**The Gilded Cage**

by **BeautifulFiction**

**Summary**

In a world where Omegas are the property of the elite Alphas, locked away and treasured by those wealthy enough to buy them, John never questioned his flatmate's secondary gender. Sherlock Holmes was an Alpha through-and-through.

Wasn't he?

A chance discovery turns the world on its head, and John is left grappling to come to terms with Sherlock's past as events conspire to threaten their future.

**Notes**

A/N: Warnings: Omegaverse related sexual scenes and biology, case-related violence, scenes of sexual threat, domestic abuse, domestic violence, implied past drug use. Dub-con is kind of implicit within the Omegaverse, and will be referenced and addressed, as will the concept of sexual consent within a marriage-type institution. There are also discussions of contraceptive rights which fall heavily on the pro-choice side of the argument.
It should be noted that none of these potentially triggering themes occur in John and Sherlock's dynamic.
John shouldered aside the door to 221B Baker Street, breathing out a sigh of relief as he closed away the outside world. His day seemed to have gone on forever thanks to a conference in central London about reproductive health and surgery. Not that it was of much use to him, but attendance was compulsory to maintain his license. Therefore he had endured it, reminding himself more than once that most of it was relevant to a GP, at least to some extent.

'Have fun?' Sherlock's laconic question greeted him. John glanced over to see him at his laptop, his fingers dancing across the keyboard and his eyes glued to the screen.

'It was a waste of time. Useless.' John muttered, heading for the kitchen and making a noise of surprise when he saw the takeaway on the table. 'How long's this been here?'

Silence followed, but John was used to it. Sometimes it took Sherlock a while to extract himself from his train of thought. He flicked on the kettle, grabbing two mugs without thinking and going through the motions of making some tea. He was just adding milk when Sherlock emerged from whatever he was doing, blinking at John as if he had barely realised he'd come home.

'Chinese?' John prompted, gesturing to the cartons. 'Days old and toxic, or edible?'

'I got it a couple of hours ago. I was hungry.'

'So you've eaten?' John rolled his eyes, realising the question was stupid. None of the packages were open and the chopsticks lay unsplit on the kitchen table. 'No, of course not. I suppose you got distracted.'

Sherlock stretched in his seat, lifting his arms above his head in a gesture that made his body seem to go on forever, all lithe grace and elegant length. Like fine art or a good sunset, it was hard not to appreciate Sherlock's aesthetic, even if his personality sometimes left a lot to be desired. He was dressed, which suggested he had probably been out at least once, though God knew where. Now his jacket shifted on his shoulders and his shirt buttons strained as he hummed a vague affirmative.

'Why useless?' He got to his feet, strolling across the room and wrinkling his nose as John began opening packages and examined the microwave for anything unsavoury. 'It's not like you to disparage the merits of medical knowledge.'

'Too much generic Omega focus.' John shook his head. 'As if anyone in the NHS ever claps eyes on them. Let's face it, if one of them needs a doctor, they'll be seeing the best of the best, and that's not going to be on the government's bill, is it?' He shoved a couple of cartons in the microwave and pressed the buttons, starting it up. 'Even if it was, it's not like they could visit an Alpha GP like me.'

'True.' He passed John some chopsticks, his eyes narrowed in a familiar deductive manner as he no doubt read all the new data John had accumulated about his person since he left that morning. 'It bothers you.'

For someone so intent on the minutiae of everyone's existence, Sherlock treated gender, both primary and secondary, as irrelevant, and John shrugged as he tried to explain. 'There's a whole section of society that the general populace never gets to see. They're segregated before they present, take part in arranged bonds soon after and spend the rest of their lives in the home of whichever Alpha was wealthy or important enough to win them as a prize.' He shook his head, wondering why he expected Sherlock to empathise with this when he could not bring himself to show outward concern
for even the most brutally murdered victims. 'I've never seen one, except at Bart's, and even then he was a corpse donated to medical science.'

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at that, probably aware of how unusual John's fleeting glimpse of that rare body had been. 'I suppose few people have an Omega parent these days. Yours were both Betas,' he said a moment later – a statement, not a question. 'They were fortunate to have both you and Harry with only a three year age gap. They must have –'

'Stop!' John shook his head, practically dropping the Lo-Mein into Sherlock's hands. The conception rate of a Beta couple was notoriously low, and he did not need Sherlock commenting on his parents' sexual frequency. He had been trying not to think about that ever since finding out about how sex worked. 'Just – don't finish that sentence.'

Sherlock chuckled as John smiled, quickly altering the course of the conversation. 'I don't see the point of focussing on Omega reproductive health at a general assembly, that's all. The biology is –' He shook his head, knowing he didn't need to explain it to Sherlock. '– frankly miraculous, and it's interesting theory, but ninety-eight percent of the doctors there will never put any of it into practice. They just won't get the chance.'

'There must have been something you can use? Surely as a GP you get sexual queries?'

'Betas needing help to conceive. Young Alphas worried that they'll hurt their definitely-not-Omega lovers... STDs and straightforward Beta pregnancies. That's it.'

'Alpha-specific physiology only responds to an Omega in heat. That's basic biology. Have none of your patients attended school?' Sherlock asked, taking his meal and settling on the back of the couch, his feet on the seat and his elbows propped on his knees as John slumped in his armchair.

'Oh, come on. It doesn't matter what they tell you in a classroom. Every Alpha is going to wonder about it. You can't tell me it never crossed your mind.'

Sherlock shook his head. 'I can honestly say it's never been a personal concern. Unless faced with an Omega, an Alpha's nodal ridge or ciliac rise remains unchanged. There's no knot in the male or penile extrusion in the female. The tissue might as well be an appendix.'

John grunted in agreement, eating in silence as his tired thoughts went around in circles. The truth was, most people forgot Omegas even existed. People knew of them, of course, but they were rare, something valuable and precious to be coveted and hidden. These days it wasn't about fighting to the death; it was about having the money. Alphas of the aristocracy and the elite frequently paid millions to an Omega's family for the right to bond, regardless of what the Omega might want, and it was that which John found nauseating.

An Omega would go to the highest bidder, end of story, and the Alphas who were left? Well, they struggled through like everyone else, looking for love, possibly having a kid or two with a Beta and, for the most part, forgetting all about knots and bonds.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the front door, and he glanced over as Sherlock lifted his head like a dog catching a scent, alert and curious with a hint of enthusiasm in his eyes. Lestrade then; he never looked so keen to see anyone else, even a client. A second later, John's suspicion was confirmed as the DI's gravelly voice drifted upwards, accompanied by his cigarettes-coffee-and-muscovado smell as it permeated Baker Street and over-rode Mrs Hudson's lighter, Beta fragrance of bluebells.

The DI's footsteps were quick on the stairs, and Sherlock was already reaching for his coat when he
knocked on the door and pushed his way inside. Greg looked tired, with deep shadows and puffy bags under his eyes. His hair was dishevelled, his tie lay askew, and his smile was strained at its edges as John got to his feet.

'Need your help,' he said by way of greeting. 'We've got something – I – well actually I'm not sure what we've got, but we needed it solved five minutes before we even found it. If the press get wind of this…'

Sherlock cocked his head, no doubt reading everything off of Greg in the space of a heartbeat. 'An Omega victim. You wouldn't look so pale for anything else. Not even a child.' He glanced at John, who had flinched in repulsed surprise at the deduction. 'Perhaps that conference won't be so useless after all, John. Where is it? We'll take a taxi.'

'Hyde Road,' Greg supplied, putting his hands on his hips and ducking his head before looking at John. 'I'd suggest you stay behind, but the whole situation appears sort of – medical. I hope to God it's not what it looks like.'

John nodded, grabbing his jacket as Sherlock trotted down the stairs, calling to Mrs Hudson and stepping out onto the pavement to hail a cab. 'Anything I need to be aware of?' he asked, watching Greg's face as they followed Sherlock out. 'You look –'

'Sick?' The DI nodded, swallowing tightly as if he were still fighting nausea. 'It's the stench. Most of my team aren't bothered; they can't detect anything. They're all Betas except for one tech, who knew what it was before we'd even clapped eyes on it. His retch brought him to his knees half a street away, and I wasn't much better. A dead Omega –'

'I know.' John swallowed. He'd told Sherlock about the body wheeled out for the benefit of his class at Bart's. It was a rare treat for students and staff alike, yet the Alphas, about a quarter of those present, couldn't stand to be in a well-ventilated room with it. The stink had embedded itself in his memory. Sickly sweet rot, for all that the flesh was preserved. It was pestilence and misery, greasy and choking. He had stood in the shower for an hour afterwards, and still the odour had clung to him. 'Thanks for the warning.'

'Cover your nose with your sleeve on the approach. You can have a mask at the scene.'

'John!' Sherlock shifted impatiently by a waiting cab, standing back to let him climb in first as Lestrade went to his own vehicle. A moment later they were on their way, and John fidgeted, trying to ignore the churning concern that bubbled through his stomach.

Not for the first time, he wished he'd been a Beta like his parents and Harry. Normally, he was happy with his lot in life, but there were times when his own biochemistry worked against him. Never had it been more apparent than when that dead Omega's fragrance had caused such a visceral reaction. It wasn't just the repulsion, but the horror that went with it. A deep, putrescent certainty that somehow he had failed to protect something vital. Never mind that he had never met the person, never shared a bond with him and didn't even know his name. It still mattered to John on some illogical level that he was dead.

It made him wonder what it would be like to scent one who was in heat. There were rumours, legends almost. Words like irresistible and maddening were whispered like a pornographic fantasy, but he had never experienced it first-hand. Few people had. Alphas cropped up in the general population at random, but only an Omega could birth an Omega child, and these days that invariably meant they were from posh families: the landed gentry and the like. There were never any cases of accidental or spontaneous presentation in an uncontrolled environment; that kind of thing happened in films, not real life.
About the only thing anyone could agree on was that if an Alpha was in the company of an Omega in heat, they would know it. Their noses were too sensitive to deceive, and John rarely had trouble identifying anyone’s secondary gender. He knew Lestrade was an Alpha just from sitting in his car and that the cab driver was a Beta by the sweeter, vanilla fragrance that permeated the atmosphere. There wasn’t any need to ask when the truth was written in the airborne chemicals around them.

Of course, Sherlock wouldn’t be himself if he weren’t the exception to that rule. When John had limped into the lab at Bart’s with Mike that first time after Afghanistan, he had to admit he had been too overwhelmed by the man in front of him to notice any scent. Sherlock wasn’t classically beautiful, but his presence jolted through John’s entire body, stirring up interest in a way he had begun to wonder if he would ever feel again. Then he had been pinned by those diamond eyes, sharp and intelligent, and Sherlock had seen everything.

“Afghanistan or Iraq?”

The question had shocked him, causing him to drag in one deep breath through his nose, and the resulting uncertainty over what he could sense had left him almost incapable of answering. There were lab chemicals and the strange, artificial edge to the air treatment system, Mike’s ashy Beta scent half-covered by cologne and then... something.

Not a bad perfume, but more the absence of one. The truth was that, even now, unless Sherlock stood particularly close or they were within their own territory of Baker Street, John could barely smell him at all. His first thought had been Unpresented, but the doctor in him had written that off almost immediately. Sherlock was physically developed, whereas those who didn’t mature sexually retained childlike, androgynous physiques. With large hands, stunning, obvious facial structure and his looming height, there was no way Sherlock fit the bill.

His next thought had been a Beta, but then Sherlock had moved and blown that idea out of the water. Too much confidence and swagger, too much presence and certainty. No Beta John had ever met before could prowl like that or command the attention of a room so thoroughly. That left one viable option: Alpha.

More than once, John had considered just asking, but in the end it didn’t matter. Sherlock was, beyond everything else, himself – the single most fascinating person John had come across in his life. John never saw him with a lover, and generally, Sherlock seemed as disinterested in sex as he did in gender, though John was fairly sure it wasn’t just him who felt the hard, sharp pull of attraction when their eyes met and lingered for a little too long.

The self-deprecating smile slid off John's face, his distracting train of thought stuttering to a halt as something vile curled in his nostrils and the back of his mouth. It was just a hint, but he quickly pressed the backs of his fingers to his nose to try block out the odour as every revolution of the taxi’s wheels brought them closer to the crime scene.

By the time Sherlock climbed out of the cab, John had given up and crammed his sleeve so hard against his mouth that he could barely breathe. Every instinct was screaming at him to get out, and he caught sight of the Alpha lab tech Lestrade had mentioned, sitting on the pavement upwind with his head between his knees as he took steadying breaths.

‘How can you stand it?’ John asked Sherlock, squinting at him in the encroaching dusk. The amber street lights cast his face into strange shadows, but John noticed that his skin seemed bloodless, even if he wasn’t desperately trying to block out the fragrance.

A frown pleated Sherlock's brow as Lestrade trotted over. 'Mind over matter,' he said at last, watching Greg give a treated cloth mask, much like that a surgeon would wear, to John before
securing one over his own face. It was only when Sherlock held out an imperious hand that Greg seemed to remember he would need one too and relinquished a third, talking all the while.

'Someone working at a nearby warehouse reported it. The place is meant to be derelict, but, well...' Lestrade shrugged, motioning for them to follow. John ducked under the police tape as Sherlock held it up, inspecting the scene. Anderson and his team were standing to one side, looking petulant, but there was an undertone of curiosity to their restlessness. Just because Betas were not attracted to Omegas, it did not make the sight of one, even a dead one, any less fascinating.

Stepping through the door, John felt his blood run cold, leaving him clammy and frigid as he took in the room beyond. It was a makeshift operating theatre, crude and dim. Various bloody tools lay abandoned as if people had simply turned tail and fled, abandoning the body on the bed. Her hospital gown was stained and the incision in her lower abdomen gaped like the split skin of a ripe fruit.

'Please tell me my first impression is wrong?' Greg sounded more than just sick. There was a thick vein of grief under his words. The same thing clenched like a vice around John's heart, and he swallowed, forcing himself to listen as Sherlock spoke.

'Chop shop,' he said succinctly. 'Profitable to the extreme for all involved, most of the time.' With a flick of his fingers, he indicated the surgeon's tools. 'High-grade equipment for the extraction; they were after the supra-ovarian structure, I imagine.'

'What's that?' Greg asked, looking at John, who could at least find some distraction in the facts.

'All Omega women have it. It's the glandular network that sustains the health of their eggs. It's part of the reason Alpha-Omega couples enjoy such a high conception rate,' he explained. 'Rather than a store of ovum that has been in the woman's ovaries since birth, like you get in a Beta, these are constantly constructed and replenished. It means she would be fertile for longer than a Beta counterpart, and she has a greater chance of twins or triplets.' John drew in a breath and coughed, wishing he could retreat further, but his back was already pressed against the wall. 'Omega males have a similar system, but it's harder to extract. An Omega man is unlikely to survive the procedure.'

'It's not like she did so well out of it,' Anderson said from the doorway where he and Donovan were peering over Lestrade's shoulder. 'So what was in it for her?'

'Money,' Sherlock replied, putting on some latex gloves and stepping towards the body, his fingers tentatively parting the incision to reveal the bloody mess inside.

'Why would she need that?' Donovan demanded. 'She might not be that pretty, but she was still an Omega. Her Alpha would have given her everything she wanted.' Sherlock's snort of derision was surprisingly subtle, but it still reached the sergeant's ears. 'Oh, what? You expect me to feel sorry for some girl who's had the world land in her lap just because she can pop out a kid every nine months like clockwork?' Sarcasm dripped from her next words. 'Imagine how awful that must be.'

'Donovan...' Lestrade's voice held a warning, but it was nothing compared to lethal, silken darkness of Sherlock's as he began to speak.

'Yes, how awful to have no choice in the matter. To be seen as merely a means of producing children and sold into a bond she had no desire to form.' He brushed the woman's hair back from her shoulder and turned her head, revealing the circular wound of an Alpha's bite. It was still raw and healing, a week old at most. Only Omegas bore a mark like that. Thanks to the chemicals in an Alpha's spit, it would scar as it healed: a symbol to show she belonged to someone. For as long as her Alpha lived, the rough circle of teeth marks would remain there for the world to see.
'She'll be little more than property, and any beneficial treatment she received was not to ensure her happiness, but to allow her Alpha to prove themselves to their peers. She could not vote or be employed, and her only method of acquiring self-sufficiency would be to sell what society views as her primary asset.' He looked back at the surgical slice in her stomach. 'She thought the risk was worth it, not only that of being caught, but that of losing her life as well. Imagine how desperate she must have been.'

John had forgotten to breathe. Sherlock's words were not impassioned, but they did not need to be. He laid each sentence down as fact, unassailable, and John was reminded that Sherlock was far from middle class. For all he knew, Sherlock had more experience of Omegas than anyone else here. One of his parents could have been one; he certainly sounded like he was speaking from experience, rather than repeating rumours.

'So, she agreed to this?' Greg asked, swearing as Sherlock nodded his head. 'Then what?'

'She would probably have made an effort to leave the country or blend in as a different gender if she could. Her Alpha would be unlikely to pursue her, since her desertion would be considered a poor reflection on them; they would not want to admit it. Better that people thought her dead than realised she had escaped.'

'Who's buying these things?' Anderson asked, his face wrinkled in confusion. 'I mean, if there wasn't any demand for it, then it wouldn't be worth doing, but who's going to want her parts? It's not like it's a matter of life and death: a liver or something.'

John blinked, rubbing the back of his hand across his brow. 'Wassinger syndrome. Sometimes an Omega's supra-ovarian structure atrophies, and they're rendered sterile. Transplant's risky and has a low survival rate, but most Alphas will pursue that option if they find out their Omega is barren.'

'Unless they have the funds to purchase another Omega with whom to bond,' Sherlock added. 'Then the infertile one is just a broken toy to be ignored.' He quirked an eyebrow and looked at Sally. 'Now why would anyone want to escape a life like that?'

She didn't respond, pursing her lips and looking away. John was gratified to notice the belligerent shame on her features, even though she couldn't be blamed for her assumptions. They were shared by most of the population, after all. Even John hadn't been aware of most of what Sherlock had said.

'John, look at this.'

Reluctantly, he peeled himself away from the wall and approached Sherlock's side, pressing the mask tight against his face with one hand as he examined the details. The woman was young, eighteen perhaps, small-breasted and long-limbed. Her face was plain and slack, and her brown hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail. Yet all that faded into insignificance when compared to the putrid aroma emanating from her skin. It made his stomach give a threatening roll, and a rough noise caught in his throat.

'I need you to take a look at the surgical site.' Sherlock sounded genuinely apologetic as he removed his latex gloves and passed a fresh pair to John before he continued, 'Your knowledge of anatomy is more intricate than mine, but she appears to be missing more than just the supra-ovarian structure. If I hold the mask tight against your nose, can you manage?'

He tried to speak, but the taste of bile at the back of his throat warned against it. Clearly Sherlock's approach was working. He seemed, if not immune, then at least better off than both John and Greg.

With a nod, John held his breath and dropped his hand, tugging on the gloves as Sherlock kept his
promise. He pulled the treated mask as taut as possible over John's face, his fingers warm through the cheap cloth. The next, tentative breath John drew in was better – still greasy and vile – but improved by the proximity of Sherlock's scent. It eased some of the jangling discomfort that ricocheted through John's frame and allowed him to focus on what he was doing.

'She's still warm,' he croaked as he slipped his fingers into the incision. Core body temperature could take hours to cool, but if it wasn't for the lack of pulse, he could almost believe she was still alive: that he was just a surgeon and that she would wake up and smile.

'Omegas produce necrotonin – the scent hormone that's making you nauseous – from within sixty seconds of brain death. An Alpha found her?' That question was directed at Greg, who replied in a cracked voice.

'Yeah. Time of death's estimated at, what, three hours ago now?'

'Two,' Anderson replied primly. 'Should he really be doing that? Isn't that the pathologist's job?'

'If you want to wait days for some kind of answer to this case, then yes.' Sherlock's curt retort was met with silence, which only came to an end when John pulled back.

'They've taken the whole thing. The entire reproductive system. Done in a hurry, too.'

'A spur of the moment decision, probably made when she died on the table.'

'It's hard to tell, but from the blood in the cavity I'd say they went too deep – possibly nicked the mesenteric artery.' John shrugged, peeling off the gloves and leaving them at the side of the body. Sherlock's palm was still over the mask, muffling his words, and John carefully replaced his grasp, letting his thankful smile crinkle his eyes – the only way Sherlock would notice its existence. 'It's an amateurish mistake.'

'Yet the skill required to successfully remove what they wanted intact is not inconsiderable.' Sherlock stepped back from the bedside, and John could see that precise attention growing wider, taking in the room, the tools and the data available. 'Most likely a skilled surgeon had assistance from students: perhaps with the offer of a cut of the pay. Check hospitals, this equipment had to come from somewhere, and whoever took it had to be high enough on the staff that it was not immediately missed.'

'What about her?' Greg asked from where he leant against the threshold. 'What can you tell me?'

Sherlock rolled his shoulders, the information pouring forth. 'Eighteen is late to bond for a female Omega. It suggests delayed presentation; she may have been under the care of a reproductive specialist. The size of her bond-bite demonstrates her Alpha was a woman. It's a week old, still healing, but relatively shallow. The Alpha's considerably senior with a weaker jaw, and this is unlikely to be her first bonding.'

'What happened to the others?' John's question curled like smoke in the air, and he watched something complex shift around Sherlock's eyes, impossible to read with half his face still covered by the mask.

'The bond is young, yet already the Omega has taken this step.' He gestured to the bed. 'I imagine any other Omegas bound to the same Alpha came to the same decision. Though whether they shared her fate or made their escape is another matter.' He cleared his throat, turning his back and heading for the doorway. 'Conjecture, of course, but the assumptions are logical. Look through the bonding registries for the last week. It's likely her Alpha's home is local. Omegas aren't permitted a driving
license, and Alphas tend not to provide a cash allowance in the hopes of preventing independent behaviour. The Omega shouldn't be that hard to identify.' He hesitated, glancing over at Greg. 'Call me if you find any more.'

'Where are you going?' Greg demanded, raising his voice as Sherlock led John away.

'To get rid of this smell.' He peeled off the mask and handed it to a disgruntled Donovan, who only glared when John apologised as he did the same thing.

The mild air outside was a relief after the humid closeness of the murder scene, but the fragrance remained, forcing John to take in shallow snatches of evening air through his mouth as he hurried to keep up. 'Aren't we taking a taxi?'

'No.' Sherlock's phone was in his grasp, the glow casting a waxy light over his face as his fingers skimmed the screen. 'The chemicals in car exhaust react with necrotonin, stripping it from skin and clothing. If we walk back to Baker Street, we won't stink up the flat.'

'It feels like it's stuck to the inside of my nose,' John complained, rubbing at his face before shoving his hands in his pockets, grateful that at least it wasn't raining. He matched Sherlock's pace, trying to suppress the buzz of questions that hummed in his mind, like the string section of an orchestra gone mad. Normally, Sherlock picked up on his discomfort and challenged it, but this time he was too intent on whatever he was looking for on his mobile, and when he took an abrupt right turn, John frowned in confusion.

'Short cut?'

'Diversion,' Sherlock replied, turning his phone around to show John the bonding announcement in the Times. 'Teresa Karndine bonded to Annaliese Ducart. Look at the financial value of the transaction.' He passed the device to John, who pursed his lips at the price listed at the bottom of the text. He could work a dozen lifetimes and never see that much.

'That's a lot of money.'

'Teresa Karndine is the owner of Karndine International, one of the leading manufacturers of car components in the world. An exceptionally wealthy woman; she's had two other Omegas that I know of. Both of whom she had stripped from her dynasty when they were proven barren by doctors on her own payroll.'

'So – what happened to them?'

'Chances are they had already fled at that point and undergone surgery, successful or not. Karndine would have protected herself from the stigma of an Omega escaping her possession by lying about their fertility.'

Sherlock's voice was steady and calm, as if he were talking about the weather while John's stomach cramped at the world that was being revealed so brutally before his eyes. 'The Ducart family are prominent jewellers, hence the price on their Omega daughter. Karndine paid for the name. It's possible she owned Ducart for years, but a bond can only be placed once presentation occurs. What do you want to bet that Karndine made Annaliese see one of the best reproductive specialists in the country in the hopes of hurrying along her maturation?'

'Christ,' John murmured as he tried to take it all in. 'Is this really what it's like? Omegas treated like things? How come no one's tried to stop it?'

'Who creates the legislation?' Sherlock shrugged, shaking his head. 'The powerful Alphas have been
at the top of society for centuries, first through strength and then through money. Every law they make is done to keep the Omegas out of the main populace and under their control.' He tightened his grip on his phone, looking down at it thoughtfully. 'For the most part, it works. An unbound Omega isn't safe. By arranging a bond to a strong, wealthy Alpha, they're protected. In many cases, Donovan's assessment is correct. They are – should be – treated like treasures: valuable and precious. They are respected and cared for. Sometimes there is even something like love.'

John watched the twist of Sherlock's face, vaguely repulsed and dubious, as if he questioned the existence of such a sentiment. 'However, occasionally the Alphas are cruel or indifferent.' There was a hint of something in his voice, a hairline fracture that John could almost convince himself was a figment of his imagination. 'In that situation, there aren't many options left open to an Omega but to endure, or do something desperate.'

'How do you know?' The question slipped through his lips – a silken strand that he could not pull back. Somehow it felt like taking the first step into forbidden territory, entering the convoluted arena of sex and Sherlock's past that John had never before dared to breach.

'Did you –?' God, he had wondered earlier if one of Sherlock's parents had been one of the rare few, but he had not considered the next obvious step. Had there been an Omega to whom Sherlock had bound? The thought made his stomach lurch, hard and hurting, and he wished he could take his words back. He would rather remain oblivious.

Too late now.

'There were always rumours,' Sherlock said at last. 'My childhood was full of it. Tit-for-tat; who owed whom, who owned whom. My parents' bond was arranged.' His voice became flat: a closure of conversation while the words themselves made John want to reach out and offer comfort. 'Relatively speaking, it was a happy one, but it was still far from ideal.'

'So you and Mycroft don't have – I mean you're not...'

'Are you going to actually finish a sentence?' Sherlock spoke with his usual smug tones, which was just as well. John was certain that if he had implied to any other eligible Alpha that they might have had an Omega and somehow lost them, he'd be carrying his teeth home in his hands. Yet now he looked closer, something darkly amused shadowed Sherlock's gaze, something that made John's spine tense. 'Mycroft's too busy running the country, and I have better things to do with my time. Like finding the doctor responsible for the death of Ms Ducart.'

He gestured to the building in front of them, all shining glass and smooth stone. It looked discreet, private and medical in the evening gloom, and John glanced over at Sherlock. 'You think Annaliese Ducart went here?'

'Almost certainly. Teresa Karndine can afford to throw money at her problems. The Avery Institute is the leading centre of reproductive medicine. I imagine if we find Ducart's doctor, we find the man behind the chop shop, or at least one who could point us to the colleague who is.'

John cocked his head, his gaze sweeping over the dim plate-glass panes. 'It looks like it's shut.'

'Clinic hours will be brief.' Sherlock crooked his finger, leading the way through a small patch of landscaped, urban garden and around the back. The building seemed to go on forever, losing its modern aesthetic as it fell into the tangled twist of hospitals everywhere. There were disposal bins and back doors, narrow windows and the pervasive scent of antiseptic coming from the air treatment vents.
John followed wordlessly, glancing around for CCTV as Sherlock extracted his picks and set to work on a ground floor office door. 'Won't a place like this have some kind of security?'

'Motion sensors,' Sherlock muttered, jerking his head to indicate the hub on the ceiling, visible through the window to the side of the door. 'As well as an access point alarm system, but it's deactivated. Someone's still here.'

'Maybe there's a ward with staff? Do they operate here?'

Sherlock shook his head, licking his lips as the lock clicked open and the door swung outward on oiled hinges. 'This is an administrative building with laboratory facilities. They conduct surgery at the Wellington.'

John sucked in a breath at the mention of one of London's most prestigious private hospitals. 'I guess they're not so keen on Omega organ removal, or whoever did this would have done it in their operating room. Think that's where the surgeon got the equipment?'

'It's possible. Of course, he could have bought some of it himself considering his illegal side-line. No doubt he would have made the money back in a month or two if he made a habit of offering his patients this kind of treatment.' Sherlock slipped his leather gloves on and idly investigated the desk before glancing in John's direction with a frown. 'Besides, the punishment for being caught enabling this kind of surgery is life imprisonment. Even the Wellington's reputation would not save it from closure if it was found that such things were taking place within their walls.'

John shifted his shoulders, hating his own ignorance. 'I've heard rumours, but not for years. Mostly it was while I was doing my training. A few people I knew were approached to conduct...’ He shrugged. 'Unspecified surgery. We all pretty much assumed it was black-market organ harvesting.'

'That's precisely what this is in the eyes of the law. It doesn't matter if the Omega volunteered for the procedure. Legally, they're not considered capable of making that choice for themselves.'

John clenched his jaw. That, he had known. Omegas and children alike were considered unable to make medical decisions. For kids, that changed when they were twelve. Omegas would go their whole lives without the final say in their own treatment. 'It's not right.'

'Going to do something about it?' Sherlock's question wasn't accusatory, but the eyebrow he raised was mocking. 'No, I thought not. Neither's anyone else. Some boats aren't worth rocking. Most people are content to leave things as they are.'

'Including you?'

Sherlock did not reply as he led the way out into the corridor, looking along its length before turning left. John followed with a sigh, modulating each footstep so it would not echo. He kept waiting for a shout of alarm or any sign of life, but the whole place seemed eerily quiet.

Finally, Sherlock paused, squinting through the narrow glass panel in a wooden door. Light spilled forth from behind its pane, clerical and harsh, and John could just make out the lab equipment from where he peered over Sherlock’s shoulder. It looked almost identical to Bart’s, and it took only a moment for John to realise Sherlock had seen a computer, still turned on, unlike the one in the office.

'Sherlock!' he hissed as the door was eased aside and that pale gaze swept the interior. 'For God’s sake; you said yourself there was someone still in the building.'

'Yes, and whoever it is, they're probably our killer.' The grin Sherlock threw in John's direction was pure exhilaration. 'The Omega reproductive structure is fragile. It needs to be treated for transit and
transplant, and this lab is the ideal place to do it.' He gestured to the pipettes on the side and bottles of solution left open – used in a hurry. 'It looks like we just missed them.'

He whirled around in front of the computer, his fingers clattering over the keyboard. There was no password protection, the previous user still being logged in, and John watched as Sherlock began to absorb the information on the screen. 'They've not exactly covered their tracks in here. What if they come back to clean up?'

'I'm counting on it.' Sherlock drew in a breath – the sharp, euphoric sound of success catching in his throat. 'Doctor Kirkpatrick was treating Ms Ducart for delayed presentation. He was her surgeon for more than two years prior to her reaching sexual maturity nine days ago.' He made a disgruntled noise. 'Tell me, what kind of diagnostic regimen would require weekly visits to a specialist?'

'Monitoring an emerging cycle, perhaps?' John shrugged.

'For eighteen months?' Sherlock shook his head, rolling his eyes as if something intriguing had resolved itself into the banal. 'Dull. They were lovers. They planned to run away together. His salary and funds from the organ sale would assist with supporting a new life elsewhere.'

'So why wait?' John asked, abandoning his nervous sentry duty to glance at Sherlock. 'Why not leave before that Alpha bound her?'

'This way, her family get to keep the money Karndine paid for her. If the bond never took place, she could get it back. The only person to lose, in theory, would be Karndine herself.'

'Until it went wrong.' He watched Sherlock hit another button, and the thrum and click of the printer filled the room, shocking after the peace of their hushed conversation. Quickly, he snatched free the pages, rolling his eyes at the tiny text as it kept coming. 'Christ, Sherlock. Do you really need all this?'

'It could be –'

Abruptly, Sherlock's head lifted, looking towards another exit from the lab. John did not bother to try and catch whatever Sherlock had heard. Instead, every muscle braced, taut and ready to fight. He gave a brief, longing thought to his gun, still locked away out of Sherlock's reach in Baker Street, but there was no time for regrets now.

The door swung open, and a man froze on the threshold, his face slack as he stared at them. Slender hands clenched fitfully, slipping into his pockets, and John saw his eyes dart to the open bottles on the bench.

'Doctor Kirkpatrick.' Sherlock straightened up, his body language relaxed and confident as Kirkpatrick – middle-aged and balding, his eyes red-rimmed – flinched. 'We're here to talk to you about your patient, Ms Ducart.'

John would have been happy to bet that the name would cause the doctor to either break down or do a runner. Yet tepid brown eyes turned cold, and thin lips pulled back over a snarl as the Beta strode forward, limbs rigid and furious. 'I don't know who you think you are, but if that bitch Karndine sent you I'll...'

'You'll what?' Sherlock cocked his head in enquiry, and John fought not to clench his jaw. No amount of lectures in self-preservation ever seemed to get through to him, and just because this doctor was not obviously armed, it didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. 'I think you've done enough damage for one day, don't you? An unfortunate accident, though I doubt the courts will see it that
Something ugly twitched across the doctor's face, his weak chin shuddering as he blinked, though whether the threatening tears were sorrow or fury it was impossible to tell. 'Don't. I don't know what you're implying –'

Sherlock flicked his fingers in the direction of the man's hands. 'You conducted illegal removal of an Omega's reproductive system less than three hours ago. Nervous sweat caused caking of the talc from the gloves between your fingers. There's blood by your temple. Unexpected arterial spray. More on the collar of your shirt. No doubt it will be a match for Ms Ducart.'

He drew a breath, and John saw the moment Sherlock decided to lie, falsifying his conclusions in the hopes of having the perpetrator correct him and prove his theories. 'I assume without the organs you've already dispatched to the waiting client, she was worthless to you.'

'No!'

John lunged the moment he saw the break in the doctor's eyes, but he was too slow. The scalpel pulled from his pocket slashed in a brutal, vicious arc, making Sherlock stagger back beneath the onslaught. John did not hesitate as he threw his full weight at the surgeon, bearing him down and holding him there, sobbing and insensate against the linoleum. One burst of rage, and the fight was gone from Kirkpatrick. Every breath sounded like a heave as John pinned him, hearing the wail of sirens as he desperately sought out Sherlock.

'You all right?' A growl trembled in his voice, feral to his ears, and he tried to put a lid on the surge of restless adrenaline that throbbed through his body. For a minute, his mind was suffused with self-blame. He should have been quicker, moved faster, neutralised the threat before Kirkpatrick could lay a finger on Sherlock. Rational thought had little to do with it, and he bit his lip to choke back furious, fretful words of reproof as Sherlock pulled his fingers away, examining the blood staining his gloves.

'Clumsy. He missed anything of importance.' Sherlock frowned down at the Kirkpatrick. John expected nothing more than his usual disdain or puzzlement at what sentiment could bring, but when he looked closer he could see a flicker of something else, shadowed and secretive.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor made them look up, and John took a deep breath as the police barged in, rapidly taking control of the situation. Judging by the lack of surprise on Sherlock's face, he had texted Greg his suspicions about the Avery Institute before beaking in; his one concession. Lestrade knew them too well to ignore the information by now. No doubt he and his men had come running.

'An hour!' the DI shouted, waving a finger in Sherlock's face. 'I leave you on your own for a bloody hour and this is what happens!' Sherlock shrugged. 'You wanted the case solved quickly, didn't you?'

'There's such a thing as process, Sherlock. So far, all we can charge him with is what –' Greg gestured to his neck. 'Assault?'

'Don't be ridiculous; he's wearing enough evidence for you to acquire any further, relevant data. Assuming Anderson can interpret it correctly, of course. Besides,' he added as Kirkpatrick was pulled away. 'His distress may be adequate to lead to a confession and the identity of his accomplices. Guilty conscience, broken heart, whatever you want to call it.'
Lestrade threw his hands in the air, briefly curving his fingers into claws as if he would like nothing better than to throttle Sherlock. However, he restrained himself, clenching his jaw as his voice emerged in a snarl that suggested he was in no mood to take shit from anyone. His gaze flickered down to Sherlock's neck again, and he half-ripped a first-aid box off the wall and thrust it at John. 'Sort him out and get him to the Yard. If you're not both there in twenty minutes, I'll find you and drag you in myself.' He glared at Sherlock. 'And no sending John in on your behalf. It doesn't work like that!'

Sherlock frowned, pulling free a dressing pad and glaring when John took it from his hands. 'Just patch it. I'll sort it out when we get home.'

John wanted to argue, because the chances were good that Sherlock would forget about it as soon as it was covered, but something about the edge in Sherlock's voice made him bite the words back. He sounded tired, as if the shine of excitement had faded to leave tarnish in its wake, and John did not miss the way Sherlock's shoulders were rounded and slumped.

He cleaned away blood with quick proficiency, checking that Sherlock's evaluation of it was right before taping a dressing in place. He had better supplies at home, but at least the wound was too shallow to require stitches: a lucky escape.

'Come on,' Sherlock ordered, stepping back out of John's reach in one fluid motion and turning away. 'I suppose we had better hurry so that we can hold the Detective Inspector's hand while he struggles to close the case.'

'Sherlock...' John's weak reproach fell on deaf ears, and he held in a sigh as he followed Sherlock's departing figure from the hospital to the Yard. They only spoke for brief, half-arguments about whether helping Lestrade was really necessary, and John got the impression he won because Sherlock didn't trust the force not to let Kirkpatrick get away with it.

They walked together, side-by-side, through the doors of New Scotland Yard, and John knew they wouldn't be leaving any time soon. It was the start of several hours of interminable statements and explanations. Sherlock's patience, never an abundant resource, expired within ten minutes, and John found himself playing mediator between a bored flatmate and a frazzled DI.

'You gave me a crime scene and I handed you a murderer. What more do you require?'

'There are rules!' Greg scrubbed his hand over his face, his shirt-sleeves rolled up and his elbows on his desk, balanced on leaning slumps of paperwork. There were at least four coffee mugs in amidst the mess, and John wondered when the DI last got a good night's sleep. 'A case like this? It's too high profile to chuck away because you couldn't cooperate!'

'Karndine will throw everything she has at a private prosecution. She has to in order to protect her name. Embarrassing enough that her Omega was running, worse that she was chasing after a Beta as well.' Sherlock folded his arms, leaning back in his chair and staring at the ceiling. The white scrap of the dressing covering the cut stretched in sympathy, and John could see the claret staining its gauze. 'The only thing you'll get from this case is a commendation for solving it so swiftly – it was hardly a challenge after all. Next time you call me in, make sure it's for something interesting.'

'Murder isn't there for your entertainment, Sherlock,' Greg growled, but there was a softness to his voice, and John frowned to see something like regret carve a brief epitaph across his face. Those dark brown eyes were watching them both carefully, and while Lestrade was not as observant as Sherlock, there was clearly something he could see that made him pause before asking, 'You going to be okay?'
Sherlock got to his feet, furling his coat around him as he nodded his head. To John, it looked like they were talking about more than the cut on the pale column of Sherlock’s throat. There was a meaningful edge to Greg’s gaze, one that only intensified when Sherlock met his eyes.

A moment later, the impression fled, leaving the DI drained in his chair while Sherlock stood, distant and indifferent, at the doorway. ‘Go on, get out of here,’ he ordered, giving John a weary little smile. ‘I'll call you if we need anything else.’

‘We’ll be lucky to get as far as the reception desk,’ Sherlock retorted in a mutter, whirling out into the corridor and leaving John and Greg to share a brief, commiserating look before John followed, captured as always in the wide ripples of Sherlock's wake.

A taxi was already waiting by the time John caught up, and he slipped into the back seat, telling the driver where to go as Sherlock kept his attention fixed out of the window, his fingers curled over his mouth and his eyes glazed: lost in thought.

John pursed his lips, reading the silence and deciding to respect its boundaries. He knew Sherlock well enough to realise that, when a case ended, there were a variety of possible reactions: elation and euphoria, if it was a good one and Sherlock could bask in his own success, or pensive aggravation if he thought the police could have solved it themselves. This one seemed to fit more into the latter than the former, but there was something else – something that, on another man, John would have labelled as pity.

Except Sherlock didn't care about the victims, and there was no reason for that to change now. Perhaps the dead Omega had bothered him more than he had let on? The image of her certainly still hovered in John's mind, greying skin and the striking dark contrast of her blood... but it was quickly overwritten by his more immediate concern for Sherlock: the slash of a scalpel and backwards stagger. It could have been so much worse. He itched to peel back the dressing and take a proper look at the wound, and his fingers curled into fists as he restrained himself, waiting until they were back at Baker Street.

As soon as they were through the door to the flat, John allowed the silence to wither, his own voice shattering it apart. 'Get that off,' he ordered, gesturing to Sherlock's scarf where it was wrapped around his neck. 'Let me see how bad the damage is.'

Sherlock pulled a face, waving John away. 'Don't be ridiculous. It's fine.'

'It needs cleaning.' He wandered towards the kettle, flicking it on before grabbing the first aid kit from above the microwave. He grunted in annoyance when it proved empty: its supplies no doubt cannibalised for one of Sherlock's experiments. With a quick glare at his flatmate, John rummaged under the sink for the spare he had hidden there six weeks ago, ignoring bottles of various chemical suspensions and a slew of Petri dishes in his quest.

'I'll have a shower later and deal with it then.' It was an idle promise, one John did not believe for a minute. He tugged his prize free before turning, effectively blocking Sherlock's retreat and trapping him in the corner made by the kitchen counter before reaching up to drag the scarf away himself. 'John, honestly, it's –'

'Stay still.'

'John –' Sherlock tried to step around him, grumbling in annoyance when the pressure of John's hand on his chest blocked him. His next trick was to stretch upwards on tiptoe, trying to put the wound beyond his reach.
'I'm not that short,' John muttered, snatching at the scarf and tugging it free. 'God, you can be such a child sometimes. Come here, you great prat. What are you playing at?'

With a huge, put-upon sigh, Sherlock did as he was told, his arms folded and his lips tilted in a petulant grimace as John peeled free the dressing and peered at the wound. His assessment at the lab had not been wrong, but he still felt a glimmer of relief to see that it was relatively minor, slicing across the ridges of the tendons. However, nothing was severed except the neat slice of skin, deeper than John would have liked, but still superficial.

Reaching for an antiseptic wipe, he gently banished the patina of fresh blood. It was in an awkward place, the flesh constantly disturbed by the movements of Sherlock's neck, and he considered the relative merits of steri-strips versus skin adhesive to aid the healing.

With competent hands, he decided on the former. One of the benefits of being a doctor was having a well-stocked kit on hand. If the strips refused to hold, then he could try the glue. Either way, there was a chance Kirkpatrick would leave them a scar to remember him by, not that Sherlock seemed fussed about that kind of thing.

He twitched as John eased the edges of the cut closer together and bridged them with a strip of tape. Absently, he cupped the nape of Sherlock's neck, holding him steady as he continued to work.

John expected some kind of protest about being manhandled, but Sherlock's response was opposite and instantaneous. He froze, muscles locked solid with tension and his indrawn breath loud in the silence of the kitchen.

He looked up from what he was doing, taking in Sherlock's abrupt pallor. He looked dead-white, cringing and panicked, so unlike his normal confident self that John almost recoiled with the shock of it.

Yet before he could so much as twitch, he registered the sensation beneath the splay of his hand against Sherlock's nape. Not smooth skin, but something gnarled hidden by the soft, overhanging twist of those dark curls.

John stilled, the cut forgotten as he concentrated on the exploration of his right hand. His fingers moved, tracing the shape and picking out the echoes of shallow pits and ridges. It felt like – but, no, that made no sense. It must be something else.

'What's that?'

'John –'

'Lean forward.' It didn't sound like a request, not in that voice: clipped and tight. 'Let me see.'

Initially, he did not comply. His pulse thrummed beneath John's left hand, fast and frightened for reasons John didn't understand. They stood there, neither of them moving as the air coiled tight. Yet this was not the familiar, unobtrusive desire John had experienced a dozen times before, when he looked at Sherlock and saw the potential for something more than friendship. This felt heavier and more dangerous, as if the world were about to change.

At last, with the air of a man resting his head on the executioner's block, Sherlock obeyed, his lips parted around shallow, fretful breaths. He was like a wild animal itching to take flight, but John did not give him the chance as he pulled down the collar of his shirt and swept up the serpentine twist of his hair.

The kitchen light drained what little colour remained in Sherlock's skin, turning it paper-pale, but
John barely acknowledged the change. He was too busy staring, shocked, at the ragged ring of scar tissue framed by his tanned fingers.

His breath caught in his throat, choking and tight. He'd seen a similar wound not two hours ago on the neck of the corpse, bloody where this one was silver with age, but he had never, ever imagined seeing such a thing cutting its way into Sherlock's flesh.

An Alpha's bite.
The kettle clicked off, the water bubbling to the boil ignored as John and Sherlock stood in the kitchen. Time locked around them, their breathing falling still as the knot of scar tissue beneath John's fingers brought the world screeching to a halt.

Even as he soaked in the sight, he could scarcely believe it, inconceivable in its current context on the canvas of creamy skin. He blinked, trying to grasp reality as the implications seeped through his brain.

Slowly, his blind-sided shock faded beneath rational observations. He'd always imagined bites to be clinical: neat and perfunctory. There was nothing so uniform about the brand in Sherlock's flesh. It was deep and decisive: an indisputable claim. Vicious – a wound John could not convince himself was born of love. It must have hurt, bruised, bled...

He rubbed at it, willing the mark to come off. He peered for flaws or inconsistencies, anything to indicate that this was all some kind of fake put in place for Sherlock's own twisted reasons, but there was nothing. The scar lingered, defiant, and John struggled to make sense of what was right in front of him.

'I can explain.'

Sherlock's head remained bent to allow John's merciless inspection, and his strained words were directed at the floor. He did not speak with the confident logic John was used to. There was something frail and pleading there, as if, suddenly, Sherlock saw him as more of a threat than the flatmate who'd shared his life for so long.

John stepped back, snatching his hands away and putting space between them. His body fell into a fighting stance, and he forced himself to drop his shoulders and unclench his fists. The kitchen table was behind him, and he leant against it, aiming for a casual pose but probably missing by a mile.

'You're an Omega.' The accusation hung in the air, coiling its fumes between them. He wished he sounded more indifferent, but this was a bolt from the blue, too unexpected to get his head around.

John fought not to let the stab of betrayal show on his face, valiantly ignoring the ice that settled in his stomach as he crossed his arms over his chest. All this time, and there was someone else in Sherlock's life that he'd never mentioned – someone who could lay claim to him in a way that, in his sharpest fantasies, John barely dared to imagine.

Sherlock dragged a hand over his face. 'Stop glancing around like you think he's going to emerge from one of the kitchen cupboards and bludgeon you to death.'
John huffed. 'Not exactly an unwarranted fear. It's still legal for one Alpha to kill another who challenges their bond.'

'That's an urban myth. Murder is murder, regardless of the cause.' He shut his eyes, his hands on his hips as he breathed in through his nose and let it out as a sigh. 'It's a complicated situation, but suffice it to say he is no longer a concern.'

It was unlike Sherlock to be so vague, and John suspected they were circling the edge of some uncharted sphere of his life, one he was obviously unwilling to share. Yesterday, John would have said without hesitation that there was very little about his flatmate that he didn't at least suspect. Now, all that had changed.

'He's not dead,' he said, more bluntly than he intended. At Sherlock's expression of surprise, he sighed. 'Just because I never treat Omegas doesn't mean I'm oblivious about the medical aspects of what happens to them when their Alpha passes away.'

'And what's that?'

John tried to ignore the suspicion that he was being tested on his knowledge, which he now regretted admitting with such a cavalier attitude. No matter how it was explained, what technical language he used and dispassionate tones he employed, it still sounded appalling.

'Normally, a bound Omega whose Alpha dies undergoes the neuro-chemical symptoms of grief, regardless of whether they actually mourn them or not.'

John gestured, feeling exposed beneath Sherlock's penetrating gaze. He couldn't be telling him anything of which he wasn't already aware, but all those lectures he sat through were abruptly hideous in their relevance. It was no longer some hypothetical Omega forced to undergo biological imperatives beyond their control. It was Sherlock.

His voice softened, and he rubbed his jaw before he continued. 'Even if an Omega hates their Alpha, they'll experience severe depression, loss of appetite, apathy, even suicidal thoughts. It can go on for months.'

'And what about the rare cases? The ones who don't fit the definition of “normal”?'

John's throat tightened and he glanced away, a chill rushing through his veins. 'They die.'

It sounded like an old wives' tale, something born of the romantic notion of a broken heart, but doctors had no other explanation. In about five-percent of bonds, when the Alpha was gone, the Omega simply wasted away.

'None of that explains your certainty that the Alpha who bit me isn't dead.' Sherlock spoke with just enough challenge in his voice to break through the maelstrom of John's emotions, forcing him to consider the facts. Perhaps that was the point. Sherlock was making him rely on his expertise and encouraging him to find comfort in fragments of quantifiable data.

'When an Omega undergoes the grief process, the hormones in their blood change and new chemicals are released. They react with a specific protein in the scar tissue of the bite, breaking it down.' John ducked his head, staring at the floor before meeting Sherlock's gaze again. 'If your Alpha was no longer alive, there'd be nothing on your neck for me to find. His mark would have disappeared.'

Sherlock's mouth twisted, his head moving in a brief nod before he began to speak. 'My gender and my bonded status are irrelevant to our arrangement. It has no bearing on my competence when it
John stared, realising that, rather than offering any explanation, he seemed intent on acting like it didn't matter. 'It's not your abilities I'm worried about.' He scrubbed his hands over his face and straightened up, sorting through the flood of questions that assailed him. 'How is it all right for you to be away from your Alpha? How the hell do you keep others away when you're in heat?'

Abruptly, his brain caught up with what he was saying, and he frowned. The scent of an Omega in such a state was meant to be irresistible, and the cycle, though variable, should have repeated multiple times since he'd moved in, yet he'd not detected anything.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows as if he could tell where John's thoughts had gone. However, he hardly noticed, because a whole new realm of unease had opened up at his feet.

'What are you taking?' he croaked, 'And where the hell are you getting it from? Sherlock, there is nothing professionally manufactured available to suppress Omega heats.'

'A fact of which I am thoroughly aware,' he growled. 'Alphas have access to condoms and medications for contraception and Omegas have nothing.' He straightened his shoulders, and John wasn't sure if Sherlock was furious at him or society in general. Probably a bit of both, and how could John blame him?

He held up a conciliatory hand, trying to make his position clear. 'I don't care how illegal whatever you're using is; it's not like I'm going to report you. Hell, if I can help you, I will. All I care about is making sure you're not taking your life in your hands every time you dose!' He licked his lips, not bothering to hide his scowl. 'Any drugs cooked up on the black market are vicious, contaminated with everything from rat poison to sawdust.'

Sherlock shook his head, his fading patience visible in the line of his shoulders and the way he bared his teeth. 'Even if there was anything I could take to suppress my biology, I wouldn't use it. It's not necessary. Any bound Omega, separated from their Alpha, experiences a reduction in the intensity of their heat cycle. The symptoms are subtle – private – and the scent that apparently drives all Alphas into a frenzy isn't produced.' He lowered his head, examining John from an angle with a mocking expression on his face. 'What's the matter? Didn't they teach you that at medical school?'

John stammered, because no, they hadn't. He was almost forty, and he'd heard plenty over the years, a lot of it more myth than solid fact, but never once had there been a whisper of anything like this. Omegas were meant to be dependent on their Alpha for protection from sexual predation by others. Until today, he'd thought the whole reason they were locked away was to keep them safe.

Now, between what Sherlock had revealed at the crime scene and what was unfolding between them this very moment, it seemed he couldn't be more wrong.

'You've seen me in heat,' he pointed out, ploughing on as John opened his mouth in denial. 'You've stood right next to me, dressed wounds, wrested a gun from my hands... You and Mrs Hudson tend to say I'm “in one of my moods”.'

Memories of Sherlock sprawled on the sofa, clad in comfortable clothes and wound so tight it was a miracle he didn't snap blazed across John's mind. He'd assumed it was just boredom, Sherlock's intellect racing down a dozen different paths with nothing to occupy it.

'So what, all those times you snipe at me and drape yourself over the couch you're just... sexually frustrated?' Sherlock groaned, like John was being exceptionally thick, and he bristled in annoyance. 'I'm trying to understand, Sherlock! You said you could explain, but so far you've told me nothing,
so excuse me for being confused.' He ran his tongue over his teeth before speaking again. 'For God's sake, most people would think this is the kind of thing you tell your flatmate before they move in!'

'Why?' Sherlock snapped, fierce enough to make John twitch. 'How is it relevant? It has no impact on your life whatsoever.'

'It matters to you, you idiot, so it matters to me!' he retorted, stepping forward and watching as Sherlock straightened his spine and stood his ground: full-on aggression.

Except not. John could tell the difference between someone planning to throw a punch and someone just trying to make it seem like a possibility. Sherlock might be angry, but it was defensive, a thick wall built between them as if he hoped he could force John to keep his distance, both physical and emotional.

'You can't expect me not to have questions,' he added, softer and cajoling now.

'And you cannot expect me to remedy your ignorance,' Sherlock snarled, pushing away from the kitchen surface and stalking past him, giving John a wide berth as he headed for his bedroom. 'In the end, it's nothing to do with you.'

The door slammed in his wake, making the wall shudder and leaving John blinking where he stood. Calm fell around him, defined by the ragged sound of his own breathing and the tick of the clock on the mantelpiece.

A clutch of minutes, and his world had turned on its head. Sherlock was an Omega – a bound one – but whichever way John turned the concept in his mind, it didn't slot into place. It was too alien, too abstract, despite the proof of his own eyes, and he was left off-balance, as if he'd had the rug pulled out from under his feet.

It was tempting to bang on the door, to harangue Sherlock until he got some bloody answers, but John recognised a lost cause when he saw it. If he pushed now, Sherlock would only withdraw further, and without understanding the root of his anger, there was nothing John could do to ease it.

With a sigh, he looked down at his shoes, shoving his hands in his pockets before glancing towards his coat. The day had been exhausting, what with the conference, the dead Omega woman, the culprit trying to slit Sherlock's throat and then this. His brain was like a water-logged sponge, saturated with revelations and heavy in the bowl of his skull while his heart hummed and ached in disbelief.

He needed to get out, just for a while.

Briefly, he considered leaving a note for Sherlock, but the bastard could deduce where he had gone. He knew him well enough. Pity the same couldn't be said for John. How had he been here, living under the same roof for so long, and never added things up?

Snatching up his jacket, he swept out the door and thudded down the stairs, scolding himself for making assumptions. Wasn't that what Sherlock was always going on about? Looking but not seeing? He certainly felt blind now, as bewildered by Sherlock's reaction as he was by what he'd discovered. Obviously Sherlock had no intention of describing his situation beyond the meagre scraps he'd cast in John's direction, but that didn't mean there wasn't more to learn.

God, earlier, when Sherlock mentioned Omegas and the life in store for them, John had been alarmed at the thought that one of Sherlock's parents might have suffered the experience. This was a hundred times worse. Sherlock had spoken about who was owned by whom and the kind of
existence they could expect, but he hadn’t been discussing a member of his family. He was talking about himself.

John tried to imagine him in that situation, tied to someone with no expectations beyond staying quiet and bearing children. In theory, his Alpha would be wealthy enough to purchase anything he wanted, but the components Sherlock believed made life worth living – the chase, the game, an exhilarating puzzle – they were the kind of thing money couldn’t buy.

An existence like that, hidden away by an Alpha, even one who adored him, may as well be the death penalty for Sherlock. He would stagnate, the engine of his mind tearing itself apart without cases to keep it engaged, and that thrilling spirit of intelligence would wither and die, superfluous to what his Alpha would consider to be Sherlock's purpose.

Fears crowded John’s head, some deep and treacherous, others mere gleams in the sea of his doubt. Yet among the sparkling shoals of his curiosity, something darker coiled. For every “how” he could think of, a “why” accompanied it. Why was Sherlock so unwilling to discuss what had brought him here? Why did he react with vitriol when normally he was quick with an explanation?

It was personal, John got that, but he’d thought they were friends. Did Sherlock trust him so little? Obviously, or he’d have told him when they started living together. Instead, he’d kept John in the dark. At the beginning, that was understandable. John was a stranger, after all, an Alpha – and suddenly his gender had more relevance to John’s existence than ever before – but surely after a few months, Sherlock would have been comfortable telling him the basics?

He’d spent more than a year assuming he knew Sherlock’s gender and not giving a damn one way or the other, but this... For reasons he couldn’t put into words, it changed things. It shouldn’t, he wished it didn’t, but right now John couldn’t see Sherlock in the same light as he had that morning. It was ridiculous. He was the same man John had met at Bart’s, but finding out he was an Omega messed with John's assumptions, forcing him to re-examine everything.

His breath left him in a cloud of steam, made visible by the chill, and he grimaced as he waited at the pedestrian crossing, trying to sort out the chaos of his thoughts. A lot of it was shock – too much and too quick to process. How was he even meant to react? Probably not like this. Were there things he should have said, or would it have been better to keep his mouth shut and carry on as normal?

‘Fuck,’ John hissed, darting across the road before turning left along the pavement, too lost in his considerations to notice his surroundings. It was only the buzz of his phone that broke through the mire, dragging him back to the present.

With a frown, he pulled free the device, squinting at the unfamiliar number flashing on his screen. He’d hoped it was Sherlock calling him home, but that seemed unlikely, and with a heavy dose of suspicion, he picked up the call.

‘Hello?’

‘Ah, Doctor Watson.’ Mycroft’s voice uncurled in his ear, professional and emotionless. 'Detective Inspector Lestrade will be at The Volunteer public house. Perhaps he can provide some assistance with your current turmoil.'

John sighed, pinching his thumb and finger over the bridge of his nose as he silently cursed the Holmes brothers in equal measure. 'How did you –? No, never mind. I don't care.' He glanced up at a nearby CCTV camera, wondering how much of tonight had been captured within the view of some lens or another. He should have known better than to hope anything was private. 'Whatever surveillance equipment is in our flat, I want it gone.'
'You underestimate me, Doctor Watson. My brother is not the only man capable of making deductions. I am aware of the nature of the case you attended this evening, and was able to extrapolate – from both your body language and behaviour in the public domain – that something fundamental must have occurred between yourself and Sherlock.' Mycroft sighed, and was it John's imagination, or was there a hint of regret to his next words? 'I can surmise my brother's reaction, and yours is evident in every angle of your frame. Talk to Gregory Lestrade.'

John paused, the phone clamped to his ear so hard it hurt. 'He knows?'

Mycroft's tone changed, and any hint of understanding was eradicated beneath the smug superiority of his reply. 'He knows more than you.'

'Right, because I'm an idiot. Thanks for that,' John ground out, sticking his middle finger up at the nearest camera before disconnecting the call and turning towards the pub. He might not be happy that it was Mycroft who threw him a lifeline, but he couldn't turn down the chance to talk to a friendly face about this. If Greg had some answers, even better.

_The Volunteer_ was a couple of streets away, and it would stay open for a few more hours. He and Greg had been there before, now and then, when either Sherlock or the job got too much and the best kind of solace could be found in a pint and some sympathy. Now, he hurried through the night's revellers and slipped past the throng of smokers at the door. The pre-club rush had been and gone, and it was only the steady press of regulars that remained: a thinner crowd. True enough, Greg was just settling at one of the tables off in one corner, two full pints in front of him as he glared at his phone.

He glanced up as John approached and gestured with his mobile. 'So, do you want to explain why, twenty minutes ago, I got a cryptic phone-call from Mycroft Holmes?' he asked, his tired grin fading as he took in John's expression. 'Bloody hell. Is Sherlock all right?'

John blinked, briefly baffled before he remembered the slice of the scalpel across Sherlock's throat. 'Yeah, he's – he's fine. Are you okay to be here? I mean, you're not busy with the case?'

'Nah. The surgeon's cooling his heels in a cell for a bit, and I delegated the processing. No point in me hovering about. I'll sort it out in the morning.' He picked up his pint, taking a sip before smacking his lips appreciatively. 'So come on, spit it out. Why do you look like –' He waved at John. '– That?'

Slumping in the chair opposite, John opened his mouth to speak before hesitating, examining the crowd. Despite his aggravation at Sherlock keeping him in the dark, he understood that it probably wasn't done out of spite. There was more to it than that. Common sense told him that Sherlock's secondary gender shouldn't be spoken of without due care, and besides, John would rather not have one of Mycroft's minions reporting back the precise details of this conversation.

The DI clearly followed his train of thought, because his brown eyes swept the room before he leaned in, propping his elbows on the table and speaking in a low voice. 'No one within earshot looks dubious. Now what the hell's going on? Please tell me Sherlock's not back on the drugs.'

'What? No!' John huffed, taking a drink before letting out a sigh. 'No, I just found out about the –' He tapped his own nape meaningfully. 'Bite.'

Greg frowned, and for a God-awful minute John thought he'd somehow misunderstood Mycroft and the DI had no clue. A moment later, his fears were eased and some of his annoyance validated when Greg hissed, 'What do you mean you just found out? He didn't tell you when you moved in?'

John breathed out, not realising how much he'd needed someone else to share his feelings on that
subject until Greg sat back in disbelief. 'I thought you knew! You've been living with him for a year!'

'I assumed he was an Alpha when I met him. I never asked, and he never said anything.' John sighed. 'Not about a bond, a mate... nothing.'

'Not “mate”.' Greg's correction was instantaneous. 'When I found out – well, was told, Mycroft and Sherlock were there. They made it damn clear that “mate” wasn't the right word. Sherlock looked like he was going to be sick and Mycroft... He shook his head. 'He gave me that look, the one that makes you feel both completely stupid and utterly disposable.'

John pressed the heel of his hand to his left eye and nodded. 'So they told you, just like that?' He watched Greg's shoulders shuffle, his grip tightening around his glass as he waited for a reply.

'If it was left to Sherlock, I'd be none-the-wiser, but when he started helping us with cases – after he'd sobered up, of course – his brother hauled us both into some abandoned car park somewhere and explained the situation.' The DI grimaced. 'Well I say explained... He told me Sherlock was a bound Omega, that it wouldn't cause any problems with me or my team, but that I should be “made aware”.' He snorted, apparently exasperated at the memory. 'Fucking useless. He wouldn't tell me anything else, and neither would Sherlock. Not that I believed them at first. It was—'

'Impossible?'

Greg nodded, putting his glass down and jamming his fingertips together in an imitation of mismatched cogs. 'I couldn't mesh Sherlock Holmes with the image of an Omega I'd built in my head. It didn't make a damn bit of sense.'

John took another gulp of his beer, relieved that at least he hadn't been alone in his confusion. 'I know that feeling.'

'Yeah, and I get that it's a shit thing to do, stereotyping and all that, but it wasn't until Sherlock showed me the mark on his neck that I realised they weren't pulling my leg. And then...’ Greg trailed off with a sigh, giving John a considering stare and sucking in a breath through his teeth. 'Then, I was pretty much in the same place you are now. Stunned and not sure what to do. I went home that night and all I could picture was what he was like when he was high, how unguarded he was, and knowing he was an Omega on top of all that?'

Lestrade had the grace to look embarrassed, and John knew exactly what he was getting at. The same compound of emotion bubbled in his gut: the collision of the awareness that Sherlock was strong and powerfully independent, and the social programming that made him sure, deep in his brain, that Omegas were helpless, naïve, innocent – an Alpha’s responsibility to protect.

'It gave me nightmares,' he admitted. 'Worse, all Sherlock had to do was glance at me to see what was going on in my head. Of course, it was probably playing out in my actions as well. I started thinking twice before calling him out on a case, and then when he was there I followed him around like a shadow, petrified he'd hurt himself somehow when I could've stopped it.' He pulled a face and cleared his throat. 'I was being an idiot – treating him like a child – but I couldn't help it.'

'What changed your mind?' John managed a smile when the DI looked up at him. 'You don't act like that around him anymore. At least not that I've noticed.'

Greg laughed, his grin infectious. He fiddled with his glass, nearly empty as it was, before meeting John's eye. 'You know Sherlock. Omega, Alpha, whatever, that doesn't matter. He's your friend. What do you reckon he did?'
A thousand scenarios dashed across his mind, some ridiculous and some chilling, but Greg was right. Discovering a new facet of Sherlock had knocked him for six, but that didn't make everything John had learned about him – from the breath-taking deductions to the appalling habits – suddenly untrue.

'Something dangerous. Ridiculously so, probably, just to prove a point.'

Greg nodded, waiting for John to drain the dregs of his beer before taking it from him and getting up to head for the bar. 'One night, we got a call from him about a den of money launderers: rough, desperate types. By the time I got there, there was blood all down Sherlock's face, he'd broken at least two fingers, and he was the only one in the whole place still standing. Four against one.'

'Jesus.' John laughed, shaking his head. 'I wish I could say I was shocked.'

'Yeah, well it did the trick. Deep down, I already knew he could take care of himself. I just needed the reminder that what he is doesn't change a damn thing about what he can do.' Greg angled the glass towards John, giving it a wiggle. 'Another?'

'Please.'

John ducked his head, allowing his breath to leave him in a steady stream as Greg's words circled his head. It wasn't anything he hadn't already told himself a dozen times since leaving Baker Street, but it was good to discover he wasn't the only one who had reacted to Sherlock's revelation with disorientation, rather than gracious acceptance. Sherlock behaved as if John should've taken it all in his stride; at least Greg made him feel that his reaction wasn't so unacceptable.

The clank of his glass in front of him disturbed his reverie, and he tipped it in salute before taking a healthy swallow.

'So.' The DI sat down again with a grunt, handing John a packet of crisps. 'I guess you were telling the truth. The two of you really aren't sleeping together. There's no way you could have missed that Sherlock was an Omega if you were doing it.'

'I told you,' John said with a sigh, 'we're just friends.'

Greg cast him a sideways look, one that spoke volumes. 'Doesn't mean you wouldn't like to be more,' he murmured, before changing tack. 'Anyway, let me guess how it went down. You found the mark, freaked out, and Sherlock refused to tell you anything about it. I'm still not clear why, exactly, Mycroft pointed you in my direction.'

'He suggested you might be able to fill in a few blanks.' John smiled as Greg snorted in disbelief.

'You're joking, right? You probably know more than me. At least you've got medical stuff to fall back on. All I've got is everything I've ever been told by friends and the telly. Not exactly reliable sources.'

'I doubt the books are much better.' John scratched his eyebrow, remembering what Sherlock had said about his heats. 'I mean, think about it. Who wrote them? Not an Omega, that's for sure.' He shook his head and leant back in his chair. 'I suppose when it comes down to it, my questions aren't that important. It's just...' Greg tipped his head, waiting patiently, and John pursed his lips. 'Why didn't he tell me? All this time I've been thinking –' He shifted uncomfortably, looking away. 'I dunno. When we first met, he said he was married to his work. Now it turns out that, actually, just “married” would have been more accurate.'
He picked at his thumbnail, wishing he could work out what it all meant. Not just Sherlock's unwillingness to tell him the truth, but the startling vice of his own disappointment.

'Look, John. I haven't got a clue why he didn't tell you sooner, but I don't reckon he considers himself married to anyone. You heard what he said today at the crime scene. Omegas are bought and sold. He didn't choose whoever put that bite there.' The DI took a gulp of his drink, licking his lips before adding, 'He chose you for a flatmate, though. Chose to take you on cases. Doesn't that tell you something?'

John paused, abruptly seeing their cohabitation in a whole new light. Sherlock would have deduced he was an Alpha, yet Greg was right; he'd still invited John to share a home with him. Now, that seemed like an unacceptable level of risk.

'I don't know,' he said at last. 'I can't get my head around any of it. I mean, all that aside, Alphas don't just let their Omegas go. Sherlock said it himself. So where's his?'

Greg rubbed the stubble that shadowed his jaw. 'No idea. When I found out, I tried to track down a bonding announcement. They archive them – something about settling the occasional claim dispute, apparently – and I thought I could at least get a name.'

'And?' John asked. 'What did you find?'

The DI pulled a face: half annoyance, half frustration. 'Some kind of court order that sealed off the information. I couldn't get at it. I suspect it's his brother's doing.'

John squinted, wondering if it was a case of Mycroft's normal paranoia or if there was a more sinister reason behind his actions. 'I suppose the only people with any real answers are Sherlock and Mycroft.'

'And the Alpha involved, of course. Unfortunately none of them are telling.' Greg tipped his glass in commiseration. 'The only thing I got off Mycroft was the impression that he wasn't cluing me in about Sherlock's status for my own good. There was a hint of something else there. He asked me to tell him if anything unusual happened.'

'Unusual?' John echoed. 'Bit hard to tell with Sherlock.'

'That's pretty much what I said. He explained it wasn't Sherlock's behaviour that concerned him, which is a first.' Greg grimaced, chewing noisily before talking with his mouth full. 'Dunno what that tells you, but if I had to guess, I'd say Sherlock wasn't dumped by his Alpha. It was the other way around.'

Peace enclosed their table as John turned that idea over, examining it from every ominous angle. Knowing Sherlock, the way he was and how intolerable he would no doubt find a cloistered, domestic life, it didn't surprise him. Sherlock wouldn't tolerate that kind of existence. Not if he had any choice in the matter.

'Now,' Greg continued. 'I'm hardly an expert, but going on what Sherlock was saying today, an Omega leaving their Alpha is no mean feat. It can't have been easy.'

John nodded, remembering Sherlock's quiet statement about Omegas having neither rights nor means of paying their own way. Admittedly, Sherlock was far from average, but if Greg was right, how had he managed to get away? 'Mycroft would have helped him, wouldn't he? I mean obviously, he's giving Sherlock a hand, or you would have been able to get to the records.'

'That's what I thought.' Greg pointed a crisp at John, bracing his elbow on the table. 'But this is
Mycroft. Definitely an Alpha – you can tell that by his smell alone – and about as traditionalist as they come. So, what happened that caused him to go against all that and help his bound Omega brother escape? What made him tell me what Sherlock was, when Sherlock doesn’t seem to have any trouble hiding the truth?

John fiddled with his unopened packet of crisps, crinkling the wrapper without piercing the bag. His breath kept trying to catch beneath his ribs, and where, an hour ago, he'd been desperate to get out of Baker Street, he now longed to be back, if only to keep an eye on the madman inside.

'He wasn't telling you for your sake,' he concluded, looking up at the DI. 'He was telling you to watch Sherlock's back.'

'Yeah, I reckon so, but not from strangers, or he wouldn't have dared risk Sherlock's safety by telling me – an Alpha and a possible threat – in the first place. The way I see it, it's Sherlock's partner in particular he was warning me about.'

'Like he might hunt him down.' John sighed, closing his eyes as Sherlock's behaviour came into painful focus. It wasn't fury, not really. It was fear. Maybe he thought that John being aware of his secondary gender would compromise the secret – another weak link in the chain – but what if there was more to it than that? What if he believed John would actively work against him?

'What're you meant to do, legally I mean?' he asked. Not that he cared about the law at this point, but he had to try and see this from Sherlock's perspective.

'If you find an Omega?' Greg's smile was dark and mirthless. 'Well, they're lost property. You're meant to return them to their Alpha, even if they fight you every step of the way. Sherlock took a risk, telling me what he was.'

'No he didn't.' John scrubbed a hand over his eyes. 'He and Mycroft would have deduced what you'd do. They were sure you wouldn't drag him off again, but me...?'

The idea that Sherlock might consider him capable of that curdled the beer in John's stomach, and he got to his feet, putting a couple of bank notes on the table. 'I need to talk to him. God knows what's going on in that massive brain of his, but he can't believe I'd do that to him. Not if he didn't want to go.'

'Of course he doesn't,' Greg stood, clapping a hand on John's shoulder and giving it a squeeze, 'but he could probably do to hear it all the same.' He gestured towards the door. 'Go on. Get going. I'll give you a call if we need you again.'

'Thanks.' With a quick nod of farewell, John picked his way through the pub and stepped out into the night. A sharp wind swept away the clouds of distraction, leaving him with one clear priority. He wished he'd stayed at the flat and talked to Sherlock, even if that meant shouting through the panel of a closed door, but he'd needed Greg's sympathetic ear and his input. He'd needed someone to share his indignation and bafflement before he could say anything that wasn't spluttering disbelief and inappropriate questions.

It didn't mean they'd gone, the hows and whys, but John could see them for what they were. Irrelevant, just as Sherlock had said. Yes, John was curious, and now with Greg's ideas whispering in his head, worried as well, but at least he could decide what to do next. Maybe one day, Sherlock would answer his queries. In the meantime, John would work on finding out the bare minimum. Not to intrude on Sherlock's privacy, but to prepare himself for whatever came their way.

Crossing the road, he strode back towards the flat, ignoring the occasional passer-by as he headed for
home. His key scraped against the lock plate, and he shut the door quietly behind him so as not to disturb Mrs Hudson before making his way up the stairs.

221B was lit by the soft glow of a few lamps and the harsh fluorescence of the kitchen strip-light. The clock on the mantle marked down the minutes to midnight, and John spared it a glance before turning to the man who sat at the table, peering down a microscope.

At first glance, Sherlock was as collected as ever, his silver eyes focused and his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. Anyone else probably wouldn't notice the latent tension in his forearms or the staunch line of his shoulders: a body braced for an argument. Sherlock's face might be expressionless, but John would have to be blind to miss the cries of his body language.

Shrugging out of his jacket, he sniffed hard and wished that Sherlock's scent was more obvious. With anyone else, there were minuscule tells to be found in their fragrance. Not just the chemicals they put into themselves – coffee, cigarettes, drugs – but their emotional state. John knew when a patient was worried, when Lestrade was stressed and when Mrs Hudson had visited her sister by the faint edge of their personal perfume, but Sherlock exuded that same, comforting near-blankness as always, and it told John nothing of use.

Quietly, he approached the kitchen table, curling his fingers over the back of one of the chairs and leaning his weight on his palms. His shoulders stayed soft and his head bowed, a habit of submissive approachability.

'Been gossiping with Lestrade, have you?' Sherlock's clipped voice hummed with false indifference, and John's lips flickered in a wry smile. Of course he could deduce where he'd been. 'The Volunteer. How pedestrian. Funny, I thought talking about people behind their backs was one of those “not good” things.'

'Perhaps we weren't chatting about you,' John suggested, sighing when Sherlock cut him a disbelieving glare from behind the microscope. 'All right, maybe we were, but you went off in a huff. What do you expect me to do?'

'What action is necessary?' Sherlock demanded, abandoning all pretence of inspecting the slide on the platform. 'What difference does it make?'

'You tell me.' John lifted his chin, catching Sherlock's gaze in unapologetic challenge. 'Something stopped you from telling me before now, and I don't think it's because you decided it didn't matter. Something was holding you back.'

He licked his lips, glancing away with a shake of his head. 'Greg had some interesting theories.' He ignored the answering noise of mockery, pressing on. 'And they're probably not right, but they're all I've got.'

'How wonderful,' Sherlock sneered, his fingers drumming on the focus wheel.

'Look, I just...' John pinched the bridge of his nose, aware that Sherlock would never make this easy. Of the two of them, John was better at talking about what mattered, and that wasn't saying much, but he had to give it a go. 'Can you just answer one thing for me?'

'And what might that be?' Sherlock's voice radiated Arctic disdain, harsh and bitter. He got up from his chair, waving one hand as his nose wrinkled in distaste. 'What puerile curiosity can I possibly appease? Do you want to know what it's like to be reduced to nothing but a sexual imperative? If I writhe; if I beg? If I--'
John lunged, grabbing Sherlock's arms. It was not quite enough to bruise, but firm all the same. Nothing could make him ignore the visible manner in which Sherlock flinched, nor the stubborn defiance in his flatmate's eyes. It was impossible to say what bothered him more, the thought of the most vivid, present man he'd ever come across made a victim of his own biology, or the edge of hurt emotion in Sherlock's words, now silenced by the jolt of John's sudden movement.

'No, you bloody idiot,' he breathed, shaking his head and squeezing, just once, before loosening his grip. He didn't remove his fingers though, couldn't, not when the vulnerable turn of Sherlock's wrists beneath his touch was like an anchor. 'I want to know if you're safe.'

He watched the puzzlement cloud Sherlock's eyes, as if the conversation had taken an unexpected detour. 'I'm used to you being a target for half of London's criminal types, but... Look, I'm not saying you can't take care of yourself. It's not that the danger's changed, or that I suddenly reckon you can't deal with it, but now there's a different kind of risk.'

Sherlock cocked his head, and John saw the moment where he searched beyond the surface, his deductions clear in the quiver of his gaze and the concentration on his features. A second later, it cleared, shallow lines wiped away beneath a quiet "Oh!". The last trace of bitterness and resentment eased away, and now he was looking at John as if he were once again some unfathomable mystery. 'You want to be prepared. Ever the pragmatic soldier.'

'I like to be aware of the situation,' John confirmed. 'So, are you? Safe, I mean?'

The corners of Sherlock's mouth twitched downwards, and his Adam's apple bobbed above his collar. 'You tell me.'

John winced at the soft implication in Sherlock's voice. It was hard to consider the two of them as anything but a unit, a pair inextricably tied together, but in this, they were opposite sides of a coin, their biology putting them in a different dynamic.

One that Sherlock saw as menacing.

That realisation made his blood run cold, and he tried to breathe around the tangle of denials in his throat. 'No.' John caught his hands back, leaning away as he shook his head. 'I wouldn't. Whatever it is you're worried about, I just wouldn't. You should know that.'

Cotton rustled as Sherlock folded his arms. 'Knowing is not the same as believing.' He sighed, his shoulders dropping. 'People react... unpredictably. Your behaviour once you discovered the truth was not something I could anticipate with any level of accuracy.'

John rubbed his hand over his mouth and nodded. He hated that, even for few hours, Sherlock had seen him as a threat - but he understood. 'You need evidence, and you had nothing to work with. I get it, but you were right, you being an Omega doesn't change much, and it definitely doesn't change the fact that I'm on your side. So is – is there anything I need to be told? Anything else, I mean?'

Sherlock lifted one shoulder, his footsteps measured as he paced towards the window and stared out into the sallow glow of lamp-lit Baker Street. 'It's all relative. I am in no more peril today than I was yesterday.'

With a huff, John leant against the wall on the other side of the glass, allowing the panes to span the breadth between them. 'But if you tell me what we're up against, then there's a chance you could be a bit better off. It's easier to act without hesitation if I don't have to ask what's going on.'

Sherlock looked over at him, calculating, as if he could read every last one of John's intentions.
Whatever he found made him turn, his voice low as he spoke. 'You have a more specific query in mind than a nebulous fear for my welfare. Why don't you just ask it?'

John hesitated, biting back his immediate response of “Because you won't want to answer it. This cuts too close to the bone, and there are some things you won't share with anyone. Not even me.” Instead, he squared his shoulders and chose his words with care.

'Is your Alpha going to come looking for you?'

He waited, motionless beneath Sherlock’s scrutiny. Everything, from his heart to his fingertips, pulsed with anticipation and the need to solidify some kind of strategy. John had learnt a lot about Sherlock tonight, but this was not just personal. It was about establishing the facts.

'Is that Lestrade's theory?' Sherlock asked. 'He believes I fled?' He raised his eyebrows, apparently impressed. 'Someone should promote him.'

'So he's right?' John shifted his weight, leaning forward. 'You left?'

Sherlock looked back out of the window, his eyes tracking the sparse pedestrians on the pavement below. 'Yes. As for Alexander, he's much like any other Alpha of the elite. Unwilling to admit that he's lost his grip on his most valuable asset, and equally reluctant to draw attention to it. He'll have made up something to explain my absence, and as long as I maintain a low profile here in London, my notoriety will not uncover his lie, whatever that may be.'

'So he's never come after you?'

Sherlock sighed, and John thought he detected a faint tremor in the flow of air. It didn't sound right for impatience, and he frowned as he watched Sherlock chew his lip, deliberating.

'Once,' he admitted. 'About eight years ago. The results were – unpleasant.'

John turned his head, not wanting to see the way the memory pinched his face and paled his cheeks. There were so many scenarios he could picture, and none of them ended well for Sherlock. However, that was one discussion that John could see was too personal. If he dug too deep, Sherlock would shut him down, so he forced himself to focus on the other gem of information provided.

'Eight years?' He swore, berating his own idiocy. Of course, Omegas bonded as soon as possible after presentation, but somehow he’d seen this as a recent development in Sherlock's life – a new and tenuous situation, rather than the status-quo to which Sherlock was accustomed. 'Christ. How old were you when he...’ He gestured to the bite on Sherlock’s neck.

'What happened to just one question?' Sherlock sighed, turning his gaze back to the window. 'Seventeen. I've been bound to him for half my life.'

John sucked in a breath, trying to absorb that information. He should have suspected as much, but it put a new slant on everything. In comparison, he'd barely known Sherlock for any time at all. It made this – the two of them and Baker Street – seem like a drop in the ocean.

Swallowing tightly, he tried to return to his main point, shoving aside the conflict of his emotions. 'So he found you once. Is he likely to do it again?'

'It's a possibility,' Sherlock admitted after the silence had stretched for a painful time, thick and cloying. 'I owe my current existence partly to my brother's influence, but mostly to the precarious balance of Alexander's pride. As long as saving face remains his top priority, he won't admit there is a problem. It's only when another issue forces his hand that he's driven to action.'
'What kind of issue?'

'Last time, it was because he had purchased an additional Omega – legally dubious in terms of bigamy but frequently overlooked.' He shrugged, his features blank with apathy. 'She died a few months later from a blood infection. He couldn't get his money back, couldn't afford a third Omega, and so came after me. Unfortunately, his behaviour is difficult to predict. It's been years, but he could still turn up at any moment in an attempt to drag me back.'

John tried to picture it, some stranger who held half of Sherlock's life in his hands storming in and robbing them of this – the Work, the game, their friendship. Oh, Sherlock wouldn't go easy; he'd fight, hard and vicious, John had no doubt of that, but judging by what he was saying, his opposition had not been enough before.

'Look, it's none of my business. You can handle it yourself, but if there's anything I can do to help....' John gazed at the floor, wishing he had more to give. 'I'll do my best.'

He expected something dismissive, a laugh or a disbelieving stare, and when none came, he glanced up to see Sherlock watching him with a perplexed slant to his brows. 'Because I'm an Omega? John snorted. 'No, Sherlock. Because you're – you know –' He cleared his throat, spreading his hands palm up before dropping them back to his sides. 'Because you're my friend, you idiot.'

Gratitude flared in Sherlock's eyes, widened as they were with curiosity and amazement, like John had done something unexpected. It was as if, to this man – this genius – John's actions were a mystery, and he fidgeted beneath the glow of Sherlock's attention.

He still had questions, but slowly, their importance was beginning to fade. Whether he liked it or not, he knew more about Sherlock than he had a few hours ago. However he looked it, that had to be a good thing. Now, he wanted confirmation that what he'd discovered tonight wouldn't damage what they'd built since the day they met at Bart's.

Ducking his head, he shrugged awkwardly, flicking his finger back and forth between them as he asked, 'So... are we good?'

For the first time that evening, Sherlock smiled. Not the false, beaming grin of a man shamming his way into someone's favour, but the crooked, shy curve John cherished. His gaze darted around John's face, no doubt taking in everything. Yet something lingered, a trace of doubt and perhaps the faintest shadow of regret.

'I think that's for you to decide.'

John looked up, reading everything that simple sentence had to offer. On the surface it may not look like much, but he knew what Sherlock was doing. Not an apology, perhaps, but a silent acknowledgement that he was somewhat in the wrong for keeping John in the dark.

It was a hint of an opening, an opportunity to push the issue and hunt down every answer he craved, but John fought down the urge. He was a soldier and a doctor, used to processing information in a handful of seconds and prioritising his actions. He'd said his piece and had the bare bones of the situation. For now that would have to be enough. Sherlock's friendship – his god-damn trust – was more important than soothing John's own curiosity, and he straightened his back as he nodded, slow and sure.

'We're good.'
An Opening Gambit

The hum of the taxi's wheels passed unnoticed, lost beneath the tidal flow of London's symphony. The metal cage of the cab muted the city's din, but Sherlock picked up on it all the same, taking a moment to relish the input before placing it aside.

There had been a time, years ago now, when this place had almost overwhelmed him: vivid in every aspect. Amazing, how things that he had craved above all else – a life in society's heart, rather than far beyond it – could become mundane given time.

Immediately, his thoughts turned to John: the exception to that rule. He was seated next to Sherlock, a warm outline that pulled softly at his awareness, returning his mind to all the ways this ordinary man had revealed himself to be remarkable. Not just the bullet in the murderous cabbie, John's opening gambit all those months ago, but everything since.

He was kind and conscientious, easy-going and made friends with minimal difficulty – all traits which Sherlock would have dismissed off-hand if not for the glimmer of more. John invested considerable effort in making himself seem harmless and ultimately forgettable, but it had taken only one glance and a single deep breath for Sherlock to see that for what it was. Not a mask, exactly, but a facet where one expected a smooth plane.

Sherlock's initial deductions of John had been intriguing, but not nearly as intricate as that first trace of his scent.

Alpha, obviously, the hormonal signature of his gender impossible to deny, but it was more than the normal bass thud of odour emitted by Lestrade or Mycroft. Theirs was flat, a single note amidst the bouquet of the air. John's was multi-dimensional and complex, not enriched by outward factors such as hygiene products or his diet, though clues to both glittered at the edges of Sherlock's perception.

Automatically, he had tried to identify the component fragrances, but the task was beyond him. His normally erudite analysis failed, reducing him to vague connotations of safe, good, yes. It was the first hint that John Watson was worthy of further investigation.

Sherlock smiled ruefully, returning his gaze to the window. He'd had more than a year, and still he had not unravelled the knot of John's nature. Evocative and seemingly dichotomous traits orbited the foundation of his character, and Sherlock remained happily fascinated. Oh, there were some certainties to be found. He knew John's moral compass was strong, but did not operate within the lines of the law. He had firm views, but was happy to allow the ends to justify his means. The legality of his actions was not so much an issue to him as the principle of their consequences.

A case in point: ten days ago, he had discovered all his assumptions about Sherlock's secondary gender to be incorrect. One unfortunate moment of chance, and the secret Sherlock worked so hard to hide lay bare for John's perusal. His initial reactions – confusion, disbelief, curiosity, anger – were all predictable. Instinctive, even. That part, at least, Sherlock had anticipated.

Yet there the path split, becoming a tangled briar of possible outcomes, some given detail more by fear than logical reasoning, but they were no less forceful for their lack of rational basis. It was easy to forget that John was an Alpha, but there in that kitchen, held down by firm hands on his neck and almost vibrating with the breathless terror of being so exposed, Sherlock had been potently reminded of the fact.

John could have walked out, disgusted or repulsed. He could have tried to track down Alexander
and return Sherlock to his control, such as was his legal obligation.

He could have made an effort to claim Sherlock for himself. Unlikely, considering John's strong opposition to any form of interaction lacking in consent, but Sherlock had been raised knowing that Omegas did strange things to Alphas simply by existing. Regardless of whether he was emitting heat pheromones or not, the very knowledge of what he was could strip away every construct of civility John held so dear and reduce him to some vicious state, intent on Sherlock as a sexual conquest and nothing more.

He wasn't sure what was worse: the fact that he had underestimated his flatmate's character so thoroughly or that, just for a moment, there had been a shameful thrill at the thought of being so completely overwhelmed by him.

Illogical. John stripped of everything that defined him was not something to which Sherlock aspired. His glorious contradictions were what he found so compelling; higher thought and reasoning, compassion and regard, that was what had captured his attention. To rob John of those qualities would be a disaster, and yet even knowing him as he did, Sherlock hadn't been able to conclusively rule out sexual attack from the man he considered his best friend.

Of course, John had proved him spectacularly wrong. He had not pushed and pestered, denying Sherlock his right to privacy, nor advanced in a show of brute superiority. Instead, he'd removed himself from the flat and discussed who knew what with the regrettably aware Lestrade. Whatever the course of their conversation, it had permitted John to rationalise events in his own exceptional way. When he'd returned, his bafflement was still plain to see, along with an emotional hurt Sherlock didn't fully understand. He seemed distressed that Sherlock had never confided in him, but rather than meting out punishment, he made his choice.

One which placed him firmly at Sherlock's side, a defender. Not a knight in shining armour for a damsel in distress, but an ally. Someone on whom Sherlock could rely without question. In theory, that was nothing new. John had proven his loyalty that first night, but this was different because John knew. He knew Sherlock was an Omega, yet he did not try and exert any form of influence over him. He treated Sherlock the same as he'd always done.

Not like something precious, nor as a freak, but a human being.

Perhaps, to others, that would seem like a basic level of respect, but Sherlock was uniquely positioned to see its value. Even his brother failed in that regard, coddling Sherlock in vice-like restrictions whenever the opportunity arose. He was permitted to have a life, of a sort, but Mycroft was never far away: an unerring presence. Even Lestrade, when he'd found out, had stumbled in his regular behaviour, becoming almost obsessive in his deference to Sherlock's apparent (and non-existent) frailties.

Only John had made it clear that his offer of protection had nothing to do with Sherlock's gender. He saw Sherlock as nothing more or less than exactly what he was: a consulting detective who put most of the Yard to shame, undoubtedly intelligent and capable of making his own choices. No, John took Sherlock's side because it was the right thing to do, and the vow to support Sherlock's decisions – particularly that of separation from Alexander – was unlikely to be revoked.

It shouldn't make him feel safe, having John's oath. He was more than able to look after himself, should the need arise, but something about John's certainty eased Sherlock's frayed nerves. In everything, from his actions to his assertion that they were “good”, John was putting their arrangement first. He chose to leave his remaining questions – and there were clearly a number of those – unanswered rather than pursuing them. He respected Sherlock's dismissal of an important issue when John himself longed for a more fulfilling explanation of his current circumstances.
If the situation were reversed, Sherlock knew he would not be so cooperative.

The taxi turned the corner sharply, its tyres releasing a faint squeal of protest. The abrupt change in direction sent John lurching into Sherlock's shoulder: a strong impact that made him grunt in surprise even as a frisson shot through him.

Immediately, John stammered an apology and righted himself with unflattering haste. Sherlock held in a sigh. It was the most notable difference in John's behaviour. Before, he would have laughed, lingering in Sherlock's personal sphere as he made a joke about the driver's abilities. Now, he visibly recoiled, flustered and trying to hide it as he stared fixedly out of the window on his side of the vehicle, ignoring Sherlock's huff of irritation.

Once, he would have treasured his personal space, protective of the barrier it provided, but ever since John had arrived in his life, those boundaries had begun to erode. He'd become accustomed to fleeting contact, even coming to anticipate it.

Yet once John discovered Sherlock was an Omega, all the small touches of friendship – ones which so frequently hinted at more – stopped. Previously, John would have handed him a cup of tea, their fingers brushing, or cupped Sherlock's elbow to get his attention. He'd lean in close to inspect an experiment or nudge him gently out of the way in the kitchen.

Now, even accidental touches seemed to cause remorse. It was if John had decided that Sherlock's gender had marked him as off-limits – strange, as most Alphas would surely consider the opposite to be true? John had been confident in his actions, even flirtatious at times when he thought Sherlock was an Alpha, but one small alteration in his fundamental knowledge, and every conversation became glassy and platonic, full of false starts and aborted gestures.

It wasn't that John didn't want to touch him: he'd caught him snatching his hand back before it could land on Sherlock's arm more than once. No, John wasn't allowing himself, because he felt he shouldn't. Alexander's prior claim forefront in his mind, no doubt.

*Used goods.*

The words hissed in his mind's ear, a memory murmuring its accusations as Sherlock fought to keep his expression blank. His hand moved of its own accord, slipping under his scarf to trace the epitaph of savagery that pitted his skin. Hatred burned in his stomach for all it represented, and he pursed his lips, wishing things were different. That no-one questioned his right to his current life, and nothing made John hold back the affection, friendly or otherwise, that he had given so freely not long ago.

Or failing that, he wished he didn't miss those fleeting moments of connection with such keenness. Like an aching tooth, it nagged at him constantly, stretching his patience as his rational mind caught itself in a web of sentimental fears.

That was why they were currently on their way to Notting Hill at Lestrade's request. The case seemed less than promising, but Sherlock was desperate to occupy his mind with something – anything – that wasn't John and the changed state of affairs in which they now found themselves.

Finally, the taxi pulled up at the end of the street, the driver gawping at the accrued police cars until Sherlock waved the money under his nose to get his attention. Irritation sharpened the cabbie's Beta citrus scent, and Sherlock cast him a disdainful glare as he grudgingly dug out change.

The usual suspects littered the scene, made ghostly by the flicker of blue lights and London's early morning gloom. The familiar faces of Donovan, Anderson and several Forensics regulars were observed and then discarded, the minutiae of their personal lives irrelevant. Sherlock held up the
police tape, standing back to allow John through before ducking under and almost walking into Donovan's outstretched hand.

She rolled her eyes, lines bracketing her lips as she pursed them in distaste. 'We don't need you, you know. We could solve this ourselves.'

The stale fragrance of a lie made Sherlock's nose itch, and he offered her a cold stare, taking in her appearance with one sweep of his gaze. Sally's pettiness arose more from defensive antagonism than anything else. She felt threatened by his abilities and frustrated by the ease with which he put them to use. It manifested in weak insults and endless, trite challenges from the Beta sergeant. Tiresome, but far from unexpected.

It was tempting to enumerate all the evidence of her falsehood, from the shadows under her eyes indicating she was far from at her best to the tremor in her hands: distress – a particularly gruesome crime scene involving a child or other, vulnerable individual. However, John was hovering at his side, tense and stiff from the cold. Better to get on with it rather than stand here putting Donovan in her place.

'Then why bother calling for me?' he asked, indifferent.

'Believe me, it wasn't my decision.' She held the radio to her mouth, speaking into it as she nodded to the officers standing sentry at the entrance. 'Bringing them in, Sir.'

Her heels tapped on the pavement as she led them through the front door of number forty-two. Immediately, the ferrous odour of blood rolled over him, and he heard John smother a noise of repulsion at his side. No doubt to Sally it was a mere nuance in the air, but to John it was probably like walking into a wall. An Alpha's sense of smell was powerful, the same as an Omega's, but it was specifically attuned to biological fragrances. Pheromones, tears, sweat and sexual fluids all took precedence to an Alpha's olfactory receptors, often to the detriment of other, more subdued input.

Sherlock, on the other hand, could take in the entire kaleidoscope offered by the atmosphere of the house. The detergent in the carpet, the food on the plates by the sink in the kitchen, the ash in the grate and the scent of the wilting roses all competed for his attention, punctuated by the treble stench of gunpowder.

It was a story written for him in the air, and one he couldn't acknowledge. Not without raising too many questions and exposing his secret to further, less friendly scrutiny. No, he would have to use the data to guide his visual observations: a method which he'd had years to perfect.

A dense carpet muffled his footsteps as he approached the living room, sparing a glance for the paintings on the wall: investment pieces, each unique, though they all followed a distinctly modernist trend. There were no signs of misalignment, and the top of each canvas was swept clean of dust. Interesting.

Lestrade waited for them at the doorway, his expression grim and his gaze weary. He nodded a greeting before gesturing to the scene within, his words quick and to the point. 'A neighbour reported gunfire, and when we got here this is what we found. The Donnellys: husband, wife and daughter.' He gestured to the three bodies where they lay amidst gory haloes. 'Mum and girl killed by a shot to the face, dad by a bullet to the temple. At first glance it looks like he did it.'

Sherlock made a disgusted noise in his throat, biting back his derision as the DI lifted his voice, one hand held out to halt his response. 'We dismissed that idea pretty quick. There's no way he could have fallen like that.'
He gestured to the man, who lay like a Pharaoh in repose, his arms folded across his chest and a gun captured in his loose grip. His suit – tailored to fit, grey wool blend, Savile Row – was immaculate, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes before turning to the other two bodies, ignoring the flash of the cameras as Forensics recorded various details, immortalising the scene in the scope of their lenses.

'The house alarm was on and active when we came in,' Donovan added, 'but it didn't register any disturbance at the time of the murder, so either it was off and someone reset it, or...'

Sherlock took in the words even as he bent to examine the other bodies, checking everything from the clothes they wore to the sprawl of their forms. Dimly, he was aware of Anderson hovering on the threshold, monitoring his every move.

'Maybe it's not what it seems?' John suggested, and Sherlock glanced up to see him gesturing to the sensors in the corners of the ceiling. 'Could it be a decoy – a deterrent, rather than the real thing?'

'No.' Sherlock frowned, gently turning over the girl's hands and inspecting her skin before he continued. 'Original artwork on the walls, unique sculpture, not to mention a dozen or more first editions.' He indicated the cube-shaped shelves that decorated the wall like portholes. 'Assets worth a million in two rooms alone. The alarm's real.'

'So why didn't it go off?' Lestrade's question hovered in the air, but Sherlock ignored it, too intent on the mother to respond until the DI sighed. 'Sherlock?'

Tutting, he cast him a glare before jerking his head towards Donovan. 'The sergeant's right. It was off during the killing, as were the cameras hidden in the cornice.' He pointed towards the plasterwork where the ceiling met the wall, its joins fractionally uneven at key intervals. 'You'll find the monitoring equipment nearby. Possibly in some kind of study. Whoever did this reset the alarm as they departed. Curious behaviour for a murderer.'

'Worth getting out of bed for?' Lestrade asked.

'Presumptuous,' Sherlock murmured, distracted by the cufflinks on the man's shirt sleeves. 'I was already awake.'

'You were still awake,' John corrected, amusement colouring his voice. 'I was the only one who was actually in my bed, and I'm a bit confused about why I'm not still there. What do you need me for?'

Sherlock's hand hesitated at the lapel of the man's suit, a flash of concern making his fingertips twitch as he considered John's words. It was rare that he challenged Sherlock's reasons for bringing him to a scene, which were less about his medical expertise and more about his companionship and general usefulness. Was this another symptom of the changes between them? Had John's departure from his life been a needless fear, or was this the first sign that it was a delayed reality?

He glanced in John's direction, trying to smother the wave of relief when he saw playful curiosity in the creases around his eyes. This was more about being dragged out of bed than any true question of purpose, and Sherlock endeavoured to hide his moment of uncertainty as he sought a distraction.

He hummed, adopting a guise of apparent thought before pointing towards the door set into the far wall. 'Check the kitchen,' he ordered, 'and take Lestrade with you.'

Grumbling, John did as he was told, the DI following a half-step behind. Honestly, they should be grateful to him. As far as he was aware, John and Lestrade had not met again since their evening at The Volunteer, and Lestrade was practically vibrating with questions, which were probably more about Sherlock than the case itself. Concern was never something Lestrade bothered to hide, and
John needed the distraction. His distress over the bodies, in particular the child's, was not as well-concealed as he assumed. Sherlock had offered them seclusion, or at least the illusion of it.

Getting to his feet, he drifted away from the corpses, moving carefully to avoid disturbing any evidence as he surveyed the room. Surreptitiously, he stepped closer to the kitchen doorway, noting the titles of the books and the wineglasses on the table as he attempted to listen in.

Lestrade was the one speaking, not with the tones a man in charge of a crime scene, but something softer and more companionable. His words were neither clipped nor authoritative, and Sherlock held his breath as he tried to make out what was being said.

'– you two are doing all right? You know, what with...’ The sentence trailed off, and Sherlock wondered if some form of indicative gesture had been made. Regardless, it stood to reason that it was he and John who were the centre of this discussion, Lestrade's worry as evident as his curiosity.

Stiffening his spine, Sherlock resisted the temptation to peer through the door, continuing his slow, thorough investigation of the room as he pictured John searching the scene. When he spoke, there was an echoing quality to his voice: he was looking in the fridge, Sherlock surmised.

'Yeah, I've had a few days to get used to the idea. I'm better than I was in the pub, anyway.' Silence again, more brief this time, interrupted by the soft chime of glass – inspecting bottles perhaps? 'What I mean is, it's fine. We're fine. In the end, he's just... Sherlock, you know?'

'Looks like you caught onto that a lot quicker than I did.' Lestrade's voice sounded strained, and Sherlock rolled his eyes at the understatement. The DI's behaviour had been intolerable for months after Mycroft had informed him of the situation. He had almost given up hope on him, and it had taken a gloriously violent altercation with some money-launderers to prove his point.

With a sigh, Sherlock shifted, expecting the conversation to have come to an end. However, before he left earshot, he heard Lestrade clear his throat, awkward and uncertain.

'What?’ John sounded wary, but intrigued. Open enough to the man he considered his friend, but there was a defensive edge to his challenge, as if he were waiting for the DI to say something he'd rather not hear.

'Listen, I'm not going to ask you to betray his confidence, but if there's anything I can help with – anything I should know...’ He left the sentence hanging: a deliberate ploy to encourage John to fill in the blanks. Sherlock recognised the technique – used it to get information out of witnesses often enough – and he clenched his teeth as irritation heated his skin. No doubt John was longing to discuss everything he'd discovered.

Yet he did not leap in with an immediate response. There was no outpouring of the few details Sherlock had so reluctantly shared. Instead, John sighed, his words carefully placed and pitched low. 'All I can really say is that you were right. Your theory, I mean. To be honest I don't know much more than that. I wish I did, but even if I had all the answers –'

'– You wouldn't be telling me.’

Sherlock frowned, trying to understand why, rather than offended, Lestrade appeared pleased, as if John had passed some kind of test.

'Okay, I can work with that.’ The DI sounded strangely relieved. 'I mean, I would have looked out for him anyway, but at least I know I'm not just being paranoid. Now we can both watch his back, right?’
Sherlock sensed John's eyes on him and feigned interest in the window latch: unforced and still in place, rarely opened. If John suspected he could overhear, he showed no sign of it, but there was something emphatic about his reply, as if it were meant to be heard by more than Lestrade.

'Right.'

Slowly, their conversation moved back onto the immediate state of the kitchen, and Sherlock wandered away, pushing aside the strange, tremulous sensation beneath his ribs. He thought of the endless hours he had worried about John finding out what he was and the ceaseless, dire scenarios that had raced through his head. The same risk had been present in telling Lestrade, of course, but there had been no emotional connection to the DI all those years ago. He was merely a tool to allow him access to the cases. His response and the action it may necessitate had been of little concern.

Yet Sherlock had never expected them to react like this. The best scenario, and in a way the preferred outcome, had always been indifference. This – the two of them working together, sharing necessary information without breaching trust, all in the name of Sherlock's welfare, was entirely unexpected. It could have reeked of Alpha dominance, the very thing he had fought so long to escape. Their actions could easily have taken on a patronising edge as they sought to cage him in their own way. Yet, despite his admittedly poor emotional intelligence, Sherlock could see that was not the case. This was not an effort to rob him of his agency. It was simply two men doing what they believed was necessary.

Not because he was an Omega, but because they considered him a friend.

Sherlock drew in a sharp breath through his nose, pushing aside an unaccustomed swirl of confused emotion as they re-entered the room. He half-expected them to smile, united in their (to Sherlock) uncomfortable sentiment, but mercifully neither of them seemed in any way unprofessional, and he greedily latched on to the details of the case as John spoke.

'I don't think the kitchen’s been touched – nothing strange about it at all. No blood, no particulates, no mud by the door... Whoever did it, they didn't come in this way.'

Sherlock pressed his fingers together in front of his lips, whirling back to the triumvirate of bodies and feeling the wings of his coat settle around him. 'They didn't have to,' he murmured, the disparate pieces connecting with flashes of light in his mind's eye as the elements formed a comprehensible whole.

'What have you got for me, then?' Lestrade asked, more eager than indulgent.

Slowly, Sherlock turned in a final circle, looking for anything he'd missed before he considered the corpses: the point of ignition and conclusion for this crime. 'Three dead, all shot with the same gun. The bullets will match the pistol in Mr Donnelly's hand. However, it was not his finger that pulled trigger.' He swayed towards the wife and daughter, indicating the destructive nature of their wounds. 'The murderer was angry with the women, hateful. Shooting someone in the face is personal. This was a punishment, but this –' He turned to the father. 'This was respectful.'

'What, because he's all lain out?' Anderson asked from where he stood, a frown creasing his brow.

'Not just that. Wife and daughter are still in their night clothes. No efforts have been made to protect any illusion of decency, but nor were they stripped, which might indicate a sexual aspect to their deaths.' Sherlock stared, seeing the contrast of the scene as clear as day. 'They're even separate from him, their heads lying away to the right while his is to the left. Additionally, he's been redressed.' He pointed, indicating one garment after another. 'He's wearing his best suit and shoes, even cufflinks. The wound at his head has been cleaned, but there was still enough gore to leave a trace on the
inside of his collar where the killer manipulated the body to clothe it.'

He lifted his head, gesturing expansively around the living room. 'The same respect has been shown to the house. It's immaculate. A family as wealthy as this may have a cleaner – no dust on the top of the canvases and no indications of obsessive neatness in the residents suggests someone is paid to keep the place spotless – but the staff's unlikely to attend on a weekend. With that in mind there should at least be rings of water on the table from the glasses.' He indicated the low coffee table, mahogany and luxurious, its surface unblemished by the long-stemmed champagne flutes that rested, coaster-less, on its face.

'So, someone cleaned up?'

'And cleaned them out,' Sherlock added, flicking a smile in John's direction as he stepped over to one of the bookcases, his fingers running along the spines, picking out spaces in the ranks. 'Paintings are big and difficult to carry, but books?'

'How do you know those gaps weren't always there?' Donovan demanded.

'Use your eyes,' he snapped. 'Volumes stacked on top of others, a pile by the sofa and another on the table in the hall. There are more books in this house than there is space for them, so why are there voids present? No, something was taken, something of value – possibly sentimental, but monetary is more likely.' Sherlock's gaze flickered, reading the room. 'The first editions remaining are of moderate worth, but there might have been a few treasures which are now gone. They'll be listed for insurance reasons. Find out what's missing.'

'Anything else?' Anderson demanded, his sarcasm evident.

'You mean I haven't given you enough to be going on with?' Sherlock raised his eyebrows before frowning in annoyance, taking in the equally blank stares all around him. 'For God's Sake, how you manage to survive is beyond me. How can you go through your boring lives and see so little? Look!' 'At what?' Donovan asked, her voice catching on a mirthless laugh as she shook her head. 'So far, you've not exactly told us anything mind-blowing. Definitely nothing to help lead us to the culprit.'

Sherlock sighed, flicking a hand through his hair and wishing he could shake her until she opened her eyes and actually observed. 'You said it yourself. The alarm was on when you came in, so someone reset it. A house like this, its residents wealthy? They wouldn't go to bed and leave the system deactivated, so whoever killed them knew the code. More to the point, they were able to get all three occupants in the same room without using restraints or raising suspicion. They trusted their killer, why?'

'They – knew them?'

'Yes, John!' Sherlock did not bother to subdue his bright grin, his approval impossible to mask. 'But it's more than a mere acquaintance. The murderer had a right to be here, one the victims didn't question. Look around. What else is missing? A family home, but...'

For a moment, no-one answered, but finally Anderson's voice broke the calm, his words tremulous like a student putting himself forward but expecting a reprimand. 'Photographs?'

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow, suspecting that was a lucky guess, but acknowledging it all the same. 'Exactly. There should be something, even if it's just holiday snapshots. The books held a source of value, but why take the photos as well? They were present; there are marks on the mantle where the sun's bleached the wood around the frames, but no pictures.'
'Something to remember them by?' Greg shrugged, looking baffled as Sherlock sighed in irritation.

'No. The only sentiment here was displayed towards the father. Look, it's obvious. Beta family, husband in his mid-to-late fifties, easily, but the wife can't be more than thirty-five. The skin on her neck and hands is still firm and relatively unwrinkled, yet neither of those are prime sites for anti-aging treatments. Younger wife, almost certainly not the first. Daughter the product of the second marriage. Interlopers in the eyes of our killer.'

'That's why they were shot in the face.' John frowned down at the visceral spectacle. 'So, what, you reckon the first wife?'

Sherlock tilted his hand back and forward, screwing up his face as he hummed in doubt. 'It's possible, but less likely. A divorce often results in animosity towards the ex-partner. Perhaps the jilted spouse wouldn't have obliterated his features, but would she have dressed him in his best clothes? No, whoever did this idolised him, but saw his death as necessary to a well-formulated plan. Look for children from the first wife; they're most likely to feel alienated.'

'Enough to kill?' Lestrade asked.

'Apparently. The only inconsistency is the timing. The daughter is what, twelve, thirteen? Assuming she was born after they were married – likely considering the wear on the wedding rings – the separation must have occurred more than a decade ago, so why wait? What changed?'

He tipped his head up to the ceiling and stared blindly at the paintwork as he adjusted the angle of the scenario, exposing all possible options. 'Unless what we see here is secondary motive.' He turned back, his hands wavering like a set of scales finding their balance as he re-weighed the evidence. 'Effect, not cause. Why kill the father at all? Necessity. The driving force here is not hatred; it's simply the most apparent consequence in the data. If the true reason for the killings was loathing for the women, they would have been murdered during the father's absence. He travels for work; look at the tan-lines.'

Sherlock was almost talking to himself now, racing along to the conclusion. 'No, this is all about money. The books are a quick fix. This is about inheritance and who stands to gain, but more importantly, it's about what makes them desperate enough to kill a man they clearly admire. That's the key detail – the only one that elevates this case beyond tedium.'

'All right, Sally, look into the other family and see what you can find out about those books,' Lestrade ordered, flapping a hand at Anderson. 'You, get processing. Sherlock, do you need to look at anything else?'

'The rest of the house. There must be something more to all this.' He was off before the DI could utter anything further, allowing the tide of data to wash over him as John followed at his heels. His feet took him from one room to another, each brimming with information, but the majority of it held little relevance.

He was just heading towards the guest bedroom when John spoke up, his voice faintly amused. 'You know, you're not exactly the world's most subtle person.'

Sherlock glanced at him. 'No. Is there a reason for that gross statement of the obvious?'

'You. Chucking me and Greg into the kitchen for a chat and then listening in.' John shut the door behind him and leaned back against it, watching as Sherlock got to work. 'I didn't notice until you were by the window, but you heard all of it, didn't you?'
Sherlock sighed, only half-listening as he examined the faint, square marks on the wallpaper and blue-tac remnants: posters now long gone. The bookshelves, strewn with a few desultory ornaments, were bowed in the middle, suggesting they'd once held a number of heavy texts, and the room was cluttered with the stray possessions people often left behind when they moved out: a child vacating the home. A busy one, prone to stress, possibly one who had grown into an adult with murder in mind.

Vaguely, he hummed an affirmative to John's question, taking in the wear pattern on the floor: rapid pacing over many years, back and forth. Perhaps while parents argued, or while a new, unwanted sibling invaded their life. Initially, the line of it was fairly straight, the oldest damage easily charting seven or eight years of anxiety, but around the edges were fainter degradations. The pacer had become unsteady later in life, consistently so, blurring the rut of their own anguish.

So, an academic child, probably sent to private school, but not a boarder. They existed in a situation of high-stress while being exposed to the intermediate upper class within their educational environment. Lack of parental supervision plus an abrupt and unaccustomed surfeit of bad influences, all in addition to the volatile hormonal cocktail of adolescence and later, young adulthood.

Really, there was only one conclusion: drugs. Faced with a room like this, where would he hide his supply?

He checked cupboards and bounced up and down on the floorboards – depressingly firm – all the while vaguely aware of an expectant edge to John's silence. What had they been talking about? Oh, yes. Eavesdropping, hardly an unexpected behaviour on his part. 'Problem?'

John sighed, but it was more resigned than disappointed. 'It was a private conversation, Sherlock.'

'One about me,' he pointed out, stopping in the middle of the room and considering his options. There was no-one here to witness him but John, who was more than accustomed to Sherlock's strange behaviour. If he thought there was anything unusual about Sherlock tipping his head up and taking a deep, long breath through his nose, he didn't mention it.

'That's not the point,' John groused, but Sherlock barely paid it any mind. He was too busy sorting through the data the air was giving him. John's presence, sun-bright and tempting, was deliberately placed to one side, acknowledged and ignored as he took in the faint ghosts of fragrances past, almost obliterated now by regular cleaning. Detergents and polish: the cleaner's perfume. Beneath that, ink and paper, a faint smell that Sherlock labelled as "school" and yes, almost gone but still whispering its story to him, a hint of acidic sweetness that strafed across his palate.

Opening his eyes, he cocked his head, considering the bed as he got down on his hands and knees and explored the void beneath. Dust, feathers from the pillows – the cleaner had been cutting corners. Nothing made itself known to him, and he squinted at the narrow slats that supported the mattress before twisting in the confined space. At last, he was lying on his back like a mechanic inspecting a car's underbelly, and he smirked as he found what he was looking for.

Three planks were missing, the sockets where their ends fitted into the bed-frame creating perfect little niches. Not big enough to hide pornography, but large enough for cigarettes or more illicit substances.

'So is this how it's going to be? You listening in on me all the time?' John asked, and now he sounded petulant and disappointed from where he stood by Sherlock's exposed feet, even going so far as to give one shoe a light kick. 'I get that you don't trust people, but this is me. What do you think I'm going to do?'
Sherlock sighed in aggravation, trying to focus on two things at once. John was looking for reassurance, that much was plain to see, but couldn't he wait until Sherlock wasn't attempting to solve a murder?

'I was merely ensuring that any remaining fears I may have were unfounded, and that leaving Baker Street unnoticed would not be necessary. It's challenging to pack quickly at the best of times. With a landlady in residence and a flatmate, it would be almost impossible.' His voice took on a thoughtful edge as his fingertips roved a third empty hiding place in the bed's frame; he was too busy considering the murder to monitor his next words. 'I've already had to adjust several variables in my escape plan. Tiresome.'

He didn't notice John's abrupt silence, and a bolt of pure alarm shot through him as powerful fingers grabbed his calves and hauled him out from under the bed with minimal effort. His coat twisted behind his back, pillowing his head in a swathe of wool, but he was too busy staring at John to protest.

John, who had straddled his legs to drag him out and then dropped to one knee over Sherlock's hips as he shook his head fiercely. 'No,' he ordered, every inch a military man bar a faint waver in his voice. 'Is that what you're thinking? That you can just disappear one day? No!'

Sherlock's scowl was instantaneous, wrinkling his nose and pulling his lips back over his teeth. The part of him that was deeply impressed and somewhat intrigued by John's blatant show of strength was drowned out by hot fury and bitter disappointment at being spoken to in such a manner, by John of all people.

'I was unaware I was yours to command,' he sneered, pushing himself up on his elbows and well into John's personal space, almost nose-to-nose. He might be underneath the powerful wall of John's body and pinned between the staunch parenthesis of his thighs, but he was not about to lie back, submissive and demure, while yet another Alpha told him what he would and would not do.

The moment hung suspended around them, the air caustic with emotion. Sherlock flinched, his muscles tightening in expectation of attack as old memories of other, Johnless times stirred in his mind. He subconsciously steeled himself even as something curled up, hollow and bereft in his stomach, because of course it would come to this. Despite all his logical deductions of John's character, one fact remained irrefutable. John was an Alpha, and Sherlock should have known it was only a matter of time before he started acting like one.

'What?'

Sherlock blinked, thrown by the tone of John's voice. Not feral or furious, but horrified. He was shaking his head in a jagged burst, and Sherlock watched, confused, as he stopped seeing what he expected and began to notice the evidence written across the lines of John's face.

His eyebrows were tilted upwards, creased with worry and unhappiness. The colour had drained from his skin, leaving him diminished, and despite the way he was leaning over Sherlock, there was nothing threatening in the set of his shoulders. Instead they were hunched, tucked up towards his ears as his right hand shook where it rested on the floor, bracing his weight.

'I – I didn't mean it like that,' he whispered, issuing a long stream of profanity under his breath before shifting to scrub a hand over his face. Was he playing his words back in his head and acknowledging how they could be misconstrued? 'I didn't mean you couldn't go if you had to, I just –'

He swallowed, and Sherlock leaned back on his elbows, a recipient to the waves of distress coming from John. 'The thought of you being there one day and just gone the next. No chance to say
goodbye. No way of knowing if you'd left of your own free will or been taken...' He clenched his jaw, wrinkling his nose and breathing out a heavy sigh. 'I'd hate it.'

Sherlock was experienced at manipulating others. He knew how to make his voice crack and shake, but there was nothing so deliberate in John's words. He was truly unsettled by the idea of Sherlock disappearing, as if the idea had never occurred to him. And why would it? The closest experience John had to such an uncertain existence was the war in Afghanistan, where life and death strode side-by-side. But then, if the worst happened, his demise would have robbed him of concern for the consequences.

For Sherlock, life went on. It had been easier in the past, to uproot himself and vanish – to become nothing but a half-remembered face to most. These days, it occurred to him that his departure would leave a hole, not just for John, but Mrs Hudson and Lestrade. There were people here who would remember him, who would question his absence.

Inconvenient for the most part, but from John it was oddly touching.

Sherlock took a deep breath, clearing his throat and giving John's knee an awkward pat where it was pressed to the floor by his hip. His fingers tingled with the urge to linger, to rub his apology into the hub of bone sheathed by denim and flesh, but he made himself drop his hand. 'Circumstances change,' he pointed out, sighing as he tried to explain. 'For better, as well as worse. It is less likely to be a necessity now that there are those who consider my wishes relevant.'

John narrowed his eyes, and Sherlock experienced a stab of relief to know that there was someone, at least, who was willing to try and work out his poor explanations of sentiment. 'You mean you won't have to a do a runner because you've got people on your side?'

'You, Lestrade, and I suppose Mycroft, though that wasn't always the case.' Sherlock glanced away, trying not to see all the knowledge that wrote itself across John's face. The pity that such action – leaving his life behind and moving on to build anew – had ever been necessary, as well as the sadness that Sherlock had expected anything less of him than absolute allegiance.

He would have to let that caution go if he didn't want to endlessly sabotage their friendship. In the same way John had put his questions and his curiosity aside, Sherlock would have to neutralise the nagging doubt that no-one truly had his best interests at heart but himself.

That was easier said than done; he'd spent his life questioning the motivation of the people he met. However, John had proved time and again there was nothing sinister behind his actions, and he continued to do so, even when uncertainty made Sherlock jump to conclusions: a course of action he could admit was reprehensible for a man of his intelligence and profession.

'I apologise,' he mumbled at last, the shape of the words unusual on his tongue. It wasn't that he didn't show remorse, it was just that he rarely saw the point. 'Not for the eavesdropping, which is part of my job, but for the belief it was necessary.'

John shook his head, the line of his shoulders easing. 'I'd probably have done the same thing. I didn't mean to – ' He gestured helplessly, indicating the past few minutes with a wave of his hand.

'Order me around?' Sherlock suggested.

'I was going to say panic, actually,' John confessed. He bowed his head, tipping it to one side and looking at Sherlock. Odd, how a man almost sitting on him could still make himself look so harmlessly endearing. Sherlock doubted anyone else of his acquaintance would be so capable. 'It wasn't so much that I won't let you go. More like “Please don't leave me behind”.'
John bowed his head as if embarrassed by the admission, but Sherlock was too busy considering his words to notice. The particular consequence John highlighted as a concern had not even crossed his mind. Fleeing into obscurity had been the logical course of action to him, an emergency exit always left fractionally ajar should he need to make use of it. Previously, he thought of it in terms of his own departure and spared no consideration for who he might discard in his wake.

Perhaps because, before, there was no-one to miss him or be missed by him in turn.

Mycroft was a thorn in his side he couldn't remove if he tried, and everyone else was a transient contact, someone to be used and discarded. All that had changed, and he'd failed to observe it until it was too late. Now a web of acquaintances held him in place. If he left — in a week, a month, a year or more — there were people who would look for him. Even if he asked them not to, he knew that John, at least, would be unable to stop himself. He would not be content to allow their friendship to fade to a memory. He would never be happy to let Sherlock face his troubles alone. The realisation was both restrictive and comforting.

Hesitantly, he reached for John again, wrapping long fingers around his wrist and offering a squeeze of reassurance. Social niceties dictated what should be said: a hollow oath that he'd never leave, but Sherlock could not bring himself to lie. John would rather have the truth, for all that it was worth, than a reassuring falsehood.

'It used to be easy,' Sherlock murmured, meeting John's eye and holding it as if he could emphasise his point through a visual interrogation alone. 'Needless to say, that is no longer the case. It would not be a simple matter for me to walk away from Baker Street.'

He stopped, watching John's slow but diligent extrapolation. He knew Sherlock was not merely speaking of four walls and a roof over his head. He was talking about home, and all the connotations of heart and hearth that came with it. Not a place filled with furniture, but the nexus of everything Sherlock considered important in his life: John and the Work.

A gleam of hope chased across John's gaze and Sherlock felt, like a slack violin string pulled taut, the change in the narrow strip of atmosphere between them. It was as if the air bloomed with the sumptuous scent he had associated with John for so long. It curled in his nose and fogged his head, parching his throat as a delicate shiver arced up his spine, summoned forth by the weight of John over him and the warmth of his touch.

Attraction was not alien to him. He'd experienced it once or twice since his estrangement, but never dared to act on it. There was too much to hide, things that could not be concealed from a lover. The same reasons had been forefront in his mind that night back at Angelo's at the beginning of their friendship, before John knew what he was. Sherlock had dismissed John's tentative questions, closing off the avenue of a sexual relationship with practice and a stab of regret.

Yet still desire persisted, flaring at the strangest of times. More than once Sherlock had considered throwing caution to the wind, but that was a foolish thing to do in the name of scratching an itch. This was not the choiceless ultimatum that his heats foisted upon him when he was unbound or in Alexander's presence. This was something that appeared to have as much to do with heart and mind as his reproductive biology, attuned specifically to the man who currently hovered above him, watching him with half-hypnotised wonder. John's pupils were dilated, his pulse a visible flutter in the hollow of his throat, and his tongue formed a pink dart as he licked his lips, never removing his gaze from Sherlock's face.

After days of John barely touching him, Sherlock felt overwhelmed. His palm was hot where it cupped Sherlock's shoulder, fingers curved around the muscles while their breaths mingled with velveteen whispers. This strange stalemate in which they found themselves, locked in close
proximity and pressed into a seam at various points, provided a flood of sensation. Not unique in itself – this was hardly the first time they'd ended up in such a position – but now things were different. John knew his secret, and like this, clasped in a moment brimming with promise, it was difficult to remember what, precisely, remained to hold them back.

The bang of the door on its hinges shattered the moment, and John's body twitched with alarm even as Sherlock's heart crashed against his ribs in shock. It was a painful fracture, and the real world, where everything was far from simple, abruptly interceded.

'Am I interrupting something?' Lestrade sounded torn between amusement and embarrassment, and honestly, it was no surprise John lost at poker when he gave himself away so readily. His flush was bright scarlet, but at least he had the sense to glower in Lestrade's direction as he staggered to his feet.

'Argument,' he said succinctly. 'Just setting some things straight.'

Sherlock huffed a sigh, crushing his disappointment as he grimly returned to the job at hand. He would consider the matter of his relationship with John – whatever that may be – later. For now, there were more pressing matters to which he should attend.

Gripping the underside of the bed, he dragged himself back under to continue his search. 'Drugs,' he called out, hearing Lestrade's footsteps approach at a rapid pace before two voices, his and John's, spoke in unison.

'What?'

'That's your motive. Drugs. Whoever used to inhabit this room was a long-term user. There are faint grooves of wear in the wood where they removed and replaced their stash during the time they were here.' Sherlock sighed, patting the final hollow before wriggling out and climbing stiffly to his feet. Immediately, John stepped closer to his side, a bare hand-span away. It was mute support, and Sherlock glanced in his direction before he continued.

'Nothing's been left behind, but there may be some residue on the bed-frame itself. Have Anderson check, if he's capable. Amphetamines of some description are the most likely substance, speed being the drug of choice for a stressed student. The efficacy reduces over time and the expense of gaining the same high increases exponentially. A sizeable inheritance after Daddy's murder-suicide bid would fill the financial gap nicely.' He took another breath, reading the air and the evidence in the space of a heartbeat. 'You're looking for an Alpha daughter in her early twenties. One who fell in with a bad crowd a long time ago and loved her fix more than even the father she adored.'

Lestrade folded his arms, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Sherlock's pockets before catching John's gaze. Something meaningful passed between them, and Sherlock spared a thought for his sock index, which would no doubt be in disarray thanks to John's rummaging by the end of the day.

'Don't waste your time.' He glared at them both. 'Find the daughter, and you've found your killer. She's clever, prone to forethought, and already had a buyer lined up for the books she took with her. There are enough funds there to tide her through until she gets her inheritance. Or at least that's what she thinks she'll get out of this. Perhaps a jail sentence will come as a surprise.'

'It'd shock me and all,' Lestrade replied, rocking back on his heels and pursing his lips as Sherlock frowned in puzzlement. 'Amelia Donnelly, Alpha daughter, twenty-three –'

'You found her already?' Sherlock blinked. 'She's not as clever as I thought.'
– was found dead about three hours ago. She's in the morgue.’

Sherlock stopped, his body motionless as he absorbed the new information, the case abruptly acquiring more angles and shattering the light of his deductions into broken rainbows of possibility. ‘Does the time of her demise provide her with the ultimate alibi?’ he asked facetiously, watching Lestrade's face.

‘You mean “I was dead at the time”? No. She bought it about two hours after her family were killed. Cause is unconfirmed. Molly Hooper's got her waiting for you.’

‘Then why are we still here? Come on, John!’ He strode out of the room, ignoring Lestrade's agreement to meet them at the morgue as he hurried down the stairs. The open front door was an arch of morning-light, and he stepped out onto the pavement, pulling on his gloves and parting his lips to hurry John along.

Before he could speak, the breeze changed direction, and Sherlock froze where he stood. He stared along the street, inhaling the scent that edged London's ozone. It smelt like brackish water overlaid with something rotten-sweet, and a slick of oily nausea turned his stomach and greased his throat.

It was a suggestion in the wind, but the sickly perfume brought the edifice of his thoughts crashing to the ground. The case fled his mind, forgotten as he examined his surroundings, but there was nothing to greet him in the doorways and shadows of the street. No dim figure with a leering smile.

A second later, the odour was gone.

‘You all right?’ John's voice made Sherlock turn, and he blinked at the taxi waiting for them at the kerb. John was holding the door open for him, his brow cinched in affectionate concern. It was such a normal sight, commonplace in their existence, and Sherlock drew in a shivering breath as he nodded.

Climbing into the vehicle, he slid all the way along the back seat and jammed himself into the far corner, glaring out of the window at the white, sunlit walls of the nearby buildings. It was tempting to tuck his knees up to his chest, but he resisted the urge, folding his arms around himself instead as he turned to look behind them.

‘You sure?’ John asked, his voice suggesting he didn't believe Sherlock for a minute. ‘You look a bit –’ He hesitated, searching for the right word as he followed Sherlock's line of sight, probably seeing nothing but the empty street receding into the distance as the taxi took them away. ‘Spooked.’

Sherlock swallowed, licking his dry lips and speaking in a tense voice. ‘I thought I –’ He trailed off, shaking his head as he forced his shoulders to relax. It was a trick of the mind, that was all. The last couple of weeks had brought old memories to the surface, which in turn made fools of his senses. The smell had been a recollection from times past, not a product of the present. ‘Never mind.’

This was his life now: cases and John, murder and the game. Alexander had no place in it. Of that, Sherlock was certain.

‘Never mind.’
Amelia Donnelly lay on the mortuary slab, her skin as pallid as the sheet that covered her. She looked painfully young, and John shuffled his feet, trying to remind himself that this was the woman Sherlock thought had shot her family. It was difficult to picture her with a gun in her hands. She didn't look capable of that kind of violence, but appearances could be deceiving.

His gaze lifted from the corpse to the man looming over it, taking in everything she had to offer with a tilt of his head. Sherlock's expression was blank, showing nothing of the theories that raced through his skull. However, John still remembered the way he had looked, less than an hour ago, on the floor of the suspect's bedroom: all wide, stunning eyes and parted lips, his original anger softening into something that held John captivated.

He shouldn't have done that – grabbed Sherlock – not even to drag him out from under the bed, but he'd acted on instinct. Sherlock had mentioned, casual and offhand, about his ever-ready plan to leave, and all John's thoughts collapsed into selfishness and panic.

Even now, his fingers itched with the urge to grab Sherlock's shoulders again, to pin him in place and yell “Don't you dare leave me behind!” but he squashed it down, trying to still the tremulous uncertainty that bubbled in his gut. Sherlock had reassured him it was unlikely, his deep voice hypnotic as he explained that John's presence changed the equation of that decision. Perhaps he hadn't been explicit, but John had grown used to refining Sherlock's words, and he'd heard the message hidden between the vague allusions.

He was more to Sherlock than a convenient flatmate. They were best friends, connected by mutual feeling, and that was not something Sherlock could easily put aside. From a man unconcerned with sentiment, his words were practically a declaration, one which left John standing on the shifting frontier of their relationship and wondering what changes tomorrow would bring.

'Pass me some tweezers?'

Sherlock's request jerked him from his thoughts, and he reached out to comply, almost dropping them when Sherlock's fingers brushed against his own. A wave of heat shimmered down his arm, making nests in every joint and flaring through his chest. The guilt that followed was an unwelcome addition, and he glanced away with a mumbled apology, sensing Sherlock cast a glare in his direction.

'And for God's sake, stop apologising,' he snapped. 'If it bothered me, I wouldn't hesitate to tell you so.'

'Sorry,' John said, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. 'I just...' He stumbled to a halt, not sure how to explain, or even if Sherlock was listening to him. He seemed engrossed in whatever he was doing, and John gave up with a sigh. He didn't really want to expose the truth to Sherlock's derision anyway. He was unlikely to be charmed by John's fumbling efforts at respect.

Before, it hadn't been an issue. He'd thought the vivid moments of connection they experienced went both ways. Now, John wasn't so sure. Sherlock might not have told him much, but he got the impression that he had spent years in a world where his wants and desires had been irrelevant, and people ignored his opinion. John didn't want to be the same. He didn't want to touch Sherlock like he had every right when, in fact, the opposite was true. Despite Sherlock's assurances to the contrary, John wasn't convinced he would tell him to back off. So he exercised restraint, missing every idle bit of contact so intensely that it became a physical ache.
John was half-starved for the warmth of Sherlock's tentative, friendly affection. Every brush of their skin was laden with meaning: more intimate than ever before. Really, it was no surprise that their argument in the suspect's room had changed into something else, treading the fine line between anger and passion. It was one thing for it to happen when they were both on their feet, drunk on the rush of a case, but this time there had been no such excuse. All his good intentions vanished like mist, and now he couldn't get the image of Sherlock beneath him out of his head, eyes sultry and his head tilted, exposing his neck in tempting surrender.

What would have happened if Greg hadn't chosen that second to barge through the door? Would he have kissed Sherlock? Would the gesture have been returned? John could almost taste it, the soft press of that mouth and the swipe of Sherlock's tongue, and he drew in a sharp breath as he licked his lips, pressing them together as if he could chase the fantasy.

A couple of weeks ago the only thing standing in the way had been John's own uncertainties. That and the faint, regretful edges of Sherlock's reluctance, which made sense now he knew the truth. If they'd been lovers, Sherlock could never have hidden what he was. Now, that impediment was gone. Theoretically, John was already aware what he'd find under the sleek lines and layers of fine cloth that covered Sherlock's frame, but there were other obstacles to consider.

Sherlock's Alpha was only the beginning. Wherever he was and whatever he thought of his erstwhile Omega, the man was still a factor in all of this. The elite would have rules about what to do with others who tried to encroach on their bond. Perhaps justifiable murder was an urban legend, but there would be other punishments waiting for him. Technically, John was already on the wrong side of the law for "sheltering" Sherlock, or whatever. If he took Sherlock to bed, matters could only get worse. His personal safety wasn't his main concern. He could take whatever was dealt his way and accept it as a worthy price for the honour of knowing Sherlock, platonically or otherwise. However, he wasn't the only one involved. In a way, Sherlock was in a more questionable position. John would be charged with a crime, one requiring evidence and prosecution. There'd be no such procedure for Sherlock. If Alexander had suspicions, he would act on them, and John loathed to imagine what Sherlock might face if he ever tracked him down.

"He came after me once, about eight years ago. The results were – unpleasant."

Leaning back against the lab bench, John stared at nothing, the unreliable memory of Sherlock's words echoing in his ears. It was just a hint, worrying in its obscurity, like a black veil hiding the face of something gruesome, and it made his blood run cold. No, just sharing a flat with Sherlock was dangerous enough. If they were more to each other – and John's heart cramped with brief, helpless longing for what could never be – there was no telling what his Alpha might mete out as revenge. John couldn't bring himself to leave Sherlock's side, to turn his back on his friend in the name of Sherlock's safety, but nor would he make matters worse.

The possibility of a deeper relationship may lie between them, profound and delicate, but it was not something John dared nurture, not if it was Sherlock who would bear the consequences.

The squeak of the doors' rubber seals against the linoleum floor shattered his distraction, making him look up and blink the haze from his eyes. Lestrade ambled in, a paper cup of coffee with its lid in place clutched in his hand as he chatted to Molly. Their happy gossip faded away as they approached, tired, smiling faces falling into weary lines as they took in the young woman on the table.

'He got something for me yet?' Greg asked, glancing over at John.

'He's not said anything, and I haven't had a chance to look at the body.'
'You may as well rectify that,' Sherlock cut in, stepping back and gesturing to the corpse. 'She bathed after killing her family, but there's still gunshot residue embedded in her cuticles. I can't find any signs of a struggle nor trauma that could result in her death. There are no track marks on her arms, and there's no erosion of the nasal cavity. Investigate her stomach contents; you'll probably find evidence of long-term oral administration. Meth, I suspect. She wasn't after the rush; she wanted a lasting high.'

John put on a pair of latex gloves as he approached, running through a depressingly familiar checklist in his head. Murder left its marks, both glaring and inconsequential. The girl hadn't been stabbed or shot. Her flesh remained unbreached by any wounds, so he progressed, searching for petechial haemorrhaging, a broken hyoid or other signs of oxygen deprivation. There were no bruises to indicate force, and no discolouration stained her skin. To all intents and purposes, she appeared to have fallen asleep and never woken up.

'She was found back at her flat, just lying on the bed,' Greg explained. 'No drugs paraphernalia, no sign of thrashing around or a struggle, no indication of an intruder. However, there was a bag full of family photos from the Donnelly's home. She was in every single one.'

'Which was why she removed them in the first place,' Sherlock murmured. 'She thought the police wouldn't draw a strong connection between herself and her victims. Perhaps she planned to claim estrangement.' He handed Molly something in a Petri dish, and she squinted down at it in confusion.

'What's this?'

'Leaf fragments. They were caught deep in her hair,' he explained. 'If they were borne by the wind, they would be somewhere more superficial. At her temple or crown, perhaps. It could be irrelevant, but at this stage it's impossible to tell. I'll try and establish a visual identification in a minute. If you find any other particulates during autopsy --'

'I'll let you know,' Molly promised, a shy flush heating her cheeks.

'There's nothing noticeable on the body that could be cause of death,' John said, smiling faintly in her direction before shrugging his shoulders. 'If I had to guess, I'd say she was poisoned, but it's discreet. Tainted drugs, maybe?'

Sherlock hummed in agreement, and John scolded himself for the comfort the sound spread through his bones.

'An overdose would produce evidence of a seizure, vomit in her throat, that sort of thing.' Sherlock picked up her left arm, exposing the unmarked plane of her skin and the crook of her elbow. 'This girl's been using for years: she had a trusted dealer and she knew her ideal dose. Something else killed her. Something we can't see.'

'Brilliant,' Greg muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. 'So we're pretty sure she did in the Donnellys for the money, both from the books and the inheritance -- or so she hoped?'

'Mmmm, it seems she didn't fear the police's crime-solving abilities. She was relatively clever, but hardly ingenious in her execution of the murders.' Sherlock stepped away and shrugged out of his coat, unlooping the scarf from around his neck in a fluid motion before giving the back of his collar a quick tug. John had never given the nervous gesture much thought, putting it down to habit. Now he realised it was Sherlock's way of ensuring his bite stayed hidden from view.

'Tie her to the murder weapon; it's the most reliable way to close the case. DNA evidence will be present, but questionable considering she was a long-term inhabitant of the premises.' He took the
particulates back from Molly's grasp, already engrossed in his examination as he headed for the lab, leaving her to queue the woman's body for an imminent autopsy.

'I should have more for you in a few hours,' she promised, looking from Greg to John and back again. 'We're a bit backed up down here, but she's high priority so it shouldn't be too long.'

They both gave their thanks as John stripped off his gloves and pitched them into a nearby bin. He let the lid smack shut with a satisfying clang before he washed his hands and followed Greg out.

Instinctively, he walked fast, too aware of Sherlock's habit of dashing off without him to be comfortable taking it slow. However, before he could go more than a few paces, the DI's hand caught his elbow, and he turned to see Greg watching him, his dark gaze serious. The fingers around his coffee cup were clenched tight, his knuckles prominent as he let John go and reached into the inside pocket of his jacket.

'Look, don't take this the wrong way or anything, but I thought you might find this useful.' He held out a handful of folded photocopies, a tremor visible in his hand.

Haltingly, John took it, flipping open the pages and reading the title. It looked like the chapter of a book, one written in dense legalise. 'What's this? “Omega Ownership Acts”.' He frowned, noticing the string of dates that went back centuries before glaring at Greg. 'Ownership?' he repeated, raising his eyebrows as he waited for an explanation.

The DI pressed his fingers to his temple, his smile apologetic as he squared his shoulders. 'What I walked in on at the crime-scene today –'

'An argument,' John protested, taking a step forward and waving a hand in the direction of the labs. 'You know what Sherlock's like!'

'Yeah, I do, but I can also see what's right in front of me.' Greg held up a pacifying hand, shaking his head. 'I don't care. I don't care what's going on between you. Maybe you've not been shagging each other since the start, but there's always been something there. Don't try and tell me I'm making that up. I'm just –' His shoulders slumped. 'I'm just trying to make sure you know as much as possible. God knows Sherlock's probably not told you shit, but at least I can give you this. It's an overview of the laws regarding Omegas, bound or not, as well as some of the court cases and their outcomes. Not that there have been many of those.'

The paper creased in his clenched hand as he glanced down at the tiny print. 'What, most Omegas do what they're told, is that it?'

'Don't be daft.' Greg took the lid off his coffee, rewarding himself with a healthy gulp before staring down into the dark liquid. 'Pretty much any case involving an Omega is all about the highest circles of society. Most never see a public court. It's handled in settlements or mutual agreement, or pistols at bloody dawn for all I know. We can't investigate crimes that are never reported, and they never seem to tell anyone a damn thing. Sherlock's proof enough of that.'

Frustration echoed in Greg's voice, and John bowed his head. 'So, you've given me this to show me what I might be up against?'

'It seemed like the sensible thing to do. If this all came out, you and me could be in deep shit, and being Alphas makes it worse. The assumption would be... Well, I'm guessing I don't have to draw you a picture? It doesn't matter if you've never touched him, they'll try and prove you guilty of everything they can think of.' He tapped the pages again. 'There aren't many cases where an Alpha of the non-elite's been brought to trial for this kind of thing, but there are a couple. Read them. That
way, whatever you do, you know the risks.'

'We're not lovers,' John muttered, feeling it necessary to repeat that fact.

Greg nodded, then shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm not actually trying to warn you off. The elite are a law unto themselves most of the time, and they're corrupt as hell. That and, as far as any court's concerned, what Sherlock has to say is irrelevant. Even if it weren't for the whole bond situation, Omegas can't testify. There's a reason Sherlock's never called as a witness.'

'And never gets the credit,' John added, still stung by the inherent injustice. 'If he was discovered, then every case he helped you with –'

'All the evidence we got from his advice would be inadmissible.' Greg nodded as John swore, scratching at his ear. 'Mycroft may have implied that he'd deal with that should the situation ever arise, which is a pretty terrifying thought, and it's not like we wouldn't be in a mess for letting him onto scenes anyway. He's not an official consultant...' He trailed off, shaking his head like he didn't want to consider how much trouble they'd be in if push came to shove. 'Take a look at that.' He gestured to the rumpled paper in John's grip. 'It might fill in a few gaps for you.'

John took a deep breath, folding the pages and slipping them in his pocket. 'Thanks.' He watched a burst of relief cross Greg's face. 'I appreciate it.'

'Yeah, well. Every little helps, right?' He cleared his throat, looking around for a bin for his empty cup. 'Before I met Sherlock, I wouldn't have cared about Omegas, not really. Now, I probably only know a fraction of the crap they have to put up with. There's nothing I can do to help them, I haven't got that kind of power and I don't think there's anyone on their side who has. Sherlock, on the other hand... I'll do what I can for him, and you, even if it's just getting hold of photocopies and keeping my mouth shut.'

He clapped John on the shoulder as he passed, heading for the door that would lead him out of Bart's labyrinthine depths. 'Take care, John. I'll see you soon.'

'You too.' John watched him go, his fingers trailing over the bulge in his pocket. It felt clandestine, somehow, like secret knowledge: a glimpse into the life Sherlock had once lived. He'd read it later, back at the flat and in the privacy of his room, away from Sherlock's inquisitive gaze and scathing commentary. At least that way he didn't have to worry about modulating his reaction to whatever details were contained in the text.

He turned towards the labs, heading for the doors that led to the right corridor. However, before he got to them, he saw Mike Stamford approaching from the other side, his big face cheerful and his glasses flashing in the harsh fluorescent light.

'Don't tell me he's left already?' John asked as Mike pushed open the door, greeting him as gladly as ever.

'No, he's still there. Eyes glued to a microscope like always. He sent me after you, actually. Something about letting you get a whiff of telikostrone? He told me you'd never been exposed.' Mike's face glowed with fond recollection. 'I explained we were all given the chance in our third year, but then I remembered you were going out with someone back then. Lisa, wasn't it? She was terrible for convincing you class wasn't worth your time!'

John blinked, laughing in disbelief. That was true. She'd been very persuasive that day, plump lips around him, her cheeks hollow and her tongue dancing along his length as the hours slipped away. It was only later he'd found out that the professor had exposed his classmates, in a carefully monitored
environment, to the basic chemical that made the scent of an Omega's heat so compelling.

'I never told him that,' he replied, shaking his head.

'Yeah, well. You know Sherlock; he can figure it out just by looking at your right eyebrow.' Mike beckoned him towards a sealed room. 'I thought the army would have shown you what it was like though, in case you came across it on duty?'

'They gave us inhibitors,' John explained. 'Why bother teaching us what to look out for when they can just remove the issue all together? A soldier doesn't need an acute sense of smell, so the side effects weren't a problem, and it protected us from any insurgent Omegas we might come across.'

Mike hummed in understanding, donning a white coat and gesturing to one of the rooms. 'Well, we've got to follow procedure. It takes ages to get through even a small class, and then you're left with a lot of shuffling, embarrassed Alphas and the Betas enjoying a good laugh at their expense.'

'It doesn't affect you?' John asked, trying to sound nonchalant. 'Not at all?'

'It smells like oranges to me, but that's it.' Mike shrugged before he continued, 'The room's completely sealed. Stand on the mark in the middle of the floor; don't approach the fume cupboard area. I'll leave the sample open for three seconds. It's enough to give you a realistic dose of what you would feel like if you passed an Omega in heat. You'll need to stay in there until the air's been purified with a neutraliser and ventilated, which takes about five minutes.'

'Hey, wait.' John managed a weak grin and thought, not for the first time, how lucky he was to have Mike for a friend, because the look he was getting was one of faint amusement and honest understanding. 'What exactly should I expect?'

Mike chortled. 'Nothing too mortifying. A quick blast like this will stimulate arousal, naturally, but the whole point of the exercise is to let students know the first signs, on the very slim chance they come across an Omega in the course of their career. It allows Alpha doctors to protect themselves and their patients.' He frowned, a picture of earnest concern. 'You don't have to do this, you know. Sherlock made it sound like your idea, but...'

'No, it's—it's fine. He's right. I wouldn't know what was happening to me until it was too late, probably.' John might not have been prepared for this, but he suspected Sherlock's motives were more complex than simply improving John's awareness, and he knew better than to try and second-guess him. 'So I just go in here?'

Mike waved his hand towards the door in invitation, moving into the adjoining room as John took his place on the black X taped on the floor. The chamber was entirely bare, clinical and brightly lit. Only the ventilation fans in the ceiling provided any contrast, and John looked up at them as the sound of the lock clicking closed echoed through the air.

'Ready?' Mike asked, his voice made tinny by the speakers, and John nodded as he watched a tiny vial being placed into a glass box on the wall. Mike handled it through gloves set in the side of the Perspex, as if he was dealing with something as volatile as plutonium. Privately, John suspected all this was just being overly-cautious – health and safety gone mad – and he folded his arms, rocking back on his heels as Mike removed the lid.

It was already replaced by the time the chemical diffused to John. One minute, he was wondering what all the fuss was about. The next...

A wave crashed over his head, swamping every sense as his knees tried to buckle. The air turned
smoky in his mouth as his vision tunnelled, and his pupils dilated so fast that his eyes seemed to buzz. He was painfully aware of his body becoming hot and swollen with awareness. His hair prickled across his scalp and down his arms, shivering erect as electricity bolted down his spine and ignited in the pit of his stomach.

'Jesus Christ,' he whispered, his voice little more than a husk as his body responded. His senses narrowed down to the synthetic signature in the air, and he could feel his gaze moving, searching the empty room instinctively as his ears strained to pick up any sign that he wasn't alone. Every inch of skin was hypersensitive to the chafe of his clothes, and he grimly tugged his jacket closed around him, thrusting his hands in his pockets to hide the uncomfortable constriction of his jeans between his legs.

Never, in his entire life, had he experienced something to which his body was so viscerally attuned, like an empty vessel that had been waiting for this moment to find its fill. His hairline itched with a fine sheen of sweat, and his leg muscles thrummed as if he'd suffered a massive adrenaline rush. He longed to pace and prowl, but he managed to hold firm to Mike's instructions, staying on the mark on the floor. The amount of concentration required was huge, and he closed his eyes, scowling hard as he tried to force his body back under his control.

It took him a while to notice the hum of the ventilation fans and the hiss of the neutraliser. Already, the telikostrone was fading from the air, and John shivered as a new jolt of desperation shot through him. He wanted to chase down the elusive phantoms of hormone, to pin it down and hold it close. It was a glimpse of the Alpha mating drive, terrifying in its ferocity. He'd only been exposed for a few seconds. What would it be like if he was actually sharing this space with an Omega? Would he have the mental capacity to hold on to rational thought, or would all that vanish beneath the strength of a biological imperative?

As it was, his body was still taut with arousal, shivery and grudging at the deprivation. It wasn't just a case of an awkward erection. His entire frame reacted as if he'd been primed for sex. His spine was tense, his balls felt heavy and there was a faint constriction around the base of his hard cock that he'd not experienced since puberty. Not a full knot, but the start of one.

'Bloody hell.' John thought he heard Mike chuckle from the other room, and he allowed a wry grin to cross his lips as he thought of diagnosing patients and savaged corpses: anything to try and get his desperate desire on a leash. The problem was that it wasn't some mental fantasy that had kicked him off, but a substance in the air. This wasn't a situation of imagination and reaction, but chemical cause and effect.

'Take deep breaths through your nose,' Mike advised through the speaker, gently reminding John of medical facts he had learned years ago. 'Telikostrone binds to receptors in the sinuses and throat. The neutraliser will denature it, but you need to really suck it down.'

Obediently, John did as he was told, embarrassed that all his training had gone out of the window. This was basic stuff, but it was difficult to remember anything logical through the fog of want that curled through him, making him jittery and feral.

His diaphragm swelled with each gulp of air, and after several minutes he felt more like himself. His hands shook in his pockets, his knees were weak and elastic, and a grinding pain dwelt in his temples, but at least he wasn't at risk of passing out from lack of blood to his brain. His flagging erection was uncomfortably sensitive, but he could probably walk without limping. More to the point, he could think in more than needy, monosyllabic concepts of wet, tight, heat, want.

'Will you be all right to come out of there now?' Mike asked, the amusement in his voice fond, rather than mocking. 'I can give you a bit longer if you need it.'
'No, I'm –' John cleared his throat, trying not to croak as he continued, ' – I'm fine. I'd quite like to get out of here, actually.' He stumbled across the room, embarrassingly uncoordinated. It was like he was drunk and hungover all at once, and he almost fell out of the door as Mike opened it. If it wasn't for his friend's hand on his elbow, he might have sprawled flat on his face, and he could only mumble his thanks as he was guided to a chair against the corridor wall.

'Steady breaths,' Mike advised. 'You've probably hyper-ventilated. Not unusual. It always takes Alphas a bit funny. Makes me wonder what I'm missing.'

John pressed his hands to his eyes before dragging them down his cheeks. 'Consider yourself lucky. That was –' He paused, trying to find an appropriate word. 'Kind of shocking, actually.'

'What did it smell like?' Mike leaned back against the wall, his arms folded and his expressive face intrigued as he watched John hesitate.

'Nothing.' He frowned at the response, but it was true. Although the hormone had heightened all his senses, there hadn't been a detectable fragrance or taste to it. It was completely odourless, and yet there was no denying what it had done to him. 'Nothing at all.'

Mike smiled at his apparent bafflement, clapping a hand on his shoulder. 'That's normal. It tends to piss off a lot of Alphas, actually. To you lot, the pheromone on its own is undetectable until you start reacting, you know, physically.' He chuckled, probably because John's face felt like it was on fire. 'Of course, naturally, it's not released by itself. There are other substances that act more noticeably on the other senses, but they vary from one Omega to another. You'd smell an Omega in heat thanks to that combination, but telikostrone's the only one that's consistent, and it's the one that triggers rut.'

John grimaced, wishing the terminology didn't make it all sound so animal. Still, there wasn't a different word he could think of that encapsulated what he'd gone through. Sex had been all his body cared about and all his mind could comprehend.

A shudder worked its way down his frame. If an Omega had been in the room, would he have stopped if they'd asked him to? Would they have been able to deny him, even if they wanted to? The issue of Omegas and consent wasn't explicitly stated, at least not among the normal working classes. They never crossed paths, so it wasn't a concern, and somehow he doubted the elite considered it important. They probably thought that if an Omega's body said yes, then what did it matter what protests they actually voiced out loud?

Nausea clamped in John's stomach, and he swallowed it back, letting his hands dangle between his spread knees as he let out a sigh. He thought of himself as a considerate lover. He didn't treat his bed-mates like toys, the way some people did. He respected them, but if the pheromone released by an Omega could make him lose sight of that, then what would it do to someone who felt entitled?

'John, are you all right?' Mike hovered at his shoulder, his concern plain to see. 'You don't look too good.'

'What? No, I'm fine.' He managed an unconvincing grin, easing his way to his feet. Sitting down had done the trick, and the strange mix of thrills and aches had subsided to a background thrum of malaise. 'It just threw me a bit, that's all. I'd better get back to the lab, or Sherlock really will be gone without me. Thanks for – for that.'

'Not a problem. If there's anything else I can do...' He left the offer trailing, and for a minute John wondered if he knew what Sherlock was hiding. However, there was no sign of guile on his face. It was just Mike being his usual, affable self, and he nodded his thanks as he said goodbye and headed towards the lab at a march, his knees rigid to hide the steady ebb of shivers that prickled over him.
He shoved open the door, his lips parted to demand an explanation, but the words didn't make it. Sherlock was sitting in front of the microscope, but at John's entrance his head snapped up like an animal catching a scent. His slender nostrils flared as his eyebrows curved upwards, and his indrawn breath hissed loudly in the peace of the laboratory. He looked at John as if he'd never seen him before, all opaque uncertainty and unusual innocence, and a dart of awareness rippled through John's body.

'You all right?' he asked, glancing around to see if he could find anything that might have caused Sherlock to react in such a way. A glance over his shoulder showed him the doorway was empty. There was no one there, nothing that could make Sherlock look so stunned, but it reminded him of how twitchy he'd been when he left the Donnelly's: on-edge and tense.

Sherlock made a strange, choked noise, and John frowned, watching a tint of pink warm those pale cheeks before he seemed to shake himself awake. His breath left him in an irritated rush as he hastily redirected his gaze down the barrel of the microscope before glancing at the computer screen to his right. 'I'm fine. I see Stamford did as I suggested.'

John risked a glance downwards, checking there was no noticeable evidence of his earlier arousal. 'Yeah,' he acknowledged, wandering over to the lab bench. 'Thanks for that, by the way. Maybe a little warning next time?'

Sherlock's brow creased. 'Why? What good would that do?'

'It'd make me feel better.' He came to a halt at Sherlock's side, noticing the way he fidgeted in his chair. Was it his imagination, or was Sherlock breathing a bit faster than usual? 'Are you going to explain to me why I just spent a fairly humiliating few minutes inhaling telikostrone? Was it another experiment?'

Sherlock shot him a sideways glance, wetting his lips and clearing his throat before he turned to face John. His luminous gaze skimmed down to his shoes and back up again as if trying to decide whether or not an honest answer would be appreciated.

Finally, he spoke. 'You're not convinced that the biochemistry of my scent, faint as it is, leaves you unaffected. It's been preying on your mind, making you question your behaviour from the day we met to this very moment. Your attempts to find support for my statement in medical texts, several of which you've left lying around the flat, have failed.'

John blinked, swallowing tightly at the clinical explanation. 'So, what? You decided that, if I knew what it did to me, I'd stop doubting what you said?'

'Obviously.' Sherlock's shoulders shifted in a shrug. 'If you'd been exposed to telikostrone during your training, you would never have harboured any uncertainty in the first place. Was I wrong?'

John frowned, clenching his hand into a fist at his side before releasing it again. In the privacy of his head, he had wondered if all this – their vast compatibility and intense friendship – had been due to some subconscious response to Sherlock's true gender. He might not be putting out enough of anything to bring on a typical Alpha reaction, but John couldn't help remembering the way he'd fallen, gladly, into Sherlock's crazy way of life. Before, he'd thought it was just because Sherlock was unique, amazing, beyond-belief, but lately, he'd started to wonder if there was more to it: a chemical influence.

This was Sherlock's way of putting John's uncertainties to rest.

'No.' He sighed, folding his arms. 'I suppose if you were producing telikostrone, even a little, it's not
'Definitely not,' Sherlock muttered. 'The effects are not exactly subtle. There are other things Omegas produce that promote care-taking and protective instincts in Alphas, but they shouldn't have any undue impact.'

'So they wouldn't encourage me to, I dunno, shoot a cabbie to save you from yourself?' John asked, unable to keep the pointed edge from his tone. 'That's hardly normal behaviour.'

'For the average individual, no. For you?' Sherlock lifted his chin, defiance and approval warring in his features. 'Your actions are entirely the result of your own character, John. Lestrade didn't show any signs of unnecessary vigilance with regards my safety before he was aware of what I was. It was only when informed of my status that he became smothering. He shrugged. 'You have a need for danger, which I could provide. You required a flat and I had one handy. You were deep in apathetic depression, and I made you see beyond it. Your loyalty has its root in genuine emotion, not a transitory chemical fog. Needless to say, the same applies to me. I do not appreciate your company simply because you are an Alpha. In fact, many would argue that's a point against you.'

John let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding, looking up at the ceiling before glancing at Sherlock. 'You could have just told me,' he muttered.

'First-hand experience was the most efficient way of providing you with the concrete evidence you required.' He shifted the slide out from under the microscope, putting it to one side before glaring at the computer, which was attempting to match the particles from Amelia Donnelly's hair with one from the database. 'I take it that it was illuminating?'

John swallowed, giving a curt nod. 'You could say that.' The memory of his fraying physical restraint and the dulling of his conscious mind was not one that would fade in a hurry. In a restricted environment, it was an education, but the “what if’s” plagued him. What if Sherlock had started producing it again, thanks to some kind of glandular illness or glitch of biology? What if John had come home one day to find his flatmate trapped in the ravages of heat? It wasn't beyond the realms of possibility, and the thought of them both – one struggling to ask for consent and the other possibly unable to give it in any meaningful way – raked fear's fingers across his skin.

'How could you be such an idiot?' The question slipped out before he could stop it, and Sherlock's head whipped around, a protest already perched on his lips as his spine snapped straight. Before he could speak, John hurried on, slicing a hand through the air. 'Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Sherlock. How could you think sharing a flat with an Alpha was a good idea? What if you'd ended up in heat somehow?'

Sherlock clenched his teeth, his annoyance plain in the angles of his knuckles as he gripped the edge of the lab bench. 'Would you believe it didn't cross my mind?'

'No.' A mirthless laugh bubbled between John's lips. 'No, I wouldn't. You think of everything, Sherlock. I was exposed for less than a minute, and I could barely remember why anything mattered except getting off!'

Sherlock frowned, regarding John carefully. 'It scared you.' A glimmer of apology was written in the line of his mouth. 'Didn't Stamford warn you what to expect?'

'Not enough to prepare me for that!' John cufféd his hands through his hair, gritting his teeth and pushing through to the core of his concern. 'Jesus, Sherlock. I knew it was potent, but I never believed it was anything like that. If you'd gone into heat there's no telling what I could have done to you.'
With a sigh, Sherlock got to his feet, shaking his head as he grabbed a pipette and started doing something with solutions. 'Don't be ridiculous. Even if I went into full-blown, overt oestrus, you would not be driven to react in the way you imagine. Yes, it might be arousing, but it would not elicit the same irresistible urge. Your rational mind would remain intact.'

John made a cracked sound of disbelief. 'I seriously doubt that.'

Sherlock pulled a face, as if further explanation was beneath him. However, after a few seconds of careful silence, he began to speak. 'I keep telling you, I experience heats. Obscure, admittedly, but they're still present. I'm still going through the same cycle. I still experience arousal and attraction for individuals outside my bond, but it's not the same. The reaction you fear, the one where I'm supposedly gagging for it and making you feel the same way is technically called pyresus.'

John shook his head. 'Does it matter what it's called?'

'Sure.' He scowled. 'At least in regards to my experiences. An Omega's separation from their Alpha makes all the difference. You're aware of bond biochemistry? Substances in the Alpha's saliva attach to cellular receptors in the flesh at the nape of an Omega's neck.'

'Yeah.' John frowned, struggling to remember the details he'd learnt at medical school. 'They enter the bloodstream and act to restructure various glands and receptors in the Omega.'

'Exactly.' Sherlock dripped some liquid onto whatever was on the slide, watching it with narrowed eyes before looking up. 'It subtly alters the structure of the scent molecules I produce, making them specific to Alexander. Biologically, we are each other's lock and key. His pheromones act on me, elevating the heats I experience into pyresus. In turn, once that's accomplished, I release high levels of modulated telikostrone which binds perfectly to his receptors and no one else's, leading to his sexual response.'

John blinked, taking in the wash of information. It was nothing new, not really. Hormones and receptors all relied on relative compatibility to regulate their efficiency. He just hadn't realised the same thing occurred in a bond. 'So, right now, only Alexander can bring about a proper full-on heat in you, and only your pheromones can cause his – rut – or whatever.'

'Any Omega bound to him, or one as yet unclaimed would excite the aggressive, sexual response with which you're familiar. One bitten by someone else would smell as I do to you. Interesting in their own right, perhaps, but not irresistible.' Sherlock sighed, fiddling with tools on the surface in front of him. 'It's a biochemical method of effectively excluding those Alphas too weak to claim an Omega from the gene pool.' If it weren't for the grimace twisting his face, John could almost believe he was as indifferent as he sounded. 'Unfortunately, what was a biological pressure in prehistory translated into something different on the birth of civilisation. It wasn't about strength or genetics anymore. It was about money.'

He shook his head like a dog casting off water, visibly flinging thoughts aside as he squared his shoulders. 'Besides, even if by some unexpected circumstances you were driven to try and mate with me, I am not defenceless. There are ways of neutralising an Alpha in rut if necessary.'

Something tightened his lips, and those eyes flickered down and away, not meeting John's gaze. There was no false bravado in Sherlock's face, just a grim certainty that indicated he spoke from experience.

John froze where he stood, every muscle locked tight as words failed him. The only way Sherlock could be more explicit was if he admitted that there were times when he had been the victim of unwanted attentions. It was nothing John had not suspected, but still, he'd longed to be wrong. He'd
hoped there'd been something like respect in Sherlock's bond, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

'Alexander?' He held his breath, half-expecting Sherlock to ignore his question. As it was, he already looked like he was regretting the admission, and he wrinkled his nose in a display of dismissive irritation.

'It's irrelevant. One of the most common myths is that, for an Omega experiencing their heat, any knot will do. It's a falsehood that's been perpetuated for centuries. Sexual need does not equate to sexual attraction for a specific individual, although most Omegas are educated to think otherwise. To be grateful.'

Sherlock could have spat that final word. God knows John would have done. Instead, he sounded resigned, as if the whole issue exhausted him. John wanted to say something, to offer some comfort, but there was nothing he could do. He only had the faintest of hints about what Sherlock had experienced at his Alpha's hand, and even if he knew it all, he realised his pity would be ignored at best and derided at worst.

'Bastard,' he said at last, unashamed of the way the word growled in his throat. 'Him, not you.'

Sherlock hummed in agreement, casting John a look of dark amusement. 'Many would argue it was not his fault. The scent of my pyresus removed any choice he may have had in the matter.'

John straightened, clenching his teeth as he recalled the precise sensations that had flooded him back in the sealed chamber. Yes, it had been enticing and hypnotic – terrifying as well – but he didn't like to think he could be so removed from all the higher concepts that made him human. 'Did he even try?' He chewed on his lip. 'Did he even ask if it was all right, or did he just take?'

The answer lay in Sherlock's expression, a flat, apathetic mask that hid black secrets, all underscored by the rise and fall of one shoulder: flawed indifference. 'Alexander's behaviour aside, today's exercise proved a point. There's no biological reason for your initial fascination with me or the friendship we've built. You're not being influenced by anything other than my stunning personality.'

John snorted a nervous laugh, unable to help himself as a frail smile curved Sherlock's lips. It was a weak joke, but they'd both take it. Sherlock's past was a grim place, one he clearly was not keen to revisit, and John struggled to put his own feelings – impotent anger and aimless, coiling dread – aside. In the end, none of this was about him. It was about Sherlock, and helping him live the life he wanted.

An obliging beep from the computer made them both turn, and something sparked in John's stomach at Sherlock's breathy 'Oh!' of surprise.

'You found out what it is?' he asked, squinting at the Latin name that meant nothing to him. 

'Aristolochia rotunda. Interesting. Why is that interesting?' He frowned at the screen, his eyes carrying its reflection as his lips moved around deductions. 'Not something you'd find in a British hedgerow. It would need a greenhouse to flourish in this country, though it's not hard to cultivate once you've got the temperature right. The question is, why would Amelia Donnelly have traces of it in her hair? If she was an Alpha of the elite it might be understandable, but her family weren't that well-off, and she certainly didn't have the money to buy her way into the top of society.'

'Okay,' John drawled. 'How's that relevant?'

'It would provide a straightforward explanation as to why she's been in close contact with the plant. Not because of the greenhouse requirement, anyone with an allotment can build one of those, but
because of what *Aristolochia* is often used for.'

'Care to explain to those of us who aren't into plants?'

Sherlock rolled his eyes. 'Poison, John. Its other name is birthwort. In medieval times it was used as a labour aid, though its efficacy is questionable. However, any Omega with half a brain and a fraction of independent thought will grow it if they can, along with flora of similar properties. It's an effective abortive agent.'

John drew in a quiet breath, his mind racing. Sherlock had been with his Alpha on and off for seventeen years, and the conception rate in fully fertile Alpha-Omega couples was astronomical. He would be lying if he hadn't pictured Sherlock's children out there somewhere: dark-haired and pale-eyed. Whenever the image bloomed, something fluttered in his chest, fragile and impossible to name.

Of course, he should have realised the first thing Sherlock would do was attempt to take control of any potential pregnancies.

'You've used it?' he asked, his words as level as he could make them. Judgement didn't enter into the matter. Sherlock had every right to take whatever measures he deemed necessary, but his heart panged at the desperation inherent in the action. It seemed like a last resort, one that wouldn't be required if Sherlock was given a choice in how and when he'd reproduce. 'Didn't your Alpha notice?'

'Alexander was not particularly observant, at least not initially. He realised what I was doing in the end. That was the first time I ran.' Sherlock cleared his throat, examining the particulates again before he continued, his voice pitched low and secretive. 'It's old knowledge. Traditionally Omegas are isolated even from those of the same gender. However, these things find their way around, especially from an Omega parent to their corresponding offspring. My mother taught me various methods away from the prying eyes of Mycroft and my father. She did her best to arm me for the future. A seven year age gap between children and only two in a fertile couple isn't natural. She did what she could to reclaim command over her biology.'

'And gave you the same knowledge, aware you'd need it.' He eased closer to Sherlock's side, reading his discomfort in the taut column of his spine. Ghosts of pain haunted the pinch of his eyes and the faint, anxious furrow of his brow, but it was well-hidden.

John knew better than to push for information, but he wasn't so stupid he couldn't see what Sherlock was doing. He didn't have to relate any of the case's findings back to his own life or draw any kind of parallel, but he did. Inch-by-inch, he was allowing John to learn more, not just about generalities of Omegas, but specifics pertaining to Sherlock.

In some ways, it felt like a peace-offering – an apology for not having revealed his secret sooner. It definitely spoke volumes about trust, which John feared had fallen beyond their reach.

'You said it was poisonous?' He leaned in, peering over Sherlock's shoulder at the innocuous fragments.

'Most medicinal plants are, taken in the right quantities. However, it's not analogous with Amelia Donnelly's death. It's an ineffective murder weapon. Consuming high levels, or a low dose over a protracted period results in renal failure. It's also powerfully carcinogenic, but it kills over years, not minutes.'

'And you were using it, what, once a month? For how long?"
Sherlock turned to face him, his head cocked as he took in John's features. 'I added a small amount to a compound mixture of other substances, rather than taking it by itself, but it was used after every consummated pyresus.' He pursed his lips, looking at John as if he wasn't sure how to make him understand. 'The earlier after conception it's used, the more effective it is.'

Sherlock looked down, his half-hidden eyes clouded. 'I did what I could to lessen its detrimental impact. My mother, on the other hand, used it religiously. She passed away when I was twelve, killed by necrotic failure of the kidneys. It was not a good way to die.'

Blinking, he gestured towards the slide, indicating the evidence and the case at hand. 'However, her health declined steadily over a number of months. In comparison, Amelia Donnelly died quickly. The vegetable matter in her hair still has a relatively high moisture content. They can't have been removed from the plant more than a day ago. Then there's where I found it, not on the surface but caught up in the tresses by her scalp. How did it get there?'

Sherlock retreated, his gaze glassy as he lost himself in his deductions. John wished he had the luxury of being distracted by the case, but his sympathies weren't with the victim, or even her slaughtered family. It was challenging to focus on the problems of strangers when Sherlock was steadily revealing more of the measures he'd been forced to take to safeguard his independence.

How could anyone think that Omegas deserved the treatment they received? How could people assume that a life of being coddled could in any way make up for their imprisonment? It sickened him to know that Sherlock risked his health, using untested substances when everyone else had proper drugs to answer their contraceptive needs.

Sherlock had nothing, except for the autonomy he had fought for with such ferocity and single-minded determination. John wondered how many others were like him. People who couldn't topple the system, but did what they could to make it work in their favour. Sherlock's intelligence might be far beyond the ordinary, but John doubted he was the only one to have taken matters into his own hands.

John had never considered himself an activist. Like most of the silent majority, he normally spared a sympathetic thought for the distant plights of others, but this – it struck too close to home. Would he have cared so much if Sherlock were not an Omega? Probably not, and John regretted that blind behaviour. Now, his eyes had been opened, and he wished there was something he could do. Something to make Sherlock's life easier beyond the hollow promise of assistance, should he ever need it.

With a sigh of aggravation, he dragged his hands though his hair again, leaving furrows. The gesture caught Sherlock's attention, and John jumped in surprise as he straightened, his face alight with epiphany.

'John, that's it!' He jumped to his feet, surging forward and trapping John's head between his palms, all personal boundaries forgotten. Long fingers wove through ash blond strands as Sherlock's thumbs rested on his jaw bone, and John's heart leapt as his body surged with excitement. 'That's how the leaf fragments penetrated her hair. They were transferred from someone else. Someone who held Miss Donnelly in a very specific way.'

Gentle pressure had John tilting his head up, lost in the bright wash of Sherlock's gaze and the suggestion of an infectious grin. Sherlock's brow was a flash of warmth against his, and he sucked in a breath of Sherlock's neutral fragrance, outlined as it was by whatever he put in his hair. He was close enough to kiss, his breath a whisper across John's mouth that made a mute whine catch in his throat.
'A lover.' His voice softened, and John thought he heard the faintest hitch in Sherlock's next inhale. 'She had a lover. One who came into contact with processed *Aristolochia rotunda*. They held her head and kissed her. Two hour later, she was dead.'

Sherlock's hands dropped away, and John stiffened, trying not to sway forward and eradicate the slender distance between them. He had already decided that he wouldn't breach any frontier of intimacy with Sherlock, but his body didn't seem to care about his intentions. It was like the pull of a magnet on his bones, reeling him in whenever he got close enough. He craved the man's presence, and while he silently vowed not to ask for anything more, he couldn't resist returning to the same, casual touches they'd enjoyed not so long ago.

Reaching out, he looped his fingers around Sherlock's wrist to stop him from whirling away. 'You think they could be our killer?' he asked, noticing the unreliable skitter of Sherlock's radial pulse.

'Not enough data.' He gently extricated himself from John's grasp to put on his coat, dragging his phone free from his pocket as he did so. 'The tox screen and stomach contents may cast some light on cause of death, but if I'm right then she met someone, someone with whom she shared a kiss, someone who transferred the leaf matter to her body with their touch. She saw them after the shower she took once she'd killed her family and before her own demise. That's a narrow window of opportunity. She didn't have time to commit murder, bathe, meet both a lover and her dealer and then return home to die.'

'So?' John asked, hurrying to keep up as Sherlock pushed out of the lab, texting furiously.

'So, the chances are her dealer and lover are the same person. If we discover their identity, we may be able to unravel precisely what happened to Amelia Donnelly.' Sherlock pocketed his phone with a flourish, striding through Bart's like a man possessed.

John made a doubtful noise, grabbing the Belstaff's cuff to slow him down. 'Kind of tenuous, isn't it? You're basing all this on a couple of bits of leaf and circumstantial stuff. That's not like you.'

Sherlock sighed, dropping his shoulders dramatically. 'We've chased weaker leads,' he pointed out. 'Lestrade's already questioning Amelia's social circle. I plan to put the word out on the street around where she lived, see if any of the homeless network saw her last night. Perhaps the vegetation in her hair is irrelevant, but it's unusual enough to warrant further investigation.' He stopped, looking over at John. 'Of course if you'd rather go back to the flat, I can do this by myself.'

'Ah, no.' John shook his head, gesturing for him to lead the way. 'Together, Sherlock. Or not at all.'

He lifted his chin as Sherlock glanced at him, something searching and tentative in his gaze. It was as if he bypassed the inconvenience of John's skin and read his mind, weighing each intention before he nodded once in understanding. 'All right.'

Sherlock's words seemed to resonate, and John caught his breath as he realised they were talking about more than just the Work. This was about something deeper between them, as yet unvoiced but potent all the same, and he nodded in silent acknowledgement.

He couldn't promise much, but this? This he could give without hesitation: his unflinching support, no matter what.

He only hoped it would be enough to keep Sherlock safe.
Sherlock moved through the city as if he owned the place, a king within his realm. Where others hurried to work or dashed around their daily lives, he strode with purpose, the tails of his coat billowing behind him. Perhaps not everyone on the street turned his way, but a good proportion took a moment to appreciate the view, and John found himself struggling not to glare in return.

Not that his assistance was needed. From day one, Sherlock had projected an air of the untouchable about him. People saw it and took note.

Well, most people.

Sherlock's admission in the lab haunted him, and thoughts of Alexander bubbled to the front of John's mind like marsh gas. He itched with anger that anyone could look at Sherlock and think they had a right to take him. He knew the excuses; Sherlock had mentioned the most obvious one, that his Alpha had no control over his instincts. However, it didn't seem like it went both ways. If Sherlock was really as desperate for sex as all the rumours about Omegas suggested, then he wouldn't be inclined to fight off Alexander during pyresus. They'd share the same want, even if it was a product of biology, rather than higher thinking.

Instead, Sherlock had learnt how to escape an Alpha in rut, and John's recent exposure to telikostrone had shown him the violent nature of such urges. It might sicken him, but he could imagine reaching the point where his highest priority was forcing a warm body beneath him, willing or not. The worst part was, people would excuse it. Even in normal society, where rape was acknowledged as a crime, they would jump to offer him a way out, labelling his behaviour as natural in the face of an Omega's biochemistry.

As if that mattered. The whole situation had always made John uneasy. Before, he'd thought that Omegas weren't able to give meaningful consent. Their proper heats put them in the same category as people who'd had too much to drink or were high on drugs. They might be saying "yes", but could they make an informed decision? From what Sherlock had said, that wasn't the case. It was within their power to object. Was it only Alexander who didn't listen, or were all the Alphas of the elite the same?

'This way.' Sherlock tugged him along one of London's alleys. The paving was cracked and rubbish lay thick in the gutters. This was a world of store-yards and forgotten plots of land. Puddles clustered on the ground, and gluts of mud waited to trip the unwary. John picked his way through it all, his jaw working and his fingers clenching into spasmodic fists.

'I shouldn't have told you.' Sherlock's face held a mixture of disappointment and acceptance, as if he had hoped for better but had resigned himself to the most likely reaction. 'Knowing doesn't do you any good. You're distracted by my past; I need you here in the present.'

John stopped, shaking his head. 'Don't. I'm glad you told me. I just hate that you were ever in that
situation.' He wasn't so naive that he thought Sherlock had always been able to fend off unwanted advances. Perhaps his mother had taught him something of fighting back as a child, but theory was different than practice. Effective self-defence was a matter of trial and error, and John's traitorous imagination couldn't stop picturing Sherlock, young and skittish, with no choice but to submit to his Alpha's demands. 'It's not right.'

'It's the way it's always been.' He shrugged, the twist of his lips painful. 'Most Omegas obey, and like Donovan said, their lives are easy. They have everything they could wish for in exchange for the children they produce.'

'And those that don't? You can't be only one who's tried to escape.'

Sherlock thrust his hands into his pockets, leading the way through the tangle of London's backstreets. Filth squelched beneath their shoes, and a jagged wind blew empty crisp packets and fallen leaves around in a giddy waltz, almost drowning out his reply.

'I doubt any of them could be considered as fortunate as I am. If they're lucky, they manage to flee into obscurity. If not...' He shrugged. 'The possibilities are numerous. Perhaps, like Ms Ducart, they die on an illegal operating table. Sometimes, they are shut away forever, ignored and left to rot in solitude while their Alpha turns elsewhere. Alternatively, they are discarded. Murdered, possibly, and buried on their Alpha's estate like a guilty secret. If the original kin of an Omega miss them at all, they will rarely report it. Either they don't care, or they hope their child has fled and seek to protect them by staying quiet.'

'Like yours did.' John watched Sherlock's profile, noticing the moue of irritated disgust he wore when his family, and by association his brother, entered the conversation. 'I'm guessing Mycroft's instrumental in all this.' He gestured to indicate the situation, from Sherlock's career to his comparative freedom.

'Unfortunately, yes. Past experience indicates that, without his assistance, it wouldn't be possible.' He looked like he'd bitten into a lemon, his pride stung, but a moment later the harsh lines softened. 'His help was not always something on which I could rely.'

John took a breath to speak, a hot surge of outrage pressing against his ribs. He knew Mycroft too well to believe that he could be unaware of the treatment his brother had suffered, but how could he have known and not tried to help? By his own admission, he existed in a constant state of worry over Sherlock. How could he have turned a blind eye?

Sherlock held up a hand, and John bit back his questions, swallowing hard. 'What happened is far from straightforward.' He squared his shoulders, his voice pained as he continued, 'If you insist upon hearing all of it, I'll tell you, but not now. Not when we have a case.'

Shifting his feet, John folded his arms, dropping his chin to his chest. It was more of an offer than he expected Sherlock to make, and it sounded like it cost him. He felt selfish, but John ached to map the terrain of Sherlock's life before he had come along. He longed to educate himself so he could understand what had tempered Sherlock into the man who now stood before him, strong despite his vulnerabilities.

'All right.' He met Sherlock's eye, seeing both gratitude and hesitance. Had he expected John to push for an immediate explanation? As if that would do them any good. His need to dig in his heels and fight everyone who had sought to bring Sherlock low was a meaningless desire, and it would do nothing to help. Sherlock wanted John here at his side, picking through London's underbelly and answering the call of the Work, not dreaming up ego-centric revenge for the shadowy injustices committed against him in years gone by.
'Thank you.' Sherlock smiled, not the fake one that fit his face like a mask, but something crooked and bashful which lit up his eyes all the same. 'Now, come on. We've got things to do.'

'You seem pretty sure there is a case,' John said, hurrying to keep up. 'One worth your time, I mean. You don't normally bother with anything so straightforward.'

'The body of a murderer is lying in the morgue with no apparent cause of death.' He turned left, and the alley opened out onto the river's edge. One of the bridges spanned the fluid causeway in front of them, its supports a concrete forest along the bank and into the water. 'While it's possible Molly may find something conclusive during autopsy, I have my doubts. It could be more engaging that it seems.'

'And if it wasn't for the birthwort you found in her hair, would you even look at it twice?'

Sherlock grimaced. 'Probably not. That didn't get there by accident, and it's an intriguing addition to the evidence. Someone, somewhere will be able to tell us more.'

He swept into the shadows under the bridge, leaving John to follow, tense and alert. The air was chill, rank from the river and stirred by the breathy wind that whipped through the city. As shelters went, the struts didn't seem the best place to bed down for the night. In fact, a distinct lack of any signs of habitation made John pause, his shoulders rounded as he frowned at the desolate shoreline.

'I thought we were trying to get in touch with your homeless network?' he asked.

'Already done. Well, most of them, anyway. Giving them cheap phones was the best investment I ever made. However, there's someone I need to see in person.' Sherlock jerked his head towards a silhouette propped against one of the pillars. The stranger was shorter than John, bundled in multiple layers and huddled against the cold. At their approach, their gaunt face lifted, muddy brown eyes glaring at John before they switched to Sherlock. Immediately, the expression became one of triumphant approval, and Sherlock flashed a grin of greeting.

'John, this is Elsie. Elsie, this is my friend John.'

'Oh yeah?' John couldn't tell how old she was, but the set of her weather-worn face suggested she wouldn't trust him as far as she could throw him. She reminded John of some of the tougher sergeants in the army, all brash abuse and disdain. 'He stinks.'

'He's an Alpha; he can't help it.' Sherlock appeared to be trying not to laugh as John managed a choked sound. Being criticised by someone who probably hadn't bathed in the past month was a bit much. 'I need your help.'

'Of course you do.' She sighed, straightening up and pulling her hands out of her pockets. They were clad in fingerless gloves, and she spread them palm up. 'Well, what is it? I haven't got all day, even for you.'

'We found traces of *Aristolochia rotunda* on a corpse – potentially a murder victim. An Alpha, not elite.'

Elsie's cocked her head, her eyes pinched. 'Processed?'

'After a fashion. They were ground particulates. Pure. The Alpha was a long-term meth user, and she was discovered dead in her flat. No obvious signs of foul play. What can you tell me?'

The woman puffed up her cheeks, glancing at John again as if weighing his worth before she exhaled. 'Not much. It's weird, finding it, I'll give you that, but I've not heard a whisper that could
explain why it's on the street. Could she have gone somewhere else and picked it up?'

'No, we think it was transferred from her dealer. Who's working the patch around Kensington Gardens?'

A pale eyebrow lifted, and Elsie shook her head. 'Once, you wouldn't have had to ask me that,' she pointed out. 'You'd have known them by name.'

Sherlock shrugged. 'Times change.'

'Thank God.' She rubbed her hands together, wrinkling her nose as the wind whipped at the tendrils of lank blonde hair escaping her beanie. 'Kensington Gardens have always been a warzone. The turnover rate there's pretty high. They come and go, same as always. Of course, that just means the best float to the top. You probably want Light Chris.'

"'Light Chris?'" John repeated. 'What kind of a name is that?'

'The one he uses.' Elsie shrugged, the gesture obscured by the clothes she was wearing. 'That's all I've got for you. I'll keep my ear to the ground. If I hear anything, I'll leave a message in the usual place.' She chewed on her lip, her teeth tormenting the chapped flesh. 'I'd know if any of the main gangs were padding stuff out with *Aristolochia*, but if they're not responsible then God knows who is.'

'The presence of the plant matter could be unrelated to either her drug use or her demise, but it was unusual enough to get my attention.' Sherlock frowned. 'I'll see what I can get out of the dealer, and if you catch wind of anything suspicious – any more deaths, any users suffering strange experiences – tell me.'

'Got it. Be careful of Chris, all right? He's not very bright, but he didn't get where he was by cooperating.' She jerked her head towards John. 'Take your Alpha friend with you.'

'I doubt I could leave him behind if I tried.' Sherlock nodded his farewell, and John went to follow him, pausing as Elsie called his name. When he turned, she was giving him a critical stare: assessing 'Take care of him, won't you?' she asked, nodding after Sherlock's receding back. 'He's got the survival instincts of a fucking lemming.'

John laughed at the unguarded honesty of her statement. Sherlock all too often lost sight of his personal safety in pursuit of a case's solution. 'Yeah, I know. I'll do my best,' he promised, giving her a crooked smile before he turned away, his footsteps crunching over the gravel as he caught up to Sherlock's long stride.

'So,' he said after a few moments of silence, digging his hands in to his pocket. 'I stink?'

Sherlock chuckled, a brief, bright sound that John needed to hear after the grim weight of the morning's events. 'Only to an Omega, and it might be stronger today than usual thanks to your reaction to the telikostrone. Besides, “stink” is not the right word.'

'Thanks,' John muttered, surreptitiously sniffing at his jacket as they left the Thames' wind-savaged bank. 'I suppose at least you're the only one who'll notice. It's not like I know any other Omegas.' Abruptly, he realised what he was saying, and he whipped around, staring back over his shoulder in the direction of where Elsie had been standing. 'Wait, so how could she smell it?'

'She picked up on your fragrance for the same reason it's detectable to me,' Sherlock pointed out, watching John's face with apparent interest before rolling his eyes. 'Elsie is what is known as a Rile.'
Genetically, she's an Omega, but biologically – 'He shrugged. 'She never presented, and thanks to an incurable condition, never will. As far as anyone in the elite is concerned, she is worse than useless: a source of shame to her family.'

John stared back at the empty stretch of water and the bridge's industrial reign, thinking of the tough woman who had already departed. No-one who lived destitute had a happy story, but to John hers sounded pointlessly cruel. 'Why didn't they let her out, then? I mean, send her to university or whatever? Just because she can't have kids doesn't mean she can be thrown away!'

'Not everyone thinks the same way you do. Elsie's family were not kind. They drove her out. Nothing overt, that would be too disgraceful, but they made it so she felt unable to stay. So a young woman, raised as an Omega, educated yes, but not very knowledgeable of how the world worked, came to London with no money and nowhere to call home. You know enough of this city to realise she was nothing but prey.'

'And you saved her?' He started walking again, watching Sherlock shake his head.

'No, John. She saved me. Elsie may have come here ignorant, but she learnt fast. She knew a bit about strategy and politics from her father's dealings, and she put it to use. Over the past decade or more, she has acquired a number of contacts; people whose faith she's earned.' Sherlock squinted up at the pregnant clouds above them, grimacing as the first drops of rain began to fall. 'Come on. Let's get you some lunch. I'll tell you more while you eat.'

Together, they hurried back through the alleys, dodging dribbling gutters before taking shelter in the kind of café that made John's arteries weep as soon as he walked in the door. Within ten minutes, he had a hearty fried breakfast in front of him, a suitable substitute for his meagre meal when Sherlock had dragged him out of bed that morning.

'Go on then,' he urged as he picked up his cutlery and tucked in, angling the plate so Sherlock could steal some of the toast if he wanted it. 'You said she helped you out of trouble?'

Sherlock sipped his coffee, narrowing his eyes against the steam that rose from the black liquid inside and swallowing as he considered his words. 'There was an issue of payment with a dealer, back in my twenties,' he explained, and John stopped cutting up his bacon, listening intently. Sherlock's history with drugs had been hinted at more than once, but by mutual agreement it was not something they discussed. 'He sought to take physical compensation. Elsie made him change his mind.'

'Oh.' John looked at his meal, picking at it as his enthusiasm waned. A lecture sat on the tip of his tongue, one about illegal chemicals, the ruthlessness of the people associated with them, and dire consequences barely avoided. 'I'm guessing they didn't realise what you were.' He surveyed the other patrons before leaning in. 'If they'd found out...' 

'My life would have taken a distinct turn for the worse. I'm sure Alexander's company would have been enjoyable by comparison.' Sherlock closed his eyes before opening them again. 'I know, John. More to the point, so did Elsie. She struck a deal, paid off my debt with information and dragged me out of there, hissing abuse all the way. She recognised the lack of a scent I was giving off for what it was, unlike everyone else I came across.'

He picked up a triangle of toast, his body moving on autopilot to sustain itself while his mind was occupied. It was the best John could hope for while a case was on. The only reason Sherlock was eating at all was because they were stuck playing a waiting game. 'You have to understand that Elsie has a finger on every pulse among London's underclass. She has worked hard to maintain herself in a neutral balance, allied with no-one, but useful to all of them. There's very little she doesn't know about what's going on in this city. Most of her network, she built up herself, but I did help her make a
few key connections.'

'All that, and she still lives on the streets?'

A smile skittered across Sherlock's lips. 'Elsie may have started out as involuntarily destitute, but now she inhabits a place below the radar. As far as any authority is concerned, she doesn't exist. That's quite hard to achieve in this day and age. She maintains the appearance of homelessness because it helps her stay invisible and allows her to appear non-threatening. She earns nothing as commonplace as a wage, but she does have a roof over her head, as well as ways and means of sustaining herself.'

'You like her.' John sat back in his chair, watching Sherlock blink in surprise. 'You, Mr "I don't have friends." You like her.'

Sherlock rolled his eyes, propping his elbows on the table and cupping his palms around his mug. 'I admire her. I challenge anyone not to. She made a despicable situation work, without relying on outside help. For someone of our upbringing, it's more difficult than you might imagine. Omegas are woefully unprepared for dealing with the real world. After all, we're never meant to come into contact with it.'

'You haven't done so bad yourself, you know,' John pointed out, smearing the last of his bacon through his ketchup. 'Were you any better off than she was, when you ran?'

'No.' Sherlock drained the mug and set it aside, his long fingers toying with the packets of sugar as he stared out of the window, though whether he was seeing the street beyond or into another time and place was impossible to judge. 'I didn't have to tell her anything. She knew, and she didn't drown me in sympathy. Quite the opposite. A bit more of a tough love approach, in fact, but it worked. I survived. To some extent, I even began to thrive, for a given value.' He tipped a packet of sweetener back and forth, making the grains within hiss. 'However, Elsie is in her element now. It's probably not the life she would have chosen for herself, but it's not one she'd give up in a hurry, either. She likes the intellectual stimulation.'

John mopped up his fried egg with the remnants of the toast, watching Sherlock out of the corner of his eye. 'So why did you have to meet her in person? Why isn't she part of your network, like everyone else?'

'Because that would be an alliance. She connects herself with no-one, and it works. Besides, she's still willing to help when I ask. If anyone in this city can find out why Amelia Donnelly had birthwort in her hair, it's Elsie.'

'And she can be trusted?' John shrugged, not liking to be the voice of doubt, but unable to ignore the possibility. 'How do you know she won't lie, or tell someone else what you're looking for?'

'I don't.' Sherlock's reply was frank and to the point, and it was clear that he was unimpaired by sentiment. 'Everyone is corruptible, either by an outside influence or their own needs. However, if it's in Elsie's interests to report our movements back to a third party, that alone suggests there's more to this than meets the eye. Are you done?' He gestured to John's empty plate, already pulling out a couple of bank notes to leave on the table. 'Come on. Let's go and find this dealer.'

John licked sauce off his thumb and got to his feet, the bell over the door echoing in his ears as they stepped out into the rain. It was light but persistent, and he did up his zip as he waited for Sherlock to hail a cab. 'I wouldn't think lunch-time was ideal for hunting down criminals. Aren't these kind of people nocturnal?"
'Not when sleep costs them money.' Sherlock stood aside as a taxi pulled up, holding the door open for John before settling at his side. 'Besides, it's Friday. Clubbers will be stocking up for the weekend. If Chris is the dominant dealer in Kensington Gardens, he won't risk some underdog muscling in on peak business, even if it means he has to stay awake all day and night to guard his turf.'

John settled back in his seat, watching the city skim by beyond the windowpane. 'So what's the plan? Do we need to call Lestrade?'

'Not yet. There's no point until we've got something more solid to go on. We'll ask him a couple of questions, that's all.'

'And if he does a runner?'

Sherlock glanced in John's direction, his smile contagious, and John turned away with a grin. It wasn't that they always ended up chasing idiots halfway across London, but today it felt like just what he needed: a way to be useful.

A few minutes later, the cab let them out at Kensington Gardens, the driver departing and leaving them at the Alexandra Gate. John ran his gaze over the wrought iron work, his eyes settling on the small stone lodge as they walked down West Carriage Drive and turned off onto one of the parks. Trees lined the paths that scrawled across the manicured lawns, leading visitors off towards idyllic themed gardens or up to the palace.

'Why here?' he asked, eyeing the tourists braving the weather and the city dwellers grimly determined to take their lunch break outside. 'What makes you think Amelia's dealer is this Chris bloke?'

'Logistics.' Sherlock pointed to the left. 'Her parent's house at Notting Hill is that way and Amelia Donnelly's apartment in Stratham Rd is about a ten minute walk in that direction.' He gestured eastwards. 'She worked in an office to the west of the gardens, making her local geography very confined. Her dealer would operate within that sphere, and the park is made anonymous by the sheer volume of people who frequent it. With an area this large, it's possible that he rotates his location on some kind of schedule, so he's not seen loitering in the same place. That's what I'd do.'

'Great,' John groused. 'So our guy is somewhere in, what, fifty acres of park?'

'Don't be ridiculous, John. Kensington Gardens and the associated grounds are much bigger than that.' Sherlock turned right, pulling his coat tight around him and doing up the buttons as the rain continued to patter down around them. 'While I might not know the dealers by name any more, I doubt their habits have changed. As long as Elsie's information is correct, Chris should not be hard to track down. He'll be near prominent landmarks to make it easier for his clientele to find him. Even better, CCTV is sparse: another reason it's favoured for illicit activities. He won't be next to the monuments themselves, but he should be close by.'

John sighed, wishing that Sherlock wasn't so intimate with the details of London's drug scene, more so than the Work demanded. His knowledge had its uses, but that didn't mean John was happy with how Sherlock had acquired his expertise. 'All right, then. Lead the way.'

'It took them more than half an hour to find the right place. They passed the Albert memorial, the bandstand and a statue of some bloke on a horse. All of them played host to empty benches and bore witness to harried passers-by, but there was no-one hanging around with any purpose. With each passing failure, Sherlock's patience waned, and he muttered a quiet curse before jerking his head back the way they'd come. 'Maybe he's at the Speke monument.'
'We could be here all day,' John complained, shivering as the rain started to seep through his jacket seams and drip down his neck. 'Can't we get Greg to pick him up?'

'Not yet. Involve the Yard before it's necessary and the dealer will shut down. He won't tell us anything; he'll be burdened with a few desultory charges and we won't have the information we need.' Sherlock reached behind him, grabbing John's hand in his gloved one and giving him a tug to hurry him along. 'The sooner we find him, the sooner you can go home.'

'We,' John corrected. 'The sooner we can go home.'

Their feet splashed through gathering puddles as they approached a small obelisk, half-concealed by the far-flung boughs of the nearby oaks. Its white stone had once been polished, but now streaks of grime marred its surface. A knee-high fence surrounded it, and John frowned at the nondescript addition to the park's pantheon of statues. 'See anything?' he asked, taking shelter under the canopy of foliage.

'Look around. What do you observe?'

John hunched his shoulders, too cold for this kind of game. 'Nothing. Trees, grass, bloody rain. No people.'

'No cameras. The statue's an unlikely target for metal thieves or graffiti and it's too big to steal.' Sherlock straightened, shutting his eyes and taking a deep breath. John knew the Omega nose was sensitive, but he hadn't realised quite how potent it could be. He could make out the rain and wet vegetation, but Sherlock's head swivelled as if he'd caught wind of something, and a triumphant smile crossed his lips.

He stepped beneath the bower and ducked his head so he could murmur in John's ear. 'A Beta dealer. Base odour of cloves, but his merchandise reeks. Mostly amphetamines.'

