feel surprise or pleasure, they widen and brighten like a blooming bud and I can get a glimpse of the innocent child he once was and I never had the chance to meet.

This is the look he's bestowing upon me, and if I had any doubts left about the righteousness of my decision, by now they are sweet dew evaporating with the first rays of morning.

He opens his mouth but no sound comes out, so he soon closes it.

I press my forefinger against my lips in mute command, and wink towards the doors.

He nods, just once, and stands.

As soon as we are in the entrance hall, and so exempted from the vow of silence, the attendant approaches me again.

"Do not be so upset, Jeeves" I smile amiably, cutting him off, "I got what I came for and now I'm leaving."

And now we are out, standing on the footsteps, inhaling fog and evening and future.

A heartbeat passes, two.

Then, "I... I am afraid you have just gained me expulsion from one of London's most respectable clubs" he murmurs, staring at the tips of his polished boots, coat and hat hanging loosely from his hands.³

I can't help it. I start laughing, loud and unstoppable.

Because, no matter what happens to us, how badly we lash out at each other every time, in the end it is all reduced to this, is it not? To this fundamental clash of personalities and self-imposed barriers and unsolved repression of feelings. We are two little, pathetic hedgehogs, that cannot survive through the winter of this unrelenting existence without the other's presence, and yet cannot avoid hurting one another with their sharp spines.

After all this time, one would think we should have learned to accept it already; to stop floundering around so fearfully and go with the flow.

Who knows. Maybe we will get there, some day.

The newly-found prospect fills my heart with such bittersweet anticipation that I can almost taste it on my tongue, in the back of my throat, like the remnants of a bite of dark chocolate.

brought to the notice of the Committee, render the talker liable to expulsion". Sherlock's brother Mycroft is also mentioned as member and co-founder.

³One cannot help wondering at the circumstances of the former two offences committed by Patrick.

"And I am as much afraid that I feel no remorse about my actions" I reply at last, shrugging and slipping my hands in my trousers' pockets in a carefree pose refined through years of practice.

"You don't need this place of self-indulgent misanthropy anymore" I add, looking at him. "From now on, whenever you feel that your disgust with this world is too much to contain, you will come to me."

"It should prove to be an easy task for you, my dear personal Atlas."

"Now, is that supposed to be a compliment? No, don't answer, it is of no importance. What I wanted to say is... Shall we go home?", and I offer him my elbow.

"I... I had assumed we were waiting for a cab".

Great Scott, my appearance must have shocked him indeed. Since when has he become so obliging?

"A daily dose of deambulation is good for the circulation, you know. Besides," and I make sure he's seeing through the mask as I say these next words "this way you can sneak away whenever you want."

He smiles, slowly but confidently; grabs my forearm, his touch sliding sure and strong over the fabric of my coat.

"Checkmate" he whispers, probably more to himself than me.

We walk.

::

And now we are standing in my study, the sixty-year old pendulum clock on my desk ticking away the seconds and our fading uncertainties.

We face each other. Our eyes meet.

This is the moment for truth.

::

Jack leaves, Jack goes to Patrick (Patrick's POV)

I have no trust in Mother Nature. I look around, and what I see is a slaughterhouse. But for this one time I had reason to be thankful.

I willed my heart to stop, there in the cold morning, surrounded by the scent of hyacinths-- but I didn't die.

And then, one day when Spring felt just around the corner, Jack came to look for me.

Boldly he came to me in the darkest hole I knew, where I believed myself safe within the circle of six dozen silent men and a baker's dozen wardens of doors. But he pushed through them all, and whispered in my ear, and called me out, out of the closed room smelling of old leather armchairs and fresh smoke of cigars, out in the open air where life and love are a permanent clear and present danger, and I couldn't but follow.

Even to the scaffold I'd follow him, and that's how it felt, as he pulled on my forearm and asked me to walk with him.

This, this is a death I die willingly.

::

Patrick leaves, Jack goes to Patrick (Jack's POV)

I don't know for how long I remain seated on that holy spot, my legs stretched in front of me, the panel a cool balm against my back and nape.

The ceiling has never felt so foreign and suffocating.

Minutes go by and turn into hours, hours become seconds. And I wait, for something that does not come.

Eventually I get up, straighten my clothes, try to tidy up the mess we have made with the cushions and the chairs hampering us in our frantic rush to the wall.

The door slides shut behind me without a sound and suddenly I am swallowed by darkness.

::

The days go by.

The dullness of routine leaves me plenty of time to spend in company of stinging memories and erratic elucubrations.

I think about the first days of our friendship, when we were students at Portora.

