The Omega Sutra

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Summary

COMPLETE. In an Omegaverse/Angels & Demons AU, Sherlock Holmes has a secret life. John Watson shouldn't want to be part of it. But they'll go through heaven and hell to keep each other. Johnlock and Mystrade caught up in the eternal battle of angels and demons.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The Mysteries

John's therapist was talking, and he wasn't really listening. She wanted him to write down everything that happened to him. Now that he was back. Shot up shoulder. Intermittent limp. Hand tremor. Feeling slightly lost and very alone in London after so long away.

"And have you thought any more about what we talked about last time?"

"I-- I did. It doesn't change how I feel, I mean. Look, bonding is the absolute last thing I'm looking for right now. The state I'm in.” He could have been referring to his limp (psychosomatic in her opinion), or the tremor in his hand. But she knew John meant his state of mind.

The man needed something, and there was a tried and true way to get it.

"John, I'm just asking you to think about it -- not bond tomorrow! Perhaps just come off the suppressants . . . You’ve been on them longer than most men your age. I do think you are failing to address your fundamental needs as an Alpha. Not that you aren't still a young man, you've still got time, of course. But London isn't Afghanistan."

"Thanks, but I know it’s not Afghanistan. I am a doctor. Anyway, suppressants were practically mandatory to get through medical college. And in Afghanistan . . . look, I'm sure it's all in my file there. Alphas in deployed medical units are required to be on suppressants. Obviously. So I’d appreciate you not reading into it anything more than what is it – purely circumstantial.” He realised that he was over-explaining and sounded defensive and was irritated to see her making copious notes of his outburst.

"Very well. Just dating – with a beta -- would be good for you, then. No pressure to bond, no pressure to breed. Perhaps wait a bit before plunging into the Omega pool."

###

The next day, he met Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes immediately proposed that they flatshare. Holmes had flamboyantly announced that he could see that John was a soldier, a doctor, had just been invalided home from Afghanistan, and that he was an Alpha.

John was too nonplussed to do more than ask the consulting detective's name and the address of the hypothetical shared flat, and forgot all about asking what the detective's own permutation was. Something about the man discouraged direct personal questions. Later that day, he decided that Holmes was an Alpha. Probably. Domineering and arrogant, with a decidedly swaggering physicality despite a certain exoticism to his looks.

But it was hard to tell for certain. He wasn’t yet used to the dizzying array of permutations in civilian life, especially in London – in the Army, all soldiers’ permutations were rigorously classified and controlled, and most of all not subject to privacy.

The man hadn't gotten close enough for him to catch any obvious scent. Also, he seemed to bundle himself in a long coat and scarf a great deal, which served to minimise the amount of bare skin giving off pheromones. He thrust away the surprising image of Sherlock's pale bare skin. Where the hell did that come from? Any possible deviation in his presumed orientation for female
omegas had been ruthlessly driven down by his conservative village upbringing and later, his Army training. The penalties for fraternizing with his fellow male soldiers had been sure, painful and shameful. And of course, omegas were not allowed to serve in the field at all, although it was rumoured that omegas generally and male omegas in particular could be devastatingly effective in military intelligence and espionage.

Yes, the Army had made things simple and clear. And John Watson had done his level best to get in line.

Clearly his therapist was right. He needed to start dating.

###

Yes, John was ultimately destined, as he assumed, his therapist assumed, as everybody assumed, to ultimately bond and breed a female omega - when the time was right. His liaisons with women had thus far not progressed in that direction: he tended toward betas, time and again, telling himself it was because he hadn’t yet had the time or opportunity to change. And if he had ever strayed toward another male-- in the Army, for instance-- it has led to nothing but unhappiness and uncertainty, and was best left to the past. Male Alphas were meant to breed female omegas. Male omegas were exotic, confusing creatures, generally meant for keeping by wealthy collectors who enjoyed, and could afford to maintain, such rare and delicate things. Far from the world of an invalided Army doctor struggling to find his place in dull civilian life.

Flatsharing with another Alpha was just the ticket - as long as he didn't bring ripe Omegas into the flat at all hours.

He thrust that faintly disturbing thought from his mind.

Sherlock smiled arrogantly. "You look worried, Doctor Watson. I confess things are worse than you think. I'm an omega, if you hadn't already observed that. Ah, you hadn't. Not much of a doctor then? I suppose the suppressants make it harder for you to detect, yes?"

Holmes looked insufferably smug. John scowled back at him.

A male omega. A rara avis. Just five percent of all permutations. They made him mildly uncomfortable, suppressants or not.

"Yes," John had said warily. Unsure what he was saying yes to, exactly.

Sherlock strode across the room, loomed over him, and stared him down with what John would otherwise have sworn was true Alpha rank-pulling, and said: "Don't worry. I'm taking a little hormonal cocktail of my own invention. You won't know the difference to living with an Alpha. I assure you that I have no intention whatever of permitting myself any . . . lapses. I never do."

He meant that he didn't have heats. Neither did John, for the time being. It wasn't like they'd be flatsharing for life. Except that Sherlock Holmes made it sound like just as much a matter of his personal will as the suppressants, whether he ever went into heat or not. The man’s arrogance was truly astounding.

John took the opportunity to inhale as Holmes moved deep into his personal space – any closer and they would be touching - but he caught no scent at all. Well, maybe a hint of Alpha. But that might have been him.

"Neither do I," John said firmly. "I should warn you, though, that I'm intending to come off the suppressants. But, ah, I'm --" he floundered momentarily. He didn't want to give offense.
"Indeed," Sherlock finished for him ambiguously. "You'll agree, of course, not to use the flat for any -- episodes" John shook his head emphatically. When and if he went into heat and found a partner - a female Omega partner - they would go to a red hotel. Far from 221b Baker Street. Sherlock was watching his face intently, and smirked. "And don't worry, John. I assure you that I won't subject you to any unwanted attentions."

After a single day filled with thrilling adventure, which began with him examining a corpse at a crime scene and ended in him shooting a demented cabbie, he took the flat.

He would simply permit himself no thoughts of any kind about Sherlock Holmes' omega-ness.

Without any real discussion, they fell into a rather effective partnership, and that crime scene was the first of many. Everything was brilliant.

And it was all fine.

* * *

Except that it wasn't fine. Not entirely.

Instead, things were sometimes . . . confusing.

What things?

Shortly after he had moved into 221b, John had woken in the middle of the night. Sometimes he had nightmares, but that wasn't it. He wondered if coming off the suppressants was disturbing his sleep. He tossed and turned. It was no good. He crept downstairs. Maybe a cup of herbal tea.

For once the flat was silent. Generally Sherlock stayed up most of the night, working on his experiments, or updating his incomprehensible blog, mysteriously banging in and out of the flat at strange hours of the night. He hadn't yet worked out when the man slept. He was sleeping now, though. John was envious. He knew that the detective had an alarming assortment of drugs -- some legal and harmless, some quite the opposite -- in the medicine chest in his bathroom. It couldn't hurt to look for a sleeping tablet. Tomorrow he could get his own. He stepped quietly toward the bathroom door. And that was when he heard the sounds. He had been in the Army, after all. He was quite familiar with the desperate sound of a man trying to wank quietly without anybody hearing. His feet froze to the spot and his cock sprang to attention.

Sherlock's bedroom door was ajar. He would have to take a few steps down the hall and stand in front of the door to see what Sherlock was doing. He pushed that thought away --- why, for god's sake, would he want to see that? He should back away as quietly as he had come in so Sherlock wouldn't think he was being spied upon.

But the sounds, god those sounds. Whatever he was doing to himself sounded like it felt better than anything John had ever done or felt or even imagined. The erotic sounds were soft but unrestrained, coupled with the faint smack of his hand stroking himself - not hard and fast like John did himself -- here his hand flew to his own cock, just to push it back down -- but slow, deliberate. Like Sherlock was taking his sweet time.

John felt trapped, confused. He should leave. What if Sherlock got up after, maybe to wash? And found him standing here with a raging hard-on. But it didn't sound like this would be over with any time soon. He found himself praying that Sherlock would come, so that he could flee while he was seized with orgasm. And that, of course, brought an image, unbidden, of Sherlock coming - what would that look like? He shouldn't even be having these thoughts.
He took a silent step backward. And then he heard something that made his face burn and his chest feel suffocated. The harsh amplified voice of a man on speaker. Sherlock must have his mobile - maybe even his laptop -- on the bed, next to him. "Very good, Sherlock. That is perfect."

He took a few more silent steps backward toward the stair, not before he heard Sherlock gasping quietly, beautifully. It seemed to go on forever.

John dove onto his own bed and pulled out his stiff prick in mixed desperation and shame. He almost didn't have to touch at all, just a few short strokes and he was seized with a powerful orgasm and his hand was drenched. He pushed his face into his pillow and pulled another on top. He didn't even have the strength to get up and wash. In this pitch darkness, his body limp and warm, he finally slept.

###

Other things were confusing too.

Things such as spending time with any other living creature who wasn't Sherlock Holmes. John soon discovered that his efforts at dating betas were being interfered with – if he thought harder about it, which he didn’t, he could use the word ‘foiled’ -- by Sherlock's sabotage.

He wasn't as entirely unobservant as Sherlock believed. In fact, his machinations were becoming increasingly obnoxious, or creative. Depending on one's perspective.

"Oh dear. That serial bomber is at it again," Sherlock cried loudly, with a theatricality that dripped innocence as he shouldered between John and his date as they sipped their pints. Apparently Sherlock wasn't above a trip to Clapham when motivated.

Foiled again.

Jenna was a sporty blonde beta. She was not interested in exclusivity and John wasn't quite attached enough to spend much time wondering about other men - or women - who might occupy her bed when he wasn't in residence.

"Thanks for sharing that vital information, Sherlock. And no, I'm not running off with you to try and catch the bomber, if that's what you're after. We're going to a party." He gave Sherlock a look intended to communicate that after the party, he intended to shag Jenna blind back at her flat. Just so Sherlock could have everything crystal clear.

Jenna loudly excused herself to the loo in a huff. This wasn't the first time that Sherlock had materialized during one of their dates. As soon as she was out of earshot, Sherlock announced in John's ear:

"Come on, John, it’ll be brilliant. You know you want to."

John turned his head to escape from the warmth of Sherlock’s breath and the near-touch of his lips against his ear.

"Want to what?"

Sherlock stared at him as though John out to be able to read the answer in his eyes. John ignored their pale grey depths and looked into his pint as though he might find the answer to life's mysteries there.

"Anyway, John -- you may as well forget the party- boring - as you won't be going back to Jinny -
"Jenna -"

"- Whatever's - flat, afterwards," Sherlock pursued. “I know that's the main event, John - you don't really care about the party, do you? Be honest. I though not. And I've got delicate experiments on in 221b so I'm afraid you can't invite Jessie -"

"- Jenna -"

"--- to stay in our flat."

John looked at Sherlock with extreme annoyance and Sherlock looked back, no longer innocent, wide eyes wicked. Although John was very angry -wasn't he?- suddenly his mouth was dry and whatever exasperated retort he might have made to this stuck in his throat.

He slid off his stool, took a step closer. This close to Sherlock, he had to tilt his head to look up at Sherlock's face. This was really unfair, so he poked a warning Alpha finger into the lapel of Sherlock’s omnipresent coat. Coincidentally, it landed right above where Sherlock’s heart ought to be. Not that he had one, John thought fleetingly.

"Sherlock, you've got to stop-- " John found his voice, growled in warning.

Jenna was back. "What’s this about staying in your flat?"

"I'm afraid your building's been just a little bit blown up, Jill," Sherlock said in mock concern.

"Oh my God!!"

Jenna ran off, nearly ripping her handbag. “Jenna, wait –" John called after her, not without stopping to down the rest of his pint. Halfway out the door, he turned. Sherlock was watching him. Their eyes met across the pub. But then his tall frame vanished in the crowd.

###

The police wouldn't let them near the building. Noxious fumes issued from the door to the front landing.

"Just a prank, probably," an officer observed. "But we've got to treat it seriously. You'll want to go somewhere else till morning, miss."

John was fuming too. Jenna looked at him expectantly. John gallantly he put his arm around her. "Don't worry, we'll stay at my flat tonight," he said.

"What about your flatmate?"

"My flatmate can bugger off."

Back in 221b, something was definitely off. Sherlock was scraping aggressively on his violin behind the door to his room. The atmosphere was tense, like night air before a thunderstorm. He pulled Jenna upstairs, where she giggled softly and held out her arms.

"Won't he hear us," she whispered.

"We'll be quiet," John promised. It felt more like a warning to himself than to Jenna.
And he did try very hard to be quiet. In fact he immediately regretted starting up with Jenna. So far, neither he nor Sherlock had brought a sexual partner of any permutation into the flat. But it served him right. Surely Sherlock didn’t expect him to live like a monk. It wasn't as though the detective was denying himself - although John had come no closer to learning who the man on the speaker was that night.

He felt a deep twinge that might be his Alpha hormones awakening. And perhaps because he was trying valiantly to be quiet, and perhaps because he could not shake a sharp awareness of the presence of Sherlock, plying his violin below, climax was frustratingly out of reach. The violin stopped abruptly, mid-note. The front door slammed.

John did not sleep.

He finally realised he was waiting for the sound of the door opening again.

####

The next morning, Jenna left early (yoga), just missing Sherlock’s return. Sherlock slipped back into 221b with the silent footfall of a cat. John was having his second cup of tea after a largely sleepless night.

Sherlock silently unwound his scarf and unfurled his coat with his back to John to hang them with greater care than usual on the coatrack. There was an awkward silence.

This made John angry, maybe because he really was feeling a little guilty now. But Sherlock had asked for it, he thought. He wasn’t going to let Sherlock Holmes play games with his head. Because it felt like a game, one where he didn’t know the rules-- or worse, where the odds were stacked against him. He hated that feeling. He took a deep breath.

“Sherlock, I –“

“It’s fine, John. Please, let’s not discuss it. If you’d do me the courtesy of texting me in advance next time you need . . . privacy, I’ll go elsewhere. For as long as you like.” Sherlock wouldn’t turn around. He seemed to be winding and unwinding his scarf in his hands.

“What I would have liked, Sherlock, was to go back to Jenna’s flat. Obviously. I wasn’t trying to -- Look. I’d say I was sorry if I didn’t know you played that prank at her flat. That smoke bomb, whatever it was.”

“It wasn’t smoke. It was a harmless vapour that I –“

“It doesn’t matter. Just don’t - enough with these little games. I know you don’t like my dates. But who I choose to date is my business, not yours.”

Sherlock turned around then. He was wearing an almost obscenely tightly fitted and expensive-looking black dress shirt with equally tight-fitting black trousers, neither of which garments John had ever seen before. For the first time he could see – in those trousers, it was impossible not to see -- that for an omega, Sherlock was rather well endowed. The shirt’s buttons were undone farther down Sherlock’s chest than he had ever seen, displaying an expanse of elegant pale neck and chest.

He caught himself gaping, which was mortifying, and took a gulp of tea to cover up but the tea was still scalding. He burnt his lip. He slammed the cup on the table, sloshing hot tea on his hand. He swore. Sherlock was watching him with those too-knowing eyes.
“Fuck!”

Sherlock smiled maliciously. “You already did.”

John growled in aggravation and ran his fingers under cold water from the tap, frowning at the remains of an abandoned experiment clogging the drain.

“Are you all right, John,” Sherlock’s voice was right at his shoulder, and he almost jumped. Almost. His nerves weren’t what they had been before Afghanistan but he was still a soldier. It would take more than Sherlock Holmes being – difficult? Mysterious? Sexy? to shake him.

He stopped himself firmly from any further contemplation of Sherlock’s personal attractions. Such as the chiseled cheekbones, impossibly lush mouth. Tousled hair that invited you to push the curls back from above those wide, clear grey eyes. Legs that went on forever and an arse that needed to be kept under wraps by that coat because even he couldn't help being mesmerized by its magnificence.

“I’m fine.” He turned to face Sherlock and the scent hit him: strong Alpha, real pheromones, not artificial, foreign and raw; a strange overlay of cigar smoke. Under that, artificial omega scent of a uniquely alluring quality, expensive and exotic. He wondered if Sherlock mixed it himself, if his real scent was like that, or… the scents were making his cock fill and twitch.

On Sherlock’s throat was a large purplish mark that was unmistakable. John was so astonished that he couldn’t quite tear his eyes from it, his mind overtaken by vivid imaginings of who made that mark, and how. The man on the speaker? Somewhere down deep, the Alpha in him wanted to make a bigger one. It was only natural. He felt a tiny chink opening in his ironclad Army training.

He looked up into Sherlock’s face expecting to see an arrogant sneer which under the circumstances, John might have allowed was deserved. Instead, Sherlock looked intent, curious. Like he did at a crime scene before he had figured everything out, or during an experiment before he knew if it would succeed. John would have backed up but he was already backed against the sink, and anyway, backing down wasn't his style. To an omega, for god’s sake.

He really hoped it was not obvious that he’d gotten hard. Which was just scent-induced, clearly. As a doctor, he understood this. He stood up straighter and tried to adjust himself without drawing attention to his condition. Sherlock looked down meaningfully. John flushed.

“Why did you do it, Sherlock?” He didn’t think Sherlock would answer questions about his little prank at Jenna’s flat. Usually he refused to answer direct questions about anything pertaining to himself. Pale eyes looked into his, unblinking. Then Sherlock turned away, retreating toward his bedroom.

“Just don’t do it again,” John said, putting the warning behind it. So Sherlock would know he meant business.

“Are you sure?” Sherlock yelled back aggressively from his room.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“All right, John.” Sherlock came back to the threshold of the room, his expression contemptuous. “You want to know why I did it? Because I respect you more than you respect yourself. Obviously.”

And then he was gone with another slam of his bedroom door. No violin sounds emerged.
John stood stock still in the kitchen, unable to frame a suitable retort. By the time he stopped processing this confusing little scene his tea was tepid. He stomped back down the stair and slammed the front door at least twice as hard. He was the Alpha, after all.

All day long, his mind kept returning to that bite mark on Sherlock's neck. This made him feel ridiculous. His initial assumptions regarding Sherlock's apparently monk-like chastity were obviously far off the mark.

He wondered where Sherlock had gone, dressed like that. Had he met someone, someone he knew? Or had the mark been made by someone he'd picked up, someone he'd let pick him up? Even on suppressants, he looked like an open invitation to...

Stop it, he admonished himself. If he didn't get a grip he would have to find new lodgings.

And he really didn't want to do that.

# # #

The next two days found John and Sherlock confined to the flat in abysmal weather with no crimes whatsoever on offer. Sherlock grew increasingly irritable and restless, tapping his fingers, twitching his leg. Snapping at John over nothing; over everything. John ignored him, which took a great deal of self-control, but watched with concern as Sherlock started rummaging in various odd corners throughout the flat, making an even bigger mess of things than they already were. John frowned. Sherlock was positively hopping with agitation. It was late, the day had been excruciating, and it was looking as if neither of them was likely to get much sleep. Now Sherlock was fiddling with his bow. If he played any more of the aimless shrieking that he did to "help him think," John would throw it out the window.

"Sherlock, Jesus, you're acting like a strung-out addict -- there can't be a brilliant crime every single day just for your personal amusement. Read a book. Clean the refrigerator. But try to relax, all right? It's about time to turn in, tomorrow will be a better day." He winced, realising some person would have to die in a fascinatingly unusual fashion for that to be true. "Knock it off, you're making me nervous."

And he was. If John had to watch him pacing the flat any longer he was going to have to do something to make him stop, force him to be still.

He hadn't worked out yet what that something might be.

Sherlock flashed a sharp grey gaze at him, like daggers. He literally snarled and began pounding on his laptop. John suppressed a smile. He was going to try to distract himself. This was good.

Except that Sherlock leaped up, snagged his coat from the rack, and dashed out the door.

"Where are you going?" John called after him.

"Don't worry, John," Sherlock yelled almost angrily, the answer making no sense.

"I'm not going to bloody worry, you conceited git," he yelled down after him. He was the Alpha, not a brooding, fretting omega.

He got up, touched Sherlock's laptop. In his haste, he had left it on and the desktop open. There was an email message.

"Little Havana, 10:30. 'Faustino.'"

John was irritated and a little hurt. Sherlock had a lead on some new case and had left him behind. Unless . . . it was a date? Sherlock certainly hadn't made any special preparations if that was the case. He had flown out the door in a rumpled white shirt, black trousers, his hair untamed. Not like last time, those tight black trousers. . . John thumped himself on the forehead to banish the thought. It was the suppressants wearing off. John had been troubled by increasingly intrusive sexual thoughts, which wouldn't have troubled him a bit if they had been thoughts of a warm female omega. But they weren't.

He checked "Little Havana" on his laptop. There was only one choice: The Little Havana cigar lounge in the City. Catering to financiers with too much money on their hands, it promised the very finest in hand-rolled Cuban cigars. John recalled the scent of cigar smoke on Sherlock when he had returned that night. The night he had the bite mark on his neck. Now John was wondering if Sherlock had some sort of drug habit. Not cigars of course, but something that was making him twitchy and jumpy and aggressively irritable.

John sighed. Sherlock had said not to worry. That, of course, meant John ought to be very worried.

"Right," he said. He pulled on his jacket and checked his gun, thrust it in his waistband and headed for the Underground.

# # #

Little Havana was near Liverpool Street tube station. It was a Saturday night and the bustle of the workweek throngs was absent. Little Havana was at the end of a street of mixed bars and restaurants, mostly closed or closing at this late hour. But he heard music coming from below the new-looking sign, showing an alluring Cuban woman proffering a fat cigar.

There was a doorman, who stopped John with a courteous hand. Not for money. "Private club on Saturday nights, sir," he said.

John gave him a few pounds anyway and said, "Faustino," with cool nonchalance.


John's heart sank. Little Havana was some sort of high-class brothel, evidently. He would never have pegged Sherlock the type to want, or need, to pay for his sexual pleasure. But his curiosity, the same curiousity that had gotten him into flatsharing and crime-solving with Sherlock Holmes in the first place, was driving him now. He slipped inside.

There was a small bar with a few patrons sipping drinks, and a curtained door at back. Music was pounding. Caribbean music, Cuban music, he supposed. Pulsing conga beats. What he would say if Sherlock saw him here, he had no idea. Maybe he wouldn't say anything at all. He ordered a tequila neat and went toward the music, staying in the back, in the shadows.

There was a full Cuban band - congas, guitars, horns, men singing passionately, raucously. He couldn't understand the words but he got the gist of the song - the singer was trying to persuade his lover to capitulate. It was a classic Alpha-omega courtship ballad, he thought. The beat was
getting to him. He knocked back a little tequila and looked around.

A few women were seated at tables, baskets at their feet. They were hand-rolling cigars. This process involved rolling the cigar somewhat suggestively between their smooth thighs. Men lined up to buy, giving extravagant tips, taking long, appreciative sniffs of the cigars. John almost laughed. He heard one of the men say, "You're an angel, Evelina," to one of the women, and she smiled brilliantly back, but returned with focus to her task.

It certainly did not appear that anything more illicit than a mildly alluring show of feminine thighs was on offer at Little Havana. He sat back to enjoy the music. It was hypnotic. It made him wish he was dancing with someone, holding tight. He didn't see Sherlock anywhere. He swallowed more tequila.

"Cigar, Senor," came a breathy female voice at his ear. A lovely Cuban woman, an omega, was offering him a cigar. "I'm Lupita. Twenty pounds," she said.

John sputtered. "I don't smoke, thanks luv."

"Best cigars in London. In the world. You couldn't do better in Cuba," she said.

"I have no doubt," he said warmly. "No thanks."

"Senor wants something different." The pulse of it was getting more driving, frantic. The singer was singing something that sounded very suggestive.

"What does it mean?" The tequila was hitting his veins. It felt fantastic.

"He sings, that the cat dances with the rat." John laughed. It was absurd. But it didn't sound absurd. "He says, he's burning down there-- he doesn't want to die that way-- from his knees up, from his waist down, he is on fire."

He drained his glass. He wondered why Lupita was hanging around.

"Biopure or synthetic?" Lupita's lips almost touched his ear as she had to almost shout over the music. John snapped a little toward sobriety. Now he was getting somewhere. Sherlock was buying some strange underground drug. Or, more likely, trying to break a case involving same. But why had he kept John in the dark?

"Ah, you choose?" Lupita smiled and stroked his cheek, which was a little damp with perspiration. The drums were shaking his chest, thrumming down deep. She delicately licked her fingertip.

"Biopure for you, Senor. The finest. Wait until this song is over, and go there -" She pointed to a black-curtained door behind the band. "El Brujo will give you what you need." She held out her hand expectantly and he gave her twenty pounds. She seemed satisfied, and left him with a little kiss on the cheek.

###

The band wailed out the last of the long, driving song, then launched into a lush, tender love ballad. Something about gardenias. John stood up. Someone else was coming out from behind the black curtain.

It was Sherlock Holmes. Before he had a chance to react, a tall, exotic-looking man with slicked-back black hair stood up to block Sherlock's path. He was as tall as Sherlock. He put a restraining
hand on Sherlock's arm and John's hand flew to his gun.

The man leaned in and kissed Sherlock.

John couldn't see from this angle whether Sherlock kissed back, whether this was something he wanted, or . . . don't be a fool, he thought. If Sherlock Holmes didn't want to be kissed he'd have ripped the man's balls off by now. For an Omega, Sherlock was utterly ruthless; vicious when he chose to attack, although John's experience of male Omegas was admittedly limited to Sherlock himself. John had seen firsthand how Sherlock dealt with unwelcome sexual advances, and it wasn't pretty. And so far as John could tell, all sexual advances were unwelcome. Except the voice on the speaker, that night --- and this man. Was he the one talking to Sherlock, praising him while he stroked himself? John felt hot and cold all over and he wanted desperately to have a target to shoot at. Such as the back of the man's head.

With his hand still on Sherlock's arm, the man's other hand went around Sherlock's neck, and the kiss got a lot more intense. John looked away, he didn't want to see, didn't want to know. Then the two men swiftly exited the club without glancing his way. John had to admit they were a stunningly well-matched couple.

He stood, torn between following, which would officially turn him into some sort of stalker, and going behind the curtain to find out what this El Brujo was selling and Sherlock was apparently buying.

He went behind the curtain.

El Brujo was a wizened old man, an Alpha. He was drinking something from a dark bottle and making marks in a little book. He looked up, seeming surprised to see John. "I don't know you," he said, eyes narrowing.

John decided to brazen it out. "No, but that man that just left . . . he's a friend of mine."

"Ah. A 'friend.' I understand."

John was getting angry. Why did everyone's minds have to work like that? "Yes, a friend. I want to know what you sold him. Show me."

"Come closer," the man said.

"You are El Brujo?" He was suddenly uncertain whether he ought to be asking to see someone else. This old man seemed frail and gentle, and didn't seem like a drug dealer.

"I am. You don't speak Spanish. I will tell you. It means, 'The Wizard.'"

John smirked. The Wizard, behind the curtain. A little joke.

"A trip to the Emerald City?"

El Brujo looked confused. "I don't know 'Emerald City.' We're in Bishopsgate, my friend."

"Just show me what he bought from you."

"He did not buy. It was a gift. If you were my friend, I might make you such a gift. But I don't know you. However, for a small donation -- to support the band, you see -- I could let you have a little of you what you need."
"What I need? I don't need anything."

"Yes you do. " He pulled out a little green bottle. It had a hand-lettered label on it.

"This is synthetic. But very lovely. You will have an amazing heat, bond strongly with the omega of your dreams." John held the bottle between his fingertips as though it might burn. Synthetic pheromones (outside of narrow medical uses for persons who had sensory impairment) were strictly banned by international conventions. He handed the bottle back.

"I don't need this," he said again. "I'm fine."

"The war can make a man's balance. . . unstable. I sense this in you. Your pheromones have become brutal and harsh. More . . . animalistic. It is only natural. But you are home now. This will smooth you out, you should take it."

"What did you give him? The man who just left?"

"That is his business alone."

John pulled his gun. "Let's pretend it's my business. I have friends in Scotland Yard."

"Gently, gently, senor. All right. You see what I mean about, unstable. Put the gun away, if you please. It is very important to you, I see. Here is what he took," the old man turned and rummaged on a shelf full of little bottles. He held out two, one red and one blue.

"What are they?"

"They are the finest pheromone concentrates. Biopure. The red one is to enhance the crossing. Formulated specifically for male Omega --- very delicate and specific needs, you know."

The crossing. First full, consummated heat.

He swallowed hard. His throat was dry and his head suddenly ached.

"And the blue?"

"The opposite. It will fully suppress the male omega heat, prevent the crossing."

"For how long?"

"It is very strong. Two dose, maybe permanent."

Permanent. A chemical neuter. Not unheard of, but the thought made him sick and furious.

"How -- how many doses did you give him?"

"Just one."

"Did he-- did he drink either of them?"

"No. But he wouldn't. Not here. You saw he was with Maxim. Surely, you understand?"

"Understand what?"

"Your friend is in The Mysteries now."

"The Mysteries?"
The old man looked suspicious. "You . . . don't know?"

"No, I bloody don't. Talk."

"You -- you have his scent on you. I thought you and he -- I am sorry, I've made a mistake. If you're going to shoot me, shoot. I am an old man. But I won't tell you more. Ask your friend. If he wants you to know, he will tell you."

John swore and turned to go. The old man pressed a bottle into his hand. The little green bottle. He almost dashed it to the floor but instead his hand thrust it into his pocket. He left Little Havana to the sound of the music, tropical, deep, and primal. He wanted to hit something. He kept picturing that man. Maxim. Kissing Sherlock. Sherlock letting him.

He stood in the empty street, dark and quiet now as the door closed behind him and the doorman bade him goodbye.

"I hope you had a good time," he said.

"Ah -- It was interesting. Thanks-- look, do you work here much, ah-- sorry, what's your name?"

"Barry Gwynn. I'm here on Saturdays."

"Did you see two men, tall, dark hair, one ah, curly and one slicked back, leave just a bit ago? Do you know them?"

Gwynn looked back, coolly blank. John didn't have any more money and didn't want to flash his gun in the street.

"Come on," he said. "Look, Mr Holmes is my friend. I'm supposed to meet them later. Did they say where they were going? I owe them a drink."

Gwynn looked doubtful. John remembered the little green bottle. "You can have this if you tell me," he said, holding it out. Undoubtedly the stuff was worth a fortune on the black market.

Gwynn palmed the bottle smoothly. "They said they were going back to the flat. They took a taxi. Mr. Purcell seemed in a particular hurry." Gwynn did not leer, but it was in his voice. John wanted to hit him.

"Address?"

"River Terrace. Lensbury Avenue. Imperial Wharf."

John hesitated. Well after midnight, the street was deserted now. There were no taxis. He started walking toward Liverpool Street Station. He could take the Bakerloo line. Or the District line to Putney Bridge. One could walk to Imperial Wharf from there. He looked at the coloured lines on the map. Green. Like the little bottle. He shook his head. He must be out of his mind. He kept walking for a while to try to clear it. But in the end, there was only one thing to do.

He took the tube back to Baker Street, his brain spinning the whole while.

Biopure.

Synthetic.

A red bottle.
A blue bottle.
Maxim Purcell.
Kissing Sherlock.
A luxurious flat in Imperial Wharf.
'The Mysteries.'

Sherlock Holmes had a private life that had nothing whatsoever to do with John Watson. Whatever impulse had caused him to want to flatshare with an Army doctor with a case of PTSD, fresh off the transport from Afghanistan, the arrangement was clearly no longer suitable.

On either side.

El Brujo was right. So was his therapist. He had taken his time with the betas. He was ready. More than ready. He was almost clear of the suppressants. His blood was up. He needed to find an omega, bond, make a permanent life, a permanent home. His own woman, breeding, children. Heat. Heat upon heat.

His cock, which had been demanding attention ever since Little Havana, throbbed uncomfortably. And it wasn't the tequila.

Thumping up the stair, throwing the door open to 221b in a state of frustrated confusion, he crashed into the flat, wrestling with his jacket, cursing furiously when his arm got caught up in the sleeve. He threw it on the floor and reached into his waistband for his gun.

"Can we talk about it first?" Sherlock said lightly from the shadows. He had been lying on the sofa in the dark for John's entire performance. He sat up now, outlined in the glow of the fire. John was breathing hard, as if he'd run a marathon, for no reason at all. Except that everything was moving fast.

"Put the gun down, John," Sherlock said slowly, sounding a little concerned this time.

"Ah. Sorry." He put it carefully in the drawer of his desk, slowed his breathing. He didn't want to answer questions, questions he didn't even think he knew the answers to. He turned to go upstairs.

"John, we need to talk," Sherlock said. His voice sounded urgent, possibly distressed. But his hyperactive agitation of earlier this evening had vanished. John could well imagine what may have soothed him.

"No, Sherlock, we don't," John said quietly. "Good night."

As he fell into bed, his brain was filled with the image of the two little bottles, one red, one blue, which he focused on to avoid focusing on the fullness in his aching cock. If he touched himself, he knew what he would be thinking about. He needed to get his head on straight. Tomorrow, he would tell Sherlock that he was moving out. He mentally went through the motions of packing his things, closing the door on 221b one final time. This gave him far more pain than he would ever have imagined that it could. But then he imagined Sherlock standing at the bottom of the stair. He reached out and grabbed John by the arm. He was asking him to stay. They could work it out.

His resolution not to touch himself crumbled. His hand stroked his stiff prick gently, deliberately, the way he imagined Sherlock had. This was difficult, his cock was used to being wanked so much more roughly. It felt unbelievably frustrating but he kept at it, slowly, rhythmically, not moving
any closer toward the orgasm that was building like a fire. In his mind he saw himself pulling Sherlock’s head down, kissing him the way that man, Maxim Purcell, had in Little Havana. He took the little red and blue bottles from Sherlock’s hand and threw them away, and they heard them shatter. Sherlock smiled inscrutably.

*I’m burning*, Sherlock said in John’s imagining. *I don’t want to die like this.*

With a moan, John rubbed and stroked himself harder, faster, unable to keep to that slow deliberate pace, fruitlessly trying to picture himself joining with some female omega. Always his mind returned to the events of Little Havana, to Sherlock, to standing in the dark hall and listening to Sherlock stroke himself while that disembodied voice murmured approval. He came hard with a loud, long groan that he tried to suppress by turning his face into the pillows.

That was the moment when he knew that no matter what happened now, he wasn’t going to leave 221b.

Not for anything.

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See art for Ch 1 commissioned from the brilliant MsAether(Kami): See art here

To be continued . . .
Maxim Purcell's penthouse in a modern building in Imperial Wharf was accessible to very few. Sherlock Holmes was one of the few. He punched the code into the keypad and tilted his face up to the hidden camera. Although it was very early in the morning, he could almost hear Maxim's sigh of satisfaction through the speaker, as if he had been expecting him.

Sherlock was borne swiftly up, up, twenty-one floors. The doors slid silently open. He was in a dark vestibule with a mirrored door. Sherlock waited impassively until the door opened. Maxim, wearing in a simple black kimono, opened the door. Sherlock felt a reluctant, illicit thrill as he entered the penthouse. Maxim had taught him many things. He was cognisant of the honour Maxim did him.

A confusing and heady mix of scents enveloped him. He inhaled deeply, analyzing with precision.
as he had learned to do. Strong Alpha base, wild, strongly musky, mingled with omega, sharper, smoother yet sultry-sweet. He could separate and visualise each chemical strand that comprised the complex threads of pheromones. Androstenone, androstenol, androstandienone, couplin. Together, they made a dance of ripe notes of heat.

In ordinary people, this pheromone assault would already be inducing a frenzy of heat behavior and response: the primer pheromones causing rapid changes in pulse, respiration, vascular engorgement of the sex organs, lubrication, the releaser pheromones throwing those in its scent range into a mating dance, potent and irresistible.

Sherlock noted his own responses while confidently maintaining composure. He was somewhat surprised at the obviousness of the gesture while appreciating Maxim's unerring instincts.

Even this was a test, and he was passing.

"Did I choose correctly? Are you ready?" Maxim walked ahead, barefoot across the gleaming black marble floor. He seemed very serene and centered, but Sherlock knew better. Things had nearly gotten out of hand last night.

They sat on white cushions on the floor, the only furnishings in this vast space of stark white walls, sheer white draperies. The only sound was of a fountain trickling.

Scents enveloped and caressed them. They observed and appreciated each other's minute responses, elevated pulse beating in the neck vein, dilation of the pupil.

"I am," Sherlock said, as calm as Maxim was. So calm.

"This is new for you, Sherlock. I'm not sure I like seeing you this way. Control is one thing. Absence of desire, quite another. I was very . . . disappointed last night."

"You made that clear."

"I don't try to hide it. You practically ran away. I do have to be certain you are ready." Maxim regarded the bite mark he had made on Sherlock's neck. He thought about what it meant that Sherlock had worn a shirt that displayed the mark so openly. A reminder, perhaps; a promise of what was to come. Which even the great Sherlock Holmes could not, as yet, imagine.

Maxim offered Sherlock tea. He had a tea estate in the Kangra Valley in India where it was made just for him. Many times, Maxim had invited Sherlock to travel there with him. Sherlock had so far refused. Soon, Maxim thought.

"This is very pure, the plantings trace their lines to ancient China," Maxim said. He had told Sherlock this before, and so Sherlock perceived he was not as entirely calm as he seemed. Maxim put two objects on the table. The red bottle, the blue bottle.

"I would very much like to hear you say it, Sherlock." Maxim was watching his face avidly. Greedy, Sherlock thought. Maxim had never seemed so covetous before, and he felt a warning finger draw coldly up his spine. He shivered and felt the blood rush, focused on it, and brought it under his control. Not so much as to extinguish desire; not so little as to allow his body and his senses to rule him. Maxim smiled appreciatively.

"The red," he heard himself say. He took the bottle in his hand.

Maxim nodded, exhaled deeply. He had been holding his breath. "When you ran, I began to suspect that perhaps. . . you would go the other way. Do you remember when we met?"
"Of course. You stopped me taking that blue dose."

"When I saw you then, I thought, what a waste! I could see what you were, what you wanted. And what you needed."

Maxim rang a little bell and a silent manservant appeared.

"Prepare the white room."

The manservant bowed and withdrew. Maxim drew closer, ran his fingertips lightly over the bite mark. Sherlock allowed himself to enjoy the sensation. For both of them, their senses so finely tuned, the feathery touch was nearly as intoxicating as a kiss.

"You make me very happy, Sherlock. I am very proud of what you have become. And what you will yet become."

"Maxim." He had no difficulty telling Maxim the unvarnished truth. Of the many things he had learned from Maxim, couching his words diplomacy to avoid hurt was not one of them. "I don't mean to take it here. With you."

Maxim was very still. His dark eyes were starting to cloud with lust, and something darker and more dangerous than lust. But his outward composure was impeccable.

"Sherlock, you are making a mistake. You chose The Mysteries. It is impossible to go back. You will see what I mean, I promise you. No one can take you to the other side as I can. No one deserves what I can give, more than you do. You are destined, although you do not yet truly understand what that means. Only I can show you."

"I didn't say I won't complete the crossing," Sherlock said, as calm as Maxim was, so calm. It was the closest Sherlock had ever come to admitting this to himself. His body was flooded with a smooth warmth that nearly made him weak. He saw John, brought him closer in his mind. He gripped the bottle tight.

"I see. You have formed a new bond. Your Alpha. I warned you."

"Not a bond," Sherlock said. "He is not inclined that way. But--"

"But?"

"I can no longer imagine anyone else... taking me on the crossing."

Maxim studied Sherlock closely. He knew Sherlock very well by now. Better than anyone, he had thought. Better than Sherlock knew himself. He allowed the pain of disappointment to fill him without disturbing his control. Still, failure was impossible. There was always a way, if one was strong.

"What will you do? He seems to be very inflexible in his... preferences."

"I know it. There may be a chance. Sometimes, things change."

"You yourself are the proof of that, Sherlock. But what if he doesn’t?"

Sherlock smiled bleakly. "I always have the blue bottle."

"You are choosing very badly," Maxim said. "I can give you all that really you need." He crossed to Sherlock and drew very close, so close that they could feel the warmth of each other’s skin,
drink in each other's scents. Sherlock commanded himself not to expose his throat for another bite, and Maxim let his lips hover there, but did not kiss. This was not the time to press in, but rather to draw Sherlock closer to him. He was rewarded. With his exquisitely refined senses, he could readily perceive that Sherlock felt the core of himself, the part that wanted to take the crossing, burning and throbbing with craving. Sherlock sighed.

"Sherlock," Maxim breathed into his ear. "I know you don't want to go, I can smell it on you. Take the red, and I will open to you the next level, a place that even you cannot yet begin to imagine. Everything that you have learned until now pales in comparison. Imagine it: heat without loss of self, the power to shape your own senses, to multiply desire. I can show you how to play with it, extend it, only ending when we choose. It is paradise. So very, very few are made to go there, and you are one. Perhaps you are the only one, aside from me. This is what you truly need, what you deserve-- heat without that base loss of self that reduces ordinary people to mere animals. You have already tasted The Mysteries. You can't go back. I warn you, I won't let you."

"Never think, Maxim, that my desire to learn control means that I can be controlled," Sherlock said, showing his teeth. Teeth that wanted to bite, but he was not going to relent. "But I mean no disrespect," Sherlock bowed his head. He knew that Maxim was telling the truth. At least, so far as Maxim knew it, which was far, far more than any other man Sherlock had ever met. His wisdom and strength as a mystic, an intellectual, and a connoisseur of Alpha/omega chemistry was unparalleled anywhere in the world. Sherlock had traveled far and wide to find such a teacher. But he now knew that there were things about himself that Maxim could never understand, because he was barely beginning to understand them himself, and things that Maxim could never teach him, because there were lessons that Sherlock wished only to learn from another. He had a feeling in his centre as if he were about to be pulled down into a dark and unfathomable abyss.

Maxim drew back, composed himself.

"I want to show you something." Maxim stood, crossed the vast space to a tall cabinet. He withdrew a carved wooden box. "I was saving this for after... But look, Sherlock. There isn't another man in Europe who will appreciate it as you do."

Sherlock touched the box. Maxim was a world-class master in the deep techniques of sexual pleasure of all permutations, and a collector of erotic artifacts. He had chosen Sherlock inducted into The Mysteries, sensing that Sherlock's unequaled mind, coupled with an almost innocent carnality and most of all, deep capacity for self-control would make him a formidable disciple in the most rarified of sexual arts. Sherlock knew what was inside the box.

The Omega Sutra.

Sherlock examined the illustrations. Exquisite brushwork. The ancients had depicted these erotic and depraved scenes with a vividness that could stir desire even across centuries. If he looked too long, it would draw him in. That was its purpose. He saw himself, allowing John to push him down into one of these exquisite positions, finding rapture together.

He closed the box.

"Some things cannot be learned through books," Sherlock said.

"No indeed," Maxim agreed.

They drank their tea, and Sherlock left quietly. They did not kiss goodbye.

"You’ll come back to me," Maxim said. "Sooner than you think."
He watched through a hidden webcam as Sherlock retreated down the elevator and into the street.

###

When John woke up the morning after his trip to Little Havana, he made a decision. It was clear that he needed to make certain changes. Plans. He could barely stand to think of his exotic fantasies of the night at Little Havana, fantasies about Sherlock. Fantasies that he needed to forget. In the light of day, this seemed very clear.

He had drifted along without a plan for too long. He pushed himself out of bed and before his feet hit the floor, he was ringing Jessica ("call me ‘Jess,’ John"), an omega in Forensic Services he had met on a pub crawl with Lestrade. He hadn’t been particularly interested, but she sounded happy to hear from him, and this convinced him. It was time to stop delaying the inevitable.

*To win,* he told himself, *you have to actually enter the race, not watch from the cheap seats.* This time he would make sure that Sherlock truly understood the way things were. After last night, John was himself under no illusions on that score.

He thought about his life with Sherlock, and then caught himself. He didn’t have a life with Sherlock. They shared the flat and Sherlock found him useful, he sometimes said. It would inconvenience Sherlock Holmes to have to find a new flatmate, and Sherlock undoubtedly had become accustomed to having John’s lesser wits about him, which served to highlight his own brilliance. Running through London with Sherlock Holmes, catching criminals and sometimes risking the life he had barely preserved from Afghanistan was dangerous and fascinating. Maybe even addictive. Last night was the proof. It was important, he decided, that Sherlock never, ever detect what John had done last night. Any of it.

He could still get control of the situation.

Thinking about addiction made him realise that this was the perfect time to pay Harry a visit. Harry actually answered on the fourth ring.

"But John, I’ve not got out of bed yet. What time is it, you inconsiderate sod," she grumbled.

He bit back the accusation that wanted to spill out, that if she didn’t go to sleep with a bottle at her bedside she could be up at a normal hour, like normal people did on a normal day. As if his own life was normal.

Perhaps because of John’s unusual forbearance, Harry felt well disposed and agreed he should come up on the afternoon train. If he got there early enough, they could go to dinner.

###

If John stopped to examine the impulse propelling his hasty new plans, he had to face a disquieting feeling that he really, really didn’t want to acknowledge. It had to do with Maxim Purcell. It had to with Sherlock Holmes. With Maxim and Sherlock.

His impulse to follow Sherlock last night was feeding something that had stirred when he had stood silently outside of Sherlock’s door, listening to him stroking himself, listening to him come. He had thought of it more than he should. He knew that. And when he did, he somehow no longer heard the sound of the other man’s voice. Maxim’s voice. Maybe it was his own voice. It had been foolish to come off the suppressants without finding himself an appropriate . . . he didn’t like the word "mate," which sounded unbreakably permanent.

But he didn’t need to overthink it. He might date a dozen omegas without the random lightning of
bonding striking him, he told himself reassuringly.

With these plans firmly in place, John went downstairs. Sherlock was gone again. John refused to let Sherlock occupy his thoughts any longer and went about household chores with a will. He allowed himself no thoughts of his flatmate other than resentment at the appalling messes he left everywhere. A few hours later, as he was settling in to well-deserved tea, Sherlock returned.

"Good, John, you're up. Lestrade’s called. Murder in Hampstead. Anderson's solved the case."

Sherlock had apparently forgotten whatever it was that he had said they needed to talk about last night. Which was good, John told himself. Sherlock was subdued, considering that a murder was in the offing, but John wasn't inclined to pry. He was determined to act as if last night, Little Havana, Maxim Purcell, The Mysteries, simply hadn't happened.

Sherlock’s private life was none of his business.

"Sherlock, I can't. I'm going up to Harry's for a few days. Anyway, if Anderson's solved it already, why does Lestrade want you?"

Sherlock whirled around. "Lestrade is beginning to see things more clearly," he said. John wasn't sure whether this was a veiled barb of some sort. Probably it was.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Lestrade thinks it too tidy. Wants us to take a second look."

"Wants you to take a second look, Sherlock. You'll do fine without me. Sounds open-and-shut. I'll see you when I get back, okay?" John resolutely drank his tea, but was unable to ignore the fact that Sherlock wasn’t leaving. He was looming over him, unashamedly scrutinising him with his laser-like stare. John felt like the insect under the magnifying glass when a curious boy focused a sunbeam through the lens. Sherlock’s cool gaze burned.

"Harry? Why would you be visiting Harry today-- it's not even the weekend. She's not having a crisis-- you would be gone already not standing about making your tea. There are only four trains and you've missed the morning trains unless you were leaving this instant, which you obviously are not. So, you're taking the afternoon train. Dinner with Harry? You hadn't mentioned the visit before and it's hardly something you would have kept a secret from me, John. So, the visit was planned quite suddenly, on an impulse-- yours, or hers? Harry has barely bothered to send you a Christmas card, let alone invite you up for intimate brotherly advice --"

John put down his tea (carefully this time), and folded his arms. "Sherlock."

"-- which means, of course, that --"

"Sherlock!" John yelled. Sherlock stopped, shut his mouth, and looked at John speculatively. John stood up, took a step forward, and Sherlock didn't back away. Maxim Purcell had been this close to Sherlock when he reached up and-- John took a deep breath. His blood was starting to tingle, as it did when he was angry, or when he needed--

"Sherlock. Stop making deductions about my life as though -- as though I were a bloody crime scene! But you're right, of course you're right. I'm taking the afternoon train and I've got a few things to get sorted before I go. You can -- you can do this one alone." He tried to push down the sudden swell of his anger because Sherlock looked a faintly puzzled, as though such an idea had never occurred to him. Perhaps it hadn’t.
The stood just looking at each other like that, until John grabbed his laptop and started to go back upstairs to pack.

"Well, come to Hampstead, you can still make your train," Sherlock said casually. "If there’s anything to it, I’ll find it quickly. I usually do, don’t I?"

"You do." Despite his irritation, John couldn't keep the admiring tone from his voice.

Sherlock smiled (charmingly, John couldn't avoid noticing), and pressed his advantage. "Besides, when was the last time you were on Hampstead Heath?"

"The murder was on Hampstead Heath? It'll be all over the news."

"Crime scene’s a house in Hampstead Gardens. But-- I thought a walk out on the Heath, after, would be. . . " Sherlock seemed to struggle for the proper word, and failed.

John looked away from his too-penetrating stare that seemed always to read right through him, while his own efforts to read Sherlock were always deflected somehow. Sherlock seemed to think John would understand what he meant without explanation. He waited for John's response, looking curiously innocent, not the playacting he deployed against John's dates.

"It would," John heard himself say. "As long as I'm at the station on time."

He pushed past Sherlock and went down the stair into Baker Street, and Sherlock followed after.

* * *

They never made it to Hampstead Heath.

The killer had left so many obvious clues for Anderson to find because he had intended to obliterate the entire scene of the crime. The Hampstead crime scene had been rigged with explosives. But he got the timer wrong. Sherlock discovered this too late: one moment, John was watching him kneeling on the floor, intently examining an electrical outlet. The next moment, Sherlock was turning, looking up, shouting - "John!"

John’s war-honed Alpha instincts took over and he threw himself over Sherlock to shield him.

Then everything went white and silent.

When he came to himself, John was sprawled over Sherlock's lean body. The first thing he was aware of was Sherlock’s breathing, and his heart rate slowed a bit. He knew from experience that in a few moments the pain would start. But for now, they were alone in a silent, slow-motion world.

He lifted his head slightly look at Sherlock, and was confronted with a pair of shocked grey eyes in a dust-covered face. An open gash on his brow was bleeding. John reached up to try to stanch the blood but he heard Sherlock from a great distance telling him to stay still. Sherlock’s hand reached for his and pulled it away, held it down.

They stayed like that, John slowly becoming more vividly conscious of the fact that his body was sprawled intimately over Sherlock's, but he felt quite unable to move. So close, even smell of the smoke and dust did not completely mask the low omega note. He thought he could feel Sherlock's fingers pressing sensitively along the back of his head, his neck and spine, which felt odd. And good.

"Sherlock," he said, the word ringing strangely in his head.
And then the pain slammed into him. The next thing he knew he was being hoisted into an ambulance. His vision was blurred then but he thought he saw the doors close on Sherlock’s stricken face.

John woke up in a hospital bed, and groaned. Every bone and muscle in his body felt like he had been viciously beaten with a bat. He had a splitting headache. He closed his eyes against the fluorescent lights, but the doctor was suddenly at his bedside. He reluctantly opened them again. It took a moment for him to recognize Sherlock Holmes wearing a white coat, looking remarkably fresh for a man who had just been in an explosion, if you didn’t look closely at the tense line of his jaw and the shadows behind his eyes. The cut over his brow had been stitched up. John knew he could have done better himself, and felt a rush of pure fury that there would probably be a scar now on that flawless skin.

"What in the hell –" Even moving his jaw hurt.

"They wouldn’t let me in. As I’m not family," Sherlock said neutrally. "Idiots. I took matters into my own hands. Although Harry has been calling, you know; she knows what happened. If you want her here, John. . . "

Sherlock looked down. John was in too much pain to even consider having Harry at his bedside.

