A Fold in the Universe

by darkest_bird, Engazed

Summary

Alpha Sherlock and Omega John are in a relationship. Prime Sherlock and Prime John are not. So what happens when a freak fold in the universe switches one John for the other?
In Which John Suffers a Collision

Cover art for this fic can be found here.

This work is being translated into Chinese, which can be found here.

This work is also available as a podfic, narrated by the lovely Lockedinjohnlock.

John Watson awoke with the sun. He yawned, stretched, and pulled back the covers, setting bare feet on a cool floor to stimulate nerve endings in his feet and wake himself up more quickly. It was a trick he had learned in the army—not that there had been cool floors, of course, but anything to shock the body and prick the mind proved effective in getting a bone-weary soldier back on his feet and about the day’s duties: a splash of water on the face, a quick stab of a pin in the center of the palm, a commanding officer shouting himself hoarse with insults and threats. The cool floor was by far the best option.

By the time he had descended the stairs and reached the sitting room, only seconds later, sleep had fled entirely. The flat was quiet, but not because Sherlock was still in bed. If he had ever gone to bed, that was. It was because he had already left. A sticky note was left behind on John’s laptop: Case!

John smirked, then crunched the note into his fist. It must have been something exciting, something to pull him out of the flat before dawn. John was one part grateful Sherlock hadn’t woken him, remembering he had work at the surgery that morning, and two parts disappointed that he didn’t get to go. He liked being a doctor—loved it, actually—but sometimes he felt like a stodgy old man compared to Sherlock, what with the money-making, bill-paying, milk-buying, newspaper-reading, boring old flatmate, while Sherlock went to the playground to horse around with the other troublemakers and come home with bumps and bruises and splashes of mud and blood but grinning like a mischievous young cad.

He let the thought pass. After all, he knew Sherlock preferred it when John tagged along, and even though he griped endlessly about the fanciful storytelling in John’s blog, John knew he read it religiously, and enjoyed it. They’d be out on a case together again soon enough.

In the meantime, though, he had to work. He checked his phone’s calendar to review that day’s appointments and other meetings. Same ol’, same ol’. Sherlock had better have something for the both of them soon, he thought.

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John Watson awoke with the sun. He yawned, stretched, and pushed the covers down to the end of the bed with his feet. For a few minutes, he just lay there, waiting for his body to slowly come online: eyes first, adjusting to the daylight, followed by ears perked for sounds beyond the bedroom; then flexing the fingers, the toes, and the blood began to flow more steadily to every limb. There was no real rush; he could take another hour, if he was a mind to. He might as well, in fact, get a little extra rest. But the morning called to him—hot coffee and warm scones, reading by
the fireplace, a hot shower—so he rolled out of bed, slid into a dressing gown, and left the bedroom.

By the time he had finished in the bathroom and entered the sitting room, the sun was fully in the sky and filling both windows. The flat was quiet. Oh, that was right. Sherlock’s new case. He had received the message to his blog about midnight the night before, and Sherlock was eager to get started on it, in part to get it taken care of and keep his calendar cleared for the next three days. He was probably an hour gone already, and John had slept right through it.

John smiled. So the morning really was his, to do with as he pleased. He could prepare properly for the evening. A long bath, then, maybe. And all the crap telly he wanted. He would push his errands into the afternoon—groceries, mostly—and have the sheets changed and the frozen dinners prepared by the time Sherlock came back. If there was time, if things weren’t already underway, they might have dinner together—John made a mean lasagna—and Sherlock would regale him with another adventure. He loved the stories, couldn’t get enough of them. Sometimes they seemed so incredible that he couldn’t help but express his incredulity that Sherlock could divine (‘Deduce, John! I don’t divine, I deduce!’) a man’s profession by the calluses on his thumbs, but in truth, he never doubted a word. He just wished, sometimes, he could see more of it firsthand.

He let the thought pass. After all, he knew Sherlock moved as quickly and brilliantly as electricity, and John would only slow him down. He wasn’t nearly as able-bodied, not to mention able-minded, and that was fine. He knew where, when, and how Sherlock needed him, and he was content with that, too.

Besides, he had his own work to do. He checked his phone’s calendar, already feeling the tendril of anticipation beginning to warm him. A few more hours, and he would be the only thing Sherlock would be able to think about for days.

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The morning was filled with migraines, sore throats, a crayon up a nose, a toy submarine up a rectum, and a three-days-neglected broken thumb.

During his lunch reprieve, John walked to the corner to buy fusion tacos from a food truck and check his phone. No messages from Sherlock begging him to drop everything and come. Just as well. He had missed enough shifts. But all the same, it would have been nice to struggle with the temptation.

It was overcast by the time John stepped out of the surgery and headed for home. Still pleasant, if only a little cooler with the breeze. He stuck his hand out for a passing taxi, but it trundled right by as if it didn’t even see him. But the quick flare of irritation passed. No matter. The day was lovely. He would walk, ten minutes, twenty minutes, and try again. There was no rush. He checked his phone: 4:12. No rush at all.

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The morning was filled with strawberry-scented bubbles, hot tea, an Antiques Roadshow marathon indulgence.

After finally dressing, John left the flat and walked to the corner to buy fish and chips from a food truck. There, he checked his phone. No messages from Sherlock asking if things had started yet or announcing when he would be home. Just as well. If neither of them said anything, it was just assumed that things were progressing normally. But all the same, it would have been nice to be asked.
He took a cab to run his errands, selecting groceries to be delivered to the flat over the next few days, all the while monitoring his pulse and temperature. It was overcast by the time he stepped back onto the street to head for home. Still pleasant, if only a little cooler with the breeze. He stuck out his hand for a passing taxi, but it trundled right by as if it didn’t even see him. He shrugged. He was still feeling well enough, and his pulse was still steady. He would walk, ten minutes, twenty minutes, and if things changed, he’d be sure to be more assertive in flagging down a cabbie. For now, there was no rush. He checked his phone: 4:12. He whistled as he walked.

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A gust of wind pushed him from behind, and John picked up his pace. The temperature was dropping fast, and a storm was blowing in. He threw up his collar to protect his bare neck, then put a hand out for a taxi coming his way, but it was occupied. Swearing under his breath, he turned left to take the footpath across the bridge, just as the first drops began to fall.

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The first drops splashed against his neck, and John tugged his raised collar closer to his neck. The last taxi he had seen was occupied, and everyone else seemed to have fled indoors at the first sign of a storm. He was the only person on the footpath crossing the bridge. He picked up his pace, eager to get ahead of the storm and into the cozy indoors. He began counting his hurried steps: one, two, three, four . . .

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. . . left, right, left, right, a military pace. Not far off, a flash of light, and a second later a tremendous clap of thunder that made his skin jump. The skies opened . . .

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. . . and the rain fell like a deluge. John broke into a run. Breath passed in and out of his lungs sharply, and

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his heart pumped a steady one-two, one-two,

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one-two, when suddenly

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John’s vision exploded into blinding white light, the crash of colliding worlds filled his ears, and

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he collapsed.
In Which John Makes a Misdiagnosis

Chapter Notes

Please take note of the dub-con tag. Not graphic or prolonged, just fair warning if you’d rather skip the last bit of this chapter.

John blinked. Raindrops struck his face, and though it was hard to keep his eyes open, he could see blue sky through broken gray clouds. The downpour was letting up rapidly. By the time he sat up—when had he ended up flat on his back?—it was barely a sprinkle.

What was that? For a moment, he was too disoriented to think straight, like coming out of a bad hangover, but he remembered the whipping rains and the terrifying crashing noise, like two trains colliding, and the simultaneous blinding light . . . Wait, had he been struck by lightning? He patted himself down the chest and ran a hand through his hair, seeking out damage. But no. Nothing. He was sopping wet, but other than a few stiff muscles and an aching head from where he had fallen, he seemed perfectly all right.

With a groan, he got back to his feet, took two steps, swayed, and reached for the railing of the bridge. Just then, a black London cab turned onto the bridge ahead of him. Still a little dazed, he lifted his hand, and the cabbie pulled to the kerb to let him in.

“Baker Street,” he said. “Sorry about the wet.”

“No bother,” said the cabbie. “I’ve got towels.”

They hadn’t gone even half a mile when John began to feel a little funny. He was still looking himself over—no signs of burn marks on his skin or the bottoms of his shoes—befuddled by what had just happened, when a sudden cramp deep in his abdomen flared to life. “Oh,” he groaned, hunching over. But the pain dissolved almost as quickly as it had come. He straightened himself out and took to looking out the window.

Despite his chilly, wet clothes, he was beginning to feel a little warm now. Easy to ignore, at first, but before long it was quite uncomfortable. His face felt feverish, and his skin confined. He opened his coat to breathe, and when that wasn’t enough, he loosened the top button of his shirt and fanned himself with the fabric. In the front, the driver sniffed and rubbed his nose.

“Bit warm, eh?” he said to the cabbie. “You have the heat on?”

“No, sir. You might wanna crack a window there. You’ll excuse me for saying so, but the smell is a bit ripe.”

Did he smell? He lowered his nose and lifted an arm away from his body to take a quick whiff. He sure didn’t smell anything. But the insult was less important to him than his need to cool off, so he rolled the window halfway down and let the cool air hit his face. He sighed into it. Oh, it was relief.

Another cramp in his gut arrested him, quite by surprise, and he doubled over again, unable to keep the moan of pain at bay.
“Just hold it together, pal, we’ll get you home right quick,” said the cabbie, laying his foot on the gas.

He wanted to say, *Yes, please, just hurry*, but oh, he felt positively ill and didn’t trust himself to open his mouth. This was food poisoning, had to be. Those damn fusion tacos from lunch were acting up on him. His pulse was racing, his skin was overheated, he had severe cramping in the abdomen, and if he didn’t find himself in a loo within the next five minutes, he feared what would happen. He didn’t feel nauseous, so to speak. Not yet. But it was coming, he was sure of it. And . . .

What was that? He felt a little bit damp, down there. God no, hold it in, hold it in! Of course, it was possibly probably very most likely just the rainwater soaking through his trousers. Yes. Of course. He hadn’t just shat himself in the back of a cab. Surely.

When they pulled up to 221B, John thrust a twenty pound note into the front seat, ignored the change and the cabbie’s call to *Have a good time!* and rushed through the door. He pounded up the stairs and had just entered the mercifully unoccupied sitting room when a particularly powerful wave of pain in his gut washed over him, resonating in the center of his body and spreading to every limb, and he was forced to crouch and wait for the pain to subside. Oh, this was bad. Bad bad bad. He hadn’t been ill in so long, and it seemed as though his body was determined to make up for it all in one go. When he could walk straight again, he hurried as quickly as he could to the bathroom.

Without even bothering to close the door, he fumbled frantically with his belt and buttons, feeling something well up inside of him, feeling something warm and wet sliding down his inner thighs. He threw open the lid to the toilet, spun around, and in one motion shoved his trousers and pants to the floor and sat on the toilet. He sobbed, equal parts relief and clenching pain, as something gushed out of him and loudly filled the bowl. He knew it. Diarrhea. If this wasn’t food poisoning—and he was 99 percent sure it was—it was the worst case of 24-hour flu he had ever known. He swore then and there to never eat another taco for the rest of his life.

Minutes passed, and though he was still flush with fever and his muscles trembled from clenching and unclenching in irregular spasms, the pain had subsided, and he could breathe. He kicked his trousers and pants aside, wiped, and stood on shaky legs. And then, the doctor in him made him look into the contents of the bowl to see if he could determine just how—

He stared. The toilet was not filled with, well, what he thought it would be filled with. The water was almost clear, maybe just a little milky. And it smelled sort of sour-sweet.

What the hell?

He reviewed in his mind what had just—and he meant *just*—happened, everything from bodily sensations to sounds to smells, and he had been sure—so sure!—that he was, you know, ill. Digestively. Loose-watery-stool-and-sudden-bowel-movement kind of ill. So what the hell had passed from his body and into that bowl?

And that’s when he noticed it: his penis—it was small.

Like, really small. Like, he had never been this small even as a twelve-year-old really discovering it for the first time. Like, a witch had cast a spell and cursed him with every man’s worst fear kind of small. He gawked at it, held it in his hand, and it didn’t even stretch across the width of his palm, a stubby, pudgy thing no longer than a thumb to the second knuckle, flushed pink and a little stiff, perfectly healthy looking (from a medical perspective) except that was so damn small. It had, what, *shrunk*?! In the past *two hours*?! Because it certainly hadn’t looked like this the last time he
had popped off to the loo!

Something was wrong. Definitely, unquestionably, alarmingly wrong. He felt a surge of panic now beginning to encroach. What was he to do? Go to A&E? And tell them what? *My cock is smaller than it was this morning; please fix it?* They’d laugh him back onto the streets. No, no, no, this, whatever *this* was, was the product of a fever-addled mind. He was ill, and his brain was playing tricks on him. He needed to calm down, beat the fever, and wait for his body to expel whatever bacteria the food truck had soaked the meat in. Then he could restore himself to a bit of normalcy. After a good night’s sleep, he would wake up to the body he knew.

John pulled his damp trousers back up. He was still feeling slightly sickly, but he had the energy to go change into dry clothes. He trudged up the stairs, feeling an unfamiliar aching in his lower body that he had no inclination to examine or dwell on. All he wanted to do was crawl into bed, curl onto his side, and ride it out. But when he pushed open the door to his bedroom, he stopped short. His bed was gone. His wardrobe was gone. His desk was gone. In their place, a long table on which stood a microscope, beakers, flasks, and Petri dishes.

“The hell, Sherlock!” he cursed. When had that madman found the time to do this? John thought he’d been out on a case all day, and yet he had carved out what must have been hours, surely, to remove all the furniture and set up his own personal laboratory? The prat! John put up with a lot in this flat, but this was a step too far. Irritated, and getting more irritable by the minute, he tromped back downstairs, momentarily forgetting his bodily woes.

In dire need of dry clothing, he decided, hell with it, he’d raid Sherlock’s wardrobe, and make a right mess while he was at it, just to teach him a lesson. *What do you think of your precious sock index now, you wanker?* He threw open Sherlock’s bedroom door and let it bang against the inner wall, and stomped over to the dresser. It was to his own dismay, however, that, upon opening the top drawer, he found not only Sherlock’s underwear . . . but his own, right alongside it. Oh hell no. He didn’t know what kind of game this was, but it was most definitely not good.

John bit off the tide of invectives against Sherlock with a stream of obscenities as another wave of heat and ache and inexplicable need swept over him again. He blacked out for a moment, only a moment, and when he came back to himself, he was on his knees, palming himself through his wet trousers. He immediately drew his hand away, a bit astonished at his own nonsensical actions. It hadn’t been pleasurable, and yet . . . slightly alleviating. It was like putting pressure on a wound and somewhat lessening the pain, just enough to recover himself. And when he did, he rifled quickly through the drawers, found a pair of his own pyjama bottoms, and changed into dry clothes.

His body begged for a relief he didn’t know how to give it; it craved something he couldn’t name. All he really knew was that all he wanted was to lie down, and he wasn’t about to do that in Sherlock’s bedroom. He returned shakily to the sitting room and lay down on the couch. There, he fanned his face and tried to quell the cramps. That’s when he received a text.

*Sorry. Running late. How are you?*

His brow furrowed. It was an unexpected question for Sherlock to be asking him. How was he? Did Sherlock sense things weren’t right? John didn’t see how. The man was a genius, sure, but he wasn’t psychic. He worked off of evidence, and half a city away, he had none. Besides, running late for what?

The questions confused him, but ultimately he couldn’t be arsed to care. He was too miserable. Almost too miserable to respond. But he did, and honestly.
Not good. Feeling awful.

The returned text was quick:

Hang on. Be home soon.

For the next fifteen or twenty minutes, John just lay there and writhed and groaned and hated life and everything in it. He could think about nothing but his need for relief. When Sherlock got back, he thought, he might have to ask to be taken to A&E after all. Food poisoning would pass. But he was beginning to doubt his initial diagnosis. He felt no nausea at all. And the cramping was bad, but he couldn’t relegate it to the stomach, and perhaps not even the intestines. He didn’t know what this was. Kidney stone? Maybe. But then why did putting pressure on his (alarmingly tiny) cock assuage some of the frightfully intense discomfort? He had no idea, just lay there writhing, groaning, and squeezing himself through his pyjamas.

Then suddenly, he was leaking once again from his backside, wet and warm. “God please no,” he moaned, believing, as before, that he’d just shit himself. He rolled, anguished, off the couch, onto his feet, and hobbled back to the loo where, as before, he discovered not a bowel movement but the same clear, viscous, oddly smelling discharge in his pants and on his fingers. He sobbed, more out of horror and confusion than anything. What was wrong with him? He was a medical doctor, for crying out loud, and he didn’t have the faintest idea.

The pants were ruined. He returned to the bedroom to change, whimpering. He dropped the soiled clothes on the floor, and naked from the waist down returned to the drawer for a fresh pair of pyjama bottoms.

Distressed and distracted, he didn’t hear the front door open, or the hurried footsteps on the stairs, or anything at all until suddenly, the open doorway darkened. John’s head snapped up, and he saw Sherlock’s tall and startlingly imposing figure filling the entryway, just a silhouette standing at the mouth of a dark room.

John gasped, aware of his immodesty, and tried to hide himself. “Sherlock!” he cried.

But Sherlock was stalking forward, a salacious grin on his face, a predatory gleam in his eye. It was an expression he’d never seen on his flatmate’s face before, and it made him appear a stranger. But before John could yell at him about the room, about privacy, about how exceedingly miserable he felt, Sherlock Holmes had crossed the floor. Three long, menacing strides, and he seized John, threw arms around his half-naked body, and lowered his mouth to John’s neck, biting.

A strangled, startled, frantic cry escaped John’s throat at the altogether unanticipated assault. He wriggled and writhed, trying to push Sherlock away, but Sherlock only pressed him closer. With one arm locked around his torso, his other dragged down, across John’s exposed arse, and hooked a thigh, dragging his leg up and around Sherlock’s waist. Then, in a single, fluid movement, two fingers sank into him, deep. He gasped, and with the sharp inhalation, he was slammed with Sherlock’s scent, and his brain momentarily went offline. Whiteout. He smelled so good. To his horror, John’s entire body responded, flushing him with arousal from head to toe, his skin on fire, his hairs on end, and more warm discharge drained down his inner leg, which was rooted to the floor. But not for long.

Next he knew, Sherlock had released him, spun him around, and thrown him face down onto the bed. He had time only to grip the sheets, preparing to crawl away, before Sherlock was on top of him and pressing him further into the mattress while breathing deeply from John’s neck.

“You smell so good,” Sherlock said, voice husky, a growl in his hear.
“Sher—!” he squeaked. He trembled. But that was all. He was practically catatonic with the shock of what was happening. This—this!—wasn’t Sherlock!

“I know you’re aching for me. I’ll be quick. This time. Then we’ll take our time.”

John made an attempt to flail, but he was too thoroughly pinned. Though breathless, he managed to snap, “I don’t know what game you’re playing at, but get off!”

Sherlock chuckled. John heard the rustling of fabric, the hum of a zip. “Oh, I intend to.”

And with that, Sherlock was between his knees, and what felt like a long, thick rod of sheer heat slid straight into him. John screamed, but his cry was muffled by the pillow beneath his face. And then, for the first time since the bridge, he felt . . . pure relief. Sherlock retreated, halfway, and rammed himself again. Relief transformed into pleasure. Again, and pleasure became sheer ecstasy. John screamed again, but for an entirely different reason. His whole body sang out with joy. What had before been waves of sharp discomfort and pure ache were now rolling surges of glorious want being fulfilled. Feelings of humiliation and betrayal dissolved, and he craved more, and more, until he was thrusting himself backwards, claiming what Sherlock was so freely giving. He didn’t even question why.

Then it happened. What he would later recall as the most intense orgasm of his life, Sherlock sank deep, and John felt his body clamp around him. They were locked together, and John shuddered violently as wave after wave after wave of heated euphoria rocked his body. It burned through him like electric elation, and he was at its mercy. Sherlock rolled them onto their sides and wrapped powerful arms around his chest, and together they pulsed, and together they cried out in pleasure and ferocious relief. And John thought he would die like this, so long it lasted, so all-consuming in its intensity, that he wasn’t even aware that unconsciousness was creeping up on him until it had already devoured him, every part.
In Which John Tries to Trick Sherlock

John hailed the first cab he saw. Before climbing into the back, he shook the water from his hair and felt his head throb a little from where it had struck the pavement. He was still a little shaky. For a second there, he thought he’d been struck by lightning.

“Get caught out in the storm, did you?” asked the cabbie by way of greeting.

“Yeah,” said John. “Haven’t seen anything quite like that before. Baker Street, please.”

“Right you are.”

“And if you could hurry. It’s the first night of my cycle.”

Shifting into second, then third gear, the cabbie looked at him curiously through the rearview mirror. “Cycle, huh?”

“That’s right.”

The man snorted. “Werewolf, or tranny?” Then he half-laughed to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing. Not my business.”

John shook his head and just turned to stare out the window. Some people were still so prudish about it, the Betas especially. But an Omega, especially one in pre-heat, was hardly a secret. He couldn’t smell himself, but he knew he must have been giving off the tell-tale scent most Betas described as unpleasant at best but which would send any nearby Alphas itching in their pants. Despite this Beta’s seeming intolerance, John cracked his window a little as a gesture of goodwill and let the air circulate more freely.

When he arrived home, he paid the cabbie and stepped onto the pavement, still wet from the storm, and stretched his back. He took a long breath through his nose, trying to draw in any of Sherlock’s scent and incite that little thrill through his body that he loved. But there was nothing. Odd.

Sherlock wasn’t home yet, clearly, but as his bond-mate, he could usually detect the intoxicating odor that lingered just outside of their home, whether he was there or not. Maybe the rain had washed it away.

He stepped to the door and noted something else odd, which distracted from the lack of scent: the names on the bell. Holmes and Watson. His eyebrows lifted in surprise, and a feeling of warmth, quite unrelated to his heat, spread through him. Sherlock had added John’s name? That was unexpected and unnecessary, but . . . touching. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of it, but he let himself into the flat with a soft smile on his face.

As per his usual routine, he set about preparing things for the evening, so that when Sherlock returned from his case, everything would be ready to go. He cleaned the bathroom; set three sets of folded sheets under the bed and a stack of folded towels by the door dividing bathroom and bedroom; made three large carbohydrate-heavy meals (carbonara, shepherd’s pie, and beef-and-potato stew) and placed them in the freezer; and was just organizing the tea tray for the first twenty-four hours when he froze.

He glanced out the window; the sun was sinking toward the horizon, and he wasn’t feeling . . .
anything.

Not a twinge, not a cramp, not even a little dampness. His cock felt a little heavier, perhaps, which was a positive sign, but other than that? Nothing.

He took a quick whiff, then a series of short, rapid sniffs, then a long, seeking inhalation, smelling the air for his bond-mate. But all he smelled was the tomatoes from the carbonara.

Slightly wary, but mostly confused, he retreated to the bedroom, lifted Sherlock’s pillow to his face, and breathed in deeply. Yes, that was Sherlock all right, but . . . no reaction. His body, normally so alert and responsive, seemed almost entirely indifferent to the scent of his Alpha. And that was the thought that made his heart stop.

Heart thumping anxiously, John left the bedroom and returned to the kitchen where he had left his phone to double check the date. He’d never, not once, gotten it wrong before. He was like clockwork: every forty-one days, his cycle started up, no earlier than four o’clock, no later than nine. He did the maths again. Yes, today was his day. But even when he started up later in the day, he could always feel it coming on, sometimes for hours, and if nothing else jumpstarted his body’s cravings prematurely, Sherlock’s sweetly sensual aroma never failed to do the trick. And now . . . nothing?

It was when he moved a hand to grip himself through his trousers—to see if anything was unhappy down there—that his world froze again. He gasped, then ran to the bathroom, where he pulled down his zipper, reached inside his underwear, and pulled himself out.

“Gah!” he cried out in utter dismay.

He was huge! His penis, once contained and modestly unobtrusive, was now obscenely long and heavy in his hand, stretching across and exceeding the width of his palm. What was this, what was this! When had this happened? How? This stranger's cock he now held wasn’t nearly so large as Sherlock's, of course, but this was the cock of a Beta, not an Omega, not his. He stuffed it away, horrified and embarrassed, and leaned against the wall with his face in his hands, thinking.

Was this a medical problem? An allergic reaction or a virus or some form of bacteria that caused swelling? But . . . this wasn’t swelling. Not really. Other than its shocking state of length and girth, it appeared otherwise healthy. But he was Omega! His sex didn’t allow for this kind of physical feature! He was well versed in Omegan anatomy and physiology, had studied all about aberrations and diseases and complications for his kind in school, and never ever had he heard of something like this. One did not simply transform sexes willy-nilly in the middle of the day! What freak of nature was this?

He had always taken good care of himself, immaculate good care. Only once had he ever had an infection, and that was before Sherlock. Back then, though unbonded, he had refused to check into an Omega House, and the Alpha Service he had hired had been substandard: the Alpha arrived hours and hours past schedule, and by the time he did, the toxins had already begun to build in his system and infect his blood. By the end of his heat, he was running a fever so high he was delirious, and next he knew, he was waking up in hospital, IVs in both arms, a drain up his arse, and a sister spitting fire, swearing to sue the Alpha Service for every last penny. She yelled at John, too.

“This is exactly why you need to find yourself a bond-mate, so things like this won’t ever happen again!”

It was by pure chance that, before his next heat, he met Sherlock Holmes. He wasn’t in heat, and
Sherlock wasn’t looking, but they ended up on the same train from Ipswich to London, sitting across from one another. John was returning from a sales convention and Sherlock from investigating a disappearance. Somehow, they got to talking. Sherlock correctly deduced his boring job and how much he hated it, what he had eaten for lunch, and what Omega School he had attended in London. John showered him with open-mouthed astonishment and admiration. When Sherlock sat closer, John felt himself begin to flush; and when Sherlock placed a hand on his knee, John began to sweat. Before long, Sherlock put his lips close to John’s ear, saying, “I further deduce that my proximity has triggered early heat. We are obviously compatible, and while I have little interest in an Omega companion on a permanent basis, I find myself unoccupied for the next few days and would not be opposed to assisting you through your heat. Say yes.”

“God yes,” John breathed.

Three heats later, John was irreversibly smitten and Sherlock had changed his tune. They bonded, and neither looked back. John needed a reliable Alpha, and Sherlock took much-needed pleasure from his Omega. It was a fitting arrangement.

And now, here he stood, his body betraying him in the form of a Beta male. The cock was one thing, but just to be sure, he dropped his trousers, crouched down, and prodded himself with his fingers. He was dry, tight, and resistant. Nothing close to a spark of pleasure. He pulled his trousers back up and began to sob.

Sherlock wouldn’t want anything to do with a Beta.

At that moment, the phone dinged and jolted him from his stupor. He scrambled to retrieve the text, which was from Sherlock:

*Home in an hour. I’ll bring Thai.*

John stared, dumbfounded, as two things occurred to him. The first, Sherlock was on his way home. He had only an hour to figure this out, to remind his body that he was an Omega and to kickstart the heat his bond-mate would be expecting. The second . . . Sherlock was bringing food? Sherlock? On the first night of the heat? That was different. For seven years of heats, Sherlock had always left the food to John. Sure, in the throes of his exhaustion, when John couldn’t even rise from bed, Sherlock popped whatever frozen meals John had earlier prepared into the oven, or let the delivery boy in with the groceries, but he never cooked or brought home food himself. And of all take-away options, Thai? John loved it, but Sherlock had stopped eating it after getting into a fight with the owner of the nearest restaurant four years ago (he had correctly deduced the illicit love affair between the owner’s wife and head chef based on the wrapping of a spring roll), and they hadn’t had it since.

But more to the point: *one hour.* He had one hour to shrink his penis, stretch himself to a level of sufficient accommodation, and reignite his heat.

With a terrified whimper, he hurried to his laptop and began a frantic hunt for information and advice, but the all-knowing search engine didn’t seem to understand his questions. When he googled “how to jumpstart your heat,” the internet asked, “Do you mean *heart*?” or asking “Am I still an Omega?” yielded the benefits of fish in one’s diet, or “I’ve transformed into a Beta” didn’t seem to understand his question at all.

The tasks before him seemed impossible.

Sherlock was going to return home and find that his bond-mate was broken. The seconds ticked by in stillness, but his mind was racing. The thought of losing Sherlock was so upsetting he felt like he
might throw up. That meant there was only one thing to do. Sherlock couldn’t find out. So John reached a white-panic decision: he would fake it.

There was nothing he could do to replicate an Omega scent. Synthetic products tried, but any discerning Alpha knew the difference, and Sherlock was the most discerning Alpha he knew. But maybe he could distract him with other scents. Something burnt, something sterile, aromatic candles and an overabundance of cologne. If his sense of smell was overwhelmed and confused just enough, Sherlock might just have to rely on his natural lusts, which he had in spades. It just might work.

John hurried around the flat. He threw a loaf of French bread into the oven and left it there to blacken while rushing downstairs with a bottle of bleach and scrubbing the front entryway; he left the soaked rag over the handrail. Back in the flat, he rummaged in the cupboard for candles he remembered having stored there, but all he found were torches and spare batteries. So he abandoned the scented candle ruse and found a tin of aromatic spray instead, which he shook hard and filled the air with the scent of pine until the tin was nearly empty. Then he retreated to the bathroom, found a bottle of cologne in the medicine cabinet (he didn’t remember buying it), and rubbed it liberally into his hands and neck, up and down his arms and across his stomach until even he was coughing on the fumes. It was too much—he knew it was too much—but if things went well, Sherlock’s hormones would be stronger than any amount of perfume.

He took the bread out of the oven only when it began to smoke.

John looked at the clock. He had twenty minutes, maybe. Probably less. Trembling with nerves, he returned to the bathroom and grabbed a jar of petroleum jelly (he hadn’t even known they owned a jar of jelly before now) and then closed himself into the bedroom. He pulled the curtains closed so only a single, narrow strip of light could pass through, and turned down the bed. Taking several long, steadying breaths, he started to derobe. First, he unbuttoned his shirt and draped it over the back of a chair. His shoes and socks came off next, set neatly along the wall. Finally, he pulled off both trousers and underwear and crawled to the center of the bed. He left the lights off. The dark would hide his cock. Until Sherlock went looking, that was.

On his knees, he opened the jar of petroleum jelly and scooped a great gloop out with his fingers. God, he was scared. He had heard of Alpha-Beta relationships, rare as they were. It was a dangerous union and highly discouraged by everyone from priests to doctors. The hormones, let alone the anatomies, were just not compatible. But they happened. Physical union was not impossible. Nevertheless, more than one Beta had suffered long-term or even permanent damage from attempting to take a knot, or from toxic shock. A sensible part of him (mostly smothered under his all-encompassing panic) tried to resist what he was about to attempt on the grounds that it was too risky. But another louder, prouder part of him argued that he was still an Omega, and damn it, he was made for this. If he could make it through this heat—or fake making it through, anyway—he would go straight to a doctor and get it all sorted out. Things would be back to normal in no time.

He bent over. Slowly, he lathered his arse with the jelly until he was dripping with it. Then he pressed his middle finger into what had once been a gaping hole but was now a puckered knot. It resisted him; his finger was reluctant to enter; he was uncomfortably tight. Oh, this was bad. So bad. He would never be able to stretch himself sufficiently to accommodate an Alpha. With a cry of frustration, he held back, straightened himself on the bed, and rolled his shoulders. “Do it, just do it,” he coached himself.

He tried again. Whimpering, wriggling, he inserted a finger, but he was so damn nervous that he could do little more than that. This was futile. The aromas were futile. Sherlock would know
something was wrong instantly. It wouldn’t take a genius. It wouldn’t even take an Alpha. He was all wrong, every bit of him.

Downstairs, the door fell shut with a bang.

John gasped. Sherlock was home. It was now or never again. He rubbed his face into the pillow to dry his tears. He arranged himself on the bed, shoulders to the mattress and arse in the air, his knees spread as far as he could manage. Completely naked on the bed, he put on his best I-need-you-now face, desperate to make this work.

Footsteps in the flat paused. In his mind’s eye, John saw Sherlock sniffing the air, eyebrows knitted in confusion.

“John?”

Sherlock’s voice sounded vaguely concerned, uncertain.

Swallowing hard, John moaned loud enough for Sherlock to hear: “Sherlock!”

The footsteps passed through the kitchen, pausing again at the end of the hallway. Again, the uncertain query, “John?”

John took a deep breath. He braced. “Sherlock, I need you now.”

The steps were hurried now. Yes. Those were the steps of an Alpha desperate for his Omega. He would throw open the door, find John spread and dripping and aching for him, and the scent wouldn’t matter; his tightness wouldn’t matter. Sherlock would know him for his own and claim him still, and everything would be okay.

But the door opened slowly. There was silence. John turned his head to see Sherlock standing as silhouette in the doorframe, unmoving, staring back. Why was he waiting? Did he suspect? Did one glance and one sniff confirm it, that John was broken? Of course he knew! He probably knew walking through the front door!

At long last, Sherlock spoke, soft and stilted, and very much unaroused.

“Are you in need of medical assistance?”


Another breath. A stopped heart. Sherlock didn’t answer. He pulled the door closed and left. John heard his footsteps retreating all the way down the hall, then through the door. He was leaving the flat. John was left alone.
In Which John Learns His A, B, Os

Chapter Summary

Note: My version of the Omega Verse may be slightly different from other stories you’ve read. This chapter notes some of those differences. Sorry for the information dump!

For over an hour after waking up in Sherlock’s bed, John couldn’t move. He lay flat on his back—fists clutching the sheets to his chin—and stared blankly up at the ceiling.

It’s not that he couldn’t move. Physically. He felt spent, muscle-sore and body-deflated, but he could wiggle his toes and feel shudders travel up his spine. No, he was in a state of shock . . . as well as a state of complete undress. Beneath the thin white sheet, he was stark naked. And for the first time in three days, that mattered. It mattered a hell of a lot. Whatever spell had taken hold of both ferociously needy body and blissfully debauched brain had passed, and with full mental faculties restored, he could fully reflect on what had transpired. Shock didn’t even begin to cover it.

Three days, and he had barely left the bed, only to go to the toilet. He had even taken meals in that very spot. Three days. Him and Sherlock. Eighteen times.

They had had sex eighteen times in three days.

Him. And Sherlock.


He was one breath away from complete meltdown. So this is what a sexual identity crisis felt like. Before this, he’d never so much as kissed another man, let alone had one so fully *ahem* seated inside of him for long stretches at a time, and certainly never in his weirdest, wildest, wonkiest fantasies was that man his married-to-his-work asexual flatmate of two years.

Despite his then-orgasmically addled brain, he could now recall each, hrm, encounter vividly, and by the power of his own admittedly substandard powers of observation, he had reached some startling biological conclusions about his current, hrm, condition that simply didn’t jive with what he knew about the male—or, for that matter, any—anatomy. The first was that his penis—undersized organ that it had become—was also non-functional. It hardened and enjoyed pressure, but he had achieved orgasm (more times than he cared to recall) without ever once ejaculating. Twitching and throbbing and thrusting, oh yes, but nothing even slightly resembling, well, what he was used to. Instead, his orgasms seemed to be more internally focused. Internally, that was . . . up his arse. Muscle contractions deep inside of him, muscles that had certainly never been mentioned in any of his anatomy textbooks or depicted in charts he had memorized long ago. The pleasure itself had been overwhelming, beginning in the unnamed muscles but emanating outward until his whole body was trembling with the delight of it.

It had been a cycle of ferocious need, mesmerizing satisfaction, and exhaustion. After the first wave of desperate aching and explosive pleasure, he had slept, and slept deeply. But upon waking, he discovered himself still trapped in the dream, still lying in Sherlock’s bed, still lying in
Sherlock’s arms . . . and the deep-down ache had reawakened. What he had mistaken for an upset stomach and blamed on food poisoning, he knew, more instinctively now, what it was his body really desired. But he resisted. He shifted, tried to unfold himself from Sherlock’s embrace without waking him, and flee to the bathroom. He may have succeeded, too, if not for a particularly painful cramp that arrested his body in the second before he was to make his escape. He curled inward, gasped, and in the next second, Sherlock’s hand had dipped down and fondled him tightly. A nip at his neck, and then Sherlock’s lips at his ear, saying, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.” And the resistance melted, just as before.

As the cycles continued, any resistance he had thought to put up wore thinner and thinner, and by the second day, it was gone entirely. He was putty in Sherlock’s hands, to be handled and moulded however he wished. He ate what Sherlock fed him, drank from whatever cup was placed in his hands or to his lips, and lay still while Sherlock cleaned him with a damp towel. They talked very little, but John had no energy for talking. When they slept, they slept hard, and when they fucked, they fucked hard. It was unlike anything John had ever experienced before in his life, or in his dreams, or in his most bizarre fantasies, and he was never satisfied until they were locked together, until Sherlock was swollen inside of him and John had him captured like an animal in a steel trap. Such union lasted anywhere from nine minutes to forty-seven (he counted, watching the clock through tear-blurred vision), during which period he had orgasmed regularly (on the low end, three times; on the high, eleven times).

It had been indescribable bliss. And now, it was over. But, as John lay in a bed that smelled of sex and sweat, he realized that the nightmare was not. He was still in this stranger’s body. What had happened over the past three days had actually happened. He didn’t know himself, and he didn’t know the man who had lain naked with him through orgasm after orgasm after org . . . God, what the hell was going on?!

John summoned all his courage and sat up. He cast his eyes around the floor, looking for his clothing, when he remember that it was all there already, in the dresser. That’s right. In this hyper-realistic dream space that had him trapped as surely as he had trapped Sherlock up his—no, stop thinking about it!—this wasn’t just Sherlock’s bedroom. It was his, too. He looked quickly toward the closed door, hoping it didn’t open, and before he lost his nerve, he threw back the sheets, grabbed a dressing gown he didn’t recognize from off the back of the door, and slipped soundlessly into the bathroom where he locked both doors.

He quickly took stock of himself, noticing a few things that three days of hazy nakedness had not brought to his attention. To start, his penis was still pathetically small, but more than that, he felt narrower around the waist and slighter in the chest and thinner in the arms. Stepping on the scale revealed the truth of it: he was twenty pounds lighter than his proper weight. In fact, he even felt shorter, though he had no way to measure that at the moment. Already a small man, he felt even smaller. He had fought the feelings of smallness and inadequacy his whole life; now, he felt it had beaten him. Not just beaten him, but had added insult to injury and taken more than its due. And to top it all off, just to make him feel even more degraded, it went ahead and added another injury anyway. He leaned closer to the mirror, staring at the unfamiliar discoloration. In the crook of his neck on his right, where the meat of the shoulder met the meat near the throat, were . . . teeth marks. It was the place he remembered Sherlock had returned time and time again, to bite and to suck, but this wasn’t just a bite. It was a scar. An old one, he discerned, and deep. It most certainly had bled. The skin was white and slightly raised, and when he dragged a finger along the ridges, it tingled. Had . . . had Sherlock done this to him?

And then he noticed, too, that the scar on his left shoulder, testament of a war fought and the bullet that had almost ended it all, was gone, leaving behind only smooth, unmarred skin.
This body had never been a soldier. He knew it. He could feel it in his bones.

But no. This was not his body! At its most fundamental, it was a body he was familiar with, but it was not his.

He wanted to scream, cry, pummel the walls and shatter the mirror, and if not that physical cage then the corporeal one. Instead, he turned to the shower, ran the water almost scalding, and, stepping inside, scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed, as if shucking off layers of skin would reveal the true John Watson he had spent nearly forty laborious years fashioning into the man he had at last become, whose life was not only acceptable to him at last, but wonderful. But that man wasn’t there.

He stayed in the shower, soaping and scrubbing and tremulously exploring what he had become until the water began to run cold. By then, he had made a decision. No more hiding. He would dress and confront the day. He would figure out what the hell was going on and work on getting things back to normal. That was the plan. It was ill conceived and unhelpfully vague, but that was the plan.

Only, once dried, dressed, and standing in the empty hallway pointed toward the front of the flat, he lost his nerve. He could hear the morning sounds of the kitchen and smell coffee, and he knew that Sherlock (some version of Sherlock anyway) was in there, and he would have to face him. And frankly, he didn’t know what would come of that. He didn’t know what he wanted to come of that.

Go on, he chided himself, it’s only Sherlock.

Sure, he argued back, and we just had sex! This is the supremest awkward morning-after I’ve ever experienced in my life!

That’s right, he returned, you just had sex with the most brilliant man on the planet. You should be pleased.

Pleased!??

You know you both enjoyed it. WE enjoyed it.

I don’t recall US having a choice in the matter, he sulked.

It’s like you always told yourself before, remember? You silently vowed to follow him anywhere.

I meant, to crime scenes and killers’ lairs and, hell, even into burning buildings. I meant, into danger!

What’s more dangerous than sex?

He took a deep breath, straightened his back, cracked his neck, and stepped into the kitchen.

And there he was, Sherlock Holmes, seated at the kitchen table holding a mug of coffee and reading the newspaper with a pen in hand, circling headlines. He didn’t so much as lift his eyes, let alone his head, when John stepped into the room and stopped just on the other side of the table. John’s mouth opened, but he had no idea how to start, what to say. Something inside of him recoiled at the thought of rebuking him or saying That can never happen again. Especially because he wasn’t too confident in the idea that he never wanted it to happen again. Maybe instead, We should talk before it happens again.

In the end, he lost all nerve, didn’t even mutter a good morning, and stepped around to the other
side to pour himself a cuppa.

From behind, he couldn’t help but examine Sherlock: his shoulders seemed broader than he expected, perhaps, but otherwise it was the same dark, curly head, the same pale skin, the same narrow waist, easy to wrap arms around, easy to hold and feel the warmth of . . .

Stop stop stop.

And suddenly, his lips were moving.

“We need to talk,” he said. He prided himself on the even tone, the casual word choice. Not too serious, but void of panic. Self-assured. No nonsense. Perfect.

“Busy,” Sherlock replied. He took another sip of coffee.

“About what happened,” John pursued, undeterred.

“Case.”

“Sherlock,” he said, and there was a note of begging in his voice now that took him off guard. He cleared his throat. But Sherlock stepped on his first word.

“John. I said, I’m busy. You know there’s always a backlog of cases after one of your heats. I’m working. Don’t distract me.”

John was stunned. Stung. For a few wild seconds, he thought he just might smack Sherlock hard upside the head and shout at him for being a reprehensible fuckhead, to pretend that nothing had happened, to not even greet him with a good morning and then to treat him so coldly, to be so dismissive of three days of . . . heat?

It was the word that distracted him from the shouting and physical assault. One of his heats? And only one of them? Did Sherlock mean there had been others? Of course he couldn’t mean that. John would remember . . . but then, if this body were truly his, he would have remembered the bite on his neck, too. He had to remind himself that this was a dream, and in this dream, there were different rules. And a history. He had to discover what those rules and history were, if he were to keep his cool and play along. And Sherlock had just given him a place to start, with a word: heat.

Ignoring the slight, he left his coffee mug on the counter and stomped to the sitting room where his laptop lay closed on the table. He situated himself so that he could see Sherlock at an angle and block the screen from view, but Sherlock was paying him absolutely no attention. Quite the opposite from the past three days, John thought morosely.

Opening the laptop and facing the login screen, he typed his username and password.

Error: Incorrect Password.

He bit his lip and tried again.

Error: Incorrect Password.

Damn. Of course it didn’t work. He had recently changed his password to his old RAMC service number, but backwards, and Sherlock had yet to crack it. He had thought himself so clever. But of course, whoever’s life he was now living had not been in the RAMC and would never have chosen that password. He had no possible way of divining it.
“Erm, Sherlock?” he asked, timidly.

“Hm,” Sherlock grunted.

“You didn’t change my password. Did you?”

“Why would I do that?”

“It’s just . . . that is, I think I’ve forgotten it.” He laughed a little helplessly, hoping Sherlock would find it amusing. His Sherlock would find it amusing.

“Same as it always was, John,” Sherlock said, bored.

“Huh.” Crap, now what? Time to keep playing stupid. “I gotta say, I’m drawing a blank here! I mean, I thought I knew it, but it’s just not working . . .”

At last, for the first time that morning, Sherlock lifted his head and turned to cock an eyebrow at John. Incredulity was written all over his face. He stood. Slowly, he stalked over to John, and, was it just him? Or did Sherlock seem . . . taller? Broader. Stronger. John almost felt himself shrinking. Every step made him want to both shiver and recoil. Sherlock positioned himself behind John’s chair and leaned over him, one arm on either side, dwarfing him, trapping him, and typed rapidly onto the keyboard, logging him in.

When he straightened, John realized he hadn’t taken a breath since Sherlock first rose to his feet. His chest ached, and he reminded himself to exhale.

“It’s Sherlock41,” said Sherlock, sounding a little aggravated, a little . . . suspicious. “Like always.”

“Yeah,” said John, breathlessly. He cleared his throat. “Thought so. Must have had trouble with, that is, I don’t think I . . . hit the shift key.”

“Hm.”

And with that, Sherlock returned to the kitchen.

So he had chosen Sherlock’s name as his password, had he? And 41? Sherlock wasn’t forty-one. Even John hadn’t hit forty yet. What did that mean? Or was it just random?

For now, he put it out of his head and concentrated. He opened a search browser. While it loaded, he glanced back to Sherlock, who was ignoring him again, and then around the room, looking for further evidences of things that were not quite right with the world. There was the skull, perched on the mantle as always, and the books looked pretty much the same at a glance (he would explore this more thoroughly later). His chair and Sherlock’s were positioned the same as always, the couch had the same throw pillows, and the rug was the same faded red. Everything looked much as it always did. The only thing absent, that he could discern, was Sherlock’s music stand. But that probably didn’t mean a whole lot.

His fingers hovered over the keys while he considered the best key phrase for his strange question. In the end, he kept it simple, and into the search engine, he typed "heat sex."

Over half a billion hits. He gaped. He scrolled. But two curious words kept popping up again and again: Omega, and Alpha. With equal parts curiosity and apprehension, he clicked the first link.

Thirty very quiet minutes later, his face was bright red and he was a little overheated—and not in a
good way. The feeling he had expected from food poisoning at last manifested: nausea.

But he had learned a great deal, and reached other conclusions besides.

First, he had come to the conclusion that he was no longer in the London he knew, because this, all of this crazy shit, was impossible in the world he knew. He didn’t know how he could be anywhere else, or why, but this world was not his own. Something had happened on that bridge, something bizarre and impossible, and he had been torn out of normality and thrust into an ass-backwards universe.

Second, the human population in Wacko World (as he was silently dubbing it) was not divided into male and female. Those words had no meaning for humans, only certain species of animals. Not anymore, at least. His research had revealed something startling:

*Evolutionary scientists estimate that the biological mutation that propelled Homo sapien sapiens forward, from two sexes into six, happened rapidly, likely between 8,000 and 9,500 years ago. What had once been the simple divide of male and female, still preserved in most reptiles, amphibians, and bird species, divided first into four sexes (as still seen in most mammals) and then into the six sexes known in most evolutionarily advanced primates today, including Alphas, Betas, and Omegas of both X and Y chromosomal distinctions.*

Apparently, according to his sources, which all read to him like science fiction, any sex could have intercourse with any other sex, but for the purposes of reproduction, only certain pairings yielded offspring. There was even a handy chart:

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Okay okay okay, he thought, studying the chart. It was important that he latch onto charts and facts and numbers and scientifically backed claims, if only not to lose his head completely. He pretended he was back in med school, studying something dull and disconnected from his own life. Like . . . jellyfish. Moss. The migratory patterns of swallows. Make sense of the data, he coached himself. *What is the biological function of the humans of Wacko World?*

To start, the texts never called a human male or female. He was either an Alpha-Y, Beta-Y, or Omega-Y; she was an Alpha-X, Beta-X, or Omega-X. So far, so good. Clear. Easy. Weird, but comprehensible.

Second, the Betas comprised an estimated 85% of the population, the Alphas about 10%, and the Omegas about 5%. Again, weird, but fine. Omegas were rare and, John supposed without too much
anxiety, headed for extinction, if nature had the same destructive trajectory he was familiar with. Give them another thousand years.

Third, no Y-Y copulation resulted in pregnancies, or X-X, only Y-X, but not just any Y-X combination. For instance, Omegas couldn’t produce offspring together, nor could Alphas, but Betas could, which accounted for the majority of the population. And an Alpha-Y and Beta-X could only produce sterile (S) children (called, pejoratively, mules). Omega-X had a 99 percent chance of impregnation by an Alpha-Y or an Alpha-X (both having anatomies that included a penis), though only a 50% chance of impregnation by a Beta-Y. And, most disturbing to John, the Omega-Y, copulating with either of the Alpha sexes, had once been capable of becoming pregnant, though no longer. The capability was now defunct (df):

*In recent evolutionary history, both Omegas have been the most fertile of the sexes, capable of copulating with either of the Alphas or the Beta-Y, with high chance of impregnation and a mortality rate as low as 2 percent. But in the early 1700s, physicians and midwives began to notice that the Beta-Ys were losing their ability to successfully impregnate Omega-Ys; within the short space of only a hundred years, Beta-Y/Omega-Y copulation had ceased entirely to result in offspring. Scientists put the onus of evolutionary change on Beta-Ys, until controversial studies on Omega-Ys in concentrations camps in the 1940s yielded a different explanation: Omega-Ys were losing the ability to become pregnant. By mid-century, the Alpha/Omega-Y impregnation rate had dropped to a startling 60 percent, though the Alpha/Omega-X impregnation rate remained constant at 99 percent, and the number was in fast decline. In 1996, the last Omega-Y to become pregnant by an Alpha-Y, did not carry to term. Scientists have been unable to reverse this biological change, and it is generally agreed that Omega-Ys have become sterile. Reproductive scientists attribute the decline of the Omegas population to this sterility. It should be noted that, within the last decade, Omega-X impregnation rates have fallen to 95 percent, which many fear is the first sign of nature-selected Omega-X sterilization, and possibly, future extinction of the Omegas.*

*Scientists have yet to determine why, if sterile, Omega-Ys continue to experience estrus.*

And there it was. Estrus. Heat. That was what he had experienced. He was an Omega-Y. Sherlock, clearly, was an Alpha-Y. And if this had been just one hundred years ago, chances were, the last three days would almost certainly have resulted in pregnancy. His.

He continued to research the nature of the heat, his own anatomy, his vestigial penis, something called *knotting*, and a mating ritual with biological implications called *bonding*. He learned that every Omega experienced heat differently. Some Omegas had them frequently (as frequently as once a week!), while others could go years (as long as five!) between heats. Some had heats that lasted for mere hours (two, he read, on the very low end), and others were bedded for up to five days (one news article claimed an Omega woman experienced a two-week heat twice a year and required multiple partners just to keep up with her, but it turned out to be a tabloid, akin to “My wife gave birth to an alien!” and “Bat Boy Spotted in Soho!”). Some experienced heats at great intensity, being barely able to move or talk or think, while others could pass the time working on a Sudoku while his or her partner satisfied them both.

But one thing was clear: partnering was essential during a heat. Without it, hormonal toxins (John had never heard of such a thing) released by the Omega’s sexual organs into the Omega’s system could not be counteracted by an Alpha’s own neutralizing semen. Without an Alpha, an Omega could suffer something called *estrus poisoning* and become seriously ill or even die. There were no reliable synthetic injections that could successfully act as a substitute.

*So, John thought, this body is my enemy.*
He was surprised at how unsurprised this thought made him.

And for three days, Sherlock hadn't been there to make love to him. He had only been there to save his life. What a happy arrangement.

The feeling of nausea only intensified.

And then the doorbell rang.

So engrossed in what he was reading, John startled, jumping a little in his chair. Sherlock was rising to his feet. Seeing John clearly agitated—though not understanding even that half of it—he said, “That would be Lestrade,” as though to put him at ease.

Lestrade?! John had the sudden urge to hide, as though someone else would be able to spot that he was an imposter in this world, though it was an irrational thought. If Sherlock hadn’t noticed, Lestrade certainly wouldn’t.

Seconds later, Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade strode into the room, looking every bit as Lestradey as ever in his black trench and silver parted hair. He looked so normal, in fact, that John instantly relaxed. He wanted to pull him aside and ask in a hushed voice whether he, too, had been yanked out of Normalia. That was, until Lestrade spoke.

“Hello John. Good heat?”

John’s face drained of blood.

“As good as any,” Sherlock answered for him, slipping into his suit coat. From Sherlock, there was no embarrassment at all, not even a hint of a wink between lovers or the self-satisfaction of a man who took pleasure in his sexual conquests. He might have been commenting on the weather. “What do you have for me?”

And Lestrade took as much interest as if Sherlock had said that the forecast was partly cloudy. No comment at all. Pleasantries dispensed with, he got straight to business. “Found this one in the London Zoo at dawn, just outside the tiger cages. Looks like he was mauled, but zookeepers insist that the animals couldn’t possibly get out. They say the wounds on the body are inconsistent with tiger attacks, but we don’t have much by way of comparison, you know? Not a crime the Metropolitan Police usually have to deal with. All the same, something’s not adding up, and we suspect foul play.”

“Are all the handlers on duty?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll want to question each of them, to start, and then . . . John, what are you doing?”

John was halfway into his jacket and moving toward the door, following. He looked between the two men, a little befuddled, then answered, “I’m coming, too.”

“Whatever for?”

He was so taken aback that he literally fell back a step. “To, you know. Help.”

Lestrade was shaking his head. “Nonsense, John, this is serious business.” He clapped a hand on John’s shoulder and offered a condescending sort of smile.
“But—”

“You’ll just slow me down,” said Sherlock.

And with that, the two men left. John stood numbly in the center of the room. With those few words, his life had just gotten a hundred times worse.
The Omega clinic he had been frequenting for the last twenty years was gone. In its place, a Dutch spa. So, after conveying his distress to the cabbie, he ended up at an unfamiliar clinic and left with the advice, “Just, you know. Ask to talk to a men’s health specialist. And good luck, pal.”

The taxi was pulling away almost before John even had two feet on the pavement.

And that was how he ended up filling out a book’s worth of paperwork, waiting for over three hours in a room with outdated magazines, and finally being escorted into a back room to await the doctor in a paper gown.

There, he waited.

He was a tightly wound ball of stress. Sherlock hadn’t come home last night, and John had cried himself to sleep, his arms wrapped around Sherlock’s pillow if only to breathe him in, feeling not only the sting of rejection but also the aching emptiness of something vital that had been lost. For seven years, without fail, he had fallen asleep next to his Alpha, and he had trusted that nothing would ever disrupt that pattern. But come morning, finding himself still alone, he feared that Sherlock’s disgust of him in this wholly baffling form meant John would never see him again, that the bond was broken, that Sherlock was off to find himself a new Omega. The thought alone almost shattered him into a thousand pieces. So by the time he had convinced himself to get out of bed, he had come to a decision: to do whatever it took to change himself back.

The door to the examination room opened, and the doctor walked in. “Good afternoon, Mr. . . .” He quickly reviewed his chart. “Watson, is it?”

“Yes, hello, yes, I’m John Watson.” He shifted nervously on the paper bed, his knees bouncing together.

“You seem a little agitated, John. Why don’t you try to relax, and just explain to me what brought you in today.”

“Right, yeah, okay,” said John. He scrubbed a hand across his face and tried to breathe normally. The man was a Beta (John could tell by the lack of pheromonal scent), but a professional. What seemed strange to John was probably run of the mill for a doctor. Maybe his condition wasn’t as rare as he believed, maybe it wasn’t even what he believed. That was an encouraging idea. Maybe, during his hasty research, he had used the wrong words in describing his symptoms. He had never been very good at internet research, anyway.

“So, my cycle was supposed to start yesterday,” he said, feeling it all come out in a rush. “It didn’t. I’m very consistent, have been my whole life, but nothing happened. And, and, and, my penis is, well, it’s huge. Engorged, and I’m really, really tight, if you know what I mean. I honestly don’t think I would have been able to have sex last night, even if we had tried. But we didn’t. He . . . he didn’t want me.”

The doctor’s face betrayed nothing of what he was thinking. But he thought about it for a long time, long enough to set John shifting uncomfortably once again. He felt like a freak.

At last, the doctor spoke. “Mr. Watson, do you identify as transsexual? Transgender?”

John stared. He didn’t even know what those words meant. “No,” he said at last.
“All right, just making sure. And your partner . . .” He seemed to reconsider his question and asked instead, “Have you and your partner been together long?”

“Seven years, yes. We’re bonded.”

“And do you have sexual intercourse regularly?”

“Yes. Every forty-one days.”

The doctor paused, pen on paper. “You have sex every forty-one days,” he repeated. “Exactly every forty-one days. That’s what you mean by cycle.”

“Every forty-one days for a three-day heat. That’s right.”

“A three-day heat? What, like, a sex marathon? Every forty-one days. Huh. Well, that’s, um, pretty . . . regulated.”

“I’m very regular.”

“. . . Right. Okay. Let’s continue, shall we? Any problems exciting or maintaining an erection?”

John frowned. “That’s . . . not relevant.”

“No problems there, eh? Good to hear. And do you use protection?”

John licked his lips slowly, not quite understanding the questions, this one particularly. He was bonded, after all. Wasn’t the answer obvious? Slowly, he answered, “He protects me, yes. Keeps me safe. Healthy.”

“Good. That’s good. So, no other partners in the past seven years?”

Taken fully aback, John tried not to showcase his offense at the question. “Of course not. We’re bond-mates.”

“Regular check-ups, for both you?”

“Yes, we’re both very healthy. Like I said.” He was beginning to feel attacked, and tetchy because of it. He needed to rein it in.

“Just making sure, Mr. Watson. Some of these questions do get a bit personal, but I’m a doctor, and if I’m going to help, I need to know these things.”

Feeling chastised, John lowered his head and nodded meekly.

“Do you engage in penetrative sex?”

John blinked. It was the most absurd question yet, but he’d already been berated, and he wanted to be agreeable. So he answered demurely. “Of course we do.”

“Do you swap positions, each taking turn, or—”

“Sorry, doctor, but I don’t think I’ve made myself clear. I’m not a Beta. I’m Omega. So, naturally, he always penetrates me.”

“Ah. I see. You’ll have to forgive me. I’m not always current on my slang.” The doctor gave him a reassuring sort of smile and pressed on. “As the receptive partner, do you use a lubricant?”
“Um.” John's frustration with these questions was only mounting, and he was having a difficult
time hiding it. “That is, I make my own, of course.”

“You make your own what?”

“Slick. You know. I make it.”

The doctor shook his head and winced. “Homemade lubricants aren’t safe. I recommend MHRA-
approved natural or synthetic lubes you can buy in the hygiene section of a chemist’s.”

“No no no, I still think you’re misunderstanding me. I’m not a Beta. I know I smell like one right
now, and I even look like one! But I’m telling you, this isn’t me! As I indicated on the form. I just .
. . Look, yesterday, something happened. I don’t know what. I can’t explain it, but my penis
suddenly became . . . engorged, and my passageway closed up. It’s very uncomfortable, sir, I’m
trying to explain, and my bond-mate wouldn’t even try to knot me.”

Ignoring most of what John said, the doctor consulted the chart, stating, “Under ‘sex’ you wrote O-
Y.” He looked up, one eyebrow raised.

“My whole life. Anyone could tell you. I’m telling you, doc, I don’t know what’s wrong! But
please. If you would just take a look?”

The doctor sighed out a long and silent breath. After what felt like an interminable pause, he finally
said, “Righty then. Let’s have a look-see, shall we?”

He had John stand while he fitted latex gloves to both hands, which he placed under a warmer on
the wall to take away the chill. Then he lifted John’s gown and began his examination.

John was not shy about his body. Not normally. But he was embarrassed by this one. So while the
doctor touched and poked and prodded and made little notes in his chart, John focused intently on a
spot on the other side of the room. And when he bent over and spread his legs for a rectal
examination (the most uncomfortable he’d ever experienced, he was so tight down there), he
recited his ABCs frontwards and backwards, tuning back in only to answer the doctor’s questions,
such as “Any pain or discomfort” and “On and scale of one to ten, how much pain?”

Finally, the doctor removed his gloves and left so John could redress. When he returned, he sat on
a swivel stool across from him and said, “Well, Mr. Watson, I’ll be honest. You seem perfectly
healthy to me. No signs of bruising or tearing or worrisome lumps or discoloration or
oversensitivity or anything, really, to give a physician cause for concern. And you’ll forgive me for
saying so, but your penis is not overly large. It’s average for a man of your stature. Perfectly
healthy. All seems to be in order.”

He smiled, and John understood: the man didn’t believe he had awoken yesterday an Omega and
fallen asleep a Beta. There was no medical basis for the transformation. If anything, he believed
John was lying to him, or possibly crazy.

John himself wasn’t so sure he was altogether sane.

So he left, carrying numbly between his fingers pamphlets on safe sex and how to prepare oneself
for penetrative intercourse. Essentially, he was being re-educated on living the life of a Beta.

xXx

He couldn’t stomach looking at the reading materials on the drive home, so he shoved them into
the inside pocket of his jacket and sat in the back of the taxi stewing over how helpless he felt. He
did not know what to do. This was worse than that time back in primary school when those Alpha kids had him up a tree for six hours before one of the adults had finally noticed and made them scatter. Or that morning when Harry had gone off to university, but not before joking about how he’d never have to worry about classes or professors or getting good marks because he’d go to a trade school or straight into the workforce. She had no idea how painfully envious he’d been, though he had long since perfected the art of silence on the matter. Once, at only five years old, he had told his parents that he wanted to be a doctor. It was the first time in his memory that he had come to the realization that there were differences between Alphas, Betas, and Omegas, because Omegas, they told him, couldn’t become doctors. Or engineers. Or scientists. Or law enforcement. Or a host of other career options.

The myth, popularized by television and the movies and magazines, was that these restrictions were a systematic response to weaker bodies and slower minds. It was true that most Omegas were shorter, slighter, and just generally smaller, but early IQ tests in children ages four to twelve revealed no marked differences in intelligence among any of the sexes. It was when the children were separated and the Omegas sent off to government-mandated Omega Schools for alternative education that the differences began. Some studies purported that it was puberty, specifically the beginning of estrus, that slowed the brain and curbed Omegas’ ability to become critical thinkers and problem solvers, or to retain massive amounts of information, or to understand complex ideas. Contrary and little-accepted studies blamed the education system itself for not fostering higher thinking in Omega Schools, and for hiring substandard teachers, and for establishing exceedingly low expectations for the student body.

But the real reason for the strictures, largely forgotten by the populous and only reviewed in history and law studies, was the impulse to preserve the declining Omega population. The law was passed in 1889 and, in laymen’s terms, it was a law for the common good, but especially the good of the Omega minority: Keep them from dangerous jobs (police officers, soldiers, construction workers), and keep them alive; keep them from jobs requiring further schooling and long hours and mental exhaustion (surgeons, professors, business men), and keep them safe and happy in homes, to procreate and restore their fading numbers. Keep them well-kept, and balance would be restored.

Only, numbers continued to decline. Omega-Ys, safe at home, still failed to become pregnant.

It didn’t matter, anymore. The original reasons had been forgotten. John never knew them. All he knew was the silenced desire for something more and the accepted refrain that, as an Omega, he was special, and all the more so when bonded. Which he was.

Or . . . used to be.

The taxi arrived back at Baker Street. John paid with his card and trudged back to the front door, glancing once again at the queer sign: Holmes and Watson. For how much longer? he wondered.

He ascended the stairs and stopped short: Sherlock was waiting for him the moment he stepped into the flat.

They stood at opposite ends of the room, John in the doorway, Sherlock by the window. He must have seen John get out of the taxi. His hands were deep in both pockets, and he wore a blue collared shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbows. Maybe it was the effect of John’s being slightly taller and marginally heavier (the nurse had measured and weighed him, and he was shocked with the numbers), or maybe it was the distance between them now, but Sherlock didn’t appear quite as tall and broad as usual. On the contrary, he seemed rather . . . narrow. Still tall, and certainly taller than he, but from shoulder to hip to floor, he was narrow as a rod.

They greeted one another stiffly, each recalling a little too vividly their last interaction.
“Hello.”

“Hello.”

God, it was awful. Awkward. Uncomfortable, like standing on a thistle in spiky grass and pretending to be at ease. John cast his eyes to the floor, a sign of shame. He was waiting for the words to come down from on high, the pronouncement of banishment.

Sherlock took a couple of steps closer, but just a couple. “So. Um.”

“Yeah.” Beta. Somehow. This was never going to work.

“I just . . . wasn’t expecting . . . when I came home . . .” Sherlock stopped himself. “I’ll be honest, John. I may not be the most socially adept man in a crowd, but I can usually figure out these kinds of things. But this one has me stumped.”

“Me too.”

“So I’m not exactly sure what to do about . . . this.” He gestured at the space between them.

“I know. Me neither.” He lifted his eyes and tried to convey the depth of his regret. “I’m sorry, Sherlock, I’m so sorry. I can’t even explain it. The doctor . . . he can’t either.”

“You’ve been to a doctor, then.”

“Just returning, actually.”

“And . . . Are you unwell?”

“I’m not ill.”

“But are you okay?”

He nodded, unable to express the intensity of his distress and depression. He knew it was over between them. Blinking rapidly to forestall tears he hoped Sherlock couldn’t see forming, he wondered how long he would have before Sherlock asked him to move out. Hopefully not that very evening. Maybe he would have until the weekend, just to get things in order, maybe call Harry, ask for some help . . .

“Then perhaps,” Sherlock said, “we just continue on as we were. We forget that—he waved a hand awkwardly toward the back of the flat—‘ever happened. Does that suit us both?’”

John’s eyes widened in surprise. One traitorous tear escaped, but only one. Though he didn’t allow himself to feel the immensity of his relief, not just yet, he nodded eagerly.

“Excellent. Well then. That’s settled.” Sherlock flashed him a smile, looking rather relieved himself. “We’re good, then.”

xXx

But they weren’t, quite.

John made dinner that evening (wondering what had happened to all the groceries he had ordered), but Sherlock said he wasn’t hungry, that he needed to think, and for most of the evening he lay on the couch, fingertips joined beneath his jaw as he stared at the ceiling, leaving John to nibble at the reheated shepherd’s pie without any real appetite whatsoever. And it was after, when he went
upstairs to hide the sex pamphlets in a box of personal items he kept in Sherlock’s laboratory, that he discovered that all of Sherlock’s lab equipment, including the tables, had been cleared away. In their place, a bed, dresser, and night table with a lamp. His clothes were in the dresser. His shoes were at the foot of the bed. This was his room. Sherlock had moved him out, after all.

It was like a wrench to the gut.

He was depressed. That night, he didn't sleep. He barely left that room the next day, only to tidy up the flat and to make Sherlock his meals, which he hardly touched. He even told John, “I can in fact feed myself, John. No need for three square a day. You don’t need to . . . I don’t know. ‘Make up' for anything.”

He even used air quotes.

So Sherlock didn’t need him for . . . anything. The message was becoming clearer and clearer.

And then, on the third day, while John was flipping channels, trying unsuccessfully to find his favorite program, Alpha Angels (the adventures of Wing Commander Max Hancock, a dashing young Alpha-Y rogue RAF pilot, fighting West Russians and East Americans as he tries to restore peace to his native Britain and return to the love of his life, Omega-X Trixie Sandberg!), the bell sounded, and seconds later, Detective Inspector Lestrade came into the room.

If Lestrade noticed anything amiss—for instance, an Omega having transformed into a Beta—he gave no sign, just smiled easily and nodded his head in John's direction.

“Hello, John. How’s work these days?”

“Work?”

“Ah, there you are,” said Sherlock striding into the room from the kitchen. “I thought you’d forgotten where we live.”

“Ha ha,” said Lestrade drily. John returned to channel surfing. Maybe he could find that cooking program he enjoyed. He only half paid attention to the conversation going on behind him. After all, Lestrade’s visits, frequent as they were, never had anything to do with him.

“What do you have for us?”

“Found this one in the London Zoo at dawn, just outside the tiger cages. Looks like he was mauled, but zookeepers insist that the animals couldn’t possibly get out. They say the wounds on the body are inconsistent with tiger attacks, but we don’t have much by way of comparison, you know? Not a crime the Metropolitan Police usually have to deal with. All the same, something’s not adding up, and we suspect foul play.”

“Are all the handlers on duty?” Sherlock asked.

“Yes.”

“Good, I’ll want to question each of them, to start, and then . . . John?”

John lowered the remote and craned his neck around, a little surprised to be addressed during a briefing. Sherlock was already halfway into his coat and grabbing his scarf. “Yes?”

“Aren’t you coming?”
His mouth fell open, but nothing came out for several seconds. Meanwhile, Sherlock and Lestrade just stared at him. Finally, his lips moved. “You want me to come?”

“Are you still worried about . . . ?” Sherlock’s eyes shifted to Lestrade, then away again just as quickly. He waved his hand through the air like shooing away a fly. “Yes, of course, I do, don’t be an idiot. Lestrade, you go ahead. We’ll be just behind.”

“I’ll meet you both at the north gate.”

Excited, John ran for his coat.
In Which John Takes a Walloping

It was dark by the time Sherlock returned home from the case involving the man presumably but not conclusively mauled by tigers, out of breath and grinning like a big cat himself, and one rather proud of himself at that. He had a fair amount of blood sprayed across his shirt, too. Apparently, he had had a terrific day.

John, meanwhile, had spent the day collecting clues about his past, and his new world, and piecing them together to construct the narrative of a man who had nearly forty years of living in Wacko World. Upstairs, in the laboratory that had once been his own private sanctuary, he found a box of his very own containing personal items, including a birth certificate (his father had been a Beta-Y, but his mother had been an Omega-X; like in his former life, both had passed), school records, and photographs of family and friends from childhood. He was surprised to recognize a handful of faces in the boys and girls who were his classmates, but the majority were strangers to him.

That got him thinking. Who else in his life did he no longer know? Because he had not gone to university, he would not have met Mike Stamford; and because he had not gone off to war, he had not met Bill Murray. Then again, maybe they were Omega-Ys, too, and neither had they done those things. Of course, it was only a one in three chance, their being Omegas. Well, not even that, if Omegas made up so little of the population. Then again, his friends may not even have existed at all in the first place.

He still had a sister: she appeared in quite a few of the photographs, but he couldn’t determine her sex just by looking at her, and, in wondering what her sex was in the first place, he achieved just a little insight into how important biological sex probably was here, culturally, socially. Psychologically. It was probably one of the first things people noticed about each other, and with that determination came a whole host of preconceptions and categorizations he was not yet privy to. He thought it had been bad enough, with simply two. With six, he thought, it must have been horrendous.

And then he found his journal. Or rather, this other John’s stack of journals, in the bedroom under the bed and kept safely in a plastic box. This other man had been something of a prolific writer, a chronicler of his life and daily living. The earliest journal was from childhood, aged 12, begun at a time when puberty had just begun and in anticipation of his first heat. Equal parts horror and fascination, John moved to the bed to read about young John’s anxieties regarding his developing body, his fears about what estrus would feel like, and perturbedness at getting teased so often by Harry. Of course, Harry would give him hell for being an Omega, John thought. And this probably meant that she wasn’t one herself. Reading further, he learned that this was true: Harry was a Beta-X who fancied Omega-Xs. He wondered vaguely: was that still considered lesbianism? Then again, what he and Sherlock had, erm, yeah, that . . . Was that still considered gay?

John did wonder how that must work for them. He supposed that must be a problem, given Harry’s inability to neutralize an Omega’s toxic hormones. But he had learned long ago not to question what went on in Harry's bedroom.

But that was when he came across the allusions to Omega Houses and this other John's clear but unspecific distaste for them. Curious, John pulled out his phone and looked them up, and after a few minutes of searching sites and reading up on them, he shared in his counterpart’s distaste: Omega Houses were, for lack of a better term, socially sanctioned brothels. Unbonded Omegas, coming up on their heats, checked into a veritable hotel—for a fee, and depending on the quality of that hotel, quite a steep fee—to share their heats with strangers, called Service Alphas. Service.
John snorted. Was this—this—really the best this society had designed to keep free (unbonded) Omegas from dying, just because their biologies dictated a ridiculous estrus period? He was just glad that he—erm, that was, this other John—had never deigned to book himself a room. As far as the record went.

Eight journals later, John was caught up to the present. By then, his fascination with this stranger’s history had worn away, leaving him once again stoking the fires of his incredulity and ire. After a preparatory school, Omega John (as John was now thinking of him), at age 17, had gone straight into the workforce . . . as a salesman. *Sales.* He had sold textbooks and dictionaries and almanacs and DIYs. It was humiliating. The kid hadn’t even set foot at university, and as far as he could tell, had never even left the country. For John, being a doctor and a soldier were indelible marks of his identity, and to have them stripped away felt like being skinned alive. Everything he knew, he knew because of those labels: medicine, anatomy, pathology, emergency care, gone! Sharpshooting, strategy, regiment, Morse code, disappeared! *This* John knew nothing! What was he to anyone? What worth was he in the world? How did this man even see himself?

Oh. But of course. *Omega.*

Bond-mate.

The way he wrote about his life with Sherlock said it all. He was besotted, completely and helplessly enamored of the genius whom he’d met on a train seven years ago, and . . .

Wait, *seven* years? But . . . that couldn’t be right. John and Sherlock had met only *two* years ago, after he’d gotten back from Afghanistan and . . . Oh, but of course. Omega John had never gone to Afghanistan. He was not distracted by the war or schooling or anything, so of course it was inevitable that they meet sooner.

And it was *that* thought at which John was visibly taken aback, and he sat up on the bed. Had he just used that word? Inevitable? His meeting Sherlock was far from impossible. But London was huge, and they traveled in very different circles, and the likelihood of their finding one another was really quite *unlikely*. Nevertheless, a chance meeting on a train was hardly *inevitable*. What was he thinking, that they were fated to . . . to meet, and be . . . become . . . whatever they were?

He wasn’t sure *what* he was thinking. But he couldn’t help but marvel that in a world so topsy-turvy and ass-backwards as this one, where so little was familiar and most of his acquaintances had disappeared from his life, he had still found Sherlock, and Sherlock had found him.

**xXx**

But when Sherlock finally came home that night, the unexamined warm feelings of affection evaporated.

“*Oh John,* you should have seen it,” said Sherlock, flopping himself onto the couch and toeing off his shoes, leaving them to clatter together on the floor.

“*Should I have,*” John answered dully. He took two steps, en route to collect Sherlock’s shoes and put them away, when he stopped short. What the hell did he think he was doing?

“It was obvious the man hadn’t been mauled by tigers,” Sherlock continued, oblivious to John’s arrested approach. “Someone just wanted it to look like he had. Stab wound was the giveaway.”

“*Huh.*”

“Obvious. Tigers don’t stab. And not enough blood, to be frank, so a post-mortem mock-up of claw
marks. Sloppy. But I figured all that out before the rhino chase!” He chuckled deeply to himself. “You should have heard Lestrade squeal like a warthog.”

John grit his teeth and threw himself moodily into his own chair.

“But enough of that!” Sherlock was suddenly sitting upright. “I’m famished. Hard day’s work, rhino chases and all. I’m off to shower, then, before dinner. What are we having?”

Head coming around, John’s jaw fell lax. “What?”

“Dinner, John.”

“What about it?”

“I’m starving. You know how I get after a case. What are you cooking up?”

John laughed helplessly and turned up his bare hands. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Do I look like I’ve been cooking? Besides, it’s late. It's nearly ten o’clock!”

Sherlock looked both puzzled and disappointed. “Well. Get something on the hob then. I trust you’ve at least done the shopping.”

John nearly threw up his hands, but he kept his composure and said, “I haven’t left the flat all day. I’ve been busy.”

“Busy. Huh. Well.” He stood and headed for the kitchen, unbuttoning his blood-sprayed shirt as he went. “I’m sure you can still whip up something hot.”

Scowling, John retorted, “Maybe you should have grabbed something on your way home.”

Sherlock suddenly retreated. “Let me get this straight. You don’t prepare any meals for the heat, leaving me to clean out the cupboards and cobble something together and send for takeaway, and afterwards, you don’t even bother to restock? Are you unwell? If you had told me, I could have sent for someone to take a look at you.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Shaking his head, apparently annoyed, Sherlock removed his shirt and tossed it in John’s face. “You can take this shirt to the laundrette in the morning, along with the sheets from your heat. I mean really, John, these things are hardly difficult.”

With that, Sherlock stomped away like a recalcitrant child. Seconds later, the bathroom door fell shut with a bang. John was left holding a bloody shirt matching the color of his face: furious.

xXx

Though he had spent the last three nights (and days) there, John was not keen to return to Sherlock’s bed (now changed with the last clean sheets they had), which he refused to think of as his, too. So while Sherlock showered, he hurriedly changed into pyjamas, and by the time he was out, John had heated him some beans with toast and milk, just to shut him up. Sherlock ate it without complaint and even had a second helping of beans. But it was while John was arranging the Union Jack pillow at the end of the couch and planning to spend the night there that Sherlock,
now pyjama-clad himself, stepped back into the sitting room and said, “Don’t be ridiculous, you’re not spending the night there.”

“No, I think I am.” John resolutely reached for the folded blanket he had brought out for this very purpose.

“Don’t be like that. It was just a little spat.”

“I’d really be much more comfortable—”

But Sherlock had crossed to him, took his arm at the wrist, and pulled him to his feet. Then, placing an arm around his shoulders, he steered John toward the kitchen, down the hall, and into the bedroom. “There now,” he said. “You’re okay. Just an off day. You’ll be better tomorrow.”

John shook off his arms. But oh, how he hoped it would be true. Maybe, come morning, he would find himself back in his own bed, in his own skin, and in his own world.

Sherlock left again, to brush his teeth, and John stood at the foot of the bed, debating. What if Sherlock wanted . . . another, erm, roll in the hay? What if there was some nighttime snogging ritual, or hell, even cuddling, that Sherlock was accustomed to? Or, gulp, makeup sex. Some couples he knew of had makeup sex at the slightest of spats. John didn’t think he could deal with that right now. He could easily march straight back out, be a stubborn arse, and kip on the sofa for the foreseeable future. But he didn’t want another row. He would tough it out, but he wouldn’t be happy about it.

He crawled onto the bed, the side nearest the door, and pulled the covers up to his middle and lay stiff as a board. He folded his arms and stared up at the ceiling, fuming. This whole situation was entirely unfair. Had he not lived a good life? Did he not help people on a daily basis, patients and police and victims of crime? What kind of cosmic joke was this?

Sherlock turned off the bathroom light and came into the room to find John petulant and glaring skyward.

“Budge over, you’re on my side,” he said.

John flung the covers back, stood, and marched around to the other side. There, he lay on his side, facing out, with as much distance between himself and Sherlock as possible. His knees were hanging over the edge.

Seconds later, Sherlock lay down too. There was silence, then the light clipped off. Continued silence, and then Sherlock said, “You smell upset.”


With that, he tugged the blankets firmly around his shoulders and curled tightly into the fetal position. He squeezed his eyes shut and hoped to God that was the end of it.

Sherlock just sighed, the sound of exasperation, and rolled facing opposite.

And that was it. Sherlock was out like a lamp within minutes, without so much as a goodnight, or sweet dreams, or any kind of touch—apologetic or otherwise—at all.

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“Police have arrested a mother and father for the death of thirteen-year-old Omega-X Charlotte Bernstein. Reports say that the Bernsteins, both Betas, neglected to provide their daughter with an Alpha during her first heat. The two Betas, members of Nothing Knotting, a cult well known for their views opposing Alpha-Omega dependencies, told police that they were trying to teach their maturing daughter to conquer her own body and practice the Eastern-inspired art of mind over matter, a growing trend among Beta and Omega radicals.”

The camera cut to a middle-aged, grey-haired man sitting behind a large mahogany desk. The caption at the bottom of the screen read “Dr. Blake Pior, chief physician at St. Vincent’s Hospital for Omega Children.”

“It’s ignorance, is what it is. These people, they don’t understand their own hormonal functions, let alone those of Omegas. I’ve even had people tell me that estrus poisoning is a myth and that knotting shouldn’t be taught in schools. Somehow, these ideas are catching, and it will prove dangerous for Omegas like Charlotte.”

“Instead of hiring a service,” the reporter continued, “the Bernsteins locked their daughter in a room with estrus aids and pre-made meals for two days. By the time they checked on her, Charlotte was already suffering severe toxic shock from the poisons in her bloodstream. She died in hospital two hours later.”

“We’ll be seeking murder charges,” said a woman wearing a boxy business suit. The caption named her Diana Walder, prosecuting attorney. “It's the severest penalty we can impose on parents who willfully place their children in harm’s way. Ignorance is not a defense. They killed their daughter, plain and simple. In the eyes of the law, they are murderer.”

John clicked off the telly and shot to his feet, running a hand through his hair. This was madness, all madness. This place was fucking insane. He didn’t know what he was doing, not until he was halfway into this jacket and Sherlock, having spent the last three hours upstairs in his lab, was re-emerging in the sitting room.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Out,” said John.

“Out?”

“I need some air.”

“Well, at least take the dry cleaning!”

But John was halfway down the stairs and flat out ignored him.

Without a plan or a destination in mind, he just started walking. That’s all he could do. Walk, let the agitation work the heart and leg muscles, let the angry breath escape in hard huffs. He was in free air, but feeling no less trapped, and he realized, after a time, what it was he really wanted, more than anything, more, even, than going back to the world he knew. He wanted to talk to Sherlock. Not that Sherlock. His Sherlock. His Sherlock would be able to make sense of all of this, and what’s more, find a way out. He trusted, too, that his Sherlock would share in his bafflement at six sexes, balk at such a thing as heats in human beings, and scorn the way the world treated Omegas. He just wanted to be back with someone with whom he could have entire conversations in a single glance, with whom shared laughter came naturally and bickering was almost as enjoyable and comfortable as long, easy silences. God, it had been only a few days, and he missed his Sherlock fiercely, so fiercely it hurt, and it terrified him at the same time, the thought that he might...
never see him again, that his Sherlock would never know what had happened to him. Surely, even now, he was racing around London, panicked, searching high and low for him. Because that’s what his Sherlock would do for him. He knew it.

*This* Sherlock? He didn’t know him at all.

He had to go home.

And that’s how he ended up back on the bridge.

He didn’t know why, exactly, or what he expected to happen, but he knew that this was where it had all begun. It was the rain and the lightning and other forces he didn’t understand. But it was here. He paced the bridge, east side and west side, looking for something, anything, a clue, a hint, anything at all, that might take him back. He looked to the sky. He thought about jumping into the river. For hours, he stood on the bridge, waiting, hoping, at one point screaming, at another point praying, but nothing happened. It was just a bridge. He knew—he felt in his gut and within in his bones—that his Sherlock was universes away. It was all he could do not to slump down and cry.

xXx

He decided to get pissed. Straight-up, bleary-eyed, sour-stomached, just-roll-me-into-a-corner kind of pissed. The sun had set by the time he left the bridge, and he was miles from Baker Street and didn’t even care. He had his wallet, and he had enough cash on him to buy enough alcohol to erase the last twenty-four hours, and maybe the next twenty-four hours, if he was lucky.

So he made a beeline for the first pub he spotted. But when he approached the door, the bouncer stood in his path and put a hand out to stop him. He sniffed. John sniffed back. Something instinctual in him identified the man immediately as an Alpha. It was terribly strange knowledge.

“I don’t think so, mate,” said the bouncer.

“Pardon?”

“You here on your own?”

John looked over both shoulders dramatically. The street behind him was empty. “Looks that way, doesn’t it. Now. If you don’t mind.”

He took a step forward, but found the bouncer’s hand against his chest, detaining him.

“Look, man, what gives?”

“You know I can’t let you enter without an Alpha escort.”

John stared, nonplussed. When his mouth started working again, he burst. “Are you fucking kidding me! Why not!”

The bouncer scowled. “What, were you born yesterday? That’s the law. No Omegas without their Alphas.”

John balled his fists at his side and breathed loudly through his nose. “What business,” he asked, his voice dark and low, “is it of anyone, let alone an Alpha, what I do in my own time? If I want a drink, I’ll goddamn have a drink.”

“Not on my watch, mate.”
He stormed away, practically spitting fire. Fine. *Fine!* So he couldn’t go inside a pub without an escort. A thirty-nine-year-old man needed an *escort* to get wasted. Ridiculous. Well. There were other ways.

But when he set two bottles of whisky on the counter at the liquor store, the clerk (whom John identified as Beta and hated himself for it) raised an eyebrow, gave a quick sniff, and said, “ID, please.”

Gritting his teeth, John slapped his ID on the counter. Really? He was being carded? Did he look fifteen?

The man gave it a cursory glance and shook his head. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Sorry, mate. Can’t sell that to you.”

“Yeah? Why not?”

“You’re Omega.”

“And?”

“Laws are laws.”

He thought. Then he said, “It’s for my”—he swallowed; saying the words for the first time was difficult—“bond-mate.”

“Don’t matter, does it? I get caught selling to an Omega, next thing I know, that Omega ends up in hospital or worse, and who do the police come after? Me, that’s who. Suddenly, they’re calling me an enabler.”

And that’s how John found himself back on the streets, completely sober, and wondering what the hell to do next.

His phone rang.

Sherlock. He ignored it.

Shoving his hands deep inside his pockets, he started walking. He’d walked so much that day that his right leg began to ache. He didn’t think much of it, at first—it was hardly anything new—but it was about the time he thought that maybe he’d board a bus and just ride it around the city until they kicked him off that he was struck by a new thought.

His leg hurt. And *this* body had never been to war. But his mind had, and the pain . . . it was psychosomatic. He’d been told a hundred times. Along with all his knowledge and memories and spit-fire personality, he’d brought along his PTSD. And that thought made him laugh. He was truly a mess.

He climbed into the nearest bus, found a seat near the back, and sighed deeply, sinking into it. Then he rested his head against the glass and watched London roll by. When his phone dinged in his pocket—a text this time—he didn’t even check to see what Sherlock had to say.

The bus kept making stops, but John paid attention to none of it, not where he was, not who got off, and not who got on. So he didn’t see when three tall men—broad in the shoulders, thick in the neck, square in the jaw—climbed on board. He didn’t notice them looking at him, or even pointing at him, or even walking toward him, until one of them stood close to his side, another took the seat behind him, and another took the seat in front. He only noticed when the man behind leaned over,
put a nose to his neck and breathed in.

Startled, he jerked away, twisting his body so his back was now against the window.

“What the hell?” he said.

The men laughed, and the man behind him said, “You’re right, Roger. If it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, smells like a duck.”

The men all laughed.

John grabbed a bar and pushed himself up. The standing man pushed him back down.

“Where you going, little omegomer?”

The side of John’s mouth quirked in an incredulous but nervous smile. They were Alphas, the three of them: the smell was so strong it almost knocked him over. But it was nothing like Sherlock’s scent, that intoxicating aroma that led to heady arousal. This was like too much cologne, and the cheap kind. His nose wrinkled at the unpleasantness, and he just wanted to get away. Eyes darting to the front of the bus, he saw a woman watching, but when he caught her eyes, she just shook her head pitiably and looked away. The bus driver kept his nose to the road. No one else was on the bus.

He took a deep breath to steady himself and immediately regretted it: he just inhaled more noxious Alpha scent. “I’m only going to tell you this once,” he said, glaring at each in turn. “Back off.”

“Or what?” said the man behind him.

“That’s right,” said the man in front. “We’re not doing you no harm. Just enjoying breathing you in. Ain’t that right, pack?”

“Oh yes,” said that man standing. He leaned in closer, his groin level with John’s head. That’s when John noticed it swelling. A shiver passed through him. “Smells amazing, he does. One has to wonder . . . is he even bonded?”

The men laughed, and the one behind him asked, “Does it matter?” and licked his ear.

“All right, enough.” He stood abruptly and shoved the man backwards just as the bus rolled to the next stop on a busy corner. “You wanna get off? Go fuck each other.” Then he jumped onto the sidewalk and without a backward glance marched straight into the crowd of shoppers and pedestrians.

He’d gotten off at a shopping center. Though dark, the weather was warm and the streets were alight, and it was a lovely night to be out, objectively speaking. But John was too upset to feel the positive energy of Londoners enjoying the evening. As he pushed his lonely way through the crowd, he could identify everyone—Omega Xs and Alpha Ys and Betas galore—and he wished it would just stop, wished everyone would just go away and stop stinking up the air, he just couldn’t take it. He turned the corner, down a less busy road, and was grateful that the press of bodies had let up. There, he could breathe, just a little easier. He slowed his step, ran a hand across his sweaty face, and tried to think straight.

He didn’t get far.

From behind, someone grabbed his jacket at both shoulders and hauled him sideways into an alley. He thrashed in the hold and kicked out with his feet, until the hands holding him shoved him hard,
and he landed on his chest. Scrambling, he found his feet again and backed up, moving further down the alley, and saw that the three Alphas from the bus had followed him.

“Leave me the fuck alone,” he said, a growl in his chest.

“Ooh, has this one got a mouth on him!” said one.

“Not the mouth I’m interested in,” said another.

“Come on, then, be honest,” said the third, chiding him. “You bonded or what?”

John had no idea the response either yes or no would illicit. If he said no, it was almost certainly an invitation for further advances. If he said yes, however, would they respect that? Was there some sort of code of respect Alphas had for one another? Don’t mess with another Alpha’s Omega or suffer the consequences? Maybe there was even a law to the effect.

He nodded once, stiffly. “That’s right.”

“And your bond-mate just lets you wander the city, alone, at night, smelling like you do?” The man tsked. “He’s just begging for someone to defile you, then, eh?”

“Don’t worry, little omegomer,” said the first with a slanted kind of smile. They were crowding in now. “We’ll be good to you.”

“We’ll take good care of you.”

John had nowhere to run. Behind him was a wall of concrete, and before him another wall of flesh. Before he could even try to break through it, they had grabbed him. He wrenched himself to and fro, trying to break their hold, but he felt weak. This body! With its reduced height and weight, he also had reduced muscle size and strength. And the Alphas were strong. He remembered how strong Sherlock had been, handling him so easily, barely aware of his initial resistance. And now he was up against three of them, all at once.

They had him behind a metal skip, blocked from seeing the mouth of the alley, even if it had been light enough to make out properly. One of them spun him around and pinned him to the wall. He let out an oof as his chest slammed into the brick and his breath was forced out of him. Then he felt his head being pulled to the side, his neck exposed, and he knew what they had found. The mark.

“Yup. Bonded. Gonna be a right mess for your Alpha to sort out, I expect.”

John struggled again, his cheek rubbing the bricks roughly. “It’s not me who’ll need sorting,” he snarled.

They laughed. A mouth fell on his neck and began lathing him there, across his bondmark, teeth scraping but not piercing. An arm circled round his middle and a hand tugged at the button of his trousers.

“We’re not scared of your Alpha. He’ll never find us,” one said. He heard zippers behind him; his heart thudded soundly in his ears, and his blood filled every limb.

“You don’t know my Alpha,” John spat.

A hand plunged down the inside of his pants.