I think about how we met for the first time, and how hard it was to slide underneath his armour. I am still convinced that what kept me pestering, teasing, begging for every smallest concession, was the awareness -so strong to be almost subliminal - that despite his feigned exasperation, his sullen retorts, his resentful demeanour, he *wanted* my company; he did not know how to ask, that was all. I knew it, from the few shared smiles, from the silences that stretched comfortably between us when we were tired, from the glances full of candid curiosity he couldn't help sneaking in my direction when he thought I was not paying attention.

He was so used to be ignored as an individual, to be considered a living legacy without ambitions or desires of his own, that when he found himself to be the centre of someone else's attention, he had no idea of which rules to follow. In this regard, I fear he will always be an outcast, like me. But while I, since I was a little child, had to face strangers and learn how to manipulate the inner contradictions of this society, he simply never knew how to live in the outside world.

The epiphany almost makes me drop the match I'm using to lighten a much-needed cigar.

May the Devil crush my soul under his claws. Why did it take me so long to see it?

There are some things that never change.

He still does not know.

He will never come back to me.

So, I have no other choice. It is up to me to go and find him.

::

The housemaid was not easy to corrupt (in all these months, she must have got at least a glimpse of what it means to disregard Patrick's direct orders) but after an inordinate amounts of compliments to her family brooch and a couple of sovereigns, I finally know where we will play our final battle against denial and refusal.

"The Diogenes Club, my man," I shout to the coachman, as I jump inside the cab, skipping the iron step.

February has just begun; the brisk evening air tickles my senses and my mind. Please, wait for me. Just a little longer.

::

Patrick leaves, Jack goes to Patrick (Patrick's pov)

I didn't die.

It's never so easy.

When the din and the coarse voices of the marketplace became unbearable, I slowly made my way home through the shabby maze of Soho and then out in the open again along Piccadilly. Belgravia was silent in the pearly light of early morning, as a pale sunlight made its way to kiss the sleeping houses amid a thin veil of dampness. The day promised to clear out into the cold crystal which is so rare to London in winter.

I cut through Hyde Park, not willing to meet my fellow humans.

A magpie crowed, then plunged on a field mouse. *Mors tua, vita mea*. Such is the fate of those who have been born under the sun...

When I arrived at my front door I stood on the step. The street was dead silent. No noise came from the inside, no light shone through the windows. The maid would not knock at my bedroom with tea for another half hour.

Would Jack still be here?

Was his faith stronger than my betrayal?

Like a man who climbs the scaffold, I turned the key in the latch.

The house was empty.

Of Jack, not a trace remained in the sitting room, only --or was it my imagination?-- the faintest trace of his cologne.

I thought of him asleep in his bedroom next door, the dear face serene in slumber; I thought of him pacing his study, fueled by anger; I thought of him waiting for a train at Victoria, leaving, leaving me...

No! I could stand to know him happy without me, I could even stand to have him furious at me, but I couldn't stand to think of him leaving.

I broke down.

I am ashamed at the effects the depth of my desperation had on me. For the next five or six days I must have appeared like a madman to the housekeeper who brought me food thrice a day in my study. I didn't appear as anything to anybody else, as I barricaded myself in there and only came out once, in the dead of night.

I closed my eyes in the familiar darkness, walked blind to the sitting room, found with unerring instinct the place where we had made love --no, where I had raped him, and I pressed my hands on the wall and stood there, arms tight with tension, shaken by silent sobs, until the first light began to filter through the drawn curtains.

::

The very violence of emotion means it spends itself sooner or later. When a week had passed, I had come back to my senses, for what they're worth. I resumed a more or less normal life. I slept in my bed, I got up in the morning, I dressed, I had breakfast, I went out.

I felt dead.

I didn't try to have news about Jack. He is by nature a man of habits, and I merely had to avoid the hours when I knew he would be going out or returning home in order not to see him. I was finding that death can be quite a drawn-out process.

January went by, February began. By the second week in the month, the weather began to show some uncertain signs of an early spring.

It was then, when the first bold snowdrops bored through the thin patches of old snow around the Serpentine, that it happened.

Jack found me.

Boldly he came to me in the darkest hole I knew, where I believed myself safe within the circle of six dozen silent men and a baker's dozen wardens of doors. But he pushed through them all, and whispered in my ear, and called me out, out of the closed room smelling of old leather armchairs and fresh smoke of cigars, out in the open air where life and love are a permanent clear and present danger, and I couldn't but follow.

Even to the scaffold I'd follow him, and that's how it felt, as he pulled on my forearm and asked me to walk with him.

This, this is a death I die willingly.

::

Jack leaves, Patrick goes to Jack (Jack's pov)

So I stand and walk out and go - where? This place doesn't feel like home at all.

