Summary

Nearly destitute after coming home from Afghanistan, omega John Watson tries to find work as he heals from the war. But a new law passed when he was away, mandating testing of all adults for latent guide abilities. Suspecting he might be a latent guide but with no interest in being forced to bond with a sentinel, he obtains a new identity to avoid being taken by the authorities and finds work in a rehab clinic. There he meets a fascinating sentinel who takes him on a wild adventure and makes him seriously reconsider his decision about bonding. But can John escape being captured and at the same time avoid a certain alpha who wants to force John to become his omega before he can make up his mind?

Notes

Many thanks to Mich for looking this monstrous thing over. You're a sweetie, Hon. :-)

Lovesfic (me23) has made a beautiful cover for me! Thank you and please go give her some love. :-) http://archiveofourown.org/works/1499819

Cleo_Calliope also made a gorgeous cover! Thank you so much! Please give her some kudos here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/1510235
Now translated into Chinese by JoannaZhang at Sherlock Ba:  
http://tieba.baidu.com/p/3086768723?pid=51696932892&cid=#51696932892 Thank you, Joanna! :-) 

Here are some absolutely beautiful posters made by bbdmy in China for the story:  
https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B0nQOr-CdRbRc3hLaDI0eHNLMlk&usp=sharing 

Thank you so much, bbdmy! 

This story is a fusion of Alpha/Omega and Sentinel/Guide themes. 

The Alpha/Omega dynamics and some of the Sentinel bonding stuff include some dubious consensual aspects. If this squicks you, please don't read. Look up the Alpha/Omega tags if you don't know what it is. 

For those who aren't familiar with The Sentinel, a sentinel is a person with all five senses enhanced. However, this makes them rather vulnerable if they couldn't control them. A loud noise, strong smell, pain or bright light could cause them to fall into a fugue state called a zone. To prevent this, a guide is required. The guide helps the sentinel's senses stay balanced and acts as a touchstone for reality. In fanon, the guide helps the sentinel calibrate the senses and prevents him or her from falling into a zone. The guide also helps the sentinel use his/her senses more effectively. There is also a sixth sense touched on in the series dealing with the supernatural, spirit animals and the spirit world where the guide and sentinel can receive advice and help from their spirit guides. Hope that helps those who aren't familiar with the Sentinel universe! 

I hope you enjoy this. Please remember I'm not really a writer but an artist so please be gentle with your criticism. Thanks so much for reading! 

I'd like to dedicate this to my Mom, who died a year ago today. She was always supportive of my slash artwork, even though she thought it was hilarious. I miss you and will always love you, Mom.
Chapter 1

Thank you so much to Lovesfic (me23) for this lovely cover!!

Cleo_Calliope also made a cover! Thank you so much! Please give her some kudos here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/1510235
Thank you to bbdmy at Sherlock Ba for creating these wonderful posters for Latent!
Part 1

Looking carefully at his reflection in the shop window, Dr John Watson, formerly a Captain attached
to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers as an assistant surgeon, anxiously checked over his appearance once again. Breath steaming in the cold air, he noted his dress shirt, brown corduroy jacket, tie and tan trousers were neat and clean if well-worn, though the trousers were now too large at the waist and the jacket was too tight in the shoulders. His hair was a bit longer than he liked but he’d combed it neatly. Unfortunately, his shoes were rather scuffed but he’d polished them to a high shine as only a former military man could do and so felt fairly confident that he looked as well as he possibly could considering that he was just a few weeks away from being homeless. The too large, threadbare coat he wore barely kept out the chill but it had been of nice quality once and he buttoned it again tightly.

John took a deep breath and nervously patted his chest to check the inner pocket of his jacket to make sure it still held his paperwork. Since he couldn’t risk using his own name at the moment, the identity papers were all forged under a different one, William Larssen. John Watson had ceased to exist a week after he stepped foot on UK soil and John was fairly certain no one in London knew his real name. His new identity had some similarities to his old but there were also major differences. Unfortunately, he’d not had the funds to make Larssen a doctor as well so he’d had to look for low-paying work along with all the other thousands of unemployed whilst he struggled to get his health back.

The economy was abysmal and in a deep depression. He’d not been able to find anything since he’d returned to the UK almost a year earlier. He had withdrawn all his savings before he’d ‘disappeared’ but now his money was nearly gone and he still had another few months before Masters’ recruiters arrived in London to select new people for her mercenary company. John had a good chance to join them but he had to survive and keep up his health until then.

John’s left shoulder and arm were still not completely healed from the wound he’d sustained in combat but he’d spent the last nine months working hard to regain his strength and compensate for the injury with special training. Masters’ standards were extremely high and John had to be in absolute top condition to make the cut. Good nutrition and consistent physio were the keys to maintaining his fitness level. He’d thought about leaving London to save money but the city had the best facilities for regaining his health and he’d decided it was best to stay, despite the risks. Unfortunately, he was running out of time as well as money. It was imperative that John get this job so he could keep body and soul together until Masters arrived and he could leave the UK for good.

Glancing down to double check the address scribbled on the paper Hairston had given him at the Gibbet, John approached the building. It was a five storey, rather non-descript place and John had no real idea what went on behind its walls aside from knowing it was some kind of clinic. Hairston had been told by someone that there were a handful of jobs available and the barman had kindly passed that information along to John.

Upon entering the building, John could tell immediately there was a lot of money associated with the place. The lobby was understated but elegantly appointed and positively reeked of extreme wealth. John recognised expensive, original paintings by well known artists hanging on the walls and the furniture was upholstered with real leather. Automatically, he made note of all the possible entrances and exits to and from the room and what could conceivably be used as a weapon in case of an attack. He knew it was ridiculous to do that in a civilian setting but it was always good to keep his skills in top form.

After a brief hesitation, he approached the desk, introduced himself and explained why he was there. The bored looking receptionist took his name and requested he sit in the waiting area. There were only a few chairs still available and his heart sank as he realised just how much competition he had for the positions available.

He sat quietly and tried not to fret as the names of the others waiting with him were called in groups
of five by a rather handsome beta in an expensive suit. Eventually he and four others were called and he followed them into a room with a large conference table surrounded by twelve chairs. A total of five pencils had been placed in front of some of the seats. The seating was deliberately arranged so that no one sat directly beside or across from anyone else. The man who led them into the room stood at the head of the table and waited until they all took their seats, then passed out a packet of papers to each person.

“Please fill out the first page of this questionnaire and sign and date it at the bottom. Then wait for further instructions.” The man sat down and ignored them whilst he began to go through a stack of papers he had brought in with him.

John and his fellows all glanced at each other and then began to fill out their forms. It asked for things like name, address, National Insurance number, phone number, date of birth, etc. John had memorised the information about his new identity and easily filled out the form carefully and without hesitation. He then waited quietly for further instruction.

Once everyone was finished, they passed the pages up to the man in the suit. “Thank you. Now the packet in front of you contains a test that you must take if you are to be considered for employment. Please remove it from its envelope and put your name, address, date and NI number on the first page. This is a timed test and you will not begin until I give you permission. You may not look at the test until I give you permission. And once you begin, you will keep your eyes on your own test until time is called. Once you finish, you may not go back to correct answers, even if there is still time. Is that understood?”

All the other applicants nodded and did as instructed. John’s palms were sweating and he surreptitiously wiped them on his trousers before picking up the pencil. He filled in the first page and then waited until they were given permission to begin the actual test.

The test had sections on maths, science, general knowledge and grammar, which John had expected. But there were a few sections that focused on basic medical knowledge and procedures. It made sense that there would be questions about those things since the business was a clinic of some kind. Those parts were very simple for John, but he could hear the others huffing and complaining at the difficulty of the test.

Once he was finished, John set down his pencil, flipped the test face down on the table, folded his hands in his lap and waited quietly whilst the others continued to struggle. He made a point of keeping his eyes down. He had realised that part of the test included not only the written part but the ability of the applicant to follow orders. And John was very good at following orders.

Before too long, time was called and John knew he was one of two who had managed to finish the entire test. Through his peripheral vision, he could tell the others were clearly frustrated with their performances. Everyone was told to put the tests back in the original envelope, put their names on the outside and hand it up to the man at the head of the table.

“The tests will be evaluated and if you are selected for a second interview, you will receive a telephone call from us to arrange an appointment within the next twenty four hours. If we do not contact you, you were not selected. Good day.” Clearly dismissed, they stood and left the room. As he left the building, John blinked at the bright late winter sunlight and slowly made his way to the Tube to catch a train back to his gloomy bed-sit and wait anxiously for a possible phone call.

John lay on his narrow bed and stared blankly at the stained ceiling of the dingy, nearly empty room. Very little in the place belonged to him since he’d lost everything in the fire that had killed his mother and sister. Harry had got drunk and passed out with a cigarette on the sofa, setting the family's home
on fire. John had been at university at the time and devastated, he'd carried on with his dream of becoming a doctor alone. The loss of his family had been the catalyst that sent him to join the army and his considerable skills had been welcomed with open arms. He’d advanced successfully through basic training, then Sandhurst and was sent to Afghanistan where he’d distinguished himself as a talented surgeon and an excellent soldier.

He’d been honoured and excited when he’d been tapped to join an elite Special Forces team as their doctor. It had been a dream come true for him and he’d never felt so alive or so useful. He worked hard and lived with his unit for three of the best years of his life before he’d been shot. It was then that everything went downhill. He’d been shipped to Camp Bastion to recover and learnt there that his injury had been caused, not by the enemy but by an unidentified and unsanctioned mercenary unit in the area. No one could or would tell him the name of the mercenaries, why they had even been there or who had hired them. They had since completely disappeared into the mountains. It was maddening not to know who had destroyed his life and he vowed to do whatever he could do to find out who was responsible.

The severity of his wound had caused his discharge and he was sent away from everything that had given his life meaning. To make matters even worse, once he’d been put on a flight back home, he’d learnt of the new law that had been passed whilst he was away. It required every adult under forty who did not have a spouse or children, to submit to a new DNA test that would determine empathic abilities. Once John was back in the country he was officially informed that he had thirty days to submit to testing or a warrant would be sworn out against him and the police would be sent to collect him by force.

There had been a time when there were enough guides for sentinels but things had changed in the past century. More and more people were being born with one, two or three senses enhanced instead of all five. Since they weren’t full sentinels, they didn’t rate a subsidised trained guide and, even though they were also prone to their senses being overloaded and therefore could zone, they had little chance of being assigned one. That’s where latent guides came into the equation.

Some people developed full guide abilities later in life but the talent had never been easily detectable and, until the new DNA test had been developed, it had not been feasible for the Bureau of Sentinel and Guide Protection, or the Bureau as it was usually called, to pursue latents. Because of the availability and relatively cheap cost of the tests, the administrators of the Bureau, seeing a resolution for the plight of partial sentinels and the lure of easy money, decided to go all out to tap this new source of income.

Over time, the Bureau had become an overextended, bloated corporation, employing a staggering number of people throughout the economically suffering country. The sentinel community had always been financially and politically powerful and had a strong presence in the government. So when a new law was proposed to force latent testing on the general populace, it was no surprise that the measure was not opposed. Therefore, the law passed by a huge majority in both houses of Parliament, with Royal Assent granted immediately. Latent guides didn't have the same ‘social’ desirability as those guides discovered early by the Bureau and trained up from childhood, but they were still worth money when sold to partial sentinels who couldn't otherwise afford a guide.

And of course the Bureau put a very positive spin on it, spending millions of pounds for adverts on the telly, newspapers and online, declaring how it was a chance for a new and exciting life for the unattached, the unemployed and school leavers who were ‘lucky’ enough to qualify. They were told they’d receive guide and job training if they wanted and would be carefully matched with their ‘perfect’ mate. It all sounded too good to be true and John knew it was.

The marketing firms neglected to mention or downplayed that the new guide would have no choice
in who would buy them and basically become their master. They’d not be able to take a job, have a bank account or sign a legal document without their sentinel’s permission. They’d basically become a non-person and an extension of another without any rights of their own. It also didn’t matter if the newly discovered latent had trained for years in another profession. All that hard work to attain a fulfilling career was considered meaningless once they were identified and brought into the Bureau’s organisation. In John’s opinion it was slavery and he wanted nothing to do with it.

Despite the crushing depression and horrible nightmares he’d suffered when he first returned, John had things he wanted to do with his life and being a slave to another person wasn’t part of his plan. When he discovered that his name had been flagged for latent testing as he arrived in the country, he did not have to think long about it before he’d made his decision to ‘disappear’.

Unfortunately, John knew his family had a history of guides going back many generations. John’s mother and paternal grandfather had been identified as latents, though how they’d been discovered, John had no idea. However, they had been recognized before the Bureau could just take them without their permission and neither one had become guides. John was fairly certain he had inherited the ‘gift’ because of some unexplained happenings whilst he was in Afghanistan. He’d ‘known’ things that he shouldn’t have been able to know about the location of the enemy. Because of that, he’d been put on point during patrol most of the time and had saved the lives of his team mates multiple times over the years.

So he knew that if he was tested, chances were excellent that he’d be found to be a guide. It wasn’t worth the risk to his life and liberty to find out it was true. To make things more complicated, John Watson was an omega. If he took the DNA test and was found to be a latent omega guide he would be worth his weight in gold to the Bureau since omega guides always bred more guides and sentinels. And in the remote chance that an omega guide was paired with an alpha sentinel, their offspring tended to be exceptionally strong. Some of the most important worldwide historical figures of the past were children of alpha sentinels and omega guides.

John considered himself fortunate to have been born after the political fight for omega rights had been won in the late ‘60’s and early ‘70’s. The invention of hormone suppressants was the great equaliser for omega rights. Things would be much better once the medical community could produce an effective birth control, but things had greatly improved overall for omegas. In the past, life for an omega meant being bonded and bred by the age of fifteen and it wasn’t unusual for an omega to have ten or more children by the time they were thirty. The last thing John wanted was to be stuck with some bone-headed alpha who would want to keep him barefoot and pregnant. In more enlightened times, aside from the odd rural area, forced bondings were now a thing of the past and omegas were considered equals to alphas and betas under all civil law. They were entitled to equal work, equal pay and equal access to universities and careers in the military. John had taken full advantage of all of it. However, sentinel law was completely different and forced bondings were more the rule than exception.

Omega guides were not quite as rare as alpha sentinels but they were highly prized, even if they were the less desirable latents. If discovered, John would be taken into custody and sold off to the highest bidder to be bonded and bred as soon as humanly possible. He likely would be sold to a partial alpha sentinel or a full beta sentinel. It was something he had absolutely no desire to experience and he intended to avoid it like the plague. Because of that, omega Dr John Watson had disappeared without a trace and his new identity, beta William Larssen, tested and certified non-guide was born and he had the papers to prove it.

Suppressants that were mandatory for all alphas and omegas in the army made John seem to be a beta to the average person and he’d religiously kept up with their use. Birth control was not reliable but suppressants did the trick for both alphas and omegas by preventing heat and suppressing rut.
There was no chance of an omega bonding or conceiving without a heat. Along with using a synthetic hormone beta body wash, John could easily pass any examination but an internal one. He only had to hold out a few more months. Then he could finally reassume his real identity and start doing meaningful work again.

But this was no time to wallow in gloomy thoughts. Things had slowly got better with time, despite his currently desperate situation. The depression hit less often and he only had nightmares rarely now. And he’d met some good people who had helped him when he’d returned such as Samuel Hairston, landlord and bartender at the Gibbet. The pub was known worldwide as London’s centre for mercenaries to meet and recruit. Hairston, a former Royal Marine who had been medically discharged when he’d lost a leg and eye to an IED, had taken John under his wing and looked out for him, even giving him work occasionally, washing dishes or sweeping the pub when John needed extra money. Hairston had been the one who had given him the information about this job at the clinic.

John sighed and sat up on the bed. His chances of getting that clinic job were remote. He still needed work and lying around wasn’t going to get him anywhere. Moving over to the wobbly table, he grabbed his ancient laptop and walked a few streets over to the local Starbucks to use their free wireless. Buying a small cup of tea, he made his way to a table in a corner, set up his laptop and started another search for employment.

Jobs were scarce and he scanned the help wanted adverts listed online for anything that he could apply for that would pay him enough to get through the next few months. There wasn’t much and he knew it was probably futile but he filled out the forms required and submitted more copies of his new CV. It was rather pathetic as resumes went but it was what he could afford. He thought about going on the dole but the rules for applying had become much tougher since the economy had tanked and he wasn’t sure if his new identity would hold up to too much scrutiny. He simply couldn’t afford to take the risk.

After exhausting the most recent discouraging employment possibilities online, he closed his laptop, stole the classified section from a newspaper left on another table and meandered back to his flat. It was a one room bed-sit and he shared the loo downstairs with a handful of other people but it was mostly clean and he could afford it for now. He didn’t want to think about where he’d end up in a few weeks if he didn’t find something soon.

The newspaper didn’t have anything he could apply for so he fixed himself a small but healthy dinner and began to plan his meals for the following week. He did his food shopping once a week at a local farmer’s market where he could find decent vegetables, beans, some meats and bread at discounted prices if he got there right before everyone closed up shop. It did limit what he could find since the best things went quickly, but he wasn’t going to complain. Most of his dwindling supply of money these days was spent on decent, nutritious food. He had to keep working on building up his strength and that took a lot of calories. Thankfully, he knew just how to get the most out of his meals so he had the energy necessary to do what he needed to improve his fitness and health.

It took some time for him to finally get to sleep but then he was up early to begin his morning routine. He went for a run and then came back to the flat where he quietly put himself through his normal gruelling exercise routine designed to give him back as much movement in his left arm and shoulder as possible. It would have been better if he still had access to a gym where he could spar against someone but finances were such that it wasn’t possible now. He was doing all right but was frustrated somewhat and his progress was slower than he’d expected, mainly because of the nerve damage to his arm. But he persevered because he was determined to meet the exacting standards demanded by Colonel Masters.
After he was done, he went downstairs to the bath to clean up and get ready for the day. It was early enough that he didn’t have to compete with anyone for the loo and he was done and out in a short time. Then he was back in his room to fix breakfast and to stare at his mobile, willing it to ring.

The hours wore slowly on and he found himself pacing back and forth, becoming more and more discouraged and wondering if he was being stupid to even consider that he had a chance at the job. He should be out pounding the pavement, going door to door, looking for work instead of wasting time sitting around the flat. John knew he was near the end of his rope and that going out into the fresh air and sunshine would stave off the feelings of depression and helplessness that were beginning to intrude, but he couldn’t make himself go.

His eyes slid involuntarily toward the dresser drawer where he kept his SIG hidden but he forced himself to quickly look away. John was determined that that was not going to be the way out. When he’d first returned, alone and still in severe pain, the stress from the nightmares, the isolation and feelings of worthlessness nearly overwhelmed him. Back then, John was constantly hyper alert, sleepless for days on end and jumped at every loud noise. When he was at his worst, he’d sit on his sofa, just staring at the drawer that kept his illegal weapon.

For a time it was a comfort to know he had at least one choice about something in his life: whether to live or die. It would be a fast, if not a particularly neat, end. However, he got through the worst of it and things had changed for the better since then. John was finally healing, had made a few friends and had high hopes he’d be hired by Masters. He knew he had a good chance to go with her outfit. Best to get up and get out in the sunshine. That always dispelled the shadows for a bit. At least until next time.

Just as he turned to the door, his mobile shrilled and his heart jumped into his throat. He stopped and stared at it, not recognising the sound for a moment. Could this be the clinic? Did he actually have a chance? He picked up on the second ring and recognised the deep voice of the man who had given him the test.

“William Larssen? This is Reginald Talbot from the Price Clinic. You’ve been chosen for a second interview. I’ll expect to see you at the clinic in one hour.” The man then rang off, leaving John gaping in confusion at the phone. One hour? He checked his watch and realised that gave him just enough time to get there if he left in the next five minutes.

Quickly, John changed his clothes into something a bit more formal. He had only the one pair of nice trousers but he had found a decent cashmere blend jumper at the local Oxfam that would be appropriate for an interview. He threw that on over his nicest shirt and tie, flew down the stairs, made it to the Tube in record time and was at his destination fifteen minutes early.

John paused a few moments outside the clinic to calm himself and take a deep breath. He tried not to get too excited. There were no guarantees. Smoothing his tousled hair back into place, he entered the building and once again presented himself to the bored receptionist. She took his name and directed him to sit again in the same waiting area. He was surprised no one else was there and he settled himself to wait patiently.

Exactly on the hour, the same man he’d met the day before, presumably Reginald Talbot arrived in the lobby and walked swiftly toward him. His haircut probably cost more than John currently had stashed away in his bed-sit. John stood as the man approached.

Talbot didn’t offer to shake hands but nodded at John. “Mr Larssen, I’m Reginald Talbot, the Director of Price Clinic. Please come with me.” Flabbergasted, John trailed behind the man. Why was the Director of the clinic meeting him instead of some flunky from HR? There was no way to answer that question at the moment but it put John slightly on edge.
They arrived at a bank of lifts and Talbot inserted an identity card into a slot on the wall. Once the lift arrived, he ushered John in and, again using his card, sent them up to the top floor. John noticed how incredibly quiet the lift was and the walls were covered with a wood like substance that looked incredibly expensive. He wondered if it was some kind of soundproofing but had no chance to ask as they reached the fifth floor.

John was instructed to follow Mr Talbot to a luxurious office where the man indicated he should take a seat in front of a large desk. John surreptitiously looked around the room, which was almost bare of any but the most subtle decoration. Again, there were very expensive but tasteful modern art pieces covering the walls. However, there was nothing reflective in the room, the colours were extremely neutral and it felt like he was swathed in cotton wool. There was a dead feeling to the air as well. It was then he realised there were white noise machines on in the room and his heart rate sped up. This room was designed for the comfort of a sentinel. He knew it was true when Mr Talbot suddenly glanced up at him with slightly narrowed eyes.

"Is there a problem, Mr Larssen?" The man’s face was totally impassive.

Shaking his head, John forced himself to calm down. He couldn’t give himself away. “No sir. I’m sorry, but I just now realised that you’re a sentinel. I’m not used to being around people such as yourself, that’s all.” It was a lame excuse but had the advantage of being true. Since apparently Talbot was a sentinel, he could tell John wasn’t lying about that.

Unless John chose to out himself as a criminal for not obeying the new law, he was probably safe. But could a sentinel determine if someone was a guide? How could one tell without the test? Could other guides determine somehow if one was a latent just by looking? If this clinic somehow catered to sentinels, the possibility of running into a guide just went up exponentially. How were latents discovered prior to the test? He had no idea and no real way to find out. This situation was completely unfamiliar to him. John would simply have to be very, very careful and so forced himself to calm down.

Talbot was still observing John closely but the doctor could tell that the man didn’t really seem suspicious. “I am a sentinel but my senses are not very strong and so I wasn’t permitted to train at the sentinel university. All of this decorating is more for the comfort of our clients than for me. Most people do not encounter sentinels on a daily basis, so I’m not surprised you’ve not met many before. However, this clinic does serve a select sentinel population as well as certain members of the non-sentinel community and that is what I’d like to discuss with you.”

Swallowing thickly but relieved that Talbot was a weak sentinel, John nodded as the other man continued. “I’ve been looking over your paperwork. Your test was perfect, which is rather unusual. It indicates that you have a great deal of medical knowledge, which we find useful here. And I see you have been tested as a non-guide, are a beta and former military, which is also very helpful to us. You have a license to drive a lorry, as well. Do you have any objection to doing some occasional delivery or pick up of supplies? No? Excellent. If you are hired here, the wage would start at £15 per hour.”

John’s eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets at that. It was far above the minimum wage he was expecting and his heart sank as his sceptical side kicked into high gear. It all sounded too good to be true and he’d found out the hard way how accurate that saying normally was.

He cleared his throat and licked his lips. “Um. That all sounds quite wonderful, but you’ve not said what the job entails yet, sir.”

Talbot gave him a short smile that didn’t quite reach his dark eyes. “That’s true, Mr Larssen."
Basically, you would be hired as a cleaner/orderly here on the fifth floor of the clinic, which is the floor we reserve for our patients who are sentinels. As you can imagine, our standards of cleanliness are extremely high since sentinels are incredibly sensitive to contaminants, especially when they are sick or injured. You will also be called upon to serve as an orderly whenever necessary. Some of our guests can get...physical sometimes and we will need to be able to safely restrain them without injury. I can see you are quite fit and suspect you have some knowledge along those lines.”

John nodded but remained quiet. He certainly knew how to take down violent attackers much larger than himself. He’d have to find out the methods the clinic preferred, however, and guessed it would be part of the training he’d receive if he was hired.

“If you are chosen to work here, you will be given a paid week’s training before you start and then a paid month’s probationary period. If you make it through that time, you’ll be brought on full time and you will receive a pay rise. You will be assigned a certain number of rooms to clean and prepare for occupancy every day and you will be fired immediately if you do not complete your assigned tasks to the specifications we require. If you fail to meet our expectations in any way, you will be fired. But, based on your test scores, we don’t think you will have any trouble with what we will ask of you. I hope you don’t mind working late because the shifts currently available are nights only.” John silently nodded his agreement as Talbot continued.

“Last but not least, we hire people who are not only qualified for the position but can be discreet. We want people we know who can keep their mouths shut, if you understand my meaning?” John’s spirits, which had been rising all through this lecture, began to fall again. What was meant by that statement? He frowned at the man in confusion.

Talbot looked down at the papers in front of him and shuffled them until he came to the initial application page that John had filled out. He glanced back up at John with a smile that would not look out of place on a shark and tilted his head to one side. “William—may I call you William? How much investigation will I need to do to find out what you are trying to conceal by changing your name and forging your identity papers?”

The man’s smile widened as John’s expression tightened and his heart rate picked up in response to that statement. As John stared at the man in bewilderment, he had to wonder where Talbot wanted to go with this. Did he know about John’s refusal to be tested for latent guide status? No, it wasn’t possible because he’d be in chains and on his way to the nearest Bureau compound if so. There was a considerable reward offered for lawbreakers like John. But why would Talbot feel the necessity to blackmail him? Just what was going on in the building that the director felt he needed to use extortion on his employees to keep them quiet? Did they do this to everyone or was he just lucky? John narrowed his eyes at Talbot and hardened his expression.

The hateful man spoke again with a negligent wave of his hand. “Whatever your reasons are for trying to hide who you really are is of no interest to me. I realise you are hilariously overqualified for this position, especially with your medical and military background. But you understand that we need employees we can trust to work here. Employees who won’t talk about what they see. Our clients demand that kind of discretion.” He stared at John, his eyes hard and dark as obsidian.

Clearing his throat, Talbot continued. “So it’s now down to you, William. Do you want to accept the position or walk away? I promise no action will be taken against you for forged papers should you decide against working for us.”

John stared unblinkingly at Talbot for a few moments, which seemed to make the sentinel somewhat tense. John could tell that the man was lying through his teeth. If John turned the job down, he’d be reported immediately to the police for suspected forging or identity theft and would be lucky not to
be arrested as soon as he returned to the bed-sit. He actually had no real choice here.

John tightened his mouth and raised his chin. He was desperate and Talbot knew it but John would make the best of this situation. Talbot truly had no idea of the kind of man he was hiring if he thought that fear of disclosure would keep John silent. If someone was being harmed in any way, John wouldn’t hesitate to report it. John had his own, very strict code of morality and would risk his freedom if it meant stopping any abuse he might encounter. Talbot may have just bitten off more than he could chew.

John made his decision, got up and stood at military attention. John could tell the sentinel was slightly startled by his response. “Thank you, sir. I am pleased to accept your offer of employment. When and where shall I report for work?”

It was clear that Talbot hadn’t expected John to accept but he recovered swiftly and pushed a button. “Our Facilities Manager, Ed Riker, will show you around and arrange whatever is necessary. I hope you will work hard and be happy being a member of our little family, William.” The insincere smile was back and John just stared at him in disbelief. He wanted to scoff at the comment about ‘family’ and suspected his experiences would be anything but family-like.

There was a quick knock on the door and a non-descript man entered the room. He looked to be much older than John’s 34 years and was dressed in a shirt, tie and trousers with no jacket. His sleeves were rolled up exposing very hairy arms and he looked nervous.

“Yes, sir? What can I do for you?”

Talbot was writing something on a piece of paper and didn’t look up. “Riker, I’d like you to meet William Larssen.” He didn’t wait for John to even shake hands but went on quickly.

“He’s one of our new hires and I’d like you to show him around.” Talbot handed the man the paper he’d been writing on and looked up finally. “Take him down to Clive to get the hiring paperwork started and then escort him to Smith so he can start instructing him on his duties.”

Riker avoided Talbot’s eyes as he bobbed his head in acknowledgement. “Yes, sir. Right away.” He gestured for John to follow him but as the doctor began to move away, Talbot stood and John turned back to face him.

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine working here with us, William. Just remember what we talked about. That will be all.”

John stood staring closely at Talbot for a moment, then dipped his chin slightly and turned his back on the sentinel to follow Riker out of the office.

The Facilities Manager said nothing as they took the lift down to the ground floor offices and got John’s hiring paperwork started. Once they’d got him an identity card they headed toward the back of the building.

It turned out the clinic was rather massive. It was five storeys and shaped like a square with a hollow centre. In that centre was a rather elaborate courtyard with a beautiful garden. John guessed that it would be an ideal place to enjoy if one was recovering from injury or an illness, especially if one were a sentinel. Half of the patient rooms looked out over this garden and there were many entrances to it from the ground floor.

Riker left him with the Head Cleaner; a man named Pat Smith who was responsible for supervising all the night shift cleaners for the entire building. Smith didn’t have much to say to John either but
gave him an employee handbook, showed him to the cleaner’s locker area, shower and toilet facilities as well as the staff room for meal breaks. He got John’s size and promised him two new uniforms and that he would begin training the following day. Smith told John that he must find and use sentinel-safe personal soaps, deodorants and shampoos from now on. Smith handed him a small bag with a few samples of the types that were commercially available and told John to use them before he came back the next day. John left with instructions to present himself at the staff entrance in the rear of the building at nine the following evening, with his new ID.

As he left to take the Tube home, his mind was swirling with a myriad of questions and excitement. What did Talbot actually know and would he really use it against John, especially if the clinic was also potentially vulnerable? What was going on in the clinic that Talbot felt he needed to blackmail his employees? John knew from experience that gossip was usually rampant in a place like that yet both Smith and Riker had been particularly closed mouthed and said only what was necessary. He’d not seen any other employees aside from the HR man Clive and receptionist yet, so it remained to be seen if everyone else was just as tight lipped. He knew there were doctors, technicians and nurses working there as well but it was unlikely he’d have much contact with them. John had few real answers and there really was no reason to speculate until he had more information. He’d just have to keep his eyes and ears open for any irregularities at the clinic and be prepared to act if he saw anything illegal happening.

It was still early so he got off at the stop before his usual one and walked to the Gibbet to give Hairston the good news and thank him. It was a nice, if cold, evening and the walk was energising and relaxing. He was in an excellent mood when he arrived at the pub and pushed his way into the warm, shabby interior. It wasn’t too busy yet so he was able to get his usual place at the far end of the bar where he could put his back to the wall and watch the door. There was only one other person seated at the bar and he was a few stools away, staring with singular focus down at his pint and seemingly ignoring everything else. John paid him no attention and smiled at Hairston, who limped over to him.

“What can I do for you, Bill?” Hairston’s expression was pleasant and his eyebrows were raised expectantly.

John’s smile grew into a grin. He leaned forward on the bar and lowered his voice. “I’ve got brilliant news, mate. I got the job, thanks to you. Will you let me buy you a drink to celebrate?”

Hairston’s gap toothed smile stretched from ear to ear. “That’s wonderful, Billy! Congratulations! But the drinks are on me! Your money’s no good here, tonight.” With that, the bartender got them both a pint and they knocked their glasses together and laughed in celebration, sloshing beer all over the bar.

It was a good evening. John had a couple of lagers and chatted with Hairston before business picked up and the bartender had to get back to work. John sat with his pint and relaxed, enjoying the fact that things seemed to be finally looking up for him. He had wanted to discuss Talbot’s blackmail threat with Hairston, but after a bit, decided against it.

Now that he was calmer and thought about it, it wasn’t as if Talbot could seriously do much but inconvenience John if he followed through with his threat and he wasn’t going to worry over much about it. There was really no way anyone could trace John’s actual name. His military records had not been redacted but his fingerprints in the records had been altered once he’d been tapped to join the elite unit. So there was no way to connect him with Captain John H. Watson if he chose not to give his real name.

He’d probably get a slap on the wrist if he was caught anyway. There were too many other, more
serious things happening with the depression going on and spending scarce tax money to prosecute a
small-time, non-violent crime wasn’t going to be a huge priority. He would wait and see what went
on with the clinic and try to make the best of the situation whilst he was there. It was a temporary job
after all and hopefully he’d be shipping out with Masters in a few months anyway.

It was starting to get loud and crowded in the pub so it was time for him to leave. Sighing, John
finished his pint and set the empty glass down on the bar. As he picked up his bag of samples and
began to stand up, a large man appeared beside him and threw himself onto the stool next to him,
bumping John hard and forcing him back rather sharply against the wall with a thump.

The man turned to him with a look of surprise and concern. “Oh, I’m so sorry, mate! Didn’t really
see you there. Let me buy you a pint to apologise.”

Unhurt but a bit startled, John blinked up at the man. The stranger was extremely tall, clearly former
military and solidly built. He had short sandy hair, a large bushy moustache and a dark tan that made
his pale blue eyes and straight white teeth stand out dramatically. Even though the hormone
suppressants damped John’s sense of smell, his nose told him immediately that the man was an alpha.
The fact was that the stranger was a very handsome alpha but there was something in his eyes that
caused an instinctive shiver of dislike to run down John’s spine.

Despite the instant aversion, John smiled calmly and shook his head. “It’s fine. No harm done. Ta
for the offer, but I’ve had my limit.”

“You sure you’re okay? I never seem to know my own strength and I really am sorry.” The man put
out a huge, meaty hand and the pale eyes were suddenly friendly and warm. “Sebastian Moran.
Please accept my sincerest apologies, mate.”

The name was familiar but John couldn’t place it at the moment. He also couldn’t refuse to shake the
man’s hand without making a scene or being incredibly rude so he took Moran’s hand firmly in his
and shook. “William Larssen. And apology accepted.”

Moran held onto his hand tightly for a few moments longer than was comfortable, but before John
could say anything else, the big man released him and motioned to Hairston, who limped over,
looking back and forth quickly between John and Moran with a frown.

“A pint for my friend and one for me, Sam.” Hairston glanced questioningly over at John, who
rolled his eyes and nodded.

Moran grinned hugely. “Ta, mate. I appreciate you accepting my apology.”

Hairston was giving Moran the stink eye as he put two pints down on the bar but the large alpha
ignored it as he peeled off two bills from a huge wad of money that made John’s eyes widen in
surprise. The man threw the cash down in front of the bartender.

“Don’t worry about change, Sam. I’m going to sit here and talk to my new friend for a bit.” With
that, Moran turned to John and smiled. He really was an extremely attractive alpha but John turned
his eyes away, picked up the pint and sipped. He had never had any interest in male alphas and
wasn’t about to start now, no matter how good looking the man was.

“So, what brings you to the Gibbet, William? You can call me Seb, by the way. All my friends
do.” He loomed over John and bumped the doctor’s shoulder with his. John couldn’t help but lean
away from him which put his left side firmly against the wall and he frowned in irritation at the big
man. However, Moran quickly backed down and pulled away as he correctly read John’s body
language and reacted appropriately.
The big man laughed. “Sorry about that. I’ve been told I tend to forget personal space when I meet someone I like. And I like you and how you smell a lot.”

John put down the pint and his eyes widened. “What do you mean, you like how I smell?” The doctor was confused. He should smell like a beta, which wasn’t necessarily automatically attractive to an alpha.

Moran lowered his voice, though the pub was rather loud and busy and it was unlikely anyone would overhear them in the corner. “Oh, I know you’re an omega. I can tell the difference between an omega on suppressants and a real beta. Plus your beta scented cologne is wearing off.” He tapped his nose with a thick, scarred finger. “I’m not a full sentinel but I’ve learnt to tell the difference. Only my nose and eyes are enhanced.”

Not sure how to react or what to say to such a strange observation, John frowned again and reached for the pint whilst Moran continued. “It’s okay if you’re shy. A lot of blokes in the military don’t want anyone to know they’re omegas and I understand. Bad for combat conditions but the suppressants really are a great invention for both us alphas and omegas. It makes things so much easier out in the desert, to not have to worry so much about heats and whatnot. But you’re not in combat now. Haven’t you ever wondered what it would be like to stop the suppressants and share your heat with someone you liked?”

Shocked, John stared in bewilderment at the man, wondering if Moran was insane. Surely the man could not be serious. Since birth control rarely worked, omegas *never* shared heats casually unless they were sterile. Recently, there had been a lot of very promising research into reliable birth control but with the world economy now so depressed no one had the funds to continue it. John had been so disappointed when the research had been halted. Even morning after pills rarely worked because of the complexity of the omega heat. So heats meant fertility and sharing them meant that children were the inevitable outcome. It wasn’t possible that Moran did not know this. When John had not needed to hide the fact he was an omega, he’d met alphas, both male and female, who had seemed interested in him but he’d never been propositioned so crudely or so offensively before and he didn’t like it at all.

The absolute lack of respect and rudeness of Moran’s impertinent question went beyond the pale. Mouth tight with annoyance, John carefully set down the pint, very aware he’d had a bit too much. He wasn’t completely pissed but he was close. However, his anger was rising and he could feel his face flush. The last thing he wanted was to overreact or create a scene so the best thing for him to do was to be off.

Standing, he picked up his bag and turned to leave only to find Moran’s hand wrapped tightly around his left wrist. Surprised, he tried to shake it off but couldn’t without risking damage to his shoulder. It was as if the other man’s hand was made of granite and Moran wouldn’t be moved. John stared into the man’s eyes and saw a shrewd calculation there. Moran had been deliberately baiting him for some reason that was unclear to John.

"Don't run off in a huff, luv! I didn't mean to offend you."

Confused and stunned, John asked, “What is it you want with me? We’ve never met before and you know nothing about me.”

Moran’s voice sank low and was barely audible but he began speaking as an alpha to an omega. Despite the suppressants, John’s knees trembled with the desire to obey but he locked them tight in defiance as Moran spoke. “Ah, but I liked you the moment I saw you and I’ve asked around about you, Billy. I know you’re looking to ship out and I want you to join my mercenary group. I could use an omega like you.”
John’s anger evaporated, replaced by alarm and bewilderment. He could feel the blood drain from his face. Moran couldn’t possibly be serious. Join his group? Use an omega like him? Then it hit him why the name sounded familiar.

Moran’s Marauders, a small mercenary group that specialised in explosives work and snipers, operating mainly in the Middle East. They had a terrible reputation for unnecessary brutality and indiscriminate murder of civilians. They also had a bad reputation for losing most of their recruits within the first six months, necessitating their need to sign up new people constantly. How they financed their operation was a mystery. Only the truly desperate hired on with them and only as a last resort. John was nowhere near that desperate yet.

Hairston stomped over to them and John was finally able to pull his arm away from Moran’s grip but only because the huge man let go. The bartender scowled at Moran.

“Don’t you try anything with Bill, Seb. I mean it.”

Moran turned slitted eyes on Hairston and spoke with disdain. “Billy-boy doesn’t need a beta’s protection, Sam. He’s decided to ship out with me, haven’t you, luv?” The sharp blue eyes stabbed at John and dared the doctor to contradict him. John’s dislike crystallised into pure revulsion and broke the spell the alpha was trying to weave.

Stepping back and away, John shook his head. “There’s no way I’d ever sign up with the likes of you, Moran. Now leave me the fuck alone.”

Sitting back, Moran gave John his huge white grin, seemingly vastly amused. “Well, you can’t blame a bloke for trying to get a piece of that gorgeous arse, now can you Sam? I’m sure I’ll be seeing you later, Billy. Cheers, then.”

John felt his face heat up again in anger. “Not if I see you first, Moran.” The huge mercenary laughed raucously at John’s furious expression and turned his back contemptuously, drinking deep from his pint. A couple of other men looked up and stared curiously at them before turning back to their own business.

Humiliated and furious, John took a careful, deep breath and glanced back over at Hairston, who was staring at him in concern.

“Night, Sam.” The bartender nodded to him as John made his way carefully out of the pub and back onto the Tube to get home. He kept a paranoid eye out for anyone following him but thankfully didn’t see any pursuers. The doctor didn’t even want to think about what Moran wanted with him. Obviously, the crude man had indicated that he wanted John sexually but was there more to it? Bonding was implied but why? Moran didn’t know John from Adam’s housecat. Or did he? He’d known that John had served in the military and in the desert. How had he known that? And what was all that about joining his mercenary group? Nothing made sense. John wanted absolutely nothing to do with the man and he would be sure to avoid him at all costs in future.

Finally back at his bed-sit, John tried to calm himself and prioritise. The new job came first and he tried to put Moran out of his mind. He’d make a point of not going back to the Gibbet until he knew that Masters was in town. That should take care of the problem. It would be a few months at the most and though he would miss seeing Hairston, he didn’t want to risk running across Moran again if he could help it.

With that settled and feeling more composed, John took out the handbook he’d been given. He spent the rest of the evening resting and reading before finally going to bed. The rules and regulations of his new job didn’t seem particularly complicated but there certainly were a lot of ways to get fired.
Apparently there were parts of the clinic he was never to access but all that would be explained during training. Also, aside from failing to perform his work adequately, if he disobeyed or questioned any order from a superior, he would be made redundant immediately. There were a fair number of things he wasn’t to do but he got the idea pretty quickly.

The book was also a fascinating primer on sentinels in general and gave specific information on what to avoid in order to prevent harm to them. A sick sentinel was apparently very vulnerable and the quickest way to get fired and even charged with criminal neglect and assault was to ignore protocol, touch a sick sentinel without gloves or mishandle things a sentinel might use. Even speaking too loudly was an offence that could get one made redundant very quickly. The rules made sense, in a strange way and John understood the restrictions were there to protect both the sentinel and employee.

In the meantime, he had to get ready to start training for the new job and the night shift, at that. As a doctor, he was used to long or double shifts and adjusting to night work wasn’t all that difficult for him. He just had to change some of his schedule and be prepared to bring his own meals with him to the clinic. He’d noticed there was a refrigerator in the staff room but he was paranoid enough that he wasn’t willing to leave his food where just anyone could access it. He would have to make meals that would keep in his locker. He had been assigned one and had been told he could bring his own lock. John had one that was almost impossible to pick. Using that lock would bring him peace of mind about leaving his things unguarded.

The next evening John was ready to start his new job, having shaved and showered with the new products he’d been given. He still used his beta body wash to reinforce his faint beta scent though. He doubted that would affect any of the sentinels adversely since it was mainly synthetic hormone. Many unbonded omegas took suppressants which made them smell faintly like betas to most people, except people like Moran apparently. Did he really smell like an omega even though he was on suppressants? It shouldn’t have been possible, really. Moran was the first to mention or even notice his omega scent since he’d become Bill Larssen. It was worrying. Could the full sentinels at the clinic smell his omega scent also? John wondered if his body wash wasn’t working as well as it should do. His visit to the pub had been late and maybe it really had just worn off. If so, he should buy more, bring it to work and reapply it during the day.

Still keeping an eye out for Moran, John arrived about fifteen minutes early for his shift and was shown to the changing area where his new uniforms had been placed in his locker. They’d even had name tags made for him that could be pinned on the uniform. He surreptitiously examined the locker carefully for any way it could be accessed other than the door. Finding nothing, he quickly changed into his new uniform and locked up his things. He joined the patiently waiting Smith and was taken to a large storage cupboard where he was assigned his own trolley full of new cleaning tools that he would need to complete his job.

Every tool was top of the line and all the cleaning solutions were extremely mild and rated as safe for use around sentinels. The hoover that was assigned to him was straight out of the box, had complex filters everywhere and was nearly silent when switched on. He’d never seen anything like it and it probably cost more than he’d make in six months.

“There are twenty rooms on each north and south wings of the building for a total of forty patient rooms with toilets. The east wing is where the doctor’s offices, exercise rooms, a couple of loos and some treatment rooms are located. Some of the lab work is done there, as well. The night shift is responsible for cleaning those rooms, too, though the critical care ward is off limits. The west side of the building is where the main lifts and the nurses’ station are located. Mr Talbot’s office and his private toilet are on that side of the building, as well. I’ll be giving you keys to those rooms if you stay long enough.
“You’ll be trained to work on the sentinel floor and you’ll be assigned a specific number of rooms to clean each night. You and Olav Lee will be the night shift workers and between the two of you, you’ll cover the entire floor. Olav is the only one of the night shift permitted access to the critical care ward. The number of rooms to be cleaned will vary and sometimes you’ll finish before end of shift, so bring a book or something to entertain yourself. Also, you’ll occasionally be asked to work as an orderly to help transfer patients or just to help if one becomes unruly.”

John frowned. “Does that happen often? A patient becoming ‘unruly’?” Everyone knew that unbound sentinels could become overwhelmed if one or more of their senses went out of control. It was called a zone but that was pretty much all John knew of them. Could a zone induce a sentinel to strike out physically and make him or her violent enough for the intervention of orderlies? He was under the impression that most zones made sentinels comatose. The fact was that John just didn’t know that much about sentinels but suspected he’d find out more whether he wanted to or not.

“More often than you’d think.” Smith muttered under his breath and didn’t say any more as he took John to a room that looked like it hadn’t been cleaned or used in some time.

“We don’t have many patients on this floor at the moment but I understand we’ll be having some new ones transferred here in the next few days. We tend to get the ones other hospitals can’t handle or if they need more extensive care. Sentinels need special handling and not many hospitals are equipped to deal with their needs.

“Now, I want you to clean this room as well as you know how.” He held up a hand before John could protest. “I know you’ve not been given any training yet, but I need to see how well you do without so I know what we should concentrate on in future. I’ve found it’s a more efficient way to train people when you find and focus on their weaknesses. You’ve got one hour to clean this room from top to bottom and then we’ll see what skills you’ll need to work on.” With that, the man left John alone in the room.

It was clear the place was dusty and when he checked the loo, it looked as if someone had had a drunken brawl in there. He stood looking around with his hands on his hips and trying to decide how he should begin his attack when he saw movement out of the window. He moved over to the curtain and twitched it back somewhat. The fabric felt a bit grimy when he touched it and the windows were also smeared with hand and fingerprints. But he could see very clearly out of the window and across the courtyard.

All ten windows to the patient rooms that faced the courtyard on the north side of the building were easily visible from where he stood. Many of the rooms were empty though some of the curtains were closed and John guessed those might be occupied. However, directly across the courtyard from him was a room with open curtains that was brightly lit and full of people.

There was a light haired man dressed in a hospital gown, lying on a bed and he was strapped down, whilst doctors or technicians of some kind were taking blood. He was hooked up to an IV line that looked to be for simple hydration. The man was unnaturally still and John would have thought him dead if the others weren’t clustered around him. He could also see someone pacing nearby who looked upset and very worried.

John was so caught up in the drama that he nearly had a heart attack when one of the cleaning tools he’d set behind him slid to the floor with a loud clatter. He jumped and turned around, heart pounding and suddenly remembered with relief why he was there. He was much too jumpy and needed to calm himself. He also needed to start the job and stop wool-gathering. Quickly, he set to work, starting with the loo. This kind of work was familiar, totally mindless and even soothing. He’d had his share of this kind of duty whilst in basic training and knew how to make the task go
quickly and efficiently. Some of his memories of that time had been good ones but being forced to clean the loo with a toothbrush as punishment when one of his unit members had screwed up wasn’t one of them.

Even though he’d never been around sentinels before, he tried to think of what would be most important to a sentinel and what would likely most irritate or harm them. It was pretty easy to figure out and using common sense was the best way to go. He cleaned every crevice between the tiles in and around the bath, around the fixtures and on the floor, getting down on his hands and knees to get behind the toilet, under the sink and scrubbing everything. He found that there were tools in his trolley that made these tasks much easier than using a toothbrush and he grinned to himself at the memory.

He finished the bath quickly and examined the main room. The bed needed changing and pretty much everything, even the walls, required a good wash. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to finish the entire room in time but he’d give it a good try. John started by hoovering the floor as well as the curtains and every flat surface. He got onto the chair and hoovered out the air vents and then wiped them and the duct work as far inside as he could reach.

Whilst he was still on the chair, he took the opportunity to clean the telly that was mounted high on the wall in the corner of the room. He immediately spotted a small security camera that had been built into it but decided to ignore it. He wasn’t exactly surprised there were cameras in the rooms and at least he’d not noticed one in the loo. Maybe they were there for practical reasons? The fact that they were hidden and not easily observable by the average person was an indication the reason was at the very least somewhat suspicious.

John then started washing down each flat surface with some of the cleaning solutions he’d been given, including the walls, chair railing and skirtingboards. There was a white noise machine on the nightstand which he checked to make sure it was functional and clean. Each drawer of the nightstand was pulled open and wiped out. Pulling out the wardrobe exposed a lot of dust collected behind it. He made sure to check inside the wardrobe as well.

He mopped the floor and cleaned the window until both sparkled. The bed was next and he wiped it and the one chair down as well as flipping and hoovering both sides of the mattress after he removed the protective cover. He then replaced it with a clean one from the wardrobe. He also found fresh linen in the wardrobe though there weren’t any fitted sheets. So John had to make hospital corners, which he’d not done for some time. He still had the knack though and smiled when he was able to make the sheets taut enough that he could bounce a coin off the bed. He stuffed the dirty linens in a special bag on his trolley and smiled again in satisfaction as he looked around the room. It was much better than before and the surfaces shined.

He checked the time and still had a few minutes left, so he hoovered once again and then waited for Smith to return. The man came back exactly on time and raised an eyebrow to see John standing idle, clearly finished and waiting for him.

As Smith pulled on a white cotton glove, John nearly laughed but was able to maintain his composure and covered his amusement with a discreet cough. He watched as Smith carefully went through both rooms, checking every surface and even under the furniture. John had been careful to get those clean as he knew those areas were usually forgotten. Being a doctor made one aware of things that most people normally overlooked.

Smith had a clipboard and was marking down things as he went but didn’t say anything. Finally the inspection was over and John awaited the verdict.

The head cleaner scratched at his head and then gave John a lopsided smile. “Well, I have to say I’ve
not had anyone yet who was able to finish the entire room in one hour. Very impressive. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you had some experience with this.” He eyed John with a dubious expression.

The doctor cleared his throat. “Well, I was in the army for a few years.”

“Ah, that explains it then. Some of our best cleaners have some military training. I must say you’ve passed this inspection with flying colours, lad. Well done.” Smith held up the finger on his white glove and it was only slightly smudged a pale grey colour. “Are you ready to begin work, now? I don’t think there’s much that I can show you at this point. Right now you’ll just clean empty rooms. Later this week I’ll show you how to clean occupied rooms. That can take a bit of finesse, depending on the person in the room. Come along. I’ll show you which ones need cleaning. You just have to ring me if you have any questions. Here’s my mobile number.”

With that, Smith led John out of the room and toward the front of the hall where he pointed out five rooms. “All these need a thorough cleaning. There’s one more on the north wing that I want you to get as well. It’s room number 512. Just go past the nurse’s station at the front of the building and it’ll be on your right. Ring me to double check when you’re done.” With that, Smith walked off down the hall and into the service lift in back.

John smiled, shook his head and got to work. None of the rooms were anywhere near as dirty as the first but he checked everything carefully anyway. Looks could always be deceiving and he made sure everything was as clean as possible. When he was done with the five rooms on the south wing John made his way to the room on the opposite side of the building. The nurse’s station was currently unattended, making John wonder where everyone was. He spotted Talbot’s office where he’d had his second interview and noted the location of the private toilet nearby.

Once he arrived at 512 he realised it was directly across from the room he’d seen through the window earlier in the evening. As he worked, he kept the door to the room open and glanced across the hall occasionally. John could see the lights were on and wondered if the doctors were still in attendance. It was unlikely, though. It’d been hours since he’d seen them. Suddenly, he heard a scream and then the door of 511 slammed open with a loud smash. The person John had assumed was a relative ran out, looking panicked.

He saw John immediately and cried out in relief. “Help me, please! My cousin, he screamed, then fell unconscious and the nurses won’t come!”

Behind the panicking man, John could see the patient in the bed. The man was no longer restrained but clearly out cold. Dropping his cleaning tools, John strode quickly across the hall and into the room, followed closely by the frightened relative. Pulling out his mobile, John dialled Smith, told him of the situation and requested immediate aid. Smith promised help shortly and rang off.

John didn’t want to do anything or even touch the man without authorisation and so simply waited, observed the situation and reassured the relative that help was on the way. However, as he watched, the man’s muscles began to go into rhythmic contractions and it was then that John realised the man was now in the clonic stage of what appeared to be a grand mal seizure.

Acting quickly, John carefully rolled the man onto his side and made sure his gown was loose and the bedclothes pulled back to prevent him from getting tangled. There wasn’t much else he could do but wait for help and it seemed as if it was taking forever for aid to arrive. A normal grand mal seizure lasted about two minutes and then any number of things could happen. The man could remain unconscious or wake up confused with a severe headache. There was no way to tell, especially since John had no idea what was causing this seizure.

The relative gasped in horror and pointed as the blond man suddenly sat up in the bed. His eyes
opened but they had rolled back in his head and only the whites were showing. The man moaned hideously and started to shake as blood gushed out of his nose. His arms and legs began to flail uncontrollably and the IV line tore out of his arm causing more blood to be spattered on the bed and floor. Before anyone could act, the man started to roll off the bed, still kicking and waving his arms.

Ducking the thrashing arms and legs, John reacted quickly and caught the patient before he hit the ground. The doctor carefully flipped the man back onto the bed with little trouble and no resistance. He grabbed one arm and was able to refasten a restraint whilst the man sucked in a deep breath and froze at his touch. John got a hold of the patient's other arm and secured him without trouble whilst the man began to shudder and shake. The patient’s eyes were still open and rolled back but he was gasping like a fish out of water. Thankfully, his breathing seemed fine otherwise.

Quickly turning to the relative, John ordered the man to get a wet flannel and use it to stop the nosebleed. Even though the patient had finally stopped struggling, John attached the chest, hip and leg restraints and then raised the head of the bed whilst the relative held the wet flannel to his cousin’s bloody face and nose. John was pressing a clean piece of gauze to the bleeding arm when Smith and another man he’d not met yet arrived in a rush.

Both Smith and the strange man had gloves on and converged on the man on the bed, who was now breathing in deep, shuddering gasps. He was also now alert and staring around the room in fear and confusion.

John stepped back quickly as a couple of doctors and a nurse ran into the room and took over. The cousin began to talk quickly to them but John couldn’t hear as he was pulled out of the room by a rather frightened looking Smith.

“Larssen, what’s happening? Why didn’t you wait for us?” Smith had John by an arm and hauled him forcefully back into the room he had been cleaning earlier and closed the door.

Shaking off the tight hold and frowning, John felt unexpectedly defensive. “I couldn’t wait, sir. The patient was seizing and so I turned him onto his side so he wouldn’t choke if he vomited. But he began to haemorrhage from his nose and became violent. He was out of control and would have injured himself if he’d managed to get out of the bed, so I picked him up and put him back. He stopped fighting immediately and I was able to restrain him. He seemed to come back to himself at that point and allowed me to stop the bleeding on his arm. I told his cousin to get a wet flannel to try to stop the bleeding from his nose. That’s all that happened and his relative can confirm everything if you ask him.” Something made him refrain from mentioning the hidden cameras he’d noticed in each room he’d cleaned but he wouldn’t hesitate to say something if he needed that backup evidence.

Smith took a breath in relief but looked hard at John. “It’s good the relative can back you up, lad. But don’t say anything to anyone about this unless you’re asked directly, okay? You touched an ill sentinel without gloves and you could have injured him. You can get arrested for that, even if it was an emergency.”

Smith went to the door and looked out, blocking the sight of the room across the hall from John and then closed the door again.

John stepped forward with a frown. “I’ve seen seizures many times before but I’ve never seen anything like that. What’s going on here?”

The head cleaner seemed to consider carefully before he answered. “That sentinel was in a very deep zone and wasn’t expected to live but now he’s awake and alert. Sometimes the medicines the doctors give them make them violent and it shakes them out of their zones. That’s why I said earlier
that they get unruly more often than you’d think.” The man sighed and looked appraisingly at John.

“Well, you certainly got your baptism by fire today, lad.” Smith reached into a pocket and handed John some thin cotton gloves. “You did the right thing and reacted properly. I should have given these gloves to you earlier but didn’t expect anything like this to happen on your first day. Just next time wear these to protect yourself and the sentinel.”

“You mean there’s going to be a next time?” John was not completely mollified by Smith’s explanation.

“Oh, I’m certain of it. Now finish up here and report to me in the staff room when you’re done. I’ll assign Olav to clean that room. I also need to check the other rooms you’ve cleaned and then we can discuss your work.” He gave John a reassuring smile and walked out.

John was left holding the pair of gloves and staring out the now open door. He could see into the room across the hall and was glad to note the relieved and happy cousin standing by the bed of the patient, talking a mile a minute whilst the sentinel responded and hung onto the man’s hand. The patient was no longer restrained and the doctors all looked pleased and rather smug as they trooped out of the room. None of them seemed to notice John’s existence at all.

As he watched, John absently rubbed at his throat, just beneath his chin. It was itching and slightly tender but the feeling faded quickly. Maybe he was developing a minor allergy to the dust. Getting back to work, he finished cleaning the room, returned his tools to the cupboard and then made his way to the staff room to meet Smith. He’d been at work for nearly seven hours without a break and was hungry and thirsty. He wondered if he’d be allowed to get something to drink at some point soon.

Smith was waiting for him as he arrived at the staff room and John joined him at the table. There was a fresh pot of rather excellent tea and a mug waiting for him.

“Help yourself, William. I’m sure you can use it. It’s not often you don’t get a break for a meal and I apologise for not allowing you to get your lunch. I’ll let you go an hour early in exchange.”

After thanking the man, John poured some tea and offered to top off Smith’s mug. “No, lad. I’ve had plenty. Now let’s get started.” John sat up straight and prepared to listen closely.

“I have to tell you that I’m very pleased with the quality of your work and I’m hoping you’ll be willing to stay here. I think I need to tell you some of what’s going on at the clinic since you’ve already begun to see some of what you’ll have to deal with in future. But you have got to promise me that what I’m going to tell you will go no further, William. I am very serious about this. You must not mention it to a soul or we’ll both be out of a job.”

Taking a careful sip of his drink, John thought about it for a moment. This was likely the only chance he’d have to find out what was going on at the clinic and he nodded his agreement. “I promise not to mention this to anyone outside the clinic.”

“Fair enough, lad. I’ve been working here for over ten years. Dr Price himself hired me and I’ve seen a lot of things happen here and seen a lot of patients come and go over the years. Most of the private patients we treat on the lower floors are not sentinels and they come here to get rehabilitation for drugs and alcohol—usually ordered by the courts. They are often very wealthy or famous people, which is why our staff must be discreet. Once you’ve worked here long enough and have proven yourself, you’ll eventually be loaned out to the lower floors to help out when necessary. Price Clinic has a very good reputation for helping recovering addicts and very few of our patient return.
Most of the money the clinic makes comes from those patients.

“However, we’re the only private clinic in London that specialises in sentinels and, until recently, all sentinels were welcome here at no charge. That was before Mr Talbot became the director after Dr Price retired. Anyway, there are normally two reasons a sentinel is brought here. The first and most common reason is zoning. Most people don’t know this but an unbonded sentinel is very vulnerable to zones and they happen more often than we like to think. Normally it’s temporary and they can be brought out of it by a touch, a sound or strong smell by pretty much anybody.

“On the other hand, sometimes an unfortunate sentinel can fall into a zone so deep that they can’t get themselves out and normal distractions won’t work. In the past, when a sentinel fell into a zone like that, usually only a compatible, unbonded guide could help and it ended up with a bonding. Back then, if there were no guides available, the sentinel would die.

“Years ago, the balance between guides and sentinels was much more evenly distributed. But for reasons we still don’t understand, guides today are scarce and sentinels outnumber them because there are now so many partials. It’s getting better with the new laws bringing in latents but, because it costs so much to obtain a guide in this economy, many partial sentinels and even some full sentinels can’t afford it without government subsidies and will stay unbonded for their entire lives. And only full sentinels are eligible for subsidies.

“So, in order to save the lives of these unbonded sentinels, the doctors here at the clinic are experts at using a mixture of drugs that can bring sentinels out of these zones. It doesn’t always work and the side effects can be very hard on the sentinel so it’s used as a last resort, but we have a fairly good success rate. What you saw this evening was an example of the drugs working. It took longer than usual but they did bring that sentinel out of his zone and saved his life.

“The doctors here are proud of their work. Since Mr Talbot took over from Dr Price, the clinic’s reputation has grown and there are now plans to open a new sentinel facility outside of the city. They will be accepting paying patients from all over the world soon and they expect business to start booming.

“Now the second reason sentinels become patients here is because of addictions and this is also tied in with zones, unfortunately. There have always been some sentinels who abuse alcohol and drugs, though, until recently, they were few and far between since most are often violently allergic to opiates and strong chemicals. It doesn’t take much of an illegal substance to affect their senses and make them so sick they can’t continue with the abuse.

“But now we’re seeing desperate, unbonded sentinels using a new designer street drug called ‘AG’, which is short for Artificial Guide. No one knows where it came from or really understands how the drug works but it can dampen the sentinels’ senses enough to soothe and control them the way a guide would do. Apparently, they can use it for a time with good results but as with all street drugs, it’s unpredictable and dependent on who is distributing it and what they cut it with. If it’s too pure or if it’s diluted with something toxic, it can cause hallucinations, paranoia and physical violence followed by a deep zone and death. Using the drug for more than a month seems to have terrible side effects and the worst part is that the user becomes addicted very quickly and will do anything for a fix.

“We’re seeing an increasing number of young sentinels come through here for treatment and it’s not pretty. Our people get called in to help with the violent outbursts often so be prepared to help out at any moment during your shifts here. Night shift is calmer and there are fewer staff members about but there’s an occasional incident like what happened tonight.

“From what I’ve heard around here, the police are trying to track down the developers and
distributors but so far no one seems to have a clue where it’s coming from. The users are no help because their dealers disappear when the police go after them. It’s a shame because the drug is terribly destructive and I hope they can stop it soon. An entire young generation of sentinels is being horribly affected by it.”

John noted that Smith seemed terribly sad at that thought and could tell the man had nothing but good intentions toward sentinels. He’d heard nothing about this epidemic of drug use by young sentinels but that wasn’t surprising. He’d been fighting a war and patching up soldiers for the past five years, after all.

John was curious about the drugs the doctors were using at the clinic though. He wondered what they were doing and if it was safe and following proper protocols. From what Smith said, they seemed to be getting positive results but were they being ethical about it? Sentinel medicine was a huge speciality of its own and John had not been interested in pursuing that field whilst in med school. Maybe he should search out some peer reviewed journals in sentinel medicine and see what they were saying about it all.

Smith continued. “So there you have it, William. I think you can go far here if you choose to stay. Do you have any questions for me?” John shook his head. “No? Okay, then, you’re free to go for the night. Tomorrow, I’ll start training you on the protocol for cleaning occupied rooms, treatment rooms, public toilets and offices. I think we’ll be getting more patients and the rooms will be filling up, so I expect we’ll all be very busy soon.”

After saying goodnight to Smith, John gathered his things and left the clinic to go home. He was pleasantly tired and felt as if he’d accomplished a fair amount that day. It was a nice feeling and one he’d not had for a long time. The talk he’d received from Smith about the clinic and what it did was very helpful and had clarified some things for John.

There was an all-night chemists’ shop on the way home, so John stopped in and bought sentinel safe products and more beta scent. After doing a few chores around the flat, he picked up his laptop, walked down to the Starbucks which opened at seven, bought a coffee and ate his delayed lunch whilst searching sentinel medical journals online. There were many articles about using drug therapy for deep zones that went back decades. The more recent articles were what he wanted to read, but whenever he found one, he hit a rather expensive pay wall and so was only able to peruse the abstracts of the articles. He then tried to find out any information he could on the street drug, Artificial Guide but strangely found nothing in the journals.

He did find a lot of mention of AG on various social networking sites. John was surprised to find out it had no effect whatsoever on non-sentinels but a profound effect on sentinels. He was horrified at how it was being hyped on the sites as better than a guide and instructions on where to find the drug. John knew the police must be onto these sites and hoped they’d be shut down but he supposed ten more would crop up with every one that was taken down. In the meantime, he found a few sites that described the negative side effects and the nasty aspects of addiction to AG. Withdrawal sounded horrendous and very similar to what was experienced with heroin or cocaine. Now John felt as if he had a bit more of a grasp on what was being done at the clinic and despite his shaky introduction by Talbot, he was glad there was such a place to help sentinels. It was still early morning once he closed down his laptop and headed home to bed.

His next evening at work was very busy. More sentinels had come in that day and Smith began training John to clean occupied rooms. It was something that was rarely done because that was normally handled by the day shift but it was occasionally necessary for the night shift to do it so it was important John know how to do it properly. It wasn’t difficult but it was important to be quiet and careful to avoid disturbing the patients. Most of them seemed to be deeply asleep or almost
John was able to meet the other cleaner on the night shift that evening but the man was aloof and close-mouthed. Olav Lee was the one who had come with Smith to help the ill sentinel the previous night but the big man didn’t seem particularly friendly. Olav was responsible for cleaning the isolation ward, which was the one area in the east wing that John was not permitted. Thankfully, Olav arrived earlier in the work day than John did and it didn’t seem as if their paths would cross very often.

Smith was pleased with John’s progress. “Next, I’ll train you to clean the nursing station, the toilets and the doctor’s offices. You’ll need to be very careful, especially the doctor’s offices. It’s important not to disturb anything that they may be working on, especially in Mr Talbot’s office. He gets very irate if anything gets moved or if he thinks you’re snooping.”

The week went by quickly as did the next. Winter was slowly leaving but it was going to be a cold spring and John was glad of the coat and gloves he’d been able to buy with his first pay packet. Work was very busy and there was a steady flow of patients in and out of the wards. Most of the zoned patients were able to be helped and were discharged fairly quickly. Those very few who came in with addiction to AG were extremely sick and ended up staying for weeks, sometimes in the critical care ward before progressing back into the main clinic and therapy. It wasn’t hard to recognise the symptoms of that addiction. The patients were pale, weak and had trouble keeping food and water down. They also seemed to be in a lot of pain. Once the withdrawal symptoms eased, the young patients usually sprang back quickly and responded to treatment. It was something that John was always glad to see. So far he’d not encountered any AG addict that was having the nasty side effects that Smith had mentioned and he hoped he never would do.

John’s work was exemplary and Smith happily increased his responsibilities. The head cleaner kept a close eye on him but John did well. Soon he was trusted to clean the doctor’s offices, therapy rooms and the labs as well as Talbot’s office and private toilet. It wasn’t as if the work was difficult and it actually helped the doctor keep his arm and shoulder limber and loose. He still kept up with his exercise and running routine and found his spirits rising considerably as things continued to go well. It was nice to finally have a regular schedule and the best part was the substantial paycheque at the end of every week. Also, there was the possibility of a pay rise at the end of the month.

John had decided to forego opening a bank account using his false name and cashed his cheques instead, bringing the money home and hiding it with the rest of his savings beneath a floorboard he’d carefully loosened under the bed. His real identity papers were there, also. He hated doing that but he was paranoid enough to want to make sure his things were well hidden from any potential burglar. He was still very careful with his money but as the possibility of becoming homeless faded, the stress he’d been carrying as a result faded as well and he began to relax and enjoy his work. Though he knew that the job would begin to bore him to tears within a short period of time, it was nice to have some security, such as it was.

Even though things were going extremely well for him on the job, John had begun to notice an increase in headaches whenever he was around large crowds recently, especially when he used the Tube during the day. Headaches were fewer when he could keep a distance from people and they disappeared gradually when he made it home or after arriving at work where he encountered very few people. He didn’t want to contemplate what was causing it but deep down he knew that his latent guide abilities were finally beginning to manifest themselves. The timing couldn’t be worse for this to happen. The headaches were caused by the barrage of emotions he was picking up from the strangers he encountered. Finding some way to suppress the abilities and make it out of the country before they matured or betrayed him was going to be interesting.
Being assigned to the night shift had turned out to be a stroke of luck in that rush hour was over by the time he took the Tube to and from work and he could sometimes find a compartment on the train with only one or two other people. That way he could easily handle the unwelcome feelings he was receiving from others. Refusing to think about his emerging latent talent was his only response at this point. He didn’t have any idea about how to shield himself and there really was nothing to be done. Wasting energy worrying about it was counterproductive, though it stayed constantly in the back of his mind despite his best intentions. He coped as best he could and counted the days until Masters showed up to start her recruiting.

Arriving early to work at the end of his fourth week, he was met by Lee in the changing room which was a bit unusual since it was the big man’s night off. “Talbot wants you to meet him down at the loading bay. He needs a driver tonight. I’ll take your shift.”

Surprised, John simply nodded and headed back to the lift, taking it to down to the basement level. He wondered why and what Talbot wanted him to drive though he was glad of the change in routine.

When the lift dropped him off, it took a few moments for him to find the loading bay. He’d not been to this area of the basement before and it was a bit like a maze. A couple of the doors he encountered before he found the way to the loading bay had ‘Do Not Enter: Hazardous Waste’ signs on them, which seemed rather odd to him. It made more sense that rooms in a clinic used for hazardous waste would likely be located closer to the loading bay and not deep in the bowels of the building. If he recalled correctly, a recent city ordinance had just passed, mandating that all hazardous waste was to be stored no more than 24 hours in a facility the size of Price Clinic and had to be properly disposed of by a company specifically trained and licensed. Why would they need so many rooms to store hazardous waste?

Dropping that line of thought as unproductive, John finally found his way to the back and immediately saw a small lorry parked at the loading bay with a handful of people carefully carrying boxes to stack inside the vehicle. Most of the boxes had hazardous waste symbols on them like the ones on the doors further inside the clinic. Talbot himself was waiting for John by the loading bay area.

“William. I heard good things about you from Pat. He says you’ve been doing an excellent job. I’m very pleased to know that you seem to be doing well here.”

John nodded and tried hard to keep a respectful expression on his face. “Yes, sir. I’m grateful to you for the opportunity.” He wondered why they were doing deliveries and pick ups at night. However, traffic during the day in London was legendary in its congestion so maybe it was more cost effective and expedient for the clinic to have the lorries run at night.

Talbot gave him a quick, false smile as his attention was diverted to another man coming their way with a clipboard. “Good. That’s good. I hope you recall me asking you about your license to drive a lorry? Well, I need you tonight. Our regular driver isn’t available and Gary here will be your navigator. If you have any questions, I’m sure he can answer them.”

Gary walked past them toward the lorry, ignoring John and Talbot completely. The sentinel jerked his head toward Gary as he walked away. “He’s not one for talking. You’d best follow him now. Do what you’re told, get back here quickly and I’ll see there’s some extra in your next pay packet.”

With that, the man dismissed John and walked off toward the lifts. Turning away, John could see that the men had finished loading and closed the lorry’s back door. Something was telling him that the whole scenario seemed off somehow but he couldn’t put a finger on what exactly. The body language of some of the labourers seemed odd but again John couldn’t say what or why. Reluctant
to attribute the feelings to his latent guide senses, John shrugged dismissively and trotted off after
Gary. Sliding into the driver’s seat of the cab, he started up the diesel engine and proceeded to adjust
the seat and check the mirrors.

Once he was ready, John turned to Gary and lifted an eyebrow. “So where do we go now?” It was
pouring rain but John had no problem driving in the wet weather.

Never once looking at John, Gary proceeded to give him instructions, but never gave him any actual
addresses. The man seemed to be completely absorbed with his thoughts but from what John could
tell, he wasn’t trying to be purposefully rude. John had the feeling that something was seriously
worrying the man and he had no energy to devote to social niceties. Thankfully, John had an
excellent sense of direction and knew the basic layout of London rather well, though he wasn’t
intimately familiar with all the streets and alleys. In the army, he excelled at reading maps and could
always remember where he’d been once he’d travelled to a location so he didn’t expect any
problems.

They drove to numerous places, picking up and dropping off various things for most of the night.
Since it was clear Gary wasn’t interested in talking except for giving directions, John drove quickly
and efficiently through the downpour, rarely encountering much traffic. He never asked questions or
offered to help move the boxes after the first stop. Gary had rejected his offer emphatically and left
him alone in the lorry to wait.

The side mirrors were excellent for watching the activity going on at the loading bays behind the
vehicle, though the rain running down the glass surface kept him from seeing much detail. There
seemed to be a few people loading and unloading things in the brightly lit buildings quickly but
carefully. John did notice a large number of rather big men standing around the lorry and inside the
loading bays whose only purpose seemed to be to keep watch. For what, John didn’t know and
wasn’t sure he wanted to find out.

He did note that most of them, from what he could see, were rather rough looking characters. A few
of them radiated an excessive sense of menace that John thought was seriously unnecessary. Maybe
the things they were transporting were very valuable and guards were needed to protect the cargo.
John just didn’t know, but the feeling that something was off about the entire operation began to
definitely take root and he couldn’t shake it off.

They drove around for hours and never stopped for a meal or break. Though John was very hungry,
he said nothing and kept driving. Finally, they turned the lorry back toward the clinic where John
backed up to the loading bay and shut down the engine. They were greeted by Talbot and more
labourers waiting to unload the full lorry. Gary got out of the cab immediately and walked over to
their employer, speaking quietly to him. John didn’t want to intrude and used the opportunity to
stretch his rather stiff shoulders and legs since he’d been sitting for hours. He noticed the labourers
had not even opened up the lorry yet. Apparently they were waiting for John to leave the vicinity
before they began to unload.

Checking the time, he saw that he still had a few more hours of his shift to go yet so he began to
walk toward the lift. Their employer finished speaking with Gary, who buggered off whilst Talbot
caught up with John. Talbot gave John another smarmy smile, though this one seemed somewhat
more sincere than any others. “You made excellent time tonight and Gary had good things to say
about you. He said you stayed focused on the job and didn’t ask questions. I like that in an
employee.”

This took John by surprise. “Oh. Well, that’s good, I suppose. I did my best, sir. Thank you again for
the opportunity.”
The lift arrived and John waited until Talbot had entered and then followed. “Yes, I would say that’s good, William. You may take the rest of the night off and go home early if you like. I’ll see to it that you’re paid for the full shift with something extra added. You’ll be notified when I need a driver again.”

“Yes, sir. I’d be happy to drive again whenever you want me. Just let me know and I’ll be there.”

“Good. Just remember that I need you to be discreet and what will happen if you’re not.”

John blinked at Talbot for a moment in surprise at the sudden threat and didn’t respond before the lift stopped on the fifth level and they both had to exit. Talbot headed for his office without another word or backward glance and John watched him walk out of sight.

The exchange in the lift had been tense and rather awkward, to say the least, though the doctor could tell Talbot was indeed very pleased with John’s performance that evening. But once again, the reason John could tell how the man felt came to him from the unwelcome, evolving and developing senses he seriously did not want to acknowledge. He had been feeling it more and more through the entire night and it worried him. Was it possible that exposure to sentinels in the clinic was waking his latent guide senses much more quickly than they normally would do? Or was it responding to some danger as it had when he was on patrol with his team mates? Maybe a combination of the two?

John was now forced to reluctantly admit to himself that he was now able to read superficial emotions from people with ease and accuracy whereas before it was hit or miss. From what little he’d heard of latents, it was typical that the abilities grew stronger with time and use. His mother and grandfather had told him some of how it worked since they both had suspected he’d also be a latent, but they’d never told him how to block or control the abilities. Maybe neither one had known or it hadn’t been a problem for them. Or maybe they thought he’d figure it out on his own. If his mother had been alive, he knew she’d be willing to help him and answer his questions. Unfortunately, that wasn’t possible any longer. She and his grandfather were both long gone.

If these abilities to pick up on emotions got stronger and he couldn’t control the input, it was going to definitely be a problem. The loss of control was more frightening than John wanted to admit to himself. The last thing he needed was to be overwhelmed by the feelings of every Londoner he’d encounter on the street or Tube. The thought of being helpless in the face of all that emotion made him shudder in horror. It would probably be as painful as a deep zone would be for a sentinel.

As he made his way to his locker to pick up his late lunch, John resigned himself to finding some way to deal with the latent issue as soon as he could do. However, he wasn’t sure whom he could safely ask or where to go for answers. John would have to try to research it on the internet without alerting anyone from the Bureau but he wasn’t exactly sure how to go about it. The last thing he wanted was to have the Bureau’s security personnel descend on him whilst he used the wireless at Starbucks because he asked the wrong questions.
Chapter 2

John’s search for information on latents was a complete failure. The sites he could find that were not sponsored by the Bureau were clearly written by people who knew nothing or were daft conspiracy theorists. He was afraid to click on the Bureau sites for fear he’d be tracked and the rest were a waste of time so he gave it up as a bad job. He would have to try to find another way to get information and decided to set aside his search for the time being.

A few nights later John had done half the rooms assigned to him when he got a call from Smith that he would be needed at the main lifts to help escort a new patient to room 508 in the south wing. It was unusual to get a patient in so late at night but it had been an unusually busy day. A new batch of AG had hit the streets that week and there were many new admissions to the clinic as the young sentinels overdosed or had bad reactions to the drug. Even the night shift had been affected by all the new patients so John got moving right away at the summons.

Pulling on his gloves, John trotted to the lifts and arrived just as the doors opened and the trolley with the new patient was wheeled out. He caught a quick glimpse of dark hair, a thin figure and very pale skin as he led the ambulance crew to a room not far from the lifts.

John was the only staff member free at the moment so he prepared the bed as he’d been instructed and reached across it to help the ambulance crew pick up the patient and place him carefully in the bed. For someone so thin, the man certainly weighed a fair amount and John felt a slight strain on his bad shoulder as he extended his body across the bed to lift the man from the trolley and get him settled. The others quickly left as the nurse and an older, dark haired man came into the room immediately afterwards.

As John carefully tucked the sheets and blanket around the still form of the young beta sentinel, he noticed that the poor man seemed very ill. His pale skin had a grey tinge to it and there were dark circles under the closed eyes. The full lips were crusty and chapped and his hair was a messy riot of dark curls that looked as if they could use a good wash. He seemed so young and John’s heart went out to him as he wondered if the poor bloke was another victim of AG addiction.

The night nurse, Emma Martin, moved efficiently about the patient. John had met her the first week on the job and had seen that she was a dedicated professional who cared deeply about her patients. Good nurses were worth their weight in gold as far as John was concerned and he gave her his full respect. “Thank you, William. I don’t think we’ll need you again this evening but I’ll ring if something comes up.”

John nodded to her courteously and made his way past the very posh looking older gentleman. The man was staring in concern at the unconscious man on the bed and paid no attention to John, who noticed a very slight resemblance between the older man and the patient. Family, but John wasn’t sure what the relationship might be. Not that it really mattered.

John glanced back as he closed the door to see the nurse insert an IV line for fluids. The young man certainly needed something. One of the problems concerning withdrawal from AG was an inability to keep anything down, which would make dehydration a major issue. If he was addicted, the poor soul was going to be suffering a lot for a few days until the drug cleared his system. He would then be subjected to intense, individual psychological counselling which was touted as the main reason their rehabilitation methods were so successful at the Price Clinic. Shaking his head in commiseration at the young sentinel’s situation, John gently closed the door and went back to work.

The shift went by quickly as he worked steadily. Thoughts of the new arrival kept intruding. Was he
truly addicted to AG or was something else wrong? The young man had seemed so very ill and it made John’s heart ache for some reason but he had to get his mind back on his job. John had been given some extra rooms to clean and then had been asked to sweep the hallway of the south wing as well after he was done with his meal. John was just completing his last room before starting the hallway when he received a call from Emma, who asked him to come straight away to room 508 along with his cleaning trolley.

Curious as to why he would be called back to that room only a few hours after the patient had been admitted, John quickly made his way there, hoping the young man was all right. After knocking quietly, John opened the door. The smell of sick hit him immediately but he controlled his desire to retch in sympathy, entered the room and closed the door carefully behind him. Emma was alone, standing beside the young man who was facing away from the door and curled up on the bed in a miserable ball.

She was standing in a puddle of vomit and her clothing and shoes were completely covered with the same. An empty wash basin was on the nightstand beside the bed. Clearly Emma had been too late to use it before the patient had become ill. John had had that very thing happen to him more than once in his medical career and sympathised with the nurse. Thankfully, the bedclothes and bed were still clean. John didn’t want to have to change the sheets and blankets as well as clean up the floor.

Emma spoke quietly whilst glancing down at her soiled clothing. “William, thank you for getting here so quickly. I need to shower and change clothes. Please clean up the floor and if you could stay with Mr Escott until I return, I’d be very grateful. He needs someone to keep an eye on him because he is likely to become ill again.”

She headed for the door and John pulled it open for her so she didn’t have to touch the handle. “Thank you again, William. I’ll return as soon as I can. I’ll let Pat know where you are.”

With that, she headed off to wherever the nurse’s changing area might be. John turned back to the room and noticed with concern that the young man had thrown off his bed coverings and was now shivering. It was possible he was feverish, so John made his way around the mess to the other side of the bed and pulled the sheet and blankets over the trembling form. The young man, Mr Escott, didn’t open his eyes but clutched the coverings closer around him and continued to shiver.

Carefully checking the IV line to make sure it was still in place, he bent to observe the young man closely. John didn’t have a thermometer but carefully placed the back of his gloved hand on the young man’s forehead and then on his cheek. Even through the thin cotton he could feel the heat pouring off the patient and John made a note to mention it to Emma when she returned. The fever would likely spike and then break, only to spike again. The constant up and down of a fever was hard on the body and completely exhausting. John knew just how absolutely wretched a spiking fever could make someone feel and he sympathised. He’d been there himself when his wound had become infected and he’d not forgotten the complete misery he’d endured.

As a doctor, he believed that touch was important to help patients heal, especially for those who were in a lot of pain. When he had been recovering from his injury, a caring touch was as important to him as water or air sometimes. Just because he wasn’t practicing as a doctor now didn’t mean he couldn’t show that he was concerned about the suffering of a fellow human being, so without really thinking about it, he gently brushed the messy hair away from the man’s forehead in an attempt to comfort.

The young sentinel actually sighed at John’s touch and relaxed somewhat, which made John smile. However, he was still looking quite ill and the smell of the vomit probably wasn’t helping him feel any better, so John straightened up and got quickly to work. The mess took just a few moments to
mop up completely and there was a sentinel-safe smell neutraliser that he used liberally on the floor.
John kept an eye on the patient and noticed he relaxed even more once the source of the smell was
eliminated, though he was still shivering.

Moving the cleaning trolley outside of the room eliminated any residual negative smells that might
disturb the patient. Returning, John moved the chair to the end of the bed and brought the wash
basin with him. He’d sat by the bedsides of many a sick soldier over the years and knew this patient
would likely get ill again before too long, just as Emma had predicted. Not ten minutes later, the
young man made a noise that John recognised straight away and he moved quickly to his side with
the basin just in time to catch the next wave of sickness.

The young man retched for at least a minute straight but was only able to produce some thin bile
before he fell back onto the bed, clearly exhausted and still looking horrible. John stayed where he
was when another wave of dry heaves swept over the poor man a few moments later. They wracked
the patient’s thin body and his shoulders shook as he tried to expel what little was in his stomach. It
was painful to watch and again, John found himself wanting to reassure him. He smoothed back the
dark fringe on the man’s forehead and murmured quiet nonsense in an attempt to comfort and
soothe.

When it was obvious the dry heaves were finished for the moment, John spotted a plastic glass with
water on the nightstand by the bed. It had a cover with a straw and John snagged the cup, raised the
bed a little and offered it to the young man.

“Here’s some cool water, Mr Escott. Rinse out your mouth and spit into the basin. You’ll feel
better.”

The patient did as he was told and John offered the water again. “Do you think you can drink any of
this?”

Shaking his head, the man moved onto his back, turned his head away and sank into the pillows.
Taking the hint, John brought the basin into the loo and rinsed it thoroughly after removing his
gloves. Wetting a flannel with cool water, he returned to the room and gently washed the patient’s
face, making sure not to touch the man’s bare skin with his hands. He then sat again on the chair
with the basin to keep watch. Mr Escott seemed to fall asleep but still shivered occasionally. The
fever may have levelled out but hadn’t broken yet and John hoped Emma would return soon.

John had brought a book with him to work and decided to read it whilst he waited for the nurse to
return. He’d picked up the mystery-thriller at the local Oxfam shop because it had been touted as a
bestseller a few years earlier but it wasn’t holding his interest. Like many bestsellers, it was rather
formulaic and predictable. After about another half hour Emma returned wearing fresh clothing. She
also had a syringe full of something that she injected into the patient’s IV line. Speaking in a
whisper, she addressed John. "That should take care of his nausea. Thank you for watching him,
William."

Also speaking quietly, John replied, "I was glad to help but he got sick again after you left and I
think he's running a fever."

The nurse checked and nodded. "You're right. He does have one but it's not unusual for this stage
of withdrawal from that drug. I'll check with the doctor and get him something so he won't feel so
horrible. Can you stay longer, William? Pat said you had done most of your work and it was fine
with him if you didn't finish everything tonight."

John hesitated. He was more than willing to stay and watch the patient but he also wanted to make
sure he finished all his tasks that night. There was no way he was going to do anything that might be
used against him if someone decided they wanted to make him redundant. "I'll be glad to stay but not too late. I do want to finish my assignments before the next shift."

Smiling, the nurse agreed. "That's fine, William. I know what a perfectionist you are and I understand. It shouldn't take too long to get in touch with the doctor and I'll be back with something to bring his fever down."

John turned back to his book when she left but unfortunately, the story continued to get worse as he read. Poorly written with even worse editing, he couldn't believe it had been on the best seller list. But it was better than nothing, even though he was pretty sure he knew who had done the murder by the second chapter. Sighing, he resigned himself to donating it back to the shop when he got home.

He about jumped out of his skin when a weak but very deep voice spoke up. "Why on earth do you continue to read that book when you clearly think it's complete rubbish and you already know who the killer is?"

Startled, John looked up in surprise at the patient and really saw him for the first time. Mr Escott was watching John closely with pale, blue-green slanted eyes. The light colour of the eyes contrasted sharply with his dark curls and when combined with the incredibly high cheekbones, made the young man unbelievably exotic in appearance. Despite his illness, the expression in his remarkable eyes was a startlingly vivid, razor sharp intelligence.

It suddenly hit John what the young man had said to him and he grinned in sheer delight. “You’re absolutely amazing! How did you do that? How could you possibly know exactly what I was just thinking?” As he spoke, John got up and came around to the side of the bed, automatically checking the IV line and taking the man’s pulse with gloved fingers. It was strong and a bit fast but that wasn’t unusual for someone going through a withdrawal process.

The man huffed a bit and seemed somewhat stunned by John’s reaction, but answered the question. His deep voice was feeble and wavered, though. “It’s actually quite simple. Your face is extremely expressive and it wasn’t difficult to determine that you were rather unhappy with the book. I could tell from the rather torrid cover that it is of the mystery-thriller genre, though I’ve not personally read it.

“You kept sighing, frowning and shifting in your chair. Then your eyebrows rose and you had what appeared to be a moment of epiphany, which suggested to me that you had discovered the identity of the murderer even though you are only a short way into the book. Then you began to scowl which suggested you were growing even more irritated with the story and were thinking about what rubbish it is. This is when I asked you why you continued to read it even though you clearly hated it.”

John shook his head in wonder and amazement. “That was incredible! You are completely correct, in fact. The book is total rubbish and I planned to get rid of it as soon as I returned home. Just astounding!”

Escott looked rather surprised and then pleased. “That’s not how most people react.”

"Well, I’m not most people. That was brilliant!” Chuckling, John grinned at the man again. Escott’s smile in response to John’s grin was tired but genuinely delighted.

“I can see that’s very true. You are quite unique, William.” Tilting his dark head to one side, Escott gave John a thoughtful look.

Suddenly a bit nervous about what this very perceptive young sentinel might have seen, John ducked his head and changed the subject quickly. “Well, I’m very glad to see that you appear to be feeling
somewhat better. The anti-nausea medication must be working then. Emma is getting something for your fever. In the meantime, do you think you can drink some water?” John held the cup with the straw out toward Escott, hoping the man would be able to get some fluids inside him.

Looking a bit dubious, the patient took the cup and was able to drink a fair amount of water, much to John’s satisfaction. Escott finished the water and John fetched more for him but the man was done for the moment.

“I’ll just put it here and don’t hesitate to drink more if you feel you can. You really need to rehydrate after being so ill. Now, may I get anything for you? Do you need help to the loo?”

Shaking his head, the man refused. “I’ll just rest until the nurse returns. The fever is still making me feel rather dreadful.” With that, Escott settled back onto the pillows and sighed, closing his remarkable eyes. John returned to the foot of the bed and his terrible book, feeling a bit unsure and shaken.

There was a lot to think about and John worried at his reaction to the young man. Despite appearing to be open and friendly on the surface to everyone, John in fact rarely trusted anyone. He had depended on his team mates to watch his back and he trusted Hairston to an extent but there was something about this young man that John had liked very much and he had responded to him quickly and instinctively. Even stranger, Escott seemed to be reacting positively to him, as well. The damn latent guide in John was no doubt to blame, possibly broadcasting something subliminal he had no idea how to stop. Normally, John could be objective and keep his distance from a patient but as he reviewed his behaviour in the past hour, he was rather shocked. He had to keep his responses under control or he could get into a great deal of trouble.

When the young man had been ill, John had acted out of character when he’d tried to comfort and look after him. It wasn’t appropriate to have done that in his current occupation as a cleaner and orderly and he wondered if the surveillance would be reviewed or if the young man would complain. He needed to keep his distance and remember that he wasn’t there to be a doctor. Thankfully, Escott hadn’t seemed to notice and in fact had apparently derived comfort from John’s touch so he hoped the man wouldn’t report him.

Emma returned just a few minutes later and gave Escott something for his fever and smiled at John as the young man seemed to settle into sleep.

Whispering, she dimmed the lights. “Thank you for staying, William. It’s okay for you to go back to work now. He’ll be fine until the morning.” Giving John another quick smile, she left the room to go back to her rounds.

Something made John pause briefly before he left the room. Looking down at the young man whose face was now turned away from him, John grinned and carefully tucked his awful book beneath Escott’s limp hand. Somehow he knew it would amuse the young sentinel to wake and find that John had left the awful thing for him to read.

As he began to turn away, his wrist was suddenly caught tight by long, slender fingers. Glancing back with a sharp intake of breath, he realised that Escott was actually still awake and staring hard at him. John returned the gaze with a quizzical look and shook his head questioningly. Escott seemed to understand him perfectly and spoke quietly, eyes narrowed in deep thought.

“You intrigue me William, because you are much more than you seem. You are former military though why you are here working as a cleaner I cannot comprehend at the moment. However I’m certain you must have good reason.”
The remarkable eyes darted over his entire body before returning to John’s face. “Oh, I see now. You have no money to speak of and are nearly destitute. This job is the only thing between you and homelessness at the moment—though the why of it escapes me. Why are you no longer in the military? Were you injured in Afghanistan? Iraq? Yes, that would explain it—invalided out of the service.”

John gasped and pulled his gloved hand from Escott’s grip, cold fear racing through his veins. “What…how can you know this?”

Escott looked at John appraisingly and arched his eyebrows. “It’s rather simple once it’s explained. I would have seen earlier but my current indisposition distracted me. I observe and deduce. The vest you wear beneath your uniform is nearly threadbare because you do not have the funds to buy new. Your shoes are clearly second hand and do not fit properly. Your haircut is military but has grown out because you cannot afford a barber.

“The way you stand and the fact you are very fit also suggest military service. Your complexion is one of someone who has been exposed to the desert sun for some time, so it would have to be either Iraq or Afghanistan. Your tan has faded so you’ve been back here for at least several months. And you slightly favour your left arm even though it’s your dominant hand so it suggests injury. Bullet? IED? Whatever caused your injury was enough to send you back home with a medical discharge.

“I could tell you’re in the medical field because when I was ill, you expertly evaluated my condition visually. You also took my pulse and checked the IV line competently. Only someone well trained would do that automatically and without thought. You’re extremely kind and compassionate so you’re probably trained as a medic or a nurse. But why are you not working in the field? It would certainly make you more money.” Escott looked intently at John and nodded slowly. “Ah, yes. You cannot use your real identity.”

Shaking his head, John could only whisper, his voice shaking, “That’s unbelievable. Incredible.”

Escott looked self-satisfied. “Was I correct?” The young man snagged John’s wrist again and the long fingers held him tight. Escott didn’t even seem to know he was doing it.

Staring in amazement, John tried to back away but was firmly caught. His heart thundered in his chest and his breath felt short in his throat. He was scared to death.

“Christ, yes, you know you are. You’re right about almost everything.” John’s mind was churning in confusion. How had Escott known all that? Had Talbot sent him? But that was impossible. John was sure Talbot hadn’t found out any of that. Even Hairston didn’t know most of that.

Before John could continue, the smug look on Escott’s face changed to concern and confusion. Something about the worried expression made John calm a bit. “You’re upset. No, you’re more than upset; you’re frightened. Why? Oh, oh! I see.” Escott released John’s wrist and sat back against the pillows, seemingly exhausted, his voice weary. He seemed disappointed for some reason and his tone changed to one of stiff formality.

“I assure you, sir, I have no intention of telling anyone this. There is nothing to be gained by doing so. I would never harm you. What I do is observe and deduce, which is an end in itself for me, but I have no plans to inform anyone else of your situation. Please do not concern yourself or worry unduly.”

Horrified, John didn’t know what to say. This young man, who, on closer inspection wasn’t as young as John had first thought, had more damning information on him than anyone else in the world and he had seemingly plucked it out of thin air. Despite his alarm at the situation, John felt
deep admiration and awe at the display. The fact remained, however, that Escott could make a lot of trouble for him and there was frankly nothing John could do about it but hope that the young sentinel would do as he said and stay silent.

Clearing his throat, John found his voice. “I’d appreciate it greatly if you wouldn’t mention it, Mr Escott. None of my co-workers or my employer knows about this. This job means a lot to me and I don’t want to jeopardise my position here.”

“I understand. Now if you don’t mind, I’m very tired and ill.” As Escott closed his eyes, John saw that the shadows beneath them were more pronounced and the man’s skin looked pallid again. John’s formerly buoyant mood was completely crushed and his spirits sank. Until the last bit, he’d enjoyed his interaction with this incredibly unique person and now he was being dismissed abruptly. He should be relieved but instead his mood plummeted even further.

“Um. Yes. Ta. I’ll leave you alone now. I hope you feel better soon.” Shoulders slumped, John reached for the book he’d set on the bed beside Escott’s hand, only to have his wrist snatched a third time. The sentinel was watching John closely once more.

“I’m keeping the book because I appreciate the spirit in which it was given to me. You may return for it tomorrow evening during your break and we can discuss how terrible it is.” There was a smile in Escott’s eyes that John couldn’t help returning and, to his surprise he found himself laughing.

“It’s a deal. Now get some sleep and work on getting well or I’ll find an even worse book and threaten to read it aloud to you.” John had actually done similar things with his patients before and it had always been a lot of fun. Laughter could be very therapeutic, especially when someone was so ill and in pain.

Escott rolled his eyes and returned John’s smile. The deep voice held a hint of surprised humour in it. “In that case, I’ll look forward to it. Goodnight, William.”

Still smiling with spirits rising, John bid Escott goodnight and turned to the door. As he reached for the handle, Escott called out to him.

“William, before you go. You said I had nearly everything right. What did I get wrong?”

John’s smile grew into a grin as he opened the door and turned back to face the ill man on the bed. “You had all of it right but one thing. I’m not a nurse or a medic. I’m a doctor and I was a trauma surgeon in Afghanistan.”

Escott’s thick eyebrows rose into his dark fringe and his expression changed to one of respectful surprise as John left the room and quietly closed the door.

Because of the delay helping Emma with Mr Escott, John had to hurry through his final assigned tasks. As he worked, the doctor tried not to think about the young man in room 508, but found his thoughts focusing on him regardless of his best intentions. Rationally, John knew he should be extremely worried about what the man had discovered and deduced about him and what harm that information could do if used against him, but John's irrational instincts absolutely refused to consider that Escott was a threat to him. Something about the young man made the doctor trust that he wouldn't cause John any harm, which should have been alarming in and of itself since John trusted no one and nothing.

But something told him this Escott was different. John had truly liked him and felt completely comfortable with him from the instant he’d first seen him. There had never been this kind of reaction to any other sentinel he’d encountered in the clinic until now. Actually, John couldn't remember
when he'd ever felt that way in his entire life about anyone. Somehow, this total stranger had stirred up something deep inside John and he realised he wanted more of his companionship, even if it was for only a short time.

John knew he was being an idiot for looking forward to seeing the young man again. It was stupid and risky and he wondered if it hadn't something to do with the fact he was probably a latent guide and Escott an unbonded sentinel. It was the height of madness to allow his biology to blind him to danger. He should be fighting it with everything he had and stay far, far away. Regardless of why or how he had this liking for Escott, he was going to trust his instincts, as he had always done. Despite knowing it was a terrible idea, he would allow himself to see the young sentinel again and as soon as he could do. It was only for a short time, after all. John wasn't naturally a solitary creature and he was all too aware of how lonely and alone he was. Escott's company had eased that ache and he was reluctant to let it go.

The final task of the evening before he could head home was to empty the rubbish bin in the CCTV room. A security guard was assigned to the room at all hours of the day and night to keep an eye on the patients and alert the staff if there were any problems. John had a nodding acquaintance with the guard who had the night shift. Guard Sterling was much older than John, near retirement and had a tendency to fall asleep at his post. It was rather amusing to enter the room to find him snoring like a freight train. Most of the time John could get in and out of the room without disturbing the man's sleep, but he wasn't so lucky that evening.

Sterling greeted John with delight when he opened the door to the room. “William! Thank goodness you’re here! I must go spend a penny and I’m desperate. Will you watch the screens for me? There’s a good lad!”

Before John could even answer, the man was out the door and down the hallway, clearly anxious to get to the loo as fast as humanly possible. Sighing, John emptied the rubbish bin, put his trolley outside the room and sat down in the rather cushy chair. He was late anyway so he figured a few more minutes waiting wouldn’t hurt. Looking around the room, he noticed that the computer which managed all the video screens was rather dusty and he decided to take care of that whilst he was waiting. When he was finished, he sat again in Sterling’s chair with another sigh and watched the screens.

John had never really paid much attention before but now he looked closer. The cameras switched from one room to another every few seconds, showing the same view multiple times. Many of the rooms seemed to be empty but a few showed sleeping patients. He knew the lights were off in those rooms, so it was clear that the cameras had infrared capability. John then wondered if sound was being recorded so he checked the equipment but didn’t see any indication of it. That was certainly a relief because he really did not want anyone else to hear what Escott had deduced about him, especially since he’d confirmed the truth of the man’s observations out loud.

A number of screens showed quickly changing scenes of the corridors, nurses’ station, exit, lifts, offices, treatment rooms and labs. Below most of the screens a series of numbers had been written and he realised each number corresponded to a specific room. Quickly he looked for room 508 amongst the screens and found it. It took a few moments before the images cycled and the room came into view.

To John’s surprise, however, Escott’s bed was empty. Had the man gone to the loo? He’d seemed very weak and he hoped the young man hadn’t fallen. He decided to keep watching to make sure the young man made it back to bed when his eye caught movement on one of the other screens. John immediately recognised the south corridor, which was where Escott’s room was located.
As John watched, the figure of Escott moved carefully along the wall, barely in the CCTV camera’s range and slipped into a room that wasn’t his own. After a moment of confusion because of the fast changing screens, John’s eyes quickly found the room Escott had wandered into. The doctor was worried the young man was confused and had gone into the wrong room. Instead, Escott walked out of camera range and then came back with something small in his hand. John could see that it was a mobile phone before Escott concealed it in the cloth of his gown and left the room. He watched as the sentinel made his way carefully back to his own room and settled back in the bed, looking exhausted.

Patients who were at the clinic to be treated for addictions were not allowed mobile phones. They could use laptops or tablets but not the internet. Their communications were strictly monitored for fear the patient would try to get access to more drugs or alcohol. John wondered who had left the mobile for Escott to find. John had not noticed anyone else with him other than the older, posh gentleman when he’d been brought in aside from the medical staff. So how had Escott got it?

It smacked of premeditation. Maybe this was not the first time Escott had been in rehab. The lifts and stairways on the fifth level were accessible only to staff at all times. One needed a security card with the proper access to leave the floor. A security guard patrolled the halls at night and the computerised system kept track of employees going in and out as they swiped their cards. John’s and all the other employees’ cards were attached to their identity badges and even John didn’t have permission to go into all the rooms on the fifth floor.

As he watched Escott turn out the light and settle into bed to sleep, Sterling came back smelling like tobacco smoke and thanked John profusely. “I appreciate you sitting in for me, mate. Had a quick fag whilst I was at it. The missus is trying to get me to quit but it’s bloody hard. I have cut down a lot, though.”

John gave the guard a half smile. Sterling was a lazy bastard but not a bad bloke. “You’re welcome. Glad I could help out. Have a good shift.” With that, John left the room and headed to the changing room and home. As he removed his uniform and climbed into his jeans and jumper, John wondered if he should inform someone about Escott’s illicit mobile. Maybe the young man just wanted it to talk to a loved one or significant other. It could get very lonely when one was in rehab and contact with a family member or close friend could be comforting. However, a patient getting in contact with one’s drug dealer was also a possibility that could not be discounted.

John sighed once again and decided it wasn’t his business that Escott had a mobile. If Escott’s doctors and therapists found it, the young sentinel would answer to them. Once again, his instincts strongly told him that Escott was not going to be contacting a drug dealer with the mobile. But John promised himself that he would keep an eye out for anything odd and do his best to make sure Escott wasn’t tempted to backslide. Shaking his head at his own odd behaviour, John simply accepted it and headed home.

For the next week, John checked in with Escott whenever he took his meal break or happened to be nearby. Escott always seemed very pleased to see John and John enjoyed spending time with someone who was simply brilliant and a pleasure to talk to. He’d missed being around people who were his intellectual equals and though he realised quickly that Escott was very much his intellectual superior, the young man never made him feel stupid, though he often was rude and abrupt in his speech and behaviour.

John had done as threatened and brought a couple of very awful books to read aloud to the young sentinel as he recovered his strength. At one point, John had them both giggling so hard at the absurdity of the dialog of what was meant to be a historical thriller that he had tears pouring down his cheeks. Escott wasn’t much better off and for a few moments John thought the man was going to
pass out from laughing so hard.

When John left to go home that night all he could think about was that he’d not had so much fun
with anyone for a very long time. Despite how brief each visit was, they always seemed somehow
intimate to John and he’d leave the room feeling settled and happy. It wasn’t safe for him to allow
this friendship to develop but he chose not to think about it much since he knew the brief interludes
with Escott would be over once the young man recovered enough to leave the clinic. Then John
would go back to being safely alone. He chose not to think about the feelings of sadness and
loneliness that dredged up, either.

To John’s great relief, he could see improvement in Escott’s health as the week wore on. The
sentinel was able to keep food down and looked much better. Escott complained that he was going
to have to start treatment with a psychologist as soon as the withdrawal symptoms eased and he
wanted to put it off as long as possible. John admonished him and the young man took it rather well,
surprisingly.

“You need to work toward getting better. By the way, what’s your first name?” John had not asked
before since he was trying to maintain some distance but he knew it was rather too late. He cared
deeply about what happened to the young man and had finally reluctantly admitted it to himself.

Escott rolled his eyes. “Stephen. Please don’t use Steve--I hate it. I’d actually prefer you address me
as Stephen or Escott but if you meet my detestable brother, you should be sure to call him ‘Mikey’.”
An evil smile lit up Escott’s face. “It always sends him into orbit when I do that.”

“Oh, so that was your brother who came with you the first day? He must be considerably older than
you are.” John had been curious as to whom the relative had been but hadn’t wanted to ask.

“Yes, he’s much older and the reason I’m here. He threatened to cut me off from my trust fund if I
didn’t agree to treatment.” The young man’s expression turned sour and he gave John a reluctant
half smile.

“Well, you should be thanking him for saving your life, Stephen. He must love you very much.”
Smiling, John continued to speak as he stood up to get back to work. “I’m very glad to have had the
chance to meet you. I want you to recover so you can go back out there and do something amazing
and incredible with that brilliant mind of yours.”

A spark of something flared up in Escott’s eyes and then disappeared. The young man looked away
and sighed. “You’re right, but it’s…difficult.”

Without thinking, John gave the young man’s shoulder a compassionate squeeze. “In the army, I
helped fellow soldiers through addiction and withdrawal, so I understand better than you might think.
You’ve got an amazing talent and the world deserves to know it, Stephen. So please do what your
doctors tell you to do and get better. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Escott looked up at him with a strange, contemplative look on his face before nodding and wishing
John a good night.

Back at work, John couldn’t wipe the huge smile off his face as he remembered how much he’d
enjoyed spending time with Escott. Knowing that what he was doing was wrong and dangerous
clearly wasn’t stopping him from visiting the young man. Thankfully, the nurses hadn’t reported him
and he’d made sure to complete all his duties perfectly and on time. He continued to worry about
getting too attached, though. Not only was Escott going to leave the clinic when he recovered
enough, John was also planning to leave soon. It was all incredibly foolish but John had to admit
that he was hooked like a fish for the duration.
The next day when he arrived to work, John was stopped once again by Lee and told to report to the lower level because he was needed to drive the lorry. John had received a considerable bonus in his previous pay packet from the last trip and he should have been excited but instead he was surprised at how disappointed he was that he wouldn’t be seeing Escott that night. Thoughts of his new friend had filled most of the previous day and he had been looking forward to sharing the absolutely ghastly book he’d found at Oxfam. It was a torrid romance set in the Regency period and looked to be beyond horrible.

Resigned, John took the lift to the basement level. He wished he could have let Stephen know he wasn’t going to be able to stop by but maybe they’d get back early like last time. When he arrived at the loading bay, the lorry was ready to go. John spotted Gary with his clipboard straight away, looking very impatient. The man glanced up at John’s approach and jerked his head toward the lorry.

“Get in. You’re late.” Gary was clearly annoyed but the doctor could tell the man wasn’t angry at him. He was deeply worried and frustrated but John couldn’t determine why.

Raising an eyebrow, John obeyed and they started off on their deliveries. This time he was directed to locations that were very different to where they’d gone before. Again, the doctor watched through the mirrors as the workers at each new location loaded and unloaded, though this time John was sensing more and more of the emotional ambience of the places they stopped. For the first time since it began to really manifest itself, John didn’t question or try to shut down the latent ability. He should have been afraid that the abilities seemed to be growing, but somehow, he wasn’t because in the current situation it seemed like a bloody useful talent. There had to be some way he could control it and use it to his advantage. Was that how ‘real’ guides used their abilities? They could forewarn one and be incredibly helpful if he could learn to direct them. Maybe latent guide ability wasn’t something to be dreaded but honed and used as a potential weapon or tool. But how? Trial and error? He couldn’t ask anyone without betraying himself.

His thoughts were interrupted as he watched what was happening on the loading bay through the lorry’s mirrors. Since it wasn’t raining this trip John could see the people much more clearly. Just like last time, there were more look-outs than workers and the few labourers present seemed extremely anxious. The men who were watching exuded menacing emotions both toward the workers and any possible trespassers.

Thankfully no unauthorised persons encroached on them because John could now see that all of the look-outs were carrying weapons of some kind. The bulge of a shoulder holster was quite noticeable to someone like John who knew how to look for things like that. In addition, most of the guards were openly armed with expandable batons normally used by the police. But John knew none of these men were with the police. Surprised and alarmed, John realised that whatever they were transporting was either very precious or very illegal. Taking out his mobile, the doctor surreptitiously recorded everything at the site that could be reflected in the lorry’s mirrors or seen through the windscreen.

If the items that they were moving were illegal and not just valuable, it made sense that Talbot would want to use someone he could blackmail to keep quiet and force to do things that weren’t quite aboveboard. Someone like John, who was desperate for work and had something to hide. He wondered if Talbot had some kind of dirt on Gary as well. It made sense that the other man was in a similar situation to John’s and it would explain the emotions John was sensing from him.

Everything seemed wrong and dangerous and John’s unease at the situation grew with each stop. After he filmed the gunmen, John also made mental notes of the roads he drove and actually wrote them down whenever Gary left the cab to direct the loading and unloading. John continue to record
what he saw on his phone but made sure that the other man never noticed what he was doing. Whenever they stopped, he also made surreptitious notes of approximately how many people were involved with the loading and unloading and when and where he saw weapons. There always seemed to be more security than workers.

Each stop was a bit different to the others. Some places they delivered boxes that were labelled hazardous waste and at others they picked up what appeared to be barrels of chemicals to be delivered to the clinic. John had quite a few notes taken by the time they turned the lorry back. He had managed to catch the actual addresses of some of the buildings they visited but most of the loading bays were nowhere near the front of the structures. Also, many of the buildings were dilapidated, clearly not used much and located in rather rough neighbourhoods. Were they being used as only temporary storage sites? John wasn’t sure but would try to find out.

Gary seemed to be very satisfied with the results of their efforts and pleased that they had finished on time considering they’d got a late start. He was practically verbose with his compliments on John’s driving when they arrived back at the clinic as he sent John home.

Feeling rather apprehensive, John did exactly as he was told without stopping in to visit with Escott. It was very late and he did not want there to be any question about his behaviour or any suspicions about his involvement with whatever irregular or illegal activity that may or may not be happening. It was difficult to tell for sure what exactly was going on but his instincts told him it was nothing good.

Once he was home, he transferred the mobile phone footage to his laptop, carefully documented everything he’d seen and where he’d been on both trips and saved it all to a USB flash drive, erasing the data from his laptop. The events of the evening had him feeling even more paranoid than usual and he found himself pacing the floor of his tiny bedsit. If something went wrong, John could easily be made into a scapegoat by Talbot, which was likely why, now that he thought about it, he’d been hired in the first place. Maybe his employer was ‘creating’ evidence against John to stitch him up at that very moment. John and Gary would take the blame if there were any hints of illegality and John was certain that Talbot would have the police sent straight to his flat the moment there was the least hint of a problem.

His instincts were screaming at him to do something. John had always listened to them before and they had saved his life on more than one occasion. Looking around the flat, he realised the most damning thing that the police could find was his illegal weapon and it was easily accessible in the drawer. If it was found, he would be sentenced to a minimum of five years in prison not to mention whatever charges were brought by Talbot. He didn’t want to leave the weapon beneath the floorboard and he couldn’t take it to left luggage storage at the train or bus station because whatever bag he used would be searched or x-rayed. He could possibly bring it to work and store it in his locker but it was likely that it would be searched if he were accused or implicated in whatever Talbot was doing. If Talbot was actually doing anything illegal and John wasn’t just being incredibly paranoid. He simply wasn’t sure but he couldn’t afford to take any chances. It never hurt to take steps to protect himself.

Hairston at the Gibbet would definitely store his real identification papers, the gun and his money for him and either charge him a nominal fee or nothing at all. Even though John had decided not to go back to the pub until Masters was in town, he felt this was too important. A chance meeting with Moran was unlikely so he would risk it. The Gibbet wouldn’t be open for another eight hours, so John decided to get to sleep early. He’d stop in to see Sam before going into work the next evening. Before bed, he packed the gun, his real identity papers and all but a small amount of his cash in a box and put it into his holdall with some extra clothes, beta scent cologne and shoes he wanted to take to work. He debated about adding the USB drive to the box but decided against it. It was never a good idea to put all one’s eggs in the same basket, so John decided that he’d find another place to hide it. It
would be safe to put it into left luggage storage along with some other things and it would be a very minimal cost. He’d arrange it after work the next day.

After waking early and finishing his exercise routines, John took the Tube to the pub late that afternoon. It was after lunch but before dinner so it wasn’t particularly crowded. Once he was inside and saw that Moran was nowhere in sight, his shoulders relaxed as if a ton of weight had just been removed. John hadn’t realised just how anxious he’d been about running into Moran. The obnoxious alpha had really rattled him more than he’d realised and he felt more than a bit ridiculous at having been so worried.

As he walked toward the bar, Hairston caught sight of him and his face split in a huge, gap toothed grin.

“William! So good to see you, lad! Where have you been? Is everything all right?” The big man slapped a pint down in front of John along with a bowl of salted peanuts.

Returning the grin and shaking the man’s hand enthusiastically, John sat down and took a sip of his pint. “Everything is great, Sam, thanks to you. I’ve been working hard at my new job and everything is going well. I’ve just been very busy.” He leaned forward a bit and lowered his voice. “I’ve also been trying to avoid a certain obnoxious alpha, which is why I’ve not been coming by lately.”

The bar man’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Has Moran been bothering you? I swear to god I’ll tear that sod a new arsehole if he has.”

Shaking his head and laughing at the beta’s protective behaviour, John took another sip. “No, Sam. I’ve not seen him since I was here last but he certainly made an impression. I’d really prefer to stay away from him if at all possible until Masters arrives.”

Shaking his head in disgust, Hairston commiserated. “Don’t blame you at all, lad. I couldn’t believe how he talked to you. There’s no respect for your gender and that’s just wrong, what with your lot being child bearers. I’ll keep an eye out. What else can I do for you? I see you’ve brought luggage?” More customers were beginning to arrive but Hairston’s assistant had things well in hand.

John had placed the holdall on the stool next to him when he’d sat down and he looked down at it. “I was wondering if you had someplace I might store some things. Important things that I can’t risk losing.”

His face sober, Hairston nodded in understanding. “Your flat isn’t safe. I have just the place.” He turned to his helper. “Wally! I’m taking a break. I’ll be in the office but back in five.” Removing his apron, he motioned toward the back of the room with a jerk of his head. “Meet me at the office door.”

Slipping off his stool and picking up his holdall, John made his way through the pub and met Sam at the door to the office. The bar man locked the door behind them and went to a large safe that sat in a corner. Quickly, he spun the lock and opened the door. “We keep each day’s take in here overnight and bring it to the bank in the morning. My wife and I are the only ones who know the combination, so you don’t have to worry. What do you want me to keep for you?”

John removed the box from the holdall but didn’t hand it over immediately. “You should know, Sam. I’ve got my identity papers, most of my cash savings and an illegal hand gun in here. If the gun is found, you could go to jail. If you don’t want to risk storing these things, I’ll understand
completely.”

Practically rolling his eyes, Hairston held out his hand for the box. “Don’t you worry, William. I’ve kept much worse things for people nowhere near as nice as you before. Pretty much everything but drugs. I don’t tolerate drugs and I know you don’t either. So hand over the box and I can get back to work.”

Smiling, John did just that and watched as Sam tucked his things way in the back of the safe, hidden behind some other objects and closed the door tight. “That should be fine. Just let me know when you need access to your cash. Now get yourself out of here and on your way to work.” His mock severe tone softened and he smiled at John. “Good to see you again, lad. Give me a ring next time you want to come by and I’ll let you know if I’ve seen Moran.”

“Ta, Sam. You’re a good friend and I do appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” John and Hairston left the office and he waved goodbye to the man as he passed by the bar on his way to the door.

Squinting as he walked from the dark pub into the bright sunshine, his mood elevated and he felt incredibly relieved to have been able to put his most important things in secure storage. Sam would keep them safe for him. There was plenty of time to get to work. Rush hour wouldn’t start on the Tube for at least another half hour or so, though he’d not been having as much trouble with crowds lately. It made him hopeful that he was getting some kind of handle on his latent talents and that he wouldn’t end up going insane because he couldn’t block out the emotions of others.

Turning the corner of the building, John wasn’t prepared to see Sebastian Moran leaning against a car parked on the road by the pub. The big man was standing with his arms folded across his chest and was looking very relaxed and smug. Surprised, John stopped in his tracks with an involuntary intake of breath.

“Why, Billy-boy, how very nice to see you again.” Moran’s white smile flashed across his handsome face and John got a strong whiff of alpha pheromones. His traitorous body reacted slightly but he easily ignored it. The suppressants were working fine, thankfully.

Gritting his teeth in annoyance, John responded to the cheerful greeting. “Moran.” The doctor looked away and warily resumed walking past, intent on taking no notice of the man. As John drew even with the mercenary, Moran’s huge hand shot out and gripped John’s left wrist hard enough to bruise, pulling him off balance and making him lurch sideways toward Moran’s body. The worst part was that, with the touch, John could feel the man’s emotions. The sheer wrongness of the man was indescribable but the emotions he could pick out most strongly were arousal, desire and a primal possessiveness that made him feel positively ill. Moran wanted to own John.

Furious and sickened at the unwanted mental and physical assault but having expected something of the sort to happen, John reacted as he was trained and used the momentum generated by Moran’s forward pull to punch the huge man in the mouth with all his strength. The idiot needed to be taught that John wasn’t anyone’s boy, least of all a stupid alphas’. Moran let go of John’s wrist and staggered back against the car as John stepped quickly out of easy reach. He had no idea how the big man would react and was ready for anything. John knew how to take down much larger opponents but Moran was not someone he could easily defeat and retreat was the best defence in this case.

However, instead of retaliating, Moran straightened and grinned even wider at John, causing blood to spill down his split lip. He caught the blood on his fingers before it could fall onto his clothing, wiped a smear of it across his lip and looked down at it staining his hand. If possible, his grin got bigger and he flashed bloodied teeth at John.
"That’s my Billy-boy! I like ‘em feisty! Come inside the pub with me. I’ll show you a good time, luv."