'Upwind?' John asked, smiling as Sherlock nodded. 'Back between the trees, then. Can you smell what we're looking for?'

'No, but that doesn't mean it's not present. It could be hidden beneath another fragrance. However, there's a hint of the same scent that was on Amelia's skin around him. Shower gel of some description.'

'So we're on the right track.' He met Sherlock's eye, doing his best to remain casual. 'Have you got a visual?'

He swayed a fraction to his right before easing back with a nod. 'Yes, he's leaning against a tree about twenty paces away, head down, waiting for his customers to find him. He won't believe we're buyers, though, not if we approach him together.'

Checking over John's shoulder as if to make sure the line of sight was blocked, Sherlock shrugged out of his coat and jacket, dumping the heavy wool in John's arms. His shirt came untucked on one side with a quick pull, and John watched him clutch at the cotton, striking creases across it. Deft fingers tousled his curls into something a bit more wild, and the press of his teeth against his lips gave them a ragged, swollen flush.

'You cut around from behind. If we can pin him, we might stand a better chance of getting our questions answered before he bolts,' Sherlock instructed, grabbing the coat back and reaching in his pocket for his phone, which was transferred to his trousers. Smoothing the Belstaff and jacket into a neat bundle, he wedged them in the fork of the branches at the top of the tree's trunk. 'I'll come back
John frowned, thinking of his Sig where it was hidden, safe from Sherlock's boredom, in Mrs Hudson's kitchen. He'd been tempted to carry it with him everywhere since Sherlock mentioned his estranged Alpha, but there was too much risk involved. The last thing he needed was to be caught in some non-essential situation with an illegal firearm. He wouldn't do Sherlock any good from jail. 'I hoped I wouldn't need it,' he pointed out.

'Never mind.' Sherlock re-examined the dealer, his gaze calculating. 'If he's armed, it'll be with a blade, and despite his reputation reaching for a weapon is not his first course of action in conflict. He's built like a runner, not a fighter.'

John's hand shot out, grabbing Sherlock's elbow and giving a warning squeeze. 'That doesn't mean he's not dangerous.' He watched him roll his eyes. 'Just be careful, all right?'

His only response was a nod from Sherlock, coupled with a flick of his fingers to show John where to go. It was easy enough to do as he was told, his head ducked and his pace brisk, like any other pedestrian caught in the rain. He picked his way back to the path, trying to watch the trees without raising suspicion.

When he thought he was in the right place, he cut across the grass, treading lightly. No dense forest crowded the manicured parkland, but there was a narrow band of mature oaks and other hard-woods. He had to ghost from the lee of one to the next, his skin prickling as he tried to see Sherlock amidst the water-slicked landscape.

The rumble of his voice reached him first, higher and thinner than normal, trembling around the syllables as he spoke. '– a friend said you could help. I need it.'

'What friend?' The dealer's question was heavy with distrust, and John raised his eyebrows as he eased closer, taking up position behind the tree to the right of where Sherlock and Light Chris stood. Clearly you didn't hang on to one territory for so long by accepting every stranger at face value. Anyone could be a cop undercover, although John had to admit Sherlock looked the part of an addict.

Creased clothes and rumpled hair were accessories to the movements of his body. Sharp eyes gleamed like glass, and he was constantly in motion, shuffling and twitching. He raked his fingernails down his forearm, then through his hair before snatching his hand away, tightening his fingers into a fist and dropping it to his side.

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'Amelia Donnelly. She said – said you could help.'

A guilty conscience could have driven Chris to take flight, and John's thighs ached as he braced to leap into action. However, the dealer just rocked back on his heels, his arms folded and his slender face thoughtful. 'Amelia, hey? She never said you were comin', but...' He sighed, reaching into his pocket. 'You good for it?'

'How much?' Raw desperation cut through Sherlock's query, and John tried not to shiver. It was too believable, that emotion, and he had to remind himself that it was a sham. Sherlock sounded like there was no price too steep for his next hit, and John fought hard not to let his imagination travel down treacherous avenues to a time where none of this had been an act.

'Depends what you're after.'

'Meth tabs,' Sherlock murmured, rich with longing. 'Just – just enough to see me through.' Money
Rustled in his hand, pulled from his pocket, grubby and creased. John was too far off to count how much was there, but it seemed to satisfy Chris, who snatched it free and gave Sherlock a tiny plastic bag containing what he'd asked for.

He was too busy putting away his cash to notice the mask fall from Sherlock's face.

It was a flicked switch; the addict was gone. In his place was a man undeniably in command and cold in his intelligence. 'Now that's over with,' Sherlock said, his body tensing as he lifted his chin. 'Maybe you can shed some light on why Amelia Donnelly was found dead this morning?'

The dealer froze, his skinny body locked in genuine surprise. The acne scars on his cheeks stood out as his pallor intensified, and he stared at Sherlock in horror, his lips parted and his face aghast. A choked noise caught in his throat, and John crouched, ready for the moment when he either lashed out or took off across the park.

'Tell me what you know,' Sherlock commanded, prowling closer. There was nothing vulnerable about him now, and Chris looked confused at how swiftly the balance of power had changed, 'and I won't take you in.'

'You're not police.' It was a more a whimper than anything else. Sherlock didn't even bother to answer. He merely lifted one eyebrow, managing to indicate with a tilt of his head that the Met were the least of the dealer's concerns.

One blink, and the decision to run became clear.

Chris lurched, veering around Sherlock and crying out in alarm when John pounced, his arms spread to tackle him. Sodden soil squelched as they went down, grappling with each other. Light Chris might be thin, and John was beginning to see where he got the nickname, but there was strength in the angles of his bones and the harsh ferocity with which he struggled.

There was no clear space to throw a punch, and John swore as he ripped back the hoodie and grabbed greasy black hair, ignoring the answering howl of pain and frustration as he dragged the kid upright, one forearm locked hard across his throat. He scrabbled at John's coat, trying to break loose, but John had the training to keep him in place, not to mention better stability. He was rooted firm while Chris' boots slid on the wet grass.

'Good catch,' Sherlock murmured, his gaze one of admiration, and John fought not to preen under the praise.

'He's not exactly tough,' he replied, bending his knees to counteract the struggles of his quarry. 'Molly could probably do more damage.'

'Let me go!' Chris yelled, exhausting himself with his ongoing efforts to escape.

'Not yet.' Sherlock stepped forward, his hands in his pockets as his eyes skimmed Chris' form, reading everything. 'Amelia Donnelly had a long-term, expensive habit over which she was losing control. She needed cash and decided to kill her family for her inheritance, hoping the police would never tie the crime back to her. She shot them, showered, and then found you.'

'Yeah, yeah, but I didn't know what she done!' He pulled at John's wrist before going limp. It was an old trick – an effort to make John relax – but he'd been around the block a few too many times to fall for it. 'Look, she was a bit behind in payments. Getting worse, you know? We came to an... agreement.'

'Sex.'
Even from this awkward, sideways angle, John saw the grimace cross Chris' face. 'Nah, I'm not like that. She ran into a bit of difficulty and I –' He shuffled his shoulders, glancing around as if he thought there might be eavesdroppers hidden in the undergrowth. 'I liked her, all right? We had some fun, but it was 'cos she wanted to. When she got behind, I said I could wait a few days, that's all. Normally, I don't do credit, but I've known her for going on three years. She gave me the money this morning, plus a bit more in exchange for the usual. I got a quick snog and then she was on her way.' He shifted, leaning his weight against John's arm, but it was more of a slump than a bid for freedom. 'You sure she's dead?'

'Very.' Sherlock circled around, his footsteps steady. Even John was tempted to try and follow him with his eyes, but he held firm, letting Chris fidget enough for both of them. 'We found something on her body. Something we believe came from you. Pieces of *Aristolochia rotunda*: birthwort.'

'What?' Earnest confusion shook Chris' voice. 'I dunno what that is. Look, whatever she did, it's got nothing to do with me. I don't kill people.'

'No, but maybe your products do.' Sherlock pulled out the meth, holding the clear polythene up to the meek daylight and examining the pills inside. 'Who's your supplier?'

Chris let out a tight laugh. 'More than my life's worth to tell you that. I'd rather go to jail.' He squeaked as John increased the pressure over his throat. 'No – no. It don't work like that! I don't see anyone, do I? It's all done as a drop-off. It's –'

Suddenly, Chris snapped his elbow back, driving it hard into John's diaphragm. His breath left him in a pained wheeze; his back bowed as he gasped for air. Before he could think to tighten his grip, his captive tore himself away, darting across the grass at a full sprint as Sherlock spat a curse.

'You all right?' he asked, his hand on John's shoulder as the warm splay of Sherlock's palm dove under his coat.

He managed to shake his head, berating himself for being so careless. 'Bruised,' he croaked, 'not bleeding. Go on!'

'Follow us as soon as you can. I'll try and herd him towards the Marlborough Gate. Lestrade's waiting for us there.' He was gone before John could do more than blink, pelting off in full pursuit after the receding figure.

John sucked in one breath after another, probing at the sore flesh below his ribcage as he shook his head. Talk about embarrassing. 'Little shit,' he muttered, finally feeling able to straighten up and take stock of his surroundings.

God alone knew when Sherlock had contacted Lestrade. He'd seemed dead against it when John had made the suggestion, but then perhaps he'd already been thinking three steps ahead, the same as usual. Now, Sherlock was lost somewhere amidst the gargantuan sprawl of the park, running hell-for-leather after the only potential suspect they had, and John was left behind.

He bit his lip, jogging back towards the path and the signposts at the junction, reading the neat text before hurrying towards the Marlborough Gate. His heart raced as he craned his neck, on the lookout for either Sherlock or Chris, sure that one would lead him to the other. The dealer could fall in the boating lake and drown for all he cared; it was Sherlock that mattered, and the same fretful fear that always plagued him when they were separated took root. It wasn't that he didn't think Sherlock was capable of holding his own, but things could go bad in the blink of an eye, too quick for even Sherlock to foresee.
A dark shape off to his right made him stare, and he broke into as much of a sprint as he could manage, hating the ache of his stomach and the stitch already threatening to form in his side. Chris was weaving through the trees, looking over his shoulder and stumbling in desperation as Sherlock hounded him at every turn.

Quickly, John joined the familiar dance, he and Sherlock partners well-versed in one another's behaviour while Chris remained the third-wheel, off-balance and losing ground. Pounding steps fell into a steady rhythm as John ran parallel to Sherlock and just behind their quarry so they could respond to his erratic efforts at escape.

Wide stretches of grass gave way to the broad approach of the Marlborough Gate. John saw Sherlock put on an extra burst of speed before he pounced. The tackle hit Chris around the hips, and they fell in a sprawl of limbs. The keen tang of blood caught in John's nose. It seemed to be coming from the graze on Chris' face: a sullen, claret flow that went ignored as he hurled abuse. Not that it did him any good as Sherlock straddled his back, pinning him before grabbing his hair and lifting his head to survey the road in front of them, where several police cars were pulling up with their blue lights flashing.

'Last chance,' he panted. 'Your supplier. Give me a name.'

John stood at Sherlock’s side, ready to lash out if necessary, but Chris was too busy trying to breathe around the weight on his back. At last, his answer came, a hoarse rasp up his throat. 'Morris. That's the only contact I've got.'

Sherlock grunted, unimpressed, squinting through the rain at the police officers hurrying towards them. 'All yours, Lestrade!' 

Chris struggled, his toes hitting the ground as he tried to kick. Immediately, John grabbed his ankles, holding them firm. 'What the hell? You said you'd let me go!'

'I lied.' Sherlock turned, speaking to John over his shoulder. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

'Just winded,' he promised, trying not to cough at the dull ache that preceded every breath. He jerked his head towards Greg, who looked exasperated, but unsurprised. 'When did you call them?'

'I sent a text message when we arrived telling them to meet us here in an hour for an arrest.' Sherlock glared at Lestrade, raising his voice. 'You're late.'

'Funny,' Greg said, gesturing for Sherlock to get up and let his officers take over, 'because, to me, it looks like we got here just in time.' He examined John's mud-streaked form and Sherlock's general dishevelment before surveying his latest suspect. 'Did he give you a bit of trouble?'

'No more than you might expect. He's Amelia Donnelly's dealer. You can arrest him for the merchandise in his pockets, and question him in relation to her death. Though I'll doubt you'll discover much.'

'Speaking of merchandise,' John said, nudging Sherlock and holding out his hand. 'Give it here.'

'What?'

'The stuff you bought from him. Was that really necessary, by the way?' John wiggled his fingers as Sherlock scowled, pulling the polythene sheath free from his pocket and surrendering it. Immediately, John passed it to Greg, who was already opening an evidence bag.

'Not my substance of choice,' Sherlock pointed out with a hint of reproach. 'I needed him to be off
his guard. Approaching him as anything other than a potential client would have given us nothing. As it is, it was hardly worth it.' Turning to Lestrade, he gestured to the pills in his grasp. 'Get Forensics to test everything he's carrying for contaminants. Molly's report should help you pinpoint what might have caused Ms Donnelly's death.'

'Yeah, thanks for that,' Greg said, casting a mocking glare in Sherlock's direction. 'I'd never have thought of following basic procedure all by myself. Speaking of which, what are you two playing at? You should have left this to us.' He jerked his thumb in the direction of one of the cars, where Chris was swearing his head off as the officers pushed him into the back seat.

'Saving you time,' Sherlock answered as John shrugged an apology. 'You'd have wasted days searching for him, and any leads he might have to offer would have gone cold.'

The DI shut his eyes like a man reaching for his patience. 'That's not the point.' He sighed, and John could see the moment he surrendered, abandoning his arguments as a lost cause. 'Look, just – go home. Clean yourselves up, get something for John's face, and call it a day. As soon as I know anything more, I'll be in touch.'

Sherlock threw his head back, his groan of "dull" spoken to the heavens. John, on the other hand, frowned in confusion and reached up to his cheek, trying to figure out what Greg meant.

'What's wrong with my face?' He rubbed at his skin, sensing a faint sting, but other than the mud there was nothing that he could make out.

'Chris scratched you when you took him down. It's superficial.' Sherlock pulled John's fingers away and squinted at him. 'Hardly worth bothering with.'

John looked to Greg for confirmation. He'd seen Sherlock dismiss serious injuries as irrelevant often enough that he no longer trusted his judgement when it came to triage.

The DI rolled his eyes and nodded. 'It could still do with a clean, considering you look like you've been mud-wrestling. Go on, I mean it. I don't want to set eyes on you again today unless I have to, you understand?'

Sherlock stalked away, leaving John to wave a weary farewell in Greg's direction before jogging after him. 'Where are we going?' he asked, slipping his fingers into his pocket and feeling the photocopies the DI had given him earlier. Thankfully they'd not been lost in the mad dash. 'And why aren't we taking a cab?'

'No self-respecting driver will accept you.' He shrugged, his long strides eating up the pavement as he stuck to the meagre shelter of the trees lining the paths. 'We'll have to walk back to Baker Street, and I'd rather undertake that journey with my coat.'

John grunted. 'That's if no-one's run off with it already. You didn't leave your wallet in it, did you?'

The look Sherlock cast in his direction told him he was being an idiot, and he shivered as a stiff wind blew across the city, flicking more water droplets from the branches overhead and sending them smattering to the ground.

'All right, so what are we doing now?' He didn't hesitate to follow as Sherlock struck out across one of the lawns, walking across the exposed space with his head down and his shoulders rounded.

'The Detective Inspector has given us our orders. It would be remiss of us not to obey.'

'Since when do you do what Greg tells you? Normally, you do the opposite, just to piss him off.'
Sherlock's hum of acknowledgement made John smile, and he fell in at Sherlock’s side, bumping him with his shoulder. 'If we're going back to Baker Street, it's because you want to, not because he suggested it.'

'You, not me.' Sherlock screwed up his nose as a strong gust of wind blew rain in their faces. 'You want to go back to the flat, clean up and dry off. I can practically hear you thinking of a hot bath and a cup of tea.'

John smiled to himself, pleased that Sherlock had acknowledged his needs, let alone given them structure with his words. 'Yeah, and keeping me happy is right at the top of your list of priorities.' He raised his eyebrows when Sherlock looked offended at his sarcasm. 'If you had any other leads to chase, you'd let me shiver in wet clothes all day while you dragged me around the city.'

'Please,' Sherlock scoffed. 'No-one is capable of making you do anything to which you object. Not even me.' Abruptly, he increased his pace, and John peered ahead to see a tree with a dark bundle of cloth stuck in its fork. God knew how Sherlock found it with such ease. If it had been John, he'd have wandered around for hours. Now, he watched him retrieve his clothes, shucking on his jacket and the Belstaff. He wrapped the thick wool around himself and fastened the buttons before pulling the collar up.

Sherlock was about to walk away when something made him hesitate, and he turned back to look at John intently. A frown bridged his brow as he cupped John's chin, tilting his head up. His fingers created warm points of pressure, and he tried not to sag into the bowl of Sherlock's palm as he bore the scrutiny, frowning at his friend's thoughtful hum.

'What?' He pulled a face as Sherlock removed a white handkerchief from his pocket and then licked it. 'What are you doing? Ugh, Sherlock!'

'Stay still,' he ordered, dragging the damp cloth over John's cheek like a mother wiping jam off their toddler's face. The fabric came away marked with mud and one or two tiny dots of blood. 'I think Lestrade was right. Some antiseptic might be a good idea. It looks a bit inflamed. Chris' filthy fingernails, no doubt.'

'Great.' John grimaced, forcing himself not to rub at it as Sherlock folded the handkerchief like a man preserving a relic, fastidious to a fault.

'Come on. I know a short-cut. We can be home within twenty minutes.' Sherlock led the way out of the gardens and back into London's rain-soaked metropolis, guiding him unerringly back towards Baker Street.

They were about ten minutes away when the sight of a nearby shop intruded on John's thoughts, making him swear under his breath. When Sherlock looked askance in his direction, he growled, 'Is there anything in the fridge but fingers? Milk? Food? Anything?'

'I'm not going in there,' Sherlock said firmly, folding his arms as John turned towards the Tesco Express on the other side of the road. 'Can't it wait?'

'I don't want to have to go out again in weather like this. Once I'm back in Baker Street, I'm not leaving it again.'

'Then I'll meet you back home.'

'Sherlock –'

'I'll light the fire. Buy some TCP while you're in there. I used the last of it in the experiment about
It was a poor excuse of a compromise, but John was too tired to argue. He'd grab the basics, and he'd get the job done more quickly without Sherlock trailing after him, complaining every step of the way. 'Fine, but there'd better be a cup of tea waiting for me. Give me your bank card.'

Sherlock surrendered his wallet before striding off, leaving John to face the crowds packed within the small supermarket. The schools had just let out, and the aisles were full of parents and their screaming kids. Most of them gave John a wide berth, probably because he looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards. Throw in a glare or two, and people left him well enough alone.

By the time he'd filled the basket with essentials and enough to feed him and Sherlock for a few days, the queues at the self-checkout were immense. He stood in line, trying to contain his impatience as his wet clothes grew clammy against his skin.

The chip and pin machine mercifully gave him no trouble, and a quick peek through the door showed him that the rain had stopped. Not that he could get much more wet if he tried, but he was determined to be grateful for small mercies as he slogged back to 221B, the plastic bags in each hand straining beneath the weight of the groceries.

All his thoughts were focussed on changing into dry clothes and washing the mud off his face, and he almost didn't see Mrs Hudson walking towards him until they met at the front door.

'John, look at the state of you!' She gave him a fond smile as she shook her head. 'You boys. The things you get up to. Let's get you inside before you catch a chill.' She pulled out her keys, saving John the trouble of digging through his pockets.

'Thanks. We, er, we had to chase someone through Kensington Gardens.' He looked down at his grass-stained knees and the clots of mud clinging stubbornly to his boots. 'Could have picked a better day for it.'

'And I'll bet Sherlock didn't get nearly as filthy,' she said with a smile, standing aside to let him in. 'Try not to get mud on my carpet, dear. I've just cleaned.'

'Right, I –' A loud crash ripped through the air, cutting off John's reply and making Mrs Hudson jump at his side. The tinkling crescendo of breaking glass fell silent, and John cocked his head, his heart in his throat.

'What is he doing up there?' she demanded, her hands fluttering to her throat in shock.

'Don't,' he ordered, abandoning the shopping on the floor before grabbing her wrist, halting her ascent to their flat. 'Something’s not right.'

He sniffed, his guts cramping as a sweat broke out between his shoulder-blades. The fragrance was faint, almost concealed beneath a false, chemical mask. It was not Sherlock's comforting nothing-scent, but something synthetic that made John's nose itch and sting. Yet it was not the only odour he could detect. A rusty tang coated the back of his throat: blood, laced with the bitterness of fear and the dull, smoky essence of anger, which strengthened with each passing moment.

'Where's my gun?'

To her credit, Mrs Hudson didn't ask questions. She hurried into her flat as fast as her hip would allow, returning with the Sig clasped carefully in her grip. 'I know you told me not to keep it loaded, but...' She trailed off, handing over the weapon with a shrug.
He didn't stop to thank her, checking the clip as he dashed up the stairs, not bothering with stealth as he threw himself at the door to their flat. Now, he could hear growled words, intimate mutterings that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Worse, within the lethal harmony was the steady sibilance of soft, choked gasps: a voice held captive beneath powerful hands.

'Sherlock?' John lunged forward, clearing the living room before turning to the kitchen, taking in everything in less than a second.

Shattered glassware lay like jagged stars across the floor, ground to dust in places. Chairs had been overturned, and the fridge rattled threateningly as Sherlock struggled against it. The fingers of one hand clawed at the grip around his throat as the other dragged at the stranger's suit, pulling the fabric taut.

Sherlock was strong, but the man holding him down appeared indifferent to the forceful kicks scraping down his shins and the bite of nails into his flesh. He was too focussed on making Sherlock suffer to consider his own pain. Even John didn't warrant a second's attention – as if an Alpha with a gun was not worthy of notice – and a leaden thud of anger pulsed through his body, surging through his muscles and turning his nerves molten.

He pressed the Sig to the man's skull. Cool steel kissed the skin behind his ear, applying suitable emphasis, and when John spoke, his voice was as steady as his hands.

'Get off him.'

He was prepared for visceral outrage, but when the man half-turned to look at him, his dark brown eyes remained impassive, travelling down to his shoes and back up again as if he were no more threatening than a painting on the wall. A sneer twitched across thin lips before he looked away, pressing his thumbs into Sherlock’s throat.

'So this is what you've been doing,' he said, each word calm as if he were discussing the weather before a razor-wire of spite cut through his next statement. 'You filthy. Little. Whore.'

Every muscle in John's back tensed, his shoulders locked solid as he planted his feet and jabbed the muzzle of the gun forward hard enough to bruise. His finger tightened on the trigger as another wave of distress, more dense than before, flooded the room. Sherlock rarely displayed true terror, and its vile perfume was a paralytic, blanking John's mind as it confirmed his fears. This was no angry client or vengeful criminal, enraged at the detective who'd ruined his plans.

It was Alexander.
An Unwelcome Visitor

Raindrops fell to the floor as Sherlock traipsed into 221B Baker Street, breathing out a sigh of relief as he closed the door on London's watercolour streets. The Belstaff slid from his shoulders, plucked free to hang on the hook in the front hall before he trotted up the stairs, stepping into the flat and heading for his bedroom.

A faint chemical smell made him wrinkle his nose, and he was reminded of an inadvisable experiment a couple of days ago. Its pervasive fumes had imbued the furnishings and wallpaper. John was no longer affected, but to Sherlock they appeared to be getting worse, and he grimaced as he strode over to his wardrobe and pulled open the doors.

Peeling off his jacket, he began to unbutton his shirt, creased and marred by dirt from the chase across the park. His shoes and trousers weren't much better, and Sherlock contemplated what to wear. While Lestrade and John may feel the case had reached the point of wait-and-see, there were still avenues of exploration open to him. He might need to go out again later. Best dress for the occasion.

Quickly, he reached for one of the evidence bags he kept in his bedside table, sheathing his fingers in it as he groped in his pockets. Contamination was unavoidable, but he did his best to minimise it as he pulled out one of the pills that he had purchased from Donnelly's dealer.

It had been the work of a moment to remove it from the package before handing the rest over to Lestrade. John would not doubt disapprove, but what he didn't know couldn't hurt him. Besides, the police would take far too long with their analysis. Even if John insisted he wait until tomorrow before venturing out again, a couple of hours in the lab would give him the answer he needed long before it was in the DI's power to provide the information.

Placing the tablet to one side, Sherlock stripped down to his underwear, removing his wet socks before he began to redress. A purple shirt covered his pale skin, the sleeves folded back and the collar left undone as dark trousers clad his legs and black cotton hid his pallid toes from view. The chill made it tempting to don a housecoat, but he restrained himself. John liked this outfit, and he did not want to ruin the impact. It was gratifying to watch the pupils flare in those blue eyes, or feel John's sneaking, sideways glances, heavy with appreciation. Perhaps, in the scheme of things, such attentions were chaste, but Sherlock hoarded them all the same.

He padded through to the bathroom, grabbing one of the towels and dabbing the water from his curls, idly running through what John had asked of him. A fire in the grate and a cup of tea. Of course, he probably didn't think Sherlock would keep his promise. Normally, such things were beneath his attention, but John had done admirably today, the careful application of his brute force thrilling to witness. Making the tea to show his approval was, perhaps, a bit excessive, but he supposed he could put on the kettle.

The sound of a door closing made him look up with a frown. Of course, the one day Sherlock took his time, John got home with the groceries quicker than expected. With a sigh, he pitched the towel aside before stepping over the bathroom threshold, his voice raised in greeting. 'Back already? You're not normally...'

He trailed off as he registered the air around him. The atmosphere still carried John's fragrance, but it was an imprint left by his earlier presence, not something fresh and rain-laden. Instead, the synthetic odour Sherlock had assumed were wraiths of his experiment had become acidic and uncomfortable, something designed to block out other, more telling perfumes.
He wasn't alone.

Leaning back, he pulled a bottle of deodorant from the mirrored cabinet above the sink, his finger poised to vent the powdered spray in an attacker's face. Perhaps it was not the most efficient of weapons, John's gun would be more convincing, but he had enlisted Mrs Hudson's help in hiding the Sig, and Sherlock didn't have time to retrieve it.

Cautiously, he inched towards the living room, his mind racing. He hadn't heard the front door open, and he knew he'd shut it behind him when he came in. Mrs Hudson was out, so the back way would be locked, and there were no indications of forced entry. Whoever was here had announced themselves deliberately. They wanted him alert to their presence, or perhaps they believed it was their right to stand in the home he and John shared, bold and unrepentant.

Sherlock closed his eyes as the obvious conclusion came to mind. He had dismissed the scent of rot and stagnant water earlier, ignoring its warning in favour of freedom's fantasy. Now, he could detect a hint of the same dreaded smell, and bile burned the back of his throat as his breath caught beneath his ribs.

Muscles shook with the urge to flee: another life left behind, just as he'd described to John that morning. It surged in his veins and tightened his spine, leaving him shuddering beneath its allure. Desperation made him long to cringe and curl up small – less of a target. His shoulders rounded and his back bowed: an instinctive cower, and the moment Sherlock noticed his body's response, anger flared through his frame.

He had spent years being bent to another man's will, taking the easy way out as the only escape. Now, history was repeating itself, the turn of the wheel bringing him back to a point in time where the same choice lay before him. He could stand his ground and fight for everything – his home with John and the sanctuary of the life he had built for himself – or he could run away and begin the cycle anew.

His breath shivered between his lips as he straightened, bracing his shoulders and clenching his jaw. This time, that was not how it could go. Even if he could throw away everything he'd worked for, there was still the matter of John, oblivious to the threat that awaited him. If Sherlock escaped, bolting to one of his many pre-arranged locations, would he be able to warn John in time, or would he walk blind into a disaster?

Alexander's reactions could be unpredictable at best. Would he leave John alone, deeming him irrelevant? Would he call the authorities? Would he engage John himself, content to fight for some warped notion of justice?

There were many things Sherlock was willing to leave to chance, but John's safety was not one of them. If he could, he'd deal with this himself.

'Don't linger in doorways, Sherlock. It's unbecoming.' That familiar voice was carefully moderated, obscured in layers of false kindness and hateful condescension. Yet on the flip of a coin it hardened, firm consonants hammered home with quiet vehemence. 'I've told you before.'

Sherlock stilled the flinch of his body, forcing his first shuffling step to become a stride as he faced the man in his living room. Behind his back, his sweat-slicked palm slipped on the cool deodorant can, and he shifted to get a better grip as he nodded in benign greeting.

'Alexander.'

It was tempting to ask why he was here, but the query was redundant. Alexander had only one
purpose, and Sherlock would resist his efforts with everything he had. He was not about to be dragged back to the other man's dominion. No, silence was the best choice. Any question, no matter how innocent, would be taken as a challenge, and Sherlock could see the turbulent resentment being held below the surface of his pleasant mask.

Steadily, he observed, noting all the changes years of separation had wrought on the Alpha to whom he was bound. Age had begun to sketch lines into his tanned complexion, more on his brow than around his eyes and mouth. There was a faint flush to his cheeks: a scatter of broken capillaries that suggested excessive alcohol consumption, though his body was still honed by hours of exercise for vanity's sake, and his hair and manicure remained immaculate.

However, while the cheaper physical maintenance had been upheld, his charcoal suit was developing a shine at the elbows and knees, and a tattered cuff did not escape Sherlock's attention. The Breitling on his wrist was several years old, not the latest style, and the glass face was scratched. Nicotine stained skin suggested that the occasional cigarette had become an addiction, but it was the other signs of chemical dependence that chilled Sherlock's blood, adding an additional element of instability.

The arches of Alexander's nostrils were reddened, fractionally inflamed and half-hidden by a touch of make-up. Despite his physical strength being apparent at first glance, his flesh looked papery and dry. Sherlock was too cognisant of the signs of substance abuse to dismiss the evidence. Alexander might not be high, nor exhibiting the effects of some kind of crash, but his active habit wrote its story all over him. Perhaps, like Amelia Donnelly, he was intelligent enough to control himself and resist a binge, but that offered little comfort.

'Is that all I get?' He spread his hands, about the same size as Sherlock's but broader, more brutal. 'Not even a hello?'

Sherlock struggled not to shudder where he stood. Alexander's rages were always the same. Bar one notable exception, he did not raise his voice. He spoke in the steady, level tones of a man laying down facts. Screamed abuse was easier to rationalise, but that was not how he operated. Instead, it was like a game of chess, manipulative to a fault. Arguments were twisted to make him look like a victim, and if Sherlock refused to engage, his silence was construed as surrender or agreement.

'I understand. I do.' Alexander smiled then, inviting, but it didn't reach his eyes. 'I know how it must have been for you, but I've been giving it a lot of thought, Sherlock, about what you did. What you've been doing.' He gestured around him, benevolent. 'I know you struggle to admit you've made a mistake, but it's all right.' He stepped forward, narrowing the distance between them. 'I'm willing to overlook your behaviour. Just come home, and all will be forgiven.'

An outraged breath caught in Sherlock's chest: a hard rock of air that he couldn't dislodge as fury and disbelief warred for supremacy. Forgiveness was not in Alexander's vocabulary, not when he could gather ammunition to sway others to his bidding. If Sherlock went back with him, even that paltry effort wouldn't be necessary. The only times he'd ever warranted a hollow attempt at compromise was when he'd slipped through Alexander's grasp. The moment he set foot back in that house, he became nothing but an object to be used at his Alpha's leisure.

He was within his rights to use force – to overpower Sherlock and take him back regardless of his protests – but that was difficult to dismiss as the actions of a wronged party. No, he would rather convince Sherlock to return of his own free will.

As if that would ever happen.

'How gracious of you,' he managed, sucking in a deep breath as he fought back a scathing retort.
That would only play into Alexander's hands, offering him the moral high ground of rationality while Sherlock railed against him, 'but I'll have to decline.'

A sigh stirred the air. 'Must you always be so trying?' he asked mildly. 'I'd hoped these past few years would have granted you some maturity, but I see you're much the same as ever.' His lips curved in a leer. 'Although I have to say, physically, the time has been a blessing. You were always beautiful, but now?' The unapologetic lechery in his gaze made Sherlock recoil, and he desperately tried to think around the circling fear that blinkered his mind. 'You're exquisite. I got a good view of that a few minutes ago.'

Realisation stuttered across Sherlock's awareness as nausea turned his stomach. His bedroom window. He always left it open a fraction, preferring a cool room, but it was also a fire escape, accessible by a metal staircase from the alleys behind Baker Street. Alexander must have used it as a way in, probably knocking out the wedge that held it in place. Worse, at Sherlock's request, the immediate area at the back of the flat was left unobserved by CCTV, a pre-agreed black spot for his convenience. No doubt surrounding cameras would have caught a glimpse of Alexander, but would it be enough to alert Mycroft?

'You watched me getting changed.' Flat and hard, the words cut through the air as rivers of repulsion ran down Sherlock's body. As violations went, it was comparatively minor, but that did not make it any less disturbing.

'And why shouldn't I?' Alexander asked, easing forward another step and running a diffident hand through his hair. 'You're my Omega, Sherlock, and it's about time you recognised your place. I've been nothing but tolerant.'

A scoff escaped him, brimming with resentment as recriminations clouded his mind. ‘“Tolerant” is not the word I'd use. I know where I belong, and it's not with you.'

Dark eyes flashed, and he stiffened as Alexander reached out, running a finger along the ridge of Sherlock's cheekbone. It was a mockery of a caress: a man admiring his possession, and Sherlock snarled as he jerked his head away.

Immediately, Alexander followed, his hand closing like a vice around Sherlock's jaw. 'You don't get to speak to me like that. We are going home.'

'This is home!' With a mighty wrench, Sherlock tore himself away, his hand whipping up to spray the deodorant in Alexander's eyes. His hoarse cry of pain echoed around them, but he did not raise his hands to his face. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he blinked furiously, and Sherlock dodged sideways, ducking under Alexander's arm in an effort to get away.

A solid backhand stopped him in his tracks, throwing him off balance as he bit his tongue and the taste of iron exploded in his mouth. Before he could blink, Alexander grabbed his collar, the cloth protesting as he slammed Sherlock back against the edge of the kitchen table, making the glassware on its surface rattle in warning.

Hard wood bruised the back of his hips as he arched beneath Alexander's weight, his body flexed and robbed of all leverage. A grip like steel closed around his wrist, and his impromptu weapon fell to the floor as he glared into the face of the man above him, his teeth bared.

'If you drag me back, I'll escape. I've done it before, and I doubt you'd provide any new challenge.’ His heart pulsed in his chest as he scraped together a desperate lie and lined the next words up like a
firing squad: death to all of Alexander's ambitions. 'Besides, there's no point. I can't give you what you want. Not any more.'

He licked his lips as Alexander froze, his expression wiped blank for one beautiful second of disbelief before a storm of emotion rolled across his features. It was not gentle remorse, but bottomless rage: a lethal font of power as his gaze turned hard. 'What?' He leant back, dragging Sherlock upright and ignoring the stifled, half-punch that slammed into his shoulder.

'After everything I did to make sure I never carried your child, do you think I'd leave it to chance once I got away? You'd have more luck with a Rile.'

The table clattered again as Sherlock was hurled against it, but this time he was ready. His knee jammed, unforgiving, into Alexander's gut, and even in the restrained space he had enough room to curve his fingers into claws, jabbing them into the gaps between his ribs.

The scent of Alpha aggression clogged his nose, overcoming whatever Alexander had used to disguise his fragrance, and Sherlock swore inwardly. It was still half-obscured, but this close, he couldn't miss it. Alexander's system would be flooded with adrenaline, fuelling his outrage and dulling the pain of anything Sherlock threw his way. Any upper hand he may have had was lost as Alexander's humid breath ghosted between them.

'You're lying,' he whispered, wrenching Sherlock's arms above his head and pinning them in place, pulling his body taut. Wetting his lips, he stared at his mouth with calculated hunger. 'You'd never take that risk.'

The bite was abrupt, sending a bolt of pain along Sherlock's nerves as Alexander sank his teeth hard into his bottom lip. He tried to jerk away, but there was nowhere to go. All he could do was twist his wrist, finally yanking it free and slamming the heel of his hand into Alexander's ear. The blow made him rear away, and Sherlock followed, crashing his knuckles into that hated face.

'You don't get to touch me anymore,' he hissed, his hand throbbing as Alexander lifted his fingers to his cheek, touching the broken skin and staring at the blood in disbelief. 'And I'm telling the truth.'

A deadly calm fell, and Sherlock tried to still the tremors taking root in his limbs as Alexander's gaze swept over his frame. There was ferocity in his expression, but more frightening was the steady logic in his eyes. He was not a man lost to his temper. Instead, he was planning his next move, and when he spoke again, it was level and indifferent.

'Then what use are you?'

Sherlock stumbled back as Alexander leapt, his fingers wrapping around his throat. A chair overturned, and the smack of his hip into the corner of the table sent the precarious glassware falling to the floor. It exploded like bombs: a furious, crystalline cacophony. The cool expanse of the fridge hit his back, wobbling as he was pinned against it.

The thrum of his pulse in his ears was a staggering beat, and every sliver of air he snatched was barbed wire in his throat. He tried to fight him off, but his muscles grew weaker with each passing second, his vision tingeing sepia at its edges.

He had hoped his assertion that he was no longer fertile would drive Alexander to turn his back and go, giving him up as a lost cause. He should have known better. Years of absence had softened the harsh corners of Alexander's nature in his memories, muting his recollections. Like a child breaking a toy to spite another, Alexander would rather see him dead than let him go, even if that meant choking him with his bare hands.
It was no half-hearted effort. Strong thumbs dug in below his Adam's apple, cutting off his air for short pulses of time before allowing Sherlock to grab one brief sip of oxygen. Not enough to allow him to escape, but adequate to demonstrate that, even here in Baker Street, power over his life still lay in his Alpha's hands.

Alexander watched him, not with passion but with purpose, as if analysing every moment. His arms softened, no longer rigid but bent at the elbows, allowing him to press his hips and chest close. Instantly, Sherlock could feel how much he was enjoying himself, and he wheezed a protest as that voice murmured in his ear.

'You see, I think you're all talk. I think if I get a knot in you, you'll swell with child soon enough.' Brown eyes dipped down to Sherlock's lips before looking up at him again. 'Why don't we try it and see who's right?'

Sherlock could only manage a wheezed snarl in response, his ears ringing as shadows drew across his brain. Perhaps he was beginning to hear things, because just for a moment, he swore he heard John calling his name.

A metallic click cut through the kitchen, and Alexander's grip loosened just enough for Sherlock to drag in a whisper of air. He blinked ferociously, renewing his efforts to extract himself from the manacles of Alexander's clutching hands, but the blood was thudding, sullen, in his veins, and he could do little more than wriggle fretfully.

'Get off him.'

John's voice could have ended wars. It was an order – a command from on high – a tone Sherlock knew to obey without question.

Alexander's gaze met his, warped with disgust, before he glanced behind him. The cool line of the Sig did not make an impression, and Sherlock watched him examine John from head-to-toe: a slow, careful inspection.

Normally, John looked almost benign: a smiling man in a nondescript jumper. Now, the illusion was shattered. Even without the sick gleam of the gun in his hand, there would be no disguising the cold power in John's gaze. Smears of mud daubed his skin with war paint. His back was ramrod straight, his feet spread and his hands competent on the pistol's grip. None of it was idle threat, and yet Alexander appeared not to register the danger.

Even if he was unimpressed with John's physical presence, the smell was another matter. The addition of John to the scene had changed the bouquet of the atmosphere, over-riding the acidic, chemical stench that lingered around Alexander with a bass musk: one that warned of strength and peril. Alexander's marsh-undertones battled for supremacy with John's richer fragrance. It was a savage cocktail, yet either Alexander was too stupid to register its importance, or what was almost overpowering to Sherlock was failing to have an impact.

He felt the exact moment when Alexander realised that John was an Alpha. Like the roll of a wave, the antagonism thickened. Sharp thumbnails cut crescents into Sherlock's throat as Alexander turned back to him, pressing in once more. 'So this is what you've been doing,' he murmured, his conversational tone at odds with the anger staining his cheeks. 'You filthy. Little. Whore.'

There was no warning as metal smacked hard into Alexander's skull: a powerful collision of the Sig's grip with his occipital bone. The pressure vanished from around Sherlock's neck, leaving him choking on the air that flooded his lungs. With nothing to hold him up, his knees went, too infirm to bear his weight. Tacky linoleum pressed against his palms as he hunkered down, blind to anything
but the clamours of his body. Blood rushed in his ears, driven on by the clumsy race of his heart. His stomach hollowed out with each ragged gasp, and his throat burned as he coughed hard enough to gag.

Slowly, the black spots dancing across his vision began to fade, and he blinked them aside, lifting his head to take in the scene. Not that he could see much. John had planted himself in front of Sherlock, shielding him with denim-clad legs. He was smaller than Alexander, shorter and not quite as broad, but one glance and Sherlock knew neither aspect could be mistaken for a weakness, not when John radiated lethal competence from every angle.

The gun didn't falter, levelled at the spot between Alexander's eyes. Despite the ferocity of John's blow, he did not look unduly affected, too high on adrenaline to notice the blood in his hair. Instead, he looked as if he would happily impale himself on the barrel of the Sig if it meant getting his hands on Sherlock again. Blunt fingers clenched into fists at his side, and the wrench of his lips revealed teeth that gleamed like ivory in the kitchen's sallow light.

'So you'll fight me every day of your life, deprive me my right as your Alpha, but you'll lie back and spread your legs willingly for – for this?' He gestured to John, not bothering to address him directly.

Sherlock managed a shake of his head, agonisingly aware of the volatility of this situation. Alexander's control was slipping, filling the flat with fury's fugue, and it wouldn't be long before John responded in kind. He was showing admirable restraint, but Sherlock could see the flare of his nostrils and the coldness in his eyes.

His sluggish mind gained speed, trying to think of a way to avert the disaster unfolding in front of him. John and Alexander were rapidly approaching a flashpoint: one where every instinct, already itching for a fight, exploded into action and the world fell down around their ears.

'It's not like that,' he croaked, his voice a ghost of its former self.

'Why else would anyone tolerate you?' Alexander lunged, his hand stretched and grasping.

John struck, a lightning bolt of movement, grabbing Alexander's wrist and twisting it, spinning them so he could thrust him back across the room and resume his place in front of Sherlock, an unmoving sentry. He was breathing hard, his lips bleached white as he pressed them together, but the bedrock of his restraint remained intact.

'You're in my way,' Alexander hissed, a muscle jumping in his jaw as he surged forward again, his eventual acknowledgement of John's existence grudging at best. 'Move.'

John gave a mirthless laugh. 'No chance.' He leant his weight back a fraction, but Sherlock knew it wasn't any form of retreat. He stood so that his leg was gently pressed against Sherlock's shoulder: a faint comfort. He didn't ask if he was all right or call Sherlock's strength into question. He simply stood there, an impassable barricade of human flesh and bone. 'Leave Sherlock alone, and fuck off out of my flat.'

'You're welcome to this –' Alexander gestured around him. '– place. That, however, is mine.' He jabbed a finger in Sherlock's direction, the movement pressing him into the unmoving presence of John's gun. 'And I'm taking him with me.'

'No you're not. Not if he doesn't want to go.'

Weakly, Sherlock got to his feet, leaning against the fridge for support as Alexander's words slipped through the air like silk, soft and dismissive. 'Why would anyone care what he wants?'
Hatred went nova in John's gaze, his entire stance moving from passive potential to visceral action. The weight of his decision, to fire or not, was plain. Sherlock could actually see John weighing the possible consequences of a prolonged prison sentence – a life forever changed – and finding them acceptable.

A tight sound caught in his throat as he pushed himself forward. He clutched at John's jumper, beseeching, before curling his grip around his arm. A frail shove urged the pistol aside, and his plea cracked in the air, robbed of volume but not intensity by Alexander’s abuse.

'Don’t! You can't kill him.’

He expected to have to wrest the gun from John's grip and scream to make himself heard, but the response was instantaneous. John ripped his gaze away from Alexander, a frown pleating his brow as he stared at Sherlock, obedient, even if he didn't grasp the gravity of what would happen if he pulled the trigger. The Sig, no longer poised to deliver its lethal verdict, pointed at the floor as the air crackled around them, taut and electric.

Alexander leapt, throwing himself against John and wrestling for the weapon. The crack of a shot rang in Sherlock's ears, but there was no time to see where the projectile had gone as the pistol clattered across the floor, dangerous still.

Sherlock stared after it, his mind racing as Alexander and John grappled with each other, one intent on getting to Sherlock, the other determined to keep him at bay. The temptation to snatch up the gun and bring everything to an end burned into his bones like molten steel, but he cast it aside. There was too much room for error: a stray bullet, and the equilibrium of his life would be shaken forever. Either Alexander or John could end up dead as a result. The former would ruin the compromise of Sherlock's current existence, and the latter – a world without John – did not bear thinking about.

No, this battle had always been about control. What mattered now was making Alexander leave. For years, Sherlock had imagined holding a position of power over him, delineating his weaknesses to be used against him. Now, the gleam of a scalpel on the floor caught his eye, and a plan unfurled in his mind.

Perhaps terrorising him with threats would be enough, but if not – if force was what was required to make the wretched man leave him and John in peace – then Sherlock would not be found wanting. He knew how to inflict pain, and Alexander had given him reason enough over the years to deal out punishment without a hint of regret.

Stepping forward, he scooped up the blade from where it had fallen on the floor. It was not a brutal killing machine, but a tool crafted for precision that could be pressed to the deadliest of uses. Perhaps it lacked impact, but every movement would be guided by his hand, not left to the spring and release of a firing mechanism.

He closed his fingers tight around the handle, waiting until a strong right-hook from John sent Alexander stumbling.

Sherlock's foot lashed out, slamming into the back of Alexander's knee as his hand pressed down on one shoulder, driving him to the floor. His nails scraped over Alexander's scalp as he grabbed him by the hair, exposing the column of his throat, the tendons arched like violin strings across their frame.

Cool steel kissed the hot flesh over Alexander's pulse, and all movement stilled. One hand, drawn down to punch upwards, loosened from its fist, splayed in mock surrender, and Alexander tipped his head back further, looking up into Sherlock's face.
For a man on his knees, he failed to appear submissive. His face may have portrayed lines of shocked appeasement, but his eyes held only leashed rage, biding its time. 'Now, Sherlock. Don't do anything you might regret. You need me.'

'Not in one piece,' he rasped as he slid the edge of the scalpel downwards, his shoulders shaking with the effort of holding him in place. The man didn't struggle, but any vulnerability would be exploited. Sherlock had no intention of giving him that opportunity.

Alexander's nose was already bleeding from one of John's blows, and the slice of the knife, shallow but emphatic, added to the stench as Sherlock angled his wrist to stab down and in. 'One push. If you're fortunate, I'd miss most major blood vessels, but I'd hit your spine.' He let out a quivering sigh, ignoring the pain in his throat. 'Not here, maybe. Too high. I need you breathing, after all.'

The blade slit apart cloth as he dragged it down to the level of Alexander's diaphragm. 'Below your waist, though? There's nothing down there I require.'

Alexander made a choked sound, and the sheen of nervous sweat across his top lip was the most gratifying thing Sherlock had experienced since John first breathed “amazing.” For once, there was genuine fear in those dark brown eyes; Alexander watched him as if he were a threat, rather than an ornament to be admired.

'You'd spend the rest of your life in jail,' he hissed, his muscles jumping beneath Sherlock's touch. 'You should be there already for daring to raise a hand against me. For everything you've done!'

'An Omega has no legal agency,' Sherlock husked. 'Any crime they commit is the responsibility of their Alpha. This would be self-harm by proxy. As for the things I did in the past, you know how that would reflect on you: an Alpha unable to control what's his.'

Alexander struck like a snake, too quick for Sherlock to anticipate, grabbing his wrist and grinding the delicate bones together. A vicious yank shot arrows of pain along his arm, and he clenched his fist around the handle of the scalpel, hanging on to his one advantage as Alexander sought to break him all over again.

He barely registered the blur of John's movement. Only in retrospect did he realise he'd been inching towards the gun. In one quick swoop, the Sig was back in John's palm where it belonged, the barrel as black as an eclipse.

'Stop it,' he ordered, pointing the pistol towards the terminus of the thin, crimson trail left in the scalpel's wake. 'Sherlock would have struggled to paralyse you with that, but he'd have been careful about it. Precise. A bullet's not so neat.'

'Shoot me now, and it'll hit him as well,' Alexander snarled. He pulled Sherlock's arm, dragging him forward so his chest was draped over Alexander's shoulders and back, his body bent at an intimate angle despite his struggles.

John shrugged, his eyes darting up to meet Sherlock's gaze. His finger shifted on the trigger, moving to a stronger, more definitive cinch as Sherlock slowly nodded his consent. 'Nothing he wouldn't survive, especially with immediate medical attention.'

'I recommend you do not take Doctor Watson's words lightly.' Mycroft's footsteps tapped across the floor of 221B, measured as if he were out for an afternoon stroll, rather than mediating a bizarre hostage situation. Sherlock hadn't even heard him enter, too absorbed with the threat of strife steadily building within the confines of Baker Street. 'He takes prodigious care over Sherlock's safety. You would not be the first man to fall foul of a bullet in Sherlock's name.'
Reluctantly, Alexander's grip slackened, allowing Sherlock to free his aching right hand. Immediately, he stepped back, not daring to cradle it against his chest. It would only be another sign of weakness to be used against him. Instead, he stood equidistant from Mycroft and John, the third point of a triangle in which Alexander occupied the centre.

For the first time since all this began, he looked beaten. A grudging scowl marred his once attractive face as he stared at Mycroft, his loathing reined in by the respect Sherlock's brother commanded. It was sickening that neither John, being not of the elite, nor Sherlock as an Omega, were granted the same consideration. For all their threats, Alexander deemed himself above them. It was only when faced with Mycroft's power and wealth that he subsided.

'I profess myself disappointed, Mr Cunningham,' Mycroft said, his eyes narrowing over a thin smile. 'I had thought I made myself clear last time we spoke that you were never to seek out Sherlock again.'

Alexander was breathing heavily, and Sherlock watched, his gaze taking in everything from the man on his knees to the two Alphas towering over him. John looked hard and ragged, his face unforgiving as his hand remained tight around the gun. With every second, the air was flooding with pheromones, charging the atmosphere and inciting a mirror response. Yet John, exposed for longer than Mycroft, did not look like a man losing his grip on his rationality. Rather than blinding him, his anger was fuel for his righteousness, held in devastating restraint.

Even Sherlock's brother was influenced, the story writ large in the tightness of his knuckles around the handle of the umbrella. His eyes were chips of ice beneath furrowed brows, his displeasure finding its outlet in his disdain.

'Sherlock is mine,' Alexander gritted out, keeping his palms spread as he got to his feet. He flicked dust from his knees before meeting Mycroft's gaze, his expression an ugly façade of civility. 'Bought and paid for, Mr Holmes. I'm here to reclaim my property.'

'Then you will be disappointed.' Mycroft stepped forward, the lines bracketing his lips deepening as he clenched his jaw in disgust. 'It was at my brother's urging that, last time, I agreed to exercise restraint. Your freedom and reputation lie entirely upon his mercy, not mine. Believe me, much like Doctor Watson I have no need for your ongoing survival. The only person in this room whose interests align even fractionally with yours is Sherlock himself.'

'You have no right to withhold him from me. If I made a claim, or prosecuted that –' He gestured to John, who lifted his chin in response. '– the outcome would be in my favour.'

Mycroft picked some imaginary lint from his sleeve, inspecting his fingernails before he shook his head. 'I think not. Dragging this into the public eye would not offer any benefits, nor reflect well on your family. I doubt your mother would be impressed by the body of evidence I have collected with regards your treatment of Sherlock. Not to mention the Omega woman you briefly called yours in the interim between my brother's first departure and your initial retrieval.'

'You know nothing!'

Alexander's denial echoed around the room, and Sherlock repressed a twitch of alarm, feeling the weight of John's gaze and deliberately avoiding his eye. However, that didn't mean he was blind to the shift of John's body. He drifted closer until they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, John a bare inch away. He did not crowd Sherlock with his shorter frame, nor thrust comfort upon him. He merely made himself available, a presence on which Sherlock could lean, should he wish to do so.

Mycroft noticed it too, and Sherlock thought he saw a shadow of approval in his brother's face.
before he returned his attention to Alexander, stepping into his personal space and broaching the physical stalemate as he looked down his sharp nose.

'On the contrary, I know everything. Your mother is a traditionalist. Her views on how an Omega should be treated – with respect, regardless of their behaviour – married firmly with those of my own family. It was one of the deciding factors in your bonding. How would she react, knowing the details of your actions over the past seventeen years?' He smiled. 'That's the problem with trials. Public. Messy. I can imagine the consequences.'

A wash of blue light flickered through the living room, giving the scene a ghostly edge as Alexander's eyes widened.

'Of course,' Mycroft murmured, 'if you're so confident, there's no reason we cannot initiate criminal proceedings. I would be fascinated to discover who would come out on top.'

Alexander bowed his head, his gaze crawling across the glass-strewn floor before he shot a venomous glare in Sherlock's direction. He was backed into a corner, and everyone knew it. Mycroft was not bluffing any more than John had been, but his weapon of choice was the threat of exposure, rather than the snap of a bullet.

Someone – Lestrade, Sherlock surmised: a neighbour must have reported the gunshot – hammered on the front door. Alexander shifted, clearly caught between the wall of his wounded pride and the logical need for a retreat. A lesser man would have threatened, spouting vitriol in the face of his defeat. Instead, he managed a respectful nod in Mycroft's direction. 'At a more convenient time, perhaps, Mr Holmes. I'll see myself out. If you'll call off your dog downstairs?'

'Detective Inspector Lestrade doesn't answer to me. If he can be considered under anyone's influence, again, you need only look to my brother.'

'You might want to leave the way you came in,' Sherlock rasped, folding his arms and trying not to wince at the pain in his hand. 'Lestrade knows a criminal when he sees one. He won't hesitate to arrest you.' A lie, of course, but Alexander wasn't to know that. Sherlock's dignity had been shredded enough in the past half hour; he had no intention of letting Alexander leave here with his head held high.

For a second, he thought it would be the Alpha's breaking point. He felt the wire of fury stretch thin and sensed both Mycroft and John ready themselves in response. The air was a dense fug of ferocity, and Sherlock dimly heard Lestrade swear as Mrs Hudson let him in and he caught his first scent of the stormy atmosphere upstairs. 'I'd hurry if I were you.'

Alexander loomed, a tower of violence barely leashed. His teeth flashed in a snarl, and John took a half-step forward, the Sig in his hand the only encouragement any sane man would require to depart. It was enough to tip the scales fractionally once more, and Sherlock's shoulders slumped as Alexander barged around him. He disappeared into the bedroom and ducked out onto the fire escape just as Lestrade's pounding feet reached the top of the stairs.

'What's going on?' the DI demanded, out of breath and wide-eyed. 'Your landlady called me asking for help, then I get reports of shots fired?' He raised his eyebrows at John, who staunchly refused to put down the Sig. It was plain for anyone to see that he was too anxious to stand-down, his body attuned to the path of Alexander's exit as if expecting him to storm back in and whisk Sherlock away.

'An unwelcome visitor,' Mycroft replied, his usually smooth tones frayed as he pressed his phone to his ear and addressed a peon on the other end of the line. 'Target departed from the rear of Baker
Street. Notify me when you have made the acquisition.'

'Mycroft.' Sherlock sighed, trying to ignore the traitorous shudders of his body. Every joint felt boneless, and rashes of unease crawled through him to coil in the cradle of his hips. His instinct was to seek out somewhere safe and curl up in the shadows until the danger had passed. Logically, he knew Alexander was gone, but there was no guarantee that he'd stay away.

Besides, as well as the threat of his eventual return, there was still the feedback loop of pheromones all around them. Every Alpha who picked up on the fragrance rife in the air would respond in kind: aggression over logic, and would produce their own compatible odour. Lestrade's arrival only worsened the situation, and while Sherlock knew he was not their target, the animal portion of his brain was not so easily convinced.

'I will merely restate the terms of the agreement, Sherlock. Unless, of course, you've changed your mind?'

Sherlock shook his head as he slumped back against the kitchen surface, clenching his teeth to stop them clattering together as the ebb of adrenaline combined with the vicious chill of shock. He loathed that Alexander could have this effect on him still – could bring about his fear with such ease. For God's sake, he'd faced down gun-toting criminals and never even blinked. All Alexander had to do was speak, and he was left defenceless.

Bowing his head, he fought for some self-control, barely registering the decisive sounds of John making the pistol safe and setting it aside. A moment later, a warm presence made him look up into pale blue eyes.

Where John's expression had been bitter and strained, there was now a softness to his features – not choreographed to manipulate, but evidence of a deliberate shift in priorities. His hands, not exactly clean, but steady and capable, were held between them at shoulder height, palm up and fingers curled in a beckoning gesture.

'You're hurt,' John murmured, a master of the obvious, but Sherlock couldn't bring himself to sneer in the face of such blatant concern. 'Can I take a look?'

The fact that he was asking permission when he would normally foist his medical opinion on Sherlock spoke volumes. He must look awful, and Sherlock huffed a sigh through his nose before he nodded, aware of every way his body ached. Once, violence had not been Alexander's forte, but now, and not for the first time, evidence to the contrary marred Sherlock's frame.

In contrast to such brutality, John's touch was angelic – cautious to the extreme, but not without purpose. He palpated Sherlock's throat, checking his hyoid and his cervical vertebrae, wincing and murmuring apologies every time Sherlock flinched. 'I should have looked you over straight away, not...' He jerked his head grimly towards the gun, his guilt over answering his instinctual urge to see an enemy from his territory apparent.

'And yet you did not,' Mycroft pointed out from where he stood a short distance away, his body locked so solid that he could have been made of marble. At any other time, Sherlock would have been amused by his brother's fallibility: a victim to the chemicals in the air as much as anyone else. Now, though, his thinly-veiled animosity only served to rile John's temper in return. 'More a soldier than a doctor, after all.'

'At least I was here,' John snapped, his touch belying none of his annoyance as he glared over his shoulder. 'Where the fuck were you? You've got the entire country under surveillance and you can't see when your own brother's in trouble?'
'I assumed he was in your safe hands! Clearly I misjudged your abilities.'

John twitched in Mycroft's direction, breathing hard through his nose and obviously struggling against the urge to throw a punch. Mycroft was not much better, a sneer fixed firmly on his face and his expression locked in Arctic arrogance.

Lestrade stepped between them, hands outspread in preparation to push them apart if necessary. 'Enough of that,' he growled, looking back and forth. 'Stop pissing about and tell me what the hell is going on.'

'For what purpose?' Mycroft retorted as John continued to glare, still hovering in Sherlock's orbit but unable to turn his back on the other two Alphas in the room. 'I hardly think a man of your limited abilities could be of assistance.'

'Oi!'

With a sigh, Sherlock gently eased John's hands away, ignoring the protest that bordered on a snarl as he pulled open one of the drawers, rooting through old takeaway menus until he found what he was looking for. The small tube was filled with a viscous pink substance, and he threw it gracelessly into the sink, dismissing the tinkle of smashed glass as he sat in a kitchen chair to wait.

It took only a few seconds for the chemical to have the desired effect, and there was something satisfying about watching three full-grown, posturing Alphas recoil as if slapped in the face. Even Mycroft's demeanour was ripped to shreds, his expression one of overt disgust as if he'd bitten into rotten fruit.

'Ugh,' Lestrade groaned, clamping a hand over his nose and glaring in Sherlock's direction, but it was his normal irritation, not something hormone-driven. 'I was wondering what had happened to that. Should've known you'd nicked it.'

'What is it?' John croaked, trying to inch closer to Sherlock to take a better look at his injuries only to be driven back by the waves of odour emanating from the sink. 'Christ, it's bloody awful.'

'Paresco,' the DI managed, retreating towards a window and opening it as wide as it would go. 'We use it for riot control. If we didn't, any Alphas would get stuck in a loop, working each other up.'

'As we have just effectively demonstrated.' Mycroft turned towards Lestrade, inclining his head regretfully. 'My apologies.'

'Don't bother,' John cut in when Sherlock's brother looked as if he might grudgingly repeat a sentiment of remorse to him. 'You'll only embarrass yourself.'

Mycroft looked suitably perturbed, no doubt disquieted by his lack of restraint. Alphas did not reach high positions amidst the conflict of government without taming the majority of their more base, biological responses. This scenario, however, seemed to have been too much for even him to bear, and he offered up a weak excuse for his behaviour. 'Exceptional circumstances, Sherlock.'

'Emotional investment,' he retorted, but it lacked bite. Baiting his brother was absent its usual appeal, and the reprieve was as close to an expression of gratitude for Mycroft's timely interference as he could manage.

'Not without due cause. You know how I worry.'

Mycroft glanced over at Lestrade, who was giving orders on his mobile. When he hung up, he shrugged, gesturing in Sherlock's direction. 'Calling off the cavalry. I was already on my way when
the gunshot was reported, but a response team wasn't far behind. I thought you'd rather not have half
the Met turning up at the door.'

'What'll you tell them?' John asked, finally steeling himself and approaching Sherlock, crouching
down at his side before reaching for his wrist and inspecting the swelling. He brushed Sherlock's
radial pulse gently, mapping the darkening bruises Alexander had left behind before looking up into
Sherlock's face, frowning at the scrapes he knew must be marring his skin.

'As long as the bullet didn't leave the flat, I'll just say it was an experiment going critical. Considering
Sherlock's hobbies, they won't question it. I'm guessing no one was actually shot?'

'Unfortunately,' John muttered, his palms trembling against Sherlock's arm. 'Though not for want of
trying.'

'So I see.' Mycroft pointed at a hole in the wall below the cow's skull, the paper tattered around the
rough circle of plaster and the projectile embedded within it. 'Perhaps we should dispose of the
evidence?'

Lestrade sighed, moving across the room to dig it out as he continued speaking. 'I suppose it was
Sherlock's Alpha who dropped by?' He looked apologetic, but Sherlock knew it was in the
Inspector's nature to verify the facts, even when he wasn't present in an official capacity. 'If nothing
else, the stink pretty much gives that away.'

'He broke in,' he corrected, shrugging. 'After a fashion, anyway. He came up the fire escape and
through the bedroom window.'

'And tried to take you back. Looks like you put up a good fight.' Lestrade placed his hands on his
hips, his eyes sympathetic as he took in the epitaph of Alexander's efforts. 'Do we have any idea why
he chose to come after you now? I mean, he's left you alone in the past, and I doubt it's a case of him
only just tracking you down. Between your business and John's blog, you've not exactly been
keeping a low profile.'

John paled, chewing his bottom lip. 'I didn't think about that.' He swept a hand through his hair,
shutting his eyes as if he was settling the blame for Alexander's arrival squarely on his own
shoulders, and Sherlock's stomach clenched uncomfortably at his distress. 'I'll delete it as soon as I
get a minute.'

'Don't.' Sherlock sighed. 'Trite as your prose is, it's good for business. Unlike the first time I ran,
concealing myself from Alexander isn't as imperative as it once was. There are... other factors that
kept him away.'

'Ones which seem to carry less influence these days,' Mycroft pointed out, lifting his head and
squaring his shoulders. 'Clearly they are no longer adequate to dissuade him from approaching you.
Until we know the precise details of what's driving him to take action, it would be in your best
interests if you left London.'

Rejection slammed through Sherlock's body in a cold rush, and he slashed the air with his uninjured
hand. 'No. I refuse to be driven out by him.'

'Sherlock, it is for your own safety.' His brother sighed, brushing his fingers against his brow. 'Please
don't make this difficult.'

Anger shimmered in Sherlock's stomach, and he clenched his teeth as he ground out a retort. 'Don't
you think enough people have attempted to rob me of a choice for one day? This is my decision,
Mycroft, and it's already been made. I'm not going anywhere.'

He rounded his shoulders as his brother glanced first at Lestrade, then John, as if expecting one or the other of them to back him up. The DI's only response was a shrug, while John shook his head, his jaw tight.

'It's no good looking at me,' he murmured, breathing out a sigh. 'It's up to Sherlock.'

'Whose reaction has no base in logic,' Mycroft replied, clearly frustrated. 'What is the point of further endangering yourself by remaining at Baker Street?'

Sherlock licked his lip, tasting the tinny echo of blood as he struggled to conjure an explanation. How could he make anyone who had spent their lives free of restriction understand the perverse necessity of making a choice just because he could? How could he define the bone-deep need to protect his interests in London because they were the only thing in the world he could truly call his own?

In the end, he dismissed the question with a shake of his head. 'It's irrelevant. Alexander's motivations are obvious to anyone who cares to look.' That got Mycroft's attention, and he sensed Lestrade's interest even as John lifted his head to listen. Honestly, did they think anything, even Alexander's presence, could turn off his powers of observation?

Hunching his shoulders, Sherlock took a moment to order his thoughts. 'His accessories are old and his suit was worn. The money is running out, probably because he's been spending it on alcohol and drugs. His use was evident. Even if it weren't for the broken blood vessels around his nostrils, there was the fact he didn't notice John's approach.' He pursed his lips, remembering how ignorant Alexander had been to John's presence and then, later, the threat he represented. It was too all-consuming to be Alpha arrogance. 'Although his attention was on me at the time, he should have detected John by smell alone as soon as he walked through the door, but he didn't react. The implication is that his olfactory sense has been damaged by snorting pharmaceuticals.'

He took a deep breath, reading the information like an actor going through a script. 'Even when I was staying in his home, the family funds were held in trust. His access was to remain strictly limited until he had children for whom to provide.' He shrugged. 'Since there are no offspring, that state of affairs has continued. I imagine he's burning through the allowance his Alpha mother gives him. However, it's still a steady annual income, so something must have happened.'

Swallowing against the soreness in his throat, Sherlock tried to dismiss the way his voice cracked, hurting with every syllable. 'I suspect his mother laid down an ultimatum. Produce children or be written out of any further assets. He can't afford another Omega, not any more, so –'

'So he came after the only one left alive that he already owned.' Mycroft sighed, glancing down at his phone with a frown. 'In that case, the chances of him seeking you out again are higher than I first imagined.' He closed his eyes, looking like he wanted nothing more than to drag Sherlock away. It would not be the first time Mycroft had over-ridden his wishes – rehab sprang to mind. However, he managed to restrain himself as he said, 'Since you will not leave Baker Street, will you at least permit me to install more thorough surveillance?'

'Can't you just keep Alexander locked up somewhere?' John asked, sounding faintly muffled as if he were trying not to breathe through his nose. 'You've got people tracking him down, haven't you?'

'While he can be contained for a short time, I am afraid there are limits, even for me,' Mycroft replied before addressing Sherlock. 'Perhaps if you moved to the sofa, Doctor Watson would be able to examine your injuries without the possibility of permanent sinus damage?'
Stiffly, John sat back on his heels, dragging himself upright before holding out a hand for Sherlock and urging him to his feet. It could have seemed proprietary or clinical, but the pressure John exerted was just enough to offer support. The cup of his palm cradled Sherlock's arm, subtly tender, and he nudged him down into the yielding couch as if Sherlock were made of glass.

'Just let me wash my hands and get the first aid kit.' He looked at his grubby palms with a frown. 'Should have done that first, really.' Shaking his head, he shrugged out of his mud-smeared jacket. His jumper followed, and John draped it over the back of the couch. His normally confident movements had become fretful, the tide of emotions from the past hour making him dither as he tried to prioritise.

'Use the bathroom,' Lestrade said. 'I'll rinse out the kitchen sink. That stench will hang around for weeks, otherwise.' He buried his nose in his sleeve, inching closer and turning on the taps as John marched out of sight, leaving Mycroft hovering nearby, quiet and distracted.

Sherlock leaned back, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. The flat still carried a myriad of smells – Mycroft, Lestrade and Alexander's fading scent – and he longed for the moment he and John were alone again. However, at least with John's jumper next to him, the primary fragrance he could detect was that of his friend, made dense by the day's events. To John it would probably reek, but Sherlock found himself restraining the urge to bury his face in the woollen depths and inhale until his jangling nerves were soothed once more.

The leather by his ear creaked as his brother rested his hand on the back of the couch: solidarity through proximity, about as close to an embrace as Mycroft would get. Sherlock didn't have to open his eyes to detect his ire and concern; it wrote itself in his brother's perfume – boring and bland.

'You need to tell him.'

Sherlock opened his eyes, looking up as his heart lurched awkwardly in his chest. 'What?'

'I am aware that you are not prone to taking anyone – not even family – into your confidence, but Doctor Watson needs to be fully informed of your past.' Mycroft sniffed as Sherlock groaned. 'If not for your own safety, then for his. It cannot have escaped your notice that today could have ended very differently for everyone involved. He risks himself for you and is happy to do so. Don't you think you owe him this much in return?'

Mycroft's phone rang, and he glanced down at the display. 'If needs must, Sherlock, then I will inform him of all I know, sparse as that may be. However, I'm sure he would rather hear it from you.' He turned away, answering the call with clipped words and a hint of smugness. From the sounds of it, his underlings had tracked Alexander down a few streets away and taken him in to Mycroft's secretive custody.

Sherlock knew it was his brother's dearest wish to see Alexander eradicated. No doubt there was some element of guilt on Mycroft's part for not having intervened earlier, not just today, but in years gone by. However, as tempting as it was to remove Alexander in a terminal manner, it was too great a risk.

He remembered the look in John's eyes when Sherlock had told him Alexander was not to be killed, confusion from a man who saw a threat and worked to dispose of it. Equipped as he was with only a skeleton of understanding, John was no doubt baffled by Sherlock's seemingly contradictory actions, protecting Alexander one minute and threatening him with life-altering injury the next.

He hated to admit it, but his brother was right. As reluctant as he was to expose the shadows of his past, even to someone he considered his only friend, Alexander's appearance and Sherlock's own
behaviour had forced his hand.

John needed to know it all. The only question was, once the story was told, would he still look at Sherlock with pride and admiration?

Somehow, Sherlock doubted it.
Hot water splashed over John's hands, making his split knuckles sting as he scrubbed away the mud. Diligently, he soaped from his fingertips to his elbows, concentrating his mind on the simple task in a futile effort to calm his racing thoughts.

It felt like he'd been stretched to breaking point, and there was no way to relieve the tension. Ploughing a bullet between Alexander's eyes would have done the trick, and damn the consequences, but Sherlock had stopped him, his pale gaze imploring above bruised cheeks and a bleeding lip.

'Fuck,' John breathed, his voice a whine as he tried to pull himself together. Sherlock's hints about life with Alexander had not prepared him for the reality. It was one thing to be told that Omegas were treated like idols at best and objects at worst, but to see it happen – to see that git act as if Sherlock had no mind of his own and no opinion worth his time?

John's blood buzzed in his veins as emotion clouded his mind. He swallowed, forcing it back as he struggled to hold on to his rationality.

He didn't know how many blows Sherlock had suffered before he arrived, and at least he'd dealt out some in response, but clearly Alexander had no qualms about using force to get his way. That knowledge crystallised John's nebulous fears, bringing them to the fore. It was not merely a cold and disinterested bond that Sherlock had to tolerate – nothing so passive – and John's stomach writhed with despair.

Yet despite what he would term as a history of domestic abuse, Sherlock had protected his Alpha from John's terminal solution, but why? Had he missed something? Did Sherlock care for the bastard, despite his protests, or was there something else, something John was failing to consider?

His imagination ran wild, thrown into further disarray by the memory of Sherlock's actions. Yes, he had spared Alexander a bullet, but then he'd threatened him with a blade. It was obvious that Sherlock had no personal affection for his Alpha, but was there some other, latent tie that couldn't be ignored? Was Sherlock keeping Alexander alive for himself, or was there a third party? Someone who needed protecting?

John stared at the steaming water running a bare inch from his hands as he turned that theory over in his mind. Sherlock had mentioned using abortive agents and had stated only minutes ago that there were no offspring, but was that true? Perhaps what he meant was that there were no children of whom Alexander was aware. Sherlock had run twice – had been separated from his Alpha for years. If he'd been pregnant when he left, he could have given birth and hidden the kid away somewhere, giving it a loving family and a life he couldn't provide.

Or, of course, Alexander might not be the father. Sherlock had been out of his Alpha's control, and just because he didn't go into pyresus didn't mean he failed to experience sexual attraction or undergo ovulation. It just meant the whole process wasn't on display for the world to see. Had there been someone else? Someone who loved him?

John shook his head, casting his questions aside. He didn't have time for this – not the roaring adrenaline that refused to fade or the dread in his stomach. He didn't have the luxury of sorting out the cocktail of rage at Alexander's actions and brittle confusion at Sherlock's response. There were higher priorities to answer than the call of his curiosity.
Analyse the wound, stem the bleeding, clean the flesh, bind the breach. It was a simple mantra – medical care pared down to the basics, and John clung to it as he shook the water from his hands.

Grabbing the first-aid kit from under the sink, he opened the door, almost walking into Mycroft and Greg. There was a moment in the narrow hallway when it was hard to remember that they were on his side, rather than intruders in his territory. He wanted to bare his teeth, but that was a daft impulse, one which John managed to stifle with a frown as he glared at the older Holmes.

For once, Mycroft looked suitably cowed. He feigned interest in his phone and refused to meet John's eyes, everything about his posture carved in lines of submission. John wasn't sure if it was deliberate, but it soothed the anger that grumbled beneath his ribs.

'A Beta team will be around in the next few hours to install additional surveillance,' he explained. 'I will hold Alexander for as long as I can, and I'll notify you and Sherlock once his release becomes unavoidable.'

'How long will that give us?' John asked. 'A couple of days? More?'

'A week at most.' He glanced towards the living room, and John cocked his head, hearing Mrs Hudson's voice and the sound of a broom over broken glass. 'While I would rather not leave Sherlock alone at this time, it's apparent that the presence of myself and the Detective Inspector is –' He hesitated, searching for a suitable word. '– unwelcome.'

'I think anyone who doesn't belong in Baker Street is pretty hard to tolerate right now,' Greg added, his expression grim and sympathetic. 'He's not said anything, but us being here isn't making him feel safe. He's too rattled.'

'Hardly unexpected.' Mycroft sighed, pocketing his phone and casting another glance back in his brother’s direction before turning towards the stairs. 'Should there be anything you require, you have my number. I recommend you make use of it, for your own sake, as well as Sherlock's.'

His pristine brogues tapped on the floorboards as John and Greg shared an exasperated look. 'I think what he was trying to say is "We're off out of your hair. Let us know if we can help."' Greg put his hands in his pockets, looking down at his shoes. 'I can't speak for Mycroft, but I do mean anything. I can be here off the clock and off the record if you two need that kind of help. Not suggesting you and Sherlock can't dispose of evidence by yourselves, but, you know... dead bodies are heavy.'

It was only half-joking, and John managed a dark smile as he nodded his gratitude. 'Thanks, Greg, and thanks for getting here so quick. Explaining this to a response team would've been a nightmare.'

'Tell me about it. Normally, I'd be looking around for something to keep Sherlock busy – take his mind off it, whatever, but...' He shrugged, his expression one of baffled pity. 'I'm not sure that'd help. If I get any more details about the case, I'll text you, rather than him. You're probably a better judge of what he needs right now.'

With a nod at John's repeated gratitude, the DI followed in Mycroft's footsteps, shutting the door behind him so that the Yale lock snicked into place: another barricade against the world. John promised himself that, later, he'd go around and check all points of potential entry. It was not adequate to be told that Mycroft had Alexander hidden away somewhere. He needed to reassure himself that Baker Street was as impregnable as he could make it.

First, though, he had to do whatever he could for Sherlock.

Walking through to the living room, he noticed Mrs Hudson had brought up the shopping bags and
retrieved the antiseptic he had purchased. There was no doubt he'd need it. Sherlock was where he'd left him, except now he'd drawn up his knees, his left arm wrapped around his shins and the right cradled close to his chest as he stared out of the window.

He was wearing that shirt that did wonders for his complexion, lending a hint of warmth, but there was no hiding the chill of his pallor. It highlighted the bruises and scabbing scrapes spilt like paint over his skin. John's fingers tightened around the first-aid kit as he glanced at Mrs Hudson, who met his gaze with worry and distress in equal measure.

Even in one of his moods Sherlock wasn't like this: quiet and blank. Failure to engage with the real world wasn't rare, he could spend hours wandering in his mind-palace at times, but this was different. It wasn't that his focus had shifted; it was gone.

John grimaced as he approached, reassuring himself that, given time, that would improve. He'd sort out the injuries to Sherlock's body first, and then see what he could do about the ones that hid beneath his skin.

Dragging the coffee table closer to the sofa, he sat down on the hard surface and pressed his hand to Sherlock's leg. It was the least intrusive way he could think of to get his attention, but he still jerked as if shot, yanking himself back into the cushions and staring at John with wide-eyed confusion.

His heart ached to see Sherlock shy away, and John swallowed back useless platitudes. Telling him he was safe was unlikely to have any impact. The best thing was to show him instead, and John moderated every movement, staying slow and predictable as he struggled to keep his voice steady. 'We need to patch you up,' he explained, gesturing to Sherlock's wrist. 'That's probably sprained, and those cuts should be checked. Okay?'

Sherlock looked down at his hand before lowering his knees, sitting cross-legged with his feet folded up under him as he submitted to John's ministrations. No doubt it stung, but he didn't bat an eyelash as John manipulated each finger, checking range of motion and looking for debris. Considering the broken glass covering the floor, there was the potential for slivers to find their way into the open wounds.

'Are there any cuts on your feet?' he asked, nodding towards Sherlock's sock-clad toes.

A slow shake of his head was the only response Sherlock gave him. After that look of surprise when John had first touched him, he hadn't made any effort to meet John's gaze. Instead he stared down at where John's hands cupped his, easing away the tacky blood that stained Sherlock's flesh and exploring the damage to his arm. The swollen wrist was warm to the touch, but a quick comparison showed his other hand was cool and clammy below the heat of John's palm.

'Are you cold?' he asked as a shiver rippled through Sherlock's muscles.

He licked his lips, and when he spoke his voice was ragged, worse for having rested for a few minutes. 'A bit.'

'Well that's no surprise,' Mrs Hudson chided kindly, her heels tapping over the floor as she approached. 'The window's wide open and you're just in your shirt-sleeves. Anyone would feel the chill.' She shut the casement, sealing it tight. 'I'm not warm enough even in my cardie, and I expect John's regretting taking off that jumper.'

Behind Sherlock, Mrs Hudson gave a sly wink before she draped the Afghan from John's armchair around Sherlock's shoulders. She didn't cluck or coddle him; even like this Sherlock would cast it aside in the name of his wounded pride. Instead, she was going out of her way to emphasise that the
room was inhospitable, rather than suggesting it was a particular weakness of Sherlock's alone.

'I'll put on another one in a minute, Mrs Hudson,' John promised as he picked up a bandage and began to wrap it around Sherlock's wrist. It would support the joint and add the correct level of compression to the injury until the swelling went down. Looping the strip of fabric between the vee of Sherlock's thumb and fingers he added, 'Maybe a cup of tea would warm me up?'

'Just this once, dear,' came the inevitable reply, and John knew she'd equip Sherlock with a drink of his own, as well as a plateful of biscuits. If there was one thing Mrs Hudson appeared to relish, it was providing home comforts, and small familiarities would help Sherlock find an even keel.

A grudging sigh escaped Sherlock's lips, as if he saw the game they were playing and was humouring them. It was a flash of his normal character, and John gave a crooked grin of relief. He'd take petulant indignation over the eerie calm of the past few minutes any day of the week.

Fastening the bandage in place, he put Sherlock's arm back in his lap. 'I'll get some ice for that in a minute, and you can have some ibuprofen in about half an hour. I don't want to thin your blood while you've got injuries that are actively clotting,' he explained. 'Let's get the rest of these cuts sorted.'

Before he could move, Sherlock shifted, placing the soles of his feet on the floor. His knees knocked into John's as he slotted them together, shuffling forward on the sofa so that they were sharing the same space. Each movement was controlled, as if Sherlock were bullying himself into making the effort, but at least he no longer looked as if he'd been sculpted from chalk, falling apart and blurred at the edges.

Left-handed, he reached out, pressing some cotton wool to the rim of the antiseptic bottle before inverting it to dampen the material. 'I'm not the only one who's hurt.' He set the vessel aside, steadying John's jaw with gentle pressure from his little finger as, awkwardly, he began patting the filth away from the scratches on John's cheek.

His heart fluttered in his chest, and he held his breath as if Sherlock were a timid animal likely to flee. Their faces were no more than a hand-span apart; John could see the taut lines of strain carving their unforgiving story around his mouth. It was hard to believe that only a few hours ago they'd wrestled a dealer to the ground in Kensington Gardens, triumphant.

Now, Sherlock looked beaten.

Briefly, he wondered if he should protest. He was capable of cleaning his own scrapes, superficial as they were, but it occurred to him that maybe Sherlock wanted a role in healing the evidence of that afternoon's events. He didn't seem inclined to treat himself, and the possible reasons for that ranged from benign neglect to the belief that he deserved what Alexander had dealt him. John hoped it was the former. Surely Sherlock couldn't think any of this was his fault?

With a shaking hand, John readied some more antiseptic, trying to look at Sherlock's face through a doctor's eyes, as well as a friend's. Maybe he wasn't interested in taking care of himself, but so far he didn't seem to resent John for shouldering the responsibility, and there were plenty of targets to treat. Alexander must have been wearing a ring, because there was a bruise-clouded gash over one cheekbone, and he silently cursed the bastard as he set about his task.

Together, they worked in silence, Sherlock's touch tender over various injuries John didn't remember receiving. The pain had barely penetrated the haze of his defensive anger, and even in the aftermath, the acrid sting of treatment was almost irrelevant.
'Are your teeth all right?' Cautious fingertips pressed against John's jaw, and he grunted in surprise at the thudding discomfort.

'They're all still in the right place,' he said, prodding at his molars. 'I didn't even notice that happen.'

'Adrenaline. An Alpha's rate of production and utility is far higher than the rest of the population. If it wasn't, Alexander would have gone down the moment you smacked him on the head.'

'Pity he didn't,' he replied, not bothering to edit the brutal undertones from his voice. 'It's better than he deserved.'

An expression John couldn't pin down flickered across Sherlock's face, and he bit his tongue, wishing it was as easy to banish the spectre of Alexander's presence from their home. Softly, he blotted Sherlock's lip, wincing in pity at the tattered skin. It didn't look like a punch, and disbelief cracked in John's guts as he recognised dentition marks in the vulnerable flesh.

His hand hovered, trembling, as he struggled to push aside a new surge of fury. The other traces of violence on Sherlock's body were disturbing, but there was an added element of the intimate to this: a kiss made cruel. He was too busy keeping his touch light to control his expression as he dabbed at the ragged injury. He didn't even notice Mrs Hudson set down some cups of tea and leave them in peace, closing them within the four walls of their flat.

'It's not that bad,' Sherlock said at last, pulling back.

'He was choking you to death,' John retorted, crushing the cotton wool in his fist as he got to his feet, tidying up the rubbish and putting away the first-aid supplies. He needed something to keep his hands busy, and there was nothing left to be done for Sherlock. None of the cuts needed stitches, and the bruises, while plentiful, would heal with time. Far easier, he suspected, than the uncertainty Alexander's reappearance had dumped on Sherlock's shoulders. 'I can't see how it could get much worse than that.'

As soon as the words left his mouth, he sensed the change in the air: a sorrowful stillness, as if Sherlock didn't want to tell him how wrong he was. Looking over his shoulder, he met those dull grey eyes. Sherlock looked exhausted by the whole affair, and John longed to ease his burden.

'He was letting me take the occasional breath. It was a display of control, more than anything. Besides, it's my own fault.'

'No!' He cursed himself as Sherlock flinched. Wariness shadowed his gaze, and John clenched his hands tight at his sides as he lowered his voice. 'None of this – none of it – is your fault. You haven't done anything to deserve –' He gestured to the injuries, the flat and the entire situation as a whole, struck mute by the strength of emotion clawing at his chest.

'It's not a case of deserving it,' Sherlock corrected. 'You can't expect to fight against the norms society thrusts upon you without facing consequences.'

'Then society's a fucking mess.' John folded his arms, hunching his shoulders and trying not to feel so bloody useless.

Sherlock sighed, scuffing his uninjured hand through his hair. The gesture was enough to pull John back from the brink of his fugue, his attention focussed again on the damage that had been wrought. In that, at least, there was something he could try and fix.

He collected an icepack from the freezer, giving it to Sherlock before handing him his mug. 'Careful with the tea. It's cooled down, but it might still hurt your lip.'
Sherlock rested the ice on his thigh and his sprained wrist on top of it before taking a sip from the cup Mrs Hudson had left for him. John looked at the clock, noting the time. He knew Sherlock too well to believe he'd tolerate the restricted mobility forced on him by the sprain for long. Better do everything he could to assist the healing while he got the chance.

'I provoked Alexander's attack today.' Sherlock's admission made John snap his head back around, his lips parted and a frown on his brow. 'I was attempting to make him leave. I told him I'd rendered myself infertile – that I was useless to him.' Sherlock shrugged, looking at the milky tea before touching the dark stains banding his throat. 'In retrospect, his response confirmed my hypothesis about an ultimatum from his family. He doesn't just want a child– he needs one. Besides, it made no difference. He didn't believe me and seemed intent on proving otherwise.'

Weakly, John reached behind him, groping for the edge of the kitchen table and propping himself against it. 'What did he do?' he asked, trying to reassure himself with the facts. Sherlock's clothing was all still fastened and the fabric wasn't torn, but that didn't mean anything. He'd thought he was interrupting an attempted murder, but now it seemed that Alexander had something else in mind.

'Threatened.' Sherlock shrugged like it didn't matter. 'He didn't get the chance to act.'

John didn't dare ask what would have happened if he hadn't walked in at that moment. He didn't want the confirmation. Instead he shuffled over to his armchair and sank into it, his hands hanging between his knees as the loudest question in his mind found voice.

'Why didn't you let me kill the bastard?'

Sherlock's bowed his head, his hand twitching around his mug before he set it aside and eased himself to his feet. He grabbed the Afghan in one hand, seemingly oblivious to the fact he also had John's jumper locked in his grasp. The blanket trailed from his shoulders, its lower edge whispering across the floor, and John watched as Sherlock nudged the leather armchair with his hip until it was situated in front of the cold grate, facing John.

He folded himself into the seat, the wool furling around him like brightly coloured wings. It looked defensive, taut and self-contained, but John didn't miss the fact that Sherlock was close enough to reach out and touch. Whatever else he wanted, it wasn't distance, and John watched him as he pressed his lips together as if trying to work out what to say.

'He was nice, once. Tolerable, anyway.' Sherlock stared at his hands in his lap, clutching the knot of fabric – a chimera of the blanket and John's filthy jumper – like a shield. 'Before she died, my mother did everything in her power to arm me for the life I could expect. I wanted to be more than...' He trailed off with a weak wave of his hand. 'She knew that from the start, and together we did what we could.'

'She taught you about the herbs you could use.' John nodded.

'More than that. Omega children are often indistinct from their other-gendered counterparts. Any biological variations aren't shown outwardly. Even in adults, it's subtle. However, Omegas carry a genetic variation that means they can detect a repulsive flavour others can't. It's something to do with our spit.'

Sherlock tapped his nails against his mug as he continued, 'Most offspring with any chance of being an Omega undergo a taste-test when they're five, and those that respond – normally through vomiting – are segregated.' A whisper of a smile curved his lips. 'My mother exposed me to the flavour frequently in infancy, making me resistant. As such, I wasn't flagged as an Omega until the standardised blood-screen at eleven years old.'
John gave a rueful laugh, picturing it with ease. Even as a child, it seemed Sherlock possessed masterful control. That must have made his presentation even more unnerving: to have so much power over oneself and then lose it to a biological urge.

'It was one of the gifts my mother could give me: the chance of a normal childhood. I went to school, had as much social interaction as I desired – not much: people are idiots, even as children – and could go where I wanted without limitation. That was freedom, and I was unwilling to relinquish it.'

Tilting his head, John contemplated the man opposite him. He didn't want to interrupt, because now Sherlock was finally talking, he was afraid the wrong word would bring nothing but silence. However, he itched to do more than just sit here, a recipient for Sherlock's story. He wanted to touch him, to stroke his hands over those tense shoulders and promise him that he could have that life back, one day.

Not that such a vow was in his power to give.

A shiver made Sherlock's teeth rattle, and John looked away, getting to his feet and rubbing his hands together. 'I need to get the fire lit,' he said quietly, 'before I freeze to death. Do you want another cup of tea?'

He hoped that, without the pressure of John's undivided attention, Sherlock would keep talking, and he wasn't disappointed. Sherlock's quiet hum of agreement cracked at its edge, and he cleared his throat, raising his voice so John could hear him over the hiss of the kettle.

'Afater that, our options were limited. Mummy's health was failing and my father was distraught; he loved her, I think. It was enough that she was able to make a few unorthodox specifications about my bonding.' His voice fell quiet. 'After her death, he could have ignored them. She had no legal say, but he honoured her wishes. She specified the kind of Alpha I should be bonded to, and when the time came, Alexander fit the bill.'

John kept his back turned, pretending to concentrate on the automatic process of making tea as he repeated Mycroft's earlier statement. 'Why, because his family thought Omegas should be respected?'

'Up to a point. They were still possessions. Assets, rather than people, but like many of the elite, they propagated the stigma for an Alpha to exercise their power over an Omega. Rape or abuse of any kind is heavily frowned upon. It's one of the reasons we're isolated, even from our counterparts. It stops such misdemeanours becoming common knowledge.' Sherlock sighed, resting his chin on his knees. 'There are always rumours, but there's never any proof.'

Looking over his shoulder, John allowed his gaze to rest on the wounds blemishing Sherlock's skin. Alexander hadn't even hesitated to use bruising force. Why should he? Out here, there were plenty of people to see the marks he left, but when Sherlock was back in his clutches, he'd be hidden from sight. Shut away to suffer.

The kettle clanged against the surface, and John braced his palms against the kitchen worktop as he took a deep breath, attempting to school his face into something that resembled calm attentiveness. Alexander's cruelty was repulsive, but it was Sherlock's acceptance of it that struck John to the core.

'One of my mother's conditions of the bonding was that, after this –' He gestured to the silvery bite mark on the back of his neck. '– I was to be allowed to attend university. There are three in the entire country that cater for Omegas. Very selective, very expensive, and very secure.'

John put his mug down by his chair before handing Sherlock his, gratified by the way those long fingers brushed against his own, neither timid nor tremulous. He didn't flinch from the contact, and
John's spirits lifted at the faint reassurance of Sherlock's skin warm against his own, if only for a few seconds.

'You got out, didn't you?'

The grin that lit Sherlock's face was pure mischief with a generous helping of pride. 'It was easy. They were expecting docile, obedient individuals.'

'And they got you.' John smiled. 'I almost feel sorry for whoever was in charge.' He hunkered down by the hearth, concentrating on matches and kindling, feeding the tiny fire until a golden glow chased off the encroaching dusk. 'Where did you go?'

'Everywhere.' Sherlock straightened where he sat, and in these memories at least, it was as if he found some of his old strength. 'I didn't have the resources to run away, not then. Besides, there wasn't the impetus. The reins of my existence weren't so tight that they choked me. I spent the week at the university halls, and the weekends with Alexander “strengthening our bond.”'

The way he said that last bit made it clear it was a euphemism, and John scowled at the fire, grabbing the poker to give the logs a somewhat vicious jab. 'I thought you said you could fend off an unwanted Alpha's advances?' He tried to keep the question light, but he was pretty sure Sherlock caught the shadows beneath each syllable. The brightness that had suffused his expression faded, and he stared into the flames.

'Like I said, initially, he was tolerable. I didn't want to bond, but I didn't have any option and at seventeen I – I was trying to make the best of my circumstances. Besides, a strong bond worked in my favour. There were about three months between my first heat and when I bound with Alexander. It was...' He looked up into John's eyes, and it was difficult to remember the last time he'd seen Sherlock look so young. 'I thought I was dying. The pyresus itself was bad enough, but after that–'

He didn't finish his sentence, and John tried to keep his traitorous mind from picturing it, ashamed at the guilty desire deep in his belly to see Sherlock so undone, refined to pure Id.

'It got worse?' he asked, clearing his throat and getting back to his feet. He grabbed his drink as he tried to distance himself from the fact that they were, to all intents and purposes, discussing Sherlock's sex life.

'Unsatisfied heats are troublesome but manageable when I'm bound. When I'm not, it's like a disease. Your body wrecks itself. I'd spend three or four days in pyresus, not eating, barely drinking, unable to focus or function.' He shook his head, his teeth clenched in distaste. 'Once that passed, I was drained, lethargic, feverish, wretched. It would take all my strength just to get dressed, and then within a week it would start all over again.'

John blinked as he sat back in his chair, finding himself once again facing the abyss of his medical ignorance. From med-school right through to the modern conferences he attended, details on Omega reproduction were thin on the ground. He knew the basics, but it was another matter to hear Sherlock speak of his experiences.

'I didn't realise the cycle was so short.'

With a nod, Sherlock explained. 'Bonding stretches it out and improves its regularity. With a strong connection, which develops through spending time with your Alpha, it's little more than an inconvenience. That is, if you don't become pregnant straight away.' He traced idle lines across the peak of his knees, but his gaze was elsewhere, focused on the past.
'For three months I was a victim of my own blood-chemistry. Then, once Alexander came along, the fog cleared, and I did everything I could to make the most of it. During the week at university, I'd sneak out and just go.' Some of the lines on his face smoothed away, and John stared, captivated by the transformation. 'At first, I was terrified that someone would catch my scent and figure out what I was. I started off wearing synthetic fragrances to conceal the truth. Then one day, in Edinburgh, I got caught in a downpour. Soaked to the skin. I was convinced a stranger would detect what I was.'

John's heart thumped in his chest, torn between shared triumph at what must have been an epiphany-moment, and horror for what could have been. 'You mean you didn't know that being bound to Alexander subdued your scent? And you went out anyway?'

'Of course I did. The expectation was that as soon as I was finished at university, I'd settle down to the whole tiresome business of starting a family. I had to seize the opportunity.' Sherlock pursed his lips, his brow creased. 'As it was, Alexander wasn't content to wait. The binding contract specified that he was to use contraceptive medication until I was done with my degree.'

John drew in a sharp breath. 'But he didn't?'

'I doubt it. Even then, I didn't trust him. He was attentive and engaging, but it all seemed too – too much to be genuine. Falling pregnant was not a risk I was willing to take.'

John set his mug of untouched tea aside, clasping his hands together in front of him. Sherlock was still curled up, and the memory of glassy determination painted its portrait across his face.

'By the time I finished my degree, he'd run out of patience. His entire attitude became one of a martyr. He constantly reminded me of what he'd sacrificed; the implication was that I owed him.' Sherlock clenched his uninjured hand, his eyes made gold by the fire's dance. 'Perhaps he was right, but I didn't see it that way.'

'No one would,' John replied, quiet but firm. He knew, deep down, that relationships were never that simple. Each came with its own baggage and a constant keeping-score. However, normally the sentiment between two people was enough to over-rule the darker, more selfish thoughts. If not, then the partnership came to an end. For Sherlock, that wasn't an option. 'So he said you owed him a family, and you declined.'

'Then he insisted. Emphatically.' Sherlock shook his head as if dismissing the grasping claws of his memories. 'I became very good at mixing the herbs I needed to control my situation. Over time, I also learned Alexander's pressure points. Things I could say or do that would make him back off or walk away.'

He closed his eyes, leaning his head back in surrender. 'It went on for months, and every time a union failed to produce a child, the situation grew more untenable. In the end, Alexander took me to see a fertility expert, who reported back that I was in perfect reproductive health.' Sherlock met John's eye, and there was a dark gleam there. 'I'd figured out a way to remove the signature of the abortive chemicals from my blood within an hour of taking it. It was undetectable. Instead, the suspicion fell on Alexander's performance.'

In another situation, John might have laughed at the cheap jibe, but there were too many shadows in Sherlock's expression for anything like mirth. 'I bet that didn't help.'

'No. It was a tipping point. After the next consummated pyresus, he locked me in the bedroom. The potency of _Aristolochia_ drops with every hour after possible conception.' He picked at the bandage around his wrist, plucking at the loose weave as if he couldn't bear to keep still. 'I – I panicked. The room was three floors up and the lock on the door was a bolt, so I couldn't pick it, but there was a
window. I slipped climbing out. Probably broke a rib or two, but it didn't matter. I ran to the orangery where I grew what I needed and took some I'd made earlier. Alexander stormed in just as I was swallowing the suspension.'

John realised he was holding his breath, his heart in his throat. Air escaped him in an unsteady stream, and he dragged his hands over his face. 'God. What did he do?'

Sherlock huddled in on himself further, impossibly small for such a tall man. 'I didn't give him a chance to act; I just ran. It wasn't a well-planned escape,' he admitted. 'His house is in a rural area; the community is close-knit. I couldn't ask any of the neighbours for help – they'd have returned me to him immediately. Instead I grabbed a change of clothes off a washing line and hid in the woods nearby. I knew he'd believe I'd go straight to the station, so I had to wait.'

'Did you have anything? Money? Food?' He rubbed his temple, too captivated by Sherlock's words to notice the fire dimming to embers in the grate as night fell. He tried to picture being in that kind of situation. Somehow he doubted he'd have handled it with anything like Sherlock's competence. 'How old were you?'

'Twenty-three. I had a few items I could pawn, but I had to get to a city first. I hid the clothes I'd been wearing when I left Alexander's, and once it was dark, I started walking. I kept off the roads and away from open fields, begged enough cash for train-fare in the nearest town and came to London.'

John glanced at the indistinct glow of the street-lit capital beyond the window. 'Why here?' The question escaped him unbidden, just like its predecessors. He longed to keep quiet and let Sherlock explain under his own steam, but it was impossible. He was too invested in the details Sherlock was laying out between them, each one a new facet that added up to the complex man who sat opposite him.

'I knew it better than anywhere else, and it's easy to get lost here – or it was back then, anyway. CCTV was more limited. It was easier to blend in. No one looks twice at the homeless. They're afraid of what they might see.'

He'd known that Sherlock spent time on the streets; he was too intimate with London's shadowed places to leave that in any doubt, but John still wished, impossibly, that he'd been there. That he could have helped, somehow, rather than Sherlock having to struggle with his decision alone. 'What about Mycroft? Why didn't you ask him for help?'

Sherlock gave a moue of distaste at the thought, but it soon melted into indifference as he removed the thawing ice pack from where it rested against his injured wrist and put it aside. 'My brother was not always sympathetic to my situation. He was raised as a traditional Alpha, and while there are many things he questioned, the role of an Omega was never one of them. Once I was bound to Alexander, I was not expected to keep in contact with my family, not even to attend my father's funeral. It was a severance – supposedly to improve the strength of the bond by making me completely dependent on Alexander. In reality, it had the opposite effect.'

'You learnt to cope by yourself.'

Sherlock nodded. 'Other than when I was in heat, Alexander was disinterested in me at best. It gave me time to pursue my own interests, as long as I stayed within the confines of the house.' He wrinkled his nose at the mention of his captivity before pressing on. 'Two and a half years homeless in London filled out my knowledge. Pyresus halted once I was out of Alexander's presence, leaving me with the heats you've witnessed. It was difficult, of course, but despite the hardships it was better than being under his thumb.'
Something in Sherlock's expression faltered, and John watched another shudder rip through his friend's frame. Whether it was a result of genuine chill or emotional strain, John couldn't be sure, but he got to his feet, holding out one hand to Sherlock and gesturing to the grate with the other. 'Come on. Get a bit closer to the hearth. It's not exactly warm tonight.'

Sherlock's uninjured hand was cool in John's palm as he allowed himself to be guided to the floor a dozen inches from the flames. The fire woke itself from embers with a few prods and another log, the crackle of the pine adding a whisper of wood-smoke to the flat as Sherlock huddled in his cocoon.

'There was a downside to my situation. I could cater to most of my needs: food and shelter are easy enough to find if you know where to look, but separation from Alexander was not as easy. Biochemically, our bond was strong, and as a result the instinct to return to him was...'

'Distracting?'

'Overwhelming. Some days were easier than others, but it was impossible to focus. I couldn't think around the buzzing need to seek out a man I loathe.' His voice was like barbed silk, vicious with self-hatred. 'I was free for the first time in years and my own body wanted nothing more than to locate my captor. I needed something to distract me. Something to co-opt the sensation: a different addiction I could feed in its stead.'

John's heart sank as he sat at Sherlock's side, shoulder-to-shoulder and both of them staring into the fire and the sable chimney mouth above it. His blanket-wrapped frame was a ghost of a presence, but a moment later the soothing burden of Sherlock's weight pressed against John's arm.

'The drugs.'

'Yes,' Sherlock confessed. 'An underestimation on my part, I admit. By the time the hormonal withdrawal of being away from Alexander had faded, I'd developed a different habit entirely – one that did not come cheap. I could already pick locks. Petty theft supplied the cash, but more went on cocaine than anything else.' He straightened, meeting John's eyes. 'It was a dangerous way to live, but it was living. It was my choice. Admittedly, it was a bad one, but at least it was me who made it.'

He said it with such vicious feeling, and despite himself, John could understand something of what Sherlock was saying. It was a mistake, but it was one Sherlock had made under his own steam. In that, there was a novelty that few other people got to experience. 'So, you were destitute and lost in a drug habit.'

'You make me sound like a junkie.'

'Weren't you?' It was a challenge, and John knew it. Could Sherlock even admit that much?

'Perhaps, but it wasn't quite as desperate as you might imagine. What I shared with you about how Elsie and I met was an isolated incident. I modulated the dose for maximum impact with minimal drawbacks. In retrospect, it was not ideal, but it worked.'

They could linger here for hours, him denouncing Sherlock's decision as Sherlock defended it. He doubted Sherlock was stupid enough to have leapt to cocaine as his first option, but it was where he had ended up, all the more vulnerable for his chemical dependency.

'And no one came looking for you?'

'I found out later that Mycroft had been searching, somewhat frantically, I believe. I don't know how he discovered I was gone from Alexander's possession. However, my brother did not occupy his current position of power then, and he didn't have the tools to locate me.' Sherlock's smug smile
faded. 'I was left in peace until I was twenty-five, when Alexander snatched me off the street. Not personally, he hired some – people – to do it for him. They sedated me, and when I woke up, I was back in that house – that same room. It was almost like I'd never left the fucking place.'

It was rare that Sherlock cursed, and John could hear years' worth of hatred in that single word. The memory of his desperation was like a physical thing in the air around them, and a clutch of empathetic panic snagged in John's stomach. All he'd been told of Sherlock's time with Alexander after he'd come looking was that it had been “unpleasant”. Now, John wondered if “unspeakable” was more apt. Sherlock's jaw was working, his teeth grinding as if he couldn't bring himself to carry on.

'You don't have to tell me this,' John said softly, wrapping his fingers around Sherlock's arm. 'You don't have to say anything you don't want to share, Sherlock, but I'm not going to think any less of you for whatever you did.'

Silver eyes met his, and he did his best to make sure there was nothing but earnest faith in his face. Whether Sherlock believed it or not was another matter. His voice, already weak from the day's events, was hoarse from use as he asked, 'How can you be sure?'

'Because frankly, I don't think there's anything Alexander doesn't deserve. You found being homeless preferable to being with him.'

'He was nice, once,' Sherlock repeated, as if that was evidence of something that John couldn't fathom. 'It was life with me that made him into –'

John twitched, his body shivering with the need for action as he turned where he sat, facing Sherlock fully. 'No. No. That's like saying that you – all your achievements and your mistakes – should be credited to Alexander. Maybe he was an influence, but he didn't make you into the man you are any more than you did him. That was his own fault, not yours.'

A shivering exhale escaped Sherlock's lips, and John wondered how many other lies made up his foundations. It was impossible to suffer such experiences through the formative years of young adulthood and not let it shape your view of both the world and yourself. Logic had nothing to do with it, and John wanted to curse Alexander for having had the chance to poison Sherlock against himself.

'Did he – did he try and tell you it was your fault?'

'There was no “try” involved. He has a way of guiding the conversation to make himself the innocent party.' Sherlock shook his head. 'That's not the point, anyway. I won't bore you with the details of what happened during the nineteen months I was back in Alexander's possession. However, since he had destroyed all the plants I had used to create my tonics, contraception became a key issue. Many alternative methods, such as high vitamin C dosage, have dubious efficacy. There was nothing I could access to reliably counteract my own fertility, or the results of it.'

Sherlock straightened, his expression grim as if he were steeling himself for John's response. 'Instead, I manipulated Alexander's.'

'You drugged him.' John squinted, cocking his head as he tried to understand why Sherlock looked as if he expected nothing but disgust for his actions. He understood the implications; it was one thing to use pharmaceuticals on yourself, but drugging someone else without their consent was another matter. They’d had this discussion before when John was the unknowing test subject, but this was a different situation. 'Am I meant to be shocked?'
Now it was Sherlock's turn to look confused, searching John's face for any sign of anger and finding none. 'In a... tense moment, Mycroft may have implied my behaviour was due cause for Alexander's retaliation. The suggestion was that his view would be shared by the population in general.'

'Mycroft's a git.' John clenched his jaw, bowing his head as he vowed to ask the older Holmes what had happened. He couldn't believe Mycroft would take Alexander's side – he clearly hadn't, or he wouldn't have supported Sherlock in his escape – yet something his brother said had given Sherlock the idea that he was in the wrong. Did Mycroft know, or had it been something given voice in the heat of the moment, driven by sentiment, rather than logic?

'No one in possession of all the bloody facts could claim they'd do anything different if they were in your situation.' John took a deep breath, wishing he could push his words through Sherlock's skin until he would accept them as truth. Instead, Sherlock sat there looking as if he'd been blind-sided, expecting distaste and instead receiving unconditional acceptance.

'What did you give him?' he asked.

'Lorelon.' The brand name rolled of Sherlock's tongue with ease. 'It –'

'– prevents production of the enzyme a sperm needs to breach the ovum wall. I know.'

'More to the point, it's one of the most powerful and heat resistant chemicals available, and its use is undetectable on an anatomical level. An acquaintance of mine from London was able to get hold of it for me. I put it in his coffee. It was meant to be temporary. Something to prevent me conceiving a child at those times when I couldn't deny him what he wanted.' Sherlock's shoulders hunched, his body folding in on itself anew. 'I intended to get away long before he started to suspect, but it didn't work out that way. Alexander was too aware of my intentions. He knew my pressure points as well as I knew his. It was like living in an emotional war-zone.'

John's hand slid down Sherlock's arm, resting over his knuckles. Inwardly, he chastised himself for touching without permission, but no one could look at Sherlock as he was now and not experience the need to offer comfort. Besides, Sherlock's acceptance was made emphatic when he turned his hand, catching John's blindly in his grasp and clinging to it like a lifeline. It was one outward sign of his inner turmoil, and John wished he could call a halt to all this, could pretend he was deaf to Sherlock's words and blind to his distress.

But no, he was the one who had brought Sherlock to this point; the least he could do was have the balls to listen to what he had to say.

'You can't hide Lorelon from a blood screen. Alexander went to have his fertility checked without my knowledge. When he got home...' Sherlock's voice shook, and he swallowed tightly before he forced himself to continue. 'There was a poker, cast iron with a spur for raking out the ashes. I don't – I don't remember most of it. Not clearly. Only that he kept hitting me long after I'd given up any attempt at fighting back. I don't recall him leaving me on the living room floor. Nor do I have any recollection of calling Mycroft for help.'

His haunted gaze became thoughtful as he added, 'I must have sounded awful for him to come running. We'd argued, shortly after I got back to Alexander's. He chastised me for leaving in the first place. He didn't care why I'd run away, only that I'd been, in his eyes, monumentally stupid for risking my safety. I hadn't spoken to him again since, but he still came.'

John realised Sherlock wasn't the only one shaking. He was torn between the futile desire to protect Sherlock as he'd been back then – to stop Alexander landing even one blow, let alone the ones which had followed it – and the need to reassure him now, which seemed equally beyond his reach.
'I woke up in a private hospital to find my brother at my bedside. It's the most emotional I've ever seen him.' Sherlock worried his bottom lip, wincing as a new bloom of blood rose from the wounds there. 'I think, for the first time, Mycroft realised that my protests over the years were not just a case of my usual dramatics. He would have disposed of Alexander there and then if I'd not intervened.'

'I wish he had,' John hissed, unable to modulate his tone any longer. 'Your brother should have butted in years ago. How can he claim to worry about you when he left you at that wanker's mercy?'

'He believed I was in safe hands.' Sherlock shrugged. 'Alexander is good at showing people what they want to see, and Mycroft was following social convention. I wasn't his responsibility anymore. An Omega is their family's obligation until they are bound. After that –' He shook his head, trailing off into silence.

John looked down at where their hands were joined, tracing the blue veins beneath Sherlock's skin with the pad of his thumb. There was so much to understand and absorb: almost two decades of Sherlock's life condensed into a painful conversation, and yet one question still hadn't been answered.

'Why do you need Alexander alive?' He licked his lips, his breathing unsteady as Sherlock looked up at him. 'That's the one thing I don't understand. After everything he did to you – his manipulations and his abuse – no one would think less of you if you just did away with him.' Straightening his shoulders, John pressed on, giving voice to his earlier suspicions. 'Is there – I mean I know you did a lot to prevent a pregnancy but – but were you always successful?'

'Yes.' Sherlock's response was absolute. 'Is that what you think? That I demand Alexander's survival for the sake of a child somewhere?' He sounded incredulous, and John tried not to wince at the faint whisper of ridicule in Sherlock's tone.

'It seemed like the most convincing reason to spare his life.'

Sherlock looked like there were a thousand things he wanted to say, explanations or reassurances, John wasn't sure, but he bit them back as he shook his head. 'No, my reasons for keeping Alexander alive are purely selfish. If he dies, my bond breaks.'

John nodded, guessing that there was something he was failing to grasp. 'I know.'

'I don't think you do.' Gently, Sherlock extricated himself from John's grasp, shuffling where he sat so they were facing one another, their knees pressed together as the fire bathed them in its glow. 'The grieving process would be unfortunate, but it would be the least of my concerns. It can last months, but when it's done I'll be unbound all over again.'

He stared at John, probably looking for signs of comprehension, but whatever he saw wasn't enough as he began to explain. 'Pyresus will be unrestrained, and as debilitating as it was when I was an adolescent. Even if it didn't leave me feeling so unwell that I couldn't function, it wouldn't be safe. I couldn't live in London, and I certainly couldn't answer the call of the Work. For that, I'd need to be bound to another Alpha, and then I would face the same problems all over again. Alexander's worldview is not unique. It's what's expected of me. This –' He waved a hand around at Baker Street before indicating John. 'This would be over.'

'But –' John frowned, trying to build a picture from shattered fragments when he was missing half of the pieces. 'But you could find a different Alpha. Someone not like Alexander. It doesn't have to be someone of the elite. It could be –' His voice strained in his throat, quiet but intense. 'It could be anyone.'
Pale eyes met his, and he tried not to duck his head under the scrutiny. Sherlock saw everything, and he was not as inept at social implication as many believed, at least not when it came to John. He looked as if he had guessed what he was really suggesting – not just some nameless, faceless Alpha from the masses, but one who'd shared Sherlock's life in all its glory and relished it as much as he did.

He expected to see dismissal, ridicule or confusion. Each seemed plausible, but none of them were fit to name the shadow that haunted Sherlock's eyes. Instead sadness was more apt. In any other circumstance, it would have given John hope, but not this time.

'It doesn't work like that,' he murmured, glancing down and taking a stuttering breath before looking up into John's face again. 'I wish it did, but –'

When he spoke again, it was in the flat, dull tones of someone reciting an inescapable truth. 'I would not be my own to give. When Alexander dies, ownership of me doesn't even revert to Mycroft. It goes to Alexander's next of kin. They would hold all rights to me, and would no doubt sell me on to the highest bidder – one who would share Alexander's expectations.'

Rage rolled through John's veins, hot and fluid, heating his cheeks and making his pulse pound in his temples. 'You're not furniture!' he snapped, his hands clenching into fists as he shook his head. 'You're not a thing!' 

'No, but in the eyes of the law I am an eternal dependent, and when it comes down to it, there's not much difference.' Sherlock reached out, his touch skimming over John's hand in a steady metronome of movement. It calmed the harsh edges of his anger, but left it sitting like a molten ball deep in his gut, malleable and strong. 'Do you see now? Do you see why, as detestable as it is, my current situation with Alexander is as good as it's going to get? I am in a unique position of having some power over my Alpha – some means of keeping him away and living the life I want to. If he dies, all that's gone.'

John fought back a litany of protests, his voice straining over unspoken sentiments as he railed against the injustice. Every word Sherlock said brought that into sharper focus, leaving him reeling at the insights into a world that, a month ago, he had given little thought.

Like a fool he'd believed Alexander was the beginning and end of Sherlock's problems: the thorn in his side. Now it was clear that he was entangled in a briar, caged by the dictates of a culture John did not understand adequately to defeat.

'There must be something you can do,' he croaked, his throat ravaged by the ineffective outrage he held down in his chest. For all his strength, Sherlock still looked too fragile, liable to break at a harsh word. Besides, there was too much room for misinterpretation. None of his indignation was aimed at Sherlock, yet he was the only target present, and John was damned if he was going to take any of this out on him.

He stared down at Sherlock's hand where it rested over his, still now, long-boned and shaking. Faint chemical stains marked his skin, and it occurred to John that even that was an act of defiance: a flaw in the perfection an Omega was meant to embody.

'The entire structure is built upon a foundation of fertility as an asset. It's not really about Omegas, it's about what they can produce: a large number of heirs over a short time. In centuries past, that was highly valued to protect the dynastic nature of the aristocratic class. Then it became less about necessity, more about fashion. If you were rich, you got an Omega. You don't still have dozens of children: Alphas control the quantity of dependants for whom they must provide, but the power remains entirely in their hands.'
Sherlock reached up to touch a bruise on his temple before pulling absently at his curls. 'The one way to remove myself from that sphere is to render myself worthless in their eyes and destroy my ability to reproduce.'

'Ligation?' John sucked in a breath, already shaking his head. In Betas, the surgery was straightforward, if not common. However, the Omega system in both primary genders was far more complex and delicate. Besides, it was all theoretical. No technique had ever been practised or perfected. It would be a ground-breaking, not to mention illegal, operation.

'Or sterilisation. There's a possibility that an Alpha could order ligation reversed, despite the risks. Sterilisation would involve stripping out everything. Not much anyone can do about that once it's been done.' Sherlock's smile was grim and cold. 'I considered it. More than once, in fact. The first time I ran from Alexander, selling the parts on the black market would have brought me plenty of funds. Enough to start my own life.'

John thought of Annaliese Ducart, dead on a back-room operating table with her dreams in ruins around her. The idea that it could have been Sherlock plunged a chill across his skin, and he ran light fingers over the bandage around Sherlock's hand. 'But you didn't?'

Sherlock shook his head. 'It was too risky. I would have been completely vulnerable under anaesthetic, had no way of confirming what they'd do to me, and why would my survival be in any surgeon's best interest? He could kill me, take what he needed and more, and not have to split the cash.'

'So what you told Alexander today...?' John held his breath, unsure why Sherlock's answer carried such weight. It was none of his business whether he could still bear children, but at the same time he shouldn't have to sacrifice his ability to have kids for the sake of his own freedom. No one should.

'A lie. Even when I had Mycroft's support and, by extension, his money, the surgical options remain phenomenally dangerous. There are no official statistics on the survival rate of either sterilisation or ligation, but they are very poor. The surgery is untried, but it would have made me useless to any Alpha. I could live without interference from my biology...' His expression was fixed in a haze of longing, and John wondered how often he had been tempted to throw caution to the wind and put himself under the knife. How many times had he been forced to remind himself that it could be the last decision he ever made?

'But I was trying to forge my existence, not bring it to an end.' Sherlock blinked himself back to the present, his shoulders rolling in a shrug. 'So I'm still here, still a functional Omega, and the only thing that makes any of my current existence possible is my bond with Alexander. If it were broken...'

John bowed his head, giving a weak nod of comprehension. He understood, now, why Sherlock had pushed the gun away. It was not about preserving Alexander, but his current way of life. Even if it was tenuous, it was still the best chance Sherlock had.

The details he'd been given rattled around his skull, almost incomprehensible in their volume. Later, there would be time to examine each in isolation, but right now John was overwhelmed by the swirl of emotion running through him. Rage at Alexander's intrusion lingered, but it was a phantom in comparison to the fresh wound of sympathy.

'Stand up?' he asked, getting stiffly to his feet and holding out a hand, watching Sherlock's puzzlement.

'Why?'
'Because it's hard to do this sitting down.' John tightened his grip around Sherlock’s good hand, helping him up so that they stood face-to-face. Part of him wanted to reach out and tug that lithe body into his embrace, but if he had learned nothing else today, it was that Sherlock valued being given a choice, and that was something John intended to respect.

He braced himself for rejection even as he spread his arms in invitation. 'Is this okay?'

Sherlock cocked his head, his gaze skimming John's face as if he were searching for ulterior motive, or perhaps just trying to understand his basic need to help in whatever way he could. Yet there was something else behind the inquisitiveness in his eyes, something confused, as if he couldn't understand why anyone would want to touch him without the expectation of more.

At last, Sherlock took a tentative step forward, allowing John to guide him close. It was tempting to let all the ferocity that blazed beneath his bones bleed out in the desperation of his embrace, but John restrained himself, holding back as Sherlock began to relax.

The light brush of a hand at John's waist made him smile, and a moment later large hands were splayed across his back, light but determined. Inch-by-inch, he could sense Sherlock's spine falling torpid. Hesitancy faded until they were leaning against each other, taking and giving solace in turn.

John tried to telegraph everything he was feeling without words, pushing his sympathy from skin-to-skin and letting his determination to keep Sherlock safe define the shape of his muscles.

They had touched before, but never like this. There had been the occasional, desperate grab for each other after a narrow escape – half clinging, half checking for injuries, but nothing so tender.

It wasn't often that someone made John feel treasured. However, when Sherlock rested his cheek on top of John's head and let out what sounded very much like a sigh of relief, he felt that, to Sherlock at least, he embodied something precious: someone who cared for him, rather than just the body he occupied.

'If things were different,' he asked, looking for one more insight into this man he knew so much and yet so little about. 'If you could pick how to live, what would you want?'

Sherlock's quiet breath stirred the hair on John's crown, and when he spoke it was in a soft, rumbling voice that resonated through John's skin and into his heart.

'This.' He tightened his arms around John's ribs. 'Just this.'
The Devil You Know

The dull green digits of John's clock radio threw strange shadows over the walls, cloaking the room in a jealous twilight. The hour had slipped past one in the morning, yet sleep continued to elude him.

His body may be knackered, but his mind buzzed, alive with memories of Alexander's appearance and Sherlock's explanations. Every time he put one thought aside, a dozen more rose in its place, clamouring for his attention. His stomach fluttered, the hurried take-away he'd had for dinner sitting heavy below his ribs, and John sighed as he stared into the darkness, mourning the past and his inability to change the road Sherlock's life had taken.

Alexander's behaviour left scars, emotional, as well as physical, and he doubted Sherlock would ever be free of them. It was a miracle that his defiance had survived, and John suspected that if it weren't for the gift of an independent childhood, he would have been forced to conform, his life wasted in the pursuit of a family. His genius would have gone ignored while his observations were forever silenced. It made John fiercely proud that Sherlock had fought so hard, and he took comfort in the fact that, here in Baker Street, Sherlock was happy.

“This. Just this.”

The ghost of an embrace whispered over John's ribs, a memory of pressure that made him smile. He wasn't sure if Sherlock meant the Work, life in London or the simple pleasure of his relative freedom, but John's part in it was clear. Whether it was as a friend or more didn't matter. It was precious all the same, and bitter-sweet joy caught in his chest at the memory of Sherlock's quiet certainty.

John understood, now, why he protected his Alpha. He couldn't seek Alexander's end, even if he longed to put the bastard down. Instead, his death was a threat: a hazard which had to be considered.

Sherlock would have contingency plans, of that John was sure, but how desperate would they be? Would the dangers inherent in undergoing surgery be outweighed by the desire for self-sufficiency? Would he rip himself apart in pursuit of the autonomy he guarded with such ferocity, or did he have other strategies in mind?

Either way, John wasn't about to turn his back. Whatever Sherlock chose, he would do his best to be there for as long as he was welcome. Whatever he needed, John would try and provide.

With a sigh, he glanced at his clock, watching the numbers change. Tiredness dragged at his joints, but there was no relief. He kept straining to hear alien noises, primed to respond, and as two a.m. came and went, John found himself scowling towards his bedroom door, his jaw clenched and his spine locked.

This was ridiculous. An hour ago, he'd been fit to drop. Now, he twitched at every creak of the settling floorboards and stray city sound that reached his ears. Logically, he realised his response was natural: his home had been invaded and his haven breached. If he was like this, jittery and on-edge, then what hope did Sherlock have of finding any peace?

At last, he flicked on the bedside lamp and tossed back the blankets. He'd just check on him; a quick peek, that was all, to reassure himself that Sherlock was all right. He felt stupid for needing it, but otherwise he'd lie here worrying all night.

The stairs groaned under his weight, and John sighed as he saw the glow of one of the living room lamps spilling a beam of gold beneath the door. Easing it aside, he padded over the threshold, taking
in the scene. Sherlock had dragged his bedding through from his room and dumped it on the sofa, ensconcing himself in its feathery depths. He was slumped in the corner, John's muddy jumper bunched beneath his head as a thick book lay open in his hands.

Normally on nights when he failed to rest, it was because he was up to his neck in the Work or chasing down the results of a peculiar experiment. Tonight, Sherlock looked as if he longed for his bed but couldn't bring himself to face it.

Realisation washed through John's mind, and he cursed himself for not having made the connection sooner. Alexander had wormed his way into their flat through Sherlock's bedroom window. To all intents and purposes, it was ground zero: the weakest point in their defences. It didn't matter that Mycroft's team had added surveillance hours ago, or that the casement was locked. Facts made no difference to the irrational subconscious. Expecting Sherlock to sleep in his room tonight was idiotic.

'Did you even try and get some rest?' he asked, nodding in acceptance as Sherlock gave a tiny shake of his head, admitting nothing verbally but confirming John's suspicions all the same.

'I'm not tired.'

Liar, John thought, looking at the marks pressed like thumb-prints under Sherlock's eyes and the weary wilt of his frame. Even if he wasn't mentally exhausted, emotionally he looked done in. Alexander's assault was only the beginning of the day's troubles. Sherlock had spoken about his past with enviable poise, but it was an act. It had cost him to drag all that free and lay it bare to John's understanding.

'Sherlock...'

'You're no better,' he pointed out. 'What did you do? Lie in bed and fret?'

John sighed, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. 'Pretty much.'

They'd spent a miserable evening trying to recover, but Sherlock's discomfort had yet to ease. John knew he hadn't helped. He'd tried to have a shower, but his unwillingness to leave Sherlock's side meant it was perfunctory at best, and he'd spent far too long prowling around, checking doors and windows. It was only when he'd walked within reach of Sherlock's grasp and found warm fingers around his wrist that he'd realised what he must look like: paranoid to the extreme.

He wished he could say the past few hours had brought an improvement, but he'd be fooling himself. 'I was wondering if Mycroft was onto something with the whole "get out of London" idea. It doesn't exactly feel safe here, does it?'

Sherlock stiffened, his lethargy crashing into determined focus as he lifted his head. 'That's ridiculous. Alexander is locked up in a bunker somewhere. I'm not in any danger.'

Before he could answer, a loud clatter rang out from the alley. Immediately, John surged forward, putting himself between Sherlock and the threat.
'It's probably the cat from three doors down in Mrs Hudson's bins,' Sherlock pointed out, but John didn't miss the fact he'd leant forward, poised to leap to his feet, 'or a fox after scraps.'

'Probably?' he asked, looking over his shoulder before striding to the kitchen table and picking up his gun. 'I'm going to check.'

'Is that necessary?' Sherlock huffed, following on John's heels and hissing arguments all the way. 'You're over-reacting. Mycroft's got this place locked down like the Bank of England, including a surveillance team across the street, which he thought I wouldn't notice. This isn't a master criminal with people at his disposal. It's just Alexander. He doesn't have the money to hire anyone to do his dirty work for him anymore, and he wouldn't admit to any of his so-called friends that he requires help.'

Stepping into Sherlock's room, John noticed that most of what he was saying was more about reassurance than recrimination, but the facts didn't make any difference. It was like being back on the battlefield after combat – not euphoric and victorious, but steeled for another attack.

Dragging back the curtains, he checked the fire escape was clear before leaning closer to the glass and peering down into the alley below. Sure enough, one of the bins had been knocked over. Whatever creature was responsible had already gone, but not before picking over the rubbish spilled across the ground.

'Told you,' Sherlock muttered from behind him, too busy verifying that they were safe to notice his chin was propped on John's shoulder.

'If you were so sure there was nothing there, then why did you come with me?' John asked, huffing a weak laugh as Sherlock's lips tilted in a petulant sulk. 'Look, you know it's normal, right? To feel like this?'

Sherlock's expression at being called normal was genuinely aghast, and John made sure the gun was safe before giving him a nudge towards the living room. 'Ask anyone who's ever had a break-in, and they'll tell you they were the same. It's instinct.'

'It's illogical,' he grumbled, folding his arms, 'although not exactly a new experience. I spent months jumping at shadows after I escaped the first time.'

'Feeling hunted.' John nodded, glancing around before picking up Sherlock's quilt and thrusting it into his flatmate's arms. 'Come on. Upstairs.'

Sherlock glanced towards the ceiling. 'Why?'

'It's high-ground, easy to defend, and only has one way in, assuming no one tries to get through the skylight. It's not up-to-spec for fire regulations, but it makes my room one of the most secure.' He trotted up the steps and pushed aside the door before putting his gun on the bedside table. 'If it comes down to it, one of us can keep watch while the other sleeps.'

Sherlock hovered in the doorway, taking in John's Spartan space. There wasn't much, but he could see Sherlock soaking in the minimal information on offer like a sponge, drawing God knew what conclusions from the state of this narrow sliver of John's territory.

'I'll take the floor, you take the bed,' he said, dragging his blankets and pillow into a heap before sitting on them, his back to the mattress.

'So, when you said one of us could keep watch, you meant you.' Sherlock raised his eyebrows, leaning against the wall and looking like he was gearing up for an argument. 'And they say chivalry
'Don't be a prat.' John stretched his legs out in front of him, making sure the Sig was within easy reach as he folded his arms. 'You get the bed and some sleep because you're the one covered in bruises. I keep watch because it's my gun, and I've done sentry duty before.'

'And I haven't?' Sherlock sighed like he didn't have the strength to debate it, and John pursed his lips, watching him crawl onto the mattress and flop down on his front. 'There's a reason my sleeping habits are not what most people would term as acceptable. Between living with Alexander and spending time on the streets, deep sleep left me too vulnerable; I had to adapt. I don't need looking after, John.'

Bowing his head, he stared at his knees, realising how every habit Sherlock possessed came back to the man who had treated him so terribly. From the drugs to the way he used his body, the blame could be placed at Alexander's feet. All Sherlock’s excuses about sharpening his mind were nothing but fronts designed to appease the curious. Had he ever told anyone as much as he'd shared with John? He doubted it. The only person who might be privy to the details was Mycroft, and John struggled to imagine Sherlock confiding in his brother.

'I know.' He lifted his gaze back to the door, 'but there's fuck-all else I can do. Let me – let me have this much, all right?'

Sherlock sighed, and cloth moved in a peaceful susurrus as the mattress springs creaked beneath his weight. A moment later, Sherlock's forehead pressed against John's left shoulder-blade while the bony jut of his knees framed his right. It meant he was huddled in a tight curve, as close as he could get without draping himself over John's body. The cove of Sherlock's chest and stomach enclosed him; if he tipped his head back, it would rest in the dip of Sherlock's waist. There was nothing overtly protective about it, but John felt better than he had all evening, grounded and reinforced by the certainty of Sherlock's presence.

Limpid calm fell around them, the relative quiet of London's night defined by the hush of Sherlock's breathing. Outside, rain splashed on the sloped skylight and trickled into the gutters as the melody of distant traffic added an intermittent hum. John took it all in, opening his senses. He knew about guard duty – how easy it was to get lost in your thoughts and distracted from the environment – and he put old techniques to use. It may not be Afghanistan's haunting terrain that surrounded him, but it was still a landscape to be learned in detail, subtly altered by Sherlock's presence.

A deep breath through his nose helped his anxiety ebb. His room smelled like nothing in particular to him, though to Sherlock it was probably another matter. Now there were delicate notes to the air, a bit like the smell of clean laundry left out to dry in the sun. Not soap, but something fresh and bright. Acrid fear no longer tainted it, and the sting of antiseptic was a fading nuance. This was just Sherlock, and his scent smoothed the jagged edges of John's restlessness.

Time slipped away, the clock measuring the minutes until the sky began to show the first glimmers of dawn. John's eyes burned in earnest now, longing for rest. His backside ached from sitting on the hard floor, and his mind had fallen into the steady focus of his simple task, taking in every variation and watching the shadows desaturate.

The nudge of a finger against his back startled him, and he looked around to see hazy silver eyes watching him over the edge of the quilt. Sherlock had buried himself in it, and John had thought he was dead to the world. Instead he looked groggy and lethargic, but still very much awake.

'Please tell me you slept?'
'I dozed,' he replied, his voice a hoarse rumble as his gaze flickered to the door. 'Enough of that. Get in.' He rolled back, pressing himself against the wall and leaving half the narrow mattress free in blatant invitation. 'If you stay down there much longer, your limp will be in full effect, and you're no good to me dead on your feet.'

'But –'

Sherlock's groan drowned out the rest of John's protest, and he sat up, looking rumpled and sore before reaching down towards John's hip and wrestling the pillow out from under him, almost toppling John sideways in the effort. 'We. Are. Safe.' He enunciated each word before softening his voice. 'With you here, I actually believe it. Besides, Alexander is bad enough to deal with in person. I refuse to let the mere idea of him have a lasting impact. I got away from him so I could live my life, not spend it running away or cowering behind locked doors.'

He collapsed down to the mattress, turning his back in a clear indication that he'd said his piece, and John eyed the space left for him. He had no good excuse to creep into bed next to Sherlock, not when there was an empty one downstairs, not to mention the couch or, failing that, the floor.

He parted his lips to point that out before pressing them shut again. Sherlock had said it himself; it was John's presence that made him believe he was secure. John's company was what kept the circling, irrational fears at bay, and to leave would be depriving Sherlock of that relief.

John was aware it was an excuse, but he was too tired to sort through the arguments. This was a bad idea, intimate to the point of inappropriate, but when did Sherlock care about things like that? He'd never been one to shy away from John's touch. Even recently, when physical contact had been limited, that had been John's doing: his weak efforts at showing Sherlock some respect.

'Stop thinking about it and just get in,' Sherlock huffed.

'Bossy git,' John muttered, but despite his protests, he did as he was told.

Giving in was the most blissful kind of surrender. The last of his stress faded away as he settled down, the sheets beneath him still warm from Sherlock's body and that same scent that had first eased him hours ago filling his nose. The slender expanse of the bed didn't offer much space for two grown men, and John could make out the hidden ridge of Sherlock's spine against his back: a steel-strong line to anchor him.

Sharing a bed with anyone took some getting used to, but John was struck with how natural it seemed, from the dip of the mattress to the press of the soles of Sherlock's cold feet against the back of John's ankles. They were both dressed, back-to-back and chaste, but to John it was more meaningful than any number of naked, alluring lovers, and he relished the contentment that rolled through him in drowsy waves.

With the world already blurring at its edges, he barely felt Sherlock's arm move, reaching behind him until he brushed John's wrist. Tiredly, he registered the meekness of it – a silent request. Maybe Sherlock didn't need comfort, but that didn't mean he didn't want it, and John was unable to deny him anything so simple.

Cool fingers wove through his, awkward at this backward angle, but cherished all the same. Their dry palms pressed together, and John brushed his thumb over one of Sherlock's knuckles, letting the steady contact lull him as, at last, sleep crept out from the wings of his mind and folded him in darkness.

When he next awoke, it was to find rich sunshine pouring in through the south-facing skylight,
coating the bed in a warm glow. The bedding was a tangled mess around them and his pillow had fallen on the floor. At some point, he'd turned over, lying on his back and staking his claim on the corner of Sherlock's instead. Not that it mattered, because Sherlock wasn't using it. He'd shuffled down so that his feet stuck off the end of the bed and his head was level with John's chest. He'd rolled over to face him, his left hand cinched around John's wrist while the right twisted in the cotton of his t-shirt, pulling it taut.

Cautiously, he reached out, nudging the quilt down with one finger so he could get a better view of Sherlock's face, serene in sleep. The bruises had ripened, daubing their inky accusations, and he fought down a grimace. True, Sherlock had received worse chasing down suspects, but these weren't trophies earned in a fight.

It made John furious that anyone could look at this man and think he was theirs to control. He didn't give a damn if it was tradition; it was wrong. Yet this was not a vague, formless injustice. It found its outline in the shape of Sherlock's profile and the twist of his curls. To John, it had become personal: an issue brought into frightening focus.

There were some people who would misread him – who would think he was angry at Alexander's possession because he wanted Sherlock for himself – and he'd be lying if there weren't base hints of that buried deep within him. However, Sherlock wasn't a prize to be won. John just wished he was free to choose the life he wanted, rather than live with a compromise.

A faint snuffle caught his attention, and he smoothed out his expression, concentrating on the here-and-now. A frown cut a line across Sherlock's brow, and he wrinkled his nose at the sun's intrusion, stirring back to wakefulness. John grinned as Sherlock mashed his face into the mattress, chasing the shadows and groaning when he failed to reclaim the trailing edge of sleep.

'Good morning.' John's voice was rough with disuse, husky and quiet, and he raised an eyebrow as Sherlock blinked awake, squinting in his direction.

'Afternoon,' he corrected in a laconic rumble, grabbing the pillow and jamming it over his head. 'It's at least two 'o' clock, judging by the angle of the sun.'

A glance at the clock confirmed Sherlock's statement, and John gave silent thanks that he didn't have work today. Part of him felt guilty at the self-indulgence of lying in bed so late, but he and Sherlock were in desperate need of the rest. Besides, it was warm and luxurious here, as if the world outside was miles away, and he was unwilling to crack apart their peaceful solitude.

With a grunt, he stretched his arms above his head, his muscles shivering awake beneath his skin. Sherlock's grasp on his t-shirt loosened, and John chuckled as he burrowed further under the covers, jamming a knee into John's hip as he attempted to hide from the day that was in full swing beyond the windowpane.

In one quick movement, Sherlock flicked John's corner of the eiderdown over his head, including him in the humid cavern of feathers and fabric. Misty light seeped through the cloth, creating a strange, other-worldly dusk. The upward curve of Sherlock's lips suggested he was being playful, but there were hints of a them-and-us mentality – of hiding from everyone else while revelling in shared solitude – and John was happy to oblige.

He took a breath to speak, but found he didn't know what to say. Everything he could think of allowed the memory of Alexander to intrude on their tiny refuge, and John would do anything to keep him out. Instead, he kept his mouth shut, letting silence fall around them.

They were both curled on their sides, Sherlock's back to the wall and John's to the open edge of the
bed. Their knees were half-drawn up, pressed together down the lengths of their shins while their hands occupied the space on the mattress between them.

At first, Sherlock's were tucked against his chest, but within a couple of minutes he'd reached out, exploring John's fingers and the webbing between them with gentle touches, bending knuckles and tracing the lines on his palms as if decoding all John's secrets. There was nothing rushed about it. Sherlock took his time, attentive to detail as always. John found himself watching, made breathless by the drift of Sherlock's fingertips across his skin, mapping calluses and vulnerabilities with placid intensity.

A delicate tremor ran down John's spine, and he squeezed his thighs together, trying to ease the pool of arousal low in his stomach. Hands had never been a hot spot for him, but here in the dark this seemed exquisitely intimate. Every breath tasted of him, and John's head grew thick and fuzzy, drugged by the slow sweep of Sherlock's touch at the very edges of his body.

John turned his wrist, caressing the vulnerable flesh over Sherlock's radial pulse. A sharp hiss of indrawn breath made him look up, and he could just make out the flush staining those cheeks in the surrounding half-light. Grey eyes met his, gleaming, and John's throat clicked as he swallowed and licked his lips.

A gasp whispered in Sherlock's chest, not-quite smothered, and John closed his eyes against the desire that slammed through him. He wasn't sure what was worse: the knowledge that Sherlock felt it too – this slow, steady wanting, quiet but inevitable – or the realisation that so much stood in their way.

There was nothing he could say that would make the problems surrounding them melt away, and he sighed, lifting his hand to cup Sherlock's cheek. Immediately, he turned, pressing into the bowl of his palm as if starved, but it was not the ragged desperation of an Omega in heat. It was Sherlock showing the heart he kept so well-hidden: a single glimpse that made John long to know it better.

A ghost of a kiss drifted over the underside of his wrist, and John's sigh was more like a sob as he sensed the emotion behind the gesture: a wish and an apology all in one.

His pulse stuttered, but despair was swiftly overwhelmed by a renewed flash of determination. He refused to believe that everything was as hopeless as it seemed. Maybe this moment was not the time to take a step forward, but that didn't mean he should retreat. He was not about to let the potential found in Sherlock's soft affection wither to nothing, and he doubted that was Sherlock's intention either. His expression might be one of regret, but even in the dusk that covered them, John could see the spin of Sherlock's mind, always at work.

He parted his lips as if to speak, but whatever Sherlock was about to say was cut off by a muffled, rapid buzz from somewhere in John's room. They both froze, ears straining until John recognised the text alert on his phone. It was tempting to ignore it, but the intrusion had been made, cracking the surface of their isolation. It allowed the concerns of reality to impinge, no longer distant, but cutting and impossible to disregard.

'It'll be Lestrade,' Sherlock said, gripping John's hand and easing it away.

'Do you want me to get it?' he asked, eager to preserve their solitude, even if only for another second. 'Your choice.'

He saw the calculation in Sherlock's gaze, the measuring of possible subjects of conversation from the DI and the realisation that, alongside the usual friendly conventions, there would no doubt be some information about the Donnelly case.
As much as he wanted to pretend the outside world did not exist, this was where he drew the line. Sherlock turning down the call of the Work would be a corruption of his nature, and that was not what John was looking for. He wanted the genuine article, not a facsimile seeking approval.

'See what he wants,' Sherlock replied at last, pushing back the quilt and letting in the light before raising an eyebrow in John's direction. 'Then I'll decide if it's worth getting out of bed.'

John sat up, cuffing a hand through his hair before leaning over and grabbing his jeans from the floor. His phone screen glowed in the depths of one of the pockets, and he dragged it free, skimming over Greg's message. 'Says he hopes we're okay, and that he thought you'd want to know Amelia Donnelly's toxicology report came back negative for any unexpected contaminants. Just the drugs.'

'What?' Sherlock propped himself up on his elbow, leaning around John's arm to read the message for himself. 'Are those Molly's results, or Anderson's?'

'He doesn't say.'

Sherlock plucked his mobile free from his grip and sat up, crossing his legs under him and texting furiously. Concentration pleated his brow, and John took a moment to admire the sight of Sherlock being so unapologetically himself. After the events of yesterday, it came as a relief. Sherlock's back was straight and his shoulders formed a natural, solid line beneath the creased t-shirt he wore. It was a sight John could get used to: mad hair, rumpled clothes, and sleep-softened features finding their focus as Sherlock turned his attention to a case.

It could have been dismissive, how quickly Sherlock could switch from muted intimacy to unemotional professionalism, but John knew it was another sign of that finite control. Sherlock was not a man who lost his way amidst useless sentiment. He did not dwell on a problem, but concentrated on the solution. It was an example John intended to follow. Somewhere, there was an answer to Sherlock's situation, and he was determined to find it.

'I need to get to the labs,' Sherlock said, passing John his phone and allowing his fingers to linger in the bowl of John's palm. 'How soon can you be ready?'

'Half an hour?' It was a hopeful estimate, and John sighed as his friend got to his feet in a fluid motion, his stride purposeful as he headed for the door.

'Twenty minutes,' he called over his shoulder, trotting down the stairs and leaving John alone. 'No more!'

John scrubbed his hands over his face, wincing at the sting of scrapes before he got up and began collecting together his clothes, throwing them on hurriedly. He worked on auto-pilot, buttoning his shirt as his mind lingered between the bedsheets, relishing the memory of Sherlock so soft and quiet. He wondered what he would have said if John's phone hadn't interrupted: an invitation for more, or an apology? Both? It would be naïve to think there was anything straightforward about exploring what lay between them. It wasn't just Alexander's existence that cast a shadow, nor anything as black and white as infidelity. After all, Sherlock had never made any vows. Like he'd said last night, he wasn't his own to give.

Stubborn anger welled up in John's gut. Sherlock may have accepted that as the best he could hope for out of life: a half-freedom of his own making, but John was damned if he was going to stop there. Not because of what hovered between them, acknowledged only in wordless affection, but because Sherlock deserved more. He'd fought hard and achieved so much under his own power. Now, John intended to take up the cause.
The question was, where to start?

The rush of the shower reached his ears, and he grabbed his shoes, putting them on and scooping up
the Sig before hurrying downstairs with the intent of making breakfast. Cereal clattered in the bowl
before he bathed it with milk and chewed it standing over the sink, too hurried to sit down. The
toaster and the kettle worked simultaneously, and he tried to judge his chances of getting Sherlock to
eat anything.

A few minutes later, Sherlock emerged from the bathroom, damp-haired and meticulously dressed.
Only one cuff remained undone, loose around his right wrist. Instantly, John saw why, and he
pressed his lips together in sympathy. Sherlock had taken the strapping off to shower, and while a lot
of the swelling had gone down, bruises from Alexander's grip slashed bold stripes across pale skin.

'Still sore?' he asked, setting aside his plate and grabbing another bandage from a box under the sink.
He tore off the cellophane wrapping and reached for Sherlock's arm, examining it with care. 'Can
you move it?'

'Yes, but it's still painful. Mostly here.' He indicated the ulnar process, where the skin remained puffy
and bruised. 'How much longer is it going to be like this?'

John gave a crooked smile at Sherlock's restlessness. 'A few days at least. I'll give you something for
it in a minute. I know it's not easy, but try and rest it, all right?' He spoke more out of hope than
experience, aware that Sherlock would push his body to its limits rather than cater to its needs. 'And
eat some breakfast. Fuel helps you heal.'

He nudged some toast towards Sherlock, satisfied when he took a grudging bite and then devoured it
with something akin to enthusiasm. By the time the new bandage was in place, he was starting on the
second slice, and John took a grateful gulp of his tea. The liquid was hot, but he downed it as quick
as he could, sensing the ticking clock of Sherlock's waning patience.

The urgency was of Sherlock's own making. The lab and the results would still be there whether
they took ten minutes or two hours, but John could see the behaviour for what it was: a distraction.
Sherlock was stuck with the helplessness of his situation, so he took control where he could. His
command over his life was sorely lacking, but in the shape of the case he found something he could
influence.

'Ready to go?' he asked, wiping crumbs from his mouth and dragging on his jacket before watching
John tuck the Sig into the back of his jeans. 'Is that necessary?'

'I don't want to be caught without it,' John replied, gesturing for Sherlock to lead the way down the
stairs and out of the front door. 'Not now I'm aware what Alexander's like.' He held out a hand,
stalling the argument that the Alpha was in Mycroft's custody. 'I know he's locked up somewhere,
but the gun's coming with us anyway. Just in case.'

He expected Sherlock to argue, but his nod of comprehension as he flagged down a taxi said plenty.
Even now, hours later, neither of them found much comfort in rational explanations.

Sherlock stared out of the window, the passing city reflected in his gaze while John toyed with his
phone, fiddling with buttons as his thoughts raced. Despite all that he'd been told, he was still missing
the information required to build a strategy. Yes, he knew about Sherlock's life, but he didn't
understand the culture that had him so firmly trapped. It seemed alien and archaic, born of another
age. He needed to talk to someone intimate with the legalities of the system without being a victim of
it.
He thought of the papers Greg had given him yesterday, lying on his bedside table. There hadn't been time to skim through the dense text, and now he regretted not having made it a priority. Maybe it couldn't have told him anything useful, but it was better than nothing.

By the time the cab slowed to a halt, his head was a morass of possibilities. However, he had no idea what might work and what was already dead in the water thanks to the complex world into which Sherlock was born.

With a sigh, he resigned himself to the day ahead, shifting his weight as he moved to vacate the taxi. Yet the clasp of Sherlock's fingers around his wrist made him pause, and he turned to face the man at his side.

'You're thinking of texting Mycroft,' he said, his sterling eyes unreadable. 'You've had your phone in your hand for the past ten minutes. You keep scrolling through your address book and lingering in the “M” section. Don't bother. He'll be at the Diogenes, and he's less likely to be disingenuous if you see him in person.'

John hesitated, too familiar with Sherlock's methods to challenge his deductions. Besides, he was right. Of everyone, Mycroft was the only one in a position of power over Alexander: feared, if not respected. 'Will it do me any good?' he asked, cocking his head. 'Can he tell me anything you can't?'

Sherlock looked away, opening the door on his side of the taxi and climbing out before bending down. He glanced at the driver, lowering his voice for John's ears alone. 'Despite his endeavours to adjust his behaviour, Mycroft's attitude towards Omegas has been hard-coded from childhood. As such, he is unwilling to burden me with the details of his plans. You are another matter, and maybe he can offer some reassurance that I cannot.'

'Wait.' John reached across the seat, grabbing Sherlock's cuff as he made to step back. 'I'm not leaving you here!'

'Well I'm no use at the club! Mycroft won't tell you anything if I'm there. I'll be in the lab.' He gestured to the edifice of Bart's behind him and smothered a sigh when John frowned. 'I appreciate your concern,' he murmured, pressing his bandaged hand to his temple before dropping it to his side, 'but it's unnecessary. I'm safe.' He rolled his eyes as John grimaced, sighing as if he were making a great sacrifice. 'If I need to go anywhere else, I'll send you a text.'

It was a compromise, a curtailment of Sherlock's independence made for John's comfort, and he grudgingly pushed his reservations down as he gave a steady nod. There was a point at which concern became smothering, and while John's stomach shivered at the thought of letting Sherlock out of his sight, he quashed the sensation. As appealing as it was, they couldn't spend the rest of their lives joined at the hip; that would just be a different kind of cage. 'All right. If you don't tell me otherwise, I'll meet you back here in an hour.'

Sherlock nodded, shutting the door and tapping his hand on the roof of the car in farewell. John watched him go, his eyes fixed on that lean, dark figure until the tails of the Belstaff vanished through the door of Bart's.

The taxi pulled away, carrying him through London's chaotic streets before dropping him off outside the austere building of Mycroft's favourite haunt. Inside, civil servants were digesting their late lunches, lounging in silence in their armchairs and hiding behind the broadsheets. John ignored them, following the mute guidance of one of the ushers into the back room, where Mycroft stood by the window, a glass of amber spirit in his hand and a far-off look in his eye.

'Ah, John. I've been expecting you. I trust you slept well?'
John scowled at the pleasantry, sure that Mycroft already knew the answer. How much had he seen of last night? Sherlock's sleeplessness, John's battle-readiness... He was fairly sure there were no cameras in his bedroom, but that didn't mean Mycroft was unaware of where Sherlock had spent the hours of darkness, as well as all morning.

'It took a while to wind down,' he replied at last, 'but yeah, we managed.'

Mycroft swirled the liquid in his glass, his expression unreadable as he took a sip before gesturing to the bottle. 'Drink?'

'I'd better not.' John sat down in one of the wing-back chairs, deciding it was best to keep his wits about him. Mycroft may be indulging, but he wouldn't put it past him to use it as a prop: more about putting John at ease than satisfying his thirst. 'Sherlock told me about – about everything.'

'I doubt that.'

He paused, looking up with a frown. His first thought was that Mycroft was questioning Sherlock's trust, but that belief melted away as he saw the defeat evident in the set of his shoulders.

'Do not misunderstand me, John. I have no doubt Sherlock's revealed more to you than anyone else, myself included, but I know from experience that there are some aspects of his life that he is reluctant to discuss. He tends to gloss over them, to insist he won't "bore you with the details". Mycroft raised an eyebrow as John's heart sank, remembering those exact words in Sherlock's low tones. 'Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he's told you almost everything.'

'Are you going to fill in the blanks?' John challenged, watching him narrow his eyes in consideration before he lowered himself into the chair opposite.

'If I feel it necessary.' His smile was thin, and John drew a breath as he realised they were sizing each other up, judging whether the man in their company was an ally or just another obstacle. It could go on forever if he played Mycroft's game – a useless stalemate. Alternatively, he could put his cards on the table and see what the older Holmes did in response.

'Sherlock explained why he wouldn't let me shoot Alexander,' he said, leaning back in the chair and sensing the Sig dig into his spine. 'I get it, I do, but that doesn't mean I don't wish that bastard wasn't in the morgue rather than one of your bunkers.'

Mycroft looked at him over the top of his glass, his gaze murky where Sherlock's was clear. 'A sentiment I share.' It was offered like a truce – an olive branch of sorts – and John relaxed a fraction. 'I assume Sherlock explained his predicament in full, that Alexander's death would worsen his situation dramatically?'

John clenched his left hand, his fingernails digging crescents into his palm. 'I don't accept that. I don't think you'll sit here, with the weight of the bloody government behind you, and watch as Sherlock's inherited by the family of his Alpha. Even if Alexander wasn't an abusive cock, you wouldn't stand for it. Ten years ago, maybe, but not now.' He shook his head. 'Not if you care about Sherlock half as much as you claim.'

The chair creaked as Mycroft leant back. Suddenly, he looked old, rumpled and worn as he met John's eyes. 'My regard for my brother is far deeper than you might imagine.' The quiet statement unfurled between them, and John tipped his head, listening as he elaborated. 'I appreciate that, from your perspective, and perhaps Sherlock's as well, my actions over the past twenty years are a poor reflection of it.'
'You allowed it to happen,' John hissed. 'You supported him being bound!' 

'Of course!' Mycroft lifted his head, his eyes narrowing. 'You can have no concept of what it is like. I had a younger brother who idolised and challenged me. We were better than equals, and then...'

He looked away, his body slumped. 'I was aware there was something about Sherlock I couldn't see, even as a boy. I convinced myself not to look too closely, but when he was confirmed as an Omega, I was appalled: the only life he could have was one he would never tolerate.'

Straightening his spine, he met John's gaze. 'I challenged my father, demanding to know why Sherlock had to be bound in the first place. We didn't need the money his price would bring, and Sherlock could have freedom of a sort. He'd be safe on the estate; I could look after him...'

The ring on Mycroft's finger gleamed in the late afternoon light as he touched his lips, seemingly filtering through the flood of words for those that could convey his meaning. 'My father said it was a matter of biology. It wasn't until Sherlock presented that I understood what he meant. I'd always assumed, like many Alphas, that Omega heats were a time of intense sexual need and thought little of it. I had no wish to bond myself and therefore no personal experience. I had not realised –'

A muscle twitched at his jaw, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. 'I watched my brother turn into a wraith of his former self, tormented by his own bio-chemistry. He was fading before our eyes and loathing every moment. It was the first time I feared he might do something – fatal – to escape his situation.'

The suggestion lay thick in the air, and John's breath stuttered. He followed what Mycroft was getting at: the possibility that there were times when he'd wondered if Sherlock would rather die than submit to what lay in store for him. 'But Sherlock's not... He said he wanted to make a life for himself, not end it.'

'Yes, but occasionally the sheer hopelessness of the situation seemed insurmountable. My father begged him to bond, invoking my mother's name, offering promises. I felt it was escaping the frying pan to land in the metaphorical fire. I tried to think of alternatives, but there wasn't time and then...' Mycroft drew in a deep breath. 'Between one day and the next, he was no longer my concern. It was made clear from all sides – my own father, who I respected, and the Cunningham family – that further contact was unnecessary. I wish now that I'd tried harder to reach Sherlock. Instead, I accepted it. It was our way of life, as it had been for centuries. Foolishly, I did not question it.'

John smoothed his palm over the fabric of the chair, trying to work out whether Mycroft was playing him. If he was, he'd missed his calling as an actor. Regret carved lines into his face, and self-loathing painted his expression in shadow, utterly convincing.

'On those rare occasions that I heard from Sherlock, the communications had two dichotomous tones. There would be some calls: quiet and vitriolic about his situation, then others where he expressed contentment. I told myself that the former were outward manifestations of his penchant for the dramatic, and the latter were a reflection of the truth.'

John shook his head in disbelief. He'd bet every last pound in his bank account that, in those phone-calls Sherlock had sounded happy, Alexander had been right there, his presence threat enough. 'You never thought otherwise? You? It's your job to be suspicious, and you never questioned what Sherlock said?'

'Alexander's role was to provide for my brother. To cherish him. It's more than social expectation. It is an obligation!' Mycroft pressed his lips together, stifling what, for him, was an outburst. He shut his eyes, his chest heaving with a sigh. 'I hoped Sherlock had found happiness, and I allowed that
hope to blind me. However, you are right. Suspicion is in my nature.'

He waved a hand, indicating the splendour of the club around him and all it symbolised. 'When I achieved a modest post in government and access to a few resources, I turned their focus to Sherlock. In doing so I was breaching a number of unspoken rules about the role an Omega's family plays in their life once they are bound, but there were higher priorities than adhering to tradition.' His lips bleached white beneath the pressure of his teeth, his jaw shifting before he added, 'As it turned out, my fears were founded. I discovered that he'd fled Alexander's house almost nine months prior.'

A ghost of despair flickered over Mycroft's features, hastily smothered. 'Attempts to locate him failed at every turn, and I spent more than a year fearing the worst: that my younger brother had fallen victim to traffickers or suffered unmentionable things without his Alpha to protect him.' A mirthless smile twitched his lips. 'I should have known better than to underestimate him.'

'You didn't know, did you?' John asked. 'What he was doing to control his situation? How successfully he was fighting the system?'

Mycroft shook his head, staring down into the whisky at the bottom of his glass. 'In retrospect, I realise how strategic Sherlock's actions were.' He set the tumbler aside, his hands curling around the arms of the chair in which he sat. 'However, back then, once Alexander retrieved him, I was relieved. Blindly, I thought he was safer in his Alpha's care than elsewhere. I had the occasional concern that something was amiss, but it was months before they became too persistent to ignore.'

'You started digging?'

Mycroft met John's gaze. 'I decided to look beyond the surface of affection Alexander portrayed. As soon as I discovered the lengths he went to in order to conceal information that should be easy for me to obtain, I realised I'd been grossly mistaken. It was enough to encourage me to utilise the resources at my disposal to discover the truth, and then I began formulating strategies to extricate my brother.' Lines bracketed his mouth as he looked away. 'All were flawed, lacking finesse, viability or both. Before I found an adequate solution, Alexander's behaviour came to a head.'

Those eyes grew distant, and John tensed where he sat. Sherlock's description of what Alexander had done to him had been vague, but judging by Mycroft's face, the memory of that day had not been dulled by time. He looked like a man navigating the recollection of an atrocity, and if John had any doubt about whether Mycroft was putting on a show, they faded in that instant. No one could fake the way those blue eyes burned with fresh loathing, and when he spoke again, it was in the voice of a man who keenly understood his own failings, as well as those of the society in which he had been raised.

'One more blow would have killed Sherlock; I'm sure of it. His injuries were catastrophic, and his stay in hospital was prolonged, exacerbated by his already weakened physical state.'

John lifted his head, but he didn't have to voice the question. Mycroft noticed, no doubt seeing the hole in his knowledge as he gave a nod of weary comprehension. 'So that is what Sherlock failed to tell you.'

'He explained how he put Lorelon in Alexander's coffee every morning, and how Alexander found out one day...' John trailed off, trying to work out why Mycroft's face looked so ashen. 'Sherlock was worried how I'd react. Said you'd implied people would frown on him drugging his arsehole of an Alpha.' His voice hardened, and John clenched his jaw as he watched Mycroft's eyebrows lift as if ceding a point. 'Like it wasn't completely justified!'

Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose before dropping his hand. 'You misunderstand the root of my
disapproval, John, and Sherlock has clearly misread my meaning. Understandable. Neither of us were at our best that day.' He rubbed his fingers together, his skin lending dry whispers to the air. 'Sherlock told you how he acquired a drug habit, yes? Did he also tell you how his addiction provided Alexander with more ammunition against him? As soon as he noticed Sherlock's dependency, a new sphere of persuasion became open to him.'

Dread crept up John's back, spreading cold fingers along his spine. It was no stretch of the imagination to picture what Alexander may have done, and he swore quietly.

'He subjected Sherlock to periods of binge and withdrawal. If Sherlock declined the drug, it was administered against his will. Alexander fed his addiction and exercised arbitrary control over Sherlock's supply, and it wasn't just the cocaine he used in that manner.' Mycroft attempted to school his features, but it was a thin veneer over a hard, abyssal anger.

'Alexander always used intimacy as a weapon, of that I have no doubt, but now his methods changed. Sherlock didn't need to treat Alexander with contraceptives for the first eleven months after his return, because Alexander did not touch him.' Distaste emanated from every angle of Mycroft's body, but it was not that of a sibling unwillingly discussing his brother's sex life. It was outrage. 'His proximity meant Sherlock experienced pyresus – the desperate need to mate – and Alexander satisfied himself with other, non-Omega lovers, leaving Sherlock to suffer. Conception of a child had taken second place in Alexander's priorities. As far as I can discern, all he cared about was inflicting punishment.'

Mycroft ran a hand across his knee, smoothing out invisible creases, and John watched him attempt to collect himself. 'To some extent, my brother was accustomed to the denial. He avoided sex with his Alpha whenever possible, but he knew his limits. There were times his biology demanded he consent and consummate, lest he experience the same decline in physical health he endured before he was bound. I believe he was able to push himself to twelve weeks without satisfying pyresus, but this deprivation went on far longer, and he suffered the consequences.'

John realised he was frozen where he sat, his body locked in denial as he stared at Mycroft. 'How did you find out? Did Sherlock...?'

'Sherlock told me nothing. It was Alexander. The first time I – arranged a meeting – to lay out the rules of his separation from my brother, he took great pleasure in gloating over the control he'd managed to achieve, as well as his methods. He was unaware of the fact he was being recorded, or the position of power I occupied.'

His eyes narrowed in cruel satisfaction, but his triumph rapidly faded. 'He made Sherlock too weak to escape.' Mycroft pressed his fingers to his temple as he added, 'Once Sherlock was recovering, I chastised him, not for what he had done to Alexander, but for taking matters into his own hands. He engaged in Alexander's war of control, rather than seeking to extricate himself, and the result was –'

He stopped, clearing his throat and avoiding John's eye. When he began again it was in the tight, indifferent tones of a man struggling to hide too much emotion. 'I am aware I have only myself to blame. Sherlock did not feel able to ask me for assistance. Presumably, he assumed – as my past behaviour suggested – that I would be disinclined to offer aid.'

'Why wait to be asked?' John demanded. 'Couldn't you have stepped in sooner?'

'I needed an excuse, a way of making it about intervention in the eyes of the law, rather than abduction.' He bowed his head before flicking a finger in weak dismissal. 'One which Alexander unwittingly provided when he beat my brother. His actions would have shocked any Alpha of the elite. It's – unthinkable.' Mycroft's voice tightened. 'It was there we found our leverage. I documented
everything, amassing an arsenal of evidence, and what I found drove me to consider a more terminal response. I wanted his influence over my brother's life removed in a way only death can ensure.'

Visceral agreement surged in John's chest, his finger twitching and the gun a sullen enticement at the base of his spine. 'But Sherlock stopped you.'

'Logical where I was – not,' Mycroft admitted, picking a piece of lint from his jacket and crossing his legs, visibly reclaiming the persona John knew so well. 'As Sherlock pointed out, any course of action I wished to take, from disposing of Alexander to dragging it through the courts would leave him in the same position. Unbound, and still in need of an Alpha. Either scenario carried great risk and removed the situation from Sherlock's control. That was not the outcome he desired.'

'Better the devil you know,' John murmured. 'So he convinced you to threaten Alexander instead. Keep the bond going, but force his Alpha away from him so he could –?' He gestured towards the window, indicating Sherlock's current life.

'Exactly. For my part, it was simple. There was a state of equilibrium between Alexander's desire for an Omega and an heir, and his need to hide his deplorable abuse. For Sherlock...' Mycroft hesitated, grimacing. 'It was not so straightforward. If I had ever doubted the strength of my brother's will, I ceased to question it then. His body required rehabilitation, from his injuries, his addiction to cocaine, and Alexander. The process was long and far from easy to endure, yet once he'd regained himself –'

For the first time since John had walked into the room, Mycroft smiled, warm and genuine. 'I had not realised I'd lost him for so long until I found him again. He gloried in his freedom and made my life extraordinarily difficult in the process, but it was more than worth it. He travelled under false papers and met the inestimable Mrs Hudson. He worked for Detective Inspector Lestrade. For the most part, he avoided further drug use, though the addiction lingers to this day.'

He raised his chin, doing nothing to hide his obvious pride. 'Sherlock seized control of his existence, and he is averse to anything that might compromise it. When it became necessary to inform Gregory Lestrade of my brother's situation, Sherlock railed against me for weeks. Understandably, though perhaps not logically, he feared the Inspector's response. The same as he feared yours.'

John lowered his eyes, wondering, not for the first time, if Sherlock would have told him the truth if not for his accidental discovery. His silence spoke for him, and Mycroft's next words were matter-of-fact.

'It is challenging to disregard those so-called truths we learn during our upbringing. In the same way I was led to believe all Omegas were honoured and respected, Sherlock was told that all Alphas would treat him as property. For years, he had daily evidence to support that belief. Yet despite that, he chose you – an Alpha – for a flatmate.'

Mycroft's piercing gaze settled on John's frame, and he tried not to fidget under the scrutiny as the conversation switched onto new territory. 'Why are you here, John? I doubt it is to answer some idle curiosity, nor do I believe the desire to confront me over my behaviour drove you to Diogenes.' A grimace twitched his lips. 'At least, not entirely.'

Words squabbled in John's head, cries of outrage and accusations without a target each as useless as the other. As tempting as it was to blame Mycroft for what had befallen Sherlock, it wasn't that simple. Instead, he forced his anger aside, struggling to pare the chaos of his thoughts down to a solitary question.

'If Alexander dies, what can we do for Sherlock?' He didn't insult Mycroft's intelligence by offering clarification. The straightening of his shoulders and the alertness of his gaze suggested it was
unnecessary. 'And don't say you don't know. If there's anything that can be done, you'll have thought of it.'

He sounded desperate: a lost man looking for a way to make everything right, but of everyone, Mycroft was ideally placed to plot his way through to a preferable outcome. John refused to believe that the older Holmes, plagued as he was by regrets over past inaction, would have failed to consider the vast potential of Sherlock's future.

'And if there is?' Mycroft asked, steepling his fingers in front of his lips in a way that reminded John strikingly of Sherlock. 'What then? Would you go against Sherlock's wishes and remove Alexander from the equation?'

John shook his head, slowly at first, then more emphatic. 'No, and neither would you. If you thought it could be done that way, he would already be dead.'

Mycroft tilted his head in acknowledgement. 'There are a number of – negotiations – which could be undertaken should misfortune befall Alexander, ones which stand a chance of freeing Sherlock from being passed to his Alpha's family.'

John let out a breath, sensing the hanging threads of Mycroft's statement. 'But?'

'But none are certain, and none will negate the suffering Sherlock would be subject to on the death of his Alpha, nor the struggles awaiting him afterwards.' Now Mycroft's gaze was like that of a hawk, practically pinning John to his chair. 'One thing is fundamental to understand, John. Even if he were not inherited by the Cunninghams, Sherlock cannot have the life he wants unless he is bound. Alexander would have to be replaced.'

'But if it was someone he chose –'

'And if that someone was not you?'

The question was like a blade, cutting him off as he fought the tight cramp of emotion in his stomach. Mycroft did not say it vindictively. There was a surgical precision to his question, one that made John wonder what he knew.

He wanted to protest that he and Sherlock weren't like that – that his motives were innocent – but how could he when the thought of Sherlock finding what he needed with someone else made dark jealousy churn in John's chest?

'It wouldn't – it wouldn't matter,' he stammered, clearing his throat and wishing he didn't sound so strained. 'This isn't about me. It's about him.'

Mycroft's eyes narrowed as if he were searching for any hint of a lie. God alone knew what he found, but it seemed to satisfy him. 'There are already clauses in place within Sherlock's bonding contract which would allow him to pass the grieving process in the company of his family, rather than with the kin of his deceased Alpha. It was a stipulation my mother made, long before Sherlock reached maturity.'

'What difference does that make?' John asked quietly.

'It buys us time,' he explained, 'and ensures Sherlock is given what he needs to recover. Should such an event come to pass, I plan to enter negotiations with Alexander's family. I believe they can be compelled to acquiesce to my demands. If not, I can offer to buy my brother back, though they're well within their rights to decline. Should even that fail, it would be a matter for the courts.' He spread his hands. 'As you can see, the options open to me are not without their pitfalls. Should a
judge decide in favour of the Cunninghams, it is probable that they will issue restraints upon me to sever all contact between Sherlock and myself. Even in my current position, such injunctions would not be easy to overcome. Sherlock could lose every ally he has.'

'No.' John shook his head, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees and his hands knotted together in front of his face in a useless kind of prayer. 'No, he wouldn't. I don't believe you'd sit around and do nothing, no matter what the court said, and neither would anyone else. Sherlock's not isolated; he's not alone. It's not like we're just going to let them take him away and forget he exists!'

He was aware that he looked brittle and defensive, but he wasn't blind to the flash of approval in Mycroft's eyes. It made him wonder if all this was some kind of elaborate test, a way for Mycroft to work out where John's priorities lay. Hopefully he realised that, first and foremost, this was about Sherlock, not John and whatever he might want.

The buzz of his phone in his pocket disturbed the silence. Mycroft gave a wave of permission, not that John needed it, and he dragged his mobile free so he could read the message from Sherlock, telling him he was heading to Scotland Yard in twenty minutes.

'My brother demanding your presence, I assume?'

'He asks how your diet's going,' John muttered in retort, getting a glimmer of satisfaction at watching Mycroft give a disapproving sniff before he shook his head. 'Look, the reason I came here is because I don't know what to do.' He spread his hands in front of him, palm-up. 'No one should have to suffer what Sherlock's been through, but if there's anyone who can think of a way to get him out of this mess, it's you. I just – I need to know you've got a trick up your sleeve.'

Mycroft got to his feet, tweaking a crease from his suit before tugging at his cuff and giving a sly half-smile. 'More than one, Doctor Watson,' he replied smoothly, all sign of the vulnerable man of a few minutes ago gone without a trace. 'I am sorry I cannot do more at this time to put your mind at rest, but should it become necessary, there are avenues open to us. As for what you can do,' He indicated the door, 'I suggest you continue as you are. I know that Sherlock values your – friendship – greatly.'

It was a clear dismissal, but despite the message from Sherlock calling him back to his side, there was still one question remaining.

'If you have all these plans, things that can help Sherlock get out of his situation, why haven't you put them in motion? You said yourself you wanted Alexander gone.'

Mycroft frowned, wandering over to a nearby desk and leaning back against it, his arms folded. 'The risk entailed is too great, and the reward inadequate. If I had killed Alexander all those years ago, Sherlock would not have his current existence in Baker Street. He would be bound to someone else and, at best, would go to waste in isolation and indifference.' He sighed. 'As much as Sherlock abhors it, it is his biology that has restricted our actions. Even if it was within his power to do so, back then, who could he choose who would grant him the life he desires?'

'And now?' John got to his feet, closing his eyes in a weary blink before dragging them open again. Mycroft straightened his tie, his gaze assessing, taking in John's short frame in a single sweep.

'Now, Doctor Watson, he has you.'
Warm, blunt fingers ran down his chest, mapping the edges of trembling muscles. Darkness pressed in on all sides, velveteen and absolute, all his input reduced to the rapturous caress of the weathered palms bracketing his ribs. They charted the plane of his waist and rimmed the humid hollow of his navel, exploring with tortuous intensity.

Parted lips, wet and greedy, pressed to the soft skin of his belly, and a growl choked in his throat as his hips gave a demanding twitch. He was hard, swollen and ready, his thighs dewy as his arousal made itself known. If his lover’s voyage of discovery continued, they’d reach down and back to find Sherlock slick, his readiness on display.

He wanted to guide the man above him, but his arms were leaden. Instead, he lay there, a willing recipient to the building pleasure bestowed upon him. Panting breaths fluted his stomach, and he keened as they pressed their face to the juncture of his thigh and torso, inhaling deep, mouth open as they moaned in appreciation.

‘Oh, *God.*’

Blasphemy had never sounded so worshipful, and Sherlock shuddered as strong hands slid under him, tilting his hips up and spreading him open to the benediction of lips and tongue until he was a writhing, sobbing supplicant.

‘Please!’ he breathed, his prayers spoken to the distant ceiling as his legs shook and excitement pooled at the base of his spine. He couldn’t understand what he was asking for, this and more, but his partner needed no further urging. They leaned back, fingers skimming lovingly over him, cupping his balls and dragging up his shaft before the mattress dipped.

Sherlock’s body spasmed in anticipation, heat slipping across his skin like silk as his lover knelt between his legs. They dragged him close, predatory and powerful, lifting him so that while his shoulder-blades stayed on the bed, his spine formed a shallow slope and the tops of his lover’s thighs struck scorching lines across his backside. He could feel the head of their cock nudging at him, yet they did not surge forward and lay their claim. Instead, they held back, shaking with restraint.

A callused hand cupped his face, the tenderness at odds with the cresting wave of animal desire that rose all around them, and a familiar voice waivered around a single, whispered word.

‘Yes?’

His body, driven to breaking point by another’s attentions, shifted in restless determination, intent on capturing its prize. A stoic, patient grasp held his hips steady until he finally found strength enough to answer.

‘Yes! Please, yes!’

Sherlock gasped as the dream shattered around him, leaving him panting in his solitary bed. His body was a quivering mess, aroused to breaking point, and he groaned as he rolled onto his front. His cock rubbed against the mattress as he ground his hips against it, plunging his hand down the back of his pyjamas to find himself wet and open.

He pressed two fingers in, too far gone to care about finding the angle. This was not a leisurely exercise in self-gratification; it was the hell-bent pursuit of release, and within minutes his muscles were clutching around his knuckles, heat coalescing along his thighs as his pillow caught his moans.
He thrust blindly back against his hand as he came in tight, eager pulses, soaking his pyjamas.

Aftershocks rippled through him, but they were not the lethargic undulations of satisfaction. Each one intensified his sulky longing. Static prickled under his sensitised skin, and he sagged in resignation as the misty details of his fantasy unwound across his consciousness.

There was no question as to the identity of his imaginary lover. He knew those hands well – had seen them clasped around mugs of tea or the grip of the Sig – tanned and capable. Besides, his partner may not have said much, but each word and action was quintessentially John, from the whispered praise to the fact that, even at the point of no-return, he had hesitated, checking they were of the same mind.

Perhaps that was a projection of Sherlock’s desire for control: another illusion. He had no way to extrapolate John’s behaviour in such a situation. Would he remain his thoughtful self, or would Sherlock’s pheromones drive his essential nature to burn through and take over, an Alpha at heart?

He liked to think otherwise, that John would be considerate and attentive, yet none of Sherlock’s past experiences put his enjoyment first. An Omega reaching sexual release during heat was practically a given, and the methods used to achieve satisfaction were more about the Alpha’s pleasure than anything else. He had little reason to believe that John, for all his kindness, would be any different.

Yet he longed to be proved wrong. He wanted to feel his responses to those acts he’d learnt from the media – the interactions lovers shared that went far beyond the realms of penetration. All his fantasies were hazy on the details, fogged by his dearth of knowledge. He’d become experienced, over the years, at delivering himself to ecstasy – after all, Alexander wasn’t going to bother – but there were some things you couldn’t do alone.

Wearily, Sherlock rolled onto his back, wiping his hand on his pyjamas and resigning himself to doing the laundry. He would require a shower, too, and soon, before John got up. He might not be releasing the undeniable odour of pyresus, but John would still smell the sex on him. His nose was too powerful to miss it or to offer the blessing of misinterpretation. Bad enough that Sherlock had to suffer through the inescapable itch of unsated desire; he would rather not advertise his consequential activities to every Alpha he came across.

Before John and Baker Street, but after Alexander, he had spent his heats in bed whenever possible, putting years of knowledge of his own body into practice. It made it more tolerable, but at the same time clouded his mind, leaving him disoriented and frankly thick with lust. Besides, such behaviour was detrimental to productivity. The more time he spent trying to satisfy himself, the more protracted his situation became, waiting for a knot that never arrived.

No, better to resist temptation and let things run their course.

Staring at the ceiling, he found himself grateful that at least this hadn’t coincided with the night he’d shared John’s bed. It was challenging to ignore his scent in normal circumstances, but that day John had experienced a gamut of exposure, first to telikostrone, then to Alexander’s dominance.

The former had been bad enough, and Sherlock blushed to remember his response when John had walked back into the lab. Outwardly he had seemed calm, but his pheromones told their own story of feral arousal. The fragrance had coated Sherlock’s throat and made him fidget in his chair, aware of a growing dampness between his legs and the urge to clutch John close and breathe him in.

Later, when Alexander’s appearance had left him shaken, John’s personal perfume had become dominant and powerful, reassuring in ways Sherlock couldn’t define. He had spent the evening clinging to John’s filthy jumper like a security blanket. After all, he couldn’t bury his nose in John’s
neck, so he had to settle for the next best thing.

If he had been in this state that day, the consequences could have been dire. He tried to imagine it: John’s distilled, heightened essence surrounding him. Could he have resisted the temptation to touch when the object of his desire had been a mere few centimetres away?

Wanting John was nothing new. He’d painted Sherlock’s dreams in erotic hues for months, particularly when his hormones were at their fertile apex. However, most of the time it was a quiet longing, acknowledged and placed, regretfully, to one side. Even when like this, all it took was the reminder that John was unaware of Sherlock’s true gender to douse his ardour with a cool shock of fear.

Except, now, the shield of ignorance had been ripped aside. John knew, but there was still nothing like relief. It had not made the situation any easier. If anything, it became more embarrassing, because now they were both aware that it was lust rather than ennui that honed Sherlock’s temper.

Cramp clenched a fist in his stomach, and he curled on his side, groaning at the consequences of his sexual deprivation. Male Omegas didn’t technically menstruate. The rich lining of the womb was broken down and reabsorbed, the toxins filtered through normal excretory systems. However, there was still a spectrum of aches at various stages of the cycle. These were precursors – warnings that ovulation had occurred and that the window of conception was starting to close.

Sherlock resented it, the grudging demands of his transport thanks to a yearning he couldn’t satisfy himself. Sex toys weren’t made for Omegas, since their release was meant to be in the hands of their Alpha. That wasn’t to say they couldn’t provide stimulation, but it was never enough to bring about the combination of blood-chemistry that would appease his heat and give him some respite.

With a sigh, he peeled off his bed covers, staggering to his feet and grimacing at the stickiness of his pyjamas. Early morning light bathed his room, and Sherlock pulled back his curtains, wrinkling his nose at the stuffy atmosphere. It was tempting to open the window and let in some air, but memories of Alexander’s invasion were still fresh in his mind.

A week had passed since Sherlock’s Alpha advanced back into his life, and three days ago Mycroft had been forced to release him from custody. All current reports indicated Alexander had retreated home, but Sherlock wasn’t convinced. Alexander wasn’t stupid, nor was he inclined to give up. He’d only left Sherlock alone for so long because it suited him to do so. Now the balance had changed, and Sherlock doubted anyone could dissuade him from claiming what was his.

John and Mycroft appeared to be of the same mind. His brother had the flat perimeter and Alexander under surveillance, and John’s placid nature had taken on an indestructible determination. He was still careful to give Sherlock space, and he did not fret and flutter. However, he rarely went anywhere without his Sig, and his normal smiles had darkened with worry.

As such, Baker Street remained a fortress, and Sherlock’s window stayed closed. He’d checked his and John’s rooms for cameras, curtailing the breadth of Mycroft’s security after the first few days. His brother had never been a good judge of where monitoring for safety became an invasion of privacy, and he reluctantly obeyed Sherlock’s restrictions. Lenses still caught the stairs and hallway in their confines, but the main flat had returned to its previous state: a haven from prying eyes.

Really, the fewer people who saw him in his current state, the better.

A glance at the clock suggested he might have thirty minutes before John came stumbling downstairs in search of breakfast. Quickly, he shrugged into his blue silk robe, shivering as it brushed across his bare forearms. He rummaged through his drawers, selecting the softest clothes he could find. Not
suitable for meeting with clients, but they were fine if he planned to stay in the flat all day. Besides, the thought of tight cut suits and the company of strangers chafed his raw nerves.

Opening his bedroom door, he peered into the flat. All was quiet, and he smothered a sigh of relief as he darted to the nearby bathroom, locking the door and stripping down to bare skin. He didn’t bother waiting for the water to warm as he flicked on the taps, ducting under the spray and stifling a gasp as the chill enshrouded him. Not that it would do him much good. If controlling his heats was simply a case of concealing an inconvenient erection, he would have no cause for complaint.

Instead, this was a burning, chafing, nagging irritation, wrapped up in his bones and flaring along his nerves to ensnare his mind. Distractions helped. A good case would be perfect, but to his disgust there was no such potential on the horizon. Everything pertaining to Amelia Donnelly’s death had turned up negative. Light Chris, her dealer, had nothing more to offer; there was no obvious cause of death amidst the victim’s toxicology screen, and the one name they had – Morris – had so far proved nothing but a dead end.

Slowly, the pressure of other cases caught the Yard’s attention, and the demands of the utility bills divided Sherlock’s focus. He’d solved a couple of banal situations from high-paying customers, but they presented no challenge, and his mind turned back to the Donnelly case, retracing its steps over well-worn paths in search of an answer.

The sullen ache in Sherlock’s stomach intensified, flashing pain down his thighs, and he turned the water temperature up in the hopes the torrid spray would soothe his muscles. He should have expected this. Alexander may have only been in his presence for thirty minutes or so – not long enough to elevate his next heat into pyresus – but even that brief exposure had an effect. His cycle had contracted, bringing on ovulation a week earlier than he expected. While the intensity was still minimal, there were more symptoms of his current condition than usual: discomfort and sensitivity where, before, he was only plagued by irritation and frustration.

Reaching for the soap, he skimmed its lather over every inch of himself. Resolutely, he ignored the thickening of his erection, washing himself clean with single-minded purpose before turning off the shower and blotting his skin dry.

The toothpaste was acrid against his tongue, and the scrape of his razor over his jaw seemed almost intolerable. Still, it was better than coping with the rasp of his stubble all day. He dabbed droplets from his hair but eschewed any product: the fragrance irritated his nose when he was in this state. Everything, from the light entering his eyes to the flavour of his favourite foods was too much, and Sherlock resigned himself to another day of being unable to block out the demands of his body or the input of his environment.

Easing on his clothes, he adjusted himself in his underwear in the hope of making his intermittent arousal less noticeable to the casual observer. Shoving his soiled pyjamas in amidst the dirty laundry, he picked up the basket, ignoring the press of its wicker ridges across his palms as he carried it downstairs to 221C. Mrs Hudson had given up trying to find tenants, and it had become a utility room of sorts. That, at least, made this whole biological farce slightly easier to tolerate.

Sherlock gave the pile a cursory examination, checking there were no wayward, bright garments caught in the clutch of his arms before loading the machine. He added detergent and chose the correct setting, listening to the rush of water and the churn of the drum before he turned to head back upstairs.

Sleep the past few days had been necessary, but sporadic at best, disturbed by vivid dreams and ceaseless longing. Weariness robbed him of his usual grace, and he stubbed his toe twice before stumbling back into 221B.
John was in the kitchen, rumpled and soft. He’d been working at the surgery since Sherlock’s heat began a couple of days ago, so his exposure to the symptoms had been minimal. Still, it was clear he’d figured it out. Now, his every glance held a question.

‘Can you manage a cup of tea?’ he asked, gesturing to a mug of hot water he’d left on the side. ‘Put it together yourself, because I don’t know how you like it at the moment.’ He took a bite of his toast, raising an eyebrow when Sherlock cast him an irritable glare. ‘Don’t look at me like that. I’m not blind. I’ve never seen you turn down Don Po before, but you rejected last night’s take away like you thought it was poisoned.’

Silently, Sherlock did as he was told, scooping the tea bag out after less than a minute and scaring the idea of milk all together. The result was a golden, clear, hot drink. The temperature at least, he could bear, and it eased some of the taut ache in his stomach as he sipped from the rim.

John sat at the table, his tea steaming by his hand as he devoured a comprehensive breakfast, bare toes tucked under his chair and his terry robe forming a deep vee to display the rumpled t-shirt he’d worn to bed. Whatever structure the garment once had was long gone. The fabric dipped to reveal the bold line of John’s clavicles and clung at irregular intervals, hinting at humid skin and musculature.

Sherlock chewed his bottom lip as his imagination filled in the details. He tried to resist indulging in admiration of John’s assets, or at least keep it hidden: stolen glimpses over the top of a book when John thought he was reading – that kind of thing. Now, his gaze felt magnetised, stuck and unable to withdraw as his mouth watered and a shiver trailed down his spine.

‘Have I got jam on my face?’ John sounded confused, but amused, as if he knew very well that nothing above the collar held Sherlock captivated.

Desperately, he tore his eyes away, shaking his head and refusing to meet John’s gaze as he pulled out the chair opposite, settling into it with one leg folded up underneath him. He clung to his drink, feigning interest in its contents as he hunched his shoulders, screwing himself up small.

Before John, his heats had never been like this. Even in Alexander’s presence, when the intensity of pyresus made its demands, his desire had been unfocused. It did not create fascination where none existed. He had tolerated Alexander as a matter of necessity, but never craved him.

Then John moved in and took a starring role in Sherlock’s fantasies. Basic attraction honed itself with every revolution of his reproductive cycle, growing richer and more intricate, extending beyond the outline of the physical as he got to know John’s complexities.

Lifting his gaze, he squinted across the table at the book John was reading before giving a snort of disgust. He should have known. John could be as single-minded in his pursuit of knowledge as Sherlock, and he had a slim medical textbook about Omega reproductive systems open in front of him.

‘Refreshing my memory,’ John said, answering Sherlock’s “why” before he could give it voice, ‘since Omega health’s become kind of relevant.’ He lifted one shoulder, and Sherlock noticed the hint of embarrassed determination in his expression. ‘I thought I’d be more use to you if I knew what the hell was going on. Biologically, I mean.’

Sherlock sighed, closing his eyes in resignation. He appreciated John’s effort and accepted, from the perspective of a scientist, his desire for empirical data, but it was strange to be so exposed to someone else’s comprehension. Sherlock had spent his life hiding what he was. Even as a child, half of his family had remained oblivious. Later, his increasing forays into a world that should be closed to him
made secrecy integral. Even those who were aware – intimately – that he was an Omega had never taken the time to fathom him. Alexander hadn’t bothered at all, medical consultants understood the biology but treated him like a specimen, and Alphas like Lestrade and Mycroft comprehended him as a person, but didn’t grasp the marriage of who he was and what his gender dictated he should be.

Yet here was John, making an effort to understand Sherlock’s situation, not to refine a stereotype or excuse deviance, but for the simple reason that he wanted to help.

‘Many medical texts contain fallacies with regards Omega biology – the infamous twenty-eight day cycle being the most notable. Additionally, they do not explain any of it in perspective.’ He drew in a breath, exhaling to blow away the steam that rose from the surface of his tea before he asked, ‘What do you want to know?’

John stared at him, his eyes narrowed in thought before he shut the book and pushed it aside, propping his elbows on the table and leaning forward. He parted his lips, but seemed to reconsider his first question, wrinkling his nose before speaking.

‘This one’s different, isn’t it? Normally you’re –’ He waved towards the sofa, encompassing Sherlock’s “moods” with ease, ‘– but not like this. Food hasn’t bothered you before, and usually you seem more pissed off than anything else.’

Sherlock shifted the mug in his palms before setting it down on the table. ‘It’s not pyresus. I already told you that.’ One of the first things John had asked, less than twenty-four hours after Alexander’s unexpected appearance, was if his brief presence would be enough to bring about a typical Omega reaction. His question had been tremulous, as if he thought it was like flicking a switch and Sherlock would plunge into helpless need right before his eyes. It had taken a terse explanation to set that straight; one he realised it may be necessary to repeat.

‘I would require at least a day’s exposure to his scent for my next heat to reach the level of pyresus. Half-an-hour inhaling his stench made things more intense and contracted the length of my cycle, that’s all. I’m not used to it, hence why it’s more noticeable than usual that something’s amiss.’

John licked his lips, his fingers meshed in front of him and his head tipped to the side as he absorbed the information. ‘What does it feel like?’ When Sherlock hesitated, he shrugged. ‘If you’d rather not tell me that’s fine. It’s private. I get that.’

Sherlock paused, trying to think how to describe the clashing sensation, from the tight restraint of his skin stretched over his bones to the constant, nagging urges of his flesh. ‘I don’t know. Scattered, aroused, irritable, hungry yet nauseous, exhausted but restless.’ He pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes, saying the one word that summed it up. ‘Frustrated.’

‘Sounds like you’re not sure whether you’re coming or going.’

‘Coming’s definitely part of it.’ The words escaped him before he had a chance to censor himself, and a rapid flush burned his cheeks as John made a choked sound from across the table.

Bright laugher filled the kitchen, school-boy sniggers dissolving into delighted mirth at Sherlock’s rueful honesty. There had been little to laugh about this past week, and Sherlock grinned to see John so unguarded. His quiet seriousness faded away, leaving him spluttering and red-faced.

‘Sorry,’ he managed, rubbing the back of his neck and giving Sherlock a lopsided grin. ‘I wasn’t expecting you to be so –’

Sherlock shook his head, dismissing John’s apology. Normally, he was hesitant to speak of matters
he considered private, but his tolerance of social convention – minimal at the best of times – faded entirely when he was like this. It meant his conversation became more direct, stripping away the last veils of civility most people believed to be essential.

‘So go on then,’ John urged. ‘Tell me what else the books leave out.’

‘Everything,’ Sherlock muttered uncharitably. ‘They always try and make it into a biological echo of a Beta’s menstrual cycle, and in doing so fail to acknowledge the variations, which does no credit to anyone.’

‘I already guessed as much.’ John shrugged when Sherlock glanced his way, tilting his head in question. ‘There are parallels, but Omegas have a greater complexity to their reproductive systems, and you’re more heavily influenced by environmental factors, such as your Alpha’s scent. You have two levels of fertility – heats and pyresus – which Betas don’t. Also, while events alter the length between one ovulation and the next, from what you’ve said that change is stable. It’s not twenty days one month, thirty the next.’

‘No. There’s different… statuses. Someone in my situation, bound but separated, experiences long gaps between their heats. Unbound cycles are the shortest; not even two weeks.’

John frowned. ‘That doesn’t sound very sustainable.’

Sherlock shook his head, tracing patterns across the table’s surface. ‘It’s not. Omegas have evolved to require a bond. Without it, their reproductive urges remain voracious, even if it’s detrimental to the individual. I could survive unbound, for a while, but it would be a wretched way to live.’

John nodded, his gaze calculating and his lips moving as he counted. ‘I’m guessing they got a bit longer when you were with Alexander, and longer still when you separated from him. Before now they were, what, every five weeks or so?’

A jolt of surprise shot through him, and Sherlock blinked. He hadn’t realised John paid such close attention to his behaviour – enough to notice patterns which, at the time, would have been irrelevant. ‘They occur at thirty-seven day intervals. Unfortunately, Alexander’s brief visit was enough to change that.’ He huddled in his chair, drawing his knees up to his chest and watching as John picked up his plate and put it by the sink. He poured a glass of water and reached for a blister pack, putting it down in front of Sherlock.

‘What are these for?’

‘Paracetamol. They might help with some of the aches. Don’t take more than two, all right?’

It was tempting to snap that if basic painkillers offered any assistance, he would already have taken them, but Sherlock bit back the response. At least John was considerate enough to offer aid. It was more than anyone else ever attempted. ‘Yes, doctor.’

He shifted in his seat, hating the dull pain at his hips and the sensitive thrum that pulsed between his legs. Grudgingly, he popped free a couple of pills, swallowing them with the dregs of his tea before climbing to his feet and dragging himself over to the sofa. Lying down wouldn’t bring him much relief, but at least the soft cushions wouldn’t exacerbate the grumbling malaise.

He pulled his robe closed around his chest, tucking up his knees and turning his back to the room, trying to ignore John’s sleep-heavy redolence as it curled through the flat. He didn’t need his eyes open to conclude when John stepped out of the kitchen. Every nerve thrilled with his proximity, sending ghostly butterflies swooping in his stomach. Each footstep resonated across his skin like the
beat of a drum, stopping by John’s armchair. He could picture it with ease: dexterous hands braced against the back, eyes intense – worried, perhaps – but attentive.

‘Is there anything I can do to help?’

Sherlock froze, his body stalled as his mind flooded with images. Slowly, he turned, looking over his shoulder to see John standing just as he’d imagined. His knuckles jutted, sharp and white, belying the intensity of his grasp on the back of his chair. Those blue eyes were closed, and his cheeks flushed dark with mortification. Both of them were equally aware of what it sounded like John was offering, and Sherlock wished it was something he could take.

‘I – I didn’t mean –’ John croaked, gratifyingly breathless, and Sherlock turned over to better memorise this: John caught between attraction and compassion, his desire which he worked so hard to conceal written all over his face.

The idea of it, of John’s hands, his lips, his rhythmic thrusts did nothing to help Sherlock’s composure. Part of him longed to demand it – to lie and tell John it was precisely what was required to bring him back into balance – but that seemed both inadvisable and perverse: a twisted form of coercion.

‘It wouldn’t work,’ he pointed out, trying not to let his voice shake as he forced his restless body still. The ripple of half-hidden hurt across John’s features spoke volumes, and Sherlock rolled his eyes. ‘I don’t mean to imply your expertise are inadequate, John. There’s one fundamental aspect that would be missing.’

When blank incomprehension was his only response he sighed, clutching his hair in despair. ‘Must I repeat myself? This is not pyresus, and nor are you my Alpha. Your nodal ridge will not be stimulated to form a knot, and that is what’s necessary. Should we –’ He made a hand-gesture, unable to bring himself to put it into words lest his longing make itself any more evident.

‘Satisfaction would be brief and my symptoms more intense in the aftermath. If all that was required to end this was sexual release, don’t you think I’d have met my own needs by now?’

He turned his back, his voice grating as he folded his arms around himself, trying to steady the tremulous longing that shook him to the bone.

The reprimand he expected for being crass, ungrateful and dismissive never came. Nor did John’s silent, stoic departure. Sympathetic tranquillity fell, and he could hear John’s occasional inward breaths: sentences aborted before they’d begun.

‘Sorry.’ His apology sounded small, not hurt, but defeated, and Sherlock tightened his arms around his own ribs, holding himself in place. ‘I wasn’t trying to make light of this – any of it. I know if there was a way to improve things, you’d already have done it.’ There was a brief, uncertain pause. ‘For the record, I wasn’t suggesting we climb into bed together. I just – I want to help, however I can.’

Sherlock closed his eyes, loathing that it was only Alexander’s odious touch that could ease the jangling discordance of his body. If things were different – if it were John instead…

He cut off that thought before it could progress, screwing up his face as regret cleaved his chest. Part of him didn’t care that he would remain unappeased if it meant he got to touch John. However, there was no such thing as a fling without consequences. He couldn’t promise anything beyond the immediate, and neither of them would be satisfied with so little. Maybe John would take it – just because he hadn’t consciously suggested a quick shag didn’t mean he was unwilling – but it could ruin what they had beyond repair. Besides, the potential repercussions, legal as well as emotional,
were too much to bear: yet another unacceptable risk.

‘I’m going to get dressed,’ John said quietly, the silence having dragged on around them for too long, unmarked by Sherlock’s turmoil. His presence receded, taking all the warmth from the room with him as he went. ‘If nothing else, one of us needs to be decent enough to field any clients we might get.’

‘John?’ Sherlock lifted his head, hearing him pause at the threshold, silent and attentive. Words bunched behind Sherlock’s lips, and he shut his eyes, concentrating on what he wanted to convey. An apology would lack sincerity in his current state, and he settled once more, his murmured thanks almost muffled by the couch’s embrace. ‘I appreciate your efforts.’

