One Brave Deed

by 3littleowls

Summary

Sherlock Holmes goes on assignment for MI6. What should be a simple retrieval mission takes a turn for the worse, with long term consequences for Sherlock and the people closest to him.

Notes

This is set in my Empty Flat AU, and the relationships won't make sense if you are unfamiliar with those stories. If you want to shortcut it, at least read my keystone story, Revival, first.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Hazy, early morning light streamed through John’s bedroom window. He tended to wake naturally now, instead of having to rely on being jarred awake by an alarm. It was his favorite feature of his new room.

He lay in for a bit, straining for any sounds coming from upstairs in 221b. The house seemed to be quiet and still, but it was possible Darin was up. He couldn’t really be sure. He used to wonder what poor Mrs Hudson got an earful of when she lived here, but the flat was more soundproof than he would have thought. Unless Sherlock made a racket, he usually only heard treads on the stairs, a dog barking or the occasional low frequency hum of one of Darin’s machines in the basement laboratory. Even the violin was muted by traffic noise if his windows were open. John didn’t mind some noise, though. One of the reasons he had moved back here was because his old house had become too quiet in the past months. Some signs of life were welcome.

He got out of bed and threw on his dressing gown. Hopefully, Darin was awake and had brewed some of the eye-popping, French press coffee he preferred. John opened his door and sniffed the air. He padded around the corner and peered up the staircase. The door to 221b was still shut tight. Bugger. He would be making his own instant this morning.

He went into his kitchen, clicked the kettle on, and then gazed out onto the garden. It was looking a bit shabby now that the end of winter was nearing. Darin promised to keep it up for him in the spring. Between Mrs Hudson moving to her sister’s and Sherlock’s resulting hysterics, and then Mary’s illness, it had been left to go wild.

Mary.

His thoughts were never far from her. Time had just begun to wear away the sharpest edges of his grief, and the agony had subsided into a constant ache. The cruel thing about loss was that life continued regardless of personal tragedy. He knew he had to keep going on. Even if doing so meant feeling as though he were being torn in two.

Moving from their old house had been a good step. He was no longer surrounded by constant reminders of the life he had lost. It had been Sherlock’s idea. While unable to support him much with sticky emotions like grief, Sherlock had at least known how to help him stay moving forwards.

Darin had been John’s true lifeline when Mary was ill. He supposed it was because Mary and Darin had become thick as thieves over the years. It had seemed only natural. While he and Sherlock would run out on cases, Darin and Mary would do lunch, or watch films, or, as John was quite sure, whinge about their crazy spouses.

Darin had sat with her in the hospice. He had read to her. Filled her room with his madman’s bouquets of benign flowers arranged with deadly ones. Near the end, he had rotated vigils with an exhausted John. Sherlock had tried to reason with John, told him she was beyond knowing if someone was with her or not. John supposed in his way, he had been trying to be helpful. He guessed Darin had had a quiet word with him, since Sherlock abruptly stopped trying to comfort him with logic. In the end, John was thankful she had never been alone in her last hours, even if she had been sleeping.

At the funeral, Darin had wanted to say a few words during her eulogy, but had lost his voice to grief. He sat next to John with his head bowed throughout the entire service, one hand clinging to Sherlock’s jacket sleeve as if it were the only thing keeping him grounded. Sherlock had looked
straight ahead throughout the service, and John could only guess he had clamped his emotions down tightly to get by.

John and Darin had always been perfectly friendly, but never close. Now, after Mary, things had changed. Before, they had always been traveling in different directions; John running off on a case, and Darin buried in research. After Mary’s death, Darin had made a point of randomly stopping by his house or clinic to take him out for lunch to make sure he was eating. He had helped pack up Mary’s things - one of the hardest things John had ever had to do in his life. When John had broken down over a half-filled box of her clothes, Darin had had the grace to simply pat him on the shoulder and offer him privacy.

Before John moved in, he had invited Darin to tea to have a long talk about him taking the ground floor apartment. John had done most of the talking. Darin had sat and listened whilst carefully dissecting a mint leaf he had plucked off of the top of his cake.

“It’s your house now. I really don’t want to intrude on the home you’ve made with Sherlock. I’ll be a third wheel, and I wouldn’t want to do anything to jeopardize our friendships.”

“You will have your own flat, John. It won’t be so very different then when Mrs Hudson lived there. Besides, Baker Street will always be your home. He won’t put it into so many words, but Sherlock desperately wants you to be with us.”

“How, exactly, do you feel about Sherlock wanting me there?” John had ventured.

Darin had given him a long look over the frames of his glasses. “If I harbored ill thoughts about the nature of your friendship with my spouse, they faded long ago.”

“I do realize what this is about. You promised her you would look out for me. You know, you don’t really have to feel this obligated.”

Anger had flashed across Darin’s face. “I don’t have to keep my promises? John, if something happened to Sherlock...” He had closed his eyes and swallowed. “If he asked you, on one of the last days of his life, to look out for my welfare, would you?”

John had nodded, feeling a bit foolish. “Yeah, I would. He wouldn’t even have to ask me. I’m sorry.”

“It’s settled then. I’ll have my sister Natalie take a look at the flat. Some of that wallpaper is much too old lady for you.”

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John’s reverie was interrupted by the sound of the house front door banging open. He peered out, finding Sherlock on the threshold, in his dressing gown and slippers, tugging both the dogs along on their leads.

“Morning. Did you take the dogs out in your nightclothes, then?” John asked.

Sherlock glared at John as he slammed the front door. He unclipped the dogs from the leads, and they went bounding ahead up the stairs, Sherlock swanning after them.

“Right,” John muttered to himself. At least the smell of coffee finally wafted down.
It took John eight minutes and forty-seven seconds to decide to join them upstairs for breakfast. Not that Sherlock had been using a timepiece, but he could assume a margin of error plus or minus six seconds. Acceptable.

Sherlock was sprawled on the sofa, slippers dangling off his feet. Darin had set a small bowl of muesli and a few segments of grapefruit on the coffee table. He was thankful Darin did not nag after him to eat. He just left him food, always in small portions. It reminded him of an altar offering, and like a fickle god, Sherlock would choose to consume it, or he would not.

Darin was breakfasting over his laptop, the light of the screen reflecting on his glasses. A frown creased his brow. He was developing dark circles under his eyes.

“Good morning. Coffee?” John asked hopefully, finally appearing at the landing and cautiously peering in.

“Carafe is on the counter,” Darin replied, distractedly.

John was still tentative entering the flat, even after living here for a few weeks now. There seemed to be no way to reassure him that he wasn’t intruding or some other rubbish. He was at a loss to why John couldn’t figure this out on his own; Sherlock really hoped he didn’t have to explain what an open door meant versus a closed one. Maybe he could chivvy Darin into talking to John about it.

Sherlock resumed his musings on his upcoming experiment on inks. He almost had everything he needed gathered on his workbench in the basement lab, he just had to inventory his supplies. Before he could start checking off mental tick boxes, he was distracted by sounds in the flat. John was shuffling around the kitchen. The softly clicking keys of Darin’s keyboard. He was using the scientific calculator program, set to reverse-Polish notation.

“Can both of you stop making so much noise?” Sherlock whined.

Darin glanced up at him, pressed his glasses further on his nose and resumed his typing.

“Um, sorry,” John replied.

“Don’t encourage his behavior, John,” Darin sighed.

“You both seem out of sorts this morning. Are you two having a domestic?” John asked.

Darin looked up at John, but before he could utter a denial, Sherlock broke in to answer.

“Darin was invited to be a member of a multidisciplinary research team doing fieldwork in South America. An archaeologist wants him to identify the source of a plant compound they use on blowgun darts for hunting small game. He needs a significant source of new funding and should hear back any day on several grant applications. Which means he is dealing with his anxiety with his standard avoidance tactic- working himself to the bone unnecessarily. Surely, as a doctor John, you must see the signs of exhaustion upon him. There are dark circles under his eyes, the coffee carafe is completely full, which means he made a second pot. He is clinging to that laptop like a lifeline. Performing unnecessary thermochemical computations like the way a monk worries at prayer beads…”

“We get it, Sherlock,” Darin grumbled.
“Which means he is being a bit of a prat,” Sherlock finished, getting in the last word.

John blinked. “Yeah, well, Darin if you need anything, let me know. If you want to take a break, we could grab a few pints and watch the Chelsea match.”

“So we can watch them lose?” Darin’s mouth twitched into a brief grin.

“You’re still cranky that your Spurs midfielder…”

“Oh please spare me from your incessant droning on about sport,” Sherlock moaned. “Besides John, I should have Darin’s moodiness well in hand this evening. See to it you have dinner arrangements.” Sherlock was rewarded with a slightly puzzled look from John, and a pink flush creeping over Darin’s cheekbones.

*There*, Sherlock thought. *Check and mate.*

“Good morning, I take it the day finds you well?” Mycroft interrupted, appearing on the first floor landing as if by magic.

Sherlock growled. “We need to look into installing better locks.”

“I doubt that would be effective, as you well know,” Mycroft drawled. “I am here to see my brother-in-law, if I may have a seat?”

“Can we stop you?” Darin snapped. Darin and Mycroft tolerated each other just enough to behave like gentlemen in public. Sherlock settled back on the sofa, prepared to watch them spar. *This* was sport.

Mycroft folded his overcoat on the chair and propped his brolly against the wall. “It came to my attention you took tea with Mother last week.”

“So I did.” Darin folded his arms over his chest. Defensive body language, Sherlock noted. Mycroft’s face was frozen into neutrality as he settled into his own chair. Sherlock could tell he was keeping his weight under control this winter. *Drat.*

“I noticed that her legal team transferred something into your ownership,” Mycroft continued, with a definite look of disapproval.

“The cottage at Cornwall.”

“Which has been part of the Holmes estate for generations.” Mycroft bored his eyes into Darin’s. To Sherlock’s delight, Darin managed to meet it unflinchingly. “I want to know your intentions for the property.”

“The ‘Holmes estate’ as you call it, ends with our generation, Mycroft. Unless you plan to get to the business of making an heir?”

Mycroft sighed.

“Violet can distribute her property as she sees fit,” Darin continued. “Sherlock and I will use it as a holiday home and it will be willed to my niece when we pass. Satisfied?”

Sherlock knew the value of the property was of no real concern to Mycroft. It was a small cottage that their father and grandfather had used as a sailing retreat. Mummy had given it to Darin, as his reward for improving his French. In actuality, it was because Mummy knew Darin would
wholeheartedly take on the responsibility of caretaker. He had become attached to the place, loved the ruggedness of the land and the closeness to several National Parks.

Sherlock liked it there too, even if the lack of technology was inconvenient. The countryside was covered in mysterious old stones and barrows, and Sherlock ranged far afield in search of them when the weather was fair. When it was foul, the isolated little cottage was a sweet refuge. The large fireplace encouraged pleasant, idle hours of nestling together in front of it.

_Ugh!_ Sherlock thought. _That approached romantic drivel. Getting soft._

Sherlock recognised Mycroft’s real problem. It drove him completely around the bend that Mummy simply adored Darin, and anyone that competed for her favor was a target in his sights. Christmas dinners had become so excruciating after his marriage that they had agreed to celebrate separately, with Darin and Sherlock often spending the New Year in Paris. It was better for everyone’s blood pressure.

Mycroft tightened his lips into a thin line. “I suppose that will have to do. What is done is done, I am afraid, since she did not seek my counsel before acting.”

“Christ Mycroft, have you lost the plot? She is almost eighty. She doesn’t need to ask your advice!” Darin’s voice rose by degrees until he was almost shouting.

The three other men stared at Darin in stunned silence. Trading barbs and snarking with Mycroft was the norm. Darin displaying actual temper was not. He had a deep well of patience that rarely ran dry, but when it did, it was notable.

Darin snapped his laptop closed with more force than necessary. “I’m sorry. I need to get ready for work.” He made a hasty retreat out of the room.

“Well that was something,” John said, breaking the silence.

Mycroft did not appear to be vexed. “Sherlock, I have you on my schedule for lunch today.”

“I will be there to fulfill my obligation.”

“Do change out of your dressing gown.” Mycroft rose and gathered up his things. “Dr Watson, dear brother. I will find my own way out.”

“Especially since you found your own way in. Laters,” Sherlock snarked.

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To gain an increased level of privacy at Baker Street, Sherlock had come to an agreement with Mycroft a couple years ago. Mycroft wouldn’t bug the flat or monitor their personal communications, and Sherlock would agree to a drama-free lunch with him once a month. It was worth the sacrifice of Sherlock’s time for his peace of mind.

Club Gascon was busy, filled with the typical power brokers discussing their big schemes. They reeked of self-importance, and the whole atmosphere disgusted him. Sherlock picked at his scallops ballotine, but decided to drink the wine. Mycroft’s company was enough to make anyone reach for a bottle.

If there was one blessing to the affair, it was that they didn’t waste a lot of breath on small talk. It was not unusual for the table to grow silent after a few moments of routine catching up. Once or twice Sherlock had caught himself speaking freely about a case, or something to do with a project of
Darin’s. Mycroft would get the oddest look on his face and Sherlock would stop himself.

“You must be thrilled to have the Good Doctor at your beck and call again,” Mycroft started.

“You would know, your staff sees to your every need. Yes, his schedule is more flexible now that he is residing downstairs and not in outer London. A live-in assistant is very convenient. Darin simply refused to pick up my dry cleaning.” Sherlock frowned.

“He seems to be recovering from his recent loss. He has put on another half-stone since moving in to Baker Street,” Mycroft observed.

“John is resilient.”

“Be that as it may, he was laid low for quite some time. They were married for what, five years? It hardly seems worth the misery.”

Sherlock shook his head. Perhaps once, he would have agreed. “You shouldn’t comment on subjects on which you are ignorant.”

Mycroft speared a tomato, unfazed. “Loss is the inevitable pain of love. I would have seen you spared. Now the damage is done, I can only hope for your husband’s longevity.”

Sherlock raised his glass in salute and took a deep swallow. On this one subject, he had his brother mastered. He supposed it should give him satisfaction, but it didn’t. He could perhaps feel sympathy for him, if he could work himself up to it.

“I read that Andrew Allard published a new book on the microload trend. It seemed to be getting good reviews,” Mycroft mused.

“Darin told me as much.”

“I am to take it Andrew has not yet overcome his prejudice.”

Sherlock took a long sip of his wine. “Darin had thought it would resolve after Natalie wed last year. Or at least with the birth of his grandchild. Neither has seemed to do the trick. It matters little if he does not wish to speak to me.”

Mycroft tutted. “I am sure it matters to Darin.”

“He puts his energy into other things. I’m sure Andrew was thrilled when he saw the YouTube video his son did for Stonewall’s latest campaign.”

The corner of Mycroft’s lip twitched upward. “Do you think that is how he found out you converted your civil partnership to marriage?”

“It could be,” Sherlock returned the briefest of smiles. “You know I have very little interest in such things. Darin wanted to waste the hundred pounds for another bit of paper to make a statement.”

He didn’t miss his brother’s knowing look after Sherlock glanced at his left hand. After four years, the platinum band still shone brightly, carefully polished.

“Ah, paper. That reminds me.” Mycroft set his fork down. “Something crossed my desk yesterday that I thought it might interest you.”

“No.”
“I believe I will soon be in possession of a new chemical formula. Let us just say there is an issue with the patent. If I send you the information, would you run an analysis?”

“Why? You have entire laboratories at your disposal,” Sherlock knew this was something other than a simple ‘patent issue’, and he tried to tamp down his curiosity.

“True. The truth is I need the work completed with all haste, and the laboratories are not able to provide the turnaround time I need. I will double your usual rate, of course.”

Sherlock did his very best to look put upon. “If your resources are so very meagre, I suppose I can take a look for you, at triple my usual rate. Have your PA contact John for the details.”

Sherlock took a bite of his scallops. If he had to dine with a bunch of businessmen, he might as well follow their example.

####

*I expect you at home promptly this evening. -SH*

*I assumed. ETA 18:00. -D*
London Blue

Sherlock was finished with his preparations when he heard the keys turning the lock in the front door. Not that the setting was very complicated. He knew what Darin needed this evening, and it really required very little effort on his part to orchestrate it.

When Darin made his way up the stairs to the first floor, Sherlock immediately saw the trepidation and anticipation in his eyes. “Hi.”

“Hang up your coat, close the door and throw the bolt,” Sherlock told him calmly from his chair. Darin seemed to consider it for a moment. If he didn’t want what was coming, this was usually when he’d put a stop to it.

Darin dropped his messenger bag to the floor and shrugged off his overcoat. He hesitated, pressed his palm to the wood. “I have work to do tonight…”

“No, you really don’t. You have been putting on a good show of looking busy lately. A stellar performance. Worthy of the West End, I do say. Yes or no, Darin.”

Darin clicked the lock on the door with a flourish and turned to look at Sherlock with a cocky, raised eyebrow. His whole face was radiating, now what? Sherlock glared at him crossly from his chair. He was being baited.

“If you’re finished playing games, we can begin. Otherwise, spend the evening acting occupied until you’re worked into a lather. It is all the same to me,” Sherlock picked a bit of lint off the front of his trousers, pretending indifference.

Darin worked on wiping the smirk off his face and tried to appear contrite. Sherlock rolled his eyes. Darin desperately needed something to fight against, so he was resisting Sherlock’s authority, and in the end, himself. He’d fall into line soon enough.

Sounding bored, Sherlock started the preliminaries. “I left you a light supper on the table. When you have eaten all of it, take your time readying yourself. Hang up your clothes, use the toilet, have a wank if you wish, I don’t care. Whatever you need to do. When you go to shower, leave the door open.”

“Is that all?”


Darin flinched as if he had just been slapped, and his mouth snapped closed with a click. He dropped his eyes to the floor.

“Better. Stay silent for the rest of the evening unless I ask you something, or if you need to say stop. Now go.”

Darin headed directly into the kitchen.

Sherlock understood the psychology of submission, but it was always fascinating to watch his husband transform behind closed doors. Darin was not passive. He orchestrated his laboratory like a maestro, and made choices that would not only affect his career, but the futures of his students and fellows. Occasionally, when it got to be too much, Darin needed a break and Sherlock would give him a few hours free from having to make any sort of decisions at all. He was envious Darin could
quiet the turmoil in his mind so easily. It had taken Sherlock a trip to Tibet and years of meditation practice to come close to the peace Darin could find.

Sherlock kept close by, reading his book, but otherwise ignored Darin. These preparations were practical. He could hear the click of a spoon against the bowl as Darin ate the chicken coconut soup Sherlock had picked up from their favorite Thai takeaway. He didn’t need supper, especially after dining with his brother, but he didn’t want Darin to be distracted by a gnawing belly the whole evening, or even worse, to become lightheaded. Sometimes, if Sherlock was in the mood, he’d feed him by hand, but right now he wanted to finish the chapter he was reading.

He eventually heard Darin wash his dishes and move into the back of the house towards the master bedroom and toilet. When Sherlock heard the shower start to run, he marked his place with a slip of paper, stood and went into the bedroom. He retrieved a pair of light blue, soft cotton terry shorts Darin sometimes lounged in. He dallied long enough to allow Darin to begin his ablutions, and then went into the loo, where the door had been kept open as bidden.

Sherlock flung open the shower curtain. Darin, nude and bathing himself, flinched instinctively at the sudden exposure. Sherlock ignored it and rolled up his sleeves. He took a towel out of the cupboard and folded it into a square, and then dropped it into the bottom of the bathtub. “Kneel on that.”

Darin silently did what he was told. Sherlock turned off the taps and disconnected the handheld showerhead from it’s bracket and then laid it aside. Darin’s brown eyes were curious and wide as he watched Sherlock fish his herbal shampoo out of the caddy. He rubbed a dollop between his hands, and went to work massaging it into Darin’s scalp. Darin sighed and pushed his head into Sherlock’s hands, as if he were a large cat getting petted.

Sherlock was thorough, enjoying the feel of the soapy strands as they ran through his fingers. Darin’s hair was thick, and he was careful to work from his scalp to the ends. He noted the few strands of silver that had just begun to thread their way around his temples, and he imagined what Darin would look like when the brown finally gave way to gray. He turned the taps back on and rinsed the suds away, filling the room with the sharp scent of rosemary that Sherlock had come to associate with Darin. He was careful to pass the spray from the handheld showerhead over the bottom of the bathtub, to make sure the slippery soap was safely gone.

Sherlock offered Darin a hand up, and gave him a dry towel. He rubbed another towel briskly on Darin’s head. Darin’s hair had a lot of volume, and leaving it to air dry, especially with no conditioner, would leave him with fluffy, unruly bedhead in the morning. The sight always amused Sherlock to no end, so he encouraged the chaos. It was childish, and Darin smirked knowingly.

Sherlock dropped the towel to the floor with a squelch and tossed the shorts to Darin. “Put those on, and then come upstairs to the study.” Darin nodded and Sherlock left him to finish up. Sherlock snagged his laptop and the book he had been reading before heading upstairs; from past experience, he knew he might be in for a long wait.

They had had extensive work done on the third floor years before, right when they had become affianced. The room was now a spacious study that served as Sherlock’s and John’s work area for their consultancy. It was bright, thanks in part to the skylight that was cut out to allow access to the gardens and apiary on the roof. A built-in bookcase flanked one wall- they never had enough shelf space. Mrs Hudson had feared for the old joists when Darin had moved in with his own books.

Natalie had helped with the design, and gone with Sherlock’s preference for shabby Victorian meets modern. She had covered the floors with old woven rugs and had reupholstered two reclaimed chairs and a small settee with contrasting, loud printed fabrics from a sale at Liberty. Sherlock adored them, and John said they made his eyes water. His old desk had been refinished and relocated from the first
floor. Sherlock’s oddments and souvenirs from past cases filled a sleek, modern glass and metal curio. It contained all manner of wonders, from jeweled daggers to taxidermy specimens.

Across from the bookcase, Natalie had skipped the wallpaper and covered the wall in natural cork, where Sherlock pinned up information on current cases, newspaper articles, or anything that struck his fancy. A small photograph always remained up, hidden in plain sight amongst the clutter. It was an excellent shot of Sherlock and Darin, caught in a private moment, holding hands with foreheads pressed together, behind one of the columns of Old Marylebone Town Hall. Natalie had captured it without their awareness, just moments before they registered their civil partnership.

Sherlock set his laptop and book down next to one of the chairs. He had just enough time to slip off his shoes and socks before Darin entered the room. Sherlock surreptitiously watched Darin’s reaction to finding the foam exercise mat in the middle of the floor, and upon it, a dark length of silk and a coil of London blue cotton rope. Darin’s toes curled into the carpet as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, already physically anticipating what was to come.

Sherlock stood and sauntered slowly to Darin. This close, Sherlock could see he wasn’t just fidgeting, but was practically thrumming with energy. Sherlock removed his glasses, and folded them up. He took Darin’s hand and slid his wedding band off, and set them both aside on his desk. He tugged on Darin’s wrists and pulled him into the center of the room, near the foam mat.

“You didn’t hurt yourself at the gym this week? Any strains I should know about?” Sherlock asked, picking up one of the folded hanks of rope. He let it come apart, playing with it, letting it slither through his fingers, then slowly wound it back again. The twisted strands hissed softly as they rubbed across each other. Darin swallowed and shook his head.

Sherlock stepped behind Darin, pulled his wrists behind his back, and held them lightly together with the one hand. He ran his free palm down Darin’s spine, feeling the tense muscles jump under his touch. Sherlock couldn’t help but be reminded of the excited twitching of a young colt, all pent up energy just under the skin. “Shhh. I know. I need you to stay still, just a bit longer.”

Darin flinched as Sherlock draped the rope over his wrists. Working slowly and carefully, Sherlock created the cuffs, wrapping both strands around, checking to make sure the cords lay flat. He pulled the ends through the loop before proceeding to create the armbind that would immobilize Darin’s arms to above his elbow. He snugged up the slack and checked the tension to make sure it wouldn’t pull on his shoulders too much. The position would burn his muscles after a while, but it wouldn’t cause his shoulders harm or cut off circulation.

“Down,” Sherlock commanded, pressing Darin to sit on the mat. Darin was trembling. Sherlock knitted his brows and squatted down in front of him. “Remember, you can speak to answer me, or to express any sort of discomfort. Are you all right?”

Darin nodded. A fine sheen of sweat was already covering his chest.

Sherlock frowned. “Not good enough.” He sat crosslegged and put his hands on Darin’s knees.

“I’m fine. It’s just...really intense this time.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock considered. He slowly stroked Darin’s legs, reassuring him. This was simple so far; they had certainly tried more restrictive and uncomfortable restraints and positions. “You know what is coming next. Do you want to proceed?”

Darin eyed the strip of silk next to him on the mat, and Sherlock wasn’t surprised. Darin had a love and hate relationship with the blindfold. Sherlock waited.
Darin let out a breath. “Yes.”

“I should have taken you to hand earlier. I let you spiral out of control for too long. I always miss something.” Sherlock leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, and Darin’s shivering eased. Sherlock maneuvered him to lie on his stomach, and picked up another length of cord.

Sherlock made a lark’s head knot, slipped it over Darin’s bent knee, and pulled the loop to lie above his ankle and around his thigh. He wrapped the rope around several times, wove the ends through and tied them off. He repeated it on Darin’s other leg, effectively prohibiting the ability to stand. Sherlock pulled Darin back up to kneeling.

Sherlock picked up the innocent silk scarf, so dark blue it was almost black. Everything for Darin was in shades of blue, for the simple fact Sherlock thought it was flattering and loved to see him in it. Sherlock wrapped the cloth around his eyes.

“Artichoke,” Darin suddenly warned. Sherlock froze. It wasn’t the safeword telling him to stop. It was the warning word. Sherlock held the scarf in place, leaving it loosely draped over his eyes. He could see Darin’s carotid artery strongly pulsing just under his skin. Sherlock kissed it on impulse, pressed his cheek against Darin’s.

“Most people consider sight the most important of senses,” Sherlock mouthed against him. “It’s just our brain, processing the data contained in a small range of electromagnetic radiation. That information gives us the ability to evaluate our environment. Oh, but it’s more than that. Eyes are indeed the windows to the soul- we can tell truth from lies, judge trustworthiness. Vision denied means we have to allow our other senses to do the heavy lifting. Ones most people find unreliable if they have been spoilt by the richness of visual perception.”

Sherlock rocked back on his heels. A demonstration was in order. He tightened his fist on the fabric of the blindfold, catching some of Darin’s hair with it, pulling. Darin inhaled sharply.

“Touch.”

Sherlock forced the thumb of his free hand between Darin’s lips and pressed it onto his tongue. Instinctively, Darin started to suck, and Sherlock removed it, making a wet pop. “Taste.”

He brushed his lips over the shell of Darin’s ear and pitched his voice to it’s lowest register- he well knew the effect it had- growling, so slowly, “Hearing. Very. Important.”

Darin whined.

Bumping his nose across Darin’s cheekbones, Sherlock huffed a breath, then another, so they were breathing each other’s air. “Smell. I find it to be the sense most often underestimated.”

Sherlock drew back onto his knees again. “Tonight you sense only what I think you should. If you listen well, you will know I am still with you.”

Darin bobbed his head, and Sherlock finished winding the rest of the silk over his eyes. He tied the last knot and Darin’s shoulders were already bunching, testing his captivity. Sherlock stood and admired his handiwork. He had never been interested in bondage before Darin admitted he enjoyed it. Now, he realized just how mesmerizing it could be.

Sherlock moved silently on his bare feet, and sat on the chair slowly, making sure the old furniture’s frame didn’t creak. Darin was still, straining to hear him. His chest was heaving now, perspiration starting to bead on his skin. Darin had told him once that even completely nude, he often felt warm when tied up.

Suddenly, Darin stopped trying to determine Sherlock’s location. He jerked his upper body, let out a
soft grunt and started to fight the ropes. Sherlock watched, enjoying the sight of his muscles flexing. Darin would settle down, catch his breath, and then writhe again, taking out all his pent up frustration on the bindings. Sherlock quietly picked up his book from the floor and started to read again. This could take a while.

Twenty minutes later, Darin keened quietly and went very still, body tense. Sherlock exchanged his book for his laptop. He kept one eye on Darin as he typed, letting the keyboard keys click and clatter. Hearing the sound, Darin let out a shaking breath and resumed his cycles of rest and struggle. Eventually, the resting time lengthened, and Darin’s breathing became slower. Sherlock made sure to periodically shift in his chair, tap his cup with his finger, or work at his laptop, creating some kind of comforting sound.

At forty-five minutes in, Darin sighed and folded himself over, head on his knees. Sherlock rose silently and lightly touched Darin’s fingertips to check his circulation. His hands were warm, and twitched a bit in reaction. Sherlock pressed the bed of one of his fingernails and watched the color return, assuring blood flow. Darin’s shoulders had to be aching, but it wouldn’t be much longer, now. Sherlock went back to his chair, waiting and watching. The only sounds in the room were the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner and Darin’s slowly deepening breathing.

Finally, Sherlock checked his watch. Darin had surrendered to his bonds some time ago, and he had let him sit and drift in his sea of endorphins. He would have to either change the position of Darin’s arms at this point, or let him free. Sherlock rose and plucked at Darin’s loosely curled fingers. They didn’t twitch. He brushed across his back lightly and also received no reaction. Deciding to call it a night, Sherlock picked his knots free and slowly unbound him. He worked at his arms first, intentionally taking his time, letting the rope slide over Darin’s skin. Sherlock hadn’t let him fall too far into euphoria, and his leisurely motions and the drag of the cotton would help to gently rouse him. Once his arms were free, Sherlock unwound each leg with equal care, until the ropes were discarded on the floor. Darin could wash them and take care of them later. He removed the blindfold last, but Darin kept his eyes closed, anyway.

Sherlock pulled Darin down on the mat so he could lie on his side, and grabbed the throw off the back of the loveseat to tuck around him. He kept an arm free and gently massaged Darin’s shoulder down to his hand. He didn’t see any damage, besides the temporary pressure marks left from his skin being compressed under the ropes. They would be gone by the morning.

While Sherlock had no real desire to cause Darin injury, he liked the patterns the red lines made, and it was a shame they were not longer lasting. He liked the idea of something visible left on his skin that proclaimed, “Sherlock did this.” Spying the expanse of his bare, vulnerable neck, Sherlock bent down and sucked a bruise almost at Darin’s clavicle. Sherlock worked the spot until he was sure the mark would be dark and livid. There. Mine.

When he sat up to check his work, Darin had cracked his eyelids half-open, but he still hadn’t fully returned to earth. The bruise was low enough that Darin’s buttoned collar would cover it. While Darin was still at his mercy, he didn’t want him to be in a strop later, annoyed about having to stand at a lectern sporting visible love bites in front of thirty twenty-year olds.

Sherlock pressed him down flat on his back to reach the other arm, and continued to rub Darin’s strained limbs. Darin was slowly coming around, now watching him with remote interest. Sherlock got up to fetch a bottle of apple juice from his desk and sat back on the floor. He put a straw into it before pressing the bottle into Darin’s hand. Sherlock arranged Darin’s head so it was pillowed on his lap and carded through his thick hair.

“Drink the juice when you won’t choke on it, ” Sherlock told him. Darin blinked at him slowly in
reply, but his hand managed to keep hold of the bottle. It was completely amazing to Sherlock that he could manipulate him into this state, and even more so that Darin easily trusted him to do this. Sherlock felt another thrilling jolt of possessiveness.

It took Darin several minutes to gather control of his body and wits enough to be able to drink his juice. He hummed happily and nuzzled his head into Sherlock’s legs.

“How you have changed over the years,” Darin murmured.

“How so?” Sherlock asked, wrinkling his brow.

“You were so shy,” Darin remembered, with a slightly drunken smile.

“Shy? Me?”

“I recall you bolting like a deer the first time I kissed you. Now look at us.”

Sherlock tsked. “That wasn’t being shy. That was...inexperience. It’s been five years since we met; it only stands to reason we would have threshed things out by now.”

Darin smiled. “Inexperienced, right. You were *terrified*. Dare to say intimidated by me.”

“I do think I like you better tied up. Remind me to use the gag next time,” Sherlock replied sharply.

A giggle slipped out of Darin’s lips. “Sorry.”

Sherlock minutely shook his head.

Darin laughed again and closed his eyes. “Thank you. You are remarkable. Extraordinary, if I had to say it.”