"No, I don't want that."

"They want you to stay, you know. At least overnight."

"Well, that’s too bad because I'm going home." John waved his hand to send Sherlock away. His clothing from the crime scene was in a little pile on a chair.

Sherlock didn’t move. Instead he produced fresh clothing. He seemed to have some idea of putting them on for John. John snatched them away. Even that movement made him stagger and grunt. Everything hurt.

"I’ve seen your X-rays, John. You have a nasty concussion and two cracked ribs."

“That’s brilliant. But I’ve had enough of hospitals," he said. It was true. The hospital was making him almost panic, bringing back his helplessness in Afghanistan, his wounds, the surgery, and his long, agonizing recovery. All that pain and fear.

Sherlock just stared at him, still and expressionless. Then he gestured to John's hospital gown. "They’ll be coming. You need to get dressed."

The idea of Sherlock putting his trousers on for him was disturbing.

"Turn around, will you," he snapped, and tried it himself but his cracked ribs made bending over an agony, and his head was spinning. Sherlock seemed unaware of his discomfort and knelt down with the trouser legs bunched up at his feet. He looked up.

"Don’t be afraid. You just threw yourself in front of a bomb to protect me. Brave, but very stupid," he spat, sounding truly scornful. John was so hurt by this that he took a sharp breath. He felt as though he’d been punched with brass knuckles. But then Sherlock was pulling his trousers up his legs.

He had to shift himself to allow Sherlock to pull them over his hips. Even that small motion hurt but the touch of cool fingers against his skin made it tingle and his face feel warm. He was thankful that the pain made any more reaction than this impossible at the moment because the sight
of Sherlock leaning down, nearly kneeling, so close, was shockingly arousing. He closed his eyes.

Sherlock was pulling the gown off now, leaving him shirtless. Without the gown, the darkening bruises across his chest and ribs were stark against his skin. The cool air chilled him. He felt Sherlock touching his ribcage very delicately.

"Does it hurt very much?" If it had been anyone else but Sherlock Holmes, John would have thought he sounded concerned. Now he opened his eyes to find Sherlock gazing at the scar on his shoulder with a peculiar expression. He had never allowed Sherlock to see him shirtless before and didn't want him to see him like that now. Sherlock's hand was drifting up from his ribs and toward the scar. He pushed Sherlock's hand away.

"I've had worse," he said shortly, and grabbed at the shirt. He didn't want Sherlock's pity, it reminded him of when he'd been invalided home in a broken state. No longer fit for duty.

He growled as he managed the rest of his clothes and limped out of the room. Sherlock walked at his side, not striding ahead on his long legs as he ordinarily would have done.

Climbing into the taxi made his ribcage feel as though he were being stabbed. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes again, maybe most of all to avoid Sherlock's gaze.

"I'll live, Sherlock, staring at me won't improve my headache," he said, more surly than he meant to.

Silence.

"Sorry. Er, thanks, Sherlock," he said.

"Next time there's a bomb going off in the vicinity, John, I'd much prefer it if you took cover rather than knocking me about with your absurd heroics," Sherlock snapped in return.

"Ungrateful bastard."

####

They arrived at 221b and John had determined during the taxi ride that he would not be nursemaid. Sherlock was already deeply absorbed in something on his own blog, something that no doubt less than five people on the planet would care about, and only one – Sherlock – would understand. John fell back awkwardly onto the sofa cushions. He curled up and closed his eyes.

He heard Sherlock sink into the chair. Sherlock was uncommonly silent. No keyboard tapping, no mobile, no violin, no dramatic sighing -- which he would have expected because with excitement of the explosion over with, Sherlock was undoubtedly very bored indeed.

John didn't regret having taken the brunt of it in the slightest. He didn't like to think of these injuries being inflicted upon Sherlock. Arrogant and brilliant though he was, and undeniably strong and fit - Sherlock was still an omega and made of finer stuff, more delicate than an Alpha. In a way, it was it was his responsibility as an Alpha to protect Sherlock. He felt a secret pride swell in his banged-up chest that he had succeeded.

"Don't be absurd, John. I can take care of myself," Sherlock said. How he seemed to always know what he was thinking, John could never discover. "And I'm not staring, John, I'm observing you. You do have a concussion, you know."

John sighed. Everything seemed very heavy. He noticed that the pillow had a unique omega scent,
very faint, but which made him want to stay awake just so he could keep enjoying it. The part of his brain that still possessed rational thought told him he needed to immediately get rid of the pheromone-tinged article for his own good.

The more primitive, Alpha part of his brain overrode that thought, and added: for Sherlock’s good.

###

He woke just once in the middle of the night and peered from under heavy eyelids. Sherlock was still awake in the chair, looking at him over the edge of a forensic journal. The little reading light cast an eerie glow against his alabaster skin, sharp cheekbones with deep shadows, and illuminating his pale eyes.

He felt he would have liked to stay awake and watch Sherlock right back, which was strange. He had lived with Sherlock for months. Nothing so fascinating about him sitting in the dark, reading an article about something undoubtedly both obscure and vile.

Sherlock smiled faintly.

John’s eyes closed.

###

The next morning, John knew it was really critical that he force himself to move. He was feeling a huge bubble of frustration gathering in his chest from being confined to the flat. It seemed that Sherlock was taking up all the air in the room and he couldn’t breathe properly. He recalled that he had now been fully off of the suppressants for a week now. Scents were affecting him much more strongly.

Time for a hot shower. Clear the disturbing scents from his skin, scents from laying all night on the sofa where Sherlock usually lay.

He stumbled up to the bathroom and groaned when he realised he would have to climb the high sides of the old-fashioned claw-footed tub in order to shower. It may as well have been the Great Wall of China. He decided to just sit on the edge of the tub and give it a go from there.

He slowly undressed and did just that, the letting the hot water run down his back. It felt wonderful on his abused muscles, and he wanted more. As it was, his arm and ribs were protesting at all the twisting to hold the shower nozzle, and water was running down the sides of the tub and onto the floor. He didn't care. He'd throw some towels down after.

John still found long hot showers, or even better, baths, to be a luxury after Afghanistan. His mind floated back to the explosion, but somehow it wasn't frightening. He was lying pressed against Sherlock's body, and John could feel every inch of him and it was so arousing that without thinking his hand drifted to his already hard cock. His hormones were surging. He immediately tried to imagine someone else, a female omega, that Jessica.

The door to the bathroom crashed open and Sherlock Holmes burst wild-eyed into the tiny steam-filled space.

"John!"

John was so startled that he dropped the shower nozzle, which immediately began twisting with a mind of its own, soaking them both. For a moment John was so disoriented that he forgot that he was naked and hard and had possibly been on the brink of wanking to the vision of Sherlock laid
out under him.

Sherlock leaned in and turned off the taps and for a moment there was only the sound of dripping.

"I saw water running under the door. I thought you'd gotten dizzy and knocked yourself out in the
tub," he panted.

"I'm fine," he retorted with an attempt at dignity, belatedly realising his still-stiff cock was
uncovered. He covered himself with his hand, but even outside of heat, his erect cock was too big
for that.

"Do you want a hand with that," Sherlock said meaningfully, with a bold gleam in his eye. His
voice, that voice that had a velvety timbre like no other, lowered seductively and John's cock
throbbed and expanded in response.

For a moment John just stared. He'd never been propositioned by a male omega. He had a
momentary vision of Sherlock's elegant hand wrapping itself around him. He gripped the edge of
the tub tighter with his free hand.

"Ah . . . no, " he said. "Sherlock, I'm, ah. . . just - no." He winced at how that sounded. Because it
really was a pretty spectacular offer. If you were into male omegas. Which, despite his recent
hormonally induced fantasies, he was not. But even he could see that Sherlock was . . .unique. It
was getting to be incredibly bothersome how often he noticed this.

Sherlock didn't go away or even look offended.

"I'm perfectly aware of your sexual orientation, John. You needn't keep reminding me. I meant
with the shower."

"No, I’m fine." He knew he should go for a towel here but if Sherlock could brazen it out, he could
too.

"You can't raise your leg over, can you? To climb in."

"It'll get better; today and tomorrow will be worst. Look, don’t worry about me."

"I'll help you over. Call me when you want to get out. That's one option."

"Option?"

"I could do some work on your back and your hips. You'll feel much better. You're out alignment
and your muscles are in spasm. You’re a doctor, you know this. And I know you didn't take the
relaxant tablets," Sherlock said coolly.

He hadn't. He hated the woozy feeling of the tablets. His muscles where sore and hard as iron.
Similar to another part of his anatomy. He leaned over and grabbed the towel and draped it around
his hips, covering his unruly cock, and threw another on the floor to soak up the watery mess as a
distraction.

"Worth a try," John said, equally cool.

# # #

So it was that he found himself lying on Sherlock's bed, draped with his towel and nothing else,
and Sherlock's sensitive and precise fingers pressing certain points on his body, mostly his back, at
the top of his pelvis, the sacral bone. He had expected a conventional massage and at first was curiously disappointed by the acupressure-type moves. John knew that Sherlock was methodically working the invisible paths of nerves. The base of his neck, the edges of his spine, between his shoulder blades, all received attention by deep firm pressure from Sherlock's surprisingly strong fingers.

"Where did you learn this?" He slurred, deeply relaxed, his stiffness and pain melting away.

"Tibet," Sherlock said, with that precise staccato click at the end. *Tib-eh-T.* His tone that did not invite further questions about that part of his past.

John thought about that. "Do you... have this done to you? Now, I mean."

"Sometimes. I can take care of myself, usually. It has to be done by someone... I trust."

More pressure, more release of pain. It was making him almost drunk. "You could teach me," he heard himself say.

"Would you enjoy that?"

He was definitely enjoying it now. But he couldn't answer that. Now Sherlock was firmly pressing the very base of his spine, the small of his back. A hot flush of arousal flowed into his groin. Hands moved to his hips, deep pressure that was nearly painful released something and the feeling expanded. He needed to tell Sherlock to stop, which was strange because he wasn't touching anywhere near his cock and yet it was demanding to be touched too. Pressure now in the thin skin behind his Achilles tendons, and on the soles of his feet, then returning to his hips. The heat swelled and covered him like a warm wave.

"Why do you take suppressants?" He asked instead. He felt uninhibited, and suddenly it seemed important to know the answer.

"I don’t want to be... out of control. My brain, my mind, must be under my will. I require that my body be, also. I refuse to let an accident of nature, mere pheromones, turn me into a mindless..."

He didn’t finish the sentence but he didn’t have to. John knew what heat was like, an obliteration of all rational thought. For a brilliant, logical, pridefully unemotional man such as Sherlock, the state would be humiliating, unendurable. He could see that. He thought again about Maxim. How he fit into this equation. "There are ways of being that you can’t imagine, John. So much more."

"Hmmm..." was all John could muster. Sherlock’s velvet voice was caressing him, and he could never have imagined that being touched like this, just random firm fingertips, could excite him so much. He needed to stop this now, before things got out of control. Before Sherlock asked him to turn over, where for the second time today he would be confronted with his hard Alpha cock. Which was apparently not what Sherlock wanted, and it shouldn’t be what he wanted, either. He wondered with a spike of jealous lust how Maxim and Sherlock satisfied each other.

"Sherlock -" He could barely find his voice and he knew he hadn't managed to keep it entirely even.

"Done," Sherlock said, immediately removing his hands. "You may want to sleep now."

And then Sherlock was gone, leaving him limp and feeling nearly boneless. He heard the creak of floorboards above. Sherlock had gone upstairs. Which was odd because that was where his own bedroom was, but he didn’t care.

He wanted to go to sleep but his cock was screaming for attention. He was able to turn over with
surprising ease and his hand slipped around his cock, so good. He wished he was up in his own room where he had a bottle of lube stashed in the bedside dresser. He fondled himself, not even pretending that he wasn't going to wank right now, in Sherlock's bed. He twisted and slid a thumb over his head, groaning a little. He could smell Sherlock's faint omega scent in the sheets. It made him want to rub his body in it, and before he knew it, he was.

This was getting dangerous.

He leaned over and pulled open the drawer to Sherlock's bedside table. His curiosity was rewarded. There was a bottle of lube, somewhat to his surprise and dismay. Half empty. He tried not to think about that. He poured some out and slicked his cock, now throbbing with urgent want. Without the dullness of suppressants, it felt on fire and he stroked himself slowly, feeling loose and warm all over from Sherlock's amazing massage. He needed to come. He hadn't felt this aroused in... years, maybe. Since the suppressants. Maybe ever. His cock felt big, thick. Very soon he would be able to feel the swell of his knot when he passed the point of no return. He moaned at the thought of sliding his swollen prick into a ripe omega, wet and ready for him. He let his thumb circle precum over his head, slick and gloriously sensitive. He muffled himself with his free hand as he was taken by spasms of his still warmed muscles, shuddering until he fell back exhausted and glowing. His hand was drenched.

The entire bedroom smelled like raw Alpha sex and semen. He felt surprisingly fluid and limber but for the pain in his ribs. He yanked the sheets off and wrapped the cleanest one around himself, balled up the rest and opened the window, and fled the room to find fresh sheets before Sherlock could return.

Sherlock was standing in the middle of 221b. Sherlock seemed to drink in the scent, be drawn to it — how could he not? The merest flutter of his eyelids closing momentarily, a soft inhale. John couldn't watch. He rushed upstairs, leaving Sherlock alone below.

In his own room he put on jeans and a soft, worn jumper. He tried to resist looking in his bedside drawer, but his hand was already on the knob.

His own lube was still there, but not where he remembered leaving it. His bed was freshly made up. He felt dizzy imagining that while he had been below, stroking his own cock, Sherlock had been doing the same, maybe more, in his bed. He imagined Sherlock laid out with his legs spread, filled with omega craving, needing so much more.

John sunk onto the bed and fell back with a thump, wincing at the pain in his ribs. This was serious. This was why Alphas had no business flatsharing with omegas of any permutation. Especially not an omega with a mysterious and wealthy boyfriend who--

He made a quick decision. He stumped carefully down the stairs with Alpha confidence.

"I'm off to the clinic," he announced.

"But you – your head, John --"  
Sherlock sounded confused, and somehow this was irritating. John squared his shoulders and put on his jacket.

"Sherlock, after Afghanistan, this is a mere scratch."

This was Alpha bravado-- but it also was unfortunately true.
Chapter End Notes

Gorgeous art, gift of a brilliant artist full of mad skills and heart:

Does It Hurt Very Much?
Wicked Game

The world was on fire
No one could save me but you.
Strange what desire will make foolish people do.

-- Wicked Game, All rights reserved Chris Isaak.

After his shift, John went to the medical library at Barts. Stamford let him in. Stamford was waiting for John to finish so they could go for a pint, catch some football.

"What do you know about alternative therapies?"

"Jury's still out, as far as I'm concerned."

"Right. I was thinking more along the lines of, um, acupressure."

"You really got smashed up in that explosion, then? I wouldn't have known it, you're looking very fit, John. I remember. . . here it is," Stamford pulled down an illustrated volume on acupressure.

There were a number of complex charts. Certain parts of the body had surprising and unexpected connections to other parts of the body. The chart noted that pressure on the sacral, the flesh behind the Achilles Tendon, and in the middle of the soles of the feet were highly sexually arousing. The text explained that in highly sexual persons, prolonged pressure on these points could produce orgasm.

He slammed the book shut.

"Everything all right?" Stamford was alarmed at John's dark expression. He sometimes wondered if he hadn't done a very foolish thing in bringing John together with the eccentric detective. John seemed to be going a bit mad.

"Perfectly," John said through gritted teeth. "But I need a drink."

###

In the wee hours of the morning, John stumbled back into 221b. He wasn't sure if he was dreading or hoping for Sherlock to be still up. He made no particular effort to be quiet coming in, and indeed Sherlock was still awake. He was occupied in staring at the ceiling from his prize spot: lounging draped along the sofa, one slim pyjama-clad leg slung over the side, and a long bare foot resting on the carpet. The other leg was flung across the back of the sofa. His robe was falling open and his thin t-shirt was riding up, revealing a small expanse of pale flat stomach and the suggestion of the top of narrow hips. He managed to look both nonchalant and debauched.

Sherlock did not look up. John stood in the middle of the room, a little worse for drink, which had been truly stupid considering he did have a concussion. He felt like it was important to get a few things clear. He took a deep breath.

"So I see you've done a little reading up today," Sherlock drawled, inspecting John's scowl, clenched fists. "Fascinating what Western doctors don't know about the human body." He waved a
languid hand at John. John wanted to smack it aside. He strode over to the sofa and looked sternly down at Sherlock.

"I don't appreciate being-- experimented on, Sherlock. When you do things like-- like what you did today, it makes it very hard for me to trust you."

"I think you mean, it makes it hard for you to trust yourself," Sherlock said.

This was too much.

"Let me be clear. Sherlock. If I ever want you to touch me in a sexual way, I'll come right out and say so. I'm not one to be mysterious about that sort of thing. Unlike some others I could name."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, glaring right back up at him. "Gender is boring. So is permutation," he snarled.

John laughed scornfully. "It's a pretty fundamental part of life, Sherlock. You can't just delete it."

"People have the stupidest assumptions. Of course one can delete it. Ninety percent, maybe more, of gender and permutation is all in your brain. When my fingers pressed the small of your back, John, what did you feel?"

"I'm not saying and you already know anyway."

"That's right. I do know. And my... gender, my permutation, John, had nothing to do with it."

John hated feeling manipulated. Like an experiment. "I'm off my suppressants. I figure you know that, Sherlock. I'll stay well out of your way. So don't go trying any more little tricks with me. Don't make me do anything I'll regret."

Sherlock stared up at him with serious intensity. "What makes you think you'll regret it?"

John took a step forward until his shadow crossed Sherlock’s face. They stared at each other for a long minute. Sherlock’s mobile buzzed. Sherlock didn’t move to answer it.

"Don’t you need to answer that," John said.

"Why?" Sherlock whispered.

John gave a short laugh and walked to the other side of the room, shaking his head. He opened his laptop and ignored Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock picked up his mobile. A few muttered words were exchanged. Sherlock lay back against the sofa cushions again and adopted one of his thinking poses. John continued to ignore him. After a few minutes in which the only sound was the clicking of John’s keyboard, Sherlock sat up.

"We have a case, John. If we want it."

"Why wouldn’t we? You haven’t got anything else on."

"It’s in Scotland. Technically. Actually, an oil rig in the North Sea. Two men dead under suspicious circumstances. They can send someone to meet us the day after tomorrow at Aberdeen."

John thought about that. Traveling north to Aberdeen by train. A boat out to the rig, out on the cold sea. The North Sea was notorious for violent storms. An adventure.
"Let’s do it," he said.

They looked at each other, and this time they smiled.

# # #

Being off the suppressants meant being hyper-aware of omegas, and spending a great deal of his mental energy fighting off the all-consuming urge to mate. To join an omega in heat. An omega female, of course. At least that is what he had always presumed before now. He was trying to keep to neutral pubs and other controlled spaces until he got used to his new hormonal reality. This night, though, he couldn't control his environment-- a potential crime scene. Sherlock had decided that they had more than enough time left today to rescue the Yard from terminal ignorance.

A female omega officer, tall, dark-haired, and possessing a pair of winning blue eyes gave John a frankly inviting glance as they entered the room.

This was the study of a wealthy executive who had reported his wife missing. Lestrade's curiosity had been piqued when the husband mentioned more than once during the search that his wife never, ever went into his study and tried to prevent their entering it to search. Indeed the room was spotless, as was every other room in the house.

Sherlock was in rare form.

"Anderson, you do know the decay rate for Luminol? Because anyone can see the killer has beaten you to it."

Sherlock demanded that the light be dimmed. The omega officer allowed her body to press, not very subtly, against John's in the dark. It felt strange to be paying more attention to Sherlock's voice in the dark than to her lips near his ear:

"I’m almost off shift. Would you like to go for a drink? I know a red bar near here."

Red bars were reserved for potentially breeding Alphas and omegas of the conventional persuasion - male Alphas, female omegas. She had worn a masking scent for the day, but it wasn't helping. She was right on the brink and he was starting to feel the buzz. He watched Sherlock bend over, his impossibly long legs spread wide, trousers tight against his arse.

"Yeah, that would be. . . good," he whispered back.

"Someone has already cleaned the scene," Sherlock declared. "He sprayed with Luminol, then cleaned the wall and floor with a biological cleansing agent. Something new, even experimental, I should think. Interesting. . . " Now Sherlock was on his hands and knees, scrutinizing the edge of the carpet, under a desk. John tried not to look, and instead caught the fact that nearly everyone else in the room was staring at Sherlock, mesmerised. And not by his wits.

"So maybe the murderer . . . is someone who has easy access to forensic chemicals," he said to Lestrade, loudly so that Sherlock could hear. So he would know that John Watson wasn't just standing around watching his arse while he showed off. Like everyone else. He adjusted his trousers.

The omega officer was right back at John's side. "Aren't you the clever one," she cooed in his ear. John knew this was just the hormones talking but he told himself that he liked the sound of this.

The lights came up again and Sherlock whirled around took in John with the omega nearly panting in his ear. John couldn't meet his eyes.
"So you’ll meet me," she said, tugging his jacket.

"Sure, yeah," John said. Sherlock was going. Lestrade, an Alpha, was rocking on the balls of his feet, staring after him as though he wanted to follow. He turned to John with a speculative look. John scowled back, squared his shoulders, Alpha style.

"Sherlock wait - there’s a ransom demand!" Lestrade called after Sherlock.

"Of course there is!" Sherlock shouted back up the stair without turning around. A door below slammed.

The omega officer said, "He’s so very rude, isn't he? Sergeant Donovan says--"

John wavered a moment. How many times was he going to be seen chasing after Sherlock Holmes before people started talking?

Anderson was muttering something in Donovan's ear. She smiled a little and they both turned to stare at John.

"Red Candy Bar?" the Omega officer was whispering in his ear. She pressed back against him and he pressed back, letting her scent wash over him.

"Right, yes," John said and he headed down into the street. It was obvious that Sherlock Holmes had rushed away from the crime scene for an assignation with Maxim Purcell before their trip to Aberdeen in the morning. He didn't understand why Sherlock had seemed to be toying with him these past few days, but obviously he was bored of the game now. Male omegas had a certain reputation for ruthlessness, and John admonished himself to guard himself better in future. John could play his own game, a game he was well up on.

The Red Candy Bar was crowded with Alphas and omegas sizing each other up, offering themselves, pressing themselves together. It was bathed in red light and the cloud of pheromones was so intoxicating that it ought to be illegal. After a few minutes, she showed up and came right to him.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Tanya Tanner. And I know who you are."

"Do you think so," John said as he ran his hand along her slender hip. His blood felt like something combustible. He leaned in and took a deep breath, and she did the same. They took a look at the bar, two deep for drinks. John ran his thumb gently across her palm, and she shivered.

"Do you want to get out of here," she said. "My flat's just —"

John stopped her with a kiss, which felt strange and electric. He wasn’t sure he wanted more. It had been a long time since he had been clear of suppressants. Everything felt new, even alien. But his body remembered.

His mobile buzzed.

*I will be out tonight. Clearly this will not be inconvenient.*

Tanya bit his lower lip. John’s cock was already taking over and he rocked his pelvis against her, experimentally.
"Let’s go," she growled. "Hurry."

But at the door, John found himself backing away, mumbling his excuses, feeling both guilty and free.

# # #

John returned to 221b to find Sherlock gone, which he had expected. Sherlock had said he would be out tonight, and he knew just where Sherlock was. He pictured the glowing doors of Maxim Purcell’s glass residence tower. He took off his coat and looked out the window. Baker Street was starting to bustle. He had not quite accidentally found himself on Imperial Wharf the other day, looking up at Maxim Purcell’s sleek modern building with sleek gorgeous people coming and going through its vast glass doors. After looking a while, he had taken the tube back to Baker Street and gone to his pub for a few pints before returning to the flat.

No, he wouldn’t hang around the flat today waiting for Sherlock to return. He would phone the clinic, see if he might pull an extra shift. But then his mobile buzzed.

*I trust you are feeling well, 20 Wandsworth Terrace. If it’s not inconvenient.*

Sherlock never inquired about his well being in texts. John winced and seriously considered refusing to go. He sighed.

*I’m fine. How are you this morning, since we’re on the subject?*

There was a long delay. John thought he was distracted, maybe had even left the scene, forgetting all about him. Typical.

*I’ve been better. Are you coming?*

John smiled a little and put his coat back on.

# # #

They spent the day running all over London, chasing witnesses and clues in the case of the bombing in which they had narrowly missed being blown apart.

Sherlock was snappish, wielding his sharp tongue at everyone in his wake, except John. When John arrived at Wandsworth Terrace, Sherlock stopped what he had been doing – terrifying a witness, it seemed – and had looked him up and down with an expression that John had seen before - when Sherlock was considering a number of conflicting theories, and he finally saw evidence that made him decide that one was correct. Then he turned his back. John felt Sherlock could read what he had done last night. It was pretty much a certainty. He stood up straighter walked right up to Sherlock and took over speaking with the distraught witness, who immediately calmed down. Sherlock stalked off.

Finally they reached the end of their trials for the day, which had flown by despite Sherlock’s erratic behavior. *Fine, John thought. I’ll show him, it’s nothing to make an issue over.*

They both would be having various liaisons of a more or less intimate sort with other people. Or at least, once John managed to work up the nerve, or courage, or whatever it was that was needed to propel him down the path of bonded bliss with a suitable omega. Last night had just been bad chemistry. Meanwhile, Sherlock was clearly entirely occupied with the attentions of Maxim Purcell. But there was no need for anything to change between the two of them.
"Let’s go for dinner, I’m famished," he said, like he did every other time they hunted without rest or food until one of them, occasionally Sherlock, was faint with hunger or lack of sleep.

He looked over at Sherlock and noticed him fidgeting and drumming his fingers against his thigh. He didn’t answer. No doubt he was already solving the cases in his restless brain. He pulled out his mobile and started texting.

"Turn here," Sherlock suddenly said through the partition. "Let me out here," he said in clipped tones, almost sounding angry. He threw money at John for the cab.

"Are you going to tell me where you’re going?" John said, keeping his voice calm. It was a mighty effort. He wanted to yank him back into the taxi, pin him down, demand some answers.

"No," Sherlock said, and strode away.

John looked out. They had been heading toward Vauxhall Bridge, but Sherlock had told the cabbie to turn. Now he was walking down the Albert Embankment.

"Where to?" The cabbie wanted to get moving.

"Ah – this is good," John said and handed over the bills. He was able to catch up to see Sherlock up the street, filled this time of night with raucous people, mostly young, pretty, and drunk, out on the town. There was a crowd clustered around a building with a glowing green sign. Sherlock went to the head of the line and was allowed behind the rope.

John was by no means a clubber, but even he knew what this was: Tantra, the notoriously exclusive 24-hour club. John clocked the line of beautiful people desperate to get inside and slipped around the back. There was security here, too. There were a few party people staggering out for air. John marched forward with calm deliberate steps, and flashed a card in a leather case. It was one of Lestrade’s, a trick he had learned from Sherlock.

He shifted his jacket so that the security man got the hint that he was packing and stared him down despite their foot difference in height. The door was opened and John was inside.

He hadn’t known what to expect. The place was tricked out like a Maharajah’s palace, pink and gold and green and white. Shimmering trance music played to a slow kaleidoscope of soothing coloured lights. It’s reputation as a haunt of film stars, models, and playboys was borne out, as far as John could see.

The music was hypnotic. As he scanned the room, he noticed the play of synthetic scents in the air. Nothing aggressive, just enough to get a little buzz going. This forced him to remember last night, the Red Candy Bar, Tanya, their desires urgent, but without passion. He swallowed hard. He wanted a drink.

This was a mixed club and there were plenty of betas here, but John didn’t think that was what Sherlock was here for.

And then he saw him. Just what he had imagined, just what he had feared. Maxim was in a curtained booth in the back. There was another man with him, but when Sherlock approached Maxim sent him away. John watched, knowing he should feel wrong about this, but unable to do anything else.

Sherlock didn’t sit, although Maxim was clearly asking him to. They were speaking. Maxim was shaking his head. Sherlock’s back was to him so he couldn’t see Sherlock’s face. But John knew Sherlock well enough to interpret every line and nuance of his posture. Sherlock was getting angry.
Maxim stood up very close to Sherlock. John started walking, pushing people aside. Maxim was putting his hand on Sherlock’s waist, intimate, trying to pull him in. Sherlock carefully removed Maxim’s hand and turned away. Maxim pulled him back by the arm, hard and possessive.

"No, Maxim," John heard Sherlock shout angrily, and that was all it took. Two more steps and he had wrenched Maxim’s hand off of Sherlock and was twisting it up high behind Maxim’s back, an Army move that never failed-- especially when you had the element of surprise. Maxim’s face was more shocked than pained, so John twisted some more and pushed him away from Sherlock, hard, before he got any ideas.

"Don’t you touch him," John said menacingly. He could hardly recognise his own voice.

Sherlock was staring at him, and for a minute all three were frozen in place.

John broke the silence. "Sherlock, we’re leaving. Unless you’ve still got business here," he said, glaring at Maxim, who was looking at him now with a sort of hungry curiousity. He rubbed his shoulder.

"John Watson," he said smoothly, trying to regain control. "I suppose I need to be more observant, as Sherlock often advises. You won’t get by me a second time."

"Is that right? Now’s as good a time as any to try that out," John said, advancing on Maxim. His head was filled with a burning haze that was commanding him to tear Maxim to pieces, so Sherlock could see. He realized that this feeling had been growing inside him since Little Havana. His rage clashed with the dreamy euphoria of the electronic beats.

"No, John, let’s go. Let’s go," Sherlock was pulling John away.

"It was for your own good," Maxim called after Sherlock. "You’ll see. I promise you, you will see."

# # #

The scent didn't hit him until they climbed back in the cab. Strong, alluring omega pheromones drifted, caressing his face. He took an involuntary deep breath and his cock instantly responded, a spike of heat shooting right to the tip. He put his palm against the door of the cab to keep himself steady.

"Sherlock."

At this, Sherlock turned away with a stifled moan.

"Are. . .you all right?" God, he was an idiot. Sherlock was supposed to be on suppressants, but these signs were unmistakable.

"Sherlock," he said, his voice thick, "I didn’t know, all right? Jesus. Where do you want to go?" He shouldn’t be there. The scent would drive him mad. Thank god they’d chosen a random beta taxi.

"John." Sherlock's voice sounded lower, rougher. "I want to go home."

Somehow they made it to the flat. John thought about looking for his pheromone mask. It was in his old Army duffle with some of his other leftover gear.

But he didn’t.
"Are you all right, Sherlock?" Bloody stupid question. If he was smelling like this, ripe and luscious, he was coming into heat. Which made no sense, Sherlock took suppressant injections. He had seen Sherlock disposing of the vial, just yesterday.

"It’s a semi-heat. You went off the suppressants and I – I didn’t take it into account, I needed to adjust my own. And I did, but —" He was pacing up and down now. Any minute he would be needing to take off his clothes. John stayed rooted to the spot.

"Why don’t you . . . what happened with Maxim?" John said without thinking. He wasn’t supposed to know his name.

"He tricked me. Trying to teach me a lesson. I won’t let him," Sherlock said, low and determined. Some sort of lover’s quarrel, John figured. This was all his fault, then. His own Alpha chemistry, invading Sherlock’s delicately balanced chemistry. He visualised this, and it made him hard. He wasn’t going to be able to stay here much longer. This was taking them both somewhere neither of them wanted to go.

Sherlock was staring down at him now, and John did his best not to stare right back. If he did, he was going to lose it, he knew it.

"Thank you, John," Sherlock whispered, and marched back to his room. "I’m going to stay in here. You should leave." He went to his room and shut the door. John thought he could hear Sherlock slide down, maybe sitting with his back to the door.

Semi-heat was tricky. As a doctor, he knew that. It usually signaled puberty in young Alphas and omegas, but in mature persons who had been on suppressants, semi-heat could be a signal of hormones returning to normal levels. But there should be no way that Sherlock could go from suppressants just yesterday, to semi-heat today. It was physically impossible. But John could see that it was true.

A trick, Sherlock had said. Maxim had played a trick.

The red bottle, the blue bottle.

Maxim had given Sherlock something that he didn’t expect. John couldn’t imagine how overwhelmingly powerful and highly illegal the pheromone cocktail must have been to trigger even a semi-heat so rapidly. Even so, Sherlock was handling it with amazing control. Most omegas would be climbing the walls by now.

The scent was getting stronger now. His cock was starting to surge, full and heavy. Last night, after all, had done nothing at all to sate him. He didn’t want to think that this was why.

He looked out the window. There was an Alpha male, tall and strong, loitering around the stair to 221b. There were Alphas who got a thrill seeking out random omegas in heat, and taking what they wanted if it wasn’t freely given. John pounded down the stair and wrenched the door open.

"Fuck off," he said, low and dangerous. "Don’t even think about it." But John really, really hoped he did think about it because he felt like fighting, and right now was perfect.

The Alpha shifted his weight, looking behind John, up the stair, where the amazingly gorgeous but still faint omega scent was drifting down over them both. He made his move, tried to shove past John, obviously thinking the smaller man was no threat. John hauled off and clocked him full in the face before he had a chance to react, and he laid in two more before the Alpha started punching back. Now they were really in it, and John felt a terrible joy in the rage that boiled over. He
couldn’t have told what happened in those few minutes, but the Alpha finally gasped, "All right," through bloody teeth, running off down the street. John’s own hands were swollen and bruised and he probably had cracked his ribs again.

Something about the pain was deeply right, and he savoured it.

He climbed back up to the flat. He could hear quiet, repressed gasps from behind Sherlock’s bedroom door. His cock was so hard that it hurt too. He was a bundle of pain and desire. In the back of his mind he knew that he could help Sherlock, if he left and went to a chemist’s he could administer an injection. Sherlock would come down in a few hours. But he couldn’t leave Sherlock alone in the flat, he told himself. What if another predatory Alpha broke in, got to Sherlock?

He could leave his gun with Sherlock, obviously. But his Alpha nature was coming into its own here, and the idea of leaving Sherlock, an omega, alone in pre-heat in their own home to defend himself, was utterly repugnant. No, he could never do that.

John would take care of Sherlock now. Sherlock needed him.

He couldn’t help touching himself, moaning a little under his breath. Seemingly in response, he heard Sherlock behind the door. It sounded like he was feeling it now, how could he not? Still, he was remarkably restrained. Before Maxim, John had always thought he sensed a sexual reserve in Sherlock, something strongly held back. But John’s brief encounters with Maxim had led him to think he had been wrong.

He remembered El Brujo's warning: "Your friend is in the Mysteries now."

John found himself at Sherlock’s door. He had to see him, had to look. He was burning with curiosity that he knew was wrong, he should leave Sherlock to suffer through this in private. That was obviously his intention. But his hand flew to the doorknob.

"I'm coming in," he said without thinking.

Sherlock on the floor, leaning against the wall next to the door. He was out of his trousers but hadn’t made it to his shirt. The scent was not the miasma of full heat, but it was still unbelievable. John knelt beside him. Sherlock looked up, his face a blur of lust. His lips had gone red, engorged with blood as his opening would be too. Needing to be penetrated, needing to release an ovum.

John’s hand, the same hand that had opened the door, reached out and touched the clear fluid that glistened on Sherlock's leg. He couldn’t help it. It was slick and smelled musky-sweet.

"Oh," John whispered.

"John," Sherlock said from somewhere deep in his throat. John had never heard his name uttered with such blatant desire, and his cock swelled. "I have to be alone."

John had gone into pre-heat once, when he first started the suppressants. Not as mind-obliterating as full heat, still enough to set him climbing the walls till he managed to find a willing omega. During that time, he could scarcely form a coherent sentence or thought.

He couldn’t make himself leave. John reached out, touched the fading bite mark on Sherlock's alabaster throat. "Why didn’t you go with Maxim," he said roughly. His blood was surging now, hormones building a fire.

Sherlock's eyes were stormy, his pupils huge. "John," he said, looking down at his bare thigh, where more slick lubricant was starting to run. "I don't, you don't . . . I have to do this alone." His
"Why?" John’s voice cracked.

Sherlock sighed. He almost leaned his head against John’s shoulder, but didn’t. "I can’t talk about it. It’s a sort of... test."

A test. John nodded to himself. 'The Mysteries.'

"Is it him? Maxim? Is he making you do this? It’s wrong, Sherlock," he growled, furious that this man, Maxim, had so much power over Sherlock. He didn’t like the idea of anyone at all having power of Sherlock. Except maybe him. The state he was in, he didn’t even try to hide it from himself.

He had never been anywhere near a male omega in any phase of heat. It felt very different to being with a female Omega. Stronger, wilder, compulsion damn near irresistible. He could see that Sherlock felt it too, despite his miraculous restraint.

Sherlock was taking deep, slow breaths. His cock was swollen and almost angry looking, and perfectly gorgeous, John had to admit. John could not understand how he was so calm in the face of his need for relief. Relief that would be impossible without the necessary ingredient. An Alpha.

"Tell me you want me to go," John said, a last desperate effort at pulling himself back from the brink of whatever this was. His friend, his best friend, Sherlock Holmes, sighed, tipped his head back against the wall, and closed his eyes.

Then he opened them and looked up at John, hungry and desperate and trusting. He said nothing, just shivered and stroked his own cock with a gentle fingertip. A quiet groan escaped his lips.

He shouldn’t get swept up in this, he really shouldn’t. Sherlock was angry with Maxim now, but what about tomorrow? He had never imagined such a thing, or if he had he had tried hard to quash it. His strict upbringing and military training were strong inhibitors, but even those iron-clad walls were shattering in this moment, maybe had been shattering since he first met Sherlock Holmes. What would happen to their friendship if he crossed this line with Sherlock? But there was something he could do, something that would end this quickly, which would be much better for both of them, he told himself. He made a decision, or maybe the pheromones made it for him.

"Right. On your knees, hands on the wall," he said, more roughly than he'd intended it to sound. It was just mechanics, he assured himself. Sherlock didn’t want him. He had said he wanted to be alone. But Sherlock was over the edge; he needed to release an ovum. Then it would be over. Deep penetration and the presence of concentrated Alpha pheromones would trigger the release. He was grateful now that he was barely off the suppressants himself, or he could never hope to control himself, even if Sherlock was a male.

"Is that what you want, John," Sherlock said, his eyes shining.

John didn’t want to answer that. "Shhhh. You don’t know what you’re saying. I know what to do," he said instead. "Don’t be afraid. I won’t-- I won't fuck you. But I can help you." John started unbuttoning Sherlock’s shirt, tearing it at the end. But he didn’t go further until Sherlock looked away, his face flushing, and nodded his assent. John’s heart was almost thundering out of his chest. He told himself he could control himself long enough to do this. As a doctor he knew what to do, and how to do it quickly.

Sherlock did as John ordered. John decided he could do this clothed. He would undo his flies at the
right time, and then leave Sherlock to recover in privacy. But looking at Sherlock’s pale skin, flushed with semi-heat, was making him dizzy. He closed his eyes.

"John," Sherlock said, low and maybe a little desperate sounding. Maybe it was just his imagination. Now he seemed more controlled, even relaxed about the whole thing. John felt wound as tight as a drum, as did his prick.

If this were a woman, he would be fondling her breasts now, getting her relaxed and open before moving lower. And kissing too. He wavered, indecisive. Kissing was out. He licked his lips.

Running his hands along Sherlock’s back seemed as good a place to start as any. And so he did, letting his hands slide firmly down his sweat-slicked back, then resting his hands rest on those slender hips, just as he would do if he were about to pull those hips back, sink his cock into his wetness. His fingers tightened. Sherlock didn't moan or pant, but took a deep breath and arched a little under his touch.

He wondered if he was doing this all wrong. In his limited experience with pre-heat, and with his medical knowledge, Sherlock ought to be quite desperate already.

"Is this... all right?"

"Yes," Sherlock said softly.

"More?" John didn’t want to step over the boundary between doing what was necessary and doing what his cock was screaming for him to do. He could stay in control. He shivered.

"Hmmmm," Sherlock hummed. John found himself running his hands around his stomach, his chest, muscular, flat and hard and utterly different to a woman. His hard cock under his trousers twitched near Sherlock's arse. His hand brushed a nipple and he felt a shiver ripple along Sherlock's skin.

He was rewarded by another aroused-sounding "Hmmm, yes," in Sherlock's most velvety-deep voice. Surely it wasn't a secret that he was hard. The entire focus of the exercise was for him to come and release massive pheromones that would trigger a corresponding release of the ovum, hopefully sooner rather than later. He leaned in, rubbed his palms more lightly over Sherlock’s nipples, and let his hands drift back around to gently explore the hot flesh around his wet cleft, slick lubrication of pre-heat feeling fantastic. But tried to listen harder to Sherlock's responses, but they were very faint, as though Sherlock were trying to suppress them. At the touch of John's hand Sherlock did gasp, once, but did not press back or try to insinuate his wet opening to invite him in.

He let his hands circle back around Sherlock's flat hard abdomen, slowly and gently approaching his cock. He couldn't see it from behind, but he could imagine it. Now his hands were curious to touch that hardness. He imagined wringing cries of pleasure from Sherlock, who was taking this entire experience far too serenely. He tried to slow his own breathing, which had become harsh and ragged, to match Sherlock's deep, steady breaths. This calmed him, and they stayed still there, breathing together.

The universe was imploding, falling away until there was nothing but him, Sherlock, this room and their unbelievable mingled scents, perfect in every way.


"Touch yourself now," John said. He imagined Sherlock instead reaching around to touch his cock, straining through his trousers. He groaned and forced his attention back to what he needed to do.
He tugged his own flies open and freed his cock, drooling precum and throbbing in his hand. He tried to ignore it and let his fingers glide along the slick wetness that was continuously running down the inside of Sherlock's long thighs, now mottled pink and white. He gave himself a few strokes with it coating his hand. It felt different that with a female omega, thicker, slicker. Suddenly he felt a flood of self-consciousness doing this for Sherlock to feel and hear. His face burned.

He felt Sherlock's arm moving suggestively, his hips thrusting. He was stroking his own cock. Good. Soon he would be ready for John's fingers.

"Keep going, John," Sherlock actually nudged his pulsing cock with his arse, which made John think Sherlock was hinting to be fucked. This close to that divine hot wetness, he was unbelievably tempted and he tried to bury that thought very deep. He thrust his cock back into his own hand to placate it. He started to feel very full and needy. It wouldn't be long until he was spilling over. He imagined this, coming right there across that gorgeous arse, then blushed, glad Sherlock couldn't see his face. "Oh, god," he moaned softly. He pulled himself back from the brink. Sherlock wasn't ready. He stilled himself until he felt a bit calmer. Closing his eyes helped.

"Ahhhh, John," Sherlock sighed, seeming more turned on by him stopping than anything he had done yet.

"You want me to stop?"

"No, keep going --"

John's cock was on fire and he didn't have to be told twice. Sherlock was stroking himself faster too, and his moans were making his balls ache.

Just as he thought Sherlock might come, this time he became still, slowing his breathing, his muscles relaxing under John’s hand which had somehow found its place on Sherlock’s shoulder to brace himself and hold himself away from Sherlock’s back.

John was a quick study. It was a game. How he could possibly want to prolong this with any sort of game was a mystery.

'The Mysteries?'

He stroked and pulled, feeling his head so hard and sensitive and wet with precum that was streaming steadily. Only a few slides along the stiff length and he was almost ready to spill over but he stopped just an instant before Sherlock gasped, "Stop." Even without touching him, Sherlock sensed when he was right on the edge. He smiled to himself. Two could play the game.

He listened hard, ran a gentle hand along Sherlock's forearm as he wanked himself. He didn't try to control it, he just focused on the feel of the muscles of his arm, the pace of Sherlock's breathing and the sounds coming from deep in his throat. And when he felt him near the edge, he said, "Stop," near Sherlock’s ear. Sherlock moaned.

"You now," he said and John started stroking himself faster, making it more dangerous. So fast he might just explode all over Sherlock's sweat-soaked back, his arse, if he lost it. And so they went, an erotic spiral as they took turns on the edge. John imagined taking Sherlock's cock in his own hand, controlling his orgasm as he was controlling his own.

"Don't you want me to give you my fingers now," he gasped. He ran his fingers along Sherlock's cleft. He definitely needed to end this very soon.

"Wait," Sherlock said, even as his hips thrust back of their own volition and just as quickly pulled
away again.

"Jesus." He needed to come. Soon. But he prided himself on his stamina. He ignored the throbbing with a strong effort. "It's time, let me," he said, and ran a fingertip across his warm, wet opening.

"I have to-- control it. I don't want -- to be -- controlled by it," Sherlock gasped.

John realised then that their little game had taken him out of the mindless fog of pre-heat. He felt present, all senses exquisitely sensitive. But as aroused as he was, he didn't think he would lose control. It was a surprising feeling. He wasn't sure he liked it. Knowing Sherlock, he could instinctively understand it, though. He should have understood it before.

He wondered what it would take to make Sherlock lose control.

"I'm going to start now," he said firmly. No more games.

"John," Sherlock said warningly but as John's finger, just one, slid along is opening and slowly pressed in, he trembled and pushed back. The sight was enough to make his head spin. His cock was screaming to take the place of his fortunate fingers. He ignored his cock, focused on slipping a second finger into that hot, slick tightness. His cock could never make it without hurting him, it was so tight. He must never have made the crossing yet, after all, like El Brujo had warned, John thought with a surge of protectiveness. The red bottle. The blue bottle. No one could be this tight. He fought a surge of fury yet again at whatever Maxim had dosed Sherlock with against his will and just as quickly the anger fell away as his body demanded to lose itself in these sensations: Sherlock sighing and shivering against his hand, slick wetness running down his own wrist as he worked his fingers gently, determinedly toward their goal, his cock a white hot rod.

"God," he sighed. "You're so wet," he said, just because his lips wanted to say it.

"Wait, wait, wait," Sherlock begged. John stopped and they just froze there. His fingers were dripping and Sherlock's tight passage quivered around them. It felt nothing like a female. He waited, whispering incoherent words of reassurance, while Sherlock tried to relax the tightness clenched around his fingers.

"Deeper," Sherlock finally said, and he tried gently to press as far as his fingers would go. He felt the little knot of the edge of his prostate. The internal opening that needed pressure, would release the ovum, was just beyond this. He leaned in, trying to make it smooth and gentle, and Sherlock's head sank and he thrust back on his hand, hard, gasping sharply. Sherlock was writhing and pushing back with a single deep moan that drove all thoughts of gentleness away. He put his weight behind it, feeling the pulsing of his passage. His cock was leaking now, actually weeping streams of clear fluid.

"I can't --" John gasped, frustrated. It was alarming to realise that he was more frustrated than Sherlock, who simply paused, almost fully seated on John’s strong fingers. John’s cock was massively erect. He was far beyond ready. The last remains of the calm from the game were torn to shreds and blew away in a storm.

"Oh, Jesus, Sherlock," he cried as Sherlock slammed down hard, pushing his fingers still deeper. He could feel the brush of something firm yet yielding at his fingertips, the bulge of the prostate under his fingers as they moved as one. The sound Sherlock of finally aproaching his rapture was the most arousing thing he had ever heard. Nothing could make him stop now.

"John, please," he gasped. And that was all it took. He grabbed his cock with his free hand and came, orgasm slamming him and pulling hard spasms through his body, from his feet to his scalp
and back again. Before he even stopped shuddering he pulled his drenched hand away and put it to

He felt Sherlock take his fingers into his mouth, delicately sucking his fluids, letting the strong
Alpha scent fill his senses. This finally started the violent and swift chain reaction. "Oh my god,"
John gasped as Sherlock arched and tightened. John pulled his hand from Sherlock's mouth and
wrapped it around Sherlock's own as he stroked his stiff cock in a maddeningly deliberate rhythm.

"It's coming," Sherlock said, his voice no longer velvety but rough and wild. His cock erupted over
their joined hands. "Oh, John," he shouted as he slammed even harder on John's hand, which was
almost cramping now from the unnatural position but he wouldn't remove it now for anything. His
fingers were trapped in the strong spasms and he watched as the orgasm took Sherlock, wondering
what it felt like when the ovum released. It looked like it felt amazing.

After a long moment of shuddering and trembling with orgasm, Sherlock became still again,
breathing deep and calm. His skin began to cool under John’s hand.

"There," John said, brushing the dark sweat-soaked hair away from Sherlock's neck. Sherlock
turned and slumped against the wall, dreamy eyed. He pulled back a little. His cock was hard as
iron again. He wondered if he had pushed himself into full heat after all; he could feel an aching
bulge that wanted something more, deep at the base of his cock. His knot, wanting its chance. If he
didn't leave right now, it was going to go down and that wasn't what this was supposed to be, that
wasn't what Sherlock wanted, it wasn't what he wanted. Except that he did, so much it literally hurt.
Sherlock’s pheromones mixed with his own must be unbelievably strong. Maybe it was the effect
of whatever experiments he had been playing at with Maxim. This made him realise that
everything that had just happened was a direct consequence of Maxim’s games. He suddenly felt
ill.

John staggered to his feet, drunk on mingled Alpha and omega scents, his ejaculate, Sherlock’s
fluids, the wetness of his cleft. Sherlock was looking hungrily at his unbelievably hard prick. John
closed his eyes, felt for the door handle, opened it, and slipped out the door, slamming it behind
him. Keeping the scents at bay.

He staggered up to his room, frantically plunged through his drawers. His suppressant tablets. He
took a small handful, crushed them under a heavy book, one of Sherlock's own ("Rogue Beta
Homicide: Three Case Histories"). He pushed the powder into a glass of water and drank it down.
It would make him feel sick, but it would push him back from heat. Probably. He was not more
than two hours in the zone.

He lay back on his bed. If he touched himself, it would keep him maddeningly stimulated and
interfere with the onset of the improvised suppressant cocktail. He put his hand under the pillow
and pulled the covers over himself, feeling hot and aching in his deepest places. He groaned into
the pillow. He considered taking some of the relaxants from the bombing.

God knows what Sherlock thought of him now. Perhaps proud that had managed to draw his
purportedly straight flatmate into a spectacularly not-straight episode of near-mating. But he'd
maintained control. The Army had taken almost every thing from him, but it had given him that
much. And so he hadn't pushed his cock up into that tempting wet opening. No matter how much
he had wanted to. He couldn't say that Sherlock had wanted it either, as much as he needed his
hands. Pure chemistry, of course. Maxim's chemistry, of course.

Still, it was their little edge game that stayed in his head. For a few minutes they had been in a
union more intimate than any intercourse he had ever had with a woman. Totally in tune with one
another's responses, listening to each other's soft cries as they neared orgasm, over and over.
His cock was still hard, so hard. He refused to touch it. He carefully wiped the stickiness from Sherlock's climax from his fingers with a tissue. He threw from him before he could start obsessing over the smell.

There was a knock at the his door. "John."

"Go away, Sherlock. You're better now, yes?" He knew that Sherlock could hear the frantic desire in his voice. God help him if this hadn't done it for Sherlock. He didn't have the strength yet to leave the flat. If Sherlock was still . . .

"I'm . . . better now. You didn't let me thank you, John." Sherlock sounded curiously formal on the other side of the door.

"Just - go away, Sherlock," he gasped. Just the sound of his voice was making his cock harder. He watched the clock. Maybe twenty minutes, the suppressants would start to kick in.

"John --" Sherlock was at a loss for words, which was unprecedented but he didn't want to think about Sherlock anymore, he had to escape from Sherlock’s voice, his words. Sherlock must have finally crept silently back downstairs because John heard nothing more. An hour passed, then two. His cock was somewhat tamed, the lustful buzzing in his brain quieted as the suppressants rushed through his blood. He sighed, whether from relief or regret he didn’t know.

He was safe.

[link to Wicked Game]
John awoke from his restless hormonal withdrawal feeling cold and sore and alone.