“And you don’t know me.”
At that moment, a finger pressed up inside him, and John’s fury was unleashed. He twisted and bit hard the nose of the man suckling at his neck until his mouth filled with blood and, with a scream, the Alpha let go and stumbled back, losing his footing and landing hard on his backside. But John didn’t wait to see him fall. He seized one of the Alpha's arms and, with every bit of strength in his Omega body, slammed it into the corner of the steel skip. He knew that a direct blow to the center of the ulna was sure to break it, and sure enough, he felt it give and heard it pop. As the Alpha slumped to the ground, hollering in pain, he kicked in a knee and slammed the man’s jaw shut with a cracking snap. Probably a few broken teeth there. Just as well.

That left just one more, plus the first grounded Alpha who was regaining his footing. He felt himself seized from behind once more, two large arms wrapping around his torso and pinning his arms to his side. The first Alpha was suddenly before him, mouth covered in the blood gushing from his nose and eyes alight with rage. He balled a fist, and John braced. Half a second later, it smashed into his face, but his lax body slipped through the ring of arms, and there, on the ground, he kicked both heels into the shins of the Alpha so hard they too probably cracked.

That’s when he noticed a beer bottle rolled halfway under the skip. He grabbed it and swung it into the head of his final attacker. It glanced off the bone of the skull with a hollow ringing. John lost his grip on it, and it smashed against the concrete below them. He snatched a shard, gripped it so tight he felt it cut into his palm, but he stuck it into the face of the Alpha, who stopped his advance.

“Back,” said John, breathing heavily, “off.”

The Alpha panted, but didn’t move.


The Alpha straightened and took a step back. John stood, his legs a little shaky but bearing him up all the same. He left the three Alphas in the darkness of the alley, backing up slowly and still bearing the glass shard in his hand. When he reached the street, he tossed the shard to the ground, did an about face, and marched away.
In Which Sherlock Is Baffled

Sherlock was not accustomed to feeling uncomfortable, least of all around John. In fact, historically, John had proven himself to be the one person around whom Sherlock ever felt entirely and unreservedly at ease. He wasn’t precisely sure why; he’d never taken the time to examine it. Likely, it was because, though John certainly made demands of him, he simultaneously accepted him as he was, hard edges and worn surfaces and all. He supposed he responded in kind. For him, John was an open book, not simply because Sherlock could employ his prodigious talents in deduction—which he had in spades—and read him backwards and forwards, upwards and down, but because John never made any attempt to hide himself, to lay deceit, or to present a mask. And Sherlock accepted those rough edges and worn surfaces, too, with a come-as-you-are mentality that suited them both.

So accounting for some of his discomfort, now, was his persistent bafflement at what mystery had seized John over the last couple of days, one he seemed determined to protect. John had stated plainly via text that he had been feeling ill, but illness didn’t explain why, upon entering the flat that day, Sherlock had been accosted with the overpowering scent of bleach, or why a bleach-soaked rag had been left hanging over the railing. John wasn’t one to clean the hallway . . . unless, maybe, he had gotten ill in the hallway and was too good a man to leave it to Mrs. Hudson to clear away. Yes, that could explain the bleach, and even the rag. In the middle of cleaning, another wave of nausea had forced him to abandon the work and hurry to the nearest loo. It might even explain burnt bread (forgotten about while dealing with the situation in the bathroom) and the reek of entirely too much pine-scented aerosol (used to mask the awful smell of vomit).

But it sure as hell didn’t explain why he had found John, his straight-laced easy-going never-ruffled flatmate in his bedroom, on his bed, naked as the day he was born, and . . . and . . . declaring his need of Sherlock’s . . . assistance.

It was the one piece of the puzzle that he could not fit into the narrative of illness, and though it bothered him to the extent that he stayed up at night thinking about it (and simultaneously trying not to think about it), he couldn’t bring himself to ask John, pointe blank, why. All he knew was that John had said he had been to a doctor, and Sherlock accepted that as explanation. But, really, it wasn’t much of an explanation. He tried to discount it as none of his business, but his data-deducing brain still wanted to make sense of it all, and he just couldn’t.

What he did know was that, although they had agreed to forget the whole thing and continue on as they were, John was still suffering from deep embarrassment and struggling to return to what had only recently been their own brand of normalcy. That was clear enough, when he made no sign of joining Sherlock on this case until explicitly invited. It had been months and months since Sherlock had had to invite him. As far as he was concerned, unless John was at work, they were a package deal.

The ride to the north gate was a short one, and though Sherlock had initially meant to use the time to re-establish a sense of normalcy between them, he couldn’t divine the words and ended up playing on his phone, scrolling through the zoo’s website but not really paying any attention to the details. He was distracted with other things. Beside him, John sat so erect his back didn’t even touch the backrest and he stared out the window, his hands between his legs and his knees bouncing together a little. If this weren’t John Watson, and if this weren’t another run-of-the-mill day on the job, Sherlock might have thought him eager as a schoolboy.
The cabbie pulled to a stop at their destination, and Sherlock got out first. John was right on his heels without even making a gesture to pay, without even an annoyed quip about how he always paid. The cabbie cleared his throat loudly, and Sherlock conceded to pull out his wallet. “I suppose it is my turn,” he said.

“Hm?” said John.

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

They started striding toward the gate. Well, Sherlock strode. John took shorter, more rapid steps, looking sideways at Sherlock every few seconds, something of a half smile on his face and a strange light in his eyes.

“All right there, John?” said Sherlock, trying to sound bored and hide, from John as much as from himself, how disconcerted he really was.

“Yes. I’m excellent. Thank you. Um. Is there, um, anything you want me to do?”

“Do?”

“Or not do? I don’t want to get in the way.”

“John, just, you know . . . be normal.” He could hardly believe he was advising someone else to behave normally. His skin was positively itching.

“Right. Normal. Like, Beta normal?”

“Whatever helps,” said Sherlock, distractedly.

A sign outside the gates to the zoo read “Closed for Maintenance,” which Sherlock smirked at. Sergeant Sally Donovan stood at the gate to lead them past ticketing and straight into the park.

“Get to come out and play today, do you?” she said drily. “You know, this is a matter for pathology. We won’t know anything for sure without a proper autopsy, so I really don’t see why we need you this time.”

“If Lestrade says he needs me, he needs me,” said Sherlock, “a thing you have born witness to time and time again. Maybe one of these days you’ll figure it out, Sally.”

She rolled her eyes but gave John a nod. “John.”

“Ma’am,” said John deferentially.

Both Sherlock and Donovan narrowed their eyes at him, but John just smiled, a close-lipped smile, and held his hands behind his back. He rocked a little on his heels and didn’t appear to have anything else to say.

At last, Donovan chose to ignore the unusual greeting. “This way,” she said. Sherlock and John fell in line behind her. Sherlock watched John from the corner of his eye, his level of concern elevated a modicum of a percent.

But once they reached the crime scene outside of the tiger cages—roped off with yellow police tape—he put John to the back of his mind and entered that much more familiar and comfortable mode of deduction. The police had finished snapping photos of the body and were now photographing everything else, Lestrade was gesturing Sherlock and John forward, and Anderson,
fully suited in plastic, was standing huffily on the sidelines, having been told to wait his turn.

“Body first, then witnesses,” said Lestrade, pointing to the ground, rather unnecessarily, to indicate the corpse. “Theodore Planter, works here at the zoo in the elephant yard. Nothing particularly skilled, he cleaned the cages and sometimes hosed down the animals. Usually clocks in at eight o’clock in the morning, but this is how he was found just before sunup. Probably here all night. Records show he clocked out yesterday at five. 999 got the call this morning, and first officers on the scene called me in on suspicion of foul play, the most obvious point being—”

“—that the body is not in the tiger cages and is rather a single, non-digested piece,” Sherlock finished for him. “Yes, I see that. And yet, someone wants us to believe this was a tiger attack. Clearly a murder.”

Anderson sighed loudly, to get his boss’s attention, certainly, but also to attract Sherlock’s. Sherlock turned a withering eye on him.

“More likely,” Anderson said, “this was a hapless accident. Talk to anyone. He had a reputation. Apparently, the man was nuts about big cats, tigers especially. Bloke probably clocked out but hid himself in the loo, waiting for everyone to go, and fancied he could get close to his favorite animals. Idiot got himself attacked, escaped, but bled out and collapsed here where he died. There’s a trail of blood that our boys have already examined, and it leads right from the tiger cage doors and straight here. Bloody shoe prints match the shoes. Pretty cut and dry, if you ask me.”

“No one did,” said Sherlock. “And maybe if you had used both eyes, you would have noticed what even an amateur, such as yourself, would have spotted straight away.”

Sherlock crouched down beside the mangled corpse. “Lacerations, probably forty or fifty, but all of approximately equal length but not much depth. Surface cuts, broken skin, but little damage to deeper tissue, or these would have bled more. I’m no expert, but I highly doubt tigers are so gentle with their prey. These are not claw marks, and unless I’m mistaken, these marks were not even made until after the victim was dead. The mortal wound, I would hazard”—with gloved hands, he tilted the corpse’s head back, exposing a neck smeared with dried blood, and with a finger, he lifted a flap of skin revealing a deep, round puncture wound, wide enough to slide a finger into—“was in the neck. One piercing object, neither tooth nor claw, and certainly not self-inflicted. Would you agree with that assessment, John?”

When an answer didn’t come straight away, Sherlock turned his face up to see that John’s was looking quite green, and his eyes were wide as saucers.

“John?”

“Oh, hum,” said John, taking a labored breath. “Uh, gee, that’s . . . boy, that’s a lot of blood, eh?”

Sherlock gaped. It wasn’t! That’s exactly the point he had been trying to make, that there wasn’t nearly enough blood on the body to suggest a tiger attack while the man had still been alive! Especially because it hadn’t been a tiger attack at all!

“The puncture wound, John,” said Sherlock, a little impatiently. But by this point, John was shielding his eyes with a hand.

“Are you okay?” said Lestrade, stepping a little closer to John. His voice indicated his concern and matched Sherlock’s confusion.

“Nah, nah, I’m good. I’m good,” said John, pulling a hand away from his eyes, but staring
skyward. “Whoo!” Then he bent over, hands on knees, covering his mouth and breathing loudly.

Sherlock straightened to standing, utterly bewildered. John was acting... squeamish. Like he’d never seen a dead body before, like he couldn’t handle the sight of blood. But that was perfectly nonsensical! John was a doctor, a soldier, and he had seen, smelled, and handled more dead bodies in the past two years than he had during his whole military career (that was, perhaps, an exaggeration). He never winced at the sight of them; he never flinched at the thought of touching them; he certainly never turned green. What was the matter with him?

“I think he’s going to be sick,” said Donovan, and everyone took half a step back.

“I’m fine, really, I just need...” He was waving the suggestion away, but then he seemed to rethink his assertion. “The nearest loo,” he finished, and at one officer’s pointing finger, he took off.

Stunned, Sherlock watched John hurrying away, a hand clamped to his mouth. Maybe he had misread the signs, and John wasn’t quite recovered from... whatever he had seen the doctor about. Maybe his insisting that John accompany him had been a mistake. But if John was unwell, he would tell Sherlock he was unwell, piss off, leave him alone. That’s just what John did.

“What the hell was that all about?” Lestrade muttered to him under his breath.

“He’s, uh, not been well lately. Sick, you know. Um, flu. Excuse me.”

He left the officers with the body and started after John, ignoring Lestrade shouting, “Hey, we’re not quite finished yet!” Picking up his feet, he jogged around the corner until he came in sight of a gray shack on the top of which read the unambiguous sign TOILETS. The paintings on the outside were garish: a grinning crocodile in a bowtie and top hat outside the men’s loo, an overly sexualized ostrich with a pink bow on her head outside the women’s. Sherlock pulled open the crocodile door and stepped in, only to find the place empty.

“John?” he said into the emptiness.

But on the other side of the wall, he thought he heard water running. Could it have been that John accidentally picked the wrong bathroom? He stepped outside again and slowly pushed open the pink ostrich, ready to retreat at a female shriek. But there he saw John, at the sink, bent over at the waist, patting his red face with cool water.

“Wrong toilet, John,” he said, letting himself in; the door fell closed behind him. “Though I suppose, with the zoo out of operation, it hardly matters.”

“Only two options, for some reason,” said John, twisting the knob on the sink to shut off the water. He straightened and looked at himself in the mirror.

“Well, yes. Fairly typical, not exactly unexpected.” He frowned, scanning John from head to foot, looking for anything that might clue him in to what was the matter.

John laughed shortly, wiping his face with the back of his hand. “It’s like they’ve divided it Xs and Ys.”

“Um...”

“Which makes no sense.”

“Right...”
“It’s like the whole world’s gone mad, Sherlock. Mad. First this”—he indicated his groin, and Sherlock’s eyes went wide with alarm—“and now that.” He jabbed a finger at the door, which left Sherlock uncertain as to whether he meant the giant, pink ostrich painted on the door of the women’s loo, or the dead body beyond.

It hardly mattered either way. One thing or another, John was behaving strangely, and Sherlock was bewildered. He came closer and took John’s arm, turning him so they faced one another, and lay the backs of his fingers against John’s cheek, then forehead. He was warm, and still flush, and Sherlock wasn’t sure if the sheen on his skin was from the cool water from the tap, or sweat. Was this fever? Or just queasiness?

He turned his hand over into cupping shape and rested it more squarely across John’s brow.

John’s eyes closed. Then, with a shaky sigh, he leaned into Sherlock’s hand, like he might fall asleep, right then and there, on his feet, his face in Sherlock’s hand.

Sherlock’s combination of confusion and discomfort led to three seconds of inaction before he cleared his throat, patted John on the shoulder with his free hand, and said, “Er, um, hey. John?”

John’s eyes blinked open and he rebalanced, pulling away. “Right. Sorry. I forget we’re not . . .”
He gestured a little hopelessly between them. “Sorry.”

“You’re not well. You should go home. Why don’t we find you cab?”

“No no, I’m fine! Really. It’s passing. It’s passed. Please, Sherlock, let me stay?”

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow, not at his willingness to stay but at his asking permission. “. . . You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You’re really sure?”

“Please?”

Please? And what was this? John looking up at him with big, blue eyes and slanted eyebrows? Really?

Sherlock felt himself caving. Illogical. But he found he couldn’t help it. Those big eyes, that pouting mouth . . . “Fine. But . . . the corpse . . .”

John waved it away and put a smile on his face. “It’s done hurting though, eh? Dead is dead.” He stretched his arms and puffed out his chest before clapping his hands together. “Not a problem.”

“Dead is dead,” Sherlock agreed. “In this case, murdered. The question is, by whom.”

John nodded, a sense of eagerness returning. He actually rubbed his hands together. “Shall we?”

xXx

When they returned, John assumed a stance of determination: hands clasped behind his back, chin squared and raised, feet slightly apart. He looked the part of a soldier, and Sherlock was glad to see it. Whatever mood had taken him for a spell seemed to have passed. And Sherlock, no longer worried, could now focus on the task at hand.

He debunked Anderson’s explanation of the blood trail and shoe prints first.
“Obvious. Someone removed them, created a false trail, and replaced them on his feet. The reconstructed prints suggest a gait that is uneven, inconsistent, even for a dying man. Some of the strides are simply too far apart for his height. What’s more, the blood around the body is spread in a wide pool, but there’s a footprint right there. So what? He bled out, and then stood and stepped only one foot into his own gore at that angle? I think not. What’s more, the conclusive proof: the tongues of both shoes are wedged down from when they were replaced, hastily, by his killer. No man walks around with tongues bunched up like that. Conclusion: he was murdered.”

“Wow,” John breathed, and he looked at Sherlock like he was a golden sunrise.

It had been a long while since John had regarded him with such open-faced admiration. Sherlock felt his ears warm.

Fully convinced of foul play now, the Yarders adjusted their investigation to include a manhunt. While Lestrade questioned employees and animal caretakers and anyone who worked in any way with Mr. Planter, Sherlock sniffed around the elephant cages, and though he was not an expert by any means when it came to the care of large, exotic animals, he kept himself attune to anything that might seem out of place. He was accompanied by the elephant caretaker, a man named Bob Geraets, who was there to ensure he didn’t hurt the elephants and vice versa. He was also accompanied by John, who followed him so closely he stepped on his heels twice and Sherlock collided with his three times when dramatically twirling to make another observation or brilliant deduction.

“Sorry, sorry,” John muttered. But he scarcely backed away.

Events unfolded quickly. During their idle chatter with Mr. Geraets, during which Mr. Geraets carried on ceaselessly about the intelligence, majesty, and enormity of their elephants, Sherlock observed that his eyes kept flitting to the large piles of hay where Mr. Geraets said the elephants liked to lie and the babies often played, and when he did, Sherlock noticed, the urgency of his inane storytelling increased. The man was nervous about something, and Sherlock had a sneaking suspicion he was hiding something. Sherlock turned casually to face John, Mr. Geraets behind him, and said in a low voice that was sure to be overheard only by John: “Check the hay.”

Then he turned back, pointed to another side of the enclosure, and said, “Tell me about their baths. I imagine it takes an awful lot of water. Do you have to wash them daily, or . . . ?”

He didn’t know or care what he was saying, only that it had the desired effect of distracting Mr. Geraets while John fell back a few steps and he could put some distance between them.

“Uh huh, uh huh, and Mr. Planter, he assisted with the bathing?”

“Oh no, hell no, I didn’t like that man getting anywhere near the elephants. He didn’t respect them. Teased them. Taunted them. The man was good only for shoveling away their shit, but he wasn’t an elephant lover, Mr. Holmes. He was always going on about those damn cats, didn’t give two shits about my elephants.”

“And that made you mad, did it?”

“Well. Within reason. I mean, elephants, they’re smart animals, like I said. They know when you don’t respect them. Didn’t like Teddy, no sir, because they knew he was an arse. I kept submitting his name for reassignment, transfer him somewhere else and we would all be happier, the elephants included, but nothing ever happened.”

“Man didn’t deserve to work with the elephants, eh?” Sherlock chanced a glance back to the hay,
where he saw John sifting his way through it.

“No, no, he didn’t. Say, what . . . what’s he doing?”

“Oh him? Nothing? Forget him. Tell me more about the, um, hoses.”

But Mr. Geraets was suddenly very agitated. “He shouldn’t— I mean, it’s not, erm, not sanitary, and the, the, the elephants, they won’t like it. You! Hey you!”

In that moment, however, John reached a hand down into the hay, and when it returned, he was grasping the handle of a pitchfork.

“Put that down!” Mr. Geraets shouted.

But John, staring at the end of the pitchfork, gasped, and he shouted back to Sherlock, “There’s blood! Blood on the prongs!”


Then he broke left and ran.

The man ran fast. For a man with a gut and heavy work boots, it was surprising how quickly he outstripped Sherlock, and Sherlock had to run at breakneck speed just to keep up, but he was nowhere close to catching them up. Behind him, he heard John’s lighter footsteps racing after them, but he was nowhere close to catching them up. They burst out of the elephant enclosure and into the open zoo, but the man was not taking predictable paths. He veered left and then he veered right, through the reptile house and then skirting the aviary before setting all the chimpanzees shrieking and slapping the bars. And then straight into the rhinoceros enclosure. Sherlock followed.

Ten seconds later, Sherlock found himself retreating with great haste.

“Back, John, back!” he shouted.

He saw John, a good stone’s throw away, eyes blown wide with terror and excitement and still carrying the murder weapon, come to a halt as Sherlock raced towards him. Next moment, the dawning realization: Charging behind Sherlock, and gaining on him, was a black rhinoceros.

“Run!” Sherlock caught up with John, seized his arm forcefully, and turned him so they were running together, right legs, left legs, keeping pace with one another at rocket speed. Behind them, Sherlock heard the pound-snort-huff of the released rhino getting closer.

“The tree! John, the tree!”

Seconds later, just as the enormous black rhinoceros would have caught up to them and trampled them under fifteen hundred pounds of sheer bulk (if not skewered them with its sizeable horn), John and Sherlock were up a tree.

There, Sherlock threw back his head and laughed. John was still diligently carrying the pitchfork.

xXx

Mr. Geraets had released the rhino in the hopes of creating a distraction that would allow him to escape. The animal had to be put down with a tranquilizer gun before Sherlock and John could get out of the tree. By then, Mr. Geraets, who couldn’t flee the zoo because every exit point was being
monitored by officers of the Met, was holed up in the veterinary clinic where just the day before, a lynx had undergone a blood transfusion for internal bleeding after consuming a rat that had itself consumed rat poison. The zoo had made headlines.

When the police tried to get in, he threw a gurney at the door to stop them. When Sherlock and John tried to get in from the other side, he threw bags of blood: lynx, zebra, and ibex. Sherlock was an able dodger. John was not.

But in the end, Mr. Geraets was arrested for the murder of Theodore Planter, and following that came the confession: During an altercation about elephantine respect in the elephant enclosure, where Mr. Planter was pitching hay, Mr. Geraets had lost his temper, and in the process of trying to fire Mr. Planter (whom he had no authority to fire), he had tried to wrest the pitchfork from Mr. Planter’s grasp. In the ensuing brawl, somehow, Mr. Planter was stabbed: the outermost prong of the pitchfork was thrust through his throat under the jaw and straight up into his brain. Within seconds, Mr. Planter was dead. And Mr. Geraets panicked.

He spent the next hour hiding evidence of a murder, though not so cleverly. He spread the hay over the bloody crime scene and hid the murder weapon. Then, he found a box cutter and hastily cut up the corpse in the hopes that it would look like an animal attack—tigers, which Mr. Planter had admired far above elephants, a sin Mr. Geraets could not forgive. Yes, he would blame the tigers. Working through the night, he created a fake blood trail with fake footprints using Mr. Planter's own shoes, which he replaced on Mr. Planter’s body, planted just outside the tiger cages. Then he returned to his elephants, pretending nothing had happened.

Almost as an afterthought, he hid the pitchfork in the hay.

They returned to Baker Street tired and blood-stained—John more than Sherlock. Sherlock’s clothes only suffered a single line of blood sprayed from a tear in the blood bag; as for John, the bag had burst. He had gotten a face full of it, and it soaked his shirtfront. Despite it all, John was positively glowing with euphoria. He couldn’t stop smiling, and on the way home, he spent the whole of the cab ride on the edge of his seat, leaning forward to tell the whole story to the cabbie, who made for a very good audience. For his part, Sherlock rolled his eyes, inserted corrections, and made a general show of objection to John’s enthusiastic accounting—but he was secretly enjoying himself.

“Shower’s all yours,” said Sherlock, who conceded that John was in greater need of a wash than he at the moment.

John nodded, still grinning, and shucked his coat, hanging it on the back of the door. “I’ll take our clothes for dry cleaning tomorrow.”

“We do keep them in business,” Sherlock replied.

“Sherlock, this was . . .” John trailed off, seeming a bit embarrassed (though it was hard to tell if he was blushing under the zebra blood), but at a pointed look from Sherlock he finished. “Fun. Maybe, I dunno, I can come along on the next one?”

“Seriously, John, why are you even asking? Of course you will. I expect you will.”

John let out a quick sigh, smiled, nodded like a bobble-head doll, and at last retreated to the bathroom.
For his part, Sherlock shook his head. So things weren’t quite back to normal after all. He started unbuttoning his own shirt, to create a pile of bloodied clothes to take for cleaning. That’s when he grabbed John’s coat off the back of the door—lest it leave a bloodstain on Mrs. Hudson’s wood—to put into a plastic bag when he felt something stiff, and heard something crinkle. Reaching into an inside pocket of John’s coat, he pulled out two pamphlets.

At first, he thought, with mixture of exasperation and amusement, that John had at some point while at the zoo grabbed a map of the park or a pamphlet about the wonders of elephants. But when he turned them over, he froze. These were not zoo pamphlets. One was titled *Men's Health: Safer Sex, Better Sex*, and the other, *Your Partner and You: Preparing for Penetration, An Illustrated Guide*. Both were targeted at gay men.

The shower in the bathroom turned on.

For untold seconds (minutes?), Sherlock stood frozen and staring at the pamphlets in his hand. But though his body was still, his mind was flashing like a strobe light, illuminating everything John had said and done over the past few days that had seemed so out of character, from finding him, erhm, naked in Sherlock’s bed to his awkwardness and general discomfort, to his shyness and eagerness to please, to his obsequiousness and overpraising during the case. Could it be that all that, that *everything*, had been the symptoms of an apparent sexual identity crisis?

What Sherlock had once written off as impossible was now, suddenly, the most obvious explanation: John was gay.

But wait. Did that mean . . . no. But maybe? No. Of course not. They were friends. But . . . the bedroom. Had he been coming on to *Sherlock*?

Sherlock reeled with disbelief. He fell back onto the sofa, still holding the pamphlets and staring at them like they were written by Martians. John? *His* John? Attracted to . . . *him*? To *Sherlock*? With his gangly body and floppy hair and dopey smile and general obtrusiveness and unlikability? *Him*?

He knew—of course he knew—that John liked him. They liked each other. It was as obvious as the day was bright. They wouldn’t have stuck together so long if that weren’t true, and they had had two years now of sharing company, sharing a flat, and sharing mad adventures. Sherlock loved it, and he knew John did, too.

But he had to admit that familiarity had bred a certain level of complacency. In the beginning, things had been fresh and exciting, but not flirtatious. The looks John used to give him—like early man looking at the moon: captivated, mesmerized, unable to look away at the brightest thing in the sky. Over time, however, that look had dimmed. John had grown used to the moonlight, and though he still looked at it with admiration and awe, from time time, and basked in its glow, on the whole, he took its presence for granted.

And in any case, though man might love the moon, no man was *in love* with it. Not like that.

Only . . . was he?

Despite the evidence at hand, it was not enough for any kind of conclusive proof. Sherlock, who had in these last seconds begun to reimagine himself in a relationship with John, which he did not find an entirely objectionable notion, needed to be sure—*sure*—he was not misinterpreting the admittedly unfamiliar signs of interest. He needed more to work from: quantifiable data, verifiable results.

Sherlock replaced the pamphlets in John’s coat and sat in his chair, where he began to design an
experiment for seduction.
In Which Sherlock Seeks Vengeance

Sherlock was not accustomed to feeling concerned, least of all with respect to John. But the sun had been down for nearly three hours now, and John wasn’t home. He hadn’t responded to any of Sherlock’s texts. He wasn’t answering his calls. And Sherlock was pacing.

He knew John was upset. But “John” and “upset” were not words Sherlock was used to using together. His John was always easy-going, as-you-like-it, come-as-you-please, don’t-mind-me. So these latest interactions were . . . disconcerting. It was almost as if John were upset with him, but that made no sense at all. He’d done nothing. Nothing wrong, nothing different. The problem couldn’t possibly be him. But then, what?

Whatever the reason for John’s strange behavior and stomping away from the flat in the middle of the day, it was of less concern than the matter immediately at hand: John wasn’t home. The sun was down in London, and that meant that the Alpha packs were on the prowl. That’s always what that meant. It was precisely why Omegas stayed indoors after sundown, or at least why they never ventured outside on their own. If they did, bonded Omegas, naturally, were always accompanied by their Alphas. The unbonded had to be sure to surround themselves with a larger group of Betas; then they were usually pretty okay. But that didn’t stop packs from finding ways to separate an Omega from the herd.

But even a bonded Omega, on his or her own, wasn’t safe from a pack. The sad truth of it was, Alphas outnumbered Omegas two to one, and that meant a lot of unbonded Alphas being slowly driven mad with the craving to bond but without the hope of a partner. An Alpha needed knotting, almost as badly as an Omega needed it, and they would go to almost any lengths to get it. Popular opinion—inaccurate, but generally accepted as true by the masses—said that the longer Alphas went without knotting, the more feral they became. Tools and toys and artificial Omega dolls helped, but it was nothing compared to the real thing. Because of this, most Omegas endeavored to find a bond-mate by eighteen—the sooner the bonding, the safer the Omega. Granted, not all of them bonded so early. That’s what the Omega Houses were for. Even John, his perfectly suitable John, was over thirty before he and Sherlock found one another. But even before his bonding, John had always, always, practiced safe habits, when he was on his own. Risks were not John’s cup of tea. Bonding hadn’t changed that.

Which was why, three hours past sundown, Sherlock was positive something was wrong, and he was hardly one to overreact. Every single Alpha-on-Omega assault case he had worked over the years, every forced bonding, and every bond severing resurfaced in his mind. He remembered the looks and smells of the victims, and even now they churned his stomach.

One particular horror involved an Alpha pack of five, who roamed London four summers before, preying on Omegas, bonded and unbonded alike. It began with a twenty-eight-year-old Omega-X, bonded for twelve years at the time of her attack. She had been working in a kitchen at a diner, and during the dinner rush, she took the trash out back to the bins; there, five Alphas, four Ys and an X, fell upon her. The pack ravaged her, broke her bonding, scented her, forced knotting, and left her bleeding in the alley. When her Alpha found out, he was devastated. She was a mess, physically, chemically. After her surface wounds had healed, she and her mate had tried bonding again, but the hormones were too confused: the scenting of the invasive Alphas had seeped too deep, and her body resisted her mate’s scent and knot; despite all his efforts, her Alpha couldn’t resolve the imbalances and re-establish their chemical link. It was during her next heat that her body rebelled entirely: her hormonal toxins converted into toxic hormones, and she was poisoned and dead before the end of the day. Her bond-mate, distraught, sought his vengeance on the Alphas who had
severed them, and the dog fight that ensued led to his death as well.

It was twelve weeks before they were caught, and in that time, they had attacked fourteen more Omega Xs and Ys, violently severing or forcing bonds. Nine died. The other five were saved only through chemical castration and intensive hormonal therapies that left them ravaged but alive. And of those five, four committed suicide. The only survivor became a member of the Nothing Knotting movement, which most regarded as a tragedy all its own.

Eventually, Sherlock caught the unbonded Alpha bastards. Of course he did. It was his job. But he was driven by more than vocation. As an Alpha with a bond-mate, he had suffered the personal revulsion and vindictive spirit inspired by the very thought of a severing, and that forced him to endure long stretches on little sleep and to take irregular meals while he hunted the Alpha pack down. During those long weeks, he made John promise to stay in the flat, even during the day, for his own peace of mind as well as John’s assured safety. He couldn’t bear the thought that something so vile and vicious might happen to his bond-mate. So it was with vengeful pleasure that he had chosen to witness the Alpha pack’s public castrations in person, rather than just on telly.

Justice had been served, perhaps, but that did not change the fact that so many precious Omegas had been brutalized and so many lives ruined. It was a disturbing story for any Omega or Alpha, and served as a cautionary tale: Alphas, protect your Omegas; Omegas, stay close to your Alphas. And don’t be alone after dark.

But it was dark. And John was out there, alone.

Sherlock was no longer hoping, and long past waiting. Heart thumping madly in his chest and throat constricted, he gathered his coat, keys, wallet, and phone. He had just finished penning a note (“I’ve gone out looking for you. If you come home and find this CALL ME”) and had his thumb poised to dial Mycroft when he heard the door open and slam closed downstairs. He dropped the phone and spun. He was halfway across the room when he stopped. John—those were definitely John’s footfalls, heavier than normal, perhaps, but definitely his—was stomping his way up the stairs. Sherlock let go of his fear and let relief wash over him. John was home. He was safe. He was remarkably late, but he was—

The momentary relief evaporated the instant John stepped into the room.

Sherlock gasped. In two-point-two seconds, Sherlock had scanned him head to toe and read the story. John was hurt. He sported a large, swelling bruise on the side of his head, just below a bloodshot eye. Dried blood lined his lips and dotted his chin. His fair, golden hair was disheveled, the sleeves of his coat were grimy, and his trousers were scuffed with dirt as well. And his left hand was fisted tightly, but blood was seeping between the clenching fingers and dribbling to the floor.

He’d been attacked. Clearly. But what was more, Sherlock knew it had been a pack. The stink radiated off of him like heat from a furnace. His John had been attacked by Alphas.

“Oh my God,” he choked. And he flew the remaining distance to where John stood in the doorway and threw his arms around him. He was almost afraid to ask but couldn’t delay the answer. “How bad?”

“Jesus, Sherlock, I’m fine.”

But Sherlock wasn’t registering fine. He turned his nose into John’s neck and breathed. Alpha. He pressed John closer to him.
“I said I’m okay.”

*Three Alphas!* He could smell each one. Rancid *stink*, the smell of another Alpha—especially an unbonded Alpha—in the nose of a bonded one. It was an evolutionary development presaging danger, alerting bonded Alphas to protect their mates, and Sherlock, even though the fucking Alphas were nowhere near, felt his hackles rise. The blood, already hot in his veins, quickened with murderous intent. “I’m going to kill them,” he vowed, his voice dark and low.

John was twisting in his hold. “There’s no need—”

Sherlock pulled back but took John’s face in his hands. He turned his head left and right, and though his touch was gentle, his fury only escalated. The contusion on the side of his face alone! John had been struck, and struck *hard*. Already swollen and blackening where the blood was collecting, a result of burst capillaries, the bruise spread from his left eye down his cheek and to the upper lip. The eye was so red itself that it hurt just to look at, and Sherlock’s eyes began to water in sympathy.

“Hey,” said John, gently. He put a hand on Sherlock’s wrist and politely tried to move his hands from holding John’s face. Of course, but it must have hurt badly. Then he saw John’s own eyes were misting; he blinked, turning his head away, and Sherlock understood. He was . . . embarrassed? *Ashamed*? Oh God! What else had they done to him!

Sherlock’s hands moved down to John’s jaw, then his throat. He could smell the scenting. Bastards! One of them had scented him! Sherlock growled, pulled the neck of John’s shirt to his shoulder to expose the bond mark he himself had first made seven years ago, and bit down firmly, his teeth finding their own grooves with ease.

“Oi!”

To his surprise and bemusement, John shoved him backwards—*hard*.

“John!”

“I said I’m *fine*.” John tugged his shirt back into place, his face suddenly red with anger.

“You were attacked!” Sherlock said. Did John really need him to state the obvious? He was most certainly *not* fine.

“And I handled it.”

No. He was lying, trying to hide what had been done to him, as if such were even possible. John had been *scented*. He’d been beaten into submission. The Alphas would not have stopped there. No pack ever did. Almost beside himself with rage, Sherlock said, “I’ll kill them all, I’ll tear them to shreds,” and he started to step around John, fully intending to quit the flat, track them down, rip them limb from limb . . .

But John stepped in his path and laid a hand against his chest to keep him at bay. The arm locked, and Sherlock felt himself rebuffed.

“Are you not hearing me?” John seethed. “I said, I handled it.”

Sherlock was breathing hard and finding it difficult to see straight. “*Handled* it? You call this handling it?”

“I’m *here*, aren’t I?”
“Yes, because . . . what? Because you got away. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Damn straight.”

“But only after . . .”

“After what?”

Sherlock was distressed; the thought was almost too ugly to even speak, and he struggled through his next words. “Did they knot you?”

Eyes flashing, John squared his shoulders and seemed to stand taller. “They did not.”

“They did knot??”

“Not knot, did not.”

“You mean, did not knot, not not.”

“Look! There was no knotting! Okay? You’re asking me if I was raped, and I’m telling you, Sherlock, no, hell no. I knew what they were after, and I fought them off.”

“You . . .” He almost choked on his words, this time with incredulity. “‘Fought them off’?”

“That’s what I said.”

“You? How!”

John blinked, his face registering offense. “Do you want me to paint you a picture? With my teeth. With my fists. I broke their sodding bones, that’s how!”

“You what?”

John threw up his hands. “Why is this so difficult for you to grasp? I thought you were a genius! Listen to what I’m telling you, Sherlock, because I’m bloody tired and sore and in need of a hot shower. I had a shitty day, top to bottom, and to cap it all off, I got cornered on a city bus by three blokes who thought they could get the better of me. When I tried to shake them, they followed me, jumped me, and dragged me into an alley, but that’s all. I fucking fought them off, like I told you.”

But Sherlock was still incredulous. “Alphas.”

“Yes, Alphas.” He said it with such scorn that even Sherlock felt the sting.

“Three of them.”

“I can count.”

“Were they pups?”

“That’s it, I’m going to bed.”

“John.” Sherlock stepped back into John’s space, wrapped his arms once again around his small body, and buried his face in his neck. “They didn’t knot you. I’m glad. But . . . you’ve been scented.”

He heard John sigh, as though in concession. Good. So he understood the seriousness of this act.
Even now, his chemistry was fighting off imbalance, contending with one Alpha’s bond mark and another’s scent. Sherlock needed to override the intrusive scent, re-establish dominance, set things right. He opened his mouth, and his tongue was poised to lathe when John said, “What the hell does that even mean?”

Sherlock pulled back. Gripping John’s shoulders, he returned a question: “What do you mean, what does that mean?”

For a few seconds, John bit his lower lip, as though contemplating. “I mean . . . obviously, this is a . . . problem . . .”

“The longer we wait, the greater the chance of infection. You know that. And I don’t want you to get sick.”

“Right. Because that’s . . . bad. No, I know. I got it. So I have to . . . get rid of the scent.” There was a tiny lilt in his voice, as if asking a question.

“I was about to do just that,” said Sherlock.

This was serious business—he would abide no more questions, objections, or delays. Sherlock pulled John’s head to the side and once again exposed his neck and shoulder, and though John stiffened (he must have still been hurting from the attack), he didn’t try to push Sherlock back this time, and Sherlock got to work. Securing his arms around his Omega, Sherlock dragged him close and let his mouth fall once again upon the bond mark. He bit, first, letting his teeth work their way into the seven-year-old mark just enough so that the skin was opened and ready for the exchange. Then he flattened his tongue and pressed it against the mark, lathing generously, as much saliva as he could work up, and helped it seep into the mark.

At last, he began to suck, pulling John’s skin and scent into his own mouth, mixing their pheromones, and pushing them back into the mark with his tongue. The stink of the other Alphas was lessening; the invasive scent was dissipating like smoke, and Sherlock could feel John relaxing. He continued to suck, determined to leave John under no confusion as to whom he was bonded to. Sherlock’s arms tightened. The flat of his hand pressed against John’s lower back and held him close. Then he heard John whimper. His rigid muscles gradually melted.

“That’s it, he thought. No need to be afraid anymore. I’m here, John. I’ve got you. You’re mine, and I’m yours.

And no one, no one, touched his Omega and got away with it.

After a few minutes of Sherlock’s diligent ministrations, their scents were fully mixed and purified —John smelled right again, but for his clothes, but he would get him out of those soon enough, and a dry cleaner could take care of the rest. But for now, he didn’t let go. John, whose head had come to rest on Sherlock’s shoulder while his opposite side was being tended to, had suffered a terrible fright, and Sherlock’s every instinct instructed him in his comfort. To think how close he had come to tragedy! How close Sherlock had come to losing him! It was unbearable. And his escape was almost inconceivable, to have fought off Alphas—three of them!—and walked away with only a battered face, an unsuccessful scenting, and . . .

“God, you smell good,” John said breathlessly, voice muffled against Sherlock's neck.

Yes, he was going to be fine. Almost.

Sherlock lifted his head, and without releasing his bond-mate said, “John, your hand. It’s
bleeding.”

A few seconds passed before John, as if coming out of a daze, responded. He stepped back, out of Sherlock’s encircling arms, and dropped his head (his cheeks were aglow) as he opened his bloody palm. “Broken bottle,” he said.

“How bad?”

“Deep tissue laceration.” He started to back up, toward the kitchen. “Not good. I’m going to need to clean and stitch it. And I’ll need antibiotics, just to be safe. Fetch me the first aid kit, would you?”

Clearly, John was still scared and not in his most reasonable state of mind. Natural, given what he had just experienced. So, as Sherlock passed by him to fetch the kit, he reassured him, “Don’t be silly, John, I’m your antibiotic.” His reassertion of their bond had just boosted his autoimmune system, after all. “But I should probably take you to the Omega Emergency Department. Just to be absolutely sure everything’s okay. Besides, I’m going to file a report, and I’d like exact descriptions of the three—”

“Omega Emergency?” said John. He shook his head firmly. “Fuck that, I’ll stitch this myself.” He turned to the sink and twisted the tap. “Granted, I’m a leftie, but I’ll manage.”

“You can’t do that,” said Sherlock, aghast.

“Watch me.”

xXx

John spent an exceedingly long time in the shower, to scrub away every last bit of scent still lingering in his hair or on his skin. The scent below the skin, now, was all Sherlock. He had seen to that.

Meanwhile, Sherlock paced and fretted, disconcerted, not only because his imagination was running wild with what might have transpired had John not managed to get away (and he hated becoming fixated on the hypothetical over the concrete and rational), but because John had gotten away, all on his own, and with minimal damage, and with the sudden know-how and confidence to stitch up his own slashed palm with his non-dominant hand! With no anesthetic! Sherlock hemmed and hawed and reiterated his position on taking John to Omega Emergency, until, that is, as he watched John stick himself with a needle and nylon thread, performing a simple interrupted suture, John explained, quite calmly, that this type of stitch had greater tensile strength and less potential for causing wound edema and impaired cutaneous circulation.

Where had that come from? Sounded like somebody had been spending a fair bit of time watching X/Y Emergency 999! on BBC Four.

John didn’t let him help wrap the bandage, or help him secure plastic around his hand to protect it from water, or help him undress for the shower. But one thing John couldn’t—wouldn’t—stop him from doing: tracking down the sons of bitches who had tried to sever their bonding.

“I require your assistance,” he said into his phone as he paced the sitting room, fighting not to kick over a chair. The white noise of the shower continued interrupted.

“Is that so?” said Mycroft with little interest. “This better not requisition too much of my time. You know my mate’s heat begins in two days.”
“Yes, yes, of course,” he said, impatiently. “But this can’t wait.”

“Tell me.”

“Alphas attacked John tonight.”

There was a long pause. He didn’t expect his brother to gasp or curse or scold him for his failure to adequately look after his Omega, as he had in the past. But he did have to allow the shock to finish reverberating before the questioning began.

“Did you kill the Alphas?” His tone was pragmatic, clinical, but there was a backlighting of fire behind the calm.

“Not yet. I need your help to find them.”

“Tell me where it happened.”

“John wasn’t specific.”

“Is he sedated? In hospital? Have you been severed?” A strain of worry had seeped its way into his tone; the clouds were crackling with electricity.

“No, he . . .” He was still flabbergasted by the thought. “He was beaten up and scented. But he got away.”

“From Alphas?”

“Three of them.”

“Good God. Are you sure? Did others come to his aid?”

“No. He said . . . He fought them off. On his own.”

“Come again?”

“He said—”

“Three?”

“Mycroft, I need to fix this. Find me CCTV footage.”

“I’ll have something for you by morning.”

“I want names.”

“Leave it to me, Sherlock,” said Mycroft curtly. Then, more gently, “How is he?”

“Shaken,” said Sherlock, though the moment he spoke it, he knew he was also describing himself. He didn’t like it. “I’m taking care of him.”

“See that you do.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. He didn’t need Mycroft telling him how to Alpha. He ended the call and went to the kitchen to make John a calming tea.

He had to open almost every cupboard to find where John stored everything he needed—cups, sugar bowl, milk, and chamomile tea packets. Then he set the kettle to boil, chewed a thumb
waiting for the water to start bubbling, and by the time he had seeped the tea and added two sugars and milk, John was out of the shower, dressed, and coming back to the kitchen for an ice packet for his face. Sherlock handed him the tea.

“Mmf,” said John as he swallowed, after a quiet thank you.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I just, you know, don’t take sugar.”

Sherlock sniffed. “Of course you do. You always have!”

John closed his eyes; it looked like he was also biting his tongue. “Sure,” he said at last, and sipped again. Sherlock could have sworn he was straining not to wince, like he was swallowing something bitter, not sweet.

For the second night in a row, John retired to bed upset: the scent was as sharp as a needle up Sherlock’s nose. This time, it wasn’t such a mystery: how could he not be upset, after such a terrifying ordeal? And Sherlock’s comfort-instinct was still going strong. John didn’t seem to want to turn in, but Sherlock could see how tired he was, how heavy his eyelids and sluggish his body, so he coaxed him back to the bedroom. There, he saw John pause at the end of the bed and stare at it like it was crawling with cockroaches. But he pulled back the sheets and crawled in anyway, lying curled on his side near the edge of the mattress, as before. And when Sherlock reached for him, intending to hold and calm him, John flinched.

“John—”

“Let’s just sleep,” said John quickly.

“You’re still on edge. Jumpy.”

“Nope. Fine. Sleeping.”

“You’re shirking from my touch. Is it because of what they did to you?”

“Drop. It.”

Sherlock raised up on his elbow, suddenly cross. “You’re upset. With me. Have I done something? Said something?”

John rolled onto his back to look at him. “You haven’t done anything. It’s just . . .”

“What?”

“It’s just . . . I’m just . . . dealing with . . . something.”

“What those men tried to do, John, I swear—”

“Look, I— I— I’m tired. I just want to sleep, okay?” And he rolled back onto his side, and that was that.

Sherlock frowned and clipped off the light, but he didn’t sleep. Any other Omega would have been desperate for his Alpha’s reassurances of protection, but Sherlock had been rebuffed. Was this shame? Had something more happened that John wasn’t telling him? Why wasn’t he letting Sherlock near?
For more than an hour, as he stared up at the ceiling and plotted revenge on the other Alphas, he listened to John’s breathing. It was tightly controlled, and he knew John wasn’t sleeping either. It frustrated Sherlock that he wasn’t seeking or accepting comfort. But eventually, that breathing deepened, and his muscles relaxed, and Sherlock knew John had entered a REM cycle. It was . . . sweet, in a way, watching him sleep. Being such a heavy sleeper himself, he never really took the opportunity. The tranquility that he found in a sleeping John may have eased some of his own nerves, but the agitation and restlessness and wanting to kill something kept him wide awake.

Then, sometime in the middle of the night, he heard John’s breathing change. It was becoming louder—harder breaths in, harder breaths out—and quicker. In fact, he was no longer breathing through his nose, but his mouth, and if he were running . . . or being chased. John was dreaming, and whatever he dreamt, Sherlock thought it must have been unpleasant. A nightmare. John started making tiny grunting noises in the back of his throat; he rolled onto his back; his legs began to writhe beneath the sheets; his head shook back and forth on the pillow; even in the dark, by the pale light from the window, Sherlock could make out that his brow was furrowed, indicating distress.

Sherlock reached a hand and grabbed John’s shoulder.

John shouted. His hand swung out like he was batting away a diving seagull and he flipped over, on top of Sherlock, and pressed an arm to his throat; and Sherlock, startled by this action and reacting faster than he could think, flung him off, and they rolled together right off the bed and onto the floor, John beneath him, fighting. Sherlock took a blow to the shoulder and a knee to the ribs but seized John’s wrists and pinned them above his head.

“John!”

At once, John’s eyes flew open. For a few seconds more, he continued to struggled, but Sherlock had him too thoroughly restrained, and in any case, his senses were slowly returning, the dream disintegrating. But Sherlock could feel the rapid pulse in John’s wrists, the labored breaths swelling his chest and constricting his diaphragm. His head, lifted off the ground, fell back to the floor, and he whispered, as though to himself, “Shit.”

Now that he thought about it, John had been cursing a lot these past few days.

“You were dreaming,” said Sherlock, still not letting him up.

“Yeah, I do that, sometimes.”

“A nightmare.”

“Those too.”

“I’ve never seen you have one like that. It’s the Alphas, isn’t it?”

“Afghan— Yeah, the Alphas. Sure. Sherlock. Let me up.”

At last, he sat back, and John with him. He was shaking a little; the pale moonlight shone off his sweaty forehead; he rubbed his left shoulder.

“You’re hurt,” said Sherlock. “You probably landed badly.”

John looked down at his shoulder like he’d never seen it before. Then he quickly pulled his hand away. “Yeah,” he said, still trying to catch his breath. “Probably that.”
Then he hurriedly got to his feet, muttering something about needing a drink of water, telling Sherlock to go back to sleep, and he limped out of the room, leaving Sherlock on his knees, more furious than ever. Those Alphas were going to pay.
In Which Sherlock’s Experiment Falls Apart

So. John was observably gay.

It also appeared that he was attracted to Sherlock. Of all people.

Sherlock had to admit: he was out of his element. Having never considered John in that light before—well, having never considered anyone in that light before—he was floundering in determining how he felt about John’s interest in him, let alone his own interest in John. That was, was he interested in John? He had long accepted that John was interesting. Probably the most interesting person he knew. What’s more, he was probably—most definitely—the person Sherlock cared for most in the world, and though that list was very, very short, that didn’t diminish the intensity of the sentiment. Sherlock cared for John, very much. He had once reasoned with himself, privately, after the pool incident, that if it ever came down to it, he would die for John. Gun to the head, no question about it, he would die for John.

But did he feel . . . attraction?

Gun to the head, he just wasn’t sure. So the experiment he designed was as much to verify the nature of his own attraction to John Watson as it was to determine conclusively his hypothesis that John was attracted to him, and not just in a friendly, hands-off, here’s-my-toothpaste-but-don’t-use-my-toothbrush kind of way.

Having never conceived of such an experiment before, let alone designed one, let far alone executed one, he took first to research, prompted by the question: How might one determined attraction? And at the conclusion of his research, he had come up with five categories that, if scored favorably (favorably? was he hoping for a particular outcome? no, this was scientific, empirical, objective) would suggest a level of physical, emotional, and sexual attraction. Within each of his five categories (favors, compliments, gifts, communication, and touch) he planned three experiments. And for each experiment, he would evaluate John’s and his own responses on a Likert scale, 1 to 5:

1 = Attraction absent
2 = Attraction weak
3 = Attraction mild
4 = Attraction strong
5 = Attraction intense

He further determined that if both subjects (Subject 1 being John, Subject 2 being Sherlock) merited a cumulative score of 50 or better, some further “action” would be required.

He even came up with a handy chart to track his results, creating columns and boxes to keep track of each category, experiment, subject, scores, and general notes. Organized, methodical, scientific.

All that remained was implementation.

Part I: Favors

Experiment 1: Making breakfast

John was an early riser, always had been, and he was usually the first to set the coffee pot or make toast. For himself. Coffee and toast, John’s predictable and solitary breakfast, and if he was feeling
especially handy in the kitchen, an egg. Lately, though, ever since the, erm, incident, he had been making a full English breakfast for both himself and Sherlock, every morning, even though Sherlock seldom woke with an appetite and had traditionally fended for himself.

This morning, the tables would turn.

Sherlock woke before the sun, had a quick shower, and was in the kitchen and over the stove before he even heard John stirring in the floor above him. When John arrived downstairs in his open dressing gown, yawning and scratching the back of his mussed up head of hair, Sherlock was ready for him with a mug of steaming coffee and a set table. John’s slippers screeched to a halt on the lino.

“What’s this?”

“Breakfast,” said Sherlock, lifting the mug and passing it into John’s hands. He watched closely for a reaction.

“You made breakfast?”

“Your deduction skills are as sharp as ever, John.”

“For me?”

“Don’t gawp at it. Sit. Eat.”

Still looking bemused (Sherlock was already squirming a little; based on the reaction he was getting, he was sure to tick a little 1 in the very first box of the chart, and his resolve to complete the experiment was already waning), John sat at the kitchen table. His eyes watched Sherlock in return, almost suspiciously, as he brought the mug to his lips, and sipped.

“Mm.”

He pulled the mug away and looked at it, as if it had winked at him.

“Too hot?” Sherlock asked.

“No, it’s . . . good. It’s . . .” He took another sip. “Fantastic. Wow.”

Sherlock turned away to hide a smirk and said dismissively, “Just making it the way you like it. Black, with just three drops of vanilla on the bottom of the cup before pouring.”

“It’s strong. Good strong. I mean”—he took a longer drink—“very, very good. I was just, you know, expecting our usual. Cream and sugar.”

“Nonsense, John, that’s my usual.” Sherlock returned to the kitchen table, sat with him, and lifted his mug as though in salute. “Cheers.”

Experiment 2: Doing chores

He couldn’t normally be bothered with them. They just . . . got done. The sweeping, the dusting, the shopping, the hoovering, the overall neatness. Much of that was thanks to Mrs. Hudson of course, who swept in, uninvited and unannounced, like their Guardian Angel of General Tidiness. But of late he’d seen John too often coming through the door, arms laden with grocery sacks, or, strangely too often, a feather duster in hand. So Sherlock made a point of relieving him of some of that burden.
So when he caught John at the kitchen table writing up a shopping list, at the top of which was the word *milk*, he dramatically whirled to the refrigerator. “You mean”—with flair, he threw open the door—“this milk?”

John’s eyes went wide. “You . . . did the shopping?”

“While you were in the shower. Saw we were out and popped down to the corner store. Eggs, bread, beans, potatoes, and apples, too. All told, it was rather heavy.”

“I—”

“And wine.”

“Wine?”

Sherlock shrugged and smirked. “Because . . . why not?”

Oh *god*, he had just punned. He couldn’t believe his ridiculousness, his utter foolishness, like his brain had suddenly gone on holiday. Where had that even *come* from? He felt a sudden and desperate urge to crawl into a hole and die, if only to spare himself from John’s inevitable eye roll or scorn. But maybe he hadn’t picked up on it? Maybe he would just let it pass, and they could go on pretending he wasn’t Britain’s biggest doofus making the English-speaking world’s saddest puns . . .

But John smiled unrestrainedly. And that smile was definitely a 3, at least.

*Experiment 3: Footing the bill*

It had been quite some time since Sherlock had last heard John complain about money. Maybe more than a year. It didn’t hurt that he had steady work and therefore steady income (though come to think of it, when was the last time he had taken a shift down at the surgery?), but Sherlock knew he still fretted over expenses, from time to time. John had always been the frugal sort. But he was also a proud man, a fifty-fifty sort of man, who insisted on paying his fair share—which usually amounted to considerably more because Sherlock could not often be bothered with petty little things. Like electricity bills. Cab fare. The occasional bail.

A short stack of bills had been accumulating on the table over the last week, maybe week and a half, and John had barely touched them. He hadn’t even opened them. Maybe he couldn’t face them this time around?

Then came Mrs. Hudson with her timid little “Yoo-hoo!” and a gentle two-knock tap on the door as she let herself in with a kindly reminder that the rent was two-weeks overdue. And that’s when Sherlock decided to surprise John by paying every bill, 100%, all at once, just to lighten John’s load.

He made no effort to hide his writing cheques and stuffing envelopes, all in full sight of where John sat flipping through channels, murmuring something about not being able to find his favorite shows. But he received no acknowledgement. Maybe John wasn’t paying attention? So he decided to be a bit more obvious.

“Well,” he said with an overly dramatic sigh. “That’s the last of them.”

Nothing. John was checking the TV listings on his phone, brow furrowed, and Sherlock thought he heard him say, “Doctor Who… That’s a funny title.”
“Paid through the month.”

“Did they cancel Alpha Angels or something . . . ?”

“John.”

“Mm?” At last, John looked up.

Pointedly, Sherlock motioned to the stack of bills. “Would you care to post these? Electricity, water, internet, phone, loitering ticket, trespassing fines, and heating bills, all paid in full, and run the rent down to Mrs. Hudson?” He patted the topmost envelope.

“Oh. Yeah, no problem.” John grunted as he stood. “Maybe I’ll just have to find the latest episode online.” He grabbed the stack of bills and headed for the door. Sherlock listened to his footsteps descend and then, unable to stand it anymore, shouted, “Good thing I paid the internet bill then, eh? You’re welcome!”

Then he sat back and sulked. That was definitely going to be a 1 in the box.

**Part II: Compliments**

*Experiment 1: Appearance factor*

The lukewarm, nay, cold response to Sherlock’s monetary assistance soured the experiment, and for a day or so, Sherlock contemplated abandoning it entirely. That was, until John seemed especially keen on laughing at all of Sherlock’s jokes, funny or not. And he decided to pick it up again.

A client had come to Baker Street, a seventy-two-year-old man who lived in the suburbs west of London, and who was convinced that the woman he was living with was not in fact his wife of fifty-one years but an imposter who had three weeks ago killed his real wife, hidden the body, and was after his stocks and bonds.

“She’ll kill me next, Mr. Holmes,” Mr. Jacobs said, trembling, after showing him and John pictures of his wife from before (white-headed and with a prominent mole above her lip) and the so-called wife now (yellow-headed and mole-less). But for those two features, the women looked very much alike.

Mr. Jacobs said that his wife didn’t have a sister, and the police had laughed at him, believing Mrs. Jacobs’ claim that she had dyed her hair and got the mole removed. There had been the suggestion (by not a few) that Mr. Jacobs was going senile. Initially, Sherlock was inclined to agree.

But there was that little something Mr. Jacobs said that gave him pause, in response to Sherlock’s query about how he knew the woman wasn’t his wife: “This woman, she’s doing things my Jackie never does. Watching that crap telly all the day long. Jackie hates the telly, only ever watches the news. And not even sitting and watching, just setting the volume high and stepping away to the kitchen where she does nothing but cut up lemons and onions and stew pots and pots of cod soup. Jackie doesn’t even like cod soup!”

With that, he decided to take the case.

“We’re taking a cab to Hammersmith,” he told John, shortly after Mr. Jacobs had left. He knew the whole conversation had perplexed John—they usually did, and Sherlock admitted he took some pleasure in seeing his brow furrow the way it did, his eyes darting inquisitively, sometimes skeptically, between client and detective. But in true John form, he didn’t interrupt and trusted that
Sherlock knew what he was doing.

John had sat the entire interview in rapt attention, practically poised on the edge of his seat, knees bouncing together. Now, he was reeling. “You really think a stranger just, you know, replaced his wife? Without anyone even noticing?”

“He noticed.”

“Sure, but—”

“It’s the little things, John, that one must learn to observe. And I’ve come to trust the instincts of loved ones. Those who are closest to us are keenest to our deceptions: even if they can’t quite put their thumb on it, they can almost always tell when something is a little off. Lemons and onions, John. Lemons and onions.” He smiled at John’s pensive nodding, his little brain struggling to keep up; he found it endearing. “Now then. If we leave now we can be there with enough time to crack this one before dinner.”

John’s expression went from contemplative to eager. “Right! Um, just let me change. Won’t take a second.”

Sherlock withheld a sigh and forestalled an eye roll—he looked fine, what did he need to change for?—when he remembered his experiment and his goal to offer John a compliment today. This was an open door.

“The dark blue v-neck jumper,” he said quickly, before John disappeared from the sitting room, headed for the upstairs bedroom. John paused and looked back. Fighting against the prickly sensation of discomfort, he pressed on and completed his thought. “You’ve always looked smashing in it. Good color on you.”

“Dark blue . . .”

“The v-neck,” Sherlock reiterated. Then, unable to bear the puzzled look on John’s face anymore, he turned away on the pretense of gathering his phone and keys together and into his pockets.

Good God, what was he doing? They weren’t in the habit of commenting on one another’s appearances. Okay, so Sherlock occasionally teased John about his comparative height, and there had been that time John made the flippant remark about Sherlock’s cheekbones . . . had that been a flirt? If it had been, in the moment, he hadn’t recognized it as such, and it made him wonder just how long John had been slipping toward attraction—if he were slipping at all. One thing was for sure: Sherlock was out of his depth.

Then John reappeared, flattening the jumper down his chest, a quirky smile lifting his face, and Sherlock felt something turn over in his stomach. A curious sensation.

“You know,” said John, “I don’t even remember buying this one.”

“Ever the observant one,” said Sherlock with mock exasperation, but he stood a moment admiring. Was he only now seeing it, as though for the first time, the clean cut of John’s shoulders, the smooth line of his jaw, the soft blue eyes, a color intensified by the shade he wore? Now he understood on a more conscious level why he liked that jumper so much.

“Shall we?” John asked, and Sherlock shook himself back to reality.

“After you.”
They arrived in Hammersmith at the home of Elmer and Jackie Jacobs, and upon entering, being ushered inside the chilly house by an ever-nervous Mr. Jacobs, Sherlock’s nostrils were instantly assaulted with the smell of boiling fish and onions. In the back room toward the kitchen, a television set blared loudly. In the kitchen, they found the woman chopping onions with a silver cook’s knife. A large bowl filled with lemons—a dozen at least—rested on the countertop.

“Erm, dearest,” began Mr. Jacobs, as though the address didn’t fit quite right in his mouth, “this gentleman is called Mr. Holmes. He’s . . . my guest.”

“We can dispense with the formalities, Mr. Jacobs,” said Sherlock, and he walked straight up to the little old woman with the dyed yellow hair so that they were nearly toe to toe; the top of her head came to about mid-chest. From there, before speaking a single word, he scrutinized her thin eyebrows and curly head, and his eyes narrowed in on a single untouched strand of silver. Not white. “Tell me, Mrs. Jacobs, what did you do with the body?”

Behind him, he heard John’s sharp, audible gasp.

For her part, the imposter’s jaw dropped and her old eyes—sharp as knives—flashed angrily. Her fingers tightened into a fist around the handle of the knife, and she shook it at him. “How dare you, sir, come into my house, into my kitchen, and without so much as a how d’you do, making all manner of outlandish accusations, you manky minger, you po-faced pillock, you gormless git, you freak, you—!”

“Oi!” said John, stepping forward. “You don’t talk to an Alpha that way!”

It was possibly the strangest thing he had ever heard leave John’s mouth, but it had the desired effect. The old woman’s mouth snapped closed, and she looked as befuddled as Sherlock felt.

Satisfied with the result, John, gave a sharp nod to Sherlock as though to say, inexplicably, “You’re welcome,” and he stepped back to resume his place just over Sherlock’s shoulder, and that was that.

For a moment, Sherlock was completely thrown off his game, but then Mr. Jacobs recalled him to his purpose.

“Now, now, there, there, erm, Jackie, why don’t we set down the knife and go quietly into the sitting room. Mr. Holmes here just wants to talk.”

But Sherlock, hands in his pockets, began to turn circles in the kitchen, scanning and cataloguing everything in sight. He had no intention of dialoguing. He had already determined that this woman was indeed a fraud, just as Mr. Jacobs had suspected all along, and he was two steps away from proving it. So he began to bark orders.

“Woman, you stay here. Mr. Jacobs, turn down that television.”

“I’m watching my stories!” protested the imposter. “And I’m hard-of-hearing in my old age, so I need the volume set high. And who are you, ordering me and my husband around, in our own house!”

But by the time she had finished her latest rant, Mr. Jacobs had complied, and the house was mercifully silent.

Everyone stood around, wide-eyed and waiting. And then . . .

“I do hear it . . .” said John, practically whispering. “What—?”

“Rats, John. In the walls.” He pirouetted toward the sink and gestured at the window. “You’ll have noticed, too, I’m sure, the strips of flypaper the supposed Mrs. Jacobs has hung from the curtains. And the incessant slicing of lemons?” He leaned over the sink and sniffed in the drain. Citrus.

“And the perpetually stewing cod soup? What for, Mrs. Jacobs?”

“I happen to like cod soup,” said the woman, but Sherlock saw her brow was beaded with sweat, even though, despite the heat in the kitchen, it was rather chilled in the house.

“You’re lying.”

“How do you know she’s lying?” John asked, eyes wide as saucers.

“No body likes cod soup. It’s clear as crystal, John. The thermostat set at sixteen degrees, the flypaper, the lemons, the onions, the cod soup, the blaring telly: what is it all for? What does it all mean?”

“I . . . haven’t the faintest, Sherlock.”

Sherlock smirked, pushed into the pantry, and spotted the anticipated door built into the wooden planks with a little brass hook. “It’s all meant,” he said with grandeur, “to mask the stench of death!”

And with that, he gripped the hook and heaved, and when he did, the reek of a rotting corpse bloomed from the subterranean cooling larder. Three rats that had been chewing away happily on the decay scattered. Flies rose like a cloud. Mr. Jacobs gave a grief-stricken cry, John said, “Oh my God!” and Sherlock, wiping his hands together, stepped out of the pantry and strode back into the kitchen.

“John, put a call in to the police. Tell them we’ve found the body of the real Jackie Jacobs, and that her doppelganger is also the prime suspect in her murd—”

“Sherlock, watch out!”

He spun, just in time to see the old woman lunging at him, brandishing the cook’s knife. With a start, he caught his breath and fell back a step, but this self-preserving reaction was unnecessary, for in that moment John had leaped forward himself and tackled the woman to the ground. There was a discernible pop at their landing, and both Sherlock and Mr. Jacobs winced. The impostor, her hip snapped like a china plate, began to howl.

xXx

The story, as it came out over the course of the following days, went like this:

Three weeks before, on her way back from York and whilst riding the train by herself, Mrs. Jackie Jacobs had encountered a woman who looked startlingly like herself, but for the fact that her hair was silver, not white. The woman introduced herself as Pamela Stauton, and together they had a good laugh about just how uncannily similar their appearances were, though they quickly determined no relation. They were not twins separated at birth (Jackie was seventy-seven, Pamela seventy-four), and nor were they sisters or cousins or distant relations (a recounting of their family pedigrees revealed no overlap). It was just one of those strange but amusing acts of nature, and they made a listing of celebrity look-alikes they had seen on the news and commented on the website
“Doppelgangers of Britain.”

Jackie learned that Pamela was a widow, and Pamela learned that Jackie had been married to the same man for the greater portion of her life, a man of modest tastes but something of brain for investments, and they were living quite comfortably, and expected to live out the rest of their days in just such comfort and leave the rest to charities and foundations, having had no children themselves in all their years together on Earth.

When it came to her husband and lifestyle, Jackie was rather verbose, and Pamela encouraged her in the details, but when they arrived at Jackie’s stop, where she expected they would part ways, Pamela got off with her, shared a cab with her, and even followed her home. Mr. Jacobs was away, and Jackie couldn’t shake her. And that’s when and where the terrible deed was done: during the altercation in which Jackie Jacobs tried to get her no-longer-welcome guest to leave, Pamela Staunton, all 105 pounds of her, took advantage of Jackie’s weak knees and knocked her over. When she landed, her head cracked against the marble clawed foot of a console table in the entryway, rendering her unconscious. Pamela believed she was dead, but she strangled her anyway with a silken scarf, just for good measure. Then she stuffed her away in the cool larder in the floor of the pantry and simply . . . stepped into her life, resplendent with home, husband, and forthcoming inheritance. The only transformation she underwent herself was to dye her silver hair yellow: she couldn’t manage white.

It wasn’t long before the corpse began to smell, and she knew she had to get rid of the body. But being something of a frail old thing herself, she couldn’t easily remove it from the house on her own without drawing attention. So she devised a plan: while Mr. Jacobs slept, she would creep down to the kitchen and saw off pieces of Mrs. Jacobs with a boning knife, and bit by bit, feed her down the waste disposal in the sink. It would take time, but she was patient, and in any case, Mr. Jacobs, she had decided, was a few keys short of a piano. She was already doing a fine job of pulling the wool over his eyes. So she masked the odor in the sink with lemons; she started chopping onions and cooking smelly soups; when the flies started coming out of the pantry, she hung flypaper; and when the rats came chewing, she turned the telly up loud to drown out the sound of their scratching.

She thought herself pretty clever. So clever, in fact, that she was beginning to make plans to dispose of Mr. Jacobs next, once she was done with the wife. So she was stunned, and furious, when the detective Sherlock Holmes dismantled her entire operation in about a minute.

“You knew she was a sham before we even got to the kitchen, didn’t you? You had solved it before we even left the flat! He said cod soup, and you knew. Wow. Just . . . just wow.”

“Nonsense, John, I merely suspected. The case wasn’t solved until I saw the flypaper. Then it was only a matter of finding the body.”

“Incredible. That was . . . amazing to behold.”

Sherlock cleared his throat, remembering his experiment. He needed to turn the compliments back onto John. “Of course, you were indispensable to me today, as always.”
John’s head came around quickly and his eyebrows rose in surprise. “Was I?”

“Oh yes. Resourceful, proactive, decisive. You saved me from a nasty cut, there’s no doubt. She was a wild thing, that woman.”

But John, rather than looking pleased by the flattery, pinched his lips together in consternation.

“What is it?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” he said. “I just saw her lunge, and you were in danger, and I tackled an old Beta woman to the ground so hard her bones broke!”

Sherlock snorted unsympathetically. “She may have been bitty, John, but not exactly a subject worthy of your pity. Let’s not forget: she killed a woman, and was disposing of the corpse down the sink piece by piece.”

“Gruesome.”

Without thinking, and primarily as a consoling gesture, Sherlock moved a hand to John’s thigh and gave it a kindly pat. “You’re the benevolent one, John, of the two of us. And I rely on that, too . . .”

He suddenly realized where his hand was, and froze. What the hell was he doing? This was jumping ahead in the experiment! This wasn’t how things were supposed to work. Part V: Touch was still days away, according to his charts, and was to be executed only if Part IV: Communication was received favorably (scoring at least a 10 for Subjects 1 and 2, individually). But the impulse had been so instinctual, the motion had felt so natural, and John was already sitting so close . . . Never mind that, it wasn’t time! He commanded his right hand to move back, but it stayed frozen on John’s left thigh, and he stared straight ahead, trying to figure out what to do next to save the moment.

Then John sighed out a contented breath, gripped Sherlock’s hand with both of his own to hold it in place, and sank back into the seat, and as he closed his eyes he said, “Thanks, Sherlock,” as if this position, this joining of the hands, was the most ordinary thing in the world for them, like he wasn’t taken aback by it at all.

John didn’t let go all the way back to Baker Street. And once there, Sherlock, heart pounding at an alarming rate, shakily scratched a five into the box for Subject 2.

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It was all wrong. Sherlock rarely ever ever ever abandoned an experiment. He disdained premature conclusions. But ultimately, he was not a patient man, and the thought of waiting many more hours, let alone many more days, to act on a conclusion he had already reached made him restless and itchy.

Back in the flat, John headed at once for the kitchen to start dinner (Sherlock had been right about the timeframe on the case after all), still muttering flattery and praises, including, “Someone should really write that one down,” and before long he was banging pots and pans and chopping carrots and celery.

From the sitting room where he sat in his chair with his phone in hand—to maintain the pretense that he was busy doing something productive—Sherlock watched John work, feeling an odd mixture of curiosity, captivation, and compulsion. That is, he couldn’t take his eyes off of John. Before this experiment had begun, before finding the pamphlets, he had genuine doubts about his own capacity for attraction of the nature that the majority of the human race suffered. Now he
wondered if it were possible to turn off. It was quite vexing, this need to watch John’s every movement (how he worked with his hands, how he licked his lips, how he shifted his weight). It was rather galling, his inexplicable urge to touch John’s hair, hands, face, arms, back. It was insufferably agonizing, thinking he would never get the chance, or that his attempt would be rebuffed.

Good God, he wanted to kiss John. He had never before ever not ever felt the desire to ever kiss anyone ever ever in his whole life at all ever. But he wanted to kiss John Watson.

Sherlock rose to his feet.

A logical thought entered his mind: He just might be mad.

He took a step.

Was there logic behind this at all? Reason? A history? Quite possibly yes. He cast his mind back, not too far back, but well before the “incident in the bedroom,” and he thought about the casual touches, Sherlock to John, John to Sherlock, that they had shared. They had been familiar, but comfortable, and he knew he never touched anyone, nor was touched by anyone, with as much ease and camaraderie as he shared with John. So there was that.

He stepped again.

Casting back further, he recalled all the times they had laughed together, before, during, and after cases. John made the work that Sherlock already enjoyed even more pleasurable, to the point where he was disappointed whenever John had other obligations. Disappointed? That was perhaps putting it mildly. There was a sharpness to his absences; it stung, just a little, being on his own. Truth be told, Sherlock missed John when they weren’t working side by side.

And again.

For two years, whether Sherlock had been aware of it or not, John had been the center of his world. His cases for the past two years were defined first and foremost by whether John had been there; details of the case came in second. He remembered their altercations with, of all things, fondness, and he could think of no one he would rather argue with. He thought about how John had introduced him to Bond movies and a few board games, and his lips quirked with the memory of how red in the face John would get when he tried to poke holes in the rules or find loopholes that made it so he would always win. He remembered, too, the danger, and the handful of occasions in which they had both come treacherously close to serious harm. The thought of losing John . . . it was too much to bear.

Standing right behind him, now, Sherlock came to the full and uncompromised realization that he loved this man. But not only that. He was in love with John Watson.

“May I try something?” he asked, suddenly and before he could fashion a proper beginning.

John’s shoulders jumped a little before he turned around and looked startled to see Sherlock standing there so close. In one hand he held the fat end of a chopped carrot, in the other a cook’s knife.

“Sorry,” said John, with a half-laugh. “Didn’t hear you.” He set his instruments down and faced Sherlock directly. “Come again?”

This close, John’s eyes were clear and blue. Had they always been so blue? He began to feel a tingling in his fingertips and a swirling of blood in his stomach.
“I’m going to ask you a question. An honest answer would be appreciated.”

“All right . . .”

“You like me, John.” When he noticed that the words rushing out of his mouth did not, in fact, form a question, he tacked on a hasty, “Don’t you,” but without the proper inflection of an interrogation.


“I know you do. But not . . . in a merely . . . friendly way.”

Lips turning down by a few degrees, as though he were hurting in some way that Sherlock didn’t understand but was prepared to do anything to correct, John nodded. In a soft voice, he said, “Some things”—he looked even sadder now—“don’t go away.”

It was the confirmation Sherlock dearly wanted to hear. Emboldened, heart rate quickening with eagerness, he asked again, “Then may I try something?”

Again, the nod.

Holding his breath, he stepped fully into John’s circle until there existed little more than a sliver of light between their two bodies and their faces were so close he couldn’t keep John in focus. He allowed his eyes to flick down to John’s lips, and to let John see him looking. Then slowly, so slowly, John began to turn his head away, and for a horrible moment, Sherlock thought he had misread all the signs and had made the most embarrassing mistake of his adult life. But it seemed that, rather than moving away from him, John was merely tilting his head to offer his neck. A curious gesture, and not one Sherlock had been expecting. So he lifted a hand, placed it gently along John’s jaw, and tilted his head back. Then, before he could lose his nerve, Sherlock closed his eyes, dipped his head, and kissed him.

The lips touched softly, moved slowly, a kiss that caressed more than it claimed. Something awoke deep inside of Sherlock, something warm and bright and wonderful, joyful even. And it startled him. Before he was ready for it to end, he was pulling back and looking at John with eyes wide in amazement. And John was looking back, mirroring his expression.

“Wow,” said John, breathless.

Sherlock swallowed and couldn’t feel his feet. He think not could do John John John . . . Wait, what? He shook his head, trying to get his syntax to order itself.

John’s chest was noticeably rising and falling.

“Was that”—dizzy, Sherlock reminded himself to breathe—“all right?”

Open-mouthed, John nodded as though in a daze. Then he said, with hope shining in his eyes, “Again?”

Sherlock felt almost jolted. He took John’s head in both hands now and brought their lips together for a second time. And this time, he heard a small whimper in John’s throat as he kissed him back. Their mouths moved together more firmly now, seeking and granting permission with each kiss, and when John tilted his head one way for better access, Sherlock accommodated by tilting his the other, and suddenly they were fitting together as surely as two puzzle pieces. John’s hand slid up and around Sherlock’s neck to pull him closer; Sherlock’s arms dragged down his back to hold him tight, and all the while, their lips never parted from each other.
It was magnificent, beyond magnificent, holding John this closely, feeling John’s hands grazing his skin and knowing that he wanted this, too. The only regret was that he had not acted sooner, weeks and months sooner, or he may have known this pleasure all along. He was so happy he wanted to laugh—and in fact, he did.

John pulled back, panting, and when they saw each other’s expressions, they laughed together until John caught his breath, licked his own swollen lips and said, more boldly this time, not a question, but a command:

“Again.”
In Which Sherlock Remembers Pink

“Run it back.”

“You’ve seen it three times already.”

“Run it back, Mycroft.”

Three keystrokes later, the footage began again. Though the CCTV that had best captured the images was in color, it was grainy, poorly angled, and distant. Despite all that, Sherlock didn’t for a second question whether it was John: he would know his Omega anywhere, scent or no scent. Once more, he watched the screen with a tilted head and squinting eyes. For over an hour already, he’d been scrutinizing the video and was beginning to develop a headache and crick in his neck. It was still early, but though John was usually first up to prepare a full English breakfast for his morning-ravenous bond-mate, he hadn’t even left the bedroom yet. It was just as well. John hadn’t slept much the night before, and what with the attack, he was certainly still out of sorts. In any case, it gave Sherlock a chance to review the details without distraction.

And here he came again, walking down the deserted pavement with hands balled at his sides and back rigid—John was angry, and his gait showed it. But then, he’d appeared angry in every video, from the inexplicable pacing on the bridge that had lasted for hours, to trying to get into a nightclub on his own, to trying to purchase alcohol, to being accosted on the bus. Mycroft had shown Sherlock all of it; London’s CCTV system was second to none in the world, and one had to be especially clever to avoid being seen. But what was John doing? What was wrong? Sherlock knew what Mycroft thought—he hadn’t said it out loud yet, but Sherlock knew—and he refused to believe it. Besides, as his brother should have known, that theory did not account for all of the facts.

John was approaching the center of the screen, just at the lip of the mouth of the alley, when the three other bodies suddenly appeared behind him. For the fourth time, Sherlock watched with riveted attention and tensed muscles as the pack seized John by the shoulders of his jacket and manhandled him into the darkened alley and away from the CCTV’s eyes, and it didn’t matter that he’d seen it three times already. He could watch this a hundred times and still feel the same bottled rage, the same barely controlled impulse to lash out, hunt down, and destroy. A low growl rumbled in the back of his throat, earning him another glance from Mycroft, but he didn’t care. A pack had set itself upon his bond-mate with the intent to ravage and despoil, and that was an unforgivable offense, by law or otherwise.

Two minutes and fourteen seconds. That’s how long he had to wait and wonder what, exactly what, was transpiring in that dark alley before John emerged from it again, quite alone. Standing upright and under his own power, he tossed something aside—the shard from the glass bottle—made a militaristic about face, and marched away with his nose pointed dead straight down the street. Not running. Not in a panic. Not desperately seeking help. He just . . . walked away.

Another thirty-two seconds, and the first of the Alphas emerged, seemingly unharmed, though his shirt was untucked and jacket was falling off one shoulder. All the same, he appeared perplexed. He looked up and down the street, making sure the way was clear before retreating once more. When he reappeared, he had the arm of one of his compadres slung around his shoulders; the second Alpha’s nose was a mess of blood, and he was hopping on one foot. Behind him, the third Alpha was cradling an arm close to his stomach and bracing his jaw with his other hand. The three of them slunk out of the frame, in the opposite direction to where John had gone.
Three large Alphas. Sherlock still could barely believe his eyes. All logic and historical precedent
dictated that John, an Omega-Y, should have been left behind in that alley, barely able to move.
After all, he had been selected, hunted, and attacked, wolves going after a deer. There was no way
he should have walked away from that.

“Do you require a fifth viewing, brother mine?” Mycroft asked, tone droll and slightly impatient.

Sherlock didn’t deign to respond, just sat back in his chair and pressed the tips of his fingers
together in thought.

Mycroft clipped off the telly. “Tell me what you mean to do.”

Shooting him a sharp look, Sherlock said, “Hunt the pack, of course. What would you think?”

“Of course. And concerning John?”

Sherlock set his jaw, trying to hide his distress. He looked to the hallway leading to the bedroom.
Still dark. Not a sound.

“It is an unhappy topic, to be sure. But I know of certain . . . institutions . . . for Omegas like John.
It would be very discreet.”

“No.”

“And I am personally acquainted with a number of renowned reparative specialists—”

“Dammit, I said no, Mycroft. I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong.”

Mycroft cocked an eyebrow, his expression alone suggesting that he thought Sherlock was being
obtuse; Sherlock had seen it before. Many times. This time, though, Mycroft didn’t hold back
saying what he thought: “You’re being an idiot. Do I need to spell it out for you?”

“I think we’re finished here.” Sherlock rose to his feet and moved to the door, but his implied
dismissal didn’t deter Mycroft from finishing what he had begun.

“Your Omega spent nearly four hours on the Waterloo Bridge, pacing, behaving erratically.
Further evidence: he made not one but two blatant attempts to poison himself.”

“We don’t know that!”

“He was trying to gain admittance to a pub! What else would he be going in there for? We saw him
trying to purchase two bottles of whiskey! You tell me, Sherlock, why else does an Omega try to
drink?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? You saw the footage. He as much as goaded those Alphas into chasing him, going out
alone after dark the way he did, separating himself from Beta crowds. He was walking meat. You
know it as well as I. His behavior has been unmistakably—”

“Mycroft.”

“—suicidal.”

Sherlock stopped pacing and swung a finger at the door. “Out.”
But Mycroft didn’t even rise from his chair. “I’m sorry, brother mine, but with so few of them left and the genes already so unstable, we’re seeing it more and more. Sometimes, without explanation, Omegas just crack.”

“He fought back, brother mine. If he was really . . . that is, if he were anywhere close to wanting to . . . Look, he fought them off.”

Mycroft put up his hands in false surrender: it was not concession. It was the action of refusing to engage further with a child on the verge of a tantrum. “You asked for my help. You know my advice comes with it.”

“I asked for the footage. Beyond that, you can just sod off. I will handle this. The pack and my Omega.”

“Handle me?”

Sherlock spun to see John, fully dressed and looking quite alert, walking toward them through the kitchen. In the light of day, he looked hardly better than when he had first stepped through the door the night before. The swelling on the side of his face had gone down, true, but the bruising had darkened to blacks and purples, and the scrapes looked just as red and mean as before.

“Good morning, John,” said Mycroft. “You’re looking remarkably well, for having been assaulted by Alphas.”

It was John’s habit to lower his head and appear smaller, as most Omegas did around Alphas who were not their bond-mates. It was simply a matter of biologically programmed respect. So it surprised Sherlock when, rather than exhibit submissive behaviors, John’s jaw hardened and his shoulders squared. For a moment, Sherlock was transfixed—he’d never seen John look at Mycroft with such an expression void of deference and replaced with . . . what was that? Aggravation? He would have pondered the gall of it a second or two longer, if that same expression hadn’t swung around to land on him.

“You called Mycroft? What for! What, are the two of you suddenly best mates in this wacked up universe?”

“Of course, he called me,” said Mycroft in the tone of one addressing a child. “He’s concerned about you.” He stood abruptly with an inflated chest and took a menacing step forward to reassert his dominance.

But John didn’t cower. “Don’t patronize me. What’s going on?”

Mycroft looked at him with knitted eyebrows, clearly not expecting this response. “Only what you would expect. My brother here is preparing for a dog fight.”

“A dog fight,” John repeated, as if he didn’t even know what it meant.

“You don’t think I’d let those Alphas get away with it, do you, John?” Sherlock said. “With the footage Mycroft brought me, we’ve been able to identify two of the three, and chances are, the third with the nose injury found himself at Alpha Emergency last night. He’ll be easy enough to hunt.”

“Hunt.”

“I’ll make short work of them, I assure you. You’ll never have to worry about those three agai—”
“Are you fucking kidding me right now!” John exploded, and both Holmes brothers flinched but tried to pretend they hadn’t. “I’m not worried about them! I handled them! If you saw footage—which I never asked you to look at, by the way—you would have seen that I was the one man left standing. I don’t need you to play my knight and shining armor or go on some revenge kick. Frankly, Holmes, it’s none of your damn business. And you”—he glared at Mycroft now—“you and your fat nose and your little puppet of a PA can just sod off, go back to your ivory tower, and pull someone else’s strings for a while.”

Stunned silence followed. And while John’s chest rose and fell with infuriated breaths, Sherlock, who felt stunned to paralysis, saw Anthea out of the corner of his eye rising from her unobtrusive place on the end of the couch where she had been sitting quietly the whole time, knees pressed together, hands folded in her lap, as noticeable as furniture. But at John’s words, she swiftly found her feet as if obeying his command.

Mycroft found his voice first, which was thin with anger as he lifted his chin and said, “Sherlock, get your Omega under your control at once. You will discipline him for speaking in such an insulting manner to an Alpha and his Omega.”

“Your Ome—?” John started, then snorted and shook his head while rubbing his face wearily. “Of course she is. The poor soul.”

Sherlock matched Mycroft’s tone, but it was a fair bit steadier. “I will deal with this. You and Anthea may leave.”

Mycroft nodded sharply, threw a glare in John’s direction, and gathered his coat. Anthea buttoned hers, and followed Mycroft out the door. All the while, neither Sherlock nor John said a word, moved a muscle, even took a breath, not until they heard the door close downstairs. Sherlock felt himself torn between amazement and anger and almost didn’t know what to say, how to act. Then:

“Sit.” Sherlock himself moved to his own chair, sat, and crossed a leg over.

“Oh you bet we’re talking about this. Everything’s bad enough already without that brother of yours sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong. If you think for one minute that I’m okay with this, with any of this—”

“John, <<sit. Now.>>”

John walked complacently to his chair and sat. Less than half a second later, he sprang back to his feet. “What the hell was that!”

“It’s for your own good. You know I dislike Compelling. And I told you I would never do it. But then, you’ve never given me cause. Something is bloody wrong with you, and damn it, John Watson, you are going to tell me what it is.”

John was shaking. The skin under his bruising was flushed red, his left hand, the one he had sliced and stitched, trembled, and he gripped it in his lap with his unbandaged hand as though to stop it. Then he put a hand to his mouth and for a moment looked like he was going to be sick. This was precisely why Sherlock never Compelled, even though by law and biology he had every claim on it. Nevertheless, he felt there was something inhuman about the act, something that demeaned them both, and it was the one point on the list of arguments he thought the Nothing Knotting movement had got right. Just the one.

He let John recover himself, let his breath return to normal, and even let him speak first. He waited him out patiently.
“Whatever that was,” said John, but barely above a whisper; there was something of fear in his eyes now now, and Sherlock regretted seeing it there, “don’t do it again.”

“I won’t. But you will talk to me.”

“Is this what Mycroft meant by”—he swallowed, and his lips formed a grimace of disgust—“disciplining me?”

“He meant worse. You know that. And you know I wouldn’t do any of that. I promised you when we bonded I wouldn’t. And I wouldn’t have Compelled you, either, if I thought there were any other way.”

John’s face fell into his hands, and Sherlock heard him murmur to himself, “This is so fucked up.”

“Answer me honestly. Are you unwell?”

Slowly, John lifted his head. He looked to the ceiling, to the fireplace, to his clenched hands. Sherlock thought he saw a wet shine in his eyes, but two blinks later it was gone. After clearing his throat, John said, “Just a bit rattled, that’s all. The, erm, attack last night. You’re right. Kind of shook me up.”

“No.”

John was visibly taken aback.

“Last night’s attack explains the contusions and sliced hand. It doesn’t explain why CCTV captures you pacing the Waterloo Bridge for three hours and fifty-two minutes until the sun went down, shouting at the sky one minute and staring down at the water the next. Nor does it explain why you attempted to poison yourself.”

“Poison myself?”

“I saw you trying to get into the pub on your own. I saw you trying to buy whisky at the corner shop!”

“Maybe . . . maybe I wanted to get wasted.”

“Omegas don’t get wasted. Omegas end up dead. I swear to you, John, if you ever do something so stupid again, I won’t think twice. I will discipline you, and you’ll be smarting for a month.”

John’s jaw had fallen open, and his eyes were wide in disbelief.

“So you’re going to tell me the truth, right now, or we take more extreme measures. And don’t think you can lie to me. I know what you’re like when you’re lying. You’re rubbish at it. Is Mycroft wrong, or is he right?”

“About what?”

“That you’re suicidal.”

“What?”

“Are you, John?”

“No!”
“Then explain.”

“It’s not . . . like that.”

“Then what?” Nothing. John seemed to be biting his tongue—literally—and he wouldn’t meet Sherlock’s eyes. John was being deliberately evasive, and Sherlock was getting impatient. Being uncivil with Mycroft was one thing. Objectionable, yes, deplorable even, but . . . kind of entertaining. But being impertinent with him, John’s own Alpha? Unacceptable.

“I can wait you out all d—”

“Charlotte Bernstein,” John blurted out.

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow. “Who?”

“News story. Yesterday. A thirteen-year-old girl died because, um. Because of her . . . that is, she had her first per— went into heat, and her mum and dad were being neglectful. She was alone, you know. I mean, God, she was only thirteen! She shouldn’t have to . . . Well, the point is, she got sick . . .”

“Estrus poisoning,” Sherlock supplied. John, in his emotional state, seemed to have difficulty finding the words.

John sighed. “Right. That. And . . . it killed her.” He shrugged a little pathetically and looked down again at his hands, which he flexed as though trying to get the blood circulating again. He scraped fingernails against the bandaging. “Guess it kind of upset me.”

“Betas like that disgust me,” Sherlock said with a scowl. “They hardly have the instinct to care for an Omega child to begin with, but wilful ignorance is reprehensible. They’re being tried for murder, I hope.”

John nodded mutely, his face having drained from crimson to ashen.

“Good. Well. That settles it. I understand. Of course a story like that would upset you. Would enrage you.” Yes, it explained so much. Like all Omegas, John had a special kinship with his own kind, but he had always seemed particularly sensitive to Omega care, Omega rights, and Omega issues, generally. And though he had never heard of it happening in an Omega, he knew it was physically possible for an individual—worked up, pumped full of adrenaline—to perform incredible feats. Those Alphas had clearly chosen the wrong Omega last night. Bottom line: he had just gotten overly emotional. “Those Betas failed to protect their Omega child, and it’s unforgivable. I can assure you, John, that I will always protect you. The Alpha pack won’t hurt you or any other Omega ever again.”

He leaned forward, offered John a consolatory pat on the knee, said, “Glad we cleared that up,” and rose to his feet. He had work to do, after all, and the day was already waning. Kitchen first, for a quick breakfast and a strong coffee, then—

“Is that all then?” John asked, and Sherlock’s feet halted beneath him. It was back: the tight voice, the tendril of anger. He retreated two steps to stand by John’s chair.

“Is what all?”

“What about this dog fight?”

Sherlock frowned in annoyance. “I just told you. I’m hunting them down, and I’ll kill them.”
“You’re not serious.” And when Sherlock gave him a dead-serious look, he shouted, “Kill them? They didn’t even have a chance to do anything!”

With the speed of a viper, Sherlock shot forward, grabbed the armrest, and loomed over John, his face so close to John’s that their noses almost touched, and John shrank back in his chair. Sherlock only crowded in on him even closer. “They went after what’s mine!” he shouted, and John flinched visibly. “Don’t you dare try to use that line on me again, that you ‘handled’ it. You! Ha!”

John turned his head to the side, blinking rapidly, but Sherlock wasn’t done. He couldn’t bear to look at his Omega anymore, but he wasn’t done. He threw up his hands and began to pace.

“You ‘handled’ them and bloody left them alive. And if they’re still alive and still walking, they’re still prowling, still hunting. And if they’re not walking, it’s almost worse, because what do wounded Alphas do? They join a bigger, stronger pack. You have made a dangerous situation worse. So I”—he jabbed himself in the center of the chest—“I need to clean up your mess. I have to go out there and cut them off at the pass. I have to do what I should have done last night.”

“Oh, you have to, do you?” said John sullenly.

“Yes, John, don’t be obtuse.”

John pushed his feet. “Then I’m coming.”

“Like hell you are. This dog fight is mine.” He whirled away and went for his coat hanging on the back of the door. “You’re going to stay home and calm down. Recover yourself.”

“You’re treating me like a helpless child. I’m not helpless. I thought I proved that last night.”