Sherlock smiled. “Flatterer. Now let’s get you put to bed.”

###

Sherlock woke in the small hours. He carefully untangled himself from Darin and checked his mobile, which he had put on mute. He tapped the screen to play a voicemail message from Mycroft.

“The job we discussed this afternoon has become more dire. Please return this call at your earliest convenience.”
Sherlock sighed loudly when his mobile began to ring. He had responsibly ignored the text message alerts, but he supposed a call could actually be important. He tapped the handsfree button on the steering wheel.

“Yes.”

“Where are you?” John asked.


“Darin is making pasta primavera for dinner, and I think he wants to know if he’s cooking for two people or three. Where the hell are you going?”

Sherlock’s stomach growled, and he ignored it along with John’s question. “He could have called me himself.”

“I think he’s making an attempt not to mother you.”

“No, that’s obviously your job,” Sherlock snarked. “I will be home tomorrow, perhaps later in the afternoon.”

“Sherlock,” John expelled a long-suffering sigh. “You really should be more considerate of your husband. You just don’t bugger off for the night without telling him where you are. It’s rude.”

Sherlock frowned at the phone. “I was going to tell him later,” he lied a little. He had forgotten to write a note in his haste to pack a bag and get on the road. It may have occurred to him to call. Eventually.

“Yeah, sure you were. Mary would have had my hide for the shit you pull. I’ll let him know. Where are you going again?”

“A mundane job. I can tell you about it later- perhaps over pints at The Golden Eagle.”

“Sure thing,” John replied casually. “See you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, John.” Sherlock smiled in approval and ended the call. ‘Over pints at The Golden Eagle’ was the phase they used when Sherlock couldn’t go into detail over an insecure channel, and John knew to shut up and stop asking questions. It usually indicated he was on a job for Mycroft.

Mycroft had managed to wheedle his way into Sherlock’s consultancy over the years. It had started after Sherlock returned from his great disappearance. He and Mycroft had spent years collaborating whilst he was gone, tearing apart the remains of Moriarty’s network.

A part of Sherlock resented it. He knew his brother had ultimately manipulated him and won; finally he had harnessed Sherlock’s acuity for his own purposes. Yet, the SIS government identification in his wallet weighed easy on him. It opened doors for his other investigations that he used to have to pry to access. The money hadn’t hurt, either. Finances hadn’t been a concern to him when he was younger, but both he and Darin liked finer things, and they had only become more hedonistic with
each other to encourage. A house steps from Regent’s Park, cashmere socks, percale sheets, and
Hugo Boss glasses didn’t buy themselves.

Mycroft was also coyly selective on his requests, and really Sherlock didn’t find that he was called in
for anything too tedious. Except today. He was still fuming that he was being used for simple courier
work, only because some political situation someplace- Korea? Syria? Oh who knew- had tapped
many of the active agents under Mycroft’s command. He was being sent to perform an errand
because Mycroft had a staffing problem.

Well, this would be quick work and he’d be able to buy Darin a watch to replace the one that he had
been so sure he could reassemble. How should have he known how difficult it was? It was simple
16th century engineering. Darin hadn’t been quick to sympathize. Apparently, destroying his
grandfather’s Longines beyond repair was enough to put him in a temper. Sherlock had spent the
night on the sofa and had been forgiven only after a promise in the morning to make amends.

Anyway, all he had to do was drive three hours on this bloody highway to some backwater
godforsaken village and pick up a dead drop. Some other MI6 moron hadn’t gotten the job done. He
probably had become lost in the endless sheep fields and hadn’t reported in yet. Perhaps Mycroft
feared for the safety of the country for good reason if his troupe of imbeciles couldn’t perform basic
espionage tradecraft like retrieving a hidden information cache. Perhaps in the age of digital warfare,
the primary skills were getting lost.

To add to his frustration, it had taken forever to brief him in the morning. He was sure Mycroft was
delaying to see if his missing lamb reported in, but the lack of personnel certainly was slowing things
down- Vauxhall Cross was running at a quarter capacity. If SIS headquarters was stripped of its
agents and running on a skeleton crew, Mycroft must have been desperate for aid indeed. It had been
late afternoon when Sherlock was finally issued his orders and given a car, then he got snarled in the
evening rush out of the city. It was full dark now, and he had another hour and a half of driving in
front of him. He pounded the steering wheel with his fist; he would need to decide if he wanted to
stumble around in the dark, or if it would be better if he took a room for the night.

Sherlock pulled up to the front of an inn. It was small, but it would suit. It wouldn’t be busy; from the
location, he determined most of the custom was from summertime trekkers. He reached behind the
seat and dug around in his bag and pulled out a second mobile. This one was equipped with a SIM
card he would dispose of at the end of his errand.

Did you hear back from your friend yet? -SH

Unfortunately not. -M

Sherlock smiled. There had always been the possibility the agent had run into some real trouble,
instead of some kind of delay. Being a courier in the UK usually wasn’t a high risk task, but then
again, Sherlock didn’t have the whole story on what was on the memory chip he was going to try to
retrieve. If someone had intercepted the agent, or compromised the drop location, this was going to
be a little more interesting than just picking up the post.

It also meant that he was definitely checking in for the night. A simple pickup he could accomplish
with a night’s walk. If he needed to get a good look at the drop site for clues, he’d want full daylight
for a proper investigation.

Will go hiking in the morning. -SH
Sherlock’s feet crunched rhythmically on the frosted grass. It was early yet- he had set out when it was still dark- and the rising sun was still not strong enough to offer any warmth. He had eschewed his city clothes for his Cornwall kit- sensible hiking boots, thick twill trousers and a heavy, worn woolen peacoat.

Darin had demonstrated the practicality of such dress on their very first outing in the country. Spying some sort of vine, Darin had charged unrestrained into the bracken and left Sherlock to slide after him on ill-chosen dress shoes. Darin had worn sturdy boots and tatty jeans- the man would sit his arse in the mud if it meant he could peer through his spectacles at some green growing thing, clothing be damned. A smile crept over Sherlock’s face at the charming memory.

Sherlock pulled off a glove and checked the heading on his GPS unit. He had been walking for about an hour, and the route to the coordinates of the dead drop had taken him off the main walking path and through sheep pastures, around hedgerows, and behind ancient stone farmhouses. While no longer on a marked walking trail, it would be easy enough to claim he was a late season wanderer and a little off course if a local got curious. He tucked the unit and his chilled hands back into his coat pockets. He was still another hour away from the location, and his current path was taking him to a small copse of trees straight ahead.

The trees were a thick barrier left unmolested to mark one property line from another’s. Sherlock didn’t understand why they bothered- it was one big livestock pasture as far as he could see. What did it matter where one ended and one began? He struggled a bit through some undergrowth at the edge of the copse before he could get under the canopy. It was dark in the little patch of woods; Sherlock knew the trees must have been very old- they loomed over him and spread bare branches wide overhead. It was eerily quiet. No bird sang, probably due to the biting cold. Twigs snapped under his stride and sounded as loud as gunshots.

After several minutes walking, Sherlock again referred to his GPS. He thought he should have reached the end of the little forest by now, which he was sure should have been just a glorified hedgerow, perhaps a half-kilometer at the widest point. He held the unit up skyward, hoping he’d get a signal undercover.

He heard the faint shuffle of the forest floor deterius, but it was too late for him to react. A cold, metal object was pressed firmly into the base of his skull. Sherlock let the GPS drop, and put both hands up.

“On your knees, nice and slow,” a deep male voice with an American accent told him. Sherlock complied, biding his time, keeping alert for an opening.

“Take what you want. Don’t hurt me!” Sherlock simpered, pretending to sniffle. He blinked his eyes quickly to encourage them to water.

“Don’t waste my time with that bullshit. Take your coat off and throw it to the side. Don’t make any sudden moves, my trigger is a little touchy.” The gun stopped prodding him him the head, and Sherlock unbuttoned his coat, shrugged it off and threw it to the side. A rough hand quickly frisked him and found the Glock tucked into his waistband. He caught the sound of the magazine being dropped out of it.

He heard the rustling fabric of his jacket, but he didn’t dare to turn around to see if the man still had the gun trained on him. If he waited, he might find an opening for a defensive strike. If he tried to...
force it, or appeared too watchful, he might never get a chance. Of course, if he waited too long, the man might just shoot him in the head.

“Stand up. Turn around, slow and easy.”

Sherlock did so. His attacker was a brick house of a man with quite a few kilos on him. Sherlock might be able to take him in an attack, but he doubted he’d be unscathed. Besides, he stood with the self-assurance of a trained fighter. He was holding the gun in one hand, and Sherlock’s wallet in the other.

“Well, screw me sideways,” the man sighed. To Sherlock’s surprise he lowered, but did not put away, his sidearm. “You have a SIS ID card. Please tell me you can confirm, so I can be sure you're not an impostor and I don't have to blow your head off. If you're not, and I shoot you, it would cause an international incident. That paperwork is fucking brutal.”

Sherlock blinked. He had been given a passphrase to use with the missing courier in case he found him, but he hadn’t been briefed on an American showing up to the party. He took a risk.

“I am not sure what you are looking for, but I speak Mandarin.”

The giant flashed him a grin full of sparkling, bleached teeth against light mocha skin. He tucked the gun away. "I just happen to have a few yi yuan on me." He reached into his pocket and flipped a coin in the air. He held it up to show Sherlock. The exchange was completed.

“My name is Orion Fall, CIA. I’m probably not who you were expecting. Sorry about the gun to the head.” His apology was given in the same inflection as if he had just bumped Sherlock getting on the tube.

“Orion Fall? Ugh. That can’t possibly be your real name,” Sherlock replied with distaste. “That is a horrendous alias.”

“You don’t say, Sherlock Holmes,” Orion quipped back. Sherlock scowled.

“I was not informed that the CIA would be involved in this matter. What are you doing here?”

Orion cracked his neck. “My lead agent sent me. I suppose you have the same story.”

Sherlock was shivering from the cold, and he retrieved his coat, thinking. “You performed the initial drop. That’s how you suspected me- I was following your coordinates exactly.”

“Yup. The military issue GPS you were flashing around confirmed it.” He handed Sherlock’s wallet and gun back to him. “Don’t usually see you MI6 guys armed.”

Sherlock didn’t answer. He was right, SIS didn’t usually issue arms to regular intelligence agents. It was his own gun that technically wasn’t legal.

“Anyway, got word down the wire that the pickup didn’t happen, so I’m back to have a look. I take it you were delayed somehow?” Orion asked him.

Sherlock shook his head. “The first courier never reported in. I was sent as a secondary to complete the task.”

Orion scowled. “That’s fucked up. Why didn’t your boys tell us they were sending a second?”

Sherlock thought back to the ghost town at Vauxhall Cross. His mobile buzzed inside his coat as he
You may run into company from overseas. Your diverse language skills will be an asset. -M

Sherlock grimaced at his phone. “I think our communications are running a little behind schedule.”

Orion laughed. “Someone in HQ almost got you splattered, buddy. You better give them hell when you get home. Anyway, I suppose we’re doing a live handoff now. May as well go to the drop and see if it’s intact.” Orion bent down and retrieved Sherlock’s GPS.

Sherlock nodded at the big man. “After you.”

Chapter End Notes

A dead drop is a spy tradecraft term for a hidden cache of information left for another agent to pick up. In comparison, a live drop is a face to face exchange between two agents.
Sherlock followed Orion through the rest of the small forest, crossing into even more livestock fields. Neither man spoke much; it wasn’t good form to be overly chatty when your duty was to gather secrets. They also kept a wary eye on each other; even with the proper passphrases exchanged, there was always a chance of one of them being a double agent. Sherlock suspected that notion was a bit too James Bond, but he couldn’t shake the impression that something was wrong, either with the American, or the circumstances they had found themselves in.

“Something has my Spidey Senses tingling,” Orion admitted and stopped to look around. Sherlock didn’t see anything but grass and fat, stupid sheep.

Sherlock nodded. “I concur. Do you think you have been followed?”

“Do you think you have been? I’m the one who caught your ass, after all,” Orion replied.

Sherlock ignored him. “If we are, then it must be long distance surveillance. Look for a lens flash from binoculars.”

“Or a scope,” the American added cheerfully. “We are headed to that pile of rocks, and we won’t be standing out in the open anymore.”

Sherlock squinted and identified the outcropping, still some minutes away. They started to head toward it, walking a bit faster than they had before, shoulderblades itching from the imagined sniper rifle. Soon the terrain changed to a steady uphill climb covered in slippery scree. They were forced to scramble with hands and feet, up the face of the outcrop. Sherlock was breathing hard when they finally got over the top of the hill. More rolling fields and a small stream lay on the other side.

“The drop location is downstream,” Orion pointed. “If we have company, this is probably where they will introduce themselves.” Orion checked the holster under his coat, as though to reassure himself his gun was still ready.

Sherlock nodded, and they proceeded down the other side of the hill, heading to the riverbank.

“Wait,” he called out to Orion. He knelt down and fished into one of the interior pockets of his jacket for his hand lens. He popped it open, and examined the faint outline of a hiking boot.

“That’s not from mine,” Orion confirmed, bending down to see.

“No,” Sherlock agreed. He stood and tucked away his lens, and he pulled out his mobile. He tapped at the screen for a minute. “It hasn’t rained here in two days, and the edges to the print are indistinct, probably from wind erosion. It is possible this was made by our missing courier.”

Orion stood up, looking around again. “Great, so where the fuck is he?”

“No idea,” Sherlock grinned, “but things are getting fun.”

“Oh happy day, another danger junkie. Let’s go and see if there’s anything left at the drop site.”

They both trudged down to the bottom of the hill, and followed the banks of the stream.

“I have not seen another footprint in some time,” Sherlock noted.
“Maybe he just didn’t leave more prints?”

“Not in the soft soil this close to the water. I don’t think our man made it to the location.”

Orion exhaled through his nose. “Shit is looking bad. All right, here we are.” He stopped near a small cluster of bushes where the stream bent. Orion entered the bracken and lifted a large rock, exposing a divot dug into the earth.

“Still here.” He tossed a small container to Sherlock, who easily caught it.

“Another test?”

“Yup,” Orion drawled.

Sherlock examined the cylinder. It was the same dimensions as a film canister, but made out of aluminum. Both ends had caps that looked like they could be twisted off. He knew that if someone opened it incorrectly, a small battery would send a charge to the chip inside, destroying the data. Orion must realize that if Sherlock was indeed who he said he was, he would know how to extract the chip safely.

Sherlock pulled his lockpick set out of his coat, and selected a small, straight probe. He twisted the bottom cap one-quarter turn and used the lockpick to activate a tiny button just under the edge of the top cap. The bottom cap fell into his palm, revealing a SIM card inside.

He looked up at Orion, who nodded at him to proceed. Sherlock stowed away his lockpicks and took out his phone. He removed the SIM card and plugged in the one taken from the cylinder. After a few seconds, the screen flashed—“transmitting.”

“Jesus, if that’s all they needed you to do, I don’t know why the fuck they just didn’t put it on Dropbox,” Orion whinged.

“The mobile has a special SIS encryption chip, and the cypher is bound to the unique hardware serial number of the agent’s phone. Just a little more secure.”

The mobile screen blinked—“Complete. Memory wipe initialized.”

“It’s done,” Sherlock told Orion. “Shall we…”

Orion held a hand up to silence him. They both froze in place, straining their ears. Orion moved slowly and put his hand inside his coat, and Sherlock followed suit, dropping the mobile with the now useless chip in his pocket before going for his Glock.

After the minutes ticked by, Orion shrugged. “I thought I heard a truck.”

“Sound can travel farther near the water due to the increased humidity in the air,” Sherlock conjectured.

“Maybe,” Orion took his hand off his gun. “You want to look around and see if we can find traces of your guy, or get the hell out of…”

A red laser light flashed over Orion’s chest. “Oh, fuck,” he muttered.

Sherlock raised his hands out to the sides of his body. “Look on the bright side. You were right about the scope.”

“Yay, me.” They heard movement in the underbrush, and Orion turned his head slowly. Two armed
men appeared, and made quick work disarming both Sherlock and Orion. Their hands were bound behind their backs with zip ties, and they were encouraged to walk ahead with a silent motion of a waving weapon. For the second time that day, Sherlock could only wait for a possible opportunity.

Several yards away, they were stopped, backs to their captors. Sherlock was very calm, even as he realized this was probably one of his last moments living. He didn’t have long to dwell on that, as he felt rough hands pull his coat down and over his shoulders, and then tug roughly at his jumper’s neckband until he heard stitches give way. Cold air bit at the exposed flesh of his neck and upper arm, and then he gasped when he felt a quick, sharp jab into the meat of his shoulder. The hands then replaced his coat back over him.

“Fuck.” He heard Orion hiss, and then what sounded like a slap a few moment’s later. Sherlock was shoved from behind, and made to walk again.

Sherlock felt a familiar, dull warmth slowly spreading through his limbs. Orion stumbled at one point, and was jerked back up by one of the men.

“They used an opioid of some sort. Meperidine?” Sherlock murmured to him. His thoughts were slowing down. As the minutes ticked by, one of the men had to help pull Orion along. Sherlock wasn’t as far gone, his tolerance built up from past morphine abuse, but he allowed himself to sag and stumble as he walked. They were heading away from the creek, towards a distant fence-line.

They rounded a small cluster of trees, and they were being steered towards a battered old army truck with a small trailer hitched to the back. Sherlock was starting to feel dizzy, and his swaying was no longer feigned. Orion was roughly hoisted up into the trailer, and Sherlock soon followed him, landing heavily on his back on the cold steel deck, covered with the remains of a load of straw.

“There isn’t a back gate on the trailer. Tie their feet,” one of the men spoke for the first time. His accent was faintly Greek.

Sherlock could do nothing as he felt more zip ties tighten around his ankles. Sherlock tried desperately to force his sluggish wits to come up with a plan. He squirreled away the knowledge that the back of the trailer would remain open, but he couldn’t imagine what he could do with the data. Escape seemed improbable; if they rolled off the back of the trailer they were still bound, and his head was spinning. Looking over, he could see Orion appeared even worse off, struggling to just keep his eyes open.

The doors opened and closed and the engine growled to life. The truck made its way over the fields and Orion moaned as they slid and bounced in the trailer. They hit a particularly hard bump which sent them banging into the deck, bits of straw flying. Sherlock kicked his bound feet, stirring up more of the straw, sending it blowing out of the back. It was something productive he could do, and keep himself awake.

He sent more straw on its way at intervals, until the truck came to a stop. He resisted the temptation to sit up and look out—it was best if his captors thought him dozing. He heard the groan of a gate opening, and the truck rolled forward onto smooth pavement. He snapped his eyes closed as one of the men walked around the trailer to close the gate. With a bang of the truck door, they were soon headed down what looked like a small country road. Sherlock kicked more straw, hoping his trail of breadcrumbs would eventually be found.

###

Orion groaned as he slid into the side of the trailer with a thump when the truck came to a sudden halt. Sherlock was pulled from the back of the trailer, the ties around his feet cut so he could stand.
There were three men now; one must had been waiting for the truck to return—or no— it was the man who had held the rifle from afar. The sniper was handed the keys to to truck before the man who had been driving turned to deal with Sherlock.

The man grabbed him and led him through the barn door, and this time, Sherlock really needed to rely on his captor’s support to walk. He was pushed past a row of empty stalls—the lack of animal smell indicated this place was in disuse—past some rusty tractor equipment and into a room in the rear corner. It must have been used once to store horse tack; empty pegs and saddle trees lined one of the walls. Another door, firmly closed, must have been the exit out of the back of the barn.

He heard the snick of a knife as his wrists were freed, and his back was pressed against one of the walls. His coat was pulled off, and the man searched his upper body thoroughly for weapons, hands roaming under his jumper. The drug had left him unable to do much but lean against the wall and put up with it.

His hands finally were brought in front of him and tied with a jute rope. He watched the man’s technique through half-lidded eyes—he was using what was called a handcuff knot. The man pulled tight, until Sherlock winced as the rough rope dug in. It would work to restrain him temporarily, but it wasn’t a self locking knot. Adding a couple half-hitches would have done the trick, but the moron securing him didn’t finish the job. Instead, he relied on tension, and strung the ends of the rope through a steel eyelet high on the wall, until it pulled Sherlock’s hands over his head and tied him off. He would be able to get out of this, if they left him alone long enough. Thank you, Darin for this bit of knowledge from the games you like to play.

The other man from the truck came in with Orion, struggling with him as he was still slumping heavily. He shoved him against the wall opposite Sherlock. It took both of them to repeat the same binding treatment with Orion—he being a much heavier man than Sherlock, and a deader weight. They also removed Orion’s shoes and then his trousers, carefully looking for anything of interest. They finished by hobbling his feet, and left him to slump against the wall.

“The first one was a lot easier to deal with, Mihal,” the second man groused in heavily accented English. He approached and continued to search Sherlock, taking off his boots and checking them inside.

“Yeah, but we caught the Devil for killing him. Theo, you know what out orders are,” replied the one that had tied Sherlock’s hands. His accent wasn’t as strong. He must have been in the UK quite a long time, which was probably why they had chosen to speak in English.

“We just need to find out what they know, which should happen shortly after Alexis brings Giorgos here. These ones won’t be alive long.”

Theo dropped the second boot with a look of disgust, and went for Sherlock’s flies. He dropped his trousers and skimmed his hands over Sherlock’s boxer briefs. While his examination was clinical, Sherlock couldn’t help instinctively arching away from the invasion. Theo backhanded him hard across the jaw. With a ringing head, he acquiesced to the rest of the search. He tied Sherlock’s feet, and did a much better job than his companion had done with his wrists. He just hoped that he didn’t double check his colleague’s work. Theo stood up, and he and his companion left them.

Sherlock blinked hard, trying to think. They had known the location well enough to track them, but not specifically enough to find the drop itself. There must have been an internal leak in the SIS or CIA. The clock was ticking at this point. Whoever Giorgos was, Sherlock didn’t want to be around when he arrived.

“Still awake?” Sherlock called over to Orion.
“Hrm.”

Just the response he expected. Luckily they had at least tied them up against a wall, or Orion would have been hanging heavily in his bonds.

Sherlock twisted his wrists, trying to work them back and forth in the loops to slowly loosen them. The meperidine was making him addle-headed, but it would also dull the pain of the rough rope rubbing him raw. He gritted his teeth and kept at it. Any wounds would be a small price to pay.

###

“Where the fuck are we?” Orion grumbled, about an hour later.

“A big barn. Approximately nineteen kilometers from the drop site.”

“This turned into a real shit-show,” Orion grumbled. “It’s freezing.”

Sherlock had been trying to ignore the cold. While the drug had helpfully reduced the pain in his hands, it wasn’t making him feel warmer in the unheated room without his coat or trousers.

“At least we are out of the wind. We are likely to only suffer moderate hypothermia.”

“Yeah. I think we have bigger problems with Giorgos Caras’ gang.” Orion watched Sherlock wince and work the ropes.

“You were aware enough to hear that. Who are we dealing with?” Sherlock asked. He had successfully created some slack.

“Small international crime ring and known terrorist sympathizers. Most of the members are related to each other. Theo and Mihal, our two buddies from the truck, are cousins. I don’t know who the third is. They must have found out we got a copy of the formula.”

“Formula?”

“Jesus, they didn’t tell you a fucking thing. Probably wise.” Orion pulled experimentally on his ropes. “It’s some sort of chemical weapon. We don’t know exactly who developed it, or what it does. It was going to be offered up in exclusive black market auction, and one of our agents stole it. Our couriers have been passing it along, trying to get it back to home base.”

Sherlock took a breath, hopped up to slacken the rope and pulled hard on his right wrist at the same time. The loop slipped further on his hand.

“Are you going to be able to get out of that?” Orion asked.

“Yes. It wasn’t tied properly. Can you run for it?”

“I’m still high, but yeah, I can run.”

Sherlock hopped again, yanked his arm, and his hand popped out of the rope cuff. Just then, the door to the room flew open. It was the man Orion had identified as Mihal, and he cursed in Greek when he saw Sherlock freeing himself. With his left hand still tangled in the rope, and his feet hobbled, there was little Sherlock could do to defend himself. He heard Orion shout before Mihal grabbed him around the throat, and then banged his head into the wall until Sherlock saw spots, and then nothing more.
Sherlock wasn’t out for long. He was aware he was being dragged across the wooden floor of the barn, but his body wasn’t obeying commands yet. He was left lying in a heap for several moments, which gave him time to completely come to. He kept still, with his eyes closed, observing.

“Did we have any more of those zip ties?” Mihal asked his cousin. “I don’t trust this one with ropes.”

His voice resonated around the room, and Sherlock knew without looking they had dragged him into the main part of the barn, near the horse stalls.

“Let me see if there are any more in our supplies.” Footfalls faded away as Theo left Sherlock alone with Mihal.

Sherlock stayed limp as he felt the rope being undone around his ankles. This was likely going to be his only other chance to try to escape. When Mihal rose, Sherlock peeped through his eyelids and waited until he stepped in closer. Sherlock snatched his leg, and dug his thumb as hard as he could into the spleen pressure point above Mihal’s ankle. Mihal howled at the intense pain and his leg buckled for a second. Sherlock pulled his ankle hard and at the same time kicked up, hitting his captor in the hip, unbalancing him and sending him crashing down.

Sherlock scrambled to his feet and kicked Mihal in the ribs for good measure. The world tilted sideways- the tranquilizer and a blow to the head weren’t doing him any favors. Before he could turn to flee to the back exit through the tack room, he heard Theo give a surprised shout from the front door of the barn.

Sherlock ran, trying to ignore the waves of nausea, but Theo was simply faster than he was. He caught up with him before he could even reach the tack room door. Before Sherlock could turn to face him, Theo tackled him from behind and he went flying forward. His buzzing head commanded him to throw out his arm to brace his fall, instead of rolling as he had been trained. So he landed heavily and poorly, with his and Theo’s weight centered over his hyper-extended arm. Sherlock cried out as his shoulder made a sickening pop from the impact.

Cursing, Theo jabbed his knee into Sherlock’s spine, and wretched his hands behind his back. Sherlock stifled a scream as his shoulder was moved, sending a line of sharp, bright pain through his shoulder and chest. He suddenly felt ill and gagged as Theo jostled him up.

In the meantime, Mihal had gotten up from the ground and came over, and they manhandled Sherlock back over to the horse stall. Sherlock moaned when they dumped him onto the floor inside, and again when Theo struck him hard across the face, his head snapping back, sending another shockwave of pain through his upper body. Mihal kneeled over him, and pulled one of the zip ties through his ankles. While he was working, Sherlock wriggled his left hand experimentally- they didn’t make mistakes binding him this time. The zip tie was tight and he'd be lucky to have circulation left in his hands if he was ever freed.

“This will keep him until Giorgos gets here.” Mihal pulled out a syringe and measured out another dose of meperidine. Sherlock watched the syringe fill, and calculated the dose. He wasn’t going to be awake for long. While not their intent, Sherlock was looking forward to the pain relief, since he was well and truly incapacitated. His hope now lie in Orion getting free, or Mycroft sending someone else after him, quickly. Mihal jabbed him in the thigh, and both men left Sherlock in the stall, shutting the door and dropping a bar down on the other side.
Sherlock carefully curled over to lie on his left side and closed his eyes, and waited for the drug to kick in.

###

Darin rapped softly on John’s door. He felt a bit guilty; it was close to the time he usually turned in, but he could hear the telly was still on. He pulled his dressing gown a little tighter around him and waited until John came to the door.

“I’m sorry to bother you, I know it’s late,” Darin bit his lower lip. “Well… you haven’t heard from Sherlock today, have you?”

John shook his head. “No. Come in and I’ll check my mobile, just in case. He’s not answering?”

“No. You said he was going to be back this afternoon?”

“That’s what he told me.” John picked up his mobile from the coffee table, frowned at it and scrolled through his messages.

“Nothing today. Let me text him.” John tapped slowly at the screen and held it up so Darin could see what he wrote:

_Call Darin, you tit. -J_

“I’m sure he’s just running behind and deleted common courtesy,” John assured.

“Do you know what he is up to?” Darin asked him, chewing his lip again.

John shrugged. “I’m not sure exactly, but from the sounds of things it’s one of Mycroft’s jobs. Which means he’s probably on some stupid errand and being monitored to boot. Go to bed. He’ll probably be home and demanding tea before the morning.”

Darin sighed. “You’re probably right.”

“You want something to help you sleep?”

“No, no. I’m alright. Just let me know if you hear from him?”

John patted him on the shoulder. “I will do.”

###

Gladstone waddled over to Darin and whined softly.

“Sorry, buddy. I don’t know where he is, either.” Darin rubbed his ears in consolation, and when he had enough, he huffed over to the cushion in front of the fireplace and curled up with Sophie.

Darin sat in his chair and tried to return to his abandoned novel and glass of brandy. He tried not to fret, he really did. John always thought he would be upset over the fact the Sherlock couldn’t be bothered with civilities like calling him. It was rather far from the truth. As if Sherlock’s affection could only be conveyed through mundane things like remembering to use a mobile at the right time.

No, he had to accept that Sherlock’s work could be dangerous. There was always a chance that one day, he might never come home. It was no different than what spouses of police and emergency responders dealt with, but it didn’t make it any easier. A call wasn’t going to ease his mind, and he was only going to feel better when his husband walked through the front door, whole and hale.
Darin leaned his head back in his chair and did the only thing he could do—wait.


Darin woke to Sophie yipping. He had fallen asleep in his chair. He felt around in his clothing and in the cushions for his glasses. A knock sounded at the flat’s door.

“Darin?” John called.

“Yeah… just a minute,” he muttered, finally finding his glasses on the floor. He stumbled to the door and opened it, and John, fully dressed, practically pushed his way in.

“Sherlock is missing,” John announced, looking grim. “Mycroft called. He apparently achieved his objective yesterday morning, but no one has heard from him since. His tracker apparently went dead as well.”

“Dead?” Darin asked, blinking the sleep out of his eyes.

“Uh, yeah a bad choice of words. It’s not working. Mycroft is on his way over now to talk to us about it. He said would have come sooner, but he sounds really harried.”

“Missing? How can he be…. I’m sorry. I’m not awake. What… what time is it?” Darin asked.

“A little after four. Mycroft will be here soon. You probably will want to get dressed.”


Sherlock yelped and sputtered as he was awakened with a bucket of water being splashed over him. He tried to scramble up, forgetting about his bonds momentarily and floundering on the ground, gasping as he jostled his shoulder. He calmed and gave himself a few breaths to come to full awareness.

“I would say good morning, but I don’t think that is true, yeah?” Theo taunted.

Dull daylight filtered through the barn windows—sedated, he had slept through the entire night. Considering the throbbing deep in the tissues of his right rotator cuff, it probably had been for the best. It was cold and he was shivering, the water he was lying in was seeping into the remainder of his clothes.

Mihal came in with a folding metal chair, and set it up in a corner of the stall.

“Oh, but he gets to meet Giorgos, cousin, and one doesn’t get to talk to such a great man every morning.” Mihal bent down into Sherlock’s line of sight and brandished a handgun. “We’re going to get you ready for your interview, but none of your little games today. We could kill you and we still have your friend to do the talking.”

“If that were the case, you would have killed me yesterday,” Sherlock rasped.

Theo poked Sherlock in the ribs with his shoe. “Mind your manners, asshole.”

Sherlock grunted and shut up, under the threat of a broken rib being added to his injuries. Theo leaned over him and sliced through the ties on his wrists and ankles. Sherlock carefully sat up, wincing as he positioned his right arm to wrap across his belly, trying to stabilize his shoulder. He wriggled his fingers and rolled his ankles, feeling the pinprick of circulation returning to his extremities. The prickling in his fingers intensified into sharper stabs of creeping pain, and he hoped
it wasn’t the hallmark of permanent nerve damage. He stood, and Mihal watched him closely as he stomped his feet.

“If you need to piss, go do it in the corner.” Theo waved to a pile of straw in the far end of the stall. Sherlock rolled his eyes, but the necessity was indeed pressing. He turned and stumbled the few steps to the indicated corner and turned his back to the two men.

“Could I get my trousers and coat back?” Sherlock asked over his shoulder as he relieved himself, teeth starting to chatter.

“Shut up. Come back and sit on the chair when you are done. Don’t make any sudden moves.”

Sherlock did as he was told, and sat in the chair.

“So when do I get to meet your boss?” Sherlock asked.