I feel tired. I want to sleep, but I can't. There's something in my head - heavy and sticky, like a lingering nightmare that doesn't want to go away and makes it impossible for me to catch my breath.

::

I don't want to go out. He's out there, somewhere, and we could run into each other, however improbable that might be. I can't take the chance.

I will stay here forever, and I won't ever be a bother again.

::

My gaze brushes the bottle of morphine resting inside my bag. So easy. It would be so easy.

The syringe is writhing and singing, until the notes become moans of agony.

And what about my scalpel, so agile and lethal in the palm of my hand?

I wonder if one could manage to choke himself to death just using a stethoscope.

I tear my eyes away, close the bag as a wave of nausea threatens to become something more serious.

Brandy. Candles. Cigarette. Books.

I feel hot. I throw the window open, strip away my waistcoat, my shirt, until the sick dampness of the industrial night licks at my stomach and my chest.

Too much fog for the Moon to shine through.

The residual coal floating above the roofs swarms into my nose and crouches down inside my lungs.

Any moment now and it will launch its final attack.

::

I wonder how does it feel, to have a pair of wings.

Instead, I keep sinking.

Acrid water floods my stomach and my lungs.

I can't get enough oxygen.

I'm drawing away from the surface, more and more.

::

All I wanted was to keep him safe, to be his shield.

Rape was my parting gift.

I think I'm going mad.

::

Someone should conduct a research on the therapeutic merits of tears.

When was it the last time I cried, besides this one?

In all probability, I was still a child.

Such a waste.

::

Life goes on. It is enough, as long as he's part of it.

I hope that something pure can last.

::

I don't love if I don't love him.

I am not if he doesn't look at me.

Please let this be only a dream.

::

...

::

Then the unimaginable happens.

He comes to me.

And for the first time in weeks, I wake up.

::

Jack leaves, Patrick goes to Jack (Patrick's POV)

Just like that, he was gone.

I had done the unthinkable, and he had left me.

"Forgive me," he had said, and he had touched my cheek.

How like him, asking forgiveness for a sin all of my own. Giving me the last gift of a touch, when what I feel is I'm too soiled to touch.

Unwelcome the sun rose that morning. I wanted to plunge myself in darkness and silence, I wanted to dissolve into this coal-stained fog wrapping wintertime London as a funeral shroud. But no, my heart beat on too loud, pushing waves of red blood through my veins and pounding into my aching head. This wretched paradox of life, compelling me to eat, drink, sleep, perform bodily functions, while all I want is die. Life holding open the doors of my mind, my body and my soul to the demons which possess me, and which demand of me that I perform other, unspeakable bodily functions...

I should despise them and myself, when I orgasm with his name on my lips, but I can't and I don't, because I am soiled, but he's sacred to me.

Yes, he is sacred, and I will shout it out to Heaven and I will fight God Himself for his immortal soul, even as I tumble into Hell. My Jack. My beloved. Whoever will have his heart (mine misses a beat at the thought), he will always be my beloved.

And so it is that I cannot make myself leave.

I cannot stand the idea of being physically far from him, not anymore, not again.

My whole time is filled with him.

I spy him from behind my drawn curtains when he goes out of an early morning-- no tarrying in bed for him. I watch as he comes home at tea-time. I count the times when he only returns after dinner, sometimes late at night. I try to divine his state of mind by the way he folds his cape around his left shoulder, the gesture with which he checks his watch. I try to guess whose company he's kept, and where. If he... Whether he...

I cannot.

I cannot.

How I hate him when I think about these things.

I hate him!

I hate his calm, his common sense, his patience with me, his faith which came so far as to let me lead him into the deadly danger of love, and thence even further, to the brink of the abyss where he felt, he knew!, I didn't want to pull him after me.

And so he left.

He knows me better than I know myself, and how I hate him for that...

...but I don't want to, because allowing myself to hate him for being the man he is would be my final damnation. *Our* final damnation.

I must leave him be.

I should leave.

But I don't.

I watch.

*Seven pairs of steel shoes I have worn out
as I have wandered in search of you;
seven steel walking sticks I have worn out
on which I leaned in my fateful search;
seven flasks I have filled up with my tears,
seven long years of the most bitter tears;
you do not wake at my desperate call,
and the cock crows, and you are sleeping still.⁴*

I am a prisoner in a cruel fairy tale, and still I can't get free, and my heart dries out day by day in my guilt and my want. They wage their battle, Guilt and Want, for seven by seven days, seven weeks of bleakness, until...

Until Want defeats Guilt.

⁴ My translation from GIOSUÈ CARDUCCI, *Davanti San Guido* (1874), lines 93-100.