Sherlock punched his arms through the sleeves and grinded his teeth. “What you proved to me, John, was that you’re reckless when you’re emotional. You got lucky. If the wind had been blowing any other way, you would likely have ended up dead.”

“You’re unbelievable.” John folded his arms crossly. “I mean, I always knew you were a prat, but you know something? You’re a bit of a monster as well.”

Sherlock paused in the doorway, his hand on the doorjamb. Slowly, he looked back over his shoulder. “John,” he said, allowing a menacing growl to color his voice. “<<Stay home.>>”

Then he slammed the door behind him.

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His hunt that day was unsuccessful. He had three names, three faces, two hospital records, and the additional tracking of the Metropolitan Police. But the pack had gone underground, and Sherlock’s search was ineffective. His brainpower was diverted, his thought processes were hampered, he was distracted. Apparently, he had left a portion of his brain back on Baker Street.

Okay, he was feeling a little guilty. He would own that much, at least. It gave him no pleasure, leaving John behind in the flat like that, all agitated and bafflingly upset. Preoccupied with that morning’s row as he was, Sherlock could barely clear space enough for the far more important task at hand, and he was floundering. Even Lestrade, dimwitted detective though he was, noticed something was wrong with him.

“That’s it, for your own sake, let’s call that a day, shall we?”
Sherlock sneered at the suggestion. “The sun has just gone down. They’ll be active. And you want to quit now?”

“Scotland Yard never quits, you know that. I’ll have boys working through the night. But you have an Omega to look after. We’re all relieved nothing worse happened, but from what you told me, John took a good couple of licks. You should be there to comfort him.”

He won’t let me, thought Sherlock. It had been nearly twenty-four hours, and the most John had let him do was cleanse the bond mark. It didn’t make sense. There had been that one evening, about a year after their bonding, when John finally told him about the trauma of his one and only estrus poisoning, owing to the incompetent Alpha Service. He was embarrassed by it, but more than that, he had been scared. He had spent the rest of the evening curled up in Sherlock’s lap, allowing his Alpha to stroke his back and his hair and whisper assurances that he would never have to suffer like that again, not now that Sherlock was in his life.

What had happened to that John?

“If we find them, you’ll be the first call we make. The fight is yours. Bring your pack. Just remember: no firearms, no blades, no explosives, no blunt instruments—”

“I know the laws of a dog fight,” Sherlock said. And he stomped away and hailed a cab.

As he ascended the steps to the flat, he felt himself feeling a little apprehensive, which was perfectly ridiculous, because dammit, this was his house, and dammit, he was the Alpha here, and dammit, he had every right reacting the way he did to a recalcitrant Omega. Other Alphas he knew would have done far worse than impose house arrest, and he would hardly blame them. John should count himself so lucky.

He didn’t know what to expect when he walked through the door. Had John calmed down and returned to his former amicable old self? Or were they in for another row? Taking a deep breath, he squared his chin and pushed open the door.

There, he found John seated at the table by the window, in the chair facing the fireplace. He had his laptop open and his hands were at the keyboard. The table, Sherlock saw, had been cleared of all his own things, including his laptop, and was now strewn with small stacks of paper, and the printer was humming with another page coming out. John, busy at work, didn’t look up at the sound of the opening door, but Sherlock knew that he heard him come in, because just as he closed the door behind himself and opened his mouth to speak, John, without taking his eyes off the screen, made a sharp gesture with his hand, saying, “Have a seat.”

A little wary, Sherlock slowly removed his scarf and coat while keeping a steady eye on John, who continued to type, unperturbed. As he crossed the floor, he tried to read the expression on John’s face, but from the side all he could see was a black-and-purple splotch, a memento from the night before. He needed to see him head-on. So he acquiesced and sat himself in the chair across the table, folded his hands in his lap, and waited.

John struck a key with a decisive nod, closed the laptop, and reached for one of the stacks of papers. Sherlock, glancing at them upside down, saw that the sheets were printed from news sites: The Guardian and The Daily Mail and The Times, among others. What was he doing, looking at all of this? What was it for?

After selecting the page he wanted, John flipped it around and slapped it in front of Sherlock. Then he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms . . . crossly.
The headline read “Serial Suicide Count Reaches Eleven in Six Months.” Sherlock frowned.

“What’s this?”

They were looking at each other now, Sherlock with furrowed brow and John with a look of . . .

what was that? Disappointment? Disapproval? He could barely name it, he was so unfamiliar with
the expression. Not from John, anyway.

“You tell me.”

Withholding an irritated sigh, Sherlock scanned the article quickly, recalling the details. “This was
a couple of years ago now. A pattern of suicides, linked: all the victims took the same poison, all
self-administered, all were found alone . . .”

“. . . in places they shouldn’t have been, yeah, I know. Why didn’t you stop it?”

Sherlock blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Eleven people died, Sherlock. Eleven. You were supposed to have stopped it.”

With a snort of derision, Sherlock shook his head, saying, “They were suicides, John. I had no
hand them.”

“Wrong. They were murders.”

“They weren’t.”

“They were. Did you shut your brain off or something? Think about it again, Sherlock.”

“That was two years ago. The evidence is stale, at best. At the time, sure, I thought I was onto
something, but in the end, both the police and I agreed: nothing about those deaths suggested anyth
—”

“Pink.”

Sherlock almost laughed at the interruption. “What?”

“Pink, Sherlock. Pink. Jennifer Wilson. She wore a pink suit, pink rain coat, pink heels, even pink
fingernails.”

“So?” Where was he going with this?

“And her suitcase was missing.” John’s eyebrows shot up, giving the impression of a schoolteacher
who expected his pupil to take the next step. “You remember that?”

“Well, yes, there was the backsplash on her stockings, strongly suggesting she had, at one point,
been dragging a small roller suitcase behind her. You only ever get that kind of backsplash from . . .
but it didn’t matter, because we never found . . .” His brain rapid-fired, and suddenly he saw the
scene again as if someone had suddenly thrown a flood light on it. R-A-C-H-E scratched into the
floorboards, which had then been dismissed merely as an unfinished note to a dead daughter. But
the suitcase was missing . . . And pink! The small roller suitcase had to have been pink, and it was
never found! It was an incredibly significant detail! (Was it significant? Yes, yes, it had to have
been. It was!) It meant, it had to mean, that someone had removed it, had to get rid of it, because
the color was too loud, too noticeable. Pink was a mistake, but not Jennifer Wilson’s: it was the
mistake of a killer, and Sherlock had missed it! How could he have missed it!??
“Oh my God,” he said, staring at the article. “Suicide count reaches eleven . . .” And Jennifer Wilson had been only number four. “These people were murdered, John! We need to reopen this case! We can still catch the killer!”

“Bet you a thousand pounds he died of a brain aneurysm,” said John bitterly. “Which would explain why the so-called ‘suicides’ suddenly stopped, eh?” He reached for another pile and tossed it to Sherlock with cool disregard. “This one was ruled a suicide, too.”

The headline read “Man Dies Jumping in Front of Train.”

“All the papers agree,” said John. “Andrew West killed himself by stepping into the path of an oncoming train. He also happened to be involved in a top-secret missile defense project. Any reason the truth didn’t come out that he was actually murdered?”

“John, this wasn’t even my case. I remember, I turned it down. I had plenty else on my plate at that time.”

“You could have solved that one from the couch. Andrew West—Westie to his friends—was found with a bashed in head but very little blood, right where the track curved, a track that, only a couple of miles south, runs right under the window of his future brother-in-law, a future brother-in-law who happened to be a debt-ridden drug addict desperate enough to filch a rather important flash drive off his inebriated soon-to-be-relative with the hopes he might be able to barter his way into the black. Not much of a head scratcher, is it?”

“How did you—?”

“And let me guess. The flash drive was never recovered.”

“No, but like I said, it wasn’t my case. So you can hardly blame the bombing of Latvithuanistan on me.”

“Where? You know what. Never mind. This one, I’m sorry to say”—he reached for yet another page and tossed it over, and his eyes flashed in anger—“actually is a suicide.”

The third headline was from The Daily Exeter, not exactly a national paper. It read “Local Man Found Dead in Dewer’s Hollow.”

“Do you remember him?” John asked stiffly. “Henry Knight, do you remember him coming to you for help?”

Sherlock scanned the article quickly. The details were scant but clear: Knight, who, for twenty years, had suffered from paranoia and delusions after witnessing his father get mauled to death when Henry was still a child, had finally cracked, put a gun in his mouth, and killed himself.

“Vaguely,” he said, setting the story aside. John continued to give him a hard look. “He came for a consultation. Believed his father had been devoured by a werewolf.” He snorted. “Preposterous. I didn’t take the case.”

“You should have.”

“It was a twenty-year-old case! I didn’t see the point! What Mr. Knight really needed was therapy, and I am not a therapist. Are you going to tell me that he was murdered, too?”

“No. But his father was. What Henry needed was to put his father to rest. You could have given him that, Sherlock.”
There were dozens more stacks and print-outs, so it surprised Sherlock when John suddenly pushed his chair back and stood. “Your dinner is in the oven,” he said. “Baked chicken marsala. Take it out in ten minutes, let it sit for five.” And he started to walk away.

“Wait, John, stop.”

John obeyed.

“What is all this?” He swept his arm over the table and to what surely amounted to hours’ worth of work.

“That,” he said, “is two years’ worth of cases. Your cases, and the ones that should have been.”

John was forcing him to say the one thing above all things that Sherlock hated saying, so when he did, his mouth was small, his lips reluctant. “I don’t understand. What does it mean?”

“It means, Sherlock, that you’re a good detective. But not much more than that. In another life, you and I solved those cases. All of them. Both of us.”

Sherlock couldn’t have been more stunned if John had out-and-out told him that he was a bad detective. “Don’t be absurd. This is history. Unchangeable. What’s the use of these hypotheticals? Besides, what do you even mean, both of us? You’re not even a detective!”

“Yeah? Well, turns out, without me, you’re run-of-the-mill at best. Brilliant, yes, I’ll give you that. But yours is the kind of brilliance that needs a sounding board, a lightning rod, a conductor for your incredible light, to give it focus and purpose. What am I to you, Sherlock? Besides a warm body you make use of every forty-one days, I mean.”

He made to leave again, but something forestalled him, and he rocked back on his heel.

“And one more thing. You said you would never do that mind trick thing on me again. And in the next breath, you did. So you’re not to be anywhere near me tonight. The couch should serve you just fine.”

Nothing more was said. Sherlock couldn’t find any more words, and John was finished talking. In the seconds that followed, he listened to John’s footsteps disappearing into the bedroom and the soft but firm click as the door closed behind him. It was the last sound he heard John make for the rest of the night.

xXx

Sherlock couldn’t sleep, least of all because the couch was too narrow, short, and uncomfortable. His brain wouldn’t quiet down, and it was driving him mad. He was driven to spend the night thinking, puzzling through everything John had said and done, wading through all the paper and notes John had left on the table.

On a pad of paper, John had listed them out, categorizing them as cases accepted or rejected, and if accepted, solved or unsolved, and if unsolved . . . John had made notes, speculations, as to why not. Not all of it made sense though. For instance, under John’s note for “Van Coon,” he had written isolated phrases, like jade hairpin, and London A-Z, but Sherlock didn’t know what they meant. That idiot Dimmock had wanted to rule Van Coon’s death a suicide, but Sherlock knew it had been a murder. The left-handedness was clear as day! But though he made substantial progress on the case, including discovering the Chinese ciphers and number code outside the Lucky Cat and getting help from the Chinese girl (Sue Lyn or Sun Li or something like that) before she was killed, he didn’t have much to go on other than a few random characters, and he never discovered what
the code was based on. Sherlock never did find out what those Betas Van Coon or Lukis had been smuggling. But at least he had discovered who was responsible.

There were a string of solved cases (like Julia Stoner’s, which John had labeled “speckled blonde” and Matthew Michael’s, called “aluminium crutch”), which ultimately outnumbered the unsolved cases (like Chris Melas’s case, or, as John referred to him, the “geek interpreter”), but he kept going back to the first one John had mentioned: the one about the serial suicides.

He thought through all the evidence again, very carefully, and with the subjectivity of a computer analyzing data, until he was convinced. They had all been murders, all eleven of them, and Sherlock had let a serial killer escape justice. How had that been possible? Had he not considered all of the facts? More importantly, how had it been done?

Sherlock sat in his chair, and as the night wore on, he puzzled through the vexing question, coming to an uncertain conclusions: The murderer had been a cab driver. It made sense, didn’t it? None of the victims knew each other, none of them had died in the same two places, and all of them had been found in places they had no business being. The only connecting tissue there was their utter randomness—random victims taken to secret locations. And who but a cabbie could hide in public? Who else could hunt in open daylight? It had to have been someone they all trusted, and yet someone who was a stranger to all. And what strangers do people trust? Who would, say, pick up a woman with a suitcase? A cab driver.

He was getting excited just thinking about it. He wanted to run into the bedroom, wake John, and tell him what he had discovered, ask him what he thought, and that was a strange thing indeed. He’d never asked John’s opinion on something before; he’d never run an idea by him, certainly not one for a case. Detective work was Sherlock’s business. John’s was . . .

*What am I to you, Sherlock?*

He felt something nasty churning his insides, so he put that question aside, opened a laptop, and started researching based on his conclusions. Considering the time line, he started looking for London cab drivers who had retired at about the time of the final murder, and after forty minutes of searching, he settled on one name: Jeff Hope. And he hadn’t retired; he had died.

Brain aneurysm.

That answer sent Sherlock back to pacing.

He had questions for John Watson, many, many questions, and come morning, it was the very first thing he was going to ask.

*xXx*

At least, it was going to be.

Just as the sun was coming up, Sherlock, who hadn’t slept a wink all night, got a phone call from Lestrade.

“A break in the case,” said the detective-inspector.

“Good.”

“Not good. Not really. The Alpha pack, pretty sure the same one we’re hunting . . . they attacked someone else last night. A gesture to reassert their dominance more than anything, we believe.”
“Shit.”

“Victim’s just come out of Omega Emergency and is being transferred to Recovery.”

“Yes, give me the details, and I’ll meet you there.”

After hanging up the phone, Sherlock—who hadn’t even changed out of yesterday’s clothes—went straight for his coat. But he had only one arm in a sleeve before he froze.

He let the coat slip away and tossed to the couch. Stepping lightly, he made his way through the kitchen and down the hall, and he stood outside the bedroom and stared at a crack of daylight shining at the foot of the door. Chiding himself for his shyness, he lifted a hand and rapped on the door . . . lightly.

Three seconds later, a mild voice bid him come in.

Pushing open the door, he found John seated on the edge of the mattress, finishing the buttons on his shirt. He wore socks but no shoes, and his hair hadn’t yet been combed. He didn’t raise his head or eyes when Sherlock stepped a foot inside.

“Morning,” said Sherlock awkwardly.

“Morning.”

“So. Um.” He made himself stand fully inside the room. It was his own room, after all. He shouldn’t feel like an intruder in it. Only, he did. A little. “Lestrade’s just phoned. The pack, they went after someone else. An Omega-X.”

God, why was he being so delicate with his words? Be clinical, detached, just say it: *The Alpha pack raped an Omega-X. They scented and knotted her, and she’s in hospital.*

Finally, John’s eyes came up, and they were filled with concern. “How bad?”

“Bad. But she’s alive and in hospital.”

“How bad, Sherlock?”

He sighed. “Scented and knotted. One of them forced a bond.”

“Oh my God.” John shook his head regretfully. “And, erm, her Alpha?”

“She was unbonded, so nothing severed. But she resisted, so she’s fighting infection.”

“I . . . should have . . . I’m sorry. You were . . . right. I should have, that is, if I had only . . .”

“Come with me,” said Sherlock. And John’s eyes went wide with astonishment. “That is, I’d like you to be there. When I talk to her. She’ll find the presence of another Omega comforting.”

“Right.” John stood, hands akimbo as he looked around for his shoes. His head bobbed up and down repeatedly and he licked his lips. “Sure, okay. Two minutes, yeah?”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

He began to retreat, to give him whatever space he needed, but John forestalled him, saying, “Who is she? I mean, do you know anything about her? A name, where she’s from, where she was attacked?”
“I’ll fill you in on the way,” said Sherlock. “But she’s a nobody, really. Just one of the unlucky unbonded. Name of Molly Hooper.”
He hadn’t known kissing could be like this. Past experience—though admittedly very limited and almost exclusively utilized as a tool for manipulation—had never even hinted at the possibility that placing his lips to another human being’s could inspire such satisfaction and simultaneously a craving for more. Nor would he have believed it possible, before now, that he could keep at it for quite a long time. Just this, two bodies lying alongside one another, sharing warmth and gentle touches, and kissing, long, slow kisses.

Sherlock’s hand trailed lazily down John’s side; his other wrapped under and around his body, holding him close. For his part, John rested against him, carding fingers through his curls, mouthing against his neck. Every sensation was paradoxical: wild and calming, fevered and cool, content and needy. His brain skittered between registering every feeling and losing itself in feeling everything. Nothing was as important as this, and yet John was more important than anything.

God, he was in love. Fascinating.

Last night had been exploratory, like learning a new language: finding out how their lips fit together, learning how to sneak breaths without breaking away, discovering how different bits of skin tasted, practicing and pleasuring and seeking permission. They had ended up on this very couch, sitting side by side, letting their mouths work and their hands rove until a late hour and timid blushes and shy goodnights had parted them. In the morning, they breakfasted together while Mrs Hudson puttered about, and their toes beneath the table continued what their mouths at the moment could not. But once the flat was theirs again, after a few minutes of uncertain hedging and stolen glances, they found themselves once again on the couch, continuing the rehearsal.

A simple case—Lestrade really was such an idiot—interrupted the day and stole their hours, but at the soonest possible moment, they returned to the couch, and this time, within a few short minutes, they found themselves horizontal, Sherlock’s knee tucked between John’s (for the sake of conserving space, of course), and kissing. Touching, and kissing, and kissing, and touching, and Sherlock was at this very moment lavishing John’s neck with his mouth. At his ear, he heard John’s sultry breaths of enjoyment. Intuiting that they were ready for access to a little more skin, Sherlock deftly popped the top button of John’s shirt and gently pulled the collar to the side. His kissed, down, down, and over, and had nearly exposed John’s left shoulder when—

“Uh!” John gasped, and he flinched against Sherlock, withdrawing a little, though his hand tightened around Sherlock’s bicep.

Sherlock’s head snapped up. “Sorry, too much?”

John’s face had gone bright red. “It’s not that. It’s . . .”

“What?”

“Something I should probably mention.”

A confession? Now? What could it be? That he’d never been with a man? That he wasn’t sure this is what he wanted after all? That he had met someone else and had a secret Spanish lover and was moving out to start a new life in Barcelona and marry a matador and open a tapas bar and ¡Dios mio, no! John, don’t go!

“Go on,” he said, calmly.
“It’s just . . . something happened to . . . my shoulder. And it’s, well, quite ugly.”

The bullet wound? Sherlock already knew about that. He had never seen it before, but he attributed that fact to John’s inherent modesty, not self-consciousness or concern about the scar tissue from an unsightly war wound. John was a proud man, and proud to have been a soldier. So it surprised Sherlock a little that John would worry that such a thing would put Sherlock off. As if he didn’t have a ceaseless fascination with scars! Time to assuage those fears.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he said. Ignoring the flash of objection in John’s eyes, he pulled back the shirt and revealed the scar: a dark pink ragged circle of slightly raised flesh, about the size of a fingerprint. It was a fascinating knot of gnarled skin, twisted but beautiful, and he longed to touch it. “Is it sensitive?” he asked, voice husky.

John nodded. “When I move too quickly, or put pressure there . . . I can feel it like it’s new.”

Gently, Sherlock brushed a thumb across it and watched John’s face for a reaction.

“I can explain.” John’s face still registered worry.

“Only if you like.” He honestly saw no need, but if John felt like talking through it, so be it.

John licked his lips, glanced down at his shoulder, took a deep breath, and said, “It happened so suddenly, I barely knew it was happening at all. One minute, I was walking across a bridge, absolutely fine, and the next . . . I was speared by lightning.”

Something stirred in Sherlock. “You’re surprisingly poetic, John,” he said, and with refreshed desire he reclaimed John’s mouth. John moaned into him, gripped him more fiercely, spread his knees and let Sherlock press more insistently against him.

When he surfaced again, John said, “It doesn’t bother you?”

Sherlock returned hungrily to his neck. In between kisses and latherings, he said, “No”—lick—“why should it”—suck—“bother”—kiss—“me?”

“It’s what—uhhng—you know, changed me.”

Sherlock stilled, his eyes on the scar. Slowly, he moved closer and kissed it sweetly. Then he lifted his head, cupped John’s face, and said, “It’s what brought us together. Call me selfish, but I wouldn’t change that for anything.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

John’s smile didn’t have time to linger before they were locked together again, knees and groins and stomachs and mouths, and the lazy, painstaking kisses were gone. The slow exploration was over. Sherlock wanted John, and he wanted him badly. His desire was the sum total of months, more accurately years, of pent-up, ignored, all-consuming longing. Heat was coursing through his body like his blood was petrol and John was a struck match, and low in his gut (and another low place), he felt the stirrings of something desperate.

And against his thigh, he felt that John felt it too.

With the abruptness of a startled rabbit, John gasped and launched his body off of Sherlock’s, rolling inelegantly, and crashing to the floor.
“Sorry! Sorry!” he muttered, scrambling to find his feet while simultaneously cupping himself like a little boy who needed to use the loo, as if he could possibly hide his arousal. “I wasn’t expecting . . . That is, I didn’t know it would . . . feel . . . like this.”

Bemused, Sherlock too arose.

Spluttering, John tried to explain: “I’ve never done it like this before, you know? I’m not sure how, erm, how everything is supposed to work.”

Ah, so it was true, then. Sherlock was the first man he’d ever been with. Of course he was, or John wouldn’t have needed the pamphlets. Having it confirmed, though, made him feel . . . special. Privileged. Thrilled. And though Sherlock had always imagined (not that he had really spent time imagining, not until very, very recently) that John was a master in the bedroom, it seemed that the prospect of being with his own sex had rendered him shy.

“Nor am I,” said Sherlock, placatingly. “Beyond a clinical understanding, that is. Come, John. You don’t think me any more experienced than you, surely. Not with that.” He indicated John’s crotch, unabashedly, and smirked when John’s already red face became a darker tomato. “Are you opposed to joining me in the bedroom and figuring it out together?”

“This doesn’t turn you off?”

“Quite the contrary. As ever, you see but do not observe.” He indicated his own tent.

John tried to hide his smile behind pursed lips, but he nodded eagerly.

“Then let’s not delay another moment.”

He seized John by the wrist and dragged him out of the room, through the kitchen, down the hall, and into the bedroom where he wasted no more time divesting himself of his shirt and assisting John with the same before they toppled together upon the bed. There, they took a few more minutes to explore the sensations of newly exposed skin. Sherlock found new ways to make John squirm, and John awakened in him new pleasure centers that left him gasping. He still found it all incredible, that he was holding John like this, that the closeness they had shared for so long had found a new and exciting manifestation, and that for the first time in his life, he was desperate to engage in what so many lesser mortals took as a given—and all because of John. Only John.

At last, he snapped the top button of John’s trousers, and as reflex, John lifted his hips, allowing Sherlock to slide a hand down his backside and in one fluid motion pull both trousers and underwear to the knee, ankle, and ultimately to the floor, and John was entirely naked beneath him. Sherlock trembled. John trembled. He took a moment to run his hand down John’s side, chest to waist to thigh, admiring every inch of him. John’s breath was coming faster now, more needy, and Sherlock could hear his own heart thumping in his ears.

“You too,” John whispered.

Yes. Yes of course. He jumped off the bed and unzipped his trousers, quickly shucking them and tossing them in a corner with no embarrassment whatsoever, not until he returned to the bed, upright on his knees, and saw John’s expression: it was fixated on his obvious interest, and his mouth had gone slack as he stared in disbelief. Sherlock didn’t know what to make of it.

John’s eyes snapped up to Sherlock’s face as he asked, “You too?”

Sherlock blinked, befuddled. “I did tell you.” Slowly, he lay himself down alongside John’s body, cupped his jaw to keep John’s attention on him as he said, “Only for you, John. This wouldn’t
“I . . . I always knew our bond was strong. I just never realized . . . We really were meant for one another, weren’t we?”

In answer, Sherlock drew his head closer, and their lips touched, almost chastely. And in that kiss, Sherlock tried to communicate what he couldn’t find the words for. As John began melting into the sheets, Sherlock followed, tucked a bare leg between John’s knees, and pressed their hips together. John moaned and wrapped his arms more tightly around Sherlock’s torso, and they remained as close as though they were fused together, even as the heat built and pleasure spiked and the shockwaves left them gasping and crying out each other’s names.

John stayed the night and slept long and deep. But Sherlock couldn’t sleep. Instead, he watched John’s sleeping form by the soft light of the window, waiting for every wrinkle of the nose or twitch of the lip, imagining that John was feeling as content as he was and wistfully wishing that he would never leave this bed. Everything seemed perfect. His best friend had become his lover, and both of those designations were things Sherlock never expected to have as counterpart. He had never desired either. Now, he couldn’t imagine giving up either one. The very thought was a knife to the belly. Or a lightning bolt to the heart, as John might put it. So he was perfectly happy to lie in the dark with John, his John, and revel in this new state of being.

xXx

Except . . . something felt . . . off.

He couldn’t say what, exactly, and so on the whole, he ignored it. It was just little things, things Sherlock couldn’t even name, fleeting thoughts he couldn’t pin down when John moved a certain way or said a certain thing or laughed at a pitch that was for a flash of a moment unfamiliar—but then the moment would pass, and Sherlock couldn’t understand why he had this niggling feeling in the back of his mind. So he stamped it down and ignored it.

That first week, they made love every night. (“It’s kinda nice, you know?” John said. “Not having to wait every forty-one days,” to which Sherlock replied, “That would be preposterous. And oddly specific.” John laughed.) Sometimes it was slow and tender, other times frenzied and hot. (“It’s like I’m discovering my body all over again,” said John. “Everything’s new. Including the scent.” To which Sherlock leaned in, put his nose to John’s neck, and said, “To me, you smell divine.” John giggled.) Sometimes facing each other, sometimes not. John had been quick to get on his knees, though he seemed less keen to do it the other way around, which disappointed Sherlock, who wanted to give it a go. But everything was still so new, and he didn’t want to pressure John into doing something he was uncomfortable doing. Although, when he thought about it, John’s discomfort at topping didn’t make a lot of sense to him. Given John’s sexual proclivities in the past, Sherlock had simply assumed he would take the more dominant role, and frankly, Sherlock had rather been hoping to be the student, in this area of their relationship at least.

But never mind. Things were wonderful, new, and exciting.

Until those little things began to stick, like food between his teeth.

xXx

Sherlock popped the cork and poured two glasses. John, who had been holding his breath, released it in a rush as Sherlock handed him the wine glass.

“To first drinks,” said John, a hint of excitement that sounded a bit like nervousness in his voice.
Sherlock conceded with a shrug. It was true: everything they did together now felt like doing it for the first time. “To all sorts of firsts,” he agreed.

They clinked glasses and drank.

John choked.

The rest of the evening became, in memory, a drunken blur of making out and making love and making it first to the bathroom to throw up. John won that one.

xXx

They were out on a case. Sherlock hadn’t truly expected things to go south, but he had accounted for the possibility and snuck John’s gun out of the flat just in case. Unless he anticipated danger, John usually preferred to leave it safely secreted away, from Sherlock as much as anyone (particularly the police, who had been known to make the occasional sweep). He didn’t quite appreciate Sherlock’s past filching and excuses like “target practice” and “bored.” But Sherlock always found it. John was terrible at hiding his things.

Weighting down his right coat pocket, the gun bounced against his hip as he ran at breakneck speed, John huffing behind him. The art thief was making his escape on a bicycle. But with the large-framed first panel of a Francis Bacon triptych tucked under his arm, his was a wobbly escape at best. Still, he was faster on the bike than Sherlock on foot. Desperate, hating to lose, especially to a thief on a bike, Sherlock went for the gun.

He didn’t want to shoot the man, just take out his ride, so he quickly passed it off to the better marksman between the two of them.

“Take it, take it!” he shouted, thrusting the gun into John’s hands even as they kept on in hasty pursuit.

“What?” cried John, nearly dropping the weapon.

“Not him, the tires! The tires!”

“Sherlock, I can’t!”

“Now, John, we’re losing him!”

“Sherlock!”

“Now!”

John skidded to a halt, pointed the gun down the street, and screamed as he fired off two rounds with eyes closed. The first scraped into the ground like a plane coming into for a terrible landing; the second ricocheted off the brick wall of a building, off the side of a metal skip, and sank into the thief’s thigh. With a shriek of pain, down he went, both man and bike scraping pavement while the painting rolled like a cartwheel, splintering the expensive frame but leaving the painting itself miraculously whole.

Sherlock reached the man first and cuffed him with handcuffs he’d filched from Lestrade some weeks before, leaving him on the ground crying and bleeding, though not mortally wounded. Breathing hard, he stood and wiped his nose, turning around just in time for John to catch him up. He was holding the gun upside down by the handle, the way one would pick up a hair from the bottom of a drain—one part wariness, two parts revulsion—and passed it back to Sherlock, saying,
“Take it take it take it.”

“Are you okay?” asked Sherlock, alarmed. He’d never seen such a dismal performance. Not from John. Certainly not when it came to firearms. He slipped the gun back into his pocket and took John’s arm. “You’re positively shaking.”

“Fine fine yeah I’m fine,” said John in a rush. Then he glanced down at the man writhing and gripping his thigh. Blood oozed between his fingers, and John went green. Quickly, he turned away to redirect his eyes.

“You shot me! You shot me!”

“Sorry, mate,” John muttered, staring at the ground beneath his shoes, shifting his weight guiltily.

“It was . . . effective. Eventually. But we should probably do something about that,” said Sherlock, blase.

“You think?” cried the man.

“Maybe a tourniquet.”

“I’m dying!”

“You’re not dying,” Sherlock spat, then turned his back on him to face John squarely. “What do you think, John? Makeshift tourniquet? Or just apply pressure directly to the gunshot wound? I don’t suppose it’s wise to try to extract the bullet.”

“Dyyyyiiiiing!”

John’s eyes were wide enough for Sherlock to see two full moons reflected back at him. For a while, he seemed as mute as a fish. Then he said, “Call 999?”

But at that precise moment, sirens sounded in the distance. John sighed with relief and distanced himself a little more from the foiled thief. The police and ambulances arrived to sort out the man, and while they were loading him into the ambulance (all while reading him his rights) and safely removing the stolen painting to a secure vehicle, Sherlock gave his report to Lestrade. But he kept John in the corner of his eye. His brain was trying to tell him something, but he couldn’t understand what.

xxx

He ran into Sarah Sawyer at the supermarket where he was deciding between a chardonnay and a sauvignon blanc, as John hadn’t seemed to care much for the red wine he’d brought home last time. Although, Sherlock could have sworn he’d seen him imbibe the pinot noir with relish in the past.

“Oh. Sherlock,” she said with barely masked displeasure. “It’s you.”

“Dr. Sawyer,” he said in return.

She sighed, and it seemed they were both resigned to exchange the necessary pleasantries dictated by social decree before moving on. “You’re looking well,” she said.

“Smashing. Your practice is going well, I expect.”

“Recovering,” she said tightly. “It’s been a bear trying to find someone to replace John. Could have
done with a little forewarning. That’s your doing, I suppose. Thanks for that.”

He set both bottles back on the shelves. “Pardon?”

“I said, you’re the reason he quit, am I right? I should have known. The medical profession always did come third with John, right behind crime solving with you and, well, you.”

“John quit?”

“I believe his exact words were ‘Stop calling me, woman.’ Charming, that. I figured you had coached him.”

She didn’t give him a chance to reply, but took her kumquats and left. Possibly she had been expecting one of his acerbic retorts, but if she thought fleeing was sparing her a nasty insult, she was mistaken: he had nothing to say. He had effectively been rendered mute—stunned into silence—and he disliked the feeling very much.

Forgetting why he had even come to the supermarket to begin with, Sherlock headed straight home, and although he didn’t have a clearly formulated question, he nevertheless felt like he and John ought to . . . talk. How mundane.

But even that thought fled the moment he stepped up to his front door: by the look of the knocker, Mycroft was there.

He groaned. Even more reluctant now, he twisted the knob and trudged upstairs, hoping that John hadn’t let the cat out of the bag that they were sleeping together now. Though to be fair, he probably didn’t need to say a word. John had never been the most subtle of individuals, and Mycroft’s deductive computer brain ran on a slightly faster CPU than his own (he was loath to admit). Sherlock didn’t quite know what he was in for, so he prepared himself for all possibilities.

He found his brother sitting in his own chair, one leg crossed over, sipping tea. That meant he’d been there at least ten minutes already. Had he asked John to make tea? Certainly John hadn’t offered. He never offered Mycroft tea, a sign that he need not stay a while. It was an unspoken rule between them: never prolong a Mycroft visit.

“Ah, Sherlock. How good of you to join us,” said Mycroft. Sherlock saw through the affability at once: Mycroft was mocking him. With a cat-like grin, Mycroft pointed to the spread. “Tea?”

John was coming in from the kitchen, bearing a fresh cup. He smiled at Sherlock and wordlessly poured him a new cup.

“What is it this time, Mycroft?”

John didn’t take his own seat. He moved aside as though to offer it to Sherlock, and retreated to the kitchen where he began . . . sweeping.

“I did come on a business matter,” Mycroft said, setting his cup into his saucer and setting the saucer aside. “My, he makes a good tea. Has he always made such good tea?”

“Get to the point.”

“A case, you see. A matter of national—”

“—importance, yes, it always is. And as always, I’m rather full up at the moment.”
He wasn’t. But it was the game they always played. Mycroft sought his help, Sherlock declined, Mycroft insisted, Sherlock got pouty, Mycroft threatened, Sherlock shrugged, Mycroft promised rewards, Sherlock rolled his eyes, and at last he accepted. He was just going through the motions.

Until Mycroft changed the dance. “Indeed, you are. So I retract my request.”

Sherlock blinked. “What?”

“We’ll deal with this little gem of a brain teaser ourselves. And so, this has just become a purely social visit. Say, John.”

John appeared at once. “Yes, sir.”

Sir??

“These biscuits, they’re fine, but do you have any of those ginger nuts? They’re my favorites.”

“Oh.” John winced. “I’m afraid not.”

“Be a good lad, run down to the corner market, pick me up some?”

“Absolutely.”

“John!”

John froze halfway to the door and twirled back. “Jaffa Cakes, Sherlock? Right you are, I shan’t forget your favorites as well. Be back in a tic. Cheers.”

And he was gone.

“What the hell, Mycroft!”

“Oh? Notice something funny, did you?”

Here it came, the censure, some rubbish about sentiment and getting involved and succumbing to baser temptations that would override his mental circuitry. He’d heard the lecture before (granted, he was thirteen and Mycroft, at twenty, had just broken up with his first serious girlfriend at uni and was in a rather vulnerable but highly logical state), but it was wisdom to live by, and both had embraced the sound logic of it. Now, however, Sherlock wasn’t so sure.

“No need for me to spell it out, surely: the uncharacteristic affability,” Mycroft was saying, like checking boxes on a list, “the air of confusion, delayed response to questions, apparent amnesia, complaining that scents aren’t as strong as they once were . . .”

“What are you saying?”

“How long has he been behaving this way?”

For a moment, Sherlock thought he would feign ignorance. But he knew Mycroft would see straight through it. “It’s been,” Sherlock shook his head quickly and flung a dismissive hand into the air, “a strange couple of weeks. Hectic.”

“Couple of weeks,” Mycroft sighed. “You idiot, Sherlock. That man needs to be taken to hospital. He’s displaying clear signs of concussion.”

“Concussion! He doesn’t have a . . .” But he trailed off, trying to fit Mycroft’s explanation with the
oddities in John’s behavior, from quitting his job to the spectacular misfire to forgetting his laptop’s password (even Sherlock hadn’t been able to crack it) to getting queasy at the zoo to . . . falling in love with Sherlock.

“Trust me, he does.” Without bothering to finish his tea, Mycroft arose and buttoned his jacket. “You’ll make my excuses for me, I’m sure. Tell him thank you for the tea.” He started for the door. “Oh. And Sherlock.”

Sherlock didn’t move from his spot in the chair but just continued to stare straight ahead at the lovely spread. Most un-John-like.

“I do hope you’ve not been taking . . . advantage? He’s in a rather delicate state, I dare say. It would be a shame to spoil whatever it is between you because he’s not in his right state of mind.”

So he knew. Oh God, he knew. But Sherlock remained stock-still and didn’t react; he wouldn’t give Mycroft that satisfaction. He didn’t move at all until he heard the front door close and Mycroft was gone. And when he did, it was only to drop his head into his hands and moan.

xXx

When asked, John said he didn’t think he had hit his head that hard. He had fallen, about two weeks ago. Slipped while walking in the rain, he said, and thought he had blacked out for a moment, just a moment, and when he came to, his head throbbed a little, but the pain went away after a short while.

Two weeks. Sherlock pinpointed it to the day he had found John in his bedroom. He thought he was going to be sick.

He was first given a neurological examination (testing his vision and hearing, the sensations in his limbs, the strength of his grip and ability to lift weighted balls, his coordination and balance, his reflexes) and passed with flying colors. He sat a cognitive examination (concentration, memory, and ability to recall information), and though Sherlock wasn’t in the room to witness it himself, he was later informed that everything seemed sharp there as well. But because Sherlock wasn’t satisfied, he insisted John request a CT scan. The results came back negative for concussion.

To mask his uncertainty on the drive back to Baker Street, Sherlock asked for silence so he could think, and without any complaint whatsoever, John acquiesced, opting instead to lace his fingers together with Sherlock’s and cuddle up next to him, resting his head on Sherlock’s shoulder and dozing. For his part, Sherlock remained stiff. He didn’t put him off, but nor did he exactly welcome the affection. He had allowed his emotions to overwhelm him of late, at the expense of his mental faculties; now, he flipped those switches to their opposite settings.

Sherlock entered his mind palace and carefully, painstakingly, began to examine the last fourteen days.

xXx

He had a plan. It began and ended with Harry Watson.

Contact your brother
SH

It was three hours before she bothered to text back.

What the fuck for?
Charming, as always. He grit his teeth as he typed:

You haven’t talked
to him in ages.

This time, the response came more quickly.

So what? Is he dying?

From where he sat at the desk, Sherlock glanced quickly to where John sat placidly in his chair, doing a crossword. He was still feeling badly about last night. John had been feeling amorous and tried to initiate more intimate activities, but Sherlock put him off; and although John didn’t exactly sulk (he was not the sulking type), Sherlock could tell he was a little wounded. But his guilt extended only so far: he had a suspicion, and he was looking for ways to prove it.

Just do it.

She must have stewed on it for a while, because it was a long, quiet ten minutes before John’s phone vibrated on the table next to him. Sherlock was now riveted, scrutinizing John’s every movement, breath, expression, everything. But, as it turned out, he didn’t need to be so vigilant in his scrutiny. John was hiding nothing.

When he read the screen, he smiled warmly.

“Who is it?” Sherlock asked innocently.

“Just Harry,” said John, then he clicked to read the text. “Asking how I’m doing.” He chuckled to himself; a look of fondness had come over him. “Such a mother hen, that one.”

Sherlock’s jaw locked; his nostrils flared. He felt a burning anger in his sinuses. But he was the very model of composure as he rose to his feet, straightened his jacket, and stepped directly in front of where John sat in the chair. With perfunctory efficiency, he extended a hand for John to shake.

“Hello,” he said. “I don’t believe we’ve met properly. My name is Sherlock Holmes.”

John quirked an eyebrow, eyes registering confusion, and he slowly took Sherlock’s hand. Sherlock didn’t let it linger. He dropped the stranger’s hand, straightened his back into an even more rigid rod, and glared down at the impostor in his friend’s chair.

“Tell me,” he said. “What the hell have you done with John Watson?”
It had been the longest seven days of his life.

Seven days in Wacko World, negotiating its screwy stratified society, living under its lunatic laws, and existing inside this fucked-up body that was basically trying to kill him. And yet all John could think about was Sherlock. Not the one sitting next to him in the back of the cab—being oddly silent, for once, and not in his familiar I’m-in-my-mind-palace way, but rather like he was uncomfortable and didn’t know what to say or to do—but the Sherlock back home. Home home. The world he knew, the people he understood, and the flatmate who was probably going mad with worry. John had been missing for an entire week, and he was fairly confident that there was no evidence on Earth (the sane Earth, where the countries had the right borders, only two sexes could make a baby, and the TV programs made sense) that would point Sherlock in the right direction.

He sorrowfully imagined a Sherlock Holmes tearing London apart in search of him. The inexplicable disappearance of his flatmate was not a case he would lightly drop. He was probably foregoing sleep, meals, grooming, and all other forms of self-care. He was probably enlisting the aid of every soul in the homeless network, every officer from the Yard, and maybe even Mycroft. And what would happen to Sherlock Holmes when he inevitably failed to find him? What would he do, when it became clear that John had vanished off the face of the earth without a trace? A body never recovered. A case never solved. Questions never answered, and a genius left alone without his conductor of light.

John wasn’t one to sing his own praises, and he would never pretend to occupy a sentimental place in Sherlock’s unknowable heart. But he wasn’t self-deceiving enough, either, to think he meant nothing at all to the man he considered his best friend. John knew he was useful in the Work (a truth he had verified beyond any doubt the day before), and they certainly enjoyed one another as companions. Sure, they dug at each other and bickered constantly, but that was half the fun, because they were also usually only a few breaths away from breaking down into laughter or knocking each other playfully about. John had never expected to have such a friend in his adult life, but being around Sherlock, he felt positively youthful again; and, as far as he could tell, Sherlock had never, before John, entertained the notion of friends at all, and was enjoying the change. In fact, John believed he had come to rely on his just . . . being there.

It was almost a certainty: Sherlock was falling to pieces without him.

“John.”

John’s heart squeezed painfully in his chest. The voice was so like the one he knew. But this Sherlock . . . He wasn’t his Sherlock.

Turning his head away from the window, he saw that this Sherlock was passing him his phone, the screen displaying a website. He took it and read the short article. It took two seconds for him to understand why Sherlock had drawn his attention to it: it was an obituary site, which named a
certain man, Jeffrey Hope, as having passed away at the age of 56. He had been a professional cab
driver for thirty-three years.

“Brain aneurysm,” said Sherlock, taking the phone back. His voice was neutral, a little stiff. “But
you knew that already, didn’t you.”

John shifted a little in his seat, wondering how this was going to play out, wondering how he
wanted it to play out. On the one hand, he was positively swelling with a confession that threatened
to burst out of him any moment: This isn’t my world! You’re not my Sherlock! I’m not your John!
On the other, he feared being labeled insane, like, legitimately insane. It was a frightfully real
possibility. He had done the research in his overabundant free time. In this world, Omegas weren’t
considered terribly stable. They had been known to crack, go mad, require hospitalization. For one
wild minute, John had entertained the possibility that it was true, that he was an Omega, always
had been, and that he had concocted this elaborate and lucid fantasy that he belonged to a different
time and place. Had he gone mad with the delusion?

But no! That was the preposterous notion. More likely, this world was still stuck inside some sort
of sexist, hyper-Freudian, psychology-of-dearth approach to why Omegas were the way they were.
And if the Freud in Normalia had been bat-shit, there’s no telling how ludicrous were the
philosophies of the Freud of the Wacko World.

In any case, Sherlock held the proof of John’s sanity in his palm: The deaths of those eleven
people had been serial killings, not suicides, and they had all been carried out by a cabbie named
Jeff Hope, who had died of a brain aneurysm, just as John had said. The question was, how could
John possibly have known all that?

“Lucky guess,” he settled on.

“I don’t think so.”

John knew that tone, and his breath hitched a little. It was the tone Sherlock used when he was
onto something, but he hadn’t quite arrived, and all he needed to do was talk it through, work it out,
test it against the sounding board, and he could untangle any knot.

“You don’t think so,” John repeated.

“No, John Watson, I do not.”

John tugged on the bottom of his jacket to straighten a crease running along his back, irritating
him. “Then how could I know about Hope?”

“How indeed.”

Swallowing, he returned his gaze to the window but said in measured response, “Any theories?”
Oh, he was playing with fire with that one. But he was still undecided: poke the bear, or let it keep
dreaming?

“Three.” There was a long, uncomfortable pause. John was dying to know what Sherlock was
thinking, and afraid to at the same time. When Sherlock did speak again, his voice carried a tinge
of bitterness, and he spoke almost as though to himself. “All quite implausible.”

“But not impossible?”

“I’ve already eliminated the impossible.”
“So whatever remains must be—”

And together they finished: “—the truth.”

For a beat, they stared at one another, almost as if they were seeing each other for the first time. Then, quite to John’s surprise, they both started laughing. Not long and loud, but contained and appreciative. It was the most normal John had felt in seven days.

“Yes,” said Sherlock, once his soft chuckles had faded, but the softness of his smile hadn’t quite disappeared. A new, curious glimmer appeared in his eyes as he watched John. “Precisely.”

“Care to share?”

“I could do that.” He gave John an imperious stare. “Or, you could just tell me.”

“And solve the puzzle for you?” John shook his head, unable to keep his own ingratiating smile from his face. “That’s not the way you like to play things.”

“True, true,” said Sherlock, sighing back into his seat. “So. Mr. Hope is not the puzzle. You are. You know your own truth, naturally, but you don’t want me to know.”

“Didn’t say that,” John murmured.

“Ah, you do want me to know. You just don’t want to tell me. Interesting.” He joined his hands together, fingertips to lips. “Very well. I’ll play.”

“Play?”

“Your game. Something is wrong with you. You won’t tell me your secret, but you want me to know it all the same. You’ve set up a mystery, and you know I love a good mystery. You do too. They’re your favorite bedtime stories, after all. So let’s play.”

It was then that John realized the brilliance of it. If he told Sherlock straight up what had happened, where he was from, why he was behaving so strangely, he would be labeled a nutter. But if Sherlock deduced it for himself, if he came to the logical conclusion that universe-jumping was the one and only viable explanation for all of the changes in John’s behavior . . . why, then he would most certainly believe it! It’s what he should have taken advantage of, not feared, from the very start: Sherlock’s brain.

“Yes,” said John with a wise and decisive nod, “let’s play.”

“First, the rules,” said Sherlock, fully embracing the nature of gameplay. “You won’t tell me outright. But do I get to ask questions?”

John thought about it. “I suppose so, yes.”

“And you’ll answer honestly.”

He considered that one too. “If I can’t answer honestly, I’ll not answer at all.”

Sherlock shrugged, accepting. “Fair enough.”

“Though really, Sherlock, before we play twenty questions—”

“Oh, I’ll get it in less than twenty,” he said cockily.
“—I’d love to hear your three implausible theories.”

Sherlock seemed to be contemplating this request. He marked their place on the road, and John knew they were less than five minutes from St. Margaret’s, a hospital specializing in the treatment of Omegas, where Molly was in intensive care. “Very well. The first. Accounting for your knowledge of the serial murders: You were acquainted with Mr. Hope. Not just acquainted. You were either a co-conspirator, informant, victim of blackmail, or relative. You knew the suicides were murders while they were ongoing, or you learned it somewhere along the way, and to protect either him or yourself, you kept quiet on the matter. Until now, that is. It could be because of guilt or a sudden shift in your moral compass. Guilt and morality lead to confessions. But you’re not confessing. So this is a ploy, a carefully orchestrated revelation in which you wish me to think you more intelligent than you are for some nefarious purpose I have yet to uncover but that will in time reveal you to be a villain in my life’s tale, and our entire relationship will prove to have been a scam from the start, one which you are eager to terminate so you can be reabsorbed back into a crime syndicate that trained you in the art of the espionage.”

John snorted. “Your first theory is that I’m a spy.”

“I did say all my theories were implausible.” He quirked an eyebrow and cast a side-long look at John. “First question, John.”

“Shoot.”

“Did you have any correspondence with Jeff Hope? Did you ever, even once, speak to the man?”

“That, I can honestly say, I never did. Never even met him.”

He nodded sharply. “That settles that.” But he was grinning.

“What’s that smirk about then, eh?”

“Oh John. You do not have the capacity for spyhood. You’re too simple.”

John’s smile vanished.

“Now then. Theory two is even less plausible: clairvoyance.”

Now wearing a scowl, John said. “Oh sure, I’m not clever enough to be a spy, but a psychic, yes, of course, that makes sense.”

“Why shouldn’t it?”

“Because it’s rubbish, Sherlock, don’t tell me you—you—buy into fortune-telling and hocus pocus.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Self-professed psychics are charlatans! Under controlled test conditions, no supposed ‘supernatural powers’ ever hold up under scrutiny.”

“Unsubstantiated is not the same thing as impossible,” Sherlock countered.

“It’s unscientific. Trickery. A scheme to prey on the most gullible and suggestible. Fake.”

Sherlock smirked. “Since when did you take an interest in the scientific method?”
“Bloody hell, Sherlock, I’m a doc—Erhm, I’m adopting the only rational viewpoint here.”

“And you are commended for it. Or, you may be trying to distract me from the truth. While I am a natural skeptic, John, it is also my job to be open to all avenues of possibility. This one, I admit, is slim to nil. Nevertheless, given your rather startling, shall we say, re-evaluations of so many of my past cases last night, knowing things you couldn’t possibly know, and conjecturing on alternative courses of action and their effects with no verifiable evidence—save that of Jeff Hope’s aneurysm—I cannot wholly dismiss that albeit highly unlikely prospect that there is something supernatural, that is, something as yet unexplained by science, in your abilities.”

“Have I ever, even once, demonstrated psychic powers before last night?” John asked, exasperated.

“I cannot rule out the possibility of latency, triggered by a moment of stress,” Sherlock said easily. “The Alpha attack, for instance. But let’s put that one to rest, shall we?

“Yes, please, this one’s bonkers.”

“Let’s call this question two. If you have such a gift as third sight, you should be able to predict something for me.”

John laughed humorlessly. “How about, I’ll punch your nose flat if you start running psychology tests on me.”

Sherlock didn’t even blink. “No, of course, it can have nothing to do with your own agency.” He thought a moment. “All right. This woman we’re about to meet. Molly Hooper. Tell me a personal detail about her life neither you nor I could possibly know.”

John groaned. “Ask me something else.”

“That’s my question.”

“Well, it’s a rubbish question.”

“Why?”

“Because if I were psychic, but I didn’t want you to know it, I would just make something up! I would lie! You would discover it was untrue, conclude I didn’t have third sight or whatever, and cross it off your list of three.” There was a beat of silence. “Which you should! Because it’s mad!”

“Ah, but John, you said you would answer my questions honestly. Plus, you also said you do want me to discover the truth.”

John sank back in his seat and let his head fall back.

“I’m waiting for an answer. Any personal detail will do.”

He closed his eyes. “Molly Hooper,” he said, “has a cat.”

Sherlock huffed. “Lots of people have cats.”

“The cat’s name is Toby. A calico. Green eyes.”

“That is more specific.”

“It’s . . . guesswork.”
“Then we shall see.”

“We’re going there to ask about her attack, Sherlock, not to quiz her about her personal life.”

Sherlock started pulling on the tips of his gloves, preparing for their stop. “You’ve rarely seen me in action, John; you don’t know my methods. Pay attention, and watch the master at work.”

The taxi rolled to a stop, and Sherlock shifted forward in his seat to pay the driver. But he continued addressing John.

“You’re never so argumentative with me,” he said. Strangely, though, he seemed not so much annoyed, but intrigued. “Interesting.” And he stepped out of the taxi.

John pushed open the door on his side and hurried around to the pavement leading to the front doors of St. Margaret’s. “Hang on,” he said. “What’s your final theory?”

In step with one another, they pushed into the entryway, Sherlock shoving his gloves in his pockets and loosening his scarf, John unzipping his coat. “The least probable of them all,” he said. “And the worst possibility I can imagine. But it will have to wait. We’ve arrived.”

xXx

The reception area of the hospital was unlike any John had seen before. After announcing themselves at the front desk, Sherlock was led through a door on the right marked Alphas, while a door in the middle read Betas, and a door on the left read Omegas. After Sherlock quickly signed in (signing both of their names), they were parted, each escorted through his own door.

John found himself led down a short hallway and into a room where three stations were set up as a queue, and two other Omegas were ahead of him going through it. His initial protests that he wasn’t ill were swiftly overridden: it was a process all Omegas had to complete, and he fell in line. At the first station, a nurse swiped his forehead to get a temperature reading; at the next, another nurse had him put his finger into a little machine that pricked his finger and gave an instant analysis to a third nurse, who declared his toxin levels “normal” and his status as “bonded”; and at the final station, the last nurse had him answer what, he felt, were very private questions:

“How long have you been bonded?” she asked, holding a tablet.

“Uh, seven years,” he answered quietly, not wishing to be overheard by the others in the room.

“How long since your last estrus cycle began?”

He glanced to the side where a fourth Omega, an Omega-X, had entered and was just at the first station. “Uh,” he said, his volume dropping even further, “a week?” Discomfited, he rubbed the back of his neck, eyes skipping around the room.

“Seven days?” she said loudly to verify.

He cleared his throat. “Erm, yeah.”

“And how long is your cycle?”

He coughed behind a closed fist. God, please let this be over soon. “Three days.”

“When is your next estrus due to start?”

Feeling the heat of embarrassment turning his face red, he said tightly, “Thirty-four more days.”
He didn’t really like thinking about it. Ever since he had read the number forty-one in the real John’s journal, he had felt like he was living with a countdown clock suspended over his head, in the shape of a guillotine.

The nurse tapped and swiped, then looked up at him a little more compassionately. Gesturing to her own face as an indication of his, she asked, “Looks like you had a bit of bad luck. You here to get that looked at?”

She meant the bruising.

“I’m fine,” he said, perhaps more forcefully than he should have. “I’m visiting a friend.”

“Right then. And you’re here with your Alpha, correct?”

“His name is Sherlock,” said John, trying not to grind his teeth.

“Kindly remind your Alpha that the mask must be worn at all times while in the hospital. The effect from his shot will wear off within six hours, and he won’t have any trouble recognizing or responding to your scent.”

John looked startled. “What?”

“Some Omegas get worried. But don’t fret. The scent inhibitor is most definitely temporary. Thank you.”

And she ushered him toward the door; behind him, the next Omega was stepping up to her station, and he heard her begin to answer all the same questions, unabashed.

On the other side of the door, the room opened up again, admitting Omegas, Betas, and Alphas into a single spacious lobby. All of the Alphas, John saw, were wearing surgical face masks, including Sherlock, whose coat was slung over one arm, and he was unrolling a sleeve over the arm where they had given him his shot. He began to understand the precautions this place took to protect Omegas from any predatory displays by Alphas. Sherlock’s scent was definitely different (he couldn’t believe he could detect such a thing), and it wasn’t enticing at all. With a pang of regret and confusion, he realized he missed the old scent. He much preferred it.

“Shall we?” said Sherlock, and they joined the queue for the lifts.

They took the lift to the third floor, and as they passed down the hallways of the unfamiliar hospital, John was struck by the strangeness of an environment that used to feel like a second home to him. The doctors, he could tell by scent, were all Betas, and he supposed that that made sense in an Omega hospital. The nurses too, for that matter. He didn’t fully understand the dynamics between Omegas and bonded Alphas (besides the one he shared with his own), but he knew a little too well about the unbonded sort, and how dangerous that could prove.

Detective Inspector Lestrade met them outside the door to where they were holding Molly, and John felt a pang of nostalgia and longing: the three of them, on a case, it just felt so normal, so right. But the moment he remembered the bigger world or the sharper picture, that sense of normalcy was spoiled. And the fact that they were all here for Molly, but only John knew her, was supremely disturbing.

Sherlock was making some flippant salutation and reaching for the door handle, but Lestrade stepped in his way.

“Actually, Sherlock,” he said, “now is not the best time.”
“Pardon?” His arm dropped to his side, disappointed. “You said she was in recovery. I need to talk to her.”

“Yeah, well, it may be a bit premature for that. She’s still in a bit of shock. Won’t talk to police, will barely talk to the nurses, might be best if we give her a bit of time.”

“We may not have a bit of time, Lestrade. These Alphas will likely go after someone else again tonight. I need to start hunting them now. This Omega is our best chance of a good start. Alpha packs aren’t terribly clever; they usually stick to their habits. So we need to find out what time they ambushed her, how they forced their way into the flat, who acted as ring-leader—”

“That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” John piped up. “I’ll be talking to her first.”

Sherlock’s mouth closed, and Lestrade’s eyebrows rose high, looking at John as if he hadn’t even seen him arrive. But when he responded, it was to Sherlock, not John.

“Shit, Sherlock, you brought your Omega?”

“Well spotted, inspector,” said Sherlock drily.

“He’s just been assaulted himself! He should be resting, if not in your care then at least in his sister’s.”

John let out a huff of laughter. “That’ll be the day.”

“He’s more . . . robust that you give him credit for,” said Sherlock, though an air of suspicion had settled over him at John’s remark. “But seriously, John, this is a crucial investigation, which requires professionalism and a delicate hand. You’re not exactly trained in this sort of thing.”

John bit his tongue from saying exactly what he felt like saying. He recalibrated and tried a different tact. “I didn’t say I’d interrogate her. But look.” He lowered his voice and stepped a little closer into their circle so that only Sherlock and Lestrade could possibly hear him. “This girl has been through a trauma. She’s terrified. And the last person she needs to talk to is a tall, scary Alpha with the bed-side manner or a hyperactive six-year-old, or a Beta copper scraping for the bottom line.” Both men’s jaws dropped in offense, but John pushed on. “What she needs right now is one of her own kind, an Omega, someone who at least has an inkling of what she’s just been through, a kindly face who is no stranger to trauma recovery. It’s not like she has anyone else here for her, am I right? Dead father, no bond-mate, no especially close friends or other relatives. So I’m going to go in, just me, alone, to talk to her, to be that calming presence you brought me here to be. Then, when she’s good and ready, and only then, will I come fetch you. We all clear on that? Good?”

Without waiting for their assent, he moved past Lestrade and gripped the door handle. As he let himself in, he heard Lestrade say to Sherlock in an undertone, “Has he always been this cheeky?”

“New development,” Sherlock muttered in reply, but there was a tinge of awe in his voice.

John didn’t have time to reflect on that. He barely remembered all he had said. He was like a volcano struggling not to erupt. But he had a more important task at hand now, and she was lying on her back in a hospital bed hooked up to IVs and monitors. The blankets were bunched to the side against the railing, exposing bare knees below the hem of a hospital gown, knees bent and pointing to the ceiling while a couple of pillows were stacked beneath her legs, elevating them and taking the pressure off her lower half. When she saw John approaching, she reached for the blanket and pulled a corner of it to her face, as though to hide.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” John said, slowing his steps. He gentled his tone, low and warm. “I
would never hurt you. I’m a friend.”

She still gripped the edge of the blanket, but she let it slip down her face just a little so she could see who was talking to her. He noticed dark bruises shining on her forehead, a blood-shot eye, and one finger was bandaged where it hooked over the blanket. He felt sick, knowing it was because of his own folly that she was in this bed to begin with.

“You’re not a policeman,” she said meekly.

“No.”

“Or a doctor.”

She spoke with a slight Cockney he’d never heard in her mouth before, and he realized that, in this place, she had been raised a little closer to the poverty line than back in Normalia. “Not in this life,” he said.

Molly breathed in, and John realized she was smelling him. He could smell her too, and bizarrely concluded that she was afraid—the scent told him so.

“You’re Omega.” At his silent affirmation, she continued, “Are you a patient, too?”

“No. But, I guess the thing is, I almost was.”

He could feel her eyes focused on his facial wounds, and the blanket came down a few more inches, tucked beneath her chin.

“Was it Alphas?” she asked, her voice quavering.

“Yeah. Three of them.” At her widening eyes, he continued, “I believe it was the same three that went after you. I’m so sorry, Molly. May I call you Molly?”

She nodded, and momentarily dropped her face into the blanket to wipe at her tears. With the shield lowered a bit, her scent became a little stronger, but he could also sense the fear beginning to recede. And he noticed something else, something he couldn’t quite name or describe, but to say that something about her smelled wounded. Like her hormones were telling him she was . . . tainted. Shaking his head to dispel the ugly thought, he gestured toward a rolling stool, asking if he could sit, and she nodded again. Slowly, he took the stool and scooted forward along the ground until he was at her elbow, but he still kept a respectful distance.

“My name is John,” he said. It felt strange, making this introduction. At least his counterpart had had some familiarity with the likes of Sherlock and Mycroft and Lestrade. But this was a friendship that had never been fostered, and that saddened him. “John Watson.” There he stopped. What they had once shared—in medical professions, in bearing Sherlock’s insults, in obsessions with Sherlock Holmes even—they no longer shared. Neither had entered the field of medicine, and Molly had never before even laid eyes on Sherlock.

“Molly Hooper,” she said, softly, dropping the H of her surname. She was looking him over now, bashfully, from battered face to bandaged hand, and John gave her time to do it. He knew he was a sight, but she was the one in the hospital bed. “Were you . . . I’m sorry, did they . . . ?” She couldn’t quite say it.

He spared her. “They meant to.”

“What happened?”
Taking a deep breath, he said, “I was cornered. I was on my own, on a bus, and they saw a target. I managed to give them the slip, get myself out of there, but . . .”

“They hunted you.”

“Yes, I guess you could say that. Caught me on the street, pulled me down an alley. I . . . I was lucky to get away.”

“Was it your Alpha what saved you then?”

“He wasn’t there, at the time. I was on my own.”

She looked sadly up at him. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Like I said, I just got lucky.” He shifted forward guiltily. He had come to comfort her, not the other way around. “How are you feeling, Molly? Are you in much pain?”

“A bit,” she said, trying to sit taller, but finding it difficult with how she was positioned and with all the wires. John stood and helped, adjusting the pillows behind her and giving her an arm to hold as she scooted up.

“We can probably get them to up your dosage a bit. What do they have you on? Morphine? Codeine?” He turned to see her chart hanging on the wall by her bedside. “Amitriptyline,” he read, but with a frown. “Have you been diagnosed with depression before?” She shook her head slowly.

“Then it might be a bit premature, putting you on this stuff. Let’s have you taken off so they can increase your . . .” He stopped, seeing her wide-eyed amazement. “Never mind,” he said. “I just, that is, I don’t want you to be in any pain.”

“Serves me right, I suppose,” she mumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Pushing twilight, like I was.”

“Pushing twilight?”

Without sensing his lack of understanding, she continued, “It wasn’t full-on dark yet, but near enough. Should have been tucked away and safe in my flat, but I wasn’t paying attention. Got caught up watching a film with some mates, didn’t even notice the clocks. When I did, I couldn’t afford a cab. I hurried, but . . . not quick enough, I guess.” She laughed, but without cracking a smile. “You’d think, my whole life spent watching the sun, I wouldn’t make such a bloody stupid mistake.”

“Molly, no. What happened wasn’t—” he fought to keep his teeth from grinding—“your fault. What happened to me wasn’t my fault. They attacked us. The blame lies entirely with them.”

“Yeah, but, they can’t help it sometimes, can they?”

“They bloody well can,” he growled. Her fear spiked (he could smell it), and he calmed himself again to say, “Sorry, sorry. It’s just . . . There are no excuses for what they did, Molly.”

She nodded slowly, but her eyes were welling with tears. “I wish I could go back,” she said. “Left sooner. Seen them before they pushed me through the door.”

Tentatively, John reached for her, setting his warm hand atop hers. “Do you want to talk about
what happened?”

“With you? Just you?”

“Yes.”

She seemed to be bracing, fighting to control her breathing, but she nodded again and began to speak.

They had been following her. She wasn’t sure how long. Since the bus? It had been crowded, filled with Alphas, Betas, and Omegas, so she couldn’t be sure. The streets had been busy, too, and they may have spotted her then, a lone Omega at dusk, clearly nervous about being out so late, and hurrying home. All she knew for sure was that she had just turned the key in her door when suddenly they were behind her, pushing her across the threshold, and following her inside.

Despite knowing how useless it was, she struggled, beat her hands and kicked her legs, but she only managed to get out one scream before the first punch knocked her silent. Then they dragged her down the hallway, asked which bedroom was hers, and threw her inside.

That’s where they did it, all three of them, right there on her very own bed. They took turns. And it was during that last assault that her two flatmates, Beta-Xs, returned home. But the Alphas kept their hands over her mouth and throat so she couldn’t call out, and the ringleader continued to knot her, then mark her, forcing a bond while on the other side of the wall, her flatmates popped on the telly and laughed together late into the night as they watched a string of stand-up Beta comedians drone on about the differences between Alphas and Omegas.

The Alphas stayed with her for hours, until the flatmates were heard readying for bed, finishing up in the bathroom, and retreating to their own rooms. When all was quiet, they slipped out of her bedroom, down the darkened hallway, and right out the front door. By then, she could already feel the toxins burning in her system. She had dropped her bag with her phone in it by the door. Because of the severity of the pain, she couldn’t reach it to call for help. All she could do was cry, and in time, one of her flatmates heard her and came inquiring. It was she who called for the ambulance. She was rushed to Omega Emergency, drained, and given a cocktail of neutralizing hormones; but her body was still fighting the bond.

John never let go of her hand as she spoke, but only tightened his grip on it, and by the time she was finished, he was sitting on the side of the bed, and as she dissolved into tears, he pulled her into his arms and held her firmly.

“What’s going to happen to me?” she sobbed.

“Molly, Molly,” he soothed, smoothing a hand down her hair. “We’re going to take care of you. I promise.”

“He bonded with me. He did,” she said, crying into his shirt, and looking down, John could see the bond mark against her neck, surrounded by black bruises. The mark looked nothing like his own, which was a thin white ring of noticeable but fairly tame teeth marks. Molly’s was red and mean-looking, like the Alpha had chomped and torn and crushed. The skin had already sealed itself (apparently a property of an Alpha’s saliva), but it looked painful still. And John reflected on his own mark with a little bit of . . . gratitude.

He wondered what that moment had been like for the other John. In his journals, he had written of his bonding with near reverence and absolute affection, and it had annoyed John at first, this gobsmacked devotion. But now, looking at the horrible mark on Molly’s skin, and comparing his
experience when he had allowed Sherlock to wash away the scent of the intruder-Alphas and replace it with his own, feeling calm and content and safe, he now recognized the gentleness that his bond-mate was capable of and how, if such things must be done, how they should be done. And he found himself regretting that he had no memory of what it had felt like, that first time, when Sherlock and John had bonded.

“We can fix this, too,” he promised.

“You can’t. I’m contaminated.” Her jaw quivered as she continued, “No Alpha will ever want me. I have no true bond-mate, no pack, no one to hunt in my name.”

“That’s not true.” He pulled back, gripped her by the shoulders, and said, “You’re part of our pack now. We’re going to hunt these bastards down, I swear, and we’re going to do it for you.”

Her wet eyes grew round with astonishment. “Who’s we?”

“Sherlock and me. That is, erm, my Alpha, Sherlock, and, well, me.”

“You’re Omega.”

He clenched his jaw but said calmly, “I know what I am.”

“Omegas don’t hunt Alphas.”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” He gave her a smile and a wink.

“But... I can’t join your pack.”

“Whyever not?”

She gawked at him, like he’d said something absurd. “Because your Alpha is... yours.”

“Well, sure, in a way...”

“You’re bonded, aren’t you?”

“Technically... yes.”

“Then he’s scented you. He hasn’t scented me.”

“There are other ways to make a pack,” said John, but secretly, he thought that perhaps he had no idea what he was even talking about, and added it to a list of things to research the moment he got a chance. What did pack even mean in this place?

But at his words, Molly, for the first time since he entered her hospital room, looked hopeful.

“Sherlock’s not only a, um, ‘Alpha on the hunt’”—he cringed, wishing he had a better handle on his new vocabulary—“but he’s also a detective. He works with the police. Would you be willing to talk to him, to tell him the same things you told me?”

She was certainly calmer now; he could smell it. And though she looked a little nervous, she agreed, saying, “Will you stay?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised.

At last, John retrieved Lestrade and Sherlock, who regarded John with an air of suspicion and
curiosity, respectively. Then he returned to Molly’s side to hold her hand as she answered their questions and gave her account of what had happened. She was scared. Unlike the infatuated Molly he had always known, she gave no signs of interest in Sherlock at all but instead seemed rather intimidated, his Alpha to her Omega, and John doubted that the surgical face mask was doing anything to ease her distress. She kept her head inclined as she spoke and seldom made eye contact, except for with John, to whom she would occasionally glance as though seeking help when things got especially uncomfortable, and he squeezed her hand to let her know he was there with her.

Sherlock, of course, asked most of the questions while Lestrade took notes, and he was just as efficient and detached as the Sherlock John had always known, to the point where he had to intercede with a warning tone (“Sherlock”) if ever his phrasing came across as insensitive or downright rude. And when he did, Sherlock shot him a look of surprise, those shockingly blue eyes all the more piercing above the line of the mask than they’d ever seemed before (likely, he was unaccustomed to be censured, especially by his own Omega!), but he did back off and try again.

But there was no denying he was good. The interview was thorough, and Sherlock extracted details John wouldn’t have thought to ask. When at last he was satisfied, he said, “I do hope you recover quickly, Ms Hooper. And rest assured, these Alphas will suffer the consequences of what they have done.” He turned to leave, but stopped short, came back around, and said, “Is there anything you need during your stay in hospital? Anyone you need us to contact, any pets to look after in your absence?”

Molly shook her head. “Thank you, but no. I’ve no family, and my flatmates will see to the cat.”

“Oh, you have a cat?” said Sherlock with feigned nonchalance as he threw another chary glance John’s way. “Animals can be a great source of comfort at times like these.” He cleared his throat and asked with a casual air, “What’s his name?”

“Toby,” she said. And her eyes brightened at his interest. “I have a picture of him on my phone, if you’d like to see.”

John winced, doubting very much that Sherlock would want to spend any time looking through cat photos, but Sherlock, who had sucked in a bit of air at her naming the cat Toby, smiled beneath the mask and said, “Please.”

She scrolled quickly through her phone (its mobile service disabled while in hospital) and turned the screen for him to see. John watched him flick through a few of the photos, saw the line of his jaw square off, and he turned the screen for John to see.

“Handsome animal, wouldn’t you say, John? I believe that’s what they call a calico.”

John cleared his throat, cricked his neck. “Indeed.”

“Rest well, Ms. Hooper,” said Sherlock, handing her back the phone and moving at once for the exit.

“We’ll let you know if we have any more questions,” said Lestrade, following after.

And John, at last, patted Molly’s hand and gave her a comforting smile. “We’ll be back. And I’ll have a quick word with the doctor. Let me see what I can do about increasing your pain medication, eh?”

She thanked him, and he helped her slump down a little further into the bed and covered her with the blanket, the better to sleep.
They were back at the flat. Lestrade’s people were working with the latest information and scrolling through Alpha registries to find their perps, and though John half expected Sherlock to hit the streets and sniff them out himself (was such terminology apt? *sniff*?), when they got back into a taxi, Sherlock pointed them straight back to Baker Street for a painfully silent ride. And even after they’d walked through the door, Sherlock still didn’t say a word, didn’t so much as look at John. He seemed . . . angry.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, John ventured to break it. “You want to talk about this?” he ventured carefully.

Sherlock was staring out the window, hands clasped behind his back. Without turning around, he said, “I do not believe you are clairvoyant.”

“Good,” said John. “That’s . . . good. Because I’m not.”

“I know.”

“Okay . . .”

“And you’re not a spy.”

“No. Not that either.”

Silence returned, and persisted. John felt a troubling tension in the air, as volatile as electricity. It frightened him. Something was about to shatter in Sherlock’s world, and it was going to hurt, hurt them both, and the horrible thing was, John knew it had to happen.

“Are we done playing twenty questions?”

“I told you. I don’t need twenty questions.”

“Oh.” Then he understood. “What was your third theory, Sherlock?” he asked quietly.

Standing stock still, refusing to meet John’s eyes even through the reflection, Sherlock asked in a monotone, “Third question. Where did you and I first meet?”

At once, John sensed the nature of the trick question, and his mind spun as he debated how to answer. He remembered the story from the journals; he knew his own story; and he remembered very, very well how he had first met *this* Sherlock. But which answer was Sherlock asking for? Which truth did he really want to know?

“We met on a train,” he said quietly. “Ipswich to London. Seven years ago.”

Sherlock slowly turned toward him. Their eyes locked, but Sherlock’s were frightfully unreadable. “And what was the very first thing I said to you?”

Yes, this was definitely a test, John thought, and he was seconds away from failing it.

He swallowed. “I don’t know,” he said.

A flash of pain scattered across Sherlock’s face, but in the next second, he had full mastery of himself again, and his expression became stone. He took a step closer. John was reminded that Sherlock, as an Alpha, was a larger specimen than he was used to; and he, John, was just a tiny Omega.
“Let’s try this again, shall we?” said Sherlock. “Where did you and I first meet?”

John frowned. He looked away. He felt an unaccountable guilt rise up in him, perhaps because of his seven days of deceit, perhaps because he was about to wound this man, and his Sherlock or not, he didn’t want to see that happen. He cared for him. God help him, he cared for him a lot.

“What was your third theory, Sherlock?” he asked again, even quieter than before, already guessing at the worst possibility Sherlock could imagine.

“That you,” said Sherlock, advancing once more before stopping directly in front of him, “are not John Watson.”

John slowly lifted his eyes and breathed in; his scent had returned to normal, but there was something else, something startling: Sherlock was afraid.

“Implausible,” he whispered.

“But not impossible,” Sherlock countered. “You look like John, you sound like John.” He lifted his hands and placed them on either side of John’s head, anchoring him there as he brought their foreheads together and breathed in, one slow, loud inhalation. “You smell like John.” The hands gripped his head harder and began to tremble, a mixture of anger and fear. “Then why can’t I believe you are really him?”

“Sherlock—"

“Give me another explanation, John. Please. I need another explanation for all of this.”

John took Sherlock by the wrists and pulled his hands away from his head. Then he took a step back, creating a distance he knew was necessary for what he had to say next. Forcing himself to make eye contact, even though it hurt, he said, “I first met Sherlock Holmes in a laboratory in St Bart’s Hospital. Two years ago.”

Sherlock’s mouth fell open, his lips forming the words two years, but he had fallen absolutely mute. Nevertheless, the stony expression had given way to pain and confusion. John pressed on before he lost his nerve.

“I let him borrow my phone.”

“Bart’s?” Sherlock said, breathless.

“He was running experiments for a case. I had recently been invalided home from Afghanistan after taking a bullet in the shoulder.”

“Afghanistan? Bullet?”

“I was looking for a flatmate. He was, too. A mutual friend introduced us, someone I knew from when we had studied together in that very hospital.”

Sherlock’s voice is very pained now. “Studied . . . Studied what?”

“We became friends, Sherlock and I. I dare say, he became my best friend. But I . . . I never told him that.”

“You’re not John Watson,” Sherlock choked.

“I am,” John sighed. “Just not the John Watson you know.”
Practically trembling, Sherlock turned away, walked to his chair, and fell into it. “Then where is the John Watson I know?” he asked.

To John’s surprise, Sherlock’s voice was strained with emotion. Then the Alpha, who had always seemed so cold and rigid and unaffected, broke down and cried.
In Which John Pulls a Drive and Dash

After the row, John fled. He barely remembered doing so. One moment, he was in the flat, on his feet and crying and shouting that Sherlock was mad, off-his-rocker mad, and the next, he was on the street, walking at a jogger’s pace, the only thought in his mind to get away and save himself from an Alpha’s temper. That was instinct. Self-preservation. Sherlock had never gone off on him before, let alone made such awful and unfounded accusations, but he remembered his lessons from school: a happy Alpha is a harmless Alpha—keep your Alpha happy, keep yourself safe.

It’s not that Sherlock had tried to hurt him. He hadn’t even lifted a hand. It was the look on his face, the hardness in his eyes, directed at him. He’d never seen such a look before, not from Sherlock, not at him. It was like there was no love there, no affection at all. And for seven years, he had always been able to see love in Sherlock’s eyes, even in recent months and his last few heats, when things felt like they had cooled.

This past week, however, their fire had been rekindled. John couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so happy, so in love. It was like they were starting over. They were like new people. Well, they were new people. They had been somehow and miraculously converted into Betas. And exploring those new bodies—discovering new pleasure points, capabilities, and limitations—had been a thrill. Erections had been... strange. But he could adapt to that. Sure, coupling in Beta bodies meant it was all over rather quickly, and usually (except once) happened only once in a night. And yes, it was far less intense, as orgasms went. He wouldn’t go so far as to say that it was disappointing, exactly. It still felt great. But it would take some getting used to. The point was, he and Sherlock had been connecting (that is, heh, more than just physically) in a way that hadn’t in months. And in that way, it was... perfect.

There were other benefits, too. Sex as a Beta wasn’t three days and done, and a long stretch of waiting and anticipating until the next cycle came around the bend. They could do it every night, for as many nights as they wished. Technically, he supposed, Alphas and Omegas could, too. Orgasm wasn’t impossible without the knot, but it wasn’t desirable. Knots were what made for the intensity of an orgasm, and the duration. Alphas had little interest in sex without it, but an Omega couldn’t take it outside of the heat without severe health risks. So it never happened. Sex, that was. Outside of the heat. Heat sex was everything, and it was why Beta sex was the butt of the jokes on so many sitcoms and stand-up routines.

But John had experienced it now, and he didn’t believe those stereotypes about inferior Beta sex anymore. Not when Sherlock had been so loving and gentle. John had spent his whole life being taken from behind, because that was just the way things were done. So to be lying on his back with Sherlock above him, holding him, holding them both while the heat built and the shockwaves came, never once looking away, and every moment seeing the love in his eyes and the shape of the words on his lips—how could there be anything inferior about that?

And then there was the kissing. They had never kissed before. After all, it was such a Beta thing to do. In the absence of estrus initiation, foreplay, as it had been described to him during sex ed, was an inferior way for Betas to exhibit and generate desire sufficient for copulation. Some Betas relied on it, apparently, and others engaged in the behavior even when already aroused, as though out of instinct. But there was no true biological function in kissing, he had learned, and so no point in doing it. Now he couldn’t imagine never being kissed again. It had been Sherlock’s idea, too. When he closed his eyes, John could still see in his mind’s eye what he had seen that night: Sherlock drawing nearer, the look in his eyes both desirous and nervous, and asking, “May I try something?” It was new for him, too, but he knew the Beta game. They both did. And clearly
Sherlock had been wanting it to work between them. After all, they had been a couple for seven years. Surely that still meant something, even without the bond.

But maybe that was the problem! He thought he could pretend that things weren’t fundamentally different now, but maybe Sherlock was right. He wasn’t the same John Watson anymore. Maybe Sherlock just wanted to return to the Alpha-Omega bond they had known from the beginning, and they couldn’t return.

He had been raised with the frightening stories of the agony of bond severance, pain both physical and emotional. He had seen others traumatized when bonds were cut. But he had always trusted that his and Sherlock’s bond was too strong, too real. He even thought it had survived their corporeal transformations. Now, however, he was beginning to understand what a terrible thing it was. His heart was breaking, and he thought he might die from the pain.

So he went to the only place left to him in the world where he knew he would find an open door and a warm embrace. Barely holding back the tears, he knocked on Harry’s door.

A full minute passed before she finally appeared, wearing slippers and an open robe exposing a three-decades-old signed Queen t-shirt, which John had only ever seen behind glass on the wall above her bed, so he was surprised to see that it looked like she had worn it every day since the eighties. Her hair was disheveled and day-old makeup was rubbing away. One arm braced the door open, the other hand held a half-drained martini glass off to her side. In this body language, John read open arms, and he collapsed against her, sobbing onto her breast.

“The fuck, John?” she asked, trying to extract herself.

“I didn’t know where else to go!” he cried, trying to hold her more tightly. With her free hand, she tried to swat him away, but he thought she was patting him consolingly.

Harry sighed loudly. “What, did someone die?”

“Nn-nnh,” he replied. “Sher— Sher—”

“Did that psychopath finally kick you out of the house?”

He flinched to hear her call Sherlock such a hateful name. True, others had called him that, and worse, but Harry had always been supportive of their bond. Maybe she was just being sympathetic in aligning herself against him? So, lips trembling, he shook his head on her ample bosom. “I . . . left . . .”

Another loud, angry sigh. “Fine. Come in. Sit down. And not a word about my cork tower.” She waved her glass at a precarious looking Eiffel Tower of wine corks in the corner. “I’ll pour you a drink.”

She left him in the sitting room and disappeared to the kitchen. John stood motionless, not knowing what to do, not only because he couldn’t find anywhere to sit (the couches and chairs were piled with dirty clothes and dirtier magazines) or even walk (the floor was littered with empty beer cans and bottles), but because he had never seen this place in such a state of disarray. He’d been here only three weeks ago for one of their mahjong nights, and the whole house had been in its usual state of immaculate tidiness. But this. The reek of alcohol, the stench of unwashed clothes. It spoke of months, years, of neglect. What had happened?

When she returned, she was holding two glasses of scotch, the bottle weighting the left pocket of her dressing gown and slapping her thigh with each step. Balancing precariously (rather like her
tower) on one leg, she kicked a pile of magazines to the floor, motioned for him to sit, and placed one of the glasses in his hands. She was serving him alcohol? Could she smell it on him, that he wasn’t Omega anymore? What he had drunk so far he hadn’t much cared for, but what he liked even less was being pinned as a Beta so casually by someone who had known him his entire life.

“You gonna tell me what happened?” she asked after taking a long drink from her own glass. She actually drained it, and poured herself another.

He pulled his eyes away from the disaster of her living room and tried to refocus them on her, but they were still blurry from tears. He had a funny ringing in his ears, too. The whole world sounded as though it were playing in a different key today.

“Sorry?” he said.

“Jesus, John, I never took you for a mope. Grow a pair.”

He flinched again at the insensitive words he was so unused to hearing from her lips. He sniffled and wiped a hand under his nose. The nearest tissue box was empty. “Where’s Clara?” he asked, needing another thread of conversation while he pulled himself together.


John blinked. “Of course, Clara Whittle.”

“How the hell should I know? I haven’t given that bitch two seconds’ thought for two fucking years. Why? Have you seen her?”

“No . . .”

“Holy hell, John, what’s the matter with you? Your flatmate texts me in the middle of a nap, telling me I need to get in touch with you or some shite like that, doesn’t even say why, and next I know you show up on my doorstep for the first time in ages, blubbering like a moron, and asking me about Clara? Are you drunk?”

His face fell into his hand, unable to keep himself together any longer. He almost dropped the glass altogether. “I don’t know what’s happening to me!”

“Ah, shit.”

“I’m not an Omega anymore, Harry. I don’t know how it happened, but I’ve changed. And Sherlock was okay with it, for a little while. But now . . . Now I don’t think he loves me at all. He called me an imposter. He says he doesn’t know me, says I’ve tricked him, just to get him into bed . . .”

She sat forward on the edge of her seat with sudden interest. “Oh my God. Oh. My. God. Are you two shagging?”

“Huh?”

“You’re screwing Sherlock Holmes?” She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh my God, I knew it! I knew you were mad for him. Well, if that isn’t one for the papers. Please tell me you’re putting it in your blog. You’d get a million hits, you know. And I’d finally start reading again, I was getting bored with the will-they-won’t-they trope. Go on then! Share the sordid details—who sucked off who, who how many fingers fit up whose whatsit, how many times in a night—and you’d have in me your most loyal follower.” She laughed again, sloshing scotch into her lap.
John stared at her in horror, and he had a sudden and terrifying impulse: to echo Sherlock’s words and ask her who she was and what she had done with the real Harry Watson.

Next he knew, he was on his feet. “I have to go,” he said.

“You just got here!”

Yes, and he had come to talk to Harry, his Harry, the protective older sister who had always teased but tended him. He had been expecting to confess everything of his transformation, to share the details of his shattered heart, to be served hot tea, not scotch malt, to be mothered, not mocked, and to have someone help him make sense of a world falling apart. Instead, he found the walls of his reality crumbling even more. His very foundations were being pitched to and fro.

“You know, John,” she said, trailing after him as he made a beeline for the door in his desperate need to escape this stranger’s house, “this is exactly why you and I have never got on. You can’t take even the slightest ribbing. You’re just a goody-goody bastard with a stick so far up his arse, it’s a wonder I can’t see it poking out your nose. You think your life is sooo great, and the moment one little thing goes wrong, you think the sky is falling. It’s just like when you came back from Afghanistan. I mean, you were barely hurt, and it’s all boo-hoo, look at me, I took one in the shoulder and now I’m limping. Like that ever made a lick of sense. You can be a real attention-seeking prat sometimes, you know, and you showing up today like this proves it. So go. Go find someone else’s shoulder to cry on. Or better yet, find some alley bloke to shag you rotten, if that’s what makes you feel better these days. I always knew you were a queer. And wouldn’t dad be so proud to have another bender in the family? So welcome to the club, poofter, and stay the fuck out of my life. Fucking knob.”

And with that, she slammed the door in his face.

xXx

He found himself wandering aimlessly in a park, so stunned by what had happened to him in the space of an hour that he was barely thinking clearly enough to walk in a straight line, or remember how he’d got to where he was. Then someone called his name.

“Watson!”

He stopped short and saw a portly, bespectacled fellow angling toward him, huffing through a smile as he lumbered along. John quickly tried to reason out why this stranger was chasing him down. Had he dropped his wallet? Had he knocked into him and not even noticed? Was he some sort of messenger? All he knew for sure was that he had never seen the man before in his life.

“You never do see me when I’m sat on a bench,” said the man with a laugh, once he had caught John up. He rested a hand on his round belly as he tried to catch his breath. “Had to shout at you three times!”

“Apologies,” John murmured, sniffing discreetly. He wanted to say Beta, but he felt like he just couldn’t be sure anymore. His intuitions seemed not to be functional lately.

“Nonsense,” said the man, slapping him familiarly on the upper arm. “You were obviously deep in thought. A million miles away. In a rush? Am I keeping you from something?”

“No, no, I’m just . . .” John looked around—at the children playing, the cyclists riding in tandem, the little leaves fluttering on the trees—not really knowing where he was. Some park. Somewhere in London. Everything just looked so strange, like he’d never seen it before, like the light was
different or something. His exact whereabouts, though, were not terribly important. There were still several hours until dark, after all. It only occurred to him then that he didn’t know where he would be once it got dark, whether he would be able to find a friend or an Omega sanctuary to take him in or . . . But then, he wasn’t Omega anymore! They wouldn’t shelter him. But then, being Beta, maybe staying out past sundown wasn’t so dangerous? Still, just the thought of it made him feel vulnerable. He was scared, and tired, and lost, and he didn’t know where to go or what to do.

“Just walking,” he finished miserably.

“Just get off a shift?”

“Shift?”

“At the surgery. Last I heard you were still down at Mayberry. Or did you find something closer to home?”

“Sorry,” said John, shuffling backwards, “I think . . . I think you’re confusing me with someone else.”

The man’s face fell, shifting from jolly to puzzled in a blink. “John? Are you quite all right?”

“I . . . don’t . . .”

He looked around in distress, wishing there was somewhere he could disappear to, but he was in wide open territory.

“Hey. Hey,” said the man, trying to take his arm. “Is something wrong?”

“Everything’s wrong,” John said squeakily.

“Oh.” The man frowned pityingly. “You want to talk about it? Maybe I can help. I know, let’s go for a drink, eh? We can talk at the pub.”

The liberty in touching his arm, the offer to get drinks, the display of concern and the look of promise on his face that he could alleviate whatever ailed him . . . Was this man trying to pick him up? Was the fact of his failing bond that obvious, that within mere hours he would once again be transformed into little more than prey for the hunt or an apple for the picking? Something rose up inside of him, unable to be tamped down, and he shouted, “No!” and twisted away from the portly man’s soothing hands.

The man jumped; a flock of pigeons took flight; and John, having startled himself, clamped a hand across his mouth.

“Okay, mate, sorry. Look, John, do you need me to call someone for you?”

“No,” said John, voiced pitched high as he backed away. “Just . . . just leave me alone. Please. I don’t know you. I don’t know you.”

And he turned and ran.

xXx

He threw himself into the back of a taxi. He was shaking like a leaf and felt close to throwing up, but he had the wherewithal to know what he needed to do, where he needed to go. “An Omega clinic, please,” he said. “Any Omega clinic.”
The cabbie looked at him through the rearview mirror. “What’s that, eh?”

“What?”

“What?”

“A clinic. An Omega clinic. For Omegas.”

“You got an address, mate?”

“Any, I said.”

“Look, pal,” the cabbie said, tetchily, “I don’t know what you mean, so you need to give me an address.”

“My usual isn’t there anymore, so just any.”

There had to be some way for him to switch back, there just had to. As an Omega, Sherlock might want him again. He was convinced that an Omega clinic was his best chance of figuring this whole thing out once and for all. That last doctor, the “men’s health specialist” or whatever, he hadn’t had a clue about what was going on. It was this damned Beta body that was throwing everything out of whack, everything from how people treated him to his perceptions of the world. He just couldn’t stand it anymore. So he was ready for whatever he needed to do: pills, surgery, hormone therapy, anything. He just wanted out of this damned body. He was Omega, heart and soul, no matter what the biology dictated.

“Well, what is it?” asked the cabbie.

“What is what?”

“This ‘omega’ clinic. What is it?”

“What do you mean, what is it? It’s a clinic for Omegas. Never mind. Just . . . just take me to Omega Emergency. That should be good enough.”

“What, like A&E?”

“I don’t know! St Margaret’s, take me to St Margaret’s Hospital.”

“Right. That I can do,” said the cabbie, shaking his head and finally putting the car into gear. The meter started running.

Twenty minutes later, as they were nearing the hospital, John patted the pocket of his jacket and froze. He felt the front pocket of his trousers and gasped. He lifted himself up and check both back pockets, and whimpered in his throat. He’d forgotten his wallet. The meter already read 15 quid, and he had no means of paying. How could he have been so stupid! To leave the flat with neither wallet nor—he checked again quickly, and nope, no dice—phone! So intent on distancing himself from accusations of “you’re not John!” and demands of “tell me where he is!” that he’d been so wretchedly distraught and had given no thought to either of those things. And now he was in for a heap of embarrassment, an infuriated cabbie, possibly detainment, or arrest, or, or, or—

At the next stoplight, still several streets away from the hospital, he panicked. He threw open the door and ran.

“Hey! Hey!!”
But he ignored the cries of rage and just bolted.

**xXx**

John felt like a fugitive.

No, there were no sirens in pursuit, no cops charging after him, or fingers pointing at him down the street, marking his dodgy steps and shifting eyes. Yes, it had been a measly 15 pounds (and he promised himself he’d pay it back, just as soon as he was able), but it wasn’t just the drive-and-dash. It was the dreadful realization that he had no safe haven. The two people he had always relied on for security, whom he had trusted heart and soul, had within an hour of each other rejected him, cast him out, closed the door. His Omega resources had inexplicably disappeared. When he had reached St. Margaret’s by foot (having taken the long way around), he had been stunned to find no marked entrance for Omegas, and the woman behind reception had seemed so puzzled, so concerned, and the moment she had offered to refer him to the psychiatric ward, he did what he had done in the taxi—fled, as though from an explosion.