He pulled his fist up in front of his face to see his swollen, split knuckles, remembering his assault on the predatory Alpha outside 221b in a haze. He had a hormone hangover from the whiplash of riding the swell Sherlock’s intoxicating pheromones up, and then suddenly crashing down.

He could hear Sherlock below, playing dissonantly on his violin. He couldn’t just march downstairs as though nothing had happened. Something had happened, and while it might not have been earth-shattering to Sherlock, to John felt as if gravity had suddenly been yanked out from under him and he was in freefall.

John was not a man without self awareness. He forced himself to stay put and not to rush into something to do, just to distract himself. He felt pulled in opposing directions, as though he might just break apart. What would happen to the pieces?

He had been obsessing over Sherlock ever since the night at Little Havana. Maybe even before that, or he probably wouldn’t have followed him at all. Yes, he had had his occasional hurried, guilty fumblings with fellow soldiers, Alphas and betas, before this. But now, sexual thoughts he had never had about any other man, of any permutation, had become almost impossible to suppress. But they weren’t just about any man. Only Sherlock. He groaned in frustration.

He was being a fool, classic Alpha. Led by his hormones and his cock. He needed to use his brain. Sherlock obviously was, even in this.

Their hormonal balances had been disturbed, and were spinning out of control. That much was clear. They might rebound back and forth, tormenting each other, until one or the other of them had had enough and moved out to get away.

Maxim and Sherlock were playing a dangerous game with illegal pheromones. God only knew what sort of indirect effect they might be having on his own chemistry. John suddenly wondered with a chill of almost horror whether last night had been something explicitly demanded by Maxim – he remembered Sherlock saying, “No, Maxim,” and pulling away. No to what, exactly? Had he and Maxim somehow planned John’s seduction, some sort of test on the path of these infuriating Mysteries? Sherlock had told him to leave him alone, but in the light of day John had a cold realisation that if Sherlock really had wanted to avoid what had happened between them last night, he would have just gone to a beta retreat. He could have ridden it out in peace and safety. Instead, he had insisted on returning with John to 221b.

He remembered, too, Sherlock’s almost superhuman self-control. He might almost have been a beta given how little he had let the hormonal assault of semi-heat rule him. But it hasn't been for lack of desire-- had it? John allowed himself a swell of Alpha pride that while he had responded strongly, almost too strongly, he had been able to pull back from the brink.

And that was where he intended to stay.

Now a cold knot of anger was tightening in his chest. He had been played, played by players in an esoteric game that had no regard for the heart and soul of John Watson. He reminded himself, as it
was sometimes necessary to do, that Sherlock was an actual sociopath.

He didn’t understand this game; but then again he had never been in a situation remotely like this one before. He didn’t imagine anyone else ever had, either. There was only one Sherlock Holmes.

And Maxim Purcell intended to have him and keep him for his very own – once he deemed Sherlock worthy in The Mysteries, evidently. Sherlock would do that, John supposed, by proving himself through these sexual challenges. Maxim offered Sherlock something that obviously he believed no one else could. John put his hand over his eyes. He was just a pawn in their elegant game of sexual chess.

And this thought brought forth a childhood memory. A father -son talk out on the steps of their council flat. John had been hoping that his father would play chess with him – he had been given a set for Christmas. But Harry had been bullied again today for her crush on another girl. Mum was tending to Harry inside, and John could hear through the open window his mother’s confused questions, Harry sullen, silent.

Perhaps if she had been a pretty child, the other children would have gone easier on her, but Harry was sturdy and boyish, an Alpha to boot. Even at their age, in this working-class town, children were relentless in their bullying of gays-- who were called a variety of colourful epithets-- indeed of anyone who “stuck out” as different. John always defended his sister, even though he was the younger. Harry gave as good as she got, too. Today John had a black eye and Harry a puffed up lip. He was ten. Harry was twelve.

“You keep letting ‘em have it, Johnny. I’m proud of you. When our Harriet is away from home, you are the Alpha in the family and it’s your job to protect your sister. Maybe she’ll grow out of it,” his father said hopefully, an often-repeated refrain.

John made a noncommital noise. His sister was his sister, and he didn’t see how it was possible to want her to be different than she was. But everyone did. Harry was already dreaming of London, where she’d heard that one’s sexual orientation was accepted, no matter what. John was doubtful of this, himself. Their father had made clear time and again that homosexuality was unnatural, an offense against God and the Church. In their town, everyone seemed to feel the same.

“Thank God you’re a red-blooded Alpha, Johnny boy. Like your old man, eh? Not like that Chester up the street. An abomination, makes me right sick.” This, about a delicate omega boy whispered to be of the homosexual persuasion. “Soon you’ll be starting to feel the heat. You’ll find a nice Catholic omega girl, and give your mother and I a pack of lovely grandchildren.”

He leaned over and punched John hard in the shoulder. “No funny business with my son,” He declared proudly as if to an audience.

John didn’t react, even though the punch landed right on top of a fresh bruise from the fight.

John snapped out of the reverie.

Everything about last night was filling him with doubt about himself, his sexuality. He had wanted to touch Sherlock everywhere, and it had been more than just trying to help Sherlock through semi-heat. He remembered his hands straying toward Sherlock’s cock. Holding his hand as he stroked himself to climax. He had even felt a spike of hot lust, imagining what it felt like to be penetrated as Sherlock had been, releasing an ovum.

His father would surely turn in his grave to see him now, John thought.
El Brujo had talked of Sherlock taking the crossing. Well, this was a crossing too, John thought. He could let the whole confusing, ambiguous, infuriating predicament go. Memories of last night would fade. He remembered the sound of their breaths becoming as one. The memory burned.

He took a deep breath and stood up and shook himself, refusing to give in to the various aches in his body from last night’s brawl, or the bigger ones in his heart. He got dressed and carefully packed his Army duffle, dug out his warmest coat and boots.

He looked into the mirror over his bureau. He wasn’t sure whether he looked any different than he had yesterday, but inside he felt change happening. It might have been the hormones; it might have been the sound of Sherlock, calling his name at the end. It might have been the clear determination that no matter what happened between him and Sherlock now, he was not going to let Maxim Purcell take away anything in his life that he wanted to keep.

The feeling of having been experimented upon, toyed with, maybe, had the perverse effect of making him determined to stand his ground. He would show Sherlock, show Maxim, and anyone else who got in his way what John Watson was made of.

He went downstairs with firm steps and dropped his gear at the door, pulled his coat on. Sherlock was extraordinarily pale. He stood up, set his violin gently aside. John took a deep breath. The pheromones from last night had nearly dissipated. Only a ghost of their mingled scents lingered, whispering to him seductively.

He marched to the window and threw it open.

“John,” Sherlock said. His expression was uncertain. John was gratified; perhaps he had some shred of conscience after all. Whatever passed for conscience in a sociopath. Sherlock studied John with great concentration, his posture, his expression, his body language. John faced him without shame, letting him look his fill. He figured they might as well get it over with.

“Admiring your handiwork? Congratulations, you did it. Managed to seduce your flatmate. I hope Maxim was satisfied with your report. Do you keep score or is there some sort of prize?” John said, low and bitterly sarcastic. His heart was hammering.

Sherlock’s face immediately closed altogether, a remote and frozen mask. John instantly wished he could reel the words back into his mouth and swallow them. But he had already promised himself. No backing down.

“What are you going to do,” Sherlock said quietly. As though it was all down to John. As if what he wanted mattered.

“What am I going to do?” He smiled grimly and folded his arms over his chest. “I’m going to do both of us a tremendous favour. I’m going to pretend that last night never happened. You are too, if you know what’s good for you. We’re catching that train to Aberdeen. Get your gear. We’ve got a murderer to catch.”

Two Nights Later. The Magnus Oil Field, The North Sea. 150 miles off the Shetland Isles
John and Sherlock watched men rushing along the gangways, heads down in hard driving rain. It was getting dark early, so far north. The rushing waves below looked like churning ink.

They were touring the largest of Britain’s North Sea oil rigs. It had looked tiny as they approached by helicopter, clad in unwieldy rubber immersion suits, called "body bags" by the men. These were intended to prolong your life in the event the helicopter didn’t make it to the rig. Three rough hours battering headwinds later, they landed on the Magnus platform. Stepping onto the deck, the wind was strong enough to nearly flatten them. Once on board, the size of the rig was imposing, a feat of modern engineering. They were here in the middle of the North Sea because British Petroleum believed in damage control, the best that money could buy.

When it came to murder, that meant Sherlock Holmes. Two men had fallen to their deaths in a week. Crime on the rigs was very rare, murder unheard of. But neither man had any reason to be in the places where they met their deaths. There were no clues.

###

Sherlock had been required to fill out a form swearing that he was under a current suppressant regimen before being transported to the rig. Omegas were prohibited on board oil rigs for obvious reasons. An exception was being made in the interest of the investigation, as their stay was expected to be brief. The BP medical officer in Aberdeen had suggested that the Company wanted his blood sample to be certain.

At Sherlock’s panther-like stare, the request was withdrawn.

“The Magnus is the northernmost of the our North Sea oil fields,” the first officer, Jack Cragie, was shouting over the wind. He pointed north. “Ten kilometers out is the end of the UK Sector. Beyond that, you’re in Norway’s sector.”

“How often do you rotate your crew?” John asked.

“Every three weeks,” Craigie said.

“Get me a list of all new crew members,” Sherlock said.

The wind was really whipping them now. The sun dipped below the waves and everything started getting even colder.
“What is that ship,” John pointed to the red-hulled ship.

“She’s our standby ship. The Grampian Protector. She can evacuate 300 souls in an emergency.”

John looked out over the panorama of the vast northern sea. There was nothing else visible in any direction except the ship and the suggestion of another rig on the horizon.

He smiled into the freezing wind.

There was no possible way that Maxim Purcell could exercise his influence over Sherlock in this place.

Here, it was just him and Sherlock.

# # #

They were escorted to the officer’s mess for supper. John established instant camaraderie with the men; some had seen military duty, like him. Soon there were colourful stories being traded across the table.

Sherlock said little, sitting at the end of the table almost in the shadows. He watched John’s face as the others urged him to tell a story. It was not one Sherlock had ever heard before. The men listened with rapt attention and respect. Sherlock realised that he very seldom saw John with other men out of their usual sphere - 221b, Barts, the clinic, crime scenes. John was ordinarily exceptionally reserved about his time in Afghanistan, and certainly never boasted. He wasn’t boasting now. But by the end of the suspenseful story, despite all that John in his reticence had downplayed or left unsaid, it was very clear how brave, how honourable he was.

Sherlock didn’t think he could actually endure the feeling that had lodged in his chest since John’s bitter accusation in 221b. He couldn’t blame John. He had kept The Mysteries a very strict secret, as Maxim required, as had always been required by its initiates. Now, inevitably, John felt preyed upon, manipulated by something he didn’t understand. An experiment.

Yes, he had been weak. His pride in his hard-earned self-control was in shreds. Laughable. Five minutes alone with John, pheromones surging, had put paid to his illusions on that score.

He should never have allowed John to stay. That had been very far from his plan when he had confessed to Maxim that he hoped he might have a chance with John. That was a plan that he had anticipated might take months, even years to unfold: in ordinary persons, sexual orientation was not easily changed, if at all. He had thought he was prepared to wait as long as it took.

And now, because he had succumbed to Maxim’s trickery, everything had been destroyed in a single night. A single terrible and glorious night.

He still had the blue dose; two, in fact.

That was where his journey in The Mysteries had begun, and there it would end.

# # #

After supper, they made their way to their cabin. They would have to share. Cabins were at a
premium on the rig, and two officers had given up these quarters to John and Sherlock. The rig lurched and swayed violently to the force of waves that seemed to be rising. The sound of wind and waves was unbelievable, a constant booming and shrieking.

John stole a glance at Sherlock’s face, and thought he looked unwell.

“You aren’t looking too keen. Shall I get you another patch?” They had been given standard anti-motion sickness patches on the flight over.

“Don’t be absurd,” Sherlock snapped. “I’m perfectly well.” Predictably, he whirled dramatically and yanked open the door leading to the cabin with excessive force. He gripped the doorframe as the ship gave a rolling lurch. John was at his side and put a firm hand under his arm. Even this much contact was unendurable and he pulled his arm away.

“Jesus, Sherlock, you’ll fall overboard at this rate,” John snapped back forcefully. “Just stay here and I’ll go for more bloody patches.” Barked orders usually worked better than wheedling. “Key?”

Sherlock fumbled and yanked at his pockets. The wind buffeted them and they were tossed almost into each other’s arms. They sprang apart as if by electric shock. John reached in Sherlock’s coat pocket, found the key and pushed Sherlock into the cabin.

# # #

It took some time to track down the medical officer, who provided him a supply of patches and anti-nausea tablets.

“You’ll want to get inside and stay off the decks till morning,” he told John. “There’s a storm coming. We’ll be rocking and rolling tonight.”

John could well believe it. The entire rig was rolling and pitching in great, long heaves that were starting to make him feel disoriented. He thought that Sherlock was probably more susceptible to the motion than he was-- Omegas generally were, he had read that in somewhere.

He held the rails tightly as he made his way back to the cabin. More than once he nearly lost his footing at a violent roll. He spared a thought to pity the crew of the Grampian Protector, being battered by the storm out there.

He threw open the door to the cabin, and was instantly infuriated by three unavoidable facts.

Fact Number One: Sherlock had left to go wandering off somewhere alone.

Fact Number Two: Sherlock had absent-mindedly rushed off without his coat.

Fact Number Three: Impossible though it ought to have been, the faint Omega pheromones from heat onset were dancing in the close air of the cabin. Sherlock hadn’t been manifesting before, he could have sworn it. After all, that had been (he had told himself it had been) the entire point of their incendiary encounter of two nights past: Sherlock’s pre-heat had instantly subsided and his exotic pheromones should have been entirely suppressed again.

But Sherlock was purportedly the only omega on board. Even John could deduce that they could only be Sherlock’s, as if he didn’t already intimately know every note of it from their near-joining. His cock immediately swelled and gave a deep throb, sense and scent memory taking over at the smallest trace of the impossibly seductive notes.

“Fuck,” he shouted, punching the door frame and feeling a surge of satisfaction to hear the
varnished wood crack under his fist. This had something to do with Maxim, he knew it in his bones.

He ran out onto the gangway to find Sherlock.

But he wasn’t there. Sherlock wasn’t anywhere.

###

Calling Sherlock’s name into the wind, he heard nothing. Finally he stormed up to the officer’s deck and demanded that they put out a request on the PA system for Sherlock to report there. Sherlock did not come. The other officers were concerned, but the onset of the storm had every crew harassed and preoccupied.

“What if he’s gone overboard?” John roared. In these waters, he would already be dead. He pushed the dread away.

One of the officers was trying to reassure him. “Mister Holmes would have to have climbed down two decks and out on the outer gangways to be anywhere close to the water. That’s not likely, is it?”

“I don’t bloody know - we’re here to catch a killer on this rig – he may have pursued him, he could be in danger.” He wasn’t sure if he was grossly overreacting or if he should be terrified.

“We’ll put on the spotlights and alert the Protector,” the officer said. “But if he went over in this weather —“

“Right,” John said, and rushed back out.

###

John decided to search the dimly lit maze of the crew’s quarters. He patted his gun, tucked into his waistband at the small of his back under his coat.

Technically he wasn’t supposed to have a gun on the ship. He had smuggled it on his own person and they hadn’t patted either of them down.

If Sherlock was down here, he thought with heavy dread, he would likely be able to follow his scent. And so would every other nearby Alpha. Of which there were many. The oil rig had a standard complement of ninety-five percent Alphas.

And then he found it. He caught the scent and ran. The rig gave a huge roll and he slammed into the wall and kept going.

At the end of a narrow hallway was a closed door, just like all the others. Behind it he heard muffled yells and heavy thumping. It sounded like a brawl, maybe four or five men.

John stopped, turned, and broke open the glass case that held the fire axe. He yanked it out, hefted it in his hand. It felt good.

Then he pulled the fire alarm for good measure and drew his gun.

The door was locked, of course. “Sherlock!” He shouted at the top of his lungs over the wail of the alarm. He heard Sherlock yell, “John –“

At this, he was slammed with an instantaneous flood of adrenalin and Alpha hormones and every
hair on his body stood on end. He shot at the door lock. This worked in films, not so much in real life. The lock bent, jammed.

He swung the axe with a yell. The door splintered and caved and John kicked down the rest.

The ripe scent hit him in the face: Sherlock’s gorgeous omega heat, impossible yet undeniable, mingled with the repulsive, aggressive scent of other rutting Alphas. Of which there were three, all big strong oilmen, roughneck and roustabouts. All three were bloodied, but even Sherlock had been outmatched in the end.

Even the sight of John, brandishing his gun in one hand and wielding the axe with his other, didn’t deter the two men holding Sherlock down, the third man as he tried frantically to rip Sherlock’s trousers for access. Sherlock’s trousers were visibly damp. John shuddered.

“Get your hands off him,” John growled, low and deadly, “Or I’ll take them off for you.” He swung the axe a little.

The two holding Sherlock, not so far gone, stepped back and released their hold.

The third moved too slowly and so John shot him in the arm, mostly to wipe the obsessed leer from his disgusting face.

Sherlock whirled and punched and kicked at the man repeatedly, brutally, ignoring his cries of pain until John yanked him by the arm and pulled him behind him.

“Fuck, mate, we didn’t know he was your bonded. Christ, what were you thinking --- bringing him on a rig with his heat coming on, you mad bugger? What did you expect?” The other two were still eyeing Sherlock like a starving lion at raw meat.

“I expect you to get the fuck away from him. Call the Captain. Take this piece of garbage with you,” John said. Sherlock’s attacker was shrieking on the floor in a fetal position and the blood was flowing freely down his arm where John had shot him.

“Shut up,” John said. “I should have cut your balls off.”

“What kind of Alpha are you, anyway,” the wounded man leered as his friends dragged him off, the stupefying influence of Sherlock’s scent still addling his brain. “Your omega's panting for it. You need to take care of your business -- or others’ll do it for you –“

John’s fury spilled over. “Let him go,” he panted. “I’m going to pound his face in. No gun. No axe.”

They squared off in the tiny hallway, where raging Alpha hormones were urging them to tear into each other over their prize.

“Stand down,” came a deep, calm voice. The captain was here. He took in the entire scene at a glance.

“Doctor Watson. Take Mr. Holmes back to your cabin immediately. And lock the door,” he said. I’ll post one of the medics outside – they’re betas. For security. When the storm clears you’ll go back to Aberdeen.”

“I’m all right,” Sherlock said loudly. John saw that his eyes were glassy and bright and he knew that the cold clamminess of earlier had transformed to an accelerating fever. But as he had before, to John’s amazement, he drew himself up to his full height with seemingly frosty composure.
Which ought to be impossible. Everything about this was impossible.

“This one is your killer, Captain,” Sherlock said disdainfully, indicating his attacker, who was looking for a way to escape. He was surrounded and instantly cuffed and taken to the brig.

“Well. We’ll get your report later. Doctor Watson can do that, I imagine.”

“He shot me!!!” The accused yelled, pointing at John.

“They attacked him. They were going to rape him,” John said, calm and steady now. “I’m bringing charges.” Sherlock’s ripped clothing and bleeding wounds told all.

“I can’t stop you – Mr. Holmes is your bonded, I take it? But be aware that it will be taken into account that you foolishly concealed from us that Mr. Holmes was in heat. That is your responsibility. As it is, you are very fortunate indeed. We’ll be taking your gun, though.”

John swallowed hard and nodded, handing his gun over to the security officer. Sherlock said nothing.

He had never felt more revulsion at the Alpha nature; base, brutal and mindless in the face of omega heat. He felt it dragging him under, too, even as he pushed Sherlock, panting from fever and holding himself up by tightly gripping John's shoulder as the rig lurched and rolled beneath them. A part of his brain that was getting stronger and more demanding despite the massive doses of suppressants he had ingested in the past two days was whispering to him to drag Sherlock to his cabin and claim his body for his own.

That was the moment when the rig suddenly slammed to one side and began to sway crazily. There was a terrific crashing, tearing sound above the storm and they both were slammed against one wall, then another. It sounded like the rig was being torn apart.

He dragged Sherlock even as they were knocked to their knees. He had no plan other than to get them to their cabin and barricade the door, keep Sherlock safe. He heard the static of the PA system: the Grampian Protector had been driven against the rig by the storm, but had recovered herself.

John achieved the door to their cabin and threw Sherlock inside, and fell in after him. The instant that he got the door closed and bolted, everything went black.

###

“They’ve lost the main generator,” Sherlock, his voice unnaturally calm in the pitch blackness.

“They’ll have to evacuate,” John said. “We’ll lose heat. And air.”

“They’ll have a backup system.”

They sat in the dark, panting from their exertions.

“Are you all right, Sherlock? Did they . . . hurt you?”

“A little. They would have, much more.” Sherlock said softly. “You came.”

John had so many questions but here in the dark, none of them seemed to matter any more.

There was an announcement that Engineering was working to get the generator online. Everyone was to stay where they were with doors shut to conserve heat, until further orders. The
temperatures outside were well below freezing.

“If you still smoked, we could light a match,” John said. He was desperately trying to ignore the nearness of Sherlock’s body, his gorgeous scent. Even with the suppressants it was making him feel almost drunk with desire. Without them, John imagined Sherlock would already be bent over and taking his cock, then he pushed the image away, revolted at his own baseness.

“I could, but better to find a candle,” Sherlock said. Their voices sounded strange and loud in the dark of the cramped cabin.

“I’ll try,” John said. He started a circuit of the room in pitch darkness. There were a multitude of drawers. No luck. He stopped when his hand brushed Sherlock’s body. He pulled his hand away.

“It’s getting colder,” John said. And it was. Without the constant flow of warm air through the vents, the room was getting chilly. But he could feel heat radiating from Sherlock.

He groped in the dark and pulled a blanket off the bed. They were both sitting on the floor for some reason and so he crawled over to Sherlock and handed him the blanket.

“Wrap yourself, stay warm,” he said.

There was a silence.

“Sherlock, I don’t understand how this is happening to you now . . . you should be clear, it’s too soon. Did you take something else? How could you do that, knowing we were coming here, for God’s sake?”

Sherlock was panting softly. “It was Maxim. I told you he was teaching me a lesson. . . . I thought he put a red dose in my tea, that day. That’s how what happened in 221b . . . happened. But was worse than that. . . . it had to have been a Heatwave.”

John growled with fury and wanted to hit something, so he punched the floor. “I’ll kill him,” he said, and in that moment he meant it. His Alpha side pictured him beating Maxim to a pulp in a flood of glorious rage.

Heatwave was an illegal pheromone/drug. It had an extended release, delivering short but intense heats, one following the other, each progressively stronger until the dose wore off. People were known to have died from it through exhaustion and relentless neural stimulation. The cure was a massive dose of suppressants together with sedatives. Neither of which were on hand at the moment.

“Sherlock, just hold on. I’ll take care of you. When the power comes up, I’ll get to the medical bay, I’ll get you some meds.” He tried to sound calmer than he felt, because he didn’t have any idea how long that could be. In the meantime the Heatwave was doing its work.

“I’m burning up, John,” Sherlock whispered.

John was transported in the darkness back to Little Havana.

“It’s that song,” John said.

“What do you mean?” They both were drinking in lungfuls of the close air, filled with their mingled scents, Alpha and omega together, and he could hear Sherlock keeping it his breaths slow and steady.
"That Cuban song, from Little Havana. ‘I’m burning up . . . I don’t want to die like this.’"

Sherlock shifted, stifled a brief moan. John could picture what was happening, what he was feeling, all that he was struggling to control, and his body thrilled involuntarily in response.

“Yes,” Sherlock said hoarsely. “Save me, John.”

At this, all resistance shattered. He could be strong enough for both of them now, but deep down, he knew he could never endure another man touching Sherlock, ever again. He was the one to take Sherlock on the crossing. But not like this, never like this. John groped in the blackness to find Sherlock’s arm, his shoulder, grazed his neck and touched his face, stroking it, feeling the flushed skin over fine bones. Sherlock pressed his palm to his lips. The bolt of pleasure that shot from the palm of his hand straight to his cock was sharp and exquisite.

“Oh god,” John gasped. He grabbed Sherlock’s shoulders and gently pushed him down, feeling his way, until he was kneeling over him. His body was caressed by pheromones of unsuspected strength and magnetism, exceeding the power of any omega scent he had ever encountered, but that wasn’t what drove him now and he was grateful for his suppressants. He could stay in control. All the feelings of anger, confusion and jealousy that had been consuming him fell away. In the darkness, it was only the two of them, and everything that had seemed impossible before felt as inevitable as the earth’s movement around the sun.

He leaned down and found Sherlock’s neck. Even in the dark he knew the precise spot that he wanted, and he bit down hard, and sucked a deep Alpha bite in the flesh of Sherlock’s throat, obliterating Maxim’s fading mark. Sherlock arched his neck to invite him in and groaned at the touch of John’s lips, and then they were burning together.

“John, John,” Sherlock whispered. He was panting harder now. “You fought for me.” It was Sherlock’s own voice, and yet not. Rough, deep, and seductive. “You told them . . . I was your bonded.”

John could feel his hardness against his thigh where his own cock was already like iron. He felt the truth of his Alpha nature right down to his marrow, even without the liquid fire of heat in his veins.

John reached down and buried his fingers in Sherlock’s hair, pulling a little. He wished he could look into his eyes. His blood and bones were combusting and his cock was near exploding.

"You belong to me now," he said. "No one else will touch you."

Their mouths met for the first time, hard and greedy, then he pulled back a little, and his heart beat faster to the recognition that this was making him whole, finally; being with Sherlock, like this, was making him ever stronger, both finding and losing himself in Sherlock. In this beautiful darkness they were one.

"Say it," John demanded, this time finding and digging his teeth into the thin skin at his collarbone and biting hard. It would make an entirely new mark, entirely his own. Sherlock groaned loudly at this and clung to him.

"I belong to you now," Sherlock whispered against his neck.

“Then hold on. We’re going to get out of here.” John wrapped himself around Sherlock and soothed his shuddering body. It seemed like hours but it may have been just minutes when the power snapped back on and he noticed that the rig wasn’t rocking any more.

The storm was over.
A beta medic brought John the meds he demanded.

“Helicopter in fifteen, Doctor Watson,” he said, peering curiously around the door to the cabin to try to see the now-notorious Sherlock Holmes. John blocked his view.

“Bring a stretcher and another beta if you can. He’s not walking out,” John said. The beta nodded, wide-eyed. John shut the door.

Sherlock was laying on the floor under blankets. John had managed to dress him warmly, which had been very difficult as the Heatwave was becoming ever harder to resist. Soon Sherlock wouldn’t be able to resist it at all.

John loaded the hypodermics. “Sherlock, it’s going to be all right. I’ve got your meds, you’ll rest now. When you wake up, you’ll be better.”

Sherlock shook his head. He was riding the waves of it now. He looked up at John in a silent plea, and John simply climbed on top and held him down as he exposed his arm and plunged the needles in: “One – two,” he said.

Sherlock’s eyes immediately began to slide closed. “John,” he whispered.

John held his hand tight and pulled him up into his arms. He looked into Sherlock’s eyes until the sedative took him and he slipped out of consciousness. Only when he was certain Sherlock was deeply asleep did he press a fervent kiss to his lips.

There was a sharp knock at the door. The beta medics helped John pull Sherlock onto the stretcher.

They marched across the platform under the greedy gazes of the Alpha crewmen and the hackles stood out on John’s neck. He’d demanded his gun back but they had taken his clip.

Finally they were airborne. The black storm clouds had parted. John held Sherlock’s hand tightly. The sky glowed golden and the ocean’s surging surface shimmered under the brilliant northern sun as the Magnus receded, then disappeared from view.
Chapter 5. The Game of Kings

Track: An Unwelcome Friend, Philip Glass: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lt9ciLP7blc

"The fact that a knight is temporarily on the edge of the board is of no great significance."

--- Anatoly Karpov.

As they made their way back to the Scottish mainland, John thought hard about how best to care for Sherlock. Sherlock needed time and seclusion to recover. The use of Heatwave carried prison sentences. Persons caught under its influence were subject to mandatory reporting to the police. John didn’t think a public accusation against Maxim Purcell was the right move here. There could be no blowback against Sherlock. Especially as he didn’t understand much, if anything, about what Sherlock had gotten himself into.

He would deal with Maxim later. But soon. Very soon, he promised himself.

"Look, I need to take Mr. Holmes to a beta retreat. Something away from the city," he said to the medic. "Can you help us?"

The medic looked worried. He had to suspect what was wrong with Sherlock. But the devotion and naked distress in John’s face swayed him.

"I can have a beta taxi meet you at the airport. Here’s the address, it’s just a few cottages. There’s nothing but the cliffs and the sea for miles around. Tell them Gordon sends his regards."

###

At the Blue Angel Inn beta retreat, south of Aberdeen
The Blue Angel Inn was a beta retreat of three tumbledown cottages on the sea cliffs’ edge. In the distance, John could see the outline of the ruins of Dunottar Castle on a mist-shrouded promontory. They might have been transported back in time. John gave them all the money he had to keep all three cottages empty for a week.

The Magnus’ medical officer had given him a supply of suppressants and sedatives without comment, even seeming to pity them. John wondered whether something similar had happened to someone he had cared about.

He had a decision to make. He could simply keep Sherlock sedated for the duration of the Heatwave: two more days ought to do it. He looked at Sherlock’s sleeping face, his body relaxed but still occasionally twitching and twisting.

He thought that was the easy way out, and one that Sherlock would likely not thank him for. Sherlock required complete control of his faculties -- or if he chose to partake of drugs that altered them, he did it his way, on his terms.

Except in the case of Maxim Purcell, John thought darkly.

He watched Sherlock shifting suggestively in the bed. His cock reacted even to this. He couldn’t help visualising Sherlock’s body, naked under the sheet. Clothes, in this state, were unendurable. How he had burned just undressing him, arranging his body in the bed. He turned away and pulled out one of the suppressant injections. Most would be given to Sherlock over the next few days.

But some were for him, so that the attractions of the Heatwave didn’t become irresistible. He had a pheromone mask if things became really difficult. Which John assumed they would. The idea that he must resist Sherlock was difficult to accept, but accept it he did, for Sherlock’s sake. So that his body would follow his mind and heart, he gave himself a strong suppressant injection.

"After this, no more," he said determinedly.

John climbed into the bed with Sherlock and pulled the cover over them. He took Sherlock’s pulse. It was steadily coming down. Soon he would be in a "valley"of calm before the next Heatwave ramped up. Did he dare let Sherlock awaken for a while? With keen hyperawareness he felt Sherlock’s body pressing against his own. The slightest movement, changes in breathing and pulse, instantly impressed themselves upon John’s senses. When he drew away a little, Sherlock’s body sought his out as if they were magnetically bound together. He had read about such things. This was a sign of strong bonding: hypersensitivity to one’s mate’s vital signs, changes in mood and state of consciousness.

He sighed. They hadn’t actually mated. Sherlock had yet to make the crossing. Despite this, John knew that for him, at least, the bond had already taken hold: a rare, but not unheard of occurrence. He became actually ill with doubt wondering if this was a one-sided bond. Unilaterality was rare, but not impossible. After all, his doubts whispered, Sherlock had been under the Heatwave’s influence for days. The Heatwave might be dictating his every word, every thought, every feeling. He had no idea how he would cope (his dark side whispered, how he would live) if Sherlock didn’t share this union, body and soul.

He sent up a prayer that it would no be so.

He carefully set his mobile alarm for one hour hence. He would watch Sherlock wake, make him eat, bathe, take some fresh air before the next wave. He pulled Sherlock close, listened to the
peaceful rise and fall of his chest, the steady beat of his heart. This was the centre of his world now.

He closed his eyes.

#

He was floating somewhere warm and safe, high above everything. Sherlock was with him. He didn't question why they were floating, or maybe flying. It felt wondrous.

They were entwined together as one, infinite. He felt a thrilling pulse deep in the very centre of himself, and it was flowing gently to envelop every part of him, down to his very cells. Sherlock’s lips were pressed against his throat, and he was murmuring his name. John opened his eyes. They weren't really flying, of course, but he was disoriented to find they were after all lying solidly in the snug bed. Sherlock had moved in closer, draping his long limbs over John, nuzzling his neck.

"Sherlock, say something," he whispered, not certain if he was conscious or if it was simply a dream. If it was a dream, he would let him have it gladly. John brushed the sweat-dampened hair from his forehead with a cool flannel. He could recognise the signs. It was a lull in the Heatwave, and the fog of sedatives was clearing.

Sherlock’s eyes opened and John’s heart was wrung to see a shadow of fear in them before he recognised him.

"It’s all right, we’re off the Magnus," John said quietly. "We’re alone. No one can hurt you. We’re at a beta retreat, we’re still in Scotland."

"How long have I been out," Sherlock said with agitation, shaking his head to clear the fog. John could almost see his brain exploring, evaluating his body and his mental function, evaluating the Heatwave’s effects. Trying to regain control. The brief flicker of fear was replaced by growing fury. John placed a calming hand on his chest.

"It doesn’t matter. I’m with you. We have to get you well." He brought a cup of water to Sherlock’s lips and Sherlock pushed it away, thrashing his limbs in an effort to climb out of the bed with a low growl of anger. John gripped his shoulders tightly and forced him to look into his eyes, light blue to dark. "Stay still. I mean it," he said firmly. He was somewhat surprised that Sherlock stilled, they lay back.

"How long," Sherlock asked again, more reasonably. John surreptitiously put a hand to his forehead for fever. Getting cooler. For now.

"Twenty-four hours. We have maybe five hours until the next wave," he said. Heatwave brought the heat episodes with ever greater frequency, until it wore off. The massive suppressant injections he had dosed Sherlock with made the waves much less violent, but no less frequent. "Now, drink this."

Sherlock sat up and gulped down water, and then more. John watched him with newfound pride and protectiveness. Sherlock had put himself under John’s care as an Alpha. This simple realisation made his blood sing in strange new ways. He wanted to touch Sherlock everywhere, show him what he felt.

He brought Sherlock some food that had been left by the betas and made sure he ate it. For once, Sherlock did not protest. The Heatwave increased metabolism tremendously and Sherlock’s system had used every available resource to ride out the waves. When he was finished, John took him by
"Try to get up and walk a little."

Sherlock shook his head, lay back on the bed. "John-- on the Magnus . . ." His hand crept up to his, fingers touched the places where John had bitten him in the darkness. He looked away. "Tell me I didn’t imagine it all."

"No, Sherlock. It’s real . . . Can’t you feel it?" His heart was beating a little faster, remembering. He deliberately ran his hand along Sherlock’s neck, over the bites, and they both shivered. His heart swelled with a unique feeling, if it was love it was a kind of love he had never felt before, which he supposed was as it should be. There was nothing like this, never had been anything like this.

"Yes," Sherlock said. "I need you now, John." His hands gripped John’s arms and John lay down beside him, looking his fill. The Heatwave suffused its victims in an irresistible glow. John thought Sherlock had never looked so gorgeous, thinking of all the times that he had thought him so before but refused to admit it. This was just the lull in the wave. Soon it would crest again.

"I’m here," he said. "Tell me what you need." Just the words, mere words were making him almost faint with desire. He would be the one to give Sherlock what he needed.

No one else, never anyone but him.

# # #

Sherlock didn’t say anything, but pulled him down, and they drowned in kisses, deep and slow, tongues exploring. Now all other kisses seemed to fade and dissolve in his mind. This is what kisses were meant to be, more intimate and thrilling by far than actual sex with anyone else had ever been for him. His arousal, that had been impatiently waiting below the surface, started to break free and roam. Sherlock sighed into his mouth, his body languid and yearning.

"John, I’ve wanted you so," he whispered. "It’s . . . not the Heatwave. You must know that." Sherlock put his hand over John’s heart, his heart that thrilled at these words. Measuring his heartbeat, John knew. Let him feel it, he thought.

"It’s you that’s making it faster," John whispered.

Sherlock’s hands roamed gently, touching his throat, caressing his chest, his thigh over his clothes. Every touch of his fingers coaxed a corresponding throb deep at the base of John’s cock. He hadn’t come since the night in 221b and his cock was straining. John watched Sherlock’s rapt expression with amazement. He hadn’t suspected anything like this, that Sherlock could feel like this for anyone, especially for him. The cool and cerebral detective.

But then he flashed on Sherlock in 221b, stroking himself to Maxim’s voice, and shuddered. Never again.

As though Sherlock intuited his thought, he clasped John’s hand in his own and drew it to his cock. "I don’t want to hold back any more, I can’t," he said raggedly.

John took a deep breath. Could he trust himself, with Sherlock under the Heatwave. He only knew that he couldn’t hold back either. It wasn’t the madness of heat, it was the riot of feeling swelling in his breast that drew him in. He let his hand be guided until it came to rest on Sherlock’s bare cock. They both watched, mesmerised.
"Help me," Sherlock sighed.

"Wait," John said, feeling a dark shiver run through him. He looked into Sherlock's eyes, hoping what he saw there was what he felt, too. "You have to tell me, these Mysteries, what do they mean? Can you, are you..." He didn't know how to articulate his instinctive fear, that Sherlock had entered into some kind of sexual bond with Maxim that could not be broken, or that had taken Sherlock into a place he could not follow. He held his breath for Sherlock's answer.

"The Mysteries are over for me now. None of it has anything...anything to do with us. I swear. Just you and I, nothing else." Sherlock meant it in his heart, even if his mind had doubts that he furiously suppressed. He would resist his rarified training and meet John as he was, as a man, Alpha to omega. Maxim, and The Mysteries, could be forgotten now, he told himself firmly. Everything with John would be different, new. And John could never endure to be touched in the ways of The Mysteries. It would bring Maxim between them, his teacher and would-be master. It would be very wrong. "Can you... let it go? For me, for us?"

"Yes, yes," John said. "If you say it's finished." He was starting to understand that it was very likely he could deny Sherlock nothing at all.

He slowly felt the length of his cock for the first time, so hard and swollen, from the shaft to the softness of the flared head, and became lost in the sensation. He had never touched a man like this, slowly exploring, never even thought of it until Sherlock, when he finally couldn't stop thinking about it. This was why: it was perfect. His hand and fingertips were alive to every curve and throb. It seemed as natural as touching himself, every stroke of his hand causing a sympathetic thrill in his own cock. He felt on fire to touch every inch of Sherlock. When this was over, he would drink his fill.

He explored gently, running his fingertip around the edge of his head, daringly pressing down on the sensitive fraenulum, carefully noting how Sherlock responded with a soft intake of breath, then drawing his fingers through the amazing clear wetness that seeped from his cleft and at the slit of his head.

John imagined sinking himself into that gorgeous heat, a place that was waiting for him, needed him, and groaned.

Sherlock seemed to have fallen almost into a trance, watching John's hand working on him. But instead of tensing as his climax grew near, Sherlock's body became more languid, more relaxed until the only part of him that was shivering with the need to come was his cock. John's own body was as tightly wound as a drum, his cock dripping and sore.

John reached down and kissed Sherlock deeply, tongue and lips meeting in a new and intense tangle of mixed tenderness and desire. He felt a thrilling shock as Sherlock's hand finally slid over his own cock and mirrored his own movements perfectly.

"You're touching me the way you touch yourself," Sherlock said passionately.

"I'm going to learn you. Everything." His hand was driving John right to the edge, so quickly. He took a deep breath, held on. Suddenly everything that clever hand was doing seemed somehow to multiply in intensity, like magic, and he gasped and nearly came.

"You'll learn every inch," John swore, slowing his own hand, willing himself stop from spilling over, and Sherlock did the same, but his cock still swelled under John's hand.

"God, I want to watch you come," he begged, stopping Sherlock's hand from those maddening
strokes. He didn’t want this to end, and he was so close. His mind was filled with Sherlock, real and beautiful and yearning right here under his hand, and visions of Sherlock, stroking himself in the flat, letting him take him with his fingers on that fatal night. The night he had truly lost his heart and soul and had been too afraid to face himself. He wasn’t afraid any more.

"One night at the flat, I heard you, with Maxim. . . and I wanted to see everything, wanted to watch you come, so much, and I hid it from you. I dreamed about you." And his hand gripped Sherlock’s cock and gave it a long, hard stroke, exulting in watching him shudder and struggle to keep his orgasm at bay a little while longer.

"John, never again, — don’t, please, please," Sherlock whispered, wrapping his own hand around John’s as John had done to him, the night that John had come to him in the semi-heat. "Just you now. Now, John," he urged him to stroke him faster, and he did, hard and fast, as he did to build his own orgasm. He felt it building again now, a fire that would not be quenched this time.

"God, Sherlock, let me see," John said, and watched Sherlock’s body shivering in endless long waves, gasping and writhing as he called John’s name.

John leaned in and took his mouth again, and the climax grew stronger, drawing John into it, but it didn’t stop. "Oh my god, Sherlock, that’s so good," he murmured, breaking away to watch his fingers teasing and stroking as Sherlock was seized with the contractions of pleasure. "Come," he demanded, desperate to see it, and their eyes met in sheer wonder until finally Sherlock arched and his climax ran beautifully over their joined hands. The sight of Sherlock’s pale slender body and gorgeous face, transported with waves of ecstasy, was bloody magnificent, and the warm omega scent was driving him higher, ever higher, suppressants or no, until he growled with a wild passion and pushed Sherlock onto his belly and exposed his wet cleft, stroking demandingly. Sherlock moaned and pressed back against John’s hand.

"When this is over, when you’re clear, I’m going to have you," John said raggedly, suddenly possessed of the vision of the two of them, complete: irrevocably joined in heat, clinging together hard as his knot swelled and bound them together. "No one else, never anyone but me." He ran his hands over Sherlock’s arse, groaning to see Sherlock grind back against the mattress, then up against his hand, thrusting to try and satisfy his emptiness, his craving.

"Yes," Sherlock gasped. John was astonished again that he didn’t beg, as most omegas would have done, as he himself was damn near to doing, even with the suppressants. But as before, even with the Heatwave, Sherlock seemed to have preternatural powers of control. This threatened to make him mad with jealousy as he knew very well that it was Maxim who had taught Sherlock to hold himself back in this way. He thought again about what it would take, what it would be like. Sherlock losing control. Him, making Sherlock lose control. A wave of lust enveloped him at the thought; he vowed he would find out for himself.

He grabbed his own cock and rubbed it in the wetness of his cleft, not pressing in although he was hard, hard as iron and he had to close his eyes against the visions of entering Sherlock, that tightness taking him in deep. He took a deep breath, pulling back from temptation. He couldn’t take this now, it was wrong.

He pulled his arm around Sherlock’s chest to draw him closer, stroking his nipple. Sherlock moaned in response to the new sensation and his nipple hardened and twitched, amazingly sensitive under his palm, which induced a feeling of desperate sympathy his own chest. He pressed himself hard up against Sherlock’s back, relishing the heat and pressure of Sherlock’s slick hot skin, drinking in his scent with the knowledge that he could stay strong, stay safe. For now.

But just feeling the warmth and heat of his opening was enough to drive him straight to climax, he
was going to be coming right there, where someday soon he would plunge in to the hilt and make Sherlock feel his knot, take his climax deep inside.

"Soon, I’ll knot us so tightly, so tight --- nothing will part us," He panted into Sherlock’s ear and this was the end of his endurance. With a cry almost of pain as he stroked himself against Sherlock’s divine slick wetness into a deep, hard orgasm that had a throbbing pulse at the very core of it, his knot fighting to come through, and he erupted in strong waves. Soon, soon, his Alpha brain was screaming as rode out the waves of pleasure.

As if he could read John’s thought, Sherlock pressed back with a moan. "Oh yes, I want it, I want you, John."

John’s body melted in the afterglow. He stroked Sherlock, more gently now, feeling the slickness, feeling the quiver there that wanted more of him. "Soon," he said.

He could hardly believe he had the power to resist taking him that instant, but he did. The thought of taking Sherlock under the vile influence of Maxim’s drug was revolting. When he and Sherlock took the crossing it would be on their own terms, and Maxim Purcell would not have the ghost of a shadow of any hold over Sherlock, body or mind, ever again. John growled at this and bit a new mark on Sherlock’s shoulder, kissed his temple and his hair.

Sherlock writhed free to turn and make a twin bite on John’s shoulder, just next to the ragged pink of his scar. Sherlock touched it with his fingers, and finally John let him, watching his serious face as he explored while they luxuriated in the afterglow, warm and sweat-slicked and sticky. It was heavenly. John pulled Sherlock closer. It was almost time to let Sherlock go back into a protective sleep. He wished selfishly that he could keep Sherlock with him, hold him through the wave but he knew better than to tempt them both that way. He pulled Sherlock's slender hand to his lips and kissed it. It smelled intoxicatingly of the two of them.

"I always wanted to touch you here," Sherlock was whispering, stroking his scar. "That day, that very first day, you told me what you said then, when this scar was made. You said, 'Please God, let me live.'"

"It’s true," John said. "I almost died. But that was Afghanistan. I’m all right now."

"I know it. Do you know that this scar tells me as clearly as if I had been there that this bullet wound ought to have been quite fatal? It shattered your clavicle and tore your aorta, you ought to have bled to death. But you didn’t die. Because you are very strong, John, strong in your mind and in your will." Sherlock kissed the scar. John raised him up and kissed him deep and hard.

"I’m strong enough. I won’t let anything happen to you now. But I have to know, why did Maxim give you the Heatwave?" He tried to keep his voice calm but he knew Sherlock was not deceived.

"It was . . . a test of sorts. It is a long story, longer than I can tell you now. I will tell you, someday. I told Maxim . . . " Sherlock looked reluctant to say more, but John took his hand and squeezed it to reassure him. "I told Maxim I’d changed my mind about something, and he thought if he gave me a Heatwave I would. . . . come back to him. For help."

"Help? What kind of help?"

Sherlock shook his head. "I don’t want to talk about it. John. It’s over, I’ve said so. I only want you," he said low, serious. He was starting to shiver. "Tell me, John, you meant it. On the Magnus. How did you . . . you changed, so quickly." He looked fearful that John might change his mind even now.
"I followed you to Little Havana, that night," he confessed, watching to see how Sherlock would take it. His eyes widened with understanding.

"In our cabin, when the power was out – you said, "That Cuban song, from Little Havana." I was too far gone to wonder how you knew about that, then."

"When I saw Maxim kissing you, I wanted it to be me. I just didn’t know it. I was thick, and stupid. And I thought that you and he were . . . "

"No, it’s not like that. He wants it to be, but I have never lied to Maxim."

"And then those men, on the Magnus, when they were trying to –" He pulled Sherlock tightly as though to shield him even from the memory. He swallowed hard. "I knew it then, you could only be mine. I couldn’t deny it any more."

They kissed tenderly, murmuring each other’s name. Finally John kissed Sherlock’s forehead and made a strong effort, and climbed out of the bed.

"Sherlock, I have to give you another sedative. You’ll be having another wave, you know I can’t let you do it without meds."

Sherlock was shaking his head violently. "No more sedatives. I can’t bear it. I can do it — you can tie me to the bed," he said in a stroke of inspiration, as though it was the most reasonable thing in the world.

"You don’t know what you’re saying," John said shortly. He had seen Heatwave victims. Mostly it happened when the men were on short leave from duty. A man could make the most of those few days by taking a Heatwave, giving one to his partner. A person who was denied relief during the short heat bursts could literally be driven mad, or even die.

"There’s no way I’m letting you go through that. Believe me."

He looked down at Sherlock, his heart swelling with new feelings: possessiveness, tenderness, desire, love. He thought it was love. He wanted to tell Sherlock, hear Sherlock say it too. This was the bond he had always heard about, read about. The bond that he had subconsciously feared all this time with other omegas, he now knew. Because he had been destined for something different, something finer and more beautiful than he could ever have imagined, than he had thought he could ever find. He was suddenly overwhelmed, and he drew Sherlock to him and held him tight.

"You have to let me do this, you have to trust me."

Sherlock nodded his head. "I do trust you. I’ve always trusted you. Now you trust yourself," he said in a satisfied way, the voice he used when he announced that his train of deduction had arrived at the correct solution, naturally, inevitably.

"It’s true, I didn’t before. I was an idiot," he said happily. But all the same, as he drew the hypodermic out he had a small sensation of disquiet.

Sherlock being rendered unconscious made him vulnerable, completely dependent upon John for protection. They were in a strange place; he knew no one. He wondered how to get fresh clips for his gun to replace those that had been taken from him on the Magnus. He doubted he could just ring the betas who ran this quaint little retreat and ask for them where he could get ammo, they’d be thrown out.

He plunged the needle in and watched Sherlock fall into deep sleep once again, this time more
peacefully, he noted with Alpha pride. Even outside of heat, he had managed to satisfy Sherlock’s raging desires for the time being. He found himself looking at the clock, counting the hours until Sherlock would emerge safely on the other side of the next wave. One or two more at most, and they could rest for a few days, and go home. He began to spin elaborate fantasies of their new life together. This was so entirely novel that he was quite absorbed for a long time. Night fell. He was about to go outside for more firewood when he heard a noise.

As a soldier, he had been accustomed during long watches, vigils waiting for possible ambush, to listen hard for stray noises that should not be there.

This was such a noise.

It sounded like footsteps in the gravel outside. More than one. A muffled voice, maybe. Then silence.

It could be the betas, coming to check on them, John thought but the hackles stood on the back of his neck as they always did when he sensed danger, especially danger to Sherlock. He hastily and quietly pulled his clothes and boots on and grabbed his gun. Whoever was out there wouldn’t know it wasn’t loaded. Then he grabbed the stout walking stick that leaned by the door. He was glad the lights were out. His eyes were used to the dark now.

After waiting a few minutes without hearing anything further, he resolved to look outside, make sure everything was as it should be. If not, he would deal with it. He advanced on the cottage door and pressed his ear against it. There was a small cough. He took a deep breath and yanked the door open, ducking - a move to avoid any attacker’s blow or shot, almost always aimed level with the chest or head, not lower.

A brilliant light was shone in his face, blinding him.

"Drop it! Drop the gun!" A man’s voice shouted in a strong Scots brogue.

"Who the hell are you?" John yelled back belligerently. He held his gun tighter.

"Police, put it down, Doctor Watson. Now."

John squinted and could make out now the outline of men in uniforms, carrying batons. There was a police car parked nearby. He slowly put his hands down.

"Lay it down the ground, if you please, there’s a lad," the voice said.

"What’s going on? Look, my... my bonded," he said bravely, for the first time, "my bonded is inside, he’s ill. What’s this about?"

"Doctor Watson, you are under arrest for attempted murder against the person of Joshua Stratton of Aberdeen. I must caution you that you do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Now come along quietly."

"Murder -- You’re mad, I never —" An officer was at his side and he started to struggle hard, his brain refusing to understand these words until he remembered shooting the man on the Magnus in a red haze of rage, the Alpha roustabout who had been trying to-- he wiped the image from his mind before it made him lose his temper altogether. He had to protect Sherlock.

"You can’t - I can’t leave him, he’s ill—"
"Stop-- or we’ll make you stop," the officer said coldly. John saw the baton swing. The idea of leaving Sherlock now was impossible, intolerable. He tried to run for it, and was rewarded with a strong blow of the baton that nearly knocked the wind from him and then both officers were holding him down on the ground, grinding his face into the stones as he struggled furiously.

Still, John thought desperately, maybe he could take them, probably they never used their guns, ever. He struggled harder and received a harder blow for his trouble. Then he forced himself to abandon these wild ideas, think it through carefully, calm his Alpha rage. Sherlock had said he was strong in his mind and in his will. He would have to be now, for both their sakes.

"I’m not resisting," he said quietly, reasonably, relaxing his body. "But look, I can’t leave Mr. Holmes, I’m his doctor and he’s just been given a strong sedative. He can’t be left alone. Let me call someone to take care of him." His brain worked. Only Mycroft came to mind. It would have to do.