There is no crowing of cocks heard in London on a morning, but it is the break of dawn, a mild clear day in the second week of February, when I carefully choose one perfect marigold from the bunch of flowers in the hall, slide the stem into my buttonhole, tuck it under the lapel, and step out of the front door.

Marigold is for repentance.

I walk seven steps down the street and knock on Jack's door.

::

Patrick leaves, Patrick goes to Jack (Jack's POV)

The ceiling remains unanswering.

I stand. I leave.

Walking the space dividing our lodgings, I think I can smell hyacinths, a delicate trail coming from a distance.

The waiting begins.

::

I was looking for something to protect.

I wanted to be what the parents I never had could not have been for me.

Home. Shelter. Support.

I wanted someone to need me, trust me, seek me.

I wanted to belong to someone.

So, in a way, it was only natural that, when I caught those bloody ruffians thrashing that blue-eyed student, my first thought was "I don't want something like this to ever happen to him again."

Unfortunately, many other brawls followed after that first one.

But at least, I was there with him, catching as many fists as I could. I supposed (I hoped) that it was better than nothing.

::

Maybe it is an indication of how deranged I am already, that I do not wonder at all about my own impassivity in all this disaster.

But is it really impassivity? Or rather, it is the natural response my mind cannot refuse to provide, just like the tide obeys the lunar phases?

Man is defined by his choices.

This devotion... feels too right to be questioned.

::

Then the unimaginable happens.

He comes to me.

And for the first time in weeks, I wake up.

::

Patrick leaves, Patrick goes to Jack (Patrick's POV)

I died then, and stayed dead for the rest of that cursed winter.

Someone should write about how terrible it would be, always winter and never Christmas.⁵

I had ruined our last Christmas, together with all my Christmases forever... And terrible it was, a brittle chill, that no fire could melt, piercing my veins.

But then winter got old.

The housemaid answers, her hand busy straightening her apron as she does a quick curtsy. I am known for a generous tipper, when the fancy takes me.

"Is Mr. Waszowski at home?"

⁵ Curiously, a discussion in these very terms about the psychological properties of wintertime can be found in CLIVE S. LEWIS, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950).

"Yes, Sir, but..."

"Would you please announce me? Despite the early hour, I am sure he will be agreeable to see me."

I am not sure at all that he will. The only sure thing is that I must see him, I must see him now, by goodwill or by force. She climbs the stairs. I stand in the hall and try not to fidget. I catch a glimpse of myself in the long mirror reflecting the vase of calla lilies on the console. A long thin line of worry, a hint of madness in the eyes. Who could ever want me? Who could ever love me? My very qualities condemn me, because I waste them. Yet I want him, although I am not worth, and regret nothing. I came here to ask his forgiveness, but I am a liar. I do not repent...

His steps down the stair.

My heart skips a beat.

I cannot raise my eyes to look at him.

I feel him coming nearer, I see his hand extended, then retracted-- he will not touch me.

"Come," he says, and his voice is imperceptibly tense under his even tone, "let's talk in the study."

He precedes me, I follow, beyond the heavy double door, through the small dark antechamber, past the thick velvet curtains draped two deep, and into the large room lined with books, the silent room where he spends so much of his time and which is just now filled with the hopeful light of this almost-spring.

We stand on the Agra carpet where hunters on horseback pierce tigers with their spears, marking them with fierce flowers of gushing blood. We face each other. Our eyes meet.

This is the moment for truth.

::

::

::

4. Reunion: Tearing down the barrier, one layer at a time

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Jack's POV

He is here. He is actually here.

I do not let myself believe it until the final step.

The sight of him, physically present in my house, makes my heart pound so wildly that I fear for a stroke.

There cannot be any errors on my part. A wounded tiger flees at the smallest sign of danger.

I extend my hand to touch him, to reassure myself that this is no ghost, then I think better of it and stop. Because I realise that, even if he were a ghost, I'd want him to stay. This is the level of insanity I have reached.

"Come" I murmur then, afraid that even my voice could startle him, and I lead him to the study.

I switch on the small lamp on my bureau, and turn to face him.

This is the moment for truth.

::

Now that we are enveloped in the safety of this room, I let myself look at him more closely.

He's been punishing himself, as I feared.

I know it from the weak shade of his skin --so unlike its usual healthy rose-- from his parched lips, from the lock of hair angrily caressing his forehead.

I can feel guilt settling in the pit of my stomach like a nasty glob of slime. Then my eyes focus on the lapel of his jacket.

"What does this mean?" I whisper, brushing the marigold he wears.

He hesitates, a tormented tremor shaking his fine frame.

"I - I... it is a... I wanted to -"

I silence him with a wave of the hand.