He felt like his world was exploding.

At a payphone, he dialled the Omega hotline, a service he had used only twice before in his life: once, well before he had met Sherlock, when he had been feeling lonely and pointless in the world; and a second time during a heat ten years ago, when the Alpha from the service had been . . . well, *unkind* (he didn’t really like to think about the disgusting things the man had said during knotting, the teasing threats that he would bite and bond whether John wanted it or not, or especially the ferocity with which he had claimed John, which had been both painful and humiliating). That time, after only a day, he had sneaked away from the sleeping Alpha, locked himself in the bathroom with his phone, and called the hotline in tears; and within the hour, a small team had arrived at his door to bear the abusive Alpha away and deliver a replacement to finish out his heat. It was a comfort, knowing that the Omega hotline was there.

Now, just like everything, it was gone.

The street was filled with Betas. Through bleary eyes, that’s all he could see, and he couldn’t smell a single one of them. He wandered, aimless and exhausted, for hours until his feet were sore and legs weary, and that’s when he saw where he was—back on the Waterloo Bridge, where it had all begun.

The sun was melting into the horizon, and John, unable to take one more step with the world crashing down on his shoulders, sank with it, leaning against the railing and staring down into the dark water of the Thames. His knees bobbed up and down uncontrollably, and his shoulders began to shake, and just before he cracked, he heard a familiar voice calling his name:

“John?”

He lifted his head and turned, and there he saw Sherlock walking toward him. Sherlock, in his big black coat and dark blue scarf, curly hair dancing in the wind, eyes bright as the sky. His gait was sure, but his face looked less so, like he was approaching a wounded animal and didn’t want to spook it, and didn’t know how it would react: would it panic and flee, or lash out? Not even John knew, in those seconds as Sherlock drew nearer, what he would do. Part of him wanted to run into his arms; another part was screaming to fly in the opposite direction, or maybe, hell, just over the railing. In the end, he chose the fourth option: freeze.

“I shouldn’t have let you take off like that,” said Sherlock, something resembling contrition on his face. “We should have . . . talked.”
John pursed his lips together, trying to keep them from quivering. “How did you find me?” he asked, a croak in his throat.


“And I’m not the John you knew,” said John sorrowfully.

“You didn’t know, either,” said Sherlock. “I saw it, the way you turned to Harry, the way you turned away from Mike. You didn’t know that you’re . . . not you.”

All at once, the truth of it crashed down on him. He clapped his hands across his mouth and doubled over, trying to contain the sobs that were trying to tear him to pieces. But then he felt a splayed hand on his back, an arm curling around his middle, and Sherlock pulled him into a tight embrace.

“This isn’t my world!” cried John, laying his head against Sherlock’s neck.

“I don’t know what’s happened . . . ‘John’ . . . but I promise you.” Sherlock pulled back and held John’s head between his large hands so that he could look him square in the eye. “Whatever it is, we’ll get it sorted. We’ll set it right.”

“I want to go home.”

“I know.” He pulled John in again, and this time John held him back. He couldn't help it. The very core of his being had always trusted Sherlock Holmes, apparently in whatever form. “I know.”
In the morning, an old man from Hammersmith arrived at the flat with an unusual claim.

“The police think I’m senile,” he said, still holding out the two comparison photographs for Sherlock to examine, “but I’m telling you, she’s not my real wife. We’ve been bonded fifty-one years, I would know. She may look like my Jackie, but I’m telling you, she doesn’t smell like her. Whoever this is, she’s an impostor.”

Though they tried to appear impassive, John’s jaw was clenched and Sherlock’s eyes were wide, and when they exchanged glances, each knew exactly what the other was thinking.

*It’s happened to others.*

Sherlock took the case, and within twenty minutes, they were following Mr. Elmer Jacobs to his home Hammersmith.

Two hours later, they were back.

“Just an ordinary murder,” said John, shedding his coat and throwing it onto the couch.

“Mm,” Sherlock murmured, echoing his disappointment.

Any other day of the year, John would have found such a case fascinating, exhilarating, one for the blog. A doppelganger encountered on a train? A body under the floor in the pantry? A down-on-her-luck Omega-X trying to force a bond with an Alpha-Y so she could be sure to inherit his money? That was something of a reversal in this neck of the wackoverse, he was pretty sure. On the cab ride back, he couldn’t help (out of old habit) but workshop blog titles in his head: The Omega Swap, or Of Onions and Lemons.

The cold truth of it was, he had been hoping, just as Sherlock had believed himself, that there had been another case like theirs, that the *new* Jackie wasn’t the *right* Jackie but was still a Jackie. But no. It was like Mr. Jacobs had surmised from the start. Just an impostor. Dull.

They hadn’t talked about it, Sherlock and John. Not really. Since last night’s confession, they’d barely said a word to each other. Sherlock was beside himself. Once he had pulled himself together, he went for a long walk, alone, and when he came back, he glanced John’s way only briefly before retreating to the bedroom. That night, John did sleep on the couch; Sherlock made no invitation or insistence to join him again. It was a testament to John that Sherlock really did believe him. It should have come as a relief. But as much as he hated to admit it, it hurt, just a little, to be left out of the bedroom. The charade was over, as well it should be, and it’s not like John wanted to sleep in Sherlock’s bed . . . but . . .

He didn’t know how to finish that thought. All he knew was that it ended in a *but*.

Now, post-case, with just the two of them alone in a room together again, the reminder of who John really was settled on them both like a cloud, and with it, the tense shoulders and shifting feet and awkward glances, like they had caught one another with their pants down and were pretending they hadn’t seen anything (as if they hadn’t, in reality, gone far beyond *looking*). Sherlock, standing by the desk with his back to John, fiddled with papers without really looking at them.

“Thank you,” he said softly.
John stared, bemused, and abandoned his ready excuse to go make tea or use the loo or go for a long and silent walk. “For what?”

“She came at me with a knife. I didn’t see it in time. I doubt she had the strength to penetrate too deeply, but I’m glad to be spared the sting. So. Thank you. For stopping her.”

Oh. That. As Sherlock had been wrapping up his summation of the murder—in classic, clipped tones—John had seen the flash of anger in the woman’s eyes in the split second before he saw the flash of the blade. He reacted instinctively; no matter his incarnation, John did what he had to do to protect Sherlock Holmes. And he might as well know it.

“Well, it’s what I do,” he said.

Sherlock turned, and for the first time since yesterday, they truly faced each other, expressions open, ready to communicate. It was as wide a window as either of them could expect.

“So,” said Sherlock, “this is the kind of thing you do. With . . .”

“With my Sherlock. Yeah. Two years now.”

“Oh.” He picked at a bit of fuzz on his sleeve, a sign of discomfort, a reason to look away. “And before that . . . You were in Afghanistan.”

“Yes. I was a soldier.”

“Omegas can’t be— Oh. I see. You . . . in that other life, you weren’t Omega.”

“No. I wasn’t.”

“Alpha then.”

John crooked an eyebrow. “Why might you think that?”

“The brash assertiveness. The crude language. Your handling of Mycroft and . . . other Alphas. Obvious markers.”

Despite himself, John smirked. He couldn’t help but feel a little flattered by the assumption. “That’s personality,” he said. “Not biology.” Then he sighed. “Beta,” he said. “Sherlock and I, we’re Betas.”

“Both of you?” He looked stunned, like he couldn’t imagine another version of himself being anything but Alpha. To be fair, though, he’d had less than twenty-four hours to imagine another version of himself existing at all.


Sherlock’s eyes near as bulged as he tried to wrap his mind around it. “How is that possible? Two sexes?”

“Trust me, six is a lot harder to swallow. Until recently, I had no idea what Alphas and Omegas even were, let alone heats and knots and all that insanity.” He sighed and scrubbed his face with a hand. Then, gesturing to their chairs, he said, “I suppose we ought to talk about this.”

Sherlock accepted the invitation with an abbreviated nod, and they both assumed their seats, John with both feet planted, Sherlock with a leg crossed over.
“Now this,” he said, indicating their respective positions, “feels normal. To me.”

“What? Sitting?”

“And talking. This is where we talk, Sherlock. With clients, with Lestrade or Mrs Hudson or your oaf of a brother.” He was pleased to see Sherlock’s lip quirk. “Usually, though, it’s just us, talking, like this. Those times are my favorites.”

“Mine too,” said Sherlock quietly.

John brightened. “Really?” He had honestly wondered about the private moments between them, Alpha Sherlock and Omega John, outside of heats, whether there was anything pleasant about them, for either party. To be more brutally honest, he wondered whether they happened at all.

“Why are you so surprised?” A look of offense darkened Sherlock’s normally bright blue eyes. “Unlike you, I’ve been bonded with my John for seven years. You claim only two with your Sherlock.”

“Well, we’re not bonded at all. Like that.”

The offense melted and converted into something very much like sadness. “Right. Almost forgot. Betas.”

“What I mean is, Sherlock and I . . . we’re not a couple.”

Sherlock appeared, at first, uncomprehending. Then his eyebrows lowered and he frowned in consternation. “What do you mean, not a couple?”

“We’re friends.”

“So are John and I.”

“Right, but, erm . . .” He spread his hands a little helplessly. “Just friends.”

“You share 221B. Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

They stared at one another like each had stated the obvious and nothing more needed to be said. But John knew he couldn’t allow the misunderstanding to persist. He groaned inwardly and said, “We don’t sleep together, Sherlock. We don’t even share a bedroom.”

Sherlock was more blunt. “No sex?”

“No.”

“Ever?”

“Never.”

“Never? But . . . why? Don’t you love each other?”

“That’s— that’s hardly the issue. We love each other like mad, but just, you know, not in ‘that’ way.”

“What way? How many ways are there?”
“Jesus, Sherlock . . .”

“You’re saying you’ve been celibate for two years?”

John laughed shortly. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”


“No. Not like, no, but not yes, it’s . . . look. Right now, I’m unattached. Romantically. But I’ve known my fair share of . . . Well, you know, women. Beta-Xs, if you prefer. I’ve only ever been with women.”

“You do not find him attractive?”

John sighed a little helplessly. How was he to answer that? Sherlock was so gorgeous a blind man could see it. His dark, hapless curls, those sharp, inquisitive eyes, his one-hundred-expressions lips, and all that said nothing about his figure. John didn’t need to be gay to appreciate it. Didn’t . . . need to be. But.

“No relevant,” he said, sidestepping the question altogether. “Interest needs to happen on two ends, you know, and Sherlock, as far as I’ve observed, has never been with, well, anyone.”

Sherlock made a startled noise, like a bird being strangled. He looked personally offended by the notion that some other version of himself might be a virgin. “Let me get this straight. You live with Sherlock. You love Sherlock. But you won’t sleep with Sherlock.”

Squirming inside, John wrestled with a response. But how did he say he’d never thought about, you know, it, not with Sherlock Holmes, not before his last sexual excursion at least, but that, at the same time, if he ever did it again, and if it had to a bloke, it would be Sherlock? And how did he reconcile that thought with the one that said there was no one in the world more important to him than Sherlock? No one he loved and admired and thought about more? No one, man or woman, occupied such a vital role in his life. Not that he could tell Sherlock that. His Sherlock, that is.

Why? Because his Sherlock was not a sentimental creature. And even if he were, he wasn’t a sexual one. And even if he were that, he wouldn’t find John attractive. As Sherlock was fond of reminding him, John was ordinary and had the added drawback of a brain that was barely functional. If his Sherlock were to be attracted to anything or anyone, that person would have to match him for intellect. John fell woefully short.

Woefully? Had he just used that word?

“Oh my God,” said Sherlock.

John was pulled from his thoughts. “What?”

“How long have you been . . . here? In my world? Exactly how long?”

“Eight days,” said John, who of course had been counting every one.

Sherlock looked pallid, and his face was rapidly draining of even more blood. The doctor in John was alerted to the very real possibility that he might just about faint. He moved to the edge of his chair. “Sherlock?”

“Oh my God,” said Sherlock, and he hid his eyes behind one hand.

“What? Talk to me.”
“Eight days. That was the first day of John’s heat.”

“Um . . .” He licked his lips uncomfortably. “Yes.”

Sherlock shook his head, averted his eyes, clenched a fist in front of his mouth. When he spoke, his voice shook a little. “But it wasn’t John. It was you. And you . . . you’d never . . . you just said you’d never, with a Y, let alone as an Omega . . . Oh my God.” Suddenly, he was on his feet, pacing. “And I came at you like—like—”


“I . . . I . . .”

“Don’t get all worked up. What happened was . . . surprising. For me. And no, not very welcome, at first, until . . . Look, I had no fucking clue what was going on! With me. Biologically. And you didn’t know I wasn’t me, so there wasn’t a lot of time for discussion before the bing bang boom—”

But Sherlock whirled around and overrode his pathetic attempt at being appeasing. “Don’t coddle me. I hurt you, didn’t I? I terrified you. Don’t pretend I didn’t. I was just trying to be exciting for you again. Him! For John! My John. I swear, I didn’t know! If I’d known you didn’t want me, I would have . . .”

“What? What would you have done? I’ve read the literature, Sherlock, I know that Omegas don’t really have a choice in the matter, do they? It’s either that—he threw a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the bedroom—”

“or estrus poisoning.”

“I would have hired an Alpha service.”

John scoffed. “A stranger? Hell no! I’d rather you any day of the week.”

“But I am a stranger to you. I’m not your Sherlock, and you’re not my . . .”

He froze, mid-pace, and stared off in the distance, a look of even greater horror on his face. After a long, terrible pause, Sherlock said in a hushed voice. “I cheated. I cheated on John.”

“Hey now.”

“How could I have done such a thing?”

“Sherlock.”

“How could I! I was supposed to protect him. And I’ve lost him and gone and cheated on him!”

“Sherlock.”

John rose to his feet and took Sherlock by the arms, turning him so they faced one another squarely. “This is hard. Every bit of this, I get it. I’m living it with you. But the worst thing you can do right now is beat yourself up over things you can’t change, things you didn’t even know about. You thought I was him. Of course you did, look at me! You said it yourself. I look like, sound like, and even smell like him. This isn’t my body. It’s his. And believe me, he—this—was responding very, erm . . . positively to, ehm, you. Your scent, your body, your everything.”

“Then where is he? Where is my John?”

Shoulders sagging, John let his arms fall to his side.
“You have his body. Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” said John, wearily. It circled the very question that had been vexing him since it happened, though never really landed: How had he come here, and how did he get back? In all that time, he had never asked himself the most important question: If he was in the wrong body, what had happened to its former occupant?

“You were there!” shouted Sherlock. He threw his hands into the air, frustration rising. “Think!”

“I have no idea how I got here! And I have no idea where your John is! For all I know, he’s still in here, somewhere.” He tapped his head, then transferred his hand to his chest. “Or here. Pushed down, buried deep. I don’t know how this works any more than you do. Maybe, God forbid, he’s just . . . gone.”

“No.” Sherlock pointed a finger at him, his jaw stern but his eyes pained. “He can’t be. If you pushed him out, or pushed him down—”

“This isn’t my fault!”

“—then he’s somewhere. And we need to find him and bring him back.”

“I’m all for it! But how?”

Sherlock huffed and turned away. “Give me time. I need to think.”

xXx

His thinking led to the following summation:

“You come from a world very similar to this one, yet clearly distinct. The people you knew there exist here, in one form or another. You even have a counterpart with the same name, like attributes, and similar personal relations, though due to environment and biological differences, certain deviations are naturally apparent.”

“So what are we talking about here? An alternate dimension?”

“Parallel universes.”

Despite all that he’d already experienced, John’s first reaction was tinged with skepticism. “Until just recently, I used to think that was all science fiction.”

“You’re living it, John. We both are. And besides, the theoretical groundwork has been laid for decades. But I am only tangentially familiar with it.” Then, seeming embarrassed by this gap in his expansive knowledge, he waved a hand dismissively and said, “Not my field.”

“Right,” said John, bobbing his head, trying not to feel distressed by the seemingly impossible nature of jumping between universes, let alone jumping back. “So what now?”

“You jumped one way. What we need to do is figure out a way to get you to jump back and leave John’s body for him to occupy once again.”

John let out a long breath. The impossibility factor was climbing. “And just how are we supposed to do that?”

“We need to learn more about it.”
“Okay. We could, I don’t know, look it up online? Maybe there’s something on Wikipedia about how one crosses worlds.”


Standing hands akimbo and squaring his shoulders, he said shortly. “Fine. What do you suggest?”

“I’ve already contacted a professor of quantum physics whose work in multiverse theory is unparalleled.”

“Nice pun.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Go on.”

“I’ve set up a meeting for tomorrow. She lives in Exeter, so I’ll be taking the morning train.”

“You want to try that again?” John folded his arms and lifted his chin.

Sherlock flashed him a menacing look; he was still an Alpha unaccustomed to being challenged by his Omega. “Excuse me?” he repeated, as though daring him to repeat it.

“It’s not you taking the morning train. It’s us.”

“There’s no need for you to come, you’ll be bored to death. This is highly advanced theoretical phys—”

“Which isn’t even your field! And I’m no dummy, Sherlock. I was a sodding doctor in my last life, for Christ’s sake.”

“You said soldier.”

“Damn right, I’m fucking amazing. Soldier, and a doctor, and your bleeding conductor of light, so I sure as hell am coming with you.”

“And there’s the mouth,” Sherlock murmured under his breath.

“Besides, you said it yourself: we’re a couple. And this is what couples do. You’ll have noticed, of course, with that big brain of yours and such advanced observational skills, that I am the one who jumped worlds—”

“Universes.”

“—and maybe I might have a few questions of my own for this Professor . . . what’s her name?”

“Stapleton.”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Not Jacqui Stapleton.”

“You know her?”

John’s mouth fell open with a ready reply, but in the next second, he decided it wasn’t worth it, explaining all about Baskerville and glow-in-the-dark rabbits. Apparently, in this world (“universe,” he heard Sherlock correct inside his head), she had chosen a different branch of science to specialize in.
“Just her name,” he lied. “And given her reputation, I reckon she’s very good at what she does.”

“I only consult the best.”

**xXx**

The morning train leaving Paddington Station was crowded, and at first, John thought they wouldn’t be able to sit anywhere near each other. As they jostled their way down an aisle, his nostrils were accosted with the scents of dozens of people all at once, but his brain took quick measurements and made ready identifications of everyone they passed: Alpha here, Alpha there, three Betas and an Omega, and a bonded pair. His olfactory senses were clearly adept at reading genders—a skill that, in his previous life, he’d had to rely primarily on his sight, and sometimes ear, to do—but every instance of it still amazed and halfway terrified him, in part because he feared one day it would just be . . . normal.

“My Omega needs your seat.”

John’s attention was drawn sharply to where Sherlock was ordering a Beta out of his chair. “What? No, I don—”

But the Beta was already complying, shooting to his feet and moving away, and within seconds, the entire carriage had shifted so as to free up two seats so that Sherlock and John could sit side by side. “Bloody hell,” John cursed, though not loud enough for anyone to hear, and for a second, he thought he’d continue his protest. But in that same moment, he caught sight of a lone Alpha a few rows away, eyeing him hungrily, and he swallowed his words. He thought of Molly. He looked at the Omega travelling with three Betas. And he realized, as much as he hated it, that this was another safety measure, culturally accepted and societally ingrained: bonded pairs travelled together. Period. No one had so much as lifted an eyebrow or rolled an eye.

An hour outside of London, the crowd had thinned a bit, and Sherlock moved to place himself directly across from John, facing him. Although he wasn’t quite meeting him face to face. He was staring out the window, deep in thought. But matters were weighing on John’s mind, and without the danger of being overheard, now seemed as good a time as any to address them.

“Does this change things?” John asked, interrupting whatever was going on in the genius’s brain.

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“This dog fight business. I just wondered. Because I’m not exactly your . . . whatever. What I mean is, you’ve a loophole, if you want to take it. Your John wasn’t attacked. I was.”

Sherlock stared at him, as if waiting for him to reach the end of his argument and render it reasonable. When it was clear John had apparently made his point, he said, “Don’t be stupid. For better or for worse, I am bonded to you right now. Can’t you smell it?”

He could. That didn’t make it any less dicey in his mind.

“Besides,” Sherlock continued, “we can’t leave those men to roam the streets and keep harming Omegas. As it stands, I am currently the only one with legal rights to fight them. I mean to.”

“First off, don’t call me stupid,” said John. “I’m not. I’m still figuring out how all of this works, remember? Second, I’m glad.”

“What of?”
“That you’ll keep hunting them. Like I said, I wasn’t sure you would.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “You’ve changed your tune.”

“That was before Molly. Before I understood the kind of damage they could do to one of . . . us. I admit it. I took it too lightly. Blokes roughing each other up in an alleyway, that’s all I thought it was. Criminal, sure, but . . . I don’t know what I’m trying to say. They could have gone after anyone. And they chose me.”

“Yes. I’m glad they did.”

“Pardon?”

“Glad. That they hunted you, and not my John.”

John sat back, a little stunned, a little offended. So Sherlock didn’t care if this version of John got hurt? He bit his tongue and, stewing, turned his attention to the window and the rolling countryside.

“You misunderstand,” said Sherlock, having noticed John’s displeasure at his words. “You’re the soldier. You’re the fighter. You were able to get away, all on your own, despite your Omega physique. My John . . . I do not believe he could have. And the thought of that—”

Suddenly choked with emotion, it was Sherlock’s turn to stare out of the window. John gave him a minute to recover.

“Your John wouldn’t have stormed out of the flat to begin with,” he said, consolingly.

In the reflection of the window, John saw Sherlock smile tightly as he thought fondly of his bondmate, clearly missing him desperately. “No. He wouldn’t.”

“But Sherlock.” He hesitated a moment, unsure whether he should say it, here and now. But, he reckoned, now was as good a time as any. So he took a breath, licked his lips, and said, “Maybe there are times when he wants to.”

Sherlock’s head came around sharply. “What?”

He tried to keep his voice placating, or at the very least neutral. “Have you never suspected that your John might want more out of life? More than simply being your Omega, that is?”

Reactively, Sherlock scowled, folded his arms across his chest, and huffed. It was the petulant, childish Sherlock John knew only too well, and though the behavior had annoyed him in the past, just now it made him ache for his old companion. “You don’t know anything about it,” Sherlock said bitterly. “Lest you forget, you’re not John. So just because you’re not in love with your own Sherlock, don’t presume my John is not in love with me.”

“No now, that’s not at all what I’m saying,” said John. This hadn’t begun well. He shifted forward in his seat to convey his openness and sincerity. “Listen. Maybe we’re more alike than even I have given us credit for. Your John and me, I mean. It’s just that circumstances have forced us to forge different paths. I did what I had always dreamed of doing, ever since I was a boy. I became a doctor. And your John? Well, that’s exactly what he wanted to do, isn’t it, when he was young.”

“What are you talking about? John never wanted to be a doctor.”
“Yes, he did.”

“How the hell would you know?”

“Because he told me. In writing.”

“What?”

“When you were out being chased by a rhinoceros, I was learning more about the life I’d been dropped into. So shoot me, I read John’s journals.”

Sherlock face softened, not in sympathy but in surprise. “What journals?”

John was taken aback as two truths suddenly occurred to him. Sherlock didn’t know that John journaled, and Omega John felt the need to hide the fact. He considered where John had kept the journals: in a sturdy plastic box under the bed. He must have thought they were safe there. The upstairs laboratory was Sherlock’s space, primarily; the bedroom was his, a space not only of intimacy but of secrets. And if Sherlock, the most observant man in the world, had not found the journals lying inches under his own body, it meant he’d never suspected John of feeling anything but perfectly happy, when the truth of his own pen told a different story. The other John was rarely explicit in his longings, and was perhaps a little bit in self-denial regarding his subtly unhappy state, but John recognized the undertones and implications as surely as if he had written them himself. Omega John had a stable life, but he craved so much more.

He felt guilty confessing someone else’s secrets, but the box had been opened. And Sherlock needed to understand.

“He’s been writing his life’s story,” said John, “since he was twelve years old.”

“But . . .”

“He wrote about everything. His dreams, his nightmares, his hopes, his fears. On one page, he talks about everything he wants in an Alpha, and on the next, he’s going on about how nervous Alphas make him. You were rather the exception. You should hear how his tone changes once he’s met you. He’s so smitten his grammar suffers, and it’s nothing but Sherlock Sherlock Sherlock—brilliant this, and fantastic that.” He smiled wryly, hearing a familiar echo.

“I didn’t know he wrote,” said Sherlock, looking down at his hands a little guiltily.

“I wasn’t surprised,” said John, “because I write, too. You know what else we have in common?” Sherlock’s eyes raised without lifting his head. He didn’t answer, but John continued anyway.

“Itchy feet. The desire to be useful, the longing for excitement, the need to be independent, and those are three things—three very important things—missing from your John’s life.”

“So I’m not enough.”


“Of course!”

“Don’t react. Think. Would you really be happy if someone told you that you couldn’t be a detective anymore? That you couldn’t leave the house unaccompanied after dark? That your only purpose in life was to find a fuck-mate and exist heat to heat? You’re the one with the super brain.
You observe the most minute of details and deduce a life’s history. *I* know that your John is not a happy man, and I’ve never even spoken to him. So you can’t tell me that *you* don’t see it.”

Sherlock’s jaw was as tight as John had ever seen it, his fists balled and his eyes burning. There was anger there, but embarrassment and fear also. His true Omega might have been afraid of him in this state, but John refused to fear a Holmes. He wouldn’t be cruel, but nor would he back down.

“You said you were trying to be exciting for him again,” he said. “What did you mean?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock said quickly. But the color was rising in his pale cheeks. Rage, or discomfort?

“Go on, then,” John prodded.

“It’s just . . . Well, you know how it is with couples. Or rather, maybe you don’t, seeing as how you and your Sherlock are just friends.” He said the word with disdain, and though John had heard Sherlock speak that word with contempt before, it still hurt, this time for a different reason. Before, Sherlock was deriding the very notion of having friends; this Sherlock was disgusted that it stopped there.

John found himself once again on the defensive. “My friendship with Sherlock is more open and egalitarian than your bond seems to be with John. And stop avoiding the question.”

“I’m not. I’m more directly refusing to have this conversation at all. Are we finished?”

John sighed and slumped back in his seat. “We’re finished.”

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Both men were surly by the time they arrived in Exeter, and John resented being back here with the wrong Sherlock. At least they would be able to avoid Baskerville. That was one memory he didn’t want tainted.

Everything was surreal. Meeting Dr. Stapleton—in this context, in this body—felt like he’d put his shoes on the wrong feet that morning. He could still walk just fine, but it felt funny, and he was sure she would notice he wasn’t quite right. But the Alpha-X didn’t notice anything amiss. She barely looked at him. Because he was Omega.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Holmes,” she said, gripping Sherlock’s hands and gesturing him to sit across from her expansive, heavy, dark-wood desk. As if from old habit, Sherlock first pulled a seat back for John before seating himself, and John, out of new habit, pretended not to feel emasculated.

“I was intrigued by your email,” said the professor. “And I’m always happy to talk about my work. But I fail to see what use it could be to a private detective.”

Sherlock smiled pleasantly. “My work is necessarily interdisciplinary. Any field may come in use, if not for practical application then to understand the people who engage in its practice or study.”

“Am I under suspicion of something?”

“Not at all. My work is in London.”

“I see.”

“But the brightest mind in the field of quantum physics and theories of parallel universes resides in
Exeter, and that is why I am here.”

“You flatter me,” said Dr. Stapleton, grinning appreciatively. Then her eyes slid to John. “May I get you something to occupy yourself with? A magazine, or maybe a film on a tablet? We have all the Pixzars, Alpha Angles: Redux, Hamish Bond . . .”

John gaped disbelieving for a minute. Control it, Watson, he coached himself. “Thank you, no. I’m quite interested in your work myself.”

“It’s terribly dry, I assure you. Not like your science fiction stories.”

John grinded his teeth, and to his surprise, Sherlock replied, “He really is interested. He may even have a few questions for you himself.”

Dr. Stapleton raised her eyebrows skeptically, then nodded condescendingly. “As you wish.”

“Let’s start with this,” said Sherlock. “In your writing, you consistently refer to a ‘many worlds interpretation’ of quantum mechanics as purely theoretical. Do you personally believe other worlds exist?”

“Universes,” John muttered. He thought he saw a subtle, unintentional smirk twitch at the corner of Sherlock’s mouth.

“Theoretical,” Dr. Stapleton said, “in that we have not designed any sort of experiment capable of verifying the hypothesis. It all exists in the realm of speculation. Not fanciful speculation, mind you. We base our speculations on highly advanced equations and thoroughly worked mathematics, which all seem to suggest the very real probability of many interacting worlds.”

“Interacting?” John said, latching onto the word. That was promising. Wasn’t it? Surely, it was.

She flashed him a glance, but returned her answer to Sherlock. “We’ve yet to discover hard evidence of other worlds having any influence whatsoever on our own. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen. In my own work, I have written extensively on transplanar displacement, a theory gaining more and more traction among my colleagues. If I may flatter myself, I dare say, its implications are exciting.”

“I’m not familiar with it,” said Sherlock.

“No, you wouldn’t be.”

“What is it?”

“Think of it like this. Imagine two worlds with a high percentage of correspondence. That is, features in one world corresponding to features in another. An England in Universe A, and an England in Universe B. An Einstein here, an Einstein there. Or, if you’d prefer, a Sherlock Holmes A and a Sherlock Holmes B.”

Sherlock grunted. She took it as a sign that he understood and moved on.

“Now imagine that those two variables come into sync. Two trains traveling the exact same track at the exact same speed at the exact same time. What happens then? The seemingly disparate universes sense the synchronicity, and for a fraction—just a hair—of a second, they become confused. They come into contact, creating a fold in the universe, building a terrific amount of energy. And then . . . bam! Lightning. Pure energy. So what just happened? The trains keep rolling, like nothing at all happened, but they’ve actually been displaced. Each is in the other’s
universe. Train A is riding Train B’s tracks.” She sat back, pleased with her illustrative example. “It’s quite fascinating mathematics, believe me.”

John shifted forward anxiously. “But for that to happen,” he said, “the synchronicity would have to be absolutely perfect. I mean, what are the chances? One in a billion?”

“More like one in ten to the 66th power, actually,” she said. “Mathematically speaking. But your chances increase the more worlds you figure into the equation. So when you consider the number of universes, the odds are actually a fair bit greater that transplanar displacement may actually occur. Granted, for human beings, the variables are too many, and behavior too unpredictable, for any scientist to render a fair prediction. And philosophers of free will will complicate matters even further, arguing that agency precludes the occurrence of displacement from being anything except extremely rare. And let’s face it. The theory is nigh unto impossible to test, no matter what the numbers say. But chances are, somewhere, in one of the centillion universes out there, synchronicity is, in fact, happening.”

“In other words,” Sherlock said, for clarification, “you don’t believe displacement is rare.”

She nodded emphatically. “Theoreticians like myself believe displacement is happening all of the time! Perhaps not with humans, but think about this: Elements—such as hydrogen, nitrogen, even compounds like water molecules—come into synchronicity regularly and, with the help of little electric charges, are frequently displaced. We’re constantly exchanging elements with other universes! Only, how could you ever know for sure? One molecule here is very much like a molecule in a parallel dimension. They’re the building blocks of the universe. But that makes it impossible to measure. However—and this is where it gets really exciting—we think it happens enough in the animal kingdom to account for . . .”

Dr. Stapleton made them wait for it. She had a flair for dramatics, apparently.

“Evolutionary leaps,” she finished.

John’s gasp was contained and his mind began to whirr, but Sherlock forced the conversation to forge ahead, saying, “Explain.”

“Well, a living organism is a lot more varied than individual molecules, isn’t it? So when synchronicity occurs among, say, the Atlantic salmon, two salmon swimming in the exact same waters at the exact same time at the exact same speed, they have a high likelihood of displacing one another. Then what happens? Salmon A procreates with a salmon from Universe B. And because the displaced subjects are in some ways biologically distinct, those differences get passed on, which, we believe, may lead to leaps forward in biological evolution. Some of us think that that’s what happened with the dividing of the sexes some eight thousand years ago. It’s just a theory, of course. There are plenty of other more probable, home-grown hypotheses for genetic mutations.”

John shook his head, not because he disbelieved her theory but because it didn’t account for his own situation. He had not crossed universes with his own body still intact. “Could it be,” he asked, trying to figure out how to phrase his question even as it was leaving his mouth, “that bodies aren’t displaced at all? Just, I don’t know, the conscious self? Mind swaps?”

For the first time, Dr. Stapleton looked at him, really looked at him, and she seemed impressed with his question. “How would you . . . ? I mean, yes, in fact. It’s a sub-theory I’ve been playing with for some time, but I’ve not published a word of it yet. Metaphysical displacement, I call it. Highly speculative.”
“So, theoretically,” said John, “two men, walking on the same bridge, at the same speed, on the same day, could . . . mind swap.”

“Theoretically, yes. But you have to understand. It would have to be the same two men. Just in parallel universes. In effect, he comes into sync with himself.”

“Right.” He could feel the pace of his heart kick it up a notch. This was it, this was what had happened to him, exactly what had happened. He and the other John had been in step with one another on the Waterloo Bridge. The energy built, the universe folded, the lightning struck, and bam. His consciousness leaped into a parallel universe.

And that meant, he was realizing now, that the mind of the other John . . .

“What are the chances,” Sherlock asked, “of those two men syncing again and swapping back?”

Dr. Stapleton, however, was shaking her head before he even finished. “Astronomically tiny,” she said, and John felt her words building toward devastation. “It’s what we astrophysicists call impossible.”

There was silence in the room. Sherlock suddenly had no more questions. John felt like he was drowning. Dr. Stapleton looked curiously between them, wondering at the sudden shift of mood in the room. But despite her brilliance, she couldn’t possibly understand.

Suddenly, John was on his feet. He muttered something half-hearted—maybe an excuse, maybe an apology—and left the room, letting the door bang closed behind him.
“So what do we do?” John asked, voice still tremulous. It had been an exhausting day, followed by a sleepless night of talking, balking, questioning, answering, explaining, arguing, recapitulating, hypothesizing, tea time, backing up, and trying again. John wanted to sleep, thinking that, if he woke up, maybe the world would have righted itself. But Sherlock showed zero signs of tiring.

“Just one more time,” said Sherlock.

They sat across from each other in their respective chairs. By this point, John’s knees were drawn up under his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs. Sherlock, who had been variously pacing, twirling, and sitting in his chair with restless leg syndrome, was for the first time in many hours quite still. Both feet were planted squarely on the floor, and both arms had found their armrests.

“Let me see if I got it right this time,” he said. “You are a subspecies of human male from an alternate reality who, for the last seven years, has been the sexual partner of an alternate version of me, also called Sherlock Holmes, also a detective, who also happens to be a subspecies of human of opposing but compatible sexuality, and fifteen days ago a, quote, ‘bolt of lightning’”—here he used fingers for air quotes—“transferred you from one reality to another without so much as a by your leave, and you have no idea how it happened.”

John frowned at the summation. “I am not a subspecies.”

Sherlock let out a long breath. “Sorry. I’m just finding this difficult. This.” He motioned between them. “All along, you were you. Not him.”

Sorrowfully, John nodded.

With a sniff and clearing of the throat, he said in a conclusive tone, “Sure puts the last two weeks in a hell of a different light. A more logical one.”

“Logical?” If John were to choose any descriptor, logical wouldn’t be it. Ludicrous and horrifying, though, were high contenders.

“Of course. The real John Watson would never have . . .” He trailed off.

“Never what?”

“Never mind.”

He seemed a little embarrassed: a pink hue had awakened in both cheeks, and he was studiously avoiding John’s eyes now. Charged with discomfort, Sherlock leaped to his feet, disappeared from John’s periphery, and when he reappeared, two seconds later, he was already donning his coat and scarf.

“Where are you going?” John asked, alarmed.

“We are going to find answers.”

“Me?”
Sherlock tossed his hands, as though exasperated. “I don’t work alone, do I? I need an assistant. It’s more efficient that way.”

“But I don’t do that. I’m not him.”

“You were doing fine before you realized that.”

John pursed his lips, conflicted. On the one hand, going with Sherlock on his cases over the past couple of weeks had been glorious. The zoo, the bike chase, even the unsettling body in the floorboards—he’d loved it. It was exciting, not only witnessing Sherlock in his element, but also, and maybe in greater part, contributing in his own small way to solving crimes and catching criminals. He felt worthwhile, needed even.

But on the other hand, Sherlock had only invited him along because he had believed John to be someone he actually knew and trusted, someone who had proven his mettle. He had believed John more knowledgeable than he really was, more competent than he really was, a fitting companion. He couldn’t pretend to be that anymore.

A balled-up jacket struck him in the face.

“You can have your dilemma in the cab,” said Sherlock. “Let’s go.”

Swallowing hard, suddenly nervous, John stood and put his arms in the sleeves. He felt unworthy, fraudulent. “Where?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“I need to consult an expert. We’re talking alternate realities, and that’s not exactly my field of expertise.”

“Are we going to talk to a scientist?”

“John.” Sherlock gave him a sardonic look, but there was a hint of a smile. “I only consult the best.”

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“An honor, Mr. Holmes, a real honor. I can’t believe I’m talking to you again! Please, please, come in, come in. And Dr. Watson! Real pleasure to see you again, sir, a real treat. Teas? Coffees?”

Doctor. He still couldn’t believe it. His counterpart had become a doctor. Those words sounded so strange together—doctor and Watson—and it hurt his heart, a little, that this world’s John had done so much, and he so little. All John was good for were home remedies and the basics of a first aid kit. He couldn’t even give CPR.

“No. We’re just here for a chat. John.” Sherlock gestured him toward the sofa. He sat, and the young man perched himself on the edge of a swivel chair, looking positively gleeful to be hosting his unexpected visitors. For his part, Sherlock remained on his feet, hands folded together behind his back. He stood rigid, chest puffed out just slightly, cutting a rather impressive figure. John couldn’t help but admire him, as he had always admired him. He ached for his own Sherlock.

The cab ride over had been an interesting sort.

“Read,” said Sherlock, handing John his phone after giving the cabbie the address.

“What’s this?”
“Your blog.”

“I have a blog?”

“John’s blog,” Sherlock corrected himself. “The young man you’re about to meet you’ve met before, so you might as well know the circumstances. His name is Chris Melas, or, as John so colorfully dubbed him, the Geek Interpreter.”

And so John read about the case, equal parts fascinated by the story and stunned that there was an entire site—with dozens of stories—dedicated to the cases Sherlock and John had worked on over the last couple of years. Together. They were truly partners in detective work. He could almost feel himself shrinking in comparison. This other John was a soldier, a doctor, a detective, and bloody hell, a writer to boot. Was there anything that man couldn’t do?

Shrinking, shrinking.

“What’s the matter?” Sherlock asked, side-eyeing him.

“Nothing,” said John softly.

The young man swiveled back and forth, restless and excited, but he was at least trying to come across as professional. “What can I do for you gentlemen?” he asked.

“You’re a nerd,” said Sherlock bluntly, “and susceptible to conspiracy theories.”

John looked at him sharply. That was a little rude.

“Um,” said Chris Melas, “yes. That is, I am open to the possibility of alternate explanations for our reality. And I believe that truth cannot be dictated by governments and is sometimes unapproachable through science. Sometimes the only way to get to truth is through art, literature.”

“Comic books.”

“Graphic novels, Mr. Holmes. Among other things.”

Sherlock grunted.

“Is that what you’ve come to talk about? Comics?” Chris’s eyes were wide with anticipation.

Crossing to a chair, Sherlock sat regally and crossed a leg over. “We’ve come to ask you what you know about alternate realities.”

If possible, his eyes grew even wider. “You mean, like, parallel universes? Many worlds theory?”

“Yes.”

“Well. Ahem.” Chris cleared his throat, shifted in his seat. “If you’re looking for a scientific explanation, or a maths one, I have my limits . . .”

“That will be of little use. What we’re interested in is”—Sherlock hesitated, like he was trying to form the best way to say it—“real-world application. Evidence that it might be true.”

“You mean, like, dimension hopping?”

“Yes.”
“Like, evidence that two universes have actually come in contact?”

“Yes.”

“Like, stories of people, actual people, moving from one universe to another?”

“Yes.”

“Of course I can.”

Sherlock and John stared. Surely, it wasn’t so easy.

“You can?”

“Sure!”

“I’m not talking about comic books or science fiction movies.”

“Nor am I,” said Chris, smiling. “Real people, real stories.”

Sherlock shot forward in his seat. “Talk.”

Chris Melas looked only too delighted to do so. “Well . . . You’re sure I can’t get you tea? This may take some time.”

Ten minutes later, all were sitting with a steaming cuppa. John took his the way he liked it, with no sugar but just a bit of lemon, and felt guilty for it.

“Ghosts,” said Chris, and he paused for effect.

Sherlock sighed. “Ghosts,” he repeated, unimpressed.

“It’s just one theory, but yeah, think about it. People all over the world talk about hearing footsteps in their house, but there’s no one on the stair. They hear people shouting or crying in the next room. Doors opening without cause, dogs playing with thin air, cats streaking out of the room, that feeling you’re not alone . . . Some people reckon it’s not the spirit world we’re rubbing shoulders with, but ourselves in a different dimension! And sometimes, we even catch images of people in other worlds in photographs. Children standing in darkened windows, an image of a woman caught in the mirror behind you . . . Just when the distance between us and them is the very thinnest, they come through. Like, maybe you saw your granddad walking in the garden, but that couldn’t be true because your granddad died last summer. Only, in another dimension, he didn’t. He’s alive and well. So what you thought was a ghost was just a parallel version of someone in our world, bleeding through. Only lasts a second, doesn’t it? Then poof, gone.”

John could see that Sherlock wasn’t buying the ghost explanation, though he wondered himself if it might have an element of truth to it. But maybe that’s just because he was stupid. He kept his teeth glued together, certain he shouldn’t talk.

“That’s it then, eh? That’s your evidence. Ghosts.”

“That’s just one bit of evidence, mate. You don’t think that actual parallel universes would yield only one piece of evidence?”

“Fine. Give me more.”

“Déjà vu.”
Again, Sherlock sighed.

“Hear me out. Lots of theories suggest that our minds are more connected to alternate realities than our bodies, yeah? And what we really mean is our alter-selves. Some people have called it alter vu, when you remember two realities, two different versions of the same event for which there is only evidence of one in our little bubble universe. It’s the Berenstein/Berenstain Bears phenomenon. There may be some neurological explanations for déjà vu, but what we may actually be tapping into are memories from our alter-selves.”

John considered this. He knew he’d experienced déjà vu before, but he couldn’t recall particulars. And he had no idea what Chris meant about bears. That didn’t sound familiar at all.

“That theory,” Chris continued, “goes hand in hand with the dream theory.”

“Go on,” said Sherlock, resigned. He looked less hopeful than when he had first stepped into the room, as if deciding that this was not a useful course to pursue.

“Ever had one of those dreams that feels really real? And you wake up, and as your own world settles back around you, or you into it”—Chris gave them both very pointed looks and a jabbing index finger—“you have to talk yourself into realizing that none of it really happened. Only, maybe it did. Just not here. Maybe you were sharing your mind with an alter-self while your prime self sleeps.”

“Prime?” John echoed, softly, because he was okay if he wasn’t heard.

“That’s what we call it,” said Chris. “The universe you know is your prime universe. Everything else is alter. Just some lingo.”

“I think we may be off the mark,” said Sherlock. “Ghosts, dreaming, it’s not really what I had in mind. I’m looking for evidence, real accounts, of real people, who have transitioned in some way from one universe to another, something that isn’t so easily solved by waking up.”

“There are stories,” said Chris, placating. “Unconfirmed, but very compelling. For instance, there’s a faction of us nerds who think universe hopping explains child prodigies. Mozart. Da Vinci. Kim Ung-Yong. The theory goes that these people came from other universes, that somehow, their older, educated, experienced selves, I don’t know, mindswapped with a child version of themselves in our own universe. Mozart can compose as a four-year-old because his mind has already had a lifetime’s worth of composing somewhere else. Or think about Da Vinci. I mean, Christ, the man was designing helicopters centuries before modern-day aviation! What if—what if—he was just trying to recreate inventions he was familiar with back in his own world?” He swiveled in his chair to the desk where his computer was set and jiggled the mouse to reawaken it. Typing swiftly, he brought up a variety of websites. “Ever heard the name Lerina García?”

“No,” said Sherlock, and John mutely shook his head, still trying to wrap his mind around the other examples.

“One day, this woman wakes up in her own bed but in strange linens she’s never seen before. She goes to work and someone else is in her cubicle. But it’s not that she doesn’t work for that company anymore—she’s just listed in a different department, working under a supervisor she doesn’t even know. Much of her life is still the same—family, friends, house, car—but there are enough little things, important things, that are different, and they’re never put right again. She wrote a blog about it. It’s in Spanish, but I can give you the link. She’s not the only one. These things pop up all over the place, easier to document and share now that we have the Internet. But it’s been happening for years, decades, centuries even. You know about Tokyo 1954?”
Sherlock just stared at him until he continued.

“Business man shows up at the airport, a Westerner, but he’s carrying a passport from a country no one’s ever heard of. Speaks Japanese and French and English and a bunch of other languages, says he’s been to Japan dozens of times on business, and he’s horribly confused about why he’s being detained. His passport looks legitimate—other than the fact that it’s been issued by a country that doesn’t exist—and he’s even carrying banknotes from that country and everything. But it doesn’t exist! To everyone but this foreigner, Taured is just a made-up word.”

John gasped through his nostrils, then quickly turned his head and rubbed at his nose, pretending it was a sniff. Taured? The tiny French-speaking nation in the Pyrenees? It most certainly was a country! And the first solid evidence John had yet heard that he wasn’t straight-out-of-Bedlam mad. He caught Sherlock’s eye and tried to communicate that they had something at last, but Sherlock wasn’t looking at him, and hadn’t correctly interpreted the sniffle.

Chris was finishing his story. “They can’t send him back, but they won’t let him in. So they detain him in a hotel overnight, and in the morning . . . Gone without a trace.”

“Did they keep the passport?”

“No . . .”

“So no real proof,” said Sherlock. Then he snorted. “No more use than folklore and myth.”

“Folklore and myth have their roots in reality, Mr. Holmes, of that I’m sure. We might mess up the details, but that doesn’t mean it never happened. It’s my belief that in some universe, maybe many universes, this country really does exist.”

Sherlock grunted.

“If you want my opinion,” said Chris, “the worst thing we can do is dismiss stories. Science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy—they’re closer to truth than we might know.”

“Yes. Thank you.” Sherlock stood and buttoned his coat. “This has been very . . . enlightening, Mr. Melas.”

“You’ll come again if you have any more questions, won’t you?” He looked up at Sherlock with hero-worshiping admiration.

“Mm,” said Sherlock, noncommittally.

Two minutes later, they were back on the street and in search of a cab.

“Well, that was a waste of time,” said Sherlock grumpily, pulling his gloves from his pockets. “Ghosts and dreams and other rubbish. I was hoping for a little more lightning.”

“It was true, though,” said John, a little shyly. “What he said in there.”

Sherlock laughed. “Which part?”

John stopped walking and pulled out his phone. By the time Sherlock noticed his companion was no longer at his side, John had pulled up a GPS map and was repositioning it over Spain and France.

“What is it?” Sherlock asked.
“Wow,” John said breathlessly. “It really is gone.”

“What?”

“Taured.”

“What?”

“It’s gone, Sherlock. It’s not on the map. I’ve never been, but I know my geography, and Taured has always—always—been right there, between France and Spain, just north of Andorra. And... what’s that? Port-yoo-gull?”

“Portugal,” corrected Sherlock. “You’re telling me that in your world, such a place as Taured actually exists, but Portugal doesn’t?”

“The shape of the land is there, but that’s all Spain.”

“Fuck me.”

John looked at him in surprise.

“Not literally, of course. Seems we’re done with... Anyway, what this means, John, is that Chris Melas’s stories have an element of truth. This has happened before. What we don’t know is how to reverse it, how to send you back to your own world. If you still want to go.”

John blanched, not sure he had heard right. “If I still want— You mean, you want me to stay?”

Sherlock shrugged and tugged at his scarf, agitated. “You would prefer to return to that world you described to me? A place where you are enslaved to biology and worth only what a hypersexual, domineering breed of ‘Alphas’ deems you are? I saw your face when you spoke of it last night, I heard your words. Tell me, John, honestly, were you happy in that world?”

“I...”

“Because forgive my saying so, but this alternate version of me seems like a real arse.”

“No!”

“Doesn’t even bring you on cases.”

“He— I— It’s not...”

“You don’t solve cases. You’re not a doctor. You were never a soldier. What exactly did you do with yourself, day in and day out? Cook dinner and clean house and watch telly? My John managed all that, too!”

“I get it!” John cried, anger and hurt exploding out of him. “I get it! Your John’s great, perfect, better than I could ever be! I’m nothing! I’m small and pathetic and useless. So go ahead. Talk shit about me all you like, but don’t have a go at my Sherlock. Because you know something? I love him. And you know something else? You’re a bit of an arse yourself.”

To his utter amazement, Sherlock smiled. “Aha.”

John blinked, shook his head, and asked, “What?”

“There’s the fire. That’s the John Watson I know.” The grin never left his face and he started tying
"his scarf around his neck. “And a good thing, too. I’m going to need him.”

“What are you talking about?” He felt confused, put out. Was he being insulted, or complimented?

“We have work to do.”

“What work?”

“Weren’t you listening? Mr. Melas may only be a good storyteller, but as he said, there’s an element of truth in those stories. In my universe, Taured is a made-up word. In yours, an entire country. What we need to find is further evidence of people like you—universe hoppers. We need their stories. If we gather enough data, we may be able to deduce what we need to do, exactly what we need to do, to hop you back home.”

xXx

To John's trepidation, Sherlock sent him off on his own with the vague task of collecting stories that seemed to parallel his own. Stories with strange events, confused memories, lightning. As for himself, Sherlock was going to do a little story-hunting of his own, beginning, he said, with his homeless network, which he seemed to think was a great resource. John didn’t know for sure, but it sounded like he was just going to talk to a bunch of homeless people. He doubted how fruitful that could be.

And John, who had no idea what he was doing, went to the only place in London he could think of where one might begin collecting stories of any sort: the London Library.

He felt like an idiot, standing there, in the center of a ring of hundreds of shelves and thousands upon thousands of books. Where was he supposed to start? What was he even looking for, really? Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe all Sherlock meant to do was get him out of the way so he could do the real work, so off with you, John, go on your little snipe hunt, and I’ll see you tonight.

Overwhelmed, determined to walk out of there and reconfigure his clearly flawed plan, he turned about, only to find himself face to face with an old woman with large spectacles sliding down the end of her nose.

“You look lost,” she whispered, because after all, they were in a library.

He didn’t quite know what to say. She was more right than she knew.

“Perhaps I could help you find something?”

He almost shrugged her off, politely of course. He almost insisted he was fine, he was just on his way out, he was late to meet a friend . . . But instead, he found himself nodding mutely.

“All right, then,” said the librarian. “What is it?”

“I’m . . . not sure. It might not even be here.”

“I see. Well. Why don’t we sit down, and you can explain your project to me. And we’ll see what I can do to help you get started.”

Hours later, walking out of the London Library with a single book tucked under his arm, he was startled to see that the sun had long since gone down. His breath hitched, and his stomach flooded with adrenaline. How had he let time get away from him? Why hadn’t they sounded the alert, letting all Omegas know that sundown was approaching and if they were alone they needed to get
home? Why hadn’t Sherlock come to get him?!

He fumbled for his phone and was halfway to dialing for his Alpha when his sanity returned, replacing the ingrained reaction to nightfall. What the hell was he doing? For a moment, he had completely forgotten where he was, that here, Alpha packs didn’t exist, and he was not an Omega that needed to be afraid. He let out a long, shaky breath, relieved. Holding his head high, he put his phone away and headed home on his own. For him, it was an experiment in freedom. It thrilled him. It was a rush of adrenaline, warm and invigorating, and he quite liked how that felt.

When he arrived at his front door on Baker Street, he again noticed the names on the bell: Holmes and Watson. Thoughtfully, he touched it with his fingertips. There was something beautiful, he thought, in the pairing of those names, side by side. Yes, his own came second, and yet he felt that it had equal weight. Equal value. These two men were partners, in nearly every sense of the word. And John experienced a long-felt, long-ignored yearning for exactly that, which he had never known with such force of clarity before. But the clarity, paradoxically, confused him. Suddenly, he didn’t know what it was he wanted at all.

Had Sherlock meant what he said? Did he really want John—him—to stay? Was that something John wanted for himself? There was an appeal to this world. He couldn’t deny it. But what about Sherlock? His Sherlock?

He shook his head to clear it, and let himself in.

“Ah, John. There you are.”

Sherlock stood facing the sofa; the wall behind it was littered with scraps of paper covered in handwritten notes, which he examined in pajamas and a bathrobe.

“The homeless network may not have been the most fruitful avenue to pursue,” he said with an air of confession. “I interviewed those who claimed to have been struck by lightning or electrocuted alongside tales of disorientation, faulty memories, and belief in ghosts, aliens, and realistic dreams. Mostly, I think I just wasted an afternoon chatting up the mentally ill. None of these stories seems to have characteristics to parallel your own.” He huffed out a breath and at last turned to regard John. “How did you fare?”

But John was in awe of all Sherlock had accomplished in the space of a few short hours, fruitful or not. He was suddenly embarrassed by the evidence of his own efforts: a single book.

“Um,” he began. “That is, I thought, when you said stories, you meant, you know … books.”

God, he was a class-A moron, wasn’t he? He felt his cheeks burning red, and he made subtle efforts to hide the book around his back.

“Books,” Sherlock repeated, sounding skeptical at best. “So you went …”

“To the library,” John mumbled.

“I see.” Holding his hands together behind his back, Sherlock adopted the air of a parent indulging a child. “And what did you find at the library?”

John had to explain, to defend himself and his stupid decisions. “Um. Well, you see. I talked to a librarian there. I didn’t tell her everything of course. She would have called the nut house. I just explained that I was looking for a story about someone who ended up, through no fault of their own, in the wrong world, and needed to find a way back, and how everything was familiar but strange at the same time. And, well. She showed me a book. I haven’t read it yet, but the way she
was describing it, I thought, maybe, there was something to it, you know?"

Sherlock endured his rambling and wordlessly held out his hand. Shyly, John brought out the book and placed it in his open palm. He awaited judgment.


"A children’s book?"

"Well, you see," said John, still needing to explain, “it’s the story of a girl who somehow steps into an alternative world, and—"

"Yes, yes, I’m familiar with the premise. It’s the sequel to Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland."

"Yes, the librarian said it was."

"John. Are you telling me you don’t know this story? Even I know this story. Everyone does."

". . . Um. No."


"Now you’re just making up words."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and handed the book back. “It’s a genuine effort, and a decent one. But this is a work of fantasy. Lewis Carroll wrote of talking cats and giant chess pieces and elusive rabbits and other nonsensical gibberish. It hardly parallels what we’re dealing with, and in any case, Alice enters Wonderland by falling through a rabbit hole. A rabbit hole, John.” He tutted. “Not exactly thunder and lightning.”

Properly chastened, John set the book aside on the table beside his armchair. “I’ll take it back tomorrow.”

“It’s a puzzle, John, and I will solve it. I promise you.” He rubbed his eyes and turned toward the kitchen, tiredness finally catching up with him. “It’s what I do.”

He started for the bedroom, but before he was out of sight, John said in a rush, “Did you mean what you said?”

Sherlock rocked back on one foot. “Eh? When?”

“Earlier today. You said . . . that is, do you want me to stay?”

With a sigh, Sherlock returned to the sitting room. “That’s not my call. You’re the one who jumped.”

“But do you want me to?”

“John—"

“I’d like to know.”

Sherlock spread his arms a little helplessly, looking conflicted. After much deliberation, he finally said, “I would be pleased if you would stay.”

To his own surprise, the answer made him sad. “Why?”
“I suppose . . .” He laughed shortly, and entirely without humor. “There’s no guarantee that you’re leaving will return the John Watson I know back to Baker Street. We don’t know where he is, do we? And, well . . . Because one Watson is better than no Watson.”

John gaped, affronted, on his own behalf as much as on the behalf of his counterpart. “So we’re interchangeable? One is enough like the other, no better or worse, so you can just swap us out?”

Sherlock shook his head, annoyed, but at whom—John, or himself—John couldn’t tell. “Let’s just say I have grown accustomed to sharing a flat and having a companion. That is all.”

“That’s all? That’s all? Don’t you miss him even a little?”

Sherlock seemed determined to not answer.

“Two years together, and that’s all you can say for him? You’ve grown accustomed? That’s all he meant? Did you really find him so dull, so utilitarian, so unlovable?”

Sherlock spun to face him and pointed an admonitory finger. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“You don’t know what John is to me, so just . . . just don’t.”

He’d touched a nerve. And in doing so, in seeing the pained look on Sherlock’s face—as if a mask had fallen away—brightened his understanding. It all became very clear to John, and it made him want to weep.

“Oh,” he breathed. Quietly, he said, “I see. I see.”

Sherlock scoffed. “Knowing you as I do, I doubt that.”

John ignored the insult. “You’re afraid he won’t come back. But you’re even more afraid that he will.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Because of the sex.”

“You need to stop.”

“You’re embarrassed that you and I had sex.”

“I said stop. You don’t get it, John. You’ve been in a relationship with your Sherlock for years. Seven years! Seven years ago in my world, John was patching up wounded soldiers in Afghanistan and I was fighting a cocaine addiction and trying to worm my way into the good graces of DI Lestrade just so I could have something interesting to do with my brain. I had no idea such a creature as John Watson existed. For five years, in some other universe, you and a different Sherlock Holmes were shagging each other’s brains out”—John blushed—“but I didn’t even have him to call my friend. But we found each other, didn’t we? Maybe we were always meant to. But you don’t understand. In this world, we’re just mates. That’s all. If John comes back, if he finds out that, that, that . . .”

He was struggling to say it, so John tried to lend a helping hand. “That you had been shagging him? Or someone you thought was him?”

Revolted. *Mortified.* My John Watson fancies women, only women, do you understand?"

"Xs, John translated in his head.

"He would resent me for desiring it, even thinking about it. He’d hate me for having done it with his doppelganger because I believed it was him. He would be so disgusted. It would be enough for him to move out, trust me. I can take hatred and disgust from anyone, but not John. He simply cannot know that, that, that . . ."

Again, John supplied the words. “That you love him.”

Sherlock, looking defeated, hung his head. He gave a shallow, almost imperceptible nod.

“But Sherlock—”

“I’m going to bed,” Sherlock announced. He looked absolutely drained of energy, and his eyes were glassed over. “I said I’d send you home, and I will. I just need to be alone right now.”

John watched him as he disappeared down the hallway and didn’t move until he heard the soft click of the bedroom door. He was stunned at the things he had heard. It was feasible, he supposed, that a world existed with only two sexes. It was entirely possible that Taured was gone and Portyoogal stole land from Spain. And he could even make himself believe that cats talked and little girls fell down rabbit holes. But it was impossible, utterly inconceivable, that there existed a world in which John Watson did not love Sherlock Holmes.

He hadn’t slept in more than a day, but he suddenly wasn’t very sleepy. He didn’t want to return to the room upstairs, with its lonely bed and cold sheets. He hated sleeping alone. It wasn’t about the sex. Not really. It was about lying beside someone he loved, feeling warm and protected and loved in return. And he realized that the Sherlock of this world had known what that felt like only recently, for only a handful of nights, and now it was gone again. For a minute, he debated within himself: Should he go to him? Just to lie there, be there, as a companion who understood? The Omega inside him, that would always be inside him, urged him to go care for his Alpha. But he knew he would not be welcome.

So, sadly, he sat down in his armchair. He picked up the book. And, if only for something to do, he began to read. Sherlock was right. It was a ridiculous story, but amusing and clever. He read long into the night. But it didn’t hold the solution to his problem. Again, Sherlock had been right. The little girl, Alice, hadn’t stood in a storm, waiting for lightning to strike her and send her back to the world she knew. All she had done was wake up.

Sighing, he glanced at the clock. It had gone one in the morning. He stood and stretched his back. Then he turned and saw his reflection in the mirror. Seeing himself now, knowing that he wasn’t himself, was a surreal experience. So this was John Watson. The doctor. The soldier. The blogger. The partner to brilliant consulting detective Sherlock Holmes. He stepped closer, examining the man’s features—haircut, jawline, dimple, eye color. For a long moment, he stood there, wide-eyed and scrutinizing.

And that was when his reflection blinked.

Chapter End Notes
Chris Melas's accounts of Lerina Garcia and Tokyo 1954 are true reports, though of course their validity is highly suspect. In this story, they are treated as strong suggestions of the validity of the other-worlds theory.
“May it never be said of me that I mistreated my Omega.”

John looked over his shoulder, pausing in the act of spreading a blanket over the sofa where a newly fluffed pillow already lay. Sherlock stood in his pyjamas and dressing gown, toes at the dividing line between the kitchen and sitting room.

“What?”

“Take the bed.”

John’s shoulders sagged. “Sherlock, I’m not kicking you out of your own bed.”

“You’re not sleeping on the couch.”

“Well, neither are you,” John said grumpily. “And I’m obviously a better fit for the couch.” He indicated his small frame with a derisive hand.

They stared long and hard at one another. Finally, Sherlock said softly, “I won’t touch you, if that’s what you’re worried about. I promise.”

John sighed. He was too tired to argue. Mentally, emotionally, he just didn’t know if he could do it anymore, or, if he could, for how much longer. He dropped the blanket.

Sherlock nodded sharply, returning to his brusque self. “That’s settled then.” He turned on his heel and retreated to the bedroom.

There was nothing for it: John followed. In truth, he wanted nothing more than to curl up, sink into a mattress, shroud himself in a duvet, and let unconsciousness take over so that, for a few hours at least, he could forget that this was his life now. The world he knew might as well have been a fiction: it was impossible to go back.

_Astronomically impossible._

He walked to the far side of the bed as Sherlock dimmed the lights and pulled back the covers. They faced away from each other while Sherlock took off his dressing gown and John exchanged his button-up for a t-shirt, trousers for bottoms. Sherlock got into bed first, and whether out of respect or sulkiness or just keeping his promise, he lay on his side, facing out along the edge of the mattress. Seconds later, John assumed the opposite position, and Sherlock pulled the cord on the lamp.

It was so silent that neither of them could even hear the other breathe. Maybe neither one did.

Then:

“I’m sorry you can’t go home,” said Sherlock.

John almost didn’t answer, not trusting his own voice. But he forced it out. “I’m sorry he’s not coming back.”

After that, there was nothing else to say.

_xXx_
He dreamed.

It began as his dreams so often did: with gunfire. But instead of the desert sands beneath a blazing Afghan sun, the battlefield was London. He was running down an empty street at midnight, shots ringing out around him and gravel erupting left, right, and center. He wore full gear and hefted an L85A2 standard assault rifle. He knew he shouldn’t be carrying it—the weapon had not been issued to him. But someone had pushed him out of the medical tent and stolen his first aid kit. So he stole the rifle. Now he was running for his life.

A bright flash of light sliced through the darkness, and John threw himself to the ground. He army crawled under a truck, then dashed into an alleyway. There, at the end of the long alley, he saw him. Sherlock. His Sherlock. He didn’t know how he knew, but he knew. Yet the distance between them was astronomical.

“They’re behind you, John!”

He looked over his shoulder and saw the Alpha Pack. They were twelve strong, enormous, inhumane, with fangs and flanks and glowing eyes. One of them wore gym shorts and a whistle around his neck. Damn it, it was Mr. Gillespie, his secondary school rugby coach!

“To the sin-bin, Watson!” shouted Mr. Gillespie, blowing on his whistle.

He screamed and ran hard, trying to keep ahead of the pack, trying to find Sherlock, trying to score a try with the rugby ball now tucked under his arm, having replaced the rifle.

John rounded the corner, and stepped into 221B.

Sherlock sat in his chair, fingertips pressed together as he regarded John thoughtfully, like a puzzle that needed solving. “I thought you’d never find me,” he said.

“Sherlock!” John cried with relief.

But just at that moment, there was a tinkling of glass breaking in the kitchen. He whirled and saw Sherlock at the table, looking down at a smashed beaker with a guilty look on his face. A violin started to play: the Twilight Zone on pizzicato. He whirled again, and Sherlock stood by the window, violin pressed to his throat as he played without a bow, just a plucking finger. Sherlock was running up the stairs, announcing a new case, and behind him, Sherlock was trudging up the stairs, having lost the murderer, and lying on the sofa, Sherlock was moaning about being bored. Sherlock filled the room, a thousand Sherlocks, from a thousand worlds, and John, in the center of them all, turned, and turned, and turned, until he couldn’t move, could barely breathe.

He fought his way to the door, past a dozen Sherlocks on the staircase. They weren’t his, they were none of them his. Breathing hard, he burst out the front door and into the streets. The skies were filled with sprawling webs of crackling light.

A whistle blew. “Sin-box, Watson!” Mr. Gillespie’s head had become a giant purple gumdrop, but it could still shout and blow.

And suddenly he was tackled to the pavement, and the Alpha pack fell on him, pulling at his legs, scratching at his arms, tearing off his shoes and jacket. Rifles exploded in his ears. He struggled to get away, but he knew this time he wasn’t going to make it.

“JOHN!”

His eyes flew open. Or rather, one eye: his hot, sweaty face was smooshed into the pillow. His
exposed hand clenched the bedsheets; the other was fisted into his own stomach where he was curled in on himself, trying to keep himself in a tight ball for protection against the pack. But he was panting, his heart was racing, and his whole body trembled. Slowly, he returned to himself, and he realized it had been a nightmare. Just a nightmare.

And, oh God, he wasn’t alone.

He’d had horrific dreams ever since Afghanistan, dreams that stole his breath, shook him awake, made him afraid to close his eyes. Fortunately, since moving in with Sherlock, the dreams had decreased in frequency, but they hadn’t disappeared. That was all right—he was used to sleeping alone, and was therefore his night terrors were shielded from witnesses. No longer: he felt Sherlock’s shadow behind him, upright and alert.

“Sorry,” he said shakily. He needed to get out, escape to the kitchen, drink a glass of water, and calm down. But hell if he was coming back to bed.

But when he sat up and started pulling back the covers, Sherlock said, “Let me help.”

John twisted his head, looking sharply over at Sherlock. It was dark, and all he could make out was a silhouette. “What?”

“You’re distressed. Afraid.”

“Hardly.”

“Your scent doesn’t lie. Come here. I can help.”

“How the hell do you plan—?”

“Would you just trust me, for a change? Lie still. On your side.”

“I just need to get some air . . .”

“This is better.”

And without waiting for further argument, Sherlock took John’s nearer shoulder, eased him back down, and rolled him gently back onto his side. Then he slid down and close behind him. His left arm curved up and around John’s head on the pillow; the other, he wrapped around John’s torso, splaying a hand over his chest. John tensed.

“Relax,” Sherlock whispered into his ear. “I know what I’m doing.” He began to stroke John’s damp hair away from his brow. The hand on John’s chest made slow, circular motions. Sherlock rested his own head against John’s, and his breath filled John’s nostrils. In so many ways, Sherlock completely surrounded him. And it was strange, so strange, but he felt himself being willed into a tranquil state. The dream was slipping away, and with it, the panic at searching for what was still lost, the fear of the pack, the terror of pain and death.

“What are you doing?” he asked, but this time, not out of irritation. He was calming, swiftly and fully, and he didn’t understand why.

“It’s the bond,” said Sherlock. “Alphas and Omegas, they have influence over one another’s moods. When an Alpha is angry, his Omega helps him keep a clear head. When an Omega is sad, his Alpha cheers him.” He continued to stroke, to rub, to breathe. “It’s in the scent. Pheromones. The stronger the bond, the more powerful the influence—we’re a drug to each other.”
John almost laughed, and he would have if the statement didn’t make him want to cry. For two years, that’s exactly what Sherlock had been to him, a drug. A stimulant. And he was an addict. But he knew this Sherlock meant it differently: he meant medicine.

“With touch,” Sherlock said, “combined with my scent, I can slow your heart rate. I can cool your skin. I can calm your mind. Whatever fear grips you, I can remove. Do you see?”

John nodded. He was feeling . . . safe. Comfortable. More comfortable than he could ever remember feeling, in fact.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Sherlock asked.

He shook his head but found himself answering anyway. “I have nightmares. Sometimes.”

“What about?”

“War. Getting shot.” He didn’t want to share the rest.

“You were saying my name. Or, more probably, his.”

“Sorry to wake you.”

“Don’t be.”

They lay together in silence, in what John was sure should have been awkward and unwelcomed. He was practically lying in Sherlock’s arms, after all. But he was too much at ease to protest. He never really thought of himself as one to seek safety and comfort in the arms of another—he was far more likely to offer it—but he craved it now. He hoped only that Sherlock wouldn’t pull away too soon, and he felt guilty for being so needy. Maybe it was biology, the bond, some Alpha-Omega mumbo jumbo. Maybe it was something else.

“You did this for your John, then, did you?” he asked, a little sheepishly.

For a long while, John thought Sherlock would keep that private, and he was on the verge of apologizing for asking the question. Then Sherlock spoke.

“Not recently. He hasn’t . . . That is, in the beginning, John was, I don’t know, skittish. He’d had some bad experiences. With Alphas. Service Alphas, primarily.” As he spoke, he continued dragging his fingers across John’s scalp, parting the hair, cooling him. John felt like he was melting. “And those memories provoked him, sometimes. I would hold him, then.”

“What did they do to him?”

Sherlock took a long, swelling breath. Consciously or subconsciously, he tightened his arms around John, pulled him closer until they were effectively spooned together. “Some Alphas,” he said reluctantly, “can be cruel. The unbonded can be dangerous.”

“Was he attacked?”

“Not like Ms. Hooper. Nothing like that, thank God. But he told me about Service Alphas who . . .”

His voice trailed away, and after a stretch of silence, John prompted. “What?”

“I understand why you hate this world. There is ugliness in it, for Omegas more than anyone. At the hands of Alphas, John has suffered leers and threats and disquiet. As an unbonded Omega in
heat, he was left at the mercy of Alphas who were sometimes... rough. Abrasive. He's suffered estrus poisoning because of one callous Alpha. Another threatened to bond without his consent. There may have been other instances he never told me about.”

John closed his eyes, feeling Sherlock’s sadness wash over him. Instinctively, he placed a hand over Sherlock’s, stilling the circular motions but keeping it in place against his chest.

“I’m glad he found you, then,” he whispered.

His eyes were feeling heavy, his body warm and restful. It no longer felt strange, lying there in Sherlock’s arms. Just for tonight, he told himself as he sank deeper and deeper back toward sleep.

xXx

They woke together. They took turns in the loo. They dressed in silence. Neither mentioned the night before, and for that John was relieved, though conflicted. He had enjoyed falling asleep like that, been grateful for it; and yet, he felt he shouldn’t have been.

Nevertheless, it had been a long, long time since he’d slept so well.

Like a good little Omega, John made breakfast, and like an appreciative bond-mate, Sherlock ate it. Sherlock read the morning paper, and John pulled out the other John’s laptop and tapped in the password: Sherlock41.

His hands froze over the keyboard. Every forty-one days. That was roughly nine times a year, for roughly the last twenty-five years. That was two hundred and twenty-five heats, and six hundred and seventy-five days of heats, and oh god oh god, thought John, if the last heat was any indication, that meant over four fucking thousand times taking the knot. How the hell had the body withstood it? Jesus Christ, if an Omega wasn’t tough as nails.

But then he turned and looked down the tunnel running in the other direction. He wasn’t young, but he was nowhere near old. He wouldn’t last four thousand more. He just wouldn’t.

And the next was only thirty-one days away. A month had never seemed so short.

He squeaked a little in his throat. “Hold it together, Watson,” he murmured under his breath.

“You’ll figure something out.”

“You say something?” Sherlock asked, looking up from the paper.

“No. Nothing.”

For the next few minutes, he conducted Google searches (“How to safely skip your heat” and “Can one go into heat if unconscious?” and then, a little more desperately, “What if I don’t want to be an Omega anymore?”). His searches pulled up nothing.

“Text from Lestrade,” said Sherlock, holding his phone up to his face as he rose swiftly to his feet.

“He’s got a lead.”

John’s head snapped up. “One of the Alphas?”

“DNA evidence from the crime matched an Alpha in the system. I need to get down to the Yard. Lestrade will be questioning relatives, those who may have seen him last, those who might know where he and the others are hiding out. The hunt is on, and . . .” He trailed off in the act of putting on his coat. Then, more hesitantly, he said, “Did . . . that is, do you want to . . .”
Slowly, still reeling from his latest horrifying realization, John shook his head. “Actually,” he said, “I was thinking I should visit Molly. See how she’s doing.”

“Oh.” There was an odd mixture of relief and disappointment in Sherlock’s face, followed by a quick headshake of perplexity, like he didn’t understand his own response. “Yes. That would be . . . kind.”

“There’s that, yes. But I’m not going just to be kind. I want to make sure the treatments to counter the bond have worked. And I sort of made her a promise.”

“What promise?”

“That when we find those Alphas, we’d fight them for her.”

Sherlock pursed his lips, his prominent eyebrows drawing together in consternation. “That’s . . . not how this works.”

John felt his irritation flare. “Why the hell not?”

“You don’t know the system, John, the legal allowances. Only Molly’s pack can fight in her name.”

“She doesn’t have a pack. That’s what she said.”

“Therein lies the problem.”

“Fine. Let’s find a solution.”

Sherlock sighed, not in annoyance, but helplessness.

“Answer me this,” said John. “What constitutes a pack to begin with?”

“A legal pack? Blood and bond. You joined my pack when we bonded.”

John nodded slowly. “And your pack includes . . .”

“Me, you, Mycroft, and Anthea.”

“What about my blood? What about Harry?”

“You left your pack behind when you joined mine. The Alpha blood takes priority. Our pheromones have dominance.”

“I see.” John thought. “So, just so I know I’m getting this right . . .”

“Go on.”

“The bond literally gives me some of your pheromones. That’s what literally binds us together. That’s why I’m part of your pack.”

“I carry yours, too. But yes. That is why. It’s legal rendering has biological basis. Harry does not have my pheromones. Nor does Molly.”

“What if she did?”

“What if who did what?”
“What if Molly were bonded with us. You. Whatever.”

“Excuse me?” The look of abhorrence was unmistakable. “You would have me”—he made a flailing, helpless sort of gesture—”with another Omega?”

“Does sex have to be involved?”

“Yes!” Sherlock exclaimed, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, the first law of nature.

“Always?”

“I thought you were a doctor!”

“Okay, okay, forget I mentioned it.” John heaved himself to his feet. “I’ll be on my way then. Don’t know what I’m going to tell Molly, but I won’t let her feel like the world’s abandoned her.”

He started for the door, grabbing his jacket en route.

“John.”

He paused at the door and waited.

“I don’t know how else to say it. I’ve dedicated myself to him. Here or not. You understand?”

Looking back over his shoulder, John felt something in himself soften. “I do. And I think that’s wonderful.”

xXx

Returning to the Omega Hospital, John once again passed through the screening room, temperature reading, blood check, declaration of status as bonded and cycle, all of that. He gritted his teeth and bore it, then walked swiftly to the lifts to visit Molly on the third floor.

“I’m feeling better,” Molly said bravely. “Less pain. No more burning . . . down there. Doctors say I’m responding well to the hormone treatment. They won’t let me leave until they’re one hundred percent positive the bond has no more effect. Not much they can do about the mark other than let it heal, though. It’ll scar.”

She pushed back her hair to show John. It looked better, granted. No more inflammation, at least, although the skin itself was a sad sight. Molly seemed in better spirits, too, though John couldn’t help but wonder how much of it was an act.

“How long, did they say?”

“Full round of hormone therapy is based on my cycle.”

“So, until your next, erm”—God, he hated saying the word—”heat?”

“Hard to know, actually. I was only eight days away from my next heat. But the doctors expect the attack has thrown things off. I used to be twenty-four and two.”

John rapidly translated in his own head: a two-day heat every twenty-four days. He himself was forty-one and three.

“You mean, they’ll keep you here anywhere from eight days to three weeks?”
“If I go into heat, they’ll move me,” she said, smoothing the hospital sheet down over her legs. “Can’t have an Omega in heat in hospital.”

John puzzled through this, trying to reason out why not, when it seemed a hospital was, perhaps, the very safest place for an Omega in danger of estrus poisoning. If he questioned her, would it be to terribly obvious that he wasn’t a proper Omega himself? But he wanted to know, so he said vaguely, “No?”

Her eyebrows rose. “They’d have to bring in an Alpha for me, wouldn’t they? An Alpha isn’t allowed inside a hospital full of Omegas unless on the scent inhibitor, but can’t help me through my heat if suppressed. No scent, no knot.”

Three things occurred to John simultaneously—it was like a firecracker going off in his brain, temporarily blinding him with light, deafening him with noise.

Thing one: What she said made sense. He should have worked it out himself. Idiot.

Thing two: She still had to be knotted?!?! She still had to suffer these heats, the humiliation of subjecting herself to an Alpha, or else die from estrus poisoning, after all she had already gone through? So the powers that be would arrange to have her moved from the sanctuary of a hospital, and then hire an Alpha to come and fuck her for two days. And there was nothing she could do about that? Outrage!

Thing three: Suppressed. Suppressed. The word rang in his head like a gong being struck.

“The detective from the Yard,” Molly was saying, when John tuned back in, “he said he’d escort me to an Omega House himself, a discreet one. And be there when it was over. He’s been so . . . kind.” And to John’s surprise, she blushed a little and tucked her hair behind an ear. “He’s Beta, you know.”

Oh. Oh.

Thing four: Molly didn’t want an Alpha. Maybe she’d never wanted an Alpha, but she certainly didn’t now. She fancied Betas. Beta-Ys. And, unless John was mistaken, a very particular Beta-Y. The Molly he knew was (tragically) besotted with Sherlock, but in recent months, he had seen (though maybe not so much observed) an increased friendliness between her and Lestrade. They often stood together at the side of the room, spoke together in lowered voices, laughed at one another’s jokes. And Lestrade. He’d been single for a while now. Molly Hooper and Greg Lestrade. Interesting.

But his mirth was cut short by the thought—what does a Beta partner do, when his Omega goes into heat?

What did Harry do? She was Beta. She fancied Omegas. That’s what John’s journal had said.

“John?”


“Yeah. He said that, no matter the outcome of the dog fight, he will make sure that Alpha pack gets what they deserve and never harm no one else, ever again. Not you, not me. No one.”

“Good man, Lestrade.”
“He is, isn’t he?” Her cheeks were burning now, and her eyes dropped to her hands. “Never mind. I just need to . . . get past this. Figure something out.”

“What do you mean? Figure what out?”

“Start looking for work again, you know?”

“You’ve not been sacked, surely.”

She shrugged but looked sad. “I’ve not been able to go into work for days now, and it’ll be days or weeks yet. Plus, an Omega like me. Damaged. It’s bad luck, innit?”

“Why, the miserable little f—!”

“It’s all right, it’s fine,” Molly said in a rush. “Didn’t much fancy food service, to be honest.”

John shifted a little restlessly in the chair by her bedside. Part of him wanted to overturn machines and smash equipment and hurl things around the room, as if by raging and destroying he could set something right. Instead, he took Molly’s hand.

“Molly,” he said, “if there were no rules, no restrictions, if you could do anything you wanted with your life, anything at all, what would you do?”

Eyes widening with confusion, she stared at him and gave a little shake of her head. “What do you mean?”

“If you could be anyone . . . What did you want to do as a kid?”

“Um . . .”

“Me? I wanted to be a doctor.”

With a sad but sympathetic smile, Molly said, “Omegas can’t—”

“I know, I know. But what if they could? What if Omegas were allowed to do everything Betas and Alphas could do? What would you do? Just for fun. A thought experiment.”

She bit her lip, trying to hold back a shy smile. “You’ll laugh.”

“Promise I won’t.”

But she laughed, then covered her mouth. When she was ready to confess it, she spoke through her fingers. “Coroner.”

John’s face split into a smile.

“I know! It’s ridiculous! But do you remember that show, Murder 999, from when we were kids? There was this character, a Beta-X, not in every episode, but most, who they brought in whenever they did a scene in the morgue, and she’d go on about what she found in the dead man’s stomach or the markings left on the dead girl’s skin or what toxins were found in the blood, that sort of thing, and I thought, when I was little, of course, wouldn’t that be something, to know so much about the body that you can tell what makes it go wrong, that you can tell if a killer was in a rage or if he hesitated because of the size and angle of the stab wounds, that sort of thing, and it would be like solving a puzzle, solving mysteries, solving crimes! And oh, you would have to be so smart, so clever, I could never do it. But, you know. I dreamed about it. Sometimes.” She smiled regretfully. “Not anymore.”
“You know,” he said, “I don’t think you should stop.”

“What?”

“Dreaming. That’s the first step, isn’t it?”

“Toward what?”

“Change. You and me, we didn’t get to live out our first dreams. But that doesn’t mean we should give up on them. What happened to you, to me . . . That’s not the end of things. We can still make something of ourselves, of our lives, meaningful things, wonderful things.”

She was shaking her head, though not in denial. With a hopeful gleam in her eye, she asked, “Like what?”

But in that moment, the door opened, and a Beta-X nurse came inside with an IV bag. Who knew what was in it, John thought. Part of the hormone therapy, perhaps.

He was told that Molly needed her rest, and John promised to come back some other time. He left the hospital room but was only two steps down the hall, heading for the lifts, when his feet screeched beneath him and he came to an abrupt halt. Someone was coming toward him, someone he recognized, wearing a white coat and carrying a short stack of medical files.

“Mike!” he exclaimed.

The doctor paused mid-stride and took him in, head to toe, with a friendly smile but without any sign of recognition. Then he quirked an eyebrow.

“Now now,” said the doctor, “that’s Dr. Stamford to you, Mr. . . . ?”

Buggering hell.

“Watson,” he said between clenched teeth. He couldn’t help but feel surly. Why did Mike get to be a Beta in this universe and not him? The injustice rankled. And now he was being corrected and condescended to by the man he had practically hand-held through immunology and let borrow his notes in embryology. And now he was the doctor? Wanker.

“May I help you, Mr. Watson? Are you visiting? Looking for someone?”

John was at a loss. The man didn’t know him. Of course he didn’t. And apparently, he had got on just fine without a John Watson in his life. And, he supposed, John had managed to find Sherlock just fine without Mike. But he had valued their friendship, in that other life, and it frustrated him that he couldn’t talk to him now, as a friend, or say they should go get a pint and catch up. Not that a pint would ever be in John’s future again.

“What are you all right?” The doctor placed a hand on his upper arm, and John realized how flustered and upset he must have looked. He had not been expecting this encounter, and was apparently failing to school his expressions.

“Erm,” said John, “I guess I’m not feeling especially well.”

He had meant it as a way to excuse himself, but Dr. Stamford misread it as a complaint.

“I have a few minutes,” said his once-upon-a-time friend. “Come in here, we’ll talk.”

And John found himself escorted numbly into an examination room and set on the edge of a
hospital bed while Mike pulled up a stool.

“I saw you in here before,” said Mike. “You’re a friend of Molly’s.”

“Yes.” He looked around the room and saw Omega anatomy charts hanging on the walls and one poster reading *Hygiene and Heats Go Hand in Hand* with a list of do’s and don’ts in bullet points. Lovely. “So you’re an Omega doctor.”

Mike chuckled. “Well spotted.”

“What specifically?”

“Pardon?”

“What’s your speciality?”

“Ah. Yes. Well, I specialize in Omega-X fertility, but more broadly, estrology.” He winked. “Heat doctor.”

John suspected it was a layman’s term. He grunted in acknowledgment.

“Something on your mind, Mr. Watson?”

Should he talk about anything that was on his mind? It didn’t seem prudent. But then again, Mike was a doctor, and a friend. At least, he had been. And doctor-patient confidentiality still applied, right? Did Omegas get to enjoy that privilege, at least?

“I, um . . . I’ve been thinking, lately. This past little while hasn’t been, erm, easy for me, for various reasons. I won’t go into it all. But I’ve been thinking . . .”

“Go on.”

“What if,” he began, slowly, choosing his words with care, “I don’t want to be an Omega anymore?”

Mike’s small, beady eyes grew round. “Come again?”

“I just don’t think I can take it much longer. Is there something I can do—anything—to stop from, you know, going into heat again?”

With a frown, Mike leaned forward and said in low voice, as if they were sharing a secret, “You’re bonded, yes?”

John eyed him suspiciously. “Yes . . .”

“Is your Alpha unkind to you? Does he hurt you?”

“What?” He sat back abruptly. “Why would you think—?”

“It’s very, very uncharacteristic for an Alpha to hurt his or her Omega. But it does happen, John. And that’s usually a primary factor in Omegas disliking or fearing their approaching heats. But there are resources for abused Omegas, hotlines and safe houses, and bond disengagement therapies—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” he said, putting up his hands. “It’s not like that. Sherlock’s fine. Everything’s fine.” *In a matter of speaking,* he thought.
“But you don’t want him to share your heat?”

“I don’t want to have a heat. It’s different.”

Mike stared at him, uncomprehending. And before he could be diagnosed as a cracked Omega in need of rehabilitation, he tried a different tack.

“Think about Molly,” he said. “You know what happened to her.”

“Of course, I do. I’m not her primary physician, but I know why she’s here.”

“Great. So here’s the thing I don’t get. She’s suffered a horrific ordeal. She was hunted, beaten, and raped by three separate Alphas who knotted her and forced a bond. It doesn’t get any worse than that for an Omega, am I right? And yet—and yet—biology dictates that she has to endure another knotting with yet another Alpha who doesn’t give a damn about her, but is only there to get himself off for two days straight. What if she doesn’t want another heat, eh? You can inhibit an Alpha’s scent receptors. You can administer hormone therapies to counteract a forced bond or stabilize an Omega after estrus poisoning. Don’t tell me there’s no treatment for controlling, curtailing, or stopping the heats altogether.”

Mike frowned. “You’re talking about protecting Omegas. The measures you’ve described do protect them, and, on the whole, are very effective.”

“You’re not listening. The hormone therapies offered are corrective, not prohibitive. They’re no good until something has actually happened! And Alphas have to take the scent inhibitor while they’re in this hospital, but not out there, not on the streets where Omegas are most vulnerable.”

“We can’t force—”

“Exactly! You’ve developed something for Alphas. And it’s an Alpha’s prerogative whether he or she will bother to use it. Chances are pretty slim on that count, eh? But what if Omegas could control their own scents? What if they could choose not to have a heat, if they didn’t want one, or until they found an Alpha they actually did want to share it with? Then the power would lie with them. Power over heats should lie with Omegas! And no one else.”

“Mr. Watson,” said Dr. Stamford, “what you’re suggesting goes against the very nature of an Omega. Estrus is basic biology.”

“Biology be damned. We’re not living in the Stone Age.”

“And furthermore, I just don’t believe it’s possible, eliminating estrus altogether.”

“Doesn’t mean it can’t be managed. Regulated. Made less intense for those who want to keep their wits about them. And, for others, suppressed.”

“Suppressed,” Mike repeated, but this time, his tone was less judgmental, and more ponderous. “A suppressant?”

“Yeah. Something like that. Not every Omega will go for it, I’ll grant you. But they should at least have the option.”

Mike sat back, eyebrows knitted, still thinking, and John saw him mouth the word again. Suppressant.

“Look, I, um. I think I should go,” said John. He stood up from the hospital bed. “Good talk, doc.”
But Dr. Stamford, deep in thought, didn’t move, not even to swivel on his stool and bid him farewell. John was halfway out the door when one more thing occurred to him.

“Dr. Stamford,” he said pointedly, to draw Mike out of his distracted contemplation.

“Yes, Mr. Watson?”

“One more question. Theoretically speaking. If one were to extract the Alpha hormones that bind him to his Omega, and insert them into another Omega without a bite or a knot, but by way of intravenous therapy or as a hypodermic injection directly into the subcutaneous tissues”—Mike’s eyebrows rose—“would that Omega then, technically, be part of the Alpha’s pack?”

“Um . . .” Mike shook his head, as though to awaken himself. “Technically. Yes, I suppose. But, well, we are speaking theoretically here, yes? I don’t believe it’s ever been done. And without the mark or reinforcement of the knot, those hormones would likely break down within a matter of days, maybe a week. So it would be a temporary bond, at best.”

“Interesting.”

“You’ve a very creative mind, Mr. Watson. And a surprisingly sharp one. For an Omega.”

John gave a curt nod. “Cheers, Mike.” And he left the room.

And just before the lift doors closed in front of his eyes, he saw, down the hall, Greg Lestrade approaching Molly’s door, pause, adjust his tie, slick back his hair, check himself out in the reflection of the window. Despite everything wrong with this world, John thought, there was at least one thing right.

xXx

The calendar days turned. The hunt continued, but without much success. Sherlock, his frustrations mounting, ignored all other cases that came to his door or inbox. But he didn’t ignore John. He took him out to retrace every step John had taken between Baker Street and the alleyway where he was attacked, hoping to get a sense of the pack’s hunting grounds, though they did make a small detour for lunch from a food truck, and again when a traffic accident made them take the long way around. For John, it felt like being back on a case, and even if it was, technically, his case, he was just happy to be part of it. It felt normal.

What he was less prepared for, however, was an attack from his sister.

She came storming into the flat—his flat, a flat she’d never even been to! despite his repeated invitations!—before he was even out of his pyjamas. He was stunned to see she had her own key.

“John Watson!” she cried, her face purpled with fury. In her hand, she held a crumpled newspaper.

“Harry!”

She slammed the paper down on the table. “So this is how I have to hear about it? From the papers? You utter wanker!”

John caught sight of the headline: “Sherlock Holmes on the Trail of Alphas Following Attack on His Omega.”

“It made the paper?” He grabbed it and started reading.
“Over a week ago! How could you not tell me!”

“Jesus, Harry, it was nothing, all right? I was barely hurt.”

“What’s this then?” She grabbed his hand, still bandaged from broken bottle; the stitches wouldn’t be ready to come out for another five days or so. “And this?” She grabbed his chin and turned his head. The bruising on the side of his face was still a sickly yellow-green. He slapped her arm away.

“And where was Sherlock when this was all going down? Why were you alone?” He didn’t get a chance even to squeak before she kept going. “I can’t even count them anymore. How many more times do I need to say it? You cannot take risks. Risks get you hurt, or worse. Come here.”

Then she grabbed his shoulders, pulled him in tight, and hugged him within an inch of his life.

What was this? Harry was one of the least demonstrative people he knew. They didn’t exactly come from a hugging kind of family, and though John had often regretted that, he had never tried to change it. Once, he had met his sister after one of her bouts in rehab, and tried to show some physical affection. A hand on her arm, that was all. She had literally slapped him away, told him to stop being a pansy, and he vowed never to try again. So what. The hell. Was this?

Harry was simultaneously rubbing his back and stroking his hair. “You’re okay, pumpkin, you’re going to be okay.”

Pumpkin??