The officers dragged him up and cuffed him, then cautiously let him stand on his own feet. One looked behind John, into the one-room cottage. Sherlock was plainly visible, tossing on the bed. John thought with a pang that Sherlock sensed that something was wrong. He tried to calm himself so as not to distress him further.

"John," he muttered in his drugged sleep.

"It’s all right," he said through the doorway, hoping Sherlock could hear. "This is a beta retreat, let me call them, let me get a beta to watch Mr. Holmes until his brother comes," John said. "It’s the only thing to do."

The officers nodded. This Doctor Watson wasn’t quite as dangerous a fellow as they had been led to believe, after all.

###

Ten minutes later, the weary beta innkeeper arrived, shocked at the spectacle of an accused murderer being arrested on her very doorstep.

"Look, I’m not a murderer, all right," John said, furious with frustration.

"Son, anything you say -- " the policeman warned again.

"Bollocks! I’m not a murderer! I was defending Mr. Holmes. He was being attacked, out on that rig. I want to make a charge now, right now. There were witnesses — I don’t understand how this is happening."

But the police were implacable, and if he got himself into worse trouble with the law, it would be even longer until he could return to Sherlock’s side. He sternly quelled rising panic as he pictured a long stretch in a cold, remote Scottish jail. Sherlock barred from seeing him, maybe. Torture. If he thought he could get away, he’d run for it. He groaned.

"Please, just watch him, keep him warm and quiet. In ten hours he’ll need another round of injections, by then his brother will be here. If for any reason he doesn’t come, he needs to be taken to hospital. He’s . . . he’s been given a Heatwave — against his will," John said reluctantly, knowing it exposed them both to drugs charges, but it couldn’t be kept secret now.

The innkeeper nodded solemnly. Beta retreats were traditionally used by Alphas and omegas who wanted for various reasons to be isolated during heat. It was not unheard of for an Alpha or omega who had abused a Heatwave to come here to "dry out" in private. They didn’t judge.
"I understand, Doctor Watson. I’ll watch over him. Never fear."

John had been permitted a phone call from the back of the panda car. He secured Mycroft’s agreement to come to Aberdeen instantly, which meant about five hours hence. Mycroft concealed his utter astonishment at these developments with the deep sang-froid for which he was well known.

"John, don’t say anything more. You need a solicitor," Mycroft said sternly.

This was a step which John had not even considered, his mind filled only with thoughts of Sherlock.

These arrangements made, he was closed, cuffed, into the back of the panda car. Before they took him away, he called out the window –

"Don’t let anyone else come to him but his brother, do you understand? His brother is called Mycroft Holmes. If a man-- Maxim Purcell -- tall, dark hair – he’s the one that gave him the Heatwave. Don’t let him near Mr. Holmes. Not for anything."

The beta looked somewhat frightened at the vision of strange men coming to abduct their mysterious guest. It seemed as if the handsome doctor was quite out of his wits.

"I’ll remember what you say," she said timidly.

"Look, can’t one of you stay with Mr. Holmes till his brother comes?" John said desperately to the officers. They ignored him.

He thought his heart would burst from his chest as he was taken away, separating him from Sherlock. He had never felt anything so painfully wrenching in his life. Getting shot was nothing to this. He felt torn in two. He strained his back twisting with cuffed hands, trying to watch out the rear window as the cottage disappeared around the bend in the road. "Oh, god!" he shouted, kicking the door of the car hard.

The police banged the seat with his baton. "None of that, or I’ll clobber you again, understand?"

Soon he was being dragged, none too gently, into the brightly lit police station in Aberdeen, and the iron bars of the jail cell closed on him with a bone-chilling clank.

# # #

At midnight, the kindly beta decided there couldn’t be any harm in going back up to her own cottage for some hot tea. The poor omega, Mr. Holmes, was still deeply sleep. She would be back within minutes. Everything was dark and still, only the dull murmur of the waves far below disturbed the silence. She shone her dim flashlight along the dark path and made her way up the hill.

When her flashlight disappeared over the crest of the hill, a car with its lamps extinguished pulled up to the cottage. A tall, dark haired man stepped out. He had two other strong men with him. He pushed open the door and inhaled deeply of the uniquely intoxicating scent that was Sherlock’s, frowning in anger at the strong, dominant notes of John’s pheromones, wild, dark and brutal. He evaluated the molecular structure. There was a power there he had not suspected. He filed this away for later consideration. He crossed the room and beckoned to the men. There was no time to lose. They carefully lifted Sherlock, and carried him to the waiting car.

Then they were driving away.
Maxim cradled Sherlock’s head in his lap, stroking his hair. The first thing he would do would be to bathe him, wash away any trace that John Watson had ever touched his prize. Sherlock could still be made to see reason. He could sense very clearly that even now, Sherlock had not taken the crossing. The thought made his heart beat with hope. With Sherlock not awake to see him in his weakness, he allowed it to fill him up. He pressed his lips to Sherlock’s.

Divine.

If only Sherlock understood how truly the word suited him.

"John," Sherlock murmured in his sleep.

"Shhh," Maxim whispered. "You’re with me now, Sherlock. Did you think I couldn't find you? There isn't anywhere you could go that I wouldn't follow, to find you and bring you back to me. But I’m going to forgive you. How could I not? Now you’re going to learn things you never dreamed of. And I am going to teach you. You and I are going to do something extraordinary together. We are going to literally change the world."

Of course, taking Sherlock to a public airport was out of the question. There was a private airfield near here with an airplane waiting. Soon they were flying high, heading east.

###
Chapter Six: King’s Gambit

*It doesn’t require much for misfortune to strike in the King's Gambit - one incautious move, and Black can be on the edge of the abyss.*

- Anatoly Karpov

Aberdeen, Scotland. A police station.

“Look, it’s not like I’m even asking to make the call myself. Just call up there and ask them. It can’t hurt,” John said coolly, reasonably. His Alpha urges were rising, fighting to break through, as though the suppressant injection he had taken at the cottage had been nothing but water.

It had taken some effort, but he had managed to clamp down tight on his furious panic and had guided himself into down into his deep place: a place that he had first discovered in boyhood and had rediscovered and fortified in Afghanistan. It was a remote, remorseless place. There, strong emotion and feeling -- anger, fear, passion, pain, heat, cold, hunger -- could not touch him. A safe and solitary place, where it was just him and whatever it was that he had to do: march with 80 pounds of gear on his back through a potential minefield, sew the blasted flesh back together for a friend that wasn’t going to make it, stay awake all night and the next day too, because the rockets wouldn’t stop coming.

And although what was happening to him right now was worse, possibly, than any of those things, from the deep place, he would find a way to do what he needed to do.

The duty officer, one PC Bannon, was a young Alpha male. John inhaled deeply and focused. Alpha notes young, unsteady. He examined him as he thought Sherlock would. Uniform new and too neat, young face, trying to look harder than he was. He was strong but untried and insecure, like the new recruits off fresh off the transport in Helmand. He could easily be overmastered . . . if he didn’t push the wrong way.

The young officer shook his head. “You need to quiet down. Get some sleep. You’ll be seeing the magistrate in the morning. You can tell it to her.”

John looked at the clock. He was waiting for word from Mycroft. Telling him Sherlock was safe. Mycroft should be here by now.

“I’m his doctor. You know what a Heatwave is? He could well die. What will they say if he does, and it was you prevented me checking on his welfare?”

John leaned against the bars and looked him right in the eye, unblinking. The officer wavered and looked away.

“Just the one call, then, that’s it. And I’m not giving you the phone, I'll call.” the officer said. John tried to look grateful.

“Is that the Blue Angel Inn? This is PC Bannon down at Grampian Police. Yes, Doctor Watson.
Well, that’s for the magistrate to decide, ma’am. He’s that worried about his patient . . . Oh, well that explains a few things,” Here PC Bannon gave John a speculative look. “Is Mr Holmes all right? Apparently his brother’s to come for him? . . . Well, that’s fine then. Sorry to disturb at this hour. Good night.”

PC Bannon put the phone down. “It’s all settled, Doctor Watson. Mr. Holmes’ brother took him away a few hours ago. If he’s . . . ah, unwell, I’m sure his own brother will make sure he gets proper care.”

John felt almost faint with relief. Mycroft would take care of Sherlock, he would know what to do.

And yet. Something in his heart wouldn’t accept this. He felt a knot of disquiet that was not soothed by this news. His brain was filled with hazy visions of Sherlock, desperately ill from the Heatwave, no one to help him.

“John.” This was Sherlock’s voice, filling him up. Panic started to seep over the walls of his deep place.

“Didn’t they leave a message for me?”

PC Bannon opened the book he had been reading. “They didn’t say and I’m not calling back to ask. Your brief can sort everything for you when he gets here. Now shut it,” he said, not unkindly.

Time, time. It was going too slowly. He had to break it down into manageable parts. This, too, was something he had learned to do in Afghanistan.

“Sorry. I’ve never been arrested before. And definitely not for attempted murder,” he said.

“Look, Doctor Watson, anything you say may be used —“

“I know, I know. I just want to know what time will they take me to court in the morning? If I . . . if I’m, say, granted bail — how long until I’m released?”

PC Bannon nodded. He was a new recruit and he still enjoyed going over these procedural details, being in the know concerning the inner workings of the courts.

“Well, let’s see now. Tonight’s Friday. Actually, we’re into Saturday morning now. Magistrate takes the bench at nine o’clock on Monday morning. Usually. No telling if your case’ll be called first, or last. If you’re last, could be nearly to the lunch hour. Maybe even after the lunch break. The prosecutor will inform the court of the charges. Your brief will do whatever you and he have agreed to do, I’m sure he’ll be requesting bail. If the judge grants bail, someone’s got to post it on your behalf. They’ll send you back here to wait. Once all the forms are in and bail is posted proper, you’ll be released.”

John looked down so Bannon wouldn’t see his eyes. Because he was starting to realise it might be seventy-two hours or more until he was out of custody.

He started eyeing potential escape routes. This was a modern jail, clean, bright, and very secure. There didn’t seem to be any hope of kicking out rusted bars to a convenient window, for example.

“John,” Sherlock said again, more faintly. He suppressed a growl. PC Bannon heard it anyway, and gave him what was intended to be a warning scowl. John wanted to punch the look right off his face but as this was not possible at the moment, he sat on the bed, head in hands and tried to imagine that everything was going to be all right.
Sherlock was with Mycroft. Knowing Mycroft, he had probably whisked Sherlock to some private clinic where he was now resting comfortably. He would wake up soon, wondering why John wasn’t at his side. Mycroft could explain. They would meet him at the courthouse.

The judge might believe agree that the roustabout on the rig had gotten what was coming to him, and that John had shot him in justified defense of Sherlock, dismiss the charges.

Maybe he and Sherlock would be safely home in 221b, very soon.

But his heart wasn’t buying what his brain was trying to sell. He forced himself to be still. Pacing and fretting was a waste of energy and he didn’t know what he might need to be prepared for. But he felt instinctively that he needed to be prepared for something.

Something was coming.

There was a small commotion at the door and Mycroft Holmes was there: tall, impeccably suited and fresh as if coming off a meeting with the Prime Minister rather than a lengthy journey up from London in the middle of the night.

“No visitors, sir. Except his solicitor,” PC Bannon said, very official.

Mycroft examined PC Bannon as though he were a previously unknown organism of the single-cell variety: formless, brainless and insignificant. He tossed a white card on the desk and waved his hand toward John’s cell.

“But I am his solicitor, isn’t that right John,” Mycroft said in ringing tones that brooked no argument. John was baffled because to his knowledge Mycroft was not, in fact, a solicitor.

“He is,” John agreed.

“I need to meet with my client at once,” Mycroft said. PC Bannon opened the door to the cell. He seemed to be conflicted whether or not to cuff John, and John immediately allowed himself to appear weary and afraid. Bannon skipped the cuffs.

“This way,” he led them to an interview room. “When you’re done knock and I’ll take him back.”

When the door closed, John hissed, “What’s happened to Sherlock, is he all right?”

Mycroft regarded him gravely.

John’s heart plummeted as though it were an elevator in free-fall. “What – tell me,” he whispered. Mycroft watched the color drain from his face. This was going to be so much more painful than Mycroft had expected, and that had been bad enough. He hadn’t taken into account the fact that John had finally bonded with Sherlock, something that he, of course, had foreseen would very likely occur from the very first time he met John Watson. John had already been halfway there, that very day. But also, very blind. Not a man to understand himself readily. Many layers of protection there.

But all that was past, Mycroft could see that now. Most unfortunate.

“But I don’t know how to tell you this,” he began. He was an Alpha too, but years of custom-formula suppressants had smoothed his own pheromone surges into a steady stream that permitted him to subtly exercise dominance over others in Government without incurring the mess of combative behaviours from rivals, or challenges from his underlings. He hadn’t bonded, ever, and had no intention whatsoever of doing so. Appalling, to put yourself in someone else’s power in that
way. He had always encouraged Sherlock to feel the same, and until recently, had believed that Sherlock would avoid bonding as well. His dalliance, if that was what it was, with the mysterious Maxim Purcell had not seemed to be tending toward bonding, whatever else their relationship involved. But he could see the marks of bonding in John now, in his obvious pain and distress at separation from Sherlock. Mycroft wished he could be anywhere else but here. He loathed emotional scenes of all sorts, but most especially those caused by his brother, whose own repressed emotions and even sometimes cruelty frequently left a tidal wave of destruction in his oblivious wake.

“Mycroft,” John growled through clenched teeth. Mycroft withdrew a folded note encased in a clear plastic sheath from his breast pocket and slid it across the table.

“I know I shouldn’t have read it, John. But Sherlock had already left by the time I arrived at the inn. He left this for you.”

John ignored his words and carefully examined the paper as he thought Sherlock would have done himself. The note was written in Sherlock’s perfect, elegant hand. Which was odd because in his state, he could hardly imagine Sherlock writing at all, let alone in such controlled hand. Yet it had been Sherlock's puzzling, almost preternatural level of self-control in the face of his omega chemistry and urges that had so tantalised and awed John.

The note was written on expensive paper, with ink of a unique, brilliant blue. John recognised these as well. Sherlock had them made specially for him at a stationers in Jermyn Street.

“John,

I have concluded based upon irrefutable evidence, which I am unable to ignore any longer, that I have drawn you into an entanglement against your natural inclinations. It is clear this has been a grave mistake. I imagine you will be surprised when I say, it is entirely my own fault. I can only hope any ill feelings will be short-lived, as I have observed your former omega attachments to have been. I am grateful for your diligent care and I assure you I am quite well.

I will be away for some time. You may remain in 221b, or take new lodgings, as you choose. I do not flatter myself that you would wish to contact me, but I request that you not attempt to do so.

With respect,

SH”

John took a deep breath. He felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. His mind was a blank slate. The words were clear on the page but meant nothing at all. It might have been Sanskrit, Greek, for all they made sense to him.

He slid the note back across the table to Mycroft. Then he curled in upon himself, as if he had taken a blow to the stomach.


“John, I –“ Mycroft wasn’t certain that John wouldn’t actually attack him for what he was about to say next. John’s eyes bored into his, and he found he could not resist. John could be very forceful.

“John, he’s gone . . . with Maxim Purcell. There is a CCTV camera on the main road into Aberdeen. The license plate was registered to one of his companies. Purcell is into oil, among other
interests, you know. Well, I suppose you didn't know. At any rate, Maxim keeps an airplane at a private airfield near here."

“No. No.”

“I’m afraid it’s true. John, I don’t know what you know about . . . Maxim Purcell and Sherlock. I would have told you before, but – to be frank, I didn’t know things had come to this. Between you and Sherlock. Sherlock has been with Maxim for a long time. What passes for a long time with Sherlock, at any rate: more than two years.”

“You can tell me later. Where. Is. Sherlock.” John stood abruptly and loomed over him with clenched fists. Few people had the nerve to try on dominance maneuvers with him, but John clearly wasn’t afraid to and he was doing it now. Mycroft unconsciously drew back from the smaller man, who nonetheless looked very dangerous indeed suddenly.

Mycroft recalled that the reason he was here at all was for shooting a man on an oil rig in the North Sea. Not the first time he had shot a man for Sherlock’s sake.

“John. Calm yourself. I’ll help you. I don’t want Sherlock running off with Maxim Purcell, either. I’ve kept my eye on them both, of course. Just to make sure things didn’t get . . . messy.”

“Mycroft!”

“India. Mumbai. They’ll have to make stops along the way, of course - but I believe that is their destination.”

“How, how do you know?”

“Discreet inquiry at the air field. Mechanics will talk.”

John’s head was spinning. He had never been to India, but he could picture Mumbai from images on the news - a vast city, with modern skyscrapers, Bollywood, monsoons, and slums.

Maxim Purcell, of course, wouldn’t be taking Sherlock to the slums.

John touched the note again with his fingertip and closed his eyes.

“Tell me, Mycroft,” he said quietly. “Do you actually think Sherlock wrote this note?”

Mycroft regarded John with pity. He really, really didn’t want to tell John the next bit. He prepared himself. John could be very unpredictable.

“John,” he said gently. “You don’t imagine I didn’t have it looked into? Sherlock is my brother. He doesn’t like to admit that he needs looking after, but he always has, at least until you-- ahem. I immediately scanned it and had it analysed. I don’t have to explain the resources I have at my disposal, I presume? No. I have many exemplars of Sherlock’s handwriting, you know. The paper itself. The ink. Those, I recognise and I see you do too. Sherlock’s fingerprints are on the paper. Computer analysis confirms that it his handwriting, to a statistical certainty.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that as far as MI5's computer logarithms are concerned, my brother wrote that note. And not under duress: those signs can be detected, and Sherlock is clever enough to have made sure they would be if he in fact was under any sort of duress.”
John didn’t open his eyes. He was picturing Sherlock. Not picturing him, exactly, because these memories were from a dark place. The dark cabin on the Magnus during the storm.

“Save me, John,” Sherlock whispered.

He opened his eyes. Now he was feeling something. The blank, empty-slate feeling was gone. It was replaced by a sensation so shocking and painful that he might literally be being torn in two. He remembered reading as a boy in school books about the horrid practices in Merrie Olde England, when men were drawn and quartered. Every nerve in his body was quaking with this pain. Probably he would die of it, any minute, and be glad for it to come. This was the reality of bonding: the tie that could only be severed by death.

“Mycroft, forget the computer. I’m asking . . . what you think. Do you believe it,” he said. Hot tears were choking his throat. He wasn’t sure he could control this at all. And the deep place wasn’t where he could stay for this.

Mycroft thought hard. This is what he had been turning over in his mind since first seeing the note. Genuine - certainly, it passed all available tests. Deeper chemical analysis might yield other clues.

That left his own instincts, his own deductions. He nearly as capable as his brother in making those.

And what he observed was that John Watson, in spite of a seemingly clear preference for females (leaving aside a few meaningless, necessarily secretive dalliances with fellow soldiers, male soldiers, in the Army, which Mycroft had uncovered with little difficulty), had very clearly formed an unbreakable bond with Sherlock. And he had previously observed (both personally and through certain clandestine means that he had no scruples at all about employing) that Sherlock was also very strongly drawn to John but was perhaps too emotionally stunted to do anything to advance his cause, or perhaps, was in too deep with Maxim Purcell to do anything else.

And as to Maxim, well, a man did not turn back from The Mysteries. Mycroft was well aware that it simply wasn’t permitted. Not once certain lines had been crossed.

And yet . . . would John have fallen into such a bond without strong signs in return from Sherlock? Without physical acts to seal it?

If so, would Sherlock just walk away?

Mycroft looked at John’s stricken face. He tried to imagine Sherlock leaving this note, running away with Maxim to become more deeply inducted in The Mysteries.

And he remembered the many times that he had surreptitiously observed Sherlock surreptitiously eyeing John. Patient, fascinated, what in another man might have been longing, but even Mycroft had doubted his own eyes in that regard. He couldn’t any longer.

“I don’t. I had to see you, John. To really understand,” he said as gently as he could. “Listen to me now. I’ve arranged to post bail, in whatever amount0. And bail will be granted.”

John was staring at him. Then he looked at the institutional clock on the wall. It was 4:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning. He probably wouldn’t be seeing the magistrate for another fifty-three hours. John laughed a little, which was rather shocking.

“Mycroft. What is it that you think Maxim wants with Sherlock?”

Mycroft coloured a little. He had a fairly precise idea what Maxim wanted with Sherlock, but he
didn’t dare tell John in his present frame of mind. As Maxim’s intentions somewhat aligned with Mycroft’s own agendas, he had until now been content to keep them under close watch, and not interfere. But now things would be different. If John and Sherlock were truly bonded, then Maxim had to be holding Sherlock against his will. That was an entirely different state of affairs.

“Not to do him, ah, physical harm, I shouldn’t think,” he said as neutrally as he could. “I am looking into Mumbai. Purcell has interests there, too. A number of real estate holdings. We’ll find Sherlock.”

“Looking into Mumbai,” John said. “So you don't know where he is, right this minute. Right.” He shook his head, and stood up. He was gripping the back of his metal folding chair very hard. “Mycroft, you might want to stand back. I’m not waiting on you, or the magistrate.”

“John – what are you doing?”

John was tearing at his clothes, his hair. Mycroft was afraid he’d lost his mind.

“Call that constable. I’m going to be very sick,” John said. “Didn’t you know — I’ve had one of those Heatwaves too.”

“John!”

John ignored Mycroft and banged the chair against the door violently, yelling at the top of his lungs. PC Bannon dashed to the door with another officer.

“He needs to go to hospital,” Mycroft said urgently through little window in the door. “He’s taken a Heatwave. Didn’t you idiots know? Get him out of here at once.”

“Jaysus, Mary and Joseph,” Bannon shouted. This would come down on him, he knew it. “Are you sure?” He peered through the window. John was laying on the floor, panting dramatically, dripping with sweat. Bannon hadn’t seen John speed through twenty-five quick pushups to get his blood and sweat going.

“He’s a doctor himself! Now get him to hospital before he harms himself. Or do I need to make some calls,” Mycroft said menacingly. The nabobs of Whitehall trembled before Mycroft when in this temper, and PC Bannon nearly collapsed with terror, visions of disciplinary hearings for allowing a detained person die in his custody overwhelming him.

“No, sir. I’ll have a car brought round. Hospital’s just up the street. You need to get out of there, sir.”

“I’m coming out,” Mycroft announced. He leaned over and said loudly, dramatically: “Try and hold on, Doctor Watson. We’re getting you to hospital.” More softly, he whispered, “Now???”


“John, I really don’t think –“

“Aaaahhhhhhh!!!” John screamed, ignoring Mycroft. He stood up and kicked the door repeatedly and didn’t stop until three cops arrived to cuff him and transport him to hospital.

# # #
The Kamala Kangra Tea Estate, Kangra Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India

Sherlock was in a new place. The air was much thinner than . . . where had he been? Scotland. Yes, he remembered Scotland. There was cold radiating from a wall nearby although the room itself was comfortable. He determined that someone had taken the trouble to try and make him comfortable too. He was laying on very soft cushions and covered with a silk quilt. He sat up.

John was not here. This explained, of course, the tearing sensation in his chest that seemed to have been there always. John was his bonded now, he knew that, he had always known it, it seemed. This pain was important, not because it hurt him, that was meaningless. It was important because it meant that John was very far away from him now.

He struggled to stand up. He thought he could see natural light at the far end of this dim room. Then a door opened, and someone brought a tall iron candelabra. There was pheromone incense, too. His vision was starting to clear. Someone was standing before him.

It was Maxim.

“Please don’t stand, yet, Sherlock. Sit, I’ve brought you something to restore you after our journey.”

Sherlock sat. Wherever he was, he instinctively knew that running wouldn’t help him now. He carefully tasted, then rejected, what Maxim had brought. It had a peculiar odor about it. He presumed it was drugged. His anger was so extreme that he was amazed he could hold it within his body, but he did. Direct attacks would be of no benefit. Images of John filled his mind. John, taken from him. But John would try to find him, he knew it down deep. He pushed the tray away.

“Maxim,” he croaked, his throat dry and constricted. “You know me better. I won’t touch it. You could force me. But I won’t do it.”

Maxim clapped his hands, once. He smiled proudly. “I have never had a pupil that was as sensitive as you are, Sherlock. In every way but one, you exceed me already.”

Sherlock stared at him with undisguised contempt. He would not play Maxim’s game. He would not dishonour his bond.

“Let me go, Maxim. You won’t get what you want. It’s over. I told you in London. There are a hundred men who would give anything to take my place.” It was true. Maxim almost never took on pupils, but rumours of his powers were whispered in many secret places. Maxim was always
sought after, but almost never took what was offered.

Maxim studied Sherlock carefully. “I know that you mean every word. But only because you don’t know what you are saying. And because you still don’t understand who you are, and what we will do, together. And I can take what I want, whenever I like.”

“I assure you, if you want to take me that way, you won’t like it at all,” Sherlock said, deadly calm.

Maxim called for another tray. This time, Sherlock took the food and drink. It had been another test. But he couldn’t afford to be weak. His body, mind and spirit needed to be strong. He held John in his heart and let his strength enter him too.

“I wanted to know whether your senses had been . . . blunted by your Alpha,” Maxim said, matter-of-fact. “If anything, they are enhanced. That is very wonderful.”

Sherlock consciously looked away, trying to find a point in the distance. The flames of the candelabra against the wall.

“Maxim, whatever it is that you want, you won’t find it in me. Not anymore.”

He stared at the flame. Soon he was withdrawing from the room, he was alone, and it was dark again, and quiet. He could hear his own heartbeat. He could also watch it slowing, watch his own blood flowing. Maxim was here/not here. He could hear Maxim’s heartbeat too, and he carefully separated it from his own and shut it out.

Maxim had been prepared for this. In a way, it was good. It was always good to anticipate possible paths that might open when you didn’t expect it.

He watched Sherlock enter his trance, going very deep quite readily. Sherlock had trained in Tibet. It was there that he had found Sherlock after a long search, although he had never yet confessed to Sherlock why he had sought him. There would be time for that very soon. He had fortunately stopped Sherlock from taking the blue dose. Maxim thought Sherlock had never looked so beautiful as he did now. His eyes were fixed, shining, his pupils huge and dark in crystalline blue-grey. Maxim wondered what he was seeing. He sent images of endless passion into his path. The Omega Sutra. He was gratified to see Sherlock shudder, his eyes flutter. Beautiful.

If his Alpha had opened his senses, Maxim could only be grateful.

Now it was time for his patience to be rewarded. Maxim took a deep, calming breath and imagined his energies, his subtle body warming, becoming hotter and desirous. It expanded, flowed and embraced Sherlock where he was. Its colour was like a rose. The sensation of their mingled energies was profoundly erotic.

He touched himself lightly, the merest whisper of pressure and a wave of orgasmic pleasure flowered from the root of his cock and unfurled it self through all of the points of pleasure - his cock, his prostate, his passage, his nipples, his lips, all tingling sensuously. These exquisite waves might endure for hours, where ordinary persons had feeble shadowy contractions of perhaps a minute, if that. Years of deep work on his sensual points had completely rewired Maxim’s erotic responses, and much of this he had passed to Sherlock. Where ordinary persons required tedious and unimaginative friction to achieve their pitiful pleasures, initiates in The Mysteries could attain rapture based upon the lightest of touch, or no touch at all.

The body, however, required strong preparation by increasingly powerful infusions of pheromone concentrates. He had a laboratory in Mumbai where they were formulated especially for him, and
for Sherlock, only the most rarified, most exotic of biopure essences.

He rubbed one of these oils delicately into the pale skin of Sherlock’s forearm, where it would be readily absorbed.

Now Maxim expanded his energy and his mind to try to embrace Sherlock fully. The waves searched for entrance, where they could penetrate and pleasure him, too. They would float on ecstasy, and go together on the cataclysmic journey that Sherlock was destined to make.

###

Sherlock was here/not here. John was with him, holding him close, whispering reassurance that filled him and lifted him up. They kissed, divine, endless. Nothing could take him from John’s embrace. He held him tighter, closer, their hearts and spirits joined, Alpha and omega. He rested his forehead against John’s.

“Can you stay with me?” He asked John without words.

“There isn’t anywhere that you can go that I won’t follow you,” John replied.

Maxim spent what may have been minutes, or may have been an eternity, patiently expanding, extending, letting his energy envelop Sherlock, trying to find the point of entrance. He touched Sherlock gently, his lips, the palms of his hands. Sherlock was filled with a radiant sexual joy that was beyond his reach, which his subtle body could not enter. This was amazing to discover, depths of pure passion even Maxim had not suspected, and he exulted. Today, the doors were closed to him. But they would not be forever. He could not allow that. He must not run out of time.

The sun had passed by the windows and behind the mountains before Maxim slowly withdrew his energies. He stood up, refreshed. Sherlock remained in his trance, seemingly at peace. He would sleep near Sherlock, he decided. Their sleeping spirits might find each other.

Only once they achieved the joining of their subtle bodies, would it be possible to take their physical body to the very highest states, the absolute limits of the human body and spirit; where their bodies could join in an ecstatic heat, esoteric and depraved, Alpha and omega but without fatigue or loss of desire, for hours, days, potentially indefinitely. And then, using the powers that Maxim had taught, they would go even farther, on a divine path that was preordained.

Maxim had never yet groomed an initiate who was capable of enduring with him on this plane. So far, the result had been the same every time. Death. Early practitioners of various paths of The Mysteries were masters of the occult, magick, and demonic worship: Aleister Crowley, Madame Blavatsky -- yet they too had made the same error. He was sure he had found the key this time. Sherlock was the one. His breeding alone confirmed it, and in so many ways, he had already proven himself. But he must not allow himself to become greedy or careless, and destroy what they had built by rush this journey. Sherlock was too precious a prize for that. And so, Sherlock’s resistance through trance would be indulged-- for now.

He crossed to the window and took a deep, cleansing breath of the high, pure air. The snow on the mountains was dazzling. The name of this land, Himachal Pradesh, meant “lap of the Himalayas.” It was late in the season, but tomorrow he might visit his tea estate. He regretted that he could not bring Sherlock, after so long desiring to show him this place.

Soon.

###
John was wheeled into the hospital. He prepared for them to administer a dose of sedatives and suppressants. He calmed himself as they brought him in, as if temporarily exhausted. He pretended to be limp and unresisting when they took him to an exam room. As expected, they cuffed him to the bed. His heart raced and perspiration coated his skin, and no one suspected he was playacting. He heard one of the police say that they would watch and wait in the hall in case of trouble.

The male nurse bent over him, taking his pulse. “You a doctor and all, you know better, don’t you,” he scolded. “Now you’ll have to wait that much longer, they say. You can’t go to court until you’re clear.”

John grunted and tossed. The nurse left. He would be going for the meds now. John was alone. He sat up and twisted carefully. His hands were cuffed to the bed rail. A fatal mistake. He frantically pulled his right hand along the edge of the rail until he felt the lever that raised and lowered the bed. It was plastic, and the bed was old. He wrenched hard and it broke. John pulled and rolled until the bed rattled a little, and the metal bar came lose. The bed made a clang as the post worked its way free and he slipped his cuff over the end of the exposed rail, then shoved it back in place. He waited, heart pounding, certain someone must have heard. He fell back against the bed, panting and dripping sweat just as the nurse returned with a tray of hypodermics.

“I am a doctor, I can do it myself,” he said querulously. The nurse chuckled.

“Nice try, Doctor Watson. Now stay still. This is for your own good. People die of the Heatwave, every day.”

“Are you an omega,” he growled aggressively.

“You are desperate, aren’t you? I’m a beta and you won’t be getting any joy from me, I promise you. You’ll feel better in a minute.”

He leaned over and pulled up John’s sleeve, then turned for the hypodermic.

John was there first.

“Wha —“ the nurse gasped as John plunged the needle accurately into his neck.

With his free arm John held the collapsing man against the side of the bed and let him slump gently to the floor. Now he pulled his other hand loose from the bar and had two handcuff bracelets, dangling. He couldn’t worry about that now. He removed the nurse’s scrub jacket and stethoscope, and rummaged in the drawers until he found a scrub cap. He heaved the sleeping nurse into the bed, an nearly impossible task but his Alpha nature had utterly taken over. He was capable of near-miraculous feats of strength and endurance now. He his mate was in danger, and he had to find him.

John pocketed the rest of the meds and picked up the tray. He opened the door casually and walked rapidly and confidently down the hall, grabbed a chart from the wall outside another examining room and pretended to scrutinize it. He didn’t even look in the direction of the police officer, but out of the corner of his eye he saw him looking curiously toward the door.

John had carefully examined the evacuation plan on the wall as they wheeled him in, and he knew where the hospital’s kitchen was. He ran down a stairwell and plunged down a service hall where staff were pushing carts piled with patients’ meals. It was time for breakfast, and he had been counting on that. Now he pushed into the kitchen, hot and steaming and filled with clattering and amiable shouting, and he kept his head down and kept walking toward the doors that should lead
And he heard the announcement: *Code Green*. Psychiatric or violent custodial patient escape. The kitchen started buzzing, but nobody seemed to pay him any mind until he pushed the door and cold air hit him in the face.

“Hey, you,” a man yelled behind him. John kept going and he heard feet running. “Hey!”

He was out in the delivery bay now, and there was a truck here, idling. Men were wheeling boxes in on trolleys.

“You! Stop!” There were more voices now, and shouting. He still didn’t turn. There was sunlight ahead at the entrance to the delivery bay. If he was lucky, Mycroft was waiting there with a car. Only if he could make it to the street. Men were close on his heels.

“Fuck,” he swore, and swerved and wrenched open the door of a truck in the dock and put it in gear. The driver was leaning on the door, filling out a form. “Move!” John yelled and floored it. In the side view mirror he saw the man tumble to the floor, and others running and shouting after him. The police were there now too. He thought he saw PC Bannon’s frantic face in the crowd.

He swerved into the street and was rewarded: Mycroft was waiting in an anonymous silver Mercedes. Their eyes met. Mycroft evidenced not the slightest dismay, but pulled his car smoothly behind John, and they sped together onto what seemed to be a main road. John realised his mistake: it was getting to be rush hour in this prosperous oil town, the traffic was heavy. He quelled his panic. They had to get off the road. He swerved abruptly onto a narrow leafy street of handsome stone mansions. Maybe his erstwhile magistrate lived here. John imagined her looking down from the morning, slightly disturbed, perhaps, but the unaccustomed rumble of the delivery truck barreling down the quiet street. He pulled to a stop and jumped into the back of Mycroft’s waiting car.

Soon they were speeding down another road, and the sirens receded. John became calmer. Mycroft handed him some clothing, jeans and a jumper, and he gratefully pulled them on. Then, he felt a vivid stab of loss remembering Sherlock, gently helping him into his clothes the day of the bombing, his dark head bent down, cool fingers brushing his skin.

“Oh my god,” he moaned. “We have to find him. Mycroft. I have to get to where Maxim is. Tell me you can get me to Mumbai.”

“My plan, John, had been to privately arrange bail over the weekend, so you could walk out of court a free man. I would have done so, within the hour. Things are rather more complicated now.”

“Spare me, Mycroft. Maxim forged that note because he wants to keep me away from Sherlock. He took a lot of trouble to make me think that note was genuine. And I have a feeling it’s not just because he’s the jealous type. He has plans for Sherlock, and I have another feeling-- that you know what they might be.”

Mycroft regarded John. He exuded total Alpha dominance. His pheromones were undeniable. Mycroft found himself involuntarily bending to John’s will, an occurrence so rare as to almost be entertaining if it wasn’t a little frightening. What was also frightening was the accuracy of John’s accusation. He was beginning to have more than an inkling of Maxim's plans for Sherlock, if only because of Maxim's dogged pursuit of Sherlock, even after Sherlock's apparent bonding with John. After all, Maxim could easily have had any of a hundred, if not a thousand, willing omegas of the most rare and exotic quality. But Maxim had wanted only Sherlock Holmes, and no other. Since
Maxim and Sherlock were not bonded, that probably meant that Maxim knew more about Sherlock than he had previously been able to discover, which was extremely provoking. And probably very dangerous.

“It’s not that simple. Maxim does business in Mumbai, as I said. He owns several apartments there, and also keeps a suite at a hotel. I have had him under surveillance, of course, since his . . . liaison with Sherlock — here, he tried to ignore John’s face, looking agonised, “— but he does not seem to have a preference for any of them. Of course, he may not have gone to Mumbai at all. He has occasionally managed to elude me. Mumbai is a very big place, easy to get lost, even for me. He may have other places that we don’t know about. I’d say it’s probable.”

John remembered following Maxim and Sherlock to Maxim’s residence at Imperial Wharf. He remembered the doorman at Little Havana, giving him the address in return for John’s bribe: the green bottle. Synthetic Alpha pheromone to enhance heat.

“A gift,” El Brujo had said. “If you were my friend, I might make you such a gift. But I don’t know you.”

The red bottle and the blue bottle for Sherlock.

El Brujo had also said, “Your friend is in The Mysteries now.”

“Mycroft,” John said urgently. “We have to go back to London. Can you get me from London to Mumbai?”

“Of course,” Mycroft said. “That was in fact my plan, to depart for Mumbai from London. They’ll be looking for you in Scotland. But what do you need to do in London, John? And take this — you need to take off those cuffs.” He handed John a tiny key.

John threw the cuffs to the floor. He smiled grimly, pushing visions of Maxim kissing Sherlock at Little Havana far away. It filled him with possessive rage and he needed to stay focused now. Instead, he was the one kissing Sherlock, holding him in his arms. Telling him what he should have told him before, that he loved him, that it was more than a bond, more than Alpha and omega, and that he would never let him go.

“John. Why do you want to go to London?”

He didn’t let go of Sherlock, but part of his mind allowed him to answer Mycroft:

“I’m going to visit a friend.”

Listen to Eyes Wide Open: HERE
Saw your face and the damage was done

You weaved a spell that took me over

I plucked bulb right out of the sun

A lotus scented supernova

-- Shakalaka Baby, all rights reserved A. R. Rahman and its owners.

A good sacrifice is one that is not necessarily sound but leaves your opponent dazed and confused.

-- Rudolph Spielmann


John had asked to be taken to the street in Bishopsgate where Little Havana was. He had told Mycroft the story of El Brujo, Maxim and Sherlock procuring illegal pheromone concentrates there. Unsurprisingly, Little Havana had vanished. Mycroft had instantly set to work on his mobile.

"I believe . . . yes, I have located a man who worked in your Little Havana, your doorman. I’m having him brought to us . . . he will be here now."

Fifteen minutes later, John was astonished to see Barry Gwynn, the tall, laconic doorman from Little Havana, thrust unceremoniously from an anonymous white van into the back of their limousine.

"Not sure I like your hospitality, mates," Gwynn said pugnacially.

"Do you remember me from Little Havana?"

"You’re the gent as was asking after Maxim Purcell." John saw his eyes greedily calculating, examining Mycroft’s hand-tailored suit, the plush interior of the limousine. He saw opportunity, particularly where Maxim might be concerned.

"That’s right," John said. "I want to get Mr. Purcell a little present, you understand? What happened to Little Havana? It’s Saturday night."
"Yeah, well, they don’t stay any one place long, ya know? People get too curious." John knew he was referring to the pheromone concentrates being sold behind the black curtain.

"We’d really like to find the old man . . . the one called El Brujo." Mycroft removed an impressive roll of large bills from his coat pocket. He sometimes found ready cash a more direct method of obtaining information than others he was capable of employing.

"Well, seeing as he gave you some good stuff before —" Gwynn winked, an obvious reference to the green bottle John had given him, "— I’m sure the old man’d be only too happy to see you again." He seemed to take the cloak-and-dagger routine in stride, even to think it proper where Maxim Purcell was concerned.

Mycroft unrolled a few bills and smoothly handed them across. "We haven’t all night," he said firmly.

The man beckoned to John, the familiar face, and leaned in. "Mahogany Bar. Grace’s Alley," he said confidingly.

"Grace’s Alley?"

"Off Cable Street. Five minutes walk from Tower Hill."

"What’s that, then, Wapping?"

"Nah, man. Whitechapel proper."

John shrugged. Whitechapel, Wapping, Shadwell were all a little muddled in his mental map of London.

"Is he there tonight, do you think?"

"Dunno. El Brujo never stays anywhere long."

###

**Wilton’s Music Hall, Grace's Alley, Whitechapel, London 1:00 a.m.**

"Are you quite sure this is it, John?"

John didn’t answer directly. "Just wait," he said. They were parked at the end of a dark pedestrian alley in a less than savoury neighborhood. Grace’s Alley. Nothing particularly graceful about it, although John allowed that the crumbling edifices might have a certain decaying charm, by day. By night, the neighborhood was gloomy, even sinister.

He had been here before. He and Sherlock had interviewed a witness in a tiny bedsit in nearby Henriques Street. They had been walking to find a taxi, very late, like tonight.

"Do you know what happened here," Sherlock had said as they passed a brick-walled enclosure. "This was once called Dutfield’s Yard, John. Jack the Ripper’s third victim was murdered here. Elizabeth Stride. They found her body still warm. Her throat had been cut, blood was still flowing from the wound. She suffered no other wounds, unlike his previous victims who were mutilated. The Ripper escaped a manhunt in the neighborhood to kill again, just one hour later. His second victim, Catherine Eddowes’ throat was also cut, but he mutilated her most terribly."

John had swallowed hard. He was not squeamish about long-ago crimes such as Jack the Ripper.
But he had seen his share of mutilation in war.

"I didn’t know you were one of those Ripperologists, Sherlock," John had said, half-joking.

"I’m not, but there is an important lesson there."

"Well?"

"Always look for the pattern, John. With Jack the Ripper, the pattern was obvious. For example, a really determined serial killer — one who has established his pattern — will, if prevented for any reason from completing that pattern, take extraordinary risks to commit a new crime in order to fulfill the pattern, and as soon as possible. And this rule applies to all crimes of the obsessive type."

John clung to this chilling memory. It was a time he had been with Sherlock; privileged to share in Sherlock’s brilliant processes. That day, Sherlock had solved a baffling murder, detecting a pattern that no one had observed but him.

Pattern.

Was there a pattern here that could lead him to Maxim Purcell?

###

John pushed open the peeling door to the Wilton Theatre, last surviving "music hall" from the 1880s. Inside was the Mahogany Bar. The entire building’s collapse appeared imminent: exposed brick, rotting beams, crazy patchwork of crumbling plaster and faded wallpaper. As before, sounds of Cuban music surrounded him. Also as before, a doorman tried to stop him entering. This time he didn’t have the password, but stared the man down with Mycroft and an anonymous bodyguard at his back, and said, "El Brujo," with a banknote to smooth the way. There was a small warped door behind the bar, and John gestured for Mycroft and his main to wait for him. Then he went through.

El Brujo was here. He did not seem pleased to see John, but was not afraid, either. He looked at John with sunken brown eyes that sparkled with vitality and intelligence in his wrinkled face.

"Ah. It is my friend from the war. Still fighting, I see," he said.

"Yes. Some enemies don’t fight out in the open, though."

"True. This is called ‘guerrilla warfare.' Che Guevara, how do you say, he wrote the book. Perhaps this is not your style."

John smiled cruelly. "Style doesn’t count. Only winning. The man I’m looking for has something that belongs to me. I’m getting it back, do you understand what I’m saying?"

El Brujo reached out and touched John gently on the shoulder, right over the place where, under his shirt, you would find the spot where Sherlock had bitten him. The mark was faded now, but that didn’t matter.

"I understand what you are saying," he said sadly. "It is truly a crime, for one man to break another man’s bond."

John shivered at this, but not with fear. His body was wracked with a prickling sensation that
would not leave him; restless and dangerous, as though something was seeking to burst free from under his skin. He knew that when he found Sherlock, this feeling would be soothed. He relished it. It kept him sharp.

"It’s not broken. It will never be broken," he said firmly. "Look, will you help me? If it’s a matter of money, I can pay."

El Brujo finally looked a little uneasy at this. "Some... persons... they have eyes everywhere, can see far."

John nodded calmly. "Good. I hope he can see me now. Because I’m coming for him."

El Brujo nodded too, as thought John had confirmed something he had been waiting to hear. "My work is to fulfill or quell desires. But always by free choice. Keep your money, my friend. I can’t tell you what you want to know. But... I have something, the only thing that he ever gave to me, other than money. Now, I give it to you. Maybe it helps you and maybe it doesn’t."

El Brujo opened a wooden trunk that seemed to be a traveling apothecary of many-coloured bottles, jars of powders and ointments. The scent that it exuded was one that under any other circumstance would likely have rooted John to the spot for hours, just to experience it. As it was, he waited impatiently, shifting restlessly.

El Brujo handed him a dark clay jar wrapped in a black ribbon, closed with a red wax seal. Some sort of pheromone agent, John assumed. Something like what he had been giving to Sherlock, he thought darkly.

"What is it?"

El Brujo put a frail-seeming hand over John’s own, so that they were clasping the jar together. His hand was much stronger than it looked. John noticed that the jar felt cool and lighter than he expected.

"Believe me when I tell you, I don’t know. Maxim Purcell is a very powerful practitioner, and one does not refuse his gift. But I have never dared to open it, nor to discard it."

John raised a skeptical eyebrow. "But you want me to take it."

El Brujo nodded solemnly. "Perhaps that is the reason why I did not get rid of it. You were coming."

John stared at El Brujo, stared at the jar. Was it a trick, a trap? He wondered if he would feel it, if it was. The odour from the trunk was somehow making the music seem even louder, more insistent. "What do they say?" He found himself asking.

El Brujo tightened his grip on John’s hands on the jar, and sang softly in a high, sweet voice:

"The love I have for you,
I can’t deny it —
It makes my mouth water,
and I can’t help it.
I want to sit down
on this trunk that I see . . .

And I know I can’t arrive there, that way. . . ”

El Brujo closed the trunk and the air cleared, and John’s head did, too.

"Thank you," John said, pulling his hands free.

"Don’t thank me yet," he replied.

John rushed from the Mahogany Bar with the Cuban song wailing at his back.

###

**The Kamala tea estate, Kangra Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India**

Sherlock awoke to bright sunshine streaming through a high window. It was hard to focus. Everything seemed to be viewed as if through a prism, rainbow tinged. He stood and his feet seemed very far from his body. His body felt unbelievably sensitive, the press of the cold stones on the soles of his feet, the whisper of cool air through the window, felt almost violently intrusive.

Then he noticed that Maxim had actually bound him by the ankle to a ring attached to the wall with a long, strong chain. He spent a good hour trying to find a way to pick the lock, with absolutely nothing to hand. Maxim knew him well.

He focused and tried to ignore the strong compulsion to simply sit and try to minimize this unpleasant sensation. He presumed that Maxim was dosing him with something that was having an hallucinogenic effect. He thought that Maxim must believe these sensations would be somehow arousing to his senses, and felt contempt for Maxim’s failure to truly understand him, after all. He took a series of deep slow breaths and he felt somewhat clearer.

There was a note by the cushions. He picked it up. It was hard to focus.

"Sherlock,

I must leave you today to attend to the estate. You know that this is a place that I have always wished you to see; now you shall. Rest, and think of us. When I return I hope for both of our sakes that you will no longer shut me out. At any rate, it is impossible, as you should know by now.

– M"

Even in his disoriented state Sherlock noted the ill-concealed greediness, and the threat, in Maxim’s words.

He had to think. Maxim said, "I must leave you today," implying he would return tonight. Sherlock thought that Maxim was trying to keep him on edge, wondering.

But he didn’t think Maxim could really stand to stay away very long.
A private aircraft en route to Mumbai, India.

Mycroft had naturally obtained them fast transport to Mumbai on an anonymous private jet, traveling with a half-dozen other dark-suited taciturn passengers, apparently Mycroft's operatives, who spent the entire flight glued to their laptops. There was no conversation.

Mycroft handed John a mobile. "Play the first video."

It was a young man, an omega by the looks of him. Something about the eyes. Dark-haired, blue-eyed and beautiful, and no more than 21 or 22 years old. A mere boy. His face was lit with excitement and his eyes were too bright. John immediately assumed he was high on something.

The resemblance to Sherlock was superficial but undeniable. It made John's heart ache.

"Hey, yeah, so . . . I'll be offline for a few days. I met some incredible people at Mocha last night, they're going to Dharamasala tomorrow, private plane!! Listen, here's my tip of the day - if you go to Oshiwara, Paramananda Pharmaceuticals, the finest biopure, you know? I'll post again when I get there. Peace!"

His accent was pure Eton despite his overlong hair, and John caught the flash of an expensive-looking watch on his wrist. The clip was over.

"Well?"

"The boy is Andrew Kearn. He disappeared three years ago on a summer holiday in India. Not of the backpacking sort. He was visiting a friend from university whose parents live in Oshiwara. That's in Mumbai. They were supposed to be going to some sort of music festival. They never made it."

"Don't tell me. Paramananda Pharmaceuticals . . . Maxim Purcell?"

Mycroft nodded. "Correct. No one saw the boys arrive in Dharamasala. But the Indian boy was ultimately found. He remembers nothing. But the families hired a private detective, who was able to obtain security video from outside of the Mocha nightclub, the night they disappeared. Play the next video, John."

With his heart hammering, he queued the next video, grainy black and white security footage. It looked like the Kearn boy and a tall Indian boy of the same age. Behind them was another tall, dark-haired figure. John didn’t have to wait for the moment when the light hit his face to see that it was Maxim Purcell.

"Of course, the police questioned Maxim. He denied anything more than casual chat at the nightclub. No one could prove anything, no one saw the boys with him after that night. These boys’ parents are wealthy, connected, but Maxim is powerful. The case remains unsolved."

"He . . . he looks like Sherlock."

"Yes," Mycroft said in a pained tone. "I thought so, too."

"But Dharamasala . . . where Kearn said he was going, is that Tibet?"
"No, India. It is in the state of Himachal Pradesh. The Himalayas."

"But no one ever saw Kearn there?"

"Paramananda Pharmaceuticals is a factory in Mumbai. It is controlled by shell corporations which in turn are ultimately controlled by —"

"Let me guess — Maxim. So this detective... everyone’s going on his say-so? Did he give you this stuff?"

"Not exactly." Mycroft said, looking at John keenly. "You don’t think much of his work, John."

"The only detective I put my faith in is Sherlock Holmes."

"My thoughts precisely."

"So we’ll start with this Paramananda Pharmaceuticals. If Maxim’s running it, so it already smells wrong. But Dharamasala..." John had an image of orange-robed monks, ascetic and saintly, chanting and fasting. "That doesn’t sound like Maxim Purcell to me."

"Sherlock actually met Maxim in Tibet."

John was mildly astonished. "He never told me that. I knew that Sherlock had been in Tibet, but he never said-- Didn’t you ask him how? Didn't you have him watched?" John was aware in a hazy sort of way of Mycroft’s omnipotence, which manifested itself in surprising and infuriating ways.

"To answer your first question, yes, I asked him." Mycroft looked pensive at this memory.

John knew what it felt like to try and penetrate Sherlock’s armour of privacy. Even now, he knew he had barely scratched the surface, and it hurt. But I’ll get my chance, he swore.

"And to answer your second, I tried. To some extent I succeeded. But there are some places where, shockingly, it is not possible to conduct surveillance. And both Maxim and Sherlock can inspire fierce loyalty in some very surprising quarters."

John thought about the homeless network, and would have smiled if his heart weren’t tearing in two. He stared out the window into blackness.

#
#
#

Sherlock closed his eyes, continuing the focused practice he had commenced as soon as he regained consciousness after the Heatwave. In Tibet, he had studied with an ancient monk who some considered a shaman. Sherlock did not believe in magical powers; but he did believe in the almost infinite capacity of the human brain and nervous system to perform feats which could appear supernatural to persons who lacked the ability to reason.