He winced at the ridiculous formality of his statement, but a subtle change in John’s fragrance – a lessening of anxious worry and distress – implied it was at least passingly adequate.

‘No problem.’ John tapped the palm of his hand against the doorframe before his footsteps padded up the stairs and his bedroom door closed behind him: a despicable barrier.

With an irritable sigh, Sherlock ran his tongue over his teeth. From John’s perspective, he could understand how uncharted this entire situation would be. He had no experience of blinding desire, not beyond the romanticised notions people in love so often claimed. While John may know need, he lacked the reference points to empathise with Sherlock’s current condition. All he could do was observe from the outside and offer suggestions.

However, at least he tried. Mycroft, on those rare occasions when faced with Sherlock in a similar situation, had a tendency to turn a blind eye. It was only when he first presented, and unchecked pyresus held him in its grasp that Mycroft had been attentive; pitying as Sherlock burned. In comparison, his current experiences were mild, so much so that he derided himself for not being able to ignore them. After all, he was accustomed to depriving his transport; the only difference between this and hunger was the incessancy of it. Night and day, hour after hour it plagued him, and it would continue to do so until his hormonal balance shifted away from its peak.

Grimly, he tried to disassociate himself from his prison of flesh, but the doors of his mind-palace were beyond his reach. He couldn’t plunge into the welcoming depths of cerebral pursuits, not when he was firmly rooted in the blood pumping through his veins and the thrill of every tiny glide of friction. Instead, he could only skim the surface, his thoughts darting around like dragonflies, iridescent and fleeting.

This had been easier before, when John remained oblivious. Playing up the guise of boredom had provided a meagre diversion, and his asperity offered the perfect shield to keep John out of reach, distant and untouchable. They had existed in a reluctant balance, John oblivious and Sherlock resigned. The moment John found out about the bite all that changed. New facets of possibility and potential disaster emerged, and Alexander’s reappearance had given the whole mess a startling momentum.

The status quo lay in pieces, and the lack of certainty stole Sherlock’s breath away as panic clenched its vice around his ribs. A month ago, he had been confident in his existence, content, if not happy. Now, everywhere he looked there was the idea of change: a threat and promise all at once. John had already told him about his meeting with Mycroft, editing emotion from his account with deliberate care as he conveyed the plans Sherlock had known his brother would construct. Each was much as he imagined: carefully devised, but by no means certain. Like so many other aspects of his life, what became of him in the event of Alexander’s death relied on the decisions of other people, and even if they released him, he would remain a slave to his biology, his desires ignored by society at large and only possible to appease through another bond.
Sherlock may not be the most emotionally aware of men, but he could see how it might go. John would put himself forward, the counterweight to all Sherlock's chaos. In the indistinct world of fantasy, it could be everything he wanted, not just an Alpha, but a mate – one who cared for him as a person, rather than a vessel for their children. Yet every time he tried to picture it, Sherlock's imagination failed him. He had no foundation on which to build the details, no evidence of John's behaviour within a bond to extrapolate. He was a good man now, but so was Alexander, once. What proof did he have that the trials of being bound to him wouldn't shatter the last of John's patience?

He shook his head, scattering his thoughts as his muscles fluttered and his stomach twisted, torn between distress and desire. It was useless. He could rip himself apart trying to rationalise the unknown. So little power lay in his hands, and such a small portion of his life was certain. This current situation was the best he had managed to achieve, and he would not cast it away in the futile hope of better. He and John would stay as they were, Alexander would live, and Sherlock would continue to fight for every scrap of freedom he could call his own.

Firm as it was, his resolution rang hollow, and he buried his face in the sofa cushions, wishing he could hide from his own circling deliberations. Like this, his gender became the focus of his attention: the definition of the self. He forgot that there was more to delineate his worth than obedience and child-bearing.

He didn’t notice John descend the stairs, and the general, domestic sounds of him washing dishes and clearing plates didn’t penetrate his fugue of self-pity. The kettle’s hiss was nothing but static, and if John said anything, Sherlock ignored it.

It was his nose that dragged him from the fogged edges of his mood, a plethora of olfactory receptors diligently cataloguing John’s scent. It was unconscious by this point, Sherlock’s body attuned to reading switches in disposition, health and environmental exposure according to the permutations in John’s fragrance. Of course, correctly interpreting them was another matter, but in the time it had taken John to get dressed, something had changed.

Sherlock glared over his shoulder at his flatmate, seeing nothing out-of-the-ordinary. There was no product in his hair, and this was not the poorly-constructed odour of cheap deodorant or dubious cologne. Yet nor was it just the rich perfume of dark spices that Sherlock had come to associate with John. There was something else. Something similar, but out of place. A discrepancy.

In one swift movement, he was on his feet, his nostrils flaring and his body tense. His first thought was that somehow, in the brief time he’d gone away to get dressed, John had touched the skin of someone else and picked up their pheromones.

Bitter jealousy filled Sherlock’s mouth before rationality interceded. This was too specific a change. It had to be some kind of deliberate aroma, organic, not synthetic, yet nothing floral or herb-based, both of which Sherlock would have identified immediately.

John finished whatever he was doing at the sink, flicking suds from his fingers and drying his hands before turning around, looking more than a bit pleased with himself. He’d dragged Sherlock from his sulk without a word. At any other time, Sherlock would prevaricate and do all he could to imply that he’d left the sofa under his own steam, rather than through any trickery of John’s, but he was too engrossed in trying to discern what his nose was telling him to bother.

Shifting his weight, John leant back against the surface and folded his arms. It was a pleasing sight. His sleeves were still rolled up to keep them out of the way of the dishwater, and warm skin stretched over strong muscles. Sherlock licked his lips as another wave of scent washed towards him,
comprehensible in every aspect but the one alien nuance.

‘Almond oil.’ The answer flashed across his brain, the creamy undertone abruptly labelled. ‘Expensive. Organic. Vegan. The kind they use as massage oil bases in top-end spas. Spanish,’ he added as an afterthought, watching John’s already surprised expression change to astonishment. ‘You put some in the crook of your elbow to see if I’d notice. Why?’

John’s lips quirked into the same smile that normally preceded a breathless bout of praise. However, his answer was enough to recapture Sherlock’s faltering interest. ‘Experiment.’ Now he grinned in earnest, delighted by Sherlock’s grudging curiosity. ‘I’m demonstrating that not everything in the books is a lie. They say, and it’s clearly true, that an Omega’s ability to pick apart a fragrance and identify its components improves ten-fold during ovulation, and it’s not like your nose is shoddy to begin with.’

‘Almond oil. Hardly a challenge, John.’

‘Spanish, Sherlock. You didn’t just tell me what it was, but where the bloody almonds came from, to me, this barely smells at all, but you – Jesus, you could probably tell me where in London I bought it.’

He held up a hand, stalling Sherlock’s answer (Tottenham Court Road, obvious.) before gesturing to the flat. ‘I put a bit on the skull and hid it. See if you can track it down with just your nose.’

Sherlock sighed. ‘I’m not a sniffer dog,’ he groused.

‘No, you’re a bored genius. Go on. It’s that or lie on the couch all day and Billy is never seen again.’ John pushed himself away from the counter, picking up his laptop and making a beeline for the sofa before settling himself at one end. It looked casual, but John was being strategic. He was reducing potential sprawling space. Of course, he could just drape himself over John, treat him like furniture, but – Sherlock swallowed as a renewed bolt of heat sizzled under his skin – perhaps that wasn’t the best idea.

Besides, while this might be bundled up in the guise of a game, John had been clever. He was utilising one of the few benefits of Sherlock’s current condition, allowing the physical to ebb in favour of concentration on the olfactory. He was providing Sherlock with a purpose, and knowing John, he wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to learn a little more in the process.

‘You’ve escalated the test conditions,’ he accused, rolling his eyes when John tried to look innocent. ‘The heat of your skin gave the oil greater molecular energy, allowing diffusion. The skull’s temperature is ambient at best, and therefore spread will be minimal. Not exactly an ideal experiment. No control. A number of unrestricted variables…’

John smiled down at his laptop, neither smug nor crowing in his victory, but apparently pleased by Sherlock’s sluggish willingness to oblige him. The slow peck of his fingers over the keys became a background, stumbling rhythm, and Sherlock quickly became engrossed with what he was doing, focussing his attention on one sense and taking note of its power.

It took him less than half-an-hour, surrounded by the catalogue of odours he could decipher within Baker Street’s air, to locate the skull. John had done his best, enlisting the help of Mrs Hudson, and he found Billy propping up her recipe book as she baked a cake for Mrs Turner. Cunning, in a way, as the aroma of almonds was neither distinct nor out of place amidst the culinary chaos. If Sherlock had been relying on that alone, the task could have taken hours. However, for all its years as an ornament, the calciferous dome had acquired a signature all its own – something that, once he entered 221A, was glaringly apparent. He could have found the thing with his eyes closed.
Sherlock had never thought anything of his sense of smell beyond the basic acknowledgement of its strength. Necessity dictated he hid its role in his work lest it give away his gender, but John’s little game had brought a number of questions to the fore, and Sherlock found his mind happily analysing the new data he had acquired. It was nothing like the relief he craved, but it was better than the alternative.

Perhaps it was time for an experiment of his own.

John flinched when Sherlock thrust Billy between his face and the laptop screen, and he glanced at the clock in surprise before looking at Sherlock. Mock annoyance was a poor mask for the soft glow of his pride. ‘Want me to hide your violin?’

‘No. Tell me what you can detect.’

The bridge of John’s nose wrinkled in distaste, and he pulled a face, steadying his laptop as Sherlock flopped down next to him, the crown of his head pressed against John’s thigh and the sofa cradling his back. His legs hung over the arm of the couch, bent at the knee, and he wriggled his bare toes in the air as he held the skull above him, roughly on level with John’s ear.

‘Why should I sniff the skull?’

‘You’re the one that started this stupid experiment,’ Sherlock pointed out. ‘You concealed it among Mrs Hudson’s baking, thinking that his scent would be disguised. Obviously you think that Billy only smells at all because of the oil you rubbed into the bone. Almonds. Is that all you can pick out? Almonds?’

‘There’s more?’ John sounded baffled, but he reached out for the bone in Sherlock’s grasp, tugging it free and giving the occipital ridge a cautious sniff. Even if Sherlock hadn’t spent so much time in John’s company reading the miniscule changes in his expression, he would have understood the flash of realisation across those features. John’s thoughtful hum made him smile, and he shut his eyes, rubbing his hand over his stomach as John began to speak.

‘Yeah, all right. He’s dusty; you should clean him more often. There’s kind of a dry rock smell, but also –’ John’s palms whispered over the smooth surface of the cranium, and when he continued he sounded a touch appalled. ‘A bit of blood and something sort of – ugh, might be marrow?’

‘Dental pulp, or what’s left of it,’ Sherlock supplied happily, opening one eye to see that John looked repulsed. ‘And there’s a small, very old blood-stain on the interior cranial space, probably from the stroke that killed him. However, you’re picking up sources of biological material approximately seventy years after this decomposed to its current state, and your nose is giving them priority recognition over the preservatives, which you don’t seem to sense at all.’

John cupped the mandible in his hand, staring into its bony face before cocking his head. ‘But I have to stick my nose in his mouth to get that much. What you can pick up from there?’

It was not a huge distance. At most, Billy was a couple of feet away, and Sherlock eyed the gap as he considered the question. ‘Almonds, chalk, polish, degrading formaldehyde or something similar, iron and copper, which could be the blood, the glue used to hold his teeth in the jaw bone, and…’ He trailed off, trying to place the final fragrance. It was a whispering hint, part of what made Billy so different from the other contents of 221B, which had absorbed the perfumes of experiments, cooking, and occupants alike. ‘Old, dry clay and a sort of mustiness, not like books but like fabric. Different, more treble.’ He shut his eyes as he tried not only to identify it, but to give John an adequate description. Finally, the conclusion filtered to the front of his mind. ‘I think it’s the soil from the grave in which he was buried.’
His statement was met with silence, and when he looked at John, he realised he was the subject of an incredulous stare. ‘One he’s not been in for the best part of a century? That’s –’

‘Unlikely,’ Sherlock muttered, taking the skull and examining it, looking for an alternative.

‘Brilliant.’ John put his laptop aside, shifting so that one arm draped along the back of the couch and he could look down into Sherlock’s face. ‘And not so strange, when you think about it. Human decomposition in an English grave is a pretty damp affair, and bone’s porous, to some extent.’

‘He soaked it all up,’ Sherlock poked at one of the molars, ‘but you can’t discern it?’

John shook his head and rolled his shoulders in a shrug. ‘Have you thought about looking at old cases when you’re like this? Ones you’ve not solved? There’s a good chance you could pick up more from the physical evidence, if nothing else.’

Sherlock sighed, setting the skull on the floor by the sofa and flexing his toes. ‘I can’t very well tell the Yard that I sniffed out the perpetrator, can I? Not without giving myself away. Even they’d start to ask questions eventually. I would have to corroborate anything I found by an alternative method, and if that wasn’t possible...’ He didn’t need to explain; John would understand. Adding the annoyance of a case he knew how to solve but for which he couldn’t demonstrate culpability would not do any favours to his current state of mind. ‘That and I doubt a fresh corpse would be so straightforward to decipher. There’d be too many odours to distinguish individual elements.’

He pursed his lips, tipping his head to look up at John. His curls whispered against the denim of John’s jeans, a gentle hiss in Sherlock’s ears. ‘It was a good idea though. A good distraction.’ His smile felt stiff. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s the least I can do,’ he replied, glancing at his laptop where it was propped on the arm of the couch. ‘Kept you quiet while I tried to write up something about the Donnelly case.’ His fingers dropped to Sherlock’s hair, shifting through the strands. It could have been tormenting or ticklish, but John’s grip was purposeful, and the sensation was a solid tether that brushed away the sharpest edge of Sherlock’s discomfort. ‘So much has happened this past couple of weeks, but we’ve got nothing.’

Sherlock grunted. ‘Not that it was the world’s most fascinating case to begin with,’ he pointed out. ‘Hardly scintillating material. The only reason it feels different is because it’s been surrounded by revelations about me. Things you can’t publish.’

John shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t, even if I could.’ He sighed. ‘It’s just not very satisfying to be left with no real cause of death, especially when you were so convinced there was more to it than met the eye.’

Sherlock hummed in quiet pleasure as John’s fingers stroked from his temple and up over his zygomatic arch: naturally intimate. Yet the second the sound left his lips, he regretted it. The physical contact was snatched away, leaving him bereft.

‘Sorry. I didn’t –’ John looked appalled at himself, and Sherlock scowled at the self-reproach on his expressive face. ‘I didn’t mean to just –’

‘Do you hear me complaining?’ he demanded, too tense to bother being coy. ‘Put it back. It was helping me think.’ That was not necessarily true, but it had been good all the same. Besides, he hated that John’s instinct was to provide natural affection, and his conscious mind’s decision was to withdraw it. Sherlock understood his motives were respectful, but it wasn’t what he wanted – this polite effigy of distance.
Fondness gleamed in John’s eyes, and hesitantly, he did as Sherlock asked, his movements growing more confident as he melted into John’s touch. It was… different. No one did this for him except John. Oh, there was the occasional hug from Mrs Hudson, but other than that, no one else touched him because they desired to do so, and Sherlock selfishly cherished the sensation as he began to speak.

‘There is more to the Donnelly case than we’ve uncovered, I’m sure of it. If we could find this “Morris”, we’d get somewhere, but there’s nothing.’ He scowled at the ceiling, pushing his head into the curve of John’s palm and banging his heel against the sofa in a jagged rhythm. ‘I was sure something would turn up in the toxicology report – more than just the evidence of her drug habit which, while entrenched, had not yet had a fatal impact. Even the speed I tested came back unremarkable.’

John made a dubious sound of agreement, his annoyance at Sherlock lifting drugs rather than surrendering them into the Yard’s evidence still apparent. ‘Not your best idea. Still, it tells us Light Chris wasn’t selling a contaminated supply.’

‘That’s a false assumption. All we can ascertain is that the tablets he passed to me weren’t tainted. That doesn’t mean what he gave Amelia Donnelly was pure.’ Sherlock steepled his fingers in front of his lips and narrowed his eyes. ‘However, let’s say they were cut with something – something that killed her and then disappeared from her system without a trace – why was she targeted? And by who? You saw her dealer. Not exactly murderer material, and why would he kill off a steady customer?’ With a huff, he rolled onto his side, burying his face in the shadows by John’s hip as he growled, ‘It doesn’t make any sense!’

A double thump from the front door stole away whatever words of encouragement John had been about to utter, and his hand dropped away as Sherlock lifted his head and frowned towards the entryway in confusion. ‘That’s not a client,’ he muttered.

‘It’s not Greg’s knock either, and your brother doesn’t bother.’ John got to his feet, every angle of his body alert as he reached for the Sig where it lay on the coffee table. ‘Stay there.’

Sherlock snorted, his disobedience automatic. ‘Alexander is unlikely to walk up to Baker Street in full view of the cameras, John.’ His response was a glare, hard like steel and demanding compliance. It shocked him, sometimes, how firm John could be. Glimmers of the army captain made themselves known and Sherlock found himself sinking down to perch on the top step while John trotted downstairs.

He kept the gun tucked behind him, but if it was required, John would have it ready to fire in less time than it took to blink. He did not fling the door wide, nor open it in creeping increments. Instead, he parted it to a width fractionally narrower than his shoulders, blocking the threshold with his body as he identified their visitor.

So much could be read from his stance. Immediately, Sherlock knew that whoever was on the other side was not a confirmed friend, but more an ally than an enemy. John relaxed a fraction, still prepared, but welcoming, and he stepped aside, leaving plenty of space.

Elsie ducked past him, the look she cast in his direction torn between distrust and amusement before she caught sight of Sherlock at the summit of the stairs. Immediately, her nose wrinkled with pity, and she shut the door firmly behind her, blocking out the world in her wake. ‘You reek,’ she said, her words bald of apology. ‘No wonder your friend’s greeting people at the door with a gun.’

‘No one but you can detect my hormonal state right now,’ Sherlock pointed out, dragging his robe around himself and sniffing in annoyance. Of course Elsie would pick up on it. He could remember
all too well her bullying him through similar times in the past, prodding and poking while his body sulked and whined its constant litany of complaints.

‘And your Alpha.’ Her expression darkened, and she stomped towards him, her boots thudding on the steps before she stopped halfway up. ‘I heard a couple of rumours that didn’t sound too good. Nothing obvious,’ she added, when Sherlock grimaced. ‘It’s not like the twat’s going to go around advertising the fact he’s lost you, is it? Some dealers mentioned a new Alpha buying from them a little while ago. Vocal. Complaining. Didn’t mention an Omega, but said his “whore” had got away. Posh git down on his luck. I wouldn’t have thought anything of it, then I saw the extra security on this place.’ She shrugged. ‘Not a challenge to do the arithmetic.’

‘I thought your brother said he’d left London?’ John demanded, glaring at the shut door like it was a barricade and the enemy waited just beyond its blank face.

‘Alexander was held in custody for almost a week. He’d have wanted to feed his habit while he regrouped. I doubt he’ll be gone for long.’ Sherlock looked at Elsie, taking in the disparities in her appearance. Her clothes were ragged, but clean, and her face was free of grime. She had pulled her hair back in a greasy ponytail, but there was no dirt under her nails. She wore her disguise well, but it was freshly applied. ‘That’s not why you came here, is it?’

‘You’re lucky I came at all. I can’t be seen being too chummy with the likes of you.’ She sighed, easing herself down onto the stairs before reaching into her pocket and handing him a slip of paper. ‘Still, I thought I should check you were all right and give you that. It might help.’

Sherlock’s eyes skimmed the brief missive. “32 Dartan Grove”.

‘Not a good area,’ he murmured, turning the address over in his fingers. ‘What exactly can I expect to find?’

Elsie shifted, stretching her feet out in front of her and waggling her boots. It made her look younger, more like the girl she’d once been as she worried her bottom lip with her teeth. ‘After you came to talk to me, I started asking around, quiet like. I don’t think your dead girl’s the first.’

Sherlock blinked, absorbing every flicker of expression on her face. ‘What have you found out?’

She chewed absentely on the side of her thumb and shrugged. ‘People on the streets die all the time. They pick a bad fight, or get ill, overdose or get offed by the bloody weather. Then they’re just gone. The only funeral they get’s in the gossip. Mostly, there’s nothing suspicious, but there were a couple – drug users, but not habitual. Got hold of some stims, took them, and died. Apparently it was like they just fell asleep.’

Elsie shifted. ‘I’d never have known if I hadn’t asked. It’s the kind of thing no one thinks about. I nearly wrote them off as nothing. The shit some of this stuff is cut with is unbelievable, but when I discovered they were both Alphas, I thought maybe it was relevant.’

‘You didn’t answer my question.’ Sherlock frowned, aware of John watching them both, a soldier at ease, but still ready for the moment when it became necessary to strike. ‘What’s at the address?’

She drummed her fingers on the wood beside her as she hesitantly explained, ‘After I got your note about Morris, I started poking about. Kept coming up with nothing. I decided he gave you the same kind of full-of-shit name dealers give cops to throw them off the trail. I thought you were losing your touch.’

She smiled at Sherlock’s disdainful sound of protest, shaking her head. ‘However, when I got the
info about this place, someone told me there was an old nameplate by the door.’ One eyebrow lifted.
‘Morrisey. Seemed like too much of a coincidence to me.’

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled something out and passed it over. Sherlock recognised it
instantly, the slender, oval leaves and the ridged stem. One flower, mostly crushed and stripped of
petals, made a forlorn crown.

‘Aristolochia.’ He turned it in different directions, absorbing the details. ‘It’s been cut, harvested.
Someone’s squeezed fluid from the capillaries, but whether it’s deliberate or not…’ He trailed off.
‘This was at the house?’

‘It’s not a squat, and there’s nothing as permanent as a meth lab, but someone’s messing with things
in there. Or they were, anyway. It’s pretty dusty. I can’t tell if they’ve gone for good if they’re just
elsewhere right now. There was other stuff, but—’ She pulled a face and scratched her head. ‘That
was the easiest thing to carry.’

‘Any idea who, exactly, occupied the place?’

She got to her feet, absently brushing off her backside. ‘Nope.’ At the expression on Sherlock’s face,
she rolled her eyes and spread her hands. ‘Look, I’ve done all I can, all right? I’ve already been
getting complaints – people think I’m throwing in my lot with you, and that’s not how I do things.
You’re the bloody genius. You can work out the rest.’

With a huff, she turned to descend the stairs, only pausing when John grabbed her sleeve. She
bristled, snatching herself free and glaring for all she was worth. However, as soon John spoke, her
gaze softened, morphing into firm understanding and faint empathy.

‘Thanks. For letting us know about Sherlock’s Alpha, as well as the case. If you come across him
anywhere—’

‘I’ll tell you.’ She said it with stone-strong assurance. ‘He’s a right wanker, by all accounts. I knew
he had to be bad, but…’ She cut a glance back towards Sherlock, her eyes narrowed. ‘Look, I’ll
leave the crime-solving to you, but if I hear anything more about your Alpha, anything at all, I’ll
come running.’

‘Thank you,’ John said again, grinning when she jerked her head in Sherlock’s direction.

‘He’d do the same for me if I asked. Even if he likes to pretend otherwise.’

She jumped down from the last step, her untied laces clicking as she headed for the door. ‘Watch
your backs.’ She glanced meaningfully in John’s direction before looking at Sherlock. ‘Both of you.’
With a nod of farewell, she let herself out, the door closing behind her with a solid clank.

Silently, Sherlock rolled the severed stem between his fingertips, his thoughts racing. He barely
noticed John climb the stairs and sit in the spot Elsie had vacated, his elbow propped on the next
step. He reached out, pulling the dishevelled flower free from his grasp before looking up into
Sherlock’s face.

‘So,’ he asked, raising an eyebrow, ‘are we going to take a look?’

Sherlock met his gaze, a joyful grin blooming across his lips as his mind finally took precedence over
the demands of his body, engaged and stimulated in a way he relished. He could see the answering
relief in John’s expression, and a cloud of worry he had not thought to notice faded from
prominence.
‘Do you really have to ask?’

He bounded to his feet, his robe fluttering behind him as he turned back to the flat. The complaints of his body did not vanish, but nor did they occupy centre stage, and Sherlock bathed in the flash of his theories as he hurried to get dressed. Ignoring his suits, he reached instead for jeans and a shirt before dragging a hoodie down from the top of his wardrobe. Walking into Dartan Grove in designer clothes was asking for trouble. The less attention they garnered in their explorations, the better.

John was waiting for him, his jacket already on, no doubt hiding the bulk of the gun. He raised his eyebrows at Sherlock’s outfit, but said nothing, not even when the familiar weight of the Belstaff remained on its hook.

‘Are you sure you’re all right to do this?’ John asked, looking as if he hated to ask, but couldn’t bring himself to hold his silence. No doubt Elsie’s comment about Sherlock’s scent had awakened his fears anew.

Sherlock reached for his patience, reminding himself that John was still trying to grasp the complex mechanics of bond biochemistry, and friendly concern hampered his logic. ‘There’s unlikely to be another Rile within a fifty-mile radius. Even if there was, Elsie was not picking up on the pheromone that drives Alphas into rut. I’m not producing it. I won’t, not unless Alexander puts in a prolonged appearance, and even then it wouldn’t be instantaneous. No one else will smell anything different on me than they do at any other time of the month.’ He held out his arm, palm up. ‘You don’t, do you?’

John’s hand slid along the back of his, tugging him closer before he inhaled from the delicate skin stretched over the tendons of his wrist. The sensuous slide of air over his flesh made Sherlock’s knees wobble, and he swallowed tightly, trying to control the riotous spin of his imagination. He could so easily picture John pressing his lips to that point, flattening his tongue over the thrum of Sherlock’s pulse to taste him. It had been a mistake to invite John so close – to offer himself up so readily – but despite the exquisite torment, Sherlock could not bring himself to regret it.

‘No,’ John husked at last, his fingers rubbing over the broad maps of veins beneath the veil of Sherlock’s skin. He licked his lips, and Sherlock saw how dark his eyes had become, the pupils dilated and focussed on him to the exclusion of everything else. ‘No, I don’t, but what if Alexander does show up? If he’s not gone like Mycroft says?’

‘Then I have you, and you have a gun. What more do I need?’ He pulled open the front door, throwing a quick wink in John’s direction. Stepping out into the wind-swept morning, his body sang with the relief of a potential puzzle to solve.

For the first time in days, it felt like he could remember who he was – so much more than the sum of his parts.

The game was on.
Dartan Grove was an area screaming for urban renewal. Old tenements lined the narrow, pot-holed streets, their doors weather-worn. Boarded windows were in plentiful supply, and rubbish clogged the gutters. It was one of London’s forgotten places, lost between the cracks of the bustling city. “Low-rent” didn’t cover it, and John stared at the buildings around them, painfully aware of the weight of the gun at his back.

“We trust Elsie, yeah?” he murmured, inching closer to Sherlock’s side. ‘She’s not going to lead us into a trap?’

Sherlock glanced at him, his shoulders rolling in an eloquent shrug. ‘Anything’s possible. I doubt we’ll know until we get there. Come on, and try to look a bit less like a soldier on patrol.’

That was easier said than done. John’s march was instinctive, locked in the vaults of his joints, and everything about this scenario screamed conflict. Perhaps this forgotten street was not war-torn, but there were signs of battle all the same. Dilapidation and disrepair showed that time and the elements were on the winning side, and no one seemed willing to stop the inexorable decline. It was the kind of place that wasn’t safe even in broad daylight, and John gave silent thanks that at least he and Sherlock hadn’t come here after the sun had set. It was hard enough to calm his frantic nerves now, when he could see the approach of any threat; after dark, it would have been impossible.

He wasn’t sure what bothered him more: the nagging fear that Elsie had lured them here, the constant concern that Alexander could be hiding around every corner, or Sherlock.

Perhaps others would write off his behaviour or ignore it all together, but John could barely tear his eyes away from the subtle consequences heat wrought on Sherlock’s body. It wasn’t blatant, at least Sherlock hadn’t lied about that, but now John understood what he was seeing, he wondered how he’d ever managed to tell himself that mere boredom dragged Sherlock into his moods.

All morning, he’d watched him touching himself. Nothing obscene, but the skim of those long fingers over his clothed body – his collarbones, his stomach, his thighs – was achingly erotic. A ghost of colour lingered on the crest of his cheekbones, not the flush of a fever, but a dab of pale pink as if he were running hot. He kept dragging his teeth over his bottom lip, making the skin there red and swollen, and John struggled not to stare.

Even clad in tight jeans and a ratty hoodie, Sherlock looked scandalously sensuous. His walk was more a prowl, and every time he dragged a hand through his hair he’d run his palm down the back of his neck, his lashes fluttering at the contact as if the pressure of his fingertips was all that kept him grounded.

More than once, John had knotted his hands into fists to stop from reaching out. Still, he hadn’t been completely successful. When Sherlock was lying on the couch, an ethereal creature made earthly, his fingers had found their way into those curls, affection bleeding from every pore without conscious thought.

Surprisingly, Sherlock had not just accepted it, he’d demanded John continue when he’d withdrawn. To John, it seemed like the first step in a bad situation, one where Sherlock stopped being the subject of admiration and became a target for objectification. He wanted to believe that was not a problem – that he’d never see Sherlock as nothing but an implement for his own pleasure – but right now, it was hard to observe anything but sex. He was always attractive, his mind and body both brilliant and
unique, but John kept going back over previous “moods” and trying to recall if Sherlock had been like this.

It wasn’t just raw passion. In a way, that would be easier to dismiss as the product of hormones. Right now, the only word that described Sherlock was needy, not just sexually, but emotionally. He was affectionate, in a hesitant, shy way that made John’s heart swell. He wanted attention. In the past, he’d got it by shooting the walls and relishing John’s fury, but then he had revealed his secret and exposed a glimpse of tenderness along with it.

He hadn’t changed in essentials; Sherlock was still rude and thoughtless. Instead, John got the impression that he was getting to see everything that made Sherlock who he was, not just the aloof, clinical mind, but the messy heart that worked away behind the scenes, well-concealed but never quite forgotten.

Sherlock probably didn’t realise what he was doing, or the effect it was having on his flatmate. If John didn’t know better, he would think he was being seduced, his already tempted mind addled with lust. Instead, he kept having to remind himself that Sherlock wasn’t putting on a show. None of this was for his benefit, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

‘There.’ Sherlock’s fingers around his wrist brought him up short, and he cast a dubious eye over number thirty-two. It was an old, brick terrace at the end of a row. A pitted alley ran along its flank, and the tiny garden was a tangle of bracken and stinging nettles. A steel door sat in the threshold, the kind used once a house had been broken into a few times too many, and the padlock was new – incongruous with the state of the rest of the place.

‘Round the back,’ Sherlock urged, tugging John along the narrow, foetid footpath. Overgrown hedges choked the way ahead, and John lost all sense of direction. He was too intent on examining every shadow to notice where they were going.

Sherlock vaulted over a low, cast-iron gate, and John followed him with a bit less grace, wary of the spikes along its peak. The weed-ridden garden brushed against his jeans, soaking the denim with lingering dew. There was a mass of half-bricks and loose earth waiting to turn the ankle of the unwary, and he picked his way forward, placing his feet in the gaps Sherlock used and trying not to pitch himself face-first into the thorny brambles.

‘This place is a wreck,’ he hissed, grabbing the back of Sherlock’s hoodie to stop him racing on ahead. ‘Wait for me.’

‘Hurry up then!’ Sherlock ordered, every angle of his body alert.

A set of narrow stone steps led up to the wooden back door, warped in its frame and several decades old. If anyone owned the place, then they clearly didn’t think the rear was worth protecting. There was a single lock, its metal covered in rust, and John heard Sherlock’s picks chime as he pulled them from his pocket.

Reaching behind him, John grasped his gun, surveying the garden and alleyway and trying not to feel too conspicuous. It was unlikely anyone was around to look out of their windows, and the whole street remained quiet – no barking dogs or kids playing, just London’s steady hum held at bay by the decay.

‘I’m not the first person to pick this lock,’ Sherlock muttered as the tumblers clicked open.

‘Maybe that’s how Elsie got in?’
‘No, well, yes, but look at this.’ He pointed to the corrosion, indicating the damage around the keyhole. ‘It’s happened repeatedly, and the scratches are consistent with a single set of picks. Whoever did it was clumsy and unpractised. Nervous.’

John licked his lips. ‘It could be that whoever’s been using this place isn’t exactly the criminal type. Worried they’ll get caught, perhaps?’

The latch sprung free, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes, wiggling the pick as if testing the tension. ‘The door’s not as old as the building. It locks itself when you close it again, hence the need to break in every time. Judging from the depth of the scratches and the rust starting to collect at the deepest points, I’d say someone’s been coming here about once every four weeks for well over a year. They’re not getting better with practice, which implies they don’t indulge in petty theft in between their visits.’

John held his breath as Sherlock pushed aside the door, cautiously stepping into the kitchen beyond. There was a gaping hole where a fridge had once stood, and corrosion stained the steel sink where the tap had dripped before the utilities company disconnected the water. The flick of the light switch offered no reward, and John squinted, taking in the details illuminated by the meek sunshine seeping in around the planks on the windows.

‘Stick to the path,’ Sherlock muttered, indicating the footprints in the dust. ‘Probably Elsie’s. We can’t hide the fact that someone’s been here, but perhaps we can mislead people as to how many of us there were.’

Together, they slipped through the house, watching where they were putting their feet as oppressive silence crowded in on all sides. Sherlock flicked on his phone, setting the camera flash to continuous so he could use it as a torch. Acid white bathed the room, and John narrowed his eyes as he took in the objects on the scuffed farmhouse table.

‘It’s like an old apothecary,’ he murmured. ‘Not exactly high-tech stuff, is it?’

‘It doesn’t need to be.’ Sherlock gestured to a ring of disturbance in the dust: an orbital trail where someone had wandered back and forth as they worked. He urged John closer until they both stood within its confines. ‘This isn’t about cooking narcotics from scratch.’ Long fingers hovered over the mortar and pestle, and Sherlock bent down to inspect a handful of vials clustered nearby. ‘I was right, I’m sure of it. There’s nothing here for distillation or manufacture. This is about doctoring an existing supply.’

‘But why?’ John shifted his fingers on the Sig, watching Sherlock take a couple of quick photos on his phone. ‘What’s the point? Is it just some kind of hate-crime – some way to knock off addicts?’

Sherlock pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t know. This isn’t a massive scale operation. It’s small. Precise, as if the victims are targeted, rather than random, but how? As for motive?’ Sherlock shook his head. ‘Without ascertaining who’s behind all this, it’s only speculation.’

He squatted at John’s feet, examining the floor, and John watched his focus move beyond the superficial. He gestured to some footprints around the edge of the clean track where they stood: dimming phantoms left in dust. ‘These are about a size eleven. Worn tread. Old shoes, almost certainly belonging to a man.’

‘Forensics might be able to get some prints off some of this,’ John suggested, gesturing to the glossy ceramics on the table. ‘It could give us something.’

‘We need more definitive evidence of wrong-doing before calling in Scotland Yard.’ Sherlock
straightened, scowling around the room as if he could force it to surrender its secrets through his will alone. ‘So far the connection of this place to Amelia Donnelly’s death is tenuous at best, and the one correlating piece of evidence was removed from the scene by Elsie in order to capture our interest.’

A distant creak had John straightening his spine, his eyes rolling upwards to the ceiling above their heads. There was more than one storey to this place, and every instinct flew outwards to the unexplored rooms, imagining shadowy figures waiting for their moment to strike.

‘Don’t bother clearing the house,’ Sherlock murmured. ‘Look at the dust. No one’s been beyond this point. If we traipse around, we’ll only make our presence more obvious and scare off whoever’s using it as a base.’

‘What if there’s another way in?’ John demanded. ‘This isn’t about finding evidence, Sherlock. It’s about keeping us safe.’

‘Then watch the door,’ he suggested, gesturing towards the threshold between the kitchen and the rest of the house. His gaze darted around, absorbing information that John would never have given a second glance. ‘We’ll hear anyone entering the way we came in because they’ll have to pick the lock. That leaves you free to concentrate your energies on defending the other line of attack.’

Sherlock’s strategy may be simplistic, but it was adequate in their situation. Houses like this creaked for no reason, their old beams settling in response to damp and sunlight. Now there was nothing to rupture the peace except Sherlock’s soft breathing, even and flowing like a tide as he pulled the fragments of the scene together into a cohesive whole.

John kept himself alert, his body strained and his eyes huge in the gloom, waiting for anything to tip him into action. Every silhouette was examined and every noise assessed, but there was nothing. He almost longed for something to shoot at, just to crack the shell of suspense, and when Sherlock hissed his name, John flinched, too high-strung to suppress the jolt of his bones.

‘Come here,’ Sherlock murmured, beckoning him to where he was hunkered down in the corner of the kitchen. Dust had collected there, clots of it encouraged to gather by the passage of feet and the whistle of winter drafts. At first, John saw nothing out of the ordinary, but eventually he noticed two small white tablets, their round edges battered and crumbling.

‘The floor slopes in this direction. Anything dropped from the table would roll this way as long as it was the right shape.’

‘You think this is what our culprit’s been working on?’ he asked.

‘Most likely, though whether it’s the base which he’s contaminating or the finished product is impossible to determine without further analysis.’ Sherlock reached into his pocket, pulling free a clear bag before turning it inside out, sheathing his fingers and collecting one of the pills.

‘Is this a good idea?’ John licked his lips when Sherlock met his gaze, one eyebrow arched in question. ‘I mean, I know this is how we do things. Break into crime scenes and get the answers ourselves before throwing the Yard a bone, but…’ He fidgeted, wishing he could find a way to explain why it felt so different. ‘Maybe we should tell them what we found? There’s something about this – something …’ He blew out a short, abrasive breath before shaking his head. ‘Never mind.’

‘Listening to your gut now, are we?’ Sherlock asked, but the words lacked his usual sharp derision. He never put stock in anything that he couldn’t quantify and treated anyone who did with the utmost disdain. Perhaps that was why his smooth response drew a sharp sound of surprise from John’s
‘There are two tablets here, identical, superficially at least. I’m leaving one in situ for Lestrade and his team should they require it. As soon as I analyse this in the lab and have a firm idea of what we’re dealing with, I’ll direct them here to collect whatever they can.’

John blinked, a frown pinching his face. ‘That’s it? You’re not going to take anything else?’

‘Best to limit our influence on this place as much as possible.’ Sherlock chewed his bottom lip, glancing away before meeting John’s gaze. ‘The potential scope of this operation, whatever it may be, suggests it could be a far-reaching crime with significant consequences. I wouldn’t want to jeopardise the investigation any more than is necessary to help the police solve it.’

That wasn’t like Sherlock. The man could argue all he wanted, but he loved showing off. The more graceful or convoluted the puzzle, the greater his delight in solving it. Sherlock always had to be front and centre, soaking up all the attention in a room, and this change of behaviour sent a prickle of unease quivering along John’s spine.

‘Do you know something?’ he asked, his hand darting out to grab Sherlock’s sleeve, pinching the excess fabric at his elbow. ‘Something you’re not telling me?’

Sherlock folded up the bag with the pearlescent offering at its heart, tucking it into his pocket before wrapping his fingers around John’s hand and easing loose his grip. Warm skin brushed over John’s knuckles as Sherlock shook his head.

‘No. Normally, the crimes we solve are insular. One murder. One killer. Sometimes, they form a linear path: serial events. Maybe this is one of those, but it feels – bigger. Usually I examine a scene and can see the shape of it. I can find its limits and plot its progression. This – this isn’t like that. At first glance, it’s almost random. Nonsensical. I haven’t yet found a pattern, and that in itself is exceptionally rare.’

He let go of John’s hand, getting to his feet and beginning the slow journey back to the door. ‘This crime is different from the usual fare London has to offer. It’s not the kind of thing to which I, or the police, are accustomed. Despite Lestrade’s complaints to the contrary I do understand procedure. I only break it when I’m confident my impact on the case won’t influence the prosecution.’

‘And this time, you’re not sure of that. Or at least not enough to run rough-shod all over this place before the Yard gets a look in.’

‘Precisely. I’ve taken what I need to convince Lestrade this lead is worth following. We’ll have to wait for Anderson and his peons to do the rest.’

Sherlock stopped at the back door, examining the latch before pulling his sleeve over his fingers and twisting it open. ‘Any prints on here will be Elsie’s anyway,’ he said by way of explanation. ‘She won’t have touched anything else if she can help it, and I’ve made an effort not to add yours or mine to the scene. With any luck, all Lestrade and his men will have to rule out is non-specific dust disturbance.’

The air in the garden was blessedly cool after the oppression of the house, but that didn’t stop John from glaring at the undergrowth, sizing up potential hiding places and avenues of approach. It wasn’t until they were at the gate that necessity forced him to put his gun away, and even then he remained on-edge, taunted by the pressure of what he hoped was an imaginary gaze. To him, every window held a witness and every doorway a sniper. His thighs ached with the constant wash of adrenaline, and his shoulders kept tucking up towards his ears.
It wasn’t normally like this. His place was with Sherlock, providing the back-up, and his body fell into the role with ease. He was used to the burden of fight-or-flight, relished in it, even, but this… It was all too nebulous. It wasn’t the standard threat criminals posed to Sherlock’s safety that had him jittery. They at least, could be taken down by a bullet if necessary.

No, it was Sherlock’s whole situation that had John feeling precarious. In reality, little had changed, and at the same time the world had undergone a fundamental shift. Was this how Sherlock lived, day in, day out, teetering on the brink of losing everything he cared about? Before John knew what Sherlock was, he could see their future stretched before them: comfortable, thrilling and full of potential.

Now, he tried to see where they might be in a week or a month, and while he could imagine it, it seemed no more reliable than a dream. It was the wrong kind of risk to push his buttons and feed his thrill-seeking needs. It wasn’t a fight for survival, but a threat to his happiness, and that was one kind of danger against which John had no defence.

It was like waiting for a war that never came – stuck on a blade of nervous anticipation with no relief in sight.

Every step carried them further away, and Dartan Grove slipped by beneath his watchful eye. Within ten minutes, he and Sherlock had ensconced themselves in the back of a cab.

The driver peered at them suspiciously in the rear-view mirror as he took them to Bart’s, and John sighed. On any other day of the week, Sherlock’s appearance commanded respect. A well-dressed man gave the right impression. Like this though, he looked rough in an artful way, his index finger tapping against his full mouth and his hair falling over his forehead. His restlessness, combined with the clothes, made him appear as if he were coming down from a high. Not dangerous, exactly, but there was a sense of the unpredictable surrounding him, and John could appreciate the cabbie’s concerns.

Absently, he reached out, pressing a hand to Sherlock’s jiggling knee to hold him steady. A flick of his eyes towards the man behind the wheel had Sherlock breathing out a sigh, every line of his expression indicating he found the obvious misconceptions tiresome. Still, he steadied himself, his muscles hardening beneath John’s grip as the fidgeting lapsed into rigid stillness.

John expected him to pull his knee away or pluck at John’s wrist to free himself. Instead, the pale splay of Sherlock’s hand covered his, the pads of his fingers touching his knuckles before sweeping down towards John’s nails. When he reached the terminus of each digit, he reversed the motion, repeating it at a hypnotic pace.

Inch-by-inch, John allowed himself to relax, concentrating his mind on the stroke of Sherlock’s fingers over his skin. It was too firm to tease, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a low, electric hum to the gesture, intimate in a way that made the hairs on John’s scalp prickle. He knew that wasn’t the point, but he couldn’t stop drawing parallels between this and the way Sherlock had been touching himself earlier – slow caresses as if he were tracing his own outline.

By the time they reached Bart’s, John’s mind had fallen lax, the rush and garble of his thoughts forming a cohesive line. His breathing, which he hadn’t realised was too fast and staggered, had levelled out, and he relished the undemanding bliss of Sherlock’s attention.

He was used to talking Sherlock down from the ledge of his hyper-active mind, of anticipating his needs and acting as a lens through which he filtered the rest of the world. This – Sherlock soothing him – made an interesting change. Not that he hadn’t done it before, in his own way, but that was about giving John the answers and building up a fortress of facts in which he could take shelter. The
touching was a recent development, and John treasured it.

‘Come on,’ Sherlock urged, his voice low in John’s ear. He blinked himself back into the real world to find the cab was idling outside Bart’s and the driver was already counting his payment. Sherlock got out with his usual grace, dramatic even without the twirl of his coat. He left John to scramble out with considerably less poise, slamming the door in his wake and trotting to catch up.

It took a matter of minutes to reach the labs, which stood unchanged: white and gleaming in the sallow, fluorescent lights. Sherlock perched at one of the benches, reaching out for the tools he needed, and John watched him fold himself away from the world, losing himself in a realm of chemical composition and careful experimentation.

He didn't hear Molly slip out of her office and gave a tiny start when she spoke from his elbow, her voice quizzical. 'Is everything okay?'

'Christ!' he huffed, grinning to take the bite out of his curse. 'Yeah, sorry. Sherlock just needs to check on something to do with the Donnelly case.' He watched her profile, seeing her take in Sherlock's clothes with a faint tip of the head. Her lips parted, the delicate pigment on them half-gone after a long morning, and her eyes followed his movements.

Back when they’d first met, she had watched Sherlock with a kind of terrified longing – a mouse charmed by a snake. Now, although Sherlock could still manipulate her with obvious ease, Molly's observations of him were more alert. Of everyone in their strange social circle, she had a tendency to search for Sherlock's vulnerabilities, not to exploit them, but in an honest effort to help.

'Anything I can do?' Her question was loud enough to reach Sherlock’s ears, but he either ignored her or was too lost in what he was doing to pay attention.

John was about to decline when Elsie’s words filtered back into his mind, and he turned to face her, rubbing a hand across his nape. 'Actually, yeah. We got a tip that there might be a couple of people who died in a similar way to the victim. Unidentified, probably. They were living on the streets.' He frowned, realising Elsie never said where they’d been when they passed away. They could be in any number of morgues in London. 'Ring any bells?'

Molly puffed up her cheeks and blew out a breath. 'Nothing I've seen come by recently, but I can have a look. There's a database. Any idea when they might have been brought in?'

'The last fortnight, possibly? And all Alphas.' He shrugged, wishing he’d thought to get more details. He'd been too focussed on what Elsie was telling Sherlock to consider delving for more information. 'Could you grab me copies of anything that might be relevant, or show me how to do it myself?'

'I'll do it.' She offered a faint smile, probably appreciating the fact that he wasn't bossing her around. 'Not that you couldn't,' she added in a hurry, 'but you know what it's like with an unfamiliar system. I can get what you need in half the time.'

'Thanks.'

John watched her go before turning back to Sherlock, raising an eyebrow when he realised he was being watched. 'What?'

'Nothing.' Despite his denial, a small smile tilted Sherlock's lips. He looked almost impressed at John's concentration on the case, and he allowed himself a moment to be smug at having surprised the man who seemed to see everything before it happened. 'I wasn't sure you'd remember what Elsie said about the other victims.'
'Well it's not like she gave us much. I dread to think how many people might fit the bill.' He winced, wondering if he'd cursed himself to hours of sorting out autopsy reports.

'Probably fewer than you imagine. However, in the absence of obvious trauma, the demise of a vagrant victim is often attributed to poor living conditions.'

'That's why I didn't ask Molly to limit it to unknown C.O.D. That way, we won't miss them thanks to a coroner who can't be bothered to investigate beyond the basics.' He smiled as Sherlock quirked his eyebrows in acknowledgement: about as close to praise as he was likely to get. 'Anything I can do to help?'

'No, it's straightforward enough. When Molly gets back, take her to lunch.'

Instantly, John's spine stiffened in rejection – not at the thought of a friendly chat with Molly, but at leaving Sherlock behind. 'Why?' he demanded, folding his arms.

There was more force behind his question than he intended, and Sherlock looked up, his gaze narrowing as he catalogued the angles of John's body. His nostrils flared; the motion was subtle, but it was one he normally tried to conceal. Perhaps he couldn’t control it in his current state, or maybe Sherlock didn't feel the need to hide it from John. God alone knew what he dragged from the air, but it seemed to clue him in to the source of John's aggravation.

'It's approaching one in the afternoon, and you experience a sharp decline in efficiency if I don’t at least try and keep you fed. There's nothing you can do to help me here, and despite your doubts to the contrary, the lab is relatively secure.' Lines bracketed his mouth before he continued in a hushed voice, laced with a trace of pleading. 'You cannot watch me every hour of every day, John, not without driving us mad. When Alexander got to me at the flat, he caught me unprepared. Needless to say, that won't happen again.'

John watched him, his jaw working as he tried to sort through the knee-jerk reaction of his denial. Sherlock could take care of himself, John didn’t doubt that. He was already starting to chafe against the meek restrictions of everyone’s efforts on his behalf. How long did they have before his patience waned completely?

Besides, he was right. It would drive them both insane. John was living with constant stress. Short-term, that was tolerable, but there was no reason to believe their current state of existence wouldn’t continue for years to come. As long as Alexander was alive, they’d fear for his return. Unless they worked out some better coping strategies, John could very well spend the rest of his days with one hand on his gun.

'You left me alone at the flat when you went to work,' Sherlock pointed out, 'and he can get in there without too much difficulty.'

'Please, don't remind me.' He pursed his lips, ducking his head as he acknowledged Sherlock's point. 'Mycroft tightened security on Baker Street. He could watch out for you when I couldn't. Here, that's not the case.'

'No, I have to look out for myself instead, just as I've been doing for most of my life.'

'With varying levels of success.' John pinched the bridge of his nose as Sherlock scowled, biting back all his arguments. They wouldn't help, and despite the base instincts that told him otherwise, rationally John knew that he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t smother Sherlock in the name of his own safety.
‘All right. If you're sure you'll be okay?’

‘Positive,’ Sherlock replied, sounding far more calm than John felt. Silver eyes swept over him, reading every reservation. ‘Thank you. Get me some crisps?’

John tutted in response, forcing his feet to turn in the direction of Molly’s office. It was like moving through glue, his every desire desperate to steer him back to Sherlock’s side. A large part of his mind was furiously asserting that if Sherlock was an Alpha, he’d still be just as worried, but John had a sinking suspicion that he’d be less quick to put it on display. It seemed more acceptable, now, as if his hind-brain thought Sherlock would find his behaviour charming, which was beyond ridiculous. He was certain nothing could be further from the truth.

Sherlock was making allowances and tolerating his moods, but that wouldn't last. How long did he have before Sherlock took reckless action, just to prove he could? He had to get a grip, for both their sakes.

He pasted a smile on his face, hoping it was convincing as he tapped on the frame of Molly’s open office door. ‘I'm going to get some lunch. Do you want anything?’

‘Oh!’ She looked over her shoulder at the clock. ‘I thought I was getting hungry. We can get something together. Is Sherlock...?’ She sighed when John shook his head. ‘Of course not.’

‘He did ask for some crisps, though whether they're for him or an experiment, I’m not sure. If you're not happy leaving him here, we can always drag him with us.’ He tried not to sound too hopeful and did his best to hide his disappointment when Molly shot that idea down with a shake of her head.

‘No. It's all right. He's unlikely to pinch anything important. Most of the things he'd like are too big to fit in his pockets.’

‘Equipment?’

‘Cadavers.’ She picked up some pages from the printer and passed them to John, hanging up her labcoat before leading the way to the canteen. ‘That's everything I've found. Try not to let anyone else see. People tend to find corpses... upsetting.’

‘Got it.’ John glanced back, taking one last look at Sherlock before turning the corner. It took every ounce of his resolve not to rush back to the lab. His jaw ached as he clenched his teeth, and he berated himself with silent fury for his ceaseless anxiety.

Molly was the first to break the uncomfortable silence, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear before she pushed her hands into the pockets of her mustard-yellow cardigan. ‘Is Sherlock in trouble?’

John let out a breath, trying to think of what to say that wasn’t an outright lie. ‘No more than usual,’ he managed, glancing in her direction. ‘Why do you ask?’ He feared her response would put him in the spotlight, highlighting every twisted expression that crossed his features. Of course, he should have known better. Molly’s eyes, as usual, were on Sherlock.

‘He seems –’ She shrugged, holding open the door of the canteen for him and smiling at his thanks. ‘– He’s just not himself. I thought, what with the clothes, perhaps he was trying to hide from someone.’

‘No, no one specific anyway,’ John pushed aside the thought of Alexander. He couldn’t explain that to Molly in terms she’d accept, not without breaching Sherlock’s trust. ‘We were in a dodgy area of town. I could get away with my usual stuff, but Sherlock in a suit didn’t seem like such a good idea. Not when we didn’t want to draw the wrong kind of attention.’
A worried frown framed her dark eyes as they grabbed a table, but she didn’t argue. Instead, a weak smile made its way onto her lips as she nodded. ‘Okay well, that’s good. I mean you do know that if – if you’re ever in trouble, and I can help…’ She trailed off, lifting one shoulder in a shrug as John smiled.

‘Thanks. I appreciate it, and so does Sherlock, even if he never says as much.’

Together, they bought their lunch, navigating the kind of stilted, awkward conversations that tended to flow between people who considered themselves more acquaintances than friends. Molly told John about her flat and her new neighbours, who seemed a bit unruly. John mentioned a couple of interesting patients from the clinic and then groped for any subject of conversation that didn’t focus on Sherlock.

Perhaps it was that which gave him away, or maybe it was the fact his finger twitched every few minutes with the raw desire to check Sherlock hadn’t sent him a text.

‘You’re really worried, aren’t you?’ Molly asked, wringing her hands as John tried to pin a reassuring smile on his lips. ‘Is it–’ She shuffled her chair forward, leaning awkwardly across the table with a furtive glance around the canteen. ‘Is it about –’ She touched the back of her neck with two shaking fingers, indicating the spot where Sherlock’s bond-bite left its mark. Concentration pinched her face, and she searched John’s expression, probably hoping for signs of comprehension.

‘You knew?’ He stared at her, incredulous.

She pulled back, twisting the cling-film that had covered her sandwich between her fingers. ‘I found out by accident. He fell asleep over the microscope. The label on his shirt was sticking out. I went to tuck it back in and…’ Embarrassment painted her cheeks. ‘Please, please don’t tell him. I don’t think he’d want me to know.’ She fiddled with her cutlery, breathing a wistful sigh. ‘I understand what it means, though. He belongs to someone else. Someone who’s not good enough.’

‘What makes you say that?’ John took the last bite of his lunch, ignoring the way it tasted like ash on his tongue as he tried to navigate the potential minefield of this conversation.

‘If he loved them, he’d be with them. Or, more to the point, they’d be with him, here.’ She waved a hand in the vague direction of the labs. ‘But they’re not.’ She seemed to steel herself, biting her lip before she explained, ‘They’d be in your place, letting him be himself and looking after him while he did it.’

John glanced up at that, seeing nothing but frank honesty in her eyes. Her hands clenched on the table-top, the ratty bit of plastic gleaming in her grip. On anyone else it would seem like they were making efforts to ingratiate themselves, but Molly didn’t work like that. She was clever, but John couldn’t convince himself she’d be cunning.

‘I don’t think it works that way,’ he said quietly, hating to contradict her romantic ideals. ‘At least, not in Sherlock’s case. I can’t tell you much.’ He watched her straighten her shoulders as if she thought whatever he was about to reveal was more important than anything else she’d ever heard. ‘I didn’t find out about Sherlock’s scar until about a month ago. Basically, his Alpha wants him back, and Sherlock doesn’t want to go.’ He shrugged, because that was the crux of the matter.

‘You didn’t like leaving him alone in the labs. Are you worried he might be taken?’

‘I don’t like leaving him anywhere,’ John confessed, draining his coffee and putting it down on the table.
‘No one’s ever come asking for him here.’ She shrugged, placing cups and rubbish back on the tray. ‘I was ready for it, but it never happened.’ Picking up the folded autopsy reports from where John had left them, she passed them over. ‘I don’t know if that helps.’

In some weird way, it did. Realising Alexander had never set foot in Bart’s when not even the walls of Baker Street had deterred him soothed the fractious edges of John’s temper. The worry lingered, but Molly’s gentle words hemmed it in, making it more controlled.

‘Thanks.’ He smiled, raising an eyebrow in query. ‘You seem to have taken it pretty much in your stride.’

She gave him a confused smile, getting to her feet and gripping the tray as she shrugged her shoulders. ‘It’s not like it changes anything. He’s still him, isn’t he? Still going to try and pinch body parts when I’m not looking and make solving mad puzzles seem easy.’

John watched her go and dispose of the plates, turning over her perspective in his mind. So far, he’d thought it was only other Alphas who were aware of Sherlock’s secret. He and Greg had shared the same reaction, confused and questioning, but Molly was raised outside all that. She wasn’t one of the elite, and being a Beta, she had no interest in the rumours surrounding an Omega’s way of life. She could view it all with a distant rationality that John envied. She could see Sherlock as nothing but himself, whereas John, despite his best efforts, still got distracted by the veil of preconceived notions Sherlock’s gender brought with it.

Shaking aside his thoughts, he noticed Molly look up as something caught her eye, making her smile and wave. He followed the line of her gaze to see Greg buying coffee, his haste bordering on desperate. His smile was warm, but his eyes were weary, and John could see the creases in his suit as he stumbled towards them.

‘Late night?’ he asked.

‘And an early morning.’ The DI smiled as Molly handed him a couple of sachets of sugar, putting his paper cup down on a nearby table before dumping the grains into the steaming, black liquid. ‘We were tracking down a thief. Nothing Sherlock would find exciting, but it took us bloody hours. I got a bit of kip at my desk on top of paperwork this morning, and then I get a text from Himself.’ He plucked his phone from his pocket, wiggling it meaningfully. ‘He still plugging away at the Donnelly case? I thought he’d given it up as a bad job.’

‘How often does Sherlock actually give up on cases?’

‘Fair point.’ Greg stepped back a fraction, including Molly in the conversation as he urged her to lead the way through the corridors. ‘Care to shed any light on what’s going on?’

‘It’s probably better if he tells you himself.’ John shouldered aside the lab doors, trying to hide his relief when he saw Sherlock was just where he’d left him, poring over print-outs.

Greg nodded, sipping his scalding drink. There were rules against having consumables in the lab or morgue, but since Sherlock flouted them with alarming regularity, Molly had given up scolding people. It seemed she took the view that if they poisoned themselves or contracted a disease, it was their own fault.

‘Come on then.’ He stopped by Sherlock’s elbow and peered at the paperwork in front of him. ‘What’s so important you had to drag me all the way down here?’

‘Methylphenidate.’ Sherlock looked up, cocking his head and meeting John’s gaze. ‘That’s what we
‘Ritalin?’ John stopped at Sherlock’s side, taking in the information spread out along the lab bench.

‘It’s what I expected – well, one of the possibilities. Ritalin is analogous with amphetamines. When taken by an adult, it provides the same effect, generally speaking, as Ms Donnelly’s drug of choice. This hit may have been a bit better, at least before she keeled over. It’s pharmaceutical grade.’

Sherlock removed his phone, showing John the picture. ‘The manufacturer’s stamp is still present on the pill.’

John took the device, staring at the screen as he turned Sherlock’s findings over in his head. ‘So it’s not tainted?’

‘No, it’s the base that our culprit tampered with. There was a press on the table. Archaic in design, but it did the trick. He crushes the tabs, incorporates his additives and then recombines them into a new shape. That would remove all markings, leaving them generic.’

Greg cleared his throat, spreading his hands. ‘All right, someone’s going to have to fill me in. I’m guessing Dartan Grove explains today’s wardrobe choices?’

Sherlock sighed, ignoring the question as he reeled off the details. ‘An anonymous informant indicated that there may be evidence of interest to our case at number thirty-two. John and I went to investigate.’

The DI pursed his lips, his jaw tense, and John could see him holding back a lecture. It was nothing they hadn’t heard already, and he wondered how many grey hairs on Lestrade’s head could be blamed on the man who sat between them. However, the rant never took shape. Either Greg was giving them both up as a lost cause, or he knew when to pick his battles. ‘When you say “anonymous informant” you mean one of your homeless network, don’t you?’

‘Something like that.’ Sherlock tapped the heel of his palm against the bench, chewing his lip in thought. ‘What we found was a primitive workspace, along with indications of regular and recent use. It was not the kind of setup you would use to create a drug supply from raw materials. This is more amateurish.’

‘Someone tampering with stuff.’ Lestrade nodded, glancing at John as he spoke.

‘But not anything they’re likely to have got off the street.’ He waved Sherlock’s phone where the image still glowed on the screen. ‘I can’t be certain, but this looks like it’s come straight out of a pharmacy.’

‘Could still have been nicked and sold to our culprit.’ The DI shrugged.

‘No, this is a small-time operation. There’s little in the way of money involved, and he’s unlikely to have had the funds to have purchased the quantities he’s working with. It’s possible they are his own supply, prescribed for a psychological issue. Either that, or he stole them himself.’ Sherlock looked over at Lestrade. ‘There’s plenty of evidence in that house, any item of which could give us a breakthrough in finding out what killed Amelia Donnelly, but a Forensics Team needs to do the collection, if not the analysis.’

Greg blinked twice in rapid succession, and his expression of doubt fell into serious lines as he looked from Sherlock to John and back again. ‘You’re asking Anderson and his team to get in on this? You?’ He set his coffee aside as he folded his arms. ‘Is this your good influence?’ he asked John.
'Don't be trying,' Sherlock snapped before John could respond. 'My homeless network are keeping an eye on the place in case our perpetrator returns in the interim, but the sooner you get the scene processed, the better.'

A whisper of a sigh escaped the DI as he stared down at his shoes, shaking his head. 'All you've got to show me is a manky pill you picked up in a squat somewhere. Even if I agree that there's something going on, the best I can do is pass it onto narcotics. Tie it to Donnelly, and then come talk to me.'

Sherlock made a small, explosive noise of frustration, rubbing one hand along his jaw before resting his fingers against his pulse. He shifted where he sat as his mind raced, the manic edge to his movements back in full-force.

John saw the moment when they became too much for Greg to ignore. His frown took on a fearful slant, his weight shifting forward in preparation for an accusation, and John hastily cut in, giving Lestrade's shoulder a rough nudge before he turned to Molly.

'Maybe there's more information in her tox-screen?' he asked. 'Proof she used methylphenidate? If Sherlock's right and it was in the drugs that killed her, it wouldn't have had time to degrade. It's easy to overlook Ritalin or mistake it for something else in the presence of other amphetamines.'

'I'll see what I can find,' she promised with a quick nod. 'If not, we can always run another test. It won't take long if we know what we're looking for.'

John glanced at Sherlock, realising he was being watched with a bored, all-seeing gaze. 'I want to talk to Greg anyway. You don't need my help, do you?'

'Not as much as the illustrious DI requires your reassurance,' Sherlock muttered scathingly, flicking his fingers towards the door. 'Leave the crisps you've got in your pocket, though, and those autopsy reports.' A faint smile lifted the corner of his lips as John tugged free the sheaf of documents, along with a packet of quavers, and passed them over.

'Don't contaminate anything.'

Sherlock appeared horrified at the suggestion, but a second later he was engrossed in John's offerings, skimming the details with frightening focus as the crisps lay forgotten at his side.

Catching Lestrade's eye, he jerked his head towards the door, waiting until he was sure the DI got the message before leading the way into the empty corridor. The clean linoleum squeaked beneath his shoes as he checked they were out of Sherlock's earshot, watching him through the narrow pane of glass set in the door before turning to take in the man at his side.

Greg leaned back against the wall, scrubbing his hands over his cheeks and speaking from behind his palms in a muffled, flat voice. 'Is he using again?'

'Is that what it looks like?' John challenged, immediately feeling bad for doing so. Lestrade was exhausted, and he was making an assumption based on past evidence. For god's sake, the only reason John wasn’t worried was because he was aware of what was really going on.

Greg dropped his arms to his side, screwing his eyes up in a blink. ‘A bit. It’s hard to explain. The concentration’s similar. He didn’t – didn’t twitch as much, but people change. That –’

‘That’s not—’ John trailed off, trying to work out what to say. There was too much room for misinterpretation in euphemisms; blunt precision was the best course of action. ‘Sherlock’s in heat.’ He folded his arms, watching Lestrade’s incredulity spread like sunlight over his face.
‘Really!’ Greg scratched at his ear, shifting where he stood. John knew the feeling: a sort of embarrassed fascination. It was private, and he wished he didn’t need to tell Lestrade what was going on. However, Sherlock wasn’t in the mood to deal with anything he viewed as stupidity, and the last thing anyone needed was the Y ard becoming obstructive because they thought Sherlock had returned to bad habits. ‘But – well – he’s not normally like that. I mean he does – he does have regular…’ Lestrade trailed off, making a kind of rolling motion with his hands. ‘Doesn’t he?’

‘Yeah. Alexander turning up made it a bit –’ John swallowed, frowning as he tried to think of a suitable word. ‘– worse. He’s more restless, and not quite as controlled. Most of the time, you don’t notice. A bound Omega’s heats are subtle unless their Alpha is about.’

Greg held up a hand, cutting him off. ‘I know. I’ve already had the world’s most uncomfortable discussion with Mycroft about this when they told me what Sherlock was.’ He flushed as if he were recalling one of his most embarrassing memories, and John stifled a smile. ‘So, Alexander showed up and kicked Sherlock’s heat up a notch?’

‘Yea, hence the twitching.’

‘And the touching.’ He turned away as if he couldn’t quite meet John’s eyes. ‘Right, okay. I’ll, er – I’ll take your word for it. Sorry.’

John sighed, leaning against the wall and tipping back his head. ‘It’s not me you should apologise to,’ he pointed out, looking at Greg when he gave a rueful huff of laughter.

‘Yeah it is. Sherlock doesn’t care what anyone thinks of him, but it matters to you. I’m sorry I had to ask.’

‘I can see why you thought it,’ he admitted. ‘I’d rather everyone suspect he’s on drugs than guess what’s really going on…’ It didn’t matter that Sherlock wasn’t producing an alluring scent. There were some Alphas who, on finding out he was in heat, would take it as an invitation. Better to keep the whole situation under wraps as much as possible. ‘The only reason I’m telling you is because you need to know it’s not what it looks like.’

‘I appreciate it.’ He ran a hand through his hair, meeting John’s eye from an oddly submissive angle. In fact, everything about Lestrade’s stance was similar to a cringe. He was slumped against the wall, his head lower than John’s – challenging, since the DI had a good few inches on him. His shoulders were rounded and his voice soft as he added, ‘I wouldn’t rush to cut Sherlock off the cases if he relapsed, you know. Professionally, I should, but this isn’t just about the work.’

Some of the tension eased from John’s shoulders. Sherlock’s relationship with the DI had always occupied some uncertain border between professional and sentimental; it was good to hear Greg acknowledge the latter – to state that Sherlock was more important than just the powerful brain in his head.

‘Good. Thanks.’

A thin silence fell between them, and when Greg spoke again, it was in the cautious voice of a man with questions he wasn’t sure he wanted to give shape. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask, did you read that stuff I copied for you?’

John swallowed, a rash of anger warming his skin as he nodded his head. He’d spent an evening about a week ago giving the dense legal text his full attention, taking it all in until he shook with outrage. He’d paced around their living room for more than an hour, venting his disbelief at the warped society that had existed for centuries, unflinching and unchanged. Sherlock had looked on,
his face a haunting mixture of mournful amusement.

‘Yeah, I read it. There were what, five cases in there about non-elite Alphas and what happened to them when they got involved with an Omega?’

‘Sounds about right.’ The DI sighed, his expression pained.

‘They were all hanged, Greg. One of them only spoke to an Omega who wasn’t hers, and they strung her up for it.’ A mirthless laugh escaped him. ‘When I first found out about Sherlock, he told me that justified murder for interfering with a bond was an urban myth.’

‘It is,’ Greg said, holding up a hand. ‘As far as the law goes, it really is, but…’ He gave a quiet groan and shook his head. ‘The most recent documented case of the sort to go through a public court was almost two-hundred years ago. Times changed. Society changed, but the elite didn’t.’ He straightened, his feet braced and every line of his body defiant. ‘If it happened again now – if Sherlock’s Alpha dragged you in front of a judge – there’s no telling how it would go, and he knows it. There’s no modern precedent. They never gave us the chance to set one. And the worst part? People don’t question it. None of us. It’s just the way it is.’

John thought of Mycroft, blindly believing in the system, ignoring his doubts about his brother’s safety until incontrovertible proof appeared before his eyes: Sherlock beaten to within an inch of his life and left to die by a man who should treasure him.

He considered himself, aware of another circle of society out there, one beyond his reach and, until Sherlock, completely removed from his existence. Could he pretend he was any better? He’d known so little about it and hadn’t thought to find out more. Even now, when it was personally relevant, his futile protests at the injustice of it were worse than useless. The world wasn’t going to change just because he demanded it.

‘When an Omega gets involved, nothing is straightforward. That’s why I gave you that paperwork. You needed to understand the system that the elite are working from. They can’t take you to court and have you hanged, not these days, but that doesn’t mean Alexander would think twice about offing you in a dark alley.’ Greg huffed a sigh. ‘In his head, he’d probably think it was his right. We’d still get him. He couldn’t cover it up, and not just because of Sherlock.’

‘That’s a pretty weak consolation if I’m dead,’ John muttered.

At his side, Greg shuffled his feet, clearing his throat awkwardly and parting his lips only to press them closed again.

‘What is it?’ he asked, trying to understand the look on Lestrade’s face. If anything, he seemed embarrassed, but there was a hard core of determination in the line of his jaw.

‘I also gave you that stuff so you’d know that it didn’t matter what you’d actually done. An Alpha will react in absolutes. To Alexander, there’s probably no difference between you living with Sherlock and sleeping with him.’ Greg glanced away before looking back at him. ‘The consequences to you wouldn’t be any different, is what I’m saying, should things, you know – change.’

John sighed, trying to ignore the ache that bloomed in his chest – hope and despair in equal measure. He got what Greg was driving at; he’d thought it himself enough times. If he was going to suffer the same punishment for sharing a flat with Sherlock as he would for taking him to bed, then why hold back?

Except when it came down to it, nothing was that black and white.
He rounded his shoulders, clamping his arms tight over his torso. ‘It’s what he’d do to Sherlock that keeps me awake at night. What he’s already done –’ He bit his lip, shaking his head viciously at Greg’s enquiring gaze. ‘That’s not my story to tell, but Alexander would take it out on him, and no one could do a damn thing about it. Maybe he would anyway, regardless of what we did or didn’t do, but I can’t risk making that worse. Sherlock hasn’t got a single right to call his own, and no way to get the law to help him.’

‘It doesn’t mean we won’t bloody try,’ Greg growled, rubbing his fingers over his forehead in exhaustion, ‘The system’s fucked up, but right now, it’s all we’ve got. Sherlock’s Alpha’s been raised with a sense of entitlement a mile-wide. He’ll think he can get away with anything, but he can’t. We won’t let him. Whatever you and Sherlock do, you need to remember that.’

A sigh from the door made John twitch, and he turned to see Sherlock leaning against the threshold. God knew how much he’d heard of all that – his face gave nothing away – but that didn’t stop him and Greg shuffling like guilty schoolboys caught doing something they shouldn’t.

‘If you’re quite done telling John what he already knows,’ Sherlock said, his voice rough in his throat, ‘perhaps you should start actually solving some crimes?’ He flourished the report in his hands, thrusting it in Greg’s direction. ‘As predicted, there’s Ritalin in her toxicology screen. Get to Dartan Grove, and try not to let Anderson make a mess of things.’

Lestrade sighed, reading through the neat text before peering at Sherlock. ‘You’re really saying it was murder?’

‘No.’ Sherlock rolled his eyes, tugging away the top page and leaving the DI holding more than half-a-dozen autopsy reports. ‘Molly and I went back further in the database, expanding the search to cover the past eighteen months. These are only the matches I would term as definite. There are another ten or so that require further investigation, and that’s just amidst the vagrant population. I suspect a search through the unexplained deaths in the Yard’s files will cast light on a few more. Motive is always a grey area, and I’ll admit the connections are tenuous, but I expect by the time you’re done with what you find at Dartan Grove, they’ll gain some strength.’

Sherlock glanced at John, and his normal delight was notably absent. He looked weary, as if he’d opened a Pandora’s box and now wished he could turn his back on whatever he’d found in its confines.

‘I can’t be certain of the details, but one thing is clear. Amelia Donnelly is not the only victim. Whoever is doing this has got away with it for more than a year, and these are only the ones we know about. This is serial murder on a massive scale.’

Greg paled. His dark eyes skimmed the autopsy reports, taking in the details underlined by Sherlock’s hasty pen and reaching the same conclusion. ‘Shit. What do we do?’

‘The same thing we always do when we find a case.’ Sherlock pushed aside the door, already turning to go back into the lab. ‘Solve it.’

John grimaced, absorbing the DI’s shaken expression and the rigid line of Sherlock’s receding back. Uncertainty tainted the air, bitter on John’s tongue, and he sucked in a deep breath as he considered Sherlock’s words.

Somehow, he doubted it would be that easy.
The drone of London’s traffic echoed in John’s ears, rising to a crescendo as the morning rush-hour got underway. Sherlock would be able to describe each vehicle as it passed, but all John could do was let the sound wash over him as he lay in bed, watching weak sunlight pool around the edges of his curtains.

Sleep had been sporadic at best, which didn’t seem fair. He was fucking exhausted. Sherlock had dragged him around half the city over the past forty-eight hours, chasing every glimmer of a lead with a focus so intense it was startling. He was like a dog after a rabbit: unrelenting.

John suspected it was Sherlock’s way of distracting himself from what his body was doing, and it seemed to have done the trick. After that day at Dartan Grove, Sherlock’s twitchy motions calmed, and the languorous sweep of his fingers over his own skin trailed away, allowing the man’s usual rigid control to reclaim its place.

He wished Sherlock’s behaviour faded as easily from memory as it did from reality. John’s helpless imagination kept conjuring up the images anew, staining his dreams in lurid fantasy and painting his waking moments. It was one thing to know that Sherlock had needs for human affection and intimacy, but to see it on display…

John sucked in a breath, folding his arms and tucking his hands under his armpits. If he didn’t, he’d be too tempted to reach beneath the covers and stroke his half-hard cock. He’d already wanked once this morning, his treacherous brain revelling in the idea of Sherlock sprawled on the couch, dishevelled, needy and reaching for him. He felt guilty enough as it was; he had no intention of a repeat performance.

At least in those few minutes of filthy bliss his thoughts fell still. He could lose himself to the pleasure and pretend he wasn’t pining for what he couldn’t have. Now, scowling at the ceiling and biting his lip, all his concerns flooded back, clouding his head with fretful arguments.

“The consequences to you wouldn’t be any different should things, you know – change.”

With a sigh, John turned on his side, glaring at his clock radio as Greg’s words came back to him. Like a fresh bruise, he couldn’t resist prodding at the idea, his hope at constant war with his logic.

In a perfect world, he wanted Sherlock in his life, his heart and his bed. When he distilled the twisting confusion of his desires, those three foundation-stones emerged. John would happily ignore everything about heats and bonds, Alphas and Omegas. That wasn’t what he craved. He didn’t need to tie Sherlock to him with a bite; he’d rather have him stay because this was where he wanted to be.

Of course, not even a bond could cage Sherlock. Against all convention, he lived apart from Alexander. In the end, Sherlock had already made his choice: London, the Work and John.

In so many ways, that was almost enough. Sometimes, he convinced himself it could be. Sherlock could solve cases and John could follow him, devoted yet platonic. Then, he’d catch a glimpse of the vulnerability Sherlock hid so well, concealed beneath layers of intelligence and arrogance. He’d see a man who leaned into the press of John’s palm, one who couldn’t hide his surprise at the simplest of praise, and John felt the limitations of their current relationship constrict like bands around his throat.

They weren’t just friends, not anymore, but nor could they take the next step, not with so much standing in their way. It was not merely a case of potential punishment. Whether he liked it or not,
John couldn’t ignore the facts of Sherlock’s biology. His heats wouldn’t go away just because he’d taken a lover, and there was nothing John could do to appease them. His knot wouldn’t respond as long as Sherlock was bound to someone else, and John wasn’t sure if a relationship would survive that kind of strain. In the end, what was in it for Sherlock?

John grunted, digging his head into his pillow as he stared towards the door. That was his real fear – not bloody Alexander and whatever “justice” he might throw John’s way – but not being enough for Sherlock. If they started a relationship and it failed, then going back would be impossible.

Still, that didn’t mean John didn’t think about it. Not just slick-skin between tousled sheets, but the quiet domesticity that could come with it. He imagined being able to reach out and touch without an excuse on his lips, and pulling Sherlock close rather than holding himself back. So many of the key aspects of a relationship were already there, unacknowledged, and despite his longings to the contrary, that was how they would have to stay.

Kicking back his bed covers, he surged to his feet, scrubbing a hand through his hair before wrinkling his nose in distaste. He needed a shower. The whole experiment with the almond oil had proven the acuity of Sherlock’s sense of smell. No doubt he would detect the results of John’s earlier session of self-gratification, even if he had caught the worst of it in a tissue. Best not to give him the chance.

Grabbing some clothes, he padded downstairs to the bathroom, hearing nothing but silence from the flat around him. It was tempting to assume Sherlock had surrendered to the call of his bed, but John doubted it. The case had him in its grasp. If he slept at all, it was a few brief hours’ rest on the couch.

Shaking his head, John turned on the shower and stepped under the spray. Hot water sluiced away the patina on his skin; if only he could wash his worries down the drain with such ease. Thoughts of him and Sherlock aside, there was still the issue of Alexander. John had heard nothing from Mycroft one way or the other, but the ongoing silence was less than reassuring.

A few days with no surprises had smoothed out the jagged edges of his battle-readiness. Now it sat in his stomach like a rock, sanded smooth but cold all the same. Sherlock, on the other hand, seemed to have put his Alpha from his mind. He hurried all over London, unconcerned. Perhaps that was the only way to survive it. After all, Alexander was a new presence in John’s life. Sherlock had been coping with the threat of him for years. At some point, he must have made the choice to live as if nothing could stop him. Fear, after all, was a paralytic, and Sherlock would never allow himself to be so-affected.

Rinsing away the shampoo, John flicked off the taps and stepped out, reaching for his towel. Absently, he dabbed his skin dry before ruffling the water from his hair. The greying gleam of his stubble disappeared beneath his razor, and he got dressed on auto-pilot, muttering a curse when he realised he’d put his jumper on back to front. He needed a solid breakfast and caffeine. Maybe then he’d be able to drag himself free from the mire of his weary thoughts.

Padding out to the kitchen, he sighed as he saw Sherlock standing by the fireplace, his eyes intent on the data in front of him. Information plastered the wall: autopsy reports, potential victims, chemical compositions and forensic findings, and Sherlock held court in its presence, his body still as his mind raced.

He was wearing a different shirt from yesterday, the sleeves folded back to his elbows. His clean-shaven jaw and fluffy hair suggested he’d at least bathed at some point between when John went to bed five hours ago and now. However, the veils of blue under his eyes indicated that sleep was a distant memory, and his body’s motionlessness implied he had dipped into his mind palace. It was unlikely to be a long trip – Sherlock would sit down or lie supine if that were the case – so John held
back his “good morning” and set about making breakfast, waiting for him to emerge.

Within a few minutes, Sherlock’s breathing quickened and his hips rocked as he shifted his weight. From this angle, John could just make out his expression, tense and aggravated, rather than exultant. It seemed a breakthrough remained elusive.

‘Morning,’ John called, pouring boiling water into a couple of mugs before reaching for the cereal. ‘Did I miss anything?’

Sherlock’s huff said it all, and John stifled a smile. ‘There’s tea here for you. Maybe a quick break will help?’ His question was a triumph of hope over experience. John expected Sherlock to ignore him until he physically placed the mug in front of him. However, after several dragging seconds of silence, Sherlock sighed in defeat, turning his back on the sprawling paper-trail of the investigation and drifting into the kitchen.

John pursed his lips, tipping cornflakes into a bowl before adding milk. Normally, he couldn’t tempt Sherlock away from the Work if he tried. It was only when that great mind was locked in a stalemate, either starving for information or drowning in it, that Sherlock could be convinced to take a few minutes to answer the calls of his transport.

It was tempting to ask about it, but John bit back his questions, focusing on his meal as a comfortable silence fledged. Sherlock propped one hip on the corner of the kitchen table, his eyes glazed. Rather than sitting down, John mimicked him, leaning against the counter. No doubt Sherlock would still be thinking about the case, but at least he’d stepped back from it, if only for a moment.

He watched the steam from Sherlock’s tea curl upwards, brushing vapour against those pale cheeks as he sipped the scalding liquid. The quiet hum of appreciation that followed was heartfelt, and John hid a smile as he finished his breakfast. He knew the signs of total immersion when he saw it. Perhaps Sherlock hadn’t been lost to the mystery all night, but John would bet it had been hours since he’d so much as moved from standing in front of the fireplace, grappling with the complexities they’d unearthed.

‘No.’

John blinked, his lips parted in confusion as he set the empty dish aside. Before he could speak, Sherlock elaborated, dark lashes fluttering downwards before he dragged his eyes open again. ‘You asked if you’d missed anything. The answer is no.’

Reaching for his tea, John picked up the mug, wandering towards his armchair in the hopes that Sherlock would follow him to the more comfortable realm of the living room. Sure enough, by the time he had adjusted the cushions to his liking, Sherlock was perched on the back of the leather chair, his feet resting on the seat and his elbows propped on his knees.

The sunlight creeping through the windows made the marks of exhaustion stamped across his features more apparent. John frowned, but he knew better than to suggest Sherlock get his head down. At best, his concerns would be ignored, so he turned towards the wall, taking in the mass of pages and hastily scrawled notes that decorated Baker Street.

‘Talk me through it?’ he asked, gesturing to the mirror, now hidden behind a slew of autopsy reports. ‘You must have some ideas.’

Sherlock grimaced, scrubbing a knuckle against his eye before he sighed. ‘Nothing concrete. So far, I’ve been able to confirm nineteen victims, mostly homeless. While time and preservation renders the results of toxicology screens less accurate, there’s enough to prove a common element. They all took
a Ritalin-based chemical substance prior to their deaths.'

He took another gulp of his tea as if the warm liquid was all that sustained him. 'Even with the relatively fresh samples from Amelia Donnelly, there is nothing evident in her body that could cause her demise.'

'What about the Aristolochia? That's what started us off on all this.' John shifted forward, watching Sherlock bow his head and drag a hand through his hair. John could see the pale silver gleam of the bite on the nape of his neck, and his stomach fluttered. It was rare that Sherlock permitted his body language to reflect his uncertainties. It was only in John's trusted company that he allowed any sign of weakness to show, and in doing so put his secret on display.

Long fingers skimmed down the upper vertebrae of his spine, rubbing at the tension that John could see, even from here. 'No trace. The half-life of a standard dose is thirty-six hours. If it's the toxic element, which I doubt, the amount required would be extreme and the chemicals and hormonal shifts would still be apparent in the victims.'

'You don't think it's what killed them?' John finished his tea, setting the mug aside and taking in the tired reel of Sherlock's body.

'I can't see how it would. Its actions are almost entirely involved with manipulating various receptors and altering hormone levels. It tricks the Omega's body into believing that conception has failed so that the cycle, which should halt once an egg is fertilised, continues, resulting in the destruction of the womb lining and the ovum. As for what it does to an Alpha...' Sherlock shrugged. 'I don't know, there's no research on the issue that I can find, but I doubt fatality is a consequence.'

John narrowed his eyes, his mind racing over reproductive hormones and their uses. As an army surgeon and then a GP, his knowledge was limited and applicable mostly to Beta systems. However, although different, the parallels between what he knew and Alpha-Omega biochemistry was adequate for a glimmer of an idea to spark in his mind.

'Aristolochia contains a progesterone analogue, doesn't it?' he asked, watching Sherlock lift his head. 'It must do, if that's the effect. Everything you've said makes it sound like the morning-after pill.'

'It wouldn't work on a Beta,' Sherlock pointed out. 'Wrong chemical structure for the receptors, but yes.'

'So it's not different androgens that distinguish secondary genders, it's a different chemical balance, the same as contrasting ratios of oestrogen and testosterone separate male and female.' He held up his hand when Sherlock grimaced, no doubt offended as both a chemist and a biologist at the simplicity of John's summary. 'I'm just saying Aristolochia would influence an Alpha in some way; they have the receptors for it. All we need to do is figure out whether it would kill them.'

'It shouldn't do. If anything, it should serve to make them more aggressive, more Alpha. The same as a Beta man taking progesterone would experience an increase in typical "male" characteristics.' Sherlock shook his head. 'Besides, weren't you listening? There's no sign of it in any of the victims.' He cut a hand through the air, his teeth bared in frustration. 'Without a sample of whatever they took, I can't say how they died.'

Sherlock was almost shaking with frustration. If he wasn’t careful, he’d fall off the back of his chair and add wounded pride to his list of complaints.

'Sit in that thing properly, will you? You're going to hurt yourself.'
An explosive sound of irritation answered his request, and John arched an eyebrow in surprise when, rather than slipping forward to do as he was told or pitching off backwards out of spite, Sherlock got to his feet. In a flurry of motion, he grabbed cushions from the sofa and stomped back to John’s side, dumping them at his feet before sitting down and leaning back against John’s right knee.

His spine struck a hard line up the crest of John’s shin, and Sherlock tipped his head back, resting his occipital bone on John’s patella as he stared resentfully at the ceiling. ‘This isn’t comfortable,’ he pointed out after a moment.

‘No-one made you sit there,’ John replied, trying to hide his surprised delight at Sherlock choosing to settle so deliberately close. It looked trusting, his head tipped back so he could give John an upside-down glare. The tantalising column of his exposed throat was on display, and John had to tear his eyes away from the fragile beat of Sherlock’s pulse as he struggled to form intelligent sentences. ‘At least now you won’t go arse over tit off the back of your chair. A concussion would be a setback, even for you.’

Sherlock closed his eyes, his lips twitching in a grimace of agreement as he let out a sigh. He would never admit it, but this past month had taken its toll. Not professionally, perhaps, but personally. For all that he hid it well, John knew Sherlock was suffering the same uncertainty and fears over Alexander. More so, since they involved his continuing freedom and welfare. Now the Work, the one thing Sherlock threw himself into with passion and vigour, was fighting back, refusing to offer him an ounce of respite.

‘The Yard haven’t come up with anything new?’ he asked, tracing a finger along the twisting outline of a curl.

Sherlock grunted, nudging his head back towards John’s hand in mute demand and letting out a small breath when John obliged. His fingers charted deep paths as he ran them from Sherlock’s brow to his crown. A few weeks ago, he wouldn’t have dared to do this, but events had swept away many of their previous boundaries, and the urge to offer Sherlock comfort was impossible to deny.

Sherlock’s response was immediate. The rigid core of his muscles uncoiled from their knots and lines of annoyance released their grip on his expression. Tight knuckles slackened, and his breathing steadied, timed to the rhythm of John’s touch: the conductor of Sherlock’s orchestral existence.

For a few minutes, there was only the peace of home. John’s question hovered, unanswered, as the sounds of the world washed around them. The nearby purr of traffic – thinner on Baker Street, dense on Marylebone Road – the wheeze and rattle of the fridge, the creak of the floorboards and laughter of pedestrians. It was as close to tranquility as they knew, and John noted its details as he skimmed his thumb over the curve of Sherlock’s ear.

‘They found plenty,’ Sherlock said at last, and the gnarled frustration in his voice was gone, replaced by a rumble that dropped into John’s stomach like a match into a pool of petrol. Heat rolled through him, and he drew a steadying breath as he managed an encouraging hum. ‘Not that it did us any good. Whoever’s doing this has had no contact with the law. Their prints don’t turn up any matches, the treads of the shoes are generic, there’s no DNA evidence worth mentioning, and I’m still waiting on the chemical compositions of the residue left on the inside of those vials.’

Sherlock rubbed a finger down the chine of his nose. ‘Now that the scene’s been processed, the perpetrator will know something’s amiss as soon as they re-enter the property. Lestrade hasn’t got the resources to monitor the place, not when we have no idea how long it will be before they return.’

‘Are your homeless network still watching it?’
‘After a fashion, but they can’t provide round-the-clock surveillance.’ Sherlock tapped his heel on the floor, his gaze returning to the paper-covered walls.

‘So what’s the plan?’ John asked. ‘There’s got to be something that can narrow it down?’

‘Profiling.’ Sherlock said the word as if it were crass, his face wrinkled in obvious disgust. ‘Inaccurate and often formed on a foundation of assumption, at least when left in the hands of those at the Yard.’

‘I doubt you’d make the same mistake.’ John smiled at Sherlock’s huff of offense. ‘I know how much you hate it – putting all the details you see in a crime down on paper and trying to build a person from it, rather than wowing us all with your deductions and pointing your finger at the culprit, but you said it yourself, we’ve not got much choice.’

He watched, sensing Sherlock’s mood prevaricate between annoyance and acceptance. At last, it fell in favour of the latter, and he sighed as eased himself free of John’s touch and got to his feet.

Grabbing a pad of paper from the table by his chair, John peered around, preparing to take notes of whatever slivers of truth fell from Sherlock’s mouth. ‘Pass me a pen, would you?’

He snatched the silver gleam from the air with ease, his body moving automatically to intercept Sherlock’s throw. Scribbling on the page to get the ink flowing, he sat forward, resting the pad on his knee as he waited for Sherlock to begin.

‘Physically, we have very little to go on. The imprints on the floor were of a size eleven trainer. The intensity of the dust’s disturbance suggests someone with feet of equivalent dimensions wore them, as opposed to using bigger shoes to cover their tracks. Statistically, that puts our perpetrator as male and above five foot nine.’ He stopped in front of an image of a handprint. ‘Hands smaller than average, but not by much. No indication of work-related characteristics such as calluses – except…’

Sherlock placed his pocket magnifier over the image. ‘Right-handed, and with a divot in the side of the distal phalanges of his middle finger.’

‘What?’ John looked down at his hand, trying to work out what Sherlock meant. ‘What the hell would cause that?’

‘Most commonly, it’s someone who holds their pen in a non-standard manner. A loose grasp, with the pen resting on the knuckle rather than pinched between the fingertips. The physiological wear indicates a high level of handwriting.’ Sherlock shrugged. ‘It’s possible they are entrenched in an academic career, but anyone who has to fill in reports and doesn’t hold their pen properly will show similar indications. Lestrade’s got one just like it.’

‘Well, that’s not exactly going to help us pick him out from a crowd, but it might confirm we’ve got the right bloke. What else?’

‘You saw that place; it was filthy, but there’s no dust interrupting any of the prints. He was fastidious about keeping his hands clean. Breakdown of the oils in some places suggests an alcoholic cleanser, but he didn’t rub down the ceramic once he’d done with it. Probably hand sanitizer. Forensics could confirm.’

Sherlock stepped back, his body shifting as he took in the walls with the path of his gaze, examining the spread of evidence. ‘Consider the logistics. He needs access to both the Ritalin base and whatever he is using as a contaminant, be it Aristolochia or something else. He clearly has some knowledge of applied chemistry, not to mention pharmacology.’
‘Then there’s the dealers who are giving this stuff out. I mean, is it just that one we caught in the park, or are there more? If these people are targeted, they must be in on it,’ John pointed out. ‘They have to know who to give the tainted drugs, or they’d just be offing any poor sod that could pay for what they wanted.’

‘Yes, though the fact that all the victims are Alphas could be due to the pharmaceuticals themselves, rather than specific targeting. It’s possible that whatever is killing them has a different action in Betas. Something non-fatal, maybe even asymptomatic.’

‘So you’re saying Betas could be given the same stuff and not suffer any consequences?’

Sherlock waved a hand before digging his fingers into his hair, shaking his head as if he were in pain. ‘Conjecture,’ he hissed. ‘It’s all conjecture until I know what’s been used. What the bloody hell is taking Anderson so long? I should have done it myself.’ He swept his phone from the desk, the screen flooding his features with a blue glow as he texted a furious hurry-up message to Lestrade.

John set the notepad aside, getting to his feet. He ignored the pacing and muttering of his flatmate as he stood in front of the mantelpiece, taking it all in.

Sherlock’s frustration was understandable. The number of victims alone was boggling. There were homeless and students, professionals, male and female… The only thing that tied them to each other was their secondary gender and cause of death.

Slowly, his eyes drifted away from the array of chemical and pathological facts to the more straightforward, comprehensible data. So far, Sherlock had constructed a rough, linear timeline, but something basic caught John’s eye, and he drew in a breath as he turned it over in his mind.

‘Sherlock, can I move these around a bit?’

‘Why?’ John suspected if he were anyone else, the question would have been issued as a challenge, but Sherlock’s tone was intrigued and respectful. ‘What have you seen?’

‘I’m not sure, but – look at the dates. All right in some cases, particularly with the destitute victims, they’re estimates, but …’ He tapped the report nearest to him as Sherlock stopped at his side.

‘They’re dying in groups.’ Sherlock reached out, tweaking the paper free of the blu-tack holding it in place before doing the same to its neighbours, shuffling and reorganising. With a nudge of his foot, he shoved some books aside, clearing a space on the floor as he laid out the timeline.

‘The first four occur in isolation. All homeless, each about a month apart, but after that…’ Sherlock stacked others in piles, and John saw the pattern begin to emerge. There were one or two that broke the sequence, and sometimes the gaps between victims would stretch for months at a time, but there was definitely significance in the distribution of the fatalities.

Sherlock spun around, his hands pressed together like a man in prayer to his own genius as he paced the room. ‘It starts as a standard escalation. Whoever did this was being careful – trying to stay hidden. They killed people who had already fallen through the cracks.’

‘Then, when they started getting away with it, they moved onto this lot.’ John pointed to the first pile with his toe. ‘Three victims, all young London professionals.’

‘They’re the anchor points of our timeline. The certainties,’ Sherlock indicated the next sequence. ‘More homeless, followed again by a batch of identified victims.’ He hesitated at an empty space. ‘I doubt this is a break in their habits as much as it is people we’ve failed to find.’ He ran his hands through his hair, turning to face John and gesturing to the documents at their feet. ‘What does this
Look like to you?’

‘Insanity?’ John hazarded, shrugging his shoulders when Sherlock rolled his eyes. ‘Honestly? I don’t know. It’s one of the most bizarre killing sprees I’ve ever seen.’

‘It’s an experiment.’

A shiver darted down John’s spine at the vein of admiration in Sherlock’s voice, and he pursed his lips as he bit back a reproach.

‘Normally, a killer will escalate and continue to do so, revelling in the visceral nature of their crimes until they are stopped,’ Sherlock explained, oblivious to John’s fading frown. ‘With those who kill by physical trauma, there’s a marked increase in the damage to the victim, from a single wound, moving on to torture and mutilation. Poisoners – if they become serial killers at all and aren’t trying to off an inconvenient relative – will instead kill with greater frequency.’

‘Which this one did at the beginning,’ John interrupted, deciding to let Sherlock’s irreverent admiration slide.

‘Once they were sure they could get away with it. The rest of this, it’s formulaic. They’re testing a hypothesis.’ Sherlock’s eyes stared in the direction of the floor, but he was focussed on something else entirely. John had no doubt he was occupying the odd frontier between his mind palace and reality, one where he continued to absorb what was happening while racing through possibilities.

‘But what are they hoping for? A better poison? Why keep trying all this time if they’re getting what they want?’

‘And what’s that?’ Sherlock asked softly.

‘Dead people.’ John gestured around him, trying to understand why Sherlock had that look on his face – the one that meant he’d seen a new angle where all John saw was the blank wall of the obvious. ‘Isn’t it?’

Sherlock didn’t seem to hear him. He was too busy prowling along the line, his gaze scanning every page for one piece of data and moving on once he’d acquired it. It was a controlled search, and when he reached Donnelly’s file, he made a tight, surprised sound: realisation.

‘No. No, it’s not. The trend is less obvious because the information isn’t complete. Many of the times of death are hard to pinpoint with accuracy due to the high number of homeless individuals, some of whom were discovered days or weeks after their demise, but look at these.’ He handed over a number of pages: reliable autopsy and tox-reports from the victims found shortly after their deaths. A long finger hovered over the concentration of unprocessed Ritalin in the bloodstream.

‘It’s going down,’ John realised.

‘They’re living longer after taking the contaminated dose. Once someone dies, organ function ceases, preventing metabolism of the drug that killed them. You know that. The first victims died promptly, within ten minutes. Amelia Donnelly, on the other hand, lived at least an hour. Perhaps ninety minutes.’

Sherlock scooped up the pen and pad John had abandoned, kneeling on the floor and scribbling frantically. Reading over his shoulder, John watched the increments increase from an almost-instantly toxic chemical to a compound that killed with a delay.

He stepped back as Sherlock stood up, a frown on his face as he tried to understand. ‘So they’re,
what, using some kind of process of trial and error? Modulating original dose or – or something?’

Sherlock’s inhale was a hiss of amazement, and John sucked in a breath as two warm palms framed his head, spinning him around in a half-turn as Sherlock spoke, exultant. ‘John, you’re brilliant! The victims are as non-variable as possible in such circumstances. It’s the drug that is evolving!’

‘Wh – what?’

‘It’s not intentional murder,’ Sherlock breathed, giving John a gentle shake. ‘It’s a clinical trial. Don’t you see? Whoever is behind this isn’t trying to kill these people. If they were, there are better ways to do it, and they wouldn’t change the drug so that it took longer for them to die after taking it. There’s too much risk involved. They’re testing for something else. Death’s not the desired result; it’s a side-effect!’

John’s breath caught, his mind racing as he tried to keep up. It was hard to string together a logical argument when they were standing this close, his hands still cupping John’s face. Sherlock filled his awareness from one horizon to another, occupying every sense with his presence, and John’s voice cracked as he spoke.

‘Are you – are you sure? That’s a theory and half, even for you.’

Sherlock shook his head, his tiredness melting away beneath the wash of his enthusiasm. ‘But it fits. The homeless are like model organisms – a callous analogy, but relevant – they share the same environment. Many levels of society consider them disposable. They were the first area of testing for each new refinement. Those killed in groups, those with homes and loved ones, they were the target. Alphas who didn’t have the exacerbating factors of homelessness to interfere with the chemical’s intended effects, whatever they may be. It’s a clumsy approach, but functional.’

John blinked, trying to get one breath that was clear of Sherlock’s scent so he could think, but it was impossible. That strange, silken nothingness filled his sinuses, making his body hum in recognition. His parched mouth felt useless as heat swelled in his veins. They were too close, but when he reached up to gently pull Sherlock’s hands away, his fingers circled his wrists instead, clinging, and his balance tipped forward, rather than back.

Their brows pressed together, Sherlock’s forehead warm against John’s skin. His eyes were closed, and his body eased by the euphoria of a potential breakthrough. It seemed so natural for Sherlock to be like this, half-propping himself up on John’s lesser height, and John tried not to shiver beneath the strain of his stark desire.

‘This changes everything.’

Sherlock’s eyes opened, and John’s body jolted with awareness. The connection shook all his chaos into alignment, pulling on his skin like a magnet. The air seemed to crackle, barbed and electric as the hairs on John’s arms shivered upright beneath his jumper.

Like a man leaning over the edge of a precipice, he could feel the dense pull of longing dragging at him. Everything else faded away: the flat, the city beyond the windows and even the pressure of the bloody case. There was only Sherlock, in his element and all the more beguiling for it.

In the blink of an eye, John realised that crystalline focus had shifted, snapping away from the mystery as the sprawling boundaries of his intellect shrank to the confines of Baker Street. No longer was it the murders that occupied Sherlock’s attention; it was John.

Shared, sultry breaths mingled, emphasising their proximity, and he looked as hypnotised as John
felt, his pupils pooling like ink across the silver of his iris. The pattern of his breathing changed, hitching yet deep. Sherlock’s teeth bit his own lip, tiny dents of pressure before his tongue darted out to take their place, there one second and gone the next.

John smothered a groan. He could almost taste him, and his mouth watered at the prospect as he tried to remember all the reasons he shouldn’t stretch up and claim a kiss. Yet they were like vapour, irrelevant as the cotton of Sherlock’s shirt whispered promises against John’s jumper.

Time spun out: a golden thread of one, eternal moment. A single step, towards or away, was all that was required to break it. However, neither of them seemed able to make that choice.

At last, Sherlock’s fingers shifted, rasping over John’s jaw before tracing the line of his mouth as if fascinated. It was a beautiful drift of sensation, and John pulled in a deep breath through his nose as he tried not to tremble beneath Sherlock’s mesmerised touch.

‘We shouldn’t.’ The whisper drifted between them, quiet and hopeless, and John gave a rueful smile. Somehow, that knowledge only made it more tempting. A reckless part of him longed to shake up the status quo and see where the pieces fell, but this wasn’t just about him.

‘No,’ he agreed, his voice low and soft, ‘but I want to.’

He watched the shadows flicker in Sherlock’s eyes. They were too close to take in each other’s expressions, but John didn’t need to. He could see a reflection of his own tumultuous emotions in Sherlock’s gaze. There was too much: hope and doubt, fear and desire all coiled together, tangling them in indecision.

At last, it was Sherlock who had the presence of mind to take a step back, his eyes dark and his cheeks flushed. It was only half-a-pace, and John’s body swayed as if in orbit, dizzy with the need to draw him close once more. The temptation to chase what he wanted was a metallic taste in his mouth, and it took all of his strength not to give in and press himself to Sherlock’s body.

‘I’m sorry.’

John blinked in surprise at the husked apology. A moment later, he noticed that Sherlock’s tension wasn’t entirely down to arousal. His muscles were braced as if he was prepared to leap out of the way of an attack, and fury twisted in John’s stomach at the man who had made Sherlock believe a declination of intimacy would end in punishment.

‘You don’t need to apologise,’ he said, careful not to let his anger at Alexander or his frustration bleed into his voice. ‘You’re right. It’s – now’s not a good time to...’ He trailed off, flicking a hand back and forth between them.

‘I wish it was,’ Sherlock admitted, and there was such quiet ferocity in his voice that John couldn’t fail to believe him. He made no effort to hide his yearning. In this, like so many other things, Sherlock was brutally honest. ‘If things were different...’

‘I know.’ John ducked his head, rubbing a hand over his face as he struggled to banish the serrated heat that still pressed against his skin from the inside: fierce, demanding and only appeased by Sherlock’s company. ‘I know.’ He ignored the plaintive voice in his head that told him there would never be the perfect moment. He did not want to concede the possibility that Sherlock might linger with him, at his side but always just out of reach.

A hesitant hand on his elbow made him look up, and he cocked his head as he tried to parse Sherlock’s expression. His brow was pleated, and his lips twisted in a tight, uncertain line before he
forced himself to speak. 'After we solve the case, if – if you still want to...' He trailed off, clearing his throat. 'We can talk about it. We need to talk about it.' He stared around Baker Street as if he’d never seen it before, lost and vulnerable, before he met John’s eye. ‘We can’t carry on like this.’

Hope popped in John's chest, sharp like broken glass, and he bit his lip as he turned Sherlock's words over in his mind. He understood what wasn't being said; whatever their future held, they could not fall into it blindly. Sherlock was too rational to leave his life, or John’s, to the vagaries of sentiment. Instead, this was what he put forward: the chance to make the choice together, eyes open and aware.

A shuddering breath escaped John’s lips, and he nodded, feeling the weight of Sherlock’s gaze as he drank in the sight of him. 'Okay. That’s – yeah.' His heart thrilled in his chest, pattering against his ribs as he considered the possibilities. Maybe other people would resent the Work taking priority over something of such personal significance, but all John felt was the electric glide of Sherlock’s promise.

It was more than he’d dared hope for.

By mutual agreement, they shifted apart, not removing themselves from one another’s influence, but providing much-needed distance all the same. It felt surreal, shifting from the enchanting buzz of Sherlock's nearness, so intense that he could barely breathe, to this – the two of them as they had always been, a Consulting Detective and his blogger.

It was not a separation – the isolation of personal and professional – but a blend that allowed them to transition smoothly. Some awkwardness lingered, outlined in the way Sherlock paced, only to change direction as if his thoughts were going too fast for his body to keep up, but for the first time in what felt like weeks there was also a sense of peace: a decision made.

‘So what now?’ he asked, watching Sherlock press his lips together in thought.

'Vee need to get to the Yard,’ he replied, tugging at various documents and collecting them into piles. ‘The sooner Lestrade sees this, the sooner he can focus his search. They’re getting nowhere as they are.’

‘You’ve got to make him believe it, first,’ John pointed out, grabbing his coat and shrugging into it before taking the stack of files from Sherlock and following him down the stairs. ‘It does seem a bit…’

‘Unusual?’

‘I was going to say “fucked up” actually.’ John waited as Sherlock flagged down a taxi. The sable car slowed to a halt, and he climbed into the back, sliding along to make space. Sherlock settled beside him, and the driver set off towards New Scotland Yard.

John put the paperwork in his lap, his hands curling around the front edge of the seat as he watched the scenery pass. Sherlock would not doubt be examining his theories, working out the best method to convince Lestrade of the possibilities. It was the kind of silence John enjoyed, busy and purposeful, but he couldn’t help a spark of sadness that what had passed between them in the living room had already been put aside, consigned to the cellars of the mind palace as the Work took priority.

Except this time, it seemed he’d underestimated Sherlock. A soft nudge against the side of John’s right hand made him look down. With anyone else, he would assume it was an accident, but he knew Sherlock had placed his own hand deliberately close, creating a single seam of contact. He didn’t try to grasp John’s fingers. Instead, it was a subtle co-occupation of space – one that said more
than a hundred stumbling sentences.

John unwrapped his grip from the edge of the taxi’s seat, skimming his palm back so that he could slip his little finger below Sherlock’s. It seemed ridiculously innocent after the heat they’d shared less than fifteen minutes ago – a glimmer in comparison to the incandescence of that moment where everything hung in the balance – but John could read its meaning.

Sherlock wasn’t as absorbed in the case as he seemed. There was room, still, in that massive mind of his, for thoughts of John.

They remained as they were, silent but connected, and John allowed himself to relish the fragility of their solitude until the edifice of the Yard came into view. Silver letters gleamed in the late-morning light, and John wrinkled his nose at the smokers loitering outside the door, dragging down cigarette fumes as if their lives depended of it. Greg was among them, gulping coffee and staring longingly at those around him. Clearly it was the kind of day where he regretted his efforts to quit.

His shoulders slumped as Sherlock stepped out of the taxi, and he was already shaking his head as John paid the driver. ‘It's been less than hour since your text, Sherlock,’ he complained. ‘We’re not going to go any faster with you breathing down our necks.’

‘How about if I tell you what to search for?’ Sherlock raised an eyebrow as Greg looked askance at John before beckoning them inside, leading the way through drab, institutional corridors to one of the incident rooms.

‘You’re already on our backs about whatever’s in those vials. You’re not Anderson’s favourite person right now. Not that you ever were, but –’ The DI shrugged, setting down his cup and collapsing into a nearby chair, folding his arms as he waited for Sherlock to start talking. ‘Go on, then. What have you got?’

‘I suspect you're looking for someone involved in the medical field, either as primary or auxiliary staff, though the former is more likely. Not only do they have adequate knowledge of how to create pharmaceuticals, but they have ready access to uncut Ritalin, more so than the average person could buy on the street. They'll be stealing it from their place of work.’

‘So, someone’s poisoning addicts?’ Greg asked, glancing up as John pulled a face and sat down nearby.

‘Sherlock doesn't think so.’

‘What?’

‘Extinction is not the desired outcome of the contaminant,’ Sherlock explained, already spreading out the autopsy reports. 'If it was, then we wouldn’t see this widening gap between the victim taking the drug and the cessation of their lives. The culprit’s modulating the dose in an effort to gain some unknown effect.' He waved his hand at the paperwork in front of him: documentary epitaphs. 'These aren't just victims. They're guinea pigs.'

Greg blinked, his lips parted and his face slack as he absorbed what Sherlock was saying. Despite his frequent cooperation, the DI was not a man prone to blind acceptance. 'I, really? It's a bit of a stretch, don't you think?’

‘No.’ Sherlock lifted his chin, rolling his eyes as he explained, 'If the gap between initial consumption and time of death were more random, it could be ascribed to factors existing within the victim: conflating medical conditions or poor environmental circumstances. There is some evidence of that
among the homeless victims, but it's limited."

He indicated the same neat stacks he’d shown John, his finger creasing the page as he jabbed it in emphasis. ‘The identified Alphas died in pairs or threes, and they demonstrate the same period of time between the initial dose and their demise – one that extends with each new group.’ Silver eyes narrowed, and Sherlock’s voice softened as he followed the trail of his theory. ‘Whoever's doing this is testing different combinations. They have some idea of what's causing the problem, but they can't remove it from their contaminant because it's a key ingredient towards their desired effect.’

As Lestrade continued to look doubtful, Sherlock bowed his head, waving a dismissive hand. 'If you won't believe me, then believe the evidence. Once we know what's in those vials – assuming the substance survives Anderson's ineptitude – the case should begin to unravel.’

‘Anything else?’ the DI asked.

Sherlock’s slender shoulders jerked in a shrug. ‘The person involved is also using some kind of alcohol rub on their hands. It's probably generic, but there could be something more telling in its composition.’

‘That’s it?’ Greg demanded. 'You can't base an entire case on bloody hand-gel!’

'I've solved others on less,' Sherlock retorted.

'We’ve got no suspects, no C.O.D., just bodies!' Lestrade bent forward, propping his elbows on his knees and cupping his forehead in his hands. 'Then there's you with some insane theory. Granted, most of the time, you're right, but this one's harder than most to swallow.'

'Then prove me wrong.' Sherlock challenged. 'If I am, it should be obvious as soon as your team process the evidence. It's hardly my fault they're so useless.'

With a glare, Greg pulled out his mobile phone, punching at the screen with his thumb. 'Anderson, get to room 102 will you? I need you to explain to Holmes why you've not got anything from those vials.'

John could hear the vitriol of the response from where he sat – an angry, tinny whine – and he smothered a smile, meeting Sherlock's eye as Lestrade hung up the call.

'What?' Greg demanded when he saw Sherlock’s scowl. 'If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. Normally, you're up to your elbows in the lab work anyway, and to be honest the fact you’re so hands-off on this case is giving me the creeps.'

‘I thought you’d be grateful,’ Sherlock murmured. ‘You’re always going on about procedure.’

‘Well it’s the first time you’ve ever bloody listened!’ Lestrade’s expression fell into lines of exhaustion and disbelief. ‘Pass those here, will you?’ he asked, indicating the reports. ‘Let me see what’s happening for myself.’

By the time Anderson arrived, his hands full of documents and his lips set into a thin line, Lestrade had finished his coffee and was poring over the paperwork. John stood at his elbow, desperately searching for the simplest explanation and coming up empty-handed.

'I've not found "nothing"!' Anderson’s opening gambit was brimming with indignation, and John saw him glare at the DI before turning to Sherlock. ‘Every analysis we’ve run on the solution in those vials has come back the same. Whatever it is, it's not in the database.’
He thrust a report in Sherlock's direction, his shoulders bristling as if waiting for a snide response. When none came he deflated, still wary and distrustful, but apparently appeased by Sherlock’s absorbed silence.

‘You tested them all?’

‘Of course,’ Anderson muttered. ‘Concentrations of different chemicals vary, but they all form approximately the same compound,’ He shrugged. ‘It’s just that no-one knows what it is.’

‘A new drug?’ John suggested. ‘That’s pretty amazing for back-room pharmacology, isn’t it?’

‘I doubt it was deliberate,’ Sherlock mused, propping his hip on the corner of the desk and flicking back and forth between pages as he skimmed the text. ‘Anderson, I need a sample of what’s in those vials. I’ll take it to Bart’s and see if I can’t make some sense of it.’

A confused noise pulsed in Anderson's throat, and he folded his arms. ‘What makes you think you'll find anything we won't?’

Sherlock raised a single eyebrow in mute, disdainful response. Anderson’s answering sneer brimmed with animosity, but Sherlock waved it aside as he changed the subject. ‘The handprints on the equipment have been degraded by alcohol, and the obscuration of the skin texture suggests long term use. Investigate the trace left on the ceramics. We might get something probative.’

Anderson gaped, spreading his hands in disbelief as he turned to Greg. ‘I don’t take orders from him!’

‘You don’t normally take orders at all,’ the DI pointed out, his shoulders slumping. ‘Please? Just get it done. The sooner we put this damn case to bed the better.’

Anderson snarled, snatching the report from Sherlock’s grip as he stomped away, his back tight and his arms swinging in the chaotic march of the irate.

John watched him go, surprised at Sherlock’s restraint. ‘You managed to go a whole five minutes without calling him an idiot,’ he said, grinning as the corners of Sherlock's mouth twitched. ‘Who knew you could resist the temptation?’

‘I only insult his intelligence when he fails to put it to use. It’s not my fault he wanders through life not using his brain.’ Sherlock pressed his fingers together, his eyes unfocussed as he continued to speak. ‘Besides, I wouldn’t expect Anderson to pick up on the markers of the chemical he was examining, not even with his experience and the tools at his disposal. No-one in the scientific community has seen fit to document the sources.’

‘Aristolochia?’ John guessed, watching Sherlock tilt his head in a vaguely positive gesture.

‘Among other things. If I were to guess, it’s some kind of herbal cocktail: hormonal analogues known to Omegas, but overlooked by modern drug manufacturers.’

Greg made a puzzled sound, looking between them as he awaited an explanation. ‘Is this about that leaf you found in Donnelly's hair?’

Sherlock sighed, glancing at John before straightening up. ‘Many Omegas covertly modulate their fertility through the use of a number of botanical chemicals. Aristolochia is one of them, and was what caught my attention about this case in the first place. I need some time in the lab before I can confirm the components in the solution and their proportions. Then I should be able to gain some idea of any potential toxicity of the combination.’
Greg pressed his lips together, and John could see the shift of his mood from professional interest to personal concern. 'So would any Omega know from looking at that?' he asked, indicating the spectrograph.

'Unlikely,' Sherlock replied, his voice distant. 'Most recipes were discovered by trial and error centuries ago and are handed down within the community, often from parent to child. A little like heirlooms.' There was a dark edge to Sherlock's smile. 'Most won't consider the chemistry behind it.'

'But you did.' Lestrade's expression wasn't pitying, but there was sympathy there, and John knew he was extrapolating the likely source of Sherlock’s knowledge.

'I perfected chemicals for my – personal use,' Sherlock replied, choosing his words with care, 'and I had the tools at my disposal to perform a rudimentary exploration of the relevant ingredients. If I thought Anderson could find the answer, I would allow him to do so, but it requires knowledge which he does not have, and for obvious reasons, I cannot share.'

Greg looked like there were a hundred questions lined up behind his lips, and John would bet they had nothing to do with the case. He watched as, with some effort, the DI choked them back, instead nodding his head. 'Take what you need. I'll give Anderson the hurry-up. If you're right about all this, then –' He gestured to the paperwork strewn around, shaking his head incredulously. 'It's unbelievable.'

'It won't be quick,' Sherlock pointed out. 'A couple of days at least.'

'Then you'd better get started.'

With a nod, he spun away, leaving John to bid Greg a quick farewell as he hurried to keep up.

Anderson surrendered the required sample with a scowl, but to John it didn't seem as deep or ferocious as usual, and his mumbled "good luck" appeared genuine enough.

By the time they got to Bart's, lunch-time had been and gone. The hours stretched out in front of them, and John doubted Sherlock would stop until he had the answers they so desperately sought.

'Anything I can do to help?' he asked, girding himself for the inevitable rejection. It was rare that he assisted Sherlock with a chemical analysis, though he could mix solutions and knew plenty of theory. His role always lay in acting as a boundary between Sherlock and the rest of the world, allowing him to maintain his concentration in all but the direst of circumstances.

It was a burden John didn't regret, but there were times when it was an exercise in frustration. Sherlock's ignorance of his surroundings extended to the cries of his own body, and he was already running on too little sleep. He didn't dare question Sherlock's stamina, but as he shook his head in response, John resolved to keep an eye on him. Just in case.

The hands of the clock swept around its face, travelling beyond sunset and into the depths of the evening as Sherlock worked. Molly started the night shift – a blessing, since John doubted Sherlock would leave for anyone – and she shot John a pitying smile as she handed him some coffee. 'You look like you need it,' she explained. 'More than Sherlock, anyway.'

'Yeah, God knows what keeps him going.' John sipped the brew, aware of Molly's thoughtful expression. 'What?'

'There are a couple of chairs in my office, cushioned, but without any arms. It's not a bad place for a nap.'

John almost declined, but the heavy drag of sleep was drawing cobwebs across his vision, and it
wasn't like he was doing Sherlock any favours by staying awake. 'I should just go back to Baker Street.'

'But you won't.' Molly smiled at John's huff of laughter. 'Go on. He won’t even notice you’re gone.' She gestured to the open door of her little sanctuary, and John set his empty mug aside as he surrendered.

‘Wake me up if he needs anything?’ he asked.

‘I will. Sleep well.’

The two chairs were not the most comfortable of surfaces, short even by John’s standards, but he was too tired to care. His shattered sleep the previous night was catching up with him, and his eyelids felt like sandpaper. He curled up under his coat, ignoring the light seeping through the window in the door as he allowed a doze to claim him.

If Molly crept in to use her office at any point, John remained oblivious. The next thing he knew after closing his eyes was that someone was shaking him awake, shoving a polystyrene cup under his nose and passing him a bundle that smelled of bacon. His grateful noise of surprise got a laugh from Greg, and as John shuffled up, he sank into the seat at his side. ‘Should have known Sherlock would keep you here all night.’

‘Not his fault,’ John said around a mouthful of butty. He probably shouldn’t be eating it only a few paces from a lab containing God knew what, but he was too hungry to care. ‘I didn’t want to leave him here on his own.’

Greg grunted, tapping a file against his palm before gesturing to the clock. ‘Looks like you didn’t sleep badly, though. All that army training, I suppose.’

John blinked at the timepiece, which proclaimed it was encroaching on ten in the morning. He must have been more knackered than he thought, and he struggled to factor in the missing hours. ‘Is Sherlock still at it?’

‘Of course he is. He only stopped for a minute when I came in. Told me to get you that.’ Lestrade gestured to the impromptu meal John was devouring. ‘Didn’t even ask why I was here.’

John made an interested noise, licking ketchup off his finger before pitching the wrapper into the bin and taking a gulp of coffee. It was luke-warm, but it hit the spot. ‘Had a breakthrough?’

‘I wouldn’t quite put it that way,’ Greg muttered. ‘Come on, we’d better share it with his nibs.’

John followed him into the lab, restraining a sigh when he saw Sherlock where he’d left him, surrounded by scribbled notes as the computer whirred at his side. There were sketches of chemical structure and things written in a code that John couldn’t begin to comprehend. It didn’t look like progress, but Sherlock appeared engrossed.

‘What’s that?’ he asked as Greg approached, glancing up to squint at the file. John got a good look at his face and couldn’t suppress his wince. Yesterday’s shadows had darkened dramatically, and the dusk of stubble on Sherlock’s jaw was stark against his skin, which seemed even more pale than usual.

‘You all right?’ he asked, not missing the way Sherlock’s hand trembled around the pen.

‘Adequate,’ he responded dismissively, ignoring the dubious glance John and Greg shared. ‘Well, are you just going to stand there?’
‘Hand sanitizer,’ Lestrade said at last. ‘Took a bit of digging, but it turns out this stuff is a bit special. Made specifically for those with a sensitivity to the normal ingredients. It’s only available through requisition by a medical establishment, and the only two places to get any in the past year are the Wellington and the Avery institute.’

Sherlock paused, narrowing his eyes at Greg as John frowned.

‘Isn’t that where Kirkpatrick worked? The one who killed Annaliese Ducart on his operating table?’

Sherlock hummed in agreement, a gleam igniting his tired eyes. ‘I believe he remains in police custody.’

‘You think he could be behind all this?’ Greg asked, whistling in disbelief. ‘I mean, killing an Omega is bad enough, but if we can add all this to his charges…’

‘I hate to break it to you, Lestrade, but Kirkpatrick wouldn’t be my first suspect. Dubious on motive, if nothing else. He was making money and helping Miss Ducart for personal reasons. Question him; he might confess, but I suspect it’s someone else associated with his chop-shop surgical team. Someone less prominent. A student, perhaps.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Sherlock’s breath escaped him in a sigh. ‘Students move more easily in the underbelly of society and are likely to be able to gather the correct connections to make this scheme work. It’s an educated guess, rather than a deduction, but Kirkpatrick will tell you more, given the correct incentive.’

Lestrade was about to reply when Sergeant Donovan pushed her way through the door. The rubber seals squeaked on the linoleum, and her heels clicked on the floor as she marched towards them. She didn’t wait to reach Greg’s side before speaking up, her strong tones loud in the peace of the lab. ‘We’ve had another body show up, not far from here. I thought you’d want the freak to take a look.’

‘Homeless?’ Sherlock asked, ignoring Sally’s insult.

‘Doesn’t seem like it. Been dead a couple of hours. It looks like he just sat on some steps and fell asleep. No signs of violence, but no wallet either. Someone could have nicked it.’

‘Any ID?’ Greg asked as Sherlock got to his feet, reaching for his coat.

‘None yet. We’re working on it. Are you coming?’ She directed that at Sherlock, who cast a deadened glare in her direction.

‘Obviously. I can spare half-an-hour, then I need to get back to this.’ He gestured to the chaos across the lab bench. ‘Molly, don’t let anyone touch anything.’

‘I’m going home in twenty minutes,’ she replied. ‘I can’t make any promises.’

Sherlock muttered something irritable under his breath before collecting his work together and handing it to Greg. ‘That’s what I’ve got so far. It’s not much, but it’s a start. Whoever’s doing this is using chemicals which influence hormonal levels. It’s a cocktail. I’ve identified two components, but I suspect there are another five or six, and they’re less obvious than those I’ve already found.’

‘Well, it’s more than anyone else has managed.’ He reached out a hand as Sherlock wobbled where he stood, and John stepped forward, ready to offer his support. ‘You need to get some food in you,’ Greg said. ‘You look fit to drop.’
‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

‘I’m fine.’ Sherlock tugged himself away from the DI’s grip, pulling up his collar and folding the Belstaff around himself. ‘Where exactly is the corpse?’

John fell in at Sherlock’s heels, absently noticing the stiffness of his movements. Of course, it could be from hours of sitting at the lab bench, the same as his instability could be down to hunger. Sherlock was the master of deprivation, but he’d gone longer without food and sleep with no ill-effects, and unease trickled down John’s spine. It was no good trying to make Sherlock go home. All John could do was hover on the side-lines and wait for the moment when his intervention became a necessity.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked, realising he hadn’t heard a word of Sally’s response. He smiled apologetically as Greg cast him a knowing look.

‘Brooker Street.’

‘That’s only a couple of minutes’ walk away.’

‘At least it’s convenient for the morgue,’ Sherlock replied as they made their way through the hospital and stepped outside.

The second they emerged, Sherlock’s phone buzzed, receiving a flurry of text messages. No doubt the dodgy reception in Bart’s meant they’d failed to get through. He retrieved the device with a frown, pulling a face which could only mean Mycroft was responsible.

‘Aren’t you going to read them?’ John asked, huddling against the wind that pushed at his back as Sherlock replaced his phone.

‘He’d have called you if it was important.’

‘I’m not your PA,’ John replied disapprovingly. ‘Besides, I turned mine off last night when I was sleeping in Molly’s office.’ He sighed when Sherlock shrugged, digging out his mobile and switching it on. A second later, it started to ring, Mycroft’s name as clear as day on the screen. He ignored Sherlock’s sound of disgust, his stomach swooping uncomfortably as he answered it.

‘Hello?’

‘John.’ Mycroft’s voice was terse, a thin veneer of annoyance running over something that sounded a lot like fear. ‘Is Sherlock with you?’

‘Yeah, yeah he’s here.’ He licked his lips, already suspecting the reason Mycroft seemed rigid with anxiety. ‘I take it Alexander’s back in town?’

‘He arrived late yesterday afternoon. Initially, it was apparent he was here on unrelated business, so I monitored him, but did not intervene. Unfortunately, I cannot keep him out of the city altogether.’ The tone of Mycroft’s voice suggested that was a state of affairs he planned to rectify in the near future. ‘He gave my team the slip three-and-a-half hours ago. I was endeavouring to reach my brother to warn him.’

John’s chest tightened, and his voice gritted between his teeth. ‘And you didn’t think you should come and tell him yourself?’ he demanded. ‘You lost track of him ages ago, and –’

‘And, regrettably, I was not informed of that fact until forty minutes ago,’ Mycroft cut in, sounding quietly furious. ‘I’m already on my way to St Bart’s as it is.’
‘The lab has phones,’ John pointed out. ‘You could have called him on one.’

‘I don’t trust the security of the lines,’ Mycroft replied, his voice edged in such a way that made John wonder if it was paranoia, or informed concern. ‘As long as Sherlock remains in the labs, he’s safe, but I needed to ensure the two of you were together.’

‘We’re with the police, on our way to a crime scene,’ John explained, seeing one of the cameras nearby swivel. ‘What should we do?’ His first instinct was to drag Sherlock back to Baker Street, where at least they had a surveillance perimeter of sorts, but he doubted his efforts would meet with cooperation. ‘We’re in the middle of a case, and I don’t think Sherlock will let it go. Especially not because of – ’

Abruptly, Sherlock lurched to a halt, his expression stricken as a hoarse, choking noise caught in his throat. Immediately, John tensed, adrenaline surging through him as he tried to understand what could have caused such a reaction.

‘Mycroft, I’ll call you back.’ He hung up, reaching Sherlock’s right-hand side in a couple of strides, his hand already stretched out to steady him. Greg was on his left, wide-eyed with concern, and even Sally looked more worried than snide.

‘What’s his problem?’ she demanded, folding her arms as John ignored her. He was too busy concentrating on Sherlock. No longer was he merely white. His skin had faded to the colour of bone: bloodless. A fine sheen of sweat glossed his temples, and his eyes were squeezed shut as he pressed his hand to his nose, his entire body locked in repulsed paralysis.

Belatedly, John realised the wind had changed direction, no longer at their backs, but blowing in from ahead. He couldn’t pick up anything beyond London’s standard miasma on the breeze, but clearly Sherlock smelled something.

‘Just – just go without us,’ Lestrade urged his sergeant, pointing to the end of the street. ‘We’ll catch up.’

She looked like she wanted to argue, torn between annoyance and genuine worry, but after a silent battle of wills with her DI, she did as she was asked. Her footsteps echoed along the quiet street, slowly fading out of earshot, and John checked around for passers-by.

‘What the hell is going on?’ Greg asked. He swore as Sherlock’s knees threatened to give way, grabbing his arm and bracing his weight as John guided them back to someone’s front steps.

The moment he sat down, Sherlock doubled over, curling up with his head on his knees. John hunkered down in front of him, spreading his shoulders as if he could block out the rest of the world. He could hear Sherlock’s breathing: quick, shallow and panicked. He still had his nose pinched shut, and air whistled between his barely-parted lips in the meagre space he’d left for himself.

Un-nameable emotion oozed through John’s frame, and he reached out, curving his fingers around Sherlock’s shoulder. He spoke softly, smoothing the jagged edges of his consonants as he tried to confirm his fears.

‘Is this what I think it is?’

Sherlock made a noise, nothing as complex as words, but a low keening deep in his throat, thrumming with stress and pain. The hand not blocking his nose reached out blindly, clutching the sleeve of John’s jacket, his knuckles knotted and his arms shaking.

He managed to lift his head, and one look was all the confirmation John needed. That acute gaze was
blank, blindsided and stunned. “Shocked” didn’t cover it.

John cursed, clinging to Sherlock with one hand while he groped in his pocket for his phone with the other, dialling Mycroft’s number as he answered Greg’s question.

‘I think I know the identity of the corpse.’

The DI may be many things, but he wasn’t stupid. His face paled, and he blew out a shuddering breath as John finally gave voice to his suspicion.

‘It’s Sherlock’s Alpha.’
If he were in his right mind, Sherlock knew his reaction would repulse him. It was the epitome of weak, riddled with the indignity of nausea’s burn and the shame of an intellect reduced to ashes. The instant the rancid scent of fresh decay reached his nose, rationality and instinct cleaved in two. One stark realisation, and his world broke into pieces at his feet.

Alexander was dead.

Muscles locked in denial, cramping his joints and turning the cradle of his ribs into a cage. He was still breathing – his lungs swelled with each ragged snatch of air – but the kiss of oxygen failed to sustain him. His blood surged, glutinous with panic, and not even the fragrance of his leather glove, crammed as tight to his nose as possible, could block out the stench.

Someone grabbed his elbow, reliable and firm, but he couldn’t comprehend anything around the keening alarm that ricocheted through his head. Dimly, he realised Donovan was watching him. She stood a few paces away, her head cocked and her face contorted in confusion.

Sherlock screwed up his eyes, blocking out the sight of her fear. No doubt she thought he’d lost his mind. Perhaps she was right. Was that what this was? This blank, deranged horror that sank through his skin and pooled in his bones like poison, turning him to stone from the inside out? How was it possible that he could still see, and yet he felt so blind? All his deductions had fled, birds taking flight far beyond his reach, and the foundations of his logic crumbled like wet sand.

His ears rang as his knees gave out. The hand at his elbow tightened, and another rested on his shoulder: an unexpected anchor. Lestrade’s voice brought with it a flicker of focus. It was a lifeline in a stormy sea – a flash of silver in dark water – but Sherlock had neither the sense nor ability to grip it. By the time he was aware of it, the words had fallen silent, carried away on the dim percussion of Donovan’s receding footsteps.

Hands guided him, urging his useless legs to bend as they pressed him down onto something cold but solid. It was a stable point in a reality which had begun to pitch and spin, threatening to slip sideways from beneath his feet and leave him tumbling into an abyss.

Immediately, he hunched over, his body making itself less of a target as he tried to ground himself, shying away from the endless blankness that threatened to flood him to the core.

He had imagined this scenario, but never had such intensity factored in to his extrapolations. Foolishly, he had expected some brief melancholy: unavoidable, chemically-induced regret. He had believed those Omegas who buckled beneath the strain, pining for people they’d once proclaimed to hate, were weak-willed – the products of a society that sought to keep them in their place.

For the first time, a glimmer of understanding was within his reach. This was not the bright agony of heartbreak. It was an insidious chill, as if something were digging out his insides and leaving him with a black hole at his core around which he would collapse. It dragged at him with frigid hands, folding him inwards: a crumpled origami man.

Someone touched his shoulder, their palm cupped with care as if they were afraid to shatter him. The warmth of their skin didn’t penetrate his coat: it was pressure, nothing more, and Sherlock tried to understand how all the heat could have vanished so abruptly from his existence.

‘Is this what I think it is?’
John’s voice. Sherlock would know it anywhere. Usually, it brought with it a host of emotions, but today there was nothing. A few hours ago, he’d stood in the living room, mesmerised by the shape of John’s mouth and the temptation of a kiss between them. Now, the memory seemed like a hallucination – something born of a dream.

He reached out, his fingers twisting in the fabric of John’s sleeve. A noise escaped his throat, rough-edged and deep. Words were beyond him, their precision eroded by the encroaching darkness that enfolded him from every side. All he could do was whine – an inarticulate plea for help – for John to make this stop because Sherlock was losing himself by increments. How long did he have before there was nothing left?

God, this couldn’t be happening. It was a nightmare; it had to be. He refused to believe that this moment was real – that he could be brought so low by so little: a man whom he had grown to loathe. Even Alexander, for all his faults, wouldn’t be so stupid as to die.

Lifting his head, he peeled his eyes open, desperate to find an alternative explanation in John’s face. He was right there, squatting in front of him. He looked solid and irrefutable, undeniably real amidst this ridiculous illusion, and a shiver whipped down Sherlock’s spine. He could focus on so little, his concentration scattered to the four corners and torn to pieces by the ravaging ice that settled in his veins. For John, however, he made the effort, reading the story written in the worried lines of his face.

There was plenty to see: a furrowed brow, pale cheeks, blue eyes turned glaucous with concern. Those thin lips pinched tight, bleached by the pressure of John’s jaw, and it drove home the truth of what was happening. John wouldn’t lie to him. John wouldn’t let him suffer, yet there he was, his suspicions crystallising into certainty with every second he met Sherlock’s gaze.

John’s curse coloured the air, but Sherlock barely heard it as he drew back into himself, pulling away from the input of his transport. He was aware of it, but much like the day Alexander had shown up at Baker Street, it became an irrelevant fact of his existence. He had a body, and it was his, but he could not bring himself to understand its distress. It was his connection to a life in which the events were... impossible.

So he sank into the frost that took root within him, letting it desensitise any semblance of emotion that tried to enslave him. His outline bled away, spread thin until there was no definition. Logically, he knew he was still there, still solid: a construct of blood and bone and flesh, but it was an abstract concept, and one he did his best to ignore.

There were noises, people talking, but they may as well have been speaking a foreign language. It was a garbled mess of sound, and Sherlock ignored it as he drew his legs up to his chest. The Belstaff hung from his shoulders, following the contours of his body like a shroud, and he stared at the black wool, losing himself to the glassy film of denial that thickened across the surface of his mind’s eye.

He stayed as he was, still and small, the better to avoid attention. However, he was aware that to those who mattered it seemed to have the opposite effect. Neither John nor Lestrade left his side, yet nor did they know how to approach him. No one tried to peel back the shell he built around himself. Instead, they stood like sentries, shielding him from the world with the curve of their shoulders. Their bodies swayed, restless, probably driven by the urge to get Sherlock away from the source of his misery but unable to do so: waiting for something.

A number of minutes later, the squeal of tyres interrupted the silence. A black vehicle slid to an inelegant halt at the kerb. Sherlock was too far gone to give any thought to the significance, even when Mycroft surged from the back, his umbrella absent and his jacket creased as if he had flung
himself into the car without care for his attire.

Those few observations should mean something, but they slipped through Sherlock’s awareness, and he turned his gaze away. The clean slate of London’s cracked pavement was preferable to the ugly surge of emotion that splashed like paint over Mycroft’s face: pity, sadness and regret.

More words burbled around him, and Sherlock wondered if he should try and discern their importance. However, that would require him to step forward again – to acknowledge what was happening – and a welt of repulsion oozed across his mind at the notion.

‘Sherlock, look at me.’

He obeyed. In retrospect, his acceptance of Mycroft’s command probably underscored the severity of his behaviour to those who witnessed it. He saw Lestrade’s features crumple in concern, and John folded his arms around himself. Both of them looked worn by helplessness, ashen and anxious, but it was nothing in comparison to Mycroft’s expression.

Grief.

It aged him by a decade or more, carving brackets around his lips and curving his spine as he crouched down. Those muddy blue eyes searched Sherlock’s face, and he returned the scrutiny impassively, disengaged. Waiting.

He knew this was not his normal response. He disobeyed Mycroft out of spite, determined to keep his older sibling entangled in their petty war of attrition, but he didn’t have the energy to feed their conflict. He felt small again, young, turning to the person who, once, before he’d known what Sherlock was, would have moved heaven and earth to right any wrong against him.

Mycroft’s mind was hard at work. For all the sentiment staining his face, he could still think. He was not lost amidst a fog of disbelief, unable to make sense of the abrupt turn in the path of Sherlock’s life. Sherlock almost envied him that clarity, but even that emotion hovered beyond his reach.

His brother took a breath, the air halting in his chest as he appeared to search for the right words. ‘Do you need to see the body?’

Lestrade made a rough sound of protest: the automatic response of a normal person to what many might view as an improperly direct query. John, Sherlock realised, didn’t say a word. He understood how Sherlock worked better than the DI and could no doubt comprehend the potential necessity of seeing the truth with his own eyes.

In theory, it was a valid question, but the rank odour in the air (how fortunate they were, that they remained oblivious to it) was all the confirmation Sherlock needed. Perhaps if the sight of Alexander’s body could offer more: a traumatic wound, a bloody sprawl, something undeniably dead, it would solidify the instability of his mind, but that was not what awaited him.

Alexander would be like the others: not sliced or battered, but whole. He would look like he was sleeping, and there was no realisation to be found in that. It would do nothing to pierce the veil of clammy disbelief that enfolded him.

He shook his head: a minimalist movement that took a gargantuan effort. His muscles shuddered as another rash of ice suffused his skin, and he managed one, long exhale amidst the flutter of his breathing.

Mycroft turned to Lestrade. ‘There’s a file on the back seat containing all the pertinent information on Alexander Cunningham. There should be plenty there to allow a positive identification. I have
very little reason to believe that my brother’s reaction is anything but a response to his Alpha’s genuine demise, but I still wish to be sure.’

‘You want me to confirm it?’ Lestrade asked, already turning towards the vehicle and liberating the fat dossier. Pale brown. It matched the colour of his hands, Sherlock realised. Was this what he had been reduced to? Meaningless observations and ridiculous comparisons?

‘My assistant will be waiting for you at the crime scene. In different circumstances, I would want to see for myself, but I have more pressing concerns to attend.’ He paused, as if expecting a protest from Sherlock – some stinging reprimand at discussing him like he wasn’t there – but none came. Sherlock held his silence, indifferent to Mycroft’s behaviour. ‘I need to get my brother back to Baker Street.’

‘Is – is that a good idea?’ Lestrade looked like he didn’t want to ask, but he tightened his jaw as he pushed on, the evidence of his determination plain. ‘You always said he was safe as long as he was bound.’ He dropped his voice, soft and apologetic. ‘It’s just that, if it is his Alpha, then he’s not any more, is he?’ He looked from John to Mycroft before the weight of that brown gaze fell upon Sherlock.

‘Maybe he’d be better off out of London?’

The idea blazed through Sherlock’s mind like a hot iron, chasing away his shocked indifference. He could see it all too easily: his banishment back to the isolation of the countryside to await his fate. His life would be left behind, decimated and in ruin, never to be reclaimed.

His protest was a thin cry on his lips, and he dropped his hand from his nose, the better to be heard.

Immediately, the stench slammed into his sinuses. He jerked back, torn between the intrinsic desire to flee and the unresponsiveness of his limbs. Agony shot through his stomach as it cramped, his body convulsing around a retch. His heave was dry and useless, strong enough to make his spine ache, and a fresh wash of sweat pricked his brow. Stars exploded across his vision, and for one reeling second he thought he would pass out before warm hands stroked his temples, easing back his hair.

‘Home.’ John spoke as if he were laying down the law, his fingers shaking against Sherlock’s skin. ‘We can work out what to do next once we’re there, but we have to get him out of here.’

‘As you wish.’ Mycroft’s response was demure and submissive: an easy relinquishment of control to John. Either his brother had more respect for his flatmate than Sherlock had realised, or he was keeping his suspicions to himself, for once. ‘As for your concerns, Detective Inspector: Sherlock is at no more risk from the unwanted advances of Alphas than he has been for the duration of your acquaintance. It will take several weeks, at least, for his unbound nature to re-establish itself, and he will not go into pyresus before then. For now, his emotional welfare takes priority. 221B is where he will feel the most secure.’

‘Can you stand?’ John murmured, his fingers dropping from the side of Sherlock’s face to his shoulder. He squeezed gently, as if trying to instil him with the strength he’d need to move. The sensation was distant, its relevance hard to define, but Sherlock endeavoured to make the effort.

Opening his eyes, he tried to comprehend the scene, but it was like seeing the cogs of a magnificent machine scattered over grassland. What once formed a united whole was now beyond him, and he wrenched his feeble mind towards the task of concentrating on the one stable element he knew he could trust. Sherlock was not a man of faith, but what little he had he placed in John’s hands.

He attempted to stand, clutching at his friend’s arm for support as his hips ached and his knees
wobbled. Pain seized him wherever one bone met another, and he tried not to cry out as he limped towards the car. The few paces may as well have been miles, but after what felt like hours, he was finally able to climb into the waiting vehicle.

The leather seat cradled his body, and he slid along the back, huddling against the far door and leaning his cheek against the window. The cold glass added to his internal chill, but it was a striking boundary: something solid to which he could cling. The overcast sky had started to birth raindrops, and they dotted the pane, distorting the world in their curvature.

Mycroft settled next to the driver as John slid in at Sherlock’s side, small and dejected in the bulk of his jacket. He looked pale, and Sherlock knew he should do something – say something – but such efforts were beyond him. Besides, any comfort he could offer would be a falsehood, and John would see through it in a heartbeat. No, right now he knew it was better to remain honest in his silence than try and give credence to a lie.

John’s worry flavoured the air, a mere hint in contrast to the greasy patina that painted Sherlock’s tongue with its vile flavour. Even in the car there was no escaping Alexander’s rot. It seemed to follow him, coating the inside of his head and catching in the back of his throat.

London passed, the city’s spin changing with every revolution of the car’s wheels, but Sherlock saw nothing of the metropolis. It was a backdrop to his distress: a vibrant place made lifeless. Once, the hurry of the pedestrians beneath their umbrellas would have captivated him, and the flicker and change of the traffic lights would have held him mesmerised with their bizarre rhythms, but now he couldn’t remember what fascination felt like.

None of it made any sense, and his mind spun, loose and unwieldy in its efforts to comprehend.

Baker Street came into view, but the familiar lines of its frontage brought him no solace. He tried, digging down deep in an effort to conjure the faintest hint of relief to see the building that had become his sanctuary, but it was no use. His body was an empty vessel: a collection of viscera with no function beyond the drag of his breath and the beat of his heart.

There was a flurry of movement as John and Mycroft vacated the vehicle, but Sherlock remained ragdoll limp. Perhaps it was best if he stayed as he was; the car was black, hearse-like. It felt appropriate that he should remain here, motionless and unresponsive. Maybe then he wouldn’t have to face what lay ahead.

He shied away from considerations of the future. This morning there had been hope: the promise of speaking with John once they had finished with the case. There was the notion of exploring, with words if not fingertips, the ways in which their relationship could change. Now all that was gone, and the blade of loss sliced through his apathy, leaving him breathless.

The click of the handle carried an air of finality, and Sherlock steeled his spine as John pulled open the door. There would be no hiding here, a phantom in his brother’s back seat. Inaction would not save him from whatever the next weeks and months held. The broken world moved on, and it would not show him the mercy of leaving him behind.

‘Come on,’ John urged. ‘A few more steps, and you’ll be home.’

Sherlock blinked, lifting his gaze to meet those blue eyes. Concern lay thick in his expression: a rigid mask over the malleable lines of John’s face, and Sherlock couldn’t bear the sight for long. Instead, he ducked his head, staring once more at London’s rimose concrete as he stumbled upright.

At least in John’s tender voice the word “home” gained some substance. It was more than four mere
letters, and Sherlock wished he’d repeat himself, just so he could grasp the fleeting ideal of their shared haven. Nothing else could return that to him – not the gleam of the brass knocker or the glimmer of the number in pride of place. Mrs Hudson’s questions, little more than babble to Sherlock’s ears, could provide no peace, and he allowed John to herd him up the stairs: every step as insurmountable as the last.

Shouldering the door aside, John stood back so that Sherlock could shuffle over the threshold. He went slowly, one hand splayed against the wallpaper for balance while the other curled in a fist against his chest. There was no point blocking his nose. The damage had been done; molecules were now bound to receptors, triggering the creeping cascade of reactions that would be his eventual undoing.

He stared around the flat, trying to glue the fragments of his life into an acceptable whole. The result of his efforts was a hideous remnant: a hobbling, crippled spectacle of an existence that had, so abruptly, been shaken to the ground.

Sherlock could hear Mycroft talking to Mrs Hudson, informing her of the situation, perhaps. It wasn’t as if it could remain a secret for long, and he pressed his lips tight as fear clamoured in his hollow head.

It threatened to drown him, and only John’s touch pulled him free as he eased him down into the armchair. It was not the leather one that he normally favoured, but the yielding softness of John’s domain, and he blinked up at the man who hovered at his side.

‘What do you need?’ John asked, his tongue darting out to wet his lips as he shifted his weight, ready to bolt away and do Sherlock’s bidding. ‘Anything. Anything at all, and I’ll get it for you.’

He sounded earnest and desperate, as if he believed there was some miracle cure he could provide. Sherlock did not know how to say that the one thing he wanted was impossible. He wished it to be yesterday again – his life restricted but stable. He wanted to know with absolute certainty that he was the master of his destiny. Instead he was here, not even in command of his own body, let alone the path of his future.

He’d fled Alexander’s captivity and battled to remain unimpeded by his demands for endless, exhausting years. Now, in dying, the bastard had succeeded in caging him once more. In so many ways, he’d been the key to Sherlock’s freedom: the detail which had made it possible. Without him, it all fell apart.

Shaking his head, he failed to provide John with a response. Distantly, he knew there were options open to him – potential avenues of action, some more dire than others – but he couldn’t wrap the power of his intellect around them. Strategy was beyond him, and he could only cower deeper into the Belstaff, huddling mute in John’s chair as his brother entered the room.

He expected Mycroft to turn to John. It was an old habit of his. Once Sherlock had presented, his brother's instinct had been to discuss him with others, rather than ask his opinion. It was a relic of their upbringing, cemented into the bedrock of Mycroft's personality. As such, a fleeting glimmer of surprise sparked in Sherlock’s head when his brother shrugged out of his jacket and dragged the coffee table closer to John's armchair, sitting on it like a king on his throne as he spoke.

'I appreciate that this has come as a shock,' he said quietly, his voice smooth but carrying notes of urgency beneath every syllable. 'If platitudes would bring you relief, I'd give them to you, but we both know they're useless. Alexander's dead, and he's taken with him any security your future once held.'
'Mycroft, is this really necessary now?' John asked, perching on the arm of the chair at Sherlock's side. His presence was neither imposing nor overly threatening, but Sherlock had enough sense to recognise the protective undertones to his proximity. Both Mycroft and John were worried for him, and they addressed the issue in different ways. John sought to ensure his health and emotional well-being: all immediate, conspicuous concern. Mycroft worked in the intangible, manipulating events and smoothing the road ahead.

'Perhaps not,' his brother conceded, 'but it has to be said. There are decisions that Sherlock may be forced to make in the coming days – ones that will not wait.' Those calm eyes, reminiscent of their father's, met Sherlock's gaze, and when he spoke again he did so with more sympathy than Sherlock had heard from him for years.

'I'm aware that Alexander's existence made your happiness here in Baker Street a possibility. It was, perhaps, the sole reason I bowed to your wishes not to have him... removed.' Mycroft fiddled with his cuff. 'I've already told John that I will do whatever I can to protect your current way of life. It was written into the bonding contract that, should Alexander pass away, you would revert to being my responsibility until you had mourned fully.'

He stared down at his hands, absorbed in the weave of his fingers as Sherlock looked on, blank but receptive, listening. 'I cannot say for certain how much time that will buy for us to negotiate with the Cunningham family. The death of their son makes any efforts on our part delicate by necessity, but your biology sets an unknown deadline.'

Mycroft pressed his thumb to his lip, tapping it against the thin line of flesh. 'As soon as you're able to do so, you need to consider your options.' He glanced towards John before looking back at Sherlock. 'I will do everything in my power to make your choice a possibility, but I need to know what you decide in order to give you the support you may require.'

Sherlock closed his eyes, dropping his chin to his chest. He had analysed the possibilities – he would have been foolish not to. Accounting for every eventuality was what had kept him out of Alexander's hands for so long. However, it was one thing to construct a course of action in the abstract. It was a different matter to face a very real decision.

Worse, his situation worked against him, robbing his mind of its usual clarity. His own inability hemmed him in, tight and claustrophobic as a knot of air caught in his chest. He could see how widowed Omegas changed hands so readily. How could they put up a fight in this situation? How could they consider their future when they were trapped in the biochemical fugue of the present - losing themselves to wretched emotion beyond the purview of the conscious mind?

He bit his lip hard, focussing on the pain in an effort to lock himself in the here-and-now. A whisper of blood coated his tongue in copper, but he ignored it. His hands knotted into fists, digging his nails into his palms as he lined up the words in his mind before coaxing his hoarse voice to deliver them.

'Whatever I decide, the Cunninghams will have no place in it,' he managed, struggling to speak around the tightness in his chest. He sounded wretched, but he persevered. 'For now, make sure I don't revert to their possession once my biology makes me eligible to form another bond.'

Mycroft nodded, his shoulders moving as he drew in a deep breath, his mind already working behind the gleam of his eyes. Again, his gaze flickered to John. Some twist of emotion Sherlock didn't understand pinched his features, and he cleared his throat. 'Doctor Watson, would you mind giving me a moment alone with my brother?'

It wasn't a request, no matter how much Mycroft tried to make it sound like one, and Sherlock gave a weary blink. Normally, he'd argue – John expected as much – but his strength had fled. All he
wanted was to hide somewhere dark and forget everything about the world that crowded in on him from all sides. The sooner his brother said his piece and left, the better.

'I –' John sounded conflicted, as if letting Sherlock out of his sight was the last thing he wanted to do. 'I, yeah I suppose. I'll be down with Mrs Hudson?' He turned to Sherlock, his expression radiating uncertainty. When no protest was forthcoming he got to his feet, casting a doubtful look at Mycroft before slipping out of the door and trotting down the stairs.

'Thank you,' Mycroft murmured, rubbing his hand over his jaw in an abnormal sign of discomposure. 'I do not wish to offend John, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention my concerns about you recovering here, with him, when you're in such a – precarious – state.'

Sherlock stared, unable to summon so much as a glare as he waited for Mycroft to say what he meant.

'I'm concerned that John may have his own agenda. He may force or otherwise manipulate you into bonding before you are capable of making that decision for yourself with anything akin to a clear head.' Mycroft lifted his chin, looking for all the world like he expected a punch. Yet the normal font of fury at his brother’s interference failed to make an appearance. A pit dwelt where anger’s heat may once have been, and Sherlock let out a frail sigh.

John was many things, but his personality was built upon a solid core of loyalty and integrity. What Mycroft was suggesting came from a knowledge of the Alpha elite. He thought of machinations and plots because the notion of friendship lay beyond his reach. Despite his intelligence, he could not help but see Alpha and Omega when he looked at them, and he allowed his preconceptions to overrule his better judgement.

It was an astronomical effort to speak again, but Sherlock could not allow John's good name to go undefended. 'He is not Alexander,' he said, his voice flat and atonal. 'He is not of the elite. He doesn't think the way we do. No one out here in the real world does.'

'Naive,' Mycroft chided. 'There are people out here who would use you terribly.'

'Perhaps,' Sherlock acknowledged, 'but not John. Not Lestrade either. They're not him.' He stopped, exhausted by the effort. His arms braced his own torso, hanging on tight. Without their restraint, he feared that he would fly apart, and he clung to his own boundaries with all his feeble power.

Even Mycroft could not miss his obvious anguish, and he leaned forward, tapping his fingers against Sherlock's elbow: as close to physical comfort as he would ever offer. 'I apologise.' For once, he looked genuinely contrite. In another time and place, Sherlock might have mocked him for such obvious sentiment. 'I didn't feel I could leave it unsaid, but I trust your judgement.'

Licking his lips, Sherlock closed his eyes in wretched gratitude. The Mycroft he had known throughout his young adulthood would not have accepted any argument from Sherlock. There would have been neither acknowledgement nor compromise. This, he realised, was a man who had seen the failings of the society in which he was raised, and was taking steps to fight against it.

With a voice no stronger than a whisper, he added one last bit of reassurance. 'Even if John were the kind of person to try something so underhanded, do you think I'm too stupid to be on my guard?'

'You trust him,' Mycroft pointed out, the lines in his face deepening when Sherlock managed a frail response.

'Not enough.'
'But you want to.' His smile was thin-lipped. ‘I simply wish for you to be careful. You are vulnerable and, even if it’s unintentional, John holds power over you by default. My doubts are, most likely, unfounded, though hardly surprising, considering that the last Alpha whom I entrusted with your care and happiness failed so miserably.’

Baker Street fell calm around them, the city’s melody a dirge to Sherlock’s ears. Mycroft’s unease came off of him in waves, his regret still palpable after all this time. There was nothing Sherlock could do to relieve it, and an exhausted, petty part of himself decided his brother deserved the punishment.

‘I shall do as you have asked of me,’ Mycroft said at length, easing himself to his feet and collecting his suit jacket from where he’d flung it across Sherlock’s leather chair. ‘If there’s anything else you need, then say so. I would stay if I thought I could be of assistance, but I suspect my efforts would be more use elsewhere.’ He pursed his lips, vacillating between Sherlock’s side and the door. His brother rarely showed less than complete confidence, and Sherlock watched him through a veil of indifference, knowing that it was his lack of emotion, rather than a surfeit of it, which made Mycroft so uncomfortable.

In that, he suspected, John would be the same.

‘Take care, Sherlock. Please.’

There was a wealth left unspoken in his parting shot, and Sherlock swallowed. He knew there was worse to come – that he stood before an incoming tsunami of hormone-driven grief. There was no way to predict its severity, nor brace himself for its impact. All he could do was try to weather the storm of its passing and face what awaited him on the other side.

Assuming he survived the process.

Sherlock stared at where his fingers curved like claws around the summit of his knee, stark white lines against his dark trousers. The pink of his nail beds bleached beneath the force of his grip, and he suspected that bruises were forming, but he couldn’t feel their bite.

He had tried to research, once, what he might face if Alexander met a sticky end. During the exploration of more noir possibilities of escape – ones involving hatred and murder – he had considered the consequences to himself. However, the information was sparse and skewed to an Alpha’s perspective.

The descriptions of the mourning process he found in text books were universally vague. The implication was that an Omega’s suffering was an impediment to establishing a new bond. Even if an Alpha wanted to, they could not attempt to stake a claim, not until the mark from their predecessor healed. Generally speaking, it took around five weeks, though sometimes it lasted more than twice as long.

However, none of his research told him what to expect emotionally. There had been no warning of this strange, apathetic paralysis. He was waiting for a disaster – helpless against it, but dreading it all the same. There had been no hint that what was once autonomous thought and action would require conscious deliberation. Simple movements, forming sentences – all of it seemed to require a vast mental and physical effort. The fast-flowing waters of his mind had grown still and stagnant, his clarity clouded with sentiment as his considerations oozed like tar.

He was aware of soft voices downstairs: Mycroft talking to John. It was too distant to make out more than the general tone of what was being said, and Sherlock decided it was gratitude laced with warning. Mycroft knew he would do Sherlock no good by hovering at his side – not when his skills
were of more use elsewhere.

Instead it would be John who bore witness to all Sherlock’s misery. Normally, he’d shy away from the idea. John may have the professional care of a doctor on his side, as well as the respect he’d earned as Sherlock’s friend, but there were still some things he’d rather even John did not observe. Now, though, he couldn’t bring himself to care. What did it matter who saw him fall apart? What difference did it make?

He allowed his head to slump sideways, his cheek resting on the back of John’s chair as his body twisted itself into the narrow space of the seat. He huddled in his coat, his face buried in the fabric of the cushion as he inhaled John’s imbued scent. He had no idea what the old piece of furniture had smelled of before John came to live in Baker Street, but now there was a touch of coconut from John’s shampoo, hints of spilt tea, laundry detergent and warm spice.

Sherlock drew it in desperately. Perhaps it couldn’t remove the slick of Alexander’s deathly odour from his awareness, but it lessened the steady roll of nausea in Sherlock’s stomach and blunted the cutting edge of his simmering panic. It could not clear his mind, but it gave him something to cling to – a symphony of details which he could catalogue.

For a little while, the simple input allowed him to forget.

He wasn’t aware that he’d closed his eyes until someone draped a blanket over him, accompanied by the smell of bluebells: Mrs Hudson.

She offered a strained smile when he managed to look at her, worry shadowing her eyes as she perched on the coffee table Mycroft had vacated. She shifted, angling her body as she wrapped her smaller hand over Sherlock’s fingers.

‘John will be right up, dear,’ she promised. ‘He’s just seeing your brother out.’

True enough, he could still hear them talking in muted voices downstairs. Clearly, mere minutes had passed. Strange. It felt like hours.

He looked at Mrs Hudson, her face lined with more than age. The loose skin on her hands was weather-worn, thin over the veins and tendons, but that frailty belied her strength. Her hold on him was tender yet determined, and Sherlock dragged his eyes back up to meet her gaze as he forced himself to speak.

‘You already knew, didn’t you?’ he asked, watching kindness steal across her features as she nodded. ‘So much for keeping it secret.’

‘You hid it from the people who would use it to hurt you,’ she replied. ‘I’ve known since Florida. It’s hard to hide a mark like that, especially in all that heat.’ She pursed her lips, the pink shimmer of her lipstick worn thin over her mouth. ‘In the end, it’s part of why I trusted you. Your situation and mine – well, they weren’t so different back then. Not on the surface at least.’

Sherlock sighed, understanding her meaning. Her ties to her husband may have been legal, rather than biological, but there were parallels there in her helplessness. Except her husband’s death had ensured her freedom, while for Sherlock…

A breath stalled in his chest, sharper than the ones before, and he struggled against it as the fog of apathy began to thin, letting in tendrils of slithering fear. He tried to quash them, but they eluded him, leaving him clammy despite the layers of wool he wore.

Mrs Hudson made a fretful noise, patting his hand again before getting to her feet. ‘A cup of tea,’ she
suggested, already bustling to the kitchen. ‘That always helps me when I’m out of sorts.’

Sherlock clenched his jaw, wishing he had her faith in such a mundane cure as he listened to the familiar chime of old crockery and the seethe of the kettle. The general din almost disguised the sound of John ascending the stairs, but Sherlock picked up the faint scuff of his foot – the first hint of the psychosomatic limp putting in an appearance. He doubted anyone else would notice it, but it spoke volumes for the troubled surge of John’s thoughts.

He pushed his way through the front door before easing it closed with the flat of his palm. Sherlock watched him hesitate, probably still picking over whatever he’d discussed with Mycroft. He scrubbed his hands over his features like a man trying to wipe the slate clean, but Sherlock was not so blind that he couldn’t see the tight lines of anxiety and shock defining his frame.

A heartbeat later, John squared his shoulders and turned around, his face clear as his gaze moving unerringly to Sherlock.

He did not know what he expected to see in those blue eyes: sympathy was a given, but other emotions filled the confines of John’s expression, impossible for Sherlock to identify. He could only observe as John crossed the room and hunkered down in front of the armchair, one hand outstretched.

‘Can I touch you?’ He cocked his head, his fingers trembling where they hung in the air. He did not clarify, nor state any kind of medicinal purpose, but he asked for permission where neither Mycroft nor Mrs Hudson had thought to do so.

Sherlock managed a jerky nod, feeling a whisper of disappointment when John pressed two fingertips to his carotid artery, measuring the stutter of Sherlock’s pulse and the stagger of every breath. After a few seconds, his hand flattened, the broad blade of his palm cupping Sherlock’s jaw.

He didn’t offer a diagnosis. Maybe he knew there was no point. Sherlock was aware he was skating the permanent edge of a panic attack, holding it together, but only just.

‘Cold?’ John asked, grimacing as a shiver tore across Sherlock’s shoulders, answering his question. ‘Come on. I think bed might be the best place for you. You were tired before all this began, and now…’ He trailed off, shrugging his shoulders before straightening up. ‘Do you think you can stand?’

Sherlock blinked owlishly at John’s outstretched hand, registering the calloused palm beneath his fingertips as he allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. The room gave an abrupt lurch, and he swayed where he stood, the blanket trailing from one shoulder as he struggled not to collapse.

John held him up without question, giving him the time he needed to re-establish some idea of balance. ‘Mrs Hudson, can you get Sherlock some food? Toast, maybe, with nothing on it? He’s not eaten for God knows how long and it’s probably making things worse.’

‘Of course, dear. Tea’s on the side.’ She gestured towards the cups waiting on the surface before bustling downstairs, no doubt preferring to use her own appliances rather than trusting the toaster of 221B.

John led him gently, his endless patience an inadequate veil for his fears. Sherlock wondered if it was deliberate, the way he held himself, every angle screaming of his need to offer assistance. Normally, some element of dominance found its way into John’s stance – in the line of his shoulders or the jut of his jaw – but it was as if he’d stripped himself of anything that Sherlock may misread as an Alpha overtone.
Was that the result of his brother’s quiet conversation in the front hall? He must have said something to make John look so grim – layers of anger and confusion hidden beneath a nurturing mask. However, Sherlock couldn’t summon his usual indignation at Mycroft’s interfering ways. He could only slump onto the mattress as John eased him down onto its forgiving expanse.

Here, at least, there was seclusion: a semblance of privacy, and Sherlock ached to slip into oblivion. Pain pounded through his head, and his eyes stung with every blink. The trembling of his body had begun in earnest now, and he fought against the clumsiness of his fingers as he finally pulled off his gloves and shrugged out of his coat, ignoring the way the heavy wool dragged over raw skin.

‘Here,’ John murmured, putting Sherlock’s pyjamas down beside him: a ratty old t-shirt so worn with age it was almost transparent and some shapeless cotton trousers. They were his favourites when he was in heat. Light and loose, they barely touched him, and Sherlock clenched his fingers in the material. ‘Get changed, then get into bed. I’ll find you something to eat.’

He hesitated, waiting for some kind of acknowledgement, and Sherlock managed a nod before John slipped out of the door. He didn’t close it all the way, leaving the panel ajar. John was too practical to shut himself off from Sherlock in this situation. He wanted to be able to react to an unpredictable scenario, and Sherlock wondered at the perfect blend of medicinal care and soldierly strategy. John probably didn’t even realise he was doing it.

One stable element in a changing world.

Gracelessly, he divested himself of his shirt and trousers, shoes and socks, his gaze skimming over the red welts that were beginning to lift across his skin. They followed the paths of bigger veins, more apparent where his flesh was at its thinnest. It was the first sign of his system flooding itself with the destructive chemicals which would burn away Alexander’s bond: a biochemical reset switch.

Shrouding himself in the clothes John had left for him, he peeled back the covers, climbing into the pocket of comfort, and cowering in the fluffy cocoon. The cool whisper of cloth warmed to his body heat, and his lashes hushed against the pillowcase with every blink, but he didn’t close his eyes. Answering one demand of his transport meant he’d have to acknowledge the rest, from the ache and cramp of muscles to the unfamiliar, rotten feeling in his chest.

He was still lying there, curled on his side with the quilt pulled up to his chin, when John nudged his way back into the room, a plate of toast balanced in one hand and a cooling mug of tea clasped in the other. He set them on Sherlock’s bedside table, his expectations clear, but like so many other things today, Sherlock couldn’t bring himself to understand food and drink in relation to himself.

‘No thank you.’ His voice was a ragged, monotone vocalisation as he stared at nothing in particular. He didn’t blink as John perched on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees and his hands clamped together in front of him. The warmth of his proximity was a distant glow, but even his obvious distress couldn’t crack the walls that surrounded Sherlock’s mind.

More than once, he went to speak, but each indrawn breath was the precursor to another empty silence. John’s expressive face lay slack, and dread drew shadows over his eyes.

Sherlock tried to imagine how he must appear to someone on the outside, but he lacked the acuity to picture it. He knew he had been quiet, and not the deep, thoughtful silences to which John was accustomed. Did he seem as fragile as he felt? Did he look like a man whose world had collapsed, or was his face the same bland pane of glass that seemed to have erected itself around his consciousness, gelid and lifeless?
He did not mourn Alexander’s passing, not really, but all the security he had taken with him. However he looked at it, it was a huge loss, and the air carried a funerary edge as John sat with him in condoling silence.

Eventually, a weathered hand slid over the quilt, brushing at Sherlock’s fingers where they clutched the dense eiderdown before catching them in his grasp. John cradled Sherlock's palm, tipping his arm to the light so he could see the slow spread of mild inflammation charting fern patterns across half-hidden bones.

'I didn't—' John licked his lips, pursing them tight before he took a deep breath. 'I didn’t realise it would start so soon. Mycroft said it was like an illness, but...' He trailed off, looking to Sherlock for confirmation.

He looked haggard, desperate, and for once in his life, Sherlock felt a burst of untarnished gratitude towards his brother. Of course he had emphasised the physical to John, framing what was happening to him in the structure of a disease: something John had the power to treat. It took the feeling of uselessness pervading this whole situation and gave it some direction, for John at least.

Perhaps he should be honest – should explain that half of it, if not more, was a state of mind rather than a physical ailment – but Sherlock dismissed the idea. John needed something like this: a pattern of decline and recovery to monitor, and Sherlock's body would no doubt oblige and provide him with such.

'Mycroft wasn't being untruthful,' he eventually replied, watching John trace the blemishes across his flesh in analytical fascination. Yet it was not a detached exploration. His care bled out in the lightness of his touch and the intensity of his gaze. 'The physiological effects are not inconsiderable.'

John looked up at him, and Sherlock saw those shoulders regain some of their previous strength. With those few words, he had given John something to work with. The body and its ills were his domain of expertise, and while John may understand very little of the consequences of a bond's annihilation, Sherlock could see this realisation as a starting point. He knew John well: he would throw himself into research, attempting to understand what Sherlock was going through, but tantamount to that would be the same diligent care John had shown him time and again.

He would tend to Sherlock's ailing flesh, and perhaps in doing so he would give him the power to face the emotional devastation he knew would find him soon enough.

A hand rested in his curls, and John's thumb brushed against his temple, following the camber of bone. 'In that case, get some sleep if you can. It sounds like you're going to need your strength.'

There was no bracing joviality in those words. John said it like a man preparing for battle, and perhaps he didn't know what lay ahead, but Sherlock suspected John's imagination was attempting to fill in the blanks.

He wished there was something he could do to offer reassurance – ridiculous, that he felt such a thing necessary when he was the one suffering, but he hated to see John so tense – yet there was nothing he could say. He didn't have any answers, and all he could do was hunch tighter in the bower of his bed, shutting his eyes in quiet obedience.

Perhaps sleep would bring him some respite.

Slowly, the sounds around him began to dim. John moved around the flat, giving Sherlock the illusion of privacy while always being nearby to answer his call if necessary. Sherlock could feel his concern like a note out of place in their usual symphony, but there was nothing he could do to appease it. He was too busy trying to soothe the jagged, fractal sharpness of his fears to think of
anyone but himself. Horror lingered like a shadow in the wings of his mind palace, dark and impenetrable, but he managed to hold it at bay, turning blind eyes to its desolate gloom as he sought safe harbour in simple sensations.

An hour ago, he had ignored his transport and the vile messages it delivered to his mind. Now he revelled in it, choosing to dissect the rasp of cloth against his skin, the rhapsody of discomfort in his joints and the prickling, tidal chills. Better than facing what lay within the caverns of his thoughts. The warnings of his body were biochemical and quantifiable – something he could see with his own eyes, given the right equipment. The gory mess of his emotions was not so straightforward.

Sherlock knew one was linked to the other. Hormones drove his mental state, which in turn accelerated the vicious cycle. He knew his desperate distinction between body and mind was a useless effort at reclaiming some control, but he clung to it all the same, immersing himself in the minutiae of the physical until that, too, faded from his awareness.

There was no way to tell when the formless shadows of sleep began to take on definition. At first, it was nothing more than faint outlines in twilight. There was nothing to identify as a threat, just a creeping uncertainty that climbed his bones to burn his muscles with its touch. It clogged his nose and mouth, turning the air to smoke until every breath was a struggle. Fear prickled through him, rendered in nothing as straightforward as sweat on his brow. This was primal emotion, and though part of Sherlock knew it was a nightmare, he couldn't pull himself free.

Humidity bathed his face. The air hung, motionless and expectant, fragranced with rich earth and the faint scent of citrus. His memory needed no further urging to bring the scene into focus. It was the orangery back at Alexander's house, where Sherlock had concocted the substances to master his fertility. The stone floor was rough beneath his bare feet, and the limpid atmosphere, warm even though there was darkness beyond the glass walls, caressed his skin. Trees grew here, fruitful in their benign neglect, and there, on a worktop once available for potting seedlings, lay the tools of his craft. None of it was obviously scientific. There were no beakers or Erlenmeyer flasks. Sherlock had used whatever mundane containers were to hand, choosing glass vials to store and hide the products of his labours. Moonlight cast a dull gleam on plastic contours, and he stepped forward, looking over the empty, disused array and noticing how every vessel was cracked and broken. Behind them, the plants he'd once tended were nothing but dried husks, their leaves withered and their flowers rotten on their stems.

'They can't help you now.'

He whipped around, his hand tightening on the table's edge as he noticed a silhouette hovering on the other side of the room. Sherlock didn't need to see its face to know who it was, not when Alexander's voice – neither hateful or cruel, but soft and admiring as it had once been – drifted to his ears. His words didn’t sound like an accusation, but Sherlock still held his breath as the man of memory stepped forward.

His heart cramped, tight and hurting. This was the Alexander from the time of their bonding – painfully young, now Sherlock looked back on it. He was in his early twenties, his face handsome and clear of the signs of chemical abuse that had later wrought their damage. His clothes were neat and luxurious, and there was a hint of a genuine smile toying at his lips.

Yet the illusion was far from complete. At that age, Alexander had looked at him with hope and affection, but now Sherlock could see that for the facade it was. Shadows played across his face, and there was something indistinct about his outline as he continued to advance, stopping in the moon's glow like an actor in the spotlight.
Fear raced across Sherlock's scalp and juddered down his spine. He felt frozen, trapped in place as his gaze fell to the object in Alexander's fist: a long, cold bar of iron with a spur at one end – the poker he'd used when he'd finally lost his temper.

Fluid dripped from its tip, and even though the moon’s luminescence painted it silver, Sherlock knew it was blood staining the stone. He stared at the droplets, listening to each one land on the floor like rain on dry earth. His muscles locked, a deer caught in the headlights, yet Alexander merely stood there, his head cocked and expectant as his expression became vile with false remorse.

‘This is all your fault.’ He swung the poker in an idle circle, leaving an arc of spatter in its wake. ‘You turned me into this. You made me hate you. So selfish. Everything you did was about you.’

It was nothing Alexander hadn’t said when he was still alive: a memory regurgitated from the lips of a ghost, but this time Sherlock’s protests stayed imprisoned behind his teeth, as useless as they had ever been. He stared, transfixed, as the Alpha who’d claimed him ran a hand through his hair, his shoulders heaving in a shrug.

‘If only you’d known your place, I could have given you everything you wanted.’

‘No.’ Sherlock’s denial seemed loud to his ears, torn free from his throat. ‘No, you couldn’t. Everything I wanted, I got for myself. It had nothing to do with you.’

‘Didn’t it?’ The response was sharp, a whip-crack that had Sherlock cowering despite himself. Around him, the scenery wavered, the limited coherence of the moonlight fading in and out of view. Sherlock could feel the warmth of a lit fire, even though there was no grate nearby. The darkness beyond the glass of the conservatory took on the pattern of Baker Street’s wallpaper: one life superimposed upon another.

‘Without me, you could never have had all of this.’ He gestured to John's armchair, which hadn't been there before, his cool gaze sweeping over the book-lined shelves and the files stacked on the table. ‘You'd be nothing.’ He grinned, but there was no amusement in the flash of his teeth. ‘Without me, everything you've fought for disintegrates.’

He stepped forward, the sole of his shoe resting on the curved dome of the skull. Normally, it lived on the mantelpiece, but now it sat on the floor, exposed and vulnerable. He balanced himself, one foot on the crown, the threat implicit in every angle of his body, but Sherlock couldn't move to stop him. He stared as Alexander shifted his weight, and the bone cracked like eggshell: shards and dust.

'It's all gone, Sherlock. All of it, and you can't pick up the pieces by yourself. Just look at you!' He gestured with the poker, the spur thrust in Sherlock's direction with enough force to make him flinch. 'Omega. Useless.'

He shook his head, and Sherlock grimaced at the disapproval radiating from every pore. 'You destroy everything you touch.' He indicated Baker Street with a wave of his hand. 'What makes you think he'll be any different?'

He shook his head, and Sherlock grimaced at the disapproval radiating from every pore. 'You destroy everything you touch.' He indicated Baker Street with a wave of his hand. 'What makes you think he'll be any different?'

Here, in this strange juxtaposition of his past and his present, there was no doubt of whom Alexander spoke, and Sherlock's gaze drifted back to John's chair as the world shifted, rippling in constant flux. Broken glass littered the floor while the wallpaper peeled back like split skin. All around him, everything was disintegrating, but Alexander remained, oddly colourless, his bleached lips wrenching in a macabre sneer.

'There's no coming back from this,' he murmured, looking down at the poker as if, for the first time, he was aware of its weight. 'Not for either of us. I'm dead, but you? Your life is over.'
The metal rod slipped from blood-slicked fingers, striking the floor. It rang like a gong, a flat, desolate chime that roared in Sherlock’s ears, over-ruling every other sense until there was nothing but the iron’s resonance clanging in his head.

His eyes flew open, his hands lashing out in alarm as his breath caught hard in his throat. The bed beneath him felt alien as panic flooded his frame. It had circled him like a pack of wolves since he’d first encountered the stench of Alexander’s corpse, but now it became eviscerating in its intensity.

A choked cry caught in his chest as buzzing filled his ears. The dream slipped through his fingers, surreal ribbons of colour and sound that took all his refined intellect with them. Only the feeling of paralysis and dread remained. It squeezed his heart, racing like static across his skin as his eyes burned. Each time he tried to snatch another gasp it became a sob, and the first tears trailed sideways to spill onto the barren cloth of his pillow.

It appalled him to be reduced to this, wrought down to nothing but raw sentiment. So much of his existence had been tied up in the bond he hated. Now it was gone, and so was any semblance of power that he held over his own future. Everything he had once convinced himself was a certainty lay in ruins, and for all the power of his intelligence, he couldn’t comprehend how to proceed. How could he make a decision about his life when he couldn’t even think?

He was so lost to the filthy, chaotic churn of his fear that he didn't hear the whisper of the door's hinges or John's slow, quiet footsteps. He didn't register him at all as tears bit at his eyes, unstoppable. They pooled at the bridge of his nose before spilling over, dragged sideways by gravity. All attempts to rein in his reactions were futile. It was too big, too overwhelming, and he fought for each strained breath as misery claimed him.

The mattress dipped, and Sherlock turned away, hunching around the hollow pit in his stomach and hiding his face as his shoulders heaved. He didn’t want to be seen like this, not even by John. Grief had its place, but this was a falsehood. It was not loss that made him cry, but the well of helplessness that had opened in his chest.

He clenched his jaw, waiting for John to start shushing him or otherwise trying to bring this wretched outburst to a halt, but it never happened. Instead, a hand splayed tentatively over the ridge of his shoulder-blade, neither stroking nor squeezing. It was a simple presence, and the next sob wrenched itself from Sherlock’s throat.

The quilt rustled as John stretched out behind him, his brow rested against Sherlock’s back. John’s other arm snaked over him, the palm splaying across his ribs and over the chaotic patter of his heart as if he thought he could hold Sherlock together through force of will.

He allowed himself to be held, too desolate to consider pushing John away. Not that he would, even if he were able. Even like this, separated by layers of cloth, John’s weight was a comfort. He offered himself with no expectation of anything in return, his support silent and without judgement as Sherlock shivered in his arms.

Weakly, he reached up, clasping John’s knuckles and clinging tight. His despair was unmistakable, and John responded with natural immediacy, twisting his wrist so he could capture Sherlock’s hand in his and return his grip with equal ferocity. Their fingers wove together, and Sherlock clutched that single point of contact, his head bowed and his body shaking as another muffled sob punched its way free.

John held him, and Sherlock wept.
God, he was an idiot.

John sat in his armchair, a cup of tea growing cold at his side as he stared at the empty seat opposite him. The past week had been one of the worst in his life, and all he could think of was that, not so long ago, he’d wanted this. He’d itched to see Alexander dead: a suitable punishment for everything Sherlock had suffered at his hand.

Now, he wished he could take it back. Sherlock may be free of the Alpha who had tried so hard to control him, but now it was his biology that held him captive.

After that first day, when he had wept as though his world was ending, John had hoped things would start to improve. Perhaps Sherlock’s mourning would manifest as a short, sharp shock, rather than a long ordeal?

Turned out he couldn’t be more wrong. Mycroft had described Sherlock’s condition in terms of an illness, but John could see that any physical ailments had a biochemical root, and it was only getting worse.

He did what he could to make Sherlock feel better. Antihistamines helped control the severity of the rash that traced its way across his skin like ferns of frost. It was an autoimmune response, according to John’s research, the same as the joint pain, but John was only treating the symptoms. Nothing he could do would target the cause.

His laptop sat by his feet with Mycroft’s response to his desperate email still open on the screen. After days of Sherlock being so unlike himself – a ghost of the man John knew – he’d implored the older Holmes for something he could use. An Omega’s mourning was hardly an unknown occurrence. There had to be something John could give him to help with the dense depression into which Sherlock had fallen.

Mycroft’s reply was emphatic, and John picked up the device, scanning it again in the vain hope that it would say something different the second time around.

“As much as my brother’s deteriorating condition pains me, there is nothing I can offer him that will provide assistance. All mainstream medical research aims to contract the mourning period and assist the prompt placement of a new bond. The few, brief trials of such medications were an unmitigated disaster. Poor understanding of the hormonal mechanisms and the brain-chemistry of Omegas meant it was a process of trial and error, quickly curtailed due to the high incidence of abrupt psychosis and eventual suicide in the test subjects.”

John closed his eyes, pressing his lips together as fresh concern washed through his chest. He could see how someone in Sherlock’s situation may turn to taking their own life. It wasn’t out of any desire to be reunited with the Alpha they had lost; it was escape at its most fundamental level.

It was well-documented that an Omega in mourning needed to be monitored for signs of what, centuries ago, had been termed as “self-alleviation”. The statistics were startling, and John’s instincts had been undeniable. Maybe he had been paranoid when he’d removed everything sharp or potentially lethal from Sherlock’s room, but he’d rather be safe than sorry.

Even now, he suspected that if Sherlock had the will to end his life, he’d manage, despite John’s efforts to protect him. His only feeble comfort was that he seemed too far gone to move, let alone
engineer a way to injure himself. Still, that didn’t mean John wasn’t a few short steps away from setting up camp by Sherlock’s bed and keeping him under observation. He probably would have already, if not for Mycroft’s strange admission-cum-warning that he’d reinstalled a camera in Sherlock’s room the day they found Alexander’s body.

He remembered how Mycroft had looked at him as they’d stood in the front hall of Baker Street. The need for answers and the desire to be at Sherlock’s side had torn John in two, but Mycroft seemed calm, his focus devoted to John, rather than his ailing brother.

It was rare that the older Holmes showed any emotion; perhaps that was why John had been so unwillingly fascinated. Either that or it was the unusual mixture of trust and suspicion on that aristocratic face, as if Mycroft wanted to give John his faith, but didn’t quite have the conviction to do so.

John wasn’t an idiot. He knew that Mycroft couldn’t help but see him as a potential risk to his brother’s safety. He’d expected dire threats. Instead, Mycroft had spoken to him in a flat voice, and every word gifted him with information while carrying dark undertones. The camera wasn’t just there to protect Sherlock from himself. It was there to keep an eye on John, as well.

Chewing his tongue, he glared down at his laptop again, heaving a sigh before closing its lid and setting it back on the floor. He couldn’t blame Mycroft, not really. It was easy to forget that he and Sherlock were Alpha and Omega, and whether he liked it or not, that brought its own issues to the equation.

Leaning forward, he buried his face in his hands. Now wasn’t the time to worry about that. Sherlock’s pyresus was far from imminent. He had to concentrate on more immediate problems. Mycroft’s email hadn’t given him anything to work with, although John suspected there were a few things he’d left out. He had mentioned official clinical trials, but Mycroft prepared for every possible scenario; no doubt he’d had his own people explore the possibility of medication for Sherlock.

Clearly, it had been a fruitless endeavour. If not, he would have provided whatever was needed without question.

And where did that leave them? John had been a fine surgeon and was a damn good GP, but this went far beyond his training, and his clumsy efforts to draw Sherlock out of his fugue met with failure. He had seen grief before – the different ways it could affect people and what it could do – but he’d never come across anything like this.

Since that first day, Sherlock had pulled back into himself, the dissociation of shock becoming something more deep-rooted. He still wept, now and then, but in comparison to that first storm of anguish they were quiet, silent tears, as if he were too exhausted to sob. He stayed in bed, only moving himself to use the bathroom, and then he drifted like a ghost, acknowledging neither John nor his surroundings.

Even the Work went ignored. Lestrade had come over the night of Alexander’s death to let John know that it was definitely Sherlock’s Alpha in the morgue. Not that there’d ever been much doubt. He’d stood on the doorstep, freshly showered in the hopes of not bringing anything more of Alexander’s dead scent to Baker Street, and asked quiet questions that John couldn’t answer.

He’d left behind the files from the case, as well as some old investigations, but Sherlock didn’t glance at them, not even when John left some of the more challenging ones on his bedside table.

Back when he’d moved in, Sherlock had warned him he might be silent for days on end. Now, he was living up to that threat, and John didn’t know what to do. Some days the frustration was too
much to bear. He wanted to yell at Sherlock to pull himself together, but he knew better than that. If Sherlock had the power to help himself, he would already have done so.

With a sigh, John got to his feet, glancing at the clock to see its hands hovering over eleven at night. He’d been kipping on the sofa since this started, too anxious to leave Sherlock alone downstairs while he retreated to his room. His back hated him, and so did his leg, but he’d suffer the aches if it meant he was within earshot if Sherlock called for him.

He padded towards Sherlock’s door, easing it aside so as not to disturb him if he was asleep. Gloom shrouded the room, but he could make out the gleam of Sherlock’s open eyes in the glow of the living room lights. He was awake, but hadn’t turned on a bedside lamp. None of the books John had stacked nearby had been touched, and neither had the fresh, crusty bread he’d brought in a couple of hours ago.

It was as if he was in the world, but disconnected from it, and John’s stomach twisted with anxiety at the sight of him, pale and motionless beneath the quilt. His hair was greasy and his jaw unshaven, his usually immaculate appearance lost to neglect.

No level of cajoling on John’s part had convinced him to move. It took a ridiculous amount of pleading just to get Sherlock to eat and drink a few morsels each day. He’d already lost weight, though John’s intensive study had revealed there was a typical downshift in an Omega’s metabolism when their bond broke. Sherlock’s body had put itself into starvation mode. It wouldn’t keep him going forever, but at least it was a known symptom.

Flicking on the bedside lamp, John watched Sherlock’s eyes, checking for responsiveness. Sherlock may not be speaking, but he reacted to his environment. Now, he winced at the sudden change in illumination, his gaze darting up to John’s face before drifting away again to focus on some indeterminate point.

The strange, webbed rash that had etched itself over his skin – first his arms, then his torso, before climbing across his face – had started to fade. Its blood-red had become a pink echo, and John hunkered down by the bed, holding his hand out, palm up.

‘Can I see?’

It was habit, asking for permission. It was one of the few ways Sherlock would respond at all, and even then his movements were achingly slow. However, acceptance was implied in the effort, and John gave a weak smile as he cradled Sherlock’s wrist, examining the stain’s progress and seeing that it had already gone from his hands.

John rubbed his thumb over the prominence of those knuckles, wishing he could tell whether he was welcome or if his presence was an intrusion. If the situation were reversed, he’d try and hide from everyone, shutting himself away with his misery until he could face the world with dignity. That said, isolation wouldn’t help him. He’d need people there, even if he railed against their company.

Sherlock had done nothing to indicate his preference one way or the other. He’d not kicked John out, but nor did he grasp and cling, not like that first day. He tolerated John’s assistance, nothing more.

‘I’m going to go to bed,’ John murmured, speaking despite the fact he knew Sherlock wouldn’t answer. ‘Do you need anything? Something to eat? A drink?’ He raised his eyebrows, hopeful despite recent experience, but there was nothing from Sherlock, not even a nod or a shake of his head. He just hunched a little tighter, trying to block John out, along with the rest of the world.

‘Right.’ He nodded, pursing his lips before straightening up, wincing as his knees clicked in protest.
‘Just – just come and get me if you change your mind, or you could text.’ He picked up Sherlock’s mobile, only still charged because John had seen to it, before setting it back down on the bedside table with a click. ‘Goodnight, Sherlock.’

He turned away, his ears pricked for a response, but not even a murmur reached him. Grimly, he straightened his shoulders, telling himself that it wasn’t personal. To think any of what Sherlock was going through had anything to do with him was ridiculous. Sherlock would speak if he felt able, and it was John’s job to help him find the strength he needed to reconnect.

He just wished he had a damn clue what to do.

Trudging up the stairs to his room, he flicked on the light, getting ready for bed on autopilot. It was only when he sat on the mattress to take off his shoes and socks that he realised his breathing was ragged and salt bit at his eyes. Quickly, he pressed his fingers over the bridge of his nose, blinking away the vice of stress and helplessness. He’d fought back his own tears while Sherlock sobbed in his arms, and forced calm into the wobble of his voice when he’d witnessed the silent despair of recent days. He couldn’t succumb now.

Drawing in a steadying lungful of air, he ran his palms down his denim-clad thighs, the coarse material scraping across his skin as he considered the possibilities. Only this morning Mrs Hudson had sat in their living room, her face pale and pinched, asking John why they couldn’t do more to help.

The question was, what options did they have? Taking him to hospital was less than ideal. They’d ask complicated questions and entangle everything in bureaucracy because of Sherlock’s gender, and what could they do for him anyway? There was nothing they could treat. Instead the staff would transfer him to a controlled Omega facility for his own safety, where he would be forced to ride out the process in isolation and alien surroundings. Maybe Mycroft could get him out again, but the whole ordeal would be of no benefit to Sherlock.

Besides, it may draw the attention of the Cunninghams. They would do whatever they could to separate John from Sherlock, more worried about money and bonds than Sherlock’s well-being. No, best not do anything that might rock that particular boat – especially as Mycroft had made so little progress.

Still, John craved a more solid medical opinion. His own was lacking in the relevant experience, and he was unwilling to put his faith in the dry, analytical texts he found, written by Alphas and conducted by multinational drug corporations. It was all too impersonal, and none of them could help with the mental impact of what was happening to Sherlock. No, he needed to talk to someone who cared about him. Someone who knew what they were doing…

A name filtered to the front of his mind: Mike Stamford – beyond reproach and perfectly discreet. More to the point, he seemed to like Sherlock and as a Beta, he had access to a lot of Omega focussed knowledge for teaching his classes. All right, so he wasn’t a specialist, but John would take whatever he could get.

He rubbed a hand across his brow, relishing the light sensation that came with having a glimmer of a plan. The uncertainty that had dogged his every step lifted, and he nodded to himself, decided. Tomorrow morning, he’d talk to Mike. Ideally, he’d like Sherlock’s permission, but he was in no position to give it, and John didn’t have the luxury of time on his side.

Reaching under his pillow, he pulled out the t-shirt and cotton pyjama bottoms he’d been wearing to bed, stripping away the armaments of his trousers, jumper and shirt before slipping them on. Normally, he slept in his underwear, but seeing as how he’d spent the past week on the sofa, that
didn’t seem ideal. The terrycloth robe came next, old and familiar, and John cast a regretful glance back at his bed before resigning himself to another uncomfortable night. He’d considered building something temporary on the floor, but it never reached the top of his list of priorities. However, if this went on much longer, he’d have to come up with an alternative. He already felt ten years older, aching and stiff.

Leaving his room, he was about to head downstairs when a sound made him pause. He’d grown used to Baker Street’s funereal tranquillity. Even when Sherlock struggled up to use the loo, he barely made a peep. Now, there were distinct noises – activity – and John’s heart jumped in his throat. It seemed unlikely that Sherlock had managed a startling recovery, and what did that leave? Mrs Hudson would be in bed by now. Had someone snuck in?

Instincts surged, and it took him a fretful second to remember that Alexander – the most obvious danger to Sherlock – was dead. So who was it?

His gun was downstairs, tucked behind the skull on the mantelpiece and hidden in plain sight. Still, it was no good to him there, and John licked his lips, leaning his weight forward and ghosting downwards, every sense pushed wide open.

At first, there was no sign of life. The living room remained as he had left it, cluttered but homey, and there was no one lingering in the kitchen or hiding around the corners. Silence had reclaimed its reign, and John frowned. Automatically, he turned to get the Sig, but before he’d taken a step towards it, something made him pause and look back towards Sherlock’s room.

He’d left the door ajar when he’d departed, separated from its frame by a couple of inches. Now a broad beam of light struck out, painting the twilight in golden shades.

John switched direction, his voice hesitant as he called out. ‘Sherlock?’ The lack of response wasn’t unexpected, but it offered him no comfort as he strode towards Sherlock’s bedroom and shoved his way inside, a repetition of his friend’s name dying on his lips.

Blood. It slammed into his nose at the same time as the colour daubed his vision, dark and ghastly on white sheets. Ferrous-tainted air caught in his throat as panic punched him in the chest. Adrenaline’s firework shot along his veins, his body jolting into action. There was no sign of Sherlock. The window remained closed, and there was no bleeding sprawl on the floor.

‘Sherlock?!’ John spun around, marching back out into the corridor and noticing a thin ribbon of illumination coming from the bathroom. The door was shut, and he slammed the flat of his palm against it, not even bothering to try the handle as terror made him snarl. ‘Let me in. Let me in right now or I break the damn thing down!’

In his head, the second he waited felt like an eternity, and with a curse, John stepped back, slamming his good shoulder and all his body weight into the latch side. Pain shuddered through him, but he ignored it as the panel flew open, pitching him into the room as the handle smacked into the wall. His chest was heaving, his entire being alert for whatever disaster he might find waiting for him. A million scenarios raced through his head, blinding him to what was actually there. A litany of curses and stammered questions escaped him as he lunged forward, grabbing Sherlock’s wrists and turning them so he could see the vulnerable vaults that held his veins in their cradle.

That was where he expected to find the breach. In battle-mode, John assumed the worst, and he stared at the unmarked skin. He was shaking so hard he could hardly see straight, pushed through adrenaline’s preternatural calm and out the other side. He’d faced worse in a war-zone, but this was different. This was Sherlock.
‘Where –?’ he managed. ‘Where?’ His gaze fell on the towel clutched tight in Sherlock’s fingers, its white fabric smeared with red, and he blinked, his addled mind trying to put the pieces together.

‘My neck. It’s the bite.’

For a scatter of seconds, John was almost too surprised by the fact Sherlock had spoken at all to take in his actual words. However, as soon as that voice, coarse from dis-use, permeated his mind, everything snapped back into focus. Practical knowledge swept his fear aside, and John gripped Sherlock’s shoulder, pushing him down to sit on the closed loo seat. Obligingly, Sherlock bent at the waist, his elbows lying on his knees and the towel still dangling from his loose fingers. The motion exposed the nape of his neck, and John hissed in immediate sympathy.

It was a gory mess: a proper bite, as if someone had sunk their teeth in and ripped out Sherlock’s flesh. Blood welled up and dripped down his back. The curls that hid it from view were drenched and slick, and the t-shirt Sherlock wore stuck to his skin in places, adhered by the miasmic flow.

‘Christ!’ John breathed, snatching the towel from Sherlock’s hand and pressing it into service, clamping his palm over the wound in an effort to stem the bleeding. ‘Is this normal?’

At first he thought Sherlock wouldn’t answer him. Perhaps only the urgency of John’s voice had driven him to speak, giving him the one answer he needed. However, after the silence dragged on for a few moments, he managed a reply. It sounded exhausted to John’s ears, but he clung to the sound, grateful despite the circumstances.

‘Relatively. The tissue is different: fewer pain receptors and a strong capillary supply. I didn’t –’ He fell quiet, and John heard him swallow. ‘I didn’t notice the blister had formed. I didn’t even feel it burst. The smell of blood woke me.’ He shivered, and John looked around, grabbing another towel and draping it, clumsy and one-handed, over Sherlock’s shoulders. All the while he berated himself. He’d been so intent on Sherlock’s grief that he hadn’t thought to research what would become of the bite.

‘What should I do?’ he asked, not caring that he was putting his ignorance on display. ‘Do you have any idea what’s best for this?’

‘Keep it covered and dry, the same as any other wound.’

‘This is a bit more major than most injuries, Sherlock. God, I think it needs stitches at least.’

‘No!’ His response was shocking in its strength, and John twitched.

‘Why not?’

Sherlock pulled his legs up to his chest, propping his forehead on his knees and breathing steadily. He seemed pale and small in the harsh bathroom lights, and John edged closer, trying to lend him a bit of warmth. ‘The healing mechanism is different,’ he explained. ‘Stitching interferes, and makes it prone to abscess. It will heal on its own; it won’t even leave a scar.’

He sounded numb, the limited intonation he had recovered falling flat once more, and John shifted where he stood. Peeling back the towel, he grimaced at the injury. Now he looked closely, it was more shallow than his first impression had implied. The bleeding had slackened, and John could see the edges of the wound were smooth, rather than ragged and torn: more like a burn than anything else.