Temper flaring, John backed further away. “I told you to leave me the fuck alone and I meant it, Moran! I want nothing to do with you.” With that John turned his back and walked away.

Laughter followed him down the pavement. "Oh, you’ll be coming with me eventually, William. We’re meant to be, you and me. It’s just a matter of time and I’m patient! But not too patient!"

The words caused a shiver of fear and uncertainty to run down John’s spine. What did Moran mean by that? John didn’t want to know and kept walking. The confusion and the mental sickness he sensed in Moran combined with adrenaline was making him feel ill and his stomach rebelled. Shaky and queasy, he finally found a place to sit in the Tube station and calm down whilst he waited for his train.

How had Moran known he was there? Did he have people at the pub spying for him? Or was it just a coincidence? Sam had said he’d not seen the man lately, so he must have a spy or spies at the pub. Certainly not Sam but maybe his barman Wally? At this point, it didn’t matter.

What mattered was why the hell was Moran so interested in John? There were millions of omegas who were much more suited to bonding and breeding than John Watson would ever be. In fact John had never wanted bonding or breeding. Moran was disturbingly attractive and could easily catch the attention of young, beautiful omegas. Why was Moran instead pursuing an older, damaged omega who clearly wanted nothing to do with him? It made absolutely no sense! The man was barking mad and by touching Moran’s emotions John had confirmed it. It had also made John feel unclean and nauseated.

Why Moran was doing this was a mystery John wouldn’t solve because he would be staying far away from the pub until Masters arrived. John would simply ring Sam if he needed access to his cash and arrange to meet him somewhere else. His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of his train and he put all worries about Moran behind him for the moment and made his way to work. He needed to keep his focus and forget the big alpha.

Arriving early, he changed and then went to the employee’s break room to try to calm down. Pacing back and forth only agitated him more so he decided to stop in at Escott’s room to see if the young man was receiving visitors. The eagerness he felt at the thought of seeing his new friend should have put him on guard but he paid no attention to his logical brain’s warnings. His instincts told him Escott was safe. All he knew was that he wanted to see Escott and he didn’t question his reasons why. Checking to make sure he still had the Regency romance in his pocket, he quickly made his way to the younger man’s room. He still had almost an hour before he was due to begin his shift.

When John arrived he knocked quietly as usual and waited for permission to enter. Once it was given, he opened the door slowly and peeked in. Escott was seated tailor fashion on the bed with a new laptop in front of him.

“Hi, Stephen. Do you feel well enough for a visitor? I won’t stay long if you’re not up to it.”

Just as he finished speaking, he opened the door far enough to see another man seated in the room’s one chair. It was the relative John had seen the evening Escott had arrived and who Stephen had said was his older brother. John stood awkwardly for a moment and glanced over at Stephen, who finally spoke up with a smug expression.

"Please come in, William and save me from the depths of excessive tediousness. My brother Mikey is here to try to raise my spirits or some such horrid thing. I’ve been telling him to go away but he
never listens.” John couldn’t tell if Escott was serious or teasing his brother but he suspected the latter. The expression on the elder Escott’s face when his younger brother called him ‘Mikey’ was priceless.

Always polite and trying not to laugh, John came fully into the room, held out his hand and introduced himself. It was apparent that the man was a beta sentinel, just like his brother. The doctor wasn’t sure how the other man would take to the fact that his younger brother had befriended a lower class cleaner and was right in that the man seemed to be annoyed at first. But then he looked at John with a narrowed, intense gaze that was very familiar and his expression cleared. The older Escott stood and shook John’s outstretched hand without hesitation.

“Oh, you’re the William that Stephen mentioned. It’s very nice to meet you. I’m Michael Escott. I understand you’ve been keeping my brother well entertained. I’m grateful to you. Boredom is a terrible thing for Stephen.” Even through the glove, John was shocked how well he could feel the man’s emotions. The older man was truly grateful and pleased that his brother had found a friend, even a lower class one. It was very clear to John that he loved his brother deeply and was very worried about him.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Mr Escott. Stephen is a brilliant young man and I’ve enjoyed visiting with him for the short time he’s to be a patient here.” John turned a narrow eye on Stephen, daring the sentinel to contradict him. “You are doing what your doctors are telling you, right? So you can get better and go home soon?” John raised an eyebrow at Stephen and the expression on the young man seemed a bit sheepish whilst the elder Escott was clearly trying not to laugh.

“Oh, no. Not exactly.” The admission from Stephen was very reluctant and John narrowed his eyes even more and tilted his head at the young man, who guiltily refused to look at him.

The elder brother cleared his throat and spoke up. “That’s part of why I’m here. Stephen threw a tantrum today and refused to work with his psychiatrist.”

“The man’s an incompetent buffoon! I can’t work with someone who isn’t smart enough to cheat properly on his taxes and is addicted to prescription painkillers!” The younger Escott was clearly indignant and John couldn’t stop the laugh that burst forth.

“Sher--Stephen! I will find you another psychiatrist. Please keep your voice down. I think they probably heard you in Whitehall.” Stephen’s older brother pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. John guessed it was a frequent expression of exasperation the man made around his much loved younger brother and he couldn’t help but smile.

“I was just going, Mr Larssen. Stephen has been wondering where you were. Behave yourself, Stephen and I’ll see about finding you another therapist. Mr Larssen, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. And you’re welcome to the laptop, Stephen. No need to thank me.” The young man made an unpleasant face but otherwise ignored his brother.

“Likewise, Mr Escott. Goodbye.” John nodded to the man who smiled pleasantly and walked out.

Escott collapsed onto the bed and heaved a world-weary sigh and closed his eyes. “Thank Christ he’s gone. I thought I was going to go mad. He’s insufferable!”

John watched the excessive drama and snickered at the sight. For the first time in over twenty-four hours, John felt relaxed enough to smile and laugh. It occurred to him that just being in Escott’s company was enough to make him forget most of his troubles. The amount of trust that implied should have alarmed him, but instead he only felt a warm glow in his chest.
At the sound of John’s amusement, Escott’s eyes snapped wide in surprise and then narrowed in
disdain. “You have no idea what he’s like. He behaved himself around you.”

Before John could reply, Escott stared hard at him and quickly sat up, his expression transforming
from amused to very serious. “Where were you yesterday and what has happened to upset you so
much?”

Taken aback, John blinked in surprise at the demanding statement. In the short time he’d known the
young sentinel Escott had always been abrupt to the point of rudeness and often impatient, though
John had never minded. In fact, his straightforwardness was something John appreciated greatly
about the other man and thought was actually refreshing. Having to live a lie and watch what he said
all the time was wearing on John and Escott’s forthright manner was a like a breath of fresh air.

Not able to come up with a good answer, John just shook his head and looked away.

Escott persisted. “William. Clearly something is worrying you and it happened last night and today.
You can tell me. You know by now that I won’t say a thing.”

Tempted, John looked up at Stephen, trying hard to keep his expression neutral and not respond to
the earnest plea of his friend. John was so tired of not being able to confide in anyone but he didn’t
want to drag the young man into any potential trouble. Even though they had quickly built a
congenial friendship of sorts, John needed to remember that Escott was a patient and should be
concentrating on beating his addiction, not listening to John’s problems. Giving him a wry grin,
John apologised.

“I’m sorry, Stephen and as usual, you’re right. I am worried about something and I know you
wouldn’t tell anyone but I’m not sure myself what to say because I don’t know exactly what’s going
on. The other thing is personal and it’ll work itself out one way or another fairly soon.” John was
confident that Moran was going to be a non-issue once he was signed up with Master’s outfit and
was out of the country.

Escott gave John one of those thoughtful looks that seemed to see all the way down to his very soul.
It made the doctor shiver a bit and he worried what the sentinel was deducing about him at that
moment. It was a good time to change the subject even though Escott continued to watch him closely
with a frown on his face. Taking a seat in the chair, John forced himself to relax as best he could do.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come by yesterday. I was asked to do some deliveries around town and it was
very late when we got back here last night. Much too late to visit.” Sighing, John shifted in his seat,
remembering the gunmen that he saw and knew he wasn’t being paranoid. Something illegal was
going on at the clinic but he had no idea what it was, what to do about it or even if he could do
anything. He didn’t want to leave his job but maybe he should do. There was just enough money
saved to keep him until Master’s arrival if he was extremely careful.

Looking up at a sound of impatience from Escott, John saw the man’s expression was deadly serious
and intense as if he was thinking deeply. Frowning, John could only blink in confusion at the other
man and wait to see what he wanted.

Scooting to the edge of the bed, Escott leaned forward and lowered his deep voice so that John could
barely hear it. “William. I must tell you something important. This has to be in the strictest
confidence because I need your help. However, once you give me permission to speak, you’re
committed. If you decide now that you don’t want to know, that’s fine, we’ll forget about it and I
won’t mention it again.”

John sat up straight and frowned in confusion. “What are you going on about? What is it that you
The intensity of Escott’s gaze didn’t falter and he spoke with great earnestness. “I know you’re an honest man and it goes against your nature to live a lie the way you’re forced to do and having to use a false identity. Your reasons are your own and I won’t pry. However, I’ve deduced that your employer is using that knowledge against you and has threatened to blackmail you so that you’ll do as he says. I know that when you were out last night, you saw something that upset you. Some activity related to this clinic that you suspect is illegal. I know what it might be and I could frankly use help to find out more. Unfortunately, we don’t have a lot of time and in order for you to help me you must trust me, at least to some extent.”

Shocked and bewildered, John sat back in the chair. How could Escott know about Talbot’s threats, what John had seen or what was happening at the clinic? How did he discover that information, confined as he was to just this room and the treatment areas? John himself had no idea what was going on and he had the run of the place. But Escott was right about everything. Mind churning in confusion, John desperately wanted to confide in Escott, but could he possibly trust the young sentinel?

After years of not trusting anyone but his army team mates it made no sense to go back on years of hard fought experience and trust anyone so casually. After all, he’d only known the young man for very short time. Unfortunately, his instincts—which had urged him to give Escott his friendship—continued to tell him that, in defiance of all common sense, Escott also deserved John’s confidence. The doctor wrestled with himself but felt his sensible side crumble to dust in the face of his overwhelming instinct. John hated that his intuition was overruling everything his life experience had taught him, but he was helpless.

As John struggled with himself and finally made his decision to trust Escott, the other man watched him with a very odd expression that the doctor could not decipher. John picked up superficial emotions of worry and anxiety but Escott was more difficult to read than most people he’d encountered lately, despite his improving latent talents.

Overwhelmed, John gave in and stopped fighting with himself. He’d trust Escott with this, but promised himself that trust would be conditional. He would not go any further than dealing with the immediate situation with whatever illegal activity was going on in the clinic. Decision made, John looked deeply into the pale eyes that seemed to see everything and sucked in a quick breath as he slowly began to truly comprehend the actual situation. John lowered his voice to just above a whisper and leaned forward.

“You’re not actually here for treatment, are you? I don’t know how you fooled your doctors but you certainly fooled me. You truly had me convinced that you were a drug addict. All the symptoms and mannerisms—you had them down perfectly. But you’re investigating something. Are you with the police?”

Pale eyes grew alight with surprise and delight at the astute observation, which made John flush with pleasure and a burst of warmth expanded in his chest at the silent approval from the other man. Escott grinned wolfishly and nodded.

“I’m very impressed, William. I’m not police but I work with them on special cases, this being one of them. I was the ideal person to go in undercover since I’m an excellent actor, can easily look like a desperate drug addict with minimal makeup and know how to imitate the symptoms. I also had help from doctors associated with the police.”

The expression became grim again. “I’m trusting you with my life here, Larssen. If you go to Talbot with this, it would blow my cover. These people are extremely dangerous and the situation volatile.
Both of us could get hurt or even killed.”

John could only smile faintly. Danger was something he had actively pursued all his career but he certainly didn’t want to put Escott at risk. “As you said, Talbot is trying to blackmail me. I’d never tell that smarmy git any bloody thing. You have my word of honour, Stephen and you know what that’s worth to me. I know there’s something going on here that’s not right. Tell me what it is and how I can help.”

Escott gave him a dazzling smile of relief and began to explain. “I’m here at the request of New Scotland Yard. You’ve obviously heard of the street drug AG?”

John nodded and the young man continued. “It is such an elegant drug and the targets are so specific. It has no effect on anyone other than sentinels and it makes no sense financially to produce such a drug. There has to be another motivation for its production yet no one has figured it out. It’s terribly addictive and is quite the rage right now amongst young sentinels, both full and partial. The administrators at the Bureau are beside themselves at the devastation the drug is causing but are trying to keep the whole thing quiet.

“The drug is manufactured on such a small scale that no one has been able to track down the source until now. We had some information recently that suggested it was coming from this clinic but we have no solid proof so we needed to get someone inside. Getting hired here is next to impossible but being admitted as a patient was much easier, though it’s hideously expensive. Thankfully, my family has plenty of money.

“I was meant to get in and find the evidence we need to get a search warrant. However, the cameras in the halls make it almost impossible for me to get out of the room without being spotted. I was able to get out once but every other time, security has caught me and escorted me back. Thankfully, they think I’m simply an overly entitled insomniac who doesn’t think rules apply to him.”

Shaking his head, John interrupted. “I saw you in the hall that first night you arrived. I was in the security room watching the screens whilst the guard took a break. I saw you with a mobile phone but decided not to say anything.”

Escott looked very surprised but grateful. “Thank you. That mobile is my only direct contact to the police though my brother will carry messages. Do you do that often, by the way? Give the security guard a break?”

John nodded. “Nearly every other shift, I suppose. Whenever I stop in to empty the rubbish bin and dust off the computer, Sterling asks me to watch things whilst he goes to the loo and smokes.”

Clearly excited, Escott grabbed the laptop his brother had left for him. “Do you think you could do something for me? I’ve got a program that will allow me to control the security cameras but I need it to be installed on the computer that runs the CCTV system on this floor. Once it’s installed, it’s nearly undetectable but it will allow me access to all the cameras and will also permit me to create loops in the video so I can cover my movements in real time.”

Escott’s eyes gleamed as he pushed a small object toward John, using his laptop to cover his movements from the room’s camera. “The program is on this USB drive. You just have to plug it in, get the file to install and I’ll be able to take over from there. It should take only a minute or two. Do you think you can do it?”

Surreptitiously reaching for the drive and palming it, John nodded. Computers were not his strength, but he’d done similar things before and it wasn’t difficult. “I’ll stop in this evening and volunteer to watch the screens for Sterling. I’ll let you know when it’s installed.”
The young man’s smile was brilliant. “This could give me an enormous break in the case. I haven’t been able to get into Talbot’s office and that’s where I suspect I’ll find my solid evidence. I don’t know where the actual drug is being made or how it’s distributed but it has to be somewhere nearby. He’ll have his records hidden well but I should be able to find them. Once we know where to look for it, we can gather enough evidence to raid the place.”

As John pocketed the USB drive with the program he was to install, it reminded him of what he’d copied onto his own USB drive the night before. This was the perfect time to pass along that information. Since he had decided to trust Escott, there was no need to keep this information from him. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, John thought.

Taking a deep breath, he said nervously, “If you’re right that the AG is coming from the clinic, I think I know how it’s being distributed. I believe if it’s made here, it’s being sent out by lorry at night, disguised as hazardous medical waste. The raw materials are brought in by lorry disguised as medical supplies. Last night I saw gunmen guarding the pickup and drop off points when I was out on delivery. Seeing armed guards was what I found so disturbing and made me think there was something very off about the entire thing.”

Escott sat back and his mouth tightened in concern at this new information. Carefully hiding his movements from the camera in the room, John pulled out his own USB drive and tucked it into a fold in the bedclothes. “This has all the locations we visited the two times I was on delivery and my observations about the people that I saw. I don’t know how much help it will be in your investigation, but you never know.”

Escott nodded, worry for John in his expression. “This could make a huge difference in how quickly we can close this case. I just need to get into Talbot’s office next.”

This was worrying news and potentially dangerous for Escott. “How do you plan to open the door? You’ll need a security card to get inside.”

Looking at John thoughtfully, Escott raised an eyebrow. “You have access. Can you leave the door open for me when you clean the office? I could sneak in then, search it and it will lock behind me after I leave, correct?”

Thinking swiftly, John came up with a solution. “I’m to clean the office tomorrow night. I can let you in though you’ll have to be quick about it and not disturb anything because he’ll notice straight away. Also, Talbot’s hours here at the clinic are not predictable and he has a tendency to hang about some evenings. I wish I could tell you when that is. I suppose I could ask Sterling.” Considering that the security man was a lazy git, he was a gossip, knew the comings and goings of everyone on the floor and was always willing to pass on that information.

Escott agreed. “It’s worth a try to see if Talbot has a pattern. It would be most helpful. Can you ask him tonight?”

"I can certainly try but no guarantees.” John checked his watch and stood. “I’ve got to get to work or I’ll be late. I’ll try to check in with you this evening at the usual time. I’ve still got that awful Regency romance to show you.”

Grinning happily at the delighted laugh he got from Escott, John was closing the door behind him when his friend quietly called his name. He glanced back into the room, eyebrows raised questioningly. “Yes?”

The young beta was looking at him seriously again. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about the other matter that’s bothering you, William. I saw the bruises on your wrist and we will discuss that when
you return.” It was not a question but a demand and for some reason John didn’t even think to argue. Uncomfortable at the thought of talking about Moran and the subjects that might be brought up as a result, John’s expression tightened in distaste before he quickly nodded in reluctant agreement and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

As he walked down the hall, it finally occurred to him that he didn’t question Escott’s command to know what happened or if the beta even had the right to ask. He had just assumed that Escott wanted to know and John would tell him. How he’d got to that point in their friendship, John didn’t understand. He’d never met a beta who was so commanding before. John had only ever had that reaction to alphas in the past and most of the time that kind of behaviour made him angry and defiant to the alpha. But coming from Escott, it had seemed so natural and it hadn’t even occurred to John to resist. Maybe it was because Escott was a sentinel and John was a latent? Dreading the upcoming confrontation, he went to collect his trolley and begin his shift.

Everything went as usual, though he nearly had heart failure when he came around a corner with his trolley and almost collided with Talbot who was heading for his office. The man smirked at John’s startled expression. It took a moment to regain his composure but then John was able to greet the man politely and continue on with his work. He’d not expected to see Talbot there that evening but again, he didn’t know the man’s schedule at all or if he even had one.

Right before his meal break, John stopped by the security CCTV room to empty the rubbish bin. As usual, he was greeted effusively by Sterling, who thanked him and left the room in a hurry. John caught the door before it closed and watched the guard disappear into the loo, then closed the door and got to work. Quickly, trying to control his nervousness about possibly being caught, he plugged the USB drive into the computer and found the file Escott needed. As promised, it installed onto the computer within less than a minute. Once finished, John removed the drive and concealed it in his uniform pocket. The cloak and dagger aspects of what he had just done reminded John of some of the easier missions he and his team mates had been on and he had to suppress a smile. It was rather exciting to do as Escott had asked and he’d forgotten how much he’d enjoyed the slight adrenaline rush.

After he emptied the rubbish bin and dusted a few objects, he sat and watched the screens. Immediately he noticed Talbot lurking in the hallway outside his office, speaking on a mobile phone. John wished there was some kind of way to overhear what the man was saying, but it was impossible. Also, the image changed too quickly to read lips but Talbot did seem rather agitated when the images cycled around to him again.

It was then that Sterling came back into the room, smelling of tobacco smoke again. John grinned at the guard as he stood to give up the chair. “All’s quiet except for our boss having a phone conversation in the hall outside his office.” Both men turned to look at the screen, watching Talbot pace back and forth, gesturing with his free arm.

Casually, John spoke. “Mr Talbot seems to be staying late a lot recently. I saw him when I was coming out of a room tonight and he almost gave me heart failure. He’s lucky I didn’t run him over with the trolley. Do you know if he’s going to be coming in every night? I’d like to avoid him if at all possible.”

Laughing, Sterling sat back in his chair and grinned up at John. “Maggie told me that he’d be inspecting the new building site tomorrow and wouldn’t be in. Talbot has been coming in pretty much every other night, though. He likes to supervise certain night deliveries and I heard you’ve been driving the lorry for him when Bray can’t do it.”

Holding up his hands, John protested. “I’ve only done it twice. I had no idea there were so many
Sitting forward again, his eyes back on the screen, Sterling replied, “Well, there are more now that the city has that new ordinance—the one where hazardous waste removal must be done much more often. You’d think Talbot would hire a company to pick up the waste but he says it’s cheaper to send it out ourselves. Who knows? Maybe he’s right. I’m just a dumb security guard.”

John patted the man’s shoulder. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, mate. You do a good job here and I, for one, appreciate that. You keep us and the patients safe. Anyway, I must be off. Have a good night and see you later.” The other man grunted a thanks and John went to take his meal and check in with Escott.

As John headed toward the young sentinel’s room, he felt a sense of a job well done along with trepidation at the confrontation about Moran that was sure to come. He wasn’t certain what to say. If he confessed the situation with Moran to Escott, he would have to admit to being an omega. John wasn’t ashamed of his true gender at all but he didn’t know how Escott would react to knowing that John was lying about not only his name but his gender as well. Lies on top of lies were not good foundations for a friendship.

He could say he preferred not to discuss it. The bruise on his wrist wasn’t that bad. Though it did ache, John had had much worse. Escott had said he wouldn’t pry but something told John that Stephen wouldn’t let him weasel out of it so easily. His new friend was turning out to be very protective and too smart for his own good. To be perfectly honest, John had to admit to himself he was feeling just as protective of Escott. If something similar had happened to the young beta, he’d not rest until the person responsible for hurting him was punished severely.

Thinking of the possibility of Escott getting hurt made him start to worry about what could happen to the young man if they were suspected by Talbot or caught snooping. The longer John associated with Talbot the more he learnt about the man and the doctor didn’t doubt that his employer wouldn’t hesitate to have both of them eliminated if it came down to it.

Once he was back at Escott’s room, with the door closed, John could see that the sentinel had been waiting impatiently for him and had been pacing the room. Giving John a half smile, Escott seemed to read his mind. “No need to worry about me, William. I’m safe as houses here. Did you get the program installed?”

“Yes, it was just as easy as you said.” John passed the USB drive back to Stephen under the guise of showing him the evening’s terrible book. Escott laughed at the torrid cover before handing it back to John.

“Oh, this one looks to be the worst one yet. Well done, you.” The smile on Escott’s face made John’s breath catch a bit and he blushed. The young man was truly striking in appearance and though John had never been interested in men, he knew he’d make an exception for Escott. Thankfully, the young sentinel seemed oblivious to John’s awkward admiration. Lowering his face to the book, John pretended to read whilst Stephen typed into his laptop, trying to access the CCTV server now that he knew the program was installed.

Still pretending to read, John spoke up. “Talbot is meant to be out inspecting a building site tomorrow. Sterling thought it was unlikely he’d be in so if you can divert the cameras or whatever it is you plan to do by tomorrow night, I can clean his office and leave the door open for you. I usually get to the office by midnight and then move on to his private loo afterwards. The amount of time the door is open is recorded somewhere and also the number of times it’s opened. If it’s left open too long, security is alerted and sent to investigate, so you’ll have to be quick. You’re welcome to search whilst I work, but again, you’ll have to be very careful.”
Still typing furiously, Escott nodded in agreement. “Right. Good job, William. Thanks to you, I’m into the security room’s computer and can access the cameras. I’ll create the loops I need and be ready for tomorrow.” He glanced up at John and then back down to his own screen, the light flickering across his features which was making his eyes appear a startling blue. “It will be best to meet you there and search whilst you tidy. You’ve been in his office. Any suggestions of where to look for something like a safe?”

Thinking for a moment, John nodded. “There are a couple of very modern art pieces on the wall but only one has glass covering the image. I think it’s likely the safe is behind that one.”

Again, Escott gave John an admiring grin that made his breath catch. “How did you figure that out, William?”

“I have to keep cleaning fingerprints off the edge of that damn frame. They’re always in the lower left corner. Maybe the print is on hinges or can swivel somehow. I’ve never tried it but it’s worth a look, anyway.”

“That sounds like the best possible location and I’ll check there first whilst you clean. Midnight tomorrow then.” Escott bent to his work on the laptop whilst John turned his eyes back to his book. It seemed that maybe the sentinel had forgotten about his plan to interrogate John about his encounter with Moran. But he should have known better. Escott was like dog with a bone and wouldn’t leave it alone.

Still typing away, his deep voice like steel, Escott interrupted John’s reading. “So are you going to tell me about the alpha who bruised your wrist this afternoon and why he has you so upset?”

Glancing up, John felt skewered by the pale grey-blue eyes that stared intensely at him. He had to think for a few moments to decide how to best answer the demand from his friend. Sighing, he set down the book and sat back in the chair.

”Honestly, Stephen. It’s not important. It was a chance encounter and it’s not going to happen again, I can guarantee it.”

Escott’s eyes narrowed and he seemed angry. “That’s not what I asked. I want you to tell me what happened and why. I think it’s important when someone hurts you enough that you damage your other hand punching him. He was much larger and stronger than you and I don’t want you hurt again.”

Mouth twisting sardonically, John replied, “I did indeed hurt him as well so it wasn’t a completely one sided fight. Leave it at that, Stephen, please.”

Abandoning his typing, Escott got up and stood over John. “I don’t think so, William. I thought you had decided to trust me so that we can work together on this case but that’s not completely true, is it? I can see that you’re not going to trust me with anything else that’s important to you. But let me ask this. How do you know that this attack you faced isn’t related to this case somehow?”

Because the accusation about lack of trust levelled by Escott was all too true, John could feel his face flush in mortification and he involuntarily dropped his eyes away from the all-too perceptive gaze. His companion sat back on the bed, looking disappointed. Sternly, John told himself there was no reason to feel guilty because it was only common sense to be wary but he actually felt ashamed of himself. Briefly he wondered how it was this young man got him so emotionally mixed up but his thoughts were diverted when Escott had started talking again.

His deep voice soft and cajoling, Escott tried again. ”William, for both our sakes, I need to know if
this person may be targeting you because of what is happening here. Please. Let me help. Tell me what happened."

The young man's request to help nearly undid John's resolve, but he shook his head. Despite knowing that it would seem as if he was rejecting Escott, he couldn't make himself take that final step.

"I'd rather not discuss it, Stephen. Please trust me on this." John hadn't planned to use those exact words in his appeal to Escott and realised they were the wrong things to say as soon as they left his lips.

A look of intense hurt flashed briefly across Escott's features. Then his expression shut down and became remote and withdrawn. Anxiety shot through John as he noted his friend’s reaction. John had clearly failed to pass a test that he didn’t even know he was participating in.

"I see." Escott hung his head for a moment, dark curls falling across his eyes and then he looked up at John, clearly reconsidering how much he was going to trust in return. His tone when he finally spoke was clearly reluctant but resolute. "This is too dangerous, William. I don't think I can do this if you aren't willing to trust me. Thank you for your help but I think it would be best for both of us if you were to go back to work and not involve yourself in this any longer. I'll find a way to get the evidence I need without putting you at risk any more than I already have done."

Gasping in surprise at his friend’s response to those few ill-chosen words, John countered. “Stephen, no! That’s not what I meant at all. I just….” Panicked at the thought of losing his only friend, John impulsively reached out and took a firm grasp of Escott's wrist with his bare hand. Though Escott frowned in surprise at the move, he allowed it, going so far as to wrap his own fingers tightly around John’s wrist in return.

It never occurred to John to question why this man’s friendship was so important to him that the threat of its loss threw him into a complete panic. So for the first time John tried to deliberately use his latent abilities to open himself up to another person’s emotions. Maybe if he could prove to himself that Escott was trustworthy it would allow him to give his friend more trust in return and the young man wouldn’t withdraw his friendship. He was certain it couldn’t hurt his friend, would only take a few moments and chances were good Escott wouldn’t even detect what John was doing. Giving into his instincts, John relaxed, closed his eyes and envisioned his mind reaching out to Escott.

To his surprise and shock, it actually worked and what he discovered amazed him. There were a myriad of feelings that John picked up from Escott through the contact. Some were crystal clear and others were muddied, which made sense considering that the young man was a very intelligent, complex personality. Now totally running on instinct, John skimmed the surface of Escott’s mind and easily read the strongest emotions. The young sentinel unmistakably radiated honesty and sincerity and a desire to trust John and obtain his aid. This was what John’s instincts had told him to expect from the beginning and it was a huge relief to have it confirmed.

What John hadn't expected was the strong sense of concern, protectiveness and an intense regard for John himself. The young man was very worried about John’s mysterious assailant and believed John was at great risk. Escott was also feeling a similar dread and deep sadness at the thought of not being able to keep John as his friend and he was surprisingly hurt by John’s unwillingness to trust him more fully.

Feeling a great deal of remorse for upsetting his friend, John continued to scan Escott’s mind but realised he was having some trouble controlling how far he went and was going much deeper than he’d thought possible or wanted to go. As he delved further, trying but not knowing how to pull
back, the mind revealed to him became more intricate, richer, enticing, warm and comforting. It was beautiful.

John wasn’t picking up emotions any longer. Instead, he felt like he was sinking into the softest, most comfortable cloud he’d ever encountered. He had found a mental landscape that happened to consist of affection, security and safety, all meant for him alone and it was right there for the taking if he wanted. And John wanted. With everything he was, he wanted to sink into that amazing, exquisite mind, make it his and never leave.

However, his instincts now told him that what he was doing wasn’t right. Escott had not given his permission and John knew that if he were to continue on without it, he would be committing an immoral and potentially harmful act.

Horrified at the damage he might be causing to the young man who meant him no harm, John made himself pull away. It was one of the hardest things he’d ever done and as he slowly separated from Escott, he sensed that a part of Escott was reluctant to let him go also.

Opening his eyes, John found himself staring at Stephen, who was gazing right back at him, eyes wide in shocked surprise. Immediately, John became aware that his throat felt odd and when he touched the area under his jaw, it was hot and very swollen. The most embarrassing thing was that he was painfully aroused and he could tell Stephen was in a similar state. Christ, Escott smelled amazing! All John wanted to do was jump him but there was no way that was happening. He had never been attracted to another man before and it was incredibly confusing. Blushing furiously and thankful he was sitting down, John quickly released the other man’s wrist.

Both of them blinked for a few moments at each other mutely. It was immediately apparent that the emotional, physical and mental communication, which had taken only seconds, had gone both ways. So much for Escott not noticing what John had done. The doctor was mortified and terribly confused.

“What the bloody hell just happened? I don’t understand!” John massaged at his throat again but it only made the feeling worse. Frightened, he turned to Escott for answers. Stephen was a sentinel and maybe he knew what the fuck was going on.

Staring at John with an expression part awe and part horror, Escott exclaimed, “What happened? Surely you must know you’re a latent! And you’re a very, very powerful guide. Now I understand why you changed your identity! What you just did was what a trained guide normally does and if you hadn’t had as much control of yourself as you did, you could have claimed me as your sentinel and bonded with me on a soul deep level. I was completely helpless against you. It’s almost unheard of to have that kind of bond and it’s only supposed to work between two people who are perfectly compatible. The odds of anyone finding their perfect mate are beyond astronomical. I don’t know what to say, William.”

John was flabbergasted and frowned as he considered Escott’s words. Perfect mate? What did that mean? Absently, he rubbed at his throat where the glands in his neck continued to feel swollen and increasingly irritated. The swelling had happened so suddenly. He didn’t feel sick. Was it related to what he’d almost done to Stephen?

“I’m not sure what to say either, Stephen, but you’re right. I suspected I might be a latent and changed my identity so that I wouldn’t be tested and forced into being bonded by the Bureau. No offence but I don’t want to be bonded to anyone, ever. It’s slavery of the worst sort for someone like me. I’d never survive it. In any event, I hope to be leaving England soon, probably for good, so I won’t have to live this way much longer.”
A barely perceptible expression of disappointment flashed across Escott’s face but he nodded sadly in understanding. “I know how you feel. Despite being hounded by my family to bond with someone--either a guide or an omega, I’ve never wanted that for myself either. Being what I am, the Bureau would normally have forced a bonding on me but my family intervened when I presented as an alpha and they prevented the Bureau from learning about me. They know I’m a sentinel, though and my father saw to it that my brother and I were trained properly as sentinels but he refused to allow us anywhere near the Bureau or the sentinel university. Just like you I’m trying to keep a low profile and off their radar. They can’t do much to me now that I’m an adult but I don’t want to take any chances.”

Mouth open in shock, John could only gape at Stephen, completely forgetting his painful throat. “Wait, what? You’re an alpha sentinel? And you’re disguising yourself as a beta? Why ever for? Alpha sentinels are the rarest genetic combination in the world! There are what, ten of you in all the country?”

Stephen interrupted crossly. “There are seven if you count me, not ten.”

Shaking his head, John continued as if Steven hadn’t spoken. “You could have the life of a rock star. You could have your pick of the most beautiful omegas in the world!” Full alpha sentinels were not only rare but could bond with multiple omegas at once and usually had a harem at their beck and call. Their rare status usually gave them considerable wealth and fame. John didn’t know if they could bond with more than one omega guide, though. History indicated that omega guides were notoriously difficult to handle and didn’t like to share. There were many more partial alpha sentinels like Moran but they generally did not share the ability to bond with more than one omega.

Escott’s expression closed down and he huffed at John in disgust. “For the same reason you disguise yourself as a beta when you are actually an omega. Just think for one minute about what that kind of life would mean to someone like me, William. Just like an omega guide, I would be a captive also, never allowed out by myself and never permitted to do the work I am meant to do. I’d be expected to be constantly mating to spawn other sentinels and guides just as you would be constantly bred if the Bureau had found you. I’d never have to work or lift a finger to help myself but I’d rather die than be trapped in that kind of gilded cage, William. So never say that I don’t understand your motivations, because I’m in the same boat as you are. Just the opposite end of it.”

Eyebrows raised, John had to nod in surprised agreement. “Described that way, you’re right. That’s just a different kind of slavery. Maybe a more comfortable life than most but it would be quite horrible for someone like you.”

Escott grumbled sarcastically, still offended. “I’m glad that you agree.”

John lowered his head, embarrassed and rubbed his throat again. “Why does my throat hurt? It’s all swollen and painful. Is this something to do with sentinel/guide stuff?”

Escott gave him an amused smile. “You really are completely ignorant, aren’t you?”

Glaring daggers did nothing to Stephen, unfortunately, except make him laugh. John replied rather acerbically. “Well spotted, that. Some of us had no formal education in sentinel/guide matters, remember? And I’ve been avoiding the subject for years anyway.”

Still laughing, Escott deigned to enlighten John. “When guides mature and are potentially ready to bond, glands form at the throat, just below the chin, that are undetectable until one encounters a compatible sentinel. Those glands then swell and emit bonding pheromones when in the presence of the compatible sentinel, which causes the sentinel to emit similar pheromones in turn. As you already know, the glands are catalysed by touch, such as when you grabbed my wrist. Your mental touch
made the experience much more intense than just physical touch would normally have done.

“To initiate the bond, the sentinel must bite the glands and release the hormones that allow bonding. Since we know now that we are perfectly compatible, you must be careful not to touch me again without gloves.”

Looking a bit uncomfortable, the sentinel continued. “You may have noticed there is a distinct sexual aspect to the bonding experience. In order to complete the bond there must be a sexual encounter. I’m sure you’ve noticed that we have both been aroused but it will die down once the pheromones disperse. You smell amazing, by the way but I have no desire to be bonded any more than you do. I’m grateful that you have such strong control or we’d be soul bonded right now.”

Realising he’d just dodged a bullet but not sure how he had any control at all, John sighed in relief. “To be perfectly honest, it was a near thing. It just seemed completely wrong to do that without your permission, though.” Suddenly he remembered his first day at work where he’d touched the sentinel with bare hands. His throat had felt weird then, too but nothing to this extent.

John remembered something else and changed the subject. “And I guess I don’t need to ask how you know I’m an omega. You smelled me, I suppose.”

“Yes, though I doubt anyone but a sentinel or someone with an enhanced sense of smell could do. Your beta body wash is an inferior brand. You should try mine. It’s much more expensive but you get what you pay for. Help yourself.”

“Christ. Fine. I’ll give it a try. So you’re not surprised I’m latent guide and an omega? You could get quite a lot of money if you turned me into the Bureau.”

Rolling his eyes in exasperation and clearly irritated, Stephen heaved a gusty sigh. “Actually, I’m very surprised. Omega guides, even latent ones, are almost as rare as alpha sentinels, but after what just happened between us, how can you even think that I’d turn you into the Bureau?”

There was a hint of hurt and disbelief in Escott’s tone and once more John felt shame at causing his friend distress. He then raised his head and looked directly into the pale eyes. “You’re right. I don’t know why I said that to you. I apologise.”

“Apology accepted, William. You know that I’m worthy of your trust. Now are you going to tell me what happened this afternoon or not?”

A laugh burst out of John at the man’s cheek. “Christ, you’re like a bloody dog with a bone! Fine, I’ll tell you but it’s rather embarrassing.” Actually, when he now thought about telling Escott, he didn’t feel embarrassed at all any longer. It would actually be a relief to share his worries. So he informed Escott about Moran and what happened outside the Gibbet that afternoon and the previous month.

As he finished his narrative, he shook his head in confusion. “I still don’t understand what he wants with me. I have absolutely no interest in him but he’s a good looking alpha. I can’t imagine he couldn’t find a willing omega pretty much anywhere if that’s what he wanted.”

Looking pensive and a bit concerned, Escott hummed. “I disagree. He doesn’t want just any omega. He clearly wants you. Don’t sell yourself short, William. You have a lot to offer.”

“How do you mean? That’s just daft. I’m nobody.” It made no sense to John that Moran would want someone who had absolutely no interest in him.
A wry smile twisted Escott’s lips. “Now we both know that’s just not true. You’re very intelligent, a
talented medical professional, an omega in the prime of life and a latent guide, though Moran
obviously doesn’t know that last bit. You’re also a highly trained soldier and you’ve caught his eye
somehow. Did you know him when you were deployed in Afghanistan?”

Thinking back, John shook his head slowly. “No. I’d never met him until that day at the pub. It’s
possible he knew of me but I’d only heard of his mercenary group by reputation. I believe we were
in the same parts of the country at the same time but as far as I can recall our paths never crossed.”

Escott’s glance was shrewd. “Moran may have heard about you by reputation, as well or even seen
you in action. I suspect he knows more about you than you think. I’ve never been in the military and
I can tell that you were part of an elite group. I suspect you were one of their more valued
members.”

Rubbing his eyes, John’s shoulders slumped and he sighed in resignation. “Okay. You can’t possibly
know that. What my team and I did was so classified there aren’t any written records in existence.”

“I simply observed and deduced, William. When my family couldn’t discourage me from my choice
of careers, they saw to it I had the best tutors in martial arts available to me. Just from the way you
move sometimes, I recognise that you have had some exposure to Krav Maga and also instruction
from someone in the Royal Marines because I’ve had similar training. But that’s not what’s important
here.

“What is important is that Moran obviously wants you and from what you’ve told me, he isn’t going
to be dissuaded by anything you say or do. You need to be on guard against him because he will
approach you again. Forced bondings of omegas still happen, even in this day and age.”

Remembering what Moran had said that afternoon, a chill went down John’s spine. Admittedly,
John had had a reputation as one of the best marksmen in Afghanistan, though he’d always thought
that was a bit exaggerated by his fond team mates. Moran also had the reputation of being a crack
shot and was said to be the best sniper out there, as well. Was John’s reputation with a gun what had
brought him to Moran’s attention? The thought made John ill and feel rather desperate.

“Well, whatever his motivations, I don’t see any connection between him and this case, so I don’t
think I need to worry. I plan to avoid him for a few more weeks and then I hope to leave the
country.”

Changing the subject again, John asked hopefully, “So, have you changed your mind? Am I on the
case with you or do you want me off?”

Glancing up sharply at the comment about leaving the country, Escott stared at John with a wry twist
to his lips and then nodded sadly again. With his tone clipped and professional, the sentinel was all
business again. “I understand. And yes. I do need your help. I’ve got the digital loops prepared and
I’m ready for tomorrow night. I’ll meet you at Talbot’s office at midnight.”

“Right. I’ll meet you then. Have a good night, Steven.” The sentinel didn’t reply and went back to
his laptop. Nodding to himself, John stood and quickly left the room. His arousal had thankfully
faded and he needed to get back to work. In addition, the swollen glands at his throat had calmed
down somewhat though he was still rather aware of them. The rest of the shift went by in a blur since
all John could think about was what had occurred in Escott’s room that evening.

His thoughts were a swirling mass of chaos as he tried to make sense of what had happened when he’d
touched Escott. He had no similar experiences in his life to relate to and he had no reference or
explanation for what he'd done. He'd been flying totally blind when he'd opened himself up to Escott. The emotions he'd sensed were irresistible and he desperately wanted to get those amazing feelings of acceptance and safety back. Not only get them back but make the person they originated from belong to him and only him. At the same time, a more rational, pragmatic part of himself was freaking out and wanted to reject the entire experience as alien and false. But no matter how hard he tried to deny what happened, the doctor knew, deep down, that what he'd experienced had been the purest truth. Believing and accepting that truth was going against years of ingrained training and hard fought life experience and John knew it was going to be quite a battle to reach an understanding with himself.

As he tossed and turned in his bed for hours, unable to sleep, his brain cycled continually over what had occurred in that short time when he’d touched Stephen’s mind. The final outcome of his deliberations was inescapable. He finally accepted with shock and reluctance that he had indeed met his perfect match and it was unlikely he'd ever find another person as compatible. But did he want to bind himself permanently to another human being, no matter how perfect? This might be his only opportunity, though. If he had any chance at happiness, this might be it. Did he dare turn it down?

Remembering what he’d felt when he touched Escott's mind, however superficially, John realised he’d regret it for the rest of his life if he didn't try to make the man his own. But on the other hand, his whole life would be turned completely upside down. He'd never wanted to bond with an alpha and had actively avoided it his whole adult life. Then suddenly, out of the blue, he was actually considering offering to bind himself to another person and he had absolutely no idea of what it meant to be a guide to a sentinel or even an omega to an alpha! To settle down with an alpha, to be a guide to a sentinel and have children was not what he wanted to do with his life. It was driving him around the twist. What was he to do? Confusion and indecision reigned supreme as he gave up on sleep, threw off the bedclothes and shuffled into his tiny kitchen to make tea whilst he thought.

And, most importantly, what about Escott? Did Stephen have any interest at all in being with John? Chances were good that Escott would turn him away. But if he didn’t and accepted John as his omega and guide, the young man would suddenly be legally responsible for another person who relied on him for everything from financial support to emotional well-being. It would be an enormous, extremely sudden life change for the both of them. John was sure neither one of them was ready for something like that to happen. Though he was ignorant of most sentinel/guide interactions, he knew enough to know that once he was bonded, there was no going back.

Also, they came from such different social and economic classes. John would be an embarrassment to Stephen’s family and friends. And what could John, on older, scarred soldier who didn't want kids, possibly have to offer a gorgeous, rich and amazingly brilliant sentinel? Just the presumption that he could approach an alpha sentinel with a proposal to bond was almost like a bad joke. Escott would likely just laugh at him if John brought the subject up and wouldn’t that be humiliating. The thought of the inevitable rejection was sickening.

But John had sensed, despite what he'd said, that Escott might be open to at least discussing it. The young man had seemed excited when he'd found out that John was an omega guide and then had tried to hide his disappointment when John had said he wasn't interested in bonding with anyone. Could John eventually convince Escott to accept him?

Unfortunately, time was short for both of them. John had a few weeks at most before Masters arrived and Stephen’s case had to be sorted out first and who knew how long that would take. It went against everything John had ever believed to propose binding his life to someone he barely knew. Hours of soul searching told him he should try to talk to Stephen but he knew he wouldn’t do it. There was just too much stacked up against them both for it to ever work. He’d follow his intended path of joining up with Masters’ team after helping Stephen with his investigation. Then
he’d never see the young man again. In the meantime, they had an operation to execute and John began to find himself approaching the next shift as if it were a mission for his team.

John’s role was fairly minimal but crucial. The most important goal was to get Stephen into the office and then watch his back whilst the detective searched for evidence. It was deceptively simple and there was always something that could go horribly wrong. Planning for any contingency was something John specialised in doing and he spent some time figuring out worst case scenarios before heading into work.

Once at the clinic, John simply had to work his shift as usual until it was time. Unlike other days, however, he was hyper alert and automatically evaluated everyone he encountered as a potential threat. Realising how ridiculous he was being, it finally occurred to him that he’d automatically gone into what he had once called ‘mission mode’. It had been nearly a year since he’d had to do something like that and he forced himself to relax. Thankfully, the patients were too sick and the staff too busy to notice anything different about him.

Another batch of AG had been released on the streets and apparently some of it had been cut with something toxic because the sentinels being admitted were much sicker than usual. Some even had to be admitted to the critical care unit immediately, which was atypical. The patients were normally stabilised by hospital staff before they were transferred but apparently the sentinel hospitals were overwhelmed and thankfully Price Clinic had enough experienced personnel to take care of critical cases.

John was run around by the nurses early in his shift helping with new patients, but then things settled down and he continued with his normal routine. Eventually working his way toward Talbot’s office, John pushed his cleaning trolley up to the door by midnight. No one lurked in the halls and all seemed quiet and calm. None of the nurses were visible as he unlocked the door to Talbot’s luxurious office and turned on the lights.

As expected the office was unoccupied though the desk seemed a bit more disorganised than usual. John observed the surface carefully to remember where things belonged in case he accidentally shifted something. He certainly didn’t want to get a bollocking from Talbot the next day for disturbing his things.

It was a few minutes past midnight when John went out to his trolley to get the supplies he needed and glanced around the silent hall, worried that something had happened and maybe Stephen wasn’t coming. Just then, Escott strolled casually around the corner as if he owned the place and John’s heart literally fluttered in his chest at the sight. Embarrassed that he seemed to have turned into a teenager overnight, John sighed and did his best to control his reaction but he was sure Stephen had noticed even as the sentinel greeted John.

Somehow, Stephen wore the pyjamas, slippers and robe as if he was a runway model and the clothes the highest fashion. He carried himself imperiously and seemed incredibly posh whilst his expression was remote and unattainable. It struck John that this must be the face Stephen showed the rest of the world. The audacity of what John had been thinking of doing hit him hard and just reinforced his difficult decision. Escott was completely out of John’s league. He was a wealthy, high-society stranger who couldn’t possibly want anything to do with a lower-class, ex-soldier. Heart hurting, the greeting John gave Escott in return was subdued.

As Stephen looked John up and down, his welcoming smile faded and was replaced by a frown that created a deep crease between his eyes. His baritone was warm and sympathetic, though. “Bad night?”

Somehow, John had almost forgotten about his sleepless night. “I’m fine, just didn’t sleep much. I’m
“I don’t think you slept at all. Were you upset about what happened yesterday?” When John didn’t answer, the frown on the younger man’s face deepened. He stared more intently at John, clearly noting the signs of the doctor’s exhaustion and no doubt deducing the cause. Despite his best efforts John knew that everything he’d struggled with during the night was etched in the lines of his face.

Not able to look away from the pale eyes, John just gazed tiredly back and watched with resignation whilst Stephen read him like an open book. In turn, he could see Escott’s response to his deductions and John’s heart sank even further as he watched the young man’s expression reflect startlement, a deep disappointment and then complete emotional withdrawal. An elegant, long fingered hand was raised to John’s face but the action was aborted quickly. John wanted to lean into it but shook his head sadly and took a step back.

“No touching, remember? Unless you want me to claim you as my sentinel and alpha right here and now, that is. Neither one of us wants that to happen and somehow I don’t think the nurses would approve.” John gave Stephen a forlorn half smile that the sentinel briefly returned as he dropped his hand.

“You’re right of course, William. My apologies.” The pale eyes never left John’s as the doctor nodded soberly in agreement.

Lips tight, Escott’s lips twitched slightly up on one side and then he sighed. “Well, since we’re all here, let us begin our work, shall we?”

John quickly ushered Escott into the office and shut the door, all business now that the operation had begun. “You’ve got half an hour before I have to lock the door. Any longer and the security guard will come to investigate.” That had happened the first week John had started cleaning Talbot’s office but thankfully the guard had understood that John was new and hadn’t reported him.

As planned, John left Stephen on his own and began cleaning. He kept an eye on the young man as he worked. The first thing Escott did was check behind the framed print and immediately found a small wall safe. Escott shot John an impressed smirk and John just gave him a half smile and a wink as he returned to work.

It seemed to take no time at all before Escott was in the safe and sorting through a stack of documents. There was a combination printer/copier in the room and the younger man rapidly began to make copies of all the documents in the safe. The sentinel then turned to searching the top of the desk and the desk drawers and removing additional documents to copy.

All was going quickly and to plan, thankfully. Checking the time, they had about fifteen minutes left before he needed to lock the door. John still had to hoover the office but didn’t want to do that whilst Escott was still in the room because the noise would drown out any sound that could warn them of someone approaching the office.

Gently, John tugged at Escott’s elbow to get his attention. “I’m heading down to the loo to apply some chemicals but I’ll be back in a few moments. Do you think you can be done by then? I don’t want to run the hoover whilst you’re here.”

Escott nodded. “I’m almost done. Shouldn’t be much longer.”

Okay, sounds good. I’ll be right back.” John shut the door to the office and made his way through the empty hall to the private loo next door. The water in the building had a lot of minerals in it for some reason but it meant the toilets tended to build up mineral deposits that needed to be treated.
every few days. The chemicals were a bit strong for sentinels, which was why they were used at
night or when the rooms were unoccupied so the smells could disperse without disturbing sensitive
sentinel noses. John applied the chemical, which needed to soak for a few minutes. As he capped
the bottle, he managed to spill some on his uniform and hands. It wasn’t toxic but he washed his
hands carefully and daubed at the spill on his uniform top. The liquid would evaporate and could be
washed away easily so John didn’t worry about it and returned to his trolley. As he returned the
chemical to the compartment where it belonged, he stood up and turned only to come face to face
with Talbot, who had apparently arrived without John noticing.

John practically jumped out of his skin and gaped stupidly at Talbot. The man narrowed his eyes at
John’s reaction and stepped closer. This was one of the worse case scenarios John had imagined
before coming in but he thankfully had a plan.

Grasping at his chest, dramatically pretending he was having a heart attack, John leaned heavily on
his trolley as if his knees had gone weak and laughed. Talbot stopped his advance at John’s reaction
and frowned.

“What’s so funny, Larssen?” The man seemed angry about something and John could tell the man
was frustrated and looking for someone to shout at. John was happy to make himself the target if it
gave Stephen a chance to hide somewhere in that tiny office.

Irritation was coming off Talbot in waves that John picked up effortlessly. He took a moment to
wonder if Talbot knew how easily he could be read by someone with guide abilities. Escott was very
difficult to read but he was a strong, trained sentinel. Talbot had admitted he was a weak sentinel and
had not been allowed to train at the sentinel university. Did that weakness have something to do with
how transparent he was? Could he be emotionally manipulated by a guide, even a latent like John?

Unfortunately, John didn’t have time to find out at the moment and shelved the thought for later
consideration. He took a deep breath and stood up straight, giving Talbot a shaky smile.

“No, sir! My apologies, sir. It’s just that you keep appearing out of thin air and scaring me! Thought
my heart was going to stop there for a minute.” John laughed again, faking the sound of shaky relief
quite convincingly. “Christ! I’ve never meet a bloke who could walk so quietly. Someone should put
a bell on you, sir.” Wondering where Stephen could be, he grinned witlessly at his employer.

Talbot seemed undecided whether to be insulted or amused and thankfully chose the latter. He
smirked at John. “Maybe you should just clean the wax out of your ears, Larssen.” Changing the
subject, Talbot gestured to the office door and then stepped back somewhat, rubbing at his nose.
“Are you done in there yet? And you smell horrible. What have you got on yourself?”

John looked down as if surprised he had anything on his uniform and plucked at the wet part to stare
stupidly at it. “What? Oh! I spilled some chemical on myself in the loo. It’ll evaporate soon and it’s
harmless. Just smelly. Sorry about that, sir.”

Talbot stepped back again, covered his nose and made a gagging sound. “Are you finished yet?”

Shaking his head, John carefully moved toward the door. “Not yet, sir. I’ve got to hoover the carpet
and then I’ll be finished.”

“Well, I need to get something.” The man moved toward the door and John thought his heart was
going to stop for sure.

The doctor had no choice but to open it for him. “Oh, of course, sir.” Where was Stephen? John
prepared himself for a possible confrontation.
They stepped through the door to a completely empty room. Maybe Stephen had finished and gone back to his room? Something told him that hadn’t happened though. There was a very small cupboard in the room that held office supplies but it wasn’t really large enough for an adult to hide. At least he didn’t think so. Could Talbot smell the young man? He and John were now using the same beta body scent. If he had left a scent, maybe Talbot would think it was John’s smell.

Before either man could fully enter the room, Talbot put a restraining hand on John’s arm. “Oh, Larssen. I’ve been meaning to mention something and just now remembered. I’ve been notified by security that you’ve been spending time with a patient here. Stephen Escott, in room 508?” He looked meaningfully at John who gaped back at him.

“Oh. Yes sir, I’ve been using my break time to visit with him since he was admitted.”

Frowning, Talbot’s eyes were sharp and penetrating. “What’s going on? Why do you keep visiting him?” John kept calm, cocked his head to one side and returned the accusing gaze innocently.

“Whatever do you mean, sir? He’s a nice bloke and I enjoy his company.”

The sentinel’s eyes narrowed. “What I mean is what are you getting out of it? Are you bringing any contraband to that little sod? He’s an overly entitled brat and troublemaker and I don’t want any of my employees associating with him. His family is very influential in politics at the London Bureau and could cause me a lot of difficulty if he has a problem with you.”

John was picking up some strange impressions and emotions from Talbot as he talked about Stephen but he noted the comment about Stephen’s family being influential at the Bureau. Escott had told him the Bureau wasn’t even aware of his existence. Again, another mystery he couldn’t solve at the moment and he turned his attention back to Talbot.

The more complex emotions John was picking up from the older man strangely seethed with anger and resentment toward Escott but he was also eager as if he had discovered something unexpected in their exchange. The whole conversation was odd and awkward but then John understood. Talbot was fishing for something else that he could use against John. Something seriously illegal and the doctor decided he was going to provide what the older man was looking for.

Pretending guilt and embarrassment, John looked away briefly and then down at his shoes. He allowed his accent to become a bit more lower class and his tone was defensive. “I’m sorry sir. Well, he’s rich, you see. Comes from a family that’s filthy with it and he offered me a lot of money. He begged me to get him some stuff and I wouldn’t at first. But that boy’s got a gorgeous mouth on him. I couldn’t resist.”

John was sure that Talbot, being heavily involved in illegal activities himself, wouldn’t give him any shite for bringing drugs into the clinic. Apparently, it was something that went on routinely and Talbot seemed to expect it. The information now gave Talbot an even stronger hold over the doctor. John watched Talbot closely and saw a flare of excitement in his eyes that was quickly controlled. But John had been looking for it and knew he was on the right track.

He continued his false confession and elaborated. “I’ll admit it. I wanted that mouth on me so I agreed to bring him what he wanted in exchange. He gave me a lot of money after, though. It was a fair trade,” he finished sullenly and pouted outrageously at Talbot, who looked like he was trying not to leer. John had to hide his disgust whilst he felt the glee practically pouring off Talbot as the older man realised what his employee had just confessed.

“In that case, I don’t care what you do with the patient as long as I don’t hear any complaints about
you from him or his family, you got that? One word and you’re out of here on your arse.” Talbot’s mouth twisted in an ugly smirk now that he had more potential blackmail material on John. He walked over to his desk and rooted around for a folder, then made his way back to the door, rubbing at his nose.

“Finish up now and make sure that door is locked. I need to do some work tonight and I don’t want you having to come back to finish later. I’ll be in the doctor’s lounge so come get me when you’re done. Hopefully that stench will be gone from the room by then.” Talbot sniffed, rubbed at his irritated nose and disappeared down the hall as John watched, relieved to see the back of the smarmy bastard.

Turning back into the room, John looked around but again saw no sign of Escott. He opened the cupboard but he wasn’t there. He then saw movement from under the desk.

“Under here. Some help?”

Escott had folded himself under the desk. It was a relatively tiny space and he couldn’t believe that Escott could fold his lanky body so he could fit there. John carefully took an elbow and helped the cramped man up and out from under the desk.

Bursting out a relieved laugh, John shook his head in amazement. “I’m guessing you must do a lot of yoga. You’ll have to show me how you did that one day. I don’t think I’ve ever been so flexible.”

Sulking and annoyed as he stretched out cramped limbs, Escott complained, “Some yoga, yes but I’ve never had to do anything like that before and don’t think I’ll try it again anytime soon. That was not something I’d recommend to anyone. I may have dislocated my spine.” John laughed again as Stephen tried to stretch out more.

"Look, you need to head back to your room. What did you do with the papers you copied?"

“I’ve put them in the rubbish container in your trolley. I heard Talbot coming down the hall just as you were returning. I’ll take them now and go through them tonight.”

“How will you get them to the police? Your brother?” John was curious how Stephen planned to get any incriminating evidence out of the clinic.

“Yes, I’ll arrange to have him pick them up tomorrow during afternoon visiting hours. Now I must go and you need to finish work.” He seemed to hesitate a bit and then looked up at John diffidently whilst batting his eyelashes. “Will you come by my room later? We shouldn’t break our routine at this point or it might look suspicious. What with me and my gorgeous mouth needing the drugs that you’re supplying after all.”

John couldn’t help but snort inelegantly through his nose. “Heard that, did you? Sorry, mate. It was all I could think of at the moment and it did convince Talbot that I’m almost as slimy as he is. What a manky tosser! He expects his employees to bring contraband into the clinic! And has no problem with his patients prostituting themselves for drugs. Christ!”

“This is why it’s imperative that we obtain the evidence so that we can get this clinic either cleaned up or shut down. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

With that, Escott gathered the papers, stuck them inside his robe and headed back to his room. John watched him walk out of sight, then went back to work. He finished his tasks in the office in plenty of time, checked to make sure everything was where it should be and locked up. After pushing his trolley out of the way, he went to inform Talbot the office was available. The man made his skin
crawl as he smirked knowingly at John and followed him back to the office. John gave him a fake smile and got back to work.

It occurred to John as he made his way to room 508 that he might be finished with helping Escott with the case. He hoped it wasn’t so since he’d enjoyed being Stephen’s back up and despite everything he’d decided, John had enjoyed sharing the man's company. It had been almost a year since he’d participated in anything like a mission and he’d missed the excitement. Sighing, he knocked on Escott’s door and entered. Escott was sitting on the bed, not a paper in sight and looking extremely tense.

As John entered the room, the younger man immediately beckoned him into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Even with the noise from the water, he whispered so that John could barely hear. “I don’t know for certain the room is not bugged and we can just let security and Talbot think we’re fucking. I need your help again, William. The criminal activity that I’ve discovered in those papers is much more extensive than I ever imagined and they need to get to the police as soon as possible. Would you be willing to courier them to New Scotland Yard after your shift is over? I don’t want to wait until the afternoon for my brother to arrive. I hate to ask you but this is urgent.”

There was no question that John would help, though the last place he wanted to go was a major police station. “Of course, Stephen. What do you need me to do?”

Escott closed his eyes and exhaled in relief. “Thank you. They need to be brought to Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade. I'll ring ahead and let him know you're coming. He'll meet you outside the visitor's entrance at 7 am. He’s a tall alpha with greying hair and dark eyes. Give the papers to him only and then get out of there. You don’t want them asking you any questions.”

“Deliver the papers to Lestrade and scarper. Got it. Now let’s get back out there and try not to deviate too much from our routine. We still have that Regency romance to finish.” John grinned evilly at Escott, who rolled his eyes as they left the toilet. He threw himself onto the bed and laughed whilst John took his usual seat in the chair.

“As John finally closed the book to go back to work, Stephen wiped tears from his eyes. "If I ever hear the phrases 'her jutting nipples' or 'his furred chest' again, I think I shall explode. That was truly wicked, William. And you did their voices perfectly. I can't imagine you'll find better dialog anywhere else."

John smirked. "Oh, now it's a challenge! I shall do my best to find another book equally as wretched if I can't find worse than that. Just you wait until tomorrow, young man.” With that, he wished Escott a good night, hid the papers in his uniform jacket, headed off to finish his shift and finally go home.

As he went through his evening routine, John’s thoughts were filled with Escott and how their adventure was going to be ending soon. Then everything would go back to its normal routine. The thought was upsetting and frustrating to John. He’d enjoyed spending time with the alpha and wanted to continue their friendship or whatever it was they shared. It seemed that Escott enjoyed their time together, also. Though he tried hard, John could not remember a time when he'd fallen into such an easy companionship with anyone. It continued to surprise him at how much he valued Stephen’s company. Reluctantly, he forced himself to acknowledge the incredible depth of his
loneliness as well as his attraction to the young man. What he’d said to Talbot about Stephen’s mouth was the absolute truth. Those lips were amazing and he’d imagined kissing them more than once. He’d even had a dream about it days earlier and it had disturbed him.

John had never been attracted to a male alpha before and had never even dated one. In the past, he’d been half-heartedly pursued by a number of female alphas but never males. Before his Mum and Harry had died, he’d caved to social pressures and had accepted the advances of a couple of female alphas. Just being around them for more than a few hours had cured him of his curiosity, though. Each one had been completely self-centred and self-absorbed and had spent their dates ordering him around and criticising him. John had walked out of a restaurant with the last alpha in the middle of their date when she began to tell him he wasn’t a proper omega since he had too many muscles and if he wanted to bond with her, he would have to fatten up and stop exercising. After that, John had restricted his love life to beta females. That way there were no expectations, their involvement was superficial and no one got hurt, which had suited John just fine. He never truly admitted to himself that he had wanted more but he knew wasn’t going to find true companionship from alphas of any sort. They wouldn’t even think about him unless he was in heat. He didn’t want that kind of relationship. The kind of alpha he wanted, who would treat him as an equal and not expect to be waited on hand and foot, didn’t seem to exist.

But maybe he was wrong. His subconscious certainly seemed to think so. For some reason, he couldn’t stop thinking of Stephen, even in his sleep. A week or so after first meeting Escott, he had slept poorly one night whilst his dreams had been exceptionally vivid. They were full of images of himself and Stephen working as a team. The two of them had been running through the streets of London, solving crimes. They were laughing, working and living together in a kind of domestic bliss he’d never imagined could ever be possible. Observing himself as if he were in a film, John watched as he and Stephen moved around a cosy flat where meals were prepared, bills paid, arguments occurred and after they made up, they sat on the sofa curled up together watching telly. They were equal partners in the dream and John felt happy and content with their shared life. Deep down, he knew that this was what he had been missing.

Then the dream shifted. The location was now a bedroom and instead of an observer, John was very much a part of the action. Stephen and John were wrapped around each other, making love with desire and passion. Kissing Stephen deeply, John bucked his hips hungrily against the alpha, demanding and pleading to be taken. Even though John had never had penetrative sex with anyone, what was happening felt real and absolutely incredible. At John’s bossy command, Stephen laughed and slid himself into the omega’s welcoming body. John arched his spine voluptuously and shuddered at the sensation of being filled completely. The alpha began to move slowly and deeply inside him and each exquisite thrust ratcheted John's arousal higher and higher until he came in ecstatic waves. His body pulsed around Stephen until, with a fast series of pounding thrusts, the alpha ejaculated deeply inside John with a shout of triumph.

Waking the next morning to find a mess in his pants had been a bit of a surprise for John since he’d not had a wet dream for years. But considering the dream he’d just had he shouldn’t have been shocked. When he’d touched his entrance, it had felt sensitive and he ached and tingled inside his abdomen in a way he’d never felt before. His body and subconscious had known who and what it wanted but John sadly knew in his heart it could never be. It had all seemed so real and even many days later he remembered every bit of it as if it had actually happened.

The memory stayed with him as he left work that day with the papers Stephen had taken from Talbot’s office but John ruthlessly forced it from his mind. He had a job to do for Stephen and it was vital to get the evidence to the police as soon as possible. Dwelling on his hopeless situation with Stephen would not end well. John had allowed himself to become too fond of the young man and it was time to disengage before he hurt them both, badly.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kind comments and kudos. I appreciate each and every one of them and thank you again for taking the time to let me know if the story is working for you. You guys are the greatest! :-)

The trip to New Scotland Yard was a bit of an adventure in that John decided to practice his growing knowledge of the CCTV system to avoid each and every camera possible as he made his way to the station from the clinic. Since he wasn’t going directly home from work first, he had some time to kill before he was to meet Lestrade and so he spent a considerable amount of time walking through murky alleyways and down dark streets he knew were blind spots. John also kept a close eye out for any possible pursuit as he made his slow and circuitous way to NSY.

He finally took the Tube to St James’ Park station and walked up Broadway to the building. There was no sign of pursuit but he stayed alert. New Scotland Yard was a huge, ugly modern building but he finally found the visitor's entrance where he was to meet Lestrade.

Of course there was a Starbucks right across the street. John checked the time and saw he was a few minutes early so he ducked in, bought a coffee and watched for any suspicious persons who might have followed him. Even though foot traffic was picking up as rush hour approached, he saw nothing out of the ordinary so he finished his drink and headed across the street at the appointed time. There were a couple of uniformed police standing near the doorway and as he approached, a grey haired, dark eyed alpha in a rumpled suit emerged from the door that said 'Visitor's Entrance'.

As John casually approached, the police guarding the entry eyed him suspiciously but the doctor walked confidently up to the older man he assumed must be Lestrade and no one interfered.

The grey haired man looked him over with narrowed eyes as John held out his hand. "Detective Inspector Lestrade? I'm William Larssen. Stephen Escott sent me."

At Escott's name, Lestrade's expression cleared and he shook John's hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr Larssen. I understand you have some things for me. Please come inside and we can talk."

John hesitated tensely for just a moment but then followed Lestrade into the building. It would have been somewhat awkward to thrust the papers at the DI and then bolt down the street like he wanted to do. However, it took only a few moments for Lestrade to get them through security and John had to show his false ID, but finally they made their way into a lift and then to a rather nice office where Lestrade closed the door.

Nervously, John stood in the middle of the office and looked around. There were numerous glass windows and the view outside was expansive though not very interesting. Lestrade’s desk was a chaotic mess but John saw numerous pictures of many children and a lovely female omega on every available surface. It was obvious Lestrade was very proud of his large family, took good care of them and loved them deeply.

The DI looked tired and careworn but John liked him instinctively. Kindness, concern and an intense curiosity were the predominate emotions John sensed from him and the doctor was intrigued.
Under different circumstances, he would have liked to have Lestrade as a friend despite the fact the man was an alpha.

"Would you like tea or a coffee, Mr Larssen?" Lestrade had sat down at his desk and indicated to John that he should take a seat in one of the chairs across from him.

To his surprise, the chair was actually comfortable. "No, thank you, sir. I just had a coffee at that rather conveniently located Starbucks across the street."

Lestrade seemed amused. "Those shops must be breeding. I think there's one on every corner these days. But their coffee is better than ours, so you dodged a bullet there."

He sat forward in his chair and skewered John with a sharp expression. "So. Let's get to business. Stephen says you're an employee at the clinic, you're helping him and I'm not to harangue or interrogate you unnecessarily. But I did want to thank you for that USB drive with the video. It was very helpful in identifying some rather nasty characters and we now have a better idea about what we'll be facing. So, how is our mutual friend and what did he send me?"

Having expected something of a cross-examination, John was pleasantly surprised he wasn't going to get one and replied easily. "You're welcome to the help and Escott is fine, though I think he's rather bored at the moment."

Lestrade rolled his eyes, making it clear that he was very familiar with the young sentinel's tendency to be easily bored, which amused John and made him smile fondly. Carefully reaching into his coat, the doctor pulled out the sheaf of papers that Stephen had copied a few hours earlier then handed them over to the DI.

Sitting back in his chair, John added soberly. "But when Stephen gave these to me, he was troubled and said they were significant. He wanted you to have them as soon as possible and said something about the degree of the criminal activity was far more widespread than he'd initially thought."

As Lestrade nodded absently, it was clear most of his attention was on the papers John had just given him. He began to frown and then his expression became apprehensive. Ignoring John, he quickly picked up his phone and dialled. Whoever he'd called picked up immediately.

"Sally, I want the team ready to go within the next 24 hours. We've got some information that needs forensic accountants here ASAP. I'll meet you in the conference room." He hung up without waiting for an answer, looking very tense.

John began to pick up waves of anxiety from Lestrade and became concerned as well. "Is there danger to Stephen, Detective? Do we need to warn him? I can bring him a message if you can't ring him." Stephen deserved to know what Lestrade was planning. It only made good sense.

Eyeing John speculatively, Lestrade shook his head. "I don't know how much Sher--Stephen has told you but I don't think you need to worry about him. He can take care of himself and I don't want an innocent bystander involved in this any more than you have been already. Escott is well protected and I can contact him if need be. There's nothing more that you can do to help and I don't think he'd thank you if you got in the way of the investigation. So go home, go back to your normal routine and stay away from Escott from now on, okay?"

"Once things have been resolved, I'm sure he'll find you and let you know what happened. Thank you for your help, Mr Larssen. Do you think you can find your own way out?" Lestrade was already up and out the door before John could properly answer him.
Uneasy despite Lestrade’s reassurances about Stephen’s safety, John hastily made his way to the lift and out of the building as fast as he could do without drawing attention to himself. Something significant was in those papers but it was clear that John would not be allowed to help. He had no idea what was going on or how to run a police investigation. The last thing he wanted to do was somehow interfere and cock up something that might get Stephen hurt.

He'd have to trust that Escott and Lestrade knew what they were doing. Maybe John should have insisted that Stephen be extracted from the clinic. But maybe they still needed him there to gather more evidence. Again, John was totally in the dark about the operation and needed to stand back unless he got more intel. That was SOP for any mission and he had forgotten that in his concern for Stephen.

As he made his way back to his bedsit, John wished there was some way he could ring or text Escott but he'd not got the man's number. A sense of unease and urgency was growing at the back of his mind and he didn’t like it. It might be dangerous to try to contact him anyway. He would just show up for work early the next shift to check in first thing with Stephen and determine that everything was okay.

Stopping by the local market, John picked up a few things and walked up to his flat, still completely absorbed by his worries for Stephen. His distraction was so complete that the smell of excited alpha pheromones didn’t hit him until he’d opened his door and taken one step inside. He had just enough time to step back in alarm before a large hand grabbed the front of his coat and pulled him fully inside the flat. Groceries scattered all over the floor as he fell onto his belly and slid forward on the waxed wooden floor for a few feet.

Training kicked in instantaneously and as he flipped over onto his back he saw that Sebastian Moran was already looming over him with arms outstretched to seize him. Furious, John pulled his legs tight against his body and lunged upward with all the considerable strength of his legs and back, hitting Moran solidly in the solar plexus with his boots, driving the alpha back and spinning him around where he collapsed to his knees, facing the now closed door and wheezing for breath.

Snarling in rage, John was on his feet immediately and locked an arm around the man’s throat with a brutal sleeper hold. Despite the bruising blows Moran aimed at John’s ribs with his elbows, he wasn’t able to break free. John held on ruthlessly, tightened his grip and felt a grim satisfaction as Moran’s struggles quickly weakened.

Just as Moran slumped and began to collapse, John was stunned to hear an exasperated sigh and felt the hard, cold barrel of a gun pressed against the back of his head. He froze instantly in surprise and shock, heart pounding hard and his breath coming fast.

“Let go of him or you’ll die right here, despite what Seb wants.” The voice was a pleasant light tenor and the speaker sounded incredibly bored. Mouth suddenly dry, John released Moran straight away and slowly raised his hands up as Moran flopped gracelessly to the ground, gulping air and retching.

John heard the man behind him wisely back away out of arms reach and sigh again. “Now stand up, put your hands on your head and lace your fingers together. Back away from Seb.” John obeyed and stood watching Moran heaving and puking, all the time hoping he’d managed to do the alpha some permanent damage.

“Move over to the bed and sit down. Keep your hands on your head.” Heart pounding, John did exactly as he was told and turned warily to sit on the bed. He saw a young beta male in a very fine suit standing near the kitchen table holding a gun on him. It was clear from the way he held the weapon that he was quite familiar with it and was trained in its use. The man was pleasant looking
with dark hair and eyes but as John’s latent senses kicked in, the doctor felt real fear for the first time since he’d nearly died in Afghanistan. The emotions that emanated from the stranger were indescribable. John felt as if he was in the presence of pure evil and it scared the hell out of him, making his stomach churn and skin crawl in horror.

As he watched the stranger settle himself comfortably in one of John’s kitchen chairs, Moran managed to stagger to his feet, hand rubbing his abused throat. The beta glared at Moran briefly but kept his black eyes mostly on John. Moran wobbled over and sat heavily in the other chair, his weight making it creak dangerously.

Moran’s white grin split his face as he tried to talk but his voice came out as a croak. Unfortunately, John was able to understand him. “I told you he was a feisty one, Jim. Do you see now why I want him?”

The younger man shook his head irritably. “Regrettably, Seb, no. I honestly don’t see what you want with him. He nearly killed you just now. Not that it wasn’t exciting, but you never were one with any fucking sense at all. It’s a good thing I like you or I’d have walled you up alive a long time ago.”

Moran apparently had nothing to say to that but the grin he directed at John grew positively predatory. John couldn’t help the shiver of disgust and revulsion that ran down his spine and he narrowed his eyes in warning at the alpha. John’s implied threat just made Moran’s smile grow wider.

The beta turned his attention to John again and gave him a ghastly, fake smile. “Hi! I’m Jim Moriarty. I’d say it’s a pleasure to meet you Dr John Watson but I’d be lying. You’re an annoyance more than anything but my Seb likes you, so I’d thought I’d pay a visit.”

John’s eyes widened in shock at the use of his real name. Mocking him, Moriarty’s eyes widened also and his mouth opened in a ‘O’ of fake surprise that he covered lightly with his fingers. “Oops! I wasn’t supposed to know that, was I? But we’ve known who you are since you arrived in London, Johnny.” He glanced meaningfully down at the table where some object were sitting that John hadn’t notice before.

Horrified, John recognised the box he’d left in Hairston’s safe keeping sitting on the table. The money he’d saved as well as his identity papers were also there and the gun Moriarty held was John’s own SIG. How had he got them from Hairston? Christ! Was Sam okay? For some reason John couldn’t understand, the tin that held his hormone suppressants was sitting on the table also.

Speechless, John could only stare at Moriarty and wonder what the hell was going on. Sighing again, Moriarty answered John’s unasked questions. “Sam is fine. He works for me and gave me your things when I asked.” He leaned forward and smiled with wide eyes, whispering as if he was telling John a great secret. “You really need to be more careful who you trust, you know.”

Moriarty giggled at John’s shocked and sickened expression of betrayal. “The reason we’re here is that Seb wants you. You’re an omega; he’s an alpha, heats, sex, babies, blah blah blah. Biology is disgusting but you get the idea. He’s wanted you for years and he totally cocked up trying to get you the first time in Afghanistan.”

Moran broke in at that point. “The wind shifted and he moved just as I shot! He wasn’t meant to be injured so badly.”

Eyes rolling in irritation again, Moriarty glared horribly over at Moran, who shut up immediately.
“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, you were too badly injured and had to be sent back to London before Seb could collect you. So I’m going to make sure he doesn’t cock it up once again. I’m bored with all of this and when I’m bored, people die. Now here’s what’s going to happen. Are you listening to me?”

The last sentence was shouted at John, which made him jump in shock. He’d been overwhelmed with the knowledge that not only had he been betrayed by Hairston but that Moran was the reason he’d been invalided out of the army. From what Moriarty had just said Moran had been the mercenary who had shot and nearly killed him in some bizarre attempt to obtain him as his omega. White hot rage and the pain of his loss crawled up his spine and settled as a knot in his stomach as the realisation swept through him. It took everything he had to jerk his attention back to Moriarty.

The beta repeated himself with gritted teeth. “This is what you’re going to do, Johnny-boy. You can’t just up and disappear, so you’re going to go into work tomorrow and give your week’s notice. You’ll work hard at that damn job I got for you and when you’re done you’ll pack all your things and go to this address where Seb will come to collect you. He’ll bond with you and you’ll all live happily ever after. Got it?” He put a card on the table beside the box he’d taken from Hairston’s safe. “If you fail to show up, I will find you and hurt you. As far as I’m concerned, you’re just a hole for Seb to fuck and I don’t think he’ll mind if some parts go missing, hmm Seb?”

Moran’s grin faltered strangely for just a fraction of a second and then got wider with anticipation as Jim threatened John. There would be no help or sympathy from that quarter. John closed his eyes and shivered in despair. He had no doubt that Moriarty would do unspeakable things to him if he disobeyed because he could read the absolute glee and almost sexual excitement the man was feeling at the thought of hurting John. John could sense Moriarty was actually hoping that John would run so he could hunt him down, torture and mutilate him.

Feeling horrified and physically sick, John held back his nausea by sheer willpower. A feeling of unreality spread through his entire body, starting at the top of his head and running down to his toes, leaving nothing but numbness. There had to be a way out of this somehow. The revelation that Moriarty had some connection to the clinic was shocking and changed the direction of John’s thoughts. Stephen had been correct from the beginning. There had been a connection between Moran’s advances and the criminal doings at the clinic, though there had been no way John could have known it.

But what was most interesting was that it seemed Moriarty was unaware that the police finally had enough evidence to raid the clinic, thanks to John and Stephen’s actions. John wondered just how much the beta was mixed up in the drug trade there and had a feeling that Jim must be deeply involved. But unlike Talbot, John suspected that the clinic was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to Moriarty’s criminal involvements. It seemed Jim also financed Moran’s mercenary group and who knew how many other illegal enterprises. The man was insanely dangerous and powerful. He would be almost impossible to defy but John had to find a way out somehow.

Moriarty gave John an ugly smirk and the doctor felt the blood drain from his face as he sensed the horrid emotions pouring off of the psychopath. “You can’t possibly get away from me, Johnny. It’s better for you if you don’t even try. But if you do, I’ll be waiting for you.” The man stood, picked up everything on the table and placed it all into the box.

“If you’re good, you can have this back next week when you meet Seb at the address I gave you. Except for the suppressants. You have to be in heat for Seb to bond with you and he’s been patient long enough. I’m tired of listening to him whinging on about you. Until then, I’ll leave you a bit of money for food, but you’d best be careful with it. It’s not going to last very long and a healthy boy like you will be getting hungry.” Moriarty’s expression was hideous as he sniggered at John. The
beta picked up the box, keeping the weapon trained on John as he and Moran left the flat.

It took a few moments after the door shut behind them for John to be able to take a deep breath without wanting to vomit. The room was still reeking with the unstable emotional miasma exuded by Moriarty and it seemed to cling to his mind like slime. John covered his face with his hands and shook, wondering what he could possibly do to escape. The situation was dismal and he had no illusions that he would be able to get away easily, if at all. His options were nearly gone.

Despite the threats of torture and mutilation, there was absolutely no way he was going to allow himself to be bonded to Moran. He couldn’t go to the police without being arrested for identity theft and John suspected Moriarty knew people in the justice system who could make his life a total hell. He’d eventually end up right back with Moran. Nothing he could think of could get him away from Moriarty except turning himself into the Bureau to be sold and forcibly bonded to a stranger. Maybe it wouldn’t be as bad as being bonded to Moran but it would still mean a kind of death to him, no matter how it turned out.

Pacing back and forth, John pulled at his hair and tried to examine his options rationally but terror kept rising up to prevent it. Finally, he sat down at his laptop and forced himself to write everything out. Masters would be arriving much too late for him to escape Moriarty’s deadline unless he could somehow stay out of Moran’s clutches for another two weeks at a minimum. On the other hand, the only way he knew how to contact Masters was through the Gibbet, which apparently Moriarty owned. If John disappeared and then resurfaced to join up with Masters, Moran would be waiting for him there, especially since Hairston would let him know the moment John showed his face, the bastard. John couldn’t run since he had no way to leave the country. He would be paid on Friday but combined with the small amount of cash that remained there wouldn’t be enough to get him very far. The only thing of value he had was his laptop and it was old and basically worth less than £20. He would have to buy replacement suppressants but it would cost more money than he currently had at the moment.

His life was spiralling completely out of his control and he had to do something. But he had no money and no possibilities of getting more without resorting to stealing. He needed to get his identity papers, weapon and money back from Moriarty, but how? Panic and despair threatened to overwhelm him but he forced himself to calm, breathe evenly and try to think logically. He wasn’t helpless. He had friends he could ring. He could find a way to contact Masters aside from the Gibbet. And the Colonel had to stay somewhere whilst in London and he could find out what hotel and meet her there.

His chaotic thoughts then turned to a pale eyed, brilliant alpha sentinel. Could he approach Stephen for help? No, that wasn’t possible at the moment. Escott was going to be very busy soon wrapping up the investigation to bring Talbot down. But if they could arrest Talbot, maybe the man had evidence to implicate Moriarty! He seemed to be the kind of slime that would immediately turn on his co-conspirators to save his own arse. Then John could possibly escape Moriarty’s clutches if the horrible man was under arrest or running from the law. Lestrade had told him to stay away from Escott to keep them both safe but the information John had discovered about Moriarty’s connection to the clinic was too important not to share as soon as possible. He didn’t trust Lestrade and so he needed to see Escott. Also, the sense of uneasiness for Stephen’s safety was building again and he needed to do something proactive.

Despite not having had any sleep the night before, John decided to head back out to the clinic right away. The day shift didn’t know him and he could easily sign in as a visitor instead of using his work ID to get access to the clinic. He really didn’t want a record of being in the clinic during the day since it might raise red flags and he wanted to avoid Talbot’s attention at the moment. He grabbed a ball cap to help conceal his features and headed quickly out of the flat.
As the train took him closer to his destination, his thoughts continued to churn, trying to find a way out of his grim situation. It occurred to him that once Escott saw John, his friend was going to know something was seriously wrong. However, he’d just have to cross that bridge when he got to it. Maybe he could ask Escott for advice but he would have to do it in a way that wouldn’t suggest to the young man that John wanted him to solve his problem. The last thing John wanted was to seem as if he were some kind of helpless omega who needed an alpha to rescue him. Even though John’s situation was dire, there had to be a solution and if anyone could see a way out, it would be Stephen. John had to be extremely careful, though as he didn’t want to turn Moriarty’s attention toward Escott. The further away he could keep that madman from the young detective, the better. His decision made, John felt more hopeful as he walked into the clinic.

The day shift was in full swing and it was much busier than at night. John wasn’t used to all the noise and commotion. The emotional atmosphere was different also and his latent senses found it all a bit confusing and it took a moment to orient himself. The staff members seemed tense and he was immediately wary. The ball cap was pulled down but he kept a sharp eye on everything as he entered the lobby area. Something was seriously wrong. He knew it the moment he’d set foot in the building. His latent senses were clamouring at him in a way he couldn’t completely understand but he could only interpret to be a warning.

His arrival happened to coincide with the beginning of visiting hours and he joined a large group milling about the lobby. The receptionist’s phone was ringing constantly as she tried to process all the visitors. Frustrated at the impatient group, she just waved them all toward the lifts instead of signing them in and John walked in with them, keeping his head down. The security guards were all on high alert for some reason but John did his best to pretend to be invisible and they didn’t even notice him. The group bunched around the lift doors whilst John waited on the outside until someone came out of the stairwell. Quickly, he slipped away, caught the door before it closed and headed up the stairs. Except in emergencies, the stairwell doors were designed to require a swipe card to leave a floor but once you were in the stairwell, you could access any floor without requiring your ID card. It had always seemed to John to be an odd system but it was now to his advantage. There was nothing he could do about the CCTV in the hallways however. He’d just have to take the chance no one was paying much attention.

John took the stairs two at a time and approached the door to the fifth floor hall not far from Talbot’s office and close to Escott’s room. Something made him wait and listen before he entered however. He was glad that he did because there were raised voices outside the door, amplified somewhat by the acoustics of the hallway. He recognised Talbot’s voice straight away and he sounded angry.

“…and you let me know the minute Larssen comes into work, you hear me? He won’t be in until later this afternoon and I don’t want him getting away. Wait for him and once you’ve got him, take him down to the basement room with the other one. The bulk of the damage will be contained that way and we’ll have time to get away before he finds out. Now move! We all have a lot to do and not much time to do it in.”

There was a muttered response, the sound of footsteps walking away and then silence. John’s latent guide senses ranged out without his conscious thought and told him the hall was now empty. His breathing evened out and his mind cleared and focused as adrenaline began to flood his system.

“What the bloody hell was going on? What did Talbot mean when he ordered the guard to take John to the basement with the ‘other one’? Was Escott a prisoner? Heart in his throat, John cautiously opened the door, slipped into the hall and around the corner to Escott’s room. There was no way he could stay off the security cameras but he walked with confidence and kept his head down, thanking his foresight to bring the ball cap. As long as he didn’t stand out from a normal visitor, it was
unlikely anyone would stop him.

Escott’s room was just ahead and he pushed his way in without knocking. His breath left his lungs as if he’d taken a hard hit to the stomach and fear filled his mind when he saw the bed stripped of linens and all of Escott’s things gone. As he scanned the room, he heard a sound in the loo and turned in time to see a young beta female dressed in a cleaner’s uniform with her arms full of towels. It was someone from the day shift preparing the room for another patient.

She gasped in sudden surprise and covered her mouth with a hand, crushing the towels to her chest. John immediately smiled and apologised. “I’m so sorry I startled you—I’m looking for someone. My younger cousin was in this room just yesterday—Stephen Escott? I was meant to visit him today but he’s not here. Was he moved to another room?”

The young woman gave a small huff of relief when she realised he was no threat and smiled back at him. But then her smile faded and her expression became concerned. “I’m so sorry but has no one notified you? I hate to be the one to tell you, but your cousin took drugs that were smuggled in by an employee last night. I was told he was taken to critical care with an overdose. I don’t know his condition. Maybe you can ask one of the nurses?”

At the news, John sucked in a breath in shock, horrified at what he’d just heard. His latent guide senses took control of him at that moment and cast themselves wildly outward, desperately trying to find Escott. Everything went black as his latent empathy searched for the young sentinel. It was disorienting and incredibly dangerous but John couldn’t have stopped himself if he’d even wanted to do. He could sense other sentinels' minds on the ward, going on high alert, trying to discover and track down the unbonded guide touching their minds. Their clamouring was loud and somewhat distracting but John ignored them utterly. Finding Stephen was the most important thing and his instincts knew what to do even if John himself didn’t have a clue. He had no idea how long it took, but when he suddenly came to, he was sitting on the bed with his head between his knees. He felt weak all over and drained of energy. The young cleaner was kneeling beside him, trying to get him to wake up.

“I’m so sorry! I’ll go get the nurse, just breathe first!” She was trembling and nearly in tears. John took a moment to feel bad for scaring her but finding Escott was urgent and he now knew where to go. His latent empathic senses had been cast far out but they had unerringly targeted Escott. The direction he’d been shown was down in the basement. John had picked up not only the young sentinel’s location but emotions of confusion, fear and pain, so Escott was not only a prisoner but possibly injured.

Talbot had somehow found out that Escott was a danger, had captured him and covered the abduction by concocting a story about an overdose. Apparently John was associated with Escott now and the current story was that John had given Escott the illegal drugs. That was why security was on the lookout for him as well.

Pulling himself together, he took a huge breath which cleared his head. His own troubles were secondary at the moment. He had to find and get Escott out safely. Energy coursed through him as adrenaline hit his system again. He stood suddenly and once again apologised to the startled young woman. “Please don’t call the nurse. I’m fine. I was just upset. I’ll go to the critical care unit to find my cousin. I’m sure they’ll let me see him. Ta, luv.”

He patted the young woman on the shoulder and helped her up. As he did, John quickly took her badge with the swipe card on it. He needed to get out to the stairwells and to the basement undetected and he knew now that his card was probably deactivated or would set off alarms at the very least.
He had a vague plan forming so he headed down to the cleaner’s changing room. It was between shifts so it was unlikely that anyone would be there. He wanted to collect his uniform so he could blend in with the rest of the employees as he infiltrated the basement. Escott needed to be rescued and John was the only one who was close enough to do it. John doubted Talbot was planning to kill either one of them right away so he had some time.

He reached his destination and the room was completely empty. He made his way to his locker and saw that the lock had been cut off. Carefully, he opened the locker and saw that some strange packages had been planted inside. John knew that if he’d come in at his usual time, security would be waiting to confront him with the evidence. Then they’d take him to the basement to interrogate him. Talbot hadn’t called the police to collect him so he was clearly planning to take care of the problem himself. Idly, he wondered if Moriarty knew about this. Talbot was a smarmy weasel and John suspected he’d not told Moriarty in the hopes of containing the disaster about to happen. Well, John was going to see to it that Talbot got what was coming to him.

Using the gloves issued to him by the clinic, he removed the drugs from his locker and set the packages aside. He then put his uniform on over his street clothes. The extra layers made him appear bulkier and harmless, which would work to his advantage if it came to a fight. Everyone always underestimated him because he was a typical omega: small and tended to look stocky. He emptied his locker completely and packed everything else that belonged to him in his holdall.

Some of the smaller, more useful things he’d stored in the locker were transferred to pockets and secret compartments in his belt. He had a very sharp flick knife that he strapped to his left forearm and he had a set of picklocks as well as a variety of handcuff keys in case Escott was restrained. It would take a very thorough search to find them and he counted on the lax training of the security if he were captured.

Then he systematically broke into and raided all the other lockers and took the identity cards of everyone he could find. He smiled grimly when he found Lee’s card. He had a feeling the man was deeply involved in what was going on at the clinic and the card might give John access to more areas than anyone else’s card. Before he left the changing room, he put all the drug packets into Lee’s locker.

The next stop was the cupboard where the cleaning trolleys were kept. He grabbed the first one and headed to the employee’s lift that would take him to the basement. His holdall was easily hidden in a compartment of the trolley and it could be quickly retrieved as necessary.

Before he got on the lift, he pulled out his mobile and rang New Scotland Yard. It took some time before he could convince someone to put him through to Lestrade, but he finally got hold of the alpha.

The gruff voice answered irritably. “This had better be bloody good.”

“This is Larssen. I don’t have a lot of time, Inspector, but Escott has been captured by Talbot and is being held prisoner in the basement of the clinic. I don’t think they’re going to kill him right away but I can’t be sure of that so I’m going to go down there and see if I can’t get us both out before the shite hits the fan.”

The DI didn’t interrupt but listened intently as John finished. “You need to get here with your team and search warrants as soon as you can. Talbot knows something is going on and he’s going to scarp if you don’t move fast. Also, someone named Jim Moriarty is involved in all of this. I think he’s the real money man behind this whole scheme.” John heard a sharp intake of breath at that but again Lestrade didn’t question him.
When John was done, the DI responded immediately. “We’ll be there as soon as we can do. I won’t tell you not to do anything stupid because clearly you’re going to try to rescue that mad bastard. I’ll wish you good luck and don’t get killed, though. Escott will murder anyone that hurts you and I don’t want to have to arrest him, too.”

John’s mind was now concentrating solely on his objective and everything else was secondary, so Lestrade’s last comment didn’t register right away. John’s voice was now focussed, flat and deadly. “Right. See you on the other side, then, mate.”

With that, he rang off and got on the lift. His heart was beating too fast and as the lift descended, John closed his eyes, inhaled deeply through his mouth and exhaled through his nose. It worked to calm him and focus his mind on the mission ahead. His goal was to find Escott and get him out alive. The basement was like a rabbit warren but he had a good idea where they were keeping the young sentinel. His first visit was going to be one of the rooms where the so called ‘hazardous waste’ was meant to be stored.

As the lift doors opened, he once more cast out his latent senses. He was unlikely to encounter any strange sentinels in the basement and so he didn’t need to worry about alerting them with the use of his empathy. The senses practically dragged him to the right and down the hallway he’d traversed previously when he’d first found the ‘hazardous waste’ rooms, so he was going in the correct direction. As he got closer to the rooms he wanted, he encountered a few people but they paid him no mind. He kept his head down and the uniform and trolley made him basically invisible to everyone he encountered.

Finally he arrived at one of the rooms he remembered seeing earlier. There was now a guard stationed at the door but he ignored John as the doctor walked confidently up to the entry and swiped Lee’s stolen card. Just as he suspected, the card worked perfectly and he entered the room. He looked around as the door locked behind him. There was a security desk to his left with another guard behind it and another door in front of John. There were a number of video screens visible behind the desk showing various views of rooms and hallways. Most were empty though there was one room that was bustling with activity. Most importantly, one of the rooms showed Escott, seemingly unconscious and tied to a chair. The floor in front of him was covered with vomit.

Again, taking a deep breath, John pushed his trolley up to the opposite door and looked for a place to swipe the card but didn’t see one. The guard must have to buzz him through and so he glanced over his shoulder at the guard and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

The guard behind the desk stood up and looked at him suspiciously. “I’ve not see you before. It’s not time for the cleaners yet. Where’s Adrian?”

John turned to look at the guard with an innocent expression. “Oh, you didn’t hear, then. Adrian was in a car smash last night. I’m Olav Lee from the night shift. They called me in to cover for him. Sorry I’m early but I was told a room needed a cleaner right away. Do you want me to come back again later? I’ve got other rooms I can do first.”

John was sweating and tense though he didn’t show it as he waited patiently for the man to decide what to do. If he couldn’t convince the guard to let John in, he’d have to incapacitate him and that would no doubt make too much noise. John needed time to get Escott out and he didn’t want to set off any alarms until absolutely necessary. He had no idea how long it would take Lestrade to get there and he wanted to be gone by then.

The guard finally answered. “Well, no. He’s been sick in there and he does need to be cleaned up. But I’m not sure… this is irregular. Maybe I should call my boss.”
The break in routine was clearly something the guard was ill-equipped to deal with and he dithered about calling his superior. John had no idea if it would work but he pushed his empathy at the guard in the hopes it could possibly influence the man’s dull mind to trust John and let him through the door. To his shock and surprise, the guard’s doubtful expression cleared as soon as John felt the odd sensation of his empathy touching the strange man’s mind. The doctor never dreamed it would actually work but as he watched, the guard pushed a button and he heard the buzzer for the door.

“He’s in the room on the left.” The man smiled vacantly at John and, with eyebrows climbing into his fringe in astonishment, the doctor pushed through the door.

It opened up into another, very long hallway that ran deeper into the building to the left and right. The hall to the left seemed to go in the direction of the loading bay and that suggested that any illegal substances were transported to the lorries through there. That would be a stroke of luck and a possible way to escape without having to go back through the two guards.

Turning his attention to the two doors in front of him, John went to the one on the left as instructed. The only thing keeping the door closed was a sliding bolt. John slid it open quickly and the smell of vomit hit him as he pushed the trolley in to find Stephen tied and handcuffed to a chair. The sense of urgency retreated and intense relief flooded through John at the sight of Escott unharmed. Something was going right for once and he just hoped it continued, though he wasn’t going to count on it.

As John looked him over, he could see that Stephen appeared groggy but raised his head and gazed blearily at John. Then recognition hit and something like pride blazed in the young man’s eyes. Seeing that did something ridiculous to John’s chest and he blushed like an omega with his first heat. He couldn’t help the no-doubt stupid looking grin that took over his own face, either. Escott returned it giddily, much to his surprise. But then John’s smile faded as he noticed with concern that there was a nasty bruise across one of Escott’s high cheekbones. Checking the sentinel’s eyes, John could see the pupils were constricted so drugs explained the grogginess. The puddle of vomit at the young man’s feet confirmed it. Sentinels often were very sensitive to sedatives and nausea was a common side effect.

Escott gave John a crooked and drunken smile and his words slurred a bit. ”William! I knew you’d come for me. I think I felt you in my mind or maybe I was dreaming? Is that how you found me?”

“Yeah, but we can discuss it later. Do you know what kind of drugs they used on you?”

“They shot me with some kind of tranquilliser dart when I resisted being taken. It looked like something the Bureau's security might use, though I don’t think those bossy ninnies are involved in this.” John couldn’t help a snort of laughter at Escott’s description of Bureau personnel. The man was rather cute when he was stoned.

However, the situation was extremely desperate and they needed to escape. John focused back on his task and quickly glanced around the room, which was actually more of a utility cupboard with a sink. He did see that a cheap, hastily installed camera had been mounted over the door. With his back to the camera and making sure Escott was watching, John put a finger to his lips, moved around behind him, grabbed the back of the chair and dragged the sentinel to one side and away from the sick on the floor. John positioned him so that Escott’s back and arms were no longer visible to the camera. He unlocked the cuffs and dropped the knife into Escott’s hand and was glad to see the sentinel grip it tightly.

Speaking quietly, John pulled the mop out of the trolley and ‘accidentally’ knocked the camera even further away from Escott.
“Okay. That kind of drug must be pretty safe for sentinels or the Bureau wouldn’t use it.”

“Whatever drug they used on me is wearing off and once I get going I’ll be fine. I’ve cut the ropes now. Here’s your knife. What’s the plan?” Escott looked more alert with each passing moment as he massaged his raw wrists.

John returned the knife to his wrist sheath. “Right now, the plan is for you to stay in that chair and pretend you’re still handcuffed. The guard will be here shortly. I’m going to draw attention away from you, then we take him down and leave. Can you walk?” He soaked the mop in the sink and proceeded to spread lots of water and vomit across the concrete floor, smearing it around into an even bigger mess and pushed it toward the door.

“I can walk. But that’s your plan?” Escott sounded dubious and rather incredulous.

John continued to spread water around but spoke defensively. “The plan is simple. It’s the specifics that are a bit vague at the moment so we’ll have to play it by ear. Lestrade is on his way. But for right now, stay where you are. Since I disturbed the camera, I imagine the guard should be here any minute. Then we’ll leave.”

John was expecting the security guard to come storming in to object to the camera being moved. John knocked it even more out of alignment as he put the now foul smelling mop back into the trolley, which was partially blocking the door. He reached for a wad of paper towels from the trolley, wetted them in the sink and handed them to Escott, who proceeded to wipe sick from his face. John reached into the trolley and got out his holdall and handed it to Escott.

“I’ve got some of my extra clothes in there that you can use. They’ll look ridiculous on you but they’ll be better than pyjamas.” John knelt by the chair and picked up the severed ropes, throwing most of them into the rubbish bin of the trolley but keeping some for possible use later.

Stephen cocked his head in a listening position and setting the holdall to one side, positioned himself quickly in the chair so that he looked as if he were still restrained. It was all the warning John got as the security guard barrelled into the room, about a minute earlier than John had expected.

The man looked livid. “What are you doing? If you’ve damaged that camera it’ll come out of your paycheque!” The man wasn’t paying attention to where he stepped and immediately slipped on the wet floor. He went down like a sack of potatoes and smacked the back of his head hard on the concrete floor, rendering himself unconscious.

John stared down at the still body for a few heartbeats, his eyes wide in surprise. Escott blinked at the unconscious man and then giggled.

John huffed, trying unsuccessfully not to smile. “You know, I actually didn’t expect that to work.” Escott snorted a laugh and stood, stretching his cramped limbs. He began to remove his pyjamas to put on John’s clothes. Though he staggered a bit, he did fine getting into the jumper and trousers. He threw the soiled pyjamas onto the floor without another look.

Stephen plucked at the sleeve of John’s old jumper with an expression of distaste, but even wearing clothes that were too small, Escott still looked as if he’d walked off the pages of a men’s fashion rag. “Do you know what happened to the rest of my things?”

“No, your room was completely cleaned out when I got there. Just a minute.” Quickly, John bent down to remove the unconscious guard’s shoes. They were actually somewhat too large for Stephen, but better than nothing. John shrugged off his own uniform to reveal his street clothes but kept Lee’s card. It took both of them to hoist the guard up and put him in Escott’s chair where they
handcuffed him.

John led them out of the room, bolted the door closed and turned toward their right. A feeling of intense relief flowed through him at the thought that they were nearly safe. “I’m pretty sure this is the way out. The loading bay is in this direction and I think we’ll find a door leading outside. Come on, let’s get out of this place before someone comes looking.” He reached over to tug on Stephen’s arm but the sentinel refused to move. John looked at him in confusion, his question clear in his expression.

Escott’s face was deadly serious. “We can’t leave yet. I had hoped we’d have Talbot in custody before the police were called in. Talbot knows he’s been found out and he’s shutting down his operation and planning to escape as we speak. I need to get to the main drug processing area. There will be more evidence stored there and if we don’t get it, Talbot will find a way to escape with it or destroy it.

“This operation is just the tip of an enormous crime syndicate iceberg, William! And you’re not the only one Talbot has been blackmailing! Think about all the famous and wealthy people on the lower floors who were patients here! He’s collected all kinds of damning information on them. We need to find it before he takes it and escapes. We have to get further inside!”

John couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His admittedly vague plan was going tits up. “What? Are you off your trolley? Talbot and his security guards will be alerted to your escape soon and will be searching for us. Let Lestrade handle it! You’re not a policeman, Stephen!”

Escott shook his head, making his dark curls fly about distractingly. “We can get in and out fast. The drug processing room is just further down this hallway, I’m certain of it. I can hear the workers from here and smell the drugs. There has to be another office there and that’s where we’ll find the evidence. We have to go now before Talbot shows up and tries to kill us both.”

Speechless, John watched with wide eyes as the stupid prat of an alpha wobbled somewhat drunkenly off down the hall. Apparently he just assumed John was going to come along unquestioningly.

John stood immobilised with disbelief and astonishment for a moment and then burst out with an incredulous laugh. He grinned as excitement coursed through him at the thought of continuing to help Stephen with the case. Before he fully realised it, his feet were moving and he was running down the hall to catch the mad bastard up. Not for the first time John thought there must be something seriously wrong with him in that he constantly pursued danger and excitement and concluded that he was just as barking mad as Stephen, apparently.

Escott was bouncing off the walls as he made shuffling progress down the hall so John put his arm around the slim waist to keep Stephen more or less upright as the drug continued to wear off. The contact with the sentinel was slightly electric but the clothing kept them from connecting completely, so it was safe for now.

The fluorescent lights above them buzzed and flickered annoyingly as they made their way to the end of the long hall. It ended in another hall that was perpendicular to theirs. Directly in front of them was a door that needed both a card and a combination for a well worn keypad. Stephen indicated the drug processing area was on the other side.

John looked at the door in disgust. “What now, Stephen? I’ve got a card that might work but unless you have the combination, we need to find another way in fast or get out.”
Escott was blinking fuzzily at the keypad but held out an imperious hand for the card. John sighed and handed Lee’s card over without question, wondering exactly when he’d taken complete leave of his senses. As he watched, Escott continued to stare closely at the keypad, swiped the card and then typed in a series of numbers. There was a click and John blinked in awe as Escott reached out and opened the door, then turned to him with a smile and a cocked eyebrow.

Dumbfounded, John blurted out the phrases he tended to use most around Stephen. “How…? Christ, that was brilliant!”

Escott’s smile turned smug before they both had to focus their attention back to their situation. Whispering, Escott spoke. “I’ll explain fully later, William. Right now we have some evidence to liberate.”

They peeked through the partly opened door. The room was a huge space that probably corresponded to the entire area of the garden above. It was a madhouse of busy workers who were wrapping blocks of drugs and packing them in medical waste containers. Other workers were ferrying the containers onto trolleys for removal. There was an office off to one side that Escott gestured to with a jerk of his head and then he was off, casually walking toward it. Holding his breath, John trailed behind the sentinel, but no one seemed to notice them. They were much too busy and the emotional ambience was very tense and anxious. John did spot a few armed men who were carefully watching the packing. The guns they had on open display explained the fearful atmosphere of the workers.

They made it to the office and Escott kept watch whilst John picked the lock on the door. Once they were inside, they quickly glanced around and Escott made a beeline for the desk. There was a curtained window that looked out over the drug factory floor. Twitching aside the drape slightly, John kept a look out whilst Escott began his search for any incriminating documents.

Feeling somewhat useless, John noticed a cupboard in one corner and decided to search there whilst Stephen was busy at the desk. Carefully opening the door, John gasped in shock as he saw a body inside. It was Gary, his companion on the lorry deliveries. Crouching down but being careful not to touch anything, John saw that Gary had been stabbed in the back and the weapon was still in place. He jumped nervously when Stephen spoke over his shoulder. “It appears that Talbot has progressed to outright murder, William. I wonder if this man threatened to expose him in some way.”

Grimly, John agreed with a sigh, saddened by the man’s death. “If anyone had something on Talbot, it was Gary. He knew where all the distribution locations were and he always seemed so worried whenever we rode together.”

As if he could tell how John felt, Stephen gave the omega a quick touch on the shoulder in an attempt to comfort. “I’m sorry about this and will do everything to see to it Talbot is punished, but we must get back to work. If you would please look through the rest of the things in the desk, I’ll get the cabinet. Take anything that seems interesting and put it into your holdall.”

With that, Escott began flipping through the files in the cabinet whilst John grumbled. He had no idea what he was looking for but he began to shuffle through the papers and books. There were a fair number of computer disks that he added to the holdall. He then picked up a ledger book, opened it and found a sudden treasure trove of illicit information. There were names of famous people, why they were being blackmailed, which bank the safety deposit boxes with the information was being kept and how much the victims were paying per month. The book also listed what bank and numbers of the accounts the money was going into. He quickly stuffed it along with another ten books into the holdall with shaking hands. It seemed an awfully old fashioned way to keep information but
maybe it was duplicated digitally elsewhere.

In the drawer with the books was a USB drive which he threw into the holdall as an afterthought. He kept looking but there was nothing else until he pulled a drawer completely out and found a very nice Glock 23 tucked far inside the desk with extra magazines. He loaded the weapon, flicked the safety on, tucked it into the back of his jeans and checked on Escott. Stephen was still searching the filing cabinet so John went over to the window and peeked out.

“Fuck!” Tension consumed John and he pulled out the weapon. Stephen immediately stopped what he was doing and turned quickly.

“William, what’s wrong?” Voice full of concern, Escott stuffed the documents he held into the bulging holdall and came over to stand beside John. He twitched aside the curtain to look outside as well.

“Talbot is out there talking to the guards. Stephen, there’s no way out of here and nowhere to go.” He turned to his friend and begged. “Hide behind the desk. I’ve got the gun. I’ll go out and confront Talbot. You can get away in the confusion. Please, Stephen. Do as I ask.”

John might as well have not spoken. Escott watched Talbot with narrowed eyes. “Yes, I see him. He’s on his way over to here right now.” John could practically see that genius brain working as Stephen thought hard for a moment. The sentinel then burst into action, pushing John toward the door.

“Stephen, please!” Angry and desperate, John pleaded once again as he stumbled backward. The thought of the brilliant young man being hurt or killed was not acceptable and the doctor would do anything to prevent it, even put his own life at risk.

Again, Escott ignored him and pushed at John until he moved behind the door. The young sentinel’s voice deepened and alpha pheromones flooded the room, making John’s knees weak but also forcing him obey immediately.

“Quickly, William. Stay behind the door and be still. Talbot’s an untrained, weak sentinel and I doubt he’ll notice you right away. Once he enters the room, close the door and see what he does. But be prepared to restrain him.”

There wasn’t enough time for John to even respond as Stephen sat down at the desk with all the casual flair of someone who owned the place. Talbot was talking to one of the men outside when he unlocked the door. He stood there with his back to the room and his hand on the doorknob whilst he shouted at one of the guards.

“I told you! You and Jack need to go out to the loading bay to look for those bastards! I know they must have gone that way. It only makes sense they’d head for the nearest exit! They have to be hiding somewhere down there.”

The other man didn’t sound inclined to obey, however. They both heard his response. “You’ve not informed the boss about what’s going on and if you don’t, I will.”

John nearly gasped as he picked up a blast of absolute terror from Talbot. “I’m going to ring him as soon as I get a few minutes! Now go and find Escott or whatever his real name is along with that traitor Larssen. We’re all fucked if you don’t and when you do find him, kill them both this time!”

There was a grumble from the other side of the door but the man must have finally gone. John heard a sigh of relief from Talbot as he stepped backward into the room and turned toward the desk. John
slammed shut the door and put his back to it. As Talbot spun to face him, John brought up the gun which shone dully in the fluorescent lighting. Talbot gulped and took a step back toward the desk and opened his mouth to shout, when John narrowed his eyes, flipped off the safety, cocked the pistol and shook his head. John mostly counted on his pleasant persona to appear harmless but he also knew how to make himself look extremely dangerous. The transformation apparently completely unnerved Talbot and the man’s eyes widened in fear as he gulped once more and shut his mouth. John had known the disgusting man was an abject coward and now he had proof.

Stephen spoke and Talbot spun in place with a start. “Mr Talbot. We meet again.” Stephen grinned and glanced at John gleefully, eyes sparkling. “I’ve always wanted to say that.” John rolled his eyes in fond exasperation as Stephen stood and came around the desk. Talbot seemed mesmerised by the younger sentinel and stood stiffly in place.

”Mr Talbot, you are under citizen’s arrest for murder, drug smuggling, blackmail, human trafficking, theft, conspiracy, terrorism and many other charges, I’m sure. The police are on their way as we speak and will be taking you into custody shortly.”

Somehow, Talbot found the desperate courage to defy Escott but it was too little, too late.

“You won’t shoot me. It’ll make too much noise and the guards will kill you.”

He was panicking and his eyes were darting everywhere, looking for a way to escape. John could feel Talbot’s fright and acted the instant the older man lunged for Stephen. Within seconds, John had him on the floor in a hammer lock whilst Escott smiled at John in unmistakable satisfaction and approval.

Grunting in pain as John twisted his arm up between his shoulders Talbot spoke, abject terror making his voice tremble. “You don’t know who or what you’re fucking with here! It’s not me you’ll be dealing with if you bring this operation down! He’ll find a way to kill me and you’ll have nothing! Then he’ll go after you! Protect me and I’ll talk! If you can put him away, we’ll both stand a chance to keep living!”

Taking a moment to consider what Talbot was offering, Escott made a decision. “William, help Mr Talbot up but keep a grip on him. You know that I’m not with the police and can’t promise you anything. But, I’ll speak up for you with Lestrade and he will listen to me if you are willing to give evidence against Moriarty.”

Both John and Talbot tensed at the name uttered by Stephen. Horror and panic oozed out of Talbot and John sympathised completely. Looking up at Escott, he knew that the young sentinel had noticed his reaction with concern and his expression indicated there would be a serious discussion about it at a later date. John caught a whiff of alpha pheromones to reinforce it as Escott shot a stern glance at him. His omega side wanted to kneel and confess all but there were more important things to do, so he locked his knees and tightened his grip on the clinic manager.

Talbot was now babbling and practically in tears. “You… you know who is really in charge here? Then you know we’re all completely fucked! There’s no place to hide from him. He’s everywhere and into everything. I’ll tell you what I know but you have to protect me!”

The man was literally shaking in fear and again, John understood exactly why. Moriarty was a psychopath and there was no telling what kinds of hideous torture he would cheerfully inflict before he allowed Talbot to die. It would be drawn out and horrible, John had no doubt. Just like what he would do to John if he defied the mad man and refused to bond to Moran. Except John wouldn’t be allowed to die. In all the excitement, John had almost forgotten the threats and the deadline looming in his future and a terror that matched Talbot’s echoed through him, as well. Escott shot him another
worried glance but turned his attention back to Talbot.

“T’ll do everything in my power to see you are protected if you’ll give evidence to put Moriarty behind bars. William, give me your mobile. I’ll ring Lestrade and see where he is now.”

Taking out his phone, he handed it over to Escott without question. The younger man got through to Lestrade in seconds.

“I’ve got Talbot here and he says he’s willing to talk. Where are you?” He listened for a few moments and hung up without replying. “Lestrade hasn’t been able to get the warrants until just now. They’re on their way. We can stay here until they arrive or go outside to wait for them.”

Talbot shook his head. “Security is looking for you. I know a back way out that I can show you.”

Suspicious as to why a craven coward like Talbot would volunteer to do that, John allowed his guide senses to touch the blackmailer. They’d been clamouring at him for the last few minutes but he wasn’t sure how to decipher them and so he’d ignored them. What he picked up from Talbot was pure deceit and bright anticipation.

Tightening his grip on Talbot, he informed Escott of what he’d just learnt. “He’s lying, Stephen. He has no intention of showing us out of here. In fact, I think he’s waiting for something to happen and trying to stall.”

Talbot turned to stare at John with wide eyes that suddenly narrowed in understanding. It occurred to John that when he’d allowed his latent guide senses to touch Talbot, he’d outed himself to the older sentinel. John almost laughed when the man tried to breach his defences. Without real thought or effort, John cut off the fluttering attempts of the weak sentinel to get through to him and watched Talbot flinch in pain.

It seemed John was well able to protect himself from Talbot’s flimsy attempt to infiltrate his mind. Shields of some sort must have developed to protect him and they worked well against Talbot. It wasn’t a real test by any means because Talbot was weak, but it was a start. The possibilities of his latent talents were becoming more fascinating each time he learnt something new but at the same he was more aware of just how much he didn’t know. It was intimidating and rather frightening.

Escott’s expression was grim. “I suspected he had something up his sleeve. He’s waiting for his men to come back and report in. His offer seemed a bit too convenient. Do you have any of that cord left?” John let go of Talbot and pulled the rope out of the now overfilled holdall. “Good. Tie him into that chair whilst I check outside.”

John didn’t want to allow Stephen to wander around by himself but he reluctantly obeyed the alpha. If he tied the knots just a bit tighter on Talbot than he might normally do out of anger at their situation, he didn’t worry about it. Just as Escott reached for the door handle, the alpha stiffened and John simultaneously was overwhelmed with a feeling of extreme danger.

Shouting Escott’s name, John dove for the sentinel, pulled him down to the ground and threw himself on top of the man. Just as he did so, the window shattered and bullets tore through the thin wall and door of the office, smacking into brick behind them. Talbot shrieked in terror, tipped the chair over and tried to push himself behind the steel filing cabinet with his toes.

John felt a tearing pain across his side and knew he’d been hit. He could tell right away it wasn’t too serious but it still hurt like hell. Since there was a lull in the shooting, he rolled off Stephen and urged him to take cover behind the desk. Keeping low, they both crawled into positions of relative safety.
As they did so, they could hear faint screaming outside and assumed the workers had seen the shooting and fled the scene. John hoped so since he suspected most of them were probably innocent victims of blackmail or coercion of some kind.

“William! I smell blood! Are you all right?” Escott seemed uncharacteristically frantic as he whispered and grabbed at John’s shirt, looking for the wound.

Something in John’s chest warmed at the sound of concern and worry in Stephen’s voice but he pushed it back firmly. “I’m fine. I’ve been shot but it’s superficial and we have more important things to worry about right now.” Escott grunted agreement and tucked himself more tightly behind the desk.

Just then, Talbot screamed out. “Is that you, Jack? Bernie? What the fuck are you doing? You almost killed me, you arseholes!”

Rough laughter was heard from outside. “That’s the idea, Talbot. The boss said you’d fucked up too many times and we were to do you and blow the clinic. Minimise his losses, he says and there’s a bonus in it for us if we bring him your head.” Suddenly, the bullet-riddled door was kicked in and fell to pieces on the floor. Two men stood at the entrance, guns raised and searching for a target.

Talbot screamed, “Wait, wait!! I’m not….” His plea fell on deaf ears. The gunmen immediately saw Talbot trying to squeeze behind the cabinet and emptied their guns into him, apparently not even wondering why he was tied up. The man’s screech of horror turned into a gurgle as they laughed. They didn’t notice John as he rose from behind the desk until it was too late. Both were dead before they hit the floor.

Sagging back down behind the desk, John took a deep breath to calm down and pressed his elbow tight against his burning side as he efficiently checked how much ammunition he had left. His hands were steady but the adrenaline and blood loss were making him feel shaky. He turned to Escott, who was wadding up a t-shirt he’d found somewhere and looked him over in concern. “You okay, Stephen? You’re not hurt at all?” John prayed the young man was not injured.

Glancing sternly at John, Stephen shook his head briefly, moved John’s arm out of the way and began to apply pressure to his side with the fabric, making the doctor grunt in pain. “Unlike you, I’m actually fine. You need to keep pressure on this and we have to warn Lestrade. They threatened to blow the place so there might be a bomb somewhere. They need to evacuate the clinic and send in explosive detection dogs and bomb disposal officers immediately. Give me your mobile.”

Once again, John didn’t question the demand and handed the mobile over to Escott straight away. The sentinel indicated John needed to apply pressure whilst he dialled. Checking the wound, John saw that the bleeding was already slowing down. Pressing the t-shirt tight to his side, he relaxed and closed his eyes as Stephen reached Lestrade and filled him in on the situation.

The alpha’s deep voice soothed him and settled his jangling nerves. The sense of urgency was still there but now muted. The anxiety and stress he felt was partly due to having just killed two men without a second thought and watching his employer being shot to death in cold blood right in front of him by Moriarty’s henchmen. Honestly, he’d seen much worse done but it was never easy. He hoped that his young friend was okay but based on what he was sensing emotionally, Escott was not strongly affected by what had happened.

On the surface, the alpha seemed to be absorbed on the next task at hand which was trying to save hundreds of lives. In actuality, most of the emotions John was picking up from Escott centred totally on John. The alpha sentinel was deeply worried about John’s wound, was feeling a fierce sense of
protectiveness and also fighting a desire to carry the doctor away immediately, despite the danger to all the patients in the clinic.

Knowing that Stephen felt that way made John feel warm and safe. It was nice to be cared for and he cared about Stephen as his friend, as well, but that would have to be it. John had to be alert and make sure he didn’t lead the young man on. John honestly didn’t want the sentinel developing deeper feelings for him because nothing could ever come of it. He felt guilty, however, because picking those emotions out of Escott’s mind without his permission or awareness felt wrong. It seemed that he was betraying his friend.