Sherlock had asked to be shown the method for creating a tulpa. This was meditation upon the mental image of a person until the image became, or seemed to become, reality. The strongest tulpas could even be seen by other persons. What was the nature of this phenomenon? Sherlock did not know, but while he did not trust the eyes of others he trusted his own, and he had seen the old monk’s tulpa, a happy child. It was akin to mass hallucination, he thought, a phenomena that had
been recorded in many places, and which had always fascinated him.

Sherlock was using the tulpa technique to draw the real John Watson to him. He had never heard of anyone using this technique to influence a real person. It was an experiment. This made him lose focus momentarily, remembering John’s anger in 221b:

"I don't appreciate being-- experimented on, Sherlock. When you do things like-- like what you did today, it makes it very hard for me to trust you . . . If I ever want you to touch me in a sexual way, I'll come right out and say so."

He hoped that when he was with John again, John could still trust him. Because he saw only one path out of his present predicament. Maxim had thought of everything, and knew Sherlock very well.

Sherlock closed his eyes, brought John ever closer.

###

**Mumbai, India**

Finally they landed and John stepped out of the jet into torrential sheets of rain. It was the monsoon season, and Mumbai was wrapped in rainstorms. They decided not to stop, but to drive directly to the Paramananda Pharmaceuticals factory.

"You should rest, John. You haven’t slept since Scotland."

It was true. His body refused to give in to sleep. There was nothing for him now but to find Sherlock, his body knew no other need.

This made him remember all the times he had pleaded with Sherlock to take care of himself, oblivious to the meaning of his own protective urges. He tried to imagine he was with Sherlock now, taking care of him. This was torment. Now sleep was farther away than ever. He replayed the video of Andrew Kearn, listening with headphones.
"Mycroft. . . do you know what ‘Paramananda’ means? Paramanada Pharmaceuticals?"

"Hmmm. I do. It has many different connotations, but all of them center around a sort of . . . ahem, ecstasy." Mycroft said uncomfortably. These were not concepts he understood.

"Ecstasy. . ." John whispered. He covered his eyes with his hands. He saw stars.

###

The Kangra Valley, that was where the tea estate was, Maxim had said that more than once.

The Kangra Valley was at the foothills of the Himalayas.

Sherlock tried to hold a picture of it in his mind.

In the other part of his mind, he prepared himself for something that it would take all of his courage to do.

It was time to show Maxim Purcell who was the student, and who was the master.

###

**Paramananda Pharmaceuticals. Oshiwara, Mumbai, India**

Oshiwara was the modern face of Mumbai: forests of glass skyscrapers, green parks under moody grey skies and sheets of rain unlike any he had ever seen. It was as though the heavens had opened and were pouring waterfalls down on the city.

There were hordes of other limousines crowding the rain-soaked streets. They passed an avenue of shops and it might well have been Bond Street, exclusive names, glittering places John never had set foot in but knew they were for the ultra-rich-- or those who wanted to appear to be. Traffic, though, was as he had feared: a complete nightmare of gridlock which terrified him as they progressed by inches and feet, not miles, and probably nowhere nearer to finding Sherlock.

His frustration was almost unbearable. He pressed his forehead to the cold glass to cool it and looked out at the strange city through sheets of rain. If Sherlock was here, he did not feel it now. He had been gifted with many strong images of Sherlock since escaping from Aberdeen, but for a few hours there had been nothing. He wondered if somehow these images came from Sherlock, or if it was just his mind, trying to somehow soothe him from the agony of separation from his bonded. He had heard of such things all his life. Now he understood. It was an indescribable pain, an amputation of his spirit.

The need to strike back at Maxim was a low, powerful throb; he tried to focus on that instead. He punched the door, sending a shock of pain through his hand which was still a bit raw from other fits of Alpha temper and punching of walls and door frames since this whole episode had begun.

And it felt strangely good. He punched again, and again, feeling even better, until Mycroft grabbed him firmly by the arm.

"John. Stop. We’re here. Try to be calm. I know it’s . . . difficult for you."
Maxim returned at sunset. Sherlock stood to greet him and pointedly made no acknowledgment at all the shackle around his ankle. He asked silent forgiveness of John, then gently but completely shut him out.

No part of this could touch John.

Now, he sent the whole of his focus upon Maxim, body and spirit, and turned the radiance that was John’s gift into a weapon of deception wrapped in seduction. He reached out for Maxim, allowed warmth to flow. Maxim looked wary but Sherlock noted his sharp intake of breath.

He wanted to believe, he wanted it very much.

"You left me alone, so long," Sherlock whispered. He was easily capable of lowering his voice a full octave, and he did. "I’m not sure how much longer I can wait," he said.

Maxim’s eyes raked over him covetously.

---

John had been surprised to find a team of Indian state police, clearly expecting Mycroft. Everyone was distributed a pheromone mask.

"Maxim is dealing illegal pheromones. Manufactured here, sold in London, which is of some interest to the less corrupt elements of the local police," he whispered to John as they marched into the clean, modern factory floor. "The kidnapping of my brother is also not without interest. I have drawn their attention to the similarities to the disappearance of Andrew Kearn."

Workers were bottling multi-coloured fluids and applying labels depicting a golden lotus. Everyone inside wore pheromone masks. John heard one of the workers shouting, gesturing.

"He says vitamins," one of the officers said skeptically.

Mycroft and John found Maxim's office. There was a photograph of Maxim with some dignitaries. Also, a large photograph of a beautiful white house on a green mountaintop. There were snow-capped mountains in the background, terraced plantings all around. A suggestion of a stone temple, perhaps, in the distance. "Kamala Kangra" was the label on the frame.

There did not seem to be anything noteworthy in the office. There was no computer, the desk drawers were empty and the air was stale. John’s frustration bubbled over. He thrust his hand into his pocket so he wouldn’t start hitting things again.

In his pocket was the clay jar that El Brujo had given him. He pulled it out.

"What do you think is inside?" Mycroft asked curiously.

"I’m going to break the seal," John said. "Let’s find out."

He carefully broke the wax seal and unwound the black ribbon. He cautiously opened the lid. He
had expected a strong aroma, and indeed there was one. But not what he had expected. Was El Brujo playing a joke?

It was loose-leaf black tea leaves.

"Tea," Mycroft observed. "How very odd."

John wondered, was he supposed to drink it? He supposed that it must be rare, or valuable. It seemed like Maxim’s kind of affectation, and he almost snarled at the thought. Why had El Brujo given it to him?

He felt a compulsion to turn and look again at the picture on the wall, terraced hillsides – tea plantings, he imagined. Snowy mountains in the distance. His heart beat faster.

He took another whiff of the tea leaves. It smelled nothing like the PG Tips teabags in the cupboard in 221b. Yet, it was familiar.

"God!" He wanted to throw the jar against the wall. He poked his finger into the tea leaves, and finally poured the tea out over Maxim’s desk. Now the jar was empty. He looked inside. There was a paper label glued to the bottom of the jar. It was the same picture as on the wall. It had words in Hindi and in English. He held it up to the light.

"Kamala Kangra," he said aloud. He showed it to Mycroft, pointed to the picture. "Just like the picture."

"One of Maxim’s companies is called ‘Kamala’. It means ‘lotus.’ I have just traced Kamala as one of fifty individual stakeholders in Paramananda Pharmaceuticals."

John was struck with the slightly familiar scent of the tea leaves. "No, not that one, John," Sherlock had said one day, seeming uncomfortable when he had pulled a strange tea tin from the cupboard . . . tea that had smelled like this. The tin had looked antique, and had a picture on the side. A picture of terraced hillsides of tea plantings, snowy mountains, a white house.

A gift from Maxim Purcell to Sherlock.

"It’s just . . . tea. But look at this picture. Where do you think it is?" The image of the house in the picture was affecting him very strongly. He stared at it, and touched it with his fingertip.

Mycroft consulted his mobile. "‘Kangra’ also comes up in the files. It is a place: the Kangra Valley. Known for its rare tea. It is in the north."

"North? How far north?" He looked at the snow-capped peaks and knew the answer. "Near Dharamasala?"


"Where Andrew Kearn said he was going. . . listen, Sherlock had a tea tin with the same picture on it," he said. "It smelled just the same as this stuff. El Brujo told me it was a gift from Maxim Purcell. We need to go there, Mycroft. Now, right now. How can we get there?"

He tore the picture from the wall, removed it from its frame, and rolled it into his pocket.

"John, do I understand you to be saying that you want to travel all the way across India . . . because some old gentleman gave you tea that you think smells like some tea that Sherlock kept in the flat? We still have many leads to follow in Mumbai."
John’s mind was filled with the image from the picture, the tea tin in 221b. The label inside the jar. It had to be, he felt it.

"Yes. I think it’s a special place for Maxim. I think it’s where he’s taken Sherlock. Can you honestly tell me that you have any sort of real lead here in Mumbai? How do we know they didn’t just stop here, then go on?"

Mycroft shook his head. "That’s why we’re here. To find out. There are several penthouses--"

At John’s implacable look, Mycroft made a call and within half an hour, they were flying again. This time, they were flying north.

John couldn’t stop looking at the picture from Maxim’s office. Maxim Purcell was a man who owned many things: penthouses, oil shares, drug companies. A tea estate. He wanted to own Sherlock as well.

His heart felt a certain warmth and he decided to trust that feeling. He had to believe it meant that he had made the right choice. He didn’t think he could live if he had chosen wrong, if Sherlock was down there somewhere in the teeming metropolis, at Maxim’s mercy, waiting for John to come. He stroked the picture with his fingers.

Somehow, he knew in his heart that this was where he needed to go.

###

Sherlock wore the raw silk robe that Maxim given him, but he had left it open, because now he needed to use every weapon at his disposal.

He brushed his hand along his own thigh, and observed Maxim under lowered lashes as he followed the trail left by his fingers under the silk. Up to his cock, long and hard.

Maxim could see, as Sherlock intended him to see, that he had been touching himself while Maxim was away. The scents that Sherlock had carefully constructed would have told him this the instant he opened the door. Maxim already looked half-drunk on it.

"I knew you would want me to wait, Maxim," he said, and took a step closer. Sherlock could sense Maxim’s heartbeat coming faster. He increased his own in time with it, as he knew Maxim would be watching for this sign as well. He could see in Maxim’s eyes that he had already made his decision. Now Sherlock was surprising him. He would not have to use force. Sherlock was not completely certain that this pleased Maxim.

He would have to be very careful now.

Sherlock had been working on his pheromones all day, which had been difficult because of whatever it was that Maxim had dosed him with, and of course he had been given suppressants after the Heatwave. But he had focused hard on John, allowing himself to replay over and over the night in 221b when John had first touched him, and the even more precious memories of the night at the beta retreat: John’s hands, his lips, making him shudder and glow, a purer ecstasy than he had ever felt or even dreamt of, until John. Nothing to what Maxim had taught him, which he had
truly believed was the absolute pinnacle of what a person such as himself, who tried to hold himself apart from feeling and emotion, was capable of. Hours he spent there with John, until his body trembled uncontrollably and hot with need.

Now Maxim thought this was all for him. His face transformed, exultant and eager. He took a step closer, and Sherlock did too, mirroring, but then he was at the end of the chain and Maxim smiled.

"So clever, Sherlock. It’s part of why I chose you, you know. You understand this better than anyone else. But there are so many things you don’t yet know. You’ll find out very soon. But I can’t let you go until I’m certain I can trust you."

"Does trust really matter?" Sherlock said. "Think, Maxim: You’ve had me all this time, and still you keep secrets from me. You don’t trust me. And I’ve been with you all this time, and haven’t allowed you to take me where you want me to go. I haven’t trusted you. Does anyone really trust another?"

"Hmmmm. Perhaps you are right, Sherlock," Maxim sighed. He was removing his clothes now, touching himself. Sherlock consciously mimicked his movements, knowing Maxim would imagining that it was his own hands. After a few minutes, Maxim seemed to give in to the feeling, and he groaned softly. Sherlock did too. Sherlock stroked along his own chest, up his throat, down to his cock slick with pre-ejaculate and back again, and allowed Maxim to watch him as he licked his own fingers clean.

"During the Heatwave, I knew I was ready for the crossing," Sherlock said quietly, calmly. Not too much emotion, but it still sounded like a painful admission. "You were right, Maxim."

"I always am, where you are concerned. And will be. What are you saying, Sherlock?"

"You know." He let the robe slip from this shoulders so that Maxim could see that he was lubricating. This had taken tremendous force of concentration to bring about. His body needed John, but his brain was still sufficiently in control that he could command it in this. For the last time, he promised himself.

"Bring the Omega Sutra, and the elixirs. It’s my time, Maxim. I can’t wait any more."

Maxim’s eyes were hot; his gaze intense, but his body remained cool. He trembled slightly. Sherlock trembled too and looked away, flushing.

Maxim watched him for a few more moments, then nodded and left him alone.

listen to Shakalaka Baby
Metamorphosis

The endgame is an arena in which miraculous escapes are not uncommon.

-- Leonid Shamkovich

Sherlock closed his eyes against a powerful image of John. John was looking for him, John was coming closer. His anger was terrible. Sherlock wondered if it was true, what the old monk had taught him -- that he was drawing John to his side. He wished he could wait for John to come, but that was impossible. There was no escape, he knew it now. Sherlock wanted to reassure John somehow, but for what was about to happen, John must be protected. He shut John completely away.

Maxim returned. Sherlock had known that he would. Maxim held two objects. He sat on the floor just out of Sherlock’s reach, and Sherlock sat too. Maxim was nearly paralysed with his ripe scent, and he smiled his appreciation to show Sherlock how much it affected him, how much it pleased him. Sherlock shifted with omega agitation.

The box containing the Omega Sutra he laid aside. He placed a small wooden chest between them. This Sherlock had seen many times; Maxim always took it with him wherever he went. In this box were his prize essences, which Maxim had made for him especially to achieve desired effects: to inflame desire or to cool it, to sharpen awareness, to bring dreams. Sherlock was of course a brilliant chemist, and they had sometimes floated on pheromone elixirs of Sherlock’s own devising.

Sherlock measured the distance between him and Maxim, but it was no good. Maxim had carefully put himself out of Sherlock’s reach. This meant that Sherlock’s first plan – to attack Maxim, to strangle him with the long chain if he could manage it — was not feasible, but Sherlock was prepared for this. He realised that Maxim was not going to release him, no matter what he said. Everything in his demeanor, and in his energies, confirmed it. His entire being radiated a black and angry covetousness, and something more, a fearful anxiety that was not characteristic of the supremely confident Maxim Purcell. Perhaps Maxim was not even trying to hide these feelings from Sherlock, or could no longer hide them from himself.

Sherlock could not believe he had allowed himself to be deceived in this way. His fascination with the secret knowledge of The Mysteries had overshadowed his sense of growing danger. And his obsession with John had blunted his reason when he had needed it most. Well, in a way, it was fitting.

"You may open it," Maxim said, pushing the chest toward Sherlock. Sherlock raised the lid.

Sherlock picked up a few bottles, held them to the light. These were the classic choices for the red Alpha dose: enhancement for the Alpha was possibly even more important than for the omega, Maxim had taught. To avoid being utterly overcome. It was important in all things to retain control. Maxim nodded approvingly.

"Perfect, Sherlock. Just what I would have chosen for myself," Maxim said. Sherlock could see that he was powerfully aroused, it surrounded them, filled the room. Sherlock summoned up a wave of desire and sent it into Maxim’s path, repressing his revulsion, and felt it take hold and join with Maxim. He willed Maxim to look his fill at his long slender body, the hardness of his cock,
glistening of his cleft. Maxim would not be able to refrain from taking Sherlock much longer, but he now utterly believed that Sherlock felt the same.

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Now to choose for himself. Sherlock maintained absolute calm as he recognised certain bottles he had put there himself. Pure old essences given him by El Brujo, fragile bottles with nearly illegible labels. These delivered powerful and sometimes surprising effects.

"We’ll take them together," Maxim said. He opened his bottle and drank, obviously relishing the instant effect on his Alpha chemistry. His skin flushed. "Now you, Sherlock."

Sherlock drew back onto the bed cushions. He touched the shackle around his ankle. "You aren’t going to let me go, are you, Maxim?" He looked deeply into Maxim’s eyes. They were shining and dark and filled with angry lust and something more: something crafty, something calculating.

"Of course I will. After the crossing, we will be together."

Sherlock saw the lie in his eyes, his body. Sherlock was as skilled in reading lies as he was in detecting the signs of fear, anger, arousal, and love. And so Sherlock selected two innocuous looking old bottles and poured the contents of one into the other. Maxim smiled, then just as quickly frowned. The scent was all wrong. In fact —

"Yes," Sherlock said, and swiftly poured the mixture down his throat. He threw the bottles aside and they shattered. The sound of the shattering bottles seemed to fill the room and echo endlessly.

"Oh, Sherlock, you never should have done that." Maxim was furious, and possibly even afraid, which seemed impossible. Why should Maxim be afraid? Sherlock could see that here, at least, was something that could make Maxim lose control. Losing something that he believed belonged to him, something that he had thought under his control.

"It’s done, Maxim." Taken together, the bottles made a sort of blue dose, suppressant of male omega heat. Taken in small quantity, or mixed with other essences, it had the power to slightly cool but greatly prolong omega heat. In this quantity, however, its effect would be massive and permanent.

A chemical neuter.

El Brujo had given these bottles to Sherlock one night, pressing them into his hand with a quick, penetrating glance. Something in El Brujo’s look had made Sherlock open the unremarkable bottles in secret. And he had laid them aside, understanding instinctively, as El Brujo must have done, how he might make use of them someday.

"You know I could kill you for that, and I think maybe I will, when the time comes." Maxim was coming at him now. "I told you, I will take what I want. And I still can, even if it’s only for a few hours. After that, well, there are other ways to make you serve your destiny. I wanted us to ascend to paradise together. But there are other paths to paradise, not so easy for you, of course. You have no idea what you have done."

"What are you talking about? You’ll never make me go with you. No matter what you do to me," Sherlock said. "I’ll never belong to you. I belong to him."
"Much good it will do you," Maxim snarled, and he finally attacked in full Alpha rage, punching and tearing at Sherlock, trying to force Sherlock onto his knees. Sherlock fought back like a caged animal. Once he might have just allowed Maxim to have his way, believing it to be meaningless. Now, everything was different. He was bonded to John, and that bond could never be broken, he would never allow it to be broken.

"Sherlock!" He could hear John’s voice below, and it wasn’t a dream. Strength surged and he fought harder. He called John’s name.

Everything that happened next was a blur: the door crashed open, there was shouting, Maxim was ripped from him, leaving huge welts. He wiped blood from his eyes to see John throwing Maxim to the floor. Sherlock ran to the very end of his shackle but could not reach John. Maxim was kicking and punching in a frenzy but John showed no pain whatsoever. Sherlock saw death in his eyes, and shuddered. John took the blows in terrible silence while he brutally pounded Maxim, taking his time, driving his head against the stones until the blood ran, and still he did not stop.

Now the Indian police swarmed into the room and dragged John from Maxim, howling. They gaped at Sherlock, naked and shackled to the wall, and the bottles of illegal pheromones in the open chest.

Mycroft was here too, his face shocked and sorrowful. He picked up Sherlock’s robe from where it had fallen and gently put it over his brother's nakedness.

"I’m not finished with you, Maxim," John growled viciously as the police picked the bleeding man up off the floor, none too gently.

"John, please stop. Let him go, you idiots, can’t you see what happened here? He was saving my brother. He’ll be calm now, won’t you, John," Mycroft said. John struggled, shouting incoherent threats. Maxim tried to surge toward him even as the police were cuffing him.

But when Sherlock said "John," softly, that was all it took. John turned away, forgetting all about Maxim, forgetting everything but Sherlock. The police let him go and he took Sherlock into his arms and they rested their foreheads together, as they had in Sherlock’s vision. The police watched, fascinated, but Mycroft sternly waved them away, then closed the door gently on them with a wistful expression.

"You’re going to stay with me now, John," Sherlock said. "Say it."

"Always. I’ll always stay with you. There isn’t anywhere that you can go that I won’t go, too," John said. "I found you." They held each other tight. John inhaled the sharp scent of the improvised blue dose. He noted the broken bottles, just as in his dream, the night he had imagined leaving 221b for good. He had dreamed that he had thrown the bottles away. The red bottle, the blue bottle, shattering. His throat closed up, tight and painful. He touched Sherlock’s lips with tears in his eyes. Sherlock nodded.

"I'm all right, It’s all right, John. I had to do it. He didn't - I couldn’t let him—"

"Shhh," John said, covering his mouth with a chaste kiss. There was no known antidote to a blue dose. Everything was going to be different now, but they were going to be together. They would find a way to get to the other side of this. Perhaps everything that had happened was enough for them. John looked into his own heart and could honestly say that he didn’t need anything more of Sherlock. What he felt for Sherlock, he had felt since before the first time he had ever allowed himself to touch him.
"It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters except you’re safe." He looked down, saw fresh blood running from Sherlock’s ankle where the shackle had bit into the tender skin. "God, I wish I’d finished him off," John cried with rage. He stood up and flung open the door. "Get this shackle off of him, now," he yelled.

An officer quickly responded and examined the shackle with puzzlement. Sherlock sighed heavily. "Give me the key to your own handcuffs," he said.

The officer obeyed, and within moments Sherlock had dextrously picked the lock. John supported him to stand, and they held each other for a long time, luxuriating in each other’s real bodies, real scents, Alpha and omega, warm and reassuring. John tried not to think about the fact that Sherlock’s omega scent, that gorgeous hypnotic scent, was already changing, fading. He held Sherlock tighter, kissed his throat where he had bitten it.

"I called you to me, John," Sherlock said seriously. "But I didn’t believe. I should have. You came for me, and I didn’t wait for you."

"You did, I felt it. I didn’t understand it, but I always felt it. I’m . . .Sherlock, I’m sorry — I didn’t get here in time to – Please forgive me," he gasped. If he could have been just minutes sooner. Now Sherlock had done something that could never be taken back. He felt crushed by failure and would have actually wept if he hadn’t noticed Sherlock begin to shiver, torn and bleeding under the thin robe. His own feelings didn’t matter and he pushed them aside, something he was accustomed to doing where Sherlock was concerned. He would take care of Sherlock now, the way that he was meant to.

"I won’t ever let us be parted again, ever," he said. They held hands as they left the beautiful, terrible room behind and went down into the cold mountain sunlight. The police had Maxim cuffed in the back of a police van. Maxim was more alert now, despite a broken nose and numerous bleeding wounds that no one was bothering to attend. He was surrounded by police who had taken the precaution of drawing their guns. Maxim glared at Sherlock as they passed, but it was John that the police were watching. Alphas were incredibly dangerous when their bonded was threatened.

"Do you know what we would have done together? Where we could have gone together, Sherlock? Now you have made yourself nothing, all for him. But it won’t change your fate. You’ll see, Sherlock."

John broke from Sherlock’s grasp and made his move. "I’m going to finish you," he growled. But he found himself held back by, of all people, Mycroft.

"My brother needs you, John. It is over. I have everything well in hand. Trust me." He pulled John away. Sherlock paused, regarding Maxim with disgust.

"You never could have found what you were looking for, Maxim. Not that way. I’ve already found it. I used to think that love was a chemical defect. Now I know that it is chemistry, but not the way you think; and not the way I thought either. You can’t change who you inside are with chemicals. And in the end, all of this . . . control . . . it’s just a way to protect yourself from feeling the truth."

"The truth. You’ll be finding out soon enough. Ask your brother," Maxim sneered.

Sherlock nodded. "Goodbye, Maxim."

###
John wanted to leave Himachal Pradesh immediately. But Sherlock was clearly unwell. Maxim had kept him dosed with nearly toxic pheromone concentrates, and Sherlock had not been eating nearly enough. John could feel his sharp shoulderblades when he held him, and it wrung his heart.

Mycroft had foreseen this too, and had provided. "There is a beta retreat in Dharamasala. I have arranged for you to stay as long as you need. I will deal with Maxim now."

"What will happen to him? And what did he mean at the end? He said Sherlock should ask you about something. I wasn't thinking straight." John could not dismiss endless visions of breaking Maxim's neck, inventing scenarios where he might still accomplish this.

Mycroft looked remote and John saw a flash there of something he had never seen. Something bloodthirsty. It disappeared as rapidly as it came beneath Mycroft’s smooth composure.

"Just leave Maxim Purcell to me, John. You may be interested to know that I have just learned of an unfortunate occurrence. The police van transporting Maxim has been held up at gunpoint in the mountains. Kidnappers, apparently. One never knows what may happen. In any event, I believe they quite overpowered our noble policemen. No loss of life, thankfully. They quite sensibly gave Maxim up. Maxim Purcell is known in these parts to be a very wealthy man. Curious, though."

"What’s curious?"

"No ransom demand had been made."

John and Mycroft regarded one another coolly. John shook Mycroft’s hand. "Thank you. You got me here. You listened to me."

"I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. Call me if I can be of further assistance, John, but I feel that my brother could not be in better hands at the moment. I hope..." Whatever Mycroft had been about to say, he thought the better of. "I will see you in 221b before long."

"I hope so, Mycroft."

# # #

A beta retreat/monasterty. Dharamasala, Himachal Pradesh, India.

The beta retreat was just what Sherlock needed: peaceful, unobtrusive assistance from monks whose apparent calling was the care of Alphas or Omegas who had been injured in body or spirit. Under John’s watchful eye he ate whatever was put in front of him, took fresh mountain air, and returned to the meditation practice he had learned from the old monk in Tibet. John never left Sherlock’s side unless Sherlock specifically asked to be alone, which he did only twice. During those times, he spoke privately with one of the monks. John did not ask what they had spoken
John refused to allow himself to grieve over Sherlock’s choice to take the blue dose. He even wondered if they had been playing with fire, whether that part of life, the crossing, heat, the obsessions that consumed bonded Alphas and omegas, was simply not meant for them. John was not a deeply religious person, but at certain times in his life he had found himself turning to the higher power for help, and he did so now.

He thought he didn’t really know what to ask for, but then he knew in his heart it was only for Sherlock to be at peace with what they were, what they would be to each other now. Nothing could change how he felt. He walked around the grounds of the retreat, looking at the snowy mountains, and felt that their strong peace was reassuring him that everything would be well.

One day, they were walking together on the grounds, when one of the younger monks approached respectfully. He conveyed to Sherlock with few words (Sherlock spoke a little Tibetan) that he had a visitor. John was very curious but Sherlock did not seem surprised.

"Shall I leave you alone?" John asked.

"No, John. You promised to stay with me. I want you here for this," he said.

The found the visitor in the reception room, looking out a window over the garden. He turned, and John saw a wizened old man holding himself upright with a stick. Something about him reminded John strongly of El Brujo. As soon as the thought entered his mind, the old man shot him a quick, bright glance. John stared.

"This is Damchok Rinpoche, John. I was with him in Tibet."

Sherlock bowed to the old man and indicated that they should sit. Someone brought tea. The fragrance was unpleasantly familiar and John almost hurled the cup from him, but Sherlock stopped him. John had told him the story of the gift of tea from El Brujo, the picture of the tea plantation, the tin in 221b.

"This tea is from the Dharamasala collective. The monks harvest the tea themselves, from their own plantations," he said calmly, and drank. John drank too, and so did the old man. It was really very marvelous, but he still felt uneasy and put his cup away. The old man smiled toothlessly at him and said something in Tibetan to Sherlock, and Sherlock smiled.

"He says you are not easily changed once you have made up your mind about something, John," Sherlock said.

John shrugged. "Maybe not. I’ve had to learn to trust my own judgment. I’m not perfect. But it’s usually served me well enough." Here he was thinking of his decision to let go of his fears and even his prejudices and bind himself to Sherlock. And that was indeed something that would never change.

If he had been afraid at first that Sherlock might himself try to pull away from him after the blue dose, he had been mistaken. Sherlock was calmer, more at peace, than at any time that John had known him. And he did not hold himself back physically, either, seeming to need John’s body near him always. They slept together in a warm tangle of limbs, innocently. He often sought John’s embrace, trusting him not to press for something that was no longer possible, and John felt a surge of protective love stronger than anything he had ever known when he did. He never gave Sherlock
reason to doubt that trust.

Damchok Rinpoche was speaking quietly and Sherlock listened intently. He bowed his head at one point, as if ashamed, which amazed John, and made a gesture that seemed to be one of humility. The old man and Sherlock both turned to look at John. The old man said something that sounded like a joke, and John was further amazed to see Sherlock actually blushing. At length the old monk withdrew a little bundle wrapped in silk from his robe, and gave it to Sherlock. Then he laughed, clapped his hands once, and allowed Sherlock to help him rise.

Without further ceremony, the Damchok Rinpoche hurried away, leaning on his stick but with a much quicker step than John would have suspected.

###

Sherlock was deep in thought the rest of the day, and John instinctively did not question him about the old monk’s mysterious visit. But that night in their room, Sherlock took John’s hands. There was only candlelight in the room, and John was content to be able to drink in the sight of him, more beautiful now to him than ever. He suppressed a rush of desire. Some days this was easier than others, but he would learn. He knew it would take time.

"John, if you could change anything between us, would you?" he asked, very grave.

"What do you mean?" But John knew exactly what he meant. He must have sensed John’s restlessness tonight. John cursed his Alpha nature and vowed to redouble his efforts. Your pheromones have become brutal, animalistic, El Brujo had said. He had been thinking of taking a similar dose when they returned to London. Maybe he would find El Brujo again, maybe the old man would take pity on him and give him what he really needed now.

"I’m sorry, Sherlock. It’s just. . . I won’t lie to you. I want you as much as I did, maybe even more. But I love you even more than that, and no, I don’t need anything to change. Is that what you mean?"

Sherlock nodded. "What happened with me, and Maxim . . . I wonder if it isn’t better this way, after all. When I met Damchok Rinpoche, he told me that I was one who would have to choose, because my mind and my desires . . . they were not in harmony, as he said. I could have one or the other, not both. Someday I’ll tell you the story, John. But after six months, I decided to take the blue dose. But then I met Maxim. And I thought he would teach me the way to control myself completely, to be above it all. I could have both, perhaps only with him. I thought that was what I wanted, or at least the best I could ever expect. Until I met you. Then I found out that I was very wrong."

"Sherlock, we don’t have to talk about this any more. I – I don’t want to. Please, just let’s . . . let’s be happy. I love you. It’s all right."

Sherlock closed his eyes and sighed. "And I love you. But I learned today that . . . it isn’t wrong to want both kinds of love."

"Of course it isn’t wrong. But I can’t . . . it is wrong to think about what you can’t have." He remembered how he had felt in the beginning, when he thought Sherlock belonged to Maxim, that he shouldn’t even think of Sherlock in that way. It had been exquisitely painful, a kind of pain he
never wanted to feel again.

Sherlock brought out the monk’s bundle and unwrapped it. It was an old green bottle filled with fluid. The silk wrapper gave off a scent that drew John to it. He picked it up and rubbed it in his hands. It was sweet, seductive. His heart was beating so fast that he thought it would leap from his chest.

"Sherlock, are you telling me that this-- "

Sherlock nodded. "I’m going to drink it," he said. "Unless you object?" His eye had a wicked gleam and John just leaned in and grabbed him and kissed him hard, almost delirious. He was on fire, just like that, everything that he had so resolutely denied surged up and he didn’t hold back, letting his lips, his mouth, show Sherlock what he felt. He finally released Sherlock and watched breathlessly, mesmerised, as Sherlock opened the bottle and swiftly drank the fragrant liquid.

They looked at each other in the candlelight.

"What happens now?" John whispered.

Sherlock lay back on the cushions and held out his arms. "Right now, we have to be patient, I think," he sighed luxuriously. "But there is something that I want to do, very much."

"Anything," John swore, holding him close. He didn’t allow himself to believe it. Not yet. He very carefully wrapped his arms around Sherlock and let him lay his head on his chest. Sherlock drew his fingertip around his scar as he loved to do.

"I want to go home, John."

###

*Faithful readers and lurkers, your toiling writer appreciates encouragement along the way. Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to comment or leave a kudo, it means a lot. Thanks very much for reading The Omega Sutra.*

*G x*
Mycroft had demanded that John telephone upon landing in Aberdeen. John and Sherlock sat side by side, the last two passengers still sitting in the aircraft. John was afraid he would be arrested the moment his feet touched Scottish soil.

"Ah, John. You are in Aberdeen now, I see." John didn’t even try to work out how Mycroft could see him right now. "I’ve arranged for someone to meet you at the airport and smooth over any little . . . difficulties. You have blissfully forgotten, I suppose, that you are a wanted fugitive throughout the EU."

"How could I forget? Please tell me I don’t have to go back to that bloody jail cell."

"I believe I have everything well in hand. You should walk out of court a free man tomorrow afternoon. But listen: at your hearing tomorrow, John, attend to your defence solicitor, and by all
means ignore any advice that my brother may attempt to offer. For your own good."

"Aren’t you coming to the hearing?" John had some idea that even a Scottish judge could be swayed by Mycroft’s August presence.

"No, I’m afraid I have pressing business that I cannot leave to anyone else. But all will be well, John. I will see you both in London, soon."

Sherlock, not even pretending he wasn’t eavesdropping, snatched the mobile from John. "Mycroft, you quite literally have an army at your disposal. Why aren’t you back in London? What are you up to?"

"I’m sorry, Sherlock, I must go. Try not to get into any more . . . difficulties, will you? My advice is that after John’s hearing, you spend some time at that beta retreat - what was it, the ‘Blue Angel’? Rather sentimental, isn’t it? In any event, it would make me feel much better if you went to a retreat instead of 221b."

"I don’t know that it’s any of your concern, Mycroft – and I can only conclude from your grossly inappropriate remarks that you have been taking liberties with my privacy – our privacy – again. I’ll thank you, Mycroft –"

"I wish you would, one of these days, Sherlock. Indeed, I am keeping a closer eye on you than I had been. Much. I wish . . . ahem. At any rate it is clear that sooner rather than later, dear brother, you and John will require strict seclusion. Goodbye –"

"— What is that I hear in the background – Mycroft, are you –"

"---- and take care of yourself, for once, please."

Mycroft rung off without giving Sherlock any further opportunities to cross-examine him.

He intended to do this last thing for his brother, for John, and even for himself. And he needed to do it alone.

"Turn that blasted radio off, you imbecile," Mycroft snapped. The guard blanched and turned off the Indian pop music.

###

John took a deep breath, nodded to Sherlock, and entered the courthouse at Aberdeen. It was difficult to recall how nervous he was, though, as he was distracted by the really inappropriately suave suit Sherlock had procured for the occasion.

"I’m sure they will want to hear from me, John, and I want to look my best. For your sake, of course."

John could only hope that Sherlock was wrong.

But even in an ostensibly somber blue suit, Sherlock looked so devastating that it was all he could do not to drag him off into a nearby stairwell and see what he could manage to achieve in the final fifteen minutes before court. The way he was feeling, quite a lot. Sherlock held the door open for John and followed his gaze towards the door to the stairwell, and gave John a glance that was too perceptive for his own good. He smiled seductively.

"Let’s get this over with, shall we?" he murmured. "I can think of at least three things you should
be doing to me right this minute."

John tripped on the threshold as his brain furiously imagined what Sherlock was thinking of and was possessed of an image of grinding Sherlock up against a wall, hard, and his breath came faster. His impatient defence solicitor waved him up and Sherlock firmly pressed his hand precisely at the small of John’s back as they entered the courtroom. Now John’s brain was overtaken with the memory of Sherlock’s audacious massage, when he had pressed down hard in precisely that spot. His cock definitely remembered.

The court clerk stood. "All rise. This court is now in session. The Honorable Cornelia Strong, Magistrate, presiding. In the matter of Her Majesty's Advocate vs John Hamish Watson."

John turned to glare at Sherlock as he realised he would now be forced to stand before the Judge in this condition. His cock throbbed. Sherlock gazed back with purest innocence and took his seat in the front row, directly behind John and his solicitor.

John looked down, coughed and fumbled for the water carafe, promptly tipping it over. There was a minor commotion that he was grateful for, because the judge was taking the bench now. She stared down at John over her glasses with an expression of displeasure.

"What is the meaning of this? The court had been under the impression that the Crown and the defence were ready to proceed. Perhaps the clerk should call another case until you manage to compose yourselves."

"No, ah, your Honor, I’m – we’re – absolutely ready," John volunteered. "Very ready." Yes, he was very ready,

His brief elbowed him sharply.

"Apologies to the Court. We are ready to proceed." The prosecutor reluctantly opened his damp file and read from a prepared statement. "May it please the court, in light of the defendant's having been acting in defence of his bonded – Mr Sherlock Holmes of London — who was under assault at the time of the alleged shooting by the defendant of the alleged victim; and furthermore, his having been under the involuntary influence of . . . a Heatwave —"

There was a shocked murmur in the courtroom and people were craning their heads to get a closer look at John. They stared at Sherlock as well, looking dashing and mysterious in the front row; but he didn’t notice as he was ignoring everyone but John. He had decided that this was an admirable way of simplifying his life.

"-- when he attacked a man, escaped from police custody, stole a cargo truck – managed to evade a manhunt, and fled the country. Doctor Watson has returned, however . . . voluntarily."

The prosecutor turned to examine John, seeming surprised that the inoffensive-looking doctor had committed these desperate acts.

John sensed the gaze, stood up straighter and shot him an Alpha glare before his brief yanked his arm and hissed in his ear, "You’re supposed to look remorseful, for god’s sake."

The prosecutor turned away first, looking as if he very much wished to prosecute this case. Today.

John examined his own shoes and tried to project contrition, which was impossible now. His brief was irritating him and he noticed he was feeling an inappropriate Alpha urge, a hot buzzing under his skin, telling him to punch someone.
This, of course, was Sherlock’s fault. His blood was rising, fast. Now his mind was drifting away from the imposing courtroom, back to their hotel room this morning. It had taken everything he had let Sherlock leave their warm bed. Sherlock hadn’t helped in the slightest, following him into the shower and nearly growling with pleasure as he took the soap from John and lathered him with serious concentration.

"Imagine how things might have been, John, if you had just let me help you with that shower, that morning in 221b. You have led me quite a chase, John Watson," Sherlock had murmured against his ear between lewd licks. John hadn’t known that this, just this, could drive him nearly wild with desire. Definitely. He braced himself against the wall of the tiny shower as Sherlock teased him mercilessly.

"Ah, Christ, Sherlock — ahh, we’re going to miss my court hearing — you bastard. Stop that — so I can get dressed — wait - I led you on a chase! Hang on — " This was really unfair. John knew he ought to defend himself . . . but Sherlock had other ideas.

"It’s rather early days, isn’t it, John, for you be asking me to . . . stop," Sherlock said languidly, releasing John’s ear and moving slowly down his throat. "Am I boring you?"

At this, John could only grab Sherlock and pull him down hard for a deep, rough kiss, all tongue and groans, before wrenching himself free with a frustrated growl. Sherlock slithered out after him, warm and wet, completely oblivious to the concept of time as he moved up behind John at the mirror. His goal was to revive a gorgeous bite he had made on John’s neck on the long redeye from Mumbai, causing John agonies as he tried valiantly to keep quiet, surrounded by sleeping passengers.

"I thought you said we had to be patient," John said, closing his eyes against the scorching vision of Sherlock nuzzling his neck in the steamy mirror. If he met Sherlock’s eyes now, it would be all over. And he didn’t need to risk the court’s ire, no matter how overwhelming the temptation.

He managed to tug on his suit at last. Sherlock adjusted his necktie as a pretext for leaning in for another kiss, brushing his tumescent cock. "God, Sherlock," John whispered. "I need you." They both sighed.

"I always thought patience was seriously overrated as a virtue. All virtues are, actually," Sherlock said, nevertheless releasing John and following him down the hotel corridor and out into the busy Aberdeen street, where John instantly became somber and quiet as they hailed a taxi for the short ride to the courthouse.

###

John snapped his attention back to what the prosecutor was saying about his fate.

"In light of these facts, which are undisputed and corroborated by unimpeachable witnesses of the highest character and standing --" here John imagined Mycroft issuing orders from on high to the unfortunate Scottish prosecutor --- "The Crown has, ahem, agreed to dismiss all charges against the defendant."

The judge looked disbelieving at this. The prosecutor would not meet her gaze.

"Swear the defendant," the judge ordered, and John raised his hand and swore to tell the truth, under penalty of perjury. That meant one went to jail if they caught you in a lie.

"John Hamish Watson. You have been informed of the charges against you?"
"I have."

"And having just heard the Crown’s statement, is the recitation of facts concerning your actions in connection with these alleged crimes true and accurate as presented by The Crown?"

"It is," he said firmly. He would tell a thousand lies to stay at Sherlock's side.

"Very well. This case dismissed in its entirety." She gave a brisk bang of her gavel.

John hastily shook his brief's hand and bolted from the defense table toward Sherlock.

"One moment, Doctor Watson," the judge commanded.

John's heart stopped.

"The Crown evidently chose not to bring charges for smuggling a firearm onto the oil rig Magnus, which a government facility. The Court advises you, Doctor Watson, to take a great deal more care in Scotland henceforth. Even those with friends in high places cannot always escape this Court's justice."

John felt the cold jail cell closing in on him again and it cooled his blood a little. Just a little. "Thank you, your Honour."


Mycroft consulted his wristwatch. It was time.

He nodded to the guard and he opened the anonymous door in an anonymous office tower somewhere in Mumbai. The entire building was empty. Well, nearly empty.

Mycroft entered. The room had been disguised as a plush hotel suite, with one aberration: Maxim Purcell was free to roam the room to the length of the long, strong chain that bound him by the ankle to an iron column. Tea had been brought to him an hour ago, and Mycroft was gratified that he had eaten and drunk.

"I hope you are comfortable," Mycroft said coldly. "You won’t be leaving here any time soon."

Maxim blanched. "Mycroft Holmes." Maxim tried to keep his voice steady, and for the most part succeeded. It was rather clear he had thought himself in the hands of ordinary kidnappers until this moment. He began to sweat, which was odd because the temperature of the room was perfect.

Mycroft produced a tea tin with a picture on the side: snowy mountains, a white house, tea plantings.

"I hope you enjoyed your tea," Mycroft said. He tossed the tin to Maxim, who caught it.

"It was kind of you to think of giving me my own. Kamala Kangra," he said, trying to match Mycroft’s cool composure. "You think of everything, Mr. Holmes. I have heard that about you."

But it was so hot, he was feeling so very hot. In fact, he really needed to remove his clothes. Right now. He inhaled. Mycroft was an Alpha under a sophisticated suppressant regimen. He felt a stab of disappointment. He loosened his collar.

"I found something very interesting at your Paramananda Pharmaceuticals," Mycroft said, examining the shocking state of his own manicure. The things he did for Sherlock. He tossed another object at Maxim, a small plastic bottle.
Maxim read the label, and the bottle fell from his fingers to the soft carpet.

"You managed to concoct a Heatwave that is tasteless and odorless, and twice as strong as any previously seized by law enforcement. I imagine you are a believer in rigorous testing of your product?"

Maxim wasn’t listening any more. He was making a great effort not to tear at his clothes. He could remain in control. Probably. Make that possibly. The latest formulation of Heatwave was very, very powerful; also inelegant. But effective. His own body was used to much more delicate and rarified mixtures and he could feel his systems in revolt at the crude assault.

Mycroft took a comfortable chair in a distant corner of the room, quite out of reach of Maxim’s chain.

"I’ve been so intrigued by these Mysteries. Sherlock has always been very drawn to anything that had potential to improve his mind. I suppose that’s how you persuaded him."

Maxim shook his head. "I didn’t have to do much persuading."

"Really. Is that why I found him drugged and chained to a wall at your estate?"

"What are you going to do," Maxim panted. It was getting harder to stay composed. Now he regretted not having taken more care with this formula. But he had been in a hurry.

"Well, no one is a greater practitioner in these Mysteries than you are, Maxim. May I call you Maxim? Formalities seem rather out of place. I am not as fascinated with experiments as my brother. But sometimes even I find them . . . worthwhile. I would like very much to see how you, a master of the Mysteries, endure the same test that you gave my brother."

"You’re mad – Heatwave is never to be taken in isolation — you know what can happen! People have gone mad -- even died! Unless . . . " Maxim looked at Mycroft speculatively. Hungrily.

"Don’t let the thought enter your mind. That is the last thing I would do, I assure you! The very last." This was unalterably true despite the fact that Mycroft Holmes devoted his sexual attentions exclusively toward Alpha males. He found it kept things both challenging and uncomplicated. "It seems to me that you were not so concerned for my brother. I don’t intend to deprive myself of the pleasure of completing our experiment to my complete satisfaction."

Maxim began pacing the length of his chain. "Look, Holmes – tell me you have sedatives and suppressants on hand. You must. You know . . . I’m very rich, much more than even MI5 has managed to ferret out, I promise you. I don’t mind making it worth your while to help me. Very worth your while. Name your price. You’ve proven your point."

Mycroft smiled a mephistophelian smile. "Call me Mycroft. As I said, no formalities. I’m going to forget that you have attempted to bribe me to overlook your heinous crimes against my own brother. Please understand that you and I are going to be together for a while. And I haven’t begun to prove my point."

Maxim, accepting his fate with an attempt at indifference, sat on the floor. He seemed to be trying to meditate. It appeared to Mycroft that he was having some difficulty composing himself sufficiently to achieve whatever state of mind was he was seeking. Curious. Maxim’s cock was massively erect, which tempted Mycroft not in the slightest.

The Heatwave was starting its first ascent. Mycroft had seriously considered cuffing his hands to see how Maxim would be adapt, but decided it would probably be much more enlightening --
possibly even entertaining — if Maxim was permitted free use of his hands.

Surprisingly, though, Maxim made no move to touch himself. Mycroft thought that perhaps he was attempting to override the Heatwave. Interesting.

With these preliminaries concluded, Mycroft settled more comfortably in his chair and patted his pockets. There were foam earplugs in the event that Maxim’s howls became intolerable. He thought, though, that all in all he would probably enjoy them for quite a long while. Satisfied that everything was as it should be, Mycroft opened his book.

The Omega Sutra, he thought, was a fitting companion for this experiment.

# # #

After emerging from the courthouse a free man, John refused to return to the Blue Angel Inn, as Mycroft had advised.

"Bad karma," John swore, quite serious. He had almost expected to be hauled back to jail in chains, despite Mycroft’s promises. "All I can see when I think of the Blue Angel is being taken away by the police - knowing I couldn’t protect you. I won’t go back there, especially not with you."

Sherlock couldn’t disagree with this logic.

"Anyway, I have an idea. A much better one." John flagged down a taxi. "Train station," he instructed.

Inside the cab, Sherlock pressed close to him, and John was still filled with amazement when he did; remembering all of the times they had sat in the back of London cabs, a careful distance between them. "We’re going back to London?" Sherlock looked out the window at the passing streets of Aberdeen. On the whole, he decided that it was best they never set foot in this place again.

He considered the unusual feeling he was experiencing and decided it was disappointment. Just a little. He didn’t mind forgoing the Blue Angel Inn. Sherlock wasn’t the slightest bit sentimental (despite his brother’s implication); but Mycroft’s suggestion that they immediately withdraw to a beta retreat was sounding increasingly brilliant. Not that he would ever admit such a thing to his elder brother.

He studied John’s face for clues. This was still much more fascinating to him that just asking John what he wanted to know. He would never tire of it. John smiled a secret little smile but his eyes were filled with dark desire. Sherlock caught his breath.

"Just stop deducing, and let me take it from here. Mycroft’s right. We ought to be in seclusion for what I’m going to do to you," he said. John pressed his hand daringly against Sherlock’s thigh, slowly rubbing higher, heart pounding, blood buzzing. The feeling of touching Sherlock anywhere was still intoxicatingly illicit, definitely nothing like touching any woman and therefore, constantly tinged with the thrill of the new. Irresistible.

Sherlock gasped and closed his eyes, biting his lips hard to keep quiet. The old monk’s green bottle was doing its work; he could feel it hour by hour, minute by minute. Every touch of John’s hand, his mouth, was making him shiver. He felt himself warming, wanting to open himself.

"John, what they read out in the courtroom . . . those things you did," he whispered rough, deep. "You did them all for me."
He pressed in closer. He could feel his Omega nature, so long and so carefully suppressed, unfolding itself deep inside. It told him to give himself to John, for so many reasons; only one of which was the fierceness for which he had fought for him, a primitive but undeniable lure.

"It’s true. I had to get back to you. Nothing could have stopped me."

They breathed deep. The scents were rising all around them. John stroked higher, not teasing any more.

They could feel what was coming for them. It was time.

To be continued . . .

Listen to Back to You, Sultan & Tonedepth feat. Heroic [original mix] HERE
At the Bridge

At the train station, John made Sherlock wait a distance from the ticket counter, then led him to the platform marked “Caledonian Sleeper,” handed over the tickets and pulled him inside. A steward showed them to their segregated cabin and discreetly slid the door shut. There was nothing inside but two narrow bunk beds and a wash basin. Sherlock sat on the edge of the bottom bunk, prodding it experimentally. “Very comfortable,” he said. “But very narrow. How will we sleep, John?”

“Who said anything about sleeping,” John said roughly, pushing him down onto the crisp white sheets.

It was only possible for them to both fit into the narrow bunk if John lay completely on top of Sherlock’s long body. John commenced kissing Sherlock ravenously as the train lurched from the platform. It was impossible now to remember a time when he hadn’t wanted this; the idea that he had ever been with anyone else, no matter how casually, seemed like a story from another person’s life. He understood that this was different than anything he had ever had before; but not because Sherlock was a man. John had very quickly realised that Sherlock had been correct - gender was boring, and having thoughts or worse, doubts about this fact simply robbed him of his new and hard-earned peace of mind. Now that Sherlock was safely back with him he didn’t want to sacrifice any part of their happiness by dwelling on antiquated prejudices about whether it was wrong to love another man like this. He couldn’t have felt any of his ingrained fears anymore even if he had tried. Perhaps something in their journey had changed him as much as it had changed Sherlock. If so, it could only make them happier.

The jolt of the train made his hips press sharply against Sherlock’s, and they both moaned sharply. Sherlock was almost mindlessly tugging at John’s clothes.

“I’ve been needing this for days,” John said demandingly.

“Your sense of time is off,” Sherlock gasped. “You were doing just the same this morning.”

“Is that a complaint,” John breathed against Sherlock’s ear, pressing himself hard against every available inch of Sherlock, who found himself unable to speak. Laying down like this, they fit together with intoxicating precision: lips to lips, heart to heart, and most spectacularly, hip to hip so that their cocks rubbed together divinely.

The fact that Sherlock was an Omega didn’t change the (still somewhat surprising to John) fact that he was intensely aroused by the feel and look of Sherlock’s cock, something he never could have imagined wanting before Sherlock, but which he could no longer imagine not possessing utterly. But he hadn’t had much opportunity to explore Sherlock properly. Here in this minuscule cabin, with nothing whatsoever to interrupt them but the lull and lurch of the train as it progressed on its journey, John intended exploring every inch: they were bonded now and there was nothing to stand in their way.

As though he could read John’s thought, Sherlock cleverly rolled out from beneath him and knelt at the side of the bed, pulling at John’s trousers and briefs slowly, so that John was close to ripping them off himself by the time they were finally gone as Sherlock looked up at him with heavy-lidded eyes. His Alpha pride swelled and leaned down and he took a deep breath in the crook of Sherlock’s neck. After the miraculous gift of the green bottle from Damchok Rampoche, Sherlock’s Omega chemistry was surging back. He thought he could smell the scent growing on Sherlock, moment by moment, and it made him feel hotter. He licked Sherlock’s throat, right where he had made his very first bite, in the dark cabin of the Magnus, and Sherlock pressed him
“Do it, I need it,” he whispered, and John took his cue from Sherlock’s own breath and movements, becoming slower even as his own body began an insistent throbbing that wanted satisfaction. He began sucking a new bite, gently at first but building, sucking and licking and nipping with his lips and his teeth against the tingling flesh as Sherlock whispering his name.