This is intolerable. This is simply, completely wrong. My heart bleeds and howls at his pointless misery. This man was made to be worshipped and loved and adored with every step he takes; to be witness of his own self-nihilism instead, and to know that *I* am the cause - it is too much. I can't allow it.

It is this new resolution that gives me the boldness I need to speak the next words.

"Although I suspect we are not contemplating the same issue" I declare, "I accept your apology."

For a moment, he actually gapes at me. Then something shifts in his mind, and a spark of the usual fire starts flickering again in those formidable eyes.

"That's it?" he snaps at last. "After everything that happened I am absolved by a few words of rite?"

"I do not care about apologies, Patrick."

"But I do!" he nearly shouts, his hands closed in fists, exposing himself like he never did.

The admission hangs in the air between us, palpitating.

I can see that he regrets it. But I do not. This excruciating foreplay has been going on for far too long. It's time to move on, together.

"Patrick, I know."

"Then why are you so accommodating? Why do you act like you don't understand that *I* can't let it go, just like that?"

"Why -- what can't you let go, exactly? The fact that we haven't set eyes on each other for seven weeks and a few hours -- or the act itself? Do you find me so disgusting?"

"No!" he cries, and I hear panic seeping through his clear voice. "No, do not ever think something like that! It - it is me. It is always me."

Usually at this point, I yield. Usually at this point, I perceive I've come just too close to that door in his heart he keeps so tightly shut; I can feel the horror hiding behind it, the memories and the vicious suggestions, an ache so subtle and pervasive that I fear by now it is an integral part of his own personality.

Usually I tell myself that, all things considered, what right do I actually have to knock on that door? And I retreat.

But now everything is different. By kissing me and asking me to make love to him, he gave me the right --consciously or not-- and may God spit me in the eye if I will pull back tonight.

"Why must you always take all the blame?", I insist mercilessly then, pressing my advantage, "Are you truly convinced that I followed you out of pity? That it would have happened, had I not met you halfway? I'm not a masochist, Patrick. I'm in love with you."

He gasps.

I back slightly, so that as little as two feet divide us, and open my arms.

"It is not stealing, when it is willingly offered" I say, and I rest my case.

Silence descends upon us. However, it doesn't feel like the disorienting emptiness that follows after the end of a symphony; rather, it is charged with potential and promise, like the interval dividing two movements.

Without ever breaking eye contact, he takes a step forward, then another, until our chins brush and our mouths graze, so that we inhale each other's breath.

All I see is chestnut eyebrows and sapphire irises and large pupils glinting with challenge.

He kisses me, an intangible graze at first, that soon becomes a sensuous glide of skin against skin.

His hands search my cheeks, fingers tracing my sideburns and the shape of my ears, while my own remain limp along my sides.

I part my lips with a contented sigh, and immediately his tongue darts forward, invading me, searching for its twin.

They meet, and it's an ignition of lust so strong that I can feel it burning and sliding down my throat, warmer and headier than a shot of scotch.

I succeed in temporarily gaining the upper hand and move inside him, licking those prominent, maddening lateral incisors of his, tasting his palate; I capture his rebellious tongue, and suck.

The soft groan this earns me hits me right between the legs.

I have to grab his hips, and grind our hard groins together, and thrust, just once.

My action elicits a snarl I had never heard coming from him before: without ever releasing my lips he clutches my collar and starts pushing me back insistently, manoeuvring me until the back of my knees bump against something and I collapse on my blessedly large sofa.

I can barely catch my breath, and a glimpse of trousers and boots falling on the floor, and then in a flash of movement he's ravishing me again, tearing flesh and clothes; he straddles me, taking my weeping prick and guiding it unerringly against his tight, dry muscle.

"For the love of --- stop!" I panic, grabbing his quivering thighs. "What's the matter with you? I don't want to hurt you again."

He falters, seemingly regaining lucidity for a moment; then slips fluidly to his knees, a wicked half-smirk playing on his lips, and takes me in his mouth.

My hips surge forward of their own volition and I have to bite down on my hand, hard enough that I can taste flesh stinging on my tongue, to prevent myself from climaxing then and there.

He sucks me deep and hard, laving and sampling with single-minded precision, his skill digging a hole in the pit of my stomach.

For some searing, exquisite minutes of torture, he seems to lose himself completely in the task.

And just when I am about to cross the line of no return, he releases me, a thin string of saliva dripping obscenely from his mouth; climbs again on top of me, spreads himself wide and joins us, this time really and completely.

We both freeze, twin moans of surprise and fulfillment escaping our control. I know the penetration was painful, no matter how well he thinks he's hiding it: I read it in the shaking of muscles, the tightness of his mouth.