‘Right.’ He cleared his throat as he took Sherlock’s wrist and placed his hand on the towel. ‘Keep that steady a minute. We’ll get it clean, and then stick a dressing on it.’ He winced at how pathetic
that treatment sounded, trying to ignore the chafe of every medical instinct that said such measures wouldn’t be enough. In this case, he would bow to Sherlock’s expertise, but first thing tomorrow, he was texting Mike for a second opinion.

Quickly, he washed his hands, reaching for the first aid kit and the antiseptic wipes inside. He went through several of them, smoothing them over the wound and the surrounding skin, banishing the claret gleam of blood as best he could before fixing a thick dressing in place. He’d need to keep an eye on it and make sure it didn’t seep, but at least the sterile padding protected the raw flesh from foreign material. Lastly, he grabbed a bit of plastic with adhesive edges, covering the absorbent dressing with it. It was a temporary measure, something to keep it dry while he got Sherlock cleaned up.

He shifted around, hunkering down so he could look into Sherlock’s face. ‘You need a shower,’ he explained, shrugging apologetically as, for what felt like the first time in years, Sherlock’s eyes met his for more than a fleeting moment. ‘There’s blood in your hair. At the very least, you need to let me wash it out. You can tip your head over the edge of the bath... Think you’re up to that?’

Sherlock gave a slow blink, and John marvelled that a man who’d spent so long in bed could still look so exhausted. Deep shadows bruised his eyes, and the whites were bloodshot. His tongue wetted his chapped lips before he managed a heavy nod, a wince of pain stuttering across his face as his neck hurt in harmony to the movement.

‘We need to take your t-shirt off,’ John added, pulling at the cotton and guiding the collar over the dressing, sighing as Sherlock merely lifted his arms: too dependent for anything else. For John, it demonstrated the extent of his suffering. Normally, it was a fight to do anything that Sherlock felt impinged upon his dignity. Now, it was as if he didn’t have the strength to care. ‘It’s covered in blood anyway. Probably only good for the bin.’

He flung it aside, watching it fall into the corner of the bathroom before the sight of Sherlock’s back caught his eye. It wasn’t the trails of blood, turning brown as they dried, that made him freeze. Even the curve of his spine, too stark beneath his skin, was not the cause of his shock. He’d not seen Sherlock so exposed before, and now he realised that it wasn’t just the bite at the nape of his neck that he kept hidden beneath beautiful shirts and tailored suits.

John pursed his lips as tight as he could, his hands clenching into fists as he took in the scars that littered Sherlock’s skin. Some were deep and pitted, almost like stab wounds. Others raked long, vicious lines across the canvas of his flesh. They were old now: pale testaments to the violence that brought them into existence, but John knew what he was looking at. Maybe one or two were the results of incidents on cases – Sherlock’s chosen way of life leaving its marks – but it was Alexander who had wrought most of the damage.

A few scattered across his shoulder blades, but most were lower down, harder and deeper over his ribs and lumbar. He understood, now, why Mycroft had looked so wan when he explained finding Sherlock after Alexander’s attack. It took force to leave this kind of scar, and deliberation to place them over the undefended organs. Alexander had found the weakest point and gone after it time and again.

Anger flashed bitter across his tongue, and he drew in a breath. Alexander’s demise had been too good for him, too quiet, when all he deserved was the same pain he’d inflicted upon Sherlock. John’s fingers itched, curving around an invisible trigger. Stupid, how he could feel cheated of a revenge that wasn’t even his to take, but that didn’t lessen the heavy thrum in his veins.

Too late, he realised Sherlock’s head was cocked, watching him out of the corner of his eye. His impotent rage at the man who had caused Sherlock harm had an audience, and he sought to calm the
fury that clamoured through him. It was useless, anyway. Alexander was beyond punishment now, and nothing John could do would change that.

‘John…’

‘Don’t,’ he begged. ‘Don’t say it doesn’t matter. Or that it wasn’t as bad as it looks.’

‘I wasn’t going to.’ Sherlock’s shoulders, too sharp now after so little food, jerked in a shrug. ‘I was going to say that it was a long time ago.’ He didn’t add anything further, perhaps too tired to do so, but John heard the underlying message in his tone. There was nothing John could have done to help, not back then, in a time before John Watson and Sherlock Holmes knew each other existed.

Now, it was a different matter, and he needed to focus on the Sherlock in front of him, not a younger version he’d never met.

With a firm nod, he looked around, putting a folded towel on the floor by the bath to protect Sherlock’s knees from the hard lino floor. ‘Tip your head over as far as you can, but don’t hurt your neck,’ he instructed, freeing the shower head from its bracket and flicking on the taps, testing the heat of the water before grabbing another clean towel and handing it to Sherlock. ‘Press that to your face. It’ll stop water getting in your eyes.’

He reached down to grab Sherlock’s hand, guiding the spray over his skin and watching avidly for any sign of displeasure. ‘Is this all right?’

‘Yes.’ Sherlock’s reply was a whisper, but it gave John the reassurance he needed to get to work. Besides, any speech was better than none, and Sherlock had said more to him in the past hour than he had done for days. Was the reaction of the bite a milestone? Surely it was a sign of progress?

Carefully, he doused Sherlock’s curls, watching the water run with rust before turning clear. He was about to reach for Sherlock’s normal shampoo when a thin hand grabbed his wrist, making him twitch in surprise. ‘I won’t let any get in the bite, don’t worry.’

‘That’s not what concerns me.’ Sherlock bit his lip, his face unreadable at this altered angle. ‘Use yours. I can’t stand the smell of mine right now.’

John reached for his bottle of cheap, generic all-in-one shampoo and conditioner. It probably cost a tenth of what Sherlock paid for his, but it would do the job, banishing the lankness from the chestnut strands and taking any lingering blood with it.

He eased the suds away, running his fingers over Sherlock’s scalp and finding another scar hidden there. It was wide, an old split in the fragile skin, and John clenched his jaw as he realised Alexander must have landed at least one blow to Sherlock’s head.

The temptation to linger, as if he could soothe away all signs of abuse with his touch, coiled below his heart, but he pushed it aside, concentrating instead on getting Sherlock’s hair clean. To give in would be an indulgence, more for his benefit than Sherlock’s, and right now that wasn’t what Sherlock needed.

Rinsing away the last of the shampoo, John turned off the flow and eased the towel away from where Sherlock had it pressed against his face. A quick but cautious ruffle got rid of the worst of the water, and he reached out, helping his friend lurch to his feet and holding him steady.

‘All right?’ John asked, giving a weary half smile as Sherlock nodded. ‘Come on then. Let’s sit you down before you fall over.’
It was not a joking concern. Sherlock’s frail strength had deserted him. Every step wobbled as John led him through to the living room. He’d pushed the couch forward from the back wall when he’d started sleeping on it, preferring to be more central to the room, and now he helped Sherlock slump in one corner.

John’s bedding lay folded in a neat pile on the floor, and Sherlock reached out, dragging the quilt over himself and huddling in its depths. It probably didn’t smell great – it had been a while since John had bothered with laundry – but its warmth seemed to soothe Sherlock’s fragile edges.

‘I need to sort out your bed,’ he explained. ‘It looks like someone’s been murdered in there.’ He swallowed hard, remembering his first, instinctive fear that Sherlock had resorted to desperate measures. Now that the rational methods of crisis management were beginning to fade, it left John shaken, pulled too thin and rattled loose by the stress. ‘Will you be all right? I won’t be long.’

Before Sherlock could reply, either with words or the return of his silence, there was a hesitant tap on the open door, followed by a quiet question. ‘Are you boys all right?’ Mrs Hudson asked from where she hovered on the threshold, clutching the lapels of her pink dressing gown. ‘Only I heard a loud bang, and then the water running.’

John winced, realising his frantic attempt to access the bathroom had caused more noise than he’d noticed at the time. ‘It’s okay, Mrs Hudson. Everything’s fine now. Sorry to wake you.’

She shook her head, her smile a little crooked. ‘It’s all right, dear. Do you need a hand with anything?’ She gestured to the towel John still had slung over his shoulder, daubed in blood. ‘Did someone have an accident?’

John thought of the messy bedclothes and all the towels. As reluctant as he was to ask their landlady to put on the laundry, he didn’t want to leave Sherlock alone in the flat, not right now. He looked so out-of-place, hunched rather than sprawled out in repose and lost in his mind palace. All the confidence he had come to associate with Sherlock had faded from sight, and the man left in its wake was horrifying in his vulnerability.

‘The blood’s from Sherlock’s bite,’ John explained, smiling as Mrs Hudson gave a moue of pity. ‘I was going to do some washing in the morning, but...’

‘Best get it done now, dear,’ she said, taking the towel and dropping it on the floor, forming the start of a pile with well-worn practicality. ‘The sooner blood’s cleaned out, the better. I’ll put what I can in for a cold soak and then wash them.’

John followed her as she bustled around, collecting up the used towels before stepping into Sherlock’s room. ‘Oh my goodness!’ She blinked rapidly, and John winced from where he was standing behind her shoulder. He’d begun to convince himself that he’d over-reacted, but seeing the smears of blood again, he had to admit it looked bad. Fluid had a tendency to spread, making even a small amount look dramatic, but this...

‘I’m just going to go and double-check Sherlock’s all right,’ he said, touching Mrs Hudson’s elbow.

‘All right, dear. I’ll strip his bed. Thank goodness I made him put a rubber sheet on it after that experiment ruined the last mattress. I’d hate to replace it again.’

John hid a grin, remembering their landlady’s outrage and Sherlock’s dismissal that the rather worrying chemical stain only covered half of the bed. However, that explained why the blood had gone so far. Unable to absorb downwards, it had travelled sideways instead.
Padding into the living room, he crouched at Sherlock’s side, pushing the bundled fluff of the quilt down so he could see his face. His eyes were half-lidded, but focused, so much better than the glassy disinterest he had displayed all week. ‘I just want to check your pulse.’ John held out two fingers, gesturing towards the crook of Sherlock’s neck. ‘The blood loss is considerable. I need to make sure you’ll be all right.’

Obediently, he tipped his head, permitting John access to the column of his throat. Stubble marked a striking boundary across his jaw, and John felt the rough nap of the hairs as he found the throb of Sherlock’s carotid artery. Slow, steady and strong, that pulse offered a wealth of reassurance, and John let out a breath of relief. His fingers lingered in the humid hollow, and perhaps it was his imagination, but the tight huddle of Sherlock’s body seemed to loosen with his touch, becoming more pliant as his lashes fluttered.

In fact, there was no denying it. Sherlock looked better, at least comparatively speaking. He was still too thin, too pale, and shadowed by the depressive nature of his mood, but he was more present and engaged. Compared to his normal self, he remained withdrawn, but John latched onto the improvement, taking heart when Sherlock glanced at him and gave a tiny grimace.

‘Sorry.’

John gave a puzzled frown. ‘What for?’

The bed covers gave a complicated movement as Sherlock shrugged. ‘Everything. This. Frightening you.’ He took a deep breath, and his next words sounded strained. ‘It’s not precisely what you signed up for when you moved in.’

He didn’t know where to start. The fact that Sherlock could be sitting there, almost drowning under the weight of what the bond’s destruction had done to him, and still be thinking of John was unbelievable. All those times he’d yelled at Sherlock for lacking empathy – had wondered if he was even capable – and now it couldn’t be more obvious that Sherlock was merely cautious about who he allowed to see his sentiments.

‘You’ve got nothing to apologise for. I’d have moved in no matter what.’

‘Because you needed the flat?’ Sherlock’s expression took on a slant of concentration. He looked like he was putting all his energy into focusing on his reply, and John’s breath stuttered as his response surged to the forefront of his mind, shorn of anything but honesty.

‘Because I needed you,’ he whispered, clearing his throat as the words rasped across his lips. He hated speaking about his emotions – found it challenging at the best of times – but he forced himself to make an exception. Sherlock, torn down by what was happening to him, deserved that much.

‘You – It was – ’

He sighed, frustrated at his inability to explain. His life had been so bleak and empty when he returned from Afghanistan: months of monotone. Sherlock had provided him with purpose, and plenty of it. He’d shown John that he was still the same man he had been before a bullet robbed him of his livelihood, not crippled beyond use after all, but powerful and necessary, able to give as much to Sherlock as Sherlock offered him.

‘You needed the Work,’ Sherlock corrected, the glow in his eyes dimming as he shifted on the sofa, propping his head on the arm and lying on his side. He still faced John, but that glimpse of life was already receding as the dense clouds of Sherlock’s distress rolled in again. ‘Adrenaline. Excitement.’ His fingers curled, clutching the quilt to his chest as if it were a shield. ‘I can’t provide that. Not like this.’
John clasped Sherlock’s hand, his grip tight as his denial burned his lips. ‘No.’ He tried to make it an order, as if he could command Sherlock’s understanding, but it came out too strained for that. A fierce shake of his head went ignored, and he moved his other arm, enfolding Sherlock’s fingers in the cocoon of both his palms as if he could physically hold him back from the precipice of depression that yawned at his feet. ‘You’re wrong. If all I wanted was a rush, I could take up fucking sky-diving.’

He closed his eyes, sorting through the clamour of his thoughts as he tried to find the right words. ‘It was you. Always you. You sat in that cab and told me everything about my life. You saw me. Yeah, at first, I was taken in by what you can do. How you can solve cases. How stupid and reckless and brilliant you are, but do you really think that’s enough reason for me to have stuck around through you shooting the bloody walls and leaving body parts in the fridge?’ He clenched his jaw, ignoring the way his voice cracked as he added, ‘You’re a crap flatmate, Sherlock, but I wouldn’t trade you for anyone. It’s got nothing to do with the Work.’

A sympathetic sound caught in his throat when he noticed the crystal glimmer of brine pooling in the corner of Sherlock’s closed eyes. They were clamped shut, as if he thought he could hold back the flood by force, but it didn’t stop the silent tear escaping to trail down to his cheek. Sherlock’s spare hand cuffed furiously at the moisture, trying to banish it as his gruff words emerged as half-whisper, half-snarl.

‘It won’t stop,’ he hissed, and his next breath turned into a wheeze, strained, as if he was trying to fight his heartache and losing ground. ‘I shouldn’t have to cry for him.’

‘You’re not.’ At least this John could say with confidence, and he shifted, sitting more comfortably on the floor and leaning his shoulder against the couch. ‘You’re not crying because he’s gone. You’re crying because of everything he took with him, and because you’re afraid you won’t get it back.’ He squeezed Sherlock’s hand again, pouring conviction into his grip. ‘But you will. I’m sure of it. Whatever it takes.’

Sherlock shook his head, his voice breaking. ‘And if I can’t?’

‘You can. People will help you. I’ll help you.’ He pressed his lips together, fighting against the lump of empathy in his throat as Sherlock buried his face in the quilt by John’s shoulder, concealing his sorrow. Bowing his head, he leaned his brow against Sherlock’s crown, his vow no more than a whisper. ‘I promise.’

A flicker of motion made John turn his gaze towards Sherlock’s bedroom door, where Mrs Hudson stood, her eyes bright and her arms full of washing. She shifted the load and one hand fluttered to her lips, promising her silence as she held back her tears. Sherlock would hate to be seen like this, and she realised that the best comfort for him would be to pretend she had never been there at all. With exaggerated care, she crept by, retrieving the pile of towels and leaving them in peace.

John waited, wishing there was something he could do to pull Sherlock free from grief’s grasp. The urge to stroke and soothe made his muscles burn, but he suspected that if he gave in, Sherlock would feel patronised rather than comforted. Instead he held still, doing all he could to transmit comfort and sympathy through two meagre points of contact: his hands furled around one of Sherlock’s and his forehead pressed to dark, damp curls. It seemed inadequate, but gradually, the vice of Sherlock’s despair eased. Quiet, fitful sobs reduced in frequency, and his ragged breathing began to regain an even flow.

‘Sorry.’ John almost missed the hoarse apology, but he thought he caught a trace of embarrassment in Sherlock’s voice. That was an improvement over indifference, and he looked down into that half-hidden face.
His skin was blotchy and his nose red. Bloodshot eyes blinked at him, a far cry from the elegant poise Sherlock managed to maintain when he was shamming. Right now, he just look wrecked, drained by the strength of his emotions and miserable with it.

‘Stop apologising,’ John urged, letting go of his hand and getting to his feet. It took less than a minute to grab a spare loo roll from the bathroom, and he put it down by Sherlock’s elbow, watching those fingers, so agile once, peel free a couple of sheets so he could blow his nose. ‘It’s not your fault.’

Sherlock made a small, disgusted sound, and John had to admit he couldn’t blame him. It must be awful, feeling so out of control. Under normal circumstances, Sherlock would not have shed a single tear over Alexander’s demise. If Sherlock’s hormonal balance had remained as it would be in his bonded state, he wouldn’t have wept at all. He would have taken action to secure his future without hesitation.

All this, the depression, the apathy... It was all because of Sherlock’s reaction to the broken bond. The chemicals in his blood did this to him, making him blank and sapping every last ounce of his energy. Even now, he looked shattered, as if he could hardly keep his eyes open, and John rested a hand on his head, skimming his thumb back and forth.

‘Get some sleep?’ he suggested. ‘Your bite should be all right for now. I’ll keep an eye on you.’

The sound Sherlock made might have been a protest, but whatever it was the words were lost. John allowed himself to observe, memorising the too-sharp lines of his cheekbones and the gaunt draw of his face as, inch by inch, Sherlock’s features softened.

Oblivion took him swiftly, dragging him under, and with a sigh, John wondered where he should sleep. His room was too far away, and now the sofa was taken.

A quick investigation proved that Sherlock’s bed lacked any pillows, probably too blood-stained to be saved, and only the quilt remained. It wasn’t much, but it would do, and he heaved it into the living room, making himself a clumsy nest on the floor and grabbing the blanket off the back of his chair. It wasn’t great, but he’d slept in worse over the years. Besides, he was tired enough to get some shut-eye anywhere. It dragged at his eyelids, and he curled up awkwardly by the sofa so that Sherlock could reach out for him if necessary.

Respite found him in fits and starts: shallow dozes plagued by nightmares he couldn’t remember when he awoke. Every time he looked at the clock, another hour had passed, and at six in the morning, he gave up on trying to get a good night’s rest. His body ached more than ever, but he bullied his way through it, blaming his age for his creaking joints as he got to his feet.

His eyes felt like someone had poured sand into them overnight, and his mouth was pasty. His arm and shoulder ached, and a quick investigation showed a large bruise where he’d shoved aside the bathroom door. Normally, he would have kicked it in, but he hadn’t been wearing any shoes and the chance of broken toes had been far too high. Not that his force had been necessary. Sherlock hadn’t even locked the bloody thing.

Creeping forward, John looked at the man in question, his face serene in sleep. Unsurprisingly, the dressing on his nape had darkened with a fresh swell of blood, and John grimaced, his resolve to contact Stamford solidifying into a certainty. He trusted Mike far more than any Internet source, and he wanted to know he was doing the right thing. He didn’t trust Sherlock to keep him informed, not now, when all his priorities were lost beneath the sea of his grief.

No, John needed someone outside of it all to reassure him of Sherlock’s physical well-being, even if
he couldn’t do anything to alleviate his emotional state.

He grabbed his phone from the kitchen table, sending a vague but determined message. He didn’t want to blurt out Sherlock’s secret over text, where anyone could find it. As soon as Mike got here, he’d explain. If he was lucky, he’d catch him before he went to work. He knew Mike too well to think he’d decline. The man was pathologically helpful. It was one of the many reasons John liked him.

With the message sent, he cajoled his weary body into starting the day, consuming cereal and wincing at the loud rumble of the kettle as he made himself some tea. Sherlock slept on, ignorant to the domestic din that seemed to accompany John’s every move, and a flicker of uncertainty twisted through John’s chest. Sherlock wasn’t normally a heavy sleeper, not unless he’d been drugged or otherwise incapacitated. Was this another symptom of the bond’s destruction, or was there something more ominous at work?

The need to ensure he was all right overwhelmed his desire to let him sleep, and he abandoned the kettle, returning to the living room before cupping a hand around one bony shoulder and giving it a gentle shake.

At first, there was no response, but after a harder shove, Sherlock snuffled and made a deep, grumbling sound of protest. His eyelids trembled, and it took several seconds before John saw a glimmer of hazy silver, foggy and unfocussed, between the dark lines of his lashes.

‘How do you feel?’ John asked, watching in sympathetic fascination as Sherlock appeared to wrest himself away from the tempting shallows of his dreams, screwing his eyes up tight before opening them wide.

‘Tired.’ As replies went, it wasn’t exactly informative, but the huge yawn Sherlock failed to stifle emphasised his point. At least he was conscious and able to answer questions, although he was already settling back into John’s eiderdown and letting out a long, gusty sigh as his eyes slipped shut.

‘Hey, stay awake a minute. Look, I need to tell Mike about this.’ John waved his hand to indicate Sherlock’s supine form, flicking his fingers towards the dressing at the back of his neck. ‘I want a second opinion, and –’

‘He’s the obvious choice. A Beta with access to medical knowledge about Omegas.’

John blinked, the knot in his chest loosening as Sherlock spoke with such familiar confidence. ‘Yeah. I mean, he’s no specialist but –’

‘But he’s impartial.’ Sherlock yawned again, his words slurring. ‘s fine.’

The buzz of his phone interrupted before John could reply, and he turned away to read the message: Mike’s assurance that he’d be at Baker Street as soon as possible. The text spurred him into action, and he left Sherlock, already dozing again, as he hurried upstairs to get dressed. He shaved quickly and had just finished brushing his teeth when a timid knock reached his ears.

Trotting down the stairs, John opened the front door, giving Mike a tired smile as he noticed the man not only had a medical kit in one hand, but what looked like a bag of donuts and coffee in the other. ‘Breakfast,’ he said by way of explanation, his round cheeks swelling with an affable smile. ‘Sort of, anyway. It sounded urgent. Is Sherlock all right?’

John stood aside, beckoning him in as he tried to decide how to explain. Now it came to it, he didn’t quite know what to say. The silence grew, and Mike waited patiently as John cleared his throat.
‘He’s, yeah – no. Look, Sherlock’s an Omega.’ He drew in a breath, looking for anything other than surprise and acceptance in Mike’s face. ‘He’s been separated from his Alpha for years, but last week the bastard bloody went and died.’

Mike’s hiss of sympathy was immediate and gratifying. Beneath that jovial exterior, there lay an adaptable and considerable intelligence, and he caught on quickly. ‘A broken bond?’

‘Yeah. It’s all –’ John shrugged. ‘– complicated.’

‘I’ll say,’ Mike agreed, looking thoughtfully at the floor before gesturing upwards. ‘I’m guessing you want me to take a look at him?’

‘If you could. He hated that wanker, but that doesn’t stop the depression.’

‘Dissociative?’ Mike puffed out a tired breath as he got to the top of the stairs, rubbing a hand over his belly.

‘Yeah. He isn’t interested in eating or solving cases. He’s been in bed most of the time. He’d get up to use the loo, but then climb straight back under the covers again.’ For some reason, that news made Mike smile, and John frowned, confused, as he waited for an explanation.

‘That’s a good thing. I bet you’ve been doing your research, so you’re aware of the fading five-percent?’

‘The ones who just... die?’ John pursed his lips, pushing down the fear that fluttered like moths in his chest. ‘Yeah. I’ve been trying to find out how you can tell if an Omega’s heading down that path, but there isn’t much.’

‘Not in the public domain, no. A lot of documentation regarding Omega healthcare is restricted. You have to be vetted and all that. Since it’s part of my job teaching, and I’m not an Alpha, I can get my hands on material you won’t even know exists.’

He stepped through to the living room, standing on tip-toe to get a better look at Sherlock’s sleeping form. When he spoke again, it was in a whisper. ‘The ones that fade are completely unhooked from their lives and their bodies. No one quite knows why it happens, but they cease to make any connection to what’s happening to them. They’ll soil themselves rather than use the bathroom, wither and starve instead of eating even a mouthful. If you move them, they just stay where you put them. Sherlock’s taking care of basic hygiene and returning to a location he’s deemed as safe. It’s a positive sign.’

Something taut unfurled in John’s stomach at Mike’s words. He spoke with the confidence of a man who was sure of his knowledge, and John wondered why he’d not called on him back when all this started.

‘I managed to find out some of what I should I expect,’ he explained, ‘but I never thought it would be quite like this.’

‘People don’t.’ Mike circled around the edge of the sofa, setting his things down on the coffee table before he reached out and nudged Sherlock’s shoulder, watching his face with interest as he slowly stirred.

‘Morning, Sherlock. I need to check on your bite.’ If he was disturbed by the sleepy slowness of that lightning fast mind, he showed no sign of it. ‘It started bleeding last night, yeah?’ John nodded without thinking, but Mike just smiled in his direction, waiting until he got a grumbling, positive noise from Sherlock. ‘That explains the lethargy then. The formation of a proper scab is essential.’
‘Why?’ John asked.

‘If it doesn’t heal correctly, the Omega runs a high risk of bacterial infection of the spinal and cerebral fluid.’ Mike’s cheerful expression fell into serious lines, and an icy chill washed down John’s back. ‘The same thing happens if a bite is forced on top of an existing one, or before a scabbed one has properly sealed. It’s practically a certainty, rare in the modern age, but not unheard of.’ Mike tipped his head, observing John. ‘You’d have spotted that the moment it started,’ he reassured softly. ‘You’re too good a doctor to miss something like that. All I’ve done is give you advanced warning of the possibility.’

‘Christ,’ John breathed, cuffing a hand through his hair as he tried not to dwell on what might have happened. ‘Why the hell didn’t Mycroft warn me? He said it might be like a disease, but he never said anything about meningitis.’

‘It’s possible he isn’t aware of the precise nature of the risks. I know this stuff because I read the body of documentation as a whole. I can see patterns that aren’t stated in reports, because I’ve got access to multiple sources.’ Mike shook his head. ‘The healthcare system for Omegas is a disgrace. Any effort at reform falls flat on its face, so we’re stuck trying to do the best we can.’

He reached out and peeled away the dressing, careful not to disturb the freshly scabbed skin, still moist and oozing. ‘This though, this isn’t looking bad. The healing factors stimulate melatonin release, which is why Sherlock’s so out of it. His body’s in a sort of hibernation-mode. It’ll be deep, limited REM. The idea is to keep the Omega still so the scab can form.’ He checked the dressing for any warning signs of infection, passing it to John to take a look at. ‘Best leave it off for now. Let the air get to it a bit.’

Wearily, John perched on the arm of the sofa by Sherlock’s feet. Mike wasn’t giving him any guarantees, but he was still arming him with the facts, checking Sherlock’s pulse and rousing him to ask quiet questions. He nodded at the fractured replies, examining the jut of his ulnar process and checking for dehydration. He also listened to his chest, his head tilted intently to the side as he focused on the sounds the stethoscope delivered to his ears.

At last, Mike packed up the few bits of his kit he’d used and reached for his coffee, taking a gulp before he patted John on the shoulder. ‘As far as these things go, it’s not bad. He’s responsive, his pulse is slow but steady, he’s healing…As alarming as it looks this is a pretty text-book progression of a broken bond.’

‘Is there anything I can do to help? Get him to eat more? Try and make him get out of bed?’

Mike was shaking his head before John had finished, and his lopsided smile was kind. ‘I wish I could help you be more pro-active about it, but the best thing to do is keep an eye on him and let it run its course.’

‘And it’s okay to keep him here?’ That was the decision he’d questioned more than once since bringing Sherlock back to Baker Street, but Mike’s decisive response swept his uncertainty aside.

‘Without a doubt. I’ve read scores of papers on broken bonds, and one thing’s clear: scent plays a key role. They need to be somewhere that smells like home. Sometimes that’s a place, but sometimes it’s more to do with people. Having their kids around helps, if they’ve got any, or family, if they’re close, but I’m guessing for Sherlock, it’s going to be this flat and the man who shares it with him.’ He gestured to John, and there was the faintest twinkle of mischief in his eyes. ‘He’ll probably start gravitating towards things that smell like you, if he hasn’t already.’

John thought about Sherlock’s strange insistence at using John’s shampoo, and the way he had
effectively buried himself in John’s bedding, rather than demanding his own. ‘It helps?’ he asked, trying to ignore the shimmer of pleasure at the thought.

Mike gave him a knowing look. ‘It comforts anyone who’s distressed to be in a familiar place with people they care about. It’s just that with Alphas and Omegas, it’s a bit more obvious.’

He cleared his throat, and something like embarrassment stuttered across that round face. Mike was the embodiment of practicality, ploughing on through uncomfortable topics regardless, but now he fidgeted, glancing from John to Sherlock and back again. ‘I suppose him asking me to expose you to telikostrone makes a bit more sense, now. It wasn’t so much about the cases as it was about him.’

John gave a weak laugh and bowed his head. ‘I didn’t find out until recently. He was trying to prove a point. Until a few days before that, I thought he was an Alpha.’

Mike’s expression was thoughtful, but he was a quick bloke, and John could see him working through various permutations before he spoke again. ‘But he’s not. Like you said, it’s complicated?’

John thought of the Cunninghams, the society that could trap Sherlock in another loveless bond and the biology that made such a connection necessary. ‘Very.’

Mike perched on the seat of John’s armchair, his hands pressed around the paper cup of coffee. ‘What about you? Are you okay?’

‘What? Yeah, I’m – I’m fine. Worried, but all right.’ John shrugged, offering what he hoped was a reassuring smile, but it didn’t look like Mike was buying it.

‘What I mean is,’ Mike eased a hand through the air in emphasis. ‘while Sherlock being here with you is good for him, it puts a few new risks on the table. Do you – do you know what to expect?’

‘Well, he’ll go into pyresus eventually, but Mycroft said it would be weeks away.’ He watched Mike’s neutral expression. ‘Won’t it?’

‘Probably, but it’s not like a switch. Sherlock’s moving from a bound state to an unbound one. You’ve never experienced him in the latter. Not his personality or his behaviour. You need to be aware of that.’ He shrugged. ‘I’m not saying he’ll be completely different from the man you know, but he’s likely to be volatile and defensive. His natural scent will re-establish itself, and then there’s the additional alteration of his fragrance during pyresus…’

Mike sighed, spreading his hands. ‘I know you, John. I know that under normal circumstances, you would never force yourself on anyone, but this –’ He gestured to Baker Street, indicating their situation. ‘This is an unknown scenario. If Sherlock goes into pyresus while you’re here, will you react the same way as an Alpha of the elite?’

‘No.’ John shook his head, adamant. ‘I’d – I’d never – I wouldn’t –’

‘You don’t know that,’ Mike said gently. ‘Hormones are powerful things, and we have no way to be sure how much of it is purely biochemical, and how much of it is social. We have no idea if your conscience will stop you.’ He lowered his voice, looking at Sherlock again before meeting John’s gaze. ‘I know you. You’d never forgive yourself.’

John closed his eyes and bowed his head. Mike was right. He could remember all too well back in the labs when he was exposed to telikostrone. It had been an invisible magnetic force, focusing his body on sex while dimming his mind. He had realised that there might be some situations in which his moral compass failed completely, overridden by a blind biological imperative.
‘I’m only saying this to put you on your guard, John, not to drive you out. Sherlock knows what to expect, and I’m sure he’ll look out for his own safety as well as yours when the time comes.’

Mike got to his feet, clearing his throat as he looked at the clock. ‘I have to get to work. I can’t give you access to the reports I have; they’re locked down to the hospital networks, but there are some things I can print off and send your way. The more you know and all that, right?’

‘Right.’ John cleared his throat, lifting his head as he stood up and shook Mike’s hand. ‘Thanks for all this. I wish I’d asked you sooner.’

‘No problem. I’ll drop what I can through the letter box on the way home from work. If you want a second opinion about anything, let me know. Oh, and…’ he looked around, grabbing a piece of paper and a pen before scrawling down a number. ‘That’ll get you through to Doctor Madison. She’s an Omega specialist. Private health, but she’s one of the good ones. If there’s any hint of infection give her a call, tell her I referred you. She won’t ask questions. All she’ll care about is making sure Sherlock’s all right.’

Mike picked up his bag before clapping John on the shoulder, his expression one of sympathy as he sighed. ‘Look, I can see how rough it’s been. I wish I could say it’ll be over soon, but from what you’ve said, it’s not that simple. There is one thing I can say for sure, though: he’ll get better. It might take a while, and it might not be easy for either of you, but he’s too bright not to figure something out, and you’re too good a friend to let him suffer on his own.’ Mike smiled. ‘Give it time, and everything’ll be all right.’

Perhaps it was Mike’s ceaseless smile, or his quiet confidence, but despite everything, John found himself starting to hope. Nothing was certain, and Mike was only guessing at the extent of the obstacles that littered the way ahead, but for the first time in days, the situation looked a little brighter.

He and Sherlock had solved improbable crimes and survived impossible odds in their time as flatmates. They’d been through everything together, and John was damned if he was going to let them be torn apart by something neither of them could control.

Not while he was still around to fight by Sherlock’s side.
True to his word, Mike dropped off three thick envelopes full of papers on his way home from work. A note stuck to the front of the stack warned about the bias of the reports, but promised that John would find enough in there to help both himself and Sherlock.

He latched onto the information, absorbing everything on offer as evening turned to night. Sometimes he sat there, nauseated at the prejudice that lay thick in the medical research. Some of the articles read more like a guide to emotional and sexual manipulation, and a few he had to put aside, too repulsed by their indifference to the Omegas they discussed. However, most gave him insights into things he hadn’t even considered. He’d been so wrapped up in what Sherlock was going through that he hadn’t included himself as part of the equation.

At least, instinctively, Sherlock seemed to know what he needed. To him, a familiar scent had nothing to do with blood-ties; it was all about John. It made him wonder if he’d stayed with Sherlock through the past week – lain beside him through the days of deep indifference – would he have shown more rapid signs of improvement? Had John made the wrong move in keeping his distance?

With a sigh, he rubbed his eyes and looked around the room. Worrying about that now was useless. He had to think about the present and what he could do, rather than dwelling on the past.

The fire he’d lit in the grate had dwindled to embers, and the clock ticked away on the mantelpiece, its hands angled over midnight. His eyes burned and his stomach growled in furious reprimand. Food was a distant memory, and he realised he’d have to eat something before giving up for the night.

Moving on autopilot, he went to the fridge, examining various leftovers before putting some Thai beef in the microwave. The fluorescent digits ticked down as his thoughts wandered, drifting back to the pages heaped by his armchair.

It was easy to think of a bond as something simple, but the truth was that Sherlock’s body was rewriting itself, switching him into a different way of life. His olfactory sense, already powerful, would strengthen further, the better to detect threats or a potential partner. The balance of his brain chemistry would shift, prioritising physical sensations over logical reasoning, and his reproductive health and efficiency would be given precedence over every other physiological need.

Even the intimate arena of Sherlock’s biology endeavoured to rob him of free will. Worse, it did so at the very moment he needed it most.

Right now, Sherlock was incapable of considering his options, but John assumed that would pass in time. Unbound was not the same as irrational. He was not some dependent who couldn’t be trusted to do what was in his best interests. He had a mind and the intelligence to use it, and the thought of anyone denying him that right…

John swallowed, shaking his head as he acknowledged that a feral, selfish part of himself wanted Sherlock’s judgement to fall in his favour. He wanted Sherlock to decide on him, not because of the Work, but because of what had simmered between them for so long. It pre-dated his discovery that Sherlock was an Omega – that undeniable chemical attraction – and John was sure it had nothing to do with gender. It was about them, nothing else.

If he offered that – the bite Sherlock seemed sure he needed and the relationship that John had always assumed went with it – would Sherlock take it? Would he do it because he wanted John, or because he needed a bond? Would he turn it down, and if he did, where did that leave them?
He shook that last question aside. He’d be here in whatever capacity Sherlock wanted him, for as long as he let him stay. Wasn’t that what Sherlock feared losing the most? What they already had? His grief was for the destruction of the life he’d built here in Baker Street, and John was part of that.

But if Sherlock said yes…

The beep of the microwave interrupted his train of thought, and John smile ruefully at the skitter of his heart. God, he was a sap. It was embarrassing to get to this age, almost forty, and find himself half-giddy again, adolescent in the surge of his emotions. As tempting as it was to blame it on the constant hormonal flux around him, it wasn’t something new. It had been washing over him with increasing frequency since well before Sherlock’s bond broke.

Except now wasn’t the time to bring it up. John wanted to ease his burdens, not add to them. Besides, he wasn’t even sure what he’d be offering. In so many ways, a bond seemed more complicated, more committed, than a wedding vow. Was he capable of being what Sherlock needed?

Retrieving his meal from the microwave, John grabbed a fork and headed back to the living room. A cushion on the floor by the sofa provided some padding and he settled onto it, kicking his legs out in front of him as he picked his way through the leftovers.

Even if John did offer himself, there was no guarantee Sherlock would take him up on it. He’d proven with Alexander that he was not afraid to make the hard decisions, nor fight for what he wanted, but that was in different circumstances. His bond had been in place when he began to combat his fertility, to run away, to become the man he was today… Mike had said it earlier: Sherlock was entering a different state, one he’d not experienced for almost two decades. There was no telling how he’d react once the fog of grief cleared.

A glimmer of pale movement flashed in the corner of his eye, and John twitched as long fingers plucked a bit of meat from his bowl. He looked over his shoulder to see Sherlock pop it in his mouth and chew, licking sauce off his thumb before swallowing the morsel. It was the first time since Alexander turned up dead that he’d voluntarily eaten anything, and John half-turned where he sat, setting the dish within Sherlock’s reach.

‘How’d you sleep?’ He held his breath, waiting for a reply and trying not to smile like an idiot when he got one.

Sherlock tipped his head, one shoulder shifting before he cleared his throat. ‘Deeply. What day is it?’ He frowned at the clock on the other side of the room. He hadn’t cared about the time for far too long, and it was satisfying to see him take an interest.

‘It's Wednesday.’ John kept his fork poised over the bowl as Sherlock grabbed another bit of meat. ‘It's been about a week since... Well.' He shrugged, pressing on quickly. 'Mike was here this morning. Do you remember that?’

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed, perplexed creases charting their grooves across his brow. ‘That feels like ages ago.’ He gave a minute shake of his head then hissed, reaching a hand back. John snatched his wrist before he could touch the bite, keeping his grasp firm as he swallowed his mouthful.

‘Don't. We took the dressing off to let it scab. Leave it alone if you can.’

He watched the cogs of Sherlock’s mind start to turn, no doubt trying to build up some kind of timeline from his scattered memories. He looked lost, but it was annoyance that tilted the corners of his lips downwards: a sign of intellectual frustration, and John gave silent thanks at the sight. It was easy to forget how quiet Sherlock had been until this – his undeniable presence in the world they
shared – put it in perspective. It made John see how bad it had become, and he reminded himself that such things didn’t just go away. Sherlock’s recovery would be slow, but this was the first step: one he had feared they’d never take.

It was tempting to bombard Sherlock with questions and revel in his answers when before there had been nothing but blank silence, but John bit his tongue, giving him the chance to order his thoughts in peace. Gradually, the bowl emptied, and maybe Sherlock wasn’t eating an adult-sized portion, but it made John feel better to see him consuming anything under his own steam.

‘I was about to make some tea.’ It was a lie, but the caffeine wouldn’t be enough to keep him awake, and Sherlock needed fluids in whatever guise John could provide. ‘Do you want one?’

‘Please.’

Sherlock’s response was immediate. There was no lingering silence as if he were struggling to remember why interaction mattered, and John relished his relief. He’d hoped the change to the bite would be a turning point; it looked like he’d been right. Everything Sherlock did seemed like progress towards recovery, and John was eager to celebrate each tiny victory.

By the time he had brewed two cups of tea, Sherlock had shuffled upright, gathering the quilt around himself and tucking his feet up under his legs. Every movement made him wince, but he was no longer a discarded puppet, limp and disconnected. There was strength in his posture, and he reached for the mug in John’s hands, taking a greedy sip from the rim.

John sat down in the space at Sherlock’s side, trying not to stare. He longed to drink in the sight of him, awake and aware for the first time in ages, but John didn’t want to make him uncomfortable. He had to content himself with sneaking, side-long glances, cataloguing the changes.

The stain of exhaustion had lifted from Sherlock’s skin, and the last of the rash had faded from sight, leaving him colourless in its absence. His hair was a fluffy riot of curls, and the stubble on his jaw emphasised the prominence of his cheekbones.

He was also shaking, and John frowned. It could be low blood sugar, but as the minutes passed, it didn’t seem to get any better, despite the boost the scraps of meat would give him.

‘It’s another symptom,’ Sherlock murmured, and John sighed, scolding himself for thinking he’d been subtle. Even like this, Sherlock was strikingly observant. Of course he’d notice John watching him.

‘Can I see?’

Sherlock set the mug down on the nearby coffee table before holding out his hands, palm down, between them. His compliance was automatic, as if he hadn’t given it conscious thought, and John glanced at him before taking in the tremors in his hands. It was enough that it would interfere with fine motor skills, like threading a needle, and didn’t look dissimilar to what John’s left hand did sometimes. Except the old trauma in his shoulder caused his. Sherlock’s had to have a chemical root.

‘It’ll fade.’ Sherlock tilted his head, observing his body’s betrayal. ‘At least, I think it will.’

‘How much do you know about what’s happening to you?’ John asked, enclosing Sherlock’s palms in his and noticing the shakes lessen. ‘I mean, your mum didn’t go through a bond’s break, and I’m guessing it doesn’t affect an Alpha in the same way, so your dad wouldn’t have shown these symptoms when she passed.’

Sherlock chewed on his bottom lip – an unusual gesture of uncertainty. He looked young, as if his
situation had shorn away years of confidence, and John shifted in his seat as he waited for him to speak.

‘I considered killing Alexander.’

The reply coiled through the air like smoke, and in those words was some of the frank ruthlessness John had glimpsed before. ‘When I was stuck with him dragging me to fertility experts, I needed to see what I might face. They left papers lying around on their desks, dumped on shelves… It was simple. They didn’t seem to think I’d be capable of the independent thought required to steal them. It wasn’t the most comprehensive collection of research, but I learned enough.’

He lifted his chin, daring John to question his behaviour. As if he’d find any sort of morality from him on that score.

‘Good.’ John smiled as Sherlock raised one eyebrow. It wasn’t quite his usual, disdainful expression, but it was close enough. He got to his feet, scooping a handful of articles off the short stack by his chair and putting them in Sherlock’s lap. ‘If you feel up to it, you can read these. Mike printed them out from the locked-down teaching network, as well as PubMed and other places. Normally, you or me wouldn’t be able to get our hands on them. Not without the right credentials.’

Sherlock traced a shuddering finger down the edge of the page, his eyes darting over the title. He thrived on knowledge, and maybe John couldn't do much to help with what was happening to him, but he could give him this.

Normally, there'd be no question about it; Sherlock would throw himself into research, arming himself with every fact he may need. He'd treat what was happening as another case he could solve, but where John hoped for enthusiasm, there was instead hesitation.

'Stamford's helping?' he asked, and John chewed on his lip, not missing the edge of surprise in Sherlock's voice. Maybe after fighting on his own for so long, it was hard to understand that other people might want to give him a hand without an ulterior motive.

'Course he is. Everyone's doing what they can. Greg's distracting people from asking questions about why you've not been able to help with the case. Molly's promised to keep some interesting bits for you down at the morgue if you need a distraction, and Mrs Hudson's broken her "not your housekeeper rule" more times this week than she has all year.' Gratitude coloured John’s voice. 'And they've all made it clear they’ll do much more than that if you ask.'

Sherlock plucked the page's corner before meeting John's gaze. 'Then there's you. Sleeping on the floor, judging by the stiffness of your back; breaking down the bathroom door because you thought I'd done myself harm. You've lost three pounds from worrying too much and eating too little, and you've barely left my side.' He drew in a shaky breath. 'You've not even been outside the flat.'

'Where would I go?' he demanded. 'Unless it was to retrieve something that would help you, what could make me leave you on your own when you need me?' He swallowed. Blunt as his statement may be, it wasn't a lie. Mike had been adamant about that. It wasn't just anyone who made Sherlock feel better. It was John.

‘Thank you.’ Sherlock met his gaze, and the tiniest glimmer of a smile curved his lips. ‘Knowing you were here made it easier – more bearable. You reminded me there was still a world outside my head.’

'Good. I wasn't sure if you'd rather I left you alone or...' He trailed off with a shrug, scratching the back of his neck before changing tack. 'You seem better. Twenty-four hours ago, you wouldn't even speak. Now...'
Something flickered in Sherlock's gaze, and he reached for his tea, drinking what remained in steady gulps before cradling the empty mug in his hands. He stared into the dregs, enchanted by the thin layer of fluid. 'It feels like I'm high: too fast, too bright, too present. Like I've swung too far the other way.' He ran a shaking hand up his arm and back down again, staring at whatever dwelt inside his own head. 'I don't know how long it will last. I should try and make the most of it.'

He looked around the living room as if he were searching for the threads of his old life. As if, weak as he was, he intended to pick up and carry on, like nothing had happened. 'I was in the middle of solving a case."

John frowned, listening more to the way Sherlock spoke than what he was saying. Normally, delays in answering the call of the Work were voiced in thick frustration. Sherlock had never sounded like he dreaded it before, but there was no other way to describe the heavy drag of his words through the air.

'Let Greg deal with that,' he urged, not mentioning the DI's futile struggle towards some kind of solution. 'You should concentrate on looking after yourself. Just because you feel better than you have done over the past week, it doesn't mean you've got to rush back into anything.'

Relief eased the harsh lines of Sherlock's face, and John's heart squeezed with concern. This wasn't the way he expected him to behave. John knew how it went when he was recovering from illness or injury. He pushed himself too soon and sneered at anyone who tried to stop him. He was the master of his transport. Seeing him like this – its victim instead – drove home the severity of the situation.

For the first time since John had walked through the front door of Baker Street, Sherlock Holmes was looking for an excuse to put his own well-being before a case.

Deviation from the norm was to be expected, but that didn't make it any easier to witness. Grimly, John told himself that it was a good thing. If Sherlock was happy to stay inside the flat and recover, then that was one less argument they had to go through. Even if Sherlock wanted to, John wasn't about to let him go haring off on an investigation. He was shaking, weak and in serious need of rest. He just wished Sherlock had fought him on that front, even if it was a token protest.

'You should get some rest,' Sherlock said, his grey eyes never leaving John's face. 'Using a proper bed would probably be a good idea.'

'I'm not going upstairs,' John replied, his denial automatic. 'You could still take a turn for the worse, and I don't want to be –' He flicked a hand towards the stairs, almost too weary to lift his arm.

'Then sleep in my bed.'

John's heart slammed against his ribs as he stared in disbelief. The fact Sherlock had noticed John's well-being was surprising enough, but for him to actively invite John into his personal space? According to what Mike had given him, the first thing a grieving Omega wanted was distance and sanctuary from any Alpha. Being with their kin helped, but the implication was they should be in the same house, not the same room.

Of course, Sherlock had never followed the standard path in anything. John knew that. He had daily proof. Even withdrawn and in the darkness of depression, Sherlock had still taken comfort in John’s proximity. The question was, where exactly was Sherlock going with this?

'I've been unconscious for the best part of twenty-four hours. If I get tired, I can sleep here. There's two perfectly good mattresses in this flat. There's no reason you shouldn't use one of them.'
John’s heart lurched in disappointment, and he chastised himself for it. What had he expected, that Sherlock was inviting him to share?

He wanted to argue. Sherlock was the one undergoing a biological process that tore apart his body and mind. If anyone should have the bed, it was him. However, one look at him, his eyes slowly starting to skim the page of the report with a welcome gleam of interest, and John knew he couldn’t protest, not at the risk of disturbing him from reclaiming some semblance of normality.

“All right, fine,’ he relented, not missing the tick of Sherlock’s triumphant smile, ‘but for God’s sake, it’s a double. If you get tired, just shove me over and climb in. There’s enough bloody space. No need to sleep on that monstrosity of a sofa for any longer than you already have.’

He didn’t give Sherlock the chance to debate it as he got to his feet, shuffling through to the nearby bedroom and smiling at the sight that awaited him. Never had he been so grateful for Mrs Hudson’s tendency to fuss. She’d found new pillows and fresh linens, which meant all John had to do was strip to his underwear and climb in, too tired to bother brushing his teeth.

Exhaustion had become a physical weight, pressing at the back of his head and crushing his neck. It pinned him to the mattress, thumping in his temples as his eyes slid shut, blocking out the grey gloom of London’s night. The quilt smelled like detergent, robbed of every trace of Sherlock’s static-fragrance, and John sighed at the loss, shutting his eyes and slowing the rush of his thoughts.

The first veils of a shallow doze fell away to the oceanic depths of oblivion, and when he finally surfaced, it was to find rich morning light bathing the room. The numbers on the bedside clock gleamed reproachfully, indicating it was closer to lunchtime than breakfast.

‘Shit,’ John muttered, sitting up and cuffing at his eyes. He’d meant to check on Sherlock during the night, but it seemed his body had other ideas. He’d hoped he wouldn’t wake up alone, but the bed lay empty, the second pillow undented, and he flicked back the sheets, reaching for his clothes before pulling them on.

Smoothing his hands over his hair, he promised himself a hot shower and a shave as soon as he got the chance. However, his first priority had to be Sherlock. This was the longest John had left him unattended, and the same old fears reared their heads, pushing his heart into his throat as he pulled back the bedroom door.

His nose picked up the difference immediately, warning him of another presence. Visceral anger-cum-panic flashed through him, blazing across his muscles and making his ears ring, and it took a moment to see what was in front of him: not a stranger invading their home, but Mycroft.

He didn’t recognise Mycroft’s scent. Normally, the older Holmes smelled of expensive cologne, which John had often suspected he tailored to keep his personal fragrance partially obscured from the Alphas of the populace. Either he’d forgotten to put it on, or it wasn’t doing its job, because their flat was laced with an odour he had never had an opportunity to catalogue.

He’d always thought Mycroft would smell like school. In reality, Baker Street carried hints of clean wood-smoke and something rich and umber in John’s mind, like fine whisky.

His gaze fell on the man himself, and John realised his assumption was correct. Mycroft did not look like someone who had seen the comforts of his own bed for several days at least. His clothes were
creased and travel-worn, and his rigid posture seemed ragged at its edges. He stood by the window, his back to the room, but he had turned as John emerged to take in his arrival. One eyebrow lifted, but for once it didn't look judgemental – merely curious.

'I trust you slept well, Doctor Watson?'

John cleared his throat, his voice rough as he nodded. 'Bit longer than I intended, but yeah, thanks.' He glanced at Sherlock, noticing the slump of his body. John’s quilt still cocooned him, but last night he'd been sitting up straight, keen and focused. Now he pulled his knees up tight to his chest, his arms wrapped around them and his head resting on their peaks. He managed a grimace of greeting, but the light had waned from his eyes, leaving them lifeless.

'Has something happened?' John asked, frowning as Mycroft abruptly looked away, turning back to the window and staring through the pane. Nerves fluttered in John's stomach, and he stepped closer, perching on the arm of the sofa. Instantly, Sherlock leaned against him, pressing close as if starved for contact.

'I am afraid I am here to report on my lack of progress,' Mycroft admitted. His hands folded around one another behind his back, and John saw the bleached sharpness of each knuckle. 'The death of the Cunninghams' son, especially in such suspicious circumstances, has resulted in a delicate situation. So far, my attempts to meet with them have been ignored, diverted or otherwise waylaid. Alexander's siblings, both Alphas, seem keen that I should not speak to their parents. I doubt it has anything to do with protecting them in their time of grief.'

'They won't give a shit about that,' Sherlock murmured.

'I believe their main concern is the potential loss of an asset.' He looked at Sherlock meaningfully. 'As, once you leave my care, you are the Alpha mother’s responsibility, the siblings do not stand to gain or lose directly, but it is clear they do not wish me to meet with her.'

'But –' John paused, narrowing his eyes as he licked his lips. 'But isn’t that a good sign? I mean, if they’re trying to stop it from happening, then doesn’t that mean they think you might succeed?'

Mycroft tilted his head in acknowledgement, his eyes cold as he glanced at John. 'It at least suggests they may be aware of the foundation of my negotiations: Alexander’s treatment of Sherlock.'

'Gabrielle knew.' Sherlock’s words stirred the air. 'The sister. She and Alexander were close. He will have told her some of it. Enough to put her on her guard. It could be she’s trying to protect him.'

'Bit beyond that now, isn’t he?' John demanded, biting his lip too late at the harshness of his words.

'But their reputation is not,' Mycroft pointed out. 'The stigma of domestic abuse can destroy a family for generations amidst the elite. Unfortunately, because few people are ever charged with their crimes, it is all whispers... rumours. Scandalous, perhaps, but easily dismissed with the right social flair.'

He straightened his shoulders as he stared out over Baker Street. 'That’s why I am here. It’s apparent that a delicate approach will not work, and my subtle efforts at –'

'Blackmail?' John asked, lifting his chin as Mycroft glared at him.

'Encouraging them to appreciate my perspective have not been successful. If I cannot speak to the parents then I will have to coerce the siblings by threatening to reveal the evidence pertaining to Alexander’s crimes in a public forum, such as court or – failing that – the press. While I can guess their reaction would be cooperative, I’m not adequately acquainted with either Gabrielle or Henry
‘Cunningham to be sure.’

‘Lean on Henry.’ Sherlock sighed, rubbing a hand across his eyes before shifting his touch to his temples. ‘He’s built a business empire on the wholesomeness of the family name. He has more to lose. Gabrielle is stubborn; she might be obstructive for the sake of her dead brother’s secret.’

‘So, let’s say you do that. Let’s say you tell them you’ll show the world their brother was an abusive bastard, they fold and you can get through to the mother. What then?’

‘That depends on whether they choose to make a settlement: of which I’ll accept nothing less than their relinquishment of any claim over Sherlock.’ Mycroft closed his eyes, looking pained. ‘Alternatively, I’ll take the whole thing to court. However, that approach is less desirable.’

John scratched his eyebrow, thinking longingly of a cup of tea and a hearty breakfast as he tried to get his head around what Mycroft was saying. ‘But, if it goes through the justice system – our one – won’t that help? They’re not going to try and hush it up or anything.’

Mycroft turned away from the window, slipping his hands in his pockets and giving John a patronising smile. ‘No? How fascinating. Tell me, John, do you know how many judges in Her Majesty’s service are Alphas of the elite?’ He waited, his eyebrows lifting as John’s heart sank. ‘To believe their influence is limited to their own sphere would be naive. If this goes to court, we lose all element of control. Sherlock’s fate will be out of our hands, and not because they place it in his.’

He sighed, sitting in Sherlock’s armchair with an uncharacteristic lack of poise. ‘Even if everything else fell in our favour, there is still the matter of precedent. There isn’t any that remains applicable in the modern age. Such a case could have vast repercussions for society as a whole.’

‘And that wouldn’t be a good thing?’ John demanded.

‘For the nation? Undoubtedly. For Sherlock?’ Mycroft shook his head. ‘It could take years to reach a resolution, and what becomes of him in that time? He cannot remain unbound indefinitely. Not as it stands.’ He closed his eyes, deep lines of stress bracketing his mouth. ‘Forgive me, but I would not choose the well-being of the populace over that of my brother. His situation is not a vehicle for social reform. At least, not at this tenuous juncture.’

‘That shouldn’t be your decision.’

Sherlock’s quiet statement pulled them up short. John had almost forgotten he was there, and he looked down sharply, taking in the line of his profile. Stress and misery turned his face grey, but there was defiance in the crease of his brow and purse of his lips.

‘You would rather that was our strategy?’ Mycroft asked, the confusion that coloured his voice making him sound like a new man.

‘Don’t be absurd.’ Sherlock closed his eyes, shaking his head. ‘The issues are too clouded to allow confidence in the jury. Any case that sets a precedent has to be about a potential crime the non-elite would judge without hesitation: theft, murder… Something black-and-white.’

John stiffened, his teeth clenching. ‘What, there’s nothing straightforward about you being forced to bond to someone who then turned to domestic abuse?’ he demanded, cutting a hard glare in Mycroft’s direction, daring him to try and be the voice of reason.

Instead, it was Sherlock’s fingers clasping his hand that interrupted the angry roll of his thoughts, plucking apart the strings of his temper as they wriggled into the ball of his fist. ‘No, there isn’t. The whole situation is clouded by sentiment, by how you define consent, and by whether you consider
my refusal to provide him with children as provocation.’ He raised his voice, drowning out John’s effort to interrupt. ‘There’s too much open to interpretation. Too many ways in which the Cunninghams could spin it to their advantage, leaving a confused jury and a mess of case.’

He shook his head, looking back at his brother. ‘You’re right. It would be stupid to let it go to court, but it still isn’t your choice. Not while I’m capable of making it myself.’

Mycroft inclined his head, closing his eyes in acknowledgement. ‘My apologies. You realise, of course, that in the end we may have no other option, but I will endeavour to avoid legal action unless it is absolutely necessary.’

He drummed a ragged rhythm on the arm of the chair, his eyebrows cinched and his gaze distant, no doubt intent on whatever machinations he had in mind. ‘If we are in agreement, I shall attempt to apply pressure to Henry Cunningham in the hopes of accessing a discussion with his parents. However, it is unlikely to be either quick or straightforward.’

‘I never thought it would be.’ Sherlock shrugged, glancing away.

‘We have to consider the possibility that the Cunninghams, or someone pertaining to them, may try and take drastic action before any negotiations are complete.’

‘What?’ John asked, tightening his hand around Sherlock’s fingers.

Mycroft’s gaze flickered, taking in their entwined grasp before he straightened in his chair. He leant forward, twisting his hands together in front of him. ‘It would not be impossible for an enterprising individual to bond Sherlock against his will, trapping him in a union that aligns more with the Cunninghams’ desires. If, for example, one of the family alerts a potential suitor to the situation, they may engineer a scenario in which they can force a bond upon Sherlock: abduction and so forth. It’s not unheard of.’

Leaden heat thudded in John’s stomach: a bass roar of emotion that seared along his veins, making his hands throb and his head pound. The sharp pressure of his teeth against his tongue held back the snarl that bubbled in his throat, and he tried to blink aside the haze that blocked his vision. Just let them fucking try it. He’d see them dead before they even touched Sherlock.

A tweak of movement at his elbow dragged him back from the edge: Sherlock’s grip pinching the wool of John’s jumper. It was the smallest possible tether, but it helped pull him back to the present, where he was left breathless and ashamed at the strength of his response.

‘I thought –’ His voice shook, and he cleared his throat, scratching the bridge of his nose before soldiering on. ‘I thought an unwanted bond could be broken without the death of the Alpha? I’m sure I read something about that.’

Mycroft was watching him, but if he had noticed John’s brief fugue, he did not mention it. ‘I suspect you came across it amidst your extensive research.’ He gestured to the medical reports around them. ‘It is not a preferable course of action.’

Sherlock snorted. ‘That’s an understatement. It’s like the most brutal chemotherapy imaginable. The Omega emerges with serious long-term health problems, if they survive it at all. Most Alphas won’t bother with it, not unless they’re motivated by spite.’ He shrugged. ‘It can affect fertility. Not exactly ideal.’

‘So while it is possible; it’s not viable. It’s certainly not a situation I would ever wish upon my brother.’ There was an edge to Mycroft’s words, something pointed. A warning, maybe, and John
lifted a questioning eyebrow, watching Mycroft tip his head towards the stairs: a promise to explain once they were out of Sherlock’s ear-shot.

‘The Cunninghams may feel that underhanded methods, such as forcing Sherlock to bond, are the only way they can maintain their grip on him. They’ll know we are unlikely to break a connection once it’s been placed.’ Mycroft sighed. ‘Additionally, any legal recourse would be limited, as I have no specific rights with regards Sherlock’s next bond. Not unless they relinquish their claim.’

His eyes grew dark, anxiety exposed within his gaze as he turned to Sherlock. ‘You’re more vulnerable now than you have been in years. I would ask you to consider whether Baker Street is still the best place for you.’

It was like watching a harsh frost strip the life from the world. Sherlock pulled inwards, withering before their eyes. His hand eased free from John’s clutches, curling against his chest. His shoulders took on a lopsided, cringing slant: a bird with a broken wing. What little colour there was to his face ebbed from sight, and his lashes fluttered as he looked down and away.

John heard the next breath hitch in Sherlock’s chest, not grief, but panic, and he cast Mycroft a beseeching look. ‘I don’t think there’s any question about that. Can’t we do more to make the flat secure? Cameras? Surveillance?’

‘Neither is fool-proof.’

‘And isolating him off in the countryside means there are fewer people around to notice if something goes wrong,’ John pointed out. ‘Here, everyone’s nearby. Not just you and me, but Mrs Hudson, Lestrade and the others at the Yard. Safety in numbers.’ He shrugged.

‘And any potential threat can obscure itself within the crowd.’ Mycroft’s counter was matter-of-fact, but one glance at Sherlock seemed to sway him. ‘You will have to leave eventually,’ he pointed out. ‘The respite the city can offer will become a threat before much longer.’

‘I’m aware,’ Sherlock muttered, rubbing a trembling hand across his forehead. ‘Do you think I don’t know what could happen if I went into pyresus here? I understand the risks, both now and in future but I just – I can’t leave.’ His voice shook, and John knew it was as much about Sherlock’s unwillingness to relinquish any more control as it was about the familiarity Baker Street could offer.

Mycroft nodded, his breathing leaving him in a sigh as he rose from the chair. ‘In that case, I will enhance the security here.’ He straightened his shoulders, looking diminished. ‘John, I realise that I may ask too much, but I would appreciate it if you did not attend any locum work at the surgery for the foreseeable future.’ He flicked his hand towards the window. ‘A stranger in Baker Street, even for Sherlock’s own protection, is unlikely to assist in his recuperation. You, on the other hand….’

‘I don’t need a bodyguard.’ Sherlock lowered his feet to the floor, his bare toes digging into the carpet. ‘I’m not incapable, Mycroft.’

‘No, but you are compromised. Forgive me, brother dear, but you look like you’d snap in a strong breeze. It would not be hard to overpower you in your current state. I’m merely asking for John to provide his assistance until you are well enough to defend yourself.’ Mycroft looked away, his voice softening as he added, ‘Which could be quite some time.’

‘I wasn’t planning on going back to work. Not while Sherlock’s recovering at least.’ John sat down; he hadn’t even thought of the surgery. ‘I’ll give them a call, let them know I’m not available.’

‘Thank you. Should you require anything: groceries and such, please keep me informed. I shall make
sure you are in possession of adequate provisions.’

Sherlock gave a strained sigh. ‘Are you quite done putting us under house arrest?’

‘It’s for your own safety.’ Mycroft closed his eyes, speaking through gritted teeth. ‘Against my better judgement I am assisting you in staying here, Sherlock, but there are limits to the risks I will take with your welfare in the name of compromise. I refuse to act against your best interests. I could not stand back, watching disaster befall you and find comfort in knowing it was your choices that brought about calamity.’ He tugged at his jacket, a sharp jerk that strained the fabric before he strode towards the door. ‘I shall appraise you of any developments pertaining to the Cunninghams. John, will you see me out?’

John got to his feet, noticing Sherlock’s lack of a reaction. He’d hoped for at least an eye roll – Mycroft wasn’t being subtle, after all – but Sherlock stared sullenly at the floor, his face hewn in tense lines. With a quiet promise to be back in a minute or two, he slipped out of the door and trotted down the stairs before stopping in front of Mycroft.

‘What is it?’ he demanded, jerking his shoulders in a shrug, more confrontational than he intended, but even like this Mycroft got on his nerves.

‘I trust you took on board what I said about the medical process to dissolve a living bond?’ The wing of one eyebrow lifted. ‘I feel it imperative to emphasise that while I would seek out other methods to free Sherlock from an unwanted connection, the Cunninghams would not be so hesitant.’

John cocked his head, narrowing his eyes and folding his arms as he waited for Mycroft to clarify.

‘Should you bite Sherlock while he is in your care and before I am able to negotiate his release from the Cunninghams’ custody, they are likely to subject him to medical treatment.’

Lead encased John’s chest, a restrictive wall of pressure that made his next breath a wheeze. ‘What the fuck are you implying? A minute ago you stood in our living room asking me to protect him. Now you’re acting like you think I’m just going to – what? Force him into something?’

Mycroft’s tattered exhale hissed through the air, and only the shake of his head stopped John before a tirade could begin. ‘Forgive me. I fear I am not making myself clear. I do not believe you would do anything at odds with Sherlock’s wishes. Rather, I suspect he may ask it of you.’

His shoulders dropped, and John had never seen him look so lost. ‘I doubt I will be able to conclude any negotiations promptly, regardless of the methods I use. I merely wish to warn you that, should he ask you to form a bond and you accept, there’s no guarantee it will be permanent.’

Mycroft lifted his chin, his gaze searching. ‘The consequences to Sherlock – and I think, to you – could be devastating.’

John stared, his lips parted but speechless as he tried to take in what Mycroft was saying. What had he seen in his brother to make him so sure? Would Sherlock turn to him out of genuine desire, or was it a decision forced by need and nothing more?

‘I – I don’t –’ He rubbed a hand over his face, pushing his way through a fog of confusion. It was unfair to Sherlock to go behind his back and ask Mycroft for an evaluation of something so personal. Instead, John appealed to his knowledge of the elite which, even after so much research, he still didn’t understand. ‘Why would they choose to break it medically? Killing me would do the job.’

Mycroft tilted his head: a thoughtful, considering gesture. ‘Murder is illegal and often complicated to engineer. They don’t have my resources,’ he pointed out. ‘There is also the matter of time. Sherlock
would be ready to bond again in little more than a week undergoing the treatment, although that comes at a high personal cost.’

He shifted where he stood, hiding the tense clench of his hands in his pockets. ‘Without knowing the family, I cannot be certain of their motives. However, in the past, chemical dissolution has been considered a moral lesson – a punishment. Families would risk all that made the Omega valuable to them – their fertility – in the name of ensuring they could not have the Alpha whom they had chosen for themselves.’

John shook his head in disbelief. ‘Cutting off their nose to spite their face.’

‘Precisely. The family potentially loses an asset, but the Omega loses everything. They’d be worthless.’

‘No, they wouldn’t.’ John’s voice shook, every syllable strained. ‘They are people. Their value is in who they are.’ He bit his lip, barely noticing the look that Mycroft gave him was thick with approval.

‘So I am aware.’ He swallowed, a frown cinching his brow as he looked at John, taking him in with a single sweep of his gaze. ‘Before I go, I would urge you again to be careful.’

John blinked. ‘Of?’

‘Sherlock.’ Mycroft cocked his head, watching him. ‘You can hardly claim to be unaffected by his changing situation: you are already exhibiting aggressive impulses which, normally, you would endeavour to conceal.’

There was no denying that. John had always been protective of Sherlock, an ally in any fight and the gun at his back. It was the way they worked: cooperative. This morning had been nothing like that. Twice he’d thought Sherlock in danger: once when he didn’t recognise Mycroft’s scent and the second at the mere mention of a potential threat. His response had been automatic and far from rational. Perhaps he’d not thrown a punch or reached for his Sig, but the power and longing had been there, coiled spring-tight and ready to snap.

He tipped his head, acknowledging Mycroft’s point as he folded his arms. ‘Maybe. I’ve got it under control.’

‘For now, yes. However, it’s only going to get worse. I wonder, have you considered medication?’

Mycroft shrugged. ‘After all, while there’s nothing we can do for Sherlock, there are options to ameliorate an Alpha’s reaction to an Omega entering an unbound and volatile state.’

John straightened up, licking his lips as he nodded. ‘I’ve already talked to Mike Stamford about various options, or there’s the inhibitors I used in the army.’

‘Yes. Neither option is ideal.’ Mycroft wrinkled his nose. ‘Long-term use reduced the effectiveness of the generic inhibitors, and additionally renders most contraceptives less than efficient.’ He straightened the cuff of his jacket. ‘Let me see what I can find. If we can remove your potential reaction to Sherlock’s changing state from the equation, I’m sure that would provide everyone with peace of mind. In the mean-time,’ He glanced up the stairs, ‘please be on your guard. Omega biology is unpredictable, and it may even take Sherlock by surprise.’

‘I will. Thanks.’

The older Holmes nodded in farewell, pulling open the front door and stepping out on the pavement before shutting away the outside world.
John bowed his head, his breathing harsh in the quiet hall as he clenched his fists at his sides. He had to hand it to Mycroft, he knew what he was talking about, but his predictions of what the Cunninghams could inflict upon Sherlock were painfully believable. He could picture it easily. Sherlock would never lie back and let it happen, he’d fight, of that John was sure, but he shouldn’t have to. It shouldn’t even be a possibility!

John bit his lip, dragging in a deep breath. Getting angry wouldn’t help. Railing against what was happening to Sherlock – what could still happen if Mycroft failed in his negotiations – wasn’t going to change anything. If he was going to be of any use, then he needed to think. He needed a rational, logical mind, not an ache in his chest and a constant, seething storm in the pit of his stomach.

The creak of the stairs made him look up in surprise, blinking to see Sherlock standing a mere arm’s length away. It was strange to see him out of the flat, upright, even if he looked shaky from the effort, and John reached out an automatic hand to steady him, gripping a slender elbow. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I could ask you the same question. Mycroft left several minutes ago.’ Sherlock's gaze darted to the door, his lips twisting and his gaze dim. ‘You didn't come back upstairs.’

It could have sounded accusing, but there was a vulnerable tilt to the syllables that made it more of a question to John's ears. He could see the bafflement on Sherlock's face, as if he couldn't comprehend whatever story was written in John's expression. He looked confused, and John drew in a breath, wondering if Sherlock was incapable of deducing the specifics of a conversation which, a week ago, he would have plucked apart within seconds from John's posture alone.

‘I was just –’ His words died away as he faltered, unable to end that sentence. Sherlock didn't need him bowed to breaking point beneath the weight of his emotions. If ever there was time for a stiff upper-lip and a level head, it was now, but both felt beyond John's reach. Rage and desperation tore him down the middle, because when it came down to it, there was so little he could do. He had promised Sherlock anything but until he asked for John's help, he was stuck in a no man's land, watching the threat approach from every side but helpless stop it.

A hand against his cheek made him flinch, and he cursed inwardly as Sherlock snatched his fingers away, startled. He hovered, wraith-like, at the bottom of the stairs, the most intelligent man John had ever known reduced to inaction by his uncertainty. Those long arms folded around himself, crossing over his chest as he shifted from one foot to the other, staring at the door with a perplexed frown. ‘Whatever Mycroft said…’ He trailed off, his nose wrinkling. ‘He was probably being needlessly dramatic.’

For a moment, John considered blurting it out. Not the shit about the Cunninghams, which he had no doubt Sherlock already knew, but the bit about the two of them forming a bond. The words fluttered in his chest, thrashing against his ribs and gilding his tongue with their flavour, but one look at Sherlock was enough to bite them back. Fragility wrote its accusations in every angle of his body, and while John had nothing but respect for Sherlock’s strength and mental acuity, he could see that there were limits.

In this, like so many other things, it was up to Sherlock to take the lead. The moment he felt ready to discuss his future, he would do so and John would put all his cards on the table. Right now, he doubted Sherlock could even consider it. He was struggling to hold his pieces together and cope with the demands of his shattered biology. Anyone under the same circumstances would find the most mundane decisions overwhelming. Expecting Sherlock to consider vast, life-altering options when he was in such a state was laughable, but it was no one else’s choice to make.

‘Come on,’ John urged, holding out his hand. ‘Let’s get you back upstairs.’
'Not until you tell me what’s upset you.' A glimmer of Sherlock’s stubbornness underscored his reply, and John would have been glad to see it if it didn’t put him on the spot.

His jaw worked as he sorted through his answer, stripping it down to bare bones. ‘I’m worried.’ The admission was stark. ‘About you. About what might happen to you, not just if Mycroft doesn’t manage to make the Cunninghams see things his way, but in the mean-time. I’m scared that every time I look at you, you seem to have acquired another symptom, and I’m pissed off that there is nothing I can do to make it better.’

His voice strained over those last words, strung across the rack of his concern. He cleared his throat, trying to stop the knot that tangled in his throat and the threatening thud of stress that banged against his temples. Pressing shaking palms to his face, he took another breath, forcing himself to be calm and quiet. He refused to take any of this out on Sherlock – the last person in the world who deserved to deal with the sick maze of his unpredictable temper.

A cool touch manacled his wrists, pulling his hands away, but even Sherlock’s grip was weak: a ghost of captivity despite the fervent gleam in his gaze.

‘Stop it,’ he whispered, stepping closer, the long expanse of his body well inside John’s sphere of personal space. The gentle heat of him, barely hidden beneath the thin layers of cotton he wore, strafed across John’s awareness, and he swayed forwards, drawn in by the promise of Sherlock’s proximity. ‘How can you say you're not helping? How can you believe that when you're the only one keeping me sane?’

John blinked up at Sherlock’s face, watching him chew his lip as if debating the wisdom of his next words. ‘You were right to fear what I might do to myself,’ he confessed, his voice hushed. ‘If you’d never moved into Baker Street - never taken such an interest...' He cleared his throat, his head moving in a tiny, fretful shake as if trying to pitch his thoughts away. ‘You help more than you realise just by being here.’

He closed his eyes, letting Sherlock's words sink in. To hear his fundamental influence on Sherlock's survival stated in such unapologetic terms constricted his throat. He shifted his hands, pressing his palms against Sherlock's and entwining their fingers, clutching as tight as he dared as he struggled to hold on to his composure.

‘I wish I could do more,’ he managed at last. ‘I wish you didn't have to deal with any of this, not just what's happening to you, but what other people are trying to do. It's not fair.’

Those last words hissed from between his lips like a curse, futile, but true. The endless revolution of his mind carried him, time and again, back to the inequality of the entire situation, but no amount of protest was going to change the grim reality that they faced.

A quick tug pulled him forward, and lithe arms wrapped around John's ribs and back, holding him close. He returned the embrace without question. He didn't know who was giving comfort and who was taking it, but in the end, it probably wasn't so straightforward. There was a sense of give and take, of holding each other up even as they failed to stand on their own two feet, and John closed his eyes, forcing the frantic splay of his mind to limit itself to the confines of this moment.

He wished he could forget it – all of it, from bonds to family politics – and stay here where there was nothing but the swell of Sherlock’s chest against his and the warmth of his body, but it was impossible. The truth was there in the tremor of Sherlock’s hands and the thinned layer of flesh across his bones. It made itself known in the slump of that tall frame and the shadows in his eyes, and John’s fears were stuck on tortuous repeat.
‘You’re worrying yourself sick,’ Sherlock whispered, his hand shifting to skim along the line of John’s jaw before he stepped back, leaving him bereft. ‘There’s nothing you can do. Not while I’m like this.’ One shoulder lifted in a shrug, and his mouth contorted in a painful approximation of self-disgust.

John sucked in a breath, silently berating himself for wallowing in emotion. Sherlock was wrong; there was plenty he could do. Looking after someone when they were unwell, physically or mentally, could be challenging, but at the same time it could be as simple as pouring everything you had into their happiness. So much of Sherlock’s life was about his value as an Omega. Even Mycroft, who was doing his best to fight for his brother’s freedom, was caught in the labyrinthine knots of elite society. How often did anyone but John take the time to show Sherlock that it was who he was as a person that held worth?

In all his fretting, it was easy to lose sight of that, and John clutched at the frail framework of a plan, squaring his shoulders and holding out his hand again: an invitation for Sherlock to take it if he wished. So much of this mess was beyond his control, but if there was any part of it that deserved his full attention – it was Sherlock. He had let that slip, too lost in the biology and gathering knowledge to focus on the man who suffered the results.

He didn’t need a bond to show his devotion, and he’d do everything in his power to make sure Sherlock knew it.
Warning Signs

Soft light crept around the curtains, lifting the night’s darkness as it spilt across the bed. White cotton glowed while shadows lingered in the fabric’s valley, but Sherlock ignored the encroaching tide, too intent on the man curled up beside him to acknowledge daybreak.

Morning sun picked out the gold in John’s hair, setting it ablaze amidst coarse greys and browns. It pooled across his profile, emphasising the topography of his features. Sandy lashes fluttered, but did not part, and Sherlock smiled as John turned his face into the pillow in an effort to escape the call of wakefulness.

He’d urged John to share the bed more than once over the past few days, but he had declined. Normally, it was the one point where John would retreat from his place as Sherlock’s constant companion, returning to the couch and the patchy sleep that awaited him there, but not this time. Not after yesterday.

It had been a step back in his recovery – a return to the dank, all-encompassing misery he had hoped he’d left behind. He’d awoken, choking on his panic, already submerged beneath the oil-slick of his mood. Perhaps Sherlock had made some kind of noise, or maybe John had attuned himself to the rhythms of sleep and wakefulness and detected a discrepancy, but in a handful of seconds, he was there, roused from his nest on the sofa to rush through Sherlock’s open bedroom door.

He’d stayed. As darkness bled to morning and daylight faded back into night, John set up camp at Sherlock’s side, digging in like a soldier on the frontier. He read books, or talked, unperturbed if Sherlock’s only answer was silence. Sometimes he slept, his body lax but chaste above the covers. Others they lay quiet, John’s grip wrapped around Sherlock’s fingers as if he were clinging on for dear life.

Even now, one hand remained on Sherlock’s wrist, not pinning him in place, but maintaining a connection. The four pads of his fingers and the broad blade of his thumb painted somnolent heat across Sherlock’s skin, and he licked his lips, seeing in Technicolor where before there had been mere whispers of hue.

John was wearing a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms: loose, unflattering garments that never-the-less managed to cling in surprising places. The band of the short sleeves emphasised the strength in his arms, and thin cotton rode up, revealing the soft line of his stomach and the firm, faint concave of his waist.

Yesterday, Sherlock hadn’t noticed any of that. John had been a presence – an entity with voice and fragrance but without form. In contrast, this man next to him was shockingly real, rendered down to an irrefutable outline. Powerful, even asleep, and some odd hybrid of uncertainty and longing fizzed through Sherlock’s blood.

Dangerous.

The word could apply to both this situation and John himself. Pyresus was still a distant threat – an abstract concept, rather than a physical reality – but Sherlock knew he was a step closer if one look at John could make his heart trip in its beat. It was a sign of recovery, a blessing, if he didn’t know what awaited him once the bond was gone.

Right now, there was a risk. Not the obvious ones linked to heat and rut, but something far more personal. How easy it would be to rebuild himself on the incorrect foundation – to make John the
basis on which he constructed his life, rather than his own desires. It would be so simple to pass all the exhausting problems into John’s hands and live in the placid existence that remained. He ached for that – to just let the future happen, whatever it may be.

To give up.

‘No.’ Quiet but fierce, he tasted the denial on his lips, giving it structure and cladding it in iron. It was tempting to take the easy road, but that way lay disaster. It would be so simple, in his malleable, unbound state, to remould himself into a pleasing facsimile and, in the process, lose track of the man he’d become.

John would loathe it. Of that, Sherlock was certain. He was no Alpha of the elite, looking for an obedient little mate. He took pride in Sherlock’s strength and admired the actions he chose for himself, recklessness and genius included. Yet Sherlock’s instincts whispered of opposites, of fitting in and meeting expectations. Why else would John ever want him?

‘Hey.’

He lifted his gaze at the quiet greeting, blinking across the expanse of the pillow at those sleepy blue eyes. They looked warm and deep, lost in the moment on waking where everything was right with the world.

It lasted less than a heartbeat. A second later, John propped himself up on one elbow, scrubbing a hand over his face and staring around the bedroom before looking down at Sherlock.

‘How are you feeling?’

Words pushed at his throat, fighting for freedom, but they felt raw, all broken, bloody edges, and Sherlock swallowed them back, taking a breath before managing a reply. ‘Achy. Stiff. Like I need to get out of this bed.’

John’s smile could have lit half of London, as if the small victory of Sherlock choosing to leave his sanctuary was worth monumental celebration. In some ways, he supposed it was, but Sherlock hated applauding such minor triumphs. They emphasised the fact that anything more substantial was beyond his reach.

‘Come on then.’ John sat up, stretching his arms above his head and groaning as his joints popped, ignorant of the admiring skim of Sherlock’s gaze. ‘I’ll cook you some breakfast. Bacon sandwich?’

Sherlock wrinkled his nose at the idea of claggy bread sitting in the pit of his stomach. ‘Just the meat. Maybe an egg. Nothing else.’

John gave him a half-hearted glare before getting out of bed, but at least he didn’t complain about his requested meal. Sherlock had Stamford to thank for that. The Beta doctor had been an invaluable resource when it came to maintaining John’s peace of mind, answering vague texts over the week since his first visit and dropping by every couple of days to see how Sherlock was coming along.

Sometimes, he barely noticed him: another ghost on the periphery of depression’s fog. Others, he was aware, locked into a world where Mike smiled at him and kept his hands to himself, his medical knowledge on display and demanding respect. Sherlock was used to doctors manhandling him as if he had no mind of his own, but Stamford was careful and diligent, following John’s lead and always asking permission before taking any readings.

More often than not, any queries were tentative evaluations of his emotional well-being. Both Stamford and John could see how he was doing physically, but the wobbling equilibrium of his
mental health was less simple to discern. Stamford maintained that it would pass, given time and patience, but neither John nor Sherlock were willing to wait. Every dark day increased John’s worry, and to Sherlock, every blank hour felt like a self-indulgent weakness once it had passed.

‘Can’t you manage one slice of toast?’ John asked as he put on his robe.

‘Stamford said that changes in dietary tolerance were expected,’ he pointed out, pushing back the quilt and getting to his feet, grimacing as his knees shook. ‘Bread makes me feel sick.’

‘And greasy bacon doesn’t?’ It was a feeble protest from John, who still seemed grateful that Sherlock was eating at all. ‘All right. Give me ten minutes, and it’ll be on the table.’

Sherlock watched him go, debating whether he had the energy to shower. Personal hygiene had been sporadic at best, and a stale patina of grime and sickness hung around him. He wrinkled his nose in revulsion, peeling his t-shirt away from his skin and trying to remember the last time he’d changed his pyjamas. The answer made his skin crawl, and he grabbed fresh clothes before heading for the bathroom.

The cascade of the shower was music to his ears, and he shrugged out of his garments, kicking them into the corner before stepping under the spray. Warm water doused his curls and swept down his neck: a transparent veil of liquid falling over the curves of his shoulders. It was blissful, and Sherlock drenched every inch of himself before considering the question of soap.

John’s shampoo was tolerable in tiny quantities, but everything else stank of corrosives, too sharp to even consider putting on his skin. Eventually, he settled for working a thin veneer of suds into his flesh before rinsing every remnant down the drain. A handful of days ago, the scent of John’s familiar brands had been soothing. Now they scraped through his sinuses: a contaminant to John’s natural fragrance.

Part of him found his fascination with his flatmate’s odour humiliating. It was animal and base – a pheremonal thirst. John acted like Sherlock’s desire to cling to his worn clothes or bed-linens was unremarkable. Sherlock was not so forgiving. He tried to stop, but as soon as his conscious mind ceased focussing on restraint, he gravitated back towards the comforting smell, be it from a discarded jumper, John’s quilt or the man himself.

Everyone knew Alphas were the victims of an Omega’s scent, but few bothered to consider the reverse. Alexander’s stench had done nothing for Sherlock, not even in the throes of pyresus, but it didn’t take much imagination to conclude that John would be a different matter. What was reassuring now would be arousing once the bond was gone. If he couldn’t start controlling his impulses…

With a sigh, he leant against the tiles, letting the water sluice down his chest and between his legs, where a faint wisp of heat coiled. Desire had been beyond him, something so alien he couldn’t begin to grasp it, but things changed. He changed. Every passing hour was one of transition, and Sherlock licked his lips, trying to pull together his scattered thoughts.

Normally, his mind was the lens through which the world swam into focus, but like this, his body took precedent. Every sense filled with information. Colours seemed bright and shadows saturated. The sheer array of noise was overwhelming and every inch of his skin tingled at the slightest touch. Flavours turned cloying across his tongue, and the city’s miasma thickened into a redolent fug.

Along with such sensitivity came precision. He could target particular sounds and smells, and it was child’s play to catalogue the input. It reminded him of being in heat, but there was no cramping in his stomach nor itching desire for release. Instead, he grew alert – predatory. The first time this had happened, his body blooming into sexual maturity, it overwhelmed him, and he’d fought it at every
opportunity. Now it was easier to accept the changes, taking an academic interest even as he dreaded where they would culminate.

Besides, his heightened awareness was not without sacrifice. Rationality was a struggle, and problem-solving seemed to be slipping beyond his grasp. He hadn’t dared try the Sudoku cube for fear of the inevitable frustration. Nor did he pick up his violin; he wasn’t convinced the music would appeal. Even Lestrade’s cases languished on the bedside table, untouched, and therein lay his greatest fear.

Were all his deductions the product of his unreachable mind palace, or were they also rooted in instinct? Could he see a clear way forward through a crime in his current state? Perhaps it was cowardly, but he would rather live with the hope that his intellect hadn’t failed him than receive confirmation that his brilliance had waned.

With a sigh, he stepped out of the shower, silencing the water’s rush before blotting his skin dry. He hitched a pair of clean, cotton trousers around his hips before easing a t-shirt over his head, his fingers tracing the hard cap of the scab as he did so. It had solidified days ago, coalescing into a protective layer. It itched, but John promised it was fine – healing just as it should. Even the water had done nothing to soften it, and Sherlock dragged a fingernail along one edge, wishing he could scratch until it was gone.

Meeting his reflection’s gaze in the mirror, he scowled at his stubble, which had reached the right length to show as ginger rather than dark. Ridiculous, not to mention irritating. Five agonising minutes with a razor, wincing at every rasp of metal over skin, banished it from his jaw. He breathed a sigh of relief at the touch of cool air, ignoring the way his hands shook from the effort of his precision.

Already he felt exhausted, and by the time he’d brushed his teeth and padded out into the kitchen, he was desperate to sit down. John reached back from the stove, tugging out a chair. Sherlock slumped into it with a grunt of thanks, pulling his feet up and running a hand through his damp curls.

‘Feel better for that?’ John asked, flipping bacon. From the looks of it, he’d delayed cooking until Sherlock was ready. Instead, there was a cup of tea steaming on the table. The fact John had added neither milk nor sugar, leaving both there for Sherlock to add in desired measure, suggested he had perceived an increased sensitivity to flavour, if nothing else.

‘Not really.’ He glared at the folded newspaper that lay nearby. He couldn’t be bothered to grab it, nor to decipher the upside-down text. There was no point anyway. It didn’t matter what crimes held London in their grasp, it wasn’t like he could help solve them. ‘I’ve just got up and I’m already tired.’

John put a plateful of bacon and eggs in front of him before opening a nearby drawer and passing over a knife and fork. ‘It’s been, what, fifteen days since this started? What you’re going through would knacker anyone. If you need more sleep, then go back to bed. It’s not a crime to look after yourself, Sherlock.’

He hummed in reply, picking his way through his breakfast and feeding the low-level groan of hunger in his stomach. He eschewed ketchup, salt and pepper – the food was flavoursome enough without it – and didn’t comment when John sat down opposite him, his own plate almost overflowing.

For a short while, there was only the scrape of cutlery across ceramic and the rustle of John flicking through the paper. He didn’t read out interesting stories, for which Sherlock was grateful, but his expressive face gave away every nuance of intrigue and ridicule at various articles.
‘I shouldn’t have to,’ he muttered at last, aware of John looking at him in confusion, trying to remember the last thing they’d been talking about. ‘I shouldn’t have to coddle myself like this. It’s ridiculous!’

‘It’s necessary.’ John sighed, looking back at the dense-packed font in front of him. ‘Your body’s diverting all its resources to wiping out any trace of the bond. It’s a demanding process. It won’t last forever.’

Sherlock closed his eyes. ‘And what then?’

That got John’s complete attention. Sherlock felt it like a physical weight. The air dragged taut across his skin, and some unknown tension snapped into focus. He opened his eyes to see John staring at him. The paper lay forgotten, and so did half of John’s breakfast, which he pushed aside so he could prop his elbows on the table.

He licked his lips, dragging in a breath and letting it out in an unsteady rush before shrugging his shoulders. ‘That’s your choice to make.’

Sherlock dragged the tines of his fork through the bacon grease on his plate, leaving brief channels in the gossamer slick. ‘I know, and I won’t let anyone rob me of that, but–’ He swallowed, panic washing across his mind. ‘Until I know whether Mycroft is successful, there’s no point in deciding anything, and it’s not as if he’s making much progress.’ In fact, they’d heard little more from his brother at all, and Sherlock wished he could find the silence encouraging.

John tapped his finger on the table before reaching for his mug, taking a quick sip and putting it down with a clank. He fidgeted, restless, and Sherlock knew that expression. It was the same one he got when Sherlock was three steps ahead on a case and couldn’t be bothered to stop and explain. The one where he felt he was being left out of the loop. Except this was more diffuse, less hard-edged annoyance and more understanding.

‘But you have ideas?’

Sherlock looked away, feeling the answer burn its way into his mind. Did John think he’d not considered how it might go? Ignorance was a cruel sort of bliss, but he knew the risk of being unprepared.

‘Whatever happens to me has nothing to do with Alexander’s family. It’s about my biology.’ He cleared his throat. ‘One way or another, it needs to be neutralised, either with a bond or surgical intervention.’ He gestured to the back of his neck before meeting John’s eye. ‘Until this has finished healing, neither is possible, and even if it was…’

He cut himself off, pursing his lips as he bit back the tangle of fear that threatened to clog his throat. Words made it sound so simple, like tossing a coin, but either decision was rife with pitfalls. Surgery was difficult, unproven, illegal and laden with risk. Even if he found a doctor willing to remove his reproductive system and thus the source of all his worth, there was no way to be sure he’d survive the process, or what impact it would have on his health.

The alternative, to forge a bond and hope for the best, had the potential for disaster. If he allowed history to repeat itself, tied himself to an Alpha of the Cunninghams’ choosing and then fled, there was no certainty of success. Another Alpha may be more persistent in reclaiming him and less concerned with the derision of society, and there would be no specifications in his bonding contract that delayed their efforts at conception, as there had been with Alexander. He’d have to act fast, and he wasn’t sure he had the capabilities or the resources. Even if he did, he’d be back where he started, always looking over his shoulder and waiting for the moment his hard-won freedom came to an end.
Or, he could choose an Alpha for himself.

He glanced up at John, who was watching him over the rim of his tea, his eyes kind, his hair ruffled and his face weathered. There was no question of who he would ask, but that was the only certainty available to him. Everything else was a mass of the unknown, from John’s potential agreement to whether it was something they could sustain.

Sherlock wasn’t even sure if the ideal – he and John bound but in Baker Street, solving crimes and living as they had always done – was possible. If John was his Alpha and always in his company, then pyresus would be a regular event. Predictable, yes, but still an obstacle. Would a stable bond rein in his biology, making it a facet of his life rather than an overwhelming impulse, or would it rob him of everything?

Was it even what John would want? The physical attraction between them was undeniable, but alone that would never be enough. John needed affection, affirmation and all the trappings of a relationship. Could Sherlock give him that if he asked for it?

There was so much that could go wrong, from the Cunninghams medically break any bond of which they disapproved to Sherlock’s invariable behaviour eroding John’s respect and admiration until there was nothing left. No matter which way he looked, there was no guarantee, and that lack of knowledge was a paralytic.

He shook his head and closed his eyes. ‘I can’t do this now.’

The scrape of the chair across the floor rattled in his ears, and a warm hand rested on his shoulder, bracing and firm. ‘You don’t have to. Concentrate on getting better. That’s the main thing. One day, you’ll feel able to figure out the way forward.’

‘What if it comes too late?’ Sherlock stared at the grain of the battered table, unseeing. ‘What if people force my hand?’

‘Hey, look at me?’ John raised his eyebrows, his jaw solid and his gaze determined as Sherlock glanced up. ‘I won’t let them. I just –’ He shook his head. ‘I just won’t. That’s all there is to it.’

It was tempting to pretend John’s words were gospel. Sherlock ached not to care anymore, but he clenched his teeth, knowing he couldn’t pass off responsibility for his future to someone else. He had to make the choice himself, even if the very notion exhausted him.

His concerns were an endless, droning buzz, ill-defined but threatening. Normally, he’d reach for the violin when he got like this, allowing the music to drown it out, but something held him back. Instead, he rose from the chair, squeezing John’s hand in mute thanks before shuffling towards the bookshelves. He needed to distract himself, just for a little while.

Vaguely, he heard John say something about getting dressed, and he hummed in acknowledgement as he pulled free one tome from the many. The covers were old and water-stained, abused beyond belief, and the paper was yellow and dry. However, the gold lettering on the spine still carried some gleam, and Sherlock smiled. Fiction was not his preferred reading material, but this was different. Bittersweet. It reminded him of hiding away in a sunny spot in his family home, losing himself amidst Caribbean seas and the creak of sails as they filled with wind.

Treasure Island had been his mother’s favourite, and her father’s before her. This copy had been theirs, and well-loved, an heirloom in sentiment rather than value. Perhaps, just for a little while, he could find respite between its pages.
Nestling in John’s armchair, he forced his mind to stillness, shutting the door on his concerns and leaving a blank slate in their place. He could still feel them – all those fears – scratching at his consciousness, but they remained distant, at least for now.

He was aware of John, the quiet sounds of his existence soothing in Baker Street’s tranquillity as the morning sun aged. He didn’t try and interrupt or capture Sherlock’s attention. It was a peaceful slice of domestic life, and he let himself believe that this was how they would always be: happy and untroubled.

At some point the words began to blur, and each blink grew slow. A doze suffused him in tropical waves, muffling the living world, and the blades of Sherlock’s concerns dulled to irrelevance as he succumbed.

The thud of the book on the floor woke him with a start, and he blinked at the sky beyond the window, made bloody by the sunset. He could hear the chatter of pedestrians, and the hum of traffic that made up London’s incessant melody. The only sound in the flat was the gentle clatter of John’s laptop keys, and a quick glance showed him wrinkling his nose in annoyance: composing an email to Harry, then.

Sherlock stretched his arms above his head, grunting as his muscles shivered off their lethargy before he scooped down to retrieve the book, checking he hadn’t cracked the already weak spine. Satisfied that it would survive a little longer, he put it on the coffee table, noticing a mug of tea, full but stone-cold.

‘I wouldn’t drink that,’ John said, not lifting his eyes from the screen. ‘I made it hours ago in case you woke up. You’ll need a fresh one.’

Sherlock shuffled through to the kitchen, going through the motions of boiling water and pouring out the unsavoury dregs. His fingers fumbled around the handle of the kettle, and he rubbed his eyes, trying to shake off the cobwebs of sleep.

Turning around to get teabags, he jerked in surprise, blinking at where John stood in his way. He hadn’t even heard him get up, but the laptop sat at an angle as if it had been shoved aside, and the chair was twisted away from the table: forgotten.

One glance, and Sherlock knew something had changed. John’s arms were folded, and his stance was braced. The dark pools of his pupils were huge, and his head was tipped to one side, focussed on Sherlock to the exclusion of everything else. The pink dart of his tongue swiped across his bottom lip as he shifted his weight forward, his nostrils flaring.

‘Is that you?’

The breathless question hovered between them, and Sherlock took a step back, horror flashing through him as for one, irrational moment, he wondered if pyresus had come upon him without his knowledge. But no, that was impossible. He knew the symptoms with painful accuracy, both bound and not; he knew how it made him feel, and that thrumming, burning, merciless desire was absent. He was not oblivious, lost in the throes of hormonal lust. Instead he felt shockingly present, aware of everything from the floor beneath his feet to the flutter of John’s unsteady breathing.

Hot exhilaration coiled in his stomach, and he scraped his teeth across his bottom lip, taking a step back and jumping in surprise when the corner of the kitchen surface caught his body in its vee.

‘What?’ he asked, trying to think what might make John react with such intensity.

John moved forward, encroaching on Sherlock’s space until he was a wall of heat in front of him.
Excitement shot along Sherlock’s veins, incandescent. His muscles slackened as his knees parted, and he tilted his head, exposing his throat as he watched John through narrowed eyes.

A strong hand cupped his jaw, each movement slow but firm: half-hypnotised. It wasn’t forceful; if he so desired, he could break free with nothing but a jerk of his head.

He didn’t.

Sherlock trembled as John leaned in, his lips almost brushing the fragile skin over Sherlock’s pulse as he inhaled. Immediately, he knew what John had picked up on – nothing created by some dire hormonal peak of fertility. Instead, it was his normal scent re-establishing itself. Not the static nothingness to which John was no doubt accustomed, but Sherlock’s base-line pheromones becoming obvious once more as the bond lost its hold. Alexander had always been able to smell them, but any other Alpha would have been oblivious.

Until now.

This, all of it, from the darkness of John’s eyes to the simmer of want in Sherlock’s veins had nothing to do with heat or rut. It was just them, more attuned to each other than ever and responding to the attraction that had evolved over the course of their acquaintance.

A heavy, hungry sound caught in John’s throat, rumbling through Sherlock’s body and resonating in his bones. He tightened his grip on the counter. If he didn’t, he would reach out, and he didn’t have the strength to see where that might take them. Instead, he allowed himself to slump further, accepting and open to John’s fascination.

A soft whine whispered past his lips, followed by a gasp of shock as John tore himself away. Cold air slammed into Sherlock’s body, and he shivered in surprise, locking his knees as every muscle burned to close the yawning gap. Prickles of sensation raced down his thighs, and he shifted his position, trying to hide the swell of his arousal and ignore the damp skin between his legs.

Not that John would notice. He wasn’t even looking at him, too lost in his own shame to pay attention. Mortification darkened his cheeks, and his face twisted with dismay. Gone was his lean, wolfish stance. Instead John huddled, cringing where he stood, looking for all the world like he wished the ground would open up and swallow him whole.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered, the hand over his mouth almost blocking out his apology. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t – I don’t know –’ He shook his head, taking a step back before spinning away. ‘I need to get some air.’

The haste with which he fled the room was far from gratifying, and Sherlock shivered where he stood. Everything he could say, from logical reassurances to weak protests didn’t make it out fast enough, and calling John’s name met with no response.

Cuffing a hand through his hair, he cursed, glaring around the flat in search of inspiration. His eyes fell on his Belstaff where it hung by the door, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes. He could smell that the fabric had been dry-cleaned: John’s considerate nature coming to the fore, no doubt he’d wanted to remove every trace of Alexander’s death-odour from its seams. The chemicals were unpleasantly astringent, but they should be enough to block out whatever John had picked up on his skin, at least for long enough for him to prove his point.

John’s fears may be valid, but this time, he was wrong.

Shrugging into the thick coat, Sherlock hurried down the stairs, already reaching for the front door
when Mrs Hudson tweaked at his sleeve, jerking her head towards her flat. 'He's out the back, Sherlock, dear.' For once, she didn't question what had happened, her age-worn face wrinkling in a kind smile as she put a mug of tea in his hands. 'Take him that. It might help steady his nerves.'

She patted his shoulder, and he did as he was told, trying not to slop scalding liquid as he slipped through the bead curtain, wincing at its clatter. His bare toes curled against the cold stone of the threshold, and he leant against the doorframe, watching John pace the length of Mrs Hudson’s tiny back yard like a creature in its cage.

‘You shouldn’t be outside.’

Sherlock tucked the Belstaff around his body and sat on the doorstep. The cool concrete had not warmed much in the afternoon sun, and the evening air carried a chill. It crept through the gaps in his clothes, running cold fingers across his skin. 'I see no reason why not. I hate to disappoint you, but it's not as if the Alpha population of London is going to break down the door to get to me. You won't be called upon to defend my honour.' He sighed, setting the tea down with a scrape of ceramic. 'This isn't pyresus, or heat, or anything like it. It's just me.'

John made a tight, disbelieving noise. 'Come off it. That's not how you normally smell.'

'Yes, it is.' He waved a hand, sweeping John’s arguments away. 'The bond neutralises it for anyone but my Alpha. I’ve explained this before. All the chemicals my body releases are changed to fit receptors in my Alpha’s olfactory senses – no one else's. Some of it's less complete – if I was bound and somehow went into pyresus in the presence of an Alpha who wasn't mine, they might notice a change, but it wouldn't drive them to distraction.'

He dragged his fingers through his hair, staring at the wall that cut them off from the city beyond. 'My pheromones are becoming more generalised as they re-establish themselves, so you’re able to detect them.' He shrugged, searching for a way to make John understand. ‘Additionally, you’re an Alpha in a high-stress situation. You’ve spent weeks on alert for danger, and anything new is suspicious. Your brain prioritised identifying a new fragrance over social niceties. Nothing more.’

John’s hands clenched into fists as he continued to pace, every stride tight: a soldier's angry march. 'And that makes it all right for me to pin you against the kitchen surface and practically lick your neck, does it?' he demanded. 'You think it's acceptable for me to behave like some kind of animal? Don’t you see what you’re doing? Making excuses? Just like you did for Alexander while he –'

The rest of John's sentence strangled away to nothing, caught between his teeth as he thought better of it.

‘Alexander didn’t ask for excuses, or forgiveness.' Sherlock looked down at the cup of tea at his side before picking it up and taking a sip, hiding his unease behind the simple motion. 'You seem to think you need both, even though you’ve done nothing wrong.'

He cradled the hot mug in his hands, examining the cracks between the paving stones as he waited for the thrum of John's emotions to find their balance. They tainted the air with a hint of burnt rubber and treble adrenaline, but he saw the moment when John smoothed away the gnarled knots of unpredictability. His movements became more measured, and he drew each breath with purpose.

At last, those fretful strides fell still as he leant against the wall opposite Sherlock. He didn't try and approach or sit next to him, and Sherlock mourned the loss of their closeness as a fresh breeze made the bin-bags rustle.

‘I’m sorry,’ John murmured. ‘For – for what I said about him, and for whatever the hell happened in
Sherlock clenched his teeth, tempted to argue, but he could see John digging in his heels, stubborn. Considering all his emphatic statements to the contrary, he wasn’t being difficult because he thought Sherlock was weak or lacked the sense to impose his will on a situation. Rather, it was the way John looked at himself that came into play. He had been an Alpha all his life, but only in the last few months had it developed relevance. Now, John saw himself as the unpredictable one – the threat to Sherlock’s well-being. Arguing would get them nowhere, but perhaps there was something else he could do.

‘What did it smell like?’

John looked up at him, his frown smoothing away as he realised Sherlock was serious. ‘What?’

‘I can’t detect it.’ He shrugged. ‘You clearly can or we wouldn’t be having this conversation. What’s it like?’

He waited, watching the moment John’s mind changed gear, stepping away from the mire of his guilt and turning instead to the freshness of a memory. A faint flush stained his cheeks, but the rest of his face wrinkled in concentration, just as Sherlock had hoped.

‘Different. Hot and a bit sweet. Like barley left in the sun, or that smell you get in the parks sometimes, where the long grass has gone dry, but there’s something else. Something clear and...’ John shook his head, closing his eyes. Sherlock could see him reaching for the recollection, losing himself in everything he’d picked up in that moment when his entire being had been focussed on the new fragrance.

He stood, careful not to let rustle of his coat give him away as he approached, folding back one cuff to expose his wrist. Any scent there would be weak: a perfect way to the test the waters. John’s eyes were still shut, his bottom lip caught between his teeth, and Sherlock held his arm closer to John’s nose, smiling as his voice became more confident and precise. ‘Rain in the desert. Sort of arid earth but not, and a little bit of lightning. The smell you get before a storm.’

John opened his eyes, snatching a breath as he realised how close Sherlock was standing, but he didn’t lunge for him or make any effort to hold him in place. Instead he remained where he was, the tense line of his shoulders easing as he got the message. Hints of desire still etched their way across his face, skating the ring of pupils too large for the ambient light and whispering on the flutter of air between his lips, but it was something normal and controlled, unembellished by the primitive response of John’s Alpha senses.

‘Do you see?’ Sherlock asked, cocking his head and watching John’s face. ‘You had to pick apart the fragrance and identify the components, that’s all. You didn’t do any more than necessary to meet that need.’ He licked his lips, his voice quieter as he added, ‘Even if perhaps you wanted to.’

John made an abortive gesture, hands moving towards Sherlock before he snatched them back and looked away. A fitful shrug jerked his shoulders and he folded his arms. ‘It didn’t even cross my mind to stop, and it should have done.’
Slowly, Sherlock pulled his arm back towards his chest, pretending to concentrate on rolling down his cuff as he noticed John’s gaze dart to the pulse in his neck. ‘You’re not accustomed to it – the way you behave in this situation. You seem to forget that I am.’

John recoiled as if he’d been slapped, his teeth bared in a grimace. ‘No. No, you’re used to Alexander’s reactions. We are not using him as a measure for acceptable Alpha behaviour.’

‘I wasn’t suggesting we did. I know the warning signs of an Alpha who is beyond every ounce of restraint. Alexander never even considered holding back. With you, it’s always on your mind. You’re afraid of what might happen if you lose control.’ Sherlock pressed a hand to his head, wincing at the droning ache that was gathering inside his skull, stress and frustration manifesting in physical pain. ‘I’m not helpless. I won’t put you in that position.’

John sighed, shaking his head as he reached out, herding Sherlock back towards the door without actually touching him. ‘I know you wouldn't, not on purpose, but what if it takes you by surprise? You’ve never been through a broken bond. It’s all very well reading about the progression, but everyone’s different. I can’t take that risk. That’s why I called your brother a few minutes ago and asked him for some inhibitors. Anthea will drop them off as soon as possible.’

He bent down, picking up the half-empty mug of tea and parting the bead curtain before slipping back into Mrs Hudson’s flat. ‘I held off for a while because you're right, we’ve been in danger. In the army, I had back-up, people watching out for me, so I could make do without a good sense of smell. Here –’

‘You're on your own.’ Sherlock raised an eyebrow. ‘Do I not have a part in this particular equation?’

‘You've been distracted.’ John shrugged. ‘I know you’re getting better, but that’s part of the problem. Every moment your health improves, the risk grows. We've reached the point where I'm more of a threat to you than anything out there.’ He gestured towards the window. ‘You won’t leave Baker Street, and I'm not going anywhere without you. This way, we both get what we want.’ He put the mug down by the sink, popping his head around the living room door and thanking Mrs Hudson before leading the way back upstairs. ‘If I can’t smell you, then I won't respond – you know – physically.’

‘Inhibitors are more complicated than that. If my brother believed they were worth putting to use, he’d have supplied you with some before now. Why did he wait for you to ask?’ Sherlock narrowed his eyes, following John into the flat and slumping into the depths of his chair, his coat still hanging around his shoulders as he propped his feet on the coffee table. ‘Unless he doesn’t think they’ll help?’

‘They tend to be less effective after you've used them for a couple of years,’ John admitted as he shuffled into the kitchen. ‘Mycroft was going to see if he could find anything else, but I’d rather he didn’t waste his time worrying about me when he should be concentrating on negotiating with the Cunninghams.’

‘So you’re going to take them and hope for the best?’ Sherlock twisted around, looking over his shoulder at where John was by the fridge, sorting through food they could eat for dinner. ‘And what if they don’t work?’

‘I don’t know.’ John’s shaky sigh crept through the air, so quiet Sherlock almost missed it. It was a lost sound, one riddled with the rot of despair, and he bit back his arguments. Despite his fears about intruders and external threats, John was deliberately handicapping himself to neutralise the potential danger he posed, putting Sherlock’s safety before his own need to protect.

In motive, if not method, that was worthy of admiration.
Anthea delivered the medication within the hour, and Sherlock watched the sleek capsule disappear between John’s lips. A flash of envy, cool with age, darted through him: how fortunate that John, at least, had access to pharmaceuticals to control his biology. Sherlock had nothing.

‘What now?’ John asked, pulling a face as he reached for a glass of water to chase away the pill. His throat worked as he gulped it down, and Sherlock tore his eyes away from the bob of his Adam’s apple, focussing out of the window and the city that lay so near, yet remained beyond his reach.

‘The same thing we’ve been doing since Alexander found me again.’ He closed his eyes, his lips twisting as he surrendered to the inevitable. ‘We wait.’

Patience had never been a strength, and the days passed slowly, no longer dark and cloying, but lacking all sense of purpose. His health improved in the most marginal of increments, marked by mundane activities like cladding himself in a suit for the first time in ages or staying awake for more than a few hours at a time. Yet none of it felt like progress. Hours slipped by without true definition, and as Sherlock grew stronger, his restlessness increased.

‘Please, will you just look at the file?’ John begged, sitting at the kitchen table with an ice-pack pressed to his right temple. His eyes were shut, creased with pain at their corners, and his skin carried a green tinge. Five days ago, he’d taken the first inhibitor; anyone could see they weren’t working. He had not reacted to Sherlock’s scent again, but his nostrils flared whenever Sherlock walked by, registering the new fragrance. Any necessary control was down to John’s willpower, not the drug in his system. ‘You’ll drive us both mad if you keep this up.’

Sherlock reached out, plucking at the box of pills John had left by the sink and shoving them in his pocket. 'If anyone's insane, it's you with your stubborn insistence on taking this rubbish.'

John grimaced, reaching out for his cup of tea with a shaking hand and taking a sip. ‘I thought they'd just take a while to kick in,’ he muttered, tilting his head and groaning in misery. 'They worked fine in the army.'

‘Where you took them every day for at least three tours of duty, if not more. You're a man of habit, so you won't have stopped dosing when you were on leave. You ceased once you were discharged, and now you're resistant to their effects and suffering as a result. Stop using them; you'll feel better within a couple of hours.’

‘You can deduce all that about me, but you won't look at the case, or faff about with a microscope, or...’ John trailed off, rubbing a hand across his mouth and shifting the ice-pack. 'You must be bored. There's only so much crap telly anyone can stand.’

Sherlock pursed his lips, holding in his undeniable agreement. It was not his normal kind of boredom – a wicked blade that cut him to ribbons. Instead he felt locked in a vague listlessness, too apathetic to turn his mind to things he had once enjoyed. 'Maybe later,’ he replied, repeating the same answer he’d given for the past two days. 'It's not like Lestrade's hammering down the door demanding our input.'

‘Your input,’ John corrected him, pulling a face as water ran down his wrist. ‘Perhaps he thinks he should leave you in peace?’

'It's more likely that other investigations have taken priority. If they'd had a break-through, he'd have told you.'

A grunt of agreement was his only response, and Sherlock looked up from where he was skimming through the newspaper. John's expression was one of absent-minded concern, and he held in a sigh.
He wasn't worried about Sherlock’s continuing refusal to look at the case – no more than usual. He was content to let Sherlock set the pace of reclaiming his interests. This was about the damn inhibitors. Sherlock could happily throttle Mycroft for responding to John's request and providing them in the first place.

'There must be alternatives. I mean, if Alpha soldiers become resistant to them out in the field, they'd have to medicate them with something different.'

'Undoubtedly, though if they were as stable or effective, they'd be the primary choice, rather than a back-up plan.' Sherlock put the paper aside and met John's eye. 'You can't keep stuffing tablets down your throat. At the very least, you need to take a week's break and let your body purge whatever's left of the last batch.'

'I know. I'm a doctor, remember?' John placed the ice-pack down on the table, getting to his feet before stumbling to the sofa and lying down, one arm draped over his eyes to block out the light. 'God, this is horrible. My head feels like it's splitting open.'

Sherlock made an unsympathetic noise, mentally composing a scathing text to his brother for enabling John with his foolishness. 'I did tell you they were unnecessary.'

'Yes, thanks for that. We've already been through this. I think they were necessary. I still do. As soon as I can, I'll get something else. Something that works.' John shifted, trying to get comfortable. ‘Not because I don’t think you won’t warn me if things get worse, but because it’s not just your responsibility; it’s mine as well.’

Sherlock shook his head, padding over to the windows and drawing the curtains to ease the strain on John’s eyes. A small chink of illumination fell through, painting a stripe over Sherlock's leather chair. He'd found little respite in its modern lines recently, preferring the nest of John's, but now it was the only spot blessed with an adequate amount of light to read.

He reached out, his hand hovering over the dog-eared cover of an uninspiring paperback as John’s urgings to look at the case echoed in his head. His gaze flickered to the bedroom door, his mind straying to the folder that still sat on his bedside table. It was tempting to let it languish there, ignored, yet every time he overlooked it in favour of something trite and entertaining, it felt like another battle lost.

Steeling himself, Sherlock drew in a breath. John was right; enough was enough. He’d ignored the Work for weeks. If nothing else, he had to see if he could still answer its demands.

Creeping into his room, he plucked the folder free and returned to his seat, smirking at John's soft snore. He already looked a better colour, and perhaps sleep would help ease the headache that had plagued him for more than twenty-four hours. Besides, it meant Sherlock's efforts went unwitnessed. If the normal deductive powers of his mind were inaccessible to him, at least his disappointment wouldn't have an audience.

He perched on the back of his chair, his muscles tensing with natural poise as he flicked open the pages, reacquainting himself with details that had become dream-like. At first, it was like looking through a window into another life, alien and unfamiliar, even though Sherlock knew he'd lived it. Gradually, the sense of separation began to fade and the machine of his mind, rusty with disuse, creaked into action, gaining speed as he absorbed all that was on offer.

There was nothing pertaining to Alexander’s death, though whether that was an effort at sensitivity on Lestrade’s part or the information hadn't been available when he’d dropped off the documents, Sherlock wasn't sure. Hasty copies of his own notes from that day at the lab lay at the back, and he
stared at his sketches, as well as the print-outs from the spectrometry analysis, seeing the point at which events had ended his train of thought.

He feared it would be like the slice of a guillotine – terminal – his brain unable to pick up the threads of his previous hypotheses, but after less than a minute, tentative ideas began to bloom.

Reaching for a pencil, he jotted down notes, his handwriting scrawling across the page. Yet as he worked, he couldn’t deny that it was different. Normally, he found the supporting evidence and made the deduction, in that order. Now, so much of it felt instinctual, coming from his heart and gut rather than his mind. He kept seeing potential solutions before consciously noticing the data that led him there.

His mind spun, unrestrained, down avenues of potential, skating along a web of intricate connections as the world slid out of focus, becoming nothing more than a thin film of reality over the chaos of his considerations. It seemed as if he was no more in control of his mind than he was of his body. All he could do was allow it to happen, the lens of his intelligence taking disparate facts and shattering them into possible conclusions, rather than focusing on a single, clear solution.

Swallowing, he put down the pencil, pressing shaking fingers to his temples as he forced himself to slow the torrent. He stared at his own dense handwriting; it was raw, delivered from where the conscious and subconscious met. Half of it was instinct given shape, nothing more, and Sherlock clenched his jaw.

He had feared being unable to make connections or comprehend the twists of logic that underpinned most cases Lestrade pushed his way. He’d not expected this: it was deduction wrought down to its purest form, nothing the Yard were likely to accept …but perhaps it was a foundation on which he could build.

He spent the next hour skimming through books and dredging his memory, attempting to distil something concrete from his initial attempts. It felt clumsy and stilted, a far cry from his usual methods. However, at least his abilities – a defining factor of his existence – remained, regardless of the state of his bond.

‘Found anything?’ John’s rough voice sent prickles down Sherlock’s spine, and he looked up, blinking the world back into focus. John lay on his side, his body relaxed but his eyes alert. He looked as if he’d been awake for several minutes, and Sherlock wondered how long he’d been watching him.

‘I’ve managed to isolate a number of potential ingredients for the compound that was being used to taint the drugs.’ He pursed his lips before continuing, ‘The two I was able to confirm back in the lab were *Aristolochia Rotunda* and *Angelica archangelica*. Both emmenagogues, among other things.’

John sat up, rubbing his eyes as he frowned. ‘Substances that stimulate blood flow to the uterine organs. I didn’t think there was much proof of that.’

‘Perhaps not, but they’re common ingredients in any cocktail an Omega uses to modulate fertility, and they’re the most stable. They’re less likely to react with other components and create something unexpected. It’s why they were easy to identify; they’re still intact.’ Sherlock tapped the pencil against his knee, watching John’s hands move to his nape, rubbing at taut muscles. ‘How’s your head?’

‘Better. Tolerable, anyway.’ He shuffled forward where he sat, craning his neck to get a better look at Sherlock’s scrawl. ‘What about the rest of it?’
He sighed, pulling out one of the spectrometry analyses and pointing to a couple of peaks. ‘They’re similar ingredients, but there’s a plethora of possibilities, and several appear to have undergone a reaction, making new compounds. I can narrow it down to those that can be cultivated in the UK, that’s it. If Lestrade manages to identify a suspect and can seize relevant plants, there’s a chance we could match them, but we have neither time nor the data to gain anything more concrete from this. No potential toxins, no real cause of death…’ He shook his head, dropping his pencil on the floor. ‘Nothing.’

The buzz of John’s phone interrupted before he could speak, and Sherlock turned his head, watching him frown down at the screen. ‘What is it?’

‘Greg. Looks like he’s been texting from the Yard while I was asleep. He’s waiting at the end of Baker Street. Wants to know if it’s all right to drop by. Says it’s important.’ John’s eyes narrowed, his knuckles bleaching as his grip went tight around the device. ‘Donovan’s with him.’

Sherlock grunted, unsurprised. ‘I’m amazed he kept her away for so long. She’s not a stupid woman. After witnessing my reaction to Alexander’s death, she’ll have figured out the connection.’

John got to his feet. ‘Why does it matter to her? She’s a Beta.’

Sherlock drew in a breath, standing up and teasing John’s mobile out of his hand. He swiped a quick reply on the unfamiliar touchscreen before setting it on the coffee table and taking in John’s stance. With his arms crossed and his shoulders hunched, there was plenty to see. Donovan usually earned politeness from John, if nothing else. Now, he was acting as if she were a threat.

‘Think,’ Sherlock urged, touching the tips of his fingers to John’s elbow. ‘My connection to Alexander raises some serious questions. She’d be stupid not to consider us as suspects. Donovan may be lacking many things, but she is passably good at her job, and determined enough that she wouldn’t let it go just because Lestrade told her to do so.’

‘It’s fucking ridiculous,’ John muttered, glaring at the floor.

Sherlock dropped his hand, cocking his head as a quiet knock pattered on the panel of the front door downstairs. ‘It’s better that she found out now, rather than back when Alexander was alive. I wouldn’t have put it past her to return me to his care out of spite. After all, it would be her legal obligation. Now, she’s got nothing.’

‘And if she arrests you?’

‘I’m an Omega, remember? Instant immunity. Any crime I commit is my Alpha’s responsibility. At the moment, that means she’d have to put Mycroft in custody, and frankly I’d like to see her try.’

His words had the desired effect. John’s lips twitched in the faintest of smiles, and some of the tension melted from his spine as he turned towards the door, walking down the steps to let in the DI and his sergeant.

Sherlock watched him go, breathing out a sigh as he turned back to the notes scattered across their living room floor. While he may be immune to whatever the Yard could throw at him, John was not. With the right spin, it would be easy to paint him as the villain: a jealous Alpha seeking to eliminate his competition, perhaps. There may not be any evidence, but Donovan could be tenacious with a theory. She was here for answers, and Sherlock doubted he would have any choice but to tell her what she wanted to know.

He smelled the sergeant long before he saw her, the thick, hot embers and sun-warmed teak perfume
that surrounded her reaching his nose almost six seconds before she stepped over the threshold. A moment later, the vivid kaleidoscope of Lestrade and John’s scents drowned her out, and Sherlock stifled a wince. It wasn’t that they smelt bad, quite the opposite, but the combination of two dominant Alpha fragrances was distracting in his current state.

Parting his lips, he tried to breathe through his mouth, cursing himself for not thinking of meeting them downstairs, where at least he could have left the door open. Instead, he forced himself to ignore the input from his nose and the unfocussed, prickling heat that rolled out through his veins as he turned to face the new arrivals.

Sally had stopped just inside the door, standing aside to let John and Lestrade enter as she stared at Sherlock, a slim file clutched to her chest. Lines struck across her brow, and her jaw was held high, daring him to challenge her presence. However, he didn’t miss the flicker of doubt in her gaze, as if one glance had her questioning her suspicions.

‘You look awful.’ After everyone else’s pity, her blunt lack of sympathy was oddly refreshing.

‘What did you expect?’ he asked.

‘I –’ She shrugged and tucked her hair behind her ear. ‘Not this.’ She flicked a hand at him. ‘When did you last eat?’

‘He had breakfast. Believe me, he’s better than he was,’ John replied, clearing his throat and making a visible effort to be sociable. However, the smile he gave was sharp, hinting at a snarl, and it got worse when his gaze flickered to Lestrade. ‘Why are you here?’

Sherlock watched, fascinated, as Lestrade cringed. Originally, it had been the idea of Donovan’s presence to which John objected. She wasn’t an ally, unlike Lestrade. However, in reality, it was the DI who was setting him on edge. It was doubtful that John realised he was doing it; he’d be horrified if anyone pointed out his behaviour, but there was no hiding the fact that, right now, he saw Lestrade as an unwelcome invader in his territory.

With people he considered friends, and Sherlock knew Lestrade fell into that category, John would have provided tea and amiable conversation. Instead there was an aggressive wall of defiance, and a dangerous, intent sort of focus that even Donovan couldn’t miss.

‘It was my idea,’ she said, stepping forward, her hand held palm out in a futile attempt at pacification. ‘Greg told me to stay out of it, but –’

‘But you didn’t listen,’ Sherlock interceded, taking some small pleasure in watching Donovan scowl.

‘I couldn’t tell her what she needs to hear.’ Lestrade shrugged, giving Sherlock an apologetic look. He twitched towards John’s armchair, but immediately thought better of it, switching direction and sitting at the table instead: as close to neutral territory as he could get in the confines of the flat. Was it instinct that had him slouching low and submissive, not meeting John’s gaze, or was it a conscious decision?

‘Wouldn’t.’ Sally frowned at him before turning back to Sherlock, her dark eyes narrowed and her lips twisting before she began to speak. ‘Listen, he swears blind you had nothing to do with Cunningham’s death.’ She jabbed the paperwork in Lestrade’s direction, ‘but I’d be shit at my job if I took his word for it. You separated from Cunningham for a reason, and since it turns out you’re an Omega, I bet it wasn’t because he kicked you out. You left him, and he came after you.’ She straightened up, lifting her head. ‘Sounds like motive to me.’
Sherlock wondered if John heard the same faint upward tilt to her words that caught his ear. It sounded desperate, but he couldn’t deduce if she was trying to prove herself right, or hoping she was wrong.

‘And what about means?’ Sherlock asked.

‘You know more about what’s been killing these people than anyone else, and you’ve probably got the right contacts in that homeless network of yours.’ She licked her lips, her gaze darting to John, who glared back at her. ‘They gave him the drug that killed him, piggy-backing the serial-killer’s M.O. Then he’s just one victim among many.’

Sherlock closed his eyes, grudgingly seeing her logic even as he plucked apart the flaws. ‘Is there something different in his autopsy report?’

The question seemed to take her by surprise, and he shifted, never taking his eyes off her as he approached. ‘Something that’s making you single his death out as a separate murder?’

‘What makes you say that?’ she asked, her arms tightening around the dossier in her grasp.

‘Well, either I made whatever killed Alexander, in which case there would be differences in the chemical – something to set him apart from the other victims – or there are no variations, and you think I know the precise formula for whatever chemical finished off the rest of them.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘Which implies you believe I’m not just a copy-cat. I’m the perpetrator.’

Greg huffed, and it took Sherlock a moment to realise it was a mirthless laugh. ‘He’s got you there.’ he muttered, scratching at the back of his neck. ‘Come off it. If I didn’t know him better, I’d consider it, but he’s not been on some bizarre poisoning rampage through half of London. What’d be the point?’

Donovan pursed her lips, her eyebrows raised in disbelief. ‘Maybe it was a cover-up?’ she suggested. ‘Perhaps he did it for kicks, I don’t know. All I’m saying is it’s a bit convenient for his Alpha to be one of the victims, don’t you think?’

‘There’s no evidence,’ Lestrade pointed out, ‘and everything you’ve got is circumstantial at best. Let it go, Sally.’

Sherlock sighed, his gaze fixed on the paperwork in her grasp. ‘Alexander was more use to me alive than dead. Without the bond he provided, I won’t be able to stay in London much longer. Nor will I be free to assist you in solving cases.’ He watched her expression, seeing the grudging realisation bloom. ‘My current way of life relied on his survival. Doing away with him is illogical.’

Silence stretched around them, and he saw the balance of Donovan’s disbelief tilt, its shaken equilibrium written all over her face. At last, she bowed her head. Perhaps she wouldn’t let it slide completely, but she was too professional to ignore the facts in favour of a more personal vendetta.

‘I’d offer my condolences,’ she murmured, ‘but you don’t look like you’d give a shit.’

John made a quiet, exasperated sound, but Sherlock ignored it, instead holding out an imperious hand for the file in her grasp. ‘You’d be right. Let me take a look at that.’

Donovan shot a hard glare at Lestrade. ‘It’s a conflict of interest. You really shouldn’t.’

‘But you need me to, because you’re not getting anywhere with this case. You wouldn’t have brought it otherwise.’
‘Doctor Kirkpatrick’s refusing to cooperate,’ Lestrade explained, standing up but keeping Donovan judiciously between himself and Sherlock. ‘The bastard’s not giving us any names. We’ve been around the Avery Institute gathering fingerprints, but apparently they’ve got volunteers and students on rotation. Whoever’s prints are on the glassware don’t match any of the ones we’ve collected. We’re still working on it, but…’

Rubbing a hand across his forehead, he sighed. The case was wearing him down, neither vanishing into obscurity nor reaching its solution. ‘The Super’s not willing to give this case precedent, either, not until a fresh body bumps it back to the top of the pile.’

He nudged Donovan with his elbow, jerking his head to indicate she should give up the file. Reluctantly, she did as she was asked, her warning about autopsy photos falling on deaf ears as Sherlock flicked open the pages.

He expected to feel something: triumph perhaps, at Alexander’s death reduced to hard facts, but he remained untouched. Indifferent. He may as well have been just another victim for all Sherlock cared. Dimly, he was aware of the stilted, awkward conversation around him: Lestrade’s quiet questions about their welfare and John’s stiff responses, but he ignored their details in favour of the case.

Molly had done the autopsy, and her findings were much the same as those in the other victims. There were signs of organ degradation from long-term drug use, a minor loss of brain mass, but no obvious cause of Alexander’s unexpected death. The blood panel showed that most of the amphetamines had begun to fade from his circulation, suggesting he died at least two hours after he dosed, but otherwise, there was nothing.

‘I need to keep this. The next body that comes in, and there will be another, get a full analysis of hormone levels.’

‘Isn’t that included in the tox screen?’ Lestrade asked.

‘Not normally. The contaminant should be having a hormonal effect, but due to the undocumented nature of the chemicals used, it’s impossible to tell what it is, or how it might be causing the death of the victims.’ He looked up at them, seeing the grim, hopeless expressions on their faces. ‘Without that information, there’s nothing more I can give you.’

Next to him, John pressed closer, his arm forming a seam down Sherlock’s in mute support. Perhaps to Donovan and Lestrade it was less obvious, but the admission of failure was galling, and John knew it.

‘And what about you?’ Lestrade asked, folding his arms and looking down at his shoes before meeting Sherlock’s eye. He wasn’t asking about the case, that much was obvious, and Sherlock sucked in a breath, aware of being the abrupt focus of everyone in the room.

There was no straightforward answer he could give – anything definite still lay beyond his reach – and he shrugged, shaking his head. ‘We're working on it,’ he said at last, deliberately vague. ‘However, it’s best to assume that I won't be able to attend any crime scenes for the foreseeable future.’

Donovan made a pointed noise in her throat, cutting Lestrade a meaningful glare that had the DI sighing before giving a weary nod of his head. ‘Go on then. Say it.’

‘What if it was deliberate?’ the sergeant began, licking her lips and holding up a hand to cut of John before he could interrupt. ‘Could someone have targeted Cunningham, hoping to remove Holmes
from the picture? I mean, you said it yourself, he made all that possible. Is there anyone who knew that?' She shrugged. 'It might be the only lead we're going to get.'

At his side, John made an uncertain sound. No doubt the same idea that had oozed to the front of Sherlock's mind had blossomed in his. His lips parted, but he didn’t give up the name as he glanced in Sherlock’s direction.

‘She doesn’t know who my Alpha is,’ Sherlock pointed out, unconsciously using the present tense.

'But she knows what you are - and she knows plenty about what it would mean if your Alpha turned up dead,' John said, rocking back on his heels and worrying his lip between his teeth. ‘You said it yourself, she’s got the connections. How hard would it be for her to find out who to target?'

Sherlock pressed a finger to his lips, turning the possibility over in his mind. Elsie was an intelligent woman; she had no difficulty manipulating people should she choose to do so, but could she have a hand in this?

'She's been giving us information, directing us towards potential crime scenes,' he replied. 'That’s a dangerous game to play if she’s behind it. Besides, what’s in it for her?'

John shrugged. ‘Revenge? Getting back at the Alphas who had no time for her because she’s a Rile?’

‘What’s a Rile?’ Lestrade asked.

‘An Omega who was born infertile.’ Sherlock turned to John. ‘You’re thinking of this in terms of murder and vengeance, as if death’s the goal, but we’ve already found indications that suggest otherwise.’ He shook his head. 'It’s someone testing their creation, and they’re not getting the effect they want. If she was concocting this which, with her level of education would be frankly miraculous, then why test on Alphas? It’s not going to be of any benefit to her. It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Who are you talking about?’ Donovan asked, frowning as Sherlock took out his phone and sent a message. He didn’t have a direct line to Elsie, but the missive would get to her, given an hour or two.

'Elsie Jacobs. I doubt she’s involved in this. It's simply not worth her while. However, she might have some information you can use.'

Donovan let out an irritated sound of disbelief. 'That's it?' she demanded. 'That's all you're giving us?'

Sherlock tucked his phone back in his pocket, raising a meaningful eyebrow. 'It's all I've got. Why don't you go and have a drink?' he suggested, turning to Lestrade. 'The Volunteer is a good spot. Lose the tie and the jacket, and don't pull out your badge. Give it a couple of hours, and if you’re lucky, she’ll come to you. And Lestrade? Don't arrest her unless it’s absolutely necessary. She's one of my best contacts.'

With a nod, the DI jerked his head towards the door. 'I'll be right behind you, Sally, all right?' he said, ignoring her sigh as she threw one last look in Sherlock's direction, her expression an odd cocktail of doubt and reluctant sympathy before she strode out of the room.

The moment she was out of earshot, Lestrade breathed a sigh of relief, pressing the heel of one hand over his eye. 'I'm sorry. I would have left you well alone if I could.' He looked at John then Sherlock, before shaking his head. 'She just...'

'She needed to see that my reaction was genuine,' Sherlock cut in. 'It would have been better if you'd
brought her by a couple of weeks ago.'

'No.' John said softly. 'It wouldn't. She'd barely have recognised you.'

'Are you two going to be okay?' Lestrade asked. He kept his head ducked, not quite daring to meet John's eyes. 'You know if there's anything I can do –'

'We know,' John cut in before pressing his lips together. He managed a faint, apologetic smile, and when he spoke again, he sounded a bit more like his old self. 'Thanks. Hadn't you better get going?'

'Yeah. Look, stay in touch, all right? Both of you. Please?'

'If you can’t get hold of either myself or John, you have my brother’s number,’ Sherlock suggested, watching relief ease the lines on Lestrade’s face. ‘Use it.’

‘Will do.’ He nodded, offering a quiet farewell as he turned to go. John followed, the two of them moving down the stairs. Before, they would have chatted about football or something equally trite, but this time there was no small-talk, only a meek goodbye at the door before the knocker thudded against the wood, reverberating as John closed it firmly in its frame before returning to the flat.

He went to the window without a word, his arms folded across his chest and his spine ramrod straight as he craned his neck, watching the DI go. That blue gaze didn’t stray from his departing back, not until he turned the corner and vanished out of sight. Then, and only then, did John relax, letting out a sigh and dropping his hands to his side.

He turned, a frown collecting on his brow as he read whatever twisted expression painted Sherlock’s features. ‘What?’

‘You don’t even know you’re doing it, do you?’

John pulled a face, looking puzzled. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Nothing.’ He managed a faint smile, hoping it masked the way his heart dropped in his chest. He’d watched John stand in their flat and treat a friend like an enemy; something he would never have done while Sherlock was bound. He’d seen Lestrade not as a threat, but a competitor. John’s instincts were steadily coming to the fore. Worse, it was so deeply rooted that he had no conscious idea of his actions. The conclusion was obvious.

They were running out of time.
Streetlights picked out the cracks in the plaster above John’s head with their sodium glare. The firm wall of the mattress pressed against his back as the sheets shrouded his body, but comfortable as he was, he couldn’t sleep. After so long at Sherlock’s side, always within reach to offer support, his own room was a place of exile. It felt like he was being held at arm’s length. The small, physical intimacies they shared faded to nothing, and his chest ached at their absence.

Sherlock was working, he knew that. Solving the case came first, and he had thrown himself at the challenge, adapting to his shifting methods of deduction. Nicotine patches and endless nights: John knew them well, but there was an edge of desperation to Sherlock’s actions now.

It had been two days since Lestrade’s visit, and he prowled the flat, collating a flow of information from the homeless network: his eyes and ears when he himself couldn’t walk the streets. Slips of paper pushed through the letter box, texts on his mobile phone: it all added up, but to what, John wasn’t sure.

Not an answer. Not if Sherlock’s continuing frustration was anything to go by.

More than once, he’d considered whether the abrupt change in behaviour was to do with the bond. Had it reached some kind of chemical tipping point, one that pulled Sherlock away from his vulnerable state and back towards his normal self? That was good. That was recovery, but it didn’t stop the complicated knot of emotion twisting in John’s guts: fear for what would happen once Alexander’s claim was eradicated, and loss for the softer, more affectionate nature that, once again, Sherlock hid from view.

There would still be moments when he would stop, pale and tired, closing his eyes like a man attempting to maintain a grip on his emotions. He didn’t touch his violin or consider any bizarre experiments. He focused on the Work, like he didn’t think he had time for anything else.

Maybe he didn’t.

Unease flickered through John’s chest, and he shut his eyes, trying to ignore it. One deep breath filled his nose with the balm of Baker Street: hints of take-away from downstairs, vestiges of preserving fluid, warm wood and cool stone walls, washing powder and Mrs Hudson’s baking. It smelt like home.

Even Sherlock’s fragrance – so different than it had been a week ago – had become something stable: a foundation of the bouquet John associated with sanctuary. It was still there, everything he had catalogued that day when he’d barged into Sherlock’s personal space and inhaled like a drowning man sucking in air, but it didn’t elicit the same, uncontrollable reaction.

Oh, he was still tempted. Sherlock would walk past him and John’s body would throb with the desire to push him against the nearest wall and lick a stripe up his neck, but that was as much about the man himself as the scent of his skin. It was longing, not a blind imperative – something he could over-rule.

Turning over, John smacked the flat of his palm into his pillow, slumping into it as yawn stretched his jaw. He wished it wasn’t so complicated – that he and Sherlock could act on the attraction between them, never directly acknowledged but there all the same. At the time, he’d been too intent on Sherlock’s smell to notice the man himself, but in retrospect, he recalled the spread of Sherlock’s legs and the tilt of his head: his invitation plain. He’d done nothing to push John away. It was John’s
own shock that had done that.

Would he have let him touch, if he’d tried? Would those lips have parted beneath his if he’d stretched up for a kiss? John was fairly certain the answer was yes, and he wasn’t sure if that made their current situation better or worse. This wasn’t the way he was used to going about these things. He went on dates; the very nature of which were angled towards romance and seduction. There was a possibility of sex: a shared aim unobstructed by ridiculous gender politics.

For him and Sherlock, it was different. So much already lay between them, an entire life built together that they could be putting at risk. They both wanted more, of that he was almost sure, but neither of them could ask. John couldn’t put Sherlock in that much danger, and Sherlock wasn’t his own to give.

Except that didn’t seem right. John had watched him ignore the rules time and again over the course of their acquaintance. If Sherlock wanted to be with him, then wouldn’t he damn the consequences? It made him think there was something else – another uncertainty Sherlock hadn’t put into words. Until John found the courage to ask, they’d stay as they were. Not just friends, but not lovers either. Stuck.

Mumbling a curse, he closed his eyes, blocking out the glow of the alarm clock and trying to empty his mind. It was too easy to dwell on possibilities and questions – to dither over the unknown and never get anywhere. More than anything, they needed to sit down and talk, not about the present, but about the uncertain future.

With a sigh, he pulled the sheet up over his shoulder, calming his breathing in an effort to tempt sleep near. Dimly, he could hear the quiet rhythm of Sherlock moving around downstairs. It sounded like he was pacing, each step measured out like a drum beat, more an amble than a stride. No doubt he was lost within his train of thought, and John allowed the steady resonance to comfort him as he slipped away.

Dreams stained his slumber, fragmentary snatches of colour and sound that slowly resolved into expectant heat and humid breaths. Beyond the window, London had vanished. In the place of skyscrapers, cedars grew, their wide boughs casting shade over the dusty ground. A breeze drifted through the open casement, trailing across John’s skin. Agile fingers followed the zephyr’s path from his navel up and out across his chest, skimming over sensitive nipples, and he gave a throaty hum, shifting his hips against the brackets of strong thighs.

Lithe muscles flexed beneath pale skin: Sherlock’s body moving with him, always out of reach. The analytical gleam of those tempestuous eyes had dimmed. Instead Sherlock’s gaze smouldered, scorching John with a single sweep. He looked secretive, silhouetted by the sun behind him: a phantom of promise.

It wasn’t real, and hazy regret filled John’s mind as he reached out, stroking from the bony jut of Sherlock’s knees to his hips, coaxing him back down until he was sitting over him again, bare and breathless. Gentle tremors fluttered against his fingertips, and he watched those delicate eyelids sink to half-mast, leaving a glimmer of silver between dark lashes.

He grabbed the back of John’s hands, and for a minute he thought that, even in his dreams, Sherlock was pulling away.

‘Please?’ John begged, trying to breathe around the warm, tidal desire surging through him. His chest heaved as Sherlock smiled, his fingers resting over John’s knuckles as he guided his touch. The bold curve of his thighs slid beneath calloused palms before he slipped down into the shadowed, secretive vee between Sherlock’s legs.
They moaned in unison, twin sounds of longing, and John closed his eyes as the brand of Sherlock’s erection stuck a line across his hand. Coarse hair tickled his knuckles as he stroked once along its length, his own arousal straining against his stomach as he lost himself to the shiver of Sherlock’s need.

Outside, rain started to fall, cool water striking arid earth and turning the world into a jungle, bursting with life. John ignored it, too busy sinking his teeth into his lip so he wouldn’t cry out as Sherlock’s fingers mirrored his grasp, cradling John’s girth.

Yet there was more to Sherlock’s desire than his erection. John could feel it, a dewy humidity, and he swiped his fingers down the underside of Sherlock’s shaft and back. Thunder rumbled outside, but all he heard were Sherlock’s moans: quiet, powerful things, caught somewhere between a sob and a whine as he touched pliant, slick heat.

The jump of the muscles in Sherlock’s stomach, his sudden gasp – it seemed so real that John could almost taste it. Electricity buzzed through his veins and rolled clouds across his mind, obscuring everything but the overwhelming desire to press in to Sherlock’s waiting body. He couldn’t breathe – couldn’t think of anything but the ache of his erection and Sherlock’s tight sounds of pleasure.

He bucked, desperate to flip them and get that endless body under the weight of his, but the moment his hips jerked, the illusion dissolved. His cock ached where it lay caught between his stomach and the mattress, and he had already tucked one hand down the front of his pyjamas, which were damp with pre-come. Passion was a storm of static at the base of his spine, and he clenched his teeth, rutting into the curl of his fist with a groan.

His voice ripped from his throat in a hoarse cry of surprise. Ecstasy shot through him, and before he could draw breath he was coming hard, lost in the intense whiteout of his abrupt climax.

It left stars popping across his vision and his pulse thumping in his ears. Each breath wheezed in his parched throat, and he wet his lips, tasting musk and desire as he tried to figure out what had happened.

His fingers twitched around his cock, and another bolt of heat smashed along his spine, leaving him twisted on his side as it surfed the crest of a wave where release spilt over into pain.

‘Christ,’ he whined, trying not to think about the mess he’d made. His pyjamas stuck to his skin, and he shifted his hand, frowning as he noticed something was different. He was still hard, his cock burning to the touch and his balls pulled up tight, but there was an additional pressure, and he brushed his fingers over the unfamiliar curve of flesh.

A moan filled the air as he cupped the weight of his knot. It was unmistakable, not the half-hearted swelling that most Alphas experienced a few times when they first hit puberty: a system check and little more. This was fully-formed, the engorged tissue pushing nerves up towards the surface to maximise pleasure in the moment he cinched with an Omega.

An Omega like Sherlock.

It was like touching a live wire. One lungful of air, and he was on his feet, his chest tight as he lifted his head, flaring his nostrils. It had been a dream, he knew that. There was no jungle and no Sherlock, but one thing remained, and his body sang as it filled his sinuses.

A whisper of perfume – just a hint – but that was all he needed. It coiled in the back of his throat and drove up his heart rate. Spit pooled in his mouth, forcing him to swallow as his eyes flickered shut, the better to relish it. No longer did the air of Baker Street carry the nuance of an approaching storm.
This spoke of a land after the rains, lush and wet, ripe and fertile.

John ripped open his bedroom door, ignoring his stained pyjamas and his persistent arousal. The stairs passed beneath his feet unnoticed, hard wood and rough carpet meaningless as his eyes scanned the milky dawn light that flowed through the living room windows.

Empty. No lounging figure, hands pressed together in false piety. No silhouette before the mirror, staring at the documents stuck to its smooth pane. The room was void of human life, as was the kitchen, and John raked them both with his gaze before striding towards Sherlock’s bedroom, his heart pulsing thick blood through his veins and his head humming as he shoved the door aside.

In here, the scent was stronger. The stark altar of the bed waited for him, but there was no Sherlock cradled in its depths. Its pillows lay askew, and the quilt was a bundle of feathers and cotton, laced with the fragrance John had followed to its source. God, he wanted to bury himself in it, to drag it down into his lungs and never let it go.

He wobbled where he stood, and a ghost of movement caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. A bolt of pain shot down his neck as he whipped his head around. His weight leaned forward, braced to pounce, but it wasn’t Sherlock. It took him an embarrassingly long time to realise he was bristling at his reflection in the mirror on the inside of the cupboard door: posturing at his own image.

Shock hit him like a splash of cold water to the face, and John stepped back, colliding with the bedroom wall. The paintwork was a smooth boundary against his spine, and he clamped a hand over his nose as he struggled to wrest his rational mind from the hormone-drenched mire of lust. What the hell was he doing?

He groaned, pursing his lips and holding his breath. Horror crept through him, bringing with it insidious whispers of repulsion. The expression of his reflection was not one of a concerned friend or a caring lover. It was that of a hunter: merciless and indifferent to reason. All he’d cared about was finding Sherlock, not to check on his safety, but to snatch him close and fuck into him. Claim him. His jaw ached with the desire to bite, and his cock throbbed, petulant.

With a starving gasp, John opened his mouth, trying not to inhale any more of the intoxicating atmosphere than necessary. He almost went to the window, considering throwing it open and letting in fresh air so that he could think, but as his hand touched the glass, he questioned his actions. How quickly would Sherlock’s pheromones disperse? What if it attracted other Alphas?

His chest trembled around a growl, and he swallowed the jagged noise down, burying his face in his hands as he fought to rip himself free from the lank, possessive fugue. Seething emotions rolled through him, burning him up from within, and he clenched his jaw as he tried to override the demands of his body with the reasoning of his mind.

After several minutes, the storm in his blood abated, leaving him cleaved to the wall, limp and wretched. Swallowing, he continued to breathe through his mouth, peeling his eyelids apart to take in the room and, for the first time, seeing the evidence he’d missed.

The wardrobe was open, and a cluster of hangers lay bare, twisted on the rail as if the clothes had been torn from them in a rush. Drawers gaped, their contents in disarray, and one of the pictures lay at an angle where someone had brushed past it. John dropped to his knees, peering under the bed and noticing the bag Sherlock used when they had cases outside of London was missing.

Scrambling to his feet, he darted back out into the living room, checking the hooks by the door. His jacket hung alone, and there was no sign of the Belstaff.
Sherlock was gone.

A fist of panic crushed his chest, and John choked back a whimper. He looked around for a note, a
clue, anything… It didn’t look like Sherlock had been taken by force – abductors didn’t stop to pack
– but that didn’t mean he had left here under his own steam. Even if he had, he was either in pyresus
or rapidly approaching it. Was he out there, somewhere in London, alone and vulnerable to God
knew how many other Alphas?

‘Jesus.’ He scraped his hands through his hair, seeing nothing that could help. There was no slip of
paper – no words of reassurance in a neat cursive hand – just an empty flat.

A flash of inspiration had him lunging up the stairs to his room, his hands fumbling around his phone
as he dialled. Not Sherlock’s number, since the mad bastard didn’t pick up on a good day, but his
brother. Mycroft had eyes everywhere, and John didn’t give a damn if the whole of MI6 had seen
him stalking around Baker Street like a man possessed, pyjamas stuck to his crotch in damning
evidence. All that mattered was Sherlock.

‘Tell me he’s safe.’ The words burst from him as the line connected, not giving Mycroft a chance to
greet him. ‘Please, just tell me he’s safe.

For a moment, there was silence, and John’s heart thrashed in his chest as he prayed that Mycroft
wasn’t about to ask what he was talking about. A second later, he sagged in relief as the response
curled in his ear.

‘He’s safe, John.’

He sank down to the edge of the mattress, weak at the knees. ‘Thank God. I thought…’ He trailed
off, shaking his head. Maybe Mycroft could see it through some camera or other, maybe he couldn’t,
but it didn’t matter. The torrent of his fears eased, no longer drowning him in their flow, and he
concentrated on breathing as he tried to calm the shaking in his hands.

‘I sent a car the moment he called. Beta driver, female, one of my most trusted. He knew he couldn’t
stay in London any longer.’

John’s heart stuttered, Sherlock’s absence already an icy ache in his chest. He stared at the carpet,
wondering if Sherlock had walked out of that door knowing there was a chance he may never come
back. He must have done, but John couldn’t get his head around it. He tried to imagine Baker Street
without him, but the picture fell apart, collapsing like wet sand.

‘What now?’ he murmured.

‘I suspect that’s very much up to you.’ Mycroft’s voice was confident, with a trace of hardness at its
core. ‘Meet me at the Diogenes in an hour. I have something I wish to discuss with you.’

The line went dead before he could reply, and he pulled the phone away from his ear, blinking at its
screen. He half-expected Mycroft to say his role in Sherlock’s life was over: a convenience that had
outlived its purpose. Thank God he was wrong. Mycroft had a plan, and if John could have any part
in it, then he’d jump at the chance.

Getting to his feet, John set his phone aside as he dashed to the bathroom, flicking on the shower and
stripping before he ducked under the cold cascade. His stubborn erection had fled, the knot receding
back to its usual form, leaving the skin reddened and sensitive. His whole body felt like a copper
wire, ready for the current that would make it glow red-hot. More than once, he took an absent
breath through his nose, and though the scent of Sherlock was weak in the humidity, it was still
enough to make him sway.

He wished he could say it hadn’t affected him the way he’d feared – that he’d been above his primal instincts – but it would be an outright lie. God, he hadn’t even tried to control himself. If Sherlock had been in the flat…

John shut his eyes as a jumbled mass of lurid fantasies poured through his mind: a pornographic flow that had him bracing his hand against the tiles to steady himself.

Would Sherlock have stopped him? Would he have pushed John away, or pulled him close, too lost in the ravages of his body’s demands?

John swore, shaking his head as he turned off the taps. It was a moot point, anyway. Sherlock had done the sensible thing. Mycroft had said that he was getting away from London, but John heard the unspoken truth. Sherlock’s departure had very little to do with the city’s populace. It was about keeping his promise.

He’d vowed he wouldn’t put John in the position of having to battle his sexual instincts, and he’d kept his word. Now, it was up to John to keep his. He’d said he’d help in whatever way he could, and he’d meant it. He just hoped that Mycroft had some idea what to do for the best.

Towelling himself off, he scrubbed his teeth and shaved, nicking his jaw in his haste. He dressed in the first clothes to hand before bundling his pyjamas up with some other washing and clattering downstairs to put it in the machine. Soapy water washed away the evidence of his earlier state as he picked up his phone, wallet and keys and shrugged on his jacket.

Yanking open the front door, he slammed it behind him and turned a sharp left, grunting in surprise when he smacked into someone. There was a brief, confused stumble before a steadying hand grabbed his shoulder, and he blinked up at Lestrade.

‘Sorry,’ the DI said, snatching his palm away as if he’d be burned. ‘I was just about to –’ He waved towards the flat, taking a step back as John advanced, planting himself squarely between Greg and 221B. ‘You all right?’

‘You can’t go up there.’ He craned his neck, looking over the DI’s shoulder for a black car at the kerb before remembering Mycroft hadn’t said he’d send one. His gaze flicked to the flow of morning traffic, hunting for a taxi. ‘There’s no point anyway. Sherlock’s gone. I need to get to the Diogenes club. His brother’s waiting.’

‘Gone?’ Lestrade snagged John’s elbow. ‘Gone where? Was he taken?’

‘No he’s, he’s all right. He just… he left.’ John swallowed, shaking his head and swearing as a cab sailed past. ‘I don’t know when he’ll be back. The case –’

‘Bugger the case,’ Greg replied, smacking John’s arm with the back of his hand and jerking his head along the street. ‘Come on. I’m parked just around the corner. I’ll give you a lift. You can fill me in on the way.’

He reached into his pocket, digging out his keys as he walked, staying quiet until they’d slipped into his car and shut the doors behind them. The transformation was immediate. John would have to be blind not to see it. Here, in a space that was very much his, Greg’s shoulders straightened and his chin went up, far more dominant than John had seen him over the past few days.

‘Did he go into heat?’ he asked as he started the engine, his hands tight on the wheel.
‘Pyresus,’ John corrected, bowing his head and staring down at his hands. ‘At least I think so. Maybe it’d only just begun. I dunno. I woke up this morning and…’

‘What did you do?’

He clipped those four words out between clenched teeth, and John was abruptly aware of being stuck in a moving car with another Alpha, one who was by no means weak. Greg’s expression had turned hard and unforgiving, and he flinched, holding up his hands in an effort at pacification.

‘Nothing, Greg. Nothing. Sherlock had already left. If not…’ He shrugged, his voice rough and low. ‘I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. I just need to be sure he’s all right.’

Greg’s shaky exhale whispered in the air, and he shifted in his seat, taking one hand off the wheel to scratch behind his ear. ‘Sorry, I – I had to check,’ he explained. ‘I didn’t mean to imply, well I did, but…’ He huffed. ‘Forget it. If you’d done something to make Sherlock bolt, you’d be trying to hide from Mycroft, not meeting him for a chat. It’s just, what with the way you’ve been acting, I thought maybe Sherlock was getting to you. More than usual, I mean.’

John frowned at the scuffed dashboard, licking his lip. ‘What do you mean, “the way I’ve been acting”?’

'Come off it!' Greg muttered, taking a right turn. 'The other day, you spent the whole time I was talking to Sherlock looking like you wanted to break my nose for breathing the same air.' He ignored John’s weak sound of protest, pressing on. 'No brew, no chat, and any smile was all teeth. You didn't want me there. Even Sally noticed.'

'It was Donovan I wanted out. Not surprising, considering she pretty much accused Sherlock of murder!'

'You didn't give a damn about her, not once she'd said her piece,’ the DI corrected. ‘It was me who was getting on your last nerve, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why.’

John parted his lips, speechless as he ran over his memories. Now that he mentioned it, the DI had been oddly quiet, taking up less space than normal and keeping his distance. It had been satisfying, which, in retrospect, John realised wasn't right. It shouldn't make him smug to see his friend cowed and submissive - not because of him. At the time, he barely noticed; now he remembered Sherlock's question after Greg left.

"You don't even know you're doing it, do you?"

He'd pressed for an explanation more than once, but Sherlock held his silence. This must have been what he meant. God, what else had he been doing? Had his behaviour changed with every passing day of Sherlock's recovery? Was that why Sherlock had pulled back, not because of the case, but because he could see what was happening to John?

'You really didn't notice?'

He shook his head, watching the surrounding traffic. ‘Why didn’t you say anything?’

Greg laughed in disbelief. ‘I like my face how it is, thanks. I knew the moment I walked in that something had changed. The smell gave that away, but since you had let us in I assumed it was normal. If I’d known it was going to make you uncomfortable, I wouldn’t have set foot inside the place.’

John rubbed a hand over his forehead, pressing his tongue to the back of his teeth before he spoke.
‘It was Sherlock’s basic scent coming back as the bond fades. There was no reason for me to be all –’ He flicked his fingers before pinching the bridge of his nose. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me.’

‘Don’t you?’ The DI drummed his thumb against the steering wheel, looking like he was debating whether it was safe to speak his mind. ‘Look, no harm’s been done. I should have known better than to show up on your doorstep,’ he muttered at last. ‘I had my doubts anyway, but Donovan’s pretty persuasive when she puts her mind to it.’

He shifted, his seatbelt creaking against his chest as they slipped into the quieter, tree-lined streets near the Diogenes. ‘As for you: Sherlock’s your friend, your flatmate and God knows what else, but the thing is, he’s yours.’ A strained sound of protest escaped John’s throat, but the DI ploughed on, relentless. ‘Has been since you met him, or pretty soon after. Same way you’re his.’

‘We’re not –’ John cut himself off at the aggravated look Greg cast in his direction.

‘Doesn’t matter what you are. What I’m trying to say is that it’s no surprise all this shit with bonds is affecting you – making you aggressive to other Alphas and more protective of Sherlock. If you were a Beta, do you think your behaviour would have been much different when I walked into the flat? I’m an Alpha so I’m a threat. Sherlock’s unbound, so he’s at risk. You’d have reacted just the same. End of story.’

John pressed the heel of his palm to his eye, seeing Greg’s point, but at least if he was a Beta his reactions would be rational, untouched by the shimmering haze of feral possessiveness that had taken up permanent residence in the pit of his stomach. He would be able to see and analyse his behaviour, rather than overlooking it, oblivious as always.

‘What if I’m the threat?’ he asked, the noxious question rolling up his throat. ‘What then? I was worried that, when Sherlock went into pyresus, it’d be a struggle for self-control, but I didn’t even try. It took a good five minutes of prowling an empty flat this morning before I realised what I was doing. How does that make me any different from –?’ He cut himself off, barely able to speak Alexander’s name without the rough growl at the back of his throat becoming a snarl. ‘From that bastard?’

‘From what I’ve heard, it would never have crossed Cunningham’s mind to stop at all.’ He turned the final corner, pulling up at the grandiose frontage of the club. The engine faded out with a smooth purr, and he scrubbed a hand across his eyes before giving John a sympathetic look. ‘I don’t envy you a bit, the situation you’re in, but you can’t keep beating yourself up about this.’ His mouth twisted in a crooked smile. ‘It’s part of your nature, and I know – I know that’s no excuse for what some Alphas will do to Omegas. More to the point, so do you. That’s the big difference.’

He rubbed a finger down the blade of his nose before he added, ‘Besides, isn’t control something you learn? Seems like you’re doing a better job of it than most.’

John let out a sigh, closing his eyes as he wished, not for the first time, that things weren’t so complicated. At least the DI made a good point. All this, his self-indulgent wallowing in his own failings, was doing fuck all to help Sherlock.

‘Thanks.’ He opened his eyes, looking at Greg with a faint frown. ‘I just – I don’t understand. You said you could smell the change on Sherlock as soon as you entered the flat the other day?’

‘Yeah.’ Greg dragged the word out, watching John warily.

‘You didn’t react to it, at least, not like I did. You didn’t barge into Sherlock’s personal space or
anything like that.’ John narrowed his eyes. ‘Why not?’

The DI cleared his throat, reaching for a packet of nicotine patches and scowling when he realised the carton was empty. ‘You would have knocked my head off if I’d tried to get any closer,’ he pointed out. ‘That, or Sherlock would have beaten you to it.’

He took a deep breath, hastening to explain himself. ‘Other than that, I dunno. I mean, I like Sherlock, just not like you do. Sure, he smelt strange and it made me want to get near him, if only to identify it, but I still felt like I had a choice in the matter, and the common sense not to risk it. Maybe it’s different for you, because you’re closer to him.’ Greg raised an eyebrow, reading God knew what from John’s face. ‘All right?’

‘Yeah.’ His lips twitched in a weak smile as he considered Greg’s words, wishing he had some concrete facts to put his mind at rest.

After a few seconds, he shook his head, pitching his confusion aside. There’d be time to worry about that later. For now, Sherlock had to be his highest priority, and he wasn’t doing any good sitting in the DI’s car. He was about to reach for the door handle when Greg’s hand on his elbow stopped him, just a tap, but it was enough to make him turn back.

‘Before you head off, do me a favour? See if Mycroft can get a message to Sherlock?’ He shrugged. ‘I already sent him a text, but the odds are he didn’t read it. I thought he’d want to know that Elsie Jacobs seems to check out. Actually, she said if she had to put money on someone offing Cunningham, then it would be you.’

John grunted. ‘I wouldn’t have fucked about with tainted drugs. I’d have just shot him.’

‘Funny, that’s exactly what Sally said. Made this Jacobs girl laugh. There’s nothing definitive to rule her out or pin the blame on her, no alibi but no motive. Gotta say though, she spent more time asking questions than answering them.’ Greg rubbed a palm over the back of his neck. ‘She did promise she’d ask around, see if she could find anything else for us before the next corpse turns up. We’ll keep tabs on her if we can, not that that’ll be easy.’

‘I’ll try and let Sherlock know. Thanks, Greg, for the lift and everything.’

‘Sure. Text me all right? Keep me informed?’ Genuine concern lay thick on the DI’s features, and John nodded his promise, sliding out and shutting the door behind him. He lifted his hand in farewell as the silver car pulled away, easing down the road and out of sight.

Two ushers waited for him in the portico, pristine and silent. They didn’t utter a word as they led him through the club, still empty in the weak light of early morning. It wasn’t even nine a.m. yet, though John knew better than to believe anyone who frequented the Diogenes kept regular working hours.

A pair of mahogany doors opened to the book-lined opulence of Mycroft’s favoured retreat. A single desk-lamp lit the gloom, and John stopped in surprise, staring at the man in the chair as the hinges whispered shut behind him.

Mycroft seemed oblivious to his arrival. He sat at the desk, his elbows on its surface and his fingers tunnelled into his hair as he gave the document in front of him his undivided attention. There was no suit jacket, his waistcoat lay unbuttoned and he had rolled up his shirt-sleeves. Shadows painted bruises under his eyes, and he’d missed a bit when shaving. He also looked thinner than the last time John had seen him: more gaunt around the jaw.

He cleared his throat, raising his eyebrows when Mycroft lifted his head in shock, blinking at him. At
last, realisation smoothed out his features, and he sat back, resting a hand over his eyes before gesturing to a nearby armchair.

‘My apologies, Doctor Watson. Won’t you sit down?’

The leather creaked under his weight as he watched Mycroft get to his feet, picking up a glass of scotch and draining the last inch from its depths. Lines bracketed his mouth and creased his brow, and his skin looked grey from lack of sleep.

‘Matters of State?’ he asked, gesturing to the papers.

‘Unfortunately, no.’ He set the tumbler down with a soft click, walking around the front of his desk and leaning his weight against the woodwork. ‘All of this pertains to Sherlock’s current situation. I have made continuing attempts to negotiate his freedom from the Cunningham family, meeting with the Alpha mother on several occasions over the past ten days.’

‘And?’ John shifted forward, his heart thrumming at the base of his throat as he gripped his knees. Mycroft bowed his head, drawing in a deep breath through his nose. ‘Sentiment,’ he muttered, his lips twisting in disgust. ‘Regardless of the evidence placed before her, Patricia Cunningham is unable to acknowledge her son’s actions. Her grief appears genuine enough, and I fear it is clouding her otherwise sound judgement. Her actions are…’ He shook his head, ‘lacking in rationality. Yesterday, the family took out an injunction.’

John narrowed his eyes. ‘What does that mean?’

‘In this case, it means I am blocked from communicating with them directly. Everything must be done through legal representation, making it easier for them to drag this out for as long as they so desire. I suspect they hoped to stall the situation until, contractually, Sherlock can be removed from my care.’ Broad shoulders slumped, and Mycroft’s fingers curled, white-knuckled, around the edge of his desk.

‘You –’ John pursed his lips, shaking his head. ‘You run half the bloody country from behind the scenes. Are you honestly saying that helping Sherlock is beyond you?’

Icy disdain sharpened those blue eyes. ‘I implied no such thing.’ Mycroft reached out, ringing a small silver bell and giving the usher who appeared an empty smile before requesting a pot of tea. Once he’d departed, he continued.

‘The injunction is a setback, nothing more. We may even be able to use it to our advantage. My position has allowed me to construct a network of individuals who are sympathetic to the Omega situation. A retaliatory document was issued by a judge of my acquaintance, barring the family from removing Sherlock from my care for the next three months.’ A ghost of a smile whispered over Mycroft’s lips. ‘I was required to state the grounds on which the rebuttal was based.’

John frowned, following Mycroft’s words carefully. He knew he often worked in the shadows, all smoke and mirrors, and he tried to think how this could work in their favour.

‘I made sure that my accusations of domestic abuse were the foundation.’ Mycroft smirked, and there was a vicious satisfaction in his gaze. ‘Should the Cunninghams wish to challenge it, they will have to answer the claims that have been made, which would force them to respond to the evidence. As it’s occurring through a private legal channel, it also keeps the issue out of the public eye.’

‘So it’s a compromise?’ John sat back in his chair. ‘You’re not exposing the scandal, which would blow the whole thing wide open and potentially make matters worse for Sherlock, but you’re
showing it to a third party. This judge.’

‘And his trusted legal councillors. It won’t move beyond those circles, not unless I give explicit instructions to the contrary, but it stalemates the Cunninghams. They can’t have Sherlock. Not without addressing the charges I’ve raised, which they are unwilling to acknowledge.’

John ducked his head, biting his lip. ‘Do we have time to be playing this kind of game? Sherlock’s already gone into pyresus.’

Mycroft hummed in agreement, offering a bland smile to the usher delivering the tea tray and watching the silent man depart. He poured the steaming liquid into a dainty china cup before doling out one for himself, stirring in the milk with thoughtful swirls of the spoon. ‘Indeed, at least two weeks earlier than anticipated.’ His eyes darted up to John’s face. ‘Any theories to explain that, Doctor Watson?’

He hadn’t considered it beyond a fleeting moment of panic, and he stared into the milky tea before shaking his head. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Perhaps you’ll have to ask him yourself.’

‘And when will that be?’ John demanded, his cup rattling as he set it down on the table in front of him. ‘A week, a month? Longer? I can’t be anywhere near him when he’s like –’ His words died on his lips as Mycroft picked up a polythene packet from his desk. It was vacuum sealed, and inside was a non-descript blister-pack, branded with a name John didn’t recognise. ‘What’s that?’

‘Pentrapenzone. It’s the inhibitor we give our agents. Powerful and easily modulated, it offers Alphas a secure level of control over their potential response to an Omega.’ He held it out to John, watching him study the packaging. ‘There are three different dosages. The highest will render your Alpha drives null. Those are the ones you’ll need; they are green. There’s a leaflet inside listing the side-effects.’

John stared, hope beating hard in his chest. ‘And why would I need these?’ he asked, his voice strained.

‘Because Sherlock needs this.’ He held up a small vial of fluid, tilting it to the light coming from the lamp on the desk. ‘I have bought him time, but he needs to be able to use it. His future is his choice. He must decide on a course of action, and soon, so we can set the wheels in motion to make it possible.’

‘He didn’t feel able to consider the options before he went into pyresus. You really think he’s going to be any more capable now?’ John asked in disbelief.

‘No. Left at the mercy of his unbound biology, my brother will find himself locked in an accelerating cycle of intense sexual need and deep malaise, unable to claim a sound mind in either state. This will break it, allowing him to return to normality, at least for a short while. He’ll have, perhaps, seventy-two hours in which he can truly think.’

John sucked in a breath, not sure where to start. Questions pounded in his head, and he made a couple of false starts before managing to speak. ‘I don’t understand. Why do you need me to give it to him? Couldn’t you have brought it to Baker Street? Does he even know about it?’

Mycroft tilted his head in acknowledgement. ‘The very basic pharmaceutical hypothesis was devised by Sherlock himself about fifteen years ago. However, there’s a distinct difference between mixing a few herbs and medication like this. It’s only just been developed and officially, it does not exist.’ He
held it out, relinquishing it to John with ease. ‘The substance is untested. While, in theory, we know what it should do, in practice –’

‘It’s dangerous.’ John swallowed, shaking his head. ‘If Sherlock’s going to take this, he should be under medical supervision.’ His brain caught up with what his mouth was saying, and he closed his eyes in disbelief. ‘Someone qualified in Omega healthcare, Mycroft. Not me!’

The man across from him raised an eyebrow before looking down at his brogue-clad feet. ‘You’re the only one I trust. The mainstream pharmaceutical community cannot know about this substance. Should we invite in anyone without an intimate interest in Sherlock’s welfare, I fear the drug’s existence would become public knowledge. Even your friend, Mike Stamford, is not above reproach.’

‘And I am?’

Mycroft looked at him as if he were an idiot, his thin lips pursed. ‘When you called this morning, I was braced to deflect demands to know Sherlock’s location. Yet in a moment of intense physical and psychological stress, your only concern was for my brother’s welfare. You proved yourself with that, John. If Sherlock takes this drug, and he will, he needs a doctor on hand. Besides,’ Mycroft paused, clearing his throat and tapping his fingers on the desk. ‘I would feel better if you were with him – as, I think, would you.’

There was no denying that. John couldn’t guess Sherlock’s reactions to pyresus, and he wasn’t convinced he wouldn’t do something rash in a fit of desperation. He kept remembering the studies he’d done on depression during his training, and how the suicide rate increased once recovery had begun. The deeply affected were often too apathetic or listless to consider doing themselves physical harm, but once their brain chemistry began to stabilise, they felt able to take action.

He did not want to think that Sherlock might turn to that, but it dogged the corners of his mind, and one glance at Mycroft suggested he wasn’t alone in his concerns.

‘Is he on his own?’

‘There’s a security contingent on the perimeter. All Betas of course, but he is isolated within the house. Should he fall ill or decide to harm himself, there’s no guarantee that they would be able to render aid in a prompt manner.’

It wasn’t a choice. John had made up his mind the minute Mycroft handed over the tablets. They were his safety net, the one thing that could neutralise every unsavoury aspect of his reactions. They were what he needed to be there for Sherlock, not as an Alpha, but as a friend.

His fingers twitched around the glass vial before he slipped it into his pocket to keep it safe. The foil packet of the inhibitors crackled in his grip, and he popped one free, swallowing it dry before even thinking to read the leaflet.

‘Shouldn’t you have done that first?’ Mycroft asked as he scanned the side-effects, sounding more amused than alarmed.

John grunted as he washed the pasty taste from his mouth with the dregs of his tea. ‘I don’t care, as long as it does its job. Now you,’ He jabbed a finger in Mycroft’s direction, ‘sit down and tell me what this drug’s meant to do to Sherlock. And don’t leave anything out.’

Obligingly, Mycroft did as he asked, his polished tones secretive as he outlined everything he knew. It was a chimera of knowledge dredged from the secret labs, the kind even the Prime Minister didn’t
know about, and John listened, rapt. He didn’t notice the passage of time until a soft knock on the door made them both look up. A young man entered at Mycroft’s bidding, John’s battered duffel bag in one hand and a file in the other.

‘Ah, Joshua, thank you.’ Mycroft accepted the dossier, reading through it with an approving expression before looking up at John. ‘I took the liberty of having someone pack your things. The air in the flat has also been neutralised to remove any indication of Sherlock’s physical state.’ His eyebrow quirked, and John craned his neck, trying to see. ‘Though from this analysis, the telikostrone levels were low, relatively speaking. Sherlock must have been expecting it and left at the first signs of pyresus.’

‘Is that a good thing?’ John asked, trying not to think what it might have been like if the scent had been any stronger.

Mycroft made a non-committal sound, looking at the clock before meeting John’s gaze. ‘How are you feeling? Any noticeable side-effects?’

‘I can’t smell much.’ He wrinkled his nose. It was stifling, but more than worth it if it meant he could be of help to Sherlock. ‘Same as with the inhibitors back in the army.’

‘Good. Take this.’ He held out part of the file. ‘It’s the documentation on the drug. I imagine Sherlock will ask to see it. Depending how far gone he is, he might question the substance and your motives. Try not to take it personally. Oh, and –’ He grabbed John’s wrist, sticking his finger with a needle.

‘What the fuck, Mycroft?’

He dabbed a reagent strip onto the blood that welled from the cut, raising an eyebrow as it began to change. ‘Forgive me, but I’d rather have empirical proof that your body is reacting as it should.’

John sucked at the breach, iron tainting his tongue as he waited for the verdict. ‘And?’

‘It seems to be doing the trick.’ Mycroft grimaced before disposing of the strip, its dyed squares bright with chemical signatures. ‘A car is waiting for you outside. The driver will take you to Sherlock. By the time you reach the house, the Pentrapenzone should be in full effect. You will be tested again at the perimeter before you are permitted to enter. If there is any doubt about the efficacy, you’ll be asked to return to London. The security are authorised to use whatever force is required to ensure you comply; do I make myself clear?’

‘Perfectly.’ He glared at Mycroft’s impassive face before getting to his feet, scrubbing a hand through his hair and picking up the bag Joshua had left on the floor. ‘Is that it then, the full extent of your plan? There’s nothing else we can do?’

‘What do you suggest?’ he asked. ‘I’ve tried every strategy at my disposal to bring about the Cunninghams’ compliance. Everything, including offers of financial compensation have been declined, though considering some of the bids they’ve already received, that’s perhaps not surprising.’ He reached behind him, picking up a sheaf of papers and holding them out for John to see. ‘As Sherlock’s current guardian, suitors have also been petitioning me for the right to bond: illegal, of course, but that doesn’t stop them. Many have said they’ll double their offer if I can prove his fertility.’

John stared, trying to breathe around the simultaneous shock at the amounts in front of him and disgust at people callously putting a price on a human life. ‘These are all at least seven figures,’ he managed, his fingers numb on the strap of his duffel.
‘There are some who will pay ridiculous sums to add even modest prestige to their bloodline. Most of these are nouveau riche looking to validate their dynasties with ties to the old aristocracy. The Holmes family has been around for quite some time. Plus there is some rarity in Sherlock’s status.’

Mycroft cleared his throat. ‘For an Omega to be fertile and reach their mid-thirties without having conceived or carried a child is rare, and therefore desirable.’

At any other time, John would have been amused to see Mycroft’s cool demeanour so ruffled, but there was nothing to laugh about in any of this. ‘So the Cunninghams won’t take your money when they think they can get more?’

‘They have refused it because it would be seen as a surrender by elite society; a sign of weakness. I was considering the merits of an anonymous bid by proxy, but the injunction rendered it irrelevant.’ Mycroft shook his head, gesturing towards the door. ‘I will continue my efforts, via the legal team, to force the situation into motion. Until I know what Sherlock wants, that’s all I can do.’

John handed back the reports, ignoring the way the paper rattled in his shaking hand. ‘And it’s down to me to make sure he’s got the strength to make a decision. What if he has a bad reaction to the drug? What then?’

‘There’s an alarm button in your bag; if you press it, my private medical team will arrive by helicopter within minutes. It’s the best solution I can offer, though I appreciate it is not ideal.’ Mycroft offered a weak smile. ‘I doubt Sherlock will suffer any consequences with which you cannot cope. I have the utmost faith in your abilities, Doctor Watson.’

‘Well, that makes one of us.’ John sighed, looking around the room as he tried to get his head around what was happening.

‘You’ll tell Mrs Hudson that we’ll be back as soon as we can?’

‘Naturally,’ Mycroft replied. ‘I will also ensure the flat is left in a safe state to remain unoccupied – remove any of my brother’s specimens and such. There’s a phone in the bag as well, a private line direct to me. I hope you will keep me informed of the situation.’

It was an order disguised as a request, and John narrowed his eyes. ‘If there’s anything Sherlock thinks you need to know, I’ll make sure he tells you himself.’

The look Mycroft gave him was one of weary annoyance, and he flicked his fingers towards the door. ‘Then I suggest you depart, Doctor Watson. The sooner you leave, the sooner we can both be assured of my brother’s well-being.’

John gave a curt nod, more military than medical as he turned and marched away, not bothering to smother his footsteps as he strode through the hallways of the Diogenes. True to his word, Mycroft had a car waiting for him, and a blank-faced driver ushered him into the back seat, taking his bag and stowing it in the boot before slipping behind the wheel. There was no greeting or friendly small-talk; Mycroft clearly didn't pay his staff to chat, and John drew in a breath, left alone with his own thoughts.

He should have known Mycroft would have everything planned down to the last detail. Sherlock had called for help, and he had risen to the challenge, providing safe transport and refuge. Yet it was more than that. Perhaps the inhibitors hadn't been too difficult to get hold of in the end, but the suspension for Sherlock was as new as Mycroft claimed. Even in the documentation, it wasn’t named; enigmatically referred to as "O.D.X."

The older Holmes had been emphatic when he explained that it was the only dose available.
Synthesising anything in large amounts would be too challenging to conceal – too dangerous to dozens of careers within secret laboratories – and almost all of what had been produced was in John’s possession.

He just hoped it worked.

The car sped on, leaving behind London's crowded streets and heading into the countryside to the north of the city. John read the file containing the information about O.D.X from cover to cover, checking the facts against what Mycroft had told him and finding no disparities.

At any other time, he'd be fascinated. It was a clever analogue, one that temporarily blocked signals from unbound receptors and reset the Omega's body to a neutral state. However, its untested nature was a huge cause for concern. They'd used a couple of basic model organisms to check it wasn't immediately toxic, rats and so forth, as well as in vitro testing to document its chemical efficacy, but none of that was an adequate mirror for the complexity of a human Omega's potential reactions.

Nothing about it, from its action to the duration of its effects, was certain, and John scraped his teeth over his lip. More than once, Sherlock had implied that many of the rumours about an Omega's state of mind during pyresus were a lie. Was Mycroft over-reacting, basing his assumptions on speculation rather than fact? Perhaps Sherlock would be able to consider his future without the serum in John's pocket?

He considered not telling him about the drug, at least not until he’d assessed the situation, but even before the thought had fully formed John dismissed it. He couldn’t do that. Sherlock wasn't a child. He was an informed adult trapped in an unfortunate biological situation. He deserved to be informed of his options. If he asked for O.D.X, John would give it to him, and he'd make sure he was there to pick up the pieces if anything went wrong.

More than two hours after leaving London, the sleek vehicle turned into narrow country lanes, and John eyed the green fields stretched out on either side. Pastoral and beautiful, he could only grimace, knowing how much Sherlock would hate it. Gone was the city’s frantic surge. Out here, everything seemed peaceful, as if the world could pass by unnoticed. They went through a small hamlet, little more than a crossroads with a church on one side and a pond on the other: a fleeting glimpse of rural tranquillity.

Ten minutes later, the car began to slow, and John raised his eyebrows as it swung off onto a long, sweeping road. It wasn't a public highway, but the tarmac was in good condition, neither pitted nor worn, so someone had to maintain it. Established oak trees were dotted about, and for the first time John wondered exactly where he was going.

Mycroft had said nothing about where Sherlock had secreted himself away, and John hadn't thought to ask. All he'd cared about was getting there. Now, he realised just how far off the beaten track they were – miles from the nearest town. The solitude was for Sherlock's safety, but John couldn't help remembering him describe Alexander’s house, out in the middle of nowhere. This, for all the beauty of the place, couldn't be reassuring. It must feel like he had ended up back where he started, trapped in isolation and cut off from everything for which he'd fought.

A set of metal gates soon blocked their way, and a man in a suit stepped out from the lodge to one side. He looked slender, but strong, and John could make out the shape of a gun tucked into his jacket as he pulled open the car door and motioned for him to step out.

One moment please, sir.' Something flashed in John's eye, and he blinked in surprise, squinting as the man tilted a device in his palm to see the screen. An iris map painted its way across the glass, confirming his identity: Mycroft's security in full swing. 'Thank you, Doctor Watson. If I can have
your hand?' He was ready for it, but the scratch of the sharp was still a bright line of pain. This time, a minuscule syringe drew up a tiny bead before the man added it to a solution. It made what Mycroft had been doing look rudimentary, and John watched as the man swirled the mixture, observing it change from faint pink to deep violet. 'Very good, sir. One more thing, and then we'll allow you to proceed. If you could just follow me?'

The building itself looked ancient, half-timbered and worn, but inside high-tech surveillance equipment gleamed on every wall. The man, who introduced himself as Tony, led the way, ushering him towards a sealed room.

John gave the threshold a doubtful look. 'I'm not going in there until you tell me what it's for.' he said, folding his arms and lifting his chin, watching the man tilt his head in grudging acknowledgement.

'We just need to make sure the inhibitors are doing their job, sir. The chemicals are present in the correct amount in your bloodstream, but we must be certain they're having the desired effect. We had the vault converted into a fume cupboard of sorts a few years ago at the instruction of Mr. Holmes – I mean, Mr. Mycroft Holmes.'

'Seems an odd thing to do,' John murmured.

'This is his private residence, sir,' Tony replied. 'Mostly, it's for the decontamination and inspection of packages of unknown origin, but it'll work just as well for this. If you don't mind?'

With a deep breath, John did as he was asked, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead as the door shut behind him. Uncertainty trickled down his spine, but he squared his shoulders, telling himself he was being paranoid. He was here on Mycroft's instruction. All this was just a case of the security team being impressively thorough.

A small hatch opened in the wall, and he eyed the tiny bottle. Gloved fingertips removed the stopper and turned the vial so John could see the label. Of course Mycroft would expose him to telikostrone before letting him anywhere near Sherlock. Trust only went so far, and he was too sensible to take risks with his brother's welfare.

'Anything?' Tony asked, his voice distorted by a speaker in the wall, sounding pleased when John shook his head. 'Okay, your vital signs all indicate no response, so it looks like you're fully protected. We'll just vent the room, and then get you on your way, sir.'

He listened to the air hiss through the conditioning system, folding his arms and shifting where he stood. By the time Tony opened the door, John was already hovering on the other side, and he marched past, sparing a brief nod of reluctant thanks as he headed back towards the car. To his irritation, the driver looked at Tony, waiting for confirmation before indicating that John should get in.

'Can't I walk?' he asked, gesturing to the gates as Tony flashed a grin.

'You could, sir, but it's another mile and a half to the house. The car would be quicker. We'll buzz the inner-perimeter and let them know you're safe to proceed. No one else will stand in your way. We have security cameras set up around the grounds, but at the insistence of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, there's no surveillance in the building itself.' The disapproval on Tony's face suggested that such a big blind-spot hadn't been negotiated, and John smothered a smile at the idea of Sherlock going through his sanctuary and ripping out the cameras. 'If you require any assistance, there's an alarm
panel in every room. Just hit the red button and someone will be there within minutes.'

'Thanks.'

'Good luck.' The tilt to Tony's words suggested he thought John would need it, and he blew out a sigh as he climbed back into the car, not bothering with his seatbelt as they set off up the long drive. Another checkpoint came and went, the gates parting to let them in, and the smooth hum of tarmac changed to the crunch of gravel as they approached the house.

John ducked his head, staring out of the windscreen. He'd expected an elegant sprawl of pillars and brickwork, something austere and intimidating that screamed of wealth. Instead, the sun shone weakly off of white plaster and dark timbers. Ivy and wisteria grew up the walls, and the leaded window-panes gleamed, some coloured in stained glass and others clear. The eaves clustered in a chaotic jumble that suggested more than one sympathetic renovation. It looked like the kind of place that had been here forever: well-loved.

The door popped open beneath his touch, and he climbed out, accepting his bag from the driver and blinking when he offered a key. 'I doubt you'll be admitted voluntarily,' the man said by way of explanation, touching the peak of his cap in farewell before he departed, leaving John to shuffle his feet as he considered the best course of action. Now he was here, he wasn’t sure how to proceed.

Sherlock had left Baker Street for a reason, and John had followed him uninvited. He was the intruder here, and he doubted Sherlock would welcome him with open arms.

Approaching the front door, he debated knocking, but without knowing Sherlock's current state, there was no way to be sure he was capable of answering, even if he wanted to. No, better to get inside, investigate the situation, and work from there.

The key slipped into the lock, the tumblers clicking as John eased forward, peering through the gloom. The lights were off and the curtains drawn, and he got nothing but the impression of large rooms off to both sides as he set his bag down on the floor.

He inhaled out of habit, pulling a face as his nose failed to register anything beyond clean carpets and furniture polish. The wooden floor echoed beneath his feet, and he clenched his left hand in a quick fist, releasing it as he hissed Sherlock's name. The whole place was mausoleum quiet, and a thrill of unease shuddered down John's back.

Turning right, he pressed his palm to the side of the arch, peering into the rooms beyond and trying to make out any human shapes amidst the furniture. He could call out, but some latent instinct warned him to hold his tongue. If he raised his voice, he would give away the element of surprise, and until he knew more about the situation, he was unwilling to let go of any potential advantage.

Abruptly, something cold jabbed against the nape of his neck, and John stiffened as fear chilled him to the bone. He recognised the press of a gun against his skin – had experienced it more times than he cared to count – and he raised his hands in surrender. He licked his lips, tasting the salt of nervous sweat. It must be one of Mycroft’s security people, one who’d not been informed of his arrival. Perhaps he’d set off an alarm and they’d come ghosting in to neutralise the problem.

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'My name is Doctor John Watson.’ He struggled to keep his voice steady as he stared at the wall in front of him. ‘I’m authorised to be here. Check with your man at the gate.’

‘I know who you are.’

That deep voice sent a different kind of shiver down John’s spine, and he turned without thinking, flinching to find the baleful eye of a muzzle a few inches from his face. He didn’t dare move,
speak, not when those cool, grey eyes were watching him like a specimen under a microscope, hideously indifferent.

Instead, he stared along the barrel of his own damn gun at the man who held it in his grasp: poised and deadly. Sherlock’s face contained no trace of mercy. His brow pinched into a vee above his nose, and a muscle ticked in his jaw: a thousand miles from the calm composure he usually wore like a crown.

John swallowed, choking on a dozen useless reassurances. He’d been worried that, as the Alpha, he would be the dangerous one.

He’d never thought it might be the other way around.
Charged silence surrounded them, pressing down on John’s shoulders as he waited for the balance of the moment to tip over into action. Prickles marched along his spine, but he didn’t dare retreat. He’d been a soldier too long to willingly show any sign of weakness to an aggressor, even if they were his best friend.

The gun kept drawing his eye, a brutal shape in Sherlock’s grasp. He’d assumed it was still in the flat – hadn’t even thought to look for it – and Mycroft hadn’t mentioned its absence. Sherlock must have grabbed it when he left.

John expected his hand to shake around the grip, but every muscle lay steady and confident, his finger tense on the trigger. He was not using the Sig as a bluff. He would fire if necessary. Of that, John had no doubt.

‘Why are you here?’

Was it his imagination, or was there a hint of a tremor in those words? John tore his eyes from the outline of the pistol, forcing himself to look beyond the mask of Sherlock’s expression and see the details that gave away his state of mind.

He wore the same clothes he’d been in last night, dark trousers and a white shirt, strikingly monochrome. The top three buttons lay undone, leaving a vee of naked flesh. His forearms were bare, but he hadn’t tucked his sleeves into their usual, fastidious rolls. They were shoved out of the way, threatening to fall back to Sherlock’s wrists. A light flush stained his sharp cheekbones and darkened the ridges of his clavicles, and his lips lay parted around each snatch of air.

Yet it was his eyes that held John captive, pinned where he stood. Sherlock did not look at him as if he were an endless puzzle or a murder to solve. His stare was ravenous and intent. He didn’t blink or fidget. This was nothing like the soft affection and sporadic moodiness of Sherlock’s heats. They had seemed transient, a normal ebb and flow. This was wild and vicious, and Sherlock’s restraint carved its message into his rigid knuckles and the straight line of his spine.

He looked hungry, lethal, beautiful and dangerous, and maybe John couldn’t smell him, but he still had eyes. He could still see everything he wanted standing in front of him, powerful and stunning, and his body responded. An erection at gunpoint was beyond inappropriate, and he shifted his weight, praying Sherlock wouldn’t notice as he struggled to remember the question. ‘What?’


‘I’m here to help.’

A snarl twitched Sherlock’s lips, and he strode forward. John’s breath left him in a “whuff” of surprise as he retreated, his back colliding with the wall. ‘Help?’ he demanded. ‘And how exactly do you intend to do that? Or is it the chance you’ve been waiting for? Did you come here expecting to find me writhing in bed, begging for a knot? Is that how you plan to “help”?’

John shook his head, the bricks bruising his shoulder-blades as he flattened himself against them, but there was nowhere to go. The gun was pointing at the floor, Sherlock’s right arm lax at his side as his left hand clenched into a fist. He loomed over John, teeth bared, their noses almost touching as he filled John’s world from one edge to the other.

‘No,’ he croaked, licking his lips and trying again. ‘No, God no. I’ve taken inhibitors. Even if I
wanted to knot you, I couldn’t. Can’t –’ He paused, drawing in a shuddering breath. ‘Can’t you smell it?’

He hoped to appeal to Sherlock’s rational mind, to point out that there was information he was failing to parse and neutralise the turbulent passion of his anger. It worked, to some extent, but not in the way he had intended.

Cool fingers gripped John’s jaw, pushing his chin up and to the side to expose his throat. The tip of that sharp nose dug into vulnerable flesh, and John choked as Sherlock inhaled: a long drag of air across his skin.

Sherlock’s response was immediate. That taut body melted against him, thrumming muscles falling slack, and John stifled a moan as the hard line of Sherlock’s erection pressed against his hip. His own had to be equally obvious, and Sherlock rubbed against him like a cat, his spine forming a sinuous, rolling arch.

‘Christ,’ John whispered, jerking at the hot flash of Sherlock’s tongue against his pulse. He should do something, push him away or at the very least wrest the gun from his loose grip. Just because John wasn’t under the influence of any abnormal hormones – was turned on by Sherlock himself, rather than any product of his gender – that didn’t mean Sherlock was free of the same issues.

Part of his mind whispered that Sherlock was not as irrational as he had imagined. He was not the begging, desperate creature John had guiltily envisaged in his fantasies, but that still didn’t make this informed consent, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

Before he could do anything, Sherlock growled, pressing the palm of his left hand to the wall above John’s head and shoving himself away. ‘My brother is a fucking idiot,’ he hissed as he dragged shaking fingers across his forehead, his body swaying near again before he yanked himself back. ‘Pentrapenzone. As if the only possible threat in this scenario is you.’

Slowly, John started to relax. A second later, he jolted in surprise when Sherlock’s head snapped up, the Sig rising to lock him in its sights. ‘Keep your hands where I can see them.’

‘What do you think I’m going to do?’ he asked, hurt resonating in his voice. Sherlock had little reason to trust any Alpha, but he knew John was neutralised. Was he unable to make the connection between Pentrapenzone and what it would do, or was there another angle John couldn’t see?

‘It’s not you I’m worried about,’ Sherlock muttered, a sneer twisting his features. ‘Your nature is inhibited; mine is not, and you still smell like you.’ His voice rumbled over that last word, and John licked his lips as Sherlock continued, ‘You protected yourself from being drawn under by my scent, but did either you or Mycroft do me the same courtesy? Did you really believe it couldn’t go both ways?’

John swallowed, ducking his head. They had focussed their efforts on freeing Sherlock from the grip of sexual need, but John had expected to find someone ailing beneath the strength of their desire, weak and lost to it. He had not imagined walking into the house and finding Sherlock like this: ragged but functional, feral but more predator than prey.

‘I’m sorry,’ he managed, clearing his throat. ‘I took a shower this morning. I didn’t realise I’d still carry any kind of scent that would make things worse for you.’

‘You rarely think.’ He stepped forward again, the Sig a terrifying chaperone, its aim wavering. ‘Your pulse and respiration are elevated, your pupils dilated, your skin flushed… None of that’s fear, John.’ For a moment, that tight mask fractured, revealing a glimpse of the desperate need beneath. ‘It should
be. In the right circumstances, an Omega is just as dangerous as an Alpha – just as lacking in control. At least if you keep your hands raised, there’s no illusion of consent. I cannot pretend you’re anything other than at my mercy.’

John’s heart fluttered as heat bubbled in the pit of his stomach. If pushed, he could make an educated guess about what Sherlock meant by “the right circumstances”. Mutual attraction. Almost from the beginning it had been there, an ember waiting for its moment to burst into flame and burn them both. Did that make all the difference? Was Sherlock’s behaviour that of an Omega who not only acknowledged the Alpha in front of him, but actively desired them?

If he dropped his hands, would he find out?

Before hope had a chance to unfurl, his train of thought crashed to a halt, caught up on the one word that made everything so complicated. Omega. It didn’t matter if they were both standing here, wanting each other so much it hurt. Sherlock’s biology still clouded his judgement, and John had no way to know how much of the passion in his eyes was because of his pyresus. Would Sherlock still look at him like that once it had passed, or would it be cold indifference and disgust that filled his gaze?

No, it wasn’t just John’s hormones they had to remove from the equation. He saw that now. Mycroft had given him the O.D.X so that Sherlock could make decisions with a clear head, and for the first time John wondered if he had been talking about more than the Cunninghams. Had he also envisaged this as a potential scenario? Had he known how important it may be to both Sherlock and John to be free of their instincts, if only for a short while? After all, there was no way anyone could believe a decision made for Sherlock wouldn’t affect John as well, not when their lives had become so undeniably entwined.

‘You wanted to know how I could help?’ he said, wetting his lips and watching Sherlock’s eyes narrow. ‘Your brother gave me something that could give you back your control.’ He slipped his left hand down to his pocket, pulling the vial free and holding it up to the meek light.

Sherlock frowned at the offering, his head tilted and his gaze intent. The gun hung from his hand, and John reached out, easing it from his unresisting grip. He thought he’d snap back out of reach, the Sig raised once more, but he let it go easily, and it took only a second for John to realise why.

‘This isn’t loaded.’ He stared at the void where a clip should be, disbelieving.

‘No. One of Mycroft’s ridiculous minions confiscated the ammunition in case I decided to use it on myself,’ Sherlock murmured, taking the serum and tipping the glass tube. He watched the liquid flow, analysing its viscosity as if he could guess the contents from sight alone. ‘Probably just as well. I might have shot you by accident.’

‘And if I’d gone for you?’ John asked. ‘What then?’

‘It makes a serviceable club, if necessary.’ Sherlock shook his head, dismissing John’s query as he prowled back into his personal space, the O.D.X held between his thumb and forefinger as if he thought it might explode. ‘What is this?’

‘Hard to get hold of; be careful.’ John tucked the Sig into the band of his jeans out of habit before stepping back towards his bag, aware of the prickle of Sherlock’s gaze raking across his body. Giving him the glass tube had offered him something else on which to focus, but John wasn’t fooled. The potential for danger in Sherlock had very little to do with the gun he’d retrieved. It was coiled in his muscles and hot in his bones. The tangent of the drug tamed it for now, but there was still a sense of an approaching flashpoint, untouched, but still world-changing.
Retrieving the documentation, he held it out, watching Sherlock stare at the papers as if they were a snake about to strike. ‘I don’t want to decode my brother’s drivel. Can’t you explain it? You wouldn’t give it to me if you didn’t know what it did.’

With a sigh, John scooped up his bag, erring on the side of caution and giving Sherlock a wide berth as he headed off to the left into what turned out to be a living room. The heavy drapes were closed and the plump sofas formed hulking silhouettes in the gloom. He dropped his duffel and the folder in one of the armchairs and made his way to the windows, letting in the daylight before taking in the man who hovered in the doorway.

Sherlock leant against the wall, too busy staring at the small bottle in his grasp to notice John’s scrutiny. Now, in better light, it was easier to see the strain leaving its marks across Sherlock’s body. Even like this, he remained tense: prepared to pounce or bolt, though John wasn’t sure which. His eyes were lined and his brow drawn down into a frown of concentration, but his fingers shook as they swept the glass as if looking for clues etched in its surface.

‘It’s called O.D.X. It temporarily resets your cycle to a neutral state. It should restore your physical and mental balance to how it was before the bond broke.’

‘Should?’ Sherlock repeated, raising an eyebrow and meeting John’s gaze.