The entire subject of latent guide abilities was so incredibly confusing. John took a moment to wonder at how easy it was to read Escott now. It had been nigh impossible when they’d first met but now it was a simple thing. Was it because the closer he got as a friend, the easier it was for him to read Stephen? Or was it that Escott was allowing it or maybe it a combination of both? John had no way to know without asking someone from the Bureau and not only was there was no time for that now, the price for getting accurate information from that source wasn’t one he was willing to pay.

His thoughts were derailed as Escott rang off and turned to him. “Lestrade wants us out of here as soon as possible. The entire building and two streets around are being cordoned off in case there is a bomb. They’re going to start the evacuation of the building as soon as they can safely enter and have called in the Met bomb disposal officers.”

Kneeling by Talbot, Escott began to search the body. “William, can you search these others? They may have something helpful on them, especially mobiles. We might be able to find a number for Moriarty and possibly track or tap his phone.”

John did as he was told and indeed found their wallets with ID, their mobiles as well as additional magazines for their weapons. He threw everything from their pockets into the overfilled holdall and stood with a grunt of pain. His side throbbed but he ignored it.

After looking around the room briefly, Escott headed for the door. “I think we’ve got everything we came for. Let’s go.”

John was never so glad to hear those two words in his life. Glancing briefly at the contorted body of Talbot, John refused to feel any regrets. Leaving the office, they made their way into the workshop area. Everyone had fled the room when the shooting had started so Escott led them toward the door they’d first entered. Before they got there, though, Stephen raised his head and sniffed. He slowly turned his head back toward the centre of the room, clearly searching for something. Chasing whatever scent he had caught, the sentinel moved quickly into the room, casting back and forth like a sniffer dog.

Groaning in frustration, John reluctantly followed with his weapon ready, trying to keep an eye out for any sign of Moriarty’s henchmen. They walked further into the room, passing large support columns that held up the ceiling, knowing that the elaborate and beautiful garden that was the trademark of the Price Clinic was just above them. As John watched, Escott zeroed in on one of the columns. Something had been attached to the base of it but it wasn’t particularly noticeable considering how much rubbish was strewn around the area to begin with.

As they got closer, John’s blood froze. Though he was no expert, he certainly recognised an explosive device with C4 when he saw one. Glancing around to the other support pillars, he saw that similar devices had been strapped to most of them. Once the bombs blew, the entire building would collapse inward and down, into the basement, killing everyone inside.
Escott finished examining the one he’d found and quickly glanced at all the others. Superficially, they all looked similar. “These are not on a timer. They’re triggered by some kind of detonator. Maybe a radio or even a mobile phone. We need to get out of here now.”

He still had John’s mobile and as they moved back toward the door, he rang the DI and let him know about the bombs. As quickly as they could do, they were out the door, which they jammed open, ran down the hall and past the room where Escott had been held prisoner. They could see that the door was open and the room empty, the guard long gone.

At the end of the hall they found a large open double door that led directly out to the loading bay, just as John had speculated. However, the area was full of gunmen and they had to retreat. There was no way they were going to be able to leave the building that way.

Discouraged, John suggested the only other way he knew to get out. “We can head back up the hall and out through the security room. The guards must have scarpered by now.”

Escott agreed and they backtracked as fast as they could. John was beginning to feel the exhaustion brought on by lack of sleep and injury but he knew he could go on for a few more hours yet before he had to rest. Hopefully, they’d be out much sooner than that. Where exactly he would go was a mystery at the moment. He didn’t want to be picked up by the police if he could avoid it and he honestly didn’t want to go to his flat, especially since Moriarty now knew what was happening at the clinic. It was possible that he didn’t know that John was involved in the takedown of the drug lab but he couldn’t be sure. On the other hand, Moriarty was likely to be much too busy for a few days to worry about what John was doing. Maybe John could approach Escott for advice and maybe a place to stay for a few days, after all had been settled with the clinic.

Still carrying the holdall, Escott insisted on going first. They dashed through the room and headed toward the lift. John could get them to the employee entrance on the first level with one of the cards he’d stolen. Escott pushed ahead and turned the corner only to come face to face with one of Moriarty’s henchmen who was waiting by the lift. The man raised his weapon just as John shouldered Escott to one side and drew the Glock.

The shots were nearly simultaneous. Moriarty’s man went down with a hole between his eyes but, to John’s horror, Escott was also down, bleeding profusely from a wound in his left leg.

John couldn’t help swearing as he fell to his knees beside his friend. Stephen was clutching his leg and his face was pinched with agony. Heart in his throat, John remembered that pain could easily cause a sentinel to go into a zone. John need to keep Stephen distracted somehow and touch and sound were all he could think of that might work.

Efficiently, John used his flick knife to cut away the fabric around the wound. The bullet had penetrated the vastus lateralis on the outside of the thigh but the bullet had missed anything major. It was still a bloody mess, however and very agonizing. John removed his jumper and vest and tore the thinner cotton of the shirt into strips.

Talking nonsense the whole time and doing his best to be reassuring, he made a pad and positioned it over the bleeding wound. Then he began to tie the strips around the man’s leg as tightly as he could do to keep it in place. “You’re going to be fine, Stephen. The bullet is still in the muscle but should be easy to remove.”

Stephen grunted in pain as John tightened the bandages and then huffed a laugh. “That was…brilliant, William. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anyone draw a weapon so quickly.”

“One of my many talents, you know. Now hold still.” He tightened the last of the bandages and
patted Escott on his shoulder.

Stephen covered John’s hand with his own. Their connection flared up again as the young sentinel looked seriously into the doctor’s eyes. “I’ll look forward to learning what your other talents are, then.”

The statement and its implications made John breathless for a moment and he stared back at Escott like a deer caught in headlamps. John was terribly confused and found he couldn’t think straight whenever he was around Stephen. What did Escott mean by that? Was Stephen trying to woo John, the omega guide as an alpha sentinel might? After all, the young alpha had been wielding his dominance at John without a second thought to force the doctor’s omega side to obey him without question. But he’d only done that to keep them both safe in an emergency situation. Or had he?

John’s heart sank but he gave Stephen a fake, half smile which faded quickly as he remembered the desperation of their situation. There was no time to worry about any possible alpha/omega fuelled feelings Stephen might have toward John, especially since this was happening in the heat of battle, as it were. Feelings were always much more intense in a fight and after the adrenaline faded, Escott was going to regret what he said and back away. It was important for John to keep his distance so that no one got hurt and they could remain friends.

After all, neither of them wanted to bond to anyone. Stephen had been adamant when he’d discussed it with John. They both needed to remember that, fight their unfortunate biology and stay strong. John was a survivor and he would find a way to deal with Moriarty and Moran. There was nothing wrong with asking Escott for advice, though. If he couldn’t get in touch with Masters, John would be more than willing to help Stephen bring Moriarty down, because that was what it would take to get Moriarty and Moran to leave John alone and keep Stephen safe.

Clearing his throat and feeling acutely uncomfortable, John removed his hand, looked away and moved to stand. “Do you think you can get up if I help? We still have to get out of here.” Escott nodded and John slung an arm around the young man’s slim waist and hauled him up. Both flinched in pain but were up and moving toward the lift in seconds. The door opened immediately and John got them on their way toward the first floor with a swipe of Lee’s card. He took a tighter grip on Escott who was looking a bit pale. Glancing down, John could see that the wound in the sentinel’s leg was still bleeding freely and began to worry.

The lift let them off into a corridor milling with confused and panicking employees and visitors, unsure of what to do. There were security guards with them, looking just as bewildered. John steered Escott to a chair and checked the bandage. It was soaked through but there wasn’t much he could do at the moment. They were minutes from safety and John was angry and frustrated that no one seemed to be going anywhere.

He stopped one of the nursing staff who seemed calmer than the rest and asked her what was going on. “The police are telling us to evacuate but gunmen are blocking the exits! The patients are being let out but not the staff or visitors! I don’t understand and no one knows what to do!”

John let her go and returned to Stephen. None of it made sense to him but it seemed that Moriarty’s gunmen were holed up and keeping the employees and visitors hostage. Did they know of the bombs planted in the clinic? John had to get everyone out and if it meant taking out more of Moriarty’s thugs, then he’d do it.

Escott was beginning to look shocky and John cast about for a blanket or something to keep him warm. There was an abandoned linen cart pushed against the wall and he raided it for some blankets and sheets. Spotting someone’s forgotten windcheater draped over a chair, he put it on. There was
no reason he needed to succumb to shock either and it would keep him warm.

Grabbing the same nurse as before, he brought her over to Stephen. She gasped as she saw the blood and knelt by the young sentinel’s side to check his vitals. John slung the blankets over Stephen’s unresisting form and handed her the extra linens he’d taken.

“He’s bleeding too much. Please put some pressure on that wound whilst I go ‘negotiate’ with the gunmen.” As she obeyed, John mentally checked how many bullets were left in the Glock and stood up stiffly. Escott grabbed him before he could head for the exit, however.

The sentinel looked much too pale for John’s liking but squeezed the doctor’s arm tightly and gave him a stern look. “Please be careful, William.” John could only nod and walked to the exit. No one tried to stop him as he approached the door.

Sending out his senses, he could tell there were at least four people behind the door. One of them was broadcasting fear and pain whilst the others’ emotions were a mixture of excitement, anxiety and nervousness. They seemed to be focused on the exit and the police outside and not the door where John was standing.

The doctor slipped into the room with them and hid behind a short wall that held the time clock. Only one man had a visible gun. One had a truncheon and the other seemed unarmed but all were dressed as patients, which explained why only patients were being allowed to leave the building. A security guard that John recognised immediately as Mr Sterling was seated in the corner. He looked terrified and had a bruise that covered one side of his face. It seemed he’d come in early for his shift and had been taken hostage. He spotted John but gave no indication aside from widened eyes.

The man with the gun had a mobile to his ear and was listening intently whilst the others watched him with various expressions of excitement. Apparently, they were receiving their instructions, possibly from Moriarty himself. As John listened, the man rang off and turned to his friends.

“We’re to go in five minutes. The police will think we’re patients and get us behind the lines quickly. The boss has notified the others at the loading bay and front entrance and promised to have cars waiting for all of us. Then he says I’m to blow the clinic once the police enter to get the employees out. He’s programmed my mobile with the proper frequency. I just have to dial the number he gave me and everything will go. It’ll be just like Bonfire Night.” The man laughed at the thought and the others chuckled along with him.

John knew had to do something to prevent a major tragedy and from getting killed himself. Taking a deep breath, the doctor closed his eyes to centre himself. He wasn’t in top form, but he’d functioned in worse physical condition before and won. As the men turned toward the exit door, putting their backs to John, the doctor moved out and away from the wall. The unarmed man saw him immediately and raised the alarm as John shot the gunman in both knees which caused him to drop his weapon and fall to the ground, shrieking at the unexpected agony. The man with the baton reacted much faster than John had anticipated and managed a glancing blow to John’s left arm, which numbed his hand and made him lose his grip on the gun. The Glock went flying and the man followed up with an incredibly quick backhanded swing at John’s head that would have killed him had it connected.

The doctor ducked the blow and as the attacker overextended his reach and stumbled, John drove his fist into the man’s gut and followed up by a hard knee to the chin. The baton fell with a clatter only to be snatched up by the man John had thought was unarmed.

That man had a knife and he knew how to use it well, judging by the way he moved with it. John
circled around him, doing his best to try to get close without getting stabbed. But between the knife and baton, he was kept at arm’s length. The knife wielder was working his way toward the gun his friend had dropped and John was forced to rush the man before he could get to it and use it.

John took a hard hit from the baton to his right arm, which he felt down to his toes and barely managed to dodge a swipe with the knife before he was able to grab the man’s right wrist with both hands. He twisted with all his strength, though both his arms were partly numb. The man screamed as his forearm broke in two places and he dropped the knife. The man flailed wildly at John with the baton and managed to get in a good knock to John’s head, sending the doctor to the floor. Everything went black for a moment.

Quickly coming to and forcing himself to his feet, John wiped his face to get the blood out of his eyes and saw that, in the few moments he’d been down, his adversary had got the gun from the floor and was aiming it at John with his shaking left hand. Face twisted in rage and pain, the man pulled the trigger just as John dove down to the floor and rolled forward toward the man. The bullet missed and John surged up at the end of his roll, driving stiffened fingers into the man’s throat, crushing the trachea and effectively killing him. The man fell back with a horrid squeak and dropped the gun, which John picked up immediately.

As he straightened, the pain in his side flared to agony and he doubled over as anguish pounded through him, taking his breath away and making him feel light headed. Again, he forced himself upright, only to realise his wound was bleeding again. The strain from his gymnastic forward roll must have caused it to open up, but he didn’t have time to deal with it.

He staggered over to the man he’d shot, fell to his knees and began searching for the mobile. John needed to find it and bring it to Stephen. As he searched, he heard a noise and quickly turned toward its source, raising the gun and aiming with unerring accuracy at the disturbance. It was only Sterling, who had stood up and approached John. The security guard had not registered as a threat to John’s latent senses and so the doctor had completely forgotten he was even there.

“Are you all right, William? You look awful.” Terrified, Sterling had raised his hands as John continued to point the gun at him, his hand rock steady. The security guard was staring at John with a wide eyed, awed expression. As exhausted and hurting as he was, it took a moment for John to register that Sterling was a friend. He lowered the gun, blinked blood out of his eyes and gave the older man an apologetic smile.

“I can imagine I do look a sight, Mr Sterling, but I’ll be fine.” He went back to searching the now unconscious man he’d kneecapped and finally found the mobile. “You heard what this one said. They’re planning to blow the clinic with all the employees inside. I’ve got this particular detonator but if they don’t blow it on schedule, there’s no telling if his boss won’t arrange for another to set off the bombs. We need to let the police know what’s going on and start getting the employees out of here, now.”

The older man was shaking in fear. “What do you want me to do, William?”

John wiped at his bloody face with a sleeve and sighed. “Just calm down, walk outside and tell the police what’s happening. Tell them to hold anyone who comes out dressed as a patient and assume they’re involved in the criminal activity until they can be cleared. I’m going to find my friend Escott and then give this mobile to the police. Tell them I’ll start sending the employees out through this door. I think most of the staff and visitors were collected and brought to this area but there might be more wandering the clinic and they need to be found before the Met starts defusing the bombs.”

Eyes huge, Sterling nodded and quickly made his way out of the door, hands high as he confronted
the police. John watched to make sure he got outside safely and then moved the bodies of the men he’d injured or killed to one side. None of them were going anywhere. Groaning as he straightened up, John emptied the gun of its ammunition, wiped the prints from it and threw it into a corner. The bullets went into a bin as he turned toward the interior of the clinic and headed back to the lift area as fast as possible. The people who saw him recoiled in fright but some came up to him in concern. As they gathered around, he spoke up.

"It’s safe to leave now. The police are outside and are waiting for you. Please walk to the exit and go where the police tell you to go. Everyone, now, move it!" Using his Captain’s voice, John shepherded the first ones toward the door. Thankfully all the others followed in an orderly manner. He did hear some voices being raised in shock and alarm as they saw the bodies of Moriarty’s henchmen but John paid no attention. His eyes were for Escott only and he trotted as fast as he could do over to his friend.

Escott’s eyes were closed and the nurse who had been with him was still there, holding the padded sheets to his leg. “I think the bleeding’s stopped but he needs to go to hospital soon.” John thanked her and sent her off with the others. Not wanting to cause his friend any more pain but needing to get them out, he shook the man gently. The pale eyes opened blearily.

"Stephen? Can you walk with me? I’ve got the detonator to the bombs and the way is clear to get out but I’m concerned that Moriarty might twig onto that fact and blow the place himself."

The sentinel’s response was to slowly sit forward and hold out his arms for John to help him up. It was such a child-like gesture indicating so much trust that John’s heart lurched painfully. Carefully placing Stephen's arms around his shoulders, John wrapped his own tightly around him and half carried the young man down the hall to the exit with the overfull holdall full of evidence swinging awkwardly from one arm. Stephen’s head lolled on John’s shoulder then pressed firmly against the doctor’s neck. Somehow, Escott seemed to gain some strength from John’s scent and tried to straighten.

However, the sentinel was fading in and out of consciousness and it worried the hell out of John. He was picking up faint emotions from Escott and paramount was pain tempered with satisfaction that John was there and keeping him safe. That Escott trusted John to take care of him made the doctor feel about ten feet tall. The knowledge infused fresh energy into his body and he made it to the door without collapsing.

Police and medical personnel were working on the two living henchmen lying by the exit, preparing to move them out of the building but John barely paid them any notice. Everyone else had made it out and John could see his fellow employees being directed away from the building as quickly as possible by the police.

Blinking at the bright sunshine, John was surprised that it was still daylight outside. Having been in the basement for what seemed like hours, the transition was abrupt and somewhat painful but he kept going. He knew that he and Escott had to go to hospital but he also needed to find Lestrade and show him where the bombs were located.

Medical personnel came running up to take Stephen, who was mostly a limp, dead weight against John’s side. Reluctantly, John let go of the young sentinel and stood back, allowing the paramedics to put him onto a trolley and start working. It almost hurt to back away. However, Stephen woke immediately, grabbed John’s arm in a tight grip and pulled. Confused, John bent over the young man, who dragged him even closer.

Before he could ask a question, Escott whispered in his ear, his warm, moist breath causing John to
shiver. “We have some things to discuss, you and I. It’s important you know where you stand with me.” The pale eyes skewered John but the doctor had no answer and just stared at Escott doubtfully. The young alpha tightened his grip, shook John slightly and gritted out, “William! Find Lestrade, give him the mobile and then come back to me. Please, do as I say!” John had the feeling Stephen would be emitting alpha pheromones if he wasn’t afraid to out himself as an alpha sentinel to the paramedics.

John was a bit bewildered at Stephen’s intensity but the doctor couldn’t help smiling fondly down at his friend. He bent and spoke quietly into Stephen’s ear so the paramedics couldn’t hear. "You’re such a bloody alpha. You’re also a manipulative git, you know that?"

Escott smirked and let go of John’s arm. "I am aware. Now go find Lestrade and return soon, William."

There was no way that John could or would knowingly disobey. He nodded his agreement as he took the risk of stroking the alpha’s cheek. Without thinking, he whispered, “My name is John.”

The exotic eyes widened and Stephen smiled in understanding and appreciation of the trust he’d been freely granted until the paramedics insisted on interrupting. Escott’s wound was still bleeding sluggishly and so John reluctantly stepped back out of the way as the medics surrounded Stephen again.

The paramedic who was working on Stephen called out to her partner in the ambulance. “He’s a sentinel so we’re going to St Thomas’, Larry. They'll have guides there to make sure he doesn’t zone.”

The name of the hospital vaguely registered with John but he experienced a violent stab of shock and jealousy at the thought of a strange guide helping Stephen. The knowledge hurt more than he’d ever believed possible. However, what he was feeling was absolutely ridiculous and he struggled to squash it. John didn’t want to be anyone’s guide and the fact that there were guides available to help his friend should be comforting, but it wasn’t at all.

Controlling his feelings and forcing them aside as best he could do, John began scanning the crowd. Once Stephen was safely headed for an ambulance, John spotted Lestrade and made his way over to the DI, shaking off the paramedic who was trying to examine him. The detective was standing in front of a large van that belonged to the bomb disposal officers. Surrounding him were men who were clearly the experts. As John approached, he held out the mobile he’d taken from Moriarty’s man and pushed it at the alpha. Lestrade looked shocked and began to speak but John cut him off. "Lestrade! I know where the bombs are and this mobile has the phone number that will trigger a detonation. This holdall has important evidence that Escott collected for you, as well.” Once he had the holdall, Lestrade absently handed it off to a young female beta, who gazed suspiciously at John but took it to one of the police cars, locked it into the boot and returned.

Sighing in relief, John turned back to Lestrade. “Now bring your people and come with me. There are at least six bombs I know of that need to be defused immediately.” He described the type of bombs he’d seen and the men scrambled to collect the proper gear.

Adrenaline pumping, John ran back into the building, followed by Lestrade, the young woman and at least six other men whose bomb disposal equipment bumped against their heavy protective clothing as they ran. Not waiting for the lift, John swiped Lee’s card again to get them into the stairwell and then into the basement. They tore along the hallways, slowing only for the security doors and made it to the drug factory floor within minutes. John directed the men to the bombs and they got right to work examining them and beginning the process of disarming.
It took a few moments for John to catch his breath and he didn't like the way his wound was throbbing. "I don't know if there are any other bombs in the building so you'll need to get sniffer dogs to search. The men I overheard talking indicated it would only take a phone call from that mobile to set these off. They were preparing to do that once they’d got far enough away. I’m guessing it had to be done within a certain distance or it wouldn’t work. I wouldn’t put it past their boss to come down here himself and set off any remaining bombs once he’s discovered that his main plan has failed."

Lestrade was watching him closely and the young woman was still staring at him sceptically. "We’ve got the sniffer dogs on site now and they’ll start searching once these bombs are defused. You’ll have to tell me what you know about this boss you mentioned, Larssen. You can give me your statement but only after you’ve seen a doctor. You look like you're about to drop, mate."

John could only nod, still trying to catch his breath. Feeling a bit dizzy, he straightened and jerked his head over toward the office where he and Stephen had nearly died. “The bodies of the clinic director, the men who killed him and an employee of the clinic are in that office. You might want to take a look before we leave. That’s where we found the evidence you locked in the boot.”

“Sally, go check it out.” Lestrade sent the beta off to investigate and continued to stare at John in concern. “So what happened? How did Sherlo…um… Stephen get injured?”

John explained whilst Lestrade took notes. The man was thorough and professional with his questions but John had noticed the slip of the tongue when it came to Escott’s real name. It wasn’t a surprise, actually. Stephen had claimed he was an unknown alpha sentinel doing his best to avoid the notice of the Bureau but Talbot had said that the Escott family were well known and politically connected to the Bureau. John wondered what Stephen’s real name was and if he’d ever have the chance to find out.

It seemed Moran and Moriarty were the only ones who knew John’s full name. Maybe he’d tell Escott the whole thing at some point if he ever saw him again. The paramedics had no doubt transported him to hospital by now and he might be in surgery shortly if they couldn’t dig the bullet out in A&E under a local.

The wound had been messy and bled a lot more than John had expected so maybe it had nicked a major vessel. Once the bullet was out, no doubt Stephen would be admitted and probably given a transfusion or at least an IV to replace fluids. John had treated more gunshot wounds than he cared to count and tried not to worry. Escott would be fine in a few days. John could easily find him at the hospital and he was sure Escott wouldn’t mind a visitor.

Sally returned from the office, looking a shade paler than she had before. “He’s right, sir. Four dead.”

“Okay, we can wait to investigate then. They’re not going anywhere. It looks like they want us out of here now. Let’s go so they can get to work and we need to take you to hospital, William. We can get your statement when you’ve had someone look at that cut on your head. There’s a lot to do here and we’ve got time, now, thanks to you and Stephen.”

Wearily, John led them back through the maze of hallways, passing more bomb experts and some sniffer dogs on the way. Remembering how Stephen had been able to smell the explosives, John wondered if there was some kind of sentinel/guide bomb disposal expert attached to the police. It would be a very useful skill for a sentinel to develop and could be used nearly anywhere. When they got outside, John’s footsteps faltered as all his energy seemed to suddenly drain out of him. Next thing he knew, Lestrade was settling him onto a trolley and he was surrounded by paramedics. One
unzipped his windcheater, exposing his bloody jumper.

Lestrade’s eyebrows rose up to his fringe and he swore viciously. “Jesus H. Christ on a crutch, William! You should have told me you were hurt! You and that daft bastard are as bad as each other. I expect the pair of you will eventually make all my hair grey.”

Lestrade just sighed as John stared blankly at him. “Let these people help you and I’ll send someone to take your statement if I can’t make it over to hospital soon. Take care, mate.” With that he trotted off and left John sitting on the trolley surrounded by strangers.

John’s eyes closed and suddenly he was lying down in the ambulance and the paramedic was trying to cut his windcheater and jumper off. Sitting up abruptly, John pushed her away. She objected strenuously and tried to make him lie down again.

He resisted just as emphatically. “Just wait! I don’t want you cutting my clothes apart. They’re all I have at the moment. I’ll remove them myself.” He wasn’t sure when or if he’d be able to get into his flat when Moriarty learnt of his association in the clinic fiasco and reluctantly assumed that the madman probably now knew of his involvement with Stephen. If so, there would likely be someone waiting for him and he didn’t want to find out what they’d do to him if they caught him. There was also the matter of his lock picks in his trousers and the handcuff keys that he had concealed in his belt pockets. He didn’t want them taken from him, even if they were stored only a few feet away.

Over the continued protests of the paramedic, he sat up on the trolley. Ignoring her, he slowly and painfully peeled off the windcheater and then the jumper. Without the vest as an interlayer, the thick cotton fabric was saturated with blood and had stuck to the area of the wound. Instead of pulling it loose, he asked for some water and cotton wool. The paramedic provided them quickly, trying to cover the fact that she’d been staring at John’s torso. He was aware that he was in excellent shape with very well defined muscles but he knew that she’d really been staring at the numerous scars that covered his body, most especially his left shoulder where that bastard Moran had shot him. It was likely she’d not seen many gunshot wounds before and especially one that bad.

The exit wound was just below his clavicle and looked rather hideous. The scar would eventually fade to the pale white of the shrapnel, burn and knife scars he’d collected in his years with his ops team but the bullet wound was still a red-purple in colour and looked raw. There was considerable nerve damage so the scar was not that sensitive. The doctors had given him hope that he’d get some nerve regeneration over time but so far there hadn’t been much progress. There was nothing for it and John made the best of it.

After soaking the jumper with water, the crusted fabric came loose without starting the wound bleeding too much and John tucked his clothes behind him. At his request, the paramedic reluctantly raised the trolley so he didn’t have to lie down again. It actually made it easier for her to place pads over the ugly, ragged bullet graze and wrap his waist with a tight gauze bandage. Just doing that much made a huge difference and he felt better immediately. However, he knew that if he lay down, he’d sleep for hours and he wanted to stay as alert as possible. The trip to the hospital didn’t take much longer and he saw that they were approaching St Bart’s A&E.

“Why aren’t we going to St Thomas’?” John had hoped they’d end up where Escott was so he would be able to check on his friend once the doctors were done with him. He wasn’t hurt badly, just exhausted more than anything and he could rest anytime.

The paramedic looked down at him from where she’d been checking his head wound. “Oh, St Thomas’ is only for sentinels and guides. You’re not a guide, are you? I never asked.” She looked alarmed at what could be a serious dereliction of duty.
Shaking his head, John quickly denied it. “No! No, I’m not. Don’t worry, St Bart’s is fine.” He could find his way to St Thomas’ later, then. He was sure someone could tell him how to find it once they let him go.

They pulled up to the A&E entrance and the paramedic opened the doors and turned to strap John onto the trolley. Much to her disgust, John insisted on putting the windcheater back on, hopped out of the ambulance and holding the jumper, walked into the A&E on his own. It was very busy and he saw others from the clinic there, mostly with minor injuries. The waiting room was quite full and the staff looked rather stressed. The paramedic walked him up to the front desk and then turned him over to get signed in. Since he was clearly not critical, she left him and returned to her ambulance.

John filled out the paperwork and ended up finding a place to sit in one of the chairs in the corridor outside the crowded waiting room. Another ambulance pulled up and a more critical patient strapped to a trolley was pushed in, followed by a couple of police officers. John noted with interest that it was the gunman he had shot at the clinic. The ambulance crew parked the trolley against the wall directly across from John and went off to find a doctor whilst the police hovered, watching everyone suspiciously. Looking closer, John was relieved to see that the man was not only strapped to the trolley but one wrist was also cuffed. Apparently the police were taking no chances with him.

As John wondered how the other man he’d knocked out was doing and where he’d ended up, the man on the trolley turned his pain filled eyes toward John and jerked in surprise. He pointed at John with his un-cuffed hand and shouted at the police. “There’s the bastard who shot me!! You have to arrest him, too!” At that both police stared over at John warily, then at each other. One nodded to the other and came over to where John was sitting, obviously planning to question him.

John wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it. The man on the trolley certainly had bollocks to try to sic the police on him. John wasn’t the one who had planned to blow up dozens of innocent people at the behest of his criminal boss. Surely the policeman should be aware of this but maybe it was best to deny it all until things could be sorted out with Lestrade when Escott and Sterling could be there as witnesses.

The policeman came up to John who just looked up at him in confusion. “Is what this man says true?”

Shaking his head, John just looked at the man on the trolley in bewilderment. “Sorry mate, I’ve never seen this bloke before. Is he pissed?” The key to successful lying was to keep it simple and not elaborate too much. John knew all the physical cues that interrogators looked for when someone lied and sat there gazing innocently at the policeman.

The man on the trolley was practically frothing at the mouth. Both police moved toward him to prevent any violence as he waved his free arm. “He’s the one who destroyed my knees! I’ll never walk again because of him! You have to arrest him!”

John just sat there looking concerned. “I hope he gets some help, officers.”

Both police clearly agreed but the one who’d approached him looked back. “Once he’s settled, I’d like to come back and speak with you about this. There’s something not quite right here and you look familiar.” John just nodded and smiled agreeably. Thankfully both police followed the paramedics as they pushed the furious man off to get treatment. They both glanced at John as they followed the trolley to the examination room.

Sitting back in his chair, John whistled silently and realised he could be in serious trouble. He’d not thought yet about the consequences of killing and injuring those men. All he’d thought about was protecting Stephen and getting innocent people out of the building. Cursing himself, he realised
belatedly that he’d not thought to find and clean his prints off Talbot’s Glock, either. Blood loss and the blows to the head were to blame. No doubt the police were dusting it for prints as he sat there. They wouldn’t find anything since his prints weren’t currently in the system, but if he were detained and his prints taken he would be connected to the deaths of four men and the GBH of another. Definitely a bit not good.

He could take care of his own wound if he could get some supplies. John didn’t really have enough money to buy what he needed and antibiotics would be good. Infection was to be avoided at all costs and John had way too much experience with infected wounds. The exam rooms would have what he needed but sneaking in and out without being caught was going to be interesting.

Getting up from his chair, his side throbbed again but not too badly. Finding the loo, he spent some time washing the blood out of his jumper and then the windcheater. It wasn’t perfect but it was better than nothing. Putting the wet jumper back on chilled him slightly but it soon warmed up after he put the nylon windcheater on over top and zipped it up.

The staff members were very busy and the exam rooms were mostly occupied but as he left the gents, he saw a group of nurses and orderlies pushing a patient on a trolley out of an exam room and leaving the room empty. It was the best time to get in and find some supplies before anyone came to straighten up for the next patient.

Acting as if he belonged there, John pushed his way into the room and made a beeline toward one of the cupboards he knew would typically hold bandaging and suturing materials. He never dreamed that there’d be any antibiotics available but somehow his luck continued to hold. He had to pick the lock but he discovered a good, all purpose antibiotic and some syringes along with everything else he needed. Hiding his loot in the windcheater’s pockets, he got out of the room and back to the hallway within less than one minute.

Checking the corridors and making sure the policemen were nowhere to be seen, John left the hospital. He made his way to the nearest Tube station and looked up the location of St Thomas’. It was on the south side of the Thames and would be a long trip. He was hurting and exhausted and it was well after visiting hours. He wasn’t a relative of Escott’s and didn’t even know the man’s real name. There was no way he was getting in tonight to see Stephen. Maybe John should head back to his flat and take the risk that Moriarty was too busy putting out fires to worry about what John was doing.

Decision reluctantly made, John took the Tube back to his flat and watched his bedsit from the safety of an alleyway for a time. No suspicious strangers lurked about and when he tried using his latent senses, he could detect nothing out of order. Relieved beyond words, he trudged up to his flat and let himself in.

Everything was just as he’d left it when he’d dashed out to search for Stephen that morning. He took a careful shower and then attended to his wound. It was a deep graze, very swollen and sore but not serious. After cleansing the wound, he sutured what he could reach and then bandaged it as well as he could do. His head wound was minor and plasters took care of closing it. Taking some paracetemol and going to bed, he fell into a dreamless sleep and didn’t wake for eight hours.

It took him a while to loosen his muscles once he was up and moving early the next morning. He was sore and stiff but the wound in his side seemed to be closing well with no indication of infection. Skipping breakfast, John instead packed his things and decided what he was going to do. The clinic had been saved but he now had no job and likely wouldn’t get his pay cheque on Friday. Since he’d been involved with Stephen in bringing down Talbot’s—and by extension Moriarty’s—operation, it was just a matter of time before the mad bastard discovered this and sent someone after him. Finding
a new flat or somewhere else to stay was paramount but he had no money.

What he really needed to do was to get his identity papers and money back from Moriarty and this might be the ideal time whilst the criminal was distracted. Moriarty had said that John would get them back when he obeyed the mad man’s orders and showed up at the address he’d been given. Maybe he should visit earlier and see if he couldn’t find his property and take it back. That would solve some of his short term problems. It was likely dangerous but he had very little choice in the matter.

In the meantime, he could try to reach Murray from his old unit and see if he knew how to find Masters. If John could contact her before she got to the UK he could arrange a meeting with her somewhere other than the Gibbet. Too many things hinged on other things going perfectly and because of Sod’s Law, the chance of everything falling into place was remote. But he had to try and soon, before Moriarty could turn his horrid, black eyes toward John and decide to make his life even more miserable.

Murray was glad to hear from him and promised to try to find a way for him to contact Masters. Unfortunately, Murray couldn’t talk long and had to ring off quickly. John then finished packing everything he owned into his suitcase and dropped it and his laptop off at the bus station’s left luggage storage for a minimal fee, basically abandoning his flat. He kept a small shoulder bag with some toiletries and a change of clothes with him. Hopefully Moran would be elsewhere working for Moriarty in the wake of all the excitement at the clinic whilst John was breaking into his house.

The Tube took him to Earl’s Court station and he walked to Carlyle Square in Chelsea, which was where the address he’d been given was located. It was a three storey house that looked well kept and obscenely expensive. There was a park-like space across the street from the building and he stood leaning against a wrought-iron fence, partly obscured by some trees whilst he watched the house, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Seeing nothing, he circled around behind the building. Reconnaissance was always nerve-racking and was the part of an op that he disliked the most, but it had to be done.

The fence surrounding the back garden wasn’t particularly high but it made it difficult to see the rear entrance from the alley. His senses let him know that no one was watching and no one was in the house, so he decided to make his move. Picking the lock on the gate, John let himself inside the garden.

Pulse pounding and eyes alert, he slowly approached the back of the house. Terror welled up at the thought of being caught by Moriarty, but he pushed it back and down. There was no time for panic. The basement door was more sheltered so it made sense to enter from there. He could see there was a security system but it was one he was actually familiar with and knew how to bypass. It all seemed too easy for some reason or maybe Moriarty and Moran were just that arrogant. John hoped it was the latter.

His senses had told him no one was in the house but he wasn’t always sure he could trust them. Heart in his throat, he entered and waited, listening hard, but heard nothing. Quietly and efficiently he began to search the basement and then made his way to the upper floors. The house didn’t appear as if it was really lived in much and the surfaces were slightly dusty. It was possible that Moran was often out of town on an op or recruiting for his mercenary outfit and didn’t stay there much. Or maybe he was with Moriarty and running the maniac’s errands. Regardless, John really didn’t care as he searched desk drawers, cupboards and filing cabinets for his things.

Christ, he hoped they weren’t in a safe somewhere. Safe cracking was not something he knew how to do well. Finally, he got to the upper floor and into the master bedroom. To his intense relief, his
SIG, papers and money were sitting on the top of a dresser. It seemed Moran and Moriarty were indeed just that arrogant. Shaking his head in disbelief, he quickly stuffed his things into his bag when he noticed that one of the dresser drawers was slightly ajar. Impulsively, he opened it and saw, amongst cufflinks and other items, a thick wad of cash.

Thinking hard for a few moments, John took the money and stuffed it into a pocket. He wasn’t sure how much was there, but it was enough to get him a cheap hotel room for a few days at the very least. It seemed there might actually be enough for a train ticket to Europe. John could figure something out once he was out of the country and away from Moriarty’s influence. Under the money was a flash drive that was labelled “Jim”. Was this possibly incriminating information on Moriarty that Moran had for safekeeping? On impulse, John took it and stuffed it in a pocket. He would look at it later, once he was safe somewhere.

As he reconnected the security system at the back door and walked away from the house, John felt a stab of guilt. It occurred to him that he was planning to abandon Stephen to fight Moriarty alone. The alpha had wanted John to return to him, ostensibly to talk about where they stood with each other, but if John was honest with himself there could never be anything between them but friendship.

Despite their brief, confusing experience of sharing their minds and emotions, realistically there was no way that Stephen—or whatever his name really was—would want to bond to him. John’s feelings of closeness to the alpha were the result of adrenaline and facing danger together. A relationship based on that kind of thing wasn’t real or lasting. Especially since neither one had ever wanted to bond with anyone, both of them would be better off if John stayed away from Stephen. Biology was working against them whenever they were together. John’s thought processes were not very rational and his knees got weak when he was around Stephen and the alpha became possessive and dictatorial around John. Talking to Stephen by phone was probably the best way to say goodbye and he did owe Lestrade a statement, at the very least. His mobile had the DI’s number and he would ring the man as soon as he’d found a place to stay for a few days.

John took the Tube to a rather seedy but busy area he was familiar with and found a very cheap hotel that he knew was safe and clean. On the way he stopped at the left luggage station and retrieved his laptop and suitcase. He regretted the money spent but it was only a few quid and he’d survive. It was still too early for lunch and he was starving, so he picked up a late breakfast. He’d ring Lestrade after his meal and arrange to make a statement. Lestrade would also know where Stephen was and how to reach the sentinel. As much as he hated to do it, John would ring the sentinel to say goodbye and wish him well. Once that was done, he would come back to the hotel and get some rest. All the emotional excitement and injury he’d sustained in the last few days made him feel completely knackered. On top of everything else, John’s throat hurt and his chest felt tight which made him think he might be coming down with a cold. Just his luck. Sighing, he took some paracetemol, turned on the telly and sat on the bed to eat his breakfast.

A brief news segment was on at the top of the hour and the Price Clinic was still the main story. A very distressed, elderly man was being interviewed by a blonde reporter. It turned out to be the original Dr Price who was promising to take back control of the clinic. He apologised profusely and assured everyone that his patients and employees would all be safe. He begged his employees to come back to work. Dr Price guaranteed he would arrange a bonus for those who’d been held captive and give them all a pay rise. John was tempted to go back but Moriarty would find him for sure if he returned to work.

The entire incident was all blamed on a disgruntled former employee and, of course, there was no mention of the drug AG or the involvement of Moriarty. No doubt the Bureau wanted it all covered up and that was what had happened. He could only hope that Stephen would pursue the case regardless, because John had a feeling it was the tip of an iceberg. Sighing in disgust but not
surprised at the turn of events, John finished his meal, cleaned up and checked the bullet graze. He’d stopped at the chemists’ and picked up more supplies on his way to the hotel. Once the bandages were changed, he rang Lestrade. The DI answered absently, apparently not recognising John’s number.

“This is William Larssen. I thought I should check in with you?” For some reason, John was feeling somewhat uncertain.

”William! Where have you been? Are you all right? I sent someone to St Bart’s to get your statement and you’d left without getting any treatment!”

“Um…yes, that’s true but I’m fine. I just wanted to know if you still needed my statement and also to find out how Escott is doing.” John hoped the young sentinel was well and recovering in hospital.

Lestrade barked out an exasperated laugh. “The stupid git left hospital AMA when he heard you were missing and went looking for you. I suspect his brother has probably scraped him up off the street at this point and taken him home. He lost some blood, unfortunately and wasn’t looking too good last night but basically he’ll recover and be just fine. Good thing that his brother will see to it he has the best of care.”

John sighed gustily in relief despite the guilt building in his chest. “Christ. I had no idea he’d do something so daft. I suppose I should go see him but I honestly have no way to contact him. I don’t even know his real name.”

There was brief silence on the other end of the phone and then Lestrade spoke slowly. “I’m sorry but if he’s not given you his real name, I don’t think it’s my place to do so. But I can certainly let him know you’ve rung here and give him your number.”

John readily agreed and Lestrade continued affably. “Well, I’m glad that’s settled. I’ll send him a text to let him know I’ve found you. Don’t be surprised if you get a text from him, though. He prefers to text instead of directly talking to people like a normal human being. Now, if you’d come down to the Met again, I can arrange to have someone take your statement about what happened yesterday.”

“I thought you’d be the one to take my statement.” John felt a bit wary and also disappointed. He liked the DI and much preferred to speak to him and not some stranger.

“It’ll be fine, Larssen. Just come to the front desk and ask for me. I’ll let them know to expect you and someone will be there to meet you once you arrive. Any idea of when you can get here?”

John checked the time. “I suppose I can arrive within the hour. It depends on how busy the Tube is this time of day.”

“Sounds good. I’ll send a text to our mutual friend and suspect that he’ll contact you soon unless his brother has knocked him out and is sitting on him. At least he’ll know you’re alive and not dead in a ditch somewhere.”

The last statement drove home the guilt John was feeling even more. He knew Lestrade meant nothing by it but John wasn’t prepared to deal with the unexpected depth of the emotions he was feeling toward Escott. Ringing off, he wrestled with himself for being a fool and put his head in his hands. There was nothing between them and there could never be! He didn’t understand where these feelings were coming from and he did his best to derail them.
Of course it didn’t work because he was fighting against biology and a definite mental connection between the two of them. John didn’t want to admit any such thing could even exist outside of a fantasy novel. It wasn’t rational to believe it was real but he knew that it was because he’d felt it. He was sure Stephen had felt it, too but John honestly didn’t know what he was meant to do with that information. This mystical connection was hard to credit. It was intangible and uncontrollable whilst biology was quantifiable and could be managed with willpower and medication. That there was someone out there that was a perfect mate to him was totally absurd. It was starry-eyed gobbledygook of the worst sort, straight out of horrid romance novels and trite beyond words but he knew it was real because he’d experienced it. It was humbling and frightening and it confused him terribly.

The fact remained that there was a connection between him and Escott. If he denied this connection, what would happen to them? Despite the direction his biology seemed to be leading him the major problem was that John still wasn’t willing to give up his entire life to bond with an alpha or be a guide to a sentinel. Would their connection shrivel and die? What would happen to Stephen? Would it damage Escott if John denied him? Could John live with that if it happened? John had no answers and his mind felt like a hamster on a wheel; constantly running but getting absolutely nowhere.

For now John would deny the feelings, get out of the country and continue with his plan to join Master’s unit. He had no intention of being Moran’s omega or Stephen’s guide. Both paths led directly to subjugation and he should never forget that. Life with Moran would be full of horror and abuse and life with Stephen, whilst no doubt benign, would be a gilded cage, despite all the best intentions in the world. Stephen would understand because he had said he felt the exact same way. Feeling unaccountably sad and emotionally torn, John left the hotel room and shortly found himself standing in front of the Met again. This time he came in through the visitor’s entrance on his own and made his way to the main desk where he identified himself and asked for Lestrade. He’d left his real identity papers and SIG at the hotel room as well as most of his money, but he’d kept a handcuff key and the magnetised card to his hotel room in his belt pocket. The key was small enough not to trigger the metal detector, unlike his lock picks. He also had some other tools hidden in the heels of his shoes that were protected from the metal detector by a new polymerised material that he’d been given by his commander before he’d been invalided out. It was experimental and he had no idea what it was but it worked and he was glad he’d kept it.

The officer at the desk told him to sit at the row of seats by the front windows and wait. Watching the people streaming back and forth he wondered what their stories were and why they had got to where they were. His head hurt and he felt tired, certain now he was coming down with something. Against his will, John’s thoughts turned inward again and he sighed in exasperation and closed his eyes. Despite telling himself he’d made his final decision about Stephen, his mind wouldn’t let the subject rest. Apparently, his traitorous brain enjoyed beating a dead horse and was driving him round the twist so he gave in. He’d not heard from Stephen yet but it was likely for the best. The easiest thing to do was for John to just say good bye and leave the country. He could start his life over and Stephen would continue his career happily pursuing criminals like Moriarty. It was dangerous work but clearly Stephen thrived on it.

As he continued to think about it, though, he had to admit that the adventure John had experienced with Stephen had certainly been exciting. Escott was brilliant and the most fascinating person John had ever encountered. Approaching the subject objectively, the opportunity to share his life with Stephen would be no hardship at all, as long as they could agree that they were equals. It would give John the stimulation he needed to keep from being bored and he’d be useful again. Watching Stephen’s back and earning the man’s trust had made John feel whole again. Until it had happened, John hadn’t realised just how much of himself he’d lost after he’d been shot. However, he still had
no intention of trading his freedom away to anyone for any reason, no matter how attractive parts of it sounded. John didn’t understand why his brain kept coming back to this subject and he willed it to stop. It didn’t work, though.

Something he needed to keep in mind was that being bonded to Stephen and helping with his cases would be exciting and fulfilling for a time, but as soon as John became pregnant, it would all end. Alphas were notoriously possessive and protective of their mates and offspring and, from what he’d heard, sentinels were even more so. John would no longer be able to help with cases and it would suffocate him. Being protected and coddled would infuriate and enrage him and that would not end well for anyone. That should put an end to his internal dialogue right there but he knew it wouldn’t do. This back and forth crap was maddening. Sometimes he absolutely hated how his mind worked. John barely resisted beating his head against the window and sighed again.

Just then a plain clothes policeman walked up to him. “William Larssen? I’m Detective Sergeant Cline. Lestrade said I’m to take your statement. Please come with me.” The male beta walked toward the lifts and John followed. There was nothing about him that raised any red flags and John relaxed somewhat though he remained wary. Cline led him to the fifth floor and into an interrogation room with a two-way mirror in the wall and instructed him to sit down. The room felt flat and closed in, like Talbot’s office had been, so it must be sound proofed for sentinels. He wondered why they had him in there. Surely they didn’t think he was a sentinel?

He was asked to wait as Cline left the room. When he returned, there was another man with the DS and he was introduced as Cline’s partner but John didn’t get his name. The new arrival sat in a chair in a corner behind John with his arms crossed. The doctor could see him in the reflection of the mirror and wondered why he’d chosen to sit there. Was he meant to intimidate John? The doctor sat quietly but began to get somewhat irritated at all the delay. How difficult was it to just take a statement? He supposed he did have some explaining to do about the dead people, but he had acted to preserve his own and Escott’s life. They had to understand that and Escott and Sterling would support his story.

Cline took the chair across from John and put a recorder on the table between them but didn’t turn it on. John felt a bit like he was in a bad detective programme on the telly and nearly smirked but managed to prevent it at the last second. Cline began by asking his name, address, birth date, where he worked and various similar things. He wrote the information down and then stood and told John again to wait before he left the room.

Irritated and starting to get angry, John waited patiently but couldn’t help sending out his latent empathic senses. The room deadened them somehow but he was able to pick up boredom and impatience from the man behind him. Cline returned a short time later, radiating an almost predatory sense of satisfaction that bothered John. Outwardly, the doctor didn’t move or react much but watched the man with narrowed eyes. Something had happened in those few minutes and it apparently didn’t bode well for John.

Uneasy, John spoke up assertively before Cline could say anything. “I thought I was here to give a statement about what happened at Price Clinic and I’m only here as a favour to Lestrade. Why have I been kept waiting? Where is Detective Inspector Lestrade?”

“Lestrade is busy and the reason you’ve been kept waiting, Mr Larssen, is that I’ve been researching your identity. Apparently, you died and were buried in Wales at the age of 3 months, over thirty years ago. Yet here you sit right in front of me.” Cline pretended to look shocked but excitement and anticipation rolled off of him. “I’m wondering how you intend to explain that.”

John raised his chin defiantly. So they had found out his ID was false. He wasn’t exactly surprised
but he began to worry and his stomach churned. Cline continued speaking with a smirk. “Mr Larssen, or whatever your name really is, you are under arrest for giving false information to police.”

The man continued to caution John about his rights but the doctor tuned him out. John was furious and not a little scared. The entire farce was unbelievable. Cline was an absolute tosser and John could tell he had his own agenda but didn’t know what it was. Even though John was guilty, Lestrade would see to it that he was released. After all, John had helped the police and saved dozens of lives, for god’s sake! He would have Stephen called in as a character witness and the alpha wouldn’t let them treat him this way. The thought of Stephen made him remember he had no way to contact the man himself, however and Lestrade apparently didn’t even know John was in the building.

He was rudely jerked out of his thoughts by Cline shouting at him. Apparently the detective sergeant had had to repeat himself and was now angry with John. “I said, stand up and put your hands behind your back!”

John glowered at Cline but sullenly obeyed and the man from the corner snapped handcuffs on John’s wrists. The same man then led John to a processing area where uniformed officers searched him thoroughly, took his photo, a DNA sample and prints, then led him back to the same interrogation room and cuffed him to the table. They hadn’t found his belt pockets with the keys and money, thankfully. Even cuffed to the table, John could still reach his belt at any time but didn’t know if he could overcome both men, get the locked door open and escape before someone noticed and took him down. He’d just have to wait and see what Cline was planning.

Trying not to show how unsettled he was, John calmed himself as best he could do and tried to plan ahead. He didn’t know exactly what these people wanted. Arresting him for having given false particulars was a very minor offence that only merited a fine, which made him wonder what other crimes they were going to try to blame on him. He supposed they could get him for having forged identification but that also was a rather minor crime. From what he could pick up empathically, Cline wanted something from John that he could use to his own advantage. Well, the man could certainly try but John was not talking. The only person he’d speak to at this point was Lestrade and even then he’d have to think about it.

Cline sat down across from him with a smirk. “Now, I want you to tell me your real name and what you were doing at Price Clinic yesterday. You’re facing some serious charges, mate.”

The wanker’s attitude irritated the hell out of John but he refused to say anything except ask for a solicitor. John had been trained in resisting all kinds of interrogation techniques, knew his rights and this total berk couldn’t even begin to intimidate him. Also, once he’d asked for legal help, any questioning was meant to stop. So he settled back in his chair and got as comfortable as possible. John suspected Cline had no intention of following the rules and he wasn’t wrong.

Cline kept trying to get him to talk for almost half an hour. John refused to engage as the DS attempted to do everything he could do to coerce and intimidate John. Nothing worked. The detective sergeant became increasing angry and frustrated as John continued to sit mute. He’d asked for a solicitor and that was all he was going to say, no matter what.

The man’s questions and comments became more and more inappropriate and personal in a vain attempt to anger John, who had to suppress a giggle at the stupid sod. Somehow the idiot realised John was silently laughing at him, which made the DS even more furious. Finally Cline got up and left the room again, slamming the door behind him. John could see in the mirror that the man in the corner rolled his eyes at Cline’s unprofessional display. It was clear Cline’s partner was simply bored.
stiff and annoyed but he stayed in his chair.

John was glad the man had remained because he was concerned at how emotional the DS had behaved and wondered if he would become violent when he returned. If so, John would take him apart, policeman or no. When he used his empathy on Cline during the interrogation, he slowly discovered that there was professional jealousy between Cline and Lestrade. The man wanted to use the information he thought John could give him to gain an advantage over the DI, which explained why Lestrade apparently hadn’t been informed that John was being interrogated. But how could a professional rivalry be the justification to completely trample over and ignore John’s rights? Unless he thought John knew something no one else did. Was it something to do with Moriarty? Cline was an idiot and way out of his league if he thought he could use John to get to Moriarty somehow. It certainly would be a feather in any policeman’s cap to bring the master criminal down but all Cline was likely to get for his troubles was a bullet between the eyes. Another thought hit the doctor. Was Cline one of Moriarty’s? Could he be trying to find out what John’s involvement was for the mad bastard? His blood ran cold at the thought.

Within a few minutes, Cline came back into the room, waving a paper and looking smug again. “We’ve processed your prints and matched them to ones taken from a weapon found at the clinic yesterday. There are three men dead with bullet wounds consistent with that weapon. If you decide to cooperate now, I’ll be sure to speak to the prosecutor on your behalf. Otherwise, I’ll personally see to it you never see the light of day again. Now I won’t ask again. Who are you?”

Before John could repeat for the umpteenth time that he wanted to see a solicitor the door to the interrogation room slammed open and a clearly furious Stephen Escott limped through, followed closely by Lestrade. Despite the limp and excessively pale complexion, Escott strode in arrogantly, head high and wearing a gorgeous bespoke black suit. John couldn’t help but grin in delight and intense relief at the sight of him.

Escott looked at the man in the corner. “You. Get out.” To John’s surprise, the man looked frightened and left immediately whilst Escott turned his hard gaze to the Detective Sergeant.

Cline jumped up from his chair and actually snarled. “Sherlock Holmes! What the fuck are you doing here?”

"Putting a stop to this illegal interrogation, you useless prat! This man is directly responsible for saving the lives of at least fifty Price Clinic employees, not to mention my own. You have no grounds to arrest or charge him with anything.”

Leaning forward defensively, Cline contradicted the sentinel. “He gave a false name, is carrying forged identification and killed at least four men that we know of yesterday!”

Stephen—rather Sherlock—sneered at the man. John watched with wide, admiring eyes a completely different side of his friend as the sentinel began to eviscerate Cline.

“Did it ever occur to you that Larssen might be undercover and your clearance isn’t high enough to know? Of course not! You are so quick to try to score points off Lestrade in a pathetic attempt to bolster your own pitiful career that you never stopped to check, did you?”

The accusation made Cline back off hesitantly and then his face turned an alarming shade of crimson as he opened his mouth to shout back. Before he could say a thing, his mobile rang and he wavered. After a moment of indecision, he answered it instead of continuing the argument. Narrowing his eyes furiously, he rudely turned his back on the other men in the room and spoke into the phone in low tones.
John ignored Cline and looked up at his friend with a wry half-smile and spoke softly. “Sherlock Holmes, eh? That’s quite the mouthful. And that was quite a convincing lie.”

Eyes twinkling with humour, Sherlock sniffed disdainfully, aristocratic nose high in the air. “‘Sherlock Holmes’ is no worse than ‘Stephen Escott’ and you didn’t have any trouble with that. And I always lie convincingly.”

John raised an eyebrow with a snort of laughter. “Well, at least your fake name was rather more conventional than Sherlock! However, your real name is unforgettable, just like you are.” He grinned happily up at the alpha, who raised a sceptical eyebrow at him. John wasn’t sure how long it would take to get used to the name but it certainly seemed to suit the exotic man in front of him.

Mindful of his leg, the sentinel knelt carefully down beside him. He took John’s cuffed wrist gently in his and his mouth tightened in anger. John’s skin was reddened and sore looking though he didn’t remember pulling at the metal cuffs earlier. Sherlock’s touch to John’s bare skin caused their connection to flare up between them, which made John gasp and glance quickly at the sentinel in clear warning. Sherlock’s pale eyes were wide with surprise and his pupils dilated as John snatched his wrist away, despite the cuff.

“Stephen—Sherlock. We talked about this. No touching.”

Moving his mouth close to John’s ear, Sherlock whispered, causing the doctor to shiver. “I know, John. My apologies. We have much to discuss. Trust me. I’ll get you out of here soon.” He pulled back and looked at John, who couldn’t help his worried expression though he gave the young sentinel another half smile.

“I’d like that very much, Steph…Sherlock. But there are circumstances you need to know about that I’ve not had the chance to tell you that might affect…things,” he finished lamely. The very real threat of Moran and Moriarty hovered over his thoughts and it was all he could do not to panic.

His expression very serious, the sentinel nodded and spoke quietly. “I understand but I doubt it will change anything.”

“You have no idea, mate. What I have to say will change everything. Moriarty is involved!” As he hissed the last statement, John pulled at the cuffs in agitation without thinking. The sharp noise made John jump nervously and with a furious expression, Sherlock turned to Lestrade and demanded the key. Looking worried, the DI quickly handed it over and John was released just as Cline turned to them both, face pale but defiant.

“You have to put those cuffs back on him.” Expression resigned but resolute, Cline stood his ground.

Sherlock scoffed at him contemptuously. “What now, you insufferable idiot? He’s done nothing wrong and he’s leaving with me.”

Red faced with anger, Cline’s mouth twisted in a sardonic smile. “That call I had just now? Well apparently your boyfriend’s DNA has tested positive for latent guide abilities. As we all know, the Bureau’s authority supersedes even murder charges. As per regulations, they’ve been notified and are on their way now to pick him up for processing and sale.”

John couldn’t have been more shocked if a bomb had gone off in the room. Helplessly, heart pounding in terror and panic, his eyes darted to Sherlock in the hope that his brilliant friend would surely know what to do. To his horror, the sentinel was staring in complete bafflement at Cline. Sherlock’s face then twisted into a mask of fury and he grabbed the hapless detective sergeant by the
"You let them test him for latent abilities? That’s not standard procedure, you bastard! What the fuck are you playing at? Why did you do that?" Sherlock had the beta lifted off the ground and was shaking him like a rag doll. Terrified and shocked beyond words, Cline could only hang there whilst Lestrade, just as surprised as John, grabbed at Sherlock’s shoulders.

"Let go of him, Sherlock! You don’t need a charge of assaulting a policeman right now. You have to find a way to help William! LET GO!" Sherlock only obeyed when John got up and touched his wrist. The sentinel’s primal rage died immediately and his full attention turned back to John as he dropped Cline onto his arse. Sherlock was breathing hard and still clearly enraged but his anger was back under control.

Lestrade turned an unresisting Sherlock to face him, grabbed his arms and gave him a firm shake. He reasoned urgently with the sentinel, words barely audible. “As of this past week, it is now standard procedure to test every person who is arrested for latent abilities and turn over all those who test positive to the Bureau. You’ve been undercover and so you didn’t know. It’s the law and we can’t disobey. I know you don’t want anyone at the Bureau to know about you, but you can make sure that when he’s put up for sale, you’re the one who buys him! Do what you have to do to make sure it happens!"

Letting go of Sherlock’s arms, Lestrade stepped back and spoke normally. “In the meantime, we have no choice but to hand him over. It’s too late for you to claim him now he's been discovered. I’m sorry, Sherlock but we can’t make any exceptions, no matter what he is to you.” Lestrade was sympathetic but determined and shot a regretful look at John. Sherlock took a deep breath and seemed to calm somewhat. When he looked at John his expression was devastated and fearful. Knees weak with shock, John sank back into his chair and watched the proceedings with despair. It seemed there was no way either man could help him escape the Met. It was no one’s fault but he certainly had no intention of allowing anyone to take him to the Bureau for sale. This talk of being bought and sold was unthinkable. He would have to help himself and find a way out on his own. His resolve firmed as he began to think of possible escape routes and exit strategies. He was mostly handicapped in that he didn’t know much about the building but he could certainly make educated guesses.

Cline had scrambled to his feet whilst Lestrade was talking Sherlock down. Angry and humiliated, the DS made the mistake of trying to put the handcuffs back on John. John could feel blistering rage consume Sherlock’s mind the instant Cline touched him. Sherlock grabbed the handcuffs from Cline and would have taken the man’s head off with them if Lestrade hadn’t anticipated his move and grabbed him from behind. John also jumped up and threw his arms around Sherlock’s neck, effectively stopping him cold.

Lestrade let go and Cline fell away in fright as Sherlock buried his face in John’s neck, wrapped the doctor up tightly in his arms and began to radiate alpha pheromones. Lestrade was an alpha also but John could feel blistering rage consume Sherlock’s mind the instant Cline touched him. Sherlock grabbed the handcuffs from Cline and would have taken the man’s head off with them if Lestrade hadn’t anticipated his move and grabbed him from behind. John also jumped up and threw his arms around Sherlock’s neck, effectively stopping him cold.

Lestrade let go and Cline fell away in fright as Sherlock buried his face in John’s neck, wrapped the doctor up tightly in his arms and began to radiate alpha pheromones. Lestrade was an alpha also but John watched the DI instinctively react to Sherlock’s more powerful presence. The pheromones were potent enough to drive him and Cline out of the room in deference to an alpha so dominant that he clearly outranked all of them. Thankfully, the only one who knew that Sherlock was also a sentinel was Lestrade and John knew the man would never give away that Sherlock had just revealed himself as an alpha sentinel.

John’s mind and empathic senses were chaotic with emotions and pheromones at the moment but he could see that Cline was white with terror with the knowledge that he’d just dodged certain death because of John’s willingness to intercede with a nearly primal alpha. Cline also seemed shocked
that a man he’d thought was a beta apparently had changed gender.

As Cline hesitated at the door, Sherlock turned, put John behind him and took one step toward the DS. “Get out!” The baritone was deeper than John had ever heard it before and barely sounded human. Cline ran past Lestrade, who gave them both an awed and worried look but stood firm.

“Sherlock, I can’t keep the Bureau from taking him. They’re on their way here now. I’ll give you a few minutes but you have to let him go.” Lestrade shut the door and Sherlock turned back to John, looking down at him in confusion.

Reaching out to Sherlock, John tried to reassure him. Sherlock reached right back and their connection flared up again. This time John allowed it. “Look, Sherlock. Just do as he says. I’ll get out of here on my own and meet you somewhere. It’ll be fine.”

Staring hard at John, Sherlock looked torn but nodded. “I’m sorry but I can’t think of a way out of this without causing some kind of irreparable harm that would injure innocents and necessitate that we leave London, John. If you can get away, I’ll be waiting for you on the pavement near the front entrance. I can have a car waiting for us and we’ll go to my flat. If we get separated the address is 221 B Baker Street. I’ll tell my landlady Mrs Hudson to let you up.”

“That sounds like a plan, then. I’ll do my best to meet you there. The police took my wallet, keys and mobile. Can you get Lestrade to release them to you? Oh, and this is my hotel key. Can you please check me out and get my belongings? The most important things I own are there and I don’t know when I can make it back. Keep them safe for me, yeah? There’s a flash drive labelled ‘Jim’ that I want you to look at, too. There may be information on it related to Moriarty that you and Lestrade can use. I got it from Moran and I’ll explain later.” John was trying hard to keep it together and mentally plan his escape route as best he could do. Things were not going well and he was starting to feel afraid he might not get away.

“Of course I’ll get them for you.” Sherlock’s mouth tightened in distress. “John, if the Bureau does take you….” Sherlock’s voice was very hesitant.

“They won’t, Sherlock.” John tried to reassure his friend but the sentinel interrupted and repeated himself.

“If they take you, John, what Lestrade said has merit.”

He held up a hand at John’s protest. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but as I understand it, the procedure for newly taken latent guides is to bring them in, process them over a period of a few days and then put them up for sale to partial sentinels at the monthly auction. I don’t know when the auctions are held as I’ve never been to one, but that’s what I’ve been told.

“The problem is that in order to purchase a guide, one has to be a member of the sentinel community in good standing. I’m not a member and they think I’m a beta sentinel. I’ll have to go there and apply. If I apply as a beta sentinel, I understand that there’s a waiting period whilst references are checked and I could be rejected since I never attended their schools and my family has a history of hostility toward the administrators of the Bureau. I’ve been told they are very particular about who is allowed full membership into their organisation.” John remembered Talbot and nodded. The man had been a full sentinel but weak and had been denied admittance to university by the Bureau.

Looking directly into John’s eyes, Sherlock spoke reluctantly. “The only way I can get into one of the auctions without any delay is to divulge that I’m an alpha sentinel. That would get me in instantaneously but there would also be a price to pay. They won’t like the idea of an alpha sentinel purchasing a latent beta as a guide. I’ll likely get a lot of opposition from them. And I would likely
end up losing all anonymity and it would affect my work adversely.”

John’s heart sank. He knew what that meant. Sherlock would be hounded constantly and never find a moment’s peace if he were discovered by the Bureau’s administrators to be an alpha sentinel. His work meant everything to him and it would likely mean he’d never be able to go undercover again, either.

Sherlock was continuing and John returned his attention to him. “But I want you to know that I’m willing to do that if it means that I can get you out of there.”

Thoughts churning frantically, John shook his head. He could think of no specific plan. It was unbelievable. All the things he’d ever wanted for himself—independence and control over his own life—would be achieved in a few short weeks but the Bureau was within minutes of tearing it all away. Sherlock was looking at him expectantly and a bit nervously. However, there was nothing John could say.

Finally words came but they seemed completely inadequate. “I…thank you for the offer, Sherlock. But you can’t reveal what you are. It could destroy your life if they find out and I’m not worth it. We’ll figure something else out. If I can’t get away, I’ll have a few days before they…sell me. That should be plenty of time for you to have your application processed. Maybe you can lie or something on the forms to make it go through faster.” He couldn’t believe he was talking about being sold. The feeling of helplessness he was experiencing was horrible and he instinctively reached out for reassurance from the alpha.

"You're worth it! Don't ever say otherwise!" Fiercely, the sentinel pulled John close, holding him tightly as John pressed his face into Sherlock’s neck and let his senses sink into the sentinel’s mind again. Not as deep as he’d gone in the clinic but just enough to comfort them both. Just before John pulled back, he felt their minds intertwine and then fit together nearly perfectly. Unfortunately, John was all too aware that something was missing from the connection that would make it permanent and so reluctantly he separated them just as Lestrade knocked on the door.

They stood pressed tightly together for a moment longer. The glands in John’s throat once again felt sore and swollen and his arousal was painful. Why had he allowed the merging with Sherlock to happen again? It had served no purpose except to depress him further. There was nothing between them and there never could be despite how much he wanted it to be true. That way led to pain and disappointment. John could turn to no one but himself now. He stepped back and looked away from Sherlock’s suddenly miserable expression.

The door opened and it was clear the DI was sorry to have interrupted. “The Bureau representatives have arrived, Sherlock. We need to take him to the holding cell with the other latents here so they can transport them all together.”

Sherlock looked furious but restrained himself. Staring intensely at John, he stepped back toward the door. “Remember what I said.” With that, the sentinel swept out of the room as regally as his injured leg allowed and John watched him disappear. It felt like tearing off a limb to watch Sherlock walk away from him but there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Chances were excellent that they’d never really see each other again and it made John want to collapse in a corner and not move.

Lestrade beckoned John and the doctor reluctantly followed him out of the interrogation room. The DI hadn’t put the cuffs on him, which rather surprised John but he was very grateful for the kindness. He kept an eye out for possible escape but the opportunity didn’t present itself. There were too many people around and he really didn’t want to injure Lestrade so he just kept his eyes open for his chance.
There was a holding cell just down the hall from the room where he’d been kept for so long. There were a handful of other men and women in the cell, all looking thoroughly frightened and nervous. It wasn’t hard to sympathise with everyone since he was feeling exactly the same way. The emotional aura of the room was depressing and unbearable but there was no real way to block it out. John found a place to sit on one of the benches and waited for whatever was to happen next. No one spoke though everyone kept shooting furtive glances at one another. He guessed none of them had any familiarity with sentinels or guides and were dreading what they would have to face in the future. He certainly had not had any experience with sentinels either until he’d got the job at the clinic. John wondered if any of the others had suspected they might be latents and if so, had any opportunity to learn to use their abilities as he had done.

Fear and apprehension warred inside him. Wrapping his arms around himself, he closed his eyes, sat back and tried to relax. It was difficult because he was not only anxious but tired, hungry and thirsty. His chest still felt tight and he coughed, resigned that he was sick. Representatives from the Bureau would be coming along soon to collect them and, though he was consumed with anger and frustration, on the surface John wanted to remain as non-threatening and ordinary as possible. Complaining, causing trouble or calling attention to himself was the last thing he wanted to do at the moment.

The door opened suddenly and everyone in the room was on high alert. John could tell that a few of them were barely holding themselves together. The last thing anyone had expected that day was to be arrested and then be turned over to a bloated bureaucracy that was going to sell them into slavery. Everything they’d ever done in their lives or tried to build for themselves would be meaningless. All that they owned no longer belonged to them but to a nameless, faceless stranger who would soon purchase them as if they were livestock. The grief and fear was nearly palpable and John wondered how the people outside couldn’t feel it. Or maybe they did but didn’t care.

The man at the door was dressed in a dark uniform and seemed incredibly bored. It was better than sadistic. John had some experience with that kind of captor and much preferred bored. “Right! All of you latents stand up and get into a queue.”

They shuffled into a line of sorts and waited nervously. The Bureau guard began with the first person and put cuffs on his wrists, then a belt around his waist. He then cuffed the next person and attached his cuffs to the belt of the person in front of him. This was done all the way down the queue until they got to John, who had manoeuvred himself into the last place. He was cuffed to the belt and the person in front of him but no belt was put around his waist. They were all ushered to large lift and taken down to the visitor’s entrance. A large van was waiting on the street and John was actually surprised to see that Sherlock was loitering outside, just like he’d promised.

Seeing the van and then Sherlock made everything hit him at once. Fear and panic threatened to swamp him but he knew he had to control himself and wait until the right moment. His breath was short in his throat and he was having a surprisingly difficult time keeping calm until he realised he was picking up the emotions of his fellow latents which were being echoed and amplified back and forth between each of them, making things much worse.

An idea occurred to John and he gently pushed his empathy at one of the men who appeared to be most on edge. John’s target was in the middle of the queue and literally shaking with mindless panic. Before John had even withdrawn his mental touch, the man snapped and began to lash out mentally and physically, screaming and flailing at one of their guards and then pulled all his shackled neighbours down into a chaotic pile on the hard floor.

John was also pulled forward but somehow managed to keep on his feet. He’d palmed the cuff key before they’d started out and as everyone’s attention was focussed on the heap of latents and guards
screaming and writhing in panic on the floor, he unlocked the cuffs and melted into the crowd. No one seemed to notice him and he slipped behind the mass of visitors and Met employees watching the chaos in fascination. He got a few curious looks but no one said anything.

Heart thundering in his chest, he moved carefully around behind the crowd and headed for the visitor’s exit. He could see Sherlock in front of him on the other side of the door when the commotion behind him got suddenly louder. There was a shout and when he glanced over his shoulder, one of the larger Bureau guards was barrelling toward him at top speed.

Even knowing he was totally fucked he reacted instinctively anyway. John evaded the rush and used the man’s own momentum to flip him high over his shoulder and into the crowd of gawkers. The wound in his side flared in sudden pain as the man bowled over the unlucky onlookers like ten-pins and John took off for the exit at top speed. Just as he approached it, however, an observant policeman locked the electronic door so that John hit it hard and bounced off with a grunt of pain.

Cursing, he turned what would have been a bruising fall into a deliberate flip and was back on his feet in seconds, frantically searching for another way out. If he could get to the control for the door, he could open it again and escape. John could see Sherlock pressed up against the door from the other side, encouraging him to hurry. Before he could even take two steps, he found himself surrounded by five Bureau guards, all of whom seemed terribly shocked at his unexpected behaviour. Apparently latents didn’t fight back much. However, the guards remained professional and were clearly preparing to rush and overpower him by sheer numbers.

The crowd of other latents were back on their feet and gaping at him, though some had hope in their expressions. John’s eyes scanned the area, looking for any help or avenues of escape but saw nothing. He hadn’t wanted to fight anyone but circumstances were such that he firmed his resolve and planned his strategy for taking all five down. John instinctively moved away from the guards, put his back to the locked door and prepared himself for an intense fight, despite the pain from his wound. *I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb,* he thought and attacked.

His actions surprised everyone and he was able to take on the two largest guards first by striking at their knee joints with lightning fast side kicks. They yelped in astonishment and went down in short order, writhing in pain. The other three guards appeared totally unprepared for his attack but one came at him anyway, swinging wildly. John ducked and delivered a fist to the abdomen, a knee to the chin and an elbow to the back of the head that knocked the man unconscious. As he recovered his stance, John watched another guard scurry away and hide behind the crowd of police and visitors. That left only one more.

Breathing hard, heart in his throat at the thought he was only seconds away from escape, John turned to deal with the final guard. This one was unfortunately smarter than the others and refused to engage John directly. Before John realised what was happening, the man pulled a small pistol from his belt and shot him with it. The weapon was a tranquiliser gun and the dart got John right in the middle of his chest. The doctor pulled it from his skin straight away but it was too late. The drug had begun to work instantly and all he could do was turn and take a few stumbling steps toward the door before he fell to his knees. Terror and panic ruled his thoughts and his mind was a chaotic mess of stunned surprise and utter shock. He couldn’t believe that it would end this way. That he’d been caught so easily. Looking up, he saw that Sherlock was kneeling, still pressed against the glass on the other side of the door, looking horrified and frantic.

As John’s vision began to tunnel inward, he watched Sherlock turn his head as if hearing something. The alpha’s expression screwed up as if he was in terrible pain but then his face cleared as his mouth firmed in resolution. John had just enough strength to place a hand on the glass mirroring Sherlock’s when the sentinel glanced again over his shoulder, stood and walked quickly away. Devastated,
John gaped at Sherlock’s retreating back in disbelief. Then he was grabbed from behind by the two remaining guards and pulled unresisting to the floor. Shattered, he blinked up at a circle of angry faces and then all went black.
Chapter 4

Emotionally and physically, John was totally numb. His first recollection upon regaining consciousness was of watching Sherlock turn his back to him and walk away. Had Sherlock given up on him in disgust when he couldn’t free himself from the guards? But then, what had John really expected? It just brought home to him how little he really knew about the young man. But the more John thought about it, the more logical the sentinel’s actions seemed. Sherlock had offered to help but the situation had been hopeless in the end, so it made sense for him to leave and avoid being implicated in a conspiracy to aid in John’s escape.

It took some time for the tranquiliser to wear off and John had to be patient. Hearing came back first whilst John couldn’t move at all except to breathe. There was subtle noise and movement around him as well as a lot of crying. The emotional ambience began to creep in and it depressed him further. Hopelessness, fear and grief dominated the emotions of those around him and he tried to block it but it had penetrated too far. The dejection was so dense that it didn’t seem worthwhile to even open his eyes and he wanted to sob out his terror, too.

After a time, he could take deeper breaths, though his chest was uncomfortably tight, and others around him noticed he was waking. He still couldn’t move but he could hear that most of the people near him started to shift away. John got the impression they were frightened of him and he supposed they might well be after seeing him take on five guards by himself. It had been a stupid thing to do since the Bureau authorities would now keep him restrained or guarded more carefully than they might have done before. But there was no point in castigating himself. There wasn’t anything he could do about it now and he’d have to pay the price.

Sherlock had said there would be a few days for the new latents to be processed and then they’d be sold at the next auction. John had no idea when that might be. In the meantime, his side hurt terribly and he was very hungry and thirsty and thought he might be running a fever. Having briefly been held prisoner previously in Afghanistan, he suspected they’d be fed at some point and in fact he may well have missed the meal because he was unconscious. Well, he’d been hungry and thirsty before and knew it wasn’t going to kill him. His side burnt fiercely though. John reluctantly admitted to himself that he had re-injured himself and began to be concerned about possible infection.

Finally, his muscles responded and he was able to open his eyes and sit up with a small groan. His limbs moved sluggishly though, indicating the drug they’d used was very powerful and had long term residual effects. Avoiding it in future would definitely be a priority.

Holding his arm pressed against his injured side, he scowled as he looked around at the other prisoners. There were about twenty other men and women in the room. Some he recognised from the Met but others were complete strangers. To his surprise, some of them flinched away from his glance and even turned their backs, but it made sense when he thought about it. He was a proven troublemaker and those few who were scared of him didn’t want to get into trouble or call attention to themselves for fear he’d hurt them or get them hurt.

As he became more aware of his surroundings, he noticed with bemusement that no one had taken his belt or his shoes and he wasn’t restrained in any way. So the guards were either still underestimating him or they were idiots. More likely both. Any of the above would work to John’s advantage. Planning to escape would keep the panic at bay.

Taking stock of the room, he looked around and grimaced in distaste. The cell was dirty, the paint on the walls was peeling and the floor was covered in a layer of grime. It had apparently been used as a temporary holding cell for a long time with minimal maintenance. There was a loo in one corner.
with no door and it stank of stale urine and vomit. However, a state of the art camera was positioned in one corner near the door and the lock seemed new. It wouldn’t take John long to disable it if he had a chance to work uninterrupted but that wasn’t likely to happen.

He stood and stretched carefully, aware that there were numerous suspicious and fearful eyes watching him. No one was talking and everyone was incredibly stressed and tense as if they were just waiting for something to happen. They were right to be concerned because the door was suddenly unlocked and swung open with a loud bang. John had just enough time to sit down and look away when a couple of guards entered. They started grabbing people arbitrarily. Some were let go and others they pushed toward the door.

It was a disorganised event and John wondered where they planned to take them. Maybe they were going to start the processing. Eventually the guards found and gathered everyone who had been collected from the Met, John included. It took some time because a few of the men resisted and one of them broke down into sobs that set off some others. It was an incredibly depressing scene and it was sobering and heartbreaking to watch some of the people begging the guards to let them go home to their families. The guards didn’t seem to care and forced them out of the room and down a hallway.

John went willingly as long as he wasn’t restrained. They did take the precaution of stationing more guards around him this time, however. These guards all carried tranquilliser pistols openly and were aimed directly at him. All the other latents cringed away from John but he had expected that and didn’t let it worry him. It was better that they stay away from him because there would be less collateral damage when he made his move. And he did plan to escape from this place or die trying. He wasn’t going to allow himself to be sold if he had any say at all in the matter.

Ignoring a small voice in his head that said maybe this time he wouldn’t have a say, they arrived at another door. They were pushed through and made to sit on benches along the walls. The place was only slightly cleaner than the last place they’d been in, which meant it wasn’t clean at all. A man wearing a lab coat came into the room looking weary and bored.

John suddenly realised that neither the guards nor the man with the lab coat were sentinels and he was certain they weren’t guides either. They must be people who were hired to process the overflow of new latents being brought in due to the recently passed laws. It explained why things seemed disorganised and half arsed. John hoped that maybe he’d be able to take some advantage of that.

It seemed that the man in the lab coat was some kind of technician and he gestured to a woman sitting beside John. She froze in fear so two of the guards took her arms and dragged her stiff, unresisting body through another door. The tension and fear in the room began to ratchet up and someone across from John began to sob again. No one tried to help the crying man and mostly they just edged away, trying not to be reminded of their own misery. There really wasn’t anything anyone could do but John wished there was some way he could comfort the man.

After a few minutes, lab coat came in and gestured at John, who slowly stood up with his head held high and walked toward the door, still being followed by the guards with their tranquilliser pistols. The space they entered was actually clean and seemed to be a medical examination room. A chair similar to a dentist’s dominated the room and some kind of mechanism lay beside it on a small wheeled stainless steel table. Sterilising equipment was placed along tables that had been pushed against the walls on the other side of the room.

The man picked up a clipboard and pen and finally glanced over at John, practically radiating boredom. His voice was flat and uninterested. “Name?”
“Fuck you.” John’s response was just as flat and uninterested. He had no intention of giving these people anything.

Sighing, the man turned to one of the guards. “What is the name?”

One of the guards pulled a crumpled piece of paper from a pocket and looked it over. It was a printed list of names. “It says here that he’s a male beta named William Larssen, but he was arrested for giving police false particulars and forging identification papers. So we have no idea what his real name is.”

The technician shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter. The fake one will do for now. It’s likely his new owner will change it anyway.” The level of indifference in the man’s voice was shocking. It became apparent that the technician thought of John and the other latents as livestock and not human beings. It was dehumanising and infuriating but that seemed to be the way the Bureau handled latents.

The guards indicated with their weapons that John should sit in the chair. As he got closer to it, his blood ran cold as he recognised what was lying on the table. It was a type of tattoo machine that was similar to one used to tag livestock, though it seemed to have been adapted for human use. John was forced into the chair and he eyed the set up with unease and a churning stomach.

The tattoo machine looked like a pair of wide pliers and John watched with mounting anger and anxiety, the technician placed tiny metal digits into it and then inked it. At least the man had put gloves on before he started and had taken the metal bits out of a steriliser. *No point in spreading diseases to the new livestock*, John thought bitterly. The guards strapped him into the chair and he tried hard not to panic. They hadn’t strapped his legs down but they were smart enough to stay out of range.

As he shifted futilely in the chair, one of the guards grabbed him around the throat and forehead with his forearms and held him tight, which allowed the technician to swab his earlobe with alcohol and neatly and efficiently tattoo it. It hurt like hell but the worst part was being treated in such a dehumanising manner. As soon as it was done, the guard let go but they didn’t loosen his arms just yet. It took longer than he liked to calm himself.

Whilst he breathed and tried to relax, the technician efficiently took a blood sample, labelled it and gave it to someone John didn’t see.

The guard who had held John’s head spoke to him warningly. “I’m going to unbuckle the straps on your arms now but if you try anything, we’ll shoot you full of tranquilliser again. Your choice, mate.”

John could tell the guard was serious so he reluctantly nodded his agreement and was finally allowed to get up from the chair. His ear was throbbing but he resisted the urge to rub at it. There was going to be enough trouble with his side being infected than to invite more infection elsewhere.

He was led into another room where the woman who’d gone before him was sitting. She looked up at him with hollow, red rimmed eyes but didn’t say anything. John’s mouth tightened when he saw that her earlobe was red and swollen with a new tattoo as well. The guards stayed with him but relaxed somewhat and started to talk to each other about a match they’d seen earlier on the telly.

As he sat there, John carefully examined as much of the room as he could do from where he was sitting but there were no possibilities for escape. There was only one other door on the far side of the room.

The voice of the young woman interrupted his thoughts. “The guards told me that the next stop for
us is medical and then they’re going to send us to a holding area--they called it ‘The Pen’-- until the next auction.” A tear ran down one cheek as she hugged herself and rocked on the seat.

“I just forgot to show up in court for a parking ticket and the police arrested me. I’m supposed to be married next week.” Suppressed sobs wracked her entire body whilst grief and hopelessness poured off her in waves. John’s heart broke and he couldn’t help but scoot over beside her and put a tentative arm around her shoulder.

The guards had stopped talking and tensed up when he moved but then relaxed when they realised he only meant to comfort her. She leaned into him and he stroked her hair as she cried helplessly. Anger filled him at their circumstances but there was nothing he could do the moment. This whole situation was so wrong and if there was any way he could stop the abduction and slavery of latents, he would do so. But first he had to get himself out of this very bad place. Having a few days to discover where he was and how to escape would be acceptable.

Just then the outer door opened and another guard came quickly into the room. He seemed a bit agitated but when he saw John and the young woman, he brightened. Smiling, he addressed the other two guards. “Oi! We need two more warm bodies if we’re to meet our quota. Can you let me have these? There’s a twenty in it for each of you afterwards if you do.”

The two guards looked at each other and shrugged. “Neither one has been fully processed but they’ve been tagged, so I guess it’s okay. Go ahead and take them, then. I’ll let Roger know you’ve got them and adjust the paperwork accordingly. When their blood work comes back, I’ll send it on ASAP. Here’s their info. But just keep an eye on this one. He’s trouble.”

The new guard smiled widely. “That’s brilliant, mate! I’ll be back in a tick with your money. Come along, you.” He held out shackles for the two of them and waggled them with a nasty grin. The young woman started shaking and held more tightly onto John’s jumper at the sight of them.

Mouth grim, John stood and pulled her up with him. “We don’t have a choice, luv. Let’s go.”

Whatever transaction had just occurred was irregular and maybe this could be an opportunity John could take advantage of. Unfortunately, there were even more men in the hallway and they held tasers on John as the first guard cuffed them with their hands in front. The young woman didn’t collapse but was clearly at her wit’s end when they were led down the hall and into another part of the building. John was observing everything carefully and he noted how shabby everything was. Wherever the Bureau’s millions were going from the sale of latents, it wasn’t being used for their building’s infrastructure or cosmetic details. More likely it was going into the pockets of the Bureau administrators or the purchasing of politicians.

They ended up in a room that had two other shackled latents in it and told to sit down. There were guards in the room keeping a close eye on the others but everyone was subdued. Another door opened in the far wall and a man dressed in a nice suit beckoned a guard to bring one of the latents over. John got a glimpse of a set of stairs leading upwards. It sounded like there was a relatively large group of people somewhere out there and he picked up a general feeling of anticipation and excitement before the door was shut and the sound and emotions were cut off. What was happening? Why was there a crowd of people behind the door? This didn’t make any sense at all.

The guard who had been in the room when they’d entered picked up a clipboard and turned to the guards who had escorted John and the young woman into the room. “What’re the names?” Again, the tone was totally disinterested and bored.

Pulling out a crumpled list from his pocket, the guard who had collected them replied, “It says here they’re Sheri Jenkins and William Larssen. Their numbers are 006392 and 006393.”
"What are their compatibility ratings?" The first guard, who was older than all the others by at least a decade, had his biro ready on the clipboard and looked up expectantly as the second, younger guard hesitated.

"Um, well, you see neither one has been rated since their blood work isn’t finished yet. We needed to meet the quota and they were running way behind in initial processing so I just took these two. Can’t you just put them both down as C’s? That’s what most of these latents tend to be anyway."

The first guard’s mouth twisted sourly but he nodded and marked something on the clipboard. None of this made any sense to John and it seemed Sheri had no clue, either. Surprisingly, she sat up straight and addressed the guards.

"What are you doing? Why are we here?" Both guards turned to her and looked at her as if she were a dog that had started speaking. One of them laughed and another smirked, making John furious.

“You’re here to be sold, girl. There’s a sentinel out there who will pay a pretty penny for a young one like you. Not so much for him, though. He’s a bit on the old side.” The guard jerked his head over at John.

They were going to be auctioned now? Without being processed? Things made more sense, then.

Sheri began to shake again but raised her chin defiantly. “But latents are supposed to get training! The adverts on the telly said so. They said we would get jobs and then be matched with a compatible sentinel.”

The guards laughed as if she’d told a hilarious joke. “You actually believed that shite? None of it’s true, luv. You’ll see.”

Another one spoke up, contradicting the other guide with glee. "Oh, you're wrong about the training, though. You'll get that, in spades. You'll be trained on how to best please your new owner, though and you won't like it."

Sheri paled and swayed beside John and he leaned his shoulder against hers. She didn’t collapse, though and straightened up, staring hard at both guards and narrowing her eyes in disdain.

“You’re hateful, tiny men. I can read you. I know how you really feel. You look down at us as if we’re animals and think you’re better than us. We’ll, you’re wrong. We can still feel and care about other people. None of you care about anything but yourselves.”

As she spoke, the younger guard’s face twisted with an ugly expression. “You’d best shut it, girl or I’ll teach you your proper place, latent.”

Sheri’s lips tightened in anger and though her eyes were swimming with grief, she spoke up. “You stole me from my proper place. Because of filth like you, I’ll never see my family or fiancé again. I don’t know how you can possibly live with yourselves.”

One of the youngest guards actually looked ashamed and turned his eyes away but the second guard stepped forward to backhand her. Just as he began his swing, John stood, caught his wrist and, despite the cuffs, twisted with all his strength. The wrist didn’t break but it was a near thing. The man yelled in surprise and as he fell to his knees, John clenched both shackled hands together and swung his fists, hitting the man hard enough to send him sprawling and flailing across the floor.

John’s voice was low with dire warning. “Keep your fucking hands to yourself, you worthless
tosser! I’ll kill you if you try to touch her again.” The other guards stared at the doctor and then each other with wide eyes and tasers ready. They could all tell he was deadly serious and John had gambled that they wouldn’t shoot him since they needed him mobile in order to make their ‘quota’.

Clearly furious, the fallen guard scrambled to his feet, wiping his mouth and stalked over to John. He looked at the blood on his hand and then punched John in the face. John had seen it coming and was able to dodge most of it, but couldn’t avoid it completely. He stumbled back and hit the wall behind the bench, where Sheri latched onto his jumper, preventing him from launching himself at the guard, who was ready for him. Despite the shackles, John would have wiped the floor with him but there were three other guards and they would have beaten or tased him unconscious. Instead, John contemptuously spat blood on the man’s boot.

The oldest guard broke the tension and pushed the man John had hit back. “Stop this shit now! We have to see to it these three get sold and if you injure him, no one will want him and we won’t make our quota. You’ll answer to Roger if that happens and I’ll see to it you don’t get your cut. Now go and wash your face.”

The older man turned to John. “You stop fighting or I will tase your arse anyway, prop you up in a chair and drag you out there myself. You understand me?” John reluctantly nodded. “Now sit your dumb arse down and behave. I’m sick of you.”

He turned away from John as the door opened again and the well dressed man returned. “Next! I need another one. Hurry! We close in thirty minutes and we still have to make quota!”

The guard grabbed John’s arm and pulled him up. “Take this one. I want him out of here and I’m tired of looking at his ugly face.”

John considered fighting him, but decided to wait until he could see what the situation was on the other side of the door. A crowd was easy to get worked up and he might be able to get away if he could create a distraction of some sort. The man with the nice suit gestured impatiently whilst two of the guards urged John toward the door.

He looked back at Sheri, who nodded to him, dry eyed. “Good luck to you and thank you, William. I don’t suppose I shall ever see you again.”

“I suspect you’re right, Sheri. Good luck to you, too, luv.” With that, he turned, squared his shoulders and stepped through the door. John was shaking inside but would die before he’d show fear in front of these worthless sods.

The man in the suit led the way up the stairs and John followed slowly at gunpoint. Two guards accompanied them onto a small raised stage where a very stylishly dressed female beta was standing. She was joined by the man in the suit and he handed her some papers. The group was standing off to one side where a curtain hid all of them but John could see a large room beyond the fabric. It was full of men and women seated in chairs facing the stage where someone was standing, looking out toward the crowd, shackled like John, whilst another man was walking around the stage, speaking and gesturing animatedly to the audience. The man was talking without a microphone but his voice carried well throughout the room. He was urging the audience to bid higher and it was then that John belatedly realised with shock that they were actually selling the man standing on the stage and that John was next to be auctioned off. His suspicions had been correct.

The reality of the situation sank in and he wanted to vomit. He was actually going to be sold as a latent and he hadn’t been able to prevent it. How could this have happened? Wasn’t processing meant to take a few days at the very least? He’d run out of time and hadn’t even realised it until it was too late. His failure to escape caused a wave of rage, fear and desperation to sweep through him
before he could control himself.

His only hope was Sherlock and he was sure the man had no idea that John was up for sale less than six hours after he’d been taken. From what he’d said, Sherlock was expecting to have a few days before he even had to register to get permission to attend an auction. The alpha sentinel was still suffering from the affects of a gunshot wound and there was no way that he could be there in time to save John. Shock and horror rolled through him again and it took everything he had not to sink to his knees in despair. But he wasn’t going to give these bastards the satisfaction of knowing how their dehumanising treatment was affecting him. He let his anger at the situation take over and stood as straight as possible with his chin in the air.

The man with the suit had the piece of paper he’d been given by one of the guards and handed it to an auctioneer. That man had a tablet in his hand and he entered the information from the paper onto it. Just then the noise level in the audience went up and people began applauding as guards came out and led the shackled latent away. Someone from the audience had left his seat and was shuffling through the row to get to the aisle. He had a big smile on his face and the people he passed by were slapping him on the back. Bitterly, John figured the man must have got a good deal on his new slave.

The emotional ambience of the hall was overwhelming and John had to keep himself closed off. He wasn’t sure how he was doing it but knew that he’d been able to shield himself better ever since he’d met Stephen…or rather Sherlock. Maybe being in close association with the sentinel had helped his latent talents develop naturally or instinctively. But he was grateful to be able to shut down the emotions of all those hopeful sentinels and depressed guides because he would be a basket case otherwise. He had no idea how the other latents dealt with it without any training. Maybe their talents weren’t as well developed yet and weren’t able to sense the seething miasma of emotions. He just didn’t know.

The guards were coming up behind him as the woman approached with a leather collar and lead that would choke the wearer if pulled. He tensed and the men grabbed his arms. One of them jabbed a taser into his back whilst the female auctioneer buckled the collar around his neck. It was the final degradation and it was all he could do to hold it together and not desperately lash out at her and the two men holding him.

Any violence would have to wait so he gritted his teeth and glared furiously at her. She glanced at him and her expression of boredom turned to fear. She stepped back so quickly she nearly tripped over her fashionable stilettos. John smirked nastily at her which frightened her more. It just served to make the guards tighten their hold on John and push him forward. When John resisted, the third guard with the leash pulled on it and tightened it so much that John could barely breathe. It was a clear warning he’d choke the doctor unconscious if he tried anything and it was confirmed when the guard spoke harshly.

“Keep your mouth shut and do what you’re told. As you can see, I have no problem using this. Now move.” He gave John a shove forward.

As John stumbled to the centre of the stage with the guards gripping his arms, the crowd shifted in surprised interest. Apparently it was unusual for a latent to be escorted to auction by guards and collared so tightly. At least the taser had been put away and wasn’t digging into John’s back any longer. It was clear to the audience that John was considered undesirable, at the very least. John proved it when he angrily tried to shake off the guard’s hands, only to have the guard with the leash make good on his threat and cut off John’s air. As soon as the doctor’s resistance stopped, he was able to breathe again and dramatically gasped for air, putting his shackled hands to his throat. The audience clearly saw what was happening and John could hear a low buzz of shocked voices that
rose and then subsided at a gesture from the auctioneer, who wasn’t particularly thrilled about the drama John presented but tried to make the best of it.

The man drifted over to John with a big, fake smile, but thankfully didn’t try to touch the doctor because then John wouldn’t have been able to hold back a violent response. He kept his head up and scanned the crowd, looking for Sherlock in the audience. But of course the alpha wasn’t there and John cursed himself for even hoping.

The auctioneer’s voice carried out far and clear into the theatre audience with a false, cheerful lilt. “Our next item up for sale is a male beta latent, newly caught, lot number 006393. Our records indicate he’s 32 years old and was working as a cleaner when he was discovered. Non-smoker, in good health and compatibility rating is a ‘C’. Now as you can no doubt tell, he’s a sturdy one but I’m sure he’ll be easily controlled once trained by the Bureau and bonding has taken place. He will be very useful around the house and garden with proper discipline. Don’t forget, the first week’s training is included free in the purchase price! That’s a £1,000 value! Now, who will start the bidding? Can we get £3,000 to start? Anyone?”

The crowd murmured and programmes rustled but no one bid. It was apparent they all sensed that John was trouble and not worth purchasing. John grinned at the auctioneer’s discomfort as the man tried to drum up interest and was again choked as a result. This made the audience restive again and the auctioneer tried to cover by lowering the opening bid to £500 but still no one reacted. Once again, John took the opportunity to test the guard’s grip and both men grasped him so tightly he knew he’d have bruises. The auctioneer glared at him and John grinned back and spat contemptuously on the ground in his direction, resulting in another tightening of the collar. Audible gasps came from the audience this time.

Trying to stay professional, the auctioneer moved away from John but kept a nervous eye on him. “Come on, good sentinels! We have a healthy latent in the prime of life here! He’ll make a fine guide to some lucky sentinel out there. I admit he’ll need a strong hand at first but I’m sure he’ll be worth a little extra effort. You can always have him trained at the Bureau, remember! First week’s training is free and I’ll throw in another week as an incentive! Two weeks obedience training free!! We guarantee once your latent has gone through our intensive programme, he will be obedient, respectful and submissive to you, especially once you’re bonded. So come on! Let’s get an offer out there! How about £10 to start the bidding, people. That’s a steal and a deal!”

Finally someone tentatively raised their hand and the auctioneer acted as if he was delighted but was in fact incredulous. John would have laughed if the situation wasn’t so unbelievably horrible. “That’s £10? Is that right? Yes? The first bid is £10. Now, is there a bid for £20? Okay! Now that’s what I want to hear! That’s £20, do I hear £30?”

The amounts increased slowly but the bids were still absurdly low. The man auctioned off before John had gone for over £5,000. John’s thoughts were chaotic and a part of him was refusing to accept what was happening. A part of him wanted to laugh hysterically. It was beyond his comprehension and he began to feel frantic. He didn’t want to panic in front of all these terrible people and so forced himself to calm and breathe deeply.

As he watched numbly, the final bidding ended up being between two rather young partial sentinels, at least a decade younger than he was. Neither of them looked as if they had much money and seemed thrilled that they might be able to get a guide at such a reduced price. Even so, the bidding still wasn’t very spirited, much to the disgust of the auctioneer.

John tuned out, still searching for a way to escape and by the time he’d focussed again on what was happening the auction was over. The very disgruntled auctioneer called out, “Sold! To sentinel
number 377 for £150. You can pay Raymond over here and pick up your new guide. Please let us know if you want the Bureau to train the guide or if you want to bond first. Bonding suites are available for free. Next!

The leash was unexpectedly grabbed by the guard and John was roughly hauled, stumbling and nearly falling, toward the exit. It refused to sink in that he’d just been sold like livestock and he fought the leash in mindless horror, pulling uselessly at the tightening collar with his shackled hands. As he was physically dragged away, he caught a brief glimpse of someone with dark hair entering the auditorium. Sherlock? Could it be his friend? He couldn’t tell for sure since the guard was pulling on the collar so tightly he had no way to turn his head. John grabbed at the leash again to force the man to give him some slack and tried to fight his panic as he turned to look for Sherlock.

Then, without his conscious thought, John’s latent empathy reached out and over the spectators. There were many unbonded sentinels in the audience and John’s wildly ranging empathy excited theirs in turn, causing them to rise and look about. Though the partial sentinels’ minds sensed him in turn and tried to reach out to him to draw him toward them, John’s powerful senses only went searching for that bright flame that meant his alpha sentinel, bypassing all others without a thought. He searched and searched for that strong presence that equalled his own but failed to find it in the audience. John was mistaken and Sherlock wasn’t actually there.

The unfairness and bitterness of it all hit John like a freight train and he would have shouted in rage if he’d had the breath. His senses then seemed to take off like a falcon loosed into the air and ranged out far beyond his body. Physical sight vanished and as it had in the clinic, his empathetic senses desperately searched for Sherlock. Hope blossomed in John’s chest when he somehow found the brilliant mind and, to his great surprise and delight, their minds meshed immediately and without effort the instant they touched. Triumph surged through him but John sensed panicked and frantic emotions that equalled his own. He tried everything he could to keep them locked together but he didn’t know what he was doing and could tell that once again something was missing in their connection. Maintaining the contact was impossible but it didn’t stop him from reaching urgently for Sherlock with every ounce of strength he possessed as he tried to express his desperate situation to the alpha sentinel.

Just as they began to establish a rapport, his mind was abruptly ripped away from Sherlock by the sharp pain of a backhanded slap to the face. Blinking, his vision restored, John fought the pull of the collar and the guard’s strength with all his might. The man holding him cursed and pulled harder, snarling and twisting at the leash. Choking, John’s vision began to go dark again and he started to panic.

As the audience watched in astonishment, John finally reached his breaking point. Snapping his elbow around, he smashed it with all his might into the head of the man choking him. He quickly pulled in a lungful of air and then spun on the second guard who was trying in vain to regain the leash. John swung his shackled fists against his jaw, breaking it with a nasty crunching sound and knocking him out cold. The third guard had run to get reinforcements and with a snarl, John turned on the auctioneers, who bleated in fear and ran off the stage. The sentinel members of the audience near the front sprang to their feet in shock and began to scurry away in fright. This caused the others behind them to panic and leave the hall also. Their mass effort to flee up the aisles knocked chairs everywhere.

Unfortunately for John, more guards arrived from the other side of the stage and piled on him before he could take more than a few steps. One grabbed the leash and began to twist on the collar again. Staggering forward, John managed to get as far as the edge of the stage before the collar tightened to the point that he could no longer breathe. His sight faded and darkness swallowed him again.
Waking was painful but he knew he wouldn’t be able to pinpoint the source of pain until he could move. Moving was not a current priority because of the pain, so he decided to lie where he was for a bit longer. His neck and head hurt terribly but that wasn’t surprising considering his last memory was of being choked unconscious. John had no idea how long he’d been out but he could hear the murmur of voices not far away.

Whoever was speaking came nearer. The man was clearly trying to convince another person of something. “…should take him up on it and sell him. You’ll not get a better offer. And I thought you wanted a female.”

“I know, but I may never get another chance and I saved so much money! We just have to do it once for bonding and then I won’t have to worry about it ever again.”

The first voice sounded exasperated. “That’s not exactly true. You’ll have to periodically reinforce the bond but it doesn’t matter now. You have other things to worry about at the moment. Look at him! He’s a bruised mess with an infected gunshot wound, for god’s sake! Where in the world had he got that? You saw how he behaved at auction! You know nothing about him except he’s at least ten years older than you are and he’s a trained killer! Do you really want to bring that home to Mum?

“And with another mouth to feed, your debts are only going to increase. You’ll be responsible for everything he needs and he needs a lot! Clothes, food, medical care and shelter for a full grown man, not to mention the training he’s got to go through. I know they offered the first two weeks free, but he’s going to need more than that! You saw how rebellious he was!

“Even with the ‘new guide’ pay rise your work is offering, money is going to be tight. And it’s a damn good thing you hadn’t taken legal possession of him before he hurt those two guards or you’d be up on charges for that! Mum and Da can only help so much. You need to think hard, Barry.”

John realised that Barry must be his new owner. The man was young and sounded torn but resolute. “I promise, I will. But once I bond with him, he’ll want to obey me and he’ll be easy to control. I’ve needed a guide for ages, Jason. You know how hard a time I’ve had of it, trying to control my senses. How many times have I zoned and barely made it back? Too many! We don’t have the money for a clinic to help me if I go too deep and he might be all that keeps me from becoming a vegetable one day.”

There was a heavy sigh and Jason responded. “I know, but I still think you should have waited for the research on that new drug you told us about to help with the senses. You said it’s shown a lot of promise in the preliminary trials and I’m sure it will be made affordable to those who need it. The Bureau will see to it.”

Barry laughed derisively. “You’re rather too trusting, Jason, for all you’re older than I am. Can’t you see that the Bureau is earning millions of pounds by selling latents to us partials? I think the reason we’ve not got that drug yet is because the Bureau is holding up the results of the trials. Also, I’m not supposed to talk about this, but I heard at work that the raid on Price Clinic is apparently related to misuse of that drug. I don’t know the whole story, but I do know the formula was stolen a few months ago. The theft was covered up by the authorities and shortly after it was taken, the street drug AG made its appearance. The chemical composition was analysed and it’s nearly identical to what we were developing and testing. The only difference was that what we were developing wasn’t addictive. So now that the theft is going public, that’ll delay any more studies until it’s sorted out. Which means that drug won’t be available for years. It’s frustrating but the fact remains I need a guide now to help me. And not someone else’s guide. I need my own. Even though he’s not female, he was affordable.”
John was astounded at what he was hearing. Apparently AG was originally being developed to truly help sentinels and was stolen and corrupted. Barry was right. Any positive results were now skewed and additional years of trials and research would be needed to overcome the negative aspects of AG being used as an addictive street drug.

What Barry was saying about the Bureau making millions off latents was true and they would lose a large source of cash if the drugs worked and latents were no longer as necessary. The Bureau had a lot to lose financially if the real version of AG actually helped sentinels. John wondered if there was a possibility the Bureau had facilitated the theft of the formula. Would they have been mixed up in it if they’d known it was going to hurt young sentinels? Was Moriarty mixed up with the Bureau somehow? It seemed a bit paranoid, but John couldn’t rule it out.

Jason was moving away and his voice was discouraged. “Well, if you insist on taking him as your guide, you’ll have to wait to bond until he’s healthy enough. Right now he’s too damaged so you’ll have to wait a few more days. You should have him sent to the barracks to start the training in the meantime.”

It was past time to get up, though he still felt unwell. John shifted gingerly as pain radiated from pretty much everywhere but centred on his neck, left shoulder and wounded side. He also had to use the loo something awful. Opening his eyes, he discovered that he was lying in a small bed and that he was shackled to the wall. His clothes were gone and he was dressed in nothing but a hospital gown and covered by a light sheet. He’d been out a long time, then. Christ! Would he ever get a break? This whole thing was a nightmare.

Did Sherlock know where he was now? Was the alpha trying to find a way to get John out of this or was that even possible at this point? He’d said his family had money but they also had a hostile relationship with the Bureau. Maybe he could buy John from this Barry person and John could eventually pay him back. But it didn’t seem Sherlock knew where he was located since John didn’t even know. Unfortunately, the doctor had to accept that a rescue from Sherlock was unlikely and he would have to rely on himself. But it sounded like someone had offered Barry money for him. Who else would want John?

At least the Bureau didn’t have John’s real name or know any way of tracking him so there was still a chance he could escape as long as this boy didn’t try to bond with him before he could get away. John wasn’t sure exactly what was involved in bonding but if John’s body reacted the same way to this boy as it had to Sherlock when they touched, John wasn’t sure if he could prevent bonding if pushed. John’s own body was not on his side in this and he couldn’t help a shiver of dread at the thought.

Slowly and painstakingly, John sat up and stared silently around at the sparsely furnished, windowless cell and then at the men. He was now the property of this young person who had bought him for £150 and he purposefully allowed the very real fear and grief he felt at his situation show in his face. The two men stared back at him in a kind of wary, frightened fascination, which made him feel like a zoo exhibit.

It was clear they were brothers just by their family resemblance. The youngest was a typical sentinel type; tall, muscular and rather handsome whilst his brother was an older version of the younger but not as large since the elder wasn’t a sentinel. The staring contest went on for a few moments and then John finally broke the stalemate. He did his best to sound beaten down and subdued.

“Do either of you know where my clothes are? I’d like to wear something other than a hospital gown, please. I also need to use the loo.”
His throat must be badly bruised because his voice was rough and it hurt to speak. He coughed and reached to rub at his neck, chains clanking loudly and he grimaced dramatically as if he were in great pain. At the same time, he very carefully and judiciously used his senses to convey his hurt and helplessness to the two men. The cough was very real, though and he realised his lungs were actually congested and he felt feverish and sick. He didn’t have time to worry about it, though. The sound of his voice made both brothers jump at first, but then they relaxed. The elder brother—Jason—seemed to buy John’s performance right away and answered his question with a hint of compassion in his voice.

“Um…your clothes are here. We had to get your things washed. You’d bled all over everything. The doctor said your sutures had torn out.” He pointed to a plastic bag that was sitting on a small table. John saw his shoes in the bag and couldn’t believe his luck. Finally something was going his way. He just had to cooperate to get his things back and maybe he had a real chance to get out.

“The toilet is down the hall. We’ll have to get a guard in here to unchain you and you’ll have to promise not to attack anyone or you’ll have to stay in the gown. They won’t give you back your belt but you can have your clothes and shoes. The money they found in your belt is what we used to pay the Bureau for your medical care, by the way.”

John grimaced in anger but covered his reaction by shifting on the bed. They’d found and taken his money but at least they’d not found the tools in his shoes. Hopefully Sherlock had gone to his hotel room and picked up the rest of his things. If he wasn’t in so much pain and not sure exactly how seriously he was hurt, he’d probably take the guards out regardless of whatever happened to him once they released him. He’d have to wait until he could assess his condition so he promised the brothers that he’d behave.

Sitting up straighter, he coughed again and then, voice weak and pathetic, asked, “Before you go to get the guards, you didn’t happen to buy any pain killers, did you?” Both men looked surprised and then guilty and John realised neither of them had thought that far ahead. No help for it but John took advantage of their moment of confusion to test the emotional ambience of the room.

To his relief, he could tell that, young and thoughtless as they were, essentially neither one meant to do him any real harm. They simply didn’t see his situation in a negative light. To both of them, John was not a person but something useful to help Barry with his senses and the idea of consent didn’t enter into the equation. Since when did one ask a slave or pet for consent about anything? There was no point in getting angry about it since they were both simply the product of the Bureau’s sentinel culture that viewed guides as a commodity. The two young men didn’t seem to be bad people and John just couldn’t spare the energy to hate them at the moment.

In the meantime, John would function within that framework as best he could do. Pretending to cooperate was always a good way to get people to relax and then he could take them off guard more easily. Unfortunately, the brothers and the guards knew that he could be very dangerous. He’d have to find a way to make the guards think what he’d done was a fluke. He could act very harmless when he put his mind to it.

In answer to John’s request, the elder brother spoke up. “The doctor who saw you did give us a couple of prescriptions and I think one was a pain killer. The other was an antibiotic. It’s not too late and I’ll see if they have a chemist’s shop still open in town. There’s enough money left to buy you some paracetemol at least.”

“Fine.” John continued to assess his injuries after the man left. The worst injury was his neck but thankfully it was just very sore from the collar and bruised. Some of the muscles had been strained but not sprained. It still hurt like hell to move, though. He’d have to spend some time trying to loosen
the muscles and a hot shower would be very nice. His left shoulder was also bruised but when he
rotated it, things moved normally. The wound in his side had been tended to and though it ached, it
didn’t feel as bad as it had done before he’d been nearly strangled to death. And a bad cold wasn’t
going to kill him or keep him from escaping.

“How long was I out?” At first he didn’t think Barry would answer him since the man was staring at
him as if he were the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen. It irritated John, but he continued to work
out the kinks in his muscles as best he could do, considering he was chained to a wall.

The young sentinel started when he realised John was speaking to him. “Oh! Yes. It’s early evening
now. You’ve been out for about three hours and we’ve been here at the compound for about twenty
minutes. The guards dragged you to medical from the auction hall and then we came here to the
compound. They were pretty angry that you’d hurt some of them and I think that’s when they
bruised your shoulder. I saw one of them kick you there.”

Well, that explained a lot. John nodded and his stomach took that moment to rumble audibly. "Do
you have anything to eat? I really need the loo. A shower would be nice, too.”

Unsure at first, Barry’s tone turned somewhat stern at John’s plaintive demands. “I’ll find out. No
promises though, guide.”

John almost laughed at the young man’s attempt to sound mature and commanding. After all,
sentinels were supposed to be the ones in control and guides were there to serve and be ordered
about. Emotionally, John could feel that Barry was feeling very much out of control and was trying
to bluff his way through a confusing and alarming situation. John didn’t want to empathise with the
boy but knew all too well how he felt.

Barry left the cell and finally John was alone. He immediately began to test the cuffs. They were
made from tough leather that was padded where they wrapped around his wrists and they’d been
tightened enough to make it impossible for him to get a hand out without dislocating his thumb.
However, once he had his shoes back, he’d be able to access the tools in the heels and cut the
restraints off.

The door had shut tight behind Barry and John could see that the lock was fairly simple and easy to
pick with his tools. The relief he felt was nearly overwhelming and he closed his eyes and rested
against the wall as he waited for the brothers to return.

Barry came back first with five guards which John thought was rather excessive and would make it
difficult for him to attempt anything. “They said you can go to the loo, get a shower and change into
your clothes if I keep an eye on you the whole time. I’ve got some extra stuff from the doctor for
your wound. The administrators said a meal could be brought to the room but it’s going to cost us
extra since it’s now past regular mealtime so I rang Jason and he’s going to bring us some fish and
chips.”

John nodded painfully in agreement and was unchained from the wall by a very nervous guard.
Having loosened some of his muscles beforehand, he wasn’t as stiff as he had thought he’d be but he
played up his injuries to fool the guards and moved slowly. As they walked out of the room and
down a windowless hall to a bathroom, he knew his back and arse were exposed by the gown. He
honestly didn’t care as body shyness was something he’d lost years ago but he could feel arousal and
sadistic interest from at least two of the guards. Using his senses again, he did his best to divert their
interest and succeed to a degree but knew he’d have to stay alert, especially if he ended up staying in
that room alone at any point in the next few hours.
The shower was very welcome and the guards didn’t follow him in once they released him since there was no other way out. Only Barry followed him in but surprisingly gave him some privacy to use the loo and wash. The heat from the shower felt wonderful on his bruised neck and shoulders and relaxed the rest of his muscles nicely. The tightness in his chest loosened a bit and he was finally able to cough up some mucus, which made him feel better but the colour of it worried him. He was on his way to a respiratory infection and he wasn’t looking forward to being sick on top of everything else that was going on.

John was careful to keep his wound as dry as possible. It had not been sutured again and the ones that had ripped loose had been removed. The wound had been drained and was scabbed over. He felt almost normal, though worn out, once he was done with the shower and dried off with the towel he’d been provided.

Wrapping it around his waist, he walked over to the sink and looked in the slightly fogged mirror. A nearly black bruise went completely around his neck from where the collar had bit into his flesh and when he touched his throat, it was very tender and sore. He knew the muscles would tighten up in the night but there wasn’t much he could do at the moment. His ear was swollen and red where the black of the tattoo stood out like a neon sign. The sight of it made his stomach churn and he looked away.

A shave would be nice but he knew well enough not to ask. Barry was staring at him again and the emotions John felt from him ranged from a kind of horrified fascination and curiosity about his scars to an uneasiness that had an undercurrent of arousal. It seemed to John that the young man was thinking about what would happen during bonding. From what John had gathered, bonding would be partly a sexual experience and Barry was alternately dreading it and curious. It seemed he’d never been with a man before but seeing John naked had made him think about it. From what John could tell, the boy was intrigued but extremely nervous.

John had no experience with men either. However, it had taken everything in him to pull himself away from Sherlock when they’d done their inadvertent merge at the clinic and John knew that, if Sherlock truly wanted him, John could not refuse the alpha despite all his good intentions otherwise. John trusted that, without a doubt, Sherlock would never, ever push him but he was certain that Barry would do and John was frankly terrified that his body might not permit him to resist.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, he turned to the boy and held out a hand for his clothes. The young sentinel blushed and handed him the clear plastic bag and actually turned his back whilst John dressed. Barry had brought the bandages with him, too and he tried to help John apply them. John didn’t want his help and dreaded Barry touching him but when the boy’s fingers inadvertently brushed against John’s skin, there was little or no reaction. The glands in his throat tingled slightly but that was all.

John wasn’t sure what to make of that because if it had been Sherlock touching him, John would be hard as a rock and the glands in his throat would have been painfully swollen almost immediately. It made him wonder about the compatibility rating that the guard had asked about and what it meant. Was it possible John wasn’t compatible with Barry at all? That would be ironic as hell. The Bureau employees had not bothered to get the test results on John before they sold him, lying about his compatibility and now he was owned by someone he might not be able to bond with. That was fine with John but what would happen when Barry found out? Hopefully, John would be gone before then, so he decided he didn’t need to worry about it.

He jerked out of his thoughts suddenly. The young man had been addressing him and John hadn’t heard a thing. “What did you say?”
"I said how did you get hurt like that? All those scars?"

John considered the questions and just shrugged in annoyance. "It doesn’t matter, does it? It has nothing to do with you, boy."

The sentinel was stung by the rebuke and deflated somewhat, though John could tell he was angry. There was an awkward silence and then the young man tried again. "Do you want to be called William or Bill?"

Huffing in surprise, John glanced over at him briefly and went back to putting on his vest, shirt and jumper. He couldn’t help the bitterness in his tone. "How about ‘Spot’ or ‘Rover’? After all, I’ve now got a tattoo on my ear in case I get lost, just like a dog."

Face turning red, the young man looked offended. "Look. I’m trying to be civil. You can make things easier on yourself by trying to be a bit more polite."

Incredulous, John wanted to lay into the young man but held his tongue. There was nothing he could say that would make Barry understand what it was like to be torn away from everything you knew and become a slave. Sold to another person who had complete control over every aspect of your life. It was best he not say anything that would anger the young man more, so he simply scowled. Whatever Barry read in his expression made him go silent and then turn to get the guards instead of trying to initiate more conversation.

They handcuffed John again and escorted everyone back to the cell, where the doctor was once more chained to the wall. After the guards left, Jason finally returned with the prescriptions and dinner. At least they gave him an equal share of the food. John had been starving and the fish and chips had been just what he needed, though a bit greasy. After their meal, Barry walked over and picked up the chains confining John, looking pensive and preoccupied. To John, the young man seemed less confused and more decisive than he’d been earlier and he wondered what it meant. Heaving a sigh, the young sentinel spoke up confidently and addressed John rather officiously.

“When we bond, I’ve decided we’ll call you Bill and not William and you’ll take my last name, which is Roland. Since we can’t bond yet, I want you to start your training straight away. I know it’s late, but I’ve arranged to have you taken to the training barracks tonight so they’ll be able to remove the chains. I can’t imagine trying to sleep like that. Once the two weeks are over, I’ll come for you. We can bond then and see if you need more training at that point.”

Jason seemed relieved at his brother’s decisiveness and clearly approved. "I think that’s a sensible plan, Barry. You can assess his progress once the instructors have a chance to work with him. Have you determined how you want him to be trained? Do you want Bill to help you with your chemical research at work or just to stay at home and keep house?"

The young man shook his head. "I don’t know yet but I was told the first week covered basic instruction in obedience for all new guides and that any specialisation training won’t start until much later, which is where it gets expensive. I’ll check with my employer to see if they have any on the job training that I can get for him once we’re bonded. If not, I’m sure he’ll do fine helping Mum around the house as long as he’s available to me when I zone. The paperwork says he was working as a cleaner when he was found."

Both men packed up the rubbish from the meal and left the room, still discussing John’s future as if he were a piece of furniture. He hadn’t really expected anything different. They had left his medication and a glass of water within reach, however. It occurred to John that there were more than enough narcotics in the small bottle to end his life if he chose to do so, but things weren’t that
desperate yet. Also, he’d not had any suppressants for a few days but missing them wasn’t going to cause any problems unless he couldn’t get some soon. He didn’t want to go into heat but he might not be able to prevent it. If Sherlock had his things from the hotel room, there was enough money there to buy more, hopefully soon. John took the antibiotics but not the painkillers since his senses had alerted him that one of the guards seemed to be planning something for later. John wanted to be alert and ready just in case and hid the pills in his clothing. Since Barry had arranged to have him transferred that night, he’d best get started on his preparations.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

***Please see notes at the end.***

Many thanks for all your very perceptive and lovely comments and kudos! I love each and every one!

Updates will resume next weekend. RL is catching up with me and I have to get back to it. :-( My apologies, but I promise John and Sherlock will be back.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Carefully, John removed the tools he would need from the soles of his shoes and got to work. The manacles were very tough leather and so a saw blade would do nicely. He used a tiny, wire-thin saw that consisted of a piece of strong and flexible carbon steel. The saw blades were tipped with diamond dust and it was so sharp that it could cut through the toughest steel within a short time. It made quick work of the leather and John was free in less than a minute. Additional lock picks were also included in his kit and once he was loose, he began to work on the door. He had the door open when he heard the sound of guards coming down the corridor.