But then I look at him, take in his closed eyes and half-buttoned shirt, and my sex twitches, enveloped in his heat.

Escaping all control, my fingers start caressing his cool, soft hips, growing bolder and bolder with each stroke, and now they are insinuating into the crevice between his full buttocks; lower and lower they go, until they reach the pulsing centre of our joining to trace my own shape and his pulsing opening, stretched wide and hot around me.

He gasps weakly at the contact, trembling in my arms like the sea caressed by summer breeze.

One fingertip timidly asking for entrance is what makes him capitulate at last. "For all the saints - " he pants, squeezing my shoulders. "What is a gentleman required to do to get sodded?"

He's right. This is not the moment for decadent shows of seduction. But there will be time for those as well, and the certainty is a warm pressure resting in a corner of my heart.

"Alright" I sigh, and wrap my arms around his torso and roll us over, so that he lies supine on the sofa and I am all over him.

I start moving, frantic and unrestrained, and each thrust makes the fire in my loins rage higher and harder.

"Please, oh please" he prays, and I suspect he doesn't really know what he's asking for.

I rotate my hips, searching for the right angulation, and finally start hitting that sweet, sweet spot inside of him.

Once, twice, thrice, and then he is shouting and writhing and exploding, baptized by his own essence.

His muscles contract convulsively around me, forcing me to follow him, and we are dying together, at last.

Minutes go by.

We lift our heads at exactly the same time, excitement still faintly throbbing in the veins. Doubt dances for endless seconds in our gazes. But this is not a time for doubts: I close my eyes, raise my hand, and begin to trace blindly the contours of his unforgettable face.

I start from the roots of his silken hair, then slide down to his broad forehead. The well-defined arch of his eyebrow is a curve of learning and discovery, leading to his straight nose and then lower, down to skim over his rich lips.

I can perceive that at some point, his eyes fall close as well.

My fingertips are still resting on his lower lip when he prepares to speak. But I forestall him.

"Do you want to stay?" I ask, opening my eyes again.

"... Do you want it?" he counters, after a pause.

"More than anything else in my life."

He looks at me, the memory contained in those words reawakening something powerful and undeniable, and I know --deep down, where mistakes and misunderstandings could never reach-- that everything is going to be alright. Not now, most probably, and not even in a week or a month, but soon. Very soon. Soon enough.

He smiles, bows his head to hide it, and punches me in the forearm.

"You know, you're becoming somehow monotonous in your answers."

"It is hardly my fault, if you keep asking always the same question. You know, sometimes you are a complete idiot."

"Must be your constant proximity."

"I can leave any time, if my presence is not deemed worth."

"You would never dare" and his hand still resting on my shoulder grips just that little bit tighter.

I draw a breath, inhale his scent of dry green musk, exhale, and feel his breath on my face at the same time, like a mingling of souls.

"That night -- it was not your first time" I blurt out after a moment, out of nowhere.

He looks at me with an expression that I can't decipher.

"... Neither was yours."

"No."

I feel him smile against my neck.

"Good."

"... Hm?"

"So you can appreciate the remarkable quality leap."

I smile back.

"... Indeed."

I wake up to find him sitting in the armchair besides the window.

It takes my dazed brain a while to realise that he is still rather naked.

He just sits there, seemingly oblivious to my hungry stare and the rest of the world, left leg bent over the right, sex quietly spent against his plane stomach, one loosely-fisted hand delicately pressed against pursed lips, while the morning twilight kisses his bones and sinews, bathing him in light blue and tangerine.

His eyes dart in my direction at the rustle of skin against fabric as I straighten to sit on the sofa, then turn back to the window, growing distant with what I manage to identify as remembrance.

"When I was eight, or maybe nine years old," he sighs at last, without tearing his eyes away from sleeping London, "I asked my mother, 'what if I were not my father's son?'"

He pauses.

"At first, she merely looked at me, like she had a sudden stranger in front of her. Then she smiled, the sweetest and scariest smile I had ever seen, and said, 'What kind of question is that? After all, you can't be anything else'".

"Do you still believe her?"

"I thought it was impossible for me not to. I was alone, and desperation felt so natural. I believed that was the only way things were supposed to be."

"But now?" I insist.

He takes a deep breath.

"But now" he resumes, exhaling and leaning backwards against the cushions, "now, there is you, and I don't feel so certain anymore."

Something in my chest lightens up, rises higher and higher and finally explodes like fireworks.

I have to stand then, walk towards him, kneel at his feet.

"Why, I think that is the most beautiful compliment you have ever paid me" I grin cheekily, while desperately suppressing my urge to climb on the roof and shout my joy for Her Majesty and all the England to hear.

"But doubts are not enough, Jack. I - I still do not know how to be someone else."