“In a few moments,” Mihal licked his lips.

“You are more nervous about this than I am. Make a few mistakes?”

Mihal froze and glanced over his shoulder. Sherlock heard footsteps approaching on the wooden barn floor before a well tanned man entered the stall. “Good morning, Mr Holmes, is it?”

The boss was a tall man and carried himself with confidence. He was wearing worn work boots, a pair of jeans and a ratty coat. The clothes did not sit on him naturally. It looked more like he was wearing a costume than a simple man’s kit. No, this was a man who usually wore tailored clothing and was more suited for a boardroom than a barnyard. There was no sign of Alexis, the sniper who had been sent with the truck.

“Yes, and you must be Giorgos Caras. Excuse me for not getting up, I’m likely to get shot for my trouble,” Sherlock quipped.

Giorgos Caras smiled, and it wasn’t a particularly pleasant one. “Indeed, Mr Holmes. Unfortunately circumstances don’t allow for pleasantries. I don’t have a lot of time to spare visiting with you; my schedule is tight.”

“Oh, what a shame,” Sherlock rolled his eyes.

Giorgos sneered and dropped Sherlock’s mobile on the ground. “You seemed to be up to chatting before I entered, so you can talk to me instead. Let us start with this mobile we found in your pocket. It doesn’t seem to be functional.”

Sherlock pouted. “Drat. I didn’t get the insurance.”

Giorgos shook his head and dropped a SIM next to the phone. “We also found this, but you see, we don’t want to plug it in and see if it works. Just in case it knows to tell your friends at SIS where you are.”

If he hadn’t been captured, Sherlock would have disposed of the erased chip from the drop and plugged his active card back into his mobile again. He had been hoping one of the meathead cousins would have become curious about the contents and tried it- it indeed had a location tracker. So had the missing SIS agent’s mobile before him, and they still hadn’t found his corpse yet.

“So I want to know… Sherlock,” he rolled his name around on his tongue, if savoring a new word, “which chip was in the container.”
“Oh dear. I must have mixed them up. I’m not sure anymore.”

Giorgos sighed. “I cannot guess why there would be a dead chip in your phone. Was it damaged when you found it? Did you erase it before my men could say hello? Or is it a decoy, and this other chip is the one you picked up at the drop site yesterday?”

Sherlock glared at him.

“I see. Like I said, Sherlock, I am a busy man. I don’t have time for your foolishness,” He motioned to Theo.

Theo moved behind Sherlock and gripped his injured right arm. Sherlock hissed as he pulled it behind the back of his chair. Without preamble, Theo grabbed Sherlock’s little finger and yanked it sideways, and it crunched. Sherlock gasped in shock, then stifled a cry as Theo wiggled the broken digit for good measure. *Proximal phalanx collateral ligament avulsion fracture*, Sherlock’s mind helpfully provided for him as he writhed in the chair.

“Let me ask you again. What happened to the data on the chip, Holmes?”

Sherlock gritted his teeth and breathed. He tried to find that empty, serene place in his mind where he could safely retreat to. He kept silent, ran through the preliminary relaxation exercises—chest expanding with inhalation, the air passing through his nostrils with exhalation.

He simply didn’t have the discipline or time to form his refuge. Agony shot through him like an electrical current as Theo hyperextended his middle finger past tolerance. *Proximal phalanx base fracture with dorsal angulation*. Sherlock saw spots as he tried to instinctively twist away, shoulder burning for his trouble. Theo slapped him in the head and twisted his tormented limb further up his back. Sherlock wailed, feet digging uselessly into the straw, his left hand clenching into the seat of the folding chair.

“We have eight more fingers,” Giorgos warned him, “or I may simply run out of patience and have Mihal shoot you. I can have the chips analyzed, as I’m sure you realize. I’ll know sooner or later, so you may as well spare yourself the pain.”

Sherlock panted, and said nothing.
Mycroft arrived at Baker Street after what seemed to be an eternity. Darin had thrown on a jumper and a pair of rumpled trousers and started to pace a track around the flat. John made tea and toast. He had learned in the military to sleep and eat whilst you can.

John was taken aback by Mycroft’s appearance. After Sherlock’s ‘death’ years earlier, he was certain nothing could outwardly faze the Ice Man. Yet his suit had creases, as though he had worn it too long, and the dark circles under his eyes indicated he needed sleep.

“Morning, gentlemen.” Mycroft sat in Sherlock’s chair. John poured him coffee without being asked to. Mycroft looked like he needed it more than John did.

“Where is he, Mycroft?” Darin asked, impatiently.

“We don’t know. We have a last known location for him, and then nothing. We expected to lose contact with his tracker for a few moments when he reached his destination, then resume transmitting again, but the latter never happened.”

“Is he in danger?” John asked.

“Potentially. With Sherlock, it’s hard to tell. He often plays off script when the situation calls for it. However, in this case, another one of my agents went missing before we sent Sherlock. Two people missing in the field indicates a threat.”

Darin rubbed his face and resumed pacing.

“I think you had better start from the beginning,” John told Mycroft.

“You understand that everything I am about to share with you is confidential,” Mycroft started. John waved him on.

Mycroft nodded. “A few days ago, I sent a junior field agent to pick up a hidden information cache. He never reported back. I called on Sherlock to retrieve the cache. Due to a developing political situation, I temporarily do not have the resources to tap that I normally do, and he was available.”

Darin blinked. “You knowingly sent him into danger? Alone?”

“I did not know anything,” Mycroft corrected. “Agents occasionally miss deadlines for mundane reasons. It was always possible our agent had simply become lost or injured. The retrieval was not considered a high risk mission. Sherlock had understood the risks involved. He himself deemed it unnecessary to ask John to arrange his surgery schedule to accompany him.”


“We do have reason to believe that Sherlock was not alone. There was a CIA agent still in the area who had planted the drop, and it was my impression he had circled around when they found out our first agent had not retrieved the cache.”

“That’s promising, but I suppose no one has heard from the CIA bloke, either?” John asked.
“According the the CIA, that agent has maintained radio silence and is not due to check in until this evening,” Mycroft shrugged. “We monitored Sherlock closely via a tracking device in a SIM card in his mobile. We know he found the cache. Part of the procedure required him to remove the SIM card momentarily to transmit information contained in a secondary encrypted chip. Sherlock was supposed to have replaced the SIM card immediately, but for some reason, he did not.”

“Oh god,” Darin muttered.

Mycroft sipped at his coffee. “At this point, I would normally send in an agent with a member of Special Forces. However, I am unable to do so for another twelve to eighteen hours, due to the circumstances that have temporarily taxed our capabilities.”

“If you don’t have a couple men to spare to go after Sherlock...are we about to get nuked or something?” Darin asked.

Mycroft drank his coffee in silence.

“Well, that settles it, then,” John said. “I’ll go. If we wait half a day, who knows where he could be. Tell me where he was last at, and I’ll see what I can find out.”

Mycroft nodded. “You see the solution. I have the coordinates and a mobile with a tracking chip for you. I can have a driver available in three hours. The location is a three hour drive, and then two hours hike to the drop site.”

Darin was shaking his head. “Anything can happen to Sherlock in eight hours!”

“It can’t be helped. John doesn’t have a driving license, and I drove myself here,” Mycroft replied. “Next available driver will arrive here in three hours.”

John thought. “Why does it have to be someone who works for you? Could we just hire a car from a service…”

“I’ll do it. I can drive. Let me have your car and we can go now,” Darin offered. “Then I can help look for Sherlock. If John and I can’t find him, no one can.”

“You?” Mycroft sneered. “You can drive, but you have no business on a retrieval mission.”

Darin set his jaw. “My husband is my business!”

Mycroft scoffed. “All the more reason not for you to go. You are burdened with an emotional investment on top of having no practical skills.”

John broke in. “Mycroft, MI6 agents aren’t usually armed, anyway. You were going to send in an agent and an SF officer. This doesn’t make much of a difference.”

“MI6 agents are still trained for fieldwork and potentially violent situations, even if they don’t routinely participate in them,” Mycroft corrected.

“I am going. I’m not going to sit idle while Sherlock needs help,” Darin said stubbornly. He looked over to John, who nodded his assent.

“That is both a very brave deed and a very foolish one,” Mycroft told him with a raised brow.

“I’ll look out for him,” John assured.

“I don’t need minding. I’m going, one way or another,” Darin insisted
Mycroft sighed. He popped open his briefcase and handed John a dossier and a mobile. He hesitated, then reached a set of car keys out to Darin.

“If something were to happen to you, my brother would resent me for years,” Mycroft admitted before dropping the keys in Darin’s palm.

Darin nodded and swallowed hard.

Mycroft called for a taxi and reviewed the detailed contents of the dossier with them briefly, while he waited for his ride.

“I will send assistance at the earliest opportunity,” he promised. “Realize until that time, you are on your own. I would advise that you try to gather information and avoid trouble.” He pointedly glanced at Darin.

John shook his head. “If Sherlock is in danger, we are going to find a way to help him.”

Mycroft nodded, as if he knew what the answer would be. “Godspeed, and keep in touch.”

###

As soon as Mycroft was gone, John started quickly preparing for departure. He went down into his flat, and pulled out warm weather gear, his Sig Sauer, a medical kit and a survival knife. He came back up the stairs to find Darin packing a backpack.

“Darin, see if you can fit in this,” John held out a bulletproof vest.

“Where the hell did you get that?” Darin asked.

“Sherlock and I tend to find things as needed. We only have this one, but I’m thinking it’s best if you wore it.”

Darin pulled it on and played with the adjustment straps. “It’s heavy. I’ll need to find a different jumper to fit over it, but it will work. Why is it for me?”

John pulled out his gun, and checked the chamber out of habit. “Speaking of things we ‘obtain,’ I checked upstairs, and Sherlock took his Glock with him. So you’ll be unarmed, and I want to give you some kind of defense.” John looked at Darin, who was eyeing his handgun dubiously.

“Sherlock has never shown you how to use his gun, right? Never shot one before?” John asked.

Darin shook his head. “Sorry. Haven’t had much call for it, mucking around in the greenhouse, have I?”

John made a face. “Since you have two weapons in your house, I’d have you at least be able to check to see if they are unloaded. Sherlock’s a bit free and easy on gun safety; I’ve seen his gun lying around more than once. Here, let me run you through it.”

Darin shied away when John tried to hand him his weapon. “Uh. Is this necessary?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what we are walking into, and if something happens to me…” John offered it back to Darin. “You don’t have to do this, you know. Go with me. You can drop me off and no one would blame you for...”

Darin carefully took the gun. “I have to. If I could be of help, in some way...I have to. Besides, even just with me, it’s better than you going off alone.”
John pursed his lips. “Right. Let’s get this sorted, then,” John gestured at the gun. "This isn’t difficult. Rule one is, never point it at anything you don’t want to shoot. Keep it aimed to the ground, but not your foot, even when you think it’s unloaded, yeah?” John went through the procedure of loading and unloading, and checking the safety. Darin was uncomfortable, but no more than anyone else he had taught how to handle weapons for the first time.

When they were done, John took a quick inventory of their supplies while Darin left a message with a dog walking service. John was finishing up and didn’t notice the silence at first, but it eventually seeped through his awareness and he looked up. Darin was staring numbly out the window.

“Hey, we’ve been in tougher spots, Sherlock’s going to be all right.”

Darin turned to him and took a deep breath. “What if he’s not, this time? I’m not sure if I could stand it, if he…”

John closed his eyes, and thought of Mary. The big aching, chasm she had left in his life. He wouldn’t wish it on anyone, especially Darin or Sherlock. “You could. You’d have to.”

Darin glanced away and swallowed. “Of course. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

John walked over and placed his hand on Darin’s shoulder. “It’s all right, I understand how you feel. Just get it out of your system before we get there. We’ll need to focus.”

Darin tried to smile. “Just be like Sherlock.”

“Maybe less of a prick, thanks,” John squeezed his shoulder and let his hand drop. “I think we’re ready. Let’s hit the road.”

###

John was getting a bit concerned for their safety as Darin sped the government car down the M4. The speedometer had been steadily creeping past the legal limit, and Darin had made some close swerves to get around traffic. He didn’t even have both hands on the wheel- he was chewing away the cuticle of his thumb instead.

John reached over and tapped on Darin’s phone that was mounted to the console to stop the music that was playing. Darin glanced over to him. “You can change the playlist if you don’t like it.” Darin suggested.

John didn’t mind the rather bland adult contemporary rock, but it evidently hadn’t been soothing Darin’s nerves at all. He needed to distract the man, before they crashed and became a fiery ball of metal. Or before he had worked himself up to a state where he would be no use at all.

“So, we have a few hours on the road, and it came to mind that we only talk about football, or about…” a sudden tightening in John’s chest squeezed away the ability to say Mary’s name.

Darin stopped chewing on his thumb and to John’s relief, put his hand on the wheel. “Um. Sure.” A few moments of silence ticked by and he added, “Did you have some topic in mind?”

John hadn’t thought that far ahead. “Well, anything really. What did you and Mary chat about?” He was able to steel himself to say her name, this time.

John snorted. “Not your husbands?”

“Yes, that, too,” Darin laughed.

“So go ahead, then. Tell me something about Sherlock that you would have told her.”

Darin shook his head. “Oh no. That is a horrible idea. There are some things you are better off not knowing. You’re his best mate. There has to be a confidentiality rule about that sort of thing.”

John scrunched his face as an uncomfortable thought occurred. “Um, Darin?”

“John?”

“Do I even want to know what Mary told you about me?”

Darin sniggered. “Don’t worry John. I’ll never tell a soul. I’m not telling you, either.”

John rubbed his face, not at all reassured.

“Instead of gossiping like schoolgirls, why don’t you ask me a question?” Darin suggested.

Something popped into his head right away. “Actually, I have been meaning to ask you about the little hand sign you and Sherlock use.” Darin looked over and John held up his hand, tapping the thumb and pinky together twice.

Darin nodded, looking like a man who found safe ground. “That? It’s simple, really. It’s Sherlock’s way of telling me he’s overstimulated and doesn’t want me to touch him. When we first started dating, it was something we had to navigate. We didn’t want it to cause a lot of awkwardness or rejection. So Sherlock came up with the sign. If he gives it, I back off right away. I repeat the sign back to him, so he knows I got the message. No hard feelings or discomfort.”

John raises his eyebrows. “That’s really clever. He should blog about that. It may help someone else. All this time I thought it was some little romantic thing you did.”

Darin’s cheeks pinkened. “Well. Over the years it’s kind of morphed into something like that, I suppose.”

“A long-distance kiss.”

“It’s really just a coping mechanism, John.”


“Screw off,” Darin said without heat, too used to John’s good-natured teasing to let it fluster him.

“Next question.”

John noticed Darin’s driving was a bit less erratic since they started chatting. This distraction technique was something he had used many times in the RAMC, either to settle a distressed patient or to calm someone on duty. No sense in wasting good adrenaline waiting for the results of a medical exam or imagining booby trapped roads. Personal questions seemed to work best, being more absorbing than talking about films or hobbies.

“Tell me about when you came out.”

“That one isn’t very exciting. It was my first year at uni. I mean, I had known for long time, but when I left home and met new people, it didn’t seem like something I needed to hide anymore. I was dating a little, nothing really serious. I helped start the campus LGBT society.”
“How did your parents take it?” Thinking about Andrew Allard, John backpedaled. He wasn’t trying to make Darin upset. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s fine. I went home for the holiday and sat Dad down and told him. I was terrified. I had what I was going to say all rehearsed, but in the end, I just blurted out. ‘I’m gay’ like an idiot.” Darin smiled. “He asked me a lot of questions like how long I had known, if I needed to know anything about being safe, that sort of thing. Then he told me he loved me. Anyway, it’s not like I grew up with a lot of homophobia in the house. He certainly had gay colleagues at Oxford and when Mum was alive, she was an artist, so you know she must of known people in the gay community. All in all, it was rather anti-climactic.”

John gave Darin a blank look. “Wait. This is your Dad? Andrew? The guy who didn’t come to your wedding reception?”

Darin nodded. “While in theory, he could deal with having a homosexual son, it became clear later it was harder for him to cope. He was really good at dodging the subject and I got the hint it made him uncomfortable. When I finally had someone I wanted him to meet, he simply made excuses not to.”

John winced. “I bet that was hard.”

“We had a blow up over it. He said he didn’t want to encourage my ‘youthful experimentation’, and soon enough I’d settle down and get to the business of finding a wife and giving him grandchildren,” Darin sighed. “The way he had carried on you’d think we were the Tudors needing to make an heir. We didn’t talk for several weeks afterward, but eventually we just avoided the issue, and that was easy to continue when I went to graduate school in America.”

John shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you and Sherlock think he’s a monster. He’s a good man, it’s just...I think he is old fashioned and can’t come to grips.”

John snorted. “You know that’s bullshit, right?”

“There isn’t much I can do about him. Natalie thinks he’ll come around someday, especially now he has a granddaughter,” Darin swallowed. John could tell it upset him, even as he was making excuses for his Dad being a homophobic prick. “So how did it go with your sister?”

“Harry? Oh god, there was never a closet big enough to contain her. I don’t remember her ever announcing anything, really. Maybe she did to Mum and Dad, but I always knew. Harry was always a handful for my parents, so that eclipsed everything else.”

“I’m happy it’s easier for some people,” Darin said wistfully.

“So did Sherlock’s family know?”

“You would have to ask him. I think Violet and Mycroft were just stunned he wasn’t going to be single the rest of his life.”

“I mean, I was never sure, especially after Irene Adler…” Darin took his eyes off the road to gape at John.

“You may want to look straight ahead, mate,” John pointed out as the moment lengthened.

Darin snapped his attention back to the cars in front of them. “Oh, sorry John. I haven’t driven in a while.” He winced. “It’s really best not to talk about her in front of him.”
“So he’s tetchy about her with you, too?” John asked.

“When we met I started reading your blog. I saw her name, and mentioned I had met her, years ago. Sherlock threw a wobbly. He can be possessive. Something about Irene Adler and I associating, even casually, sent him over the edge.”

John licked his lips. “So you..her..you didn’t…”

Darin replied vehemently. “Hire her? No, I mean she’s not really my type. In many ways.” Darin wrinkled his nose. “I met her before she went professional- we were both young things at the time. She would give demonstrations for BDSM theme nights in gay clubs around Vauxhall. I um, well.” Another blush started to creep up his collar. “I’ll just leave it at that.”

John felt his draw drop. “Are you saying she…”

John’s mobile rang and Darin looked relieved.

“Hello?”

“I was able to speak to the owner of the inn you are interested in,” Mycroft told John. “He advised me if you wish to start your walk today, the best place to leave a car would be a trailhead just south of the inn. My maps match up, so I advise you to start there.”

“Sounds good,” John said. Mycroft was being a bit vague, even though the line was supposed to be secure. Mycroft must have believed there was nothing of immediate interest at the inn, but he knew where Sherlock had begun his journey. “We will let you if we find parking.”

“Send me a text unless it is of immediate importance. I am likely to be in meetings. I hope you have an uneventful journey. Good day, John.”

Chapter End Notes

My Betas gnashed teeth when I didn’t elaborate on Darin and Irene, so a supplementary fic was created called Expanding Horizons. It’s now posted in it’s entirety. Enjoy the kink!
“Well, this is it, Sherlock’s car,” John told Darin, comparing the plate number on the car to the one written in his notes. John peered through the window. “Nothing here. Compartment seems to be empty.”

Darin shrugged on a backpack. “We know he got to the site, so we should probably just get going.” Darin pulled a small handheld GPS unit from his pocket.

“I’m happy you know how to use those things.” John watched as Darin tapped at buttons and waited for a signal.

“Yeah, I’ve used them collecting samples. I don’t do as much fieldwork as I did as a student, but sometimes I still get out of London. Sherlock likes to use it when he goes roaming in Cornwall. You didn’t have them in the army?”

“Not the docs. As it was, with medical gear I already had to carry 18 kilograms more than everyone else.” John shut and locked the car’s door.

Darin whistled. “I won’t complain about this vest, then. Ah, there is our signal. Let’s go.”

###

It was easy to forget that Darin was as fit as he was, but John had a abrupt reminder when he had to practically jog after him down the trail. John hadn’t completely let himself go, but he couldn’t run through the fields for two hours, either. He was also four years older than Darin and more firmly into his middle age. John allowed himself a few uncharitable thoughts toward his friend as he watched him practically spring down the path.

“Hey!” John called out, and Darin stopped and waited for him to catch up, puffing a bit. “I know you’re anxious, but don’t charge forward. We don’t know what we are walking into.“

Darin’s eyes widened. “I didn’t think about that.”

“Just stay alert. We don’t want to overlook any signs of Sherlock, either. I don’t suppose you tracked animals when in the field?” John asked.

“Not since I was in the Scouts, I’m afraid,” Darin frowned.

“Me neither. We’ll do our best.”

###

Darin stood at the top of a rocky slope, checking the GPS again. He had slowed down and hadn’t been too far ahead, but John still had had to maintain a grueling pace to keep up with him. When he got up to top of the hill, he was happy for the chance to stop moving for a few minutes.

John pulled out his water bottle. “I can’t imagine the trouble he could have found out here. There isn’t anything around but sheep.”

“There is an obligatory bestiality joke in there someplace,” Darin muttered while still looking at the little screen.

John sputtered on his water and barked out a laugh.
“I suppose finding nothing is good news. Our destination is right down there- off to the side of that stream near that patch of immature *Crataegus,*” Darin pointed towards the creek.

“Do you mean that hedge?”

Darin nodded. “That hedge.”

####

They slid down the rocky hill and followed the banks of the stream. John reached out and grabbed Darin’s arm.

“Slow down. If this is where Sherlock’s last known point was, we’ll want to look around carefully.” John slid his gun out of it’s holster. He wasn’t expecting trouble, but it was good to be ready for it.

“John, look.” Darin pointed to a set of footprints in the soft mud around the stream. “I don’t know if they are Sherlock’s, do you?”

“No. But there was more than one person here...scratch that, more than two. It seems like a bad location for a party. Wait here.” John made his way around the brush, headed away from the river. He found another set of footprints, but they faded out as the ground became harder. There wasn’t anything in sight up ahead, except a copse of larger trees and a fence in the distance.

John tucked his gun back under his coat. “All clear, Darin,” he called.

“Anything?” Darin asked, when he jogged up to meet John.

“No. Let’s go a bit further up to those trees and circle back around.”

They quickly spotted the tyre tracks of the truck and trailer, pressed into the yellowed grass of the field.

“Would they be feeding livestock here?” Darin asked, pushing at a few strands of hay with his foot.

“I don’t know. I’m a doctor, not a farmer. Do you see any droppings or hoof prints?”

Darin walked a slow circle around the tyre marks. “No. I’m getting a bad feeling about a truck being out here at the same time Sherlock disappeared.”

“Yeah, me too. It’s all we have to go on, at any rate. Let’s follow the tracks and see where they go. I bet it’s through that gate.”

Sure enough, John could easily follow the tyre tracks and periodic bits of hay leading up to the gate. Muddy marks turned onto the narrow country road, and faded away.

“Now what?” John asked, crawling through the bars of the gate to join Darin on the side of the road.

“Wait.” Darin jogged up ahead and looked down at something on the road. He called out, “More hay.”

John wiped his hand over his face and thought. If he was Sherlock, ambushed and taken, what would he do? *You know my methods...*

Darin returned to John’s side. “It could be nothing. Just a farmer’s trailer.”

“Or Hansel and Gretel leaving a trail of breadcrumbs.”
“If we’re wrong, we could be wasting a lot of time.” Darin looked down the long road, with nothing but fields in the distance.

“We don’t have another idea. Either Sherlock disappeared and we can’t track him, or he’s in that truck. Let’s keep going. Keep to the side of the road. It looks like there are some hedges in places. It won’t be much cover if someone drives up, but it’s all we have.”

###

John grew more confident of their decision as they spotted more hay piled on the road at regular intervals. It was especially encouraging since they had to trudge along for almost two hours before they saw a large old barnyard and a dilapidated paddock ahead.

John stopped and peered through his binoculars. “Our truck and trailer is parked there, I’m pretty sure of it.” He waited and watched through his optics, taking his time gathering information.

“Do you see anything else?” Darin asked, impatiently.

“No. Here, keep watching,” John handed Darin his binoculars. ”I’m going to text Mycroft a status update. He has our coordinates on the tracker, but I want to make sure he knows what we’re looking at.”

_Morning walk uneventful. Detour to an old barn that may be interesting. -J_

“I see someone going out to the truck,” Darin told John.

“Keep watching him,” John’s phone chirped.

_Noted. -M_

Darin turned the focus knobs and then froze. “They must have Sherlock, John. Shit.”

“What is it Darin? What do you see?”

“The man just pulled a rifle out of the truck!”

John reached out for the binoculars. Darin looked startled. He was holding together, but he was certainly more high strung than John would have hoped. There was nothing for it now.

“He’s not shooting birds with that gun.” The man had a sniper rifle with a long range scope. John saw the man look around outside for a moment, then proceed back into the barn.

John handed the binoculars back to Darin. “Keep watching for anyone else.”

_I think we have a problem. -J_

“What are we going to do?” Darin asked.

_Business is proceeding more rapidly than planned. Four hours ETA. Learn what you safely can. -M_

John cursed. Anything could happen in four hours. Hell, it could have already happened. If it was him and Sherlock, there would be no doubt they would go in. With Darin, he wasn’t as confident.

“Mycroft can have a team here in four hours. We can wait and watch, or we can go in and see what we can do. There is one armed man and we have no idea who else at this point.”
Darin licked his lips. “Sherlock is probably in there. We can’t just sit around for four more hours.”

“It’s really risky Darin. No one would blame you if you don’t want…”

Darin lowered the binoculars and shook his head. “What’s the plan?”

###

“I really wish it was dark out,” John sighed. “Ready?”

Darin checked the straps on his backpack. “As I ever will be.”

“Remember- run to the tree, then the shed. Get a look around the back of the barn before you move again. Try to keep down.”

Darin bobbed his head once.

They had moved off the road and used any cover they could find. They had been able to cross the road and double back, maneuvering closer. Now there was nothing left ahead but a few sprints over open ground to reach the rear of the barn. John hadn’t seen anyone on lookout, but it didn’t mean someone wasn’t out there with another long range rifle.

John took one more careful look with his binoculars. “On my mark.”

He heard Darin shift next to him.

“Mark.”

Darin dashed out and was fully exposed for several terrifying moments. He finally plastered his back against the poor cover of the tree. John looked through his lenses again for signs of other life. Nothing. John waved his hand. Darin peeked behind the tree before ducking his head and running out again to disappear behind a small shed.

John couldn’t see around the back of the barn from his angle, so it was Darin’s job to see if they had a possible way in. John waited and watched, the familiar weight of his sidearm ready in his free hand. Darin finally waved again. It was time to move.

John tucked the binoculars into his jacket so they wouldn’t bounce on their strap, and took off out of the shrubs in which he had been hiding. He made it to the tree just as Darin crossed the last few yards toward the barn. John took a quick glance around and ran to the shed as fast as his feet could carry him. His shoulder itched, imagining the feel of a bullet finding him at any moment, but he reached the shed without incident.

He looked around the corner and was finally able to see the back of the barn. There was a large double door that one could lead livestock through and a smaller, man-sized door off to the side. Darin had crawled under a rotting fence into the paddock behind the barn. He was sitting on the ground, shoulder pressed against a water trough. He waved frantically at John to stay down.

The man who had retrieved the sniper rifle came around the corner of the barn, casually looking around. He paused to light a cigarette, before moving on and passing between the paddock and the barn. He didn’t see Darin, who had flattened down onto his belly. The man was clearly headed in John’s direction towards the shed.

John jerked back and creeped along the structure’s far wall. He listened, and could hear the crunch of the man’s boots on the frosted ground. He wasn’t slowing his pace to stop, so John risked a peek to
see the man was following a path that took him just steps past where John was hiding.

Working on instinct, John leapt out and smashed the butt end of his pistol into the back of the man’s head. He then grabbed his coat and pulled hard, yanking the dazed man behind the shed as his knees gave way. John leveled his gun towards the kneeling man’s temple, but he need not bothered- his blow had knocked the man unconscious, and he was falling face-first onto the ground.

John looked around the corner again and motioned quickly toward Darin to stay still. He scanned the property, but he didn’t see anyone else coming. John ducked back behind the shed, unzipped his backpack and hurriedly dug through the contents, pulling a roll of medical tape from out of his kit. He used a strip to seal the man’s mouth, then taped his hands together behind his back. It wouldn’t hold forever, but it would have to make do. He dumped the tape back into his bag and after checking to make sure he was clear, he scrambled under the fence to join Darin.

“One down,” John reported quietly. “He was unarmed. He was keeping an eye out, but I don’t think they are really expecting company.”

“No windows. The big door seems like a bad idea, but I think we can get through the small door,” Darin told him. “It might lead into a secondary room.”

“No luck. It’s padlocked.”

Darin opened his hand to reveal a small roll of lockpicks. John stared at him.

“Sherlock taught me when he was bored one day. It was interesting, so he got me my own set. I’m not as fast as he is, but if you can look out for a minute, I can see what I can do.”

John smiled. “You’re full of surprises. Listen at the door first, and be careful.”

Darin pulled his gloves off and selected two slim metal tools from the roll and held them in his palm.

Pistol in hand, John glanced over the water trough. “Go.”

Darin rushed over to the door and pressed his ear against it. He waited and listened much longer than John would have, but he finally grasped the padlock and inserted the tools into the tumblers. He worked with the picks for a while. John was just starting to get nervous and think about calling him back when the shackle finally snapped open.

John hopped up and joined Darin at the door, and placed a finger over his own lips. Darin nodded, and slowly pulled the lock out of the hasp. John pressed his own ear against the door. Nothing. He finally waved Darin aside and cracked the door open, gun at the ready.

The room inside was dim and John’s eyes hadn’t quite adjusted yet. It was some sort or storage area, he assumed. He was just happy it hadn’t opened out to the main barn or directly into a nest of armed men.

“I really hope you came to get me the fuck out of here,” a male American voice rasped quietly from the corner.

John raised his gun toward the far wall.
“It depends. Who are you?” John asked.

“A friend of your buddy the syndicate has out in the main room.”

“CIA?”

The man snorted. “Special Forces?”

“Sure,” John answered. His eyes were slowly getting used to the dim light and he could see the man was hanging from ropes tied against the wall. “Darin, get in here. We found someone.”

Darin slid through the door and carefully shut it. He squinted into the darkness.

“This your spook?” the American asked.

“What?” Darin replied.

“This is Darin. I’m John. Darin, cut him down, will you? Quietly.” John lowered his gun. There was another door that he knew must lead into the main section of the barn. He kept his body angled so he could watch it. “Who are you?”

“Orion Fall. Are there any more of you?”

“Afraid not. How many goons are here?” John asked.

“Four, that I know of. Armed. I’ve been shut up in here but they took your friend out last night. They have been jabbing us up with narcotics to keep us quiet.”

Darin approached Orion and examined the ropes. His fingers ran over the knots. John was about ready to hand him his knife when Darin teased the rope loose, probably faster than it would have been to cut through it.

“Boy Scout?” Orion asked, rubbing his wrist.

“More like a hobby,” Darin answered dryly. He bent down to work the man’s legs free. “Do you know if the other agent is all right?”

“I heard him yelling- must have been a few hours ago. So he was still alive, then.”

“Hell’s bells,” Darin cursed. Orion kicked the rope away and stretched his limbs.

“We took one of them out. That leaves us with three.” John looked closer at Orion. “I’m a doctor. Are you okay?”

“Cold. Blood rushing back to my hands, but I’ll live.”

John handed Orion a bottle of water from his backpack, and the big man chugged it down gratefully. “Don’t suppose you have another gun in there? Or a pair of shoes?”

“Sorry.” John looked around the tack room, but didn’t see Orion’s shoes or trousers.

“Right, your spook armed?”
“Er, no.” Darin replied.

“I guess we’re not going in guns blazing. Is that old truck and trailer out front?” Orion stomped his feet.

“It is.” John licked his lips, thinking.

“I have a plan.” Orion grinned.

###

John and Darin had stripped off their socks and given them to Orion to help pad his shoeless feet. Neither of them had anything that would come close to fitting him. John hoped for his sake they didn’t have to run around outside for very long.