Cursing his luck, he moved quietly back to the bed and had the cuffs in place when the door swung open wide. John watched with narrowed eyes as the guard he’d pinpointed as having sadistic thoughts about him entered the room grinning, followed closely by one of his fellow guards, though the second one seemed somewhat nervous and his eyes kept darting around.

“This is your lucky night, Bill! We’re here to transfer you to the barracks so you won’t have to sleep in chains.” He leered at John and nudged his tense friend in the side. “We might be making a side trip, though. I think we can find something fun to do on the way.”

John knew exactly what the sadistic freak meant but what the guard was planning to do would inevitably work out in John’s favour by taking them all far away from any populated area. Keeping the severed leather manacles close to his body, John stood as they unlocked him from the wall. John followed the guards, meek as a lamb and pretending he didn’t understand what was going to happen.

Once they were walking through the halls, John got a slightly better idea of where he was imprisoned. As they got further away from the cell, windows appeared along the corridors and he could see they were on the third level of a complex of rather ugly, unremarkable buildings that had the look of army barracks. John was very familiar with that kind of architecture and could guess the general layout. The windows overlooked a square courtyard that was blocked in and surrounded by identical structures. He couldn’t see beyond the courtyard or the buildings, however, so he was uncertain yet where the location was or if they were even still in London.

John scanned the walls and ceilings for evidence of any surveillance but could see no evidence of it. He was rather surprised at this but didn’t question something that worked in his favour. The corridors were deserted and John could sense that there were very few people about since it was after hours. The longer they walked, the further they got from any populated areas. This was what the sadistic guard had meant about taking a side trip. John could sense the man’s growing excitement and arousal.
the closer they got to their destination, which John was sure wasn’t the latent training barracks.

It was actually another cell, far out of earshot of any other occupied rooms and John could tell there was no one else nearby. The first guard chained John to the wall and pushed him down on the bed.

"Everything costs money here, even your bog rolls. Your new owner didn't pay us anything to escort you to the barracks, so we thought we'd take it out in trade. Put that smart mouth of yours to some use."

The guard grinned maliciously and John could sense the man's cruel emotions. They were like a cesspool and sickened him. The younger man was scared but also excited and intrigued to see what the elder guard might do. John could expect no help from that quarter; not that he’d expected any. The doctor glanced dismissively at the second guard and then looked back at the first.

The older man removed a taser from his belt and handed it to the younger man. “Al, shoot him if he tries anything funny. I hear he’s a troublemaker, though it’s rather hard to credit, just looking at him.”

Al took the weapon and aimed it at John with a single minded focus. “Sure thing, Henry.”

The first guard then opened his trousers and pulled out his penis, stroking himself to hardness. “So, Billy, let’s you, me and Al have some fun. If you do a good job, maybe I’ll go easy on you and see if it you get fed regularly whilst you’re here.”

Al’s grip on the taser tightened and he started to breathe heavily as he avidly watched the proceedings. It seemed he would be participating fully in the proposed festivities, given a chance. John had hoped the younger man would not have the stomach for it but he’d clearly been wrong.

John tensed as the guard came nearer. He pretended to be afraid and allowed his hoarse voice to quaver. “Wha…what do you think you’re doing? You can’t get away with this! I won’t do it!”

Smiling nastily, the guard came closer and forcefully grabbed the hair at the back of John’s head, shaking him hard enough to make his teeth rattle. “You’ve got a choice here, Billy. You can do this with your mouth or I’ll have Al here tase you and we can use your arse while you lie here twitching. I’ll leave it up to you.”

John shrank away from the man, moving further up the bed and away from Henry, forcing the horrid man to come even closer. The guard was holding his penis and aiming it at John’s mouth whilst tightening his grip on John’s hair. In his eagerness, Henry thoughtlessly put himself between John and the taser. It was then that John acted.

Grabbing Henry’s balls and twisting as hard as he could do, John was able to use the guard as a human shield whilst Al tased the shrieking man in a reflexive, panicked reaction. The electrodes struck Henry right between the shoulder blades as John let go of the man’s crushed bollocks. Henry stiffened with the electrical shock and then collapsed. Pushing the twitching weight of the now semi-conscious body off of himself and to the floor, John pulled free of the cuffs and rose from the bed in one fluid motion. He advanced on Al, who backed away in shock. Having no weapons of his own and the taser now useless, Al made a break for the door but John was on him in an instant.

Hauled back by the collar, the younger man went flying over his partner and landed on his back on the bed, hitting his head against the wall. Stunned, he froze in place and closed his eyes in fear as John advanced on him, putting shaking hands out to ward off John’s approach.

Instead of engaging with the younger man, John seized the semi-conscious and moaning Henry by
an arm, flipped him over on his back and began to search the trembling man. John found another pair of cuffs and quickly threaded them through the chain on the wall. He then snapped the manacles onto both men and continued to search the older man as Al finally realised he wasn’t going to be killed and opened his eyes to watch what was happening.

John found and discarded some lube, condoms and some other rubbish in Henry’s pockets. A ring of various keys, an identity card with a magnetic strip and a wallet stuffed with money were very welcome finds. The money was no doubt stolen from latents or coerced from their owners and John felt no guilt in taking it. However, he couldn’t find a mobile.

John began to search Al in frustration and croaked angrily at him. “Where’s your mobile? Why don’t either of you have mobiles?”

Al’s reply was tentative as he cringed from John’s searching hands. “We’re not to have them at work. We’re meant to leave them in our vehicles or our lockers in the changing room.”

Irritated, John huffed in annoyance as he relieved Al of everything he had in his pockets. He’d hoped to be able to reach Sherlock by mobile but there was no point in getting upset about it. Al had no money or keys but he did have an ID tag. John eyed him narrowly as he put away the various items into his trouser pockets. “What’s the quickest way out of here?”

Despite looking frightened, the younger guard seemed willing to help. John could sense that he was scared and very sorry he’d agreed to accompany guard Henry on his ‘outing’. Knowing that didn’t make any difference to John, however. The bastard would still have taken part in rape if John hadn’t stopped it.

“You can’t get out. This place is a compound and fenced in. The fences are at least three meters high with barbed wire across the top and the way we get in and out is through the front gate only. They check the pictures on the IDs every time and even if you stole a uniform, you can’t use these ID cards.”

John considered for a moment. It wasn’t impossible to escape a compound. Only difficult. “Are the fences patrolled at all?”

“Yes, a pair of guards does a circuit every hour. When I was walking the fence, though, my partner liked to stop and smoke so it would often take longer.”

As far as John could determine, Al was telling the truth. “Is there an area of the fence that’s more isolated and poorly lit?”

For some reason, the man became uncomfortable. “Um, yes. You’ll have to go around to the latent’s barracks, though. The lights are often out there. The guards on duty break the lights and it takes some time to replace them.”

Frowning, John stared at the man in confusion. Why would the guards want the area around the barracks dark? Then it suddenly hit him that they wouldn’t want light when they took the latents outside for some extracurricular activities. John wanted to hit Al, who had obviously taken part, and it must have shown on his face because Al cringed away in fear.

Furious, John was barely able to grit out his disgust at the man. “You’re all a bunch of sick wankers. I should burn this place to the fucking ground with you still in it. You’re lucky I don’t have the time right now.” With that, John angrily turned his back on the two guards, left the room and locked the door behind him. He knew the chance of the guards being found anytime soon was remote. Obviously Henry had got away with rape before and had chosen the location of his sexual assaults
well. The remoteness of the room meant that no one could possibly hear him or Al scream. At least until morning.

Finding the closest stairwell, John used the keys he’d got from Henry, unlocked the door and headed up to the roof. Once he hit the cold air, his lungs seized up and he had to cough until he was short of air. Bent over, he rested his hands on his thighs until he could catch his breath and swallow around an extremely sore throat. Finally, he straightened up and studied his surroundings. From that height, he was able to survey the layout of the compound and see that Al had been right. The place was a massive complex of mostly well-lit buildings that was surrounded by a very tall chain link fence with three layers of barbed wire at the top. Off to the northwest must be the latent barracks as that area was considerably darker than the rest of the compound.

John wasn’t sure he was still in London and the surrounding area was rural and very dark. There were some lights to the north and east, however. He must be somewhere near a small city or town but he didn’t know which way London was located. Sighing, John realised it might take him a day or even two before he was finally able to get to Sherlock. First order of business was escaping, however.

Turning back to the matter at hand, John decided that the rooftops made a perfect pathway for him since the buildings all joined together and were of a uniform height. It took almost no time for him to reach the barracks and he wondered how difficult it would be to release the latents imprisoned within and then burn the entire complex down. After deliberating for a few moments, he decided against burning mainly because he knew there had to be some latents who were chained up in the other buildings like he had been. They’d die horrible deaths and, though John had killed before, he’d never knowingly caused the deaths of innocent people. He didn’t want to start now, so wholesale destruction would have to wait for a better time.

If he survived and got to safety, he vowed that he’d do his best to try to find a way to expose what the Bureau was doing to latents, even if he couldn’t end the abuse himself. He also needed to get the information about AG and its possible connection with the Bureau to Sherlock or Lestrade. If there was a direct link with the Bureau and Moriarty, the shite was going to hit the fan and John guessed quite a few prominent Bureau employees might be out of jobs and hopefully even imprisoned.

In the meantime, even if he couldn’t have the satisfaction of burning the place to the ground, it didn’t mean he couldn’t try to release as many other latent prisoners as he could do. He sensed a small number of people in the building below him and the emotional ambience was so depressing and toxic that he recoiled from it. Firming his resolve, John used his new keys to open a service entrance from the roof and entered the building. Quietly he crept down the stairs to the third storey to find the entire floor empty of people. It seemed to be reserved for classrooms and offices. As he cautiously sent out his senses, he discovered that the lowest floor housed the latents and he picked up the mental signatures of guards, as well. These latent senses of his were turning out to be damned useful and if he made it through this whole nightmare, he promised himself that he’d find some way to learn to use them properly.

Slowly, John ghosted down the stairs to the first level where he came to what seemed to be the main entrance to the building. To his left was a long corridor with many doors along either side where the other latents were imprisoned. It seemed the locks were electronic and controlled by the guards. John could see them in a room through a Plexiglas window installed in the wall on the left. They’d not spotted him and were, in fact, watching a match on the telly. The door to the room was left ajar, which made it much easier for John to distract them.

A rubbish bin had been placed to one side of the main entrance to the barracks and John pulled a glass bottle out of it. He tossed it down the hall, hid in the stairwell and waited for a reaction. It
didn’t take long for one of the guards to poke his head out the door and then wander down the hallway to pick up the bottle. Looking at it quizzically for a moment, the man then headed over toward the stairs to replace it into the bin. Unbelievably, the guard didn’t seem to be even question why the bottle would end up in the corridor and it made John wonder if the man was under the influence of something.

Whether he was stoned or just stupid, the guard went down with a well placed blow to the back of the neck. John dragged his body up a few stairs and then came down to hear the other guard calling for his friend. Again, there was little or no concern about himself from the second guard. It was like he had no concept that he could possibly be in any kind of danger and John felt slightly amused at the look of shocked surprise on the man’s face when John walked up to him and knocked him unconscious.

Dragging both men back into the small room, John searched them and came up with two mobile phones. Pocketing them to use for later, he turned to study the controls to the electronic locks that were keeping the other latents prisoner. They were well marked and easy to find. John hit the main switch and all the locks disengaged with a loud clunking sound. John walked out of the room and stood in the hallway as about half a dozen latents slowly walked out of their rooms, looking around in surprise and not a bit of fear. John recognised Sheri as well as the two men that had shared the room with them just before John had been auctioned. She looked to be okay though somewhat shell-shocked. When she recognised John, she gasped, then gave John a small smile and waved.

Nodding back, John rapidly strode down the hall and addressed his fellow latents. Clearing his throat, he tried not to cough but his voice was still rough and it hurt to talk. “Listen up, everyone. I’ve got a way out of this place and you’re welcome to leave if you want. It won’t be easy and chances are we’ll be caught again, but I think it’s worth a try. But we have to move quickly. There’s a patrol that comes by at least once an hour and I don’t honestly know when they’re due to arrive. So if you want to try to escape from this place, follow me but be quiet about it.”

They all looked at each other and milled hesitantly about. No one seemed willing to make a decision until Sheri stepped forward. “I’ll leave with you, William. When do we go?”

At her declaration, the others nodded their agreement, as well. John handed one of the mobiles to Sheri and the other to a man standing closest to him. “That’s fine. I’m not completely sure where we are. The surrounding area is rural but from the roof I thought I could see the lights of a town or small city off to the north and slightly east of here. Does anyone know this area? If we know where we are, we can ring friends or family to meet us nearby to help us escape.”

A man with glasses raised a hand. “I’m pretty sure we’re in the South London latent compound, which is located in Surrey west of Reigate and Banstead. The area surrounding the compound is mostly farm land but the town begins less than a mile from here. The Reigate Priory Cricket Club isn’t too far away. Park Lane runs beside the compound and the Priory is right in front of the grounds. It’s just off the A25 and an excellent place to meet.” His eyes were sparkling in excitement.

Thanking the man, John continued. “What’s your name? Harold? That’s a great idea, Harold. We’ll pass around these two mobiles. When you get your turn, ring someone you know with a car and arrange to be picked up at the Cricket ground. If someone needs directions, can you give them? Ta! Make your calls and wait here until I come to get you.”

Sheri stopped him before he could get outside and put a hand on his arm. “Do you have someone to ring, William?”

Regretfully, John shrugged. “I do, but I don’t have his mobile number. I know where he lives in
London and might be able to contact him if I could access the internet. He’s in consulting, has a very distinctive name and might have a website, but neither of those mobiles have internet access and none of the computers here do either. Directory enquiries will send him a message but I don’t know him well enough to determine if he’ll respond to what is essentially an unknown number ringing him.”

She tightened her grip on his arm. “It’s worth a try, isn’t it? You can come with me and Phil as far as East Croyden, at least. He’s got family there and they’ll hide us until we can leave the country and get married. Say you’ll come with us that far, at least. By that time, your friend will have responded, I’m sure. If not, you can catch a train from Three Bridges into London.”

Smiling, John gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, Sheri. Let’s do that. In the meantime, I need to check on the location of the patrol and then get us out of here. Can you tie these two up? Maybe strips from the sheets of a bed would work best.”

She nodded and turned back to her room. John made his way out of the building and crouched in the shadows, using his senses to search for any guards in the immediate area. He couldn’t find anyone else nearby so he sprinted across the distance between the building and the fence. He had taken the time to remove the saw blade from his shoe and used it to cut through the chain links that made up the fence beside one of the support posts. It took longer to cut through the metal than it had the leather, of course, but he was done in a few minutes.

Checking the status of any patrolling guards, he still sensed no one else other than the latents and headed back to the building. Everyone was bunched up by the exit, waiting for him. Sheri handed him one of the mobiles and insisted he make his call before they left. He did, left the expected message and then pocketed the mobile.

“Okay, everyone. Follow me and stay close. Once we’re out, Harold, you’re in charge of leading us to that cricket field.” They all moved quickly over to the fence where John pulled back the chain link and ushered everyone through. He brought up the rear but first made sure the fence was back in place exactly. In the dark, it would be difficult to tell it had been cut and hopefully the direction of their escape wouldn’t be discovered until morning, which was hours away.

They moved slowly through the darkness, being very careful of their footing. A false step would be disastrous. The ground was mostly even and the grass was thankfully kept short and they moved toward a thicket of trees that they could barely make out in the darkness. John kept expecting them to come across another fence. In his considerable experience most compounds would have had a second layer of fencing to discourage escape. However, it seemed the Bureau didn’t expect their latents to actually attempt to run away and hadn’t put in that extra security.

A road ran beside the trees and Harold led them directly to it. Walking the road at night seemed like a good way to get caught but it was fairly even footing and any vehicles would be seen by the escapees first and the trees could hide them easily. Eventually, hedgerows began to line the road and they finally stumbled across pavement. After that, they quickly came upon houses and parked vehicles. The lights from the houses made it much easier to find their way and soon they arrived at the Priory. It had taken them close to forty-five minutes to walk just over a mile and thankfully no one was around to notice their group.

To John’s intense relief, there were already cars waiting for most of them. Sheri’s fiancé was the last to arrive but he got there just as the seven latents arrived. One by one, each latent came up to John, gave him their names and thanked him with a handshake or hug. Urging them to leave as quickly and to get out of the country if at all possible, John wished everyone well as his fellow latents wasted no time and sped off into the night. John got into the back seat of the car driven by Sheri’s fiancé
Phil. Sheri took a moment to hug her partner tightly before he engaged the gears, turned around and headed out of town at a careful speed.

As John watched, Phil reached over to take Sheri’s hand. The younger man seemed to be shaking as he gripped her hand tightly. “Sheri, we can’t stay in Croyden with my family. I just had Bobby ring me and they said they’re afraid of what Bureau might do when they find out you’ve escaped. You know Clarice works for them. So I’ve decided we’ll take the ferry to France tonight. I’ve got tickets for this morning, early. I’m hoping the French authorities won’t know to look for you yet so we need to go quickly.” He looked back over his shoulder at John. “I’m sorry, mate. I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you’ve rescued Sheri, but we can’t take you much further than Purley or we won’t make the ferry.”

“That’s fine, Phil. Why don’t you just drop me at Gatwick? It’s only a few minutes south of here and I can catch the train into the city from there.”

Sheri turned around in her seat, a look of concern on her face. “Are you sure, William? It’s awfully close to the compound. That’s surely the first place they would look.”

“I’ll take that chance, Sheri. It’s a relatively short ride and we’ve been gone less than an hour. A train leaves the station every hour and I’ll be sure to keep my eyes out for any Bureau personnel.”

Sheri clearly was reluctant. “It’s not the Bureau guards but the police I’m worried about.”

But Phil gave her a look of desperation. “We should do as he asks, luv. We’ll drop you off at Gatwick. It’s much closer. Do you have any money?” Phil started to hunt for his wallet when John stopped him.

“I’m good, Phil. Ta for that, but I expect you and Sheri will need every penny.” The young man looked quite relieved and John knew they were going to be on a shoe string budget for some time until things calmed down and they could return home.

Phil drove the car carefully but quickly toward Gatwick and stopped illegally at a bus stop just after the south terminal walkways and near an entrance. Sheri turned to her partner. “Did you pack my makeup kit, Phil?”

At his confused nod, Sheri hopped out and rooted around in the boot of the car. Coming around to where John was standing on the pavement, she removed a concealer pencil and used it on John’s ear. “This won’t last for long, but it will keep people from noticing the tattoo. Keep the pencil and don’t forget to use it.”

“You’re brilliant, luv! Now you and Phil need to get on the road. Good luck to you both!” John gave the young woman a quick hug whilst Phil kept looking about the area nervously. No one was in sight and traffic nearly non-existent but John completely understood the man’s concerns.

Sheri laughed and hugged him back hard. “I’m going to name our first child William.”

John smiled fondly at that. “Let’s just hope it’s not a girl, then. That would be weird.”

Inelegantly snorting another laugh, Sheri kissed his cheek and got into the car. John watched them drive away and then turned and made his way into the terminal, hoping with all his heart they would be able to get away safely, marry and have that child someday.

Numerous clocks throughout the terminal told him it was just after 0100 but it felt much later to him. The next train to Victoria was at 0200 so he had nearly an hour to wait. John was afraid that if he sat...
down, he’d fall asleep immediately since his day had been incredibly gruelling and he felt like death warmed up. His cough took that moment to remind him that he was ill, also.

The terminal was quite busy despite the time of night and he knew he stood out too much. Getting cleaned up would help and kill some time. Spotting a shop nearby, he purchased a disposable razor, a comb and some coffee and found the nearest gents’. Shaved, washed, combed and caffeinated, he felt like a new man. However, the bruise around his throat was very dark and he pulled his collar higher and buttoned it. At least the swelling on his face where he’d been punched by the guard had gone down and a judicious application of the concealer helped hide that bruise as well as the tattoo. He left the loo, looking for a safe place to wait for the next train.

He sat in a corner partially hidden by some decorative pot plants and eyed the other people in the terminal. Everyone was in a hurry to get where they were going and paid no attention to him. John did notice a police presence but no more than he’d normally expect in a busy airport or train station. There were no visible signs of any Bureau personnel but John was afraid to use his senses with all the people in the terminal. Being tired and physically weakened made him wary that he might get overwhelmed too easily. As he sat waiting, it took a lot of effort not to fall asleep. It helped that he’d found a newspaper and though the small print swam before his tired eyes, holding it up kept him awake.

Finally it was time to leave and John managed to get himself onto the train without incident. After boarding he went from carriage to carriage, keeping an eye out for police or Bureau guards until he arrived at the last one and found a seat near the back, making sure to have a good view of the carriages ahead of him. There would be five stops until Victoria where he’d have to transfer a few times before he could walk to Baker Street. It shouldn’t take more than a total of two hours and he would be in London.

Smiling to himself, he realised he’d probably be at Sherlock’s flat before the man was even awake for the day. It would be fun to surprise him and he hoped that the alpha would be willing to help John and wouldn’t turn him away. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, there was always that remote possibility. After all, if the Bureau ever found out that Sherlock had helped John, it could cause a lot of trouble for his friend and possibly his entire family. It was one more worry that he didn’t need on his shoulders.

The rocking of the train lulled him and it was hard to stay awake. Each stop seemed to find him dozing and he woke abruptly as the train jerked whenever it slowed down or sped up. All the trauma he’d suffered over the past few days seemed to hit at once and he felt incredibly groggy and totally exhausted. As he’d predicted, his cough was worsening and he wanted desperately to sleep and recover but he had to hold on for just a few more hours and then he could allow himself to rest. It wasn’t as if he was a stranger to staying up for days at a time but he wasn’t usually suffering from injuries, incipient illness and extreme physical exertion on top of sleep deprivation. He’d just have to cope. It was amazing what he’d accomplished that day and he felt a vicious satisfaction in having escaped the complete tossers at the compound and freed six others. There were only two more stops before Victoria and the walk to the bus would no doubt revive him. The temperature had dropped even further and the cold air would feel good.

However, he couldn’t fight his tiredness and slipped irresistibly and quickly into a deep sleep. The nightmares he normally experienced were nowhere to be found. Instead, just like before, John dreamt of a tall, dark haired alpha whom he loved intensely and he knew in his heart that he was profoundly loved in return. In his dream, he reached for Sherlock and knew he was holding someone who belonged only to him, body and soul. John also dreamt of safety and security and of a flat in the city full of curly haired, blue eyed children that filled him with incredible pride and great joy. The feelings of happiness and deep contentment surprised him since he’d never experienced such things
before. It was disturbing on one level, yet it made his heart ache for it to be true.

The dream ended as the train rocked and rattled more loudly than usual and he woke abruptly with a gasp. Rubbing at his chest, he realised he was feeling so much pain there because what he’d dreamed wasn’t true and never could be, despite his subconscious’ desire. Loving someone so much and having his own family had never seemed so attractive but he’d never wanted that before he’d met Sherlock. The more John’s traitorous unconscious mind deliberated about the possibility of being allowed to have that, the more attractive it sounded, despite all the real impediments against it. It was a terrible idea but John had to face the fact that a part of him—apparently a very large part-- wanted to bond with Sherlock and have a family. Everything he’d worked for in his life was being turned completely upside down by the presence of the alpha sentinel in his life and he couldn’t let it go no matter how hard he tried. That thought worried him as he stared out the window at the dark landscape rushing by.

Sighing miserably, he sat up with a groan. Every muscle was stiff and sore and he felt awful. On top of everything, he was hungry again. The fish and chips had been hours ago. The newspaper he’d brought from Gatwick slipped from his lap as the train shuddered again toward its stop at Clapham Junction. As he bent over to pick it up, the internal alarm that he’d relied on so often to warn him in Afghanistan went off and he automatically stayed bent over, hiding behind the seat back. Watching from between the seats and looking toward the front of the carriage, John saw a police officer enter and begin to glance around. John was the only one left in the carriage and he knew the man was searching for him. There was absolutely nowhere to hide and he debated what to do as his heart hammered in his chest. How had they found him? Their escape must have been discovered. Should he attack the cop and risk the wrath of the police? Or give up and try to escape again when the train stopped?

Before he could make a decision, the door opened once more and another policeman entered. The doctor breathed a sigh of relief as the first policeman turned away from him.

“Nobody here? The conductor said this carriage was occupied earlier. Do you think he got off at the last stop?” The tone of the man was bored.

“Don’t know and could give a rat’s arse, to be honest. Maybe he’s in the loo. I’m tired of this. It’s stupid. I think the Bureau should be sending their own people to look for escaped latents. But I guess since they don’t escape all that often, their own special unit takes time to be assembled and sent out. I expect they’ll be searching the CCTV for this bloke and then search all the stations. Come on. The dining car is serving fresh coffee and sarnies right now. This latent can do whatever the bloody hell he wants to as far as I’m concerned.”

To John’s great relief they both left the carriage. He waited a few minutes and retreated to the back of the row of seats, as close to the exit as possible. His heart was pounding and adrenaline flowed through his veins. Keeping awake wasn’t going to be a problem any longer. It was understandable that their escape had been discovered. It had been a couple of hours after all and it was asking too much to hope it would be morning before their absence was noted.

But how had they known he was on the train? Was it luck on their part? Just as he wondered this, the mobile in his trouser pocket vibrated and chimed. Startled, he pulled it out of his pocket and flipped it open. He wasn’t great with technology and had never really learnt to use all the features of his own phone very well. This one seemed much more complicated but he eventually figured out that the phone had received a text.

Reading it, his heart leapt in his chest. It read: “Message received from directory enquiries. Who are you and why should I care? SH”
It took a few moments for John’s shaking hands to figure out how to return the text but he did so as quickly as possible. “Sherlock, it’s John. I’ve escaped from the compound and am on train to Victoria. Can you help? I need to get my things and leave the country ASAP. JW”

Staring at the mobile, John waited tensely for a text in response but then it rang instead. Startled, he nearly dropped it before answering it.

“Hello?”

“John! Where are you? Are you all right? Please say you’re all right! I felt you reach out to me but then you were torn away!” The voice on the other end was the deep baritone of Sherlock Holmes, anxious and strained with agonizing worry. Just Sherlock saying his name made John want to sob in relief and reach through the phone line to hold onto the man. The sound of the alpha’s voice alone soothed him and made him feel safe. He knew that feeling was false and suspect but he couldn’t help but take comfort from it.

“Sherlock! I’m fine. I escaped one of the Bureau’s compounds and I’m on a train heading north, approaching Clapham Junction but I think they’ve tracked me somehow. I don’t know how they’ve done it unless it’s just a lucky guess on their part. The police were in the carriage looking for me just a few moments ago.”

The deep voice steadied but the anxiety remained. “The mobile you have. It’s obviously not yours. Is the GPS signal active?”

Sucking in a breath, John realised immediately what Sherlock was asking. “I don’t know. Can you hang on whilst I check? I’m not familiar with this thing.”

Assured that Sherlock would wait, it took a few moments for him to figure out how to access the mobile’s settings but once there, he saw that the GPS signal was indeed switched on. John immediately turned it off but the damage had been done. He returned to speaking with the alpha.

“Fuck. Well that explains it. The GPS was turned on which is how they’ve found me. I overheard the police say that there’s a special unit that’s been assembled to track escapees. They may be at the station, waiting for me and we’re almost there now.” John had allowed some of his exhaustion and fear to surface in his voice but didn’t regret it. Sherlock wasn’t going to think less of him for showing his temporary weakness and it was nice to be able to express his vulnerability to someone he trusted.

The tone that responded to him was pure alpha. John could almost feel the pheromones through their connection and wanted to kneel to Sherlock right then and there. A jolt of pure want also shot through him and he ached with it. Dizzy, he realised it had been almost three days since he’d taken a hormone suppressant and they were beginning to wear off.

Sherlock was speaking to him and he focused on what the man was saying. “You must do your best to avoid them, then. I am completely confident that you can do that. Once you arrive, get off at Clapham Junction and go to the Grant Road exit via the walkway. When you’re outside, head north and east to the Battersea Bridge. It’s less than a mile from the Junction. I’m on my way and will meet you there. You should be at the south end of the bridge before my cab makes it to that location. Just in case I’m not there when you arrive, just keep walking on the east side of the bridge and I’ll pick you up when I see you.” In the background, John could hear the sound of fast footsteps, a door slamming shut and Sherlock yelling taxi! “I’ll be there in about 20 minutes or less. Be safe and keep moving, John.”
“I will do my best.”

“I know you will, John. I want you to know that I didn’t intend to abandon you at the Yard and meant to find you but it’s obvious you didn’t need me. I should have remembered that you’re more than capable of taking care of yourself. I barely managed to escape Bureau guards who saw me trying to help you at the Yard. You weren’t able to see them from where you were in the lobby but that’s the reason why I had to leave so quickly. I have been working since then to discover where they’d taken you but have had no luck. No one from the Bureau would speak to me and I even had Mycroft and my homeless network looking for someone who might know where you’d been taken.”

Something inside John that had been terribly hurt by Sherlock leaving him so abruptly was reassured and relieved by the alpha’s explanation.

“It’s fine, Sherlock. I’m just glad to be out of there and appreciate you being willing to pick me up. We’re approaching the station now. I need to ring off.”

“I’ll see you soon, then. Be careful.”

The mobile disconnected with a loud click. Putting the stolen phone in his trouser pocket, John sighed in sheer relief and stood by the door whilst the train slowed in its approached to Clapham. Taking a deep breath, he swayed with the motion of the train and tried to calm himself. Heart racing, John’s face was flushed and his lips tingled just from having talked with Sherlock. It was useless to deny that he had it bad for the alpha. But what was more important was to focus on escaping whoever had been sent by the Bureau and finding Sherlock first. Once the train had stopped, John waited patiently by the exit until a large group of people walked by. Slipping out of the door, he joined them and headed for the walkway that would take him to Grant Road and eventually to Battersea Bridge.

By the time he got to the doors leading to the street, he knew he’d been spotted. Whilst he saw no one, alarms were going off in his head and he did his best to stay calm as he exited the building and turned right toward Battersea Bridge. He had a mile or more to walk but his instincts were telling him to run. The first road to his left seemed to head into a wooded area surrounding a couple of high flats. Turning down the street he quickly saw that the road was a cul-de-sac. The buildings were surrounded by a wall and access was restricted to residents only by a large black metal gate. Looking around to see if anyone was about, John moved to a dark area between lampposts and quickly hoisted himself up and over the wall. He landed softly in a crouch and listened carefully for pursuers.

Hearing footsteps from the pavement beyond the wall, he quietly moved away and picked up his pace. Staying within the wooded part nearest the wall, he paralleled the car park and ran along the length of the enclosed space until he reached a gate where he saw another street. He then pulled himself up and over the wall again and started following the new road north and east. It was fairly dark with few lampposts and the neighbourhood consisted of well maintained terraced houses. Since it was so late, he could see no one but his instincts were telling him to hurry again and this time he listened.

As soon as he began running he heard the footsteps behind him so he picked up speed. Emerging onto a major road, he slowed a bit and turned left. He was exhausted, his side ached and his breath burnt in his lungs but he forced himself onward. The area was unfamiliar and it would be very easy to get turned around so he kept a sharp eye out for landmarks. Noting the buildings and shops all around, he trotted past two streets and then arbitrarily turned right onto another that ironically was called Afghan Road. It was a quiet, tree-lined street with more terraced houses. There were no alleys that he could cut into so he picked up his pace. He knew he was flagging but kept grimly at it
because he could hear that he was still being followed. Why hadn’t they closed on him yet? It was clear that they were much fresher than he was. They must be planning something.

He was near the end of the street and approaching an intersection when he heard his pursuers begin to speed up. Heart in his throat and breathing hard, he picked up his pace also and turned left onto the next street. Out of the corner of his eye he saw men in dark uniforms coming up the road behind him and then heard a shout as they saw him and began to run faster. They had tried to ambush him but failed and were now running full out. However, John was tiring and they weren’t very far behind. Putting on a final burst of speed he realised he was going to have to stop and fight before he was totally exhausted.

Arriving at an intersection of two more streets, he saw that they were named Cabul and Candahar Roads. He would have laughed if he’d had the breath. The men chasing him were nearly on him and he had to find a place to stop and defend himself. Lampposts illuminated the north east corner of the intersection where he stopped and turned to face his pursuers. At his back was a combination brick/wrought iron fence and he slumped against it, trying to appear afraid and harmless. Considering how exhausted he was, it wasn’t difficult for him to do.

For the first time he got a good look at the six men who had been chasing him from the train station as they approached and surrounded him in a semi-circle. Dressed in dark uniforms, none of them seemed too eager to approach, however. Assuming that they must be the elite team the Bureau had assembled to find him, John was surprised to see them hesitate and eye him nervously. Taking advantage of their uncertainty, John spent the time trying to regain his breath. Deciding that he would pretend ignorance as to why they were there as long as he could get away with it, John straightened and took a deep, calming breath whilst his heart rate began to return to normal. Preparing himself for combat, he noticed with satisfaction that the others were still breathing hard after their run.

John allowed fear and fake panic to colour his tone. The volume of his voice rose, too. Maybe if some of the people in the neighbourhood heard what was going on, the men surrounding him might back off.

“Who the bloody hell are you? Why are you chasing me? Leave me alone or I’ll ring 999!” John’s body language reflected his statement and he watched as some of the men stepped back in consternation whilst glancing at each other doubtfully. However, one who seemed to be the leader stepped forward. He was older and though each of their uniforms was indistinguishable from the others, there was something about the way he held himself that screamed authority.

“Don’t try to pull any tricks on us, latent. We know who you are and we’re here to take you back into custody. Your status has been re-evaluated and you’re to be put up for auction again. Come with us quietly and we won’t have to hurt you.”

Fuck! That meant that they now knew he was an omega guide. Shaking his head, John tried to sidle away. They wouldn’t risk injuring him any further. He was worth roughly his weight in gold to the Bureau and he would take full advantage of that.

“I don’t know what you’re on about but leave me alone! Go away! Help! Someone call the police! I’m being attacked!” Even though it hurt like hell, John forced his voice louder and he noticed some lights turn on in a house across the street. Maybe this would work. Taking on the men any other time wouldn’t be too much of a problem for him but he was so tired and his wound was throbbing again. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could stay on his feet let alone fight anybody. If the neighbours called police, maybe John could get away in the confusion.

The leader’s expression became ugly and so was his tone. “Get on your knees and put your hands on
your head. I won’t tell you again, Larssen!”

Rather than obey, John moved even further away from them. The other Bureau goons looked to their leader for orders when one of the windows in the house behind John opened.

“Oi! What the bloody hell is going on down there? It’s the middle of the god damned night! Shut the fuck up and go away or we’ll call the bloody police!” Other lights were coming on and windows were opening up as well.

“This is Bureau business and none of your concern. Shut your windows and go back to bed.” The head goon looked really pissed and John was starting to enjoy the show.

"Like fuck I’ll mind my own business! I see six against one, I do! That’s just bloody wrong. I’ve rung the cops now and you’d best get on your way if you don’t want more trouble than you can handle, you manky bastard!” Sirens were heard in the distance and John wanted to cheer. He’d had the chance to rest somewhat and was getting ready to resume his run to the bridge when the leader drew out a taser. Before John could even think to dodge, the guard fired and both electrodes hit John in the right arm and shoulder.

Never having been tased before, John didn’t know what to expect. Excruciating pain consumed him utterly. His muscles tightened and contracted whilst the electric current coursing through him seemed to go on forever. His mind was clear but his body was completely paralysed. No longer able to hold himself up, he collapsed. His head hit the brick wall and then the pavement hard. Everything went hazy for a few moments and finally the pain stopped as the electric current was cut off and the probes were yanked out of his flesh. When he came to himself he could only lie on his back on the pavement, completely disoriented and wheezing for breath. His muscles felt weak and they tingled unpleasantly. Dazed, John tried to move when he heard squealing tyres, shouting and then gunshots.

Blinking and flailing, he attempted to sit up but his side cramped with severe pain and he fell back gasping. The contractions of his muscles from the taser must have strained his wound. But with each passing second, he felt better and almost energised. Frantically, he reached out to grab at the brick wall and finally pulled himself up to a sitting position, only to hear another shot. A body hit the pavement nearby and he managed to focus his eyes in time to see a huge, dark figure holding a gun stalking toward him. There was an enormous black vehicle with an open door idling on the street behind the man. Surprised, John realised all of the uniformed men from the Bureau were down, either dead or severely wounded and there were faint screams and shouts coming from the houses surrounding him.

The approaching figure was backlit at first and then John recognised him. His mind froze and blanked in absolute terror and panic. He couldn’t help cringing away as Sebastian Moran grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet. The sound of sirens was closer than before and the alpha snarled as he dragged John toward the car and shoved him inside.

The interior was swimming with angry alpha pheromones. “Get your arse inside and behave. I’ve had just about enough of you right now.” John flopped face first on the bench seat and uselessly tried to right himself with muscles that felt like over cooked spaghetti noodles. Moran slammed the door shut, beat his meaty fist against the window between the driver and passenger areas and shouted. “Let’s go! Take us to Chelsea right now.” The car accelerated abruptly and took off with a screech of tyres at high speed.

Moran settled back in the seat with an angry scowl, then turned to look at John who was still trying to sit up after being tossed around first by the alpha and then by the rapid movements of the car.
Finally he was upright and immediately tried the door but it was locked and nothing John could do would open it. Moran’s attractive white grin flashed at John and the gigantic man laughed harshly.

“Well, fuck me raw. So you’re an omega guide. I knew you were special. I heard those bastards at the Bureau about shit themselves when they found out they’d sold you for £150. They could have got £150 thousand if they’d known what you were. Wankers.”

Moran gave him a nasty smirk, then reached across the seat with a long arm and wrapped his huge hand around the back of John’s neck. Moran pulled him close so that John was squished unpleasantly against the alpha’s hard body. He tried to push himself away but the solid grip on his neck made him feel strangely weak and pliant. The hold was something that John had never experienced but he had heard of it. It was an evolutionary throwback trait that allowed an alpha to physically control a disobedient omega. In western societies the hold was considered rude at best and abusive at worst but was used routinely in many other cultures that still oppressed omegas. It felt horrid and demeaning and John absolutely hated it.

“How did you find me?” Pushing against the gigantic man’s chest did nothing but John kept trying to put some space in between them, despite the futility of it.

Moran answered absently. “Jim’s got people everywhere. When you went missing after the cock up at the clinic, I had him put out a word. Talbot had fucked things up so bad that it wasn’t until the day after that I had time to start a search for you. I know you were at St Bart’s and then at the Met to give a statement. After those idiots arrested you, I tracked you to the compound and offered good money to that child who bought you but he wouldn’t take it. I was going to break you out but you got yourself out instead. It took me some time to find you after you escaped. They were tracing the GPS on that phone you stole until you turned it off. Then I listened in on the Bureau’s communications and found you here. Did you know before you were arrested that you were a guide?”

Horrified, John shook his head mutely and lied, denying any knowledge of his latent guide status. Christ! Moran had been just behind him the entire time and he’d had no idea! But at least he and Moriarty didn’t seem to know how much John had been involved with Talbot’s demise or the takedown of the clinic. Sherlock’s name hadn’t been mentioned at all. Did they know the alpha sentinel was involved, too?

Moran grunted his acknowledgement to John’s response and pulled the doctor closer. “Those Bureau bastards are overstepping their boundaries these days. I told Jim when they took you that you’d probably get yourself out and I was right.”

John blinked in confusion at the overdose of aroused alpha pheromones that began to assault him. Moran smiled fondly down at John, radiating approval and pride. “Not only did you escape but you got six other latents out, as well. Those fuckers didn’t know what hit them when they took you, did they?” John had no response to that and could only stare at the huge man, mystified.

The alpha’s expression became hard and possessive as his hot breath wafted across John’s face. “What they don’t know is that you’re mine and I protect what’s mine. We’re on our way to the house in Chelsea to pick up your papers and leave the country for a time. Once we’re bonded and you’re pregnant, we can return and the fucking losers can’t touch you. I’ve told Jim he has to do something about the Bureau. They’re getting overconfident and arrogant. They’re forgetting what they owe him.”

Moran didn’t appear to know that John had already got his ID papers back. How would the alpha react when he found them missing? John was terrified. Abruptly, Moran bent his head and took John’s mouth in a brutal kiss. The hand gripping the back of John’s neck kept him helpless against
the assault and he had no choice but to submit. Shocked by the alpha’s actions and dizzy with exhaustion and the pheromones permeating the air, John’s hands weakly wandered around on Moran’s torso whilst the huge man deepened the kiss in appreciation. John’s muscles still felt incredibly feeble and it took a lot of effort to move anything. One of John’s hands accidentally brushed against the alpha’s crotch and he felt Moran become hard. Christ, Moran was enormous in more ways than one.

Being controlled like a puppet was infuriating. John had to get Moran to let go of his neck so he could move properly. An idea occurred to him that might not work, but it was worth a try. Though he had to concentrate with all his strength on moving his hand where he wanted it to be, John began to massage Moran’s growing erection more forcefully and did his best to press against the man as if he wanted him. It was difficult since all he wanted to do was retch, but John seemed to convince the alpha he was sincere.

Releasing John’s neck and breaking the kiss, Moran moved the doctor’s hand away from his crotch and grinned down at him. “Patience, luv. We’ll have time to fuck until you’re too sore to walk once we get to the house. You’re safe, now. The Bureau won’t ever come after you again, I promise.”

Kissing the doctor deeply once more, Moran pulled him close but didn’t return his hand to the back of John’s neck, which allowed John to move easily of his own volition once again. Both John’s hands wandered around to Moran’s back and down where he found the weapon at the alpha’s belt. Moaning and pressing closer, John thrust his tongue deep into the alpha’s mouth to distract him as he carefully removed the weapon from its holster. Once he had the gun in hand, John immediately wrenched away from Moran, slid across the seat with his back to the locked door and pointed the weapon at the alpha.

“Tell your man to pull over or I’ll shoot you in the face.” John’s hands were steady as a rock and his voice was hard.

Wiping John’s saliva from his lips, Moran grinned at the doctor with delight. “Oh, you are a marvel! Jim just doesn’t understand how amazing you are. But, no, luv. I won’t tell him to pull over and you won’t shoot me. Don’t you remember? You’ve got no where to go, Johnny-boy. If you leave this car, the Bureau guards will be on you in a flash and I might not be able to get you back before they sell and bond you to someone else. I’ll kill you before I’ll let that happen. And if you kill me, Jim will cut you into tiny pieces.”

John raised his chin high but his heart was pounding in fear. Moran was deadly serious about killing him rather than let anyone else have him. He wouldn’t let it deter him, though. Keeping the gun aimed at Moran’s left eye, he refused to be diverted. “I escaped them before and I can do it again. And I can keep clear of both you and Moriarty, too. Now have him pull over or I will shoot you, Moran! Don’t think I won’t.”

Expression mournful, Moran shook his head. “But even if you can escape the Bureau again, where will you go, John? You have no money, no identification papers and no job.” Moran’s expression cleared and he grinned even wider. “Oh! You still think Masters will take you in? Well, that’s a pipe dream, luv. She’s good friends with Jim and he’s had you blacklisted with all the other mercenary units. No one wants you but me. The only company you’ll ever be able to join again is mine and my plan is to get you bonded and pregnant with my babies instead.”

John wanted to vomit as his mind spun uselessly in confusion and despair. Masters was friends with Moriarty? John was blacklisted? If that was true, there really was nowhere for him to go and no place to belong ever again. His life as he knew it was over. His hands began to shake. Exhaustion, illness, fear, pain and hopelessness washed over him and he didn’t know what to do.
Cocking his head to one side, Moran looked at him sympathetically. “There, there, luv. It’ll be okay, you’ll see. Once you’re in heat and bonded to me, I’ll make you very happy. Now, give me the gun.” Despite his relaxed appearance, Moran was very careful as he reached out for the weapon. He clearly had a high opinion of John’s shooting abilities and knew he was risking certain death.

Anger and fear began to overcome John as he tried to think of what to do. Arms shaking and feeling as if they were made of lead, John considered giving up. But what Moran was proposing was a fate worse than death. As hyperbolic as that phrase sounded, it was accurate. John would rather die than bond to Moran. If he killed Moran, Moriarty would hunt him down and John would die a ghastly death. He didn’t want to die but killing Moran or turning the gun on himself seemed to be the only options he had left.

But he did have another alternative! In his confusion and misery, John had nearly forgotten that Sherlock was still out there and clearly wanted to help him. If he could believe what the alpha sentinel had said, John was fairly sure Sherlock would be willing to consider bonding with John. Surely life in a gilded cage was better than death? Being bonded to an alpha sentinel was not what John wanted to do with his life but all his other options had evaporated. Where else could he go if not to Sherlock? But was it going from the frying pan and into the fire?

Would Sherlock force a bonding if John didn’t want it? Somehow, John didn’t think so. Sherlock would honour John’s wishes and not push him into anything he didn’t want. Sherlock would give him time to make his own decisions. Their minds had been joined together, even if it was only for a short time and John had been able to see just how much Sherlock respected and appreciated him. He also knew that, though the alpha sentinel lacked social graces and didn’t give a toss about much else, Sherlock cared about John and was more than worthy of John’s trust and loyalty. Together they could face any enemy and prevail. But bringing Moran and Moriarty to Sherlock as deadly enemies was one hell of a bonding gift.

His decision made, John’s resolve hardened and his hands resumed their steadiness as he cocked the gun. “I’ll only say this one more time, Moran. Have the car pull over or I’ll shoot you.”

The alpha’s hand stopped moving and his expression froze in surprise. Clearly he’d expected John to submit and his face expressed deep disappointment. “Oh, luv. You’ve just made the wrong decision.”

Striking fast as a snake, Moran grabbed at John's hands and batted the gun to one side. The alpha got a good grip on John’s left wrist and began to crush the bones. Despite the agony screaming through his arm, John kept hold of the gun and it went off, bullet striking the divider between the front and back seats. As he struggled with Moran, John saw that blood covered the windscreens and the driver had slumped to one side. There was a violent lurch and the car accelerated out of control. Moran had to let go as John was thrown to the floor. Heart pounding in fear, John stayed down and braced himself for certain impact. Cursing foully, Moran shoved the shattered divider window open and tried to force his bulk through to reach the steering wheel but was thrown back onto the seat by the erratic movements of the car.

Hanging on for dear life, John heard metal shriek horribly and watched it crumple above him as the vehicle jumped onto the pavement, sideswiped a brick wall, destroyed a telephone box and then roared forward powerfully with increasing speed. Their momentum sent them hurtling across to the opposite side of the street, barely missing oncoming traffic and headed straight toward the buildings there. Horns shrilled as they ploughed into a lamppost and a bus kiosk on the pavement. The last thing John remembered was the jarring sound of glass shattering.

John woke lying on the floor of the vehicle and wedged partially under the front passenger seat. For
a moment he couldn’t recall what had happened but then his memory returned in a rush of adrenalin. The car had smashed at high speed when the driver had been shot. Miraculously, John was more or less okay though his right leg felt funny and so did his face. John knew he was probably concussed but he sat up and took stock. His side throbbed with pain and now his wrist ached cruelly where Moran had tried to break it. One side of his face hurt and a quick examination with his good hand revealed a painful and swollen cheek. He realised his leg was stuck beneath something and he twisted to pull it free and heard the fabric of his trousers tear. As he shifted to sit up, his hand brushed against the gun so he absently picked it up in his right hand, intending to hide it beneath his jumper once he was out of the car.

He looked for Moran but the roof of the car had collapsed downward and the man seemed to have disappeared beneath it. It was actually too dark to see where the alpha was at the moment and all he could think of was to escape. Shaken and disoriented, it took him a moment to realise that he could possibly walk away from this with his life and his freedom. Taking a painful, deep breath of air that was full of petrol fumes, John tried to organise his sluggish thoughts.

The passenger side door was damaged and he couldn’t open it, but the bullet resistant window had shattered and it took a few blows with the gun to finish the job. John squirmed out of the exit and fell gracelessly onto a glass covered ground. His wrist gave him a sharp stab of pain but he ignored it, staggered upright and stared around in a daze.

Down the road for many meters behind him was a trail of devastation left by the vehicle and huge shards of glass sparkled on the ground everywhere around the car. The only sounds he could hear were muted traffic, the drip of petrol and the ticking of the cooling metal of the now destroyed vehicle. The car had ended up partly inside a building with large windows and had finally been stopped by smashing into and wrapping itself around a massive cement support pillar. John must not have been unconscious for long as no one had yet approached the vehicle, though he could hear sirens not far away.

Suddenly, the smell of petrol was stronger and he could also see flames coming up from under the bonnet. A fire had started in what was left of the engine compartment and the orange light gave the darkness where he stood a strange and frightening glow. Afraid the car would catch on fire and explode, John turned to go when he heard a groan come from the front of the vehicle. All he wanted to do was get out of the area but as a doctor, he couldn’t leave an injured person to die so horribly.

Rather surprised that the driver had survived, John crunched through the glass and around to the opposite side of the vehicle. The front of the car and right side had borne the brunt of the collision but it was a well build vehicle and the driver’s side was miraculously nearly intact. The driver had been strapped in and the front and side airbags had deployed. Glancing at the rear passenger side where Moran would be, all he could see was crushed and crumpled metal that would take a portable hydraulic tool to access. Turning back to the driver, John was able to reach in through the shattered window, loosen the seat belt and carefully drag him out. His left wrist flared in agony but he kept hold of the man and pulled him carefully across the glass covered floor and as far from the now brightly burning vehicle as he could manage.

Reluctantly, he turned to go back to the car to search for Moran when, with a loud whoosh, it went up in violent flames. There was no possible way he could possibly get to Moran without getting himself killed. Even so, he dithered for a moment and then tried to get closer. Moran was a horrible person who had shot John and destroyed his life because he wanted him. Moran would have made what was left of John’s existence a living hell on earth, but no one deserved to die like that. Before he could get too much closer, however, the flames reached the petrol tank and John had to retreat from the incredible intensity of the heat.
Falling back from the potentially explosive situation, he gaped in shock at the sight. There was no way Moran could survive that inferno and there was nothing John could do. The horror of the situation would no doubt sink in at some point but all he felt was sick and numb. Turning his back to the flames, he returned to the driver he’d left on the pavement and pulled him further away from the fire. He took them across a side street and settled the injured man in a small car park next to another building. As John examined the unconscious man in the weak illumination provided by a few lampposts, he realised there was nothing he could do for him. Undoubtedly, there were internal injuries and possible head trauma, not to mention a gunshot wound to the shoulder. An ambulance would no doubt be along shortly and could care for him.

Unsure of where he was, John stared up at the structure they’d smashed into and had apparently now set on fire. It was then he recognised his location and blinked in surprised disbelief. The building they’d hit was the Royal College of Art and he was no more than 200 feet from the south side of the Battersea Bridge where Sherlock was meant to meet him. Taking a deep breath, awed at this amazing stroke of luck, John stepped forward and headed toward the bridge, hope bright in his chest.

John shivered and coughed wetly as he left the scene of the accident and headed toward the bridge. The police, fire brigade and ambulances began to arrive behind him. No one noticed as he walked away but he was startled as the world tilted briefly to one side and he barely caught himself against a lamppost. It was then he realised his right leg wasn’t working properly. Using the poor illumination offered by a street light, he looked down in surprise to see dark blood saturating the fabric of his trousers. There was a deep tear in his calf but the bleeding was already slowing. He’d not even noticed it in his need to escape the car. Thankfully, the leg wasn’t broken and he was certain he wouldn’t bleed out so he kept going.

It had been an extremely cold spring that year and the temperature continued to drop as he trudged onward. On top of that, a bitter drizzle started up. John had lost his windcheater somewhere along the way and he had to tuck his hands under his arms to try to keep them warm. It was then he realised his wrist was seriously swollen and likely broken. Sighing in exasperation, he noticed that his breath misted in front of him in the dim illumination. It was very dark outside with dawn only a few hours away and he was beyond exhausted. At least he’d remembered to tuck the gun into his trousers and cover it with his jumper.

Sherlock had said he’d meet him at the south end of the bridge but there was no one waiting. So John kept limping and entered the bridge, hoping desperately to meet the alpha’s cab somewhere along the way. He was over halfway across when a wave of pain and dizziness hit. His chest hurt and his leg throbbed. John stopped to rest just inside a narrow niche in the bridge that contained a large decorative metal lamppost. Leaning against the barrier, he looked down into the water but it was much too dark to see anything. The lights on the Albert Bridge caught his gaze and he briefly admired the beautiful reflections. Squinting a bit, he could see other lights reflected on the water closer to him and to his left. It took him a moment to realise they were boats tied to a pier. He vaguely remembered reading about the houseboats that were moored right by the Battersea Bridge but they were supposed to be on the other side of the bridge and clustered along the north shore.

Slowly, it occurred to him that the traffic going into town was backed up and at a standstill. Also, there was now no traffic coming from the other direction. That was ominous and his heart sped up in alarm. Just then, his stolen mobile rang. Again, it took a moment for him to recognise what he was hearing and when he answered it Sherlock was on the other end. Just the sound of the alpha’s voice made John whimper in relief. He slumped against the barrier and slid down to sit on the pavement with the lamppost beside him whilst he listened with all the concentration he had left to the soothing, deep baritone.
"John, there's a complication. Traffic going onto the bridge has been jammed. It seems there are men from the Bureau blocking the road. All vehicles entering the city are being stopped and searched before being allowed to continue. Where are you?"

"I'm sitting in the middle of the bridge. I was nearly captured by men from the special unit the Bureau sent out but Moran tracked me and shot them. He tried to take me to his house in Chelsea but the car smashed into a building and I walked here from the wreck."

There was silence on the other end of the mobile for a moment, then a hiss of displeasure and a sigh. "I know there is much more to that story than you are relating. My respect for your capabilities just continues to grow, John. Once again, you've outdone yourself. Are you all right? Can you get back to the other side of the bridge and hide somewhere until I can get across the river to pick you up? They will capture you if you come this way."

Heart sinking, John shook his head, though he knew the alpha couldn't see him. "I don't know, Sherlock. I'm knackered and hurt. A four year old could beat me in a punch up right now. I can try to make it to back to the south end of the bridge again but there are a lot of rescue personnel and police there right now." He got up slowly and began to retrace his steps anyway.

Sherlock's voice was fierce and John held onto it like a lifeline as he stumbled down the pavement. "I'll find a way to you, John. Just don't give up. We're so close to getting Moriarty! The flash drive you gave me has amazing information tying him to every level of criminal mischief in this city and most European capitols. Did you know he's deep in with the top administration of the Bureau, too? Apparently, the money taken in by the sale of latents is being funnelled into multiple criminal organisations across the globe! The AG drug trade was nothing in comparison to his other ventures. I'll need your help to take Moriarty down so you need to wait for me."

Before John could reply and tell him about the AG connection, a vehicle came barrelling down the wrong way on the bridge toward him. Turning to look the other way, an identical black vehicle was heading his way from the north side of the bridge.

Unfortunately, he knew exactly what that meant. The Bureau had found him and had trapped him on the bridge. Grimly, he had to face the dismal truth. There wasn't going to be a rescue and he was well and truly caught. In his exhaustion and wretchedness, John could only think of one thing to do in order to prevent being sold again. Accepting it was hard. Miserably, his mind swirled chaotically with sadness and regret. There was so much that he'd wanted to do with his life but now there was no time and he had to accept the inevitable. Before despair overwhelmed him, he focussed his thoughts on the alpha sentinel that had been his only real friend. Stomach churning in fear, he wanted to at least make things right with him.

"Sherlock. I'm so sorry but they've found me. Cars are coming toward me from both sides of the bridge now and they'll be here in a few moments. I just want to say thank you for ... well. Everything. It was my honour and privilege to be your friend and to help you on your case, even for only a short time."

The voice on the other end of the line was frantic. John could hear the slamming of a car door and footsteps as Sherlock's breath began to come more quickly. "John. John, don't give up! Don't you dare give up! I'll find a way to you. Just promise me you will stay alive for me. Fight for us, John!"

Us? That was odd. Sherlock thought of them as a couple? John felt detached and numb as he listened to the alpha breathe whilst the black saloons drew up nearby and stopped. A handful of men got out of each car and began to slowly approach him. In his peripheral vision, John noticed that the people in the stopped vehicles heading into town were staring at him and the uniformed Bureau
officers with confusion and trepidation. Some had their phones out and were filming the whole thing.

He supposed the situation must look peculiar to them. Clearly John was injured, yet this large group of men were slowly advancing on him as if he were a dangerous criminal. Smiling, he realised that they were treating him that way because that’s what he now was. John had defied the authorities of the Bureau and had escaped lawful detention, injuring and maybe killing Bureau personnel in the process. They had no idea how close he was to collapse and he’d do his best not to give himself away immediately.

“JOHN!” He jumped a bit as Sherlock’s voice shouted in his ear and he turned his attention back to the alpha.

“What? They’re almost here. I have to go in a minute.” Sadness began to overtake him and his body begin to shake. Backed against the bridge’s railing, he tried to watch both groups of men as they approached and listen to Sherlock at the same time.

“You have to promise me that you will do everything to stay alive! Promise me, John!” Fondly, John smiled at Sherlock’s use of his alpha voice over the mobile, though it was actually working on him and if they’d been in the same location, no doubt pheromones would be pouring off the man to reinforce the order. He wouldn’t have even tried to resist Sherlock if he had been there.

“I told you that you are a manipulative git and I will still say it. But I…I can’t promise that. I care for you very much and I’ll do my best but I can’t guarantee that I’ll be able to follow through. I can’t let them catch me. I’ll die first.” Frowning, John heard a deep, throaty noise start up on the other end of the line as Sherlock breathed heavily into the mobile.

“No! You will not die. John, promise me!” Sherlock’s demand sounded furious.

John kept an eye on the Bureau officers whilst they approached him. They stood in a semi-circle surrounding him and stopped a respectful distance away. One man stepped forward with another moving close behind him. There was something different about them and then John realised he was seeing his first real sentinel/guide pairing. The other men were just muscle but clearly deferential to the sentinel.

“Latent guide William Larssen? I’m the Co-Director of London Bureau of Sentinel and Guide Protection, Charles Murphy and this is my guide, Walter. You are under arrest. Will you come with us willingly? You’re badly injured and in need medical attention. We want to help you.”

Mobile still pressed to his ear, John shook his head and scoffed derisively. “No, I will not go anywhere with you willingly. I may be a latent guide but I’m a free man and you have no moral right to sell me as a slave and force me to bond with a complete stranger.”

Murphy’s expression hardened and he looked about a bit nervously. “That’s not going to happen to you. You’ll be treated well, given additional educational training so you can find a good job and we’ll search for a compatible match for you. You don’t have to be afraid.” It seemed this sentinel was aware of how important public opinion was for their latent project and was also very conscious of the large number of civilians watching and recording the encounter.

John couldn’t help the belly laugh that erupted from him but the pain in his side and chest nearly made him fall to his knees. Straightening up, he coughed, then snarled as he pulled away the collar of his shirt to expose the deep bruising around his throat.

“You are completely full of shite. The Bureau is lying to the entire country! Treated well? This
bruise was caused by a collar used to control me when I was sold for £150 to a complete stranger yesterday afternoon. I’d not even been in custody for two hours before I was sold and then choked into unconsciousness when I objected to being auctioned off like cattle!

“And further education? I’m already a medical doctor, for god’s sake! And my new owner was going to use me to help his mum keep house! There is no further education available for latents unless you count training in obedience to your master, in between being raped every night by the guards assigned to ‘protect’ us!”

The sentinel looked positively livid and his guide paled as John did his best to appeal to the people trapped in traffic, unwitting eyewitnesses to the entire thing. Raising his voice, John gestured toward them with his swollen left hand and saw many of them recoil in fear and confusion.

“What happened to me could happen to you! To your children, grandchildren, your nieces or nephews! Your brothers or sisters! It’s too late for me, but it’s up to you to stop it before it happens to you or someone you love! I came back from serving Queen and Country in Afghanistan to find my rights as a human being taken away from me. Why did you sit idle and let Bureau-bought politicians change the laws to allow slavery? Do something, damn you all!”

One of the men near John pulled out a taser and the doctor froze at the sight and memory of the awful pain it caused. Before the uniformed man could move closer, the doctor decided he was going to take control of the situation first. He could have used the gun but he didn’t want risking injuring any innocent bystanders caught in the traffic jam behind the Bureau men. John still had the mobile connected to Sherlock but put it into his pocket before using his good hand to hoist himself onto the railing of the bridge and swing his legs over the side. His toes found a short stone ledge on the outside of the bridge and he stood on it, turning to look into the stunned faces of the Bureau men and the civilian witnesses.

The sentinel stepped forward, followed closely by his guide, who looked horrified. “William, step back onto the bridge. Please! We can work something out.”

Laughing, John dug the mobile out of his pocket and put it to his ear. He was relieved to find out that he and Sherlock were still connected and he could hear the weird thrumming sound again. Curiously, it sounded like a diesel engine. There must be some kind of interference on the bridge or a large lorry nearby. His attention turned back to Murphy and his expression became grim.

“There’s nothing to work out. You want to sell me again to make money for the Bureau. I have no intention of allowing it. We’re at an impasse, Sentinel Murphy and I actually hold all the cards. This is my life to do with as I please. I belong to no one but myself. Go away and leave me in peace to live my life in my own way. That’s my only condition but since that won’t happen we both know what I have to do.”

To everyone’s surprise, especially his sentinel’s, the guide stepped forward this time. “Look, William. It’s not as bad as you make it out to be. Being bonded that is. It’s really quite nice once you get used to it.”

Raising a sceptical eyebrow, John asked, “Were you raised as a guide or are you a latent?”

“I was found young and raised in the Bureau. But I can tell you....”

John interrupted him. “Then you have no fucking idea what it’s like to live your own life and be your own man. To work hard toward something that gives your life meaning. I was a trauma surgeon and a soldier. I helped people and saved lives. You’ve been raised from childhood to be someone else’s appendage and exist only to serve this bastard. You didn’t even get the courtesy of a
last name when he introduced you. Did you even notice that? You basically don’t exist as an adult in his mind. He sees you as less than human and I’m sorry for you. You really don’t have anything to say to me that would make a damn bit of difference.”

Looking as if he would vehemently disagree with that, Walter refrained when his sentinel touched his arm. “Walter, thank you. It was worth a try but he’s not going to listen.” Cheeks flaming, the guide lowered his head and returned to stand behind Murphy. John had some sympathy for the man but his sentinel was right. John seriously didn’t care to hear what the other guide had to say. Clearly the young man was suffering from a lifetime of brainwashing.

Murphy continued. “For what it’s worth, Larssen. I had no idea how latents were being treated at the compound. Walter says you’re telling the truth and I promise you I’ll look into it. You can read me if you don’t believe what I’m telling you.”

_Read him?_ It took a moment for John to understand what he meant. Murphy was giving John permission to use his abilities to determine if he was lying. Apparently, Walter had already done the same to John but he’d not noticed. Was the other guide that much stronger than John or was it the fact that John had no real idea of what he was doing whilst the other man had had a lifetime of training? Was this a trick to distract him whilst they moved in and captured him? John hesitated for a moment and then decided to throw caution to the winds. Not completely sure of what to do, he directed his latent empathy out toward the sentinel. It was odd and different to his encounters with Sherlock but there were some similarities.

With Sherlock, he’d been able to delve deeply immediately. There had been no resistance and the joining had been smooth as silk. With Murphy, John’s mind skimmed roughly over the surface of what seemed like a shield and then sank in by layers. He was stopped painfully by something before he could get too deep and he got the feeling that it was the bond between Murphy and Walter. The guide was protecting his sentinel fiercely and John couldn’t help but perversely poke at the shield somewhat. It yielded slightly but sprang back with an almost electric sting. However, John got the feeling that he could easily break through if he tried. When he thought that, he began to pick up feelings of anxiousness and fear from Walter and so backed off.

Turning his attention back to the sentinel, he relaxed and did his best to read the man’s emotions. It actually was quite easy and Murphy had the training to help him do it. The man wasn’t lying. He hadn’t known what it was like for the latents but wasn’t sure what he could do about it. Instead of reassuring John, it made him furious that someone who was so high up in the Bureau hierarchy was so fucking ignorant of what was really happening.

Angrily, he delved a little deeper and in the process pushed aside Walter’s shields as if they were tissue paper. What he found alternately reassured and disturbed him. Murphy had suspicions about certain superiors in the Bureau but had no proof and wasn’t sure where to look for it. The Price Clinic was one situation that had his suspicions aroused but there were no clues. Still angry, John pulled his mind away roughly and watched both men flinch. What he had done was rude and painful to the other two men but he didn’t care.

“So you know something is going on but you have no proof. I happen to know that there are certain criminals that have ties to your organisation and I suggest you contact DI Lestrade of the Met. He has information that could help you if you decide to clean house. Just tell him I sent you.”

For a moment, Murphy looked hopeful and nodded. “Thank you, William. Now, please come away from the edge. You need help. There’s no need for you to endanger yourself!”

But John’s attention was now turned to the other Bureau officers. Whilst he had been occupied with
Murphy, the men surrounding him had not been idle and his latent abilities told him that the men were planning something. John watched as one of the Bureau officials spoke into a mobile, requesting the northbound traffic finally be allowed to continue into town. Apparently, they didn’t want any witnesses to what they were going to do.

John still had the mobile he’d stolen from the guard. He didn’t want to say Sherlock’s name aloud where the sentinel or the Bureau people could overhear since it was such a unique name and he could easily be tracked by it. Instead, John used the name he’d know him by when they’d first met.

“Stephen, are you there?” Sherlock confirmed over the odd thrumming sound. It was hard to hear him as there was also now the noise of the vehicles on the bridge starting up again interfering but John was able to tune most of it out.

“They’re planning something to take me and I have to do this. I…I just wanted to tell you thank you and I’m sorry things didn’t work out for us. I know it’s too late, but after having known you, even after what I’d said, I’ve changed my mind about trying, you know? But it could only be you. No one else would ever be acceptable.”

The voice on the other end was intense. “I know, William. The same thoughts occurred to me as well. I believe I indicated that to you many times and I’m glad you understand. Now I want you to remember what I said to you just now and I still want you to promise me.”

Exasperated at the man’s sheer bloody mindedness, John licked his dry lips and sighed. “Sher… Stephen. Fine! Fine, dammit all! I promise I’ll do my best.” Sadness and fear began to build up in John’s chest and it was making speech difficult. “We…we could have had something real together, you know? I just wish we’d had the chance.”

“We will! Don’t you dare give up, William!”

Okay. I promise. Got to go, luv.” John switched off the mobile as the man with the taser narrowed his eyes and moved closer. Two others shifted in on John's flanks at the same time. John wasn’t sure what they thought they were going to accomplish but he wasn’t going along with it. It was time.

An animalistic terror suddenly shook John’s entire body and then a feeling of serenity settled over him like a blanket. He knew, deep down, that there was nothing else he could do and nothing else left for him except this last act of defiance. He absentely watched the stalled traffic finally beginning to move again, then stared angrily at Murphy and straightened, raising his chin angrily.

“You go back to the bloody slave traders you call your bosses at the Bureau and tell them William Larssen says to rot in hell.” With that said John stepped back from the ledge and fell into the Thames.

The drop wasn’t far though he hit the water hard and sank deep. It was pitch black and the water was so cold it actually felt warm. John quickly became disoriented and struck out in panic. Not knowing which way was up or down was terrifying. It didn’t help that the force of his body hitting the water had pulled his loose jumper partially over his head. It covered his face so he had to fight to remove it whilst still underwater. Finally, he was able to pull it off just as he was about to run out of air and managed to fight his way to the surface. He couldn’t hear anything but the rushing of the river, his own gasps and the splashes he made. Flailing about, he got in a deep breath of frigid air and sucked in some foul tasting water before he sank beneath the surface again.

The tide was going out and the current was heading east quickly so he was a few hundred feet away from the bridge when he managed to get to the surface again. Coughing and retching violently, he
tried not to panic this time and was able to keep his head above the surface somewhat. But his clothes and gun were heavy and kept dragging him down. He pulled the gun from his waistband and let it go into the water but it didn’t help much. The shore wasn’t far but the current was swift and he was already exhausted. He’d never excelled at swimming, but he struck out as best he could for the shore. After all, he’d promised Sherlock he’d not give up though he knew it was no use.

John tried hard but seemed to make no headway as he was swept along in the darkness. His limbs felt like lead and they barely moved despite his best efforts. Hypothermia was setting in, it was hard to think and he couldn’t seem to keep his head above the surface for long. Lights slowly drifted past on his left and they confused him. He couldn’t tell where he was in relation to them as his head kept going under the water. It didn’t seem worth it to spend the energy to fight to the surface again but he tried with the last of his strength. He knew he wouldn’t be able to do it again and felt sad that it was all going to end this way. But at least his death was on his own terms and he wasn’t going to be a slave to some idiotic sentinel or abusive alpha. He’d had a short but interesting life. His main regret was not having admitted to himself or to Sherlock how strong his feelings for the alpha sentinel were and now he’d never get the chance.

Feeling himself sinking again, he resigned himself to the end. There were worse ways to die. But then there was that weird thrumming sound again and his body impacted with something hard. As he slipped under the water, he raised his right hand and felt wood sliding by his numb hand and tried to scrabble for a hold but failed. Maybe he’d drifted toward the boats tied up at the pier between the two bridges. It was too bad that he had no strength to grasp anything but he thought he felt something grab his numb hand just as he slid under for the last time.

TBC....

Chapter End Notes

***There is attempted sexual assault in this chapter.***
John was disoriented at first and he couldn’t remember anything. Something was missing and that was wrong. His aching left hand reached out to search the cold sheets of the bed he was on but found nothing. The space beside him was empty and it made him extremely upset for some reason. A wonderful scent tantalised him but he couldn’t get a fix on it. Because this head seemed very fuzzy and every thought was an effort, he couldn’t figure out what was wrong.

Suddenly, all became clear and he remembered everything that had happened at the bridge and before. His mind blanked briefly in horror and adrenalin flooded his bloodstream. He had no idea where he was but he wasn’t dead and that meant the Bureau must have him in custody. How they’d managed to rescue him from certain death was a complete mystery but escape was imperative and he needed to figure out what was going on and to find a way out.

He tried to force his eyes open, but they refused to obey. John also attempted to sit up but was too weak and only managed to flail about, noting with surprise that he wasn’t restrained. Was his new owner somewhere nearby or were they going to sell him again? Panic, pain and exhaustion weighed down his limbs and when he took a deep breath, he choked and began to cough. John managed to turn onto his side by the time the coughing fit was done and he was finally able to open his eyes. It seemed he was alone in a hospital room of sorts but it was a very nice private room and the bed was much wider and more comfortable than any hospital bed he’d ever encountered before. How had he been rescued before he’d drowned? Just how long had he been unconscious and how had he got to hospital?

It was apparent he wasn’t going to be able to go anywhere anytime soon because he felt as weak as a new-born kitten. Lying back, he calmed himself, looked around carefully and took stock of his situation. On the positive side, he had not been handcuffed to the bed. On the negative side, he was a physical wreck. All of his muscles were stiff and painful, his left forearm was in a cast, heat and pain radiated up his right leg and he was hooked up to an IV for fluids. An empty bag hung on the stand beside the bag of fluids and it looked to have held antibiotics. A shudder went through him and he realised he was freezing. There were lots of blankets on the bed and he pulled as many as he could reach over his body.

Wearily, he closed his eyes. It occurred to him that he felt horribly unwell and deeply chilled. The antibiotics meant he was being treated for an infection and the tightness in his chest, the cough and chills suggested possible bronchitis/pneumonia along with fever. The cough he’d picked up had obviously got much worse. The pain in his leg meant infection, most likely from the bacteria that festered in the Thames. Queasiness swept through him and the sudden, rough cough choked him again. It seemed to take forever to subside and John felt even more exhausted when he could finally relax back onto the pillows. Again, he wondered where he was but his eyes wouldn't open and so he
When he woke again, he felt even worse than before but something smelled absolutely wonderful. It was indescribable but a bit like his Mum’s baking bread combined with spicy, hot chocolate. It was an odd but beautiful mixture. However, taking a deep breath made him cough so much that he nearly blacked out. As his breathing finally calmed John knew he should be concerned but everything seemed remote and he was only interested in finding the source of the marvellous smell. A deep sleep claimed him before he could start his search.

The sound of whimpering woke him a third time. He didn't think he’d slept very long, though. It took him a moment to realise he was the one crying out. Instead of being too cold, he felt too warm and was in a lot of pain from his leg and wrist. On top of everything, his abdomen was cramping, it was still hard to breathe and something was missing again. Had he picked up dysentery from the Thames on top of everything else? It would be just his luck. He began reaching out again in vain to find that missing thing when he heard a strange voice say, “Get Mr Holmes, now.”

As John groggily wondered what the hell that meant and who had said it, the wonderful smell returned and he couldn’t help but moan again and reach out for it. He wanted that scent more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life and amazingly it was coming closer. Forcing his eyes to open, he only got a bleary glimpse of a dark human shape as it got onto the bed with him and gathered him into its arms. Clinging to the person instinctively, John suspected that he knew who it was but his mind wasn’t working properly at the moment. Regardless, it felt right and he wasn’t going to question anything and reacted solely on impulse.

John buried his face in the person’s neck and breathed in the amazing smell as deeply as his tight chest would allow without starting a coughing fit. In the back of his mind, he wondered why his nose was pressed into a scarf and not touching skin, but despite that, the scent made him relax immediately and the pain in his body receded. The scent seemed to enter his brain directly and did wonderful, indescribable things. However, the cramping in his abdomen began to throb in a rather more interesting way and he had to clamp his teeth together to prevent another whimper.

A soft but very deep voice sounded right above his head. “John? Are you awake? Can you understand me?”

It was Sherlock! So it wasn’t the Bureau that had him! He jerked in surprise as incredibly profound relief flooded through him and the alpha’s grip tightened. Sherlock had found and rescued him from the Thames somehow. Tightening his hold on his friend, John nodded his head and tried to speak but only a croak came out of his throat. There was some movement in the room and John wordlessly protested as Sherlock pulled away from him momentarily. But then there was a straw placed between his lips and he was sipping cool water. It tasted like ambrosia. He’d not realised how dry his mouth was until then and he drank until Sherlock gently pulled the straw away.

“You’ll make yourself even sicker than you are if you drink too much. You’ve been having a lot of trouble keeping things down.”

Ignoring what the alpha said, John asked, “Where are we, how did we get here and what’s wrong with me, Sherlock?”  John’s voice was barely recognisable and he had to cough after speaking but the tightness in his chest eased from the moisture.

Sherlock petted John’s hair but was careful not to touch skin. "We're in a private hospital just outside of London. Mycroft arranged it for us. The Bureau has no idea where you are or if you’re even still alive. I brought you here over 36 hours ago after pulling you out of the Thames just as you nearly drowned. I appropriated a water craft from the owner of one of the houseboats moored by the north
west side of the bridge and came for you.”

Astounded and grateful for the unexpected gift of his life, John pulled himself even closer to Sherlock as he listened to his explanations. He knew then what the detective had done. When Sherlock realised that John was trapped on the bridge, the alpha had figured out what the doctor was going to be forced to do before John had even known himself and had planned ahead to rescue him. Sherlock had raced like a bat out of hell from the cab and stolen a boat to get to him. John had heard everything Sherlock had done over their connection on the mobile but he hadn’t deciphered the sounds or realised their significance at the time. The odd thrumming sound he’d heard must have been the diesel engine of the stolen boat.

Completely overwhelmed, John could only whisper his admiration to Sherlock. “Christ, you’re amazing, Sherlock. Absolutely brilliant!”

Taking a firmer grip on John, Sherlock buried his face in the doctor’s hair in response to the praise. John felt him smile before he continued his explanation. “As for what’s wrong with you, give me a moment to recount the many and varied ways you’ve managed to injure yourself. You were treated initially for mild hypothermia and near drowning from your bracing dip in the Thames. For the next few days, you’ll be under observation for secondary drowning.

“Once here, the doctors encountered multiple contusions and abrasions, sprained muscles, a festering gunshot wound, a deep laceration to your right leg, a broken wrist and, on top of everything else, you are in the process of developing bacterial pneumonia. From what your doctors have said, it’s been incubating for some time and the swim you took in frigid waters didn’t help. Thankfully, it’s responding well to the antibiotics.

“However, you had a deep, open wound in your leg when you fell into the Thames, which, as everyone knows, is full of hazardous microbes. The laceration was treated, but has quickly become inflamed and the infection seems resistant to any antibiotics they’ve tried to use so far. Your doctors are fairly confident that you’ll be fine, but that, along with the incipient pneumonia, is making you feverish, which explains why you feel so unwell.”

Sherlock hesitated for a moment and looked over at John. The doctor poked him in the ribs with a finger. John was indeed feeling unwell and therefore irritable. "Fairly confident? I know what that means. It’s doctor-speak for a potentially serious infection that could be life-threatening. They’re afraid it will go systemic. And I know that look on you. What else aren’t you telling me? And who the bloody hell is Mycroft?"

A grin blossomed across the alpha’s face. "Mycroft is my incredibly irritating, but sometimes useful older brother, John. You met him at the clinic when I introduced him to you as Michael. What I’ve not told you yet is something you’d have figured out yourself shortly. The cramping in your abdomen and feeling overly warm are the two major symptoms that you’ll be going into heat in a few days. Along with the interruption of your hormone suppressants my presence is part of what is bringing your heat on so quickly. And because you haven’t had a heat for some time, the doctors say it’s going to be a long and difficult one.

“Unfortunately, it’s not safe for you to do so at this time because the infections you are fighting make your health precarious. Also, you’re borderline malnourished and since you can’t eat during heat, you don’t have enough body fat to sustain you for a solid week. You could suffer heart damage since your body fat percentage is much too low to be safe for a breeding omega. The doctors are actually surprised that you are going into heat at all but they blame me.”

Lying back on the pillows but keeping a firm hold of the alpha, John groaned. He was feeling more alert and speaking was a bit easier. “Well, I’ll blame you too, then. Also, it explains why you smell
so fucking delicious. I miss a couple of days of suppressants and now my sense of smell has come back online. I’m sure the doctors can help with keeping me nourished intravenously and keep a close watch on the infections. But there’s no way to stop the heat and so I’ll just have to suffer through it on my own. I’ve always done it before and I’ll deal with it but Christ! That’s all I need right now. When it rains it pours, doesn’t it?” He tried to laugh but it ended up as a deep sigh.

The alpha made a throat clearing noise that had John turning his head and squinting up at him again. “What? What are you meant to be telling me now?”

Leaning over John, Sherlock looked down at him with a deep crease between his eyes. “I don’t want to tell you what to do about this but you must have all the options. There may be a solution to the heat. With the recent elections, Mycroft has had himself appointed to a very new government-run scientific committee and has access to experimental treatments that can be used to ameliorate your symptoms. If you use them, your heat will last only one day and be mild. Your flow will be heavier than usual but will last a few days at most. That will allow you to continue your treatments and recovery with minimal interruption. However, you must be given these drugs now if they’re to be effective and since I’m the catalyst for your heat, I must leave the hospital for the duration.”

John’s heart sank at the thought of Sherlock leaving him for any reason but he was also intrigued by the information about new research into omega reproduction. “You say these drugs are safe? How do you know that? Last thing I heard was that all experiments in omega reproductive research had been halted years ago as fruitless and unsuccessful and no one wanted to fund it any longer.”

"That’s what the political administration at the time wanted everyone to think. Mycroft informed me that the PM at the time was a staunch traditionalist opposed to omega rights and the research for reliable birth control. Apparently the researchers had made a major breakthrough in omega birth control and the testing had been safe and successful. The doctors were ready to publish and cleared to begin production of the synthetic hormones when the PM shut down the research facilities, discredited and fired all the researchers and forbade the release of the information. Apparently suppressing this research was done with the full knowledge, cooperation and active assistance of the American president at the time. I understand he was some kind of a religious extremist also opposed to omega reproductive rights, from what Mycroft said.”

John was disgusted and furious. "Well, isn't that just typical. I remember hearing that the research was going well and that we'd see major results in my lifetime but then everything just came to a complete stop and all talk of it disappeared. It was partly blamed on the depression as well as failure of the research, but I often wondered if there might have been something else to it and I was right. It's inexcusable that in this day and age, that we can't have easily available, safe and reliable birth control for all omegas." John's rant left him gasping for breath and Sherlock kissed his hair.

"Relax, John. Things have now changed. Mycroft is seeing to it that the doctors who developed this have their funding and research returned to them. Soon all omegas will have access to these medical advances and none of you will have to worry about unwanted pregnancies again. But in the meantime, do you want to receive this medication? It’s your choice.”

It wasn’t as if he had to think about it for long. “Since you’re certain it’s safe, of course I’d like to have it. I know how dangerous it can be to go through heat when ill and would very much like to avoid that if at all possible. The thought of spending only one day horny and witless instead of five is a huge incentive, as well.”

Sherlock tried to suppress a smile but not very successfully. “It’s decided then. I’ll arrange it straight away. You’ll need to be moved to an omega suite for the duration of your heat, however and of course, I cannot be with you.” Clearly reluctant, Sherlock sat up and got out of the bed, despite
John’s protests. The doctor wanted the alpha to stay but he understood. Before he left, Sherlock handed John a television remote.

“I’ll take some time to arrange this but I’ll be back with the doctors to escort you to the omega suite and to say goodbye. In the meantime you can watch telly if you feel up to it or just sleep. Your choice.” Smiling warmly, he left the room.

As the door closed behind Sherlock, John noticed a rather large person standing across the hall just outside the room. Even as ill as he was, John’s training kicked in and he easily spotted the concealed weapon hidden under the man’s suit jacket. So he had an armed guard stationed outside his room. Sherlock had said the Bureau didn’t know where he was. But he’d not said anything about Moriarty. Would Moriarty be hunting John? Surely the crazy bastard knew that Moran was dead by now. Would he know that John had been directly involved in the accident? The driver would certainly have told him so. Repressing a shudder, he wondered how long it would take for Moriarty to find him. Thankfully, Sherlock had found him first and it appeared that he was safe for the moment.

Lying back on the bed, John covered his eyes with his arm and groaned in embarrassment. Now that Sherlock and his lovely pheromones weren’t around, John’s head was much clearer and he couldn’t believe his own behaviour around the alpha. He was acting just like one of the clingy teenage omegas from the terrible romance novels he and Sherlock had read and mocked mercilessly at the Clinic. And now, here he was reacting with his hormones and throwing himself at his friend. It was bad enough to be a mindless slave to his body’s needs whenever he was in heat but this was humiliating.

John had to forgive himself for some of it, though, since it wasn’t really all his fault. His system was flooded with hormones at the moment and his response to a receptive alpha wasn’t rational. Since Sherlock wasn’t in his right mind either, it didn’t matter that he clearly had enjoyed and returned John’s embraces. An alpha in rut would agree to anything an omega in heat suggested.

This was not the best time for John to try to think through possible choices concerning his future. His body was overruling his mind and all it wanted to do was fuck Sherlock raw and make lots of babies in the process. Once the heat was over, however, there would be time to consider the situation properly and objectively. Then, John could discuss his circumstances rationally and find out what his options were. Confessing his feelings for Sherlock would have to wait.

John was in a terrible situation and his choices were severely limited. Moriarty was likely still after him and if what Moran had said about John being blacklisted was true, the doctor had no job prospects and nowhere to go. If Sherlock had picked up his things at the hotel as he’d asked, John did have enough money to get him out of the country. But then what? Jobs were even more difficult to get overseas and there was no guarantee Moriarty wouldn’t still find him. John could live on the streets, but that would only work for a short time. He could no doubt survive, but it would be very difficult and without suppressants he would go into heat again and be vulnerable to any alpha who happened to wander by. There was no one he could appeal to for help at the moment except for Sherlock.

What exactly did Sherlock want from him? Did he want to bond with John? Or did he just want to help him as his friend? Before John could decide where he stood with the alpha, they’d have to deal with Moriarty. John, and by extension Sherlock, would never be safe as long as the man was loose and even if he was imprisoned, he was still dangerous. From what Sherlock had said earlier at the bridge, Moriarty might be too busy at the moment putting out fires caused by the evidence on the jump drive John had found at Moran’s house in Chelsea but unless the mad bastard was dead, John was certain Moriarty would eventually come after him. No, John would have to find a way to eliminate the nutter.
John cared for Sherlock and thought sharing a life with him would be rewarding and fulfilling, but only if they were equal partners. Despite having shared minds briefly, John knew only some basic things about the alpha but nothing about his day to day existence. Clearly, Sherlock was interested in John as an omega and possibly as his guide but the doctor didn’t know how Sherlock might envision John fitting into his life. Would he be welcome or an intrusion? Some alphas weren’t really interested in omegas until they went into heat. The pair would live separately and the omega would also often raise the children alone whilst the alpha would live his or her life independently, dating other omegas as they chose.

It was a way of life that had been traditional at one time and was actually making a bit of a fashionable comeback in modern society. It was touted as a form of freedom for omegas and seemed to work for many who didn’t want the bother of a possessive alpha interfering with their life’s choices all the time. It was easier for an omega to live that way in modern times since they now had many more legal rights than ever before in society. However, John failed to see any advantage for the omega in that kind of arrangement and absolutely hated the idea. He wanted a full-time life partner and lover, not a sometime fuck buddy for heats. Also, if he ever did have children, John wanted someone who would want to share in the responsibilities of raising the child. So there was much yet to learn about Sherlock and his intentions before John would decide anything else. Confident that they could eventually negotiate something agreeable to both, John ignored the little voice that wondered what he would do if they could not.

With that decided and feeling much better about the entire thing, John managed to get out of bed and made his slow way to the loo. There were a few scary moments when he thought his leg might not hold his weight, but the pain was bearable and he knew it was better to get up and move about whilst he still felt well enough. He was walking slowly but at least he was moving and being able to wash his face and hands made him feel almost human again.

Looking into the mirror, he didn’t particularly like what he saw. Dark blue eyes stared hollow-eyed at an ashen, badly bruised face that had had more than its share of care and worry lining it. There was much more grey in his hair and beard stubble than he remembered and it had him wondering what a young, wealthy and attractive alpha sentinel could possibly see in someone like him. The tattoo on his ear created an overall picture of extreme unattractiveness. He’d have to see about getting it removed at some point soon.

Despite the fact that he was an omega guide, he had little to offer to an alpha sentinel. Sherlock represented a genetic combination that was as rare as hen’s teeth and he could have any omega he wanted. John was older than Sherlock, scarred, war weary and far from perfect. He had a terrible temper that frightened even him sometimes. He was unapologetically ruthless to his enemies and could be every bit as possessive as the worst alpha.

By no stretch of the imagination could John ever be confused with an obedient, graceful, plump and fertile omega or especially with a well-trained Bureau guide. However, Sherlock seemed sincere in his desire to be with John which confused the hell out of the doctor. They’d have to see what happened when the heat was over and rationality reasserted itself. Sighing, John carefully dried his bruised face and scraped hands. Deliberately, he turned his back on the mirror in the vain hope of forgetting what the reflection really represented.

Once he limped to the bed and collapsed onto the pillows, John raised the bed to watch the evening news. He was still feverish and coughing but felt well enough to try to catch up on local events. Also, he wanted to be awake when Sherlock returned with the doctors. He was starting to actually feel hungry so it seemed the antibiotics were doing their job and fighting back the infections. Hopefully, someone would bring him a meal soon.
The political and economic situation of the country led the broadcast. The news about the markets and job growth was becoming more positive with a surprising increase in jobs noted for the previous quarter. It was very nice to hear good news for once and John relaxed into the pillows and wondered if he could possibly stay in London and practice medicine someday. With Moran gone maybe Moriarty would forget about him. Maybe there was some way he and Sherlock… and maybe pigs would sprout wings and fly. He really didn't want to get his hopes up only to have them dashed so instead focused on the news again. Shifting gingerly in the bed, John turned the sound up.

The story had changed to local events and the newscaster’s expression had turned grim. The picture on the screen switched to the River Police fishing a familiar and very soggy jumper out of the Thames.

“In London news today, we must sadly report that the search for the latent guide, William Larssen, has been suspended and he is now presumed dead. As many of you already know from our previous broadcasts, the dramatic confrontation between Guide Larssen and Co-Director Murphy of London Bureau of Sentinel and Guide Protection as well as the latent’s plunge from the Battersea Bridge were recorded by eyewitnesses early yesterday morning. We will repeat the video of the dramatic events shortly but right now we have breaking news related to this story from the London Bureau.”

The scene switched to Murphy and his guide Walter being followed aggressively by reporters shouting questions at them as they exited a vehicle and headed into a building. One reporter yelled very audibly and somewhat angrily, “What are you going to do about the abuse of latents at your South London compound, Director? We all saw Mr Larssen’s condition before he jumped from the bridge. You can’t deny he’d been badly misused and he’d just escaped from your custody. Have you heard that questions are being asked in Parliament about this very thing right now?”

Murphy stopped a few meters before the door to the building, put Walter behind him and turned to face the reporters. “I can assure you that the allegations of abuse of latents reported by Mr Larssen are being addressed by the Bureau at the highest levels. I will leave no stone unturned and if these accusations prove to be true, the Director and I assure you that heads will roll, ladies and gentlemen.” He continued to make his way toward the entrance to the building but the reporters kept after him.

More questions were shouted. "Are your adverts for latents lies? Was William right that there really is no job training or further education available for latents and that you are selling them into virtual slavery?"

"What about the rape charges? Are you going to look into that?"

“Where are the other latents that escaped? Have they been apprehended yet or are you letting them go?"

“What are you doing about the anti-sentinel groups that have been forming to protest the taking of latents and the death of Mr Larssen? They have some very high-powered legal backing and claim what you’re doing is highly illegal, you know.”

"Why do you think Mr Larssen preferred to commit suicide rather than be returned to the custody of the Bureau? What does that say about his treatment and the treatment in general of latents at the compound? Was he raped and beaten by your employees? We’ve always been told that sentinels would never hurt a guide!"

Rather than looking angry, Murphy's expression turned sad. "The people who allegedly injured Mr Larssen were not sentinels. A sentinel would never willingly or knowingly injure a guide, even a latent! What happened to William Larssen is a tragedy for the entire sentinel and guide community. I can’t begin to know what was going through his mind when he chose to jump from the bridge. But I
will answer no more questions until I have additional information. As soon as I know something concrete, I will call a press conference. Good day to you, ladies and gentlemen. Walter, please come with me.” With that, he turned and opened the door for himself and his guide and disappeared into the building where the reporters couldn’t follow.

John was stunned. His false identity had been declared dead and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. On one hand it was a relief since the Bureau and police would stop looking for him. However, since he didn’t have enough money to buy another identity, he’d have no choice but to return to being John Watson, who was still untested by the Bureau and worse, known to Moriarty. And even if the Bureau somehow forgot about him, John knew Moriarty would never forget. If John stayed in London, he’d have to do something about Moriarty and he really had no real idea of where to even start looking for the mad bastard aside from the house in Chelsea. He’d have to wait for the madman to come to him, which scared him witless.

His thoughts were interrupted by the telly as the camera cut back to the newscaster. “That was a live report. Co-Director of the London Bureau Charles Murphy was being asked questions from reporters about the events on Battersea Bridge that occurred in the pre-dawn hours of yesterday morning. For those of you who missed the tragic and dramatic events, the following video was taken by an eyewitness. Please be aware that this might be too intense for young viewers.”

The screen switched once again, this time to a video that had been taken from a mobile camera. The filming had been done by someone who had been in one of the vehicles stopped in traffic off to John’s right. It took a moment for him to understand what was happening because he didn’t even recognise himself at first. One side of his face was badly swollen from the car smash and it looked as if he’d been in a major punch up. John watched as the camera zoomed shakily in on him and the men surrounding him. It was heart wrenching to see just how exhausted and defeated he looked as he backed against the bridge’s barrier. But then his spine stiffened and he was all angry defiance as he faced down Murphy. It was so odd to see himself that way, as if he was an actor in a play. His breath caught while he watched himself crawl painfully over the barrier and then deliberately step back off the ledge and fall, presumably to his death. The video cut off just as gasps and cries of distress could be heard from the occupants of the car as the vehicle the owner of the camera was in began to drive away.

“The police assured us that a search for Mr Larssen’s family is ongoing but so far there has been no success. They are appealing to the public to help them find any relatives of the unfortunate latent guide.”

The picture behind the newscaster changed to a burning car and John’s heart sped up when he recognised the location. “Also, in a related story, there is still no real answer as to who else may have been involved in the accident where a vehicle smashed at high speed into the Royal College of Art and burst into flames, causing untold thousands in damage to the building.

“As we reported earlier, the vehicle fits the description of one that was seen by witnesses at the location of an appalling mass shooting of six Bureau employees at the intersection of Candahar and Cabul Street a short time before the accident. Someone fitting Mr Larssen’s description was reported to have been surrounded by six Bureau security men who were presumably preparing to take him into custody when a vehicle drove up to the scene and someone inside began shooting. Witnesses say that Mr Larssen, who had been tased by the Bureau members and was helpless, was taken from the scene by the shooter and placed in the vehicle, which was then driven away at high speed. It was shortly after the abduction that the same car ran into the building.

“It is unknown how Mr Larssen may have been involved in the car smash, though CCTV shows him walking away from the area just after the accident. It is suspected that Mr Larssen was in the vehicle
at the time, but it is known that he heroically extracted the badly injured driver at great risk to himself just before it exploded in flames. CCTV shows Mr Larssen carrying the driver out of the building to a car park about fifty meters away from the burning vehicle before leaving him and walking toward the bridge.

“Now there is additional disturbing news. The driver of the car was found dead in hospital this morning, though his injuries had not been considered life threatening. An autopsy will be performed but representatives of the police say foul play is suspected. No one else was found in the burnt out car and the police cannot trace the owner of the vehicle. The investigation will continue and we will bring you the latest on this mysterious situation.”

John’s heart seemed to stand still in his chest and then began to pound in his chest. His stomach churned and he felt light headed. No one else found in the car? Where the bloody hell was Moran? Against all odds, had he survived? John hadn’t seen him leave the car but then he’d been face down on the floor shortly before the accident and then unconscious for a time. Putting his head in his hands, John couldn’t believe it. He’d thought he was at least free of that one particular bastard. Now he would somehow have to deal with both Moran and Moriarty.

The door swung open suddenly and Sherlock was back. It was clear he’d been running and he spoke breathlessly. “John, are you all right? I could hear your heartbeat pick up from down the hall.”

John could only point to the television that still showed the image of the burning car. “Moran’s still alive. They didn’t find him in the wreckage and now he’ll come after me again. He’ll either kill me himself or have Moriarty do it, just like he promised.”

Sherlock glanced at the screen and then back at John with a concerned expression. “You’ve still not told me how you met Moriarty.”

“I was planning on telling you what happened that day that you were kidnapped at the clinic. There simply hasn’t been time yet.”

Just then there was a knock on the door and the room was suddenly full of medical personnel. A doctor walked in as well as a nurse and an orderly with a wheelchair. They bustled about and before he knew it, John was wrapped snugly in a robe and slippers and had been carefully placed in the wheelchair. As Sherlock trailed after them, John was transported to another room on an upper floor. To John’s relief, the very large bodyguard followed them, also.

The new room was every bit as nice as the one he’d left, though the bed was much smaller than the one he’d been in downstairs. As he relaxed on the new bed, the nurse had him hooked up to another bag of antibiotics while the doctor made notations on his chart. Sherlock entered the room carrying a tray with food that actually smelled somewhat good. Stomach growling audibly, John sat up and made grabby hands for the tray, making Sherlock huff a genuine laugh.

The orderly was suddenly there with a table positioned over John’s lap and finally he was tucking into the first decent hot meal he could remember having in days. The fish and chips didn’t count. Sherlock settled beside the bed in a chair as the nurse and orderly left the room, leaving only the doctor behind. The man was a slightly plump, bonded omega and he seemed very excited to be there. John watched him with a raised eyebrow as he sipped his broth.

“We’ve not been introduced yet, Mr Watson. My name is Dan Harris. I’m an omega specialist and I’ll be looking after you for the next few days. I understand you’ve been brought up to speed on your injuries and the new medications by your alpha. Providing you can keep the food down, I’ve got some pills for you to take. They’ll help you through your heat and I’m excited to say this is the first time we’ve had access to these drugs. I’ve read all the research and trials so if you have any
questions for me, please feel free to ask at any time. As an omega myself, I have to say this will revolutionise omega’s reproductive lives. It’s unbelievable!” Practically bouncing on his toes, Dr Harris smiled broadly at John, who couldn’t help returning it.

"Please call me John. And thank you for your help, Dan. I honestly wasn’t looking forward to three to five days of heat after what I’ve been through recently."

The younger doctor’s face fell and he nodded sympathetically. “Yes, indeed. You’ve been badly mistreated and I’m sorry for that. If you need anyone to speak to, there are psychologists on staff who would be glad to help you. Please let me or the nurse know if you’d like to talk to anyone at any time.”

John frowned in confusion at the man’s extreme concern before he recalled that the younger man did not know how John's injuries had come about and his reaction suggested that he might assume there had been sexual assault. Instead of correcting him, John just smiled wanly, thanked the man and finished his meal. The food was bland and easily digested but John was only able to eat a small amount of it. Sherlock clearly wasn’t happy about that but didn’t say anything as John pushed away the remains of the meal and looked expectantly at the doctor.

Harris handed John a couple of pills. “Please wait fifteen minutes and take these if you keep the food down. You are not underweight but you are mostly muscle and bone. For an omega, you have hardly any fat reserves and you understand why this can be dangerous. I’d very much like to see you gain a few pounds before you leave here, if at all possible.

“You’ll be going into heat in a few days.” Dr Harris nodded toward Sherlock. “In the meantime, your alpha should stay away or his presence will prolong it. Once the heat is over, you’ll bleed more heavily than usual but it should last only a comparatively short time. One interesting side note about this pill you should know is that it will shorten your heat now but you will have another one sooner than usual. So instead of having a heat in three months, you’ll likely have another, full heat within the next month or so. It’s a fair trade off, in my opinion to protect your health.” John had to agree with that one and urged the doctor to continue.

“Also remember that this pill is not a contraceptive. You are still fertile and if you are knotted by your alpha you will conceive. Now if you have any questions, I’ll be available to you whenever you need me and we plan to take very good care of you. This is a fully furnished omega room, so you will find everything in here you need to help you through your heat. If there’s anything else you want that we don’t have, please ring one of the staff.”

With that, the doctor nodded to them both pleasantly, picked up the tray with the remains of John’s meal and left them with a smile. John turned to Sherlock and looked carefully at the alpha. For the first time, John noticed the dark shadows under his eyes and the cuts and scrapes on the alpha’s hands. They looked red and irritated and John sighed.

“I see you’ve managed to injure yourself, too. Did you do that when you pulled me out of the water? If so, I hope you’ve seen a doctor. You yourself recently mentioned the amount of bacteria in the Thames.”

Wearily, Sherlock nodded. “Yes, I saw someone the night they brought you in and received a prescription for an antibiotic and a tetanus shot. I’ll be fine, John. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, I won’t worry. So. Have you been here since I was admitted? When was the last time you slept?” Sherlock blinked vaguely at him and didn’t answer.
Rolling his eyes in exasperation, John sighed again. “Well that answers that question. You’re exhausted, Sherlock. You should go home and get some rest.”

Shaking his head, the alpha disagreed and sat up, looking more alert. “Lestrade, Mycroft and I are actively pursuing the leads you gave us with that jump drive and we’re making considerable progress. But I had to make sure you were going to be all right and arrange for your safety. Now you need to tell me how and where you encountered James Moriarty. He is probably the most dangerous villain in London with an incredibly wide reaching criminal organisation. If left unchecked, I suspect his reach would eventually extend worldwide if it hasn’t already.”

Sighing again, John took as deep a breath as he could without coughing. “I had a feeling that was the case but you forgot to mention that Moriarty is also totally mental. Moran isn’t much better. Mad as a box of frogs, the pair of them.” John proceeded to tell Sherlock about Moriarty and Moran’s visit to his flat and what Moran wanted. Sherlock frowned angrily at that and moved closer to John. The possessiveness of his expression thrilled John’s inner omega but he had to disregard it for the moment. It was hard enough to think as it was with all the pheromones floating about.

As he continued, John gave an involuntary shudder when he mentioned the horrific threats Moriarty had made against him if John didn’t agree to obey Moran’s demands. As the alpha’s expression grew grimmer, John also told Sherlock about what he’d learnt from his new ‘owner’ of the connection between the Bureau, Moriarty and AG.

John sniffed in disgust. “It’s clear that this is all about money for someone high up in the Bureau. So many young lives damaged to line some idiot’s pocket! We already know Moriarty is involved. Talbot’s records must have some information that can be useful. Find and follow the money trail and you’ll discover the ones in the Bureau who are responsible.

“If the actual drug that helped young unbonded sentinels had been not been concealed, it would have been freely available to any sentinel. Real guides will always be needed but the demand for latents would dry up and the cash flow along with it. Altering AG into an addictive street drug that could kill and having a criminal like Moriarty distribute it completely destroyed any credibility the original formulation would have had. With the research on omega reproduction being suppressed as well, it makes me wonder what else is being kept away from the public. We can’t let them get away with it!”

Sherlock huffed angrily. “Don’t worry. Mycroft is looking into it all. Also, Talbot’s documents have been turned over to a forensic accountant and are currently being analysed. I don’t have any connections to the Bureaucracy myself, but it seems that your Co-director Murphy took your advice to contact Lestrade for help. They plan to meet soon and discuss the connection between latents, AG and Moriarty. What are your thoughts about Murphy? Did you get any kind of read on him on the bridge?”

Surprised that Sherlock had understood what had happened between them on the bridge, John nodded. “He’s an honest man, though his hands are mostly tied. Murphy doesn’t believe he’d got as much support behind him as he needs to push the issue. ‘Reading’ him was very different to when I entered your mind. I mostly got emotion from you. With Murphy I got emotions, too but I also was able to sense actual thoughts. It was weird but I think his guide helped me to understand what I was ‘reading’. They wanted me to know and I could tell that they were telling the truth because I broke through Walter’s shields and went deeper to where Murphy’s emotions were. I hurt them both, but got what I wanted, at least.”

Closing his eyes, John allowed a wave of tiredness to sweep through him whilst Sherlock digested what he’d just learnt. Turning his head toward the alpha, John opened his eyes and smiled at
Sherlock fondly.

“Did I ever thank you for saving me? No? Well, thank you. For what it’s worth, I appreciate it very much and think you’re remarkable. I'm grateful for my life. I was pretty sure that, when I went down for that last time that I wasn't coming up and I had a lot of regrets.”

He was going to continue but found himself being strongly embraced by an anxious alpha. Angry pheromones were flying all about. "I was not going to allow you to die! And you are not to ever do anything like that again, do you hear me?"

The demand was reinforced by a flood of urgent alpha dominant pheromones and John's omega had no defence against it. His response was immediate. Clutching Sherlock tightly, John found himself murmuring nonsense, trying to calm and reassure the alpha.

"I'm sorry, Sherlock. I won't ever do that again." Finally Sherlock relaxed and pulled back, gazing with narrowed, frowning eyes at John's face.

"I expect to be obeyed in this, John. Do you understand?"

Something about the possessiveness of Sherlock's tone thrilled John but at the same time worried him. They still needed to work things out but this clearly wasn't the time. He had an alpha to reassure. "I do understand you, Sherlock and I will try not to scare you like that again if I can help it. As much as I want to do, I can't promise that I won't do something dangerous again, though."

Pressing his forehead against John's, Sherlock sighed in defeat. "I suppose that's all I can ask, since we aren't bonded and you aren't my omega. Yet. But I would appreciate you doing your best to avoid anything that would put you in a similar situation in future."

"I'll do my best but I can't promise, luv." The skin-to-skin contact, small as it was, began to affect John and he couldn’t help a grin. "You'd best go now or I'll start to climb you like a tree."

That brought another huff of delighted laughter from Sherlock, who pulled back and looked at John as a starving man would look at a banquet. “You and I have a lot to discuss when I return. There are …things…I want to say to you when I am free. In the meantime, there are some major leads in this case that I have to pursue. Time is not my friend in this and I must go. I may not be back before you are discharged but I’ll make arrangements for you."

Quickly, Sherlock spun on his heel and headed for the door. Once there, he turned back momentarily. “I've asked my brother to bring you some more clothing. The things I picked up for you from the hotel are already here. Your mobile is in the bedside drawer and your laptop in the wardrobe. I'll see you as soon as I can get away, John.”

The alpha was likely going into danger and John wished there was some way he could be there to watch his back but it wasn’t possible. Suppressing his frustration, he smiled supportively. “Good hunting, mate. I’ll be thinking of you.”

Once the door was closed, John reached over to the table beside the bed and pulled open the drawer. John’s mobile and charger were there, just as Sherlock had promised. Quickly he checked for messages and found two missed ones. Both were from Murray and he listened with his heart pounding in apprehension.

Murray’s cheerful voice chimed out. “Hey, mate! I’ve not been able to reach Masters but I was able to get hold of her second-in-command. He promises to check with her and get back to me. Don’t bother ringing me back since I know you’re skint right now. I’ll ring when I know something.”
The second message was much less jolly. “Doc, what the hell did you do? You’ve been blacklisted, no shit. No one will take you, which I find impossible to believe. Anderson said someone’s got to Masters and threatened her to keep you off her team and that it’s not personal but Christ, mate! Try to find out who did this to you or you’ll never get work again. Look, we’re shipping out soon and I’ll not be able to communicate for a couple weeks at least. I’ll try to find out what I can but it’s going to be a while. Good luck, John. I’m really sorry to be the one to tell you this.”

Setting down the mobile, John slumped back on the pillows. Moriarty had actually followed through with his threat and had blacklisted John. On the positive side Moran’s claim that Masters was “good friends” with Moriarty seemed to be false. At least that door wasn’t permanently closed to him and when Moriarty was finally dealt with, the option of joining up with Masters may be open to him once again.

But right now, there was nothing for it. He’d figure something out once the damn heat was over. John could already feel some of the symptoms coming up on him. He was ravenous again at the moment, which was a sign he needed to stock up on calories. Instead of large meals, the staff would be bringing him six small, nutritious meals throughout the day and night over the next day or three. Right before the heat started, his body would reject all food and his system would clear his digestive system out naturally so he could be ready for heat and impregnation.

The room was a typical omega suite similar to the ones John had always used in the past during his heats. Once his heat began, the door could be locked from the inside with access only by the staff, which consisted of betas and omegas exclusively. Even John’s bodyguard stationed outside the room was a beta. Alphas were not allowed anywhere on the floor when an omega went into heat and it was a directive that was strictly enforced.

All the other omega rooms John had used only had a few simple vibrators or life-like dildos with expanding knots that usually didn’t work very well. This room was well stocked with numerous sexual aids and John carefully inspected them. As per regulation the aids were all professionally sterilised and carefully packaged. Also, there were many different varieties, designed only for omegas.

As he examined them all, what surprised him was the very high quality of the aids, many of which were of the newest and most recent design. However one in particular was extremely expensive and even had a large faux-semen reservoir that would be triggered by the omegas’ orgasm to not only knot but to realistically simulate the ejaculation of the alpha. John had read about that particular aid and had been curious. Some research had shown that faking ejaculation would fool the omega’s body into a shorter heat. Though he wasn’t sure he believed that, John decided to try the aid at least once when his heat arrived.

John had never enjoyed the feeling of penetration when in heat before and had avoided anything that would go that deep. He would reluctantly use one of the dildos or vibrators because it helped him scratch an itch he couldn’t reach without it but he had never really liked the feeling of being invaded and filled. It made him feel even more helpless during a time when he was completely out of control anyway.

This new aid might be too much but he thought he should at least try it since it was touted as being almost as good as a real alpha and since he was thinking of bonding to Sherlock, it made sense he should experiment with it and see what the fuss was all about. It was huge in size compared to the aids he’d used before and it would actually expand as he used it, just as an alpha’s penis would do once knotting started. It was rather intimidating, actually and he gave himself permission to change his mind later.
The next few days were boring but he spent most of his time sleeping, occasionally watching telly and recovering from his various injuries. The doctors had indeed found an antibiotic that could deal with the infection in his leg and he finally began to feel almost human again. Daytime telly finally rotted his brain so he downloaded free e-books to read on his laptop and the nurses took it upon themselves to keep him supplied with newspapers and gossip rags that made him laugh. The newspapers had some brief mentions of his former identity and he noted with interest that a memorial ceremony was held for him at some church near the bridge. People were leaving mementos of cards, flowers and stuffed animals on the bridge where he’d jumped, which he thought was alternately creepy and rather touching.

It was exciting to find that people were not forgetting why he’d jumped and had put the screws on their politicians for answers. John sniggered as he read a newspaper article about a politician who’d been one of the major sponsors of the most recent anti-latent bill. A large number of his constituents had surrounded him as he left his office, demanding he respond to their questions and when security tried to scatter them, they had pelted the hapless official with rubbish from a nearby skip.

It seemed an appropriate response from the constituents, in John’s opinion and he was glad to know there was indeed a grass-roots movement growing to halt the trade in latents. Sherlock had assured him that Mycroft was not only looking into the legality of the new laws but was somehow providing support to the anti-sentinel movements as well. John wondered just how much money and power the beta sentinel had and if he could actually do anything against the bloated organisation that was the Bureau.

On the third day after Sherlock left, he could feel his heat coming on. As always, it started with the nausea and aversion to food followed by cramping in his guts. Soon he was spending a lot of time on the toilet as his system cleaned itself out. The nurses had put fresh linens on his bed in addition to a plastic protective sheet below since the lubrication of an omega was copious and soaked in everywhere. Extra linens were stocked in the wardrobe. Since he was much more mobile now that his health had improved, they had also supplied the room’s small fridge with a large amount of water and nutritious drinks. It was unlikely he’d need them since his heat wasn’t supposed to last more than a day, but with his luck it would go the entire three to five days. He hoped the new drug would work but he wasn’t going to count on it.

Restlessly he prowled the room as his skin began to feel tight and itchy whilst his abdomen felt increasingly bloated. The nurses noticed and made sure he was comfortable before leaving and reminding him to lock the door for the duration. No one would come in until he rang for them so John would be on his own for the next day or so, depending on how long the heat lasted. After a time, he managed to fall into a light sleep only to waken to soaked sheets and a raging erection. It was a condition he was very familiar with and knew just what to do.

In reality, wanking endlessly for hours and days was not as much fun as it sounded and he was glad the heat was going to be short. It was the mindless lust that he objected to most of all. Such extreme loss of control was hateful to him and he had never had a partner that he trusted enough to allow them to see him in that condition. Sherlock was the only alpha he’d ever seriously considered sharing his heat with. He shuddered at the thought of Moran and put it from his mind.

The heat progressed more or less normally, though there was a feeling of urgency to it that he wasn’t prepared for and he’d not experienced in the past. Also, despite sometimes feeling overwhelmed by his body’s needs, this time he was able to keep his wits about himself more than usual. The new medication was likely the cause and John decided not to worry about it.

When the time came where stroking himself to orgasm was no longer enough and he needed something more, John hesitantly reached for the newest sexual aid that he’d promised himself he’d at
least try. Its artificial testicles were primed with the fake seed and ready to go (he must have put 20 ml or more into the device to fill it, since alphas were prodigious ejaculators), but he stared at the enormous thing for a few moments before he cautiously inserted the glans into his opening. His natural copious lubrication made the insertion slick and smooth. It was big and at first seemed much too large, stretching him further than he’d experienced before. But then his body suddenly relaxed and eagerly accepted it. In fact his traitorous muscles actually pulled the device deeper inside him, much further than he’d ever allowed a toy to go before. It felt very weird and he wasn’t sure he liked it. The artificial knot stayed just outside his opening but teased it in a strange way that also felt odd. The knot hadn’t expanded anywhere near the way it was meant to later but it was still quite large, which made John wonder with some trepidation just how it could possibly fit. After a few tentative thrusts back and forth, he decided he was going to go back to the type that he was more familiar with but then reluctantly recalled that this experience was what he could expect if he were to bond with Sherlock.

Just the thought of the alpha fucking him made his body clench around the toy and suck it inside again before he could fully remove it. The contractions of his muscles caused the false glans to rub against something and he gasped in surprised pleasure. Imagining it was Sherlock’s alpha sized cock doing that to him made his hips involuntarily thrust upward which resulted in the weight of the heavy toy pushing in even deeper, rubbing the false knot against his opening hard and beginning to force it in somewhat. It felt absolutely wonderful and he hadn’t realised he could take so much length but as he touched the base of the aid there were even more inches yet to be inserted.

Deciding to go with it, John started to push and pull the toy smoothly in and out, keeping the knot just outside, establishing a rhythm and at the same time trying to find that lovely spot again. He finally succeeded and began to hit it at every other thrust. Breathing heavily, his arousal ratcheted up and he began to moan and thrash in ecstasy as he fucked himself harder and deeper with the toy. He’d never felt anything like it and on the next thrusts he pushed the device in all the way, which forced the thick part of the knot at least an inch inside. It surprised him that it didn’t hurt at all and then the end of the fake cock seemed to find another place deep inside that he’d never touched before and with an astonished shout, he orgasmed without even touching his own member.

As his back arched in bliss and the lights went off behind his eyelids, the toy’s knot suddenly inflated enormously and the synthetic penis began to pulsate and swell, forcing a huge amount of the sterile, fake ejaculate into him, just as a real alpha’s cock would do. It felt incredible and immediately set off another orgasm that lasted for what seemed to be hours but was actually nearly a minute. He’d never felt anything like it and shuddered, gasping for breath as the device continued to pump fluid into him. Body quivering in rapture, John amazingly felt another orgasm building as the knot swelled even more and pulsed, doing incredible things to his insides. Throwing his head back with a sharp gasp and a cry, he came again hard as his internal muscles writhed and fluttered tight around the toy and tried to milk every drop of the fake semen out of the device.

After at least a half hour and about four more orgasms later, the false knot deflated and the heavy toy slipped out of him with a wet splat onto the saturated bed. Lungs heaving like a bellows, John could only blink up at the ceiling in sheer astonishment. His exhausted body hummed happily in satiation and his abdomen throbbed pleasantly, bulging full of fake come, while his limbs felt like they were made of jelly. After what seemed like days, John finally managed to stand on weak legs that shook and twitched with electrical shocks. He expected a large amount of the fake semen to come out when he stood, but he was surprised when hardly any of it leaked out. Making his way slowly to the loo, he took a hot shower before the next wave of lust overwhelmed him. Happily, he also took the time to clean and refill the new device, deciding that, if he was never able to have a real alpha, that toy would make an excellent substitute. The knot alone was worth the price of the gadget.

Once he was back in bed, now with clean linen, John wondered how much better the sex would be
with a real alpha. If it could be this astounding with a stupid plastic device, how would it be with Sherlock? Bloody fantastic, he imagined. Again, just the thought of Sherlock seemed to set him off and the heat started up again. This time the session was every bit as intense and marvellous as before. After multiple orgasms John was totally shattered and dropped off to sleep immediately afterward. Dreams of Sherlock fucking him hard and deep made him toss and turn occasionally but then a sound woke him.

Shocked, he blinked sleepily as the door slowly opened with a click. Sitting up in the sticky sheets he’d not bothered to change before falling asleep, he rubbed his eyes and stared at the shape standing in the darkness. Had he accidentally pushed the nurses’ button? The perfume of alpha pheromones stunned him and he rolled off the bed, ready to defend himself when he belatedly recognised Sherlock’s scent.

“Wait! Sherlock? What the bloody hell are you doing? You’re not supposed to be here until my heat is over!”

The shape moved closer but it was too dark to really see the alpha. As John fumbled for the light, the deep voice stopped him. “No, John. Don’t turn on the light. I’ve been thinking about nothing but you for days and I just want to feel you. I want to sink my cock into your tight hole and fuck you until you scream.”

That actually sounded fabulous to John, but he didn’t want to do anything like that until they had a chance to work out an agreement between them. “No, Sherlock. You need to leave. We can’t do this right now, luv.”

“Please, John. Please! Let me feel you come around my cock, just once,” the alpha begged. Though mostly still in shadow, Sherlock stepped forward enough to reveal he was gloriously nude and John couldn’t believe how gorgeous and well endowed the alpha was. Sherlock’s penis was purple with arousal, leaking pre-come and hard as a rock. His bollocks were absolutely massive and were pulled up tight between his legs. John had never seen anything like it before and his knees went weak as his mouth began to water.

John couldn’t help but consider the request seriously. “Well, I suppose we could try it once, but don’t you dare knot me, Sherlock! No bonding either, mate. We have things to work out first.”

"Of course, John. Whatever you say.” The alpha was magnanimous in his triumph. “Now get on your hands and knees and present yourself, omega!”

Blinking in surprise at the order, John’s body was already obeying before he realised how out of character the words were. However, the room was now thick with alpha pheromones and Sherlock was on the bed behind him. The alpha put a big hand against the back of John’s neck and pushed him face down onto the bed whilst he pulled John’s hips up high. Then there were two fingers in John’s opening, thrusting swiftly in and out. John was a bit sensitive from the toy he’d been using but it still felt wonderful. Pressing back onto the long, thick fingers, he groaned as a third and then a fourth was shoved inside. Copious amounts of slick lubricant oozed luxuriously out of him, coating his legs and cock as he writhed shamelessly at the sensations produced by the clever digits.