"How can you not see it, my dearest friend? You *already* are. Your father is dead, while the Detective is alive. Even the Colonel had to face his sins. Patrick, you are free."

He smiles, a bitter twist of lips made in equal measure of hope and disbelief.

"You always make everything appear so easy. How do you do it, Jack?", and he turns to look at me, fragile like I have never seen him.

"It is because I know you. I know you, therefore I trust you."

"Would you lend me some of this trust?" he asks after a small pause, with eyes dangerously bright.

"Of course. All that is mine is also yours," I answer, taking his hand and pressing it against my heart.

"Unfortunately, this means that you will have to stand by my side as long and as often as possible" he adds.

"Is it a proposal?"

"I would read it more as a threat, but after all, who am I to make you change your mind?"

Only the best and bravest man I know. But in this regard, he is actually right. So I merely smile, and rest my head on his thigh.

We watch dawn break over the city together.

Patrick's POV

I had prayed to God. I had prayed to the Devil. I had prayed to every Goddess to turn their face to us and save us. I don't know who listened, but now I am here, in very heart of his house as though I also was in the very heart of him, and I know someone has heard me, for salvation or perdition. I don't know and I don't care.

What I cannot do for the life of me is speak, now that we are face to face in his house after seven weeks of purgatory.

His fingers reach for the marigold in my lapel. He asks me what it means. This is the moment I feared and desired, when I would be granted audience to tell him my shame and grief, and -- once again!-- I fail. I stutter, I fall silent. Yet he forgives me.

He declares me forgiven, like that, just for my knocking at his door. No other effort of mine, no penance, like my fault was not screaming in his face.

And as the selfish monster that I am, I cannot accept it. I fight, I fight to be allowed a measure of suffering as price of what I did.

It's so hard to be forgiven freely.

But, "Do you find me so disgusting?" he asks, and-- oh, I realise how I wronged him, even as I tried to make my amends. I used to see the world in black and white: my blackest heart, his fine soul white as light. Yet now he wants me to see the colours, infinite shades of brilliance reflecting between us.

He talks of meeting me halfway.

He spells it loud and clear: "I am in love with you."

He offers himself, for the past and the future, his arms wide open in welcome for the burning, dangerous flame of my love and the sharp cutting blade of my wickedness.

And I go to him.

If he's so strong and so brave and so proud that he wants me, oh how I want him, and he will stand the shockwave, for me, for us.

Still he doesn't grab me.

He leaves me free to turn my back on him, pliant to my whims, even as he has pledged himself.

I touch my lips to his once, and it feels like touching the leaves, delicate as lace, of the *Mimosa pudica* my mother grew in her conservatory. I feel I am despoiling something virginal and precious, this trust of his --in himself, in me-- doomed to be broken so soon. So I don't stop, I deepen the kiss, I hold his face between my hands as I search for his hot tongue with mine. He doesn't pull back. He rises to meet me, with his tongue, his mouth and his groin.

I am undone.

I manhandle him to the sofa, divest us both of what garments are in our way, and go for what I want, because I can't wait one moment longer.

He stops me. Bless his clear head and his gentle heart, he stops me before I make myself guilty of the same offense again. I can only grin at how I feel curbed and held in check and

safe in his hands. Safe from myself, at last, for a while. This really is heaven. Some invisible, taut wire which kept me painfully tense breaks in me now, and relief floods me. He will not let me do wrong. Indeed he will watch upon me, upon us both, and keep us safe...

What can I do to thank him? And to celebrate this rebirth, this irrevocably short lapse of time before sin catches up again with us?

I take him in my mouth and I do my damndest to bring him into the same heaven in which I am now.

Then I impale myself on him.

I'd have thought he would accept my offer, even as I make it seem a demand. But no, he's always been the stronger man between us. He waits, still inside me while I shiver under the slide of his hands on me, gentle, amazing fingers, until I can't stand it anymore and burst out: "For all the saints, what is a gentleman required to do to get sodded?"

This shocks him into action at last. He abandons every pretence of not being the one in control (and when, oh when has he not been in control?), rolls us around, and by the Devil's tailtip, he brandishes sin like a sword and goes into battle next to me. In me, for a handful of moments that feel like forever.

As the grace of a beech tree is in the curve of the lower branches where they part from the trunk, so his is in the curve of his armpits and his raised limbs.

When we come back from the other side of bliss and oblivion, the first sensation I receive is his touch. Eyes close, like he wants to concentrate all his being into his sensitive fingertips, he touches my face all over, making it anew with different contours all of his own.