“You smell gorgeous, Sherlock. You’re going to come into heat for me, very soon, aren’t you,” They kissed ravenously, suddenly wanting it to be now.

“Yes,” Sherlock breathed. “I can feel it.”

“When it happens, I won’t be able to control myself,” John warned, looking deeply into Sherlock’s eyes, trying to show all he felt. “Don’t be afraid of it. Of losing control.” He stroked Sherlock’s face, ran fingers along fine cheekbones. He was already finding this a challenge. The Omega pheromones were dancing and becoming entwined with his Alpha pheromones. He remembered El Brujo, warning him that his pheromones had become brutal and animalistic. He shuddered. His Alpha chemistry was racing to catch up with his mate.

“But I promise you, no matter what, I’ll never hurt you. Will you trust me?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, “Always.” At this, John’s cock swelled, crying out for attention. He moved his hand slowly down between his legs, touched himself. Sherlock watched, then slid his own hand over John’s. Beads of precum leaked from the tip and Sherlock swirled his thumb delicately.

“God, look at that.” At this, Sherlock groaned once, deep, and leaned down to lick the clear fluid with the tip of his tongue, the first time he had touched John there with his mouth. The sight of Sherlock’s head bent between his legs inflamed him. His Alpha brain filled with visions of pushing Sherlock’s mouth down to take him in, and he moaned. Impossible; even outside of heat, that wasn’t going to happen. But his lips were mouthing suggestively along his head, so sensitive. He gripped the side of the mattress and tried to breath deep and slow.

“I need to touch you,” John said, suddenly feeling desperate for it. But he was conscious that his inexperience must be a very great contrast to Maxim Purcell; this made him growl angrily and imagine for the thousandth time snapping his neck, consoling himself with memories of Maxim’s bloody face as he pounded it in Alpha rage at the harm inflicted on his bonded. He thrust these violent thoughts from him. There was nothing here now but him and Sherlock.

“I . . . don’t care what you’ve done before. Now it’s just us,” John said haltingly, as he pulled Sherlock up, then reached down with his own slicked palm, resting his head against Sherlock’s shoulder, urging Sherlock to thrust hard against his hand as he watched.

“I haven’t done anything like this before, John,” Sherlock whispered. “You have to know it. Oh, god,” he gasped as John wrapped his hand around his cock more firmly, not stroking, just feeling him pulse in his hand. John realised what Sherlock was trying to say: whatever had gone between Sherlock and Maxim might have been thrilling and esoteric; but it had been without feeling.

Feeling: Now John was still for a moment, just letting them both feel it, he held Sherlock literally in the palm of his hand. This was so strange and new that John was almost overcome with a carnal current that electrified him.

“Push yourself into my hand,” John said, hypnotised by the feel of Sherlock’s cock, growing rigid and hot, slipping against his hand. It was almost if it were his own cock. Somewhere inside he
hazily wondered if this was yet another way that their bond affected their senses but suddenly it was too much, his cock surged without the slightest touch.

“Sherlock,” he whispered, and Sherlock said, “Let me, I want it, I want to, John,” and he bent again to take his cock between his lips, caressing the thick shaft with his hand. John knew he would come immediately.

“Don’t make me come yet,” he begged, astonished at his own demanding boldness, but somehow Sherlock understood, and pulled him away from the brink while keeping him right there, his lips becoming a light tease, his fingers stroking lightly until he was writhing for more. He had had his share of experiences with women (more than his fair share, to be truthful), but nothing had ever felt like this. It seemed impossible that he could keep quiet, and finally he stopped trying, especially with the sound of Sherlock moaning around the head of his cock, the hottest thing he had ever heard. His fingers were so tight on the edge of the bed that they cramped, but he didn’t want to move an inch to disturb Sherlock’s perfect, divine rhythm on his desperate cock. Finally he couldn’t hold back and pushed his fingers into Sherlock’s curls, which had the effect of making Sherlock decide to take him even deeper, impossibly deep, he thought.

“God, wait, Sherlock, ahhhh, I’m going to — “ an orgasm was pushing its way up from down deep, and at this stage, the whisper of the beginning of heat, his cum was building and his knot was trying to swell.

“Not yet,” Sherlock said, and withdrew his mouth altogether. “Wait.” The sight of his lips, wet from his own precum, made his lust spike higher and he dragged Sherlock up for a harder kiss, lips crushing together, the unbelievable smell and taste of himself on Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock smiled wickedly and broke free.

“I can feel it coming, my knot is there for you,” John said, and it was true. He could feel it throbbing and swelling. “God, I need to get inside you,” and that was true too, and his hand reached down to try and find Sherlock’s cleft, but he pulled back.

“Just you, now, I promise you’ll have everything you want, John,” Sherlock said passionately. They looked into each other’s eyes for a long minute, each imagining what was coming, what their heat would be. Sherlock shivered to see John’s eyes already changing, something wild underneath that was ready to break free and have its way; something inside himself rushed to the surface to meet it. He closed his eyes and tried to soothe the wildness with his mouth on John’s cock, sucking harder now, feeling it throb, imagining it finding its way inexorably inside him.

The feeling of John’s orgasm bursting to explode in his mouth triggered the same in his own cock, and he both wanted and couldn’t bear to prolong the edge, that glorious moment just before orgasm, that moment that he had worked to extend and prolong so artfully. He didn’t want this to be anything like his liaisons with Maxim, and yet he longed to satisfy John in ways he never had been satisfied before. John felt him hesitate, his mouth lightly brushing his rock-hard shaft.

“Oohhhhh, Sherlock, you’re killing me, this feels so amazing, you’re amazing. Don’t stop, don’t hold back, please,” he begged. “Do it.”

Sherlock understood this to be permission to play with John’s responses. “Oh, John, yes,” he moaned. He wasn’t sure he could be disciplined, he craved John’s orgasm now as much or more than John did. Their hips were thrusting involuntarily, seeking union. His hand around John’s hard shaft detected the bulge at the base just barely swelling there, and he licked it, knowing he would be spreading himself open for this, very soon. He licked and sucked just there, a unique sensation that had them both gasping.
“Oh, god, please, keep going,” John groaned. “I need to come soon. You’re going to make me come.”

He and Maxim had never come to this point, the brink of heat. The last time Sherlock had permitted it before that was more than ten years ago. It had been very unpleasant. This was completely different, as he knew it must be even without understanding how. John was his bonded; they were meant for each other in every way. He never really believed in the phenomenon before, thought himself above it, even immune from it maybe; but he felt it now down to his bones.

“More,” John begged, greedy and desperate. Sherlock imagined what they must look like, him on his knees, John sprawled back on the little bed with his cock thrusting between his lips. He set himself a hypnotic rhythm that had John moaning and crying his name in time.

“It’s coming now, Sherlock, god, you’re —” John shouted as Sherlock deftly pressed his fingers lightly against the tender flesh of his perineum, behind his balls, probing for a particular spot with expert gentleness. John was flooded with a burning orgasm that seized every muscle and nerve in his body and obliterated every thought from his mind but the throbbing of his cock the wave rocked him hard and took his breath away. But it felt strangely light, there were no strong contractions of cum spurting from his cock. He gasped and panted as the wave started all over again until he didn’t think he could contain the feeling, so he tipped his head back and nearly roared with ecstasy, heedless of who might hear.

He was floating in another dimension where this orgasm would not, could not end, and Sherlock was to giving it to him, coaxing the waves to keep embracing and battering him. Time stopped, he could no longer hear his own ecstatic cries. His mind slipped away entirely; he was nothing more than a receptacle for hot waves of orgasm taking him higher and higher still. He couldn’t catch his breath for the sheer otherworldly intensity of it, but he dimly was aware that he still hadn’t ejaculated, and some part of him marveled at the art of it. Sherlock somehow teasing his body into a new realm of sensation. He thought he might even die here, the little death, and feel blessed to be floating off to paradise. Finally, after maybe minutes, maybe longer, his body began to fight it, rebelling.

“Please,” he finally gasped, not knowing if he meant for it never to stop, or if he wanted Sherlock to somehow bring his body back to earth. Sherlock’s hot mouth changed its rhythm, harder and faster, and his slick fingertip brushed a slow wet circle suggestively around the wrinkled ring of his hole, triggering a flood of sharp new contractions of carnal pleasure until he finally felt his balls draw up and his warm wet cum shooting hard into Sherlock’s mouth in pulsing waves as he cried Sherlock’s name. Slowly it faded, leaving him warm and shuddering with little aftershocks.

Sherlock climbed up and they both wedged into the tiny bunk, kissing everywhere they could reach. “I feel — you made me feel — there aren’t any words,” John whispered in awe. “I have to make you feel that, how did you make me feel that,” he stammered incoherently, his mind still reeling.

“You can, you will,” Sherlock said longingly. “But I want so much more, John. Feel this,” he put John’s hand between his legs, where his cleft had become hot, wet and swollen. “In the morning it will be here, John. I want you . . . to take me,” he whispered against John’s mouth, wrapping his legs around John and pulling him in, letting his semi-hard cock brush up against his slick entrance. They both gasped, it felt so electric and perfectly right.

“You’re almost ready,” John said hoarsely, inflamed. His cock was already swelling at the feel of slippery warm heat between Sherlock’s legs. “In the morning we will be somewhere safe, No one will be able to hear us. I won’t be able to wait any more. I won’t stop for a long time, not for days.
You’ll be begging me not to."

Sherlock stared at John, mesmerised by the sound of his voice, hard and thick with desire. “Yes,” he said. “I want that, so much.” He spread his legs wider. “I need it.” He was amazed and a little horrified how much he meant it. His entire body was demanding to open itself to John, Omega to Alpha.

John shuddered against him and thrust, his cock seeking its rightful place. But he pulled back.

“No yet, not until you’re ripe for it, I don’t want to hurt you,” John said with powerful effort at control. “We’re right at the bridge, tomorrow we’ll take the crossing together.” He was very proud that he could still hold himself back. But not completely. He slid off the bed until he was the one kneeling on the floor.

“Don’t dare tease me, John,” Sherlock gasped, groaning with frustration, cool air between his legs where John had just been, where John should be. John reached out and stroked his cock, swollen and hard and craving. “I — I’ve never done this,” he said, amazed at how calm he was, how much he wanted to do this. He pictured Sherlock thrusting up into his own mouth and moaned. “Show me what you want,” he said, looking up with eyes dark as sapphires.

“God, John,” Sherlock sighed. “I want everything.” It was true. With Maxim, there had been so many carefully constructed boundaries, destined never to be crossed. With John, there were none at all. The thought made him shiver. Nothing must ever come between them, they would give each other everything.

“Yes,” John said, “Everything.”

To be continued . . .

Listen to Tori Amos- Professional Widow /Armand van Helden Mix HERE
I'll Feel You Burn

Extinguish my eyes,
I’ll go on seeing you.

Seal my ears, I’ll go on hearing you.

And without feet I can make my way to you,
and without a mouth I can swear your name.

Break off my arms, I’ll take hold of you with my heart as with a hand.

Stop my heart, and my mind will start to beat.

And if you consume my mind with fire,
I’ll feel you burn in every drop of my blood.

--- Ranier Maria Rilke

On the Calendonian Express sleeper train between Aberdeen and Fort William, Scotland. The middle of the night.

John was begging Sherlock to get some sleep.

"I -- I don't know what to say other than . . . I want you to be rested." He felt his face getting hot, thinking about it.

Sherlock smiled faintly. "That is the least of my worries," he said. "And do you mind, that elbow is really most inconveniently placed."

John was more attuned now than ever to Sherlock's mood. There was something here that was not entirely right. He sat up, kissed Sherlock gently but thoroughly, and climbed into the top bunk.

"There. All the room I can give you at the moment. Take advantage and get some sleep, Sherlock, I mean it." He leaned over the bunk and looked down into Sherlock's luminous eyes. "Look, you won't be missing a thing. Its still dark outside. We have our whole lives ahead of us. I'm not going anywhere. Just . . . sleep."

Sherlock closed his eyes. John listened for his breathing. He knew very well now the difference between Sherlock really sleeping and pretending to sleep. He waited a few minutes for the change. It didn't come. John opened his eyes.

"Sherlock."

"I thought you ordered me to sleep."

I ordered you? That's a little strong."
"You've become quite dictatorial recently."

This hurt. It was also true. He was having the devil's own time calming his Alpha urges: Sherlock had no idea. He was doing his best.

"I'll . . . it's what happens. It's the pheromones." He wasn't going to apologise for his nature.

"Actually . . . I quite like it." This was said with a sudden low purr that instantly put John's senses back into overdrive. He shook it off. There was something on Sherlock's mind, and he was pretty well certain he knew what it was. He steeled himself.

"Sherlock . . . I know you're thinking about . . . afterward. You know. Even with everything you've been through - all those pheromones, the Heatwave -- well, ah, it's still almost a medical certainty --"

"--- you'll make me pregnant. Yes, that's what I'm thinking about, John."

John had been holding his breath. And then he realised that Sherlock did not sound repelled by the thought. Which he had assumed Sherlock was. All of his careful avoidance of heat, his constant experimentation with pheromones, refusal to risk bonding -- until now -- had made John fear that the idea of children was beyond the pale for Sherlock. Not that he ever could or would have avoided bonding with Sherlock, no matter the consequences. But this was a bitter pill to swallow and he didn't feel like hiding it. There had been enough hiding of feelings between on the way to this place.

His heart felt squeezed in his chest. He had always hoped for children. Medical school, internship, and deployment to Afghanistan had put the idea into his mental file of "dreams for the future." Without letting himself really think about it, his bond with Sherlock had made him close that file and hide it away. Almost the last thing he could imagine Sherlock wishing for was a child. Children.

On the other hand, it wasn't so very long ago that he had thought that the last thing Sherlock Holmes was interested in was love. Or sex. Especially love and sex with John Watson.

And so, John let his Alpha boldness take over.

"Well, I want you to think about it. We ought to think about it. Because it's what I want. With you. I want that for us, Sherlock."

And he did. He didn't think it was entirely his Alpha nature that had been filling his brain with soft-focus visions of a new domestic happiness born of the two of them together, of their love.

There was a long silence, and John's heart went from feeling squeezed to feeling crushed. He was grateful he had climbed into the top bunk so Sherlock couldn't see his face.

"You underestimate our bond, John. I can see your face as plainly as if you were down here with me. Which I rather wish you were. These bunks are rubbish."

John was back in the bottom bunk and wrapped around Sherlock before he quite realised how he had done it.

"I did say I'd been thinking about it. You know my methods, John."

John was confused. "Well, I do . . . but I don't see what having a baby has in common with a crime scene -- or solving murders."
"Mmmmph." This was a derisive sort of noise John hadn't ever heard before. "John, surely you can see it's precisely the same. Other people's children are horrible, aren't they?"

Well, this sealed it. Sherlock hated children. John had to admit he had never observed Sherlock to treat them with anything other than the cool abrasiveness with which he treated the rest of the world. Except John. "Hang on, Sherlock, my niece Alice is lovely ---"

"Exception that proves the rule. I'll take your word, not having met the creature."

"Creature!! All right, Sherlock, just -- stop. Stop there. I get your point. Please let's not . . . we'll be at a beta retreat, they'll have afterpills on hand." He felt terrible. He shouldn't have gotten his hopes up.

"John," This said with a deep rumble that thrilled him even as he felt a hollow in his center. "John, pay attention, if you please. I said, 'other people's children' are horrible. I was not, therefore, referring to our hypothetical children."

He wasn't sure his heart could take the rollercoaster, but then he realised that living with Sherlock pretty much guaranteed such sensations on a daily, if not hourly, basis. Nothing for it but to hold on tight with both hands. "Right," he said, starting to smile.

Sherlock was smiling too, in a very self-satisfied way. The same smile he had when he announced to Lestrade and in particular, Anderson, that they were idiots--- before telling them of the incredible stupidity with which they had overlooked every glaringly obvious clue.

"But our children, John. Just think! That would be entirely different. All of the available evidence leads to the inevitable conclusion that we would produce a remarkable child. I happen to have some very strong theories on the proper upbringing of a child. I have been conducting research, you know. Until I can work with an actual subject. For example, there are some amazing things being done with infant intelligence, John."

"Naturally, our child will be intelligent," John teased.

"Naturally," Sherlock agreed. "Everyone else seems to have this business of child rearing entirely wrong. That is self-evident, surely? Even you have observed this? I thought so. Now do you see, John? Just like the police. The Yard haven't a clue how to solve crimes, police all over the world have the same faults and more. So unobservant. But I've nine whole months to study up for the early bits, and once the baby comes, of course, close observation and experimentation will ---"


"Hypothetical baby. . Well, we can talk about experiments later, no need to get ahead of ourselves. Perhaps that niece of yours, Alana--"

"-Alice --"

"-- Alicia would consent to be a test case. It goes without saying that you will be a superior parent, John. You're practically perfect. So it was really just a question of whether I could conclude, based upon the evidence, that I myself had capabilities in this area. It wasn't anything I had ever contemplated before, I assure you." He sighed. John's heart was swelling now to an impossible size with joy and pride.

"Stop squeezing, you don't know your own strength John ---" Here, John squeezed harder and kissed Sherlock harder yet. When they came up for air, Sherlock said very seriously, "I have decided I shall be a superior parent as well. You know I'm a rather superior person, John."
"I'm always telling you so, you gorgeous, conceited, superior man."

"One thing, though."

"Hmmm?"

"You do realise we'll need some sort of... nanny, don't you?"

"Thank god! I was afraid you had completely lost your mind."

* * *

John and Sherlock awoke in the same bunk, squeezed together in what ought to have been an impossibly cramped position. They were blissfully happy with their state and groaned when the last stop of the Caledonian Sleeper was announced.

"Fort William Station."

Sherlock looked slightly puzzled. He was occupied in devouring John’s neck and so this was difficult. John sensed the difficulty, although his own brain power was rapidly diminishing in the face of the ever strengthening pheromone fog that enveloped them in the tiny sleeper compartment.

"Where... are... we?" Sherlock murmured. His knowledge of the geography of Scotland was limited to those places where notorious murders had occurred, which meant mostly Edinburgh and Glasgow.

John carefully rolled out of bed. It was nearly impossible to pry himself from Sherlock, his warmth, his scent, but necessary.

"Scottish highlands."

"Dear god. Do you think it remote enough, John," Sherlock mumbled, nibbling.

"It’s a cottage. On Loch Linnhe."

"Promise me, John, no boat... no ferry," more nibbling, nipping, "- or anything of the sort. I need to be alone with you. Now," he growled.

"Oh god," John groaned, trying not to let the shower of kisses stop him from extracting them from the compartment. "No - just a short taxi ride — they promised. Come on," he clasped Sherlock’s hand firmly and pulled him off the train.

Sherlock made an effort and composed himself. They needed to procure a beta taxi without attracting undue attention; devouring John on the steps of the train station most definitely would attract attention. John gave him a scorching look that conveyed his strong opposition at any further efforts at composure.

Several nearby Alphas began almost unconsciously gravitating toward Sherlock, but they both nearly snarled at their approach. The Alphas reluctantly left them in peace.

The beta taxi had a little curtain that could be drawn for privacy. John gave the direction to the cottage and yanked it closed, pulled Sherlock to him, looked at his face starting to flush, into his eyes starting to grow darker, shining. He had a lump in his throat suddenly, how much he felt for this man, how much he wanted to show him what he felt, how it was impossible that he ever really
could. No words would come and he leaned in and inhaled deep, then kissed Sherlock, making it soft, undemanding. It would be the last time for days.

Sherlock matched him, understanding instantly what John was trying to say, trying to show. Then they heard the crunch of gravel and felt the jolt of stones. They were here. John paid the cabbie and asked him to return in a week’s time.

* * *

A cottage at Loch Linnhe, Scottish Highlands

They stood at the edge of a great loch. Green mountains reflected in tranquil water. The cottage was set a little way back from the loch’s edge. There was not another habitation was visible in either direction. The only sound was wind and the waves lapping the shore.

"I love you," John said, reaching for Sherlock’s hand, already so warm. Sherlock lowered his lips to John’s, sighed, "I love you, John." They held each other, felt each other's rising heat.

John retrieved the key, pushed the door open, and they were inside.

John took a brief walk around the cottage, checking that it was secure. He checked the locks on the doors, bolted them. Only when he was satisfied did he turn again to Sherlock, standing there, looking at him with lips parted, hungry. There were tempting soft sofas by the fireplace but John led Sherlock to the bedroom. Sherlock closed the door.

The pheromones so long suppressed were rising all around them, strong and bewitching, and deep instinct was taking over. They instinctively craved this small enclosed place, safe and defensible. To his surprise, John had found a gun concealed in his bags after leaving the courthouse, and imagined that Mycroft had provided this, too. He pulled it out and laid it close at hand. No one would get to Sherlock, ever again. John paced the little room, checking and double checking and faintly growling at the thought of other Alphas until Sherlock reached out his hand and touched him.

The air was filled with electric tension. John was already feverish, he could almost feel the heat coming from Sherlock through his clothes. Conflicting impulses fell away, leaving only this: the
need for skin on skin, lips to lips, cock to cleft; to penetrate his bonded, to make new life.

"John -" Sherlock whispered, pulling hard at John’s shirt, trying to get to skin, "– I want –" He watched John removing his clothes with eyes that were glazed and drunk on pheromones, John’s every movement fascinating, drawing him. "I need you."

"–Yes, yes, yes." He briefly wondered what it was like, the Omega craving to be penetrated. He could only think of driving his cock deep into Sherlock at last, filling him up. He could see the depth of Sherlock’s need, it was his to satisfy.

"I’m going to, I have to get in you now," he said softly, running his hands soothingly over Sherlock’s bare skin, so hot, still so new and so different than anything he had ever had before: all smooth long limbs, elegant angles, pale shining eyes in a flushed face, gorgeous needy cock. All his. He pressed Sherlock down hard onto the bed, tearing his own clothes and scattering them. They were panting now, and their mingled musky scents were driving them straight into a primal place. He crouched over Sherlock possessively.

But Sherlock reached up, slowly stroked his face and the place on his shoulder where he had bitten him. He had fantasized so much about this moment: what it would feel like to consummate their bond, for John to enter him at last, but no fantasy could match what he was feeling now. And yet his mind was rebelling, trying to pull him back from the brink of losing himself, losing his reason and his will in the onslaught of heat. These feelings were stronger than anything he had felt in his games with Maxim – his love for John, the power of their bond, the unique intoxication of John’s pheromones that were pulling him down hard and fast into heat.

He was already losing control, his heart rate speeding, his breathing ragged. He heard himself gasp.

He closed his eyes, feeling the edges of fear, trying to find the center of himself.

"Sherlock, " John said. "Open your eyes, look," he said. Sherlock looked up into stormy blue eyes that were changing, dilating and shining with an intense and almost carnivorous gleam. John took one of Sherlock’s hands and clasped it tight against the pillow while they stared into each others eyes. Sherlock shivered.

"Don’t be afraid," John said. He had only ever seen him afraid twice - when he awoke under the Heatwave, and now. No mater how strong the compulsion, he would never touch him like this.

"It’s me, it’s us . . . it’s all right, I promise," he whispered. So hard to hold back.

"John, it feels like . . . I can’t think, my mind is going . . ."

John stroked his body, soothing, long strokes that Sherlock’s body melted under, craving the touch of his bonded, the only thing that could assuage his heat. John kissed him, tongue languid and slow, bringing Sherlock down to him as he fought to ignore the fierce demand of his Alpha cock that knew nothing about slow and gentle.

"But. . . I want to . . . stay here, I want us to be us," he said, not sure what he really meant. His body was already leaving him behind. Hot waves battered him.

"It is us. Just – you don’t need to think. Not now. We think enough. Feel it. Just feel. This is part of us."

None of the rarified mixtures Sherlock had ever subjected himself to before had prepared him for
this: his body being invaded by his bonded mate’s pheromones, his own pheromones in unadulterated heat. Any idea of resisting the siren call of their heat, of remaining present and in control, was slipping away fast on a delicious wave that was carrying him to one place, the place of crossing.

John’s hands were insistently stroking him, calming him. Sherlock took a deep breath and parted his legs to let John in. This felt as if he had cut a rope that kept him from being swept away in a storm of sensation; but as he let it take him he found John was there to catch him, and then they were swept away together, Alpha and Omega, each pulling the other deeper, and all fear was washed away. John felt it go, kissed him harder, deeper.

"Yes, John," Sherlock whispered. The primitive desire in John’s eyes made him shiver as John pressed in with his first finger, not looking away, and the feeling of it barely assuaged the craving inside him. "More, now, ahhhh, I need it," Sherlock begged now, unashamed.

"Let it come, Sherlock, let me in," John said roughly, pressing in slow and deep with a second finger and then a third. Sherlock was arching under his hand, and then he held there very still, letting Sherlock’s tight passage accept the intrusion. They both were remembering the first time John had done this.

"Ohhhh, mmmmmnn," Sherlock cried out at the feeling of John’s fingers filling and stretching him. He needed even more than this, unable to imagine how he could hope to take it, it felt so intense and foreign and yet so perfect. He sighed, trying to open himself more. John began to stroke him harder with his fingers.

By now John’s cock was straining and full and desperate to drive into his mate.

"God, Shh...Sherlock, you’re so beautiful," John murmured, feeling a gush of wetness as Sherlock’s passage opened itself under his fingers. "You want this, tell me this is what you want," he begged; the part that loved and cherished this man must to be assured before the Alpha took what it would take.

"Yes, now, I want you so, I...I do want it," Sherlock said, no longer whispering, letting John’s full cock brush against his opening. At that one touch, the room filled with their heat. John pulled back with a groan, pushed in harder with his fingers and Sherlock cried out under his mouth, letting his cry be swallowed and kissed away by John’s probing tongue, letting the rhythm that John was setting was take him. Just the stroke of his fingers inside was making his cock ache, he thought he might come just from the feel of John’s hand rocking his body. John sensed it too, released Sherlock’s hand to stroke his cock, rigid and weeping, rubbing it with Sherlock’s own slickness, and the sight of it was making his head spin. Sherlock held himself back from the brink of orgasm, incredibly hard in the fog of heat.

"Not yet," Sherlock said, looking into John’s eyes, huge dark pupils drawing him still deeper. "You inside me."

"Christ, yes." His cock was on fire. John felt the strong ripple clinging as he pulled his fingers free, still so tight. He groaned, imagining his cock inside that incredible wet heat and tightness, filling Sherlock with his seed. He slicked himself, feeling harder, bigger than he ever had been, intoxicated on Sherlock’s scent, the feel and the look of him; every sense in overdrive, his Alpha urges surging now, taking over.

"You make me so fucking hard," he growled. "I’m going to make you feel it." Sherlock was writhing now, needy, trying to turn over but John held him down, pulled Sherlock’s legs wider and lowered himself between them. For this, he needed to see Sherlock’s face. He leaned down and let
his hand guide his pulsing cock where it needed to go, and watched as his cock slowly pressed into his glistening cleft at last.

Sherlock felt himself stretched beyond what he thought he could take, yet he ached for more, all of John. Then his body gave some more and John slipped in deeper, the first time he had ever been inside a man, his bonded. It was divine. John felt an indescribable possessive lust that urged him to thrust hard, but he summoned up a moment of restraint to watch Sherlock’s face, radiant with bonded heat as he took John deep inside himself with a sharp gasp of revelation. "John, John," he whispered.

"Hold on to me now," John said. There was no more holding back. He drove in hard until he was sunk to the hilt, so perfect, and they both moaned. He felt Sherlock’s passage opening to accept him. His knot was filling fast, and Sherlock’s hands were gripping his back so tight, pulling him in deeper. "That’s it, feel me in you."

"It’s so much, John, mnnmmnng" Sherlock whispered, overcome with the sensation of his body being invaded, changing its shape to take John in. "Now, do it," he begged, and John understood. He pulled back again, drove in even harder, wringing a deep cry from Sherlock that he would remember even if he lost everything else in the haze of heat.

He leaned down and bit deep, drawing blood, and drove into his mate in a delirium to fill him full of his cum. There was nothing else. He didn’t even feel Sherlock’s bite in return as he absorbed John’s punishing thrusts, his body rising to meet them.

Sherlock came, and John watched it unfold, gorgeous and violent. John’s Alpha nature exulted to feel his head probing deep against Sherlock’s internal opening, where the ovum was waiting for his stroke, his seed to release it. The idea took hold and he was overcome with the idea of impregnating his bonded. This made his cock throb urgently, expanding even more, and his balls felt heavy and hot. It was time.

"Look at you," he said, amazed to see Sherlock spread wantonly beneath him, glistening with sweat and his own lubrication. "You’re making my knot come — can you feel it coming . . . now, oh my god." Sherlock rocked his hips up against him. They both cried out sharply as John’s knot filled Sherlock, hard and hot and impossibly tight, locking them together in a carnal embrace.

Sherlock felt stretched to the edge of pain and he gasped, grabbing at the sheets but John’s hand pinned his, holding him steady. Suddenly he felt a sensation of almost panic as he felt John shuddering against him, knotted so tight, his burning cock feeling like it would split him in two.

"Oh god— John, it’s -- too much," he gasped, and this was true and was a lie, he was being driven down, his body filled with a burning rod that threatened to take him utterly, and that he wanted to take him utterly. Some unknown part of himself that had always been missing had been delivered into his body, filling it perfectly. This was the moment of crossing, and it terrified him as much as it fulfilled his deepest Omega hunger.

John groaned, "Shhh, wait, wait, hold on," and tried so hard to still himself as they clung together, all hot sweat soaked skin and burning heat. Finally Sherlock’s body gave in his Omega yearning. "More," he begged.

John rocked against him, grappling their slick bodies closer. "I can’t stop," he whispered, "I feel you taking me in." He could never be close enough or deep enough inside Sherlock. Though they were locked tight, he kept thrusting with his cock in short strokes, all he could manage with that tightness, pushing against Sherlock’s swollen prostate, probing his opening. With an explosion of heady lust John bucked and came with a long cry, "god Sher– ohhhhh god."
John threw his leg over Sherlock’s and held them close, whispering passionately in his ear, "Beautiful, beautiful, I love you, can you feel that," and Sherlock could only nod, unable to speak. Sherlock struggled not to tighten, to stay open as John shuddered and pumped cum into him again. These were sensations like nothing else, emotions unnameable. In this moment he never wanted this crossing to end.

He pulled John’s hand to his cock and then they were in a spiral, not on the edge like before, but floods of orgasm that couldn’t be stopped.

"John, John, please don’t stop," Sherlock gasped, all prideful control stripped away, melting into his mate.

Now they were one.

* * *

Everything was warm and wet. John licked sweat from his neck. The cum was starting to seep and run around John’s knot, and the sheets were drenched. "Oh god god god god," John cried as Sherlock seized with orgasm, hard and deep, and felt his internal opening surrender as he cried John’s name, helpless as the ovum released in a glorious spasm. The knot began to slowly loosen.

"Oh, oh, John — please," Sherlock cried out, unable to bear the strange emptiness. The craving to be filled rushed through his blood like a drug; he had never wanted anything more. John’s cum ran down his legs and John stroked his fingers in it, let Sherlock lick it, triggering more shudders. His body was being driven by a hormonal tide that was timeless, irresistible. Mad with desire, they bit each other, licked, stroked.

"I love you, I need you," they murmured, over and over. Sherlock’s body no longer remembering a time when he had wanted to control its passions, but now his mind shifted; freed from the knot, it stirred and fought to take back control.

John watched the conflict pass over Sherlock’s face as if it were happening to him too.

"No," John said, kissing him passionately, brutally,"You can’t control it," John repeated, caressing Sherlock’s cock, bringing it back to hardness, while he was filled with the compulsive drive to thrust into his Omega.

"Just feel," he murmured, "only feel." He showered his face with kisses. At that, Sherlock fell back trustingly against the sheets, giving up control for the last time. He felt free, his body floating. He had never loved John more, never felt John’s love more.

John simply thrust his cock back home and Sherlock came with heavy spasms that drove John even higher.

"God you feel so fucking amazing when you come," John moaned, overcome with the feel and the sight of his mate transported with pleasure.

This time, when the knot came Sherlock felt himself opening to accept it. John wrapped him in his arms from behind, hard, stroking his nipples, his thighs, his cock as they writhed in the divine lock together. The moment when the knot finally loosened again almost made him sob with frustration, the feeling of John’s warm seed overflowing only made him desperate for more. He kissed and bit frantically until John just pinned him down and pounded into him again with glorious brutality. His own cock kept up with orgasm after orgasm, even after it could no longer produce even a trickle of
Sherlock’s body remembered the Mysteries, orgasms that did not end; John’s merciless stroke kept them coming until he was almost blinded with the relentless intensity of pleasure.

* * *

After five knottings, John pulled himself, trembling, from Sherlock’s embrace. He staggered up on shaky legs. The room smelled unbelievable, a fog of scent that made it almost impossible to think of anything but his bonded mate.

"John, no, don’t go," Sherlock moaned, trying to drag him forcibly back to the bed.

"Shhhh. I’m going to wash you, feed you. I have to take care of you," John said, his voice hoarse, eyes wild but filled with passionate love.

He pulled Sherlock into the shower, where he washed Sherlock carefully, soothing his cleft with balm, kissing his bites, rubbing against him greedily, still needing contact. Sherlock hardened again under John’s gentle touches, and he reached down between them and let his wet fingertips glide over his cock, semi-hard but responsive to Sherlock’s coaxing along his veined shaft, over his velvety head, under his balls, stroking his perineum gently, cleverly. He felt a temptation to explore John’s responses. He wanted to make John feel some of what he had felt in the crossing: ridden, taken and consumed.

John shivered even at his lightest touches, so sensitive after his tumultuous orgasms. Sherlock rubbed his stiff cock against John’s as they pressed, groaning, against the wall. He teased a daring fingertip around John’s puckered opening, John involuntarily spread his legs wider, holding on to Sherlock’s shoulders under the cascade of warm water.

"Sherlock," John moaned, "god, that feels . . . that feels," he pulled Sherlock’s head down for a kiss and moaned deeper as Sherlock probed him lightly, slowly, piercing him with a burning rod of sensation radiating from that tight hole.

"Do you want it," Sherlock said, his deep velvet voice caressing John’s senses, making him dizzy. He felt so hot and his cock felt almost painful, so hard at the thought of Sherlock’s fingers pushing into him.

His face flushed. He was the Alpha, convention dictated that he should know no other desire in heat than to fuck his bonded, fill him with his cum, breed him.

But his desire for Sherlock was stronger than their heat: Sherlock matched him strength for strength, their bond of Alpha and Omega was a meeting of equals in every way, both giving, both taking. They would give each other everything, deny each other nothing; that was the promise they had made.

To answer Sherlock he pressed his hand harder against his hole that was tingling and quivering under Sherlock’s gliding fingers.

"Wait then," Sherlock whispered, and pulled John back to the bed and stripped off the wet sheets. Sherlock found the lube and dripped it over his long fingers.

Sherlock was wild with heat, nipping at his neck, his lips. John was mesmerized, watching Sherlock’s face flushed with arousal, those full lips parted as he rubbed and stroked him, hunting slowly around his hole with slick clever fingertips. This was something John had never experienced; but in his deepest imagination, he had dreamed of Sherlock doing it and he was seized
with a thrill of strange discovery that Sherlock must have known this.

His hips thrust involuntarily, seeking the new sensation greedily, his hole feeling hot under Sherlock’s fingers, growing bolder.

"Spread your legs, John," he whispered, just as John had to him, and John obeyed with a groan that inflamed them both.

"I’m going to fuck you with my fingers, John. I want you to feel what I feel -- feel me inside you," Sherlock said, pressing in with one slick fingertip into his hole, pushing against the incredible tightness.

"Ohhhh, oh, oh, god" John gasped. Just that single finger felt huge and foreign inside him, but the frenzy of their heat made any idea of taking this slowly impossible. He thrust back against Sherlock’s hand as Sherlock’s slick finger slid higher, brushing his virgin prostate. His cock jumped and his passage shuddered and glowed.

"Jesus Christ what are you doing to me," he gasped as Sherlock rubbed his hole with his thumb, stretching the ring then thrusting in with a second finger, staring into John’s face intently.

"I’m taking you on a crossing too, John," he said wickedly, thrusting in smooth and deep now. "Perhaps you’ll beg me to penetrate you with my cock, soon."

Here he pushed up higher with his fingers, set a hard steady pace. John didn’t know how to accept these illicit and foreign sensations, pierced by Sherlock’s hand, Omega in Alpha, inverted, perverse and magnificent. His cock was leaking clear precum in a steady stream of beads from his swollen slit; the shocking feel of Sherlock’s fingers rubbing and thrusting against his prostate bringing urgent fullness to his Alpha cock. His knot sprang to life again with nowhere to go. He ground back against Sherlock’s hand in desperation, clung to him hard, dizzy with lust.

"God, Sherlock, please," he gasped, helpless to relieve this divinely cruel sensation of being battered, invaded. Sherlock bent down and licked his cock, his knot, then squeezing and stroking fast with his fist as he kept up the deep penetration with his other hand so that there was nowhere that John could escape the sensations. He began to shudder and quake uncontrollably, his passage pulsing with strange and intense contractions of pleasure, cum jetting forth hard as he was seized with a white-hot flood of rapture.

Sherlock kissed him deep, letting the cries of his afterglow melt into his mouth as their tongues slowed, lapped, and John felt himself returning to earth from their strange new paradise.

They lay curled together in the bed as Sherlock very gently pulled out his fingers, another unique sensation of loss, of emptiness. They murmured each others’ names, kissed and licked, rubbed their barely sated cocks against each other.

John forced himself out of the bed again, his body feeling erotic new aches where Sherlock had penetrated him. "This time, stay put," he warned, licking one of the many fresh pink bites he had made on Sherlock’s alabaster skin. "I’m going to feed us."

The cottage was provided with a small kitchen and a well-stocked refrigerator. John brought out a tray of roast beef, new potatoes, bread, and fruit; a bottle of wine, and a pitcher of cold water. Sherlock was shifting restlessly, Omega craving still thrilling his blood.

"We have to eat, I want you to stay strong, you need it," John said firmly as Sherlock pushed his plate aside to attack John’s neck.
"You’re all I need, John," Sherlock said, pulling at his hand, licking his palm. John was powerfully tempted but now the idea that Sherlock might possibly have conceived already was filling his brain with strong protective urges.

"No, you’ll eat this, and you’ll drink this water too. We have to take good care of you now, love,” he said firmly, his face hard. Sherlock examined John’s expression and understood that John would brook no opposition.

Anyway, giving John what John really wanted was usually a very good thing, Sherlock had come to learn. There were vast areas of life that he simply attempted to delete, but John in his vigilance had been there to make sure he didn’t hurt himself in the process. Now he always would be.

He smiled a little, then quietly ate his food and drank more water than he wanted, letting John watch a little of the water run down his neck.

"Satisfied?" Sherlock said throatily, his deepest voice, seductive and irresistible.

"Not nearly," John said, rough with surging desire. He pushed Sherlock down and moaned with pleasure to feel Sherlock’s legs part for him eagerly.

"I’m going to fill you up, you’re going to have our baby," he said, feeling a powerful rush of lust at the words.

They looked into each other’s eyes, misted with heat.

"Yes, now," Sherlock said, and opened himself again, Omega to Alpha.

* * *

Mumbai, India.

Maxim had decided that Mycroft Holmes was the most desirable Alpha male he had ever encountered.

Some part of his drug-addled brain knew that this was the Heatwave driving him, but he could not help it. He had to have him; he would give himself to Mycroft, if that was what he would allow.

Mycroft was watching him more closely now, Maxim thought. He felt a surge of hope flamed by overwhelming desire. Two days had gone by and it had taken all of his art and power to even survive the onslaught. His efforts to satisfy his own cravings had been nothing but entertainment to the steely elder Holmes, and strangely, the humiliation made him admire Mycroft much more. Here was a man who was truly his match. A man who held himself above it all, a man who held himself at a very high price.

He was ready to pay it.

"I know you know what I want," Maxim said, making it direct and simple. There was no time for verbal games of seduction, another wave was coming fast. "You are very strong, you have superb control. Let me show you, I’ll give you pleasures you never dreamed of."

Mycroft looked at him seriously, put away his mobile, stood up. Maxim had been permitted to bathe, and he was clean and clear-eyed now, the Heatwave in a short lull. The incessant raving threats and pleas from the past waves were forgotten. However, while they lasted it had been
vastly entertaining. Always Mycroft kept his younger brother in his mind’s eye. This is what Maxim would have reduced his brother to. He thought Sherlock would likely have gone mad if John hadn’t saved him.

The thought made him furious all over again, but Maxim interpreted the sudden fire in his eye as lust. Maxim crossed the room to the very end of his chain. He was breathing deep and slow, but his Alpha cock was red and swollen.

Mycroft considered. He took a step closer to Maxim, then another. If he wanted to, he could reach out and touch Maxim. Or strangle him.

Maxim’s eyes were on Mycroft’s crotch, greedily raking over the bulge of his Alpha cock. He stretched out his hand to touch, his eyes bold and pleading and hot with hunger. He needed the touch of another desperately, nothing else would soothe the fire. Mycroft sighed, took a small step closer.

"Get on your knees," Mycroft said cooly. With a groan, Maxim obeyed. His hand could barely brush Mycroft’s ankle clad in silk socks, upward along Mycroft’s long elegant leg, encased in an impeccable hand-tailored suit. Mycroft looked down impassively as Maxim’s hand drifted higher, seeking his cock. He observed Maxim’s cock expand and weep copious precum. Maxim had brought himself off many times, and in many unusual and fascinating ways during the past two days, and still the Heatwave drove him on. Maxim shivered and touched just the outline of Mycroft’s cock, not hard in the slightest.

"Let me see it," he begged, "You know I need it. Let me give you my mouth." Mycroft was greatly amused by the depth of pure lust there. After all, Maxim generally sought out only Omegas.

Mycroft firmly pushed Maxim’s hand away and stepped back quite out of his reach. Maxim’s vaunted self-control vanished, and he nearly sobbed with frustration.

"You’re so cruel," he whispered.

"So I have been told. Many times," Mycroft agreed. "This little experiment has been most enlightening. For you more than for me, but still. I believe we are now in a position to reach a gentlemen’s agreement, Maxim."

"What are you talking about?"

"I will agree to have all charges in connection with your kidnaping of my brother dropped. It will be as if it never had happened."

"What do you want, Mycroft," Maxim asked with an attempt at dignity. Mycroft could hear the current of desire when Maxim spoke his name. This gave him a deeply unpleasant sensation. Time to move on.

"Several things. All of which I am sure you have anticipated. You will not return to London. You will never attempt to communicate with Sherlock in any way, ever again. You will close Paramananda Pharmaceuticals, and find a more wholesome line of business henceforth. Believe me when I tell you that you will never get a better offer," Mycroft said. "Indian jails are very wretched places and the sentence for kidnaping can be very long, depending on the judge. And I know several, as I am sure you can imagine."

"I’ll tell them what you’ve done to me," Maxim threatened. "That won’t go down well in Whitehall. It will all come out. You and your brother will be ruined."
"Do not speak of Sherlock. Ever. I promise you that if I have to say this to you again you will regret it. And what could you complain of, really? We confined you – most comfortably – for your own good when you stupidly took an experimental Heatwave – of your own manufacture, no less. During our tender care, no one took the slightest advantage of you. In fact, no one laid as much as finger on you. I don’t think anyone will be terribly interested in pursuing it, do you?"

Maxim glared. It had been many a year since he had been outmatched, outmaneuvered. It burned, as did his helpless desire for this cold man. He prayed that when the Heatwave was over at last, that it would be extinguished.

"I don’t suppose you would shake on it," he said.

Mycroft sneered briefly, then composed himself. "Hardly. I suppose I'll have to take your. . .word on it."

"Very well. You have my word," Maxim spat angrily. The Heatwave was coming on. "For god’s sake, get me a sedative now, you have what you wanted."

"Hmmm." Mycroft murmured noncommittally. "I shall look into it. And now I have an urgent engagement. Goodbye, Maxim."

He shut the door behind him, and watched as the guard turned the bolt.

Maxim watched the closed door avidly. Perhaps Mycroft would return himself with the sedative. He would have another chance. He closed his eyes, imagining this.

Minutes ticked by.

Maxim opened his eyes.

His last rational thought before the Heatwave took him again was the realisation that while he had given his word, Mycroft hadn’t given his.

* * *

"Do you have what I ordered?" Mycroft enquired. The guard nodded and opened a small case containing a series of hypodermics. Mycroft examined them, satisfied. He consulted his watch.

"Do you want me to administer one now, sir?" The guard asked.

Mycroft was silent.

"Wait two hours," he said finally. "Yes, I think that will be perfect."

* * *

Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade walked off the jet into the crowded airport. He had flown straight from London to Mumbai; he tried to shake off the stiffness from the long flight.

The Yard was often asked to assist in the investigation of British citizens who went missing on foreign soil. This was such a case. The disappearance of Andrew Kearn, the privileged son of prominent London neurosurgeons, had not been publicised. But upon reading the file, Lestrade had a sinking feeling, a feeling that he could generally rely upon: the feeling that told him that this was not a missing persons case. This was murder.

He had been told to look for a driver, and there was one here, holding up a placard with his name
on it. He refused help with his single bag and followed the driver to waiting limousine and climbed inside.

He hadn’t known what to expect, but possibly the last person he had expected to see was that mysteriously unobtrusive yet all-powerful government functionary, Mycroft Holmes.

He regarded Holmes warily. Holmes held out his hand and Lestrade shook it. Holmes’ hand, like his brother’s, was cool to the touch. Which did nothing to explain why his own hand felt suddenly warmer.

Mycroft regarded Lestrade’s small bag. "I don’t suppose you have black tie in that case, Detective Inspector?"

Lestrade shook his head. The idea made him grin a little. The last time he had worn a tuxedo had been his sister’s wedding; he had spoiled his trousers shagging the best man in a mutual fit of drunken exuberance.

"I don’t, sorry," he said, trying to match Mycroft’s gravity even as his detective’s brain began wondering why on earth he needed a tuxedo to assist the Mumbai police with their inquiries.

Mycroft looked him over appraisingly. Lestrade wasn’t vain, but he was getting the distinct feeling that Mycroft liked what he saw. This was another of those feelings that Lestrade generally could rely upon. He leaned back a little, let him enjoy the view. This trip was looking to be a lot more interesting that he had thought.

"Well, Detective, we have three hours until the British High Commissioner’s gala. There is an important witness there that you will want to interrogate. The first order of business will be to get you out of that dismal suit — he indicated Lestrade’s ordinary Marks and Sparks blue, "— and into black tie."

Lestrade raised an eyebrow. Smiled. Mycroft looked coolly back, and kept looking.

"Well, Mr. Holmes," Lestrade said, "I think I’m going to need your help with that."

To be continued . . .

Listen to Anyway: Anyway
A Savage Jealousy

Chapter Notes

Warning for a brief depiction of a non-graphic, off-stage non-con scene in this chapter.

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Chapter Twelve. A Savage Jealousy.

Why should I not, had I the heart to do it,
Like to the Egyptian thief at point of death,
Kill what I love?--a savage jealousy
That sometimes savours nobly.
------Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

A cottage on Loch Linne, Scottish Highlands, the third day.

Listen to the Sound of Violence, Dennis de Laat mix HERE

“Aren’t you tired, love?” John whispered hoarsely.

They were bound together in a slick hot tangle after their third knotting of that day. At least John thought it was day. John had stalked around the cottage on their second day and fastened all of the shutters tight as if against a storm, then drawn all the curtains.

The resulting cave-like darkness soothed the nagging growl in the back of his mind that was constantly listening, scenting for the imagined depredations of other Alphas.

“Hmmmm, what do you think,” Sherlock sighed in response, pulling his long legs tighter around John in a vise-like grip to indicate that he was not tired in the slightest. They were laying on a carpet in front of the fire now, a blanket crumpled around them.

John’s eyes were burning from lack of sleep but he refused to close them for an instant; Sherlock was ravishingly incandescent in heat; he never wanted to stop looking at him. He was very far from being able to distinguish any longer whether this feeling came of their heat, their love, or their bond or if there was any longer a difference between them.

The thought of all the time they had let slip away, when they could have been like this, like they were meant to be, drew him to almost frantic explorations of Sherlock’s body. There he discovered and mapped all the places where he loved to be stroked, places that made him shiver and gasp, places that tasted delicious. John reached up and pinned Sherlock’s elegant arms above his head, mainly because it made his chin tilt up just so, exposing even more of Sherlock’s pale graceful throat.

He admired the bites he had made and held back from inflicting another by giving his mouth a new occupation: licking Sherlock’s lower lip slowly, like a cat. Sherlock squirmed and tried to capture John’s mouth, but with a carnal stare John pulled back.
“Stay still, I want to taste you . . . just like this.” He began a careful circuit of Sherlock’s mouth with his tongue. All thoughts of rest were banished. Sherlock closed his eyes, parted his lips. It felt intensely erotic to lay still without responding to John’s bold tongue gliding between his lips, licking the top lip, then the bottom and back again. It made his lips tingle and then slowly burn. With his legs wrapped so tightly around John – perfection – he could feel John’s cock becoming fuller, harder with every lick.

He couldn’t get enough of the feel of John’s hardness rubbing in his divine wetness. After so many years of suppressants, his body was racing to take in every drop of feeling and experience. He needed John to soothe the prickling that danced over his skin, down his thighs and into his cleft whenever John was not thrusting there hard, filling him up. A steady pulsation deep in his core made his hips press up to invite John in.

But John just pulled back a little, driving Sherlock nearly wild with need. He dimly recalled that he once had possessed not-insignificant self-control where John was concerned; if any remained, he had lost all desire to exercise it. At first, Sherlock had experienced some moments of doubt. John had begged him not to think and indeed, in their current state he was less able to think than even in the throes of his worst experiments with drug abuse.

Yet he had come to find the haze of heat very freeing. He no longer fought it: John was here, and he was safe. They were together in a way they had never been before, in a way he knew we could never experience with anyone else. But even Sherlock in a reduced mental state had brainpower to spare to worry at little problems, and in the back of his mind he could not help wondering: was John’s own capacity to summon self-restraint, holding back his Alpha needs, a sign that John might be holding back. . . because he was after all not completely comfortable with the fact that he not . . . a female? With all of the things that female Omegas offered, that he did not?

The thought made him groan in frustration, trying to push away unimaginably painful visions of John with a tantalising parade seductive female Omegas: Jenna; that female officer; others that multiplied in his mind and seemed to mock him for all that he imagined lacked. The intrusive images made him restless and angry.

He ignored John’s demand to stay still, that was impossible; he captured John’s tongue with his own, bit hard on John’s lower lip, swollen and sore, and pushed his hips up harder, demanding John’s entry. “Now, John.”

“Tell me what you’re feeling,” John said, still pinning him there, looking into his eyes. “Sherlock.” Sherlock knew John felt every shift in his feelings nearly as strongly as if they were his own. Now that they were bonded this mysterious osmosis made them feed on each other’s passions, driving them on, seemingly endless. John could feel Sherlock teetering on the brink of something dark and ravenous. He instinctively held him tighter so they could go down together.

“I can’t - I can’t,” Sherlock looked away; he couldn’t say this. “Just – don’t stop.”

John pressed his lips against Sherlock’s ear, licked, whispered, “I won't. Stop thinking, don’t.”. He rocked his cock against his mate, and they groaned, swearing. After so many knottings they both stung and ached, but only their union, his cock driving home, could slake their cravings.

“I can’t stop, I hate it,” he said, unaccountably filled with a hot anger at John, at all the women who had had him first. His fingers dug into John's hair, he wanted to stare into John's eyes, see if there was any sign he thought of anything, anyone but him. "All those . . . women. That Jenna. Tanya from the Yard. Sarah. You --let them have you,” he accused, his eyes grey steel daggers. “And all that time, I . . .” He willed John to understand him without having to say it.
Feeling the anger fed John’s jealousy, ignited the fire of his hatred for Maxim. “Everything before was nothing. You're my bonded.”