The fingers were suddenly removed and replaced by something much, much larger, even bigger than the toy John had been using. It was blood hot and thrust roughly into him, making fireworks go off inside as he shuddered in delight. Strong, large hands gripped his hips tightly, holding him immobile, as the alpha grunted and began to thrust and plunge in and out of John. Even though it hurt when the large knot was forced in and out of his opening with each push, the omega squirmed
and pushed back, welcoming the enormous invader and urging it to force its way in deeper. Sweat dripped from his face and Sherlock grunted as they slid and moved together, slick and sodden with perspiration and body fluids, to create as much pleasure as possible. The wet sounds they made as their bodies came together were incredibly erotic, making John shudder and writhe. Then the thrusts sped up impossibly fast and all John could do was to brace himself against the headboard and moan in ecstasy.

The sensations were indescribable, so much better than the toy and as Sherlock bottomed out inside him, his enormous bollocks slapping against the omega’s arse with a meaty smack. John shouted and came suddenly, just as he had before. His internal muscles clamped hard, then shuddered and rippled around the enormous cock, holding Sherlock tightly immobile and fully sheathed as the alpha moaned and cried out in delight. As John began to come down from the orgasm Sherlock pulled out slightly and then roughly forced his cock in even further whilst his knot started to swell.

“Wait, Sherlock! Pull out, luv! You can’t come inside me! I’ll conceive!” But it was too late. John could feel another orgasm building as Sherlock swelled, pulsed enormously and throbbed deep inside the omega as the alpha’s gigantic bollocks poured gouts of seed directly into John’s fertile womb.

“Fuck! You weren’t supposed to do that, Sherlock!” John gasped and shook through another intense orgasm as Sherlock’s sweat slick, heavily muscled torso covered John’s back and the alpha’s mouth nipped at his neck. The man was grinding himself harder against John’s arse as he continued to ejaculate and his knot swelled and pulsed painfully large inside John. The alpha kept trying to force himself inside John even further as his orgasm ebbed, though it wasn’t possible. Thick, hairy arms encircled John and huge hands plucked at his sensitive nipples, causing an involuntary ripple of pleasure to run through John’s body, which resulted in his muscles clamping even tighter around the enormous cock. The deep voice sounded different now as the alpha began to come copiously again into John with a guttural grunt and gasp.

“Now you’re mine, luv. No one will ever want you but me.” Then Sebastian Moran’s strong, white teeth bit the back of John’s neck, drawing blood and making John scream in abject terror as he felt his mind begin to intertwine and bond with the huge alpha’s.

Gasping in horror, John sat up in the damp, sticky bed as his eyes darted around in panic. The lights were on full, the door was still firmly locked and there were no strangers in the room. He was safe. Collapsing back on the bed, he closed his eyes, drew in a shaky breath and covered his face with his hands. Christ, what a nightmare! It had been amazing at first, but he cursed his over active imagination. It was clear he was still worried about Moran being on the loose and what he and Moriarty would do to him if they caught him.

There was no way he was going to get any more sleep before the next round of heat, so he changed the sheets again and cleaned up in the bath, filling the sex toy to the maximum. Looking down at himself, he could see that his normally flat belly was slightly distended from the infusion of the fake ejaculate. Most of it was ending up inside his body and very little was actually escaping from his opening, just as would happen if he’d been truly knotted. And he’d likely have conceived already if it had been real. Again, he wondered how different it would be with a real alpha and if Sherlock would fill him up as much if not more than the sex toy.

John’s inner omega shuddered in absolute delight at just the thought of being filled with that much seed by Sherlock and the thought of his belly expanding to an enormous size with babies made him ache and whimper with need. Evolution had certainly done a number on omegas, doing its best to make sure they desperately wanted to reproduce. Thank Christ he only went through this a few times a year, if that much. As he headed back to bed, he hoped that his mind would soon return to rationality.
Though, if he bonded with Sherlock and the new birth control measures worked as promised, he might be able to do this much more often. Would he be able to enjoy sex with Sherlock during his heat without fear of pregnancy? The thought was intriguing and hopeful. His sex drive wasn’t anywhere near as strong when not in heat, but he had always enjoyed it with his beta girlfriends before.

If he and Sherlock bonded as sentinel and guide, would their encounter be just a one-time thing to facilitate bonding or could they have sex whenever they wanted? Would that delicious feeling he got when they touched skin-to-skin be constant or wear off after their first encounter? He really had no idea but didn’t like the thought that sex with Sherlock would be rare. Did Sherlock even like sex? Honestly, that was part of why they needed to get to know one another before they got in too deep but then John laughed at himself. It was too late for that, really and he wasn’t sure he could walk away from the alpha at this point unless he was told to go.

Barely twenty hours into the heat and after a few more rounds with John’s favourite new sexual aid, his heat finally became gentler and less urgent, signalling the beginning of the end. Amazed and thankful that the medication he’d been given had actually worked, John was determined to enjoy what time was left with this heat and his new toy. The whole concept of enjoying his heat and not being mindless during it was a novel one and he marvelled at it while he took full advantage.

Once all was done, the aid’s knot deflated and he reluctantly removed the toy from his body. For the first time, a rush of the fake ejaculate followed, indicating the heat was indeed done. Relieved and somewhat disappointed at once, John did a final clean up and went to bed, sleeping dreamlessly for about twelve hours.

John was ravenous the next morning and rang for a nurse as soon as he woke. The omega who responded teased and giggled at him, brought him an enormous breakfast and gave him the latest newspapers. With his mind finally free of the rampaging hormones that had been infesting it, John sat at the small table by the window and spent the day eating, resting and writing on his laptop. Recording the events of the previous weeks helped him understand what had happened and allowed him to focus on what he needed to do next.

What he had to do was talk to Sherlock and reach some kind of agreement as to what they each wanted from the other. However, Moran was on the loose and probably still actively looking for John, so he should put their talk off until after the threat Moran represented was dealt with. The nightmare he’d had during his heat had just driven home to him that he had to take care of Moran and soon.

In addition, John would be released from hospital in a few days. Before he could start to go after Moran, the most important thing to do first was to find somewhere to stay, if only temporarily. Sherlock said he’d make arrangements but didn’t say what kind. Unless Sherlock agreed to allow John to stay with him, the doctor had nowhere to go. He could take a hotel room but his funds were limited and he had no prospects at the moment since working for Masters wasn’t going to be possible for a while at least.

Sighing, John wondered what Sherlock was doing at that moment. Was he following a lead with Lestrade? Or was he working undercover somewhere like he’d done at the clinic? How close were they to tracking down Moran and Moriarty? Would they have enough usable evidence to put them both away? The clinic was just the tip of the iceberg, from what little they’d found out earlier. Did the jump drive labelled ‘Jim’ that he’d found in the house in Chelsea help at all? Sherlock had implied they’d found something significant on it and that he wanted John’s help. John would like nothing more than to have the chance to work with Sherlock again to find Moriarty. Maybe John should contact the alpha and see if there was something he could do now. Realistically, John knew
he needed a few more days of rest since he wasn’t yet fully recovered from the infections. His leg still ached and he got tired quickly, but he could do research or something, maybe go through evidence. If he could help in any way, he wouldn’t feel so helpless or useless.

Just as he was wondering about the best way to contact Sherlock, his mobile rang. To his surprise, it was Sherlock’s brother.

“May I come see you later today, John? Now that your heat is over, I hoped this would be a good time to speak with you. I have some things to discuss for my brother. Sherlock sends his regrets that he cannot come himself and has asked me to be his intermediary.”

John frowned in confusion. Sherlock wanted Mycroft to be his intermediary? What about? And how had the man known his heat was over? He must have spies in the hospital. Despite that, John was grateful to the elder Holmes for helping him and arranging for a private room and the no doubt very expensive doctors who had been taking such excellent care of him. It would be nice to thank him in person.

“You’re welcome to come by anytime, Mr Holmes. I’m not going anywhere.”

There was a small chuckle on the other end of the line. “I don’t suppose you are. Thank you, John. I must say I’m very gratified to know that you are so much improved. Sherlock and I were quite concerned. I’ll see you shortly. We have much to discuss.” With that, the beta sentinel rang off.

Wondering again what it was that they had to discuss, John got himself cleaned up and dressed for a visitor. It was nice to wear his own clothes again instead of pyjamas and a hospital robe, even if it was only a pair of worn jeans, a checked shirt and jumper that had seen better days. At that moment, they were the nicest clothes he owned and posh Mycroft would just have to deal with it. Opening his door, he spotted the guard and spoke to her. “Mr Mycroft Holmes is coming to visit. Is there any place here that I can order some tea for when he arrives?”

She nodded agreeably and touched a device in her ear. “I’ll arrange it. He’s expected in an hour. It’ll be ready when he arrives.”

Realising he shouldn’t have been surprised that she knew Mycroft was going to be visiting, he went back to his room to read the latest tabloids that the nurses had saved for him. It took him few minutes to think of what day it was but he finally remembered that it was now Thursday. He picked up the previous Sunday’s copy of The Sun. Normally, he hated celebrity gossip because he had no bloody idea who any of the people were, but he was bored and a little bit nervous about Mycroft’s visit and so flipped through the pages absently, just to pass the time.

A headline suddenly caught his eye because he actually recognised the celebrity’s name. She had made a splash at the opera when she’d first arrived in London from America a few years previously and had received excellent reviews. John had been in London on leave and had actually been fortunate to get a ticket to her performance even though he usually didn’t care for opera. Irene Adler had impressed him as a very beautiful and talented omega and he’d kept an eye out for more about her but she mysteriously seemed to drop off the face of the earth after her London debut. John had heard somewhere that she’d got bonded and then he’d all but forgotten about her after he’d returned to Afghanistan.

The caption screamed out. “Infamous Omega Irene Adler Seen Out and About with Mysterious New Alpha! Who Is This Newcomer? Potential Home Wrecker or ‘Just a Friend’?” The story led with an enormous colour picture of a gorgeous Ms Adler outside a very posh nightclub escorted by a striking, ginger-haired alpha. The alpha’s face was partially obscured by a hand held out blocking the
paparazzo’s lens but there was enough of the man visible to see he was tall, slim and had incredibly exotic cheekbones. The two of them made an absolutely stunning couple and John felt sick at the sight. All the blood seemed to run out of his head as he stared at the picture of the alpha. The colour of the hair was wrong and it had been combed straight back from the high forehead but John would always recognise that face. Only one slanted grey-green eye was visible but the high resolution camera had picked up the small scar at the corner of his mouth on the right side of the lower lip. Unless he had a ginger twin, it was Sherlock Holmes going out on the town with the former opera singer who was now, if the article was true, currently an infamous dominatrix.

Sitting back, John covered his mouth with a shaking hand and closed his eyes, trying to subdue his extremely hurt reaction to what he’d just learnt. John would never have suspected it, but it seemed Sherlock was indeed the type of alpha to court more than one omega at the same time. If Sherlock had a potential partner in Irene Adler, why the bloody hell did he want anything to do with John? His throat ached and it was suddenly hard to breathe. Anger and bitter disappointment threatened to swamp him and John tried hard to calm himself.

But another thought struck the doctor that loosened the constriction in his chest. Maybe Sherlock was just undercover, which would explain the change in hair colour and style. Did Adler know something that made such a deception necessary? Was she somehow connected to Moriarty and Moran? If so, Sherlock could be planning to seduce the information out of her. John understood duty and doing what needed to be done to obtain the mission objective, no matter how distasteful the task. Not that dating or sleeping with Irene Adler would be distasteful for any alpha. John told himself he didn’t care if Sherlock had to be intimate with her and almost believed it.

After all, Sherlock looked positively edible in the bespoke suit and the red hair actually suited him. If the alpha sentinel was undercover and planning to seduce Ms Adler, John almost felt a bit sorry for her. Sherlock would no doubt dump her once he got what he needed. At least John hoped that’s what would happen. But he had to sternly remind himself that Sherlock hadn’t promised John anything, really. If the alpha wanted Irene Adler, John would step aside. It would break his heart, but he’d do it. John refused to be second to anyone else.

Deep in thought, he jumped a bit when there was suddenly a knock on the door. As he called out an invitation to enter, the door opened to admit the elder Holmes brother. John began to stand but Mycroft waved him back down.

“Please, John, don’t get up. I know your leg was injured and is still on the mend.”

Mycroft carried a briefcase and was followed into the room by a dark haired female beta who deftly held a large tray. Eyebrows raised in surprise, John recognised all his favourite biscuits as the tray with a silver pot of tea was set down on the room’s only table. A male beta entered the room after her, loaded down with numerous carrier bags from some of the finest clothing shops in the city. Setting the new clothes and what looked to be a very fine black leather coat onto the bed, the man nodded to Mycroft and both betas left the room as quietly as they’d arrived. The elder Holmes brother joined a stunned John at the table and smiled as he noticed John’s confused expression and without a word, poured the tea and expertly added just the perfect amount of milk. How had Mycroft known?

Handing John the cup and nudging the plate of biscuits toward him, Mycroft smiled again and finally spoke before John could do. “I make it my business to know everything about anyone who is important to my family, John. Sherlock has so few friends and therefore you are very important to us. I hope you enjoy your tea.”

The thought warmed John unexpectedly and he stammered a reply, feeling unaccountably wrong
footed. “I…well…thank you, Mr Holmes. The tea and biscuits are perfect and I never expected you to bring me new clothes! And I want to thank you for the care and consideration I’ve received here. I know the room is expensive and I’ll pay you….”

Holding up an imperious hand, Mycroft shook his head, interrupting John’s attempted offer to repay him. “Do not mention it, John and please call me Mycroft. On Sherlock’s behalf, one of the things I very much wanted to discuss with you today is that we are hoping you will consent to become part of our family. If you allow it, the Holmes’ will always take care of you.”

Blinking in surprise, John was speechless. This was not what he was expecting to discuss with Mycroft. A warm feeling suffused his entire body and he knew his face was flushed with embarrassment and confusion as he finally glanced away from Mycroft’s kind smile. It was incredibly touching and rather overwhelming to have someone want to bring him into their family and he felt rather breathless and excited at the same time. He couldn’t remember the last time someone offered to care for him and his first reaction was to refuse. It was his nature as a doctor to be the one who nurtured and cared for others and having the tables turned on him was disconcerting. But there was something about the offer that his inner omega wanted desperately.

“I…I honestly don’t know what to say, Mycroft.” John stared awkwardly at the other man, who looked sympathetic.

“I do understand how difficult this has all been for you, John. You are an unusually self-contained omega with a strong independent streak and I realise it must seem alien to allow anyone else to take care of you. I fervently hope you will learn to accept it, however, because Sherlock has tasked me to perform some delicate negotiations for him.”

Mycroft straightened his shoulders and cleared his throat, looking at John seriously. “The Holmes family is very traditional and since he cannot be here himself, Sherlock has asked me to mediate for him. He did not wish you to wait any longer to know of his intentions toward you.” Mycroft opened the briefcase and removed some papers before continuing, obviously quite pleased. “In essence, Sherlock wishes to formally ask if you would bond with him as alpha to omega and as sentinel to guide.”

Once again holding up his hand before a flabbergasted John could respond, Mycroft continued. “I know this is a lot for you to absorb and you don’t have to give an answer straight away. Now here is the paperwork for you to go over at your leisure.”

Mycroft handed John a sheaf of documents and the doctor absently took them and stared at the pages blankly. A myriad of thoughts and feelings were bouncing around in John’s skull and were confusing the hell out of him. This was the last thing he’d expected, especially after seeing the picture of Sherlock with Irene. He wasn’t sure how he wanted to react. On one hand, his inner omega was jumping for joy but the more rational part of himself was putting the brakes on. Things were happening much too fast for him to properly process and he wanted more time and a lot more information.

“This is the bonding contract and it stipulates that Sherlock, as the alpha, will support you and your children. As you can see here, you will be provided your own residence along with a generous stipend. You may have as many beta nannies as you require to help you with the children. That was a condition that I personally insisted upon.”

Mycroft’s smile at John seemed oddly smug but the omega’s attention was drawn back to the contract and his heart sank in dismay. It was difficult to keep the severe disappointment from his expression. He was being offered the traditional alpha/omega contract that required he bear children
for the alpha. Any other omega would be thrilled and jump at the opportunity to bond with such an alpha but it was the very last thing John had desired. It seemed that Sherlock wasn’t planning to live with John, share his life or work together, either. John had hoped to be equal partners with the alpha but that apparently wasn’t what Sherlock wanted at all. His shoulders slumped in dejection as Mycroft happily pointed out another part of the contract.

“I thought it best to have a separate house on the family estate for you and the children as I can tell you from experience that Sherlock is extremely difficult to live with.” Mycroft literally shuddered at an unpleasant memory. Something was off about the whole thing and John frowned in confusion as Mycroft continued.

“Sherlock can be very moody, barely remembers to eat and stays up for days at a time. He does noxious experiments at all hours which wouldn’t be safe for an expectant omega or children to be around. Sometimes he won’t speak for days and will play his violin until the early hours. He’s very capable of playing beautifully but when he’s thinking, his playing becomes...unpleasant.” Mycroft’s reminiscent expression was one of extreme distaste.

John lowered his head and kept his eyes down as he listened to Mycroft relate all of Sherlock’s negative traits. None of them seemed particularly bad to John. In fact he was sure he could deal with it all but then his eyes were involuntarily drawn again to the picture of Irene Adler with Sherlock, partially hidden under the plate of biscuits. Did Sherlock want to remain free to date or have other omegas and children on the side? Was John going to be expected to stay at home, be available for heats only and raise any children all by himself? Christ, it seemed a lonely way to live. There was no way he would keep his sanity if so. He’d have to refuse the contract. Depression and disillusionment settled over John’s shoulders like a soft blanket as Mycroft continued to chatter away and John tried hard to pay attention.

“Thought the likelihood is remote, you might need to act as his guide occasionally so you will also require some superficial guide training. The family will see to it that you will get proper tuition if you agree. It would be best if you were available to Sherlock in case he was to zone, though he’s never done so in the past. The training is just a precaution.

“Finally, and most importantly, you must agree in writing that you will not reveal your true association with Sherlock to anyone. My brother is known as a sentinel but no one is aware that he is an alpha sentinel. He is listed as a beta on his official paperwork and it isn’t possible to legally bond with an omega unless he willingly declares himself. So you will be bonded under assumed names, though we have made it clear that your children will have access to the Holmes name and fortune when the time comes. Considering the dangerous profession Sherlock has chosen to pursue it only makes sense and it was agreed amongst the family that you and your children should be protected from that.”

John was beyond shocked. The whole thing just kept getting worse and worse. So he wasn’t even going to be allowed to acknowledge being bonded to Sherlock. Even though it was ostensibly for Sherlock’s safety, the condition was unacceptable and an incredibly insulting thing to even suggest. There was no way John was going to be able to accept any of that. It seems Mycroft hadn’t studied John as well as he thought he had done. Maybe the beta just didn’t understand John’s need for excitement and how important it was for him to feel useful. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly and looked up from the table top to give Mycroft a small smile. John could be a bloody good actor when he needed to be.

“Please let me think about this for a while. You were right when you said this was a lot to absorb.”

Nodding, Mycroft smiled happily. “I expected you would wish to examine the contract carefully.
We are so grateful to you. I have hoped for years that Sherlock would find someone to bond with. He is such a unique individual in so many ways and Mummy, Father and I despaired that he would ever find a life companion. Of all the omegas we have paraded past him, you are the first one that he has ever shown even the slightest interest in and he wants to bond with you! The fact that you are also a latent guide is literally icing on the cake.”

Mycroft’s smile turned into a delighted grin. “It’s a day to celebrate, John. We couldn’t be happier to have you become a member of our family and I assure you that you will be welcomed with open arms by Mummy and Father. I hope you will seriously consider Sherlock’s proposal.”

“Thank you, Mycroft. I’m very flattered but as I said, I really need to think about this.”

Mycroft’s smile dimmed a little and a small frown line appeared between his eyes. It reminded John so much of Sherlock for a moment, the poignancy of it hurt like a stab to the heart. “Of course, John. Take all the time you need. I....”

There was a hasty knock on the door and Mycroft’s dark haired assistant came inside the room. She was openly armed and John’s senses went on high alert. “Sir, there’s a situation. You need to come with me immediately. There is a credible level five threat to your life and this location is now compromised.”

Quickly, Mycroft stood and turned concerned eyes toward John, who had also got to his feet. “John, please stay here. I need to find out what’s going on. This room is secure. You’ve got an armed agent outside and there are others within the building. Also, the door will be locked behind me. I have made every provision for your safety.” Without another word, he left the room with his assistant and John heard the lock engage behind him, as promised.

Frowning, John stared at the locked door. What kind of job did Mycroft have that his life was in danger and required an armed bodyguard to come collect him to bring him to safety? John had had the impression at first that he was some kind of administrator for a corporation but he now knew from Sherlock that Mycroft was deeply involved in the government. What was the situation and why was the hospital’s location compromised? There were too many unanswered questions and that meant he needed to be prepared.

Turning to the bedside drawer, John quickly removed the SIG and checked the magazine. It had the full 20 rounds but that was all. Limping to the door he listened but heard nothing and was relieved. As he headed over to the table John suddenly heard a faint sound he immediately recognised as gunshots. It seemed Mycroft was indeed in danger and the hospital was under attack. John’s heart rate picked up and he rushed to the window as quickly as possible. He could see a small car park three floors below and watched as people ran from the building, clearly in a panic. The muffled sounds of more gunshots rang out and once he opened the window, it was very clear the hospital was under armed attack. But why and who would do this? The people running from the building didn’t appear to be injured, so it seemed whoever was shooting up the hospital was trying to frighten but not necessarily kill innocents. He began to worry about Mycroft and hoped the man had got away safely.

Returning to the door, he pressed his ear to the thick wood again and heard more shots, this time closer. Was Mycroft trapped in the hospital and his bodyguards fighting back? If so, they’d need help. Making his way to the wardrobe again, John found his lock picking tools and set to work on the room’s door. It was a matter of a few seconds to get it open and he looked out to see his guard sheltered in a doorway opposite his room, looking down the hallway with her weapon up and ready. When she saw him, her eyes went wide and she violently motioned him to close the door.
Before he could say anything she hissed at him, “Get back into the room and lock the door! We’ve called the police but only the AFOs can handle this bunch and they’re about fifteen minutes out. I’ll do my best to hold the attackers off. They’ve managed to get through two other agents and are on their way to this floor. From what I can tell, there are only three left now.” She looked grimly satisfied at that announcement and turned to look back down the hall with a fierce expression when she continued. “Now get your arse back into that room before you get it shot off. I don’t want to be the one to explain to the younger Holmes that I let his omega get killed.”

Obeying her, John quickly retreated to the room, knowing better than to interfere with a professional. She had no idea what kind of training he had but then she knew what the situation was. Despite that, he had no intention of allowing her to face whatever was coming alone. As his mind rapidly settled into combat mode, he packed various useful tools and some money into another belt pocket in case he had to make a run for it. Sherlock would keep the rest of his money and identity papers safe until he could return for them. John left the bonding contract on the table without another thought and returned to the door just as gunshots rang out and a flash bang grenade went off just outside the room.

The sound of it stunned him momentarily and he stumbled back from the door with his hands over his badly ringing ears. Shaking his head, John realised his hearing was affected but nowhere near as badly as it would have been if he’d opened the door. The agent outside would be deafened and possibly blinded so he reached for the door handle, hoping to help. Once again, he heard gunshots that sounded as if they were coming from down the hall, likely aimed at the agent. Quickly, he opened the door and peeked out into the corridor. The agent was down and bleeding. She had been stunned by the flash bang and hadn’t been able to take cover completely. A man John vaguely recognised stood over her with his gun aimed at her head. Calmly and efficiently, John shot the gun from the man’s hand and then kneecapped him. Despite having to use his non-dominant hand to shoot with, both bullets hit true and the man dropped his weapon and fell shrieking, clutching alternately at his ruined hand and destroyed knee. Immediately, John noted two more men coming around the corner at the other end of the hall and his eyes widened in alarm as both raised and aimed their weapons at him.

Heart in his throat, John ducked back into the room and threw himself to the floor as bullets slammed through the door and door post, splintering the wood and ricocheting into the room. Distantly, he heard furious shouting and the gunfire stopped immediately. Because his hearing was still affected, he couldn’t decipher what had been said, but he wasn’t going to let them get any closer. Staying flat, John crawled back to the door, swiftly threw it wide and opened fire from a prone position. Aiming at where he remembered the position of the gunmen, John was able to get them before they could start shooting at him again.

Both were very dead so he turned back to the man he’d shot first. Lurching awkwardly to his feet, John cautiously approached the now unconscious man and kicked his gun out of his reach. Whoever the man was, he wasn’t going to be going anywhere or hurting anyone else for a long time. As John got a closer look at the man’s face, he realised with horror that he recognised him from The Gibbet. He didn’t know his name but John had seen him there many times. Quickly he checked the two dead men and he also knew them but not from the pub. He’d seen them as guards at one of the warehouses when he’d been sent out by Talbot on deliveries. His skin crawled in horror and he tried not to panic as he picked up their weapons. These men must have been sent by Moran and Moriarty. It was the only explanation he could come up with that made sense.

But standing and staring about in shock wasn’t getting help for the injured agent. Shaking himself and focusing on what needed to be done first, John holstered the SIG in his belt, quickly went over to the agent and checked the pulse at her throat. She was still alive but shocky. There was a wound to her abdomen below her body armour that was bleeding sluggishly. Grabbing her under the arms,
he dragged her into his room. She had said that there were only three gunmen left but he didn’t want to take any chances. The bath was the safest place from bullets at the moment and he carefully laid her out on the floor.

Regretting he’d never got the agent’s name, John retrieved the blankets and sheets from the bed and wrapped her to keep her warm. Then using a knife he found at her belt, John carefully cut away her shirt and tugged off the armour. The wound was in a bad place but he couldn’t detect the distinctive smell of bowel contents and since she wasn’t bleeding out, she’d likely recover once she got help. Ears ringing and head aching, John packed the wound as best he could, tied the bandage tight with strips of sheets and pulled out his mobile.

The first person he thought to ring was Sherlock and was pleased to see that the number had been programmed into his phone. Waiting anxiously for Sherlock to pick up he was disappointed when the call went unanswered. Instead, John left a message and let Sherlock know what was happening. Once he’d disconnected, John dithered about what to do. According to the wounded agent, the Authorised Firearms Officers had already been notified and were on their way. Since he didn’t know exactly where the hospital was located except that it was outside London, there was no point in him ringing them as well. The last place he wanted to be anyway was in the hospital when the police arrived. He had no intention of being put into police custody ever again if he could help it. Leaving the grounds was the best thing to do and he’d find Sherlock later. He’d have to take the chance that all of Moran’s henchmen were down or gone and leave.

He began to put the mobile back into a pocket but something made him hesitate. If the police caught him, he didn’t want to be without a way to communicate. The swelling in his left hand had gone down since the plaster had been applied, so he turned off the mobile’s sound and tucked it into the pocket created between his palm and the plaster cast. The mobile fit surprisingly snugly and securely and his fingers automatically curved over it.

The injured agent would be found quickly once the police arrived and he felt confident that she would be fine if he left her and went to the still open window to look out. There was no sign of the police yet and he was preparing to go when he heard the distinctive sound of a cocking gun. John sucked in a breath and froze. Since he’d been looking out the open window, he’d not seen the reflection of two gunmen coming into the room. John had been right not to trust the agent’s intel but he’d not expect anyone to reach the room so quickly.

Someone laughed nastily from behind him and John thought he recognised the voice. “Stay where you are, Watson. You know the drill. Hands on the back of your head. Do it slowly. That’s right. Now kneel down and cross your feet at the ankles. Very good.”

The voice became smug as John reluctantly obeyed the orders. “Seb wants to see you and said to say sorry he couldn’t come himself. Now if you move before I tell you to, I will shoot you in the other shoulder because he said you don’t need your arms for him to fuck you.”

The speaker wisely stayed well out of John’s reach and to one side of him. Another man approached cautiously from John’s other side carrying cable ties. John had not seen or heard either man but his hearing was not back to normal since the flash-bang had gone off. These men knew just how to handle someone with John’s training and his breath caught in his throat as the beta applied the cable tie tightly, though he had some trouble with the wrist covered with the cast. The back of John’s right wrist was forced painfully against the plaster. Without a great deal of luck, John knew he probably wouldn’t be getting loose anytime soon.

Once John’s wrists were restrained and his SIG and knife taken away, the beta pulled him to his feet and turned him around by a cruel grip in his hair. Thankfully, John’s captors had not found any of
the money or tools that he had hidden in his belt pockets yet. Heart pounding, John recognised the first man as an omega he’d first seen at the Gibbet. John had avoided him at the pub because his latent senses had always picked up on something perverse and wrong about the other omega. Now the sickness was much more evident as he looked John up and down with a twisted grimace.

“So, this is the great Doc Watson we’ve all been hearing Seb talk about. Never guessed that was you at the pub. You’re not much to look at, I have to say. Don’t really know what Seb sees in you but there’s no accounting for taste. He’ll get tired of you soon and I’ll get my chance.”

The man behind John tightened his grip on the doctor’s hair. “We need to get out of here, Ned. The police will be here soon and we need to do something about Dave and the others out in the hall.”

Ned’s cold eyes flicked to the man and back to John’s face and he grinned viciously. “Fuck them. Dave can peg out for all I care. I bet Doc here shot them all. Am I wrong, Doc?”

Refusing to answer the man, John wanted to sneer at him but kept his expression impassive, trying to hide his fear and desperation. If John could delay them somewhat, the police might get there before they could make off with him. Being in the custody of the police was suddenly infinitely better than capture by Moran. The thought of being brought to the man made him want to hyperventilate. John twisted his left arm against the twist ties and miraculously, it seemed to slip slightly.

Ned sniffed disdainfully at John’s continued silence. “No matter, anyway. Let’s go, Doc. Don’t try anything or I’ll make you very sorry you were ever born.”

John looked frantically about for any way to escape but it seemed impossible. Both men were armed and John was not only restrained but still injured and sick. Even so, he tried to slow the men down and resisted when they began to drag him from the room. It only earned him a vicious clout to the side of his head. The blow stunned him and he couldn’t control how he fell. He landed on his bad shoulder and his head impacted the hard floor of the room. Agony engulfed him and everything went dark.

The next thing John was aware of was cramping pain in his shoulder and neck. Rolling onto his front to take his weight off his shoulder, he tried hard not to be sick and hoped he didn’t have a severe concussion. He had no idea how long he’d been out but it seemed some time had passed and because the compartment he was locked into had no windows he couldn’t tell where they were. However, he seemed to be in the back of a large vehicle, perhaps a van of some kind, that was clearly in motion and driving slowly along an uneven surface. All he could hear were the sounds of the rather badly tuned engine and the wheels crunching along the road.

It was cold and he wished he’d taken the new leather jacket Mycroft had bought him as he tried to sit up. With a painful wrench to his bad shoulder, he finally managed it and began to work desperately at getting loose from the cable tie. The tough plastic shifted again as he twisted his left arm, scraping the back of his right hand bloody with the hard plaster in the process. His heart sped up as it finally slipped enough for him to pull his hands apart. His left shoulder felt like it was on fire and his right hand stung from the returning blood flow. Blocking the pain, John quickly moved to the very back of the vehicle to try to open the door, but he couldn’t see and his right hand couldn’t feel anything. Remembering that his phone was literally in his left hand, he removed it and turned it on for the light. He cursed under his breath in frustration when he found the door was locked and it was rigged so that he couldn’t open it. If he’d had more tools and some time, he might manage but that wasn’t going to happen. There were no other doors except for one that led to the front of the vehicle.

Not knowing what else to do, John took a deep breath and looked back at the phone. To his surprise, there must have been something like thirty messages from Sherlock. Quickly, he dialled
Sherlock’s number, fully expecting to leave another message but it was answered immediately and Sherlock’s tone was extremely worried. “John! Are you all right? Where are you? I’m at the hospital and can’t find you!”

At the sound of the alpha’s deep voice, the depth of John’s relief was immeasurable. At that very moment, John vowed to accept any bonding conditions the man had if only he would be allowed to see Sherlock even one more time. John knew he’d been a complete fool for even thinking of refusing the man’s offer of bonding. No one had ever made him feel safe the way Sherlock did and John would accept bonding even if the alpha wanted to live separately and have a hundred Irene Adlers on the side. John finally realised and accepted that all he really wanted was to belong to Sherlock no matter what and his pride and independence weren’t worth the price he was paying for rejecting him.

Speaking in a controlled whisper, knowing his alpha sentinel would be able to hear every word, John explained what was happening. “I have no idea where we’re going, Sherlock, but they’re bringing me to Moran. I doubt it will be to the house in Chelsea but I’m wondering if it might be to one of the warehouses where Talbot sent me on deliveries all those months ago. I recognised two of the men who attacked us at the hospital as guards from the one that we drove to on Chequers Lane. The man I kneecapped outside my room wasn’t at the warehouse, but he might know something.”

“If you’re headed for the Chequers Lane warehouses, you’re about an hour away from here. I’d rather rely on the GPS in your phone to make sure that’s where you’re going, though. Turn it on and I’ll track you.”

“I’ll do that now. Please hurry, luv. Last time I saw Moran, he told me he wanted to take me out of the country.”

Sherlock’s voice was practically a snarl. “I won’t allow it, John! He’ll never have you.”

John closed his eyes as warmth suffused him and his breath caught in his throat. He wanted to say something more but then the van ground to a sudden halt. “I’ll do everything I can to prevent it, but I’m not sure how successful I’ll be. We’ve stopped now. I’ve got to go, luv. Find me, please!”

“I will, John. I’ll be there soon.” Reluctantly, John disconnected and switched on the GPS before hiding the phone again. He couldn’t do anything about concealing the fact he was no longer restrained and decided to take his chance on attacking Ned and his beta henchman when they opened the door. It might get him injured but then he might also get away. Having the element of surprise would be his greatest advantage since he was not in very good physical shape.

Crouching by the door, John waited, heart in his throat and adrenalin flooding his system, until he heard the men get out of the van and come around to the back. As soon as the door unlocked and began to open, he threw all his weight against it, knocking Ned’s assistant onto his arse. This time, John controlled his fall to the ground and rolled his body toward Ned, who had his gun up but was gaping in surprise at John’s unexpected move. John swept the man’s feet out from under him but Ned managed to get off a shot that hit the van before his weapon went flying off into the darkness.

Powering to his feet, John raised his left arm just in time to block a lethal blow from Ned’s associate. The man howled in pain as his fist encountered the plaster cast. This gave John enough time to retaliate with a powerful right to the man’s face, knocking him backward into the door of the van. The other man smacked his head hard against the metal and fell stunned to the ground.

Turning as quickly as he could do on his injured leg, John barely managed to duck a lethal blow from Ned and then rushed the man, driving his good right shoulder into Ned’s stomach with all his
weight and strength behind it. John heard the breath whoosh out of the other man in a pained gasp and then John straightened, picked Ned up and flipped the man over his shoulder to land onto his back on the hard ground. As the other omega flailed, stunned and whooping for breath, John delivered a hard kick to his head, knocking him out.

Breathing heavily, John straightened with a groan and glanced around. The van was parked in a dimly lit loading bay near a large warehouse. Some of the surrounding structures that were dimly visible looked somewhat familiar and John realised he was indeed at the Chequers Lane industrial site. Unfortunately, it was a huge complex and he wasn’t exactly sure where he was located within it. Turning back to the unconscious Ned, John searched the other omega and found his SIG and knife but couldn’t find the keys to the van. Just then, he heard shouts from the building where they’d parked. John needed to get away or at least hide but he had no idea where he was. Eyes darting frantically about, John chose a direction randomly and forced his pain-wracked body to move. Sherlock was going to come for him and that thought kept him going through the cold darkness.

Running as quickly as he could do, he knew it wasn’t fast enough. A handful of days weren’t enough for him to recover from illness as well as the other injuries he’d incurred and he was feeling it. Going through even one day of heat had depleted his scant reserves, as well. He needed rest and a dark place to hide. Voices were shouting behind him as John ran toward another large warehouse building he could barely see in the distance. He wasn’t sure where he was going but at least it was away from his pursuers. If he could gain access to one of the warehouses, he might be able to hide until Sherlock could reach him.

There were few lights about and it became increasingly darker the further he moved away from the loading bay, which worked both for and against him. It made him harder to find but he couldn’t see where the bloody hell he was going, either. All around him loomed the dark shapes of large skips, rubbish, parked lorries and unidentified objects that he could barely see and only just managed to avoid running into or tripping over. A glimpse of a weak glow from a large building ahead drew him toward it. Faint illumination leaked out from around painted over windows and though he knew it was too convenient, he ran toward the structure anyway. A wave of dizziness swept over him before he reached it and he had to stop and lean against one of the skips to try to catch his breath. It almost felt as if he were having an asthma attack as he wheezed and tried to get in enough air and suppress a cough at the same time. His head pounded from the earlier blow and lack of oxygen and he knew he had to find someplace to rest soon or he’d pass out.

Shouts came from close behind and John jerked upright in alarm. His pursuers were too close and he had to move. Taking a slow, controlled breath, John began to run toward the building again when suddenly he was falling. Completely stunned and shocked, he could only throw out both arms to try to slow or stop himself and ended up face down, almost completely immersed in bitterly cold water. He’d stumbled into an enormous pothole in the decayed pavement and it was full of muddy water. Sitting up with a gasp, he vainly tried to wipe mud from his eyes and painfully crawled out of the hole, drenched and freezing but grateful that at least he’d not broken anything on the shattered ground.

Shaking with exhaustion, he got to his feet, staggered toward the building ahead and found a barely visible door. The light above it was either burnt out or turned off. He could still hear shouts but they were off to the left and further behind so he waited until his heart slowed down somewhat and his breath calmed while water poured off him to puddle around his feet. The door wasn’t locked and he hesitated for a few moments before entering. The door opened into a dark area and John could see faint glimmers of light ahead and to his left through cracks in other doors that led further into the building. The rooms were probably offices or maybe storage areas where he could possibly hide. As wet as he was at the moment however, even a blind man could follow his trail.
Quietly closing the door behind him, John haltingly sent out his latent senses. They weren’t warning him of anything but then they didn’t seem to be working properly either. One moment he could feel the intense emotions from the men pursuing him and then nothing. Could the blow to his head have made them go offline or was his distressed emotional state interfering? Maybe both or neither. He didn’t know and didn’t have enough energy to even really worry about it.

Shivering, he shoved his hands under his arms to warm them while he tried to decide what to do. As he continued to drip on the floor John realised with horror that the cast on his left arm was sopping wet and that the mobile he’d hidden was also soaked. With shaking hands, he extracted the mobile from under the plaster and tried to turn it on. It was dead and he knew then that, if Sherlock hadn’t found his location yet, John was totally screwed and not in any good way. It had only been a few minutes since John had rung off with Sherlock and he wasn’t sure the alpha had had enough time to track the GPS signal.

Sinking to the floor, the knowledge that he was probably not going to be rescued hit him hard and he felt sick. If Sherlock couldn’t locate him, Moran would surely find him first and John would be at the mercy of whatever Moran wanted to do to him. He didn’t have enough energy or strength to fight the huge alpha and win. Moran would no doubt beat him unconscious, take him out of the country and forcibly bond with him in a month when his full heat returned. John couldn’t let it happen but he didn’t know of any way to prevent it.

Disheartened and more frightened than he wanted to admit, John decided to look for somewhere to hide. If he could only find someplace to safely conceal himself until morning, he might be able to escape. His eyes had adjusted to the very faint illumination in the entry way and he noticed that there was another door to the right. Quietly opening it, he stepped into a pitch black room. He couldn’t see a thing but he got the impression that the room was large. Reaching out with his arm, he swept the space to his left until he encountered the wall beside the door. Keeping a hand on the wall, he stepped forward carefully into the darkness.

He took only a few steps before he bumped into something very solid. Brushing over it didn’t help him identify it at all but he manoeuvred around it and kept going, blindly navigating his way around other objects placed along the wall until he ran into another wall that forced him to turn to the right. Quietly opening it, he stepped into a pitch black room. He couldn’t see a thing but he got the impression that the room was large. Reaching out with his arm, he swept the space to his left until he encountered the wall beside the door. Keeping a hand on the wall, he stepped forward carefully into the darkness.

As he dragged the fingers of his left hand along what felt like unpainted plasterboard he began to step forward to continue his search for a hiding place when he saw a flash of light near his feet. Startled, he stopped in his tracks and glanced down but it was gone. Wondering why his eyes were playing tricks on him in the dense blackness of the room, he closed them tightly then opened them. There was nothing but the darkness. Shrugging, John stepped forward and once more saw light and now movement at his feet. But this time he was looking for it and was dumbfounded to see what appeared to be the pale form of some kind of animal. Instinctively, he stepped back and stared down at the thing, which looked like a small dog or rather more like a skunk without the tail.

Shaking his head, John rubbed at his eyes and blinked down again in disbelief, but the pale creature was still there. The light that it emitted didn’t illuminate anything around it which made John realise he was probably hallucinating. The blow to his head must have been much more severe than he’d thought, but on the other hand, he didn’t feel that badly concussed and the creature looked incredibly real even if it was glowing. The top of its head and its back were striped a grey white colour but the rest of it was black. It had small ears and eyes but incredibly large claws on its front paws and was staring at him balefully. Deciding to test if it was actually there, John stepped forward again,
expecting it to evaporate and the darkness to descend on him again.

As he did so, the animal suddenly opened its mouth, exposing very sharp fangs and seemed to be screaming at him but there was no sound. Badly startled, John jumped back, reacting instinctively to the stance of a predator ready to attack, even though it couldn’t possibly be real. Thankfully it stayed put and allowed John more time to study it in turn. But the longer he examined the animal, the more solid it became. Clearly it was an incredibly fierce creature but he was receiving a feeling of warning and protectiveness from it which was just plain weird. Just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone.

Frowning and confused, John decided to chalk the unexplained experience down to his rather fertile imagination and the blow to his head though he was positive he’d never before seen an animal like that one. The incident made him wary, however and instead of stepping out as he had been doing, he slid his foot forward cautiously and after a few careful steps, his foot encountered nothing but air. The floor had disappeared and he involuntarily stepped backward, flailing behind him to try to balance against the wall. He barely caught himself and managed not to fall but it was a close thing. Had the animal been trying to caution him to danger?

After he regained his balance, John knelt down and put out a hand to feel the edge of the floor where it ended. Encountering nothing, he slid over to his right a few feet and found the beginnings of stair steps. Relieved, he sat down onto the first step, crossed his arms over his chest and bent over his knees, trying to have a rest for a few minutes. He must be in or near a loading bay with a raised platform. Those were fairly common and the stairs no doubt led down to the main floor of the warehouse where lorries were driven down in to be unloaded or loaded. It likely wasn’t a long drop but if he had fallen, he could have seriously injured himself or even broken his neck. Whatever the creature was, imagination or something else, it had probably saved his life.

As he rested, his thoughts automatically went to Sherlock. His chest ached, wishing they were not separated by so many miles. Desperately, John hoped that Sherlock had got a fix on his location before the phone had died. Trying to stay optimistic, John did his best to relax, control his breathing and slow his heart in order to maximise his rest. Much of his exhaustion was probably from stress and emotional confusion. He’d been in much worse danger in his life but he’d never been so emotionally befuddled before. It was possible his hormones were still affecting his brain. It would certainly explain why he was having so much trouble concentrating.

As his mind calmed, John continued to think about Sherlock and the alpha’s offer to bond them together. It would change the path of John’s entire life irrevocably. He would no longer be the respected soldier and doctor, free to take on whatever job was most interesting at the moment. If he accepted the bonding contract as it was, he would be safe and financially secure with his own home but he would no longer be free. Maybe he could work in a clinic or at the A&E until children began to arrive. Mycroft had said he could have beta nannies so maybe he could continue to work after they were born. But who was he really kidding? He’d never allow someone else to raise his children.

What he envisioned seemed a very lonely life, though he was sure he’d love his children to distraction. Remembering the dream he’d had of the blue-eyed, curly haired children and the love and joy he’d felt for them, John decided he could bear it. Even if he had Sherlock’s love and attention only some of the time, to be even a small part of the alpha sentinel’s life would be worth it. It made John sad to think he wouldn’t be first in Sherlock’s life but one couldn’t have everything and as his old gran had always told him, ‘there were worse troubles at sea.’

As he rested, John’s latent senses, without any direction from him, went in search of the man who was the centre of his thoughts. Worry and fear fuelled his desire to reach Sherlock and then his mind seemed to disconnect from his body with a very odd sensation and began to travel far beyond his physical self. Faintly, John wondered if he should be concerned about that. Could he lose himself
without meaning to do? There was no way to know but it didn’t feel wrong. In fact, what he was doing felt very right as his latent senses seemed to fly out and speed directly toward something that attracted it like a moth to a flame. Wherever his abilities were taking his spirit, it went eagerly. Finally his empathy found its home and began to mesh happily with another’s emotions.

He had found Sherlock! Relieved and triumphant, John sensed the strong presence of the alpha and it warmed and calmed John’s chilled soul. Feelings of shock and surprise from Sherlock engulfed John and the omega tried to soothe the alpha. Sherlock was stunned but pleased at John’s contact, had recognised him and began to immediately project imagery that felt like questions. Clearly, Sherlock wanted answers but John had absolutely no idea of how to respond. Awkwardly, John tried to send the alpha the information that he was safe at the moment and where he was located. In return he received feelings of incomprehension and frustration. Stymied, John tried unsuccessfully to think of what to do and then had a sudden inspiration. Doing his best to visualise the outside of the warehouses near Chequers Lane in his mind, he envisioned it and the enormous, water filled pothole in front and tried his best to project it to Sherlock. What he got back in return was puzzlement and then bright comprehension. _Sherlock understood!_ Using mental pictures seemed to work!

Wishing with all his heart that he could reach and speak to Sherlock directly, John vowed to engage the tutor Mycroft had promised as soon as he was out of this mess. He’d been able to understand Murphy’s thoughts better but Walter had been there supporting his sentinel, as well. Being able to speak directly to Sherlock would be incredibly useful right now but the fact remained that the alpha was not yet his sentinel. Once they were bonded as sentinel and guide, he suspected it would be possible to communicate more effectively.

However, the impressions he received from Sherlock indicated that the alpha understood, knew where John was located and was on his way. Relief suffused the doctor and he sent back his heartfelt thanks and admiration of the alpha. Surprisingly, Sherlock shyly returned the same admiration and a command that John was able to interpret to mean that he was to stay hidden and safe. Agreeing wholeheartedly, John began to feel their connection wavering and though he desperately tried to stay linked, whatever was needed to achieve that permanent tie was missing and he slipped away from Sherlock’s mind like water running through his fingers.

Coming back to himself in the darkness, John sucked in a deep breath and slowly sat up. Surprisingly, his head had ceased to ache and he felt stronger than he’d done since he’d left the hospital. Perhaps his connection to Sherlock had lent him strength somehow or he’d got a second wind. It didn’t matter where he’d got the energy from because now he knew Sherlock was on the way. Finding a place to hide until his alpha arrived was more important.

Turning his attention back to the stairs, he tentatively put out a foot to the next step down and scooted on his bum to the one below where he was sitting. There was another step below that and then a concrete floor began. John turned to the right and followed the edge of the raised floor until he hit a wall again and kept going. The wall felt as if it consisted of rough, concrete blocks and then it transitioned to cold metal that was likely a roller shutter door for the warehouse. Carefully he felt his way further into the room until he found the far wall and moved to the left again. This time he began to encounter obstacles right away. The first ones were small and he was able to get round them quickly but then he ran into a large vehicle of some kind. It was parked too close to the wall for him to squeeze between them so he went around it. It led him out into the centre of the room where he encountered another vehicle parked next to it. As he ran his hand over the bonnet of the second one, he knocked into something that had been resting on top and it fell to the concrete floor with a deafening clang.
John froze in place, heart racing in fear. The loud noise seemed to echo through the large space, making the doctor cringe. Suddenly, he heard the sound of footsteps and then light was blasting into the room from an open doorway across the room. Frantically John ducked between the two vehicles, crouching down and then crawling under the first one. The overhead lights went on in the space and he heard the footsteps of two men approach the van beside the one he was hiding under. He watched as they stopped in front of the vehicle and one of them bent to pick up the spanner John had accidentally knocked off the bonnet.

To his horror, he could see faint wet foot prints on the floor where he’d been standing and very wet smears where he’d crawled under the van. Thankfully, the area was mostly in shadow and he hoped the men would be too lazy to look closely. One of the men went around the back of the van and checked the area while the other stayed standing in front of the van.

The first man returned and stood beside the other, who returned the spanner to the bonnet of the van with a loud clank. “Looks like it must have just slid off the bonnet. Let’s get back to the game.”

Silently sighing in relief, John could see them begin to walk away when the door that John had come through earlier slammed open. John had a very good view of the door as Ned, his beta henchman and a few men John hadn’t seen before stormed in. Ned was armed and looked angry enough to chew nails. Stalking furiously into the room, Ned came quickly down the stairs toward the first two men, trailed closely by the others.

“Why are you here, Ned? Shouldn’t you be looking for that little bloke you lost? Moran is going to go spare if you can’t find ‘im.” One of the men sniggered at Ned’s expression of fury.

Ned snarled and gestured recklessly with his gun. “He’s in here, you gobshites! He fell in the pothole outside and you can follow his fucking tracks plain as day into the building and on the stairs over there! Look at the bloody floor; he’s crawled under that van. Now get him or I’ll shoot you myself!”

The men with Ned and the two others reluctantly surrounded the van and approached John’s hiding place cautiously. He was caught and there was nothing for it. Not knowing what else to do, John surrendered rather than be pulled out and possibly injured. He held up his hands as the men ushered him into the centre of the room to stand in front of the second van. John’s eyes darted around the room as his adrenaline started to flow and he kept his eyes open for any opportunity to escape. From what he could tell, only Ned was armed and John still had his SIG and knife. Even though it was likely wet, the SIG was a tough weapon and would still function when needed.

Surprisingly, the first two men ran swiftly to the door across the room and disappeared, while the two men who had first followed Ned into the room retreated back toward the stairs, looking uncertain. It seemed they were afraid of Ned and for good reason. Even if he wasn’t quite in the same league as Moriarty, the man was clearly mental. Ned didn’t try to stop the first two men from leaving as he glared at John with insanity in his eyes. As his vision adjusted to the bright lights, John smiled slightly to see one of Ned’s eyes was swollen shut and he had a very sore looking bruise on his temple where John had kicked him in the head.

This angered the other omega and as Ned’s face contorted in rage, he took a step toward John and drew back his arm, clearly preparing to strike John with his gun. Getting ready to defend himself, John retreated and placed his back against the front of the van. However, before he struck, Ned stopped himself, clearly fuming and beyond furious. “Fuck! Shit! You’re not worth a bollocking from Moran. Wade, get your arse over here and tie him up. Properly this time.”

The beta looked wary as he came up to John’s right side, making sure to stay out of the way of Ned’s gun. “We’ve done this once before, Watson. Turn around and put your hands on the bonnet.”
Cursing silently John reluctantly obeyed, trying to keep an eye on Ned who was watching the proceedings with a nasty smirk. Wade took John’s right hand and looped a cable tie tightly around it. He then made the mistake of gripping the back of John’s neck the way Moran had done in the car as he reached for John’s left arm. Maybe Wade had seen an alpha do that to an omega and decided to try it in an attempt to make John docile. Regardless, it was a hold only an alpha could succeed in using because instead of making John pliant and controllable, it enraged him. Mindlessly infuriated, John immediately reacted by swinging his left arm around, smashing the plaster cast into the side of the beta’s face and knocking Wade straight to the ground where he lay limp. Agonising pain shot through John’s broken wrist and he faltered and sagged to his knees for just a moment, which saved his life when Ned took a shot at him. There was also a shot from the door where the two men had disappeared earlier. Both bullets missed and everyone ducked when the shots ricocheted around the room. Someone roared an order to stop shooting but John didn’t pay any attention as he was focused on Ned.

John spun about and barreled into the other omega and the two men behind him which took him out of the sights of the man by the door. Ned was caught flat footed by surprise, clearly not expecting John’s extremely violent reaction. Once again, John hit Ned hard in the stomach with his shoulder, punching the wind out of him and making him lose his weapon. The other two men had also been knocked over by John’s rush and were trying to get up while John dove for the fallen weapon. Picking up Ned’s gun in his right hand, John threw himself to the floor and rolled toward the centre of the room, firing from a prone position at two men standing in the doorway. He wasn’t as good a shot with his right hand as with the left and so missed both men when they frantically dove back through the doorway. John then sat up and snarled, turning the gun toward the two men who had come in with Ned. They both put their hands up and backed away from him, looking terrified. Then they turned and bolted up the stairs and out of the room, leaving Ned moaning on the floor. John got to his feet but his bad leg made him lurch to one side again. Steadying himself by leaning against the raised platform, he turned back toward the open door in case the other men came back and found himself face to face with Sebastian Moran. A number of armed men had followed the alpha into the room and ranged out behind him.

Gasping in shock and horror, John couldn’t react fast enough to get a shot off before the alpha swatted the gun out of his hand. Moran then backhanded John so hard he staggered. His injured leg gave out and he fell to his knees as pain exploded in his face and his mouth filled with blood. Panic threatened to overwhelm John but there was nothing he could do at the moment and he forced himself to calm and breathe deeply. Holding his bruised and now swelling cheek with his stinging right hand, John slowly raised his eyes to Moran, scowled in fury and defiantly spat the blood on the floor between them.

Predictably, the huge alpha grinned in delight and approval at John’s actions as the omega recoiled in loathing. “That love tap was for making the wrong choice in the car. I didn’t like having to bail whilst it was moving. It hurt and it was your fault. But I’ll be magnanimous and forgive you. For now.”

John tried not to flinch from the sight of the man but couldn’t help himself. The once handsome face was now a mass of scabs, bruises and road rash. One eye was still swollen and Moran had suffered from a subconjunctival haemorrhage, making him appear monstrous. As John watched, Moran turned to check on the men clustered around the doorway and the doctor noticed that the alpha was moving stiffly, suggesting that there were other, hidden injuries. The decision to jump out of the moving car had probably saved his life but Moran had evidently paid a steep price. John wondered just how damaged the man really was and if he could take advantage of that.
The alpha had turned back to observe John’s reactions intently and gave the omega a half smile. “Oh, yes. I was hurt but I can still handle the likes of you, Watson, no matter how badly I’ve been injured.”

Hearing a shuffling noise from behind him, John began to turn around but then Moran spoke out harshly. “Touch him without my permission and you die, Ned.”

Glancing quickly over his shoulder, John saw the other omega back down as Moran glared furiously at him. Ned had a nasty, sullen expression on his face and he looked as if he wanted to say something but had wisely decided not to do at the last moment.

John turned his attention back to Moran as the alpha spoke again. “So glad you could finally join us, luv. I’ve been waiting for you. We’ve got a boat to catch. Now, come along nicely and I won’t hurt you. Ned, you handle him and do it right this time. Simon, pick up Wade and get to the boat. Take the van outside and make sure everything is stowed properly. I’ll take it out of your arses if anything is lost on the crossing. We’ll be along once I’ve got Johnny sorted out.”

John’s stomach churned when he heard that they were going to take him away on a boat. All but Ned and one other man left the room immediately at Moran’s order. Frantically, John’s eyes darted around the space and tried to find a way to escape. Adrenalin began to surge through his veins again and he steadied himself as he sensed Ned cautiously approaching him from behind. Suddenly, Moran’s hand shot out, reaching for the back of John’s neck to hold him still while Ned prepared to restrain him but John was ready this time. Hunching his shoulders, he evaded Moran, pulled out his SIG and quickly darted to one side. The alpha was stunned when he missed John by a fraction of an inch and the big man stumbled forward while John turned and headed for the stairs as fast as his leg allowed. To John’s surprise, instead of helping Moran, Ned stepped back and stayed out of the way.

Barely reaching the steps, he turned to see Moran nearly on top of him. The alpha was too close for John to shoot before he was bowled over so the omega dodged to one side and slid painfully along the concrete floor, twisting to get his feet under him. Despite his injuries, Moran was quite light on his feet, was able to change his direction and was on John before he could get up.

Moran reached for the back of John’s neck but the omega managed to hunch his shoulders again and roll away. But he wasn’t able to avoid the gigantic hand that grabbed his bad shoulder and squeezed. The pain was excruciating and John cried out as he was hauled to his feet by his left arm. Agony consumed him and he lashed out involuntarily, striking Moran in the ribs as hard as he could with his elbow and then kicking at the alpha’s knee. Moran roared in pain and let go of John, who fell to the ground and scrambled as hard as he could to get to his feet. He’d lost the SIG somewhere but didn’t bother to look for it as he forced himself to run for the door the previous gunmen had left open.

Before he got even halfway to the door, however, another group of armed men came into the room brandishing guns. Cursing his luck, John came to a screeching halt and froze in despair as his lungs struggled for breath. Then Moran was on him in an instant and had him by the scruff of his neck. There was no way John was going to get free from that grip and he sagged hopelessly until a smartly dressed beta pushed his way through the crowd of gunmen. When John saw who it was, he actually pressed back into Moran’s hard body, trying in vain to hide.

“Jesus H. Fucking Christ! What the bloody hell is going on? Seb, why is Watson here? I thought I told you to forget about him! And now he’s led the police here, you stupid idiot! They’ll be here in less than an hour!”

Jim Moriarty walked into the room, crazy black eyes slitted and livid with rage. The man was plainly
infuriated and John couldn’t help but shrink away from the aura of madness in his expression. Through the tight grip Moran had on him, John could feel the huge alpha stiffen as Moriarty stalked up to them.

Before Moran could respond, Moriarty looked the alpha up and down in loathing and sneered. “Did you know your precious omega here has been working all along with Sherlock Holmes, Seb? And that he’s now under the protection of the Holmes family? Your Johnny helped that bastard detective at the clinic and it was Mycroft Holmes’ agents you took him from at the hospital. And because of him, the police and that bastard Murphy now know of our connection to the Administrators at the Bureau.” Moran’s only response was to tighten his grip on John and suck in a sharp breath through his nose. Wide-eyed, John stayed as still as he could do and still felt like a rabbit being stalked by a cobra.

The maniac’s eyes then turned to John, who couldn’t help but recoil, heart pounding so hard he thought it would explode. Moriarty’s voice dropped to a vicious whisper and his eyes narrowed dangerously as he spoke directly to John. “Everything I’ve worked for is now ruined because of you and Holmes. He somehow got to Irene and through her, uncovered my entire network. Because of you, the idiots at the Bureau are throwing each other and me under the bus in a panic to divert blame away from themselves. Because of you and Holmes, everything is gone!” Spat flew into John’s face and he blinked as the beta screamed at him. “So I will destroy the both of you!”

Striking like a snake, Moriarty’s hand reached out, grabbed John’s face and squeezed painfully. His finely manicured nails deliberately dug into the bruises on John’s cheek but the doctor stayed silent despite the pain, unable to look away from the horribly contorted expression on the man’s face. Fear shot through John in a way it had never done before because the demented look on Moriarty’s face promised him worse than death.

Hissing furiously, the beta squeezed harder, digging his nails into John’s face and gouging the skin. Hot blood ran down John’s cheek. “Oh, but I’ll start again and build it all up better, next time. Too bad you won’t be around to see it.

“Irene told me Holmes is an alpha sentinel, just like Seb here, though your Sherlock is a full sentinel while Seb is only a partial. She said he didn’t want anyone to know and I can’t wait to see what happens when the world knows all about him—and I’ll see to it that the word gets out. But Holmes being an alpha explains why you helped him. You omegas are pathetic whores who will do anything for an alpha’s cock. It’s disgusting. I should take my time killing you and make Holmes watch while I do it. But none of it really matters because unfortunately, I don’t have time to kill you. So Seb is going to do it for me. As punishment for bringing you here against my orders.” The black eyes shot up to Moran as the beta abruptly let go of John’s aching face and stepped back.

Reaching into a pocket, Moriarty removed a pristine handkerchief and proceeded to wipe John’s blood off his fingers. “Kill him and then follow me to the ship, Seb. I don’t care exactly how you do it, but it should be painful. If you don’t do it, I’ll have Henri here do it for me and then I’ll have you killed, too. So it’s your choice.” Moriarty scornfully turned his back on Moran and walked toward the door while a nasty looking alpha stepped forward with a grin.

Surprisingly, Moran stood immobile during Jim’s rant, frozen with indecision and John began pick up on the alpha’s emotions for the first time. The physical contact between them enhanced John’s abilities and he sensed a lot of anger and fear. Some of the anger was directed at John but surprisingly most of it was directed at Moriarty. Despite outward appearances, Moran was actually afraid of Jim, which explained why he was uncertain. Frankly John couldn’t blame him since was
also scared to death of Moriarty.

But as soon as Moriarty demanded Moran kill John, the emotions the doctor could feel from the big man changed to violent possessiveness along with deep resentment. As a result, Moran’s fingers closed even tighter on John’s neck. Unable to prevent a whimper of pain from escaping, John sagged even more into Moran’s hold. It was then that John recalled that even though Moran had only two enhanced senses, he was still a partial sentinel. Contrary to Murphy’s assertion on the bridge, it was apparent that Moran had no problems hurting John, but killing a guide might be going too far, even for him. At least John hoped that would be the case.

Moriarty paused at the door and looked at Moran expectantly. Finally the alpha came to a decision and answered the impatient Moriarty with a lopsided grin. “Okay, Jim. I’ll take care of it. You get to the boat and I’ll follow along shortly. I’ve not had the chance to have any fun with Johnny-boy here yet and before I do him in, I’d like to fuck him at least once. Shouldn’t take long and maybe Henri might want a taste, too.” The last bit was directed at the other alpha, who looked very interested. John thought he couldn’t possibly have felt more terrified, but he had been wrong. Raped and murdered was not how he wanted to die.

Sneering in revulsion at both of them, Jim huffed and turned away. “Whatever. You’ve got fifteen minutes and if you’re not on the boat by then, I’m leaving without you. Henri, you know what to do if Moran doesn’t kill Johnny.” With that, he disappeared with the rest of his men, leaving Moran, Henri, John and Ned alone in the warehouse.

Without looking at him, Moran spoke to Ned. “Go out to the car and get ready to drive me to the boat. Wait there until we come out.” Ned obeyed quickly, looking pale but shooting a quick, triumphant glance at John.

Once Ned was gone, Moran turned John around to face him, putting John’s back to Henri and stared down at him with a thoughtful expression. Then, to John’s surprise, Moran let go of his neck and pushed him away. Stumbling back a few steps, John rubbed at his bruised neck and glared up at the alpha, trying not to show his fear and dread. There would be no escape for him. The knife was still in his belt but Henri was armed and as he watched, Moran pulled a pistol out of a holster at the back of his belt, flipped off the safety and racked the slide of his weapon, which he then pointed at John.

“Hey, I thought we were going to fuck him first. I don’t want to fuck a corpse. That’s just sick!” Henri sounded confused and disappointed.

Moran raised the pistol and aimed it at John’s torso. “Shut up, Henri. He’s my omega and I’ll do what I want with him.”

Fury welled up in John’s chest and all his terror and panic dissipated in the face of it. John belonged to no one but himself. If things had worked out differently, he might have given himself to Sherlock one day but no one owned him and most definitely not Moran. Despite his hopes otherwise, it seemed the partial sentinel was going to kill him anyway so John might as well face his death with his head up and eyes open. As before, regrets threatened to consume him so he forced his mind away from thoughts of Sherlock and what might have been.

Deciding to take control with the hope that Moran would just kill him outright without the threatened rape, John took a deep breath through his nose, then stepped forward, grabbed the barrel of the weapon with a rock steady hand and pulled the muzzle directly against the centre of his chest.

Staring straight into Moran’s eyes with a grim expression, John surprised himself when he was able to speak firmly with a steady tone. “You’re a soldier, Moran. You know how to kill people but I know your reputation. Since you’re a sniper, you mainly kill from a distance. Have you ever killed
anyone up close? No? I have done. It’s messier, smellier and much more personal. So if you’re going to do this, you should do it right. You could shoot me through the heart. It probably won’t kill me right away and I’ll suffer but it will be fatal within a few minutes. Or you can do this instead.

Dumbfounded, Moran blinked at him and didn’t resist as John tugged the muzzle of the weapon up to place it between his own eyes. “This is better and will likely kill me straight away. But it will be rather messy so you might ask Henri to move to one side if he doesn’t want blood and brains all over him.”

John’s intent eyes never left Moran’s and though they were no longer physically touching, John could still pick up some of the alpha’s emotions. Moran was feeling real respect and admiration for John and his courage, which stunned the omega. He’d had no idea that the alpha was even capable of such feelings but it didn’t change the fact that John still loathed the man. At this point, he just wanted to get Moran to kill him without torturing him first.

The moment was interrupted when emotions of confusion intruded on John’s senses and he blinked, looking away. Henri was getting angry and impatient because Moran was not only ignoring him but was apparently not going to allow him to fuck John. Moran’s eyes narrowed dangerously as the other alpha spoke up sullenly.

“If you’ve changed your mind about doing him, you could at least let me have a go before you shoot him. Selfish bastard.”

Moran peeled John’s hand from the weapon and then lowered the gun. Gently cupping the side of John’s bruised and bloody face, Moran didn’t answer Henri. After briefly caressing John’s cheek, the big mercenary moved his hand to the back of John’s neck again. He gripped hard so that John’s head fell back and the omega’s body involuntarily became pliant. The huge alpha bent and kissed John, who gasped in surprised disbelief and groaned in dismay. Moran took advantage and deepened the kiss, sucking on John’s tongue. The doctor couldn’t prevent any of it and, as he did before in the car, tried in vain to push the big man away. The emotions he was picking up from the partial sentinel were wild and violent and they frightened the hell out of him. All he wanted was to get away but it was impossible as long as Moran gripped him by the neck.

Finally, Moran broke the kiss and John gasped again as he was finally allowed to breathe. Moran pulled him close and spoke quietly. “You’re right. I know all there is to know about killing someone and I doubt there’s anything you can teach me about that. But you have taught me other things. Because of you, I’ve learnt to imagine a future where I won’t kill people any longer and where I can have a family of my own one day. You are the most amazing omega I’ve ever met, John Watson. Bonding with you, finding a way to make you happy and having children will be the greatest challenge of my life. You are the only one for me. No one else will ever do. I know you don’t agree but I don’t care. You’re mine. I’ll hurt you but unless you try to leave me, I won’t kill you.”

John froze in place and stared at the alpha incredulously. It was all he could do not to laugh at the man but Moran was serious. He could never kill John? The omega’s heart started up again and jumped into his throat. Moran was going to defy Moriarty! But what about Henri?

The man in question spoke up, sounding surprised and mistrustful. “What the hell do you mean, you can’t kill him? Moriarty gave you an order. You’d best shoot him now if you’re not going to fuck him. We’re running out of time.”

Moran glowered at Henri as he answered. “I’ve always done whatever I want and Jim knows that about me. I’m keeping John and that’s all there is to it. You don’t like it you can fuck off.”
John was able to move enough to see that Henri had his gun aimed at Moran. The other alpha was wary and suspicious. “That’s not what I was told, mate. I’ll give you one last chance. Do it now or die!”

Alarms had been constantly going off in John’s head but they spiked as his latent senses warned him of serious danger. His heart was pounding hard enough to leap out of his chest and he gripped at Moran’s arm with more strength than he had before. This got Moran’s attention and the alpha glanced briefly down at John’s horrified face and gave him what was probably meant to be a reassuring smile. Exhibiting amazing strength, the alpha suddenly swung John behind him and shot at Henri from the hip, hitting the man in the chest, but not before Henri got off a shot, too.

The big alpha grunted in pain as the bullet struck him in the abdomen. The force of the impact made him involuntarily step back, crowding John and making him stumble but neither man went down. Despite being hit, the alpha kept a tight hold on John while the omega uselessly pried at the alpha’s fingers, trying to make him let go. Even though he hated the man, John was obligated to try to help.

“Moran, let go of me. You’re injured and in case you’ve forgotten, I’m a doctor. Let me help you.”

Ignoring him, Moran shook his head. “I’ve had worse. Let’s go. I don’t want to miss the boat.” John was dragged by the scruff of his neck toward the door and out of the warehouse. There was nothing he could do to prevent it and Moran kept him behind him and off to one side.

They emerged into the darkness and John shivered. His clothes were still wet from the fall into the pothole and he was feeling the cold. Once they were outside, John caught a glimpse of a car with Ned leaning against the driver’s door. The other omega straightened as they emerged from the warehouse and looked startled to see John with Moran.

"Seb, what are you doing? You heard Mr Moriarty! He’ll kill you!” The man sounded genuinely upset. He didn’t seem to notice that Moran was injured.

Moran’s voice sounded strained. “He won’t, Ned. I’ve known Jim for years. Now shut the fuck up and drive us to the boat.”

Ned gave John a furious look just as the doctor was pulled into the back seat beside Moran. Since the alpha never let go of John’s neck and kept him pressed to his side, he was effectively helpless and was alternately furious and desperate. Moran must have gone off his trolley and was deluding himself if he thought Moriarty would ignore this. There was no fucking way that mad bastard would allow either of them to live now.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter but more later. Thank you all for your patience and for all your very kind comments and kudos.

The car started up and Ned guided it carefully around the pothole and then picked up speed. Moran’s grip on John’s neck loosened somewhat but he still had too strong a hold for John to do anything. They passed a few street lights and in the illumination John could see that Moran’s dark shirt was glistening with blood. Despite being badly injured, Moran wasn’t showing much sign of it and seemed as strong as ever. John was hoping that Moran would pass out and he could bail from the vehicle but that was not happening. They drove down a paved road, passing dark mysterious structures, parked lorries and finally large round buildings John guessed were used to store oil.

Within a relatively short time they were driving onto a pier that projected far out into the Thames. As they drove up, John could see the vague outline in the darkness of an enormous ship moored there. John knew fuck-all about boats but it looked somewhat like a small oil tanker or some such thing and it clearly was older than he was. Whatever it was, it was still very large and John wondered how the river could be deep enough for it. Then there was no more time to think about it as Ned stopped the vehicle and Moran hauled John out to stand beside him on the pier.

The area was dimly lit, probably because people weren’t really meant to be there at that time of night. An enormous crane permanently fixed to the pier loomed over head and was obviously the way that cargo was loaded on and off any docked ship. Moran pulled John toward what looked to be a gangway. Being frog marched up it was an adventure in terror as it creaked and swayed with each step and John could see that it was a very, very long way down. He caught glimpses of the Thames reflected in the dim lighting below their feet and it seemed they climbed at least two storeys high to reach the deck of the ship. At the top of the gangway they were eyed dubiously by two men who were working to disengage the gangway from the boat but neither tried to stop them.

Adrenaline spiked as John was dragged up and onto the deck, trailed by a clearly anxious Ned. They turned to their right, walked past a large structure on the left and toward the centre of the ship where the lighting was better. John’s impression of the ship being ancient was reinforced once he got a good glimpse of the deck. Everything was filthy and cluttered. All the metal visible showed severe corrosion and peeling paint as evidence of poor maintenance whilst the waist high railings along the sides looked to be not only rusty but dangerously unstable. He was surprised that the ship was even seaworthy let alone had been chosen as a getaway vehicle by Moriarty. But maybe it was all the crazy bastard could afford since the majority of his assets had apparently been frozen or confiscated by Sherlock and the police. There were a handful of men on deck who stopped working and stared in surprise at Moran, Ned and John as they arrived. Whilst John watched, one man slipped into an entrance to the main structure, likely to inform Moriarty of what was happening.

Moran made his way to the middle of the deck, then turned and faced a door leading into the superstructure, forcing a helpless John tight to his side as he waited. The other men milled about nervously and Ned shifted uncomfortably behind them and then moved out of sight. As they waited, John glanced around the deck of the ship. Amongst the filth, there were all sorts of things scattered about that he didn’t recognise but could be used as cover and even a few things could be converted
into weapons. John vibrated with tension, unsure what was going to happen next. To his surprise, Moran loosened the grip on his neck but didn’t let go completely. Dark, dangerous emotions flowed from Moran to John but this time the omega received something different in addition to the other feelings.

Apparently, Moran was fairly confident he could convince Jim he had good reasons for disobeying orders and that they would be on their way shortly. Moran was clearly delusional, but there were other, darker thoughts John sensed that were promising extreme violence if Moran was proven to be wrong. The big man was preparing for battle and the emotions resonated with John. The doctor’s heart was practically beating out of his chest and he was on high alert, breathing fast with eyes darting about, searching for danger.

It was so very odd to realise he was almost reading the other man’s thoughts and it horrified him. Was it that he was somehow emotionally bonding to Moran or did it mean he was just getting better at picking up and reading emotions in general? How would it work with Sherlock and would he ever have the chance to find out? The thought of the other alpha calmed and centred him, knowing that Sherlock was coming for him. In the meantime, he would stay alert and be prepared to react to whatever happened in the next few minutes.

Just as John readied himself, Moriarty walked onto the deck through the door that the henchman entered earlier. Looking furious, he stalked up to Moran and stared up at the big alpha. A handful of his men had followed and spread out behind him. A couple of them were armed. The hideous black eyes wandered to Moran’s bloody shirt, widened slightly and then narrowed before he addressed the alpha in a deceptively mild tone.

“Seb. I thought I told you to kill Johnny. I take it you shot Henri instead?”

Watching out of the corner of one eye, John saw Moran grin fiercely and defiantly. “Yeah, I did. Sorry, Jim. After everything I’ve been through to find Watson, I’m keeping him.”

All the calmness John had gathered a few moments earlier fled as Moriarty glanced at the omega with his dead, black eyes. Tensing in panic, John vainly tried to edge away as he sensed insane fury and hatred pouring off Moriarty in waves and couldn’t understand why no one else seemed to feel it. The beta’s face was impassive though and didn’t betray any evidence of the madness that was so evident to John. Then Moriarty spoke to Moran in what sounded like a reasonable tone.

“You sure about that, Seb? Your obsession with Johnny-boy is clearly not reciprocated. Look at Watson. He detests you and doesn’t want anything to do with you. He’s a risk and will always be a threat to us. Now Ned there would bend over for you the second you ask him to and has already proven his loyalty.”

This time Moran openly scoffed which caused Moriarty’s expression to turn ugly with anger. The beta stepped back a few feet as he waited for Moran’s response, which was snide.

“You not what I want, Jim. And John won’t be a threat once he’s bonded and bred. He'll be loyal to me the instant I put a child in him. That's how it works between alphas and omegas. I didn’t think I’d have to explain that to you after all this time. Now, shouldn’t we be getting underway?”

As he spoke, the diesel engines of the ship engaged, causing the ship to vibrate noisily. The wind had picked up, making a loose tarpaulin somewhere nearby to flap noisily, startling everyone and helping the engine to drown out the faint noise of night time London. Shivering in the cold breeze, John’s attention, like that of all the others on deck, was focussed completely on the two men who were staring each other down to the exclusion of all else. There would be a battle shortly and it only remained to be seen how much violence would be unleashed and which man would prevail.
Moriarty stepped back again and his mouth tightened in fury at the blatant insolence and disrespect he’d received from Moran. Everyone on the deck tensely observed the beta and his second-in-command, each one wondering what was going to happen and what they were going to be expected to do. Abruptly, John sensed that Moran had reached a decision of some kind because the tight hold on his neck was loosened to the point where he was no longer confined. Moran kept his hand resting on his shoulder but the doctor was free to move. John stood there, just as paralysed as before, but this time with shock, wondering what Moran was playing at.

Lowering his head, Moriarty glared at the big alpha and sneered, addressing the men beside him. “Kill them both and dump their bodies over the side. By the time anyone finds them, we’ll be long gone.” With that, he turned to leave the deck.

Two things happened almost simultaneously. Moran pushed John toward the scant cover to the left side of the deck and drew his weapon just as Moriarty’s men began to aim their guns at Moran. Surprised, John managed to roll to safety and gain shelter behind some rusty metal machinery bolted to the deck as Moran opened fire on Moriarty and the men surrounding him. Despite his wound, the big man was light on his feet and was beside John and covering him with his body as the bullets began to fly. Two henchmen fell injured while Moriarty roared orders and hid behind his men.

Bullets ricocheted off the machinery John hid behind, forcing him to keep his head well down. The sheer amount of noise being made by the gunfire reverberated in his bones, reminding him of his time in Afghanistan. He heard Moran grunt as bullets struck him whilst he tried to protect John. Then Moran cried out and the omega glanced up with horrified eyes to see that a bullet had taken the alpha in the chest and exited from his back. The gun fell from his hand and Moran slid bonelessly to the deck, eyes staring vacantly into John’s. The man was dead and John was sure he was next.

Moriarty emerged from behind his men, turned his attention to where John was sheltered and pointed. “Get Johnny and bring him to me. Don’t hurt him. I want to take care of him myself.” Moriarty apparently didn’t realise it, but by announcing that he wanted to kill John personally, he had just given the doctor cart blanche to create as much havoc as possible and he was ready.

John had seen what looked to be the wooden end of a mop lying on the deck, picked it up and stepped over Moran’s body out to the middle of the deck as the men advanced on him, keeping it hidden by his side. As the first man reached him, John attacked by sweeping the goon’s feet out from under him using the stick. The man fell backward with a surprised grunt as John turned and drove the wood into the stomach of a second man. When the man involuntarily bent forward with a wheeze, John followed up with a knee to the chin that knocked him out. While Moriarty screamed at them, the five other henchmen nervously pushed forward to surround John.

Brandishing the mop like a staff, John backed away to gain more room to manoeuvre just as a helicopter dove down and hovered over the centre deck, shining a spotlight on the proceedings. It took John a moment to realise he’d been hearing the sound of it approaching for some time but the events on the deck had kept him from reacting to it. The overwhelming noise and wind of the helicopter’s arrival was disorienting and deafening and the brightness of the light forced John to shield his face with a hand. He had no idea where the helicopter had come from, but the incredibly intense light was literally blinding.

The five men surrounding John were not affected by the beam since they had their backs to it and sensing his weakness, rushed John at once. They paid for it painfully as John swung the wooden stick against the head of one man, knocking him out but breaking the weapon in half in the process. Using his momentum, John spun on his good leg and delivered a flying kick to the gut of the second man but landed badly on his injured leg, making him stagger before he regained his balance. He managed to block a swing from a lead pipe with the plaster cast on his left arm but agony
reverberated through his body and he stumbled again. That was all it took for the remaining three men to bring him down with a painful tackle and then haul him to his feet held tightly between them. As they dragged him toward Moriarty, John could see the henchmen he’d put down were scattered around like rubbish and smiled grimly in satisfaction.

The helicopter’s spotlight shifted away from John just as the loud speaker came on. “THIS IS THE METROPOLITAN POLICE! PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER! YOUR VESSEL IS SURROUNDED!”

The sounds from the helicopter drowned out Moriarty’s screams of fury but instead of giving up and surrendering, the beta grabbed a gun from one of his men and started shooting at the helicopter. The other henchmen followed suit and as John watched in alarm, the bullet resistant windscreen of the helicopter cracked alarmingly as it was peppered with bullets. The pilot wisely pulled up and flew toward the bow of the ship whilst Moriarty ordered one of his men to go inside to tell the captain to get under way. There was no possible way the madman could escape but he was apparently going to try anyway.

John strained and struggled against the men who held him but was unable to break away. Exhaustion and panic had him in its grip again and he found himself facing an insanely angry Moriarty. The beta’s face was drawn up in a rictus of absolute rage and John couldn’t help but cringe away from the intensity of the man’s lunacy. Snarling, Moriarty swung the gun and clouted John on the side of the head. John saw it coming and tried to avoid the blow but was hit solidly on the temple. Pain exploded across his brow and everything went hazy. He sagged in the arms of the men holding him but they tightened their grip and kept him upright. Whilst Moriarty drew back his arm for another blow, the omega’s senses came alert in a way they hadn’t done in what seemed like years. Lifting his aching head, John’s eyes darted to the right and widened as he caught the sight of Sherlock racing toward them from around the superstructure, closely followed by another man John recognised as Lestrade and a handful of others in uniform carrying assault weapons. They must have been on the helicopter!

Moriarty saw them at the same time and instead of hitting John with the gun, he pointed it straight at Sherlock. The alpha was too close to get out of the way and the beta’s finger tightened on the trigger. Panicked, John kicked out at Moriarty’s gun hand, trusting all his weight to the two men holding him. Again, they automatically tightened their grip on his arms and inadvertently braced him so that the blow to Moriarty’s hand was hard enough to divert the gunshot away from Sherlock and knock the weapon out of his hand. The gun went flying away and Sherlock was on Moriarty as the two men holding John realised what they’d done and mistakenly loosened their hold on him.

Even though he was still unsteady from the blow to the head and blood was running into his left eye, John’s elbow snapped up and smashed into the face of the man to his right, knocking him to the deck. The man to John’s left didn’t have time to react before John spun toward him and hit him hard in the chin with the heel of his hand, making the man reel backward. Lestrade was on the third henchman next and John ignored them to search out his alpha sentinel.

Sherlock and Moriarty were exchanging vicious blows near the railing of the ship. The alpha was larger and better trained but Moriarty fought like a rabid, cornered animal and was holding his own against a superior opponent. He’d produced a nasty looking knife from somewhere and was using it expertly to hold Sherlock off as they danced back and forth. To his dismay, John saw spatters of blood on the deck and it seemed to be coming from Sherlock. Moriarty must have cut him but Sherlock was now being very cautious and the loss of blood didn’t appear to be affecting him.

Using an incredible move John had never seen before, the alpha suddenly slipped inside Moriarty’s guard and delivered a devastating blow to the chest that rocked the smaller man back into the railing
with great force. The bloody knife flew into the night and Moriarty mouth made an ‘O’ of shock as
the corroded metal of the railing gave way. He teetered at the edge but then managed to grab
Sherlock’s jacket with both hands at the last second. However, instead of using his hold to pull
himself forward onto the deck, the crazy bastard grinned madly and deliberately stepped backward
and off the ship, throwing Sherlock off balance and taking the alpha with him.

As John watched, paralysed with shock, one of Sherlock’s hands flailed and managed to grab
the end of a broken railing as he fell, but it bent the structure as the weight of both men pulled on it.

"NO!!" John found himself screaming, horrified beyond belief as the piece of rusted metal groaned
and began to break. Throwing himself toward the side of the ship, John somehow managed to grab
one of Sherlock’s wrists with his good right hand just as the metal broke. John’s chest hit the deck
with a bruising smack and Sherlock’s weight dragged the omega forward across the wooden deck
and partly over the edge. John continued to slip but then his left arm hooked around the remains of
the railing where it was embedded in the deck and the metal miraculously held. Agony screamed
through his bad shoulder and broken wrist but he held onto the railing and his alpha with all the
strength in his body.

Sherlock’s face was strained and pain filled as he gazed up in terror at the omega. Gasping, he tried
to loosen John’s grip. "John! John, let go of me! You’ll fall, too! Please! I can’t risk you!"

Grimacing with effort and breathing harshly through his nose, John didn’t waste his strength
bothering to reply to an idiot who had clearly taken leave of his senses. Instead he shook his head
and tightened his grip. Glancing quickly down to the pier, the dim lights revealed Moriarty lying still
on the concrete with black blood pooling around his obviously broken head. It was a fitting end to
the daft bastard but that very same thing would happen to Sherlock if John failed to hang on until
help arrived.

Even though he didn’t have the strength to pull Sherlock to safety, there was no way he’d ever let
him go. The man was going to be his mate and the father of their children. They were going to
bond and have a happy, long life together. Even if Sherlock had other omegas on the side and they
only saw each other during heats, Sherlock would always be the only one for John and John was
determined that he would die before he let anything happen to him. The echo of Moran’s words to
John rang in his head and he understood how the man had felt with a fierceness he’d never imagined
possible.

It seemed that time crawled as he waited for help but in reality only seconds passed. The effort of
keeping the heavier alpha from falling began to affect John and he felt his strength drain slowly
away. Sweat mixed with the blood on his face and ran into his eyes and mouth as he gasped
desperately for breath. Pain consumed him and his vision darkened but he held on grimly, gazing
down into Sherlock’s beloved face, trying to convey everything he felt for the man with his latent
senses.

To John’s shock and surprise, something actually clicked between them as they stared into each
others’ eyes and though he knew it wasn’t a complete bond by any means, John realised he had
finally managed to partially complete some kind of connection. Sherlock’s face cleared and took on
an expression of wonder as John proceeded to transfer his deepest emotions to the alpha and
Sherlock finally stopped struggling. In fact, he managed to grip John’s wrist in return. John grinned
fiercely in triumph and pride at his amazing, brave alpha, his sentinel. Straining harder to hang tight,
John’s arms trembled and shook with pain and fatigue. He knew he couldn’t hold on much longer
but they would be together, whatever happened.

Suddenly, John sensed movement around him. Another hand reached out to catch hold of Sherlock
and pulled hard. Help had finally arrived and John wanted to howl with relief. With the last of his waning strength John pulled also and then more hands joined them, helping with Sherlock whilst others dragged John away from the edge. John collapsed on his back, shaking and gasping while the detective was laid down onto the dirty wooden deck. Once Sherlock was safe, John stiffly forced himself to sit up and crawled to him, rudely forcing the others out of the way. He then gathered Sherlock up in his aching arms and buried his face in his alpha’s neck. If his eyes were wet and his breathing hitched with sobs, no one mentioned it.

Sherlock’s embrace was just as tight as he petted John’s hair and inhaled the doctor’s scent with wheezing breaths. John finally calmed and abruptly remembered that Sherlock was injured. Quickly, he pulled back and began to search Sherlock’s torso for wounds.

“You were hurt. Where were you stabbed?”

Sherlock tried to push John’s hands away and return to the embrace. “I’m fine, John.”

John would not be deterred. “I’ll be the judge of that, you git. Now where….?” He found the injury high on the alpha’s chest. The left side of Sherlock’s shirt and coat were saturated with blood. There was a long, shallow wound in Sherlock’s upper body and it was still bleeding but it was indeed superficial. Tearing a strip of cloth from Sherlock’s shirt, he put pressure on the wound as the alpha hissed in pain.

Lips tightening into a hard line of distress and concern, John looked down at Sherlock.

“This is not the definition of ‘fine’ Sherlock. But it’s not too serious, thankfully. It does need to be taken care of, though. Are the paramedics here?”

Sherlock’s expression was smug. “You’re a doctor. You can take care of me at home.”

John wiped his face with a sleeve and sighed tiredly. “I’ve never even been to your flat, Sherlock. How do I know if you have the things I would need to take care of this?”

Hearing a laugh beside him, John glanced up and realised the deck was swarming with police officers and a grinning Lestrade was kneeling nearby. It was the DI who had laughed and John smiled briefly at him.

The warm brown eyes sparkled. “This one’s got everything in his flat to take care of injuries. And yes, this kind of thing happens to Sherlock all the bloody time but he’s never listened to anyone else before, so good on you. Maybe it will happen less in future now that you’ll be with him. And somehow I’m not surprised to find out that you’re still alive, Larssen or whatever your name really is. I’m guessing Sherlock had something to do with that.” His expression then became serious as he looked meaningfully at the people surrounding them. “Sherlock, you’d best take him home before someone notices that an escaped, unbonded latent is here and tries to take him into custody.”

Surprised at being reminded of what he now was, John’s eyes darted around but no one seemed to be paying him any attention. Sherlock nodded at Lestrade. “For once you’re making good sense, Lestrade. Please help me up, John. I can tell you’re hurt and need to be taken care of, as well.”

Embarrassed, John reassured Sherlock. “I’m mostly just sore and tired. A hot shower and a good night’s sleep will see everything else right, so don’t worry about me.”

With John’s help, Sherlock got to his feet and turned to the DI. “Lestrade, I’d like you to meet my future guide and omega, Dr John Watson. You are a witness to my claim on him. John, you’ve met Lestrade already, so let’s go.”
Stunned at what Sherlock had said, John stood and just blinked at the alpha, mouth open in surprise. As proposals went, it wasn’t very romantic but John had never needed romance. His heart sped up and he looked over at Lestrade to see what the DI had to say.

Shaking his head in mock exasperation at Sherlock’s rudeness, Lestrade laughed again, smiled warmly at John and responded to the detective with his own ritualised words.

“Sherlock, as a fellow alpha, I see and recognise your claim to this omega and will testify to it in court if necessary.” He then stuck out a hand to the doctor. “John, it’s good to finally meet you properly, mate. We’ll all have to get together soon for a pint at your local. I’m sure you’ve got quite a tale to tell!”

John shook Lestrade’s hand and laughed at Sherlock’s horrified expression. “I’ll be there with bells on as soon as I find a local. Like I said, I’ve never even been to Sherlock’s flat before.”

“John, we really have to go. Now.”

This time Sherlock was serious because someone was looking suspiciously at John’s tattoo. The alpha slung his arm around John’s aching shoulders and glared hard at the man, who blanched and turned away but he still shot glances at John. As they moved toward the gangway to leave the ship, they passed a group of forensic technicians standing around the body of Sebastian Moran and John paused whilst Sherlock spoke to one of them. John didn’t bother to listen in as he gazed with mixed feelings down at the dead man. Vague emotions of regret and sadness for the wasted life went through John but he felt nothing but numb relief that Moran wouldn’t be able to bother him any longer. For all his protestations of wanting to make John happy, he knew Moran would have instead made his life a living hell and John was not sorry that he’d avoided that. And even though Moran had died protecting John, he’d put the doctor into danger to begin with.

All of Moriarty’s henchmen were handcuffed and lined up, ready to be transported to jail but there was no sign of Ned anywhere, which worried John. Maybe the man was elsewhere on the ship or had already been taken into custody but John was too tired to follow up on it at the moment. It wasn’t as if Ned was one of the big players after all. He was only a lowly goon and without Moriarty and Moran around, it was likely the omega was running away as fast as possible.

Sherlock turned concerned eyes on John and the omega realised with surprise that the detective was reading John’s anxiety as they walked across the deck. Whatever connection had occurred between them was slowly strengthening and John exulted as he speculated how deep their link would grow once they could establish it properly. Right now it felt superficial and shaky, but that would change with time and a chance to be alone. Instinctively, he knew sex with Sherlock would cement the link permanently but only once they were both fully recovered. It had been a traumatic few weeks for both of them and they needed to rest and heal before John’s heat returned in less than a month. The two of them had a lot to sort out, but they now had the time and John was looking forward to it.

As they reached the gangway, John glanced over to the bow of the ship and smiled. “Helicopter, huh? A rather dramatic way to arrive at a crime scene.”

Sherlock didn’t even glance at the huge machine sitting on the deck. “Mycroft insisted.”

“Really? How very kind of him. I guess we can’t get it to drop us off somewhere?”

“Unlikely, as it appears to be full of bullet holes.” John couldn’t help laughing in relief at Sherlock’s dry comment and got a half smile from Sherlock in return.
Finally, they made it to the pier and John’s knees nearly gave out in relief. The trip down the gangway had been almost as nerve-wracking as walking up it. Looking over to where Moriarty lay dead, John saw the body surrounded by more forensic people. Something in him relaxed profoundly knowing that the hideous man was definitely dead and there was no coming back for him. Finally he and Sherlock were safe. It felt as if a ton of weight fell off his shoulders at that moment.

They walked out onto the pier and John looked around. His exhaustion was creeping up on him and he didn’t think he’d make it to the main road but didn’t want to ask a policeman for a ride for fear of being arrested as an escaped latent. The officers were all too busy anyway. But Sherlock led them unerringly to a car parked on the pier and used a remote key to open the doors.

John got in the passenger’s side and looked around. “I didn’t know you had a car, Sherlock. Who brought it here?”

The alpha’s expression was smug. “This isn’t my car. It’s Anderson’s. I ‘borrowed’ his keys since I knew you’d need a ride home. Once we arrive, I’ll text him and let him know where it is.”

John picked up on an undercurrent of extreme dislike from Sherlock and was confused. “Who is Anderson?”

Sherlock scoffed derisively. “An incompetent buffoon disguised as one of Lestrade’s forensics experts. I was speaking to him on the deck earlier. His repulsive personality is only surpassed by his lack of intelligence.”

John sighed in mock despair and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re a colossal tit, you know that? I don’t know how Lestrade puts up with you. Christ almighty. I will not bail you out when you get arrested for car theft.”

Sherlock grinned as he started the car and pulled onto the road. “Yes, you will. You love that about me, so stop complaining.”

Snorting inelegantly as Sherlock cheerfully contradicted him, John shook his head in fond exasperation, and smiled despite himself. “God help me, you’re right. I do love you. We’re both as bad as each other and it’s going to take some doing to get used to each other. Even if we can’t live together, we’ll find a way to sort it all out somehow. We’ve got time now.”

The alpha stilled and John could feel his bewilderment and surprise. “What is that meant to mean, John? That we can’t live together? I don’t understand.”

Equally surprised, John sat up straight and looked over at Sherlock in confusion. “I…well. The bonding contract stipulated….”

Sherlock interrupted John before he could continue, looking completely mystified and increasingly alarmed. “What bonding contract are you referring to? Who gave you a bonding contract? You didn’t sign anything, did you?”

Heart sinking, John felt wrong-footed and his face burned in embarrassment. Apparently Mycroft Holmes wasn’t above taking the piss with a penniless, lower class omega and suddenly John was humiliated, angry and upset. Everything the man had said about the Holmes family welcoming him was now suspect. The thought chilled him and made him feel ill. John had been looking forward to being part of a real family again and the thought that Mycroft might have lied about that physically hurt. At the same time, relief flooded through him that Sherlock hadn’t arranged for that horrid contract and didn’t mean for John to accept any of the intolerable things in it. John had no idea what game Mycroft was playing at but he wanted to punch the beta in the nose for what he’d done. But
now wasn’t the time to argue with Sherlock about it. They were both exhausted and injured and John wasn’t feeling particularly rational at the moment.

Glancing over at Sherlock, he forced a smile to hide his bewilderment. “No worries, luv. I didn’t sign a thing. We’ll talk about it later when we get home.”

Sherlock eyed him sceptically but thankfully didn’t pursue the subject. It hit John then and he sat there stunned. He was going home. It finally began to sink in that Sherlock had actually claimed him in front of a witness who had acknowledged the claiming. For all intents and purposes, legally and morally, John now belonged to Sherlock and for the first time in years, John would truly have a home of his own. The ride to Baker Street gave John some time to think about his circumstances and evaluate how he was feeling.

For some reason, John found himself unaccountably nervous as they drove toward what would be his new home. There was so much to try to figure out. John wasn't used to thinking of himself as half of a partnership and he could tell that Sherlock felt the same. It was going to take a lot of adjustment for them both to be completely at ease with each other so they could live together without too much conflict. On the positive side, having a bond as sentinel and guide would allow John to read Sherlock's emotions almost effortlessly and Sherlock would be able to sense John’s, as well.

The tentative connection that they’d forged earlier allowed John to sense that, as Sherlock approached his own familiar territory, it was beginning to occur to the sentinel just how much his life was going to change. John's heart sank because he could tell that Sherlock was not only anxious but wasn't sure he liked the idea of changing his ways in order to take care of an omega and guide. Even though his situation was different, John understood how Sherlock felt because he was also feeling the same way. He would soon be expected to take care of and guide an alpha sentinel. The responsibility was enormous and made worse by the fact that he knew just enough to know he was probably dangerous to Sherlock in his untrained state. Despite his anger at Mycroft, John hoped he could still convince the beta to arrange some tuition for him despite the fact he'd never signed the bonding contract.

His thoughts had totally absorbed him and it wasn't until Sherlock spoke that he realised they’d already crossed the river and had nearly arrived at their destination. Not surprisingly, Sherlock had indeed picked up on his feelings and tried to reassure him.

"I'll see to it, John. You'll have the best tutors that I can find to help you learn as much or as little about guide lore as you like."

The alpha was smiling gently at him and John couldn't help grinning back at him and decided then and there that even though their lives would change dramatically, he would make sure it would all be for the better. Sherlock glanced over at him again as John’s spirits rose, clearly picking up on the omega’s elevated mood. Smiling, the alpha tentatively put a hand on the seat next to John, leaving it up to him if he wanted to take his hand. Immediately, John responded and twined their fingers together tightly. A charming flush spread across Sherlock’s pale skin and John grinned.

The omega looked around and saw the car was driving down a rather nice street combining residential and commercial buildings and Sherlock pulled the car over to park in front of a café with a red awning that said “Speedy’s”. The street was marked clearly as a tow away zone but the alpha didn’t seem worried about it as he got out of the vehicle and walked up to a door to the left of the restaurant. Brass numbers said 221B and John understood with a start they were finally at Sherlock’s flat. It just brought home how exhausted he was that it hadn’t occurred to him immediately and his heart started to hammer in his chest and his fingers felt tingly as he followed Sherlock up seventeen steps to a landing. The alpha stopped there and looked nervously down at John.
"Well, here’s your new home, John. I do hope you like it."

John glanced around the landing and back up at Sherlock. “It’s nice but rather small for two people, don’t you think?”

Sherlock groaned and rolled his eyes again, then unlocked the door to the flat and turned toward the omega with a wide grin.

Suspicious, John stepped back and narrowed his eyes at the alpha. “You’d best not be thinking about hauling me … oof!!”

Sherlock suddenly bent, picked John up and threw him over his shoulder. He then staggered into the flat and set the omega down with a grunt.

Eyebrows raised, Sherlock caught his breath. “You’re a lot heavier than you look, John.”

“Jesus Christ, Sherlock! You didn’t have to carry me over the threshold! That tradition went out with the dinosaurs!” John straightened his jumper and shook his head at Sherlock in annoyance.

The alpha’s face fell and he looked embarrassed. “I know it sounds odd, but I told myself that if I ever found an omega that I truly wanted and who wanted me, I’d do that to welcome him or her into my life. I liked the symbolism of the tradition.”

John’s expression softened when he saw the look of disappointment on his alpha’s face. “It’s all right, luv. A little warning wouldn’t have gone amiss, though.”

Nodding, Sherlock stepped aside and threw out a hand, indicating John should enter the flat. Once he’d taken a few steps into the main room, John stopped and looked around, shocked. Everything was familiar since this was the same flat he’d seen in his dreams! He turned around and stared up at Sherlock in astonishment.

"I’ve seen this place before, Sherlock! It’s exactly as I recall it from two dreams I’d had with you and…well, dreams.” John felt odd telling Sherlock that the dream was about the future, featuring their lives together and their numerous children. It was just a dream for all it felt real. John didn’t believe in precognition but suspected that might change.

Humming thoughtfully, Sherlock speculated. “You must have visited here in the spirit world, then. It means there is a lot of significance to this place and you are apparently very sensitive to things like that. Once you’ve had a chance to take some lessons in guide lore, maybe you can find that out for us. In the meantime, I’ll give you a tour.”

_Spirit world?_ John hadn’t heard of that term before but he had a very strange thought concerning the weird animal he thought he’d hallucinated in the warehouse. Did it have something to do with spirit worlds? The term _spirit animal_ came to him suddenly and he didn’t honestly know why but it sounded right somehow. His attention was drawn back to Sherlock, who proceeded to show him about his new home, obviously nervous and clearly hoping that John liked the place.

It didn’t take much time to see the flat but John was impressed at how tidy the place actually was despite its cluttered appearance. It was important that sentinels’ living spaces be very sanitary or their senses could easily be thrown off and they could zone on a speck of dust. Bonded sentinels had an easier time of it but it was still important to maintain absolute cleanliness at all times. It was a good thing that John excelled at that and didn’t mind keeping things clean. He would have to go over what products to use in future with Sherlock but there was time for that later.
John was surprised to find his clothing—even the new outfits and jacket that Mycroft had bought him—arranged in Sherlock’s bedroom cupboard and all his other belongings, along with his identity papers and money, resting safely in a dresser drawer. Sherlock shrugged and mentioned Mycroft but John didn’t say anything for fear of starting an argument. He was exhausted and hurting and John remembered that he had to take care of his sentinel before he could rest.

Hustling the protesting alpha into the loo, John forced the man onto the side of the tub and inspected the knife wound as well as numerous contusions on Sherlock’s arms and chest. Moriarty had given almost as good as he’d got from Sherlock during their fight. There were going to be some seriously painful bruises coming up tomorrow and Sherlock was going to be feeling some pain. Thankfully the knife wound didn’t need sutures and John cleaned the area thoroughly, used plasters to close it and then bandaged it tightly. His sight was fading in and out by the time he was done and Sherlock took both his hands in his and stared seriously into his eyes.

"John, you’re beyond exhausted. Please go to bed. I’ll clean up here.”

“No, I want a shower first. My muscles are seizing up. You don’t happen to have any cold packs, do you?” John looked blearily at Sherlock who took John's head in his hands and kissed his forehead.

“I’ve got some in the other room. Go ahead and shower if you think you can stay upright. I’ll be back shortly.”

John managed a hot shower that felt like bliss against the sore muscles of his back and shoulders and then Sherlock was there with a soft towel for him and gently led him out of the shower. He carefully wrapped John up in the towel, handed him a toothbrush so he could clean his teeth and waited until he was done. Feeling a thousand times better than he had just a few moments earlier, John mindlessly followed Sherlock back to the bedroom and sank down onto the cool sheets of the large bed on his stomach. The sheets smelled wonderfully of Sherlock and John nearly moaned in happiness. He jumped a bit when Sherlock placed some cold packs on his shoulders but they were right where he needed them the most and without thinking, he used his empathy to send his grateful appreciation to the alpha. Sherlock hummed happily in acknowledgement as John drifted off.

Before he fell asleep completely, John felt a tender kiss on his cheek and a deep voice murmured in his ear. "Thank you for my life, my love. Thank you.”

TBC
Chapter 8

After a delay in posting, I wanted to thank everyone for your patience! Your lovely comments and kudos are very welcome and many thanks to you all. :-)  

The delicious smell of frying bacon woke him. Sitting up in bed, John rubbed at his eyes as his stomach rumbled. It was bright and sunny and he realised he’d slept the entire morning away, which explained why he was so hungry. He stretched and yawned, feeling rested but very stiff. His shoulders ached but the shower and cold packs had done a good job and he knew the stiffness would ease as he moved about. The muscles were mostly just sore but his right shoulder was definitely strained. Rest, hot showers and more cold packs would see him right as rain in a few days. Thankfully, his bad leg only grumbled a bit at him and he knew it was well on its way to being completely healed.

However, when he inspected the cast on his arm, he found that the blow from the lead pipe had cracked and crushed the plaster. He’d been too tired the night before to notice. Not only that, his broken wrist was now throbbing painfully and his fingers were slightly swollen. At the very least the plaster would have to be replaced and at the worst, he’d broken a bone again. He made a mental note to ask Sherlock for some paracetamol and find a way to arrange a trip to see a doctor. But he had other, much more important things to do first, like breakfast and then bonding to his sentinel.

Excitement jolted through him at the thought and then he forced himself to calm with a laugh. There was time now and he just had to be patient.

Looking around, he saw that the other side of the bed had been slept in. Apparently Sherlock had stayed by him all night and the pillow and blankets smelled wonderfully of him. Feeling silly, John couldn’t help picking up Sherlock’s pillow in his arms and taking a deep breath. His alpha’s scent went straight to his head, making him feel settled and secure. Excitement charged through him again as he recalled that they would be bonding soon. He knew Sherlock would make the experience special.

It took a few pain-wracked moments to get out of bed but he stretched carefully and slowly until his muscles warmed up. After getting dressed in some of his new clothes, it took him only a moment to find the loo and then he followed the lovely smells of breakfast into the kitchen. As John entered the room, Sherlock was just placing scrambled eggs, toast, fried tomatoes and bacon onto plates and handed one to him along with a mug with tea. John noted with satisfaction that the alpha moved smoothly and without pain, which meant his injuries were indeed minor. As he followed Sherlock with his plate and mug balanced precariously, John felt a stab of guilt in that traditionally, the omega provided the food for the alpha, not the other way round. But then he realised just how stupid he was being. He and Sherlock would never be a traditional alpha/omega, sentinel/guide pairing. Hopefully their partnership would be equal and it was best they start their lives together as they meant to go on.

They sat at the table in the lounge and ate in comfortable silence. John couldn’t remember when he’d had such a delicious meal and offered to do the dishes but Sherlock wouldn’t hear of it.

“Have some more tea and relax. I’ve a few things to tell you. Mycroft came by this morning and has...
confirmed the deaths of both Moriarty and Moran. Their criminal enterprises are in total disarray because of our efforts and the AG money trail has led directly back to some of the highest officers in the Bureau, and by extension their bought politicians in Parliament.

“Some very important heads are going to roll and there is serious discussion of repealing the latent laws, mostly because of public reaction to your allegations of abuse by the Bureau. Mycroft is spearheading the political aspects of it all, making sure that the Bureau and their politicians can’t cover this up. My brother prefers to stay behind the scenes politically but he’s had to expose his involvement with this and is taking some serious flak because our family has been traditionally critical of the Bureau. But that also gives him a considerable amount of credibility with the opposition. What the Bureau has been doing has not been sitting well with many MPs who were too afraid to say anything before now. With our family’s and Mycroft’s open opposition to the Bureau’s actions regarding latents, these politicians are backing away from their political and monetary support of the Bureau.

“It also helps that the public has been hounding them mercilessly over what happened to you on the bridge. It’s the beginning of the end of the Bureau’s absurd influence over the British government and its politicians. They just don’t know it yet.”

John thought about that whilst Sherlock washed their dishes. He hadn’t expected the pang of sadness he felt at the mention of Moran’s death but it was there. However, the thought that latents might once again be free to live their own lives nearly overwhelmed him with excitement. People like Sheri could come home again without the fear of being taken away. He wondered how she was doing and hoped that she and Phil were happy in France, which was much more tolerant and didn’t pursue latents.

Then his thoughts turned to Sherlock’s brother. So Mycroft was very high up in the British government and a masterful manipulator, just as John had suspected. It explained how he had been able to play John so well and had him convinced that he actually cared about the omega’s future. Reluctantly, John decided not to punch Mycroft in the nose. He might punch him somewhere else, but not in the face.

Once Sherlock had rejoined him at the table with another pot of tea, John brought up something he’d been thinking about since Sherlock had mentioned the spirit world the previous evening.

“I had a question about something you talked about last night. I know this might sound peculiar and is probably only a figment of my exhausted imagination, but are animals somehow part of the spirit world?”

Instantly alert, Sherlock’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “You’ve seen an animal? What did it look like? When and where did you see this?”

Glad that Sherlock wasn’t laughing at him, John hesitantly described what he’d seen in the warehouse before he’d been taken to the ship by Moran. The alpha listened intently and, to John’s surprise, replied with all seriousness.

“I suspect that what you saw was your own spirit animal trying to warn you of danger, John. They rarely appear but when they do you should pay attention. It’s also a sign that you’re a very strong guide. Most guides only see their spirit animals once they’ve been to the spirit world under the strict supervision of a tutor. It’s a dangerous place to go if you’re untrained or unbonded. However, Shamans and very strong guides are known to have access to the spirit world and their animals easily.

“I’ve never been to the spirit world but I have seen my spirit animal. It’s different for sentinels in that
most of us catch a glimpse of ours at one point or another, usually during times of stress. My spirit animal is a clouded leopard. Let’s see what yours might be.”

Getting up from the table, Sherlock went over to his laptop and booted it up, then rapidly typed something into the Google search box. John followed and watched over the alpha’s shoulder.

“Is this animal the one you saw?” Sherlock turned the screen so John could see it more easily and the doctor gasped to see the creature that had helped him in the warehouse. Its lower body was black and the fur on its back and head was white. Sherlock was using Google images and there were many photos on the page. Most of them showed the creature snarling and brandishing large claws.

Checking out the name, John saw that Sherlock had typed ‘honey badger’ in the search box.

“So this thing is called a honey badger? What a bizarre name for such a strange creature!” John was rather offended to think the odd mammal was his spirit guide. He looked down at Sherlock, expecting him to agree with John but found the alpha laughing at him.

Irritated, John smacked the man on the arm. “Oi! What’s so bloody funny?”

Once Sherlock stopped sniggering, he explained again. “John, a honey badger is ideal for you! Look at this page on Wikipedia! They’re small, tough and ferocious and can even fight off lions and hyenas. They’re intelligent and have even been known to use tools!”

John hummed at Sherlock sceptically. “It also says they’re a type of weasel. Great. Oh, look. There’s also something on YouTube about them. ‘Crazy Nastyass Honey Badger’. Lovely. Just what I’ve always wanted; to be associated with a viral video about a badass animal.”

“Don’t you see, John? It’s perfect! You’re every bit as badass as that badger! Look at him!”

Rolling his eyes, John watched the video with the ridiculous narration and began to see that there was something funny but strangely appropriate about the honey badger being his spirit animal. ‘Small, feisty and tough’ were words that had been used to describe John often enough and it certainly fit the honey badger, too. He decided it was okay with him if that’s the animal that the spirit world had assigned him. It wasn’t as if he had much choice about it anyway so he decided to accept with minimal complaining.

Sherlock was still grinning at him when they returned to the table. John narrowed his eyes dangerously at Sherlock but it only served to make the impossible man laugh more. Finally, John took a sip of tea and asked the other, more important question he’d been thinking about since he’d woken up.

“So, what do we do now, Sherlock? You’ve verbally claimed me as your omega—which I happily accept-- but we can’t bond for almost another month. We can bond now as sentinel and guide, but what then?”

Sherlock sat back down at the table across from John and looked away nervously. Taking a deep breath, the alpha slowly let it out before he spoke.

“I’ve been thinking about it for some time so this is a perfect opportunity to speak. John, I’m rubbish at this so my apologies ahead of time if I say something wrong, and hurt or upset you. Just so you understand fully, only a few people in the world know that I’m an alpha sentinel. My family knows, of course. Mrs Hudson and Lestrade know and he’s known since the Bureau took you from the Met that day. Irene found out whilst I was undercover and told Moriarty but both of them are now dead.

“So for my safety and career, I’d very much like to keep this fact as quiet as possible. I’m known at
the Met by those I most associate with as a beta sentinel but most of the officers don’t even know I’m a sentinel. It’s not unheard of for a beta sentinel to bond with an omega guide but it’s very rare. Officially, the Bureau doesn’t allow it but it’s been done before and since we’re not members of the Bureau, it hardly matters what they think.

“In addition, the bonding of sentinel and guide blend the scents of the bond mates in the same way that alpha and omega bonding does so our scents will change to a mix of each others’ in the same way. Once we bond again as alpha and omega during your heat, the scent will intensify but no one will really notice the difference enough to suspect what we are. To all intents and purposes, we’ll be a mixed gender couple. People may look askance at us and talk about us behind their hands, but I don’t particularly care. Once we begin to have children, there may be some talk but again, as you know already, it’s possible for betas and omegas to be fertile together if they use in vitro.”

John nodded at the wisdom of that. He’d heard of the great success that some mixed gender families had producing children with that technique. If it would keep Sherlock safe, he’d do anything.

“Once we bond, I do not want you to kneel to me in public or behave like a servant in private. I know most omegas are raised to treat their bond mates that way and many alphas expect it. Rest assured that I emphatically do not. You’ve not been raised as a guide either, so there are no bad habits to break there.

“But you should know this about me. I’m set in my ways, arrogant, rude, selfish and thoughtless. I play the violin when I’m thinking, perform biological experiments on human flesh in the kitchen and sometimes won’t speak to you for days. It’s not personal but has to do with the way I work my cases.”

Relieved, John reached across the table and squeezed Sherlock’s hand. “I already knew a lot of that, Sherlock, and I don’t care. We’ll sort it out. And you should know that I’ve got a terrible temper but it takes some time to go off and you’ll have plenty of warning before I blow up. When that happens, one of us might want to leave the flat. Most of the time, I’m fairly easy to get along with. We’ve got ages to sort things, but I’m going to try to fit into your life without causing too much change for either one of us. Keeping busy will help, I’m sure.

“I realise that, once we’re bonded, I legally have to get your permission to work but I was thinking I’d look for a part-time position at an A&E. Or I could apply to do locum work.”

Finding work as a doctor wouldn’t be as exciting as being in a war zone but working part-time at a London A&E would be a close second as long as he could also go with Sherlock on some of his cases. Locum work would be less satisfying but it would bring in some money so he could at least pay his own expenses until he became pregnant. He just hoped that Sherlock didn’t want John to stay home all the time until the babies began to arrive. And arrive they would eventually. The thought was sobering. He’d never wanted children but he had to face the fact that it was now inevitable. The decision had been made and he had no choice but to accept it with good grace.

The alpha hesitated and finally answered reluctantly. "I don't want to restrict whatever you want to do, John. If you want to work as a doctor, I'll do everything in my power to help you find an ideal position. But I was really hoping you'd want to work with me full time. Your qualifications as a doctor would be an enormous asset. Once we are bonded, I understand that my senses are likely to be even more enhanced which will aid greatly in being able to examine a crime scene even more thoroughly. But I'll need you there to guide me. As a doctor and as my guide, your help with the cases would be invaluable."

Excited, John straightened and squeezed Sherlock's hand. "Of course I'll help. It's what I wanted more than anything, to be honest. I'd love to be your assistant!"
"You won’t be just my assistant, John. You’ll be my partner. So, it's sorted, then. We'll work together.

John couldn’t help the grin that nearly split his face and the excitement that seemed to burst out of his chest. Sherlock was going to allow him to help with his cases and he’d not even had to ask!

“Ta very much, luv. I was really hoping you’d let me help you on your cases sometimes. Even if you have other omegas, knowing you would allow me to work with you would be brilliant!”

Sherlock sat back in his chair with a frown. “I’d really like to know why you’d think there could ever be anyone else.”

Sensing that Sherlock was actually hurt at the suggestion that he would have other omegas, John was shocked. Even though he’d seen the photo of Irene and Sherlock together, John had apparently made a seriously erroneous assumption. Flushing in embarrassment, he looked down at his tea and shrugged.

"I’m sorry, luv. When I was in hospital, I saw the photo of you and Irene Adler together in one of those stupid birdcage liners the nurses kept leaving for me to read and just thought, despite you not wanting to reveal your gender, that you’d want a harem of omegas eventually. Every other alpha sentinel does, after all.”

He dared to glance up at Sherlock and gulped. The alpha was still frowning but there was now a deep crease between his eyes and his mouth was tight with anger.

“I most certainly am not like all the other alpha sentinels and I thought you understood that, John. I never had any relationship with Irene Adler aside from a professional one. She provided vital intelligence about Moriarty’s criminal network whilst I was undercover as one of her many admirers. Rest assured, John, that I never touched her sexually nor did I have the slightest interest in her. The entire time I was away, all I could think of was getting back to you. Now tell me the rest.”

Shamefaced, John nodded and continued. “Your brother contacted me at the hospital right before Moran had me kidnapped. He said he represented your interests and offered me a bonding contract in your name. Mycroft led me to understand that you wanted us to live separately and that all you expected from me was to have and raise your children. He also said that our bonding couldn’t be recognised under our real names because you wanted to keep your status as an alpha sentinel secret. All the things he told me were complete rubbish and there was no way I could accept that contract but I didn’t want to reject you.”

As John told Sherlock about all the other stipulations from the bonding contract that Mycroft had brought him, his face continued to burn with embarrassment and humiliation. It was clear that Sherlock had no idea what he was talking about. On the one hand that was a good thing, but on the other hand, John had been completely taken in by the elder Holmes and wondered why he’d felt it necessary to try to trick John like that. It made John decide he’d punch Mycroft in the nose after all.

When he’d finished, he dared to look at Sherlock’s face again and saw the man was coldly furious. Afraid to try to read him, thinking that Sherlock was angry with him, John pulled back but Sherlock snatched his wrist, making John gasp in surprise. The alpha’s touch was electric, practically making John’s hair stand on end and Sherlock’s feelings and thoughts flooded into him through their newly forged link. Sherlock was livid but it wasn’t directed at John at all. The anger was meant for Mycroft for interfering and Sherlock desperately wanted John to understand that.

Hesitantly, John smiled and grasped Sherlock’s hand in return as the alpha sighed and spoke seriously.
“John, please know that I never authorised Mycroft to act on my behalf. My brother always has his own manipulative agenda and in this situation, I cannot tell you what it was until I have a chance to question him. I wouldn’t object to a bonding contract if you wanted one, but the one you describe sounds like hell on earth and completely unacceptable. I want us to live and work together and I know you do, too. Children are not a priority for me. We can discuss it later, but with reliable birth control measures soon to become widely available, I’d honestly prefer that we use them when you have your heats. If you want to go back on suppressants again, that would be acceptable to me, as well. I can wait to bond if you want. That decision I leave up to you as it’s your body.”

Pale eyes bored into John’s with honest intensity. “All I want from this bonding is you. Just you, John. Agreed?”

Happiness and excitement swelled in his chest and John felt breathless. Their skin to skin contact was electrifying as John’s grin returned and Sherlock’s matched it. “Agreed, Sherlock. I don’t need a written bonding contract. Your word is enough for me.”

A charming flush spread across the alpha’s cheeks again as John gazed adoringly at Sherlock. He seemed captivated by John’s expression and cleared his throat nervously. “Well then. That’s… good. I’m glad we sorted that out.”

Amused that Sherlock was at a loss for words, John realised that the alpha didn’t seem to know how to ask for the next step. As far as John was concerned, it was finally time to bond as sentinel and guide. Letting go of Sherlock’s hand, he got up, came around the table to stand in front of the alpha and when Sherlock turned toward him, John put his arms around the detective’s neck and straddled his lap. It made him a bit taller than Sherlock but it also made it quite easy to kiss the soft lips with his own.

John took control of the kisses and Sherlock followed his lead. He sucked and licked at Sherlock’s mouth, pulling back every so often to see the beautiful flushed face and swollen lips and caress the stunning cheekbones. Pride swelled in John’s chest at seeing the effect he had on Sherlock. The alpha's eyes were closed as he processed the new sensations he was experiencing, causing John to smile and kiss him again. The alpha's hands moved up and under John's shirt and the skin to skin contact made John arch his back and grind his pelvis against Sherlock’s. They both gasped at the surprising pleasure that raced through them and their breathing and heart rates increased. Everything seemed sharper and more exciting and John had no intention of questioning it.