They left the tack room by the back door. Darin hung the lock back in the hasp, but didn’t snap it shut. It would give the appearance of still being locked from a distance. They retreated from the barn, retracing their tracks and working their way back to the front.

Orion paused to look into the shed as he passed it, and reappeared with a big smile, hefting an old spade. Orion moved around to the far side, where John had left the gunman taped up. John heard a dull thud. The man certainly wasn’t going to be a problem now. Finally, they were all huddled into the thicket once again.

John lifted his binoculars. “We’re clear. Is everyone ready?”

“I was hoping we could fuck around outside in our underpants a little more,” Orion quipped.

John packed his binoculars back in his bag and readied his handgun. “Darin, go.”

Darin took off at a dead run straight for the truck. When he reached it, he crouched against the driver’s side and pulled the door handle. Luck was on their side and the door opened, and Darin slid into the seat.

John and Orion both broke cover. Orion pressed himself against the front of the building next to the door, and John took his place on the passenger side, gun aimed at the front doorway. Orion signaled and Darin tapped the horn, giving a series of friendly sounding beeps. He ducked down on the seat, out of sight.

A few minutes later, an annoyed looking man came out through the front door. He started right for the truck, and froze when he saw John drawing down on him. Before he had time to do anything else, Orion swung the shovel and slapped him over the head with it. John winced as the man’s head twisted on his neck before he crumpled into a heap.

Orion wasted no time and searched the downed man, finding a gun tucked into a coat pocket. They waited a moment longer to see if they were going to flush anyone else out. When it was clear only one person was sent to investigate, John knocked on the side of the truck and Darin slid out.

“Time for the tricky part. Darin, remember to stay well behind us and let us clear the area before you follow.” John cracked the door open slowly, so it wouldn’t creak. He could hear someone speaking, but whoever it was, he wasn’t very close. He opened the door further, just enough so he could slip through into the barn. Orion, close behind, followed him in. They stuck to the shadows and against the sides of the walls as much as possible.

There was a row of empty horse stalls with dividing walls about eight feet high. The voice he heard
was coming from the direction of the stall on the end. He couldn’t see over the walls, but afternoon sun was coming through the windows, and he could make out the shadows of two men.

“I am losing my patience, Mr Holmes. I could put a bullet in your brain, but I think I have a better use for you. Unless of course, you want to start talking?”

John got a glimpse of Darin easing his way into the barn before he and Orion ducked into one of the empty stalls.

“I have been talking, but you haven’t been listening.”

John recognized Sherlock’s voice and was flooded with relief. His voice sounded rough, but he was still alive.

The other man sighed. John hadn’t recognized the accent, but Orion grimaced. John could tell he knew who the speaker was, and it probably wasn’t good news.

“Theo, Alexi and Mikal still haven’t returned? Well, never mind them. Would you bring one of the syringes from my briefcase? Mr Holmes, The human trials on the serum have been limited, but you will do nicely as as a new subject, I think.”

John and Orion froze as a man walked past the stall they were hiding in. John really hoped Darin had found his own cover.

“You don’t want to waste your precious product samples on me,” Sherlock rasped.

Orion took a chance and quickly peeked out the stall door. He held up two fingers to John and shrugged. Orion thought there were only two captors, but of course they couldn’t be sure. It was clear, however, that Sherlock’s time was running out. Orion covered his face with his open hand and John nodded. It was the common military sign to start an ambush.

Orion pointed at John and towards the last stable. It was best to attack while the men were separated. Orion made another quick check down the barn, and waved for John to move. He ran for it, and John was able to hustle and get into the stable adjacent to Sherlock’s.

“Oh, but we can make more, Mr Holmes. This is your final opportunity. Really, If I was in your shoes, I’d rather be shot. I’ve seen what this drug can do in high doses. It isn’t pretty.”

John strained his ears and heard the shuffling of footsteps on wood. Theo was returning. It was time.

John heard Theo’s grunt of surprise and a series of hard thuds as Orion leapt from his hiding spot and snatched him. John spun into the next stall, gun ready, and took aim on Giorgos Caras.

Giorgos turned and looked slightly surprised, but unfortunately, he was also holding a gun in the direction of Sherlock’s head.


Sherlock was sitting bound to a chair. He had a trail of dried blood on his temple, and an array of bruises. His eyes flicked up to John’s. He looked exhausted, but alert.

“I don’t think so,” Giorgos replied calmly. “I have a hostage.”

John heard a metallic clatter, then another series of thumps and smacks from the stall down the corridor. Orion cursed loudly. A moment later, he appeared, struggling to keep Theo in a neck lock.
“This motherfucker is strong,” Orion pronounced. John guessed Orion had lost his gun in the struggle.

“We have all your goons now. Just put the gun down and we can come to some sort of deal,” John offered.

“Oh, and what kind of deal would that be? I would disappear into some secret military prison and never come out again. I am a cornered man. It would be wise to back away, unless you want your friend to…”

Theo growled and writhed in Orion’s grasp. Giorgos’s eyes flicked from Sherlock to Orion for just an instant. It was the very last thing the man would see. A gun fired, and blood spurted out the far side of Giorgos’s face. His body fell to the floor.

John looked toward the direction of the shooter. Darin was about five meters away, somehow leaning over one of the stable walls, with a gun still aimed. His eyes went wide, and he stared at the fallen man.

The chaos gave Orion an advantage, and he was finally able to get a proper hold and choke out Theo. Orion dropped the man and looked up towards Darin.

“Nice shot!” Orion stepped forward and claimed Giorgos’s gun. John assumed Darin must have snatched up his. “I’m going to sweep the place. Can you guys secure him?” Orion poked the unconscious Theo with a toe.

“We’ll take care of it. Darin, come on down from there.” John took the remaining steps to Sherlock.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock gasped.

“Saving your arse, you tit. Mycroft sent us.”

John knelt beside Sherlock and set his Sig down, but within reach. The head wound was concerning. He pressed gently around it, but he couldn’t tell if he had a fracture or not. He needed a CAT scan as soon as possible, but for now, the bleeding had slowed to a trickle.

“Did you say Darin?” Sherlock tried to pull his head away from John to look, and winced. “Darin made that shot? John, what the hell?”

John looked up. Darin hadn’t moved, and his eyes were wide and glazed over. His gun was still aimed, finger on the trigger.

“Hey Darin. It’s okay, mate,” John said gently. “Put the gun down.”

Darin blinked slowly.

“Just take your finger off the trigger. You’re going to be fine. There you go. Now lower your arm a bit so you’re not pointing it towards me.” John watched as Darin obeyed, his actions robotic.

“He’s going into shock. Hold on just a minute,” John murmured to Sherlock. “We’ll explain everything after we get you out of here.”

John smiled reassuringly back up to Darin. “Try to breathe nice and deep. What are you standing on? Can you get down?”

Darin blinked again. He closed his eyes and took a deep, stuttering breath, and it seemed to fortify
him. “I’m standing on a hay rack, bolted on the side of the stall. I can get off it.”

A moment later Darin disappeared from the top of the wall and came around into the stall. His face was pale, and his lips were pressed together.

“Hand me your firearm, Darin.” John reached out, and Darin placed the gun in John’s hand. John sighed in relief. Darin’s gaze fixed onto Giorgos’s ruined head, and his expression turned wild. His eyes were wide and dilated and a tremor rippled across his jaw muscle.

“Come on, help me with Sherlock, please?” John asked him. Darin looked at Sherlock, and John could see it took him a couple seconds to remember why he was there. Darin nodded, but John knew he was reaching his limit. He only hoped Darin could hold together a bit longer.

Darin stepped forward, but he suddenly yelped and kicked out. John turned in time to see that Theo had regained consciousness and had snatched at Darin’s leg. Darin kicked again and danced away. John cursed at his own ineptitude. He pointed the gun Darin had turned over at Theo.

“Just stay still. I will shoot you. Darin, untie Sherlock.”

Darin stumbled over to Sherlock, kneeled on the floor and started plucking at the ropes.

“You’re alive...alive...god...I was so worried...” Darin repeated as he worked the rope free.

“Of course I’m alive. Hush,” Sherlock swayed a bit in his chair when the tension of the ropes was no longer holding him into place. Shivers racked his body.

“Oh Jesus, what did they do to your hand?”

“It’s my bowing hand, at least, and the shoulder, too. Easy.” Sherlock hissed as Darin took off his coat, draped it on Sherlock and wrapped his arms around him.

Orion picked that moment to return. “We’re clear, looks like there were only four.”

“Can you tie this guy up?” John tilted his head toward the discarded rope near Sherlock’s chair.

Orion shot a confused look at Darin, who was kneeling with his head buried in Sherlock’s chest. “What’s with them?”

“Oh. They’re married.”

Disapproval flashed across Orion’s face. John scowled at him, not really needing to deal with homophobic bullshit while he was holding a gun on someone.

Orion clicked his tongue. “Bad idea, sending someone’s spouse on a retrieval mission. No wonder he’s shook up.”

John’s eyebrows shot up, surprised at his true objection. “We didn’t have a lot of choice.”

Darin let Sherlock go, and grabbed the rope. “I can secure him, if you want..”

“Orion can do it. Go out of the barn for a few minutes, yeah? I’ll give you the phone- try to call Mycroft. I need some space to look at Sherlock’s hand, anyway. ” John really wanted him away from the gruesome gunshot wound. Darin’s eyes had been drifting back and forth between Sherlock to the dead man.

Darin tossed the rope over Orion, and John tucked the gun into this other pocket. He then gave Darin
the phone, who shuffled out of the barn.

Orion wiped his forehead as he tied up Theo. “It’s hot.”

“It’s freezing,” Sherlock corrected, teeth chattering.

John went to Sherlock and gently took his hand and turned it over. It was a mess. There were several fractures and a nail was missing. It must be an agony. John pulled the neckband of Sherlock’s shirt down. John assumed by the way Sherlock was holding his arm across his belly that it had been dislocated, and indeed his shoulder seemed to have lost some its roundness. John felt the shoulder gently, but it had found its way back into its socket on its own. John pulled out his medical kit. He could clean Sherlock up and bind up his injuries for support, but that was all he could do for now. He’d need x-rays later.

“John, you missed some text messages from Mycroft. He assembled a team sooner than expected and they are on their way.” Darin still looked shaky, but he didn’t seem in danger of drifting into catatonia.

Orion sat back from binding Theo. “That’s good, because this bastard jabbed me with something, and I don’t think it was more Demerol.” Orion’s face was pink, and beads of sweat peppered his brow.

A rhythmic vibration hummed through the barn. All of them stilled and listened.

“Rotor blades,” Sherlock announced. “Our ride is here.”
Triage

John sent Darin out to signal for the helicopter. Not only did John have his hands full with two patients, but it was good for the state of Darin’s mind to keep him moving and give him something productive to do. Sherlock was shaky but stable, but Orion wasn’t looking well. John had found the suspect syringe that had been used as a weapon lying nearby and carefully stored it. They would need it for testing later—if Mycroft’s goons didn’t get enough information from questioning their prisoner.

John sat Orion down outside the stall and took his pulse again. It had been borderline high, but it was increasing as the minutes passed. He didn’t have a thermometer in the bare bones emergency kit he had brought in the backpack, but from how Orion was flushed and sweating, he assumed his temperature was rising.

“How are you feeling?” John asked him.

“Like a fucking train hit me. I feel kind of dizzy,” Orion replied, wiping at his forehead.

“They were threatening me with an experimental serum,” Sherlock added. John had carefully moved Sherlock away from the gory remains of the man Darin had shot. “We don’t know what it does, but Mycroft may be able to shed some light on it.”

“That would help,” John said. He pulled off his jacket and gave it to Orion, so he could at least wrap his bare legs up in it.

“Tell me if you feel worse, or have any other symptoms,” John told Orion.

“You know what’s weird, doc? I swear I can smell rotten eggs.”

John licked his lower lip. “I see. Just stay seated. Don’t try to stand. Do you have anything in your medical history we should know about? Any conditions?”

“I’m allergic to shellfish. Can’t see how that would matter.”

“It’s good to know. Just…”

The front door of the barn flew open and several armed, uniformed men came in with Darin following behind. Some of them split off to search the premises, but two approached them.

“Doctor Watson?” One of them asked. “I’m Doctor O’Neil. Do we have wounded?”

John nodded. “Yeah, our two men here, and you’ll want to check the condition of three of the prisoners.”

“The one behind the barn will just need a bodybag.” Orion corrected. “Two dead, two down.”

O’Neil motioned to the other soldier to take Theo in custody.

John gave O’Neil a summary while he double checked Sherlock’s and Orion’s conditions. Orion’s pulse had continued to rise. O’Neil made a call to the team to bring stretchers in.

“We need to get this man loaded up and in the air as soon as possible,” O’Neil told one of the soldiers. “Ask the captain if we can send him ahead.”
John glanced over at Sherlock, who was being wrapped in a blanket. Darin was trying to stay out of the way, but he was starting to look dazed again. He stopped and leaned on the wall, and reached down to scratch at his ankle.

“Darin?” John went over and pulled him aside. He wanted to make sure Darin was still okay. While he wasn’t the medical priority, they didn’t need another person to treat right now.

Seeming to regain a moment of clarity, Darin asked, “What’s going on with me?”

“Combat fatigue. A normal reaction to what you’ve been through. You are going to be fine, but you need some quiet. Just stay with us a little longer.”

John noticed there was a flush of color across Darin’s cheeks. He bent down again, lifting his trouser leg to itch at his ankle. John saw a smear of red.

“Darin, let me see that.” John kneeled down and lifted the fabric away, and cursed inwardly at what he saw. “Did that man Theo jab you with anything when he grabbed at you?”

Darin tried to peer down at this leg. “I thought he just dug in with his fingernails, but I guess I’m not completely sure.”

John sighed. “You weren’t exactly at your best right then, but this doesn’t look like fingernails. Do you feel warm?”

“Yes. That’s why I asked you what was wrong with me.”

“Shit.” John looked up. Orion was being carried away on a stretcher, and Sherlock was being loaded onto the next one. “Dr O’Neil? Can I have a word?”

###

Sherlock felt a bit foggy around the edges when he was laid on the stretcher. The adrenaline had worn off and he was cold, tired, and his hand was an agony. He had been carried out and loaded into one of the three black helicopters. The pilot had dropped two blankets on him, which had reduced his violent shivering. They seemed to be waiting on something to take off. He knew Orion Fall hadn’t been doing well, and that John would be forced to triage by severity, but he wasn’t sure where Darin was. During his captivity Sherlock had calculated it was unlikely that he would see Darin ever again. With that in mind, he’d rather like to be with him now. If only for him to help keep him warm and bring him some water, of course.

The door to the helicopter slid open and John came to his side. “Sorry for the delay. We’re going to be in the air in a moment, so I’m going to get you sorted to travel.” John set down a military medical bag and started working with determination.

Sherlock grunted in affirmation as John pushed his face to the side to insert a thermometer in his ear. When it beeped, John scowled at the reading. He went to the end of the stretcher and uncovered Sherlock’s feet and took his socks off. His warm fingers pinched Sherlock’s toes, apparently looking for frostbite. John hummed and pulled Sherlock’s socks back on, tucking him back in.

“They found your things- your coat, boots, wallet, watch and wedding band,” John told him. “One of the men will help you into the boots. The cold damage isn’t severe on your feet, but it will burn when you warm up.” John pulled a bag of saline and a line out of his kit and laid it on Sherlock’s belly before rummaging around again.

“Where is Darin?” Sherlock asked, the mention of his wedding band reminding him to ask.
“He’s in the other helicopter with Orion. I’m going to get some fluids into you, and give you something for the pain. You might get bounced around in flight, and your arm and head won’t like it. You’ll get sleepy.” John reached for his undamaged arm and pushed up his sleeve.

“Why is Darin in the other helicopter?” Sherlock asked, frowning, as John put on a pair of gloves and swabbed the ditch of his arm.

“We can’t all ride together. There is a weight limit on these things, you know,” John muttered as he bowed his head to open the sterile wrapping on the intravenous catheter. He wrapped a rubber tube around Sherlock’s arm and tapped up a vein.

“Someone else can switch...” Sherlock started to protest.

“Shhh. Be still.” John slid the needle home. Sherlock looked up and watched him hang his bag of fluids on a hook on the bulkhead of the helicopter.

“You’re hiding something from me,” Sherlock scowled. “You’re a horrible liar.”

John measured out a dose of medication and pushed it through Sherlock’s line. “There. It’s morphine, it should hold you for the ride. We’re going to a military hospital outside London—it won’t be long.”

“John!” Sherlock protested, but he was already feeling the warm, familiar tug of the painkiller rushing through his bloodstream.

“I really can’t stay and chat, Dr O’Neil needs me.” John wrapped up the medical waste and zipped up the bag. “One of the SF boys knows first aid and will be keeping an eye on you. Take a nap.”

Sherlock realized that he had little choice. His eyes were drifting closed before he heard John open the door to leave.

###

It was a long while before Sherlock was fully alert again. He had slept through the flight, and had only vague impressions after that. Murmurs of voices and the sensation of being shifted from the stretcher to a cot.

The first time he opened his eyes, he was looking up into the round gantry of a CT scanner. His head was cradled in a brace, and the machine whirred and clicked around him.

The medical technician’s voice crackled over a speaker. “I see that you’re awake, Mr Holmes. Stay still, please.”

He slept a little longer.

###

Sherlock was glowering at John before his friend even had time to say hello.

“You took your time! No one is telling me anything,” Sherlock complained. He had woken again in a hospital room not long after his CT scan. Nurses came in and out, settling him in and adjusting various tubes and wires. They had ignored all his demands for information and would not administer more morphine.

“Sorry. I’ve been trying to help since everything went sideways.” Sherlock watched John pick up his
chart and flip through it. John was tired. No, it was more than just exhaustion, he looked tense.

“John,” Sherlock demanded.

John set Sherlock’s chart back in its holder. “Your CT scan was clear, just a mild concussion. Shouldn’t be any complications with your shoulder, it’s a simple anterior dislocation. You should be out of that sling and in physio in no time. You’re scheduled to go to x-ray for your hand in an hour, and your brother has an orthopedic surgeon on call if it’s necessary. He’s very good; he treats musicians and athletes.”

Sherlock growled in impatience and waved his good hand. “Yes, yes. Now will you tell me what the hell is happening with the case?”

John ruffled a hand through his hair and pulled up a chair. “Yeah. Before that, I need to tell you something. Orion Fall started to have seizures in the helicopter. He had a high fever, and his brain started to swell. We iced him down with cold packs we had in the kits, but it wasn’t enough. He’s in critical care, and he hasn’t stabilized. They’re putting him into a medically induced coma to reduce the swelling in his brain and slow the effects of the serum.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Sherlock replied. “Keep me apprised of his condition. Did Mycroft say anything about the serum?”

“Yeah, but he’s not saying much. They found more samples of it at the barn, and a few cc’s left in the syringe. They took it to be analyzed.” John bit his lip and paused. “Sherlock, that’s not all. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but in the struggle, Darin got a jab of that stuff, too.”

Sherlock’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“We don’t think he was injected with nearly as much serum as Mr Fall, because he’s not as bad off. We kept his fever down through the flight, but he started to get confused and have small convulsions when we arrived. They packed him in ice, gave him drugs to reduce his blood pressure, but he’s not responding the way they would like.”

Sherlock’s mind came to a screaming halt, refusing to absorb John’s words. He could only gape at John, who frowned sympathetically, waiting for Sherlock to catch on. Finally, Sherlock shook his head to clear it, but it just made it ache. Concussions didn’t facilitate quick thinking.

“Prognosis?” Sherlock was finally able to grit out.

“We don’t know yet. The next step is to induce him into coma, too. If they can get him under sooner than Mr Fall, there is a better chance he’ll suffer less damage.” John looked at his watch. “They wanted to give him more time in cold treatment, but they will decide soon.”

Sherlock rubbed the back of his good hand across his mouth while he calculated the potential possibilities of outcome. He wasn’t a doctor, no matter how much dabbling he did in forensics. That was why John and Molly were useful to his investigations. He knew quite a bit, though, and he realized John was talking about brain damage. He shuddered. Darin’s mind.

“Tell them to stop waiting. Have them do it now, without delay. Whatever is necessary.” Sherlock started to shift in his bed, trying to rise.

“Whoa. Sherlock, take it easy,” John put a restraining hand on his chest.

“I need to see him,” Sherlock demanded. It was difficult to fight John off without the stability of his right arm, which was in a supportive sling.
“He’s sedated. Plus he has a whole medical team is working on him, which, by the way, I’m not officially a part of. They are giving me updates as a courtesy. There is nothing we can do for him now. Sherlock, stop it!”

Sherlock struggled to get out of his cot and felt the needle in his arm shift. He made a low growl from the back of his throat.

“Look at me,” John ordered. “I know you tend to go walkabout when you are in hospital, but you need rest. You’re dehydrated and you are concussed. Plus, you may have to have surgery on that hand.”

“Blast my hand!” Sherlock cursed, but he thumped back into the bed.

“I’m not Darin’s doctor, but I am yours. I’m going to see to it that you are in one piece when he wakes up again, even if that means tying you to the bed. This is a military hospital. Do you want me to have guards set?”

Sherlock laughed. “Good luck.”

“I’ll bring you to see him, as soon as I can,” John’s voice gentled. “Even if I have to sneak you in myself. Right now, the truth is we would just be in the way, and that’s not in Darin’s best interest. Think.”

Sherlock bit the inside of his cheek and turned his face away. John was right. For now.

“Promise me, Sherlock,” John prodded. “Don’t try to go wandering around. Let me get you sorted. I swear, I’ll tell you everything as soon I hear it.”

Sherlock tasted copper, and relaxed his jaw. He realized the last dregs of the morphine were keeping the worst of his rising panic down, which was good. Losing control never served any purpose. He took two deep breaths, and looked over at John again.

“Promise,” Sherlock said, a bit sarcastically.

###

John parked Sherlock’s wheelchair outside Darin’s room. All of the critical care rooms had a large glass window so the patients could be observed by the attending ward staff. The curtain over Darin’s had been pulled, but Sherlock could make out the murmur of voices inside. Three hours had passed since Darin’s doctors had decided he should be placed into a coma to protect his brain.

“Wait here a moment.” John entered the room and Sherlock could hear him speaking to someone. A minute later John, a nurse and another doctor left the room. The nurse flashed Sherlock a sympathetic smile that grated on his nerves.

John waited for them to to be out of earshot before kneeling down in front of Sherlock’s chair. “Fair warning, OK? I know you are fine with hospitals, but it’s a different thing seeing a loved one on life support. He’s on a vent, and the room is crowded with machines.”

Sherlock wanted to chide John, but his heart wasn’t into it. “I understand.”

“All right. Let’s say hello.” John stood and went to the back of Sherlock’s chair and maneuvered him into the room. He pushed him to the side of the bed, and Sherlock’s heart skipped a beat. He really hadn’t heeded John’s words, and seeing Darin covered in tubes and wires shook him to the core. Darin looked so small and vulnerable trapped in a wrapping of technology, his face partially
obscured by the ventilator, his chest moving to a rhythm set by a machine.

John placed both his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders, and the warmth of them seeped through Sherlock’s hospital gown.

“Christ,” Sherlock whispered.

“His vitals and EEG readings look fine. He’s on a twenty-four hour watch, so he’s in good hands. Now we just have to wait it out.” John squeezed his hands before letting them drop. “You want a few minutes?”

“Please.” John turned and left him, but Sherlock knew he wouldn’t be far. He reached out and brushed his fingers over Darin’s arm. His skin was warm, a reassuring, non-mechanical sign that he was still living. Sherlock carefully took his hand, minding the oximeter on Darin’s finger.

“You idiot, look what you have done to yourself. You had better wake up, or I’ll be quite cross.” Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut, keeping himself from being overwhelmed. “I have become accustomed to your company, you realize, and I’m no longer confident I can do without you.”

Sherlock shifted his hand to find Darin’s radial pulse, and counted beats. He sat that way for a long time, simply tracking the tempo of Darin’s steady heart. Eventually he heard John clear his throat outside the door, and he knew his time was almost up. He let go of Darin’s wrist, gently arranging his hand back on the bed, and very slowly stood from his wheelchair. He felt a wave of dizziness from the postconcussive syndrome, but it passed. He leaned over the bed and pressed a kiss on Darin’s cheek. “I love you. Rest well.”

John stepped in the room, and upon seeing Sherlock sway on his feet, immediately went to his side and grasped his elbow. “Sit back down.”

“I’m fine, John.” Sherlock sat into the chair, mindful of their agreement.

“Maybe, but I can’t have you falling over on my watch.”

“John. When I told you it wouldn’t make a difference, being with Mary when she was unconscious, I was wrong.”

Pain flashed across John’s face. “Yeah, you were. It’s fine.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Darin told me, even if she wasn’t aware, that being with Mary wasn’t really for her.”

“I’m sorry you had to learn it this way, Sherlock. I really am.” John looked away with the pretense of studying one of the monitors, giving both of them a moment to gather themselves.

“Hey,” John said suddenly, as he looked down at his watch. “We need to get you back. Your surgeon is due to call in about your x-rays soon.” John crossed behind Sherlock to push his wheelchair, and patted Darin’s knee. “Don’t get up, Darin, we’ll see ourselves out.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened, and then he snickered. “That was awful.”

“It really was,” John drawled. “He can wake up and tell us off in forty-eight hours.”

Sherlock dropped the little smirk on his face. The wait was going to be abominable.
Darin remembered the stages of his awakening, and would review them with interest later. In films, the patient would just open groggy eyelids, look around their room to find their loved ones waiting for them. Consciousness would then be won and the process would be complete. Reality wasn’t quite like that.

His first and faintest recollection was of competent hands holding him steady. An uncomfortable sensation of something being in his throat and the urge to cough it up. The hum of voices in soothing, professional tones. Then nothingness again.

The next time, he opened his eyes. The light felt like daggers stabbing his cornea and he snapped them closed again. A blurry glimpse of an unfamiliar room and a woman in a white coat. Consciousness hardly seemed worth the effort, so he slept.

Nagging thirst woke him an indeterminable amount of time later. He cracked his eyelids cautiously, but this time, the lights of his room had been dimmed. A nurse was next to the bed, tapping something out on a tablet computer.

“Hello, Dr Allard. Are you staying up with us now?” she smiled.

Darin’s brain was sluggish to process her words. He licked his dry lips and croaked out, “Water?”

She nodded and reached for a button next to his bed. “Call Dr Verma, please. Dr Allard is awake.”

The nurse must have known he would rouse soon, because she had a cup ready on the table. She held it for him whilst he slipped an ice cube into his mouth. It melted, and the cold wetness was blissful.

“I’ll give you more soon. I know your throat probably hurts, but we want to make sure you don’t choke.”

Darin moved his head to look around the room. He was surrounded by a staggering number of machines in what was clearly a hospital. He couldn’t recall how he came to be there. He looked down at himself in the bed, and at the wires and tubes running from his arms and out from under the sheet. He wriggled his toes and fingers experimentally.

The nurse touched his shoulder. “This is often very confusing and frightening, but you are completely safe, please don’t worry. Your doctor will be in shortly, and everything will be explained.”

Darin didn’t feel upset. He was curious about his circumstances, of course, but he supposed everything would be revealed in time. The nurse helped him slip another cube of ice into his mouth.

A doctor entered the room in short order. She was a older woman, gray sprinkled generously in her dark hair. The nurse made way for her by Darin’s bedside.

“I’m your attending, Dr Ava Verma. How are you feeling?” She looked over the readings from some of the machines close by.


“I bet,” She pulled on a pair of exam gloves and checked Darin’s vitals as they spoke. “Can you tell
me your full name and address?"

"Darin Richard Allard. 221b Baker Street, London NW1."

"Good. Where did you attend uni?"

"Imperial College, then Harvard." The doctor gently pried one of his lower eyelids down. She hummed and placed a thermometer in his ear. It beeped. She turned to the nurse who handed her the tablet computer, and the doctor added in a few notes. Darin tried to focus, but sleep tugged at him.

"We are going to let you rest soon. You are in hospital, not far from London. You’ve been sedated and intubated for four days- it’s why your throat hurts. Do you remember what happened?"

Darin forced his groggy mind to respond. Broken bones. A gunshot. “Sherlock...he was hurt.” He forced his eyes to stay open, but he was too tired to panic.

“He’s here, too. He’s going to be fine. He had surgery on his hand yesterday. He was visiting not very long ago, and he is going to be angry he wasn’t here when you woke up.”

“Oh,” Darin murmured.

Dr Verma adjusted his blanket. “We will tell you more when you’re feeling better.”

Darin was sleeping before she left the room.

###

“Your cacophony is going to wake him,” Sherlock warned. He was sitting next to the bed, holding onto Darin’s hand.

“They have to run the tests, Sherlock. Don’t…” John trailed off when Darin opened his eyes.

Sherlock let out a quiet gasp. “You’re back,” Sherlock whispered, relief flooding his face. He squeezed his hand and Darin returned the pressure. Sherlock was wearing one of his dressing gowns draped around him, the sleeve hanging empty to accommodate the sling supporting his right arm. Sherlock leaned over their clasped hands, trying to hide his face. Darin caught the flood of emotions that swept over his countenance, which he was trying to keep as private as he could. There were three other people in the room, John, Dr Verma, and a male doctor he hadn’t seen before.

Dr Verma looked up at him. “Dr Allard, sorry to wake you.”

“It’s fine,” Darin grated out hoarsely. John raised the bed with a control, then held out a cup with a straw so he could take a few sips. Sherlock stayed where he was, forehead almost touching their hands. Darin could feel him trying to control his breathing by the hot huffs on his skin.

“We need to run several tests, are you feeling up to it?” Dr Verma asked.

“Sure,” Darin replied. The doctors descended on him, looking at the readings on the machines, drawing blood, flashing a penlight in his eyes, taking his blood pressure. Sherlock didn’t budge, even when it was clear he was in the way.

“I’m your neurologist. Do you recollect what happened to you now, Dr Allard?” The new doctor asked him.

“Call me Darin, please.” He concentrated for a moment. “Helicopters. Then I wasn’t feeling well...oh. I was injected with something. It’s a bit of a blur, I’m afraid.”
“The injection caused a high fever and edema,” Dr Verma explained. “We placed you in a medically induced coma to give your brain time to recover. You had two seizures before you stabilized, but your current readings are promising. We don’t know the intended effects of the serum, and it’s being analysed by our researchers.

“What happened to you is classified, Darin. You are in a military hospital, and your medical team has special clearance. You will be debriefed when you have had more time to recover. Until then, unless it is related to your condition, it’s best if you keep details to yourself,” she advised.

Darin nodded. “I see.”

“I’m going to run you through a lot of tests today. An MRI and cognitive examinations. Please let me know if you get tired, or have any other symptoms of discomfort,” the neurologist said.

Sherlock growled. “You are descending on him like vultures. He’s been awake ten minutes and you’re going to work him up.”

“I’m fine, Sherlock,” Darin assured. Maybe things hadn’t sunk in yet, but so far, he felt rather unperturbed about his condition.

“You are not fine,” Sherlock snarled, looking up with red rimmed eyes. “They didn’t tell you you were unconscious for four days instead of the planned two. They didn’t mention Orion Fall…”

“Sherlock, shut up,” John warned.

“...never woke up,” Sherlock finished anyway.

Darin studied Sherlock carefully. He looked tired and harried. His fury was masking the frantic fear, but Darin knew him too well not to be able to see it.

“We should give these two a minute. Everyone should step out for tea and reconvene later,” John announced. It wasn’t a request. The other doctors murmured ‘of course’ and ‘so sorry’ and filed out. John stayed behind.


“I’m really not upset,” Darin told John. John cocked his head to the side thoughtfully.

Sherlock moved to sit on the edge of the bed. He leaned over, doing his best to try to embrace Darin with one arm. “When they put me under for surgery, I didn’t know if you would still be alive when I came to. A machine breathed for you for days and…” Sherlock’s voice hitched, and he buried his face into Darin’s shoulder.

Darin let Sherlock hold him and whisper endearments. He knew he should be offering something more, but didn’t know what to say. Surely being alive was enough to reassure him?

Darin saw that John had moved to the far corner to give them some privacy. He was still watching, with a deep frown furrowing his face.

Sherlock shivered. It occurred to Darin to lift his hand and place it on his back.