It had been days since John had been so thrown off by the Wacko World, and he had halfway convinced himself that he’d be able to take anything in stride. But this . . .

And yet, he didn’t pull away. He didn’t balk. Apparently, the John of this world had a much, much better relationship with his sister, and as overprotective as it seemed right now, bordering on infantalizing, he allowed himself to indulge in the illusion that he and Harry had always been close. He lowered his head to her shoulder and slowly lifted his arms to hug her back, half expecting her to push him away and mock him. But she didn’t, only held on tighter. Behind closed lids, his eyes burned. It was the first time, in a very long time, that he admitted to himself how dearly he wanted this in his life. So he would take it, for those few short seconds, even if it wasn’t, strictly speaking, real.

xXx

He knew he was depressed. Sherlock was too. But they didn’t talk about it. Not about the transplanar displacement that had brought John to the wrong world and sent the other John away, not the impending heat, not Dr. Stapleton’s pronouncement of impossibility. They carried on, John like a soldier in a war he knew was lost, Sherlock like nothing was amiss. They were pleasant with each other, conversant, attentive. At night, they retired to the bedroom together, a thing John decided not to fight anymore, or resent. It was kind of nice, actually. They didn’t talk much after turning out the light, but they did talk, and it was there, in the dark bedroom, they spoke most openly and honestly to one another before rolling onto their sides and falling asleep. John took notice, however, how he often awoke lying on his back, and sometime in the night, Sherlock had rolled to face him. A protective instinct, surely.

But despite their relative quiet on the subject, John should have known better: Sherlock’s brain would not have simply let it rest. Nor would his heart accept that his John was gone for good.
“Synchronicity, John, that’s what Dr. Stapleton said.”

John put down the spatula and left the stir fry to simmer. He turned around to see Sherlock standing in the sitting room, rotating slowly in a counterclockwise direction, eyes in examination mode.

“Yeah . . . ?”

“All we need to do is line you and John up, and here, here”—he indicated the sitting room with two enthusiastic hands—“is where we do it.”

“Okay . . .”

“We arrange everything exactly as it is in your own universe. The furniture the books on the shelves, the rugs on the floor, everything.” He spun. “Then we sit you there, in your chair. You said yourself that’s where you and your Sherlock talk. My John is bound to sit there, same as you. You’ll match up, this universe to that, and snap. Synchronicity.”

“If it were as simple as that,” said John, “it’s a wonder we haven’t swapped before now. This room looks exactly the same, Sherlock.”

“Something must be different. Close your eyes.”

“What?”

Sherlock strode forward, grasped John’s head between two large hands, and started spinning like they were dancing.

“Whoa, what are you doing?”

“I need you to maximize your visual memory.”

“Holy fuck—”

“Picture 221B, your 221B. Capture it in your mind. Details, John. Do you see it? Are you seeing it?”

“Is the spinning necessary?”

“It will disengage you from your immediate surroundings. Keep your eyes closed.” They made two more rotations, and stopped. “Describe what you see.”

Behind closed eyelids, John saw the 221B he had known for two happy years. Everything from the way the curtains fell over the windows to the skull perched on the mantelpiece. He began to describe it aloud, item after item, detail after detail, right down to the color and where it was placed in the room, and Sherlock listened intently, not interrupting until . . .

“What was that last bit?”

“Schubert?”

“Yes, on the music stand. You said music stand.”

“Right. I mean, it’s not always Schubert, but . . .”

“What do you play?”
John opened his eyes. “I don’t,” he said, astounded.

“Then why the music stand?”

“Sherlock. *You* play.”

“I play?”

“Violin.”

Sherlock was visibly taken aback, like he was impressed, but also a little disappointed in himself. John couldn’t quite explain why this one, of all the differences big and small, felt like a punch to the stomach.

“So you . . . you don’t play. Do you.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Never.”

“Then how—?”

“How what?”

John pursed his lips, realizing what he had been about to say, second guessing it. But he third-guessed and pressed on. “How do you let it all out?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “Let what out?”


Sherlock stepped away completely, putting his back to John as he went to resume his own chair in the sitting room. “That’s one problem your Sherlock and I do not share. I do not hide from anything.”

“No?”

“No.”

“How were things, then, eh? Between you and John?”

“Eh?”

“That’s right. The question you keep dodging. Something was going on you won’t admit aloud. Why, Sherlock, were you trying to be *exciting* for him again? What did you mean by that? And don’t tell me it’s none of my business. We’re both too deep into each other’s lives for that kind of line.”

“I thought we were talking about your violin-toting non-lover.”

“You’re dodging again.”

Sherlock sighed, conceding, but he looked none too happy about it. “Lately, things have just seemed . . . off. Between us.”

“What do you mean by ‘off’?” John stepped lightly toward his chair, seeking for signs that he would not be welcome if they sat together. There were none, so he sat.
“I don’t know,” said Sherlock, and from anyone else, John might have read it as hedging, but from
Sherlock, it came out as sincere. He really didn’t know. “On the surface, everything was, you
know, fine. Nothing out of the ordinary. Day in, day out, we were as we ever were. But there were
times I would look at him, when he didn’t know I was looking, and he seemed . . .”

“Yes?”

“Sad.”

John nodded slowly. “Did you ask why?”

“I researched: ‘How to handle an unhappy Omega’ and ‘Reasons Omegas crack and what to do
about it.’” Before John could react, Sherlock jumped on what he was thinking. “I already know
what you’re going to say, so spare me. Maybe we should have talked about it. But in any case, I
concluded that the problem wasn’t with him—it was with me. With us. The seven-year itch Betas
complain of. We just weren’t connecting like we once had. Then, one day, he said something to me
about it.”

“What?”

“It was the morning after the last heat we shared together. Him and me. It was just a little thing. He
said—” Sherlock dropped his head, like he was mortified, like repeating it was costing him
something. “He said, Thank you. Then he left the bed to go make breakfast.”

John couldn’t stop himself now: he gaped wide, and he gaped long. Whatever he might have been
anticipating—a protestation of the meaninglessness of his existence, a rant on the subjugation he
endured in his own house, in his own bed—was blown over and dismantled in the tiny
acquiescence, the gloomy gratitude, that for three days out of forty-one, he’d been the center of
Sherlock’s world.

“Like I had done him a favor,” Sherlock continued. “So I was determined to show him, next time,
how much I desired him, too. Because I feared he’d forgotten it. And I didn’t want him to doubt it.
Not for a second.”

“Next time.”

“Eh?”

“You said next time.”

“Yes. So?”

“So you waited thirty-eight days to show him you wanted him? You waited until the only moment
an Alpha ever wants an Omega?”

Sherlock scowled, but John read beneath the offense to the embarrassment lurking below.

“Look, I’m not trying to harangue you. It’s just . . . How often were you two, you know, intimate?
Outside of his heats?”

Almost as though confused by the question, Sherlock said, “You mean, how often did we have
sex?”

John sighed. “Yes. Bluntly.”
“One does not knot an Omega outside of his heat, John. I thought your time here had made that clear.”

“You can’t have sex without knotting?”

Sherlock threw up his hands. “I thought you said you were a doctor!”

“I am!” He scrubbed his face, grabbing hold of the reins of his temper. “But you must at least, you know . . .” When Sherlock apparently didn’t know, John was forced to finish. “Be affectionate. Physically.”

But Sherlock was frowning. “Say it, why don’t you. You didn’t enjoy it in the slightest.”

John colored and cleared his throat. “You mean . . .”

“The heat. The orgasms. You hated every second of it.”

“No. No, that’s not what I’m saying.” He took a deep breath. Why was this so hard to communicate? “Look, Sherlock, the . . . the sex was good. Fantastic. Powerful. Quite, quite powerful. Frankly, I’ve never, erm . . . I’ve never felt anything like it. But it’s not just about, you know, satisfaction. It’s about caring for your partner. All the time. While you’re, you know, at it, but also between, erm, sessions. And dammit, before things get crazy. You know. Foreplay.”

“Foreplay,” Sherlock repeated, like he didn’t know the word.

“Come on, you know what I mean.”

“We’re not Betas, John. We don’t need precursors to arousal, do we?”

“Oh please. This isn’t about— Listen. You knew your Omega was going into heat that day, right? You’ve got a fucking calendar. But where were you? In the minutes and hours leading up to it, when your Omega was writhing with discomfort and all that, why weren’t you there, easing the way? You should have been.”

Unexpectedly, Sherlock sat forward in his chair and fixed John with an inquisitive expression. “Explain.”

John sighs. “You know. To care for him. To make him comfortable. To warm him up to the idea of a three-day heat. I’m talking about the mind and heart, not just the body. That’s clearly taken care of. But it’s making love, not going at it like rabbits. Talking and petting and touching and kissing, that sort of thing, which sure as hell doesn’t need the excuse of impending heat. You should be doing these things, um, regularly.”

“Kissing?”

John snorted, certain he was joking this time. “Don’t tell me you don’t kiss.”

“What for?”

“What for!”

“Honestly, John, you’re so easily shocked by the perfectly ordinary. Kissing is a Beta practice, a way to sniff out compatible pheromones. Alphas and Omegas, our sensory receptors are far more advanced, negating any need for messy, unhygienic oral contact. And once the bond is established . . .” He stopped, seeing John’s shaking head. “What?”
“Damn, Sherlock. You have no idea what you’re talking about, do you?”

“What I’m talking about?”

“A kiss is . . . God, it’s the sweetest, most affectionate, most intimate thing two people can share! It’s selfless: you give a kiss, you don’t take one. It’s sensual: the touch, the movement, the warmth. It’s love, pure and simple. Sex is exciting and stimulating and very personal, yes, but without kissing . . . You have no idea what you’re missing.”

He noticed then, that Sherlock was examining his mouth, not so much with desire, but curiosity.

“Show me?” he asked.

John’s heart made a hard thud. It took him a moment to answer.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because . . .” He searched for the words. “Look, no offense, but I’ve never kissed a bloke before. And if I ever do . . .”

Sherlock waited.

His heart was burning, his nose tingled. John had to push those feelings aside to finish talking. “It’s going to be him.”

“Your Sherlock.”

“Yeah,” he whispered.

“Because you love him.”

“God help me. I do.”

At last, Sherlock grinned, reserved, but delighted, like he had scored a point in a game John didn’t realize they were playing. “I knew it.”

xXx

By the next morning, a music stand and violin had appeared in the sitting room.

Synchronicity, John thought glumly, positioning the stand where he remembered seeing it last, and placing the violin on the floor beside Sherlock’s chair. As much as he wanted to believe in Sherlock’s latest scheme, he honestly had no faith in it.

That night (day sixteen), after they retired to bed, John lay awake, staring at the ceiling, Sherlock snuffling softly in sleep beside him. But John felt restless. His forty-first day was still a ways away, but the number of days was dwindling, and as much as he was growing to appreciate this version of Sherlock, he still couldn’t bear the thought of losing his mind to another three-day heat. He just couldn’t. He was afraid of the lack of choice and control; he was afraid of the pain, desperation, begging, and losing himself to the throes of merciless sexual drives.

Softly, he slipped out the bed, making sure not to disturb his sleeping companion; but Sherlock didn’t stir. Easing open the door, he padded his way down the hall and into the sitting room. What he wanted was a scotch, but that was out of the question. Telly was rubbish. Even the tea didn’t
seem as strong, though he conceded that that might have been in his head. So he sat in his chair, staring longingly at the empty one right across from him and thinking about the Sherlock he had left behind, and the confession he had uttered. He wondered if Sherlock were looking for him, too, even if he didn’t feel things . . . that way.

Sighing, he glanced at the clock. It had gone one in the morning. He stood and stretched his back. Then he turned and saw his reflection in the mirror. So that’s what he was now, eh? An Omega that wasn’t an Omega. A head full of erroneous history, incorrect anatomical knowledge, and wrong desires to be something more than what he was. He stepped closer, examining the man’s features—haircut, jawline, dimple, eye color. Familiar, and yet, strange. A face he knew and yet would have to get used to. For a long moment, he stood there, wide-eyed and scrutinizing.

But then he blinked.

And flinched.

But wait. No. He had not moved a muscle.

John gasped, and half a second later, the man in the reflection gasped too and clapped a hand across his mouth. John made a strangled sound in his throat, an aborted cry, but the reflection had no such restraint. Instead, it turned its head toward the kitchen, and cried out Sherlock!
In Which John Meets John

Chapter Summary

Happy Holidays, friends! See you in the new year.

“Sherlock!”

John’s head snapped back to the mirror, and to a reflection that was no longer a reflection, but an image of himself falling back several steps, fingers raking through his hair at both sides of his head, looking utterly shocked and mouthing, “Oh my God, oh my God.”

“Sherlock! Come quick, come quick!” He waved a hand frantically until he heard noise from the back of the flat. “Quick!”

Through the glass, his autonomous reflection had rushed closer, and it was almost as though he would fly through the mirror. But he stood on the other side of it as if it were a window, peering through, eyes searching wildly in the direction of the kitchen.

John could scarcely contain himself. He bounced on the balls of his feet, hands flapping on either side. Behind him, Sherlock, half-dressed and eyes still adjusting to the light, skidded into the room. But the instant he came into the frame of the mirror, John suddenly found himself staring once again at … himself.

He stopped bouncing. His hands stopped waving. His face fell. He watched himself transform from elation to devastation in the blink of an eye, the way a proper mirror allows you to.

“What is it?” Sherlock rushed to his side, chest heaving. With the heel of his hand, he scrubbed an eye to clear his vision. He took John by the shoulders and turned him around to face him. “What’s wrong?”

“I—”

Looking back at the mirror, he slowly lifted a hand and watched his fully compliant reflection do the same.

“No,” he whispered. “Where did he go? Where is he?”

“John. What are you talking about?”

“I saw him, Sherlock!”


“Him. Me!”

Sherlock’s eyes followed his to the mirror, then refocused again on John’s troubled face. (He knew he looked troubled. His reflection told him so.)

“You saw yourself in the mirror,” Sherlock rephrased for clarification.
“Not myself. Me.”

“Have you been in the wine?” He leaned forward and sniffed.

“No, no, I was there. Right there.” And he pointed at himself through the glass. He was so stunned, he was stunted. He wasn’t articulating things properly.

“Yes, John,” said Sherlock in a tired, condescending tone. “It’s called a mirror. Mirrors are smooth, reflective surfaces that bounce little particles of light called photons into your eyes where cones and rods register the image and send a message to your brain.” His tone shifted suddenly from that of a patronizing know-it-all to an overeducated wiseacre with a crusading need for accuracy. “Well, actually, the photons don’t bounce. They can’t. That’s physics. They’re actually absorbed into the atoms of the mirror, where the particle atom has more energy, for just a fraction of a second, and —”

“No, Sherlock, I didn’t see myself, I saw me!”

The more dubious of Sherlock’s two eyebrows arched high.

“Not this me, me me. The real me!” He jabbed a finger at the mirror. “Your John!”

The sleep fled from Sherlock’s eyes, like light punching through a fog. He twisted to the mirror. But despite his sudden alert state, he whispered, “Where?”

“Through the mirror! I saw him! I thought I was looking at myself, my reflection, but he moved, and I didn’t, then I did, and he didn’t, and, and, and …”

“Then where is he!”

“I—I don’t know.”

He’d never seen Sherlock looking so distressed, neither this version nor the one he knew himself. “You’re sure?” he asked, stepping toward the mirror and looking into its depths and corners, raking across its smooth surface with sharp, penetrating, anxious eyes.

“As sure as anything.”

“How did he look?”

“Like me! I just told you.”

“I mean.” Sherlock huffed. “Did he look upset, unhealthy, unwell in any way?”

John put his hands on his hips and said defensively. “My Sherlock wouldn’t let that happen.”

Sherlock threw a look of disdain over his shoulder, and when he did, his eyes fell on the book resting on the small table beside John’s chair. His eyes snapped back to John’s, and he revolved completely to face him.

“You haven’t slept.”

Blinking in confusion, John said, “No, I couldn’t, I …”

“It’s late. Very late. You’ve not been watching telly. The remote control is where it was when I went off to bed. So what have you been doing in the meantime, eh? A little light reading?”
John followed his gaze. “You mean the book?”

“I mean the book.”

“Yes, I read it.”

Sherlock sighed, long and … disappointed. He rubbed his sleepy face. “I think it got inside your head.”

“What?”

“Through the Looking Glass?” He waved his hand at the mirror behind him. “A bit of a literal interpretation, John.”

“No no no, that”—he shook both hands at the mirror—“was real!”

“I think you need sleep.”

“I’m not making this up, Sherlock.”

“You may believe you saw something, but …” Sherlock turned and looked again, the last light of hope fading from his eyes. “Sometimes we see only what we want to see.”

xXx

John didn’t sleep that night.

Long after Sherlock once again disappeared to the back of the flat, he remained staring into the mirror, waiting. Barely blinking. Barely breathing. He waited until his legs ached and his back was sore and he could hardly stand, but he refused to move, not even to sit. If he sat, he couldn’t see the mirror, and he was afraid to take his eyes away for even a second, lest he miss whatever had connected him to himself.

Just as the sun was coming up, breaking through window panes and blinding him—white rays reflecting off the mirror—Sherlock reappeared.

“All right, you’re done,” he said. He tugged on John’s arm, meaning to steer him away from the mirror and perhaps toward the couch. But the blood had left both legs, and they were numb from thigh to toe. John’s knees collapsed under him, and he fell forward and into Sherlock, who gave an *uumph* and caught him in his arms.

“Sorry!” said John, his voice betraying how exhausted he was. But he couldn’t get his feet back under him—he couldn’t feel them.

“You’re impossible,” said Sherlock. “And your counterpart would kill me for this. But he’s not here. So.”

And with that, Sherlock lifted John into his arms.

“What’s happening? Where are we going?” John said through a yawn that stretched his mouth wide. “I need to watch the mirror. I’ll miss him.” His objection fell on deaf ears.

“You need to turn off your addlepated brain. It’s not doing you any favors at the moment.”

John’s head fell back with a groan as he was transported from sitting room, through kitchen, down the hallway, and into what he had once claimed as his own bedroom. There, Sherlock deposited
him—or rather, *poured* him—onto the unmade bed. Instantly, John melted into the mattress, the call of sleep suddenly overpowering. He completely forgot that this room wasn’t his anymore. He burrowed his face into the pillow and breathed deeply, a sense of home washing over him.

Before he drifted away completely, he felt Sherlock pulling the covers around him. They were still warm from where Sherlock had been lying only moments before.

“Watch the mirror,” John mumbled into the pillow, his eyes already closing and embracing the darkness of sleep.

Sherlock only sighed.

Hours later, John awoke well rested and content, forgetting the stresses of the night before. But when he opened his eyes, he remembered where he was. Not only in a bed not his own, but a world not his own. He remembered, too, the image he had witnessed through the mirror. The other John, he was convinced, had *not* been the fabrication of a sleep-deprived, literature-inspired, underdeveloped brain, but plain and simple truth:

He had seen through into his own world.

Deftly, he threw off the covers and rolled lithely onto his feet, padding back to the kitchen with renewed determination. He would tell Sherlock again what he saw, insist that he be believed, and make him sit down so they could make sense of it together. He needed someone with a cleverer brain to help him sort through it. He still had an Omega mind, after all.

But when he reached the sitting room, Sherlock was gone. He turned, and turned, and turned, looking for some sign of him, or at least a note, but there was nothing. A little desperately, he resumed his spot before the mirror.

“John?” he spoke timorously. “Hello?”

But the mirror was just a mirror.

He went for his mobile.

*Where are you?*

John sent the text with a feeling of agitation, something he didn’t normally allow himself to feel toward Sherlock. But damn, if this wasn’t important!

A few seconds later, Sherlock texted back.

*Had to get out.*

The brevity of the message, the clipped tone, the calculated lack of warmth … John frowned, seeing it for what it was. Sherlock was overwhelmed and refused to acknowledge how all of this was getting to him. So he was escaping, long enough to get himself under control. But weren’t they supposed to work this out *together?* John wished Sherlock would let him help.

Why shouldn’t he?

Why should he sit on his hands? John may not have been the most brilliant of companions, but he wasn’t entirely useless. And he had just as many question and just as few answers as Sherlock did. What was wrong with making an individual attempt to shift that balance? He had no pride. Ignorance, stupidity, helplessness, it was already on display wherever he went, wasn’t it? So why
He dressed quickly, shoved his feet into a pair of shoes and grabbed his coat off the hook. Probably for the first time in his recollection, he left the flat without letting anyone know that he was leaving, without any real plan, and without having grabbed a bite of breakfast. It was a thrilling sensation.

xXx

“That’s an interesting theory, Dr. Watson,” said Chris Melas, who had sat with rapt attention as John recapitulated Alice’s story in connection with Chris’s own alternative version of reality and evidence of multiple worlds. “You’re suggesting that the author was from another world himself.”

“Why not? Like your other examples of brilliant men of extraordinary talents. Why not Lewis?”

“No no, honestly, I’m intrigued.” Chris moved eagerly to the edge of his seat, his knees bouncing. “People have always been a little dismissive of Wonderland as the product of a drug-added brain. But what if he was just trying to explain his experience? Or… or! What if he took drugs to cope with the experience of shifting worlds and trying to explain it through metaphor? Maybe the experience is akin to what it would be like, falling down a rabbit hole.”

“One would think it impossible,” John agreed, “as much as jumping worlds.”

“Yes. But why a rabbit hole?” Chris mused.

John thought. “Because of the rabbit?”

“What?”

“I mean…” Would he be able to articulate what was going on in his head, or would he come across sounding like a moron? An Omega could get away with it, but a doctor shouldn’t sound moronic. “For the whole story, Alice is chasing the elusive white rabbit. She catches glimpses of it, but it always gets away from her.”

“Yes. Yes! The white rabbit signifies Lewis’ attempts to return to his own world, but he doesn’t know how. He’s chasing something he can never reach.”

“Because it’s impossible? Going back?”

Chris shrugged. “I wouldn’t think so.”

John perked up. “Really?”

“If something can happen once, it can happen twice. Sure. Why not?” He leaned in conspiratorially and lowered his voice. “Why did you come back here today? And without Sherlock?”

“Ah.” John looked down at his hands, then spread them on his leg, wiping the sweaty palms on his knees. “You said …”

“Yes?”

“You said we sometimes get closer to the truth through literature, didn’t you?”

“And what truth are you looking for, Dr. Watson?”

Doctor. He wasn’t sure he would ever get used that in connection with his own name. He liked it,
but he felt like such a fraud responding to it. He lived in fear of a medical question.

“What if I told you,” he began slowly, “that I … saw something. Something that couldn’t be explained but by, you know. ‘Other worlds’ theory.”

“I’d say I want to hear all about it,” said the excitable young man.

John was fit to bursting with all he wanted to say. He couldn’t divulge everything, of course. Chris Melas might be open-minded, sympathetic, and excited, but he was still a stranger, and outside of Sherlock, John didn’t want anyone knowing he was from another dimension where he had been a different sex, one without equivalent in this world, and apparently one better left unmentioned, and certainly undescribed. It had not gone well with Sherlock. Subspecies indeed.

“I was looking at myself in the mirror,” said John. “And then, it wasn’t me. My reflection moved, but I did not.”

Chris’s eyes went so wide John thought they just might fall out of their sockets. “Holy shit.”

“Yes. That.”

“Like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*!”

“Just so. It didn’t last long, but it was undeniable.”

“And did your reflection see you? Because in the story, Alice can see into her home through the mirror, but no one can see her. To them, it’s just a mirror.”

“He saw me.”

“Shit shit, holy shit.”

“We were both rather taken aback.”

“An understatement, I’m sure!”

“And I’d give anything to figure out how I can make it happen again.”

“Tell me what you were doing. Everything. Every last detail.”

For the next hour and a half, John and Chris worked on the puzzle. John described every action of his body, every thought in his head, right up until the incident. Chris Google searched every key word he could think of, from gateway mirror to windows to parallel universes to *can I talk to my alternate self through a mirror?* finding very little of use. One theoretician of quantum mechanics suggested that mirrors could serve as dimensional doorways linking one universe to its parallel, bridging the perceptual gap via vibrating strings of the quanta . . . but the article was so dense that neither man could make much sense of it. Then—

“Here’s something,” said Chris. “It’s from what looks like a pseudo-Eastern philosophy spiritualism site, so maybe a little far-fetched, but bear with me. The article is called ‘Soul Searching.’”

Chris began to read aloud:

*Do you believe in the existence of the soul? If you’re perusing this website, chances are, you are inclined to be a believer. But what exactly is a soul? Many Eastern philosophers believe that your soul—okay, listen closely—is a reflection of your true self.*
Have you ever wanted to know your true self? Have you ever wondered who you really are, deep down? Most of us would rather not wait until we are dead to be parted from this body and have our true selves revealed. But what if there were a way to encounter your soul before you die, as easily as talking to a friend? Only, the most honest friend you’ll ever meet.

The answer, dear reader, is in the mirror. To speak to your truest self, follow these simple but important instructions: Stand very still before the mirror, and look deep into your own eyes. Your pupil is a mirror itself, absorbing light and reflecting truth. Mirror to mirror, one sees into eternity —

“What?” said John, his brow scrunched in confusion.

“Ignore the vapid, flowery language. I’m getting to the good stuff. Here, I’ll skip ahead.”

If you look long enough, your soul will be transported. It will remove itself from you for a time, travel through your eyes (the very window to the soul), and find home in the mirror. Do not move. Do not blink. When you have achieved separation, you will feel it. Then speak, and listen, and your soul will reveal your most hidden truths.

Chris turned away from the monitor. “Near as I can tell, that’s exactly what you did. More or less. And that’s what you need to do again.”

“But my soul didn’t leave my body and make itself cozy in a mirror,” he objected.

“No, of course not. But this writer is just looking for some sort of explanation for an unexplainable event. Maybe it’s just a matter of you and your counterpart in another dimension happening to, you know, match up. Like in an improv game.”

“Like coming into sync?”

“Sure, that’s a good way to put it. You come into sync, and the mirror, somehow, serves as a sort of conductor. A portal that allows you to see each other.”

“So what you’re saying is, when I was looking into the mirror, another me in another universe was doing the same. Exact same space, exact same moment.”

Chris nodded enthusiastically.

“But … how can I make that happen again? If I want to see him again, how can I communicate that we need to sync up?”

“You said he saw you, too. Right?”

“Oh yes.”

“Well, if it were me,” said Chris thoughtfully, “and I’d experienced something like that, I’d be keen to have it happen again, too. And I’m betting my alternate self would be just as eager. We’re the same person, after all. In a manner of speaking. So if you try to recreate the conditions, I’m betting he’s trying the same. Ask yourself honestly: what would I do. Chances are, he’s thinking the same way you are. Wouldn’t you think?”

“Recreate the conditions,” John echoed.

“Where you were standing, how you were standing, what time you were there. Maybe even what you were wearing. Everything you can think of.”
John thought Chris must be right. Everything had to match up, down to the last detail. And, he supposed, that included the people in the room. The connection had been lost, the moment Sherlock had stepped in from the kitchen. Already in his mind, he was making plans to recreate the experiment, and part of that plan, as much as it made him uncomfortable to think it, was to keep Sherlock out of it.

“This is fascinating, Dr. Watson,” said Chris, as he saw John to the door. “You’ll tell me if it works, won’t you? You’ll let me know if it happens again?”

John smiled noncommittally. If things worked out the way he hoped, he wouldn’t be around to tell.

xXx

Where are you?

John received Sherlock’s text—a perfect echo of the one he himself had sent Sherlock that morning—while strolling through the park, so deep in thought it took his brain a few moments to register the ding of his text alert.

In his own world, an Omega walking alone in Hyde Park, even during the day, was basically walking under a red light. Here, though... There were no signs reading “Alphas: Keep Your Omegas in Sight at All Times” or “Omegas: Did You Know 1 in 3 of Your Sex is Molested in This Very Park Every Day? Never Walk Alone.” Instead, he read things like “Keep London’s Parks Clean: Pick Up After Your Dog” and “Lost? Take a Free Map.” And while there were emergency stations in both universes—tall blue poles with a big red buttons where one could call for help—one read “Omega Urgent Rescue,” whereas the other read simply “Emergency.”

It made him sad, the differences. He was no dummy—he knew which was more equitable. And it should have given him further cause to choose this world, a place where he was not, by law, by society, by biology, labeled inferior, fragile, in dire need of a superior hand to see him through life. But his stomach turned to think that his home world would continue on like it was, because no one could see a better way. He wanted to help it, fight for it. It wasn’t all bad, after all, and, he supposed, anything with even a little good in it deserved a chance to be saved.

He texted back:

Out.

He stopped walking, stood staring at his phone and the message he had sent—it was even more curt than the one Sherlock had sent him earlier. The Omega in him chided him for treating his Alpha so ungraciously. The man inside him was smirking.

Patiently, he waited for a huffy reply. Instead, the phone rang in his hand. Sherlock was calling.

“Afternoon,” he said mildly.

“We have a case.” Sherlock’s voice came through clear, unperturbed, maybe even a little eager. It had an instant effect on John’s mood; his heart began pumping in earnest, though he stood stock still. It was impossible to deny what he felt. He loved cases. Though he’d been on only a handful of them, he was quite prepared to say that assisting Sherlock in his work was one of the things he loved best in the world—this or any other. Damn, he was snared.

“Oh?”

“Body’s in the morgue. Curious tattoos up and down the arms. Naturally, Lestrade doesn’t know
what to make of them. Are you coming?”

Just like that? John was chuffed beyond measure. Just as he was unused to playing partner to a
detective, so was Sherlock unused—or unwilling—to go it alone. Not if he could help it.

“Which morgue?”

“St. Bart’s. Molly’s expecting us within the hour. Meet me there.”

“Um. Yes. All right. I’m on my way.”

Excitement now fueling him, John picked up his feet and jogged to the edge of the park where
he hailed the first taxi he saw. “St. Bartholomew’s,” he said, with a feeling of importance.

He arrived first, with no sign of Sherlock. To his surprise, there had been no health screenings or
questionnaires. He had just … walked inside, and without speaking to a soul, he followed the signs
leading to the mortuary on a basement floor. For a few minutes, he wavered outside of the double
doors, wondering whether he should wait or go inside on his own. He didn’t think he should, not
without Sherlock. Through the round windows, he saw only one (living) person in the room, a
woman in a lab coat and purple latex gloves, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. He didn’t much
fancy approaching a stranger and trying to explain himself. So he decided to wait. Maybe he should
text Sherlock? Just to see how close he was…

“Hello, John.”

He turned and saw Detective Inspector Lestrade of the Yard walking toward him from the direction
of the lifts. His timidity suddenly intensified. The last he had seen Lestrade had been during the
zoo case, where he had first been queasy at the sight of blood, and last been soaked in zebra blood.
What must the man think of him?

“Feeling better?”

“Ah! Yes. Thank you, sir, yes, very well, thank you.”

But apparently this was an unexpected response, because Lestrade slowed and looked at him with
an air of uncertainty. Crap, he’d done something wrong.

Okay. Think, Watson. Re-evaluate. You sound like an Omega. What does that mean? Timid,
inferior, complacent, submissive. You are not that anymore. You don’t have to be. You are Captain
Watson, Doctor Watson, don’t-take-no-shit-from-no-one Watson. Act like it.

“Ha ha,” he said, weakly, trying to pass off his behavior as a joke. Then he cleared his throat
loudly. “Erm, you? How … how are you?”

Lestrade smiled a little falsely, clearly still disturbed. “Great. Well. You know. As good as one can
expect when investigating a murder. Sherlock on his way?”

Places.” God, what was he even saying? “I mean, I win. Ha ha.” Again, he cleared his throat so
loudly he coughed. “Erm. Shall we?”

“Yeah, just right quick,” said Lestrade, forestalling him. “Look John, maybe it’s none of my
business, but … is everything okay? Between you two?”

“Who? Sherlock and me?”
Lestrade nodded. “You’ve both just seemed … slightly off. Ever since … you know.”

John felt his cheeks beginning to glow red. “He told you?”

“About what?”

“About the seeeehhhhcccc”—oh God! Abort, Watson, abort! Desperately, he made a futile attempt to change course—“retary who, um, who … came … to see …” He was floundering, the most miserable liar on this side of the planetary divide.

“Oh my God,” said Lestrade. Then his voice dropped to a frantic whisper: “You had sex with Sherlock Holmes??”

“Only a few times!” John protested, looking around in a panic.

“More than once??”

“Shh!”

“Oh my God! I mean, I knew you two were good mates, but wow. Really? How? How! How did that happen??”

“Please, please don’t say anything. It’s … it’s not happening anymore, okay?”

“I mean, did the two of you get drunk? Did he come onto you?” Lestrade gasped with a thought. “Did Sherlock Holmes seduce you? What was that like?”

From behind gritted teeth and a panged expressions, John said, “It wasn’t his fault. It was mine.”

“Whoa, seriously??” For a moment, Lestrade looked utterly taken aback. Then he smirked, blushing a little himself now. “I mean … John.” And he winked.

“Shut up, here he comes.”

Like a grand master of entrances, Sherlock was striding toward them, his large black coat billowing behind him. John could do nothing else but look at his shoelaces, convinced Sherlock would read his untimely confession in his eyes if John gave him the chance.

“What, have the pair of you forgotten how doors work?” he asked, none the wiser, and he pushed directly into the morgue.

With a grand, sweeping hand and a grin like a cat, Lestrade held the door and bid John follow after his erstwhile lover.

xXx

It had been an achingly painful twenty minutes in the morgue. John stood stock still, arms folded, over the corpse while listening to Sherlock deduce and avoiding eye contact with a detective inspector who was doing a fool’s job of keeping a straight face. At one point, though, Lestrade moved off to talk to the mortuary attendant, and Sherlock finally lifted his face to John.

“Okay there?”

John didn’t realize his jaw had been locked so tightly until he attempted to move it. “Hm?”

“Are you feeling sick again?” He indicated the corpse.
It was the body of a white male, middle aged, and with a belly like a pregnant woman. There was no obvious sign of death, although the mortuary attendant (Molly, was it? Polly?) had pinpointed cardiac arrest as the cause of death. This would not have been suspicious at all, had the corpse not been found when a couple who had returned from their holiday only to discover a stranger, half-naked, half-buried in the back garden, his head and shoulders poking up with the petunias. He was still listed as John Doe, the only identifying markers being the tats covering both arms, shoulder to wrist.

John realized, with some surprise, that the corpse, aside from being dead, wasn’t that upsetting.

“No,” he said smoothly. He felt Lestrade’s eyes flick in their direction. “Just … thinking.”

On the way back to the flat, while Sherlock ruminated on the tattoos and scrolled through websites, John got a text message from Lestrade:

_We should grab a pint._
_Talk about it._
_If you want._

He quickly angled the screen, lest Sherlock spot it.

Was that something this world’s John and Lestrade did together? Grab a pint? Like colleagues? Like … friends?

His phone dinged again.

_Until you’re busy. U know._
_Bow-chic-a-wow-wow._

John shoved the phone in his pocket. In his mind’s eye, somewhere in the city, Lestrade was laughing his arse off.

As the day progressed, John forced the misstep into the back of his mind as he followed Sherlock around the city, interviewing a series of tattoo artists, getting tips from a handful of homeless men and women, and grabbing a quick bite to eat from a food truck. Now, they were back in the flat. It was late, but Sherlock was showing no signs of tiring. He had printed off images of the man’s tattoos and was tacking them to the wallpaper.

“Might be time for bed soon, eh?” John suggested around eleven o’clock. If he was going to try to contact the other world again through the mirror, he needed to have the sitting room to himself at precisely 1:15. Having been doubted once already for claiming to have seen the other John, he didn’t want to mention it again until he had more solid proof.

“Yes, goodnight,” said Sherlock absently, staring at his wall.

“You’re not … tired?”

“Mm. No. Not when I have a case on, John.”

Bollocks, this wasn’t going to work. But John was anxious to try out his new plan—because surely his counterpart would have come up with the same one—so he had to devise another: getting Sherlock Holmes to go to bed without Sherlock Holmes know he was being manipulated.

How the hell was he supposed to do that?
He was sitting in his armchair, reading the paper without really reading it, when he yawned. A few seconds later, quite by accident, Sherlock yawned, too.

Sherlock was tired—he was just refusing to acknowledge it. All John had to do was, you know, help it along a little. And that left him with an idea.

Over the next hour and bit, John set about to subtly create the perfect sleepy-time conditions. When Sherlock went to the bathroom, he turned down the brighter lights, leaving on only a couple of dimmer lamps. He turned on the telly to a blank station for practically undetectable white noise. Every twelve to twenty-one minutes, he was sure to yawn (even if it was fake), and without fail, Sherlock followed suit. And, to cap it all off, he made tea, chamomile tea, and, for good measure, laced it with a sedative antihistamine he found in the cupboard.

He didn’t bother asking Sherlock whether he actually wanted tea. He just shoved it into his hand. Sherlock made no protest and sipped appreciatively.

Finally, all his work paid off. At 12:45, with a loud yawn and a stretch, Sherlock announced that he was one for bed.

“Yeah, me too,” John lied.

At last, the sitting room was his.

He hurried around the room, making sure that everything was in the exact same spot as before, even going so far as to disassemble Sherlock’s wall of tattoo photos, just in case it somehow interfered with the connection. He even put on the same clothes he had worn the night before, right down to the underwear. And then he stood facing the mirror, heart thumping, stomach writhing, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Sometimes he shifted. Or lifted a hand. Or cocked his head. But his reflection followed suit. It was one o’clock, then a quarter past. And as half one drew nearer and his heart began to sink and his stomach to unknot, he tried one more thing:

“John?” he spoke aloud.

And his reflection’s eyebrows shot up into his hairline.

John gasped and rushed to the mirror, and the other John did the same, until they were nose to nose, gaping at one another. And the other John mouthed, My God, it worked!

“Wait,” said John, concerned. “Can you not hear me?” He pointed to his ear, and his counterpart shook his head sadly. Then he reached behind himself, grabbed something out of sight, and lifted it for John to see. A pad and pen. Apparently, he’d anticipated this and came prepared.

Careful never to lose sight of John in the mirror, lest he lose him entirely, John scrambled quickly to locate the same, and was relieved when he returned to the mirror and John was waiting for him, a message already scrawled in a familiar hand.

Where’s Sherlock?

John uncapped the pen and wrote hastily against the mantle.
Sleeping.

John 1: Does he know?

John 2: He figured it out before I did.

On the other side of the glass, John smirked. Then he scribbled some more.

John 1: How is he?

John 2: Fine. He’s [John hesitated, wondering how much he ought to say.] trying to find a way to bring you back.

John nodded and made a gesture John read as same before continuing to write.

John 1: What have you learned?

John 2: That I’m a rather useless companion. I’m not good for much.

When John read John’s note, his face fell.

John 1: I meant, about how it happened. The switch. [Then he shook his head, scratched out the last bit, and scribbled furiously onto the notepad.] You’re not useless. You’ve been living in impossible circumstances. You’ve dealt with shit every day of your life, and yet you survived. You’ve even carved out for yourself a piece of happiness here on Baker Street. That takes balls. [John barely finished reading before John returned to writing more.] And useless? Hardly. You’re Sherlock’s fucking rock. He practically fell to pieces when he discovered you were missing. He needs you, even more than he knows.

John 2: Really?

John 1: Damn straight.

John 2: You swear a lot.

John watched John laugh on the other side of the glass.

John 1: You don’t swear enough.

There was so much to say, so many questions to ask, but neither John knew how long this connection would last. As if reading one another’s thoughts, they opted for sharing everything they knew about the how of their unusual situation, writing until their hands cramped. John taught John about many worlds interpretations of quantum mechanics and something called transplanar displacement, correspondence, and interacting worlds, replete with examples about Atlantic salmon and a drawing of trains labeled A and B. In return, John—feeling significantly foolish—shared theories about ghosts, déjà vu, and Alice. They took notes on one another’s work.

John 1: You’ll share all this with Sherlock, right? See what he makes of it?

John 2: Yes. I just hope he’ll believe me when I say I talked with you.

John seemed to be thinking, then he moved to write again.

John 1: Tell him ‘vatican cameos.’

John 2: [Puzzled.] What does that mean?
John 1: *He’ll know. And he’ll know who it’s from.*

John 2: [Reflective.] *Do you think we’ll ever switch back?*

John 1: Yes. I think we have to believe it.

John took a deep breath. What he had to say next, he debated. And when he put pen to paper again, he wrote slowly.

John 2: *If we don’t, will you promise me something?*

John 1: [Looking hesitant before writing back, just as slowly.] *You want me to look after him.*

John 2: *Please. Would you be his bond-mate?*

If he weren’t himself, he might have found it difficult to read the deliberately stoic expression on his own face. It wasn’t reluctance, exactly, but there hesitancy born of something being held back. John didn’t look away, pleading with his eyes. At last, John started writing again. His face bore the hint of a wince as he did so.

John 1: *You should know. I shared your last heat with him. Before I understood what was going on* [He had underlined *before* twice.]

John 2: *I figured you would have.*

John 1: *I found it … shocking.*

John 2: *I’m sorry. I’ve since come to learn how strange my world must seem to you.*

John 1: Yes, it is very strange. I don’t know how long I can last as an Omega in your world. [He let John read this, but held up a finger, forestalling him from responding, and kept writing.] *What I wanted to say, though, was that I’m sorry I slept with your bond-mate. There may have been some necessity driving it, but whatever the hell it was, he was not disloyal to you. I believe he would want me to be clear on that.*

John smiled sadly, missing his Sherlock with such fervor it felt like a knife in his heart. Yet John’s words warmed him all the same.

John 2: *He’s a good man. A good bond-mate. Always has been.*

John 1: *Yes, I’m seeing that.* [More scribbling.] *I’m glad you’re not upset.*

John 2: *I’m not. I understand.*

John 1: *If we can’t be honest with ourselves, who can we be honest with?* [John smiled, looking very much relieved.]

John 2: [John laughed, feeling carefree.] *Well then. In the spirit of full disclosure, I should reassure you of the same. Your Sherlock is a good man, too. The best. And he wouldn’t want the strength of your friendship at all compromised, even though he and I did have sex.*

But when John read the confession that had been intended to establish greater rapport and reinforce their mutual trust, when his eyes landed on the final word, he visibly flinched. His whole body fell back a step, as though he had been physically jolted, and his eyes went wide with what John could only describe as dismay.
“Shit, shit,” said John, taking a page out of John’s book and allowing himself to swear. It was only then that he remembered Sherlock’s words, his fear, if ever his John were to discover that Sherlock had shagged him. “He’d be appalled. Revolted. Mortified … He simply cannot know …”

On the other side of the glass, John was anxiously raking fingers through his hair, stepping further and further away from the mirror.

“Wait, wait, come back!” John said, rapping knuckle on the mirror.

John, however, seemed too much overcome, and for the first time, he turned away, turned his back, and the moment John lost sight of his face, the connection broke, and he was face to face with himself.

“Fuck.”

xXx

Sherlock sat at the kitchen table with the daily paper, sipping the morning brew and eating a bit of toast. John strode into the room, bleary-eyed from a night without sleep but still keyed-up. Without preamble, he slapped the notepad down in front of him, enforcing precedent over the London news.

Sherlock started, sloshing a bit of coffee on his hand. “Jesus, John!” he said around a mouthful of buttered toast.

“Vatican cameos.”

Sherlock choked.
In Which John Walks on Hunting Ground

Chapter Notes

I hope you all enjoyed The Abominable Bride! I sure did. And I kept thinking, how fun would that be, to swap modern!John with Victorian!John and watch that play out? But enough daydreaming. I have a fic to finish.

Sherlock.

My Sherlock.

He had sex with my Sherlock.

The hussy!

John stood in the shower, hot water running over his head, down his back, and into his eyes, as he rested his forehead against the tiles. The nausea had passed, more or less, but unless he concentrated on breathing deeply, his stomach tightened, then twisted, then writhed, and it came back.

It wasn’t revulsion. It was a different kind of pain.

He couldn’t name it. Maybe he didn’t want to.

Seven hours earlier, after midnight, John had slipped quietly away from Sherlock’s bed in the Wacko World for his early morning rendezvous with himself, although he wasn’t entirely convinced it would work. His mind might well have been playing tricks when he thought he had seen his reflection move on its own accord. An exhausted brain, a trick of the light, a secret wish. That’s why he hadn’t mentioned it to Sherlock. Nevertheless, he had spent the day silently plotting to recreate the conditions that had led to the first bizarre encounter and had been bracing for the bitter sting of disappointment. But this felt worse.

After he lost John in the mirror, he couldn’t get him back. Well, no, John had to be honest with himself, in this at least: he didn’t even try. Instead, head spinning and heart racing—unaccountably startled stupid by the confession—he had sunk down onto the couch, where he remained, head in hands, until suddenly, somehow, he ended up on the floor, head hanging between his knees. He felt … deflated. Defeated. Then came the nausea.

There was a rapping on the bathroom door.

“John?”

John pushed back from the wall, scrubbing the water from his eyes. Not just shower water. “A minute,” he called back.

“You’ve been in there for thirty-four minutes already.”

“Wonderful you’ve been counting,” John muttered.
“All right?”

“Fine. Just. A minute, yeah?” He returned his head to the tile. _Breathe, Watson. Breathe._

Three minutes passed, and he didn’t move. Suddenly, he heard Sherlock’s voice directly behind him, his deep timbre reverberating throughout the tiny bathroom. “You sick?”

John jumped. He looked over his shoulder and saw Sherlock poking his head past the curtain into the steamy shower.

“Jesus, Sherlock, what the hell!”

He kept his back determinedly turned; even so, he cupped himself for privacy.

“What? Oh! Right.” Sherlock snorted. “You have issues with modesty now. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“This has nothing to do with your level of comfort. Out!”

“Fine.” His head retreated, but he didn’t leave the bathroom.

John killed the shower. Waited. “Are you just going to _stand_ there?”

“Are you going to talk to me? Something’s wrong. Shower as long as you like, I can still smell it on you.”

“Damn you and your damn scents and this damn fucking shit-soaked universe,” he muttered under his breath.

“I’m waiting, John.”

He sighed moodily. “Towel,” he demanded. One landed on his head.

As he dried off behind the shield of the curtain, Sherlock took the opportunity to talk first.

“I heard you. Two nights ago, you left the bedroom after midnight and didn’t come back for three hours. Last night, you left again and didn’t come back at all.”

“You were supposed to be asleep.”

Sherlock huffed. “I know when my Omega leaves my side.”

John paused in the act of scrubbing the towel across his head. Not long ago, Sherlock wouldn’t have stood for that kind of distance, that absence. And yet, last night, he hadn’t come after John, to coerce him back to the bedroom. Instead, he had fought his instincts and allowed John his privacy. Despite himself, John was impressed. Touched. And he felt himself softening a little.

He took a long breath, held it, steeled himself, then said, “It worked.”

“What worked?”

“Synchronicity. I saw him, Sherlock. Through the mirror in the sitting room. I saw John.”

Sherlock flung the curtain aside, revealing wild bedhead and an even wilder, saucer-eyed expression. John gripped the towel around his middle.
“Tell me everything.”

xXx

John told him everything. Nearly. He finished a little abruptly, a little pathetically, with this: “And then he was just … gone.”

“Gone,” Sherlock repeated. He sat on the very edge of the chair, so far forward it was a wonder he wasn’t on the floor. He was clinging to John’s every word like it was a lifeline.

“You know. Like we lost the connection.”

“But it’s worked twice now.”

“Yeah.”

“So it’ll work again tonight.”

“Um. Maybe. That is, I suppose it’s possible.” He tried not to hum and haw or give away how the thought of seeing the other John, knowing what he now knew, upset him to think about.

“We’ll try it then. Tonight. All conditions, exactly the same. Tonight. Yes, we’ll see him tonight.”

“I mean, I can’t guarantee—”

“Tonight.”

Sherlock was no longer listening. He sat ponderously back in his chair, fingertips steepled and an absent expression in his eyes. Daydreaming, no doubt, of reuniting with his real love, even if it meant it had to be through glass.

xXx

And there was the crux of it.

As the day wore on and Sherlock got more and more agitated, like a kid on Christmas Eve or a drug addict in need of a fix, John made up an excuse to get out the house, mumbling something about needing to buy milk or get a haircut, he had no idea. Whatever he ended up saying, the truth was, he just needed his own space, and that was something he could no longer find in 221B.

But he didn’t go shopping, and he didn’t go for a haircut, even though he was feeling a little shaggy around the ears and not quite as kempt as he preferred. Instead, he went north, looping Regent’s Park via its long, curving paths. The park was unpopulated, quiet, perhaps quieter than he had ever known it, and that suited him just fine. He didn’t want to deal with other humans. So he walked aimlessly, locked inside his own mind, not even realizing how he favored one leg and was limping along until a sharp, phantom pain just above right knee flared to life. Psychosomatic, he told himself. A remnant of a different universe that wanted to kill him. Maybe he was simply destined for misery. He sucked in his breath, cursed silently, and made his way to a park bench to rest and watch the ducks.

What did it mean, what did it mean?

John was struggling to wrap his mind around it all. The other John—he had said it (written it) so matter-of-factly, like it was nothing. He and I did have sex. He might as well have written, He and I ordered a pizza. The words bounced around his skull, seeking—or avoiding—translation. The
other John, the Alpha’s John, in his body, had—had—(every time he thought the words, he felt dizzy, but he ploughed forward) had had sex with Sherlock, his Sherlock. And that meant, his Sherlock had had sex with some other John.

Why??

Everything he knew, everything he had always understood about Sherlock Holmes, indicated that he was not a sexual creature. Women weren’t his area; he had said so from the very start. Men didn’t seem to be much of a consideration either. And Sherlock had never, not once, not ever in all of everdom, indicated any interest whatsoever at all in any way ever, ever, in John Watson.

Had he?

No, of course not. John would have noticed.

Would you?

Of course I would have, moron, I’m not blind! If Sherlock Holmes had come onto me, I would have seen it!

And then what would you have done?

I—Shut up.

It was a question John didn’t know how to answer. But in avoiding the hurtful truth that he probably would have shut it down by aggressively dating more women (much had changed in the last seventeen days regarding his self-understanding), he took a hard left and instead walked straight into an even more painful conclusion.

Guess he wasn’t too keen on you after all.

Sherlock hadn’t been interested in him. Him. His John. But the other one?

He figured it out before I did. That’s what John had said. Which meant that Sherlock knew exactly what he was doing, and with whom, and it hadn’t been with the John he knew. He had desired a man after all. And that man wasn’t John.

He felt wounded. Betrayed. Hurt. He felt like he had been cheated on and dumped and dismissed and laughed at. He felt rejected and alone and undesirable. And all this just days after he had admitted to himself what he felt, and who he wanted, more than anything, more than anyone. He knew Sherlock had no obligation to him. They weren’t a couple! John had said so himself more times than was necessary. So, reasonably, Sherlock was free to do as he wished. To do whom he wished. (John groaned.) John had just figured. . . Well. He figured that if Sherlock were to love/desire/have anyone . . . it would be him.

How could he have been so stupid?

Seated on the park bench, John whimpered a little and curled over, hands covering his face. He’d never felt more wretched in his life. He didn’t belong in this world. And he was no longer wanted in his own.

The mobile in his pocket dinged.

John sniffed and straightened himself before checking the caller ID. Sherlock had sent him a text:
Do they only sell toilet paper in Sussex these days?

Oh. That’s the excuse he had used? Toilet paper? He must not have been trying too hard. But Sherlock was right. He’d been gone an extraordinarily long time for a TP run. He texted back:

Sorry. Got distracted.

He blinked his eyes rapidly to clear them and sniffed again, but he didn’t rise from the bench. His legs were unwilling, not to mention his heart. Frankly, he just wasn’t quite ready to face the world again. Any world. He was tired.

Where are you?

John glanced up at the sky. It was still full daylight, so it’s not like Sherlock had anything to worry about. Not like before, at the very least.

Regent’s Park.

Where?

For a moment, he stared at the question, puzzled. Then he sighed, pulled up the GPS on his phone, and saw what the problem was. The park he had known as Regent’s his entire life went by a different name in this world. Not that big of a deal, really. From what he’d seen, it was essentially the same place. He typed out a correction.

Marylebone Park.

Two seconds later, the phone lit up. Sherlock was calling.

“Yes?”

“Where are you?”

“I told you. Marylebone—”

“No, where are you exactly?”

John frowned at the urgency in Sherlock’s tone and looked around for a landmark or sign, something to pinpoint his location with some degree of familiarity to them both, which is when he noticed them. In the selfsame moment, a stiff wind carried their scent to his nose.

“Um. Sherlock?”

“I’m coming to get you. Where are you?”

“Uh . . . Somewhere in the middle. By a pond. I see a bridge, and … Yeah, shit, they’re definitely staring at me.”

“How many?”

John rose to his feet and revolved slowly, feeling his sense of alarm elevate like mercury in a thermometer. He counted slowly, his heart thudding in his chest. Two on the bridge, three down the path, one on the ridge, four under the trees, and two more standing by a tall blue pole labeled “Omega Urgent Rescue.”
“Twelve,” he said, trying not to sound as anxious as he felt. He licked his lips and clenched a fist at his side. They ringed him north and south, east and west, along every possible escape route, and though none advanced, each was staring directly at him. He felt like he was in an Alfred Hitchcock movie, where the perfectly ordinary, standing in silent and intense vigil, was downright terrifying. The world seemed to slow down and the air to cool. He no longer heard the birds. And the Alphas stood against the sky like wolves who had marked their prey, surrounded it, and were waiting for the signal to pounce. “What do I do, Sherlock?”

He didn’t know whether it was mere Omega instinct, or whether it was the knowledge he had gained of what they could do, what they had done, to Molly and others, but he was feeling unmistakable panic begin to swell in his stomach and tingle down his arms and legs. They wouldn’t attack him in broad daylight! Surely! But he felt exposed, vulnerable, and trapped, more than he had been in that darkened alleyway. Shit shit shit.

On the other end of the phone, he could hear Sherlock huffing rapid breaths, and the whirr of feet flying over pavement. Even while running, Sherlock managed to say, “Can you reach the Rescue pole?”

Keeping his voice level, trying to keep calm, he said, loud enough for only Sherlock to hear, “Nope.”

“No?”

“They’re blocking it.”


“Nope.”

*Huff. Huff.* “Is it”—huff huff—“a single pack”—huff huff—“or multiple?”

“How . . . ? How am I supposed to know that?”

“*Smell it*, John.”

“I can’t, all right? I fucking can’t, they’re too far away. But they’re watching me. Jesus, Sherlock, this is not okay, this is fucking not okay.”

“Three minutes, John!”

He must have been hauling ass, if he thought he could make it from Baker Street to the middle of Regent’s, or rather, Marylebone Park, in three minutes. Even if he could, John doubted he had three minutes. He looked around for something that might serve as a weapon, bemoaning the absence of a firearm, and found nothing. Even the bench was bolted to the pavement. The cluster of four Alphas under the trees were now whispering together, and the two on the bridge were now edging closer. John held himself rigidly, phone pressed to his cheek. He didn’t fidget or pace or break down blubbering. He just … waited.

As Sherlock continued to huff in his ear, another wind carried the scent of the Alphas from the west, spiking his internal agitation, because he could smell them now, more powerfully than before: the hunger. He calibrated quickly: He couldn’t outrun them. He couldn’t outmuscle them, not all at once. His only prayer was to outwit them, at least long enough for Sherlock to arrive. But even then, he didn’t know if the mere presence of his Alpha was enough to make them back off.

This wasn’t right, it wasn’t *fair.*
He heard a strident kissy noise break the quiet, and he turned his head sharply to the pack of four, which was striding unabashedly closer now, eyes fixed on him.

“Oi there, omegomer, sweet little tart. Out here all on your own, eh?” one of them taunted, and another grabbed his crotch suggestively and gave it a crude shake.

John’s jaw hardened. His hand tightened around the phone. “Shit shit shit,” he whispered into the mouthpiece.

In his ear, Sherlock panted as he pushed ahead at what by now must have been break-neck speed.

Maybe he could run. Just fast enough to push past their closing ranks, just far enough to outpace them until he reached Sherlock. Taking his eyes off the pack of four to assess his chances, he noticed, instead, that the two standing by the pole had literally abandoned that post and were coming forward more steadily now that the pack of four were making their move. John wasn’t sure, but he began to suspect they were not all one pack, but many. Competitors. The solitary Alpha on the ridge, who stood at the greatest distance, was stalking forward with intent, quickly, to cover more ground, hoping to reach him first, to claim him. The three down the path were egging each other forward, though with a little more hesitancy (John judged them somewhat younger than the others), and the two on the bridge, strangely, were gesturing him forward, mouthing come on, come on, over here, as if to offer him their protection if he chose them.

Fat chance, thought John.

There were only seconds until certain disaster. The circle was closing in. Sherlock was still nowhere in sight. The Alphas were leering, taunting, coiling, about to spring. But damned if John was going down without a fight. Just as the two Alphas on the bridge sprinted toward him, John feinted left, sprang right, and launched himself at the nearest Alpha, driving his right shoulder hard into the beast’s stomach. The Alpha—caught off his guard at being attacked by an Omega!—oofed, and suddenly he was on his back, the breath knocked out of him. And John ran.

They shouted: “Get ’im! Get ’im!” The bridge was blocked, and the pavement as well, so he took off into the grass, eyes scanning for another emergency pole, a strolling copper, or a carelessly abandoned handgun lying in his path. No dice.

His mad dash didn’t last long. He just couldn’t compete with their long legs or predatory instincts. One of them pounced, and John was driven into the ground so forcefully he got a mouthful of grass. The phone bounced away from him, and suddenly two hundred and twenty pounds of Alpha pinned him so tightly he could scarcely breathe.

“Turn him over, the little shit!”

His shoulders were seized; he was rolled onto his back. Two fists grabbed the front of his shirt and half lifted him off the ground, and all around him, the Alphas huddled, blocking out the sun.

“Oi,” said one, “ain’t that the little fucker what messed up Roger and his boys? I seen his face in the papers.”

“Yeah, that’s the private detective’s bitch, innit?”

“Wait’l ol’ Roger hears we caught him.”

“You’re kidding. This is the omegomer that broke Trevor’s arm? That smashed Sean’s nose? This puny thing?”
“I say we do him one better. Before we knot him so hard his arse splits in two. The little cretin.”

The Alpha brought a boot down, stomping John in the stomach.

John gasped in pain and tried to curl inward, but the hands holding him up by the shirt wouldn’t allow it and shook him so roughly his neck cricked. Someone was pulling the shoes from his feet. Another set of hands were making short work of his belt buckle. He saw a fist raise. Squeezing his eyes tight, he turned his head away and waited for the blow.

But it never came.

Suddenly, he was dropped to the ground as a body slammed into the Alpha directly above him. John wheezed and rolled to his side, hugging his body to the earth and cringing in pain, as all around him, he heard snarls and growls and punches and grunts. But no one was touching him. His eyes snapped open.

Sherlock.

His Alpha prowled around John in a tight circle, creating a protective barrier as he snarled at the Alphas that had backed off but still ringed them both. From where John watched from the grass, he seemed to have doubled in size, darkened in color, and though he kept his back to John to face their enemies, his posture was that of—John could think of no other way to describe it—a wolf. Fingers curled into claws at his side. Shoulders broadened by a curved back. Neck forward but head lifted, twitching from side to side as he stared threateningly at each Alpha in turn. And his voice was the deepest John had ever heard it.

“Stay. The fuck. Back. He chose me.”

The three youngest Alphas—comprising the weakest pack—turned and fled.

The two on the bridge had not left it. They stood immobile, watching.

That left seven. Slowly, John pushed himself up on his hands and rose to his knees, but a terrible pain flared up in his stomach, forcing him back to all fours. One arm wrapped around his middle.

Sherlock continued circling him, and in a low voice meant only for him, he said, “<<Keep still.>>”

John’s body stilled completely. Warm relief washed through him like an electric wave. He felt himself turning full trust and confidence over to his Alpha.

“You should keep your gomer on a tighter leash,” growled one of the Alphas. “Careless, really.”

“S’right,” said another. “He was asking for it, innit?”

“One more word,” Sherlock said, and John felt his bones trembling with the timbre of Sherlock’s voice, “and I’ll rip your throats out.”

“Sherlock,” John said, and Sherlock twisted his head, his eyes flashing, but John wasn’t trying to chide him. “They know Roger and his mates.”

Slowly, Sherlock straightened, growing taller. And though he was less wolf-like with that posture, he was no less frightening. “Is that so? You lot know the pricks who tried to take what’s mine before? Very well. Then you’ll deliver a message for me.”

“We ain’t bloody couriers.”
“You have a choice, you cocks. Deliver my message, or I’ll tear you to pieces here and now just for looking at my Omega. Doubt I can do it? Go on, then. Try me.”

There was silence. Even John felt the fear rippling through the Alphas, and he wasn’t sure if it was theirs or his. A couple of them lifted their eyes to the trees and light poles, and following their gaze, John saw the CCTV cameras. What little he understood of the law regarding bonded Alpha rights meant that Sherlock was perfectly entitled to doing exactly as he threatened. To John, the odds of seven to one (or seven to two, if he could just get his feet under him—but his body wasn’t responding to commands) were grim. And yet, Sherlock didn’t hesitate to threaten, and the Alphas were beginning to look uncertain.

“What’s the message?” one finally conceded. John knew him to be the bloke that had launched himself at John and sucker-stamped him on the ground. He appeared far less dangerous all of the sudden.

“Just this,” said Sherlock. “One week from today, Marble Arch, twelve o’clock noon. I am issuing an official challenge on behalf of John Watson and Molly Hooper. You tell them, I’ll be waiting. Now fuck off.”

John watched in awe as the seven remaining Alphas took wary, backward steps, eyes skipping between him and Sherlock, and eventually turned and walked away. Unmoving, Sherlock watched them go, watched until they had rounded corners, disappeared over crests, and became obscured behind distant trees. Then he spun and dropped to his knees in front of John and gripped his shoulders. John felt his bones melting at the touch, power restored.

“You’re hurt.”

“Mostly my pride,” John replied. He lifted a leg, braced hands on his raised knee, and made to push to standing. But the sharp pain in his abdomen made him gasp and freeze.

“Stop. What hurts?”

“Just—” But despite his best efforts, John was struggling to hold everything in. His hands were shaking, and he felt overheated and about to crack. “Fucking hell, Sherlock.”

“John. I’m sorry. I should have warned you about Marylebone. It’s hunting grounds for Alphas, day or night. I . . . I forget there are things you don’t know.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can take this. Any of it.” His voice was breaking, but he couldn’t stand the thought of losing it completely, so he shut up and averted his eyes. He didn’t realize how hard he was holding onto the front of Sherlock’s shirt, didn’t even remember grabbing it, until his hands were pinned between their two bodies and Sherlock wrapped two strong arms around him and held him close.

Was he trying to calm John’s racing heart, or ease his troubled mind with scent? Frankly, John didn’t care. It didn’t matter. He felt tired and angry and defeated, like the universe was laughing at him, spitting on him, giving him the finger. He just didn’t want to feel anything anymore. But if he had to, it was this, just this: surrendering for just a moment, and letting Sherlock hold him.

xXx

John had hoped the pain would just ease out of him, but he was kidding himself. Before long, his abdomen became hardened and was tender to the touch, clear indications to a medically trained professional that he was bleeding internally. With no other choice, he ended up in Omega
Emergency. Because Sherlock wasn’t allowed to be with him until he was in recovery, the Alpha detective went to the Yard to file his official challenge to the Alpha pack, promising to return before visiting hours expired. Neither of them said anything about their midnight appointment with the mirror, but it was on John’s mind, and he knew it would be on Sherlock’s. It wouldn’t be happening. Not tonight.

Though he had some nasty bruising, ultrasounds revealed that the damage was not extensive or terribly dangerous, and the bleeding would likely stop on its own. They would monitor him overnight, just to be sure, and discharge him in the morning when doctors gave him the all clear.

“There now,” said his doctor, smiling pitifully down at him like he was eight years old. John had half been hoping that Mike Stamford might take the occasional shift in the emergency department, but he knew it was a foolish hope. “You’ll be back on your feet in no time and all healed up before your next heat.”

“Splendid,” John said dryly.

“And I think we learned ourselves a wee bit of a lesson, eh, John?”

“Pardon?”

“Wandering away from home without an explicit purpose? Being on your own like you were? Walking through hunting grounds? Rather inviting a problem there, weren’t you?

“Oh my God.”

“Now now, don’t upset yourself. You’re one of the lucky ones.”

“Lucky?”

“You’ve a bond-mate. Not every Omega has that. Best not take him for granted, eh?”

The doctor patted his shoulder and left. He felt like screaming.

xXx

He tried to sleep but couldn’t. The nurse offered him a hospital meal—a dry turkey sandwich, raw carrots, and a juice box—but he couldn’t stomach it. They gave him a TV remote, but he didn’t bother with it. All he wanted was to go home.

A few hours later, Sherlock returned, but John's initial pleasure at seeing him dampened when he realized he couldn’t smell him. Sherlock had been given the scent inhibitor, and he wore the surgical face mask. It startled John, how much he associated the scent with Sherlock now. It felt a little disturbing, like talking to a person with no eyes. But he was more disturbed by how much he missed it.

He worried that the more time he spent in Wacko World, the more melded together his mind and body became. For one, he found himself not only enjoying but actively seeking Sherlock’s scent, and never feeling one hundred percent secure unless he found it. He worried that his increasingly dominant instinct was to run from Alphas, not to fight them. And he worried, too, that as much as he hated this world, he . . . could he even admit it to himself? Yes. He feared leaving it. He feared returning to a world that no longer wanted him.

“It’s done. I registered the challenge with the authorities,” said Sherlock, after John assured him that he was doing well and would be discharged in the morning. His hand had hovered over John’s
for a second or two, like he was about to hold it and then thought better of it. John himself wondered whether or not he would have welcomed Sherlock holding his hand.

“I thought you had to find them,” John said. “I mean, isn’t that what you’ve been trying to do?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I would have preferred a face-to-face challenge, of course. But there are other ways. It’s an old tradition. If unable to make direct contact, a messenger might be employed.”

“Then why didn’t you do that before?”

“A couple of reasons, John. The messenger has to be acquainted. It’s called a Confidence Courier, and it’s the only legally binding way—”

“You found the family members, though!”

“—but cannot be a blood relation. Conflict of interest, you see. Neither blood nor pack. But these Alphas we met in the park . . . They will serve.”

“Glad I could help you out, then,” said John dismally.

It was hard to tell, but he thought Sherlock was frowning behind the mask. “If I’d had a choice in the matter, I wouldn’t have had it happen like that. I would never use you as bait.”

John stared down at his hands. “So what happens if these messengers don’t tell the Alphas about your challenge?”

“I’m sure they will, or make every effort. They’re legally obligated, and failure to comply means I can challenge them. No one wants to engage in a dog fight, John. They can be messy affairs. In any case, the official challenge will be printed in every paper in London tomorrow and repeated on the news. They can’t avoid knowing about it.”

“Holy shit.” John rubbed his face. “This is a spectacle, isn’t it?”

“I expect a crowd, certainly.”

“And if they don’t show?”

“They’ll show. Penalty’s worse if they don’t. John, don’t worry. I’m not going to lose.”

“It’s three against one, Sherlock.”

“I said don’t worry.”

“I don’t like those odds.”

“I’m more than up to the challenge.”

“I want to fight alongside you.”

Above the line of the surgical mask, Sherlock’s bright blue eyes narrowed, and John thought he heard Sherlock’s teeth close together with a snap. “Absolutely not.”

“You said any member of the pack can fight. That’s what you said. But who does our pack include? Me, you, Mycroft, and Anthea, yeah? No one else? Well, correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m guessing Mycroft won’t be entering that fray anytime soon, blood or no blood.”
“Of course he won’t. He knows this is my fight.” Sherlock sniffed. “He’d probably send me to his own dog fight, if it were Anthea, in his stead.”

“That’s what I figured. So they’re out. I’m in.”

“John, you’re in hospital.”

“This? This is nothing. I’ll be fine in the morning, and we still have a week yet, yeah? Plenty of time for me to teach you a thing or two.”

“You? Teach me?”

“Bet I can show you a few moves,” John said, smirking. “When it comes to hand combat, I came in second in my class during basic training, and I was the smallest of the lot.”

“Omegas don’t do dog fights. They just don’t.”

“Is it law?”

Sherlock didn’t answer, which was answer enough for John.

“Then what you mean is, they didn’t until now.”

Shaking his head emphatically, Sherlock said, “We cannot ignore the facts. The biological facts. Alphas are vicious by nature. Omegas are smaller in everything from bone to muscle mass. It comes down to this: I’m built to fight. You’re not. Besides, if I allow it, people will say I’m mistreating you, to put it mildly.”

John laughed out loud. “Since when do you care what people think?”

“No. This is nuts. We’re not talking about this now.”

“Fine. We’ll talk about it when I get home.”

Sherlock sighed. “Stubborn arse,” he murmured behind the mask.

“Funny. I was going to say the same thing about you.”

There was a beat. Then Sherlock chuckled lightly, and John joined him. For the first time that day, he felt some of the heaviness in his chest lift a little.

“I didn’t say yes.”

“You don’t get to say no.”

“When you get home,” said Sherlock, rising, fingertips brushing the top of John’s hand as he did so, “we’ll talk.”

Before he exited the room, John called to him one more time. “And Molly?”

“Yes?”

“You issued the challenge on her behalf.”

“I did.”

“Why?”
“My Omega made her a promise,” said Sherlock. “When one bond-mate does that, both are sworn to it. We keep our promises, John.”

John marveled. There was a cultural element of oath and honor in this world that didn’t exist in his, and so much of it, he was slowly coming to see, began and ended with Alphas and Omegas. The beginning and end. It was a humbling thought.

“But how? I mean, I thought . . .”

“That’s something else we’ll need to figure out, won’t we?”

_We_. He had said _we_. It felt like a milestone and significant as any.

“Sleep well, John. I’ll see you in the morning.”

xx

Against their nature, Alphas with bond-mates in hospital had no choice but to leave them there overnight and return home alone, and like any bonded Alpha, Sherlock found such action wholly objectionable. He’d never had to do it before. It had been seven years since he had spent a night in the flat alone. And there was only one reason why it had happened, as every bonded Alpha knew:

He had failed to protect his Omega from harm. That was twice now.

Three times, he corrected himself. Maybe if he’d been a better bond-mate, he never would have lost his John to begin with.

With his Omega away, Sherlock knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. So he stayed awake in the sitting room, rereading John’s notes from the night before, scratched out over several pages of lined notebook paper. Here, John had written out everything he remembered about Dr. Stapleton’s theories, and taken notes on preposterous theories about ghosts and some fictional little girl named Alice.

He’d already spent hours contemplating these new theories, without much breakthrough or insight. Could it be possible that his counterpart wasn’t as clever as himself? An unacceptable notion.

Sherlock and John had brought _quantum physics_ to the table, but Sherlock and John had brought children’s stories. Disappointing.

But it wasn’t the theories he was interested in at the moment. No, it was the first lines of interaction. He could read what John had written, queries about his own Sherlock at the forefront, but his own John’s words were missing, trapped on the other side of the mirror. John had recounted them as best he could, but it wasn’t the same as having them in hand. What had he said, and how had he said it. What he did have was a rather impassioned retort from the John on this side of the glass to the John on the other: _You’re not useless. You’ve been living in impossible circumstances. You’ve dealt with shit every day of your life…_

What had John said to prompt that response? John had been vague, rushing over the initial dialogue to get to what he called the meat of the conversation, but the brevity haunted Sherlock now. Did his John really feel like that? Useless? And was he, Sherlock, responsible for it?

_Four times_, he thought dismally. _I failed him four times, and probably a thousand and one more._

“I’ll make it up to you, John,” he said aloud to the empty room. “I promise.”

At one o’clock in the morning, he stood before the mirror and waited, a fearful hope in his heart.
He waited in vain.

xXx

Sherlock pulled on his coat, opened the front door, and found himself face to face with an unexpected visitor on his doorstep frozen in the act of ringing the bell.

“Mr. Holmes!”

“Dr. Stapleton,” he said, bemused.

“I did hope to catch you early,” she said, adjusting her blazer.

Sherlock took stock of her quickly. She hadn’t come from Exeter. At least, not directly. She was staying in town: Her shoes were polished, which suggested that she’d had them shined recently. An airport, perhaps, but more probably as a service at her hotel. Yes, her skin smelled of inexpensive soap common to everything from Hiltons to Holiday Inns. And there, in the front shallow pocket of her handbag, the top edge of a door key to a hotel room.

“I’m in town for a conference,” she said, as though it were some sort of excuse. In flustered agitation, she brushed her hair back behind an ear. Clearly the hotel shampoo wasn’t working well for her.

“And to what do I owe the pleasure of your coming to my home?” he asked. “I’m afraid I’m not seeing clients today.”

“That’s not it, that’s not why I’m here, I just . . .” She trailed off, looking a little embarrassed. “Our meeting. Before. In my office. The thing is, I’ve been thinking—that is, I haven’t been able to get it off my mind, your questions and our discussion and your Omega . . .”

She was rambling, and far less composed than she had been ten days before.

“You’ve not been sleeping,” Sherlock deduced. “Why? Late night research, is it?”

“Yes, yes, reading and running numbers and talking to colleagues in Western America and New Russia and Japan, and Mr. Holmes, I couldn’t stand it anymore, I just had come and ask you . . .”

“Ask me what?”

“Which one of you is it?

“Pardon?”

“You or your Omega? Your questions were far too specific, a little too on the nose, so I just have to know. Which one of you at least believes himself to be from a parallel universe?”

Ten minutes later, Sherlock was back in the sitting room, Dr. Stapleton sat in John’s chair with a cup of instant coffee, listening intently as Sherlock related the story of how it had happened.

Still shaking her head in giddy disbelief, Dr. Stapleton said, “Incredible. Just incredible. To think! Transplanar displacement, in human beings! I should want to hear it directly from the horse’s mouth. I have questions about his, erm, experience.” She looked around, as if noticing for the first time that the Omega in question wasn’t in the same room. “Is he at home?”

“No, he’s . . . out.”
“Quite early, isn’t it?”

“He’s a go-getter. Now, I have some questions for you.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed. You wouldn’t have come to my doorstep at the crack of dawn with your hair in that unconditioned state if you hadn’t discovered a compelling new theory you were just desperate to share. Or test.”

“Well,” said Dr. Stapleton, smoothing her hands across her trouser legs.

“You’re in town for a conference, you said.”

“Yes, at King’s College, I presented a paper yesterday. But this is nothing to do with the conference. It’s merely coincidence that I am here this week.”

“I don’t believe in coincidence. The universe is rarely so lazy.”

“The universe. Hm. Do you believe, Mr. Holmes, that the universe, this one or others, is striving for a state of perfection?”

“Excuse me?”

“An obscure branch of quantum philosophy, dubbed plenary stellar idealization. In essence, it’s the notion that a state of perfection, on both a microcosmic and macrosmic level, is both possible and desirable, and that the forces in the universe are in constant motion to achieve it.”

“Why are we talking about this?”

“Just an observation. I’m a scientist of quantum physics on the lookout for grand answers to our oldest questions.” She shrugged. “A possible explanation to support your disbelief in coincidence. Or rather, it might be said, your belief in destiny.”

Sherlock huffed a breath of incredulity. “A universe trying to set things in their proper order,” he said, “defies principles of entropy.”

Dr. Stapleton shrugged impishly. “Quite the contrary, Mr. Holmes. The second law of thermodynamics is all about equilibrium. Balance. Entropy within an isolated system never decreases. Destruction is balanced with creation. In a system as complex as the universe, or multiple universes, such equilibrium is almost impossible to observe, but we cannot preclude that it is occurring. In a sense, we can extrapolate the fundamentals and conclude that in a very real sense, the universe does have an ideal state, and is perpetually striving to achieve it. Righting wrongs. Correcting errors. In short, striving for perfection. Maybe it’s the universe that places people in our path that will set us on the right foot again. Maybe the universe brought you to my door, and me to yours. Maybe none of this is coincidence after all.”

“You believe in destiny.”

“You said it first,” she laughed. “But more to the point. Your Omega claims to be from a parallel dimension. He believes he has actually undergone metaphysical displacement, the very subject I’ve been toying with for ages but been too hesitant to publish anything about. I must speak with him, Mr. Holmes. I want an exact account of the moment of displacement. What’s more, if we can prove this to be true, and convince others, think of the contributions his testimony of another world will make to almost every scientific field!”
“John is not a spectacle, Dr. Stapleton.”

“No. No, of course not. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Nor a test subject. Our primary interest is in reversing the event.”

“But—”

“And bringing the John I know back home.”

“Impossible.”

“If you cannot contribute to that result,” Sherlock said stiffly, “then we have likely run out of things to say to one another.”

Dr. Stapleton blanched. “Mr. Holmes. Please. You don’t know what you’re dealing with. None of us do. Displacement—physical or otherwise—is incredibly rare as observational science. If we don’t seize this opportunity by the horns . . . Look, I’m sensitive to the personal nature. He’s your Omega. You’re protective of him. Only right that you should be. But you’re an intelligent man. A brilliant one. So you must understand how foolish it is to indulge his fantasy of a reversal of the metaphysical displacement. Not only because repeated synchronicity is nigh unto impossible to achieve—”

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow but refrained from mentioning the mirror. He didn’t entirely trust Dr. Stapleton. Her motives, not her science.

“—but because the predominant theory of reversal suggests . . .”

“Yes?”

“It’s philosophy. Speculation. Not science.”

“Tell me.”

She sighed. “My New Russian colleague uncovered some incredibly obscure writings by a 1980s metaphysicist out of Moscow named Serebryakov. Unpublished. And no wonder, there wasn’t much to back it up or colleagues willing to offer a positive peer review. But his theories run parallel to my own in some ways. Serebryakov believed in mind displacement, as I do. He based it on the paranormal supposition that the mind actually travels to alternate realities when sleeping, and can occupy or share space with a parallel version of oneself. Returning a mind to its original corpus is simply a matter of waking up.”

Sherlock snorted. “I think we can reasonably conclude that we are not figments of John’s imagination, or mere characters trapped in an elaborate dream.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting. That’s not what Serebryakov was suggesting. Instead, he said that, given the right circumstances—like the ones I proposed to you, including synchronicity and energy—the mind can actually be pushed into that space, or swapped in my definition, with another. His theory was that returning to the original state would require similar mechanisms to coming out of a dream.”

“Essentially, to wake up.”

“Essentially, yes.”
“How does one wake up when he isn’t even asleep!”

“How does one wake up when he isn’t even asleep!”

“The point is to move the consciousness from one state to another, isn’t it? Besides natural waking, what pulls you out of a dream? What forces you to return? A shock, a jolt, a sort of trauma. One must be forcibly shaken out of one reality to return to the other, and certainly you can already see the problem here, the paradox, the impossibility of such a thing working.”

“Stop dancing around it. Say what you mean. According to this theory, how does John go back?”

Dr. Stapleton let out a longsuffering, apologetic breath. “He has to die.”
In Which John Plays with Fire

Not for the first time in three days, and certainly not for the last, John bowed his shaking head and said, “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

It had gone two in the morning on the twenty-first day since the Bridge Event (as they had come to call it), and both John and Sherlock were standing shoulder to shoulder and staring at a perfectly ordinary but damn-it-all damned mirror. Since losing the connection three nights ago, John hadn’t been able to get it back. And he was pretty sure why.

“Stop saying that,” said Sherlock wearily, closing his eyes and shaking his head morosely.

“But it’s true.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“If I hadn’t told him—”

“I said, stop.”

“—about the sex.”

“Please.”

“If he’d only given me a chance to explain! You weren’t knotting me, not in your mind, you thought you were knotting him, and in effect you were, given that this is his body, so yeah, you were knotting your own John . . .”

“Oh my God,” Sherlock groaned, rubbing his face.


“Stop! My God, John, don’t— Why can’t you— It’s not even— Just shut up for a moment, won’t you? Listen to me. The reason this isn’t working”—he indicated the mirror—“has nothing to do with what you wrote, okay?”

“I rather think it has,” John argued.

“No. Know how I know? Because John, my John, may be reactionary and overdramatic, but he’s not the sort to run away from . . . That is, he’s not a coward. He wouldn’t refuse to use the mirror again just to stick it to me.”

John frowned. “I rather thought he was sticking it to me.”

“He’s disgusted, jealous.”

“Are you sure?”

“I know John better than he knows himself, so yes. If anything, he’d want to communicate again just to have a shout at me for doing what I—. Look, my point is, something has happened, something standing in the way of the communication. We just have to keep trying.”

They took John’s notes on John’s explanation of synchronicity as gospel, but they were each beginning to have their doubts. That first night, both had been in front of the mirror. Realizing that
his presence might have been having a deleterious effect on recreating the conditions perfectly, Sherlock had stood out of sight (in the kitchen) the second night. John made him wait in the bedroom the third night (which he didn’t like at all), but tonight, Sherlock suggested that perhaps the other Sherlock was waiting alongside the other John, and that for synchronicity to be effective, he needed to be there after all. Still, nothing.

“Maybe it’s only John tonight,” John suggested, “but it was both of them last night.”

“Maybe it’s only Sherlock,” said Sherlock, “having eliminated other failed variables.”

“Maybe it’s both, but they’re standing left to right, not right to left.”

“It’s a mirror. We should be opposite, not parallel.”

“It’s parallel worlds.

“Maybe they’re out on a case.”

“Not both of them.”

“Why not?”

“Because Sherlock would never invite . . .” John trailed off, embarrassed. “That is, what I mean is . . . Well, it’s so late, you know.”

“John.” Sherlock turned him away from the mirror to face him, holding him by the upper arms. “Did you ever tell him?”

“What?”

“That you were so bored.”

John laughed, shaking his head, but suddenly unable to meet Sherlock eye to eye. “Of course not. I had a good life. Safe home. Reliable bond-mate.”

“Sounds thrilling.”

“Not everyone needs that kind of excitement,” he mumbled unconvincingly.


“I do?”

“There’s fire in you, John Watson.”

“There is?”

“There’s grit and guts and piss and vinegar. My John is no coward, and neither are you. You’re more capable than you realize.” Sherlock paused a moment, eyes narrowing as he thought. “And I’m going to prove it to you.”

John felt that new and exciting thrill chase up his spine, and so despite his incredulity, and probably his better judgment, he asked, “How?”
“Tomorrow,” said Sherlock, “we’re going to play a little game. It’s called, ‘Better Late Than Never.’ Get a good night’s sleep, because we start bright and early.” He waved a hand at the mirror. “He’s not showing up tonight anyway.”

xXx

“Technically,” said Lestrade as he strode down the hallway in a sub-level of New Scotland Yard, Sherlock and John following after, “this isn’t allowed. But I pulled a few strings. Called in a few favors. You’ve got one hour, and not a minute more.”

“So you’ve said,” Sherlock drawled.

Lestrade glanced over his shoulder, catching John’s eye. “Here to teach him a thing or two, eh, John? Improve his form?”


“It’s for research,” said Sherlock stroppily. John snorted. The ruse had been Sherlock’s idea, after all, so he had no business getting offended when someone believed his own excuse.

“Ah yes,” said Lestrade. “I’m sure you two get up to all sorts of things. In the name or research.” He winked at John.

John’s eyes went wide in warning, trying to communicate the forbidden nature of that particular confession. Lestrade saw, but only smirked, and turned back around just as they reached the door. He pressed his card to the keypad, and the door clicked open.

“Evans will get you two set up. He knows you’re coming. I have a meeting to race off to, but I’ll probably be back before you finish up.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “And can we go for ice cream afterwards? Give us a push on the swings?”

“Only if you’re a good lad and behave.” Lestrade chuckled, and he tapped John’s arm as if they shared part of some inside joke then left them to it.

Five minutes later, John stood nervously at the open partition, wearing goggles and a noise-cancelling headset, one ear exposed. Sherlock, ever the defiant one, had yet to dress himself properly and wore the goggles on the top of his curly head and the headset around his neck. On the long table beneath the open partition were laid five different pistols.

“Glock 17,” said Sherlock, pointing, “Glock 26, Walther P99, Heckler and Koch USP, and—your personal favorite—the SIG Sauer P226. Your service weapon was a SIG, and it’s the weapon you hide in the locked bottom drawer of the desk in your bedroom. Let’s start with that one.”

Keeping his back to Evans, who was watching from a distance, he explained to John the various components of the pistol, from grip to safety to trigger to barrel, and though he spoke clearly, he spoke rapidly, and John was holding his breath just so the sounds of his own breathing wouldn’t compete for his attention and he could take it all in. As Sherlock transitioned into discussing how to hold it and explaining what the kickback would feel like, John felt his heart begin to pick up a little more speed. He was eager to hold the weapon for himself, feel its weight in his own hands, and see if he could do even marginally better than he had the first time Sherlock had thrust the gun into his hands and shouted at him to fire. He licked his lips and nodded at everything Sherlock said, showing him he was ready.
Sherlock passed him the gun. It was heavier than he remembered.

“Finger off the trigger, for now,” he said. Then he maneuvered John to face the silhouette of a man with circles targeting his chest. “The target is at a distance of twenty meters. So you’re going to want to take the proper stance.

While Sherlock proceeded to reposition him, and coach him in everything from bent to locked elbows, John asked, “He was rather good at this, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, he is,” said Sherlock.

“Yes, he is,” said Sherlock.

“Years and years of experience, eh?”

Sherlock nodded, finally fitting the goggles to his face.

John had read every word of John’s blog, three times now, and he hadn’t once mentioned his proficiency with firearms. Sure, he must have had the proper training, being a soldier and all that, but John had always figured it was a formal training hardly used in the field. He was an army doctor, after all.

“Crack shot,” said Sherlock softly. “And the reason I’m still alive.”

“What’s that?”

Sherlock cleared his throat. “Inhale as you aim. Exhale and squeeze the trigger. Both eyes open now. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

John held the gun with his right hand and steadied it with his left. His eyes narrowed in on the target, dead center in the man’s chest. He breathed in, held it, decided he had nothing to lose with this one shot, exhaled, and fired.

Slowly, he lowered the gun and looked to Sherlock for evaluation.

Sherlock frowned and bobbed his head in an approving way. “Clipped him in the shoulder. Not bad. But a few inches off target. You can do better.”

“This is my first go.”

“Again, John.”

For the next forty-five minutes, John fired off rounds. Every time he emptied a magazine, Sherlock handed him a different pistol and took to reloading the empty one himself. Occasionally, he offered reminders about stance or breathing, gave tips on what to look at and how to line things up, but for the most part, he just let John shoot. For his part, John found it surprisingly . . . relaxing. No, that wasn’t the word. Alleviating, maybe. Like each pull of the trigger was working out the knots in his muscles, unwinding a tightly coiled string. It felt good. Transgressive, but good. He felt like he was breaking some kind of law, crossing some type of boundary, violating some sort of moral code. But in doing so, he felt free.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

“There it is,” said Sherlock. “Three in a row, straight through the center.”
It’s like he had been doing this his whole life. Maybe it was this body’s muscle memory. Or maybe he was just always gifted at precision shooting and had simply never had the chance to discover it. Omegas couldn’t join the army, or the police force, or go hunting, or participate in any other sort of activity requiring the use of firearms. But here he was, shooting like a pro.

Then it happened, perhaps for the first time, that he understood the difference between not being able to . . . and simply not being allowed.

And he wondered what more he was capable of doing.

And he wondered when he would get to discover it.

And he wondered why things in his world were the way they were.

And he thought about the Alphas who had collectively given him barely half a life to live, and about all the times he had been afraid, and all the times he had been hurt, and all the times he had been treated poorly or regarded as lesser-than or lower-than or slower-than or weaker-than, when he knew now that he was capable of so much more, that in some other universe, maybe many other universes, John Watson was a creature of substance, valued and valuable, capable and cunning, a man of intelligence and action, one to be respected and admired. Maybe those same traits were inside him, too. Somewhere. In a hidden place where the Alphas hoped he wouldn’t go looking.

The magazine emptied. He thrust it into Sherlock’s hands, snatched up the next pistol, and—raising it to the target, imagining it to be the embodiment of all Alpha oppression—he fired off three rapid shots, each exploding in the center of the forehead.

“Damn, son, stop showing off.”

The voice was muffled because of the noise-cancelling headset, but John could make out the words perfectly. He turned his head and saw that Lestrade had rejoined them.

In the corner of his eye, he saw that Sherlock was staring, jaw slack with astonishment, something he didn’t know he was capable of inspiring in the man so much more impressive than himself. At Sherlock’s expression and Lestrade’s words, John flushed. He flicked the safety on, lowered the weapon, and passed it back to Sherlock.

“Just showing him how it’s done,” he said. Then, feeling daring, he clapped Sherlock on the shoulder and said consolingly, “Don’t sweat it, you’ll get there eventually.”

Lestrade laughed appreciatively. Sherlock seemed at a loss for words.

xXx

During the cab ride back to Baker Street, Sherlock got a call that deterred them from their destination.

“A case,” said Sherlock. Then he threw a sideways smirk at John and asked, “Coming?”

John smiled. “Hell yes.”

And just like that, they were once again on a case.

The next two days were jam-packed with a series of intertwined, death-defying, no-rest-for-the-wicked cases. John was tired, hungry, but exhilarated with the challenge of keeping up and having his mind blown time and time again. Together, he and Sherlock zipped around London,
interrogating black-market electronics hawkers in Islington, trespassing through an exclusive art
gallery in Soho, and chasing a series of clues from Stratford to Shepherd’s Bush (John couldn’t
believe the fortune they spent on taxis and wondered why Sherlock didn’t just break down and buy
his own car). They solved the case of the Halloway disappearance (It was the dog walker! Who
would have thought!), and the Fleet Street poisonings (By George, the cat sitter!), and the copy-cat
dog-nappings (Good lord, a secret society of avian occultists!).

Now, at last, they were headed home. Though it was late, John was wired, and on a high he never
wanted to come down from. Without the prospect of another case immediately at his fingertips, he
was rereading on his phone for the fourth time John’s blog and imagining himself in each scenario.
It was one of his favorite pastimes, this fantasy. He was nearing the end of “A Study in Pink” when
he was struck by a thought.

“It was him, wasn’t it?”

“How did you figure it out?”

“Just a feeling.” He smiled warmly at his companion. “So that’s what you meant. Crack shot. That
night, he saved your life.”

“First time of many.”

“I wonder . . .”

“What?”

Sheepish, John shrugged and returned his attention to his phone, scrolling without purpose.
“Whether I’d be able to do something like that. For him.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“No? You think I could really be that kind of man?”

“You already are.”

Sherlock spoke so matter-of-factly, that John couldn’t help but believe it. He felt emboldened, just
positively swelling with good feeling, and part of that was imagining returning to his bond-mate a
new and improved man. To see the look on Sherlock’s face, as impressed with him as this one! He
could hardly sit still at the thought. More than ever before, he was determined to find a way home.

“Tonight,” he said, watching London’s lights come on all over the city, “I think we need to go back
to basics with the mirror.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sherlock.

“The first time I saw him, it was just me. The second time I saw him, it was just me. Tonight, it
should be just me.”

Silence followed. Slowly, John turned his head to see Sherlock’s carefully neutral face angled toward the other window.

“I see.”