He sighed, pursing his lips before he admitted, ‘It’s untested on humans. There’s no way to tell how effective it will be in an Omega system.’ With a shake of his head, he picked up the file again and thrust it in Sherlock’s direction. ‘Look, Mycroft said it was based on a hypothesis you developed ages ago. Most of this will mean more to you than it did to me. Just read it.’ He wiggled the dossier expectantly, watching as Sherlock glared at him from where he stood.

Eventually, he strode forward, tugging it from John’s grasp only to dart back to the edge of the room, his nose buried in the pages. The vial remained curled in the cradle of his palm like a gem, and after a few minutes, he slid down the wall against which he leant, seating himself on the floor as the report devoured his attention.

John perched in one of the armchairs, analysing symptoms even as he admired the sight of Sherlock so focussed. His behaviour was similar to when he had been in heat – unsurprising, since pyresus was the same hormonal event elevated to the next level. Pale fingers skimmed across Sherlock's skin, touching his jaw and the vee of exposed flesh at his collar. He fidgeted where he sat, his bare toes, incongruous in comparison to the trousers and shirt he wore, flexing against the wood floor.

Yet despite that nervous energy, he looked graceful, a creature of fluid movement and sensuality. Sherlock licked his lips, and John had to tear his eyes away, swallowing back the urge to close the distance. It didn't matter if Sherlock was wary of the threat John posed or remained concerned about the shattered remnants of his own self-control. He'd chosen to hover on the periphery of the room, and John wouldn't try and encroach. Not without an invitation.

Steady minutes passed before Sherlock set the folder aside, his hand resting on its covers. ‘How do I know this isn't something different?’ he asked, cocking his head in John’s direction. ‘I only have your word for it, and unless you tested it before you came here, you only have my brother’s.’

John hesitated, frowning as he realised he hadn't questioned Mycroft's information. ‘Why would he lie?’ He rubbed his hands down his thighs before getting to his feet and folding his arms. ‘What else could it be?’

'A sedative, something to neutralise me while I'm moved elsewhere. Poison. Something to make me compliant. A placebo. Anything is possible.' He shrugged, the movement an aggressive jerk of
defiance. 'Perhaps my brother has ulterior motives. He's certainly taking his time dealing with the Cunninghams, and it's not like he has the best track record when it comes to my welfare.'

John put his fingers to his lips, struggling to find the angle that would throw light on Sherlock's fear. It almost sounded like paranoia, but he would hesitate to say Sherlock's concerns were unjustified. Not that Mycroft would do any of it. His guilt over leaving Sherlock in Alexander's care and the desire to make amends was genuine, but Sherlock was evaluating potential threats based upon years of poor treatment. Mycroft may not abuse him in such a manner, but John had no doubt Alexander would have, given the chance.

'Then why would he send me?' he asked, stepping around the armchair and crouching down so that they were on eye-level, still a good six paces apart. 'Unless you think I'm in on it? This scheme of his?'

He could see Sherlock turning over the possibility, and for one heart-stopping moment, John wondered if this was where it would all end. All those months of friendship and conviction they'd built in each other reduced to nothing in Sherlock's estimation.

'No.' He said it slowly, as if the taste of the word surprised him. 'No, you wouldn't do that to me, but Mycroft knows I trust you. He could use that. Trick you. It wouldn't be hard.'

A glimmer of pleasure bloomed in John's chest, pride at being the one in whom Sherlock put his faith. Even like this, jumping at shadows and seeing danger everywhere, he knew John was on his side. Unfortunately, Sherlock didn't think Mycroft was as deserving, and there was nothing John could do to ease his mind. All he had was his gut instinct and the knowledge of Mycroft's tired desperation.

'If you can't depend on your brother, can you at least believe in my judgement of him?' he asked. 'You didn't see him this morning, Sherlock. He's throwing everything he's got at the Cunninghams, even when they block him with injunctions. He's doing what he can, including handing over the serum. He knows you, and he knows that whatever decision you make, it needs to be unimpeded by your biochemistry.'

He shifted his weight, sitting on the floor to ease the ache in his knees. 'He didn't send me because he thought I'd convince you. I'm here in a medical capacity. If he could have you in hospital while giving you this, he would, but he can't risk exposing the existence of O.D.X. Apparently, I'm the next best thing.'

'Emotionally invested,' Sherlock murmured, his voice so quiet it was almost as if he were speaking to himself. He ran his fingers along the tight seams of the polished floorboards, his gaze unfocused and his lips parted before he snapped back into himself, looking at John from beneath his lashes. 'Both of you. He should be ashamed of himself.' There was a hint of shadowed humour in those words, and John smiled weakly. 'The side-effects...'

'Are unknown. They've done basic toxicity testing, but we have no idea what the drug might do to you.' John licked his lips and shook his head. This felt more like a shot in the dark than a pharmaceutical treatment, as likely to do Sherlock harm as anything else. 'You don't have to take it.'

Sherlock raised his eyebrows, the look he cast in John's direction soft and hopeless. 'Yes, I do. Mycroft's right. Should I come to regret whatever I decide, I would blame what was happening to me at the time for the eventual outcome. He knows that's why I've stalled for so long; I haven't been sure of my mind since Alexander's death.' He unfurled his hand, looking at the slim vessel caught in the curve of flesh before holding it out to John. 'I'm assuming you know the dosage?'
Slowly, he reached across the distance, his fingertips brushing Sherlock's palm as he reclaimed the O.D.X., eyeing it doubtfully before getting to his feet and moving back towards his bag. 'This is it. One intramuscular injection. In theory it will last about three days.'

'And the pyresus following it will be more intense.' Sherlock sighed, his head hitting the wall behind him with a soft thud. 'Wonderful.'

John dug out the green first-aid bag he'd seen in his duffel, exploring syringes and a small, expensive-looking device that would monitor Sherlock's vital signs. There was also a stethoscope, thermometer and other basics, as well as the alarm button that Mycroft had said would bring his medical team running. John turned the sleek, flat disk over in his hands before setting it aside, praying it wouldn't be necessary.

'Is it bad?' he asked, looking up at Sherlock as he tried to establish a baseline observation of his well-being. He needed to know what he should consider a normal symptom for Sherlock's pyresus, rather than a potential side-effect.

Sherlock huffed as John approached, holding out his hand so the clip of the pulse monitor could go over his thumb. 'It's not in full swing, yet.' He licked his lips, watching John's fingers against his wrist as if he couldn't tear his eyes away. His jaw moved, chewing over his words. When he spoke again, he sounded weary. 'This is just the start of it, and it's already fucking hateful.'

John looked up from the readings on the monitor in his palm, making a mental note of the elevated heart rate. It was rare that Sherlock's frustration reached a point where he fell back on cursing, but if ever there was a time for it, it was now.

He itched to soothe him, to stroke hands through dark curls and across pale skin, but he didn't dare. The line between the platonic and sexual had vanished. If he started touching Sherlock now with anything more than a clinical mind, John wasn't convinced he could stop. It highlighted how lost he'd be if he hadn't taken the inhibitors. At least now he could think, and with any luck, in the next hour or so, that same rationality would be back within Sherlock's reach once more.

'I'm going to need you to take off your shirt.' He shrugged when Sherlock looked askance in his direction. 'Look, it's that or your trousers. As it is, if you don't have enough mass on your deltoid, it'll have to go into your glute.'

'Why not do it intravenously?' Sherlock demanded. 'It'll act in a matter of seconds.'

'And the side-effects will hit just as quickly. It's a compromise. If I inject it into a muscle, it will start to take effect in roughly thirty minutes, and we should get time to react to any serious issues that the drug might cause.' John readied the syringe, keeping his back turned and listening to the whisper of Sherlock's feet padding across the floor. When he turned around, it was to find him sat on the arm of one of the chairs, bare-chested. His shirt was a crumpled twist of cotton in one hand, and he gripped the pulse monitor in the other.

The numbers increased by the tiniest of increments: anxiety, probably, and John ignored them as he reached out, hesitating an inch or so from Sherlock's skin. 'May I?'

Sherlock's nod was quick and determined, and the flesh beneath John's fingertips felt hot to the touch as he located the injection site. The procedure required little thought, and within a few seconds it was done. He withdrew the empty syringe and disposed of it in the sharp box Mycroft had provided, keeping one eye on Sherlock at all times. 'If you start to feel anything strange: trouble breathing, problems with your heart, anything like that, for God's sake tell me.'
'An extreme reaction is unlikely,' Sherlock pointed out, his eyes fixed on the fluorescent digits of his pulse as they twitched up and down: normal variations in his cardiac rate. 'The carrier fluid is benign, reducing the chance of anaphylaxis or allergic response, and the chemicals are hormonal analogues. The most likely detriment would come from long-term use, not a single dose.'

'Yeah, well, I don’t want to take any chances.'

He grabbed his stethoscope, warming it on his palm before pressing it over Sherlock's heart, checking for any irregularities in rhythm or constriction of his airways. His chest remained clear and his heartbeat firm, fast but strong, and John reached for a torch, shining a narrow beam in one eye, then the other, watching Sherlock's pupils constrict and his eyelids crease against the urge to blink or look away.

'Satisfied?' he asked, raising an eyebrow as John grimaced.

'That you're not about to drop dead? Sort of. Ask me again in half an hour. Just because you've not had an immediate response doesn't mean you're out of the woods.' He set his equipment aside. 'Can you bend forward for me? I need to check your bite. God knows what flooding your system with this drug will do to it.'

'That shouldn't be an issue.' Sherlock shrugged, his hand drifting up to the back of his neck and pressing at the skin, hidden beneath the twist of his curls. 'It's gone.'

John paused, his head cocked. 'Gone?' he repeated stupidly. 'You mean the scab's fallen off? I still need to check it, Sherlock. It's a healing wound.'

Sherlock's lips parted as he blew out a stream of air, his gaze flicking towards the door as if he were considering making a run for it. Yet he didn’t leap to his feet and dart away. Instead he watched John as if weighing his worth. His expression was completely unreadable: a morass of conflicting information John couldn’t pick apart, from a deepening flush on his cheekbones to the flutter of his pulse.

After what felt like hours, Sherlock’s shoulders relaxed, his inhale swelling his chest as he drew a shuddering breath. Inch by inch, he bowed his head, one hand reaching back to sweep aside the curls so that John could see the skin that lay beneath.

He stared at the blank canvas that Sherlock revealed. There were no pits or divots, no raw redness or shiny scarring. It was as if teeth had never sunk into his nape, marking him as the property of another.

Unable to believe his eyes, John stopped at Sherlock's side, running his fingers over the unmarked plane as he tried to find any hint of Alexander's savagery. Yet Sherlock’s neck was silk smooth, warm and yielding to the touch.

Sherlock shivered, leaning his weight against him, his shoulder pressed to John's chest. Of their own accord, John’s fingers curved around the strong column of his spine, and his mouth watered as Sherlock arched his back, pushing his neck into the bowl of John’s palm.

One bite, and Sherlock would be his.

The thought speared through his mind, and John gasped, snatching his hands away and taking a deliberate step back. He wanted to. It didn't matter that the inhibitors were doing their job, he was still tempted to press his lips to hot skin and follow with a sharp flash of teeth.

It would work; he'd read enough about bonds to know that. They formed more quickly if the bite
happened during pyresus and rut, when hormones were in full flow. It was also more likely to occur at the most intimate moments, when inhibitions were at their lowest, but it wasn’t essential. He could look after Sherlock, be everything he needed – keep him satisfied, whole and, above all else, happy.

His heart squeezed, and he turned his back, staring out of the window with a hand over his mouth like a muzzle. Christ, this was harder than he’d thought. Foolishly, he’d assumed the Pentrapenzone would remove every sexual drive, but it only influenced those specific to the Alpha's rut, limiting Sherlock's pheromonal influence and John’s responses. It didn’t stop him thinking about what he could do, or put a lid on the basic, human desire he’d known all his life. It gave him the clarity he needed to exercise restraint, but it didn’t make it easy.

‘You amaze me.’ Sherlock’s voice was closer than he expected, and John turned to find him a little less than an arm's length away. He’d put his shirt back on, but the buttons remained undone, white cotton framing a narrow band of pale chest and a flat stomach. ‘Inhibitors don't restrain the mind, and bites aren’t just about instinct. Any Alpha of the elite, in rut or not, would have tried to stake their claim.’

‘You’re not property,’ John croaked, dropping his hand to his side. Guiltily, he recalled his own desires only a minute before, speaking as much for his own benefit as Sherlock's. ‘You can’t claim people.’ He ducked his head, speaking to the floor. ‘And you’re in no state to give yourself to anyone.’

‘Not yet.’

The reply was so quiet John wondered if he’d imagined it. He made an aborted noise in his throat, butterflies shimmering in his stomach as Sherlock met his gaze, but what could he say? Sherlock would never give him a straight explanation. Even now, scattered apart by his body’s cycle, he spoke in riddles and vague allusions.

A moment later, Sherlock turned away, settling back on the chair arm and watching the pulse monitor, leaving John to fidget where he stood. He prowled over lush rugs and bare floorboards, his mind skipping back over the last few minutes and getting caught in tangle of confusion.

‘You thought I might bite you, didn’t you?’ he demanded. ‘You said it yourself. Any Alpha of the elite would have tried. So why did you show it to me rather than explain why you couldn’t? Why take that risk?’

That’s what it came back to, not just now, but over the entire course of their acquaintance. John had seen Sherlock as a flatmate and friend long before he’d known he was an Omega, but Sherlock had been under no such illusions.

‘Because I hoped it wouldn’t be a risk at all.’ Sherlock stared at the screen in his grasp, one shoulder lifting in a shrug. ‘I wanted to believe you’d retreat.’

‘Are you –?’ John licked his lips, folding his arms. ‘Are you testing me? Trying to work out how far you can push me before I break?’

That got Sherlock’s attention. He looked up, his gaze skimming to the side as he considered John’s question. ‘Not intentionally.’ He pressed his fingers to his forehead, his eyes darting back and forth as if he were reading lines from a book. ‘I want to trust you, but every instinct tells me to do so would be a disaster.’ His voice thinned, becoming hazy at its edges, sharp consonants starting to slur. ‘They’re wrong. The instincts. You wouldn’t hurt me?’

He probably didn’t intend that last part as a question, but it came out like one, hesitant rather than
John swallowed hard, his chest hollowed out and hurting at the knowledge of why Sherlock would ever need to ask. ‘No,’ he whispered. ‘Of course not.’

An owlish blink was his only answer before Sherlock lifted his other hand to join the first, pressing at his temples. In one pace, John was at his side, cradling his jaw as he watched Sherlock’s eyes flutter closed before he opened them wide.

‘What’s wrong?’ he demanded, his veins tight with adrenaline. ‘Sherlock?’

‘Nothing. Just – just tired.’

John acted quickly, checking for any signs that could indicate a serious issue. It was not a rapid loss of consciousness, nor was he having any difficulty in his vital signs. Instead, it looked similar to when the bite had first bled: a deep, inexorable lethargy. ‘The O.D.X might be making you drowsy. We should get you lying down. Bedroom?’

Sherlock made a vague, upward motion, and it was up to John to steer him towards the stairs, his bag in one hand and his arm around Sherlock’s waist to steady his wobbling steps. They stumbled together along the corridor, John checking various doors until he found the room where Sherlock had abandoned his few possessions.

It was a large, airy space nestled up under the eaves. The ceiling sloped in several directions, wooden beams holding up the roof above a truly palatial four-poster bed. It was the kind of thing hotels would charge a month's wages just to sleep in for one night, but if Sherlock noticed John casting dubious glances at the furniture then he didn’t say a word as he slumped onto the mattress.

‘Hey, don’t doze off yet,’ John said, nudging Sherlock's shoulder. ‘Do you feel anything other than tired? Feverish? Sick?’

‘No. ’m fine.’ Sherlock waved the pulse monitor in John's direction, and he took the box, checking the digits and finding some reassurance in Sherlock’s rock-steady heart rate. Surely if the drowsiness were anything ominous, there would be some sign of it?

He clenched his teeth, hating that it was up to him – a doctor with little experience in Omega healthcare and no background awareness of the drug’s potency – to make these decisions. As far as he could tell, it was a normal and benign side-effect, but how could he be sure? Maybe he should retrieve the file from where Sherlock had left it downstairs, just to double check.

‘Where are you going?’ Sherlock managed to open his eyes halfway, splaying one hand out beside him as if to push himself upright. ‘Stay?’

If he’d made it an order, demanding as usual, John would have shrugged it off with promises of a prompt return, but Sherlock sounded hopeful, his voice deep and soft as he blinked at John from where he lay on top of the sheets. In any other situation, his rumpled appearance could have been tempting, but the fog in his gaze was enough to dampen John’s appreciation, tempering it with affection.

‘Come on.’ He tugged at the quilt, pulling it out from under Sherlock’s body. ‘You might as well get in properly. Lie on your side. That way we can keep the pulse monitor attached without too much trouble.’

He waited for Sherlock to settle, his hair sinuous against the bright white of the pillows and his lashes drifting shut once more as John pulled the sheets up over his sharp shoulders, tucking him in. Sherlock’s quiet hum was almost a purr, and John smiled to himself, raising an eyebrow when
Sherlock spoke again.

‘It wouldn’t be so bad.’

‘What wouldn’t?’ he asked, waiting as the silence dragged on. He nearly believed Sherlock had
fallen asleep, but at last there was a reply, heavy with exhaustion and right on the edge of slumber,
where the logical mind held no sway.

‘Breaking.’

John blinked, his tongue clumsy around unspoken words as he tried to work out what to say. Not
that his answer mattered. Sherlock wasn’t awake to hear it.

He rested one hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, stroking down the length of his arm before beating a
strategic retreat, his mind racing. What had he been getting at? Was it John he wanted to break, to
give into his instincts, or Sherlock himself? Did he mean both of them, lost in need?

It was possible. Like this, teetering on the brink of pyresus, he wanted John. Sherlock said he was
testing himself, but John doubted that was the end of it. Maybe some small part of him hoped John
would react and bite him regardless of consent. At least that was something Sherlock understood,
known territory and behaviour.

Except that was not what John wanted: himself in Alexander’s role. He did not want to overrule
Sherlock’s agency for his own gain, even by accident. Alexander had acted based on social
expectation and biology. If challenged, he would say he had done nothing wrong. John, on the other
hand...

He let out a sigh, bracing his hands on his hips and shaking his head. He knew better, and he had no
pale shadow of an excuse. His Alpha instincts were neutralised by the inhibitors. Whatever remained
was him alone, his fundamental hopes and desires, and if he couldn’t control those, then what good
was he?

No, they needed to talk about this. Not ragged half-promises made in times of stress or quiet
murmurs underscored by the heat of need. If they were going to do anything to move their
relationship beyond its current position in the strange border between friends and lovers, then it had
to be by mutual decision.

There was no way to be entirely free of the pressures their respective genders brought to the damned
situation, but here, in a sanctuary of Mycroft’s making, they could at least figure out what to do. It
was a rare opportunity, with no case or crisis to interrupt. There was just the two of them and a
choice to be made. All he had to do was wait for Sherlock to wake up.

Assuming he did so.

Biting his lip, John took in his profile, utterly relaxed. Sherlock's body was a boneless sprawl, and he
took advantage of the moment. Turning to the pulse monitor, he pressed a couple of buttons so it
would release a shrill alarm if anything took a dramatic change before heading towards the door.

Trotting downstairs, John grabbed the file, riffling through its pages as he hurried back to Sherlock’s
side. After less than a minute, he found the sparse information that highlighted possible side-effects.
Drowsiness was included, with the drug’s creators theorising that it would wear off in a few hours,
leaving the recipient alert and rational.

They’d targeted the issue as an area for improvement, should O.D.X ever become publically
available, and John frowned in consideration. He’d not given it much thought on his first read-
through, too intent on what it might mean for Sherlock, rather than the populace as a whole, but now he looked closely, he could see hints throughout the report that this was more than a preliminary phase. It didn’t just look like Mycroft doing all he could to consider Sherlock’s welfare. There were shadows of something more.

John didn’t know why he was surprised; Mycroft had fingers in all sorts of pies. God, maybe it wasn’t just secluded labs that would suffer if O.D.X came to light. Mycroft was careful, of that John was sure, but how much did he stand to lose if the serum currently spreading through Sherlock’s body were discovered? His job? His rank? His power?

Where would that leave Sherlock?

Licking his lips, John shut the file, sitting heavily in an armchair near the bedside. He tucked the dossier out of harm’s way, hiding it in the shadows. Now more than ever, he could appreciate Mycroft’s desire for secrecy. They were all taking risks of one sort or another.

Closing his eyes, John let out a shuddering breath. The mere hours that had passed since he’d awoken this morning, panting and desperate, felt like days. Anxiety sat in his stomach, a cold stone, and not even the welcome balm of a cup of tea held any appeal. Not if it meant leaving Sherlock’s side to get it. Hunger was absent, despite his lack of food, and the small, petty needs of his body had fallen silent beneath the weight of his concern.

Time slipped by, lost to the glutinous flow of John's thoughts. More than once he got to his feet, ignoring the protests of aching muscles as he checked Sherlock was all right, but as two hours turned into three, his eyes grew heavy. He caught himself nodding in the chair more than once, his head lolling forward only to snap upright as he jerked himself awake.

Eventually, even the discomfort was not enough to pull him back from oblivion, and the next thing John knew, late afternoon sunlight was splashing across his face, warming his skin and guiding his return to the waking world.

His neck and back protested, but the pain went ignored as he stared in horror at the empty bed. A dent marred the pillow where Sherlock had rested his head, and the pulse monitor sat on the bedside table, its digits dimmed. God, had he gone again, haring off somewhere unknown while John dozed? What if he got ill? What if the drugs didn't work? Why the bloody hell had John let himself fall asleep?

Staggering to his feet, he barely noticed the rush of the blanket that had been placed over him fall to the floor. The abrupt change in position made him dizzy, but a wavering second was all he allowed himself before he strode across the room, preparing to search the rest of the house or, failing that, raise the alarm with Mycroft's men.

He had already gripped the handle when a soft breeze washed over him, making him pause. Looking over his shoulder, he saw white curtains billow around the balcony doors. He hadn't noticed them when he came in – too focused on Sherlock to observe – but now the open doorway was an obvious invitation, and John brushed the fabric aside to take in the sight beyond its veils.

It was a small outdoor space of worn stone, overlooking the front of the house and the view of the land beyond, but John paid no mind to that. Instead it was Sherlock who caught his attention. He sat in one of two cushioned chairs, one leg pulled up to his chest while the other hung down, his bare toes pressed to the floor of the balcony as the wind ruffled his hair.

The moment he stepped through the doorway, Sherlock turned towards him, and John snatched in a quiet breath. It was like flipping a coin. One flash of dazzling silver, and the man whom John had
met that day at Bart’s was back, razor-sharp and present, his scattered focus drawn down to a rapier point that sliced John to the core, seeing everything.

A faint smile lit Sherlock’s face, and he gestured to a nearby table and the tray that crowned its peak. ‘Eat. There’s plenty to spare. The fridge is full; Mycroft rarely skimps on food.’

John had no trouble believing that. There was enough fruit and fresh bread rolls on the plates to feed a family, and he grabbed an apple. The first bite awakened his hunger, and in a few minutes only the core remained. He looked over everything else with a practiced eye, seeing it for what it was. Nutritious food that required little in the way of preparation. It was the kind of meal you gave invalids on the road to recovery – morsels that were easy to eat in bed – loaded with sugars and carbohydrates without being junk.

Picking up a bread roll, he broke it in half, pushing a piece into Sherlock's hand. 'Eat,' he urged, leaning back on the stone railing around the balcony's edge, 'and tell me how you're feeling. Still tired?'

Sherlock shook his head, consuming the snack with a moderate amount of enthusiasm. He certainly looked better. No longer was he a man walking the high-wire of some invisible conflict. The shimmering tension in his body had vanished, leaving stable strength. Previously, there had been a growing air of the unpredictable about him. Now, he looked determined, and John couldn't help but hope that the O.D.X had done just as Mycroft promised.

Still, hormonal therapies were tricky, their potential effects far reaching. They could destabilise mood and curtail appetite, reduce or enhance sexual drive and aggression and disrupt the even-keel of a body's natural rhythm, and that was just in a Beta. Omegas, with their infinitely more complex and undocumented physiology, might rely more on the balance of various blood chemicals for numerous functions. Just because Sherlock looked well didn’t mean he was all right.

'I woke up shaking, but it subsided within a few minutes. Other than that, I feel much like I did before Alexander's death.' Sherlock raised an eyebrow. 'Perhaps Mycroft's peons have done something right, for once.'

John hummed, finishing the bread before brushing crumbs from his fingers. 'Can I check you over? Just to make sure?'

'As long as you can do it here, then yes.' At John's questioning look, he shrugged. 'I'd rather stay outside for a while longer.'

Something about the way Sherlock said it made it sound like there was more of a story to the simple request, but he didn’t explain. He just watched John with a faint frown, waiting for a response. 'Fair enough. I'll go get my kit.' He shivered as the cool air wormed its way through his jumper, yet Sherlock, still in his shirt with the buttons now fastened, seemed unaffected. 'Just don’t get cold, all right?'

Slipping inside, he collected together the equipment from his bag before heading back to the balcony and going through the basics. 'How do you feel in yourself, compared to when I arrived? Does it seem to be working?'

'Has pyresus stopped, you mean?' Sherlock nodded, closing his eyes in a brief flash of relief. 'Apparently so. The world's no longer overwhelming. I can think.' That last part was said like a blessing, hushed and grateful. 'Before, it was difficult to be rational. To remember why any of it mattered. The effort was immense, and my mental process was abrupt. Linear. Fragmented.'
'And now? I want to check you're all right, but also –'

'I'm the first test subject for the drug,' Sherlock interrupted, a small smile curving his lips. 'A guinea pig.'

'Only you could be happy about that.' John slipped the thermometer into Sherlock's ear, reading the output a few seconds later with a nod of satisfaction before replacing the clip on Sherlock's thumb and waiting for the monitor to give its verdict. 'It'd be useful to record any readings or anecdotal evidence, just in case it can be of use. So, can you tell me how it's working?'

'It's not perfect,' he replied. 'I've got abdominal cramps, one or two hot flashes, and emotionally...' He trailed off, pursing his lips in familiar distaste at the discussion of sentiment. 'That could be influenced by my current situation as opposed to anything else, so I'm unsure of the relevance.'

'Tell me anyway? Just in case.' John looked at Sherlock. 'You seem fine, but the number of female Beta patients I've had come to me with emotional side-effects from using the contraceptive pill is ridiculous. Something similar could be happening to you.'

Sherlock sighed, looking away and speaking to the horizon. 'It's just anxiety.'

'Anything else?' John feigned interest in double-checking his measurements. His vital signs were strong and well within normal range, but perhaps Sherlock would find it easier to speak if John could convince him his concern was purely medical.

He waited, his fingers resting over Sherlock’s radial pulse. He didn’t need it, not with the electronics still reading out the metrics of Sherlock’s existence, but it was a chaste fraction of contact: one which John craved and Sherlock did not reject.

'Dreading. Doubtful.' His shoulders hunched; he couldn't have looked more uncomfortable if he tried. 'Not just of my situation but of myself.'

John turned, putting away his kit. Sherlock’s body was still too thin and too pale, but that was unlikely to improve until his existence recovered some stability. It was possible the O.D.X. exacerbated an already troubled mental state, honing the emotions Sherlock had described. However, it was impossible to tell in such an uncontrolled environment. There were too many external factors to draw a definitive conclusion.

In the end, he was less concerned about the drug than he was about Sherlock’s welfare. There was nothing physically wrong that a few square meals and less stress wouldn’t fix. Instead, it was his emotional well-being that required attention, and John squared his shoulders, sitting in the chair at Sherlock’s side as he began to speak.

'All the documentation says the effects should last roughly three days. As far as the Cunninghams are concerned, your brother's bought you plenty of time, if we're lucky. Something to do with injunctions and counter legal documents…' John spread his hands. 'It means that whatever you choose to do, we've got time to set it in motion – to get things done before they can even try and take you away.'

Sherlock reached out, picking up a white card from where it rested by the tray of food. He stared at it, turning it over in his grasp, and John craned his neck in an attempt to see what he was considering with such serious concentration.

A blue curve of ink stained its face, and he recognised Mike Stamford's scrawl. Memory jostled, and he drew in a breath as he noticed the name on the front: Doctor Madison.
I've been doing some research,' Sherlock began, chewing on his lip before slumping back in his chair. 'Stamford recommended her to you when my bite bled because he knew she wouldn't question my presence with an Alpha of the non-elite. Her concern would have been for my health, nothing else.'

He wrinkled his nose, staring at the faintly smudged ink. ‘She's not a recognised expert in her field, but I suspect that's because she has a reputation for respecting an Omega’s wishes, rather than bowing to the demands of Alphas. About a decade ago she was also conducting some pioneering studies into Omega contraceptives, but a court order shut down her experimentation. I'd be surprised if she's not one of the doctors behind O.D.X.’

John leant forward, propping his elbows on his knees as he slid the card from Sherlock's unresisting grasp. 'You're considering asking her for help – for surgery...' He trailed off, unable to continue.

'If I'm right, she's proven herself to be morally motivated. One of the few I could trust to enter into the operation with my best interests, rather than financial gain, at heart. You're the only other doctor I know who would fit that bill.'

There was a slant to Sherlock's words, a question curled up at the core of his statement, and John swallowed thickly as he realised what he was asking.

'No.’ He held out a hand as he hastened to explain. 'I can’t. Even if I was trained in Omega medicine, I still wouldn’t be capable of that kind of surgery.' God, he could picture it all too easily, Sherlock quiet and still, his skin split apart as blood clouded the white of latex gloves: his life placed by choice in John's weathered palms. One wrong move and it would all be over, with no one to blame but himself.

His stomach rolled, and he cleared his throat, shaking his head. ‘I was an army doctor. Everything I've had to treat on an operating table has been a major trauma. Gun shots, amputations, that kind of thing.' It had been an age since he’d felt his own failure so keenly, and John ignored a twinge in his thigh as he shook his head. ‘Even if there was a tested procedure – something I could study and learn for your benefit – they discharged me for a reason. Surgeons need steady hands.’ His shoulders sagged. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know. I just…’ Sherlock’s voice trailed off to nothing as a frail silence fell. John clenched his left fist on his knee, wishing his answer was different. He’d said he’d do anything to help, but that.... It would be a death sentence.

He looked at the number again, taking in the slant of the digits. He hadn’t even noticed that Sherlock had picked up the doctor’s details, but clearly it was something he’d given thought, and not just since waking up this afternoon. Had there been other moments, unseen by John, where Sherlock had walked the paths of his possibilities and decided this was the best way forward?

'Do you think she'll do it?' he asked, looking up to see Sherlock shrug.

'There's no way to be certain without contacting her directly, and in doing so, I'd put myself at risk of exposure. If the Cunninghams knew I was even considering it, I've no doubt they'd do whatever they could to ensure it wasn't possible.’ He sighed, tipping his head back and looking up at the pale blue sky. 'There's no point in asking. Not until I'm sure. Finding a surgeon doesn't magically make every other risk disappear. It's still dangerous.'

John shifted, turning the chair so he was facing Sherlock. 'Tell me. I know you've probably said it all before, but I need you to explain it again.'
It was a lie. He knew most of what Sherlock feared and could imagine the rest. This was for Sherlock's benefit: laying out the facts. Either they'd be able to find a way around every problem, or they'd write off surgery as an option – another door closed. 'Let's say for now Doctor Madison will do it. She's got the skills, more so than me and Mike, anyway, and she's not after the money.' 

'Equipment and an operating theatre wouldn’t be a challenge – as long as my brother is willing to cooperate. He has access to both. Assisting staff would also be possible to arrange. The main risk comes from the untested surgical procedure. Then there's the potential for long-term damage to my health.'

'Is that likely?' John asked, narrowing his eyes as he considered the possibility. Removal of the uterine structures in Betas had consequences, but most were easy to avoid with supplements or drugs. 'Do you know something I don't?'

Sherlock dipped his fingers into his pocket before pulling free his phone, sliding his touch over the screen and handing it to John. 'Stamford has access to a broad range of reports. I asked him to do some digging. None of it's certain, but...' He shrugged, gesturing for him to read.

Squinting, John skimmed through Mike’s message. It was suitably vague, but there was no way to deny the strength of his warning.

"There are a few studies from unbiased researchers that theorise serious, chronic consequences. It's unproven, but it makes sense, especially as the full function of the Omega reproductive system isn’t known. Best option is to find someone who's survived it: living witness and all that. - Mike"

'I couldn't locate any,' Sherlock muttered.

'Witnesses?'

'Survivors.'

John looked up sharply, feeling as pale as Sherlock looked. 'What?'

'I enlisted Anthea's assistance a few days ago and gained a list of Omegas who were known to be absent from their Alphas. I didn't explain why I wanted the information, and I doubt she cared to extrapolate a reason.' He dragged a hand through his hair. 'Most of the few that she discovered were impossible to confirm. There's no official record of the surgery, and without an investigation, there's no way to be sure what became of them.'

'But?' John asked, Sherlock's phone still cradled in his loose grasp. 'You must have found something.'

'There were four whom I recognised. Omegas I'd known by name, though not sight, who had both the determination and potential resources to go through with it and had not been seen for prolonged periods of time. It took a great deal of searching through one of Lestrade's databases, but I found them eventually. Three buried, one cremated. The autopsy reports told me the rest.'

John sat back in his chair, his fingers curled in front of his lips as he considered Sherlock's words. 'They died as a direct consequence of the surgery?'

'Systemic physiological issues, rather than disease or injury was listed as cause of death.' Sherlock's shoulders jerked in a shrug. 'Kidney failure, pancreatic abnormalities and failures in the circulatory system.' He closed his eyes, his lips parting around a sigh before he opened them again. 'It's impossible to be certain, but the correlation is present. One died within nine months of their
disappearance, the others within three years.’

‘That’s all?’ John swore. Perhaps with proper aftercare and treatment, they would have lived longer, but it wasn’t available; not for Omegas. Without their Alphas, they’d be invisible to the system and probably unwilling to risk discovery in their new lives by exposing themselves to the NHS.

Sherlock, with doctors at his side and Mycroft’s power behind him might be able to access something, but until symptoms of a problem started to show, they wouldn’t know what to treat. What if that was too late? What if, by the time they knew something was wrong, the opportunity for medication had passed?

‘A few years of freedom at best.’ Sherlock’s lips twisted in a sorry little grimace. ‘Better than nothing, I suppose.’

‘No.’ John got to his feet, unable to sit there and listen to the hurt in Sherlock’s voice. It was well-hidden. Greg would never have noticed it, and maybe Mycroft wouldn’t either, but he could hear the echo of it as clear as day. ‘God, no. It’s not right. Surely you can see that?’

‘It’s not about what’s “right”, John. It’s about what’s possible.’ Sherlock pulled his other knee up to his chest, wrapping his arms around his shins and resting his head on their summit. ‘Don’t you see? The Cunninghams are never going to let me go. Mycroft’s fooling himself if he thinks otherwise. This way, I’m of no interest to them.’

‘So we lie.’ John spread his hands. ‘We say you’ve had it done. Falsify reports. Get it signed, witnessed, whatever… You’ve got people on your side. People who’ll break the law without a second thought.’ He shook his head, tight and frantic. ‘I’m just saying you’ve got options. Better ones than throwing away decades of your life. Unless… Unless that’s what you want?’

He said it softly, hunkering down in front of Sherlock and trying to see the situation from every angle. He was stupid if he thought he knew how Sherlock felt. Perhaps there was more to this than freedom. Did Sherlock hate what society foisted upon him as an Omega, or did he hate his gender in and of itself?

‘You can’t begin to understand,’ Sherlock hissed, his eyes flashing. ‘If the Cunninghams were the only issue, my captors and nothing more, it would have some merit, but faking the surgery wouldn’t remove the issues my pyresus presents, or have you forgotten my behaviour this morning?’

John scraped his tongue over his teeth, nodding once. ‘Your biology is only a problem because of the culture that surrounds it,’ he muttered. ‘It’s wrong that you should have to rip out parts of yourself and shorten your life just to be afforded the same rights other people are born with!’

‘So what do you propose?’ Sherlock sneered. ‘Do you think I should wait until the day someone finally unravels centuries of prejudice and sets things right? You think it will be that easy? Someone clicks their fingers and suddenly Omegas are free? You can’t be that naïve.’

‘Of course not, but don’t you see? Even if you underwent the surgery, you still wouldn’t get your old life back. Not without the Cunninghams finding out what you’d done. Other Omegas flee and start over somewhere else. That’s not what you want, is it?’

He’d struck a nerve. Sherlock’s expression rippled with acknowledgement and distress, and air hissed between his teeth as he shook his head. ‘No.’ He pressed his fingers over the bridge of his nose, and John wished he could wipe away the deep lines of stress that marred Sherlock’s face. He longed to stop this conversation and pretend none of it mattered, but that wasn’t an option.
‘If I don’t leave, they’ll come after me, and when they find out what I’ve done, it’s not me who will suffer.’ Sherlock shrugged. ‘They’ll discard me, and I’ll be free to live how I please, but there’s a chance they would attempt to ruin those who helped me. Mycroft can take care of himself. You, on the other hand….’

John lifted his chin, shaking his head. ‘Don’t worry about me. Whatever the consequences of helping you, I’ll manage.’ He sighed as Sherlock glanced his way, his response to that request apparent in the elegant arch of one eyebrow. John could beg and plead all he wanted, Sherlock wouldn’t put him at risk in the name of his own welfare, and that made everything infinitely more complex. So far, all they’d managed to do was rule out their options, and John cleared his throat as he checked they were both on the same page. ‘Knowing what you do, are you seriously still considering the surgery?’

Sherlock looked away, his eyes skimming the golden glow of the sunset. ‘No – I don’t know. It’s not safe, and even if I survive it would still carry consequences.’ The corner of his lips twitched in a joyless smile. ‘It’s strange how I spent years trying to avoid pregnancy, but now I’m hesitant to permanently remove the possibility.’

John winced, distracted by the ache in his knees. He needed to give this conversation his full attention, and he couldn’t do that if he stayed crouched here much longer. Straightening up, he grabbed the arm of the empty chair, ignoring the scrape of metal on stone as he dragged it over, placing it squarely in front of Sherlock before perching on the edge of the seat.

‘It’s not strange at all.’ He shrugged as Sherlock looked back at him. ‘You weren’t fighting against the fact you can have kids, you were standing up for your right to choose the time and the place. Alexander tried to take that from you, and the surgery would do the same thing.’

Sherlock leaned back, his body weak with surrender. Frustration pinched his mouth and shadowed his eyes, and he shook his head, slashing a hand through the air. ‘This is useless. I can have my freedom or my fertility. I can’t have both, not in today’s society. That’s unlikely to change any time soon, and I know which of the two I value more. Perhaps surgery’s out of the question, but there must be something!’

John swallowed, his heart in his throat as he rubbed his hands together. ‘Maybe we’re thinking about this the wrong way, trying to solve too much at once. Forget about the Cunninghams for now. I know it doesn’t seem it, but Mycroft has that under control. Let’s just focus on you.’

Sherlock bowed his head, and John could almost hear his silent protests that ignoring half of the problem didn’t make it vanish. His back curved in defeat as a sigh escaped him, and he nodded, just once, folding his legs up under him as he met John’s gaze. ‘So what do you suggest?’

John froze, surprised that Sherlock – a man who always seemed to have the answer – was instead turning to him. It took him a few moments to reply, each word strained as he picked his way forward. ‘We need to deal with your pyresus. A knot will help in the short-term, but in the long-run you’re either going to need medical intervention or a bond, right?’

Sherlock sat up straighter, leaning forward to mirror John’s position, his elbows on his knees and his gaze intent. They were close enough that John could see the flecks of colour in Sherlock’s eyes, clouded by both doubt and suspicion. ‘Right.’ He dragged the word out, a faint frown marring his brow.

John twisted his hands together, his heart tight with the desire to put his cards on the table – to risk everything for the chance of a bond. Yet, if he were offer that, here and now, he could demolish all of Sherlock’s trust in him. It would be easy to read the suggestion as a manipulation, him putting himself forward as Sherlock’s saviour even while he stood to gain so much in return.
That wasn't the way he could do this, and he swallowed back the clamour of his longing as his mind turned to the other possibility, the one that would tie them together even as it split them apart.

'I could leave,' he said, his voice strangled. 'Bite you and then go. When you separated from Alexander, you were fine. You could carry on with the Work and your heat cycles wouldn't interfere because the bond would control them.' He kept his eyes fixed on his hands as he hastened to explain, meaning every word. 'I would never ask anything of you. You'd be free to do as you pleased.'

Leaving was the last thing John wanted to do, not because he’d lose the thrill of the cases, but because he’d be turning his back on the most indescribable man he’d ever met. Sherlock had become an integral part of his existence, and the thought of carrying on without him seemed incomprehensible. However, if it was the only way to give Sherlock the freedom he deserved, then John would do it.

He dreaded meeting that pale gaze, fearing either grateful acceptance or disdainful rejection, but when John finally dared to lift his head, he found Sherlock watching him, puzzled and intense. He looked as if he couldn’t believe what he’d heard, shocked into silence by the offer. ‘I don’t understand.’

John spread his hands. ‘It’s the only thing I can think of that doesn’t put you at risk. Mycroft could deal with the Cunninghams, bid by proxy, legal wrangling, something. This – this would neutralise your biology without putting you under the knife or loading your system with experimental drugs.’

‘But what about you?’ Sherlock’s throat clicked as he swallowed. ‘Even if you could convince me that you would be happy living out a mediocre existence as a GP somewhere, a bond is more than just a bite. If it goes uncontested, it’s legally binding. It’s not like marriage. You can’t get a divorce when it’s no longer convenient. You – you’re offering to tie yourself to me in a manner that’s as good as permanent, and for no perceivable personal gain.’

He shrugged, his lips wrenched in a grimace. ‘But you’d be free – happy.’

John shut his eyes. He felt as if he had signed his own death warrant, consigning him to a life of monotony: black and white in Sherlock’s absence. He tried to picture it – each day much the same, a vast expanse of unfaltering routine, uninterrupted by mad chases, body parts in the fridge or the flash of Sherlock’s rare, wicked smile – but his mind shied away from the image.

‘No, I wouldn’t.’ A skim of cool flesh over the back of his hand made him look up, and he turned his wrist, catching Sherlock’s chilly fingers in his palm.

‘Listen –’ John’s voice died as Sherlock slipped off his chair, kneeling in front of him.

‘No.’ His grip tightened, almost painful. ‘John, I appreciate the sentiment, more than you probably realise, but –’ He pursed his lips, his hands trembling. ‘You said to ignore the Cunninghams, to pretend they weren’t an issue, but if that were the case do you honestly think I’d want you to bond with me and then leave?’

‘What –’ John licked his lips, the air dead in his lungs as breathless hope clamped its vice around his ribs. ‘What are you saying?’

Sherlock’s lips parted, but no words came out. His cheeks bleached white and he looked away, his head moving in a frantic little shake. 'It's nothing. It's a moot point anyway.'

'No, Sherlock.' John cupped his jaw, nudging him back to face him and running his thumb over the prominence of one cheekbone. 'Please, just – just tell me what you want.'
Silence hung between them, caught in the gossamer moment of indecision. John's pulse was thumping a quick-march in his chest, but he didn't dare utter a word as he watched the roulette spin of Sherlock's mind fall still on an answer.

Long fingers curved around his wrist, but he didn’t pull John’s hand away. Instead, he held him in place as he tipped his head up, their noses brushing before he pressed his lips to John’s mouth.

It was a silent plea – a request where John would have imagined a demand – and a moan shivered in his throat as he relished the sensation. In that moment he did not care about the impossibility of their situation; there was only Sherlock – warm, willing and beautifully tentative, pouring everything into the kiss.

Helplessly, John’s fingers trailed through dark curls, guiding Sherlock’s head as he tasted the fullness of that bottom lip. It was dream-like, another fantasy brought to life, but none of his imaginings had been so bittersweet or fragile. Sherlock felt as if he might break beneath his touch, every muscle pulled tight. Except it was not the blind lust of heat that stretched him across its frame. Instead, he suspected it was sentiment, and when Sherlock broke back, flushed and shaking, John found confirmation in his whispered reply.

‘You. I want you.’
‘You. I want you.’

Sherlock shivered as the words wrenched free from his chest, little more than a breath given shape. His stomach and heart weighed heavy, dragged down by the power of the emotions that he had spent so long trying to ignore. Yet in his neglect, his sentiments had flourished: admiration and attraction, hope and fear all interwoven to smother him with their presence.

He was used to certainty, but now there were no assurances. The outcome of his confession – not just John’s immediate reaction, but where the path may take them – defied all extrapolation, and Sherlock was left in the murk of the unknown, hating his doubt but unable to escape its grasp.

John pulled his right hand free, and for one horrifying second, Sherlock read it as rejection. A quiet sound of protest caught in his throat, but it faded as he realised his mistake. John was many things, but he was not a coward. He did not rise to his feet, but slipped down to mirror Sherlock’s knelt position, cupping his face as if he were made of spun glass, beautiful and breakable.

Thin lips parted, but John didn’t speak. His stuttered inhalations suggested aborted words as the lines of his face gave away the flood of his sentiments. There was no easy delineation of joy or regret. Instead, John looked how Sherlock felt: longing but wary, happy yet already haunted by the shadow of some unnamed grief.

At last, he seemed to give up on finding his voice, deep blue eyes sliding shut as he caught Sherlock’s lips with his. The kiss tasted like a promise, John’s determination clear in the gentle pressure of his grasp on Sherlock’s jaw and the smooth flicker of his tongue.

With a moan, Sherlock clenched his fist, his fingers tangling in wool. The shallow, shy chasteness of a moment ago fled, and a groan rumbled in his chest as he pulled John near, clumsy and awkward, savouring the heat of him.

John drew a line down his throat before his palm curved over his nape, urging him closer. Sherlock shifted, his thighs bracketed John’s knees as John sat back on his heels, his capable hands slipping down to rest on the crest of Sherlock’s hips.

Hungrily, he explored John’s mouth, torn between sketching his outline and keeping his hands where they were. John filled his senses, and Sherlock succumbed to the flood, allowing it to wash away the warnings that whispered through his mind. For once, he did not want the clear lines of logic to intercede. He would rather exist here, now, where there were just the two of them.

John’s teeth dragged across his pout, coarse and thrilling, before the gentle whisper of his lips chased it away, teasing hoarse gasps from Sherlock’s throat. No one had kissed him like this before – like it was the main event, rather than an indifferent prelude. Yet John devoted himself to it, as if he knew that their first could also be one of their last.

Too soon, he pulled back, his mouth curving into a soft smile as Sherlock swayed forward, half-drunk with want. They were both panting, and when Sherlock rested his brow against John’s he realised he wasn’t the only one shaking. John’s eyes were closed, his face flushed and his lips pursed, as if he were trying to memorise the sensation of Sherlock’s mouth against his own.

‘You want me too.’

Sandy lashes flew open, John’s gaze searching Sherlock’s face. ‘You’re just getting that now?’ He
husked. It was a gentle tease underscored by his crooked smile, but a second later it was gone, replaced by undaunted honesty. ‘I’ve wanted you from the start.’

Sherlock’s chest squeezed. It was one thing to observe John’s quiet attraction, to watch the days and weeks temper it with genuine affection until it became something more, but it was quite another to hear his observations framed in John’s own, simple words.

‘You didn’t know what I was,’ he pointed out. ‘You spent months with no idea, looking at me like…’ He swallowed and glanced away, vulnerable in John’s embrace. Rationally, he understood that John had always seen him where other people noticed only his cold genius. John saw worth where most observed only usefulness.

After years of being valued more for what lay between his legs or in his head than who he was, it was hard to believe. Yet here they were, John close enough that every breath mingled, blue irises dark with desire and understanding as if, for once, he was reading Sherlock’s mind with ease.

‘You were a brilliant, mad, nutter of a man.’ He nudged Sherlock’s chin, encouraging him to meet his gaze again as if he could drive home the truth with eye contact alone. He licked his lips, his voice cracking as he forced out the words that Sherlock knew John would not find easy. ‘And you still are. Alpha, Beta, Omega… This –’ He cleared his throat, huffing out a sigh and squaring his shoulders. ‘This isn’t about any of that. It’s about who you are. Not what you are.’

Sherlock latched on to John’s certainty: an anchor to which they could cling. There was so much of his current existence balancing on the precipice of the unknown. However, in the complex chemistry of the two of them, there was an element of stability – volatile, but resolute.

‘You realise that the same is true of me?’ Sherlock murmured, licking his lips as John’s thumbs rubbed in circles, skirting inwards across the plane of his waist before retreating once more. ‘This isn’t about needing what your biology can offer.’

He watched the shadows changing in John’s eyes, seeing the gleam of joy ebb beneath the ever-encroaching clouds of reality. That expressive face fell into a faint frown, and John let out a deep sigh, his lips parting to outline all the obstacles Sherlock was so desperate to overlook.

‘Don’t,’ he implored, brushing two fingers across John’s mouth before he could speak. ‘We can’t dismiss the impact our respective genders have on our situation, particularly mine, but please – don’t say it.’ He swallowed, his breath leaving him in a shuddering rush as John kissed his fingertips, his tongue darting out to lap at the skin before sucking them into his mouth.

Fire lanced along Sherlock’s veins and into the pit of his stomach, his shattered train of thought disintegrating. The simple gesture was innocent, yet obscene, and he cut off a choked sound of disappointment as John released him.

Sherlock expected some kind of protest. John was a man of strength and strategy. He took comfort in planning a method of attack. Normally, Sherlock was much the same, but this was too much, too close, too personal. Like a coward, even now, he preferred to bury his head in the sand. He longed to ignore the imminent future in favour of the present, just for a while longer, and finally, John obliged him, his agreement given with a single nod of understanding.

‘You’re shivering.’ The slow skim of John’s hands sped up as he endeavoured to rub warmth back into Sherlock’s frame. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were cold?’

Surprised, Sherlock looked around, realising the last rays of the sun had faded from the horizon, allowing the seep of the gathering twilight. The occasional bat flitted overhead, and the first stars
were fading into view. ‘I didn’t notice.’

John couldn't be comfortable, kneeling on frigid stone, and Sherlock shifted, helping him to his feet. The fractional distance yawned like a chasm, unsavoury, and it was clear he was not the only one to think so. John’s fingers remained woven through his, and as soon as he was upright, he was back in Sherlock’s personal space, chest-to-chest and perfect as he pulled his head down for another kiss.

It was different than the others, neither shy nor ragged with hunger, and Sherlock dizzily wondered at John's competence in this new, unspoken language. How was it possible to convey so much without a single word? Yet there was no doubting the questioning slant of John's lips, as if he were still unsure how much he was allowed.

‘Come inside?’ John whispered against Sherlock’s mouth. ‘Please?’

He must have sensed Sherlock's hesitation, because he pulled back, blinking as he attempted to read his expression and got the wrong end of the stick entirely. 'Not – Not for – I mean, we don't have to do anything you don't want to.'

He looked lost, confused and repentant even as Sherlock shook his head. Biting his lip, he swallowed back his reassurances, grabbing John's wrist and placing his hand over his thundering heart before guiding him downwards.

Skin whispered over cotton, across the arc of Sherlock's ribs and the flatness of his stomach until it hovered over the obvious hardness in his trousers. ‘What makes you think there's anything I don't want?’ he asked, swallowing as the heel of John’s palm pressed against him, offering a tease of friction.

‘Oh God.’ John arched his hips in a quick, ragged grind before he broke away and urged Sherlock back towards the bedroom. Maybe some sixth sense made him leave the doors to the balcony ajar, or perhaps he was too engrossed in Sherlock to notice his omission. Either way, Sherlock was grateful.

It was not John who was the target of his reluctance, but the claustrophobic notion of being indoors, shut away behind locked windows and thick walls. It was too reminiscent of his time with Alexander, for all that this was Sherlock’s family home: irrational, but then fear often was.

Now, John left him an escape route, and then set about helping him forget why one had ever been necessary.

He lost himself to the blissful focus – the world pared down to the simple connection of hands and lips, hips and thighs. John cinched to him in a long seam of contact, eager for every inch of proximity. They were still upright, still clothed, but he had never been so exposed, stripped of every mask by John’s devotion.

This was not the frantic pawing of past encounters. Even at his most caring and outside of rut, Alexander had not bothered to take his time. In contrast, John acted as if the night would wait for them, locked forever in darkness as every caress set them alight.

Blunt fingers flirted along the line of buttons on Sherlock’s shirt, seeking permission, flicking them free one by one as Sherlock plucked at the hem of John’s jumper. Their hands tangled in their haste, and John’s laughter lifted the air. Immediately, Sherlock ducked his head, tasting his mirth as white cotton fell from his shoulders.

Wool prickled against his chest, sharp against sensitive nipples, and he pushed into the sensation, enjoying John’s throaty rumble of approval and the slide of weathered palms across his bare skin.
They trailed over his back, taking in the scars there and the silk-smooth canvas on which they lay before skirting the waistband of Sherlock’s trousers, charting the latitude of fabric.

‘You’re sure about this?’

Sherlock took a deep breath, wetting his lips as he rested his hands on John’s hips, forcing himself to consider what they were about to do.

Everything that had held him back in the past: the fear of retribution from the Cunninghams, the threat to John’s freedom from prosecution or other consequences… none of that had changed. Previously, it had all seemed like too much of a risk, but now their mutual longing was the one facet of his life that carried any guarantee. It was something he could grasp with both hands and call his own.

He was not lost in the oblivion of pyresus, struggling to recall his logical train of thought. Desire fogged his mind, but he remained rational. This was not just answering a need, it was about making a choice, and Sherlock knew his answer.

‘Yes. Are you?’ It was the one thing that could stop him. If John’s doubts outweighed his longing, then Sherlock would retreat, but he needn’t have concerned himself.

John cupped his cheek, his eyes black in the room’s half-light. ‘I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life.’

‘Then please,’ Sherlock whispered, not ashamed to beg – not for John. ‘For god’s sake touch me.’

He felt the wicked slice of John’s smile as their mouths collided, all grace lost in the meeting of teeth and tongues. The necessity of tugging John’s jumper over his head forced them apart, but before the wool even hit the floor Sherlock reclaimed his place, peeling back John’s layers until he could explore the soft flesh he had only glimpsed in the past.

John gasped, swaying where he stood like a man bewitched. He leaned into the splay of Sherlock’s fingers as they traced the outline of muscles, some still solid and firm, others slowly giving in to middle age. He sketched the knot of the scar at John’s shoulder, noticing the difference in density and texture before moving on, picking out every feature of note and mapping the space in between.

Not enough. It was never going to be enough, and Sherlock glanced towards the bed before grabbing John’s arm and leading the way, dragging John down on top of him as the mattress sighed under their combined weight.

His body sparked, his spine bowing in search of more as he clutched at John’s back, charting the peaks of his shoulder-blades and the dynamic shift of skin over their summits before sliding downwards. Denim rasped as he grabbed John’s backside, his hum of appreciation blooming into a moan as he pulled John’s hips close.

A curse shaped the air, John’s snatched gasps catching on profanity as Sherlock threw back his head, sinking his teeth into his lip and squeezing his eyes shut against the assault of pleasure. It flared along his cock and pooled further back, dampening his underwear by steady increments.

Faint worries that John would find it off-putting – Omega arousal understood in theory but never seen in practice – slipped through Sherlock’s clutches: irrelevant. How could he worry about that when John lapped up the vulnerable column of Sherlock’s throat, a scrape of teeth hinting at the thrill of danger without ever crossing the line? It was predatory, but beneath the hunger resonating in John’s body, Sherlock could detect his restraint. It was as if John was observing his every reaction,
mindful of any moment where Sherlock’s unequivocal “yes” became a “no”.

With a growl, he pressed one foot flat to the mattress, flipping them over so that John was on his back and Sherlock lay on top of him. Instantly, John scissored their legs together, locking their ankles. The rasp of fabric over Sherlock’s crotch carried a frustrating edge of friction, and he rolled his hips, chasing the sensation as John groaned.

‘Fuck, yes.’

John wriggled where he lay, pulling their joined hands over his head, and the submissive sprawl sent a bolt of static crawling along Sherlock's spine, new and fascinating.

It was an act; he had the presence of mind enough to realise that. John was the one underneath him, but this was about shared control. He could sense the strength in those flexed muscles – more than adequate to reverse their positions again if he desired. Sherlock may be forcing John's wrists into the pillow in a mimicry of captivity, but John's grasp held his fingers in place, trapping him in equal measure.

He dropped his head to the hollow of John's neck and inhaled, his head swimming with the hot, spicy fragrance, tinted with the salty sharpness of sweat and arousal. The Pentrapenzone in his bloodstream added a faint, chemical edge, but Sherlock cast that aside, dismissing it in favour of the kaleidoscope of scents he could detect.

Each was evocative and captivating, addictive. Sherlock opened his mouth against John's pulse, scraping his teeth over delicate flesh and observed John's reaction: a tight, desperate writhe as if he couldn't decide whether to push into the almost-bite or pull away from it. In the end, he tilted his head to the side, granting Sherlock better access and urging him on with filthy praises.

The endless grind of his body was a rhythm in constant flux, and Sherlock revelled in it: not just the data John surrendered so readily, but his own ability to understand it.

Pyresus robbed him of his analytical abilities, reducing him to a creature of selfish need. Now, his body and mind were in harmony, experiencing every sensation and comprehending it as more than the simple burn of neurones lost to pleasure. Sherlock knew by the way John's breath stalled that he loved a firm touch, rather than light adorations. The flicker of his tongue over a nipple did not get more than a hum, but a hint of teeth called forth a growl and a suck made John's lashes flutter.

Steadily, he formed a map of John's body and its most responsive places, from the obvious to the sublime. John’s cooperation was glorious, skating the edge of surrender. It was as if he knew that this was something Sherlock had longed for through endless days and lonely nights, and he gave his reactions without a hint of shame, blatantly approving in most cases and laughingly discouraging in others.

Power thrummed in John's body: his arousal winding tighter. Sherlock had deduced long ago that his flatmate would never be a selfish lover. It went against his natural instincts to lie back and enjoy himself at the potential neglect of a partner, and Sherlock suspected he was running out of time before John turned the tables.

As it was, he had already inched downwards in the tiniest of increments. Now, Sherlock lay between John's legs, enjoyed the solid line of his erection against his sternum. He nuzzled at John's belly, purring at the soft give and the strong resistance of muscles beneath. John’s body was much like the man himself: deceptive, and Sherlock marvelled at the contrast, lapping a trail down towards John’s jeans.
Before he could wriggle any lower, John's blissful inaction surged into movement. A broad palm cradled the back of his head, urging him up and away. Sherlock followed blindly, crawling up his body and catching his mouth in a clumsy kiss, all bumped noses and clattering teeth, hungry and deep.

‘My turn,’ John murmured as they broke apart, his cheeks flushed. ‘Can I –?’

‘On one condition.’ Sherlock licked his lips as John looked up at him. ‘Take these off.’

He hooked a finger through the belt loop of John's jeans, watching the flare of his pupils as he got the message. He wanted more than clumsy rutting against one another and the fabric prison of cotton. The craving for John's bold affections almost overwhelmed him, and he longed to see if his mental image of the hardness in John's underwear matched the reality.

John reached for his fly before switching direction, resting against Sherlock's waistband instead. ‘I will if you do?’

Mutely, Sherlock sat back and put his hand over John's, nudging him aside and easing free the button of his trousers before pulling down the zip, aware of the tiny vibrations buzzing against his straining flesh. The tailored fabric sagged around his hips, but didn't fall, and he shivered as John thumbed up the parted cloth before dipping inside, sitting awkwardly to kiss Sherlock again as he brushed against his length.

Sherlock moaned, pulling himself from John's lips as he tipped his head back. Taut muscles trembled as a wave of pleasure rolled over him. This was new, someone touching him there in a manner that was far from perfunctory. He did it to himself, of course, but no one else had bothered. Alexander had fucked him like an Omega, something to be penetrated, but had forgotten that he was also a man. Perhaps John ran the risk of being the other side of that coin, remembering Sherlock's masculinity while forgetting there was more to him than that.

Yet with John, Sherlock knew he could ask for what he wanted. "Anything" he'd said, and he was starting to believe John meant it. It was there in the curiosity of his confined caress as he stroked the head of Sherlock's cock with varying pressure, attentive to every little twitch and sigh.

Abruptly, John's other arm banded Sherlock's waist, spinning him around so that they switched places: him supine and John above him.

God knew what he looked like. It was almost uncomfortable, to see John's often scattered focus narrow down to him and nothing else. Sherlock fought the urge to hide from it before meeting John's gaze, seeing blatant approval and the glimmer of something wicked.

Before Sherlock could ask what he was planning, strong hands grabbed his trousers and the boxer shorts beneath, pulling them down and off before discarding them in a shadowed corner of the room. He considered complaining about the discrepancy, pointing out that his demand had been for John's nudity, not his own, yet he didn’t get a word out. John robbed him of thought and air in one fell swoop as he took Sherlock’s length in hand – a far more encompassing gesture than that of a moment before – and stroked, just once, from root to tip. ‘The things I want to do to you,’ he husked as Sherlock’s hips arched and his toes curled. ‘Christ. I can’t work out where to start.’

Neither could Sherlock; he could not even find his voice as he fought against the twin attack of John’s unfaltering attentions and his own treacherous imagination. It was not the lightning strike of need he experienced during heat, but it was no less intense.
A seething tide of arousal rose through him, unstoppable. It flushed him from his bones to his skin, and he wriggled on top of the quilt, torn between seeking more and pulling away from its endless advance. He was already half undone, not lost on a sea of want but drowning in it, present and aware.

And John had only just begun.

‘Off,’ Sherlock managed at last, shaking his head as he scrambled together enough of a sentence to prevent John’s inevitable confusion. ‘Get the rest of your bloody clothes off and let me touch you.’

‘Bossy sod,’ he muttered, more affectionate than anything else as he hurried to oblige.

The denim didn’t even hit the floor before Sherlock sat up, grabbing John’s shoulders and dragging him down on top of him, letting his smaller frame fit against his like a key sliding into a lock.

‘Oh my God,’ John moaned, his praise almost lost as Sherlock tried to kiss him everywhere at once. It was like a shot of stimulant right to the heart: raw, crackling urgency flooding outwards and bringing with it the keening need to be as close to John as possible.

Restraint melted away as John's bare erection slid against his own, and Sherlock choked off an incomprehensible noise. He reached down, encompassing John's girth and appreciating the heft of him as he weighed and tested, his strokes graceless.

John managed a ragged moan, his hand clasping over Sherlock’s and cinching his fist tighter as he thrust into the curl of his palm. It was cramped, and his wrist would ache from the angle before a minute had gone, but it was still one of the best things Sherlock had ever seen.

There was nothing coy about it – no bizarre power-play. This was just John, his mouth open and his eyes screwed shut, as honest in this as he was in almost everything else.

Ducking his head, John licked the sweat from Sherlock’s chest, circling his left nipple before sucking it into his mouth. He was gentle at first, testing and tasting as Sherlock tried to speak around the shimmering static that shattered through his body, coalescing wherever John touched him.

It was almost too much, too overwhelming, like standing too close to the fire and loving the heat even as the skin began to redden and burn. He needed less, more, something: a lens to focus all this scattered pleasure into input he understood.

Almost as the thought crossed his mind, John shifted, reluctantly pulling himself free from Sherlock’s grasp as he slid downwards. His lips blurred across Sherlock’s ribs and stomach before he nosed at the trail of dark hair that led down between his legs. Sherlock’s breath left him in a rush as he dropped a kiss to the side of his straining erection – close, but not close enough – before pulling back.

‘Tell me how you like it?’ John murmured, his lips so near to Sherlock’s cock that they brushed against it when he spoke. It was torture. He’d never realised John had it in him to be such a tease, and Sherlock managed a faint, strained noise as he struggled for some kind of response that would get John’s lips around him now or sooner.

‘Anything,’ he croaked at last, his cheeks heating further as the word came out like a sob. ‘Please, anything!’

There was a brief hesitation, and he wondered if John read the “I don’t know” inherent in his answer. However, in the space between one heartbeat and the next, he bent his head and Sherlock’s world dissolved down to pure sensation.
His imaginings of this had failed to come even close to the mark, diaphanous compared to the definitive edge of John’s guarded teeth and the firmness of his palate. The noise that tore itself from him was a deep, breathless ‘Oh!’ of surprise as John’s tongue flickered and stroked before he hollowed his cheeks, soft suction increasing until Sherlock could think of nothing else.

One fist curled around the base of his erection while the other pinned his hip, holding him steady as his body tried to coil and thrust into John’s mouth. His voice was scattered thin across useless, inarticulate praises, but he was too far gone to censor himself, even when his next whimper became a whine, called forth by John’s wandering fingers.

They trailed down from his hip, mapping the curve of his thigh before sweeping across his balls. He stroked the fragile sac as he inched backwards, slipping between Sherlock’s legs to where he was wettest.

John flinched in surprise, retreating only to return a second later, bold and curious. He swiped through the clear, viscous fluid that glossed Sherlock’s skin, seeking it out while keeping up the deliberate slide of his mouth, distracting Sherlock from anything like embarrassment.

At least until he did something with his tongue, a kind of flick that made Sherlock’s arse clench, and a new pulse of moisture drenched John’s hand.

John’s mouth left him, and for one awful minute Sherlock thought he was pulling away, repulsed. It took a few hazy seconds for him to realise John’s head was resting against his thigh, his nostrils flaring and his cheeks darkly flushed.

‘You’re an Omega,’ he croaked, sounding almost as wrecked as Sherlock felt. It was tempting to give some kind of snide reply, because Sherlock’s gender was the root of all their problems, but it occurred to him that John wasn’t stating the obvious for dramatic effect. He had genuinely forgotten.

‘You’re an Omega,’ John repeated, ‘and I have no idea how to make this good for you.’

Dizzily, Sherlock propped himself up on his elbow and looked down the length of his body, past his flushed, eager cock and into John’s face. ‘I think,’ he rumbled, licking his lips, ‘you were doing just fine.’

John gave a shaky grin, his fingers moving again and making Sherlock’s eyes roll back. ‘Here, I mean. I don’t – I–’ He bit his lip, sucking in a deep breath before meeting Sherlock’s gaze. ‘Will you show me?’

Sherlock blinked at him, swallowing as a whirl of thought rushed across his mind. John was a doctor, and perhaps he didn’t receive the same training in Omegas as a Beta would, but he knew the basics of anatomy. He wasn’t seeking out generic knowledge, but something far more specific to Sherlock, something he doubted anyone else would bother with.

This, John’s request, was as much about discovering Sherlock’s personal predilections as it was about his unfamiliar physiology.

Sherlock wanted to say that his reactions would not be hugely different from that of John’s other lovers; after all, Omegas were not as alien as most people would suppose. Instead, he choked back his protests, nudging John’s head out of the way as he bent his legs at the knee, thighs splayed wide, and reached down to take John’s hand.

‘You can’t really go wrong,’ he rasped, scraping his teeth over his bottom lip as he guided John over his damp entrance. ‘Omegas are well-blessed with erogenous zones, especially males.’
‘I don’t care about Omegas.’ John sat up on his knees, bracing himself with his right hand as Sherlock clung to his left. ‘I care about you.’

He had no response to that – couldn’t have strung the words together anyway. He was too lost in conducting John’s caresses, teasing himself with another man’s touch before urging John to breach him.

Whatever he would have felt was magnified a-hundred-fold by John’s reaction: his pupils dilating wider as he focused on feeling Sherlock’s body around his fingers. Perhaps he’d been expecting the tight ring of muscle he would find in male lovers, or the smooth, wet heat of a woman, but Omegas were somewhere between the two, as John was now finding out.

Slowly, he drew out before sliding in again, deeper this time, and Sherlock’s hips hitched up, urging him on. God, it’d been too long since anyone had laid hands on him but himself, and this was far more intimate than the thrust of an Alpha’s cock.

John shook with the effort of self-control. The strength of his concentration was obvious as he focused his entire being on what he was doing, varying firmness and speed before adding a twist on the next withdrawal that made Sherlock’s heels skitter on the sheet.

‘Fuck!’ He stared at the ceiling, observing nothing, too intent on John in him to care about anything so external. ‘What are you –?’

John huffed a laugh, shifting down again so he could rest his head on Sherlock’s stomach and nuzzle at his arousal, humming in pleasure when he noticed how much he was leaking. ‘Seeing if I can remember my anatomy lessons.’ He paused, his next confession little more than a rumble of sound, ‘and trying not to come like a fucking teenager.’

That thought was enough to make Sherlock’s muscles clench against a fresh wave of longing. He wanted to see John like that, unravelling and struck senseless by his release. ‘You’re not even letting me touch you – Ah!’

His complaint trailed off to nothing, irrelevant as John pressed firmly just inside. Somehow Sherlock had managed to underestimate just how clever John could be. He was a doctor, he did know anatomy, and he knew how to put that information to use in devastating ways.

John’s sweat gathered where his forehead rested against Sherlock’s stomach, and cool air huffed over his skin. Those strong shoulders shivered with tension, and Sherlock knew he was taking just as much pleasure from Sherlock’s reactions as he was giving with his deft ministrations.

‘Bartollic ring,’ John murmured. ‘God, you’re sensitive. I didn’t realise…’

Sherlock moaned, his throat pulsing around the sound as he shifted, trying to get John just where he wanted him and failing miserably. With a growl of frustration, he grabbed John’s wrist, urging him deeper. ‘Curl your fingers,’ he ordered, his stomach muscles clenching as he lifted his shoulders from the mattress, closing his eyes and chewing his lip. ‘Just sort of slide –’

His words choked as stars exploded across his vision, his muscles clamping hard as John swore in amazement, gasping and half-giggling to himself in disbelief. He’d found the seam of nerve-rich tissue that led from the male Omega’s bartollic ring – the part that cinched around an Alpha’s knot – to the vestigial prostate: a treasure trail of sensory overload that Sherlock knew well. It was what he aimed for when pleasuring himself, but of course John’s angle was better, firmer, hesitant at first and then increasingly confident as Sherlock’s world turned white at its edges.
John shifted, but Sherlock’s whine of complaint dissolved as he realised John was nudging closer, settling more comfortably lower down. A wet stripe lapped up his thigh, across twitching skin, flickering inwards, and before Sherlock could guess his next move, John’s lips slid down his length, sucking in earnest.

He was babbling now, almost sobbing: crude, meaningless things that John rightly took as encouragement. He rubbed back and forth, in and out, brushing over Sherlock’s prostate at his deepest point before skimming back, lighting fires along the way before ending with another twist and repeating it in reverse. Between that and John’s clever, wicked mouth, he was lost, coming apart at the seams and unable to stop himself.

His climax surged, pushing forward from the base of his spine and flooding outward, pulling his body taut as it hit him like a train. Hot and cold rashes swept through him as he shuddered through his release, clutched tight around John’s fingers and pulsing in John’s mouth, making him choke in surprise.

‘Sorry,’ Sherlock gasped, slurring as he tried to find some element of coordination, brushing his fingers against John’s jaw. Everything seemed unbelievably heavy, spent in a way he’d not felt for years, but there was no time to savour it. Not now, when John was still hard and panting and glorious. ‘Come here.’

John followed with mindless obedience, easing free and wiping his mouth with the back of his other hand. A gentle tug made him lie down at Sherlock’s side, pliant but for his cock striking a line against Sherlock’s hip.

Swiping through the come on his skin – in his surprise, John hadn’t swallowed it all – Sherlock wrapped his hand around John’s length. ‘Show me?’ he asked, meeting John’s gaze as that fumbling grasp locked over his knuckles, guiding the beat. It was a balance of friction and finesse, and Sherlock watched, captivated. John’s lashes fluttered closed, his groans muted but intense until his grip fell away, ceding control.

It wasn’t easy, doing this without sensory feedback, but Sherlock was a fast learner and John was turned on beyond belief, every muscle quivering.

Slipping his left arm under John’s waist, he pulled him closer, kissing John’s hair and temples, the flat crest of a cheekbone, the bridge of his nose – wherever he could reach without letting go or faltering in his rhythm.

He licked the sheen of sweat from John’s skin, tasting need and sex. The flavour was intoxicating, a sharp tang across his tongue, but it was nothing compared to John’s scent: a heady mixture of intense, base musk and Sherlock’s release laid across him like a veil. Yet it was more than that, something beyond definition that made Sherlock’s heart race as he dragged it in, filling his head with the perfume of John’s desire as he coaxed him towards the edge.

Fingers clamped tight around Sherlock’s forearm, digging into shifting muscles as John’s cock thickened in his hand, swollen and twitching. A second later, hot fluid spurted against his stomach, dripping over his knuckles as John shook and gasped, clinging to Sherlock as if he were the only thing that mattered.

It was absolute surrender: John Watson refined to his fundaments, and Sherlock tried to take it all in, from the noises – quiet curses and ragged cries – to the flush across his collarbones and the heat blazing from John’s skin.

Like this, John was beautiful: a crime scene brimming with the evidence of emotion and need, simple
yet nuanced, and Sherlock could not tear himself away.

He gentled his grip, stroking his thumb down the column of John’s shaft before resting his hand on his thigh and watching the man in his arms steadily come back to himself. Even that was a sight to behold. John did not seem smug, as if he had attained some great prize. Instead, his expression was one of thankful satisfaction and genuine happiness, and Sherlock basked in its glow.

'All right?' John asked, resting his head under Sherlock's chin as his breathing returned to its normal rate.

'That's a phenomenally stupid question.' He pressed a kiss to his temple, as much to show his appreciation as to hide his surprise at the query. 'I'm better than all right.' His voice softened as he added, 'Thank you.'

He felt John's smile: the swell of his cheek and the curve of his lips like a secret against his skin. 'I think it's me who should be thanking you. That was --' John looked up with a grin, flushed and happy. 'Brilliant.'

Sherlock was tempted to point out that John should take the credit, since he had devoted himself to Sherlock's pleasure. His own input had been minimal: an issue he hoped to rectify in the near future. Assuming he had the chance.

A tendril of worry unraveled in his mind, furrowing his brow and eroding the edges of his sated mood. What they had shared changed very little about their situation. This was not a fairy-tale, with declarations and a world reformed. Reality was never so kind.

'Stop it,' John whispered, quiet but forceful. One hand cradled his cheek before that blunt nose nudged at his pulse. 'You asked me not to bring it up, and now I'm asking you the same thing. We can deal with it tomorrow. For tonight...' He shrugged, a shiver dancing over his skin as a breeze chased through the parted balcony doors. They'd not even bothered getting under the covers, a fact Sherlock quickly rectified, cocooning them both in the downy feather quilt to ward off the chill.

He clung to John's unfinished plea, happy to obey. This was a fragile sanctuary, a brief, forbidden oasis, but it was one in which he intended to linger. The bed cradled them, comfortable and safe, and if he blinkered his mind he could force himself to ignore the weight of his concerns and the hollow, dreading ache that this one night may be all he and John could ever share.

Strong arms wrapped around his waist, and Sherlock sank into John’s embrace. Even in the brightest days of their bond, Alexander had rarely bothered to engage in such affectionate intimacy. In contrast, John seemed to relish it, nestling close and encouraging Sherlock to do the same. He kept up a steady stream of lazy contact, more comforting than scintillating, and Sherlock attuned his body to the language of John’s touch. He mimicked every caress before branching out, trying to transmit all the words he didn’t dare speak through the sweep of his palms.

He hadn't known he could feel like this: out of control one moment and powerful the next. He hadn't thought that the hand of another could play his body like a fine instrument, or realised anyone may be willing to devote the time to it. In the back of his head, he'd been waiting for John to turn him over and sink into him, chasing his own pleasure at last, or sink his teeth into Sherlock’s neck, but it hadn't happened.

He shouldn’t be surprised, but the fear had lingered that even John, noble to the core, wouldn’t be able to overcome the shackles of his instincts. Perhaps the inhibitors had helped, but they couldn’t do everything. They could only tame the body, not the Alpha way of thinking. That had been John’s
triumph, and his alone.

A puff of cold air trailed across his skin, interrupting his musings, and he grunted in protest as John pulled away. He squinted, watching him scoop something up from the floor before rubbing it over Sherlock's stomach, cleaning up the worst of the mess. 'We'll get stuck together otherwise,' he said by way of explanation, looking guilty. 'I –' He cleared his throat. 'I should probably have resisted coming on you like that.'

'What on earth for?' Sherlock asked as John used the garment – his boxers, he realised – on himself before pitching them aside. He climbed back into bed, his head settling on the pillow and his expression one of apologetic self-blame.

'Because I've not been tested for a while. I know the risk of transmission is lower without me being in you, but...'

Of course. John was normally rigorous in the defence of both his own sexual health and that of his partner. Still, it was flattering that he had been too wrapped up in what they were doing to think of safe sex until after the fact.

'Practically non-existent,' Sherlock corrected. ‘As is the risk of pregnancy.' He raised an eyebrow as he watched shock flicker over John's face. The emotions that followed were a roulette wheel of incomprehensibility, flashing over his features too quickly to read.

'Christ,' he muttered, scrubbing a hand through his hair and grimacing. 'I didn’t think of that.'

It was hard not to envy John that privilege, and Sherlock swallowed back the sharp comment on the tip of his tongue. John may grasp the fact that Sherlock was an Omega, but at his most base the facts slipped away from him. It was understandable, considering how the society in which he’d been raised had little reason to take Omegas into account, but Sherlock never had the luxury of forgetting.

‘And I call myself a doctor.’ John frowned. ‘Although most of the inhibitors double as contraceptives.’ He cleared his throat, wincing. ‘I just didn’t check whether Pentrapenzone had the same effect.’

Sherlock sighed, curving an arm around John’s waist and tugging him close. Part of him delighted in John’s distraction, self-satisfied in a way he struggled not to examine too closely. John’s decision not to penetrate him had nothing to do with preventing potential conception, and instead revolved around his desire to pleasure Sherlock as an individual.

That knowledge made something complicated shiver awake beneath his ribs, and Sherlock set about putting John’s mind to rest.

'It does. Pentrapenzone’s one of the most effective Alpha contraceptives available. The only reason it’s not a mainstream drug is because Mycroft’s governmental departments can afford it; the health service cannot. There are cheaper alternatives that are adequate enough for the purposes of the general populace.'

John let out a breath, his shoulders twitching in a shrug. 'Still, I should have thought it through. It's not just your responsibility. It’s mine as well.'

Sherlock’s heart skipped, noticing that once again John put them on equal footing. He did not speak in the smug overtones of someone thinking they were progressive and expecting praise for it. All of John’s considerations were instinctive, stemming from who he was rather than born of an effort to seek approval.
‘Thank you.’ He murmured his gratitude against John’s skin, taking a deep breath as if he could lock John’s satisfied, spicy scent in his lungs forever. He did not clarify, couldn’t even think how to explain the complex gestalt of his emotions. However, John seemed to understand at least a fraction of it, tipping his head to suck softly on Sherlock’s bottom lip, tracing its outline with his tongue as they kissed.

It felt bittersweet, tender and delicate, almost as if John were already saying goodbye, and Sherlock fought back the sudden vice of panic that clamped around his lungs. He wanted this, not just for a few hours or days, but for as long as John would have him.

His heart ached to put himself in John's hands and accept the affection on offer. His body revelled in the comfort of John's embrace, in the warm expanse of John's chest against his and the occasional, soft kiss that he bestowed, but his wretched, logical mind kept up a litany of distress, shattering his fantasies.

At every angle, something threatened to drag him and John apart, from the Cunninghams to the foundations of society itself. He was surrounded by problems, and each time he turned to face a new one, he faltered, stuck without an answer.

John’s hand moved from his waist, stroking up his side and over the peak of his shoulder before skimming down the tense line of his spine. It was a shifting point of contact, one that awakened shimmering nerves with each pass. It was not enough to overwhelm his mind, but it quieted the jagged, panicked edges of his considerations, removing their immediacy as he concentrated on this: he and John in the confines of their bed, together, if only for a while.

John did not say a word as he continued to comfort Sherlock, naked and unapologetic. It was vulnerability and intimacy, less about one of them inside the other and more about hearts in hands. John always wore his heart on his sleeve: a bloody mess of empathy for the world to see. Sherlock had spent too long guarding his emotions to be so open, but here, now, it wasn't even a choice. Equality went both ways, and Sherlock would not allow John to keep giving without getting anything in return, not when the same stresses that plagued Sherlock wrote their evidence in the lines of his face, half-shrouded in twilight's gloom.

He mimicked the path of John's hand across the expanse of his chest, allowing himself to be mesmerised by John’s scars. Sherlock traced the stories in their seams and read the legacy of strengths and weaknesses. He knew John as a person, the man within the flesh, but the understanding of the physical was new and vivid in Sherlock's mind. It was something he could turn to: a beautiful distraction as he learned his lover in the moonlight.

They flowed together, and Sherlock submerged himself in the quiet force of John's adoration. At times they slept, spending shallow dozes in a tangle of limbs and humid skin. Others they would reach out, stirring sated lethargy into renewed interest with the burn of friction and hushed praises in the night's darkest hours.

John made him feel precious: ethereal and carnal. He was not prone to being fanciful, but as they kissed, slow and leisurely, Sherlock found himself wishing the sun would never rise. He would rather stay here, drawing out John's quiet sounds of pleasure and encouragement, than face what the dawn would bring.

Yet time slipped on, unstoppable, and Sherlock curled up tight around John, shuffling down the bed to listen to the thud of the heart that marched inside the cavern of his ribs. They were sticky and spent, both of them clinging to one another as sleep began to blur the edges of the room.
John's fingers drifted through Sherlock's curls, teasing them back from the sweat drying on his forehead and delving into their twists. However, his actions didn't hide the way his hand shook or the faintest hitch in his breathing.

'Please,' John whispered, so quiet Sherlock almost didn't hear it. Perhaps he wasn't meant to, because what followed seemed more like a prayer than a request. 'Please let us have this.'

He rarely sounded so ragged: a man in a situation beyond his control, and Sherlock nestled closer, hating himself for dragging John into this mess but full of contrary elation that he had come willingly. He was under no illusions about Sherlock's personality or his biology. He was not expecting some docile ideal to fulfil its duty. He knew Sherlock, all his glories and his flaws, and still he wanted to keep him.

John wanted the chance to make it work. He wanted the opportunity to see if this one night could flourish into something that would last a lifetime, and Sherlock found the panicked chaos of his mind stunned to silence.

Faith in his own emotions was hard to come by. He'd spent too long viewing them as an inconvenience to give them credit, but John's were another matter. With each moment of intimacy, he had shown Sherlock there was something worth having, and with a few simple words he'd made it clear that Sherlock wasn't alone in wanting more.

That seed of knowledge glimmered in the storm of his thoughts, a focal point that allowed his swirling concerns to stabilise their orbits. Sherlock had been so busy focussing on the problem, paralysed by the length and breadth of the obstacles in their path, that he had been unable to conduct more than the briefest of forays in search of a conclusion. It all seemed insurmountable.

And yet, for John, Sherlock knew he couldn't stop trying. It was easy, when considering himself in isolation, to feel swamped by the impossible, unwilling to give up but locked in a stalemate of indecision.

However, it wasn't just about him, not anymore. Bond or not, it didn't matter. He was John's, and John was his.

He just needed to find out how to keep him.

Determination sizzled through his veins, and Sherlock pressed his lips to John's chest, sensing the sluggish beat of a sleeping heart. The pair of them were wrecked and exhausted, but Sherlock was accustomed to pushing the limits. Besides, he couldn't sleep now, not when there was work to do.

Slipping out from under the sheets, he held his breath, waiting to see if John stirred. There was a faint snuffle as he moved, seeking out the absent heat of Sherlock's frame, and he tucked the quilt around John's body, wrapping him in its depths. Leaving made him ache, the scant distance seeming as wide as a mile, but Sherlock steeled himself against it as he crept over to his bag.

He hadn't packed much, and what he had included was a random mix of necessities, but at least he'd remembered his robe. It was an ideal garment when struggling through pyresus, soft enough not to rasp at humming nerve endings, but an adequate covering to help stabilise a fluctuating temperature.

He snagged the blue silk from its nest and put his arms through the sleeves, grimacing at the patina of dried fluids on his skin: sweat, John’s semen, and traces of his own ejaculate. Any sane person would duck into the shower, but Sherlock didn't dare. His resolve felt fragile at its edges, and he did not want to risk slipping back into the paralysis of uncertainty. He'd bathe later.
Bending down, he liberated his phone from the pocket of his discarded trousers, allowing himself one last look at John's sleeping face before he slipped from the room, closing the door behind him. The stairwell was dark, and he held his mobile aloft to light the way ahead as he padded downstairs.

Once far enough away from the bedroom that he was sure he wouldn't wake John, he turned on the lights, picking his way through to the kitchen. Quarry tiles chilled his toes, but he thought nothing of it as he flicked on the kettle. Caffeine was an inadequate supplement for nicotine, but he had no cigarettes or patches to help him solve this problem. Tea would have to do.

All his efforts so far had come to naught. He had bogged down in a morass of personal implication and desperate strategies, each as useless as the last. He'd believed what he wanted – Baker Street, the Work and John – was an impossible dream. Perhaps it still was, but how would he know unless he tried?

He refused to settle for a compromise, to maim himself in the name of freedom or sacrifice one part of his life for the sake of another. John was right, it wasn't fair. Maybe that argument wouldn't be enough to sway anyone's mind in his favour, but he was damned if he was going to lie back and let society rob him of everything he'd earned.

Yet thinking of it as a personal crusade was getting him nowhere; that was not how he worked. He dealt in facts and data… He solved cases, and that was how he had to think of their current situation. Not as a problem, but as a crime. All he needed was the evidence, and he knew just who to ask for it.

The kettle clicked off, ignored, and Sherlock looked down at the phone in his hand, dialling without a second thought. It rang only twice before Mycroft answered.

'Brother, dear. I trust you are well?'

Despite the smoothness of his voice, Sherlock could detect a hint of concern. In retrospect, perhaps he should have texted to inform Mycroft that the O.D.X was effective, rather than a disastrous mistake. Too late for that now.

'As well as can be expected. I need copies of every written communication you've had with the Cunninghams, including the legal documents. I also want to see anything you have in your possession that details Alexander's treatment of me.' He scowled, sensing his brother’s hesitation.

'Problem?'

There was a faint creak of leather, and Sherlock could picture him sat at his desk, the papers on its surface lit by the glow of the lamp as he leant back in his chair. A ghost of a crystalline chime reached his ears: ice in a tumbler of scotch. 'I assume this means you've made a decision?'

The past few weeks must have frayed Mycroft's nerves more than Sherlock had ever imagined. He couldn't recall the last time he had been so transparent. If he were in front of him, he would have been able to observe every concern, but a visual was unnecessary. His intonation gave everything away. Did Mycroft fear his response, or was he bracing himself to leap into whatever action Sherlock required?

'Yes.' He licked his lips, swallowing the tightness in his throat as he struggled to find the words to convey his intentions. 'I'm not going to oblige the Cunninghams and crawl into bed with the highest bidder, but nor will I sacrifice the life I've built for myself in the name of my freedom. I –' He paused, feeling a world of possibilities unfurling in front of him. 'I choose John.'

The line crackled over Mycroft's silence, and Sherlock braced himself for whatever arguments were about to surge forth. He expected an attack on John, questions about his morality and motives; he did
not think he would find himself in the spotlight of his brother's curiosity.

'Why?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Why do you choose John?' Mycroft's sigh hissed in Sherlock's ear, and he could picture him pinching the bridge of his nose. 'Is it because you think that tying yourself to another Alpha is the only option open to you? Is he merely convenient: a man who admires you and would do anything for you, regardless of potential personal expense?'

'No!' Sherlock shook his head, not caring that his brother couldn't see him. 'No. I –' He blinked, staring at his insipid reflection in the windowpane. 'He's not just a means to an end, Mycroft. He is integral. Without him...’ He trailed off, his stomach twisting in knots as his heart ached, dithering from happiness to devastation. 'Without him, I doubt I'd have much interest in the rest of it.'

'The Work?'

Sherlock swallowed, trying to remember life before John. Looking back on it, it seemed lacking. The joy the puzzles gave him was brief, and the intervening times stretched out, dull and empty. John filled up the spaces with kind smiles and quiet understanding. He was Sherlock’s catalyst, someone who allowed him to reach his full potential, rather than holding him back.

He didn't need to answer. Mycroft read the response folded up in his silence. Sherlock heard him draw in a breath: shocked or merely surprised, it was impossible to tell, but any emotional reaction from Mycroft was worthy of note.

'I had some inkling, of course, but I didn't realise...' His brother trailed off, shuffling paper around and tapping at computer keys. 'Has he formed a bond with you?'

Sherlock gripped the edge of the table, white-knuckled, pursing his lips at the casual question. It was a simple query, but he couldn’t deny its effect on him as something hot surged in his chest and caught up in the cradle of his hips. His nape prickled, and he rubbed a hand over the skin, increasing the pressure until his palm clamped like a vice across the sensitive flesh. 'No.'

The faint clatter of keys stumbled to a stop. For a minute, it was so quiet that Sherlock wondered if his brother had disconnected the call, but before he could check, Mycroft spoke. 'Then it seems that Doctor Watson is even more remarkable than I thought.'

‘He’s an Alpha who has not been raised with the toxic expectations of the elite,’ Sherlock said, drumming a tattoo against the kitchen surface.

‘But he is still an Alpha, one in close proximity to an unbound Omega he admires,’ Mycroft pointed out. ‘Even with the ameliorating influence of the inhibitors, his restraint is commendable. I think there are few in his position, elite or otherwise, who would have been able to hold themselves back.’

Sherlock closed his eyes, considering John’s behaviour and their conversation that evening. He had offered to bond and then go, putting his heart on the line and leaving Sherlock to his freedom. Did he think Sherlock’s rejection of his plan included a dismissal of a connection between them?

Even at their most intimate, John had not attempted to leave his mark. That was probably for the best, considering their circumstances, but Sherlock could not help the guilty disappointment that resonated in his gut.

'I'm so glad you approve,' he managed, desperate to change the subject. Bonds were for him and
John to discuss; Mycroft had nothing to do with it. 'Are you going to give me what I asked for, or not?'

Mycroft sniffed, and Sherlock could picture the supercilious arch of his brow. 'It's already on its way. I've sent a file transfer via a secure connection. The guards at the gate will be up to the house shortly to supply you with the necessary equipment to access it; a laptop and such. Perhaps you'll have some luck seeing a way forward where I have not.'

There was a whisper of rare apology in that statement, and Sherlock hesitated. He was tempted to hang up, but a niggling voice at the back of his mind pointed out that, if not for his brother's meddling, he and John may never have reached this point.

'Thank you,' he said at last, the words stiff. 'I'll call you if I require further assistance.'

'And I shall continue to try and find a solution on your behalf. We can but hope it will be more straightforward, now we have a definitive goal in mind.' His brother's tone brooked no argument, blunt and to the point. He may be willing to give Sherlock the information that he requested, but it was obvious that did not mean he considered his job done.

'Or twice as complicated,' he murmured, knowing he had selected the most difficult path: all or nothing.

Mycroft made a faint sound of agreement. ‘Perhaps. Do be careful, won’t you, Sherlock?’

The line went dead before he had a chance to formulate a response, and Sherlock slipped his phone into his robe pocket, his brother’s parting words echoing in his ear.

He knew Mycroft meant more than the Cunninghams. They were a threat, true, but a distant one. To his brother, there was a more immediate concern. He had been surprised by Sherlock’s admission of sentiment, and Sherlock would be an insult to his chosen profession if hadn’t noticed the faintest of tremors in his sibling’s voice.

Fear, well-hidden, but present all the same.

His attachment to John complicated matters, derailing the logical track which Mycroft favoured and dragging the situation into a maze of emotion. Caring represented a mass of unquantifiable possibilities, and Mycroft loathed its imprecision.

Once, Sherlock would have been the same, but as his thoughts turned to the Alpha asleep in his bed upstairs, he knew he had found the exception to his rule.

Defiantly, he wished he could proceed without care for the consequences, but such hopes were nothing but wishful thinking. It was tempting to ignore the problem, to carry on his life with John as if it were a non-issue, but the Cunninghams would never allow it.

The spectre of retribution would haunt their lives at Baker Street. They would forever be looking over their shoulders, always aware of the finite limits of their time together. That was not what he wanted for him and John: a half-hidden, anxious sort of existence. They’d never survive that, not for long.

No, somewhere, there was a flaw, a weakness, a pressure point – something he could use to crack apart the bars of his gilded cage.

All he had to do was find it.
Wakefulness trickled in around the seams of John’s mind. It was a creep of awareness at first, a sensation of drowsy happiness, but with an odd twist in his gut that told him something was wrong. He shied away from that and buried his face in the quilt, taking a deep breath of the Sherlock-and-sex scent carried by the cotton. A smile tilted the corner of his lips as muscles twinged, and a couple of tender, stubble-scraped places protested.

It had been beyond brilliant. He should have known from the way Sherlock held himself back that, in the arms of someone he trusted, he would fall apart. Even now, the memory of his gasps and cries stole John's breath away, and a twitch of interest between his legs had him reaching across the bed. The empty sprawl of the mattress was worse than the shriek of any alarm clock. John's eyes snapped open, taking in the dented pillow and the quilt furled tight around his body. The knot of trepidation in his gut clenched, and he chewed his lip, adrenaline surging as he threw off the last tatters of sleep. Sherlock was gone and had been for a while. The sheets lay cold at his side, untouched by another human's warmth, and for one blinding moment, John wondered if it had all been some elaborate fantasy.

No. Sherlock may not be with him, but the evidence of his presence and what they'd done together still lay on John's skin, dry and uncomfortable. The pillow had collapsed at its centre, and one or two mahogany strands caught the light. He hadn't imagined any of it; the question was, when had Sherlock left him, and how had John not noticed? They'd been wrapped around each other, completely entangled. Had the emotional rollercoaster worn him out so much that he hadn't felt Sherlock free himself and creep away?

With a sigh, he scrubbed a hand over his face, peeling back the quilt and reaching for his discarded clothes as he tried to calm the thrash of anxious butterflies in his stomach. It didn't have to mean anything, this unexpected departure. Sherlock’s sleeping habits were hit and miss at the best of times. Maybe he just wasn't tired? Maybe he'd got hungry? Maybe...

John shook his head, dragging on yesterday’s trousers, t-shirt and jumper over his bare skin. The benign possibilities were endless, but they didn't put his mind at rest. Tension wove through his muscles, chasing away the last trace of satisfied lethargy. He kept thinking of the fragility of the previous night, the hint of sadness that stole across Sherlock's features and made a nest in John's chest. There had been an undeniable sense of joy mixed with grief, and his fears ran rife.

What if this was Sherlock's way of increasing the distance and putting it behind him? Did he intend to pretend it had never happened? To turn his back on the potential of what they could have? John knew he wasn't the only one who had felt it, the undeniable rightness. It wasn't about fitting into one another's arms or anything so trite; it was the foundation of their friendship that made sex a logical progression. First times with any date were fun, but a bit nerve-wracking. With Sherlock, there'd been none of that. John had never been so comfortable with another lover for the first time, and to him, that spoke volumes of what one night could grow into, if given the chance.

He paused, the tail end of that thought catching in his head. That was the key issue, the one he and Sherlock had urged each other to ignore in the darkness. Eager and desperate, they'd turned away from everything but each other. Now, in the weak light of an overcast morning, reality was difficult to dismiss. A night spent together, no matter how mind-blowing, solved none of their problems.

It was useless staying here, imagining a hundred different scenarios and trying to summon the courage to find out which one was true. Until he found Sherlock and actually spoke to him, all he'd
have was guesswork.

Moving down the stairs, John frowned, aware of how quiet the house was around him. Not a sound stirred the air, and a new rash of fear prickled across his skin. God, please let Sherlock still be here. John wasn't sure why he might feel it necessary to bolt from his sanctuary – he didn't understand what went on in that head most of the time – but the possibility sank like a stone in his stomach, making his heart thump in fright.

'Sherlock?'

'In the kitchen.'

Relief made him light-headed, and John turned towards the sound of Sherlock's voice, wincing as his bare toes touched the cold tile floor. A laptop was perched on the kitchen island; a printer whirred at its side and a slew of paperwork spread over the black granite surface. The air smelt of toner and static, but John ignored it, his attention drawn by the man who sat facing him, reading intently.

Sherlock wore his blue silk dressing gown, the deep vee of the collar doing nothing to hide the line of his bare chest. His hair was a disorganised cloud of curls, and John fought back a smirk as he realised he was responsible for its disarray. There was also a lingering hint of stubble burn against Sherlock's pale skin, almost faded, but not quite. He looked wonderfully debauched, and John had to rein in the impulse to stride over and ruffle Sherlock some more. Perhaps if he was sure of where they stood, he wouldn't hesitate, but he could pick up the "working" vibes emanating from Sherlock in waves. An interruption, even with pleasant intentions, wouldn't be well-received.

In a way, it was hard to marry Sherlock as he was now, serious and intent, with the breathless, trembling man who'd shared his bed. This was the Sherlock John had known from day one: intelligent and cutting, firm of purpose and sharp of mind. Yet his appearance this morning helped tie the two together. It reminded John that what Sherlock had shown him last night was another, well-hidden aspect of his character, rather than a different person entirely.

He didn't know how Sherlock did it – held all that feeling in check, locked away from everyone – but he was honoured to have witnessed it. Sherlock had allowed him in when he was at his most vulnerable – had shaken himself apart beneath John's touch without even a hint of doubt – and the memory took John's breath away.

Stepping forward, he curled his fingers in towards his palms, wanting to reach out but unsure whether Sherlock would appreciate the gesture. If they were back in Baker Street and all the obstacles they faced did not exist, he wouldn't think twice. He'd be doing everything he could to make sure Sherlock knew he was wanted. Christ, if it was up to him, they wouldn't even get out of bed.

Yet that wasn't the way this could work. John couldn't bully his way into Sherlock's life and make himself at home, not without considering the consequences. As it was, he found himself searching that profile, looking for any crack in the mask of concentration. Did he regret it? Did he, like John, wish they could crawl back under the covers and hide until the rest of the world left them alone?

'Are you all right?'

John blinked, realising his friend wasn't as engrossed in the report in front of him as he'd assumed. Sherlock was not the most expressive man, but John could read the little clues that gave away his emotions, and he looked as uncertain as John felt, wary yet hopeful – unsure in the new territory they'd claimed.
Screwing up his courage, he inched closer, standing behind Sherlock and stroking his hand down his arm. It was a test, something strong but not too overwhelming. He didn't catch Sherlock in an embrace, didn't dare, in case his arms became a cage, but he couldn't keep his hands to himself, not when Sherlock was watching him as if he knew what he wanted but wasn't sure how to ask for it.

Almost immediately, Sherlock relaxed against him. If John stepped back, he'd fall off the stool on which he was perched, but it didn't seem to have crossed his mind to consider the risk. John smiled, his heart lifting to see him respond to physical contact. There was no dubious look or sigh of resignation, just a fractional hesitation, as if Sherlock was trying to judge how much he could take of what was on offer.

'It missed you,' John said, wincing at his inadvertent honesty. 'I woke up and didn't know where you'd gone.' He frowned at the paperwork, full of dense type and Sherlock's scribbled notes. He must have been reading for hours, and John eased away to stand at Sherlock’s side, the better to see him.

Reaching out, he swept a thumb along the shadows that rested under Sherlock's eyes. 'You didn't sleep at all, did you?'

Sherlock nudged his cheek into his palm, abandoning any pretence of distance as he melted into John's touch, his skin warm and his lashes like moth’s wings against John’s fingertips. It was a brief respite, as if Sherlock were offering sustenance to some starving part of himself. A moment later, he steeled his spine and straightened up, leaving John to hover in his personal space, close, but not touching.

A grimace twisted those full lips as he tapped his pencil against the page. 'No. I harassed Mycroft until he agreed to send over everything pertaining to the Cunninghams.' He shrugged, meeting John's gaze. 'I thought I could find something he didn't. Something that would let us...' He pursed his lips, trailing off and pressing the heel of his palm over one eye.

John swallowed, hearing everything Sherlock didn't say out loud. Perhaps voicing sentiment had never been his strong suit, but Sherlock made himself clear through his actions: his acceptance of John in his bed and now this – his search for a weakness in the legal chains that held them in place. He was not pretending problems didn't exist, but nor was he leaving anything in Mycroft's hands. This was Sherlock finding the strength to take control of his fate, and John's heart sang to see him so determined.

He wanted to bend his head and capture that full mouth, to press his gratitude into Sherlock's lips and skin, but if he started now, he wouldn’t be able to stop. He could be many things for Sherlock, but he would not allow himself to become a distraction – not when it really mattered.

Still, he felt too fierce with hope and relief to restrain himself completely, and he settled for a quick, rough kiss to Sherlock's temple before stepping back. 'Take me through it,' he urged, already turning towards the kettle, moving through the familiar ritual by rote as they fell back on old routines.

Sherlock ran a hand through his hair, getting to his feet and leaning against the surface by John's elbow as he made tea. 'The Cunninghams have been thorough, though how much of it is them and how much it's their legal representation remains in doubt. Mycroft's been rigorous in any rebuttal: it's a complete stalemate. Neither party can do anything of any merit. Mycroft's blocked from approaching the family, either in person or via an intermediary in his employ, and they are not permitted to approach me in any respect, be it verbally, in writing, or physically.'

John frowned as he put some bread in the toaster, collecting together fruit and breakfast meats on the plate. It wasn't often he got more than a hurried bowl of cereal in the morning before dashing off to
work or chasing after Sherlock; he planned to make the most of what was available. 'Seems unlike Mycroft to back himself into a corner like that.' He angled the plate towards Sherlock, hiding a smile as those long fingers plucked up some grapes.

Sherlock ate them with a scowl, his gaze focused more inside his own head than on his surroundings. 'It was deliberate. There's a statutory time-limit. If I'd chosen surgery, it would be enough to get the job done without the Cunninghams interfering.'

John's stomach jolted. He looked up, wondering if Sherlock had changed his mind about his options. His fear must have been easy to read, because Sherlock caught his eye and shook his head. 'That's not what I want,' he murmured, grabbing another grape, 'and I doubt Mycroft would have let me go under the knife without protest. He can't be unaware of the potential consequences, not if he was as involved in the development of O.D.X as I suspect. He left me free to make my own choice, but he would not have allowed me to undergo a dangerous procedure without at least expressing his opposition.' The corners of Sherlock's eyes crinkled in a weary smile. ‘No more than you would.’

John ducked his head, nodding. ‘We couldn't stop you if you set your mind to it. We might try, but...' He shrugged. It would be so easy to take it a step too far, to help Sherlock do anything, no matter how stupid, all in the name of his absolute autonomy: indulgent in all the worst ways.

'Just because you can do something, doesn't mean you should,' Sherlock pointed out. 'Mycroft thinks half of the choices I make fit into that category. He believes I enforce my decisions, even if they're the wrong ones, because the freedom to do so is a novelty.’

'Don't you?' John asked, raising an eyebrow as he thought of a number of crime scenes and break-ins where Sherlock's actions had been more results-oriented than sensible.

'I did at first.' He smirked, his honesty dark at its edges. ‘To many, my young adulthood seemed permissive. I experienced my childhood unimpeded, attended university; I enjoyed a freedom very few others of my gender ever would. Perhaps people thought I'd get it out of my system, rather than acquiring a taste for it. Instead...' He waved a hand, indicating his situation as a whole: his escape and rebellion against the role society dictated he should accept. 'It was challenging, once I no longer answered to Alexander, to place any form of restriction on myself. I learnt, eventually. At least in those few areas of life where it matters.’

John put his plate on the kitchen island, hopping up on the stool and humming in thanks when Sherlock set a cup of tea down by his hand. He took a mouthful of breakfast, chewing and swallowing as he turned Sherlock's statement over in his mind.

Before he discovered Sherlock was an Omega, John had found his lack of boundaries refreshing. Unlike everyone else he met, Sherlock didn't fuck about with what was acceptable. He did things and damned the consequences, pushing the edge of “within reason” to its limits. Now he realised that this facet of Sherlock’s behaviour, like so many others, had its roots in the life he’d lived with Alexander.

Omegas weren’t encouraged to moderate themselves. All the responsibility for control fell on the Alpha, and Sherlock was living proof of how dangerous that could be. He was by no means weak in body or will, and yet he had ended up a victim. He’d found what it took to save himself from Alexander’s tyranny, but how many others out there didn’t have that strength?

John's hand tightened around his fork, and he twitched when Sherlock's fingers ghosted over his wrist, sliding across his ulnar process and following the ridge of his knuckles. That grey gaze flickered over his face, reading everything, and John shook his head, turning his back on the subject. He couldn't think about others, not now, not when their situation turned the air around them heavy
with dread.

‘You and Mycroft work in remarkably similar ways, sometimes.’ When John raised his eyebrow in question, Sherlock gave a crooked little smile. ‘Neither of you are so foolish as to forbid me from a course of action. Instead, you offer preferable alternatives.’

John scratched the back of his neck, his ears growing hot at the coy mention of his suggestions: himself, in one form or another and for all that he was worth. ‘What was Mycroft’s?’ he asked, squinting in thought. ‘The O.D.X?’

Sherlock stole a piece of bread off John’s plate, eating it in silence before taking a sip of his tea. He watched John over the rim, quiet and thoughtful, before shaking his head. ‘The drug’s a tool, not a solution. My brother’s methods are rarely one-dimensional, and the serum was not all he provided.’

He raised an eyebrow, and John gave a dubious scowl. ‘Me?’ he asked. ‘You think your brother intended…’ He waved a hand upwards, clearing his throat. ‘Somehow I don’t think me shagging you was what he had in mind.’

‘He was aware of my physical and mental state, knew I’d left Baker Street to spare you my influence and myself the temptation of your presence, yet he insisted you bring me the O.D.X. No doubt he fed you something, some half-truth about being the only doctor he trusted, but do you believe that was his sole motive?’ Sherlock tilted his head. ‘Perhaps some of it was happy circumstance, but I’m certain Mycroft intended for some development between us. If not, he’d have been more shocked by my implications when I called him for all this.’ He flicked his fingers at the documents scattered in front of them.

John blinked. ‘Implications?’ he repeated stupidly.

‘Nothing explicit.’ For the first time that morning, Sherlock blushed, a hint of pink resting on his cheekbones as he looked away. ‘He wanted to know if I’d made a choice – you, rather than anything else. It made no sense to keep him in the dark: not when we need his assistance.’

‘He... approves?’ John asked, still trying to get his head around Sherlock’s theory that Mycroft had, at least in part, facilitated their decision.

‘Would it make any difference if he didn’t?’

John took in the hunch of Sherlock’s shoulders and the sidelong slice of his gaze. One dark curl fell across his forehead, casting a shadow, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t see the flatness of those eyes, as if Sherlock were bracing himself for disappointment.

Pushing his plate aside, John slipped off the stool, moving to stand in front of Sherlock so that they were face-to-face. ‘As far as I’m concerned, what happens between us has nothing to do with your brother. Perhaps he gave us the opportunity, but that’s where his influence ends. Even if he opposed my presence in your life, Sherlock, I’d still be here.’ He took a deep breath. ‘It’s one less obstacle, that’s all. Easier for us to fight the Cunninghams if we don’t have to worry about Mycroft’s sticking his nose in as well.’

Sherlock sighed, blue silk whispering over bare flesh as he reached for John’s hand, twining their fingers together. A fortnight ago, if someone had asked John if Sherlock was shy about anything, he’d have struggled not to laugh. Now, there was something endearing about his uncertainty. It wouldn’t last long, John wouldn’t allow it. He wanted Sherlock to be confident of what they had and what they could be to each other, but for now it was comforting to see a reflection of his own tentative explorations.
'He'll still interfere,' Sherlock pointed out. 'It's practically his raison d'etre. As for approving, I wouldn't go that far. A relationship is about sentiment, and Mycroft abhors such things. I suspect he looked at my options and the evidence in front of him, and realised the obvious path.'

'Best out of a bad lot,' John joked, grinning as Sherlock grabbed his jumper and tugged him close. Silk and wool whispered together as Sherlock nudged at John’s nose. It was a tease of proximity, and John's blood went hot in his veins as that resonant voice rumbled between them.

'My choice.'

He made it sound like a vow, unbreakable, and the kiss that followed was the tender cling of lips, dizzying and far from demure. This was Sherlock taking him apart, deducing him through all of his senses, and John's brain stuttered offline, the faint niggle of his doubts obliterated by the wicked, intoxicating pressure of Sherlock’s mouth. It was a moment without urgency, and John seized it with both hands, creasing silk and feeling the heat of Sherlock's naked body beneath the thin barrier of cloth.

John’s cock thickened, twitching in interest, and his quiet hum became a moan as Sherlock arched into him, his robe doing very little to hide his matching state. The kiss changed, deepening until there was no denying the fact that they were making out in the kitchen. Hands began to wander as the edges of the world contracted, the horizons narrowing down to just the two of them.

God, even like this, with his Omega biology neutralised, Sherlock's sensuality was enough to derail John’s mind and render everything else meaningless.

Almost.

Sherlock made a fretful sound, breaking away and resting his brow against John's. The fine tremor of his body telegraphed itself wherever they touched, and he drunkenly admired Sherlock’s unmasked longing. There was nothing choreographed in the whisper of his panting breaths or the darkness of his eyes. The sultry flutter of his lashes was as involuntary as the tightening of John's fist in Sherlock’s lapel, and those full lips gleamed, swollen and spit-slicked.

Yet with that glimmer of space came a wraith of restraint. It seeped in between them: Sherlock’s clarity wouldn't last forever, and there were more pressing issues at hand. Besides, John thought as he willed his erection to subside, he was old enough to understand that physical intimacy was only one tool used in the construction of a relationship. Just because they couldn't spend the time pleasing each other, it didn't mean that this – whatever it was – had to be put on hold.

'I'm sorry,' Sherlock murmured, his hand resting against John's cheek as he drew back, half-turning towards the laptop. He looked torn, divided between the need to turn his mind to the problems they faced and the desire to be with John. It was a flattering realisation, to know that he had the ability to distract Sherlock, one of the most disciplined men John had ever met, at least when it came to the Work.

'I should...'

'I know.' John pressed himself up on tiptoes, kissing Sherlock's cheek before stepping back, making the decision Sherlock couldn't. 'You don't have to apologise.' He blinked off the haze of lust and analysed the flicker of Sherlock's expression. It was a mixture of rational and irrational, as if logically, he knew John wouldn't fight him on this, but instinctively, he expected an argument.

Any words of reassurance probably wouldn't have much impact, and John sighed as he forced himself to swallow them back. All he could do was make sure that, in his actions, he broadcast a
clear message: he was nothing like Alexander. He wouldn’t punish Sherlock for being himself.

'Anything I can do?' he asked, grimacing at the half-finished tea, cold and unpalatable now. 'Help you read through? Maybe I'll catch something you've missed.' It seemed unlikely. Sherlock's focus was absolute, and his knowledge of the workings of the elite was far superior to John's own. Still, he wanted to do what he could.

'A fresh perspective might not be a bad idea.' Sherlock's fingers trailed along John's arm as he let him go. Reluctance was clear in the angle of his body as he brought the hibernating laptop screen back to life with the press of a key. 'You're looking for anything that could be used as a weakness.'

John pursed his lips, biting back the doubt that he'd recognise such a thing if he saw it as he took a seat at Sherlock's side and pulled the nearest stack of papers close. They were still warm from the printer, unrumpled by use as he began to read, scowling as he tried to unravel the dense legalise. He bent his mind to the task at hand, but kept getting tangled up in the language. It didn't take him long to realise that Sherlock, after being named at the beginning, was entitled "the asset", as if they were fighting over property. Legally, that was precisely what Sherlock was, but it made John sick to see it in black and white.

By the time he got to the end of the transcript, his head was swimming and the heat of his temper pressed against his skin from the inside, coating his tongue in bitter fury. Worse, he was no better off for it. All he'd managed to do was cement the suspicion that, when it came to transactions about Omegas, both Mycroft and the Cunninghams had access to skilful lawyers. John wasn't unintelligent, but his mind wasn't the tool for this job. Anything he discovered would be a stroke of luck, and he sighed in frustration before grabbing another pile.

They sat there for what felt like hours, Sherlock's fingers tapping over the computer keyboard or skimming over a passage before falling still. More than once, John found himself staring, rapt by Sherlock's profile as he worked, but every time he dragged his eyes away, forcing them to focus on the neat monochrome font that filled his world.

At some point, he began to lean, drawn in by Sherlock's warmth, and by the time John cast yet another endless piece of legal wrangling aside, they were propping each other up, their shoulders touching, absently offering each other comfort as they continued their futile search.

'There's nothing in any of this.' He sighed, dropping the stack of pages onto the counter with a slap. ‘At least I don't think so, though to be honest the answer could have been staring me in the face and I might not have realised it.'

'Unlikely,' Sherlock murmured. 'The web of legality is well-formed. I've been checking references back to previous contracts, looking for any false suppositions, but there are none. There's nothing here that could break the Cunninghams' claim in the eyes of the law.'

John rested his head on Sherlock's shoulder, rubbing a hand over his eyes in an effort to shift the headache that camped in his skull. A minute later, he straightened, reaching for a plain, beige folder set apart from everything else.

'No.' Sherlock's hand shot out, and John jumped in surprise as he grabbed his wrist. 'Not that one.'

Narrowing his eyes, John glanced at the innocuous dossier before turning back, noting the absolute seriousness of Sherlock’s expression. 'Why not?'

'You're already angered by the terminology used in all this and frustrated by our lack of progress. That's the evidence detailing Alexander's abuse.' Sherlock licked his lips, but he didn't look away.
'You're not in an ideal frame of mind to explore its contents.'

John froze, his stomach writhing with a toxic mixture of emotion. He could see, even from this angle, the edges of glossy photograph paper shielded by the covers, pictures as well as God knew what else. Part of him wanted to understand Alexander's methods and their consequences, if only so he was prepared to face any obstacles Sherlock's past might throw up in the path of their future. Yet at the same time he wished he could burn it, as if wiping away the evidence could annihilate the event from history and undo its damage.

In the end, he sucked in a deep breath, dragging his eyes away. He twisted his hand, and Sherlock allowed him to shift, catching those long fingers and folding them in the bowl of his palm. 'Better I read it than you,' John pointed out. Yet even as he said it, he wondered if Sherlock would react typically to the proof of what he had endured. Would he find it distressing, or would he apply the same distance he used at crime scenes?

Sherlock shook his head. 'It's irrelevant. The evidence of Alexander's behaviour is all about leverage. In theory, it's the tool we use to appeal to the Cunninghams, or to provide in court to press charges. Nothing in there impacts any of –' He waved his hands at the contracts and declarations arrayed before them. ' – this.'

John watched as Sherlock bowed his head, rubbing a hand over the blank canvas at the nape of his neck as if trying to dispel lingering tension. Lines of stress etched their way into his face and his lips were pursed in hopeless annoyance.

Deliberately, John set aside his concerns about the file. Sherlock was right: it wasn't important. What mattered was keeping Sherlock at his best, and John got to his feet, tugging on his hand and urging him to follow. He did so on autopilot, abandoning his perch, his bare feet making no sound on the tiles as he followed.

'Where are we going?' he asked.

'You need a quick break,' John replied, looking over his shoulder and taking in Sherlock's rumpled state, 'and we could both do with a shower.'

Sherlock grunted, his eyes unfocussed as if he'd left half his mind in front of the laptop. 'You can go first. I should probably –' He gestured behind him, and John stopped, pursing his lips. Sherlock was still thinking about problems and solutions. That would explain why he'd failed to take their changed surroundings into account. They weren't in Baker Street, with its one bathroom. A house this size was bound to have several showers, and even if it didn't, there was one other option Sherlock hadn't considered.

'Or... we could share?' John said it lightly, trying not to sound as if his heart was thumping wildly in his chest. He had no idea whether casual intimacy was something Sherlock would find appealing or revolting. He leaned into touches readily enough, but was there a line drawn there that John was unaware of, some kind of boundary he shouldn't cross?

Sherlock blinked, and a brief flash of intrigue had John re-evaluating his uncertainties. Obviously, Sherlock hadn't put it forward because he hadn't considered the possibility. It spoke volumes of the lack of affection in his bond, right from the start, and John wondered how anyone could have Sherlock and not cherish him.

'Come on.' He tugged Sherlock's hand again. 'You don't have to get in with me if you don't want, but there are some things we need to talk about, and it's not like you didn't get a good look at me last night.'
'It was quite dark actually,' Sherlock pointed out, ever the logical one. Yet his tone was far from disinterested, and John grinned as Sherlock took the lead, heading through the house with familiar confidence before pushing open a door to reveal the bathroom. It wasn't palatial or pretentious, but it did have a large, independent shower, as well as a gargantuan bath that looked like it was more for show than function. There were fluffy towels stacked on shelves along one wall, and John pulled a face at his reflection in the mirror over the sink.

'You could have told me my hair was sticking up all over the place,' he complained, trying to flatten the spikes before turning to the shower and staring at the unfamiliar taps. It took a few tries, but he managed to get the flow of water to the right temperature before peeling off his clothes.

He did it without hesitation, pushing aside his embarrassment. Years as a soldier and a doctor had given him a fairly blasé attitude towards nudity, but Sherlock saw everything. What the shadows hid before, the daylight threw into sharp relief, and there was still a thrash of nervousness lingering in his stomach at being so exposed.

Stepping into the enclosure, he waited, making a show of checking the water’s temperature and keeping his back turned to the room: the only modesty he would allow himself as he wondered what Sherlock would do. He'd meant what he said, if Sherlock didn't want to share, then John wasn't going to make him feel like he had no choice. Still, he couldn't ignore the flash of pleased relief when he heard the chime of the glass door opening again and sensed Sherlock's presence slip in behind him.

'All right?' John asked, smirking as Sherlock hummed in pleasure. A long expanse of naked skin pressed against his back, and Sherlock wrapped his arms over John's chest, giving him time to pull away from the embrace if he wanted before enveloping him completely.

It was good, not just erotic but safe. John was used to being the caretaker in his relationships, regardless of the gender of his partners. It was a pattern he fell into with natural ease, one that was pretty obvious in the way he treated Sherlock, even when they were just flatmates: trying to get him to eat and sleep, tending wounds and soothing ruffled feathers. Yet for the first time, John could see how fluid the roles could be – a shifting landscape of cooperation, rather than rigid constraints to tie them in place.

Sherlock’s weight against him steadily increased as steam billowed around them, easing away stress and unwinding taut muscles with phantom fingers. John held him up without question, humming as Sherlock’s hands stroked over his nipples, down across the give of his stomach and around to the ridge of his hip bones. They lingered there before trailing inwards, and John leant back, his eyes fluttering closed as Sherlock's right hand slid down between his legs.

John's breathing shattered, harsh amidst the solid percussion of the water. With every moment, his cock hardened from an inoffensive handful of flesh to its full size, filling Sherlock's appreciative grasp. He could feel Sherlock's gaze on him, that pointed chin resting on his shoulder and his soft lips brushing against John's neck as he started to stroke.

'You don't have to –' John's protest died as Sherlock twisted his foreskin around the head, sending a new wave of sparks along his nerves before rolling it back, his fingers sweeping the crown.

'I want to,' Sherlock said, his voice a deep purr of promise that was John’s undoing. Sherlock last night had been beautiful and glorious, lost in his need, not lacking in reciprocation but very much John's to satisfy – and he had loved it. This, though, this was another side of Sherlock's sensuality: strong and in control, and John would be lying if it wasn't a whole different kind of thrilling.

Blinking open his eyes, he looked down, watching the bunch and flex of the muscles in Sherlock's
arm as he moved. God, how many times had he pictured this? How many times had he taken himself in hand and imagined it was Sherlock's agile fingers and broad palms tempting him closer to release? The fantasy-made-real was almost too much, and John took a deep breath of wet air, his skin prickling where the shower spray shattered itself apart on the tiles and filled the space with mist.

He bit his lip, stifling the tight sounds that caught in the hollow of his throat. Sherlock's erection pressed against his back, trapped between them, but he didn't rut against John's skin. He was concentrating on what he was doing, indifferent to his own needs as he satisfied John's. He murmured filthy encouragements, dirty talk twice as obscene in Sherlock's refined voice, and John could feel himself coming undone, his threads snapped and pulling apart.

He reached behind him, his hands slipping and clutching at Sherlock's hips and thighs, scrabbling back to squeeze his arse in clumsy appreciation. He dropped his head back onto Sherlock's shoulder, eyes closed and mouth open, panting raggedly. His hips hitched, chasing friction, and Sherlock obliged, his fist finding the perfect balance of pressure as he moved in counterpoint, prolonging each exquisite stroke.

Electric bliss ricocheted through him, knifing down to his toes and up into his brain as John came. It blanked his mind, cutting the world down to nothing but Sherlock's heat behind him, the lewd press of his cock and the slick beat of his hand, lubricated by come and water. He eased John through it, neither pulling away as some of John's more fastidious partners had done, nor carrying on too long, where pleasure gave way to sensitivity. Of course, John thought dazedly, Sherlock read the truth in everything; he should have known he'd pick up on what John needed.

He realised he was sagging against Sherlock's chest, one hand pressing bruises into his hip and the other clutching the back of Sherlock's neck, holding him tight. Right now, Sherlock's steady presence was about the only thing keeping him upright, and John allowed himself to lean, catching his breath as Sherlock smudged worshipful kisses over his neck and shoulder.

At last, he could support his own weight, and he staggered around, noting the flush on Sherlock's face that had nothing to do with the tropical bathroom air. He looked drunk with want, his pupils blown and his lips parted as John leaned up for a kiss. Sherlock's cock nudged his stomach, yet there was no bossy demand for John to reciprocate, not even a hint that it was expected, and when John murmured 'Your turn.' Sherlock's breathing stuttered in surprise.

It took him a minute to guess the reason, and when he did, his hands shook with the urge to form fists. How often had that wanker Cunningham used Sherlock for his own pleasure and left him wanting, intimacy a bargaining chip, rather than something shared? Too many times, from the looks of it.

Sherlock wasn't something broken, he didn’t need fixing, but with every moment it became more obvious that he had no idea what a good relationship should be like. That, at least, John planned to put right.

'What would you like?' he asked, his voice rough from release and emotion. He allowed himself the pleasure of watching Sherlock's mind flash, considering the possibilities, his gaze darting down to John's mouth as he licked his lips.

It was a minuscule hint, and perhaps John could look at a crime scene and see nothing but a corpse, but he'd lived with Sherlock for far too long not to have a good read on his tells. Sherlock was thinking of last night, and he hid a smug smile as he kissed the curve where Sherlock's neck met his shoulder, murmuring into damp skin, 'I need you to ask for it.'

That much wasn't a lie. The fear of misreading him – of doing something he didn't want – was a
constant presence in the back of John's mind. They'd need strategies to handle that, one way or the other, but they could discuss that later. Right now there was just Sherlock's ragged snatch of indrawn breath and his low voice framing the words John wanted to hear.

'Your mouth?'

John hummed, scraping his teeth along the ridge of Sherlock's collarbone. 'My mouth where?' He asked it innocently, his query shrouded in the guise of a game as he probed the edges of this new thing they were building between them. Sherlock had no trouble whispering filthy promises in John's ear, but when it came to asking for what he wanted, he bordered on reluctant. Too much rejection, maybe. Too many times where there just hadn't been any point - and so Sherlock stopped trying.

He wasn't a brilliant actor, but John knew how to emphasise what he already felt - how to drag it closer to the surface and put it on display. That was easy, it was hiding things that was more challenging. Now, he didn't even try. He looked up at Sherlock, wearing the heat in his cheeks like a medal, eyes soft and wanting as he skimmed his hand down Sherlock's chest. 'Here?' he asked, tracing the outline of Sherlock's stomach muscles and skirting his belly button, watching Sherlock give him the world's weakest glare for being obtuse.

Long fingers curled around his wrist, guiding his hand lower. 'Here,' he growled as John's fingers wrapped around the solid length of him, and there was the confidence John was looking for: Sherlock saying what he wanted as if he trusted John to make it happen.

He was happy to oblige.

The base of the shower was hard against his knees, but John ignored it, too engrossed in Sherlock's moan of pleasure to care about the discomfort. Besides, he doubted he'd be here long, not with Sherlock throbbing in his grip, his precome salty against John's tongue.

Absently, he considered the flavour, more aware now and able to notice the variations that wrote themselves in Sherlock's biology. John was pretty sure no one enjoyed giving a blowjob because they liked the way it tasted, but as far as these things went, Sherlock's was less bitter than others in his previous experience. Still not delicious, not by a long shot, but a bit more tolerable.

Sherlock braced his palms on either side of him: one on tile, one on glass. His teeth sank into his lip, bleaching it white as John bobbed down, taking him deeper, letting him nudge the back of his throat before drawing away, flickering his tongue and hollowing his cheeks. He couldn't do anything spectacular with his mouth, hadn't ever stuck with a male lover long enough to put in the practice, but John doubted Sherlock cared about his technique. He was gasping and hypersensitive, lost in the novelty of it as John's fingers skimmed around the inner curve of his thigh.

The viscous slide beneath his fingertips reminded him of the previous night, and John drew back from Sherlock with an obscene pop, grinning as his groan of pleasure became a complaint at the deprivation. He'd been too blinded by need, before, to take in this other facet of Sherlock's arousal: a hard dick and a wet hole. He'd explored through the sense of touch more than anything else, but now he watched, one hand still stroking Sherlock's length as he ran the fingers of the other back, finding that same, slippery dampness as before. Not as much, not this time, but getting there.

Pressing kisses to the underside of Sherlock's shaft, he inched towards the base, aware that this would be much easier if they were horizontal in bed rather than upright in the shower. He wished he could smell him, add that last puzzle piece to the sensory picture he was steadily building in his head, but this was almost enough: the taste of skin and musk, heat and longing.

Sherlock's moans turned breathless: straining, keening little noises. He shifted his feet further apart so
John could twist his head, the angle awkward but still tolerable as his tongue swept curiously through the thick fluid on Sherlock's thighs.

He expected – he didn't know – he didn't know, but the flavour seemed to bypass his taste-buds all together and hit him straight in the brain instead, taking the twitching, curious chaos of his thoughts and jolting them into alignment. His hips surged in a futile thrust, cock still soft and irrelevant, but it seemed like a meaningless detail. His hand fell from Sherlock's erection to brace himself against the shower's floor as he panted, trying to think around the weight of sudden, abrupt want. Not arousal, not quite, but a different kind of need he couldn't comprehend. All he knew was that this angle wasn't enough, not for what he wanted, and he drew back, nudging Sherlock's hips as he tried to speak.

'You need to – I want –' He stammered and stumbled, too distracted by the lingering appeal of Sherlock's taste.

Maybe Sherlock could read minds, or perhaps it was written all over John’s face, because he nodded, eager, turning around so that he could brace both hands on the glass, legs spread and his cock hanging heavy as he presented himself. He did it naturally, easily, vulnerable but willing, and John pressed shaking hands to Sherlock’s flesh, spreading him wider and taking another taste.

If it weren’t for the inhibitors, John suspected he’d be rock hard again, sod the fact that he was closer to forty than twenty-five. Sherlock wasn’t in heat, but he was still an Omega, and this was flicking all of John’s switches, slotting together hormonal puzzle pieces and filling his head with fog.

Better, so much better was Sherlock’s obvious response. Perhaps he was too turned on to be self-conscious, but his moans were filling the tight space of the shower, unabashed, his weight braced on one forearm as he stroked himself, slow at first, then faster.

He arched his back further, seeking out more contact, and John was sure his fingers were leaving bruises on the canvas of Sherlock’s skin. Yet he couldn’t loosen his grip. Something deep down in the animal part of his brain made that impossible: carnal and possessive. This was where he had to be, right here, between Sherlock’s legs, answering every twitch and moan with more, lips and tongue sweeping around and in as Sherlock came with a hoarse cry.

His body tightened, muscles corded tight beneath John’s hands as he slowed down, easing Sherlock through it. Sherlock’s thighs were drenched with his arousal, and John pulled back, pressing gentle, biting kisses into the swell of Sherlock’s arse before wiping his chin.

He was tempted to lick it off his fingers, not for the purpose of putting on a display of appreciation for his partner, but because he wanted to. The taste wasn’t delicious: a touch smoky and undoubtedly human, but the effect it had on him… It was like espresso – an indifferent flavour but a good kick of caffeine. Sherlock was a drug to him already, fulfilling something in John’s biochemistry he hadn’t known he needed.

Shakily, John got to his feet, running his hands up Sherlock’s spine and feeling the heave of his chest as he got his breath back. The steam was thick around them now, the shower still streaming, and John relished the heat as he wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s chest.

‘Tetratocin.’ Sherlock’s voice scraped over the non-sequitur, and John hummed a question, blinking as Sherlock turned around and nudged him back under the spray. The water doused his hair, making him splutter, and John squinted up at Sherlock’s face, trying not to smirk at his dazed expression.

‘It’s one of the chemicals in this.’ He ran his fingers up the inside of his thigh, tipping them to the light so that they glistened before rinsing it away. John watched, thinking he shouldn’t be
disappointed by its loss and faintly embarrassed by the fact he was.

With a great effort, he scrambled together some brain power, raking through memories of his training to try and make sense of what Sherlock was saying. ‘Tetratocin: arousal hormone, present in Omegas whether they’re in heat or not, has some structural similarities to… oh. Telikostrone.’

‘Inhibitors don’t block it as effectively, so it can still influence you. That’s why you were compelled to…’ Sherlock gestured vaguely, as if John going down on him was just a matter of biochemistry.

‘No.’ He swallowed, coordinating lazy hands to reach for the shampoo, tipping some into his palms before rubbing it through Sherlock’s hair. He didn’t try and coddle, but Sherlock was less likely to step back if John’s fingers were caught up in his curls. ‘That’s why the taste of it was so intriguing, but that’s not why I did it.’ He shrugged. ‘I liked it, and so did you.’

‘Obviously.’ There was a moment of silence, and John let it grow, allowing Sherlock to work through whatever was going on in his head. He needed the time to process what John was trying to say – to grasp the message that his pleasure was of equal importance. Sherlock knew that already, he was sure. Maybe he just didn’t quite believe it.

‘Thank you,’ Sherlock murmured at last, raising an eyebrow as John completely failed to hide his smirk.

‘Any time,’ he replied, his voice dropping just enough in promise that Sherlock’s lips twitched in a smile.

Reaching for the soap, Sherlock lathered it before smoothing the suds over John’s body, covering every inch of him from the curve of his biceps to the flaccid handful of his dick, intimate without being erotic. John let himself be cleaned, reading the emotion in the sweep of Sherlock’s hands: his dedication and tenderness. It was neither perfunctory nor a seduction; it was a way of connecting, and John returned the gesture, slowly skimming bubbles over Sherlock’s skin with patient care, taking his time as he explored the breadth and length of his body in the daylight, from the vaults of his ankles to the crown of his head.

‘Rinse?’ He gripped Sherlock’s arms, guiding him around so that they switched places, water sluicing its veils over Sherlock’s shoulders and slicking his hair. Sherlock scrubbed out the shampoo before pulling the showerhead from its bracket and directing it over John’s body, his low chuckle echoing around them as John gasped in surprise. ‘I suppose I should be grateful the water’s still warm.’

‘No hot water tank to empty out,’ Sherlock explained. ’Not like Baker Street.’ He flicked the spray over the tiles and fixtures, rinsing away the evidence of their activities before looking at John. ‘Are you ready to get out?’

He wanted to say no, to keep Sherlock here with him in the dense mist and pretend nothing awaited their attention, but it couldn’t work like that. He’d told Sherlock they needed to talk, and he was painfully aware that they’d said very little since stumbling into the bathroom.

With a nod, he stepped out of the shower, grabbing two thick towels and wrapping one around his waist. Behind him, Sherlock turned off the taps, and John handed the spare towel over, watching him dry himself with the fluffy fabric.

As soon as he was done, Sherlock opened the bathroom door, heading towards the bedroom and the clean clothes that awaited him there. John followed behind, his lips pursed. He needed to know what Sherlock expected of him: needed consent laid down in black and white before he could question Sherlock’s capacity to provide it. It was a matter of logistics as much as anything else, and John took
a breath as he padded along in Sherlock’s wake, glancing at the nest of the bed and wishing he could crawl back into its depths.

‘What exactly did you want to talk about?’ Sherlock asked, and John had to give him credit for broaching the topic. At least he wasn’t backing down or ignoring John’s earlier statement, but then he never had been one to turn away from such things.

John cleared his throat, scratching at the back of his neck as he hesitated. There really was no other way to ask but come out with it, and he braced himself as he blurted it out.

‘Do you want me to keep taking the inhibitors?’ He winced at the bluntness of the query, a bit more forceful than he intended. He hadn’t meant to make it sound like a challenge. ‘What I mean is, the O.D.X is going to run out eventually. If – if you want my help when it does...’

It felt presumptuous, asking this, and John reminded himself that this man had wanked him off in the shower and come apart beneath the stroke of his tongue not fifteen minutes ago. How could he feel so comfortable with that, but so awkward talking about Sherlock’s heat?

Those silver eyes watched him, the sated haze from the shower gone. This was him as close to top form as he could get in the current circumstances – reading John like a short book with big letters. A flush of embarrassment stained Sherlock’s cheeks, disconcerted by the directness of the conversation, perhaps.

‘You’re offering your knot.’ It wasn’t really a question, but the upward tilt at the end made it sound like one.

‘If you want it,’ John replied. He couldn’t emphasise that point enough. Need would play a part in Sherlock’s decision, of that he was sure, but at least here, in the calm before the storm, he could make his choice with a clear head. ‘If – if you do, then I need to stop taking the inhibitors, or I won’t be able to...’ He trailed off, feeling ridiculous as he sat on the edge of the bed. He was a doctor for God’s sake, but clinical language had no place here, and John didn’t know how else to put it.

At his side, the mattress dipped, and when Sherlock spoke, it was in the steady tone of someone who knew themselves and their limits. ‘I could manage. If it was a case of a stranger’s knot or none at all, I’d cope without.’ He licked his lips, his gaze sliding away as he stared at the floor. ‘But I don’t have to, do I?’

John looked at him, a gnarled twist of hope catching in his chest. He’d expected more hesitance, more embarrassed fluster. Instead Sherlock was watching him out of the corner of his eye, almost breathless as he waited for an answer.

‘No,’ he murmured. ‘I mean, I’m not going to lie, helping you isn't without its benefits to me,’ He smiled as Sherlock gave a wry huff of laughter. ‘but I don't want you to think that's why I'm asking. I –’ He stuttered to a halt, sucking in a breath before straightening out his thoughts. ‘I could happily go the rest of my life without the kind of sex where knots come into play. If you didn't need it, I wouldn't miss it. You don’t have to say yes to keep me happy.’

He waited for Sherlock to meet his gaze again, seeing the dart of his thoughts like clouds over moonlight.

‘I know. I – if you’re willing to provide it, I’d appreciate your –’ Sherlock hesitated, his blush intensifying as he struggled to find a suitable word. ‘– company.’

John bit back a smile, ducking his head and rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. ‘Right, so...
No more inhibitors then?'

Sherlock sucked in a breath, straightening his shoulders as he cast off the awkwardness of their conversation, taking comfort in the facts. 'Mycro will have given you the whole packet of Petrapenzone. If I remember correctly, there are three levels of the drug. Green’s a complete inhibitor; it'll be the one you're using. Yellow is a variant: it doesn't prevent a knot, but it does act as a contraceptive.' He shrugged. ‘We’ll be needing that, unless you have any alternative supplies?'

John shook his head. ‘If I had, I would have used them last night.’ He clutched the towel around his waist and got to his feet. 'I'll go and find out what we’ve got. I left my bag in the living room anyway, along with all my clean clothes. I'll see you downstairs in a minute?'

He waited for Sherlock's nod of agreement before padding around the bed and slipping out of the door, letting out a sigh as he shut it behind him. Embarrassment's heat lingered in his face, and he grinned to himself as he headed down the stairs.

It felt good to be on the same page. Most of John’s relationships, when new, were coy and uncertain, full of benign secrets. However, they couldn't ignore the fact that Sherlock had a different set of needs than any of John's previous lovers. It wasn't just about satisfying a kink. Sherlock’s biology had the potential to be uncompromising in its demands, and they needed to be sure what they were doing before he reached that point.

Reaching his bag, he pulled free his clothes, slipping into them without conscious thought. The curtains were still open, but there was no one close enough to the house to get an eyeful, and he went through the motions of pulling fabric over his body before reaching for the Pentrapenzone.

Just as Sherlock said, there were two other colours, and a quick read of the leaflet told John everything. The red, the one Sherlock hadn’t mentioned, was a scrubber, something to reset him to his basic Alpha state, but it was unnecessary. If he took the yellow pill now, his body would adjust to the change in chemicals over the next twenty-four hours, rendering him capable of a knot when Sherlock needed it, but as good as infertile for as long as he was dosing.

Reality sank in, and John’s shoulders heaved with a sigh as he stared at the box. There was a basic logic to their situation. Before long, Sherlock would need a knot – it was that or suffer an intensifying cycle of need and illness – and John could provide that, but it wasn’t just a case of compatible biology. Sherlock's pheromones would give his Alpha nature free reign. For the first time, he'd know for sure if he could control himself in the heat of the moment, or if, when it came down to it, he wasn't that much different from Alexander after all: instinct over-ruling everything else.

Now, in the cold light of day and without Sherlock at his side, that seemed like an intolerable risk. Tapping the packet against his palm, he headed through to the kitchen. He hadn’t heard Sherlock come downstairs, but there he was, dressed in trousers and a dark shirt. For once, there was no paperwork in his hands. Instead, he was frowning out of the window, lost in thought.

Reaching out, John brushed his fingers against Sherlock’s elbow to get his attention, waiting for fogged eyes to find their focus before motioning with the box of inhibitors. ‘You sure about this?’

Sherlock raised an eyebrow, examining John from head to toe and back again in a single sweep. ‘Are you?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. The flicker of his gaze took in every doubt, and John held his breath as Sherlock described what he saw. ‘You’re afraid you’ll lose control, that you’ll be reduced to an imperative and little else.’ He faced him fully, taking a step closer and cupping John’s elbows in his hands. ‘That if I tell you to stop, you won’t listen.’
"Something like that," he admitted. "When Mike exposed me to Telikostrone it wasn’t exactly promising, and then there was the way I reacted when I woke up to find you gone. I – I wasn’t myself."

Sherlock drew a breath, hesitating before he spoke. "Every time I have expected you to behave in a typical Alpha fashion, you have shown remarkable restraint, and I don’t just mean these past few days. Even back at the start, when Alexander invaded the flat, you never fell back on instinct. You should have been violent from the outset, but you weren’t. You used force strategically, no more."

"But there was nothing like an Omega’s scent clouding my judgement, Sherlock. That’s the unknown, that’s what I’ve just had hints of..." He swallowed, his voice quiet. "I don’t want to hurt you."

Warm hands rubbed up his arms, rasping over his shirt sleeves. "You won’t. If you don’t trust yourself, will you trust me?" he asked, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "I know you struggle to believe it, but I can stop you doing anything I don’t want, even in the midst of pyresus. Especially now, when I’m at full strength – not weakened by a run of unsatisfied cycles."

"It’s not down to you to stop me. That’s not how it should be!"

"It won’t come to that." Sherlock lifted his chin, his expression matching the certainty in his voice. "I’m merely providing reassurance." He pulled the box of Pentrapenzone from John’s grasp, sliding free the pack and popping out a yellow tablet. "Take it, and stop fussing. If I wasn’t confident you can handle yourself in the midst of rut, I wouldn’t have considered your offer, let alone accepted it."

John stood there, watching Sherlock making the tea as he turned the pill over in his fingers, considering his options. Really, he didn’t have many to choose from. All he could do was hope for the best and, when the time came, do everything in his power to maintain his control.

Sherlock had faith in John’s restraint, that much was clear. John just hoped it wasn’t misplaced.

Swallowing the pill dry, he accepted his cup of tea from Sherlock, taking a sip of scalding liquid to ease the tablet on its way. Sherlock set his own mug down with a clank, shuffling the pages on the surface into loose piles.

His face was pinched: no doubt all their talk of his next pyresus had only reminded him that they were running out of time. With something as untested as the O.D.X there was no telling when Sherlock’s biology would overwhelm him. They had to make every second count.

With a sigh, John joined him, separating the documents he’d already looked at versus the stuff he’d yet to explore. There was heaps of it, dense paragraphed-text with wide margins, slips of notes, even what looked like old, personal letters: negotiations between the Holmes and Cunningham families for the original bond.

"It’s hard to believe this is all about you," he murmured, running a hand through his hair and perching on the stool at Sherlock’s side before taking up the most recent file, the one that stalemate them all. "They’ve done everything they can to stop Mycroft arguing your case."

Sherlock hummed in agreement. "Naturally. They’re not –" He cut himself off abruptly, his eyes narrowing before he turned to John. "Wait, what did you just say?"

He looked up, frowning in confusion. "‘They’ve done everything they can?’"

‘No, the bit before that. You said it’s all about me.’ Sherlock sat down, tugging the page free from John’s grip and scanning its contents. A moment later he reached for another report, then another, searching each one intently.
John held his breath, the moment crystallising around him as he wondered if this was it. Had Sherlock finally found something he could use, something that would flip this whole situation on its head?

‘You’re right, the documents are precise and uncompromising in regards to my brother.’ He set the papers down, staring blankly at the far wall. ‘Mycroft can’t plead my case to the Cunninghams, not anymore.’

‘But...?’

Sherlock turned to him, triumph gleaming in his eyes even as trepidation made itself known in the slant of his brow and the tension in his spine. His teeth scraped over his lip, a flash of ivory against pink flesh before he straightened up, lifting his chin in pure defiance.

‘But I can.’
‘You?’ John’s pulse thumped in his ears, his muscles rigid with surprise. ‘You plan to confront Alexander’s family?’ He folded his arms and lowered his chin, mulish. ‘You must be joking.’

Sherlock rolled his eyes as if he had expected an argument but was disappointed by it all the same. ‘All this documentation focuses on keeping Mycroft and his peons away from them, blocking him from showing them further evidence of Alexander’s conduct. Not once have they mentioned me as anything other than a passive object. There is nothing here that bars me from approaching them.’

‘What about common sense?’ John lifted his eyebrows, his jaw tight. ‘These people will sell you to the highest bidder if they can get their hands on you!’

‘Then why haven’t they tried?’ Sherlock whirled around, pacing, just as he did when the solution of a case was coming into focus before his eyes. ‘Think, John. It’s been weeks since Alexander’s death, and for the majority of that time, I was unprotected in Baker Street. It’s not as if they would have had any problem finding me.’

‘But Mycroft set it up so that they couldn’t take you. It was all written into the contract.’ John waved a hand at the pages: black on white all around them.

Sherlock shook his head, steepling his fingers and pressing them to his lips. ‘That was a tenuous threat. Mycroft knew as much. He warned us that they might try something underhanded to get hold of me – abduction and so forth – and if they did, they could have me sold and bound before anyone had a chance to retaliate. All of Mycroft’s machinations relied on the honour and integrity of the Cunninghams. It only worked because they played by the rules.’

John shrugged, the movement a sharp jerk as he tried to work out where Sherlock was going with this. ‘So, what? We should be grateful they did the decent thing?’ The question escaped him in a faint snarl, his lips twisting. ‘That they respected Mycroft’s demands but didn’t give a damn about what you wanted?’

A cool hand rested on the back of his wrist as Sherlock stopped in front of him, calm and logical in the face of John’s anger. ‘Considering their son’s actions, their behaviour was by no means certain.’ His grip tightened, encouraging John to meet his eyes. ‘One might assume that the threat of bringing Alexander’s misdemeanours to light is enough to keep them in line, but they must be aware that exposing his crimes would not do me any favours: a long legal battle with no control over the outcome.’

John pursed his lips, shaking his head. ‘I don’t get it. Are you saying that it’s not the promise of dragging it to court that’s keeping them away?’

‘I’m saying it’s not the whole story.’ Sherlock straightened his shoulders, and John watched him lay out the details as if he were explaining the facts to the dubious officers at the Yard. ‘Remember when I was recovering from the broken bond, and Mycroft complained about Alexander’s Alpha mother?
How she seemed unable to accept any of his allegations could be true?’

‘Vaguely.’

‘Look around you.’ Sherlock flicked his fingers towards the stacks of paperwork. ‘She opposed the idea that her son may have committed any wrongdoing, but there’s nothing here that states Alexander’s innocence. They’re in denial, but they’re not fighting Mycroft’s claims. Why not? Why wouldn’t you defend a family member, even a dead one, against such accusations?’

John sighed, knotting his fingers in his lap as he tried to come up with an answer. He wasn’t like Sherlock, he couldn’t take disparate information and weave a comprehensible picture from it, but this wasn’t a crime scene. It was human action and reaction, empathy and understanding. If it was him in the Cunninghams’ place, his disbelief would make him righteous. There was no way he could stand by and hope it went away, not unless…

‘They think there’s a chance that what Mycroft’s saying is true.’ He looked up at Sherlock, a chill racing down his spine. ‘They’re not kicking up a fuss, because they’re afraid any effort to prove Alexander’s innocence might highlight his guilt instead.’

‘And they’d be right.’ Sherlock stepped away, his eyes flashing as his mind raced a mile-a-minute. ‘Mycroft said himself that sentiment had come into play. Perhaps that’s something we can use. As far as the law goes, we have nothing; we knew that from the start, despite our hopes to the contrary. No, we have to appeal to the Cunninghams directly. When you strip away everything else, they’re the ones who will decide what becomes of me.’

‘You’re hoping to appeal to their sympathies.’ John scrubbed his hand over his face, his stomach cramping in disbelief. Perhaps Sherlock couldn’t see this for what it was: a last, desperate bid for freedom – doomed to failure. He shook his head, hopping down from the stool and intercepting Sherlock’s pacing as he tried to find the words to express the cavalry of his doubts. ‘You think you can sway them into letting you go. Sherlock…’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, John. This isn’t about turning up on their doorstep and making a plea for mercy.’ He sneered as if repulsed by the thought of something so imprecise. ‘It’s about proving they have no other choice – demonstrating that they’re better off without me.’ He grinned: a wicked slice of dark mirth.

‘And if it doesn’t work?’ John asked, reaching for Sherlock’s wrists, manacling them with his fingers as if he could stop him from flying off into disaster. ‘If you can’t manipulate the situation to your advantage, what then? You’re behind enemy lines without an extraction plan. Like you said, they’ll have you bound before anyone can blink.’

‘Who said I was without an extraction plan?’ Sherlock pulled one hand free and reached behind him. A faint click of metal, and the brutal shape of the Sig pressed against John’s palm, still warm from Sherlock’s skin. This time, it was not an unbalanced mimicry of threat, impotent and unloaded. The clip sat in its proper place, and John glanced at it before meeting Sherlock’s gaze. ‘I made Mycroft’s men bring up the ammunition along with all this.’ He indicated the laptop and printer. ‘They were reluctant at first, but complied when I stated that Captain Watson would prefer to be armed in case of a threat. If anything goes wrong, you’ll have the advantage.’

‘As your bodyguard?’

Sherlock shrugged. ‘If you like. However, it’s not just me who could be in danger. So far, your existence has remained under the Cunninghams’ radar, relatively speaking. Your presence will remove any doubt that your role in my life is a considerable one, and that the part you play is no
longer platonic.’ Silver eyes danced over John’s frame, and he leaned closer. His lips hovered a bare inch from John’s throat as he inhaled his scent. It was pointed and possessive, a demonstration that made John’s knees tremble.

His voice escaped him in a strangled groan, intoxicated anew by Sherlock’s proximity. It was as if they were walking some new line, one that blurred what they had always been – friends, colleagues, flatmates and some unknown, unlabelled essential – and what they were now: partners in almost every sense of the word.

It took all of John’s willpower to sway back rather than lean in, and he clung stubbornly to his concerns. Sherlock had been bewitching him into courses of action that went against his better judgement since the day they met, but this... If this was going to stand even the faintest chance of success, then they both had to be aware of the situation. He couldn’t be one step behind and in the dark, not any more.

‘You can’t be blind to how risky this is,’ he managed. ‘You’re playing right into their hands.’

‘They won’t expect me to walk into their midst. If nothing else, we’ll have the element of surprise. Besides, they’re human: emotional and fallible.’ Sherlock shrugged. ‘Grieving relatives who are easy targets for manipulation.’ He straightened up, every inch the cold, distant man who strode through London with confident ease. ‘This isn’t some blind effort to appeal to their sensibilities. It’s not action without strategy.’ His lips tilted, his smile small and secretive: a shared joke. ‘Could be dangerous.’

‘There’s no "could be" about it,’ John pointed out, tucking the Sig into the back of his jeans. It was the wrong kind of threat to push his buttons, Sherlock knew that as well as he did. It was not the clean slice of survival – not blood and flesh and pain. It was emotional, personal, and the odds were not in their favour. ‘Nothing I can say is going to stop you, is it?’ He watched Sherlock’s face, gleaning the glimmers of apology and determination that tilted the angles of his features.

‘No.’ He turned away, his lips pressed together before he returned his gaze to John’s, his honesty stark. ‘No, if you try, I’ll wait for an opportune moment and go alone.’

He would as well, John knew Sherlock too well to doubt that. ‘That’s not what’s going to happen.’ His hands clenched into fists as his mind slid from one possibility to the next. ‘We could at least take some of Mycroft’s men.’ He raised his voice as Sherlock started shaking his head. ‘They’re right there, well-trained and at our disposal. Leaving them behind would be stupid.’

‘Even if they did agree to accompany us, which is unlikely considering the instructions I’m sure they received from my brother, it puts us back on legally complicated ground.’ He ran a hand through his hair, the other resting on his hip as he repeated himself. ‘No one under my brother’s employ is permitted to approach the family, remember? He is responsible for their pay, and he is the one giving the orders. They can’t come with us, John. We’re on our own.’

‘And how do you know the Cunninghams won’t decide I’m one of your brother’s hired guns?’

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. ‘They might try and take that path. However, they would have to prove it, and anyone who does any digging will find that you declined my brother’s invitation of employment the one and only time it was offered.’

A flash of memory: the cold car-park, his cane in his grasp, and Mycroft Holmes playing the part of an arch-nemesis to perfection. ‘It was more a bribe than an job offer,’ he pointed out.

‘Regardless, you aren’t under Mycroft’s control, so it’s not a concern.’ Sherlock brushed his
thumbnail over his bottom lip, his gaze fogged with consideration. ‘I can’t be sure whether he’s blocked me from leaving or if I’m free to come and go. As such, it’s better to depart unnoticed. If Mycroft has an inkling of what we’re planning, he’ll stop us.’

‘Isn’t that proof that this is a bad idea?’

Sherlock paused as John’s words hovered in the air, reproachful. ‘If you have another plan, then now is the perfect time to share it.’

It was the emotion in his voice that made John hesitate. Rough-edged and carrying a well-hidden hint of desperation, those words hammered home the truth. Sherlock might act like this was all some kind of game – a thrilling case to solve – but it was just that: an act. There was far more on the line than his professional pride. He wasn’t suggesting this for the fun of it. It was the only vaguely acceptable method of escape he could devise, and John didn’t have the right to stop him. All he could do was be there to help with the damage control.

‘Well?’

John bowed his head, pressing his hand over his eyes. He wished he had an answer or, failing that, could say something that would give Sherlock the inspiration to see a new way forward, but he had nothing.

At last, he dropped his arm, shaking his head and dragging in a deep breath. A tentative tap on his shoulder made him look up, and he took comfort in the smooth confidence of Sherlock’s expression. John may have his doubts, but if Sherlock had any, he’d rationalised them away.

‘In that case, you need to be ready to go in fifteen minutes,’ Sherlock commanded, grabbing the beige dossier from the surface and turning away. ‘No later, all right?’

He didn’t wait for a reply, disappearing into the depths of the house and leaving John standing in the kitchen. He was already dressed and prepared to leave at a moment’s notice. He had his gun, it would take a few seconds to grab his coat, and that would be that. Whatever preparations Sherlock was making, John had no part in them, and he rounded his shoulders as he tried to calm the jitter of anxiety in his gut.

It felt too much like Afghanistan, waiting for a battle to begin. Except this time there would be no bullets, not unless he was the one pulling the trigger. At least then he’d known what he was facing: insurgents, troops, people following orders. Pointless in so many ways, but this... This was different. Sherlock acted like he had it all under control, but John wasn’t daft. He could see there were too many variables for even Sherlock to deduce. This wasn’t a case: victim, perpetrator, evidence and a solution. It was a debate, a manipulation, an argument which, for all John knew, they might not win. What then?

He shook his head, casting the thought away. They’d cross that bridge when they came to it. Sherlock was there to do the talking, and John had seen him run rings around witnesses and criminals alike in the past. He had to let Sherlock do what he did best. His job was to keep him safe: an unbound Omega in a strange Alpha’s house.

Christ. Had Sherlock even thought of that?

With a jolt, John strode forward, heading for the stairs. However, before he could set his foot on the first step, Sherlock trotted towards him, his shirt buttoned and prim. His collar was parted a fraction, and a suit jacket sheathed his torso. He looked immaculate, and John’s stomach gave a pulse of
longing. As much as he loved Sherlock rumpled and lazy-eyed amidst tangled sheets, it was still thrilling to see him so capable, aloof and intellectual, powerful in a way that had nothing to do with the body and everything to do with his mind and how he put it to use.

‘Ready?’ Sherlock asked, fiddling with his cuff and failing to notice John staring at him.

‘Yes.’ The automatic reply escaped John’s lips before he corrected himself. ‘No, wait. Look. They’re going to know that you’re unbound, aren’t they? They’ll smell it on you.’

Sherlock lifted his head, his expression unreadable as he watched John intently. Bright eyes carved into him like spears, making him stumble over his words as he tried to get his point across.

‘You said it yesterday. Most Alphas would place a bite just because they could. What’s to stop one of the Cunninghams doing just that?’

‘You.’ Sherlock blinked, as if the answer were obvious, and John’s heart tripped. ‘A gun will stop most people in their tracks. I’m not in pyresus and I’m unlikely to enter it in the next twelve hours. As such, they’ll probably maintain some grip on the rational, enough to see you’re not bluffing if you have to point the Sig at them in my defence.’

John pursed his lips, closing his eyes against the curl of disappointment in his gut. For a minute, he’d thought Sherlock was inviting him to place his own bite: something the Cunninghams could rail against, but couldn’t deny.

‘I’d rather not kill anyone today if I can help it.’ His voice sounded strained as Sherlock swept past, reaching for his Belstaff and throwing John’s jacket towards him. ‘What if I’m not quick enough? What if I can’t stop them?’

Sherlock pressed the fingertips of one hand to his temple, pink nail beds bleached white with the pressure before he met John’s gaze. ‘I’ve already considered the danger, but arriving at their residence bound would be too inflammatory. For now, my unbound status is as much of a playing piece in this ridiculous game as the evidence.’ He lowered his voice. ‘It shows my restraint... and yours.’

John ducked his head, his shoulders hunched. He didn’t like any of this, but all the options open to them seemed equally disastrous and riddled with their own pitfalls. If ever there was a time he had to trust Sherlock’s judgement, it was now.

Still, he had one promise to extract before he let Sherlock go through with this. ‘If anything goes wrong, we get out.’ John wanted to believe the Cunninghams were reasonable people, appalled by their son’s behaviour and open-minded, but somehow he doubted they would be so lucky. ‘If I say it’s necessary, we leave; no arguments.’

Sherlock sighed as if he were being tiresome before nodding his head. ‘Fine. Now, come on. If we’re going to stand any chance of keeping Mycroft in the dark about this, then we need to get moving.’ He twirled a finger around above his head, indicating the house as a whole. ‘There’s no surveillance equipment inside. I made sure of it, much to the annoyance of his men. Beyond these walls is another matter.’

‘How are we going to get out? There’s a double perimeter. Guards everywhere.’ John followed Sherlock past unexplored rooms and through some kind of pantry towards a back door. An alarm protected it, just like all the others, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes before turning towards the fuse box, pulling it open and inspecting the rank and file. ‘If you shut down cameras, they’re going to run up to the house.’ John warned. ‘Basic rules of guard duty. You secure the target and then try and
resolve the problem, not the other way around.’

‘I’m aware,’ Sherlock murmured as he reached for one of the fuses, not removing it, but nudging it loose. ‘My brother designed this system with his own protection in mind. It’s complicated and almost impenetrable, at least in the right hands. Now, we’re approaching lunchtime in the middle of a long, boring shift. I don’t intend to do anything that will alarm the guards, merely distract them and enable our escape.’

‘And then? They’ll realise we’re gone in no time. Do you really think your brother’s not going to guess where we’re heading?’

‘The Cunningham estate is less than an hour away from here. As soon as we are on their land, Mycroft’s influence is gone. He can’t follow us, not without breaking the stalemate.’ Sherlock turned to John, his voice smooth as he explained, ‘All that ridiculous paperwork means that I can be standing as close to a member of the Cunningham family as I am to you, and they still have no power to restrict my agency. For all intents and purposes, Mycroft owns me, at least for now. If he sets foot through their gate, he breaks the contract, and they automatically gain possession of the asset – of me. He won’t risk that.’

‘God.’ John rubbed a hand over his brow, his head spinning not just from the legal mess but from Sherlock’s manipulation of it. ‘So, what, we’re racing your brother to the Cunninghams’ house?’

‘And I’m giving us a head-start.’

Sherlock’s fingers danced over the keypad by the door. It popped open with an obliging beep, allowing them to slip out into the crisp, daylight air. He closed it behind him, scanning the corners of the house and taking in the cameras, still functional, but unable to pivot with ease. ‘Like I said, I’ve slowed them down a bit. There are numerous reasons for that kind of malfunction, and it will take them a while to identify the cause. Come on; we need to stay out of sight.’

Like a dog out of a starting gate, Sherlock took off, gravel skittering beneath his feet. John followed, his heart in his throat. It felt like they were kids sneaking off school grounds, except there was nothing so harmless in what they were planning. Part of John wanted Mycroft to stop them – to block Sherlock’s efforts if only to spare them the consequences – but he knew that wouldn’t be the end of it. Better to do this now, him at Sherlock’s side, than have him creep off alone.

His breath ached in his lungs as Sherlock vaulted over a gate and skidded to a stop by what looked like some kind of garage. John could see the gleam of several dark, expensive cars through the windows, and he sucked in a breath, admiration bubbling in his gut despite himself. ‘We’re taking one of those?’

Sherlock shook his head, nodding towards an Audi under a nearby shelter. ‘That one. It’s more discreet. If we go in the garage, they’ll know which car to search for thanks to the CCTV footage. In contrast, since it’s not in the line of any cameras, it might take them a few minutes to figure out which vehicle we’ve pinched.’

‘And every second counts.’ John nodded, watching Sherlock pull something from his pocket.

‘That, and I have the key. I lifted it from one of Mycroft’s men this morning: a risk, if he notices its absence, but that’s unlikely.’

John watched the lights flash as Sherlock blipped the button, unlocking the car and disabling any alarm. Even before he’d peeled open the passenger door and slipped in at Sherlock’s side, the engine was purring. ‘How are we for petrol?’
‘Almost a full tank. We won’t need to stop.’ Sherlock leaned forward, his gaze sweeping the view beyond the windscreen before he guided the car forward, controlling the turning circle with enviable ease.

‘What about the gates?’ John asked, doing up his seatbelt and frowning when Sherlock seemed to turn the opposite way to the direction he considered "out". ‘It’s not like Mycroft’s men are going to abandon their posts to figure out what went wrong. They’re not that stupid!’

‘No, but they are procedural. My brother doesn’t hire people for their imagination. They’ll split the task force into three. One to approach and clear the house, one to remain on the main perimeter gates, and the other to spread out and patrol the boundaries of the estate. They can’t be everywhere at once, and Mycroft can’t spare the manpower to shut this place off one-hundred percent. He’ll have covered the most obvious points of entry to block out intruders. Keeping me in is secondary.’

‘So you know another way out?’ John asked as Sherlock turned a sharp right. Loose stones flicked out from beneath the tyres, scratching the paintwork as they veered down what was little more than a track. ‘Jesus. This isn’t an off-road car!’

‘It’ll cope.’

Slowly they followed the meandering path through a long thicket of trees. A cattle grid buzzed beneath the wheels, and John winced as a deep rut made the car lurch and sent a bolt of pain up his spine.

‘If we get stuck in a ditch and Mycroft’s goons have to pull us out, I’ll never let you forget it.’ He gritted his teeth, seeing the flicker of Sherlock’s smile and wishing he could see the funny side of this whole situation.

Finally, they pulled out onto a slender sweep of tarmac. It looked older than the main roads, and John realised it had to be some kind of utility route for gardeners or groundskeepers or whoever it was that kept the land around the house in shape.

‘Does all this belong to your brother?’ he asked, peering out of the window at the old, half-wild fields. It wasn’t used for farming, but he’d bet there were deer and pheasants and things: a throwback to the times when gentlemen came out hunting game.

‘Yes. After the civil war back in the 1600s, this became the Holmes family seat.’ Sherlock said, as if everyone had a chunk of England to call their own.

‘You have a family seat?’ John couldn’t keep the incredulity out of his voice.

‘No.’ Sherlock’s expression cooled. ‘Mycroft does. None of this is mine, John. If anything, I am, or was, part of it. Chattel.’

John stared down at his hands, biting back the same old outrage that had dogged his steps since this all began. He should have known. How could Sherlock own property when he didn’t even own himself?

He sat in silence until they approached an old gateway. It was little more than a gap in the hedgerow, and Sherlock eased the car out onto the empty road beyond, his foot pressing on the accelerator as they left the house and its grounds behind them.

John half-expected some kind of blockade: grim men with guns barring the way forward, but there was nothing. Sherlock was right. It wasn’t about slipping out unnoticed, it was about having enough of a head-start, and John kept his gaze fixed on the wing mirror, waiting for the moment when the
view behind them filled with vehicles in pursuit.

After a while, a rough buzz tweaked at his ear, and he glanced over at Sherlock, realising it was his phone. ‘Need me to get that?’ he asked, raising an eyebrow as Sherlock shook his head.

‘No need. It will be Mycroft. He so enjoys being the voice of reason.’ That mercurial gaze flickered to the clock on the dashboard. ‘Eighteen minutes. I’d hoped for a bit longer. I suppose I should be flattered that he put his best men on the job.’

‘He cares.’ John shrugged, sighing when Sherlock’s phone stopped buzzing and his started. ‘Sherlock...’

‘Don’t answer it. In fact, turn it off for now. Mine as well. I already deactivated the GPS on both, but with any luck, any devices he has installed without our knowledge will run off the battery. We may as well blind him just that little bit more.’ Sherlock watched John press the button on his phone, the screen dying to black. ‘Mine’s in my pocket.’

John glared before reaching over for Sherlock’s trousers, slipping into the hollow of cloth and trying to ignore the warmth of Sherlock’s thigh beneath his fingertips.

‘Coat pocket, John.’

Sherlock sounded like he was trying not to smile, and John smirked as he retrieved Sherlock’s mobile and did as he was told. ‘Don’t laugh,’ he begged, looking out the window. ‘It’s worse than giggling at crime scenes. Your brother’s probably already scrambling the air force.’

‘That would be a touch dramatic, even for him.’ Sherlock checked the dashboard, his hand moving over the gears as the incline changed. He was pushing the speed limit, but not enough to draw the attention of any police. The last thing they needed was to be pulled over for some menial infringement. ‘More likely he’ll attempt to cut us off, but even if his men take the motorway, they won’t beat us to our destination.’

‘Motorway’s faster.’ John licked his lips.

‘But more congested, more prone to closure and it doesn’t lead straight to the Cunninghams’ door.’ Sherlock’s statement was matter-of-fact, hovering in the air between them as John shifted in his seat.

A tense silence grew as the miles and minutes slipped away. John spent most of them staring at their mirrors, watching Sherlock’s back, the same as always. The brutal weight of the Sig against his spine anchored him, digging in hard enough to bruise, but it gave him something to focus on other than the aching uncertainty that tied knots in his stomach.

Finally, Sherlock sucked in a breath, lifting his chin as his fingers shifted on the steering wheel. His knuckles bloomed white with tension, and John turned to look at him. ‘What is it? Are we being followed?’

‘No, but we just passed the last junction at which anyone could intercept us.’

John’s stomach clenched, his uncertainty ramping up to new levels. He hadn’t realised how much he’d expected Mycroft to cut off Sherlock’s mad dash until he’d failed to do so. ‘That’s it then? We’re really doing this?’ He expected Sherlock to glare at him with icy disdain for having harboured any doubt. Instead, he only got quiet confirmation.

‘Yes.’ He breathed out, the sound shivery, and John closed his eyes at the blatant tell. Sherlock wasn’t as convinced of this as he appeared. It was a gamble, whichever way they looked at it, and
losing didn’t bear thinking about.

‘We can still turn around. Go back to the house. Think of something else?’ Gooseflesh prickled down John’s arms and across his scalp as Sherlock shook his head. Adrenaline surged, his fight or flight response engaged even though he was stuck in this useless tin can of a car. ‘So talk to me. Tell me what I need to know to keep you safe.’

Sherlock’s gaze flickered up to the rear view mirror before drifting back to the road ahead. ‘They’re nouvelle riche, made wealthy by a strong business sense and clever investments. Patricia Cunningham is the Alpha mother, the one with whom Mycroft has been endeavouring to negotiate.’

‘The one we have to convince to let you go.’ John frowned, already envisaging some battle-axe of a woman, grim-faced and inflexible.

‘Her oldest, and now only son, Henry, provides financial backing to a number of start-ups. A venture capitalist. It’s a risky business, but he pulls in a lot of favours. Debts and the like are underwritten more on the family reputation than anything of tangible value. That gives us a bit more leverage. Alexander’s behaviour could ruin them financially, as well as personally. Their position is far from secure.’

‘Right, well that’s good, isn’t it?’

‘It could go both ways, make them sensible or desperate. I’m leaning towards the former. If they were going to do anything rash, they’d have done it by now.’

John pulled a face, hoping that Sherlock’s assumption was correct. ‘Anything else?’

‘Gabrielle, the daughter and the youngest, is a year Alexander’s junior. Most likely a "happy accident". She has a Beta husband who she married about four years ago.’ Sherlock narrowed his eyes, perhaps sensing John’s confusion.

‘That’s not normal, is it? An Alpha of the elite marrying a Beta?’ John drummed his fingers on his knees, ignoring the mirrors to study Sherlock’s profile.

‘It happens. Omegas are rare and expensive. Not every family can afford to purchase one for each of their Alpha children, or sometimes there just aren’t enough to go around.’ Sherlock sighed. ‘Normally, it’s a male Alpha marrying a female Beta: a fertile pair, even if the chance of progeny is reduced. There may be some family friction there… It’s possible Gabrielle felt she should have been awarded an Omega, as opposed to Alexander.’

‘Given you, you mean?’

Sherlock nodded. ‘It’s just a theory. It will be easier to draw conclusions when I actually see her.’

‘So she’s a bit of an unknown, then?’ John grimaced, not liking that hole in their understanding.

‘And she’s not the only one.’

‘There’s more?’ John asked, swearing under his breath. ‘I thought Alexander only had two siblings?’

Sherlock looked at him, his disappointment plain. ‘Yes, John, but he would also have two parents. I know nothing of the Omega of the household. Not even if they’re living or dead. However, discounting them out of hand would be foolish at best. They may be a factor to consider, either in our favour or against it.’
John swallowed, nodding in understanding as he realised what he’d done. It was easy, with all the talk of Alphas, to fall into the trap of ignoring any Omega as a mere detail. Stupid, especially when it was that ingrained way of thinking that had given them this opportunity.

Abruptly, Sherlock turned left, and John raised his eyebrows at the pair of high, white pillars that flanked the road. A marble lion stood at the peak of each. It was more what he had expected of Mycroft’s place: pageantry and grandeur. The wrought iron gate lay open, suggesting that there was some element of coming and going from the house.

‘Turn of the century,’ Sherlock murmured. ‘The last century, I mean. Like I said, they’ve not been rich for long.’

‘Long enough.’ John wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans, feeling under-dressed and resenting it. He wasn’t here to impress. ‘So, what now?’

Sherlock pulled the car to a stop, running a keen eye over the large windows of the house before he reached behind him, pulling the file from the back seat. He looked paler than usual, and he squared his shoulders, shrugging on confidence like a suit of armour. It was a sham, but a subtle one. If John hadn’t seen him place the mask of certainty over his face, he wouldn’t have known it wasn’t genuine.

‘Follow my lead,’ Sherlock urged, slipping out of the car and walking towards the steps leading up to the front door. John did as he was asked, his own pace more a march. He couldn’t stride in as if he owned the place, but he could fall back on his military training: an unstoppable force, at least at first glance. ‘With any luck, they won’t be sure how to react. An unbound Omega and an Alpha of the non-elite walking into a home like this? It’s unheard of.’

‘Sounds like the start of a really bad joke,’ John muttered, his breath catching under his sternum as Sherlock reached out and clanged the brass bell hanging from a nearby bracket.

The door opened, revealing, much to John’s disbelief, an honest-to-God butler. The man was dressed in a smart black suit, his shoes were polished to within an inch of their lives, and his expression was one of passive welcome. ‘May I help you?’ he asked, his gaze sliding from John to Sherlock’s more presentable frame. ‘Sir?’

‘We’re here to see Patricia,’ Sherlock said, his lips curving in the kind of casual grin that put people – or at least people who didn’t know Sherlock – at ease. He stepped past the man, giving him no option but to open the door wider. ‘Please don’t trouble yourself; we are expected. She’ll be in her study, I’m sure.’ With that, he was off, not giving the man a chance to protest. At any other time, John would laugh, but he was too intent on sticking as close to Sherlock’s side as possible, barely taking in his surroundings as he heard the butler regain some of his senses.

‘No, excuse me, sir! You can’t –!’

Sherlock ignored him, his eyes skimming several closed doorways, reading their bland panels before he gripped the handle of the one on the right and stepped inside.

A clanging silence descended as they swept into the room, and the weight of several pairs of eyes dragged at John’s shoulders. It felt a bit like walking into a lion’s den. For now, everyone was shocked motionless by their audacity, but before long all hell would break loose.

The butler was at the door, a stream of apologies tumbling from his mouth, but they went ignored. It was a background monologue, one which petered out as the woman sitting at the desk raised an elegant hand.
‘It’s all right, Boston.’ Her voice was hoarse, and red-rimmed eyes stared at them from a wan face. She was wearing black, as was everyone else, John realised, grateful that both he and Sherlock were dressed in something suitably sombre. He’d forgotten that the Cunninghams were grieving. Mycroft had said that the situation needed handling with care, but John had written it off as an excuse. Now he saw how true that assessment had been.

Alexander was a fucking wanker, but to these people he was still family, no matter what he’d done.

‘Mr Holmes.’ The woman – Patricia, John assumed – pressed her palms to the smooth wood, and John noticed the pressure bleaching the edges of her hands white as she stood up. She was in her mid-sixties, but where John had been expecting some towering, Amazonian woman, she was no taller than him, and significantly more frail. The strain of the past few weeks carved lines across her face, and some of John’s aggression faded, leaving him guarded but grounded, able to see everything in the room, rather than just focusing on the threats.

Though there were plenty of those. Two others had half-risen from the sofa, Henry and Gabrielle, he assumed. Definitely Cunninghams, anyway. He may not have seen Alexander at his best, but the resemblance was undeniable.

The butler had withdrawn, and habit had John looking over his shoulder. Another woman sat in an armchair by the door. Her hair, streaked blonde and grey, swept in an elegant bob around her face. She hadn’t risen when they entered the room, and as he watched, she slipped a crumpled piece of paper in between the pages of her novel, brown eyes meeting his before switching to Sherlock. Her expression wrinkled in confusion, but she did not seem nearly as surprised to see them as everyone else.

‘Lady Cunningham.’ Sherlock didn’t say anything beyond that acknowledgement, and John glanced at him, all too familiar with that expression: complete concentration. Sherlock would be reading all their secrets from their clothes, posture and surroundings, gathering ammunition against them with every passing moment.

John just hoped he got the chance to use it.

‘Holmes?’ Henry asked, his face locked in incredulous disbelief as if he were failing to comprehend the man standing in the middle of the study. ‘That’s not Mycroft.’

‘No,’ Patricia said softly. ‘This is Sherlock, Alexander’s Omega.’

The confirmation of her children’s suspicions sent a ripple through the room. Henry and Gabrielle twitched forward, stopping their advance by the slimmest threads of their self-restraint. Even Patricia was biting her lip, some half-hidden, instinctual longing simmering in her gaze.

They looked like predators ready to pounce, the balance shifting from shock into action, and John moved, stepping around Sherlock to place himself squarely in their way. He didn’t pull his gun, but he did clench his hands behind his back, his parade’s rest uneasy.

Immediately, everyone’s focus switched to him, and that was fine. John would rather have that than watch them staring at Sherlock as if he were a piece of meat.

‘And you are?’ Gabrielle asked, her delicate hand shifting to press the backs of her fingers to her nose. She turned away for a moment, one hand on her hip, and John thought he saw a glimmer of emotion on her face. Was she regretting her instinctive surge towards Sherlock, or did John repulse her? Before he could guess at an answer, she turned back, her head held high as if the past couple of minutes had never happened.
‘Doctor John Watson. Sherlock’s friend.’ It sounded like a coy way to introduce himself, wrong and yet right, somehow everything he and Sherlock were to each other and at the same time, miles from adequate.

The sneers were instantaneous, unanimous on the face of every Alpha in the room. Even Patricia’s lips twisted, though John noticed she turned away as if wishing to hide her distaste, older and wiser than her two children, if nothing else.

‘A bit too "friendly", judging from the smell of you,’ Henry rasped, arch and disdainful. He stepped forward, his body moving with hidden strength as he looked down his nose at John and inhaled, reading everything from the fragrance in the air. ‘You’ve put your hands all over him, had him, but not bothered to bite him.’ His gaze raked John’s body, his expression twisting in a moue of false sympathy. ‘Deficient, are you?’

John sniffed, his lips twisting as he watched Henry’s knuckles clench into fists. His skin prickled beneath the weight of that assessing gaze, and John knew he was being weighed and found wanting by Alexander’s older brother.

Not that it mattered. Henry was a tall man, strong as well, but he didn’t have military training to put to use. His intimidation tactics rolled off John’s back, useless in the face of his placid calm.

Patricia made a faint noise of protest, as if she thought her son were being vulgar. Perhaps she believed John would lash out, so insecure in his own virility that he’d put her other son in the ground for the insult. God, maybe that was how the elite worked. What had Greg said, all those weeks ago? Pistols at dawn?

‘You must be,’ Henry concluded. ‘Why else wouldn’t you bind him when you had the chance?’

‘Because he didn’t say I could.’

They looked at him as if he were speaking tongues, their faces masks of incomprehension. All except one. The woman in the chair straightened where she sat, the movement obvious enough to catch John’s eye. Her head was tilted, attentive, and he saw a weak smile twitch one corner of her mouth before Henry recaptured his attention.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

John’s hands clenched into fists, and for one hazy minute he considered throwing a punch at Henry Cunningham’s bewildered face.

‘Everything.’

His retort was the breaking point. John didn’t bother to hide his contempt, and with one flash of disrespect, he tipped the balance from threat into action.

Henry lunged, his hands outstretched, though whether to grab John or Sherlock, he wasn’t sure. Not that it mattered. John reacted instinctively, gripping Henry’s wrist and using his momentum against him, driving him to his knees and pulling his arm up behind his back.

The garbled mix of outrage and insult that spilt forth from Gabrielle’s lips almost drowned out Henry’s cry of pain. At her desk, Patricia Cunningham flinched, her entire body tense as if she expected John to rip Henry apart before her eyes.

Ragged gasps escaped Henry’s lips, his broad shoulders writhing as he struggled against John’s grip. Not that it mattered; he wasn’t trained to fight. Even with one hand free, he didn’t have the sense to
throw a punch, and John watched his efforts, happy to let him cower and cringe beneath the undeniable force of John’s dominance.

‘Enough!’

He was vaguely aware that the command did not come from Patricia, but before he could identify the speaker, Henry responded. He went slack in John’s grip, one hand lifting in surrender, trembling as it did so.

Without thinking about it, John looked at Sherlock, hiding a smile as he saw the admiring heat in his gaze. Sherlock’s lush mouth curved up at one corner, and he nodded his head, indicating that John should let the other Alpha go.

John stepped back, allowing Henry to stagger to his feet, his face flushed and his hair flopping in his eyes. He glared at John, straightening his shirt and pinching his nose shut as if the room were filled with a vile stench. Gabrielle mimicked the action, and it reminded John of him, Mycroft and Lestrade at Baker Street after Alexander’s invasion, their pheromones only exacerbating each other’s aggression. His inhibitors blocked his sense of smell, sparing him all that, but it looked like the two Cunninghams were riling each other up.

‘I’m disappointed in you.’

John blinked, realising the voice he had heard belonged to the other woman. She had risen to her feet and moved to the door, which she held open pointedly. Yet it didn’t seem to be Sherlock and John she expected to leave. She was watching Henry and Gabrielle, and when she spoke again, her voice was smooth and firm: not the kind of tone with which anyone could argue.

‘You both have families waiting for you at home. I think it’s time you joined them.’ She raised an eyebrow, and Henry’s spluttered protest died away. ‘We’ll call you as soon as we hear anything more about what happened to your brother. As for this –’ She gestured towards Sherlock and John, her voice kind, but still determined. ‘The business between your mother and the Holmes family was never your concern. Now go, please?’

John stared, stunned by the obvious battle that etched its way across Henry’s face. Gabrielle was just as conflicted, her expression twisted beneath the war of respect for this woman, who must be the Omega of the household, and her desire to be included in whatever transpired between Sherlock and the Cunningham matriarch.

At last, they gave in, and with a great deal more grace than John expected. He didn’t bother hiding his surprise when Henry nodded,-smoothing back his hair and moving to the desk, kissing Patricia on the cheek before repeating the gesture to the woman by the door. Gabrielle followed, but where Henry swept past them, choosing to ignore John and Sherlock in favour of a dignified departure, she lingered.

Her lips parted, her brow creasing as she met Sherlock’s gaze. Her hitching breaths suggested a mass of aborted sentences, but finally, she forced the words out. ‘I’m sorry. I – I didn’t know what to do for the best.’ Her throat convulsed as she swallowed, and John realised she wasn’t talking about just now: her outburst driven by grief, surprise and the taint of pheromones. This was about the past and what had happened to Sherlock under Alexander’s care.

As if an apology could ever be enough to make up for it.

‘I think you knew exactly what to do,’ Sherlock said, and while his voice was quiet, it wasn’t gentle. ‘Self-preservation.’ He indicated the wedding ring gleaming on her hand. ‘Distancing yourself from
your brother’s ruin long before it happened.’

She shivered, too ugly a gesture to be choreographed. ‘I didn’t see how bad it was. If I had...

‘You would have done nothing different.’ Sherlock said it like it didn’t matter, and John clenched his jaw as he bit back harsh words. He wanted Gabrielle to suffer. He wanted her to feel the pain she was complicit in bringing down on Sherlock’s head, if only through ignorance, but that wasn’t how this could go. He wasn’t here to play the knight in shining armour, nor the vengeful lover, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

Gabrielle’s shoulders sagged and her spine curved. She departed, small and ashamed, not beneath John’s glare, but by Sherlock’s cool indifference. The door closed behind her, a whisper of metal and wood, and John met the Omega woman’s gaze, seeing the serene mask across her features flicker and crack, revealing the pain beneath.

He watched as she approached the desk where Patricia had collapsed back into her chair. Sobs hitched the older woman’s breathing, and he felt a hot flush of shame that he hadn’t noticed the intensity of her distress. She was hiding behind her palms, even though her children were gone, and John realised that he was probably the one she was attempting to keep in the dark. She saw her tears as a sign of weakness, one which she couldn’t bear to put on display.

Briefly, he wondered if it was some kind of ploy, but a quick glance at Sherlock’s face eradicated his suspicion. He wouldn’t look that uncomfortable over someone faking it; he’d look smug instead.

Clearing his throat, John stepped away from Sherlock’s side and pretended to examine the books on the shelves lining the room, turning his back while keeping an eye on the reflections in the mirror over the fireplace. That way, he could still react to anything untoward, but he could also provide some privacy.

He watched the Omega woman tug a crumpled tissue from her sleeve, pressing close so that her body nudged against Patricia’s shoulder as she offered it to her.

There was nothing subtle about Patricia’s reaction. She slumped, allowing her Omega to support her as she struggled to regain her composure. Manicured fingernails bit into her palms, and she drew deep, shuddering breaths, the pearls around her neck gleaming as she did so.

At last, she seemed to calm, and she pinned a frail smile to her face. ‘Thank you, Aveline.’ Her voice shook with gratitude, her devotion clear even in her pale reflection. The pair were practically flooding the room with the cocktail of their emotions, despair and compassion doled out in equal measure, each hurting and each soothing the other’s wounds.

John stared at the mirror, unable to help himself. He didn’t know what he’d expected, but this wasn’t part of it. He’d thought the Omega, Aveline, would be hidden away, drummed off to hide from the strangers in her home. Instead, he could see her for all that she was: an integral part of the family. Was this what Sherlock meant when he described how some Omegas were treasured? Was this how it was supposed to be?

He looked over his shoulder, trying to read Sherlock’s expression, yet his entire body was a clean slate, bland and unremarkable. He didn’t seem fussed one way or the other about the Cunninghams, neither sympathetic nor disgusted. He just waited, although perhaps that was more telling than anything else. Normally, Sherlock didn’t care if a witness was upset; he’d shout at them to get the answer he wanted. Now, his patience stuck out like a sore thumb.

‘My apologies,’ Patricia croaked, reminiscent of Mycroft: all upper-class manners. Her gaze shifted
to John as he returned to Sherlock’s side, and she met his eye, dominant, despite everything. She may have tear tracks down her face, but this was her home, her land and her family. He was the intruder, the potential villain, at least within these four walls. ‘This has not been easy for us. Henry and Gabrielle...’ She trailed off, her breath caught in her chest as if she didn’t know what to say. ‘Alexander’s death came as a shock.’

‘Not as much of one as they’d have you believe.’ At Sherlock’s statement, both women cast him a sharp look, silent and staring. ‘Your children guessed what was coming: his inevitable decline. Gabrielle’s suspicions had more foundation, but then she probably suspected his ruin didn’t lie in the drugs but in what she feared he’d done to me. She married a Beta husband with a fortune of his own, not through love, but for financial stability should the Cunningham wealth go into decline.’

Sherlock slipped his left hand into his coat pocket as he continued. ‘Henry began distancing himself from Alexander and his problems, stopped lending him money: a bad investment. The only surprise, to them at least, was that the police treated it as a murder investigation, rather than an overdose.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘That, they didn’t expect.’

The leather creaked as Patricia shifted. She looked devastated, wrung out and beaten down, and she wasn’t the only one. Aveline was too thin beneath her fine clothes, giving away her lack of appetite. They were a far cry from the uncompromising people John had built up in his head, but that didn’t mean they weren’t dangerous in their own way. He’d seen too much of war – women and children armed with guns and grenades – to let appearances deceive him.

With an exhausted sigh, Patricia waved her hand before pressing her fingers to her temples. ‘I thought having children would save him, that having others to care for would make him look beyond himself,’ she murmured.

‘No.’

Her head shot up, a flicker of disbelief spasming her features. John had seen that before, normally on the face of a suspect before Sherlock peeled back their masks and showed them for the murderer that they were: their guilty conscience making itself known.

‘Alexander’s well-being wasn’t the only issue, your actions make that clear. Besides, his drug use did not become an issue until long after I’d left him a second time. You had another goal in mind. Not heirs in the next generation, you’ve already got those: Henry’s three Alpha children, so what...?’ Sherlock’s voice softened, falling into those same, musing tones that John knew so well. His eyes glazed, skimming the shelves behind the desk as if scanning some enormous database, and when he blinked, his expression twisted in disappointment. ‘Oh, obvious.’

His hips swayed as if he longed to pace the room, forward and back like a tiger along the bars of his cage. ‘You’re not interested in maintaining your wealth; you want to expand it. Henry’s business is profitable, but it doesn’t bring the esteem that you value. Omega grandchildren, on the other hand, especially those from a distinguished line, would do wonders. They’d be an investment in your family’s future. My children to be sold for your gain.’

It would have been better if Sherlock shouted that last part, John thought. Better he sounded outraged than resigned, but his expression was mirror smooth, a blank pane in comparison to the odd expression on Patricia’s face: determination, mostly, but not without a hint of shame. She didn’t say anything – no correction or denial. Instead she sat there, an audience to his deductions.

‘Initially, you were happy to ignore Alexander and me. You thought Henry’s Omega would provide. She bore her second Alpha child a few months before Alexander came looking for me eight years ago. He hunted me down because you put pressure on him to reproduce.’
‘We didn’t know you had fled,’ Patricia explained. ‘He was too ashamed to share his problems with us, and we had no reason to suspect you were gone.’ She stood up, shaking her head fiercely. ‘Nor did we know what he would do once he reclaimed you.’

Sherlock pitched the file onto the desk, and a few photographs skimmed free from the covers. It was a repulsive sight: pale skin, dark bruises and the slick, deep red of blood that should never have been spilt.

‘Now you do.’

John’s ears buzzed in the silence that followed, and something fierce surged in the dark recesses of his mind. The gun dragged at his belt, and he stiffened his shoulders, trying to breathe around the knot of anger in his chest. He couldn’t see all of the images, and he wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse: a glimpse of scandal, rather than the whole story.

Aveline had turned away, her hand pressed over her mouth in shock. Patricia’s eyes stayed fixed to Sherlock’s face. Her lips were pressed together, repulsed, as if he’d just flung a carcass down in front of her. In a way, John supposed he had. That was his body captured within the borders of the paper. His bruises and bloody wounds. No one could ignore that.

‘If you were aware that I had left him,’ Sherlock asked, his voice bland, ‘would you have done anything differently?’

Patricia’s silence was as damning as any confession. It grew between them: a cloud of smoke choking the air until John could barely breathe.

‘I thought not.’ Sherlock frowned, his head tipping to the side as he considered the woman before him. ‘Something else happened more recently, something to make you lean on Alexander for a second time, despite his continuing failure to produce a family. I wasn’t sure what that might be until I saw Henry.’

Those silver eyes flickered, and now Sherlock looked like a terrier after a rat, giving chase without mercy. ‘He’s had a vasectomy. It was a while ago now, but it’s obvious in the way he sits. No doubt he’s put some sperm on ice, just in case it becomes possible to select secondary gender prior to conception in the next few years, but that doesn’t seem likely.’ He shrugged. ‘With that, your chances of getting an Omega child by that bond fell from slim to none, and so you turned back to Alexander. If you questioned why, after seventeen years, there were no children, you didn’t bother to find out. Perhaps to you, it didn’t matter, the same as Alexander’s drug habit.’

A crack yawned in Patricia’s composure: abrupt and visceral. Fury made her eyes flash as she jumped to her feet. Her lips pulled back from her teeth, and the palm of her hand slammed into the blotter. ‘Of course it mattered! He mattered! I gave him the best Omega money could buy and then could only watch as he fell apart!’ Her chest heaved, all sign of restraint disintegrating as her voice rose to a shout. ‘There were no drugs, before you. There was no brutality. Everything he did, everything, was all because of you!’

‘No,’ John snapped, placing himself between her and Sherlock without a second thought. He’d kept quiet through the tears and the avoidance, watching Alexander’s mother try and make excuses, but this was where he drew the line. ‘Sherlock’s not to blame for any of this. Your son was a bastard; he locked him up, abused him, hunted him down and beat him, all because he thought he had the right.’ Fury seethed like tar in the pit of John’s stomach, black and burning as he stared Patricia down. ‘Would you raise a hand to her?’ He pointed at Aveline.

If it weren’t for the desk in the way, John knew Patricia’s fingers would be around his throat. He
could take her, probably, she was older and smaller than him, but he could see the outrage and repulsion in her eyes: horror at the very accusation, and loathing that someone like him would put it into words. ‘Of course not!’ she hissed.

‘Then what made your son think it was acceptable?’ John braced his knuckles on the desk, leaning his weight against them as he stared at her. What little blood lay in her cheeks drained to nothing, and John swallowed hard.

‘Look at the file. Look at it, because I bet Mycroft didn’t shove it in your face like he should have done. Have the fucking guts to own up to what Alexander did. If, when you’re finished, you can still look Sherlock in the eye and say it was his fault – that he deserved it –’ John stepped back, his shoulders jerking in a furious shrug. ‘Well then I guess we’ll know where Alexander got it from.’

It was probably only Aveline’s hand around Patricia’s arm, white-knuckled and desperate, that stopped her lunging forward. Her aristocratic face went from white to puce, and John was itching for her to let it boil over. He wanted a fight, someone to punish, and she seemed like as good a target as any.

Cool fingers around John’s wrist pulled him back, gentle at first, then more firm. He didn’t want to shift from his defensive stance in front of Sherlock, but he slowly obliged, stepping away from the confrontation that hummed in the air.

It went against every instinct to turn his back, and his spine crawled in expectation of an attack. Yet none came, and John lifted his face, meeting Sherlock’s gaze and hoping he didn’t expect him to apologise for jumping to his defence.

That expression was unreadable. Sherlock’s full lips were pinched, and a frown cut creases across his brow. He looked at John as if he didn’t know what to make of him, and John could only offer a shrug as he swallowed, trying to understand where all this was going. There had to be some point to Sherlock rehearsing the past, but John couldn’t see it for the life of him. ‘What –?’ He glared over his shoulder, lowering his voice. ‘What exactly are you doing?’

‘Proving a point.’ Sherlock’s hand skimmed down John’s sleeve, his fingertips tickling his palm before he wove their grip together and gave one, brief squeeze. ‘I need them to see that I am as much an antagonist in this drama as Mycroft, not just some passive thing over which they can fight. Also, look at them.’

John glared over his shoulder, taking in their turmoil. Patricia Cunningham’s emotions were reaching a breaking point, yet she did not dismiss Aveline. Instead, she tipped her head, listening to the Omega’s whispered words and taking the comfort she offered so readily. ‘What about them?’

‘I needed to understand the role the Omega plays in this household. Alexander’s treatment of me suggested two possibilities. Either his Alpha mother was as abusive and manipulative as he was, or she was like that.’ He inclined his head towards the couple. ‘Doting and respectful: the kind of nature against which Alexander might rebel through resentment, or for the sheer thrill of committing actions so taboo within the society he was raised.’

John shook his head, not following. ‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘Potentially, everything. Aveline is both Patricia’s strength and her weakness. If nothing else, that dictates the way we should proceed. It’s not about what we can take away – their reputation, their social standing; it’s about what I can give them.’

‘And what might that be, Mr Holmes?’ Aveline’s voice cut between them, ripping away the illusion
of privacy. Sherlock’s deep voice had a tendency to carry, and it wasn’t like there were more than a few paces between them and the Cunninghams.

Guiltily, John freed his hand and folded his arms. He didn’t bow his head or look away. He wasn’t going to apologise for what he’d said any more than they were. Instead they were stuck in some bizarre face-off.

At his side, Sherlock drew in a deep breath, his spine coiled tight like a man about to dive into unknown waters. His eyes gleamed, and he wet his lip before he began to speak, his words too rapid to allow interruption.

‘You wanted Omega grandchildren for the respect and money they would bring the family name. If you sell me into another bond, the children will have nothing to do with you. They’d be a credit to my new Alpha, no one else. You only stand to gain financially from your claim to me, and that is not your primary motivation. Nor is the price I will attract adequate compensation for the damage your reputation will suffer when my brother exposes Alexander’s abuse in court. And it is a matter of when, not if.’

Patricia shook her head, a vague, stunned motion, but before she could speak, Sherlock hurried on.

‘The only reason you are not already facing a summons is because of me. If we pressed charges now, I would be expected to remain unbound for the duration – hardly ideal in terms of my physical and mental health. However, should you force me to bond at any point, that would no longer be an issue, and my brother would proceed.’

John shot him a look, wondering if Sherlock was bluffing. Except, no. He could see Mycroft dragging all this in front of a jury out of a sense of justice, if nothing else. Sherlock spoke the truth. If it weren’t for him, Mycroft would have exacted revenge in some form or another long ago.

‘Perhaps the judge will find in your favour,’ Sherlock suggested, his gaze sliding to the file containing the photographs and other evidence. ‘However, regardless of the outcome, everyone will know what Alexander did to me, and you’ll all be tarred with the same brush: abusers and addicts.’