###

John walked out of Darin’s room with a sense of dread settling in his bowels. He hadn’t been sure at first, especially with the amount of medication Darin had received, but most of the side effects should
have worn away by now. Watching Darin’s reaction to Sherlock practically sobbing had been the confirmation.

John found his way behind the nurse’s station, where Darin’s medical team waited, sipping drinks and tapping on tablets and mobiles.

"Dr Verma," John began, waiting for Darin's head doctor to look up at him before continuing, "something’s wrong."

She set down her foam cup and stood. “What’s happened?”

John shook his head. “Nothing’s changed, but I think Darin needs a full psychological evaluation as soon as possible.”

###

“Thank you for meeting, gentlemen,” Dr Verma started. “We have some preliminary results on Darin’s condition.”

Sherlock looked around the small table. John was there, of course, as well as a doctor from Psychiatry. Mycroft had deemed it necessary for national security or somesuch to attend. Sherlock had argued that it was a breach of privacy, but Mycroft had just glared icily at him. At least he had sent one of his lackeys to bring Sherlock some real clothes overnight. It would be some time before he could struggle his cast into his tailored jackets and buttondowns, but the loose polos and trousers were a far cry from a hospital gown.

“The good news is that we are pleased with Darin’s recovery. The induced coma did the trick, and we no longer think he is at risk from the deadly side effects of the injection. He does complain of headaches, but that isn’t unusual. It has only been twenty-four hours since he became fully conscious, so we will continue to monitor him.”

The psychiatrist cleared his throat. “Whilst Darin’s physical condition seems to be stabilized, we have some more data on the original purpose of the serum.” He glanced at Mycroft for approval, and received a curt nod to continue.

“This appears to be a kind of mood tranquilizing drug. To put it simply, it numbs strong emotions like fear, anger, joy.”

“So...the victim becomes a robot?” John asked.

“No. I would think in that case they would become catatonic. We are not sure what is preserved. Basic empathy seems to be intact, curiosity, simple pleasure reactions to creature comforts like food, the list goes on.”

“If you applied the drug to an entire population, imagine how easy it would be to invade them,” Mycroft mused. “They would have enough self preservation and motivation to keep alive as obedient sheep, to farm the fields and work the factories.”

Sherlock rubbed his lips. “You're saying this is what has happened to Darin.”

The psychologist nodded. “We’re afraid so, but we have just begun our research. We have many more rounds of testing ahead.” He opened a laptop on the table. “Let me show you some video clips from the interviews.”

A grainy video started to play. The camera had Darin in focus in his hospital bed, with the doctor
sitting to the side.

“I’m going to show you several photos of people you know. I’d like you to identify them and then I’ll ask you some questions,” the psychologist asked in the recording. He opened a folder and held up a sheet of paper for Darin.

“That’s my Mum,” Darin answered. “She died when I was thirteen.”

“Do you still think about her?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“What do you feel when looking at her photograph now?”

Darin spread his hands and rubbed his palms on the bedspread. “I’m not sure. It happened a long time ago.”

The doctor nodded and held up another photo. “Let’s try another one. Who is this?”

“Melissa, my niece. She’s about five months old,” Darin said, squinting at the page.

“She’s lovely. Do you get to visit with her often?”

“Yes. My sister Natalie and I are very close.” Darin paused, tilted his head and looked perplexed for a moment.

“So you enjoy spending time with your sister and the baby,” he prompted.

“Yes. Yes, I must have done. I remember...” Darin lost his train of thought, shook his head as if to clear it.

“Hmm. One more, this should be an easy one.” The doctor held up the final photo for Darin to inspect.

“Sherlock, my husband,” Darin answered readily.

“He was quite a handful the last few days. Dr Watson had to fight with him to let the doctors give him care. He wanted to stay at your bedside.” The doctor collected the photos and put them back into a folder.

Darin rubbed at the back of his neck with his fingers. “It’s good John was here to handle him.”

He smiled. “Sherlock seems very devoted.”

Darin glanced up, almost right into the camera. “There is something...” he shook his head slightly, and frowned.

“What is it, Darin?” the doctor prompted.

“It’s the feeling like when you have a name or a word on the tip of your tongue. It’s just out of reach, but you can’t recall it,” Darin squeezed his eyelids together tightly.

“Don’t strain yourself. Your body has been through the wringer...” the doctor warned.

“No,” Darin’s eyes snapped open. “Something’s missing.”
“Missing?”

Darin looked at the psychiatrist calmly. “I think I know what you're testing for.”

“It’s not a secret, Darin, but I’ll get better results if I tell you after…”

“I’m supposed to love him, aren’t I?” Darin asked, plainly.

The video clip ended.

Everyone in the room fell silent.

###

Sherlock calmly walked out of the doctor’s office into the hallway. He hastened his pace when he heard his brother’s muffled call to him through the door, but he was simply rushing, not running. One foot in front of the other.

He knew he would be chased down, comforted, a stream of useless babbling. He had had enough words. His head was full of them, on a repeated loop.

*I’m supposed to love him, aren’t I?*

He shook his head to clear it, words echoing like a hornet’s drone. He placidly looked down the hallway, spied a small door across from the toilets. It would probably do. He headed toward it, pulled the handle, and it opened. As he expected, it was a small cleaner’s closet.

He could now hear pursuing footsteps down the hallway.

He examined the inner doorknob, saw that it could be locked, stepped inside. Breathed. Waited. The footsteps passed by the door moments later, assuming he had flown further away.

It wouldn’t hide him for long, Sherlock knew that someone would check the door eventually. He had fifteen, twenty minutes, depending if it was John or Mycroft who was searching. At any rate, he had enough time to do what he needed.

He didn’t like it, but yes, even he had limits. He couldn’t deny it, but at least he chose his own terms.

He looked at his watch. He would allow five minutes. He coolly waited for the second hand to tick to the next one. The large hand moved, and he let go.

*I’m supposed to love him, aren’t I?*

Sherlock clenched his hands to his midsection. The words felt like a blow. He had been stabbed, shot, and he was quite sure none had felt quite like this. He couldn’t catch his breath, and this pain had to be a sign of some real physical damage.

His knees hit the floor.

A part of him, the cynical part, hadn’t expected Darin to stay. Even after rings had been slipped over fingers, there had always been a ticking clock. He wasn’t good enough, wasn’t programmed to love, wasn’t worthy of being cherished. He thought it would end with slamming doors or sad disdain. Not with words chill and cold as a grave. Not from Darin, who was everything warm and good.

*I’m supposed to love him, aren’t I?*
Tears stung Sherlock’s eyes. He had four more minutes, so he let them fall.

All hearts are broken. It was simply time to pay his due.
Sherlock smothered a yawn as Mycroft glided into his room.

“I see you have finished your stroll, brother mine.” Mycroft took a seat in one of the guest chairs.

“I was bored,” Sherlock groused.

Mycroft looked unconvinced. “You are in hospital. You should be resting.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “I’m trying, but you’re talking.”

They hadn’t found his refuge in the cleaner’s storeroom. Sherlock abandoned it after his self-allotted time had passed, splashed some water on his face in the restroom and wandered the halls. He had been well aware that he would eventually be picked up on surveillance, so he hadn’t bothered to hide his whereabouts.

No one had come after him or tried to stop him. He had had no goal in mind, other than solitude. He had known an RMP had been tailing him when he got too close to restricted areas, but there was a limited amount of damage he could do, especially with the cameras tracing his movements.

As hours had passed he had returned to his room on his own, footsore with his hand aching. A therapist had been sent in, who had asked Sherlock if he needed to talk. He’d sent the man packing. The nurses had come next, clucked over him and gave him his drugs. Not that the painkillers were very effective. They were monitoring his doses carefully to prevent a relapse of his old addictions, especially after the injections he received during the incident. They did, however, still make him drowsy, and he was considering a nap before Mycroft had invited himself in.

“You can manage to stay up a few minutes longer. While you were prowling the halls, there were some developments in Darin’s condition,” Mycroft said.

“Out with it,” Sherlock growled.

“Let me first assure you, his health continues to improve. He is still running a low grade fever, but that is being managed and monitored. The medical team is reducing the anti-seizure drugs, and that is going well. His lungs are clear from the side effects of several days of ventilation. He got out of bed today, and if all is well in the morning, he is on schedule to be downgraded and moved from critical care.”

“So he’s not going to die any time soon,” Sherlock summarized coolly.

“No, he is not. The doctors are not sure why it was terminal to agent Fall. He either simply received a lethal overdose, or perhaps it was the timing of the treatment.”

Sherlock steepled his fingers over his lips. “Orion’s next-of-kin have been notified?”

Mycroft shook his head once. “His body will be returned to the United States when we have concluded the investigation. Until then, the research team may need access to his remains.”

That made sense, but Sherlock couldn’t help but spare a thought for the man who helped save his life. He hadn’t even asked him if he had family or friends, and he had been too focused on his mission to deduce it. Now not knowing more about him seemed like a loss. Still, one had to be pragmatic. Darin was living, and if Orion’s corpse held any answers, it needed to be available.
“Also, you should be informed that Darin has requested that John Watson be his attending. It’s highly unusual, not only for ethical reasons, but because John isn’t on staff here. Darin made a compelling argument, however, so I will see that it’s done once Darin leaves critical care,” Mycroft said.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “What sort of argument?”

“His current team was formed to not only tend to his health, but to collect data on the serum. He expressed a desire to have his lead physician only be burdened with the duties of his medical treatment.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “Why? Why would he do that? John has been my general practitioner for years, but Darin has always felt more comfortable with another physician, keeping a small semblance of privacy.”

Mycroft signs impatiently. “People reach for the familiar in times of stress.”


Mycroft threw his hands in the air. “Even in his state, he’s hardly the most logical fellow, is he? The testing over the last two days has been arduous and they have been pushing his limits. Perhaps he was tired…”

“How many pain drugs do you think I’m on? Or has age simply addled your brain? Of course, he will want them to run the tests. He probably has been encouraging them to perform more. Wait, I know what this is really about.” Sherlock shook his head. “He doesn’t trust you, or your staff. He wants someone of his own nearby, keeping an eye on you.”

Mycroft frowned. “What are you implying?”

“It’s not a large leap, brother. You are responsible for his current state, after all. Don’t think I’ve overlooked that,” Sherlock snarled.

“How predictable. Darin chose to go after you, against my better judgment.”

“You let him!” Sherlock yelled, his voice echoing in the small room.

“You’re in hospital, Sherlock. Keep your histrionics down to a dull roar. I did not intend to place Darin, John, or you in significant danger. Or at least, no more than you are prone to finding on your own.”

Sherlock’s eyes flared. “Oh.”

Mycroft stilled in his seat.

“Darin wouldn’t be angry at you if he volunteered for this mission on his own. Of course, you could have manipulated him, but I’m sure that was hardly necessary. He doesn’t trust you for another reason completely. This is something new, something other than your usual maneuvering.” Sherlock kicked off the bed and slid his slippers on.

“You can’t go see him now. He’s sleeping,” Mycroft objected, suddenly edgy.

“He’s not,” Sherlock said confidently. He reached for his dressing gown, draping it over his shoulders to avoid taking his arm out of the sling. “Are you coming to face the music, brother mine?”
Mycroft groaned as he rose, and followed Sherlock out of the room.

###

Sherlock cracked the door carefully as Mycroft spoke the nurses at the critical care station. The lights were dimmed in Darin’s room, but not off. As Sherlock suspected, Darin was sitting up, flipping through a pile of papers and reports.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping,” Sherlock scolded softly.

“Hmm. When Dr Verma found out about my research, she agreed to let me see the initial chemical analysis of the serum samples and the data from the SIM you transmitted,” Darin explained.

When Darin looked up at him, Sherlock suppressed a shiver. There was definitely something missing behind his eyes. It was like a stranger was peering out at him. The loss of what they had built together was a cold, deep ache that threatened to crush Sherlock’s composure. Even though he was out of practice, living with pain was was no stranger to him, and Sherlock knew how to press it down and lock it away.

“What have you figured out?” Sherlock finally asked.

Mycroft came in quietly and stood near the corner of the room. Darin watched him for a moment before addressing Sherlock.

“It’s a highly modified neurotoxin that once had an organic source. If they would give me my laptop, I probably could break it down, eventually.”

“We have an entire team working on it now,” Mycroft added.

“From these notes, I think they are on the wrong track. The transport proteins are certainly of botanic origin. Do you have a phytochemist on your team?” Darin asked.

“We have the very best people working on it,” Mycroft assured.

Sherlock turned to face his brother. “I find it interesting that you had this group of specialists assembled waiting for the data on the chip. If the goal was to remove the formula from the black market, why not just destroy it? Why go through the trouble of setting up a crack team to analyse it?”

Mycroft nodded. “Of course, we needed to know the nature of the threat, in case this wasn’t the only copy of the serum.”

Darin turned a few pages and held it up to Mycroft. “Your team wasn’t just performing a simple analysis. The formula is effective, but it wasn’t in a finished state. Look what it did to me and Mr Fall. It could easily kill the people that it was intended to control. Your team doesn’t just want to know what it is and how it works. They are trying to perfect it.”

Sherlock smiled smugly at Mycroft. “You couldn’t look a gift chemical weapon in the mouth, could you?”

Mycroft sighed. “That’s classified.”

“Did you ever intend to develop an antidote? Or was the plan to unleash it on the next threat, the chemical weapons convention be damned?” Darin asked.

Sherlock swallowed. There was no anger in Darin’s voice- his inflection was flat and lifeless.
Mycroft raised his chin. “Since you were injected, the team has also been working on an antidote. I assure you, everything in my power is focused on healing you.”

“Reducing collateral damage,” Sherlock sneered. His brother had the courtesy to drop his eyes and at least sham guilt.

Darin gathered the papers into a neat pile. “Where is the research facility?”

“Not far,” Mycroft replied.

Sherlock reached over and took the papers out of Darin’s hand and flipped through them.

Darin stared at Mycroft, eyes cold and hollow. “I want to be on the team, as soon as possible.”

Mycroft frowned. “You are still in critical care.”

“I won’t be for much longer. Once John authorizes me fit for light duty, assign me to your research staff.” Darin paused and considered for a moment. “My one condition is that you use the antidote as the weapon. With an antidote, you can pull the teeth of your enemies that may have the formula. You’ll have a defense and never need to weaponize the serum.”

Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’m not as omnipotent as you think,” Mycroft said. “I can’t barter matters of national security with my brother-in-law.”

Darin shrugged. “Send my CV to your research team. Ask them if my skills would be a good trade in the bargain. If I fail, you won’t have anything to lose.”

“Ha! You underestimated him,” Sherlock crowed, waving the papers at Mycroft.

Mycroft sniffed. “No. You both have clearance, there was no reason to hide the files. Especially considering his affliction.”


“I will take your offer under advisement,” Mycroft told Darin, ignoring Sherlock. “I won’t keep you from your rest any longer.” Mycroft turned and went out the door, looking thoughtful.

Sherlock took the files and set it on a small table out of Darin’s reach.

“Did they explain my condition to you?” Darin didn’t protest as Sherlock reached out and gently pulled his glasses off. He set them on top of the files.

“Yes.” Sherlock pressed the buttons on the bed controls, lowering the headrest.

“The prognosis is still unclear. While there is a chance at an antidote, there is still a lot of data to process and many unknowns. This could be permanent.”

For once, Sherlock resisted the urge to spin out future probabilities. He busied himself rearranging bedding the best he could one-handed. Darin felt warm through the sheet as he tucked it around him.

“Go to sleep,” Sherlock commanded.

“I know this must be hard for you. If that gives you any solace, I’m not suffering. I’m not sure I’m capable, really. So try not to worry.”
Sherlock rested his hand on the covers. He breathed through his nose as grief squeezed his chest.

“When Mycroft agrees to put me on his research team, I’ll try to bring you with me, if you’d like. I’ve never been to a lab that couldn’t use another physical chemist.” Darin closed his eyes. “It will be interesting for you. Think of it as another case.”

Sherlock bit at his lower lip, but was unable to hold his words back. “Of course I’ll go. You’re not just another case. How could you even suggest…” Sherlock trailed off, faltering.

Darin sighed. “I’m sorry, I should have realized that. My interpersonal skills are hampered, it’s hard to explain. I’ll try to adjust.”

Sherlock rubbed idle small circles over the sheet. He was at a loss for words.

“I’m falling asleep, Sherlock. Your injuries are still healing. Go take care of yourself. I’m sure I’ll want to hear you play violin again, when this is over.”

Sherlock, still mute, reached to turn off the remaining light before getting up to leave.
A young woman in a business suit walked briskly ahead of Sherlock and John, her heels clicking on the lino as she lead them down the hallway. The campus of the Langdale research facility wasn’t overly large and they could have found their own way, but she was one of Mycroft’s fixers, and she was going to personally assure everything was in order. Sherlock supposed attention to detail in her line of work was critical. If she were able to successfully manage the logistics of setting up new flats, this could lead to more interesting projects, like picking up Mycroft’s lunch order.

They followed clearly marked signs to the rear of the building towards the infirmary. This building housed all the support services the facility needed to function. They passed the dull offices of accounting and procurement, a cafe, and a small gymnasium and staff locker room.

The fixer slowed and stopped in front of a door across the hall from the infirmary. She worked her key in the lock. The name of whomever they had ousted had been scraped off the glazed window; flakes of paint still clung to the glass.

“Mr Holmes, these are your temporary quarters,” the fixer announced unnecessarily, swinging the door open and clicking on the lights.

“I realize it’s rudimentary. The nearest toilet is across the hall. The cafe kitchens and the locker room showers are available for you and Dr Allard when he arrives.” She crossed the room and opened another door. Where they were standing must had once been a waiting or reception area, and the room beyond had been the office.

Sherlock glanced around the outer room. Her minions must have raided Ikea for the furnishings. There was a bright red sofa on one side of the room, and two plain tables and chairs that could act as desks on the other. Darin and Sherlock’s computers and large monitors were already there, along with a few scattered boxes of books and clothing they had packed from Baker street. A mini refrigerator and a kettle sat in the corner, and a blue patterned cotton carpet was thrown across the linoleum.

“The sofa folds out into a bed, in case you would like to stay the night, Dr Watson,” the fixer mentioned.

“Ta, that’s a good idea.” John smiled at the woman.

Hopefully, John wouldn’t have to stay very often. John had conceded to this arrangement so Darin could transition out of convalescence. Langdale was a few hours outside of London, a commute too arduous for Darin to attempt only a few days out of intensive care, so it seemed easier to keep him on site instead of going home to Baker street. A nurse from the infirmary across the hall would monitor Darin and John himself would come several days a week to examine him. If Darin was still working here by the time he had recovered enough that he no longer needed daily supervision, they would look into renting a proper flat in the town nearby.

Sherlock walked into the adjoining room which had been set up as a bedroom of sorts. He sighed loudly when he saw the twin bed on one side of the room and a hospital bed on the other. He had argued with John over not having a proper bed, but Darin would still be hooked up to monitors overnight and a separate hospital bed made dealing with the leads easier. The machines sat in the
corner, switched off for now. The sterile medical equipment made a bizarre contrast to the cheap furniture and cheerfully colored linens.

“This will do,” Sherlock said gruffly. The truth of the matter was that Sherlock had bedded down in much worse places. He had slept on bare, lice-infested mattresses in drug dens, in the rain on park benches, and had hidden in condemned buildings for days when he had been on the trail of Moriarty's network. He would be warm and clean and with Darin. Eventually they would be back to home and normality. He hoped.

“I will leave you to settle in, while I see to Dr Allard’s transfer from hospital. You have my mobile number if you need anything. I am at your disposal at any time or day,” she offered.

“Thank you very much. Please let us know when Darin arrives,” John shook the fixer’s hand, and she saw herself out of the room.

“Let me help you unpack,” John suggested. Sherlock nodded absently. He was out of the sling, but the range of motion in his shoulder was still limited and his hand was still in a cast. Lifting anything heavy and reaching were still difficult.

Sherlock could start sorting through the boxes and putting away clothing, so he bent down and opened the nearest one.

“So…” John started, hesitantly. “Things with Darin all right?”

Sherlock looked up, mouth twisting in confusion. “What do you mean?”

John made a vague gesture. “You haven’t really spent much time together.”

Sherlock blinked slowly. “I’ve been busy. I have been making arrangements so he can disappear with no questions asked on a mysterious assignment. Are you forgetting that we just saw him yesterday at hospital?”

John licked his lips. “Yeah, I know. I was there the whole time- you haven’t been alone with him. So is everything okay? Relationship-wise.”

Sherlock sighed. “Are we having these sorts of talks now?”

“It’s been a hard couple of weeks.”

“Considering his current disability, it hardly matters if I sit and hold his hand, does it? There was work to do once he was accepted on the research team. I’ve done it. The rest is irrelevant to him.” Sherlock pulled a pile of thin wool jumpers out of the box and stacked them on the floor.

“Did he tell you that?” John asked in surprise.

“He doesn’t have to tell me anything.” Sherlock stood and opened a drawer in the dresser a little harder than necessary.

John studied him with a frown. “Sherlock, he thinks that his condition can be reversed. If that happens, how are things going to be with both of you after this? He must know on an intellectual level that he’s hurting you.” John rubbed his nose. “I know I’m shite at this stuff, but look, if he sees you pulling away from him now, it’s going to be even harder for him to handle the guilt when his emotions come back. All I’m saying is don’t avoid him. Reach out a little, yeah?”

Sherlock retrieved the jumpers and put them away in the drawer. His hand was preventing him from
doing a perfect job, but Darin could refold them later. He shut the drawer and opened the next one.

“If you wanted to talk to someone, you know, you can always talk to me,” John added quietly.

“What I want is the box that has socks and pants in it,” Sherlock grumbled. “Let me know if you find it.”

###

Darin followed Dr Lewis Carter, the head of the research team, through the facilities at Langdale. He had been ushered through various labs, shown the locations of critical machines and introduced to a fleet of scientists and technicians. His head throbbed trying to remember all of the names, but he would just have to tolerate it. He had a low grade headache almost all of the time that slowly worsened as he tired.

Sherlock followed close behind, his quicksilver eyes taking everything in and committing it to memory. He was assigned to a bench in the main lab and would be part of the team testing any antidotes that they formulated. Anything that passed initial control would be verified again through computer modeling, then finally sent to the animal testing wing. Darin knew he would likely be the first human trial of anything that passed that stage.

Dr Carter led them to an elevator, and pressed the button for a lower floor. “The last stop on the tour is our facilities’ pride and joy. It’s the latest technology in virtual modeling. It’s the only system like this in the world, but we hope to have a product for industry and education in the future.”

The doors opened and they stepped into what looked like a command center for a space agency. The room was set up like an amphitheater, with tables and banks of computer equipment arranged in tiers. Sunk in the center was a circular platform where a scientist stood. He wore a small camera mounted to the front of a pair of spectacles and close fitting black gloves painted with small reflective dots.

Sherlock watched as the man waved his arms and a projection of a structural chemical formula appeared in the air in three dimensions. The text glowed and floated around the man and he moved and tilted the formula with movements of his hand. A flick of his wrist popped up a window of calculations, and with a finger drag he merged the two together.

Darin watched for a moment. “It’s like something Tony Stark would use.”

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow. “Who?”

Dr Carter chuckled. “You are not the first person to make that comparison. With this system, we can cut our production times in half. It works with a network of...Dr Allard?”

Darin had already walked off down the steps toward the podium. “Excuse me. May I try that?” he called out to the man on the platform.

###

Sherlock watched Darin push calculations through the virtual modeler. It was awe inspiring. In two days he had taken over the system and extra staff had to be allocated to keep up with him. Darin would run simulations of potential formulas, save the results and call out a file number. The staff on the floor would send it to a team to re-test and generate compounds based on his findings. Sherlock spent most of his day testing those formulations. It was certainly below him- but the hum of a well running lab and the reassurance of the scientific process had its own appeal. At least for a time.
Darin stood on the platform surrounded by a transparent wall of floating text and numbers, a faint glow from the projections cast him in colored light. He was gesturing in the air to change screens; his motions had become smaller, more efficient, almost as if he was conducting a miniscule orchestra.

“Pause,” Darin commanded the system. The hovering text and the people in the room froze.

Darin’s eyes flicked over the right side of the virtual screen. There was nothing in his expression but pure focus and calculation. He was one with the system; no, he was the master of the system. A biological-based central processor. Darin was beautiful like this, stripped down to just his intellect. A chill ran down Sherlock’s spine. It was also terrifying.

“Save file. Version 134. Add to the queue for Team C.” Darin called out to the room.

“File confirmed,” the computer analyst responded.

Darin barked out a curt, “resume.” The floating information started to move, and the bustle in the lab continued.

Mycroft strode in through a set of double doors. “Dr Carter says he is quite the talent with the new system,” Mycroft told Sherlock as he approached, in lieu of a greeting. “He is very pleased.”

Sherlock spared his brother a cool glance. “Anything to get the job done.”

“A theory is that the serum has enhanced his intellectual efficiency. Darin is no longer burdened with emotional distractions.”

What Mycroft was saying was possible, and Sherlock had wondered the same thing himself. Darin had been a genius beforehand, emotions and all. Though, that the man standing on the riser was not the same one he knew. He was an automation. A brilliant one, but a robot none the less.

“They can test their theories once he has an antidote. If he is still good at operating the device, you’ll have your answer.”

Mycroft hummed. “If there isn’t an antidote, he can do good work here.”

Sherlock felt his stomach sink. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

Mycroft frowned. “No. Just that he could have a permanent place where he could make real contributions, if it came to that. You could go back to London and cease working as a lowly lab technician.”

“I’m not leaving him,” Sherlock snapped.

Mycroft didn’t say a word.

###

Sherlock was surprised to see the lights were still on in their makeshift flat. John only allowed Darin to work so many hours without a rest to control the headaches, so he was often asleep by the time Sherlock called it a day.

Darin was sitting on the ugly sofa when Sherlock came in. Before he had a chance to say hello, Darin looked up at him and asked, “Are you avoiding me?”

Sherlock closed and locked the door and sat on one of the office chairs to take off his shoes. He took his time to consider his answer. The small quarters were stifling and he had little to entertain himself
with cooped up in here. Unless he wanted to stare at the shell of his husband going through the motions of what they had for a life.

“There is plenty of work to do in the lab,” he settled on. It was evasive, but true.

“You can go back to London if you wish. I had thought you would rather be here, but if I was wrong and you are bored…”

Sherlock tossed his shoes under the desk. “Why is everyone trying to send me back to London? I’m fine. The faster we work, the sooner we can both leave this place. I’m busy. The testing team is behind; they can’t keep up with what you’re throwing at them. That’s all.”

Darin shrugged and reached for a book on the cushion. “I brought you back a sandwich from the cafe if you want it. It’s in the mini fridge.”

Sherlock ran a hand through his hair. He didn’t have anything to feel guilty about. It wasn’t like Darin needed his company. He remembered John’s advice from a week ago, that he should try harder. It just seemed a pointless exercise.

Sherlock rose and sat down on the sofa close to Darin, who peered at him over the book.

“Something you want?” Darin asked.

Sherlock reached out and plucked the book from Darin’s hands. “I should spend more time with you. Here I am.”

Darin looked at him, nonplussed and waiting.

Sherlock nudged closer and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. He was relieved when Darin turned toward him and slid a hand along his ribs and pulled him in. Sherlock carefully lay his cast on Darin’s thigh, and rested his cheek on the top of his head. Sherlock felt some tension slip away as they let the minutes tick by.

Darin shifted in his arms and Sherlock nuzzled and kissed the side of his face. He didn’t want him to pull away, not just yet. It had been an age since they had been affectionate, and now that Sherlock had a taste, he missed it. To Sherlock’s delight, Darin tilted his face up, eyes closed in an obvious offering. Sherlock kissed him gently and Darin brought his other hand up to wind into his hair.

Darin melted tighter against him as the kiss deepened, meeting Sherlock measure for measure. It was an unexpected development. Darin hadn’t given any signals that he had been interested in intimacy, and Sherlock had written it off as another emotional response he had lost. Perhaps, he thought, it had only been temporary whilst he had been recovering. Darin felt hunger and craved food, maybe his other physical desires were not as dampened as Sherlock had assumed.

Sherlock pressed Darin back, down into the cushions. There was some clumsy arranging of legs and avoiding his injured arm before he settled comfortably with Darin under him. Sherlock let his teeth graze the stubble on Darin’s jawline and was rewarded with a soft gasp. He hummed as the warm glow of arousal suffused him. He could at least have this one thing, a fraction of their old affinity.

Darin wriggled under him delightfully as Sherlock nosed and licked under his ear. “What do you want?”

“Clothes off,” Darin answered.

Sherlock quickly realized he wasn’t going to be able to brace himself up and remove clothes with
one good arm. He growled in frustration, and Darin insinuated his hands between them to pull at the buttons of Sherlock’s shirt. Sherlock’s breath hitched when Darin paused to tease his nipples.

“What do you want?” Darin asked him.

“Hmm.” Sherlock struggled up, so he was straddling Darin’s hips, pulling his cast free of his sleeve. “Damn thing.” He threw the garment on the floor.

Sherlock reached down to pull Darin’s shirttails from his trousers. Darin grabbed the hem of his jumper and started to squirm it over his head. Sherlock’s eyes roved over his body while he writhed, and his gaze paused over the front of his trousers. Sherlock frowned.

Darin’s head popped out of his jumper and Sherlock grabbed a handful of the fabric and twisted it tight before he could slide it off his arms, trapping him.

“Look at me,” Sherlock commanded and Darin did so. His pupils were normal sized. If kissing hadn’t sparked at least some signs of arousal, pinning him down certainly would’ve done the trick. Sherlock let go of the jumper and pressed his fingers against Darin’s carotid artery. Slightly elevated pulse, but nothing close to what he expected. He had measured his response many times before, and he had perfected what made Darin’s heart pound.

Sherlock growled and crawled off Darin to sit on the end of the sofa. “You’re faking. The twitching around to hide your lack of an erection. Keeping your eyes closed or turned away. You think I wouldn’t notice?”

Darin leaned his back against the armrest. “I thought you would, eventually, but by then you’d just go with it. Don’t take it personally. I’m sure it’s just another effect from the serum.”

“You were trying to deceive me!” Sherlock snapped.

“Sherlock, it’s not that important. It’s fine if you need me.”

“So it’s pity. At least that emotion is functional,” Sherlock bit out. It was harsher than he intended, but Darin just regarded him calmly. Of course he did. What else could he do?

Darin shook his head. “No. I remember, Sherlock. If I were well, I would want this. Just because I’m not reacting to you now, doesn’t mean it’s not all right. We have sex- we’re married.”

“You’re not interested!”

“How many times have we made love when you weren't interested? Or at least, not to the degree I was. I’d say it was the majority of the time. It seems ridiculous for you to—”

Sherlock rounded on him, anger boiling over. “Is that what you thought? That I wasn’t interested? All these years? I don’t always manifest the typical responses, but it doesn’t mean I wasn’t completely absorbed by you. Christ.” He stood and snatched his discarded shirt and struggled into it.

Darin got up and went to him. Sherlock flinched back, then realized Darin was reaching to assist him with the buttons. He didn’t want to accept the help, but Sherlock would struggle with them one handed for an age if he didn’t, and he wanted to get out of the damned little rooms as quickly as he could.

Darin fished the buttons through the slots. “Before you storm off, know I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you don’t have emotions.”
Sherlock snorted.

“No, really I am. You know from the reports my empathy still works. I remember everything. How I used to feel. A lifetime of how I’m supposed to react. Sometimes, it feels just out of reach. Almost if I try hard enough, I can break through, like some sort of amnesia.” Darin stepped back, finished with the buttons. Sherlock pulled away and did his best to tuck the shirt in himself.

“I’m sorry. The best as I can describe it is like being numbed at the dentist. You know how to chew and move your mouth, but you’re clumsy because you don’t have the proper feedback. I have my recollections of how I should feel under certain circumstances, but it’s still hard to read people on the fly, sift through and pick the proper reaction. I misjudge.”

Sherlock huffed and slid into his shoes. He sat in one of the chairs, and cursed at the laces and then at his cast. Darin bent down and tied the laces for him.

“I know this must be difficult. I’m not trying to hurt you. If there is anything I can do, I will,” Darin told him. He managed to play act sincerity convincingly, and it left Sherlock feeling cold and raw.

He slid into his Belstaff by himself, able to manage that, at least. Darin reached for his scarf but Sherlock jerked away from him and made do by looping it loosely around his neck. He turned and made his escape without saying goodbye.