“That’s the only way it will work.”

“You’re so sure about that, are you?”

He’d never felt more confident about anything in his life. “Yes.”

“Fine.”

John’s evidence resided in a combination of precedence and gut-feeling, and the truth was, because they were both so far out of their element on this, Sherlock had little ground for argument. Nevertheless, he detected a trace of disappointment.

“I know you want to see him—”

“I said it’s fine.”

“And it’s not that I don’t want you there—”

“It’s fine. I get it. You’re probably right anyway, as remarkable an occurrence as that must be for you. But we need to talk about what you’ll say. And make sure you record everything exactly. We’ll examine it when you’re done.”

They lapsed again into silence, and not a terribly comfortable one. For a short moment, John wondered if he had said the wrong thing, made a mistake. But no. He was confident that in order for the mirror trick to work again, the conditions had to be exactly as they were before, and that meant John alone in the sitting room, and Sherlock in the bedroom. And if that meant he wouldn’t get to see or talk to his own Sherlock either, so be it.

“I don’t get it,” Sherlock suddenly burst out. John startled. “You’re the emotional one, the romantic, the seven-years-shagging-one-bloke Casanova. Why aren’t you upset?”

“Me?”

“Yes!”

“What about?”

Sherlock gaped. “You told me my John slept with your Sherlock! Your Sherlock slept with someone not you. But you’ve said scarcely two words about it! How does that not bother you? Aren’t you devastated? Don’t you feel betrayed? Isn’t that how ordinary people feel?”

The cab driver’s eyes slowly lifted to the rearview mirror and back again to the road. Knowing they had an audience, John felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He was gobsmacked, less because of the content than the outburst. When he had told Sherlock of the mirror conversation earlier that week, he had not neglected to mention the other John’s “confession,” even though he had already assumed it. The swap had taken place the first day of his cycle, so the other John had been thrown into a body on the verge of a three-day heat. That needed to be dealt with, and Sherlock was there to deal with it. What else could have been done? So no, it didn’t bother him.
As a matter of course, John had always looked forward to his impending heats, but he had never fully examined why. The physical ecstasy was unmatched, and certainly a highlight. It was more than that, though. It was the feeling of existing. An Omega in heat was fulfilling his or her quintessential purpose in life. In the bedroom, on his knees, in the nude, he felt needed and valued, cherished even, in his bond-mate’s care. Heats were the be-all and end-all of what he was for. Right? Of course, they hadn’t meant nearly so much until Sherlock came along. In fact, being more honest with himself now, before Sherlock, he’d actually dreaded them.

Wait. Had he really thought the word _dread_? Omegas weren’t supposed to dread their heats! But . . . that was exactly how he had felt. The intensity of the act of knotting was actually _objectionable_ until Sherlock. Why? Well, because Sherlock loved him. And he loved Sherlock. It made every bit of difference. And what’s more, even taking heats out of the equation, he realized he could be happy, perfectly happy, because of that bond. He’d missed his last heat, hadn’t he? And yet he hadn’t missed it at all, hadn’t longed for it, hadn’t felt sorry to have skipped it for the first time in all his life. Nevertheless, his love for Sherlock was in no way diminished. If anything, their separation made him realize that he loved him all the more.

So . . . no. He wasn’t bothered at all. He was in love.

But this Sherlock. Upon hearing how his John and the other Sherlock had spent the heat, had merely offered a shallow and silent nod, seemingly unfazed, and the conversation had continued on to focus on more important matters, like the validity of quantum mechanics and how to get the mirror to work again. It appeared, however, that for three full days, the little detail regarding sex had been weighing on Sherlock’s mind, festering, until it exploded. Apparently, that was how ordinary people felt.

“Do they?” John asked, innocently.

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“Why!” Sherlock threw himself back into his seat and crossed his arms. “Never mind. What do I know?”

“Does it bother you?”

Sherlock maintained a huffy silence, of which John decided to take advantage.

“I mean, I know you’re in love with John”—Sherlock made a strange noise, something between a strangled kitten and an exasperated puppy—“but you shouldn’t be jealous. It was necessary, and I’m sure Sherlock was good to him.”

Sherlock closed his eyes and looked like he was biting his tongue.

“In any case,” John said, placating, “he was sorry about it.”

“Sorry?”

“Yeah. He thought _I’d_ think Sherlock was being unfaithful. Which is ridiculous, but I think I understand the reason behind his worry. I’m telling you, though, there was really no way around it.”

“Right. You’ve explained that bit,” Sherlock said, practically spitting. “Anyway, that’s _not_ what he was sorry about.”
“I really think it was.”

“It wasn’t.”

John frowned, not understanding. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. Why should anything be wrong? You know how I feel about John. You keep harping on about it, even when I tell you to shut up. And now you know how John feels about me.”

“He—”

“If it’s a choice between me and dying, he’ll man up and wait for it to be over. I’m so flattered.”

“I don’t think—”

“That is why he is sorry. He was put in an impossible situation. Sleep with Sherlock, or wind up in hospital.”

“Fuck or die.”

Both Sherlock and John looked sharply to the front of the taxi where the cabbie was nodding sagely. Having inserted himself into the conversation, he continued, “Classic porn trope. Role playing kink.” When they continued to gape, the cabbie took it as permission to explain further. “Nothing to be ashamed of. Me and the misses, we’ve had our fair share of spice in the bedroom. She’s the untouched princess captive betrothed to a prince to unite the kingdoms. I’m the virtuous peasant hero chosen to rescue her at my own peril. But just before I can free her, I get captured, too, and the evil wizard is going to kill me unless I take the princess’s virginity and spoil her for the prince, thwarting the union of the two kingdoms.”

Sherlock’s and John’s mouths fell open, but neither could find words.

“The wizard can’t touch her himself, of course,” the man carried on, shamelessly. “He’s more of a voyeur anyway. But what he doesn’t know is that we’re secretly in love with each other. And we don’t know what the other feels, so it’s like, forbidden, but also hot as hell, and it starts slow, but builds and builds until we’re both gasping and wanting it desperately, begging, crying out each other’s names—”

“Oh my God,” Sherlock said. “Pull over, I’m getting out.”

“Sherlock!” John cried, because the car was still rolling as Sherlock popped open the door, and it looked like he was planning to tuck and roll.

The cabbie slammed on the brake, screeching to a halt, and Sherlock was out the door. John was halfway out himself, planning to run after him, when the cabbie said, “Oi! That’s twelve pounds fifty, that is!”

John huffed and dug into his pocket for his wallet.

“Is he named Sherlock, too?” the cabbie said conversationally. “I thought Sherlock was your boyfriend. Are they both in love with John? Where does that leave you?”

John fished out two ten-pound notes and shoved them into the front seat. “Not your problem,” he snapped.
Without bothering to collect his change, he thrust himself out of the taxi and looked up and down the street, but Sherlock had disappeared.

xXx

It was clear that Sherlock was not very adept at sentiment. Intimacy and love were like foreign languages to him.

No. That wasn’t quite true. He made love like a poet—imbuing every touch with meaning, feeling, passion. His every touch was a request, for permission, for returned affection. He was tender and ardent and lovely, not shy but thoughtful, slow, in ways John’s Sherlock had never been, but maybe could be. And the kisses . . . God, he had the most incredible mouth, the most versatile tongue. Nothing in John’s life had felt more intimate than being kissed by Sherlock Holmes. But then, for the first time in his life, Sherlock had been in love; he’d had a lover. And now?

It wasn’t the sentiment he couldn’t handle. It was the broken heart.

John returned to Baker Street alone, taking the long way round. He was preparing a speech in his head, hoping to find that Sherlock had beaten him there so he could deliver it at once. But the flat was empty. An hour later, finding himself still alone, John texted:

Coming?

Twenty minutes passed before he got a response.

Busy tonight. Case. You don’t need me anyway.
Good luck.
SH

John sighed. His own Sherlock was never this stroppy. He texted back:

If it works, anything you want me to tell him?

There was an even longer delay in response this time, going on half an hour. John couldn’t take it anymore. He texted again, trying to elicit an answer.

This is silly. We should talk about it.

Five more minutes.

Sherlock?

And another five. At last, Sherlock responded:

SH: I could never do that.

JW: Do what? Talk?

To John.

John glared at the text, trying to make sense of it.
JW: You did it to me.

SH: No! Not THAT.

JW: Then WHAT?

SH: You know what. I could never be with him without knowing he wanted me too.

JW: Shall I just ask him?

SH: GOD NO.

SH: He doesn’t want me. OK? He didn’t want to be with your Sherlock, and he was horrified to find you’ve been with me. End of story.

JW: What do you want me to do?

SH: Let’s just focus on getting you home.

SH: I’ll deal with the rest of it when and if I must. It’s not your problem.

SH: Promise me you won’t talk to him about it. Any of it.

JW: You’re being ridiculous.

SH: Promise me.

JW: And if I don’t.

SH: PROMISE ME.

JW: You’re acting like a child, but fine. I promise.

Sherlock seemed satisfied and didn’t respond, but John, after a couple of minutes, couldn’t help but send off one more:

But I can’t promise HE won’t ask.

xXx

Just as John expected, Sherlock didn’t return that night. It was midnight, and the flat was quiet. John was ready.

He had the paper and pen ready, but also the laptop with notes (Sherlock’s laptop, as neither of them had been able to crack John’s password). His palms were sweaty with anticipation, hoping it
would work, even though for the last five nights it had not. It had to work tonight. It just had to. He had done everything right; conditions were perfect; he felt it in his bones. John would be on the other side of the mirror, and they would figure it out.

The clocks turned. 1:00. 1:01. 1:02. His heart thudded, but lower now, dropping into his stomach. 1:09. 1:10. 1:11.

“John?” he whispered. “Please. Please.”

He hadn’t noticed the change before. One minute, he had been staring at himself, and in a blink, it was the other John. But this time, this time, he saw the barrier dissolve, slowly, like coming out of a dream. The transformation was more obvious this time, because there was something wrong. Where his reflection bore smooth, lightly tanned cheeks and jawline, suddenly he saw the bristles of a three-day beard. His neatly combed hair on the other side of the glass was in disarray, sticking out in every direction and covered in flecks of mud. The whiteness beneath one eye gave way to blackened, puffy skin and a bloodshot cornea. And there was dried blood rimming one nostril and staining the collar and front of his shirt. But the look of anxiety on the other John’s face suddenly evaporated: he smiled and sagged his shoulders in relief.

But John was horrified. “Oh my God!”

On the other side of the mirror, John pointed to his ear, shaking his head as a reminder that they couldn’t hear one another, and raised his notebook, on which he’d already prepared a statement in shaky pen:

_I don’t have much time, so we’ll have to be quick. A lot has happened over the last few days, events that have precluded me from being here to meet you, and ‘technically’ I’m a fugitive in hiding, but Sherlock and I jailbroke a couple of hours ago to make this rendezvous. He’s downstairs, watching the street. If he gives the signal, I have to run. But don’t worry! This will all go away after tomorrow’s dog fight. We have a plan._

John gaped in utter, almost debilitating shock. Fugitive? Jailbreak? Dog fight???

The other John flipped a page, upon which he had already written:

_First question. Answer honestly: Do you want to come home?_  

Numb, John nodded. The other John uncapped his pen with his teeth and spit the cap to the side, scribbling furiously across the page: _are you sure?_

John’s own hands were trembling at this point, but he wrote back: _It’s my home. My world. My life. I have work to do there. Yes. I am sure._

Then, as almost an afterthought, he added one more line: _And Sherlock needs you to come back._

Upon reading this, the other John’s face went steely with resolve. He nodded sharply. _Then pay attention. Because we only get one shot at this._
In Which John Starts Fires (Part 1)

It was early, very early, before-the-sun early, and definitely before-visiting-hours early, when John woke up in his hospital bed to find he had a visitor.

“Molly?” he croaked, straining to open his eyes.

“Morning!” Her voice was a whisper, being considerate of the other two Omegas sleeping in the room.

He blinked to clear the blur and stretched out his legs to wake them. His stomach still felt a little sore, so he pushed himself up gradually, groaning and stifling a yawn.

“I should have let you sleep,” she continued softly, “but I was too excited, I just had to see you.”

“Oh?”

It was then that he noticed the newspaper in her lap. She quickly lifted it for him to read the headline:

PRIVATE DETECTIVE SHERLOCK HOLMES ISSUES CHALLENGE TO DOGS

Jun 7, London – In the wake of an attack on his Omega, John Watson, Alpha Sherlock Holmes, a London private eye and primary consultant of New Scotland Yard, has filed an official charge with the Ministry of Omega Affairs and Wellness, challenging Alphas Roger Garret, Trevor Malone, and Sean Pepper to a dog fight at Marble Arch on June 13, at twelve o’clock GMT.

In accordance with Her Majesty’s Official Law Regarding the Preservation of Omega Kind, the challenged Alphas are required to be present to answer the challenge.

In an unprecedented move, Holmes has issued his challenge on behalf of not only his own bond-mate, but also a non-pack O-X.

Mr. Watson, Holmes’ bond-mate of seven years, was hunted and attacked by the pack on May 24, sustaining mild injuries, including a scent-bite and broken skin, before escaping back home to his Alpha, who removed the invading scent and reinforced the seven-year bond. The next day, however, the same pack hunted unbonded Omega-X Molly Hooper. Ms. Hooper is recovering in hospital from a forced bond and other injuries sustained in the attack. No relationship between Mr. Holmes and Ms. Hooper has been established.

“There is no record of bond or blood between Holmes and the Omega-X in question,” says Beta-X Helen Powell, chief clerk at the Ministry of Omega Affairs and Wellness. “A junior clerk initially rejected the paperwork, but relented because Mr. Holmes got a bit shouty, and frankly, the junior clerk has a noodle for a spine. We’re still working it out.”

Although the law states that an Alpha must have a blood or bond relationship with an Omega to engage in a dog fight on his or her behalf, there is no record of an Alpha actually trying to issue the challenge on behalf of the bond-mate and another Omega.

“It’s a sticky situation,” says Powell. “On the one hand, Mr. Holmes has the legal and moral obligation to fight for his Omega, who was in fact attacked. We cannot stop him from that. The fact that he threw another name onto the ticket? Well. That’s just weird.”
When asked whether Mr. Holmes’ action would result in any sort of a penalty, Ms. Powell was uncertain. “We may fine him. I don’t know. I’m off to lunch.”

As a ride-along beneficiary, Ms. Hooper may very well be the first Omega defended in a dog fight without a legal relationship with the challenger. It is yet to be seen what consequences this may bring to Mr. Holmes, if he survives.

Spectators are encouraged to come early, as prime viewing spots are sure to fill fast.

John raised his eyes from the article with a carefully neutral expression, holding back his reaction until he had gauged Molly’s. Was she concerned the legality wouldn’t hold? Was she offended at being called a “ride-along”? Was she mortified that her situation as a victim of forced bonding was being broadcasted to all of London?

Molly Hooper was smiling. Her eyes were sparkling, like she was about to cry.

“You told me he would fight in my name, and he is. I didn’t believe it. I wanted to, but I couldn’t. Even when he came to see me yesterday, when he said he’d put my name on the registry, it didn’t feel real until I saw it in print.”

At last, John allowed himself to smile in return. He hadn’t known that Sherlock went to see her. “Sherlock is an honorable man. He keeps his promises. And mine, apparently.”

“I can’t thank you enough. I really can’t.” She took his hand and squeezed it, and a tear spilled over and rolled down a cheek.

John squeezed her hand back. “We’re going to be all right, eh? Things will be okay.”

She nodded hopefully. Then she let his hand go to brush her cheeks. “Again, I’m sorry I woke you. I just had to say thank you before I leave.”

“Leave?”

“Just for a couple of days. It’s begun.”

She was right; now that she mentioned it, John could smell the subtle sweetness in the air that stirred in him a sympathetic response. His bowels rumbled unpleasantly. She was entering her heat.

“They’ve been monitoring things closely, and my estrogen levels started spiking an hour ago. They’re moving me to the House.” Her smile looked a little strained now. “Only one day off from normal! That’s good, I guess.”

“God, Molly.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s just two days, and there will be a doctor on call, just in case something . . . And not just the doctor, but—” Her cheeks went a rosy color, and she looked away, embarrassed, but fighting a smile. “Well. The detective inspector. He keeps his promises, too.”

Torn between default outrage and quixotic impulse, he decided to settle on the latter and support her in what appeared to be romance burgeoning in the midst of tragedy. “Oh yeah? Greg Lestrade, right?”

“He’s been by every day, just to see how I am. Sometimes twice a day. He brought me lunch and we ate it on the rooftop terrace. It’s a bit weird, but it’s kind of like, I don’t know, maybe Betas aren’t so put off by an Omega who’s been spoiled. He’s great.” The color in her cheeks was
deepening. “I told him about our conversation, actually. The one where you asked me if I could do anything? And I said coroner?”

“I remember. What did he say?”

“He didn’t laugh at all. I thought he would, like they always do, you know, when we say things like that. But he didn’t. And he said that if I was interested, he could tell me stories, such stories! About cases he’s worked, and what it’s really like in a morgue, and oh, just all sorts of things, and we just talked and talked and talked, and . . .” She giggled a little. “I said I might steal some of his stories and turn them into fiction. And I kind of meant it as a joke, but you know what he said?”

John was smiling openly now. “What?”

“He said, ‘I’d read that.’ He said, ‘Molly, you could be the next Agatha Christie.’ And he meant it! He thought I could be a writer. Me!”

“Damn right, you could be!” John rejoined. He wanted to hug her. He wanted to hug Greg Lestrade.

“I don’t know,” she said, shrugging, but the smile wouldn’t leave her face. “A week ago, I thought . . . Well, the worst thing that could possibly happen to me—it happened. And I thought my life might as well be over. Like, what was the point of it, in the end? What was the point of me? But . . .” Another tear escaped. “Then why am I so happy now? I can’t remember a time I felt this way, like things are brighter ahead than behind. I don’t know, maybe I’m being silly. But John. I feel like things are changing. Like, maybe, life is good. Or can be. Am I crazy?”

He didn’t hold back anymore. Pushing through the pain in his abdomen, he leaned forward, arms spread. Molly stood to reach him, and they embraced.

“You’re a wonder, Molly Hooper.” Holding her close, he noted that her scent was ripening. It wouldn’t be long, and she needed to get going. “What you’re feeling right now, hold onto it. Remember it when it gets rough. Fight for it every day.”

“You, too, John Watson.” She kissed his cheek and stood straight, sniffing, still smiling, still sparkling. “Stop letting those Alphas get the better of you, yeah?”

He laughed. “Don’t worry. They’re in for a world of hurt. From both of us.”

xXx

Less than an hour later, John watched discreetly as Molly left the recovery ward, her arm hooked through Lestrade’s, as he was providing her an escort. They walked slowly towards the lifts as if strolling through a park, not the sterile wing of a hospital, and Molly held a single daisy at her side, a gift from her new friend and protectorate.

He knew where she was going, and he knew that she was nervous about it. And sweet mercy, it was so fucked up, because Lestrade was going with her, and he knew it all, too. But, truth be told, John was glad she wouldn’t be alone. And he realized, too, that if Lestrade wasn’t going, John would have gone himself, if she would let him, to support her and care for her in any way she might need. John didn’t know if Lestrade would be in the room when it was . . . happening, or just outside the door, or just down the street, or what, and he decided it wasn’t his business to think about. All he knew was that Molly was glad Lestrade was there, so he was too.

But Molly Hooper was not the only X to call on him that day.
Visiting hours began at ten o’clock, and John expected to see Sherlock at ten sharp, to check him out so they could go home. But fifteen minutes passed, and no Sherlock. Meanwhile, his doctors informed him that although he was recovering nicely, they weren’t ready to release him. He argued with them, but not surprisingly, they barely listened. He wondered if he might have more luck if he sicked Sherlock onto them—but by eleven o’clock, still no Sherlock.

Instead, Harry Watson arrived in the recovery ward, brandishing the same paper Molly had shown him at daybreak.

“Look at you, you pillock, getting yourself into another scrape, I’m going to lose all my hair on account of you,” she said, then whacked his knees with the paper.

“What can I say?” said John drily. “Alphas love me.”

“John Watson,” Harry said, swatting him in the arm this time, “don’t you dare joke about a thing like this. At least your bond-mate is finally taking action.”

For nearly two hours, Harry stayed and prattled on, her severity melting quickly to something warm and motherly that John was so unused to seeing in his sister. Although he couldn’t stand being mollycoddled by everyone—from doctors to policemen to Sherlock even, and basically everyone else in the Wacko World—he decided not to fight it in Harry. It was better than their constant sparring on the rare occasions they saw one another. It was, perhaps, the way things should have been between them. Or, at least, a little like it.

“Oh!” She jumped when she checked her watch. “Is it two already? John, baby, I’ve got to run. Clara needs me to pick her up from yoga, and we’re going shopping for that new mattress, at last. Finally convinced her that spending a thousand pounds on a mattress is an investment. Better sleep, better health, better productivity during the day, all of that. You and Sherlock, when’s the last time you bought a new mattress?”

“Um . . .”

“You don’t know? That alone tells me it’s been too long. You should bring it up. Nothing wears down a mattress like an Omega in heat, isn’t that what they say? I mean, Omega Houses alone are enough to keep Serta in business.”

“. . . Sure.”

“I mean, if you don’t have resilient enough springs. Think about it. It’s the equivalent of two full-grown men jumping up and down on the box springs for three days, non-stop. It’s bound to grind and tear, and that’s not to mention the staining, no matter how often you change the sheets—”

“Yeah, yeah, ssh, we’ll talk about it, I’ll talk to him.”

So maybe being too close to one’s sister wasn’t optimal.

“Well. You’ve got a couple more weeks, I guess. Oh! And next week. Day of the dog fight. My place or yours?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Your place or mine? To watch the fight? They’re broadcasting it on BBC One, BBC World, Alphas On Air—”

John let out a loud pfffff. “I’m pretty sure I’ll have a front-row seat there, sis.”
Her face registered bafflement. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m going to be there. In person.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Of course I will! You don’t think I’m going to let Sherlock enter the ring alone, on my behalf, and me all cozied up on a sofa with a hot cup of tea and a hope and a prayer that it turns out fine and dandy? No, thank you.” He knew better than to mention his intentions to enter the fray himself.

“John, don’t be absurd. What Omegas attend their Alphas’ dog fights? I mean, how uncivilized would *that* be? Subjecting them to that kind of stress? Especially if things go south?”

“Oh, but watching it on the telly? That’s just fine, is it?”

“What, are you going to try to tell me that Juniper Jordan *didn’t* go suicidal when she saw her Alpha die just ten feet away from her? At least I can be there to turn the telly off for you if it becomes too much!”

He buried his face in his hands and groaned. “Oh please, I’m not a child.”

“John . . .”

His head came up sharply, and his smile was sarcastic. “I’m an adult. Okay? I love you, Harry, and I’m grateful that you’re my advocate, I really am, but I need you to show you love *me* by letting me stand on my own two feet. You and Sherlock and the whole damn world, okay?”

Her hands fell to her hips and her mouth dropped open. “What’s got into you?”

“And my sex life? None of your business. I don’t need mattress-shopping advice, and I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t talk about my sheet stains and overtaxed bedsprings with the casual weather-talk of a mum going on about her baby’s stool. It’s infantilizing, it really is. I can’t believe I’ve put up with it this long.” He looked at her beseechingly, wondering if he’d said too much, gone too far, and done irreparable damage to another man’s relationship with his sister. But he couldn’t hold it in, and he wouldn’t take it back. Nevertheless, he was not above damage control.

“You’re one of the most important people in my life, Harry. And I get it. I’m your little brother. I’ll always be that. And you’ll always be the sister I look up to. But I need you to see me as more than that. Because I am. More than that.”

Harry slowly let out a breath, and for a moment, John imagined it reeked of alcohol, and he braced for the tirade. But it never came.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

“Just . . . like that?”

“You’re right. I’m . . . sorry.”

“No. Don’t—”

“I know you miss Mum. And I’ve probably gone too far, thinking I could fill her shoes . . .”
“Harry—”

“But you don’t need me to be that for you.”

“I need you to be my sister. And friend.” He grinned. “And confidante. For those days Sherlock drives me crazy.”

She laughed and walked up beside him. “We can’t talk on the phone every day, John dear.” She ruffled his hair, froze, and withdrew her hand. “Oh, too much?”

He rolled his eyes, and tapped a cheek. She kissed him.

xXx

Visiting hours were drawing to a close, and Sherlock had not stopped in. Trying to ignore the sting of insult (or just plain hurt), John asked one of the nurses to call him. She returned with the report that there had been no answer.

“I can keep trying,” she said.

Annoyed, John shook his head. “He probably just had a case or something. It’s fine. I’ll see him tomorrow when I go home.”

The doctors checked him over one more time before the night-shift started, reported that he was doing well, and assured him of an early-morning check-out. “When you get home,” they told him, “have your Alpha re-scent you, just to reinforce the bond and boost your antibodies and immunity. You’ll be right as rain.”

Re-scent. That was to do with the bond mark on his neck, wasn’t it? Like before? He’d have to look it up. But not wanting to seem ignorant, he nodded and smiled tightly, and they left him to sleep.

He was awoken several hours later with a gentle shake of his shoulder, the left one, and his eyes flew open with a silent gasp and found a pair of brown eyes looking back at him, a finger held to the lips to keep him quiet.

He blinked. Dr. Stapleton came even closer, and transferred her hushing finger to his own frowning lips.

“Mr. Watson,” she whispered, barely loud enough to be heard, “I need you to keep calm and come with me.”

“Why?” he mouthed. Then a decibel louder: “Why are you here?”

“Shhh,” she soothed. Then she softly started to pull his covers off and took hold of an arm to lift him.

“Where’s Sher—?”

She shushed him again with the finger, then took hold of his head and drew it closer to speak in his ear. “I’m here because of Sherlock. He told me everything. That you’re from another world, and I believe him. That’s why I came. You’re not safe here. We need to get you out.”

He could smell the Alpha in her. That meant she had not been properly screened or injected with inhibitors, and that meant she had somehow snuck in. Urgent and secretive. But she was in the
midst of Omegas and not properly inhibited, which added an additional layer of danger—for others. He glanced at his sleeping Omega roommates, turned back to her, and nodded.

“Good boy,” she murmured. Then she took his hand and led him from the room in nothing but his socks and polka-dot hospital gown.

They crept down the hallway and around corners, John stifling yawns in his free hand and trying to pull himself into full alertness more quickly. His other body was more adept at shocking itself awake.

When they made it to the stairwell, John hazarded to ask, “Is Sherlock okay? Is he hurt?”

“Don’t you worry about Sherlock Holmes. He’s the one who made sure I came for you.”

“Why? Is someone after me?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Shh. Right through here.”

They pushed through an exit and into the cool night air where a car idled on the curb. A young man—another Alpha, by the smell of him—hopped out of the backseat and opened the door.

“Right you are, Mr. Watson, Dr. Stapleton, we’re ready to go.”

Being no stranger to being ushered into strangers’ cars, John felt his suspicious hackles rise, and he stopped cold. “Sorry, where are we going, exactly?” His eyes darted up and down the empty street.

“Mustn’t dawdle, John,” said Dr. Stapleton, tugging on his hand. The man put an arm around his shoulders, pulling him forward.

“I want to talk to Sherlock.” His brain was at last fully awake, and his body charged, ready to act.

“Running out of time, doctor,” said the young man, trying not to move his mouth, as if he could keep John from hearing or understanding him.

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” said Dr. Stapleton. “Let’s just get him in the car.”

And without further attempts to coax or reason with him, they coerced: each seized an arm, and with their superior strength they wrangled John into the backseat, pinning him between them and commanding the driver to step on it.

John struggled, fighting off their hands. “The hell!” He twisted his head to peer through the darkened windows to see where they were going or whether he could signal anyone for help.

“You’re kidnapping me?”

“It’s for your own good, John,” said Dr. Stapleton.

“The hell it is! What did you do to Sherlock!”

“Sherlock is perfectly safe. It’s you I am trying to protect from him.”

John’s head snapped around so quickly a twinge of pain ran down his neck. “What?”

“I’m sorry, John. I can only imagine how difficult this will be for you. But you see . . . It’s not only
Omegas who sometimes crack.”

“For fuck’s sake, what are you talking about?”

“Sherlock’s mad! He’s gone absolutely mad. I went to see him this morning, told him I had figured it out. All those questions about parallel universes, displacement, everything, I knew one of you had actually crossed planes, and he confirmed it—it’s you. You’re from another world, and you’ve displaced the John of this world. His bond-mate. Do you see?”

“You’re crackers,” said John, who suddenly felt that denying everything was the best tactic in the current situation.

“You didn’t think an Alpha would so easily give up his Omega, did you? He wants the other John back.”

“Please pull the car over. I want to talk to him—”

“And he’s going to kill you to get it done. Kill you.”

John stared at her, flummoxed. “That . . . that’s not true.”

“I’m so sorry. This must be perfectly awful to hear.”

“No. No, because it’s not even the least bit true. That doesn’t even make sense, and Sherlock, he’s . . . he’s all about reason, and logic, and what the hell, let me out of this car, I need to talk to him.”

“Listen to me, John.” Dr. Stapleton took his jaw and twisted his head to look at her. Her grip was so firm, John was sure it would leave bruises. For a woman of no great stature, she had fingers like a dog’s jaws, and he reminded himself that he was flanked by two Alphas. “He believes your death will somehow make room for the John he knows to return. No, it doesn’t make sense, but an Alpha maddened by the loss of his Omega is unstable, unpredictable, dangerous.”

“No . . .”

“So I’m going to protect you. Keep you safe.”

“This is fucked up.”

“Language, dear.”

xXx

They took him somewhere outside the city, down a country road, and through iron gates leading to a Jacobethan-style house of brick. It looked a bit like it had once served as a boys’ school.

“Can you tell your boy to keep his hands off me?” John griped as he was escorted inside.

His mind was roiling with a thousand questions and competing for space against a hundred different plans of escape. He knew three things with absolute certainty:

Thing one: Sherlock was not a killer. Therefore, Dr. Stapleton was a liar.

Thing two: Her Alpha stooge had been sniffing and sizing John up from the moment of the abduction. Therefore, it was in their company, not Sherlock’s, that he was unsafe.

Thing three: Dr. Stapleton thought he was an idiot. Therefore, she had no idea what he was really
He needed to keep it that way.

What he did not know, yet, was what she wanted with him.

xXx

He made one escape attempt.

They put him in a room with a bed, a TV set, a fluffy robe, microwave popcorn, a small collection of Pixzars, and the invitation to enjoy himself or get some sleep, because surely he was tuckered out from all the excitement, but not to worry his pretty little head, he would be right as rain and they would keep him safe from the mean, nasty Alpha trying to hurt him. Then they dimmed the lights, closed the door, and turned a key. He was locked in.

John went out the window.

He was caught out on the grounds, not even halfway to the gate. The young Alpha had been concealed among the trees, and John didn’t see the glowing end of his cigarette until it was too late. There was a chase. A proper hunt. John’s breath rose in puffs as the chilled air seared his lungs and burned his ears and nose. He ran, tried to evade, tried to hide, but his scent was his undoing. The Alpha caught him. And when John wouldn’t submit, he beat him. Still, John fought like a trained soldier, sweeping the kid’s legs out from under him, landing a blow in the solar plexus, making him see stars.

He just wasn’t counting on Dr. Stapleton entering the fray with a syringe full of tranquilizer. She plunged it into his neck, and he was unconscious before hitting the ground.

xXx

When John came to, he was laid out on a gurney, ankles, knees, wrists, and elbows strapped down with nylon cords and head locked into a metal brace.

But though conscious, he pretended to still be asleep so he could listen to them talk, unaware they were being observed.

“Damn, he smells good.”

The young Alpha’s name was Byron. John had already gathered that he had not too long ago been Dr. Stapleton’s student and had been graduated to lab assistant.

“Don’t get any funny ideas,” said Dr. Stapleton. Her words were admonitory, but her tone teased.

John could feel her moving around him, could hear the sound of a machine humming and metal clinking against glass. The smell of sterility put him in mind of a laboratory or hospital, but he didn’t open his eyes to find out, lest he give himself away.

“When’s his next heat?”

“Chart says another couple of weeks. The poor little guy.”

Suddenly, her fingers began to rake through his hair, a petting gesture. Had he any less self-control, John would have flinched.
“He’s been through so much. And he has so much to teach us. He’s exactly what I didn’t know I was waiting for, the key to it all. The universe is rewarding me! At last, I’ll be able to publish my work. My life’s work, Byron!”

“I know, Dr. Stapleton.”

“Oh, he’s a treasure. A gift.”

Her warm, moist lips pressed to his forehead, leaving behind a kind of burning tingle he couldn’t scrub away even if he weren’t strapped to the gurney.

“This *gift* will only try to run again.”

“As long as his Alpha is still out there, of course he will. The bond will compel him to. But that’ll go away soon enough.”

“What do you mean? You don’t mean . . . we’re not going to . . . kill the detective?”

John felt his heart thud more solidly against his ribcage, and his palms began to sweat.

“What?” Even Dr. Stapleton sounded scandalized. “Do you take me for some sort of monster? Of course not!”

John felt the ache in his chest ease a little, until:

“He doesn’t need *us* to do that.”

“You mean the dog fight?”

“I mean the dog fight. Holmes comes from a very small pack, and he’ll almost certainly be fighting alone. Three against one? We couldn’t hope for better odds. There’s no way he’s coming out of that.”

“But . . .”

Dr. Stapleton sighed. “What is it, Byron?”

“Even with Holmes out of the picture, the Omega’s loyalties are still chemical. That’s why so many of them go into depression or even commit suicide following the deaths of their Alphas.”

“That’s why . . .”

There was a long pause, and it was all John could do to keep himself breathing normally. They were hoping Sherlock would be killed in the fight? Not only that, they were *counting* on it? Why?! And then he got his answer:

“. . . I have *this*.”

Byron asked the question John could not.

“What’s that?”

“It’s . . . controversial. To say the least. Not yet approved by the Ministry of Omega Affairs and Wellness. But Japan is already using it, and extensively. Have you heard of their practice of hormonal bond transition therapy?”
“Only in the case of prisoners.”

“It’s going mainstream. In Japan, at least, and mostly in cases where the Alpha in a bond-pair is terminal—cancer or whatever. But it works. This little vial contains 20 milligrams of my scent. Pheromones, mixed with the bonding DNA sequences unique to me. Not enough for his antibodies to fight it, not enough to confuse the hormone balance, but just enough to begin to rewrite his DNA and make it become more tolerant of mine. Without the bite to seal the bond, my scent won’t have any staying power and will begin to break down, but that’s okay. We’re just building tolerance, compliance. So I inject this now, and in twenty-four hours I increase the dosage by fifty percent: 30 milligrams of scent. Another twenty-four hours, another fifty percent increase; 45 milligrams of scent. Not only will this prepare him to accept a new bond-mate sans complications, but it will kick-start his heat in about a week, just a couple of days after the dog fight. And with the old bond broken and my hormones already in his system, his body will most certainly be receptive to me. No violence, no hormone confusion or estrus poisoning. I’ll take good care of him. I’ll knot him and mark him, and just like that, Byron. Voila! He’ll have a new Alpha, a new bond-mate.”

“And you can just . . . inject it? No frills, no fuss?”

“Observe.”

And with that, the sharp point of a needle sank into John’s abdomen. John’s eyes flew open and he let out a cry of pain and alarm. Through eyes watery with panic, he saw her withdraw the syringe, its contents already drained inside of him.

xXx

John could not believe he had left the hospital with that woman. Had simply walked out! Barely a question asked! He had been tricked into believing that Sherlock had sent her, that there was danger, that they needed to move fast. And because he trusted even an imaginary Sherlock, he hadn’t bothered to grab even his shoes, let alone wallet or phone, and walked straight into a predator’s arms.

Of all the stupid things he had ever done—in this life or any other—this one made the top of the list.

“This will never work,” said John, grimacing twenty-four hours later as the second vial was emptied into him. He was once again strapped down, the only protest possible a verbal one.

To his dismay, he was already beginning to detect a difference in her scent, a shift from bitter to sweet. But his loathing for her only grew. She had taken to him like he was a grand puzzle, or a lab rat to be experimented on. With Byron’s assistance, they had taken a series of biological samples, including blood, hair, saliva, and urine for examination, looking for any kind of marker that could identify him as having experienced transplanar displacement. But it seemed Dr. Stapleton was just crossing that possibility off the list because, as they both knew, the body remained the same. It was the mind that had been transported.

That’s why she put him into the MRI machine that apparently existed in her super-secret laboratory.

“Fascinating,” she said to her assistant, staring up at the triptych of brain images on screens as behind her, John struggled through the nausea of too many sedatives and tried to sit up. “See how the lobes are all lit up, here and here? These are centers that are normally active only during REM sleep, but just look at that activity, and he’s clearly wide awake!”
“How is that possible?” asked Byron.

“My knowledge of this field is rudimentary, and I’ll have to talk to some colleagues. But what it seems to suggest is exactly what Dr. Serebryakov hypothesized: being in a state removed from his prime corpus shares metaphysical properties with that of being asleep. Oh, the implications! The scientific community will go mad with excitement!” She looked over her shoulder at John, who was holding his stomach, his face flushed with fever, and flashed a toothy smile, saying, “Oh, if I could just bite him right now.”

xXx

When he wasn’t locked in his room with the fluffy robe and children’s movies (and new metal bars across the window pane), he was under constant supervision. Aside from the testing, Dr. Stapleton tried to interview him about his own world, the exact moment of displacement, what differences he had discovered, the challenges of adjustment, and so on, and so forth, but John refused to even part his teeth. He sat with crossed arms and a fixed glare for what felt like days but only amounted to hours. So she had no idea just how long ago the displacement had occurred, or how. John didn’t even confirm that it had happened at all.

“You’ll answer my questions eventually, John,” she said with a condescending sigh to indicate that though perturbed, she fully expected to win out in the end. “You can’t deny me forever.”

If she was trying to get a rise out of him, any kind of reaction at all, she was disappointed. John had a number of things he wanted to say to her, but he settled on glaring.

They cared for him in the humane way one does a prisoner. Byron brought him clean but ill-fitting clothes, and they gave him five minutes to shower, three minutes to shave, and two minutes to piss whenever he needed it. They fed him, too, but after realizing that his Cheerios had been laced with a mild sedative (thus the nausea and subsequent fever), he stopped trusting the food and refused to eat. He didn’t realize how short-lived that tactic would prove.

“John,” said Dr. Stapleton, setting before him a bowl of microwaved mac and cheese, “it’s dinner time.”

His stomach moaned and his mouth watered, but he made no move to pick up the fork.

“John,” she said again, this time setting two hands on the table across from him and leaning over. “<<Eat.>>”

A hazy veil descended. He instantly picked up the fork, dug it into the macaroni, and lifted it to his mouth before he realized what was happening, because he’d felt it before, and it was the worst thing he could imagine, having his free will tampered with like that.

He had to fight it. But it was like trying to straighten a limb when the muscles had all seized and curled. With gritted teeth and sweating brow, he dropped the fork and shot to his feet. Panting, he backed away from the table.

That . . . shouldn’t have happened. Only Sherlock . . .

“Oh good. It’s beginning to work.” Dr. Stapleton smiled, picked up the dropped fork, and helped herself to a bite. “Mm. Creamy.” Pointing the tines in his direction, she spoke around another mouthful. “A couple of more days at higher levels of scent, and you won’t be able to resist me. You see, John? I’ll take care of you one way or another, even if I have to Compel you to eat. Or to speak. Or tell the world whatever I need you to. They need to understand that you came with me
willingly, after all.”

The haze lifted; like the scent, it had no staying power without a proper bond.

“You’re a criminal,” he said, shakily.

He should have known. Her ethics had been questionable enough back in Normalia. Why should they be any better here?

“I’m a scientist,” she said, as if it were a fitting counterargument. She came around the table and drew nearer until she had him backed up against the wall. “And you”—her hand came up and gently touched the side of his face—“are my greatest discovery.”

Her hand trailed down to his throat, popped the top button of his shirt, and pulled the collar aside to reveal the white scar of the bond mark on his neck. “And this will soon be mine.” Dragging her finger across its ridge, her voice dropped to a husky timbre. “All mine.”

Her scent was sweet. He wanted to throw up. Nothing she had done to him yet compared to this violation, this uninvited touch. She could strip him down and fondle his nether bits or Compel him to dance the cha-cha in the nude, and it wouldn’t feel as intimately intrusive as this. Whatever his first thoughts of the bond mark had been, he understood it better now. This was what tied him to Sherlock, and Sherlock to him. No one—and that meant no one—had a right to touch him there, only Sherlock.

She pressed her nail more deeply into the mark.

Something happened then, something John couldn’t explain, would never be able to explain, not by the laws of nature or super-nature or anything but poetic materiality. In that moment, lasting half a second, several images flashed through his mind and left him gasping:

First: A pistol in his hand, the bang bang bang as a feeling of freedom rang through his bones, and Sherlock saying, There it is. Three in a row, straight through the center.

Then: The gentle, swaying rumble of a train as he sat alone, and a tall, handsome stranger asking, May I sit with you?, and the feeling of surprise, as no Alpha had ever asked permission before taking what they wanted from him, whether it was an adjoining seat or possession of his body, just as they wanted it, during his most vulnerable hours. The gesture was small, almost insignificant. But it was the first time he could name when he felt respected by an Alpha, and he knew that if he said no, the Alpha would acquiesce, move away, and leave him be. He had never met one like that. So he said yes. And Sherlock sat.

Then: The single bang of a pistol, and the cabbie flew back, and John ducked out of sight, heart racing but hands steady, and he knew with certainty that he would do it again, if he must. To protect this man he had just met, this incredibly brilliant and charming and captivating man, he would do it all over again, no matter the cost.

Then: The whisper in his ear, Are you sure? and the hot, naked body pressed up against his backside, deep inside of him, arms tight and caressing, and the feeling of love quite distinct from everything else, and John answered back with all the conviction of his heart, Yes, I’m sure. At his answer, Sherlock sighed hot breath against his neck, then lathed him slowly with a hot tongue. John waited, air trapped in his lungs, one heartbeat, two heartbeats, three . . . and Sherlock pressed his teeth into John’s skin, and with slow, pulsing precision, sank into him. He expected pain—he received pleasure. He thrust backward, and as they continued to move together, as the knot swelled inside of him, Sherlock’s teeth held firm, sinking deeper and deeper, the scent growing more
powerful, and he felt like he was floating, dissolving in a sea of happiness and warmth. It was the closest he had ever come to believing in magic.

Then: He clapped Sherlock on the shoulder. *Don’t sweat it, you’ll get there eventually.*

John gasped and pushed himself off the wall and away from Dr. Stapleton’s claying hands. But his knees had gone weak, his head felt heavy, and suddenly he was on the ground. Dr. Stapleton crouched beside him, one hand on the back of his neck, not gripping, but firmly keeping him down, like pinning a dog by the scruff.

“There now, John, sweetie. See what this food strike is getting you? You’ve barely enough strength to stand. Let’s get you to bed.”

xXx

John Watson of the Wacko World loved Sherlock Holmes. John Watson of Normalia had felt it for himself. He hadn’t exactly doubted it before. After all, he’d read the journal entries, and he was personal witness to the depth of feeling Sherlock held for him in return. But now he knew the truth of it beyond a shadow of a doubt, and he had to protect that. John was steward of this body now. He was its guardian. And what would happen, if on some random day, by some freak of nature as unpredictable as the last, John and John swapped back, and John returned to this body, to this world, only to discover that his Sherlock was dead—murdered—while defending the honor of his Omega, and that he was now the bond-mate of a psychotic Alpha-X scientist whose greatest interest in him was to further her research and gain international acclaim?

He could not let that happen. For the sake of his counterpart, he had to defend this body.

But he was weakening. The next time Dr. Stapleton told him to eat, he couldn’t fight her. She gave him tomato soup, and it was delicious. He greedily slurped it up until he was practically licking the bottom of the bowl, and only then did her Compelling ebb.

“I hate you,” he muttered over the bowl, panting. Three treatments in, the scent was having greater effect on him. She Compelled with gusto, and his obedience had to match. Therefore, he’d eaten so fast he had barely taken time to breathe.

“Maybe you’ll learn to mind,” she said. “I’m a reasonable human being, and a desirable bond-mate. Don’t I take care of you? Don’t I see that your needs are well met? I have status, wealth, respectability, and soon, notoriety. You couldn’t possibly be better matched.”

“I don’t *choose* you. I choose Sherlock.” *Here, and in every universe,* he thought.

“I’m afraid he’s no longer an option. What with the dog fight coming up.” She lazily turned the page in a large scientific tome, adjusting glasses on the end of her nose and utterly disinterested in whatever he had to say.

“A fight he’ll win,” said John, “before challenging you to the same. He’s going to rip your throat out, Dr. Stapleton, in front of all of Britain.”

Her eyes lifted. “What did you say to me?”

“I said, you’re dead where you sit. Bitch.”

“How dare you speak that way to an Alpha. Your Alpha.” Her voice was level, almost monotone, but her eyes had begun to smolder. “I’m in you now, do not forget.”
John pursed his lips, held it, and then let the plosive fly: “Bbb-itch.”

Dr. Stapleton rose to her feet. “<<Don’t move.>>”

His muscles became heavy and immovable as stone. He wasn’t even able to move his eyes to track her movement as she came around the table. Then, with an open-handed palm, she cracked him across the face. Twice.

If she had been an ordinary woman, or even a Beta in this world, it would have stung, he would have winced, and that would be that. But she was not Beta. She was Alpha, he was Omega, and the blow made him feel like she had just slapped his face off his skull. Twice.

“Your last Alpha clearly failed to discipline you or teach you proper respect of your betters. I won’t make that mistake.”

He lifted a hand to touch his face and ease the pain. She grabbed his wrist to stop him.

“Now say ‘thank you.’”

John grinded his teeth and glared.

“<<Say ‘thank you.’>>”

Automatically, his teeth parted, his tongue pressed to the back of his front teeth. But he was at war with himself. The compulsion to obey was strong, almost overpowering; his determination to rebel, however, would not yield ground.

“Thhhhhfanck you.”

“What was that?”

“Ffffffuck you.”

For the third time, she raised her hand and delivered a bone-shattering blow that knocked him from his chair and landed him on his back.

This time, she didn’t wait for a full twenty-four hours. She grabbed the fourth vial, a full 70 milligrams of her scent, and plunged it into his stomach.

xXx

“What is your name?”

“John Watson.”

“Where were you born?”

“London.”

“The London of this world?”

“No.”

“Where were you born, John?”

“In my world. My world.”
“Are you saying you’re not from this world?”

“I’m not from this world.”

“What world are you from?”

“A parallel one.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how long I’ve been in this room.”

“Do you remember the date? Your first day in this world?”

“May 20.”

“That was twenty-three days ago. Byron, write that down.”

John felt sluggish, dizzy, confused, like he’d been drugged. But there was a burning in his blood, a discomfort in his stomach, the sensation that he was only moments away from vomiting or fainting. He struggled even to keep his eyes open. But he continued to answer her questions.

“John, I want you to tell me about when it happened, the exact moment you moved from your world to this one. Where were you? What were you doing?”

“I had just got off work. I was going home. There was . . . a bridge . . . and then wind.”

The recorder’s light glowed red.

Her fingers stroked the hair of his head, fingernails scraping lightly across his scalp. He continued to talk, only vaguely aware of how her nose traveled up and down his neck, breathing him in.
“Yoo-hoo!”

Sherlock groaned involuntarily, no longer unconscious, not quiet awake. Mrs. Hudson’s ascending steps vibrated in his hear. Quite literally, too, as his ear was pressed into the floorboards beneath the sitting room table. Slowly, his body was coming online, and he blinked, but even with eyes wide open, he saw nothing.

Then a lamp turned on somewhere above and behind him.

“Sherlock, what are you doing on the floor?”

He groaned again and lifted his pounding head, and a trail of saliva dripped from his lips to the pool that had accumulated under his cheek. His head. God, it was like a jackhammer had taken a fancy to it, almost like he had been . . . struck. No, stuck. Stuck? Struck? Stuck.

Fuck.

“Mrs. Hudson,” he moaned, pushing himself upright, “what time is it?”

“Nearly nine o’clock.”

“At night?”

“Of course, dear! Don’t tell me you’ve been down there all day.” She laughed at the absurdity of the thought. “Anyway, haven’t you got a case on?”

“What? A case?”

Damn, his head was in such a fog. What had he been doing? Last thing he remembered, he was getting ready to go out. Go out? Where? Oh! He’d spent the night alone! John was in hospital! The Alphas from the park! He had to get to John!

But then . . . what had stopped him? There had been someone at the door . . . Yes! That’s right, the scientist! She had tracked him down, needed to talk to him, wanted him to . . .

Struck. Stuck. He remembered the needle.

John!

“I should think so,” Mrs. Hudson was prattling on. “Isn’t that why the police are here? I told them to wait downstairs, that you wouldn’t be a moment. Gracious, Sherlock, are you ill?”

But the police, evidently, had tired of waiting and were ascending the staircase. Lestrade, he noted, was not among them. Instead, they were five Alphas. And as a rule, the Met never sent five Alphas together anywhere, not unless it was to—

“Sherlock Holmes, we have a warrant for your arrest.”

“Oh my God,” he whispered.

“What’s that? What did you say?” Mrs. Hudson’s neck swiveled from the officers to Sherlock, looking like someone had just told her she’d given birth to an alien.
“On what charge!” he demanded.

“Omega endangerment.”

“What?”

They wasted no time, answered no questions, but surrounded him, a ring of five Alphas against whom he would be a fool to put up a fight. His wrists were cuffed in iron, not the dainty steel bracelets reserved for Betas and Omegas, and not only his wrists but his ankles as well, and a steel contraption called a muzzle across his nose and mouth, preventing him from smelling, from speaking, or from biting. And they escorted him away.

xXx

They left him overnight in holding, all binds and gags in place, because no one could be bothered to process or interrogate him until morning. Technically, this wasn’t legal, but the system hated an Omega abuser, alleged or otherwise. Still, the hours alone gave Sherlock plenty of time to recall what had happened, and to consider his way forward.

Dr. Jacqui Stapleton had drugged him. A tranquilizer. Why? When? He had scoffed at her claim that the only way to swap John for John was for John to die. Preposterous. Oh, but then, what had he said to that?

“John probably wouldn’t be opposed. He hates it here.”

He had meant it flippantly, while at the same time wondering if there was a kernel of truth in his words. Was John desperate enough that he would risk death to escape this reality? Sherlock didn’t think so. And he would fight tooth and nail to stop him from trying anything rash.

But when Dr. Stapleton learned about the second attack that had landed John in hospital, she concluded what Mycroft had suggested after the first: that Sherlock was doing an inadequate job of protecting his evidently suicidal Omega. In Sherlock’s hands, John was going to get himself killed. It was shortly after that, when Sherlock’s guard was down and he assumed she was on her way out the door, that she had produced the syringe with enough tranquilizer to fell three full Alphas. He caught sight of it only briefly, in the mirror. Next moment, he was crashing to the floor.

“All right there, Mr. Holmes, let’s have a chat.”

They sat him at the interrogation table, in the interrogation room, with the interrogator. Though they took off the muzzle and ankle chains, they left the iron cuffs.

“Where’s John?” he asked the moment he had use of his mouth again. They set water before him, but he ignored it. “I want to talk to him.”

The unsmiling detective inspector, a Beta-Y named Dimmock, sat across from him and glowered. “You don’t get to make demands. And we’re the ones asking the questions. We take Omega abuse very seriously in the Omega Crimes Division.”

“I am not an Omega abuser. Anyone will tell you.”

“An Omega did.”

Inspector Dimmock pulled out a sheet of paper in a plastic sleeve and slid it across the table.

“How do you answer that, Mr. Holmes?”
Sherlock’s eyes fell to a short, typed letter, and read:

To the Metropolitan Police, Omega Crimes Division:

My name is John Watson. I didn’t know if I could write this letter. I’ve tried so many times and lost courage, but I am at my wits end, and I don’t know what else to do.

Though it is the hardest thing I’ve ever done, I have to do it. I am leaving my Alpha. I don’t think I have a choice. He frightens me. I’m afraid of what he will do to me. When he gets angry, he hits me. When he’s bored, he torments me. When he’s high, he Compels me to hurt myself. If I stay, I think he’ll kill me.

I’ve gone into hiding with someone I trust, at least until after the dog fight. If the situation is not then resolved, I call upon the help of Omega Services to relocate me permanently, keep me safe, and sever the bond. Please help me.

Sincerely,

John Watson
221B Baker Street
London

When Sherlock reached the end of the letter, he was so beside himself that he started laughing.

“Think this is funny, do you, Mr. Holmes? Scaring your Omega so badly he’s gone into hiding?”

Sherlock shook his head. “You idiots. John didn’t write this!”

“Oh course, we expect you would deny it—”

“Open your eyes! That”—he jabbed a finger at the bottom of the letter—“is not his signature. Compare it to anything in the flat! It’s not even a good fake. For one, it was written by an Alpha-X! It’s plain as day. And a right-handed one at that. See the angle here? The pressure points in the dips? Aren’t you people experts? John is left-handed. Left-handed people don’t write like that.”

Sherlock threw himself back into his seat, perturbed. Then he suddenly slammed a fist on the table, making Inspector Dimmock jump. “My Omega is missing! Kidnapped! And you’ve got me locked up in here on false charges, when I should be out there looking for him!”

“All right, he’s getting violent,” said Dimmock, looking pale and trying not to show how intimidated he was. “Get him back into holding until he calms down.”

“Her name is Stapleton! Jacqui Stapleton! She tranq’d me and abducted John from the hospital! She’s the one who wrote the note! He’s in danger! Why aren’t you looking for him!”

The officers pulled him to his feet, then through the door and out of the room. They were taking him back to a holding cell until he could be officially charged, then arraigned, then taken to court. He knew how these things worked. Even when it was proven that he hadn't penned the note and that John had been taken against his will, the paperwork alone would slow his release.

Unacceptable.

He had an obligation, not to the cops or the system or the law of the land, but to John, first and foremost. Biological or not, he would honor that. In fact, the more he thought about it (and Sherlock could think an awful lot in the space of about two seconds), the more he realized that, for him and John, biology no longer had much to do with it at all. They could both be Betas, and he
would feel the same.

And that’s why, at the earliest, most opportune moment during his short transfer from the interrogation room to the holding cell, Sherlock decked the Alpha to his left and drove him to the ground, disarmed the Alpha to his right in three swift moves (iron cuffs be damned!), and turned the gun on the other three officers in the hallway.

“Hands in the air!” he cried. “And face the other way.” When they hesitated, he added, “I’ll give you to the count of one before I start popping off rounds and shattering kneecaps!”

He leveled the gun at the knees of a Beta.

They twirled like ballerinas.

And that was how Sherlock became a fugitive.

xXx

He went to Exeter because he believed that Dr. Stapleton had taken John to Exeter. But when he arrived at her house, it was empty. The office was closed. The lab was deserted.

So he did what any good detective would do, and started looking for clues.

He started by ransacking her paper files, then rummaging through her bins, then hacking into her computer, collecting data in his head and organizing it into neat little rows of pertinent and not-evidently-pertinent-but-you-never-know. And it was while combing through her emails regarding correspondences with the Western Americans and New Russians and Japanese that she had mentioned, that he came across a sent but never answered email to the elusive Serebryakov, metaphysicist extraordinaire:

To Dr Serebryakov:

It is imperative that I speak to you regarding your theories of mind displacement relating to the infinite-dimensional matrices acting on quantum states. Please contact me at the following number at your earliest convenience.

Signed,
Dr Jacqui Stapleton

Her number was included at the bottom of the email.

Would it be so simple, just to . . . call her up?

Sherlock was without his own mobile (it had been confiscated during his booking), but there was a landline at his elbow. He started to punch in the number on the screen when he realized that it was the very same number printed out on the phone. She had asked the metaphysicist to call her here. That wouldn’t be useful at all.

Unless . . .

Well, what if he hadn’t emailed back, but had called? What if she had mentioned John? What if she had discussed what she intended to do with him, or where she would do it, or some other information that would give Sherlock a clue as to how to find his Omega? Sherlock didn’t have the New Russian’s phone number. But suppose his was the last call to come to the lab? Maybe it was that phone call—and this was a mad guess, but was it so far-fetched?—that had prompted Dr.
Stapleton to rush to London and find out who had been displaced: Sherlock or John? If that were true, then it was imperative that Sherlock speak with Dr. Serebryakov immediately.

He picked the phone up from the cradle and punched in a code to dial the last incoming call. Listening to the dial tone, he knew it was an international number. He held his breath, not daring to hope.

After six rings, he was about to call it a loss, when there was a soft click. A pause. A breath. Then a gruff voice saying, “Zdravstvuyte?”

Fortunately, Sherlock spoke Russian, and the rest of the conversation proceeded in the foreign tongue:

“Dr. Serebryakov, I presume?”

“Yes. Who is this?”

“My name is Sherlock Holmes. I am a . . . colleague of Dr. Jacqui Stapleton. It is my understanding that you and she recently spoke concerning”—he searched his Russian vocabulary for the proper lexical terms—“alternate universes. Mind . . . exchanges.”

“Yes,” said the voice on the other line, sounding curious. “I already told her, I haven’t done work in that field in almost two decades. What is this about?”

“Just some, erm, follow-up questions, if you don’t mind.”

Despite his initial confusion and reluctance to engage, Dr. Serebryakov, once he got going, was a faucet that wouldn’t turn off. Twenty years before, he had given up his work on metaphysical displacement when no one in the scientific community would give him the time of day. But suddenly, there seemed to be an inexplicable resurgence of interest in his work, and his excitement was reignited. He talked so much and so fast that Sherlock did something he hadn’t done since uni: he took notes.

Forty-five minutes later, as the conversation was winding down, Sherlock said, “So three ingredients. Velocity, sudden transference of energy . . .”

“To counteract the prolonged state of inertia, yes.”

“. . . and space-time coordination.”

“Synchronicity, if you prefer.”

“And those criteria would, theoretically, work?”

“Theoretically. The mathematics is sound. But if one criterion is not carefully accounted for, then failure is inevitable.”

“Of course. Thank you, Dr. Serebryakov.”

“Always a pleasure to discuss my work. Call me anytime. Dr. Stapleton is lucky to have such a bright assistant in you. Tell her I would be happy to accept her invitation to discuss these theories further at her estate.”

“Her . . . estate.”

“In Chelmsford. The old family home? She did mention it. The family sold it to an experimental
teaching hospital sometime midcentury, but it went broke and she bought it back. She was telling
me all about her father’s chemistry lab and state-of-the-art equipment that was just sitting there,
collecting dust.”

“Chelmsford. Yes. Of course. That estate. I’ll be sure to tell her.”

“Good day, Mr. Holmes.”

“And to you, sir.”

They hung up. Sherlock stared at his notes, and his ears rang with Chelmsford.

xXx

It was night, and the cab dropped him off somewhere not far outside of Chelmsford on a country
road, just before a tall iron gate leading to a Jacobethan-style house of brick. A quick survey of the
gate, fence, and grounds revealed a single surveillance camera, a remnant of 1980s security, and
easily dismantled. Hopping the fence was just as easy, and he was halfway across the grounds
when he stopped short. He had just smelled it:

Another Alpha had passed this way, not long ago. Not Dr. Stapleton, he would have recognized it.
Someone he’d never met. But there . . . he took a few steps into the trees. There she was, the
Alpha-X scent. A few days old, but Sherlock’s senses were very sharp. Yes, it was definitely her,
and she was definitely here. Another dozen paces, and—he inhaled deeply—John. The trace of him
was so faint, days old, but it registered for Sherlock like the ringing of a bell. He was here. And
captive.

A growl began to build deep in Sherlock’s chest, which had begun to swell. He stalked
purposefully toward the house, hoping he would meet Dr. Stapleton on the way.

xXx

He did not.

Breaking in was easy. The house was locked, but a window pried open on the ground floor without
much resistance. Once inside, he left the lights off and followed his nose. John’s scent was
everywhere. He just had to follow the freshest trail.

The trail led him up a grand staircase, down a long hall, and around several corners, growing more
and more potent with each step. Sherlock’s insides twisted with the urgency of his hunt, his
mounting desperation to find his Omega, and get him far, far away from his captors. Mixed with
John’s scent, the unmistakable Dr. Stapleton, and the other Alpha he had smelled out on the
grounds. If they had marked him . . . if they had hurt him, in any way . . . His fingers curled into
claws, and he had barely enough control to keep himself from snarling.

His feet stopped directly before a closed door.

Sherlock rested his head against the hard wood, and breathed. This was it. John was behind this
door. And—he breathed again—Dr. Stapleton was not.

He grasped the handle, but the door was locked. He huffed. No damn door was going to keep them
apart. Clamping his powerful hand around the handle once more, he twisted it with all his might
until something snapped, something twanged, something crunched, and the lock was busted. He
threw the door open.
If his nose hadn’t been telling him differently, he would have thought he’d busted into the room of a child. Despite the dark, he could make out the bright yellows, friendly blues, and happy reds of the wall paint, curtains, and woven rugs. But in the twin bed in the center of the room, curled up in a fluffy duvet, was John. And John, upon hearing someone storm into his room, flinched and curled tighter into himself, drawing the duvet up around his head as though he could hide himself.

Sherlock waited. He quelled the desire to rush to John’s side, gather him up in his arms, scent him six ways to Sunday, and rush him out the door. It would be best if John recognized him, first. But John must have been holding his breath, because seconds passed, and he didn’t respond to Sherlock’s scent.

Then Sherlock smelled something else, something about John’s scent, something . . . wrong. It was sharp in his nose, making him twitch, making his skin crawl and his blood boil and his Alpha nature take over any reasonable or tolerant course of action. He strode across the room, seized the duvet, and jerked it aside. John gasped and scrambled up the bed, nevertheless somehow managing to maintain himself in a defensive little ball that shielded his head with his arms. Sherlock fell on him, then, quite unable to stop himself. He swept John into his arms and crushed him tightly to his chest. His nose pressed firmly into the side of John’s neck where the scent glands were the most pronounced, and he smelled her there. He growled.

“What’s going on?”

John’s voice was high-pitched, strained, warbling.

He lifted his head from John’s neck. John’s eyes were wide with shock, and even in the dark, by the light of the moon pushing through the window, Sherlock could see the pale blue gaze struggling through the haze of sleep—or something else—as he registered the sight of his Alpha.

“Hey,” said John, a hand slowly reaching for Sherlock’s face. “I . . . know . . . you . . .”

In his mind’s eye, like standing outside of himself, Sherlock could see it happening—John touching his cheek, guiding him closer, their mouths would touch, their lips would part, it would be a reunion like they’d never had, and this would be what John had meant about kissing and intimacy, he was going to show Sherlock exactly what he’d been missing, and Sherlock realized he wanted it, he wanted to find out, he wanted to put his mouth on John’s mouth, and—

John’s hand went from a cupped shape to a single extended digit. He tapped Sherlock on the tip of his nose and said, “Boop!”

Sherlock pulled back, bewildered. “Excuse me?”

John started giggling.

“You look just like my Sherlock,” said John, aiming a finger at his nose again. Sherlock dodged.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Same eyes. Same cheekbones. Same floofy hair.” John twirled a finger into Sherlock’s curls, still giggling.

“I am Sherlock.”

John shook his head. “My Sherlock.” He sighed, almost dreamily. “Do you think he thinks about
me at all, Sham Sherlock?” He snorted. “Sham Sherlock. Sham-lock. Shamrock. You’re a very handsome leprechaun, Shamrock.” He tee-heed some more and continued fluffing Sherlock’s hair.

“Oh my God, are you drunk?”

“High.” He chortled in his nose. “Hi! Hi!”

“Hi?”

“Happy drug.”

“She drugged you?”

“Slapped me. Stuck me. Drugged me. All the things.”


“You made that last one up,” John laughed, and Sherlock supposed there might be such drugs that one world had and the other did not. “Dunno what it was. The doc said I was too depressing. But it didn’t fix it. I wasn’t really happy until just now.” He pinched Sherlock’s cheeks. “You’re my happy.”

“That’s it, I’m getting you out of here.”

“Happy happy happy.”

John’s arms draped around Sherlock’s neck; so Sherlock used that to his advantage to pull him upright and out of the bed. But John’s legs were uncooperative. He didn’t seem to have the strength—or will—to stand on under his own power. After some awkward shuffling, hefting, drooping, and slipping, Sherlock exited the bedroom wearing John like a cape.

“You smell terrible,” Sherlock griped, holding onto John’s wrists to keep him from sliding down his back and onto the floor.

“Not my fault,” said John. His chin was resting on Sherlock’s shoulder like the second head of a two-headed monster. “She’s crawling inside of me, like termites through the wooden bones of an old house.”

“You really are a writer, aren’t you?”

“I feel her. Like poison. Caustic.” Then he started nibbling one of Sherlock’s ears.

“Cut it out.”

“You taste good.” His tongue flicked the lobe back and forth between tiny, contained, bursting giggles.

“You’re not yourself, John.”

John tittered. “Just catching on, are you?”

“I mean, either way, you’re not you.”

John began to hum I’m a Little Teapot.

“That’s it, I can’t take this anymore. You smell toxic, and it’s affecting more than just your
hormones.”

At the end of the hallway, just before the stairs leading down to the first floor, Sherlock spotted a door, which turned out to be a broom closet. *This will do*, he thought. And driven by the need to set things right with his Omega, to purge the intruder Alpha from his bond-mate, he shoved John inside.

“Hey!”

“Shut up.”

“At least buy me dinner.”

A closet wasn’t ideal. Given the potency of the interfering scent, this might take some time, and there wasn’t a lot of space to get comfortable. But also given that they were, technically, on the run and would need to be furtive (and if not, combative), he needed John to be of sound mind and able body—he needed the John Watson that had some experience with this sort of thing. So a twitterpated, addlepated, scent-intoxicated version was no good. No good at all.

In the dark closet, he crowded in, pushing John up against the wall. He felt the small body beneath his tense up, and John’s giggle added a note of anxiety. “Oh, do we have to do this again?” He was trembling a little.

“Shh. You want to be rid of her, right?”

“More than anything.”

“I’ll be gentle.”

“M’kay.”

True to his word, Sherlock gently pulled John’s head to the right and opened his shirt collar wider to expose the bond mark between his neck and shoulder. Then Sherlock dipped his head. He softly scraped his teeth against the skin—John’s breathing hitched—as he searched for the mark. When he found it, he began to press his teeth down.

John shoved him back and slapped him hard across the face.

Sherlock started. “The hell!”

“Sorry!”

“Don’t be so jumpy!”

He made a second attempt. And for the second time, John pushed back and slapped him again.

“Sorry!” John cried.

“I’m trying to help!”

“I know! But she’s . . . making me!”

Sherlock took John’s head, trying to make out his expression in the dark. “What do you mean? She’s *Compelling* you? She can’t do that!”

“I told you, she’s *in me* now. She said, *Don’t let anyone bite you but me.* She meant Byron, I think,
but she *meant* it, you know?”

“When?”

“Hours ago, now. Last injection.”

“Injection?”

“Stabby stabby.” John sighed, tiredly, his head falling back against the wall. But his hands were on Sherlock’s upper arms, kneading the flesh. When he discovered the muscle there, his eyebrows lifted, impressed.

“She injected her scent,” said Sherlock, cottoning on. His revulsion was escalating dangerously. “But she didn’t bite you?”

“No bitey.” John’s fingers searched for his face in the dark. “She’s waiting for you to die.” Suddenly, he laughed again. “If that happens, I’ll just kill myself.” He continued laughing.

Sherlock’s gut wrenched. “Don’t. I can fix this. John. Let me fix this.”

“You can try.”

“This will be unpleasant. I may have to be . . . forceful.”

“I know.”

“But it has to be done.”

“Got it.”

“I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

“Just do it already.”

Sherlock crowded in again, bracketing John with his body as best he could to prevent escape. John didn’t like it. Sherlock didn’t either, but that was quite beside the point. He seized John’s wrists, one in each hand, and raised them above his head, pinning them to the wall so John couldn’t hit him. And for the third time, he lowered his mouth.

John couldn’t help himself. Compelled to resist, he resisted. It was just squirming at first, but when Sherlock’s teeth sank into the bond mark, he gasped and started kicking, bucking, twisting his body. Sherlock pressed in further. Locking the wrists together in one hand, he used his other to cover John’s mouth and keep him from crying out, and utterly laid his body against John’s to still him.

Trapped between wall and Alpha, John screamed into his hand. But there was nothing Sherlock could do. If he broke it off, Dr. Stapleton would still be inside of John, having her way with him. If he rushed it, he might do unintended damage in the exchange of scent hormones and the integrity of the bond mark, which he had been so careful with creating. This was a delicate process, and an intimate one. It shouldn’t have to be like this. Damn that Alpha-X!

The minutes passed, and both kept at it: Sherlock, purging the unwelcome scent and fortifying his own, and John, putting up a good fight to shake him off, and he didn’t seem to be tiring, which likely meant he would exhaust himself in the end. The screams, at least, were fading to whimpers, suggesting that as Dr. Stapleton’s scent became weaker, so too did the force of her Compelling.
Still, Sherlock didn’t remove his hand, even though it was dripping with John’s spit.

Sherlock pulled and pulled, and then gave and gave. John’s scent flowed into him, and his flowed into John, and somewhere in the mixture, the intruding scent began to dissipate. The drug was dispersed, lessening in John’s system and being shared in Sherlock’s, so that he began to feel a muted sense of euphoria himself. Was that the drug? Or something else?

Slowly, slowly. Time began to melt. And as it did, something else happened. The closet grew quiet. John grew stiller. Sherlock was barely aware of what they did next. But slowly, he removed his hand from John’s mouth and curled it around his head instead, guiding it to rest on his shoulder as he continued his ministrations; and just as slowly, John pulled his hands from Sherlock’s loosened grasp, sliding them down to clutch Sherlock’s neck and shoulders, an invitation to keep working on the bond mark. They were holding each other, closer, closer.

The cleansing was finished. Order was restored. Sherlock gave his bond mark one last salving lick, then removed his mouth. But the embrace continued. Now that he had John back, now that the danger had passed, the weight of what might have transpired struck Sherlock to the core. He might have lost John completely. And that horrible thought, so stark and raw, sharpened the emptiness of his other loss, his own dear John, and he trembled at how much he missed him, at how terribly he hurt deep inside. The fear that he would never see him again was sharper than a razor. He crushed John to his breast and fought hard to keep from gasping with pain.

And John wasn’t letting go. He was latched on like a limpet, face buried in the crook of Sherlock’s neck and arms locked around him. His breathing was long and labored, like he’d just run a mile and was trying to catch his breath. He was hot, perspiring, and an occasional shudder crawled up his spine and shook them both. But his grip was unbreakable.

“Where the hell were you?” John asked tremulously into his skin.


Even though John pulled back to look into Sherlock’s face, it was too dark in the closet to see him properly. So instead, he reached to find him. Sherlock felt John’s fingertips against his cheek. “What?”

Sherlock gently stroked the line of John’s jaw with a thumb. Huskily, he said, “Never mind. It was you who was in danger. You who I was worried about. I thought I’d lose my mind.”

He heard John’s hard swallow. A thumb touched his bottom lip, and Sherlock’s heart skipped a beat, like missing a step in the dark.

“Sherlock, I . . .” John started, breathless. “We have to . . . we can’t . . .”

“I know,” said Sherlock, but oh, how he hated saying it, because he wanted to so badly. So, so badly. This John and his John were getting all confused in his head, fuzzy with desire, and would it be so bad, so wrong, if just for this moment, both of them could forget that they belonged to different worlds. Just . . . one . . . moment? With the softest nuzzle, he let his nose trace John’s cheek, and breathed.

“I mean,” said John, placing a hand on Sherlock’s chest and pushing back gently, “we can’t leave here. Not yet.”

Some of the haze dissipated. “I hope you mean this closet.”

“I mean this house. Listen. Dr. Stapleton’s research—”
“Cock and bull, that’s what it is.”

“No, Sherlock, listen. She’s spent the last however many days running all sorts of, erm, experiments. She has a ton of information on me! Brain scans, blood samples, and I’m pretty sure I gave a wallop testimonial to her digital recorder.”

Sherlock’s brow furrowed, concerned, as it dawned on him what John was saying. Even if John switched back to his own world and his John returned to this one, Dr. Stapleton’s obsession would not be ended, not with the kind of evidence she had acquired. He would challenge her, of course, and win, but others might take up her work. The existence of her work and any evidence she had acquired needed to be destroyed, or no John would be safe.

John held Sherlock’s head in both hands to make sure he was paying attention.

“We have to destroy the lab.”

xXx

John had wanted to pluck the veins from his arms, one by one, like pulling hair from the drain, just to get rid of it, to get rid of her.

Fortunately, such drastic measures hadn’t been necessary. Sherlock had come at last.

For hours (days), however, he had existed in fear, not so much of the pain but of the Compelling, and of what would become of him if the bonding she designed was successful. He wondered, too, what would happen if it wasn’t. What if he died? What if her attempts to knot him against his will resulted in the poisoning that had nearly been the end of Molly, that had been the end of Charlotte Bernstein? His mind, this body, shutting down together. Would the other John feel it? Would the other John survive? Were they in any way keeping each other alive, even universes apart?

It was not a question he wanted to test.

John and Sherlock navigated the grand old building’s spacious hallways, John leading Sherlock by the hand. It seemed . . . appropriate, linking themselves together like that. When they reached the door to the laboratory, however, Sherlock let go, reached into the back of his trousers, and produced a pistol. John’s eyes widened in surprise.

“ Took it off one of the arresting officers,” he explained simply, passing it over. “As I understand it, you’re a pretty good shot.”

“When I have to be.”

“You may have to be.”

John nodded. Then he pulled open the right side of the double doors, and both men slipped inside. John’s hands got fresh with the wall before he found the switch and illuminated the space. Still hanging on the illuminating boxes were his MRI scans, and he ran to those first, yanking the photographic paper off the wall and briefly attempting to tear them up, but he knew better. He would need scissors for this kind of work.

Meanwhile, Sherlock threw himself into a swivel chair on wheels and rolled to the computer in the corner, bringing it to life.

John next spotted the notebook in which Byron had been recording results. Keeping the scans in hand, he snatched up the notebook, and then a folder full of bloodwork, and another with
transcripts of his interviews. He rifled through a drawer and found the digital recorder, and added it to the pile. Every scrap of paper within sight, whether it had his name on it or not, he considered somehow incriminating, and he gathered it all together and dumped it into a metal bin.

“Password cracked,” he heard Sherlock murmur under his breath, a little cockily. He then cracked his knuckles and started clicking away.

John tore a sheet from the notebook and rolled it up like a straw. He stepped to the lab counter’s Bunsen burner and twisted the valve to release the gas, only then realizing that a striker or match wasn’t readily at hand, and he had no way to light it. Shit shit shit. Had Byron not left his cigarette lighter lying around somewhere? Panicking, he returned to the drawers to rummage, hoping to discover a striker or box of matches or lighter or anything to set the evidence aflame.

“This computer has no internet,” said Sherlock, “no server connection to any other systems. That’s good. That means nothing outgoing. If anything is on here, it’s all right here, and we can destroy it with a quick—”

“I need matches. Do you have matches? A lighter. Something to ignite this shit and send it to a fiery hell?”

“I do love it when you swear,” Sherlock quipped.

“Is that a no?”

Just then, through the door on the opposite side of the room, the jiggling of a knob. Sherlock’s hands froze on the keyboard, and John spun around to face the door. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, Sherlock slowly rising from the stool, transforming in much the same way he had in the park, shoulders squaring, back curving, and fingers curling into claws. Damn, if John didn’t find that sexy as all hell.

But before the door swung open and admitted his captor, John’s eyes fell on the mini refrigerator, and he remembered one more thing that needed to be destroyed.

John yanked open the small fridge door, grabbed the case of glass vials containing Dr. Stapleton’s scent, and held it aloft over his head.

“<<Put that down!>>” Dr. Stapleton bellowed.

Nothing. No instant rush to obey, not even so much as a tingle. A smile slowly spread across John’s lips.

To his right, darkening the doorway, Dr. Stapleton stood like a mad scientist, hair wild and eyes bulging while wearing a white lab coat and pointing an imperious finger at him to put down the vials.

To his left, Sherlock filled the room like the reckoning, curls in disarray and eyes flashing while his black trench coat fluttered and his arm extended toward John as a lifeline, silently beckoning him to come closer, stand behind him, be protected by his true Alpha. John didn’t find that sexy as all hell.

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“John?” Dr. Stapleton’s voice betrayed a note of fear, and her eyes were fixed on Sherlock. “John, <<come here>>. John?”

“You,” said Sherlock, and John shivered at the rumbling bass in his voice, “bitch.”
As Byron’s face appeared behind her, she held out her hand to John. “Come here, baby, I’ll protect you.”

John laughed; Sherlock growled.

“He’s dangerous!” To Sherlock, she returned a growl of her own. “I’m saving him, Mr. Holmes. From you. I know what you mean to do to him, to get your John to come back. But I’m telling you right now, it’ll kill him. I will fight you for him, and the law will be on my side.”

“Oh, believe me,” said Sherlock stalking forward, “there will be a fight. I’m going to make you wish you had never made that call to Dr. Serebryakov.”

She blanched. “What do you mean?”

“I spoke to him today. He gave me some very interesting information.”

“He’ll kill you, John, I see it in his eyes!”

And she started forward, intending to rush to John before Sherlock could reach him. But John dropped the vials to the floor. The glass shattered, the solution ran all over the floor, and John whipped out the pistol and pointed it in her face. “Back! Stay back!”

She came up short and asked breathlessly, “What’s that?”

“Never seen this before, have you: a gun in the hands of an Omega. Or, as I call it, the great equalizer.”

“I mean, where did you get it?”

“A gift.”

“Gift?”

“From someone who both cares about me and trusts me. Now back the fuck off. You. Byron. I know you have a lighter in your pocket. Toss it over. Now.”

John could tell they were both startled by the tone of command in the voice of a lowly Omega.

Byron stood dumb, mouth hanging open with nothing to say.

“How!” John leveled the gun at him, and there was something in his eyes, the steady confidence in his hands, that made them realize he knew exactly what he was doing, and he meant exactly what he threatened. Byron dug into his front pocket, extracted the lighter, and tossed it through the air. John caught it, and without taking his eyes off his targets, tossed it again over his shoulder. He heard Sherlock catch it.

“Light it up, Sherlock.”

He heard Sherlock flicking the lighter on, testing it, as he walked over to the rubbish bin of evidence.

“What are you doing? Light what up?” asked Dr. Stapleton.

“Your ‘life’s work,’ dear doctor,” John taunted.

He watched as her confusion turned to understanding, then shock, then outrage. “No!” she cried,
just as Sherlock set the crumpled paper alight and dropped it in the bin.

When she sprang forward, John fired off a warning shot, intended to terrify her in her tracks, but it wasn’t enough. And Sherlock, seeing her sprinting toward him, crouched, snarled, and launched himself at her. They met in the middle, colliding with a force that sounded like a thunderclap in John’s ears, almost as loud as the explosion from the gun, and they knocked over a stand of flasks and beakers on their inexorable crash to the ground.

Before he could fly to Sherlock’s aid, he saw Byron charging at him, taking advantage of his momentary distraction and spurred on by the confidence that an Omega, gun or no gun, was no match for an Alpha, and he was determined to wrangle him into submission. John felt his adrenaline spike, but his focus was clear, and his hands steady as ever. In two seconds, he was about to be mauled, laid out on the ground, helpless. Before one second had passed, he fired the weapon.

Byron’s right knee ruptured with blood. He collapsed to the lab floor, screaming.

The sound of it startled the fighting Alphas, who feared their Omega had met some terrible violence. Sherlock shot to his feet, breathing hard, three parallel deep scratches trailing across his neck and his shirt ripped at the sleeve. Dr. Stapleton, just behind him, sported a swollen lip and a dislocated shoulder. It had been all of three seconds since their collision.

John was just about to turn the gun on her when her attention was suddenly diverted. The fire in the bin roared yellow, and the smoke billowed black and puffy to the ceiling.

“No!” she cried, howling like a she-wolf. She ignored Sherlock, forgot John, and ran to the bin. And then she did something that was sear itself in John’s memory for the rest of his life. She didn’t even hesitate. She reached into the bin and pulled out the flaming evidence, scorching her hands and causing her to shriek, but she flung it away and went back for more. Desperation filled her eyes until the black smoke obscured them, and through the pain and blood and shrieks, she dug through the blaze to save her treasured evidence, the proof of her greatest discovery.

Sherlock and John stared in horror at her madness. She was flinging fire in every direction, and that’s when John remembered the Bunsen burner. He’d twisted the nozzle, left it on. It was leaking like a faucet.

“Sherlock!” he gasped, pointing his gun. “The gas!”

“Oh fuck no.”

Sherlock didn’t wait another breath, not to see what happened next, and not to ask John’s permission. He sprinted for John, grabbed his arm, swung him around as deftly as a child until John found himself riding his back, and with the speed of a raging bull, he bolted for the door, leaving Dr. Stapleton and Byron behind.

John held on for dear life. They both knew what was coming. It was as inevitable as landing after a fall. “Go go go go go,” John panted frantically in his ear, but there was no need. Sherlock was as self-preserving as an impala with a hungry cheetah on its heels, and before John knew it, they were flying out the door.

And then the air was burning.

They were blown off their feet, ten, twenty feet, landing hard in grass and mud, rolling, as the heat bloomed outward, exploding stone and shattering glass. John face planted before flinging himself
onto his back and watching the fireball rise to the sky. But he didn’t get to stare for long. Sherlock was suddenly on top of him, using his body as a shield as rubble, ash, and sparks rained down on them. All was heat, and energy, and light.

xXx

It was only a matter of time (minutes, hours if they were lucky) before they were discovered. If the cops hadn’t tracked Sherlock to Exeter, an explosion in Chelmsford in the Stapleton Estate was bound to draw attention. They would be apprehended, for sure: Sherlock for his escape and officer assault, and John alongside him for the murders of Dr. Stapleton and her assistant Byron. With the survivors as the only witnesses and accusers, it would take a while to sort out the facts and determine Sherlock had not been lying, but protecting his Omega. After all, Omega protection laws outweighed some of the severest of crimes.

But they didn’t have time to mount a defense and wait for the charges to clear. There was the dog fight, for one, an appointment Sherlock would not miss. But more importantly, they needed to get a message to the other John.

On the train back to London, sitting in a private room, on the same bench, hands clasped between them, they devised their plan. Sherlock laid out all the details he had gathered from Dr. Serebryakov and interpreted them. John repeated them to exactness, rehearsing the proposal he would deliver through the mirror. It scared him, Sherlock’s solution. A part of him didn’t want to suggest it to his counterpart, let alone go through with it. But Dr. Stapleton had said that the treatments of her scent would ignite early heat. If that was true, and if Sherlock's ministrations hadn't counteracted the hormone boost that would send his body craving the knot, then that meant he had only a few days before his cycle started again. He would bear it, if he had to. Knowing what to expect, knowing Sherlock would take care of him, made the thought more tolerable. And if he was entirely honest, a part of him . . . wanted it.

But then he thought of Sherlock, his Sherlock, and he knew what he really wanted was to go home. He trusted this Sherlock’s calculations. It would work. It had to.

In the meantime, he held Sherlock’s hand, and steeled himself.

“I’m going to ask him,” he said softly, “if he wants to come back.”

Sherlock turned his head slowly toward him, concern etched across his brow.

“I just . . . have to ask.”

With a hard swallow, Sherlock nodded. “Of course.”

He didn’t explain why because he himself didn’t fully know. He knew he’d made a right mess of things for the John of this world, and he knew that the other John had started something . . . special . . . with the Sherlock of his. He wanted dearly to return, so dearly he couldn’t think about it for too long without risking losing control of the burning sensation in his chest that threatened to bubble to the surface. But at the same time, he feared to.

Trying to hide their faces from CCTV, they took a cab from the train station to Baker Street, riding in perfect quiet, each man engrossed in his own thoughts until they stood before their own door, looking around warily for cops who might be surveilling the area. They let themselves in.

“I’ll wait down here, watch the street. If we need to get out in a hurry, I’ll signal, give you time to wrap up before the connection breaks. We’ll leave out the fire escape.”
John nodded tensely.

“Anything else you . . . you know. You want me to tell him?”

Sherlock’s chest rose and fell slowly, like he was trying to think of what to say, or how to say it. “Tell him . . . the moment he crosses back, I’ll be there. The very moment.”

John squeezed Sherlock’s arm and nodded. “Got it.” His hand lingered, but when Sherlock moved to place his own hand over John’s, he let go. He started for the stairs, but his foot had only reached the first step when he stopped and turned back around. “Oh. And Sherlock.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“All of it, really.”

“What, finding you?” he asked, like it was a ridiculous thing to be grateful for.

John shook his head. “Yes, of course. But, well. Just all of it.”

And he turned back to ascend the steps, and meet himself on the other side of the glass.
When Sherlock returned the next morning, looking like he had faced off with a train and lost, John was waiting for him at the kitchen table, coffee at the ready.

For a while, they just stared at one another. John wanted to rise and go to him, but he didn’t think his attempts at comfort beyond the morning joe would be welcome. Sherlock was a Jenga tower about to fall, holding himself together as a bracing measure for what John had to tell him. But when John wasn’t instantly forthcoming, Sherlock (fearfully?) broke his silence to ask.

“Did you . . . did it work?” His voice was gruff. A-cigarette-every-twenty-minutes-all-night-long kind of gruff.

“Yes,” said John.

Sherlock blinked his glassy eyes. “Right. Um. Give me a moment.”

And he disappeared into the back. John listened to the water run in the bathroom for thirty seconds, then to silence for another sixty. At last, Sherlock rejoined him, face scrubbed bright and just the tips of the curls framing his brow beaded with water droplets. He sat across from John, the perfect visage of composure, and sipped from his coffee.

“Let’s hear it then.”

John’s notes were already at his elbow. But because he had reviewed them again and again and again in an effort to understand perfectly, he no longer needed to consult them.

“We have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Sherlock talked to a New Russian metaphysicist. And he thinks he’s solved the problem of how to switch us back.”

“He thinks?” Sherlock ran both hands down his face, exhaling loudly. “All right. What’s his solution?”

“So here’s the thing. The metaphysical displacement itself is an extremely rare occurrence for cognizant parallels, mathematically. And for it to happen twice to reverse the effect is nearly impossible—without coordination. But we discovered the mirror, didn’t we? That mirror allows us to coordinate.”


“For it to work, we need three ingredients,” said John, ignoring the sleep-deprivation-inspired cynicism. “And each is essential. First, the one we know about already, is synchronicity. Space-time coordination, he says.”

“Right.”

“The second, velocity.”

“Magnitude and direction,” Sherlock said.
“Exactly. And it has to match more or less perfectly.”

“I thought you told me that your ‘Omega’ body is smaller than this one.’

“It is. In some, erm, significant ways. So maybe that’s why it wasn’t our bodies that swapped. It was our minds.”

“Oh, right.” At last, despite himself, Sherlock smiled. “See? I told you. You’re of equal mindpower, the pair of you.”

John did realize it. And he blushed with happiness to be equated with a version of himself he so admired. He carried on. “So when we were walking on that bridge, exact same magnitude, exact same direction, perfectly coordinated, conditions were perfect for the swap.”

“That’s why the first displacement occurred in the first place,” Sherlock recapped.

“Right. But to switch back, it’s not enough that we walk the same bridge again at the same time.”

“Why not?”

“John told me that he recently had some MRIs taken of his brain. I don’t understand everything he said about it, but basically, the scans show patterns very similar to a brain in sleep mode. He bets scans of my brain would reveal the same thing.”

“What are you saying, that your brain thinks it’s asleep?”

“Sort of?”

“Like what Chris Melas said about dream theory? A mind traveling to other dimensions while asleep?”

John shrugged. “Maybe there’s an element of truth to that. That’s how Alice got back, right? In the story? She . . . woke up.”

“Right . . . So how do we do that? Wake you up?”

“That’s where the third ingredient comes into play. John called it ‘energy transference.’ Something to jolt you awake.”

“Like lightning?”

“Can’t coordinate that, though, can we? Besides, too dangerous.”

Sherlock sighed. He was clearly weary, and rubbed his temples where apparently a headache was pounding. “So. What brilliant plan did my counterpart come up with to account for synchronicity, velocity, and energy transference?”

John shifted nervously. His fingers tapped his coffee mug in agitation. The proposal was . . . frightening, to say the least.

“The Waterloo Bridge,” he said at last. “Same place it happened before.”

Sherlock furrowed his brow, confused. “You just said: We can’t coordinate a lightning strike.”

“Of course not. But if we coordinate a fall . . .”
Sherlock’s mug slammed down on the table. “Stop right there.”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? John explained it: all objects fall at exactly the same speed—”

“The acceleration of gravity, yes, I’m familiar with the physics. All objects, regardless of mass, free fall at a rate of 9.8 meters per second, per second. I get that. But what you’re suggesting is that you both throw yourselves off of a bridge?”

“John said the resulting impact would provide the required jolt—”

“No. Let’s continue the physics lesson, shall we? You’re not falling into a pile of feathers. These aren’t disparate molecules tapping into one another, giggling, and shyly backing away to give each other room. Water molecules are highly cohesive. Hydrogen will bond to the oxygen atoms of other molecules, creating as many as four bonds per atom, and those bonds are tight. You think water is soft? Fragile? It’s dense, and when you crash into it, it becomes a wall. Waterloo Bridge is thirty-five feet above the water at high tide. ‘So what, Sherlock,’ you say, ‘that’s not very high at all!’ Try again. At thirty-five feet, roughly ten meters, and taking into account your mass at approximately 63 kilograms, you’re slamming into the water after only 1.43 seconds going at a speed of 50.4 kilometers an hour. Your energy at impact is 6,174 joules. Can you picture it, John? What does a car look like slamming into a brick wall at 50 kilometers an hour? ‘But Sherlock,’ you say, ‘people survive car crashes all the time!’ Shall we talk next about blunt force trauma? Do you know the effects of sudden compression of the abdomen when it hits an unyielding surface? Do you have any idea what it feels like to be kicked in the stomach, because that doesn’t even begin to cover it. Broken ribs that tear through your spleen or puncture your lung. Get ready for a ruptured liver and a spine snapped like a stalk of celery. And even if your neck remains intact, the shock waves radiating through your abdominal cavity spike your blood pressure, pushing massive volumes of blood through your major vessels until your brain hemorrhages. ‘But Sherlock,’ you continue to protest. ‘I’m a really good swimmer!’ Ha! If you’re lucky enough to survive all of that, you can’t combat both the depth to which you sink and the swift current of the Thames that will sweep you far down the river until your bloated body washes up on one of the banks or is spit into the North Sea. So tell me, John Watson, what good is swapping back if your mind arrives in a corpse?”

Sherlock shot him a pained look. The anger, unsustainable, was melting slowly from his weary eyes. “This is your Sherlock’s plan? To kill you outright? Brilliant. Just brilliant. So he’s an idiot after all. It’s not happening.” He ran a clawed hand through his curls, but his fingers got caught and tugged. He let out a grunt of frustration and anger.