Patricia sank into her chair and reached shaking fingers across the desk to tuck the images back into the file, hiding them from sight before folding her hands in front of her. ‘So that’s what you can give us? Threats? I’m afraid that’s nothing new. Your brother’s already tried that, and we declined.’

‘And your resistance has become a matter of pride rather than logic. You would rather face what he throws at you, and the consequences, than surrender to his demands.’ Sherlock looked away, one hand tightening into a fist. ‘How about I allow you to save face? Negotiate with me instead.’

A scoff escaped Patricia’s lips. ‘And how would you go about that, Mr Holmes? You have nothing that we want. Are you hoping to pay us off? Your brother’s already tried that, and we declined.’

‘Because it’s not money you need. Look at yourselves. Mycroft probably thinks your mourning is an act, but it’s tearing your family apart. Gabrielle can barely breathe around her own guilt. She feels she should have told you sooner. Warned you. She’s bitten her nails down to the quick and picked her lip bloody. Nervous habits, both.’

Sherlock’s gaze swept from Patricia to Aveline and back again, uncompromising. ‘Then there’s Henry, desperate to protect you from what he discovered Alexander had done, but unable to do so in the face of my brother’s persistence. Mycroft intimidates him: unsurprising.’ He shrugged. ‘Between the Botox and the personal trainer he’s recently hired, it’s obvious he’s a man with insecurities.’
‘I –’ Patricia sounded breathless as she clutched her hand against her chest. Quickly, John performed a visual examination, wondering about the strength of her heart, but she seemed to recover herself. ‘I don’t understand…’

‘Sentiment.’ Sherlock’s clipped voice sliced through the room. ‘Your family is riddled with it, but Aveline is the most affected. She has stopped caring for her appearance. Usually, she wears jewellery, her tan lines attest to that, but today she is unadorned. She’s lost weight, but not asked you to buy her new clothes, and the prescription she is using as a bookmark speaks volumes. A short term treatment of antidepressants to assist in her grief. Hardly surprising, considering the unexpected death of her son.’

Sherlock straightened up, and John had seen him perform that trick more than once at crime scenes. He didn’t loom, but he did ensure that all eyes in the room were on him.

‘However, the main source of Aveline’s distress is not his untimely demise, but the nature of it. The pad by the phone in the hall is covered in names and numbers: points of contact within the police – I saw them on my way past.’ He indicated a pile of documents on the corner of Patricia’s desk, half-hidden beneath a paper-weight. ‘Then there are the letters from your lawyer, not about me for once, but about reclaiming Alexander’s corpse: impossible during an active investigation. All of this indicates a desperate need for closure, something which not even a funeral will provide. Not with so many questions left unanswered.’

Sherlock turned to Aveline, who was shaking where she stood, his expression smooth but for the intensity in his eyes. ‘Tell me, what would you give to know what happened to your son? What would you pay to find out why he died and to see the person who killed him answer for it?’

John stepped forward as Aveline’s knees gave way, her stalwart control crumbling to ash. Patricia beat him to it, glaring at him as she drew her Omega close. She held Aveline as if she were made from glass, compassionate, even to John’s cynical gaze. However, before she could snap any kind of reprimand at Sherlock for his cruelty, her Omega’s answer stirred the air.

‘Anything.’ A tear spilled from her lashes, the first one John had seen her shed, and Patricia grabbed a tissue, blotting it away as if she couldn’t bear to witness it. ‘Anything.’

‘That’s what I can give you.’ Sherlock stepped forward, bracing his palms on the edge of the desk as John had done a few minutes before. ‘I was working the case when Alexander died, assisting the police with the most complex spate of killings they’ve seen in years, and he was one of the victims. If you doubt me, a quick call to Scotland Yard will confirm it. Without my help, it’s unlikely Alexander’s murderer will ever be caught.’ He drew in a breath, and when he spoke again, his voice throbbed with urgency. ‘Relinquish your claim on me, and I’ll make sure that’s not the case.’

Sherlock swallowed, the only outward indication of his desperation. It was all he had to offer, the sole bargaining chip in the negotiations for his own freedom, and John’s heart surged in his throat, fast and fretful.

Aveline clutched Patricia’s sleeve, her body shaking itself apart as the dam broke. Great sobs rattled her frame, half hysterical, and her shoulders bowed as if she were shielding an open wound. It was painful to witness, and John tore his eyes away, taking in Patricia’s agonised expression.

He knew that look. He’d worn it himself when Sherlock had sobbed in his arms, mourning the life he had lost as his bond broke apart around him. He’d have done anything to help him, regardless of the cost to himself, but would she do the same?

A few hours ago, if Sherlock had told him this was part of his plan, John would have scoffed in
disbelief, certain that the Cunninghams were too indifferent for it to work. Now, he could see Patricia faltering, not wavering beneath threats, nor swayed by money and acclaim, but by Aveline’s anguish.

‘You leave me little choice.’ She stared at Sherlock, her gaze unblinking. It felt like a standoff, and John was nothing but an audience to whatever silent communication they shared. ‘Very well, the day you solve Alexander’s murder, I shall relinquish my claim.’

She pursed her lips, her spine straightening as she shrugged on the mantle of her Alpha dominance. ‘However, if you fail, Mr Holmes, then you’re mine to do with as I please without fear of retribution, either in the form of a court case or your brother’s more personal brand of justice. Agreed?’

Her query coiled through the air – a promise and a threat – and John heard the rush of Sherlock’s indrawn breath. It was not surrender, but an all-or-nothing deal, and he met Sherlock’s gaze, frozen where he stood as he watched sharp silver soften, taking on a questioning gleam.

It was an acknowledgement that John never expected, an unspoken hint that, even now, on the uncertain precipice of success, Sherlock thought John had a say in his choice.

All it took was one, tiny nod – a vow that he would be with Sherlock no matter what happened – for resolution to settle over them both. For better or worse, their answer was obvious.

‘Agreed.’
A fresh breeze brushed against Sherlock’s face, lifting his curls and cooling the traces of sweat that gathered along his hairline. It flared the wings of the Belstaff, pressing through his suit to give his adrenaline-fuelled shivers strength.

Behind him, the front door of the Cunningham residence slammed shut, the letterbox banging like a gunshot, but he paid it no mind. He’d got what he came here for.

Sherlock’s knees shook as he reached the Audi, and he leant his back against the sleek, black metal, allowing it to support him. The world seemed unreal, saturated and knife-edge bright. Each breath tasted piquant, and the call of the birds in the trees was more melodious than any symphony. It was psychosomatic, of course. Sentiment. His environment had not changed because of the promise of freedom, but his senses made a liar of his logic.

John’s hair gleamed in a dozen shades of ash and gold as he stopped in front of Sherlock. He didn’t bother asking if he was all right; the question redundant. He kept his words trapped behind his lips and spoke with his hands instead, stroking up Sherlock’s arms before running his fingers along the chine of his jaw.

It was a tender gesture, not patronising, as so much of Patricia’s behaviour towards Aveline had been. John did not seek to coddle him or treat him like a child. Instead, he offered silent support and steadfast strength, immune to the pressure of people who were his peers in gender, if nothing else.

Sherlock’s heart fluttered as he recalled John’s uncompromising stance. Even outnumbered and outclassed, at least in terms of wealth, he did not back down from his principles. John was unapologetically himself, and although Sherlock had seen his determination numerous times, it still stole his breath away.

Then there was the manner in which he had handled Henry: precise violence, perfectly controlled. He had not lost himself to anger, though a ghost of that fury lingered in the lines bracketing his mouth and feathering his eyes. He had neutralised the threat as if he were swatting a fly. One twist, and the aggressor was on his knees.

Yet despite that obvious show of dominance, John had deferred to Sherlock. He was not trying to prove a point when he’d looked at him, waiting for permission to release Henry. It was just what John did: an automatic acknowledgement that they stood on an equal footing, even when surrounded by Alphas who sought to convince him otherwise.

Gratitude welled up in his chest, and Sherlock ducked his head, grasping denim-clad hips as he slanted his lips over John’s mouth. Taut muscles relaxed, and John’s weight shifted forward as he stretched up to meet him. His fingers drifted down Sherlock’s throat, resting over his pulse while his other hand caught in the collar of the Belstaff, anchoring them in place.

He could have stayed like that forever, kissing John in full view of the Cunninghams’ house, indifferent to who might be watching. Sherlock wanted to wrap John in his arms, to crawl as close as he could get and revel in this moment: the dizzying relief and the blinding hope that finally, after far too many years, his freedom was almost within his grasp.

A moan pulsed in his throat as John pulled back, narrowing his eyes against the sun and looking up into the sky. It took Sherlock a minute to tune back into the real world, and when he did, he groaned in annoyance.
‘Mycroft,’ he explained, raising his voice over the thrum of an incoming helicopter. The sleek navy-blue machine would settle in a field nearby, as close to the boundary of the estate as it could get without setting down on forbidden soil. ‘I had hoped he’d save his dramatics for when we got back to the house.’

John sighed, his hand shifting to linger over Sherlock’s heart, counting the beats. ‘Well, at least this way he can give us a lift. You probably shouldn’t drive.’ When Sherlock cocked his head in query, John smiled. ‘Your hands are shaking, and your pulse is going a mile-a-minute: symptoms of shock.’

‘Or arousal. You did just kiss me,’ Sherlock pointed out, fascinated by the flush that rose to John’s cheeks. Yet now that he mentioned it, he did feel a bit overstretched, as if the events of the day had spread him too thin.

‘Either way, it’d be better if you didn’t get behind the wheel of a car. Not after all that.’ John’s hands cupped Sherlock’s shoulders, his thumbs rubbing over the coarse wool of his coat. ‘Come on, how about we get out of here before Patricia changes her mind?’

Sherlock’s eyes raked the front of the building, analysing every empty window. His mind, lost briefly in the sluggish calm of disbelief, began to gather speed, and he pulled the car key from his pocket. He shouldn’t have lingered; there was far too much at stake, and he berated himself for his weakness.

‘Hey, I meant what I said about driving!’ John protested. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Get in.’ Sherlock ordered, taking his place behind the steering wheel. ‘I’m only going as far as the gate. Mycroft’s men will be waiting, and leaving it here is far too dangerous. One of them might be idiotic enough to come in and claim it, thereby breaking the injunction. I have no doubt the Cunninghams will jump on any technicality that might void their promise.’

John turned to face him, his seatbelt straining across his body and that expressive face pinched. ‘You don’t think they’ll keep their end of the bargain?’

Sherlock tilted his head, squinting as he considered the possibilities. ‘It’s hard to be certain. Patricia, at least, is a woman of her word, even if she is shrewd in her negotiations. However, that doesn’t stop her children from seeking to undermine the agreement. Henry, in particular, might be a threat. Besides, it’s a fragile deal at best.’

‘What – why?’

Sherlock pursed his lips and shook his head, concentrating on getting the car out of the gate. He made sure that he was well beyond the boundary of the estate before pulling onto the verge. ‘We need to talk to my brother. What we achieved today was a foundation of an agreement, nothing more. It will be up to him to hammer out the details. Unfortunately, his involvement is essential.’

Climbing out of the car, he slammed the door behind him and strode towards the field, ignoring the dry mud and broken stems underfoot. The chopper had touched down, its rotor spinning in a lazy arc as the motor powered down and the blades began to wilt.

Mycroft stood a safe distance from the helicopter, his weight leant on his umbrella and his expression hard. ‘Have you lost your mind?’ he demanded, lifting his chin and looking down his nose, first at Sherlock, then at John. ‘I expected as much from my brother, but you, Doctor Watson? I confess myself disappointed.’

Sherlock glanced in John’s direction, taking in the way he stood, his arms folded across his chest and
his feet braced shoulder-width apart. ‘He doesn’t need a babysitter. In two hours, he’s managed more
than you have in bloody weeks.’ John’s smile was tight and far from friendly. ‘They said that if he
solved Alexander’s murder, they’d let him go.’

Mycroft caught Sherlock’s gaze, lifting one eyebrow, and Sherlock endeavoured to hide the flinch
that twitched over his face. John’s pride was obvious and gratifying, if perhaps a touch misplaced.

‘Are you going to tell him,’ his brother asked, ‘or shall I?’

Sherlock glared, pursing his lips in annoyance. He wished he could drag John back to their bed and
relish this moment in all its potential: the brief fantasy that his freedom was as good as guaranteed. Of
course, his brother always had to ruin things, sticking his big nose in where it didn’t belong.

‘Nothing discussed today is of any legal consequence.’ Mycroft offered John a thin, sympathetic
smile. ‘An Omega has no rights and no power. As such, any agreement Sherlock may have made
with the Cunningham family is moot. They’ll deny it ever happened.’

John made a noise: a rough, growling sound of disbelief. It was obvious that Sherlock’s status hadn’t
even crossed his mind. He’d taken the Cunninghams’ promise at face value, unaware that, in the
eyes of the law, it was meaningless. His tongue darted out to wet his lips as he shifted his weight: a
soldier keen for battle, but there was nothing here he could fight.

‘So it makes no difference?’ John looked at Sherlock as if he didn’t believe it, too accustomed to
Sherlock having a trick up his sleeve. ‘We’re right back where we started?’

Mycroft sighed, tapping his umbrella against the soil in meaningless Morse code as he addressed
Sherlock. ‘You risked everything, both your safety and John’s, and for what?’

John watched him, waiting for him to say something that would prove his brother wrong. He wished
he could give him the pleasure of a complete victory, one claimed without any help from Mycroft,
but it was impossible.

Still, that didn’t mean he’d left the Cunningham residence empty-handed.

‘Here.’ Sherlock pulled his phone from his pocket and tossed it to his brother, finding some
satisfaction in watching him fumble to catch it. ‘It’s all on there,’ he promised. ‘A verbal record of
the proceedings, if nothing else.’

It had been the matter of a moment to turn on his mobile and activate the app. He’d done his best to
minimise movement so that the rustle of his clothing did not interfere with the recording, but he knew
from previous experience that the audio quality was superb. ‘Feel free to provide the Cunninghams
with a transcript. You can send it over, along with the new contract outlining the arrangement. I’m
sure you’ll enjoy setting out the precise terms.’

Surprise was not an emotion that regularly appeared on Mycroft’s features, but it was in evidence
now. His murky eyes had widened, and a faint smile eased its way past his austere mask as he
touched the screen and listened to Patricia’s voice, as clear as if she were standing with them.

‘Apologies, brother mine. It seems I have misjudged you.’ He handed the device to Anthea, who had
appeared at his elbow. ‘Remove the relevant data, and be sure to make copies.’

‘Will it help?’ John asked, rocking back on his heels. ‘Will that be enough?’

‘While the verbal agreement holds very little weight, the recording enables me to take action,’
Mycroft explained. ‘The Cunninghams won’t be able to deny the conversation took place, and I’m
sure with some quick thinking, we can negate the fact that it was made with an Omega.’

‘Mediation by proxy.’ Sherlock smirked as his brother stared in his direction. ‘Since I’m currently
under your care, my actions are a manifestation of your intent. They’ll have difficulty getting around
that.’

‘Is that like the whole thing of if you offed someone it would be Mycroft’s fault?’ John asked,
grinning as Sherlock nodded. ‘So if they tried to argue with it, they’d be overturning a basic premise
about how they treat Omegas?’

‘Precisely.’ Mycroft sounded almost admiring. ‘It seems I was mistaken.’ He glanced away, and
when he turned back, his face was a stiff façade once more. ‘I should have known better than to
believe this was an act of impulse. My apologies for doubting you.’ He looked at John. ‘Both of
you.’

‘You can make it up to us by giving us a lift back to the house,’ John said, his words more a
command than a suggestion. ‘Sherlock’s done enough of the hard work for today, don’t you think?’

Mycroft sniffed at the thinly veiled critique. ‘Indeed. A car is waiting. I hope you won’t mind if I join
you? As much as I applaud your progress, there is still a great deal to discuss.’ He stretched out a
hand, indicating one of the innumerable black vehicles as it pulled up on the road nearby. ‘Do get in,
won’t you?’

It was an order couched as an invitation, and Sherlock didn’t have the strength to argue. Stress
buzzed through his system, its teeth sharp in the absence of adrenaline. A hollow thud beat a pulse in
his head, and his muscles were like bedrock, no longer light with relief but leaden with the
knowledge of how much still stood in their way.

He slumped in the leather seat, shuffling along to the end as his brother, much to his disgust, slid in at
his side. That left the spot next to the driver for John, and Sherlock caught his eye in the rear-view
mirror before pulling a face of exaggerated dismay.

Mirth crinkled the slice of John’s expression that was visible in the pane, but he didn’t say a word as
the car pulled away. No doubt he would be listening, taking in every nuance, but much like back at
the Cunninghams’ house, he happily relinquished all control to Sherlock, leaving him free to take the
lead.

‘What, precisely, did the family say?’ Mycroft asked, watching Sherlock like a hawk. ‘I appreciate
the accuracy of the recording will be unparalleled, but we need to move swiftly. The more
information you can give me now, the sooner I can capitalise on today’s efforts.’

‘It was Patricia, no one else.’ Sherlock rubbed a hand down the back of his neck, leaning his head
against the window and speaking to the glass. ‘Henry and Gabrielle left on Aveline’s orders.’

‘The Omega?’ Mycroft made a soft sound, and Sherlock looked over to see his brother watching
him, his expression wiped clean and his hands folded, neat and precise, in his lap.

‘Does that surprise you?’ he challenged.

‘Not as much as you probably assume. Don’t you remember what Mummy was like? She never had
to raise her voice, but Father and I knew to obey her.’ Mycroft’s curious expression carried a trace of
sadness, and Sherlock looked away, staring at the skimming landscape as his brother continued.
‘Respect is an intrinsic part of many families of the elite. Your experience with Alexander was the
exception, Sherlock, not the rule.’
He scoffed. ‘I doubt it’s as rare as you wish to believe, Mycroft. I remember you and Father respecting Mummy’s wishes, but I also recall how Father’s expectations hemmed her in. He spoke to her as if he knew her mind better than she did, and paid no heed to her intelligence, which was considerable.’ He shifted in his seat, scowling at the passing fields. ‘Patricia treated Aveline in much the same way. She spared no real thought for the woman’s intellect, but she did care prodigiously for her emotional happiness and stability. In the end, that was an area of weakness, one which I could exploit.’

‘How so?’

Sherlock grimaced, drumming his fingers on his knee. ‘Aveline needs to know what became of Alexander so that she can move on. Her grief is genuine and overpowering, and Patricia cannot bear to witness it.’ He breathed in, pressing his hand to his brow as he recalled the memory in perfect detail. ‘If I give them the answers they need about their son’s death, then Patricia will relinquish her claim. If I don’t, then I’m hers to do with as she pleases, without fear of any retribution from you, legal or otherwise.’

‘I see.’ Mycroft reached into the pocket of the seat in front, pulling free a pad of paper and a pen. His writing formed neat, looping cursive across the page, too challenging to read from this angle. For a moment, Sherlock wondered if his brother had taken control, once again seeking to dictate his future. Yet before he could voice a complaint, Mycroft continued.

‘Obviously, the first thing is to ensure that the Cunningham family as a whole relinquish their claim, rather than just Patricia. The fewer loopholes we leave for the remaining Alpha children, the better. Then we must define the point at which the investigation is “solved”. Is it when the police make an arrest, press charges, or when the perpetrator is sentenced?’ He tapped a finger against the page, a frown eclipsing his eyes. ‘I shall endeavour to negotiate for the conditions to be met as soon as possible, but I doubt it’s an area in which they will be flexible. Then, of course, there is the matter of time.’

Sherlock watched, aware that most of what his brother was saying was little more than musing aloud. It was a familiar sight, one of his own habits displayed in another. Mycroft was unlikely to indulge too often. Mulling over state secrets in public spaces was inadvisable at best, but here, in the privacy of a vehicle he no doubt checked for listening devices on an hourly basis, he allowed himself free reign. It reminded Sherlock of better times, before his secondary gender had become common knowledge. He remembered how close they had once been, and although he would never admit it, he experienced a pang of loss for the days when his brother had been his closest and most unquestionable ally.

Now, that honour fell on another man’s shoulders, and Sherlock looked up at the mirror again, taking in the sliver of John’s reflection: a brow creased with confusion and blue eyes unfocussed with thought.

‘What do you mean, a matter of time?’ John asked, twisting in his seat so he could look back at Mycroft. ‘She didn’t mention any kind of deadline. Wouldn’t it be better to leave it at that? Open-ended?’

‘No. It leaves a weakness in the contract. They might state that, since no time limit has been set, they don’t have to release their claim promptly, and instead do so at their own leisure: weeks, months or years after the fact. Alternatively, they could claim they had a far shorter time-frame in mind, and that Sherlock had failed to meet the conditions in a prompt manner.’ Mycroft shook his head, not looking up from what he was writing. ‘It’s far better to detail both how long Sherlock has to conclude the investigation, and how swiftly they must release him when he does so.’
He caught Sherlock’s eye, and for the first time since this conversation began, he looked uncomfortable. ‘From what I’ve managed to glean from Detective Inspector Lestrade about Alexander’s murder, it’s clear that it is far from straightforward, and your biology does bring logistical issues into account. How, exactly, do you plan to proceed?’

Sherlock sank further into his seat, folding his arms and staring into the middle distance. More than once since leaving the Cunninghams, his concerns had attempted to intercede, but he had shaken them aside, enjoying the brief elation of success. With Mycroft’s words, they returned full force, casting long shadows across his mental horizons.

What had been a puzzle of intriguing complexity now became a distasteful obstacle in Sherlock’s eyes. Worse, it was not the kind of thing he could resolve from a distance. He needed to be in London again, pacing the streets and dipping his fingers into the evidence, living it in a way that was impossible via phone-calls and video links. He had to be able to respond to the changing landscape of the investigation, and he couldn’t do that locked away miles from the metropolis.

Yet returning to the city unbound was far from ideal. Without a bite, his natural cycle would be short and unpredictable, and his pheromones would impact every Alpha he came across. The consequences of that alone could be disastrous.

A knot would make each event easier, physically, but it would not reduce the frequency. Nor was Sherlock sure how his body would react in between each pyresus if a bond were not in place. It was never something he had experienced. Would he return to normal, his mind clear and his transport tamed, or would there be some new, unknown effect on his well-being?

What he required was the peace of mind that came with certainty. He had to be free to focus his intellect on the case, rather than losing himself in the hormonal ravages of his unpredictable flesh.

And for that, he needed a bond.

His gaze flickered to John, who had turned back around to face the windscreen, preferring to keep his eyes on the road ahead as the miles vanished beneath the car’s wheels. Already, they had come to the tentative agreement that he would help with Sherlock’s next pyresus, and he kept recalling John’s words to the Cunninghams about why he had not placed a bite. It was not due to any hesitation on his own part, but respect for Sherlock that held him back.

If he asked now, would John agree?

The idea of it, of living with John and sharing everything: the Work, the flat, a bed and a bond was incandescent – almost painful to consider. He had never thought he would find an Alpha who could tolerate him with such ease, one who did not stifle him or try and mould him to their desires, but admired him for who he was when untethered by the expectations of society. It felt like a trick, too perfect, and Sherlock’s heart hammered in his throat at the possibility.

‘I’m considering my options,’ he answered at last, taking a deep breath as Mycroft followed his gaze, no doubt reading everything in the sweep of one glance.

‘Good.’ His brother turned the page and began to write something, his letters clumsy with haste. ‘Let me know when you have made your decision.’ He flipped the pad around, and Sherlock took in the two words scrawled across its face.

“Be sure.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, turning his head away at the simple warning. He knew that Mycroft’s
concerns were unlikely to lie in matters of the heart, nor was it a slight against John. Instead, he would be thinking of the legal dangers inherent in Sherlock’s choices. He’d mentioned them more than once over the past few weeks, and Sherlock suspected there had been the occasional private word with John, as well. Quiet conversations that outlined what might become of them both if they formed a bond without the Cunninghams’ approval.

Yet without one, finding Alexander’s killer would be twice as challenging, and it was not a straightforward matter to begin with. Being as close to peak performance as possible was essential, and his thoughts scrambled as he tried to see the best way forward.

Imperiously, he held out his hand for the pen, taking it from his brother’s grasp and scrawling a brief demand across the page.

“Ensure John is protected from any potential consequences. Write it into the contract if you have to.”

Sherlock looked up, knowing he would understand what he was implying: whatever happened, he had to be certain that John would not suffer as a result. That, at least, was within his brother’s power.

‘Leave it with me,’ Mycroft urged, his voice not quite loud enough to carry over the sound of the engine to John’s ears as the vehicle finally swept through the gates of the Holmes estate. ‘I’ll inform you of the precise terms of the negotiations within the next few days. I appreciate you are no doubt eager to unravel the crime and earn your freedom, but the time may be better spent on other things.’ He cast a meaningful look in John’s direction.

As aggravating as it was to admit it, he had a point, and Sherlock gave a curt nod as the car slowed to a halt. He reached for the handle, his mind racing as he delivered his parting shot.

‘One thing, Mycroft. The Cunninghams forgot about the importance of Omegas when they were creating their legal documents. They blocked you from approaching, but didn’t consider the role I might play.’ He stepped out of the car, turning back and bending down to cast a dangerous look at his brother. ‘Don’t make the same mistake, will you?’

‘As if I would be so foolish.’ The corner of Mycroft’s mouth twitched in a flicker of amusement before he gestured towards the house. ‘By the way, you are free to leave at any time you wish. To restrict your movements after today’s demonstration is pointless. However, please inform me should you choose to depart. I would hate to worry.’

Before Sherlock could summon a retort, another car skimmed to a stop behind them and Anthea stepped out, her heels crunching over the gravel as she approached. Her elegant hand cradled Sherlock’s phone, and she held it out to him, offering a vacant smile that conveniently veiled her intellect.

‘I’ll be in touch,’ Mycroft promised, nodding farewell as his assistant took the seat Sherlock had vacated. She closed the door, leaving him to retreat from the ghostly image of his own reflection in the tinted windows as the two vehicles pulled away.

‘Hey.’ A hand against his back made him twitch in surprise, and Sherlock cursed inwardly as John recoiled, his hands held up in surrender. ‘Sorry.’

‘No, it’s –’ Sherlock shook his head. ‘It’s fine.’ He fought the urge to press his fingertips to his temple again, knowing John would pick up on his distress. The mere hours spent at the Cunningham residence felt like an age, and the stress of it had left Sherlock drained and weary.
Despite his best efforts to hide them, John noticed the signs of his flagging strength and offered a sympathetic smile. ‘Come on,’ he urged, standing back and gesturing towards the door. ‘Let’s get inside. I’ll dig out something for that headache.’

True to his word, as soon as they were across the threshold he trotted off to track down his kit, leaving Sherlock to head for the living room. His scarf whispered as he pulled it from around his neck before peeling off his coat and jacket. Gooseflesh raced across his skin at the abrupt chill, but he ignored it as he flung the garments over a nearby chair. His phone was in his pocket, and he plucked it free, swiping out a quick message.

“Send everything you have on the Donnelly case to the usual email address. – SH”

His mobile chimed obligingly, showing the text was on its way to Lestrade, and Sherlock set the device down on the coffee table before considering the two sofas. They were fatter than the one at Baker Street, less worn and dented, as if unaccustomed to anyone’s weight. Of course, Mycroft had refurnished the place since their father’s death, and he barely spent any time here. The whole house felt expectant in its disuse, as if it were waiting for the day when a family would return.

Kicking off his shoes, he sat down on the one facing the fireplace, wrinkling his nose at the alien firmness. Baker Street’s furniture was well-loved and had deformed over time to fit the shape of him. Still, this would have to do.

With a sigh, he lay down along its length, stretching his arms above his head and forcing the tight twist of his spine to uncoil. It was a shivering moment of bliss, his muscles shaking off the biting tightness. Yet his discomfort made itself known in other ways, from the thumping in his head to the fretful flutter of his pulse.

Years of practice had Sherlock pushing aside the pain. He had suffered worse, and he knew himself well enough to realise that his transport’s reaction was natural: an accumulation of stress abruptly released had a tendency to bring on a sense of malaise. Better to let his body get on with its recovery in peace. Occupying his brain would not be a challenge, not when his mind palace was calling.

He sank downwards, beyond the conscious level to the deeper, mental plane on which he had placed the edifice of his intellect. The point of entry was always the same: Baker Street, all the useless, intervening space pared away so that the black door, with its gleaming numbers, opened straight onto the living room.

Sherlock paused, examining the structures which had come to epitomise so much of his life. There were many rooms in this artificial construct of memory – every object was a doorway to another place of knowledge, like spokes bursting out from the hub of a wheel – but it was here, within 221B, that the three main influences of his existence converged to form a stable core.

His independence shone in the fabric of the imagined building, forming the bricks of the walls while his conviction made the mortar. The abundance of files and evidence represented the Work, each one signifying the start of a thread that could lead him back down to some key piece of knowledge.

Then there was John.

His influence was everywhere. It found form in handwritten notes stuck to the fridge and a cup of tea on the table. A blaze flickered below the maw of the chimney, and John’s laptop sat open on the arm of his chair, a blank blog page ready and waiting.

This room contained everything that Sherlock considered necessary to his existence. Perhaps that was why he found it so easy to shed the weight of his distractions, and why pacing across the floor
felt so much like coming home.

His footsteps measured a quiet beat as he took in the details of the Donnelly case, neatly arranged on the mirror over the mantelpiece. The pages looked yellow at their edges, aged and stale like the investigation itself, and one or two ferns of frost crept over the reflective glass. In his mind, at least, the trail had gone cold, and until he had more input from Lestrade, it would no doubt stay that way. All he could do was hope that the DI would offer up some new fragment, something that would slip into place and bring the whole thing into focus.

Not that it mattered. He hadn’t come here to work on the investigation. He had more personal matters to consider.

His armchair breathed a sigh as he sat down, and the strings of the violin shivered beneath his touch as he stroked their lengths, filling the air with ethereal notes. It was a nonsense melody, something to occupy his hands and curl in his ear while his thoughts raced on.

Mycroft was right, he had to be sure, and that meant Sherlock had to bend the power of his intellect to the matter of bonds. Whether one was necessary remained impossible for him to discern. Could an Omega exist in a mutually beneficial relationship with an Alpha, without the need for a biochemical connection?

The answer was unknown. Before John, he had found the idea of anyone knotting him and not placing a bite laughable. It was instinct: the natural order of things. He had never believed an Alpha with the required level of restraint could exist. Now, he found himself intrigued. If he had the time, he would be eager to experiment and chart this foreign territory of an Omega’s existence, but he didn’t have that luxury, not when his future hung in the balance. When bound, he knew that absolute clarity was within his grasp: that was a certainty, and it was not one he could afford to ignore.

Thoughtfully, he set the violin down and moved towards the fire, his hands outstretched to the warmth of the flames. Tongues of heat washed against his skin, almost solid to the touch, and he allowed his mind to continue to turn, setting aside necessity and moving on to desire.

Was a bond something he wanted?

In general, the concept had always filled him with disgust. The notion of being tied so completely to an individual had once repulsed him, the dependency distasteful even though it was encoded at the genetic level. His connection with Alexander had been a gross sacrifice, his Alpha subsuming everything until he was a mere footnote in another man’s life.

Then he’d met John, and slowly, all that had changed.

All Sherlock had to do was examine his surroundings to realise the truth. Sentiment left its mark on every surface, written into the firmament of his existence. His respect and admiration for John daubed the patterns of the wallpaper, and the heat of his desire blackened the chimney with torrid soot. Affection wove through the Afghan blanket on the back of John’s armchair, while pride gleamed in the metallic frame of Sherlock’s dichotomous seat.

Yet it was not a superficial gloss. Like a tree setting down roots, his regard for John had insinuated every crack and seam. To attempt to deny it would be futile, and to remove it would rock his very foundations. It must have happened in the steadiest of increments, a seed nurtured by every breathless smile and shared glance.

Alexander had lived in the shadows of Sherlock's mind palace, existing only as half-hidden threat. John, on the other hand, was everywhere: the stability in Sherlock’s life, working in harmony with
the driving force of the Work. Their lives were already entwined, and John’s influence was undeniable.

The reality was staring him in the face. They were bound to one another, not as Alpha and Omega, but as Sherlock and John: a balanced equation. The idea of John biting him seemed neither alien nor alarming. It was simply taking the connection that wrote itself in their interactions and transcribing it to a cellular level: something rendered into biology, rather than consigned to the realm of the intangible.

His body surged, excitement flooding his veins. In John’s hands, the bond would not be like a chain around Sherlock’s throat, holding him captive to the ridiculous expectations of society. It would not be about ownership, but partnership: more proof, should they need it, that they worked better together. John’s bite would guarantee Sherlock the precision of mind he needed to find the killer, smoothing out the demands of his transport into something manageable, and in return...

Sherlock’s thoughts slid to a halt, the light feeling in his chest turning lank in the presence of the unknown. A bond with John might give him his freedom, but would the price of that be a cage of a different sort for John? He was an honourable man, one who believed in doing what was right. Would it be something he wanted, or would he see it as an obligation? Would Sherlock be enough, or would John tire of him and find he was stuck with a biological connection to an Omega he no longer admired?

The idea chilled Sherlock to the bone, and he shivered as he realised his fears were not something he could accurately assuage. Any evidence he had of John’s feelings was too vague: impossible to deduce. No, he required John’s input, not the facsimile that lived in this echo of Baker Street, which would act as a conduit for Sherlock’s own uncertainties. He had to put the offer into words and see how the real John responded.

More to the point, time was of the essence. The pressure of the case was only exceeded by that of their biology. There was no guarantee that the ODX would last as long as the scientists theorised, and if Sherlock knew nothing else, it was that they had to make their decision before he went into pyresus and logical thought slipped beyond their reach.

The sooner he discussed the matter with John, the better.

All it took was a shift of intent, and reality drifted back into focus. The bland ceiling stretched above him, lit by the wavering glow of the fire in the grate. Otherwise, the room was in twilight, disturbed by the mellow haloes of one or two lamp while thick curtains blocked out the encroaching dark.

He must have been submerged for longer than he thought, long enough, at least, for John to have settled on the floor by Sherlock’s head, his legs kicked out towards the hearth and his back supported by the sofa. A book lay open in his lap, and he was already a few chapters in. An empty plate sat on the coffee table, perched next to Sherlock’s phone, and a few smears of gravy suggested he had taken the time to cook something.

‘Back with me?’ John asked, a smile swelling his cheeks. He didn’t look at Sherlock, no doubt discerning his emerging presence from the change in his breathing. He appeared engrossed in whatever he was reading, though since it was Dickens, which John loathed, that seemed unlikely. No, this was a deliberate bid for attention – flirtatious in a way that was still so new to them – and Sherlock knew precisely how to respond.

A huff of laughter caught in John’s chest as Sherlock rolled on his side, pressing his face to the back of John’s neck and inhaling the scent of him: comfortable and grounding, a balm to the butterflies thrashing in his stomach. He brushed his lips over John’s nape, fiercely aware that his intentions...
were bleeding out into his body language, but unable to care as John leaned into him, relishing the point of contact.

‘How’s your head?’

It took Sherlock a moment to recall the grinding pain, now conspicuously absent. ‘It’s fine. Thinking helped.’

John made a curious noise as he set the book aside, not bothering to mark his place. ‘Were you going back over the case?’ he asked, turning where he sat and resting one arm on the sofa so that he could brush his fingers through dark curls.

‘No. I examined it briefly, but...’ He shook his head, dismissing the rest of his sentence. Anxiety tightened the knots in his stomach as he tried to think how best to broach the topic that was forefront in his mind. ‘I was considering what happened at the Cunninghams.’ That wasn’t exactly true, but he felt too on-edge to ask John about bonds directly. This, oblique as it may be, at least allowed him to approach the subject with a modicum of grace. ‘Did you mean what you said to Henry?’

John tipped his head, a touch of wariness entering his gaze. ‘Which part?’

‘When he asked why you hadn’t bitten me, you indicated that it was because I hadn’t given you permission to do so. Is that true?’ Sherlock waited, his chest tight as he watched John struggle to understand what he was getting at.

‘Yeah. Yeah of course it is.’ John’s hand twitched in Sherlock’s hair, his body telegraphing alarm and uncertainty despite the stoic calm of his expression. ‘I wouldn’t take anything from you, not if you didn’t want to give it.’

Sherlock sighed, pursing his lips. Of course, he should have realised John would get the wrong end of the stick, thinking that Sherlock was looking for reassurance and a reinforcement of boundaries, rather than offering any form of subtle invitation. Clearly, he had to take a direct approach.

‘And if I said you could?’ he murmured, doing his best to subdue the thrumming tension that had taken up residence beneath his skin: breathless exhilaration and fear inextricably mixed. ‘Would you?’

John sucked in a deep breath, his body rigid with shock. Yet for all his stillness, he was not a blank slate. Sherlock saw a wealth of information in the angle of his mouth and the tilt of his brow. Blue eyes darkened, their pupils dilating further than the ambient gloom required as John’s gaze took on an extra intensity. A glimmer of a smile curved his lips before it vanished beneath lines carved by doubt, and his smooth forehead crumpled in concern.

‘Why?’ His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. ‘I mean the answer’s yes, Sherlock. Of course it’s yes, but I need to know why.’ When Sherlock didn’t respond, John drew back his hand, his fingers clenching in a brief fist before he released them again. ‘Is it for the case? For convenience?’

Sherlock swallowed the instinctive denial before it could tear itself from his throat. He understood John’s need for certainty. To an Alpha not raised in the elite, a bond was not an inconsequential matter, and it was up to Sherlock to find a way to explain it in terms John would accept.

Slowly, he sat up, no longer comfortable to lie submissive in John’s presence. He folded his legs up under him and wiped his palms on his knees, the fabric skimming his sweat-damp skin as he considered how best to begin.

‘I don’t know whether I need a bond to answer the call of the Work. I don’t have the data, and nor
do I have time to acquire it.’ He wriggled his socked toes, the cotton whispering as he continued.

‘From past experience, I know that a bite would offer numerous advantages, even while I’m living in
the presence of my Alpha. My biology would become more predictable and less of a distraction, and
even though I would still go into pyresus, it would be more infrequent and shorter in duration than if
I remained unbound.’

He paused, aware that John’s frown lines had eased. Now, there was an edge to that familiar
expression that Sherlock couldn’t name. ‘What is it?’

‘“Living in the presence of my Alpha...”’ John repeated. ‘You, uh, you’d want me to stay?’

Sherlock blinked, and the memory of John’s offer from the day before resurfaced in his mind, as
appalling now as it had been then. ‘You’re an idiot,’ he huffed. ‘I thought I’d made myself perfectly
clear. I thought I’d made myself perfectly clear. The last thing I want you to do is bite me and then leave. Even before we shared a bed,
demanding your departure was never a possibility.’

John shifted where he sat, drawing breath as if he wanted to speak, but Sherlock ignored him,
looking down and away. ‘That said, you wouldn’t be obligated to stay if you chose not to, nor would
I attempt to imply you had no choice in the matter. The bond could be as much or as little as you
require. It’s not –’

The firm band of strong fingers around his wrist cut off his rambling excuses, and he looked up in
surprise. John had risen to his knees, taking both of Sherlock’s hands and wrapping them in his grip.

‘What about you?’ He tilted his head, watching him.

‘What about me?’ Sherlock asked, a hollow ache blooming in his stomach as John sighed. This
wasn’t going the way he had hoped, and his efforts to put John’s mind at rest – to point out that he
would not be forever caged at Sherlock’s side – seemed to have somehow backfired.

John swallowed, the smile on his lips crooked and more distressed than joyful. ‘I’m trying to
understand what, exactly, you want. Is it just a knot and a bond, some help keeping your biology
intact or – or is there more to it than that?’

Sherlock paused to consider his words. The chaff of sentiment was chaotic and useless in almost
every aspect of his life, but now its relevance became acute. John did not want to hear Sherlock’s
faultless rationale. He wanted to see the murk of emotion beneath it, as if he thought he could find
the answer in the turbulent waters of Sherlock’s feelings.

‘I – the idea of a bond has never been put to me as a choice.’ He looked down at his hands, his white
fingers still cradled within John’s weathered palms. He did not have the vocabulary for this, but he
had to try. ‘Circumstances have always dictated the necessity of it. Now, it’s not so absolute. Yes,
it’s logical to take the known road and form a bond, but it’s not the only option.’ He cleared his
throat, more vulnerable now than when he had been naked and splayed open beneath John in the bed
they shared. ‘If it were someone else offering to bite me, I wouldn’t accept. It’s not something I’d
want from anyone but you.’

John said nothing, his gaze full of endless patience. He looked as if he were happy to wait until the
end of time for Sherlock to find the syllables necessary to convey his message. Unfortunately, he was
not nearly so patient with himself, and he eased a hand free from John’s grip to run it through his
hair.

He wished he could somehow slip his fingers through the blockade of his skull and pull free the
vision of his mind palace, where John’s essence was plain in every glimmer and seam: irrefutable.
Perhaps then John would understand that a bond was not merely the act of a rational man, but the
desire of Sherlock’s ridiculous heart.

‘I wouldn’t ask for a bond from you, not if I didn’t feel the way I do.’ He closed his eyes as he
attempted to explain. ‘You’re – You’re integral. Fundamental. You moved into Baker Street and
altered everything for the better. Except me. I was the one thing you never tried to change in a world
where everyone thought I should be different.’

Other words formed lumps in his throat: trite things that seemed too pale to give voice – wrong in
this moment even if they were true – and he swallowed them back, pursing his lips a mere moment
before he felt John’s breath flutter across his cheek.

Sherlock opened his eyes, surprised to find him so close, and his heart hammered into triple time as
he saw the look in John’s eyes. It was passion under a tight leash, held down and restrained by a
power John wielded with natural grace. Seeing him so undeniably in command of himself was
intoxicating, and Sherlock was torn between delight that his trust had been well-placed, and the
temptation to push at that control until it disintegrated around them.

‘Can you answer one more question?’ John husked, his voice low in his throat. ‘Do you want us to
stay as we were before all this started: friends, colleagues, solving crimes and living together, but
with me helping out with your pyresus…?’ He trailed off, looking pained, as if the thought of
returning to the way they had been was too much for him to bear. ‘Or are you hoping for more? A
lover? A partner? I need to know what you want from me.’

John’s expression was completely unmasked. He meant what he was saying. Even if it would break
his heart to do so, he would step back, meeting the demands of Sherlock’s biology even as he
restrained himself to the confines of friendship. If that was what Sherlock needed of him, then that is
what John would do, regardless of the personal and emotional expense.

It was that, more than anything, which galvanised Sherlock’s intentions, allowing his answer to
ripple into focus. His nose nudged against the tip of John’s before he angled his head, their lips
brushing as he murmured his response.

‘I want everything.’

He kissed John softly, his fingertips lifting to rest on the angle of his jaw as he poured all he could
into what he was doing: the hope and the uncertainty, his fear of failure and the impossible ecstasy of
their potential success. Words were finite yet complex, easily misinterpreted, but in this there was
something like clarity: a direct communication from skin-to-skin with no translation required.

There were no syllables with which to restrict his sentiments, but John was getting the message all
the same. His shoulders melted and his lips parted. One hand still clutched Sherlock’s left tight, their
fingers entwined, while the other rubbed circles into the hub of his kneecap. A moment later, those
digits followed the line of his in-seam up his thigh, and Sherlock gasped, emotion and need mixing
into a new entity that was somehow more than the sum of its parts.

John broke back, his head bowed and his breathing ragged. He looked stunned, as if he couldn’t
believe his luck, and when he stared up into Sherlock’s face, the answering glow in John’s eyes
almost sliced him in two. It was as if, with a few simple words, Sherlock had handed John the world
on a silver plate: a flawless fantasy which lay within their grasp.

Except that there was no such thing. The Cunninghams’ touch tarnished even this tentative
agreement between them, and Sherlock swallowed, wishing he could leave his warnings unsaid. It
galled him that every action he took came with a risk. No choice he made was free from
consequences, even those that he knew could change his life for the better.

‘Before you agree,’ he murmured, rasping his thumb over the stubble on John’s cheek, ‘you should know that, if I fail to unearth Alexander’s murderer, any bond between us will be destroyed. The Cunninghams will see to that.’

‘I know.’ Clumsily, John got to his feet, his knees clicking and a wince tightening his eyes as he traded the floor for the sofa at Sherlock’s side. Not once did he release his grasp on Sherlock’s hand, and he took comfort in the connection, solid amidst the ebb and flow of tenderness and desire, uncertainty and doubt that seemed to be in constant flux around them. ‘Mycroft said as much, weeks ago now.’ John looked at him, the heat in his eyes still glowing but no longer aflame. ‘Do you think it’s a possibility?’

‘I don’t think it will be straightforward. Solving it to my satisfaction is not the same as giving Aveline and Patricia the answers that they desire. A great deal of my success will come down to the details of whatever contract Mycroft manages to agree with them.’

‘You’re worried they’ll catch you out on a technicality? One that even your brother can’t work his way around?’

‘It’s a possibility. Mycroft can ensure your safety from prosecution, of that I’m certain. The Cunninghams know when to pick their battles, but any bond we have…’ He trailed off, his shoulders jerking in a shrug. ‘There’s no guarantee that it will survive the year.’

John squeezed his hand. ‘There’s no guarantee we’ll survive the year, either,’ he pointed out, shuffling closer and turning to face Sherlock where he sat. His left hand skimmed the line of his shoulder to curve around the nape of his neck, his grip warm and firm in a way that made Sherlock melt into the cup of his palm. ‘I don’t give a damn about myself. It’s not me who could suffer because of a chemically broken bond, is it? It’s you who’s risking everything. You’re the only one who can decide if it’s worth it.’

Sherlock shook his head. He knew John too well to think that he would take the destruction of a bond between them lightly. He would place blame on his own shoulders, knowing that whatever happened to Sherlock was a direct consequence of his actions. Of course, he would fight it with every weapon at his disposal. He and Mycroft would tear the contract down to its component parts and utilise every possible tool to prevent Sherlock’s bond being broken, but if they failed…

He shied away from the thought: a dire imagining of the worst-case scenario. It was easy to think of it as the inevitable result, but nothing could be further from the truth. He had spent too long fighting for his own control, wresting it from the hands of others who sought to keep it. Now, for the first time in his life, he had the opportunity to earn his freedom, and a bond with John could only be an asset in that endeavour.

‘It’s worth it.’ Sherlock leaned forward, resting his brow against John’s. The effect of his confidence was immediate. Those strong shoulders straightened, not aggressive or tense, but broader than his normal, more accommodating stance, and the faint cringe of uncertainty that had bent his frame ebbed away, replaced with something solid and dependable.

Yet he did not move to decrease the scant distance between them, or ask any stammering questions about what placing a bond entailed. Instead, Sherlock sensed a faint edge of professional concern, and he drew back with a frown. ‘What is it?’

John hesitated, his lips twisting as if he knew Sherlock wouldn’t like what he had to say. ‘Biting you right now might not be the best idea.’ He shook his head, not giving Sherlock the chance to splutter a
protest. ‘Not because I think either of us need more time to think about it, or because I’ve got any doubts, but we don’t know what effect the ODX might have. Maybe it’ll do nothing, but for all we know it’ll stop a bond from forming, or cause some kind of traumatic response.’

Sherlock closed his eyes, not bothering to hide the flash of his disappointment. He couldn’t deny the logic of what John was saying, but part of him chafed against the restraint. He finally had the chance to take action towards gaining permanent freedom from the Cunninghams, and at every turn he found his progress hampered. He couldn’t address any issues of the case until Lestrade gave him all the details, nor could he use the respite from the investigation to advance the status of his and John’s relationship.

‘If I could bond with you now and be sure it wouldn’t do you any serious harm, I would.’ John nudged him. ‘God, I wouldn’t even hesitate, but…’

‘But you’re already uncomfortable with the level of savagery implied by biting someone hard enough to make them bleed, and if there were any additional consequences, you’d never forgive yourself.’ Sherlock shrugged, his lips twitching in a faint smile as John gave him a curious look. ‘You demonstrate visible distress whenever you see a bond bite. Some of that could be because of what it represents, but you tend to wear the same expression when you’re treating injuries on myself or others.’

John sighed, chewing his lip. ‘You’re right. I don’t much like the fact that I have to sink my teeth into you to make a bond work, but there’s no way I’m going to risk it being any worse than it has to be. As soon as the effects of the ODX are gone –’

‘I’ll go into pyresus,’ Sherlock pointed out, cocking his head as he observed John’s reaction, a visible conflict of arousal and concern. ‘Generally speaking, it’s the most common time for a bond to be placed, and the most effective, but I’d be lying if I said either of us would have much in the way of control.’

Resolve filled John’s expression. ‘If you told me to leave you alone, I would. If you change your mind about sex or a bond, then all you have to do is say.’ He lifted his chin as if daring Sherlock to question him. He needed to believe he could stop himself, that much was obvious, but the point was irrelevant. John’s restraint was not something he had any intention of putting to the test.

‘I know.’ He ducked his head, stealing a kiss and tasting John’s conviction. ‘I also know that I’m not going to change my mind. When the time comes, I want you to bite me.’ He lowered the pitch of his voice, a thrill shivering down his spine as John’s breath caught and his pupils pooled across the expanse of his iris: determination bleeding into desire. ‘I want you to claim me, to fuck your knot into me. I want –’

John’s lips collided with his, cutting him off, and Sherlock growled in approval, his fingers hooking in John’s jumper as he pulled him close. Their limbs tangled and their bodies twisted, clumsily and uncomfortable until at last Sherlock had John where he wanted him: a heavy weight across his chest and pressed into his stomach. He cocked his legs wide, allowing John to settle between them like a matching piece, and every time they shifted it sparked more beautiful friction.

It was a powerful aphrodisiac, to know he could do this to John – not with some biochemical fragrance designed to entice, but with the rumble of his voice and the flicker of a glance. Yet John’s overwhelming presence was equally hypnotic, from the glow of his eyes to the skim of his hands which, even now, were driving every rational thought from Sherlock’s mind.

He trailed his fingers down the wool-clad line of John’s back, seeking the band of denim at his waist. The Sig was gone, set down somewhere in the hours since they had arrived home, and instead he
found cheap cotton underwear and the warm curve of the skin beneath. Sherlock gave a greedy grope, laughter bubbling in his chest as John groaned in pleasure.

Lips at his throat had him flinging his head aside, granting John better access as they shifted against one another, not enough to find release, but lost to the promise of satisfaction. There wasn’t much room on the sofa for two full-grown men, but then maintaining personal space was far from a concern.

The definition between one kiss and the next blurred, the initial flash of hunger fading to something they could sustain. John’s lips wandered Sherlock’s skin, tracing the boundaries of his clothes: the splay of his collar and the lines of his cuffs. It would have been reverent but for the sacrilegious heat in John’s gaze, and he choked in a gasp as John rolled his hips, intensifying the grind that threatened to tip them both over the edge.

A faint, discordant buzz barely permeated the delicious haze blanketing Sherlock’s mind. He was too lost in the taste and feel of John above him to pay it any mind, but when the sound repeated a few moments later, he broke away, scowling in the direction of the coffee table.

The screen of his phone glowed in the gloom, its acidic light a cruel interruption. He should ignore it, could, in fact. With John still hovering over him, his hair mussed and his lips swollen, it would be far too easy. Yet before Sherlock could reach up to pull him into kissing range, John shifted away, leaning across the gap and scooping the mobile from the table before sitting back on his heels.

‘Check your messages,’ he suggested, sounding more than a bit breathless. ‘It’ll just keep buzzing if you don’t. It’s probably Lestrade.’

‘All the more reason to ignore it,’ Sherlock replied.

‘You don’t mean that.’ John smiled without a trace of recrimination. ‘You wouldn’t be you if you started turning your back on the Work.’

Sherlock sighed as the mood shifted. What had been blissful solitude and exquisite intimacy fell away as the horizons of their world broadened anew, and the pressures they had kept at bay came flooding back.

Silently, he took the phone from John’s grip, watching him for any hint of disapproval. Yet his face remained softly affectionate, unsurprised, although perhaps a touch resigned as Sherlock read the missive.

“Thought you’d never ask. All available electronic copies are in your inbox. Everything else is on its way to you thanks to your brother. For God’s sake, let me know what you find. - GL”

Even in a simple text message, Lestrade’s desperation was evident, and Sherlock muttered a curse, letting the back of his head thud against the sofa cushion. ‘The evidence is waiting, and it’s obvious the Yard has made no progress,’ he explained, glancing down the length of his body to where John still knelt, looking flushed and delicious and achingly understanding. He kept searching for indications of anger or irritation, but there were none. Of course, John was not happy at the interruption, but if he resented it, it didn’t show.

If it were any other case, Sherlock would have let it wait, just for an hour or so. In this moment at least, he would have reassigned his priorities to put John squarely on top, but they both knew this was different. Biology and circumstances set a time limit, and there was a far greater reward for unravelling the puzzle than mere pride in a job well done. This was the key to their future, and as such, it couldn’t be ignored.
Sherlock sat up, shifting his legs so that he could stand before turning back. John and the Work did not exist in isolation. From that first day, John had been a part of it, racing along at Sherlock’s side. There was no reason for that to change, and he glanced over his shoulder at the man still sitting on the couch.

‘Will you help?’

It was more than a simple request. One question hid inside another, and Sherlock knew John heard his unvoiced hope for approval. Even better, he saw John’s answer before he spoke it, made plain in the way he smiled and held himself. There was no cringe of disappointment or sullen scowl. Instead, John followed Sherlock’s lead, his spine straight and his shoulders firm.

‘I’m all yours.’
**Benediction**

Early morning light seeped around the edges of the curtains, peeling John back from his fractured doze. The fire in the grate had died to wraith-grey ash as the sofa cradled him through a few hours of sleep. It was ridiculous to have insisted on getting his head down here when there were who knew how many comfortable beds waiting for him upstairs, but he couldn’t stand the thought of being apart from Sherlock. Not after yesterday.

The memory of the Cunninghams had lost its sharpness, his anger and distaste drowned out by the warm flood of hope. He wasn’t sure what stunned him more: the fact that they offered the deal, or Sherlock’s reaction to their promise. That cool reserve that kept so many at bay had cracked apart once they were outside the house, his body shaking and his face pale with shock. He’d looked at the world as if seeing it through new eyes, and at John as if he were the most compelling man in the universe. Not even Mycroft’s words of warning could take that away from them.

As amazing as it had been to see Sherlock so exposed and young in that moment, it was nothing compared to what happened next. John had known that the topic of bonds would come up one day, but he hadn’t thought it would be so soon. He expected Sherlock to turn his back on the concept, unwilling to tie himself down all over again. That was why he’d been so brutal in his questions, desperate for Sherlock’s reasons.

It wouldn’t have changed his answer. Even if Sherlock had said it was to help him solve the case and nothing more, he would have obliged. Still, John would have tried to hold some part of himself back, to protect himself from the inevitable pain of giving more in a relationship that Sherlock could offer in return.

As it turned out, he needn’t have worried.

Hot butterflies thrashed below his belly button, and a smile curved his lips as he played back Sherlock’s stumbling, honest explanation. He’d offered John a bond without restraint, saying he could leave at any time if he wanted, but the power of Sherlock’s grip around his hand told another story. Sherlock had been busy giving voice to what he thought John would want to hear, but all the while the angle of his body and its subtle, shifting gestures had revealed the sentiment at work.

It seemed too good to be true. That was why John had held back, waiting for Sherlock to put it into words, because if they both wanted the same thing then what they shared had the power to be life-changing. Right from the start their friendship had been all-or-nothing, and John had prayed that this was no different. He hadn’t required much in the way of patience before Sherlock’s breathless answer removed the last of his doubts.

Sherlock wanted everything. Not just a knot and a bond, but all that John had to offer. For one moment, half-blind and instinctive, he’d almost bent Sherlock’s head forward there and then, intent on sinking his teeth into the blank flesh at his nape. Only a faint whisper of logic had held him back. At least Sherlock’s disappointment had seemed as keen as his own, but they now existed in a world of self-denial: perverse, exquisite torment.

It was hard to tell whether the interruption of the investigation was a curse or a godsend. It distracted them from the endless task of waiting for their respective biologies to return to normal, but at the same time it meant John had spent the hours of darkness watching Sherlock being his volatile, brilliant self. He devoured the evidence, reading through the new details and thinking out loud, prowling the house as his deep voice gave form to the mystery’s chaos. This was the man he wanted. Not some biddable doll to do as he was told, but Sherlock: flawed and dazzling and independent, so
vivid that he took John’s breath away.

Nothing had changed, and at the same time everything was different. Sherlock’s musings were less absorbed than usual, as if part of his attention remained constantly on John. Small, affectionate touches punctuated every interaction: the brush of fingers or a hint of a smile. Sherlock looked at him, and now the gleam in his eye wasn’t all about the Work.

It made restraint a painful challenge. He’d managed it, of course, allowing himself to match Sherlock’s quiet, subdued affection without pushing the line he’d drawn in the sand. The case came first; John had no qualms about that. Expecting anything different was idiotic, and at least it was a role he knew well. He was there as Sherlock’s sounding board, his conductor of light, and he kept going until exhaustion took its toll.

He couldn’t say for sure what time Sherlock had told him to go to bed. There were vague memories of being stubborn about the sofa, and John rubbed at one eye, realising that the warmth draped over him was not a blanket, but Sherlock’s coat. The Belstaff was heavy and comfortable, and the aromas of wool, Sherlock and London all blended together as John inhaled.

Abruptly, he realised the change, and he drew in another breath, blinking at the difference.

Yesterday, the odours of the house had been two-dimensional, limited to obvious fragrances of polish and cooked food. Now the input was kaleidoscopic, his olfactory sense back at peak efficiency thanks to the altered dose of the inhibitors.

There were a dozen different facets, but it was Sherlock’s scent that took priority: that same before-a-storm smell that John had come to associate with his base, unbound state. It may not have been the lush perfume that came with pyresus, but John’s response was still potent. Heat flushed through his body from the tips of his toes to the top of his head, and saliva pooled in his mouth, forcing him to swallow.

Once or twice the previous day, he’d noticed an increase in intensity, but the scent of Sherlock’s skin did not register beyond a salty, human musk. Now, the complex bouquet threatened to overwhelm him, and John’s lashes fluttered as he sorted through the wave of emotion that accompanied the input.

Attraction was a Pavlovian response, triggered by Sherlock’s proximity rather than any particular pheromones. Sherlock was nearby, therefore John was turned on: a simple equation by anyone’s standards. Yet there was more to it than that. The fragrance focused his mind, narrowing the wide beam of his concentration down to the most immediate concerns. He was relaxed but alert, and felt more rested from a few hours on the fat couch than he had in weeks.

Quietly, he got to his feet, folding the Belstaff and leaving it over the back of the sofa before he padded through to the kitchen. Yesterday’s clothes clung to his body, stale and uncomfortable, but he couldn’t make a shower his first priority, not with the need to see Sherlock humming beneath his skin.

Pausing on the threshold, he took in the sight. Sherlock was perched on one of the bar stools at the kitchen island, poised on the edge like a creature about to take flight. The long fingers of his right hand curved around a pen, guiding the nib as he sketched out what looked like chemical compositions. He had printed most of what Lestrade had sent their way, from pathologist reports to crime scene photographs, and they lay around him like gruesome offerings at a shrine.

Sherlock was in his element, and John could barely tear his eyes away. The only difference between life at Baker Street and this was his state of dress. Normally, he was either in a housecoat and comfortable clothes, or trapped within the confines of a suit. Now, his untucked shirt still bore the
creasing from John’s roving hands, and his collar was undone and crooked around the column of his throat. He had rolled one sleeve neatly out of the way, but the other slumped halfway down Sherlock’s forearm. Also, for some reason John couldn’t fathom, he’d taken off his socks, and his bare toes twitched in the cool air.

Stepping into the kitchen, John noticed the minuscule hesitation in Sherlock’s writing – a flicker of a pause before he resumed, quicker now, as if he were desperate to complete whatever thought lay in his head before John could interrupt him. Within a few seconds, he put the pen down, shaking out the knuckles in his right hand as he looked up.

‘Progress?’ John asked, swallowing hard as Sherlock stretched his arms above his head: an endless, long line of flesh that he wanted to touch.

‘If you can call it that,’ he replied, grunting as his back popped before rubbing a hand over his eyes. ‘Though it’s negligible, and came at price.’

John grimaced, his gaze skimming the files on the latest victims. Three all told, though Sherlock theorised there were more homeless who had not been located, their bodies in morgues or the river or some forgotten, shadowed place in London. ‘What have you found?’

Sherlock beckoned him with the curl of a finger, gesturing to the pages laid out before him. The dead were all Alphas, young professionals with an existing drug habit, and they fit the pattern perfectly. Sherlock’s neat handwriting interrupted the bland type, picking apart the tapestry of the deaths into their component parts, and John skimmed the information. Last night he had been helping Sherlock organise and absorb the new data the Yard provided, but while he had slept, Sherlock had been hard at work.

‘These people died between four and six hours after taking the contaminated dose.’ Realisation softened John’s voice as he picked out that relevant detail, boldly circled in red ink. ‘Whoever’s mixing this stuff up is getting closer to what they want.’

‘But also more cautious.’ Sherlock shrugged. ‘I suspect they have become aware of the police investigation and are limiting the majority of their experiments to the homeless population. If I was in London, I’d track down Elsie. I’m sure she’d have plenty to say on the subject. The Yard may be blind to it, but there’s no way she could miss something of this scale amidst the vagrants of the city.’

‘What about the substance?’ John gestured to the diagrams, glancing at the spectrographs arrayed around them as he leant his weight against Sherlock’s shoulder. ‘Have you worked out what it is?’

Sherlock scrubbed a hand through his hair, turning the froth of his curls into a manic halo as he shook his head and shrugged. ‘All I can do is make an educated guess at the potential components, the same as before. I’m waiting for the results of the hormone panels on the latest victims. Lestrade didn’t have them available electronically, so they’re coming via Mycroft.’

‘Couldn’t Molly give you a summary?’

‘Apparently she’s taken a few days off to visit family, and I don’t trust Lestrade not to leave out important details.’ Sherlock rolled his eyes, a picture of irritation. ‘Even if we know how they died, it’s unlikely to bring us any closer to who did it, and that’s the key issue.’

He tapped the pen against the kitchen surface, all nervous energy and aggravation. Patience had never been Sherlock’s forte, and John made a quiet noise of comfort, unable to stop himself from skimming his hand over the sharp angles of those shoulder-blades.
Immediately, Sherlock stilled, the pen hanging lax from his fingers as he cocked his head, shooting John a sideways glance. At first, John wondered if he’d overstepped some invisible line, but the look on Sherlock’s face was more thoughtful than annoyed. The flare of his nostrils was subtle, but distinct, and John paused, wondering what he had detected.

‘Your inhibitor dose has stabilised at a lower level,’ he murmured, pivoting where he sat so that he was facing John.

‘How can you tell?’

‘Normally the kettle is your first port of call when you wake up in the morning. You’re perfectly capable of asking about the victims and making yourself tea at the same time. Instead, you’ve been hovering inside my personal space for the past six minutes, and your respiratory rate and depth have both increased.’ Sherlock raised one eyebrow. ‘Inhaling through your mouth would suggest a greater need for oxygen, but you’re breathing through your nose. Your olfactory sense has returned and you’re making the most of it.’

One shoulder lifted, and Sherlock glanced away as if admitting a weakness. ‘That and the chemical taint to your skin is much more subtle than it was yesterday. I noticed that the minute you walked into the room.’

John grimaced, sniffing at his own sleeve speculatively, but it was no use. His nose was powerful at its best, but it was nothing on Sherlock’s. ‘If you can smell me from twelve feet away, I guess that means I really do need a shower.’

‘That will do nothing to reduce the intensity; it will only add soap to the mix.’ Sherlock reached out, tangling his fingers in John’s jumper and giving a suggestive tug. John went willingly, not that he had far to go. He had been hovering at Sherlock’s side, and now it was a matter of closing the last few inches of space so that the tip of Sherlock’s nose nestled in the hollow beneath his jaw.

A delicious shiver raced across John’s skin, and he bared his neck to Sherlock’s attentions. He wasn’t doing anything: no whispering lips or the sharp, threatening edge of teeth. He was simply breathing John in, as if it were all he needed to sustain him.

It was a good feeling. Arousal was not an unstoppable force, but a background thrum, something that John could enjoy for its own sake as he slid his arm around Sherlock’s back and relaxed against him, pressing one cheek to Sherlock’s crown and letting the scent of him fill his lungs.

The fragrance of his lovers had always played a role in his attraction. It seemed to be an Alpha’s lot: smell mattered, more so than it would to a Beta, but it had never been like this. Part of it had to be because Sherlock was an Omega, fundamentally compatible, but John doubted that was the whole story. He didn’t think anyone else would make him feel this way: not just content, but strong and peaceful, like there was nowhere in the world he would rather be.

He wasn’t the only one, either. Sherlock was a dead weight against him, and every time he breathed in he gave a quiet little hum, almost inaudible. It was a brief respite for them both, a moment to enjoy each other’s company before the growl of John’s stomach reminded him his body had other needs beyond Sherlock’s touch, chaste or otherwise.

‘Breakfast?’ he asked, watching Sherlock wrinkle his nose. Normally John wouldn't even try to get Sherlock to eat something in the middle of a case, no matter how stagnant their progress, but he couldn't help wondering if the approaching pyresus made food necessary. All he knew about it came from medical texts, and even in clinical terms, it sounded like an exhausting physical event. Shouldn't Sherlock be stocking up on energy while he had the chance?
'Just some toast,' Sherlock ceded at last, looking as if even that token compliance was a huge sacrifice. 'Nothing on it.'

'What about tea?' John frowned when Sherlock shook his head, but he didn't argue. There was a fine line between taking care of Sherlock when he was too distracted to do it himself and deliberately over-riding his decisions. Besides, Sherlock always responded better to temptation, and it was with that in mind that John put the makings of his own breakfast within Sherlock's reach, should he decide to help himself.

When he turned around after making the tea and grabbing the toast, Sherlock had an apple in his hand and was chewing absently, engrossed in the paperwork. John knew better than to make anything of it as he settled at Sherlock's side, leaving the toast by his elbow and digging into his cereal, eating in silence as his thoughts continued their idle turn.

It wasn't that pyresus was a complete mystery to him, and nor were bonds. He was still a GP after all, and that meant he had to know the basics, even if he never put them to use. He understood the theory of his own biology – knew about knots and their function, if only so he could treat potential medical issues arising from the structures involved – but the thought of putting any of that into practice was enough to make a nervous sweat gloss his spine.

He had resigned himself to a life where his knot would have no role in sex. Now all that was set to change, and John realised he only had pictures in textbooks and some rather patchy sexual education as a teenager to fall back on. Back then, the teacher had mentioned Omegas for the sake of completeness. They hadn't bothered going into details.

Not only was Sherlock inviting him to share his pyresus, but he was asking for a bond, and suddenly the holes in John's experience seemed far too big for comfort. More than half his life had gone by since he considered himself in any way virginal, but right now he felt like one: excited and terrified in equal measure.

Dimly, he realised his cereal bowl was empty, and that he was staring at the plain white ceramic as if it held all the answers. Next to him, Sherlock was motionless, but John could feel the weight of his gaze, probably trying to deduce what had caused his distraction. Could he tell what John was thinking? Could he follow the inevitable path of his concerns, or was this something Sherlock couldn't figure out for himself?

'You do know that you have just as much right to change your mind as I do, don't you?' Sherlock asked, his voice little more than a murmur. 'If you don't want to –'

John shook his head, cutting off Sherlock's statement before it could reach completion. He didn't need to hear the half-hidden hurt in Sherlock's voice, nor the threads of fear that wove themselves beneath his words.

'I know, but that's not the problem, not by a long shot.' He set his spoon down, turning where he sat and settling his hands on his knees, taking a breath as he tried to explain.

More than once, he almost spoke, but nothing came out until he stripped away all the circling, little concerns and got to the core issue. 'I'm worried I'm going to fuck it up because I have no idea what I'm doing.' A blush stung his cheeks and he folded his arms, glowering at the tiled floor. 'What if I hurt you? What if I get something wrong?'

He met Sherlock's eye, seeing him shoot the paperwork in front of him a quick, almost longing glance, as if he'd rather break his mind apart on the rocks of the wretched case than talk about sex. However, eventually he looked up, and his expression wasn't condescending or indifferent. Instead,
he looked at John as if the fact that he cared was alien and baffling, well beyond his sphere of experience. Hell. It probably was.

Sherlock cleared his throat, shifting where he sat. 'Judging from the night before last, I don't think you have anything to worry about,' he managed, a dull pink darkening the crest of his cheekbones. 'If you hurt me it won't be on purpose, and if you get something wrong then you'll learn from your mistakes.' He gave a little grimace. 'I suspect you'll have plenty of opportunity to practice once my pyresus arrives, though I have no idea when that might be.'

'Seventy-two hours from when you took the dose.' John winced. 'Though that's only an estimate,'

'I'm aware.' Sherlock pressed a hand to the back of his neck and closed his eyes, his expression shuttered: half-repulsed by the unpredictability of his own transport. 'Yesterday I was confident we had time to get to the Cunninghams and back. Today, I wouldn't dare step outside the door.'

That caught John's attention, and he straightened up, hopping down from the stool. His fingers pressed over Sherlock's radial pulse, which fluttered beneath his touch. Sherlock froze where he sat, staring at John's hands as if mesmerised, and when he finally pulled his gaze away, there was a hint of heavy longing in his expression.

'I need to –' He gestured fitfully at the papers in front of him, his hands waving like a conductor before an unruly orchestra. 'The case…'

It was unlike Sherlock to leave sentences trailing, and John stepped back with a nod. He knew he was asking for space, even if he didn't vocalise that need. Just because he had not yet entered pyresus, that didn't mean the threat of it was a distant thing. John could already see the first, minute tells of his changing state: a fast pulse and a flush on that pale skin that refused to fade.

Perhaps if John didn't know what was coming, he would have written it off as normal attraction: Sherlock captivated by his proximity. However, in that situation, Sherlock's ability to focus remained within his control. Now he was looking at John as if, as long as he were in the room, he had no option but to admire him.

'I'll use the shower, then,' John croaked, clearing his throat. 'Unless you need my help?' He jerked his thumb over his shoulder as Sherlock shook his head, his knuckles white around the pen in his grasp. Yet despite the promise to leave, John's feet felt leaden, as if his body had no intention of moving from this spot. It took all his willpower to turn his back on Sherlock and walk away, his stride firm and swift as he headed for the stairs.

It was only once he closed the bathroom door behind him and twisted the lock that he let out a shuddering breath, revising his estimate of how long they had left before pyresus struck. Sherlock wasn't emitting any detectable pheromones, but their natural, background attraction had taken on an extra layer of intensity, one that John recognised as a warning of what was coming.

He'd felt something like it before, of course, more times than he cared to count. How often had they stood in the front hall of Baker Street, adrenaline still cresting in their veins as laughing, panting breaths fell quiet and deep? It was that same long, slow pull of his body to Sherlock's – a dire temptation amplified a hundred-fold by a different hormonal surge.

John was half-hard, and he gritted his teeth as he shed his clothes, turning on the shower taps and stepping under the spray. If Sherlock hadn't been working, John would have suggested they go back to bed and ride the building wave of sexual imperative together, but they didn't have that luxury. Instead, Sherlock would no doubt fight for every second of mental clarity he could muster. All John could do was be ready for the moment when heavy desire turned into unstoppable need.
He washed himself thoroughly, scrubbing shampoo through his hair and ignoring the sullen ache of his erection. As soon as he’d rinsed, he turned off the water and stepped out, wrapping a towel around his waist as he set about brushing his teeth and shaving. There was no temptation to linger, not this morning, not when the itch to be back at Sherlock’s side had taken up residence under his skin.

John’s dirty clothes went ignored as he walked back through to the bedroom, his mind turning towards the undeniable logistics that would face them in the days ahead. They would need things like fresh sheets, and a source of food and drink that wasn’t all the way down in the kitchen. He had no idea how long they might be out of action, but John knew they had to be prepared.

As soon as he was dressed, he got to work, a vague strategy solidifying in his head. He tracked down the linen closet and changed the bedding, making sure there were spares on hand. Sleeping in the wet patch was fine for a few hours, but pyresus sometimes went on for days, and there was a point where he drew the line. Besides, it felt important that Sherlock had a clean, comfortable bed to use. That, at least, John could provide.

The ODX threw further doubt onto the situation. Would it make the ordeal longer, shorter, more intense? With that in mind, he padded down the stairs, heading for the pantry he’d seen the previous day.

There was plenty of packaged, non-perishable food available: the kind of thing that didn’t need to be in a fridge to stay fresh. There was also bottled water, and John grabbed as many as he could carry before delivering his supplies back upstairs, placing them under the bed so all they’d have to do was reach down for what they needed.

Biting his lip, he ran through a mental checklist before grabbing a couple of spare loo rolls and towels. Sex could get messy at the best of times, and he doubted that he’d want to leave the bed to clean up, not if Sherlock was right there next to him.

He rubbed a hand over his face and gave a dry laugh at his own behaviour. Maybe he wasn’t going for candlelight and rose petals strewn across the pillows, but he couldn’t deny that he was setting the stage.

John wanted Sherlock to feel safe and cared for – to draw a line under his past experiences as they built something new together. More than anything, he wanted to be the one to help remove the shadows of resigned dread from Sherlock’s eyes whenever he mentioned what he saw as his body’s betrayal. Sherlock was giving him that chance. All John had to do was make sure that he didn’t blow it.

Taking one last look around, he nodded to himself. No doubt he’d think of other things they’d need, but for now the room was well-stocked and temperate: as much of a haven as he could make it.

A sound nearby had him cocking his head, and he frowned as he heard Sherlock growl, his deep voice tense and irritable. Following the noise, he trotted down the stairs, pausing on the bottom step to watch Sherlock pace, his phone clamped to his ear and his teeth bared.

‘I don’t give a damn how confidential they are! Just – Oh for God’s Sake!’ He glared at the mobile’s screen as if the device was a personal offence, and John saw his knuckles tighten as Sherlock considered lobbing it at the wall.

‘Something wrong?’ He offered a sympathetic smile as Sherlock ran his hands through his hair, scrubbing his fingers back and forth before pointing accusingly at the front door.
‘Molly’s results are here, but Mycroft’s wretched minions won’t bring them to the house and put them through the letterbox. Something to do with confidentiality issues and culpability.’ His lips twisted as he shifted his weight back, folding his arms across his chest. ‘And I do not want to open that door to anyone.’

There was a tiny tremor underneath Sherlock’s words – something edgy and defensive that John barely understood. Not that he didn’t share the sentiment. Mycroft’s men may all be Betas, but the walls of this house felt like the borders of his territory, and the idea of anyone approaching that line made his skin crawl. He didn’t need anyone else that close to Sherlock – couldn’t stand the thought of it – and he clenched his fists, acknowledging the instinct before trying to think around it.

‘I can go and get them.’ He shrugged, chafing against the notion of leaving Sherlock in this place by himself, if only for half an hour or so. However, he’d rather suffer a bit of personal unease than watch Sherlock as he was now, so tense he was almost shaking with it and twisted up with something very much like despair. ‘It won’t take long.’

He expected Sherlock to jump at the chance and all but shove him out the door. Instead, he froze, his throat working as if he was trying to swallow around something unspeakable. His hands fell to his side, and John stepped down from the final stair. ‘Sherlock?’

‘I – all right. Thank you.’ He looked at John, and there was something helpless in his expression. ‘Take your phone, just in case.’

John licked his lips, watching Sherlock closely as he began to speak. ‘You know the files will still be there in a couple of days. It can wait, if that’s what you need.’ He didn’t push – didn’t tell Sherlock that it was bloody obvious pyresus was approaching fast – but he did give him the excuse if he wanted it. He forced Sherlock to take stock and saw those full lips purse, bleaching to the colour of bone as he shook his head.

‘I don’t – I –’ He pressed a hand to his temple, tugging at his curls before looking at John, his eyes so sharp that his gaze was almost painful. ‘I can still think. I need to make the most of that. Do you see?’ He sounded desperate, as if John’s understanding were integral.

‘All right.’ John smiled, watching Sherlock sag in relief as if he’d honestly thought John would overrule him and force him to stop. He strengthened his voice, driving his simple message home one more time. ‘It’s your call, Sherlock. All of it. I’ll get the lab reports and be back as quick as I can, okay?’

He didn’t say that he suspected it might be too late. Sherlock looked like a man staring into the abyss, knowing he would have to jump but putting off the inevitable for as long as he possibly could. Part of that could be Sherlock’s stubbornness and his earnest need to keep picking at the puzzle of the investigation, but John would bet a month’s wages that there was more to it than that. It was his way of demonstrating that there was more to define him than just his gender and the powerful hold it had over his biology.

In a lifetime of people treating him like a possession, Sherlock would view every ounce of control as precious, even as it unravelled in his grasp. John wouldn’t rob him of that, not for the world, and he quickly grabbed his jacket and some keys before heading to the front door.

‘I’ll let myself back in,’ he called over his shoulder, fighting against the urge to return to Sherlock’s side and stick there like glue. ‘For God’s sake, don’t answer the door to anyone.’

‘Obviously.’
John felt Sherlock’s eyes on his back as he stepped outside, closing away the house and its occupant before he tried to convince his legs to move. One foot in front of the other was all that was required, yet just like back in the kitchen it seemed an impossible task. Every impulse John could call his own was clamouring for him to turn around and go back inside, and he gritted his teeth, bullying his way through as he set off at a brisk march.

God, if it was this bad now, how much worse would it get? He blew out a breath at the thought, jamming his hands in his jacket pockets and wrapping his fingers around his phone so he would feel it vibrate. Now he was out of the house, his nose full of crisp, cool air, he realised how dense the atmosphere inside had become. Omegas produced a number of pheromones, most of which peaked as pyresus approached: another warning to someone with the education to understand it that Sherlock’s cycle had resumed and was racing towards its culmination.

John picked up the pace, almost jogging down the long driveway towards the inner perimeter. It was a fair distance from the house, a good three-quarters of a mile, and by the time he got there he felt twitchy and aggravated about having to leave Sherlock behind. Perhaps Mycroft’s peons had anticipated his behaviour, or maybe Mycroft had warned them to be careful. Either way, Tony was already waiting at the gate, a dossier in his grasp that he handed over without fanfare.

‘Sorry, Doctor Watson.’ He sounded genuine enough. ‘We didn’t want to risk a confidentiality breach, and we know better than to approach the house, considering the circumstances.’ He held out a couple of pieces of paper, folded neatly and still warm from the printer. ‘Mr Mycroft Holmes also wanted you to have these. He thought they might put your mind at rest.’

Clumsily, John opened the top one, seeing his name and a slew of information: an STD panel – all clear. No doubt the other one would be for Sherlock, and a quick, guilty glance showed the same infection free profile. ‘When –?’ He shook his head, looking at Tony and trying to work out whether to be grateful for the facts or horrified at the invasion of his privacy.

‘Mr Mycroft Holmes was able to order an investigation using some of the blood he took from you back in London. Mr Sherlock Holmes provided a small sample when he arrived, so that we could react to any existing conditions in the event of a medical emergency.’ He must have read some of the doubt in John’s expression. ‘We have superior facilities to the health service, Dr Watson. A couple of dots of blood is more than enough, but in case you doubt the results…’

Tony reached around the door to the lodge at the side of the gate, retrieving what looked like a pharmacy bag. ‘Some, er, supplies.’ He looked uncomfortable in his dark suit, his shoulders rigid, and John glanced at the contents, his brain staggering to a halt as he realised what was inside: condoms designed for an Alpha in rut.

He wasn’t sure who was more embarrassed, him or Tony, and he cut a glare in the other man’s direction. ‘Did Mycroft give you these?’

The moment the question left his lips, John shook his head. If his hands were free, he’d have held them up to stem a response. He didn’t want to know. However, Tony was already speaking, looking straight ahead and over John’s shoulder as if he were a soldier responding to a commanding officer.

‘No sir. It was Ms Anthea. I believe she was using her own initiative.’ Tony’s eyes flickered to meet his, and a moment of comradely, mortified amusement passed between them. ‘Is there anything else I can help you with, Doctor Watson?’

‘No that’s – I think you’ve done enough.’ John cleared his throat and tucked the files under one arm, making sure the test results and pharmacy bag were safe in his pocket. ‘Thanks.’
With a curt nod, Tony stepped back in the lodge, closing the door and leaving John to scrub his free hand over his face. Really, he should have realised Mycroft would leave nothing to chance. He watched the world through a battalion of CCTV cameras and had very little notion of other people’s privacy. Why would he think twice about running a few blood tests without permission?

‘Christ.’ With a shake of his head, John turned around, glad that no one had offered him a lift back to the house. He didn’t think he could have stood the awkward silence, sitting next to Tony and knowing that he could guess exactly what John and Sherlock would be doing. Of course, people had thought they were sleeping together since the beginning, but this was different. It highlighted the fact that Sherlock’s nature put sex on display – not just a possibility, but something definitive, intimately and unavoidably linked to the needs of his gender.

With a jerk of his head, John shook the thought away, his embarrassment fading with every step. He couldn’t waste time worrying about strangers. They could believe whatever they wanted, and who cared if they knew exactly what he and Sherlock were getting up to? It’s not like they had any reason to be ashamed.

By the time he got to the front door, John’s fingers were chilled and he’d almost dropped the folder in a puddle. The pages kept trying to fall out, and he juggled them irritably as he dug in his pocket for the key, pulling it free and slipping it into the lock before shouldering his way back into the house.

Instantly, the fragrance swamped him, and the door banged in its frame as he leant against it without thinking, the hinges giving way as it swung shut. He stumbled, one hand still splayed on the wood as ripples swirled across his vision and sweat prickled across his brow. His mouth was open, and he could hear the hiss of each panting breath as he struggled to gather his scattered wits.

It was like being back at Baker Street: the air thick with Sherlock’s fertile scent. Except back then, John had been asleep, marinating in the rich perfume for who knew how long and responding accordingly. Now, he was awake and aware, able to feel all the ways his body clicked online as it happened, rather than waking up with a knot and a desperate, feral ache to get Sherlock underneath him.

Clumsily, John lifted his wrist, staring at his watch as he examined the time. His nerves sang, making his knees shake and his vision jitter, but he managed to work out that he’d not been gone for half an hour. Less than thirty minutes, and already there was a noticeable difference, as if the ODX had accelerated everything. Somehow he doubted Sherlock’s descent into pyresus would be a leisurely transition, not if its current pace was anything to go by.

He dumped the pathology reports on the table by the door as he stalked through the hallway. Each breath made his blood hum as prickles raced across his scalp and down his arms. His eyes felt strange, blinkered, dismissing every shape that wasn’t Sherlock as meaningless.

“What took you so long?”

John whipped his head around, staring at where Sherlock stood off to the left, framed in the arch to the sitting room. His voice throbbed in John’s ears, husky and strained, and John’s skin pulsed in response: a heavy, primal beat of awareness.

He twitched, an all over body jolt as his instinct to lunge forward and grab Sherlock came up against the grim bands of his restraint. He kept thinking of how he’d caught sight of his own reflection back in Baker Street and what he’d looked like: not loving and aroused, but feral and vicious with lust.

That wasn’t the man he wanted to be.
'I –' His voice cracked and he swayed, screwing his eyes up tight and clearing his throat. 'I didn’t think it’d start this soon.'

Footsteps: the soft hush of skin on polished wooden floors. Each one drove John’s anticipation higher, and he tightened his hands into fists, not daring to open his eyes. Not that he needed to see to know that Sherlock was moving towards him. Each measured pace made the aroma that coiled in John’s sinuses intensify: layer upon layer of it – delicious and tempting. It grew from a coy hint of sex and heat to something that filled him to the brim: fundamental.

'If you’ve changed your mind –' Sherlock’s voice shook, his throat clicking as he swallowed. 'If this isn’t what you want, then you need to leave now.'

John’s eyes flew open, and he stared at Sherlock in disbelief. He had stopped less than an arm’s length away, flushed and trembling, staring at John with eyes blackened to the colour of slate. Plump lips parted, swollen from the scrape of Sherlock’s teeth, and now the dishevelled shirt didn’t just look enticing, it was obscene. Stark angles of cotton lay askew, revealing glimpses of Sherlock’s collarbones and chest, and each of Sherlock’s heaving breaths made the fabric whisper its promises.

'I’m not going anywhere.'

The noise Sherlock made quivered through John’s bones: a needy gasp of relief before their lips collided, bruising and possessive. It was like being hit by a tsunami, and John tried to ride the wave as Sherlock herded him back against the wall. His body pressed against John’s, demanding, and he tipped John’s chin up, every angle of his frame dominant and hungry.

This was not the submissive, pleading creature John had once imagined. This was Sherlock taking what he wanted: John, in every aspect. The slide of his tongue was greedy and erotic, tracing the outline of John’s lips before plunging inside. He moaned in response, feeling overwhelmed. Those long fingers were everywhere, creeping beneath clothes and finding every gap, stroking at John’s skin as if he couldn’t get enough. The cradle of his hips rocked against John’s swollen erection, narrowing the world down to nothing but friction and heat.

A sudden jolt of discomfort poked John in the waist, and he grunted, blinking himself free of the haze of lust as Sherlock pulled back. A second later, his hand dove into John's jacket pocket and pulled out the pharmacy bag. One quick glance, and he dropped the box of condoms, ignoring the rustle of the packaging as it hit the floor. 'We won’t be needing those since you've taken inhibitors to prevent conception,' he murmured, his tongue darting out to wet his lip as he tugged free the STD reports. 'Unless these aren't good enough for you?'

'How –?' John managed, the words dying in his throat as Sherlock buried his face in his neck, practically purring as he inhaled John's scent from the source. Really, it didn't matter how Sherlock had known about the results. He was a mind reader, a magician, a bloody seer for all John cared. 'They're fine, they're – Oh God.' He stammered to a halt as Sherlock's hand slid down his body, palming him through his jeans before dragging aside his zip and delving inside.

There were things John wanted to say, but words were beyond him, lost in the crashing cacophony of sensation that flamed along his nerves. He could only grit his teeth, holding in a rough, desperate noise as Sherlock pulled him free of his clothes and wrapped his hand around the burgeoning knot at the base of John's cock.

Fireworks went off behind John's eyes, and his voice choked in his throat as his hands scrabbled at Sherlock's shirt, looking for something to stop him coming just from this. Every sense hummed at maximum, his mind and body saturated with Sherlock's presence and still hungry for more. Sherlock wanted him; he couldn't be more obvious about that if he tried. This was consensual – mutual – and
John finally allowed the grip of his self-restraint to slacken.

His fingers banded Sherlock’s wrists as he twisted them around, reversing their positions so that it was Sherlock against the wall while John crowded into his space, rutting against the straining line of his arousal and growling something filthy and inarticulate. In hindsight, maybe that’s what Sherlock had been aiming for – John letting go – because he melted, his knees sagging and his head tipped back, the column of his throat exposed and his eyes half-lidded, languid but for the spark of desire in their depths.

Immediately, John’s hands skimmed downwards, across the creased, ruined cotton of Sherlock’s shirt until he could grab his thighs and lift him, hitching those long legs around his waist and swiping his tongue up Sherlock’s throat, tasting the ripeness of his skin. It was a drug, an addiction, a God-damn elixir, and Sherlock shivered as he sucked a bruise against that creamy skin.

As marks went, it was satisfying, but a new rush of longing scorched down John’s spine as he thought of sinking his teeth into the back of Sherlock’s neck: a bond more permanent than anything else he could offer.

His cock still hung free, revealed from the ruffle of denim jeans and cotton underwear, and he hitched his hips up, dragging the sensitive head along the damp fabric that strained across Sherlock’s lush arse. Long fingers dove into his hair, cupping the back of his head, and John could feel the flex and arch of the lithe body in his arms, all shaking strength and ragged urgency.

‘John –!’

Sherlock’s voice cracked over his name: a desperate prayer that John could barely acknowledge as he buried his face in Sherlock’s neck, trying to get closer. This wasn’t enough, the barrier of clothes seemed insurmountable in his current state, and John gasped as Sherlock ground along his length, driving him to distraction.

‘Upstairs –’ He blinked, attempting to calm his swimming vision. ‘I'm not – I'm not knotting you against a wall.’ He closed his eyes, a feral smile curving his lips as Sherlock gave a disappointed groan. ‘Next time,' he managed, too far gone for cohesive sentences. ‘Maybe next time. Come on.’

Sherlock went to unhook his legs from around John's waist, but immediately an unhappy noise bubbled in John's throat. His fingers dug into Sherlock's thighs hard enough to bruise, and his weight leaned in, caging him against the plaster at his back. John's head gave a dizzy spin: not enough air, maybe, or too much want raging through his blood – and he hid his face in the crook of Sherlock’s neck.

‘Sorry.’ His lips brushed against the skin at Sherlock’s collar, and he dragged in another lungful of his thickening fragrance. ‘Sorry.’

‘You're the one who wanted to move,’ Sherlock pointed out, his voice half an octave lower than normal. His fingers were stroking over the back of John's head, down his neck and across his shoulders, slipping under the fabric of his jumper to scratch lightly over his skin. Even like this, held captive by John's weight, he continued to fidget: tiny, tormenting hitches of his hips as his spine arched, pushing him further into John's body.

‘Easier said than done.’ John tried to think around the raging storm of pure lust – but it was useless. His instincts were too close to the surface, impossible to tame, at least while Sherlock seemed to relish the attention. He wasn't pushing John away or complaining, although his movements were getting increasingly restless, and John nipped at his shoulder, growling in approval at the answering cry of pleasure.
'Get me to bed or knot me here,' Sherlock snarled, a glimmer of sweat shining like starlight along his hairline, 'but make up your fucking mind!'

Before John could answer, Sherlock began to move, no longer a passive recipient to John's embrace. It wasn't that he struggled against it; he just twisted free. One minute he was wrapped around John, warm and wet and wanting, the next he was on his feet half-a-pace away, a grin playing across his lips as John grabbed for him and missed, too thick with desire for coordination.

'Want me?' Sherlock asked, looking down at John's bare erection. It jutted between them, flushed and aching. 'Then you'd better catch me.'

He took off, dashing towards the stairs before John could offer a garbled protest. At first glance, it looked like the kind of game lovers played, but John just had time to realise how deliberate Sherlock's actions were before his mind became blinkered, lost in a fugue where getting Sherlock back was the only thing that mattered.

He wanted to catch Sherlock, and Sherlock, leaning against the wall at the top of the stairs, shaking and laughing in tight, breathless moans, wanted to be caught.

'Dangerous,' John snarled, the single word throbbing in his throat as he pounced back into Sherlock's sphere, smoothing his hands along slender sides and curling his fingers around those narrow hips.

'Efficient,' Sherlock gasped, clasping John's jumper and hauling him close, kissing him so thoroughly that John's body pulsed with it, every sense overwrought with Sherlock's presence. He was right there, so close, and yet John couldn't get enough. Every brush of skin or swipe of his tongue only drove them to breaking point. John felt drugged, sky-high and addicted to Sherlock Holmes, and it seemed that Sherlock was no better, breathing against John's skin as if he could soak him up, each movement a strange contradiction of blind surrender and predatory demand.

John didn't even notice they were moving, Sherlock stepping back and him pacing forward in the world's strangest waltz. It was only when the bedroom door swung open that he realised what Sherlock had done, luring him along with the promise of his prize without ever blatantly putting it on offer.

Sherlock took John's nature and made it work in their favour, grasping John's single-minded focus and putting it to good use. It was almost manipulative – a way to take advantage of John's addled state – but he couldn't quite see it that way, not when Sherlock was looking at him like a drowning man seeing safe harbour, as exposed and vulnerable in his longing as John felt in his.

They came together without a word, Sherlock's arms wrapping around John's back as John slid his fingers through dark curls, relishing each wet, filthy sound he made as they kissed and broke apart and kissed again: hungry and lost.

Trembling hands roved over buttons and snatched at hems, graceless, and more than one seam crackled in protest at the rough treatment. Not that either of them cared. John would rather have split his jumper down the middle than have to step back and pull it over his head, but the old wool was tough. He spared it and the layers beneath the minimum of attention before he was back, slipping his hands under the parted cloth of Sherlock's shirt to skim it off his shoulders and down his arms. His palms lingered over the rapid rhythm of Sherlock's heart and charted the muscles of his flat stomach, feeling them spasm. Sherlock let out a long, low sound, and the scent of him took on an extra richness as his arousal reached new levels.
John blinked, rapt, watching Sherlock's face and reading his actions. With every moment, he was changing, evolving, becoming not less but more beneath the growing waves of his biology. Pretence and restraint were shorn away, the scant remnants of choreographed grace turning into something fluid and sensual: Sherlock's body moving in response to John's touch, rather than any higher thought. Every lead he offered, Sherlock followed, allowing John to guide him down to the mattress, coiling up into his palms and pressing their chests together: skin-to-skin and one heart racing against the other.

Innocence was not something this scenario had ever brought to mind in John's filthy fantasies. However, now he was here, he could see it had its place, divorced from chastity and rooted instead in how Sherlock responded to him, open and trusting. Even burning up with arousal, John was awed by what Sherlock placed in his hands. Not just his physical self, but everything else as well. It was complete surrender, willingly given, and John struggled to breathe around the enormity of it: Sherlock's hunger and passion and vulnerability all laid bare.

Bending his head, John ran his hands down Sherlock's sides, sliding his tongue across scorching flesh and listening to the symphony of Sherlock's desire: his choked-off words, the rush of his breath and the whisper of the quilt beneath them as he moved, restless, constantly seeking out more. His hands were everywhere, tracing the line of his waist before shoving at the loose barricade of John’s jeans as if he couldn’t bear their presence for another moment.

‘Ah, wait!’ John winced as the fabric that encircled the base of his cock dragged against his knot, making his spine twist and stars sparkle across his vision. ‘Let me –’ He sorted himself out, freeing himself from the uncomfortable manacle of cloth before kicking off his jeans and underwear.

He knelt back on his heels to take off his socks, peeling one free before choking in shock. Sherlock had moved, the rustle of the bed-covers the only warning John got before long fingers wrapped around his knot and warm heat engulfed him.

His mind blanked, no longer a collection of thoughts and memories, but a vessel of sensation soaked in hormones. Sherlock's tongue flickered over his crown before he bobbed down, and John forgot how to breathe. His thighs trembled as Sherlock brushed, very lightly, around the swell of his knot and made the most lewd, filthy sound John had ever heard: one-hundred percent approval.

He reached out, splaying his hands over Sherlock's shoulders and stroking down the smooth plane of his back as far as he could reach. Vaguely, he noticed the shift of his muscles, and when he opened his eyes he realised that Sherlock's other hand, the one not occupied between John's legs, was buried in his open fly.

Those tailored trousers sagged around Sherlock's hips, but it was not the ragged, pumping motion of a man jerking himself off. Instead, he reached further back, and John gasped a curse as realisation flooded his mind; Sherlock was fingering himself.

He couldn't take any more of this, not the restless buck of Sherlock's pelvis or the wicked worship of his mouth, and John gently pushed him back, swallowing his keening sound of disappointment with a deep kiss. 'I need –' His voice cracked, thinning to nothing as he swallowed hard, focusing all his strength on speaking, rather than just bearing Sherlock down to the bed and bloody well taking. 'I need to be in you. Can I –?'

Sherlock moaned in something very much like relief, his hands tugging at John's shoulders like he couldn't figure out how to get him where he needed him or what to touch first. He arched obediently as John peeled away his trousers and underwear, the cloth wet with arousal. The smell of it gave John extra urging that he didn't need, and he moved without thinking, nudging Sherlock's legs apart and kneeling between them, hauling him close so that his cock slid in the slick between Sherlock's
arse cheeks, making them both swear.

It was an impression of tight, wet heat, so near and yet still not enough, and John grabbed Sherlock’s hips, trying to control his eager writhe as he struggled for breath. He didn’t want to stop and think: logic had no place in this room, but he forced himself to fight his instincts. If nothing else, he wanted to prove to himself that it was possible. Even like this, with Sherlock practically shaking apart beneath him and looking divine, he needed to know he could still grasp the last threads of his control.

‘How –?’ He clenched his teeth, his lower back hurting as he restrained the impulse to thrust forward and find his target. ‘How’s the best way to do this?’

Sherlock bit his lip, trying to wriggle down onto John’s cock before shaking his head, his curls tumbling over the pillow as he choked a reply. ‘I don’t care. I don’t care. Just – please, John. Please!’

John groaned, bending double so that his forehead rested on Sherlock’s stomach, the muscles twitching and glossed with a gleam of sweat. Sherlock felt like a furnace, almost feverish, and John chewed his lip as he struggled to think. ‘On your front,’ he managed at last, pushing weakly at Sherlock’s hip. ‘Lie on your front.’

Sherlock went one better, turning over, climbing to his knees and spreading them wide, his forearms folded on the bed and his brow pressed against them. It was a classic position of open submission, completely exposed, and John’s cock lurched, so hard it was painful and only getting worse as Sherlock reached back, his long fingers slipping around and in, unashamed in his sexuality.

John’s hand shook like a leaf in a gale as he reached out and palmed Sherlock’s backside. The contrast of his honeyed skin was alarming against Sherlock’s pallor, but he barely paid it any mind. He was too busy watching the dart and dive of Sherlock’s fingers, seeing the rhythm disintegrate and hearing Sherlock’s strained, frustrated sounds. It wasn’t enough for him, not like this. He wanted more, and it was John’s job to provide it.

As gently as he could, he grabbed Sherlock’s wrist, guiding his hand away before replacing it with his own, dipping his fingers inside and biting his lip hard as tight, smooth heat fluttered around him. He meant to check if Sherlock could take him. John knew all too well that just because a partner was wet, it didn’t mean they didn’t need some preparation, but then he’d never been with an Omega – not like this.

Sherlock was shuddering around him, his thighs shining with moisture, and John smothered the desire to run his tongue through it. Later, he promised himself. Later, he’d lose himself in everything Sherlock had to offer, but right now this was sex reduced to its most common denominator. Sherlock didn’t want foreplay – didn’t need to be teased. He was panting and writhing, riding John’s hand and speaking in a random jumble of pleas and praise and John’s name on repeat.

‘Now! God now, John. Please!’

Sherlock reached behind him, no doubt planning on guiding John in if he didn’t oblige, but John beat him to it, the head of his cock nudging Sherlock’s opening and making him keen. John’s thighs were shaking, and his hand clamped hard around his length as he lined himself up, breathing like he’d run a marathon already as he dredged together enough presence of mind to check, just once more.

‘Yes?’

He felt Sherlock go still, and for one awful second John thought this was it: Sherlock coming to his senses and withdrawing his consent. He would obey, he fucking would, even if it killed him, but the thought made a gasp bubble in his throat, too close to a sob for comfort.
‘Yes.’

Before he could respond, Sherlock shifted back, sinking onto him as John gave a shout. He was blind and deaf, struck senseless to everything but the constriction of Sherlock around him, those powerful muscles yielding in acceptance. His hips snapped forward, burying him deep, and Sherlock threw back his head, a wordless cry of praise loud in his throat.

John meant to ask if he was all right, to check that he was ready for more, but he couldn’t. His brain was offline, refined to a lower set of parameters. He thought rut would make him stupid: a mindless animal reduced to satisfying a need. He’d never realised it would be like this, his circuitry realigning to read the primitive language of Sherlock’s body and fragrance, gaining understanding through biological cues: the shudder of Sherlock’s hips, the roll of his spine, and the tilt of his head – all blatant signs of encouragement.

With a grunt, he moved, pulling back to surge forward again, his knot pressing against Sherlock’s hole. Dimly, he wondered if he’d done this the wrong way around. Maybe his knot was meant to swell once he was inside Sherlock, because right now there was no way it looked like it was going to fit. However, he couldn’t spare the question much thought, not when Sherlock picked up the rhythm, moving in exquisite harmony.

Sherlock might be underneath him, but John had no illusions about who was in control. His hands were on Sherlock’s hips, but really, he was just hanging on for the ride. Sherlock knew how to move to get what he wanted, conducting shallow, teasing thrusts before taking him deeper, pushing back as John thrust forward.

‘Fuck!’ The curse escaped John's gritted teeth as his head gave a dizzy spin. A thrill was building in the pit of his stomach, flaring up his spine and down his thighs. He wouldn't last long, not like this, and he scrabbled at Sherlock’s waist, not knowing what he needed. He was vaguely aware that, if he were in his right mind, he’d be mortified. This had barely started and it was already going to be over, his control shredded as if he were a teenager again, too excited to restrain himself.

Abruptly, Sherlock moved, the muscles in his shoulders rippling as he changed position, no longer resting his head on his arms. Instead, he pushed himself up, his strength on display before he sat back, his knees and shins either side of John's legs and his spine to John's chest. It meant John could slide his hands over Sherlock’s torso with ease, teasing pink nipples and moving downwards to the proud jut of his erection.

It wouldn't be comfortable, not for long, but John would take the burn in his legs and whatever cramps came his way if it meant he got to enjoy Sherlock like this: his head tipped back in worship and that low, rich voice escaping him in gasps of benediction.

Greedily, John nipped along the hard ridge of Sherlock’s shoulder-blade, grunting as he began to move, thrusting up into Sherlock as he ground down. John's mouth was watering, and he closed his fist around Sherlock's cock, stroking in a jagged rhythm that had Sherlock giving a breathy "Ah!" of surprised delight, like he hadn't expected John to bother touching him.

Sherlock shook from head to toe, his stomach muscles flexing under John's arm as he picked up speed, slamming down as John thrust up. There was a sudden jolt and a blinding flash of pleasure, the fuses finding ignition as John's knot slipped inside Sherlock and caught there, locked in place. It was the point of no-return, where the final fractions of John’s restraint vanished.

His left fist quivered over Sherlock’s length, pumping and squeezing as his right moved up, his fingers wrapping around the arched column of Sherlock’s throat. He could feel the rush of air and the hammer of Sherlock’s pulse beneath his palm, but Sherlock didn’t struggle, despite the implicit
threat. Instead, he obeyed John’s gentle directions, leaning back, curving like a bow before the archer let his arrow fly.

John stretched up, senseless to everything but the eager vice of heat around his knot and the thrashing, coiling desire building in his veins. His tongue darted out, and Sherlock shivered in anticipation as John licked a luxurious stripe up the back of his neck. He could feel the stutter of Sherlock’s chest with every hitching breath and the taut poise of his body: waiting – not daring to move in case John backed off.

A tremulous voice in John’s head said that this was not the gesture of a loving man, but it went ignored as he opened his mouth, his lips sliding over spit-slicked skin before he sank his teeth into Sherlock’s tender flesh.

Sherlock went rigid as blood welled up between John’s teeth, flooding his tongue with the tang of iron and the taste of that heady, fertile scent. His right hand was still in place around Sherlock’s throat: meek, careful pressure stopping him from moving away, and it took John an age to realise it wasn’t necessary. Sherlock wasn’t going anywhere. His breaths were leaving him in shallow cries of ecstasy and his hips hitched in the tiniest imaginable thrusts, tugging John’s knot and pumping his cock through John’s fist before he tensed anew.

Thin, hot fluid pulsed over John's knuckles as Sherlock came. John wished he could watch, but he couldn’t, not with Sherlock tight around him, his inner muscles clutching his knot in wave after wave of pressure, blinding John to everything but exquisite sensation.

He climaxed fast and hard, his orgasm ripped from him. His jaw fell slack, releasing Sherlock, and John tipped his head back, surrendering to the rush of it. His pelvis jerked, shoving deeper, striving to get closer as he pulsed and throbbed, his balls so tight they hurt and his knot strained to bursting point, driving the endless tide of his release higher until it left him drained, so tired he could barely keep his eyes open.

He buried his face between Sherlock’s shoulder-blades, the sweat on his brow sticking his hair to his forehead and his chest heaving as he sucked down air like he was dying. His body sparked with aftershocks, shaky with release, and John tried desperately to focus on the man in his grasp, rather than the blissed-out hum of his own body.

Sherlock was pliant, slumped heavy against him. John could feel the race of his heart where it throbbed against his back, and he licked his lips, about to speak before the taste of blood shattered his tranquillity.

He lifted his head, staring at the deep, red bite on the nape of Sherlock’s neck. A bruise was starting to gather around the edges of John’s brutality, and he swallowed hard, still tasting the ferrous liquid across his tongue. That was his mark on Sherlock’s neck, his claim, but that knowledge came hand-in-hand with guilt.

John went to pull out, gasping as his knot stayed firmly where it was and sent another twisted bolt of arousal through his body.

‘Stop.’ Sherlock’s voice slurred over the word. He sounded drunk, and when he reached behind him to stroke a soothing line down John’s thigh, he was clumsy and weak. ‘You can’t move yet.’

‘You’re bleeding,’ he rasped, reaching up with a shaking hand to wipe away a trail of crimson before it could get too far down Sherlock’s spine. Maybe it was necessary, but he didn’t have to bite so deep. He hadn’t been in control – hadn’t even been trying to restrain himself – and Sherlock suffered as a result. ‘I shouldn’t have – I –’ He stammered to a halt, bowing his head and nuzzling at
Sherlock’s back. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m not.’

Sherlock’s husky reply sounded exhausted, but happy. More than just relieved, he seemed almost bashful, embarrassed and shy in a way John struggled not to find endearing. Keenly, he wished he could see Sherlock’s expression and try to understand what he felt, but he was still locked in place, his thighs burning now and his body beginning to scream its abuses at him.

He would have borne it if Sherlock hadn’t started shivering: not the gentle aftershocks of orgasm, but a spreading rash of chills. He couldn’t be comfortable with his legs cocked wide over John’s lap, and John tightened his arm around his waist, summoning up the last reserves of his exhausted strength as he man-handled them both down onto the bed.

It was a careful, tortuous transition, and more than once John’s knot shifted, making them both hiss at the unexpected pleasure and hints of sensitivity. At last, they were lying down, John spooned behind Sherlock’s taller body as he pulled the quilt over them both, trapping them in its warmth.

‘It doesn’t hurt, and it won’t bleed for long,’ Sherlock murmured, grabbing John’s arm and placing it over his chest, holding him as he snuggled back into John’s body. ‘It won’t need covering and antiseptic will only irritate the flesh. If it bothers you, lick it. Alpha’s have a coagulant in their saliva when they’re in rut.’

John pursed his lips. What he wanted was sterile dressing and antiseptic, not the dubious benefits of his own spit. Yet he couldn’t go and get anything, and stupidly, he hadn’t thought this bit through. He hadn’t done the mental arithmetic that ended in them both drowsy in the afterglow with a bleeding wound to tend.

He nuzzled at Sherlock’s back, breathing in the odour of their mingled sweat: the undeniable fragrance of himself all over Sherlock’s skin. Yet it was not just something superficial. The bite tied them together in a way that would linger long after his knot went down, and John wondered if Sherlock would always smell this way, now – mostly of himself, but also just a bit like John.

It satisfied him in a way John didn’t care to look at too closely – bestial and grasping – and he cleared his throat, trying to concentrate on being a good doctor, rather than a man steeped in possessive satisfaction.

‘How long does it take for a knot to shrink?’ he croaked, looking down. Not that he could see anything much from this angle, buried deep and pressed close, but he could still feel it. Right now, it seemed they were inseparable, and although John had some idea of the facts, it was Sherlock who had more practical experience.

He sounded exhausted, his words heavy and lethargic. ‘Varies. Fifteen minutes to half an hour, normally. You don’t have to – I mean, you can pull out if you want. It won’t damage you.’

There was something about the way he said it, some extra emphasis on the “you” that made John tense. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt him – though John found that hard to believe – but it seemed likely that the result for Sherlock would be far from painless. He’d caused quite enough harm for one day. John had no intention of adding to it.

Besides, if it wasn’t for the need to tend to Sherlock’s bite, the last thing he would want to do was pull away. His dick was still hard, and would remain so as long as passion swelled his knot. Every now and again Sherlock would tense around him, coaxing free another ripple of ecstasy, intimate and blissful. It felt right to lie here with Sherlock in his arms, tied together and spent.
With a quiet sigh, John pulled his hand from Sherlock’s grasp and teasing the curls away from the nape of his neck so they wouldn’t catch in the wound. What he was about to do went against all his training. The human mouth was a filthy place, but Sherlock was unlikely to be wrong about the clotting factors. Even now, the flow was turning sluggish, and John tentatively licked the thin patina of gore from Sherlock’s skin, raising an eyebrow at the noise he made: not sexual, not quite, but there was a faint, rumbling purr of happiness that made John’s heart skip.

This was what Sherlock wanted. He didn’t care about the blood dotting the sheets, nor did he seem angry at John’s actions – the clamp of his teeth or his subsequent guilt. For him, the bite was all part of it, but this – someone looking after him? This he treated like something new, turning boneless in John’s embrace, beautifully compliant as John ran his fingers through his hair and stroked down his side, pressing kisses to his shoulders and back.

Fierce protectiveness clutched at John’s chest, making his next breath wheeze. It was so rare that Sherlock allowed anyone close, stoically independent even when others offered their assistance. Yet now he lay here, soft and defenceless. It hurt to think of what Sherlock must have been like before, needing someone to take care of him in these moments of biological vulnerability and having only Alexander, whom John was sure didn’t bother.

He stayed where he was, touching Sherlock constantly, each caress designed to soothe rather than arouse as he waited for his knot to subside. Once he could slip free, he eased away, biting his lip as he sensed the disappointed slump of Sherlock’s shoulders.

‘I’ll be right back,’ he promised. ‘Just give me a minute.’

Padding through to the en-suite bathroom, he grabbed a flannel and wet it in warm water. The supplies under the bed were still there, but they seemed inadequate. Normally, he’d clean up with tissues, but his knot had prevented him taking any kind of quick action and the fluids had started to dry. Instead, he slipped back into the bedroom, smiling as he saw Sherlock watching him from the depths of the bed, drowsy and peaceful: that great mind quiet for once.

Gently, he bathed the mess from Sherlock’s skin, swiping over his stomach and between his thighs, noting every bruise and looking for any other signs of damage as he made him clean and comfortable.

‘All right? Does anything else hurt?’

Sherlock managed a faint “No.” his lashes fluttering fitfully. He looked exhausted, and John chewed his lip, checking the bite and deciding to leave it alone. The bleeding had stopped, and Sherlock seemed perfectly content, more tired than in pain.

They wouldn’t have long before the next wave struck, a few hours at most, and he knelt down beside the bed, stroking Sherlock’s hair back from his forehead. ‘Is there anything you want? Food? A drink?’

‘You.’ He reached out a hand, wrapping it around John’s wrist and giving a weak tug. Maybe Sherlock was too exhausted to put any force behind it, or perhaps, even like this, he wanted John to understand it was more an invitation than a demand. Either way, John obliged, dropping the flannel on the floor, forgotten, as he slipped into the circle of Sherlock’s embrace.

‘Thank you.’

Sherlock’s gratitude was little more than a whisper as he twined their legs together, wrapping himself around John as if he couldn’t bear the thought of letting go. He gave a shuddering sigh, and John
pressed a fierce kiss to Sherlock’s temple as he tried to swallow around the lump of emotion in his throat.

He wanted to protest that he was the one who should be thankful. Sherlock had given him everything he wanted, from purpose the day that he’d limped into Baker Street to this: his body, his affection, and the newly forged bond.

Yet he knew that his words would fall on deaf ears, written off as the result of the moment, rather than true emotion. Instead, John set the froth of his sentiments aside, pulling Sherlock close as he voiced the only possible reply.

‘You’re welcome.’
Stop The Clocks

John groaned, his body taking stock and making its displeasure known as consciousness found him. He ached everywhere, oft-neglected muscles complaining from the stringent workout. His stomach was brimming with a mix of nausea and hunger; his throat was parched, his tongue felt like sandpaper and his teeth were vile. If he didn’t know better, he’d think he had a hangover, but it wasn’t alcohol that had been the subject of his three-day binge.

Wrinkling his nose, John peeled his face off Sherlock’s shoulder, blinking aside the grittiness in his eyes as he surveyed the man next to him. Sherlock’s face was half-buried in the pillow, his mouth open and his breathing steady. The sheet lay twisted around his body, revealing the occasional stretch of pale skin marred with fingerprints and love-bites. If Sherlock hadn’t responded with such obvious delight to each one, John might be more guilty over that. Instead he suspected a look in the mirror would show that Sherlock had daubed his own marks over John’s flesh with equal enthusiasm.

It had been a marathon of intense pleasure, one where the rational mind fell further away with each passing hour. Some parts of it were little more than a blur in John’s memory, particularly around the end of the first day, when Sherlock’s pyresus had climbed to a prolonged peak.

That had been the worst bit: twenty-four hours where Sherlock’s desire reached a level that bordered on pain. There’d not been much in the way of respite, and when he wasn’t shaking his way through his climax and dragging John along in his wake, he was half delirious with fever and discomfort, his shivers rattling him so hard he couldn't hold a bottle of water. Instead, he’d let John guide it to his lips, gulping it gratefully before reaching for him again, his need for John overriding even the most fundamental of physical necessities.

The ebb of pyresus was almost imperceptible, the decline back to normal achingly slow in comparison to the swiftness of its arrival. Frantic scrabbling at each other and the slick urge to knot anew gave way to tender intimacy. They’d rocked in each other’s arms, trading kisses as each orgasm unravelled like silk.

Now, John knew it was over. The wax and wane of Sherlock’s scent told him as much. The last traces of lush, wet rainforest and tropical storms had faded from the air, replaced with something different: a new blend. There were still traces of the tempest in Sherlock’s fragrance – clean rain and cool skies, but there was also an underlying spice, musky and a touch sweet. It filled John’s nose and drifted down into his chest, soothing away the faint, fretful edge of his concerns. It calmed him, allowing the next breath to flow deep into his lungs and ease away his exhaustion.

Gently, he reached out, resting a palm against Sherlock’s brow and finding a natural heat, rather than the burn of a low fever. The twin flags of red on his cheeks had faded, and though shadows gathered under his eyes, he looked peaceful, lost in sleep and happy to linger there.

Like this, unobserved by that keen gaze, John allowed himself to drink in the sight of Sherlock, unguarded for once. He took in everything, from the faint dusting of freckles over the bridge of his nose to the lines that feathered the corners of his eyes. So often, Sherlock presented some distant, untouchable persona to the world. Now, it was easy to see the truth: the complexity of his genius and the warmth of his sentiment on equal display. He was gorgeous, arrogant, magnificent – an absolute cock, half the time – and John couldn’t quite believe his luck.

Not only had Sherlock invited him into his bed, he had allowed him to witness the raw, untamed savagery of his pyresus. He had asked for John’s bite without a hint of doubt, and now John found
himself breathless at the implications.

Sherlock was bound to him.

It hit him like a blow to the solar plexus, and John sucked in a breath. For him, it could mean as much or as little as he wanted. All of the biochemical influence occurred in Sherlock, tying him inextricably to John. It made it so only John’s scent would bring about pyresus, and only John would get a knot in response. He became the on/off switch for Sherlock’s biology, narrowing down the viable prospects of a potential partner to a single option.

In contrast, there were no such restrictions for John. The way Omegas were treated was unfair even on a biological level, their dependence on one person written into the way their bodies worked.

He frowned, knowing “dependence” wasn’t the right word. Sherlock had proved that himself. It was not an Alpha or their actions who were a necessity, but the biochemistry of a bond. That was what controlled pyresus and stopped his body tearing itself apart with each cycle. If John left now, Sherlock would return to the way he had been for the majority of their acquaintance: collected and in control, able to live his life as he’d always wanted, uninterrupted by pyresus unless John returned.

In so many ways, it seemed like the most logical choice for Sherlock – the known path – but that wasn’t what either of them wanted.

John brushed his lips over the curve of Sherlock’s shoulder, tasting the brine of sweat on his smooth skin as he breathed in the scent of him and tried to get his head around what it all meant – the two of them, together. Would life at Baker Street remain intact, everything they’d ever known but better now that the last traces of platonic friendship had shifted to accommodate so much more? Would they find themselves struggling to reclaim their equilibrium, attempting to factor in the changes in their lives and facing the constant prospect of failure? Would they even make it that far, or would the Cunninghams rip them apart?

‘Stop thinking.’ Sherlock's rough voice made John look up, and he saw a gleam of bleary silver between the dark lines of his lashes. ‘It can wait.’

‘What can?’ John kept his voice quiet, even though his spine was tense and his jaw ached with the urge to clench around a snarl. The very thought of the Cunninghams made him defensive and fierce, and he fought not to let any of that find its way into his embrace.

‘Whatever you're worried about.’ He looped one arm around John's waist and dragged him closer, burying his nose in the hair at his crown and giving a rough, happy hum. ‘It can wait.’

Normally, Sherlock hated repeating himself, even for emphasis, but this time he seemed not to notice. He was too busy nuzzling closer to John’s body. His arms were an anchoring weight, and those nimble fingers rubbed small circles at the base of his spine before switching to long, soothing strokes. Within minutes, John's scowl vanished, melting away in the face of such bliss.

Sherlock was right. There was no point in fretting over the future, not when they still lay tangled in each other's arms, shattered by their first time together and half-lost in the flood of resulting endorphins. He wanted to curl up amidst fresh bed-sheets and forget about everything but the man at his side. If he could, he would stop the clocks and let this moment live forever – because even like this – tired, hungry, filthy and aching – John couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so good.

A second later, the brush of Sherlock’s thigh between his legs shattered his tranquillity. He was gentle, but after days of overuse, John’s cock was decidedly uninterested in any romantic proceedings, and he didn’t quite manage to stifle a yelp as his bruised flesh protested.
Sherlock froze. ‘Are you all right?’ His fingers moved over the curve of John’s hip with definite intent, and John grabbed his hand, halting his progress.

‘Sore,’ he replied bluntly.

A huff of laughter jolted Sherlock’s ribs as he shifted, his hands moving up to cup John’s shoulder-blades as he pressed their brows together. It was an odd sort of embrace, not quite skin-to-skin, but so close he could sense the warmth radiating from Sherlock’s body.

‘What do you expect? You kept up with me, satisfied me every time I asked for it and never left me wanting.’ Sherlock’s voice went low at the memory, and John swallowed, desire coalescing beneath peaking nipples and flaring through his chest. Sherlock’s mouth whispered across his skin, sharp teeth capturing his lip before letting him go.

John made a quiet noise of complaint, grumbling at both Sherlock’s retreat and his own body’s outright refusal to respond to the arousal that simmered in his blood. ‘Where are you going?’ he asked, watching Sherlock slip out of bed. He stretched his arms above his head, the shadow-daubed canvas of his skin on display as his joints popped.

‘You’ve spent the last few days taking care of me. It seems fair to return the favour.’ The smile Sherlock threw over his shoulder was more affectionate than flirtatious, and he twitched the covers back over John’s chest. ‘Stay there. I’ll be back in a minute.’

Part of John wanted to argue that he didn’t need doting on, but he was a bit too shocked by the novelty of Sherlock doing something for him to protest. Instead, he did as he was asked, letting his mind drift as he curled up in their nest. It wasn’t the same without Sherlock next to him, but there was something comforting about the sounds of him moving through the house: the splash of water and his quiet footsteps, which barely impinged on John’s drowsiness as he dipped into a shallow doze.

The skim of fingers through his hair made him lift his head from the pillow, a grunt of confusion rasping up his throat. Sherlock sat on the edge of the mattress, the blue silk robe around his shoulders doing very little to protect his modesty. He hadn’t bathed, or at least his hair wasn’t wet, and the gentle tease of his fingertips became a prod against John’s shoulder as he failed to show more signs of wakefulness.

‘Come on. I have something to help with the aches, but you have to get up.’

John groaned, not wanting to move. The sheets were filthy, in need of a wash as much as he was, but they were comfortable and the smell of the fabric appealed to him on an innate level. Moving meant admitting that his first time with Sherlock had come to an end. That and he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that getting out of bed was going to hurt.

‘Can’t you bring it to me here?’ He wrinkled his nose as Sherlock shook his head, heaving a sigh when he realised he had no choice but to oblige.

Even the act of sitting up was a trial, his abs squealing in protest and his thighs aching with a dull, leaden throb. Gravity made the soreness in his crotch worse as his blood flowed south, and he winced as he staggered upright, cursing beneath his breath.

The room was a disaster. Half-empty bottles of water filled the surface of the bedside table, and wrappers from some of the food he’d foraged lay discarded on the floor. There were used tissues that had missed the bin, and a vague heap of laundry sat in one corner from when John had taken advantage of one of Sherlock’s quiet moments to change the stained linens.
He blinked in disbelief before shaking his head and picking his way along in Sherlock’s footsteps. He’d tidy up later, when he could bend down without feeling like his body would kill itself in protest. Every inch of him was faintly chafed, which had been fun at the time but wasn’t so great in the aftermath. Yet however uncomfortable it was for him, Sherlock had to be twice as bad. He’d had John in him who knew how many times, and they hadn’t always been gentle with each other. Not to mention the bite…

‘Wait.’ He reached out, snagging Sherlock’s wrist and pulling him to a halt on the bathroom threshold. ‘Are you – Did I hurt you? Do you need anything?’

Sherlock cast him an amused look, his lips pursed around the smile he was trying to suppress. ‘I’m no worse off than you are,’ he said after a moment’s thought. ‘You did all the work. I just enjoyed myself.’

John narrowed his eyes, distinctly recalling more than once when he’d been the one lying there and taking the pleasure while Sherlock rode him, his back against John’s drawn-up knees and his body gleaming with sweat.

‘If it makes you feel better, I planned to get in with you.’ Sherlock gestured towards the gargantuan bath, two-thirds full of steaming water. ‘Unless you’d rather not share?’

John didn’t bother giving a response as he tugged on Sherlock’s hand, dragging him along and trying not to limp. Not that he was the only one. Every pace Sherlock took lacked its usual grace, and his arms trembled as he shrugged out of his robe. John urged him into the bath first, waiting for him to settle before clambering in between his legs and leaning back against his chest.

The water rose, flirting with the rim and gurgling down the overflow as John breathed a sigh of relief, letting the perfect heat soothe him from skin to bone. ‘Don’t let me squash you,’ he murmured, closing his eyes, ‘or fall asleep.’

Sherlock hummed, his muscles rippling beneath John’s head as he reached out of the bath for something. A strong smell of citrus assailed John’s nose, and he opened one eye to see Sherlock peeling what looked like a clementine. He debated making some kind of complaint about getting pith in the bath, but the growl of his stomach, furious and neglected, got there before he did.

‘Eat it. There’s water as well, lukewarm, so the temperature difference between the drink and the bath shouldn’t make you sick.’ He spoke with the complete certainty that came from experience, and John suspected this was part of Sherlock’s normal routine after pyresus – not put to use for years, perhaps – but familiar all the same.

‘Thanks.’ A mouthful of fruit muffled John’s earnest gratitude, and he devoured the small morsel in seconds, reaching for more when it was gone. He had never realised how physically exhausting pyresus could be, not just for the Omegas, but for the Alphas too. It was a strange inversion of the hierarchy of needs, one that placed sex far closer to the top than usual. Now he was suffering for it: hungry and dehydrated.

Part of him felt that this should be the other way around. He should be the one feeding Sherlock, making sure he had enough to drink and tending to his aches and pains, but for once he let it slide.

They ate fruit until the juice ran, thick and sticky, over their knuckles and down their arms, sating their hunger with eager haste. It was one of the few times John had seen Sherlock genuinely enjoy the food in front of him, though perhaps that wasn’t surprising. He must be starving. John could make out the indent between every rib, his already meagre layer of fat melting away under the strain of the past few days.
'It won’t always be like that.’ Sherlock licked his thumb before dipping his hands under the water to rinse them clean. ‘Pyresus, I mean.’

‘Thank God,’ John murmured, trying to sip water from the bottle in his hand rather than gulp. ‘I don’t think I could keep up, and you –’ He licked his lips, sitting up so he could look over his shoulder at the man slumped artfully against the curve of the cast iron tub. ‘I didn’t know it would be like that. You mentioned you became ill afterwards if you were unsatisfied, but I didn’t think that happened during pyresus.’

‘It doesn’t, normally. The malaise and fever show up a few hours after it passes, as long as I don’t experience a knot.’ Sherlock shrugged, a thoughtful frown dipping his brow. ‘I don’t know if the remnants of the ODX interfered with my physiology, or if it’s something to do with how long it’s been since I last entered full pyresus. Next time should be less – extreme.’

The water rippled around him as he reached for John again, settling him against his chest. It wasn’t some idle, coddling embrace, although even if it was, John wouldn’t protest. He wasn’t averse to someone taking care of him now and then, but there was more to this than simple affection. Sherlock’s weight dragged at his shoulders as if he were the only thing holding him upright, and there was a definite edge to his mood that made John chew his lip, worried.

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’ He ran a hand over Sherlock’s knee, palming the hub of bone as he waited for a reply. It wasn’t that he objected to Sherlock like this, pliant and affectionate – in fact John quite liked it – but there was also an edge of fragility where he was used to confidence and strength, and it made his stomach clench.

‘Yes, John.’ There, at least, was a hint of Sherlock’s usual impatience, and he managed a weary smile at the familiar tone. ‘It’s just –’

‘Just what?’ He tensed, knowing Sherlock would detect it but unable to stop himself. Guilt slid into the pit of his stomach, cool and smooth like ice, and he held his breath, his mind brimming with possibilities of Sherlock’s next words: none of them good.

‘What if I can’t solve the case?’

John blinked, his hands fumbling for Sherlock’s in the water as he grabbed them both and squeezed. It was tempting to brush off his concerns, to say of course he’d figure it out, but in all the time he’d known him, Sherlock had never expressed his doubts over his abilities. Oh, there’d been ones he couldn’t unravel, when evidence went up in smoke or something equally frustrating, and then he would sulk and grump for days, but this – he’d never done this before.

‘Then we’ll think of something else.’ John licked his lips, pressing himself back into Sherlock’s body and wishing he could face him. For all its luxury, the bath was still a tight squeeze, and he couldn’t change position without pulling away. ‘We –’ He cleared his throat, leaning his head back on Sherlock’s shoulder as he drew in a deep breath. ‘We have to. We can’t let the Cunninghams have their way.’

He couldn’t put the surge of emotion in his chest into words. It was too much, thrashing under his ribs and expanding to fill all the space beneath his skin. It tripped along the edge of wildness: a reflexive violence towards anything that might try and tear them apart. It was the same instinct he’d experienced when shooting the cabbie: that absolute certainty that nothing in the world could be permitted to take Sherlock down, not even his own desire to prove himself right.

‘Talk to me,’ John urged, just as he had done so many times over the past few days and weeks, begging Sherlock to give the chaotic workings of his mind voice even when the shattered bond
robbed him of words. ‘Why do you think you might not solve it?’

Sherlock sighed, his fingers easing free of John’s grasp before he reached for the soap, lathering it between his palms. He rubbed it over John’s skin as if he were a work of art: something priceless undergoing the most delicate restorations, and John’s eyes drifted closed, tempted shut by the flawless adoration in his touch.

‘It’s a complex case,’ Sherlock said at last, ‘one that’s been left to go stale for far too long. Perhaps if my bond hadn’t broken, I would have been able to maintain the momentum of the investigation, but it’s been weeks.’

‘Maybe Donovan was right,’ John murmured, sucking in a breath as Sherlock’s soapy hand slid below the waterline, down across his stomach and lower. Stupid that it should seem more intimate than what they’d been doing together in bed, but it did: soap-clouded water not quite obscuring the gentle way Sherlock cleaned John’s flaccid length, wary of causing more pain to the tender flesh.

‘Maybe someone targeted Alexander with the idea of getting you out of the way?’

‘That in itself suggests a surprising knowledge of the elite. They would have had to know Alexander was my Alpha, and Mycroft suppressed the bonding information from public media after our seperation. It’s not easy to come by.’

‘So what’s more likely: that someone of the elite – or with connections to them – offed Alexander to slow you down, or that his death is a coincidence?’

John could picture the face Sherlock was making, a sort of disbeliefing grimace. ‘While it’s possible that Alexander merely fit the demographic to be influenced by the contaminated drug and ended up dead as a result, it would be unwise to rule out a more direct approach.’

There was a slower, thoughtful cadence to Sherlock’s speech that suggested he had some idea of their killer’s motive and methods, but lacked the evidence to back it up. It was tempting to prod at him for an explanation, but John held his silence as he allowed Sherlock to work a bit of shampoo through his hair, banishing the gritty aftermath of sweat from the coarse grey-blond strands.

He’d tell him when he was ready, but that didn’t mean John couldn’t voice his own suspicions.

‘Elsie knows.’ He kept his tone matter-of-fact. Ever since Donovan had first mentioned her suspicion that someone had specifically targeted Sherlock’s Alpha, John hadn’t quite been able to put Sherlock’s friend from his mind. He knew Lestrade and Sally had questioned her, but they had not come away with anything conclusive, and his suspicions lingered.

She hovered on the edge of it all, the same way she prowled the perimeter of London’s underworld, always watching, but somehow never quite getting involved – at least if Sherlock was to be believed.

‘She couldn’t have done it on her own.’ Sherlock’s answer went briefly tinny as he poked John in the back, urging him to lie down so he could rinse out the worst of the suds before allowing him to re-emerge. He cupped water in his hands and trickled it over John’s crown, washing away the last of the shampoo. ‘Elsie is intelligent, but she’s relatively uneducated. She has some of the connections to help with distribution, and it’s plausible, though unlikely, that she could mix the plants that make up the active ingredients of the contaminated drug. However, I doubt she’d have the knowledge to attempt recalibrations. The variations between the few samples we have are precise – methodical.’

Sherlock frowned as John stood up, water streaming from him in sparkling rivulets as he got out of the bath. ‘Your turn,’ he said succinctly, grabbing the soap and getting in behind Sherlock, trying not to slip and smack his head open as he settled down. ‘Keep talking. She couldn’t do it on her own,
but if she had help?’

‘Then whoever’s assisting her is doing most of the work. Think about the logistics: they require access not just to the plants they’re using as additives, but enough knowledge of their holistic properties to manipulate the ratios and alter the impact. Then there’s the base they are contaminating. It’s not a sugar pill, but pharmaceutical-grade Ritalin, almost certainly stolen directly from a medical establishment.’

John ran his fingers through Sherlock’s curls, charting every ridge and plateau of the skull beneath. Sherlock’s lashes fluttered in response, his body relaxing as his mind continued to race. ‘What else?’ he asked quietly, watching Sherlock catch his lip between blunt teeth before he continued.

‘Then there’s the fact that whoever is doing it must have access to London’s morgues, or at least the reports generated by them. How else would they know that their substance was killing people and realise the necessity of modulating the components, not just once, but in a systemic and logical fashion?’ Sherlock’s shoulders rolled in a shrug. ‘Some might be reported in the paper, at least the named victims, but the deaths of vagrants are frequently overlooked, and they’re the main guinea pigs.’

‘Couldn’t they rely on rumour?’ John asked. ‘The homeless community doesn’t take well to outsiders, but someone like Elsie’s always got her ear to the ground. She could find out about the fatalities and report back.’

‘Perhaps.’ Sherlock followed John’s gentle guidance and ducked his head under the water. Black curls waved like fronds of sea weed before he re-emerged, slicking them back from his face. ‘The rest of it, though? I don’t think she has the skills or the access to the substances required. Some are common enough, they can be found in your average garden nursery, but more than half are challenging to cultivate and almost impossible to obtain.’

John stopped slithering the soap between his palms, staring at the frothy white bubbles that coated his skin before he began smoothing it over Sherlock’s shoulders and chest, mimicking the same tender care that Sherlock had shown him only minutes before. ‘So, you’re saying whoever’s doing this has access to a house of the elite? One where these plants are being grown?’

Sherlock tipped his head back, looking surprised that he’d made the intuitive leap. ‘In theory, Elsie could get hold of some, but I doubt she would risk returning to her family home to procure the samples she needs.’ He sighed, the sound becoming a low hum in his throat as John skimmed down his back and then around to his stomach. Warm muscles twitched beneath John’s touch as he dipped under the water, the suds starting to dissolve as he slipped between Sherlock’s legs.

God, how could the thought of sex still linger? They should both be sated, gorged on each other’s desire and content in the aftermath. Yet even now a soft, steady longing shimmered under John’s skin, peaking in thorny spikes as he cupped and rolled, cleansing Sherlock’s flesh even as he explored its secrets.

He pressed a kiss to Sherlock’s shoulder before reaching for the soap, replenishing his supply and returning to his task. Bathing with his lovers was not something in which he often indulged. Occasionally, it was fun, but there was always something a bit too trusting about letting them wash him. Yet he hadn’t questioned Sherlock’s actions, accepting them without thought, and now Sherlock was doing the same. He sprawled against him, giving a hum of encouragement as John’s fingers drifted further back.

‘This isn’t –’ Sherlock swallowed, his throat moving convulsively. ‘– isn’t very conducive to brainwork.’
‘Do you want me to stop?’ John’s voice was a rumble as his fingertips circled over where Sherlock was still warm and welcoming, not as loose as he had been, but still a little open. The awkward angle pulled at his shoulder, but he couldn’t bring himself to care, not when Sherlock’s body was shifting in his arms: a living, breathing, wanting thing – his mind not lost in pyresus, but very much present and aware.

‘I don’t know.’ Sherlock’s rough response was pure frustration, and John smothered a smile. In all fairness, he shouldn’t have started anything, not when he was too pained and exhausted to follow through. Even now, mentally aroused as he was, he showed no sign of gaining an erection. Besides, he hadn’t missed the wince of discomfort that crossed Sherlock’s features before he pulled away. There was only so much sex a body could stand, and they’d both pushed the limit these past few days.

‘I think I know what you mean.’ He squeezed Sherlock’s hip, dropping another kiss to his skin. ‘I want you, but I’m too sore to do anything about it.’

Sherlock’s smile was small, but genuine, as if John’s honesty had caught him by surprise, and John’s heart fluttered at the sight. Sharing the bath with the long, lean, naked stretch of Sherlock’s frame wasn’t helping either of them resist the temptation of each other’s touch, and with a sigh of regret, he shifted his weight.

‘Come on,’ he urged. ‘The water’s getting cold, and I need more to eat than a bit of fruit.’

Sherlock eased forward, giving John space to vacate the bath. He could feel those pale eyes watching him as he grabbed a towel off the radiator. The warm fabric was wonderful, and he bundled himself in its depths, blotting away water and cringing as the aches in his muscles started up again.

‘Ibuprofen,’ Sherlock suggested, leaning back and flicking the hot water tap on with his toes. ‘There should be some down in the kitchen if there aren’t any in the first-aid kit you brought with you.’

‘Aren’t you coming?’

Sherlock shook his head, one wet curl twisting across his brow as he closed his eyes. ‘Not yet. I need to think.’

John pursed his lips, wondering if it was the case or something more personal that occupied Sherlock’s thoughts. His words were too soft to be a complete dismissal. It wasn’t as if he’d commanded John to leave, but he still got the impression that privacy might be the best option: a bit of space, if they could bear it.

‘All right.’ He wrapped the towel around his waist and headed for the door, his hand resting on the brass handle as he looked over his shoulder. ‘Call me if you need anything?’

Sherlock hummed in agreement, and John stepped over the threshold, shutting away the steamy bathroom air with a sigh. It felt odd, being in a different room from Sherlock for the first time in days. Even when they’d used the loo during Sherlock’s pyresus, privacy had been the lowest possible concern. John had wanted Sherlock where he could see him, within easy reach at all times, and Sherlock’s every action echoed the impulse. Now, their biology allowed them to separate, leaving John off-balance, as if he’d left part of himself behind.

Shaking his head, he tried to work around it, ignoring the tremulous flutter of emotion in his stomach as he dug out some clean clothes and slipped them on. The old, well-worn fabric chafed against a few of his more tender regions, and he adjusted himself, scowling at his discomfort. Maybe Sherlock
was right and painkillers should be one of his highest priorities. He hadn't really given any thought to how he might suffer in the aftermath – all his concerns had been for Sherlock's welfare. Now it was obvious that had been a mistake.

'Idiot,' he muttered, grabbing the packet of inhibitors off the bedside table as he headed down towards the kitchen. A quick glance at the clock told him he should take another dose. It had been the only thing to interrupt them, the daily alarm on his phone breaking through the haze of lust to remind him to swallow the tablet. It was not so tenuous that one missed pill would lower its efficacy, but John was unwilling to risk it. If nothing else, he couldn't bear the thought of putting Sherlock in that position: his freedom up for debate and the threat of pregnancy hanging over his head.

John's stomach twisted, and he blew out a shivering breath, deliberately pushing his mind away from that particular path before it could begin its journey. Already all this – Sherlock as his lover and the bond between them – felt like something out of a dream, liable to vanish if he looked straight at it. Any future they had together, any long-term decisions they made, were more than he could grasp. Besides, whether he liked it or not, there were still formidable obstacles standing in the way of their happiness.

Pursing his lips, he opened the fridge, examining the contents before beginning to fill a plate with cold meats and salad. There was some bread, threatening to go stale but not quite there yet, and he shoved it under the grill, toasting it lightly as he boiled the kettle. The smell of food made him light-headed, and he didn't bother to sit at the table, eating and cooking at the same time.

At least this was a problem he could solve. Dealing with the requirements of a physical body was second-nature to him, even when it was his own. There was something reassuring in providing a nutritious meal and medication, comfort and hydration. It was one thing he could control in a scenario where very little lay within his power.

'Is there any for me?'

Sherlock's question made John turn, already gesturing to the plate he'd stacked high. 'Plenty.' He passed him a knife and fork before retrieving some for himself. He'd been too hungry to bother with anything like manners and had been eating with his fingers, but somehow he doubted Sherlock would do the same. 'Tea?'

'Please.'

They settled into a comfortable silence, the peace of the kitchen disturbed only by the scrape of cutlery on plates and the quiet, domestic noises of the house. John watched Sherlock, noticing with satisfaction that he ate bread, cheese and ham with enthusiasm. It would be enough to stabilise his blood sugar and replenish some of the energy he'd lost. In fact, he already looked far more recovered than John felt. He was dressed in dark trousers and a purple shirt, clean-shaven and neatly groomed. If it wasn't for the way he sat, his hips canted, John would never have believed he'd spent the past seventy-two hours being thoroughly debauched.

'Do you want a cushion?' John asked, smothering a grin as Sherlock glared at him over the top of his cup of tea.

'At least I'm not limping.' He stared pointedly as John moved to the cupboard over the kitchen sink, retrieving enough pain medication for them both. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

John tilted his head, reading the softness in Sherlock's voice as he grabbed the first-aid kit and turned back to the table. 'I will be in a day or two,' he promised. 'Besides, it was more than worth it.'
Sherlock’s faint smile became a crooked grin, and a trace of warm colour touched his cheeks at the compliment. It was such a new reaction, these shy, flirtatious edges to his mood, and John couldn’t resist doing his best to bring it to the fore: Sherlock’s playfulness, such as it was.

‘What are you doing with that?’ he asked, indicating the green fabric case in John’s hand and effectively cutting off any other coy remarks he was tempted to make.

John set it on the table and turned towards the sink to wash his hands. ‘I want to check your bite.’ He shrugged, shaking the water from his fingertips. ‘I know you said it was fine, but –’

‘But you can’t resist the urge to see for yourself.’ Sherlock narrowed his eyes before bending his head, allowing John to see the mark as he held the tips of his curls out of the way. ‘It doesn’t hurt. There is really no cause for concern.’

John pursed his lips, not dignifying that with a response. At first glance, it appeared brutal: a ring of dentition marks pitted deep into the skin. Bruises gathered like storm clouds, but as he looked closer, he could see obvious signs of healing. Each puncture was dry and clean, not scabbed, but sealed off in a way that was reminiscent of cauterisation. There was no unnatural heat or swelling, and Sherlock wasn’t experiencing any restriction in his mobility. In fact, compared to the very few bond bites he’d ever seen, it looked straight-forward, not just healthy, but neat as well.

‘It’s different.’ He licked his lips as Sherlock tipped his head to the side, attentive. ‘The one you had before was more ragged, not because of crooked teeth but –’

Sherlock stilled, turning to look at John out of the corner of his eye as if debating his next words. His expression gave an odd twist that John couldn’t read from this angle, and Sherlock cleared his throat before he spoke.

‘I tried to pull away,’ he confessed, straightening in his seat and pushing his empty plate aside. ‘Most Omegas are sexually inexperienced when they’re bound and the entire process can be somewhat… overwhelming. As a result, many recoil.’

John clenched his jaw, nodding as he read between the lines. Trust didn’t play a part in most bonds, and it was easy to imagine an Omega, anxious and exposed, trying to escape from the viciousness of their Alpha’s teeth at a pivotal moment.

In contrast, Sherlock’s reaction when John had bitten him shone like a beacon, not just accepting, but enjoying the act. He’d had faith that John wouldn’t hurt him any more than necessary, their friendship forming a solid foundation for their bond. This was the result: a defined halo of a bite mark, rather than something blurred and torn.

John swallowed, choking back the recriminations he wished he could spit in Alexander’s direction. They wouldn’t do any good, seeing as the bastard was already in the morgue. Besides, it wasn’t John's place to demand retribution; he was not the one who had been wronged. That dubious honour fell to Sherlock, and it wasn’t in violence he’d find his justice. In the end, it all came down to solving the case.

He bent his head, kissing the side of Sherlock’s neck before stepping back. ‘I’ll go and get the hormone panels you wanted,’ he said, ignoring his graceless change of topic. It was worth it anyway. Relief and gratitude gleamed in Sherlock’s eyes, as if he were just as happy to drop the subject of his previous bond all together. ‘Maybe if we’re lucky, we can have the killer in jail by dinnertime.’

‘Unlikely.’
Sherlock’s reply followed John out into the front hall. It felt like he’d retrieved the paperwork from Tony a lifetime ago, but he spotted the files on the table where he’d abandoned them, still waiting to be read.

When he returned to the kitchen, Sherlock’s hand was already outstretched. His long fingers closed around the card cover of the dossier before he flipped it open and spread out the pages. There was no apologetic glance in John’s direction, nor a fumbling effort to excuse the shift of his focus back towards the investigation. Instead, he made room at the kitchen island, inviting him to share in the information that was on offer.

John obliged without a hint of regret, pulling up a stool as he settled down to read. To others, maybe it looked like they were flicking a switch, moving from intimate lovers to professional partners, but John knew better. The Work bled into every aspect of Sherlock’s life, and this case in particular had deep roots and heavy consequences for their future. Even if it didn’t, he still wouldn’t resent Sherlock’s behaviour. How could he, when the Work was what made Sherlock come alive?

He skimmed the unembellished figures, frowning as he realised Sherlock was riffling through the pages, a thoughtful expression lining his face. John had expected to find something telling in the results, a hormonal discrepancy to set them on the right track, but everything was well inside normal parameters: unremarkable.

‘Are they all like this?’ he asked, tilting the page for Sherlock to see.

‘Very similar.’ Sherlock arranged the documents in front of them, allowing John to examine them. ‘Hormone levels are within the acceptable spectrum.’

‘All at the low end, too,’ John pointed out. ‘Not enough to cause any medical concern but…’

‘But they’re almost uniform. Bar one or two subtle differences, these results look as if they came from the same victim. Yet these individuals occupied contrasting socio-economic backgrounds and had different primary genders.’ Sherlock pressed his fingertips to his lips, his eyes narrowing. ‘There should be more variation.’

‘Could it be something to do with when the bloods were taken, or how long the body had been in the morgue?’

‘That might explain why the levels are at the minimal end of the acceptable range, but not why all the tests yield such similar results.’ His fingers danced over the pages, touching the readings as if he were plucking apart their code. ‘I expected to find at least one abnormal hormone level in each body. Something that would give away the fact that someone is manipulating their biochemistry.’

‘Instead we’ve got this.’ John gestured to the paper in front of them. ‘Another dead end.’

The sharp slice of Sherlock’s smile caught his attention, and John held his breath, watching the intrigue ignite in Sherlock’s eyes. ‘Not exactly. If nothing else, it shows that there’s something to hide. These samples have been hormonally neutralised, probably by a slow-acting compound that’s incorporated into what they’re taking. Whoever is doing this knew something would show up in an analysis, so they made sure there was nothing to find.’

John nodded, catching Sherlock’s drift. At first glance, the results were unremarkable. Yet now Sherlock pointed it out, he could see the numbers were too similar to have occurred naturally. An identical chemical had to have been at work in each victim to cleanse away the substances in their veins.
‘How?’ John blinked, trying to get his head around it. ‘How is someone doing this?’

‘Anyone can mix together a few plants and get a medical result from the finished product; Omegas have been doing it for centuries. I did it.’ Sherlock propped his elbows on the surface and steepled his hands together in front of his face. ‘I can’t be the only one who took old remedies and made them more effective. The compound they’re using must have taken years to perfect; they’re still in the process, or we wouldn’t have any new victims…’

Abruptly, Sherlock got to his feet, striding away and calling over his shoulder. ‘Pack our things, John! It’s time to go.’

‘What are you doing?’ John demanded, rolling his eyes as Sherlock waved a dismissive hand.

‘Gathering a few essentials.’

He opened a door, vanishing into another part of the house and leaving John to the mundane task of organising their departure. With a sigh, he set to work, clearing the dishes and tidying the kitchen, putting away what was left of the food and making the place as spotless as possible.

Heading upstairs, he surveyed the chaos of the bedroom. He suspected Mycroft hired staff – people to clean and look after the place – but there was no way he was leaving this disaster for some other poor soul to find.

It took longer than he would have thought possible, binning food wrappers and tissues. The water bottles went in his bag, along with his dirty clothes and toiletries. Sherlock hadn’t bothered to unpack his things, which at least made John’s job easier. Still, by the time he’d stripped the bed and bundled the laundry in to the washing machine, almost an hour had passed.

He expected Sherlock to be pacing the hall, desperate to leave, or to come marching upstairs to drag him out, but there was no sign of him. Instead, the house was ominously quiet. Apart from the occasional creak of a settling beam, he couldn’t hear anything as he carried the bags downstairs.

‘Sherlock?’

His call went unanswered, and John pursed his lips as he set their luggage down by the door and turned back towards the kitchen. ‘Sherlock?’

Paranoid fears cast their shadows through John’s mind, and he took a deep breath, reminding himself to be rational. The house was well-protected and Sherlock was far from defenceless. If anyone had tried to snatch him, he’d have raised seven kinds of hell and John would have heard the racket. Chances were that Sherlock had wandered off and become distracted, losing himself in the case while John dealt with the tiresome practicalities of their existence.

Crossing the kitchen, he passed through the parted door into a luxurious dining room, the kind that seemed ideal for holding banquets for visiting dignitaries. The long table could easily seat twelve people, and the dark wood gleamed. Long windows gave him a good view of the manicured lawns beyond, and he noticed what looked like a huge conservatory jutting out into the grounds.

A glimmer of movement within its transparent walls caught his eye, and he breathed a sigh of relief, dodging furniture as he continued his journey. He passed through a few more rooms, barely bothering to take in their details. Less than a minute later, he found what he’d been searching for.

A pair of glass-panelled doors stood ajar, and beyond them grew a veritable jungle. The plants were well-loved, glossy and green. John struggled to picture Mycroft pottering around and getting his hands dirty while tending to the inhabitants. No doubt more hired-help was responsible.
The humid air was deliciously warm, and the smell of damp earth mingled with Sherlock’s brighter scent, leaving a clear, olfactory trail. John followed his nose, walking a snaking, stone path through vegetation until he came across a secluded alcove, full of tools and gardening paraphernalia.

Sherlock had his back to John, his shoulders hunched as he bent over a worn table. Scattered around him were a number of cuttings, their stems seeping fluid. Sherlock was labelling polythene bags in his elegant scrawl, but John didn’t need to read the Latin names to know what they were: the components of an Omega’s illicit contraceptive arsenal.

‘They were my mother’s.’

John twitched in surprise before chastising himself: just because Sherlock appeared engrossed it didn’t mean he was unaware of John’s presence. He cleared his throat as he approached the table, noticing how Sherlock handled each specimen, careful not to crush the fragile tissues of the plant.

‘The ones she used, you mean?’

Sherlock hummed in agreement. ‘I used to think her proclaimed love of gardening was a ruse to cover the substances she made in here, but now I’m not so sure.’

‘What makes you say that?’ John followed Sherlock’s gaze, taking in the plants arrayed around them. He picked out the leaves and flowers of *Aristolochia rotunda* instantly, too familiar with the sight to miss it, but it was one among many. They grew from raised beds, some little more than a carpet of greenery while others rose on long, proud stems.

‘She only used *Aristolochia* as a contraceptive, I remember watching her make it, yet she has a vast array of flora with similar properties: a collection.’

If Sherlock noticed his slip into present tense, he didn’t bother correcting himself. Instead, he gestured to the foliage on the bench: more than a dozen in all. ‘Some of these I know – I’ve used them myself – but others weren’t available to me. If I can analyse them in the lab at Bart’s we might find ourselves at least one step closer to solving our case. More importantly, understanding how they interact with each other could throw some light on why our victims are dying.’

‘It’s a good thing these are still here,’ John murmured, reaching out and touching the feathery frond of a nearby shrub. ‘You would have thought they’d die with no one to look after them.’

‘My father was a man of sentiment. He probably ordered the staff to keep it going, along with the rest of this place, and you know how loathe Mycroft is to break with tradition. Besides, it’s –’ Sherlock stopped, one bag held open and forgotten in his hand as he blinked at whatever notion had erupted in his mind.

‘Gardeners.’

John raised his eyebrows, waiting for him to elaborate. ‘What about them?’

‘You don’t need to be a member of the elite to get your hands on these plants. You just have to work for them. Who would question a gardener doing his job?’

John narrowed his eyes. ‘I thought you said our perpetrator was a med-student? Access to Ritalin and all that?’

‘It is possible that he’s both. Manual labour during the holidays is a common way for students to supplement incomes, especially those with an expensive education.’ Sherlock waved a hand. ‘It’s nothing but conjecture at this point, but it could be worth pursuit. I’ll know more once we’re back in
London.’ He scooped up the polythene bags and strode away from the tropical atrium, leaving John to follow in his wake.

He shut the doors behind them, sealing the peaceful house as they went. ‘How are we going to get home? Are we taking one of the cars?’

Sherlock huffed. ‘That was my initial plan. However, when I called down to the gate to procure some keys, they informed me that my brother would be happy to provide us with transport back to London in his personal vehicle. Apparently there are matters he wishes to discuss.’

John winced, trying to banish the ridiculous desire to avoid Mycroft for as long as possible. The man saw everything, and if Sherlock was right, he had known days ago that they would bond. However, John didn’t like knowing that the older Holmes would be fully aware of what they’d spent the past three days doing, and sitting in a car with him for two hours sounded like torture.

‘There’s no point in him driving all the way up here to get us,’ he offered weakly, sighing as he saw the look on Sherlock’s face: understanding and a hint of shared feeling. ‘He’s already here, isn’t he?’

‘He was in the area, negotiating with the Cunningham family in neutral territory between the two estates. I suspect most of his conversation will centre on whatever specifics he’s managed to achieve in those talks.’

‘Like how long we’ve got to solve the case, you mean?’ John sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face as he nodded his head. ‘Right. When does he get here?’

Sherlock gestured to the window by the front door, and John saw the black car idling on the gravel beyond, its paintwork gleaming. His heart sank, and he clenched his left hand into a fist as he realised their time in solitude was well and truly coming to an end.

It seemed like a fantasy and, irrationally, John wondered if it would fade away once they stepped out of the door. He tried to picture them as lovers in Baker Street, but his mind failed him, unable to translate what they’d discovered together in Sherlock’s family home to their life back in the city.

The squeak of Sherlock’s shoes on the floor made him look up. He’d stuffed the samples into his bag and then abandoned them, turning back to John with a pinched, uncertain expression. ‘You don’t want to go?’

‘No. Yes.’ John pulled a face as he shook his head. ‘I miss Baker Street, miss my chair and Mrs Hudson and watching you prat about with body parts on the kitchen table, but…’ He shrugged, not sure how to put it into words.

Sherlock’s gaze flickered, and the next thing John knew those elegant hands were sliding around his waist, pulling him into an embrace. He went willingly, inhaling the new, mingled scent that emanated from Sherlock’s skin. It grounded him, hardening his resolve, and when Sherlock’s lips brushed against his, he realised how much he’d needed the simple reassurance of the physical.

They kissed softly, each breath traded like a promise, and John cursed his own stupidity. How could he think that all they had become to each other – lovers and more – might be left behind once they walked out of the door? Hadn’t their relationship, ill-defined as it was, been building steadily for more than a year? What had happened here was neither the beginning nor the end, it was just another step in a very long road, one that John intended to walk with Sherlock at his side.

The way they felt went with them, and it always would.

Quietly, Sherlock withdrew, his palms running over the coarse wool of John’s jumper as he stepped
back. ‘Ready?’

John nodded, not missing the way that Sherlock stuck close as they scooped up their bags. They moved around each other with an ease born of familiarity, their strides falling into step as John hauled open the front door.

Mellow, afternoon sunlight made him squint, casting long shadows and highlighting the topography of Mycroft’s patriarchal features. He stood by the open door of the car, watching them. For once, however, his face was not a cool mask of disinterest. The change was subtle, but the glimmer of a genuine smile lit his eyes, curving Mycroft’s mouth before he spoke.

‘I see congratulations are in order.’

‘Did you predict otherwise?’ Sherlock asked, surrendering his bag to the driver, who stowed it in the boot before reaching for John’s.

‘Where you are concerned, brother mine, I have come to expect the unexpected, if not the impossible.’ Mycroft gestured towards the car, and now his smile was gone, replaced by a solemn seriousness that sent unease crawling down John’s spine. ‘Let us be on our way. We have much to discuss, and I am afraid none of us have the time to spare.’

John climbed in beside the driver, pulling down the visor and revealing the mirror within. He didn’t give a damn about his appearance, but he could tilt the reflective pane to give him a view of the back seat. At least that way, he could watch Sherlock’s reactions without constantly turning around.

Sherlock, of course, noticed what he’d done, and there was an approving edge to his smile as he slid into the car, settling behind John and diagonally across the vehicle. Silver eyes met his gaze in the mirror before skimming away out of the window, his familiar mask of indifference falling into place in his brother’s presence.

With a nod of his head, Mycroft encouraged the driver to depart, the gravel skittering beneath the wheels as they picked up speed. John watched the reflection of the house dwindle out of sight, paying no heed to the details of the landscape as the older Holmes began.

‘I have spent the past few days discussing matters with Patricia Cunningham. I must admit, my success was limited.’ John thought he could hear a thin vein of frustration in those clipped words. It must annoy him no end, a man so used to being in control having to flex to the whims of another. ‘The Cunningham family stands on the brink of self-destruction. The health of the Omega grows worse by the day. Patricia Cunningham may be the Alpha of the family, but it is obvious that her mate is the glue that holds them together. Without her, the level of conflict between Patricia and her son Henry increases exponentially.’

‘What does that mean for us?’ John asked, running his palms down his thighs as he studied Sherlock’s unmoving profile. He’d not said a word, but he didn’t look surprised by his brother’s opening revelations.

‘It means that negotiations of specifics were challenging to say the least. Henry Cunningham sought to argue with every aspect. Legally, he does not have a leg to stand on, but he is trying to have his lawyers demonstrate that since we have stated Sherlock was my proxy, we breached the injunction when he approached the Cunningham family.’

‘Will that work?’ John licked his lips, a dull thump starting in his temples as he tried to follow.

‘No. The wording of the injunction was very specific. Even if he did take it to court – which,
considering I am still holding the evidence of Alexander's abuse over their heads, would be most unwise – a judge would find in our favour. As it stands, Henry Cunningham is a minor impediment: an irritant and little more, at least while his Alpha mother lives.'

John didn't have to look at Mycroft to know he was sneering, his disdain for Alexander's brother clear. 'So Henry's not a problem, but Patricia is?'

The leather upholstery squeaked as Mycroft shifted his weight. 'She knows Aveline's recovery may well hinge on Sherlock illuminating the proceedings surrounding their son's death. Fears for her Omega's well-being have led her to demonstrate confrontational and inflexible behaviour. It was not so much a negotiation as it was her issuing ultimatums.'

'Spit it out, Mycroft. How long did she give us?' Sherlock didn't turn away from the window, choosing instead to continue staring out of the glass. 'It's obvious she thinks a short time-frame will provide further incentive for me to solve the case. That's what she really wants. Ownership of me may be a financial boon, but Aveline's health takes priority, at least in Patricia's mind.'

The older Holmes cleared his throat, and when he spoke he sounded pained. 'You had ten days, starting from the moment you entered the Cunningham residence and struck the deal. The family will consider the terms of your offer met when the police decide to press charges. Having a suspect in for questioning will not be enough.'

John closed his eyes as he realised the ramifications of Mycroft's words. Almost half their time was already gone, absorbed by the demands of Sherlock's pyresus and the quiet afterglow of their intimacy. Hours had already vanished, and now they had little more than a handful of days in which to unravel one of the most confusing crimes John had ever seen.

'Is that the best you could do? Sherlock demanded, scowling in his brother's direction.

'I'm afraid so. I can manipulate foreign dignitaries with ease thanks to a known framework of laws and precedents. I know when to push and when to give the appearance of capitulation. There is no such foundation when it comes to this scenario, Sherlock. It's unbroken ground. There are no records of any Omega attempting to legally break free of their Alpha's claim, and there is still no guarantee we will meet with success.'

Mycroft sighed, and John could empathise with the helpless frustration contained in that sharp exhalation of air. The rustle of paper suggested he had opened a notebook, and he appeared to read its contents before speaking. 'There are alternative methods to gaining your freedom, of course, as we have previously discussed, but –'

'But the deal is the best choice.' Sherlock's response was final. There was no trace of doubt in his answer, no unspoken request for support. He had made his decision, and John knew he planned to see it through. 'It offers the optimal outcome with minimal personal sacrifice.'

'As long as you can give the Cunninghams the answers they require.' Mycroft tapped his pen against the page. 'Should that prove impossible...' He didn't finish his sentence, allowing the heavy silence to speak for him.

John swallowed, his hands tightening over his knees as he watched Sherlock's profile in the mirror. He looked pale and untouchable, silver eyes once again fixed to the skimming horizon and his full lips fractionally parted. Whether he was staring at the scenery or the contents of his own head, John couldn't be sure, but he could hazard a guess.

Even now, discussing the uncertain matter of his future, the investigation was the focus of Sherlock's
attention. Perhaps it wouldn't be exclusive. After all, he was not totally immersed in his musings, but he would be nudging at facts and twisting the pieces, waiting for the moment when everything locked into place.

John knew that Sherlock feared failure, but looking at him now, there was no evidence of that uncertainty. Mycroft and John were united in their concern, but Sherlock seemed unaffected. The firm line of his shoulders radiated a confidence that grew stronger with every mile that passed beneath the car's wheels.

Minor roads merged into motorways as they raced along, the speed limits duly ignored. Not that anyone was likely to pull over Mycroft Holmes, but the driver's skill cut the long journey almost in half. Before long, warehouses and train-lines, narrow terraces and cramped flats cluttered the broad swipe of the countryside. The suburbs of London grew dense, as did the traffic, red brake lights gleaming in the encroaching twilight.

'Take us straight to St Bart's,' Sherlock ordered, his voice breaking apart the peace. The driver glanced in the rear-view mirror, seeking out permission from Mycroft before changing lanes. They scythed down a side-road and ghosted along quiet back-streets, bisecting London's rush-hour traffic until, at last, they drew up outside the hospital.

'What would you have me do?' Mycroft asked. 'I can return to negotiations and attempt to win you an extension on the deadline, but I doubt it would be a valuable use of our time.'

'No, it's pointless. The Cunninghams are more likely to retaliate in desperation. They're not thinking logically, and any effort to appeal to their common sense will meet with failure.' John watched Sherlock run his thumb over his bottom lip. 'Focus on viable contingency plans. We're not lacking in options.'

'Indeed. Your bond with John complicates matters, legally speaking, but it does mean your continued good health is no longer a concern.' Approval laced Mycroft’s voice. 'Very well. I'll be in touch in a day or so. What of the investigation?'

Sherlock's gaze shifted, meeting John's in the mirror. It was a moment of dazzling connection, and for once he could read everything in those eyes, the softness of Sherlock's affection and the honed blade of his intellect all forged together in a single glance.

'Leave that to us.'
The sweet scent of dried flowers filled Sherlock’s sinuses, almost drowning out the astringent, baseline odour of the lab. The pestle in his hand crushed the oven-baked leaves to powder, releasing their properties as he mixed solutions for analysis.

His methods would not be precise, of course. Those Omegas who used the plants for medicinal purposes would often hang them to dry for days to make a more concentrated product, but he didn’t have that kind of time. All he needed was an analogous substance – something that could swing the teetering equilibrium of his theories in one direction or the other.

It felt as if he were forging the key to a lock he’d never seen, and all the while his thoughts darted back and forth like ethereal fish, conclusions tempting him with their glimmer but always just out of reach.

‘All right, that’s that one done.’ John handed over a spectrograph of one of the samples, and Sherlock compared it to the silhouette of the contaminant, trying to find any readings that could indicate the presence of *Tanacetum parthenium*. While the blend killing their victims may not be in the vast database at their disposal, the signatures of its components were well-known.

‘Unlikely,’ he concluded, watching John set the short-stemmed cutting aside. ‘While it’s possible that the chemical fingerprints are being altered as the compound is mixed, there should still be some evidence of Feverfew in the data if it were present.’ He grimaced, hating his uncertainty. This was a mess of trial and error based on the core of his personal knowledge: a needle in a hay-stack. ‘Keep trying.’

John’s obedience was immediate, his movements methodical and precise like a surgeon laying out his tools or a soldier dismantling his gun. If he could, Sherlock would take the time to admire that competence, but he had to satisfy himself with a single, side-long glance, one that lingered on strong hands and the forearms exposed by John’s folded back cuffs.

The time-limit imposed by the Cunninghams was inconvenient, but it allowed Sherlock to evaluate the effects of their changing relationship on the Work. John could have been obstructive – possessive and jealous of the demands the case placed on Sherlock’s attention. It could have been a mess of conflict, yet instead they moved together as smoothly as ever, fluid and adaptable.

John bowed to Sherlock’s superior knowledge without hesitation and offered his assistance without any expectation of recompense. He did not hover, nor demand reaffirmation of their new-forged affections. Sherlock would be the first to admit his experience of relationships was limited, but to find that John’s character remained unchanged despite their bond was nothing short of a relief.

He reached up, the fingers of his right hand brushing the new ridge and furrow of the bite at his neck. He knew the mark would not be as defined as it felt beneath his fingertips, but now he allowed himself to chart the divots, remembering how it had felt when John bit him. He’d expected savagery: the sensation of being overwhelmed by the will of another.

Instead, John made him feel loved.

Sherlock knew part of it was a hard-coded response. Even the most vicious bite would release endorphins, bringing about positive feeling or at least stifling the pain. However, John’s claim and his actions thereafter incited far more than that. First, there was the joy of John wishing to bond with him, not because of social-status or his gender, but because of his feelings for Sherlock – unnamed as
they were. He wanted him for the dubious assets of his personality and intelligence, nothing more.

Then there was the way John had taken care of him.

Sherlock’s heart fluttered, and he swallowed tightly, trying to wrest his mind free from the tempting memory. Yet the novelty of the experience lingered with him, resurfacing at random moments to fracture his concentration.

John had shown him what it would be like to be together, to live each day in one another’s company and each night in each other’s arms. Part of Sherlock, made cynical by too many years of self-preservation, wondered if it was an act – something to lure him off his guard – but no. John was cunning at times, intelligent and brutal when the situation required it, but he was not duplicitous – not in matters of sentiment. His tenderness was a genuine reflection of his character, and his behaviour underlined the personal repercussions of tracking down the killer.

The reward for solving this case was nothing as ephemeral as the satisfaction of finding an answer. Capturing the culprit could give him everything: Baker Street, John and his freedom. What more encouragement could he possibly need?

His hands moved on autopilot, measuring concentrations and creating solutions, the straightforward rules of chemistry like a well-worn road beneath his feet as the sounds of the mass spectrometer disturbed the peace. Perhaps handling the device had not been part of John’s training before he met Sherlock, but a year assisting him in the lab had given him the knowledge required to provide serviceable results.

Sometimes a plant’s particular chemical qualities confirmed its presence in the finished solution within seconds. Others were not so easy to assess, and by the time Molly shuffled into the lab to begin her shift, they were still engrossed in the arduous process.

Surprise made her stammer over her greeting, and Sherlock looked up to see her gaze dart from him to John and back again. As a Beta, it was impossible for her to discern the nature of their bond from any scent in the air. However, it seemed Molly, surprisingly astute at times, didn’t need her nose to tell her something had changed.

‘I didn’t know you were back in London?’

She made it a question, a perfect opening for someone to fill in the blanks, and Sherlock listened with half-an-ear as John obliged. He told her nothing of note, not about the bond or Sherlock’s state during his absence, but his answer seemed to satisfy Molly’s curiosity, even if it didn’t confirm her suspicions.

‘Well I – I’m glad you’re feeling better.’ She twisted her fingers together before pasting an expression of interest over her features, clumsily changing the subject. ‘Are you still working on that case?’

‘Obviously.’ He sighed as John caught his eye, urging him to be nice – or at least tolerable – with a single quirk of his brow. ‘The hormone panels you provided indicate some form of manipulation. They were too uniform for anything else.’

Molly’s expression, so uncertain when she had entered the room, solidified into something approaching confidence. ‘I ran those tests twice, in case there was a calibration issue giving bad numbers, but they came back the same both times. Do you need any help?’

He glanced over the samples left to process, knowing that Molly’s interference and inevitable
questions would be more of a distraction than anything else. ‘Not with this. Are there any new victims?’

‘No, it’s been quiet.’

Sherlock made a rough noise of annoyance. There were plenty of other morgues in the city – plenty of other places to seek out new leads – but the pressure of the ticking clock was like a weight on the back of his neck: a constant presence in the lightning storm of his thoughts. ‘Search the database. See if bodies have been brought in anywhere else.’

‘Please,’ John added, offering her a kind smile before he handed the next batch of information to Sherlock.

He didn’t hear her response, too busy focussing on the latest collection of data, reading the parallels and muttering under his breath as he scrawled another name on the catalogue of components present in the final drug.

Each new addition gave him more pieces of the puzzle, painting a distorted picture of potent effects. At first glance, it looked almost random, but Sherlock knew differently. The plants involved were complimentary, amplifying each other’s characteristics. It was deliberate – knowledgeable – and he closed his eyes in thought.

‘You all right?’

Sherlock lifted his head to see John standing on the opposite side of the bench, watching him. His determined expression had eased into lines of concern, and Sherlock ducked his head. ‘There are still a couple of ingredients I need to isolate.’ He glanced at the samples left to process, trying to judge the likely additions to the array of chemicals already present. ‘Whoever did this –’

‘Knew what they were doing?’

‘That’s an understatement. This recipe forms the foundation of a balanced concoction, one which takes many pieces of an Omega’s contraceptive toolkit and puts them to use.’ He scanned through his handwriting, plucking out one after the other as examples.

‘Emmenogogues, like *Aristolochia*, stimulate the menstrual cycle to continue. *Arisaema triphyllum* induces sterility. *Daucus carota* prevents implantation – some Omegas use it as a prophylactic contraceptive, though on its own its effectiveness is debatable.’ He pursed his lips, considering the possibilities. ‘If I had to guess, the missing components will be something to induce uterine contractions coupled with an additional emmenogogue.’

He picked up a purple flower on a thick stem, one of the few he’d not dried, as well as a spider web of roots. ‘*Mentha pulegium* and *Caulophyllum thalictroides*, also known as Pennyroyal and Blue Cohosh. Dangerous, both of them. The oil of the first is fatal within a week if you take too much, and Blue Cohosh needs to be treated with respect. More than a dilute tincture, and you’ll get debilitating headaches, vomiting and other, unsavoury consequences.’

He changed his gloves, processing each specimen with care. John’s hands were already shielded by latex, but Sherlock watched him don a second pair as he squeezed the fluid from the stem of the Pennyroyal. ‘Be careful,’ he warned, looking up when he realised John was watching him, his expression hovering on the precipice between admiration and pity.

‘How did you learn all this? About what goes with what? I mean, I know you used some of these…’ He waved one hand, indicating the sheer diversity of flowers and leaves spread out before them.
Sherlock sliced the roots into small pieces, careful to catch the fluid that seeped from them before mixing it into a suitable solution. He remembered it clearly: time spent in the orangery; the smell of citrus heavy in the air as he weighed and measured; his first, fumbling attempts successful but wretched in their side-effects.

‘My mother taught me the basics, and I took cuttings and seeds from her collection, as well as some premixed elixirs, before bonding with Alexander. However, I needed to know more than a recipe could offer.’ He inverted the solution of Blue Cohosh, allowing it to mix before setting it aside to wait for analysis.

Stripping off his gloves, he washed his hands, raising his voice to be heard over the flow of water. ‘Alexander was more willing to oblige my requests at the beginning of our relationship. He believed I was satisfying an intellectual curiosity and provided the basics I needed for dip chromatography.’ Reaching for a paper towel, he blotted his skin dry. ‘From there I could explore the components of my mother’s plants to some level of accuracy and put together more effective substances. The story of their compatibility is written in their chemical signatures. All I had to do was fine-tune it.’

‘Much like whoever’s doing all this,’ John murmured

Sherlock turned back to the bench, picking up a pencil and rolling it between his palms. ‘Yes and no. In this case, the person who mixed the contaminant knew full well how to use each of the ingredients involved. It was only in combining them that they created something they didn’t expect. Something fatal – to Alphas at least.’

John braced his weight on the lab bench, bowing his head and letting out a breath. He looked like a man bending beneath some immeasurable burden, and Sherlock’s fingers fluttered at his side, awakened by the urge to reach out. Would John respond if he stroked the staunch column of his spine? Would his shoulders relax and the faint shadows of that hunted look fade from his eyes?

He had never been in this situation before – had never imagined it possible that the Alpha to whom he was bound could be a friend and lover, rather than an enemy. It left him conflicted, grappling with his current observations and his past experience.

‘So, we really are looking at someone knowledgeable, then?’ John lifted his head, interrupting Sherlock’s train of thought as he glanced at the cuttings littered around them. ‘Someone with a good understanding of chemistry and biology as well as these?’

Sherlock blinked, a deep breath hissing between his lips as his distractions vanished, coalescing into something new as the facts rearranged themselves.

‘Someone like me.’

‘What?’

He whirled around, pacing as the words tumbled forth. ‘I think you’re right. Someone is getting help to make this bizarre clinical trial a possibility, but I doubt it’s Elsie Jacobs. The level of expertise our perpetrator demonstrates in these particular substances requires not just years of study, but personal experience. It’s there in the evidence. Without it, they wouldn’t be able to prevent basic mistakes. There would be victims with side-effects due to the ingredients themselves. Obvious ones, ranging from vomiting blood to pulmonary distress and collapse, but there’s no indication that such events occurred.’

‘Okay.’ John cocked his head, his eyes wide as he drank in everything Sherlock was saying. ‘What are you getting at?’
'Who is ideally placed to not only cultivate such things, but use them for their notable properties? What kind of person might have intimate experience of their effects?'

He saw the bloom of realisation in John’s eyes, bright and amazed. ‘You think an Omega’s doing it?’

‘I think one might be giving instructions, handing out methodologies and recipes, receiving information and making adjustments only to start the whole process again.’ He closed his eyes, shaking his head at another tenuous piece of supposition. Yet even as he questioned its validity, he saw how it could work. He just needed the proof to forge his conjecture into fact.

‘We need to find whoever’s contaminating the drugs. They’re the fulcrum on which the entire case rests. If we locate them, we either catch our perpetrator or we find an accessory: someone’s eyes, ears and hands in the city. Someone who will lead us back to the main culprit, willingly or otherwise.’

‘And how do we do that?’

They stared at each other as silence fell, thick like smoke. Lines bracketed John’s mouth, and Sherlock bowed his head, consumed by the hole in their knowledge. So much was available to them, a glut of information unravelling beneath his focus, but so far their efforts to turn up a suspect remained painfully futile.

He swore under his breath as he reached for his phone, punching off a hurried text to Lestrade. “At Bart’s. Bring everything you have pertaining to the Donnelly case that I’ve not already seen. - SH”

The fact that he had to look through the evidence again rubbed against his nerves like steel wool. It was humiliating, how the demands of a broken bond had annihilated him so utterly, reducing him to a creature of instinct, need and little else.

Now he had to blow the dust from his deductions, and every minute he had to wait was another one wasted.

‘Here.’ John waved something at him, and Sherlock took the results, glancing at them to confirm his conclusions: Pennyroyal was part of the contaminant. It was tempting to make an assumption about the Blue Cohosh in an effort to save time, but that would be a foolish oversight. Besides, information was his ammunition. The more he stored away, the better.

Settling on a stool, he pulled the various pages closer, examining each peak as the minutes ticked passed. One or two of the samples they’d tested had come back inconclusive, too corrupted by whatever reactions were occurring to allow a definitive identification. Only mixing the plants together would let them know if they’d successfully isolated the ingredients.

He began sketching out likely ratios for the combination, looking up when Molly slipped through from her office, one ear red from where she’d had a telephone receiver pressed against it. ‘I checked the database and called around to as many morgues as I could, but they’ve got nothing.’ Her lips twisted. ‘At least, nothing they’re willing to admit.’

‘You think someone might hide the fact they’ve had victims of a murder brought in?’ John asked.

‘It’ll be the homeless ones. If an autopsy can give a basic cause of death, their remains are processed and removed from storage. Admit they might be part of something ominous, and they’re clogging up drawer space for months.’ Molly flushed. ‘Not that that’s what I think about them, it’s just…. Well,
you overhear what people say. They’re not very kind.’

‘Few people are,’ Sherlock murmured, looking up as the door along the corridor squeaked, its rubber seal dragging over linoleum. He could make out the deep cadence of Lestrade’s voice, followed by something abrupt in Donovan’s tones, and he narrowed his eyes before glancing at the clock. He had not expected so prompt a response, and he straightened in his seat, his gaze glued to the threshold as the two officers pushed their way into the lab.

Unlike Molly, Lestrade had an Alpha’s nose, and Sherlock didn’t miss the stumble in the rhythm of his stride as he picked up the fragrance in the room: not just chemicals and the scents of the individuals within its walls, but the combined perfume of him-and-John, its significance undeniable even to an Alpha who did not occupy the elite.

The DI’s brown eyes went wide before crinkling at their outer edges, the corners of his lips twitching upwards. Lestrade was a romantic at heart. His behaviour towards his ex-wife – a strange mixture of resignation and regret, rather than spite – gave that away. Now he looked honestly happy, and much more blatant about it than Mycroft, who was subtle in his approval.

For one moment, Sherlock wondered if Lestrade was about to blurt out something congratulatory, but it seemed that he still had his wits about him. Perhaps it was the sharp look John shot in his direction, or the less-than-exultant atmosphere in the room, because his smile faded and his brow wrinkled in confusion before he set some files down on the bench and gave them both a hard look.

‘It’s good to have you back,’ he said at last, his voice resonant with plenty of other, unspoken sentiments, ‘but I gotta say, you two don’t look happy to be home.’

John took a breath before letting it out in a huff, glancing at Sherlock as if he was unsure how much he could reveal. In the rush to return to London, they had neglected to discuss what should be put on the table.

Years of hiding in plain sight made Sherlock reluctant to admit to their bond. The fewer people who had verbal confirmation of its existence, the better, at least until the Cunninghams were out of the picture.

Yet time was of the essence, and keeping the Yard in the dark about the demands of the investigation – personal, as well as professional – would only cause delays. Besides, working the case alone was inadvisable. Official charges had to be pressed against the perpetrator before the Cunninghams would consider relinquishing their claim, and for that, he needed the authority and cooperation of the police.

Lestrade was trustworthy. His friendship with John and his years of acquaintance with Sherlock offered proof of that. Molly, who hovered nervously to one side, was discreet. It wasn’t until John mentioned it that Sherlock realised she’d discovered the truth about his gender. She knew more than she let on and was more than capable of keeping it quiet.

Yet Sally Donovan was neither a friend nor a confidante. She stood half-a-step behind Lestrade, her eyes narrowed as she scrutinised the scene. She didn’t just take in him and John, but the array of substances around them: scattered paperwork and discarded pipettes – their desperation made plain.

‘I thought you couldn’t come back?’ Her question was flat as she arched one eyebrow, her folded arms tightening around the documents she clutched to her chest. ‘Not unless you found another Alpha.’

‘You thought right.’ Sherlock held out his hand for the dossiers in her grasp, watching her scowl at
his deliberate silence on the subject. ‘Thankfully that’s no longer an issue.’

Her lips trembled as if she were tempted to sneer, but her next question came out more curious than scathing. ‘Should I be offering my congratulations?’

Sherlock glanced at John, watching the flicker of emotions and feeling a mirror of them simmer beneath his own skin. He longed for it to be that simple, for their bond to be unchallenged and safe, yet nothing could be further from the truth.

‘Ask me again in five days,’ he replied at last, tilting his head towards John to indicate that he should explain. He would do a better job of it anyway. Sherlock would be too tempted to render it down to a bald, scientific statement, rather than something embellished with personal sentiment.

He listened as John explained, noticing what he said and what he left out. He never explicitly mentioned their mutual agreement to make the bond more than a thing of convenience, but it was there in the tone of his voice: soft when he spoke of Sherlock, harsh and unforgiving whenever he brought up the Cunninghams.

No one interrupted him, not even Donovan, who was always quick to challenge the veracity of people’s words. It was only when John trailed off, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders that she shifted her weight, her lips parted and her features taut.

‘Five days?’ She stared at him, waiting for his acknowledgement before she let out a sigh. ‘And if you don’t solve it?’

‘Everything becomes infinitely more complicated. I can’t be more specific, because it’s impossible to be sure what might happen.’ He met her gaze without hesitation. ‘However, I’d rather not find out.’

Her expression was thick with doubt, but beneath that there was a hint of sadness and a touch of righteous anger, not directed at him for once, but generated on his behalf.

‘Then we’d better get started,’ she said at last, placing the stack of files beside him and dragging a stool towards her, perching on it as she began to sort through the pages. She was careful to avoid Sherlock’s experiment as she laid out key pieces of information. ‘We’ve had pressure from higher up to put this on the back-burner, but…’ She cocked her head, glancing at the DI.

‘But we kept poking at it.’ Lestrade cleared some space next to John, shuffling through the documents and pulling out one or two. ‘To be fair, we’ve not found much that’s new. With no more bodies to work with, we’ve gone back to the old evidence, run a few more tests, that kind of thing.’

‘And?’

‘Anderson found some skin cells on some of the equipment, you know, the stuff you found at that dodgy house? There was a bit of flesh caught in the hinge of the pill press, like someone had trapped their finger.’

‘DNA?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Yeah, but we’ve got nothing to match it to, so it’s not got us very far. He did say the epithelial cells were discoloured, though, something about vegetable proteins and potassium nitrite.’ Lestrade raised his eyebrows. ‘Mean anything to you?’

‘Could be a gardener?’ Molly spoke before Sherlock could answer, her cheeks flushing as she became the centre of attention. She had been working at a nearby desk, unobtrusive and quiet. ‘My Dad always had filthy-looking hands. It wasn’t that they were dirty, just stained. Potassium nitrite’s a
common ingredient in synthetic fertiliser.'

‘Did he spend a lot of time tending the soil?’ Sherlock asked, tilting his head as he catalogued her information.

‘It kind of went in phases, actually. He’d potter around in his shed for weeks and then ignore it for months. Then he got ill, but even when he’d not touched the garden for years, his hands were still black around the fingernails.’

‘Could someone else have the same kind of thing? Farmers and the like?’ Lestrade asked.

‘A farmer is unlikely to fertilise his fields by hand. It’ll be done with machine, reducing contact with the chemicals involved and negating the likelihood of discoloration.’ Sherlock ran his finger over his lip. ‘However, it’s possible that there’s an alternative explanation.’

‘But you said they might be a gardener,’ John pointed out, ‘and if Molly’s right and the stains linger, then your theory about a med student working in the holidays still holds up.’

Donovan tapped her nails on the desk, her gaze skimming down a register of names before she passed it over to Sherlock. ‘Kirkpatrick’s not told us any more about his team, no matter how hard we try and convince him we can help.’

‘That’s probably because he knows there’s damn all we can do,’ Lestrade complained. ‘Kirkpatrick’s been taken off our hands. I tried arguing, but it didn’t get me anywhere.’

‘Since we couldn’t get anything from him, I re-examined the list of employees at the Avery Institute, trying to figure out potential suspects.’ Donovan brushed her hair out of her face as she continued. ‘We already checked everyone who worked there on a full-time basis and came back with nothing, but there are students on rotation and that kind of thing.’

‘Any luck?’ John asked, leaning forward where he stood, eager for a breakthrough.

‘I’m still trying to get information on who had placements there from the universities, but they’re not exactly in any hurry to help us with our enquiries.’ She sighed, pressing her fingers to her forehead before glancing at Sherlock. ‘I also tried to work the drugs angle. You said you thought the contaminated Ritalin was professional grade, probably stolen from a pharmacy?’

‘Most likely,’ he replied. ‘I take it you’ve not come up with anything conclusive?’

She shook her head. ‘Nothing’s been reported that fits the bill, and if someone’s stealing it from a hospital where they work, it’s either being covered up or they’ve not noticed anything’s missing.’

‘And we can’t do more detailed searches of any premises, not without firm targets. Even if it weren’t for procedure, we just can’t spare the manpower.’ One of the machines beeped, cutting off anything else Lestrade had to say, and he gestured to the shredded foliage around them as John handed over the latest data-set. ‘What about you? Taken up gardening yourself, have you?’

Sherlock hummed, reading the signature of Blue Cohosh root and adding it to the list. ‘The core ingredients of the contaminant is a cocktail of plants used by Omegas to create contraceptives and abortive concoctions, that much we already knew. I’m narrowing down which specimens are responsible.’ He held out the document to Lestrade.

‘This is it?’

‘Most of it.’ Sherlock looked at the list he’d derived over the past few hours, conducting a hasty
calculation in his head. Thanks to their imprecise processing, there wasn’t much of each solution to
spare for further experimentation. Mistakes at this stage would be unforgivable. ‘I need longer to
come up with something conclusive.’

‘And in the meantime?’ the DI asked. ‘You need all the help you can get. What do you want us to
do?’

‘Keep looking.’ Sherlock reached for some gloves, slipping them onto his hands as he set to work.
‘Take the case apart piece by piece and put it together again; see if you can find anything new.’

It sounded like a desperate hope, and he couldn’t be the only one to think so. Donavan pinched the
bridge of her nose as Lestrade glanced at the clock, either mourning the loss of an evening at home
or dreading the march of the hours.

It was John who surged into action first, grabbing a pen, setting out evidence and picking apart the
same old threads of the investigation. Within moments, the DI and his sergeant joined in, leaving
Sherlock to bend his mind to the task before him, his hands moving steadily as he measured out
precise percentages and observed the reactions as he progressed.

Time passed, filled with quiet conversation and the beep of machines, but a breakthrough was
elusive. There were no cries of relief or curses of surprise as the hands of the clock swept through
one hour after another. The answer remained blurred, no more than silhouette and suggestion despite
their best efforts.

‘Anything?’ John asked as he leant over his shoulder, taking a look at the latest printout. It showed
the extracts in combination, their proportions adjusted in an attempt to recreate the contaminant.
However, while there were similarities to indicate they were on the right track, key variances
demonstrated something was amiss.

Sherlock gestured to a transparency overlaid on top of the results. ‘This is what we found at Dartan
Grove. It’s not been combined with the Ritalin base, so this is purely whatever they were adding to
the drug.’ He sighed. ‘It’s close, but not quite right.’

John rested his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, his thumb brushing the bare column of his neck. It was
a minor touch, as comforting as it was thrilling, and Sherlock leaned into it without thinking.

‘The most likely culprit is whatever they’re using to remove the evidence of hormonal abnormalities
in the blood. It would have to be added at this stage, but what was it?’ He spread one hand in
question. ‘There are a number of substances that could, in theory, have the desired effect, but
identifying the chemical could take weeks.’ He grimaced, peeling off his gloves and pressing the heel
of his palm to his eye. ‘Even if I can derive the correct formulae, it will only prove what’s been done.
It won’t give us much idea who did it beyond what we’ve already deduced. It’s hardly a
breakthrough.’

Warm fingers skimmed along the back of Sherlock’s collar, ghosting across his skin and sending
ripples of sensation along his spine. His awareness of John had always been potent, even before all
this began. Now he could detect the whorls of his fingerprint and the warmth of his flesh, the faint
tremble of his touch and the underlying intensity to the feather-light caress: a reminder that they were
in this together.

He sighed, grimacing at his current state. Physically and emotionally, he was not at his best. The
extremes of his pyresus had exacted their toll. His mind remained sharp, which was a blessing, but
muscles hummed and cramped as pain took root in his joints, only made worse by a long car journey
and too much time spent sitting in the lab. The afternoon had vanished and the evening bled away
into night, and still they had nothing to show for their trouble.

Abruptly, Lestrade gave a grunt of confusion, the steady susurrus of turning pages coming to a halt. ‘Where did this come from?’ he asked, waving the sheet of paper that he had dragged from a small pile by his right hand. ‘I’ve not seen it before.’

‘Oh, sorry.’ Molly stepped forward, separating them out so they wouldn’t get muddled with the evidence. ‘They’re copies of the autopsy reports from a few of your other cases, you know, the ones you asked me for? One’s the woman found in the river, then there’s the hit-and-run, and finally the John Doe who’d gone a bit… runny.’

‘Christopher Tate,’ the DI read out loud, scrubbing at one eye. ‘Hidden in one of those big junction boxes near Kensington Gardens, where no one noticed him until he began to ooze and caused a short circuit. What did you use, dental records?’

‘Yes, there was nothing left of his fingerprints.’ Molly pointed to something on the page. ‘He’s been in a bit of trouble with the police before. Drug dealing, mostly.’

Sherlock looked up, watching Lestrade’s exhaustion fall away. His gaze darted back and forth, absorbing the lines of the text in front of him, but Sherlock didn’t need to know the details to make an educated guess. ‘Christopher Tate, also known as “Light Chris”?’

‘One and the same.’ Lestrade blew out a breath and straightened up, meeting Sherlock’s eye as his own expression glowed with hope. ‘That can’t be a coincidence can it? Amelia Donnelly’s dealer-slash-boyfriend showing up in the morgue?’

Sherlock reached out, teasing the report from the DI’s grasp. ‘It’s hard to say. Arguments between dealers and customers aren’t uncommon. How long has he been dead?’

‘Weeks, definitely.’ Molly chewed her lip. ‘The junction box protected him from the elements and scavengers, and the weather’s been cool, so the heat from the circuitry wouldn’t have been enough to speed things up.’ She shrugged. ‘I think he’d been there at least a month. Maybe more.’

‘So –’ Donovan looked at Lestrade before turning back to Sherlock. ‘Is he part of our case, or not?’

‘If Molly’s right, then he died within days of being released from police custody. That does rather increase the odds of his demise being connected with our investigation.’

John leaned in, reading over Sherlock’s shoulder as they both examined the photos of the remains. What was left of the tissue structure lacked the integrity to give a reliable account of his death, but the bones beneath told another, quite specific story. ‘Something struck the back of his head, right where the skull and neck meet.’ John pointed out the damage. ‘A blow like that would sever the cerebral artery. He’d be dead before he even hit the ground. If it weren’t for the fact someone hid the body, it almost looks like an accident.’

‘Perhaps it was. It doesn’t take much for a fight to get out of hand. One hard shove and it’s all over.’ Sherlock wet his lips, collecting his thoughts as ideas began to slot into place. ‘He said he got hold of the contaminated drugs by drop off, correct?’

‘Yeah.’ Lestrade scowled. ‘Seemed quite smug about that, actually.’

‘Probably because he was lying. He’d met with the creator of our contaminant at least once.’

‘Wait, how do we know that?’ Donovan asked, shaking her head as she scrambled through the notes. ‘There’s nothing like that in here.’
Sherlock rolled his eyes, flicking through the weeks in his mind palace with ease until he reached the point where he stood over Amelia Donnelly’s corpse. She lay, cool and still, on the mortuary slab, her body surrendering nothing but the few leaf fragments that had started them all on this convoluted journey.

“We found pieces of leaves and petals in Donnelly’s hair, close to her scalp. Ones that had been transferred to her from Light Chris when he cradled her head to kiss her. The question is, why was that debris beneath his fingernails in the first place?”

He sighed at the blank stares all around him. ‘If he was only exposed to the finished, contaminated product, there would be no reason nor opportunity for him to come into contact with crushed Aristolochia. Either they were transferred to him from the individual mixing them up, or he was there, at Dartan Grove, dipping his fingers into the ingredients.’

‘Maybe it was him, then?’ Donavon suggested. ‘Maybe he mixed it up and dealt it out?’

‘Except he probably doesn’t have any GCSE’s, let alone the aptitude at chemistry required to put it together,’ Sherlock pointed out.

‘Besides, he seemed genuinely upset about Donnelly’s death,’ John reminded them. ‘I don’t think he knew what the drug he gave her would do.’

‘He was probably told it was something new: cheap, satisfying and with a good profit margin. He wouldn’t have asked too many questions.’ Sherlock bit his lip, staring at the autopsy report that was all Light Chris had left of note in the living world. ‘Either way, he knew the man we’re after and would have been able to pick him out of a line-up. That kind of knowledge is dangerous… Then he was arrested.’

There was a moment of silence as everyone followed that path of thinking towards its likely conclusion. ‘You think our killer did away with him once we let him go?’ Lestrade asked, scratching at his eyebrow. ‘It’s not like the bastard gave us anything.’

‘He didn’t have to. The possibility of exposure would be there.’ Sherlock shrugged. ‘Blunt force trauma is an imprecise method of murder. A knife or gun are far more reliable. I suspect our perpetrator meant to rough him up a bit – find out what he’d told us – and something went wrong.’

‘The injury was caused by a uniform amount of pressure,’ Molly said, glancing at Donovan and Lestrade as she explained. ‘If someone hits you over the back of the head, they’re normally swinging a weapon, and the angle of it means you get a wound that demonstrates variable forces.’

‘So what do you think did him in?’ The DI looked at Molly with a hopeful smile.

‘If I had to guess, I’d say he was pushed hard, fell backwards, and something – a handrail, maybe, but more likely the edge of a kerb – caught him just at the wrong point.’ She shrugged as Sherlock took over.

‘Whoever did it now had an inconvenient corpse on their hands, which they hid in a junction box.’ He shook his head, knowing there would be nothing of note remaining on the body to help point them in the direction of their suspect. Any trace would be destroyed by decomposition, and Molly had already checked the more resilient areas for evidence. ‘Probably think they got away with it, too…’ He trailed off, his thoughts arcing like lightning, joining the dots of probability and expectation, building branching theories until they culminated in a single point.

‘We need to find Elsie.’
He got to his feet, already shrugging on his coat as he considered potential locations. His phone was a sleek weight in his palm as he sent out the message, reaching out for contacts within the homeless network who may be able to narrow down his search.


They both froze, Sherlock in surprise and Lestrade in apparent horror, as if he only just realised what he had done. Everyone, even those not of the elite, knew you didn’t touch a bound Omega. Over the years of their acquaintance, the significance of that knowledge had faded, worn smooth by the continuing absence of Alexander and Sherlock’s righteous independence. In its place there was something like friendship, which meant Lestrade often forgot that Sherlock’s gender had any role in their interactions.

Now though, things were different. Sherlock’s Alpha was right there, present and very much aware. More to the point, the bond was in its infancy, and it was at that stage that an Alpha was at their most territorial.

Yet John didn’t snarl a warning or step between them. He just shrugged on his jacket, apparently indifferent. Only a faint tension in his shoulders suggested otherwise. If John had been of the elite, it wouldn’t have crossed his mind that such possessive behaviour was in the wrong, but of course that wasn’t the case. John’s rationality stamped its mark across his features, passive and calm as Sherlock plucked his sleeve free and smothered a smirk at Lestrade’s pallor.

‘Light Chris was one of the few living links between our killer and his victims. He provided us with very little information. Elsie, on the other hand, gave us a lead that took us right to the perpetrator’s lab. She may not know his face, but she provided the evidence we need to close the net.’

‘You think she might be another target?’ Lestrade asked, clearing his throat and stepping back, his hands in his pockets and his gaze fixed to the floor: submissive and respectful. ‘Why not do away with her when she first got involved?’

‘The dealer was easy to find. He worked the same patch day in, day out. Elsie’s more transitory and harder to track, unless you’ve got the right connections. Whether she’s actually been targeted or not remains to be seen, but if she knows Light Chris is missing, then she’ll have taken action.’