He walked down the hallway and around the corner before he stopped to consider where he was going. He leaned against a wall and pulled out his mobile. Sherlock considered calling John, but he didn’t know what he would say if he did. My husband was cruel to me and my feelings are hurt. No, god no. Perhaps he’d ring Mrs Hudson, just to hear her soothing prattle.

Sherlock jammed his mobile back into his pocket and clunked the back of his head rhythmically on the wall. He would walk the grounds of the campus and perhaps find someone to beg a cigarette from. He could always go into the infirmary and pick the locks on the drugs cabinets and peruse the dispensary.

No. He scolded himself. The damn pain drugs and meperidine had reminded him of the pleasant oblivion, but he wouldn’t succumb to his old habits. He had looked over Darin’s drugs with a curious eye, yes, but that had been all. There hadn’t been anything interesting, anyway.

He pressed himself away from the wall and headed toward the building’s entrance to begin his long and very solitary stroll.

Chapter End Notes

The whump will end eventually, I promise. Hang in there...
Darín’s attention was drawn away from the virtual modeler by a familiar baritone.

“Report from testing.”

“Pause,” Darín commanded the system. The three simulations he had been running froze. Darín looked beyond the projected screens towards Sherlock, standing in the middle level of the amphitheater.

“Sample twenty-two has passed initial testing and has graduated to the mammal facility,” Sherlock announced. The scientists and staff in the room clapped and cheered their success.

Darin remembered to smile. He could tell it bothered people when he didn’t. Then they got distracted from their work, and shot him odd glances. All because he didn’t make his face into the right shapes.

This was the second sample to go to animal testing. In two weeks of work, they had found two possible antidotes. The first one had yielded no result. Yet, Dr Carter had called the team’s progress remarkable.

“Thank you, Sherlock. Please extend our congratulations to the testing team.” Darín turned back to his screens and reactivated the system.

“Of course, Dr Allard,” Sherlock replied stiffly.

###

Sherlock jarred awake in his narrow bed. He blinked his eyes until they focused on his alarm clock. It was just past eight in the morning.

“Sherlock?” John called again from the other room.

Sherlock moaned. It had been a long night. “What?”

“Is Darín still sleeping? He was supposed to meet me for his checkup.”

Sherlock looked across the room. It was empty. “He’s not here. Have you tried calling him?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t pick up.”

Sherlock frowned and kicked out of bed.

###

_Softly, softly._ Darín willed his spinning thoughts. _No need to be so sharp._

He opened his eyes. Or perhaps they were already open? Specks of color danced around the lab, tickled the animals in their cages, vibrated on the table and around the empty syringe like a halo. Maybe it was angels, then. He didn’t believe in angels, but there was no doubting the proof of his eyes.

Pain pierced through his head again and he ran his fingers through his hair. It crackled under his fingers. Did he have a halo, too? Was he dead? Panic started to bubble up. _Softly_, he reminded himself. The back of his legs hit something solid, and he slid down to the floor.
“Jesus Christ!” Darin heard someone exclaim. Impossibly bright lights flickered on overhead. It burned his corneas, so he snapped his lids closed. Why would anyone be so cruel?

“Darin...Darin...what happened?” Hands grabbed at him, much too loud, much too blue. Was that right? Fear again,stabbing at his cerebellum.


Different hands. Darin flinched away as they burned into his skin.

“Open your eyes. Shhh. It’s Sherlock, Darin. Just open your eyes.”

Darin did. He saw concern. Fear. Sharp, too sharp.

“Sheehh, shit…” The other voice, shrill in the background. “The antidote. He took the sodding antidote.”

He was pulled close, and every place he was touched ignited into points of fire. He thrashed and tried to escape.

“We’re here, Darin, John and I. Can you be still and quiet?”

It hurt. He pushed, kicked and struck out, trying to distance himself from the source of the fire. Why was this happening to him? If there were angels, maybe there was a hell, too. He was burning up.

“Why is he screaming, John?” Sherlock asked. Sharp. Hands held his wrists, the floor against his face. The knee in his back was melting off his skin.

“I don’t know, he’s delusional. Just keep him still a minute more.”

Persimmon...persimmon...persimmon. Why wasn’t Sherlock acknowledging the safeword? Darin bucked and writhed. This couldn’t be Sherlock. It had to be the devils, then.

Footsteps. A new group of hands were on him. He heard crashing glassware.

“Sherlock, let him go.” John shouted. “Something you're doing is freaking him out.”

“John…”

“Just go!”

Darin felt a scratch on the inside of his arm. Something ice cold ran through his veins.

“Darin...try to relax. I gave you some medicine. It’s going to help. Can you stop yelling for us?”

Yelling? He wasn’t yelling. The cool numbness was chasing away the burning. He closed his eyes again. When he did that, the angels went away.

“Hey, good. We’ve got you.” John was supposed to be soothing, but it was still so sharp with concern it hurt his head. Maybe if he slept it would be better.

Or maybe, with his eyes closed, the devils would come.

###
Darin opened his eyes. He looked around an unfamiliar room, all in shades of white. He was strapped into the bed and a drip was taped to his arm. Smell of antiseptic. Sherlock was sleeping, slumped in a chair in the corner. A dark slash of color.

*Back in hospital,* he reasoned. His head throbbed.

It hardly mattered. Nothing mattered.

###

“Darin, hey mate. It’s John.”

“I know who you are. Of course I know you you are. You live at my house,” Darin replied. He rubbed his feet back and forth on the bed. “I’m extraordinarily intelligent. Do you know I’m rated as one of the fifth best researchers in my field in the world? The world, John.”

John frowned and nodded. “Sure...I think Sherlock told me that once. Hey, a few doctors are going to come in and take a look at you and run some tests. Is that okay?”

“You said I passed the medical,” Darin reminded him. Maybe they needed him to run the tests. He could think of several different ways their methods could be improved. If they let him go from the bed, he could help.

“Well, yeah, pretty much. Besides the headaches, you seem fine. These are psychological tests.”

Darin sighed. “I suppose, if they think it necessary. I have all my feelings back. Isn’t that grand? I can tell them the psychosis was only temporary too. I’m not having hallucinations any longer. I am in perfect control of my facilities.”

“They are more concerned about your rapidly changing mood swings now. I’ll let them know to come up.”

“Of course, of course.” Darin tugged at the restraints and kicked his legs. He hated staying still. “Do you think they are part of Mycroft’s team? We have to be on the alert, John. You can’t let them convince you of things about me that aren’t true. I’m sure they’re trying to discredit me.”

John licked his lips. “Yeah, don’t worry. I’ve got your back.”

Darin smiled at him. John looked worried, but that was understandable if he had to go head to head with Mycroft’s spies. You never knew what they would do next.

###

Darin curled up into the pillow. He supposed he should be glad that they finally took the restraints off his wrists. He was drugged up so much, he wasn’t sure if he could run away or take a swat at someone if he cared to. He supposed he understood. He had apparently wrecked the lab and bloodied Sherlock’s nose when they had found him. He knew he was still a little erratic when he got some energy, but he had no desire to hurt anyone.

“May I ask you something?” Sherlock asked cautiously.

Darin curled tighter into the pillow. It was difficult to look at him. Sherlock was trying so hard to keep himself together and failing miserably. Maybe not everyone couldn’t see it, but Darin could. He also knew he was responsible for the pain.
“Sure,” Darin sighed into rough cotton bedding.

“Why didn’t you wait for testing to complete on the antidote? What drove you take it prematurely?”

Darin moaned. What was the point? It was too late, now. “Didn’t you read the note?”

“Yes. ‘Dear research team, If my calculations are correct, you will never read this letter. If you do read it, I am dead or unconscious, which means I was in error. There seems little point dragging out the final antidote testing phase. The rats are responding to initial treatment and I know I am to be the first human subject. Hopefully, I will walk out of this room a healed man. If not, I’m sure several of my saved files will result in success. I thank you for your work, no matter what comes to pass. Sincerely, Dr Darin Allard.’”

Darin lifted his head. Sherlock had his chin resting on his hand, reciting his note from the recesses of his mind palace. Darin wished, not for the first time, that he had such an eidetic memory. Darin dropped his head back into his pillow.

“I guess I was impatient,” Darin closed his eyes again. “I was so sure I was right.”

Sherlock hummed. “I doubt you had experienced anything one could call impatience for six weeks.”

Darin sagged his shoulders. “Yes, but I knew the longer I waited, the worse things were going to become between us. You were more unhappy day by day. You could leave. I knew if I ever recovered, I wouldn’t want to wake up to that.”

A wave of despair washed over Darin. He probably would still lose him now. Who would want to stay with the wreck of a human being that he had become? There was only so much strain a marriage could take.

Sherlock was silent. Darin risked a glance. Sherlock had dropped his hand into his lap and was blinking at Darin, perplexed.

“You rushed your treatment...for me?”

“Of course I did. I’m sorry it didn’t work out. We never anticipated the mood cycling. Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters!”

Darin sighed and curled up tighter into his pillow. His head throbbed. “Can we talk about this another time? I’m tired.”

###

Sherlock was in the family waiting room when John came in to find him. John was nervously flexing his fingers at his side, which did not bode well. Sherlock worked at keeping his face impassive.

“Hey. We have the results from Darin’s first evaluation.” John shut and locked the door and walked over and handed a folder to him. John sat down.

“We started Darin on a series of mood balancing medications often used to control manic and depressive mood swings in patients that suffer from bipolar disorder. It can take weeks to see full effect. For now, we also have him on tranquilizers to control the worst of it. He will slowly be weaned off them over time. His medical exams are complete, but we still don’t know if...”
Sherlock stopped shuffling the pages. He came to a sketch Darin made for one of the evaluation tests. It was a dark and twisted vine, drawn with bold and aggressive strokes. Sherlock could tell he had broken the lead at least once and had torn the paper in haste to add evil looking thorns. The dark image sent a stab of fear through Sherlock’s heart.

“Sherlock?” John asked.

“Continue.” Sherlock shut the folder and set it aside.

“Yeah, anyway, he is in good health. He has headaches and the tiredness, but that could have to do with the tranquilizers. His MRI’s are not exactly normal, but nothing of concern, considering. We don’t know what changes have been made to his brain, or if they are reversible. It’s only been forty-eight hours and it could be this fades in time, like how the psychotic episode was temporary.”

“So what is the next step?” Sherlock asked.

John rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Sherlock, you're not going to like this.”

Sherlock clenched his jaw. “Out with it.”

John dropped his hand. “We told him there was no medical reason for him to stay at hospital, but we were concerned about his mental state. He immediately understood that we couldn’t treat him at Baker Street. He’s just too unstable right now. He asked me to find a psychiatric inpatient facility for him.”

Sherlock bit his lower lip. “He would be admitted voluntarily.”

John nodded. “Yeah, he wants that, until we get his medications nailed down. I called Mycroft right before I came to find you. They’re going to find a discreet facility due to the security of the situation. Your brother mentioned he would call you to decide what you should start telling Darin’s other family and coworkers. The excuse that he faffed off to a research project for a few weeks isn’t going to hold water for much longer.”

Sherlock ground his thumb in his eyelid. “I don’t like it, but I admit there is some sense to it.”

“That’s not the part you won’t like. Sherlock...there is no easy way to say this next bit. Darin has requested no visitors until he feels he is ready to receive them.”

Sherlock snapped his head up. “Me. He means me?”

“I’m afraid he means everyone. He said he wants you to keep full access to his medical files and progress reports. The exception are his sessions with his therapist when he is assigned one, which are to remain sealed. I’m sorry, Sherlock.”

“Why?” Sherlock croaked.

“I don’t know. I’m not exactly sure he knows. He might just need some time to get sorted. He’s been through a lot these few weeks.”

Sherlock pressed his hand to his middle as his stomach rolled wildly. He dropped his eyes away from John’s sympathetic ones. He was angry and hurt in equal portions, and his body didn’t know what to do with it.

“If there is anything I can do, let me know. I will,” John said quietly.
Sherlock hopped to his feet and rushed to the small ensuite toilet. His legs were shaking, and he just managed to get over the bowl before the retching started. Nothing came up. Maybe if he pushed his fingers down his throat and got it over with, he would get some relief from the miserable churning.

“Sherlock?” John called, coming to the door.

“Get out.” Sherlock flailed an arm to try to shut the door, trying to block John out.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Sherlock wiped a hand over his lips and sat on the toilet seat. He ran his hand through his hair, tugging hard. Trying to keep some semblance of control. “Doctor, don’t you think you’re needed someplace else?”

“Nope. Sherlock, look...”

“If you start spilling out prosaic bullshit like, ‘It’s going to be fine’ I’m going to punch you,” Sherlock hissed.

John was quiet for several minutes, leaning on the doorframe. When he started to speak, it was obvious he was picking his words carefully. “No, that’s not what I was going to say. I was going to tell you that when Mary was ill, when I had my worst days, at least you never once made me feel like I was somehow weak for being in mourning. You didn’t drown me in fucking pity, or feed me a bunch of platitudes.”

Sherlock shook his head. “That’s because I didn’t do anything. I didn’t know what to say.”

“No one knows what to say. So most people fill the discomfort with empty words they think are going to help. You didn’t. I’m not going to tell you this is going to all work out in the end, because I don’t know that. What I am going to tell you, is no matter what happens, I’m not going anywhere.”

“You and me against the rest of the world,” Sherlock mumbled. He unclenched his hand. There were bits of hair between his fingers that he had yanked out.

“That’s right.”

Sherlock stood and ran the tap. He leaned over the sink and splashed some water on his face. Everything was piling up, all the things he had had to endure so far. He wasn’t sure how much more he could take.

“No one expects you to be able to hold up, you know.”

Sherlock propped himself up with his good arm over the sink. He hung his head, silent, water still dripping off his face.

John put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “We’ll get your things packed up from Langdale, move you back home. I’ll let you know when and where they are going to transfer Darin.”

Sherlock leaned into John’s hand. He was unable to form an objection.

“I’ll take care of it,” John reaffirmed.
Chapter Summary

I cannot tell why this heart languishes In silence.
It is for small needs it never asks or knows or remembers.
-Rabindranath Tagore
Stray Birds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The shade opened with a snap as Darin looked out the window of his new room. The grounds of the hospital were still dull in their winter colors, but he could see the buds on the tops of the trees were starting to swell. He usually looked forward to this season, the big hesitation before the burgeoning of spring. It was a time for seed starts and browsing plant catalogs. He would be behind in his own gardening this year. He should ask Mrs Hudson if she would prune the roses.

He turned away from the window with a sigh. He felt the depression pulling at edges, around the tranquilizers. The season of garden planning was also when Sherlock would start to make decisions on his little rooftop apiary. If his hives survived the winter, would he have to supplement them with sugar water before the flowers started producing nectar? Would he split the hives this year and did they have the space for one more hive? This discussion would wander to what they would do when they finally retired. Perhaps a modest house in the country, but with plenty of land to garden and have more bees.

Darin shut his eyes. It wasn’t likely that was going to happen now. He swallowed around the despair. He just had to wait for the cycle to turn- it was likely in a few hours he would be tearing around the place in an energetic fit.

Right.

He opened his eyes again and looked around his new lodgings. It was much better than he had been expecting. His room was large and airy, looking more like a hall of residence than a hospital. He had a bed and a small sitting area, and the walls were painted a soft calming blue. He knew it was an illusion of sorts- he had no doubt his door locked tightly from the outside if they needed it to, and his belongings and packages were searched for anything that he could harm himself with. Not that he felt suicidal, but who knew where his mind would carry him off to next? Anyway, this was an improvement over what his imagination had implied; it had gone wild with movie images of asylums with barred windows and padded walls. Of course, this place was posh and discreet- the best Mycroft could manipulate. It wasn’t like he had been sectioned.

A soft tap on his door broke his reverie. An older man with graying hair cracked the door open and peeked in. “Dr Allard?”

“Yes?”

The man stepped into the room and smiled warmly at Darin. “My name is Jeremy Pritchard. I’ve been assigned as your therapist.” He extended a hand, and Darin crossed the room to shake it.
Darin noticed that he didn’t carry anything with him. No folders that contained his medical records, not even a notebook. He wondered if the man had a hidden microphone, or a small recording device hidden away in his nondescript tweed jacket. Darin wasn’t sure if he was being paranoid, or if it was wisdom. That was the whole rub, really. He didn’t know anymore.

“Everything we discuss will be confidential?” Darin couldn’t help but ask, watching Jeremy’s face closely, looking for tells. He wished he had Sherlock’s skill at reading people.

Jeremy nodded. “Completely. I noticed your request to make sure your spouse and general practitioner wouldn’t have access to my notes. So my reports to your doctors will be general, evaluating your progress and wellbeing so they can determine if your treatments are headed in the right direction.”

Darin sighed. “Can I see the reports you send first?”

Jeremy shrugged. “Of course.”

Darin couldn’t tell if the man was lying, but he could tell he had just mentally ticked a box for paranoid delusions.

“Thank you,” Darin added.

Jeremy smiled and reached into his coat. He handed Darin his business card. “So you can remember my name. I know intake can be draining, and you look a bit wilted, so I’ll leave you to get settled. Our first appointment is tomorrow before lunch, but you can have me paged any time you need.”

Darin frowned. He had thought they would start right away. He wanted this over with. He wanted it to stop.

“Dr Allard? You all right?” Jeremy asked

“Just ‘Darin’, please. And no. No, I’m not.” He felt for a chair behind him and sat down heavily. “I’ve committed myself to the loony bin. How can you ask me if I’m all right? I’m a disaster.”

Jeremy took the other chair. “I’d argue that admitting you need help is a good sign.”

Darin covered his eyes with his hand. It was hopeless. What was the point? He wasn’t even sure if he could trust these people.

“Darin,” Jeremy tried. “What are you thinking?”

Darin dropped his hand into his lap. What choice did he have?

“I’m terrified.”

Jeremy leaned back into his chair. “That’s perfectly understandable. Can you elaborate on that?”

Darin took a heaving breath, and did.

###

Sherlock cradled his violin against his chest. He hammered on the fingerboard, making the notes resonate softly. It was unsatisfactory. His right hand was out of the cast, but his fingers were in splints and still useless to him.

John squinted at his laptop. “There is an email from a woman in Shoreditch who thinks her boss is
smuggling antiquities.”

“No,” Sherlock sighed.

“A man claims his Twitter account was hacked and someone is posting lewd messages…”

“No.”

“This one looks really good, Sherlock. A musician thinks his antique harp was switched with a fake but he can’t prove it.”

Sherlock muted the strings with his fingers. “Oh?”

“He has had it examined by an expert, but he still thinks it was swapped when the orchestra was travelling on a recent tour.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh come on. You’ve been trapped in the house for days. Worrying about him isn’t going to make him better,” John reasoned.

Sherlock snapped the strings. “I’m not worrying.”

John groaned. “Sulking, whatever you are calling it. If you don’t want a case, at least take the dogs out and get some air.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and slumped further into his chair.

###

Darin returned to his room from one of the neverending blood draws to find a cardboard box sitting on his table. He opened it, and it smelled like Baker Street. He shuffled through the contents. There were several books and some unread journals, a pad of drawing paper, colored pencils and a container of his favorite earl grey.

His tablet and mobile had been taken away from him. In his manic phases he tended to search for disturbing things and work himself up. Besides, he didn't want to be inspired to send emails to colleagues. He would come up with some pretty bizarre theories when those moods hit him, and he wanted to still have a good reputation to return to when he was well. If that ever happened.

He flipped through the pages of the books. He had expected that Sherlock would try to slip him messages after a couple days, but so far, he had respected his wish to grant him some time to deal with his rebelling brain. Darin dropped the books on the table with a dull thump. He found nothing secreted within. He didn’t know if he was relieved or disappointed by that.

Darin felt a building restlessness, like an internal flutter. It was the hallmark that his brief pocket of right-mindedness was switching to a manic episode. He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. They kept telling him he had to have patience, that he was doing well, and that some of his medications would take weeks to work.

It was hard to be patient when your life and sanity were unraveling.

###

Darin sat with his face pressed against the cool glass of the window, watching the rain bucket down in sheets. Five more days of his life, wasted in pointless struggle. A part of him wanted to go outside,
and let the storm melt him down and wash him into the drain.

An orderly came in, bearing a paper cup containing his scheduled drugs. She said something that didn’t quite filter through his thoughts, and then her hands pulled at him firmly. Darin realized she was trying to stop him from repetitively banging his forehead into the window. He hadn’t even been aware he was doing it.

“Oh god,” Darin sobbed softly in revelation as he let her guide him to a chair safely away from the glass. “Oh my god. I’m a lunatic. My life is over, everything is finished...”

She clucked at him in comforting tones. “You’re doing just fine, Dr Allard. Just a bad day. This weather isn’t helping anyone’s mood. Take these, I’ll call the staff doctor and let her know you’re having a hard time of it.”

Darin nodded numbly and tipped the offered paper cup of drugs into his mouth and chased them down with water. The orderly smiled at him and gave him the novel he had abandoned on the floor. “There we go. Stay away from that window, mind.”

He nodded, mutely. He really didn’t know what else he could do.

###

John was outside Euston station when his mobile rang.

“Hello?”

“Oh, hello Dr Watson. I do hope I’ve caught you before you’ve left London.”

“Yes you have. What’s happened?”

“I think you should schedule your exam for another day. We’ve sedated Darin, unfortunately. He had worked himself into a state right after breakfast. Refused to take his medication. He was raving about his brother in law using the drugs to cause his condition.”

John stopped walking and moved to an out of the way place on the sidewalk. “I thought he was showing signs of stabilizing?”

“He has been. It’s probably just stress rather than a setback. It’s taxing for the delicate patients to be in hospital and under treatment, no matter how gentle we try to be. We are letting him rest quietly and will re-evaluate his treatment plan.”

“Fine. Thanks for keeping me in the loop.”

“I will do. Good afternoon, John.”

“You too, Samantha.”

John stared at the blank screen of his mobile. He was the only person allowed to see Darin, and that was only because he was his physician. Sherlock used his visits as a way to try to glean more information on Darin’s condition. Now he had to abort his trip, and try to find a easy way to break it to Sherlock.

###

Darin doodled on a pad of artist’s paper while he talked. It helped, sometimes, to keep his hands busy while he confessed his soul to a man he didn’t really know. For the most part, Jeremy sat across
from him, drank his tea and listened. In another setting, they would seem like friends having a chat.
The conversation had lulled, and Jeremy set his cup on the table.

“How about we talk about your husband?”

Darin’s pencil hovered over the paper. He had mentioned Sherlock in passing a few times, but had avoided delving too deep. He had been busy losing his grip on his sanity, and managing his terror between the fits of depression and mania. He hadn’t ask what his diagnosis was- only a few people around him knew the truth. That he had poisoned his own mind twice.

Now that Jeremy was asking, he felt a growing unease. He shifted in his chair and tapped his pencil lead, leaving dots on the paper. “What do you want to know?”

“Well, to start, I’ve been curious on why you asked him not to visit you.”

Darin shrugged and drummed out a random beat on the paper.

“You must miss him.”

That question he could answer. “Yes. I’m trying not to think about it….but yes.”

Jeremy lifted an eyebrow. “You're trying not to think about it? Why is that?”

Darin dropped his eyes. He felt himself automatically locking up as Jeremy probed gently at his tender emotional spots. He didn’t answer the question.

Jeremy picked up his tea and sipped patiently. Finally, he looked over his cup at Darin. “You can contact him at any time, you know. Your isolation is completely self-imposed.”

Darin drew a leaf at the edge of the page. “I’m not ready to see him.”

“Fair enough. You could call him, if you’d like.”

Darin thinned his lips against his teeth.

Jeremy sighed. “You miss him, but you don’t want to see him or talk to him. Someday you're going to go home, Darin. You’re going to have to face him. Or am I missing something? Are you breaking things off?”

“No.” Frustration popped to the surface. “I just...need some time. I thought I was here to rest, not be quizzed on why…” Darin stopped his words and dropped his pencil. He folded his arms over his chest.

“Fine, I get the hint.” Jeremy reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a mobile. He slid it across the table. “If you change your mind, maybe you can start by sending him a text. It’s a new number. We don’t want you to bombarded with calls from the outside world, yet.”

Darin looked the the phone like it was a curled viper. He didn’t pick it up.

Jeremy shrugged, smiled at him and changed course. “So let’s go over your coping strategies again...”

###

John looked up from his film as the door to his flat swung open. Sherlock marched in, his expression
fixed and grim.

“Everything okay?”

Sherlock stood in front of the television and from his pockets pulled out his mobile, house keys and wallet. He arranged them on the coffee table in a neat row. He nodded curtly. “Don’t let me leave the house tonight, John.”

John blinked up at him for a moment, reading the tormented but determined look on his friend’s face.

“Danger night?”

Sherlock grimaced. He all but dragged himself across the room, and dropped in one of John’s chairs. John watched him curl into a tight ball.

“I don’t suppose you want to talk about it?”

John wasn’t surprised when his question was met with silence.

“I’m proud of you, Sherlock. Darin will be, too.”

Sherlock huffed and buried his face into his knees.

###

A text alert woke Sherlock with a start from John’s chair. John snored in his sleep from the sofa. They must have both drifted off watching films and Sherlock hoped John had never been on guard duty in the army.

Sherlock reached over the coffee table for his mobile.

*It’s me. I have a new number. -D*

Sherlock blinked owlishly at the little screen before replying.

*It’s half two. Shouldn’t you be sleeping? -SH*

*I just wanted to say goodnight.*

Sherlock resisted the urge to rub his eyes. Almost a fortnight had passed with no contact, and now Darin was texting him to put him to bed?

*Now you have. Can I call you tomorrow? -SH*

There was a long delay before the next reply came through.

*Just texts please.*

Another pause, and a second message followed.

*As many as you like.*

Sherlock clenched his phone like it was a lifeline. Well, it was an improvement.

*Goodnight, then. Until tomorrow. -SH*

*Yes, until tomorrow.*
We are getting to the comfort, I promise!
“What are you doing here, Mr Holmes?”

Sherlock turned away from the window in the waiting room. Andrew Allard was standing there, grimly considering him. Sherlock had seen pictures of Darin’s late mother and knew his looks favored her. Darin did, however, have his father’s chin and thick hair, although Andrew’s had turned to silver.

“I do hope you weren’t trying to break in. Darin’s wishes have been clear,” Andrew told him in a bland tone. Andrew avoided Sherlock as much as possible, and they had probably only spoken three times. The last had been at Natalie’s wedding, where they had to share a table.

“Which makes me wonder why you are here?” Sherlock drawled. “Darin still isn’t receiving visitors, as you so adroitly observed.” He didn’t really have the energy to play games with Andrew today.

“You are ill-informed. An exception was made for his family,” Andrew told him. “We had matters to discuss.”

Sherlock didn’t rise to the offense. Andrew had never considered Sherlock Darin’s family, so the barb wasn’t new or particularly painful. The ache was because Darin had apparently acquiesced to his father’s request to see him, whilst Sherlock was still exiled to the outer offices of the ward.

“What would be?” Sherlock asked.

“His recovery, Mr Holmes. I am of course, concerned about his welfare,” Andrew answered.

“I am supervising his care. Since you asked, I am here for a meeting with his physicians. If you have any concerns, you can bring them to me,” Sherlock managed to keep the edge out of his voice.

“Why on Earth would I do that?” Andrew snapped. “My son can still speak for himself, and if he couldn’t, I wouldn’t accept your word for it.”

Sherlock sprung up from his seat, clenching his hands. “You would have to, since I am his legal-”

Andrew waved Sherlock off. “As if that matters.”

With superb timing, John walked into the waiting room carrying a clipboard.

“It matters, if you like it or not,” Sherlock retorted, raising his voice.

John quickly stepped in. “This is going to stop right now,” he said. “Mr Allard, your visit is over. Sherlock, the doctor is waiting for us.”

Andrew folded his arms over his chest.


“Oh, and you have done such a fine job up to this point. Your brother may be able to hide the truth, Mr Holmes, but don’t think I don’t know that you are the one responsible for his condition,” Andrew threw back.

“Enough!” John ordered, in his best Captain’s voice. “Not here. Sherlock, come with me.”
Sherlock glared at Andrew, but the barb had found its mark. He turned and followed John down the hall without looking back.

“It’s not true,” John assured him, seeing Sherlock’s pinched face. “Darin knew exactly what he was getting into, and he would do it again.”

“He didn’t know this was going to happen, that his life would become a living hell...” Sherlock stopped in his tracks and stared at the floor, clenching and unclenching his fists.

John put a hand on Sherlock’s arm. “Would you have done the same if you had been in Darin’s position?”

Sherlock didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Well then. Come on, we have an appointment.”

###

Darin lay on the sofa, staring up at the popcorn textured ceiling. Jeremy folded the corners of the pages on the steno pad in his lap, waiting for Darin to answer his question. The minutes stretched on.

“Darin, we don’t have to do this today. The thing is, you’re stabilizing. Your doctors think it’s fine for you to convalesce at home soon. You’re here voluntarily, but you can’t stay forever.”

“I know,” Darin whispered.

Jeremy leaned forward in his seat. “Is the texting still going well?”

“I suppose. We stick to trivial things. I’m sure John has told him not to upset me,” Darin took his glasses off and set them on his chest. He folded an arm over his eyes.

“If John has done so, he didn’t tell me about it,” Jeremy touched Darin’s arm. “How do you feel, communicating with Sherlock again?”

“I jump for my phone every time a new message comes through.”

“So you like hearing from him?”


Jeremy squeezed Darin’s arm. More minutes rolled by.

Darin dropped his arm and pushed himself up to sitting. He slid his glasses on and looked up at the clock. “Anyway, our appointment is almost over.”

Jeremy cocked his head. “Darin, do you need more time? If you do, you can have it.”

Darin studied him through haunted eyes. He swallowed, and nodded. “Yes, all right.” A deep breath. “I’m ready to talk.”

Jeremy picked up the phone to tell the nurse to clear his schedule.

####

*Visiting hours are between 1-5 pm tomorrow.*
Sherlock dropped his mobile. It skittered across the linoleum floor of Lestrade’s office.

Greg leaned down and picked it up. “Everything all right, mate?”

“Of course,” Sherlock took the phone back from Lestrade. “I’m right handed, and my left still isn’t as agile.”

_They would like you to make an appointment, though._
_If you’re not busy. It’s a long train ride._

“Send someone over to the butcher shop,” Sherlock told Lestrade. “Have them look at the ground lamb. If it’s imported, you have found your killer.”

Lestrade looked confused. “The lamb?”

_I’ll be there at 1 pm. -SH_

Sherlock looked up from his phone and groaned. “Do I have to spell it out? What am I saying? Of course I do...”

###

Sherlock’s feet crunched on the gravel as he walked through the garden. It was cold, and the garden was bleak and dreary, the plants still waiting for spring to emerge. He could see the back of Darin’s head on the bench at the end of the path.

Darin looked up at him when he approached, and Sherlock was careful not to start at the sight. His skin was sallow, and he had lost weight. Darin looked exactly what he was: a person struggling in the throes of a long illness.

Sherlock sat on the bench and handed Darin the insulated travel mug he was carrying.

“You brought me coffee?” Darin looked up at him.

“They said you can have it.”

Darin opened the lid and breathed it in. “It’s heavenly. Thank you.”

Darin smiled and Sherlock wanted to weep. He looked tired, but the detachment from the serum had fled. He was himself again. Except his pupils were dilated and...

“I thought they took you off the alprazolam?” Sherlock asked.

“Mostly. Now it’s only as needed. I think they overdid it today.”

“Special occasion,” Sherlock muttered, his elation short lived. Darin had to be drugged to near sleeping to bear to be with him.

“Just today,” Darin replied, unaware of Sherlock’s turmoil. “Thank you for the other things you sent. My clothes, books and the art supplies. You didn’t have to buy me a new scarf,” Darin touched the soft light blue wool at his neck.

“Your other one had a hole,” Sherlock fibbed.

“Someday, I’m going to post to your blog how much you like to go to the shops. Your reputation will be ruined,” Darin smiled.
It was a forced smile, a bad attempt at a joke. Darin shifted his legs restlessly. Something was horribly wrong. Sherlock had been reminded not to say anything to upset him, and so he pretended he didn’t notice and resisted the urge to ask him.

“How is your physio going?” Darin finally asked.