John stared down at his coffee, which felt like it had suddenly gone cold. Last night, the prospect of jumping off the Waterloo Bridge had sounded precarious and frightening, but also a sure-fire way of sending him home. All morning, he had been talking himself up, convincing himself he was brave enough to take the plunge, and a strong enough swimmer to survive it. Besides, the other John had told him: Sherlock would be there. If something went awry, he could rely on that. He just hadn’t considered how many ways things could go so wrong.

But then, why would Sherlock and John have devised such a plan, if they weren’t confident in its success?

“If this is the only thing that will bring your John home,” he said in a small, hopeful voice, “isn’t it worth a shot?”

Sherlock shot him a pained look. The anger, unsustainable, was melting slowly from his weary eyes. “Look.” Seeming to regret his outburst, he sank back into the chair. “I know you want to go home. And of course I want him back. If I never—” His voice caught. A few seconds passed
before he could continue. “If I never see John again . . . Just the thought makes me want to throw myself off a bridge. He’s . . . my life. But I can’t expect him to throw his own life away on the chance something like that will work. And they have no right to ask that of you, either. You deserve better. I would rather know John’s alive, in another world I can never reach, than dead in this one.”

Letting out a shaky breath, Sherlock sat back and closed his eyes. “Look. There’s no cause to rush this. We know the formula. We can brainstorm other solutions. They didn’t propose a time and day, did they?”

John lifted his eyes to Sherlock, a Sherlock who could not sense when he was lying because he had no scent to give himself away and no seven-years’ bond to tickle in Sherlock’s glands that something was amiss with his bond-mate. He didn’t want to do it. He simply had no choice.

“No,” he said.

“Then you’ll talk to him again. Tonight. You’ll tell him, won’t you, that we can think of something else.” Sherlock attempted a smile that was brave and reassuring, and failed at both.

“I’ll tell him.”

xXx

In a neighboring universe, something was happening that neither Sherlock nor John expected. What’s more, it was all over the news.

“Free Omega John! Free Omega John!”

“Can’t say I’m digging the moniker,” John grumbled under his breath, beneath the moustache.

They stood in a crowded pub at midday. Outside the window flowed a steady stream of Londoners on their way to join the demonstrations at Marble Arch, some carrying homemade signs for picketing, others sporting t-shirts with the words Set John Free! and Omega Rights Are Human Rights! and ALPHAS SUCK! emblazoned in permanent black marker or otherwise silver-and-pink glitter across the chest. Inside, the mounted television sets continued the BBC report.

“What you hear behind me is the rallying cry of an Omega rights movement that seems to have sprung up overnight,” said the Beta reporter into the camera. “And it’s not just Nothing Knotters, as you might expect. They’re everyone, from everywhere, Alpha, Beta, and Omega alike, all spurred on by the question, ‘What happened to Omega John Watson?’”

The story cut to a shot of St. Margaret’s Omega Hospital. “It was from here that John disappeared, five days ago, in the middle of the night. No one—not the doctors or nurses or security officers—saw him go. Hours later, the police received a strange note, purportedly written by John himself.”

While the reporter read highlights from the letter, Sherlock, the bill of his baseball cap pulled down so low it was a wonder he could even see, leaned close to John and said, “The barman’s getting suspicious. Keeps eying you, wondering why you’re not drinking.”

“You just said, if we get too close, he’ll smell me.”

John was standing with a Coke Sherlock had ordered him at the bar, just part of the attempt to blend in. There were a couple of other Omegas in the pub, keeping close to their Alphas, so an Omega scent wasn’t unexpected. Still, he was trying to pass for Beta. That explained the fake moustache—facial hair being socially unbecoming an Omega—and glass of Coca-Cola the
unobservant (which Sherlock presumed they all were) were meant to mistake for beer. They wanted information without being spotted, and constantly being on the move, awaiting the scheduled dog fight the next day, Sherlock decided it was easiest to get lost in a crowd. And a crowd next to a TV meant a pub.

“He thinks he recognizes you. He does. From the telly. Just. Turn this way. Casually.”

They shifted weight, and Sherlock managed to place himself in the barman’s line of sight, effectively hiding John in his shadow. The report continued.

“It was Watson’s sister, Beta Harry Watson, who spotted the letter as a forgery.”

Sherlock snorted.

Suddenly, Harry Watson appeared on screen, speaking heatedly into a microphone held in front of her face. “I told those bastards, John didn’t write that! I know my brother better than anyone, save his Alpha, and believe me, if he had to escape and hide out somewhere, he would have come to me. That’s a fact. And the fact that he didn’t means he’s in trouble, and the fact that his Alpha—whose job it is to protect him and who’s a bloody detective, for chrissakes—was arrested for endangering an Omega is an outrage. I’m glad Sherlock got away from those pigs, because it’s Sherlock who will bring my John home.”

“Oh. She likes you!” said John, surprised.

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow at him. “I’ve always been a favorite of hers,” he said, like it was ridiculous to presume otherwise.

The report continued: “After learning of her brother’s disappearance, Harry Watson took to social media, where the story caught the eye of prominent human rights blogger, Kitty Riley.”

“Ha!” John exclaimed. Then he quickly ducked his head and pretended to rub at a spot on his trousers.

An attractive ginger—a Beta-X, John detected—next appeared on screen. “I recognized the name right away. He’d been in the news already as having been attacked twice by Alpha packs within the span of just a couple of weeks. And I thought to myself, how does this happen? For one poor bloke to be the target of so much violence? It was a foolish question. Why? Because this kind of thing doesn’t just happen, and it’s not just one poor bloke. It’s thousands. All across Britain, our Omega brothers and sisters are being targeted every single day because they smelled a certain way, because they walked alone in a certain place, because they were easy pickin’s for untamed Alphas who feel entitled to an Omega of their own but were never chosen. And who has allowed that to happen? We Betas have long sat on the sidelines. It’s an Alpha-Omega problem, we say. It’s just biology, we say. There are already laws out there to protect Omegas, we say. Yeah? Look how well that’s worked out for John Watson.”

“Advocates for Omega rights have been lobbying for legislative reforms for years,” came the voice over, “but some experts say, it’s not enough.”

“You can’t dismiss the biological factors.”

John gasped and squeezed Sherlock’s arm. “That’s Mike! Mike Stamford!”

“Who?”

“A doctor friend I know from . . . back home. I met him in the hospital here, and . . .” He quieted,
“Mother Nature designed Alphas and Omegas to mate, and everything from scents to heats facilitates that. However, if we can engineer scent inhibitors for Alphas, as a protective measure, shouldn’t we be able to do something for Omegas? Something that gives them power over their own heats . . . ?”

John listened in astonishment to a boiled down, heavily edited recap of the very conversation he’d had with Mike after the attack on Molly. He had thought every word had simply gone in one ear and out the other. But apparently not. Here Dr. Stamford was, suggesting to all of Britain that perhaps there was a reason to introduce such a thing as a heat suppressant into the Omega world.

The field reporter was back. “In just a few short days, John Watson has become a rallying point, a symbol of Omegas everywhere. So when the people chant, Free Omega John!, what they’re really saying, is Free Omegas Everywhere from the societal conditions that set them up to be targets in the first place.”

The program went to commercial. John felt Sherlock nudge him with his hip.

“Way to turn my world upside down. You’ve been here, what? Less than a month?”

He glanced up. Beneath the shadow of the baseball cap, Sherlock winked at him.

xXx

John took a deep breath to calm the butterflies in his stomach. Then he reached for the bell.

He chided himself for the pounding heart. It wasn’t right he should be so nervous, like he had no business being there. But as the seconds ticked by and stretched over a minute in silence, John seriously considered just high-tailing it out of there and telling himself, Well, I tried. He’d leave the “peace offerings” on the door, maybe. Or in the rubbish bins around the corner. Yeah, maybe he’d just—

On the other side of the door, two stomping feet made their way closer. He swallowed and readied himself.

Harry Watson looked like she had just woken up from a nap. Hung over? It was two in the afternoon. At least she wasn’t drunk. Yet.

“What the fuck are you doing back?” she grumbled. “Having another breakdown?” A cigarette butt fell out of her unkempt hair.

John shook his head and lifted the six-pack of Coca-Cola as evidence of other plans. “Fancy a game?” In his other hand he held a grocery sack.

Eyes narrowing, lip curling, she regarded him with suspicion. “What’s that, eh?”

“Cards. Gin rummy. Do you know it?”

Still befuddled, she shook her head. “Poker.” Then she stepped aside. “Come in then. We’ll see what this is really all about.”

While she cleared the kitchen table of empty bottles and pizza boxes, John set the Cokes on the counter and unloaded his other grocery bag of playing cards, Earl Grey tea packets, and three kinds of biscuits. Ginger snaps were her favorite in another world. He would see if they still were in this
“Let’s crack open a bottle of red wine to get started, shall we?” she said, angling toward the kitchen cupboards.

John placed himself in her path, took her by the shoulders, and pointed her back to the table. “I brought drinks. Which do you fancy, the Coke or the tea? Or we can do water from the tap.”

“Shit John, is this an intervention?”

“No. I promise it’s not. That’s not why I’m here. I just . . . for the next hour or so, just no booze. Okay? For me, Harry?”

She sighed in irritation but relented. “This better be damn good. Tea then. Put the Cokes in the fridge.”

For the next hour, they played poker. Harry smoked and drank tea. John took his without sugar. They didn’t talk much at first. Harry was too suspicious, and John didn’t quite know what to say. He wasn’t even fully certain of why he had come. Only, he knew his time in this universe was short. If things went to plan, he would go back to a different Harry Watson, one who adored him, doted on him, and had since childhood; one who had been in a committed relationship longer than he had been; one who was sober. The Harry of this world—she led such a sad life. And he ached to see her so unhappy. It was devastating, really, that the other John didn’t have much of a relationship at all with his sister. It wasn’t that he thought he could fix it. Just give it a nudge in the right direction, so that when John came home, maybe he and Harry could start something good.

If things went to plan . . .

He wasn’t sure if they would. He was scared, and he couldn’t talk about it with anyone. Sherlock still believed they had time. They didn’t. In forty-eight hours, John would be standing on the precipice of a bridge, ready to plummet, and he was going to be all alone.

It wasn’t that he wanted to lie to Sherlock. He hated it. But there was no way around it, either. The other John had been clear: they wouldn’t get to talk again. Things were happening in his world, things that precluded him from getting to the mirror again. There would be no meeting tonight to address concerns or formulate a new plan. He had his instructions. If he didn’t follow through and meet John on the bridge tomorrow at precisely twelve o’clock midnight, the other John would fall without him. He couldn’t let that happen.

But if Sherlock knew, he would try to stop them. John couldn’t let that happen either.

So he couldn’t talk to Sherlock. He couldn’t talk to John. In cases like these, he had always turned to Harry. But he knew he couldn’t talk to her either.

“I take it you haven’t moved out,” she said, eying him across the table, her hand spread close to her breast like he was trying to sneak a peek at her cards.

“No.” He examined his hand. Three eights. It wasn’t much, but he had been making the most of a crap hand all his life. He threw in another chip.

“You two kiss and make up?” She was teasing him now, and not too kindly.

“We’ve . . . reached an understanding.”

“Raise.” She threw in two more chips. “Make-up sex?”
“No, Harry,” he said tiredly.

“All right, all joking aside, John. What the hell is going on with you? Are you in love with Sherlock or what?”

He plunked in three more chips. “I’ve been in love with Sherlock Holmes for a very long time.”

“I see.” She folded her cards together in her lap, regarding him very seriously now. “And he doesn’t feel the same.”

“It’s . . . complicated.”

“Isn’t it always. Look. What I said before. I didn’t mean it. You were trying to come out to me, and if anyone in our fucked up little family should be sensitive to that, it should be me. I shouldn’t’ve said what I said. So whataya say? Can I take it back? Can we try again? You and Sherlock. You gave it a go, but what? It didn’t take?”

“It’s not that. Exactly.”

“Oh. Oh.” She leaned into the table, dropping her voice to a discretionary level. “Trouble in the bedroom, then. Look, not my area, your . . . equipment. But maybe you need to talk about it. It helps. They say it does, anyway. I wouldn’t know. Clara and me, we just screamed. But this is about you, so go on, little brother, I’m here for you. And I won’t poke fun. Is he bad in bed? Or”—she gave him a confidential, sympathetic nod—“are you?”

John was suddenly struck with an idea. “How about this. You win this hand, and I’ll answer any question about my love life you want.”

Harry licked her lips, trying to determine whether this was a trap. “And if you win?”

“Well. Then I guess I get to ask a question.”

They had been playing for pounds and pence. This avenue felt far more dangerous to both of them. Apparently, both of them liked that.

“Deal,” she said. She threw in one more chip. “I call.”

“Three eights,” he said, displaying them on the table.

“Shit.” She laid down her three sevens. Then she chuckled to herself a little and swallowed some tea. “All right, hit me. What’s your question?”

“What’s up with the beaded curtains? What are you, like twelve?”

She looked over her shoulder to where she had hung blue and purple plastic beads in the passageway leading to the sitting room. Then she burst into loud laughter, apparently expecting a much more serious question that pried into her personal life.

Two hours later, John was heading for the door. “Thanks for the teas and Cokes,” said his sister, seeing him out. “And for wasting my afternoon. I could have been sleeping.” But she was smiling.

“You’re just cross you had to answer more questions than I did.”

“This time, maybe. Next time, I’m going to town on your ass. Oh!” She covered her mouth like she’d said something scandalous, but she was still in joking mode. “But that’s Sherlock’s job, isn’t
John blushed and laughed it away. “Next time,” he agreed. “Next . . . week?”

She shrugged like she didn’t care but said, “You know where to find me.”

They checked into a seedy little hotel tucked away in a seedy little part of London under the names Mulder and Scully. John’s pick. Tragically, that television show hadn’t made its way across dimensions. Still in their disguises—the moustache was really itching by this point—they ate in the hotel’s virtually empty, five-table restaurant, where they were left with two badly microwaved burritos and corn chips to share between them.

“There are four ways this could go down tomorrow,” Sherlock was explaining. “One: no contest default. If the pack doesn’t show, my challenge goes unanswered, and the law declares them as at-fault fugitives. There will be a nation-wide manhunt initiated, in that case. But no Alpha of any proper pride, guilty or not, would let a challenge go unanswered. So the outcome we might more reasonably expect is surrender, defeat, or demise.”

“All right. Break it down for me.”

“An Alpha surrender can occur at any time once the fight has begun, and for any reason. In the case of the offender, this means that the Alpha admits to wrongdoing and accepts the consequences. He’s taken into police custody and suffers castration by chemical injection.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. For an offender who sees his chances of winning as dismal, this is the best option.”

“Why might he think his chances dismal?”

“If our pack was larger, for instance, which it’s not. Or if he was a pup, which none of them are. Or if, in the course of fighting, he gets injured and doesn’t wish to suffer more harm. He doesn’t need a reason. He surrenders, and the fight is over. For him. He keeps his testicles, but they’re rendered worthless. The other pack members may continue to fight.”

John was pensive. “Does the challenger ever surrender?”

Sherlock frowned. “A surrender on my part would retract that challenge and force an end to the fight. No consequences whatsoever would befall the offenders. I can think of no action more shameful, and it would be legal grounds for you to file for bond severance.”

John’s jaw dropped. “Omegas seriously do that?”

“If an Alpha proves himself a jellyfish, absolutely.”

“Jesus.”

“The second outcome is defeat. If one of the Alphas of either pack is physically too debilitated to continue fighting, a defeat is declared. The fight continues until each pack member has been defeated or surrenders, but most dog fights end with defeats.”

“Too debilitated,” John repeated. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“You’d know it if you saw it. Usually, the Alpha can no longer stand or has been rendered
unconscious.”

“Got it. Like a knock-out in boxing.”

“If that helps you. If the offending pack is defeated, they do not admit to wrongdoing, as with a surrender, but the guilt is presumed, so the Alphas of the pack who have not surrendered are surgically castrated in public.”

John winced and pressed his thighs together beneath the table. “In public? Like, with scalpels?”

“The testicles are crushed with clamps first,” said Sherlock. “Then yes. They’re sliced off.”

“You know that’s barbaric, right? You have to know that.”

“So is rape.”

Conceding, John pressed on. “And if we’re defeated?”

“In that case, a defeat renders the challenge lost, and it cannot be re-issued. No consequences befall the offenders.”

“You mean they get off?”

“They get off.”

“Even though everyone knows they’re rapists?”

“They get off.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“So you can see that’s not a viable option for us.”

“No shit, Mulder.”

“I thought I was Scully. The logical one.”

“No, Scully’s the doctor. That’s me.”

“So I’m the one who believes in alien abductions?” He tutted. “I think not.”

“Well, we can’t both be Scully. Never mind, it’s not important. You were saying.”

“The last possible outcome is demise. The death of any Alpha from either pack will terminate a dog fight, losing the challenge for the whole pack. In the case of death in the offending pack, each surviving member is given the chance to surrender and receive chemical castration, or refuse to admit fault and accept surgical castration in public. Either way, guilt is presumed.”

John wasn’t sure he wanted to hear it, but he asked, “And in the case of the challenger pack? If one of those members is lost?”

“Then the surviving members of the pack are given space to mourn, and the dead is venerated for defending the honor of his or her Omega.”

“Cold comfort,” said John dismally.

“That’s one scenario you don’t have to worry about.” Sherlock leaned into the table. “Whatever
happens tomorrow, John, you make the rendezvous. Okay?”

“What happens tomorrow,” said John, “is that we win it together. Both of us still standing. And the three of them in one kind of defeat or another. Best case scenario?” Quick surrender of all three offenders, he thought, and was on the cusp of saying so, when Sherlock stepped on his first word.

“Quick death of the pack leader. That’s what I’m going for.” He took a big bite of the burrito, pulled a face, and spit it back onto his plate. “Fucking frozen.”

xXx

“I’m glad we’re finally doing this,” said Lestrade, signaling to the barkeep that he wanted another drink. “We don’t get out enough just to relax.”

“I hear you,” John agreed. He was still nursing whatever had been on tap, following Lestrade’s lead when it came to ordering drinks. It tasted awful, just awful. Like liquid bread that had gone sour. What people found appealing about this boggled him. He would much rather go for a lemonade or Coke. But drinking was a form of camaraderie that the other John apparently engaged in with the inspector detective, so he played the part and took another hard swallow.

“So.” Lestrade clunked down his new glass. “Are we finally going to talk about it?”

“You mean . . .”

“I’m gasping over here, John. You gotta give me something or I may just crack. I mean, I’ve known you two for ages, and this is completely bowling me over.”

“You’re saying it doesn’t make sense?”

“What doesn’t make sense?”

“Me and Sherlock?”

“That’s just the thing, John. It makes perfect sense. Which is why I feel like such an idiot for not seeing it coming. It’s like getting hit by a train and being surprised by it when you’ve been standing on the tracks for years. It was definitely coming, so how did I ignore all the bells and whistles?”

“Maybe we all have.”

“So are you going to tell me already? I don’t need the play-by-play. But how did you go from mates to . . .” He dropped his voice. “You did say you slept together.”

John’s eyes darted around the room, as if expecting to see Sherlock eavesdropping on them. But he didn’t recognize any of the faces. He wondered if anyone there knew his.

He had debated inviting Lestrade out at all. But, he reasoned, one way or the other, Lestrade and what little he knew about John and Sherlock’s short-lived fling would prove critical to what happened next. That was, if John wanted to set things right in the other John’s life, before turning it back over to him, Lestrade was key.

Of course, that all depended on what John meant by “set things right.” Did right mean the way things had been before? That seemed fairly impossible. He couldn’t get John’s job back for him, for instance, and he’d already decided that he needed to make some effort to fix his relationship with his sister before he left. So maybe what he really meant by right was the way things should
be, which, granted, was fairly presumptuous. But wasn’t it right that John and Harry got along? And wasn’t it also right that John and Sherlock become partners, in every sense of the word? So maybe they needed a cheerleader.

He just hoped he wasn’t making a bigger mess than he had made already by saying what he did next.

“I made the first move,” he said at last, though he neglected to mention what exactly that move had been. Even Lestrade didn’t need to know about how he’d splayed himself out naked on Sherlock’s bed as a surprise hello. “I think it startled him. Knowing I was, you know, interested. In him. Like that.”

“For all his brilliance, Sherlock isn’t always the most observant,” Lestrade agreed, encouraging the conversation to move forward.

“It took him, um, a few days to think about, erm, whether he felt the same. I don’t think he believed me, or trusted himself. He’s not really good with understanding his own feelings, I don’t think.”

“There’s the understatement of the century.”

“Then, one night, out of the blue, while he was still trying to decide if he felt anything, he asked if he could . . . kiss me.”

“He asked? That’s . . . sweet.”

“It was an experiment. For both of us, really. And he liked it. I liked it. It was good. Really good. He’s really good.”

Lestrade laughed with delight.

“And one thing led to another, and it was all . . . very, very good.”

“Let’s be frank,” said Lestrade, halfway done with his second tall drink and his filter thinning. “You’re talking about sex. Sherlock Holmes is good at sex.”

“I’m not bad either.”

Lestrade roared, drawing attention to their table. When he had recovered himself, he asked, “So what happened? If it was all so good, why did you stop?”

Because I’m not the John he’s in love with. Obviously, he couldn’t tell Lestrade the straight-up truth. He could only tell it slant. “Fear. A month ago, life was easier. Uncomplicated. We were satisfied with it. It just seemed simpler to go back to that.”

Lestrade arched a skeptical eyebrow. “Sex changes things, for sure. But you can’t just go back to simple. Not with that kind of thing in your history. You’re just making things messier. And anyway, you’re lying.”

“What?”

“You weren’t satisfied. Not you, John, or you never would have made a pass at him to start with. So are you just going to go back to bottling that up? You still love him, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re still attracted to him.”
“Yes.”

“You’d still jump into bed with him if he asked.”

John blushed.

“See? Messy.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” How do I fix this? How do I make it right? How do I get Sherlock to admit his feelings to John when he returns, and to get John to do the same?

“Well, John,” said Lestrade, signaling for his third beer, “I’m hardly a study in successful relationships.” He tapped his left ring finger, conspicuously absent of a ring. “But one thing I do know is that the longer you stay silent about this sort of thing, the messier it gets. It’s cliché, but true: communication is key.”

John sighed. That was the last thing he needed to hear. Sherlock shut down any attempts John made to talk about it, and when he managed to push it far enough, Sherlock ended up ranting and leaving in a huff. Communication is key, my ass, he thought, sipping at his bitter beer.

“If you have to,” Lestrade continued, “write it down. Put it in a letter. Make him read it. I don’t know, you’re the writer. You’ll know what to say.”

The waiter showed up with another beer and refreshed the bowl of pretzels.

“And while we’re on the subject of long-term acquaintances turned romantic interests,” Lestrade continued, and for the first time that night, he seemed a little bashful, and he hesitated before completing his thought: “What do you think about Molly?”

xXx

It was morning. The day of the day.

Still in disguise, John and Sherlock swam in the sea of protesters, demonstrators, onlookers, and blood-sport aficionados. Eyes on the clock, they jostled through the crowd, knocking shoulders and stepping on toes, trying to get closer to the yellow police barricades that sectioned off a large ring called the dog-pen. Technically, it was in Hyde Park, the northeast corner just across from Marble Arch, to accommodate the crowds. But the rendezvous point was unmistakable. And on the far side of the ring, a platform.

“For the castrations,” Sherlock explained.

Holy fuck, this is real, John thought.

He had been under no delusions about what this day was all about, and what he was about to do. But until he saw the crowds, saw the ring, and saw the bloody platform upon which, if everything went the way it was supposed to, authorities would perform public castrations for an audience of thousands—millions, given that it was being broadcasted—John didn’t fully appreciate just how horrible it all was. He was about to face off against his attackers, again, with the full intent of causing extreme bodily harm, or death. It was enough to sober any man.

Sherlock, keen as always to John’s moods even in a pressing horde of Alphas, Betas, and Omegas, suddenly slipped a hand into his. “John,” he said into his ear, because he couldn’t shout above the din, “it’s not too late. You don’t have to—”
“Not one more word,” John said back, his fake moustache tickling Sherlock’s cheek. “Adrenaline is fuel.” He winked and smiled.

Sherlock nodded, accepting his decision. “Like we planned then.”

“To the letter.”

John checked his watch. Fifteen minutes until high noon.

xXx

John checked his watch. Fifteen minutes until twelve o’clock noon. Just twelve hours to go. Eleven hours until he left the flat. Ten hours to complete his work. He had just finished writing one letter. One to go. Then he meant to spend the rest of the day with Sherlock, to say goodbye, without actually uttering the words. Damn it, he could already feel the lump forming in his throat.

You can do this, Watson, you’re strong enough.

“What time’s the rendezvous?”

John slapped the notebook shut and twisted in his seat, throwing on an expression of casual curiosity, but feeling like he’d just been caught in his bedroom. By his mum. With his pants down. “Eh?” he asked. Sherlock was standing in the doorway.

“The mirror tonight,” Sherlock said, pulling on his gloves. “Didn’t you say you’d rescheduled?”

“Yes!” John said. Too high-pitched. Pull it down. “Yeah, uh, we said eleven. Eleven o’clock. The one a.m. thing was ridiculous.” He laughed forcibly.

“So, in the meantime?”

“In the meantime?”

“Lestrade just called. There’s a case in Hyde Park. Body found in what looks to be a ritualistic killing. Maybe something involving the occult. Body’s naked, in the center of a circle of stones, balls cut off.” He spoke this all very quickly, and his eyes gleamed hopefully but shyly as he said, “You coming?”

“Oh! Oh yeah, just, um. Let me get my shoes.” He pushed the notebook under his closed laptop as he stood.

Sherlock looked pleased.

“Sounds gruesome,” said John as he followed him out the door, shrugging into his jacket.

“My favorite,” said his partner.

xXx

As the clocks struck the hour, a loud chorus of boos rose up from the masses. John, who was too short, couldn’t see why until he finally broke through near the front of the crowd, Sherlock just behind, and saw the three offending Alphas had entered the dog-pen. One of them had his arm in a cast, another still sported bandages across his nose, the third a scab crusting over the gash on his head, proudly displayed. Sean, Trevor, and Roger. John knew them by name now. Just as Sherlock had said, they had answered the challenge.
For the space of three beats, his heart stopped. Memory of the night of the attack resurfaced like overflowing sewage because now he understood what they had tried to do to him, what they would have done, had luck not been on his side. And he knew what they had done to Molly.

When his heart started beating again, it pumped hot blood. He wasn’t fighting for himself. He was fighting for Molly Hooper.

“It’s time,” Sherlock said behind him in a low growl.

John nodded sharply. Throughout London, the clocks struck noon, and John Watson peeled off his ugly moustache and threw it to the ground. Then he vaulted lightly over the police barricades and walked straight-backed and head-high into the center of the large ring, alone.

A hush rippled through the crowd. John could feel the eyes of thousands like mini spotlights heating his skin. He knew his movements were being tracked by cameras and that his face was being broadcasted around London, Britain, the world maybe. The quiet deepened. Not so much as a whisper. No one understood what was happening. It was him, the Omega, the despoiled, dishonored, disappeared John Watson for whom they were all gathered to see avenged. Where had he been! Where was his Alpha? And what in the world was he doing walking into the dog-pen!?

The banners sporting his name blurred in his peripheral vision as he kept his eyes locked on the three rapists he had come to confront, and defeat. They stared back, eyes widening with amazement, bafflement. Sean, the Alpha with the casted arm, looked around as though expecting someone to interfere and take the Omega off the pitch. The other two slowly began to transform their stance: heads shifted forward, shoulders back; fingers curled at their sides, and they slowly began to lower themselves into crouching positions. Gasps popped throughout the sea of onlookers, and finally murmuring rose up. What was this Omega thinking? Was no one going to stop him?

The police officers ringing the dog-pen, just as stunned as everyone at the appearance of the Omega in the center of the ring, at last began to take action, although even they didn’t seem to know what that would be. They weren’t entering the ring. Technically, once a dog fight began (initiated by the declared hour), no one but the contending packs were allowed inside the circle until it was over, not even cops. So instead, they signaled to John, holding out their hands, beckoning him to leave the danger zone and be protected. John ignored them but continued walking until he came within a short distance of the Alphas. There he stopped. The crowd held its breath, mesmerized, horrified.

Then John spoke, addressing the Alphas but raising his voice for all to hear.

“I’m giving you the chance to surrender,” he said.

The Alpha’s shocked faces split into grins, and they laughed.

“You attacked a friend of mine,” he continued. “You nearly killed her. You don’t get to do that anymore. No Alpha has the right to any Omega. Surrender now, and we’ll spare your lives. And your balls.”

A buzzing went up from the crowd, titters and guffaws, mostly. They were unaccustomed to hearing an Omega talk like that. The gall!

The leader of the pack, Roger, the one with the gash in his head, stepped forward. “You gonna fight us? You? We’re going to end you, you fucking cunt. No one enters this ring till it’s over, yeah? So we’re gonna beat you and pin you and knot you so hard, right here, right in front of the whole damn world, so everyone will know you belong to us.”
A chorus of boos and anger surged from the crowd. A few started shouting for them to get on with it, fight, fight, fight, while others cried out for John to run. Others still screamed at the police. Why were they just standing there?

“One last chance,” John said.

Roger spat on the ground. “Come at me, little bitch.”

And with that, Sherlock vaulted the barricade and stalked across the circle to stand at John’s side. At his sudden appearance, dead quiet fell again, but the moment he took a fighting stance, and John alongside him, a roar went up from the masses, loud enough to startle the birds into flight and shake the very foundations of London.

xXx

“Whoa,” said John, stopping midstride and splaying a hand across his chest. He felt like someone had just knocked the wind out of him. But all he was doing was walking across the grass in Hyde Park, on a case with Sherlock.

Sherlock pulled up short and backtracked. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t—” His heart was pounding irrationally in his chest, and suddenly there was a sound swelling in his ears, like the roar of thunder. But then it faded, his heart slowed again, and he could breathe just fine. “Nothing. I just had a moment of . . .” Of what? He had never experienced anything quite like it and so couldn’t find the words. He shook his head to clear his mind and said, “I’m fine.”

“If you’d rather not see the body—”

“No, no, I’m fine. Really. It was just a dizzy spell or something. It’s passed.” He smiled to reaffirm his state of wellbeing.

“All right,” said Sherlock, though suspiciously, and they carried on.

The police were already milling about and taking photographs, but they left the corpse as it had been found, waiting for Sherlock’s examination.

“Don’t ask me any medical questions,” John jested, and Sherlock chuckled. The heavy air seemed to lighten between them.

But it was while Sherlock was crouching beside the body, and while Lestrade stood with arms folded trying to catch John’s eye and ask questions with his eyebrows, that it happened again. A surge of unaccountable rage swelled inside of him. Adrenaline bloomed in his stomach and spread to his limbs, and he clenched his fingers into fists, feeling the urge to strike something. The roaring returned, and he thought he heard, amidst the tumult, a steady rhythm, like music, of people chanting his name: John! John! John!

xXx

The deafening roar of the crowd swiftly faded to white noise as John surged forward, two steps behind Sherlock, to meet the offenders in the middle. Three Alphas against one plus an Omega was bad odds, and they both knew it; but they had a plan, and it rested squarely on coordination.

“We incapacitate the weakest first,” Sherlock had devised in the hotel room, where they rehearsed their moves.
“Shoulder dislocates here,” said John. “Two moves, like this. Pop, pop.”

“They we throw out the hip bone.”

“One. Two. Down.”

“Exactly. Let’s do it again.”

The curtain had risen; the rehearsal was over.

They went straight for the man with the cast, Sean, taking advantage of the handicap. With the other two Alphas already pouncing, they knew they would get only one quick shot at this, so it had to work. Sherlock slammed into Sean. But rather than let him fall, he pulled him down at the neck. John seized the man’s injured arm and wrenched it: two moves, and the humerus popped away from the scapula. Sean threw his head back and screamed in agony, and in the next second, Sherlock seized a leg, and with simultaneous action, twisted it clockwise while John rammed a knee into Sean’s groin. The impact, combined with the wrenching, dislocated the ball-shaped head of the femur from of the ball-shaped acetabulum of the pelvis. Then they dropped him, and Sean fell to the ground, writhing, and fully incapacitated. Approximately two seconds had passed.

The crowd was going mad was astonishment at what was being witnessed.

“Next, it’s divide and conquer,” Sherlock said in the hotel room, once they had the dislocation actions down to an art. “I’ll take the pack leader.”

“That would be Roger,” said John. “Leaving me with Trevor.”

“Repeat the vital points for striking.”

“Eyeballs, eardrum, nose, throat, groin, kneecap, instep.”

“Keep center of gravity low—”

“And use evasive maneuvers. Got it.”

“When I’m done with Roger, I’ll help you finish him off.”

“All right. Let’s do it again. Come at me.”

Having grounded Sean, and with the other two Alphas rushing at them, John and Sherlock split apart. John darted left, acting as a rabbit to catch Trevor’s hound-like eye, and Sherlock sprinted right. But when it seemed that both Alphas were pursuing John, Sherlock changed course and threw himself into Roger’s path. The two Alphas crashed to the ground to the sound of a crowd groaning and screaming.

John looked over his shoulder and saw that Trevor was nearly right on top of him. Bracing for what he knew was going to hurt, he spun around, grabbed the front of Trevor’s shirt, and in his inexorable fall to the ground, John used the momentum to drag Trevor down with him, launch the Alpha over his head, and roll back onto his feet. The crowd went nuts, shrieking hysterically, and took up the chant again.

*John! John! John!*

Maybe he should have kept his distance. Maybe he should have kept the *evasive maneuvers* tactic at the forefront of his mind. But he was feeling impulsive, and angry. So he took advantage of
Trevor being momentarily grounded with the wind knocked out of him, strode up to him, and kicked him hard in the side of the head.

He wasn’t sure what he was going for, necessarily. He wasn’t sure what he expected to happen next. But he wasn’t prepared for what did happen. Trevor roared. He rolled with the kick onto his stomach, jumped to all fours, and next he knew, John, tackled around the knees, was going down.

The crowd booed and hissed.

In a flash, John caught sight of Sherlock, some twenty feet away, wrestling his opponent on the ground. It was impossible to tell who was winning, because in the next second, Trevor was fully on top of John, hands around his throat, squeezing. If the crowd could have turned into a fire-spitting dragon, it might have done so at that moment. His situation was precarious. He knew he had only seconds. But with his wits about him, and with Trevor’s two hands occupied in strangling him, the rest of the Alpha was left exposed.

John kicked in a knee, directly to the man’s groin. Above him, Trevor’s face went wonky and his eyes filled with tears of pain, but he didn’t slacken his grip. So John whammed him again: knee-groin, knee-groin. Trevor cursed and released, and as he moved away, John seized his head, and did it again: knee-nose, knee-nose. The bridge crunched. John walloped him in the ear next with a cupped hand. The air pressure burst his ear drum, and Trevor fell back screaming, giving John time to find his feet.

It must have been humiliating for the Alpha, being bested by an Omega like this, and John gave him another opportunity to end it:

“Surrender!” he shouted, circling the Alpha, who wavered on his knees and held his ear like he was keeping it attached to the side of his head.

The Alpha Trevor spit on the ground. His gushing nose dripped blood like a fountain.

“Surrender!” John cried again.

But the crowd shouted something else.

“Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!”

“Is your pride worth your life? Your dignity?” he asked, appalled. “You can walk out of here. You can still walk out of here!”

Panting, Trevor looked over to his pack leader. But both Sherlock and Roger were locked together in a ferocious battle, unaware of what was happening just feet away.

“Don’t look at him. You decide this. You did something horrible, Trevor. You can’t deny it. Own it like a real man. Like a decent Alpha. Do that for yourself, and the world will remember you better for it.”

“As a coward,” Trevor croaked.

“As a man who chose decency in the end. You did wrong. And there is a consequence to that. Accept it.”

Trevor closed his eyes, bowed his head, and lifted his arms in surrender.

In its frenzy, the crowd practically pissed itself.
“John? John?”

Someone took him by the shoulders, shaking him, and John returned to himself to find Sherlock’s face close to his, bright blue eyes round with worry.

“I’m here,” he said, dazed, taking in his surroundings and surprised to see that he was in Hyde Park. For a moment, he barely remembered arriving. Then it all came back. Sherlock. The case. The body.

“You weren’t responding to any of us, mate,” said Lestrade. “Are you okay?”

He rubbed his neck, for some reason expecting it to be sore. But it felt fine. Why was his heart racing like a startled rabbit?

Sherlock took his arm at the elbow and led him away from the crime scene and the coppers who were staring at him as if he were a car crash. But he was fine, he was feeling just fine. A little . . . confused, maybe. But fine.

“What’s going on?” Sherlock asked as they walked.

“I don’t know.”

“Is it the body?”

“No.”

“The blood?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know, Sherlock, I feel like . . . like I’m unfolding.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know! Look.” He pulled his arm out of Sherlock’s grip. “I’m okay. Go finish up. I’m just going to sit and rest, yeah? On this bench. Don’t worry about me.”

“I haven’t stopped worrying about you for twenty-five days,” Sherlock grumbled, but he saw John to the bench, gave him one more critical once-over, and walked away.

John closed his eyes. The gentle roar once more began to swell.

“Do we really have to kill a man?” John had asked, the night before, when they were running through scenarios and coming up with game plans. He was a soldier, yes, and he knew that in battle there was sometimes an imperative to kill or be killed. But though he had taken lives before, he took no pleasure in it, and never had. Besides, he had always thought of himself as a doctor first, and it was that instinct—to save a life—to which he felt most beholden.

“We do if they leave us no choice,” Sherlock replied.
“How will we know?”

“We’ll know.”

At twenty minutes past the hour, John knew.

Roger was the most ferocious of the pack, the largest, the strongest, the most experienced. It was no wonder he was the pack leader, the Alpha of Alphas, as it were. It was no wonder Sherlock had insisted on taking him on himself; he knew what he was up against, and John did not.

After taking down Sean, and after Trevor’s surrender, John had thought it would be only a matter of a few well-timed punches and well-placed kicks before they could knock Roger out or bring him to the point of surrender. It was two against one, after all, and working together, Sherlock and John had already proved their mettle. But things did not resolve themselves as quickly or easily as John had hoped. The termination of two of the Alphas from the fight should have had a demoralizing effect on Roger, but the opposite seemed to be true instead: as the last of his pack, Roger seemed to be spurred on by more than anger or self-preservation. There was a heat of vengeance in him now. And he was trying to unleash his devastating rage upon those from whom he had already taken too much.

Roger’s face was bloody and his chest mangled from his battle with Sherlock, before John entered the fray. For his part, Sherlock was dripping blood down the neck, but John couldn’t tell where he was wounded. A gash in the scalp, maybe. One sleeve was ripped away entirely, and the shirt was torn open to his sweat-soaked white tank underneath. John suspected that bruises in the face and chest had yet to form. When he stepped one way or another, a slight limp betrayed a wounded ankle. All told, the person in the best shape, still standing, was John.

But he was finding it hard to get close.

The two Alphas were locked in battle, moving so quickly and fiercely, that John almost couldn’t make out where one Alpha ended and the other began. He knew one thing for sure, though. One wrong move on Sherlock’s part, and it was over. It could be lost so easily. Too easily. Roger wouldn’t yield. He was out for blood. And then neither John nor Molly would receive any justice for the things he and his pack had done. If Roger won this fight, he would be exonerated. Sherlock would be defeated. Not only were attacks on other Omegas sure to follow, but there would be one less defender in London.

This battle was bigger than Sherlock and John. It extended so much further than this moment or this park. This was a fight for Omegas everywhere, now and in the future.

And John could feel it—the people wanted him to win. Him, John Watson, the Omega that overnight had become a symbol for all Omegas. Because if he could emerge from this victorious, the Omega that had saved his Alpha, a first in the history of dog fights, that meant that other Omegas would rise with him in glory.

Maybe Molly was right after all.

*I feel like things are changing. Like, maybe, life is good. Or can be.*

Maybe it could be.

An invitation would never come; there was no time to wait for an opening. John had to create one himself. So he charged into the fracas.

The element of surprise proved to be his greatest advantage. Sherlock saw him coming, but
determining that there was no time to ward him off, he dodged to the side to give John just enough room to launch himself into Roger and throw him off balance, and it was while being hunched over to redistribute his weight and keep his feet under him that Roger lost his advantage entirely.

John leaped onto his back, locked an arm around his neck, and squeezed.

Roger twisted and jerked, trying to throw him off. With his oxygen supply rapidly diminishing, he made the mistake John knew he would make: to free his esophagus, he turned his head into the angle of John’s elbow, desperate for air. But doing so meant that John’s arm was now cutting off the blood that flowed from his carotid artery to his brain. Only seconds, John knew, and Roger would be unconscious. He just had to hang on for a few more seconds.

Sherlock swept Roger off his feet, landing him on his stomach. John, his landing padded by the Alpha’s body, continued to apply pressure. Roger continued to struggle, and he might have rolled and thrown John off, if Sherlock were not there to pin them both. There was nothing he could do, nowhere he could go. For him, this was the end. Roger stilled, then flinched. Then stilled. Then shuddered. Then stilled.

Quiet returned to Hyde Park. Slowly, Sherlock got off John’s back, and John felt his hand on the back of his head.

“It’s done.”

Shaking, John released Roger’s throat. The Alpha’s head thunked back to the ground.

They didn’t wait to see whether Roger could be revived. They didn’t stick around for Sean’s public castration. The Alphas were defeated, and that was what mattered. Sherlock took his Omega’s hand, but it was John who led them away, through the silent crowd.

And when they were swallowed up in it, when the cameras could no longer follow them, the cheers erupted. Banners shook and horns blew, and once again the people took up the chant:

John! John! John!

xXx

The strange spell that had seized John's mind and body had passed, and it felt like it had all been some strange hallucination, slipping away fast like a dream. John put it out of his mind. There was still a case to solve.

He did a damn good job—if he did say so himself—of avoiding every appearance of distraction. He asked intelligent, fully engaged questions; he laughed at the right times, grunted when appropriate, and berated Sherlock just when a dressing down was called for. But his eyes were on the clock, watching his last seconds in this world, with this Sherlock, tick by, vanishing before his eyes.

He felt the torturous angst of divided desires. He loved this. Oh, how he loved this. And he had come to love this Sherlock. Not in the same way as he loved his own, but he cared about him immensely. And he wouldn’t get to say goodbye. Not in person anyway, and not at all if they didn’t return in time to 221B for him to finish his letter.

But as one half of him despaired to leave, the other half was positively giddy with excitement at the thought of return. In six hours, he would be with Sherlock again. His Sherlock. Oh, all the things he had to tell him! All the adventures he wanted to share! He wanted to stay awake and talk until his voice was hoarse. He wanted Sherlock to listen with rapt attention, smile at him, ask him
questions, and be impressed by all he had seen and done.

Would he be? After twenty-five days with the other John? Would things be . . . different between them?

“You lost in there again?”

John pulled himself out of his musings to find Sherlock staring at him sideways. They were knee-deep in refuse inside of a skip where they were rooting through a week’s worth of rubbish. The detective life wasn’t always so glamorous.

Forcing a laugh, he said, “Just trying not to breathe through my nose.”

“John.”

“Mm?”

“You never did say . . .”

“Say what about what?”

“Last night. When you talked to John.”

Nope. Never happened.

“Yes?”

“Did he . . . That is, has he . . . asked after me? At all?”

“Oh yeah! Of course. He . . .” John scrambled for something believable but vague. Maybe even if Sherlock could tell he was lying by scent, this skip, reeking of rotten vegetables and baby nappies, would obscure the fact. That somehow made the lie easier. “He wasn’t happy when I said we needed to figure out another solution. He understands, of course, but, you know. He just wants to come home really badly. For you.”

The skip search was a bust, and happily, both crawled out of it to pursue the investigation down less smelly paths. John didn’t see how Sherlock frowned at him.

Because Sherlock had never needed scent to know when John was lying.

xXx

While the world reeled with wonder, the Omega and his Alpha disappeared again. They decided not to return to Baker Street. It was only three hours before the rendezvous on the Waterloo Bridge, and sitting around the flat—where doubtless they would find reporters and coppers—would make leaving again nearly impossible. For John, that meant that the next time he saw his home, it would be the one in his own universe.

“Be sure to hit the water feet first,” said Sherlock, “to transfer as much energy as you can to parts of your body better equipped to withstand impact. Tuck in the elbows, cover your mouth and nose —”

“I know, Sherlock, stop fidgeting.”

They had ended up at St Bartholomew’s Hospital. Sherlock had a contact there (not Molly Hooper) who was letting them lie low. From there, it was a short twenty-minute walk to the bridge. While
they waited out the remaining hours, John stitched Sherlock up. His wounds, fortunately, were superficial, but needed tending to.

In the background, a telly announced the news on low volume: Alpha Sherlock Holmes, the verified winner of the dog fight, had successfully defended the honor of Omega John Watson and Omega Molly Hooper. His opponents had been summarily defeated. The pack leader had died. The other two had been castrated. And an Omega had made history by being the first to ever enter a dog-pen and fight on his own behalf, and another’s. Some were already calling it a dangerousprecedence. Others named it an unmistakable turning point in Omega rights. (At the bottom of the screen, the news scroll mentioned a devastating fire in Chelmsford, still being investigated.)

“You’ll make sure to see to Molly?” said John. “See that she recovers all right and is taken care of?”

“Of course. We’re practically pack now.”

John laughed lightly, but mostly to fight down the lump in his throat. Not long ago, he would have happily jumped off a bridge to leave this place. So why was he finding just the thought of it so difficult now?

“What will you do?” Sherlock asked. “Once you’re back, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Fall back into the usual routine, I guess. Work, cases, blogging, paying the electric bill on time.” He finished the stitches in the back of Sherlock’s head, cleaned it, and began peeling off his gloves. “Maybe walk in the park alone at midnight or get wasted at a pub.”

Sherlock smiled wryly. “The good life, huh?”

“Good enough.”

“And Sherlock?”

John shrugged, suddenly very intensely focused on cleaning up the medical kit.

“John.”

Reluctantly, he flicked his eyes to find Sherlock frowning at him.

“You’ve just changed an entire world. Why are you afraid to change your own?”

xXx

The case took the rest of the night. Too long, frankly, and by the time Sherlock and John got home, it was already half past ten o’clock. He had thirty minutes. Thirty minutes, and he would need to leave for good.

“The trains are usually quite reliable,” Sherlock was saying conversationally. “What if we put you and John in the same seat on the same train departing at the same time? That would account for synchronicity and velocity, at least. Now, as for the energy transference, we could coordinate something, maybe an electric shock, just a little one . . .”

“Yeah. Maybe,” said John, distractedly. His notebook was still on the table. How was he to finish his letter if Sherlock planned on chewing his ear off with proposals that would never work because everyone but Sherlock had already decided on a solution, and it was happening in ninety minutes? But then, with only thirty minutes left before he walked out the door, how could he do anything but
spend it with Sherlock?

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “Tea, maybe?”

“Sure,” said Sherlock, clearing a spot on the table and sitting himself at it.

While John made tea—he was so good at it, after all—he listened to Sherlock rattle off theories and half-baked solutions. He nodded and grunted when he needed to, but other than that, he just staved off the tears that threatened to overflow. This wasn’t how he wanted it to happen. But there was no other way.

He really was such a sentimental fool. As he lay the tea tray, he thought of the last three weeks and how it felt like a whole lifetime’s worth of living, and everything from the horrible beginning to the wonderful interlude to the startling self-revelations were . . . precious to him. And it was all because of the man sitting across from him, sipping his tea, none the wiser.

“You’ll tell him, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course I will,” he answered, tuning back into the conversation. He had no idea what he had just agreed to, because it didn’t matter. He’d never get to talk to John again.

Sherlock smiled, then turned his head to the clock. “Oh! I’d best disappear then, eh? Five minutes.” He rose to his feet, passing over a sheet full of notes for him to communicate.

Five minutes?? John’s heart was practically leaping out of his chest.

“Sherlock!”

Sherlock froze, taken aback by the outburst.

“I— That is—” He couldn’t say anything of what he was thinking and feeling. Or could he? “I just wanted to say . . . I wish this was something we could do together. I really . . .” Breathe, Watson, don’t lose it now. Power through. “. . . wish I could have you at my side.”

“Nonsense, John, you’re doing splendidly. And you’ll let me know how it goes.”

He nodded numbly. He wanted to reach for him. One embrace. That’s all he wanted.

“Well then. Knock on my door when you’re done, eh?”

And just like that, he was gone.

xXx

At thirty minutes to midnight, Sherlock and John left St. Bart’s. The night was cool, but a warm wind kept it comfortable.

Thirty minutes, thought John, until I see him again.

They didn’t talk much. They had said what they needed to say. Sharing one another’s company was enough. Even though the pavement was virtually empty, they walked nearly hip to hip, hands brushing, until finally Sherlock just intertwined their fingers. It was comforting, giving John the added strength he needed for what he was about to do.

His heart pumped a steady one-two, one-two. Their footfalls seemed to match.
John asked the cabbie to drop him off a short ten minutes from the bridge. He needed time to clear his lungs and collect his thoughts.

He regretted the hastily scribbled letter he had left for Sherlock on the kitchen table before sneaking away. It wasn’t enough. It was nowhere near enough. Maybe Sherlock had already discovered it. It was quite possible. Mirror conversations didn’t usually last terribly long, after all, and nearly an hour had passed. Maybe he was already on his way to the bridge.

And then it came into sight: the Waterloo Bridge. A fairly unremarkable sight, with its stretch of concrete and unadorned arches. But for one set of headlights, it was empty and open to the skies. Then the car passed. By the time John stepped onto the footpath, he was the only one on the bridge. He checked the clock on his mobile: 11:56. He hurried to get into position.

“Here,” said Sherlock. “The exact center.”

They had chosen the western side, where one could see the London Eye and Big Ben in the distance. With the other John, they had coordinated the precise location both Johns would assume. Only a waist-high, three-rung white railing separated the pedestrian from plunging into the river; it was easily surmountable.

John climbed over, knees bobbing. With Sherlock still holding onto him tightly, he looked down into the black waters. Lights below the bridge, for the sake of passing boats, illuminated the distance he would fall.

“What’s our time?” he asked. He was finding it difficult to get a good, calming breath.

“Seventy-two seconds.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“John.”

Hands gripping the rail behind him, John looked over his shoulder to where Sherlock stood behind him, holding him at the waist.

“You’re the bravest man I ever met.”

John smirked. “You’re just trying to make sure I jump.”

Sherlock laughed, but his smile was sad.

“We’re the same person, you know,” said John. “Everything I’ve done, it’s been in him the whole time. So when it comes straight down to it, John and I are the same.”

“I do know that,” said Sherlock. “Because at this very moment, I know he’s standing exactly where you are now.”

With thirty seconds on the clock, John climbed over to teeter on the precipice of the bridge. He looked left, then right, but no one was near to see him standing there. He stood utterly alone. In this
universe, at least. Somewhere else, the other John was lining himself up with him, in this very spot. And that meant, Sherlock was right there with him, too. John looked at the empty spot beside him, imagining he could see Sherlock there, calling him home.

He allowed himself a few fallen tears. Then he sniffed loudly, tightened his jaw, and squared his shoulders. He did not look down. Instead, he looked straight ahead and across the river at the lights of London. He thought them beautiful.

His phone was in his pocket, set to vibrate at precisely midnight. It would be destroyed in the plunge, but there was nothing for it.

“I’m coming home, Sherlock,” he whispered.

Then he closed his eyes, and waited.

xXx

“Ten,” Sherlock said, a quaver in his throat. “Nine.”

John let go of the railing with one hand. He twisted his neck and kissed Sherlock’s cheek.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Goodbye.”

“Five. Four.” A tear slid down Sherlock’s cheek, over the place John had kissed him. “Three. Two.”

John faced out again. He closed his eyes. “I’m coming home, Sherlock,” he whispered.

“One.”

xXx

At midnight, exactly, John’s alarm went off in his pocket. He let go of the railing, and fell.
In Which Sherlock Makes a Case for Destiny

Heart in his throat, Sherlock watched John fall. It was the longest 1.43 seconds of his life. Like a falling star, light streaking against a black backdrop, John sped away from him, shrinking rapidly, until a crash of broken water announced the moment.

Energy transference.

Without sparing another iota’s worth of space-time waiting, Sherlock lifted his leg to the railing, launched himself into the air, and plummeted into the Thames after him.

He plunged into the water’s dark, broken surface with a sharp crack and was engulfed in the frigid river. The freezing bite in his skin was nothing compared to the shockwaves that passed from feet to head, and if he hadn’t been covering his mouth and nose, the force of it would have stolen his breath. But though his mind darkened momentarily, he never lost consciousness. He fought for the surface, gasped in a lungful of oxygen, and looked around wildly for John.

“John!” he cried, getting a mouthful of Thames. But in every direction, he saw lapping currents and debris, but no John.

Sherlock sucked in his breath and plunged again below the surface, eyes wide and searching, but it was too dark to see anything. Although he thought he had aimed very close to the very spot where John had gone down, already he himself was being swept downriver. That meant John was ever so slightly further along.

With powerful overhand strokes, Sherlock swam frantically downriver, surfaced and diving, surfaced and diving, until suddenly, he spotted a body, dark in the water, not moving, just being carried along by the current. Muscles burning, Sherlock swam faster. He saw that it was John, and he swam faster still.

Sherlock swept an arm around John’s middle and kicked for the surface. But though he gasped for air, John did not.

“Hold on, John, hold on,” Sherlock panted, kicking for the north banks.

John’s body was heavy in his arms, unresponsive, and Sherlock was panicking. As he fought for the shore, he struggled to keep John’s head above the water. Land had never seemed so far.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you, I’ve got you.”

At long last, his toes scraped the muddy bottom of the water. Sherlock splashed and grunted, getting his feet under him and hauling John out of the water. Then he stumbled forward onto dry land, where he collapsed, exhausted, to his knees and laid John upon the rocks. “John!” he cried. “Please, oh please, don’t be dead. That’s not how this is supposed to happen!” He felt for a pulse but couldn’t find one.

Instantly, he started chest compressions.

“John please. Oh God, please, please.”

He performed rescue breaths. More chest compressions. More breaths.

And suddenly, river water spouted from John’s throat, and he began coughing.
“Oh! Yes, John, yes! Cough, get it out, you’re okay, you’re okay!”

But John’s eyes remained sealed. As he continued coughing and struggling to breathe, Sherlock rolled him onto his side to facilitate easier breaths.

“Oi, you there!”

Someone from the bridge above had spotted him and was waving an arm.

“All right, mate?” the man shouted.

Sherlock cupped his hands. “An ambulance! Now!”

John was breathing. But he lay as though sleeping, not opening his eyes, not moving. Sherlock gathered him into his arms to keep him warm until an ambulance arrived. He pressed John’s head to his chest and smoothed his wet hair back, rubbing his arms and back, rocking with him, and telling him over and over again, “You’re home, you’re home. John, I’m here. You’re home.”

xXx

“All his vitals are reading as normal,” said the doctor, consulting his chart. “Body temperature is good, despite time spent in the water. Pulse steady at 72 beats per minute, blood pressure 120 over 80. No respiratory problems, no broken bones, no organ damage. Injuries sustained in the dog fight are minimal, which is a miracle, frankly. There are some curious puncture wounds in the abdomen, as though from a needle, like he’d been injected with something, but nothing is coming up on the bloodwork except your own scent markers, Mr. Holmes.”

“Then why isn’t he waking up?” Sherlock asked. His fingernails were practically gnawed to the wick.

“I really can’t say. Hitting the water, he was knocked unconscious, but we should have been able to revive him completely by now. By all measurements, he’s healthy. So we’re flummoxed as to why he should persist in this comatose state.”

Sherlock supposed it wouldn’t do to alert the medical staff to such factors as space-time jumps or displacement theories. But he couldn’t stop himself from suspecting that something had gone wrong with the energy transference. Was it his John in there, or the other John? Or, the most devastating possibility, no John at all? What if John had been forced out, and there had been no one to take his place, and all that was left behind was a hollow shell?

“Between you and me,” said the doctor, “why did he jump? After the victory at Marble Arch—”

“He didn’t jump,” Sherlock said instantly, and anger flashed in his eyes at the suggestion that John had been suicidal. “He fell.”

“Oh. I see.” But the doctor obviously didn’t. “Good thing you were there to save him, then, Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock didn’t even grunt a response.

They didn’t let him stay the night, scent inhibitor or not, and so, feeling like a wreck, he returned to Baker Street where the damn mirror mocked him by being nothing more than a mirror.

Had it worked or not? Had the other John made it home? Was his John lying in hospital, or lost in another universe? Or just . . . lost?
For Sherlock Holmes, it was the longest, loneliest night of his life.

xXx

He returned to the hospital in the morning, passed through Alpha screening and injections, donned the face mask, and made his way to John’s beside, where, after badgering the nurses for updates and examining John himself (minus scent, which frustrated him to no end), he promptly fell asleep in the chair, his head resting on John’s stomach, which swelled and deflated rhythmically with regular breaths.

A couple of hours later, he was awoken by the tap of a hand on his shoulder, and his head came up with a snap, thinking it was John nudging him awake. But John’s face was still placid in sleep. So he turned the other way and saw Greg Lestrade, who was holding a vase of daisies.

“So the daisies aren’t for me?” Sherlock said wryly, rubbing an eye.

“They’re for Molly.”

“She’s back in hospital?”

“The heat wasn’t without some pain, so she came back to finish her round of treatments. But she’s checking out today. That’s why I’m here, to, um . . .”

“Take her home.”

“Yes.”

“Your home?”

Color spread across Lestrade’s cheeks like he had developed a sudden and alarming rash. “Molly doesn’t have much by way of family. And she likes her flatmates just fine, but the place holds bad memories for her now, so . . . Well, my place is in a really good part of town, and I know it seems fast, but we’ve made something of a connection—”

“Say no more.”

“Sherlock, I just have to say, what you and John did for her . . . It means more to her than you may ever fully appreciate. More than I can appreciate.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“No, I have to.” Lestrade set the flowers on the bedside table and took a seat across from him, on the other side of John. “We watched the fight yesterday, Molly and I. On the telly. I would’ve been there in person, but Molly—”

Sherlock waved away the apology.

“Anyway, it was incredible, Sherlock. Most of us were too stunned to process it properly, not in the moment, but it’s been playing on the news around the clock ever since it ended. The way John walked out there on his own, the way you two took down that first Alpha in two seconds flat, everything right up until Roger’s demise. People are analyzing every second of it, every angle, every word the mics could pick up. I mean—” He floundered in search of words to express his
“Holy hell, how did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Train John up like that? Convince him to join the fight? Why did you do it?”

Sherlock laughed. “You think that was my doing? That was all John. I tried to talk him out of it.”

“What? John wanted to fight?”

“Like an angry cat. I didn’t see his reasons, initially. There were many. But Molly was one of them.”

“I still don’t understand. They’re not even pack.”

“You can see how little a thing like that truly matters.”

“Well. I’m . . . grateful to him. And always will be.”

“You can tell him that yourself. When he wakes.”

“You bet your arse, I will. I just wish . . . That is to say, Betas aren’t . . .” He paused, and Sherlock knew what he had been about to say. Betas aren’t allowed to fight. But he had stopped short, because technically, Omegas weren’t either. And yet one had. He closed his eyes, ashamed. “I should have been there, too.”

“Why?”

“If you could issue the challenge in her name, and not even be bonded, and if John could decide that being Omega didn’t matter and join the dog fight anyway, then what the hell was I doing? It should have been three against three.”

Alpha, Beta, and Omega, all fighting the same fight. There was something poetic about it, Sherlock thought, and John would have approved.

“We did all right,” said Sherlock.

“Did you?” Lestrade’s eyes fell to John, asleep between them. “Did something happen during the dog fight that led to this?”

“No, this is . . . something else. But Lestrade. People can’t know about it, all right? The media especially. It will undermine everything he accomplished. He’ll be all right. I’ll be taking him home soon. Just keep it under your hat, okay?”

“Yeah, no problem.” Lestrade gave him a confidential smile, stood, and retrieved the daisies. “Oh, and Sherlock. You should know. Charges have been dropped. Obviously. We’ll have some follow-up questions about what went down in Chelmsford, but we’ve pieced a lot of it together already, everything from Jacqueline Stapleton abducting John to holding him prisoner and, well, it seems you were entirely within your rights, acting as you did. You’re clear.”

“Thank you.”

“See that he gets well again, eh? I want to hear the whole story from his own lips.”

Sherlock watched him go, only then realizing that he had been holding John’s hand the whole time. He rubbed John’s skin at the palm and stroked the back of his hand. Still, he didn’t stir. Slowly, he
laid his head once again upon John’s chest, and, listening to his heartbeat, fell back to sleep.

xXx

Sometime in the afternoon, Sherlock got a call from Harry Watson. He stepped out into the hall to take it.

“John’s not answering his phone,” Harry said. “Is no one at the flat? I’ve been ringing the bell for ten minutes!”

“Mrs. Hudson must have stepped out then,” he said.

“Where are you? Where’s John?”

“We’re taking a well-deserved holiday,” Sherlock lied easily. “As you can imagine, we’re both exhausted. We needed to get away from London for a spell.”

“He could have told me,” she pouted.

“Blame me. I whisked him away. Neither of us much fancy reporters.”

“Sherlock, I was about to wring your neck when I saw John step out into the dog-pen.”

“Harry—”

“I started sobbing, I’m not ashamed to say. Because I thought I was about to watch my baby brother die on national television. Are you hearing me? I thought he was a lamb for the slaughter.”

“I see how you would think that.”

She huffed. “But it turns out John was a hero. He saved your arse, for one.”

“That he did.”

“So I guess what I’m saying is—” Her words caught in her throat, and when she spoke next, her voice was high pitched and she was clearly in tears. “I’m just so proud of him. Angry! But so proud.”

Sherlock smiled. “I promise you, Harry, John is just fine. He’ll swing around again when we return to London, and you can hug-choke him yourself.”

“See that he does. Cheers, Sherlock.”

“Harry.”

xXx

“You need to leave, sir.”

Sherlock didn’t stir.

“You’ve received four injections today, which is already bordering on dangerous, and the doctors refuse to give you anymore. Besides, visiting hours are over.”

Sherlock continued to stroke John’s hand.
“We’ll take good care of him, Mr. Holmes. Just you go on home now and rest.”

Reluctantly, he stood. But he took his time following the night-shift nurse out of the room. To delay, he readjusted John’s blanket so it would keep him nice and warm. Then he made mental notes of all the blipping and blooping from the machines monitoring John’s vitals so he could make comparisons in the morning. At last, he bent over and kissed John’s forehead. He wasn’t much practiced at the kissing thing, but he wanted to leave John with something, and it was all he could think of.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” he whispered.

At last, he grabbed his coat and headed for the door, not knowing that just seconds after it closed behind him, John’s eyelashes began to flutter.

xXx

It was like slowly, so slowly, emerging from a thick pea-soup fog, the kind that not only obscured your vision but hampered your movements, and like trying to run in a dream, or through mud up to your waist, struggling so hard and not going anywhere.

But then, all at once, he was awake.

John gasped—actually gasped—like it had been a while since he’d taken a proper breath. His eyes opened to a dark room, but for the blinking lights of monitors and a florescent lamp left on just a few feet away. His disorientation lasted only a few moments before he realized he was in a hospital bed, and the second after that, he remembered the bridge.

And how he had fallen right off of it.

He didn’t remember hitting the water, or anything that followed. But putting two and two together, he realized it must not have gone perfectly. Not if he was in hospital. But wait, did that mean . . . ? Had it not worked?

John sat up abruptly and put a hand down his pants, feeling around, and when he felt what he had down there, he promptly burst into tears.

It was back.

He was back.

Hearing his sob, a nurse hurried into the room. “Mr. Watson! You’re awake!”

John pulled his hand out of his pants, hoping she hadn’t seen anything untoward. He grabbed the blanket and used it to wipe his face.

“Just lie back down, Mr. Watson, be still. You’ve had quite the couple of days.”

Days? Try weeks.

“I’m not tired,” he protested. “I need to go home.”

“Now now, the doctors will want to have a look at you. Make sure everything is all right. You had quite the fall.”

“I’ll come back. I promise. They can look at me upways and downways and sideways and all the ways. But right now, I need to go straight home.”
“Stop it now. Your bond-mate will be back in the morning. You know, he’s hardly left your side all this while. I had to make him go home to sleep. Don’t take that away from him.”

Bond-mate. She had said bond-mate. His heart burned. The word had never sounded so wonderful. Fresh tears welled up in his eyes.

“See now? A little more sleep might do you a bit of good, too.”

“Sleep? What time is it?”

“It’s half four in the morning, John. All of London is asleep.”

Half four. So that meant . . . he had jumped four and a half hours ago? Or longer? How long had he been in hospital? Had Sherlock been the one to pull him from the river? Of course he had! He had promised to be there the very moment he crossed back, and he was. John just regretted that he hadn’t been awake to see him.

By five o’clock, a small team of doctors had arrived to evaluate him. He let them poke and prod and run their little tests, but he could hardly keep still. He wasn’t the least bit sleepy, and he felt like a kid on Christmas morning who had woken too early to go down for presents, and he was just waiting it out.

But the doctors were saying curious things he didn’t quite know how to respond to.

“You need to stop finding yourself in here, John,” said one doctor with a stern wag of the finger but a twinkle in the eye. “Pretty soon, the whole hospital will know you by name.”

“But then, don’t they already?” laughed another doctor. “All of England knows this one by name!”

“Way to look after our Molly, John, lad. That’s giving them the what-for.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen any of the footage, have you, John? It’s different when you’re on the outside of things. Here’s the remote, you can watch it yourself over breakfast. Visiting hours don’t start for another two hours. Then we’ll give your Alpha a call, if he’s not already pounding down the door by then.”

They winked at him, patted him on the head, and left him to himself and a bowl of corn flakes.

It had been twenty-five (-six? -seven?) days since anyone had treated him like that. Suddenly, the Christmas lights were snuffed out. The jingle of sleigh bells faded into the distance. And he lost the desire to open presents. He loved his Omega body, he really did. It felt wonderful to sit in it again. So how could those Betas so swiftly, so casually, make him resent himself by their thoughtless treatment of him?

Having lost his appetite, John set the cornflakes aside to get milk-soggy and reached for the remote to see what all the hubbub was about. He thought he might have to do some searching, but he didn’t even have to change the channel. Because there he was, right up there on the screen, cameras zoomed in on the same face he saw every time he looked into a mirror, only this time, the expression was hardened, and the eyes were sharp with anger. John Watson had just walked into a dog-pen.

Twenty minutes later, John was on his feet and fully dressed. He was leaving. They didn’t need to call his Alpha to escort him home, or hell, graciously offer him permission to leave. He was medically cleared and able-bodied, so he was damn well walking out of there on his own. John shoved his feet into his shoes and laced them tight, shrugged into his jacket, and pulled his watch
out of a little tray at his bedside table. But he noticed that the watch face had a water bubble inside, and the time was stuck at twelve o’clock, right down to the second-hand ticker. Broken. He put it on anyway.

The nurse was surprised to see him dressed, but he lied smoothly (he was getting good at that) and said he was just going to the waiting room for some magazines to read. She smiled and he walked on by, straight for the lifts. From there, it was easy to make his way out of the hospital, unimpeded. Soon, he was standing on the street, the cool morning air welcome in his lungs.

From St. Margaret’s, it was a good thirty minutes to Baker Street on foot, but John was happy to walk. He needed the time to think. Besides, it wasn’t dangerous, this time of morning. The sun was just cresting in the East, and morning commuters were already busying the roads but not the pavement, so for the most part, he walked alone.

And he thought about what he had seen on the telly, the amazing things he had seen the other John do, and do with Sherlock. John had engaged in a dog fight and won. Together, he and Sherlock had defeated three ferocious Alphas. He still didn’t know the whole story yet. For instance, why had the challenge been issued in the first place? What had happened to the other John? Was it bad? There was usually only one reason an Alpha challenged another on behalf of his Omega, and John shuddered to think about it. Had he been attacked? Raped? He tried to feel something in his body that indicated something of the sort had happened to it, but he felt strong, healthy, as good as ever, except . . .

That’s when he noticed the scar in his palm. It looked like a clean slice, stitched neatly, leaving behind a pink ridge of skin. It was new, but not exactly fresh. How had he come by it?

What had struck John the most, however, from watching the dog fight, hadn’t been the fact that he had been part of it (though, naturally, that was a stunning sight to behold), or that he had done well (at one point, he’d literally punched the sky after a rather deft move by his counterpart), but it was that Sherlock and he had looked so . . . well suited. They fought together harmoniously, like it was more of a dance than a brawl, and when they had left the dog-pen, having vanquished their foe, they had walked away hand in hand.

John . . . he couldn’t remember the last time he and Sherlock had walked hand in hand. He couldn’t remember if they ever had, frankly. Certainly not in public. Sometimes, Sherlock had taken his arm, or guided him with a hand on the small of his back. But not like that, what he had seen on the screen.

And he was struck by two distressing thoughts:

One: The world believed John Watson was a fighter, a revolutionary. The cheers of the crowd still rang in his ears, and not only those captured on television, either. He now understood exactly what he had been experiencing in Hyde Park, and it was John Watson in all his glory. But . . . that hadn’t been him. That had been some other John Watson. The world expected something of him now. They would want to know how he had done it, why he had done it, and maybe they would want him to do it again. Did he really have what it took to step into that man’s shoes?

And yet, the last thing he wanted to do was go back to being the old John Watson. He now knew a different sort of existence, a more liberated one, and he liked it. He wanted it. Only, he wanted it here, in this world. But even after all the other John had done, the doctors had still treated him like a child. Would Sherlock?

Which led him to two: Would Sherlock still want him? For the first time, he fully appreciated the other Sherlock’s fear, that when they swapped back, things would be different between him and his
John, because of things that had happened with the stranger. Now, John was sharing the fear. Sherlock had had a taste of a more competent, more confident, more amazing version of John Watson. How could he go back to this one?

It was with these new fears and complicated feelings roiling inside of him that he approached 221B Baker Street, the sun inching into the sky and warming his shoulders. He didn’t have his key, but it didn’t matter, because at that moment, the door opened.

It was Mrs. Hudson, on her way to run errands.

“Oh John!” she said warmly. “You’re home!”

She had no idea just how right she was. “Mrs. Hudson!” he exclaimed.

She opened her arms and he stepped into them.

“Sherlock told me you were visiting Harry for a while,” she said when they stepped apart.

So she didn’t know about the bridge. Just as well. It was probably best no one did. “A very short while,” he said. “But I just . . . wanted to be home.”

“Sherlock will be glad of it. He’s so moody when you’re away. Oh John, I can’t tell you how happy I am for you. All the ladies are talking about you and what you did, and we think it’s marvelous, just marvelous. Mrs. Turner, she won’t stop going on about how it’s just like those days in the sixties, and she’s right of course, and Mrs. Humphrey reckons your name will be in all the history books from now until history’s done being made. Oh, look at you, you’re blushing.”

“I just . . . don’t feel like I deserve . . .”

“Nonsense. You’re the face of hope for a lot of Omegas out there. You just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Then she patted his cheek, but from her, it was affection, not condescension, like a mother, not a nanny.

She left the door open for him, but before he stepped through, his eyes fell to the name on the bell: Holmes. Just Holmes. The bloom of euphoria at the prospect of seeing Sherlock again began to wilt, and the weeds of doubt began to choke. He frowned, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him. There, he steeled himself.

John didn’t know what was about to happen. Above his head, he heard the creaking of floorboards. Sherlock was pacing. A part of him was desperate to run up those stairs, shout Sherlock’s name, and leap into his arms. Another part feared what would happen if he did. He was returning a different person, an Omega that was no longer just an Omega, and he was still figuring out what that meant.

So he drew on a source of strength for whatever was to transpire. That is, he took inspiration from himself. John Watson is brave, he thought. John Watson is bold. John Watson can change the world.

Standing tall, he ascended the stairs.

When he drew nearer the second landing, however, he heard Sherlock’s voice, and it stopped him in his tracks. True, it hadn’t been long since he’d heard a Sherlock. But the reality that it was his Sherlock, right there, on the other side of that closed door, sent his heart racing. He suddenly felt
the days apart like they had been years, and the distance had been astronomical. Just seconds, and the time and space would collapse into here and now. How could he bear another second standing on this side of the door?

But on that side, Sherlock sounded angry. His voice boomed through the door.

“Fine! Then maybe next time John and I decide to take on the wankers, you can get off your fat arse and help us for a change. You are pack, after all. Sort of.” A pause. Apparently, he was on the phone. “Why don’t you try asking Anthea that, then? Maybe her opinion is different from yours.” Pause. “Don’t be a moron, of course she does . . .”

John pushed open the door.

Sherlock whirled.

Then, without so much as a fare thee well or screw thee sideways, he ended the call.

“John,” he said, breathless. He stood in pajama bottoms and a thin t-shirt, overlaid with his blue dressing gown. His feet were bare and his hair was mussed, black curls in every direction. Either he had just woken up or had never gone to sleep, because his eyes were still glassy with tiredness.

“Hello, Sherlock,” John said, letting the door fall shut behind him. Oh, he was so close, he wanted to cry. But his feet were now frozen to the floorboards.

“My John?” Sherlock asked, a slight tremble in his voice, like he didn’t dare to hope.

Slowly, John nodded. “It worked.” He spread his hands a little pathetically. “I’m home.”

Whatever he was expecting to happen next, it wasn’t this. Sherlock threw the phone to the floor, swept across the room like mighty wind, and lifted John off his feet as he pulled him into his arms, crushing him to his breast. They swayed, overbalancing, and though Sherlock’s rocking feet sought to restore balance, it didn’t seem to occur to him to set John down again. Instead, they ended up against the door, John wrapped in Sherlock’s arms but otherwise pinned to the door.

For his own part, John held tight to Sherlock, arms encircling him over the shoulders and around his neck. Then he buried his face in the crook of Sherlock’s neck, and when he breathed in, his whole body shuddered, because there it was. It was like he had been living with a plugged nose for the past month, and he had forgotten how rich the world smelled, how heavenly Sherlock smelled. It was like the breath of life, and his brain and body flooded with the sense of home and belonging, happiness and security, and love. So much love. Oh, how he loved this man! He nuzzled closer, needing to get closer, and his hands pushed into Sherlock’s hair and held his head more firmly against his own.

Time disappeared entirely. However long they held each other, just like that, John would never know, but Sherlock’s arms around him never slackened, and John’s feet still didn’t touch the floor. John had never seen Sherlock so outwardly affectionate, not outside of a heat anyway. It was startling, though not unwelcome. John wanted this tenderness, this demonstrative wanting. But there was something else going on. He felt it against him: Sherlock stomach muscles shaking, shuddering. Then the ragged, breathy gasp. He was crying.

It was a thing John had never seen before, not from Sherlock. Astonished, holding Sherlock’s head with both hands, John pushed him back, gently, not to escape Sherlock’s arms but just far enough to see his face. Sherlock’s beautiful blue eyes were shining with tears, and his lips quivered as he tried to speak but struggled to voice the words. At last:
“You’re home,” he squeaked, like he couldn’t believe it.

John nodded, smiling, half laughing. “I’m home,” he repeated, stroking the side of Sherlock’s beautiful face.

But Sherlock was finding it difficult to smile. His face cracked, and he buried it once again in John’s shoulder to hide it. “I thought maybe I’d lost you.” His voice was strained with tears.

“Me too.”

“I thought I’d never get to tell you . . .”

He trailed off. John ran his fingers through Sherlock’s curls to comfort him, reassure him of his presence. It wasn’t usual, his being the strong one. But just now, it felt right. “Tell me what?”

At last, Sherlock set John squarely on his feet, backed away from the door for space, and unwound his arms. At least, a little. He still held him, one hand curled around his waist, the other cupping John’s face. John was melting.

“How sorry I am. I understand now, how unhappy you’ve been. With your life. With me.” He was positively trembling. “So things are going to change. I’m going to change. I’m going to make you happy, I promise. Whatever you want, John, whatever you need from me—”

“Shh, Sherlock, please.” His thumb grazed Sherlock’s lips to still them.

“I just want you to be happy.” His voice cracked again, filled with regret.

“I know. Oh sweetheart, I know you do. But a lot of that has to come from me. There’s a lot I want to change about myself, my own life. Though, maybe, it starts here. So . . . can I tell you what I do want? From you?”

“Anything, John. Anything.”

“Three things,” said John. “To start.” God, those lips. He wanted to kiss them so badly. It was strange, because he knew how wonderful it could be, but in seven years, he had never kissed this man before. Not this man.

Sherlock nodded somberly.

“One.” He glanced toward the door. It was a little thing, but he hoped Sherlock would understand. “I want my name on the bell. Next to yours. I live here, too.”

Before he was even finished speaking, Sherlock was nodding fervidly. “I can go change it out right now.” And he made as though to leave, but John gripped him firmly at the shoulders to keep him in place.

Laughing, John said, “Later’s fine. We’re not done here.”

“Oh,” said Sherlock, smiling through his blush. The man was blushing. “Of course. Two?”

“Two . . .” John took a large gulp of air, readying himself for this next request. It wasn’t as simple as adding a name to a paper slip, and he didn’t know how Sherlock would take it.

“Say it,” Sherlock urged.

“I want to start assisting on your cases. I can be useful. Now,” he hurried on, to forestall any
objections, “I know I’m not as, as, as smart as he was. I don’t have the same skill sets, or experiences, and I may have a lot of questions, but—”

“John.”

“—but! I can still be of help! I can, I don’t know, take notes, or interview people, or, or, well, I’ve some practice firing a weapon now, and I can learn other things, like first aid and Morse code, I mean, I’ve read all John’s blog posts, and maybe I should start one—”

“John.”

“So you see, I can be handy in a pinch, if you’ll let me. Just let me. I’ll prove to you—”

“John!”

His mouth snapped shut, and he waited for an answer.

Sherlock smiled at last. “John, I want you working cases with me. I want you by my side, every case, every step of the way.”

“You do?”

“I do.” He combed through John’s hair with his fingers, and his eyes occasionally skimmed down to his lips, like he was thinking about it, too. “I’ve been . . . distracted, so my cases are piling up. I could really use your help.” He chuckled softly at the expression on John’s face, which, John imagined, must have been one of utter disbelief at how easy that had been. “We can start with the disappearance of Richard Halloway. Been missing for almost a week now, and some say he’s fled to Taured, but—”

“It was the dog walker,” said John. “Only person with spare keys to the back door, and a history of mental disorder. She said the birds told her to kill him, and she trained the dog to follow the wrong trail.”

Sherlock stared at him in wonder.

“We . . . already solved that one. In the other place.”

“John Watson,” said Sherlock, his eyes sparkling, “you wonderful, you brilliant—”

John couldn’t wait a second longer. He grabbed the back of Sherlock’s head, pressed up on his tippy toes, and brought their lips together at last. There was a short squeak of surprise in Sherlock’s throat, but John eased him through it. Softly, he moved his lips, and softly he parted them, and as he caressed Sherlock’s mouth with his, he touched his face and neck like his skin was fine porcelain, while the other hand slid under Sherlock’s shirt to feel the warm skin just above his trousers, then trailing around until his hand splayed across the small of Sherlock’s bare back, pulling him closer.

Sherlock sighed into John’s mouth. He was recovering himself quickly. With the penchant of a genius in love, he was a quick study of the art of kissing, and he followed John’s lead with gusto. Soon, he was cupping John’s head with both hands as though to keep him from wandering away, and their mouths moved together, kissing fervently, hungrily. Filled with the burning need to fully express his desire, John ventured forward with his tongue, suggestively, and when it met Sherlock’s, warm and wet, Sherlock groaned, quaked, and pulled back, breathing hard. His pupils were blown wide with want, but also amazement, because Sherlock Holmes had never before known the sweet wonder of a kiss.
But before he could get a word out, John said, “And three.”

Speechless, Sherlock nodded.

John kissed him again, softly, chastely; nevertheless, his body tingled in anticipation. His voice was husky with want as he said, “Make love to me? Today? Right now?”

Sherlock stared, mouth slack, uncomprehending. And John knew why. He wasn’t in heat. Taking a knot outside of the heat was foolhardy at best, and most likely would result in estrus poisoning. But they didn’t need to knot to become one, to touch each other in every part, to inspire pleasure that set the body singing. He knew that now. He knew how things could be different between them, better. He knew what he wanted.

“How?” Sherlock stuttered.

“I have a few . . . ideas,” John smirked. “I can show you . . .”

He was slowly backing Sherlock toward the sofa.

“Show me . . .?” Sherlock said, as his calves met the cushions.

John placed his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders, guiding him down. He knew what he was doing, but he wasn’t exactly sure what he was doing. Even with the other Sherlock, with whom he had, erm, experimented more widely, he had never really taken the lead. But with Sherlock now seated on the sofa, he crawled on top, one knee on either side of Sherlock’s thighs. Sighing, he sat back on Sherlock’s knees, grasped Sherlock’s hair, and rested his forehead against his Alpha’s.

“If you’ll let me?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. You can’t. Not like this.”

John placed a finger beneath Sherlock’s chin and tilted his head back, and there, he kissed him again. Sherlock keened. His hands roved up John’s back in the shape of claws, but without the nails, raking pleasantly in all directions. John’s legs spread wide and his pelvis slid closer to Sherlock’s waist, where he felt, beneath the pajama bottoms, a firm swelling, getting firmer.


“John, John.” Sherlock’s eyes were closed in an effort to control himself, keep himself from taking over, and let John work.

“That’s right, just let me. Let me . . .”

He tugged on the string of Sherlock’s bottoms to loosen them, and while one hand undid the bow, the other busied itself with seeing just how much Sherlock wanted to be touched.

“Aaah!” Sherlock threw back his head, and John did something he’d never done before, and went for his neck, like an Alpha.

Sherlock bucked. His fingers squeezed John’s shirt so fiercely John thought he heard a rip at the sleeve. Too much, it was too much too fast, for both of them, and he needed to slow things down.

John removed his hand and scooted back, but he lifted his lips to Sherlock’s once again, changing the rhythm from fevered want to slow-burning desire. “Softly.” He kissed. “Softly, my love.”
He moved his hands away from their lower halves and softly, softly, brushed the pads of his fingertips down Sherlock’s cheeks. When they were both sipping sweetly at one another’s mouths, and when the fire had gentled to a steadily glowing ember, John slid to the side to lie down on the sofa, bringing Sherlock with him.

There, they lay together, legs intertwined, bodies warming each other, and hearts beating as one. There, they kissed and touched and tasted, exploring in ways they never had before. There, for both of them, it was a second first time, one they were never meant to have and didn’t know was possible. There, John learned that his Sherlock could be soft. He learned that Sherlock could do tender. It didn’t have to be rushed and frenzied and desperate. They already knew how to do things that way. No, it could be just like this—unhurried, thoughtful, and wonderful.

Softly, softly.

So it was softly that John pushed the shoulders of Sherlock’s dressing gown down his arms and dropped it on the floor, and slowly that Sherlock, one handed, pulled his shirt over his head. There, John saw the bruising from the dog fight: large circles of purple and brown, some still swollen, others fading. Frowning, John lightly brushed them with the backs of his fingers, but Sherlock stopped him, taking hold of his hand and bringing it to his lips to kiss, and John understood the gesture. The fight was for him, all for him, and he would do it again and never complain. Sherlock pulled the fingers into his mouth, sucking sweetly. Then he helped John out of his own shirt. With hips kissing, leisurely grinding, they explored one another’s collarbones and nipples and navels. Sherlock kissed the bond mark with an air of reverence, and as he did, John let out a long sigh, his hands stilling in Sherlock’s curls.

Sherlock lifted his head.

“Thank you for coming back to me,” he whispered.

John was lying beneath Sherlock now. At some point in their sensuous ministrations, he had lain back and Sherlock found himself on top. But even this was new. Normally, he was on his stomach with Sherlock behind him. But now they faced each other, and from here they could look into each other’s eyes and read each other’s faces.

“Thank you for wanting me to,” John answered.

“Of course I wanted you to. How could I want for anything else? You’re my John. You’ve always been.”

For a moment or two, while stroking Sherlock’s bare neck and shoulders, John contemplated how to respond. Always, he had shied away from bald honesty, even with himself. He didn’t want to do that anymore.

“Sherlock, when it happened . . . The swap, I mean. When I was pulled into another universe and I realized I wasn’t Omega anymore . . .”

“Yes?”

“I thought it was over between us. I believed you wouldn’t want me anymore, because if I wasn’t Omega, how was I any good to you?”

Sherlock’s face cringed as though in pain, and he started to shake his head in denial. “Never—”

“I know. That is, I know now. But you have to understand. I didn’t know it then. I didn’t value myself as anything more, and I didn’t think you did either. And it was the most miserable feeling in
any universe.” His fingers kneaded Sherlock’s skin. “I don’t want to feel like that ever again.”

“I’m sorry you ever felt that way,” Sherlock said, and he closed his eyes and nuzzled John’s face with his own. His lips skimmed across John’s lips. “I’m sorry I made you think you were anything less than the world to me.”

John felt his throat thickening. “You mean it?”


“What?”

“You remember the day I met you, when I told you I had no interest in a bond-mate?”

“I remember.”

“What I meant was, I’d never, before you, had interest in a mate. Any mate. At all. Full stop.”

“So . . .” said John, trying to understand what it was Sherlock was trying to tell him, “before me—”

“There was no before you. Not for me. Alphas don’t need to mate, not like Omegas do, and any Alpha who thinks differently is kidding himself. Most have a drive, certainly, but . . . not me. Not until I met you.”

John knew his mouth was open in wonder, but he couldn’t seem to find words to fill it. He and Sherlock had been partners for seven years. How had he never known this? Not that he went on and on about his former Alphas—they were a given—but in part because he had enjoyed so few of them, but in greater part because he remembered so few of them: they dissolved in Sherlock’s shadow.

“I saw you, sitting alone on the train that day,” Sherlock continued, “and I can’t really explain it, but I felt . . . drawn to you. Like I already knew you, like we had been dear friends as children, or in another life altogether. It was like there was someone pushing at me from behind, urging me toward you. So I decided to talk to you, sit with you. Within minutes, I knew I wanted to share your next heat with you. And well, you said yes, so I did, and after, I never wanted to let you go.”

“We’re meant to be, Sherlock,” John said with conviction. “I’ve always thought so, but now I know it with all my heart. Here, or in any world. We complete each other.”

“I love you, John Watson. I know we don’t say it. But it’s always been true.”

“Sherlock, Sherlock,” said John. He felt fire coursing through him, and pulled Sherlock down by the neck, hungry for his touch. Sherlock kissed him with urgency, open-mouthed and lithe-tongued, and John couldn’t stop himself from moaning from a place down deep. He spread his thighs wide, creating a cradle, and he felt the full weight of his Alpha sink against him, heavy, hot, and thick. His hands slid down Sherlock’s back, and his fingers pushed down into Sherlock’s trousers and beneath his underwear to grasp firmly the smooth, round skin, and pull him closer, closer. Sherlock’s hardness increased, and John’s own cock, though considerably smaller, throbbed excitedly as they rubbed together.

“Touch me,” he gasped. “Please.”

“How?” Sherlock asked.

Sherlock moved swiftly down John’s body, licking his nipples, kissing his belly, and suddenly stripped John’s trousers and underwear to his knees, then off entirely. John shivered with delight, expecting Sherlock to rejoin him at the head of the sofa where they would kiss passionately, John’s legs wrapped around Sherlock, and they would thrust together. Instead, Sherlock stayed at the foot, kissed the inside of John’s right knee, then up the inner thigh. John stopped breathing entirely as Sherlock spread his legs wide and parted his lips obscenely, and then—

Everything was heat. Tight, and wet, and hot, and Sherlock’s mouth was on John, and John was inside him. John was inside Sherlock. He was small; Sherlock could take him all at once. Tongue undulating, swirling, pressing, and John was left writhing in a pleasure he’d never known before. This body, which had once known only what it was to receive and be filled, now knew the pleasure to belonging inside someone else. It was capable of more than he ever dreamed. He was capable of more.

The pleasure was building toward ecstasy, but John was not losing himself in it as during a heat. He was fully aware of everything. He was seeped in every moment, feeling every heartbeat. His fingers twined in Sherlock’s hair, he gasped and panted and moaned, and Sherlock gave and gave, tongue flattening, lips smoothing against John’s skin, and the hard cave of Sherlock’s mouth vibrating John toward fulfillment. Closer, closer. He whined at the intensity of it all, and his fingers tightened in Sherlock’s hair.

Then Sherlock was moaning, and John fell over the edge. Waves of pleasure rolled through him, and he was thrusting into Sherlock’s mouth, and he may have shouted, or sang, or yodeled for all he knew, but Sherlock saw him through it, let him ride the storm. He’d never had an orgasm like this. Omegas usually took it another way. But this—this was possible. And he had never known. He trembled through it, filled with sheer joy, and then, as the heat began to ebb, Sherlock eased him down.

And when Sherlock lifted his head again, John reached for him, beckoned him with love-filled eyes, wanting to hold him. Then Sherlock was there, head lying on John’s chest, and John’s arms encircled him again.

“I love you, Sherlock Holmes,” he said, voice still quivering with what he had just experienced.

“Thank you,” Sherlock whispered in return.

“Let me . . . That is, do you need . . . ?”

“Um. No. Not for a little while.”

There was a beat of silence. Then John began to giggle, and Sherlock with him. John tightened his arms and kissed the top of Sherlock’s head.

“You’re a wonder.”

“I was going to say the same of you.”

They lay together in the bliss of afterglow, still touching and stroking, but without intention, only to feel and be felt. John felt like he could lie like that forever, perfectly sated, perfectly content, breathing in his bond-mate and reveling in their lifelong union.

Until John was struck by a horrible thought.

He gasped. “Oh shit.”
“What is it?” Sherlock asked, lifting his head from John’s chest.

“When I fell into the river,” he began, “I was knocked out. The river swept me under.”

“I’ve never been so scared in all my life,” Sherlock admitted.

“But what if you hadn’t been there?”

“I don’t like thinking about it.”

“But— Oh God. Oh God, Sherlock.”

“What?” Sherlock’s eyebrows lowered in consternation.

John shook his head in despair. “When I fell . . . I was alone.”

“What do you mean? Where was—?”

“Sherlock wasn’t there. I didn’t tell him.”

Sherlock lifted himself sharply up on an elbow. “What? Why!”

“He wouldn’t listen. He thought it was a horrible idea, and he would’ve stopped me! So I— I lied. I had to, or John would have fallen without me. But what that means is, he landed without Sherlock. There was nobody to pull him from the water. Oh my God, what have I done!”

“No, John. No. He’s okay. John is okay.”

“He’s not!”

“He is!”

“How do you know!”

“Because!” Sherlock lifted a hand to John’s face, holding his cheek to soothe the worry lines there.

“The bloody universe hasn’t made us all go through such shit just to fuck it all up now.”

“The universe?”

“A brilliant, though insane, scientist recently convinced me that the universe is striving for a state of perfection. This”—he slid his fingers between John’s and squeezed their palms together—“is perfection.”

“You mean, like destiny?”