At this he felt his cock swell and ache, and he thrust into Sherlock and Sherlock slammed down to take him deeper.

"Ah, fuck," Sherlock gasped, and John gave him another brutal stroke that burned and still wasn’t enough.

"And —Maxim – all those other Alphas -- they want you, they couldn’t keep away ---"

Sherlock wasn't listening, his only sensation the feel of his bonded filling him, stoking him deep. But he felt John's jealousy in a wave; Sherlock was hyper-aware of John's feelings, his aura and the state of his subtle body. "No," he muttered. Nothing must come between them.

“I thrashed one in the street. That night in 221b. --- and on the Magnus – three of them, god, if they had —“

“Stop, John. Stop.”

But he couldn’t. Now his brain was engulfed with the flames of jealousy and the wildfire was out of control. He held Sherlock down, his gaze turned wolfen. “All those things you let Maxim do to you — he took you, he wants you —“

Sherlock’s eyes widened. John’s anger felt appallingly wonderful, that he could drive John to such heights, all of the elemental emotions he had always prided himself on evading: Love. Lust. Jealousy. Rage. But everything about Maxim was poison, he understood now. “John, Maxim could never–“

“— That’s right, never,” John said, his voice suddenly soft, so soft. A dangerous voice. “He can never have you.”

“Show me,” Sherlock said.

John growled and pulled away, pushed Sherlock onto his knees, and Sherlock quivered and moaned when he slammed back in, thick and hard, inescapable. This was where where they both needed to be, and they cried out, it was so perfect. John cried, “ I’ll – kill him — for touching you —", pulled out, then pounded back in again, over and over in a furious struggle to drive out all trace of the man who had tried to take his bonded from him. Gasping and panting they ground into each other, slipping into the mindlessness of pure heat.

“Harder,” he demanded, and John obeyed, driving into him with slow hard thrusts that battered and shook him. He felt John watching him covetously, and his grunts and groans made him shiver and groan in return. His oversensitive prostate sent spikes of sharp, painful pleasure through him with every stroke, and his cock, which had been nearly spent, snapped upright again, heavy.

“More,” Sherlock said, “Harder.” John’s stroke was taking them out of their bodies, blurring even the boundaries of flesh so that they were one. There, nothing and no one could come between them. They came together in raw euphoria; John's knot was coming again. Sherlock collapsed to the floor, then almost unconsciously focused his energies to invite John’s jealous rage into himself. Inside him, it roamed and drove away the alluring Omega women whose bodies had touched what was his.

“He never had me,” he gasped, “I’m yours, John.” Sherlock came again in wave after wave as John’s knot slammed into him. “Ohhh, it’s so much, I can’t — god, stay like that, right there,”
Sherlock begged when John finally stilled, letting the knot bind them even as his cock kept pulsing.

John stroked Sherlock's back, the back of his neck as they rode out the knotting, so tight. His body was accustomed to it now, craved it, it felt almost unnatural when it inevitably loosened and freed them.

“John,” Sherlock whispered. “Let it go,” and John knew he was asking him to release the fury of his jealous lust. Impossible. Maxim’s arrogant greedy face mocked him. He bit sharply.

“No,” he said to Sherlock; to Maxim. But Sherlock began delicate and patient strokes, clever pressures of his fingertips that John knew were meant to manipulate his senses. He struggled; he could only think that it was Maxim who had felt this before him; maybe done this and more to Sherlock in return. His hands on Sherlock’s body. His rage swelled again, he might have shouted it, he didn’t know. There was no controlling it.

“No, John,” Sherlock murmured, licking away sweat, willing him to calmness with his voice."I'm yours. Shhhh."

John felt his body responding, unclenching and becoming warmer and lighter even as his spirit fought back; the Alpha wanted to fight Maxim even if only in his own mind, perhaps only so that Sherlock would feel it. He remembered when Sherlock had said that he had called John to him. In his jealous frenzy, he imagined that his murderous thoughts were being communicated to Maxim now.

John still clutched Sherlock to him tightly, possessively. Sherlock tried to pull away. “Let go, John, come back now,” he whispered. John shook his head. This made no sense at all. He would never let Sherlock go. Only here was he his, only in his arms was he safe. With his cock, he owned him. Through his fog he heard himself snarling “No,” and “Mine,” in an unrecognisable, guttural voice. His heart and blood were racing, fueled by primitive urges to guard his mate from rival Alphas. He bit Sherlock’s shoulders, rubbed his face against the back of Sherlock’s neck, breathed in his glorious amber-musk scent of heat. He would let Sherlock go, perhaps, only to vanquish marauding Alphas, who were not the less threatening for being entirely in John’s fevered imagination.

Sherlock allowed John full reign, his Omega nature exulting at the feel of his mate marking and guarding him from all others; but all the while he tenderly stroked John, tried to soothe his Alpha passion. Finally, Sherlock’s clever hands and fingers were irresistibly drawing him into a drowsy sort of rapture that did not stop him from entering Sherlock again, and they rode out another knotting, pulsing with a give and take of orgasm as they held each other close, John's struggles finally turning to gentle caresses. When at last the knot was loosened, John’s rage had done what his passion could not; he had spent his strength at last.

Sherlock lay very still and peaceful beneath him, his hand buried in John’s hair, feeling his chest rise and fall, comforting steady metronome of his heartbeat. Something dark had been summoned up and banished.

In an enervated embrace, they slept.

* * *

Sherlock awoke. John was draped over him, his hair glowing golden in the last embers of the firelight, deeply asleep with his fist clenched around Sherlock’s slender hand. Sherlock attempted to form a new thought. It seemed to be a long time since had formed any thoughts that did not involve John, fucking John, licking John, biting John ---- something deep inside his skull stirred. Sherlock closed his eyes to focus. His mind palace was completely closed to him now. He was not
entirely sure he wanted to find his way back inside. He felt wonderful, and yet . . . something inside was restless. The state of heat with his bonded took place, he now understood, in a different region than that intricately constructed edifice in his mind. Not a palace at all, but a wilderness for he and John to explore together: vast stormy spaces, warm waves, stardust and shimmering light.

When he moved just a little, John growled possessively against his ear, muttering incoherent imprecations against Maxim, Lestrade, and assorted nameless Alphas. His cock was questing, prodding back right where it wanted to go. Sherlock felt tender and stiff all over.

He waited quietly to see if John would become calmer. But when he felt the scrape of John’s teeth Sherlock sprang up from the carpet with an almost unimaginably difficult force of will, planted a long bare foot firmly on John’s chest to prevent him trying to seize him. John, half-awake, tugged at Sherlock’s leg. Sherlock felt cold wetness, the remains of innumerable knottings, running down his thigh. He yanked his leg free, and his skin was so slick that it slipped free from John’s grasp easily.

John groaned and fell back, looking up with confused lust; dawning libidinous intent. The room was as hot as a furnace, the air sultry and thick with pheromones. They both were still at the fever peak of heat, skin burning, blood blazing. It was perhaps the fourth day. Sherlock felt his mind attempting to rebel against this feral state. Even under the influence of drugs Sherlock’s mind had never surrendered control for so long a time. It was starting to demand a return its rightful place.

“Shr’lk. Shower now,” John slurred, his voice raspy, throat closed and dry. “Come with me.”

Sherlock stepped back, shook his head slowly. The air made it almost impossible to think. He wanted to do what John wanted to do. But his mind was being rather insistent suddenly, and he took a few shaky steps and unbolted the front door.

There were birds chirping loudly outside. Brilliant sun and shockingly fresh cool air struck him. He blinked and covered his eyes. They felt like sandpaper. He noticed that he was drenched with perspiration. John had insisted on wrapping him in a thick woollen blanket when he refused to get up from the floor, and had wrapped himself around Sherlock as well.

“Sherlock,” John bellowed, “you’ll catch cold! Put some clothes on!”

Sherlock was of course quite naked. He took a few steps on the gravel. The sharp sensations were transmitting corresponding sharp prickles into his brain, a different sensation to flesh and pheromones. He took another few steps and his feet felt smooth grey stones. He turned to see John blinking at the sun from the doorway.

“Sherlock—“ He stumbled out onto the gravel. “God, you look gorgeous, come back,” he said. Later the multitude of bites he had made in Sherlock’s alabaster skin would make him almost weep with guilt and shame, but in this moment nothing could be more beautiful. Sherlock was marked as his alone.

This led, naturally, back to thoughts of piratical Alphas bent on seizing his Sherlock. John almost went back inside for the gun but then he saw that Sherlock was actually grinning at him, which of course stopped John in his tracks from the sheer radiance of it. “I always want you to look like this,” he said.

Sherlock turned away, giving John a heart-stopping view of his plush, reddened arse. He didn’t have long to enjoy the view because Sherlock ran the last few steps to the edge of the loch, and without hesitating dove into the icy water, then immediately burst back up, sputtering and laughing.
“Sherlock!” John dashed to the edge of the loch. “Get out! You mad berk, you’ll freeze! Jesus Christ!”

Sherlock leaned back and began a slow backstroke, which of course looked fiendishly sexual to John, as did every single move Sherlock made. “You’ll have to catch me, John, if you want me back,” he yelled, and somehow he made even is sound seductive. He stopped swimming and began treading water.

“You’d better hope I don’t, Sherlock,” John warned as he dove in after him.

Sherlock wasn’t really terribly interested in evading capture. John wrapped his arms around Sherlock, kissed him with wet salty kisses. “I ought to thrash you for this,” he said. They were shivering and Sherlock’s lips were tinged with blue. “You'll freeze, you're coming out now.” John started towing Sherlock to shore, while Sherlock began an impromptu lecture on hypothermia to prove to himself that he still could:

“We won’t. It's a sea-loch, John. Temperature is around 20 degrees, I should think. Hypothermia does not begin to really set in at this temperature for thirty minutes or so. One could potentially endure this temperature for up to seven hours, although reports of such incidents are somewhat unreliable. This is an ideal opportunity to test it, actually . . .”

“If you think I’m letting you stay in here for even another minute, you’ve got another thing coming,” John barked sternly, propelling Sherlock onto the shore, and was surprised when he let him do it. The cool air felt like ice on their naked skin, and they both started shivering. John pulled Sherlock back inside and into the shower. Even under the hot water, John was outraged.

“What in god’s name were you thinking!”

Sherlock grinned smugly.

“That’s just it. I was thinking. You are now, too. Am I right?”

John paused. It was true. Coherent thoughts were forming in a somewhat orderly fashion. The thoughts still were almost entirely centered on getting Sherlock Holmes back into the bed where he could finish what he had been about to start, but still. Somewhere in there he was also thinking about food, and about how gorgeous the fresh air and blue sky had looked, after so many days cocooned in the closed-up cottage.

But there was something important he needed to say before he lost himself again.

“I thought you were going to give me a thrashing,” Sherlock purred.

“Jesus Christ,” John swore, and dove in to grope and kiss and lick. With a groan he remembered what it was he needed to say. He put a hand over Sherlock’s flat belly, looked up at Sherlock, awed by the knowledge that at this very moment, it might be sheltering new life. “You deserve a thrashing. Don’t you know you have to take more care? What if you’d gotten pulled under by a current — or you catch a cold, or worse? And we don’t know what’s in that water - what if you’ve swallowed bacteria, or ----”

“John,” Sherlock pressed a long finger to his lips, leaned in and bit gently. This effectively stopped John’s tirade. “I just wanted to wake up a little. I wasn’t going to swim across the loch.”

“Just don’t do it again.”

“You’re always saying that,” Sherlock sighed. “You recall I do have a mind of my own. A brilliant
one, in fact. You used to always be saying that, too, John. I wouldn’t mind hearing more about that, at this point in the proceedings. This heat is all very well —“

“All very well!” John exploded.

“Just seeing if you were paying me any mind. Stop petting my stomach, John. I’m warning you that I won’t always take so readily to you bossing me about. I suppose you were very strict with your subordinates in the Army?” Sherlock seemed to be momentarily entranced by his private imagining of that particular scenario.

“All right, brilliant idiot. Let’s have dinner.”

“You’re still petting my stomach. Don’t tell me you already expect me to eat for two, John. Nothing is certain yet.”

John beamed. He usually found it impossible to stay angry with Sherlock for long -- for example, as long as he deserved --- even when they weren't in heat.

“Yet,” he said, stroking Sherlock’s flat belly, imagining.

Sherlock followed John into the kitchen, ate a truly astonishing quantity of food, suddenly ravenous. He was actually glad, for once, of the distraction of a meal. Despite what he had said to John, it was entirely possible he needed to start attending to his caloric intake, nutrients. But he found it impossible to focus on this exceedingly novel prospect. Because the part of his mind that had been stirring had been circling uneasily around a nebulous feeling that was faint, but possibly getting stronger. He tried to tell himself that the feeling could have nothing to do with Maxim Purcell, and polished off a rich slice of chocolate cake under John’s approving eye.

* * *

*The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, Mumbai, India*

Listen to Born Slippy, Underworld Nuxx Remix [HERE](#)
Mycroft issued instructions to the driver and they soon arrived at the spectacular looking Indian edifice that was the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, commanding a peerless location at the edge of Front Bay.

“This gala is here?” Lestrade asked. They had briefly reviewed the facts of the Andrew Kearn case. He had a twinge of disquiet as they entered the historic hotel, which was luxurious to a degree Lestrade had never imagined. The Taj Mahal Palace had been the scene of a notorious Islamist attack just a few years ago, in which over 150 persons had been killed. The hotel had been under siege for several days. He found himself surreptitiously looking for traces of the attack.

“There has been a thorough renovation of the hotel after the terror attacks. I believe you will be quite unable to find even a single bullethole, Detective Inspector.”

The surroundings were incredibly elegant, all white, apricot, and gold. It was hard to imagine this place under assault. Still, it was always good to remember that danger could come at any time, and in any place. He felt the reassuring heft of his gun in its shoulder holster.

Lestrade was no closer to understanding how he would be in a position to wear black tie imminently, but he was aware of Mycroft’s ability to arrange matters large and small with a terrifying degree of efficiency.

An exceptionally gracious bellman escorted them to their rooms. Which were adjoining, Lestrade could not fail to notice.

“If you’ll just wait in your room, someone will be coming round to take care of your attire,” Mycroft said, disappearing into his own room.

Lestrade kept his mouth shut and went into his room. It looked like something out of the Arabian Nights, he thought; except, of course, that this was India. He looked out the window; it had a view of Front Bay, boats passing by. He hadn’t ever really thought about the fact that Mumbai was a sea port. He examined the minibar and decided he deserved a drink if he was going to have to submit to some sort of fitting. He recalled the painfully obnoxious process of being fitted out for his rented tuxedo for his sister’s wedding as he poured himself a small scotch and admired the room.

He knew he was trying to distract himself from thinking about Mycroft Holmes. Something about his cool hauteur was strongly bringing out his own Alpha impulses. Which was interesting. He had once heard a rumour that Mycroft Holmes had a rarified taste for Alpha males. He himself had never been with another Alpha. But after his divorce, he hadn’t been terribly drawn to female Omegas. He had recently, appallingly, found himself eyeing Sherlock Holmes at a crime scene in Wandsworth and of course immediately shook it off at John’s savage stare. In his encounters with Mycroft Holmes over matters that touched on his clandestine yet expansive jurisdiction, Lestrade had never observed him to behave toward him with anything other than rigid propriety. And yet, if he was honest, he had always felt an undercurrent of . . . curiosity?

There was a knock at the door. He opened it to admit a diminutive man followed by a tall man pushing a garment rack.

"I am Sanjit Gupta, and this is Rajiv. We are your tailors. Mr Holmes instructed us to make up your tuxedo for the gala. Please allow us to take your measurements, sir."

With a soft curse, he agreed, knocking back the rest of his drink to put himself in a better frame of mind. He had to disrobe down to his undershirt and briefs. Unbidden, he found himself imagining Mycroft watching him – he knew Mycroft kept Sherlock under surveillance – and he felt a strange thrill. Maybe he wanted him to watch.
Quick, deft hands measured him with a tape measure. Lestrade amused himself by counting how many they took: forty.

“What in god’s name are you going to do with forty measurements? Make a wax figure of me for Madame Tussauds?”

“No, sir,” Sanjit Gupta said with grave politeness. “This was Mr. Holmes’ request. We have here several suits. Rajiv will make some alterations. It will be — acceptable.” This was said with a sour expression, as though ‘acceptable’ were the lowest form of sartorial degradation imaginable. “For just this one evening. If we had only had sir’s measurements in advance, well —“

Lestrade waved him away. “No worries, listen, I’m sure it’ll be brilliant. What do I need to do?”

“Just wait, be comfortable. We will have you looking smashing for the gala, yes?”

Lestrade had never considered himself “smashing,” but he was willing to give it a go. “Sure, right.”

He stared out at the harbour, watched as night fell. Lights began to glimmer on the other side of the bay. Sanjit Gupta and Rajiv returned and the men insisted on helping him dress. This was painfully awkward, but he didn’t want to look foolish by doing himself up incorrectly.

When he looked in the mirror, he realised immediately how very badly his own mediocre suits fit him. He looked like an entirely different person.

“Sir looks very fine, indeed,” the tailors enthused, clucking their approval, adjusting, tugging. Finally they left him in peace.

There was a knock on his door at precisely eight o’clock. Mycroft was waiting at his door, also in black tie. For a long, heartstopping moment they looked at each other, and everything shifted. In a minute, if he didn’t do something, he was going to drag Mycroft Holmes into his room and show him what he thought of him standing there looking like that, so tall and debonair.

Mycroft’s cool, intense expression made Lestrade want to see what it would take to make him hotter, and while this was a pretty shocking impulse, he wasn’t about to fight it. He was about to toss out a challenge, Alpha to Alpha, but this felt too important for games.

“Thanks.” he said instead, indicating his new attire. “What do you think?”

Mycroft did not smile but looked him over carefully. Lestrade felt he was being undressed. He didn’t deny to himself that he wished he was.

“Detective Inspector, I believe it is I who should thank you.”

“What for?”

“You’ve made me remember something that I thought I had forgotten.”

“Unless we’re in a hurry, I think you’d better tell me about it.” He took a step into Mycroft’s space.

Mycroft didn’t pull back. He felt an impulse to even up their height difference - the infuriating Holmeses, always towering over one - by grabbing his jacket collar, bringing him down closer. Instead, he thrust his fists into the pockets of his new trousers. This drew Mycroft’s attention downward, and he stared just a beat too long for it to be casual. Lestrade’s heart thundered.

“I will. But not now. Shall we go?”
Mycroft and Lestrade strode down the long hallway. There were huge mirrors in ornate mother of pearl frames on either side of the elevator, and they regarded each other, devastating in black tie. Then the elevator doors opened and they were borne swiftly down to the gala.

* * *

The gala was a stuffy affair, diplomats and some environmental sorts. It reminded Lestrade of formal police functions, but with better food and drink and a much swankier setting. The ballroom was breathtaking, all gold and white, enormous chandeliers, evoking its namesake, the Taj Mahal. Mycroft was moving away to join some functionaries discussing climate change and sustainable growth. As they had agreed, Lestrade scanned the room for their target: Vijay Mathur, a junior diplomat with the British High Consulate. Mathur was a UK citizen of Indian descent, rumoured to have some association with Maxim Purcell. Mathur had also been at the Mocha nightclub the night that Andrew Kearn had disappeared.

Lestrade agreed with Mycroft’s belief that approaching him here, undercover, might cause Mathur to fall into an indiscretion; whereas a summons to police headquarters to be interrogated formally by a Scotland Yard detective would have the opposite effect. It always did.

Lestrade spotted their man. He had never met Maxim Purcell, but had seen pictures from the file. Dark exotic good looks, hawklike profile, long, slicked black hair and an obvious aura of wealth and decadence. This man, Vijay Mathur, projected a similar allure. Lestrade nodded to Mycroft and made his way across the room.

Mathur was drinking too much, chatting up a young Omega male, almost a boy, wearing a badge of one of the environmental groups. Lestrade overheard him chattering innocently about a water project, while Mathur clearly was imagining what those lips might soon be doing to him.

Mycroft had told Lestrade the setup, and they put it into play. Standing near to Mathur, with Mycroft surreptitiously watching, Lestrade pulled a little golden bottle from his pocket and poured it into his drink. No one but Mathur could see him do it, as Lestrade had planned. Lestrade didn’t look, but he could see with a quick glance into Mycroft’s eyes that he had sunk the bait.

Mycroft drifted over, murmured some false chatter about wanting to take a few minutes with the High Commissioner’s wife. “I still want to go to Mocha, after. Do we really need to stay much longer?” Lestrade said, a little louder than he needed to.

“If you insist. I don’t want to spoil your fun. I’m ready now,” Mycroft said. This sort of talk was going to get one of them in serious trouble.

Mycroft said he would say his goodbyes and left Lestrade alone again. Lestrade pulled out a cigarette, patted his jacket for a lighter. Vijay Mathur beat him to it.

“Allow me,” he said, all charm. “I couldn’t help overhearing. I was just telling Raj here, we should go to Mocha tonight. We’ve made our showing here. Duty has been satisfied.”

The younger man, Raj, looked uncertain. “I’m with my uncle tonight, I can’t,” he said. “Please excuse me.”

Lestrade took a deep breath, and gave Vijay a look that was intended to promise that amusements might be forthcoming. He didn’t have the slightest confidence that he could carry this off: a recently divorced, heretofore (mostly) straight detective. But the tuxedo seemed to be doing its magic because Vijay looked fascinated. He released Raj with a sigh.
“He was terribly young, anyway,” he said with a shrug. “They don’t know what they want, at that age.”

Lestrade flashed him an inviting grin. “I think we can manage on our own.” He flashed the golden bottle again in the palm of his hand, poured a little more into his drink. This time the label, a golden lotus, though ostensibly hidden, could be easily seen by Vijay if no one else. He saw Vijay look closely.

Paramananda Pharmaceuticals.

Vijay smiled knowingly. “Such a pleasure to meet a gentleman of discernment. An unexpected pleasure is a double pleasure, I always say.”

Mycroft joined them again. “I’m just having the car brought around. Can we give you a lift?”

* * *

One of the many indiscretions committed by Maxim Purcell while under the influence of the hyper-concentrated Heatwave had been to reveal certain secret customs of initiates into the Mysteries. Certain signs, passwords to private rooms in private clubs. Mycroft had hastily imparted this knowledge to Lestrade, who commented that it wasn’t unlike the signs and passwords used by drugs gangs.

They wasted little time getting to the point. Lestrade uttered a word in Hindi. Mycroft had told Lestrade it meant, “phoenix.” Vijay was satisfied, and led Lestrade to an upper room, leaving Mycroft at the bar, where he was alert to any potential threats to their safety. Their driver was, of course, one of Mycroft’s agents, left to cover the street.

Lestrade hadn’t known what to expect; an orgy, maybe. Instead, there were plush seats and a movie screen, as Mycroft had predicted. Vijay rubbed his hands in delight and took his chair. He was already rubbing discreetly at his own cock. “I have some boys coming soon. Beautiful, and they like the juice,” he said, referring to illegal pheromone cocktails. The lights were dimmed and the film began.

There was a young man on a table. He seemed to be in a trance. He was restrained and gagged with soft velvet bindings. There were several different men, and one woman, circling in and out of the light. Lestrade tensed up, expecting to see the man tortured; but after a few moments it was clear that the man wasn’t being tortured in the conventional sense. For a few minutes he was horrified to find himself inappropriately aroused until he recognised that this was torture too. The man was being brought to the brink of orgasm, and refused release, without any cessation or rest.

There was a notation on the bottom of the screen: “Elixir No. 35.”

Vijay looked knowingly at Greg. “This one showed some real promise for a while. It’s been surpassed, but you know that. Still, amazing effect.”

Greg gripped the edges of the chair, willing himself not to look away so that Vijay would not suspect him.

There was also a running timer at the bottom of the screen. It read “50:24:15” It was going up, second by second.

There was a small commotion on screen. The victim had lost consciousness.

This was Lestrade’s opening, Mycroft had coached him in what to say and how to say it. “I remember that English boy, the dark-haired one, blue eyes . . . now that was beautiful.” The words felt revolting as they fell from his lips.

Vijay looked wary. “I don’t know about that.”

“Come now, it’s rather notorious. Hospitality in Mumbai isn’t what I’d been told.”

“Look, let’s go down, have a drink. I’ll make a call, have a word,” Vijay said meaningfully. Lestrade looked bored.

“I’m up for anything,” he said, trying to keep his voice light.

They went down into the pounding nightclub. Lestrade watched Vijay talking with a man at the bar, then Mycroft watching the action. Lestrade and Mycroft exchanged their signal. Mycroft brushed off an Omega boy who had been openly cruising him and turned to distract Vijay. Lestrade faded into the crowd and slipped quickly back up into the projection room. There was a locked door, but he had a compact lock pick set concealed in his breast pocket. One of many things he had learned from Sherlock Holmes. His fingers were steady but then he almost dropped a pick, imagining the elder Holmes brother teaching him something new.

Inside he found a cabinet with boxes containing hundreds of DVDs with Hindi writing scrawled across their jewel cases. He was elated to discover that, as he had hoped, they were dated in Hindi. He knew the date of Andrew Kearn’s disappearance and had carefully memorised the dates in Hindi. He found a few discs in the right timeframe and stuffed them into his coat pockets, then closed everything back up. He checked his watch. Total time elapsed, eight minutes.

He went back down the stairs to find Vijay coming back up. Lestrade was ready. He held up a glamorous aluminum cigarette packet.

“Treasurers. Twenty quid. Dropped them on the stair. Don’t want to lose them,” he put the case in his jacket pocket. Mycroft was at the bottom of the stair. Lestrade called down, “What’s up, didn’t you bring me a drink, luv?”

“I thought you were finished,” Mycroft said.

“Do you know, I think I am.”

Vijay was opening the door, beckoning them inside. “But I think I have what you were hoping to see,” he said, seemingly more at ease now. “Your friend can come, too.”

This was a problem because if he’d gotten it right, the disc was in his pocket. Mycroft climbed the stair, stood close to him, waiting to see how Lestrade would play it. Lestrade wanted to lean into him.

“Actually,” Greg said, putting his hand on Mycroft’s arm, feeling an illicit thrill. Mycroft didn’t pull away. “I think I’ve seen enough. It all starts to feel the same. Go on, though. I’m just going for a smoke.”

Mycroft gave him an intense look, and Greg wasn’t certain if it was because he still had his hand on his arm, or because Greg wasn’t following the script. Greg looked back harder; he was a cop, and his instinct was that it was definitely time to go.

Vijay looked a little nervously from Mycroft to Greg, and back again.
“I wouldn’t want it said that I had failed in hospitality to a friend of Maxim’s,” he said.

Lestrade turned and offered Vijay a smile of dismissal, consciously imitating Mycroft’s hauteur. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry,” he said. “I’m sure Maxim will be seeing you soon.” He turned back to Mycroft. “I’m terribly sorry if we’ve bored you, luv. No need to see us out, Vijay. Come see us in London. Little Havana is brilliant.”

Vijay looked happier now. He might see Maxim, apparently. All would be well.

And he hadn’t had to watch the Kearn boy die agonisingly slowly, all over again. It was one of Maxim’s favourites; but he personally thought that it was rather excessive to actually kill the creatures. After all, the memory juice was working very well; the Kearn boy’s own friend didn’t remember a thing, and never would. And once could extract all of a subject’s essence, there was really no benefit in taking things further. But Maxim had become insatiable. “No limits,” was his mantra.

* * *

Back at the hotel, Mycroft asked Lestrade a difficult question.

“Are you going to look at the discs now?”

Lestrade considered. They were standing at the door to his room. It was after midnight. He was feeling a buzz, and it wasn’t the drinks. His tuxedo felt hot and tight suddenly.

“I am,” Lestrade finally said. For a number of reasons, it was the last thing he wanted to do right now.

Mycroft nodded. “I thought you’d say that.” Lestrade thought he sounded disappointed.

“Yeah. Well. It’s what I came here for,” he said. He opened the door but didn’t go in. His heart was thundering again. He wanted to put his hands on Mycroft again, more than he had done in the club. He didn’t want to watch whatever he was going to find on these decadently evil discs. Then Mycroft’s hand was on his arm.

“Let me stay. I involved you in this case. For Sherlock’s sake. You don’t have to do this alone.”

He felt a painful tightness in his throat and his breath came quicker. He walked into the room and Mycroft followed him. The room was pitch dark. He fumbled for the light, but Mycroft’s cool hand was there first, stopping him, closing around his hand.

“It’s been over two years,” Mycroft said in the darkness. “It can wait an hour.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Lestrade said, shrugging out of his jacket, throwing it to the floor. He heard the plastic jewel cases rattle. “What I want is going to take more than an hour.” Lestrade backed up to the wall, dragged Mycroft with him. He felt for Mycroft’s jacket, pulled hard on his lapels as he had wanted to do before, bringing him down close.

“Show me,” Mycroft said, and Lestrade took a deep breath and just took his mouth so hard in the dark that he bruised his lips against teeth, but the sharp pain felt wonderful and he moaned to feel Mycroft kissing him back just as hard, leaning down so their hips could meet. Lestrade gasped at the feel of another Alpha’s hard cock pressed against his own, filling him with a dizzy rush like a drug. His cock swelled; he shoved back hard, and they ground against each other for a few intoxicating minutes. Mycroft finally pulled away, Lestrade tearing at his jacket, throwing it somewhere. They still couldn’t see and Lestrade didn’t care. What he wanted was to feel.
“No you don’t, get back here,” he demanded, turning Mycroft and pushing him hard against the wall. Mycroft allowed it with a restrained power that made Lestrade know that at any moment, he could find himself pinned down, ravished. He groaned at the thought, his Alpha urges surging and confused. Mycroft sensed it and removed all doubt by tearing at his trousers, ripping them — Mycroft was evidently much stronger than he looked, Lestrade thought dimly, realising he was in trouble here — freeing his stiff cock and taking it into his brilliant hand that seemed to know how to work him better than he did himself. His knees threatened to buckle but his Alpha dominance made him grab Mycroft tighter, thrust his cock hard against the hand that was working him so roughly.

“How did you know,” he gasped.

“I always knew,” Mycroft retorted, a hard stroke and a thumb circling firmly around his swelling head. So hard.

“Fuck, that’s so —” Lestrade was almost shouting, blood racing with Alpha urges. He wanted to drive Mycroft down onto his knees, make him take his cock in his mouth; he wanted Mycroft to do the same to him – maybe even more - he imagined, wildly, pushing Mycroft down, spreading his legs, slowly sliding into him, stretching him almost to the limit, making him feel it. He groaned and shuddered at the thought, feeling a deep thrrob imagining Mycroft’s hard member pressing against his hole, penetrating him just as slowly, a forbidden act he had never imagined wanting, but now he thought he maybe even needed it. He yanked at Mycroft’s trousers, freed his massive cock. Its hot girth felt utterly perfect in the palm of his hand. They were both weeping precum that ran over their girth felt utterly perfect in the palm of his hand. They were both weeping precum that ran over their fingers, slicking them just enough to temper the roughness.

They bit each other, panting and gasping up against the wall, working each other’s cocks hard in the dark. It was strange and bloody magnificent and the most brilliant thing Lestrade had ever felt.

“That’s it — god, yes — Mycroft,” Lestrade gasped as he was seized with a sudden powerful climax in Mycroft’s hand that nearly knocked him to his knees; Mycroft held him up with his other arm. Before he stopped shuddering he felt Mycroft groan, “Greg, oh,” thrusting once, twice, and warm cum was dripping down his hand. They collapsed against each other, biting and grappling to stay upright on legs that trembled, fighting to feel as much skin as they could.

The darkness was making it so easy to take what he wanted from this frighteningly seductive man. He didn’t think he would be able to stop. “Too many bloody clothes, these tuxedoes,” Lestrade muttered fiercely, making quick work of the rest of their elegant black tie by feel.

“But it was worth it,” Mycroft said mysteriously, and they stumbled blindly to the bed and fell down hard into each other’s arms.

To be continued . . .
The Strangest Flavour

Night air has the strangest flavour
Space to breathe it, time to savour
All that night air has to lend me
Till the morning makes me angry
In the night air
I’ve acquired a kind of madness
Daylight fills my heart with sadness

The Night Air, Jamie Woon, all rights reserved to its owner.

LISTEN TO Next to the Night Air, Jamie Woon, Solomun Remix

The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, Mumbai and London

"I’m afraid I can’t make a case with this, Mycroft. Not officially. Not in London, and I don’t think the Mumbai coppers’d been too keen, either."

Lestrade rubbed his eyes, took another gulp of hot black coffee. He and Mycroft had been up all night, laying claim to one another. This was an adventure that had barely begun, and he was hoping very hard that it would not end. But for now his prosaic job, that of overworked detective, was weighing heavy. The end of their long night, the arrival of the cold morning, almost made him angry. Daylight meant a return to work, responsibilities, duty. He wanted the night back.

Lestrade sat back in the far too comfortable chair, wrapped in one of the hotel’s plush robes and nothing else. He was bleary-eyed but sharply aware of Mycroft’s possessive, vivid blue gaze following him. Weighing, calculating. He figured Mycroft already had some sort of clandestine scheme here, and not just in the Kearn case. He thought about that: whether he was at all likely to allow Mycroft to just orchestrate him like he did everything else: smoothly, invisibly, always with restrained power.

He looked back at Mycroft, cool and gorgeous in the hotel robe which had fallen open to give him an impressive view of all that he hadn’t been able to fully appreciate in the dark. He sure as hell was appreciating it now.
Mycroft was drinking tea and working intently on three files at once while still sparing a great deal of his attention to scrutinizing his person in return. Lestrade decided this felt pretty fantastic despite the fact—or possibly even, because of the fact—that it felt like a challenge. Alpha aggression being what it was, they were not unlike two wild wolves, or perhaps big cats—pacing around one another, seeking dominance. In the morning light, they both were covered with bites and bruises proving that neither of them could claim the advantage. Yet.

"Explain," Mycroft said crisply.

"Close your robe or I won’t bloody be able to focus."

Mycroft briefly flashed a cunning sort of smile before slowly wrapping his robe about himself, modestly covering up to the chin.

"Better?"

"Hell, no. But we have a job here, and I’m running short on will power."

"The day is looking better and better."

"Look. These discs. You saw what I saw. Bad lighting. Nobody’s face is clear. Mostly they’re wearing masks. It’s not clear at all that the "victim" isn’t a willing participant."

"At least at first."

"Well, that’s a slippery slope. None of these films show anyone...well, anyone dying. I’m willing to present this to the Mumbai authorities as a rape case, but murder, I don’t see it. No bodies. And don’t even know who these people are."

"I understand. It was worth looking into. We know now more than we did."

"Exactly. Listen, Mycroft, I’m not saying I’m not willing to give it a shot. I’d feel better about this case if we were in England. This Vijay is a British citizen. So is Purcell, for that matter."

"You’d rather we were back in London?"

"Hell - I’m not complaining, mind you. It was worth it, coming here. You know it was."

"Indeed. I know it very well. Why do you suppose I brought you here?"

Lestrade stood up, leaned over Mycroft, trapping him in the chair. "I thought it was because I’m the most brilliant detective you know. Leaving aside Sherlock. My turn to say, ‘show me.’"

They kissed with brute desire that was barely sated. With a groan Lestrade pulled himself back.

Lestrade’s mobile buzzed. He spoke quietly, expressing puzzlement.

"I’m needed back at the Yard. I’m not sure we can do anything more here, anyway. Unless you have something new, I’m going to have to take the next flight back to London."

"Conveniently, that was my plan."

"I don’t think you planned this. I’ve been working a case at the Yard. Dead Omega boys. Heart failure."

"Drug overdose?"
"That’s what we thought. But Dr Hooper found something suspicious. We’ve just got the reports. The drugs weren’t in their systems long enough to metabolize. And it looks like we just got another one."

"And you’re thinking... perhaps Maxim’s new Heatwave?"

"Got it in one. Before I came here, I would have thought maybe it was a new club drug, something we haven’t seen. Now I’m wondering... are my victims like the boys in these videos? Does Maxim Purcell have something to do with it?"

"About Maxim... Mycroft looked down, seeming to gather his thoughts. Lestrade waited. Mycroft was quiet and wouldn’t look him in the eye, which seemed odd considering how very close they were. Finally he said, "I must... thank you, Greg."

"That’s the second time you’ve said that to me. I’m happy to oblige, whatever it is. Are you going to tell me what you mean?" Lestrade leaned in again because Mycroft was looking entirely too serious, pulled Mycroft’s head lower so that he could whisper in his ear, bite his earlobe. "Maybe I’ll just figure it out for myself."

Mycroft was giving as good as he got by, rubbing his palm over the outline of Lestrade’s swelling cock. "Do you think you can?"

"I’m a detective." Lestrade applied himself diligently to the other ear, moving down Mycroft’s throat. "Not just any detective. Believe it or not I’ve solved loads of murders without your brother’s help. You’re thanking me because... you noticed that I haven’t run you down for letting Maxim go free."

"Very good, Detective Inspector Lestrade. And for that, I’m grateful. Now, if you really want to impress me... you’ll tell me why."

"Don’t try to hide it - you’re already impressed." At this, Mycroft groaned softly in assent, parted his legs, but Lestrade was too quick. He climbed up and straddled Mycroft in the chair, which felt devastatingly perfect. "But I’ll have another go-- just to show I’m really motivated. Sherlock was involved with Maxim. Sherlock was abusing pheromones. Maxim would have claimed he had been confining Sherlock for his own good, maybe to detox. But those weren’t the most important reasons you let Maxim go."

"No?"

"No. It would have been a serious scandal. It being here in India still wouldn’t keep it from being fodder for the press. They would have taken him apart. So it all came down to protecting your brother. That’s why you let Maxim Purcell go free. But I know you’re planning to take Purcell down another way."

"I knew I was right about you. Correct on all points. I’m going to put Maxim Purcell all the way down. For murder."

"Those Omega boys."

"That’s right. Andrew Kearn, and the others."

"We don’t have any evidence that it’s Purcell. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. But... I’ve been thinking... Vijay seemed very interested in hooking up with this Maxim Purcell. Did you see that? What if... we caught them in the act?"
"Do you mean, a sting?"

Lestrade considered. "Maybe. I'd like to get them under surveillance."

Mycroft snorted. "I assure you that is already being done." He held up his mobile. A tall, dark-haired man was exiting a limousine, entering a restaurant.

"Is that Maxim Purcell?"

"Yes. He's at a luncheon engagement with some disgruntled investors, here in Mumbai. Paramananda Pharmaceuticals' shutdown is causing some unpleasant waves."

"But he's been a slippery bastard. It won't be easy. And don't forget, even Sherlock didn't suspect him. That has to mean something."

"It means that my brother is a high-functioning sociopath. I'm sure that is no secret to you by now, Greg. Sociopaths... fundamentally lack a proper sense of danger. Particularly with respect to their own personal safety. Sherlock was simply too close to Maxim."

Lestrade could see how this might happen. He wanted to be a lot closer to Mycroft at the moment. He briefly stood up only to draw the curtains very tightly and dim the lights. This brought back the illusion of night, where their inhibitions melted away. Where anything could happen.

Straddling those long, strong legs again, he reached in and pulled Mycroft's robe open again, very wide. Mycroft was effectively pinned, and Lestrade grinned triumphantly. He was going to make Mycroft pay for tormenting him all morning long. But Mycroft reached up and pulled Greg's robe open, pushed it down around his shoulders, just as effectively pinning Lestrade's arms, evening the score with a sardonic glint in his eye.

"I believe we call that a draw, Mr Holmes," Lestrade said. Straddling Mycroft like this brought their naked cocks fast together, just as he had hoped. For a sensation so new, he was dimly shocked that he had become quite desperate for the feel of it, Mycroft's pure, powerful Alpha scent, the feel of his pale smooth skin under his own. He rubbed himself against Mycroft hard, a scorchingly, mind-blowingly brilliant frottage as their bare Alpha cocks slid against each other, swollen heads thrusting against each other's heated skins.

"I can't believe what you feel like," he said, overcome. "I can't stop touching you. What you do to me." Lestrade lost all pride, allowed Mycroft to grab his arse and pull him even closer, grinding. He felt hot cum burning in his balls, so urgent; and with a burst of excruciating pleasure he climaxed thrusting against Mycroft.

"Ohmygod ohgod yes," he shouted his ecstasy as he crushed his forehead into Mycroft's shoulder, falling into his arms limp and shocked with the sudden strangeness of it all. Passively he felt Mycroft pulling him up, turning him so that his arse was pressed against Mycroft's stiff cock, and his weight pushed him until he was collapsed against Mycroft, almost sitting in his lap with his feet on the floor. But Mycroft wouldn't let him rest even while he was still panting from climax. Mycroft swept his fingers in his copious cum and spread it between his cheeks, sliding his cock audaciously between them. He could feel the flared head brushing and prodding against his hole as Mycroft thrust, not trying to press in. The sensation was intoxicating and his entire arse, a part of his body that had never been a source of pleasure for him, was almost devouring these sensations. Mycroft's hand slid around to find his cock, still limp from the aftershock of orgasm, and began working it expertly.

"Come again," Mycroft commanded. "I want you to. Feel that," he said, pressing his cock up,
hard against Lestrade’s tightness, and they both trembled while Mycroft held him firmly.

"I can’t, I can’t come again,” he gasped even as his cock betrayed him, rising up to fill Mycroft’s hand thickly. The feel was unbelievably sharp, almost pain. Every nerve in his cock was hypersensitive and flinched against Mycroft’s touch while his body rocked back and forth between pleasure and discomfort, Mycroft’s heavy cock thrusting suggestively against his arse, sliding slickly against his hole; his hand sending sparks of anguished pleasure up and down his trembling cock.

"You can. You can take it," Mycroft urged roughly. Greg gritted his teeth and moaned, it was so intense, knowing Mycroft meant he could come again, but the implication that Mycroft would try to make him take his cock overwhelmed him with a shock of fearful lust. He felt Mycroft’s mouth sucking hard on his throat, making it tingle. He rebelled against pleasure that threatened to make him beg, maybe even get on his knees; he could never do that.

He pushed back hard, grinding back against Mycroft’s cock, took control of the rhythm and forced Mycroft to take what he gave.

"Ah, making me pay, yes? Show me, then," Mycroft said, allowing Lestrade to take over. Now it was Mycroft who was nearly whimpering with desperation. Lestrade was filled with a wicked impulse and he allowed Mycroft’s massive head to rest against his tight hole. He could feel their shared fantasy that Mycroft might somehow enter him that had them both moaning unrestrainedly. One more thrust and he felt Mycroft’s cum hot between his arse cheeks and he collapsed back against Mycroft as another climax was wrung from his sensitised cock, cum shooting out and into Mycroft’s hand.

Impulsively, as he would do with an Omega partner, he took his wet hand and pushed it back, and felt Mycroft lick it, and then Mycroft’s long fingers were doing the same, and he boldly licked, tasting another man’s cum, sharp and pungent, tantalising. The feel and scent and taste of their mingled cum was making his head buzz with an almost angry Alpha passion.

He wondered where it might lead them, this frustratingly matched dance of dominant pheromones, confusing and exhilarating. It felt something like he imagined a fall from a great height might feel, a sensation he had occasionally had in dreams: your body seized with sheer joy and freedom of falling through the air, the almost orgasmic pleasure that falling delivered into the depths of your belly, a fall where you knew that there was something wonderful there to catch you at the end, but still a shadow of a doubt that you might crash and be obliterated after all.

###

By the time Mycroft and Lestrade landed in London, Lestrade had already orchestrated electronic wiretap warrants for Vijay Mathur’s telephone, mobile and computer. Upon landing, Lestrade was relieved to find that Donovan had already unearthed a few suspicious snippets. They climbed into Mycroft’s waiting car, ubiquitous black with darkened windows. Bulletproof glass, Lestrade assumed. He rubbed his eyes, looked over Donovan’s missive.

"I’ll be damned."

"If you’re going down, I suppose I’ll have to go with you," Mycroft said smoothly.

Lestrade could never decide if Mycroft actually possessed anything resembling humour — he rarely ever smiled and certainly did not laugh, except to mock an adversary. And yet, he felt that Mycroft was actually teasing him here, and shot him a sidelong glance under lowered eyelashes to show he felt it, and didn’t mind a bit. He felt dizzy with bafflement and desire, and maybe
something more. He shook it off.

"I meant, we have something. Vijay’s on the way back to England. And he’s been asked to bring the entertainment to a private party."

"Am I to take it that our dear Maxim is the host? How convenient of him to be celebrating so soon. I do hope the party isn’t in London. I made it quite clear he was forbidden to return there." Lestrade heard pure malice.

"Not London. Surrey. A place called Hantswood Hall. On Saturday."

"Hmmmmm. That gives us three days. And I believe I know the place. Frightful old pile."

"Surrey’s a bit outside my patch. But I’ll tie it in with these Omega murders. The investigation’s gotten to the tipping point – with our new victim, we’ll all be working round the clock. Nobody’ll stand in my way."

"I’m sure they won’t."

Lestrade was quietly pleased that Mycroft didn’t offer to pull any strings.

"Look, Mycroft – I’ve got to dive right back into the thick of it. This case, it’s gotten away from me a bit. Nothing I can’t handle. I need to hit my desk hard, get back on top of it. But… tomorrow, would you come for dinner with me?"

Mycroft waited a beat. Lestrade could hardly imagine he would say no. All of his instincts told him he hadn’t read the evidence wrong. Mycroft was in just as deep. He could play it as cool as he liked, Greg knew had gotten under that patrician skin. He intended to stay there.

"That was just my plan, but I had intended to invite you myself."

"You’ll get your chance. Can you meet me at nine o’clock? I won’t be free before then. Come round my flat. And don’t pretend you don’t know where it is." Lestrade gave him a cop’s look, and Mycroft shrugged.

"I won’t, then. Should I… wear anything particular, Greg?"

"Whatever you like. We won’t be going anywhere, though, if that helps."

"Oh, I beg to differ. I think we’re going somewhere already."

They smiled, and their Alpha energies swelled and collided roughly. It felt fantastic. Lestrade felt invincible. It would be good to show Mycroft that he, too, could make people pay, people who deserved it. People like Maxim Purcell.

###
Sherlock lay very still on the bed, listening to John breathing. Somewhere between peace and complete exhaustion, John slumbered. Sherlock idly noted that this was not the agitated sleep of an Alpha unconsciously alert for the encroachment of other Alphas. The rational part of Sherlock's mind, which was still very much inhibited by his Omega nature, appreciated that John needed rest, if only because it would enable John to resume their joining with fresh vigour, an event which Sherlock was awaiting with barely restrained impatience. His body was saturated with pheromones, and had fallen more readily into slumber over these past days than at any time he could remember, probably ever.

Still, his need was less than John's. Therefore he lay awake gazing at a narrow finger of sunlight breaking through the curtains as it traveled across the ceiling, while John slept. If he gazed at John instead, he would shortly find himself ravishing him; but he had learned that something about their bond and the nurturing (his brain skidded around the word but he couldn't deny it was a biological fact) impulses of his Omega nature allowed him to hold back, to allow John a little peace.

Still, after an hour - two hours - three hours of this, Sherlock's self-restraint was exhausted. He couldn't resist stealing glances at John's body, sprawled with abandon on top of the bedcovers, at the places he had marked John with his teeth, scratched at him too, at his golden-toned skin, every inch of which he had explored with his mouth and tongue. John lay on his stomach, his face turned toward Sherlock, and he was starting to stir finally because his hips were thrusting a little into the bed and he was murmuring in his sleep. Sherlock was very tempted to touch, but instead he decided to let John have a few more moments of rest (and was inordinately pleased with himself for this).

Almost reflexively, his body, provoked by the nearness and growing arousal of his mate, fell into the subtle contractions taught in the Mysteries, and he started to quiver. A light sheen of perspiration sprang up all over his skin, his cock rock-hard and needy. John's subtle body was glowing brighter, flame-coloured, strong and irresistible. It caressed him everywhere, passionately and possessively. He caught his breath, opened himself more to let the powerful Alpha energy sweep over him and carry him closer, and sent his own energy to curl over John's relaxed limbs, stealthily sensual.

John's body was stirring restlessly now. Without conscious will, Sherlock drew John's energy closer, tighter, and their subtle bodies twisted and spiraled in heightening heat and passion. They were both panting now, and Sherlock felt them climb higher, but he wasn't afraid. John was with him, they were one. His body commenced a rhythmic euphoric wave and he felt it flow into John. John's eyes opened, dark with huge pupils, lost; yet he instinctively groped for Sherlock's hand and gripped tight, and the rapture crested even higher as their gazes locked and melted into one, and the Mysteries took them. In their minds they moaned and growled and sighed but their bodies were silent, riding relentless waves of pleasure. Sherlock held John's hand tighter, they gazed into each other's eyes and he willed them to stay suspended, not to allow the wave to spill over.

Sherlock focused lightly and isolated the pleasures - his cock, his prostate, his cleft and passage, all
melting in seeming erotic perfection, but as ravishing as these sensations were, now he perceived 
everything that they were not, and never could be. Yet he wanted to be here, their synchronously 
mingled energies made sharing this with his bonded so much more than it had ever been before. 
Their subtle bodies glowed with love, joy, desire, and ecstasy; taking and giving, leading and 
following, they let the waves take them.

After a time, the rapture elevated them into a dimension that was unnatural, mystic and 
Unnamable sensations wracked them and their bodies shook hard with radiance, as one. There was 
an orgasm rooted deep within them now which had no peak but stretched out with a radiance that 
was first white, then red, flowing through their veins, penetrating and surrounding them.

It was John who led them back, down into a soft glow, and Sherlock followed him. They finally 
lay quiet and still in their bed in the little cottage on the loch, looking at each other, luxuriating in 
the fading waves of sensation. And then the air changed and their own scents surged around them, 
reinvigorated and undeniable. John climbed on top of Sherlock, straddling him, and pinned his 
hands.

"So . . . 'the Mysteries'? It that what just happened?" Sherlock looked up into his face, no longer 
the familiar John of 221b, but his bonded, his lover, Alpha-strong. John ran a finger along his 
cheekbone, traced his lips. Yet it didn't feel entirely loving. Behind it was a question. And this 
time, he intended to get an answer.

To be continued . . .
Chapter Fourteen. The Sleeping Beauties.

Listen/Watch Funk Mandala, Ted Chambers, [HERE]

A cottage at Loch Linnhe. The fifth day.

"I --- I didn't intend it to happen... but... we're bonded, John," Sherlock tried to explain the unexplainable. The Mysteries. It's been so many days, the pheromones --- it's so much stronger even than anything..." He flushed. He didn't want to tell John about these things. It felt all wrong now, it was not who they were and it wasn't what he wanted any more.

But John had other ideas. "You mean, all those pheromone cocktails you polluted your body with. That Maxim gave to you. So that - what just happened -- is what you did? Together? You and Maxim? Tell me." John's eyes were darkening, and not with passion.

Sherlock shook his head, Impossible to explain. "No. Not like that, never. But in a way, the... process is the same. I can't describe it."

"Try."

Describing sensation and emotion was not an area that Sherlock excelled in. And yet, their bond and their heat had opened places, given him things he had never had. "Think, John," he said haltingly in a burst of inspiration. "Surely you've had... a cold, an ordinary cold?"

"Of course."

"And then think... the worst fever you ever had, or could have, so that your mind lost touch with your surroundings, perhaps you hallucinated?" More than once Sherlock had treated his body with so little care -- abused it with drugs, lack of food and rest -- awakening to find Mycroft, and on one occasion, Lestrade, holding anxious vigil over him.

John nodded. After he had been shot, sepsis had set in. He had been delirious for days. "So you're saying it's like being ill?"