“It’s fine. The splints came off my fingers Monday. I just need to keep the middle one taped up another week.” Sherlock pulled off a black mitten to show Darin his healing fingers.

“Any idea when you can play again?”

Sherlock shook his head. “I can hold a bow, but playing is a couple more weeks in the future. My shoulder isn’t flexible enough yet.”

“That’s really good,” Darin smiled and Sherlock was again taken on how sincerity touched his eyes.

“Speaking of progress, you seem to be well,” Sherlock returned his smile.

Then Darin’s smile faded. “The new drug regimen seems to be helping. I haven’t had a psychotic episode in days.”

“From what your doctors tell me, you were only psychotic the first few hours after injection,” Sherlock corrected, trying to be reassuring.

“Semantics.” Darin bowed and drank his coffee.

Sherlock felt he was treading on thin ice, so he backed off. “Mrs Hudson sends her regards, as do Roger and several of your colleagues. Greg Lestrade also wishes for a speedy recovery.”

“What did you have to tell them?” Darin asked carefully.

“The same thing I told your sister and father. You’re recovering from a vehicular accident whilst driving in Wales. You have associated head trauma. It’s causing you stress, so you cannot receive visitors until your brain heals sufficiently,” Sherlock told him. “You are on medical leave of absence from the university until you feel fit to resume your teaching and research.”

“It seems a little like a BBC drama, but I suppose it is more believable than the truth.”

Sherlock heard the approaching footfalls on the gravel. It was one of the orderlies making a slow progression to their bench. “They told me I only had fifteen minutes to see you today.”

“You can come again. Not tomorrow. I’m scheduled in the afternoon for another EEG,” Darin swallowed. “If you would like that.”

Sherlock pursed his lips. “Of course. Perhaps without the tranquilizers. You’re a bit slowed.”

Darin smiled again. “Go on, before they decide you’re a resident, too.”

Sherlock leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to Darin’s winter-cooled cheek. He didn’t pull away from him, but his eyes were sad. “I’ll return at the next opportunity.”

###

Darin kicked his legs back and forth, letting them dangle over the exam table. John read the charts on his clipboard.
“Looks like you have turned a corner this week. You had a bout of depression three days ago for a few hours, but that’s it. How’s the tiredness?”

Darin shrugged. “It hasn’t changed. If I don’t have a lie down in the afternoon, I get bad headaches.”

John wrote something on the chart. “Sleeping nine hours or so a night still?”

“Yes. It seems like all I do is sleep.”

John set the clipboard to the side and parted Darin’s gown in the front so he could feel along the glands in his neck.

“Hmm. Well, unfortunately, some of the drugs are known for certain side effects, and tiredness could be one of them. Or it’s from your altered brain chemistry from the serum and the antidote. We just don’t know. There is still a chance your brain is healing and it will fade over time. Have you had a dry mouth? Any trouble with your libido?”

Darin blinked. “No to the first and…I haven’t exactly been on the pull in the asylum, John.”

John reached for a blood pressure cuff and slipped it over Darin’s arm. “I suppose not. If you’re having decreased drive to the point it bothers you, or erectile dysfunction, let me know. It’s common.”

Darin blushed a bit. “Bloody fantastic.”

“I did warn you. This is what happens when your mate is your doctor. You have to disclose personal things you wouldn’t do just over a pint.” John reminded him. “Wait until I have you turn your head and cough.”

Darin rolled his eyes and then sat still, letting John pump up the cuff and listen to his pulse.

John nodded and pulled his stethoscope out of his ears. “Your EEG looked good the other day, and everything else seems to be fine. We’ll need to do blood draws to check your liver every six months and I’d like to see you start exercising again and gain some weight back. Otherwise, you can certainly go home when you’re ready.”

Darin looked toward his feet. “I don’t want to be a burden for you or Sherlock.”

John snorted. “Sherlock is the pain in the arse. You won’t be. Jeremy is still going to see you twice a week for counseling?”

Darin nodded.

“Good idea. Stick with it,” John tapped his clipboard. “That’s it for today, you can get dressed. Sherlock is coming by later, isn’t he?”

Darin slid off the table. “Yes.”

John flashed him a smile. “Good. He missed you.”

Darin nodded, using the excuse of putting his trousers back on to turn his back and hide his expression.

###

Sherlock tried to settle the butterflies fluttering in his stomach as he walked down the hall of the
ward. He focused on the room numbers, but he already noted the opened door that was likely to be Darin’s room. He paused and looked at his watch. He was two minutes late. That should be good, right? Too early might catch him unprepared, exactly on time seemed too desperate, but too late was annoying.

*Stop it,* Sherlock scolded himself. He walked the last steps to Darin’s room and peered in the door.

Darin looked up. He was fidgeting with a tea service on a small table. He smiled, but it was more of a nervous gesture than from the pleasure of seeing him. “Hi Sherlock. Come in.”

Sherlock entered the small room. “I see my brother didn’t hide you away in some dreary cell, at least.” The room was spartan, but had a lot of natural light. Several flower arrangements and a basket of fruit sat on the windowsill.

“It’s not bad, considering. Can I take those?” Darin asked.

Sherlock had forgotten about the cellophane-wrapped bundle he was holding. He handed it over to Darin. “Oh.”

Darin quirked an eyebrow at him, amusement wiping away the anxiety for a heartbeat. Sherlock waited as he examined the flowers. *Helleborus.* Nice choice. Did you know that the Black Hellebore was used to treat insanity?”

Sherlock blinked. “I didn’t mean to imply…”

Darin shook his head. “No, no. These are *Helleborus orientalis*- the Lenten rose. Sorry. You know how I get.” Darin set the flowers down on the table. “Your coat?”

Sherlock unfurled his scarf and took off his long woolen coat. Darin was nervous. Sherlock also felt jumpy, and the simple acts of removing his outwear and Darin helping him hang them up were awkward and unsettled.

“You look...good,” Sherlock sputtered. Darin had obviously taken extra care dressing for his visit. He wore a thin yellow jumper over a blue-checked shirt, was newly shaved, and his mass of dark hair was carefully shaped.

“You do, too.”

Sherlock looked down at his newest, freshly pressed black Spencer Hart suit. He shrugged. “The standard uniform, I suppose.”

“You shined your shoes.” Darin laughed and covered his lips, as if the sound wasn’t allowed. “God, look at us. We’re acting like two lads on our first date.”

Sherlock reached out a hand, but Darin was already in motion. They twined fingers as Darin drew closer, tilting his head up towards him. Sherlock let out a carefully held breath before leaning into the kiss, a soft, chaste glide of lips.

“Hello,” Sherlock started again.

“Hello.”

Sherlock watched a riot of emotions cross Darin’s eyes. Sorrow seemed to win out as Darin ducked his head, squeezed his fingers and pulled away.
“Let me find some water for the flowers. Would you like some tea?”

Sherlock looked over at the set table and the tea tray. “That seems out of place at a hospital.”

“Special occasion. Sit.” Darin fussed with the flowers, finding a drinking glass to put them in for the time being. Sherlock saw through it, and knew he was taking the time to arrange his feelings and not the stems. So he unbuttoned his jacket and sat, pouring tea from the silver pot into their cups.

“John was here this morning.” Sherlock started as Darin finally sat down. Sherlock knew he was atrocious with small talk. The room grew tense again.

Darin fiddled with the milk, fixing his cup. “Yes, he was. Everything is well. The EEG was unchanged from last time. There was always a concern that the seizures would return, but that seems not to be a problem.”

“Good. The rest of your treatment?” Sherlock asked.

“As well as to be expected. Um.” Darin set the teaspoon down on the table. It made a soft clink. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I suppose we should discuss something.”

Sherlock’s throat tried to close up around the sip of tea. He forced it down, made himself remain calm. “Of course.”

“I’m being encouraged to discharge myself soon. The mood swings are lessening and John and the other doctors think the rest of my recovery is only a matter of time. They don’t want me to return to a full workload for a few more weeks, but there is no reason I need to take up a bed here.”

“That’s excellent news.” Sherlock cocked his head. Darin’s mouth was a grim line, his dark brown eyes serious.

“Yes. My father was here a few days ago.”

Sherlock nodded. He was missing something, a critical detail. He hated it when he couldn’t sort the bits together quickly enough.

“He said that if I wanted to, I could convalesce back at his. He’s on sabbatical, so he has the the time if you and John would rather…” Darin trailed off and took three gulps of his tea.

Sherlock stared. “You don’t want to come home? Is that it?”

Darin shook his head. “I don’t want to impose. I’m not fully recovered. I’m not always going to have good days.”

Anger roiled through Sherlock. “Impose? It’s your home! It’s our home!” He slapped the table with his palm and the cups and saucers jumped.

Darin flinched. “It’s an option. That’s all,” he said meekly.

“No, it’s your bloody homophobic father being an arsehole,” Sherlock growled, trying to calm himself and not startle Darin further.

Darin straightened his shoulders stubbornly. “No, I think he’s really concerned about my welfare.”

“You refuse to see it! It’s as clear as the nose on your face!” Sherlock leaned forward intently. “He is poisoning you against me. If you want to stay with him, do so, but at least decide with your eyes open!”
“I didn’t say I wanted to,” Darin snapped back.

Sherlock leaned back into his chair. “You want to come home?”

Darin studied Sherlock for a long time before nodding and adding quietly, “If you still want me.”

Sherlock’s heart wrenched, and his lower lip trembled before he bit it. He felt the tears well up in his eyes, and blinked them back.

Darin looked horrified.

Sherlock cleared his throat. Christ, when the hell did everything go tits up?

Sherlock quickly realized his mistake as Darin pasted on a brittle smile at the landing of their flat. The dogs circled and hopped excitedly, overjoyed at the return of their master. John and Darin’s colleague, Roger, made trips up and down the steps unloading the car. Mrs Hudson and Natalie chatted in the kitchen whilst setting out slices of cake.

Darin kept up a polite facade, but his too thin shoulders sagged under his blazer. It was too much noise and attention for him, and Sherlock cursed himself. The process of being discharged had been long and tedious. Even though he had dozed in the leather seat of the car Mycroft had provided, Darin looked like he would rather crawl into bed than be welcomed home by his friends and family.

Sherlock gracefully slipped around Roger, who was carrying in a vase of flowers. He shooed the dogs away from Darin and grasped his elbow. “Why don’t you sit?”

Darin tugged away. “I’m not an invalid,” he muttered.

“Oh course not,” Sherlock huffed. He let him be, not willing to risk making things worse.

###

That evening, Sherlock let Darin acclimatize to his home at his own speed. Wary of making any more missteps, Sherlock mostly kept out of his way, but he didn’t go far, just in case. Darin did his laundry, washing already clean clothing to eradicate the hospital smell of industrial detergent. He clucked and checked the contents of the kitchen and made a shopping list, even though Mrs Hudson had seen that they had some groceries in.

They didn’t say much over a dinner of some dish someone had brought them. Sherlock hardly tasted it. Afterwards, Darin continued roaming the flat working on small chores, sometimes stopping to look around, as if he was taking a mental inventory of what had changed over the last couple months. He smiled once as Sherlock lifted his violin under his chin and clumsily attempted to draw music out of it, with two of the fingers of his bowing hand still taped together.

Darin gradually lost steam and started to droop while sorting through a backlog of mail.

“Why don’t you turn in?” Sherlock finally suggested.

Darin looked like he was going to snap at him, but finally just sighed. “Yes, you’re right.” He stood and cracked his back. “Good night.” He didn’t offer Sherlock his customary kiss before going to bed.

In the small hours, Sherlock set his e-reader aside and went through his nightly routine. When he opened the bedroom door, he saw that Darin had curled tightly onto himself on the very edge of the mattress, as if he was trying to take up the smallest amount of space possible. Sherlock quietly crawled into his side of the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Like a door warped out of alignment with its frame, everything seemed out of true and Sherlock had no idea what to do about it.

###

The next couple of days saw little improvement as Darin struggled to find a new routine. He sat in his office and would sullenly go through his email. He slept at random intervals through the day and
found it hard to keep track of his medication timetable.

“If I have to sit around the house for two more weeks, I’m going to throw myself off a bridge,” Sherlock heard him complain to John.

“You’re getting as bad as him,” John chuckled pointing at Sherlock. “We need to get you on a schedule before we can even think of letting you get back to work.”

“You could set alarms on your phone when you need to take the next dose,” Sherlock suggested.

“Well gee, I never would have thought of that,” Darin snipped sarcastically.

Sherlock ignored the barb, but John flinched on his behalf.

John frowned. “I’ll set everything out for you on the counter and see if that helps. You’re keeping your appointments with Jeremy, right?”

Darin sighed. “Yes.”

“Good.” John glanced at Sherlock, and he shrugged back. He didn’t have any answers.

###

Sherlock looked up from his laptop as John entered the flat.

“Are we having dinner together tonight?” John asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, stupid question. Food just magically appears as far as you’re concerned. Where’s Darin?”

“I think he’s in the shower. He was in bed all day.”

John took off his coat. “Depressive mood?”

“Likely.” Sherlock resumed tapping on his keyboard.

“What do you mean, ‘likely’? Didn’t you talk to him?”

“What was there to question? It was obvious, and we knew there was a high likelihood that he would experience breakthrough episodes from time to time. There is nothing to do but let it take its course.”

John sat down in Darin’s chair across from Sherlock. “So, you just left him to it? All day alone, in bed.”

Sherlock groaned. “I can’t somehow make it go away, John. As much as I am loath to admit it, not everything is in my power to fix.”

John scrubbed his hand over his face. “Yeah, true. Just next time, why don’t you go ask him if there is anything he needs, or if he wants to talk about it? Just so he knows he’s not trapped in his room by himself.”

Sherlock scowled. “He knows to ask.”

John graced Sherlock with one of his comforting doctor smiles. “I know it’s not easy dealing with
sick family. I see it every day. I know you get pissed off when I bring it up, but maybe a support group or something?"

Sherlock snorted. “Can you imagine me in a support group?”

John winced. “Yeah, I can. Scratch that suggestion. I’m going to send you some things to read, about living with a loved one with a mental illness. Maybe it will help.”

Sherlock gave John a long look, and went back to typing.

###

Jeremy leaned forward in his seat. “Are you telling me things at home are not going well?”

“I thought things would be different than they are. No...” Darin paused. “...I thought things would be the same. My life would return to normal, more or less. I guess it was naive of me to believe so.”

“I wouldn’t call it naive, but your expectations were a bit high. It hasn’t been two weeks since you’ve been home from hospital. You need more time,” Jeremy tried to reassure him.

“More time. I’m so tired of hearing that!” Darin sprung from his chair and paced the room. “I just want things to be the way they were. I want to work. I don’t want to be saddled with medical appointments, and pills and fits of mood. People treating me like I’m sick all the time!”

Jeremy lifted his eyebrows. “You’re convalescing. You are a recovering person, Darin.”

“It’s just so damn frustrating. I know I’m being an arse to John and Sherlock. I just get so irritated. I want it to be over, but I don’t even see an endpoint in sight. What if I’m never normal again?” Darin waved a dismissive hand. “I know it won’t be completely normal again, but what if whatever I am isn’t enough?”

“Sometimes, after bad things happen, you have to pick up the pieces and make something new. It won’t be the same as before, but it doesn’t mean it’s going to be bad. Don’t poison the future with the past, Darin.”

Darin threw his hands in the air and barely repressed screaming.

###

The 9mm cracked and jumped in Darin’s hand. He smelled gunpowder and a bead of sweat ran between his shoulder blades. Sherlock was facing him, a perfect, round hole in the center of his forehead.

Darin stopped breathing, and his shaking thighs gave way and he tumbled from the hay rack onto the stable floor. One of the gang members was on him, and Darin was able to land a punch to his face. He scrambled around, the straw tangling in his legs, and he screamed...

###

“Darin, Darin it’s me,” Sherlock called out from the far corner of their bedroom. He held his hand to his nose and blinked back tears from his stinging eyes. Sherlock could just make out in the darkness that Darin was thrashing on the floor tangled up in the duvet.

Sherlock went to his side of the bed and turned on the light. “Darin!” This time it had the desired result, and Darin stopped writhing.
Darin watched him cautiously with glassy eyes as Sherlock wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He didn’t see red. He pressed the bridge and it was tender, but nothing serious.

They both jumped as the door at the landing banged open with a rattle of keys. “Sherlock?” John called out.

“It’s fine,” Sherlock reached for a dressing gown behind the bedroom door. Keeping one eye on Darin, Sherlock looked down the hall. John was standing in the kitchen in his pants and holding his handgun.

“What the hell, Sherlock. It sounded like someone was going to come straight through the ceiling!”

“Darin had a night terror. He’s still disoriented. If you’d please resist shooting someone, it would be appreciated.” Sherlock ducked back in the room. “Darin?”

Darin stared at Sherlock intently. “Yeah, I’m...I hit you?”

John looked around Sherlock’s shoulder, taking in Darin sitting on the floor against the side of the bed, in a pile of sheets.

“I’m unharmed,” Sherlock reassured him.

John eased past Sherlock and kneeled on the floor in front of Darin. “Do you know where you are?”

Darin nodded. He shivered and pulled the duvet around himself.

“Is it okay if I take a look at you?” John slowly reached out to Darin, who flinched back violently. A hand flashed out of the covers and made the ‘don’t touch’ sign Sherlock sometimes used.

“John,” Sherlock warned.

“I know what it means. Darin, I won’t come any closer. Did you hurt yourself when you fell?”

Darin shook his head. “It was...so real.” Darin looked up at Sherlock, and his lower lip started to tremble.

“I know, trust me, I know. I’m going to get you an alprazolam. I’ll be right back,” John stood slowly, and Sherlock followed him out the door into the kitchen.

“It wasn’t unexpected that he’d have some sort of post traumatic stress symptoms crop up,” Sherlock said quietly.

John nodded. “Yeah, and he has enough to deal with.” He opened the drawer where Darin kept his medications. Sherlock rolled his eyes when John dumped the contents of the bottle in his hand and quickly counted the pills.

“I’m not stealing his tranquilizers,” Sherlock sighed.

“You know I’m checking, though.” John handed one of the tablets to Sherlock. “Don’t stand out here with me. I’ll make tea and then see myself out. Wake me up if he gets worse.”

Sherlock swallowed. “John, I don’t know…”

John thinned his lips. “You do know what to do. Now go in there. Don’t forget to give him that pill.”

Sherlock shuffled into the bedroom. Darin hadn’t moved from the floor, and had cocooned himself
tighter in the duvet, pulling it over his head. Only his feet and calves stuck out.

Sherlock sat on the floor next to him, back resting against the bed. “John wants you to take this. Chew it.”

Darin stuck a shaking hand out of the fabric nest. Sherlock dropped the tablet in his palm without touching him.

Sherlock cleared his throat. There were so many choice ways to muck this up. He finally settled on, “Do you want to get off the floor?”

“I’m fine here,” he replied through the folds of cotton.

They both sat, letting the minutes silently roll by while Darin’s tranquilizer kicked in. John returned and set two mugs of tea on the bedside table, and let himself out quietly.

“Tea?” Sherlock tried.

“No now.”

Sherlock rolled his head back on the bed. “Would it be unwise to ask you what the dream was about?”


“You didn’t, though. I’m right here,” Sherlock said softly.

“Which relieves me, but I still killed someone.”

“Do you regret it?” Sherlock asked curiously.

“No. Yes. I mean, I wish I hadn’t had to.” Darin rustled around inside his hiding place. “I’m a scientist. I never thought I’d have to kill anyone.”

“If your actions feel justified given the circumstances, this will pass quickly. Giorgos Caras was a bad man. You only shot him because he was threatening me.”

Darin pulled the duvet down away from his face. “You’ve killed people, before.”

Sherlock looked over at him. “Yes.”

“When you were away. Before you met me.”

Sherlock nodded and reached over for the two mugs of tea. He handed one to Darin, who accepted it without complaint. “Two men.”

“Did you have nightmares, too?”

Sherlock drank the tea. As a rule, he didn’t talk about the two years he spent dismantling Moriarty’s crime ring. Finally he answered. “Not the first man. It was self defense. I had no other option left to me. The second man had to be eliminated. Whilst I have no remorse for what I did, I am not an assassin. There were...repercussions.”

“Dreams?” Darin asked quietly.
“Yes. Plus my usual self-medication. Tracking the network was exciting, but demanding. That job especially.”

Darin reached over and tentatively brushed his fingers over a curl that had fallen in the center of Sherlock’s forehead. “I’m just uncomfortable with how easy it was for me to decide to end another’s life. What right did I have?”

Sherlock leaned so his shoulder touched Darin’s. “I understand.”

Darin dropped his hand but didn’t pull away from Sherlock’s shoulder. “Will you tell me what happened? With those men you killed?”

Sherlock thought on it. “Will that help you?”

“I think so, hearing how you decided it was right to pull the trigger.”

Sherlock was always struck by how much credit Darin gave him for being a good person. Well. It had been years ago, and maybe it was time to tell the story to someone other than Mycroft and the SIS. “The first man was working for a human trafficking scheme in Prague…”

###

The next morning John went up to the flat. Everything was still except for Gladstone and Sophie, who met him at the door, eager for him (or just about anyone, really) to fill their bowls with kibble. John ignored them, went through the kitchen and looked down the hallway into Sherlock and Darin’s bedroom. The door was still open, and they had fallen asleep sitting on the floor. Darin had ceded some of the duvet he had been cowering under to Sherlock.

John smiled, and quietly fed the dogs.
Darin sat with his head tipped back, staring at the textured ceiling of Jeremy’s London office. This session was slowly building a throbbing headache behind his eyes.

“To me, it sounds like Sherlock handled your night terror pretty well.”

“He did. He really did.” Darin closed his eyes.

“Do you think it helped move you two in the right direction?”

“Things seemed more normal the next day. It was nice. Which is kind of silly, after I woke up screaming.”

“No, it’s not silly. You met a challenge together. It was reaffirming.”

Darin groaned. “Yeah, but it didn’t last. It’s back to where we were last week. Now what do I do? Have a few more nightmares?”

“You could come to terms with what has really been bothering you. Admit why you’ve been keeping him at arm’s length. He’s shown he can comfort you. Are you letting him try?”

Darin ground his teeth. “I’m not a child and he’s not my nurse.”

“No, he’s your husband and he loves you.”

Darin felt a roil of frustration bubbling up, and he tried to force himself to be calm.

Jeremy tapped his pen on his clipboard. “One way or another, these feelings are going to come out, Darin. You keep pushing them down; I can see you doing it right now. If you work it out in session, it’s going to be better than if you just explode on him.”

Darin clenched his hands into fists. “I don’t know what you want from me.” The muscles in his jaws were aching.

“I want you to be honest with yourself.”

“All right!” Darin shouted, shooting upright in his chair. “He took off on his own, like a fucking idiot, with no backup, because his arse of a brother dangled a carrot in front of him. We could have both died. Now I’m broken, probably an emotional cripple, and I don’t think he regrets rushing into danger one lick!”

Darin stopped, and realized he had been yelling. Jeremy sat waiting calmly through his outburst. Darin took a deep, cleansing breath and let it out slowly. It wasn’t helping.

“I know who I married. It’s not fair for me to feel like this.”

Jeremy shook his head. “Fairness doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Being angry won’t help, either. He won’t stop being a detective.”

Jeremy lifted his eyebrows. “Is that what you want?”

“No! I’d never ask him to do that!” Darin pounded the arm of his chair in frustration. “I don’t even
want an apology. I don’t know what I want. I’m just so…”

“Angry.” Jeremy nodded. “You’re doing really well, Darin.”

“Oh yeah, terrific. I’m bloody pissed off and don’t know what to do about it.”

Jeremy shrugged. “You could start by telling Sherlock what you just told me.”

Darin snorted. “He’ll think I’m barmy. If it doesn’t make any sense to me, it won’t to him.”

“Fine. You can distance yourself from him until the resentment festers into something more serious.”

“That is not fair!” Darin yelled again.

“Like I said before, fairness doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

###

Darin trudged up the steps to Sherlock’s office. It was late, but Sherlock was still dressed and staring at case notes he had pinned up on the wall. He had left his glasses on the nightstand so he couldn’t see what Sherlock was working on; the details of the text and photos faded into a soft blur.

Darin plopped down on the loveseat and pulled his blue dressing gown around him. He rubbed the striped silk with his fingertips. He hadn’t owned a dressing gown before Sherlock had given him one of his years before, when he had started to stay nights at Baker Street. The old house could be drafty. Whilst Darin had a couple others now, this one was still his favorite.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Sherlock said, not taking his eyes off his notes.

“No.”

Sherlock took a red pen from out of his pocket and wrote something on one of the papers. He considered it for another moment before turning to look at Darin.

“Are you in the middle of something?” Darin asked, tiredly.

“It can hold. You may as well tell me what you came up here to say.”

“Ugh. Stop deducing at me.”

Sherlock scowled. “I can’t turn it off and on like a tap. Besides, anyone with eyes can tell something is bothering you. You’ve been tetchy since you came back from your therapy session this morning. So out with it.”

Darin swallowed. “Well. This may not be nice to hear. It seems that I’ve been harboring…” He trailed off, losing his courage.

Sherlock clicked his tongue in impatience.

Darin shot him a dirty look. “This isn’t easy, damn it.”

“Sherlock!” Darin snapped, temper flaring. It helped him get the next bit out. “Fine. I apparently blame you. For this.” He tapped his head with a finger.
Sherlock’s expression didn’t change. “Yes…”

“‘Yes?’” Darin rubbed his face. “Sherlock, don’t push my buttons right now.”

“I’m not trying to. Yes- it’s obvious you have been angry. Was that your revelation?”

Darin frowned. “How did you know, when I didn’t even realize it myself until today?”

“The clue was when you refused to see me in hospital for days on end. Now that you’ve been home, you have been grumpy, or trying your very best to keep to yourself. While feelings are not my forte, I did get the hint.”

Darin covered his face and made a low groan. “So I’m a passive aggressive arsehole.”

“You didn’t mean to be.”

“Asking you to stay away when I was at hospital wasn’t meant as a punishment. I was angry, I suppose, but that wasn’t everything I was feeling. I just needed some time to pull together. I didn’t have the energy for our relationship and what you may have been dealing with through all of this. I know that was selfish, but I couldn’t even handle what was going on with myself.”

Sherlock shifted his shoulders in something like a shrug. Darin squinted at him, trying to pick out the subtle changes in his expression.

“I know you didn’t intend for me to get hurt. It was my own choice to go find you. Yet, I’m still angry and it doesn’t make sense.”

“Emotions are usually not logical.” Sherlock pulled out his pen and turned to write something else on his wall. “You are a man of science. You want a discrete answer, but you are trying to solve a formula when there is no solution.”

Darin growled softly. “So...I’m just going to be unreasonably mad forever?”

Sherlock dropped his pen back in his pocket and walked over to the loveseat. He looked down at Darin and his expression softened. “I am sorry. For whatever my apology is worth to you.”

Darin swallowed. It didn’t magically help, but the acknowledgment didn’t hurt, either.

“Come here.” Darin moved over and patted the cushion. Sherlock sunk down next to him. Darin reached over and put his hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck, rubbed the taut muscles with his thumb. Relief washed over Sherlock’s face. Darin tried to remember when he had last been the one to initiate more than casual touch.

“You do know I don’t expect you to change who you are just because you scare the hell out of me sometimes, right?” Darin asked him, quietly.

Sherlock nodded, and ducked his head against Darin’s shoulder.

“I’ll work on it,” Darin promised, and kissed the top of Sherlock’s head. They sat like that together, until Sherlock started to bounce his knee and get impatient to get back to his work.

###

“He’s not very good, is he?” Sherlock said, squinting at the target.

“He’s learning,” John said noncommittally. He wiped a smudge off the bulletproof glass that
separated the shooters in the SIS pistol range from the observation area.

Sherlock winced as Darin’s next shot went wide, clipping the edge of the target. “His nightmare wasn’t a farfetched fantasy. It’s a miracle he didn’t blow my head off in the barn.”

“It was a good shot, but he took it at less than 5 meters. That target is at 15.”

Darin steadied himself and lifted Sherlock’s Glock.

“Why are we doing this?” Sherlock sighed.

John rolled his eyes. “Because it’s not acceptable he lives in a house with two handguns and has no basic safety training. It’s also therapeutic- it’s helping him work through what happened that day. I think it’s giving him a sense of control.”

Darin’s next shot went wide again. Sherlock snorted, “Control?”

“Or something,” John amended. He reached for a microphone that communicated to the speaker in Darin’s headset. “Make sure you’re not reflexively closing your eyes when you fire.”

Darin nodded and his next shot pierced the paper close to the center.

“There we go,” John smiled at Sherlock. “He’s picking it up.”

Sherlock stared at Darin intently as he reloaded. “It is sexy as hell.”

John blinked.

“What?” Sherlock snapped. “You don’t think so?”

John grinned. “Mate, I wouldn’t know.”

“It’s simple aesthetics, John.”

John laughed. “Whatever you say. I’ll take this as fair warning to watch a film with the volume turned up tonight.”

Sherlock smirked. “I think you’ll be safe from trauma.”

###

Sherlock stood quietly and watched Darin dig around in one of the raised beds on the rooftop. He was late with his spring plantings and had thrown himself into the task while he was still off work. He always seemed happiest elbow-deep in clean soil, his fair skin starting to bronze over his cheeks, his hair a riot, and his face a picture of contentment. It would be a good snapshot in his memory to take with him over the next couple days.

Darin finally felt his presence and looked up from his work. He offered Sherlock a sympathetic smile. “You’re off, then?”

“Yes.”

Darin stood up and pulled off his work gloves. “Are you sure you don’t want me to change my schedule and go with you?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No. I know you’re anxious to start back at the lab, and I won’t keep you
“Yes. They think they might have an idea or two for perfecting the antidote, and I want to take a look. Tuesday, I’m back in the lab on a short schedule.” Darin’s smile was radiant as he considered his return.

“Make sure Roger knows the symptoms for manic outbreaks,” Sherlock reminded him. He hated to damper his good cheer, but he didn’t want to see him sent packing if there was a lab accident due the side effects of his ‘injury’.

Darin’s laugh was a bit unexpected. “I told him if I started to act like a mad scientist with a streak of megalomania, it was time for him to send me home. He said I sounded like a comic book character. Man gets into an accident, turns into a evil super-genius and schemes to poison the water supply of London,” Darin snickered. “I suppose I could get some of the leather and spandex out from my clubbing days to play the part? Anyway, I assured him I was just likely to do something dull like distractedly miscalculate a reaction and cause an evacuation.”

Sherlock grinned in return. “I’m certain it will be fine. Your manic breakthroughs are rare, albeit entertaining.”

“I do my best to make my handicap amusing,” Darin’s smile faded. An uneasy silence stretched between them. Things were better, but far from ideal. They were still dancing around each other as Darin found his way through his recovery.

“Anyway, please offer my sympathy to Mr Fall’s family,” Darin finally said. “It’s good of you to escort his remains back home, Sherlock.”

Sherlock grunted softly in reply. The Langdale researchers had decided they no longer needed Orion’s body and by necessity, he had been cremated that week. Sherlock, and a double-oh agent who worked with Orion during several missions, would be his honor guard back to Washington DC. Sherlock felt like he owed the man that much.

“We’ll be flying out immediately after the funeral. I’ll be back in three days time. If I’m asked to stand up and speak, I’ll be sure to use as many expletives as possible.”

Darin slapped his hand over his mouth to hold in a giggle. “Don’t you dare.”

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at the challenge.

“Safe travels,” Darin smiled. He didn’t move to offer him a kiss, and Sherlock didn’t press it.

“I’ll text you when we land. Enjoy your grand return to work.”

###

Sherlock took the airstairs down from the jet slowly. He was grateful there were two black cars waiting on the tarmac for him and the MI6 agent. He wasn’t in the best of moods to deal with luggage claim and taxis like one must do when flying commercial. Sherlock could go days without sleep, but he still felt the disorientating effects of jet lag, especially from short back and forth flights.

His daze had nothing to do with the funeral. Sitting stoically in the back row with the double-oh while Orion’s (his name had been Nick Sawyer) few family members and colleagues gave their respects. He hadn’t had a wife or children, or much time at home between missions to cultivate many friends.
They left as soon as their plane could get clearance for takeoff. The agent had fallen asleep, in that way men accustomed to combat could take advantage of opportune moments. Sherlock sat and tried not to think about his own mortality for eight hours. It was still a favorable diversion over imagining how close he had come to having to plan Darin’s funeral.