Arousal and sexual tension sang through their blood and increased with each moment they touched. John buried his hand in Sherlock’s hair and scratched lightly at his scalp, making the alpha hum in pleasure. The glands at John’s throat began to swell, throb and ache pleasantly with every beat of his heart and with every stroke of Sherlock’s hands on his skin.

Breaking a particularly deep kiss with a very wet, erotic sound, John sighed into Sherlock’s panting mouth. He was more aroused than he could ever remember being in his entire life, his glands hurt now and it felt as if he’d explode if they didn’t do something soon.

“Is it time, luv? Are you ready to do this?” Sherlock shuddered and opened his eyes. His gorgeous lips were red and swollen and his pale eyes looked almost black as his pupils were blown wide with lust. John couldn’t help a small laugh because apparently Sherlock was so aroused that he could only blink at John whilst he tried to catch his breath.

Finally, the alpha managed to croak, “Yes! Christ, yes, I’ve been ready for ages, John. Let’s go!”

Grinning, John gave Sherlock another wet, filthy kiss and slid off his lap. John took Sherlock’s hand
to lead him to the bedroom just as there was a loud banging at the front door downstairs and an
indistinct shouting. Shocked, John turned to Sherlock for answers. The alpha looked just as startled
and then paled alarmingly.

“John, It’s the Bureau!”

John was petrified. “What? Someone from the police must have reported me! Is there a back way
out of here?”

But it was too late. The members of the Bureau were storming up the stairs and before John could
take a step in any direction, the door to the flat slammed open and the room was filled with Bureau
enforcers, all armed with tasers or tranquiliser guns aimed at Sherlock and John. John froze,
unwilling to take the risk of being incapacitated in case Sherlock needed him. A man pushed his
way through the enforcers and they parted to allow it. John’s heart seemed to stop as he recognised
the man. It was the leader of the Bureau’s special unit who had chased and tased John right before
Moran had picked him up off the street. He seemed to have recovered from his gunshot wound and
gave John a mocking grin.

“Well, well! Mr Larssen! What an unexpected surprise. It’s good to know you survived your fall
into the Thames. We were never actually introduced. My name is McDonnell. Now you need to
come with me.” The man’s tone was astonishingly pleasant, despite the fact that he had a taser out
and aimed at John.

Sherlock pushed John behind him and literally snarled at the men. “You are in my territory,
uninvited! You have no right to be here! Get out!”

The man’s eyebrows rose. “I beg to differ, sentinel. This unbonded latent was seen by the police on
a crime scene last night and it was reported that you, beta sentinel Sherlock Holmes illegally took
him away. We have full legal authority over him since you are not bonded. Please move out of the
way, sentinel.” Despite the harshness of the words, the enforcer was being extremely careful not to
escalate the situation. The last thing anyone wanted was a feral sentinel.

John calmed his panic and stepped forward carefully, keeping a hand on Sherlock’s arm. “You’re
wrong. We have already begun to establish a bond and were just about to complete it. I say that you
have no jurisdiction over me at this point.”

The man looked at them with narrowed eyes but stepped back and nodded. “If it’s true that you
have begun a bond, that does change things considerably but it needs to be verified by another guide.
I can’t just take your word and since I see no bonding bites on your throat and your scents aren’t
blended, I have to say I’m rather sceptical of your claim. Mr Larssen is an omega guide and you, Mr
Holmes, are a beta sentinel. A bond between your genders is not normally permitted. Latent omega
guides are always offered for auction only to alpha sentinels. There may be an exception but I’m not
the one to make that decision. I’ll need to bring you both in to see the Director and he can determine
what to do about this. If you will please come this way, gentlemen?”

Stricken, John held out his hands in an urgent appeal for time. “Wait! Please! Can you give us a
moment to discuss this privately?”

Looking back and forth between them, the intruder’s expression tightened and then he reluctantly
nodded. “I’ll give you a few moments but then you both have to come with me. And you already
know I won’t hesitate to use force.”

John’s took Sherlock’s arm and led him into the kitchen, knowing they were still under close
observation.

“What do we do, Sherlock? We can’t possibly take them all between us. You’re hurt and my muscles are badly strained. They’d tranq us both before we could do anything!”

 Whispering, Sherlock stared intently into the omega's eyes. "I agree that we can’t fight them, but they will take you from me! The only thing that I can think of that will allow you to stay with me is if I declare myself an alpha sentinel. I know I said I wanted to keep it secret, but it’s not a secret worth keeping if I lose you! Perhaps if I just tell the Director, it won’t go any further and he’ll let us go.”

"Sherlock, it's too dangerous! You know something like that won't stay a secret! I'm pretty sure the Director won't keep something so important to the sentinel community quiet. You told me all those months ago that there are only seven of you in the entire country! You don't know this but Moriarty threatened to reveal your alpha sentinel status to the public because he knew it would risk your life! He wanted to destroy you and that was how he was planning to do it! I won't allow it! And anyway, the Director probably won’t just hand me over to you even if you declare yourself; he’ll probably make you bid for me with all the other alpha sentinels! Do you have that kind of money?"

The alpha's shoulders slumped. "No. My family is wealthy but we don't have anywhere near the kind of cash that most alpha sentinels can command. If I were forced to bid for you, I would lose."

"It may not come down to that, luv. We have an ace up our sleeve in that we have already established a bond. I don't know what it's called, but it's there. It has to count for something."

"I hope so, John. I didn't delete everything from Sentinel school and I believe that what we have formed is called a 'soul bond'. There are a number of preliminary, weak connections that can be established between a sentinel and guide before they finally join permanently but only those who are totally compatible can create this kind of bond. They're rare and special but somewhat fragile until physically completed. If I remember correctly, it's the only preliminary bond that will actually strengthen with time. I don't know if it will mean anything to the Bureau. You've met Co-Director Murphy. Maybe you can appeal to him and his guide."

Shaking his head, John was dubious. "Murphy is only co-director and though he seemed to be an honest man, he’s committed totally to his people and their laws. Even though we're a sentinel and guide, neither one of us is really part of his community. At least McDonnell says they’ll give us a hearing and we might have a chance to reason with them. There has to be a way to prove that we're bonded already and that we intend to make it permanent as soon as we can do."

"Maybe I’m much more cynical but I’m not very hopeful he’ll listen. If worst comes to worst, I’ll reveal what I am and demand you be given to me."

John shook his head. "No, Sherlock. It’s unlikely that he’ll allow that and you’ll have endangered yourself for nothing. Like I said, he’ll probably demand you bid for me with the other alpha sentinels. But you know I’m not without certain skills and if they do take me away from you, we can both work toward getting me out. Once I’m out, we’ll bond right away and once we’re bonded, they can’t do a bloody thing about it."

Sighing, Sherlock rested his forehead against John’s. "I’m sorry, John. We should have been bonded hours ago."

"If there's any blame for that, it should fall on us both, luv. I thought we had all the time in the world. Neither one of us ever dreamed this would happen but we’ll just have to deal with it. So let’s go and sort it out with the Bureau. The last thing you want is to be tased, believe me."
Temporarily defeated, they returned to the lounge and were escorted out to the van sent to pick them up. John walked down the stairs behind Sherlock, past a stricken looking older woman John guessed must be the landlady and out onto the street as the other enforcers followed them into the van. All of their weapons were put away and the tension of the situation began to dissipate somewhat. John was still terrified, though and he could tell Sherlock was afraid, as well. The alpha put an arm around John’s shoulders and the doctor couldn’t help but wrap his own arms around the alpha’s waist and press his face into Sherlock’s neck.

He didn’t want to allow them to be separated but honestly didn’t know how he was going to prevent it. Instead, he focused on the faint connection he’d forged between them during their life and death struggle on the ship and willed it to strengthen with everything he had. Surprisingly, it flared to life and he felt it pulse as Sherlock glanced at him questioningly, clearly feeling it as well. It made John smile for the first time since they left the flat. Maybe they really did have a chance.

The ride to Bureau headquarters was anti-climactic. John and Sherlock were driven past a non-descript building that John recognised as the one he’d seen Co-Director Murphy standing before when he was being interviewed on the telly. There were a few protesters with anti-Bureau signs at the front, but the van drove past the entrance and down to an underground car park. They were then ushered out of the van and directed to a lift. No effort was made to separate them and John began to relax as they walked from the lift and into the enormous lobby of the building. Sherlock kept an arm around his shoulders and John kept his tight grip around the sentinel’s waist. They were brought to the centre of the lobby and told to wait whilst McDonnell disappeared down another hallway.

After a few moments, John actually allowed his empathy to extend beyond himself and Sherlock. Most of the enforcers around him had no strong feelings about them one way or the other and some actually felt sympathetic toward them. It perplexed John and he tentatively extended his empathy even further.

The lobby was a busy place and there was a large hall attached just opposite the entrance. As John watched, more and more people emerged from the hall into the lobby, talking quietly but animatedly. John recognised that almost half of them were sentinels with their guides. He’d never seen so many other guides and it intimidated him.

A few gasped John’s false name and approached the enforcers, who had loosely circled John and Sherlock. These newcomers tried to question the guards but were politely turned away. The emotions John felt from the questioners were all positive and very excited. He wondered what the hell was going on. By all rights they should hate him. John was directly responsible for the problems the Bureau was having with Parliament and the public. But they didn’t hate him or Sherlock. The prevailing emotion he was picking up was delight and then enthusiasm.

Glancing up at Sherlock questioningly, the alpha bent down and spoke in John’s ear. “They’re all saying that they can’t believe you survived the fall into the Thames and they’re very happy about it.”

The alpha stood up straight and joined John in assessing the people for threats but clearly could find nothing. Bewildered, John picked up only emotions of surprise and good will directed toward him. It worried him and he pulled back his empathy, not knowing if the other guides would sense him too and take advantage of his untrained status. He didn’t know what they could do to him if he allowed himself to become vulnerable around them and he didn’t want to find out.

Sherlock suddenly went on alert and John strengthened his shields as McDonnell returned with Co-Director Murphy and Walter in tow. The crowd parted for them but closed up behind and pressed forward. Apparently some of whatever was going to happen would take place in front of everyone
who happened to be in the building. John wasn’t sure how he felt about that but it didn’t seem he had any choice in the matter.

Co-Director Murphy stepped forward with a slight smile on his face. John stared back at the man and his guide suspiciously as Murphy spoke. “First of all, normally I would take a meeting like this to a private office, but I think it is important for everyone in this building to hear this. I can’t tell you how very glad I am to know you’re still alive, Mr Larssen. Everyone here grieved for you when we thought you’d died. I can assure you the sentinel community will be celebrating the return of an omega guide of your calibre for days.”

Shocked and mystified, John’s empathy told him that what the Director said was actually very true though it seemed inconceivable. Everyone in the room was happy to know John had survived, just as Sherlock had overheard. John’s expression must have reflected his doubts because Murphy’s smile widened. “Whether you believe it or not, no one here means you ill, Mr Larssen. But it’s time to take this to a more private setting. If you’ll please follow me?”

Suspicious of their courteous reception, John gripped Sherlock’s hand and reluctantly followed Murphy into the hallway with the guards close on their heels. They took a lift to an upper floor and were ushered into a spacious conference room with no windows. All the guards with the exception of McDonnell stayed outside. Walter immediately began to prepare tea whilst Murphy politely showed John and Sherlock to chairs and took the seat at the head of the table with McDonnell nearby. John took Sherlock's hand again and squeezed tightly, not sure if it was to comfort himself or Sherlock. He then pulled his shields in close to protect the two of them. The room seemed stuffy and his latent senses were muted but he’d expected that the room would be buffered for the protection of sentinel and guide senses. White noise machines were running in each corner, as well. Murphy waited for the tea to be served and urged everyone to drink. It was excellent and both John and Sherlock each took an appreciative sip before Murphy began to speak again to them.

"To your credit, Mr McDonnell here says you gave him no trouble when he asked you to come in. Thank you for that because I know you both could have seriously injured our men if you’d chosen otherwise. He also says you claim to have begun a bond with Mr Holmes."

“However, before we address that particular issue, I want to take this opportunity to offer you my deepest, most personal apologies and the apologies of the entire sentinel community, for what happened to you when you were initially in our custody. Because of your terrible experiences and that of other latents, we’ve cleaned house completely of all the incompetent, criminal and corrupt employees. We ferreted out the truth of what you told us and many of those men are now facing criminal charges under Sentinel Law, which is harsher than civil law. So you can rest assured they will be punished and I will be happy to provide proof of that if you wish.

"You and all latents can expect much more respectful treatment in future and the rules are no longer as lax as they were before you escaped the compound. So we have you personally to thank for our tighter protocols and regulations concerning the acquisition and proper treatment of latents.” John wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that but he kept quiet.

“I also owe you my thanks for putting me in touch with DI Lestrade at the Met. The evidence you helped uncover enabled us to track down corruption in our highest levels of the administration and root it out from the top down. I’m no longer Co-Director but I am now sole Director of the Bureau and it’s an honour I take extremely seriously. The street drug AG has been totally eliminated at the source and the distribution network has been destroyed, largely due to sentinel Sherlock Holmes' efforts in conjunction with the Met.”

The man turned his attention to Sherlock and smiled again. “Thank you, Mr Holmes. Your work
Sherlock bent his head graciously to acknowledge the comment as Murphy continued. “Finally, the research into its proper formulation and intended use of AG has been resumed. Someday soon, a safe and thoroughly tested version of the artificial guide drug will be available to all sentinels who cannot have a guide and the need for latents will diminish. I want to work toward the goal of latents actually volunteering to be guides and stop the practice of coercing your kind into service altogether. It seems new laws might do that sooner rather than later but that’s still some time in the future and the transition will no doubt be slow.

“So, let’s get back to the subject at hand. Mr Larssen, McDonnell says you claim to have developed a bond to Mr Holmes. This is a problem since you’re an omega guide and he is a beta sentinel. Normally a special auction would be held for you and you would only go to a full alpha sentinel. But if it can be proven that you’ve got an established, consummated bond already with Mr Holmes, there is precedence in Sentinel Law indicating that the bond can stand and you will be allowed to stay with him. Can you prove your claim?” Murphy smiled hopefully and looked expectantly at John.

John let go of Sherlock’s hand. It was time to argue his case even though he had no idea what he could do to prove anything. The truth was the only thing he had in his defence, so John took another soothing drink of tea for his suddenly dry throat and began to speak carefully. He still didn’t trust Murphy and wasn’t sure the other sentinel had their best interests at heart yet but John hoped he could convince him otherwise.

“I’m not sure how I can prove it but Sherlock says we have a ‘soul bond’. Despite all our many differences, we are apparently perfectly matched to be sentinel and guide. We discovered this by accident when my latent senses began to develop just after we first met. I touched his mind without knowing what I was doing and discovered that we were meant for one another.

“Just yesterday, the two of us experienced a life threatening situation where I was able to save Sherlock’s life. At the very moment when I thought we’d both die, I was able to form a connection with Sherlock. Whatever I did was done completely by instinct since as we all know I have no training. Maybe you can tell me what I did but we both feel the connection and it’s real. I’m guessing it’s the manifestation of this soul bond.”

John looked over at Sherlock, whose expression shone with pride. Smiling, John turned back toward Murphy. “I don’t know how to prove it to you. I just know it’s there.”

Murphy gestured to his guide and Walter got up to stand by him. “Mr Larssen, will you allow my Guide to determine the truth of this?” The words sounded ritualised somehow, similar to what Sherlock had spoken to Lestrade concerning his claim on John.

Nodding politely toward the other guide, John agreed, relieved that Murphy was actually willing to investigate his claim. “Of course Walter can check on this. Just let me know what you want me to do.”

Walter came forward and nodded back to John. “I just need to put my hands on your temples for a moment. You’ll feel my mind in yours but I promise not to hurt you or go too deep except to find the bond. You’ll need to drop your shields, though. They’re hellishly strong and I have no way to get through them without your permission.”

Surprised, John took a deep breath, closed his eyes and tried not to squirm as Walter lightly touched the sides of his head. Slowly, he worked to lower his shields and allow the other guide to enter. He
could feel Walter carefully wind his way into John’s mind and search for the bond. The other guide then found and began to examine it. To John’s inner eye, the bond was beautiful and perfect. He was proud of what he’d forged and though it was precious and small, it was strong and pulsed with their heartbeats as if it were also alive. Then Walter slid away and John opened his eyes to see the other guide step back and sigh.

“My Sentinel, I do see the soul bond. It’s definitely there but very new and still weak. It could be easily broken.” That wasn’t what John wanted to hear and his heart leapt into his throat in fear. What did Walter mean when he said that their bond could be easily broken?

Murphy seemed to think for a few moments and then spoke up again. “Have you and Mr Holmes consummated your bond sexually? I see no bonding marks on your neck and your scents haven’t begun to echo each others’ yet.”

Face flushed red with mortification, John had to shake his head. “No, we’ve not had the chance. We were just about to do that when your men barged in on us in the flat.”

Shaking his head sorrowfully, Murphy pronounced his decision with a firm tone. “I’m so sorry, Mr Larssen; Mr Holmes, but your bond just isn’t physical. Sentinel Law stipulates that in order for the bond between an omega guide and beta sentinel to stand it must have been physically consummated. Regrettfully, a soul bond isn’t enough to justify a mixed gender bonding.

“Mr Larssen will have to return to our custody and the soul bond must be broken. We’ll have the best guides in the country for you here to break it as painlessly as possible before we send you to auction. We’ll do our utmost for you, so please cooperate.”

Horrified and feeling as breathless as if he’d been punched in the gut, John couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Quickly glancing over at Sherlock, he could see the detective was just as shocked but beginning to become angry. Urgently, John tried again to reason with the man as his heart thumped wildly in his chest. The last thing he wanted was to have to fight his way out of the centre of the Bureau itself but he would do it if he had to. Taking a deep breath, he tried to speak calmly but his voice wavered.

“Look, if your men had been even five minutes later, we would have had that physical bond and none of this would be happening. Can’t you please overlook it this one time and let us go home? No other sentinel will ever be acceptable to me, can’t you see that?”

John was willing to get on his knees and beg if he thought it would do any good, but his pleas fell on deaf ears and John tried hard not to panic. Murphy seemed very sympathetic but was clearly not willing to change his mind.

“It’s out of my hands, Mr Larssen. I have no choice in the matter any longer. I can’t go against hundreds of years of tradition and Sentinel Law. There’s no situation I can think of that would allow a tentative bond between a beta and omega to stand. I’m so very sorry.

“But I know you’ll be fine. You’re young and strong. It will only hurt for a short time and once your bond is broken, I’m sure you’ll find that one of the alpha sentinels is much more appropriate for you. You’re an omega after all and having an alpha to give you children will be a comfort. You’ll forget about Mr Holmes in no time.”

John blinked at the man in absolute astonishment. Did he think John was a child who didn’t know his own mind? How could Murphy say such inane things and keep a straight face?

Sherlock stood up slowly then, unable to stay quiet any longer. “A child can see that you’re lying
through your teeth, Murphy! You could make an exception if you wanted to do. You have the power but you’re choosing not to use it. And why is that?” The detective narrowed his eyes at the other sentinel and then his expression cleared. “You let a beta relative bond with an omega guide, against all the rules, didn’t you? You’re a despicable hypocrite! Let us go, now! You have no moral leg to stand on here.”

Murphy’s expression was murderous and his mouth tightened in anger. It was clear that Sherlock was correct in his deductions and the Director was irate at being caught out in a lie. Shocked and becoming angry also, John tried to stand but was strangely weak and couldn’t force his legs to work. Dizziness made his head swim and suddenly his face felt numb whilst his fingers tingled unpleasantly.

Slowly turning his head, to his dismay he saw Sherlock waver on his feet and catch himself abruptly on the edge of the table. But his knees collapsed and he folded up to land on the floor, unconscious. John tried to catch him but slid to the floor on his side beside Sherlock, completely paralysed. They’d been fools and had been taken in completely by the Director. Not only had the man been lying to them the entire time, but the tea had been drugged!

John could not move but he could still hear Murphy get up from his chair to stand over them. The only thing John could see was the man’s shoes and trouser cuffs when the Director prodded an insensate Sherlock with his toe. McDonnell and Walter walked over to stand nearby.

“Well done, Walter. The drugs worked just in time. Larssen was getting angry and he can be rather dangerous.”

Walter replied tentatively and sounded very unhappy. “I don’t like it, Charles. What you did just now isn’t right. They have a soul bond for god’s sake and you know how incredibly rare that is! Your cousin and his omega were very compatible but they weren’t perfect matches by any means. What these two have is beautiful! You should have let them go.”

Murphy’s tone was firm and unyielding. “I don’t care if their bond was physically consummated right in front of me. I’d still not allow it, despite the Law! This bastard Holmes and his fucking brother have nearly destroyed us! Do you realise just how much money they’ve cost us? We don’t have the income from AG anymore and we’ve had to quickly close down our other operations before Moriarty’s people gave us up! And if we stop collecting the money from the sale of latents before we can restructure, we’ll lose everything! You know all of this, Walter. I’m fighting for our very survival, here.

“Larssen is worth potentially hundreds of thousands of pounds that the Bureau needs desperately right now! Soon we can consolidate and diversify. Eventually we’ll be able to adapt and adjust to these changes but right now things are desperate.”

John could hear Walter murmur something and then Murphy continued. “Anyway, I’d never agree to a Holmes having a guide if I have any say in the matter. Their family has been banished from the Bureau since the 19th century for good reason. Their ancestor’s investigations into our doings back then caused the incarceration of hundreds of members and a reorganisation that took decades to recover from. My family was impoverished and disgraced! We suffered for years until we could claw our way back up from the gutter! The Holmes’ have been a thorn in the side of the Bureau ever since.

“McDonnell, have Holmes brought back to his flat. The drug is affecting him more than Larssen so he shouldn’t give you any trouble for a few more hours. In fact, he might even sleep through the bond breaking. I don’t care if he zones when we break the bond between them, but I suppose you
should ring his brother and tell him what’s going to happen. Unfortunately, we don’t want to go so far as to have him die. His family would hold us liable, no doubt. But I hope it hurts the bastard a great deal. And see to it that security knows to look for him at the auction. He’s not allowed inside for any reason.”

Completely numb, John held onto consciousness just long enough to hear Murphy’s final orders.

“Take Mr Larssen-- or whatever his real name is--to our facility in the city and get him in secure restraints as soon as possible. I’ve never seen an omega—or anyone, actually-- as devious and dangerous as he is. Walter says he’s in pain from his broken wrist and needs to see a doctor, so arrange it. We’ll break the bond after he’s been treated. The auction has already been organised for tomorrow evening and all six alpha sentinels will be attending. They’ve heard about this omega and there’s a lot of interest. I’m hoping the bidding will be quite spirited.”

John’s mind wailed in despair as his body finally succumbed to the drug and took him into oblivion.

TCB...
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

My sincere apologies for the last cliffhanger and I'm extremely sorry if I angered or frustrated anyone. Thank you and I appreciate you bearing with me as we begin to wind this up in the next few chapters.

--Warning for sex stuff in this chapter--

John went from being deeply unconscious one moment to completely alert an instant later, remembering everything that had happened in the conference room. Grief, fear and a wild anger filled him as he tried to sit up but the strained muscles of his back, neck and shoulders seized painfully and he realised he was restrained to the surface he was lying on. Settling back, he tried to relax and stared wide-eyed around the room. John could only see four white walls, a door, fluorescent light fixtures and the bed he was lying on. The room was completely empty of anything else.

Blinking stupidly up at the ceiling he realised that the drug Walter had put in the tea was making him feel queasy. John suspected that whatever they’d used was something specifically designed for sentinels and he hoped desperately that Sherlock would be okay. It also must be a drug that was undetectable to sentinels since Sherlock hadn’t noticed a thing. And of course, who would know better what kind of drug would be unnoticeable to a sentinel than another sentinel?

As he lay there, the pains of his body began making themselves known. His left arm and wrist throbbed sickeningly with each beat of his heart. Moving slowly and carefully, he looked down at himself. His clothes had been taken and he was now in a hospital gown. Glancing over at his left arm, he could see the plaster cast had been cut off, leaving the broken wrist unsupported. His wrist, fingers and hand were swollen and he’d sustained a dense, dark bruise on his forearm where the plaster cast been struck by the lead pipe. In contrast, he was barely aware of the healing wound on his leg that had given him so much trouble on the ship. Ironically, it itched and of course he couldn’t reach it.

In general, John’s body ached but what hurt worse than anything was being separated once again from Sherlock and not knowing if he’d be able to find his way back to the alpha before something awful happened. In addition to everything, John was furious with himself for getting caught once more. He hadn’t trusted Murphy but his empathy hadn’t warned him and he wished he knew why. Maybe there was something that muffled his abilities in that room but then he had to admit that it was partially his own fault in that he’d been afraid to use his talents with all the other guides around. They’d intimidated him and he’d pulled back to protect Sherlock and strengthen his shields, very aware of just how little he knew compared to the others.

Unfortunately, raging and ranting at his stupidity would be useless and he had some serious problems at the moment. As always, the best thing he could do was to remain calm and gather intel as to his situation and location. From what he’d overheard before he’d fallen into a drugged stupor, he was at least still in the city. Once he knew exactly where he was and what he was facing, he would use everything in his power to get himself out and back to Sherlock.

But time was short. They were going to try to break his bond and then auction him off the next day.
Fear tried to overwhelm him and then anger took its place. They could certainly try but he would defend what he and Sherlock had made together. The fierce protectiveness he felt for the fledgling bond was such that it was almost as if they’d conceived a child. Maybe it was something similar in some strange, vaguely spiritual way but he knew he wouldn’t allow it to die without a serious fight.

He wondered if Sherlock was awake yet. Murphy had indicated the drug had a stronger effect on sentinel, so possibly not. Once he woke, however, the detective would be looking for John and one thing on their side was that John had been able to communicate with Sherlock using his latent abilities before and he could do it again. Once the drug had cleared his system, John vowed he’d try it.

The smell of antiseptics and disinfectants suggested to John he was in some kind of medical facility and he remembered that Murphy had ordered his wrist be seen to before they tried to break the bond. He could hear the murmur of voices not too far away. They were speaking softly, though and he couldn’t understand the words yet. Carefully, he moved his right arm slightly. The strained muscles in his shoulder and back continued to object with each slight movement but the pain was bearable. Unfortunately, he was strapped to the bed with regulation hospital restraints. His ankles, upper legs, torso and both arms were buckled to the bed, completely restricting all movement except for his head and neck.

Just then, the murmur of voices got louder as the door opened and John could see a small group of medical professionals waiting in the corridor. However, Murphy was also there and he entered the room with Walter trailing behind. John’s angry gaze darted back and forth between Murphy and the medical staff still in the hallway and finally settled on Murphy. Against his will, John’s breathing sped up, his heart hammered in his chest as he wondered what the sod wanted from him now.

Murphy stopped by the bed and clasped his hands behind his back. “I’m guessing you have questions for me before we begin the bond breaking process later this evening. I know I would do if I were in your position.” Smiling pleasantly, Murphy watched John expectantly with his head cocked to one side.

Of course John had questions but he wasn’t going to say a bloody thing to this man. He just narrowed his eyes and thought horrible things at Murphy. To think he had hoped and believed that Murphy would give him a fair hearing or that the sentinel had been genuinely concerned for and possibly sympathetic to him and Sherlock. To find out he was so corrupt had been a shock that John could have lived without. Sherlock had been right to be so cynical and John should have listened to him. It was a lesson he would take to his grave.

Walter gasped as he picked up the violent emotions that were coming from John and tried to reinforce the shields around his sentinel but John knew he could break through easily. How he knew this, he didn’t have a clue but he was angry and wanted to laugh at Walter’s feeble attempts to guard his sentinel. Face pale with sudden fear, Walter stared back at John in a panic, knowing he was inadequate to protect Murphy. Suddenly ashamed at his behaviour, John withdrew his challenge and the other guide relaxed somewhat. The thought of hurting someone like that made him ill and it wasn’t Walter’s fault he was brainwashed and the man was only doing what he had been taught was right. But he suspected that Walter, whilst not a very strong guide, was probably a very sneaky one. Something told John that Walter had been able to somehow prevent John from picking up on Murphy’s treachery and wondered how he’d managed it. Subtlety wasn’t something that John had learnt yet and suspected that was how Walter had managed to fool him.

Murphy glanced at his guide in concern, unaware of the full extent of the silent exchange between the two guides but knowing Walter was distressed. He reached out to soothe Walter and then looked back at John. “I understand your anger toward me and your reluctance to speak. I can guess some
of your questions and I’ll try to answer them for you before I allow the doctor to finish treating you. Believe it or not, I realise and regret that you’re in considerable pain and I won’t keep you long.

“From what Walter has told me, you’re a amazingly strong guide even without training. We are fortunate to have the strongest guide in the country here today to break your bond with Holmes. There is no way you can stand against him and I recommend you not even try or you’ll suffer needless pain. Like you, Wood is an omega guide and will also be explaining some of what you can expect when you’re auctioned off and properly bonded.

“As you already know, the only ones who will be allowed to bid on you are alpha sentinels. Partial alphas and full beta sentinels will not be allowed to bid, though as it turns out, your sale will be held tomorrow at the end of a normal auction, so many of those unbonded sentinels will be there to see this momentous occasion.

“An auction like this happens rarely so I’ve made sure it will be well attended. All six alpha sentinels have expressed a great deal of interest in acquiring you, even those who already have an omega guide, so it should be quite the show.”

If looks could kill, Murphy would be very, very dead at that moment. Despite his earlier resolution, John spoke through gritted teeth. “You won’t sell me again. My bond with Sherlock will stand.”

Throwing back his head, Murphy laughed as if he were genuinely amused. “You sound so brave now but you’ve not met Guide Wood. You’ll discover soon enough that you can’t possibly hold out against him. Mark my words, this time tomorrow you’ll be on that stage being auctioned off to your new alpha sentinel and the bond with Holmes will be totally eradicated. Wood specialises in bond breaking, you see.”

John shot an angry glance over at Walter. The other guide looked pale and ill and refused to meet John’s eyes. The omega addressed the guide anyway. “You know this is wrong yet you helped him and stand by him anyway. My soul bond to Sherlock is unique and special, and you know it.”

Surprised that John was speaking to him, Walter swallowed nervously and darted a glance at his sentinel, who only looked bored. “You just don’t understand, William. Once you’re bonded you’ll know. You’ll be totally loyal to your new sentinel. Trust me, you’ll forget all about Holmes.”

“Walter knows what he’s talking about, Larssen. You ought to listen to him.” Murphy was clearly ready for the conversation to end.

John had to bite his tongue to avoid cursing at the ignorant fool. “Walter is mistaken, Director. He has no concept of the mutual love and respect that can grow between two adults. He’s been bonded to you since he was a teenager, yeah? So he’s never experienced the deep friendship and real trust that develops into genuine love. And he never will. I pity him.”

Murphy only rolled his eyes but John could see he’d struck a nerve with Walter, whose face had paled even further. Not that it would do John any good.

The medical staff members were still waiting in the hallway and were looking impatient. John closed his mouth and turned his head away, dismissing the sentinel and guide. He was done with them and as far as he was concerned, he’d be happy to never see them again.

The sentinel reached out and gently patted John’s shoulder, sounding surprisingly sympathetic. “Like I said, Walter knows what he’s talking about. Once you’re sold and bonded, you need to reconcile yourself to the fact that you’ll have a new, extended family and be too busy having and taking care of babies to be worried about anything else. Isn’t that what all you omegas dream about
anyway?”

Speechless, John could only gape in astonishment at Murphy as the sentinel stepped back from the bed. The Director’s back was to the door as he looked down at John and his expression changed from benevolent to threatening in an instant. “Before I go, you need to know that if you ever mention what you heard in that conference room to anyone, I’ll see to it that your precious Sherlock Holmes suffers a fatal accident. His job is rather dangerous, after all. Do you understand me?”

Walter must have stopped shielding his sentinel because John could actually feel the menace pouring off the man. Horrified, John could only nod his agreement. The benign smile returned and John began to seriously wonder if the man was crazier than Moriarty had been. It was a different type of crazy but possibly even more dangerous.

Murphy turned and gestured the medical staff into the room. The Director and Walter left John flabbergasted and wondering what the hell had just happened when someone cleared their throat and intruded on his thoughts. The doctor approached John carefully and spoke hesitantly.

“Mr Larssen? I need to know if you are allergic to any medications before we can begin treating you. We have some other questions for you as well.”

Sighing in exasperation, John decided to cooperate fully with the medical staff. The situation wasn’t their fault, they were professionals and he needed their care if he was to find a way out of his predicament.

After giving the pertinent information to the staff, John was finally taken to x-ray. He was kept restrained the entire time and a large guard was stationed in the corridor outside the rooms. Doing his best to ignore the situation, John waited patiently whilst he was prodded and pushed about. Surprisingly, the pipe had not broken his arm but the blow had bruised it to the bone. He’d reinjured his broken wrist, though and he would require a new cast. Also, he was told he had mild muscle strain in his right shoulder, neck and back. All in all, he was going to be fine once he had a chance to rest.

In the meantime, a temporary splint was wrapped around his wrist and he was issued some painkillers, ice packs for the swelling and muscle strain. They then moved him to a windowless, private room with an en suite bath where the restraints were removed and he was finally free to move about and loosen up somewhat. All he wanted was to shower and rest, but first he had to attempt to contact Sherlock.

Concerned that additional drugs would interfere with his latent abilities to contact his alpha, he put off taking them, much to the displeasure of the nurse. But he was an army doctor and could overrule any nurse with a look. Though the confused nurse was uncertain as to why he obeyed John’s demand to leave him alone, he left the medication on the nightstand and locked the heavy door behind him. Lying back on the bed, John felt his strained muscles loosen up one by one. He wanted to drift off but fought sleep instead.

The last few times his abilities went out in search of Sherlock, John had been in serious, immediate trouble or in a highly emotional state. He really didn’t know how the contact had been made because at the time his talent seemed to behave as if it was a separate entity that had a will of its own. John thought it was time he learnt to properly control it. How he would do that was anyone’s guess but he would do his best to try. He’d always followed his instincts in every other aspect of his life and this couldn’t be any different. He would try that approach first.

No knowing how much time he had before they came for him to break the bond made it very hard to
calm down. Trying to recall just exactly what he’d done before to reach Sherlock was difficult but
he persevered. Relaxing onto the pillows, he carefully searched his memory and tried hard to recall
whatever he had done to reach out to Sherlock the other times. There had to be a way to access and
direct this strange talent because he knew that trained guides must do it routinely. What he’d
experienced with Walter and Murphy told him it was possible to communicate clearly, even if they
couldn’t necessarily use actual words. John suspected a large part of that was training and the
connection formed between a fully bonded pair but he could only work with what he had.

Maybe figuring out how to deliberately use his latent abilities to contact Sherlock was like learning to
see those 3D hidden image optical stereograms that had been so popular when he was young. The
main key to seeing the images was to relax one’s focus and allow the eyes and brain to look into and
past the surface. Then, suddenly, the three dimensional form would appear from the mass of shape
and colour. Once he’d learnt to do it, the images became very easy to see, especially the more he
practised. John decided to use his memory to visualise the beautiful complexity of Sherlock’s mind
and then direct his talents out to find his alpha. His thoughts quickly relaxed into the patterns of his
memory as he followed his instincts, shutting out the room completely.

All at once, his mind was loose and John was somehow actually directing it, though not very well.
Just like when he first learnt how to ride a bicycle, John’s control was shaky and there were too
many things going on all at once. That made it very hard to keep focussed on what he was doing, so
he felt anxious and scattered. He seemed to have a body of sorts but it felt insubstantial and wanted
to examine the situation more closely, but time was of the essence and he had to find Sherlock.

As his thoughts ranged out with that purpose, John could feel cold and darkness surrounding him.
Also there was no sense of any concrete direction which meant there was no up or down, left or
right. It was odd and disorienting. At the same time he could feel pinpoints of heat that he somehow
knew represented the energy of other minds. They distracted him from his goal of finding Sherlock
and he found it hard to ignore them.

The surrounding cold began to permeate his bones and he shuddered. Suddenly, John didn’t know
which direction to go and became confused. The pinpoints called to him strongly and it became
increasingly difficult to disregard their pull on him. Feeling apprehensive, his intuition belatedly told
him that searching like this without knowing what he was doing was incredibly risky and he was in
great danger of losing himself forever. Fear unexpectedly blossomed in his chest and he had trouble
forcing himself not to panic. Finally, he recalled that he and Sherlock had the soul bond and he
guessed it had to manifest in this odd place. Glad for something to do, he searched for it. If he could
find and grasp it, he was convinced it would lead him to Sherlock or at least back to himself.

As he looked about, he caught a glimpse of a faint, gossamer strand in front of him in the darkness
but it twisted and he lost it. Barely keeping his terror at bay, John continued staring in the same
direction and nearly cried out in relief when he finally found it again. Reaching toward it with barely
substantial hands, he could literally feel its fragility and delicacy but he grasped it tightly anyway. A
shock of energy shot through him at the contact and the thread strengthened and brightened as it
seemed to draw something from him. He also felt strength suffuse back through him, as well.

Fancifully, John imagined his touch fed the link. Maybe his feelings for Sherlock gave their
connection more power whilst Sherlock’s regard for him fed strength back in return. The thought of
Sherlock made John recall his lovely dreams of living, loving and raising children together.
Somehow, the memories warmed him and the cold slowly receded from his spirit.

Relieved, he tried to follow the thread but he didn’t know how. Pulling on it didn’t do anything since
he was basically insubstantial and he became frustrated. He realised he needed help and wished there
was someone to ask. Just as he thought that, the fanged, black and white creature that he’d first seen
in the warehouse appeared in front of him.

So startled he nearly let go of the thread, John stared in disbelief at the animal that Sherlock had laughing identified as a honey badger. He then remembered that Sherlock had also called it a ‘spirit’ animal and it seemed appropriate since John was now effectively an insubstantial spirit himself. Before he could consider what to do next, the creature actually spoke to him in exasperation.

“About damn time you managed to find your way here, lad. I just about gave up on you and your sorry arse of a mate. I don’t know what I was thinking when I agreed to take you on. The both of you are as thick as two short planks. Why didn’t you two bond when you had the chance? Christ Almighty.”

Shocked, John’s felt as if his eyes were bulging out of his head in surprise, though he couldn’t help wanting to laugh hysterically. The creature had sounded just like one of his instructors in basic and before he could clap a hand over his mouth, a strangled squeak emerged. The animal narrowed its eyes at John and lifted a lip to expose impressive fangs.

“Yeah, laugh all you want, you prat. Do you even know where you are or how you got here? Do you have a clue how dangerous it is to be here without a guide or mentor?”

Apparently spirits could talk in this place so maybe he could do, as well. Wiping the amusement off his face, John coughed politely and then tried to speak. He could hear himself so it seemed to work and the animal understood him, at least.

“Um. No, actually. I don’t know where I am and I’m not sure exactly how I got here but I was just trying to figure out how to follow this link to Sherlock when you arrived.”

The badger glanced at the thread in John’s hands and harrumphed. “Well, that’s a good start but you obviously have a lot to learn. You needed help, so, in case you’re wondering, that’s why I’m here.”

“Oh?” Surprised and a bit dubious, John wasn’t sure what to do or say at the moment and just blinked at the badger. This apparently made the creature impatient and it actually rolled its eyes at him.

“For fuck’s sake! Fine! Let’s start at the beginning. I am your spirit guide in this place, which some call the spirit world. This is a mystical place where guides and shamans can walk to gain insights and wisdom so you can safely guide your sentinel through life’s difficulties. Guides are usually led here by their mentors to learn how to navigate the spirit world safely. It’s a dangerous place for those who are untrained and you just got a small taste of it. There’s a lot more you should know but we’re running out of time. You need to go to your mate and let him know what’s happening as best you can do. My partner and I can help facilitate matters this time but you’ll have to eventually work up toward walking the paths here by yourself. Having a permanent bond will allow that.”

John looked around the utter darkness, mystified. “There are paths here? I don’t understand.”

Shaking its head, John actually heard the animal sigh in frustration. It turned away and began to move in the direction the filament was going. “Of course you don’t. You’re an idiot. A very talented idiot, but there’s no help for it at the moment. You’ll learn. Just keep your mind and eyes open and follow me.”

Following the creature just took a thought and then he was moving swiftly after it with an ease that shocked him. The pinpoints of heat that had tried to pull him away from his goal were nothing and easily ignored. The darkness began to solidify slightly around John and he could sense direction and
orientation. It was faint but it helped that the thread he was following stayed firm, bright and strong. After a short time, they came across a clouded leopard waiting for them. John gaped at the elegant creature, remembering quickly that Sherlock had claimed his spirit animal was one. The end of its tail was flicking back and forth fast and John had the impression that if it were human, the leopard would be glancing at a wrist watch with a scowl and tapping it impatiently.

The leopard spoke abruptly without preamble. “Hurry up, both of you. Time is running out before he has to go back. I managed to get mine here but he can’t stay long, either. The drug they gave him is still affecting him.”

Glancing at John with blue-green slanted eyes that mirrored Sherlock’s exactly, the leopard fussed at him. “Go, John. He’s waiting for you through there. And remember we don’t have much time. Your soul bond is weak and you must find a way to strengthen it or you will be lost.”

*Strengthen the bond or be lost?* What did that mean and how was he to do that? He wasn’t even sure exactly what he’d done to establish their link to begin with. Looking past the two animals, John could barely make out a rectangular shape, slightly lighter in colour to the surrounding blackness. It looked to be a doorway where the strand he held disappeared. At the urging of both spirit guides, he quickly approached the entrance and crossed the threshold into Sherlock’s flat. He would have to remember to ask the spirit animals why this site was so important to them in the spirit world. Could it be that it was significant because it represented home now to them both? He ached at the thought that, if he failed in his task, that it would never be home to him again.

John glanced briefly down at himself, expecting to see himself wearing the hospital gown. Instead, he was pleasantly surprised to find that he was wearing his favourite cream coloured Aran jumper that his mum had given him years ago and a checked shirt and jeans, though his left arm was still in the temporary splint. It seemed he was rather more substantial in this particular environment, wherever it was. Now how was he to find Sherlock?

Suddenly hearing a noise, John turned to see the object of his thoughts come striding into the lounge from the back bedroom. The alpha was dressed in a black bespoke suit buttoned at the waist; handmade shoes and a crisp white cotton shirt open at the throat. He looked totally delicious to John, who blinked at him in surprise. Sherlock didn’t look up immediately and had both hands grasped in his hair, seemingly tearing at it in distress. But then he saw John and stopped in his tracks, mouth gaping open.

“John? Is it truly you?” The alpha seemed shocked and anxious but very glad to see him.

Speechless at the sight of the man he’d honestly thought he’d never see again, John’s only answer was to hold out his arms. Sherlock strode quickly across the floor and gathered John in a close embrace. Feeling as if he could finally breathe properly, John returned the hold and decided he never wanted to let go. As he gratefully buried his face in Sherlock’s neck and squeezed the alpha sentinel with all his considerable strength, he felt like he’d truly and at long last come home.

“I remember now! I thought I’d lost you! They drugged us and were taking you away from me.” Mumbled against John’s hair, Sherlock’s voice sounded like gravel in his anguish as he tightened his hold on John.

Finally able to speak, John felt like he could only babble. “You’re all right. Thank Christ, you’re all right. I was so worried they’d let you die.”

All too soon he pulled back from the embrace and looked up into Sherlock’s eyes. The alpha’s hands stroked John’s face tenderly, careful of the bruises and gouges left by Moriarty’s fingernails.
“I can actually feel you this time, John. This isn’t like the dream I had when we were both here before. Just what is this place? Is this the spirit world? What are we doing here?”

_Sherlock had been here before with John in a dream?_ John had dreamt of being with Sherlock in this very flat, too. Had they shared that same dream? Sherlock had never said. Maybe he’d not remembered until now. John would have to ask but there wasn’t time at the moment.

Taking a deep breath, John explained what had happened since their separation as best he could do and Sherlock listened without interruption. The alpha’s expression tightened and became increasingly grim as John told Sherlock everything he’d overheard Murphy say about AG and Moriarty’s people after the drug had rendered Sherlock unconscious. He also relayed Murphy’s threat to Sherlock’s life and told the coldly furious sentinel exactly what Murphy had planned for John shortly. Recounting his trip through the spirit world and stumbling across their spirit guides, John then revealed their orders to him. When John was finished, Sherlock let him go and paced nervously around the flat, clearly thinking deeply.

“The spirit world was mentioned in my sentinel training courses but it wasn’t something sentinels were expected to understand until they obtained a guide. Even then, I got the impression from my tutors that most sentinels and guides actually had very little to do with the spirit world and damn few could even see their spirit animals. The amount of contact a pairing has with the spirit world is directly proportional to the strength of the guide.

“As I mentioned to you earlier, I’ve only ever seen my spirit animal a few times before and then briefly. So the fact that you can not only clearly see and speak to _both_ our animals but also travel through the spirit world without any training is amazing and rather extraordinary, to say the least. It simply proves what I’d always thought about you. That you’re strong and immensely powerful.” Sherlock’s glance at John was admiring and proud.

Flushed in a combination of embarrassment and pleasure, John returned them to the point. “That’s all well and good, luv, but the spirit animals say we need to find a way to strengthen the bond and they weren’t particularly helpful about how to do it. I’m not really sure how that will help us either and apparently we don’t have much time.

“I’m just speculating here, but if we reinforce our bond, maybe this other guide won’t be able to break it easily. If he can’t break the connection between us, they can’t auction me tomorrow and there will be more time for you to find me and help me break out. But you’re the only one here with any useful training. Do you know how we can do that, here in the spirit world?”

Sherlock reached out to John again and his long fingers slowly and delicately traced down the sides of the omega’s face and then under his chin to finally rest gently against the swelling glands in his throat. John trembled whilst his heart rate and breathing skyrocketed at the contact. Without thinking, John’s fingers undid the button on Sherlock’s suit coat and he slid his arms around the alpha’s waist to hold on tightly. John could feel the exquisite heat of Sherlock’s body against his hands and shivered again.

Moving his hands back up to John’s face, Sherlock rested his forehead against John’s as they softly breathed each other’s breath. “If we were back in the real world, we would simply make love to one another, just as we were going to do before the Bureau interrupted. It would make the bond permanent and we’d not have to worry about you being forced to bond to another. In the spirit world, having sex with you won’t make the bond permanent but perhaps it would strengthen it. That’s the only thing I can think of to do and unless you have another idea, it’s worth a try.”

Sherlock moved to gently embrace John, murmuring softly into his ear. The alpha’s deep voice was
incredibly intimate which made John sigh and close his eyes. “Since we are perfectly compatible in
the real world, my touch alone would be enough to arouse you fully. The glands in your throat
would swell and when I bit them, they’d release hormones that would allow us to complete the bond,
joining us forever. Shall we try it here? Could be dangerous.”

The sound of the alpha’s deep voice, whispered words about danger and his scent wove a potent
spell over the omega and John could only whimper his assent and press closer to Sherlock. Breathing
heavily, John realised he’d thrown his head back, presenting the now nearly swollen glands under
his chin to the alpha. He gasped audibly as Sherlock’s soft lips took advantage and gently caressed
and teased the skin of his throat. Just as it had happened before in the real world, John was strongly
aroused and the glands in his neck began to throb and engorge even further.

Wishing with all his heart that what was happening was real, John took control by grabbing a fistful
of curls and tasted those incredible lips again. Sherlock was as talented at kissing as he was as a
detective and John melted against him. Very briefly, John wondered if Sherlock had kissed Irene
this way, too, but the jealous thought fled. Sherlock had promised he’d never touched the other
omega and John believed him.

Suddenly, something shifted in the environment. Reinforcing the unreality of their situation, they
were both suddenly naked and lying on the sofa, limbs locked tightly together and kissing
frantically. Not bothering to wonder how that had happened, John moaned and clutched at his
sentinel’s arse to bring them closer together and locked his legs around Sherlock’s waist as they
rutted against each other. There was an unreal haze about everything as they writhed together, trying
to reach satisfaction. Then things happened much too fast when Sherlock sucked at John’s nipples
which caused the omega’s arousal to peak and he came with a loud cry, arching his back and
throwing back his head, exposing his throat to Sherlock. The sentinel, still thrusting hard against
John’s belly, moved up and bit at John’s throat just as he came, also.

John expected something radical to occur when Sherlock bit his throat but when nothing happened
he had to remind himself that nothing was real in this place. But then their thoughts suddenly
meshed together and a surprised John happily basked in the beauty of Sherlock’s mind as their
bodies shuddered and quivered from their near simultaneous orgasms. It was an odd sensation to be
able to feel what his sentinel was experiencing during the aftershocks of sex, but he couldn’t dwell
on it as much as he might like to do. John needed to penetrate further into and past the alpha’s
deeper barriers and try to find some way to strengthen their bond. He could feel Sherlock’s
encouragement and dared to go further, trying to be exquisitely careful not to hurt his sentinel.

Suddenly he could see what should do to make their bond permanent but it was just out of his reach.
He tried to grasp it anyway but couldn’t and he cursed in despair, finding himself slipping away and
out of Sherlock’s mind. Their time together was growing short and he felt the urgency and
precariousof their situation strongly. Frustrated and frantic, he cast about for a way to hold on
longer. He hadn’t come so far to fail them at the last moment and he had to find a way to strengthen
their connection. Then he saw what seemed to be the source of the filament that he’d followed
through the spirit world. Grasping for it quickly so he wouldn’t lose sight of it, he watched it
brighten at his mental touch.

Briefly, he wondered what to do and the answer came to him suddenly from somewhere outside of
himself and Sherlock. Mentally thanking his spirit animal for its help, he immediately thought of
Sherlock and of the profound emotions he felt for the young sentinel. Fondly remembering the
dream that had showed him a possible future with Sherlock that was full of happiness, love and
children, he watched with excitement as the pale thread became a colourful, glowing rope that
pulsated stronger and stronger with both their heartbeats. The feeling of satisfaction at a job well
done came to him from outside and again, he sent thanks to the spirit animals.
He sensed a feeling of amusement in return for his mental thanks and then he could no longer hold onto the bond. As he reluctantly slipped away from his alpha’s mind, he opened his eyes to find himself lying on his back on the sofa with Sherlock gazing down in wonder at him. They were still closely entwined together with Sherlock lying between his legs, though John had relaxed his limbs in exhaustion and the toes of one foot were now resting on the floor. Spontaneously, John raised his arms and wrapped them around Sherlock’s neck, bringing him down for a long and very sweet kiss. Smugly nipping and sucking gently at Sherlock’s beautiful lips, he knew they’d been successful in strengthening the bond. The ease at which he was able to communicate his victory to Sherlock was thrilling. Their bond wasn’t permanent yet, but it was much, much stronger now.

Immense pride and delight at their triumph radiated from Sherlock and John absorbed it as if it were sunlight. Breaking the kiss, John smiled up at his alpha and brushed the fringe back from Sherlock’s forehead. Sherlock grinned down at him, eyes twinkling with amusement. John’s innermost feelings welled up and without thinking he said something he’d never said to anyone else in his entire life. “I love you so much. I don’t think I could live without you, Sherlock.”

Expression stunned, Sherlock pulled back from John with a gasp. A bolt of fear ran through the omega. Had he said too much? Said it too early? He thought he knew how Sherlock felt about him, but if he’d cocked it all up by a post-coital slip of the tongue, he’d never forgive himself. As panic threatened, Sherlock cupped John’s face again and bent to kiss him tenderly, his feelings for John suddenly as easy to read as if they were in blinking neon sign five meters high. Sherlock returned John’s feelings fully and though he didn’t say the words, he didn’t need to. They embedded themselves in John’s heart permanently at that very moment.

Breathless, John melted into the kiss, incredibly happy and thankful to be in his alpha’s arms. They now needed to go back to the real world, find a way for John to escape the Bureau and to reunite with Sherlock. But all he really wanted to do was have sex again and go a bit more slowly this next time. Even if it hadn’t been real, it had been fabulous all the same. And how often would they have the chance to have sex in the spirit world?

Intensifying the kiss, John pulled Sherlock closer and ran his fingers lovingly through dark, messy curls. Suddenly, something freezing cold was pressed against the foot dangling from the sofa and he shuddered when a very rough, wet tongue licked his instep. Jerking away from the shocking sensation, John caused the both of them to fall off the sofa in a heap on the floor. As they disentangled themselves, they came face to face with the spirit animals. John looked down with annoyance to see both animals were laughing at them. The honey badger lifted its head and sniffed in amusement.

“I’d like to stay and make fun of you both some more, but we have to go, lads. Time runs differently here but not so that you can remain here much longer.”

Glancing over at Sherlock to see his reaction to the news, John realised with surprise the sentinel was seeing the animals for the first time. Reaching out to the clouded leopard, Sherlock reverently touched an ear with a finger and it pressed into his hand with a pleased sound. Delight, wonder and pleasure glowed from the alpha’s face.

“I’ve seen you a few times before but never thought I’d ever be able to touch you. How is this happening?”

The leopard answered and rubbed Sherlock’s hand with its head. “Your guide is very strong and despite not being trained yet, he instinctively knows what’s best for you and how to balance your needs. It’s vital that you be able to see us now and it’s through him that you can do this, even though you are not bonded yet.”
The leopard pulled back from the alpha’s touch and spoke sternly to Sherlock. “Once you return to the real world, you must do your utmost to take back your guide or your link will be broken and he will be bonded to another against his will. That bonding will not benefit anyone and it will be another lifetime before you will be able to come together again. Don’t let this happen or both your lives will be nothing but loneliness and misery, young sentinel. It means you must seriously reconsider the goals you have set for yourself. They may not be as important as you think. However, you must make that decision on your own.”

Both John and Sherlock stared at the leopard in consternation until the badger broke in.

“We haven’t got time for this. Do as your bloody spirit guide says, sentinel. Now it’s time to go. Shift it, mates.”

When they stood, both were dressed again. John held out his arms for Sherlock and he heard the badger sigh but it didn’t interfere with their embrace.

“Find me, Sherlock. I’m somewhere in the city. According to Murphy, one of their most secure buildings. Maybe Mycroft can find it. Murphy also said my auction was going to be held after a previously scheduled latent auction that allows partials and beta sentinels to bid. Maybe you can infiltrate the auction, though Murphy told McDonnell to have security keep an eye out for you and forbid you entry.”

“I’ll have Mycroft search for the auction venue and if anyone can find you, he will do it. He’s got more spies in the Bureau now than he had before.”

“Ta, luv. I’ll do my best to keep the bond safe. But if they succeed….”

"They won’t, John. You’re too strong. You won’t let them.” Sherlock’s face had paled at the suggestion that their bond could be eliminated.

“You don’t know that, Sherlock, but we have to consider a worst case scenario. We created our bond before and we can do it again. I’ll do everything I know how to do to prevent it from being broken but I just don’t know that much yet.”

The clouded leopard broke into the conversation. “Follow your instincts, as you always have done, John. They’ll never lead you in the wrong direction. Protect that bond with every scrap of strength in your body and you will succeed. But it’s now time to go, both of you.”

Reluctantly agreeing, Sherlock stepped away from John and looked at him with a bewildered expression. Trying hard to be brave but feeling as if his heart was being ripped out of his body, John turned toward the badger, who was watching them both thoughtfully.

“Come along now, lad. You need to go back soon or that damned Bureau guide will arrive, discover what you’ve been up to and make trouble. Right now they underestimate you and you don’t want that to change too soon.”

Looking over his shoulder at Sherlock, John saw the sentinel heading for the bedroom with the leopard. At the same moment, Sherlock also turned his miserable gaze back at John. The doctor knew his own face reflected the same emotion but there was no help for it. He straightened his shoulders and reluctantly turned away, moving toward the window. Then he and the badger were through the mysterious doorway and back out in the blackness. The environment looked even more solid than before and as he watched the honey badger navigate in the dark, John began to see more things around him as if his eyes were adjusting finally. Or maybe the strengthened bond had given him the ability to see more.
There was indeed a path beneath his feet and he had a faint body now whereas before he hadn’t been able to see anything. He thought he could see the slight indications of a faintly blue grass and foliage here and there. It was baffling and he gazed about in wonder as they travelled swiftly along the path.

"You’re finally beginning to learn a thing or two, lad. Once you become a true guide to your sentinel and bond fully as sentinel and guide and alpha and omega, your abilities will magnify exponentially and you’ll be able to do amazing things you never dreamt possible. Walking these paths will be a doddle for you. But right now, you have no idea what you’re capable of and if the Bureau has its way, you’ll never know."

When John remained silent, the badger harrumphed again. “You two are destined for great things if you can just get your heads out of your arses long enough to actually bond.”

Unaccountably defensive, John protested. “Oi! Bonding is important! We had to sort some things out, first.”

“You think too bloody much! You both should have been at it the moment you woke up this morning. No help for it now. And you need to remember what the leopard told your mate. She wasn’t just talking to Sherlock about rethinking your goals in life. You need to do the same.”

Confused, John frowned at the badger. “What do you mean? I’ve had to rethink and rearrange everything important in my life just to be with Sherlock. Don’t you think I’ve done enough?”

The badger rolled his eyes. “I know you feel hard done by and I admit you have been having quite the time of it, the two of you. But everything happens for a reason and you both have some lessons yet to learn. I’ve never met two more bloody minded gits in my entire existence and if it takes the entire universe dropping on your head to get your attention, then that’s what will happen!”

Taken aback, John just gaped at the spirit animal, who huffed and continued. “Once you get back, you need to take every advantage, no matter how disgusting, to learn everything you can about being a guide because those who hate what you are will do everything in their power to suppress your talents and keep you from learning how to use them. I suspect you don’t even know that you have the ability to influence the minds of other people, especially sentinels?”

John just looked gobsmacked at that and the honey badger shook its shaggy head in despair and kept moving.

“Like I thought. Guides today are shite because of the interference of the damned Bureau. So much knowledge has been lost or hidden. It didn’t used to be that way. There was a time when it was a point of pride and honour to be a guide to a sentinel. The way has been perverted and is a loss to humanity as a whole. There’s a lot you can accomplish if you can manage to bond yourself to your Sherlock. The two of you will be nearly unstoppable.

“Well, here we are, mate. Nice seeing you. Don’t try to come here by yourself again unless I’m with you or until you’re bonded, got that? If you try, I’ll kick your arse. The soul bond gives you some protection now but a permanent link will always guide you through this place safely.

“And a word to the wise, lad. I may appear to you at moments of danger in the real world. It’s usually to warn you, so you bloody well better pay attention to me. If I tell you to do something and you ignore me, I’ll do more than just kick your arse. If you manage to survive, that is. Now it’s time for you to slope off before they find out you’ve been gone. And don’t forget, trust your instincts!”

Wanting to ask what the spirit animal meant, especially about being able to influence other people,
John could only blink stupidly at the animal before he was suddenly sitting up in the bed. None of his journey had been genuine but it certainly had felt real. His body was also humming with sexual satiation. Getting up slowly and painfully, he made his way to the bath and had a very hot shower. There were more gowns in a cupboard and he dressed and got into bed. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, briefly forgetting in his exhaustion that they were going to be coming to break his bond that evening.

The sound of the door being unlocked woke him a few hours later. Groggily, he sat up to find a rather large orderly bringing him a meal whilst an equally large person stood at the door with the keys and a taser in his hand. Of course they didn’t trust him at all and had no intention of giving him an opening to escape. At the moment, he wasn’t up to doing anything physical anyway, so he lay back down and watched the orderly set the tray down and leave, locking the door behind him. The dinner smelled vile and he ignored it in favour of getting some water from the tap instead. He didn’t want to run the risk of being drugged again with something that would keep him from being able to use his latent abilities and he didn’t put it past Murphy to try it.

About half an hour later the doctor arrived to replace John’s cast. He raised his eyebrows at the untouched food but then proceeded to get the guard to cuff John to the bed. The guard stood nearby with the taser ready whilst John eyed the locked door in frustration. There was no way to get out of the room so there was no point in even thinking about it.

The new cast was applied without fanfare. Though it was made of a lightweight synthetic material, it was still heavy so a sling was necessary to keep any stress off his bad shoulder and to give his strained muscles a rest. The doctor noticed the shoulder wound and fussed over it. The strenuous activity of the previous days had inflamed it noticeably and the doctor prescribed some paracetamol for him. John thanked him graciously and the man absently smiled back at him as he continued to make the cast.

It occurred to John that it might be the perfect time to try to see if he could influence the doctor’s thoughts. The spirit animal had said his abilities worked best on sentinels but the badger hadn’t said he couldn’t influence non-sentinels. When the doctor’s hand was on his bare skin, John focussed his empathy and tried to determine what he could feel of the doctor’s emotions. John nearly gasped when he instantly connected.

The man was worried about something related to John but of course John couldn’t read his thoughts. Or could he? Glancing at the guard, who just looked bored, John closed his eyes and turned his attention back to the doctor. Sinking his empathy through the layers of the doctor’s mind, he began to get more than feelings and began picking up odd sensations and impressions. The doctor was focussed on John and was worried because something was going to be done in the next few hours that he knew would hurt John.

Deciding to take a less passive role, John actively searched for an answer. The doctor wasn’t a guide or sentinel, though and he didn’t know exactly what was going to happen. He’d just seen others hurt by this experience that John was about to undergo and he didn’t like it. It seemed that he respected John and was concerned for him.

Opening his eyes, John slowly and carefully disengaged from the doctor’s mind as he finished up with the cast. It occurred to John that most doctors would have had a technician or nurse do the work but this one seemed unusually sympathetic to John. Maybe he could ask a favour of the man, using his empathy to encourage compliance. As the doctor began to pack up his supplies, John sat up and smiled gratefully at the man.

“Ta, mate. By the way, may I ask something of you? I realise I don’t even know your name.”
The other man stopped what he was doing and smiled at John. “Daryl Moore. Pleased to meet you, Mr Larsen. I understand you’re a medical doctor, too?”

So that was the connection. John would use whatever he could do to his advantage and nodded. “Yes, I was a trauma surgeon in the army. Served in Afghanistan for some time and was invalided out when I got this.” John gestured to the shoulder wound with a dip of his head since his right wrist was still chained to the bed.

Dr Moore’s eyes widened. “I… I had no idea you were a war veteran. My brother served over there and was also injured.” He gulped and continued. “He lost both legs when a bomb went off under his vehicle. He’s… had a very bad time of it. Sometimes I worry….” Sorrow hung heavily over the man and John reached out slowly with his left hand and patted the other man’s arm carefully with his fingers. The guard tensed and then relaxed when he realised John meant no harm.

“I’ve been there, mate. The depression and PTSD can be frightening and overwhelming at times for the family but especially for him. There’s not much to say except that it does get better with time. But he needs to be open to getting well. Good friends helped me a lot and I’m sure your family will be there for him, too. Just be patient with him and be sure to take care of yourself. It won’t help him if you get dragged down, too.”

John didn’t want to think about his betrayal by Hairston but the man had truly helped him come back to himself and Sherlock had done the rest by giving him a reason to keep living. John had a lot to be grateful for and instinctively used his empathy on Moore, trying to give him some support and encouragement. It actually appeared to work as the doctor stood straighter and the sorrow that burdened him seemed to lift somewhat. Shaking his head, Moore stepped away and gave John his first genuine smile.

“Thank you for that, Dr Larssen. I do appreciate you sharing your experience. I know what you went through must have been very painful. But I’m sorry to have co-opted the conversation. You had a question you wanted to ask?”

Using his empathy to try to encourage a positive response, John nodded. “Ta, yes I do. I was hoping there might be a way to get something other than a hospital gown to wear. Do you know what happened to the clothes I had when I was brought in? Can you get them for me?”

Surprised, the doctor thought for a moment and patted John’s arm carefully. “I think your clothes are stored in the room where you were first admitted. I’ll find out and get them back to you. If I can’t get them, I’ll find something else for you.” He gave John a wry smile. “It’s the least I can do for a war vet. I should be able to find something out soon and let you know.”

So his empathy seemed to have worked! John forced himself to conceal any indication of triumph as Moore turned to the guard and requested that the man unshackle John from the bed. To make sure that what he’d done wasn’t just a fluke, John needed to try his talent on another subject. As Moore waited by the door, John turned his attention to the guard. It was worth a shot to see if he could influence someone who wasn’t particularly sympathetic toward him and do it without the benefit of touch. If it didn’t work, it was still useful information. As the man reached for the cuff to unlock it, John sent out his empathy. Picking up mainly on the man’s boredom, John tried to mentally suggest that his nose itched and he should scratch it.

Watching the guard closely as the shackle was unlocked, John saw the man’s nose twitch in irritation. Backing away from John and keeping the taser pointed at him, the man lifted his hand and rubbed at his nose. John’s heart lurched in excitement and he had to turn his head away as he suppressed a grin. It had worked again! What he could do with the ability was the next question.
Could he convince the guard to open the door and let him go? It was worth giving it a try, as soon as he got some clothes.

However, as soon as the excitement of his success faded, a sudden feeling of exhaustion nearly overwhelmed him and he was very glad he was lying down. John couldn’t help but wonder if the fatigue was related to the new way he’d just used his empathy. If so, he might have to reconsider using it to influence people. But then, maybe it was like a muscle that just needed to be strengthened before it could be utilised effectively. And one strengthened a muscle by using it.

But practising his empathy might take an unacceptable amount of time before he could gain full use of it. John had very little time before they would come to break his bond. Not knowing when they were coming was nerve wracking and he wondered if that was meant to soften him up before the main event. He’d have to stay focused and save his strength if he was going to have to battle another omega guide for his bond. This guide would be properly trained, knew what he was doing and was apparently adept at breaking other guide’s bonds.

What kind of person would specialise in breaking the bonds of other sentinels and guides, anyway? Maybe some wanted their bonds broken for whatever reason. In that case, having someone who knew how to do it with minimal pain would be a good thing. But in John’s case, it was wrong and immoral to break his and Sherlock’s soul bond. Could this guide—Wood, Murphy had named him—be swayed by knowing that John and Sherlock loved each other and wanted to bond? Would he refuse to break the soul bond or would he obey orders and try anyway? John knew he’d find out soon enough.

The door unlocked again, jerking the omega out of his thoughts. The orderly had come to pick up the untouched food tray but he’d also brought a plastic bag with John’s clothes and trainers inside it. Even though his belt with its tools wasn’t included, it was a huge relief to be allowed to wear something other than the hospital gown and he changed into his threadbare clothes gratefully. It made him feel human again and his spirits rose. He wished there was some way to contact Sherlock again but he recalled his spirit animals’ warning and desisted. Trying to visualise his arse being kicked by a honey badger pretty much exhausted his imagination.

Once he was dressed, two guards John had never seen before came into the room. They held tasers, flanked John and demanded he stand up, turn around and put his right hand on the back of his head. Reading them easily, he knew they were prepared to tase him the instant he tried anything. Apparently, it was time.

Slowly, John followed their directions and though the muscles of his right shoulder and back protested, the pain was nowhere near as much as he’d expected. One of the guards buckled a belt with cuffs and chains fastened to it around his waist. The guard then brought John’s right hand down and cuffed it in front of him. This cuff had an extremely short chain that attached to the belt and radically restricted John’s arm movement. The other chain had a special cuff that fitted snugly around the cast on John’s left arm but allowed the arm enough chain to continue to rest in the sling.

Whilst the first guard watched narrowly, taser ready, the second guard knelt and attached leg irons to John’s ankles with short chains that were then connected to the belt with a separate, longer chain. The short chains would keep him from being able to do more than hobble along at a snails’ pace. The Bureau was taking no chances that John would escape his fate and his heart sank in despair. He knew he was running out of time but remembering what the spirit animals had said to him about trusting his instincts John calmed himself and lifted his chin high, ready to take on whatever might be thrown his way.

The guards gestured for John to move to the door and he obeyed slowly. Trussed up like a Christmas
goose, John was directed to shuffle and limp through the door and down the corridor. He used the opportunity to learn as much as he could do about the building he was incarcerated in but there was little information to be had. Aside from the cameras placed at regular intervals, the hallway was completely non-descript and none of the doors they passed were numbered. Some rooms had keypads on the doors instead of doorknobs, which was interesting but not helpful to John. He could see no windows or any other indication of where he might be located and he wanted to scream in frustration. Spotting a door that was labelled as an exit, his spirits rose until he saw that it had not only a keypad but a place where a card had to be swiped, as well.

They proceeded down the hall and turned a corner into another corridor that looked just like the last one. Again, there were no windows anywhere but John continued to be alert for anything that might help him as he stumbled to a stop in front of another door just like all the others. This one opened with the swipe of a card and a quick punch of numbers. John made note of the code and then he was pushed inside.

The room was bare except for a grey metal table and two matching chairs. One wall consisted mostly of a large two way mirror and John wondered why that was necessary. Regardless, he’d certainly find out shortly. The guards took his arms and dragged him to the chair that faced the door and forced him to sit, then produced another chain and shackled him to the table, which John belatedly noticed was bolted to the floor. He was then left alone in the featureless room.

Glancing quickly over at the two-way mirror, all he could see was his own reflection but impulsively he sent out his empathy and sensed the room behind the glass contained a fair number of watchers. It wasn’t possible to know exactly who they were but he could tell that at least four of them were sentinels. His touch then brushed against two people who could be guides and he withdrew his empathy quickly in case they could sense him in turn. When he could determine no reaction to his empathic incursion into the other room, he sent his senses back into the room to try to listen in on the group.

Closing his eyes and lowering his head to better concentrate, he was amazed when no one seemed to detect his presence. Maybe he wasn’t doing it properly but he began to feel the emotions of the group. The longer his senses ranged around and listened in, the more he could decipher their feelings and it was very odd. At first they were jumbled but then his brain automatically began to filter and sort out the impressions he was getting. John couldn’t help raising an eyebrow in astonishment when he ‘heard’ surprise and slight outrage expressed at his physical condition. Apparently they’d not been expecting to see all the bruises and cuts on his face and neck. However, the overwhelming feelings he sensed were strong curiosity and a keen interest. But he couldn’t tell if the interest was in John or what was going to be done to him. It was possible that some of the sentinels behind the window were alpha sentinels wanting a good look at what they might be bidding on later. John hoped they’d be disappointed in what they saw and refuse to bid.

Untrained as he was, he didn’t know how the guide Wood might go about breaking the bond. There wasn’t really enough information for John to plan a real strategy on how to protect himself but he had to think of something and fast. Breathing deeply, John tried in vain to keep his heart rate slow and even, but he was very aware that, if the sentinels in the other room were tuned into him, they’d know he was very frightened.

Slowly and carefully, he withdrew his empathy and shored up his shields as strongly as he knew how. His strategy was going to have to be totally defensive and to do his utmost to protect his bond. Keeping his shields close and strong and not to allow himself to engage with the omega guide would hopefully keep him safe. Just then the door opened slightly and he looked up to see the back of a blond omega male standing in the entrance, speaking to a worried looking woman.
“…no untrained latent can hold out against me. You don’t have to worry about him creating a scene tomorrow, either. I’ve got it under control and he won’t be hurt-- much.”

With that, the man entered the room and closed the door in the woman’s face. Turning toward John, he approached the omega with an arrogant, confident stride and sat down in the other chair, smiling brightly. John could easily tell the man was not only a trained guide but also a major threat. John would have to be extremely careful what he said or did until he could take the measure of the man.

“Well, hello! My name is Terrence Wood but you can call me Terry. I know you understand the main reason why I’m here and we’ll get into that unpleasantness in a few minutes. But I’m also going to fill you in on what will happen at the auction and then what you can expect once you’re part of a multiple omega and guide household. I’ll also answer any questions you might have about that. I expect you’d want to know as much as possible to avoid any unpleasant surprises.”

Narrowing his eyes, Wood inspected John’s threadbare clothes contemptuously “We’ve arranged to bring you some newer things so you can dress nicely for the alpha sentinels tomorrow. You’ll want to look your best, after all, right?”

He didn’t wait for John to respond but kept talking. “So, I’m sure you must be curious about what’s in store for you. Tomorrow afternoon, you’ll be taken by van to an auditorium where there is a latent auction scheduled. You’ve been through the process before but this time you’ll be the star of the show. Aren’t you excited?”

John couldn’t help his expression of incredulity but then he controlled himself as Wood smiled slightly, clearly aware he’d got a reaction despite John’s best intentions.

“As you know, you’ll be auctioned off and immediately bonded to the winning alpha sentinel to start your new life. Depending on which alpha sentinel wins you, it is very likely there will be a large pack of omegas and possibly another guide in your new household.

“So yes, alpha sentinels can bond with more than one guide, though the relationships amongst us tend to be complex and are based on seniority of acquisition. Primary status goes to the first omega guide and then to any subsequent guides. I know some of the alpha sentinels have beta guides but as an omega you’ll outrank them. Bonded non-guide omegas belonging to the alpha sentinel are subject to the authority of the guides. In multiple omega households everyone shares child care duties for all offspring and not just your own. No nannies necessary! Anyway, you’ll find out more shortly. Let’s get started, shall we? I have a few preliminary questions to ask you before we get to the main event.”

John stomach churned but he forced himself to relax and refused to respond with anything other than a shrug. His head was beginning to ache and it felt as if someone was squeezing John’s temples with increasing pressure. It wasn’t really painful but it was annoying and divided his attention. He had to focus and not allow himself to be distracted. Finding a way to protect his bond was his main priority. Taking slow, deep breaths in order to remain calm, he tried to centre himself but Wood drew his attention by bringing out a notebook and a biro and slapping them on the table. Eyes focusing on the biro, John’s heart lifted. If there was some way John could get it, the pen could be used as a lock pick. He decided to pay more attention to Wood to see what he was planning.

Again, speaking cheerfully, the other guide positioned the biro over the notebook and arched an eyebrow at John expectantly.

"Before we start, let's get acquainted. So, we all know your name isn't William Larssen. I need your real name so we can get your proper paperwork together and make sure you and your alpha sentinel start off your new life together in complete honesty. So, please tell me about yourself. What's your
name and where and when were you born?” Despite the cheerful tone, Wood was not asking but ordering John to comply.

Instead, John remained silent and frowned slightly at the other guide, mildly surprised that Wood actually expected him to answer. However, the pressure on his temples increased and John narrowed his eyes with the abrupt realisation that his shields were under attack. Wood was using his empathy in an attempt to force his way into John’s mind, which was why he was feeling pressure. The questions being asked were a ruse to divert John’s attention so it would be too late and his shields would be destroyed before he noticed. Well, John was onto Wood’s plan now as he held his shields firm and refused to engage.

Wood looked slightly frustrated and rather taken aback that John resisted him and the pressure on John increased again. Instinctively, John knew that Wood’s attempt to use empathy in such a way in order to coerce him was completely immoral. However, it wasn’t as if he’d expected anything else from an omega guide that specialised in breaking bonds. Thankfully, the pressure was only an irritant and John forced himself to remain expressionless as he resisted Wood’s assault.

Pretending he was simply bored, John allowed his attention to wander and inspected the nails on his left hand, noting that they were dirty. Using one of his other nails, he dug some grime out from underneath his thumbnail and at the same time used his own senses to analyse the empathic attack from Wood. The other guide wasn’t trying to use deception to snake his way past John's shields but was instead attempting to bull and batter himself in by sheer force and strength. Even though John had very little experience using his empathy, he knew that Wood's unsubtle approach would definitely be quite successful on someone who had weak shields, allowing the attacker to enter and take over the other person's mind quickly.

From John’s own observations of the few people he’d used his empathy on, the mind consisted of layers of memory, thoughts and emotions. Surface thoughts and recent, strong emotions were closest to the surface and easiest for empathy to access. Complex, subtle emotions, memories and the essence of someone’s personality spiralled deeper and deeper and took more energy to reach until the core of the person’s mind was exposed. That was where John knew his bond with Sherlock originated and his instincts told him Wood needed to access that part of his mind in order to destroy the bond by pulling it up by the roots.

Though John had never really touched the core of another person, he had seen the beauty of Sherlock’s and knew, once the protective layers had been bypassed, the mind was exceedingly delicate. Intuition told John that the centre of a mind should be sacrosanct, especially to a guide and that core was meant to be shielded and protected at all costs and never, under any circumstances, be violated. That same instinct told him that Wood did not subscribe to that belief and would breach John’s inner self if he could reach it without a second thought.

With his limited experience, the best way John had found to access other people’s minds was a gradual, almost seductive approach that worked around and behind any natural shields. Whilst Wood was trying to smash John’s shields with a frontal assault, John held him off easily and decided to see if he could try his own, different approach by sliding around and behind Wood’s own shields. In the meantime, though, John gave Wood what appeared to be a minor victory by allowing him to access to his surface thoughts, being careful to only permit the other guide to feel his worry and fear about the bond breaking. Surprisingly, it wasn’t very hard to do as John’s latent talents seemed to take to that kind of subterfuge like a duck to water.

The look of frustration disappeared from the other guide’s face as John allowed him in that little bit but Wood still seemed mystified as to why he wasn’t getting further. Frowning, the other guide sat forward to get a closer look at John, who briefly raised his eyes from cleaning his fingernails, lifted a
sardonic eyebrow, then looked away and continued to pretend to ignore Wood whilst John’s own empathy snuck up on the other man’s mind and found gaping holes in Wood’s shields. The man was so arrogant that he’d not bothered with erecting strong shields at all! Either that or he was putting all his energy and strength toward battering John’s defences whilst not expecting any retaliation.

John was astounded at the ease of it and was instantly wary of being lured in and entrapped by someone who was meant to be highly trained and very powerful. But as John progressed slowly, there was no sign from Wood that he knew what John was doing. Worming his way in gradually and being exquisitely careful, John was shocked to find that he was beginning to learn things. He had somehow stumbled over a section of Wood’s mind where there was a plethora of information on guide lore. How he was able to access it, John couldn’t say except that his mind seemed to absorb the information by osmosis as soon as he realised what he was observing.

Wood continued to ask John inane questions as he kept up his battery on John’s shields but the omega heard none of them as he sank deeper into the other man’s mind. To say it wasn’t a pleasant place to be was an understatement but John persevered and began to learn astonishing things about guide abilities and how to use them. Aware of how limited his time was, once he had learnt all he thought he could do without alerting Wood, John slowly disengaged from the other guide’s mind, absolutely dumbfounded that he’d been completely undetected.

John had no idea how much time passed, but he had the feeling less than a minute had gone by when he finally returned to shelter behind his own shields. Having touched the other man’s thoughts made John feel unclean, but it had been necessary and incredibly helpful. He wasn’t sure what he’d be able to do with the information he’d obtained and there was a lot to sort through but at least he now knew in more detail what Wood's plans for him were and that those orders had come directly from Murphy.

He’d learnt that Wood was meant to use his abilities to basically take over John’s mind by stages and then reach deep to break the bond whilst John was defenceless. Then Wood was to access John’s memory of what had happened in the conference room and erase it. The powers-that-be of the Bureau also wanted to make sure that John would not create any problems afterward and go to the auction willingly like a placid little lamb to the slaughter and Wood was the perfect man to ensure it happened. Apparently the wanker had no moral qualms about brainwashing other guides as well as breaking their bonds and had done it successfully before. John had also discovered the technique of how Wood planned to accomplish that very thing. John’s spirit guide had not been wrong. A trained guide could indeed manipulate the minds of others and a strong one, unchecked by any morals, could do horrible things.

It took a few seconds for John to decide what to do. He needed to let Wood think he’d succeeded. If everyone thought he was ‘safe’ and that his bond was broken after their ‘session’, the guards might relax and give him a chance to escape. The best time to attempt it might be when they transferred him to the auction site. He also didn’t want Wood or anyone else thinking he could withstand the mental games of a trained guide without breaking a sweat. Being underestimated was a serious advantage he didn’t want to give up so soon. But what he was planning was risky in that he had no practice and only theory to go by. He’d have to learn to sink or swim in this case. If he let Wood in too far, John didn’t know if he would be able to stop him.

Slowly coming back to himself, John could hear Wood’s voice becoming increasingly aggravated in that he couldn’t seem to break completely through John’s tough shields. Suddenly, Wood gave up the pretence of questioning him and focused instead on the task of breaking the doctor’s shields. The other omega guide’s face had transformed into a furious mask reflecting frustration and more worrisome, suspicion.
Finally figuring out his own strategy, John decided to permit Wood to ‘break through’ another superficial layer of his mind and allow the man to think he’d gained some control over him. At the same time he would re-enter Wood’s mind and plant a false memory, making the other guide think he’d succeeded in accessing and breaking the bond. It was absurdly simple now that he knew how but the further he allowed Wood in the less control he had and he began to feel pain. John hoped that they could finish the session soon and began to focus and wait for Wood’s next move.

In the meantime, John reinforced his protections around his real bond whilst at the same time decided to create a section in his own mind where he replicated the empathic look and feel of his and Sherlock’s precious bond that he could use as a decoy in case his other idea didn’t succeed. The decoy was located deeper inside his consciousness than he really wanted Wood to go, but John believed that he could create a protected corridor within himself and shepherd the other guide down it to where he wanted him if it came to that. John noticed absently that he’d started the new section perilously close to where he kept his deepest and darkest nightmares locked up and shuddered at what would happen if Wood somehow accessed those and let them loose.

As the pressure increased yet again John hesitated and then decided to respond to Wood’s stupid questions in order to buy more time. The decoy bond wasn’t finished yet. However, he also needed to carefully plant the idea in Wood that he’d successfully begun to control John so the man might back off some. Quickly accessing the other guide’s mind as Wood stayed focused on pushing against John’s shields, John planted the superficial false memory and withdrew back behind his shields. Distressingly, they’d begun to weaken during his short absence and this worried him but he was sidetracked when the pressure from Wood eased off immediately. John wanted to crow his victory but stayed wary in case of the remote possibility that he was being fooled by Wood’s arrogance.

It was time to begin answering the questions to bolster the false memory he’d given Wood to make the man think he’d finally begun to take control. Also, John hoped that the other omega guide wouldn’t become even more suspicious. For the sake of drama, John made sure that it seemed as if the answers were being dragged out of him with great reluctance.

“Rubin. My name is William Rubin. My friends call me Billy.” He also gave a fake date and place of birth and then stared up at Wood, allowing defiance, anger and confusion to show on his face and in his mind. It was unlikely that the other guide was educated or well read enough to know the real meaning of the phony name.

The beta guide sat back with a smug and satisfied expression and withdrew his empathy completely; giving John a much needed rest and time to continue to construct his fake bond.

“Well, that wasn’t too hard, now was it? So your first name really is William? That’s convenient. Well, Billy, we shouldn’t have trouble looking up your information for your new sentinel. I want you to tell me what you are trained to do. I understand you told Dr Moore that you were a trauma surgeon in the army. Now that can’t possibly be true. You’re too young and not smart enough to have that kind of experience.”

Shaking his head, John replied reluctantly with part of the truth. “I was in the army for a time and I’ve done lots of jobs. The last one was as a cleaner at Price clinic.”

Reading the truth of John’s statement, he wrote the information down on the pad and moved on, giving John a predatory smile. “Well, it’s been nice getting to know you but it’s time, Billy. Since you don’t seem to have any questions for me, I think we should get on with it. And you know why we’re here, don’t you? You’ve got a weak bond with another sentinel and I need to break it before you can bond with your proper sentinel tomorrow. I promise it will only hurt for a short time and you’ll be right as rain. Don’t fight me or it will be more painful. Are you ready?”
John lowered his head and shook it defiantly, refusing to answer him verbally. He shored up his shields hoping to keep Wood from going any further into his mind than he wanted and prepared himself to reach out again to plant the false memory he’d constructed. It had worked the last time and hopefully it should work again. Then he hoped the other man would withdraw and leave him alone.

The outside world faded from John's sight and the pressure increased to a painful level as Wood suddenly pushed harder than he’d yet done and John relaxed his shields to let him in the small amount he needed. But somehow Wood slipped past his shields and horrified, John realised that, because of his inexperience and incomplete knowledge, he’d let the man in too far and he couldn’t plant the false memory.

All of John’s energy was spent wildly trying to hold Wood back and so he was unable to finish creating the section in his mind where he’d hoped to lure Wood with the decoy bond. What he did manage to form was located too close to the original bond and John didn’t know how to move it or how to hide the real bond. As he dithered, undecided about what to do, the pressure and pain suddenly became too much.

Terrified, John was forced to let Wood completely in, hoping against hope that the other guide would only go where John wanted him to go. Even though his mind was shielded as best John knew how, the deep intrusion by Wood was agony and John faintly heard a strangled cry that he belatedly realised as coming from himself. Wood was too fast and well trained, and John knew he’d made a fatal mistake by letting the man in at all.

Panic-stricken and frantic, John watched horrified as Wood found the real bond first instead of the false one that lay nearby. Pushing arrogantly and roughly forward, Wood pounced on and immediately ripped that section of John’s mind wide open, exposing the area and the vulnerable bond. John was dazed with pain and cried out in desperation as Wood reached for the bond and began to shred it, pulling it apart and scattering pieces like confetti. It was very strong though and Wood seemed to be having a tough time of it.

John’s empathy battered helplessly at the man, who ignored him and kept tearing at the connection with Sherlock. The agony was hideous and John wasn’t sure how he could survive but he poured his strength into the ravaged link, trying to save it. As Wood continued to pound away at his bond, John began to feel himself weaken as pain and exhaustion took its toll and the life force that sustained his link to Sherlock began to bleed out. He was going to lose it if he couldn’t think of something else to do. John couldn’t remember ever feeling so helpless and he wanted to stop and just sob out his fear but he had to somehow find a way to save his connection to Sherlock. Then inspiration hit and he acted.

Using all his faltering strength, he poured everything into the nearby decoy bond, making it brighten and flash prettily. Then he tried his best to shield what remained of the real one and give it the appearance of a dead thing. Just as John thought he couldn’t stand it for another moment, Wood paused, obviously confused and distracted. He then sensed the fake bond nearby and suddenly abandoned the remnants of the real bond to approach the counterfeit one. John sent more energy into the fake one, making it appear shiny and even brighter than before. He wasn’t sure if it would work and he waited in agony of suspense whilst Wood made up his mind.

Then Wood took hold of the fake bond and John went into action. Desperately, John poured everything he had into the real bond in order mend the torn and damaged link and at the same time shield what he was doing from Wood’s notice. As he worked, John sensed a feeling of triumph from Wood as the other guide repeated what he’d done with the real bond and worked to annihilate the false one. This time, the bond was completely destroyed and with his success, Wood chose that moment to pull back, leaving John’s mind in a rush that made him shudder with anguish.
As the other omega guide withdrew, John became once more alert to his actual surroundings and found he’d collapsed onto the table. He was gasping for air, his body shaking whilst his skin crawled with the feeling of having been completely violated. At the other side of the table, John could sense Wood’s satisfaction at a job well done. But even though Wood was certain he’d achieved his main objective, instead of backing off and ending things, the guide took a deep breath and the pressure on John’s mind increased again. Wood believed he’d broken the bond but still needed to erase the memory of the conference room and secure complete control of John’s mind, as per Murphy’s orders.

John was terrified for fear the other guide would discover he’d not succeeded and so did his best to block and hold back the intrusion but his strength was tattered. Wood was angry that John was still fighting him and at the same time the other guide was perversely taking pleasure in the knowledge that he was going to seize control of a strong but untrained latent guide and intentionally cause him pain. Apparently Wood wanted to teach John a lesson for resisting him so successfully and making him look ineffective.

Furious at the deliberate cruelty of the other guide and scared that the guide would find out that he’d not destroyed the bond completely, John tried to think of a way to stop him. He needed to make Wood back off and once again a flash of inspiration took him. Like many soldiers, John excelled at compartmentalising his memories. He wouldn’t have been able to survive some of the horrors he’d faced in Afghanistan if not. The nightmares that represented his most horrendous experiences were tucked neatly away, behind a mental door that only opened without his permission when he slept. He’d worked through many of the worst memories but there were still a few, terrible experiences that would be with him for the rest of his life. He now knew their location within his consciousness.

John was doing his best to keep Wood out of his head but he was now confident, based on the bitter experience of what he’d done wrong before, that this time he could lead Wood to where he wanted him to go. He needed time to prepare the way, though and make it convincing enough to lure the man in. John could feel that his strength was fading but he knew he had just enough to do what he wanted and needed a distraction for a few moments.

Gripping his head in distress as Wood pushed again, John cried out and his heart rate soared at Wood’s completely gratuitous efforts to hurt him. Sounding thoroughly exhausted and bewildered, John gasped and panted in pain, using a small amount of his strength to broadcast his very real suffering throughout the two rooms as he sent most of his empathy inward to set his trap.

Taking in a breath that turned into a sob, John begged, his tone pitiful. “Please stop. Please! You’re hurting me! Leave me alone!”

John’s pleas had no effect on Wood and the man stepped up his empathic assault. Suddenly John heard a voice over the room’s intercom system and Wood paused in his attack to listen.

“Terry, back off, now! Can’t you see he’s finished? You’re not meant to hurt him like this. I’ve had enough of you doing this kind of thing to untrained latents!”

John had never heard the voice before but it sounded very angry and surprisingly concerned for John. Perhaps one of the other guides or sentinels was finally seeing through Wood’s façade.

Speaking fiercely, Wood protested. “Murphy was wrong! I was led to believe this bond was weak! I’ve never seen a tentative bond like this and I had to use a lot of energy to even access it because his shields are so strong. He’s also cleverer than any of us thought. I don’t know how he did it, but he managed to create a false bond to try to obscure the real one and almost had me fooled. The real bond is destroyed now and he’s almost under my control so if you want him to behave and do exactly what you say, you need to stop interfering and let me finish! I won’t be responsible
The other voice didn’t reply and Wood took that as permission to continue. The interruption had given John just enough time to gather his strength to prepare and finish his plans. Wood’s face flushed with annoyance and he pushed hard just as John dropped his shields and immediately opened the mental door to his nightmares, inviting the stupid wanker to enter. When John stopped his resistance, the amount of force Wood had been using literally catapulted him down the prepared path and through the door John had opened for him. John had just enough strength to metaphorically slam shut and lock the door behind the other guide to trap him with the nightmarish memories before a spike of agony nearly whitened out his consciousness. Wood was fighting to get out of John’s mind and trying to rip apart the mental ‘room’ he was trapped in but John had built those rooms to house his nightmares over a period of many years and they were as strong and secure as an iron cage.

Distantly, he watched Wood’s eyes bulge in horror and the biro fall to the table and roll away as the other guide’s hands went to his own temples and he threw himself back in his chair. However, terrible pain was piercing through John’s skull and he could do nothing but clutch at his own pounding head. Wood’s flailing about pushed the biro toward John and it literally rolled under the sling. Awkwardly, John picked it up, tucked it into his plaster cast and then opened the door to his nightmares once again, letting Wood out.

The worst of the pain eased instantly as Wood fled with his empathic tail tucked between his legs, but John knew he’d overdone it. The room began to spin so he put his head back down on the table to keep from passing out. As he sat there trying to recover, his head throbbing with every heartbeat, his nose itched and he rubbed at it only to see his hand covered with blood. Apparently overextending oneself empathically caused a nosebleed as well as extreme exhaustion.

Feeling as if he had the worst hangover of his life, John raised his head slowly to see that Wood was on the floor, retching and sobbing. This brought a grim, satisfied smile to the doctor’s lips. The fucking tosser had deserved everything he’d got and John wondered just how often Wood had been allowed to hurt other latents without any consequences. It seemed so strange for a guide to want to hurt other guides, but then John had learnt long ago there were always exceptions to every rule.

His head was hammering so badly that he could barely see and when the door to the room opened wide and a group of guides and sentinels burst in, radiating alarm and fear, John started in surprise. Gazing at them with blearly eyes, John vaguely guessed they must have been the ones he’d sensed in the other room and they were now arriving rather late to the rescue. Some went to pick up a now unconscious Wood and drag him from the room but most clustered around John. Almost all of them were sentinels and it alarmed John but he had no strength to do anything but sit there. It was all he could do at the moment to keep his eyes open. Thankfully, none of them touched him but they milled about anxiously and radiated protective feelings. John could tell they were extremely upset but he didn’t understand why. All he knew was that his brain felt like raw hamburger and he just wanted to sleep.

Unfortunately, someone stepped forward and reached out to touch him. Instantly, John could tell that the person was a bonded guide attempting to ascertain John’s mental condition and that meant more pain. Reacting defensively, John shied away as far as his chains allowed and used his empathy to lash out at her with everything he had left. It hurt but the other guide backed off immediately with a shocked and aggrieved expression. One of the sentinels put an arm around her and pulled her away whilst John snarled defiantly at all of them. Since he was as weak as a kitten at that point, any threat from him was pathetic but then they didn’t know that and most of them stepped even further away, still radiating distress and concern.

However, one of the sentinels knelt by John and carefully offered a handkerchief without trying to
touch him. The stranger smelt very good so John accepted the fabric and raised it to his nose to try to stop the bleeding. Blinking groggily at the kneeling man, John noticed he was pleasant to look at, as well. His scent was enticing and spicy. Not as pleasant as Sherlock’s but still quite lovely. John’s heart calmed and the ache in his head began to ease.

The man’s voice rang out and it was nice, too. Rather commanding, but very nice. “You! Guard! Get your bloody arse over here and unchain him, now! He needs to see the doctor!”

Surprisingly, the guards jumped the instant the man spoke and John was immediately free of the all cuffs and chains. He meant to thank the man and tried to stand, but his knees gave out and he pitched toward the floor. Astonished at his weakness, he was stunned when he didn’t hit the ground face first but was caught in very strong arms and picked up as if he were a child. He knew he was no lightweight and the strength in the arms was wonderful. But then the room started to spin again and he had to close his eyes and clutched feebly at the shirt of the person carrying him. It took a moment to realise the same man who smelt so delicious was the one carrying him and he buried his face in the man’s neck and took a deep breath. It calmed and centred him immediately, though his brain was still refusing to function properly.

“Mmmm. You smell really good.” John didn’t realise he’d spoken aloud until he heard a deep chuckle from above him. Cracking open an eyelid he saw the handsome face looking down at him with a fond smile.

“So do you, Billy. But it’s not surprising. I’m an alpha sentinel and you’re an omega guide. We were made for each other and I’m going to see to it that you’ll be mine, soon. You’re quite a fascinating creature, you know that?”

John didn’t know that and was puzzled. His brain wasn’t working right and he didn’t know where he was. Who was this person again? They’d not been properly introduced but John was too tired to worry about it and his eyes still wouldn’t open completely. All he could seem to do was mumble.

“You’re talking complete rubbish. I’m not a creature and I’m not fascinating. I’m nobody.”

“Oh, you’re somebody, all right. Somebody very special.” The deep chuckle came again and then John was lying on something soft though he was afraid to open his eyes in case the room was still spinning. Someone stroked his forehead and the glands under his chin began to tingle and throb and so did his groin. It felt amazing but was also irritating.

John pushed the man’s hand away. “Stop it. My head hurts. I don’t want you. I’ve already got a sentinel.”

“So you have a sentinel already? But… I was told the bond was superficial. And now they’ve broken it…?” The voice suddenly sounded worried and confused.

Nearly unconscious, John roused himself enough to respond. “Yeah. My very own alpha sentinel. Name’s Sh’lock. Our bond is strong. It’s a soul bond. You smell nice but he smells better. Love him.” With that, John could no longer stay conscious and passed out.

Waking was bad. The hangover feeling was back with a vengeance and John barely rolled to one side of the bed in time before he became sick. Thankfully, a nurse was beside him and holding a basin so the floor was saved. There wasn’t much in his stomach anyway because he’d not eaten since he’d arrived that afternoon. A cool cloth wiped his face when he was done. Breathing heavily, he mumbled his thanks and lay on his side to take stock of his situation as the nurse left the room. Everything hurt, especially his head. Vaguely remembering being carried somewhere, John realised he was back in his room and must not have been unconscious long since he was still dressed in his
clothes, though someone had removed his trainers.

A jolt of panic ran through him then as he suddenly recalled his wounded bond. His mind felt raw and shredded but he closed his eyes and quickly found the location of his link. He almost cried to see the damaged thing. What had been a beautiful and perfect multi-coloured strand of intertwining filaments was now a pathetic and frayed ruin. However, he could see there was still life to it and he couldn’t help but reach out and caress it. To his surprise, it responded to his mental touch and flared bravely to life. John shuddered to think what might have happened to the bond if he and Sherlock hadn’t strengthened it in the spirit world and if Wood hadn’t been distracted away from it in time. Their spirit animals had been so right to advise them to reinforce it. Otherwise it would have been utterly and completely destroyed at Wood’s first touch.

As he gently held his precious link to Sherlock, he could feel his empathy feeding it slowly. It pulsed just a bit brighter and some of the tattered filaments actually rejoined to the rest of the bond and solidified. John grinned madly in excitement. Their bond had survived and he could mend it! But it would have to be done later because his head still ached abominably. At least his brain was more-or-less functioning again.

Shaking with exhaustion and pain, he rolled back onto the pillows and cracked open an eye just in time to see Dr Moore enter the room, probably called by the nurse. The man looked horrified and sad at John’s condition. He must look quite terrible to get that kind of expression from the kind man. But if he looked that bad, it would reinforce the lie that the bond had been broken.

“Christ, I knew this would happen. I don’t understand why they allow it. But I’ve got something that will help, if you’ll okay it.”

A pang went through John when Moore asked permission to give him medication. It was such a simple thing but made John understand how being a captive made him feel less than human. Basic respect from Moore brought sudden moisture to his eyes and he had to cover his face with a shaking hand before he calmed. Nodding to the other doctor, John settled back on the bed with a sigh and wearily closed his eyes.

John heard Moore approach. “This will make you feel much better but it will also make you sleep.”

Feeling a sharp prick on his arm, John tried to relax. The doctor was correct and the medication began to work almost immediately. His head felt as if it were full of cotton wool but that was such a huge improvement John didn’t care and settled back to rest. Moore patted his arm kindly and quietly left the room. John immediately drifted off to sleep.

The next time he woke was much more pleasant than before. He’d slept a long time and it was very early morning. Most of the effects of the drug Moore had given him seemed to have worn off and he felt much better. Though his head hurt and he was still tired, it was nothing compared to what it had been. Quickly, he checked the bond and was relieved to see that not only was it still there but it seemed stronger than it had been earlier. Knowing that it was recovering so quickly after such extensive damage was heartening and John’s spirits rose considerably. He had to be careful of appearing too cheerful, though. If another guide sensed his good spirits, they’d know his bond hadn’t been destroyed and they might force him to endure another session with Wood.

The thought of having to face that man again was sickening and so he vowed he’d be extraordinarily careful. He wondered what had happened to Wood once he’d been taken from the room but had trouble finding the energy to care. John lay there and tried to make sense of what had happened. Aside from the near destruction of his bond, parts of his encounter with the other omega guide had been extraordinarily useful. John had been with Wood for less than an hour but he’d learnt so much
about what it meant to be a guide in that short period. There was still a lot of information to sort through in order to fully comprehend it, but he knew now why his spirit guide had told him he had so much to learn and to take what he could do, despite the source. Just the small amount he’d managed to pick out of Wood’s brain had been the tip of the iceberg. Even though he’d discovered all these new things, he still wasn’t quite sure how to implement what he’d learnt, as he’d unfortunately found out when he’d ended up letting Wood get too far and couldn’t stop him. Having a tutor or mentor would help him master and use what he’d discovered. Imagining what he might be able to accomplish if he ever got proper training was mind boggling. Mycroft had promised him tuition but he wasn’t sure if he could trust anything the elder Holmes had told him. Sherlock would find a way to get him what he needed.

Mostly, John just wanted to be a proper guide to Sherlock. The alpha deserved to have the best and John knew he could be very good if given the chance. Wood had actually been afraid of John’s strength and had refused to admit just how powerful John’s shields were. In the end, that blindness and refusal to accept that someone could possibly be stronger cost the other guide dearly. That thought was strangely satisfying and John hoped that Wood had suffered and would at least think twice before he volunteered to break a bond or try to brainwash another latent. From what John had sensed from the sentinels and guides watching from the other room, Wood had been revealed to be an abusive bully, so maybe he’d be censured.

Suddenly, John remembered that he had the biro and quickly sat up. After the room stopped spinning, he removed it from his cast and disassembled it in order to use it as a lock pick. It wouldn't work on the door to his room since that had a keypad, but he wouldn't be in this room forever. They would be taking him away later that afternoon to the auction and maybe he’d have a chance to use it then. Anyway, he was in no shape to do anything physical at the moment and needed more rest. Closing his eyes, he quickly went back to sleep.

After what seemed only a few moments but he knew was hours later, the door opened, waking John. Surprisingly, he felt almost normal and his head didn’t hurt any longer. The open door revealed his usual guard waiting outside and an orderly with his breakfast. She was also carrying a package with the new clothes that Wood had promised him. Seeing the parcel reminded him of what was to happen in just a few short hours and his spirits plummeted. They were going to try to sell him to some alpha sentinel if he couldn’t find a way to escape. His and Sherlock’s spirit animals had said that Sherlock was meant to find a way to take him back and John wanted to believe with all his heart that the alpha would succeed. Trust was always hard for John and he trusted the alpha but unless Sherlock came for him in the next few hours, chances were good they’d never see each other again. Murphy had security on alert to keep Sherlock from the auction, though John suddenly remembered that Sherlock was good with disguises. Maybe Sherlock was planning to disguise himself and get into the auction that way! But then what? Could he infiltrate the location and somehow break John out? The doctor could only hope but it all seemed so impossible.

The depression that thought induced nearly choked John. Anger and defiance immediately flared to life, though. He wasn’t going to allow an auction to happen again and was determined that he would fight and die fighting if that’s what it took. When John had told Sherlock he couldn’t live without him, he’d meant it. Right now, though, the Bureau thought John’s bond was broken and that he was under Wood’s control. John would do nothing to change that opinion until he was in a position to act. His lips twitched in amusement as he wondered when and if they’d realise he’d given them a fake name and what they might do when they discovered it.

Suddenly John remembered the kind sentinel who’d carried him back to his room and realised with horror that he’d outed Sherlock’s alpha sentinel status to him and even worse, that he still had a bond! Had the man even understood what he’d said? John could barely remember. Maybe he thought John was just fantasising about having an alpha sentinel already. At least John hoped so.
The sentinel had admired John and had promised to win him in the auction. The thought made John feel ill and a wave of despair hit but there was nothing for it.

Even though he was starving, John ignored the food and opened the package sent by the Bureau. Going through the clothes that had been delivered, he wondered what they’d been thinking. He’d much rather wear his jeans, shirt and jumper but now there was blood from his nose all down the front of his jumper. Also, he’d just slept in them. There were new shirts, trousers, socks and pants and also a pair of shoes. None of them were to his taste and none fit properly, especially the shoes. His trainers were of black leather and though they were rather worn, he’d just continue to wear them instead of the ridiculous dress shoes they’d provided.

John sorted out a pair of black wool trousers and a dark blue, long sleeve cotton shirt that were the least objectionable of all the other things. The shirt was snug across the shoulders and arms more than he liked and the trousers were tight in the thighs but loose in the waist. When the orderly came back, she took the clothes he’d rejected away along with the untouched tray.

Despite having slept the night, he still felt like he’d been dragged through a hedge backward and so went to the bed to lie down. He wanted to spend some time trying to heal the bond and it was important to try to rest as the afternoon was going to be hell. Something told him that spending time healing the bond was not time wasted, so he settled himself comfortably on the bed and withdrew into his mind to search out and try to mend his bond. It amazed him that he’d become comfortable with his own mental landscape so quickly and he was able to find and locate the bond straight away. It seemed better than it had a few hours before, though it still looked pitiful. The section of his mind that Wood had ravaged needed healing, too, though he wasn’t sure how to do that. He guessed it would heal itself over time and that wasn’t as critical as the bond. His decoy bond had completely disappeared and the door to his nightmare room, though dented, was intact, so he focused on his healing.

Until then, he’d not had the time to really examine the link thoroughly but did so now. John's breath caught at how close he'd come to losing it. In some places the filaments that constructed the bond had been reduced to only tiny strands that couldn't possibly contain the life force pulsing through them, but somehow they continued to work and were visibly strengthening under his regard. In his own mind, he had a body of sorts, just as he had in the spirit world, so he took the bond into his hands and searched for further injury, just as he would do with a patient. He was dismayed to find more damage but like the more visible areas, he could feel them begin to regenerate with his touch. The more time he spent with it, the faster it seemed to be healing, so he focused everything on recreating what he’d build with Sherlock. Thinking about the alpha sentinel seemed to infuse more strength into the bond and John guessed it was coming from Sherlock directly somehow.

Time had no meaning but at some point, he became aware of what was happening in the room whilst he was still mainly focused on healing the bond. There were people in the room with him but something told him they wouldn’t hurt him so he stayed with his bond but allowed himself to listen in.

“…looks so bad. Isn’t there anything more you can do for him?” John recognised the voice of the kind alpha sentinel who had carried him to his room.

“I’m sorry, Mr Hammond. Only time will heal this. I’ve seen much worse, to be honest. I don’t know what that horrible man does to these latents but it’s never good.”

“How is Terry doing, by the way? Does anyone know what happened to him?” Even though he was asking, the sentinel’s tone was hard, indicated that he didn’t seem particularly worried about Wood or was angry with him.
Dr Moore sighed. “He’s comatose right now. We don’t know what happened and we’ll only be able to know once he’s awake again. I know it’s not my place to guess, but I think he bit off more than he could chew with this one.”

John heard that lovely, deep chuckle again and nearly smiled. “I believe you are correct, Dr Moore. William here has some hidden depths to him. On the one hand I’m very sorry he was hurt but at the same time very glad that all the others finally saw how dreadfully Terry treats latents. It’s been agreed that he won’t be allowed around them any longer. Murphy was reluctant to go along but he can’t stand against all of us. His power base is too shallow at the moment. He’s consolidating though.” The alpha sentinel—Hammond’s voice was bitter.

Surprised, John moved more of his attention to the conversation as Dr Moore’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You shouldn’t say things like that around here. You never know who’s listening. Murphy is very popular with everyone and he’s getting the things done that he promised. The corruption has been rooted out and he’s bringing prosperity back.”

“I’m not worried. He can’t do anything to me. Yes, he got rid of the other Director and his toadies but he’s replaced them with his own and they’re all just as corrupt. We need a new start with someone who has a fresh outlook.”

“But who do you have in mind? I wouldn’t wish the job of Directing the Bureau on anyone!”

“I don’t know yet but I have some ideas. I have someone on the inside who is giving me information that we might be able to use against Murphy. We just have to get through the next round of government investigations and see what they uncover first. Murphy is completely distracted with William and getting him to auction right now, which is all to the good. The money he expects the auction to bring him will help him consolidate his power base and allow him to implement his next stage of reorganisation. I’ve got operatives searching his office and home for evidence now.”

“It’s crazy that you’re participating in this whole disaster, Keith. You’re putting yourself at risk by doing this. I don’t know what to think sometimes.”

“You’re right. But a revolution needs to start somewhere and I suspect we’ll have much more support than we think if we can reveal what Murphy has really been up to and get proof of the things he’s done. The situation is at a crossroads right now. We may fail to uncover what we need and Murphy may well win this round. If he does, we’ll just have to be alert for our next possibility. In the meantime, I’ve got to go. The auction will be held shortly and I have things to do before I get there. I think Murphy would have security throw me out if he could, but the Law says no alpha sentinel can be kept from the auction of an omega guide.”

“All right, Keith. Good luck.”

“Thank you, Daryl. Keep William safe for me, please. He’s going to be mine if I have to bankrupt myself and I want him well protected.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.” Both voices faded as they closed the door and John was left with the shock of what they’d revealed. Apparently there was the possibility of a revolt in the sentinel community led by an alpha sentinel. That thought was amazing and he hoped it worked. Hammond seemed like a decent person though John wasn’t sure he trusted his empathy anymore to tell him the truth at that point because biology was working against him. The man was almost as attractive to him as Sherlock and he felt a pang of guilt at that thought. Sherlock was his and they were perfect for one another. There could be no one else, no matter how good they smelled.

As John thought about Hammond, he felt a strange throb in his lower abdomen and suddenly began
to worry. A heat could be brought on early by two alphas competing for one omega. It was an evolutionary throwback to primal times and the excitement and adrenalin of watching a fight, sometimes to the death, between two feral alphas was what brought on the heat for the omega, making them receptive and fertile to the winner. Even though nobody was feral at the moment, it was clear as day that Hammond wanted John for himself and so did Sherlock, which could be translated as conflict to his primal self and with John’s luck his biology would interpret it that way. Christ, that’s all he needed right now on top of everything else.

He had other things to worry about at the moment. From what Hammond had said, it was nearly time for the auction. Getting up from the bed, he took a shower and dressed himself in the ill fitting clothing. As he carefully shaved and combed his hair, he checked himself in the mirror and was surprised to see that he didn’t look too bad and though he still had marks on his face from Moriarty’s fingernails they were healing nicely.

One good thing was that John was feeling much better and spent some time loosening his stiff muscles whilst he waited. He needed to be ready to move at a moment’s notice. Reminding himself to stay alert and to pretend to be obedient to all orders, John knew he was as ready as he’d ever be. It was time.

TBC
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

**Warning for sentinel/guide bonding --sexy stuff ahead!**

Oh, fluff warning ahead, too. :-)

Patiently, John waited and shortly sensed activity outside his room. It was time to go. Dressed in the clothes they’d given him, John stood up, his mouth dry with fear as the door opened. Guards with drawn tasers came into the room but they seemed more relaxed than previously, so apparently they thought he was under Wood’s control. One of the guards approached with only wrist shackles similar to the ones he’d worn the other day. John’s hands shook as they were fastened and he saw what seemed to be a look of sympathy cross the face of the guard.

Once he was shackled, they led him out of the room, into a lift and then an underground car park. A van awaited them and John was put alone into the back and strapped securely into his seat. Two guards accompanied him but they sat in front. It was difficult to see where they were going but the seats in front of him hid his hands so as soon as they began to move, he pulled out the biro pieces and, with his right hand, got to work on the shackle around the cast on his left wrist. Most of the work had to be done by feel as it was late in the day and the light was dim. John worked diligently, all the time waiting and hoping there might be a rescue attempt from his alpha but none came. After a time, his heart leapt as he heard the very faint click of the lock and the shackle loosened. Transferring the pick to his left hand, he struggled to open the other manacle but the movement of his fingers and wrist were restricted by the cast and he wasn’t able to open the cuff before they pulled to a stop and the guards got out of the van. Hope and then huge disappointment filled him as the side door opened. John saw they were in another underground car park and no one resembling Sherlock was in sight.

Clasping his right hand over his left wrist to prevent the guards from noticing one hand was now free, John allowed the guards to remove the seatbelt and awkwardly help him to the door of the van. Mind racing, John couldn’t decide what he was to do as his stomach churned in distress. There were only two guards. He could easily overcome them both and find a way out of the car park. But just as he thought that, something told him to wait. The time wasn’t right yet but would be soon. His instincts proved to be correct as he stepped out of the vehicle and encountered a large contingent of guards surrounding the van, giving him virtually no chance of running. Apparently, despite Wood’s assurance that John was compliant, the Bureau was taking no chances. He shivered as he stood beside the vehicle and not just from the cold evening air. At least none of the guards had tasers out as they escorted him to a lift. Only four could get in the lift with him, so that was something. John could handle four men on a good day but he wasn’t exactly at his best. Unfortunately, more men were waiting for them once they exited the lift.

Dragging his feet, John’s anxiety ratcheted up and his eyes darted everywhere, looking for an escape but could find nothing. His instincts kept telling him to wait and he forced himself to calm. The building they were in was old with considerable renovations, however and they moved through a rabbit warren of hallways. Finally they came to an area John immediately recognised as the backstage of an old theatre. The building they were in was somewhat intimate in size but must have been renovated specifically for latent guide auctions. For once it appeared that the Bureau had spared
Looking around, John could see the original structures still existed beneath the new trappings. The old catwalks and stairways could easily be seen overhead where the stage backdrops had been hung or where the lights were still attached above. John guessed they were all now manipulated by computer program rather than by hand. Rows and rows of ropes and levers were barely visible behind layers of curtains, running up the unpainted brick of a back wall and John wondered if the curtains were still worked by hand or if the ropes were just for show. He did catch sight of some rickety looking wrought iron stairways leading steeply upward, probably connecting to the network of catwalks and spot lights high above the stage and running out across the entire theatre.

As they stopped in the wings of the stage, John could see the seating area and it was packed full of people. However, the front row was roped off and no one was seated there, even though there appeared to be standing room only everywhere else. The audience was applauding as some poor latent was being led away in chains, just having been auctioned off. Her eyes were empty and she radiated such extreme terror and despair that it felt to John as if he’d been slapped in the face.

Rage at the emotional insensitivity of a group of people who were meant to be the most physically sensitive humans on earth continuously bewildered John. The cognitive dissonance was astounding to him but then that was the sentinel culture and none of them thought to question it. Still, he was angry and had to close his eyes and breathe deeply in order to control himself. His inner voice kept telling him that he had to continue playing the part of the obedient omega guide and wait, though he was practically vibrating with nerves.

Then the auctioneer's voice again rang out over the crowd and he was easily heard since the acoustics of the place were perfect.

"Congratulations to another lucky sentinel. May you and your new guide find happiness and fulfilment in your bond.

"Finally, we have reached the high point of the evening where we will be offering for sale a special item, an exceptionally strong guide! But sentinel ladies and gentlemen, don’t get your hopes up! The only ones who are going to be allowed to bid on this latent omega guide are Great Britain’s national treasures, our six alpha sentinels! And they are all here tonight!"

At the announcement that the alpha sentinels would attend, there were loud cheers as well as whistles and cat calls from the audience, but they were mostly good natured. It seemed everyone was aware ahead of time that John would not be offered to the average sentinel but all of them were ready to watch a good show and see with their own eyes the six well-known and celebrated UK alpha sentinels face off against each other to try to win an omega guide. It was better than reality telly and it made John sick to his stomach.

Just then a well dressed female beta approached quickly, carrying a kit with her. She addressed the guards with irritation. “You there! Guards! Bring him over here right now. We have to hide these bruises and cuts. This whole damn circus is now going to be televised.”

The guards pushed John into a small, well lit room off to one side that had probably been a dressing room at one time. The woman roughly grabbed John by his chin and then set about applying makeup to the cuts left by Moriarty’s fingernails. They had been healing well but apparently were still too easy to see.

John hadn’t thought his nausea could get any worse, but at the woman’s announcement that the auction was going to be on telly, his stomach burned and his knees wanted to collapse. His humiliation was going to be broadcast to who knew how many people. It took all his strength to lock
them and keep his expression impassive. The only positive thing about the situation was that they
didn’t have a collar on him like the previous auction. He eyed the guards but they were hyper
vigilant with him and he couldn’t make a move without being tased.

As she worked on him, John could hear the roar of the crowd. Apparently the alpha sentinels had
arrived and the auctioneer was introducing each one individually. Backstage, John couldn’t
understand what was being said, but he knew that some of the alpha sentinels were major celebrities
and quite beloved by even the general, non-sentinel population. Some had their own reality shows
featuring their privileged lifestyles and their multiple omega households. Every alpha in Britain
wanted to be an alpha sentinel and every omega wanted to belong to one. Until he’d met Sherlock,
John hadn’t seen the appeal.

Finally the woman working on him was satisfied with his appearance. She'd even covered the tattoo
on his ear but before she forced him out of the room and back to the stage area, she tsked and
unfastened the top two buttons of John’s shirt, exposing some of his chest. It irritated him and he
frowned at her but there was nothing he could do. The guards then took him by his arms and walked
him out to the side of the stage to apparently await his introduction.

The auctioneer was certainly a consummate showman and he stood in the middle of the stage and
gestured dramatically out to the audience.

“Now we have a special treat for all of you and what you’ve been waiting for all afternoon. Sadly,
everyone here must certainly recall last month when we all grieved the loss of latent omega guide
William Larssen when he leapt into the Thames as he was confronted by our own Bureau Director
Murphy.” The crowd went silent since apparently the death of an omega guide, even a latent, was a
very solemn thing. The auctioneer paused for effect and then continued.

“But I’ve got great news for you! William somehow survived and he’s here this evening, ready to be
auctioned off to one of our six alpha sentinels! Soon he’ll be properly bonded and bred, joining a
new household and happily bringing more sentinel and guides into the world. Let me introduce you
to latent omega guide William Larssen! Give him a big official welcome to London’s sentinel and
guide community!”

It seemed they had figured out that John had lied to Wood and knew the name he’d given the guide
was false. The guards had John firmly by the arms but the omega walked under his own power to
the stage. Once they stopped, John stood at military attention with his head up, defiantly facing the
wildly applauding audience with a scowl. The spot lights moved to shine down on him and blazed
into his eyes so that he had to squint and turn his head aside as the sentinels roared their approval.

Suddenly all his fear disappeared and his anger flared instead. When the lights moved back to the
auctioneer, John looked down at the alpha sentinels with a sneer to see six overly entitled men and
women whose only talent had been the good fortune to be born an alpha sentinel. He recognised
most of them from the telly and newspapers and realised they’d all been in the room behind the glass
to witness the bond breaking. They’d belatedly come to his rescue when they’d realised exactly
what Wood had been doing to him but he still hated them all. Even though he’d pulled his empathy
in and shored up his shields, John could still feel their desire for him and it made him ill. Then his
eyes found the one who had been so kind to him and he blinked in confusion.

Keith Hammond was much better looking than John had remembered and he was smiling at John
proudly and possessively. Mouth suddenly dry as his eyes locked with the man’s, John gulped and
had to force his eyes away so he wouldn’t stare. The effect Hammond had on John reminded him of
Sherlock and the pain and grief that went through him at the thought of the other alpha almost
overwhelmed him. John was suddenly hit by waves of hopelessness but he pushed them away. He
knew, deep down, that Sherlock would come for him and together they’d find a way out of this mess before it went too far. Something in his expression must have shown some of what he was feeling because the Hammond’s face changed and he looked concerned. John hated that the man appeared to be so tuned into him. That should be Sherlock’s place and not some stranger, no matter how nice he smelled. The man had been kind but he was not John’s alpha and never would be.