‘And if she’s helping the people behind all this?’ Donovan asked.

‘Then locating her will go a long way to solving our case.’ Sherlock waved a dismissive hand. ‘The Yard needs to stay out of the search; we won’t find Elsie using official channels.’ He hesitated before acknowledging another possibility. ‘We may not find her at all.’

Lestrade pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘What about us? What do you need?’

‘I’m sure the scene where Light Chris was found will have undergone at least rudimentary processing. See if there’s anything damning among the evidence,’ Sherlock ordered. ‘Go back for another look. He probably didn’t die far from where he was concealed, and you might get some information on who pushed him.’ He read through the incoming text messages on his phone: all negative, but it helped narrow the search area. ‘I’ll call you if you’re needed.’

‘You’d better.’ The DI looked at John, probably knowing he’d take the urging more seriously. ‘And watch out for yourselves, all right? The middle of the night is not a good time to be trawling through London.’
Sherlock managed a grunt of agreement before striding to the door. He marched through Bart’s towards the exit, his muscles stiff from inactivity and his thoughts sparking like fireworks in his skull. After hours of being trapped within the hospital’s stale, clinical confines, the fresh air felt like ice. It blew away the cobwebs and shook off his exhaustion, and Sherlock dragged in a deep breath before turning to John.

‘Do you have your gun?’ he asked, lifting his arm to catch the eye of a passing cab driver.

John’s hand went to the back of his jeans: confirmation enough. ‘I got it out of my bag as soon as we got to Bart’s.’ A taxi eased to a halt in front of them, and he slid in, settling down as Sherlock slammed the door behind them. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Locating Elsie is difficult at the best of times. Usually, she comes to me, or I’m told where she’ll be. If she doesn’t want to be found, for whatever reason, then it won’t be easy.’

‘But you know where to start?’

‘Vauxhall Arches. It’s densely populated by the homeless, and we’re more likely to meet one of her contacts there.’ Sherlock drummed his fingers on his knee as he explained. ‘She has procedures in place for when she needs to hide. Whether she’s a perpetrator or another kind of victim, I’m convinced she’ll have put them into action, and the greeting we receive might go a long way to settling the debate over her innocence.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘If she’s trying to avoid us, the occupants will be hostile at best.’

‘Great.’ John sighed, slumping where he sat. He looked shattered and grim-faced. Sallow streetlights passed overhead, casting his expression into stark relief and deep shade. ‘What’s the alternative?’

‘If she’s in danger, she’ll do what she can to protect herself. Fleeing the city won’t be an option. Beyond London, she’s more vulnerable. There’s nowhere else in the country where it’s so easy to hide. She’ll leave a clue, a hint… some way for us to track her down.’ Sherlock sighed, trying not to dwell on the magnitude of the search ahead of them. If they were lucky, it would be simple. If not…

He closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the window as his mind continued its frantic turn.

Never before had there been a case where so much was at stake. Yes, there had been more than a few in which he or John or both ended up in danger, the risks elevating exponentially when the culprit realised they were caught, but this was nothing so clear cut as survival. In so many ways, it was a challenge to prove himself. It felt as if the Cunninghams had asked him not to merely earn his freedom, but to demonstrate he was capable of dealing with the consequences of his agency.

And it galled him that he had no viable choice but to do as they asked.

‘Hey.’

John’s hand on the back of his wrist – a request, not an intrusion – made him open his eyes. He met that blue gaze, almost navy in the gloom of the cab, and attempted a reassuring smile that felt stiff across his face. He braced himself for shallow questions about his welfare, but after all this time, he should have known better than to believe John would fall back on such platitudes.

‘We’ll figure it out. As soon as we catch whoever’s doing all this, we’ve got more than enough for Lestrade and the others to make a conviction: DNA, demonstrable evidence of what’s been going on, everything.’ John’s fingers wove between Sherlock’s, more skin contact than they’d had since leaving the house, and Sherlock relished the feel of him.
It was instinctual, the craving for physical contact. The biochemistry of the bond increased the desire to strengthen emotional ties, but understanding it on a scientific level did nothing to rob it of power. He longed to return to the flat, to reclaim the territory they shared and reinforce what grew between them. Instead, he was about to start trawling through London’s hidden places in a desperate, potentially futile search for the truth.

The taxi’s brakes squealed as the car drew to a halt, its headlights gleaming off of dappled puddles. Bank notes rustled as they changed hands, and the driver’s quiet thanks lingered in Sherlock’s ears as he stepped out of the vehicle and turned his collar up against the rain.

John stopped at his side, eyeing the nearby shadows with deep suspicion. It was not the first time they had ventured beneath the Arches, but those had been fleeting chases fuelled by the thrill of the hunt.

‘This way.’

Memory unfurled, leading him along familiar paths. Investment had encouraged the growth of trendy nightclubs, and now London’s modernity glowed in Technicolor while the destitute died in the gutters nearby. The beat from one of the clubs hammered at his ears, but he ignored it as he walked onwards, away from the presentable fringes and into the places where the renovation had yet to spread its reach.

Half-hearted efforts to board up the vacant spaces had met with little success. Thick gloom pressed down around them as the streetlights, in a state of disrepair here, stuttered and waned. John flicked on a torch, angling the beam towards the rubbish-strewn ground as he kept pace at Sherlock’s side.

‘Who are we looking for?’ he asked, clearing his throat. The awkward angle of his shoulders suggested that one hand rested on the butt of his gun, braced and ready. John’s eyes, so often filled with attentive concern, searched their surroundings, trying to make out distinctive shapes in the blank canvas of the night.

‘We’re not,’ Sherlock murmured, spotting a likely place and guiding John beneath the vaulted stonework. ‘If Elsie wants to be found, then someone will come to us.’

‘And if not?’

‘She has numerous boltholes – safe, hidden spaces.’ He reached out, pinching John’s cuff between his fingers and dragging his hand away from his gun. The torch beam swayed as he continued to pick his way deeper into the tunnel, but at least now John was listening to him rather than imagining the horrors in the twilight around them. ‘I’ve deduced one or two, and could make an educated guess as to the location of a couple more, but searching them individually would take too much time. This way’s more efficient.’

‘You hope.’

Despite the cynicism in his tone, John turned his hand, his fingers twining firmly with Sherlock’s and their palms pressed together. The urgency of his grasp conveyed everything that his words did not: that same hope that their answer lay here somewhere, and that they wouldn’t find another dead end.

The rank air was quiet, unremarkable beyond the faint sounds of the city, and the back of Sherlock’s neck prickled in warning. In weather like this, the homeless took shelter wherever they could find it. This section of the Vauxhall Arches were far from salubrious, but they offered a dry place to sleep. However, there was no one to be seen.
‘Listen.’

Sherlock obeyed John’s command, straining his ears to glean what he could. ‘What is it?’ he murmured, allowing John’s hand to slip from his own, heading back towards the Sig even as he dipped his own fingers into his pocket. Weaponry was more John’s area than his. Besides, being caught carrying a knife or similar only upped the ante in any confrontation. No, there were better, more mundane things that could render damage to an attacker, and he grasped his keys, slotting them between his fingers like barbaric little blades.

‘We’re being followed,’ John breathed. ‘The drips from the ceiling are steady because the brickwork’s so saturated. Every now and again they don’t hit the ground, but something else. A shoulder, the top of someone’s head, that kind of thing.’

Sherlock kept facing forward, still walking, still searching, but now focused more behind him than in front. John was not the world’s most observant man, but in some select areas, he excelled. He could not look at someone and chart their path through the city from the mud on their shoes, but when his instincts slipped back towards the arena of the military, he knew how to read the local environment for signs of a threat.

Silently, Sherlock nudged John with his elbow, keeping the wave of his hand hidden from any prying eyes behind them as he gestured to the other end of the tunnel. He separated his fingers into a clear vee shape: part ways and hide from the direct line of sight, one of them to either side of the yawning arch.

They moved slowly, Sherlock taking the torch from John so he had both hands free for the pistol in his grip. The moment they stepped out from under the huge curve of the brickwork, they sprang into action, splitting like a torn seam to press against the bridge.

Sherlock turned off the light as he held his breath, waiting for the balance of events to shift. If whoever was after them intended them harm, they would be adequately confident to launch a pursuit. If not, they would linger in the shadows, unwilling to step into the light for fear of attack.

Delicately, he sniffed, processing and ignoring the stench of the city before picking up on a hint of unwashed skin and nervous sweat.

Sherlock lunged.

The beam of the torch bathed their stalker in its halo: a garish light that dazzled the young man’s eyes, making him rear back in shock. His empty hands shot up to shield his face, and he swore in disgust. Dirt smudged his thin cheeks, and his bare feet were filthy. That explained why he could move so quietly. During the day he probably stole from tourists and such, picking their pockets without a sound. However, either the money went on drugs or he wasn’t very good at it. He didn’t look like he’d eaten for a week.

‘Who are you?’ Sherlock narrowed his eyes, meeting the boy’s belligerent glare. He was too young to have been here when Sherlock was sleeping rough: another of London’s unknown homeless. He also wasn’t part of Sherlock’s immediate network, yet the boy looked at him with recognition – annoyance mixed with a dose of grudging respect.

‘None of your business,’ he spat, flinching as John stepped out from his hiding place, his gun held firmly in his hands. He stood a short distance from Sherlock, watching both the youth in front of them and the open street to their backs: a sentry on duty.

‘Next time you have a plan like that,’ he grumbled, ‘you might want to share it with me.’
‘I did.’

‘No, you suggested we split off and hide. You didn’t say anything about pouncing on whoever was following us.’

Sherlock smirked, not taking his eyes off the boy. ‘He’s hardly a threat, and he’s on his own. Weight leaned back, body half-angled away – he’s ready to run because there’s no one here to help him and he’s out-numbered. Public school accent, Harrow, not Eton. He’s not been in the city long. A few months, if that. The way he speaks means the others exclude him. They think he’s playing at runaway. They might be right. Either way, he’s an outsider in a tight-knit community and will be for a while. When did Elsie take you under her wing?’

The boy straightened, raising his chin in shaky defiance as he looked Sherlock up and down. ‘Who says she did?’

‘She has a weakness for strays, and a use for them. Their isolation makes them loyal.’

John shifted, the weight of his gaze a brief flash of heat against Sherlock’s skin. Did he understand that Sherlock spoke from experience? Was he imagining him in a similar position, devoted to Elsie by default?

‘You’re not armed, therefore it was not your intention to attack, especially since you’re too malnourished to throw a punch, let alone do any damage. You’ve been told to keep your eyes open for us. Word of mouth moves fast, and your exile isn’t so extreme that you wouldn’t find out I was searching for Elsie.’ He watched the youth’s face, reading every flinch of emotion. ‘You don’t know where she is. You only have a message, something that means nothing to you, but you’re worried about her. Why?’

Grey eyes darkened with a scowl, and the boy thrust his hands in his pockets, his lips twisted as he shook his head. ‘You’re Sherlock Holmes,’ he said with a shrug. ‘You figure it out. She told me if you came looking to tell you “Martello”. Said you’d know what it meant.’

A memory of cold grass and colder stone snapped into focus, and Sherlock drew a breath. He had been expecting a coded clue, but not something so personally specific. She hadn’t left something for any potential rescuer to find. She’d left a message for him and him alone. Elsie was well-connected; there were people who would help her, though perhaps none who would do so without demanding something in return. Was this a sign she trusted him more than anyone else of her acquaintance, or was there something more ominous at hand?

‘One more thing,’ he called out, watching the boy pause in his retreat. He stood on the edge of the torch’s glow, already half lost in the gloom. ‘Where is everyone? Vauxhall Arches are normally crowded on a night like this.’

Pale eyes flashed with something; sadness, perhaps, though it was hard to be sure. ‘It’s been a bad winter.’

He was talking about more than the weather, but he offered no clarification as he vanished, departing as quietly as he’d come.

John let out a breath, but he didn’t return the Sig to its favoured spot at the base of his spine. ‘Did that mean anything to you?’

‘Yes, I know exactly where Elsie wants me to be, but whether it’s where she’s lying low remains to be seen.’
John’s worried frown cast shadows over his eyes, and he followed Sherlock without a word. He still watched their surroundings, scrutinising every angle and searching for threats. Even once they were beneath the streetlamps, he hid the gun with undisguised reluctance, casting more than one glance back in the direction of the bridge.

‘So, where now?’

‘Tottenham Park cemetery. It’s privately owned, and while some parts of it have been rejuvenated, there are still some places there to hide.’

John blinked in surprise as Sherlock hailed another taxi. ‘You got all that from “Martello”?’

‘It was the name on a gravestone there, near the old chapel.’ Sherlock didn’t elaborate as he climbed into the backseat and made way for John. He had no wish to reminisce over the time he’d been crashing from a high, twitchy, disoriented, and trying to escape some unknown, half-remembered pursuer.

The graveyard offered sanctuary of a sort, and he’d staggered through the gate, tripping over subsided earth and tufts of grass. Finally, he’d slumped against a mostly stable headstone, face pressed to frigid marble as he breathed his way through shuddering nausea and the rebellion of his body. Hideous.

He never had discovered why Elsie, a moderately new acquaintance at the time, had been out that side of the city, but he had hazy suspicions she sometimes made the place a base. She had found him, scolded him, called him all kinds of idiot and then stayed with him, tracing the engraved letters on the stone as she spoke to him, guiding him through it.

It wasn’t the first time she’d done something similar, nor was it the last, but it stuck in his mind because he hadn’t asked her to stay. She could have left him without a hint of guilt, and instead she lingered.

‘The location was one of my educated guesses,’ he explained, checking his phone and scanning through more messages, but there was nothing concrete upon which he could act. ‘The question is, why does she want me there? To help her? Or is there another reason?’

‘You think it could be a trap?’

‘You don’t?’

John scrubbed a hand over his face, letting out a gusty sigh. ‘You know what I think already. I’m just – you seem to be more open to the possibility that Elsie might not be on our side than you were a few days ago.’

‘I’m considering all the possibilities.’ Sherlock shrugged, offering no further defence. Truthfully, there were very few people in the world he could trust to have his best interests at heart, and despite her assistance in the past, Elsie did not make the cut.

London’s urban spread thinned beyond the window, only to grow dense once more as they traversed the vast maze of the capital. The cemetery was out of the north side, far from the river’s influence, and here the thrum of the city’s industrial and financial sectors gave way to a quieter, more suburban existence.

Sherlock didn’t tell the taxi to wait as he climbed out, paying the driver before shutting the door behind him. The rain had stopped, leaving a landscape of slick stone, and he surveyed the boundary gates before removing his picks from his pocket.
The padlock was dispatched in a matter of seconds, John standing at his back to shield him from the view of any passers-by. Not that there was anyone about. At this time of night, most people were in their beds, or stumbling from bus-stop to station to London’s bustling heart. There was no one about to witness them slip into the eerie confines of the graveyard.

‘Oh!’

John’s quiet breath of surprise was understandable. Here, in the main, well-used part of the place, one could be forgiven for thinking they’d left England’s dreary shores far behind. Even tombstones had their fashion, and there was a flavour of the Asiatic about the place. White marble shone, reflecting what little light there was, and the graves were neat and loved, their wording still clear.

‘Come on.’

It wasn’t hard to find the chapel: a small, pseudo-Gothic affair. The slumping ridge of the roof told its story of dereliction, and a metal fence had been rigged around it in a half-hearted effort to keep people out.

‘You think she’s here?’ John asked, narrowing his eyes at the dark, squat building. A few gaping holes – windows, before the glass had lost its fight against vandals – showed nothing but darkness within, but that didn’t mean the place was deserted.

Sherlock nodded, creeping along the perimeter. Undergrowth surrounded the chapel on two sides, dense and inaccessible. However, towards the back corner, almost out of sight, the gravel around the fence had been disturbed. ‘A barricade like this is temporary. The footings are placed on top of the ground, not in it.’ He reached out, wrapping his fingers around the edge of the cool, thin panel before pulling it aside. The chain tying the section together was a loose binding, allowing him to make a gap and slip through. ‘Simple.’

He turned, watching John eye him from the other side before following, wincing as the metal clanked and a pigeon took startled flight from its roost in a nearby tree. The steel rattled, hardly subtle, but Sherlock shrugged off John’s whispered apology. Stealth had not been forefront in his mind. Outside, it was challenging, and he knew once they were within the ruined, rubble-strewn interior, it would be almost impossible.

‘The door will be locked; there’s no point in disturbing it. Look.’ He pointed to one of the blind eyes of the windows. Unlike the others, still lined with jagged glass, someone had carefully knocked out any threatening edges, leaving a quick way in and out.

Sherlock stepped forward, pausing as John’s hand cupped his elbow, pulling him back with a shake of his head.

‘Let me clear the place first. If it is a trap, then it’s set for you. No point walking right into it.’ He pulled out the Sig, pressing his back to the wall and peering around the window’s rim. It could have looked ridiculous, but John’s movements at times like this were economic and lethal. He directed the gun without hesitation, moving fast as he checked both directions before swinging himself through the hole in the masonry.

The light was poor, but even from outside, Sherlock could see there was enough for John to survey his sparse surroundings. There was no furniture to hide behind, no altar, niche or nave. It was a bare room, strewn with debris and rubble, dust and bird droppings, while the worn stone radiated a sepulchre chill.

John shook his head, shrugging his shoulders as Sherlock swung through the window, his eyes fixed
to the floor even as John looked up, checking the rotting rafters for any signs of life.

‘Are you sure this is the right place?’

‘Positive. Look.’ He stepped aside, revealing the clean path beneath the window. It hadn’t been swept. Instead, someone had poured water, allowing the scatter of droplets to give the impression of rain. ‘This was done deliberately. Most people would think the elements had seeped in through the window and disturbed the dust, but this wall doesn’t face the prevailing winds, and the fence panels act as an impromptu shelter. It’s been carefully washed to hide any potential footprints.’

John shifted his fingers on the butt of the pistol, flexing his knuckles as he licked his lips. ‘The floor’s filthy everywhere else, but there’s no tracks to follow. It doesn’t look like anyone’s been in here.’

Sherlock’s gaze swept the ground, examining the artistry of its deception with an appreciative eye. Elsie may not be educated, but she was cunning. It was no wonder she had survived for so long. ‘Stepping stones,’ he pointed out, treading on a piece of brick in demonstration before taking a short stride to the next chunk of rubble. ‘Someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure they could get from one to the other, and they did it a while ago. This isn’t some spur-of-the-moment decision. Elsie prepared this place in advance.’

He picked his way over, wincing at every wobble. They were more appropriately sized for someone with feet much smaller than his, and more than once he almost turned an ankle before the trail ran out. It had taken him to the spot where an altar might be located. There were foundation stones standing proud of the floor: old, grey and smooth. The lack of dust on their surface was only noticeable if you were looking for it, and wouldn’t be seen at first glance from the window.

‘Anything?’ John asked, hopping down from the last crumbling brick of the stepping-stone path and landing at Sherlock’s side.

‘This church isn’t old enough to have suffered the difficulties of the reformation, but the Victorians loved to romanticise the past,’ Sherlock murmured, crouching to run one finger over the iron ring that nestled in a hollow in the floor. ‘Follies, fake temples, and even unnecessary priest-holes in their chapels.’ He slipped his hand through the hoop, muscles bracing to lift before he glanced in John’s direction.

‘Ready?’

One nod from John, and he pulled, almost falling over in surprise at the lack of weight. It had been made to look heavy: ancient granite. Instead it was some cheap composite, moving smoothly on hinges that creaked in the gloom. If whoever lay in wait for them hadn’t been aware of their arrival, they would undoubtedly have heard it, and Sherlock winced, expecting someone to leap out from beneath.

He wasn’t the only one braced for an attack. The muzzle of John’s gun never left the growing pit of darkness at their feet, but there was no target within the depths of the shadows, just a ladder, and on the top rung a faint gleam of fluid.

Sherlock didn’t need to dip his fingers in the liquid to know what it was, not when his nose told him loud and clear. Blood, a day old at most and made viscous in the chill. It was smeared on the metal, emanating a rusty, overwhelming tang. He couldn’t tell if there was anyone down there: one person, injured, or more than that. Anything could await him in the darkness – a corpse, a trap or a hostage situation.

There was no way to enter the room below without being seen, and besides, he and John had made
no real effort to hide their presence, not in the impossible landscape of rubble and debris. Stealth had never been a viable option, and Sherlock abandoned all pretence of it as he flicked on the torch and shone the beam downwards.

It flowed like white gold across a bare floor: a perfect circle with impenetrable night pressing in from all sides. Sherlock changed the angle as best he could, trying to pick out the confines of the chamber, but it stretched beyond the narrow opening in its roof, leaving hidden corners.

If he were more sure of the situation, he would call out, but too many facts eluded him. Normally, a bit of blood would not be adequate to block his sense of smell to other input – not like it would John – but the cool air reduced the molecular energy of most fragrances, and all he could detect was the metallic fumes and the cold, grave-dirt odour of the stonework. Maybe whoever was below them knew they had company, but he saw no reason to confirm his identity.

‘We need to stick together,’ he whispered, leaning in so he could mouth the words in John’s ear. ‘You need both hands for the gun, and you can’t see what you’re shooting at unless you can control the torch. In theory, you could hold both simultaneously, but it would reduce your accuracy and reaction time. Besides, you’ve got to get down the ladder.’

John grunted in acknowledgement, his expression tense with disapproval. He didn’t want Sherlock going into anywhere blind, that much was clear, but in this situation they had no choice. Elsie had selected her hiding place with care. It was a bastion of protection or a closing cage, depending on your perspective, and Sherlock held his breath as John swung his weight onto the ladder.

It was a moment of vulnerability quickly traversed. It would be so easy for someone to launch an attack while John’s back was turned, and the fact he made it to the bottom bolstered Sherlock’s confidence. Within seconds, he was at his side, shoulder-to-shoulder as he allowed the glow of the torch to spread through the room, peeling away the masks of gloom to reveal damp walls and a bare earth floor.

Tree roots crept beneath the brickwork, ghastly white, and there were one or two small, calciferous fragments stuck in the disintegrating mortar: bones from the old graves moving with the shifting soil. Yet there was no sign of life in the hollowed out hiding place. Bare corners, slumped and crumbling, were revealed by the beam of light, and Sherlock stared in disbelief.

John grabbed his arm, pointing back the way they’d come. The ladder shone weakly, and Sherlock noticed that it protruded into the room, mounted into an outcrop of the wall. At right angles to it was a doorway, the wood pulled closed and rotting in its frame: a small cupboard for whatever chapels felt it was necessary to hide.

As one, he and John inched towards it, and the dull, ferrous odour of blood increased, thickening in his nose until there was nothing else. Gone was the wet mud and old bones of the cemetery around them. It stank of butchery, and Sherlock flicked his gaze towards the ground, checking for a crimson pool at the door’s base.

Beside him, John had reached a similar conclusion. His shoulders softened, and a different form of wariness clouded his features. He didn’t look like a man prepared for a threat. Instead, he seemed to expect something gruesome and macabre. He breathed through his mouth in shallow, ragged snatches, the better to avoid the smell, and the barrel of the Sig lowered to point towards the floor.

In retrospect, that was a mistake.

A sound like cannon-fire echoed through the room as the door burst open, propelled back by someone’s weight to smash against the wall. There was a brief impression of movement and the
sharp, treble stench of fear, but there was no time to react.

The shadows leapt, pain sparked across Sherlock’s temple, and the world went black.
Blood roared in John’s ears, almost drowning out Sherlock’s thin cry of pain. Instinct and reflex ignited in his veins, sparking like gunpowder, and a red veil tinged the corner of his vision. His knuckle cramped over the trigger, and only the split-second indecision between neutralising their attacker and rushing to Sherlock’s side stayed his hand.

He lunged, the barrel of the Sig rock steady in his grasp. He wasn’t quick enough to grab Sherlock before he hit the floor: dead-weight on the cold, hard ground. All he could do was stand over him, bristling and furious as his heart raced fit to burst and every breath hissed between his lips.

‘Shit!’ The shadowy figure dropped to its knees, practically prostrating itself on the floor, hands spread and empty where he could see them. ‘Shit. I thought –’ The familiar voice wobbled, shattering around desperate, pleading words as John kept the gun’s aim lethal. His wrist ached from the tension of holding back the shot, teetering on the brink of no return, and the seconds ticked by as he wrestled with the urge to put Sherlock’s attacker down like a dog, regardless of whether they were a threat or not.

At last, the haze began to clear, the roiling tide of shock and ferocity receding as his basic nature succumbed to the litany of a rational mind. Adrenaline ebbed, replaced by a greasy, twisted kind of fear for the man at his feet, still and unresponsive. Flashes of aches ran down John’s arm, and he shifted his fingers, feeling the metal of the pistol slip in his sweat-damp palm.

‘You thought what?’

The torch had fallen to the floor when Sherlock went down, casting odd highlights and shadows: incomprehensible. Now he watched a grubby hand, white and spidery beneath the dirt, inch into the arc of its beam. Fingertips brushed against it before setting it on the base of its handle. Harsh light flooded upwards, spreading through the room to fill in the gaps, and John sucked in a breath.

Elsie Jacobs looked like hell. Dark circles dug in under her eyes, her lips were chapped and her cheeks hollow. Some dried blood scuffed across one cheekbone, and there was a bruise on her chin, no more than a day old.

‘I thought someone had come to get me,’ she croaked, tightening her jaw and glaring at him as if daring him to comment on her fear.

He said nothing, indifferent to her distress as he switched position, kneeling at Sherlock’s side and pressing the fingertips of his right hand to his pulse. He found the beat immediately, firm and steady, throbbing against his skin like a beacon.

Something loosened beneath his ribs, allowing him to take the first proper breath since Sherlock’s collapse, and he swallowed hard before turning to Elsie.

She was watching Sherlock, her lips twisted and trembling as she sat back on her heels. She was a far cry from the strong woman who’d dropped in and out of their lives over the past few weeks, but John struggled to rustle up any sympathy. Just because she looked pathetic didn’t mean she was defenceless, as she’d just demonstrated.

Abruptly, she turned away, and John twitched, lifting the Sig in his left hand and pointing it at her back. She rummaged in her foetid hiding place, scrabbling through God knew what. There was a metallic clunk accompanied by a bit of swearing, and John tried not to gag as a fresh wave of rancid
blood washed over him.

‘God, what have you –?’ He shook aside the question, deciding it could wait. Right now all he cared about was making sure Sherlock was all right. ‘What are you doing?’

Elsie withdrew, going rigid as she realised she was the focus of the Sig’s attentions once more. She stared at the gun as if mesmerised, a mouse charmed by a snake, before opening her fists to reveal what lay in her shaking palms: a few sealed medical supplies.

She held them out like a peace offering, cringing as she placed them on Sherlock’s chest. ‘They’re all I’ve got.’ Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. ‘I – I didn’t think I hit him that hard. There wasn’t much space to swing. It was meant to give me time to get away.’ She jerked her head towards her impromptu weapon: a tree branch from outside. It lay where she’d dropped it, the wood damp and splintered. It didn’t seem heavy, and John took a bit of comfort in the fact that it could have been worse. She could have bashed Sherlock’s head in with a brick. There were enough lying around.

He stared at the wipes and gauze where they shone against the dark wool of Sherlock’s Belstaff, then looked down at the pistol, still clenched in his grip as if his fingers were fused to the metal. His other hand bunched in Sherlock’s coat, clinging uselessly. ‘You’re on your own?’ he asked, watching her face as she nodded her head.

‘Yes. I – If you don’t want to let go of the gun I can –’ She shifted towards Sherlock as if to check him over, but John’s snarl stopped her before she moved more than an inch.

The deep noise rasped up his throat, guttural and raw. He couldn’t have muffled it if he tried, and his fingers clenched in Sherlock’s clothes, itching to drag him out of this vile, filthy den and back to Baker Street where it was safe. ‘Don’t touch him.’

Elsie’s lips tightened into a thin, white line as she raised her hands: blatant surrender. ‘Then you do it.’

John set the Sig down by his knee, angling the barrel towards the wall in case it fired by accident. If Elsie wanted it, she’d have to lunge across Sherlock’s prone form, and John would have time to block her attempt. She could still use something else as a weapon, but in that, at least, he’d have to trust her.

‘Move out of the way of the light,’ John ordered, using one antiseptic wipe to clean off his hands before he pressed his fingers to Sherlock’s pulse again, double-checking the steady rhythm. His breathing was normal, and a quick, careful examination of his temple showed that Elsie had barely broken the skin. There was a small graze and a bit of a lump, but nothing more obvious.

John swept a wipe over the wound, cleaning away the blood and wishing there was a way he could check what was going on beneath Sherlock’s skin. Just because a head injury seemed inconsequential, it didn’t mean it wasn’t serious. Internal swelling, ruptured blood vessels, skull fractures: any of those were possible. However, the closer he looked, the more John’s doubts grew – a few subtle signs cluing him into the fact that Sherlock wasn’t as out of it as he first appeared.

Those pale eyelids flickered almost imperceptibly, and his breathing sounded a touch too fast to be the product of an unconscious mind. Instead, John suspected the initial blow had stunned him, his slump to the floor genuine beneath the brief confusion of a whack to the head. The following stillness, however, looked more like he was shamming to John’s trained eye.

The curl of something against John’s knee – long fingers pinching a ridge of denim – confirmed his suspicions, and he held his tongue as he reached for his patience, fighting down the urge to openly
berate Sherlock for giving him such a fright. Whether he was trying to reassure John or seeking out something to anchor himself, he didn’t know. What mattered was that the motion was hidden from Elsie. To her, Sherlock seemed genuinely unconscious.

God knew why he was faking it, but John resigned himself to maintaining the charade. He blotted at the graze, sweeping away a couple of splinters. He’d have to check it over in better light, but for now he did his best, waiting for the moment when those silver eyes slid open, sharp with annoyance.

‘Was that really necessary?’ Sherlock growled, screwing up his face in an expression of pain which probably wasn’t faked. He moved slowly, as if he were testing the limits of his body, glaring in Elsie’s direction before struggling to prop himself up on one elbow. He blinked, wincing in discomfort before pressing a hand to his brow. ‘John could have shot you.’ He met John’s gaze from the corner of his eye: assessing. ‘He still might, judging by the look on his face.’

‘She hit you,’ John muttered, shrugging his shoulders to indicate that he thought that was a good enough reason.

‘He’s fine,’ Elsie snapped, her voice brittle as she wrapped her arms around herself, scowling at Sherlock. ‘You’re always so bloody dramatic.’

‘You’re the one hiding in a cemetery and leaving coded messages,’ he pointed out, easing himself into a sitting position. Even in the odd light from the torch, he looked too pale, a few shades whiter than usual, and John began second-guessing himself, wishing he could work out how much was an act and how much was a genuine response to the injury. Either way, he itched to get Sherlock out of here and examine him properly.

He opened his mouth to say something, to make it a bloody order if he had to, but one glance at Sherlock’s profile told him it would be useless. The case took priority, and right now nothing John could say would change that. All he could do was watch Sherlock’s face, checking time and again for ominous symptoms as Sherlock focussed on the matter at hand.

Reaching for the torch, Sherlock shone it in Elsie’s face. On the surface, it seemed like a cheap intimidation tactic, but John knew differently. One good look and Sherlock saw everything; he just needed some light.

‘Was there something you wanted to tell me, or are we to expect an ambush?’

Elsie’s scowl darkened, her lips parting with disbelief as her brow furrowed. She cocked her head, apparently giving Sherlock’s words some thought before she spoke. ‘You mean you thought this was a trap?’ All trace of her anxiety fled, replaced by the bright burn of righteous anger. However, it was not the dramatic rage of the falsely accused. ‘And you came anyway? Are you stupid or just desperate?’

Sherlock’s expression was a mask of neutrality across his aristocratic features, but John had never been good at hiding his emotions. One glance at him, and Elsie had the only answer she needed. Her face fell, taking on a curious slant as she looked John up and down.

‘Shit. What happened?’

‘You first.’ John lifted his chin, straightening his spine as he stared at her. Anger still simmered in his veins, fuelled by the memory of Sherlock’s slump to the floor. His thighs ached with the urge to pace, and his knuckles felt like granite as they curved into a fist. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to get to his feet, not when Sherlock’s left hand still lay curled around the hub of John’s knee – the only sign of his weakness.
'You brought us here for a reason,' Sherlock added. 'I suggest you start talking.' He wrinkled his nose. 'Though moving this upstairs would be a good idea. Whatever you’ve got in there smells revolting.'

Elsie glanced over her shoulder at her hiding place, and the swing of the torch beam illuminated its confines. There was a sparse nest of blankets, a lighter, a candle stub, and John could just make out what looked like an upset paint tin. A creeping pool of rancid, brown-black liquid seeped from its rim, and he winced in disgust. 'What is that?'

'Pig’s blood.' She blinked at them as if the answer were obvious. 'You get used to it after a while, but anyone who came looking for me wouldn’t be able to smell anything else.' She smirked at John. 'Especially if they were an Alpha. Mind you, after a few days it’s pretty overpowering to everyone.'

'Where did you get it?'

'It’s amazing what you can find if you know where to look.'

Elsie shifted, rising to her feet, and John’s hand shot back towards the gun. Cool metal brushed against his fingertips, kissing his skin, and he relished the sensation. Every inch of him felt on edge, expecting some new twist in events – hyper-alert and primed to face down an attack.

Perhaps Elsie saw the hint of movement, or maybe she just recognised the dangerous look on his face, because she folded her arms, staring at him with hollow eyes. Fear still stamped its presence all over her, making her shake in the ragged, dirty clothes she wore, but there was resignation there, too, as if violence was something she’d come to expect.

Slowly, John stood up, his jaw clenched and the gun held low at his side. He didn’t take aim, not yet, but that could change in a heartbeat if necessary. Part of him knew he was being illogical, his distrust taken to extreme, but he was too wound up to back down now.

They glared at one another, not saying a word, both waiting for the other to tip the balance. The air, already vile with the smell of rotten blood, felt thick enough to chew, and John wondered who would be the one to break the stalemate. Him, or her?

Sherlock muttered something uncharitable, his deep voice little more than a scathing rumble as he climbed to his feet. The rustle of wool harmonised with his cautious change in position, and the scrape of his shoe struck through the air, loud as he struggled to keep his balance.

John and Elsie moved in the same instant, forgetting one another as they both reached out to steady the man between them. Elsie’s dark eyes, so often hard and calculating, were shadowed with hints of guilt. Whatever other motives she had, it was clear that she respected Sherlock, and any lingering distrust was born from years of hard-living and playing it safe.

As much as John hated to admit it, he could see her attack on Sherlock for what it was: the actions of a frightened woman in the face of a potential threat, rather than something premeditated.

Quickly, he reached out, easing the torch free from Sherlock’s hand before shining it in his eyes. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked, checking Sherlock’s pupils. ‘Any dizziness? Nausea, anything like that?’

Sherlock raised one eyebrow. ‘I’m fine.’

John met Elsie’s gaze, united in disbelief, and the silence stretched between them as he considered their options.
‘Let’s get you upstairs, at least,’ he suggested at last, still unsure how hurt Sherlock truly was. ‘That way if we need to call an ambulance, they won’t have to look for us too hard.’

‘You go up first.’ Elsie ordered, jerking her head towards the grey-blue hole of night in the ceiling. ‘Just because I didn’t bring anyone here with me doesn’t mean you two weren’t followed.’ She rolled her eyes when John hesitated, his suspicion still forefront in his mind. ‘If I try anything, you won’t have any problem turning around and putting a bullet between my eyes,’ she said. ‘Besides, I don’t think Sherlock’s so concussed he can’t take care of himself.’

‘She’s right.’ Sherlock sighed, pulling his elbow free of Elsie’s grasp to stand on his own two feet, steadier now. ‘Down here, the only potential threat is her. Up there is another matter. It won’t take you long to make sure the coast is clear.’

John hesitated, trying to find any hint of Sherlock’s plans in his expression. However, if he had some kind of strategy, he couldn’t work it out. In the end, he had no choice but to nod his obedience and step away, heading for the ladder with the Sig in his hand and hoping that he wasn’t playing right into the enemy’s hands.

Much like coming down, he chose speed over stealth, the rungs chiming beneath his boots as he rushed upwards, pausing under the opening. The most dangerous moment was when he was half through the trapdoor, his head over the parapet: an easy target for a sniper or anyone waiting in the shadows to attack. However, if he opted for caution, they could end up pinned, his range restricted and their options cut down to almost nothing.

No, better to risk it.

John lunged over the top, rolling to the side with practiced ease. He ignored the jutting angles of the debris on the floor as he rose to one knee, his back to the north corner and his eyes scanning every inch of the chapel’s interior.

It was much as they’d left it, dust-smeared and silent. The only new addition was a barn owl up on the rafters, its beak scraping over bone as it devoured whatever it had clutched in its talons.

‘All clear.’

He stepped back, waiting as there was a brief debate down below: Sherlock telling Elsie to go first so that he could keep an eye on her, and Elsie insisting he be the one to climb. From the looks of it, Elsie won, because it was Sherlock who emerged first, climbing free from the trap door with more grace than John had managed and turning in an instant, offering his hand to Elsie to help her out.

Normally, John would bet anything the offer would make her sneer, but up here, where the darkness was less absolute, her frailty became more obvious. Her wrist bones were slender protrusions, and now he looked closer her could see that the scrape on her face wasn’t healing well. There was also a cut on her arm, small but deep, and he noticed the inflamed indications of an infection taking hold.

‘You need to get that seen to,’ he said, reaching down and helping Sherlock haul her out. ‘It should have been stitched, but you at least need antibiotics.’

Elsie looked at it, her eyes flat before she pulled the cuff of her hoodie down to hide the wound and sank onto a piece of rubble. Her combat boots were splattered with dry mud, and so were her jeans. Her hair trailed in lank wisps from beneath the beanie pulled down over her head, and her face was papery. She perched there like a woman awaiting judgement, her fingers curled around the edge of the stone and her tattered, bloodied fingernails stark against the grey rock.
‘Talk,’ Sherlock urged, leaning back against the wall nearby, half-turned so he could peer through one of the glassless windows. ‘You brought us here. What, exactly, did you have to tell us?’

John stood at ease, his feet hip-width apart as he formed the third corner of the triangle. It allowed some of the excess tension to drain from his body, and what remained he could use to his best advantage, constantly on the lookout for further danger.

Not that he was alone in his vigilance. Elsie’s gaze swept around the chapel interior, only pausing when she looked at him or Sherlock. It was too steady a search to seem shifty; she was as alert for danger as he was. Even Sherlock, normally eager to involve himself in the new details of any investigation, divided his attention between Elsie and the world beyond the walls.

‘The dying got worse.’ She licked her lips, picking at her cuff as she began to explain. ‘You probably wouldn’t notice unless you were right there, watching it happen. The homeless are desperate, they’ll take anything if they think it’ll make things better for a while. It makes them easy targets.’ She shrugged. ‘It used to be we’d get two or three people who keeled over in a month, Alphas, the lot of them, but these past few weeks, there’s been more and more. People blamed it on the weather.’

Her mirthless laugh grated through the air, bouncing off the walls as she shook her head. ‘It wasn’t. I watched people popping pills, and five hours later, they were dead. Not from the cold, or starvation. They just… stopped.’ She drew in a shivering breath, lifting her head to glance at John before looking in Sherlock’s direction. ‘I thought it would be over. That you or your police friends would put a stop to it, but…’

‘But I was indisposed, and there’s only so much the Yard can do, especially when the supply of confirmed victims dries up.’ Sherlock rubbed his hands together, his gaze distant with thought. ‘As I suspected, whoever is doing this started to play it safe. We began to find more evidence, and they focused their experimentation on the vagrant population. Their deaths are much easier to hide.’

Elsie bit her lip as she bowed her head, propping her elbows on her knees and cupping her chin in her palm: the picture of defeat. ‘I didn’t know when you’d get better, or even if you’d still be in London. You had your own shit to deal with so I – I started looking – trying to see what I could find.’

‘Why didn’t you go to the police?’ John asked, cocking his head as she spread her hands in demonstration of her destitute appearance.

‘Why would they listen? Besides, even if they did, they couldn’t do anything with what I told them.’ She jerked her thumb in Sherlock’s direction. ‘Without him, they’ve no clue what’s going on. They don’t understand the drug or the stuff that’s going into it. He does!’ She scrubbed at her face, wincing as she disturbed the scab on her cheek. ‘Better than anyone else in fact, including me.’

Sherlock shifted, bracing one hand against the stone as he pushed himself away from the wall. His shoulders were firm and his back straight, every inch the Consulting Detective in charge of himself and the situation. ‘So what happened? Something must have changed, or you wouldn’t be in hiding.’

She nodded, her boots scuffing on the floor as she drew vague shapes in the dust with her toe. ‘I didn’t know much except what I’d already told you. There was Dartan Grove, but the police had cleared the place. That left Light Chris. Normally he’s not too hard to find, but –’

‘But someone else got to him long before you did.’

‘Yeah, poor bastard.’ She stood up, and John watched her pace, her body looping in a tight line as
she continued. ‘There’s always someone watching in this town. Not cameras. Sometimes it’s just people who see something dodgy.’

She wrinkled her nose, drawing a deep breath. ‘I asked around, and it didn’t take long to find an old guy who’d seen Chris go down. Said it happened weeks ago, not long after you two were asking for him.’ She twitched: a quick, abortive shake of her head. ‘The homeless bloke who saw it didn’t stick around. Witnessing that kind of thing can get you killed. In his case, it did. The day after I spoke to him, he turned up in a bin in one of the alleys. Just thrown out, like he was nothing.’

She looked up, her face locked in bitter misery and anger. She didn’t look haunted, but resigned, as if she had never expected anything better. ‘No one even bothered calling it murder. They said it was a heart attack.’

‘The problem with asking around for information is that you never know who else might be listening,’ Sherlock murmured, letting out a faint sigh as he pushed for more details. ‘The chances are whoever did away with Chris, as well as the witness, is the same person who is contaminating the drug supply. Did you get anything else, anything that could help us identify him?’

Elsie gave a hopeless sigh. ‘Male, white, average height, average face…’ She trailed off, rubbing her hands over her eyes. ‘Unremarkable.’

Disappointment oozed through John’s chest, and he glanced over at Sherlock, sensing his tired frustration. It was like banging their heads against a brick wall, fruitless, and hours were slipping through their fingers while they chased around after leads that vanished like smoke.

‘Why did you go into hiding?’ Sherlock watched her as if he thought she could give him the key to the case if he only asked the right question. ‘None of what happened threatened you directly, so what made you come here?’

Elsie looked up. ‘I was warned someone was looking for me. They paid for information with drugs, too. Stims.’ She shrugged. ‘I’m not stupid. I could see where it was going, and I didn’t want to be found dead in a gutter somewhere.’

Sherlock stepped towards her, stopping her pacing as he reached out, hovering over the bruise on her face. ‘And this?’

Elsie’s fingers skirted the edge of the blemish. ‘I went out to try and scrounge some food and water. Someone chased me. I don’t – I don’t know if it was to do with this or just someone being a prick, but I ran. Tripped over one of the gravestones, cut my hand on the top of the ladder…’

‘And your arm?’ John asked, gesturing to the older wound that was hidden under her sleeve. ‘That’s well on its way to becoming infected.’

‘The window.’ Elsie indicated the smooth stonework through which they’d entered the place. ‘I didn’t want to smash out the glass – thought it would give too much away.’ She pulled at her cuff. ‘I changed my mind pretty quick, though. It took me ages to clean up the blood. I didn’t realise it had gone bad.’

John glanced at Sherlock, drinking in his still, thoughtful expression. There were times he would give anything to know what flashed through that mind of his, and right now, he could see it was hard at work, exploring possibilities. More than once, his lips parted, and when he spoke, his voice was calm with quiet logic.

‘You can’t stay here. John’s right, that injury needs treatment, and if whoever chased you is our
suspect, then they’re already too close for comfort, wouldn’t you say?’

Elsie chewed her lip, glancing back towards the open trapdoor as if she were weighing her options. It was not a quick decision. She dithered for long moments, wringing her hands before slowly nodding her head. ‘What’s your plan?’

‘We’ll take you back into central London, sort you out and get you somewhere safe. Any of your old bolt-holes might have been compromised, depending on who our suspect has been talking to and how free they’ve been with their information.’ He hesitated, raising his eyebrow. ‘Unless there’s somewhere you’re confident you won’t be found?’

‘If there was, why would I tell you? How do I know I can trust you?’ It wasn’t much of a challenge; she sounded beaten down, at the end of her rope and miserable with it, and her shoulders slumped as Sherlock answered.

‘You don’t, but you’re the one who brought me here. No one else would have understood the relevance of “Martello.” It might not be saying much, but you’ve got more faith in me than anyone else.’

Something passed between them: a heavy, significant look that John didn’t understand. He could only guess the depths of their silent communication, and he stamped down on a bright spark of irrational jealousy. Whatever lingered between them in the past was none of his business. What mattered was the present, and he stepped forward, drawing their focus.

‘She’s not the only one who needs medical attention,’ he pointed out, folding his arms as Sherlock sighed and flapped a dismissive hand. ‘She knocked you out.’

It was the perfect opportunity for Sherlock to confess, and John watched him flick a quick, guilty glance in Elsie’s direction.

‘No she didn’t.’ He ignored Elsie’s squeak of aggravated protest as he explained. ‘Although my vision was interrupted both from the blow and when I fell to the floor. If I passed out at all, it was only for a moment.’

‘You wanker!’ Elsie hissed, smacking his arm with the back of her hand. ‘You absolute wanker. I thought I’d bashed your bloody brain in!’

Sherlock took a judicious step back from her, his hand absently going to prod at the bruise. ‘Guilt makes people talkative. Besides, I decided exaggerating the injury might put you at ease. John was threatening enough for both of us’ He turned back to John, his words cool and logical. ‘If you take me to hospital, they’ll conduct the same rudimentary examination you’ve already provided and leave it at that. They wouldn’t even bother with an x-ray.’

John sighed, rubbing a hand over his face as Elsie looked mutinous. He wanted to believe that Sherlock had played dead to throw Elsie off balance and make her more willing to talk, but he’d seen him hide the severity of wounds when it suited him. That knowledge made John cautious, and he folded his arms, trying not to grind his teeth as he grudgingly agreed. ‘Fine, but if anything changes –’

‘Then I’ll permit you to drag me to A and E,’ Sherlock promised, and although his lips didn’t twitch in a smile, there was a certain softness in his eyes: something that suggested he appreciated John’s concern, rather than finding it smothering. ‘First things first, we need to get back. There’s no guarantee we’ll come across a taxi out here, not when it’s closing time at the clubs in the middle of the city. We’ll have to stick to public transport.’
John hid a smile at Sherlock’s repulsed tone, knowing how much he hated travelling with the masses of humanity. Still, he had a point, and he turned to Elsie, indicating the trap door. ‘Anything you need down there?’

She shook her head, scrubbing her hands over her eyes before she shuffled towards the window, not bothering about the dust she stirred up in her wake. ‘There’s no point. It’s not like it matters if someone figures out I’ve been here. I won’t be coming back.’

She craned her neck, trying to see beyond the stonework as Sherlock spoke. ‘As far as I can tell, the place is deserted, but the fence panels limit my view. Let John go first. Once we’re in the open, he’ll have to put the gun away, but if anyone’s watching us and they see it, its presence may be an adequate deterrent.’

With a nod, John did as he was told, making his own, quick survey of the chapel’s perimeter before he slipped through the window, landing on the gravel and easing through the gap in the barriers. The cemetery sprawled before him, unearthly and silent. No shapes moved beneath the gleaming headstones, and though the undergrowth rustled with the passage of the wind, the briar was too thick to offer a good hiding place.

Reaching back, he flicked two fingers in a beckoning motion, watching Elsie emerge before Sherlock followed in her wake. Any clumsiness from the blow Sherlock had suffered was gone. Instead it was Elsie who stumbled and tripped along at his side, her body shaking from the strain.

‘When did you last eat?’ he asked, wishing he had some crisps or something to give her. ‘Did you manage to get anything yesterday?’

Elsie shook her head. ‘I drank some water from a puddle on one of the gravestones, you know, the big flat ones.’

‘A dais,’ Sherlock provided, jerking his head towards John and indicating he should hide the Sig from sight as they approached the boundary.

‘Whatever. It was fresh rainfall. Less chance a dog had pissed in it.’

‘We’ll get you something on the way back,’ John promised. ‘Before you keel over.’

Sherlock eased open the gates, allowing John and Elsie to pass. A fine drizzle had begun to fall, filling the amber streaks of streetlight with diamonds as he headed towards the nearest bus stop. ‘You’re normally better at taking care of yourself than this.’

‘ Normally, I don’t have someone trying to hunt me down,’ she retorted. ‘I had some supplies stashed in the chapel, but something determined had gnawed on the tins. It had all gone bad. The last thing I ate was some scraps of ham from the butcher. Same place I got the pig’s blood.’

‘They didn’t ask why you wanted it?’ John asked.

‘Who says they gave it to me?’ Elsie replied, offering a weak, tired smile. ‘It was in the bin, same as the ham. I didn’t dare beg, in case someone recognised me, shoplifting draws attention if you’re caught, and I’m out of practice at picking pockets.’

‘Going soft,’ Sherlock murmured, and John saw him smother a smile as Elsie pulled a face.

The Perspex arch of the bus shelter gleamed, lit with fluorescent lamps. One had been smashed, but the other was still working, and they huddled beneath it as they waited, the three of them close enough that their shoulders brushed. The bitter air pressed down around them, and John fought the
urge to shiver as Elsie sniffed, then sniffed again, more pointed than before.

Next to him. John felt Sherlock tense, and it took him a minute to realise that a runny nose wasn’t responsible for her actions. Between the dodgy blood, the cold stones and then the strong wind blowing through the cemetery, it seemed Elsie hadn’t picked up on the fundamental change in Sherlock’s scent. Now, she leaned forward, casting a sharp look in Sherlock’s direction before staring at John: a calculating expression on her face that reminded him of Mycroft.

‘Well, that explains a lot,’ she said at last, settling back against the bus shelter. ‘Now I’m even more surprised you didn’t shoot me when I whacked him over the head.’

‘It was a close run thing,’ John admitted, feeling the pistol dig into the base of his spine and remembering the hot, bitter flash of his rage.

Elsie hummed, apparently unconcerned by the fact that she’d nearly had a bullet put in her. Instead, she looked thoughtful, her mind hard at work despite the weakness of her body, and when she spoke again, it was to Sherlock. ‘How are you pulling this off? You told me your Alpha had family.’

‘That was a long time ago.’ Sherlock’s hands dug into his pockets as he wrapped the wool of the Belstaff around himself. ‘How do you know they’re still around?’

Elsie’s expression twisted in sarcastic amusement. ‘I don’t, but I can make an educated guess. You’ve been bound, what, three days at most, judging by the smell of you? Even if you hated each other, which it’s obvious you don’t, you wouldn’t be out in public for another week at least, not unless you had no other choice.’

She must have caught sight of John’s wistful expression, because she wiggled her eyebrows and managed a wonky grin. ‘Strengthening a bond takes priority; it’s instinct. You should be seeing to that. Instead, you’re out in the arse end of London looking for me. I’m flattered.’ She screwed up her face, narrowing her eyes. ‘And I’m not stupid. Something’s going on. How did you even know to come looking?’

Sherlock huffed as if she’d insulted his intelligence. ‘Basic logic. Once we knew about the dealer, it was common sense to think of the risk to our other informants.’

‘Sounds a bit desperate if you ask me,’ Elsie murmured, straightening up as the bus approached, light glowing from its windows. It stopped with a pneumatic hiss, and John found himself left to pay as Sherlock and Elsie both headed for the back, the better to keep an eye on any other passengers. By the time John took a seat one row in front, half-turned so he could watch them both, Elsie was speaking again.

‘The case has waited weeks. No one would have thought twice about you giving it a few more days, or blamed you if you’d dropped it all together. It’s not like you had any more “official” victims to worry about, is it?’ She sneered as she drew her knees up to her chest, indifferent to getting mud on the cheap, synthetic upholstery. ‘Unless someone else has turned up?’

John watched as Sherlock cut a hard look in her direction, reading her like a book before shaking his head. ‘Not that we know of. I came looking for you in the hopes of finding new leads.’ He pulled his phone out of his pocket, his thumbs moving quickly as he sent a text message. ‘Solving the case has become a matter of urgency. You’ve not given us much, but perhaps we can start putting pressure on the morgues about the homeless victims. How many people are we looking for?’

She shrugged, turning to look out of the window. ‘Ten, maybe? And that was a while ago. God knows how many more have taken the drug since then. I tried to warn them, but…’ She shook her
head. ‘People don’t listen.’

Silence fell, Elsie’s expression drawn and weary as she huddled in her corner of the seat. Sherlock stayed glued to his phone, checking God knew what, and John divided his attention between them and the other occupants of the bus.

There weren’t many going into London at this time of night. They’d missed the club rush, and those that did get on kept quiet, tucked up in their private little worlds as the stop-start journey carried them towards the middle of the capital.

‘We’ll get the underground back towards Baker Street,’ Sherlock murmured. ‘I need a couple of things from the flat, and I don’t have enough cash for taxi fare.’

John frowned before doing his best to blank his expression, looking out of the window in the hopes Elsie wouldn’t notice his confusion. Sherlock rarely ran out of change, and even if he did, he was more likely to walk back to Baker Street than submit to the noise and bustle of the tube.

There was some kind of plan in the works, and John realised he could only play along. With Elsie right there, Sherlock couldn’t fill him in on the details. She already seemed suspicious, her lips pressed into a grim line, and if he and Sherlock had any kind of conversation behind her back, she’d do a runner.

‘Where’s this safe place, then?’ she asked, stumbling to her feet as the bus drew to a halt and the last of the passengers disembarked: end of the line. ‘Near your flat, is it?’

‘Near enough. Baker Street is secure, but it’s better to have you somewhere else.’ He crossed the road, his coat flaring behind him as he hurried down the steps and into the underground station. ‘Staying with us would remove any doubt as to what side you’re on in this investigation, and maintaining your plausible deniability could be the only thing that saves your life.’

Elsie fell silent at Sherlock’s gentle warning: not a threat, but a statement of fact. She’d already involved herself in the case, her compassion for the homeless who were dying by the dozen overcoming her usual compulsion to linger on the edge. John wondered if she regretted that. Did she wish she’d never stuck her nose in? Did she wish she could go back and stay out of it all?

Too late now, he supposed.

The station was busy, the laughing, drunken revelry of the clubbers swelling like a chorus as the barriers beeped and clanked. A few quid got them valid tickets – cheaper than a taxi fare – and John stopped at a vending machine, grabbing Elsie some crisps and shoving them into her hand before dropping some coppers into the hat of the homeless man camped out nearby.

‘Eat those,’ he ordered, watching her rip open the packet and shove three in her mouth at once. ‘Not too fast, or you’ll be sick. It should take the edge off until we get wherever we’re going.’ His stomach rumbled in sympathy, and he rubbed his hand against his jumper, trying to remember when he’d last had a meal.

That morning seemed like a lifetime ago – another world compared to their current existence. He longed for a decent takeaway and a warm bed. Instead he was chasing around after Sherlock, and there was no end in sight. Perhaps if they’d been in peak condition when they started, they’d manage to go for the next five days on crap snacks and catnaps, but John knew that wasn’t possible. Even Sherlock was exhausted, existing on the thrill of his own intelligence.

Maybe it would be enough to keep him going, and maybe not. All they could do was wait and see.
The tube train clanked and sparked its way along the rails, filled with people sweat-slicked from the dance floor and reeking of booze. Elsie watched them all, the empty crisp packet crumpled in her fist. Even at this time of night, there was obscurity to be found in the crowd, and John found himself looking at each face, wondering if they were as innocent as they seemed.

Only Sherlock appeared relaxed, leaning against the plastic wall next to the door and staring out into the skimming darkness, watching the utility pipes writhing up and down the walls as they sped onwards. The bruise at his temple had bloomed into a smudge of pale blue, and the edge of the graze peeked out from his hairline, pink and sore. However, despite the injury, he seemed alert, his eyes bright and his expression sharp.

‘We should get off at Regent’s Park,’ he murmured, nodding down the length of the train when John looked askance. ‘It’s a short walk to Baker Street, and one of our fellow passengers will vomit between here and the next stop. The fresh air will be eminently preferable.’

‘How can you tell?’ Elsie demanded, but even as she spoke the young man Sherlock had indicated staggered, his face taking on the sweaty sheen of someone who’d had too much on a night out.

‘Come on then,’ John urged, heading for the door as the train screeched to a halt. He disembarked in a single stride, careful not to lose either Sherlock or Elsie in the rush. The tiled walls of the station gleamed in the fluorescent lights, the air filled with the stale fragrance of the underground and the stench of too many people packed together. Stepping out into the fresh air was a relief, and he sucked in a deep breath through his nose, taking in the city’s miasmic perfume.

‘So your place, then?’ Elsie looked around her as she scraped the toe of her boot along the ground, her gaze skimming the pedestrians staggering home for the night or hunting down a takeaway to fuel them until dawn. London never slept, and there were plenty of people flowing back and forth around them as they began to walk. ‘We’re not being followed, are we?’

‘Not that I’ve seen,’ Sherlock promised, and John realised that he was watching the reflections in shop windows, checking behind them for anyone suspicious before glancing at his phone. ‘Besides, even if they were, they’re unlikely to jump us in a crowded street with good CCTV coverage.’

Sherlock’s pace was slightly faster than that of those around them, and John picked up on the subtle sense of urgency. Just because they weren’t being followed didn’t mean they were safe, and he ignored the occasional look passers-by threw in their direction as they marched towards home.

At last, as they approached the junction of Baker Street, Sherlock slowed down, his stride becoming more of an amble as he cleared his throat. ‘I’m afraid it’s not anyone following us you need to be worried about.’ His smile was thin and indifferent as he jerked his head towards a car parked at the kerb. ‘It’s who’s waiting for you up ahead.’

The doors popped open, and John frowned as Sally and Greg stepped out, calm and professional. A pair of handcuffs gleamed in the sergeant’s hands, and her brow was creased with determination. Even Greg looked uncommonly serious, raising his voice to be heard as he stopped a short distance away.

‘Miss Jacobs? You need to come with us.’

‘What?’ Elsie leant away as she glared at them both, no doubt recognising them from when she’d met them at the Volunteer. ‘Why?’

‘We just need to ask you some questions about the investigation.’ Donovan held out a pacifying hand. ‘We want to clarify a few things, that’s all. It’s best if you come quietly.’
Before John could blink, Elsie bolted, lunging away in a desperate bid for escape. Unfortunately for her, Sherlock was faster. He grabbed her wrist, yanking her off balance and wrapping the other arm around her waist, paying no mind to her efforts to kick him in the shins as she spat abuse.

‘You fucking shit, Sherlock Holmes! Let me go!’

‘I don’t think so.’ Sherlock shifted his grip, letting Lestrade take over. The snick of the handcuffs seemed loud in the busy street, and John realised they were drawing a crowd: nameless strangers watching Elsie’s helpless struggles.

‘But I haven’t done anything!’ she cried, looking like she’d happily gouge Sherlock’s eyes out with her fingernails if given half the chance: brutally betrayed, as much by Sherlock’s indifference as his actions.

‘Then you’ve got nothing to worry about.’ He jerked his head towards the unmarked police car, standing back to watch as Greg and Sally dragged Elsie towards it, putting her into the back seat with forceful care and slamming the door on her panting, spitting fury.

All around, people craned their necks, trying to get a closer look. Maybe if Elsie hadn’t made a scene, they wouldn’t have noticed, but she’d got the attention of everyone in earshot. John sighed as the DI shouted at the bystanders to move along, flashing his badge before he stopped in front of Sherlock.

‘You’ve got to stop doing this. We’re not an arrest-on-request service.’ He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose before looking back towards the vehicle, its tinted windows hiding Elsie and Sally from view. ‘Is there anything I need to know?’

‘She needs a good shower, a hot meal and some antibiotics,’ Sherlock replied. ‘Question her about every angle we have pertaining to the case. Oh, and check her for weaponry. She’s unlikely to hurt anyone unless threatened, but she’s had a rough week.’

‘She hasn’t done much harm to either of you,’ Greg pointed out, his assessing gaze flicking to John. ‘Or is that just because she was outgunned?’

Sherlock tilted his head in acknowledgement. ‘It may have been a contributing factor.’

John shifted at the admission, the weight of the Sig dragging at his waistband. He’d thought the weapon might deter anyone following them, but he hadn’t considered its impact on Elsie’s behaviour. For all his distrust, it had been hard not to take Elsie’s misery at face-value. Had Sherlock seen something he’d missed?

Greg sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. ‘Look, it’s going to take us a while to process her, and frankly, I need a few hours’ sleep before I’m with it enough for any kind of interrogation.’ He cocked his head, taking them both in and offering a faint smile. ‘ Somehow, I don’t think I’m the only one. It’ll be at least six hours before we’ve got anything of use for you. Why don’t you head back to Baker Street? Get your heads down while you can?’

Sherlock made a tight noise of irritation at the idea, the arch of his eyebrows collapsing into a scowl. ‘We don’t have the luxury of free time.’

‘And what are you going to do instead? Go back the lab, where you don’t have enough samples left for any more experiments? Wander around London and hope you come across whoever’s behind all this by chance?’ Greg shrugged, shaking his head as Sherlock folded his arms, looking petulant. ‘Face it. Any answers we’re going to get are with Elsie, and you can’t talk to her yet.’
Sherlock sniffed, his expression one of imperious disdain as the silence dragged on. Around them, the crowd started to dissolve, losing interest now that the drama was over, and John hovered at Sherlock’s side, waiting for him to make a choice.

At last, he ducked his head, acknowledging Greg’s logic with bad grace. ‘We’ll be at the Yard by eight in the morning.’

‘Nine,’ Greg replied. ‘Any earlier and I won’t let you in. It’s nearly two now. If you hurry, you can grab a Chinese from that place on the corner before they shut.’

John’s stomach chose that moment to offer a hungry rumble of approval, and he grimaced as the DI sniggered, waving them off. ‘Go on, both of you. If anything happens that needs your attention before then, I’ll give you a ring.’

He turned back towards the police car, climbing in behind the steering wheel and flicking on the blue lights in the back window. The engine started with a growl, purring as he pulled away and into the flow of traffic. Cars reluctantly parted, clearing the way towards New Scotland Yard as John watched it go, his tired brain struggling to comprehend the events of the past few minutes.

‘Are you coming?’ Sherlock asked, nudging his shoulder before he began walking away.

‘That depends.’ John shoved his cold hands in his pockets, his breath steaming in the air as he jogged to catch up. ‘Are you going to tell me what just happened? I didn’t think having Elsie arrested was part of the plan.’

‘Didn’t you?’ Sherlock’s innocence was short-lived, and he sighed, making a bee-line for the takeaway place Greg had mentioned. They were cutting it fine, and John gave a sigh of earnest relief when the door proved to be unlocked and the tired staff still greeted them with a smile. ‘I’ll explain once we’re back at the flat. What do you want?’

They placed their order and Sherlock paid in cash, revealing another little deception amidst the night’s performance. ‘You could have covered taxi fare,’ John muttered, his voice muffled as he grabbed a bit of dim sum from the bag, too hungry to wait until they got home. ‘What was all that about taking the tube?’

Sherlock glanced in his direction, remaining tight-lipped as he strode along the length of Baker Street towards 221B. The keys gleamed in his hand, and John shuffled from one foot to the other, juggling paper bags of fried rice and other essential sustenance as he waited for Sherlock to let them in.

The place was dark and quiet, and John winced, hoping they didn’t wake Mrs Hudson as the door clanked in their wake. They crept up the stairs, the smell of takeaway trailing behind them before Sherlock slipped into the flat, flicking on the lights and shrugging out of the Belstaff.

John didn’t bother with such niceties, too intent on the food in his hands to bother taking off his jacket. He ignored the chopsticks – after the day he’d had, he doubted he had the coordination to put them to good use – grabbing a fork and slumping into a chair at the kitchen table. The greaseproof paper made an adequate plate, and he scooped up a pile of rice, shoving it in his mouth as he waited for Sherlock to settle opposite him.

‘Go on then,’ he urged after a few silent, hurried mouthfuls, torn between easing the ache of hunger in his stomach and curiosity over Sherlock’s actions. ‘Tell me what tonight was really about.’

‘Keeping Elsie safe.’ He shrugged, chewing on some foo young. He consumed his dinner more politely than John, wielding the cheap chopsticks with expert precision. ‘I promised to get her to a
secure location. There aren’t many places more suited to that description than a holding cell at the Yard.’

‘And the rest of it? Unnecessary use of public transport? Having Lestrade and Donovan meet us on Marylebone Road, rather than here at the flat? It wasn’t very discreet.’

‘Exactly.’ Sherlock smirked. ‘If whoever chased her near the cemetery was our perpetrator, then I maximised our chances of being seen between there and the city. The same with riding on the tube. Perhaps most of the passengers won’t remember a thing, but you never know who might be watching. Even if she went ignored, there were plenty of homeless about. There’s a good chance she was recognised, and loyalty only goes so far. If someone’s buying information and offering the right price…’

John stared, his rice forgotten on his fork as the evening’s journey took on a whole new light. ‘You wanted her to be seen.’

‘I wanted her to be seen with us,’ Sherlock corrected. ‘If whoever’s behind all this wasn’t desperate to get to Elsie before tonight, they will be now. Especially since she’s just been dragged off by the police in full view of a busy London street.’ He gestured with his chopsticks. ‘They don’t know how much or little information she has, only that she’s some of kind of threat to their operation.’

‘So you think they’ll come after her.’ John licked his lips, more interested in what Sherlock was saying than the food in front of him now that the edge of his appetite had been sated.

‘I’m counting on it.’ Sherlock polished off a spring roll, licking sauce from his thumb. ‘The fact that whoever’s doing this hasn’t stopped despite the police investigation suggests there’s something in it for them: profit, most likely, since they’re selling the contaminated drug on the black market. They’ll want to find out if the risk has reached the point where it outweighs the reward, and for that, they’ll need to know what Elsie’s been saying.’

It was brilliant and ruthless, the kind of plan that made guilt spark in John’s stomach even as admiration bloomed in his chest. ‘So she’s not a suspect?’

Sherlock shook his head. ‘She’s bait. If I’d taken her to a safe-house, any ambiguity over her allegiances would have been eradicated. She would have been seen to be helping us, and would be in more danger as a result.’ He nudged his chopsticks aside, the cheap wood rattling on the table as he continued. ‘By having Greg arrest her, I’ve put us into apparent conflict. There’s doubt as to whether we’re friends or enemies, and the danger to her is reduced. Additionally, her plausibility within London’s underworld remains intact. At least to some extent.’

‘People will see her as a pawn in your plot, rather than someone helping us willingly.’ John nodded, understanding how that could work. ‘Also, that uncertainty means whoever’s after her might not be so quick to do away with her.’

‘Exactly. It’s the best I can do to keep her safe without compromising her usefulness to us in the investigation. She can’t help us find the perpetrator, but with any luck, he’ll come looking for her once she’s released from police custody.’

John pulled a face, sensing the precarious balance of Sherlock’s strategy. There were far too many things that could go wrong, but they didn’t have much choice. ‘You’re going to have to tell her,’ he said after a brief silence. ‘If she gives us the slip, we’ll never find her and she’ll be left to face the consequences on her own.’

Sherlock nodded, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. The chair screeched over the floor as
he got to his feet, crossing the kitchen to flick on the kettle. ‘I’ll tell her tomorrow. If she’d been forewarned, she would have gone quietly rather than making a scene. This way we’ve increased the chances of the news reaching the attention of our perpetrator.’ He hesitated, clearing his throat before adding, ‘I’ll also have to inform Lestrade and his team. The less they knew about it, the more genuine the arrest would seem.’

John sat back in his chair, shaking his head in quiet disbelief. At least he wasn’t the only one Sherlock had kept in the dark.

He watched him move around the room, pouring water into mugs, steeping the tea bags and getting the milk. It looked perfectly mundane, as if they were having an evening in rather than discussing how to catch a killer and secure their future; John closed his eyes, wishing that were the case.

‘Here.’ Sherlock set a full mug down by his elbow, and John latched onto it as if it were the elixir of life. Keeping up with Sherlock’s plans could be challenging at the best of times, and now, with his mind sinking into the fog of fatigue, he found himself struggling to consider all the angles.

‘So once she’s released –’

‘We find out who’s waiting for her.’ Sherlock blew on his tea, narrowing his eyes against the flow of steam. ‘They’ll realise she’s hard to track down and even harder to find once she’s gone into hiding. They won’t want to give her the chance to get away. If they’re smart, they’ll grab her within a few streets of New Scotland Yard.’

‘And you intend to be waiting for them.’ John blew out a breath, rubbing the heel of his hand against his eye. ‘You know they might not stop to ask questions? They might just stick a knife between her ribs and be done with it.’

He watched, looking for some glimmer of expression beyond Sherlock’s usual machinations. Relief whispered through him when he saw it: a glimpse of compassion and the flicker of calculation in Sherlock’s eyes.

‘The death of the dealer was almost certainly accidental; our suspect has probably written off the demise of their test subjects in the same way – a regrettable but necessary step.’ Sherlock tapped his fingers against his mug. ‘The only other body is the witness Elsie spoke to. If it wasn’t even termed as murder, that suggests any element of foul play was subtle and borne from the culprit’s notions of necessity. Whoever this is, they’re not on some kind of mindless killing spree.’

He shrugged, taking another sip of his tea. ‘Besides, if I’m right, they need to decide if it’s time to cut and run, and that depends on what Elsie tells the police.’

John pursed his lips, unable to ignore the number of ‘ifs’ that floated around unspoken. Normally, he wouldn’t question him, but this wasn’t just a standard case. Whoever was contaminating the drugs had avoided them at every turn, a nameless, faceless individual. They had plenty of information surrounding him, but he was still a hollow space amidst the detailed landscape of the investigation: an unremarkable man, Elsie had said.

‘What if it doesn’t work?’ he asked, swallowing as Sherlock met his gaze. ‘If he doesn’t take the bait, what then?’

They stared at each other over the table, the silence that stretched between them all the answer John needed. This tenuous scheme was their best hope of grabbing their suspect, and if it came to nothing then they were back to square one: empty-handed.
‘People follow set patterns of action and consequence,’ Sherlock said at last, leaning across the table, his hands spread as if he were begging for John’s belief. ‘There’s nothing to suggest our suspect is mentally compromised or has any reason to deviate from standard behaviour. I’m not saying the strategy is infallible, far from it, but we’re running out of options.’

He bowed his head, his brow creasing into a frown. ‘If Elsie doesn’t lure out our suspect, then we would be left with the option to conduct a manual search, approach the universities and the homeless alike, stir everything up until he either flees or forces a confrontation...’

‘But that could take weeks.’ John nodded as he finished Sherlock’s sentence for him. He pushed the remains of his takeaway aside, reaching out to clasp Sherlock’s hands in his and feeling the chill of his fingertips grow warm against his skin.

It was a way to bridge the distance, to shift them both from the locked in-lines of the investigation and back to the promise of each other’s company. It blended the professional and the personal, and John drew strength from the way that Sherlock returned his grasp, neither hesitant nor insipid, but bordering on desperate.

Everything felt frayed around the edges, as if one hard look would make the whole situation unravel around their ears. Part of John longed to ignore it, but it was impossible. They both knew there would be consequences if they failed to solve the case, and John couldn’t push aside the need to establish what he was up against.

He rubbed his thumbs over Sherlock’s knuckles, sweeping back and forth as he cleared his throat and asked the question that had hovered in his mind since Mycroft had told them how little time they had left.

‘What happens if we can’t do it?’ He licked his lips, watching Sherlock close his eyes. ‘I don’t believe what you told Sally about not knowing. You must have some idea?’

Sherlock glanced sideways, away from John and towards the windows as if he were looking for the answers beyond their blank panes. At last, he lifted one shoulder. ‘That depends. If I abide by the terms of the agreement, it will be over. The deal we made with the Cunninghams states that I would return to Patricia’s control, and she would have no fear of retribution from my brother or anyone else.’ He gestured to the back of his neck, where John’s bite marked his skin. ‘This complicates matters. In an ideal world they would relinquish their claim to you, but they’re far more likely to have the bond removed.’

A shiver worked its way down John’s spine and he pursed his lips, not wanting to consider what would become of Sherlock’s health, both mental and physical, if that was the Cunninghams’ decision.

‘That’s not what’s going to happen. I won’t let it, and neither will you. You won’t go to them willingly, no matter what you promised.’ He sighed, his hands moving to skim over the delicate skin of Sherlock’s wrists. ‘Mycroft said there were other options, and you told him to put things in place. What did you mean?’

‘If we don’t capitulate, then it all falls back into the realms of a court dispute,’ Sherlock explained. ‘One contract with the Cunninghams over-rules the other, at least in theory, but by this point the situation is so complex it would take an official ruling to substantiate any claim.’ He shrugged. ‘Mycroft will be making sure he’s got his legal counsel in order so that he can meet that challenge. Whether he’d win or not is impossible to deduce. It could go either way. If we were victorious, our bond would be safe; as my Alpha, ownership of me would go to you –’
John grimaced, his lips already parted to protest, but he bit back his words as Sherlock shook his head, dismissing the terminology as if it were irrelevant. ‘– and the Cunninghams would lose all right to dictate my future.’

‘And if a judge decides in their favour?’ John bowed his head, not wanting to hear it laid out in Sherlock’s deep, quiet tones but unable to hold back the question. He wanted to believe that no one in their right mind would hand someone over to the family of their abuser, but doing the right thing would go against centuries of tradition. It could be the fulcrum which overturned a way of life, and John doubted there were many people in power who would think it worth rocking that particular boat.

‘I’d be theirs the moment the verdict was passed. Most likely, our bond would be broken and I would be sold off. My brother would no doubt be barred from all contact with me, and you…’ Sherlock shook his head. ‘I asked Mycroft to ensure, contractually, that they wouldn’t press charges against you. They might still try, but…’

John’s breath caught in his chest, tangled up in a wrenching knot of sadness and gratitude. Even in the midst of all this, Sherlock was still looking out for him – trying to make sure that whatever repercussions they faced, John was spared the worst.

‘It’s not me I’m worried about.’ He squeezed Sherlock’s hands, trying to ignore the haunted, leaden dread of what they could face. He felt so weary, like they were both existing on the precipice of elation and despair. He should be happy – he should be fucking ecstatic because Sherlock had asked not just for friendship and a bond of convenience – but everything John had to offer. Instead, he sat here with the potential future aimed at his head like the barrel of a gun, and there was nothing he could do to set things right.

Sherlock’s palms slipped free from his grasp, and a chill washed over John’s skin as he was left clutching empty air. It felt prophetic, as if Sherlock were already slipping through his fingers, and John swallowed, the takeaway he’d eaten sitting slick in his stomach.

The scrape of the chair against the floor made him blink, and a moment later, Sherlock guided him to his feet with gentle, insistent pressure. He ran his hands up the woollen sleeves of John’s jumper, giving him a brief shake. ‘We’ve not run out of time yet,’ he murmured. ‘Besides, I don’t think it will come to that. Our culprit will be waiting for Elsie’s release, and if we get him, we’ll have what we need to rip this whole investigation wide open.’

Sherlock eased closer, his voice taking on an extra edge of intensity. ‘This won’t be resolved by arguments in court. Not if I have anything to do with it.’

John took a deep breath, relishing the fragrance of Sherlock’s skin as he leaned into his embrace. He was right, there was no point in borrowing trouble. They’d cross that bridge if they came to it, and in the meantime, do their best to make sure it was never an issue they had to face.

It felt good to be comforted, and Sherlock offered his reassurance with ease. He acted as if it came naturally, and John smiled against his cotton-clad shoulder, letting himself be cherished. Broad palms swept up and down his spine, teasing out the tension until only weariness lingered in its wake, making his bones heavy and lethargic.

‘You should get to bed,’ Sherlock urged at last, his deep voice a soft rumble in John’s ear. ‘We need to be at the Yard in little more than six hours and you’re dead on your feet.’

‘So are you,’ John looked up at him, reading the story of blunt exhaustion that left its impressions on his face. For Sherlock to sleep during a case was rare, and when a time limit was in place, it was
practically unthinkable. Yet he’d sat opposite John and eaten takeaway, meeting the demands of the transport even as he outlined the details of his plan. Perhaps this time he’d see the benefit of a few hours’ sleep, as well.

‘Come with me?’ He tried to keep emotion out of his voice, doing everything he could to remind Sherlock that the decision was his. John craved him, wanted to feel the press of skin against his own and slip into sleep with Sherlock’s arms around him, but he didn’t want Sherlock to think he was obligated to do as John asked. Even this, when it came down to it, was all about choice. ‘Just for a little while?’

He had arguments lined up: good, logical reasons why Sherlock getting his head down made sense, but in the end, he didn’t need them. Perhaps if there was a new lead to follow, or some unexplored angle of the case for Sherlock to consider, he would have turned John down: the call of the Work taking precedence.

This time, things were different.

Sherlock’s agreement was unspoken, wrapped up in the curve of his fingers around John’s hand and his gentle, insistent guidance towards his bedroom. He led John over the threshold, directing his tired footsteps before easing him from his clothes, brushing gentle kisses on the skin he revealed: innocently intimate.

Sherlock’s bed welcomed them, warm and soft beneath John’s spine as he slumped into the pillows, too tired to think of anything but the man who settled at his side.

The enticement of bare skin flirted along the edge of carnal promise, but other needs took priority. Sex was a distant temptation, more an abstract possibility than something either of them wanted, and John wrapped his arms around Sherlock, pulling him close.

It was perfect warmth and unquestioning acceptance, their bodies pressed together from chest to knee. John could feel the thump of Sherlock’s heart against his chest, calling his own pulse into equal, steady time. It was affection without expectation, and John smudged a kiss against Sherlock’s shoulder before letting out a sigh.

The morning held many possibilities, from the light of resolution to the shadow of yet another failure, but for now there was this: the certainty of Sherlock’s embrace and the soft whisper of their shared breaths, quiet and at peace.

In each other’s arms they found their sanctuary, and as John drifted off, he hoped that would never change.
Scotland Yard smelled of strong coffee and stress. The treble note of adrenaline imbued the walls, coiling in his nose, and John screwed up his eyes as he tried to blink away the lingering cobwebs of exhaustion.

He didn’t want to be here. The few scant hours of rest he and Sherlock had managed to claim had left him more groggy than refreshed, and his body keened for more. It felt good – right – to sleep with Sherlock at his side, wrapped up in each other and oblivious to everything else. That closeness eased the jagged edges of John’s mood, at least for a while, but now they were back in the real world, and the very air seemed to chafe at his skin.

‘Here.’ A paper cup was pushed into his hands, and John blinked at its contents: black, and judging by the half burnt smell of it, it had to be coffee. No one made tea that looked like tar. He took a sip, wrinkling his nose at the taste, but at least the caffeine might kick his brain from its weary sulk.

‘Thanks,’ he managed, clearing his throat as he looked up at Sherlock. ‘I swear I thought sleep would help, but I think I’m more tired now than I was before.’

‘You’ve been deprived of adequate rest for several days,’ Sherlock pointed out. ‘Yesterday we were busy chasing Elsie and before that you were – otherwise occupied.’ A faint flush coloured his cheeks, and John grinned into his cup. ‘Your body’s just taking a little longer to adjust to a waking state than normal, nothing more.’

John grunted, thinking that was a rather charitable way of putting it. He’d been embarrassingly petulant when the alarm on his phone had gone off, and foul-tempered when Sherlock hadn’t let him linger between the sheets. Instead he’d dragged him from their nest, shoved him in the shower and allowed him a desultory breakfast before hustling him out of the door. The result was this: a foggy head and muscles that ached with the desire to lie down.

He leant back against the wall, letting it support his weight as he sipped the coffee, which was at least hot and caffeinatted. He doubted the buzz would have much impact, but he had the sense to know he needed his wits about him. If everything went to plan, then by the end of the day they’d have their suspect in custody. He couldn’t afford to be asleep on the job.

‘Part of it’s also to do with the bite,’ Sherlock murmured, keeping his words below the earshot of the denizens of the Yard as he relaxed at John’s side, his arm brushing his shoulder. ‘Elsie was right in her assessment yesterday. In any new Alpha-Omega pairing, even those with little romantic feeling, the couple will stay within their home for a substantial period of time. Close proximity helps with emotional stability as the bond matures. You don’t just want to be in bed; you want to be in bed with me.’

‘Obviously,’ John replied, his teasing gentle as he repeated one of Sherlock’s favourite words. ‘It’s not as fun without you there.’ He caught sight of the look Sherlock shot in his direction, part surprised and part flattered by the compliment. ‘I understand what you mean, though. It’s –’ He tried to think of a way to describe the itching, prickling sensation that had taken up root beneath his skin. Having sex at every possible moment was standard behaviour in most of his new relationships: the joy of intimacy easily shared, but this wasn’t just about finding release. There was far more to it than that.

‘It’s normal,’ Sherlock explained, ‘and you’re not the only one who feels it. If it were not necessary for me to solve this, do you think I would set foot outside Baker Street when I could lock myself
The thrum of hunger in his voice sent a wash of heat down John’s spine and he looked up, more alert than he’d been all morning as he examined the intense expression on Sherlock’s face. There was no trace of a lie there, and even now it wasn’t as if Sherlock would fib to spare his feelings. No, he meant what he said. The same buzzing need to touch that lingered in John’s bones made a home in Sherlock as well, and instead of being able to indulge themselves, they were left snatching fragments of physical contact whenever they got the chance.

‘When this is over…’ John licked his lips, shaking his head at the impossibility of that simple statement. Even now, it seemed hard to believe that this mess would ever come to an end.

‘When it’s over, I plan to drag you back to bed and keep you there for as long as possible.’ Sherlock turned to give John his full attention, the air between them blooming with promise. A tilt of his head, and it was as if all his desires came into focus. Where John had viewed an eagerness to complete the investigation, he now saw the hope for what could lie beyond it and the simmering heat of Sherlock’s subtle longing.

John swallowed, the drink in his hands forgotten as he let out a shivering breath. ‘God, yes.’ He wanted that: the four walls of the flat around them and the time to give their bond the attention it deserved. The desire was almost a physical taste, and he inhaled Sherlock’s scent, letting it fill his lungs. He swayed forward as if magnetised, tempted to catch Sherlock’s lips in a kiss. Only the knowledge of where they were – in full view of the eyes of the Met, friends and nay-sayers alike – made him hesitate.

It was just as well that he did because someone cleared their throat, and John watched Sherlock roll his eyes before turning to face the source of the interruption. ‘Yes, Lestrade?’

Greg looked like he was struggling not to break out into a grin, his dark eyes gleaming. ‘Want me to come back later?’ he asked. ‘I thought you’d be sick of waiting, but I can always go to the canteen, grab myself some breakfast while you two…’ He trailed off, quirking his eyebrows suggestively.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Sherlock replied. He looked more resigned to Greg’s gentle teasing than embarrassed by it and John stared down into the dregs of his coffee, relieved.

He couldn’t care less if anyone saw them snogging in the middle of Scotland Yard. However, he hadn’t had the chance to explore that particular boundary with Sherlock. After half his adult life where Alexander used affection as a weapon, and the rest of it in apparent self-denial, would he be comfortable with public demonstrations or were such things only acceptable in the privacy of Baker Street?

For now, perhaps he shouldn’t push his luck. Besides, while Sherlock hadn’t said anything explicit about trying to hide their bond from the Cunninghams, John got the impression it was best not to advertise their changed relationship. Answers to all those personal, private questions would have to wait. They had a killer to catch, and judging from the expression on Greg’s face, Elsie hadn’t told them anything new.

‘We got started early,’ he said by way of explanation. ‘Recorded interview, that kind of thing, but she didn’t have much more to tell us than she gave up in the Volunteer.’ He looked up as Sally approached and passed him a file. ‘Definitely nothing that makes her a suspect, so unless you come up with something else, we can’t hold her for much longer.’

‘Good. Give me a few minutes to talk to her and then start processing her release.’
John watched the confusion shadow Greg’s face, cinching his brow and clouding his eyes. At his side, Sally folded her arms as she wrinkled her nose.

‘What do you mean, “good”?’ she demanded. ‘I thought you wanted this bloody thing sorted?’

‘I do, and that’s not going to happen with Elsie in a cell. I never implied she was the perpetrator. You did that all by yourself.’

‘You asked us to arrest her!’ Greg looked at John, who shrugged an apology. ‘If you don’t think she’s behind it, then what the hell is she doing here?’

Sherlock reached out, taking the file from Lestrade’s hands and flicking through the pages. John could just make out that it was a hurried transcript from the interview. ‘Not much, from the look of things. Where is she?’

‘Interrogation room three. We kept her there in case you thought you might have more luck.’ Sally raised an eyebrow. ‘You do know all you’ll get is abuse? You’re not exactly her favourite person any more.’

She glanced at John as Sherlock strode away, looking torn between delight at the punishment Sherlock might face at Elsie’s hand and genuine concern that she might do some harm. ‘I’m not kidding. She can’t say his name without sounding like she wants to stab him in the face.’

‘He’s got a plan.’

‘A good one?’ Greg asked as they trotted to keep up, grimacing at John’s doubtful expression. ‘Oi, Sherlock. We can be in there with you or behind the mirror. Where do you want us?’ He jerked his thumb towards a neighbouring door, indicating the observation room.

‘Leave me to talk to Elsie. She might realise she’s being watched, but the more people there are in the vicinity the more threatened she’ll feel.’ He met John’s gaze with a hint of apology. ‘You too, John.’

He folded his arms, frowning at Sherlock as he waited for some kind of explanation. Greg and Sally being absent he could understand, but the last thing he wanted to do was leave Sherlock’s side, especially now, when Elsie wasn’t just scared but pissed off as well.

Sally and Greg seemed to sense they were better off elsewhere, and John barely noticed the door close behind them, leaving him and Sherlock in the empty corridor.

‘Why don’t you want me in there with you?’ he asked, trying not to come across as defensive. Even to his own ears, he sounded like some prick trying to control his lover, demanding they explain their every move. He bowed his head, hoping Sherlock would understand that wasn’t what he meant.

‘Because Elsie sees me as an equal – or she did – whereas you are a threat.’ Sherlock’s words were annoying in their honesty, and John rounded his shoulders, knowing he didn’t have a leg to stand on. ‘You pointed a gun at her more than once yesterday. Even if you hadn’t, you’re still an Alpha and her prejudice is somewhat understandable. It doesn’t help that our current situation means your stereotypical traits are coming to the fore: protectiveness, dominance, poor impulse control…’

John bit his lip, knowing he should apologise. He could see what Sherlock meant – knew he was walking a fine line where his natural character began to blur beneath the onslaught of instinct – but he couldn’t seem to help himself.

Sherlock paced closer, his footsteps steady across the cheap linoleum. John’s body relaxed, his
muscles going slack with Sherlock’s proximity. The nearer they were to one another, the better John felt – more like himself again – and if even he could sense the difference then how must it look to everyone else?

‘I need to convince her that this course of action is for the best, and that will be challenging enough as it is. You hovering in the corner will make it impossible.’ Sherlock’s fingers brushed against his hand, imploring him to understand his decision. His eyes never left John’s face, not until his knuckles flexed and he ducked his head in agreement.

‘All right,’ he murmured, looking up at Sherlock and letting out a sigh. ‘All right. Just watch yourself. The last thing we need is her clobbering you in a fit of rage.’

‘Elsie’s more prone to verbal abuse than physical.’ He touched the edge of the bruise on his temple before nodding in acknowledgement of John’s point. ‘Most of the time, anyway.’

With a huff of dry laughter, he watched Sherlock turn towards the door of the interrogation room, digging his phone from his pocket and sending a text message. He shrugged out of his coat, leaving it over one of the plastic chairs that lined the corridor before jerking his head to indicate John should go.

Reluctantly, he obliged, easing his way through the nearby door and feeling the moment that he became the centre of attention. No one made any snide comments, which was a relief. Greg knew better, but John wouldn’t have put it past Sally to mention something about trouble in paradise. Instead, the sergeant watched him, curious but silent, her features outlined by the brightness of the lights on the other side of the pane set into the wall.

‘Everything all right?’ the DI whispered, giving John’s shoulder a rough squeeze when he nodded. ‘Good. Don’t suppose you’d care to fill me in on the details of this so-called plan?’

John jerked his head towards the image in front of them. ‘You’ll hear it straight from him in a minute. He has to explain it to Elsie.’

Sally gave a quiet snort. ‘This should be interesting. He knows she’s not restrained, right?’

John shrugged, his gaze fixed on the woman before him. She slumped in her chair, picking at the dressing on her arm. Someone had given her fresh clothes; the cotton hung from her slim frame, but at least she looked warm and clean. Her hair had been washed and pulled back in a ponytail, and she didn’t shake from hunger any more. Instead, her mouth pursed in a thin line, and John didn’t miss the way her nostrils flared, probably detecting Sherlock’s scent from the other side of the door.

She fixed her eyes on the panel, unblinking, and her lips twisted in a snarl when he stepped over the threshold. Her shoulders were like bedrock as her hands curled into fists, white-knuckled. She looked as if she were struggling to restrain herself from leaping across the table and throttling him there and then.

Sherlock’s indifference to her fury made things worse. He concentrated on his phone, barely sparing Elsie a glance as he sat in the chair opposite her, his legs stretched in front of him and crossed at the ankles. He wasn’t wearing his suit jacket and had rolled up his shirt sleeves. No doubt it was a deliberate ploy, and John wondered whether he was trying to put Elsie at ease or enrage her further.

‘You bastard,’ she hissed, the words escaping between clenched teeth on a voice that shook with anger. ‘You utter bastard.’

Sherlock glanced at her, unmoved, before looking back at his phone, and John watched Elsie’s
fingers flex as if she was resisting the urge to claw at his face. Red blotches stained her pale cheeks, and she leaned forward in her chair like a creature waiting to pounce.

‘You had me arrested.’ She said it like it may as well be the death penalty. Perhaps, in Elsie’s mind, it was. ‘All those fucking years I kept my head down – made sure I wasn’t enough of anything to give anyone trouble… I trusted you! Look where it got me!’ She gestured around them, indicating stark walls and a scuffed, grey floor.

‘I am looking.’ Sherlock set his phone down, meeting Elsie’s gaze for the first time as her voice cracked in her throat, her tirade crashing to a halt in the face of his implacable calm. ‘You’re the one failing to observe. Strong security, around-the-clock surveillance, food, medical care, hot water and a warm bed. In addition to all that, your precious neutrality remains intact. If anything, the fact I had you arrested will strengthen it.’

Elsie’s eyes narrowed, her chest swelling with an indrawn breath, but she didn’t speak as Sherlock continued to explain. ‘If I’d taken you anywhere else your safety would be far from guaranteed, and any witnesses would believe that we were working together. Your prized impartiality would go up in smoke. You’d be seen as a snitch at best, and they don’t last long.’

Sherlock squinted at his mobile as the screen glowed, flicking through something before looking up. ‘Besides, not all of this is about you. Our suspect might have dismissed you entirely if you stayed out of sight much longer. You were a threat, yes, but not much of one. Now you’ve been in police custody for almost twelve hours, and who knows what you’ve been saying?’

‘Nothing!’ Elsie gritted her teeth, scrubbing a hand through the wisps of hair that trailed across her brow, and John shifted his weight at the sign of her blatant frustration. ‘I’ve told them and I’ve told you: there’s nothing else I know.’

‘But whoever’s behind this can’t be sure. Not unless they ask you personally.’

Sherlock raised one eyebrow, and John saw Elsie connect the dots. Beside him, Greg gave a quiet groan, rubbing his palm across his forehead as he grasped what Sherlock was getting at.

‘You’re using me as bloody bait?!’ Elsie propped her elbows on the table, burying her face in her hands. ‘That’s what all that was about: the buses, taking the tube… You wanted to make sure everyone saw.’

‘I also wanted to ensure they believed it. If it’s any consolation, no one else involved had a clue what was going on.’

‘Not even John?’ She lifted her head to glare at Sherlock, but when the only answer she got was a long, slow look, she sighed, dropping her forehead to the table. No doubt she was trying to think of a way out of it, travelling through the same endless permutations of possibility John had voiced the previous night and coming to the same conclusion.

‘I don’t have a choice, do I?’ she said at last. ‘If I bugger off out of here, I’ll have to deal with whatever shit you’ve landed me in by myself.’ She grimaced, shaking her head in disgust, but there was a gleam of something else there, and when she spoke again John realised it was a sort of defeated respect. ‘Don’t you ever get tired of always being one step ahead of everyone else?’

‘I’m not always one step ahead,’ Sherlock corrected her. ‘Sometimes I’m several. One of the more challenging aspects of this scenario is knowing where to set the trap. There are a number of ways you could leave this building and slip past whoever is waiting for you unnoticed, only to have him catch up with you later when no one’s around to offer assistance.’
Elsie grimaced. ‘So, what? You expect me to wander around until he grabs me? Because that won’t be suspicious or anything.’

Sherlock sighed, bored of her sarcasm. ‘A CCTV perimeter has been in place since shortly after your arrest. Anyone dubious has been monitored.’

Next to him, John felt Greg’s attention sharpen even as Sally shifted her weight, both of them seeing the shattered stained-glass of Sherlock’s strategy come together. He hadn’t known Sherlock had called on his brother for assistance. John was sure that, in any other circumstances, he wouldn’t have considered it. However, they didn’t have time for petty sibling rivalries, not with the hours slipping away from them.

‘There are several homeless individuals who set up camp first thing this morning: could be a coincidence, but foot traffic on Dacre Street is poor and begging opportunities are minimal. More likely they’re lookouts to report back should you go in a certain direction.’ He tapped his fingers on the desk before waving a hand dismissively. ‘Still, they’re of no concern. You need to head for Caxton Street. An individual, not a vagrant, judging by the quality of his clothes, has been lingering in that vicinity since dawn.’

‘Wait, you know where he is?’ Elsie demanded, spreading her hands in disbelief even as Sally made a tight, uncertain noise, no doubt trying to follow Sherlock’s logic. ‘Why don’t you just go and pick him up, then? What do you need me for?’

Sherlock rolled his eyes, letting out a sigh. ‘Think.’ He stared at Elsie, neither blinking nor looking away. ‘From the moment we left the cemetery, this has all been a game of probability. The odds are good that the man on Caxton Street is the one we’re after, but if we arrest the wrong person we could lose our only chance of closing this investigation.’

He folded his arms as he continued. ‘Whoever is doing this is not a professional criminal, but they’re still intelligent. They can assess the risks, and they are standing hovering on the brink of fleeing into obscurity. We can’t make a mistake and push them into action. We need confirmation before we make an arrest. That’s where you come in.’

Elsie gave him a long stare, weighing Sherlock with the unflinching intensity of her gaze. John could see the anger ebbing from her expression, the rigid line of her shoulders bleeding away as she realised how neatly Sherlock had trapped her in the heart of his plan.

‘Tell me why.’ She lifted her chin when he looked at her. ‘Why are you so desperate? It’s not like you to rush into anything, but you’re taking too many risks. What’s your hurry?’

John watched, seeing the knowing gleam in her eye. Something told him she already had a good idea about the driving force behind their frantic efforts to catch their culprit. Now, she was looking for confirmation.

He held his breath, waiting to see if Sherlock answered or if he brushed aside her curiosity. His profile was motionless, a blank mask covering the workings of his mind, and when he spoke, it was flat and to-the-point. ‘Alexander’s family will relinquish their claim to me if I find his killer in the next few days.’ He raised one eyebrow, his voice low as he added, ‘Or so they say.’

‘And you believe them?’ Her lips twisted in something that looked more like pity than disdain, and she leant back in her chair, mirroring Sherlock’s position.

‘I don’t have any choice.’ He parroted back her earlier words, but there was no mockery there. Instead, the emotion beneath was dense and unreadable.
Elsie drew in a deep breath, unfolding her arms and fiddling with her cuff, teasing the material as she worried her lip in thought. When she finally looked up again, John could see the new steel in her gaze: powerful resolve.

‘Tell me what you need me to do.’

Sherlock made an imperious, beckoning gesture in the direction of the glass, and John grinned as Greg grumbled and Sally snorted in annoyance. They’d been summoned, and they knew it. Not that they’d go quietly. John had felt the questions growing around him like a building storm, held in behind Greg’s clenched jaw and Sally’s pursed lips. Maybe they could understand why Sherlock hadn’t been upfront with them about Elsie’s arrest, but that didn’t mean they had to like it.

He followed half-a-pace behind them and settled himself in the corner, his arms folded over his chest as he observed. Sherlock didn’t need his help – not for holding court in front of Scotland Yard’s finest. He needed the space and freedom to set his plan in motion, and John had no problem giving it to him.

‘You know we can’t sanction this, don’t you?’ the DI demanded, gesturing towards Elsie. ‘Not officially. We can’t give you backup.’

‘Of course not.’ Sherlock frowned, barely acknowledging Greg’s concern. ‘However, two officers “happening” upon the scene would not be out of place, not in such close proximity to headquarters.’ He offered a thin, joyless smile. ‘And if the person you took in for harassing a young woman turned out to be a key suspect…’

Greg sighed before ducking his head, one hand on his hip as he pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘What about you? Where will you be in all this?’

‘Nearby. John and I can’t be seen for risk of scaring him off. He needs to think Elsie is alone. Once we have confirmation that we’ve got the right person, we’ll disabuse him of that notion.’

‘And her?’ Sally jerked her head towards Elsie. ‘You seem pretty sure that this person’s going to want some answers, at least at first, but that could change. He could be armed, and we’ve got evidence enough to prove he’s dangerous.’

‘Providing Elsie with a stab vest beneath her clothes shouldn’t be a challenge. However, I expect it will be unnecessary; the use of a knife would be an uncharacteristic escalation.’

‘Not if he’s desperate,’ Sally muttered, huffing when Sherlock dismissed her in favour of turning to Elsie, speaking in swift, clear tones as he laid out the details.

‘Caxton Street has strong CCTV coverage and heavy foot traffic, at least at this end. Walk in the middle of the pavement, but not on the road edge, make it –’

‘Hard for him to drag me off somewhere,’ Elsie rolled her eyes. ‘I know. So you want me to lure him out?’

‘It shouldn’t be challenging. If he’s as intelligent as I think he is, he’ll have chosen a more isolated location to force a confrontation, and he’ll need your cooperation in getting there in order to avoid gathering unnecessary attention. Don’t go too easily, or he’ll get suspicious. Make him give you some kind of threat to encourage your capitulation.’

‘Then what? Once he’s got me where he wants me, what do I do? Wait for the cavalry?’ A cold grin twisted her lips, and John guessed that idea wouldn’t go down well. Even at less than one-hundred percent, Elsie was no damsel in distress.
Sherlock got to his feet, his phone back in his palm, but he tore his eyes away from the screen to look her over once more. ‘You won’t have to wait long.’

Greg cleared his throat, shaking his head as he held up a hand. ‘Hang on. We’re assuming that anyone who bothers Elsie is going to be the person we want, right? If that’s the case, why not just jump him when he first approaches her? Why wait for him to drag her off somewhere?’

‘Because it’s unlikely that he’s working in isolation.’ Sherlock headed for the door, already half in another world as he pulled it open. ‘Without more information I can’t be sure of the details, but arresting him in plain view could alert others pertinent to the case.’ He turned, jerking his head towards Elsie. ‘Get her processed for release and let her go as soon as she’s ready. We’ll do the rest.’

John pushed himself away from the wall, noticing the way that Sally and Greg both obeyed, albeit grudgingly. They may have their doubts about Sherlock’s plan, but they’d seen him succeed too many times to dismiss it out of hand. It might be risky, but when it came down to it, it was still the course of action that held the best chance of success.

Slipping out of the room, he followed in Sherlock’s wake, watching him grab his coat and jacket before striding along the corridor towards Greg’s office. He opened the door and pitched both garments over the chair inside before spinning around, almost colliding with John in his haste.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled, turning again as Sherlock stepped around him with little more than a grunt of acknowledgement. ‘Aren’t you going to need those?’

‘Too distinctive. I don’t have time to put on any kind of disguise, so this will have to do.’

‘What about me?’ John glanced down at his jacket, knowing what Sherlock would say even as he asked.

‘You won’t have any difficulty blending in. We need to grab the suspect at the right moment. Tip him off too soon and it’ll be over.’

‘And how are we going to know when to make our move?’ John challenged, snagging Sherlock’s bunched cuff and pulling him up short. ‘If we follow Elsie, we’ll be seen in no time.’

‘We won’t have to rely on anything so rudimentary as shadowing their footsteps,’ Sherlock reached out, grabbing John’s hand and urging him along with a quick tug. ‘As much as it pains me to admit it, my brother’s surveillance network has its uses. He’ll inform me of both Elsie and the target’s location. That will allow us to keep our distance.’

‘So we’ll be too far away to react if things go south. Sherlock…’ His protest trailed off as he saw the disbeliefing look Sherlock shot in his direction.

‘You shouldn’t underestimate Elsie’s abilities to defend herself, nor my desire to keep her safe. Our culprit isn’t the only one with spies on the streets. I’ve got a few people watching the route and ready to act if necessary.’

‘More homeless?’ John sighed. ‘They’ve not exactly proven to be loyal so far, have they?’

‘That depends on the individual. Some can be bought, but others are more than capable of retaining their moral integrity. The trick is knowing who to trust.’

The automatic doors slid open with a hiss and John strode out at Sherlock’s side, breathing in the cool city air as he tried to calm the anxiety in the pit of his stomach. He wanted it to work. For all its flaws and uncertainties, the desperation for this plan to be a success threatened to choke him.
‘Let’s get this over with,’ he said at last, stopping near one of the pedestrian crossings. He turned back to look at Sherlock, realising that those eyes were no longer trained on the screen of his phone. Sherlock drank him in as if he thought it might be one of his last chances to do so, his scrutiny so intense that John felt the weight of it against his skin.

The atmosphere between them seemed to crystallise, exquisite yet fragile, and John swallowed hard, chasing away useless platitudes. He knew why Sherlock was looking at him like that – understood that for all his confidence, he was still aware of the shortcomings of his own strategy. Failure was a possibility, and they both knew it.

He reached out, gripping Sherlock’s wrist and giving it a quick squeeze. There was no point in voicing the same old concerns: rehashing his fears would get them nowhere. Instead, John straightened his shoulders, a soldier even now. ‘What do you want me to do?’

It was what Sherlock needed to hear, not more questions or challenges, but cooperation. John wasn’t being blindly obedient, but he knew when to stop talking and start taking action. Relief bathed Sherlock’s expression, short-lived but honest, before he drew a breath and gestured to the north.

‘Take this side of the road and head towards Caxton Street. Buy yourself a snack and be prepared to wait. Elsie could be a while. I’ll send you a text when she’s on the move.’

‘What about you?’

‘If we’re not together, we’re less likely to be recognised.’ Sherlock swiped his thumb over the screen of his phone before holding it out to John. ‘I’ll go on ahead and then double back. Our man might be looking over his shoulder, but I doubt he’ll consider threats from other directions.’

John nodded, squinting at the device in his palm. ‘Is this the guy?’ He peered at the grainy image. The figure was loitering on the edge of the frame, possibly aware of the coverage and trying to avoid the scope of the lens. ‘Plain clothes. No major logos or anything.’

‘The hoodie is UCL. You can just make out the insignia. It’s the only distinctive thing on him.’ Sherlock sighed, retrieving the mobile from John’s grasp. His fingertips lingered, a few points of heat against John’s skin before they, too, were gone. ‘He’s been walking back and forth along a half-mile stretch of Caxton Street for several hours. Mycroft also noted how he appears to be attempting to avoid the cameras, with limited success. Keep your eyes open for anyone dressed in similar clothes.’

‘Got it.’

‘And John?’ Sherlock took a breath as the pedestrian crossing began its insistent beep. ‘Be careful.’

With that he was gone, darting in front of the idling cars and never once looking back.

John turned away, those cautionary words ringing in his ears. It was unusual for Sherlock to offer any kind of warning or show outward concern for his welfare. Did he know something John didn’t, or was the stress of this situation wearing him down?

Shaking his head, he shoved his hands in his jacket pocket and timed his stride to fit in with those around him, becoming part of the ebb and flow of human traffic as he focused on the task at hand. The staccato clatter of shoes on the pavement muffled the nearby purr of vehicles, and he kept his gaze fixed straight ahead as he strode onto Caxton Street.

High-end offices and the sprawl of one of London’s better hotels filled the broad thoroughfare, but it was a façade. A thin layer of splendour hid the functional, in-between places: alleyways and yard-spaces. No doubt Sherlock would be putting them to use, ghosting along unseen as he hurried ahead,
more knowledgeable and easy with London’s shadowed side than John could ever hope to be.

After a few minutes of walking, a coffee shop caught his eye, its large windows gleaming in the weak sunlight and offering a good view of the street beyond: perfect.

Slipping inside, John grabbed a cake and a cup of tea before settling near the glass. He made sure he sat behind one of the pillars, half-obscured from anyone outside as he feigned interest in a discarded newspaper. There were coffee rings on its sheaves and someone had already filled in the crossword, but he paid it no mind, remembering to turn the page now and then as he surveyed the city’s panorama in front of him.

A homeless man sat a few paces from the front door, huddled in a nest of blankets with a cardboard cup in his hands. A ratty scarf was wrapped around his neck several times, obscuring the lower half of his face, but there was a sharp, focused quality to his gaze. To anyone else, he might as well have been another piece of street furniture, but John kept an eye on him, trying to determine if he was one of their suspect’s spies.

Before he could make up his mind, the buzz of his phone interrupted his thoughts, and he pulled it out to examine the curt message on the screen.

“Elsie has left Scotland Yard. Be ready. – SH”

Licking his lips, John polished off his tea, his heart fluttering in his chest. This was the moment of truth. Would Elise fall in line with their plan, or would she take advantage of her freedom and make a break for it, regardless of the risks?

His palms grew damp and his leg began to twitch as the minutes ticked by. More than once, he caught himself drumming his fingers on the table before stilling the movement. The urge to fidget was overwhelming, and he clenched his teeth as he tried to control himself. Beyond the window the back and forth of pedestrians carried on, unceasing, but there was no sign of Elsie.

He’d almost given up hope – praying that he’d overlooked her but fearing she’d done a runner – when her petite figure finally came into view. Her thin body was swathed in layers, her long sleeves draping over her hands and the hem of her frayed jeans dragging on the pavement. A beanie was jammed over her hair like a crown and she kept up a brisk pace, her arms folded and her head down.

Within seconds, she had passed him, and John swallowed his relief, pushing aside his empty plate and frowning as his phone gave another buzz.

“Wait for the signal – SH”

“What signal?” John muttered to himself, huffing a sigh as he leant back in his chair, gazing around the street in the hopes of identifying something that meant he should start moving.

In the end, he didn’t have to wait long. The beggar caught his attention with a flicker of movement, and now John recognised the face: one of Sherlock’s network. A subtle thumbs-up and a wink was all the hint he needed, and he gave a brief nod before setting off, easing his way through the crowd of other patrons and stepping out of the door.

Keeping his mobile in his hand, John maintained a steady pace, fighting the desire to pick up speed. Elsie was a distant figure, dipping in and out of the obscurity offered by her fellow pedestrians. She was walking fast enough to stand out – something John assumed was deliberate – and he did his best to keep her in sight without drawing attention to himself. The last thing he wanted was to blow this whole plan out of the water by being careless.
A darting shadow caught his eye, and John stared at the man moving perpendicular to the flow of people: purposeful and calm. Plain jeans and a dark sweatshirt covered his frame, and his hood hid his hair from sight.

The stranger fell into step behind Elsie, close enough to be uncomfortable without addressing her directly. To anyone else, it would seem unremarkable: just another person on a busy street, but John could see what he was doing – hounding her in the most subtle of ways. Worse, he kept blocking John’s view, his broader figure hiding her with ease.

He tried to focus on the tenuous line of sight, attempting to blend in without giving up on his goal. Distance passed unnoticed as he walked along the pavement, waiting for the moment when the man following Elsie sprang into action, but he did nothing. He was no more than a constant presence, and John attempted to ignore the heavy, fretful thrum of his pulse as he waited for an attack that never came.

A sudden shout rang out, followed by the squeal of tyres and the blare of a car horn. People around him jumped and gasped, and John looked on instinct, analysing the scene. It took only a second to realise that no one was hurt, but even as he turned back John realised his mistake.

Elsie was gone.

He spat a vicious curse at his own stupidity, walking faster and craning his neck in a desperate effort to find her, but both she and her pursuer had vanished.

His fingers stumbled over the letters as he sent a frantic text, his casual stride increasing to a quick march as he pushed his way none-to-gently through the crowd. His thighs ached with the need to break into a run, but he restrained himself, looking left and right in a steady, sweeping search that he’d learnt during his time in the military.

Even with his experience, he almost missed the dark bundle at the side of the pavement. It was too small to be a person, but the blank, black cotton caught his eye, and he sucked in a breath as he realised their suspect must have stripped off his hoodie in an effort to confuse any surveillance.

‘Clever,’ he muttered, hurrying along as he glared askance at his unresponsive phone. There was no reply from Sherlock, and John was busy cursing him for his silence when something grabbed his elbow.

He yanked himself free, his teeth bared as he turned to face the threat. It took longer than normal for him to realise it was Sherlock, who rolled his eyes as if John were being difficult before gripping his wrist and giving him a yank. ‘Come on. We don’t have much time.’

‘What? Where are we–?’

His question died away as Sherlock took off at a full sprint, darting down a narrow alley. Instantly, John followed, clueless but willing, his heart thumping and his breath whispering between his lips as he allowed his body to focus on the simple act of giving chase. It was easy – instinctual – and John was reminded of the first night he’d met Sherlock, chasing a cabbie across half of London, gasping and laughing all the way.

The burn in his muscles was a welcome relief after the tension of the past day: shaking off the fatigue and banishing the few lingering aches. He’d probably pay for it later, but as he splashed through shallow puddles and clattered up a fire-escape, he couldn’t bring himself to care. This was where he was meant to be, and he revelled in the clear cut demands of the pursuit.
Sherlock jumped a couple of gaps between rooftops before shimmying back down towards the ground. Navigating the rusty ladder was far from straightforward, and by the time John reached the bottom, Sherlock’s breathing had returned to normal: a faint gleam of sweat the only sign of his exertion.

‘Where are we?’ John wheezed, keeping his voice down as he bent over, his hands on his knees as he tried to call the wild thrill of his body back under his control.

‘Look.’ Sherlock beckoned him closer, and he peered around a crumbling brick wall to view the space beyond.

It was a small, cobbled courtyard, well off the beaten-track. The buildings around them looked derelict, and even if they weren’t the walls were high, with no windows pocking their breadth. A tiny garden had once been in its centre, but now weeds and a mad tangle of holly choked the patch of earth. Some kind of tree with long, weeping branches – dead now, but still in one piece – provided a thin veil, and a slender pathway led south, wending out of sight.

‘What am I looking at?’ John breathed, twisting his head to glance up at Sherlock.

‘There are numerous places along Caxton Street that offer an element of privacy, but this one is the most secluded.’

John frowned, blinking and wiping sweat from his upper lip. ‘So, what? We’re just hoping our bloke has the common sense to use it?’

Sherlock cast him a dark stare out of the corner of his eye, as if offended that John thought he would leave anything to chance. ‘CCTV coverage around here is thin on the ground, but the footage from surrounding areas indicates that he spent time here last night. Additionally, this is hidden under the holly.’

He tilted his phone, allowing John to see the photograph of a duffel bag, its zip parted to reveal the contents: vials and familiar plant cuttings, as well as a couple of pieces of equipment. ‘He’s almost ready to run.’

‘Who got you the photo?’ John demanded, letting out a breath and making a tight gesture. ‘Another one of your network?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, John. This came from Angelo. He owed me a minor favour.’ Sherlock’s mobile vanished into his pocket, and he tilted his head, listening for a certain note in London’s symphony as he continued to speak. ‘The main access point for this place, one that wouldn’t involve dragging a potential hostage over the rooftops, involves walking almost the entire length of Caxton Street and then doubling back, hence why we had time to beat them here. According to Mycroft, they’re following the expected route.’

He jerked his head towards the small expanse of cobbles, retreating into the shadows. John did the same, pressed tight to Sherlock’s side as he strained to hear anything to suggest they weren’t alone.

‘What about Sally and Greg?’ he whispered. ‘They can hardly “stumble over” this.’ He indicated the shadowed area in front of them. ‘They won’t even know it’s here.’

‘I’ve texted them the location. If necessary, we can make up an excuse for their convenient yet unofficial presence at a later date.’ Sherlock’s lips brushed against John’s ear. ‘If this goes to plan –’

He cut himself off sharply, and John heard Sherlock’s inhale in the same moment he picked out the sound of footsteps. One pair was stumbling, scuffing over the stones, but the other seemed quiet and
steady: more familiar with the territory.

John bent his knees to get a better look beyond the screen of the shrubbery, not that it did him much good. He couldn’t make out anything beyond a vague impression of blue jeans and a white t-shirt. It wasn’t until he spoke that John had anything else to go on, and even then, there was nothing familiar in the voice.

‘I just need to know what you said.’ He sounded young, and John narrowed his eyes, cocking his head to hear him better. ‘That’s all. Just tell me and I’ll let you go.’

He didn’t shout or threaten, but there was something – some uncomfortable edge of intensity – that sent a prickle of unease down John’s spine. He sounded like a man who’d found himself backed into a corner, and if he thought Elsie was between him and the only way out, then she could be in more trouble than Sherlock had anticipated.

‘I don’t know anything,’ Elsie’s voice trembled as she enunciated each word, convincing, at least to John’s ears, ‘and neither do the police.’ Her boots rasped on the ground as she backed up a step, and John felt Sherlock lean forward, tense and focused as her movements brought her into view.

She was huddled tight in her fleece, one arm stretched out awkwardly where someone still gripped her wrist. Her eyes were huge and imploring, darting between the general area of her captor’s face and something else: a weapon, perhaps?

‘You’re lying.’ The speaker’s voice was quiet, more disappointed than enraged, and John frowned up at Sherlock as he tried to get a read on the man’s mood. He’d expected brute force and violence, but whoever this guy was, he acted as if he were carrying out an important job: duty-bound and rational.

‘I don’t want to hurt you.’ The words were matter-of-fact, which somehow made them seem more threatening than if he’d yelled. ‘This was never about hurting people.’

‘We need to do something,’ John whispered, grabbing Sherlock’s collar to pull him down close. ‘Get his attention off of Elsie.’ He met that pale gaze, trying to convey all his concerns in the strength of his stare. None of this sat well with him, not using Elsie as bait and not their suspect’s chilling, rational behaviour.

At last, Sherlock nodded. ‘Go left.’ He tilted his thumb to indicate the tree a short distance away. ‘Circle around and get behind him. I’ll keep his attention on me.’

A brief protest rasped in John’s throat, but Sherlock shook his head, silencing him. ‘If you approach him with the Sig, he’ll use Elsie as a shield, thus neutralising any advantage the weapon gives us.’ He shrugged. ‘The gun is more use brought into play from behind: a more decisive threat, especially if we can take him by surprise.’

Before John could muster a response, Sherlock ducked his head, his lips brushing over his mouth in the lightest possible kiss. A moment later, he was gone, stepping out from their hiding place with his head held high and his hands in his pockets. There was no way to snatch him back, and John mouthed a curse as he realised he had no choice but to obey Sherlock’s instructions.

Scraping his teeth over his tongue, he crept in the opposite direction, checking the clip of the Sig and settling it in his grip. It was an agonising balance of stealth and speed, and he breathed a sigh of relief when Sherlock’s resonant voice filled the air.

‘You’re right. She is lying.’
Elsie gave a cry of alarm, the noise ringing out in the enclosed space. John picked up his pace, ignoring the rustle of his clothes as he moved. The tree blocked his view, eclipsing everything until he completed his orbit, the gun steady in his palm as he took in the scene.

The young man had dragged Elsie back against his chest, his slender arm wrapped across her shoulders to hold her in place. She struggled, kicking and swearing, but a heartbeat later she fell still. Something metallic caught the light, and John recognised the shape: not a pistol or a knife, but a syringe.

The sterling column of the needle tilted towards Elsie’s neck, not the clumsy stab and shove of the standard kidnapper, but something that spoke of skill and training. It didn’t breach her flesh, not yet, but the threat was there, implicit in every line of the man’s body as he stared at Sherlock.

‘She said the police were unaware of your actions, but that’s not quite true. In fact, there is very little they don’t know about what you’ve been up to.’ Sherlock’s voice was smooth with indifference, but his gaze didn’t falter as a thin smile curved his lips. ‘The only missing piece was your identity, and you’ve surrendered that with this pitiful effort.’ He waved one hand, indicating Elsie’s captivity. ‘You should have run while you had the chance.’

Silence fell around them, disturbed only by the rattle of the wind through the dead tree branches. John wished he could see the youth’s face – could read his expression and understand what was racing through his mind – but he had to gather clues from Sherlock’s features instead: a mask of placid observation, untainted by shadows of sentiment.

‘You don’t know who I am.’ The young man straightened up, spreading his feet for balance, and John would have felt better if there was even a hint of doubt in his response. Instead he sounded as if he’d weighed Sherlock’s worth and found him wanting: not a threat at all, but another inconvenience.

‘Don’t I?’ Sherlock murmured. ‘A Beta student hoping to specialise in reproductive medicine, you tend the gardens of one of the large estates during the holidays to bring in extra money.’ He jerked his head to indicate the man’s hands. ‘The stains from the fertiliser have been absorbed into your epithelials, suggesting hours of hard work with the soil. It was there that you discovered the properties of the plants that you’ve been using to contaminate the drug supply, though I doubt you realised their relevance without assistance.’

John wet his lips, trying not to let Sherlock’s monologue distract him as he eased forward. The only thing stopping him from announcing his presence was Elsie – a hostage still. He had no idea what was in the syringe, but it was stupid to assume that the substance wouldn’t affect her, and there was no point in taking unnecessary risks, not yet.

‘I know what you look like and I know what you’ve done. How long do you think it will take me to unearth the few, trivial facts that remain? If you flee, how many hours will you have before we catch up to you?’ Sherlock’s gaze flickered. ‘You could finish off Miss Jacobs with whatever you’ve got in that syringe, but there’s not enough for all three of us.’

Their suspect stiffened. ‘Three…?’

All it took was a second of uncertainty and Elsie burst into action. Her booted foot slammed into the man’s instep as she smacked her head back into his nose, filling the air with the forceful crack of bone-on-bone. She ripped herself away from him, reeling as her captor staggered back, the plastic syringe clattering on the cobbles.

John lunged, pressing the Sig to the nape of the man’s neck as his finger floated over the trigger,
ready to shoot. It wouldn’t come to that – he’d injure him rather than taking him out – but it was better to emphasise the depths of his defeat than offer him the faintest hope of escape.

‘On your knees,’ he ordered. ‘Hands where I can see them.’

Running footsteps made him glance up, and he saw Elsie’s figure disappearing down the alley in which he and Sherlock had hidden. Rather than try and block her flight, Sherlock had moved politely to one side and when John caught his eye, he shook his head, unconcerned. ‘I told her to get out of here as soon as we had him. She’s done all she can.’

He folded his arms, tilting his head as he surveyed the figure on his knees at John’s feet. There were no babbling protests of innocence, nor hissed promises of revenge. The young man’s knuckles bleached white where his hands lay on the back of his head, his fingers tangled in his hair. The blood dripping from his nose, probably broken thanks to Elsie’s blow, created a steady beat in counterpoint to the deep, even hiss of his breathing. From this angle, John couldn’t see much of his face, but he could see the flutter of his lashes as his eyes darted around, working through possibilities and rejecting each in turn.

The man on the floor might look submissive, his body meek in surrender, but John was far from convinced. Perhaps he wasn’t moving, but he was definitely thinking – a threat even now – and the abrupt clatter of footsteps made John twitch in surprise.

Greg and Sally marched towards them, their stride a hair’s breadth off a sprint. Normally, John did his best to hide the Sig from Lestrade and his men. However, right now, the gun was probably the only thing keeping the man on his knees. He didn’t dare hide it away, not until the police had their suspect in cuffs.

‘Is this him?’ Greg tilted his head. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ Sherlock stood back as Sally strode forward, the restraints in her grip gleaming as she guided the man’s hands down to the small of his back and fastened them in place. Her dark eyes explored his profile, full of professional judgement, and she reached for her radio, calling for backup to help escort him to the station.

‘His fingerprints should match those that we found on the equipment, and his DNA will do the rest.’ Sherlock jerked his head towards the bag hidden under the holly, its dark canvas easily overlooked. ‘There’s plenty of evidence in there. Due cause for arrest, too, I imagine.’

‘How do you know that’s mine?’ The man’s voice shook a fraction, a sign of weakness well-concealed as he rolled his shoulders in an approximation of a shrug. ‘It could be anyone’s.’

Sherlock raised one eyebrow before turning to Lestrade, and John watched the suspect’s skin grow more pale with every word. ‘Check for epithelial cells on the zip and handles. That should give you confirmation enough. Even if he wore gloves the bag’s old. You could no doubt prove he owned it.’

Sally guided the man to his feet, and John braced himself, waiting to see if he would try and run. He was unlikely to get far with his hands behind his back, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try.

Yet he didn’t move an inch, not even bothering to leer at Sally as she patted down his pockets and retrieved his wallet, opening it to examine his driver’s license. ‘Callum Reed. Twenty-two years old with a current address on campus.’

‘Run a complete background check. I need to know where he’s been, and more importantly, to whom he’s been speaking.’ Sherlock shifted his weight, hungrily examining Reed’s features. ‘He
didn’t come up with all this by himself.’

Reed said nothing, and as John stepped back, slipping the Sig into his jeans, he got a glimpse of his impassive face. To John, it didn’t look like he was giving anything away, but he did notice a gleam of sweat across his brow: nervous after all. The arrest had never been part of his plan, and now John wondered what desperate measures were racing through his mind.

Yet it was Sherlock’s expression that made him pause, the first weak flush of hope and success dimming to an ember. There was no bright jubilation of a job well done, nor the smug satisfaction of unravelling a complex puzzle. Instead, he looked pale and perplexed, as if Reed had failed to live up to some unknown expectation.

‘We got our guy, right?’ John asked, watching Sally and the other officers lead away their suspect. ‘He’s not some… decoy or something.’

‘Unlikely, though we’ll find out soon enough.’ Sherlock moved, stopping when he reached John’s side. ‘I don’t think our perpetrator is quite that clever. The more people he involved in his scheme, the less secure his secret. No, we’ve got the right person.’

John sighed, rubbing a palm down the back of his neck. ‘So why aren’t you happy? Elsie didn’t come to much harm, the guy behind this is under arrest… What am I missing?’

Sherlock cast a fond smile in his direction, but John didn’t miss the weariness in his gaze. ‘More than anything, we need a straightforward conviction, and I doubt Reed will make that easy for us. I had hoped he would be panicky on capture, making his level of involvement more apparent and his cooperation more likely. Unfortunately, that’s not been the case. He was not expecting arrest, but nor is he obviously frightened by it.’

He scrubbed a hand through his hair and stared at Greg, who appeared to be calling in Forensics to process the scene. ‘He was sensible enough to realise escaping arrest through violence would only worsen his situation. Instead, he’ll concentrate on damage limitation – though whether he chooses to obstruct our investigation or offer a confession and surrender the identities of any other parties involved remains to be seen.’ Sherlock trailed off, curling his fingers over his lips and frowning before he reached for his phone. ‘I need to talk to Mycroft. Keep Lestrade busy for a moment, will you?’

John frowned, watching Sherlock saunter to the opposite side of the courtyard, the distance providing him with privacy. Yet even though he couldn’t hear what Sherlock was saying, he didn’t tear his eyes away, not until Greg approached him, brushing his elbow to get his attention.

‘Something wrong?’ he asked, jerking his head in Sherlock’s direction. ‘I thought he’d be pleased his scheme worked.’

John sighed, lifting one shoulder and shaking his head. ‘Like Sherlock said, there’s no way Reed set this up by himself.’

He grunted in agreement. ‘He’s an accessory, a major one, and from the look of things he’s not exactly daft, but he’s carrying out someone else’s ideas; I’d bet a month’s wages on that.’

‘But whose?’ John closed his eyes in disbelief. ‘We’ve got all kinds of evidence to tie Reed into all this, but anyone else…’ He trailed off, letting his silence speak for him.

Greg tugged at his jacket, trying to flick out some of the creases before meeting John’s eye. ‘Give me a couple of hours, and I might have something for you. Like Sherlock said, we pull anything and
everything we can on this kid. We see what he’s been doing all his life and we search for connections. Even if we find nothing, it’s not a dead loss. We might not know who’s set all this up, but he does.’

‘And if he won’t tell us?’ John asked.

‘Then maybe the evidence will. Besides, if he’s got any common sense at all, Reed will confess. With all the proof we’ve got against him, it’s the only way to save himself. That should work in everyone’s favour.’

Greg cleared his throat and when he spoke again, his voice was low with concern. ‘The main problem I can see with all this is dealing with the other person, whoever they are.’ When John’s only reply was a puzzled stare, Lestrade jerked his head towards Sherlock. ‘His theory is that it’s an Omega, right? If that’s true, then we can’t arrest them. They can’t be guilty of a crime, not as the law stands.’

Realisation oozed across John’s mind, and he berated himself for his own stupidity. How many times had Sherlock told him an Omega had no legal agency? Even if Sherlock proved they’d murdered dozens, there was no way to press charges. They’d walk free while their Alpha took the blame.

It was the perfect excuse, and worse, it was an ideal technicality over which the Cunninghams could complain. How simple it would be, through some stupid quirk in the law, to say that the real culprit behind Alexander’s death had got away scot free, and that the terms of the deal would never be met.

Bitter and cynical, John wondered if that had been their plan all along. Had they ever intended to honour their agreement, or was it just another delaying tactic, something to run Sherlock ragged while they gathered their arguments around them and prepared to fight for their claim?

Shaking his head, he clenched his jaw, knowing there was nothing he could do. Dozens of possibilities raced through his mind, from returning to Baker Street and making the most of their time together, to packing a bag and fleeing the country.

Except neither would do Sherlock any good. He had spent his life one step ahead of Alexander and his family, had battled hard for his current existence, and there was no way he would let it go without a fight. Nor would he turn his back on the case, not while there was still even a single avenue left unexplored. This was more than just an obligation, it was personal, and all John could do was support him as he saw it through to the finish.

Straightening his shoulders, he turned to Greg and jerked his head towards the street that led away from the scene. ‘Do me a favour and put a rush on everything you can, all right? For now, we worry about figuring out who did it. We’ll fret over who to arrest when we get there.’

Greg nodded, accepting John’s orders without argument. ‘I’ll go wait on the street for the Forensics team, make sure they get to processing and do it quick. Will you still be here in a couple of minutes?’

John shrugged, glancing at Sherlock. ‘It’s hard to say. If not, we’ll be at the Yard.’

With a quick nod of understanding, Greg trotted away, leaving John standing in the peaceful courtyard. The wind rustled in the branches, disturbed only by the occasional murmur of Sherlock’s voice: mostly agreement, which was unusual, considering it was Mycroft on the other end of the line.

He didn’t have to wait long for Sherlock to finish, disconnecting with a tap of his thumb before pressing the corner of his phone to his bottom lip. Even from a distance, John could see his gaze was focused inward, rather than on the world around him, and he ambled closer, allowing Sherlock to
blink himself awake before he spoke.

‘Everything all right?’

He hummed, glancing up as Greg returned with the Forensics team in tow. ‘Considering the complexity of the investigation and the potential consequences of its outcome, Mycroft asked to be kept abreast of the situation.’

‘And?’ John folded his arms and watched Sherlock’s face intently, but it was a neutral mask that gave nothing away. He concealed his worries, and John wished that Sherlock wasn’t so well-practiced at hiding his emotions.

Sherlock’s lips parted, their delicate curve hovering around something unspoken before he glanced towards Lestrade and his men. When he began, it was in a slow, measured pace, as if he were choosing his words with care. ‘He has a plan. Mycroft needs some time to lay down some groundwork – something that could help us with the case. In the meantime we need to be sure the prosecution is airtight.’

‘What groundwork?’ John tilted his head, frowning as he tried to follow the vague explanation. ‘What’s going on?’

He reached out, tweaking John’s cuff in a mute command to follow him, his steady stride rapidly putting some distance between them and anyone who might overhear. He held his silence, his lips pursed as the echo of their footsteps bounced along the narrow street that paved the way from the dead tree and its holly-tangled roots.

‘It seems Mycroft has been thinking ahead, not just for a few months, but for years. He’s been careful, but the situation could be considered delicate and secrecy remains essential.’

‘What situation?’ John hissed, his heart thumping in his chest. ‘Sherlock…’

Glancing over his shoulder, Sherlock ran a hand through his curls. It seemed fretful and uncertain, but when he looked back at John there was a feverish gleam of hope in his eyes. ‘Do you remember when we were discussing options with Mycroft? He explained why taking this whole mess with Alexander to court was less than ideal?’

John racked his brains. It felt like a lifetime ago that they had sat in the living room at Baker Street, Sherlock fragile beneath the weight of his broken bond and Mycroft trying to do what was best for him. ‘He said that there were no guarantees they’d find in our favour.’

‘But that if they did, it would set a precedent – that there could be huge repercussions.’

The prompt jolted John’s memory, and he nodded his head. ‘He said your circumstances weren’t a vehicle for social reform. You agreed.’ His lips twisted as he recalled Sherlock’s quiet reasoning. ‘You said the jury would need confidence, and that the scenario with Alexander was too complicated to offer a black and white case of right and wrong.’ His voice lowered to a growl, his opinion on that unchanged. Alexander was abusive and Sherlock had suffered. To him at least, there was no argument there.

‘It’s also personal, isolated. I am the only victim, and my treatment doesn’t have an impact on society as a whole.’

John shook his head, not wanting to hear it, but before he could shift away Sherlock cupped his elbow, holding him in place. His voice was little more than a murmur, too quiet for anyone to overhear, and even John had to lean closer to pick it up. ‘This case, on the other hand, is completely
different.’

Sherlock raised an eyebrow as he continued to explain. ‘Members of the general populace are dead as a consequence of the tainted drugs, and not just one or two. The body count is well into double figures. A crime of this scale has never knowingly been perpetuated by an Omega before.’

John grimaced. ‘Yeah, and they’ll walk free, no matter what we can prove. We can’t even arrest them.’

‘That’s not necessarily true. At least, not if Mycroft’s plan finds fruition.’ Sherlock’s eyes gleamed as John’s head snapped up.

‘What? He – What?’ John ignored the hum of nearby traffic as he stared. ‘He thinks he can change things, just like that?’

‘Of course not. This isn’t an act of impulse, John. Mycroft’s been working for years, gaining allies, planning contingencies and, above all else, waiting for the right opportunity.’ Sherlock pressed his fingers to his lips, frowning before he tried to explain.

‘A criminal case like this, one which forces the spheres of the general populace and the elite to overlap and brings an Omega into the spotlight, not as a victim but as an aggressor?’ Sherlock shrugged. ‘It’s the ideal chance to challenge current precedent. To even get an Omega into court, the law must be changed, do you see? The state has to award the Omega both rights and agency in order to bring them to trial. That’s what Mycroft thinks he can do.’

John rubbed a hand over his jaw, frowning as he tried to take the rush of words on board. ‘And how does that help us?’ That was what mattered the most. Before Sherlock, John hadn’t given the plight of Omegas much thought. Even now, while he found the notion of how they were treated appalling, it was hard to relate to people he’d never met. As much as he wished he could say his fervour was for them, he would be lying. His determination and outrage was all for the man who stood in front of him.

Sherlock let out a breath, tapping John’s wrist and encouraging him to keep walking, his voice low as they stepped out onto the street and headed back towards the Yard. ‘As long as Mycroft can get the paperwork in place, we would be able to press charges against an Omega – which I am almost certain will be necessary. The case wouldn’t be left half-solved…’

‘No, I meant how does it help you and me, personally?’ John reached out, wrapping his fingers around Sherlock’s hand and giving a meaningful squeeze. ‘What effect would it have on this – us?’ He stumbled over his words, trying to grasp the impact of Mycroft’s machinations.

Sherlock swallowed, drawing in a breath as he shook his head. ‘It’s hard to say. Even if we were able to charge an Omega, the trial would be controversial and long-winded. In theory, setting it in motion would bring the laws regarding Omega ownership and treatment into the spotlight, but any changes could take years.’

John nodded, realising that they could not unravel centuries of social structure in a matter of days. ‘It won’t free you from the Cunninghams, then. I thought maybe –’ He shrugged, feeling stupid for hoping.

‘You thought my brother could negate the Cunninghams’ claim on me by emancipating Omegas.’ Fond sadness edged Sherlock’s expression, as if he envied John his optimism. ‘If it were that easy, I have no doubt he would have done it a long time ago. The case on which we’re working provides him with the opportunity, but a change of that magnitude would not be without opposition. There’s
no telling how long it may take or if it would be a success. However – ’

John watched him, seeing the dart of his gaze and knowing Sherlock was thinking hard and fast. ‘Forcing changes to the law in order to prosecute an Omega suspect would shake the stability of the establishment. Rulings that have been set in stone for generations would be thrown into doubt, and such uncertainty can only work in our favour. It’s an extra angle we can use, should it come to fighting the Cunninghams.’ He shrugged. ‘If nothing else, it might buy us more time.’

It was all connected, a network of arguments and counterarguments that made John’s head ache, but he understood the basics. The more they called the foundations of the Cunningham’s claim into question, the more difficult it was for them to get their hands on Sherlock once and for all.

He only hoped Mycroft knew what he was doing.

‘So,’ he said, clearing his throat as he tried to keep his grip on the situation. ‘We’ve got one suspect in custody, and we think it’s an Omega who’s been planning his every move. What now?’

A smile darted over Sherlock’s features, and where there had been the ragged edge of desperation, there was now something like certainty. He straightened his shoulders and tilted his head in the direction of the Yard, the shadows of his doubt melting away beneath the glow of his confidence.

‘Now, we prove it.’
Shadows of information took shape beneath Sherlock’s gaze, his deductions resolving into solid fact with every passing hour. Each new piece of data was a foundation stone, turning his theories of possible crimes into concrete events. They were like gems, something tangible that he could tie into the web of evidence they had been building since day one.

It was a triumph, yet still it was not enough.

Lunch had been and gone, the meal little more than a sandwich of indistinguishable flavour. He’d eaten it because John had pushed it into his palm in small chunks, leaving his mind free to pore over the details spread across the incident room table. People came and went. Sometimes they spoke in hurried voices, jubilant or puzzled by what they had unearthed. Others they were nothing more than shapes in his peripheral vision, departing in silence.

Only John was a constant – a pen in hand as he took notes, or his voice quiet as he ran interference between the police and Sherlock. He carved away the superfluous chatter of the officers and presented him with the raw information they brought to him like offerings at a shrine.

Yet John was not an invisible man, a mere convenience for Sherlock to ignore. He existed on the boundaries: a subtle pull on his consciousness. It made him feel as if he could loop far off into the deepest reaches of his mind palace, chasing leads, but that John would always be there to guide him back, maintaining his orbit without complaint.

It was an anchor Sherlock had never known he was missing, one John had provided from the day he moved into Baker Street. Now it was more solid, almost a tangible force, not a restraint but a safety net.

He allowed himself a brief moment, his breathing calm and his body still, to relish the sense of security that John wove around him. It was never something he had craved, before, but now he knew he would mourn its loss. He needed John, and even submerged deep in the investigation, he spared a few seconds to be grateful.

With a blink, Sherlock pushed on. He paid no mind to the tiredness in his muscles or the ache of his back from bending over the table. There’d be time to assuage the complaints of his transport later. For now, it was just a vessel for the furious workings of his mind.

At some indeterminate point, someone nudged him, and he dragged his eyes away from the latest page to realise they were no longer alone. Donovan, Lestrade and Anderson were all there, propped up against the walls with cups in their hands. Each bore the same strained expression of people who were running on empty, driven on by determination and bloody mindedness.

‘Well?’ Sherlock asked, murmuring his thanks as John passed him a cup. He took a sip of bitter coffee before setting it aside, knowing it would grow cold and forgotten, but too intent on the situation to care. ‘What have you found?’

Lestrade began, chewing on his thumbnail in a way that suggested he longed for a cigarette. ‘Reed’s not talking. He declined a lawyer, though God knows he needs one.’

‘Probably doesn’t want to expose the details, not even to legal counsel.’ Sherlock frowned,
wondering if their suspect was happy to throw himself to the wolves. If so, did loyalty to an individual drive his martyrdom, or was he fighting for some kind of cause?

‘He confirmed his name and all that. Otherwise, we’re getting no reaction. Complete stonewall.’

‘But not entirely hopeless,’ Donovan interrupted, gesturing to a thick file she’d put on the desk. ‘His background brought up a lot of stuff, like his educational and residential history. We’re checking out old properties, as well as his current address.’ She took a gulp of her coffee, staring at the liquid before she met his gaze. ‘The only thing that’s turning up blank is employment. He had a couple of jobs stacking shelves at the supermarket when he was at sixth form, but other than that…’ She trailed off with a shrug.

‘It’s not hard to hide manual labour from the system. Cash-in-hand is a favoured method of payment among many: an easy tax dodge, as well as being untraceable.’ Sherlock clenched his jaw, realising that the key piece of information he sought may be the hardest of all to locate. ‘Anything else?’

‘Only that his older brother used to live at Dartan Grove,’ the sergeant said. ‘A good decade ago now, when it wasn’t so bad. He emigrated; the house failed to sell, so it fell derelict.’

Sherlock nodded. It was a mere sliver of fact, but it filled in some of the outline of their suspect’s character. ‘Reed is not a man prone to taking unnecessary risks. Wherever possible, he chose locations familiar to him. Sensible, there’s less danger in known territory. Anything else?’

‘The bag’s his,’ Anderson set down another pile of printouts, rubbing at one eye as if he’d been staring at screens for too long. ‘His DNA’s all over it, and the substances inside all match up to what we’ve found at other places. The analysis shows the plants came from the same soil source.’

‘What about the Ritalin?’ John asked, speaking for the first time. He stood nearby, his hip propped on the corner of the table and his arms folded. ‘Can we find out where he got it?’

‘It’s not in a box, but the blister packs have a batch number.’ Anderson flapped a hand in the direction of the door. ‘I’ve got someone trying to trace it. We should know where he stole it from soon enough.’

‘It will be a hospital that’s part of the UCL group, one in which he’s been conducting his training.’ Sherlock straightened up, grimacing as his back protested. ‘It’s easier to steal from somewhere you know intimately. Check his financial records. If he’s not got friends in the pharmacy then he may have been passing out bribes to ensure someone’s assistance.’

‘Already working on it.’ Donovan glanced around, her eyes settling on the documents scattered around them. ‘Anything else?’

Anderson nodded, wrinkling his nose as he explained, ‘The stuff in the syringe was sodium thiopental. It’s a barbiturate used in anaesthesia.’

‘A strong one.’ Anger thrummed beneath John’s words. At first, Sherlock wondered if it was directed at the Forensics Lead, but a moment later he realised it was for Reed: a man abusing chemicals that should heal, perverting them to a lethal purpose. ‘It’s used for medically-induced comas in this country, but it’s a euthanasia drug in others. Give someone enough, and they’re gone within minutes.’

‘It was a fatal dose for a woman of average height,’ Anderson confirmed.

John huffed. ‘And he said it was never about hurting anyone.’
In his mind, it wasn’t,’ Sherlock pointed out, wishing the truth would soothe John’s aggravation. ‘The main objective was to test the substance. The deaths were merely side-effects, and Elsie would have been collateral damage.’

‘But what was he hoping to achieve?’ Donovan folded her arms and frowned down at her feet. ‘We know what he was doing, but we’ve still got nothing but guesswork about motive, and Reed’s not giving anything away.’

Sherlock rubbed a hand over his brow, acknowledging her words with a nod. ‘Perhaps the Omega will be more forthcoming. If I had to make an educated guess, I would say it’s something to do with behavioural modification. They’re trying to control Alpha biology. A more intriguing question is, how did they get to this point? The contaminant is not a random collection of chemicals; there are signs of careful, scientific development, but how did an Omega discover the potential use of their cocktail?’

There were a number of possibilities: A permissive Alpha may have allowed an Omega reading materials to aid in the construction of a biological theory, but that would require a level of education not normally attained. Alternatively, a serendipitous discovery could be the cause. The idea of coincidence rankled, but it was a possibility he couldn’t overlook.

‘Get one of your constables to examine the deaths of Alphas of the elite over the past three years. See if there’s anything that matches our victims.’

‘That’s a bit of a long shot isn’t it?’ Lestrade asked, cocking his head. ‘What are you hoping for?’

‘Anything unexplained. Omegas are isolated from society and can die unseen. People don’t question where they’ve gone. However, an Omega would struggle to hide the demise of their Alpha from the public eye.’ He stretched across the table, reaching for the file Donovan had mentioned. ‘Keep trying to get something out of Reed.’ He picked up a piece of paper and passed it to Lestrade. ‘That’s a list of everything we can prove he’s done. On the opposite side are other charges we should be able to add by the end of the day.’

Lestrade whistled at the impressive collection of potential crimes, mostly revolving around the theft, contamination and distribution of the illegal drugs, and the consequential deaths thereafter. ‘This could be good leverage. I’ll see what I can get for you.’

‘Molly is working on the extra bodies that Elsie told us about, at least those that have not already been destroyed. We should hear something from her soon.’ Sherlock sighed, gesturing around him. ‘Perhaps we don’t know where Reed worked from his employment history, but there’s a chance we can narrow down likely targets based on geography.’

‘What about the soil?’ Anderson cut in, riffling through the pages and pulling out an analysis. ‘If the plants were grown in a garden…’

Sherlock held out his hand for the report, doubting it would be that easy. Good, strong foliage grew in chemically enhanced earth. Outside, perhaps the background geology would still have some relevance, but many of the substances they were dealing with grew in potting soil, completely foreign to the native landscape. ‘It’s unlikely,’ he replied, ‘but I might be able to make something of it. Tell me the moment you find anything else of use.’

They seemed to understand they’d been dismissed. Normally, Sherlock would expect grumbles about authority, but for once Lestrade and the others obliged without complaint, discarding their empty coffee cups as they went. He did not know if their cooperation stemmed from some fragment of sentiment for his situation or if it was a matter of professional pride, but it made no difference. He
could not hope to solve a case this size on his own.

‘What about me?’

Looking up at John, Sherlock winced as his neck protested, stiff muscles humming their complaints. His back was no better, and John shot him a glare, pulling out one of the chairs pointedly. ‘There’s no need to stoop over the table like a vulture over a carcass,’ he pointed out, waiting for Sherlock to collect various papers before he did as he was told and sank into the offered seat.

The thin padding offered minimal support, but it did give some relief to the discomfort. If nothing else it took his weight off his feet, and when John’s hands, warm through the cotton of Sherlock’s shirt, rubbed idly at his shoulders, they spread comfort and heat.

It was a distraction, but Sherlock could not bring himself to tell John to stop, not when he began to chase away the knots of tension at either side of his neck, his fingers brushing over the bite on Sherlock’s nape. It was healing well, far more swiftly than his previous mark, which had wept clear fluid and stung for days, sore beneath Alexander’s indifferent treatment.

‘Does it hurt?’ John asked, his voice soft as he traced the divots: a reflection of the pattern of his teeth.

‘No.’ Sherlock sighed, leaning his weight back into John’s palms and soaking up the attention. His mind still moved, slotting puzzle pieces together, but for a moment his search for the answer was an idle want, insignificant when it came to feeding the part of himself that hungered for any fragment of John’s touch.

A light kiss dropped on the top of his head made his lips twitch, the smile tired but grateful, and slowly he lifted one hand to cover John’s wrist, stroking hair-scattered skin. ‘I need to work,’ he murmured, not even trying to keep the regret out of his voice.

‘So work.’

Sherlock tipped his head back – one eyebrow raised in a pointed implication of John and his powers of distraction. He was gratified to see the brief flash of John’s grin in return. He withdrew his hands, and Sherlock tried to ignore the way his muscles shuddered at the absence of his caress. The power of bond biochemistry was not to be underestimated: potent at the best of times.

With John, it was practically an addiction.

‘What about me? There must be something I can do.’ John sifted through the paperwork, pulling faces as he searched for some facet to which he could lend his expertise. Molly’s pathology reports would be ideal, but there was nothing new to add, not yet, and Sherlock watched him grudgingly decide to look over Anderson’s notes. ‘I can’t see the wood for the trees. Have we ever had a case with this much information?’

‘We’ve never had one with so many victims,’ Sherlock pointed out, skimming through the bland details of Reed’s life, from his childhood school to his family home. ‘It all adds up.’

John grunted in agreement, and for a long time the susurrus of each turning page was the only sound other than their breathing. Sherlock sat there, unaware of the changing quality of the light beyond the windows as he continued to pull together the strings of the case, attempting to weave something sensible from the disparate filaments scattered around them.

A knock interrupted his thoughts: a frantic little tap that made him look up to see Molly nudge her way into the room. Behind her stood Mike Stamford, his round face flushed as he closed the door.
behind them, blocking out the corridor as Molly’s voice left her in a rush.

‘We know what’s killing them.’ She smiled, not the timorous, uncertain thing that so often graced her face, but something strong and certain. ‘It was pure luck that I even thought to look, but I did, and then I called in Mike and…’

John held up a hand, his smile friendly as he gestured them towards a seat. ‘Wait, wait,’ he urged, letting Molly get her breath back. They looked as if they’d rushed here straight from Bart’s; sweat glossed Stamford’s face and Molly’s ponytail fell in a tangle over one shoulder. ‘Start at the beginning. You’ve figured out what finished off the victims?’

‘It took both of us,’ she replied, digging through her bag and putting reports on the table, creased from where she’d crammed them in. She tried to flatten them out, her hands shaking as she did so. ‘Even when I found it I wasn’t sure what I was looking at.’

‘And I would never have thought to run the test in the first place,’ Stamford cut in, grinning in Molly’s direction before meeting Sherlock’s gaze. ‘I’m not certain it would have shown up in a blood screen. Definitely anything routine would have missed it.’

‘Missed what?’ Sherlock asked, his voice quiet but firm, waiting for them to give him the answer he so desperately needed. So far, there was no definitive proof to link the victims to the same killer – nothing they could lay down before a jury in black and white. If Molly and Stamford could prove it, then the whole prosecution took a huge step forward.

Molly drew a deep breath, brushing her hand down her rumpled lab coat and glancing at Stamford, who urged her to begin with a wave, his expression lit with friendly pride.

‘It started with one of the homeless victims. He was brought in from a morgue on the other side of the city, and his autopsy was a farce.’ She gave a nervous laugh before stifling the sound, clearing her throat as she carried on. ‘His fingerprints were on record, and from there I could pull up his medical history. He’d had some kind of brain injury, years ago. Something that damaged his hypothalamus. It was due cause for a more in-depth exploration of the cerebral tissue.’

She licked her lips, leaning forward and pressing the edge of her hand into the surface of the table, her fingers pointed like the blade of a knife. ‘From the outside, everything looked normal. It was only when we sectioned the hypothalamus that I found anything odd. The cells were full of a substance similar to melatonin.’

Sherlock raised an eyebrow, tilting his head as he stared. ‘A hormone involved in sleep regulation.’

‘And one that occurs in huge amounts in Omegas when their bond breaks,’ Stamford added. ‘You experienced it yourself when your bite began to heal. In an Omega, it’s akin to a biologically-induced coma. Molly couldn’t ascertain the relevance of what she’d found, but I had some idea of what it could do.’

‘But everyone produces melatonin, regardless of their gender,’ John interrupted. ‘How can it kill someone?’ He narrowed his eyes as he tried to puzzle it through for himself. ‘I know it’s often used as a premedication before anaesthetic because of its sedative properties. Is that what it’s doing? People said the victims just… stopped.’

Stamford bobbed his head in agreement. ‘We think so. Humans produce melatonin in moderately small amounts. Omegas are the only ones who experience high levels at any point in their lives, when their bite begins to heal after a broken bond. Their bodies are designed to withstand the onslaught.’ He shook his head. ‘Alphas on the other hand…’
‘We checked other sites to make sure we were right,’ Molly promised, her dedication to procedure apparent. ‘The hypothalamus was saturated, like I said. The retinal receptors were just the same, and once we knew what we were looking for, we were able to find large quantities of it elsewhere, mostly in other areas of the brain, as well as the spinal fluid.’

She twisted her fingers together, wringing her hands as she continued. ‘Betas are known to have a lower number of melatonin receptors than the other genders. Even if every receptor was full, it wouldn’t have a fatal effect. They’d just feel a bit sleepy.’

‘Alphas are different. More like Omegas,’ Mike explained. ‘Lots of receptors, many of which are unused, a throw-back from an earlier point in evolution. On their own, an Alpha doesn’t produce enough melatonin to fill more than twenty-percent of the receptors in their cells, but introduce more –’ He waved a hand, indicating the autopsy reports. ‘– and you’re filling up the morgue.’

Sherlock snatched a pen and paper, scribbling down a list of the plants they knew made up the ingredients of the contaminant. ‘In any biological system, it’s impossible to alter the levels of one substance without the body reacting in unexpected ways, but this – excess production of melatonin, or even a substance similar – shouldn’t have been involved.’

He was aware of Stamford getting to his feet and shuffling around the table to read over his shoulder. John stood at his other side, and Molly craned her neck, trying to discern the text upside-down. Stamford’s wide finger skimmed down the list, whispering under his breath before he shook his head.

‘You’re right. Put this in an Alpha system, and you’re going to get prompt changes in brain chemistry: lower aggression, impeded sex drive and possibly some forms of sexual dysfunction.’ He scratched his head. ‘Over prolonged periods of time it would affect physiology, perhaps introducing Omega characteristics in the Alpha, but I don’t see how it would kill them.’

‘Unless it’s not the plants causing it.’

Sherlock looked up as John gripped his arm, the pressure almost painful as his eyes gleamed. ‘Didn’t you say there was something else in the contaminant, something you couldn’t identify?’

Ideas bloomed in Sherlock’s mind, and the last fragment of information fell into place, making him sigh in disbelief. ‘Of course. It’s not the surge in Omega hormones that results in the excess melatonin, it’s the sudden drop.’

He turned to Stamford as he tried to explain. ‘The contaminant in the drug stimulated the Alphas to produce high amounts of various Omega chemicals in their body, causing an imbalance, but by the time they were in the mortuary, all the evidence had been removed. There was no sign of foul play beyond unilaterally low hormone levels.’

‘Even the ones they should have produced naturally?’

‘Yes. We hypothesised the unidentified substance in the tainted drugs was a broad-scope scrubber, similar to those they use to remove the effects of some Alpha inhibitors. It cleansed the body of many of the active hormones in the blood. If, in an Omega, that scenario induces increased melatonin production, could it do the same in an Alpha?’

He watched Stamford’s kind face crumple as he shook his head. ‘Not to this extreme.’ He held up his hand as Sherlock’s shoulders slumped and John bowed his head, letting out a tight breath of frustration. ‘But, we have nothing to say that the melatonin we found in the victim was produced by the body. A different chemical – perhaps a by-product of the scrubber’s action – could have a very
similar effect.’

‘We didn’t have time to map the molecule,’ Molly explained, ‘but as long as it’s the right shape to fit the melatonin receptors, it would have the same consequences.’

She pursed her lips, pushing pages in Sherlock’s direction. ‘I checked some of the other victims. The same thing’s present in the three I examined before I came here.’ A self-deprecating smile twisted her mouth. ‘It seemed too much to explain in a text, and we knew you were busy, so we thought we’d come to you.’

Sherlock nodded as he re-examined her work. It was a step in the right direction – at least they now had proof that the victims shared the same cause of death and could explain it to a jury if necessary. ‘It’s unlikely to be the plants themselves that are causing people to die.’ He looked to Stamford for confirmation, bowing to his broader knowledge on the subject, and watched him nod in agreement.

‘It’s possible that mixing them together in a cocktail would create something toxic, but there should be more obvious signs in the victims. Vomiting, heart issues, that kind of thing. No,’ He indicated Molly’s report. ‘This is what killed them. Suppress the central nervous system too far, and your patient becomes a corpse.’ Stamford shook his head. ‘If I was going to point the finger, it’s at whatever this scrubbing compound is you mentioned. I can think of a few that might fit the bill, herbal and pharmaceutical. Want me to see if I can find a match?’

‘I doubt it will be easy. The contaminant changes between one batch of victims and the next. If the scrubber is one of the variables –’

‘Then I should be able to confirm that much.’ Stamford patted him on the shoulder, offering a beaming smile. ‘I can’t promise it will be quick, and I’ve heard that time is of the essence, but I’ll do what I can. Molly’s got copies of your notes in the lab anyway, and my lectures are done for the day. No one will complain if I’m using the faculties after hours.’

‘I’ll check the rest of the victims.’ Molly got to her feet, picking up her empty bag. ‘I’ll text and let you know if anything else comes up.’

Sherlock ducked his head, murmuring his thanks as they slipped away, waved off by John. The door shut behind them, and for a moment there was only silence as the two of them tried to process the rush of information.

The laughter came unbidden, a disbelieving giggle from John and a huff from Sherlock, inappropriate and bordering on hysterical. It felt like they’d been banging their heads against the brick wall of that particular mystery for far too long, skirting the edge while never reaching the core of the problem. Instead of a glittering moment of epiphany, it was Stamford and Molly who had found the answer.

‘Obvious.’ Sherlock glanced up at John, watching him collapse into the chair Molly had vacated. ‘The victims looked as if they’d simply fallen asleep because, to all intents and purposes, they had. Biological shutdown taken to the extreme.’

‘Saturated melatonin receptors set off a cascade of reactions that subdues everything: brain function, breathing, heartbeat. They wouldn’t know anything was wrong, not until it was too late.’ John pulled Molly’s hastily produced reports closer, skimming over the figures before reaching for his phone, accessing the Internet with laborious fingers as he began to check facts.

‘And of course, it cements another of our theories,’ Sherlock pointed out. ‘If the drug dealers sold something contaminated to a Beta by accident, they wouldn’t suffer any noticeable ill effects. Some
mood swings, perhaps, a bit of drowsiness, but it would be short-lived. They wouldn’t bother seeking medical attention. That, along with the fact that nothing abnormal showed up in the blood panels means the drug contamination remained under the radar.’

‘At least until we came along.’ John gave a weak smile, his gaze a tangible sensation against Sherlock’s skin as he watched him pace back and forth, his long stride eating up the confines of the room.

‘If Stamford can work out what substance is causing the melatonin receptors to fill to capacity, then it’s more likely to satisfy the jury. It’s easier to explain when you can put a name to the chemical, rather than merely point to a biological process.’ He reached for his phone, the text to Lestrade brief.

“Cause of death pinpointed. – SH”

If the DI was still interrogating Reed, then the message was an innocuous way to interrupt. If he was in need of specifics, then he could choose to come running or wait for a more opportune moment.

‘Unfortunately, that’s only one aspect of this mess.’

‘Everything else is slipping into place,’ John pointed out, optimistic even now. ‘We can prove Reed contaminated the drugs that killed these people.’

‘But not that he distributed them, nor that he was acting on the wishes of someone else. That remains a theory, nothing more.’

‘A compelling one.’ John got to his feet, moving around the table and propping himself against its edge as Sherlock continued to pace. ‘You said it yourself: even with a medical degree he’s unlikely to have the expertise to understand how the plants work and change the contaminant each time.’

‘But where’s the evidence?’ Sherlock sighed. ‘That’s all the court will care about, and there’s nothing here. I can deduce all I want, but without something more solid to offer the police, it’s all talk.’ He tipped back his head, the relief at Molly’s revelations dimming beneath the drag of his exhaustion.

‘So you deduce it.’ John shrugged. ‘You get the proof in retrospect. It won’t be the first time you’ve dashed off on a hunch only to have everything fall into place after the fact.’

‘I can’t.’ Sherlock shook his head, hurrying on as John gave him a confused, frightened look.

‘Deductions are still well within my capabilities, but as I’ve said previously, this needs to be done by the book. To have the case thrown out on a technicality would be –’ He stopped, swallowing hard as he contemplated that possibility. ‘People will use any excuse to dismiss the prosecution should it come to court. I can’t give them one.’

John nodded, taking a deep breath and looking around the room as if searching for inspiration. ‘Fine, then you work out where to point the finger, and we’ll have to trust Greg and the others to figure out the rest. They’re not stupid. They’ll manage. Look at what they’ve already achieved.’

Sherlock grimaced, ceding the point. When it came down to it, there was no other option. An educated guess was better than nothing, and there should be enough information scattered around him to make one possible.

‘Get me a map?’ he asked. ‘A large one of the British Isles will do. Lestrade has one in his office somewhere.’

‘Anything else?’ John asked, already hurrying off, eager to help in whatever way he could.
He shook his head, blinking at the pages in his grasp as the door closed behind John’s back.

The stale air of the incident room pressed down around him, making him feel starved for his next breath. An ache pounded in his temples, and his skin crawled as if John’s absence were a lost limb.

With a huff, Sherlock strode to the window, pushing open the glass and ignoring the rain that dripped down in the gathering dusk. These feelings were temporary, yet another annoyance thrust upon them by their respective biology. Things would be easier if this stage had already passed, if the bond had grown beyond infancy into something on which they could rely, but that was a useless wish, impossible to achieve.

Hanging his head, he tried to ignore the dull pain that was rolling in his temples and the itching craving for a cigarette. He didn’t even have any patches, and a covert rummage among Lestrade’s office drawers earlier had offered no reward.

The fresh breeze brushed his face, and he propped his elbow against the sill, the wind fluttering the papers in his hand. It felt like a reproach, the Work reminding him of its presence, but he ignored it, inhaling the city air. He’d been trapped in the stifling room for hours, picking over the evidence like an archaeologist over ruins and building it up, piece by piece.

It was intervals of slow going interspersed with the sudden jolt of realisation, the landscape of the case sliding in new directions. Molly and Stamford had not offered the first breakthrough, and he doubted it would be the last. This investigation was a machine in constant motion. All he could do was try and keep up.

The door opened, but it wasn’t John who entered. The scent of Lestrade, dark sugar and a hint of smoke, announced his presence long before he spoke, and Sherlock didn’t bother turning around, listening instead to the slow stride as the DI ambled across the room.

He settled at Sherlock’s side, leaning against the wall. His suit was crumpled and his hair a disordered mess: no doubt he’d been running his hands through it, yet it was not weariness that dogged his expressive face. Concern deepened the brackets around his mouth, and those brown eyes were fixed on Sherlock’s profile.

‘You all right?’ It was a calm question, neither harried nor pushy. Dependable. It reminded Sherlock of Mycroft: oddly fraternal.

‘Well enough.’ He heard the shift of Lestrade’s frame and the faint rustle of clothes as he folded his arms. From the corner of his eye, he could see the DI’s features harden into something grim.

‘You don’t think they’re going to let you go, do you? Your Alpha’s family.’

He sighed as Lestrade’s words summoned up the same well of doubt that had haunted him for days. It was always in the back of his mind: a nagging suspicion that every ounce of effort he put into solving Alexander’s murder would not be rewarded as he hoped.

‘It’s hard to say,’ he murmured at last. ‘I can’t do anything about their intentions, whatever they may be. I can only keep my end of the bargain.’

‘Even if it’s half killing you to do it.’ Lestrade raised an eyebrow, and it aggravated Sherlock that a man who saw little at a crime scene could be so perceptive of those he considered his friends. ‘You and John both.’

There was nothing to say to that. Neither of them had been discreet in their longing to be back in Baker Street, and the small reprieve the DI had offered them had only made things worse: a taste of
what they could have before they were deprived once more.

‘What would you suggest?’ he challenged, turning away from the window. ‘It’s not as if I can leave this to anyone else.’

‘No.’ Lestrade’s shoulders slumped, and Sherlock bit back a sigh. It had never been like this before, the Work something he could barely tolerate, but too often since the breaking of his bond it had become his burden, rather than his saving grace.

He knew, logically, that the feeling was not permanent. As his biology settled, so too would his temperament, but that did nothing to appease his current situation: one where the thrill of the puzzle was a mere ember and the blade of the Cunninghams’ claim hung over his neck like a guillotine.

‘No, you can’t, but if there’s anything you need…’

Sherlock huffed. It sounded trite, a tired old promise, even if Lestrade meant it. ‘Assistance hiding bodies?’ he asked. He did it to make the DI flinch, to watch the dictates of his profession come up against the man’s desire to help those around him, but it didn’t work. Dark eyes merely watched him, Lestrade’s lips twisting as he lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

‘Anything you need,’ he repeated, offering a sad smile as he pushed himself away from the wall and squeezed Sherlock’s shoulder, just once. ‘Though your brother’s probably better at hiding evidence than me. Now what’s this about cause of death?’

By the time John returned, the two of them were shoulder-to-shoulder, the DI listening intently as Sherlock explained what Molly and Stamford had told him.

The moment he entered the room, Sherlock felt the change in the air, a short: sharp spike of something that was hastily subdued. Instinctively, John objected to there being another Alpha so close to Sherlock’s side, but rationally, he knew Lestrade was a friend. The brief spasm of possessive protectiveness that flickered across his features was fascinating to watch, and Sherlock raised an eyebrow.

Lestrade shifted, apology writ large in the curve of his shoulders before John waved it away. ‘Don’t worry, I’m being stupid.’

‘It will pass,’ Sherlock murmured. He hated repetition, but John had been in frequent need of reassurance over the past few days. ‘Did you get the map?’ He held out his hand, not looking up as the coarse folds of paper pressed against his palm.

‘Donovan’s by the photocopier, but she’s on her way. She seems excited about something.’

‘At least someone’s had a breakthrough,’ Lestrade grumbled, still reading over the notes Molly had provided.

‘Reed’s not talking?’ John settled at Sherlock’s side, his expression sympathetic.

‘So far, the little berk’s asked for a glass of water. Otherwise, he just stares. Doesn’t make any demands. Doesn’t answer questions.’ Lestrade scowled. ‘Doesn’t even gloat about how clever he is.’

‘Not that clever,’ Sherlock pointed out, unfurling the map and spreading it out on the table, taking in the lay of the land before picking up a pen and marking relevant locations from Reed’s life. ‘After all, he did get caught.’

The DI leant back, dragging his palms down his face. ‘True. With every hour we gain more leverage
and he loses more ground, but I don’t think he’s going to confess.’ He grimaced when Sherlock and John both looked at him. ‘He’ll make us prove everything piece-by-piece, and when we’re done he’ll go to court and he’ll make us do it all over again. He’ll take his sentence and do his time. He’s not fighting anything we tell him.’

Sherlock circled another place name. ‘Perhaps he just needs the right encouragement.’

The door swung open, banging against the wall and making them jump. Donovan smirked, striding into the room as she waved a handful of evidence bags around. ‘I just got word back from the officers processing Reed’s apartment. The place is clean, all packed away like someone was going on holiday. However, our guys also thought to check his locker at Uni.’

‘What was in it? More drugs?’

‘Letters.’ The sergeant smiled, her eyes bright. ‘They’re not in his handwriting, and they’re not your standard correspondence.’ She skimmed one across the table, and Sherlock’s eyes were drawn to the recipe that covered its face. It was similar to the one he had laboriously deduced, and as Donovan spread out the others, he noticed the dates spanned the past eighteen months or so.

‘The formula for the contaminant.’ He dragged his finger down the paper, reading over names and varying quantities before he came to one he’d not expected, familiar, but unconsidered. ‘And the scrubbing compound.’

John was reading over his shoulder, and he turned to meet Sherlock’s eye, something understanding in his gaze. ‘You recognise it?’

Sherlock shifted, sparing a glance for Lestrade and Donovan. ‘When I was using these plants to control my biology, I selected a flower from the same family to conceal traces of my actions from a blood screen. It helped to speed up the body’s mechanisms of metabolising the evidence.’

‘And that’s what our killer wanted.’ Donovan ducked her head, tapping the heel of her shoe on the carpet. ‘Something to hide what they were doing from any test results.’

‘Except that the effort at concealment is what cost our Alpha victims their lives.’ He turned to John, speaking quickly. ‘Call Stamford. Tell him to try Sarium Vanadensis, also known as Love-In-A-Spin. As he said, it might take some time, but perhaps we can cut down the wait.’ He gathered together the other formulae, observing the similarities.

‘Were there any envelopes?’ he asked, grimacing as Donovan shook her head. A post mark would have been helpful. As it was there were no identifying features beyond the quality of the paper and the undeniable slant of an expensive fountain pen.

‘We dusted for prints, but –’ She pursed her lips, spreading her hands palm up. ‘Nothing.’

‘If it is an Omega then how were they getting the letters out?’ Lestrade asked. ‘From what you’ve said they’re not exactly allowed to trot down to a post-box. You’d think email would be easier.’

Sherlock pulled a face. ‘It’s possible to trace electronic messages. For all that it’s primitive, using the postal service can be more private. Stick a stamp on it, hand it to your postman when he delivers your mail, and then it’s one of millions of letters. If it gets lost, there’s nothing incriminating. Return messages are much the same. As long as the Omega got to the delivery before their Alpha, no one’s any wiser.’ He glanced at Donovan. ‘Did you find anything else?’

‘Yeah, actually.’ She turned to Lestrade, including her DI in her hurried explanation. ‘Reed’s not as clever as he thinks he is. In the bottom of that duffel bag there was a list of names. They turned out to
be places scattered around London. I sent what men we could spare to investigate, and the first got back to me about thirty minutes ago –‘

‘His drop off locations.’ Sherlock smirked, taking petty satisfaction in stealing Donovan’s thunder.

‘The point is,’ she continued, her voice a bit louder than before, ‘we think Reed stashed one last batch. The hiding places were full, and the dogs found the drugs in no time. We’re just waiting for confirmation, checking for fingerprints and DNA on the bags, that kind of thing. We should be able to tie it all together within a few hours.’

John straightened up from where he was leaning, his palms pressed to the table at Sherlock’s side. ‘So if we get that, we’ve proven it all, right? Molly’s checking the victims died of the same issue, and we’ve got all the evidence we need that Reed mixed the drugs and dealt them out. He’s directly responsible for their deaths.’

Donovan and Lestrade nodded in unison. ‘When it comes down to the bare bones of this investigation, yeah, that’s it. The problem with a trial is that you’ve got to answer every question.’ The DI gestured to the map Sherlock was examining. ‘Unfortunately, we’re still missing some bits.’

‘I’m working on it,’ Sherlock promised, his gaze moving over the chart as he read the geographical boundaries of Reed’s life. He had spent his entire childhood in the same family home, never straying far from it until he came to London to study. His existed in a rut between home and university, a fact for which Sherlock was thankful: it made his job easier.

Large estates throughout England were not uncommon, relics from times of the aristocracy. Many were no longer privately owned, falling under the protection of the national trust, but there were still enough for Sherlock to start circling potential candidates, his phone in his hand as he checked the registries of the elite.

‘Does he return home for the holidays?’ he asked, cocking his head as Donovan began rummaging through another file.

‘He’s bought train tickets heading somewhere up Oxford way, and yeah, they’re at the right times of year for trips home.’ She turned, handing the page to Lestrade. ‘The only other thing of interest in his bank records are cash withdrawals. A few hundred each time.’

‘Is he paying someone off like Sherlock said?’

‘Probably,’ she replied, answering John’s question. ‘Cash is harder to trace than most other methods, but if the recipient put it in his account, the matching deposit will show up.’

‘And if they spent it instead?’ John sighed, no doubt understanding the silent answer he found in Lestrade and Donovan’s expressions. ‘Would they be that clever?’

‘The most likely beneficiary of the funds is someone related to the pharmacy from which the drugs are being stolen,’ Sherlock reminded them, his voice vague as he devoted most of his attention to his current work. ‘Once the batch number has been traced, you’ll know where to look.’

He scribbled some notes before leaning back, scanning the map as he spoke. ‘Based on the assumption that Reed would not want to spend too much on petrol in order to get to a potentially low paid, manual labour job, the place we’re looking for is one of these.’ He gestured to the list of six places alongside the names of their occupants. ‘They’re all within a brief drive of his parent’s home, and privately owned by families of the elite. It’ll take me some time to narrow it down further.’

‘I’m leaving Reed to stew a bit,’ Lestrade murmured. ‘It might do him some good. I’ll go check on
Anderson, see what else he’s got to add to the pile. Do you two need anything?’

Sherlock shook his head, already lost in what he was doing. He tugged pieces of paper towards him and scanned their contents, hoping for a glimmer of fact that could enable them to narrow down their search: a foothold in the precipice of data that, at times, threatened to overwhelm them.

‘What are you looking for?’ John asked, pulling out a chair, his other hand already outstretched to offer assistance. It was a comfortable gesture, lacking in anything like resentment, and one corner of Sherlock’s mouth curved in a smile. John wouldn’t see it, not from this angle, but it was a simple expression of weary happiness he couldn’t stifle: appreciation that John was an asset rather than a detriment.

‘I don’t know,’ he confessed. ‘Anything that stands out.’

‘Not the kind of thing I can help you with, then.’ John’s wry tone made Sherlock glance up, slow and assessing.

‘I wouldn’t be so sure.’ He handed over a stack of paperwork. ‘Read that. If there’s anything that strikes you as unusual, tell me.’

John grimaced as if he had little faith in his own abilities to discern anything out of place, but Sherlock knew better. Perhaps he did not have his skills of observation, but he had developed good instincts over the course of their acquaintance. More than once, he’d been the one to point out something was “off” in a scenario, his gut telling him where Sherlock should aim the beam of his attention.

‘We could be here a while.’

Sherlock murmured an agreement. Already, most of the day had slipped away, the city beyond the windows sinking into street-lit gloom. He paid it little mind. Light or dark, it didn’t matter, the hours still sifted through his grasp as he explored each potential family for anything that could tie them to the case.

The first household was easy to dismiss. With no Omega occupants for more than a century, the Trevellians were well-known and considered eccentric by others of equal status. They were not the only family who refused to buy Omegas for their Alpha children, but they were one of very few.

Others were less straight-forward. The dynamics of the elite could be complex, and when it came to Omegas, private. Even being part of the society as he once was, he had little information to go on, and it took a great deal of digging to dredge up any useful data. The Alphas were of no real consequence, and he focused on the Omegas as someone entered the room and the smell of takeaway – loaded with fat and salt – filled the air.

He barely paid any mind to John’s sound of happy relief and ignored whatever Donovan placed nearby for him to eat. Only the buzz of his phone caught his attention and he glanced at it, swiping the screen before setting it aside.

‘Mycroft?’ John asked around a mouthful of noodles.

‘No, one of my network. I requested that a few people check on Elsie to make sure she was all right.’ He became aware of John’s fond scrutiny, and he shifted beneath its weight, feigning irritation. ‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ John hid a smirk behind his polystyrene cup. ‘It was good of you to look out for her. I take it she’s okay?’
‘Perfectly, though I expect it will be a while before we can ask her for any more favours.’

John chuckled in agreement, scratching the back of his head with one hand and licking sauce from his finger on the other. Papers surrounded him, and it looked like he’d been trying to organise everything into a more cohesive whole.

‘Have you found anything?’ Sherlock asked, watching him shift in his chair.

‘Not really. The only thing that stood out was the Avery Institute.’

‘What about it?’

‘Reed demanded that placement. Normally, students can put in requests for specific rotations, but there’s no guarantee that the university will pay any attention. There’s a note from one of his tutors indicating that he was quite insistent.’ John shrugged. ‘If he planned to specialise in reproductive medicine, it makes sense that he’d want to get in somewhere that dealt with the subject, but…’

‘But there might be a more relevant reason.’ Sherlock pursed his lips, turning the notion over in his head. They had known Reed worked in the Avery Institute, and there was still the vague suspicion that he had been one of Kirkpatrick’s illegal surgical team, but there had never been any confirmation. ‘Have I missed anything else?’

‘Sally came in and said they’d found the batch numbers linking the Ritalin to University College Hospital. Their administrators are checking how much is gone, and the narcotics squad are down there to assist with any necessary arrests.’ John shoved another forkful of takeaway into his mouth and chewed before swallowing. ‘If they make any, they’ll be checking the culprit’s bank account to see if they can pin those payments down. Reed must have been bribing someone.’

He sighed, propping his elbows on the table as if he were racking his brain, trying to give Sherlock the data he’d missed while immersing himself in his search. ‘Molly sent Greg a report. So far, preliminary results indicate that the same chemical process killed all the victims. At least, those they could still test. The only exceptions are Light Chris and the homeless man who witnessed his demise. The old guy was injected with a high dose of sodium thiopental.’

‘The same as Reed would have used on Elsie.’

John grimaced, his distaste apparent as he nodded his head. ‘If nothing else, that links Reed to his murder. That just leaves the dealer, and that will be difficult to prove.’

Sherlock grunted in acknowledgement. It would be up to the prosecution whether they included Chris in the list of Reed’s victims, but it might be necessary to sacrifice his anomalous murder for the sake of the case’s coherency.

‘The only other thing is that Mike texted me to say you were right about Love-In-A-Spin. Said it was nasty stuff – potent. He’s trying to map the shape of the molecule that caused the victims’ deaths; it might help a jury understand what happened.’ John quietened, but there was a sharp edge to his silence before he drew in a breath. ‘You said you used something like it?’

The question sounded strained, and he saw the gleam of John’s concern. That a substance could have the desired effect on Sherlock but leave him whole and unharmed when Alphas dropped dead was clearly unsettling, and he did his best to explain.

‘The family of plants all create analogues of the same chemicals: similar, but with subtle variations. The one I used was not as powerful as this. It works by mimicking enzymes found in the liver, thus allowing the accelerated degradation of complex hormones.’ He gestured to the various recipes,
showing the steadily decreasing concentration of the plant that worked to strip the evidence from the blood. ‘This does the same thing, but its stronger, breaking those structures down into different shapes, with apparently fatal consequences. The scrubber is the culprit, and the person developing this formula knew as much. They use less each time.’

‘But they never removed it, because taking it out would mean that the evidence stayed in the blood for too long. What they were doing would have been uncovered sooner.’ John narrowed his eyes in thought. ‘Although if they didn’t use a scrubber, maybe they’d get what they wanted? Something that made Alphas docile without them ending up dead.’

Sherlock went back to checking names on his phone, his fingers going through the motions as he replied. ‘There could be other reasons for removing all trace after each dose. A big hit of Omega biochemistry in an Alpha system swiftly affects their behaviour. Over time, the body should break it down, but if you repeatedly drug someone, there’s going to be a build-up. As Stamford said, it would affect their physiology – increasing the amount of breast tissue, for example – and an Alpha would probably seek medical assistance as a result.’

‘And that would expose the fact that they’d been drugged.’ John frowned. ‘So the Omega was trying to develop something that would alter their behaviour without taking it too far?’

‘It’s the most likely motive, and they almost succeeded.’ Sherlock raised one eyebrow as he considered the effort. ‘It’s brilliant, really. Developing any kind of new pharmaceutical outside of a laboratory is challenging at the best of times. It’s a miracle they got as far as they did.’

He knew John would not approve of his admiration, but it was unavoidable. The evidence laid out before them showed an intelligent mind hard at work: someone doing their best to manipulate chemistry and biology, probably with the most rudimentary of equipment. Their dedication and ingenuity was something he had no choice but to respect, regardless of the outcomes.

John sighed: the weary sound of someone who didn’t have the energy to repeat this argument. ‘Is there anything special about it? Anything that might help you narrow down who grew it?’

Sherlock shook his head. ‘If this were a normal murder investigation, we’d interview the suspects and go from there, but since we’re dealing with Omegas, that’s not possible. We’ll need the papers Mycroft’s drawing up to even get close to them.’

John settled back in his chair, rubbing his knee. ‘So we can’t turn up at their houses and start asking questions?’

‘No. There’ll be something.’ Sherlock swallowed. ‘Somewhere in all this, there will be information that links Reed to the person we are looking for. I just need to find it.’

He made a tight noise, casting his phone aside in annoyance. The screen was too small and the keyboard inefficient. If he were back at Baker Street, he would use his laptop. Instead, he would have to make do with Lestrade’s PC. Hardly top-of-the-range, but it would get the job done.

He got to his feet, not bothering to answer John’s query as he swept along the corridor. The DI’s office door was open, and the password to his desktop remained unchanged since Sherlock’s last attempt to access it. The larger monitor and wired connection made his endless task less frustrating, and Sherlock dove in to the Work, barely noticing John slip into the room or the steady peace that fell around them.

Initially, he could find very little to distinguish one Omega from the next. None stood out as anything remarkable: at least on the surface. One-by-one, he went backwards, looking through bonding
announcements as he tried to discover who they had been before their Alpha’s identity consumed them.

Assumptions were a dangerous necessity, but Sherlock limited his focus to the past two years. Reed had to have met with their suspect at least once, probably more, and none of the households had relevant family members who had departed in the interim. With any luck, that meant their culprit was still in the area, sequestered away within the high walls of their Alpha’s domain while Reed was their eyes, hands and ears in London.

A snuffling snort made him glance up, and he saw John curled up on the two padded seats that Lestrade kept side-by-side in his office. He had shoved the paperwork usually covering them aside, and Sherlock’s heart gave a tight squeeze as he realised John had dragged the Belstaff over his frame, nestled beneath it to catch some sleep while he could. It was a good idea, at least one of them would be well-rested, and Sherlock let him be, keeping up a steady pulse of clattering keys and long moments of silence as he read through his findings.

His eyes were gritty from lack of moisture and his back ached from slumping in Lestrade’s tired old desk-chair when he came to the last household. Neither as big or impressive as the others, it did not belong to an established family, but a second-generation entrepreneur.

Sherlock tapped his fingers against his chin, noticing the sparse wording and subtlety of the bonding announcement. It was enough to pique his interest. Notifications of second bonds were often less explicit, unless the match was a particular triumph, and Sherlock examined it in more detail.

Madeleine Stratford. There was no information of her past life, nor her maiden name, and Sherlock sighed, realising he would have to look for her first bonding to find information about who she had once been. He scrutinised older records, seeking out a match. Those he found who could fit the bill were set aside as he drifted through months and years, stepping back more than a decade.

And finally, after what felt like hours, he stumbled over the answer.

His breath caught in his throat as realisation shot through him, rattling disparate pieces into place. A frisson of adrenaline made his hands shake over the keys, and he scrubbed them through his hair as he read it again.

Jolting to his feet, he hit the print button, shifting his weight in impatience. Over on the chairs, John groaned, dragged from sleep by the noise of the machinery. ‘Found something?’ he asked as he rubbed a hand over his eye.

‘Not just something.’ Sherlock picked up the printout, already striding towards the door. ‘We came at this backwards. We should have paid more attention about why Reed was at the Avery Institute.’

‘What?’ John stumbled after him, banging his shoulder on the doorframe and muttering a curse as he tried to keep up. He was hot on Sherlock’s heels as they pushed their way into the incident room, his questions still unanswered.

Lestrade and Donovan were both slumped in chairs, their clothes creased and their expressions locked into the grim lines of people who have been working since daybreak. However, the moment they saw him, they straightened, no doubt recognising the gleam of epiphany in his gaze.

‘Made any progress?’ Lestrade asked, climbing to his feet and squinting at the paper in Sherlock’s grasp.

‘Did you interrogate Reed about his association with Kirkpatrick?’ he demanded, not bothering to
answer the DI’s query.

‘Yeah. Not that it did me any good.’ He sighed, shaking his head. ‘He didn’t react. Just stared at me like I was a moron.’

‘Perhaps you weren’t asking the right question.’ He gestured to the map, indicating the estates he’d highlighted. ‘There’s an Omega called Madeleine Stratford. She was first bound almost twenty years ago, and not to the Alpha who currently shares her home.’

They all looked at him, waiting for an explanation, and he held out the page to Lestrade. Donovan and John both leaned in, reading over the older man’s shoulder. ‘Her first Alpha is certainly dead, although how, I don’t know. I’ve not had the opportunity to check. For now, it’s her birth name that should catch your eye.’

He waited, watching them shift their gaze and stare, the slow bloom of realisation almost painful to see.

‘Ducart?’ John murmured, his brow wrinkled in a frown. ‘Wasn’t that the woman in the chop shop? The one who was going to run off with Kirkpatrick?’

‘Annaliese,’ Sherlock confirmed. ‘Madeleine is probably a relative. Sister, most likely, and I refuse to believe her being a potential suspect is a coincidence.’

He steepled his fingers, trying to form the flow of his ideas into something meaningful. ‘My research indicates that, although she was first bound when Annaliese was little more than an infant, she returned to the Ducart family after the death of her first Alpha; he had no remaining kin to claim her. Madeleine stayed there for a short while, during which time I imagine Annaliese was sold into a pre-bonding agreement: one that would see her connected to her Alpha when she presented eighteen months later.’

‘You think there’s a motive there?’ Donovan asked, and Sherlock raised an eyebrow at her quick thinking. Not that he should be surprised; she had a sharp mind when she bothered putting it to use. ‘Maybe they were looking for a way to get one or both of them out of being bound?’

‘They probably couldn’t avoid that, but there’s a chance that Madeleine began this whole process in an effort to develop something that would make it easier for her and Annaliese to control their Alphas.’ Sherlock rubbed his hand over his mouth, glancing at Lestrade. ‘Check the database for Madeleine’s first bond-mate. See what became of them.’

‘I’ll go,’ Donovan promised. ‘It shouldn’t take long.’ She was out of the door without another word, her heels echoing along the corridor as Lestrade continued to stare at the document.

‘And if it’s just a coincidence?’ he asked, wincing at the grimace that crossed Sherlock’s features. ‘Don’t look at me like that; it’s possible the poor woman’s got nothing to do with this. I’ve already had a call from your brother, letting me know what he’s trying to do.’

‘And?’

‘He said he’d need a name before he could issue any special warrants and so forth. If we put the wrong person on that paperwork, we won’t get another shot.’

Sherlock huffed in annoyance, wishing the others could see the investigation as he could, sprawled out in his mind for his appreciation. There was no proof, perhaps, but it was obvious all the same.

‘Talk to Reed. Madeleine only bound to her new Alpha the year before last. She would have left the
Ducart home shortly before her sister began her treatment with Kirkpatrick. It was at that same point in time, give or take a few months, that people started dying. She moved into her new Alpha’s home, where Reed was working, and together they came up with a plan.’

‘For Annaliese?’

‘For any Omega that needed it.’ Sherlock shook his head. He could see the potential for what Madeleine had done, not just something that could help her personally, but one that could assist every Omega who struggled through an uncaring bond. Whether she had considered the implications, he couldn’t be sure. For now, what mattered was convincing everyone else that she was their Omega suspect.

‘Reed’s kept his mouth shut, probably in the hopes of protecting Madeleine. She’s significantly older than him, but there’s a relationship there, platonic or otherwise.’

‘But – he’s a Beta, isn’t he?’ John asked, raising his eyebrows when Sherlock shot him a pitying look.

‘So was Kirkpatrick, but that didn’t stop Annaliese attempting to run off with him. Alphas frequently have Beta staff in their homes and estates, thinking that because they can’t detect an Omega’s heat they wouldn’t bother entering a relationship. Needless to say, they’re often wrong.’ He waved a dismissive hand. ‘Regardless, if he has been holding his silence hoping to keep Madeleine safe, then this might loosen his tongue. Even if not, I suspect his facial expression will give it away.’

Lestrade sighed, glancing at the clock before nodding his head. ‘I was going to give it one last try anyway. He’s waiting in the interrogation room. Do me a favour and observe?’ He shrugged when Sherlock glanced his way. ‘You might see something I don’t.’

‘Lead on.’

The corridors of the Yard unfurled around them as he and John walked side-by-side, following in Lestrade’s shadow. The night had crept ever onwards, and the building had fallen into the semi-hush of offices half-abandoned.

‘We’ve not got long.’ Lestrade explained. ‘By law Reed’s got to have eight hours of uninterrupted rest in every twenty-four. I don’t dare push it. Not if this case is as important as it’s shaping up to be.’ He shrugged when Sherlock raised a questioning eyebrow. ‘Your brother may have mentioned something to me about what he’s planning. I don’t know the particulars, but I know I’m not going to be the one who fucks it up.’

He gestured towards the interrogation room and its neighbouring chamber. It would be identical in layout to the one in which Elsie had been held, and Sherlock was familiar enough with the observation pane to take it in his stride. ‘I guess you’re not coming in with me?’

He shook his head. If Reed was truly determined, then Sherlock would have no better luck.

‘Right.’ The DI held open the door for them before sealing them in to the quiet gloom. Speakers set in the walls enabled them to hear what was going on while the glass offered an uninterrupted view, and Sherlock took a moment to take in Reed’s appearance.

The student’s hands rested on the table, flat-palmed and fingers splayed. His hair was still gelled in its previous style, undisturbed, and his face was smooth of emotion. Yet for all his efforts to present a stoic mask, Sherlock could see the flaws.

Whenever he moved his hand, his sweaty palm left a misty outline, and his eyes darted around,
taking in everything about the bare room. As soon as Lestrade entered, he focused on the DI, and there was nothing indifferent about his expression. Instead, his face was guarded and his head tilted to one side in anticipation of the expected barrage of questions.

Lestrade went through the preliminaries, asking once again if he wanted a lawyer. He declined the offer with a single word, Reed’s voice level but hoarse, his vocal cords probably tight with stress.

For a while, the silence dragged on, the DI happy to let Reed sit there and sweat. When he did finally look up, it was with an expression of polite enquiry: a mask that suggested the response didn’t matter, because he already knew the truth. He did not lead up to the question or ease Reed into it. There were no pleasantries. Instead, Lestrade uttered two words, and even he couldn’t miss the way the young man went white.

‘Madeleine Stratford.’

Reed licked his lips, moistening the dry skin as his hands spasmed against the table: an undeniable twitch of shock. Next to Sherlock, John leaned closer, taking in every micro-movement from the jolt of the suspect’s chest around his next breath to the way he drew his feet back under the chair, abrupt and tense, as if he were trying to take up less space.

Like a dog after a rabbit, Lestrade pursued that reaction, laying out one name after the other, collecting them together as if they were the cast in a poorly executed play.

With each one, Reed’s demeanour wavered.

Sherlock didn’t stay to watch. There was no point. Lestrade would milk Reed’s surprise for as long as it lasted. Maybe he would rebuild his walls and retreat, but for now, in this moment of weakness, the DI would get whatever answers he could.

The cool air of the corridor brushed his face as he pulled his phone from his pocket, dialling his brother’s number without hesitation. He picked up within three rings, his greeting cut off by Sherlock’s announcement.

‘Madeleine Stratford, previously Madeleine Ducart. That’s the name to put on your paperwork.’

‘I won’t insult your intelligence by asking if you’re sure,’ Mycroft murmured. ‘You wouldn’t have called me otherwise.’

‘Obviously.’ Sherlock swayed where he stood, one hand on his hip. His body brimmed with anxious energy, and he clenched his jaw as he held himself motionless. ‘How long will it take you to have everything ready?’

There was a pause as his brother considered it. ‘We need to be prompt, but any flaw in the documentation at this stage could be disastrous. Give me until morning.’ He paused, lowering his voice from its commanding tones to something more secretive. ‘I hope I don’t need to remind you not to do anything rash? The balance of this situation is tenuous at best. I’ve already faced serious opposition.’

‘Enough to make it impossible?’

Mycroft’s laugh was mirthless. ‘No. This will happen, Sherlock, and it will happen soon. All I ask for is your patience.’

Sherlock stared at the clock on the wall, the hands of which swung towards midnight, dragging away another day. ‘We don’t have much time to spare.’
‘Forty-eight hours, give or take. Do not think I have forgotten about the Cunninghams.’ Mycroft’s voice softened, taking on the soothing qualities Sherlock remembered from his childhood, before puberty had put the first flaws in place that would eventually leave him and his brother with their current, distant relationship. ‘You focus on tying up any loose ends, and let me deal with the rest.’

The call disconnected, leaving a flat buzz echoing in Sherlock’s ear. Closing his eyes, he slipped his phone into his pocket, taking a deep breath as he fought to calm his inner turmoil: elation and fear, relief and despair. He was doing everything he could, and still there was so much left unanswered. Two more days, Mycroft had said.

He just hoped it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Sarium Vanadensis is a fictional plant; it's the only one in the story so far that is :D
John’s seatbelt lay across his chest, the band a solid restraint against the eager beat of his heart. Impatience simmered beneath his skin, a chafing itch that grew more intense with every breath. At last it was time to make their move; all that held them back was London’s rush hour gridlock.

The night had passed in a stuttering array of shallow sleep and aching wakefulness. Much like Greg and Sally, he’d got his head down when he could, stealing a few hours here and there in some quiet, unconsidered corner of the Yard. Only Sherlock had remained awake through the silver light of dawn, fuelled by determination and necessity. Even now he was still working, a file open in his lap as he read its contents, paying no mind to the frustrating crawl of vehicles all around them.

John shifted in his seat, drumming his fingers on his knee and letting out an aggravated sigh. In front of him, the driver lifted her eyes to the rear-view mirror, glaring in his direction. No doubt she was more used to Mycroft’s professional silence, and John folded his arms as he looked around the bland-yet-sumptuous interior of their borrowed transport.

Little more than an hour ago, the older Holmes had walked into New Scotland Yard, and he hadn’t been alone. With thinning hair and a slender body, the stranger’s lined face suggested his age, but it was the set of his jaw and the iron in his spine that told John all he needed to know.

High ranking ex-military.

He’d fought off the urge to salute, and he wasn’t the only one. The man’s arrival had sent the Yard into discreet chaos, and it was he who had barged into the Chief Superintendant’s office, paperwork in hand.

‘Lord Michael Greene.’

John blinked, glancing at Sherlock in surprise. ‘What?’

‘The man with Mycroft was Lord Michael Greene: a powerful ally.’ He looked up, taking in John’s posture before letting out a sigh. ‘Your arms are folded but your back is straight. You’re not even leaning against the seat. You’re mimicking your reaction to his military bearing. He was a general, once.’

‘And now?’ John let out a breath, forcing himself to relax. ‘He didn’t waste any time. Twenty minutes in that office and everything was signed and ready to go.’

Sherlock’s smile was mirthless. ‘Much like Mycroft, he would say he occupied a minor position in the British Government. In reality, he is the force behind the figurehead of the Mayor of London, and the man with ultimate power over the metropolitan police service.’ He turned the page, frowning at the text. ‘He’s also connected to the Home Secretary, which allows him some influence over the justice and prison systems. Considering we hope to have an Omega in a cell by the end of the day, his involvement is rather necessary.’

‘Certainly put the wind up everyone. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Greg move so fast.’

Sherlock hummed, but John could tell he wasn’t listening, too engrossed in whatever he was reading. Sally had shoved it into his hands before she’d climbed into Lestrade’s car, the two of them riding together with a couple of police vans in tow. They’d be up ahead somewhere, stuck in the same traffic and probably just as impatient.
‘I thought your brother would come with us. Either that or keep us behind.’

The look Sherlock shot in his direction suggested he would have loved to see Mycroft try and hold them back. ‘He loathes fieldwork, and besides, his time is better spent in London making preparations. Apprehending our suspect is just the first step. She will need to be held in a secure, segregated location, and the entire process will have to be overseen for transparency.’

He sighed, and John half-turned where he sat, taking in the pinched line of Sherlock’s mouth. ‘Nothing in this scenario is straightforward. Mycroft stated that the warrant names me as an expert Omega investigator. That will pre-emptively negate complaints about my credibility thanks to my gender, but those same prejudices could work in our suspect’s favour.’

‘You think the defence will try and paint her as the victim?’

‘In a way, we’re counting on it. The trial needs to make people question whether Omegas are individuals with the same rights as everyone else.’ He raised his hand, cutting off John’s response. ‘It’s one thing to know that they are, but a different matter to have it set down in law. That’s what we want. That’s what will make a difference.’

‘And if her defence is successful?’ John asked quietly. ‘If they prove she can’t be held responsible for her actions?’

Sherlock grimaced, shaking his head. ‘It would be a disaster, further cementing the way the elite treat Omegas as property.’ He gestured with the file in his hand, passing over what looked like a coroner’s report. ‘It would also be a serious failure of the justice system. I don’t think even the best defence can get her out of this.’

John scanned the document, trying to decipher the clumsy scrawl of the pathologist’s notes. ‘What am I looking at?’

‘The report on Madeleine Ducart’s previous Alpha, a man by the name of William Howard. She called an ambulance, but the paramedics pronounced him dead at the scene. Her statement claims that they were eating breakfast when he started clutching his chest. She rushed to call the emergency services and came back to find him deceased.’ His phone buzzed, and he pulled it out, responding to a text before hiding it from sight once more.