Sherlock reached the bottom step, and the door of one of the black sedans opened. Instead of one of MI6’s well trained drivers, Darin stepped out. “Can I take your bag, sir?” he grinned, but his smile wavered. “Sherlock, did something happen? You look like shite.”

He would justify his uncharacteristic public display of affection with an excuse of exhaustion later. He pulled Darin into a crushing embrace and buried his face into his hair.

“I’m so sorry,” Darin said simply, wrapping his arms around him just as tightly, grounding him. “So sorry.”

###

Darin set Sherlock’s plate in front of him with a half portion of tuna before taking his own seat at the dinner table.

“What are these?” John asked, spearing something green off his plate.

“Fiddlehead ferns. You can only find them this time of year when the fronds are still young and curled. Try it, they taste a bit like asparagus,” Darin replied, putting his napkin on his lap.

John stared at the vegetable on his fork thoughtfully.

“I swear, they are completely edible,” Darin told him. “Some contain shikimic acid, and there is the thiaminase to contend with, but these are safe.”

John set down his fork with a click. “Right, then.”

Sherlock grinned and popped one in his mouth with his fingers.

“So...um,” John began. “I suppose there is something I’ve been meaning to discuss.”

“Oh?” Darin asked, distracted, watching Sherlock fondly as he picked up another fern and tried to uncurl it. It snapped with a spray of garlic oil, so Sherlock settled on eating it instead of investigating it.

“I know you both were close to Mary, and I wanted you to know before...well…”

Sherlock stopped poking his ferns and sighed. “You’re dating again. I’ll alleviate your fears and skip to the chase- we’re not traumatized by it. I’m only surprised you waited so long with your past history.”


“It takes too long,” Sherlock complained.

John glowered at Sherlock before looking over at Darin, seeking approval. Darin smiled. “It’s good. Mary wouldn’t have expected you to stay single forever.”

John looked down at his plate. “Thank you.”

Darin reached over and patted his shoulder. “So? Who’s the new lady?”
“It’s not serious. We’re just dating.”

“Hmm,” Darin grinned. “I know what that means. I suppose we might be seeing her leaving your flat in the mornings?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes with a huff.

“Where did you meet this mystery woman?” Darin asked, picking up his utensils and starting on his fish.

“Erm. Yeah. I’ve known her for some time now,” John watched Sherlock from across the table and winced. “She works at the Met.”

Sherlock’s eyes went wide and he pushed his chair back from the table. “Sally Donovan?”

John held up his hands. “Your charges were cleared a long time ago, Sherlock. You know Moriarty played her, like he did everyone else.”

“Well of course he did, she’s an idiot,” Sherlock glared at John. “She is also rather carefree with her affections. If that’s what you’re after I’m sure any pub in London would turn up someone else with the same character.”

“Sherlock, stop,” Darin warned.

“I’m not referring to your protracted sexual history, I’m talking about hers.”

Darin glared at Sherlock.

“Besides the complication of sleeping with someone we often work with, she’s simply beneath you, John,” Sherlock pronounced.

“Not necessarily. She could be on top,” Darin said with a straight face.

John coughed, sputtered and started to laugh.

Sherlock glowered at Darin, who cracked a smile and started to chuckle.

“It’s not funny,” Sherlock sniffed haughtily.

Darin and John both looked at each other and laughed until their sides hurt.

To Darin, it felt really quite good.
Darin was sure Sherlock was still mostly dreaming, his kisses were slightly uncoordinated. Darin tucked his ankles around Sherlock’s and kissed him back. It was the type of kissing that didn’t have to lead anywhere, but could also be a promise of more pleasures to come. He wasn’t sure who had reached for whom, but he didn’t mind. It had been ages since they had started the day tangled together. Before the serum, they had almost always woken up touching, no matter when Sherlock finally found his way to bed. Since Darin had returned home, they had strictly kept to their own sides.

Sherlock had his arms locked around him and wasn’t going to let go, not unless Darin wanted to wake him. It was a bit warm under the duvet, especially with two men nestled tightly together. Somehow it added to the unreality of their shelter, the close quarters and the pleasant but heady combined scent of their clean perspiration and traces of grooming products. Nothing existed but them, and Darin yearned for it to last. The closeness was a balm, soothing a myriad of little hurts he hadn’t even realized he had.

Eventually, of course the spell broke, and Sherlock roused. The kiss ended, and Darin felt a stab of remorse.

“Hmm. What time is it?” Sherlock slurred.

Darin freed a hand and pulled the duvet from over his head. It was in the very small hours still and the sky was just starting to lighten from black to dark gray. The timer hadn’t yet kicked the furnace on, and the room was cold. Darin pulled the duvet back over his head.

“Too early. Go back to sleep.” Darin nuzzled against Sherlock’s shoulder. Sherlock hummed again in response, and Darin was relieved when he made no move to leave their nest. He was even more so when Sherlock nudged noses to resume the sleepy, morning kisses. There was no goal, just closeness and shared warmth. His self-imposed barriers crumbled, and Darin was suddenly keenly aware of the depths of his loneliness and lost intimacy over the last couple months.

Darin made a soft little choking noise, between relief and a sob. Sherlock slid his hand to cup his face and deepened their kiss by a measure. He knew, Darin realized. You couldn’t always assume Sherlock’s deductive powers would work when it came to feelings. Especially the deep and complicated ones, the ones that were conflicted and didn’t obey reason. The accord of their bodies was speaking volumes, interpreting the messy logic of I hurt but I don’t want to drag you down with me. I need you, but I’m afraid to ask for it.

They were clinging to each other now, the kiss evolving into something other than tenderness. Darin’s dormant libido stirred and his blood started to thaw, suffusing him with a flush that had nothing to do with the temperature under the quilts. Darin felt dizzy- they had rolled their bodies across the bed, and trapped in the darkness of the duvet, he wasn’t sure which way was up anymore. He didn’t know where his limbs ended, or where Sherlock’s began, or who started slowly sliding their sweat-slicked bodies together. Whichever of them it was, it was a brilliant idea.
Darin ultimately found his internal compass. He had ended up sprawled on top of Sherlock, both hands buried in jet curls, kissing now like his very breath depended on it. He was grinding his hips slowly, and Sherlock had a hand on one of his buttocks, holding him steady for his answering upward press. It wasn’t enough, it wasn’t nearly enough. Darin resented the separation of their atoms, wanted to fold himself into Sherlock’s very skin.

The soft brush of fingers against the sensitive core of him made Darin jolt and gasp into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock pulled away a bit, yanked the covers down and reached awkwardly for the bedside table, fumbling in the dark until he fished out what he was after. Lips returned to nibble on his neck, and newly slickened fingers teased his arse. Darin cursed and felt Sherlock smile against his neck. His delicate hands were so good at this, and they both knew he was about to play havoc on Darin’s nerve endings.

Conscious thinking paused as a slippery finger gently pressed in, then a second soon followed. Somebody was making an obscene amount of noise, but identification was impossible right now. There was only the slow rocking of their bodies, the delicious stretch, and the jolt of lightning when a pad of a finger brushed Darin’s most sensitive spot within.

Recognition of the slight vibration under him brought Darin’s mind back online. Sherlock was trembling, just a little, and Darin sucked in a surprised breath. Sherlock was shaking from the combination of excitement and over-stimulation. He was trying to let himself go.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Darin crooned to him softly. It was encouraging, but it wasn’t pressure, either. Sometimes it was apparent Sherlock really wanted to, but just couldn’t open up. Whatever happened next was fine, but Darin couldn’t help himself from needing this, of thinking, yes, oh please.

He felt Sherlock’s nod against his head, but his trembling didn’t stop. Neither did the slow tease of his fingers, or the roll of their bodies. Darin could get off from this, the nudging on his prostate and the increasing slide of their erections grinding together. He felt the slow building of his climax and forced himself to breathe deeply, wanting to hold off and see where Sherlock was willing to go.

Darin knew when Sherlock had managed to relinquish his self-control. It wasn’t dramatic, just a small gasp, like he had been holding in a breath, and a slight relaxation of limbs. His thighs were still trembling, and probably would continue to do so for the duration, but Darin paid it no mind.

Sherlock gently removed his fingers and rolled them over so he was on top, settling his knees between Darin’s thighs. Darin could hear the snap of the cap of the lube again, and tried to be patient. Sherlock’s hand brushed his leg, then the two fingers worked more of the cool gel inside him.

“Sherlock,” Darin sighed, quickly losing his willingness to wait any longer, he grabbed a sharp hipbone. It had been so long- three months since they last had sex at all, and maybe six or eight months before the stars had aligned and they had shared each other in this way. Sherlock couldn’t usually tolerate the intensity of penetration. The desire to somehow become part of Sherlock, to fuse himself with his husband so they could never be parted, flared hotly again, burned brighter than just simple lust.

Sherlock peeled Darin’s hand off his hip and placed it on the bedsheets- Darin realized belatedly he had probably been gripping hard enough to leave thumbprints. Sherlock tapped the back of Darin’s other hand, resting on his knee, and Darin dropped it to the bed as well.

“Hands off, just for a moment,” Sherlock asked him in a husky whisper.

He wished he could see Sherlock’s face through the near darkness. Then he remembered something
Sherlock had said to him, months before: *Vision denied means we have to allow our other senses to do the heavy lifting*. Sherlock leaned over him on one arm and Darin could feel his thighs quivering in earnest now. He could hear his breaths, coming in short, quick pants. He could smell the sex musk in their mingled perspiration. Darin didn’t need his eyes to know—*He needs this, too*.

Sherlock steadied himself and began to press into him, and Darin bore down to make the acceptance into his body easier. He didn’t touch Sherlock, he left his hands on the bed and waited for them both to adjust to the sensation. A drop of sweat from Sherlock’s brow dripped onto him, and they both froze, waited.

Sherlock finally sighed and moved tentatively, gently. It was as much for his benefit as Darin’s, he knew. Sherlock dropped down to his elbows and established a brutally slow rhythm. Darin tucked his calves around Sherlock’s legs, let his hands drift from the mattress. Sherlock hummed in consent, and Darin finally was able to weave his arms around him.

The pace Sherlock set was teasing, even though Darin knew he didn’t mean it to be so. Still, it was almost an agony, and Darin couldn’t help arching up, wheining, wanting more. Sherlock tilted his hip with a firm hand, and Darin grunted as the angle was suddenly just right. The tempo was going to drive him completely insane if Sherlock didn’t give him more, soon.

Sherlock moaned and finally snapped his hips, and Darin rolled his eyes up inside his head. Sherlock’s incessant quivering had finally lessened, and he was making small staccato gasps in time with his quickening thrusts. Darin pulled him down for a sloppy kiss, tongues twining and teeth bumping against lips. Sherlock pulled back with a sharp cry, raised himself up on a hand, and cradling Darin’s hips with the other, lifting him almost off the mattress to plunge deeper. He was working faster now, finally chasing his climax, his control no longer subjugating the demands of his body.

Darin didn’t want do anything to break the rising tide that was about to take Sherlock crashing down, so he resisted the urge to work a hand between them. Instead, he rode just on the knife’s edge of his own pleasure, murmuring nonsense phrases of praise and encouragement that neither of them would remember later. Sherlock bucked, and came with a surprised sounding cry, erratically thrashing through it for what seemed to be an eon.

Darin let out a yelp; before he had even caught his breath, Sherlock withdrew and rolled them over on their sides, Darin spooning him from behind. He pressed Darin’s cock between his thighs and squeezed. Darin swore as he thrust into unexpected wet tightness—Sherlock must have smeared lube on himself during his preparations. The man was a damn genius. It didn’t take Darin long before his own orgasm shattered him down to molecules—he blissfully hoped some of Sherlock’s found their way to bond with his when he reformed.

They lay together for a long time afterwards, slowing their breathing, resettling back into themselves. Sherlock was still shaking.

“I thought,” Sherlock started, voice quavering, “I thought I had lost you.”

“I was a little worried I had lost myself,” Darin whispered, holding him tight.

“Over, and over again, this past few months, I was sure you would never be back…” Sherlock stopped with a pained sigh. Darin kissed his shoulder and didn’t push him to say more. He had shoved the gates to his emotions wide open, and he was vulnerable until he had a little time to reassemble himself.

“Does this mean…it’s over?” Sherlock finally asked.
Darin couldn’t lie. “No, I don’t think so. Things are getting better. We’ll work it out. It’s going to be okay.”

Sherlock nodded and fell quiet, and eventually he stopped trembling. Darin felt around for the duvet they had kicked off, and pulled it back over their heads, reforming their shelter. They could still get a couple hours of post-sex sleep before the morning.

“You should go wash,” Sherlock complained.

Darin grinned. It didn’t take Sherlock long to become a giant prat again. “Says the man with sticky thighs.”

“Too cold out there. It’s not like I enjoy it.” Sherlock accused.

“Shush you.” Darin shifted so he could feel the slickness against his skin. Sherlock knew he liked to feel the evidence of their union. It made him feel pleasantly marked, possessed. “It’ll hold until morning.”

“You’re washing the sheets.”

“Oh, like you were going to? Now go to sleep,” Darin laughed. He felt unburdened for the first time in ages.

“Hmmm.”

“I love you,” Darin told him, with a yawn. Sherlock kissed his knuckles in reply, and was snoring softly a minute later. Darin closed his eyes, and in the protection of the duvet fort, tumbled into a deep, restful sleep.

###

Darin wiped the steam-fogged mirror with the corner of his towel and stared at his reflection. The months spent in convalescence had marked him. The dark circles under his eyes were just starting to fade, even if the exhaustion still refused to leave him. He also had lost a great deal of weight that was mostly muscle tone, which was frustrating.

He didn’t have Sherlock’s stature or presence to pull off lithe, and liked having broader shoulders and chest. He had been teased as a boy for being lean, and had started lifting weights as a teenager out of self-consciousness. He learned to enjoy the exercise and had kept it up as an adult for more than simple vanity. It was a good way to manage stress, for one. John and Jeremy both agreed it was a good idea for him to start his routine again, and he was looking forward to his clothes fitting as they should. One more familiar thing in his life slotting into place.

His fingers traced his clavicle and he pressed into a yellowing bite mark. He quirked a smile. At least Sherlock didn’t seem to mind he was looking more the part of a bookish nerd. He dare not accuse Sherlock of being cuddly, but he had been invading Darin’s personal space since their lovemaking the other night.

He made a goofy face in the mirror and resumed his critique. There were a few more strands of gray sticking out of his wet hair, but he reasoned that could just be due to the passage of time. He turned his face to the side and looked at his scruff. He didn’t see any silver in his beard yet, which was something, anyway. He had a sudden revelation, quick and biting. He dropped his eyes from the mirror. Still being alive and entire was the thing he should be thankful for, not what he looked like. He scolded himself.

Feeling properly chastised, he opened the mirror to get his shaving foam and razor from the medicine
cabinet. His hands froze over a brown paper envelope that hadn’t been there the morning before. He took it off the shelf and opened it, and his watch slid out. To his surprise, hands tracked steadily over the face. Perhaps Sherlock had found another antique of the same make- two watchmakers had told him his grandfather’s watch was a lost cause. He turned it over, and yes, he found the familiar, worn inscription:

*May all we do, be done in love. RA&AA January 20th, 1940*

Darin slipped on his dressing gown and opened the door. Sherlock hadn’t come to bed at all the night before, busy working on something or another. Darin heard soft notes from his violin, followed by a not-so-soft curse. Sherlock wasn’t quite in full form yet, himself.

“Good morning. Composing?” Darin asked. Sherlock stood by the window, marked up staff paper scattered around him.

“Nrgh,” Sherlock replied enigmatically. The light from the rising sun cast Sherlock in a breathtaking, ethereal glow.

Darin held up the watch and Sherlock smiled.

“The mechanism was not repairable, so I had the bezel salvaged and the movement modernized. It will be more precise, although it’s not quite your grandfather Richard’s timepiece,” Sherlock explained, setting his Strad down in its case.

“That must have taken you a lot more effort than finding me a new one,” Darin said.

“I presupposed, you being a romantic…” Sherlock over-enunciated the last syllable with a wince, “…you would still prefer it over one of the new, stainless steel, chronograph monstrosities that are in vogue.”

Darin opened his arms. “Come here, you pretentious, watch-ruining menace.”

Sherlock beamed and stepped into Darin’s embrace. “Sorry,” he murmured into his damp hair. “Forgiven, dear heart.”

Darin chuckled when Sherlock groaned at the endearment.
Sherlock opened the door to the lab in the basement. Darin sat with his back to the door, on a stool at his bench, pipette in one hand. Not wanting to disturb him, he made his way to the chemical cabinet, flung the doors open and began to push bottles aside. He was certain they had acetone…

A sniffle made him freeze and listen. A second one followed. Sherlock frowned, and quietly shut the cabinet doors. He walked around, to the other side of the bench, where he could see Darin’s face. Tears tracked down his cheeks. He considered leaving- Darin had been in here alone and may have wanted privacy, but the sight of him twisted Sherlock’s gut too painfully to turn his back on him.

What was this about? Darin’s moods had been more stable recently, but he had lapses. No, this didn’t seem like the symptoms of another depression phase. Darin’s hand was clenched tightly on the edge of the table, knuckles white and the line of his jaw was hard, grinding his molars together.

John had told him, time and time again, that it was rude to tell people what they were obviously feeling; Sherlock should ask instead, even it was pointless. “What’s wrong?”

Darin looked up at him, eyes red. “I’m not making any progress. I’m just so damned tired. What can I do in just a few hours a day, Sherlock?”

Sherlock swallowed. He wasn’t sure what to say. The exhaustion was one symptom that had not improved. Darin still needed to take frequent breaks to rest. Otherwise, he’d lose focus or get a searing headache that would lay him low for the rest of the day.

Darin nodded, taking Sherlock’s lack of response as confirmation. “I’m useless. I’m a scientist who can’t actually do research. Roger is holding things together, but for how long? I’m not going to be able to keep up a teaching schedule and lab work.”

Sherlock stood still, and just watched him. He was right. The last few months his lab manager, Roger, had kept Darin’s projects running. However, Darin was the leader, he drove the lab’s work, with his brilliant mind, his passion, and hours upon hours of simple, hard labor.

“You know it, too.” Darin’s shoulders sagged. “You love me because I’m good at this. What the hell do I have to offer anyone now?”

Sherlock frowned. No, that wasn’t right. He motioned to the pipette Darin was still wielding. “What’s on your bench?”


Darin had been extracting cyanide compounds, and it was stable enough to leave for awhile. Sherlock tried for a reassuring smile he didn’t feel. “Put it down for a few moments. Come talk to me.”

Darin looked at Sherlock through wet eyes and nodded. He slipped off his bench and went through the long practiced motions of following a strict lab protocol; making last minute notes and properly labeling and putting things away. Watching the precision and care he took was usually soothing to Sherlock, but the defeated slump to Darin’s back today just made him burn with sympathy. Sherlock knew he wouldn’t be bearing up as well as Darin if he himself was suddenly limited on what he
could do; so much of both their lives revolved around their commitment to their respective careers.

Darin snapped off his gloves and threw them in a hazardous waste container, and washed his hands in the sink. Sherlock approached him then, tugged the lab coat off his shoulders and draped it over a stool.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to try to say anything. I know there isn’t anything you can do,” Darin muttered.

Sherlock huffed and took his elbow, and led him through to the small side room that was Darin’s home office. It was cluttered without being a mess; a mahogany writing desk was covered in charts and papers and two large computer monitors. There was also a loveseat with a few books piled on it. Darin’s very favorite plant, an *Atropa belladonna* took up proud residence in a corner under a grow light, dark berries and tiny purple flowers hung in clusters between the leaves. Sherlock at once remembered Darin’s wedding buttonhole, a woven circle of deadly nightshade pinned on his lapel, pruned from this very specimen.

Sherlock unceremoniously cleared the books from the loveseat cushions, sat, and pulled Darin down next to him. “You really think I…” Sherlock licked his lips. It had never become an easy word for him to say, ”...love you because of your work?”

Darin wasn’t meeting his eyes. “It was the first thing you noticed about me.”

It was technically true. The first time he had seen Darin he had been on a bench in Regent’s Park. The the chemistry journal he had been reading indeed caught his attention, but it had been a mere second before he had felt his heart trip when he saw the handsome face behind the book. Of course at the time, he thought the cause of the sudden lurch in his chest was from the curry John had foisted on him the night before.

“Darin,” Sherlock cleared his throat. “I *admire* your research. I feel kindred to you for your dedication. How I…” Sherlock picked at his trousers. Why was this so damned hard? “…it is not the biochemistry. If you retire, my esteem for you will not change.”

“Retire?” Darin all but whimpered. “You see it too, then.” Darin put his head in his hands, and to Sherlock’s horror, began to cry again.

*Oh, well done.* Sherlock reached for Darin and pulled him against him. “No, no. Not now. That’s not what I meant. When you want to. Someday.” Darin clutched at the lapels of his jacket and buried his face into Sherlock’s shirt. Sherlock had seen him weep a few times, but never like this before. He was breaking down in deep, heaving sobs.

*It was overwhelming, and it terrified Sherlock. “I’m sorry. Can you please, just stop crying?”*

*Darin didn’t. He just continued to come apart, insensate, leaning into him for support.*

*Support! Stupid, stupid. Sherlock knew with a sudden flash of insight that he didn’t have to supply a solution to Darin’s problems. He pushed Darin’s face away from him and peeled off his glasses, then cradled his head back into his chest. He rubbed his back, and whispered comforting nonsense. Tears soaked a wet spot into his shirt.*

*Darin’s grief eventually subsided, and finally stopped with a series of watery snuffles. He pulled away, wiping his face. Sherlock kept a hand on his knee to steady him as he put himself together.*

“Sorry,” Darin said weakly.
“You have nothing to apologize for. It’s a normal reaction for someone that has recently been through a trauma,” Sherlock reassured.

Darin tried a shaky retort. “You have been reading those psychology articles again.”

“I have done,” Sherlock admitted.

“You have been bloody amazing through all of this, you know. All the shit I’ve put you through recently,” Darin said ardently.

Sherlock blinked at him, perplexed. “I have?”

Darin laughed and then sniffed his running rose. “Yes, you have.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Admittedly, I thought I was bollocks at it, but I tried for you. Now go upstairs and rest,” Sherlock told him, placing a kiss on his brow.

“That’s all I do,” Darin sighed. “Thank you. I think, maybe that was a long time coming.”

“Any time. I’m water resistant, after all,” Sherlock quipped. “Go on.”

Darin stood to leave, and Sherlock remembered something critical.

“Darin? I have an important question for you.”

“Yes?”

“Where is the acetone?”

Darin’s tear stained and blotchy face broke into a grin.

###

“Morning!” A cheerful female voice greeted him.

“Hello Petra,” Darin smiled at one of his graduate students. He was now working half-days at the university, and going to the greenhouses at Kew once a week. It wasn’t enough, but it was what he could manage right now. He was trying very hard not to dwell on it, and compare it to what he used to be able to do, to take Jeremy's words to heart: Don’t poison the future with the past.

Darin took off his jacket and hung it up, pulled on his lab coat and grabbed his notes. Every morning started with him making a list of what needed to get done that day on the whiteboard in front of the lab.

Petra was still there, waiting for him. “We have some good news! They are done with the bloody construction!”

Darin smiled. That was good news. Someone was building a new research center on the basement floor, right under his lab. It was hush-hush on who the new faculty would be, which was driving the selection committee completely around the bend. Darin was just thankful the banging was over. It was annoying to his staff, and triggered some of the headaches he was prone to have near the end of his day.

“Boss man!” Roger came in the door, his pudgy face flushed. “What’s on the agenda?”

Darin uncapped the dry erase marker hanging on a string next to the board. “I’m just getting to it.
Petra was telling me they are done making that racket downstairs.”

Roger whooped. “Finally! I thought they were going to come right up through the floor a few times! I’ll be back in a jiffy, let me get myself settled.”

Darin started writing on the whiteboard, marker squeaking, as staff started to filter in- the normal morning arrival routine. He was proud that they had been able to move along and keep things running without him. They were still very gracious about his ‘head injury’ and new limitations, and he was doing his best to at least provide them with direction and leadership, even if he had to delegate more of his hands-on tasks to others.

“Hello?” A woman in a dark suit walked in the door. Darin looked at her curiously, wondering how she had got this far without a keycard.

“Can I help you?” Petra asked.

“I’m looking for...” the woman looked at an envelope in her hand. “...the phytotoxicology lab?”

“You found it...usually we have to sign people in at the security desk?” Petra asked, confused. They were all more security conscious after the past theft of digoxin from the freezer.

The woman brushed aside Petra’s concern. “Is Dr Allard in?”

“That’s me,” Darin confirmed capping the marker and turning from the whiteboard. “Most people call me Darin around here.”

“Or Boss man, Chief Nerd Wrangler, The Queen’s Royal Poisoner, Professor Snape...” Roger started in. Darin glared at him, and he shut up with a toothy smile.

“Darin, then.” The woman inclined her head. “I have a delivery for you, to be opened at once.” She pulled a small envelope from her pocket and presented it to him.

Darin turned over the envelope. The front was blank, and the creamy paper was thick and expensive. He opened the flap, and a keycard fell into his hand as he removed a slip of stationary:

Please meet me in room 42a immediately. -MH

“Oh for the love of...” Darin cut himself off and glared at the woman. “Can’t he just use the mobile like normal people do?”

The woman just shrugged at him. “He would like you to see him now, Darin.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

###

Darin swiped the new card through the reader and the locks on the door clicked open. Darin supposed if Mycroft needed a discrete place to meet him in the building, the newly constructed, but still unoccupied lab was a good choice. He didn’t even wonder how Mycroft had obtained the keycard- that would have been child’s play for him.

The room was illuminated by only a few dim emergency safety lights near the door. The rest of the windowless room was shrouded in darkness. Darin could tell from the echo of his footfalls it was cavernous- the new facility, whatever it was, was going to be on an epic scale. The space seemed to be more like an auditorium then an unfurnished chemistry lab.
“Good morning, brother-in-law,” Mycroft greeted him from the shadows.

“I have little time today, Mycroft. What do you want?” Darin sighed.

“I have news I believe will be of interest. Dr Carter has completed the antidote and was able to nullify the side effects you have unfortunately, experienced. It apparently only required a minor formulation adjustment.”

Darin nodded. “That’s good news for anyone else who may need it.” It was too late for him and Mr Fall, of course.

Mycroft tilted his head. “I think you underestimate your contribution. You didn’t just create an antidote, Darin. It’s a military countermeasure. The serum is now useless to our enemies; your work has disarmed the threat of chemical warfare.”

“I’m sure you’re really heartbroken that my offer worked and your weapon is useless,” Darin grumbled.

Mycroft lifted his eyebrow. “Oh no, I am sincerely happy with the result. You properly assessed that I could not leave a weapon of such potential unexplored. Of course, if my researchers discovered a flaw, or somehow revealed it was useless, it would never be weaponized. All whom I report to would be appeased that due diligence was done.”

Darin stared at Mycroft openly. “This was really your plan all along.”

“Who would want to start a chemical arms race, Darin? It would be like the nuclear crisis all over again.”

Darin clenched his jaw. “I just have one question, and after the hell Sherlock and I have suffered, you owe me an honest answer: did you maneuver me into position and poison me so you’d have an excuse to get my help to find your damn antidote? Was I guinea pig for your project?”

“Now you disappoint me. For good or for ill, Sherlock cares for you deeply. You should know by now I take pains not to compromise his well-being.”

Mycroft tapped his brolly on the floor. “I will share a trade secret with you. There is a trick to appearing omnipotent-you simply plan for every possible outcome. So your answer, brother mine, is that you became another variable in the equation. Nothing more, nothing less. You wanted to go rescue Sherlock, and I trusted in Dr Watson to keep you safe. You were then exposed to the formula, which was a misfortune. However, that placed you in a position where you had a relevant skill set I could utilize, and proper motivation to perform the work.”

“Well, I’m happy I could help, I guess.” Darin wasn’t sure how he felt. It was good no one else would suffer, but it still left him with his brain chemistry irrevocably altered. All for geopolitical posturing.

“With that said, I very much regret that collateral damage is sometimes a consequence.” Mycroft clicked a remote in his hand, and lasers scanned the darkened room and red dots bounced over his chest.

Darin let out a startled shout.

###

Sherlock slowed his run, and jammed his keycard into the swipe. Roger had left him a hysterical
voicemail that was nearly incomprehensible. All he could make out was that something had happened to Darin, and he needed to come right away. Neither Roger or Darin had answered his calls, so Sherlock had hailed the nearest cab to the university in haste, not knowing what to expect on his arrival.

“Come in and be quiet,” Mycroft told him at the threshold.

Sherlock looked around the room. It was a circular theater of sorts with dark grey walls, split level by a short center riser that took up most of the room. People milled around the lower level, it looked like the entire UCL life sciences department, and Darin was standing whole and hale in the middle of the plinth-like riser, speaking.

“...was very last minute today. Due to the nature of the donor, the unveiling of this laboratory has been kept under wraps. I do apologize for the secrecy, and the construction noise some of you had to endure. Today, we get to show you what has been in progress.”

Darin turned to Roger, who was standing at a small podium off on the edge of the circle. After a moment of discussion and pointing at a control panel, Roger nodded. Darin touched something on his eyeglasses, and walked back to the center of the room.

“Mycroft, what have you done?” Sherlock whispered. Mycroft hushed him.

“Colleagues, I’d like to demonstrate the new Virtual Laboratory of Chemical Modeling,” Darin announced. The lights dimmed, and a grid of red light projected across the entire room. It faded, and a menu of text floated in the air. Darin made a series of hand gestures, and a new list of glowing text opened.

“I am going to demonstrate a series of bimolecular nucleophilic substitutions and vary the factors affecting the rate of the reaction. Using current computer modeling this takes about seventeen hours. This new system will deliver preliminary results in about five minutes.”

Darin began to activate the system, and a series of molecular formulas appeared. Darin moved with familiar, efficient grace, hands pinching and moving to rotate the virtualized formulas and change screen views, arms waving like an orchestra conductor. To Sherlock, he was just as spellbinding as he had been at Langdale.

“Another abuse of government funds?” Sherlock murmured to Mycroft.

“Not at all. Dr Carter was quite clear that Darin is the most skilled man in the country using the system, and it would be a detriment to scientific discovery in England if he could not utilize it.”

“How many strings come attached to this gift, brother?” Sherlock asked.

Mycro grimaced. “None. Consider it payment for services rendered.”

“Or restitution?” Sherlock said, through tight lips.

“If you must.”

Darin’s demonstrations came to an end, and the virtual screens faded away as the room lights came up. Darin answered questions for a few moments from his colleagues. He was animated in his discussions, beaming and his cheeks flushed with high color. In a word, Sherlock would say he was happy. More so than he had seen him in months.

“Thank you,” Sherlock sighed.
Mycroft lifted an eyebrow. “I do take care of my family, Sherlock.”

Darin eventually was able to work his way over to them, a huge smile on his face. “Isn’t it wonderful? It’s the newest version of the Langdale system. The eyetracking is even better than the first one, and I don’t need the special gloves anymore. We didn’t even get a chance to fully calibrate it this morning! Thank you, Mycroft!”

“All this gratitude. This is a banner day,” Mycroft replied dryly.

Darin laughed. “Do you realize this eventually could all but make up for my reduced hours?”

Sherlock smiled back at him. He didn’t know what to say that would be adequate, so he chose to just return his husband’s joyful beaming.

“Mycroft,” Darin started, a bit hesitant. “If you are free tonight, dinner at Baker Street is salmon with mustard sauce, quinoa and wilted greens. Usually I serve around seven-thirty if you would like to join us.”

Sherlock and Mycroft both blinked owlishly at him.

“That is...yes. I can. Thank you.” Mycroft recovered quickly, “Could I bring the pudding, perhaps?”

“Of course, you would bring the pudding,” Sherlock quipped.

Darin laughed, lively and unhindered. The very sound of his happiness lit up the inside Sherlock’s own chest.

Chapter End Notes

Undying love to my betas, who have labored on this for over six months, looking over multiple drafts of chapters. I have learned so much from you. If you have left a comment about Darin, and my very off-the-beaten-track Empty Flat AU, simple words will never express my gratitude.

End Notes

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!