The auctioneer was turning toward John and this brought the omega out of his distracted state. John could tell the man was going to say something to elicit a response from him. He was more than willing to oblige and the auctioneer probably wouldn’t like what he got.

“So, William! How do you feel about being here today, knowing you’re about to join the household of one of our national treasures?”

Staring incredulously at the idiotic man, John could only shake his head disbelievingly whilst the guards tightened their grip on him.

“How do I feel? Are you mental or just stupid?” He held up his bound hands. “Does this look like I’m happy to be here? I’m a fucking prisoner, you wanker! Here to be auctioned off like livestock! How do you think I feel?” Vibrating with rage, John shrugged off the two guards, who finally let go and stood back.

For a moment there was a shocked silence and then the audience tittered at the expense of the auctioneer. If looks could kill, John would have been incinerated when the man turned his glare on him. John scoffed openly and looked away only to have his eye caught again by Hammond, who was clapping and openly laughing whilst his companions in the front row just seemed confused. To John’s irritation, Hammond winked at him and grinned. It made John breathless and he hated himself for it.

The auctioneer continued to glare at John, who glared right back insolently. “Well, you should at least kneel and submit to your betters, omega. One of these six people will soon be your alpha sentinel and the sire of your children.”

The crowd cheered as most of the alpha sentinels stood and waved to the crowd. Strong alpha pheromones wafted toward the stage and John could feel his knees weaken but he locked them tight and lifted his head. They’d never get him to kneel. Only Sherlock deserved that honour from him.

The alphas who had stood to wave at the crowd turned and looked expectantly at John, who gave them a derisive snort. “Piss off. I’ll never kneel to the likes of you. Most of you are overly entitled twits who’ve never worked an honest day in your life and don’t deserve anything you’ve got.”

The audience laughed outright at John’s response and after a moment, most of the alpha sentinels laughed along with them, though John could tell some of them were angered by his defiance. He honestly didn’t care and decided that he would do something soon to end this debacle, despite what his instincts said and even if it meant he was tased unconscious for his efforts.

As the audience quietened down, the auctioneer turned toward them with a large, fake smile and nodded politely to the celebrities.

“Heh. Sorry about that! Well, as we all already know from the video on the bridge, William certainly has a colourful vocabulary. Now, if it pleases you, we will begin the auction.

“Alpha sentinel ladies and gentlemen, we have here a latent omega guide in his early thirties with many breeding years yet left in him. As you can see, William is stubborn and wilful, but bonding and a few weeks of discipline training should take care of that. He’s also a very strong guide but
completely untrained and not currently capable of much. Limited guide training is recommended to whoever should win him.

“Now, the opening bid is £100,000. Do I have a bidder?” The handsome alpha raised his hand immediately. “Very good, sir. That’s £100,000 from Keith Hammond. Do I have another…?”

Before the auctioneer could continue, there was a noisy disturbance at the back of the theatre. People turned in their seats to see the doors at the rear of the house slam open and a very irate person stalk through with a loudly complaining beta trying to stop him. Security began to head their way as the tall stranger completely ignored the usher and entered the theatre with an arrogant stride. He was dressed in a black, bespoke suit with a dark coat swirling dramatically around him as he easily outpaced the theatre’s protesting employee on his way down the aisle to the stage. John’s heart leapt into his throat and he felt as if he was going to faint. He’d been right to trust his instincts, just as the badger had said. Sherlock had come!

The deep baritone rang out angrily, projecting throughout the entire hall easily and drowning out the whispers of surprise from the crowd. “Stop this ridiculous and illegal proceeding at once! You cannot auction off my guide. He was stolen from me by the Bureau. We have a soul bond and he is mine!”

The last statement came out as a powerful roar that startled everyone in the theatre. Just as Sherlock reached the stage, John’s knees buckled and he knelt to his alpha sentinel in an unmistakable display of utter submission and obedience. Sherlock looked magnificent, dark curls flying about his head, pale eyes flashing with a disdainful expression directed at everyone in sight. He was completely in command of the situation and John fell in love all over again.

Stunned silence reigned for a few moments and Sherlock spoke softly. “John. Get up now. We’re leaving this… place.”

John scrambled to obey but the guards were back holding tight to his arms and security had arrived behind Sherlock. How he’d avoided them in the first place, John didn’t know but he suspected he’d disguised himself until he could get inside. Then all the alpha sentinels were on their feet and talking over each other. The shocked reaction from the audience drowned out their voices as the auctioneer tried to calm the situation. Sherlock’s expression was wrathful as he shouted over all of them.

“Quiet! All of you! John is mine and I plan to take him.” Before Sherlock could continue, Director Murphy and Walter arrived and confronted the alpha.

"What the hell are you doing, Holmes? You have no say in this. You’re neither an alpha sentinel nor a member of the Bureau! Security, remove this man now!"

Before security could act, Sherlock’s voice rang out again. “On the contrary, Director.” The alpha’s tones dripped with derision and annoyance as he addressed Murphy. “I am indeed an alpha sentinel but I decided not to notify anyone of the fact until now. And if you’ll read this, as much as I loathe admitting it, you’ll see that I’m now an actual card carrying member of the Bureau. Apparently, according to Sentinel Law, all alpha sentinels are automatically members, whether they wish it or not. And you cannot legally or morally keep me from this auction.”

Sherlock thrust a sheaf of papers at Murphy. As the Director flipped through them, the other alpha sentinels except Hammond, milled about in confusion, talking quietly as they waited for the outcome. John was absolutely flabbergasted and his heart just about pounded out of his chest. Sherlock had just revealed what he was to everyone and their brother without a qualm. And he’d done it all for
John. He wanted to be furious at the risk Sherlock was taking but his inner omega was exultant.

Humbled and wishing he could go back on his knees to Sherlock, John also waited and watched Sherlock closely. The detective’s eyes bored into his, hinting at something John couldn’t decipher immediately. Throwing caution to the winds, he decided to use his empathy and mentally reached out to Sherlock. He quickly picked up a warning to be alert and ready to move at Sherlock’s sign. Nodding slightly, John let the alpha know he understood. As the adrenalin surged, John’s mind calmed and stillled, allowing him to enter into a hyper aware state where he could react instantly whilst he kept all his attention focussed on Sherlock.

The Director huffed in annoyance. “Well, this does look to be in order. You’re indeed an alpha sentinel and now a member of the Bureau.” Murphy glanced up at Sherlock with an expression of distaste. "It doesn’t mean you can just come in here and take him away, though. Whilst he was in our care, he was examined and indeed found to have a superficial bond but we broke it. There’s no proof it was yours, Holmes and no proof that it was a soul bond.”

John spoke up angrily before Sherlock could even open his mouth. “You lying bastard! You knew it was a soul bond and you had it confirmed by your own guide right before you drugged us both and then ordered it broken!”

Livid, Murphy narrowed his eyes at John, promising all kinds of trouble. “As I said, you cannot prove any of this. Your bond was superficial and would have faded with time anyway. We just accelerated the process.”

Laughing bitterly, John shook his head. “Well, I’ve got news for you mate! Your precious super-guide failed and whilst he damaged my bond with Sherlock, he didn’t destroy it. I was able to protect it in the end from your pet psychopath. An untrained latent bested your strongest, trained guide. Pretty funny, that.”

Murphy’s mouth opened and closed in astonishment and then his expression turned wrathful. Out of the corner of his eye, John saw Hammond gesture to a tall, thickset woman with dark hair and waited to see what was going to happen. She came forward and stood beside Hammond as Sherlock’s stared daggers at Murphy.

Hammond interrupted. “My guide can determine if William—rather John—still has a bond and if it belongs to this alpha sentinel. Will you allow this? I say we should find out the truth.”

“We all saw the bond broken by Wood, Keith! The omega is lying. What’s the point? Let’s get on with the auction!” One of the other alpha sentinels looked impatient, clearly wanting none of the drama.

Hammond spoke sternly. “I also thought I saw the bond broken by Wood, but I’m beginning to doubt that, now. It will only take a few moments to determine the truth of the matter. Lori, please check for the bond.” The woman mounted the stairs by the stage and no one tried to stop her, though Murphy’s face was red with rage and Walter looked pale as a ghost. Lori walked steadily across the stage to John and nodded politely.

“Please lower your shields, Guide. I will search for the bond.”

John glanced quickly at Sherlock who nodded with a serious expression. Taking a deep breath, John closed his eyes and tried to relax his shields. It made him feel naked and anxious, especially around so many unbonded sentinels. But then Lori touched him and he flinched before he realised he’d expected it to hurt like it had with Wood. Somehow, Lori understood what had caused the pain before and made a point of letting him know that it didn’t have to be that way. In fact, Lori was
exquisitely careful with John and the omega could tell that she shared the same reverence for other people’s minds that John did. It seemed that Wood was unusual as a guide and John sensed a feeling of outrage from Lori at what Wood had tried to do to him. She’d been in the room with the others and had seen it first hand.

Then Lori was inside John’s mind, searching for the bond. Anxiously, John led her to it and then moved away so she could examine it. To John’s inner eye, the bond had healed well and though it was a fraction of what it was before Wood had ravaged it, the bond now glowed gorgeous colours again and pulsed with his and Sherlock’s matching heartbeats. He could only imagine the beauty of it once they’d had a chance to complete it. John could feel Lori’s awe and admiration for it but then they were done and she left his mind, allowing John to raise his shields again. Feeling greatly relieved to have his mental walls back up, John watched as she turned toward Hammond with a sigh and a tender smile.

“He does indeed have a soul bond with alpha sentinel Holmes. Also, I can see that it was badly damaged but is healing well. It’s growing strong and is absolutely beautiful. They are ready for a permanent bond.”

A murmur of awe and then concern swept through the crowd at the announcement. Clearly they agreed that a soul bond was something that should be preserved and the fact that the Director had ordered it broken was serious. Murphy’s mouth tightened in anger and he looked as if he’d just sucked on a lemon.

One of the other alpha sentinels stepped forward. “You say it’s a soul bond. But that’s only a preliminary link at best. Have they consummated their bond physically?”

Lori shot a regretful look at John and reluctantly shook his head. “No, not yet. But they are more than ready for it.”

One of the alpha sentinels waved an arm toward John impatiently. “I say we continue with the auction! Holmes here can bid for the omega guide along with the rest of us.” He turned to his fellow alpha sentinels for their opinions and they nodded and agreed loudly. All but one.

Keith Hammond spoke with concern as he helped his guide down from the stage. “As much as I wanted to win this omega guide for myself, a soul bond is rare and precious. It means that John and Mr Holmes are totally compatible. It’s immoral to break it and as you all saw it causes considerable psychic pain to even attempt it. I’d rather not do that to him again. I say we should let him go so that he may join properly with his chosen sentinel.”

Murphy shook his head angrily. “No, you can’t do that! The auction will continue and Holmes can bid along with the rest of you! If he loses, then we’ll get Wood to break the bond afterwards, as alpha sentinel Buchanan suggested.”

Hammond’s mouth tightened in anger. “I think you forget that Guide Wood is comatose because of what happened when he tried to erase memories from John yesterday. And he was ordered to erase those memories by you, Director Murphy. Am I correct, John?”

The crowd gasped collectively as they heard Hammond accuse the Director of a rather heinous crime. John shook off the guards and again, they surprisingly let him go.

“Director Murphy ordered my bond with Sherlock be broken even though he knew it was a soul bond. You all now know this is true and that Murphy is a bloody liar.”
Resolute, John continued. “And yes, Murphy also told Wood to erase the memories of something I’d witnessed in his conference room when Sherlock and I went there to beg him to allow us to stay together. As you know, he flatly refused and drugged us both, stealing me away from my sentinel. What you don’t know is that I also heard Murphy admit he was involved in taking money for the distribution of AG and was deeply involved in James Moriarty’s criminal activities. He also threatened to arrange an ‘accident’ for my sentinel if I ever told anyone!”

Murphy paled as John announced what he’d witnessed in front of everyone and Walter looked as if he were going to be ill. John couldn’t help a smirk from appearing on his face as the Director realised just what John had done to him.

It seemed there was a huge intake of breath from the entire audience and then there were yells of anger and outrage. A man near the front stood and shook his fist. “My brother was nearly killed by AG! I supported you when you wanted to take over the Bureau! You swore to us all you weren’t involved and that you’d rooted out the corruption! You owe us the truth!”

“Wait! I can explain everything! You’ll take the word of an omega over mine? Think what you’re saying!” The crowd calmed somewhat but John could tell they were still angry. “Let’s get the auction over with and I’ll explain everything. Please! Give me a chance! After all I’ve done for you, you owe me that much!” People still muttered but relented and Murphy turned toward Sherlock with a scowl.

“Like I said, Holmes. You can bid against the other alpha sentinels for this guide or I can get security to escort you from the theatre. I leave the decision up to you.”

Sniffing haughtily, Sherlock responded loudly. “You’re a disgusting criminal, Murphy. There is evidence to prove it and everyone in this theatre will know soon what you really are. But right now, I’ll take my guide. John belongs to me and none of you can have him.”

With that, Sherlock whipped away from Murphy and threw something at John, who automatically caught it. It was a handcuff key and John reacted immediately. One wrist was already free so John quickly freed his other hand from the cuff. As the two guards gaped in surprise, the doctor hooked a foot behind the knee of one of them and he went down with a crash. The other guard looked stunned by what had happened but reacted when the cuffs fell to the floor by taking a swing at John’s head.

Heart racing and adrenalin pumping, John was able to read the man’s move to block it, then used the guard’s own momentum to send him flying off the edge of the stage and into the group of alpha sentinels, most of whom shrieked and scattered. Hammond was the only one watching John and was alert enough to move out of the way in time. The audience members cried out in fear and dismay whilst John knelt at the edge of the stage and reached out his hand.

“Sherlock! Up here!” The alpha moved to take John’s hand when Director Murphy grabbed him and pulled Sherlock off balance. Furious, John rose to launch himself onto the Director when Hammond blocked Murphy and gave Sherlock a push toward John. Hammond struggled with Murphy and shouted at Sherlock.

“Get John out of here and take proper care of him!” Wasting no time, the detective leapt forward out of Murphy’s grip, grabbed John’s hand and vaulted onto the stage whilst Hammond held onto the struggling Director. The auctioneer, who had frozen when the fighting started, gave a small squeal as Sherlock towered over him and then scurried away.

“This way, John!” Pulling the willing omega after him, Sherlock dashed toward the wings of the stage. Glancing back briefly, John saw Murphy had escaped from Hammond and was trying to scramble onto the platform. Once again, John caught Hammond’s eye. The man shrugged with a
wry, regretful expression and then Sherlock dragged John out of sight. Hammond had clearly given up any attempt to claim John as his. Profoundly relieved that there would be no conflict between the two alpha sentinels, John focused on following his true mate.

Immediately Sherlock headed toward the wrought iron stairs leading up and onto the catwalks above the theatre. John followed but wondered what the bloody hell his alpha was intending to do. As they pelted up two flights of the rickety structure, John glanced down and saw a large group of guards pounding up the stairs after them. There were stairs also on the opposite side of the stage that a couple of guards had found and they had reached the catwalks just below John and Sherlock.

Sherlock saw them too and increased his pace, making John work hard to keep up as the omega wondered again just where the alpha thought they were going to escape to. They reached the upper storeys of the building and this time when John quickly looked down, he could see the audience pointing up at them. The guards were just below them and catching them up. Shouting from the enforcers as well as loud gasps and cries of alarm could be heard from the crowd of people who apparently were expecting to see them fall. John wasn’t so sure they weren’t correct because the platform they were on had not been restored and hadn’t been meant for people to use any longer. It creaked and swayed with their weight and the boards cracked under their feet.

Sherlock was running along the catwalk when John saw his spirit animal appear a few meters in front of the alpha. Immediately, John grabbed Sherlock’s coat and pulled him sharply back.

“Sherlock, stop! Don’t you see the badger? He’s right in front of you!” Panting hard, Sherlock stopped and looked around but clearly didn’t see the animal. He started forward again on the catwalk but John grabbed him by the arm.

“We can’t go there, it’s not safe! Come on, this way!” John swung over the edge of the catwalk and jumped lightly down onto another that was slightly below and oriented perpendicular to theirs. Sherlock followed and then took the lead again, heading upward and toward the centre of the building. John looked behind him to see the Bureau enforcers running along the same catwalk he and Sherlock had abandoned and watched in horror as the wood cracked and splintered beneath their feet.

One of the guards fell and the crowd screamed in terror as the man barely managed to catch himself on the catwalk where John and Sherlock were standing. It was clear he wasn’t going to be able to hold on though, and his partners couldn’t reach him. Damning himself for a fool, John reversed course and ran back to where the terrified enforcer was dangling. Reaching down, John grabbed the man’s sleeve and pulled. The strained muscles in his back reminded him of what he’d done to them just a few days before and John despaired as he caught the frightened eyes of the man whose life he was trying to save. Then Sherlock was beside him and between the two of them, they pulled the man to safety.

The crowd cheered them as they stood and ran, leaving the guard panting on the catwalk. He was in no shape to follow and his fellow guards were blocked by the broken catwalk from coming after them immediately. Sherlock took them further up near the ceiling and when they reached the centre of the walk, an appalled John watched Sherlock swing his long legs over the railing and balance on top of a wooden strut that supported the roof. The crowd below renewed its cries of amazement and fear at the risk he was taking with his life as he moved easily along the beam toward the wall. Grinning wildly, John jumped over the railing and sure-footed as a mountain goat, followed behind his madman at a run. Sherlock glance behind him and gave John a smirk as they reached the wall.

To John’s surprise, a window was hidden behind one of the support beams. It had been painted black but was still functional. John pressed up close behind Sherlock and looked back the way
they’d come. The guards were gaining but it seemed they didn’t want to chance the thin wooden beam and were dithering about moving forward. John turned his attention back to Sherlock.

“I studied this building’s blueprints once I learnt the auction was to be held here. This window has access to the roof and from there we can escape. Help me with this, please.” Turning away from the sight of the guards, John did his best to help the alpha push open the rusty window. It took some doing but they managed and were outside on the roof in a moment. John shut the window behind him but there was no way to latch it from the outside.

It was still early evening but the temperature had dropped severely. John shivered as he looked around at the amazing view of the city but Sherlock noticed immediately. He took off his overcoat, removed his suit jacket and held it out for John to slip into. Gratefully, John did so whilst Sherlock put his coat back on and then moved out across the roof and to the edge of the building.

“The plans I accessed indicated there was a…yes, here it is. Come along, John.” The alpha didn’t even look behind to see if John was following but hopped over the edge of the roof and disappeared. His heart in his throat, John rushed over to see the alpha landing like a cat on a fire escape about ten feet below. Sherlock looked up at John and tilted his head in puzzlement.

“Well, what are you waiting for, John? Let’s go.”

Relief making his voice rough, John sagged against the wall and shouted down at his alpha. “Jesus H. Christ on a crutch, Sherlock! Warn a bloke next time, will you, mate? Give me a minute. I’m not built like a sodding giraffe, unlike some people.”

Worried that his wrist would give him trouble, John swung his legs over and lowered his body over the edge, holding his weight on his elbows. Sherlock reached up and caught his legs and then helped him down so that he didn’t have to put any weight on his broken wrist. Taking in a huge breath in relief, John turned to Sherlock, looking up at him expectantly. “Now what, luv?”

Sherlock gave him a mischievous grin that lit up his entire face. “Now we run! Follow me!”

Turning, the alpha dashed down the fire escape and then leapt across the alley to the roof of the next building, two storeys lower than the theatre’s roof. He then sped across that roof and jumped the gap to another building. John was right behind him every step of the way, running easily, his healing leg surprisingly giving him little trouble. Before they could get too far away, John heard a shout behind them and looked back to see the guards and Director Murphy still on the theatre rooftop, pointing at them. Sherlock laughed and kept running whilst John followed behind.

Dashing across the rooftops of London with Sherlock, trying to escape the representatives of the Bureau, was one of the most exhilarating things John had ever done in a very exciting lifetime. The presence of his alpha leading the way was a large part of what made his heart race in joy as they madly pelted over roofs, through abandoned buildings, down stairs, up fire escapes, and narrowly managed to avoid dashing their brains out as they navigated miles of night time London rooftops.

Finally, they both had to rest and by mutual agreement, stopped on the rooftop of an abandoned building surrounded by higher building on three sides, making it very difficult to be seen. John closed his eyes, placed his back against one of the brick walls and slid down to sit, breathing fast and deep as his heart raced from the unaccustomed exercise. Sherlock sat down next to him, also breathing heavily. The alpha’s warmth was welcome and John slid over and pressed his shoulder to Sherlock’s to take advantage of the impromptu wind block. As John finally caught his breath and his heart calmed, he turned to Sherlock with a grin.

“Did we lose them, luv?” At times throughout the night, John had caught glimpses of their pursuers.
Some of the people tracking them were sentinels, after all and there was a chance their hunters might catch them up if they rested for too long. John had no idea where they were going but he trusted that Sherlock must have some destination in mind.

“I’ll have to check. Can you ground me?” It was the first time Sherlock had asked John for such a thing and he was stunned and honoured at the same time.

“Of course, luv. Just tell me what to do.” John shifted so that he was facing the detective.

“Just watch over me with your empathy and if I seem to get lost or unfocused, just touch me and I should come back quickly.”

Thinking about it for a moment, the request dredged up something that he’d learnt from Wood but hadn’t had time to process yet. “I think I understand. Okay, go ahead.” John sent his empathy toward Sherlock and envisioned a protective shield about the detective as Sherlock sent his hearing out to listen for pursuers. After a few minutes, Sherlock came back to himself.

“I don’t hear anything nearby other than normal noises I would associate with the city. I don’t want to say we’ve lost them completely, but I think we have the time to rest for now.”

Grinning widely, John nudged Sherlock’s shoulder with his own. “You are incredible, Sherlock. The whole rescue and escape thing. Very dramatic, that. The Bureau should have some great footage if they ever dare to show it. I have to say that you are absolutely amazing and I can’t thank you enough for getting me out of there. I just hope you’ve not brought a heap of trouble on yourself with the Bureau by taking me away. How did you get into the building? Murphy had security looking for you.”

Sherlock stared at John with a fascinated, fond smile on his own face. “I can’t say I was altogether altruistic in my motives for rescuing you, John. I got in dressed as one of the ushers. Mycroft found out that they were hiring temporary workers and got me in. Security was tight but he created the paperwork I needed. That beta discovered me just as I changed into my own clothes and alerted security, but too late. Frankly, I don’t care if the Bureau tries to cause trouble. You’re mine and have been since we met. They have no grounds to take you from me and once we’re bonded, they can’t do a damn thing to us.”

Giving Sherlock a satisfied smile, John had another question. “So, where are we going, luv? I hope it’s somewhere we can bond.”

Returning the smile, Sherlock nodded. “There’s a rather cheap, dingy flat that I rent for emergencies south of the river. I would prefer to take you to my flat at Baker Street to bond but that’s not going to be possible. That would be the first place they’d search for us. The second place they’d look is Mycroft’s house but I would never take you there to bond. I would be scarred for life!”

The expression of absolute disgust on Sherlock’s face was priceless and John couldn’t help but start giggling. To be perfectly honest, John felt a bit hysterical but it was very good to be able to laugh. His giggles turned in to a loud snorting laugh and he nudged Sherlock in the ribs with his elbow. After a few seconds, Sherlock’s deep chuckles joined John’s laughter and the alpha threw an arm around him. As they slowly calmed down, the omega snuggled into the embrace and gazed up adoringly at Sherlock with another huge grin.

The alpha stared down at John, with a wide smirk to match. Slowly Sherlock’s smile faded and he reached over with his hand to trace John’s lips with a gentle finger, his face full of wonder and fascination.
“The first time I saw this smile, you called me amazing. But you are the amazing one. I’d never seen such a brilliant expression and when I first saw it, I felt dazed, as if I’d been struck by lightning. I knew then I was lost and that I would do anything to see you smile like that at me again. I hope that I’ll be able to give you lots of reasons to smile in the years to come, though I’m very certain there will be many times when you’ll no doubt curse the day you met me.”

John knew his expression was probably totally daft and completely soppy but didn’t care. He certainly hoped his face showed all the love he felt for his alpha. His alpha sentinel. John could finally say it and believe it to be true.

“I knew you were something special the first time I saw you, too. I don’t know what it was about you, but I liked you and trusted you the instant I set eyes on you. It confused me because I’ve never trusted anyone the way I trust you, ever. But I wanted to be with you, even if only for a short time and I was willing to do anything to make it happen. I never dreamed you could ever want someone like me.”

Immediately, John was gathered into Sherlock’s embrace and held tightly. “How could any sane alpha sentinel not want you?” His deep voice turned dark. “I saw how Hammond looked at you and could smell how all the others wanted you as well. But they can’t have you. You’re mine!”

The possessive growl from Sherlock thrilled John’s inner omega to no end and he held onto Sherlock tighter, burying his face in the alpha’s neck and stroking Sherlock’s back soothingly.

“Yes, luv. I’m only yours. No one else can ever have me. I won’t let them.”

They sat embracing for some time whilst John crooned soothing nonsense to his sentinel. As they rested, the wind picked up and the temperature began to drop again. Despite being cuddled together, it became imperative that they move or they would freeze. Reluctantly, they climbed to their feet. Suddenly, Sherlock’s head went up like a dog catching a scent. John wrapped him with his shields as the sentinel listened intently for a few minutes.

“Damn! The Bureau is closer than I initially thought. It seems they’re close to surrounding this area a few streets out and though they’re still thin on the ground right now, I heard them calling for reinforcements. They’ve set up roadblocks and if they spot us, they have a good chance of catching us. If we wait much longer, I’m not sure we can just slip through. We need to get out of this immediate area and past the roadblocks. I was hoping to get us closer to the river before we tried to catch a cab to take us to the flat. I’m sorry to say, I’m not very familiar with this part of London. Let’s see where we are and then decide.”

Both of them moved to the front of the building’s roof and looked out onto the street. John was stunned when he realised that he knew just where they were. Two streets over was the Gibbet. Was Hairston still working there or was it under new management? Ever since he’d been betrayed by the barman, John hadn’t ever thought to go back, but now he had an idea.

“Sherlock, there’s a pub around the corner that’s a gathering place for mercenaries and former soldiers.”

The alpha huffed in disgust. “The same one where the pub landlord turned all your things over to Moriarty after you’d left them with him for safekeeping?”

Sighing, John continued, ignoring the interruption. “Yes, but you have to understand something. The men who frequent a place like the Gibbet are very insular and they protect their own. I’m one of theirs, despite what happened with Sam and Moriarty and they would never betray me to strangers, especially hunters from the Bureau.”
Not looking particularly convinced by John’s argument, Sherlock cut his eyes briefly at the omega and hummed. “What about me? I’ll be a stranger to them and I’m certainly not military by any stretch of the imagination.”

John grinned again at the alpha and watched as Sherlock’s stern features softened at the sight. “You’ll be with me, luv. They’ll accept you because I ask them to and they’ll protect us both until it’s safe to move on. As long as we can get there unseen, we should be safe as houses.”

Considering for a few moments, the alpha nodded. “I can get us there unseen. The hunters haven’t reached that area yet. Come, John.”

With that, Sherlock turned toward the trapdoor access to the roof and took them down into the abandoned building, out the back and into the alleyway. They made their way carefully across the filthy cobblestones of the alley, across dark streets and emerged behind the pub in record time. As far as John could tell, they’d not crossed the path of even one CCTV camera or any Bureau enforcers.

Before Sherlock could lead the way to the front of the establishment, John took his arm and pulled the alpha around to face him. “I need to be the one to go in first, Sherlock. Just follow my lead.”

Solemnly, Sherlock nodded. "Of course, John. I had no intention of doing otherwise."

John stood on his tip toes and gave the alpha a quick kiss on the lips with a quick swipe of his tongue as a promise of more. "Thanks for understanding. Now, to paraphrase somebody or other, once more unto the breach, my love."

Chuckling at Sherlock’s pained expression, John pulled open the door to the pub and was immediately hit by the sound, smell and heat of the place. It was normally rather close and dark in the Gibbet but tonight seemed especially so since it was at full capacity. Wondering why there were so many people there, John made his way through the crowd to the bar, closely trailed by Sherlock. As he pushed through, John became uncomfortably aware of the silence growing behind him. Once he got to the bar, people there stared at him and backed away, which allowed him to see Hairston hard at work. When the beta caught sight of John, though, the blood drained from the man's face and he looked as if he was going to faint.

Gaping at John, Hairston limped over to stand in front of him and John felt Sherlock put hand at the small of his back in a show of support. Nodding to the barman, John spoke, keeping his tone neutral.

“Hello, Sam. I hope you’ve been keeping well.”

Finally, Hairston closed his mouth and gulped before he replied. “William. I’d not thought I’d ever see you again, lad. I have to say I’m glad you survived.”

Over John’s shoulder, an irritated, deep voice replied to Hairston. “No thanks to you, I understand.” John glanced back at Sherlock and the detective shut up, though he moved closer and put his arm possessively around the omega’s waist.

Sighing in exasperation, John turned back to the now shame-faced bartender. “Yes, I survived but I want your help. I figured you owe me.”

Nodding, the man removed his apron and moved from behind the bar as everyone watched. “Aye, you’re right, William. Come to my office. Wally, keep an eye on things, mate.”
They wove their way through the now silent crowd and followed Sam into the office. Conversation picked up as soon as they left the main area and John closed the door behind them. As he turned toward Sam he saw the man had retreated behind his desk and was sitting down, running his hands through his thinning hair. The man looked grey and ill, making John alarmed.

“Are you all right, Sam? You look terrible!” Hairston waved him away when he went to check on him but John got a bottle of water from the mini fridge in the room and made sure the man took a drink before Hairston explained.

“It’s just that it’s a shock to see you, lad. I’m honestly glad that you’re still alive. I don’t know how you survived that fall into the river, but since you did, I would have sworn Moran would have taken you out of the country by now. He told us all often enough what his plans for you were, the sick bastard. And I can’t tell you how very sorry I am that I had to turn your things over to Moriarty. Not only do I owe him money, but the madman threatened my Cora. I didn’t have a choice, William.”

The man stared at John, clearly begging the omega to believe him. Automatically, John’s empathy flowed out to determine how honest Hairston was being. It seemed the landlord was indeed ashamed of what had happened, but he felt he’d done what he needed to do in order to save his wife and business.

Reluctantly, John had to agree. “I understand, Sam. I was threatened by Moriarty, too and know just how frightening he was. But you do know he’s dead, right?”

Taking in a deep breath, Hairston nodded. “I heard a few days ago that he’d cracked his skull open and all his yobbos are scarpering like rats leaving a sinking ship. But he was the devil himself and if anyone could fake death, it would be him. I wasn’t sure I could trust what people were saying. I heard tell the Yard and a private detective had found something that they could use to take down his organisation, at least. Thank Christ they found and destroyed his network. If he’d had more time, he’d have taken over London-- if not the country-- and God alone knows what would have happened then.”

Realising just how right Sam was, John suddenly shivered in fear at the thought of that insane psychopath being in charge of a huge complex of criminal activity. Something told him that Sherlock would have been a target for Moriarty at some point so it was a relief to know that the man would never have the chance to reach his full potential for evil. A wave of anger and possessiveness ran through John as he thought of his alpha sentinel in possible danger. Anyone who threatened Sherlock had best watch their back. John would do anything to protect and shelter his alpha. He’d already killed for him and would willingly do so again, if necessary. He turned his attention back to Hairston.

“Rest assured, Sam. I saw the man fall and his body afterward. There is no coming back from a smashed skull. Moran is dead too. Moriarty had him shot but Ned is missing. You don’t happen to know where he’s holed up?” When the beta shook his head no, John sighed in frustration.

Realising he’d been rude, he gestured to Sherlock and he introduced the sentinel. “This is Sherlock Holmes, the consulting detective that saw to the destruction of Moriarty’s kingdom, Sam. You can thank him that you and Cora are now safe.”

Sitting up straight and looking much better than he had done earlier, Hairston sighed and gazed back up at the two of them. “Ta, mate. I can’t tell you how relieved I am. Moriarty was….” The beta couldn’t finish his sentence but shivered in remembered horror.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say. Now lad, you said I owe you and I reckon you’re right. What
do you need?”

Glancing briefly at Sherlock for support, John explained what had just happened and how they were trying to stay off the Bureau’s radar for a few hours at least.

“We need a place to hide, at least until the Bureau’s hunters have left the area. I doubt they’ll come here but in case they do, can you see to it they don’t find out about us?”

Standing, Hairston smiled crookedly at John. “Of course, William. We’d send them out on their ears anyway if they dared to come in here. By the way, there’s someone here tonight you’ve been wanting to meet for months. Masters is interviewing in the back rooms, which is why the place is so busy tonight. Whilst you’re here, I’ll arrange to get you in to see her. Stay here for a tick and I’ll be back.”

Hairston left the room and a stunned John sat down abruptly in one of the chairs facing the desk. Masters had arrived and was now interviewing? Christ, John had nearly forgotten all about his plans. He’d worked so hard and so long toward this day and a jolt of excitement ran through him at the thought of meeting Masters. It was everything he’d wanted after he’d been injured and the hope of joining her group was all that had kept him from putting a bullet in his brain some days.

Sherlock had sat down beside him and was now watching John thoughtfully. Guiltily, John turned toward the alpha.

“Sherlock, I don’t need to meet with her. I’m ….”

The alpha gently interrupted John, looking tense and sad. “Yes, you do, John. Unless you talk to her, you’ll always wonder if she would have accepted you. This is your life and your choice. As I see it, you have two paths you can take. If she rejects you, you’re welcome to stay and bond with me. If she accepts you and you want to go, I won’t hold you back. I don’t want you to ever regret bonding with me because you felt obligated or grateful to me.”

Confused and heart aching, John broke in, objecting. “Sherlock, you know that’s not how I feel about you. I love you and I want to be your guide and omega.”

Giving John a wry smile, Sherlock continued. “I know that, John. I want it, too. More than I can adequately express to you. But I am aware of how difficult that decision was for you to make. Being a guide and omega to a sentinel and alpha was never something you wanted. At the time you decided, your choices were so limited and even then, you struggled for a long time before you decided to be with me. I just want you to know that, if you do decide to go back to the wars, I’ll support you. And if you do go away but ever want to come back to me, I’ll wait for you. No matter how long it takes.”

Speechless, John could only stare at Sherlock, who continued to smile softly at him, trying to hide his misery. But the omega could tell Sherlock meant every word he said and it touched John like nothing ever had in his entire life. If he thought he’d loved the impossible man before, he’d been very wrong. It seemed his heart swelled with wonder and affection so much that it couldn’t possibly fit into his chest. No one had ever loved John so much that they’d put his happiness before their own.

Blinking rapidly, John knew he wasn’t keeping the moisture from his eyes and he quickly wiped the tears away. As much as he hated to admit it, Sherlock was right. John had been forced by dire circumstance to accept a bonding with the alpha and he would always wonder what could have been if he didn’t at least speak with the Colonel. “I’ll go see her, Sherlock, if you insist, but….”
Before he could say anything else, Hairston was back. “She’ll see you now, William. Your friend can stay back here if he wants.”

Standing, John nodded to Sherlock and followed Hairston out of the office, into the main room again and then through another door. This led into a short hallway with a door to the loo and another door to the back rooms. Sam knocked and then entered, John close behind him. There were a handful of dangerous looking men and one woman seated around a table in the room and the remains of a meal littered the table.

Hairston gestured toward John and spoke respectfully to the woman. “Colonel Masters, this is William Larssen. I was telling you about him earlier. He just arrived here with a friend and wanted to meet you.” With that said, the bartender backed out of the room and closed the door gently, leaving John standing in the middle of the room with six pairs of eyes staring pensively at him. No one offered him a chair.

Masters was pretty much what John had heard about her. She wasn’t a large person but she radiated competence and intelligence. Sharp, dangerous eyes narrowed at him as she sat forward, looking him up and down and not appearing to be very impressed. Involuntarily, John’s empathy ranged out and confirmed that indeed, Masters was not particularly taken with him. She sat back and pursed her lips, still staring with narrowed, sceptical eyes.

“So, Mr Larssen. Sam said you’re looking to work for me. Frankly, you don’t seem to be the type to join a mercenary troop but I’ve known Sam a long time and he vouches for you. You’d got five minutes to convince me to even consider you.”

Honestly, John had expected no other reception, since William Larssen didn’t actually exist and they had no idea who he was. “Colonel. I was hoping to work for you, but I have stumbled across another opportunity whilst I was waiting for your arrival. I do appreciate you taking the time to meet with me, however.

“My name is actually John Watson. I worked with Bill Murray in Afghanistan and ….“ John didn’t get to finish when one of the men stood and came around the end of the table. If his empathy hadn’t told him otherwise, John would have thought the man intended to attack him. Instead, the beta approached with his hand out and John took it without thinking.

“John Watson! I’ll be goddamned! Bill said you’d wanted to meet with us but then he lost touch with you. I don’t know what happened, but now that fucker Moriarty is dead, I’m glad you resurfaced. I’m second to the Colonel, Doc. My name’s Doyle, Jesse Doyle and I’m a mate of Bill’s from way back.”

Turning to face the table, he introduced John to his startled and now very impressed comrades. “Everyone, this is Captain Watson. Just call him Doc, though. He was with Harrison’s outfit out in Afghanistan for years. Some of the stories…..”

Expression much more thoughtful, Masters interrupted. “Yes, Jesse, we’ve all heard about the legendary Doc Watson and how he’s a bloody magician with weapons and even better as a surgeon. And I apologise to you, Doc. Because of Moriarty, I was forced to blacklist you. Unfortunately, I owed the bastard and he collected the debt by telling me I had to turn you away if you applied to join us. Things have changed now that the crazy bastard is dead and I’m willing to consider you. What can you offer us?”

John measured what to say. “You heard I was invalided out, right?” Masters nodded. “I’ve kept up my skills as best I could do, though things have been rather tough lately.” John held up left arm,
showing the cast and shrugged. “I’ve been identified as a latent under the name William Larssen and am, in fact, being actively pursued by the Bureau at this very moment. With the help of a friend, I managed to escape in the middle of being auctioned off just a few hours ago. They have hunters not too far away.”

Dark eyebrows rose into her fringe as Masters looked at John in shock. “You’re an omega guide? My god, it’s completely illegal to transport you from the country, you know that, right? The Bureau could get the government to yank my passport faster than I could blink if I hired you. When do you want to start, Doc?” The woman’s wide grin was predatory and there was a twinkle in her eye at the thought of sticking it to the Bureau.

John couldn’t help the surprised bark of laughter that escaped his lips at the officer’s words. Grinning back at her, he replied, “It means a lot that you want to hire me. But you have to know that I’ve been working for the last year to improve the range of motion in my left arm but it’s still not 100% and I’ve come to the conclusion I will never regain full use again. There’s considerable nerve damage also. I won’t be able to do the same things I was able to do for Harrison’s outfit.”

Masters pursed her lips and cocked her head to one side. “You bring up some good points, John. But I think that, even with your injury, I’d be willing to give you a chance. I’d certainly put you through your paces first and if I liked what I saw, I’d take you. Even if you can’t meet all the physical requirements perfectly, you can still take over our medical unit.”

John blew out a long breath, not realising until then he’d been holding it. A weight had lifted off his shoulders, knowing that he could have the job with Masters. He could be independent and live his life as he chose.

“I’m grateful to you, Colonel, but I have to decline your kind offer. I feel I owe you an apology for wasting your time tonight but I wanted to meet you and see if I even had a chance to join your unit. It’s flattering to know that you would be willing to hire me despite my injury but that other opportunity I mentioned earlier? I’m going to take it instead.”

Smiling, Masters stood and reached out to shake his hand with an iron grip. “No worries, Doc. I’m sorry you won’t be joining us but it was a real honour to meet you. Not every day one gets to meet a legend. May I ask what you’ll be doing next or is it confidential?”

Grinning back at the Colonel, John winked. “Believe it or not, I’ve found my very own alpha sentinel and I plan to bond with him soon.”

Masters gaped at John and then threw back her head and laughed. “Good lord, man! An alpha sentinel? What the bloody hell are you even doing considering working with us? I’m assuming he’s the ‘friend’ Sam mentioned earlier? And he’s here? You arse! Go back to your alpha sentinel and bond with him. And good luck. I hope you have lots of babies who can shoot as well as you do. Send them my way when they grow up. Now get out of here and tell Sam to send in the next candidate.”

Laughing also and feeling almost giddy, John thanked Masters but before he could turn to leave, all the other men in the room stood at once, saluted John respectfully, then shook his hand and wished him well. Something that had been warped in his chest since he’d been injured righted and stabilised as John received the honest respect and good wishes from his fellow soldiers in the room. They were offering him a ritual leave taking, giving him the approval, respect and closure that he’d never received when he’d been medically discharged. Sherlock had been so right. John had needed this as a sign of acceptance of his past and permission to move on to his future.

Now that his military life was officially over, John was finally ready to start anew. His heart filled
near to bursting with optimism and excitement. Loving Sherlock was going to be every bit as challenging and exhilarating as being at war and probably every bit as dangerous. Being able to work with Sherlock would make every dream he’d had to give up worthwhile. The chase through the city had been extraordinary and he wanted to be able to do that kind of thing more often. But instead of being the hunted, John wanted to be the one doing the hunting.

Carefully making his way back to the main room, he opened the door to see there was a row going on near the entrance to the building. Men were shouting and pushing at others and not for the first time, John wished he wasn’t such a typically short omega. Standing on his tip toes, he looked over the shoulders of the men in front of him to see Hairston and Wally arguing with two representatives of the Bureau. As John watched, a handful of the bar’s roughest looking customers came over in support of the landlord and glowered at the Bureau reps threateningly. The two Bureau men glanced about the room nervously but stood their ground.

“This is the only place they could have come to, Hairston! It’s your duty to turn them over to us if you’re hiding them. We could have your license revoked and you both arrested. Now tell us where they are or….”

One of the larger, scarred men stepped into the Bureau man’s personal space. “Or what, boyo? What will you do?” Everyone within earshot growled agreement and two other mercenaries moved to support the scarred man. This made the Bureau men back down in fear. Hairston finally stepped in and put an end to it.

“I already told you two, they didn’t come in here. Now leave my pub or I won’t be responsible for what happens to you. You don’t belong here.” John moved slowly back to the office door and slipped inside. Sherlock was waiting for him just beside the entrance.

Grimly, John looked up at the alpha. “Did you hear what’s going on, Sherlock? It seems they’ve found us. Sam is putting them out but no doubt they’ll wait around outside.”

Sherlock hummed in agreement, clearly still listening to what was happening in the main room. “Indeed, you’re correct. They’re planning to station a couple of men around the building and stake it out. Do you know if Hairston has any rooms we can stay in for a few hours? You need to rest, John. I can tell you’re about dead on your feet.”

As soon as Sherlock mentioned it, John realised he was indeed very tired and was starting to feel stiff and sore from the miles they had run over the rooftops of London. The adrenaline was wearing off after his meeting with Masters and he did want to rest and spend some quality time with Sherlock.

“I’ll check with Sam to see if there’s a room upstairs we can rest in or maybe he’ll just let us stay in the office. That sofa doesn’t look too bad and right now I don’t really care where I lie down.”

Just then the office door opened and they turned to confront a very annoyed Hairston. “You lads seen what just happened? They’re on to you somehow. Maybe they got a sentinel out there waiting for you, bloody tossers!”

Sherlock broke into Hairston’s rant. “They do indeed have a sentinel waiting outside but he can’t really hear much since the pub is so noisy. If he tries to sort out specific conversations, he’ll risk zoning, even with a guide and this sentinel doesn’t have one. But I believe they are calling into headquarters to get a more experienced sentinel with a guide to come here soon. The best place for us to hide is underground if possible.”

Grinning evilly, Hairston nodded. “I’ve got something even better than that, lads. This pub is
ancient and there are old passages in the cellar leading out toward the river where the previous landlords smuggled things in under the noses of the coppers for hundreds of years. They’re still there, though a bit damp in places. You’re welcome to use them.”

Glancing at each other, John simply had to look at Sherlock’s fascinated face to know the alpha wanted desperately to check out the tunnels, but only if John was willing. Answering for both of them, John agreed. “Of course we’ll use them, Sam. Ta very much.”

“Right, then. Give me a minute and I’ll meet you at the door just left of the bar. It leads down to the basement.”

As the barkeeper left the room, John turned and looked up at Sherlock with a smile. “Were you listening in on my meeting with Masters, luv?”

His expression a mix of fear and nervousness, Sherlock shook his head. “No, John. I didn’t think it was appropriate. I may not have many social skills but I thought you might not appreciate me eavesdropping.”

“It would have been fine with me, luv. You should know that Masters said I could join her group as head of their medical unit.”

Before John could continue, Sherlock gasped and turned away, then walked over to one of the chairs and sat down hard. Alarmed, John followed quickly, knelt by the chair and took Sherlock’s hand. It was ice cold and Sherlock’s face was bloodless. Shocked, he realised his alpha had somehow expected John to reject him and go back to war without him. John would just have to set him straight.

“You’ve got it wrong, luv! You said I had two paths to choose from. Well, as I see it, I actually have three and I chose the third. She accepted me but I turned her down and told her that I wanted to be with you. I choose you, Sherlock. There really was no competition.” John grinned at Sherlock’s tremulous smile and then the alpha sat up straight, eyes shining with profound relief and suppressed happiness.

After he took a shaky breath, Sherlock finally spoke haughtily. “Of course you chose me over her. You’ve shown in the past that you do have a modicum of intelligence, after all.”

John huffed and rolled his eyes as he stood and took Sherlock’s face in his hands. “Now listen to me and believe what I say. I choose you. I love you and always will. Now shut up and kiss me before we have to start crawling through cellars and sewers and we’re both too stinky to do anything.”

The kiss started out sweet and tender and then turned hungry, leaving John breathless. It promised the omega things he’d never known he’d wanted before and he ached with need as his arms slid around the alpha’s neck and clung tightly.

He moaned in disappointment and panted as Sherlock reluctantly broke the kiss and stood. John gave him a narrow eyed glare. “You’d best be willing to follow through with that soon, mister.”

Smirking, Sherlock agreed. “I’ll look forward to it, John. But Hairston is waiting for us and we must leave now.”

Grudgingly, John let go of Sherlock and both of them met Hairston by the basement entrance. The landlord unlocked the door and led them down stone stairs to a dank and dark room filled with kegs, wooden cases and actual, antique looking wine racks. John wanted to inspect them but Hairston took them further back and moved some heavy looking wooden crates out of the way, exposing a rather
small wooden door.

Taking out a set of keys, Hairston went through them until he found the right one for the large padlock on the door. “Sorry the door is so small, lads. I hear tell that people was much smaller back in the day. Watch your heads. The roof’s not much higher than the door. Now I’ll not lock this again in case the tunnel’s collapsed and you need to return, but I will put the crates back in place. You can’t use your mobile to ring me because there’s no signal down here.”

Handing them both torches, Hairston wished them well and shut the door behind them once they’d entered the tunnel. It was musty and pitch black but the torches worked well enough and the passageway was fairly straight toward the river. The stench of the Thames hit them quickly but the sewer smell was faint. John did remind Sherlock to tell him if he needed his help with his sense of smell and they took off down the passageway toward the river. The tunnels were surprisingly dry with only a small bit of water running down the centre, likely because there hadn’t been much rain in the past few days. After about twenty minutes they emerged into what looked to be a rainwater runoff channel from the sewers, which explained how the smugglers’ tunnel could remain hidden.

Sherlock glanced around and found a stone stairway nearly completely covered by weeds and rubbish. Since they had to turn off their torches to avoid notice by their pursuers, effectively making John blind in the darkness, Sherlock took the omega’s arm and led him up the steps and back onto the bank of the river. The area they’d emerged onto seemed to be a rather unkempt park of some kind but they weren’t too far from warehouses and a road. Stopping to listen carefully, Sherlock determined they were well on the other side of the roadblocks and search area. They’d managed to slip through without incident. Feeling a bit paranoid at their good fortune, John kept up with the long strides of his alpha and shortly they reached the road and started walking east, hoping to catch a cab. Thankfully, their clothes were not too muddy and they looked fairly respectable.

Miraculously, Sherlock found a taxi for them and gave the beta an address in Brixton. John knew that area was not the best part of town but then it was unlikely the Bureau would think to look for them there. The ride took some time and as exhaustion caught up with John, he fell asleep on Sherlock’s shoulder. Before he knew it, the alpha was gently shaking him awake and helping him out of the cab. Not really aware, the omega trusted Sherlock to take care of him and was led into a building that smelled strongly of cabbage and helped up a few flights of stairs. The walk woke him fully and he was finally aware enough to register the small flat Sherlock let them into.

The flat was shabby but tidy and there were three rooms—kitchen, lounge and bedroom—and surprisingly, a toilet with a shower was included. There wasn’t enough room to swing a cat but John didn’t care. All he wanted was the lovely bed that was calling his name.

He turned and put his arms around Sherlock’s neck, standing up on tiptoe to kiss the alpha with all the skill he possessed. Sherlock returned the kiss but pushed John away after a few moments.

“We should sleep, John. You’re exhausted and we can bond tomorrow.”

Pulling back, John looked up at Sherlock in astonishment. “After everything we’ve been through because we didn’t bond right away last time, you’re mental if you think I’m going to spend this night sleeping. We’re bonding and that’s the end of the discussion.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows climbed into his fringe as John laughed. “Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted by the Bureau?”

Sherlock laughed as John took his hand, led them to the bedroom and began to undress them both. The detective seemed nervous but the evidence that he was very eager to bond with John was right in front of them as the omega helped to remove Sherlock’s pants. Unlike John, who was typically
omega in that he was short and stocky, Sherlock was not a typical alpha in many ways.

Most male and some female alphas tended to run toward large frames and lots of bulky muscle like Sebastian Moran. Sherlock was built like a racing greyhound; all long, lean muscle that was deceptively strong. Because Sherlock was tall and thin and so unlike most alphas, John guessed he’d been overlooked and underestimated his whole life in a similar way that John had been. Sherlock had clearly taken full advantage of it and had been able to hide his alpha sentinel status in plain sight.

In one way, Sherlock exceeded most alphas. Pushing the other man down onto the bed, John couldn’t take his eyes off the massive erect penis that would soon be inside him. He’d expected it should have made him nervous, never having been with a male alpha before, but instead his lower abdomen throbbed in excitement and he felt warm wetness saturate his pants. It confused him for a few moments because he’d never produced that much lubrication outside of a heat, but then again he’d never wanted to have penetrative sex with anyone before.

John was out of his clothes and on top of Sherlock in just a few moments. The glands under his chin began to tingle and swell with the skin-to-skin contact. Looking down at his lust-filled sentinel, John had to suppress the urge to giggle. He couldn’t believe this was finally happening. After all the multiple life changing events he’d been through over the last months, John had never in his wildest dreams imagined himself willingly preparing to bond to a sentinel, especially an alpha sentinel of his own choosing. Happiness welled up in his chest and he felt like he was overflowing with it, sure that it must be visibly shining out of his eyes, at the very least.

Sherlock was staring at him with a dazed look and reached up with his fingers to trace John’s swollen lips as the omega grinned at him. John captured the finger and sucked on it, allowing his expression to grow wicked. Sherlock gasped and his breathing hitched as he gazed helplessly at John’s mouth.

Breathlessly, Sherlock spoke hesitantly. “You must know, John, that I haven’t much experience with this kind of activity.”

Curious, John let go of Sherlock’s finger with an obscene slurp whilst the alpha whimpered at the loss of contact. “What do you mean, luv? Do you mean that you haven’t much experience with a male omega? You’ve only been with female omegas before? I’ve not had any experience with male alphas, so I guess we’re even.”

John gave Sherlock an encouraging smile and tried to capture the finger again, but Sherlock cupped the sides of John’s face with both hands so he could speak seriously.

“No, I mean I’ve had no experience with any omegas outside of our encounter in the spirit world, which wasn’t real.”

Frowning, John cocked his head to one side in confusion. Sherlock had said he’d done nothing with Irene Adler, but surely he’d been with other omegas? But then John began picking up on uncomfortable feelings from Sherlock. It seemed the detective didn’t like talking about this and was also afraid of what John would think of him.

“So, betas then? Though I know you would have had difficulty with a beta because of your size.”

Alphas’ penises were much too large for a female beta. Sherlock was very well endowed for an alpha and John could see that it would have been impossible to have had penetrative sex with a beta. John’s girlfriends had all been betas and he knew that he was typically quite a bit larger than most omega males but was tiny compared to an alpha. However, John had never had any trouble satisfying his beta lovers in the past.
Sighing, Sherlock let go of John and sat up. “You’re right; I can’t safely have sex with betas. But what I’m trying to say is that I’ve never had sex with anyone, John. There’s never been anybody for me before you came along.” A flush crept across Sherlock’s face at this admission and he lowered his eyes in mortification. John could only stare at the man in amazement. Sherlock was a virgin and humiliated by having to admit it to John.

Shaking his head, John kissed the detective to force his attention back to focus on him.

“Don’t, Sherlock. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re an alpha sentinel and I can imagine that it would have been extremely difficult to let go during a sexual encounter with someone who wasn’t your guide. Your senses would have gone completely wonky.”

Sherlock’s eyes rose to meet John’s and he smiled gratefully. “Thank god that you understand, then. It was impossible to even touch another person until I met you. Everyone else’s touch was distasteful and made it very difficult to keep my senses balanced. Then you touched me and for the first time, it wasn’t irritating. Our minds meshed together so well and I knew then that I’d found my ideal match. I didn’t care that you were a latent, though Mycroft was disdainful at first. You’re perfect for me and I was willing to wait until you decided what you wanted to do with your life. I would have waited forever for you.”

Eyes wet, John pulled Sherlock tightly to him. “That’s got to be the most beautiful thing anyone’s ever said to me. I love you, too.”

Kissing Sherlock tenderly, John beamed at his alpha. “Now, I think we should get on with it before the entire Bureau breaks down the door or some evil genius swings in through the window.”

This startled a laugh from Sherlock, who hugged John back. “What I was trying to say is that I’m totally inexperienced at this and you may need to help me through it.”

“Okay, I’ll help you through it, Sherlock, never fear. But your own body will be your best guide. I expect you’ll know just what to do when I touch you like this.” John reached down to the alpha’s still erect penis and began to stroke it. It was wet with pre-come and his fingers picked up the fluid and spread it generously around the shaft and head. It hardened and lengthened even more as John stroked. Sherlock whimpered again and thrust upwards into John’s hand.

Kissing Sherlock’s cheek, John then whispered into his ear, “That’s it, luv. See, your body knows exactly what to do. Just let go and trust yourself. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Sighing, Sherlock closed his eyes and nodded. John took this as permission to continue, pushing him down again and crawling back on top whilst lubricant leaked out of his hole and down his legs. Slowly, he pushed their hips together, causing electricity to jolt through them both and making Sherlock gasp and grab at John’s shoulders. Moving down Sherlock’s body, John took the time to explore and discover the alpha’s most sensitive spots. It was important to find out what worked and what didn’t since this was the first time for Sherlock. To help him in the task, John extended his empathy to surround them both. It felt as if he was enfolding them in a warm blanket and a net of safety at the same time. No one and nothing could interfere and so John got to work bringing his alpha pleasure. Despite his own body clamouring urgently at him, John decided his own satisfaction could wait. First times were too precious to waste.

Sherlock’s nipples weren’t particularly sensitive but the insides of his elbows and wrists had him writhing when John licked and kissed them. His sides were too ticklish but a tongue in the belly button made him sigh with delight. Smiling, John headed down toward the straining erection, took it in his hand again and studied it whilst stroking gently. He’d never seen an alpha’s genitals up close
before and the knot fascinated him. It wasn’t fully inflated as it would do during John’s heat but it was a good size and John knew it would take some doing to get it into him at first. His hole throbbed at the thought of it breaching him, even though he knew it would likely hurt.

Carefully cupping Sherlock’s testicles, John noted how enormous they were and saw that they had pulled up tightly against the alpha’s body. In contrast, John’s testicles were considered vestigial and didn’t produce sperm but contained the necessary organs to provide the hormones that made him a male omega, whilst Sherlock’s produced the copious amounts of sperm necessary to impregnate an omega.

Focusing back on the alpha’s penis, John found that running his hands up and down the shaft and gently squeezing the knot forced very interesting, rather guttural sounds from Sherlock’s throat. Wanting to hear more, John bent and took the head, purple with arousal, into his mouth, which was all that would fit. The touch made the alpha thrust up and shout but John had been ready for that and pulled back as Sherlock came forcefully, seed hitting John in the chin but mostly landing on the alpha’s belly and chest. Still holding Sherlock’s penis, John could feel the ejaculate pulsing copiously over and over up and out of the shaft and he bent down again to cover the head with his mouth and suck so he could swallow as much seed as possible until Sherlock became overly sensitive and squirmed away. John pulled back and wiped his mouth, grinning at the alpha, who looked devastated.

Quickly, John moved back up and kissed Sherlock before the embarrassed alpha could say anything. “That was so incredible, luv! I can’t wait to do that again!”

Unfortunately, Sherlock was still distressed and mortified. “I’m so sorry, John! I didn’t mean…”

John shushed him. “That was brilliant and nothing to be sorry for. I’m flattered that you liked what I did so much. The next time will be even better, just you wait and see.”

Sherlock’s face cleared as John reassured him and the alpha’s expression was heartbreakingly vulnerable and trusting. A lump formed in John’s throat and he couldn’t help but smile tenderly and kiss Sherlock deeply. Suddenly, the omega was on his back on the bed and Sherlock hovering over him with an intent look on his face.

“It’s your turn now, John. Please allow me to reciprocate.”

Stunned, John could only watch and then groan at the wonderful feelings as Sherlock proceeded to use all of his senses to sniff, taste, touch, see and actually listen to John’s body, imprinting and using John to begin the calibration of his immensely powerful senses. Instinct had finally taken over and Sherlock was totally focused on John. It was a heady experience. The amount of concentration Sherlock put into his examination made John alternately fidget and sigh as the alpha unerringly found all John’s secret places. The touches set fire to his skin and John had a hard time staying still as the sentinel started at the top of his head and moved down to John’s toes, covering every inch of his body. John was barely able to hold off coming when Sherlock wanted to taste him and took his entire length down his throat in one go. The omega had to grip the sheets to keep from forcing his alpha’s head down to finish him off, but Sherlock pulled away once he’d got a good taste.

John was then unceremoniously flipped over onto his belly, landing with a surprised grunt and a laugh on the mattress. He held onto the headboard as Sherlock worked his way up John’s legs and to his buttocks, spreading his cheeks and burying his face between the omega’s legs to taste the lubrication being produced there. The sensation of Sherlock’s tongue laving and penetrating his hole had John arching his back and thrusting himself backward, trying to get more of the amazing sensation. All too soon, Sherlock moved away and was finally nuzzling at the back of John’s neck,
where the alpha would bite to bond them further when they were joined together during heat. The detective’s cock was hot and heavy on John’s back, nestled between John’s buttocks and the omega could feel the slickness of pre-come on his arse as Sherlock nipped and licked at his neck and shoulders, lingering on the scars as if he could somehow remove them.

Then Sherlock was done and John was once again flipped effortlessly onto his back. It seemed the sentinel had come back to himself and his eyes were aware as he gazed down into John’s face with an uncertain expression. John was prepared to bond and the glands in his throat had begun to throb with pain.

“Are you ready, John? You can still change your mind….” Sherlock was attempting to be noble but John was having none of it.

“Shut up and fuck me, Sherlock! I need you now!”

Keening with need, John clawed at Sherlock’s arms and pushed his hips against the sentinel to find that his mate was once more fully aroused. Sherlock continued to kiss and lick at John’s throat. The caresses to his neck made John quiver with desire and his arousal ratcheted up. Sherlock’s lips were magic and John squirmed in delight as they skimmed over his body and down again. When the alpha reached his nipples, it seemed to set off a bomb in John’s groin and he wailed in ecstasy. He’d never been particularly sensitive there until Sherlock began to suck and bite at them. John’s entire body throbbed with the desire to be filled by Sherlock and he had to push the alpha’s head away from his nipples to avoid coming early like a teenager.

Time became meaningless as they writhed together. Despite never having had penetrative sex with a partner before, John’s body also knew just what to do. Locking his legs around Sherlock’s waist, John canted his hips so that he could be filled and reached down for the enormous shaft. It pulsed hot with each beat of Sherlock’s heart and was dripping. Sherlock moaned at his touch and John took a moment to stroke and pet the huge member and then placed it at his opening and arched his back. Sherlock thrust at the same moment and slid deep inside John with an agonised sounding moan of ecstasy.

Even though he’d expected the penetration to be painful, John was surprised at how massive Sherlock actually was and how much he forced John’s tissues to stretch, especially when the knot entered. It hurt as the enormous phallus with its swollen knot forced its way into John’s body but once Sherlock bottomed out, pulled back and pushed again, the pain ebbed and John felt nothing but extreme fullness, excitement and pleasure as each thrust opened him further. The knot forcing its way in and rubbing back and forth seemed to massage something special inside him that had John trembling and shaking with need. His whole body quivered and he cried out, quaking and mewling helplessly with each new plunge, writhing wantonly as he was impaled again and again. Sherlock was also voicing deep moans and cries as his hips snapped back and forth, faster and faster. As he pounded into John’s eager body, obviously close to orgasm, Sherlock finally bent down and bit at John’s exposed throat.

The glands broke and flooded John’s system with hormones that would bond them together for the rest of their lives. As they entered John’s bloodstream, the omega’s orgasm hit him like a freight train. Crying out wildly, John arched his back as his internal muscles began to pulsate and clamp on the enormous intruder that was suddenly pushing in faster, harder and deeper. Then, their joining became more than physical as Sherlock shivered, cried out and began to ejaculate copiously inside John’s body. At the moment of orgasm, their minds flowed together and became one. Their minds slotted together and blended seamlessly just as their bodies had done. After all the times John had tried and failed, this time he created their bond effortlessly and permanently, relieved and rejoicing at the ease of it. The soul bond, which John had thought perfect, was nothing in comparison and he
understood why it was considered a tentative bond. It aided in the formation of their permanent bond by creating a base for it, but was truly a shadow of what they now built.

Sherlock’s teeth continued to worry at John’s throat, breaking the skin and mixing his saliva into his new guide’s bloodstream and at the same time absorbing John’s blood into his own system, just as his seed continued to be pumped into John’s body. The combination of the two fluids aided in the hormone shift and change taking place in John’s body as their minds continued to flow and meld together. Sherlock’s hormones would change also but not as much as John’s. Soon, John would take on a new scent which was a combination of his own and Sherlock’s but the change wouldn’t be complete or permanent until they were also united as alpha and omega during John’s next heat, which was only a week or two away. The new scent would be mostly Sherlock’s, which was nature’s way to cement the alpha’s ownership of his omega and John thrilled at the thought of fully belonging to Sherlock.

Joyfully basking in the beauty of each other’s minds, their bodies relaxed as they came down from their orgasms. John didn’t want to move and kept his legs locked tight around his sentinel whilst Sherlock stayed buried inside him, breathing hard and shaking. Slowly, their minds separated from one another and they were themselves again. John mourned as the alpha’s cock slipped out of him, followed by a flood of ejaculate and lubrication onto the sheets. Lowering his legs, he shifted to his side away from the wet spot and gathered a completely exhausted Sherlock into his arms. Running his hand through the dark curls, John breathed in his alpha’s changing scent and smiled. They’d finally done it! They’d managed, after all the trials and tribulations, to bond with one another as sentinel and guide. There was much for him to learn about being Sherlock’s guide and he looked forward to it. But at that moment all he wanted to do was join his alpha sentinel in sleep.

Over the course of the night and into the morning, they woke periodically to reinforce their bond. John was surprised that he wasn’t sore from the constant penetration but his body was made for that kind of activity and he was eager for Sherlock each time. Also, he instinctively knew it was necessary to strengthen their bond. Even though he was fairly certain their link was now permanent he worried that it was still fragile and he knew it was important to reinforce it as often as possible. It was still early days and John wanted to take no chances of it somehow breaking before it was cemented into place. Despite knowing he was being paranoid, he listened to his instincts and gladly accepted Sherlock each time the alpha wanted him. Finally, they fell into a deep sleep that lasted the rest of the night and he woke in the morning to find Sherlock fussing over John’s mangled and bruised throat, trying to apologise. Sighing in exasperation, John sat up and ran a hand through his hair.

“I’m fine, luv. It was necessary. You should know that better than I. I thought you said you went to sentinel school.”

Shamefaced, Sherlock looked away. “Yes, but I deleted a lot of it. I remembered about the bonds, though. John, I never thought I’d find a guide. You’ve been hurt so much before and now I’ve hurt you also….”

Interrupting, John laughed and embraced Sherlock, who buried his face against John’s shoulder. “You didn’t hurt me, Sherlock. What you gave me was a love bite, literally. And I adore having it. It means I belong to you and no one else can have me.”

This seemed to perk Sherlock up and he began to speak when there was a banging at the door. John’s empathy went out immediately to check for danger but could find nothing but the emotion of irritation coming from the person outside. It took him a moment but he recognised the emotional signature.
Sherlock frowned fiercely and spoke before John could do and identified their unfortunate visitor. “Mycroft! Why has he waddled his fat arse out here and what does he want?”

The alpha rose naked from the bed and stalked toward the bedroom door. John sat up, pulling the blankets around him. “Sherlock! Don’t you think you should put something on?”

“Why should I? He’s here uninvited and he can deal with whatever he encounters.”

With that, Sherlock stomped through the flat and jerked open the door. It was indeed Mycroft standing in the corridor with a look of surprise and then mild distaste on his face at the sight of his very nude brother. Rolling his eyes in exasperation, John took that moment to gather up his clothes and escape to the loo. When he emerged into the bedroom, freshly showered and cleaned up, he found the bedroom door had been shut and clean clothes were lying on the bed. They were his own, which meant that Mycroft must have brought them from Baker Street. Gratefully, he changed into them and poked his head out of the door. From their bond, John could feel Sherlock’s irritation but otherwise everything seemed fine so he didn’t worry.

Sherlock, dressed in the clothes from the day before, was sulking at the table, glaring daggers at Mycroft, who was placidly sipping tea from a chipped mug. When John walked out of the bedroom, Sherlock got up without a word, left the room and shut the door firmly, leaving John alone with Mycroft. The shower started up a few moments later.

John sighed and went to fetch his own tea, aware of judgemental eyes boring a hole in the back of his head as he heated the water. After such a busy night, John was starving. Once the tea was ready, he found a package of biscuits and brought them to the table with him. Taking Sherlock’s chair, John sat and glanced at Mycroft. He wasn’t completely sure what to think about the man any longer and any trust he’d had in the beta was gone completely after the fiasco with the bonding contract. But he’d been raised to be polite.

"Thank you for the clothing and I’m glad to find that you weren’t injured when the hospital was attacked. I was worried there for a bit.”

Mycroft raised a courteous eyebrow and gave him a faint smile. “Thank you for your concern, John. I made my escape just before any fighting began. All our information suggested that I was the target but we were clearly wrong. I deeply regret that we were not able to protect you appropriately and that you were further injured. The guards who were meant to protect you will recover, thankfully. You saved the life of the agent I left with you, by the way. And I understand you saved my brother’s life, as well. You’re quite the hero, John. Thank you.”

This went a long way to relieve John’s mind but then the elder Holmes’s expression turned somewhat sour as he looked John up and down and sniffed disdainfully. “Also, I am sorry I wasn’t able to warn you about the Bureau coming to retrieve you. My contacts in the Bureau were not in a position to find out until too late.” The beta’s expression was disagreeable. “When I was finally informed, you’d already been taken. However, all’s well that ends well, I suppose. I can see that you got what you wanted after all.”

Beginning to understand and share Sherlock’s suspicion and dislike of his elder brother, John found himself intensely angry, though he acknowledged to himself that some of it may have been an emotional echo coming down his permanent bond with Sherlock. Mouth tight with anger, John sat forward, nursing his mug whilst he tried to calm down. Taking a deep breath he glared at Mycroft and narrowed his eyes dangerously.

“No, you really don’t see. What was the real reason behind all that shite you gave me that day at
hospital? That ridiculous bonding contract. What the bloody hell were you playing at?"

Mycroft jerked his chin up and looked down his long nose at John, elegant eyebrows arched in surprise. “I have no idea what you’re referring to. I gave you what you wanted from the bonding contract.”

“Bollocks! That’s not what I wanted and you knew it. You’ve always known it. It wasn’t what Sherlock wanted, either. You never bothered to ask him, did you? Because of what you’d put in that contract, I almost walked away from your brother. Or was that what you were hoping I’d do? I’m only a latent with no money or family connections, after all. You probably couldn’t wait to be shed of me.” He sat back in his chair, face grim. “You must have been so disappointed when Sherlock chose me anyway. I’m happy to report that your plan didn’t work.”

Mycroft took a sip of tea and smiled infuriatingly at John over the rim of his mug. “On the contrary, John, my plan worked perfectly. I did know you would reject that contract because it contained everything that was anathema to you. You were trying so hard to be a good little omega and accept the terms but it was tearing you apart. To say you were conflicted about bonding to my younger brother is an understatement.”

Putting down the mug, Mycroft looked seriously into John’s stunned eyes. “You are not the kind of omega who would jump at that type of contract and if you were anything like a typical omega guide, my brother would want nothing to do with you. I wanted you to see that about yourself and accept that you were worthy of Sherlock and more importantly, a balance for him. Most of all, I wanted you to think about the absurdity of the contract and talk it over with my ludicrously emotionally stunted brother. If anyone could get him to discuss such things it would be you. Your bonding as sentinel and guide and as alpha and omega will be the most important actions you will ever take in your life and you were both bloody minded fools heading into it without even talking about what it meant to you or what your goals were. Am I mistaken?”

Caught completely wrong-footed but still angry, John didn’t really know how to respond, so Mycroft continued. “I’m glad to see that I was mistaken. You and Sherlock did finally discuss what you wanted from your life together and have reached an accord. I’m happy for you and give you both my heartfelt congratulations.”

Mycroft’s placid smile was genuine whilst John continued to sit mute, staring in bewilderment. “I once told you that I made it my business to know everything about the people who are important to my family and you are more important to Sherlock than anyone else alive. I wanted to see the mettle of the man who would be a caring partner for my little brother and I’m glad to see that I was not wrong about you. You will be the only one he turns to whenever he’s happy, in trouble or injured, not to me or anyone else in the family. Only you. It’s a relief to know Sherlock is in good hands now and you will see that he’s well cared for.”

Just as the elder Holmes stopped speaking Sherlock entered the room and stood behind John, placing his hands on the doctor’s shoulders. John reached up and laid his hands over Sherlock’s in a show of unity. Mycroft just gave them another superior smile, making John grind his teeth.

“See? Everything worked out just fine. I’m pleased for you both.”

Sherlock was livid with indignation on John’s behalf. “We would have sorted things out between us without your interference, Mycroft. Don’t think I’m grateful to you for what you’ve put John through.”

Appreciative of Sherlock’s defence, John used their link to communicate his feelings but also soothed his alpha. To be perfectly honest, Mycroft had been correct. John had been terribly
conflicted and torn about bonding and he’d planned to completely reject the bonding contract. He’d not had a chance to even think much about it since Moran’s henchmen had kidnapped him shortly afterward, though. But he resented that Mycroft had played him and he was still angry. What the beta had done had worked in a sense but had been ultimately unnecessary.

“Mycroft, you were right. I was uncertain about what I wanted to do, especially after you presented that bonding proposal and lied about Sherlock’s involvement. It caused all kinds of confusion. But Sherlock is also right. We would have figured things out in the end without your interference. It might have taken longer but that should have been our decision. In future, your meddling is not appreciated and I will not hesitate to kick your arse if you ever try anything like that again.”

Offended eyebrows rose up toward his receding hairline and Mycroft huffed but nodded. He didn’t seem particularly worried by John’s threat. “Fair enough. I shall take my leave now since I’m clearly not wanted here.”

The man stood and absently straightened his cuffs. “By the way, it’s now safe for you to go home. Murphy has given up the search because he has other, more important matters to attend to at the moment.” Mycroft gave them a tight smile that reminded John of the cat that swallowed the canary and the omega wondered just what had happened in the last few hours that would make the beta look so incredibly satisfied.

“However, you might want to use the back door. Your dramatics from last night have caused quite a stir. Now, before I leave, I have a few things for you, John, but you must promise to open the box only after I’ve gone.”

When a suspicious John reluctantly agreed, Mycroft produced a box and package from a chemists’ from his briefcase and set them both on the table. Pushing the package toward John he eyed the doctor meaningfully. “As I mentioned earlier to Sherlock, you’ll want this soon, John.”

Frowning, John reached for the object curiously. “What is it?”

“Those are your contraceptives. They have finally been released. There will be an announcement to the public about it next week but since your heat is due in a few weeks, it’s best I give them to you now. The instructions are in the box. You’re to begin taking them approximately a week before you’re to start your heat and I suggest you see an omega doctor between now and then. If you want a referral, I know some people.

“Oh, and I’ve made an appointment for you to have that unsightly tattoo removed. I’ll send a car around to Baker Street, eight tomorrow morning. Good day.” With that, Mycroft left the flat whilst John blinked in astonishment and then stared down at the package.

Still very annoyed with the elder Holmes but also excited at having the contraceptives, John examined the box and opened it to read the directions as Sherlock looked over his shoulder.

“My heat is supposed to begin in less than three weeks, I think. I was worried for a while that it might come early but I don’t think that will happen, thank god. Dr Harris had said I’d have another heat within a month or so after that last one, which is rather imprecise in terms of timing. I think I should start taking them soon, then, just to be sure. Do you think Dr Harris would be willing to see me for an exam?”

Sherlock moved to sit beside John. “I’ll get his number from Mycroft for you. I suspect my brother already has deduced your choice of doctors and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s not already made you an appointment for an omega physical, as well.”
Snorting in amused agreement, John went back to reading the directions on the contraceptives.
Similar to the last medication he’d taken, the pills would not prevent his heat but would shorten its
duration and severity. Unlike the previous medication, these would inhibit eggs from developing so he
couldn’t get pregnant during his heat. The thought relieved his mind considerably about sharing
his heat with Sherlock. Most bonded omegas began having children in their late teens and even
though he was in his thirties and considered positively ancient for a child bearer, he didn’t think he
was ready to be a parent yet.

Once he finished reading the directions, he reached for the other box on the table. “I wonder what’s
in here. And why did Mycroft insist that I wait until he left?”

Sherlock laughed when John opened the box to find his own SIG resting inside. “I think he wanted
to leave so you wouldn’t be tempted to shoot him! It would serve the fat idiot right if you did.”

“Well, I did promise myself that I’d punch him in the nose for what he’d done to us. But I suppose I
can forgive him for arranging to get the SIG back to me and for the contraceptives. You have no
idea, Sherlock, what it means to me to have these!”

John knew his eyes were shining in excitement. He’d be able to work with Sherlock and share in his
adventures until they were ready to plan their family, if they even wanted one at all. It was their
choice now! Omegas would know true freedom finally with the ability to control their reproduction.
It was the beginning of a new era, as far as John was concerned and bound to make international
news.

Smiling fondly, Sherlock took his bond mate's hand. “Come along, John. Let’s go home.”

After so long, it seemed almost inconceivable that John was finally free be who he really was and to
be able walk outside as a fully bonded guide without fear of discovery. He had to take a moment to
just savour the feeling and couldn’t keep the grin off his face as they walked through the door, down
the stairs and out into the bright sunlight to catch a cab home, hand in hand.

TBC
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Warnings for sexy stuff, alpha/omega bonding, primal Sherlock and fluff.

Thanks to you all for coming along with me on this rather twisty ride. It's been an amazing experience and I'm very grateful to you all for reading, commenting and for giving kudos on this story. Thanks and best wishes to you all. :-)

The cab ride home was a blur to John until they actually got to Baker Street. It was then that he understood Mycroft’s cryptic suggestion that they use the back entrance. Milling about on the pavement in front of Speedy’s was a crowd of people that John immediately recognised as reporters along with a large cluster of photographers. They were all waiting for the seventh, newly revealed alpha sentinel to arrive home. It would be quite a scoop if they could get Sherlock to answer some questions or get some photos of the alpha sentinel with his new latent guide.

At Sherlock’s direction, the cab drove them around the next corner. After paying the cabbie, Sherlock put an arm around John and pulled him close as they walked down the pavement to a locked gate. Pulling out a key, the alpha unlocked and pulled the gate closed behind them as they entered the alleyway between the buildings. It was then John realised they were heading for the rear entrance of Sherlock’s flat in order to avoid the reporters. He was incredibly relieved because the last thing he wanted was to have to force his way through a bunch of intrusive idiots.

They made their way to the back of one of the buildings where Sherlock drew John up some stairs behind him and knocked on a door. They waited a few moments until it was answered by an elderly omega.

"Sherlock! How lovely to see you! And you are so clever to come in the rear entrance to avoid all those horrid people blocking the front. Come in, dear. I’m so sorry about those men breaking in the other day! I couldn’t stop them. Now, who’s this?” She gasped in recognition before they could answer. “Are you the omega guide Sherlock rescued from the Bureau? I saw you on the telly!” She smiled brightly at John, sniffed and then squealed in excitement.

“Oh, Sherlock! Your scent has changed! You’ve bonded with this one, haven’t you? He’s an omega and your guide now! How wonderful!” She immediately engulfed Sherlock and then John in a hug and John couldn’t help laughing as he returned the embrace despite not knowing exactly who he was hugging. He remembered seeing her earlier and suspected it was Sherlock’s landlady, Mrs Hudson.

Smiling, Sherlock put his arm around John’s waist and tucked him into his side again. John decided he liked the possessiveness of the gesture and wrapped his arm around the alpha in return.

Sherlock spoke proudly as he squeezed John tight. "Mrs Hudson, I would like to introduce you to Dr John Watson, my new guide and soon to be my bonded omega. John, this is our landlady, Mrs Martha Hudson.”

John nodded politely, let go of Sherlock long enough to shake Mrs Hudson’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs Hudson. Sherlock has mentioned you to me a number of times.”
“I’m so happy to meet you, too, John. I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to know that this one is finally going to settle down and let someone take care of him. I expect we’ll have some little ones soon? I so miss having babies around. The second bedroom upstairs would make a wonderful nursery.”

John’s eyebrows rose into his fringe and he had to hide a smile. “Um, it’s a bit early to say, Mrs Hudson, but you’ll be one of the first to know, I’m sure.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and huffed in amusement. “We need to go, Mrs Hudson. We’ve not had breakfast yet.”

“Oh, of course, love. Your young man is too thin! Let me fix something for you both and bring it up. But only this once, since John is new here.”

Sherlock obviously had heard that before and didn’t bother to answer her as he led John to the door and up to flat. John called out his thanks as he was pulled up the steps. It was a huge relief to be back and John happily began to fix tea and set the table in anticipation of breakfast. He was thrilled that Mrs Hudson had offered to fix the meal since there wasn’t much left in the flat after their breakfast a few days ago.

Christ, had it only been a few days? So much had happened in the meantime that it seemed as if years had passed. But the flat in Brixton had only had some tea, tinned soup and a package of biscuits so he’d not eaten much for what seemed like days. Now John could finally look forward to a good, solid meal. Glancing over at Sherlock, he watched him boot up his laptop and begin reading his email. There seemed to be a lot of it but it wasn’t his business so he didn’t ask.

Mrs Hudson eventually tottered up the stairs with an enormous tray full of the biggest fry-up that John had ever seen in his life. There were eggs, sausage, bacon, hash browns, beans, mushrooms and his favourite, fried tomatoes. She’d also managed a large plate of toast, butter and jam. Sure that the food would clog every artery in his body, John’s mouth watered at the sight and smell and he ran to take the heavy tray from her. Despite her protests, John escorted Mrs Hudson to the table and served out the food. After pouring tea for all of them, he practically had to separate Sherlock from his computer with a pry bar but he eventually managed it, much to Mrs Hudson’s amusement.

Sherlock picked at the food until John’s glare made him finally eat something. John knew the alpha hadn’t had much either over the last few days and he was determined that Sherlock would eat at least one decent meal that day if it killed him. Mrs Hudson was a wonderful cook and John had to consciously slow down to avoid stuffing himself. He’d forgotten what it was like to have this kind of food. For so long he’d only had enough money to buy stale bread or limp vegetables. His meals had been healthy but bland and sometimes sparse. Meat was a rare luxury and he took full advantage of the embarrassment of riches in front of him. However, it reminded him that he was going to have to establish an exercise regimen soon or he’d start to seriously put on weight. If he remembered correctly, Regent’s Park was quite close by and would be ideal for running. Maybe he could get Sherlock to go with him.

Mrs Hudson was absolutely thrilled at John’s appetite. “Please, help yourselves boys, especially you, John. There’s plenty! Sherlock, you need to fatten him up so he’ll look the proper omega. Here, John. Have some more sausages and bacon. Everything is completely organic and sentinel safe. No chemicals or anything bad for our boy here. My youngest daughter’s alpha makes them herself. They have a farm out in the country and raise pigs and chickens.”

Everything was incredibly fresh and delicious so John gladly helped himself to more and put another fat sausage on Sherlock’s plate. The alpha gave him a dirty look but ate most of it anyway, much to
John’s amusement. It seemed Sherlock was a picky eater and John would just have to find a way to tempt his palate. He was happily looking forward to the challenge of making sure the detective ate properly.

John hadn’t honestly thought about the kinds of foods that would be safe for sentinels or where he could buy them. He wondered if Sherlock’s apparent disdain for food came from not having a lot of safe choices. Chemicals and preservatives routinely added to commercially manufactured foods wouldn’t be detected by a non-sentinel but John could only imagine how it might taste to an unbonded sentinel. From what John had learnt at Price Clinic, food allergies were all too common in sentinels, often with devastating effects. It was surprising just how vulnerable their enhanced senses could make them. Shuddering at the thought, John would do his best to remember that. No doubt Mrs Hudson would know where the best local places were to buy what he needed for the proper care and feeding of one alpha sentinel consulting detective and he planned to enlist her help as soon as possible. She obviously loved and adored Sherlock and John guessed she wouldn’t mind helping.

As they ate, Mrs Hudson prattled on about the weather, (“It’s meant to rain starting tomorrow afternoon.”) the neighbours (“The omega next door is expecting his third! Mrs Turner is so excited to have another baby to help look after!”), and the reporters out front.

“They’ve been out there since yesterday. You made quite a splash on the telly when you rescued John, Sherlock. It was so romantic! I’ve called the police on them, but they say they can’t do a thing. Isn’t there something you can do to shoo them away, dear? It’s a terrible shame when a body can’t leave her home without being harassed.”

“I’m not sure, Mrs Hudson, but I’ll think of something.” Sherlock’s expression was pensive.

“What are you thinking, Sherlock?” Curious, John munched on a large piece of toast that had been slathered with a huge helping of butter and jam. It tasted fantastic and he took another piece as Mrs Hudson smiled happily at him and pushed the plate closer.

“I’m thinking of giving them a statement. It would certainly get them off our backs for a time, anyway.”

Mrs Hudson beamed at Sherlock. “That would be lovely! I hate those people. Asking impertinent questions about you.” She stood and began to gather up all the empty dishes.

John helped her clean up and place the remains of their meal on the tray whilst Sherlock got up to go back to his email. “Thank you for breakfast, Mrs Hudson! It was lovely.”

Mrs Hudson patted his cheek fondly. “You’re welcome, John. I’ll feed you up in no time.” She lowered her voice and smiled. “You’ll need your strength to keep up with that one, you know.”

“Um. Yes, indeed. I believe I’ve figured that out already.” Mrs Hudson giggled and declined John’s help as she carried the tray down the stairs.

Once she was out of the flat, Sherlock came over to John and gathered him up, burying his face in John’s neck. “Thank Christ she’s gone. I’ve wanted to do this since we got home. Everything was getting too loud or smelling too strong all of a sudden.”

Strangely, John had been feeling as if he needed to embrace Sherlock, too and had been itching to do it. It felt great to be held and he was comforted as he breathed in Sherlock’s scent but he was alarmed slightly that Sherlock’s senses apparently weren’t stable.

The sentinel picked up on John’s worry. “Something else I recall from school. It’s early days and
normal for a newly bonded sentinel’s senses to fluctuate somewhat whilst they calibrate on the new guide. It’s rarely dangerous but we will need to reinforce our bond often during the first few weeks.”

John had absolutely no problem with that. “Well, let’s go do some reinforcing, shall we?” Sherlock grinned in agreement, took John’s hand and pulled him into the bedroom.

A few hours later, happily humming with contentment, John spent the rest of the short afternoon going through the kitchen, bath and bedrooms whilst Sherlock went back to his email. There hadn’t been time when John had first arrived to take stock of the household and he wanted to see what was needed to keep the flat clean and sentinel-safe.

The kitchen was the worst and it appeared that Sherlock rarely fixed any food in it and used the space primarily for biological experimentation. The large binocular microscope taking up most of the kitchen table clued John in to the main function of the room, but the carefully packaged and labelled body parts scattered throughout the refrigerator confirmed it. First on John’s list was to order a smaller fridge, transfer all the body parts to it and scrub the existing fridge with bleach. Or better yet, throw it out and get another. The experiments might be best if they were to take place in the spare bedroom for the sake of proper sanitation.

Moving on to other things, Sherlock was surprisingly patient as John asked him incessant questions about sentinel safe products for cleaning as well as what types of foods he preferred. Assured that money was no object, John put together a list that was rather substantial and daunting. He had the feeling that once Sherlock was on a case, it would be difficult to get him to eat but he would see to it that they both were nourished properly.

Once he was done with his list, he went downstairs to see if Mrs Hudson would accompany him on a shopping trip. She was delighted and they left the flat by the back way, catching a cab on the side street. As they drove past the front of the building, John saw that the reporters were still out front and didn’t seem to be going anywhere. It worried John but there was nothing he could think to do to get rid of them. In the meantime, he spent an educational few hours with Mrs Hudson, using the card Sherlock had absently handed to him. It was frightening how much they spent but Sherlock had said money was no object. John enjoyed spending time with the chatty omega and learnt quite a few things about her many children but nothing about her alpha. He didn’t want to ask her in case it was a delicate matter and made a note to himself check with Sherlock later.

They returned to Baker Street just before dinner time. The reporters were still outside so they dragged all their purchases in the back way. The new refrigerators would be delivered the next day so Mrs Hudson allowed John to store the perishables with her. She then gave him a casserole that he could warm up for their dinner. Thanking her profusely, he brought the rest of the groceries up the stairs. Once he’d finished putting everything away and stuck the casserole into the cooker to heat, he made his way to the lounge and sat with an exhausted sigh in one of the chairs beside Sherlock, who was still on his laptop. The telly was on the BBC News but the sound was so low that John couldn’t hear it and the remote was nowhere in sight. Too tired to look for it, John closed his eyes and settled back in the chair.

“The reporters were still outside when we came back from the shops. Personally, I’m wondering how they found out so fast about you. I had the impression that auction was being recorded only for the sentinel community.”

Absently, Sherlock shook his head and answered. “I wondered about that myself but it seems Murphy was so confident that Wood had successfully brainwashed you that he arranged to have your auction televised every place that was willing to carry it. He gambled everything that the public would rejoice in seeing you alive and relatively unscathed. In that regard, he was right and various
versions of the video were all over the internet within minutes of our escape.

“However, I suspect Murphy was really attempting to show the general public that the auctions were not harmful and that latents actually welcomed their new sentinels. If you had behaved yourself as he obviously expected, it might have worked. Remember, alpha sentinels are tremendously popular, even with non-sentinels. You and Keith Hammond certainly helped turn the tables on Murphy. That was an unexpected but not unwelcome distraction.”

Suddenly, John remembered that he’d not told Sherlock what he’d overheard between Dr Moore and Hammond when he’d still been a captive. The alpha appeared to be fascinated by the information as John filled him in. “It seems Hammond is the possible instigator of a revolt amongst the members of the Bureau. He said he had an inside source but I don’t know who it was.”

As Sherlock steepled his fingers under his chin, his expression became pensive. “This is all very intriguing and bodes ill for Murphy. He’s been accused publicly of wrongdoing by an alpha sentinel and you, John. Believe it or not, despite Murphy’s attempts to undermine your credibility, what you had to say resonated with everyone in that theatre. There are multiple shocks going through the sentinel community even now. Murphy’s going to be scrambling to explain himself and if he can’t, it may well be the end of his Directorship of the Bureau.”

“Well, it can’t come too soon. The man is a tosser.” John stretched stiffly and got up. The enticing smell of Mrs Hudson’s warming casserole was wafting through the flat and he was hungry. Sherlock set aside his laptop and actually joined him without any prompting, which John took as an encouraging sign. He’d be sure to get the recipe from Mrs Hudson at his earliest opportunity.

As they ate, John decided he couldn’t rein in his curiosity about what Sherlock had been doing all afternoon. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but you certainly seemed to have a lot of email to go through. I know we were gone for a few days, but I had no idea you were so popular.”

Sherlock gave him a half smile. “I rarely get email like this. It’s the video of the auction and the fact I’m now revealed as the seventh alpha sentinel that has increased the traffic on my website.”

“Ah, I should have realised. What are the emails saying?” John took a large bite of his excellent dinner and waited for Sherlock to answer.

To John’s surprise, Sherlock winked at him in amusement. “Most were good wishes for you, actually though many were for us both. In fact, some alphas have threatened to take you from me if I don’t take excellent care of you and the omegas want me to give you lots of children. It seems you are quite popular with the masses, John.”

Putting his hand over his face, John groaned. “Christ. Next thing, someone will offer to give us a reality show.”

Sherlock’s grin grew. “Actually, we’ve been offered five reality shows.”

Sighing in exasperation, John narrowed his eyes at Sherlock. “I expect you turned them down?”

Looking offended, Sherlock’s only answer was a raised eyebrow and then a scowl as he ate a morsel of dinner.

“I’m an idiot. Of course you turned them down. Good god, what was I thinking.” John wanted to bang his head on the table and barely managed to refrain.

“There were other, much more interesting emails, though, that have potential cases associated with
them. Of course there are the usual requests to find lost pets or misplaced keys but I’m quickly sorting through them and will consider the most interesting cases for investigation. Often I can just solve them from here, but I fully expect that you will be able to help me look into some of these if it becomes necessary.”

John was thrilled and said so as he got up to clear the table and do the dishes. Sherlock offered to help but John would hear none of it and sent Sherlock back to his computer. Before he could boot it up, the alpha’s mobile rang. John finished gathering their dishes and started washing up so he wasn’t able to overhear the conversation. Once he was done with the dishes, he found Sherlock parked in front of the telly, watching the BBC news. It didn’t seem to occur to the sentinel that the sound was turned down so low that John couldn’t hear a thing. In addition, the big git still had the remote and John was too tired to get up and get it.

The alpha turned to John as he sat wearily down in the chair beside him and grinned evilly. “Apparently Murphy’s fat is now in the proverbial fire. That was Mycroft who rang. He and the Prime Minister, along with some high ranking representatives of the Bureau, were to meet with the Director this afternoon so that Murphy could account for the accusations you and Hammond brought against him. He never showed and about 20 million pounds were found to be missing from the Bureau’s treasury. Rather a startling coincidence, I believe. Murphy is now wanted for questioning. It’s just a matter of time before he’s caught.”

Sighing in exhaustion, John could only feel relief that things were finally coming to a head. But Murphy was still out there. “Christ, that’s all we need is Murphy on the run, showing up who knows where. He’s devious and I hope they catch him soon. At least he’ll no longer head the Bureau, which can only be a good thing. I wonder who will become the new Director.”

Looking thoughtful, Sherlock glanced briefly at John. “I’ve got one or two ideas, but from what Mycroft suggested, there may be an interim Director appointed by the government. You’ll be pleased to know that not only is there an indefinite moratorium on all latent auctions but that the collection of latents has been stopped. The Bureau itself is in total political disarray at the moment and Mycroft will make hay whilst the sun shines.

“Already, his minions in Parliament are pushing the latent ‘Freedom’ bill through to a vote this week in both Houses. It’s unprecedented to force something through so quickly, but apparently there is no one willing to oppose him at the moment. I hate politics, but in this case I’ll make an exception. In this case, politics as wielded by Mycroft seems most effective.”

Sherlock smiled warmly at John who grinned back, but then the omega’s smile faded. “I know I should be ecstatic but I can’t help thinking about the latents who are now bonded to sentinels that they never wanted. I wonder if there’s any way to address that and find a way to get justice for them. To maybe somehow allow them to go back to their previous lives.” John’s expression was melancholy.

Sherlock’s face was sombre, too. “I don’t honestly know if it’s possible, John. Their bonds would have to be broken. I know it would kill me to lose you. And you know first hand how painful it was when Wood tried to break our soul bond, which was a shadow of what we have now. Our body chemistries are merged and we’ll eventually have identical scents. We are bonded body and soul and so are they now, whether they chose it or not.”

Nodding regretfully, John agreed. “Yes, but you and I—we’re exceptionally compatible. I’m sure there must be pairs where the bond isn’t so strong. The boy they sold me to at first—Barry—wasn’t compatible with me in the least. I’m sure they’d have tried to force a bonding of sorts between us and maybe there would have eventually been something, but any kind of bond he and I would have
formed pales in comparison to what you and I have created. But what I’m saying is that there may be pairs where their bond is weak and they should have the chance to break that bond if they want. Sure, it may be painful but it should be their choice. And Lori, Hammond’s guide, gave me the impression that bond breaking didn’t have to be painful in the way that Wood did it. He just liked causing pain, the psychotic bastard.”

Mouth tight with remembered anger, John wondered what had happened to the other omega. He didn’t wish a permanent vegetative state on anyone and reluctantly hoped the other guide had recovered. But at the same time John hoped Wood had learnt his lesson and that he’d be forbidden from hurting anyone else. Whoever his alpha sentinel was should take him away and keep him from other guides because if John ever saw him again, only one of them would walk away.

“John, I’ll talk to Mycroft about your concerns for the latents already auctioned off. I know you care deeply about them and want to see their grievances addressed if possible. You should know that one thing about the law Mycroft is endorsing is that it will allow latents who have fled the country to come back without any penalties.”

Thinking of Sheri and Phil, John felt a smile spread across his face again. “That would be fantastic. Thank you for telling me, Sherlock. Now if only we could get rid of the reporters camped out on the front door, I’d be completely happy. I don’t like them there.”

Sherlock gave him a questioning glance. “Why are you so worried? They can’t do anything to us.”

John stared at the alpha wondering if he was just being wilfully ignorant or really thought that. “You’re wrong, Sherlock. They can make trouble and affect how the public sees you, especially if they just decide to make up a bunch of shite about you. Despite how positively everyone seems to be taking your newly revealed status, I’m worried for your safety. Other alpha sentinels live isolated and away from the public so they’re not constantly bothered. You’re too accessible and I’m worried about what could happen.”

Sherlock stared back at John and spoke seriously. “You know better than anyone why I was hesitant at first about revealing my status. But then I remembered what my spirit animal told me. She said I had to rethink my goals in life and that the ones I had before I met you weren’t as important as I’d thought. So when I was searching for you, I spent a considerable amount of time revaluating what I wanted from my life and discovered that she was right.

“I’d never thought I’d want a guide or omega, but you changed my mind. I never wanted to have the notoriety being identified as an alpha sentinel would bring me but it allowed me to free you and make you mine. What it came down to in the end was that I wanted you. I wanted us to bond and work together. I want to have a family with you. I wanted the freedom to be who I was and I was willing to pay any price a thousand times over if it meant you would be safe.

“The need to hide what I am has overshadowed everything I’ve done my entire adult life. Every decision I made and any goal I set for myself was with that firmly in mind. But because I hid what I was, I do know for a fact that everything I have and all that I’ve achieved is based on my own merits. Every success in my career has been because of my own hard work and not handed to me because I happen to have a rare combination of DNA.

“Knowing that about myself, I can finally let go of that early part of my life and move forward with you by my side. I am an alpha sentinel and don’t care who knows. I believe that this is what my spirit animal meant for me to do and so I refuse to worry about what might happen.

“And because I trust her, I’m certain it will all be fine. I admit I hadn’t expected the welcome we’ve received but we both know that the public has an incredibly short memory for anything unless it’s
constantly thrown into their faces. So we’ll be a nine-day wonder and they’ll forget about us as soon as the next news cycle uncovers some juicy scandal—case in point: Director Murphy.” Sherlock winked at John and his eyes sparkled. “And we’ll be too busy solving cases to worry about much else. Remember, you promised to be my partner in this, Dr Watson.”

Relieved by Sherlock’s response and happier than he could remember being in a very long time, John could only shake his head. He should have known and trusted that Sherlock would be able to see the big picture. “God help me, I did promise you. And you’re right about everything. You can count on me, Sherlock.”

Expression soft and warm, Sherlock smiled shyly. “That’s something I’ve known about you from the moment we met, John. I can always count on you.”

Warmth spread through John’s chest and he felt a bit breathless. All John could do was blink at his alpha’s face as his eyes filled and then he was kneeling beside the chair with his arms around Sherlock’s neck. It was Sherlock who closed the distance between their lips and gave John a kiss so full of love and adoration that the omega’s heart felt full to overflowing. The bond sprang to life and seemed to expand and strengthen as it pulsed with their heartbeats.

Suddenly, Sherlock tore his lips away from John’s, who embarrassed himself by whining in protest. “Just a moment! I’m sorry but I believe we need to watch this, John.”

Reluctantly and with a pout on his face, John sat on the arm of Sherlock’s chair to watch the news. Sherlock snaked an arm around his waist and pulled John into the chair beside him. Snuggling into his alpha’s side wasn’t as wonderful as snogging him but it was a close second. John peered at the screen and saw someone being hustled through an airport by members of the Metropolitan Police. There was still no sound and he glanced in irritation at Sherlock, who didn’t seem to notice. Looking back at the screen and squinting, he sat up quickly when he recognised Lestrade and pointed. “Wait. Is that…?”

Sherlock interrupted. “Yes, that’s Lestrade. Do you recognise the person being taken away?”

Looking closer, John saw someone he didn’t know but right behind him he did recognise the pale face of Walter, Murphy’s guide. “What the bloody…? Who is that bloke with the awful fake beard? Surely that’s not Murphy!”

Grinning, Sherlock put a finger to his lips as he finally turned up the volume with the remote. “Shhh. Listen to what they’re saying, John.”

"... apprehended right before the aeroplane was to depart for Thailand. The police refuse to comment on any charges at this time but a governmental press conference has been scheduled for later in the day. Again, our top story is the arrest of former Bureau Director Charles Murphy at London’s Heathrow airport. The Director and his guide were attempting to board an aeroplane for Thailand this afternoon. We can only speculate on the reasons for his arrest at this time, but unnamed sources say it’s directly related to the accusations levelled against him by alpha sentinel Keith Hammond and latent guide William Larssen.

“Mr Larssen, whom most of London thought had died last month, actually survived his dramatic leap into the Thames. We have reporters currently at his home trying to ascertain the facts of Mr Larssen’s miraculous escape and will bring you the latest on that story and the developing drama concerning Director Murphy as we continue to collect the facts. Stay tuned….”

John turned toward Sherlock with a look of wonder on his face. “I’ll be buggared. He’s been caught.
I wonder how they managed to find him.”

Giving him a mysterious smile, Sherlock kissed his forehead. “I’m beginning to suspect they had some inside information. I’m sure Mycroft will fill us in on the details, but it’s been a long day and you’re tired. Let’s go to bed. Don’t forget you’ve got an appointment in the morning to get that tattoo removed.”

Standing up, John pulled Sherlock to his feet. “I’d completely forgotten about that. You’ll be coming with me, I hope? Good. Now, come on. We’ve got some bond reinforcement to get done. Very important, that.”

Laughing, Sherlock eagerly followed John to the bedroom.

John woke early the next morning, feeling exquisitely content, happy and fully rested. For the first time in what seemed like months, nothing hurt. A nude and very warm Sherlock was spooned behind him and the alpha had John wrapped up tightly in his arms. Body humming in satiation from their lovemaking, John felt the pleasant ache of having had Sherlock buried deep inside him multiple times during the night. Each time had been better than the last as Sherlock continued to learn more and more about John’s body and how to satisfy him. The alpha seemed to delight in finding new ways to take John apart and make him scream. The embarrassing sounds John made as he was thoroughly fucked seemed to arouse Sherlock to new heights and when they’d finally fallen into an exhausted sleep, Sherlock had been still inside him. John fervently hoped Mrs Hudson was partially deaf but he suspected she’d be winking at him and giving him naughty smiles for days.

Slowly, he eased out from under Sherlock’s arm. The alpha grumbled and clutched John’s pillow to his face. Somehow satisfied with the poor substitution, Sherlock took a deep breath of John’s scent and fell back to sleep. Taking a few moments to smile down at the sight of a blissfully sleeping Sherlock, John finally had to head for the loo. Now that he was upright, more of Sherlock’s come was beginning to leak out of him. He was covered in the stuff anyway but he shivered and his belly throbbed as more warm fluid slid out of him and down his legs. He still couldn’t believe just how much semen an alpha could produce. Theoretically, he’d known it was a lot but to actually experience it was a different matter altogether.

Also, he was astonished at how much he craved the feeling of penetration, especially since he’d never liked it before. Having a real alpha instead of a toy made all the difference, it seemed. Even thinking about it made him clench deep inside again with arousal and John wondered if it would always be like that. His heat was going to be very interesting, to say the least, and he was actually looking forward to it. Experiencing a fully aroused alpha in rut and being knotted would be amazing.

As he showered and began to wake up, he reminded himself to start taking the contraceptives soon. Also, John had never spent a heat outside of an approved omega safe room before so they would need to stock up on things like bottled water and energy drinks. Mrs Hudson’s advice would again be very helpful in that regard.

Dressed, kettle on and breakfast started, John finally woke a bleary eyed Sherlock and they prepared for the day. From what he recalled, a car was meant to pick him up at 8am to take him to his appointment. Dishes were done and they were ready to go early. Sherlock turned on the BBC news to see what was happening but nothing new had been reported about Murphy.

John looked outside the front window to see if the car had arrived yet only to see with horror that the reporters were still swarming around outside of Speedy’s.

“Sherlock, the car is here and they’re still out there. Can we get the car to meet us on the side street? I
really don’t want to run a gauntlet right now if we can avoid it.”

“I don’t think that would be wise, John. We just need to face them down and get rid of them. Don’t worry. Just stay close to me and I’ll take care of it.”

Trusting in his alpha, John followed Sherlock down the stairs, feeling edgy and anxious. Throwing open the door, Sherlock strode out into the midst of the reporters with John tucked under his arm. Wishing he’d had a polo neck jumper amongst his clothes, John had buttoned his shirt up but it still didn’t hide the still visible bonding marks on his throat. He felt exposed and self conscious but glad that Sherlock appeared to be the main focus of the reporters.

Forcing his way through the throng of people, Sherlock stopped at the edge of the pavement beside the car, turned to face the swarm and was immediately surrounded. John went into combat alertness and prepared to strike out at anyone who tried to touch them but the reporters surprisingly didn’t get too close. Just in case, John extended his empathy around both him and Sherlock in the hope that it would protect and prevent Sherlock’s temporarily unstable senses from becoming overwhelmed.

The reporters were all shouting questions at the same time, creating a cacophony of irritating sound while others shot numerous photos and ran video of them. Some of the questions made John alternately cringe in embarrassment and then become angry enough to want to knock the reporter’s loaf off.

“Are you really an alpha sentinel?”

“Why did you hide what you are?”

“Will you be having your own reality detective show?”

“How many omegas do you have? Where are you hiding your children?”

“Did you really steal William Larssen from the Bureau during the auction and bond with him? Why didn’t you just buy him? Will you be facing charges for that?”

“How did William Larssen survive the fall into the Thames? Is he your only omega?”

“Is your omega pregnant yet? How long have you been bonded?”

Sherlock held up one hand whilst pulling John just a bit closer. His beautifully modulated baritone rang out over the noise.

“All you vultures listen because I will not repeat myself. Yes, I’m an alpha sentinel and did indeed bond with a latent omega guide. His name is Dr John Watson and he will be helping me with my work. I dare the Bureau to come after me for taking what was mine and you will all be gone by the time I return or there will be hell to pay. And no, there will be no reality show! I will not answer the rest of your idiotic questions. Now sod off!”

Sherlock urged John into the car whilst the reporters continued to shout at them. Quite a few were now directed at John. The vehicle took off and as John looked back at the mob, he could see them dispersing.

“It seems your threat worked, Sherlock. They’re all running off.”

Huffing with disgust, Sherlock sat back in his seat. “Now that they’ve got a quote, they’re off to file their reports, but more will return, I’m certain.”
“Like you said, we’ll just be a nine-day wonder and then something more interesting will come along in the news cycle. That reminds me, when will Mycroft arrange to announce the omega birth control pill? That combined with the scandal at the Bureau should knock us off the headlines quite neatly.”

“I believe he said sometime next week, so it seems we’ll just have to endure sharing the spotlight with Murphy.”

Sighing, John could only hope that the press would get bored of them quickly. Focussing on their journey, he realised they were heading to one of the most posh parts of town. Of course Mycroft had arranged the appointment with one of the most expensive dermatologists in London but he’d expected that. There were a fair number of people in the waiting room and John stuck out like a sore thumb, but he’d expected that, too. He was grateful to Sherlock for accompanying him because the alpha sentinel glared menacingly at anyone who looked too long at John. Most of them were shooting wide-eyed glances at Sherlock anyway and ignoring John. Apparently they knew who Sherlock was but everyone was well mannered enough not to make a scene. John was well content even though the doctor was running late. The chairs in the room were comfortable and the magazines relatively interesting. Eventually an assistant came to get them and they were finally ushered into the back.

The doctor hemmed and hawed at the latent mark but the procedure was actually straightforward. Since the tattoo was made with black ink, John was assured it was perfect for laser removal because the black pigment absorbed all laser wavelengths. It was an interesting procedure and somewhat painful but not unbearable. After a few rather uncomfortable moments, the doctor showed him the results. His earlobe was swollen and sore but he was thrilled to see the tattoo was much lighter and once it was healed, would be almost undetectable. The dermatologist covered the tattoo with antibiotic cream and a bandage and then announced that John was to make another appointment in seven weeks.

Pleased that it hadn’t taken long at all, John did as he was asked and was finally able to leave the place with a follow-up appointment card made out in his real name. With a light heart, John held it out to his alpha, who smiled indulgently at his excitement.

"Look, Sherlock! This feels amazing! I've not been able to use my real name for almost a year."

“Yes, John. I believe I know somewhat how you feel about that.” He looked fondly down at John who grinned up at him as they got into the car. It was turning out to be a beautiful day.

Once they were settled, Sherlock turned to him. “We should go clothes shopping for you soon, John. I know Mycroft got you a few things but you should be able to choose what you want. Now would be an appropriate time, I think.”

John had been relaxing in his seat with visions of an early lunch dancing through his head when Sherlock’s statement belatedly registered with him. “What? Wait, no, Sherlock! I’m fine with clothes. I just spent an obscene amount of your money yesterday. I don’t need anything, seriously!”

“I disagree, John. We’ll go now.” Leaning forward, Sherlock got the attention of the driver and gave him directions.

Rolling his eyes and sighing, John gave up. There was no way that he was getting out of it and he realised he should just accept it. Sherlock was the alpha and was used to things being a certain way. It wasn’t as if he’d not been warned that the detective was set in his ways. John hated clothes shopping and wasn’t looking forward to it at all. He didn’t like the idea of the shop staff seeing his threadbare clothing, making assumptions and talking about him behind their hands. He knew the
whole experience would likely be humiliating but he lifted his head, squared his shoulders and followed Sherlock into the shop.

Despite John's expectations, Sherlock was greeted affectionately by staff members who clearly knew him. John was introduced by Sherlock as his new omega guide to one of the older betas in the shop, who congratulated them both on their bonding. John knew his face was flaming with embarrassment but the elderly gentleman gave him a genuine smile and did his best to make John feel comfortable. The experience turned out to be remarkable and surprisingly positive. The staff doted on them both. They made tea for John and had him sit whilst they brought him multiple selections from their ready to wear section. They used their considerable experience to find clothing that would be comfortable, fit properly and look well on him. They respected his input and preferences and somehow he came away with numerous carrier bags of purchases that he was absolutely thrilled to own.

Eyes sparkling with amusement, Sherlock carried the largest bags out of the shop. “I'll bring you back in a few weeks, once we’re fully bonded and we’ll get you a few suits and a tuxedo. I’m sure Mummy and Father will want to throw us a party at some point and it's best you be prepared for that eventuality.”

“Um, about your parents, Sherlock. Do they know about me and that we’re bonded now?”

Sherlock had given the bags to the driver to put into the boot. “Of course they know. Mycroft has kept them informed practically from the moment you and I met at Price Clinic.”

Getting into the car, John sighed and didn’t bother to ask how Mycroft had even known anything about him that early on. Maybe the man was psychic or even better at reading people than Sherlock, which was an absolutely terrifying thought. It was another thing he would simply have to get used to and he’d always felt it best to not ask questions he didn’t really want the answers to. In the meantime, his stomach growled alarmingly. Their shopping trip had taken a surprising amount of time and John hadn’t even noticed. They’d missed lunch and it was now well past two. Laughing, Sherlock had the driver take them to a sentinel friendly restaurant for a late lunch. They lingered over their meal, simply enjoying each other’s company.

Finally, Sherlock picked up the thread of their earlier conversation. “If you’re worried about what my parents might think of you, John, you needn’t. As far as I’m concerned, they’ve got nothing to say in the matter, but I’m sure they’re thrilled that I’ve finally bonded. Mycroft is a beta and I’m the only alpha in the immediate family so of course they want grandchildren to carry on the family name.”

John tensed at that, still certain he wasn’t ready to be a parent yet, but Sherlock reassured him. “I’m not demanding children, John. If they come eventually, well, that’s fine but honestly, it’s up to you.”

"Ta, luv. I do appreciate that. I figure we'll discuss it when the time comes." It was getting close to tea time when the car finally approached Baker Street and thankfully all the reporters had taken Sherlock's warning to heart and had left. However, there was a man in his early 50's walking back and forth in front of their door, clearly agitated.

Sherlock handed the keys to John as they got out of the vehicle and collected the carrier bags. "It seems we have a case, John. Do open the door for him and I'll see to the bags."

The strange omega greeted them as they approached the door. "Are you Sherlock Holmes, the detective? My name is Thomas Craufurd. Your landlady said you'd be back soon. My baby--she's been missing for hours! Please, you must help me!"
John soothed the distraught man and took his arm. "Of course we'll help. Please come in."

Mrs Hudson met them at the bottom of the stairs. "I offered to let Mr Craufurd into the flat but he wouldn't hear of it without permission from the alpha of the house. He's so upset. I hope you can help him."

"I'm sure we'll try, Mrs Hudson. Cheers."

They led Craufurd into the flat and Sherlock questioned the man whilst John prepared tea for them and then took notes.

The omega ran his hands through his hair, completely at his wits' end. "My daughter Winstone is missing. She just turned 14 last week and we had her omega coming out party, too. She stayed home from school today as a treat and this afternoon we were going to go shopping for her gift but she disappeared. She was only meant to take the rubbish out before we left but she never came back. I've contacted all her friends and the school but no one's seen her. I rang the police but they say she's simply a runaway and will come home when she's hungry and tired."

He looked up at them, eyes tortured and swimming with tears. "She wouldn’t run away. Someone’s taken her and I've got to find her. She's my baby. I have to get her back."

Sherlock eyed him narrowly and glanced at John. Using his empathy, John could only pick up frantic worry and desperate fear so strong it made him withdraw quickly. Grimly, he nodded to Sherlock, who began questioning again. "Does your alpha know you're here? What kind of relationship does Winnie have with her sire?"

"My alpha knows I'm here and she loves our daughter. Winnie is named after her, for god's sake! She wanted to come with me but had to help watch the grandchildren instead."

"My questions may seem harsh but we have to investigate every possibility." Sherlock’s tone was surprisingly gentle for all it was a rebuke. John was pleased and sent his approval to Sherlock as a mental caress. The alpha shot him a quick smile and then focused back on their client.

Pressing his hands over his face, the omega nodded and shuddered. "I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. I’m just so worried."

The questions continued but no real picture of what could have happened appeared, at least to John. Sherlock finished his questions and sat still, thinking deeply while Craufurd stared at him, a desperate hope in his eyes.

Suddenly, the alpha stood. "Mr Craufurd, we must go see Winnie’s room and her laptop. I’d especially like to see if we can access her Facebook page. We might be able to do that on the way with my laptop if you know her password? No? Unfortunate."

"Her sister Wendy will know. I had my eldest son pick her up early from school. Let’s go!"

The now hopeful omega clattered down the stairs and out the front door with Sherlock right behind him. John hesitated a moment and impulsively picked up the SIG before following his alpha. He felt awful for Craufurd and hoped he’d never be in the position of losing a child. The thought caused chills to run down his spine which drew a sharp glance and frown from Sherlock. Shaking his head and giving his alpha a smile, they both followed their client into the back of a taxi and headed off.

Craufurd rocked in his seat, chewed his fingernails and remained silent the entire ride. It occurred to John that this man might not be able to afford Sherlock’s rates and then it further occurred to John
that he had no idea if Sherlock even charged for his services. This situation was nerve wracking and incredibly sad. John felt unbelievably tense and wondered what they would encounter at the omega’s house.

The distraught man had rung ahead and his bond mate was waiting for them as they arrived at the lower middle-class neighbourhood. She looked tearful and frightened but was gracious and invited them inside the relatively small house. The lounge seemed completely full of young people who ranged in age from fifteen to thirty. Several babies were being held and comforted and the entire room reeked of fear and anxiety. Sherlock ignored everything but zeroed in on a dark haired beta girl who was the youngest teen sitting on the sofa.

"Wendy. You share a laptop with your sister. Where is it? I’d like to see Winnie’s room, also. John, with me.” Without speaking, the frightened young girl rose and led them up the stairs to a small room with two sets of bunk beds, clearly shared by four siblings. There were two small desks, a dresser and a cupboard. Everything was incredibly cramped and worn, but clearly well cared for and tidy. Wendy opened an ancient laptop and started it up whilst Sherlock seated himself at the tiny desk, hovering over it like a large bird.

“John, look around the room and see what you can find. Wendy, what’s your sister’s Facebook password?”

John tuned Sherlock and Wendy out as he began to search the room. The walls were covered with photos of teenage heartthrobs and certificates for scholarly or athletic excellence. John noted at least four different girls’ names on the paperwork. There was a printout sellotaped to the wall that drew his instant attention, though. It was a formal announcement from a local online newspaper of Winstone Craufurd’s coming out as an omega.

Many families had recently returned to the traditional presentation declarations for their omega children. Historically, coming out announcements were done to let local alphas know when an omega had come of age and John strongly felt it was an antiquated tradition that should have died of old age long ago. Coming out parties were often very expensive but as the baby of the large family, Winnie was obviously greatly treasured by the Craufurds and likely indulged. John pulled the paper off the wall and brought it over to the alpha.

Sherlock had questioned Wendy about Winnie’s friends and then dismissed the girl. John handed Sherlock the announcement and saw the alpha’s mouth tighten and his expression turn grim.

“What have you found, Sherlock?”

“This child had an online stalker, though she wasn’t aware of it. If you look at these Facebook postings, you can see that one person is responding to her posts but under numerous names. This person is posing as a young male alpha and this one as another omega female but you can tell by the way they structure their sentences and the same grammatical errors in each posting, it’s the same person. They’re also not native English speakers. I’ll wager anything you name that this person is involved in her disappearance.” Pulling out his mobile, Sherlock dialled the phone.

"Mycroft, I’ve got an abduction case and it’s serious. Can you track an IP address from a Facebook account if I give you the username and password? Excellent!”

John left Sherlock to wrangle with his brother whilst he looked around the room again. Nothing stood out except for the fact that this tiny room housed four girls at one time, all very close in age. Not for the first time, John wondered just how many children the Craufurd family had. He’d not really had time to count all the people downstairs but he guessed they had at least ten children as well
as grandbabies. Hopefully not all of them lived in the house still but how they managed it he couldn’t imagine.

John was one of only two children to beta parents and he and Harry had constantly got up each other’s noses and drove their poor mother round the twist. They’d never really stopped fighting, even after they’d reached adulthood. There was no way he’d have survived such a large family as the Craufurds, but it was common with alphas and omegas to have many children, especially since there was no reliable birth control until now.

But the Craufurd household didn’t have any of the feelings of animosity and sibling rivalry he’d experienced with Harry growing up. It was obvious their lives weren’t perfect but they got along somehow and seemed to have a lot of respect for one another. Maybe alpha/omega families truly were different to beta families. If he and Sherlock began to have children, would he be able to raise them without making major mistakes? Chances were good that he’d end up channelling his Mum and all he could think about were the things he’d likely do wrong. His stomach began to churn just thinking about it.

He was jostled out of his thoughts as Sherlock finished his conversation. “Mycroft is going to trace the location of the IP address of Winnie’s Facebook friends. In the meantime, we need to go out to the rubbish bins and see if there are any clues left by whoever abducted Winnie.”

Early evening was falling as they made their way to the rubbish bins and John threw a net of empathy around them both as Sherlock began to use his senses to examine and investigate the scene. He had John take photos with his phone of various things that John couldn’t even begin to see.