“If you like. I didn’t believe in fate before I met you. I didn’t understand it until I met the other John. But yes, I believe there is a state of perfection, and the universe corrects for it. It’s what brought you back to me. And it’s what will take the other John back home. Safe. With the Sherlock of his world. Because that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

John smiled, filled with hope. “Then, do you think . . . ?” he began, then trailed off, not sure whether he should give voice to another concern.

“Hm?” Sherlock encouraged.

“I was just thinking. Hoping.”
“For what?”

“I’ve never been happier than I am now, right at this moment. With you. And I was wondering if, you know, they are feeling the same.”

“What do you— Oh!” Sherlock shimmied up the sofa, so their heads rested together. “You’re wondering whether, in the other place, things are going quite so . . .”—he grinned—“. . . well.”

“Well,” John smiled in return, “it would be a damn shame if it weren’t.”

“Mm, a damn shame.”

“A damn fucking shame.”

Sherlock tittered, apparently enjoying his newfound foul tongue.

“But,” John sighed out dramatically, “I think it’s quite possibly a disaster.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well, I hate to admit it, but the other Sherlock is a really stubborn soul.”

“When it comes to mulish obstinacy,” Sherlock said, “I bet the other John’s got him beat.”

They laughed again, but John was still worried.

“Did John love him?”

“Yes, he does love him.” But Sherlock was somber as he spoke. “It just took him a while to realize it. And frankly, I think he’s scared shitless by it. And Sherlock?”

“So much he can’t even talk about it.”

“Right. So.”

“Rather puts them at a standstill, doesn’t it?”

“So who makes the first move?”

They looked deep into each other’s eyes without blinking. Then, they each spoke at once:

“Sherlock,” said Sherlock.

“John,” said John.

They cracked up at once, and the laughter dissolved into tiny pecking kisses, interrupted by more laughter.

“Ah hell,” said Sherlock, once the giggles had subsided. “Whatever happens . . . Between those two? It’ll be an explosion.”
In Which John Suffers Another Collision (Part 1)

Sherlock wants you to know—John wrote with urgency, the last message he would ever be able to deliver to himself—that he’ll be there. Right after you jump, he’ll be there. So don’t be afraid.

He turned the message around and pointed it at the mirror, watching John’s eyes skitter across them, then widen with the hope of this promise. His counterpart nodded eagerly, and began to scribble back.

“John!” Sherlock was calling from down below. “We have to go!”

Damn it! There was more he wanted to say, more questions he needed to ask. But there was no more time. He wrote quickly: Gotta go. Good luck. And when he showed it to the mirror, he saw John had written back as well:

Is there anything you want to tell your Sherlock? Before we jump?

They read each other’s messages, and each of their faces fell. On the other side of the mirror, John nodded somberly and lifted his hand in farewell. For his part, John could barely respond. Was there anything he wanted to say? Anything at all that could be expressed in three seconds of furious scribbles, anything that could appropriately convey his longing to return or desperation to see the face of his dearest friend? Overwhelmed by the impossibility of getting it right, he did exactly the wrong thing instead, and shook his head.

He had never seen so sad an expression on another man’s face, let alone his own. But there it was. And then he was gone.

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John burst with white light. He fell into white, and white surged out of him, and he was white, and he was light, and all was celestial fire, enveloping, enfolding, unfolding. He floated in nothingness, and he glided on time like it was a wave, and he walked on lightning like it was a road, and in front of him was himself, who drew nearer and was nearer and was gone, all in a moment that lasted forever, and they passed each other, and they were each other, and they touched each other, were cloven together and then cloven apart, and they traded worlds, and the fire became ice.

Pain shot through his bones. Icy water bit his skin like razor teeth. His lungs felt like they had collapsed. John opened his eyes to darkness. He kicked his legs, but the water resisted him, pulled him down, down. He reached up. Kicking, flailing, fighting, he pulled for the surface of the water, against the pain, against the current, against a body trying to find rest in unconsciousness. And then he broke through.

He shattered the barrier between water and air, and gasped. When the lapping water pushed up against his face, he choked, but he could breathe. He was alive. The Thames was sweeping him along, downriver, and as he floated onto his back to rest and recover, he knew that he was leaving the Waterloo Bridge behind. Looking up to the rails, however, he saw no one standing there.

His adrenaline-fueled body and pounding heart were the only things keeping him warm, so he had one primary objective: to get out of river. The banks seemed so far, but he swam, hand over hand, and kicked his shoed feet. Shoes, trousers, shirt and jacket, all these things slowed him, and a couple of times he thought he might not make it. But through sheer grit, he refused, after all he’d
endured to get there, to be beaten now, and by the bloody Thames, no less.

And then, the northern bank. On hands and knees, he crawled out of the water, across mud, flint, and dried weeds. There, he collapsed, panting hard, his muscles weary and unwilling to move another inch. Flipping onto his back, he stared up at the black sky, its twinkling stars barely visible through the light pollution of the city, but he could still see them. He shivered. His breath rose as fog, evidence that he was alive.

He was alive.

So did that mean . . . ? Had it worked? Was he back?

Without sitting up—he was too exhausted at the moment to manage it—he fumbled with the top button of his trousers, and only then did he realize that they were his trousers. Not the ones he had put on that morning, but ones he hadn’t seen in weeks. Yes, yes! Then that meant—

Two-handed now, he yanked and flipped and unzipped, and . . . yes! That was him down there! All of him! He saw it, felt it, knew it to be his own. Infused with joy, he gave himself an affectionate pat on the head (as it were), like shaking hands with an old friend. Then his head fell back to the bank and he started laughing. He punched the night sky and gave a loud whoop, then continued to laugh so hard he almost cried.

“Oh, I’m back,” he breathed. “I’m home.”

But he lay there on the bank, all alone. The bridge was empty. The river was quiet. It wasn’t quite the welcome home party he had imagined.

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Sherlock was lost.

Sitting cross-legged in the center of his bed, elbows on knees, fingertips joined at his chin, he was supposed to be working out possible solutions to counter the imprudent bridge proposal. So he entered his Mind Palace and took temporary residence in one of his thought laboratories. He set his internal alarm clock for thirty minutes. John would likely be done talking with John by then. Hopefully, if he didn’t return with a more prudent solution, Sherlock would be ready to offer up half a dozen.

But he had run through only two experiments (favoring ones involving trains) when his intensive thought process was . . . derailed. By a visitor to his Palace.

“What’s wrong with my plan?”

Sherlock turned from his worktable and saw Mind Palace John leaning against the doorjamb.

“It’s a damn good plan. Takes care of all the moving parts.”

“And don’t be foolish, it’s too risky.” Sherlock rose from the swivel stool to face him and buttoned the suit jacket he always wore in his Mind Palace. “Like I told the other John, what good is swapping minds back if your body just ends up dead?”

John rolled his eyes. “We’re not jumping from the top of Tower Bridge. It’s the Waterloo. It’s not that high.”

“John, how well do you know your history?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “In the nineteenth
century, the Waterloo Bridge was the most popular place in London for committing suicide. Not that high? It was high enough to account for fifteen percent of all suicides in the city. Few people ever survived the drop. So don’t tell me it’s a good idea. I won’t risk it.”

“Won’t risk what?”

“You not coming back to me in one piece.”

“Coming back . . . to you?” John chuckled and shook his head. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Sherlock felt himself blushing. “What I meant to say—”

“Sherlock, please. Do you have any idea what I’ve gone through over here? It’s been a nightmare. *Sherlock* has been a nightmare. All he wants to do is fuck, and I don’t have a choice one way or the other. It’s screw, or be screwed, so to speak, and I hate it. I’ve hated every second of it. Even if I were gay, I’d hate it. I never wanted that with you. Or whatever the hell version of you keeps coming at me. So when I get back—and I *will* get back—I don’t feel like I have a choice in the matter. I’m going to need some distance. *From* you.”

A well of protest rose in his throat. “What are you saying? I’m not the one who did that to you. That was *him*.”

“Right. So tell me. Just what have you and the ‘other John’ been up to in the meantime, eh?”

“I . . .”

“He told me. You *know* he told me. I don’t think I can bear to even look at you anymore, knowing what you did to me. To my body. Two Sherlocks have taken advantage of something I never wanted to give.”

Sherlock trembled. It hadn’t been like that. He had thought— The other John made him believe— How could he make John understand? How could he make it right?

“I’m so, so sorry, John. I swear: You come back, and we’ll never mention it again. I’ll delete it. It will be like it never happened.”

“Yeah, well.” Mind Palace John sighed and shook his head. “You can delete things, Sherlock. But I can’t. I’ll always know. And *I* can’t live with that.”

Mind Palace John stepped backwards through the door, disappearing.

“John?” Sherlock called after him, dismayed. “John!” He ran to the door, but when he burst through into the grand corridor with its vaulted ceilings and stone archways (he did tend to favor a gothic sensibility when it came to decorating), John was nowhere to be seen. He started running, desperate to find him, reason with him. It didn’t have to be like this!

Then a side door opened, and John poked his head out. “Psst! Sherlock! In here!” And Mind Palace John reached for his wrist and pulled him into a closet.

Sherlock didn’t remember ever constructing this closet. He’d never seen it before. But it was dark and tight, and but for John, empty.

John pulled a chain, and a dim lightbulb slowly burned into being above their heads.

“What’s this? What’s going on?” Sherlock asked, bewildered. “You’re—” He squinted. “You’re
not John. I’ve never seen you before.”

“I’m new,” said John, grinning like he knew a secret. “I’m Fantasy John, and I’m about to solve all your problems.”

“. . . How?”

“Oh, sweetie.” John placed two hands on his shoulders and shoved him against the wall. “From here on out, I’m all you’ll ever need.”

Suddenly, John surged forward and they were kissing. Passionately. Open mouthed and tongues as excited as a kid licking an ice cream cone, and hardly less messy. Heat spiked from Sherlock’s stomach and to his heart before flooding rapidly to his cock, which swelled with heaviness.

“Yeah, you like that,” John panted, his hands roaming wildly, touching every part of him.

“Whatever you want, however you want it. You have such a vivid imagination, after all. You want me sweet and compliant? I can do that. You want me quick and dirty? Honey, I can do dirty. I can do it all.”

“Jommph,” Sherlock tried to protest, but John’s mouth was all over his. Meanwhile, his hands were busy further south, pulling down a zip, folding back the flaps, reaching into his underwear. And oh God, he wanted more, he wanted all of it. But this wasn’t right. This wasn’t real.

“Stop,” he gasped.

John paused. Lifted his eyes. Frowned.

“You don’t want me?”

“I want . . . I want . . .”

“You want this. I know you want this.” John ran his hands across Sherlock’s chest, sending shivers down his back. “That’s why you created me.” He grazed Sherlock’s bottom lip with his thumb and combed clawed fingers through his curls before tightening and pulling and making him groan.

“Because ever since he left your bed, you’ve known he’s not coming back to it. And it’s never felt so cold and empty. But it’s okay, it’s okay. You have me.”

Fantasy John slid an arm around his neck and pulled Sherlock closer. Sherlock, trembling from heartache, parted his lips to meet him. Maybe he should give in. Maybe this was the solution, the only way he could survive a life without John’s love. In the real world, he would be his normal, detached, cold, robotic self, the way John preferred him. But at night, he could retreat here, to this closet, to this John, a dark secret within his Mind Palace, and surrender to the memory, no, the fantasy, of a John that loved him.

The closet door flew open, and there stood John.

“Sherlock?”

Fantasy John tried to grab the door handle and pull it closed again, but John’s foot came down as a barrier.

“John?” Sherlock gasped in confusion, his arms full of another John.

“Of course, it’s me. What are you doing with him?”
But this wasn’t Mind Palace John, who had stormed off. And it wasn’t Fantasy John, either (the John that was gripping his curls so hard he saw the world sideways). Like Fantasy John, this was a new John to the Mind Palace, one that had never made an appearance before, and one he had never really expected to. He didn’t know what else to call him, to distinguish him, so he silently dubbed him Omega John.

“I think you should come out of there,” Omega John said, holding out his hand for Sherlock to take. “Come on. You don’t need him.”

“Don’t I?” Conflicted, Sherlock looked perplexedly between the two Johns. One pouted. The other regarded him with compassion, understanding, his hand still outstretched.

“Of course not. Come on. I’ll show you.”

Sherlock turned to look one last time at Fantasy John, whose eyes were wide, pleading him to stay. But he put his hand in Omega John’s, stepped out of the closet, and closed the door.

The Mind Palace was quiet. They walked it together, hand in hand. Sherlock was rather surprised by this kind of silent familiarity. John was leading him, confidently, as if he knew the floorplans of the Palace better than he did.

“Where are we going?”

“You know where.”

He did know where. It was a wing he coded as “Study in Pink,” but what he really meant was “John Watson.”

“You told me,” said John calmly, and Sherlock had the surreal impression that he was in the presence of some sort of sage, “that if John ever found out how you felt about him, he would be upset. Appalled, I believe, is the word you used. Mortified.” John turned the corner and came to a set of locked double doors. There was a keypad, and only Sherlock knew the code. But John punched the numbers as smoothly as if he had done it a thousand times.

“You forgot repulsed,” Sherlock said in a small voice. Together, they entered the large wing, as wide and long as a passage in Versailles. It was cluttered with everything that reminded him of John and all his memories about John and all his thoughts about John. It was fit to bursting.

“Have you paused to consider it the other way around? How he really feels about you?”

“What do you mean?”

John pointed at the portraits lining the walls. Well, not exactly portraits. More like blown-up pages of illuminated manuscripts, as painstakingly inked and decorated as any page of ancient scripture. They contained every word John had ever penned on his blog, transformed into calligraphy, highlighted with colorful inks and images. As they walked, Sherlock’s eyes grazed the words:

_I definitely think he might be mad but he was also strangely likeable. He was charming. It really was all just a bit strange._

_He’s fascinating._

_Did I mention he’s clever?_  

_H e’s so good at working the rest of us out._
I can’t deny that I prefer this kind of life.

I could see the look in Sherlock’s eyes—a flash of, not anger, but hurt. For a second, he looked like a little, lost child. I should have been horrified that he’d even doubt me for a second but, to be honest, it was so refreshingly human of him. He actually did value our friendship. He did, despite himself, care.

Not sure my life with Sherlock is compatible with long-term relationships.

Sherlock’s so brilliant, sometimes I’m left with my jaw hanging open.

I love this life. I do. I never want to give it up.

“John Watson—your John Watson, I should say—has an entire blog dedicated to you. It’s not about him. It rarely even touches on his personal life. It’s about you. What does that tell you, Sherlock, about how he feels about you?”

“He . . . admires what I do. He’s impressed by it.”

“He admires you. He’s impressed by you. Come on, you’re cleverer than this. What can you deduce about his heart?”

“I . . .”

“A man who writes this much about another man? With such pride, respect, veneration? His interest isn’t academic. A man who could be out there, dating, having other long-term and sexually fulfilling relationships? Instead, and he says this repeatedly, this is the life he wants. The one he is sharing with you. Because . . . ?”

Sherlock covered his mouth with a hand, wanting to say it, but not knowing how.

“He loves you, Sherlock. Just as you love him. It’s not that complicated.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Maybe not. But look around you. You’ve built him a palace inside your palace. Do you really think he hasn’t dedicated an entire chamber of his expansive heart to you? If the way he writes about you isn’t proof enough, think of the way he looks at you, teases you, laughs with you, and follows you into danger, night after night. Isn’t that exactly why he’ll follow you again? What’s more dangerous than love?”

Sherlock shook his head, wishing, hoping, but fearing all the same. He let those words be heard. “I’m scared.”

“Of love? That’s okay. But one thing is certain. You don’t need to be afraid of him. John Watson is the very last person on earth you need to hide from.”

“Then why did he lie to me?”

There was a long pause, because what he said wasn’t quite right. Omega John corrected him.

“Oh. No, Sherlock. That wasn’t him. That was me.”

Sherlock nodded, realizing he had momentarily confused the two of them. “That’s right. You lied to me. I could always tell when a John lied to me.”
“What was the lie?” John challenged him.

“What about the mirror?”

“You said John wanted to come home. For me. But you were lying. John never said that. And then later, when I asked you to tell John through the mirror that I miss him, miss him so terribly I can’t think straight anymore, and that I promise to do whatever it takes to bring him home, because I need him back . . . You said you’d tell him, but you were lying then, too. You finally understand, don’t you? John won’t want to hear it. He won’t return if he knows how I love him. But you need to get home, so . . . you can’t tell him, can you?”


Somewhere, far away, a door slammed.

“What do you mean?” Sherlock asked, feeling something inside of him turn over. A foreboding. What had he got wrong?

“That wasn’t the lie.”

“It wasn’t?”

In the distance, someone called his name.

“Think harder, love. It’s not that I wouldn’t tell him. It’s that I couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t?”

Omega John shook his head. “Because it’s done. It’s decided. The mirror is shattered; we’ve stepped through the looking glass.”

Sherlock’s eyes flew open with a gasp and found himself sitting upright on his bed. At last, far too late, he understood the lie: there was no rendezvous with the mirror tonight. There was only the bridge.
“Sherlock!”

Squishing in sopping socks, dripping river water with every step, a soaking John Watson took the steps two at a time in his eagerness to reach the sitting room. He missed a stair, fell forward, but scrambled upright again until he could see the door, the only thing separating him from the rest of his life.

He crashed through it.

Only to find the room empty.

“Sherlock?”

There was a sudden *thunk smash patter* from the back of the flat. Heart racing, John whipped his head around to see Sherlock racing through the kitchen. Then his face broke out in delight, because *Oh God there he is it’s him it’s Sherlock it’s my Sherlock!*

Sherlock skidded to a halt on the kitchen linoleum, and his eyes went wide at the sight of John standing there, hair wet and wild, clothes sticking to his skin. John’s heart skidded in response. They stood mute, staring at one another, like they’d never seen the sight of each other before, or never expected to again. John couldn’t help himself: He smiled. He laughed. He stood tall and spread his arms as if to say, *Here I am.*

Then Sherlock, with a face of disbelief, said, “He’s gone.”

The smile froze on John’s face. “What?”

“He lied to me.” His voice was flat, each syllable carefully measured, monotone.

John felt like he had walked in in the middle of a conversation. Or like he’d missed another step on the stair. He wasn’t quite following Sherlock’s train of thought.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re . . . John.”

John blinked at him. A feeling of impending dread was swelling in his stomach like a balloon. “Of course I am.”

“My John?”

“Yes.”


“Sherlock, what the hell is wrong with you? It’s me.”

“So . . . he left. He jumped.”

“Damn right he did. Question is, where were you?”

“He didn’t tell me. He didn’t even say goodbye, so and I didn’t know. And I wasn’t there to—”
Oh.

John’s face finally fell as the rest of him at last understood what Sherlock was saying. It all made sense. It explained why he had crashed into this world and woken up in it all alone, with no one to pull him from the river or be with him on the shore. Suddenly, his excitement swirled down the drain in the face of the reality that Sherlock . . . missed the other John.

“Oh,” he said again.

The heat was rising in his face, from embarrassment at his eagerness, from shame that he had been expecting, even hoping for, a different kind of reception.

*What are you, an idiot? What the fuck were you expecting, Watson? That Sherlock Holmes would sweep you off your feet? Crush you to his breast? Welcome you home with tears and kisses? You fucking fool!*

“I’m, um—” He fell back a couple of steps, laughed shortly, pretending not to be bothered, even though he was wishing he had drowned in the Thames. He ran a hand through his damp hair, feeling suddenly very itchy and self-conscious.

“John,” Sherlock said, barely a whisper.

But John couldn’t even look at him right now. He had a sudden and desperate need to escape.

“Right. So. I’m, uh . . . back. And clearly in need of a hot shower. The Thames is fucking freezing. If you were wondering.”

He pushed past Sherlock, making a bee-line for the loo. Sherlock didn’t even call after him. And just as well. He threw the door closed behind him, locked it, and twisted on the shower head, grateful for the noise that served as just another barrier between him and . . . whatever the hell had just happened. Jaw set hard (to keep his teeth from chattering), he peeled off the cold, wet clothes, left them to puddle on the floor, and stepped into the stream.

Within minutes, however, he was sitting on the floor of the tub, water coursing down upon his head from above, and staring into nothing.

Nothing. That pretty well summed up Sherlock’s reaction to his homecoming. Sherlock had been his greatest—and in the end, maybe his only—reason for needing to return. What else was there? He knew he no longer had a job. His sister pretty much couldn’t stand the sight of him. He’d even begun to enjoy *Alpha Angels* and now would never know if Wing Commander Max Hancock would escape the volcano lair where he was being held captive by a native tribe on whose island he had crashed in trying to return to Trixie Sandberg before her litter was born. He had come back for Sherlock. Because he had believed there was something more to come back to. But it was as he suspected. Just as he had feared.

Sherlock had fallen in love with the other John. And that John had gone.

This John had never felt so unwanted in all his life.

Heartsick, he began to cry.

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What. The hell. Just happened?
Sherlock stood stunned, mute, *dumb*. He’d been completely and utterly blindsided. In the space of five seconds, he had gone from believing—with great intensity—that he would need to spend the next several days, maybe even weeks, fashioning the perfect solution to bring John home.

And then suddenly, there he was.

His vision whited out. White noise filled his ears. He tried to move, but his feet were stuck; he tried to speak but his throat was stoppered. John. Right there. Right in front of him. His John.

It had been like seeing the aurora borealis for the first time after a lifetime of only hearing about it. It had been like hearing music for the first time after years and years of being inundated with only noise. The sight was so beautiful, he could only stop and stare. He could only freeze and listen. And then, when he spoke again, it was like his mouth couldn’t move, and words couldn’t form, and ideas were so garbled in his brain that he couldn’t order them. He had been reduced to an imbecile.

The other John had lied to him. He had left without saying goodbye. He had jumped alone. So John had returned alone.

“. . . and I wasn’t there . . .” *to catch you*, he had been trying to say. *To save you, to hold you, to bloody well be there for you upon your return!* He was horrified by his utter lack of verbosity. And so, just like that, John disappeared again.

What was he to do? How was he to fix this!

For a few wild moments, Sherlock paced the sitting room, brainstorming desperate and terrible solutions.

One: Throw caution to the winds! Break down the bathroom door, throw wide the shower curtain, and against yelps and curses and a whacking hand, gather John into his arms and confess his love.

No, John would wail on him if he did it like that. So he cast aside the dramatic fantasy of ripping away a towel or steamy bathroom mirrors and came up with—

Two: Write a note, a letter of apology and confession, and pin it to the wall for John to see the moment he stepped out of the bathroom, and meanwhile hide in his bedroom and wait for John to come to *him*. Yes, that was better. Relinquish the decision-making and put the power in John’s hands. And if a knock never came? Why, he’d just never leave the room ever, ever again. Yes, that sounded reasonable.

But also no. John wouldn’t respect such cowardice.

Was turning back time not an option here?

So though it made him nauseous, and strangely itchy and self-conscious, he knew what he had to do—

Three: Wait for him, right here in the sitting room, and then . . . talk.

That meant he had only minutes to prepare.

First, he trekked heavily upstairs to John’s room. John had hurried off to the bathroom so quickly, he’d forgotten to get clothes to change into, and probably didn’t want to tramp through the flat in naught but a towel (an image Sherlock tried to shake from his imagination). So Sherlock grabbed him underwear, pajamas bottoms, and t-shirt, which he knew to be John’s favorite to fall asleep in.
He also grabbed his dressing gown from off the back of the door and slippers from under the bed. Then he folded it all neatly together and stacked it outside the bathroom door for John to find.

But on his way back to the sitting room, he noticed, there on the kitchen table, a folded piece of paper with his name scribbled across it in John’s unmistakable handwriting: For Sherlock.

Curious, he lifted the page and began to read:

Dear Sherlock,

Please forgive me. There is so much more I wanted to tell you before I left, but I’ve run out of time. I’m heading to the Waterloo Bridge. I’m going home, and I’m bringing your John back. I’m sorry I’ve lied. But this is the only way.

These past few weeks have changed me. You’ve changed me. I’m going to live a better life and be a happier man because of the short time I got to spend with you. I will always love you for that.

Now it’s time to change your own life. John will be home any minute now, and if his time in my world was anything like my time in his, he won’t come back the same. Things will be different, but it doesn’t mean they won’t be good. Be honest with him. Be honest with yourself. You don’t have to be afraid, not of him. He loves you. I know, because he’s me.

Goodbye, my friend. And thank you.

John

Sherlock heard the door to the bathroom creak open shyly. He folded the letter quickly and slid it under the tea tray.

But John must have found the clothes laid out for him, because just seconds later, the door closed again, softly.

So he waited.

While he waited, he rehearsed in his head what he was going to say. Every word had to be perfect.

And he waited a bit longer. John was taking his time leaving the privacy of the bathroom.

Heart pounding like a kettle drum in his chest, Sherlock went to stand by the window. He needed to calm down if he was going to do this right and not choke.

Be honest, John had said.

It’s not that complicated, John had said.

You don’t need to hide from him, John had said.

If he had to wait much longer, though, he just might die of high blood pressure and heart disease.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock whirled. “John, I can explain,” he said at once, and was ready to launch into prepared remarks when John, who stood at the edge of the sitting room in the clothes and dressing gown Sherlock had picked out for him, lifted a hand to forestall him, appearing unexpectedly composed.

“I want to say I’m sorry. That was . . . unkind of me.”
“What?” Sherlock felt like he had walked in in the middle of a conversation. Or like he’d missed a step on the stair. He wasn’t quite following John’s train of thought.

“I was being insensitive. I should have asked: are you all right?”

Sherlock blinked. All he had planned to say, all he needed to say, was popping like soap bubbles in his brain. “Am I all right?”

“I realize how you must feel about . . . him. The John you lost. I mean, what you two had together—”

“Please . . .”

“—it was special. It must have been, for you to want to . . . That is, it must be really hard to give that up just so I could come back. So I’m . . . really sorry about that.”

John was speaking with utmost sincerity, but he was unable to make eye contact, as if his every word pained him to speak.

“I need to say something,” Sherlock said. He swallowed hard. God, his throat was dry. “Yes. I loved him. Because he helped me—”

“No, I do—”

John shrugged, a tortured smile on his face. “It is what it is, yeah? Don’t worry about it.”

“I need to explain why I loved him.”

“No need, no need. I told you before, it’s aaall good.” He laughed forcibly and rubbed the back of his neck, a clear sign that John Watson was troubled. “Shit, is that the time?” He looked at his wrist. He wasn’t even wearing a watch. “Jesus, Sherlock, I’m knackered. It’s been a while since this body’s had a proper night’s sleep, I can tell.”

“I really think we should talk about this.”

“No.” He said it like a command, and for that moment, the feigned ease slipped away and his face hardened. He couldn’t take it anymore, and he wouldn’t. “Please. Not right now, I can’t— I need to sleep.” Sherlock heard John’s throat tightening with emotion, and John heard it too. His face flushed with obvious embarrassment. “We don’t have to do this tonight. Let’s just . . . go to bed and worry about it in the morning.”

And with that, John made an abrupt about-face, marched back through the kitchen, down the hall . . . and straight into Sherlock’s bedroom.

Sherlock stood at the end of the hallway and stared. There was John, in his bedroom, tossing his dressing gown into the corner, kicking off his slippers, and pulling off the pajama bottoms because, evidently, John Watson slept in his boxer shorts. Then he disappeared from view, heading to the bed, and Sherlock heard the covers being pulled back and the sigh of the mattress as John crawled in.

Flabbergasted, Sherlock as much as floated down the hallway and stepped cautiously into his own bedroom, like it wasn’t his own. John was on the bedside farther from the door, lying on his side facing out, with the covers gathered up around his shoulders. He had left a wide space on the other
side of the bed for another body to occupy.

Sherlock’s internal debate raged. What was happening? Was John claiming this room as his own now? Was Sherlock expected to go sleep on the sofa? Or . . . did John mean for him to . . . join him . . . in the bed . . . for the night?

What. The hell. Was happening?

Slowly, keeping a weather eye on John’s back and preparing to bolt from the room at any moment, Sherlock began to undress. Socks first. The least intimate of articles. Then he unbuttoned his cuffs and shirt down the front, removing it carefully, then his trousers, until he wore only an undershirt and pants. But he grabbed some pajama bottoms and slid into them quickly. At last, he folded back the sheets, waited another breath, but when he received no objections, he slid under the covers and held perfectly still, staring at the ceiling, wondering what would happen next.

“Lights,” John mumbled.

He clicked off the lights.

xXx

Two hours and eleven minutes later, Sherlock observed that John was dreaming.

At first, it was the little twitches: a restless foot, an agitated shoulder, a head that seemed to be shaking back and forth, saying no.

Then came the little noises in the back of his throat. Glottal stops pushing air from lungs to mouth, then the panting, the whimpering. The bed shook as John started to tremble. This wasn’t just a dream. It was a nightmare.

Sherlock knew John had nightmares. He heard them, sometimes, through the ceiling. Some nights, they wore themselves out and John continued sleeping. Other nights, he shouted himself awake. Once, he even fell out of bed. Because John never brought them up, neither did Sherlock, and so both pretended like there was nothing wrong. But Sherlock never felt right about that. He had always felt like he should be able to offer some sort of help.

And now, he was less than a foot away, witnessing firsthand the throes of bad dreams that too often beset his friend. What should he do? Was it wrong to wake him? Dangerous to touch him?

John’s breathing was coming harder now; the fear was escalating. Whatever was happening behind those sealed eyelids, Sherlock had to put a stop to it.

He reached out across the space that divided them and placed a hand on John’s back. “John,” he whispered.

John sucked in a shuddering breath, and he rolled. He rolled right onto his back, pinning Sherlock’s arm beneath his body, and kept coming, until he was almost right on top of Sherlock, curling around him, burrowing his head into Sherlock’s chest, and clutching the front of his t-shirt. Instinctively, Sherlock’s arms folded around him like wings, locking onto either shoulder, holding him close.

Then he held his breath. What. The hell. Was happening? He was holding John Watson in his arms! His John Watson. His John Watson had just rolled into his arms, and he was holding him, and they were together, there, in his bed, and he was holding the one person in this universe or any other that was more precious to him than his own existence. He couldn’t breathe. Breathing would
break the spell.

But in that quiet, he realized something: John had stopped breathing too.

As if in slow motion, a fully awake John Watson lifted his head from Sherlock’s chest. In the dark, their eyes met. Sherlock parted his lips, having no idea what he was about to say. But John spoke first.

“Oh my God.”

Suddenly, he was scrambling. Tangled in sheets and limbs, it was not an easy affair, but John was like a startled white rabbit. Sherlock took a splayed hand to the face and a knee in the ribs before John floundered to the floor. “I’m so sorry,” John was saying, as he picked himself up. “I don’t know what I was think— I’m so sorry.” And he bolted for the door.

Sherlock threw back the covers and rushed after him. “John, wait, stop!”

Running down the hallway, he hit every light switch he came to until he caught up with John in the sitting room. With nowhere else to go, John came to a stop by the sofa, facing away from Sherlock in mortification, and in his desperate need to hide, he covered his face with his hands.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock asked as gently as he knew how. Whatever was happening, whatever would happen next, they had just crossed a border, which placed them in new and uncharted, and possibly dangerous, territory.

“Please don’t say anything,” said John, voice muffled by his hands.

Sherlock stopped himself from crossing the void between them to lay a hand on his shoulder or rub his back, as he was inclined. Instead, he stayed planted, hoping only to say the right thing and ease the torment John clearly suffered. “No need to feel embarrassed. It’s just . . . one of those things.”

John groaned. The back of his head shook no with remorse. “Crawling into your flatmate’s bed and then throwing yourself on top of him in the middle of the night is not just one of those things.”

“To be fair,” Sherlock equivocated, “you didn’t think it was me.”

John’s hands lowered, and he slowly turned his head to regard Sherlock over his shoulder, like he couldn’t believe what Sherlock had just said.

“And you thought you were . . . somewhere else.”

“Yes. No. Not exactly. Hell, I don’t know.” He slowly sank to the couch and dropped his head into his hands to avoid looking at Sherlock. Instead, he addressed the rug. “The other me, in the other place . . . he doesn’t have his own bedroom. The two of them are, you know, a couple. They share a room. A bed. And so I . . . for the last however long . . . He insisted, you see, and it was only practical, and I guess . . . I guess I just forgot.”

“Well,” said Sherlock, “there you have it. You didn’t mean it. It was hardly a problem, what happened tonight, but if you don’t want me to, I’ll never say another word about it. It will be like . . . like it never happened.”

“That’s what you want, is it?”

“It’s what you want.”
John’s head came up sharply. “That’s not what I said. God, Sherlock, can we just not—”

“Why is this so hard!” Sherlock suddenly exploded, shocking even himself. But something had been unleashed, and despite half of him being horrified and begging him to rein it in, the other half was an engine that had just been kicked into life. “Why won’t you talk to me? Why won’t you let me talk to you? Is it really so terrible, what’s happened, here or there, that you can’t even look at me anymore?”

“I’m sorry!” John shot back to his feet. “I am! I didn’t think it would be like this! I didn’t think that so short a time could change so much.”

“What has changed? Tell me, what?”

“You fell in love with him!”

Sherlock felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. So it was true. That’s what bothered John the most, that Sherlock had fallen in love with him, and John couldn’t stand it. Their friendship was ruined. Sherlock fell back a step, but before he could recover and find a way to fix this, John continued shouting.

“He told me, Sherlock. And I thought . . .” He shook his head and tried to laugh to hide just how serious this was to him, but Sherlock wasn’t fooled. “I thought you’d never been with anyone. Ever.”

“I hadn’t,” Sherlock said softly.

“Because you weren’t interested in anyone.”

“. . . I wasn’t.”

“But you were with him.”

“. . . Yes.”

“Then what was it? About him? What did he say or do to make you fall in love with him in . . . how many days before you—before you two—?”

“Seven days,” Sherlock said softly, “before I kissed him. Nine days before we . . . did anything else.”

John’s face twisted as though in pain, and he half turned away; but Sherlock’s accusation that he was hiding seemed to root him from turning away completely. Instead, he tried to school his face.

“Two years we’ve lived together,” he said, nearly whispering because of the thickness of his throat. “Two years, and you never once . . . And then, I leave, and just one week later—”

“Because I thought he was you!” Sherlock cried. “He didn’t know he was in the wrong world, and I didn’t either. I thought he was you. Each time, I thought I was kissing you. I thought I was making love to you.”

John started, like he’d been jolted with electricity. Or struck by lightning.

“He may have been the one to strike the match, but I was a fuse ready to be lit. Don’t you see? The whole time, every time, I thought I was with you, John. The John who always waits two-and-a-half minutes before giving me my tea because he knows how impatient I am and how many times I’ve scalded my tongue by drinking too fast. The John who scolds me for making Lestrade beg for
answers. The John who makes me sound like a hero to a host of online strangers. The John who shot a homicidal cabbie to save my life, after knowing me barely a day. The John I have known for two full years, squabbled with, laughed with, learned from, and . . . been in love with. For two full years. I didn’t fall in love with him. I was already in love with you. And thinking you felt the same made it was the happiest week of my life. It was only after that we both realized . . ."

John was covering his mouth with both hands, which trembled with the ferocity of his grip, and he was struggling to stand straight. He looked like he was in pain.

“I’m . . . sorry if this isn’t what you want to hear. But that’s the truth of it. All my life, I didn’t know I was looking for you. Then there you were. And I took that for granted. I didn’t really understand what you meant to me until I lost you. And I’m honestly afraid I’ll lose you again. But if you want, I’ll never say another word about it, ever. Just please. Don’t leave. We can still be friends. Can’t we? We can go back to how things were, before we collided with other versions of ourselves. I can control myself, John. Watch me. Even now, it’s all I can do to keep from throwing myself across the room and snogging you senseless, but I’m doing it, and—"

“Stop, stop,” John said, balling his hands into fists and forcing them at his side. Slowly, he breathed, and slowly, he forced his spine straight as he faced Sherlock from the other side of the room.

But Sherlock bowed his head, contrite. “Right. I’m sorry. I know. I’ll try—”

“No. I mean . . .” John’s eyes challenged him, even as his jaw quivered. “Stop holding back.”

Slowly, Sherlock lifted his eyes. Had he heard correctly? Interpreted correctly? Strangely, he felt his heart pushing against his ribcage, as if it had only just learned to beat.

“I can’t bear it anymore,” John said, voice cracking with emotion, “this wanting you. Needing you. You. My God, Sherlock, if you don’t kiss me right now, I’ll—”

Sherlock didn’t remember giving in. He didn’t remember commanding his feet to move. He didn’t even remember crossing the room. But suddenly, there he was, and he held John’s head with two hands. John. His John. The most precious thing in the world. And then he kissed him.

xXx

John didn’t know what was wrong with him.

Having lived in the Wacko World, he knew what it was like to ache and moan and writhe with pain, desperate for relief that only another body, a very specific kind of body, could provide. Occupying an Omega body had opened his eyes to one of the most intense and agonizing kinds of hunger a human could suffer. Frankly, it had been a miserable experience, and one he was anxious not to repeat. He needed out. He yearned for home.

But he simply hadn’t known: a person could suffer the very same, fraught yearning in other ways. And it was just as horrifying, just as painful, and just as desperate.

He yearned for Sherlock Holmes.

And in the very moment when he believed that his unfulfilled and frantic longing would destroy him, he heard the words *I was already in love with you.*

He felt like he was breaking apart. It wasn’t enough. He needed more. And he said so.
Kiss me.

Sherlock came at him in a rush. His mouth was hot and eager against John’s own: the warm slide of slips, the hot breath and needy tongue. There was no shy experimentation or nervous exploration. They didn’t follow the normal progression of lips first, then a little tongue, then a lot. John met him with an open mouth, and was met with an open mouth, and they were kissing with a longing grown in secret over two years of living together: walking the same bit of carpet and drinking from the same teacups and bathing under the same stream. They already share these same spaces, just not at the same time. But time and space were collapsing, and John craved a oneness with this man, his best and closest friend, that they had not allowed themselves before.

But as Sherlock kissed him, and as he kissed back, John felt like he was burning inside. He didn’t understand. Sherlock loved him, had always loved him. John loved him fiercely in return. So why did the horror of losing him remain?

He didn’t know what was wrong with him, or broken inside of him, but even in his inexpressible joy, he was crying.

Without removing his sweet lips from John’s, Sherlock brushed the tears from his cheeks and massaged the nape of his neck, like he understood. At least one of them did. He felt unlocked and vulnerable, but in Sherlock’s arms, he didn’t care. Here, he was safe. This must have been what a proper Omega felt in the arms of his Alpha. Maybe they weren’t so different after all. Maybe it wasn’t so wrong, feeling that. He craved it. Feeling loved and desired was a balm to a soul he didn’t know was wounded, and he no longer felt weak for needing it. The point was, he never wanted to stand alone again. Maybe he didn’t have to.

Sherlock’s kisses slowed, and a hand dragged down John’s back, pulling him closer so that their chests were flat against each other and they could feel each other’s breaths in the movement of their stomachs. John raked his fingers into Sherlock’s hair and squeezed. Then they fell into an embrace, warm and secure. John didn’t let go of Sherlock’s hair, but he rested his chin over his shoulder and whispered his desperately unspoken truth.

“I thought I’d never see you again.”

“John, John, John.”

Could it be? Sherlock sounded as though he were barely in control, that maybe he too was overcome by the raw emotion of the moment.

“The thought of it . . . of being trapped there forever and never . . .” His throat was closing off again at the thought; he couldn’t continue.

But he didn’t need to. Sherlock took his head once again between two large hands, and he brought their foreheads together gently, eyes closed but a line of wet along the eyelashes. “I’m here,” he said. “You’re home.”

Home. The word had never sounded so glorious.

John tipped his head, and Sherlock opened his eyes, looking at John like he was a wonder of nature that even the great Sherlock Holmes couldn’t unravel. Both were amazed by the other, astounded and incredulous that this thing between them that each desired . . . was real. It didn’t feel real. John wondered if maybe he were in a dream.

But oh, how he needed him. He pressed forward, and they were kissing again. And John had only a
throbbing need to get closer, closer. With arms wound round Sherlock’s neck, he sought to dispel even the tiniest bit of space by hooking a leg around his knee. Still, it wasn’t enough. Sherlock was crushing his ribcage with the strength of his embrace. Still it wasn’t enough. Suddenly, as though they made a joint decision without saying a word, John hopped and Sherlock caught him. With both legs hugging Sherlock around the waist, he was now in a position to tug Sherlock’s hair back, force his chin up, and give him the snogging of his life, like he was trying to crawl inside of him to find the place where he belonged, and stay there. His tongue dipped deep and pulled from Sherlock a moan so deep John’s whole body quivered with it.

“I want you, Sherlock.” He kissed, and kissed, and kissed. Nothing had ever tasted as good as Sherlock’s skin, powerful as scent. “I don’t want anything but you.”

Sherlock growled deep in his throat, sending a current of heat straight into John’s groin. Sherlock must have felt it against his stomach, their skin separated by only a thin t-shirt and pair of boxer shorts. He grasped John’s arse with one hand while his arm held him securely around the back, and pressed him closer, letting him rub, making the heat spike. John gasped and felt himself going weak. But holding him firmly, Sherlock made an about-face and marched back through the kitchen, down the hall, and into their (their?) bedroom, all the while mouthing at John’s neck.

There, they fell together onto the bed, John’s legs still wrapped around Sherlock’s waist and Sherlock’s weight pressing down on him. He whimpered, his back arched, and his hips rolled. They met in the middle, a delicious burst of pleasure.

And John’s whole being was on fire.

He grabbed Sherlock’s face, kissed him again, but pushed off from the mattress and rolled so he was now on top, pinning Sherlock to the sheets. Sherlock stared up at him, eyes widening with excitement, his pupils large and black. Sitting straight, knees on either side of Sherlock’s waist, John grabbed the back of his white t-shirt at the neck and pulled it over his head, casting it aside. He bracketed Sherlock with his elbows, kissed him hungrily, then said in a husky voice, “Hold onto me.”

Sherlock obeyed, placing arms around John’s neck, looking curious, expectant. Then, as John ran his hands up the underside of Sherlock’s shirt, rubbing bare skin from stomach to pectorals, he leaned back, bringing Sherlock with him. And as Sherlock’s upper body left the mattress, John’s hands moved to his back, to his shoulder blades, up his shoulders, and deftly, he slipped Sherlock’s shirt over his head and laid him back down.

“Make love to me, Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock hands were running down John’s firm back and slipping under the elastic of his boxers. To encourage him, John hooked a finger under Sherlock’s pajama bottoms, catching the underpants below. Their eyes met. Unspoken agreement passed between them. Sherlock lifted his hips, and they were off, the pair of them; within seconds, nothing separated them, not clothes, not time, not space. They moved into oneness.

xXx

They were skin on skin, and John had taken the lead, the way Sherlock had always wanted him to. A master in the bedroom. Here, now, Sherlock was melting into him. They had been moving together with needy thrusts and groan-worthy groping, until Sherlock, desperate for more, spread his knees, took hold of John, and guided him where he wanted John to go. There had been a flash of uncertainty in John’s eyes, mixed with longing, but all Sherlock could do was nod.
“Have you . . . ?” John asked, panting, and the sweat beaded on the end of his nose.

Sherlock shook his head no. He had wanted to, before, with the other John, but it had never been right. Not then. But now . . . he was ready. He wanted this. He positively trembled with wanting it. John claimed his mouth, adjusted his knees. He went for the bedside lube, warm, silky, slicky lube, bought weeks ago but barely used. John was generous.

The sensations were incredible: the initial breach, then the gentle push, push, pull and silky friction in the tightest of spaces; the hands that massaged the skin of his thighs and waist and chest while a far more intimate kind of massage was taking place deep within. John’s breaths against Sherlock’s neck were coming faster and faster, and with each thrust, a tiny whimper of ecstasy sang in his throat, like music in Sherlock’s ear.

Clutching tightly to John’s back and hanging on for dear life as the pleasure built inside him in a way he didn’t know was possible, Sherlock opened his eyes. It was a sight so beautiful he thought he might cry. There he lay, bare legs parted but ankles resting atop John’s—and John, perfect John, lying naked between Sherlock’s spread knees, bare chests pressed together, and John’s flawless buttocks, round and tempting, pumping with a regular rhythm into him—pushing, pushing, softly, softly—striking again and again a sensitive spot deep inside that he never truly believed was there. Until now. This was his John, his perfect and wonderful John, claiming him with a lover’s unrivaled passion. This was where John wanted to be—with Sherlock. Just like this. It was too much, and just enough.

Sherlock climaxed. And in that moment of purest ecstasy, as he tried to cope with wave after wave of physical pleasure and emotional joy, he bit down hard into John’s neck.

As the skin broke, John gasped and let out a startled cry. Sherlock felt John’s cock shuddering inside of him, flooding him with warmth. Yes, yes, he thought he heard John panting, but he couldn’t be sure, because he was himself still on a high plane of transcendent euphoria, clutching and grasping and letting himself be filled.

“John, John, John,” he moaned. It was the most glorious name in creation.

xXx

John had been awake for almost half an hour, but he barely moved a muscle. Morning sunlight illuminated the room, pushing through the sheer curtains, and the sounds of London going about business as usual floated in from the streets. But John just lay there, staring at the beautiful face of a sleeping Sherlock Holmes. Soft lines, softer skin. Hair deliciously mussed on top and flattened around the brow, where the salty sweat from last night’s . . . activities . . . had loosened the curls. His lips were pink and perfect, and the dark eyelashes against his alabaster cheeks looked like the work of a master artist.

It was so much better than waking up alone.

Might this be something he would always get to wake up to?

Then Sherlock began to stir, first nuzzling his face into the pillow, then flexing his legs beneath the covers. He seemed to sense that he was being watched, because his eyes fluttered open in search of the spectator.

A soft smile appeared on his lips. “Morning,” Sherlock said, voice deep and groggy.

John regarded him with exaggerated gravity. “This was a mistake, wasn’t it?”
Sherlock hummed in sleepy agreement. “Yes, you should move out.”

A beat later, they both started giggling.

“I think you’re mistaken on who gets the flat,” John retorted, feeling a bubble of glee rising in his stomach. He couldn’t stop smiling. This felt so right, so perfect: the two of them, waking up in bed together, and launching into verbal spars. The world had changed, but they were still the same, if only happier.

“I was here first,” Sherlock reasoned.

“Barely twenty-four hours.”

Sherlock pushed up on his elbow with a sudden energy that defied the morning, then in a swift movement pulled John beneath him and propped himself above. “Shall I wrestle you for it?”

A thrill passed through John’s body at the unexpected morning treat. They were both still naked below the sheets, and Sherlock’s interest was just as apparent as his own. He couldn’t help himself. He started giggling again, feeling euphoric, like he was drugged, like Sherlock was the happiest happy drug he’d ever had. Sherlock caught him in the middle of smile and kissed him, and it wasn’t so much wrestling as it was a dance. They were too much in sync with one another, and too eager to submit to one another’s pleasure. There, John learned something new and wonderful about Sherlock. Last night proved he was a deeply thoughtful, tender lover. This morning, he showed he could be playful, as well.

Afterwards, well sated for the time being, John reluctantly pulled back the sheets. He needed to use the loo. But also, he was returned to his own world, and he was eager to see what had become of his life over the last month.

“Oh,” said Sherlock, sitting up behind him. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

John twisted slightly to see Sherlock’s brow knitted in concern. “What?”

Sherlock scooted closer. A soft hand reached for his neck, the fingers brushing across the skin, and that’s when John noticed it, the bruising ache, the soreness of broken skin. It was where Sherlock had bitten him last night. He hadn’t remembered it being painful, though. Rather, it had been the shock of pleasure that had immediately tipped him over the edge.

John touched the mark with awe.

“I just got carried away,” Sherlock said. He gingerly kissed the wound, apologizing. “Let me get the surgical spirit and a bandage. It looks nasty.”

“It’s beautiful,” John said.

“What? Look, right there, I broke the skin. It might scar.”

“Mm.” John touched Sherlock’s cheek, drawing his face over his shoulder for a kiss. “Guess that means you belong to me now, Holmes. You’re a permanent part of me. Etched into my skin.”

“But I hurt you.”

“Not how I remember it.”

Sherlock kissed the mark a though to soothe it. He hummed into the skin. “So what’s he like?” He
traced a finger down John’s spine. “The other me. In the other place.”

John closed his eyes, absorbing the sensations. “Kinder than he first appears. And the other John?”

“Wiser.”

He shifted to better face Sherlock now. The white sheets were twisted about his naked body like the marble sculpture of a Roman god. He kissed him again, and he knew he would never tire of kissing him, not if he lived to be a thousand. “It’s amazing, Sherlock.”

“What is?”

“A chance encounter on a train. The random introduction of an invalided soldier to a consulting detective. How many other accidents, coincidences, or flukes of fate? How many other versions of us in how many other universes? Do we keep finding each other, do you think? In however many scenarios and incarnations, do you think it’s always meant to be you and me, a John for every Sherlock, and a Sherlock for every John?”

Sherlock smiled at the thought, eyes roving over John’s face from hair to eyes to mouth. “Those are some very lucky Sherlocks.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. A Sherlock Holmes is nothing unless there’s a John Watson at his side. Isn’t it obvious? The universe knows exactly what it’s doing.”

And once more, they kissed, happily submitting to a universe determined to get its way.
Epilogue: In Which the Universe Congratulates Itself

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two Days After the Bridge

Dear John,

I hope this letter finds you, and finds you well. Tonight, I will be leaving your world behind and returning to my own. But I am of two minds. As much as I want to return home to the world I know and the Sherlock I love, I feel like I need more time here, to set things right. I wish we had another day or two to talk through the mirror and sort things out. But this letter will have to do.

First off, an apology. I believe I got you sacked. In my world, I don’t have a job, let alone so important a job, and because it took me so long to realize I wasn’t in my own world . . . Well, I suppose I would have got you sacked either way, showing up or not. So I’m sorry for that spot of trouble. Maybe Sarah (was that her name? Sarah?) will hire you back if you ask nicely?

“Right there!” Sherlock declared, laughing. “I told you he was polite. Just ask her nicely, John!”

“Shut up, I’m reading,” said John, though he smiled.

Sherlock gave his thigh a squeeze, and John continued.

Secondly, your friend Mike may think you had a bit of an episode. I ran into him in the park, and thought he was a stranger trying to pick me up—

Sherlock burst out laughing again, throwing himself back into the couch cushions. John whacked his leg, but his face was bright red from trying not to laugh at the embarrassment he couldn’t identify as either first-hand or second. It was sort of both.

—so I ran away from him and declared I’d never met him before. I didn’t know how to smooth that over, once I realized my mistake, so I’m terribly sorry to leave you that one, as well. Oh, and I got caught in a taxi without money, so I had to dash away without paying. You may have been caught on camera. Oh, and I haven’t returned the library book yet, so there’s that too. Sorry.

Third, and this is important: I went to see Harry . . .

John trailed off as his eyes read ahead but his mouth ceased to work.

“What?” Sherlock prompted.

“He . . . visited my sister. He says . . . they had a great time? They, holy fuck, they spent an hour laughing together and drinking Coke? What the hell?”

“This is bad?”

“No! This is”—he searched for the words—“bloody astonishing! How did he do that?” He felt suddenly a little choked up. How had the other John bloody well done that? “He says I have a date with her this coming Friday for more poker and drinks—but no alcohol. She’s promised. Not when I’m there.”

Overcome, he sank back to the couch and found himself resting against Sherlock’s shoulder.
Sherlock’s arm wrapped around him as he finished the letter.

. . . She really loves you. She just doesn’t want to disappoint you, and she’s afraid she’s done that a lot over the years. So, what I’m trying to say is, be kind to her. And don’t judge her on the cork tower. She said that specifically.

And speaking of those who love you. I made him a promise that I’d not say anything, but it’s a promise I just can’t keep.

“Oh, here it comes,” said Sherlock, snuggling closer, and John heard the smile in his voice.

I know that what I told you, about Sherlock and I doing the sex—

Sherlock shot forward in the couch, inadvertently bringing John with him. “Wait, is that how he put it?”

“Shut up, I’m trying to get through this!” John laughed. He was finding it hard to keep going, he was smiling so hard.

—came as a shock, and maybe it’s because you’d never thought about it before, or you never imagined that he had any feelings for you. But I promise you, John, I’ve never seen a man so in love, and that wasn’t because of me. It was because of you. He is in love with you, only you, and he’s desperately afraid to confess it for fear of discovering he is alone in that regard.

“I wouldn’t say desperately,” Sherlock countered. He rubbed John’s back now, and let his fingertips tease the skin at the neck whenever they chanced there—John knew Sherlock knew John liked it. “He’s painting me as some witless, besotted, hopeless romantic.”

“Are you not? Ahem.”

And the thing is, I don’t think he is. Alone in feeling that way, I mean. Maybe you haven’t come to know it for yourself yet, but I’m convinced you love him, too. I’ve read your blog a dozen times, and Betas be blighted if every word wasn’t a love note to him.

“Betas be what now?” Sherlock asked.

“It’s an expression from his world. It means something like, if this happens, then we’re all doomed. Basically, he’s saying it’s impossible that I’m not in love with you.”

“Good to know.” Sherlock nuzzled his neck.

I cannot tell you how to feel, but I think I already know how you feel, and if you give it a little bit of thought, I think you’ll know it, too. Being a companion to Sherlock Holmes is an amazing thing. Being his lover—

“Oh, lover.” Sherlock licked a stripe at John’s collarbone and sucked gently.

—is even better. If you come to see that you love him, don’t deny yourself, or him, a second longer. Tell him how you feel. Living these last few weeks in your world has been both terrifying and wonderful. I was left in awe at every turn, and so much of that was because of you and the life you lead. It’s a kind of life I didn’t know was possible, not for someone like me. I admit I’ve been jealous of you. I’ve experienced first-hand a day in the life of the companion to Sherlock Holmes. It’s different from being his bond-mate. But I don’t think it’s either-or. I think it can be both, and that’s what I intend to make of my life when I return. Maybe you can make it yours, too. I think that’s where we’ll find our greatest happiness.
I feel like there’s something I’m forgetting, but the day is almost over, and before long, I’ll be leaving for the bridge. So I must end this letter. Goodbye, John. I don’t think we’ll meet again. So I will think fondly of you, and Sherlock, and wish you both the very best, and a long and happy life in your strange universe.

Yours,
John


“Mm,” Sherlock agreed. He continued kissing John’s neck. A hand began to rub his inner thigh, inching northward. “Very insightful.”

“So if it hadn’t been for our, erm, dramatics the night I came back, maybe this letter he had slipped under my pillow would have been the nudge I needed.”

“Mmmm.” Sherlock’s rumbly voice vibrated in John’s skin. “I’m glad we didn’t have to wait so long.”

“It’s been two days.”

“Two fucking amazing days.”

“A man of puns.”

They laughed together, and John let the letter fall onto the coffee table so he could take Sherlock’s face in his hands and snog him properly. It was all the signal Sherlock needed to grab John’s lower back, lift and shift his hips, and press his back down onto the sofa where Sherlock stretched himself out on top of him.

“Wish I could tell him how well it’s working out,” John said with a gasp, tightening his fingers in Sherlock’s curls (Sherlock moaned. Oh, how he loved when Sherlock moaned.) and stirring their cocks together between thin layers of clothing.

“Maybe if we’re loud enough, he’ll hear us,” Sherlock said.

“Challenge accepted.”

Five Days After the Bridge

“Where should I look?” asked John nervously as he took a seat in the cushy red leather chair. The lights above his head were brighter than he thought they’d be, and the stage was larger.

“Ignore the cameras, just talk to me,” said Heather Hill of the Morning Hilltop Show. “Can we get a mic check? Testing, testing. The bonny Beta bakes a batch of brittle biscuits. Biscuits, biscuits, la la la la, Sam, is that feedback? I think my mic has feedback.”

While the crew adjusted the lights and performed the sound check, John fidgeted and tried to find a natural place to rest his arms. Should he cross a leg? Plant both feet on the floor? He felt so out of his element that the most appealing course of action at the moment was to get up and walk right outside to the street and go home. But then he caught sight of Sherlock standing offstage, behind a cameraman. Sherlock flashed him a thumbs up and a wink, and he smiled tight-lipped in return. He could do this.

“And we’re rolling in five . . . four . . . three . . .”
“Good morning, I’m Heather Hill, and you’re watching Morning Hilltop. With me today is the Omega-Y they’re already calling The Goliath Slayer, Alpha Watson, and John the Defiant. Unless you’ve been lingering in a coma, you’ve already seen his incredible victory in last week’s Marble Arch Dog Fight, which is being recorded—get this—as the first dog fight in history to be won by an Omega.”

“She was there, too,” John muttered, then shut up, not sure it was his turn to speak yet.

Her white-toothed smile didn’t falter in the slightest, but she ignored him. “We’re delighted to have you on the show, John. Welcome.”

“Um, thank you. It’s good to be here.” You have no idea how true that is.

“So tell me, John. What’s it been like for you, since defeating the Alpha pack?”

“Oh. Well, um. It’s been a little crazy, actually. Letters have been arriving in buckets, I’ve had to turn off my phone, I keep getting stopped in the street, getting invitations to interview, all of that. I can hardly find time to breathe, let alone take it all in. People are pretty excited about it.”

She laughed, but it struck John’s ear as somewhat fabricated. “So are you ready for things to settle down again? Return to normal?”

“Um . . . No, I wouldn’t say that. I don’t want things to just go back to the way they were, you know? I want a better life. A changed life.”

“Fame is addictive, isn’t it? Let’s go back to it: the moment that changed your life. When you stepped into the dog pen, the whole world went quiet. What was going through your mind?”

“Wrong moment.”

“Sorry?”

“That wasn’t the moment. You said, ‘the moment that changed my life.’ That wasn’t the moment.”

“Oh. What would you say—?”

“People are already forgetting what led to the dog fight in the first place.” John took a deep breath, preparing to tell a story he had not been a direct witness to, and yet was now an indelible part of his own history. “I was attacked. I was bitten and scented, and if I hadn’t fought my way free, I would have been forcibly knotted, too. It was that moment, Ms. Hill, that finally opened my eyes to the truth that Omegas are not safe in this country. It made me angry. And if it weren’t for that anger, I never would have entered the dog pen to begin with.”

“Oh yes, absolutely. We all agree: Alphas like that are despicable, their actions reprehensible. It’s why we have laws—”

“Pass all the laws you want—it doesn’t change two undeniable facts. One, Alphas believe they are entitled to Omegas, and two, Omegas do not have the tools to defend themselves. We’re not expected to fight, so we don’t realize that we can. No, it’s worse than that. It’s not just about expectations. Every day, every hour of the day, we Omegas have it beaten into our heads that we’re inferior to Alphas and Betas, in every way. We’re told that we’re weak, and stupid, and incompetent. I believed it. I grew up believing it. And it was John who had to prove me wrong. That is”—he backpedaled quickly—“I saw a better version of myself, in myself. A stronger John.
Someone that had been there all along, but I was too blind and too scared to let him out.”

“So do you think more Omegas should join their Alphas’ packs in the dog pen?”

John frowned. “Well, there are risks one can’t dismiss, so I can’t advocate that.”

“Too dangerous for the average Omega, you mean?”

“I am an average Omega. And I’ve been living far below my potential. No, what I’m advocating is a more egalitarian approach to Alpha-Omega relations so that dog fights are no longer necessary. I’m advocating that Betas get off their arses and see that this isn’t an issue that concerns only Omegas. If people, Omegas I mean, are going to take inspiration from what happened in the dog pen, I would hope that, yes, they do fight. Fight for better education. Fight for better jobs. Fight for respect and better treatment. Fight to know themselves and all they’re really capable of, because we are capable of so much more.”

Heather Hill nodded vapidly. “Every Alpha deserves a happy Omega.”

“Are you even listening to me?” John turned in his seat to face the camera directly. “Johnwatsonblog.co.uk. I’ve started a website. If you’re an Omega, and even if you’re not, check it out. I don’t need my voice filtered through people like this.”

Then, in an action that at last wiped the insipid smile off Heather Hill’s face, John unclipped the mic from his collar, pulled the battery pack out from his trousers, and left them on the armchair. Heather Hill, speechless, looked at the camera, not knowing what to do as her guest of honor stormed off the stage. Before they cut to commercial, there was the sound of clapping from the man standing just behind the camera.

Seven Days After the Bridge

On the narrow balcony of a flat on the forty-fourth floor of a high-rise in Canary Wharf, Sherlock was crouched, examining the body of a socialite who had disappeared three days ago—and apparently had been dead on this balcony the whole time. The birds had begun to make a meal of her.

There wasn’t enough space on the balcony for more than the corpse and one consulting detective, so John, Lestrade, and some of the other officers waited inside for him to finish his examination.

John was so pleased to be on a case again, he could scarcely stop himself from smiling, which he realized was not an entirely appropriate reaction to a dead body. He had a newfound respect for Sherlock’s delight over bloody crime scenes and kidnapped children. Sherlock was just doing what he loved. So what if a smile or giggle escaped from time to time? It was one of the things John had come to love about him. And now sympathize with.

Besides, there were new perks to the job. Sherlock, bent over, arse in the air . . . It was a lovely sight.

Lestrade elbowed him discreetly, and when he glanced over, he was met with an eyebrow waggle.

“What?” John asked, startled from his musings.

Lestrade made a funny I-know-something-and-you-know-something-but-I’m-going-to-make-you-say-it-first kind of face. When John just stared at him in bemusement, Lestrade added words to his expression. “So? Anything . . . progressing in that ‘department’?”
“Say what now?”

It had been a week since he and Sherlock had been, erm, actively engaged with one another, but it wasn’t like they had announced the fact. It wasn’t that they were embarrassed or anything. But for both of them, it was still very new, quite private, and, well, it wasn’t like they’d left the house much in seven days. And if Mrs. Hudson suspected a shift in their relationship toward the intimate, she wasn’t mentioning it. Though that morning, on their way out, John thought he caught her in the middle of a self-satisfied kind of smirk. But then, Sherlock had just pinched his bum at the bottom of the stairs.

“Did you finally say something?” Lestrade asked without parting his teeth, evidently trying to maintain a private conversation among Yard officers.

Wait, where was this coming from? How much did Lestrade know? Did the other John say something? John felt his heating blood darkening his cheeks, and as he blushed to the shade of a sunburn, Lestrade’s eyes widened in delight.

“That good, huh?”

“Shut up.”

Lestrade’s grin almost broke his face. “So. You two are”—another eyebrow waggle—“back at it, are you?”

Yes, the other John had definitely spilled the beans. Which surprised him. After all, in the other world, John and Lestrade hadn’t seemed that close.

In answer, John returned his gaze to Sherlock’s ass, cocked his head to the side, and smiled. Lestrade roared with laughter.

The officers’ conversations in the background halted abruptly, Sgt. Donovan jumped, and out on the balcony, Sherlock straightened his spine and turned toward the room. He pushed open the door, an expression wavering between annoyed and curious on his face.

“Problem?”

Lestrade was still laughing and couldn’t talk. John, face still red, just gave Sherlock a wink and said, “Back to work, Holmes.”

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him, but when he turned back to the balcony to continue his observations, John was almost positive he gave his butt a gratuitous wiggle.

One Month After the Bridge

Molly and John sat on one side of the table, Lestrade and Sherlock on the other, each across from his or her respective partner. While Lestrade enjoyed a lager and Sherlock a scotch on the rocks, John took lemonade and Molly cranberry juice.

“Sherlock’s taken up the violin,” said John, proudly.

“Really?” said Lestrade. “But you’re . . .” He trailed off, scrambling for something to replace what John knew he was about to say: But you’re an Alpha. And Alphas didn’t really go for delicate instruments like violins. Guitars, maybe. Electric guitars. “. . . a bit old to be starting, aren’t you?” Lestrade finished.
"We weren’t going to mention it," Sherlock griped, shooting John a reproachful look over the rim of his glass.

"He’s really good," John said, ignoring it. "Only been a couple weeks, and already he’s playing in the level three book. Two weeks ago, it was a scratchy Hot Cross Buns. Now you should hear him on Fur Elise and Downtown Boogie."

While Lestrade laughed, Molly smiled and said, "I’d like to hear that!"

"Come over sometime, and he’ll play for you."

"John!" Sherlock protested.

"Wouldn’t dream of missing it," said Lestrade.

"John’s last interview has gone viral," said Sherlock, mostly to deflect attention, but John detected the note of pride in his voice as well. 'It’s world-wide news now. More than fifteen million hits in under forty-eight hours, and still going strong.'

"Yes, we saw it on the news last night," said Molly. "I can’t believe you’ve been asked to address Parliament. Are you nervous? I’d be nervous."

Scared shitless, thought John, who enjoyed a much more profane inner monologue these days. But he’d been hiding his fear and self-doubt a lot for the past couple of months, and even he was beginning to believe himself braver than he was.

He enjoyed these nights out with Lestrade and Molly. It had been a long time since he’d had friends. At least, not the kind you went out with on weekends, just to socialize. And especially not another couple. He and Sherlock had always been the staying-in sorts, and the keeping-to-ourselves sorts. But these days, they were constantly coming and going, often together, but not always. John had meetings with the leaders of the revamped Nothing Knotting organization, and rallies with the newly burgeoning Omega Rights movement. But aside from that, he socialized with new friends, like tonight, or went out on cases with Sherlock. That was probably his favorite kind of outing. The cases. They were terrific fun, and he enjoyed watching Sherlock show off, seeking to impress his bond-mate in a way he’d never sought to impress before.

So nights in, given that they were now fewer, had become more . . . special. So despite all the stresses of becoming a revolutionary, quite independent of his own desires, John had never been happier.

Beneath the table, he and Sherlock were playing footsie.

"I’ll manage," John told Molly. "What about you two? Still getting on, I see."

Molly ducked her head, blushing, but her hand was atop Lestrade’s on the table, and she gave it a little squeeze.

John liked Molly, and although he was still getting to know her, he felt like they shared a real connection. Much of that, of course, was owing to whatever had happened between her and the other John. He regretted that he himself was not privy to those apparently friendly, confidential conversations, and he would probably never find out. He’d picked up a few clues, but he couldn’t ask her outright. So he just had to build on what he knew of the history they shared and what they were now building together. But one thing he had come to understand was that he, John, was in a large way responsible for her positive outlook, despite the horrible things that had happened to her.
“We’ve found a good sub,” said Molly softly.

And that was the other thing: one did not discuss the matters of subs casually. It was awkward conversation for anyone involved. Even as close as John was with his own sister, she had only, ever, just once, alluded to the fact that she and Clara had a sub. They were necessary in Beta-Omega relationships, to see the Omega through a heat, because Betas were of no biological use in that time. People knew about them; they just never talked about them. It was no one’s business, really. So the fact that Molly was sharing was a sign of highest comfort and trust in her new friends. John thought he understood the impulse—she’d never really had close friends before either, and having them now was . . . liberating.

“Oh?” John asked politely.

“Yes. An Alpha-X. I can’t really stomach the thought of even being around the Ys anymore.” She smiled apologetically at Sherlock. “Present company excluded.”

“I am entirely sympathetic,” Sherlock said.

“She’s a bit older, and very kind. Very gentle. Her bond-mate passed away a couple summers ago, and she has no interest in bonding again. And we like her. Don’t we, Greg?”

“Very lovely Alpha,” Lestrade agreed.

“And do you stay for the duration?” Sherlock asked.

“Sherlock!” John said, kicking him under the table. What a scandalous question to ask!

“What? It’s a natural curiosity.”

“It’s not your business.”

“They brought it up.”

“They didn’t bring up that.”

“Yes, I do,” said Lestrade, cutting in. “A partner should be there during the heat, bonded or not. It was Molly’s request, and I agreed with her. And that, Holmes, is the extent of what all the juicy details you’ll get out of us.”

Sherlock chuckled. “I’m just glad you’ve worked it out.”

Oops, that’s me,” said Lestrade, as his phone buzzed in his pocket. He stepped away from the table, and John, Sherlock, and Molly continued chatting. Molly was toying with the idea of writing a book, she said, giving John a knowing look. Aha. John had in some way inspired or encouraged the idea, so he smiled back like he understood. When she mentioned that it would be a detective novel, Sherlock immediately started pestering her with questions (Was it a police detective or a private detective? Did she need help envisioning the details of the murder? It would be a murder, wouldn’t it? And not something pathetic like a cat-napping?) until Lestrade returned with an apologetic look.

“There’s been—”

“A murder!” Sherlock declared. “Marvelous!”

Patrons at the nearest tables turned to give them bemused and scandalized looks.
“—an incident,” Lestrade finished. Then, sighing, “And yes, it may well have been homicide. They just pulled a body from the Thames. I’m sorry, Molly, I have to run. Maybe Sherlock and John can escort you home?”

“That’s all right,” she said, pulling out her phone. “I’ll just call for an Omega Uber.”

“You’re sure?”

The Omega Uber service had popped up within the last couple of weeks, shortly after John’s first interview: staffed entirely by Betas, it was a free service, funded by the proceeds of regular Uber cab rides, to transport lone Omegas wherever they needed to go after sunset. John had used it himself, mostly just to check it out, and he was quite impressed.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said. She lifted her face to his and gave him a kiss. “Sherlock and John can go with you.”

Lestrade looked at Sherlock and John. “Do I even need to invite you?”

But Sherlock was already dropping enough money on the table to cover the whole bill. “On our way, John?”

That delicious thrill chased up his spine and he pushed his chair back. “Ready when you are.”

Six Months After the Bridge

“Bloody hell, Sherlock! My God!”

John practically threw a nurse into the wall as he pushed past her to reach Sherlock’s bedside. He mumbled an insincere apology and she straightened her nametag and left in a huff.

“Let me see your eyes.”

He took Sherlock’s face in his hands and angled it to meet him, then he pulled the skin down at the cheek to keep him from blinking.

“Dilation seems okay. Any dark spots? Double vision?”

“I’m fine, John. It was just a bump.”

“It was not just a bump. The man cracked your bloody skull with a crowbar! I watched your eyes cross just before you hit the ground cold.”

“My eyes did not cross.”

“They bloody well did, you bloody bastard.” He gently lay a hand over the bandage swathing Sherlock’s skull. Then, in a much softer voice, he said, “I may have freaked out a little. I let the man get away, and the ambulance took forever to get there because of the snow—”

“I’m okay, John. Really.”

“When you collapsed, I thought—”

“I know.” He kissed the inside of John’s wrist, as it was the closest bit of him he could get to.

“And those morons who wouldn’t even let me see you!”
“Who?”

“The doctors, the nurses,” John huffed. He lifted a leg, and Sherlock shifted so John could sit on the hospital mattress more easily, and their fingers slid together. “You know how it is. The family-only policy is strictly enforced while patients are in the ICU. But it’s not like Mycroft was hanging around. Apparently, he’s in Brussels. Asked if you would live, and when I said yes, more likely than not, he said fine, and hung up on me.”

“He always was my favorite brother.”

“It was bloody maddening.”

“Well, if you were my husband, this would be a non-issue.”

John’s teeth clapped together and his breath hitched. Then Sherlock, the color rising in his cheeks, sought distraction and started fiddling with the bed controls. But he didn’t take it back.

“Sherlock Holmes,” said John, pulling the controls out of his hands and setting them aside. “Did you just propose marriage to me?”

Sherlock sniffed. “No need to romanticize,” he said off-handedly. But his cheeks remained inflamed. “It’s a practical solution to an ongoing problem. This likely won’t be the last time one of us winds up in hospital, and I don’t fancy being on the other side of that door any more than you do. Besides, one can’t discount the financial benefits of marriage, and as far as tenancy goes, it dramatically simplifies the paperwork. Travel, possessions, life insurance, it all becomes more tenable, spouse to spouse. And no court could order us to testify against each other, which we may one day need to rely on—mmf.”

Minding the bandages, John, unable to restrain himself a moment longer, shut Sherlock up with a kiss.

His mind was spinning, heady with the fog of affection and devotion he felt for this man. He kissed him. He was so in love, it hurt everywhere, even in his toes, if he didn’t do something about it. He kissed him. A future without Sherlock in it was no future at all, and he would do anything and everything he could to ensure that they stayed side by side. He kissed him. Maybe he hadn’t given any thought to marriage before because he already felt that they were a fixed unit and nothing would change that, and the truth was, nothing could; but to think that Sherlock was even willing to entertain the notion, let alone desire it, suddenly marriage took on a whole new level of significance, and now he knew that he wanted it too, and he needed to answer the proposal in the affirmative. He kissed him.

“Is that a yes?” Sherlock asked breathlessly.

“That’s a hell yes.”

He kissed him.

One Year After the Bridge

They were on the trail of the Teacup Burglar, the notorious crook who broke into people’s homes, stole their teacups, and left behind dead rats on the saucers. He took money, jewelry, and electronics as well, but the teacup-rat swap was his trademark. So far, sixteen hits on London flats. One of the victims had contacted Sherlock the day before. He took the case.

But it was while interviewing a member of Sherlock’s Homeless Network in a crowded park that
John felt the first cramp, low in his abdomen, and his body flushed with heat. Sherlock caught the scent and cut the interview short.

“You should keep working,” said John as they made a beeline for the road to hail a taxi. “It’ll be a few hours.” He winced as another pang shot through his gut, but he kept walking.

“Nope,” said Sherlock simply.

To say that John’s biology had escaped Dr. Stapleton’s invasions unscathed would be untrue. Sherlock had been able to rid him of the mad-Alpha’s scent and restore and reinforce his own, but whatever she had given him, and what other stressors he had endured, had thrown his heats off. His whole life, he had been forty-one and three. Now, he was unpredictable. He was anywhere between thirty-one and fifty-two days between heats, and their duration varied between twenty hours and eighty-nine.

He had been quite distressed during those first few heats, after the bridge. Heats already made him feel out of control of himself, but at least there was some consistency, and he knew how to handle that. Now? He was too often caught by surprise. He couldn’t always plan around them, or plan for them. And after several consultations with his new heat doctor, Mike Stamford, who identified a hormone imbalance, he was beginning to accept that there might be nothing he could do to correct it.

“I lead a team,” said Dr. Stamford, “dedicated to the study of Omega hormonology, and we’re in the early stages of developing a drug that can manipulate hormones involved in heats. I’m afraid it’s still several years away from market, though. In the meantime, you’re just going to have to rely on your Alpha to see you through.”

If it weren’t for Sherlock, John didn’t think he’d be so okay with the changes to his body. Shortly after his return, and then in light of his next heat, which was six days late, Sherlock told him everything he knew of what had happened in Dr. Stapleton’s labs—as far as the other John had said and what more he had guessed. John was horror-struck when he learned of it. It seemed worse than the Alpha attack. He couldn’t believe that the other John had gone through something like that, and come out of it with his wits intact.

They arrived back on Baker Street, and John had barely made it through the door into the flat when another vicious cramp took over his body. He groaned, clutched his abdomen, and bent over. Sherlock steadied him, supported him, rubbed his back, and waited for the wave to pass. Then, as John straightened, sweaty and panting, Sherlock lifted him into his arms and headed for the bedroom. It was too soon to do anything—his body needed anywhere from two to five hours to adjust in preparation for taking the knot—but if he had to be in pain, this was how he preferred it: lying in his bed, clothes off, a light sheet over his skin, and Sherlock near at hand. As his scent intensified, so did Sherlock’s, and just his proximity was enough to calm him.

For two and a half hours, Sherlock was in and out of the bedroom, getting water, preparing meals, holding his bond-mate, putting holds on his emails and other business, stroking John through a particularly difficult cramp, turning on the AC, turning off the AC, and doing everything necessary to make John comfortable, until—

“Now, Sherlock. Oh God, now, now.”

Sherlock undressed quickly. He pulled back the sheet. John was ready for him, on his back, with knees splayed, eyes blown wide with need. Sherlock was ready for John, penis erect and straining, fingertips tingling with want, heart thrumming with desire. Before the bridge, their mating had always seen John on his side or on his knees, with Sherlock taking him from behind. Since the
bridge, they always met like this, face to face. Sherlock crawled onto the bed, between John’s knees and hovering over his body as John reached for him. And as he drew Sherlock’s face to his for a kiss, Sherlock slid inside of him in one, long push. John gasped; Sherlock trembled. And after three, passionate thrusts, John’s pain dissolved. He swam in pleasure.

As the hours wore on and the nights and days passed, they would assume other positions, try new things. John had discovered a certain liking for being on top and riding him to heaven while Sherlock stroked his cock and groaned out his own fulfillment. There was the one where Sherlock sat with his back against the headboard and John fully seated in his lap. There was the wall, and the shower, and sofa, and the table. But always, at some point, they returned to this, just this, lying in bed, facing one another, and making love as they kissed.

At the end of three and a half days, as they lay sated in each other’s arms, Sherlock’s phone dinged with a text. He half-rolled on top of John to reach his phone, then squinted to read.

“Whozit?” John murmured sleepily into his pillow.

Sherlock’s lips found the back of his neck before answering. “We’ve just become godfathers.”

John rolled onto this back, smiling. “Molly had the babies?”

“Two little Xs. Both Betas.”

“That’s fantastic.”

“They’re naming them Sherlock and John.”

John blinked. Then he saw the teasing light in Sherlock’s eyes. “You liar,” he laughed.

“Margaret and Lucy.”

“That’s better. Come on! Let’s go meet them.”

John started to rise, but Sherlock’s arm wrapped around him and pulled him back, flush against his chest. “John. It’s two in the morning. Let them rest.”

John looked to the window and saw that it was night. “Oh.” He exhaled and snuggled closer. “All right then. Just got excited.” He rested his cheek against Sherlock’s chest, and Sherlock began combing fingers through his hair. They would need to shower and clean the room soon. But not yet. Morning. “I’m very happy for them.”

“Me too. Our pack just got a little larger.”

“God, I love you.”

Sherlock’s hand paused. “I love you, too. But what brought that on?”

“I felt it. So I said it.”

“I see. Well. You know what happens when you say things like that to me.”

John lifted his head smiling. The heat was over, but that didn’t mean they were. “What?”

“I get . . . amorous.”

And with that, he slipped his head below the sheets. John started giggling, and didn’t stop until
Sherlock’s next actions took his breath away.

Two Years After the Bridge

“Right there, Sherlock. Yes, yes, you got it, just like that. A little to the left. Perfect.”

John gasped.

Because right at that moment, the wooden chair slipped, and Sherlock, who had been balancing on it as he leveled the mirror on the wall above the mantel, leaped to avoid crashing to the floor. But the mirror wasn’t so lucky. Not yet stabilized, it pitched forward, and fell, as though in slow motion, but it was lost. Next second, it shattered against the hearth.

“Oh shit,” said Sherlock.

They had removed the mirror to begin with in order to repaper the wall after the unfortunate exploding-toads incident (it took them three more days to track down the elusive Reptile Bomber), and now they were trying to set the sitting room to rights. Mrs. Hudson was one of the most tolerant landlords in all of England, but the toads tested her resolve and she hadn’t been back up to the flat since it happened, and swore she would not, until she could walk through the door and be none the wiser.

They spent the next half hour sweeping away broken mirror shards, hoovering the rugs, and disposing of the destruction. “Don’t tell Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock said. “We’ll replace it, and she won’t even notice.”

But that evening, Sherlock found John standing alone and contemplative in the sitting room, facing the bare wall, with something of remorse about him.

“What’s wrong?”

John was startled out of his thoughts. “Hm? Oh. Nothing. It’s nothing. It’s just—Nothing. It’s stupid.”

“Tell me.”

John sighed. “The mirror. I guess . . . I guess I’ve been holding on to the foolish hope that, one day, somehow . . .”

“You’d see him again.”

John laughed at himself and rubbed the back of his neck. “I just wonder, sometimes. How things are for him. For both of them.”

“I do, too.” Sherlock came up behind him, wrapped arms around his shoulders, and squeezed gently.

“It wouldn’t work now anyway. The mirror. The only reason it worked before was that part of me was there, and part of him was here. We shared space. My mind in his body, his in mine. But now, being fully separated . . . It just couldn’t work. And even if it could . . .” He shook his head, laughing regretfully. “Mirror’s gone. And that’s that.”

“I’ve often wondered about them,” Sherlock said, laying his head against John’s as he continued to hold him fast; John placed his arm along Sherlock’s, his hand atop Sherlock’s hand, and absentmindedly stroked the band around his finger. “It’s a shame, really, that we can’t just pop
over for a visit. I’m kind of jealous.”

John snorted. “Yeah? Maybe next time the universe can swap you. See how you like it.” Then he grinned at the thought.

“I would have been an Alpha, though, wouldn’t I? And the other Sherlock? He would have gotten the humbling of his life.”

They laughed together, imagining how things might have gone differently, but they had talked about this before, and they knew that what had happened had happened the way it did for a reason. It was good the other John had come here. And it was good he had gone there.

But two years had passed, and the further and further away they got from it, the more it felt like a dream. And Sherlock thought he understood how John felt about the mirror. It was like just one more link to those few, strange, life-changing days two years ago had been snapped.

**Five Years After the Bridge**

“From a patient of mine,” said Mike Stamford, in answer to the question of where he had got the idea for a series of drugs that could act as suppressants and regulators of Omega heats, now in the final stages of human testing. “An Omega-Y, who shall remain anonymous, expressed his frustrations over the nature of his heats, and his desire to have control over them. That’s what planted the seed. And from there, after thinking on it for a long while, it began to germinate.”

Mike sat at the long table with his colleagues. The press release was being aired live, and the panel was anticipating hard-hitting questions from the press.

Another reporter stood.

“Dr. Stamford, you claim the drug can control an Omega’s scent. Inhibit it, in fact, so that one can’t be identified as Omega in public. Won’t that have a negative or, at the very least, interfering effect on bonding?”

“We’re actually discussing a range of different drugs. So no, actually. The drug you are talking about, the scent inhibitor, is designed for unbonded Omegas who do not want to be identified as such on the streets, thereby offering that Omega a certain level of protection against Alpha packs. It does nothing to alter their heats however. That requires a different drug. And the former has not been proven safe for bonded Omegas, because of the nature of their chemistry, which includes the Alpha scent. We’re still developing a drug for bonded Omegas that can also hide scent from any Alpha other than the bond-mate. But further research is required in that area.”

“Dr. Stamford, regarding the scent inhibitor: what side effects, if any, have you observed in trials?”

“In initial trials, test subjects complained of fever, nausea, headaches, and disorientation. After a series of modifications, we have been able to refine the drug to eliminate any fever or nausea whatsoever. In the most recent trials, one in every ten subjects experienced mild to moderate headaches, and about half complained of disorientation. We believe that the disorientation is owing to the nature of the inhibition: they can smell others, but not themselves, and it’s a confusing thing. Alphas on inhibitors often have the same complaint, so it’s not an unexpected result. But trials have also shown that it’s a matter of adaptation: in short time, these same subjects learned to become accustomed, and so disorientation is now described as a temporary effect.”

“And how long does the drug last?”

“It’s a fast-acting drug, taking effect within ten minutes of oral administration, and depending on
the dosage, can last anyone from two hours—the length of a brief shopping trip, for example—to twelve hours. It is not recommended, at this time, that Omegas take an inhibitor for more than forty-eight hours at a time. And, it bears saying, during that time, Omegas can become orientated within the first hour of inhibition. I dare say many would be willing to accept this minor, temporary discomfort in lieu of the alternative. And it also bears saying that we are continuing our work to keep improving the duration and lessening the disorientation. But we’re very pleased with the product as it is, and we think Omegas will be, too.”

“What do you say to those Alphas, Omegas, and even Betas who are angry about these drugs, calling them unnatural and dangerous?”

“One, they are not dangerous. There are no adverse effects whatsoever to an Omega’s health. In fact, one might argue that there is rather a positive effect, if it helps prevent assaults. And as for the unnatural part?” Dr. Stamford shrugged. “For Omegas: Don’t like it, don’t take it. And for Alphas and Betas: It’s really none of your business.”

Applause rippled throughout the room.

When it settled again, Dr. Stamford ignored the newly raised hands and said, “Look. Not in our lifetimes, but on the horizon—two, maybe three centuries from now—the human population will be comprised of only Betas. Already, the Omega population is dwindled to unprecedented low numbers. Omega-Ys cannot conceive, and the numbers of Alphas, particularly the Xs but also a notable number of Ys, are failing to get their Omega Xs pregnant, Omega Xs who can otherwise conceive with a Beta-Y. We may be on the cusp of Alpha sterility. Omegas still need Alphas, but it looks like, increasingly, they need Betas, too.

“Evolutionary biologists and geneticists agree: the trend toward a fully Beta population seems irreversible. People talk about the disappearance of Omegas, followed by Alphas, as if it means a species is going extinct, but that’s not true. Alpha and Omega, these are biological traits, not the beginning and end of the human race. And sometimes, traits disappear. Sometimes they’re introduced. Thousands of years ago, we were all Betas. Maybe that’s how it should be. Maybe nature is correcting for that now. But we as a species are not going extinct. It’s just our characteristics that change. If people stop being born with blue eyes, that doesn’t mean those same people stop being born. They’ve just traded one trait for another. That’s reproduction. That’s evolution. It’s all fine. Let nature paint her canvas. In the meantime, let us do what’s right by our Omega brothers and sisters.

“Maybe one day Alphas and Omegas will exist only in the history books and as legends. What legacy will they leave behind? One of oppression and unhappiness? Or one of complementary parts, working and living and loving together? Now is the moment in the history when we choose the latter, and work together to ensure it.”

On Baker Street, where John and Sherlock watched the press conference on the telly, Sherlock clapped John on the back and then squeezed his arm, pulling him in for a hug.

It was another victory.

Ten Years After the Bridge

In her will, Mrs. Hudson left 221 Baker Street and its three apartments—a value of over three million pounds—to its occupants of twelve years: husbands Sherlock Holmes and John Watson.

“If it weren’t for her,” said John, as they returned from the funeral, “if she’d not been renting, we never would have met.” He threw his jacket on the sofa and stood in the center of the sitting room,
looking around, trying to remember that first day, so many years ago.

“No. Our story would have been different, but we would have met all the same,” countered Sherlock. He stepped around to face John squarely and rubbed his upper arms, consolingly. “And then we would have been looking for a place to rent. Mrs. Hudson would have become a part of our story, one way or another. I’m sure of it.”

John nodded mournfully. “I’m going to miss her.”

“I told you. We can have her stuffed. Keep her in the foyer, greet her whenever we come home.”

“You cock,” said John, but Sherlock’s attempts to lighten the mood did crack his face into an unwilling smile. He reached up and Sherlock encircled him in his arms, and they laughed their saddened laughter together in a warm embrace.

She hadn’t been ill long, but when she took a turn, it was a fast downward slope. At her age, there wasn’t much the doctors could do. So Sherlock and John did all they could to make her comfortable and happy in her final few days, before she quietly—and quite contentedly, she insisted—slipped away.

John hugged Sherlock tightly, enjoying the comfort of their chests pressing together and sharing a single heartbeat. For a long while, they stood like that, John stroking Sherlock’s neck, Sherlock rubbing John’s back, and then John opened his eyes, and he saw himself in the mirror. But he was surprised to see just how splotchy his face looked, how red his eyes. He didn’t realize he had been crying.

Because . . . he hadn’t been crying.

“Sherlock,” he whispered, as his reflection’s wet eyes widened slowly. “I want you to turn around. Slowly.”

Sherlock made a curious humming noise and slowly broke the embrace. He rotated slowly. John kept a hand on his arm, and together, they faced the mirror, the one they had bought after the first was destroyed. There, on the other side, in a different universe, another Sherlock and John stood together, facing them.

The Johns broke into smiles. The Sherlocks stood in dumb shock.

“How is this possible?” Sherlock asked, breathless.

“Don’t lose eye contact,” John coached, and though he still gripped Sherlock’s arm, he went for the nearest notebook and pen within reach.

“It’s them,” said Sherlock. “It’s really them. It’s the other world.”

“I know, I know,” John said, scratching excitedly onto the paper:

_You’re still here! You’re still with us!_

At the same time, the other John, who had launched for his own pad and pen, said:

_You survived the bridge! Thank God!_

John’s eyes burned with happy tears as he nodded, looking between the other John and Sherlock. Sherlock. He looked just like his own Sherlock, of course, but a little taller, slightly broader, but
seeing him now, a flood of decade-old memories flooded back, and John swore he could almost smell him, too. The other Sherlock looked at him, and something passed between them, an understanding he would never be able to quantify or articulate, but it was real, and powerful. Something similar was passing between his Sherlock and the other John.

Over the next few hours, the wonder of the mirror didn’t falter, and they filled pages and pages of written communication, the four of them together. The Sherlocks were filled with questions; the Johns caught each other up on everything that had changed since the bridge. Some things were the same: Lestrades had married Molly’s; Mycrofts had become Prime Minister; Mrs. Hudsons had passed away three days ago.

But there were differences, too: in John’s prime universe, Lestrade and Molly had twin daughters; in the other John’s, they’d had twin Beta-Xs, twin Beta-Ys, and an Omega-Y. In the prime universe, John and Harry had reconciled, and their relationship had never been better. The Harry and Clara of the other world had become leaders in the Omega Revolution. In the prime universe, Mycroft remained single and aloof; in the other, Mycroft, reformed on the issue of Omega-Alpha relations, had done something radical, and allowed a Beta-Y to mate with his Omega, and Anthea had given birth to a healthy Beta-Y Mycroft claimed as his own son: Mycroft’s scent, part of Anthea, was present in her child.

_We have a very large pack these days_, the Sherlock of the other universe wrote, proudly.

The Sherlock of the prime universe was thunderstruck.

For their own part, John explained how he and Sherlock had married nine years ago and Harry had served as his best man, and Sherlock chimed in that the photographer had tried to murder one of the guests, making it a perfect wedding day. While the other John looked dismayed, the other Sherlock nodded approvingly. Then John showed John the faint scar on his neck, left behind from when Sherlock had bitten him, their first time together.

_A bond mark!_

_As it were._

The other John wiped away tears of happiness.

_Sherlock has one, too, in a less . . . visibly accessible location._

The other Sherlock threw his head back and laughed.

From the other John:

_I knew you two loved each other. I knew it._

The sun set, and midnight crawled closer. He couldn’t describe it, but John knew that soon, the connection would lessen, and then break. And that would be that. This, the chance to reach across a great void, was a gift from the universe, and one they would not be given again. He could see in the other John’s eyes that he knew it, too. And they were both at peace with it. The universe had righted itself, and so how could they feel anything but peace, and joy?

_Thank you, John, Sherlock. [John showed his final message to the mirror.] For changing our lives._

_Thank you, John, Sherlock. [The other John raised his notebook at the same time, his last words to cross time and space.] For changing our world._
They held gazes, offered grateful smiles. Sherlocks held their Johns. Johns lifted hands in farewell. And slowly, the connection faded, and John and Sherlock were looking at their own reflections in the mirror, as, really, they had been all along.

The End

Chapter End Notes

A thousand thank yous to readers who have left kudos, comments, and translations, and to those who have recommended this fic to others. Please keep sharing, and continue to enjoy the marvelous stories produced by this super-talented fandom!

Works inspired by this [m@DFIC] A Fold in the Universe by Lockedinjohnlock (Podfixx), [Cover] A Fold In the Universe by allsovacant, [Music] Eventually by GloomyLight

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