I don't want to return to the grey light of common days. I have no faith in the future, no affection for the past: I only want to close my eyes and stop here, in this spacetime forever. The world as I know it can't exist without him, and his gentle strength and wisdom. The light of a new season is trying to break out, and Jack is as comfortable in the light as I am at ease in the darkness.

I try to tell him; I want to find a language of joy, an inhuman tongue unheard-of, to tell him that nothing will ever be so good as **now**, and that I want myself to finish here.

Maybe I'll burst out in birdsong...

But it is he who speaks, and the Queen's English is only tolerable in my ears because it is he who speaks it.

"Do you want to stay?" he asks.

"Yes!" I want to answer. Stay, and never be alive and wracked by pain anymore.

"Do *you* want it?" I say instead. Leaving him space. Denying my greed for him, because after what he's already given me, what else could I make myself believe I could receive?

"More than anything else in my life," he answers.

The swell of happiness is too much: should I allow it to flood me, I would be transformed into something else, unknown, a different monster. I am dangerous, all the more so when I am happy-- disaster follows my joy like a wolf stalks its prey. I don't want him to have my joy, I don't want him to even see it, because with it come destruction and death, tightly knit in a hard poisonous ball which I never want him to come near, although it sits at the core of me like a curse. I must hold it back, hidden, safe inside, and keep him at a distance, although he bleeds at the gate as much as I am bleeding. He must not have it.

So I stifle it, and I wear my sour mask once again, this *fin de siècle* persona of the gentleman who waits for Last Judgment because everything else he's already seen, and who doesn't really care for love.

It hurts. I can see I'm hurting him --now that he's still unguarded-- with my denial of something fundamental, although he can't begin to imagine what it may be. But I can see he knows that I am refusing him access to the innermost part of myself, and although it wounds him, he accepts my need to distance myself that much so that I'll be able to stay and not run away.

Again.

I speak of a quality leap.

I hope he understands what I am really trying to say.

I believe he does.

He has fallen asleep, sweetly and deeply, his head hanging back on top of the velvet armrest, his long throat exposed. I count the slow strong beats of his heart in the pulse of his jugular vein.

I look at him for a long time. He is my peace.

But peace is always short-lived with me.

I watch, and I feel my heart silently cracking and breaking.

What can I offer to this man who offers me the whole of himself?

Only madness, and sin, and an irrevocable fall into the same slavery that binds me.

He doesn't understand. He can't understand. He won't!

Suddenly, I can't stand his sight anymore. I stand (he sighs and murmurs something in his sleep), I step aside, I turn his armchair to the window, and I sit there, watching the morning flood over London in rose-pink light.

*Earth has not anything to show more fair;
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This city now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning...*

Can this pure light from heaven, bathing me from the half-closed curtains, change me into something worth of his love?

*...silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie
Open unto the fields and to the sky,
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.*

Or will this moment of bliss be swept aside by time, as soon as the thrum and noise and bustle of the city will gather momentum for another wicked day?

*Never did Sun more beautifully steep
In its first splendour, valley, rock or hill;
never saw I, never felt, a calm so deep.*

Oh if only I could wrap this peace around me like a mantle, or even like a funeral shroud, and rest inside it forever...

*Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.⁶*

But he whose mighty, kind heart was lying still, asleep on the sofa, now wakes up, he stands, he turns to look at me. So beautiful he is, half-naked, just now back from the soft hazed territory of dreams, and so far he looks yet from the harsh planes and surfaces of conventional wisdom, that on impulse, like a lover would leave a freshly plucked sprig of sweetbriar on a lover's doorstep, I tell him something nobody now alive has ever known.

Sweetbriar is for simplicity.

I tell him of my wild desire to be someone else. Not my father's son, but a free man of my own, even as I was only eight at the time.

Even if this would have condemned me to a deeper isolation than has been my share until now.

I tell him of my hopelessness. I tell him of my doubt, now that I have been allowed in his presence again. Of my absurd dream that I may still become someone else, and --this I don't spell in words-- his.

He comes to me, he kneels, and it looks as though he's trying to curl around his happiness like a jar of warm honey he doesn't want to break.

"Patrick, you are free," he says.

I grab at his words. I was drowning, and he took my hand. I am not gentle. I hold him too tight, and dig my nails into his flesh, because I want to live, to live for him, and I want him to know.

I am desperate.

I ask for his help.

I beg.

"Of course," he answers, and he takes my hand in his, and presses it to his heart.

Tick, tock goes his heart.

Tick, tock goes the pendulum on his desk.

Tock, ta-tack, goes my own heart, skipping a beat and leaping in my throat.

So I threaten him.

"You will have to stand by my side as long and as often as possible," I say.

He doesn't answer.

He smiles.

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⁶ WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, *Upon Westminster Bridge* (1802).