John frowned, wondering if he’d missed something. ‘His blood panel shows he wasn’t taking any medication, which rules out an existing heart condition. It could be a spontaneous event, but…’

‘But?’ Sherlock raised an eyebrow, and John sighed, suspecting he already knew the answer. This was Sherlock’s way of making sure he was paying attention.

‘It takes, what, five minutes at most to call the emergency services? Complete cardiac arrest, one that kills in such a short space of time, is catastrophic. There’d be a lot of heart damage. While there’s some, the pathologist says it’s due to lifestyle and age. I’d expect ruptured blood vessels at the very least, but there’s nothing like that.’ He turned the page, expecting to see more information to explain the discrepancy and finding blank paper. ‘How did no one pick up on that?’

‘William Howard had no family to urge an investigation, and the police are encouraged to leave such things alone. It’s more than their job is worth to interfere with the elite.’ Sherlock leaned over, tapping a different paragraph. ‘Another inconsistency: if they were eating when his heart failed, then why is the food in his stomach almost digested? It should be intact.’

‘A confused witness?’ John suggested. ‘People aren’t reliable at the best of times. If her bond was
A tight sound of frustration hitched in Sherlock’s throat. ‘The death’s too suspicious – the facts don’t add up. What if she was using a precursor of the contaminant on her first Alpha? He could have been her initial test subject.’ He jerked his head towards the documents still in John’s grasp. ‘The autopsy covers the basics, nothing more. They wouldn’t check for the substances we know to be responsible.’

John narrowed his eyes, watching the slant of Sherlock’s expression. He knew it well: it was the look he got when he was convinced of a theory but couldn’t get his hands on the evidence to prove it. ‘What makes you so sure that’s what she was doing?’

Sherlock breathed out a heavy sigh, rubbing the back of his neck as he met John’s gaze. ‘Because I considered something similar when I lived with Alexander. Drugging yourself to control your fertility is one thing, but such actions do nothing to counteract an Alpha’s unsavoury behaviour.’

A lump of anger caught in John’s chest, not for Sherlock’s admission, but for the man who had made him consider such ruthless possibilities. He already knew that, towards the end of their cohabitation, Sherlock spiked Alexander’s coffee with contraceptive substances. It had been a desperate effort to wrest back some control, and one John couldn’t criticise. However, there was a difference between Sherlock’s behaviour and his theory about Ducart.

If nothing else, Sherlock hadn’t killed anyone.

‘Regardless of that, the complexity of these crimes suggests there has to be a point of origin,’ he continued. ‘Something must have happened to make Madeleine Ducart believe it was possible for her contaminant, whatever it was, to be a success.’

John blinked, looking at the coroner’s report and waving it in demonstration. ‘I wouldn’t say her first Alpha dropping dead was a triumph…’

Sherlock shrugged. ‘She might have considered his demise a set-back, rather than a failure, especially if he did not die outright. What if, for a while, it worked?’

The question hovered between them, gleaming with potential, but there was nothing to prove it. For now, it was just another hypothesis, and Sherlock knew it.

‘Speculation is useless,’ he muttered, scowling at the immaculate carpet beneath his feet. ‘The only person who could cast any light on the death of her first Alpha is Madeleine herself, and we won’t know more until we arrive.’

John looked out of the window, where London’s congested streets had given way to the broad sweep of the motorway. Suburbia ebbed and flowed around them, sometimes fading into the wide stretch of fields before building up once more. ‘Another hour, maybe,’ he promised, seeing a sign totalling the number of miles left to Oxford. ‘Then we’ll be there.’

He set the file aside, jiggling his leg and reminding himself to be patient. Unlike Sherlock, he didn’t have anything to distract him but the passing scenery and the comforting weight of the Sig in his jacket pocket. He hadn’t dared to leave it back at the Yard, and there was no time to stash it in Baker Street. Besides, for all he knew, he might need it.

Another rustle of paper caught his attention, and he glanced around, leaning in to read over Sherlock’s shoulder. In one hand was a photocopy of one of the letters Reed had received, the handwritten recipe neat and unembellished. In the other was a sheet of A4.
A bonding certificate.

‘Leverage,’ Sherlock said by way of explanation, ‘courtesy of Mycroft. Although we have the letters, we had nothing concrete to indicate they came from Madeleine. At least, not until he surrendered this.’

Sherlock’s thumb rested over the space left for an Omega’s signature, where a neat, curving hand had scribed her name. Even from here, John could make out the similarities. Handwriting analysis was not a hard-and-fast science, but at this stage it was a much-needed connection.

‘She did this herself?’ he asked, looking up to see Sherlock nod his head.

‘The same as I signed mine. Some Omegas refuse, but it’s a token rebellion. The name of a guardian is just as binding. If it was signed by proxy, it would be noted on the document.’

He folded the papers away again, tucking them into the inside pocket of his Belstaff as he stared out of the window. His gaze was distant, but it was not the vacant, intent appearance of a trip into his mind palace. Whatever occupied Sherlock’s thoughts was more superficial than that, crumpling the skin above his nose and twisting his mouth.

John reached over, stroking his hand over the clenched knuckles of Sherlock’s fist and watching it unfurl, fingers reaching to catch John in his grip. It seemed like all they were allowed, these days – the chaste press of palms – and his body pulsed with the urge for more.

His eyes darted to the rear-view mirror where the glass reflected the driver’s face. Her concentration remained fixed on the road. Mycroft valued discretion, and John doubted she’d find it necessary to report a quick, stolen kiss in the back of her car. He’d rather have privacy, no witnesses but the two of them, but this was probably the closest they’d get to solitude in the hours to come.

Quietly, he undid his seatbelt, shifting across and reaching out. He brushed against rough stubble as he touched Sherlock’s jaw, dragging him from his thoughts and back into the present.

He didn’t need to ask. Sherlock saw his desire with ease, and an answering emotion flared in those pale eyes. He heard the faintest hitch in Sherlock’s breathing, as if, even now, the force of how much John wanted him was cause for amazement. It made his heart hurt to think that basic affection should be the source of such surprise, and he tipped his head up, closing his eyes as he guided Sherlock down.

Soft, full lips brushed against John’s mouth, the pressure little more than a whisper across his skin. It set his nerves buzzing, and his grip tangled in the collar of the Belstaff, the fabric coarse beneath his touch as he tugged Sherlock near. His desperation bled out into the kiss, hard to the point of being forceful, and Sherlock’s longing sigh curled in his ear.

This was what he wanted: Sherlock solid and real against him, not a distant figure at his fingertips. He wanted warm flesh against his hands and the hurried hush of their shared breaths.

The broad blade of Sherlock’s palm rested against his face. It felt comfortable and safe, a dose of stability in a shifting world, and when he pulled away, John followed, pressing his forehead to Sherlock’s brow rather than allowing the distance to grow once more.

‘I–’ He swallowed, unsure what to say. Part of him felt he should apologise for snogging Sherlock in the back of his brother’s car, but he couldn’t bring himself to regret it. For the first time in days, he felt centred. Maybe he wasn’t sure what the next few hours held, but he had confidence that they could see it through.
‘Thank you.’

The corner of Sherlock’s mouth curved in that familiar, private half-smile, and he skimmed his thumb along the ridge of John’s jaw. ‘I wasn’t sure it would be something you’d want,’ he confessed, one shoulder jerking in a shrug. It was not the dismissive gesture John had seen over the past few hours when investigating the case, but a more vulnerable motion. ‘Casual intimacy. I don’t – I don’t have much experience.’

John swallowed, realising that Sherlock had misconstrued his attempts to give him space. Where John had been standing back to let him work, Sherlock had seen a desire for distance, and nothing could be further from the truth.

‘I thought –’ He paused, reaching up to clasp the slender line of Sherlock’s wrist. ‘I was worried it would be a bad idea. If the Cunninghams heard about it…’

Sherlock shook his head, quick and decisive, as if he were flinging his concerns aside. ‘It wouldn’t make any difference, Besides, I’d rather take that risk.’

‘I’d rather it wasn’t a risk at all,’ John murmured, leaning back and dropping his hands to his knees, pressing into the hub of bone.

Sherlock’s palm covered his knuckles, firm but gentle as he gave a quick squeeze. ‘Give it a few days, and perhaps it won’t be.’

He reached up, dragging the seatbelt down around John’s chest and clipping it in place, holding him safe in the central seat. It was a mute command to stay, rather than sliding back to the opposite side of the car. It was confirmation that Sherlock wanted him there, not just within reach but joined down the seam of their arms and thighs: intimate and inseparable.

The gesture gave John strength, and he sighed as an easy silence fell. The car’s engine rumbled ever onwards, and he stared ahead, watching the shifting landscape and the metallic gleam of other vehicles. They passed small towns and sprawling farms, and all the while Sherlock kept his hand wrapped around John’s, his attention locked on the mesh of their entwined flesh.

More than once, he almost asked what he was thinking, but it felt like an intrusion. Besides, he didn’t want to disturb Sherlock’s reverie, not when his features had softened, rapt and fascinated. This reminded John of the time, weeks ago now, when they had lain in his bed beneath the eaves of Baker Street, locked within the cocoon of the quilt as Sherlock played with his fingers, admiring the lines of John’s blunt, unremarkable hands.

He wasn’t used to anyone looking at him like that. Most people took him in and dismissed him in a glance, but Sherlock had not been one of them. Even after all this time he never stopped looking. Surely by now John was no longer a mystery?

‘Five minutes to our destination, Mr Holmes.’

The driver’s calm words were like a splash of cold water and John straightened in his seat, the tension coating his spine in steel. At his side, Sherlock remained relaxed, his feigned indifference almost convincing apart from the tightness around his eyes as he took in the land surrounding the Stratford estate.

John followed his gaze, seeing a thick copse of pine trees sheltering the groomed gardens. A paved driveway led up to the modern building, and after the stately affair of the Cunninghams’ home, the house seemed out of place, all glass and beams rather than bricks and mortar.
Greg and his men had stopped out of sight of the gate, their vehicles pulled up to the verge as they talked among themselves and gathered equipment. They looked up as Mycroft’s car came to a stop a short distance away, and the DI was already approaching as John and Sherlock climbed out.

A fresh suit jacket hid the worst of the creases in his shirt, and the grim set of his mouth emphasised the shadows under his eyes. John didn’t know how much sleep Greg had grabbed the previous night, but he knew he hadn’t gone home. Still, the look he gave them was intelligent and focused as he came to a halt, folding his arms and squaring his shoulders.

‘So what’s the plan?’ He smiled when Sherlock raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m not stupid. If this was a straightforward arrest, you wouldn’t have come. You’re after something. I can’t help you get it if I don’t know what to do.’

Sherlock nodded his head towards the warrant in Greg’s hands. ‘Put that away. Without it, we’d be here to put the Alpha in custody.’ He indicated the house, hidden from sight at this angle behind a thick, high hedge. ‘As far as the Omega knows, there are no personal consequences of her actions. She can’t be affected by the law, and she may even see the arrest of her Alpha as a benefit.’

‘That’s one way to get him out the picture,’ John murmured. ‘Her bond wouldn’t be broken, but she wouldn’t be under his thumb.’

‘Precisely. She’ll be more cooperative if she thinks she’s safe.’

Greg put his hands on his hips, looking doubtful. ‘Legally, that’s a bit dodgy. We couldn’t admit anything she said to the prosecution as a confession.’

‘No, but if she’s already damned herself with her answers, there’s a chance she’ll repeat it once she’s under arrest. Besides, with access to the evidence in that house, such as the plants, her input may not be necessary.’

Greg sighed, glancing at John before looking down at his watch. ‘Whatever we do, we can’t hang about. The warrant’s valid for twelve hours, and we’ve already lost three on the journey up here.’

‘That’s not normal, is it?’ John asked. ‘A deadline like that?’

‘Nothing about this situation is “normal”.’ The DI managed a smile before pressing his hand to his forehead, rubbing his temples as if trying to dispel a lingering headache. ‘With that in mind, where’s your gun?’

Greg read the stubborn guilt on his face before John could think to hide it, and he scowled as he jerked his thumb back towards the car. ‘Leave it behind, John.’

His croaked complaint faded as Greg held up a hand, shaking his head in a quick, brutal motion. ‘Look, this whole situation is complicated enough without adding an illegal firearm to the mix. You’re not alone; you’ve got plenty of backup and we’re not expecting to meet any serious resistance – definitely nothing that could merit the use of lethal force.’ He sighed. ‘I’m just trying to limit the number of ways all this could go to shit.’

It was tempting to argue, to point out all the times they’d gone into so-called safe situations only to have the presence of the Sig save a life, but John knew Greg well enough to realise the suggestion was more like an order. If he stood his ground and kept the pistol, then the odds were good he’d be told to stay behind, and there was no way he was sitting this one out.

With a reluctant glance in Sherlock’s direction, John headed around to the passenger-side door, slipping the gun from his pocket and putting it beneath the front seat, tucked out of sight. If the driver
was curious about what he was doing, she didn’t show it, offering him nothing but a bland nod of promise before he stepped back.

‘Thanks,’ Greg said as he re-joined them. ‘I know you’d rather go in armed, even if you’ve got no intention of using it, but if there’s ever a time to do things by the book, it’s now. We’re already pushing it by having you two here. It’s only because of Mycroft’s manipulation of the paperwork that you’re not back at Scotland Yard.’

‘My name on the warrant reduces the chance of our presence being a problem.’ Sherlock looked past Greg to where Sally and the other officers were waiting. ‘Shall we get started?’

The DI huffed out a breath, his haggard face grim, but he didn’t argue. Unlike many others on the force, he was happy to defer to Sherlock’s expertise ‘Yeah, fine. Anything I should know?’

‘Estates like this often have more than one exit. Posting men at the perimeter may be wise. If you’re right, we won’t need a dozen officers in the house itself. Have them secure the grounds.’

The DI glanced at Sally where she hovered within earshot. At his nod, she got to work, a map in her hand as she delegated the task to several officers, telling them where to go as Greg explained, ‘I’ve also called in some of the local force. Once the Omega realises it’s her we’re after, she might do a runner. The more manpower we have for ground cover, the better. Sally’s keeping them organised.’

‘It’ll take about fifteen minutes to have everyone in position,’ the sergeant added. ‘I’m coming in with you, but Dilloway and Magill are in charge.’ She gestured to a couple of officers in high-vis jackets, already taking command of the situation. ‘I’ve told them not to let anyone in or out. Is there anything else?’

When the DI shook his head, she fell in at Greg’s side, the pair of them striding towards the gate as John and Sherlock followed on behind. The sergeant had a radio clipped to her belt, the volume turned down low, and John didn’t miss the fact that they both had truncheons to hand, holstered for now, but a promise of force all the same.

Another officer accompanied them, her sensible shoes creating a steady rhythm as she brought up the rear. The woman’s name was Harding, and her uniform added a touch of credibility to their appearance as they approached the front porch.

‘This is the right place, yeah?’ Greg murmured to Sally as John eyed the blank windows of the house. It would be just their luck to come all this way and find no one was in.

‘Bit late now if it’s not.’ She reached out, pressing the doorbell. A crisp pair of notes rang through the air, making a dog bark, but it was several long, tortuous moments before there was any other sign of life.

The door swung open, yanked back to reveal a man in his mid-forties. Sweat stained his t-shirt and he had a towel in his hand, blotting it against his face. He was flushed and panting, and if it weren’t for the fact he was in gym gear, John would have wondered if they’d interrupted something more personal.

‘What is it?’ he demanded, shoving his blond hair off his brow in annoyance. ‘Who are you?’

‘Mr Stratford?’ Greg reached into his pocket, retrieving his badge and holding it out for the man’s benefit. ‘Detective Inspector Lestrade. Could we have a word?’

Stratford blinked down at the identification before looking up, his cheeks pale. For a minute, John thought he might slam the door in Greg’s face, but eventually he nodded, stepping back and allowing
them to pass. ‘Of course. Come in.’ A nervous laugh caught in his throat. ‘Though I must say, if this is about that speeding ticket, this response is a bit over the top don’t you think?’

Greg’s smile was little more than a sneer, and Stratford’s anxious grin faded from sight. His gaze darted from Sally to Greg and back again before settling on Sherlock.

A slow, steady inhale, like a man dragging in smoke, and Stratford had eyes for no one else. He stared at Sherlock as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing, his features twisted in an expression that skated the dark edge between desire and disgust.

‘That shouldn’t be allowed out,’ he croaked. ‘Bound or not.’

John shifted, planting himself between Stratford and Sherlock. He folded his arms, saying nothing, waiting for the Alpha to connect the dots. Perhaps his response was not sexually aggressive, but it was far from harmless. As much as John hated it, his presence might be the only thing to make Stratford back down.

The man wrinkled his nose as he examined John’s appearance, taking in the cheap clothes and his scuffed boots before looking him in the eye. ‘I would have thought an Omega was beyond the means of a member of the police force.’

‘As one was almost beyond yours.’ Sherlock’s voice slipped through the air like black silk, shadowed and menacing. ‘Of course, Madeleine Ducart was going cheap.’

Stratford jerked back, gaping as he stared. John wasn’t sure if he was shocked that Sherlock had spoken to him or if it was what he said that struck him speechless, but either way the effect was laughable.

‘Did they tell you about the suspicious nature of her previous Alpha’s death, or was it not a concern?’

John glanced at Greg, smothering a smile. Perhaps Sherlock didn’t have proof, but he was not afraid to wield his theories like a sword if necessary.

‘Dr Watson and Mr Holmes are consultant investigators,’ Greg said by way of introduction, his hands in his pockets and a blank look on his face. ‘I’ll need your full cooperation with every member of my team, Mr Stratford. I’m afraid the issue is rather more serious than a speeding ticket.’

‘Hey, if this is about Maddie’s last Alpha, there was never any need for an investigation. It was a heart attack.’ He shot a glare in Sherlock’s direction. ‘Everything else is just rumour.’

‘But the deaths of a number of Alphas in London aren’t.’ Greg reached into his pocket for his notebook, checking over the particulars. ‘I’m afraid Ms Madeleine Ducart has been implicated in a crime of a serious nature.’

‘What’s going on?’

John turned, observing the woman who hovered in the doorway to the kitchen. She gripped one side of the threshold with both hands rather than stepping through it, her body hunched to take up as little space as possible. Her head was bowed and her spine curved, submissive and meek.

He almost fell for it, sympathy swelling unbidden in his chest. Only Sherlock’s mutter of “shamming” made him look twice.

She resembled her sister, her nose a bit less sharp and her face a touch more round, but their
relationship was plain. Madeleine was wearing clean, designer running shoes and what looked like high-end athletic gear. Unlike her Alpha, there was no sweat glistening across her brow, and the touches of makeup that emphasised her features were undisturbed. It reminded John of the disguises Sherlock used; nothing obvious, but hints designed to give the desired impression.

Then there were her eyes, astute and intent, utterly at odds with her diminutive appearance. She looked at each of them in turn from beneath her lashes, barely sparing him and the others more than a glance, but when her gaze settled on Sherlock, John noticed her back stiffen and her knuckles bleach white.

She already knew why they’d come; any doubt on that score vanished when he saw the brief cloud of aggravation cross her features. There was neither outrage nor guilt, just annoyance, as if they were nothing more than an inconvenience. Sherlock was right, she didn’t see them as a problem, but nor did she drop her mask and step forward. Instead she glanced back the way she had come before turning to her Alpha. ‘Eddie?’

‘We’re here because of Callum Reed.’

Stratford frowned at Sally’s words, his mouth already open to deny all knowledge, but John was watching Madeleine, seeing the same micro-expressions that were often the only tells to Sherlock’s thoughts tighten her eyes and bracket her lips. She was practiced at hiding what she was feeling, pushing it down and away so most people wouldn’t notice. Even now, she didn’t pale or panic. Her sole response was to straighten up, folding her arms and taking a deep breath.

‘What about him?’

‘You know him?’ Stratford demanded.

At any other time, his look of betrayal would have been ridiculous. He was wearing the same stare as the one that had crossed his face when Sherlock spoke. Then, it had been disbelief that an Omega was helping a police investigation. Now, he blinked at Madeleine as if he couldn’t comprehend her being aware of anyone beyond the walls of the house.

‘He works in the garden,’ she pointed out. ‘You hired him yourself. He helps out Annabelle and Marcus during the holidays.’

‘And what’s that got to do with – you said Madeleine had been implicated in murders.’ Stratford snorted. ‘Has he said something? Made some kind of accusation?’

Greg straightened, gesturing towards the view of the kitchen they could see over Madeleine’s shoulder. ‘May we have a seat?’

After a moment’s deliberation, Stratford stepped aside, waving them through. ‘Make yourself at home,’ he muttered, turning away from Sherlock as he passed as if attempting to deny his existence.

In contrast, Madeleine couldn’t tear her eyes away from him, fascinated and wary. She didn’t seem to care about John or Greg, but Sherlock she watched like one animal sizing up another, analysing the threat.

She kept her distance as they entered the kitchen, her back pressed to the wall as Sally and Greg took their seats. Stratford remained on his feet, divorcing himself from them by moving to the other side of the breakfast bar and pouring himself a coffee. John followed Sherlock’s lead, standing at ease as he assessed the changing situation, relaxed for now, but ready to leap into action.

Subtly, he drew air in through his nose, sifting through the bright scent of kitchen cleaner and the
organic smell of food to pick at the fragrances beneath. Greg and Sally’s odours were little more than ambient, at least in comparison to the stench of anxiety that poured from Stratford’s skin. He was not as disbelieving of Madeleine’s guilt as he seemed, and even now he was watching her over his cup as if seeing her for the first time.

The Omega’s scent was different, and it took John a minute to realise her emotions were more intrigued than alarmed. Had Reed warned her, somehow? Had she been expecting them, or had she prepared for this eventuality from the start?

A nudge at his waist shattered his thoughts, and he met Sherlock’s eyes, following the flicker of his gaze away and to the left. A glass doorway stood in the far wall, and warm air spilled through the gap from the conservatory beyond. Sand-coloured stone wove short paths between the raised flowerbeds, and John could see a few familiar shrubs. He'd bet anything that samples would match the cuttings they'd found in London, and he could feel Sherlock’s frame thrumming with tension, eager to get his hands on a few last pieces of evidence.

‘So if Reed didn’t send you, why are you here?’ Stratford demanded, setting his mug down with a clank. ‘His crimes have nothing to do with us.’

‘The letters from Ms Ducart found in his possession suggest otherwise.’ Sherlock reached into his inside pocket, pulling out the documents he’d shown John earlier and pitching them onto the sleek, granite surface. It was Greg who unfolded them, splaying their edges wide so that Stratford could read their contents. ‘They’re instructions, enabling Mr Reed to mix chemicals to Madeleine’s specifications. The substance was then used to contaminate the illegal drug supply.’

Stratford’s snort cut through the kitchen. ‘So a few addicts are dead? Who cares?’

John clenched his jaw, thinking of the bodies they’d seen: men and women half-starved and living on the edge of existence, desperate for a few hours of escape. He remembered the emptiness of Vauxhall Arches and the hollow dread in Elsie’s voice, but more than anything, he thought of Sherlock, who’d been an addict himself not so long ago. People had their reasons for making the wrong choices; they didn’t deserve to die for that.

‘We care.’ Greg wasn’t smiling any more. He looked at Stratford with unapologetic repulsion, as if the upper-class entrepreneur was proving himself more worthless with every minute. ‘As well as more than seventeen confirmed deaths among the homeless from consuming the contaminant, a number of professionals in the city have died of the same cause.’

Stratford gave a brittle laugh as he scrubbed his hand over his face. ‘So you’re saying my Omega, a woman I’ve lived with for the past two years had a – a what? A secret vendetta against druggies? Why? What would be the bloody point?’

Sherlock sighed, and John smothered a smile at the blatant sign of frustration. Stratford was being obvious, following the simplest of reasoning, and John took huge pleasure in the way Sherlock turned his back on the Alpha, cutting him from his focus. Now, that gaze rested on Madeleine, who lifted her chin and folded her arms, as if daring him to do his worst.

‘The drugs were a blind: a convenient method of delivery. It wasn’t addicts you were after; it was Alphas. Statistically speaking, they’re more likely to indulge in addictive and risk-taking behaviour: drinking, gambling and drug abuse. Perfect test subjects.’ He indicated the letter where it lay. ‘You’d give Reed a recipe, he’d mix it up and contaminate the supply, then keep an eye on the morgues and let you know the outcome. You’d then adjust the formula and try again.’

‘Formula – what? What’s he talking about?’ Stratford’s hands clutched the edge of the breakfast bar,
and his glare darted around the group before settling on Sherlock’s profile, his face thunderous.

John’s nostrils flared, picking up the change in scent as anger took precedence over anxiety. He didn’t need to see the distrust in Stratford’s eyes to know he was losing his temper. Distaste at Sherlock’s presence in his home was warping into something else – volatile and instinctive.

‘The contaminant wasn’t designed to kill. It was to control an Alpha’s behaviour, making them less aggressive and reducing their sex drive.’ Sherlock glanced at him, indifferent. ‘Madeleine was conducting illegal clinical trials on the general population. Any other gender who consumed the tainted drug experienced no particular effect, but the Alphas – the ones she was after – were another matter.’

He looked back at Madeleine, his head cocked. ‘You even knew which substance was to blame: the scrubber that removed the evidence of your meddling from a blood panel, but you didn’t dare remove it. You thought doing so would expose your efforts, so you kept reducing the amount, hoping you’d find a point where it was safe to use.’

She blinked, watching him with morbid fascination. She neither confirmed nor denied a word Sherlock said, and the longer her silence persisted, the more uneasy John became. Madeleine’s impassive reaction was not what he’d expected. He didn’t think it was a reflection of her innocence, but one of her intelligence. It made him feel that there was something – some unknown facet – that even Sherlock had failed to see, and the thought of being blind in this situation had fear coiling in his gut.

‘You must be kidding me.’

Stratford’s response shattered the silence, and both Madeleine and Sherlock looked in his direction, breaking the odd, calculating stare they shared.

‘Problem?’ Sherlock raised one eyebrow, probably enjoying the way the Alpha twitched whenever he addressed him directly.

‘All this it’s – it’s science. A bit beyond an Omega, don’t you think?’

John couldn’t have said who gave Stratford the coldest glare. Sally’s gaze could have cut through steel, and Greg’s lips twisted in disbelief. The only people who didn’t seem surprised by the comment were those to whom it applied. Madeleine’s mask was as flat as mirror, revealing nothing, and Sherlock’s wasn’t much better. Whatever they thought, their implacable blankness hid it from view.

‘But not beyond the grasp of yours.’ Sherlock narrowed his eyes, his hands in the pockets of his Belstaff. ‘Tell me, have you been feeling strange lately?’ He glanced down towards crotch level, his implication clear. ‘Lacking in performance?’

A quick flash of ugly colour suffused Stratford’s face as he lunged around the breakfast bar, all gritted teeth and blatant fury, his fist half-raised. Madeleine gave a cry of alarm, but her shout went ignored as John and Greg lunged forward, the stool the DI had been sat upon banging against the floor as it overturned.

Between the two of them it was easy to subdue Stratford’s uncoordinated attack. A quick kick knocked out his knees, and a spin had his chest pressed to the kitchen counter as Sally’s cuffs slid into place behind his back, restraining his struggles.

‘Did you have to?’ Greg muttered to Sherlock, and John looked over in time to see him nod before
gesturing in Madeleine’s direction. Her hands were clamped over her mouth, and she’d lunged forward from the wall, shocked into action by her Alpha’s sudden burst of movement.

‘I didn’t.’ She dropped her arms to her sides, darting across the kitchen so she could bend down and meet Stratford’s eye. ‘I didn’t give you anything. I – I wouldn’t do that to you.’

Sherlock drew in a breath, the doubtful sound hissing through his teeth. ‘Well…’ He pulled a face, and John winced at the venomous look Madeleine shot in his direction. ‘That’s not quite true, is it?’

‘What?’ Stratford demanded, his hair flopping into his face as Sally and Harding pressed him down into a chair, ignoring his inarticulate protests. Sally outlined his rights, her voice calm as she went through the words she knew by rote, but the Alpha wasn’t listening. He was looking back and forth between Sherlock and Madeleine, vibrating with anger. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The meal plan on the fridge isn’t about weight control, not when considered in conjunction with the blood sugar monitor.’ He indicated a small device on a shelf nearby. ‘You’re a diabetic. One under constant medical surveillance.’

Sherlock shrugged, turning back to Madeleine and extrapolating his theories. ‘An Alpha in the privacy of your own home would make a convenient test subject, but he’s too much of a risk. With the right blood analysis, a doctor would discover that you were up to something. Anyway, who knows how your contaminant would interact with his particular blood chemistry?’.  

He lifted his chin, his smile mercenary. ‘You wouldn’t want a repeat of what happened to William Howard, would you? His heart was in excellent condition at the time of his death, considering the suspected cause. What did you give him?’

Everyone in the room focused on Madeleine, from Sally to Stratford, all searching for a glimmer of guilt. Her delicate hands tightened into claws, and John wondered if she was about to lob a punch in Sherlock’s direction. If she did, he wouldn’t hesitate to stop her, but in the end he didn’t have to take action. Madeleine swallowed, skimming her palms down the front of her jeans before she whispered her reply.

‘It was an accident.’

She lifted a trembling hand to her face, tucking her hair behind her ear as she ducked her head, her eyes downcast. Whether her show of remorse was for the benefit of her Alpha or the police, John wasn’t sure. All he knew was that Sherlock wasn’t buying it.

‘Killing him may have been, but drugging him with a concoction of plant extracts Omegas use as contraception was not.’

John licked his lips, his heart thrumming beneath his ribs. Sherlock was taking a risk with this, pushing his own theory forward to see if she cracked. It was nothing new, he’d done it at crime scenes a dozen times in the past, but he could still feel the air drawing tight: a gathering breathlessness as they waited for her reaction.

She raised her head, and the shroud of false submission fell away. What had been mere glimmers of intelligence and determination were now in full view, and John marvelled at the difference. It made her into a new woman, impossible to overlook. How Stratford could have lived with her and never seen what she was really like – not meek and peaceful, but determined and driven – boggled the mind.

Her gaze lingered on her Alpha before settling on Sherlock, cool and unrepentant ‘You know how it
‘is,’ she said at last. ‘All they want is an heir, and they don’t care how they get it from you. They
don’t give you a say, so you take matters into your own hands. My father taught me how to mix
elixirs. I put it in my tea to hide the taste.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Then one day William drank from the
wrong cup.’

A smile bloomed, genuine and joyous. It would have been beautiful if not for their current situation.
‘It was best thing he’d ever done. Within hours, he was so different. Courteous, polite, patient...’ Her
face shuttered, turning dark. ‘It made me ask myself why I was the one filling myself with poisons
when he was the problem.’

‘So you kept doing it.’ Sherlock watched her like a hawk, recording and dissecting whatever he saw
for hidden meaning.

‘Wouldn’t you?’ She reached for her Alpha’s abandoned coffee mug, moving to tip the dregs into
the sink, keeping busy as she spoke. ‘My life changed. I almost felt it was something I could
survive.’ She set the cup aside and turned off the tap. ‘Then he started experiencing side effects. He
couldn’t get it up – an Alpha’s worst fear.’ She gestured to Stratford. ‘Look at how he reacted to
your accusation. William had made a call to the doctor, and he drank the drugged tea just before he
told me about the appointment that afternoon.’

John’s mouth twisted as he guessed where this was going. Sherlock had been bang on the money.
She’d discovered how her anti-fertility treatments could affect her Alpha’s behaviour and acted
accordingly. It wasn’t that which had killed him, but what came next.

‘You panicked.’

‘I reacted.’

She tapped her palms on the edge of the sink, her rings chiming against the stonework before she
pushed herself away, pacing to a halt in the middle of the room and folding her arms. ‘I waited for an
hour and then made him another drink. I dosed it with Love-In-A-Spin. It’s what my dad always told
me to take if I used too much of the other stuff. He said it would help remove the chemicals from my
blood and I’d feel better.’ She met Sherlock’s eye, and if she was lying, then she was one of the best
actors John had seen. ‘I was trying to hide what I’d done. I didn’t mean for it to happen like that.’

Her hand went to the back of her neck, and John realised she was touching her bite, perhaps
remembering the one that branded her skin before the current mark. ‘There was nothing I could do to
help him. He was dead before the ambulance got there. They took me to my family, and that was the
end of it. Not a single soul thought anything about it beyond a few rumours. Not until now, anyway.’
She frowned in Sherlock’s direction, grimacing. ‘I suppose it takes one to know one.’

Sherlock didn’t argue with that, and John saw the truth of Madeleine’s simple statement. If Sherlock
had been an Alpha faced with this case, would he have had the relevant knowledge to see its
convoluted purpose? A great deal of his expertise had its roots in his personal experiences, and
without them, John wondered if they’d ever have unravelled the vast complexities of what Madeleine
had done.

‘And perhaps that’s where it would have ended, if not for your sister.’

At Sherlock’s words, Stratford gave a tight, troubled whine. The man still sat in the chair, hunched as
if he’d taken a knife to the gut. He strained against the cuffs holding his arms behind his back, and
John could see the tremors shuddering through his frame.

‘Wait. I – Madeleine doesn’t know about Annaliese.’
Sherlock glanced at the Omega, taking in her rigid posture and tense shoulders in one sweep. ‘Wrong. You may not have told her, but Reed did. I suspect he had a front row seat to witness her sister’s death.’

Silence fell, punctuated by the shallow sound of Madeleine’s breathing. She didn’t weep, but it was a close-run thing. John could see the gleam of tears in her eyes; an old grief, less raw than it had once been, but present all the same. Stratford looked equally broken, a victim of circumstance.

‘Stupid girl.’ Madeleine shook her head, dabbing at her eyes with her cuff. ‘I told her to wait – to be a bit more patient… We had time. She hadn’t presented yet, and then she fell in love.’ Scorn laced her voice, and she swallowed as if fighting the urge to spit her disgust. ‘She gave her heart to a man who ripped out her insides and left her dead on an operating table.’

Her chest hitched, and John could see the flaws in her composure: months of frustration and helplessness breaking through. ‘We were getting there! Making progress, but she – she couldn’t wait any longer. Callum tried to stop her. He said he tried to save her when the surgery went wrong, but …’

She trailed off, her eyes unfocused as she stared at whatever horrors her imagination produced. For Stratford and the officers of the Yard, she was the centre of attention, but John frowned, squinting as he tried to recall that particular crime scene before glancing in Sherlock’s direction.

A similar hint of puzzlement wrinkled his brow, and they shared a look, knowing that they’d had the same thought. There had been no sign of any attempted resuscitation on Annaliese Ducart. No one had tried to repair the arterial damage or re-transfuse her blood volume. There hadn’t been the equipment or the time to spare.

And if Reed had lied to Madeleine about that, then perhaps he had a more active, manipulative role in events than they had first suspected.

‘Was it him who convinced you to keep going, once your sister was gone?’

Madeleine’s zip chimed as she fiddled with it, clutching the small tab of metal in a fit of nervous tension. She stared, unblinking, at the floor, not taking her eyes off the tiles. ‘He suggested it, that’s all. If we could get it to work, the drug would have helped Annaliese deal with her new Alpha, but she’s not the only one who could benefit.’ She blinked, breaking herself from her reverie as she stared Sherlock in the eye. ‘Not that you need me to tell you that. You’ve been in the same place.’

Her brow furrowed, and John watched her push her pain aside, hiding it beneath the gloss of her intellectual frustration. She looked like Sherlock when a case had gone cold, all misery and annoyance as she repeated, ‘We were so close.’

‘But you never thought to stop?’ Greg’s rough voice was a shock. John had almost forgotten he was there, silent and observant by the breakfast bar. He’d righted his stool and perched on its edge, his body language neutral. ‘You knew people were dying because of what you were doing, but you kept going?’

She shifted her weight, slipping her hands into her pockets as she stared at the DI. ‘The way Alphas treat Omegas isn’t going to stop, so why should I?’

‘Perhaps you should have questioned your motives when you started using your contaminant as a weapon?’ Sherlock suggested, his eyes boring into Madeleine without mercy. ‘At that point, any hint of moral superiority fades, and a charge of manslaughter becomes one of murder. Was there anyone else, or was it just Alexander Cunningham you deliberately killed?’
John blinked, hiding his surprise at Sherlock bringing up Sally’s theory. It felt like a lifetime ago that the sergeant had suggested someone had gone after Alexander to get Sherlock off the case, and there’d never been any evidence to back it up.

Madeleine smiled, matching Sherlock’s stare. Her eyes were bloodshot from the earlier sheen of her tears, but she didn’t flinch. ‘Good luck proving that one, Mr Holmes.’

Sherlock glanced towards Lestrade, and John saw the questioning light in his gaze. If the DI had anything else to add to the conversation, now was the perfect time to do so. A minuscule shake of Greg’s head was his only response, and he held out the slip of paper that had never left his grasp, surrendering it without question.

‘I don’t think that will be a problem,’ Sherlock murmured. ‘I’m sure we can find adequate evidence to acquit or condemn you of that charge in due time.’

Her smile dimmed at its edges, her eyes narrowing. ‘You mean him.’ She nodded in Stratford’s direction, and knowing what was coming, John almost felt sorry for her. ‘The charges will be pressed against him, not me.’

Sherlock raised one eyebrow, holding out the piece of paper at arm’s length so she could read the nondescript text. It was straightforward and to the point, leaving nothing in doubt, and Madeleine’s eyes grew wide in horror.

‘I’m afraid not. You’re under arrest.’

The faint wash of colour in her cheeks drained away as she stared, transfixed, her mouth moving around silent protests. Her hair whispered as she shook her head, slow at first and then more frantic. Off to her left, Harding shifted, walking behind her with a pair of cuffs in her hand. She didn’t step in to make the arrest, not yet, and John could see her analysing the situation, her body braced beneath the lines of her uniform.

‘That’s impossible.’ Madeleine’s breath stuttered between her lips as her voice rose, turning shrill. ‘That’s – an Omega has no legal agency! They can’t be held responsible for any crime they commit!’

‘In this case, the law has made an exception.’

Her expression cracked like porcelain, the last vestiges of control slipping to reveal a cocktail of fear and resentment. Her trainers squeaked on the tiled floor as she lunged away, crying out in surprise when she found Harding waiting for her.

Madeleine reacted, her palm open and punishing as she smacked it hard over Harding’s ear. It was a typical movement of self-defence, executed without hesitation, and the officer reeled back, dazed by the noise and pain.

One second of indecision gave the Omega the opportunity she needed. Before John could even blink, she was gone, darting away through the open doors of the conservatory and vanishing into the greenery before anyone could move.

‘Double around the house. Try and cut her off!’ Sherlock ordered the others, taking off in pursuit and leaving John to spit a curse as he broke into a sprint.

Behind him, he could hear Sally talking into her radio, snapping out curt orders to the officers on the perimeter. Greg and Harding followed Sherlock’s command, doors banging open in their wake as they hurried back to the front door, desperate to block Madeleine’s escape before she got too far.
The humid atmosphere of the huge greenhouse pressed against John’s skin as they rushed along the path, moving fast enough that more than one branch left a stinging cut across his cheek as it whipped past. Yet he paid it no mind, his attention fixed on Sherlock’s back as he tried to keep up, determined not to let him out of his sight.

A cool breeze ruffled his hair, and he groaned as he realised that there was another door connecting the glass room to the gardens beyond. He could make out the stretch of green lawn and the looming, spindly boles of the pine trees that surrounded the estate. Up ahead, Madeleine raced across the intervening space, her head down and her stride long. She knew where she was going, and she ran as if her life depended on it.

John followed Sherlock into the garden, speeding up to fall into a steady, dogged pace at his side. Behind him he could hear Greg and several other officers, probably splitting up in the hopes of covering more ground, but Madeleine was strides ahead, already vanishing into the trees.

Underfoot, the lush grass soon gave way to the dry, parched earth, littered with pine-needles and reeking of resin. The air between the trunks carried a dim, grey gloom, the overcast day barely sparing enough light to penetrate the spiky canopy. The earth was a tangle of twisted roots and fallen branches, waiting to trip the unwary, and he tried not to twist an ankle as they ploughed after her receding figure.

She was little more than a ghost up ahead, indistinct as she slipped between the trees, the columns of bark breaking up the line of sight. John kept his eyes fixed on her, but with every moment, a clear view was harder to come by, and he blinked sweat from his lashes.

Between one breath and the next, Madeleine was gone.

The forest broke around them, releasing them into a small, empty clearing. John could see the stumps where someone had cut down a few rotten trees, and the window of sky overhead stared down at them.

Sherlock swore, his Belstaff whispering as he turned this way and that, peering into the shadows before shutting his eyes and pressing his hands to his temples. His lips moved silently, and John looked away, keeping watch for Madeleine and missing the weight of his Sig in his pocket.

‘Any ideas?’ he asked, his chest heaving as he endeavoured to get his breath back.

Sherlock dropped his arms to his sides, his nostrils flaring as he shook his head. ‘The estate is surrounded. Between Lestrade’s men from the Yard and the reinforcements from the local station, there’s no way she can leave unseen.’

John wiped his hand along his top lip, straining to hear anything but the sigh of the wind in the branches and the soft trill of birdsong, but there was nothing. He couldn’t even make out the sound of traffic. Had Lestrade closed the road, or did the trees muffle everything?

‘What options does she have?’

‘Not many,’ Sherlock replied. ‘Her Alpha is in custody, so even if he were willing to help her, there’s nothing he can do. She’s unarmed, or at least without conventional weaponry, which puts her at a disadvantage. She can’t try and force her way through the police perimeter by violence or coercion. If I were in her situation, I’d stay out of sight until the right opportunity presented itself.’

Putting his hands on his hips, John stared around the clearing, eyeing the dusky frontier of the trees. They’d been planted too close together, growing thin and sinister as they fought for light. Worse,
Madeleine knew the land better than they did. She’d be aware of every place where she could hunker down and bide her time, leaving them in the dark as they tried to track her down.

‘If Lestrade can bring in some dogs –’

The whirr of a wood pigeon taking flight drowned out the rest of John’s words and he spun around in surprise, his nerves singing. Branches rustled and something shifted in the gloom, but before he could react a shape hurtled through the air, skimming past the corner of his vision to strike Sherlock on the back of the head.

His cry of alarm was loud in his own ears as he lunged forward, adrenaline jolting in his veins. He grabbed Sherlock’s arm as he reeled, dazed by the blow, and John just had time to see a piece of flint gleaming on the ground before Sherlock collapsed.

John followed him down, kneeling on the cool, hard soil. Immediately, his hand went to the back of Sherlock’s head, a litany of questions falling from his lips as his fingers came away slick with blood.

‘Sherlock, look at me. Can you focus? Can you see all right?’ There was nothing he could use to stem the flow from the wound, and he swore as he felt the large lump swelling on Sherlock’s skull, high up towards the crown. He supposed he should be grateful it hadn’t clouted the same spot Elsie had attacked a couple of days ago, but really, any additional head injury was a worry they didn’t need.

‘Distraction,’ Sherlock bit out, his teeth clenched and his eyes screwed shut against the pain. When he blinked them open, they were hazy, but his pupils were still the same size and dilated when John shielded Sherlock’s brow with his hand. ‘She’ll head back to the house.’

‘Where Sally and God knows how many police will be waiting,’ he retorted, knowing his faith in the sergeant was not misplaced. No one from the Yard was the type to flap and fluster when things went pear-shaped. They’d get the job done. ‘Come on. We need to get this seen to.’

As soon as the words left his lips, he saw Sherlock stiffen, lunging towards something behind John’s back. The movement was clumsy and quickly aborted, and John felt a presence nearby like a line of fire down his spine. One delicate hand dropped to his shoulder, hinting at force, but before he could throw it off and retaliate, cool metal pricked the skin over his pulse.

‘I don’t think so, do you? I’m not the type to hide.’

Madeleine’s voice was soft in the quiet air, bordering on conversational, and he swallowed as he tried to take in the details. She had her weight braced, hard and firm. For all that she was slight, she was strong. He would bet anything that, at some point, someone had taught her basic self-defence. She seemed more aware of her body than the average civilian, and John cursed that particular advantage.

If he had been standing, he would have had no problem breaking free, but like this, knelt at Sherlock’s side, there was no quick way to find his feet. Had that been part of her plan? If Sherlock hadn’t gone down after the first blow, would she have kept throwing rocks until he did?

Hopelessly, he examined Sherlock’s face, trying to glean some glimmer of information he could use to extricate himself, but the shadows across those features were ones of defeat. Sherlock’s focus was locked on whatever was pressed against John’s skin – too fine and delicate to be a blade – and John closed his eyes as he realised it had to be a syringe or something similar, fragile, but not a threat to be ignored.
'He’s hurt,’ he gritted out, sparing no civility for the woman behind him. ‘He needs treatment, unless you want to add another count of murder to the list?’

‘I’m not interested in talking to you.’ Her words dripped with disdain, and John winced as her nails dug into the scar beneath his clothes. ‘Keep your hands where I can see them, Doctor Watson, and I’ll explain how this is going to work.’

He did as he was told, staring at the bright red gleam that smeared across his right palm: Sherlock’s blood already growing tacky in the cool air. Madeleine seemed indifferent to the sight; John couldn’t detect so much as the faintest tremor in her hands, and when she spoke again, her voice was steady and confident.

‘We’re going to go to the boundary of the estate, and you’re going to convince one of the police to give me a lift to the nearest train station. If you refuse, or anyone tries anything on the way there, then I inject the contents of the syringe into Doctor Watson’s blood stream.’ She shifted her weight, and John realised she was planting her feet more squarely on the ground. He couldn’t see her, but he could still sense her desperate determination.

Her plan was patchy at best; even if they did as she commanded and helped her onto a train, they could beat her to the next stop and arrest her there. Either she was making a frantic bid for escape, or there was some aspect that he wasn’t seeing.

‘And what’s in the syringe?’ Sherlock asked. His hands were flat on the earth beneath him, hidden by the folds of his Belstaff, and John narrowed his eyes as he saw a twitch of movement.

‘It’s the earliest version of the contaminant, fast-acting and very toxic,’ Madeleine replied. ‘I kept it in case Eddie became an issue. It would be easy enough to dose him if things got… inconvenient. Injected into a vein, your doctor will be dead within minutes. You may survive the ordeal, Mr Holmes, but he won’t.’

Sherlock blinked, squinting at Madeleine as his fingers curled against the earth. To a stranger, it might look like frustration had him clenching his hands into fists, but John knew better.

‘How can I be sure you’re telling the truth? That syringe could be loaded with anything. Water, saline, something benign.’ He shrugged. ‘Nothing but a bluff.’

‘Are you willing to take that risk?’

John met Sherlock’s eye, his tongue darting out to wet his lips as the silent communication shot between them. He knew John was not a man frozen in fear. He was a soldier biding his time, and Sherlock trusted him to react to the changing situation.

The muscles in his thighs tensed as he shifted his weight, preparing himself as he gave one, miniscule nod of agreement – a silent oath that he would make the most of whatever plan Sherlock could devise. Behind him, he felt Madeleine misinterpret the gesture for cooperation.

Perfect.

Sherlock’s arm flashed out, pitching a shower of grit and pine-needles in their direction. Debris scratched at John’s face, but his eyes were already shut, blocking out the worst of it as he rolled to his left and leapt to his feet.

Madeleine shrieked and swore, stumbling back as the soil dusted her skin with grey sand. He had a narrow window of advantage, and it was already slipping away as she staggered, cuffing filth from her vision with one hand as she held the syringe upright with the other.
John lunged forward, but the instant he grabbed her wrist, she retaliated, smashing her forehead into his nose. John saw the gleam of her intent a second before she acted, but pain still flared across his face, sharp and unavoidable. It made his eyes water and his head pound, but he blinked through the discomfort, not bothering to waste his breath on curses.

He may be stronger than her, but he was slower, and Madeleine writhed like an eel, trying to twist out of his grasp. She knew how to move to make it hard for a captor to maintain their grip, and she employed feet and knees and teeth if given half the chance. Unlike Sherlock, John didn’t have much of a height advantage over her, and try as he might, he couldn’t quite get the upper hand.

The crack of twigs underfoot and the sound of voices barely impinged on his concentration, but Madeleine gave a sob of rage, her eyes flashing as she threw herself away from him, heaving with all her strength. A heartbeat later she reversed direction, slamming herself against him and pitching them both to the ground.

Stars danced across John’s vision and a twinge of pain sparked across his mind. He clenched his jaw in frustration, trying to hold onto her as she twisted and spat, struggling to break free. He’d tried to keep his efforts angled more towards restraint than incapacitation, and now it was too late to change his strategy. He didn’t have the leverage to clock her on the chin, and even as he tried to throw a punch, his muscles were oddly unresponsive.

Suddenly, her shouts of rage became a cry of pain, and John winced as someone hauled her off him, slamming her into the ground at his side. The silver ring of one cuff tightened around her wrist as Donovan straddled her spine, ignoring her thrashing. Only when she felt she had her under control did she loosen the fingers tangled in Madeleine’s hair and trap the woman’s other hand in the small of her back.

‘Good timing,’ he murmured, grimacing as his voice slurred and Sally glanced his way, quick and concerned.

‘You all right?’ she asked as he winced at the scrapes and bruises littering his frame. Madeleine had put up a solid fight, and even now she was fighting against her captivity, battling her restraints as the sergeant hauled her to her feet.

‘Yeah, I –’

‘John.’ Sherlock’s hoarse voice made him look up. He was slumped against a tree, pallid and weak, a swathe of blood staining the collar of his shirt. Yet he seemed indifferent to the injury, paying it no mind as he fought to keep his balance, staring in horror at something near John’s shoulder.

A quick glance, and John realised that one of the aches was far worse than a bruise. The syringe hung from the fabric of his jacket, the plunger depressed, and he could feel the point of the needle dragging at his flesh.

Anxiety prickled across his body as he clenched his teeth, cursing his luck. He hadn’t even noticed it go in, too intent on trying to bring Madeleine down. Now it jutted out from the meat of his arm, obscene, and he reached up, easing it free and examining the bloody tip.

‘John.’ Sherlock let go of the tree, his knees hitting the ground hard as his dusty palms pressed to John’s cheeks and brow. Before he could say anything, Sherlock was yelling at the surrounding officers, demanding an ambulance as his touch swept down the column of John’s neck and over his chest.

‘Hey.’ He reached out and grabbed his hands, ignoring the tight sound of protest that caught in
Sherlock’s throat. ‘If anyone needs help, it’s you. Come on, let’s get you to the gate. Someone needs to take a look at your head.’

As soon as he moved to stand up, John realised his mistake. The earth seemed to jerk away from beneath his feet, and the next breath he took barely made it past his lips. A buzzing hum rang in his ears, and an alien pain built behind his eyes.

Dimly, he heard Sherlock yell for Greg. It was a raw, panicked cry, and John reached out, groping for something to hold him up as a rash of numbness spread across his chest. Distantly, he heard Madeleine crow in triumph, but it was little more than white noise.

His stomach cramped as his limbs grew leaden, coordination almost beyond him. Strong arms went around his back, holding him up as a jumble of meaningless words stirred the air. The slow, uneven beat of his heart filled the cavern of his head, and he pressed a hand to his face, feeling the bloom of a cold sweat across his skin.

He ached to sit down, but people were guiding him, half-dragging him through the trees as he attempted to move his feet in time to the haphazard, clumsy stride of those who were helping him. Someone was muttering reassurances and asking questions. Greg, he thought, but he couldn’t quite understand what was being said.

Sherlock was on his other side, his scent familiar but tainted with the stench of fear. Greg was just the same, reeking of uncertainty, and John swallowed, his mouth dry as he realised their horror was for him.

‘Here will do.’

His palms splayed against warm stone as someone eased him to the ground, leaving him bereft as he struggled to orient himself in the wavering world.

He should be terrified, because the insidious, creeping weight that spread through his body wasn’t just a wave of sleep, but something much more permanent. However, even that concern seemed beyond him. All he could grasp was the thought of Sherlock, the bite on the back of his neck not yet healed – their bond still in its infancy and already facing destruction.

Time stuttered and jumped, his vision cut down to random images of Sherlock weaving where he stood as Greg gave hasty orders into his mobile.

A burning discomfort bloomed under his ribs, and a pained sound caught in his throat, unstoppable. Immediately, shaking hands rested against his face, tipping up his chin and pressing something to his lips. It was a coarse cup of some kind, but it was the bitter tasting liquid inside that had him gagging and pulling back, trying to latch on to Sherlock’s frantic pleas.

‘Trust me, John. You have to drink it. All of it.’

He didn’t explain what it was, and John couldn’t make his tongue work well enough to ask. His only option was to swallow, choking down the vile flavour and trying not to gag. Sweat dripped down his spine, the weight of his jacket stifling even as shivers wracked his body, and he clung to the floor as another ripple of disorientation raced across his vision.

At last, the liquid was gone, rolling around in John’s aching stomach as he peeled his lashes open, trying to focus on the verdant greenery and the glass walls of the conservatory. Not that he cared about his surroundings. The only thing that mattered was the man crouched at his side.

Sherlock’s hair was a tangled mass of dark curls, and his eyes were huge in the pallor of his face. His
touch remained fastened to John’s pulse, pressing hard enough to leave a bruise, but Sherlock’s gaze never left his, as if by maintaining eye contact he could stop John from slipping away. He looked haggard and wrecked, bloodied and bruised, and still he was everything John had ever wanted.

The rough sound of his voice, inarticulate and useless, rasped across his tongue, and Sherlock shook his head, trying to silence him. His lips were pursed, bleached bone-white, but John reached up, grabbing his wrist so he could press a clumsy kiss to his filthy, trembling palm before finally managing a few, quiet words.

‘I love you.’

Long fingers twitched against his skin, a stutter of shock that made him smile even as his eyes slid shut against his will. The world faded, slipping beyond his reach as his heartbeat staggered further, slowing all the more as the next breath dragged between his lips.

And if Sherlock replied, John was too far gone to hear it.
Thick oblivion shrouded John’s senses, covering everything in gleaming tar. There were no surreal twists of imagination to paint the canvas of his unconsciousness, nor any hint of the world outside his head. It was only when the first flickering hints of wakefulness found him that he gained any sense of just how lost he had been.

*Surgery.*

The thought oozed through his mind but no, Afghanistan was years ago and the wound in his shoulder was nothing but a smooth scar. This wasn’t the addled delirium of fever, but the absolute nothingness he associated with general anaesthetic: like someone had pressed a button, turning off his awareness only to revive it once more.

A mechanical noise resolved into the beep of a heart monitor and John fixated on the sound, listening to the regular pulse. It seemed to take aeons for some stumbling part of his brain to associate the rhythm with the muscle that pumped in his chest, and even as the thought lit up his mind, he lost his grasp, dipping back into the depths.

There was no sense of time. He felt disconnected, without any notion of day and night. Things kept dimming in and out: gentle hands checking him over and odd, stray sounds. Sometimes there were voices – quiet murmurs he couldn’t recognise. He wasn’t sure whether they were words or just tatters of sound, a foreign language or utter nonsense.

Someone gripped his hand, cradling the lax curl of his fingers in their palm. He wanted to respond, to cling to them and let them pull him free from the rising tide that locked him within its grasp, but how could he move when he couldn’t even open his eyes?

It became a battle: long periods of shadow interspersed with wraiths of consciousness. Every time he emerged, there was more to try and understand, from the arid, aching pain in his mouth to the deep fatigue in his muscles and joints. More than once, he wondered if he was paralysed, because the effort to move even the smallest fraction of himself was more than he could manage.

Whoever was holding his hand didn’t let go, or if they did, John didn’t notice. They were his touchstone, a permanent reminder that he wasn’t alone. Each time a new fragment of wakefulness came upon him he would check they were still there – long fingers and strong knuckles shielding his palm.

Then, after what felt like an age, his desperate efforts to part his lashes were met with success.

A blank white ceiling sprawled above his head, the fluorescent lights dazzling. He winced against their intrusion, trying to lift a hand to shield his eyes. Not that it worked. His arms were dead weight, and all he managed was a fluttering twitch of his fingers.

‘John?’

Sherlock. It was as if, with one word, he reached into John’s brain and flicked all the switches, allowing the mess of his thoughts to jolt into place. All the things he’d struggled to identify, from the presence at his side to his surroundings, made embarrassing sense: obvious now he cared to look.

He was in hospital, and that was Sherlock sitting at his bedside and looking like absolute hell. He stared, his lips parted as if he didn’t dare believe that John’s eyes were open and focused. The line of his jaw was unshaven, and if their positions were reversed, John was sure Sherlock would know
when he’d last picked up a razor. However, he didn’t have those powers of deduction and he was hardly at his best. He could only guess that it had been far too long. Days at least.

‘Hey.’ The word cracked in his throat, little more than a rasp across his thick tongue. He grimaced, licking his lips and screwing up his eyes. ‘What’s going on?’

He sounded like he’d been drinking, slurring consonants and vowels into one another in a garbled slew of noise, but Sherlock understood. Perhaps it wasn’t as bad as it sounded to John’s ears, or maybe he was just used to John’s half-asleep complaints: accustomed to waking him up in the blackest hours of the night, begging for his company as he set out to chase some criminal across London.

‘I – you –’ Sherlock stopped, and John watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed hard, closing his eyes as both of his hands tightened around John’s fingers. ‘Madeleine Ducart injected you with the contaminant. You lost consciousness within minutes.’

His voice cracked, the low notes thinning to nothing as alarm shot along John’s veins. Sherlock’s shoulders were shaking. What had been a delicate tremor, easy to ignore, now juddered through his slender body, as if he had been struggling to hold himself together and had finally lost the fight.

A wracked whine of sympathy escaped John’s lips. Even in his current, woozy state, Sherlock’s distress was like a battering ram against his senses. He wanted to sit up and pull him close, wrap him in his arms and tell him everything would be all right, but it didn’t work. He could twitch his fingers and wriggle his toes, but his limbs were unresponsive, as if someone had lain a lead blanket over his chest.

The heart monitor at his side began to mimic a faster rhythm, John’s heart rate driven up by his body echoing Sherlock’s anguish.

The noise jerked Sherlock into action. He reached above John’s head, pressing the call button that would bring the doctors running. Within seconds, John could hear hurrying footsteps, and he belatedly realised this wasn’t an ordinary ward. The equipment in the private room – no doubt funded by Mycroft’s bottomless pockets – was the kind of thing he’d expect to find in an intensive care unit.

Had it really been that bad?

Before he could ask, a pair of doctors swept in. One hurried to his bedside with a smile on his face while the other reached for his chart, checking over what looked like a long list of notes with a frown of concentration on her brow.

‘It’s good to see you awake.’ The man examined the reading from the heart monitor before giving John his full attention. ‘I’m Doctor Clements, and this is Doctor Wilkinson, our consultant neurologist.’ He gestured to his colleague, who offered a professional nod as she moved around to his left and checked the IV taped to the back of his hand. ‘Can you tell us how you’re feeling?’

‘Tired.’ It was the first word that came into his head, occupying his mental horizons and leaving room for little else. ‘Heavy.’ He wanted to say more, to give them something useful they could work with, but saying more than a few words at once made him breathless and light-headed.

The man hummed, asking basic questions about his name and current events, satisfied with John’s straightforward replies. Meanwhile, Doctor Wilkinson reached for a pen torch and approached John’s side, smiling her thanks as Sherlock moved out of her way.
Normally, he hovered during any medical treatment John received, pestering the staff and giving off the general impression that they were all inferior. This time he shied away, choosing to stand over by the window, and John ached at the abrupt absence.

‘I just want to check a few reflexes,’ Doctor Wilkinson said, explaining her actions as she worked. ‘Your current state is to be expected, considering the nature of the chemical we’re dealing with.’

She shone the light in his eyes, murmuring an apology as he blinked, but she seemed satisfied with the responses of his pupils. She then began going over the rest of his body, asking him to confirm whether he could feel a stylus pressed to his skin. There were no numb spots, but when she lifted his arm she had to take the weight of the limb, pursing her lips and nodding to herself.

‘Because of the way the toxin acts in the brain, binding to certain receptors and producing a sedative hormone, muscle weakness is to be expected. The same thing occurs to a lesser degree as we fall asleep. As the chemical degrades and is flushed from your body, your mobility will return.’ She moved to his feet, running her stylus down the sole of each, watching his toes flex with approval. ‘You’ve already made considerable improvements since you arrived with us.’

‘How long?’ John asked. He meant to clarify, to ask how long he’d been oblivious while Sherlock worried himself sick at his bedside, but again the words eluded him, leaving him slumped and useless on the thin pillows.

‘You’ve been unconscious for approximately eighty-five hours,’ Doctor Clements explained, looking up from where he was writing on John’s chart. ‘We began immediate treatment to stimulate your central nervous system, as well as to support the functions of your heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. Normally, we would endeavour to remove a poison from a patient’s body – stomach-pumping and such – but since this entered via your bloodstream and acted so quickly, much of it had been absorbed by the time you got here. Instead, we concentrated our efforts on counteracting the effects until the molecule started to degrade on its own.’

‘Which is already happening.’ Doctor Wilkinson gestured to him, indicating his wakeful state. ‘We’ll need to keep you under observation, but I have no reason to doubt you’ll make a full recovery.’ She smiled, and John noticed that she raised her voice, making sure Sherlock could hear her prognosis. ‘Rest, if you can. I’ll get you some ice chips to rehydrate your throat, but no solid foods until we give the all-clear.’

John managed a tiny nod of understanding. The ban on food was no surprise. Even if it weren’t for the fact that his gut was undoubtedly suppressed, much like everything else, his kidneys and liver didn’t need the undue stress of digestion when they were processing the remains of the contaminant.

They made it sound easy, as it was all just a matter of time, but biologically, John knew it was not so simple. He’d been dying, and if it weren’t for Sherlock and whatever he’d given him back in the conservatory, he suspected he wouldn’t be here.

The doctors may have kept him going, but Sherlock had saved his life.

A slow blink blocked his vision, and he peeled his eyes open again, refusing to succumb. He’d been under for so long, and he didn’t want to lose his grip so soon after reclaiming the living world. Instead, he let himself watch, ignoring the room and its medical paraphernalia and drinking in the sight of Sherlock instead.

He still stood by the window, the fluorescent lights throwing the lines of his back into stark relief while the insipid glow of dawn painted his face in tones of pearl. It made him look translucent, like something out of a dream. John ached to reassure himself that he was real, but that was impossible.
He couldn’t move, let alone get to his feet.

‘Sherlock?’

It was a whisper; he couldn’t manage anything more, but the response was instantaneous. Sherlock jolted as if an electric current had raced through his skin, shocked from his musings. Normally, John would have decided his position by the window was deliberate: a way to pretend to give privacy while watching proceedings in the reflections, but this time it seemed Sherlock hadn’t thought of that.

He looked around the room, surprised to find that they were alone again, and John saw him wobble as he shuffled back to the chair at the side of the bed. He didn’t reach to take John’s hand again, choosing to pull his knees up to his chest, his feet resting on the edge of the seat and his shoulders stooped.

He was exhausted, in need of at least twelve hours of sleep and a good hot meal, and not necessarily in that order. Yet John was in no fit state to coerce him into any of it. All he could do was watch, trying to read the strange blankness of Sherlock’s expression and getting nowhere.

It was a nurse who saved them, breaking the odd impasse when she brought a cup of ice and deposited it in Sherlock’s hands, too aware of John’s condition to assume he could feed the chips to himself.

For a second, Sherlock stared at it in surprise, as if he was struggling to understand what he was supposed to do. When it clicked, the look of self-disgust on his face was almost funny.

He shifted closer, the chair scraping over the floor as he moved with overzealous care. Sherlock made sure he didn’t pull on any wires that connected John to the heart rate monitor, casting the device a quick glance before he sat down, dipping into the cup and slipping the ice between John’s parted lips.

The cold was a shock, shoving back some of the fog in John’s mind as the flash of cool water slipped down his parched throat. It felt wonderful, life-giving, and he greedily opened his mouth again, too eager for more to spare any regret for the fact he didn’t have the coordination to attend his own needs.

‘Thanks,’ he managed at last, his voice sounding more like normal. His lips were dry, but at least he could moisten them with his tongue and it no longer seemed as if throat was lined with sandpaper.

The ice rattled in the cup as Sherlock put it down on the small table by the bedside, and John noticed he was still shaking. It made him want to damn his body and reach out, holding on until Sherlock was relaxed against him, safe and happy, but his current condition was not something he could ignore. Even the act of dragging his hand across a few inches of mattress so he could nudge at Sherlock’s wrist took an embarrassing amount of energy, and he cursed himself for his weakness.

However, his annoyance was short-lived, washed away by the eagerness of Sherlock’s response. It was as if he’d been waiting for an indication that he was still wanted, and he quickly wrapped John’s hand in his again, clinging as if John were his lifeline and saviour, rather than the other way around.

He couldn’t turn over, but after what felt like a gargantuan effort, he did manage to shuffle closer to Sherlock. It was a small achievement, but right now he would take whatever victories he could get. Besides, it was worth it for the way Sherlock shifted forward to the edge of his seat, his shoulders hunched and his back bowed until he could rest his brow against John’s forehead.

It was halfway between a nudge and a nuzzle, the kind of soft, loving gesture that made John smile.
Sherlock treated him as if he were formed of spun glass, liable to break at the slightest amount of force, but he wasn’t about to complain. Like this, he didn’t feel fragile, precisely, but vulnerable, and having Sherlock this close, warm and real and very much alive, did wonders for his peace of mind.

Or it did, until he noticed the dark stain of old blood on the collar of Sherlock’s shirt.

Memory exploded across his consciousness: a sharp stone on dry earth, its surface flecked with crimson as Sherlock reeled where he stood. There were other recollections, filmy and grey, but he didn’t have the mental capacity to give them his attention, prioritising with a soldier’s practicality as he managed a restless twitch of concern.

God, if he were well he’d drag Sherlock close and run careful fingers through his curls to explore the wound himself, but he couldn’t even do that much. Instead he focused all his effort on marshalling together the words he needed, uttering each one with care. ‘Tell me,’ he rasped, ‘that someone’s checked your head?’

He tilted his chin up, the skin of his forehead dragging against Sherlock’s brow as he moved so he could meet Sherlock’s gaze, doing his best to search for any trace of guile.

Rather than reply, Sherlock took John’s hand, bending further and guiding his fingertips to the wound near the peak of his head. Where John had expected to find dry, crusted blood and split skin, there were curls lank with neglect and there, just at the edge of his senses, the odd, rough lines of what were probably skin staples.

‘Lestrade made sure someone looked at it when they – when there was nothing more I could do but wait.’ Sherlock didn’t bother to move John’s hand away, lying there beneath his touch, limp and broken. ‘I didn’t lose consciousness, and there’s no indication of internal damage. They’ve observed my condition while keeping an eye on you.’

Sherlock’s head was on the corner of John’s pillow now, sharing the small square of cheap cotton, and his implication was obvious. He had rarely – if ever – left John’s side since all this began. Even if it weren’t for Sherlock’s words, John could have guessed that from the state of his appearance. He wondered how often the nurses had tried to shoo him away only to be met with the full force of Sherlock’s stubbornness. Had the others been here, at first trying to convince Sherlock to take care of himself and then eventually assisting him in maintaining his vigil?

There was so much John didn’t know, but right now he didn’t have it in him to formulate any questions. It was all a confused mess in his head: the case, Sherlock, the flash of pain and the chaotic rush that followed. That, and there was something else, something important that skirted the edges of his mind like a word on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t for the life of him think what it was.

It nagged at him as someone pulled the sheet up over his shoulders, murmuring comforting reassurances that John couldn’t make out. He’d not noticed his eyes slip shut and he tried to peel them open, his lashes flickering as the hand that rested on Sherlock’s head was returned to the mattress once more.

‘Stay?’

Sherlock’s reply was a murmur in his ear, blissfully close: a curl of sound that guided John back down into the shadows.

‘Of course.’

He dreamt, this time. Gone was the death-like grasp of unconsciousness. In its place arose tatters of
noise and colour – nonsense John couldn’t understand. They haunted him, bright at first, but sinister, their smooth edges turning jagged and raw.

A massive weight pinned him to the ground while unseen teeth hovering over the pulse at his throat, ready to rip into him. Yet even when he dragged up the energy, through some superhuman effort, to try and fight it off, there was nothing above him but empty air. His senses made a liar of him, and a yell caught in John’s chest, choking beneath the pressure of some invisible grip.

Terror tore him from slumber, his heart banging against his ribs and his breathing scattered to the wind, shallow and ragged as sweat cooled on his brow. He could hear the warning chirp of the machines alerting the staff that something was amiss, but someone was already there, large palms resting on his shoulders.

‘The Cunninghams!’ he gasped, wincing at the tight clutch of panic in his chest. That’s what he hadn’t been able to remember: the thing preying on his mind. The doctors said he’d been out for days, which meant the deadline had passed. Their time had run out while John was lost to the world, and his throat closed off as possibilities raced through his head.

God, what if Sherlock was only here because they permitted it? What if being at his bedside was the one victory Sherlock had been able to pull from the wreckage? Could they already have broken the bond, severing it while John slept? Had it even survived whatever Madeleine had done to him? He hadn’t thought to check Sherlock’s scent when he first awoke, and now he clutched Sherlock’s wrists, ignoring the sting of tears in his eyes as he shivered.

‘John, listen to me!’ Sherlock’s hands cupped his face, hemming in the horizons of his perception. It forced him to concentrate not on the room or the hospital beyond, but the man in front of him. ‘Whatever you’re thinking, you’re wrong. We’ve not heard anything from Alexander’s family. They’ve not approached us and we’ve not sought their attention, not while you’re like this.’

Several nurses arrived, checking things over with a calm professionalism he would have respected if he’d had eyes for anyone but Sherlock.

Graceful thumbs brushed over his stubbled cheeks, sweeping back and forth in a repetitive motion that John latched onto, timing each breath with the movement. It took only an instant for Sherlock to realise what he was doing and slow down accordingly, the two of them working together without a word.

At last, when John could breathe without choking, Sherlock removed one hand, turning his arm so that the underside of his wrist was exposed. The pale flesh hovered beneath John’s nose, the blue road maps of veins charting a course up and under Sherlock’s loose cuff, but John paid them no mind. He was too busy concentrating on the smell of him, faint as it was.

Sherlock had the common sense to know that, like this, jittery and unable to sit up under his own steam, the last thing John needed was to be pinned down, even by someone he trusted. For Sherlock to bare his throat he’d have to bend down further, trapping John against the mattress. This was a compromise, allowing him to draw in the fragrance of Sherlock’s skin and read its story without making his panic any worse.

John sagged into the pillows, clenching his teeth in an effort to hide the lingering tremors that rattled along his bones. His body felt like it was trying to shake itself apart, his chest heaving as if he’d run a marathon and his pulse too fast. Even with Sherlock’s presence and the reassurance of his scent, he couldn’t seem to calm himself, and in less than a minute one of the nurses announced she was going to get the consultant.
He didn't argue, and neither did Sherlock. It made John want to curse, torn between embarrassment and horror that no matter what he tried, the basic mechanisms of his own body were beyond his control. It was like those first grim days when he had come back from Afghanistan, displaced in a civilian world and unable to catch his breath. Of course, that association didn't help, and Sherlock twitched as John snatched in another gasp, grimacing as it burned all the way down.

'They won't give me a sedative,' he managed after a minute, turning to look at Sherlock. 'Not if we're right about how the contaminant works. They won't want to risk it.'

Sherlock shook his head, but otherwise he didn't answer, letting John fill it with his own, disorganised diagnosis. He went through the basics on autopilot, speaking just because he could. His voice was his own again, and the words came easier with every minute. It wasn't much progress, but he'd take it if it gave him some element of power in this whole wretched situation.

A quiet sound from the door made him glance over to see Doctor Wilkinson observing him from the threshold, nodding along in agreement with his vague assessments. 'You've done well,' she said, more kind than patronising as she tilted her head towards the heart monitor, which reflected the growing stability of John's pulse. 'Can you describe what happened?'

John did as she asked, keeping it brief. He didn't have the air to spare for long sentences. Besides, it was less embarrassing to be clinical about it. He didn't want to explain how he'd woken up almost in tears at the thought of his bond lying shattered around him. The only one he trusted to see that level of vulnerability had been right there to witness it, talking him through, laying down a foundation of fact and helping John to find his feet again.

Wilkinson didn't interrupt, but she did nod her head, her cropped brown hair catching the light as she took in everything John said. When he was done, she made a quick note on his chart, checking the information from the heart monitor and recording the peak of his tachycardia.

'Normally, we'd provide medication, but the issue we have is that we can't be sure whether the lingering toxins in your system will react to any additional treatment. As frustrating as I know it must be, Doctor Watson, the ideal approach is to keep chemical interference to a minimum.'

She tapped her pen on her clipboard, licking her lips and glancing at the clock. 'We're already testing your kidney and liver functions via blood and urine samples every twenty-four hours to make sure they've not been compromised. However, I think it would also be a good idea to check your heart. A basic echocardiogram should be enough at this point, just be certain there's been no tissue damage.'

'Is that likely?'

It was the first time Sherlock had questioned the doctor directly, and John turned his head to explore his profile, taking in everything that Sherlock was too tired to hide.

Fear. It wrote its legacy all over him, reminding John of Sherlock's wide-eyed panic back at the Stratford estate: dusty hands against his face and the tight hitch of his breathing. Perhaps his distress wasn't quite so obvious now, but it was still there, vibrating beneath his skin and dragging all traces of colour from his cheeks. Worse, there was nothing John could do to comfort him, not like this. He had to settle for nudging at Sherlock's wrist, reminding him that he hadn't gone anywhere.

'It's a possibility,' she confirmed, folding her hands in front of her. 'Decreased circulation and breathing rate can lead to low oxygen saturation of the blood and subsequent tissue starvation. For myself, my primary concern has been for Doctor Watson’s neurological functions. However, for someone who has been unconscious for a prolonged period, he is showing a high – and constantly improving – level of mental acuity and physical motion.'
She smiled. 'I'm more than satisfied with his progress. That said, Doctor Clements is focussing on heart rhythm. Normally, we would wait for recovery to progress further before running additional diagnostics, but I think at this point it's better to err on the side of caution.'

She looked to John for his permission, waiting until she got it before continuing, 'We'll book you in for later on today. If it indicates any abnormalities, we'll discuss the best course of action.' She set the file at the bottom of his bed, narrowing her eyes at the almost-empty IV bag above John's head before checking his catheter. 'A nurse will be in shortly. Is there anything I can get you in the meantime?'

'No. Thanks.' John offered her a thin smile, eager for her to leave. He wanted to talk to Sherlock, to ferret out the truth about whatever he had missed while he was dead to the world, and he doubted he would receive a straight answer while they had an audience.

As soon as Wilkinson was gone, John focused, concentrating all his efforts on shifting his hand and gripping Sherlock's arm. It was clumsy and weak; Sherlock could break away without effort if he put his mind to it, yet he did not. Instead he stopped, no longer moving as if to return to the chair, but staying on the edge of John's bed. A veil of fatigue dimmed his eyes, but beneath it his gaze was astute, sharp but weary.

'Tell me.' He swallowed, wishing he could roll onto his side or, better still, drag Sherlock down next to him on the narrow mattress. 'Tell me what happened, back at the estate?'

'What do you remember?' Sherlock drew one sock-clad foot up to the bed, resting his cheek on the peak of his knee. He watched John from between the half-dipped fan of his lashes, moving to brush a spike of hair off John's forehead.

He leaned into the touch as best he could, soaking up the sensation of Sherlock's fingertips against his brow as he considered the question. ‘Arriving at the Stratford’s and the look on the Alpha’s face when you spoke to him. I’ve never seen anyone so shocked. He couldn’t believe his ears.’

Sherlock hummed, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. ‘What else?’

‘Madeleine.’ John closed his eyes, the better to visualise the petite woman. ‘You said she was shamming.’

A sigh escaped Sherlock’s lips. ‘She’s had years of practice at manipulating people: a rather necessary survival trait for many Omegas.’

John grunted, shifting against the mattress as he tried to get comfortable. He was starting to ache, bits of him waking up and making their presence known with nagging pains and dull complaints. ‘Well, it would have worked. I was ready to believe her, at least until you took her apart. You showed her the warrant for her arrest. She bolted…’ He remembered her slamming into the police officer during her flight. ‘Is Harding all right?’

‘You were the only one seriously injured.’ Sherlock raised an eyebrow, but the teasing slant to his features was short-lived, vanishing beneath a bloodless wash of white. ‘A few other people had scrapes and bruises, that’s all. Do you recall anything else?’

John narrowed his eyes, attempting to picture what had happened. ‘You got hit on the head; she threatened me with the syringe… It was Sally in the end who took her down, but not before she’d stabbed the needle into my shoulder. I don’t –’ He scowled, racking his brains. ‘I can’t remember what she was trying to do.’
'She was trying to get away.' Sherlock pressed the heel of his palm to his eye. 'Something about heading for the station. At first glance it was a hopeless effort, but Lestrade sent some officers to check once we had everyone in custody. Madeleine had no intention of boarding that train. Annabelle, one of the people who looked after the grounds, was waiting with a car to take her wherever she wanted to go.'

'Another accomplice?' John blinked in surprise.

'A good Samaritan. She had once promised Madeleine that if her relationship became abusive, she'd help her escape. Apparently, Madeleine saw us approaching the house from the conservatory, snuck into Eddie's office and made a call – just in case she needed to get away.'

John frowned at the bedsheets, losing his gaze in the ridge and furrow of their fall over his body as he tried to work through what Sherlock was saying. 'She knew who we were?'

Sherlock shrugged, shaking his head. 'It's impossible to be sure. I doubt Madeleine was expecting the outcome of that day, but there was always the risk of the police asking questions without arresting her Alpha. In those circumstances, she could face a potentially violent reaction from him. It was an adaptable strategy, and one she did not hesitate to set in motion. Not that it did her any good.'

He hesitated as a yawn stretched John's jaw, the joint cracking in protest.

It was ridiculous how such short periods of wakefulness left him so exhausted. Some of it was because of the adrenaline crash, expected in the ebb of his panic attack, but John was damned if he'd slip off now, when he'd finally got Sherlock talking.

'Keep going,' he urged, forcing himself to blink rather than allowing his eyes to sink shut. 'Madeleine was arrested, and then you made me drink – whatever it was.' He wrinkled his nose, remembering the appalling taste.

Sherlock lowered his foot to the floor, shaking his head as he folded his hands in his lap. Before, he'd been quick with answers, happy to fill in the blanks. Now, John could only guess at the reason for his reluctance. Normally, he'd be crowing over his own cleverness, but not this time.

'If you feel the need to thank anyone, it should be Stamford, not me.'

'Mike?' John frowned, not following. 'What's he got to do with it?'

'He was mapping the molecule. He texted me with what he'd found when we were on our way to the Stratfords'. The substance that bound to the Alphas’ melatonin receptors, leading to their deaths, also combines with a number of other chemical structures, particularly disulphides.' Sherlock shrugged. ‘If I could get even some of the contaminant to join with another molecule rather than your cells…’

'It would limit the damage.' John licked his lips, the first glimmers of comprehension beginning to dawn. 'But Mike wasn't the one who shoved what was effectively an antidote down my throat,' he pointed out, managing a clumsy swat at Sherlock's elbow and holding his hand out on the mattress, palm up and demanding. 'That was all you.'

'A lucky guess.'

'I don't care!' If he was at full strength, that would have been a shout. As it was he couldn't do much more than growl. ‘Sherlock, it saved my life, didn’t it? You had a concussion, and you still had the intelligence to put together something based on what Mike told you. That’s what it was, wasn’t it? One of the plants was rich in disulphides?'

Sherlock stared at John’s hand where it lay, his lips pinched and pale, yet it was like he was looking
into another world, seeing nothing of what was right in front of him.

‘I couldn’t do anything,’ he whispered, his expression crumpling with disgust. ‘You were fighting
Madeleine, and I couldn’t even stand up, let alone help. If I’d been able to grab her, she’d never have
got the needle into you in the first place, but I – I couldn’t.’

His voice cracked, and John reached out, bullying his body to move so that he could pinch the
creased sleeve of Sherlock’s shirt between his fingers, tugging on it to get his attention. He should
have known that it was the same feeling of helplessness that currently plagued him which was
bothering Sherlock. He hadn’t been able to help John fight, and in his eyes at least, all his subsequent
actions were too little, too late.

Normally, he was the first person to see the logic in a situation, to rationalise away the regret, but
right now it was beyond Sherlock’s capabilities. He was too tired, drained emotionally and
physically, and this was the result: a skewed perspective and a deep well of guilt that lingered just
beneath the surface of his expression.

‘You saved me,’ he repeated, not knowing what else he could hold up as evidence of Sherlock’s
success. Here he was, grateful to be alive, and Sherlock was still fixated on his inability to prevent
John from being hurt in the first place. ‘That’s all I care about.’

Gritting his teeth, he pulled on the fabric in his grip. It was a laughable effort, but Sherlock seemed to
get the message. He caught John’s hand in his, eyes widening in surprise when John managed a
sharp tug, stronger than before, and enough to topple Sherlock sideways so that he lay down, his ear
to John’s chest and one knee tucked up on the mattress.

A gruff noise of protest rumbled in Sherlock’s throat, but he didn’t pull away or scrabble to sit up
again, and John gave a crooked smile as he watched him turn his face into the sheet, breathing deep
and giving John a quick, careful squeeze.

Maybe the burden should be claustrophobic, too reminiscent of the odd, half-paralysis he was only
just starting to shake off, but Sherlock’s weight was a comforting thing, real and undeniable, and
John soaked it up as he swept tiny patterns over the cotton stretched across Sherlock’s shoulder.

‘It was wild garlic.’

For a minute, John didn’t understand what he was talking about, and when he realised that was the
stuff Sherlock had forced him to drink, he pulled a face. ‘God, no wonder it tasted awful.’

‘When the bulbs are crushed, it releases diallyl disulphide in huge quantities. I mixed it with some
water from the watering can. It would have been far more efficient if administered intravenously,
but…’

He grimaced, glad Sherlock hadn’t tried that in his desperation. It was one thing to introduce a
refined, liquid solution into the bloodstream, but quite another to try and inject what he suspected
was effectively raw garlic paste. ‘It worked well enough.’

‘We hope.’

John closed his eyes at Sherlock’s whisper, feeling the stroke of fingers back and forth along his arm,
disturbing the pale hairs and raising gooseflesh in his wake. He wanted to point out that he’d
improved in leaps and bounds already, going from barely able to move his fingertips to lifting his
arms in a matter of hours. All the doctor’s warnings were nothing but precautions, and despite the
lingering fear, John had to put his faith in their prognosis.
'I'll be all right,' he whispered, lifting his hand to brush it through Sherlock's hair, careful of the wound at the back of his crown. He moved over the dome of Sherlock's skull and down his neck, skimming over the bite with a tingle of awareness before reversing direction, lulling Sherlock with all the affection he was strong enough to give.

Yet Sherlock did not melt against him or relax beneath his caress. Some latent tension remained, and John pursed his lips, trying not to worry over the stiff, uncertain silence.

More than once, Sherlock drew breath as if he were about to speak, but it was several minutes before any words emerged. When they did his voice was strained, as if he were fighting against his own better judgement. ‘Do you remember what you said, back in the conservatory?’

John’s hand stilled, and the monitor at his side gave away his sudden jump in heartrate. Normally, Sherlock would be all over that as some kind of evidence, but he ignored the sound as he tilted his head, meeting John’s gaze.

It was tempting to pretend he had no idea what Sherlock was talking about, but tired as he was, John didn’t have it in him to be so cruel. Sherlock was the one bringing it up, after all, and he deserved the truth.

‘Yes.’ It was hard to forget. For all his disorientation at the time, the need to tell Sherlock how he felt had been a searing weight in his mind. The words were never something he’d given so freely to anyone, borne not out of instinct, but of absolute, blinding necessity. Back then, almost sure he was about to die, all that had mattered was that Sherlock knew.

That hadn’t changed.

John swallowed, damning himself for his lingering cowardice as his voice creaked in his throat. ‘And I meant it.’

He braced himself, anxiety prickling down his spine as he waited for Sherlock to pull away. Perhaps if Madeleine hadn’t put his life on the line, he would never have uttered the words out loud. Maybe he would have kept quiet, wrapping up his love in every action instead of giving it voice, but it was too late to change that now.

He wouldn’t, even if he could.

The abrupt weight of Sherlock’s body as he relaxed was enough to force some of the air from John’s lungs, and he blinked down in surprise. He hadn’t known how much tension Sherlock carried with him until it was gone. His cheek still rested against John’s chest, but he could just make out the smile that curved his lips: not the twisted, bashful thing that Sherlock tended to favour, but something that swelled his cheeks with its strength.

John teased some hair back from where it clung to the skin of Sherlock’s temple before resting his hand against the side of his face. Immediately, Sherlock turned his head into John’s touch, brushing his lips over the vault of John’s wrist.

‘Thank you.’

He let out a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding, trying to smother a grin of his own and failing miserably. He didn’t expect Sherlock to say the words back, not now and perhaps not ever, but that didn’t mean his emotions did not run just as deep. This, Sherlock staying right where he was, happy and accepting of John’s attentions, was more than enough acknowledgement of that. He reciprocated each touch with something gentle of his own, a stroke over John’s wrist or a hint of a kiss to the palm
of his hand, and John cherished every moment.

Slowly, his breathing evened out, falling into steady time with the slow rush and swell of Sherlock's chest against his side, and his eyelids began to droop anew. Part of him fought against it, desperate to stay awake in Sherlock’s company, but it was no use.

Sleep snuck up on him, enfolding his mind in its clutches. He didn't notice the nurse come to check on his medication and deal with other essentials, nor did he feel Sherlock leave. It wasn't until Doctor Clements began setting up a device at his bedside that he stirred, groggy and confused in the late-afternoon light.

'Sorry,' the doctor murmured, not lifting his voice, and John glanced over, realising Sherlock had been disturbed from his resting place and was now curled up in the chair, fast asleep. 'I would have held off until you were awake, but Doctor Wilkinson explained what happened this morning. I'd like to make sure there's nothing to worry about.'

'S fine.' John licked his lips, thinking longingly of the ice chips, which were long-since melted, and taking stock of the changes around him as the doctor began his preparations. 'It was just a panic attack.'

Clements inclined his head towards Sherlock. 'Your partner informed us of your PTSD, and we’ve taken it into account. There were some subtle disruptions in the flow of electricity across your heart which exacerbated your discomfort this morning. It's possible it was a side-effect of the toxin leaving your system and will never occur again, but we just want to be sure. Have you had any pain in your chest at all, unexpected, spreading numbness, anything like that?'

John shook his head, answering the questions about his family's medical history as his robe was unfastened and cold gel spread across his chest. Normally, he suspected this kind of job would fall to a radiologist, but what had happened to him was unusual. He was an interesting patient, and as such, he warranted the personal attention of the consultants.

Doctor Clements was thorough, helping John turn on his side, moving tubes and supporting John’s weight so he could check various angles. He took in everything, and John tried not to fidget as he waited for his verdict.

Finally, he was done, setting the wand aside and wiping John's skin clean with quick, proficient movements, speaking all the while. 'As far as I can tell, Doctor Watson, everything seems fine. The tissue is healthy, your valves are not damaged in anyway, and there is no indication of any mechanical dysfunction.'

'Good, that’s – good.' John smiled, lifting his hand to rub at his eyes and noticing the way the doctor watched him, no doubt taking mental notes of all the ways in which he'd improved. 'So what now? I'm guessing you're not about to let me go?'

Clements gave an apologetic smile, shaking his head as he scribbled something on John's chart and pocketed his pen. 'I'm afraid not. We'll continue to monitor you, as before. Tomorrow, we'll try you with a little food and reassess your mobility. I fully expect you'll have recovered full control of your body within another seventy-two hours. Once you can walk unassisted, and barring any complications, we'll consider discharging you. Is there anything else I can help you with?'

Glancing towards Sherlock, John seized his opportunity. 'What are my chances of getting a spare bed in here? He’s not going to leave, but…' He indicated Sherlock’s half-curled form, watching Doctor Clements in an effort to read his expression. Bed shortages were not uncommon in many hospitals across the country, and he would rather Sherlock remained uncomfortable than deprive a
needy patient, but something told him that would not be an issue in this place.

‘Would he use it?’ the doctor asked.

‘He will if I have any say in it,’ John promised, waiting for an eventual nod of response. ‘Thank you.’

‘I’ll see what we can spare. Someone will be along shortly.’ Doctor Clements offered one last, toothy smile, gathering up the cables of the echocardiogram and wheeling it out in front of him. ‘Try and get some rest. He’s not the only one who needs more sleep.’

John wanted to argue that he’d done nothing else for God knew how long, but he stifled his protests, settling back in the bed with every sign of obedience. However, he didn’t shut his eyes, partly because he wanted to make sure that the doctor kept his promise, but also because he was more aware now than he had in days: anchored to the thin mattress of the bed and alert enough to understand his surroundings.

He whiled away the minutes examining the room, noticing that some of the equipment that had surrounded him when he first awoke was gone, leaving it looking less like a medical armoury and more like a simple observation ward. It was reassurance of his recovery, a sign that the staff were pleased with his progress.

The rattle of a bed being pushed through the doorway caught his attention, and he winced as Sherlock jerked awake, eyes wide and disoriented before he remembered where he was. Instantly, he sought out John, the tension in his shoulders melting when he realised he was still there.

‘Lie down,’ John urged as soon as the orderly had nudged the bed into place and locked the wheels. ‘Before you collapse.’

It wasn’t an unrealistic concern. Even sitting down, Sherlock swayed, still trying to pull together the pieces of his groggy mind into something like consciousness. His sleep-debt wasn’t the kind of thing that could be wiped out by a few hours slumped in a chair, and John saw the moment when Sherlock reached the same conclusion.

He did not bother to remove any clothing as he pulled back the thin blanket and slipped beneath it, his curls falling chaotically across the pillow. Around them, the orderly rearranged the furniture as a nurse arrived with a fresh cup of ice chips, pushing them cautiously into John’s grasp.

The cold was sharp against his skin, but at least he could grip the ridged plastic. Even better, as long as he used his right hand he could pick up the ice as well, moving it to his mouth and savouring the bite of water across his tongue. It wasn’t much, but a few hours ago even this fraction of independence was beyond him, and John made the most of it.

Within minutes, his knuckles were cramping and the tremor in his left arm had begun to make its presence known. He told himself it was to be expected, forcing his thoughts away from nagging worries about exacerbated nerve damage as he set the cup down on the bedside table.

Rolling on his side was still an immense effort, but it seemed that Doctor Clements’ assistance had reminded his muscles how to move. Wary of the tubes and wires, he shuffled over until he could face Sherlock, taking in the straight line of his profile and the faint glimmer of silver between the dark sweep of his lashes.

‘How did it go?’ Sherlock’s deep voice rumbled over the words, and John raised an eyebrow, questioning. ‘The echocardiogram: your gown’s been retied but there’s a smudge on your sheets
from the gel they use. Also, there’s a scuff of rubber by the door from the wheel of some kind of
stand that wasn’t there when I fell asleep.’ He said it mechanically, reminding John that, even now,
he was still observant.

‘Everything’s fine,’ he replied, wishing he could reach out and take Sherlock’s hand in his. Even if
he stretched his arm as far as it would go and Sherlock did the same, their fingertips wouldn’t quite
brush, not without one of them moving.

Tomorrow, John promised himself. Tomorrow he’d be well enough to at least sit up and drag
Sherlock into a proper hug, something with strength and meaning to it, rather than the tired slump of
one body against another. He’d smooth his hands down his back and see for himself if Sherlock felt
as thin as he looked, half-starved by lack of self-care and an abundance of worry.

For now, though, such wishes were beyond him. All he could do was whisper his reassurances as
evening slipped into night and Sherlock’s expression softened with sleep, his breathing turning heavy
as he finally got some of the rest he deserved.

John stayed awake for an hour more, listening to the noise of the hospital around him and watching
the dim-lit darkness beyond the windowpane. When he did finally drift off, it was a shattered kind of
sleep, disturbed by the flash of dreams that made no sense.

It felt like no time at all had passed when he jerked awake, dragged from slumber by some ill-defined
and alien presence. His body tensed as he tried to keep his breathing steady, feigning sleep. His mind
raced, dashing through likely scenarios. Was it a friend at his bedside, or an enemy? The benign
medical staff or some unknown aggressor?

‘Hello, Doctor Watson.’

‘Mycroft.’ John sighed, opening his eyes to the wash of morning light and squinting at Sherlock’s
older brother where he sat in a nearby chair. Some kind of file was open in his lap, but John ignored
it, directing his focus towards the other bed and shivering in alarm when he realised it was empty.
‘Where’s Sherlock?’

‘Commandeering one of the showers that are made available in this establishment. He was becoming
a risk to public health.’ Mycroft offered a thin smile at his feeble joke, but it was a mask for the astute
gaze that followed, picking out God knew what from John’s appearance. ‘He’ll be back shortly.
How are you feeling? Better, I trust?’

‘Better than I was.’ John shifted, attempting to prop himself up on one elbow and breathing a sigh of
relief when it worked. He was still shaky, as if he’d just recovered his senses after a bad bout of ‘Flu,
but his reluctant muscles had regained some of their strength, and his joints moved with relative ease.

He swallowed the dryness in his throat and blinked in surprise when Mycroft held out a cup to him.
He hadn’t heard him move, yet there he was, standing by John’s side and, it seemed, making a
visible effort not to loom as he offered his assistance.

Gratefully, John took the drink, realising it was the melted ice cubes from the previous night. It was
tempting to gulp it, but he forced himself to take sips, allowing only a trickle of water to pass his lips
each time as he tried to judge how his stomach might react to the intrusion.

When he’d had a few mouthfuls, he handed the cup back, easing himself into a sitting position and
waiting for his head to catch up with the rest of him. He felt as if he were a fraction off balance,
probably because he’d been lying down or half-reclined for so long, and he screwed up his eyes
before blinking them open again, trying to set the world straight.
‘Is Sherlock all right?’

Mycroft nodded, his lips pursed. ‘As well as can be expected, in the circumstances. What happened at the Stratford estate has left him – shaken.’

By which Mycroft meant scared out of his wits, if John was any judge. At his best, Sherlock would have bundled that fear out of sight and pretended it didn’t exist, but over the last couple of days it had been there for anyone to see.

‘He will be fine, given time. As will you, if the doctors’ prognosis is anything to go by.’ Mycroft indicated the chart at the bottom of his bed, which he’d no doubt perused. ‘It could have been much worse.’

John closed his eyes, fully aware of how bad it could have been. It didn’t bear thinking about. Dead and gone, he wouldn’t be the one to suffer the consequences, but Sherlock… God, another broken bond in a matter of weeks. Could anyone survive that? Would it have done less damage, being so new when it shattered, or more?

He swallowed, leaning against the pillows and twisting his hands together in his lap as he tried not to think about it: Sherlock hurt and grieving and John the one to blame. Instead, he clenched his jaw, meeting Mycroft’s gaze.

‘But it wasn’t,’ he pointed out. ‘We got what we needed, didn’t we?’

Mycroft turned back towards the chair and settled into it, as prim and proper as ever. He crossed one knee over the other and clasped his hands, his spine straight as he inclined his head in agreement.

‘Callum Reed and Madeleine Ducart have been charged with a number of crimes, including the murder of Alexander Cunningham. The discovery of further letters between them implied they knew of Sherlock’s professional reputation and had uncovered hints of his private life. At that juncture we believe that Baker Street may have been watched, and Alexander’s return was… noted.’

‘So they killed him to get Sherlock off the case, just like Sally thought.’ John let out a breath, pursing his lips as he wondered if he would be seen in the same light: Sherlock’s weakness, rather than his strength. He wasn’t about to regret Alexander’s death, but maybe he could learn from it.

‘Both Reed and Ducart are set to stand trial. There has been opposition to the arrest of the Omega from a number of parties, but we were prepared.’ Mycroft tapped his fingers on his knee, looking out of the window as he continued. ‘A jury has been selected, and the news will break imminently. That is where the truth will shine. Not in the trial itself, but the public reaction.’

Mycroft glanced at his watch. ‘If this goes the way we intend, it could be an historic day: a turning point.’

‘And if it doesn’t?’ John chewed his lip, watching Mycroft’s impassive face grow tense.

‘Let us hope that we never have to find out. Even if she were, by some travesty of justice, to be found not guilty, her arrest and subsequent trial before a jury of her peers should be enough to disturb the current status quo.’ He lifted his chin, raising one eyebrow. ‘However, if she ends up being sentenced, as I believe she will be, the call for society-wide reform will be much more challenging for any opposition to ignore.’

John looked up at the hint of movement in the doorway, his heart lifting to see Sherlock at the threshold. He was clean shaven and clad in fresh clothes, his hair still damp from the shower as he leant against the door’s frame, observing them both. A small smile curved his mouth when he
realised he’d caught John’s attention, and he stepped forward into the room, as arresting a presence as ever.

‘As much as I am sure John cares for the state of society as a whole, Mycroft, I suspect his primary concern is over what will become of me.’

‘As is mine.’ The older Holmes sighed, getting to his feet and offering Sherlock his seat. They shared a brief, silent communication, one that seemed to involve a lot of scowling, and John smothered a smile as Sherlock relented, dragging the chair closer to his bedside and lounging in it without a hint of gratitude. ‘I have not yet had word from the Cunninghams, though they have been informed of the identity of their son’s killer and that charges have been pressed.’

‘Did we manage that before or after the deadline?’ John asked, watching Mycroft’s eyes close and his shoulders slump.

‘It could be argued either way,’ he admitted. ‘We were no more than an hour past it, if that.’ He pinched his fingertips over the bridge of his nose, and John didn’t think the show of stress was an act. He could barely imagine what it must be like to be in Mycroft’s shoes, with all his manipulations to make this trial into a reality. No doubt he was attempting to consider every possible angle, both of the event itself and the aftermath. The very idea made John’s head hurt.

‘I wish I could offer you some assurances over what the Cunninghams are likely to do, but I’m afraid I have no further information on the subject,’ Mycroft continued. ‘Baker Street is under observation, and there is additional security in the hospital itself in case they attempt something reckless. However, that is unlikely. You’d be more at risk in London –’

‘Wait, we’re not back home?’ A flush rose to John’s cheeks, and he glanced out of the window. It overlooked an unremarkable courtyard garden, but now he paid attention there was little in the way of traffic noise coming through the glass. ‘Where are we?’

‘Oxford,’ Sherlock supplied. ‘After your collapse at the Stratford state, you were airlifted to the nearest facility that had the necessary equipment to stabilise you. London was too far, even by air.’

John swallowed, looking down at his sheet-swathed lap as he absorbed the information, making room for it in his mind before nodding his head. ‘Right. Sorry. I should have thought of that.’

‘A forgivable oversight,’ Mycroft murmured graciously, ‘considering your condition.’

Sherlock looked like he’d love to give his brother a hard kick, and John leaned over, grabbing his hand and holding on tight. The response was instantaneous. Sherlock leant forward, close and attentive. It was enough to distract him from Mycroft’s pomposity, and John didn’t miss the flicker of a smile on the older Holmes’ face before he moved to the window, speaking towards the glass.

‘As I was saying, I am doing all I can to bring the matter with Alexander’s family to a close, but as long as they continue to ignore my overtures, then I’m afraid patience is our best option, at least for now.’

‘Especially as you’re busy organising a revolution,’ Sherlock muttered.

‘Don’t be dramatic,’ Mycroft chastised. ‘It is not a revolution. However, the situation is still delicate and requires—’

‘Interference?’

He turned, glaring at Sherlock. ‘Supervision.’ He smoothed a hand down his jacket, banishing a
couple of creases. ‘As soon as I have any word, you will be the first to know. For now, I recommend you focus on recovery.’ His gaze moved from John to linger meaningfully on his brother. ‘Both of you.’

Sherlock rolled his eyes, letting out a sigh as Mycroft picked up the file he’d left near the chair, tucking it under his arm as he bade them farewell. ‘Unfortunately, there are a great many things that require my attention, and I need to return to the city. Should you wish for my assistance, you have my number. And John?’ He smiled, genuine but for a faint sharpness of authority in his gaze. ‘Get well soon, won’t you?’

He swept out of the door with his usual poise, his phone in his hand. No doubt he was already reintegrating himself into his web of communication, pulling on strings as he orchestrated whatever was happening in the capital. He was surprised Mycroft had bothered to stop by at all, but one glance at Sherlock told him all he needed to know. Mycroft hadn’t been here to check on John’s welfare, not really. Sherlock was his main concern.

‘Are you all right?’ The last traces of Sherlock’s bland indifference had vanished from sight the moment Mycroft departed. Now, he abandoned the chair to perch on the edge of the bed, his hip pressed to John’s thigh. ‘If I’d known you were going to wake up, I wouldn’t have left.’

John shook his head. ‘I’m fine,’ he promised. ‘Mycroft was here to keep an eye on me. Besides, you needed that shower. I was beginning to think the beard was here to stay.’ He dragged his finger along Sherlock’s smooth chin in emphasis, huffing an apology when Sherlock repeated the gesture on him, his palm rasping pointedly over days’ worth of stubble. ‘As soon as I can get to the bathroom by myself, it will be gone.’

He breathed out a sigh at the idea of being clean. His body was stale and sore, and an ache in his stomach skirted the uncertain edge between hunger and nausea. If he asked for it, he was sure that the hospital could provide shaving and bathing services. They had probably cleaned him, or at least parts of him, while he was unconscious, but now that lack of independence rubbed him up the wrong way. He’d rather get up and exhaust himself in the effort than put his basic hygiene in someone else’s hands.

Warily, he leaned forward, resting his forehead on Sherlock’s shoulder and wrapping one arm around his back. It was a clumsy embrace, but it felt like some kind of elixir as John fulfilled his promise to himself the night before, drinking in the warmth and proximity of Sherlock’s body. Yet his gesture was not returned. Sherlock remained rigid, and for a horrible moment, he read it as rejection. He was just about to pull away when something – some cobweb filament of restraint – seemed to snap, and he found himself engulfed in the circle of Sherlock’s arms.

The noise that escaped him was little more than a mewl of relief, the conflicting knot of emotions that had haunted him for days tightening in his throat and threatening to choke him. This – Sherlock’s heat and trembling muscles, the give of his flesh and the soap–tinted perfection of his fragrance – was better than anything the doctors could offer: a panacea.

He buried his face in Sherlock’s shirt, inhaling deep and feeling the swell and rush of air in Sherlock’s chest as he sighed. He pressed his smooth cheek to John’s rough one, the sharpness of his cheekbones a hard, welcome line across John’s skin as they clung to each other: overwhelmed.

‘I want to go home.’

Sherlock sounded almost as weary as John felt, tired, still, despite hours of sleep. He could make out the curve of his spine, bending under the burden of too much stress, and John thought longingly of
the sanctuary of Baker Street – of a fire in the hearth and a comfortable bed: peaceful and secure.

’Soo do I,’ he admitted, pulling back and looking into Sherlock’s eyes, rubbing his thumb under the lingering bruises beneath them. ‘The doctor thinks maybe in a few days... I just have to –’ He gestured, indicating his body and the realm of recovery that lay before him.

‘And you will.’ Sherlock said it like it was a certainty, resting his hand against John’s jaw and stroking over his pulse as if he were something exquisite. ‘Two days ago I thought you might never wake up,’ he admitted, swallowing tightly. ‘Now look at you.’

He ducked his head, nudging his brow against John’s. It was beautifully tender, and John soaked up the unapologetic affection. He was right, as insurmountable as the road to recovery may seem, it was a process of increments. All he had to do was keep going, and he had Sherlock to help him.

John’s steady climb back to full health began in earnest that day. Each new hour brought with it a range of tiny triumphs, from taking his first mouthful of food to the nurses removing the last tube that helped to keep him comfortable. He clenched his teeth as he wobbled his way through his first tentative steps and breathed a sigh of relief when he managed to stay awake for more than a few hours at a time. At night, he slept like the dead, and during the day he did his best to oblige the doctors and regain some of the strength he had lost.

All the while Sherlock was right there, offering comfort and the occasional stolen kiss. He did not hover or patronise, understanding better than most how much John would hate it. He kept him entertained with deductions about the nurses and news from the outside world, and all the while he was within arm’s reach, ready to offer help the moment John asked for it.

It took almost a week, but now, six days after he’d first regained consciousness, John was finally well enough to take care of himself. As long as he could shower without incident, the staff were happy to let him go.

The water dripped and stuttered as he flicked off the taps, pressing a hand to the wall as his knees shook. It was not the first time he had bathed since regaining consciousness, but it was the first time he’d made it through the ordeal without assistance.

With a deep breath, he gave himself a moment before stepping out and wrapping a towel around his waist, taking a good, hard look at himself in the mirror.

The small bruise from the IV line in the back of his hand had begun to fade into tones of green, as had the angry puncture in his shoulder where Madeleine Ducart had jabbed him. Scrapes had scabbed and begun to heal, and he’d not required any medication for more than twenty-four hours. His arms ached and he suffered occasional moments of dizziness, but it was still a vast improvement.

Blotting his skin dry, he reached for the bag Sherlock had left with him, perching on the closed loo seat as he clad himself in familiar, comfortable clothes. They seemed alien after the papery gown that had protected his modesty, but he relished the texture of the fabric all the same, rolling up his shirt sleeves before bracing himself against the sink and drawing water to shave.

He met the eye of his reflection, trying not to grimace at the evidence that still wrought its way across his flesh. His skin was pale and dry, and his face looked thinner than it had before all this began. His hair was the colour of ash in the harsh fluorescent light, and the stubble aged him by a good decade.

At least that he could sort out.

He worked carefully, aware of the tremor in both his hands that the medical staff had promised
would fade within a couple more days. Doctor Wilkinson had done a few tests on neural conductivity and ruled out any permanent damage. It was just his body adjusting back to its unmedicated, uncompromised state.

Still, it made the glide of the razor across his chin more dangerous than usual, and he considered it an achievement when he finished the job without drawing blood. Now at least he looked more like himself, and he rinsed the blade before draining the water. By the time he’d brushed his teeth and combed his damp hair, he felt almost human, and he packed his bag before opening the bathroom door and smiling at Sherlock.

The look he got in return was a blend of relief and heat that sent a shock of pleasure through John’s stomach. Perhaps neither of them were looking quite at their best: Sherlock was still thinner than he had been, made gaunt with stress stretching back weeks, but that didn’t mean that familiar twist of desire had faded for either of them. In fact, John was sure that if it were not for the presence of his doctors in the room, both of them filling out paperwork, he would already have been in Sherlock’s arms.

‘Ready to go?’ Sherlock asked, rising to his feet and reaching for his Belstaff.

‘Just one minute,’ Doctor Wilkinson said before John could reply, looking up and offering a smile. ‘There’s no problem with any of the final tests, and we’re happy to discharge you. However –’

‘We’re handing your care over to a consultant back in London.’ Doctor Clements sounded almost apologetic as John sighed. He should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. ‘Purely for monitoring purposes, and so you have a point of contact with someone familiar with your situation should you have any concerns.’

‘You’ve got an appointment booked in three days’ time, Doctor Watson,’ his neurologist added. ‘I recommend you use it. In a case such as this, with an undocumented recovery process, it’s best if we keep an eye on you for a while longer.’

‘He’ll go,’ Sherlock promised, taking the card and scanning the name. ‘You’ll make sure all his records are updated in the event of an emergency?’

‘Already done. We’ve made thorough notes and ensured they’re available on the system. Anyone needing to offer treatment will have access to the details they require.’

‘Thank you.’ He twitched the card free from Sherlock’s fingers, slipping it into his pocket before turning his attention back to the two people who have overseen his recovery. ‘I appreciate it.’ The words seemed inadequate when talking to those who had capitalised on Sherlock’s efforts to keep him alive, but there wasn’t much else he could say, and he smiled his gratitude as they inclined their heads and made their departure.

‘I can take that,’ he pointed out as Sherlock tugged his bag from his grip and guided him, his hand hovering over the small of John’s back. His only response was a vague hum of agreement, and John sighed as he decided not to argue.

The truth was, he was glad Sherlock had taken it from him. He may be well enough to eat and drink and walk around, but he couldn’t deny the fact that he was still weakened by what had happened. Better that he concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other than worry about carrying his stuff.

A bright, crisp breeze lifted his hair back from his forehead as they stepped through the door to the hospital, and John shut his eyes, enjoying the shock of it after so long stuck inside. The insipid sunlight stroked his face, and he squinted, scanning the frontage until he saw a familiar car parked at
the kerb, its engine idle.

‘Mycroft?’ he asked.

‘Hopefully just his driver.’ Sherlock stowed the bags in the boot as John slipped into the back, realising that it was the same woman who had transported them to the Stratford estate. She nodded a greeting, and this time there was a faint smile on her lips, as if she were pleased to see him in one piece.

‘Your gun has been returned to your premises, Doctor Watson,’ she said before he could lean forward and check under the seat. ‘Mr Holmes thought it might be… awkward, if someone were to discover it in his private vehicle.’

John ducked his head in understanding, his smile becoming a grin as Sherlock slid in beside him. The Belstaff whispered against the leather upholstery as he budged John into the corner, making sure he was comfortable and could brace his weight in the vee made by the wall.

Yet Sherlock did not retreat to the other side of the car, choosing instead to huddle his lanky frame in the middle. There wasn’t space for his legs and it was far from the most comfortable seat on offer, but Sherlock didn’t seem to care as he leaned against John.

He was slouched far enough that John could wrap his arm around his shoulders, and he didn’t even hesitate. After days of being coddled, it was good to return the favour, and he nestled in to Sherlock’s side, enjoying the connection.

After so long with the barrier of the medical equipment and John’s physical condition between them, being free to touch without thought seemed like the most glorious reward. They pressed against each other, from fingertips and palms to shoulders and thighs, and the steady slide of Sherlock’s thumb over the hub of John’s knee was almost maddening.

He itched for more, to peel aside layers of wool and cotton until they could be skin-to-skin. Yet it wasn’t the burning need of release that stole his breath away. In regards to sex at least, while his spirit was willing, his flesh remained weak. Instead, it was the craving to curl in Sherlock’s arms that filled his body with a lethargic, heady thrum. He wanted time together, talking and eating, sleeping and shoring up their strength for whatever the future held.

Judging by the tightness of Sherlock’s grip and the occasional, uneven hitch in his breathing, John wasn’t the only one eager to be back. More than once Sherlock would glance his way, his cheeks flushed and something hot in his eyes. If it were less honest, it would look coy, but Sherlock made no secret of his affection, and John did his best not to fidget as the miles slipped away.

London built up around them, its skyscrapers rising ever upwards as they wove their way through the traffic. At last, the car pulled up outside Baker Street, sliding to a halt in front of the familiar black door, and a huge weight lifted from John’s shoulders.

They were home.

Sherlock had already extricated himself from John’s embrace, climbing out and retrieving their bags from the boot as John eased himself to his feet, cursing at the cramps that lingered in his legs. He’d have to talk to that consultant about getting back into shape if he wanted to be able to keep up with Sherlock any time soon.

He hovered on the doorstep, waiting impatiently as Sherlock looked for the keys, first in his coat pocket and then in his bag, grumbling all the while. One of the nearby CCTV cameras pivoted to
watch them, and John smothered the urge to give it a wave as he propped himself against the door, taking a deep breath and watching the flow of the traffic.

A smooth limousine caught his eye, and he held in a sigh. ‘Looks like your brother’s here to welcome us back.’

‘What? Sherlock straightened up, the keys gleaming in his palm as he frowned at the vehicle, idle curiosity sharpening into something more. His hand gripped John’s elbow, bruising through the wool of his jumper, and John sensed the abrupt return of tension singing through his body. ‘That’s not Mycroft.’

John’s breath caught as the car slid to a halt, its tyres kissing the pavement. The darkened windows mirrored the frontage of Baker Street, revealing nothing of the person behind them, and he shifted in front of Sherlock without a second thought.

‘Then who –?’

The door popped open, the reflections in the gleaming paintwork sliding away as it swung aside to reveal the woman within.

Patricia Cunningham.
Chrysalis

Sherlock’s fingers tangled in the back of John’s jacket, striking creases across the fabric. Whether he was trying to restrain him or offer support, he couldn’t be sure, but like this he could feel the solid bar of John’s spine, harsh and unforgiving.

Perhaps he should be grateful that the Cunninghams had held off for so long, inadvertently giving John time to regain some of his strength, but Sherlock couldn’t spare much thought for that. What mattered was that they were here now, and one way or another, all of his and John’s efforts to secure the future they longed for were coming to an end.

Patricia’s hair shone iron-grey in the sunlight as she pressed her lips together in a thin, firm line. There was no sign of the grief that had been on display back in the sanctuary of her home. Instead, her expression was neutral, the lines of age untouched by emotion and her posture rigid.

This was a woman who had recovered the armour of her composure. She cloaked herself in her authority and rank, and Sherlock’s gaze darted over her frame as he tried to read anything that might hint at her motives.

She seemed immaculate, her clothing smooth and her shoes polished. There was no run in her tights to suggest shaking hands, nor mud on her heels to indicate where she had been before pulling up at their doorstep. Only one, miniscule detail was apparent, and he narrowed his eyes at the dot of ink on the sleeve of her jacket. It was still rich in colour, so the mark was fresh, but whether it was of any consequence to their current situation was another matter.

A flicker of movement caught his attention and he glanced over, seeing Mycroft’s driver step out of the car. She slipped a mobile into her pocket as she did so, and he read everything in her face before it vanished behind a mask of serene acceptance.

His brother was already on his way.

The driver stood to John’s right, the two of them forming a defensive wall between Sherlock and the woman by the limousine: antagonistic by default. It built up the teetering equilibrium of the moment, each side waiting for the other to make its move.

Patricia said nothing as she stepped aside, holding out her hand to assist a second, unnoticed occupant from the vehicle.

Sherlock blinked as Aveline emerged, her bobbed hair obscuring her profile as she rose to her feet. A heartbeat later, she tucked the strands behind her ear, allowing him a good look at her face.

She had the appearance of someone recovering from a long illness. Much like John and himself, she was thinner than she had been, the softness of her cheeks waning to reveal the bones beneath. Her hands and wrists were slender, too, and Sherlock didn’t miss the way she wove her fingers into Patricia’s grip. Her knuckles whitened as she squeezed, but who was reassuring whom?

Her presence beyond the boundaries of the Cunningham Estate was unexpected, but she didn’t look around as if this were the first time her Alpha had allowed her out of the house. The din of the traffic and the heaviness of the city air garnered no reaction, and Sherlock wondered how often she had been here before. Did Patricia insist on her company, or was it Aveline who had put her foot down and made her demands?

Although her grief gave her the appearance of frailty, Sherlock would have to be blind to ignore the
strength in her stance: a mirror image of her Alpha. Mycroft had said she was fading by the day, but that wasn’t what Sherlock saw. The diamonds in her ears and at her throat, the freshness of her manicure and the fit of her clothes – perfect now, indicating they were new – told a story of acceptance and survival. She was not someone wasting away in self-neglect, and when he met her gaze, he saw it held a gleam, hopeful, if a little subdued.

‘Must we conduct our business on the street?’

Patricia raised an eyebrow, addressing John, and Sherlock hid a fraction of a smile as he deliberately looked over his shoulder, deflecting the question to Sherlock despite his obvious desire to deny any Cunningham access to their home.

It was petty to antagonise Patricia, but Sherlock was tired, the craving to be curled up in the sanctuary of Baker Street a humming ache in his bones. It was a miniscule vengeance, but he would take it anyway, so he gave his answer to Aveline rather than the Alpha at her side.

‘We’re waiting for someone to join us.’

As if on cue, another car pulled up. Its tyres didn’t squeal, and the doors didn’t swing open with unseemly haste, but Sherlock knew that it was Mycroft’s restraint that made a graceful entrance possible. There must have been some sign of the Cunninghams on CCTV elsewhere in the city, something to alert Mycroft of their intended destination. There was no other explanation for his prompt arrival.

‘Apologies,’ he said by way of greeting, inclining his head first to Patricia and then, rather deliberately, to Aveline, including her in the conversation. ‘Had I anticipated your arrival, I would have ensured my presence upon my brother’s return home.’

It was a challenge wrapped up in a platitude, and Sherlock sighed, admiring his brother’s methods even as he loathed them. Without uttering a word, he had effectively demanded to know why the Cunninghams had sought them out, and urged them to reveal their intentions.

Releasing his grip on the back of John’s jacket, Sherlock swept his fingers over the spine beneath, knowing John could feel the brief, soothing caress even if nobody else could see it. It was all he could give him, comfort and apology all in one as he turned away and unlocked the door.

‘I believe the Cunninghams wished to continue this discussion inside.’ He caught Mycroft’s eye, keeping his expression blank. Letting them in was not what John wanted, and no doubt Mycroft would fail to see the logic. After all, this was about sentiment. More than anything, Sherlock felt the need to surround himself with the artefacts of his hard-earned existence: evidence that he was more than this endless conflict of who owned whom.

Without looking back, he stepped across the threshold, immediately detecting the smell of wood polish and cleanliness. Mrs Hudson’s ever-present bluebell scent was faint, suggesting she’d left yesterday and not yet returned: probably visiting her sister. As he climbed the stairs, he realised she had also been into their flat, taking care of things while they were away.

His suspicions were confirmed when he opened the door to find their home was neat and tidy, the surfaces cleaned of clutter and the case notes piled into a stack by his chair. The vacuumed rugs were smooth, and there was no stale, unused smell that so many places developed when they had been unoccupied for more than a week.

Sherlock ignored the sounds of the others behind him as he took a deep breath, drawing in the scent of a place that indisputably belonged to him and John.
Shrugging out of his Belstaff, he draped it over the back of the chair and straightened his shoulders. Within the walls of 221B, he felt able to face whatever lay ahead. Outside, on the pavement, it seemed too transient and insecure, as if the Cunninghams could whisk him away and no one, neither John nor Mycroft, could stop them. This place, at least, was his stronghold, and he saw the recognition of that in Patricia’s expression as she stepped through the front door.

It was subtle, but he was used to looking for the things other people tried to hide. Her posture, so rigid before, softened into something that hinted at acceptance, and for the first time since her arrival, she met his gaze head on.

She had been the one who had asked to come inside, and Sherlock wondered if she wanted to see how he lived. Had she been hoping for signs of his inability to look after himself – something she could hold up as proof that he belonged in their care – or was she seeking some form of reassurance?

He closed his eyes, chasing away the questions that ricocheted through his mind like bullets. Assumptions at this point were useless, and his deductions were dangerous. Already the first, tiny stirrings of hope sprouted in the pit of his stomach, but he could not allow them to take root, not yet. Not until Patricia revealed her motives.

John was the last one in, bringing up the rear with a grim expression on his face. His shoulders were tense beneath his coat, his arms folded and his stance wide. He looked a thousand times better than the invalided man who Sherlock had watched from his bedside, but even now there were marks of strain across his features.

He raised one eyebrow and glanced meaningfully towards John’s chair, unsurprised when he declined the suggestion with a single shake of his head. John wouldn’t sit down, putting himself lower than everyone else, not while the people in their flat had the potential to threaten Sherlock’s ongoing freedom. He would rather stand and suffer than give in to what he would only see as a weakness.

No one offered the Cunninghams a seat, and neither of them deigned to take one. They weren’t here for the hospitality, and Sherlock waited for someone to break the silence.

Mycroft glanced at him, a quick question in the tilt of his brow as to whether he wished to be the one to speak, but Sherlock shook his head. There was a time and a place for him to give voice to his thoughts, and this was not it. As an Alpha of the elite and the point of contact for previous negotiations, Mycroft was the logical choice to lead the conversation. He and John could interrupt as necessary, though whether anyone would listen to what they had to say was another matter.

‘To what do we owe the pleasure?’ his older brother asked at last. He didn’t smile, nor offer any form of social courtesy to ease the way. Abrupt wasn’t Mycroft’s usual style, but there was a point at which even he gave up on the concept of civility. ‘As I said, your arrival was rather… unexpected.’

‘You must have known you would hear from us eventually,’ Patricia scoffed, standing up straight and lifting her chin. ‘We had hoped to talk to Doctor Watson and your brother alone.’ She inhaled, no doubt reading the scents in the room. ‘I must admit, Mr Holmes, I’m surprised to see you are still acting on your brother’s behalf, seeing as he has already been bound by another.’ The tone of her voice was flat and harsh. ‘Without payment or permission, I might add.’

John gave a rough huff of laughter, and Sherlock winced at the confrontation written all over his face. ‘The only permission that mattered was Sherlock’s, and he gave it.’

Patricia raised an eyebrow, giving John a long, slow look. Yet it was not the twisted sneer of someone who thought him naïve or ignorant. Instead it was calculating, as if she saw his belief in his
own statement and took it seriously. ‘Regardless, my point is that as Sherlock’s Alpha at this moment in time, you are now the one in charge of his interests and ownership. Mr Mycroft Holmes’ involvement is unnecessary and unwelcome.’

‘Not to everyone,’ Sherlock murmured, more for his brother’s benefit than anyone else’s. It was rare he sought to offer Mycroft any form of comfort, but it was thanks to his complex web of communication that he and John had received the time they needed to sort things out, not just about the case, but personally. Perhaps an outsider would see Mycroft’s actions as disorganised and bumbling, but Sherlock knew the value of the smokescreen his brother had been able to provide. Thanking him outright was unthinkable, but he could give him this much: coming to his defence, if nothing else.

‘My continuing involvement in my brother’s affairs are neither unwarranted nor without precedent,’ Mycroft explained. ‘At this juncture, it would be remiss of me to bow out of the discussion.’

Patricia snorted, derisive of Mycroft’s apparent willingness to go against centuries of tradition that stated an Omega’s original family had no influence once another Alpha placed a bond. Ten years ago, Mycroft would never have considered his current actions, but time and events had changed his way of thinking.

‘And if I refuse to discuss matters with you?’ Patricia snapped, taking half a step forward, her heels tapping on the floorboards as one hand clenched into a fist. Her rings sparkled in the meek sunlight spilling through the windows, and the lines of her expression deepened with genuine anger.

‘That would be unwise.’

Sherlock looked at his brother before glancing at John, noticing that their nostrils were flared, inhaling the increasing levels of pheromones that saturated the air. Few Alphas got anywhere in life without learning some modicum of control over their more basic instincts to confrontation, but this was one step too far for all involved. Weeks of conflict were coming to a flash point, Patricia’s pride colliding head on with Mycroft’s intelligence and John’s determination. Perhaps it would not devolve into physical violence, but it was hardly helping anyone make progress.

Behind Patricia, he noticed Aveline’s shoulders slump, a sigh gusting between her lips as she rolled her eyes. Her fingernails chimed against her earring as she fiddled with it – a nervous gesture of concentration – before meeting Sherlock’s eye.

Very slowly, she tilted her head towards the kitchen in invitation.

No one else noticed, not even when Sherlock shifted to open a window. John stood back to let him pass, but he couldn’t peel himself away from Mycroft and Patricia, who appeared locked in a battle of wills, squabbling over technicalities without saying anything of worth.

A fresh breeze stirred the papers by his chair, and Sherlock turned away. Better ventilation wouldn’t neutralise the tension between the three Alphas, but with any luck it would help them clear their heads enough to break the stalemate they currently endured.

In the meantime, he would find out what Aveline had to say.

He stepped into the kitchen, pausing out of reach of the other Omega. She was neither armed nor aggressive, but the situation with Madeleine Ducart had driven home how dangerous even a hint of assumption could be. Alexander’s Omega mother may not seem as much of a threat as Patricia, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t capable of causing him harm.
He had no intention of giving her the opportunity.

Aveline ran her right hand over the sleeve of her left arm, casting a quick, fierce glare back in the direction of her Alpha before she met Sherlock’s gaze. There was no mask of pleasantery across her features: no patronising smile or demure mien. She watched him without apology, her sharp chin lifting as she drew in a breath.

‘I’d hoped Patricia would be able to do this herself,’ she murmured, keeping her voice down lest she catch the attention of everyone else. ‘She would like to, I know, but –’ Aveline looked down, shaking her head. ‘I’d be lying if I said I didn’t expect this would happen.’

She gestured to the three Alphas, and Sherlock glanced over, taking a moment to look beyond the surface and smothering a smile at what he saw. At first, they seemed unmoved, still caught up in a petty debate of one legality after another, but already Mycroft’s posture had softened, becoming something more accepting as he began to bring himself back under control, and Patricia was much the same.

John, however, stood apart, benefitting the most from the breeze, and its impact was clear. He was not noticeably battling his instincts. Instead, he seemed calm and controlled, standing between the two groups like a sentry guarding the border of warring nations. He made no move to interrupt or try and gain control of the conversation, but Sherlock could feel the weight of that blue gaze on him as he turned back to Aveline.

She glanced at Patricia before reaching into the small bag at her side, pulling free a creamy white envelope. ‘I took it from her in the car, just in case whatever occurred in here rendered her unwilling or incapable of handing it over herself.’ Her fingers brushed the thick paper, tracing along one edge and around the corner before flicking her wrist, thrusting it into Sherlock’s grasp. ‘Take it. It’s yours.’

The envelope was blank: a shroud to protect whatever lay inside from prying eyes. On the reverse lay a wax seal, and Sherlock endeavoured to ignore the way his fingers shook as he broke it, slipping free the sheet of A4. The creases were precise, and Sherlock watched Aveline before he unfolded it and cast his eyes across the text.

In many ways, the document was unremarkable. The type was neat and the wording ruthlessly concise, leaving nothing open to negotiation. The signatures in place looked fresh, and some part of his mind that always celebrated the confirmation of his deductions noted that the colour matched the stain on Patricia’s sleeve. However, that was a loose thought, irrelevant in the face of what he was seeing.

A sharp hiss of air rushed between his teeth, his shocked body reminding him of the necessity to breathe. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw John shift in alarm, taking a half-step towards him, but Sherlock paid him no mind. He couldn’t, not now, when disbelief and shock jangled along his nerves.

‘How –?’ He blinked, trying to find the words to give his question voice. There was too much going on in his head: an overwhelming cacophony of suspicion and hesitance tamping down on the burgeoning fount of emotion that threatened to drown him in its surge. ‘I didn’t think…’

‘That we’d keep our end of the bargain?’

John made a tight noise of surprise, and Sherlock watched him vacillate. He could see John’s desire to offer support, but he did not step in to over-rule him. His only action was to shift closer, ready to react if Sherlock reached out.
Aveline’s smile was bittersweet as she cupped his elbow and guided him back so that he could lean on the edge of the table. He felt sharp with shock, shaky yet hyper-alert as he registered the motherliness of her grip and the pinch of understanding concern on her features.

‘I suspect, at first, your fears were well-founded.’ This time her glance did not flicker back in Patricia’s direction, deferring, however subtly, to her Alpha. She spoke for herself, and Sherlock stared at the paper in his hands, reading it repeatedly as he listened.

‘I watched my family become the worst facets of themselves, arguing over the best course of action without pausing to consider the moral implications of the situation. Tradition had them in the right, or so they believed, and they did not question it.’

‘What changed their minds?’ he rasped.

She withdrew her hand from his arm, weaving her fingers together in front of her and bowing her head. ‘A number of things.’ She pursed her lips, and Sherlock wondered how much of an advocate he had found in Aveline Cunningham. ‘I was honest in my grief the day you came to us, and at the time, my request for justice for Alexander had no ulterior motive. It was only later that I realised I had asked that you prove yourself. Not to me, but to everyone who ever doubted an Omega’s abilities.’

Her narrow shoulders jerked in a shrug, her breath leaving her in a shuddering rush. ‘I did my best to be the voice of reason. After Alexander’s treatment of you, how could we, in good conscience, make any demands? Even my desire to see his killer caught seemed like too much to ask.’

She stared at the floor, her hair a curtain on either side of her face. ‘By that point, though, it was not about you as an individual. It was about the family name. Your brother’s threats were seen as challenges, and Henry, in particular, made several efforts to convince Patricia to respond in kind: to fight for the sake of fighting, without any consideration to the logical or compassionate choice.’

Sherlock held his silence, unsurprised by her revelation. In his own twisted way, Henry no doubt thought it was better to take a stand and lose than lie down and accept what was happening. The elite, isolated in their own ways, were saturated in the entitlement that came from such strong adherence to tradition, and Sherlock was a threat to that.

Aveline’s smile held a hint of satisfaction. ‘The more I thought about it, the more I hoped you would keep your promise, not just because then I would know who had murdered my son, but because it would be an Omega – you – who had solved the crime. You could challenge what was considered normal and acceptable through your own success.’

‘And if I had failed?’ Sherlock reached behind him to brace his weight against the kitchen table, watching the shadows pass over her eyes and the lines that bracketed her mouth.

Her silence was the only answer he needed.

If he had not uncovered Madeleine Ducart’s guilt, then the Cunninghams would have tried to claim him. They would have held him to his end of the deal, even as they considered breaking theirs, and nothing Aveline could have said or done would have changed that.

‘Once news reached us that the culprit was an Omega, one who would be arrested to stand trial, the truth became obvious. What was happening was no longer just about us. It was about the future of the whole elite and how it might finally change for the better.’ She looked towards Patricia, and Sherlock realised that, at last, the squabbling had stopped, falling silent amidst Aveline’s impassioned explanations.
‘It was the excuse I had hoped for,’ Patricia said, stepping away from where Mycroft stood to approach Sherlock, turning the ring on her finger as she did so. ‘The pressure on me to stand up and fight your brother, not just from within my own family, but from the larger spectrum of the elite, was huge. Our conflict, private and personal as it may have been, was detailed in rumour and seen as a weak link in the chains that held the elite together. I am ashamed to say I allowed that pressure to cloud my better judgment.’

She took a deep breath, and Sherlock noticed that she kept her back turned towards Mycroft, as if she could not bear to see his expression. Perhaps she feared his smug triumph, but from here, all Sherlock observed was a grimace of understanding, as if Mycroft knew of that same pressure: the demand that he stay in line and not question events, despite his own thoughts on the matter.

‘Whatever the outcome of the trial, it has the power to change everything. Others will no longer take my relinquishment of you as a failing. Rather, many would perceive it as us cutting our losses.’ Her smile was cold, mocking of her own manipulations of the society in which she lived. ‘Through your actions, and one must assume those of your brother, you have created a scenario that allowed my family to save face. I appreciate it was not your intention, but it is mutually beneficial all the same.’

She gestured to the paper in Sherlock's hands, and the signatures at its base drew his eye. Patricia’s name was scrawled across the surface, witnessed, he suspected, by her lawyer. Today’s date lay neatly in place, the numbers clear and concise. It made Sherlock’s head swim to think that, at some point that morning – perhaps while he and John were in the hospital, or even curled up together in the back of the car, racing towards Baker Street – Alexander’s family had finally given him what he’d wanted.

‘All that remains to make it valid is the signature of your Alpha.’

He didn’t miss the hint of an apology in Patricia’s voice – as if she did not want to lessen their sense of victory with the legalities that remained in place. Of course, this was not true freedom; neither his rights nor his agency had been acknowledged. He was still an Omega, and for now at least, the closest he could get to real autonomy was this: the Cunninghams relinquishing him to an Alpha he could trust.

‘John?’

Sherlock murmured his name, watching the twist of emotions across that familiar face. It was a poignant blend of stark, breathless hope, overshadowed with hints of uncertainty and repulsion. John knew the rights putting his mark on the document would give him over Sherlock – the powers he would be granted – and clearly it was not a pleasant thought.

‘Does it have to be me?’ he asked, excluding the other occupants of the room through sheer force of will as he met Sherlock’s gaze. ‘Can’t Mycroft do it?’

Sherlock shook his head, glad that neither his brother nor Patricia chose that moment to deride John for his ignorance of the laws within the elite. ‘If I were unbound, it would be Mycroft’s place to add his signature, but that’s not the case. You’re my Alpha, and as you’re of sound mind, it has to be you. It’s the only one that can be officially recognised.’

‘For now,’ Mycroft added, his voice heavy with promise. ‘I know you find the idea of owning my brother abhorrent, John. However, until changes are made, we have no other option.’

Sherlock caught John’s eye, wishing he could communicate how he felt with just a look. When Alexander had signed something similar, back when they first bound, he had experienced nothing but the sinking chill of horror and dim, weak acceptance. This was different, and despite their
audience, Sherlock knew he had to try and offer reassurance.

‘If it has to be anyone at all, then I’m glad it’s you.’ He swallowed, deliberately ignoring the others as he added, ‘You’re the one I chose.’

John’s expression cleared, doubt giving away to understanding as he ducked his head in agreement. It seemed he had needed to hear that Sherlock’s commitment to every step of their relationship was equal and undeniable. He had to realise that in this, like everything else they had shared, he had Sherlock’s complete consent to proceed. Perhaps it wasn’t ideal for either of them, but it was miles better than any alternative.

With a sigh, John reached for a pen on the table, hesitating as Mycroft placed his hand on his forearm. ‘Just one moment. We will require a witness. Julia? If you please?’

Sherlock looked up in surprise, taking in the silent figure of Mycroft’s driver where she stood by the doorway, a benign sentry he had not even noticed enter the room. Her expression was blank and poised, though he had no doubt she had taken in everything. Now, she shifted her weight, leaving her post to approach John’s side. Her cool eyes watched him place his signature before she added her own in the space provided.

And just like that, the Cunninghams’ claim on him was gone.

Sherlock let out a breath, feeling it quake between his lips. His skin felt pale and clammy, and his pulse skipped beneath his collarbone. After so long fighting, first against his Alpha’s tyranny and then against the family’s rights, this seemed surreal.

From the day he presented and through the years that followed, he’d been swimming against the current, struggling against what society expected of him. Now the moment had arrived where he had what he wanted – his life, the Work and John, all at once – and he realised he’d never believed it would happen: an impossible dream, finally attained.

‘I think it’s time to go,’ Aveline murmured, and Sherlock ripped himself from his disbelieving stupor to see her already half-turned away. She held her hand out to Patricia, and the Alpha took it reverently, glancing between John and Mycroft before bowing her head in Sherlock’s direction.

‘Thank you, Mr Holmes.’

She didn’t clarify, nor offer any apologies. Most likely, her words would have been hollow. After all, remorse would never undo Alexander’s actions, nor soothe any emotional wounds. Anything more was pointless, and Patricia knew it. There was nothing more they could do, and nothing that remained to be said.

Their footsteps echoed down the stairs, loud on the bare wood, and it wasn’t until Sherlock heard the soft sound of the front door swinging shut behind them that he allowed himself to breathe. The whole interlude kept flashing in his head, stuttering images and glitches of noise as his mind attempted to sort it out, turning it this way and that until it was something he could understand.

‘So, that’s it?’

John glanced between them, looking tense and off-kilter, as if he were waiting for some sick punchline. Despite all their hopes, they’d been expecting a fight. Even Mycroft had come here braced to argue. There’d been antagonism, of course, but capitulation, like leaning against a locked door and finding that it opened with no effort, and the lack of resistance from Alexander’s parents made Sherlock’s head spin.
‘Not quite,’ Mycroft replied, reaching out for the certificate on the table and folding it once more. ‘I need to get this copied and filed with the appropriate authorities. I’ll see to it immediately.’ He slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket, his gaze already distant, and Sherlock nodded his understanding.

Like this, with only one copy and no official knowledge of it outside a very small circle of individuals, what they have been given remained tenuous. Were the document to be destroyed and the Cunninghams to deny it ever happened, there was a chance – however slim – that they could find themselves back where they started.

‘Do you have the time?’ Sherlock’s voice sounded hoarse, but he ignored the rough scrape of it up his throat. ‘Shouldn’t you be seeing to Ducart and her trial?’

‘I have a number of trusted individuals working twenty-four-seven to ensure that comes to fruition.’ Mycroft tweaked his lapel, indicating the paper hidden within. ‘This, I believe, requires a more personal touch. I will let you know as soon as it has been filed, and return the original to you once it is no longer needed.’

He hesitated halfway to the door, his eyes following the departing form of his driver before he turned back to John and Sherlock. He took them both in, but for once there were no trite urgings to take care of each other, nor some vague instruction to call if they required his assistance. Perhaps, for once, he understood that neither of them needed to be told, and with a faint smile, he ducked his head in farewell before heading down the stairs.

Baker Street seemed to fold around them, the last chink in its armour vanishing from sight as Mycroft saw himself out. The purr of his car was a low rumble in Sherlock’s ears before that, too, was gone. Instead, the strains of London’s melody trickled through the open window, chaotic but soothing in its familiarity.

After almost a week in the strange, sterile confines of the hospital, the city was a vibrant wash of life. At any other time, Sherlock might have taken a moment to appreciate it, but right now it barely permeated his thoughts.

It wasn’t until John grasped his chilled fingers that he blinked himself back to the present. Focusing on his existence felt like trying to clutch grease, slick and slippery, but John was solid in front of him, his body radiating faint heat as he stepped closer and ducked his head so he could meet Sherlock’s lowered gaze.

He didn’t speak. Maybe John knew there was no point in asking if Sherlock was all right. Instead he slipped his palms up Sherlock’s arms, giving him time to step away if he wanted before pulling him close.

He could feel the whisper of John’s breath against his throat and the cool skim of his jacket beneath his hands as he mimicked the gesture, wrapping his broader body in his embrace. He might be the one cocooning John with his taller presence, but it was John who held him up, strong and stalwart, taking Sherlock’s weight without complaint.

Gradually, muscles which had been tense since the moment Patricia Cunningham stepped from her car began to uncoil, but with that came the jagged chaos of a shiver, something that raced from the top of his head to the tip of his toes in a sharp rush. Within a few seconds, it happened again, and when John went to pull back, Sherlock tightened his arms, making a brief sound of protest.

John’s breathing hitched, and Sherlock realising he wasn’t the only one trembling, John’s were more subtle, like a plucked harp string, but they were still there even as he settled again, his face buried in
Sherlock's neck and his pulse discernible as it beat against his chest.

'It's shock,' he murmured, and Sherlock suspected he wasn't just diagnosing his own, faint symptoms. 'All this – I think it's been a bit much.' He managed a weak laugh at his own dire understatement, but it was a mirthless sound, caught up in traces of bitterness.

Sherlock knew how he felt. A new life lay before him, yet now it was within his reach, he didn’t know how to accept it. Everything was overwhelming, and despite his best efforts and his vast intellect, there was no way to stop the wobbling, off-balance kilter of his disbelief.

‘Hey.’ John pressed his lips to Sherlock’s pulse, the kiss humid and fierce as if he could sense Sherlock’s turmoil and was trying to drive it out. ‘Sherlock, what –?’

To his embarrassment, his next breath caught in his chest, the bubble of near-hysteria popping in his throat. His eyes stung, and he knew John felt it when a tear dripped into his hair, stark and surprising to them both.

God, this was ridiculous, but much like back when the bond with Alexander had broken, he felt as if he had been robbed of any choice by his emotion. It filled him to the brim, some coarse blend of elation and doubt, and his body seemed to think that tears were the only way to relieve the pressure.

John didn’t shush him or cluck like a mother hen. He did not withdraw, appalled, either, but stood firm beneath the onslaught, his hands moving from Sherlock’s back to his waist to his shoulders, as if trying to hold him together at his seams. It was not the same, raw grief that had enslaved him against his will when Alexander had died, but the steady, gentle flow of it was still devastating, and Sherlock buried his face in John’s crown.

He inhaled, and with John's scent curling in his nose, he found some element of solace. This was something quantifiable: not the superficial hints of hospital and the wrong shampoo that lingered on the surface, but the musky, spicy fragrance beneath. It seemed to seep into his head, smoothing away the serrated edges of distress that burned into the forefront of his mind, making it pebble-smooth and manageable: the tide of his tears ebbing after their brief inundation.

At last, when Sherlock’s breathing stopped quivering in his chest, John shifted his hands to his arms, easing him back so he could get a good look at him. No doubt he observed lashes still spiky with moisture and an undoubtedly blotchy face, but he didn’t speak as he pulled a clean tissue out of his pocket and offered it to Sherlock.

‘Come on,’ he murmured, looking as if he had a million things to say but was biting them all back. He led the way over to the kettle, indicating it with a flick of his fingers. ‘You get the tea going. I’ll see if there’s anything to eat. God knows we both need something better than what the hospital had on offer.’

It was a desperate stab at normality – an attempt to anchor themselves in the mundane, and Sherlock did as he was asked, listening to the water seethe as John braved the fridge.

After more than a week left unattended, it should have been a disaster zone, but John’s brief sound of pleased surprise suggested someone had intervened before its contents had become too toxic. Food packed the shelves, including several casserole dishes that Sherlock knew were Mrs Hudson’s.

‘So much for not being our housekeeper,’ he murmured as John pulled out one of the lidded, earthenware pots with a sound of approval, setting it on the hob to heat.

‘More like a lifesaver,’ he replied, and Sherlock silently shared the sentiment. Right now, the simple
necessities – buying groceries or even ordering take-away – were beyond his capabilities to attain. At least this way, neither of them had to step outside the flat. They could confine themselves to the safe horizons of Baker Street’s walls and focus on building their strength for whatever came next.

He remembered promises about a week in bed, about stabilising their bond and relationship all at once, but even that notion seemed impossible. It was as if, now they had achieved their goal, neither he nor John knew what to do for the best. It left them in an awkward kind of limbo, locked in a holding pattern with no discernible path forward.

‘I feel like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.’ John looked up at him, and Sherlock paused in the act of reaching for a pair of mugs, glancing over his shoulder at where he stood, his shoulders slumped and his face lined. ‘Like it’s all some kind of trick.’

Sherlock made a brief, doubtful noise, torn between denying the possibility for John’s peace of mind and acknowledging the miniscule risk. In the end, he shook his head, setting about making the tea and watching what he was doing as he spoke. ‘It’s unlikely. Once Mycroft files the certificate with the proper authorities, which he should have done within the hour, your claim becomes much more challenging for anyone to contest.’

The spoon John was using to stir the hearty beef stew clanged on the side of the pot, and Sherlock looked up to see his face locked in a scowl. ‘There shouldn’t be any claim,’ he growled. ‘It shouldn’t be down to a signature on a piece of paper whether you –’

He cut himself off, biting back the same old protest, and Sherlock attempted to bully his brain into offering some form of reassurance. However, there was not much he could say to relieve John’s outrage. Perhaps one day, things would be different. He suspected Mycroft would not rest until that was the case, but such reforms never came quickly. It could take decades, and in the meantime, someone’s name had to be on the paperwork.

Leaving the tea to brew, Sherlock reached out, taking the collar of John’s coat and easing the sleeves down his arms. At least in his jumper he looked less as if he was preparing to walk out. An irrational fear, Sherlock knew, but one he couldn’t quite shake.

‘In our case, it’s a formality.’ He draped the jacket over the back of one of the chairs, obeying John’s quiet request for a couple of plates. ‘Just because you have that power over me doesn’t mean you’ll use it.’

‘No. God, no.’ John abandoned the pot, leaving it to simmer as he reached for Sherlock’s hands again, squeezing them in reassurance. ‘I just hate that it’s there – that’s it’s even bloody necessary.’

Sherlock bowed his head, wishing there was something to ease John’s agitation, but there was nothing he could say. He understood and appreciated John’s distaste, refreshing after the behaviour of the elite, but Sherlock was not the only one potentially restricted by the power of the bond agreement.

‘You do realise it goes both ways?’ he asked, watching John narrow his eyes in thought. ‘In the same way you won’t make demands of me, I will not harbour any expectations of…’ He shrugged, swallowing hard. ‘I won’t hold you to any contractual obligation to be responsible for my care. You don’t – you don’t have to stay, if you decide you’d be better off with someone else, or on your own or….’

He trailed off, cringing at the clumsiness of his words. He was not trying to make John think he was unwanted, but no matter how he tried to explain it, that’s how it sounded to his ears: indifferent, almost rejecting, even though nothing could be further from the truth.
Emotions darted across John’s face, their flow too swift for Sherlock to decipher. A crease appeared above his nose, the first hint of a perplexed frown as he tried to see what Sherlock was getting at. ‘Do you want me to stay?’

‘Of course.’ That Sherlock answered without hesitation, the confirmation already on the tip of his tongue before his brain had even considered it. ‘I, what I meant was –’

John stepped forward, silencing Sherlock with the gentle nudge of his lips against his jaw, neither possessive nor demanding, but comforting. ‘I know. You don’t want me to feel like I’ve got no other option. The same goes for you. This –’ He looked down at their joined hands, hesitating, but he didn’t shy away from the discussion. ‘There’s choice for both of us in all this, and right now, we’re both where we want to be, yeah?’

Sherlock leant forward, pressing his brow to John’s and revelling in the contact. ‘Yes.’

The smell of something nearing its burning point tainted the air, and John pulled away, his sigh regretful as he checked on the dinner. ‘You may as well sit down and get some of this in you. It’ll help.’

Sherlock sighed, taking a seat and trying to ignore the prickling chills that swept over him once more. Whenever he stepped beyond the circle of John’s arms, the impression of being cut adrift from his own life returned, leaving every interaction strangely inconsequential. Yet when John touched him, it was as if he snapped back into himself, grounded by the one thing on which he could rely.

John set a steaming plate in front of him before grabbing cutlery and sitting down in the chair opposite. The narrowness of the table meant that their knees brushed, an intimate sliver of sensation that became a solid pressure as John inched forward. The corners of his mouth lifted as Sherlock mirrored him, the two of them leaning in and sharing space without a second thought.

For a while, they ate in silence, the peace around them thickening as they lost themselves in their own musings. More than once, Sherlock checked his phone, waiting for the text from his brother that he hoped would put his mind at rest. Yet every time the screen was blank, and he set it aside on the table's surface in disgust.

'Did you buy it?' John asked, shrugging one shoulder when Sherlock frowned at the non-sequitur. 'What Patricia said about us giving her a way out to sign you over without bringing the elite down on her head?'

Sherlock grimaced, chewing on a bit of beef and swallowing before setting his cutlery aside. John had given him a small portion, but he felt too unsettled to do it justice, his stomach tying itself in knots.

'It was only part of the truth,' he replied. 'If she really wanted to let me go, she would have dealt with whatever the elite threw in her direction. Her children are both mated, and it would be far less of a scandal than what Mycroft would have revealed about Alexander.' He reached for his tea, sipping the hot liquid before shaking his head. 'The Cunninghams aren't stupid. Ducart's trial didn't just give her an excuse; it removed every other option.'

John’s fork chimed on the side of his plate as he put it down. 'How do you mean?'

'Think about it. The whole situation will shine a spotlight on the elite and how they treat Omegas. What family’s going to risk trying to conclude a bonding contract in that climate? Who’s going to bother buying an Omega when, for all they know, they could have their rights over them stripped away?'
He leant back in his chair, narrowing his eyes. 'Ducart facing justice has thrown the elite into 
instability. Perhaps nothing has happened yet, but those who are aware of the situation can sense that 
change is coming. As such, my status as an asset is no longer certain, and as Patricia said, it was safer 
to cut their losses.'

It was a mercenary theory. He knew John would like to believe there was some element of 
compassion to Patricia's decision, but Sherlock had spent too long moving in their circles to think that 
might be the case. Perhaps guilt was a contributing factor, but for the Alphas of the family at least, 
that was where the sentiment ended.

John abandoned his half-eaten dinner and reached one hand across the table in a mute request. It 
made Sherlock's heart skip to see him offer affection and invite it in return. He shouldn't be surprised, 
considering John's past behaviour, but it still shot through him like a flash of electricity: the dazzling 
realisation that John wanted him, not just for passion and fire between the sheets, but for the casual, 
undemanding intimacy of the life they shared.

'Does it matter? To you, I mean. Do the reasons they signed you over make a difference, if it means 
they're finally gone?'

Sherlock suspected that if he were anyone else, anyone normal, John wouldn’t have bothered asking. 
He would have assumed some level of emotional response and left it unsaid, but he was used to 
Sherlock’s way of thinking. He knew not to make assumptions about what Sherlock might consider 
meaningful or relevant.

'Not nearly as much as it matters to you.' John grimaced, and Sherlock set his tea aside, easing 
himself to his feet and pulling John up after him. ‘You think I deserve better.’

'You do deserve better. There’s no –' He shook his head, a quick jerk of motion as his nostrils flared. 
‘Alexander’s killer is on trial. The Cunninghams are getting their justice. When will you get yours?'

Sherlock pursed his lips, suspecting John already knew the answer and would not like the 
confirmation, but he replied all the same. ‘As far as the law is concerned, I won’t.’ He ignored John’s 
explosive sound of frustration, lifting his fingers to his jaw and guiding him up to meet his gaze. ‘But 
I’m here, and he’s not.’

He closed his eyes, thinking of the years of conflict and strife. Of the pain Alexander had dealt and 
the knife-edge existence Sherlock had led from day-to-day when he escaped, always looking over 
his shoulder. Now, thanks to Madeleine Ducart, he would never have to do that again. He would 
never have to wake up one morning and wonder if this was the day his Alpha returned to drag 
Sherlock back to a life he loathed.

Perhaps it was morally unacceptable, but if his choices were seeing Alexander alive but imprisoned 
for what he had done, or dead in the morgue, Sherlock knew he would rather Alexander was gone 
for good.

‘I got what I wanted,’ he said at last, meaning it in every possible interpretation, not just Alexander’s 
fate, but his own as well. He opened his eyes, searching John’s face for comprehension and seeing 
its dawning gleam.

‘So did I.’ John raised one eyebrow, a hint of playful flirtation skating across his features. It didn’t 
quite chase away the shadows of seriousness beneath, but it was a welcome sight all the same, and 
Sherlock relished it.

His hand trembled as he reached up, cupping John’s jaw and running the pad of his thumb along the
thin line of his lips. It felt like an age since they had kissed for more than a moment: fleeting, stolen things at the Yard or in hospital. The desire for more seized him, and something must have made itself known in his expression, because John’s eyes darkened, his pupils dilating before, to Sherlock’s dismay, he stepped back.

‘Bed? I mean not for –’ John rubbed a hand across his nape, abruptly as stumbling and uncertain as Sherlock had been. He let out a sharp breath, his voice dropping to little more than a whisper as he confessed, ‘I just want to be close to you for a bit.’

Longing curled down Sherlock’s spine, welcome in the wake of the chills that had suffused him. Like this, recovering still and thrown by the events of the morning, the invitation sounded like a relief, and Sherlock was happy to accept it as he followed John’s lead.

The dim light of an overcast sky crept through the window, making the white sheets glow. Plump pillows and soft comfort awaited them, and Sherlock smiled at John’s earnest groan as he sank onto the edge of the mattress.

Sherlock shrugged out of his jacket and began to unbutton his shirt, admiring the unashamed way John stripped off his clothes. It gave him the opportunity to see him properly: not wan and washed out beneath grim hospital lights, but confident despite the bruises that still painted him in greenish hues.

The only article of clothing that remained in place was John’s underwear, and Sherlock watched him slip under the quilt and slump into the pillows with a sigh. He looked good there, in Sherlock’s bed, tucked neither to one side nor the other but sprawled in the middle. Sherlock approved of the sight, something possessive sweeping through him. So far, except for a single, exhausted night, all their moments of intimacy had occurred either in John’s room or beyond Baker Street’s walls, and to bring it into Sherlock’s personal space only made it more real.

With a whisper of cotton, he dispatched the last of his clothes, retaining his boxers as he crawled in at John’s side. His smile bloomed, half-buried in the pillow as John immediately closed the distance, wriggling his arm under Sherlock and pushing his leg between his knees. He cinched them together from chest to thigh: John’s heart drumming against his own and the faint softness of his belly pressing against Sherlock’s skin.

Exquisite.

It was pure connection, as basic as it could get without one of them being inside the other, and Sherlock allowed himself to soak up the warmth of John’s body and the heavy, trusting weight of him in his arms. It was a reprieve, and Sherlock’s breath whispered between them before the soft brush of John’s mouth against his stole it away.

Blood surged through his veins, heating him right through as the tantalising whispers of sensation became more determined. The pressure increased, followed by the swipe of John's tongue, and Sherlock invited him in, the languorous press of spit-slicked flesh no less passionate for its slow pace.

Intoxicated by John's attentions, Sherlock's brain slowed, shedding his uncertainties like a butterfly breaking free of its chrysalis. There was simply no room inside his skull for anything but the shift of the body beside him and the broad plane of John's back under his palms.

He allowed his fingers to drift, sometimes climbing John's neck and cupping his nape, urging him closer, deeper, before returning to their wanderings. John was no different, one hand half-trapped beneath Sherlock’s weight, stroking the faint dip of his waist while the other skimmed over his shoulder and up his throat, stroking his pulse before smoothing back through his hair.
It was as if they were reminding themselves of each other, sketching their outlines and filling them with the colour of each caress. In a reality where, even now, doubt lingered, they were one another's certainty, and Sherlock clung to that knowledge as a low moan caught in his chest.

John echoed the sound, beautiful and secretive, and Sherlock broke back, hissing through his teeth as a delicious shiver rushed through him. He was hard in his boxers, his body indifferent to John's statement that it was not sex he had in mind, and he tried to shift his hips away, aware of the fact that John was still soft.

'Sorry,' he gasped, his face hot with a mixture of desire and mortification as John nudged his jaw with his nose, one hand meandering over Sherlock's twitching stomach and down to the ridge of his erection. 'I know you don't want –'

'Wrong.' John huffed. 'Believe me, Sherlock. I want you. I just – I don't think I'm up to it yet.' He glanced downwards, a grimace crossing his face. 'Quite literally. The doctor warned me it might be an issue for a couple more days.'

Before Sherlock could respond, John's hand moved again, drifting down to stroke at the humid parting of his thighs, hard enough not to tickle, but slow enough to be little more than a tease. 'That doesn't mean I can't help you out, though, if you want…' He trailed off, his tongue darting out over his lip as he cocked his head. His eyes were questioning as one finger swept over the curve of Sherlock's balls and further back, to where the cotton was damp.

Sherlock managed a rough, happy kind of growl as he lifted his hand to clutch at John's shoulder and parted his legs, his permission implicit.

This wasn’t what he was used to, but John had already proven more than once in their short time together how much he valued Sherlock’s pleasure. It was not something that came second, a consequence of John taking what he wanted and nothing more. Instead, it was his priority, and Sherlock bit his lip as John dove beneath his underwear, circling his length with his left hand and giving a firm stoke.

Lips trailed along his jaw and across his pulse, the edge of teeth no more than a hint against sensitive nerve-endings. A moment later, he reclaimed Sherlock’s mouth. Gone was the steadiness of John’s kisses. This was more, overwhelming and enticing to the point where nothing else mattered but the presence of John’s adoration as he tempted Sherlock towards his climax.

He rutted forward, keening as John’s palm skittered over the crown of his cock, captured within the restraints of his underwear. Yet even better was the way John held him close, taking in everything, learning Sherlock in the broad light of day, without the fog of rut to rob him of clarity. He watched Sherlock buck and writhe, leaning closer still when Sherlock reached for him with clutching fingers, returning each caress and clumsy kiss as static crawled along his spine.

‘Are you–’ His voice petered out as John tugged at Sherlock’s underwear, shoving it down his thighs and giving himself more space to work as he fell into a pattern of long strokes that made Sherlock’s toes curl.

He wanted to ask if there was something he could do in return. It felt sinful, shamelessly taking all John had to offer without returning the compliment, but Sherlock’s thoughts were shattered, lost to the need that was pooling in his stomach and making his hips jerk. ‘Fuck, John!’

A low, greedy sound resonated in John’s chest, and he shifted, switching hands so that his right picked up the rhythm over Sherlock’s erection while his left moved back, slipping in the slick between Sherlock’s legs to lubricate his fingers before nudging them carefully in.
Sherlock choked, his body shuddering beneath the heat of pleasure ignited by John’s slow, leisurely kisses and his ceaseless attention. He was already so close, and a few crooks and slides of John’s finger was all it took for Sherlock to lose himself, mind whited out to nothing and unravelling at the edges.

John’s name was a gasp on his lips as he came, the tight clutch of ecstasy almost painful as he spilt across John’s pumping hand and tightened around his fingers, his muscles fluttering.

It was like wiping the slate clean, drowning out everything in a tidal-wave rush of sensation. At length, it receded to leave him lying, limp and sate, as John blurred kisses over his collarbones and murmured his praises into Sherlock’s skin.

‘All right?’

Sherlock managed a weak hum, wincing as John eased his fingers free. He skimmed them wistfully through the viscous fluid of his arousal before propping himself up on his elbow and smiling down at him. Sherlock returned the expression, relishing John’s obvious delight and the hazy bliss that filled him to the brim.

‘I’ll be right back,’ John promised, cool air gusting around Sherlock as the quilt shifted. He was aware of footsteps padding over the carpet and the splash of water in the nearby bathroom, but he did not open his eyes again until John returned, a damp flannel in his hand to swipe away the come that spattered Sherlock’s stomach.

Gently, he grabbed John’s wrist, reaching out to tug the cloth from his grasp and pressing his lips to his soap-scented knuckles before wiping himself clean. A moment later, he abandoned the flannel on the floor, ignoring John’s disapproving tut as he dragged him down and stole another kiss.

‘Are you sure,’ Sherlock asked at last, his voice wrecked from the passage of so many panting breaths, ‘that there’s nothing I can do for you?’

John nudged at Sherlock’s brow. ‘You already did plenty,’ he promised, shifting to the side and draping Sherlock’s arm over his waist, settling back into their shared embrace as if it were where he belonged. ‘For now, this is all I want.’ He tightened his grip on Sherlock’s hip, indicating the tangle of their bodies.

Sherlock pressed a kiss to John’s brow, murmuring his gratitude before he shifted his weight, kicking off the boxer shorts that were caught around his knees and settling once more. If this was what John wanted – closeness and devotion – then Sherlock was more than happy to oblige. He sank into the peace of the moment, letting John’s arms cradle him.

He was just dipping into the shallow edge of a doze when a buzz from his bedside table shattered the tranquillity: an intrusion from the outside world that sent a jolt of adrenaline rippling along Sherlock’s veins. He twisted in the bed, ignoring John’s lazy, questioning hum as he grabbed the device and stared at the screen, his heart high in his throat as he opened the message awaiting him.

“*The certificate has been filed. It’s done – MH*”

Sherlock read it more than once, allowing the words to seep through his consciousness, carving themselves into the fabric of his mind palace. In retrospect, he realised this was what he had been waiting for, not the Cunninghams’ blessings, nor their verbal relinquishment of him, but this undeniable confirmation that it was all as real as he hoped.

‘Sherlock?’ John’s rough voice caught his attention, and he rolled over to face him, the phone held
screen outwards so that John could read the simple missive. He screwed up his eyes, blinking away his lethargy as he focussed on the words before looking up into Sherlock’s face.

‘So, that’s it?’ he asked, sounding as if he didn’t dare to hope. ‘It’s official?’

Sherlock set his mobile aside, allowing it to become lost in the furrows of the bed covers as he reached for John again, barely able to breathe around the crystalline surge of his relief.

‘Yes.’

It was over. There was no going back for the Cunningham family, no unravelling their promises or changing their minds. More to the point, there was no one who could arrive on his doorstep and take everything away from him.

His life was his own to live as he saw fit, and now, as John kissed him, passionate and joyful, he finally believed it.
The red banner of breaking news crawled along the bottom of the screen, its stark white text underlining the wind-harried reporter standing outside the Old Bailey. It was a media scrum, cameras flashing and reporters shouting questions, each voice pitched to carry and each getting lost in the noise.

John watched, fascinated, bent at the waist with his forearms resting on the back of his armchair. Someone official-looking, Lestrade’s boss, maybe, or someone further up the chain, was about to give his statement to a breathless nation. Or at least he would, if any of the journalists gave him a chance to speak.

It had been eleven weeks since Madeleine Ducart’s arrest: almost three months of a high profile court-case. Sometimes the coverage would fade for a few days, slipping back into the grim, daily grind of murders and missing children, political upheaval and war. Yet always they returned to this, and now it seemed it had reached its grand finale.

‘Guilty,’ Sherlock said from where he stood at John’s side, no doubt seeing a hundred nuances in the flickering pictures. His hand stroked down John’s back, all the way from the nape of his neck to the waist of his jeans: a hot, slow point of contact. The calming gesture felt as if it were more for Sherlock’s benefit than John’s: his lover reaching out, as he often did, as if to check he was still there.

‘How do you know? Did Mycroft already text you?’

Sherlock snorted, moving to sit on the arm of the chair, his socked feet on the seat and his body at right angles to John’s bowed frame.

‘Nothing of the sort.’ The response was prim, almost offended, and John hid a smile as Sherlock pointed out the evidence. ‘His clothing’s neat but there’s a drop of liquid on his tie. Spilt coffee. He thought the verdict would take longer and had settled in to wait. Turns out he didn’t have to. He sloshed his drink in his hurry to respond. Guilty is a triumph for the prosecution, and in a case like this, they’d want to make the statement immediately.’

‘You got that from his tie?’ John asked, raising one eyebrow.

‘Well, that and his hair.’

Before John could scoff any kind of response, the man began to speak, his soft, Scottish brogue rising above the reporters’ clamour thanks to the microphones thrust in his direction.

‘After a short deliberation, the jury have reached their verdict.’ His dim grey eyes swept the crowd. ‘Madeleine Ducart has been found guilty of all charges.’

The noise exploded, and John winced as he wondered how the man could stay so serene amidst such a racket. All the expected questions were there, not just about her sentence, which had not yet been announced, but quick-fire queries about the possibility of far-reaching social policy.

Omega oppression was the conversation on everyone’s lips. There were marches and rallies, as well as vicious online arguments beneath the shroud of anonymity. Current events threw the general
public into uproar, fuelled by the media coverage. No longer could anyone claim ignorance, and with that knowledge came the demand for change.

He glanced at Sherlock, watching the washed-out colours of the TV dance over his impassive features. Throughout the trial and the rigmarole surrounding it, he had seemed indifferent to what the rest of London’s population thought about the issue. Oh, John had no doubt he was paying attention, noting the sway of popular opinion, but he rarely spoke of it himself nor expressed any kind of satisfaction at their success.

Now, though, he was scouring the broadcast for hints, as intrigued by the footage as he was by any crime scene, and John took a breath as he put forward the question that had burned into his mind for weeks. ‘Do you think it matters?’ he asked, waving a hand at the news. ‘All this? Will it make a difference?’

Sherlock blinked, tilting his head and lifting one shoulder. For a minute, John thought that was all he would get, but then Sherlock spoke, his voice firm and controlled.

‘I don’t know.’ He sighed, running his palm over his bond bite as he considered the multitude of possibilities. ‘In the end, changing the law is the easy part; it’s dealing with the aftermath that will pose the greatest challenge.’

He raised an eyebrow when John gave him a questioning look. ‘If an Alpha loses their rights over an Omega, and Omegas lose all monetary value, then where does that leave them? You’ll have a number of highly vulnerable individuals entering the general populace with no infrastructure in place to help them.’

Sherlock sighed, his hands spread as he explained. ‘There’s been minimal research into drugs that would allow Omegas to move through society unthreatened by their own biology. There’ll be abrupt demand for untested pharmaceuticals, and very little segregated higher education to tide people over while drug companies play catch-up.’

He brushed his palms together, the gesture slow and thoughtful. ‘For adults, employment is likely to be nigh on impossible to attain. They’ll have no way to achieve the necessary qualifications or support themselves. The chances of powerless Omegas – either dismissed by their families or seeking to escape them – falling victim to traffickers is not inconsiderable. If the politicians rush this through, hoping to get votes, then they might as well put Omegas in front of a firing squad.’

John pursed his lips, realising with a sinking heart how right Sherlock was. He’d never stopped to consider what Omegas could face – how giving them their freedom without proper thought could do more harm than good. Sherlock was the exception to the rule, at least now. He’d spent years building himself a life and providing for his own needs, but others didn’t have that foundation. With no money, no home and no support, they’d be vulnerable in the worst possible ways, just like Sherlock had been when he’d first fled Alexander.

‘It won’t come to that, will it?’ he asked, already suspecting what Sherlock’s answer would be. The government did not have the best track record when it came to such things. Taking legislative action was high profile and the results were swift, but dealing with the aftermath could be messy and unpopular.

‘Perhaps. It depends whether the people in power – the bureaucrats like Mycroft, rather than the politicians – have the time to prepare and the foresight to see what measures are necessary. If they have any sense, they’ll begin putting pressure on broadcasters to explain why immediate reform without adequate preparation would be a disaster.’ Sherlock shrugged, shaking his head. ‘It’s a political balancing act, the like of which Mycroft and his allies have been performing their whole
lives.’

It was a morsel of hope, but Sherlock’s faint praise for his brother’s abilities highlighted the truth of the matter. Whatever happened was out of their hands. He and Sherlock had played their part in bringing Ducart to justice. Now all they could do was wait to find out what the future held.

‘She’ll be the face of it.’

Sherlock’s statement interrupted John’s thoughts, and he followed his gaze back to the TV in time to see the tide of reporters sway. It took him a second to realise why, and he squinted as he caught a brief glimpse of Madeleine herself, cuffed and supported by police officers as she was loaded into a prison van.

It was so different from Reed’s departure. The man had been found guilty earlier that day. When he left court, he hid beneath a coat, scurrying away from the mob of waiting photographers. In contrast, Madeleine kept her head high, her shoulders back and her eyes straight ahead. She didn’t meet anyone’s gaze, yet nor was there any sign of distress across her features. She looked, John thought, more like a martyr than a criminal, calmly accepting her fate as if she had decided the price was worth it.

The reporter continued to babble, breathless in the gathering twilight, but John ignored it as Sherlock talked over them. ‘Whenever people think of this, they’ll think of her, and she knows it. That’s why she didn’t hide. Maybe none of this – the trial, the uproar – was her goal, but the outcome may well be the same: Omegas attaining more freedoms than they’ve ever had before.’

John watched the doors shut on Madeleine’s figure as the blue wash of the police van lights bounced around the scene. She was what the nation needed: someone on whom they could focus – a figurehead, positive or negative, who slowly became the face of change.

He thought of Mycroft’s vehement opposition to dragging Sherlock’s abuse by his Alpha through the court. Now, he understood why. If they’d gone ahead with it, it would have been Sherlock plastered all over the news. Everyone in London would know who he was, and how could he go back to the life he’d forged for himself after that? Any glimmer of obscurity would be beyond his reach, and while he may be a hero for some, he would no doubt be a target for others.

Brutally, John shook the thought away, refusing to dwell on might-have-beens. It hadn’t come to that, and for the first time he understood why Mycroft had been so reluctant to spill Sherlock’s past across the public stage. He had been thinking of his brother, after all.

Swallowing tightly, he reached out, running his fingers along Sherlock’s forearm as he jerked his head back towards the screen. ‘What do you think her sentence will be?’

Sherlock shifted, his body still balanced on the arm of the chair and his elbows braced on his knees as he considered John’s query. ‘It’s hard to say. Normally, sentencing reflects the severity of the crime. Plenty of people died because of her actions, but…’ He grimaced. ‘It will be political.’

John scowled, hating that anything but justice played a role in the decision. Every part of this trial had been as much about public reaction as breaking the law. It was stupid to think that Ducart’s sentencing would be any different. ‘So you don’t reckon she’ll get life?’

Sherlock’s hand rested over his, and when he spoke again, his voice was low and dangerous, sending a thrill down John’s spine. ‘No, but she should, considering what she tried to do to my mate.’
John’s breath caught in his throat at the power in those fierce, quiet words. For one split-second, he thought he meant Alexander, but no, Sherlock didn’t care about that. He was talking about what she’d done to John, the needle in his shoulder and the poison in his veins, and he’d called him…

‘Your mate?’

Sherlock turned to look at him, his eyes luminous. He stared for a moment before his gaze flickered up and to the left, no doubt dipping into the surface of his mind palace and replaying the immediate past.

To an outsider, perhaps Sherlock’s words would seem ridiculous, but John knew better. For an Omega, a mate wasn’t just someone you met for drinks down the pub. He remembered Sherlock explaining, months ago now, how the word described a highly compatible bonded pair.

Normally, it was reserved for the most devoted of love matches, and as such had become rare to the point of extinction within the elite. Alexander had never deserved the title, a point which both Sherlock and Mycroft had made clear. People rarely bothered with the term, unless they didn’t know any better, and John had forgotten all about it.

Until now.

The silence formed around them, as close to quiet as it ever got in Baker Street. Sherlock’s expression was unreadable, wiped blank in a way John hadn’t seen for weeks. He’d grown so used to the subtle ways in which Sherlock allowed himself free reign in John’s company that the sudden absence was like a slap in the face, clanging and abrupt.

Yet John stood his ground, his thumbs skimming over the bones of Sherlock’s wrist as he waited. They were getting better at communication, the two of them working their way through their insecurities. However, as a rule they didn’t do big declarations. Neither of them were the type, at least not often. Instead they’d spent weeks learning to read each other better than ever before, seeing everything that remained unsaid and treasuring it all the same.

This was different.

Sherlock swung his legs around, standing up and stepping into John’s personal space as he straightened up to meet him. It was not a retreat but an advance, and John tried not to sag in relief as Sherlock’s hands rested on his hips and pulled him close.

The weight of his brow against John’s forehead was the first point of connection in the long line of their bodies: a tight, enclosed space where only a few layers of cloth kept them apart. John could feel Sherlock’s thrumming heart against his chest, but the voice that filled his ears was slow and certain.

‘Obvious,’ he murmured, running the tip of his nose alone the bridge of John’s, their lips tantalisingly close. ‘How could you be anything less?’

It was stupid that Sherlock’s words affected him so deeply, especially when he made an effort to show John how much he cared for him. It was there in every touch and kiss during the day, and in the quiet, needy way Sherlock reached for him at night, drawing him into a cocoon of comfort. How he felt wrote itself in each shared moment, and John’d had no reason to doubt the depths of Sherlock’s feelings since they’d bound more than three months ago.

Yet hearing that claim in Sherlock's voice – the visceral, possessive growl of it – made heat blaze in his stomach and surge through his veins. His pulse fluttered at the base of his throat, and he slipped his hands around Sherlock’s waist, resting them on his back.
Sherlock responded instantly, leaning into his touch, and the warm expanse of his body sent prickles of awareness racing across John’s frame. A flush rose to the surface of his skin, hot and inescapable, as desire swelled between his legs.

The subtle surge of Sherlock’s hips intensified the sensations thrilling along John’s nerves, and his breath hissed between his teeth as he tightened his grip, unsure whether he wanted to keep Sherlock near or ease him back. Either way, it was impossible for him to miss the hardness in John’s jeans, and he opened his eyes to see Sherlock watching with a limpid kind of curiosity.

‘Why?’

It was not the first time he’d asked that question when he’d reached out to find John hot with want. Initially, it sounded reluctant, and more than once John had backed off immediately, his need for Sherlock overwhelmed by the desire not to pressure him into anything. However, before long, he began to see those questions for what they really were: a genuine thirst for answers.

Sherlock spent his life attempting to rationalise the world around him. His questions were not a protest, but an outward display of his efforts to understand the kind of relationship he’d never had, and John was not about to deny him that.

Sometimes it was hard to explain. It was a feeling, a craving, a hunger in him only Sherlock could satisfy, not because of his gender but because he was Sherlock Holmes. Others it would be something almost trivial: a certain look, the sharp angle of his body or the sudden flash of brilliance on a case when everyone else was still fumbling around in confusion.

This time, John didn’t even have to think about the answer. Sherlock may not have been explicit, but the sentiment behind him calling John his mate was clear.

‘Because you love me.’

His heart jumped in his chest, beating fit to burst as he waited for Sherlock to deny it, but it never came. Instead that lush mouth brushed over his, chaste and sweet. It made him shiver, his body humming anew as he moaned softly. He nipped at Sherlock’s pout before skimming his tongue over the affront, tasting the faintest remnants of London’s city air and the sharp, pre-storm crackle of Sherlock’s skin.

The flavour seeped into every corner of John's mouth, heady and irresistible. It was not the raw, unstoppable tang of pyresus. They’d experienced that twice more, now, since that first time, and John had a precise knowledge of what to expect during the depths of their biological imperatives. This, however, was Sherlock in his natural state of arousal: delicious and divine.

Wanton noises purred in Sherlock’s throat as John shifted his hands, gripping the lapels of his suit jacket and pushing himself up on tiptoes to kiss him long and deep. They took their time, stroking and teasing, surrendering to the dizzying pleasure.

‘Idiot,’ John gasped fondly when he pulled back, his cheeks hot and his knees weak.

‘You or me?’ Sherlock nipped at the ridge of John’s jaw, growling his approval as John tilted his head. His tongue darted out across his pulse before his mouth replaced it, sucking against the vulnerable skin.

‘Both,’ John ground out. ‘You for not thinking I needed telling, and me for not guessing before now.’

His breath left him in a huff as his shoulder-blades collided with the wall. He hadn’t noticed Sherlock
walking them backwards, too lost in the clever play of his mouth across the humid plains of his
throat.

Sherlock’s erection nudged at him, hot through the tailored fabric of his trousers, and John bucked
his hips, grinning at Sherlock’s choked groan of longing. A moment later, he found himself hoisted
upwards, warm palms splayed under his backside as he was pinned between that long, graceful
frame and the wall.

It meant their mouths were level, and John did not hesitate to make the most of it. His fingers
tunelled in Sherlock’s hair as he kissed him, slick lips and strong tongues sliding together, breaking
apart and finding one another again as their breaths mingled.

He loved this, loved that Sherlock, so hesitant at first to ask for what he wanted, would now do so
without a second thought. In the weeks they’d spent together, safe within Baker Street and
strengthening their bond, it was something John had set about encouraging in every way he could
imagine. It had started with him asking, time and again, what Sherlock would like, sharing out the
power rather than hording it, placing it in Sherlock’s hands more often than not.

Now, he was reaping the rewards in Sherlock’s bold advances and eager responses. Nothing, not
even pyresus and rut, was as much of a turn-on as the simple truth of being desired by this amazing,
brilliant man.

Sherlock’s jacket rasped as he pushed it from those narrow shoulders, and John grumbled in protest
as the sleeves caught around his elbows. Unless Sherlock actually loosened his grip, there was no
way to get the garment off, and within a few seconds, their kisses had dissolved into breathless
laughter, spurred on by John’s clumsy irritation.

Gently, Sherlock released him, stepping back so that the jacket could fall to the floor in a whispering
rush, leaving him in his shirt with the top button undone and the collar askew.

John reached out greedily, yanking the hem from his trousers and skimming his hand under the cloth.
Slender muscles twitched at his touch, and he could see Sherlock’s nipples pebbling beneath the thin
fabric. His thumb skimmed across the tell-tale nub, and he watched Sherlock’s lashes flutter, a gasp
caught in his throat.

Lowering his head, he sucked, the weave rough against his tongue as he scraped his teeth over that
sensitive skin. A half-smothered grin swelled his cheeks as Sherlock swore, his whole body twisting
in a desperate writhe. Pale fingers gripped his arms, and he chuckled when Sherlock plucked at his
jumper, clearly wanting it off but not willing to let John step back and remove it.

‘Come on.’ He eased Sherlock’s grip free of his bicep, twining their fingers together and tugging him
towards the bedroom. ‘This way.’

Sherlock needed no further urging, and John laughed as his long stride soon overtook him. He found
himself dragged over the threshold, the door slamming in his wake before Sherlock reached out to
peel off his clothes.

It was a tangled mess of kisses and rucked cotton, shaking fingers and half-undone shoelaces. Their
panted breaths caught on giggles and tight cries of need, intimate in the sallow glow of the
streetlights: the only illumination they had.

With a flick of the switch on the bedside lamp, John changed that. There were times for the slow drift
of one body against another in the shadows of the night, but this was not one of them. He wanted to
watch every sweep of Sherlock’s hands over his skin – to enjoy the vision of those clever fingers
They dispatched the last of their clothing with barely a second glance, pitching it over the side of the mattress as Sherlock's weight rested over John's frame. Cool air kissed him wherever hot skin did not, and his toes curled as Sherlock's heavy cock nudged into the crease at his groin, sparking stars of sensation. Yet it was not a greedy demand for more; the rhythm was a subtle tease, and John keened as Sherlock's hands wandered.

Dry palms stroked the camber of his ribs and the line of his flank, raising gooseflesh in their wake. The response did not go unnoticed, and John's claims that he wasn't cold fell on deaf ears as Sherlock shifted, tugging the quilt out from underneath them before trapping them in a layer of cotton and feathers.

It would be too much later, they knew that from experience, but now it was comforting rather than stifling, and John gave a pleased hum as he reached for Sherlock again, pulling him down and kissing him soundly.

They fell into one another, moving with eager familiarity. They'd spent long enough in bed together to know what they were doing, and John snatched in a breath as Sherlock sucked at his collarbone, raising blood to the surface and sending a thrill of something that skated the border of threat along John's spine.

His clumsy hands skittered down Sherlock's back, blunt nails dragging over pale skin and making Sherlock thrust his hips in a grind that left them gasping. It was ecstasy and torment, and John was torn between chasing the sensation and pulling away, the better to prolong it.

Without thinking, he spread his legs, letting Sherlock settle more deeply between them before cinching his heels around Sherlock's calves, scissoring them together and bucking his hips in eager reciprocation. The movement made Sherlock breathe his name: a single, trembling syllable that hovered in the air, and his cock slipped behind John's balls.

They gasped in unison, the sound like the rush of the waves in the sanctuary of their bedroom. John threw back his head, his teeth sinking into his lip as sensitive skin seemed to glow with sensation. Sherlock hadn't pushed against him, hadn't hurt him, but he was still right there, and all John's scattered need focused into the sharp knowledge of how he wanted this night to go.

'Will you?' he asked, his voice imploring as Sherlock tensed above him. His arousal twitched between John's arse cheeks in a way that made him want to push down against it.

'I – ' Sherlock braced his weight on one elbow, and for the first time in the weeks spent exploring each other, he looked uncertain.

It was new territory, something they'd never done before, although John had almost asked for it more than once. Initially, he'd held back because he thought that perhaps it didn't appeal to Sherlock – that he wouldn't get off on it – but now he knew better. There was no magic combination he had to hit to bring Sherlock release; their time together made that obvious. Besides, Sherlock's fleeting touches to John's arse had become more frequent as his confidence grew: curious, feather-light skims growing more bold with every passing day.

Yet he never brought up the subject. Had he been longing for an invitation even as John hoped he would take the initiative, or had he overstepped some unknown line by asking? Was it something Sherlock didn't want after all?

But no, that expression wasn't one of discomfort or distaste. Pale cheeks flushed bright, and his eyes...
looked glazed at the possibility. Only the frown creasing his brow seemed out of place, and John reached up, smoothing his thumb across the furrowed flesh and shifting his hips, his breath catching in his throat.

'Talk to me?' he asked, his voice strained. He felt hot all over, his skin pulsing with need. It didn't help that, despite whatever he was thinking, Sherlock's erection hadn't flagged in the slightest, its presence still very much noticeable and right there, making John's nerves sing. 'We don't have to if you don't want –'

The noise Sherlock made brought a grin to John’s face, and he closed his eyes in relief as a laugh threatened to jump in his chest. That was not the sound of a disinterested man: a rumbling growl that resonated through John's ribs and made his entire body throb.

'It's –' Sherlock frowned again, and John suspected there was a healthy dose of embarrassment enriching the arousal that coloured his cheeks. He shrugged one shoulder, his hand moving from John's hip to rest over his sternum. 'I don't know how to...'

He trailed off, and realisation bubbled in John's chest. He'd been there himself, not so long ago, made uncertain by Sherlock’s relatively unfamiliar biology. While he may not be the only Alpha Sherlock had known, he was the first to ask for such a thing.

Stretching out one arm, he fumbled in the bedside table drawer, retrieving some lube and shoving it into Sherlock's palm. 'Then I'll teach you,' he rasped, trying not to shake beneath the zapping surge of excitement that pooled in his hips. 'If you want?'

Sherlock's agreement was beautifully willing, his pupils huge and his breathing ragged as John pulled him down into another kiss, wet and filthy. Words tangled with each brush of skin-to-skin, and butterflies thrashed in John’s belly as he picked out what Sherlock was saying, his single plea caught on desperate repeat.

'Show me,' he murmured against John’s mouth, the fierce press of lips his only punctuation. ‘Show me what to do?'

'Down,' John managed, tipping back his head to drag in a breath of clear air. He almost choked on it as Sherlock obeyed, burning a trail with teeth and tongue down John’s throat and across his chest. He wriggled southwards so that his stomach dragged along John's length, making him twist his hands in the sheets beneath him.

God, but he was hard, bobbing against his belly as Sherlock huffed a breath over him, tropical beneath the splay of the quilt. Immediately, John threw the covers back so he could stare at Sherlock, his dark curls resting on John's hip as he popped the cap of the lube.

At least in that, he needed no instruction. Perhaps he’d noticed it from John himself, who still reached for the bottle despite Sherlock’s natural slick, following his personal mantra of better too much than too little. Either way, Sherlock dripped a generous amount over his knuckles, spreading it around before propping himself up on his other hand and kneeling between John’s thighs.

Cool fingers slid back over his bollocks, circling John's hole, and his entire body blazed with anticipation. Yet it wasn't until he urged Sherlock on that he even tried to push inside. Sherlock's eagerness bled out in the shudder of every breath, but he didn't rush what he was doing: so slow and careful it was almost tortuous.

'I won't – won't break,' John promised, reaching down to give himself a quick stroke and moaning his approval as Sherlock timed the push of his hand with the motion. 'You'll need to use more than
He grinned as Sherlock rolled his eyes, apparently realising that much at least. He was waiting, easing his way through the natural resistance of John's muscles, and he had to admit he was grateful for the patience. As desperately as he wanted Sherlock in him, it had been a while since he had done this, and he'd had more than one encounter where his pleasure had skidded a bit too close to the border of pain thanks to his partner's impatience.

'See if you can find my prostate,' he challenged, arching his hips as Sherlock added a second finger, giving John time to adjust before his cautious movements became purposeful. It was the perfect distraction, removing Sherlock's attention from the fear of doing John harm and focusing him instead on seeking out the sensitive spot within him.

One more pass, and John couldn't stop the long, ragged groan that bubbled in his throat or the jump of his thigh muscles as he contracted around Sherlock's fingers, tightening with ecstasy.

He'd forgotten how good it was, the sudden slice of sensitive bliss. Not that he didn't sometimes do this when pleasing himself, but it was different when someone else was teasing over thrilling flesh, unpredictably bestowing each new frisson of delight.

It was as if, now he'd found what he was looking for, Sherlock was intent on seeing exactly how John responded to different touches, noting every reaction. Perhaps he was reading his expression, but John was too far gone to notice, vaguely concerned he'd unravel just from this as he began to leak pre-come against his stomach.

'Sherlock – please!'

He realised that Sherlock had bent at his waist, his dark head resting on John's belly. He could feel the ragged edge of his breathing, and when he deliberately tightened his muscles, he heard Sherlock's faint, wrecked curse. One hand was still occupied, a third, wet finger easing in to join the other two as John opened fully. Sherlock's other palm, he suspected, was gripping the base of his cock in a desperate effort to prolong what was happening.

'Now,' John managed, shoving at Sherlock's shoulder, his strength lost beneath the shake of exhilaration. Each gasp was little more than a snatch of arid air, and sweat cooled across his chest and forehead. 'Now's good. Please, Sherlock...'

He didn't need asking twice, and John spread his legs wide as Sherlock shuffled close, the blunt head of his erection, glossy with lube, lining up and pressing slowly, smoothly in.

Sherlock made a noise as if he was the one being impaled: a heartfelt groan that caused the hairs on John's arms to shiver upright. He could feel how much Sherlock was shaking, restraining himself against his body's instinct to plunge on regardless. Despite the overwhelming sensations John knew he was experiencing, he was forcing himself to wait.

The faint burn and stretch ebbed beneath the full, satisfying sensation of thick heat within him. John settled his knees on either side of Sherlock's rib cage, feeling the slide of sweaty skin as he offered a quick squeeze of encouragement. This position gave him a bit of leverage, a way to guide Sherlock while still giving him most of the control, and John shifted, listening to the desperate, needy noises
that escaped his lover’s throat.

‘Wait!’ he begged, one hand gripping John's thigh hard enough to leave a smattering of small, circular bruises. ‘Wait just – just give me a minute.’

He looked depraved, a few curls sticking to his sweat-glossed temples and a flush spreading across the pale skin of his chest. It was empowering, watching Sherlock holding himself so close to release, wound up too tight by the novelty of the experience to manage anything like finesse. Perhaps he wouldn't outlast John, but right now, he really didn't care. He wanted to watch Sherlock come undone inside of him, and impatience made him greedy as he tightened his knees against Sherlock's sides and shifted his hips.

It was all the hint Sherlock needed, and he shot John a dark, hungry look before pulling back and surging in, igniting thrilling sparks as he went.

What had been gentle and tentative rapidly lost its rhythm, growing into something ragged and a touch wild. Sherlock's fingers were tight over his hips, holding him steady as he fucked into him, and John clung to Sherlock's forearms, moving with him as each thrust punched a gasp from his chest.

Oh but it was good: not some choreographed dance nor the visceral surge and plunge of rut. There were no secrets between them here, no coy hidden meanings to what they were doing. It was the give and take of pleasure, and John tightened his thighs as Sherlock bent down over him, stealing a clumsy kiss.

Their lips parted with a lewd, wet sound and Sherlock dropped his brow to his collarbone, hiding his face in John’s skin. He made a rough, apologetic noise, John’s name caught on an almost-sob as his body tensed, and John felt Sherlock pulse where he was buried inside him.

He held Sherlock close, making no secret of how much he enjoyed being filled. Sex was about more than getting off, and even if the need for release crawled along his spine, he could still appreciate Sherlock falling apart in his arms, clinging helplessly as he came.

Bending his head, he smudged a kiss to Sherlock’s temple, murmuring praises into his skin. He stroked down Sherlock’s back as far as he could reach, trailing his fingertips through the brine of sweat and feeling the delicate aftershocks that raced through Sherlock’s body. His cock throbbed again, and John groaned, barely managing more than a croak of response at Sherlock’s apology.

‘I meant to last longer,’ he slurred, sounding half-drunk.

‘Takes practice,’ John managed, his voice thinning as Sherlock’s deep breath swelled his chest and stomach, adding pressure to where John’s hardness rested between them. ‘That’s all.’

Sherlock made a sound John couldn’t quite decipher, something soft and almost curious. ‘You’ll let me try again?’ He lifted his head, his gaze hazy with satisfaction and his hair going every which way. Those full lips, swollen from shared kisses, parted a fraction, and John couldn’t resist straining up for another, rutting against Sherlock’s stomach as he did so and feeling his softening length shift inside him.

‘God, yes,’ he breathed against Sherlock’s mouth. ‘Whatever you want, whenever you want it.’

It wasn’t a half-hearted promise, not by any means. He wanted Sherlock to experience sex in all its forms, not just the ones society had spent so long telling him were acceptable for an Omega. He wanted Sherlock to seek out his own pleasure as much as he gave it. They could share it all, from the way he keened when John sucked him off to the reaction he would have the first time John came,
clutched tight with Sherlock hard and deep inside him.

The thought of that made his breath catch, and before he could recover, Sherlock was kissing him, strong and determined. When he retreated, his voice was a wicked twist of sound in John’s ear.

‘Right now, I want to make you come,’ he said, the muscles in his arm tensing as he rested one hand on the mattress and deliberately slid downwards.

The heat of Sherlock’s mouth around him made John swear, his curse shouted to the ceiling as his entire body leapt. His hips jerked, and the answer to his stammered apologies was the curl of Sherlock’s clever tongue and the drag of his soft palate over John’s tip.

A warm palm cupped and rolled his balls before fingers edged back, trailing through the wetness of lube and Sherlock’s release. They hovered over the hottest part of him, and John moaned. He couldn’t get the breath to form the words – couldn’t concentrate on anything but the building storm within him – but he spread his legs wide, his invitation obvious.

‘Ah!’

He bit his lip, trying to hold in his whispers of longing and relief as Sherlock slipped two fingers inside of him, moving easily as he began to time the actions of his mouth with that of his hand, playing John as well as he played his bloody violin. It felt good, brilliant, full but not stretched, and the slick sounds of what Sherlock was doing were obscene in John’s ears.

It only added to the fire burning within him, scorching its way along his bones and intensifying with every bob of Sherlock’s head. He could feel the puff of each breath stirring the curled hair between his legs, and even in his lustful haze, John trembled at that tiny detail.

Then Sherlock twisted his fingers while sucking hard, and John was lost.

The tide of release roared over him, suffusing him with the froth of ecstasy as he came, pulsing in Sherlock’s mouth and clenching around the fingers within him. It was overwhelming, filling every sense until there was nothing but the warmth of their skin and the rolling, thunderous storm that followed the lightning strike of orgasm.

Only the faint knowledge that Sherlock might choke stopped him from thrusting up. Instead he tangled his grip in the sheets and hung on tight, his praises intermingled with wordless cries as his body burned itself up and spent everything he had to give.

At last, he sagged into the cradle of the bed, his stomach muscles jumping fitfully and his chest heaving as he gulped down one breath after the other. Slowly, Sherlock eased off of him, brushing his lips over the sensitive, flagging flesh between John’s legs before sitting back on his heels.

And that was a sight John would treasure for the rest of his life. Sherlock dishevelled and debauched, wiping his hand across his mouth and watching John from between half-lowered lashes. His pale skin glowed in the illumination from the single lamp, ivory touched with a hint of a gold and, here and there, rasped pink by John’s stubble and marked by his teeth.

‘Come here.’ John lifted his arm, ignoring the way it felt too weightless to be real as he beckoned Sherlock closer so he could press kisses across his nose. ‘Thank you.’

Sherlock raised one eyebrow and tilted his head, giving him such a look of disbelief that he almost laughed. ‘I think I’m the one who should be thanking you,’ he murmured, and John’s stomach thrilled with joy at the simple, unembellished honesty of Sherlock’s smile.
‘Then we’ll just have to be grateful for each other, won’t we?’

Sherlock murmured in agreement before reluctantly slipping out of their tangled nest with a promise to return soon. The splash of water followed shortly after – washing his hands, John suspected – and a quick skim of his palm over his stomach showed there was nothing much to clean up. Despite his lack of warning, Sherlock had swallowed, his preference for the taste over the mess having been made clear weeks ago. Still, that didn’t stop John getting up to use the loo when Sherlock came back, sorting himself out before returning to the warmth that awaited him.

Sherlock was sprawled on his stomach, taking up almost all the available space, and John huffed as he slipped in next to him, dragging the quilt over Sherlock’s shoulders before wriggling under his arm and snuggling close. His right hand skinned along Sherlock’s spine, wrapping him in a loose embrace, and he trailed his thumb over the shallow dip of Sherlock’s waist, feeling the smoothness of the soft skin there.

‘Are you staying?’ John asked, burying his nose in Sherlock’s shoulder and relishing the combined scent of them. It was a delicious fragrance, and he drew it in as he waited for a response.

Just because they were together didn’t mean Sherlock’s sleeping habits had improved. He still had a tendency to get up at odd hours of the night to conduct experiments or play the violin, and even when he did doze off in John’s arms, it was rare he was still there by morning.

Sherlock hummed, nuzzling his face in John’s hair and mumbling something affirmative. His body was hot and heavy, his muscles languid as he settled. The covers whispered, the bed sighing around them as they made themselves comfortable in one another’s arms.

Slowly, the peace surrounded them, disturbed only by the steady unison of their breaths. John watched Sherlock’s profile, seeing the serenity smooth out his features as a shallow doze ensnared him. He knew that feeling. The temptation of sleep hovered in the wings of his mind, but for now John resisted, happy to watch the man at his side, uninterrupted and unobserved.

So often, Sherlock looked like some untouchable piece of art, poised and perfect. His intellect set him above and beyond anyone else, and for most, that made him unreachable. Yet as beautiful as he was in those moments, John preferred him like this: rumpled, vulnerable and unashamedly human.

Under his ribs, his heart seemed to swell, full to bursting point with the breathless, peaceful joy that came of true happiness. He had never thought his life could turn out this way. Back when he’d returned from Afghanistan, even a smile seemed beyond his reach. Now John wasn’t sure he ever stopped.

Perhaps what they had wasn’t perfect: they still argued, and Sherlock was still arrogant and cold with those he considered undeserving of his sympathy, but John wouldn’t have it any other way.

Sherlock had chosen him to share not just his bed, but every aspect of his existence, and that was something he would never turn aside. As long as Sherlock wanted him, he would be here. John’s love would not be the cage that held him back, but the promise that got him through the day.

And Sherlock would return the favour.

His lover. His partner.

His mate.
Thank you so much to everyone who's been along with me for this ride, whether you've been a silent reader or an active commenter, it's been wonderful to have you.

B xxx

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