“I can smell the scent of an alpha here and the remnant of Winnie’s fear where she was pushed against the bins. There are footprints leading over here from the other side of the alley and then they return with Winnie’s.” Sherlock walked down the alley and pointed out spots in the muddy cobblestones. “She’s being dragged here and finally picked up there and carried.”

Sherlock stood up and looked around. There were tall privacy fences and brick walls surrounding the alley on all sides and he stopped, held out a hand for John to take and then closed his eyes. Amazed and awed, John could feel Sherlock extend his senses to range out and around the area until he honed in on one house to their right, directly behind the Craufurd’s residence.

”Come, John!” Sherlock ran to the front door of the house and knocked loudly. There was a post box beside the entrance with the name ‘Wells’ roughly pencilled on it. The door was eventually opened by an unshaven male beta in a stained vest who grunted at them.

“What do you want?” The man was surly looking and reeked of stale beer. John didn’t know how Sherlock could stand it and strengthened his empathic protection around his sentinel just in case.

Sherlock pushed his way into the foyer, despite the man’s protests, and shouted up the stairs. ”Mrs Wells, I wish to know what you saw! Please come out, Winnie’s life depends on it!”

Confused, John waited, keeping a close eye on the outraged man and stepping in front of him to keep him from approaching Sherlock as the alpha quickly advanced up the stairs. An elderly woman came to the top of the landing and looked down at them.

“Who are you? What do you want?” John could see she was frail but her mind was sharp. Her eyes widened as Sherlock introduced himself.

“I’m alpha sentinel Sherlock Holmes and I’m searching for Winnie Craufurd. She’s gone missing and I heard you arguing just now with your son about reporting what you saw this afternoon. You
wanted to report it to the police but he said you were imagining it. You didn’t imagine it. What did you see?”

The woman gaped at Sherlock but then pulled herself together. “Yes, I was watching the alley from the window and saw Winnie come out to put rubbish into the bins. She’s a good omega and behaves herself. A man walked over and started talking to her. At first she was friendly but then she pulled away and looked scared. I tried to wake Toby, but he was drunk and he’d hidden the mobile. He doesn’t like me talking to my friends because it costs him money. Anyway, the man took her arm and forced her into a car. I wrote down the number plate.”

Mrs Wells took a scrap of paper from the pocket of her frock and gave it to Sherlock. “You’ll call the police, won’t you, dear? Get Winnie home soon?”

Sherlock smiled and gave the old lady a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll do my best, Mrs Wells. Thank you for this.” Bolting down the stairs, Sherlock stopped briefly and glared down his nose at Mr Wells. Alpha pheromones flooded the hall and John nearly laughed as the beta trembled and went to his knees under Sherlock’s overpowering alpha personality.

“You had best take better care of your mother, Mr Wells. She has likely just saved the life of your neighbour’s daughter. I will see to it that someone comes for a visit very soon to determine her condition and I will tell them that you’re keeping her isolated. You’d best change your ways or I’ll see to it you’re very sorry.”

Following the alpha out of the flat, John couldn’t help but be effected by the pheromones as well and found his knees were a bit weak, but he caught up to Sherlock quickly. The alpha was on his mobile, this time speaking to Lestrade and requesting information on the number plate. Apparently Lestrade was able to give him the information quickly.

“We have to move fast, John. I suspect that Winnie isn’t the only omega that’s been kidnapped. There was a mention on Winnie’s Facebook wall about some missing girls in other cities, all of them new omegas. Winnie was smart enough to notice it and was frightened about it. I suspect each of these girls had coming out announcements in their local newspapers or online versions and were selected as victims because of it.”

Everything was happening almost too fast but it was incredibly exciting and John was relieved that he could contribute. His latent senses were ranging around them but mostly wrapping around Sherlock as he shielded and buffered the sentinel from any imbalances to his senses. It seemed to have become automatic since their bonding and he was glad to be of use to the detective, even if he couldn’t really help with the investigation.

As if he’d read John’s mind, Sherlock reassured him. “You’re helping me considerably, John. Just your presence allows me to focus on what’s important, knowing that my senses will not be allowed to go out of control. You have no idea how freeing that is now that I can use them without fear of zoning. I was able to pick up on things in that alley I’d never have found before and easily overhear Mrs Wells’ conversation with her son, so don’t sell yourself short.”

The mobile buzzed before John could say anything but he couldn’t help the warm glow that grew in his chest, knowing that he was acting as a proper guide to his brilliant sentinel.

“We’ve got a location from Mycroft. It’s from the Olympic Internet Cafe in Stratford, on the other side of the city. Lestrade says the number plate is registered to someone who lives on Widdin Street in Stratford. I’ll see if I can’t get him to meet us there but if I include him I’ll need to gather evidence first. Taxi!”
“Don’t you want to tell Mr Craufurd where you’re going?” John was hustled into the taxi and it sped off on their destination.

“No time, John. It’s going to take us over an hour just to reach that location in northeast London. I’ll tell them when we bring Winnie home.” Sherlock checked in with Lestrade, who agreed to meet them there with some officers. He then pulled out his phone and began researching their destination on Google maps. John watched over his shoulder.

“As you can see, they’re all terraced houses but the one we’re looking for is only connected to the others on one side. Each house has a small garden surrounded by gates and that’s where we will go. I need to listen in on any conversations inside and once I hear something, I can give Lestrade authorisation to go in. It’ll be easier if we wait until full dark, though. We can get closer to the house without raising suspicions.”

British law indicated that if a sentinel associated with the police heard something illegal occurring inside a dwelling, his word was all that was needed to allow the authorities to enter and search. John had always thought the law was too broad and easily abused but was grateful for it in this case. At long last, they finally arrived at their destination but had the cab drive past and drop them off further down the street. As they passed the house, the car with the number plates Mrs Wells had given them was parked right in front. Their luck was holding; though for how long, John had no idea.

It was fully night time when they arrived. The street was dark since only some of the street lamps were working but they were able to make their way to the house they wanted easily. The entrance to the garden was locked but Sherlock made short work of the gate and then they slipped inside and were finally looking at the back of the house. John couldn’t see much but he knew his sentinel was examining it with all his available senses.

Some of the lights on the ground floor were on and also in the basement level. John couldn't see an entrance to the basement from the rear of the house, though. Belatedly, he realised Sherlock had begun to listen intently to what was going on in the house and John once more surrounded and shielded Sherlock with his empathy. It seemed he’d done it just in time as he could feel the sentinel's sense of hearing pull back from a near zone, making John's heart beat faster in fear for him. Being a guide was a huge responsibility and he couldn't imagine how a sentinel could dare feel comfortable using their senses without one.

Suddenly Sherlock spoke grimly. “She’s in there. I also hear four men inside. Two are on the first floor and two in the basement where Winnie is located. I can’t hear anyone on the second level.” Sherlock pulled out his mobile and dialled Lestrade.

“Where are you, Lestrade? They’ve got her in the house on Widdin Street. Come around to the back when you arrive. I can hear them planning to take her elsewhere ‘with the others’. It seems we’ve possibly stumbled upon a gang that specialises in kidnapping omegas. We need to find out where this other location is and I suggest we let them go and follow them.”

As they watched, lights came on in the second floor and John could see movement behind the thin curtains. After about five minutes, the lights went off. A few moments later, Lestrade slipped into the back garden and crouched down in the shadows beside them.

"So, what's happening? Have they said where they plan to take her?"

Absently, Sherlock shook his head. "They've packed their things and are preparing to abandon the house. From what I overheard, they're from Eastern Europe and plan to ship the omegas over to the continent for the sex trade. Apparently, there’s a lot of money to be made from selling new omegas and they've manufactured documentation to prove each omega is a virgin." Sherlock was coldly
furious and both alphas began to emit protective pheromones, worried about the other omegas as well as Winnie.

John shuddered at the thought of these young kids being torn from their families to become sex slaves in a foreign country. It infuriated him and he hoped he'd have a chance to expend some of his outrage in violence that night. Once again, Sherlock read his thoughts and the alpha smiled down at him and pulled him close for a quick kiss.

"I can guarantee that you'll see some action tonight, John."  Fiercely glad, the doctor gave his alpha a feral grin and Sherlock smirked back.

Lestrade looked at both of them, frowning in evident disapproval. "Are you sure you want John involved in this, Sherlock? Once we get Winnie free, I'd like to have her and the other omegas sent to the Yard for their statements and I think if he accompanies them as another omega it would go a long way toward calming and comforting them."

"No, Lestrade. John stays with me and can get as involved with this as he likes. You've got omega officers who are on call and can respond to this once we find the others. John is my partner and deserves to see this through to the end."

Lestrade shrugged, though clearly not in agreement. "You're his sentinel and alpha, so it's up to you. Wait, what's happening?"

Sherlock stood and headed toward the rear entrance. “Damn it! They've spotted your incompetent officers, Lestrade and are now heading out the back of the building. Be ready!"

Sherlock took one side of the door and John stood just behind him as Lestrade took the other side of the door. The rear door crashed open and three men burst out of the building with the intention of heading out the garden gate but Sherlock caught the first, Lestrade the second and John the third. All three men shouted in surprise and began to fight to get free. Confident his alpha would be able to take care of himself, John dealt with his man quickly whilst keeping one eye on Lestrade. Once John’s man was down and unconscious, the omega turned toward the doorway, expecting the fourth man but no one else was present. As he saw Lestrade handcuffing his man and watched Sherlock deliver a beautiful strike that put his opponent down, John heard a shriek.

Immediately, he dashed inside the house, saw a door with stairs leading down to the basement and heard a scream again, this time louder. John took a few steps down into the basement and the sight that greeted him made his vision go red. A large man had a young girl by the hair and had just pulled out a knife. She was fighting him with everything she had but she was minuscule in comparison.

Flying down the stairs, John barrelled into the surprised man, grabbed the kidnapper’s wrist with his right hand and put him into a headlock. The man released the child and elbowed John hard in the chest, forcing him to let go of the kidnapper’s neck but somehow John managed to keep hold of the wrist. As John twisted hard on the arm holding the knife, the weapon fell to the floor with a clatter and bounced under a piece of furniture. But then the young man wrenched away from the doctor and turned on him like a snake, swinging a meaty fist that John barely ducked.

Lestrade had come down the stairs behind John and there was just enough time to see that the DI was heading over to help Winnie before John had to turn his attention back to the kidnapper. The stranger was hellishly fast, had some training and was much larger than John but the doctor had faced bigger and better foes in the past and won. They exchanged a few blows before the man flung a wild punch that John easily blocked with the cast on his left arm. This gave him the opening to step
forward and drive his palm into the man’s solar plexus, throwing all his weight behind it. The kidnappers’ eyes bulged comically when his knees collapsed and he fell to the floor in agony, unable to breathe as his diaphragm spasmed. Snorting in contempt at the young man writhing on the ground, John looked up to see Lestrade staring at him in surprise and awe. Standing behind the protective DI, Winnie was also looking at him with wide eyes.

John ignored their expressions and glanced around for something to tie the man up with, finally settling on an electrical cord from a lamp. “Lestrade, did you get the others? We have to find out where they were going to take Winnie so we can rescue the omegas.”

“All three upstairs are handcuffed and in custody. But you’re right; we have to find out where they were going to take her.”

Sherlock came down the stairs along with some other officers, eyes darting frantically for John but he calmed as soon as he saw the doctor was unhurt. One of them took Winnie and led her up the stairs. Lestrade was still looking at John with respect as the omega grimly hauled the much larger man up and easily dropped him onto a sofa. The man was finally getting enough of his breath back to moan in pain and confusion.

Walking up to the omega, Sherlock put a proprietary hand on his shoulder. “We have to question him, John. How soon before he can breathe again?” Sherlock was cool and collected, though John noticed his knuckles were bloody. Knowing the alpha wouldn’t want him making a fuss in front of the police officers, John looked back at the young man who was slowly recovering his ability to breathe.

Mouth a tight line, John stared down at the man menacingly. “Give him five minutes and he’ll talk.”

The kidnapper was following their conversation and John’s empathy told him he had no intention of talking. Glancing up at Sherlock, he tipped his head toward their prisoner. “He thinks he’s not going to talk.”

Elegant, dark eyebrows rose in disbelief. “Really? I disagree.” The sentinel turned and gave a meaningful look at Lestrade, who silenced all the other police looking on. Nodding his thanks, Sherlock took a step toward the kidnapper and loomed intimidatingly over him. John’s knees weakened as the alpha pheromones began to build up in the room. The man on the sofa was a beta and John could see him tremble but then the kidnapper’s resolve hardened and he remained stubbornly silent.

“As I’m sure you already know, I’m an alpha sentinel. You will tell us where the other young omegas that you’ve kidnapped are located or I will ask my guide to use his abilities to force you to talk. And I can promise you, it will be painful.”

The beta, still trying hard to take a deep breath, looked at Sherlock sceptically but there was also an element of fear. Thankfully, the kidnapper didn’t see John’s expression of surprise and dismay that he aimed at Sherlock. John didn’t have the training to interrogate a prisoner! But then he realised that he did indeed know what to do. Of the many things he’d inadvertently learnt from Wood, some of it covered this kind of thing and the knowledge was repugnant. It would mean violating the man’s core personality, which would cause extreme pain and was the equivalent to mental torture. Surely Sherlock was bluffing and John relaxed when he realised that indeed, Sherlock wasn’t seriously suggesting he force the man, but the kidnapper didn’t know that.

Finally the prisoner wheezed out, “I won’t tell you anything. Piss off!”
Scoffing derisively and weaving a spell of alpha pheromones, Sherlock tried to terrorize the man but a greater fear kept the kidnapper silent. John had to lock his knees to keep from kneeling and out of the corner of his eye he saw a few beta police officers were having the same trouble. Sherlock was incredibly dominant but whatever was keeping the man from talking was more powerful. Finally John’s knees gave out and he knelt to his alpha, pressing his forehead against Sherlock’s hip. The pheromones were too powerful for him and he heard a few thumps behind him as the betas in the room knelt, too. Absently, the alpha caressed John’s hair but backed off from more pheromones since they clearly weren’t working.

As his head cleared, John suddenly had an idea. Trusting his sentinel would understand what he was doing, John got shakily to his feet, turned to the prisoner and reached out to gently touch the man, who flinched but couldn’t get away. The omega guide then began to weave his empathy into the upper layers of the man’s mind to find out what was making him so frightened. It was an anxiety that ran deep, but the doctor then set about soothing the man’s fears and reassuring him that he wouldn’t be hurt and that no one would be upset if he told them what they wanted to know. It was astonishingly easy to cajole and persuade the man’s mind instead of forcing and trying to bulldoze his way in. The intrusion into the kidnapper’s mind didn’t feel wrong the way that Wood’s method would have felt and John was able to encourage the man to do the right thing.

What John discovered was that the man really wanted to cooperate but was terrified of what would happen if he did tell. It was hard to determine exactly what was frightening him, so John focused on soothing the panic. John continued to encourage the feeling of cooperation because the beta wasn’t a completely bad person. Finally, to the surprise of all the people in the room, the kidnapper suddenly relaxed and began to speak in heavily accented English.

“I wasn’t going to hurt the omega. I panicked and didn’t know what else to do except try to use her as a hostage. My name is Konstandini Bujaj. My brothers and cousins have all the omegas in an abandoned industrial building down by the river. We’re to take them on a boat tonight and sell them once we get back home. We’re supposed to meet them there in an hour.”

Apparently, the gang consisted of fifteen men from one extended family, originating in the same city in Eastern Europe. The house they were in had been rented a year earlier by one of the young man’s cousins. The family had successfully abducted omegas for the sex trade before in other countries but this was their first foray into the UK and the first time Bujaj had accompanied his brothers. The omegas were taken from various cities and all from lower, middle class neighbourhoods. Even though searches were being made, they’d been careful and left the cities immediately after each abduction, making it almost impossible for the frantic families to find their missing children. Winnie was an exception in that her family noticed immediately and didn’t rely on police protocol but instead consulted Sherlock. The omegas were indeed targeted from their coming out announcements on the internet, then befriended through Facebook and would often go to meet their kidnappers willingly. Bujaj gave them the address of the abandoned building and practically collapsed on the sofa once he was finished, as tears ran down his cheeks.

“My family will disown me now. They’ll never forgive me.”

Lestrade gruffly pulled him up and put proper handcuffs on him. “You’re better off without a family like that, mate. I’ll speak up for you at your trial for saving those other omegas. Anything else you’d like to add?”

The man thought for a few moments and then nodded. “They’re all armed and if they find out you’re coming, they might kill the omegas. They’re hard, desperate men and don’t care about the lives of others.” John was suddenly very glad he’d brought his SIG.
Sighing in despair, Lestrade handed the man off to his officers and turned to Sherlock and John, looking back and forth between the two of them.

“I shouldn’t do this but are you two ready to see this through? It sounds like it’s going to be especially dangerous and we don’t have much time before they’re tipped off when Bujaj and the others don’t show up on time. We have to get in there and rescue the omegas before the kidnappers realise they’ve been discovered.”

John looked at Sherlock and they both shared a feral grin that warmed John’s entire body and sent a thrill up his spine as adrenalin sang through his veins. *This* was what he’d hoped for when he’d asked to work with Sherlock: an equal partnership and a share in the danger.

“Of course we’ll come along, Lestrade. Let’s go, John.”

As his heart swelled fiercely with the knowledge that he’d willingly follow Sherlock through hell and back, they made their way toward the stairs as the remaining police officers stepped back deferentially. Lestrade had his own vehicle and soon they were on the road south to the location of the kidnappers. The DI had called ahead to have additional police and Specialist Firearms Officers available to deal with a possible hostage situation. They were to meet them a few streets away from the building and to carefully surround it, doing their utmost not to give away their position. Another sentinel/guide team was also being dispatched to back up Sherlock and verify the presence of the omegas.

It was fully night time but the road next to the building they wanted had some working street lamps and the building itself had a few lights of its own illuminating the entrances. Inspecting the building from afar as they arrived, John noted it was a large, three storey brick structure that had a rather limp and ragged “For Lease” banner stretched across the side facing the main street. Most of the windows were intact and it seemed easily defended since it had only two doors that weren’t bricked up.

Once they exited their vehicle, Lestrade led them to the Sergeant in charge of the Firearms Unit who had set up in an old van that was parked a few streets away from the building. The sergeant had body armour for them and handed one to each of them. Sherlock refused to use it at first but John wouldn’t hear of it and gave him an earful, demanding he put it on.

As the alpha grumpily obeyed, Lestrade shot John another look of respect and grinned. “Well done, you. I’ve never been able to get him to put one on before. None of my threats ever worked.”

John smirked. “Well, I’m guessing that you didn’t threaten to withhold sex from him for a week. Worked like a charm.”

Lestrade gagged and covered his ears. “That’s way too much information, mate. Christ, I’ve got to bleach my brain now.”

John laughed and though he couldn’t see Sherlock’s grin in the dim lighting, he could certainly feel the alpha’s amusement.

Sherlock huffed and replied sardonically. “Good thing you never tried. It wouldn’t have worked, Lestrade.”

Lestrade snorted and turned to greet two more people approaching the ad hoc command post. The police sentinel/guide pair had arrived and John stepped back and away from them, reading their outrage and shock at seeing what they knew to be an omega and worse yet, a latent on the scene. However, Sherlock didn’t let John fade back and pulled the doctor to his side, clearly and proudly displaying their partnership.
Before either newcomer could speak, Sherlock broke the tense silence with a sneer. “This is my guide and omega, Dr John Watson and I am alpha sentinel Sherlock Holmes. Who are you?”

The other beta sentinel spluttered angrily and ignored Sherlock’s introduction. “What are civilians doing here, Lestrade? You know department policy….”

Rolling his eyes, Lestrade interrupted the other man’s rant. “Yes, but Sherlock and John are the reason we even know about this kidnapping ring. Sherlock is also a very powerful sentinel and you’ll be backing him up. Sherlock and John, this is Sentinel Ellis Tomlyn and his guide Peter.”

Tomlyn was still indignant and getting angry. “I know who he is and I heard all about the stunt Holmes pulled to steal his guide from the Bureau and I’m not impressed. This latent is clearly untrained and can’t possibly know what he’s doing and he’s also an omega, for god’s sake! Neither of them should even be here. Peter and I have an impeccable record that can’t be matched and we should be in charge of this aspect of the operation. Now we need to get closer to that building so I can get to work.”

Heart sinking as he realised they would likely be shut out of the action John tugged on Sherlock’s coat. “I hate to say it, but he’s got a point, Sherlock.”

The detective was coldly livid. “Yes, he does have a point John and it’s on top of his head. I’ll have you know, sentinel, that John is the strongest guide, bar none, in this country and possibly the world. When I work with him, I could hear a rat fart in the sewers on the other side of the Thames and am in no danger of zoning. I seriously doubt you and your record could possibly beat that. This pissing match ends now.”

Turning away from the shocked men, Sherlock focused on the building while John covered his mouth with his hand in an unsuccessful attempt to stifle a laugh. He’d never heard Sherlock speak like that and it was not only hilarious but it also served to continue to infuriate the pompous fool in front of them.

Holding out a hand, Sherlock reached for his omega. “John, I need you. We have to start our search.”

Immediately, John clutched Sherlock’s hand and extended his empathy around his sentinel, isolating him from harm, distraction and intrusion. In the dim light, John could see the expression on the other guide’s face as his eyebrows rose in surprise at the strength of John’s empathy. This made him want to gloat but instead he behaved professionally and turned his attention back to his sentinel.

Sherlock’s focus was fixed firmly on the building. “There are three guards watching the perimeter and we dare not allow your people any closer at the moment or we’ll alert the men inside. I can sense six adult heartbeats on the first level and the heartbeats of a dozen young people above them. The omegas are in there and are on the second level, in a room at the south east corner of the building. That leaves one kidnapper unaccounted for. It’s possible he’s left the building and will return. Lestrade, it’s best you warn your people.”

They all looked up toward the second level but the room they wanted was on the other side facing the river. Lestrade was texting the information to his squad. “Are any of the kidnappers in the room with them, Sherlock?”

“No. No adult male is up there with them. They’re not panicked but they are afraid and some are crying.”
Lestrade glanced at Tomlyn. “The number of guards has been confirmed by my officers, Tomlyn, can you verify what Sherlock’s telling us about the people inside?”

Irate, the other sentinel hissed furiously, “Of course not! We’re nowhere near close enough to hear that and he’s lying if he says he can.”

Irritated, Sherlock snapped back. “Your guide knows I’m not lying, Tomlyn. Ask him and he’ll tell you.” This caused the other sentinel to shut up but the man was still fuming.

Sherlock ignored him and continued. “We must do something soon or the captured omegas might get hurt or worse.”

As Lestrade nodded, John agreed wholeheartedly. The situation was tense and risky, made worse by the uncooperative sentinel/guide pair. There had to be something they could do that would bypass the guards and get them into the building safely. Suddenly, a plan unfolded itself fully formed in John’s mind. Turning to Sherlock, he squeezed the alpha’s hand to get his attention.

“Yes! When we get inside, we can find the omegas, take them to another room and hide them. I can contact Lestrade once they’re safe and he can then launch his operation to take out the kidnappers.

“Just the two of us can get to the building unseen. Once there, we can remove each guard as they patrol, scale the brick wall and enter the building from the broken window there above that light fixture.”

Sherlock’s face glowed with pride and his eyes lit with excitement. “Yes! When we get inside, we can find the omegas, take them to another room and hide them. I can contact Lestrade once they’re safe and he can then launch his operation to take out the kidnappers."

”Let’s go now before the missing man turns up. I suspect he’s the leader and could alarm the others once the four we have in custody are determined to be missing. Lestrade, I will text you when we’re inside and have moved the omegas to a different location.”

“Just wait a bloody minute! You’re not taking an omega into a dangerous situation! I insist on coming with you instead.” Tomlyn wasn’t giving up and John sighed in exasperation. The fucking git was obviously an idiot of the highest calibre.

Pinching the bridge of his nose to hold off what was promising to be a migraine caused by aggravation, John persisted in being polite. “If Greg agrees, I’m going in there to help these youngsters. If you can haul your arse up that wall without giving us away, you’re welcome to come along. Just stop arguing and let’s get going.”

“You can’t possibly do that. You’re an omega.” Tomlyn was adamant and refused to budge.

Finally losing his temper, John stepped into the man’s personal space and suddenly he was Captain Watson, RAMC again. It felt good.

“Look here, you tosser. I can do anything I bloody well please and you can go fuck yourself if you don’t like it. If you want to come along, fine. But once we get going, you will do as you’re told. If you put me or my sentinel in danger by arguing with us, I will personally end you. Got that?”

Whilst he’d spoken quietly, John’s empathy had projected to Tomlyn just how sincere he was about the situation and he could tell he’d finally got through to the incredibly hard head of the other man. He could feel amusement from Lestrade and the SFO Sergeant and a blazing feeling of pride from Sherlock. There was a stunned silence from the beta sentinel and his guide and then the larger man opened and closed his mouth a few times like a gutted fish, swallowed thickly and finally looked away, defeated.
Smiling grimly, John nodded. “Glad to see that you finally understand me. Now let’s go. We’re running out of time.”

Surprisingly, Tomlyn left Peter behind, saying the young man wasn’t trained to climb walls. John would have thought it would be useful to have a guide with that kind of training if you worked for the police but he supposed that, with the lack of guides in general, a sentinel was lucky to find a guide at all and would take what he could get. It wasn’t John’s place to question it and instead, he led the way toward the building.

Automatically taking point as he’d always done when on a mission, John extended his empathy ahead to search for danger as well as stabilising his sentinel’s senses. Sherlock was a silent shadow behind John and Tomlyn was actually rather light on his feet for such a large man. The grounds surrounding the building were seriously neglected, giving them numerous places to hide. The darkness enveloped the three men as they crouched in the weeds. They settled near to where they had seen the guards patrolling and as close to the broken window as they could get and waited.

As the first guard walked past, John approached him silently from behind and got the man in a choke hold that rendered him unconscious in seconds. As he dragged the man into the overgrown weeds, John picked up a sense of astonishment from Tomlyn whilst Sherlock was ready with a gag and zip ties to immobilise him for pickup. The detective had just finished tying the first guard up when the second one strolled into view, totally unsuspecting. He was dispatched the same way as was the third. Sherlock texted their location to Lestrade and suggested pickup soon and they turned their attention to their goal.

The window they wanted to enter was just above a light fixture with a working bulb. On closer inspection, it was clear the building itself had also been neglected and the mortar between the bricks was powdery or almost non-existent. John had suspected that would be the case which made it much easier to climb. Despite the cast on his left arm, he quickly swarmed up the wall without any trouble. Again, he sensed with exasperation Tomlyn’s bewilderment and surprise at John’s abilities. The man was a sexist dinosaur and he had not time for it. The window they wanted was broken and he had to be careful to avoid the jagged edges of the glass but once he was in, he took off his jacket and used it to protect his hands as he pulled the worst pieces out.

Looking down at the faces of the two sentinels in the dim illumination, he motioned to them and Sherlock was next up the wall. John helped him over the ledge and then it was Tomlyn’s turn. The beta sentinel made it but it was a close thing and both Sherlock and John had to help him up and over the edge. The man sat on the floor under the window with a grunt, shaking a bit and breathing heavily. John’s mouth tightened in irritation and he turned to look about the room.

It was very dim in the place but he could see it was a large room with rough wooden flooring and a couple of doors. Checking with Sherlock, John cautiously approached the door closest to them. He knew no one was on the other side but it never hurt to be careful and he was the lightest of the three of them. If a floorboard creaked, at least it would be unlikely to be heard downstairs. The door opened noiselessly onto a long hallway that bisected the second storey. It was very dark, but to his right he could see a faint light from under a closed door and even more illumination coming from the open stairwell to the rooms below. John guessed that the room behind the door was where the omegas were being kept.

The three moved silently down the hall to the omega’s door and Sherlock began to work on the lock whilst John glided over to the stairwell and knelt, hoping to spot any movement down below. He couldn’t see anything but could hear a number of male voices speaking an unfamiliar language that sounded vaguely Slavic and the sound of something slapping down on a table. It seemed they were passing the time playing cards. John’s empathy picked up weariness, boredom and impatience from
the men below but they weren’t worried or concerned about their missing people or the captured guards yet. A hiss from Sherlock got his attention and he left his perch and approached his sentinel immediately.

Whispering, Sherlock spoke into John’s ear. “I want you to go in alone, since you’re an omega and let them know what’s going on. Get them to come out and head for the opposite end of the hall. Tomlyn and I will get one of the rooms at the far end open and ready for them.”

Nodding his agreement, John watched Sherlock and Tomlyn move silently away and disappear into the pitch blackness of the hallway. Turning back to the door, John quietly opened it and moved slowly inside, shutting it behind himself. The click of the door closing alerted the omegas. Some gasped but thankfully none of them screamed or tried to warn their captors in any way. Instinctively, John projected his empathy to soothe and calm them all. There were nine young omegas in the room and Winnie was to have been the tenth.

John smiled and continued to project calmness to the children. It was somewhat difficult since his heart was pounding and adrenalin was singing through his veins. He couldn’t believe things were going so well and something was bound to go tits up at any moment.

Whispering, John introduced himself. “My name is John and I’m an omega guide. My sentinel and I are working with the London police and we’re here to take you home to your families. Please stay as quiet as you can do, join hands with one another and follow me.”

Eyes wide, the omegas all looked afraid at first, but John’s empathy was working like a charm and they quickly obeyed him without question. All of them looked hungry and scared but otherwise unhurt. Quietly opening the door, John took the hand of the nearest omega and led them all out into the corridor. He waited until the last one was out and the door shut and then took them down to the end of the corridor where Sherlock waited with a small torch to help light their way. The room they entered was dimly lit from Sherlock’s torch and John could see it had wooden crates stacked about the room. Once they were inside and the door locked behind them, Sherlock was on his phone, texting Lestrade to start closing the trap.

Keeping his voice down, Sherlock instructed the omegas to hide far away from the door and behind the large boxes. The detective took advantage of his status as an alpha to command the omegas, who obeyed him immediately and without question, hope dawning on their faces once they were in the presence of such a powerful alpha. John felt pride at their respectful reaction to his alpha and knew Sherlock was trying to protect them in case there was any shooting whilst the police cleaned up the nest of kidnappers. Tomlyn was acting very protectively of the young people as well and stood guard by the door, listening.

Instinctively, John extended his empathy over Sherlock and the beta sentinel to check that their senses were balanced. Sherlock was fine but John was surprised to find out the beta sentinel wasn’t balanced at all. He wasn’t in danger of zoning but John automatically corrected his senses whilst he wondered how they’d become so unstable in the short time he’d been away from his guide. Or had they been that way before they’d left?

Tomlyn jerked like he’d been shot and turned to stare in shock at John. “What did you do? I feel… different.”

“I just balanced your senses. They were unstable, though you weren’t going to zone. They should work more efficiently, now.”

“More efficient? I don’t remember ever being able to hear this well before now! Whatever you did, you must tell my guide.” Tomlyn was so stunned he didn’t seem to realise what he was saying.
“Your guide was trained by the Bureau from childhood. I’ve had no training at all. I seriously doubt Peter will listen to me.”

"He will if I tell him to. This is amazing!” The beta sentinel went back to listening at the door with a look of awe on his face.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at John and the omega picked up a feeling of amusement tinged with a bit of jealousy. “You’re making friends and influencing people now, are you John?”

Huffing in irritation, John responded. “Not really, no. His senses weren’t balanced properly. It seemed the right thing to do. Have I overstepped some kind of guide boundary?”

“I should think so, but Tomlyn didn’t seem to care. Apparently Tomlyn’s Bureau trained guide isn’t doing things correctly. How very interesting.” Sherlock’s grin was smug and again John caught a strong feeling of pride coming from his sentinel. “We’ll discuss it later, John. In the meantime, what do you make of this?”

The alpha slid the top off of one of the wooden crates and pointed his torch into the packing material, revealing an assault rifle. John whistled soundlessly and picked up the weapon, automatically checking to make sure it was unloaded and the safety on.

“Well, look at that! Sherlock, this is a type 86s assault rifle, Chinese, made only for export. These are basically a Kalashnikov AKM clone and use standard Kalashnikov AKM magazines.” John respectfully placed the weapon back in the crate, noting there were at least five other rifles packed with it and there must be at least ten crates. A number of smaller boxes that sat nearby were full of ammunition.

“It appears as if we’ve unearthed an armoury here. There are enough weapons to start a small war. I wonder if these were meant for resale overseas, also. This may not be the best room to have moved the omegas to—the men downstairs will likely come straight here to arm themselves when the police close in.” John looked worriedly at Sherlock, who shook his head.

“I disagree. They will indeed likely come here but we can defend ourselves and the omegas at the same time using their own weapons and keep the kidnappers at bay until the police can round them up. They’ll be trapped between us and the police and will give up quickly. It’s unlikely that they’ve got many weapons downstairs.”

Cocking a sceptical eyebrow at his alpha, John moved back to the rifles, pulled one out of its nesting material and expertly loaded it with a full magazine. He then handed it to Sherlock and began loading another. “I think you’re being optimistic but we should take cover behind these crates in case they decide to shoot at us through the door. We can move the ammo to another room or hide it behind the crates to keep it from being hit by gunfire. Two layers of crates should provide excellent cover for us and the omegas. Any shooting will be very frightening for them, though. I wish we could get them out of here first.”

Pensively, Sherlock suggested an alternative. “We can move them to another room but one of us will have to stay with them and I dislike splitting us up.”

“You and I can defend the weapons.” John turned to the beta sentinel who was still listening at the door. “Tomlyn, can you operate an assault rifle?” When the man nodded, John handed him the loaded weapon. “Did either of you think to check the other rooms?”

Tomlyn gripped his weapon tightly and nodded again. “Yes, but there’s no cover, which is why we
chose this one. I still think it’s safer here than anywhere else in the building simply because the crates can provide cover for the omegas.”

Reluctantly, John had to agree. “I don’t like them being anywhere near gunfire, but if we can rearrange these crates to create an even stronger barrier without making too much noise, I’d feel better about it.”

“Watch the door, John. Tomlyn and I will do the heavy lifting. I don’t want you to strain your shoulder.”

It was a sensible suggestion so John pulled out his SIG and walked over to the door whilst the two sentinels strained to move the heavy crates. They were amazingly quiet about it and John was able to listen well enough to hear the shouting start downstairs as the police finally made their presence known and began their assault. Focusing his empathy on the kidnappers on the floor below, John felt their shock and alarm as the police burst into the room. He read resignation and acceptance from a few of the men as they surrendered, but then defiance flared from others and John knew they were running toward the stairs and the weapons with the police close behind. Then he heard footsteps heading their way and his sense of danger went on high alert.

“Move! Get behind cover now!”

John’s voice was soft but the bark of military command in it was undeniable. Both sentinels obeyed instantly and John was behind the barricade a moment later. Sherlock’s relief that he was safe briefly washed over him as John settled into place between the two sentinels. The young omegas were huddled behind an extra, very cleverly constructed barricade that had been built close to the wall. In front of them and behind another barrier were John, Sherlock and Tomlyn. The alpha, beta and omega stood side by side, tensely holding their respective weapons, ready to defend the children at all costs. John’s blood was racing through his veins and he felt more alive and alert than he had in what seemed like years.

As they waited, John instinctively threw his empathy about both sentinels like a shield. If there was any shooting, he knew that their senses must be buffered and protected, preventing any possibility of a zone out. Tomlyn twitched as he felt John's mental touch but otherwise didn't react. The emotions John picked up from the beta were mixed and confused but there was no time to concern himself with them. Tomlyn wasn’t truly his responsibility and he needed to remember that.

The sound of running footsteps stopped at the door and someone outside fumbled with a key at the lock whilst the police shouted at them to stop from further down the hall, but the kidnappers ignored the commands. The strange calm and extreme focus that John always experienced before battle settled over him and instinctively he used his empathy to share it with the two sentinels beside him. It was a novel experience to feel all three of them in synch and ready to protect the young people. John hadn’t felt that amazing feeling of camaraderie and teamwork since Afghanistan and the thrill of anticipation travelled up his spine.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, the lights were turned on and three men piled into the room only to stop dead, blinking in the sudden bright illumination with shocked expressions as they saw their own weapons and John's SIG pointed at their heads. Sherlock barked a command in the same Slavic language that John had heard the men speaking downstairs and all three slowly raised their hands and then knelt. The kidnapper's emotions were a riot of fear, astonishment and dread as they surrendered to the superior firepower displayed by the two sentinels and one guide.

Cautiously, the police called out and Tomlyn reassured them that it was safe to enter. By that time, John had hidden his SIG beneath his jumper and had turned to retrieve the omegas. The three
kidnappers were duly cuffed and removed from the room and John took the hands of one of the youngsters and led her out of hiding, followed by all the others clinging to each other, many of them near tears. John projected reassurance and calm to them as huge grins broke out amongst the members of the police and backs were slapped in triumph. After a few moments, a number of omega police officers came in to take charge of the young kidnapping victims and lead them out of the building.

"Where are you taking them?" Lestrade had come in to take charge of the arsenal of weapons they'd found and he answered John's question.

"We’ll take them down to the Yard to get their statements and find them something to eat. They'll be able to contact their parents or guardians from there and arrange to be picked up or we can take them home. I want you and Sherlock to follow them and give us your statements, as well.”

Peter had joined his sentinel and was staring daggers at John, but the omega ignored it and so did Tomlyn. The beta sentinel walked over to John and Sherlock. “I’ve got my own vehicle. I’d consider it an honour to take you both to the Yard and escort you inside.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows rose into his fringe and John tried not to allow his astonishment show in his expression. He wanted to ask what had suddenly changed but honestly didn’t want to know. Glancing quickly at Sherlock, John answered for both of them.

“Ta, mate but I think we’ll catch a cab.” His eyes tracked over to the furious Peter and then back to Tomlyn and suddenly the penny dropped for the beta sentinel.

“Oh, yes. I understand now. Well, I do hope I’ll see you around sometime.”

Sherlock took John’s arm and led him away without answering whilst John politely nodded and thanked the man again as he was being dragged away. Once they were out of the building, John glanced about at the changed landscape before they continued down the pavement toward the main street. The entire place had been surrounded by emergency vehicles and was now crawling with police. The area was blockaded with yellow tape and John could see numerous vehicles parked behind it with lots of people crowding around, trying to see what was happening.

The detective headed toward the barricade and John tugged at his arm. “That was rude, Sherlock. Tomlyn was trying to make nice.”

The alpha stopped and stared down his nose at the doctor. “I don’t care, John. He’s an idiot and an appalling sentinel who doesn’t even know that he’s got a totally incompetent guide. You’re so much better than they are but they look down on you simply because you’re a latent and an omega. That’s unforgivable.”

John sighed as they resumed their walk to the street. He seemed to do that a lot around Sherlock. “I am untrained, Sherlock. It’s possible Peter is just a weak guide. Neither one of us is in a position to really judge him. I would like to take you up on your offer to engage some guide tutors for me after my heat is over.”

Sherlock pulled John close to him with an arm around his shoulders as they walked. “I’ll see to it right away. You should have the best and my family knows guides who aren’t affiliated with the Bureau. But I leave it up to you as to how much instruction you wish to receive.”

“Ta, luv. That means a lot to me.” John snuggled closer to Sherlock but looked up when someone shouted Sherlock's name. They both stopped and turned when the person ran up to them, followed by a handful of others. They were within just a few meters when John realised they were reporters
with cameras and they surrounded the sentinel and guide within seconds. Shocked and surprised, John was glad of Sherlock’s arm around his shoulders as someone shoved a microphone towards Sherlock’s face.

“Sherlock Holmes! What happened here this evening? The official story is that there were kidnapped children. Did you find them? How did you do it?”

Another reporter pushed forward aggressively, spotted John and nearly squealed in excitement. “Oh my god! You’re the latent who jumped from the Battersea Bridge almost a month ago! How did you survive? That was so amazing! It’s all over YouTube! You’re a hero to all latents!”

John was flabbergasted at first. He couldn’t imagine how he was a hero and had no immediate response. Thankfully, Sherlock spoke up. “No comment on the case. Anything will have to come from the official spokesperson at the Met. About the other matter, yes, against all odds, my guide John Watson survived his fall into the Thames. The details aren’t important. What is important is that no one should be forced to choose between keeping his freedom or being bonded to a stranger without his consent. What is happening to latents is wrong and if it were up to me, all the latent laws would be repealed immediately. We are leaving now.”

John put a hand on the alpha’s arm and squeezed gently. “Wait, Sherlock. I’d like to say something.” Nodding respectfully, Sherlock waited as John took a breath and faced the reporters.

“Look. I’m not a hero. I’m just an average bloke who happens to have the genetic makeup of a latent guide. I could be your neighbour, your son or brother, your co-worker or your best friend. The latent laws are unjust and immoral and they take your freedom away without a trial, judge or jury and there is no appeal. One minute you’re minding your own business and then you’re suddenly a permanent slave to whoever can afford to buy you.

“I realise latent guides are a small minority and I’m grateful to everyone who spoke up for us and for their continued support. I can only hope the laws will soon be reversed. It’s heartening to hear that’s a possibility and it can’t happen soon enough. On the other hand, the problem remains in that there are real people: actual sentinels, both full and partial, who are suffering because of the lack of guides.

“If the Bureau actually offered latents real training and jobs and allowed sentinels and guides to choose each other, I can guarantee there’d be many who would volunteer. Allowing a latent to keep his or her career and not forcing them to legally become an appendage to their sentinel would be a good thing, too. The Bureau seriously needs to push forward more quickly with the very promising research being done to provide medicinal relief from zones for unbonded sentinels. I urge whoever takes over the Bureau to do the right thing by his or her community and continue to change the direction the Bureau has been going for too long.”

Blinking, John focused on the faces of the reporters and saw that they were rapt and hanging on every word of his rant. Realising he was preaching to the choir, John felt his face heat and he wound down. “That’s all I wanted to say.”

Sherlock’s arm went back around John’s shoulders and the omega could once again feel his sentinel’s intense pride in him as he glanced up to see it reflected in Sherlock’s expression. He couldn’t help the soppy smile that blossomed across his own face and the reporters jumped on it.

“Dr Watson?” John’s eyebrows rose at the proper use of his title and he turned toward the crowd, which seemed to have got larger in the few moments they’d been standing on the pavement. “You’ve not talked yet about what happened on the bridge. Everyone who saw what happened was outraged at your situation but mostly heartbroken that you’d rather jump and risk certain death than
surrender to the Bureau. But it was clear you were speaking to someone you cared about right before you jumped. Was it Mr Holmes?"

Thinking for a moment, John decided to answer, face grim as he reluctantly remembered the moment when he knew he was going to die. “Yes, it was Sherlock I was speaking to and I was sure I was saying goodbye to him. I honestly didn’t think I’d survive but there was still a chance.” John could practically feel the sympathy oozing off the reporters.

“But I knew I wouldn’t survive being bonded to anyone other than Sherlock, so it was worth the risk to get away. Thankfully, Sherlock rescued me before I could drown.” John’s adoring smile came back as he remembered waking up after thinking he’d died only to find himself wrapped around the alpha.

One of the omega reporters was practically swooning in delight at the story. “And now you’re bonded as sentinel and guide! This story is so romantic and I can easily imagine someone will try to make a movie for the telly about it soon.”

Finally Sherlock stepped in and cleared his throat. “That’s not going to happen and I’m telling anyone out there who might consider doing it that they should think again.”

Someone John couldn’t see yelled out. “Guide Watson! Will you be working with Mr Holmes on his cases now that you’re bonded?”

Sherlock answered this question with a smug expression. “Dr Watson has very graciously agreed to help me with my cases as my partner. Now it’s very late and we have statements to make at the Yard.”

Despite the persistence of the reporters, Sherlock turned away with John at his side and kept walking steadily toward the nearest main street. Eventually, the reporters gave up and went back to the building, hoping to get more information there. John looked back over his shoulder with relief.

As they settled into a cab for the ride to the yard, John sighed again. He was very tired but it felt good, for once. They’d accomplished quite an amazing amount in a very short time and saved ten young omegas from a living hell. He’d not felt so alive or useful for a very long time When he’d imagined working with Sherlock, this kind of experience was exactly what he’d hoped for. It was exciting, challenging and an honour to be the guide to someone as brilliant as Sherlock and he took a moment to feel incredibly thankful that things had turned out so well.

He sat in silence for some time, thinking about the case and how remarkable it had been. A huge smile drifted across his face and he turned to Sherlock. “Well, that was different.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow and glanced down at him. “Not really. You’ll get very used to intrusive questions from reporters soon.”

John thought for a moment and then looked at the detective with a questioning expression. “Is this how they usually go, luv?”

When Sherlock looked confused, John clarified. “Your cases, I mean. This one was non-stop from the moment we first met Mr Craufurd and you realised how serious Winnie’s disappearance truly was.”

Sherlock’s expression cleared and he smiled as he sat back in his seat. “Oh, yes. Well, sometimes they’re even more exciting than this. You’ve already been a part of one where we both got shot and discovered bombs and a major drug operation. But they all have one thing in common, it seems.”
Eyebrows raised, John cocked his head to one side. “Really? What’s that?”

Groaning in mock despair, Sherlock nodded toward the Yard as they pulled up to the front. “The bane of my existence, aside from Mycroft. Paperwork!”

Laughing, both men entered the Yard to find someone to give their statement to. Sherlock would also be expected to write a complete report on the entire affair. As they waited for someone to come get them, John realised with amazement how different this visit was to the last time when he’d been dragged away to be sold as if he were a piece of meat. It still angered him that such things continued to happen but he hoped the laws would be changed soon. His circumstances were totally different now and he knew just how incredibly fortunate he was to have been found and bonded to Sherlock and not Moran. The thought made a shiver run down his spine and caused Sherlock to give him a troubled look. John patted the alpha’s leg comfortingly.

“I’m fine, luv. Just thinking about the last time we were here and what happened. If I see that bastard Cline, I might have to punch him, though.”

“Oh, unfortunately, I understand he’s been transferred to a tiny village in the north of Scotland.” Sherlock’s expression had hardened and then turned smug with satisfaction at Cline’s fate.

John smiled evilly. “Lestrade’s doing?”

Sherlock grin matched John’s and he bumped their shoulders together. “No, actually it was Mycroft. The interfering git is good for some things.”

Eventually they were led further into the building and asked to wait in a large space with comfortable furniture. To John’s surprise and pleasure, the room was full of the omegas they’d rescued, along with some of the omega police officers who had escorted them from the building where’d they’d been held captive. The young people were also waiting to give statements but had had the chance to speak to family members and waiting to be picked up. John didn’t see Winnie, though and guessed she had arrived earlier. He hoped she was doing okay and that her family would be by to get her soon. Feelings of happiness and relief suffused the room when all of the omegas recognised John and Sherlock and came over to John to hug him and thank him for their rescue.

They were very shy with Sherlock though, since he was an alpha sentinel but he unbent enough to give them all a reassuring smile. John sat with the young people and chatted quietly about their homes and families whilst Sherlock hovered by the door. John could sense his protective alpha instincts were on anxious overdrive because the room was packed with juvenile omegas as well as his own, still unclaimed omega. Cheerfully, John sent him reassurances which were greatly appreciated but Sherlock wouldn’t let down his guard and remained on high alert. He couldn’t help himself and John finally left the man alone.

Over the course of an hour or so, each omega was escorted out to give their statements and be collected by their grateful families. Eventually, a Detective Sergeant arrived to collect them. John recognised her from the day at the Price Clinic and recalled her name was Donovan and that she worked with Lestrade. Giving Sherlock a disgusted look, the DS asked them both to follow her and set off to the lifts. They waited in silence until the doors opened to reveal Winnie and her parents. Both Mr and Ms Craufurd practically pounced on them both and shook John and Sherlock’s hands, thanking them tearfully. John could feel their near incandescent joy without even trying.

“Thank you both so much for finding Winnie! When you didn’t return to the house, we didn’t know
what to think and wondered if you’d abandoned us. We started asking around and found out that you’d questioned Mrs Wells and she told you she had seen everything. She said you’d gone off in a cab. We called the police to find out they were finally on the case because of you and now we have Winnie back!” Winnie hugged John and sweetly thanked Sherlock with a chaste peck on the cheek, which caused the tips of the alpha’s ears to turn pink.

Tears were falling freely amongst all three of the Craufurds and John couldn’t help grinning from ear to ear at the sheer happiness that exuded from the family. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so wonderful about being able to help someone and wondered if this was partly why Sherlock did what he did. As the family said goodbye and left to go home, arm in arm, John turned to his alpha to ask that very question but Sherlock answered before he could even open his mouth.

“Thanks are not why I try to solve these crimes, John, but I have to say that when we get an outcome like this one, it’s very satisfying. I see that you agree.” The alpha’s eyes sparkled and John couldn’t help but take his hand and squeeze as he read his sentinels’ happiness that all the omegas were safe and soon to be reunited with their families.

John noticed that Donovan rolled her eyes as she ushered them onto the now empty lift and took them to one of the upper floors. Once the sentinel and guide arrived at their destination, they were split up and asked to give their statements separately. Sherlock was handed off to someone John had never seen before and John slowly followed Donovan into a room exactly like the one he’d been in with Cline on his last visit. It unnerved him slightly but he forced himself to calm.

John had picked up that Donovan was less than fond of Sherlock and that it was clearly mutual, which made John wonder why they disliked one another so much. He was sure there was a story there but he would have to wait to ask. However, Donovan was extremely professional with John and recorded his statement meticulously. It took some time to complete and John was flagging halfway through. He’d not eaten or drunk anything since lunch and it was currently after midnight. Thankfully Donovan noticed and arranged for some sandwiches and decent hot tea to be delivered. It revived John and he was able to finish his statement shortly afterward.

However, Sherlock’s statement was taking longer and he also had to write a report of the incident. Donovan took pity on the exhausted omega and showed him to a rather comfortable couch in an office and he fell asleep almost immediately. It seemed a very long time later when he slowly woke to feel someone carefully stroking his hair. He also heard people speaking softly around him. He immediately recognised Sherlock’s and then Lestrade’s voice.

Slowly sitting up, John blinked and stretched. He felt much better for having slept for a few hours but he knew Sherlock hadn’t slept at all. From the looks of it, neither had Lestrade.

“So, what’s happening now? Can we go home or is there more to do?” John couldn’t help yawning, which got Lestrade doing it, too, much to Sherlock’s amusement.

“Nothing more for you or Sherlock to do at the moment. We’ve got your statements and wonder of wonders, we actually have the full report from Sherlock on time. Thank you for that, by the way. You may go home anytime you like. I, on the other hand, still have boxes of evidence to process and statements to go over before I can go home. So get out of here now before I find something for you to do.” The man’s harsh words were softened by the huge grin he was wearing. Lestrade was thrilled at what they’d accomplished that night and was flying high on the satisfaction of a job well done. He was also very pleased with Sherlock and also John by extension, but he did have a lot of work to do.

“Ta, Greg. We did well today but don’t work too hard, mate. I hope we’ll see you around soon.” John stood and put out his hand to the DI with a smile.
The DI shook it warmly. “I’d say I owe you both a pint down at the pub. Next chance I get, the first round’s on me.”

Laughing at Sherlock’s perfect expression of disgust, John could only shake his head. “Sounds great to me, Greg. Just let me know where and when and I’ll be there with bells on. I’ve not been out to get pissed in a long time.”

Impatiently interrupting, Sherlock gently took John’s arm and escorted him from the office as the DI smirked at them both and waved. “Come, John. It’s time to go home. I’ll treat you to breakfast at Speedy’s. Good day, Lestrade.”

“Cheers, you big git. Take care of him, John! Good work, the both of you! And see you later!”

John waved goodbye as he was nearly dragged toward the lifts and then out of the building by his exasperated sentinel. The sun was just coming up and when John checked the time it was just after 7:00 am. That explained why he was so hungry and breakfast at Speedy’s and then bed with Sherlock sounded absolutely heavenly.

The restaurant was just opening when they arrived but John wanted to wash up first so they wearily entered the downstairs foyer. Suddenly Sherlock was on high alert. John’s empathy also picked up on possible danger and he looked to his alpha for cues on how to react.

Whispering, Sherlock took John’s arm in a tight grip. “There’s someone in our flat, John. Mrs Hudson’s gone to visit one of her children so I know she didn’t let them in. I’ll go first….”

Interrupting, John pulled out his SIG from under his jumper. “No, Sherlock. I’ll go first since I’m armed. Follow me.”

Unhappy but reluctantly acknowledging the logic of the situation, Sherlock followed John up the stairs, neither one making any noise. The door to the flat was cracked open and they could hear movement inside. Looking back at Sherlock, John nodded and slowly pushed the door open with the SIG. Then simultaneously they both entered the room. John aimed the gun as Sherlock shouted at the man to freeze.

The intruder had been going through the desk drawers in the lounge and John could see he’d already ripped up the post on the mantelpiece. What he was looking for, John could only speculate. At Sherlock’s command, the man immediately stopped what he was doing and slowly raised his hands. It was then that the scent of pregnant omega hit them both between the eyes.

Before John could say anything, he watched in horror as Sherlock took an involuntary step forward. Thankfully the alpha stopped before his primal instinct to protect a pregnant omega put him between John’s gun and the burglar.

“Sherlock, don’t you dare move!” Glancing at his bond mate warily with wide eyes, John stepped around Sherlock and approached the omega. “You there! Keep your hands up and turn around slowly or I’ll shoot you, pregnant or not.” The last comment elicited a faint protest from Sherlock but John ignored it. He wasn’t going to shoot but the other omega didn’t know that.

It was a very dejected and miserable Ned that obeyed his barked command. The man was dishevelled and bruised. John knew he’d put a few of those bruises on the man’s head himself less than a week ago. Mouth tightening in anger and surprise, John glanced briefly at Sherlock, wondering what the alpha wanted to do next but Sherlock was fighting warring instincts at the moment so John just sighed. Motioning with the gun, he gestured toward the sofa.
“Christ. This is all we need. Sit your arse down and keep your hands on your head. You’ve got some explaining to do, Ned.”

Sherlock finally shook himself and took a deep breath as Ned cautiously moved to sit down. “You know this omega, John?”

Grimly, John gripped his weapon tighter and nodded. “Yeah. He helped Moran kidnap me at the hospital. I’d seen him around at the Gibbet from time to time, too. Psychotic bastard, this one. Last time I saw him was on the boat, but he somehow slipped away before the gunfight that killed Moran. It seems he’s fallen on hard times and I had no idea he was pregnant. So why are you here, Ned? What is it you were looking for?”

Glancing back and forth suspiciously from Sherlock to John, Ned appeared completely defeated and nothing like Moran’s former henchman. John’s empathy ranged out without his permission and wrapped around the other man. Ned was desperate and clearly at the end of his rope with no one to help him and nowhere to go. It was a feeling John was intimately familiar with and he reluctantly empathised.

“I’d heard on the telly that you’d bonded to an alpha sentinel and it was easy to find out where you’d ended up. All alpha sentinels are rich. I thought you’d have some money I could steal. The pup is growing and I have no food or anywhere to live.”

Pity consuming him, John put the SIG away. It was clear he’d not had anything to eat for days and he could barely hold his arms up. John hadn’t noticed that Ned smelt pregnant before, but sometimes the scent didn’t always appear right away or only came out during times of high stress. And to be honest, John had been rather distracted when last they’d met. Regardless, the omega was weak and there was no way he could be a threat to him or Sherlock.

“Put your arms down and relax, Ned. Sherlock, I’m going to fix him something to eat. Keep an eye on him, yeah?”

The alpha nodded agreement and settled in a chair nearby as Ned slumped and put his head into his hands. The other omega was a shaking, pitiful lump and again John felt an unwelcome stab of compassion for him. All John could think was it could easily be him sitting there if it wasn’t for Sherlock. He’d been nearly homeless, penniless and almost as desperate before he’d been lucky enough to meet the alpha sentinel. Silently, John counted his blessings as he fixed easily digestible food for Ned.

Within a few moments, he delivered some hot soup and sandwiches along with a nutritional drink that John had bought in anticipation of his heat in a few weeks. Ned had to take better care of himself for the sake of the foetus. A fierce, primitive protective feeling reared up in John when he thought of what Ned was carrying and it startled him. Then he realised it was likely coming from Sherlock, though he knew some of it was his own, very visceral response to the situation. It could easily be him sitting there and it hit him hard.

As he placed the tray down on the coffee table in front of Ned, John got a closer look at the other omega’s face. Some of the bruises and scrapes on Ned’s face appeared to be recent and looked painful. “You’ve been in a punch up, Ned. Do you need a doctor? Are you hurt anywhere else?”

Startled, Ned stared at John a moment and then shook his head. “I was tired and fell asleep in an alley last night. This alpha came along and wanted me to...well. You know.” Ned gave John a nasty smirk and flexed his scraped hands. “He won’t be fucking any pregnant omegas any time soon.” The man shakily lifted his chin and looked at John suspiciously. “But I’ve had worse. I don’t need your help.”
As John stared thoughtfully at the omega, something odd happened that he couldn’t really explain. John’s empathy once more reached out to the man in front of him without his conscious thought and the image of a bruised and battered child superimposed itself over Ned’s face. The vision surprised John enough that he gasped slightly.

Quickly recovering, John finished setting out the food. “Fine. But I’ll get you some paracetamol once you’ve eaten.”

Nodding to the other man, John stood and walked over to Sherlock, thinking deeply. What had his empathy just shown him and why? From what he could determine, his latent abilities had somehow shown him that Ned had been systematically abused since childhood. Instinct told him to trust what he’d seen and John’s pity for the omega turned into sympathy and respect for a survivor.

As Ned began to wolf down the food, John knelt on the floor beside Sherlock in a show of submission so that there was no question that the alpha was taken. Sherlock had noticed his sudden surprise and looked at him questioningly. John just shook his head and went back to watching Ned eat.

“So, I’m assuming Moran is the sire of your child?” The other omega nodded as he chewed and John continued. “So how far along are you?”

Swallowing a huge mouthful, Ned coughed and took a drink before answering. “The pup’s about 2 months along. I’ve been taking supplements that the doctor recommended but ran out. I’ve got no money for food and have been running since Seb was killed. The house in Chelsea is sealed off by the police and I know they’re still looking for me.”

Sitting back, John realised how incredibly vulnerable Ned was at the moment and the man clearly needed help for the sake of his baby. But were John and Sherlock the ones to give it to him? Ned should be in jail, but that was no place for a pregnant omega. He’d lose the baby for sure if he was incarcerated and despite what he’d done, he didn’t deserve that.

Before he could stop himself, John asked the question that had been swimming around in his head. “Do you plan to keep it, Ned? Or do you want to get rid of it?” Ned’s answer would give John enough information to know what to do. Sherlock made another odd sound of protest at the suggestion of terminating the pregnancy but quietened down immediately.

Ned stopped eating and stared in horror at John. “Wha…? No! I want to keep it! It’s Seb’s pup!” He seemed to deflate, then. “But I’ll probably lose it anyway since I don’t have an alpha. Seb knotted me but wouldn’t bond because he was waiting for you. And now he’s dead.”

Instead of being angry or jealous, Ned just sounded weary and beaten. “Even if the pup survives, I’ll have to give it up for adoption. I can’t care for a kid.”

It was the most intelligent and responsible thing that the other omega could possibly have said. John nodded to himself and decided. “Okay. Wait here.” Ned just blinked at him suspiciously in confusion and took another bite of his sandwich.

John got up and went to the bedroom where the roll of money he’d taken from Moran’s house in Chelsea was still sitting. He’d not used much of it and actually had never counted it. He was astonished when he did. There had been more than enough money there to get him out of the country many times over. If Ned was careful, it would keep him for at least a year and give him the shelter and nutrition he needed to safely deliver the child. But clearly the man needed supervision and help. From what John could tell, Ned was very close to needing to be hospitalised, in fact. His health was
fragile and the foetus was taking all his energy as it struggled to grow.

Making his way back to the lounge, he put the wad of cash in Sherlock’s hand. “Can Mycroft find a good home, preferably outside the city, for unbonded omegas that Ned can go to? This cash belonged to Moran and I took it from his house in Chelsea when I went to retrieve my papers and money. Ned needs protection and good medical care for the duration of his pregnancy so that the child has every chance to be born healthy.” Unbonded, pregnant omegas ran a very high risk of miscarriage and even with the best of care their babies were often stillborn.

“Yes, I’m sure he’d be willing to help. Give me a moment and I’ll ring him.” Sherlock pulled out his mobile and dialled.

John eyed Ned thoughtfully. “That money belongs to your and Seb’s child. If we arrange for you to go to the home, will you stay there and take care of yourself? The money will pay for your stay and cover everything you’ll need to deliver this child safely. But if you plan to run off, then we’ll forget about it and you can just walk out of here. I won’t call the police. But you’re risking your life and the life of your child if you continue this way.”

Ned swallowed nervously and looked away. “I know. Since Seb died, everything has gone to shite. I’ve got nothing and now that I smell pregnant, no one will hire me.” John’s empathy surged out again and told him that Ned was terribly frightened. As they waited for his decision, John could feel the man suddenly control his fear with a great force of will. Ned was still afraid but his concern for the life he carried overruled it.

“Oh, I’ll go to the home. They’ll take Seb’s money to pay for things, yeah? And treat me and my pup right?”

Sherlock had rung off with his brother and answered Ned’s questions. “Yes. My brother will get you a room in a place outside of the city. They’ll take care of you both and the money will be used for your room, board and medical care. This place also offers job training and placement if you want it so that you can support your child once it’s born. My brother knows the owner and she’s a compassionate person with a lot of experience helping unbonded omegas safely through their pregnancies. They won’t put up with bad behaviour, though, so you’d best follow their rules to the letter. I hope you’ll leave your life of crime behind you. If you go back to breaking the law, I’ll find you and have you put away. But whilst you’re pregnant, we have a truce between us, for the sake of your baby. Fair enough?”

To his credit, Ned thought long and hard about it and then nodded his head. “More than fair enough, mate. I don’t deserve it but my pup’s done nothing wrong. It deserves a better chance at life than I ever got. So yeah, I’ll take your offer and thank you both. How do I get there?”

Briefly looking at his watch, Sherlock glanced back over at Ned. “You’ve got about half an hour before my brother sends a car here for you. You can finish up your meal in the meantime and clean up if you like. We might have something here that can fit you. They’ll supply you with appropriate clothing at the home.”

Agreeing, Ned actually began to look hopeful though John’s empathy told him the man was still frightened. “I had about given up hope, you know? I … I don’t know how to repay you. This is almost impossible to believe.”

John knelt by Sherlock again, who wrapped an arm around his shoulders. John leaned into the embrace and replied to Ned. “Believe it, Ned. Just do your best to take care of yourself and your baby and we’ll be well repaid if you can bring it safely into the world.” John could feel Sherlock’s
fervent agreement but also picked up on something odd that made him look at Sherlock questioningly.

The alpha wanted to ask him something but didn’t want to do it in front of Ned, so John nodded his understanding and went to get some clean clothes for their ‘guest’ so he could shower and change into fresh things before Mycroft’s car arrived for him.

Once Ned was in the shower, John knelt beside Sherlock again. He liked doing it and despite what Sherlock had said about kneeling, he didn’t reprimand John for it. “So, what was it you wanted to ask, Sherlock?”

Looking pensive, Sherlock shot a glance over at John and sat forward, twining his long fingers together. “You won’t like this, but I think I should escort Ned to the home. I hate to leave you here by yourself but he’s terrified and I think if I went with him the transition would be easier for him. That way he’ll be more likely to stay there until he delivers.”

“Why can’t we both go, then? Why do you want me to stay here? I’m another omega, after all.” It wasn’t as if he really wanted to spend the next few hours in Ned’s company but he was curious why Sherlock didn’t want him to go.

“Yes, you’re another omega, but he’s terrified of you. His heart rate increases every time you get close to him.”

“Well, I did rough him up a few days ago. I’m guessing the fact that you’re a very dominant alpha will help him feel more secure when he goes to the home?”

“Yes. Also, I will deliver Moran’s money for him and make sure he’s properly admitted. He’s barely literate as it is and I can make sure he understands what’s expected of him. If necessary, I can use my alpha pheromones to calm him and make him more willing to accept the rules and regulations of the house. That will give him and his child a better chance to survive.”

Nodding reluctantly, John agreed. “Ned may not thank you for it, but it’s the right thing to do. Can I fix you something before you go?”

“Thank you, but I’m fine. I’ll be back in a few hours and we can get lunch together if you still wish.” The alpha still looked pensive and somewhat nervous.

John arched an eyebrow at him. “Okay, what else, Sherlock? I know that look and it means you are thinking about telling me something that I won’t like.”

Smiling, Sherlock huffed a small laugh. “Bonded for such a short time and already you know me too well! John, if Ned is able to take his pregnancy to term and decides to give the baby up, I want us to adopt it.”

Opening his mouth to reply, John closed it again with an audible click. Finally he was able to hiss out his response. “What? Are you mental? Adopt the child of two psychopaths? And here you were just telling me just a short time ago that you weren’t ready for children!”

Looking completely serious, Sherlock nodded. “I remember what I said and it wasn’t that I wasn’t ready for children. I said that I wasn’t demanding children from you and left that decision up to you. But think, John! This infant is going to be at a serious disadvantage from the moment it’s born, completely due to the fact that Ned is un bonded. Even in this day and age there is still severe prejudice against children of unbonded omegas. With all it has stacked against it, it will likely end up in care. We can make a difference for such a child, John. At least say you’ll think about it.”
John pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “No, Sherlock! I understand that, as a responsible alpha you’re very concerned about an unbonded, pregnant omega, but believe me when I say we are not qualified, by any stretch of the imagination, to raise the child of Seb Moran! You’re reacting as an overprotective alpha and you’re not being rational.”

Sherlock looked as if he’d been struck. “Perhaps you’re right, John. But you’re reacting from your dislike of Moran and Ned. This foetus is innocent of their crimes. I still want you to think about it.”

Sighing, John capitulated. “Fine, then. At the very least we can keep track of Ned’s progress at the home. Chances are that he’ll leg it once he’s got his health back. We can discuss the other thing later, since we’ve got six or seven months at the least.”

Satisfied, Sherlock sat back and ran his hand over John’s hair and the tension from the room eased. “That’s all I ask. Thank you, John.”

“I promise to think about it, but that’s all.” John was adamant they would not be adopting anyone’s child, especially the child of Ned and Moran.

Smiling, Sherlock stood to go to the window to check on the arrival of the car. “It looks like Mycroft’s driver is here. I think we should prepare more food for Ned before we leave. The home is a few hours north of here in the country and he’ll need to eat again before we get there.”

John hastened to put together something nutritious for their guest and had it ready and waiting when Ned finally emerged from the loo, clean and freshly clothed. Just having had the opportunity to wash and change clothes made a world of difference in Ned’s appearance.

Taking the bag of food from John, Sherlock turned to Ned and explained that he would be accompanying him to the home and seeing to it that he was settled properly. John’s empathy confirmed that Ned was enormously relieved that Sherlock was going with him and the pregnant omega lowered his head in submission to the powerful alpha.

Before they left, Ned turned to John and spoke nervously. “I’m sorry for what I done to you. I thought Seb would turn to me if I helped him. When he got me pregnant, I thought I had a real chance to bond with him. He always talked about how he wanted a family but he never wanted me or my pup. All he wanted was you.”

John wasn’t sure how to feel about that aside from queasy. “I’m sorry also, Ned. I’m sorry that Moran was such a bastard to you. I don’t know what else to say except that I never wanted him.”

Nodding in resignation, Ned turned and went down the stairs with Sherlock following close behind. Throwing a glance over his shoulder at John, Sherlock gave him a small wave. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Bye, luv. I’ll see you when you get home.” With another smile, the alpha was down the stairs, gently ushering the pregnant omega out the door and into the car.

John turned away with a huge sigh of relief that Ned was gone and silently wished him and his unborn child the best of luck. Sherlock had been correct that, even in this day and age, there was still considerable shame in being a pregnant, unbonded omega. It meant you were good enough for an alpha to fuck but not good enough to bond with. John thought that attitude was disgraceful, but it was deeply ingrained in their society. The worst part was that, for some inexplicable reason the prejudice against an unbonded omega who had been bred spilled over onto the child as well. Yet Ned had permitted himself to be bred by Moran in the hopes he could change the man’s mind and
that was a sad, poor and very desperate gamble on Ned’s part. Because of Moran’s obsession with John, Ned hadn’t stood a snowball’s chance in hell and as a result had lost everything. It was the worst insult that Seb could have dealt Ned and John’s heart ached for him. But it seemed Ned was going to try to do better and that was all anyone could ask at this point.

Returning to the flat, John thought about the last few days as he began to straighten up the lounge and kitchen. So much had happened and he wanted to remember it all. He knew it would help him deal with and sort out everything so, despite being tired, he decided to write down all the events of the past week. Fixing himself some breakfast and a large pot of tea, John booted up his ancient laptop and got to work.

Now that he had some distance on it, his confinement at the Bureau, the auction, escape over the rooftops and his meeting with Masters all read like an exciting action/adventure script. Even though he’d been terrified most of the time, not knowing if he’d ever see Sherlock again, he was actually able to laugh at some of it and remember other parts fondly, especially their bonding. Launching immediately into the new case of the missing omegas had been equally as exciting, if for different reasons. He knew now for a fact that his life with Sherlock as his bond mate would be full of challenges, but also full of excitement and adventure that his alpha intended to share in full with him.

When he went over what he’d written from beginning to end, John was surprised that it wasn’t half bad and was actually an enjoyable read. He’d not had the time to really look at the press’ take on the auction, escape or their latest case. He then wondered wryly how true their versions would be, especially considering how they would likely want to hype the fact that Sherlock was now the newly revealed seventh alpha sentinel. It then occurred to John that a way to make sure the record was accurate was to write the cases up himself. It would be straight from the horses’ mouth, so to speak and there wouldn’t be any question of what had happened within any particular case. The press wouldn’t be able to twist or warp Sherlock’s involvement. Maybe creating a blog associated with Sherlock’s website might be the best way to go about it. He could invite comments on the cases and counteract any negative press that might get printed in the mainstream media. Grinning from ear to ear, John began to investigate various blog templates online and made a mental note to check with Sherlock when he returned to the flat.

The activity of writing and researching blogs was surprisingly enjoyable and it was well past noon before he realised how much time had gone by. Stomach growling, John saved his work and got up to fix himself something to eat. Some of his muscle stiffness had returned whilst he had been sitting for so long, but it worked its way out quickly as he moved about. Sherlock would likely return soon, depending on how long it took to get Ned settled. He really hoped the omega would change his ways for the sake of his baby and if John could help, he would do so. But there was no way he would agree to adopt the child. He and Sherlock had just finished agreeing they weren't ready for children yet! Well, to be honest, Sherlock had said it was John's decision and John was the one who had thought he wasn't ready yet.

When he thought about the Craufurd's alpha/omega home and the deep love they clearly had for one another, it reminded him all too much of the feelings he'd experienced in his dream. He could remember the dream, as clear as day, and his feelings of love, pride and joy for his alpha and their large family. Would his life with Sherlock truly be like that if they decided to have children? Closing his eyes, he smiled when he could hear their laughter as if they were actually in the room with him. It startled him and was actually kind of eerie. He was forcibly reminded that somehow his empathy had shown him Ned as an abused child and gave him the insight to feel real compassion for the omega. Had he suddenly developed the ability to see the past and future now? Christ! The thought was totally absurd. John had always had a very good imagination and that's all this was. But again, a little voice in his brain disagreed. Sighing in exasperation, John turned back to his computer and
then the doorbell rang.

Since Mrs Hudson was visiting family, John was the only one available to answer the door. He was expecting some things he'd ordered to be delivered and reluctantly clattered down the stairs. Pulling open the door, John was very surprised to see Keith Hammond on his doorstep and gaped at him instead of saying anything.

The alpha sentinel gave him an amused and very fond smile. "Hello, Dr Watson. May I come in? I'd like to speak to you and Mr Holmes, if I may." Despite his pleasant expression, the alpha sentinel looked tired and careworn and John thought he could see tension in the lines of his face.

Self-conscious, John closed his mouth and flushed. Christ, the man smelled good. John’s heart rate picked up and he cursed himself for being such an omega. "Of course, Mr Hammond. Sherlock is away at the moment but I expect him back within the next hour or so. You're welcome to come back later if you don't want to wait."

Giving John another warm smile, Hammond stepped inside the foyer. "If you don't mind, I'll wait for Mr Holmes to arrive. And please call me Keith."

Surprised but pleased at the informality, John gave him a quick smile. "No, that's fine. Please call me John. You're welcome to come up." John gestured toward the stairs and followed Hammond into the flat.

The man took an appreciative look around. "Very cosy, John. I like this place very much." He turned his smile at John and looked down at him affectionately.

A blush heated John’s face for some strange reason and he quickly moved toward the kitchen. "I'll make us some tea. Please have a seat and I'll bring it to you."

Instead of sitting down at the table or on the sofa, Hammond followed John into the kitchen and watched as he made tea.

“You seem quite settled into the flat, John. Congratulations on your bonding, by the way. As much as I wish you’d wanted to be mine, I’m happy for you. It’s rare that a guide can choose his or her sentinel. I’d like to see that change, especially seeing how happy it’s made you. You are happy, aren’t you, John?”

John shot a look of shock and surprise at the other man, not quite sure how to answer that. His empathy was picking up on something odd but whatever Hammond was feeling was well concealed. But John had been taught that the truth was always best. “Sherlock is everything I could ever have asked for in a bond mate and I can honestly say I’ve never been happier in my life, Keith.”

Giving John a sad smile as the omega carried the tea things out to the table in the lounge, Hammond sat at John’s invitation. “I’d like to think I’d have made you happy, too. At least, I would have tried my best.”

At John’s expression of discomfort, Hammond quickly changed the subject. “But that’s not why I’m here. I felt you and your sentinel deserved to know what was going on with the Bureau. I expect Holmes’ brother Mycroft will fill you in on some of it, but I thought you’d want to hear it from me.”

After pouring tea for them both, John gave the alpha sentinel his full attention. Hammond cupped the mug in both hands and took a deep breath. “You should know that I’ve been appointed the new Director of the Bureau. I didn’t want the responsibility but I was convinced by our sentinel
community to take the job, at least temporarily. I don’t plan to keep the position for long but I do hope to make some major changes before my tenure is up. I also wanted you to know that it’s entirely due to you that these things will happen.”

Touched and very surprised, John’s empathy told him that Hammond was being completely candid and straightforward with him.

The alpha sentinel continued. “I can’t go into great detail but you should know that acquisition and auctioning of all latents has stopped and those that had been captured have been let go. I’ve added my support to the law that ensures freedom for latents and I’ve been assured that it will pass both Houses later this week.

“One thing I do want to try is to fulfil our promise of offering job training and education to any latent that comes in voluntarily. And they will be allowed to choose their own sentinel. It’s a huge change. I know I’ll meet a lot of resistance from the community, so it will take some time to implement. But I’ll see to it that it will get done. Also, there’s going to be a lot of restructuring of the Bureau. Guides will finally be allowed into the upper management of the organisation. Mycroft has lent one of his best people to help train guides to work within the Bureau and Lori will be working with her. I believe her name is Anthea.”

John nodded his approval but had a question. “That’s a very good start and I’m glad to hear it. But what can be done about the latents who were bonded against their will? Is there any recourse for them? Can you track them down and arrange to break their bonds if they wish it? Also, do you know what happened to the latents that I helped escape? Is there any way to find out?”

Hammond flinched at the suggestion of bond breaking, just as Sherlock had done. “I don’t know, John. What you’re suggesting would be incredibly expensive for the Bureau to implement but I’ll look into it. The problem is that we no longer have the revenue streams that kept the Bureau afloat and employed thousands of people. We’ve had to make a large number of our employees redundant. It’s been terrible for the economy and has actually pushed the country’s economic recovery back. I hope that, with the help of the government and the input of our sentinels and guides that we can find another way to create jobs for our community but it’s going to be slow going for some time. I expect I’ll be blamed for a lot of hardship that our former employees will suffer and I’m sorry for that. But that’s not your problem and I shouldn’t worry you about it.

“Now I do believe I can find out what happened to those latents that escaped with you. Give me some time and I’ll get back with you.”

Knowing the immense pressures Hammond was experiencing certainly explained the alpha’s weary expression and the new lines on his face. “Thank you for that, Keith. I’m confident that I and all the other latents can count on you to do the right thing. And I don’t think I had the chance to thank you for helping Sherlock against Murphy at the auction.”

Hammond gave John another sad smile. “I was glad to help, John. You deserve to be happy and I could see that it was Holmes you wanted, not me. It was no trouble and I’d do it again.”

Returning the smile with a bashful duck of his head, John asked another question that had been bothering him. “What’s going to happen to Murphy, by the way? And will Walter have to go to prison with him?” John had wondered if Murphy’s guide would be punished along with him.

“Murphy will face Sentinel Law and will likely be imprisoned for life for what he’s done. It’s shocking because a sentinel is supposed to care for his ‘tribe’ and with AG he attempted to destroy an entire generation of young sentinels. I simply cannot understand it. I believe there’s something wrong with the way he sees the world, because he doesn’t seem to understand that what he did was
immoral.

“Walter was the key to catching Murphy, by the way. He became our inside source and informed on what Murphy was doing. It was a terrible decision for him to make but he couldn’t support the man any longer. I think the final straw was when he ordered your soul bond broken. Murphy never told any of us that you had a soul bond and it wasn’t until Walter informed me that we knew the obscenity he’d attempted. I was so glad to find out you were able to fool Wood and protect your bond. I’d had my eye on Wood for a long time and suspected he was abusing latents but couldn’t prove it. Again, you helped us get the evidence we needed and now Wood will be dealt with according to Sentinel Law, as well.”

Astonished, John gaped at Hammond for a moment. “I remember hearing Walter object to Murphy ordering our bond be broken. I’m glad to know he helped you. So what will happen to Walter? Will he have to join Murphy in prison?”

“No. Actually, he’s asked to have his bond broken. It’s incredibly risky and I’ve urged him to reconsider. They’ve been bonded for at least 20 years and breaking it could kill one or both of them. He can live without Murphy quite well, though the initial separation would be difficult. So he’s promised to try that and see how it goes.”

The news about Walter was shocking. John wished the other guide well and hoped he could live without his sentinel because John knew he couldn’t live without Sherlock. But again, Walter had not chosen Murphy the way John had chosen Sherlock so maybe they could exist apart more easily.

Checking his watch, Hammond stood. “I’ll help you with the tea things but then I’d best be off. I’m sorry I didn’t get to see Holmes but I have another appointment and you can certainly pass along what I wanted to tell him.”

John collected the tea things and Hammond took the tray to carry into the kitchen. They then walked to the door to the flat as the alpha sentinel prepared to leave. “Thank you for your time, John. It was a pleasure to see you again.”

Clearing his throat, John felt his face flush again. He couldn’t understand why he was practically stammering. The man smelt nice but he wasn’t Sherlock. “It was nice to see you as well, Keith. Thank you for telling me all of that.”

Once again giving John a warm smile, the alpha sentinel reached out and drew John into a gentle hug. “Thank you for opening my eyes to what was happening. Every latent owes you their lives. I just want you to know that I think the world of you. You’re happy and I’m glad for you. Selfishly, I wish things could have been different and you belonged to me now.”

Taken off guard by the embrace, John automatically hugged the man back briefly and then stepped away, smiling slightly. The doctor had been afraid he’d respond strongly to Hammond’s touch as he had before, but was greatly relieved that he’d felt absolutely nothing. His bond with Sherlock had overcome any slight attraction John had had for the other alpha sentinel. Hammond’s hands were still holding John’s arms and he gave John a gentle squeeze. But before the doctor could respond, there was a deep baritone voice speaking from the landing.

“Well, it’s lucky for me that he’s mine and not yours, Hammond!” Sherlock strode into the flat, clearly furious at what he perceived as Hammond’s intrusion. Grabbing John roughly by the arm, Sherlock pulled the omega away from the other sentinel and set John behind him.

“You’re in my territory, sentinel, touching my guide. I suggest you leave. Now!”
Frowning angrily, Hammond didn’t budge. “Look, Holmes. I just came here to tell you and John about what was happening with the Bureau.”

“What I just saw didn’t look like you were telling John much of anything. It looked like you were pawing my bond mate!”

The accusation seemed to infuriate Hammond. “I did no such thing! I simply gave him a hug goodbye!”

Before Sherlock could respond, John tugged at his arm. “He’s telling the truth, Sherlock! Keith didn’t do anything except talk to me!” The detective spun on John and stared down at him narrowly, his eyes filled with hurt.

“So he’s ‘Keith’ now, is he? And just a friendly goodbye hug, was it? You belong to me but you allowed him to touch you and now you reek of his stench.” Distressed alpha pheromones were beginning to thicken the air and it made John dizzy. He could sense through the bond that Sherlock was becoming primal and he did the only thing he could think to do to try to reverse the process. He knelt at Sherlock’s feet and bowed his head, leaning into the man’s hip.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock, I shouldn’t have allowed it, but you misunderstood. He meant nothing by it but friendship.”

Not mollified at all, Sherlock reached down, took John by the back of the neck and forced the omega to look up at him. The grip on his neck should have angered John but had the opposite effect. Instead, John gasped and melted into the touch and to his horror and embarrassment he felt a gush of lubrication soak his pants. He was becoming aroused by the clash between the two alpha sentinels and, though it was arousing him, the fact that he was wet made him want to sink into the floor and disappear.

Sherlock’s nostrils flared as he scented John’s arousal and it seemed to inflame him more. “I misunderstood nothing! You’re mine but you allowed him to touch you! You still smell of him. Go wash it off, now! And throw away those clothes!”

”Wait a minute, Holmes! Where do you get off ordering him around like that? He’s done nothing wrong!”

It appeared that Hammond was becoming more than a little irrational himself and John could smell his anger and confusion at Sherlock’s seemingly harsh words toward John. It wasn’t like Sherlock to behave this way at all but it seemed that spending many hours with a pregnant unbonded omega had brought his primal instincts too close to the surface and the situation with Hammond set him off like a bomb.

Sherlock glared at Hammond and through the bond, John could feel the detective becoming unhinged. It excited him but he forced the inappropriate feeling down and intervened when he realised that Sherlock was ready to strike Hammond. The other alpha sentinel had no clue how deadly the detective could be. “Mr Hammond, please leave. I’ll be fine. Sherlock won’t hurt me but please stop arguing with him now and go.”

Hammond had scented John’s arousal as well and John could see the man’s pupils expand in interest. The older alpha sentinel seemed to be teetering on the edge of making a very bad decision. John’s heart wanted to leap out of his chest as his body tingled in desire, helpless in Sherlock’s grip and waiting breathlessly for something to happen. This whole thing was getting way out of hand and John didn’t know what to do to stop it.
Voice quiet and very deep, Sherlock took a threatening step toward Hammond. “You still want him and you’d take him from me if you could do. I can smell your desire for him.”

For a moment, Hammond looked shocked and then angry as he stepped back. “Yes, I still want him. He would be perfect for me and I’d take him away from you if he’d allow it. I think I’d be better for him.”

At Hammond’s admission, a wave of shock and arousal washed over John and he gasped again. Sherlock tightened his grip on John’s neck in response, making him go limp as the alpha literally growled at Hammond. John was shaking with hunger for his alpha and was losing himself in a fog of desire. His own primal side was being strongly affected by the feuding alpha sentinels.

“He’s mine and you can’t have him. I’ll kill you if you try to take him from me!”

Sherlock’s possessive growl ignited John’s insides and he began to burn with excitement and actually whimpered in distress. This thankfully brought Sherlock’s attention back to John and away from Hammond. The sound shook the other alpha sentinel also and he finally realised the extreme danger he was in. Hammond came to his senses, gave John an apologetic look and then retreated down the stairs and out of the building.

Sherlock slammed the flat’s door shut and locked it before turning back to John, eyes narrowing with pain as he scented wrongness on his bond mate. “John. Please, remove those clothes, wash yourself and then go to the bedroom to wait for me.”

John wasn’t scared of the primal alpha, because he knew Sherlock would never hurt him, but John obeyed instantly anyway. As he left the room, he paused and glanced over his shoulder to see Sherlock begin to pace around the lounge, scenting at every place where Hammond had been. Hoping to help Sherlock down from his primal, feral state, John did exactly what he was told. Knowing it would pass eventually John quickly got to the loo and removed his clothes, stuffing them into a plastic bag to be washed later. There was no way he was going to throw them out and once Sherlock came down from his primal state, he’d understand and forgive John.

A wave of vertigo and heat swept through him and his stomach cramped in nausea. Thankfully he was in the loo and was able to reach the toilet just in time. The cramping stopped quickly as whatever had caused the trouble was eliminated and then he got into the shower, anxiously scrubbing the scent of the other man off his skin. He hoped Sherlock would calm down soon. Hammond had not been any threat to Sherlock as far as John was concerned. John belonged to Sherlock only and now he just had to prove it and hope that Sherlock accepted his apology.

He’d never experienced an alpha going primal and he had no idea how long it would last or exactly how to bring Sherlock out of it. Sherlock’s possessive behaviour was incredibly exciting to his inner omega and he felt another gush of wetness between his legs and his abdomen burned and cramped again. Quickly, he rinsed and dried himself off and ran for the bedroom. The alpha wasn’t there yet and John heard crashing about in the lounge and kitchen but didn’t dare go out. He started to sweat and shake, feeling vaguely nauseous as he pulled out some fresh clothes. He couldn’t remember the last time he was so nervous and anxious.

Suddenly the bedroom door was flung open and Sherlock was there, still in his feral state. John spun around with his back to the bed and watched with a combination of apprehension and arousal as the alpha shut the door and paced over to him, sniffing deeply.

He picked up the clothing and tossed it away with a growl. “John. Get on the bed.”
Hesitating for just a moment, John did as Sherlock instructed and lay back on the pillows, carefully observing the alpha. His abdomen was throbbing and he squirmed, craving the feeling of Sherlock inside him as he watched the detective remove his clothes and then crawl over him to sniff his body to make sure that Hammond’s scent was nowhere to be found. John was flipped over unceremoniously and so stayed as still as possible whilst Sherlock checked over his back as well. John couldn’t remember when he’d been so hard and he was panting as if he’d run a race. Lubrication was leaking out of him at a rate he’d never experienced outside of a heat and he humped against the bedclothes as fluid dripped out of him.

John’s tension eased as Sherlock seemed satisfied with what he’d found and hoped he would finally relax. The alpha hummed in approval and began to lick, bite and kiss messily across John’s shoulders, paying particular attention to the back of his neck. Then the alpha positioned himself over John’s back, kissed his neck and spoke into his ear, his voice nearly a growl.

“You allowed him to touch you. But you’re mine and only mine. I will have to show everyone that you belong to me so there will never be any doubt again.”

Something in the possessive way Sherlock said the words reached deep into John’s subconscious and his arousal ratcheted up to a point he’d never experienced before. Writhing helplessly, John involuntarily lowered his head and arched his back, presenting himself for his alpha’s pleasure. Sherlock took the invitation and entered John with a quick, smooth thrust that pushed the omega practically into the headboard. Bracing himself against the bed, John cried out in ecstasy as the huge intruder forced its way inside and the omega came harder than he could ever remember as the alpha bottomed out and then pulled back roughly. Sherlock proceeded to fuck John fast and hard, harder than he’d ever done before and John thrashed and squirmed and came again, crying out. Sherlock paused his thrusts and moaned appreciatively as John’s muscles clamped tightly and pulsed around him and then Sherlock resumed his fast pace as John panted and moaned.

As he continued to fuck John, Sherlock’s knot seemed to grow larger than before and John began to push back to try to get Sherlock to force it inside. Each time it breached him, John felt an almost electric shock from his head to his toes and he urgently wanted it more than anything he’d ever wanted before. But despite his demands, he became frustrated because Sherlock wouldn’t give it to him.

Suddenly, the alpha pulled completely out of John with a wet sound, flipped him onto his back and, as John watched in surprise, Sherlock stroked his engorged cock, groaned loudly and then came all over John’s stomach and chest. It was so incredibly hot that John’s brain nearly short circuited with arousal. All he wanted was to have that cock back inside him and he whimpered pitifully with need as he smeared some of the semen into his skin.

Sherlock bent over John then, looking him straight in the eyes. “You belong to me and no one else. Say it!”

Gasping in shock, John became instantly hard again. “I’m yours and belong to no one else! Truly, Sherlock! You have to believe me!”

The sentinel pulled back enough to grab John’s legs and drape them over his shoulders before plunging back inside John’s wet hole with an obscene squelch. Crying out in passion, John arched his back and grabbed at the headboard again, pushing up so that Sherlock could get deeper inside as the alpha began to fuck him hard and fast again. John couldn’t believe it. He was experiencing a sexual fantasy he hadn’t even known he’d had and he cried out again as he orgasmed around Sherlock. The alpha pulled out and shot stripes of come over and over on John’s chest and neck, this time rubbing it into the omega’s skin too. The alpha had stayed hard even after coming twice and
once more flipped John onto his stomach and pushed back into him as he growled again.

“Now everyone will know that you're mine!”

Almost out of his head with rapture and nearly delirious, John moaned and pushed back as the hard fucking resumed. “Yes! Christ, yes! I’m yours! I belong to you and no one else! Fuck me harder, please!”

Sherlock rumbled in primal satisfaction and picked up the pace, driving the breath from John with each piston-like plunge. His knot was huge and swollen and John manoeuvred his hips back and upward to get the thing far inside him, finally succeeding with a cry of exultation. Then Sherlock’s knot seemed to swell to gigantic proportions and the alpha gasped in shocked pleasure and began to come inside John. The knot, combined with the pulsing of the cock as it filled him with seed set off another orgasm in John and he mewled and writhed in utter bliss.

It was then that Sherlock bent down and bit hard enough at the back of John’s neck to draw blood. John cried out at the shocking and bizarre sensation. His body shivered with cold and then turned burning hot as Sherlock continued to chew at the wound, his saliva beginning to mix with John’s blood, just as his semen was filling John up. Things became hazy and strange and then John could feel their bond nearly double in strength.

The realisation of what was happening shocked John out of his fog of extreme arousal. They were actually knotting for the first time and Sherlock had just delivered an alpha bonding bite to him. John had not recognised that he had gone into an early heat because he had been so worried about Sherlock. The two alpha sentinels fighting over him had clearly been the catalyst. It didn’t seem to matter to John’s biology that the fight had not been physical like it would have been in primitive times. Their conflict had excited him and his body was now responding to the winner of the battle by going into heat and offering the victor his fertility. However, John hadn’t been ready for this and horrified, remembered that he hadn’t even started to take the contraceptives that Mycroft had left for him.

Sherlock’s hips were bucking and grinding into John, trying to get further inside as he continued to orgasm and fill John’s no doubt now fertile womb. Despair took hold of John briefly but then the fog of arousal began to build again and suddenly John didn’t care anymore. Sherlock’s seed and saliva mixed with John’s own body chemistry began to have its effect. His heat ramped up, forcing John to focus instead on the amazing sensations originating from the gorgeous knotted intruder buried deep in his body, still pulsing, filling and exciting him beyond measure.

He clenched around it and relished the moans his actions elicited from Sherlock. The alpha was completely lost in his pleasure and John had done it to him. Primitive, smug satisfaction of having pleased his alpha consumed him and he writhed again. Sherlock’s weight pinning him down as he continued to chew on John’s neck felt wonderful and John never wanted it to end. The bond was continuing to strengthen and grow as the moments passed and then finally Sherlock’s knot deflated and he let go of John’s neck.

Carefully pulling out of the omega, Sherlock rolled away, panting and then covered his face with his hands. Worried, John sat up and crept closer and as the urgency of his heat died down temporarily, his brain reengaged. Expecting a gush of seminal fluid to escape from his opening, he was shocked when nothing but his own lubrication slid out. As if he needed more proof that he was now fully in heat, this fact confirmed it. His neck throbbed but it wasn’t painful in a way he’d expected and he put his hand up to his new bonding bite to find it was still bleeding sluggishly. It would scar noticeably but the thought of everyone seeing it and knowing he belonged to Sherlock was beyond thrilling to him.
But Sherlock had come out of his feral state and was now speaking to him. “I don’t know what came over me, John. I don’t remember why…. But I behaved like a Neanderthal toward you!” Taking his hands away from his face, Sherlock turned toward the omega with a frightened expression. “Are you all right? I didn’t hurt you, did I? I wasn’t too rough with you?”

Smiling, John lay back down to put an arm around Sherlock and was gathered in close.

“Christ that was astonishing! If you search your memory a bit, I believe you will recall me screaming for you to fuck me harder, in fact. And if you say anything about my lovely new bonding bite, I shall have to hurt you because I think it’s absolutely perfect.”

That elicited a look of incredulity and then a huff of laughter from Sherlock. John’s smile grew into a grin. “And addressing the matter of what came over you? You became primal and picked a fight with Hammond over an innocent hug.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed dangerously at the suddenly remembered fight. “It wasn’t so innocent. I could smell his desire for you, even though you apparently didn’t notice it. It was there and I just couldn’t let it go because you’re mine. I’m sorry, though. I’m not normally like that.”

“I know that, Sherlock but it was unbelievably hot! I think you discovered a kink that I didn’t even know I had when you shot all over me. Twice! I think I almost overloaded when you did that. If you ever want to do it again, I certainly wouldn’t object. But I think you went over the edge into primal behaviour with Keith because we weren’t bonded yet as alpha and omega. Your instincts were close to the surface all morning because of Ned and I suspect it made you insecure when a rival for me appeared suddenly. It also affected me and sent me into heat early. I wonder if maybe I was just as insecure about the lack of bonding as you.”

Nuzzling John’s throat and licking around to the new bonding bite, Sherlock responded softly, his voice very deep. “I’m going to have to apologise to Hammond as soon as I can do, but I’m not sorry that this happened and I’m glad we don’t have to wait any longer to bond. There’s no question that you belong to me now and you to me. We are permanently bonded and only death will ever separate us.”

The feral possessiveness of Sherlock’s admission set off the fire in John’s belly again and he pushed closer, wanting his alpha. Shamelessly pressing and rubbing against Sherlock, he pulled the unresisting and eager alpha on top of him and guided his cock inside him again. This time Sherlock was sweet and slow with John as they kissed deeply and only speeding up and becoming rough as the knot was pushed inside. John keened in delight as Sherlock began to fill him again. The feeling was marvellous and his body happily milked the alpha dry of every drop of seed.

The heat had started off very exciting and rather well but John knew the loss of control was coming. Soon he and Sherlock would be mindlessly fucking every waking moment, sleeping only when completely exhausted. John tried to remind himself to get some water into the room for them to drink but then he lost the thread of that thought as Sherlock moved perfectly inside him and another orgasm hit.

Time had no meaning as they fucked, knotted, slept and fucked some more. His body burned and only Sherlock’s touch could quench the flames. The alpha seemed to be in no better shape mentally and John could mostly recall only guttural grunts, moans and cries from him. At one point during a particularly intense knotting session, John thought he heard Mrs Hudson’s voice and suddenly he was being given cool water to drink. It tasted like ambrosia and he came to himself slightly to realise Mrs Hudson was also giving them both water and then the nutrient drinks as they lay knotted together, naked and exposed. She was no threat to them so Sherlock didn’t react and after allowing
them both to drink their fill, she left them and John went under again. From that time on there was always cool water within reach or the chocolate flavoured energy drinks John favoured. Mrs Hudson was a saint and John vowed to find some way to thank her once his mind cleared.

He remembered bits and pieces and tender moments when they came up for air or to stagger to the loo to wash, pee and then start all over again. It took four days for the heat to come to an end and it stopped without warning. One moment they were tied together moaning mindlessly and then suddenly it seemed as if a mental fog lifted. The moment the knot went down and Sherlock pulled out with a flood of ejaculate escaping, John knew it was done. Totally exhausted, he immediately fell into a deep sleep. When they woke covered in bodily fluids on filthy sheets, looking like they’d been dragged through a hedge backward, both of them just looked at each other and started to giggle. It felt wonderful to laugh and though he was tired, his body hummed happily in satiation. He yelped when he sat up, though.

Sherlock was immediately kneeling beside him. “What’s wrong? Are you all right, John?”

“Oh, just a teeny bit sore, luv. But a good soak will see me right. Help be up?”

Sherlock threw on a robe and helped John to the loo. The alpha treated John like china and drew a hot bath for him. Soaking felt lovely and when he was done, there was a soft towel, a dressing gown, hot soup and tea waiting for him.

As they ate their light meal, Mrs Hudson stuck her head in the door. “Are you decent, boys? May I come in?”

Sighing dramatically, Sherlock gave her permission to enter. “Come in, Mrs Hudson. You’ve seen us knotted together and covered in semen. I don’t think you need to worry any longer if we’re decent or not.”

The elderly omega giggled merrily at them and though John thought he’d be embarrassed, he really wasn’t and joined her in laughter.

“Thank you for everything you did for us, Mrs Hudson. My heat came early and I wasn’t prepared for it. I think we would have dried up and blown away if it wasn’t for your help.”

Smiling, Mrs Hudson gave John a peck on the cheek. “When I returned home from my daughter’s to find the house smelling like an omega in heat, I knew what had happened. There was a time or two that Mr Hudson and I were surprised by my heat and I was lucky to have help. I was hoping you wouldn’t mind me letting myself into the flat to make sure you stayed hydrated and I’m glad to see you both looking so well. I remember how I’d feel after my heats ended. Well loved but so hungry I could have eaten a horse.”

John glanced over at Sherlock who was looking quite pleased with himself. “For our first heat together, I think we did okay but again, it would have been a disaster without your help.”

“You’re very welcome, John, Sherlock. But remember, just this once!”

Sherlock put a hand over his eyes and groaned. “Yes, Mrs Hudson. I know. What you did was above and beyond the purview of any housekeeper but I honestly don’t think we’ll be making a habit of it.”

Eyes twinkling, she winked at John and then glanced down at his slightly protruding abdomen, taut with Sherlock’s seed. “It’ll probably be some time before John has another heat, dear. I wouldn’t be
surprised if you’ve given him more than one baby.’’ With that parting shot, Mrs Hudson made her way down the stairs, cackling with amusement.

Then it was John’s turn to cover his face. “Oh, god, she’s right! I could be pregnant! I hadn’t started taking the pills yet, Sherlock!”

The alpha put an arm around John and pulled his hand down from his face to gently kiss him. “I know that John and it’s fine with me. It seems that our primitive natures took the decision whether or not to start a family away from us. But I promised you that you will be my partner and I will never shut you out of my cases, even if you’re nine months along.”

Laughing, John shook his head. “We don’t even know if I will conceive. We won’t know for weeks and about half of early heats are not fertile, so we’ll have to wait. In the meantime, I feel like I could also eat a horse so maybe we should have a proper breakfast. It’s early enough that Speedy’s is still serving and you promised me a meal there, Sherlock.’’

“So I did.” Giving John another kiss, Sherlock stood. “Let me get cleaned up and dressed and I will take you to breakfast.”

As the day had dawned bright and sunny, they were seated outside. John ordered Speedy’s Breakfast and lots of tea. Sherlock watched John eat the enormous meal and drank tea whilst he picked a few bits off an enormous cheese Danish that looked absolutely delicious.

Sitting back in his chair with a replete sigh, John surreptitiously loosened his belt a notch. “That was great, but you know that we can’t do this very often. Like all omegas, I have a tendency to put on weight rather quickly.”

Sherlock’s look aimed for innocence but didn’t quite get there. “Oh, really? I had no idea. Here, have the rest of my pastry.” Sherlock slid his breakfast over to John, who glared at him suspiciously.

“You’re not helping, Sherlock. Or are you deliberately trying to fatten me up?”

Thick, dark eyebrows rose up to Sherlock’s fringe in mock outrage. “Of course not, John! But if you did gain some weight, I wouldn’t mind. It would just mean there was more of you to love.”

Eyes narrowed at the alpha, John knew what Sherlock was doing but picked up the Danish and finished it in three bites. It was indeed heavenly but he promised himself he’d not indulge again until he’d established an exercise routine. Right now he was still tired and wanted to go back to bed.

Instead, Sherlock ordered two more Danish and another pot of tea with an additional cup and saucer. Frowning, John gave him a sharp look as the pastries were set on the table. “What are you doing, Sherlock?”

“We are expecting company shortly. I spotted Mycroft’s car coming this way and thought I’d go ahead and order for him so he’ll go away and leave us in peace more quickly.”

Turning in his seat, John spotted the sleek black vehicle pull up to the kerb and watched as Mycroft stepped out. Pinning a bright smile on his face, the elder Holmes made his way over to the table and seated himself. John poured him some tea whilst Mycroft tucked into the pastries.

Sherlock eyed him dubiously. “Difficult morning ruling the world, Mycroft?”

Mycroft took a polite sip of tea before replying. “Actually, it’s been a lovely morning and I now get to share it with my brother and his omega. Congratulations on your bonding as alpha and omega, by
the way. Mummy was ever so pleased.” A smug smile spread across the beta’s face and for some reason John wanted to smack it off. It took some doing to stop himself and thankfully Sherlock took his hand.

“Since you’ve both been… busy… for a large part of the week, you wouldn’t have heard about this yet and I wanted to be the one to tell you that the latent ‘Freedom’ bill passed both houses and is effective immediately.”

The smile Mycroft turned to John was genuine. “You asked Keith to research what happened to the latents you helped escape from the compound and he asked me to tell you what he found. Why he didn’t come himself….”

Sherlock’s hand tightened at the mention of Hammond’s name but John just squeezed back tightly and gave his alpha a stern look. Of course Mycroft didn’t miss a thing and his eyebrows practically rose into his hairline but he didn’t say a word about it.

“As I was saying, Keith tried to find out what happened to the latents you helped free. As far as he has determined, all of them dropped off the face of the earth. The Bureau was totally focused on looking for you that day and the others were not pursued seriously. I believe their relatives were questioned a few weeks after their escape but of course no one knew where they’d gone. I suspect many of them, if not all, escaped to the continent.”

John thought of Sheri and Phil and wished he had some way to contact them. Sheri had said Phil had a brother in East Croydon but John didn’t know his last name. He’d just have to hope that Sheri would hear about the changes in the law, return home and look him up. He was sure she’d connect William Larssen with John Watson since it was all over the news. John had admired how brave she’d been despite the terrible situation she’d been thrust into and he also thought Sherlock would like her quick wits.

Shaking himself out of his short reverie, John gave Mycroft a polite smile. “Ta for the information, Mycroft. I do appreciate it. I’m glad to know they got away successfully and also hope they will return home soon.”

“As do I, John.” Pushing aside the remains of the second Danish, Mycroft checked his watch. “Well, I must go. It was lovely seeing you, Sherlock. John, a delight as always. Oh, by the way, Mummy has invited you both over for Sunday dinner. Eight sharp! See you then!” With that, the beta walked over to his vehicle and was quickly driven away.

John stared in surprise at a suddenly pale Sherlock. “We have to go to dinner with your mother? How do we get out of this?”

A wild eyed Sherlock glanced over at him and then his expression morphed into a grin. “We shall have a case. I received the email just this morning. An international case and I believe it will take us to Paris and then to Rome for at least a week… no, two weeks!”

John’s grin felt like it was going to split his face. “Lovely! I always wanted a honeymoon in France and Italy. I expect we must leave in the next hour or so? Yeah?”

Sherlock stood up abruptly and pulled John with him. “Of course! There are mysteries to solve and lives are no doubt at stake so we must hurry. Come along, John! We can sleep on the aeroplane!”

Giggling happily, John followed his madman up the stairs. Whether the case was real or not didn’t matter, though he suspected there really was a case. Just the fact that Sherlock would keep his promise and always include John fully in his life filled him with an intense joy. Someday soon, John
was going to learn how to be a proper guide for his bond mate and the possibility of a child or two joining their family would challenge them both but also enrich their lives. There wouldn’t be a dull moment with Sherlock and he suspected that, as the years passed, their life together would just get better and better. And John was looking forward to every moment.

Epilogue: Approximately five years later...

Sighing in annoyance, John glanced down at his mobile. Sherlock had just texted to say he was going to be running later than he’d anticipated. Traffic was murder but he was going to be home as soon as possible. On the plus side, he had the ice cream cake safely in hand. Thankfully, there was plenty of time before the guests started arriving and Mrs Hudson was downstairs so she could answer the door just in case someone came early.

Looking around the lounge and kitchen with a critical eye, John was satisfied that everything was as ready for the birthday party as possible. The decorations were up, all the food prepared and Sherlock’s mum was due to arrive in about an hour. In the meantime, Bastina and Corin were finally napping upstairs and Evan was quietly and seriously constructing towers of stuffed animals in his playpen with the sole purpose of escape. Watching the tiny, blond 20 month old concentrating so hard to figure out how he was going to manage to build a structure strong enough to get him out of the playpen this time was fascinating and somewhat frightening.

When the child could barely walk, they’d found he’d snuck out of the flat, down the stairs and somehow managed to open the front door before they’d caught him. John had nearly had a heart attack and the safety gates went back up immediately. But Evan somehow was able to get around them, as well. From that point on, John had to watch him like a hawk but couldn’t help admiring his single minded focus to get free and see the world. To get them both outside, John had taken up going for runs around the neighbourhood and park with the pushchair whilst the other two were in school. As a result, John was in the best shape he’d been in years. Sherlock also took every opportunity to take Evan outside to explore the zoo and the park, just as he’d done with the older two. Thankfully now that he was almost two, Evan was finally beginning to develop other interests besides emulating Houdini.

Certain that Evan was secure for at least a few minutes, John made his way laboriously to the upstairs bedroom and quietly opened the door to check on the ‘twins’. They really weren’t twins but were so close in age that it didn’t actually matter. They were inseparable and shared a special language between them, just as many twins did and their personalities balanced each other perfectly. His heart swelled with love and he couldn’t help the soppy smile that crossed his face as he watched them sleep. John’s first born son was the spitting image of Sherlock down to the pale skin, blue-grey eyes and dark curls. And just like his sire, Corin was a certified genius.

Bastina was a strawberry blonde with green eyes and the most beautiful child John had ever seen in his entire life. And he wasn’t prejudiced just because she was his daughter. Complete strangers would come up to them on the street and comment on her beauty. It worried John at first but she didn’t seem to let it affect her at all and took it in stride. Like her brother and sire, she was more interested in learning about the world and didn’t care what others thought of her. Bastina was not a genius like Corin but he challenged her intellectually to keep up whilst she kept him grounded socially. The two were like night and day, sleeping curled up together like puppies. John was so incredibly proud of them both.

His thoughts turned sadly to Ned, the omega who’d given birth to her. There had been no word of
him since Bastina was born. Even Mycroft could find no trace of him and John worried he had finally died of self neglect or been killed. Sherlock was convinced he was dead and had actually mourned the omega for a long time. The alpha had developed a strange but surprisingly deep friendship with Ned during his time at the home for unbonded omegas and had gone up weekly to check on him and then daily as the date of delivery came close.

John had been jealous at first because he wondered if Sherlock would want to take Ned as another omega after the child was born. But Sherlock was adamant that he wanted no one other than John and the doctor could read the truth of it in their bond. After that, he began to accompany Sherlock on his visits. Ned wasn’t someone John would ever have chosen as a friend but he got along with the other omega for Sherlock’s sake and eventually began to enjoy their visits.

Having had an alpha sentinel nearby who cared about him allowed Ned to bring Bastina safely to full term and slightly beyond. She arrived two weeks late and Sherlock and John had both been there for her birth. Sherlock had been the one to cut the cord, hold her first and give her to Ned. John had been seven months pregnant and as John held Bastina for the first time, Corin had begun to kick him mercilessly at just that moment, as if he had wanted to see her, too. John had laughed and the child had opened beautiful eyes that looked just like Sebastian’s.

Ned had been completely wrung out from the labour and delivery and was not particularly interested in feeding her, so the nurses had whisked her away. John had followed hard on their heels and had been allowed to give the newborn her first feeding from a bottle, falling hopelessly in love with her from that minute onward. He and Sherlock had stayed with Ned for some time and visited every day until Ned had disappeared a few days after her birth, leaving a note and his infant behind. In the note, he named the child Bastina Lynne, said he wasn’t coming back and indicated he wanted Sherlock and John to adopt her. With Mycroft’s intervention, they were able to take her home immediately and the elder Holmes arranged the formal adoption.

When Bastina was barely two months old John delivered Corin three weeks prematurely. The little bugger was absolutely fine but John was convinced that he just wanted to meet his sister early. Surprisingly, taking care of two babies at once wasn’t as difficult as he’d thought it would be and he surprised himself even more by producing more than enough milk for both of them. He did have lots of help from his family, though.

Sherlock’s mum had turned out to be delightful and frighteningly efficient, almost like John’s drill instructors in the army, and she earned his respect immediately. Violet Holmes was a force of nature who thought schedules were the most important thing for babies and parents of newborns. John found soon enough that he agreed whole-heartedly and was grateful whenever she came swirling through like a whirlwind. Mycroft actually helped by anticipating and supplying anything they needed. He was also an excellent uncle and occasional babysitter.

Between Mrs Holmes, Mrs Turner and Mrs Hudson, John practically had round the clock babysitters if necessary. And of course, Sherlock was everything John could have wished for in a bond mate. He shouldered as much of the care for the infants as humanly possible and at the same time kept both of them deeply involved in their cases. He somehow managed to balance both work and family well enough to give them the breaks they needed to keep them sane and allow them to give the children the best of care and attention.

John and Sherlock were so absorbed with work and children that when John’s heat returned to surprise them about 18 months later, Evan was the result. John had been upset at the time, not sure if he could handle three very young children at once, but he’d managed. And he honestly couldn’t imagine life without them.
The twins still needed more sleep or they’d be complete monsters that afternoon, so John closed the door and made his way carefully down the stairs. Checking on Evan, he saw that the toddler had given up on his plans of escape for the moment and had finally fallen asleep, too. That was a relief because the afternoon was going to be exciting enough for them all. John wished he’d had a chance to take a kip, too and decided to lie down on the sofa for bit. He knew he really didn’t have time to sleep so he took a deep breath and quickly entered the spirit world. As he expected, his spirit animal was waiting impatiently for him.

“About time you got here, lad. You missed our last lesson.”

“Well, Evan had a cold and the twins had an event at school, so I was busy. And we don’t really have much time today, either. We’re having a big birthday party for the twins with all their friends, so let’s just do a short lesson today.”

“Fine, fine. Hard to believe they’re four years old now. Oh well, come along. We’re wasting time.” The badger huffed with annoyance, then turned and began to travel through the dense foliage of the spirit forest that John could now fully discern.

After their first heat together, Sherlock had, as promised, obtained the best guides possible to tutor John but none of them seemed to really know anything and after a few useless lessons, he’d taken the bit between his teeth and gone to the spirit world to ask his badger what he should do. The creature had acted as if he was irritated but John could tell he was secretly chuffed. From that point onward, the badger and the leopard both began to tutor him on what it meant to be the guide to an alpha sentinel and all the things that were possible to do with his empathy.

John knew it was an unusual arrangement but the badger had insisted that most guide lore was either destroyed or hidden away by the Bureau over the last century or so in order to keep better control of their guides. If guides knew how much power they actually had over sentinels, it would soon become apparent that the guides were really the ones in charge. That apparently hadn’t sat well with the powerful sentinels of an earlier age but things were now slowly changing.

With the full support of the badger, John had approached Keith Hammond with the idea of sharing what he was learning with other guides—latents and Bureau trained alike. Keith had been incredulous and uncertain at first but then completely enthusiastic after he saw Lori’s excited response to the request. So once a month John tutored a handful of guides, mostly newly bonded latents, showing them everything he was learning from his spirit guide and teaching them how to see and access their own. Of course he was starting from scratch but since he had known next to nothing himself at first, John found it ridiculously easy to teach what he knew.

It turned out that one of the latent guides he was teaching was now bonded to Barry, the sentinel that had bought John at auction all those years ago. The guide was a latent who had freely come in and she had chosen Barry as her sentinel under the new rules established by Keith. It had worked out beautifully and John was very happy for them both. Because of Keith’s reforms, more latents were choosing to bond with sentinels and the new program was considered an enormous success by the sentinel community.

Time ran differently in the spirit world and his badger was able to give him nearly a full lesson before John sensed the imminent arrival of his alpha sentinel. Thanking his spirit animal, John returned to the real world and was up and aware by the time Sherlock blew into the flat. He looked gorgeous as always with his coat flowing around him and his pale cheeks flushed with cold. Sherlock’s eyes lit up as he saw John and the alpha swooped down to give him a loud, smacking kiss before he carried the cake into the kitchen to put into the freezer. John hung up his alpha’s coat and scarf and then followed him into the kitchen.
Tilting his head in a listening posture, Sherlock smiled at John. “I made it home just in time, it seems. The terrible twosome are awake and are on their way downstairs.”

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, John sighed as he heard what sounded like a herd of elephants come thumping down the stairs and make a beeline for Sherlock. He couldn’t help smiling as both children squealed in delight upon seeing their Papa and simultaneously tried to climb him.

Somehow, Sherlock managed to hoist both children up at once, balancing one in each arm and carry them into the lounge where he proceeded to put them on the sofa and tickle them until they shrieked with laughter. Of course this woke Evan up, who stood looking pathetic and left out until John scooped him up and nuzzled him, making him laugh, also.

Just then the door bell rang and John heard Mrs Hudson greet their guest. Then small feet pounded up the stairs and another diminutive person burst into the room to be greeted enthusiastically by the twins. John didn’t even get a good look at the child before the twins rushed their friend upstairs and disappeared, chattering away excitedly.

Sherlock lay sprawled on the sofa looking dishevelled and amused. “Woe is me! Abandoned by my children in favour of another. I don’t know what the world is coming to.”

Grinning, John helped him up and smoothed his wild curls before giving him a quick kiss. Sherlock kissed back and took Evan out of his arms, hoisting the child up high and making the toddler giggle and clap his hands. “You still love me, don’t you, Evan?”

John watched them fondly. “Get used to it, Sherlock. Before you know it, they’ll be too embarrassed by us to even acknowledge our existence.”

“Sometimes I can’t wait for that.” The newcomer who had accompanied the other child up the stairs entered the flat, smiling widely.

Delighted, John greeted their guest. “Sheri! So that was Jean who ran in here? I didn’t even get a look at her before she was dragged upstairs. How have you and Phil been?” Sheri was nine months pregnant and looked about ready to drop. Sherlock led her to the sofa whilst John fixed a cool drink for her.

She sipped it and thanked him. “I’d have given you a hug, John but I’m afraid that our arms aren’t long enough at this point. How far along are you now?”

John glanced down at his belly, swollen taut with his daughter. “I’ll be eight months next week. And you look like you could deliver any minute!”

Sheri groaned. “If only I would! This one seems unwilling to leave home. I’m afraid we may have to kick him out. I honestly hope we don’t have to do that but the doctor says that if I’ve not delivered by the end of the week, they’re going to induce me.”

John leaned down and kissed her cheek affectionately. “I hope it won’t come to that but honestly, being induced is not all bad. You remember I had to be induced with Evan, which was a bit of a shock after Corin came so early. You’ll be fine, luv.”

They sat and chatted, catching up. John hadn’t seen Sheri for some time since she’d taken maternity leave a few months prior. After the Freedom law passed five years earlier, Phil and Sheri had come back to London. Sheri was about four months along with Jean at the time. As soon as she could do,
Sheri had looked John up. He was thrilled to see her doing so well and they’d become fast friends. Now their children were growing up together and were best friends, too.

Things had been changing for the better for latents. Under Hammond’s leadership, the Bureau was trying to track down and compensate latents for their poor treatment as much as possible. The economy was improving slowly and the Bureau was growing again and adding jobs. However, the alpha sentinel had wanted to make sure they didn’t repeat the mistakes of the past and created a civilian committee tasked to oversee the doings of the Bureau. John had recommended Sheri for a position and she’d been appointed. Her input had been invaluable and she’d been named the head of the committee after a few years. John had been able to see her whenever he went in to give lessons.

Whilst they chatted, Phil had come up carrying the presents for the twins and other parents began dropping off their children. Finally, Sherlock’s mum arrived and things really got started then. John had to get to work and hoisted himself up to begin sorting out the children and start the games. Everything went off without a hitch and the party was declared a huge success by the numerous children. Laughter and giggles reverberated throughout the flat and John found himself joining in constantly and having a wonderful time. Of course, Sherlock was in the middle of everything, helping with the games and the children all adored him.

Toward the end of the party, John and Sheri were both wrung out and resting on the sofa. John had an exhausted Evan tucked in his arms. The child was so tired he could no longer hold his head up but he was fighting sleep since there was still too much excitement to be had. Finally Evan went down and John just held the sleeping toddler close and watched the other children say their reluctant good byes as their parents arrived to pick them up.

Phil, Violet and Sherlock began cleanup as the twins thanked their last guests and once everyone but Jean was gone the three ran up to the bedroom to go over their loot. Groaning as his unborn daughter began kicking him in the kidneys; John got up and put Evan down to sleep in the playpen. Right now their second son had a cot in their bedroom and John couldn’t wait for the renovations of the attic to be completed. They’d have twice the space they had now and he was looking forward to it. Sherlock had moved his lab down to the basement years ago, but it was still damp and not suitable for children.

Sheri and Phil were finally getting ready to leave and called Jean to come down so they could go home. John watched with heart overflowing as his children hugged their friend goodbye and Sherlock arranged for a play date for the four year olds the following weekend. It then struck John that the feelings of joy, pride and love were exactly the same as he’d felt all those years ago. He could barely believe it but his dream had literally come true. Sherlock picked up on John’s emotions through their bond and gave him a look that took John’s breath away. He could still do that to John, even after all this time. Smiling back at his alpha, John knew he’d make mistakes and there would be difficult times ahead, but they had honestly earned their happiness and he would hold onto it and his alpha sentinel with both hands as long as they both lived.

The end

Works inspired by this one

Cover for "Latent" by Hisstah by Lovesfic (me23)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!