"No, of course not - the opposite. But whether you have an ordinary cold, or a very dangerous infection, the mechanism is the same. Both are infections. But the effect is entirely different. And so it is with the Mysteries. But I didn't know it until just now."

John smiled a dark smile and smoothed damp hair from Sherlock's forehead. "So you're saying you had this -- experience with Maxim, but... it's different with us."

Sherlock nodded solemnly, willing him to understand. Even their bond could not help convey what he meant. "Perhaps a better comparison would be... think of your tedious solar system. There is that planet they threw out not long ago -- what was it --"

"Pluto. You can't have deleted that too, Sherlock."
"Of course I did! Look, it's quite simple. After you scolded me so harshly in 221b, all those months ago --- you must remember, you were quite upset; you were even shouting about it. Very Alpha, John. And so afterward, I did make an effort. I memorized all of the planets, their moons, all of that rubbish."

John was speechless at this. Sherlock looked up at him, wide-eyed and earnest. If he had ever doubted Sherlock's feelings, this was as meaningful a declaration of love as he could ever hope to get. His smile became a little warmer, and Sherlock felt warmer too.

"All right. I'm very impressed. So. Pluto. But you said you'd deleted Pluto."

"Surely that is acceptable? I didn't think my obligation to retain useless data concerning the solar system extended to planets no longer deemed worthy of inclusion in it by our eminent astronomers. Am I wrong? Please tell me it's not vitally important to you that I clutter my mind palace with meaningless bits of data pertaining to cast-out dwarf planets, planetoids, comets . . . . where will it all end? It is very hard, John, to understand how you prioritize your data." Sherlock was beginning to visibly panic.

John licked Sherlock's throat, terminating in a teasing lick to his bottom lip. "Calm down. The answer is, no. I'm chuffed the solar system is back in your mind palace. But now let's just focus on Pluto. I'm trying to follow your train of thought here —"

"Really, John, you make it sound as if I’m not expressing myself rationally. Don’t imagine that my Omega pheromones have addled my wits just because you’re slow on the uptake."

John gave the other side of Sherlock’s throat a long lick to match the other, and nipped the corner of Sherlock’s mouth, continued licking.

"But I don't think I can last much longer. Give me the idiot’s version, then."

"When you're licking me there . . . .it's rather difficult to speak properly."

"Then speak improperly. That’d be even better."

"And anyway, I’m not sure you deserve an explanation, John. You aren’t attending to what I’m saying in the slightest. You only want my body, now. You’ve forgotten all about my amazing mind." Sherlock mumbled halfheartedly. He sighed dramatically.

John paused, hovering. "Sherlock, your mind is so fucking amazing that all this nonsense has stopped me these last ten minutes from fucking you blind. Hurry up, genius."

"Very well." Sherlock concentrated, which was challenging because John’s Alpha blood was up again, and his cock was bent on proving it. Its hardness slid insistently against his thigh.

"That Pluto, the one they ejected. It's orbit is at the very far edge of the solar system, yes? And it's very cold. Its surface is covered with nitrogen and methane ice. And it is very very dark as its so far from the sun. And the sun is quite the opposite, brilliant, radiant in fact, and almost unimaginably hot. Entirely covered with lava, I believe."

Sherlock looked inordinately proud of his little store of reclaimed planetary knowledge. John rewarded him with a more meaningful thrust and a deep kiss, tongue slowly exploring.

"Mmmmmmm. Do that again. You’re rather brilliant, John, actually. At least your tongue is."

"Good enough for me. Are you finished, then? I’m supposed to understand now about Maxim,
and the Mysteries?" His cock gave a thrust that pressed him intimately against Sherlock’s slick cleft, promising but not penetrating. He held Sherlock down hard and refused to let him pull him in deeper. Sherlock’s face was transformed with desire. He didn’t want to talk about it anymore, didn’t want to speak at all. But John’s stormy eyes held jealous passions still beneath the deep blue and he couldn’t hide, didn’t want to hide.

"It’s true. I took those drugs. I let Maxim lead me into the Mysteries," he whispered. "I wanted to know. But I never gave myself up to him. And until you, I didn’t know that what we were to each other was . . . as cold and distant as Pluto."

"I think I’m starting to get it. So that makes me, makes us —"

"The sun."

"Ah," John said gently. Then he started giggling helplessly. Sherlock looked hurt that his heroic effort at expressing his feelings was being mocked. Then again, he was so unaccustomed to such expressions that he fully expected that he had, without intending it, said something utterly ridiculous.

"Well?" He said, slightly mortified. The feel of John’s cock pressing in, promising entrance, was more than ample salve for his feelings. He generally placed even less importance upon his own than those of others, excepting John’s. "I suppose you’re going to tell me what’s so funny?"

John laughed even harder. After a moment he composed himself sufficiently to nuzzle into Sherlock’s neck, bringing his lips to Sherlock’s ear.

"What’s funny is Maxim Purcell," he whispered, gripping Sherlock tightly. At the sound of his name, Sherlock tried to squirm but John held him tighter.

"What kind of man would want to have sex with Sherlock Holmes — without touching?"

John suppressed his laughter and teasingly drew back, withdrew his cock that had been threatening to pierce his bonded again. His body was on fire with Alpha heat. Sherlock released a flood of gorgeous Omega musk of deepest heat in response and John shivered and drank it in, letting it pull him in.

"Tell me," Sherlock demanded languidly, raising his hips suggestively, so that John’s cock slid right back where they both wanted it, so badly. "What kind of man is that?"

"Biggest idiot in the history of – well, the solar system. And the Mysteries - that’s nothing to where I’m going to take you now."

John took Sherlock’s mouth with his own, then pushed his cock slow and deep inside his mate’s hot passage and held them there, still, until they were both gasping with the need for his stroke, and he delivered it. Slow and deep he stroked them to the heart of ecstatic heat, carnal and ethereal, earthly and celestial. This was their own paradise, their very own mystery; they had discovered, explored and would keep building together, forever.

# # #

Listen/Watch The Phantom Appears, Ted Chambers: [HERE]

John and Sherlock took another compartment on the Caledonian Sleeper train to take them home to London at last. They settled into the bunks, John insisting on leaving Sherlock quite alone in his, worried that he would somehow crush Sherlock’s flat belly with an accidental elbow or knee.
Sherlock sulked but couldn’t deny that he was weary at a cellular level from their six spectacularly wild days and nights of bonded heat. His body was sore and he throbbed and stung in many uncomfortable places, but he clung strongly to these still-vivid feelings; they reminded him of their journey.

He was fidgeting restlessly with his mobile. This he had switched off entirely during their time at Loch Linnhe. He felt his brain surge into control as he read the headlines:

"Fifth Omega Boy Found Dead in The Sleeping Beauties Murders – Scotland Yard Baffled."

He rapidly scanned everything he could turn up by legitimate means about the strange deaths of the Omega boys. He felt a prickling up the back of his spine.

These boys looked suspiciously the type that he knew Maxim had always been drawn to. Tall, slim, dark haired, with beauty either elegant or exotic. The latest victim hadn’t yet been identified; or if he had, the Yard was keeping it close to the vest.

Sherlock groaned a little, impatiently — then felt a little thrill as he successfully hacked the Yard’s electronic "murder book."

The case had been dubbed the ‘Sleeping Beauties Murders’ because the beautiful boys were found in perfect condition, not a mark on them. Their expressions were so peaceful that they seemed to be sleeping, even dreaming --- until one touched their cold skin.

By the time the train pulled into Euston Station, Sherlock Holmes knew as much as, or more than, the detectives of Scotland Yard and the investigative journalists.

And he knew something that none of them knew.

He had finally been able to unlock the Yard’s murder scene and morgue photos of the fifth Sleeping Beauty victim, killed just two days ago in London, not yet integrated into the official murder book pending completion of the initial report. He enlarged the photo, studied it for a long time. Closed his eyes, searched his mind palace for the first time since he surrendered to his first heat in more than a decade and took the crossing at last. He gently, regretfully put these precious memories aside for now.

He had found what he was looking for in his mind palace. It hadn’t been buried terribly deeply; in fact it had been on the brink of deletion. He had been very seriously contemplating deletion of everything in his mind palace connected with Maxim Purcell, with prejudice. Now, he knew it was very important that he preserve these memories carefully. They were much more important than he had ever thought they might be.

The fifth victim. His face. Sherlock had only ever seen the dead boy once, and then only fleetingly.

It was amazing, really, that his memory had captured and classified this singular memory. Because at the time, the boy had been sent away from Maxim’s table at Tantra.

Sherlock had barely glanced the departing boy’s way before a wrathful John Watson in full Alpha fury appeared, jerking Maxim’s hand from his body, twisting so viciously that he had thought John would dislocate it. That night, he had succumbed to John and to the Heatwave, offering himself but almost destroying their chance by infecting John with doubts — about him, about Maxim Purcell.

His brain was sorting and classifying the things he had learned about the Sleeping Beauty Murders,
creating the outline of theories he could test, avenues to explore. He barely noticed John pulling him out of the bunk, scolding him fondly for being a lazy git, and firmly refusing to let Sherlock carry his own bag. At Sherlock’s reflexive protest, he simply shook his head and pushed out of the train.

As they left the platform, he heard the steward call, "All aboard for The Deerstalker!! London to Fort William!!"

Sherlock prodded John’s shoulder. "The Deerstalker," he snorted derisively. "I’d no idea they called our train that. Ludicrous objects. Not a proper hat at all. Thank heavens one isn’t expected to wear one whilst on board. Or . . . did we avoid humiliation by keeping to our bunks?"

John grinned. "Your brain’s back online I take it."

Sherlock grinned crookedly back. "I don’t deny it was offline these past days. Whose fault is that?"

They strode comfortably along the few blocks to Baker Street. Sherlock indignantly refused a cab, John anxiously eyeing the region of his stomach. He rolled his eyes.

"John. I’m quite fit. You’re going to drive me mad with all your ----"

"My what," John growled, pushing open the door to 221b and pushing Sherlock ahead. He wanted to be there to catch Sherlock if he got dizzy on the stairs.

"Your – hovering!" Sherlock boomed, folding his arms and executing a perfect whirl as he greedily began examining their stack of mail. Sometimes people sent him strange messages, particularly when a serial killer was on the loose. He reserved judgment as to whether the Sleeping Beauty Murders had been committed by a single killer.

John ignored Sherlock and stopped hovering. Instead, he bolted to the kitchen to confirm what he already knew perfectly well: not a single particle of food fit for human consumption was to be found in the cupboards of 221b’s so-called kitchen — also known as the secondary lab and morgue facilities reserved to morbidly curious consulting detective Sherlock Holmes. He knew better than to even open the refrigerator. John tugged at his hair in despair, picturing himself sterilising baby bottles in the bath due to the toxic condition of their kitchen. He suppressed a growl and stole a glance at Sherlock, who was thoughtfully staring at his laptop screen.

Business as usual, John thought ruefully. Then Sherlock turned his head, and the stark pattern of red and purple bruises covering his neck made him suddenly mortified at the thought of all he had inflicted upon his mate, what ordeals might be still to come. Deliberately not petting Sherlock’s stomach, he bit back his imminent tirade about the state of the kitchen and kissed Sherlock’ forehead gently.

"I’m off then," he said. Sherlock didn’t look up but nodded.

"Hmmm," he said absently. John smiled.

"I might pop by the clinic, see about this week’s schedule."

John was also suddenly possessed of the new awareness that it might be necessary for them to guard the state of their finances more carefully than heretofore. Time to start being responsible. Being a parent was serious business. Potential parent, he cautioned himself even as a joyful bubble rose up in his chest.
Because it seemed impossible that he should not have accomplished exactly what heat, what knotting, was for. And he had a feeling. They would know, soon enough. He walked down Baker Street with a spring in his step.

The only difficulty would be to make Sherlock take proper precautions until the baby came. But all things considered, he felt well up to the challenge.

###

Sherlock sometimes found a walk around their Marylebone neighborhood stimulating to his mental processes, and after so long away from London he fancied a stroll. His footsteps somehow drew him to the entrance to their Tesco Express, a place he ordinarily avoided like the plague.

He went inside, baffled by the brightly displayed consumer goods, ninety-nine percent of which he thought were utterly useless and completely stupid. He was about to say just that to the sullen teenaged clerk when an object caught his eye. He didn’t really want to admit that this was why he had come, so he floundered around the aisles until he found a bottle of rubbing alcohol, occasionally useful for experiments. This he placed by the register with a flourish, together with an economical triple-pack of Omega pregnancy tests. “Guaranteed to give an accurate result one day sooner than other brands,” the label trumpeted.

The clerk thankfully did not remark upon Sherlock’s hypothetical state of pregnancy. On the way back to Baker Street his hand worried at the pink-and-blue box (the manufacturers had wanted to present as scrupulously unbiased, he supposed, as to the possible gender of the hypothetical baby.) He fumed at the manufacturer of the pregnancy tests encouraging persons - Omegas, specifically – to obsess over learning one single day sooner – after all, pregnancy lasted — how long, exactly? He was slightly appalled to find that he had deleted the information. It simply had never come up in any of his cases, and he found himself curiously thankful that this was so.

He climbed the stair to 221b and shut the door. John was still away. He pulled out his mobile and confirmed his suspicion.

"Helping out at the clinic. Back by dinner. I'll bring Thai."

There was a few minutes delay, and a second text. "Unless you have any particular request?"

Sherlock snorted, and smiled. Evidently Doctor Watson was already anticipating that he would manifest the famous cravings that pregnant Omegas were supposed to be consumed with, making demands for all sorts of revolting foods that Sherlock would not touch if it were his last meal. Pickles and ice cream were the classics. His stomach churned uncomfortably at the thought.

"Thai is perfect,"

he texted back.

He really was feeling like he could stand to eat something. This was not a common feeling, but he hadn’t eaten on the train even when John had used all of his powers of persuasion. Those were considerably more persuasive than Sherlock recalled, but then again they were bonded now. Even so, the thought of food on the rocking train had been unappealing.

###

Sherlock thrust these vague musings about the hypothetical state of pregnancy aside for the moment.
He was seized with a suspicion, and those were usually correct. It was the absence of suspicion that was really what got one into trouble. Look at what had happened with Maxim. He felt a surge of pure fury at himself for having been blind to Maxim’s true nature. It could not possibly be a coincidence that the fifth Sleeping Beauty victim had known Maxim.

Especially after what he had seen of Maxim’s true nature when he had been captive at Kamala Kangra.

He took a deep breath, decided that there was nothing for it. He called Lestrade. He would offer his services to help crack the Yard’s baffling case. Probably no one was better able than he was now to capture Maxim Purcell, if he was their killer.

Lestrade wasn’t answering. He took a deeper breath and tried Donovan.

"I need to talk to Lestrade."

"Well I need a vacation in the Costa del Sol, and I’m not getting it any time soon either."

This made no sense but Sherlock got the point: Donovan wasn’t going to help. "I take it that means Detective Inspector Lestrade is not available."

"You can take it that if Detective Inspector Lestrade hasn’t called you in, he don’t need you. And I don’t either. Right? Now if you’ll excuse me, I have about four hundred more witnesses to contact before suppertime."

Sherlock was undaunted. There was always a way, if one applied one’s mind to a problem. He spent a few moments at his laptop, then called DI Dimmock.

Dimmock answered too eagerly on the first ring. Dimmock, Sherlock had determined, had not been let onto the Sleeping Beauty murder team. He was working a case of seemingly natural death, but the suspicious daughter was married to a Cabinet minister and as such, the Yard had been asked to treat it as a potential homicide. Truly, the old man had been exceptionally fit for his age, which was seventy-five. Last year, Sherlock noted, he had made an ascent of Mount Everest.

"Sherlock Holmes! I hear . . ." Dimmock fumbled, then rushed on. "Well, I heard about you and Doctor Watson. May I offer my congratulations?"

Sherlock felt a twinge. He hadn’t really thought about what it would be like to return to London, bonded to his former flatmate. He evaluated the nature of the twinge. He decided it was pride. Since he was familiar with the feeling as it related to his own admittedly astounding feats of deduction, he was pretty sure that was what it was. He was not, however, accustomed to this feeling with respect to himself as a couple, with his bonded mate. He decided he rather liked it. He imagined John would become rather insufferable about the whole thing; he was already one of the only persons in London who would admit to being proud of Sherlock Holmes at all.

"Ahem. Thank you, Dimmock. Now about the Montmorency case."

"What on earth’s got you on that one, Mister Holmes? I’m closing the file today. Natural causes. Died peacefully in his sleep. Blessing, really. Not a sign of foul play."

"Except that the son did it."

"The what? Listen, if this is some sort of joke — I’m already being pushed out of this Sleeping Beauty case. I can’t afford to look ridiculous. I can’t go announcing the old man’s son did it, without proof."
"But he did. And I’ll get you what you need to prove it. But I need something from you. One good turn deserves another," he said confidently. He had never followed that advice personally—but he certainly understood that quid pro quo was expected when dealing with the police.

"Well, I can consider it. No promises, mind you. What do you want?"

"Detective Inspector Lestrade has been taking out some warrants, I imagine? In the Sleeping Beauty case?"

"He might have. I’m not sure I’ve heard they have any suspects. If so it’s being kept very quiet. What are you looking for, exactly?"

"I don’t know yet, Dimmock - not until I see them. Of course you’ll get full credit if it comes to anything. Get me copies of any warrants he’s pulled."

"The son, you say?"

"The son. Now get me those warrants."

Half an hour later, Sherlock was scrutinizing a freshly issued warrant for electronic wiretap of an estate in Surrey called Hantswood Hall. He rummaged around his mind palace while thinking of other things. Specifically, Sherlock spent a few more minutes pretending to think about the Sleeping Beauty case before the little pink-and-blue box started to burn a hole in his pocket. He sighed and crept quietly into his own bathroom, and shut the door.

He didn’t know why he felt he had to be quiet. It seemed one of those solemn moments, like a wedding, or a funeral, where you were supposed to be quiet and respectful and which drove him nearly mad with distraction over the stupidity of such hypocritical proceedings. These thoughts distracted him for a few more moments while his long dextrous fingers opened the box and peeled open the foil wrapper of the slender, pen-shaped test stick.

The test kit was, thankfully, designed so very simply that even a complete idiot could use it and plainly comprehend the result.

Which did not stop Sherlock Holmes from refusing to believe his eyes, and repeating the test. It was, after all, something like an experiment; and repeating an experiment ensured the accuracy of the outcome.

He repeated it a third time, because the manufacturers of the Omega pregnancy test had after all thoughtfully provided three complete test strips for the reassurance of scientifically brilliant person such as himself, who would naturally require proof in triplicate.

He laid the strips neatly along the edge of the sink. The bright pink "+" signs looked rather cheerful, he thought. Strange. He had thought he might have felt otherwise. The truth was, until very recently he hadn’t ever thought of how he might feel at all — because he had never contemplated permitting his body to open itself to such an event. It was easily avoided, after all. But he hadn’t for a moment considered trying to avoid it with John. That meant the obvious.

Shockingly, his long-repressed Omega nature was demanding a baby, and had admirably achieved its goal in record time. The odds of an Omega male falling pregnant after a decade on suppressants — not to mention the use and abuse of a wide variety of off-label and black market pheromones — ought to have been slim indeed. Probably there was a way to compute the precise figure. Another area that he had never bothered to learn, or had deleted long ago. It didn’t matter now, anyway.
Because no matter the odds, it was one hundred percent certain that Sherlock Holmes was pregnant.

He tugged up his shirt and examined his stomach carefully. Surely it wasn’t looking a little swollen? He had thought his trousers uncomfortable on the train, but at Loch Linnhe, John had vigilantly nearly force-fed him healthful meals for nearly a week. Surely that would explain his gaining a pound. Or two.

But eyeing the bright pink "+" signs again, he could not avoid the fact that (1) he was pregnant and (2) that as a result, various physical consequences of a more or less horrifying, or at least, he amended, inconvenient nature were about to take over his body. Weight gain, vomiting, dizziness, weariness, swelling of the feet and ankles, tenderness and swelling of the nipples, complete destruction of the normal center of balance as the baby, and hence, one’s belly, grew enormously. And that was all in a healthy pregnancy without interesting complications.

He stared at himself in the mirror. He thought he looked just the same as before. Only... happier? Well, John was the cause of that, that was obvious. It was far too early for any of the fabled "pregnancy glow" to be setting in. He snorted to himself and turned away from the mirror.

He estimated he had a good week, possibly two, before symptoms started affecting his stamina, possibly even his concentration. Also, before he started showing. And vomiting.

He thought about hiding his condition from John and this made him feel peculiar. He looked at the clock. He was glad he hadn’t unpacked his bag.

He left a scrawled note for John and taped it carefully to the skull. There wasn’t any time to waste.

"John,

Don’t worry. I may have evidence in the Sleeping Beauty case. I’ll be back by tomorrow, probably. Look in the bathroom. Don’t worry. I feel fine."

"SH"

He tried to ignore the riotous yelling in his suddenly rebellious brain. This is what must happen, he supposed, when you were bonded and did something that you knew would make your bonded furious. It couldn’t be helped.

He grabbed his bag and returned to Euston Station.

###

Lestrade had a wiretap warrant on Hantswood Hall. Sherlock had retrieved the long-forgotten fact that this was a tumbledown estate that Maxim had purchased on a whim, six months ago. In his warrant application, Lestrade declared that he had come into information that Maxim and one Vijay Mathur, a UK citizen currently employed as a diplomatic attache in Mumbai, were conspiring to drug and abduct young Omega boys and transport them to the estate for the purpose of committing sexual assault – possibly murder. The possible connection to the Sleeping Beauty murders was implied, and clearly had been given credence by the judge who signed the warrant.

Sherlock had no compunction about hacking Lestrade’s mobile records. He was mildly surprised to see that Lestrade and Mycroft had been in intimate contact for a number of days. Mycroft had sent a number of texts to Lestrade in the past few hours, referring to "Hants Hall," as well as the initials "V," and "M."
It didn’t take the brains of the world’s only consulting detective to deduce what was happening here. His brother, his domineering, interfering, insufferable brother Mycroft Holmes, had taken it upon himself to entrap Maxim Purcell in his own lair. Lestrade was with him every step of the way. This was puzzling, but then again, it hadn’t been so very long ago that John Watson had done his best to maintain his blustering mask as a straight Army doctor.

Mycroft and Lestrade.

Lestrade wanted the glory, of course. Perhaps he was tired of sharing the spotlight with the brilliant Sherlock Holmes. But knowing Lestrade as he did, he rejected this thought. It didn’t feel right.

Mycroft. He was working with Lestrade. Obviously for the purpose of putting Maxim away for good. Maxim was too rich; perhaps Mycroft had judged that he would be well able to bribe his way out of justice in Himachal Pradesh, and even Mumbai.

Mycroft was trying to protect him, he could see that clearly. Mycroft wanted Maxim punished, but not for any crime that would touch his brother. If he hadn’t been so muddled in India, he would have foreseen it all. Sherlock frowned. No one knew now better than he did how dangerous Maxim was. The lengths to which he would go to pursue his desires. Nothing and no one would be allowed to stand in his way.

Lestrade and Mycroft were walking into grave danger, and all for his sake. He felt a burning creep up his face and he recognised that exceedingly foreign sensation as shame. He imagined that before bonding with John he wouldn’t have felt it at all. Their bonding seemed to have allowed Sherlock to access unfamiliar emotions. He didn’t like this feeling.

He next considered very seriously what would happen should he allow John to become involved in this. It was immediately obvious that it was quite impossible. John had threatened over and over to kill Maxim. At Kamala Kangra, he would have done it — if the police hadn’t stopped him. John had never had any trouble, really, with the concept of killing anyone who threatened Sherlock’s life.

He imagined John being arrested a second time; this time, not escaping. Convicted. Sentenced to prison for murder. They would be torn apart, John would be destroyed.

No, he could never allow John to become involved in this now.

He excoriated himself. Everything that had happened, had happened because of his own folly, his own vanity. Fascinated by the Mysteries, vain enough to be flattered to be chosen by the elusive Maxim Purcell, he had stupidly ignored all the warning signs. He would almost certainly be dead himself now at Maxim’s hand, if not for Mycroft and John.

This was his mess. He had made it; he would clean it up. No one knew Maxim Purcell better, especially now. There were no more secrets between them. He would take care of this before Mycroft and Lestrade were endangered. John need not know until it was finished. And there was plenty of time to start planning for the baby. Eight and a half months. He stared down at his stomach, perplexed. There was something - someone - growing in there, this very minute. Something that John had given him, something unique that only he and John could make. A child. For a brief moment he imagined a baby with John’s eyes, John’s determined chin. He wavered.

With a tearing pain in his heart, he stepped off the platform and onto the train that would take him to Maxim Purcell, one last time.
To be continued...
I heard your voice through a photograph
I thought it up and brought up the past
Once you've know
you can never go back
I've got to take it on the otherside

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**bond**

*n*  something that binds, fastens, confines, or holds together.

*n*. The force of attraction holding two neighboring atoms of a molecule in place and resisting their separation, usually accomplished by the transfer or sharing of one or more electrons or pairs of electrons between the atoms.

*n*  binding security; firm assurance.

*synonyms*:

bonds, chains, fetters.

John rubbed his face, stretched. His body protested at every move. He had a headache, a stabbing pain. He knew perfectly well this was heat withdrawal, especially difficult after so long on suppressants. His body wasn’t accustomed to such violent hormonal fluctuations. He stubbornly resisted taking any one of a number of allieveiants to smooth out the androgen crash. He rubbed the painful spot between his brows that seemed to be the center of the pain.

This was the clinic’s late night shift and another doctor was supposed to be here to take over. He checked his watch. Twenty minutes past his time. He ought to have been on his way back to Baker Street by now. He was unaccountably nervous about the delay and reached for his mobile, thinking to text Sherlock, let him know he’d be later than he had thought. Not, he thought
resignedly, that Sherlock was likely to notice he was late. He no longer believed, however, that Sherlock didn’t notice when he was gone. He had come to understand that it was the opposite: Sherlock, when absorbed in the science of deduction, simply assumed John was always there.

There was a commotion in reception. "Doctor Watson!"

There was crashing, hectic shouting. John ran out to find a deceptively fragile young man struggling and shouting while two female beta nurses tried to calm him. When the man struck out with his fist at one of the nurses, John neatly swept his feet out from under him and made sure he fell against a chair, where John penned him in by holding his wrists. The boy’s eyes were glassy, pupils huge.

"Are you all right, Nancy," John asked over his shoulder.

"He pushed past and was tearing through the closet. Looking to steal drugs, that one," Nancy said calmly. "Shall I ring the police, then?"

They all saw the signs. Heatwave. It was mandatory to report it. But looking into the shivering boy’s eyes, John didn’t have the heart to do it.

"I’ll take care of it, Nancy. Call that Doctor Chandra -- find out where he is. I can’t stay late tonight," he said, dragging his reluctant new patient behind him. He pulled him into an examining room and gave him some water, looked him over and with a sigh, prepared a hypodermic.

"Don’t turn me in," the boy panted. "Please. I’ve never done it before. I swear. It was — a dare, like. Look, I’ll do you right," he swayed closer, tried to clutch at John’s trousers. John knocked his hand away in disgust.

"None of that or I will call the police, understand? Where do you live? Is there someone who can take you home, watch you?"

The boy shook his head sullenly, shivering. He had huge purple circles under his eyes. John looked closer. The boy looked like he’d been living rough and Heatwave wasn’t the only drug he’d been abusing.

"I won’t call the police— on one condition. Who gave you the stuff?" The boy was dark-haired and delicate looking, almost an innocent. Almost. John’s irritability swelled to a dull anger. He couldn’t help imagining Sherlock, first meeting Maxim, naively — he gritted his teeth and helped the boy roll up his sleeve, plunged in with the injection.

"I got it from . . . a mate. Dunno know where he got it, do I? Ohmygod, help me," he panted. "I feel — I need —" He clutch at John’s sleeve, his face shocked and desperate. His Omega scent exploded in the room. Through the throbbing of his headache John observed that it had no effect on him at all. He was bonded to Sherlock; no other Omega pheromones could arouse him now.

"Shhhh. Where’s your friend, then?" He couldn’t account for his curiosity; he’d treated dozens of Heatwave cases since starting at the clinic, dozens more in the Army medical corps.

Here the boy looked shifty, the lying look that was always right below the surface whenever you dealt with an addict. John groaned. He really ought to turn him in. He’d done it before, often enough; but the dryout tanks were harsh places and he’d heard the horror stories. He took the boy’s pulse. Slowing now.

"What’s your name?"
Another shifty look. "C’mon, please let me . . . fuck – " he said slyly, but then his eyelids were starting to get heavy. He sighed, almost a sob.

"Shut it. I’ll let you sleep here. I need your identification."

The boy fumbled in his pocket, dropped a crumpled wad of papers to the floor. John stooped and scooped it up, then caught the boy as he slumped over. Possibly intentionally. He held the boy away from him. He was radiating the heat of fever. Of heat.

"Listen to me. You can’t take this stuff any more, do you hear? It’s poison." He was holding the boy’s arm too tight. He let it go. The boy couldn’t hear him anyway. He sank back onto the examining table, curled up with his eyes closed. John found a blanket, tossed it over the boy.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered. He threw his coat on and went out, almost crashing into the night doctor, Chandra.

"About time — listen, I just treated a Heatwave, he’s sleeping it off. If you could check in on him every hour or so . . . Just — don’t call it in, all right? He’s . . . learned his lesson." He had some vague idea of telling Sherlock about the boy, seeing if his homeless network could shed any light. It was highly unusual for such an expensive drug to be found on a street boy. He hated to think of what could have happened, ugly things that happened in the dark places in the city every night. Sometimes in places not so dark. An image of the vast glass doors of Imperial Wharf, a luxurious glow within.

Chandra was curious. Doctor Watson was behaving oddly. He was known to be very strict with drugs cases. But John’s face, tight and impatient, the frown between his brows, made him hold in his questions. Clear case of androgen crash. He thought for the thousandth time how grateful he was to be a beta.

"Just this once," he said. "Lad like that ought to stay off the street now, anyway. That Sleeping Beauty killer is on the loose. They just found another dead Omega – you’ve seen the news? I’d have thought that Sherlock Holmes — "

"Yes, good," John said shortly, rushing out the door. He’d seen fragments of news everywhere, all about the terrible string of murders: the nurses clustered around the screen, gasping in sorrow and shock for the young victims. The last thing he wanted was for Sherlock to get swept up in a new serial murder case just now. He craved just a few days peace and quiet to recover and get their bearings. Settle into their new life as a bonded pair. As he passed, the nurses whispered behind him; how very different Doctor Watson had been, of late.

Nancy for one might have been inclined to challenge him for not calling the police; but one look at Doctor Watson’s implacable face and she kept it to herself. She felt it wouldn’t be wise to get on his bad side. In truth, she hadn’t really thought he had one before now. Watching Doctor Watson almost storm out into the street, she felt a wave of aggression in his wake.

###

The Thai shop was just closing. He took two curries and hurried the final two blocks home. It was cold, winter was coming. He had lost all track of time in India, even more in Scotland. He had seen a newspaper and was shocked to realise it was nearly All Hallows Eve.

He looked up; the night sky was clear and the moon, brilliant. This made him smile a little, thinking of Sherlock’s diligence in restoring the solar system to his mind palace, describing Pluto to him. ("It’s very cold . . . and very very dark so far from the sun.") Pluto the cast-off planet was
also the name of the ancient god of the underworld. A faint memory rattling around in his pain-wrecked brain reminded him that Pluto had first been known as Hades; later, Hades had become the name of his domain.

His smile faded to a frown. The aching in his head was getting more insistent. He allowed that a paracetamol was overdue.

He pushed open the door to 221b and set down the curries. It was very quiet.

"Sherlock!"

He started toward Sherlock’s bedroom, imagining happily that he might be tired from a cause other than the prodigious exertions of their first heat. His eye caught the gentle flutter of a slip of paper hanging neatly from the skull’s forehead, covered with a hasty scrawl. His hands flexed, closed into fists as he carefully crossed the room as if through a minefield. Sherlock’s note was short and very clear.

He didn’t move again for some minutes. When he did, it was to tear the note from the skull. The first clear feeling in a storm of feelings he recognised readily enough: dread; not yet fear, not yet terror. Not yet. He swallowed hard and willed his hand not to shake.

The first clear thought he had was that it was . . . how grotesque; yes, that was the word – how grotesque for Sherlock to have left these words, announcing an event that ought to have been so intimate, so joyful. Left the words attached to a skull. The skull was a reminder of death. Not that he needed reminding. He looked into its dark sockets. For the first time it seemed sinister and he wondered why he had never noticed that before. As if it could see dark things. Bad things.

He crumpled the note and it dropped to the carpet.

His leaden legs carried him to the bathroom. There, three Omega pregnancy test sticks were laid out in a precise row on the sink’s edge. Three pink “+” signs. Undeniable.

He reached out and very carefully picked one up, brought it close to his face; stared at the little symbol. The plus sign. Which meant, "positive." As in, "yes."

A plus sign was, of course, a mathematical symbol indicating the operation of addition: the adding of one thing to another. To create something larger.

His heart skittered in confusion — wanting to beat with joy, but weighed down as though by strong chains.

Alpha and Omega were symbols too. Bonded couples commonly wore bracelets engraved "Á + Ú." He had idly looked at an advert for one in a slick magazine on the train back from Scotland. Imagining fastening one around Sherlock’s slim wrist. Sherlock having scoffed, once, at the custom: "One might as well wear handcuffs," he had said with seeming contempt. And yet John had felt that curious, intense gaze, waiting to see what John might do or say.

# # #

Clearly, upon the occasion of learning he was bearing their child, Sherlock Holmes had not felt compelled to ascertain what John Watson might do or say, or even want, given the cruelly succinct facts he had written out in his note.
John gently placed the little test stick exactly where Sherlock had left it. He stared remotely at the pattern of hexagonal white tiles on the floor. He hardly noticed that he was heaving great breaths.

Seemingly a lifetime ago, he had been sitting on the edge of the tub, letting water run over these tiles. Sherlock had burst in; he’d been afraid, he’d said, that John had hurt himself.

The pain in his skull broke loose and joined with black ire; together, they marauded through him. He thought it might get too big for him to take. He wondered what would happen, then.

Sherlock hadn’t cared in the slightest that he was hurting John now, a hurt far worse than the blow to his head all those weeks ago. A blow to his heart he might have called it, except that he had thought their hearts were one now. That was what bonding was supposed to be. But he could still recall a time when he had thought that Sherlock Holmes didn’t possess a heart. Not like other people did. Standing here alone in the bathroom of 221b, he remembered exactly why. Probably he had been very stupid indeed to have forgotten it.

A bond could never be broken. Bonded mates took on traits of the other, a mysterious osmosis that could be a blessing—and a curse. But bonding did not change what a person fundamentally was.

John had flash, a vision of himself. Of Afghanistan. Blood on his hands and in his eyes. He looked up finally into the mirror and confronted himself. His hand strayed back to the test stick.

Clearly Sherlock Holmes, brilliant chemist that he was, had forgotten one of the fundamentals of chemistry: Only Alpha and an Omega binding together at a molecular level could form a new bond and create the miracle of a new life.

But it wasn’t chemistry that was uppermost in Sherlock’s mind, apparently. Sherlock Holmes, his bonded, the love of his life and the father of their unborn child was bent on acting alone, possibly putting his own life and that of their child, at risk.

All over this Sleeping Beauties case.

The dread and pain and anger took him. Now there was a keen new pain. His hand was lacerated. Blood dripped steadily onto the white tiles. The mirror was gone.

John stepped in his own blood, crushing sliver shards beneath his feet.

###

He stopped himself from storming out the door to try to hunt Sherlock down in London streets. To find Sherlock would require calm analysis, the last thing he felt capable of. He sat down on the sofa and closed his eyes. What did he know?

First, not one day back from their sojourn in Scotland, had Sherlock gone after the Sleeping Beauties killer - for surely, that was what he was doing — fully aware of his new condition. Deep inside, beneath his fear and his anger, John heard a warning voice telling him that there was something driving Sherlock here, something he could not turn from.

The Sleeping Beauties case dominated the news. John started reading on his laptop. There were photographs of the victims - not their bodies of course, but happy smiling faces of the boys in life. He froze. The boys all had a certain look about them.

He pulled up a video link that Mycroft had given him. Andrew Kearn, the boy who had vanished
on the way to Dharamsala, smiling. Chattering excitedly about Paramananda Pharmaceuticals. John hit "pause." He studied Andrew Kern’s face, frozen in time; the last time anyone had seen him alive. John pushed back black emotion and tried harder to focus. The thought of those little test sticks in the bath parted the fog and permitted him a glimpse of the way forward.

The face of Andrew Kern lead him to another fact: Mycroft Holmes suspected Maxim of murdering Kern. The Mumbai authorities had as well, but then they had given up. Maxim had been too clever for them all. John remembered saying to Mycroft, "He looks like Sherlock." Mycroft had thought so, too.

Finally, there were the "Sleeping Beauties," Omega boys turning up dead around London. Their arresting, dark-haired beauty reminded him of the missing Kern boy.

Another fact – the press was speculating that the "Sleeping Beauties" had taken – or had been given --- some new sort of club drug.

A drug manufactured by Paramananda Pharmaceuticals, possibly?

Sherlock was hunting Maxim Purcell.

Maxim Purcell was the Sleeping Beauties murderer.

Sherlock said in his note that he’d "be back tomorrow, probably." If Sherlock would be gone longer than a day, it was likely because he planned to leave London. But not too far.

###

The fundamental problem here, John decided, was that Sherlock Holmes was in need of a demonstration of what bonding really was, what bonding truly meant.

And it wasn’t the acts performed in heat, no matter how exhilarating. His anger momentarily slipped and he was back in the cottage, enfolded in purest rapture. But the blackness took him back, his feet planted firmly on the floor of 221b. He vaguely noticed that his shredded knuckles were slowly dripping blood onto the carpet with a soft patter.

He willed himself to stillness and made a decision. John Watson was very good at making decisions. The decision he made was very simple. If Sherlock Holmes was willing to risk himself and their child, John Watson was willing to do whatever it took to preserve them both, at all costs. And if Sherlock Holmes required education in the meaning of a bond, he was ready to make a demonstration.

###

So much for strategy. Time for tactics.

As for how he would go about finding Sherlock, he knew of only one likely source: Lestrade. But an excruciating half an hour of frustrated effort yielded precisely nothing - Lestrade was out of touch, Donovan wasn’t taking his calls. He thought of calling DI Dimmock, but instead decided to attack the problem from the opposite angle. The morgue at Barts.

Molly Hooper did not look happy to see him. "Doctor Watson! You can’t be here – if you’ve read the news you know why." She looked pale and more nervous than usual and was frowning over a stack of computer printouts.
"Look - I think I can help."

"You can help – where’s Sherlock, then?"

John steeled himself to outward calmness. "He’s following leads. In the Sleeping Beauty case. He — he asked me to see you. Ask if you’d found out anything new." He was floundering here, which made him even angrier, but he was still sufficiently in control to understand that anger wouldn’t work with Molly Hooper.

Later, he would give it full reign.

"I didn’t know Sherlock was on the case. DI Lestrade would have said something."

"Look. Haven’t you checked out whether it’s a Heatwave?"

"Of course we did. But it isn’t. And the look... too peaceful for that. If you understand what I mean."

He did. He had seen corpses of Heatwave victims. During rigor mortis, their faces were frozen in frightful contortions.

"Listen, Molly. There’s a company in India, Mumbai... Paramananda Pharmaceuticals. The Mumbai police just seized all of their drugs. They were manufacturing new sorts of Heatwaves, black market pheromones. Sherlock thinks... maybe these boys were being given something made there. Something new."

"How do you know all this?" She said suspiciously. "I’ve been running tests on a little vial that was found on the first victim. But it’s been kept strictly within the investigation, no one knows about it."

"Does it have... a gold label? With a lotus?" He couldn’t keep his voice from choking with revulsion, imaging all the times that Maxim had poured such stuff down Sherlock’s throat. Then terror as his brain couldn’t help sliding toward a vision of him doing the same to Sherlock now. Sherlock and their –

Molly put her papers down and looked at John, really looked. And backed away. "John? You seem – look, maybe you’d better go," she whispered. John blinked and realised she was afraid of him.

"No, Molly - I’m, I’m sorry. It’s Sherlock — he’s gotten himself into something – this murderer, he knows him. And he thinks he can handle it alone. And he can’t. I can’t let him."

Molly softened a little but didn’t come any closer. Betas were very intimidated by Alpha fury, and she had never felt one as dangerous as this. It didn’t feel like John Watson at all. She glanced at the door. She wanted to get away. John put his hand on hers, and she gasped. He clenched firmly, not hurting. But he wasn’t going to let her go.

"Show me anything you have. Anything at all that might help me find out... where these boys were actually killed... or where they might have been going." He was thinking now of Andrew Kearn, who had blithely announced that he was on his way to Dharamsala – "private plane!" before vanishing.

She was mesmerised: a rabbit before a cobra. Frozen, Molly held her breath, didn’t move, colour draining from her face. John felt a twinge of remorse. Only a twinge.
"Molly. He’s — I can’t let him get hurt. He’s my bonded now. Do you understand what that means? And, and... he’s. We’re. He’s —"

"He’s what? What’s wrong with Sherlock? You’re frightening me, John."

John crumpled and let go her hand. He put his hands over his eyes, and she saw the raw cuts, ragged strips of flesh clotted with fresh blood. "He’s pregnant."

Molly sat slowly down on a stool. She hadn’t the faintest idea what to say. Such a thing seemed impossible. Now at least she understood the change that had come over John. She pushed one toward John with her foot and he sat too.

"All the other evidence has been taken by the Yard. But there was that boy... brought in two nights ago. I found something. But it might be nothing." She pulled over a laptop and brought up a fuzzy pixelated image that was slowly resolving into something sharper. While John stared, she quietly sterilized and bound his cuts. He felt nothing. Finally the picture was still, crisp and clear.

What they were looking at was a close-up of woven fabric. On it was a blurry pattern that seemed to be words, maybe a code? Then he realised they were simply reversed.

"Oh. Sorry," she said, and pressed a key. The image reversed.

"The victim had a scrap of paper in his pocket. There was drug residue in the pocket as well: that was our first priority. The body lay in the rain for a long time. The paper itself turned to pulp. But the ink had soaked into the lining of his trouser pocket. It left an impression. I noticed it when we were removing the drugs residue."

They looked at the image. The words were:

"Hants, AHE"

"Hants? Hampshire?" Molly printed the photograph, then looked at John and silently printed another. "This’s for the Yard to sort. Maybe... he had a friend in Hampshire? Anyway, it’ll be a day or two for toxicology."

John folded the image and put it in his pocket.

"What will you do now?" Molly asked.

"Bring Sherlock, bring them back home safe," John said.

She watched the doors swing closed behind him and took a deep calming breath. It really was true about Alphas when their mate was in danger. She had never seen it up close before, although she had seen the result often enough. She had worked with corpses so battered and mutilated that they almost didn’t pass for human. Alpha rage could be almost supernatural in its power. The fact that it didn’t really show in John’s face didn’t count. She had looked into his eyes.

She decided to make a call. No one seemed to know where DI Lestrade was, but she left him a message and put him in the picture, and felt a little relieved for having done so. Then she turned to her notes on the effects found on the bodies of the Sleeping Beauties victims to date.

One boy had indeed been found with a little vial, a scrap of a golden label nearly rubbed off. She pulled up that image and decided that if you looked closely, the image might be the petal of a flower. Possibly a lotus.
Reaching into his pocket for his Oyster card, John felt an unfamiliar wad of papers and groaned. It was the papers the Omega boy at the clinic had dropped. He unfolded it. Unsurprisingly, there was no ID. But there was a grubby little folded card, a little bigger than a business card. It had an engraving of the outline of a grand house, some sort of manor or hall. Beneath, it read,

Hantswood Hall
Tatsfield, Surrey TN16 2BJ
All Hallows Eve.
Ten O’ Clock

On the reverse was a now-familiar symbol, this time not golden. A black lotus.

He rang the clinic. Chandra answered curtly.

"Doctor Chandra. Is the boy still sleeping?"

"That boy woke up. You didn’t dose him enough, Doctor. But I suppose you were being conservative, he was in frail condition. Not too frail to leave, though."

"He’s gone? Did he leave his name, number, anything?"

"That sort! What do you think. Right back on the street. You asked me not to report him. I thought you were fine with him going, once he was better. Is there something you’re not telling me, Doctor Watson?"

"Forget it," he said shortly. It didn’t matter now. He studied the card. Hantswood. Like the note pressed into the dead boy’s pocket. One of the Sleeping Beauties" "Hants” Not Hampshire at all. Surrey. Not far, then. And "AHE” was plain enough. All Hallow’s Eve.

("I’ll be back tomorrow, probably.")

John didn’t have a mind palace; nevertheless, he possessed an excellent memory. John had excelled in physics, a required course for premed.

"For every action," he recited to himself coldly, "there is an equal and opposite reaction."

###

_A pub on the North Downs, Surrey. The next day._
A tall bearded man, a beta in a rough tweed coat and thick boots, sat quietly in the darkest corner of a half-timbered pub. He appeared to be a local farmer. Smoke clung to the beams from yesteryear’s cigarettes and pipes, wafted from the ancient blackened fireplace. There was a malty, doughy aroma of ale.

The man who might have been a farmer paid for steady half pints, ate heartily of a shepherd’s pie. Nobody noticed he didn’t actually drink. After a while, nobody noticed him at all.

Night fell.

A small, frail looking old man in an overcoat and muffled up in a scarf entered and directly approached the farmer. The old man carried a small battered case, like an antique traveling trunk. He sat at the farmer’s table.

They regarded each other silently for a few moments. The old man’s eyes were dark with the sorrows of the past, and of knowing too much of the future.

"There is nothing to be done. You’re . . . " The old man looked down.

Sherlock Holmes nodded. He looked down too. "I knew you’d feel it. He’ll feel it too. I can’t have that. Of course I can’t ingest . . . well, anything at all, now."

"But I admire your mixture. An oil, perhaps? The very centre of a beta of the countryside."

"The air in here helps. So many mature old notes. People mind their business here, anyway."

El Brujo gave Sherlock a commanding look. "Go back. Your Alpha fought for you, he freed you. Why are you alone?"

"Because no one else can pay for this. It has to be me. You’ve been in London, you know what he’s doing now, surely."

"Your homeless friends, they do not say much. But I came anyway. I thought this might be your idea. But I didn’t expect you to be—"

"Yes, yes," Sherlock muttered. "I need to get very close to him. He can’t know about my condition, he can’t even know it’s me. This beta oil is all very well for public consumption. Maxim would never be fooled, obviously. Will you help me? There’s no time, you see— or I’d do it myself."

"You use the words, "me," and "myself," far too much, my reckless friend. This does not become an Omega who is bonded. Have you thought truly of what you mean to do? What could happen?" El Brujo was too old and too wise not to pretend not to be afraid. "I’ve helped you before."

Sherlock flushed a little at this, felt the rebuke. He remembered El Brujo’s gift: the old bottles, draining their contents. Maxim’s rage.

"What would my friend Damchok Rinpoche say about this plan?"

Sherlock’s eyes widened. El Brujo did not smile. His eyes glittered. Sherlock looked away.

"I will tell you what he says. He says to remember what he told you. In Dharamasala."

Sherlock frowned, remembering. They had spoken of many things that day. John had been with him, then. He was with him now, too; he felt John strongly. Not just inside, not just the spark of
new life that was still more an idea than an actual feeling; this was John himself. He had never felt impressions like this from John. He didn’t want this feeling, it was frightening, and Sherlock Holmes was never afraid. Almost never. (In a cottage on a loch he lay against tangled sheets, shivering. "Don’t be afraid," John said.) He felt a foreboding, like opening a familiar door and finding something behind it that was not supposed to be there.

"Damchok Rinpoche said," Sherlock began slowly, "Your Alpha is not easily changed—"

"– once his mind is made up about something," El Brujo finished.

Sherlock nodded. It was true. "Then I need to be quick. What I have to do, I have to do before John... tries to find me."

El Brujo closed his eyes, steepled his fingertips. "You are on the wrong road. But I can see you won’t turn back. We need someplace to work. A quiet place."

"I’ve rented a room from the publican. The outbuilding across the way. I’ll go now. Wait, then follow me."

Sherlock doffed his cap and went out into the night. El Brujo watched out the window as he crossed the road, then walked up a chalky slope that shone very white in the moonlight. Outlined in the brilliant silver light of the autumn moon, Sherlock looked radiant.

And very alone.

To be continued. . .
The Road to Canterbury

The Omega Sutra. Chapter 16 - The Road to Canterbury.

I want to give my mind to gain, if I can, and not to explain our deceptions. For though I told them to you, your wit is all too bare to understand them.


Sweet dreams are made of this --

Who am I to disagree?

I travel the world and the seven seas . . .

everybody’s looking for something.

Some of them want to use you,

Some of them want to be used by you.

Some of them want to abuse you;

Some of them want to be abused.

Avicii - Sweet Dreams (Cazette Meet at Night Mix): Listen here:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAfXG2fWgQQ](www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAfXG2fWgQQ)

9:00 p.m., 30 October. Creechurch Lane, the City.
Mycroft arrived punctually at nine’o clock.

"You’re right on time," Lestrade said.

"Punctuality is the courtesy of kings."

Only someone as innately regal as Mycroft Holmes could get away with this, Lestrade thought briefly, but he was too weary to tease him. He led Mycroft across the tiny flat (a matter of mere steps) to the equally tiny kitchen and uncorked the wine. He didn’t like to admit that Mycroft was his first visitor to his new residence. "Home" was not a word he used for this place; then again, his former house had not been a home for a very long time. With Mycroft here he felt an unexpected twinge, perhaps of longing, for that simple comfort and peace.

"What shall we drink to?"

"I usually drink to Her Majesty’s health. Tonight, I think ‘to the future’ feels right."

But the only future Lestrade could see was the immediate one: the Sleeping Beauties case. He turned to the thick files balanced on the counter bar that served for his dining table. Mycroft observed his preoccupation, and strode across the sitting room to the window.

"I do so admire your confidence," Mycroft said lightly, looking out into Creechurch Lane.

"I’m glad to hear it. Why, especially?"

Mycroft was craning his elegant neck, looking up. From the window, one could see rounded edges of alternating dark blue and clear window glass.

"It’s not every man who can live in the very shadow of The Gherkin. . . . a Freudian nightmare, one should think," he pronounced.

Lestrade choked on his wine. As usual, he found it impossible to tell if Mycroft were deadly serious or jesting. This was aggravating. He felt he ought to be able to tell.

"I never thought of it like that."

"Naturally. I can attest that you have absolutely no reason to," Mycroft said archly. "Which brings me to an important question. Are we eating?"
Lestrade suppressed a smirk. He could never have imagined that Mycroft Holmes would be better able to lift his spirits than anyone else, and he was quietly glad now that Mycroft was here. More than any other case he could remember, the Sleeping Beauties case felt sinister.

Lestrade was not susceptible, as some other officers were, to the unique atmosphere that seemed to surround certain murders. But this case induced a sort of creeping sensation when he stopped long enough to notice his own feelings. And with Mycroft here, he knew why this case felt different. It wasn’t just the poor victims; though they were always present, driving him on and sometimes invading his sleep with their beautiful, still faces and accusatory eyes. This was about Mycroft.

Lestrade had almost canceled their engagement tonight. But he really didn’t want that, and had allowed himself to keep it on the self-imposed condition that tonight was strictly business.

"We are eating," he said, and distributed takeout Italian from the chic restaurant across the street. He never went there for himself, but in making his hurried plans for this night he had decided that Mycroft would probably find his usual standbys sorely lacking.

Mycroft approached as he climbed onto one of the barstools, pressed up against him, brushed cool lips on the back of his neck. It felt bloody marvelous, but he pulled back.

"Look. Mycroft. You’re making it much too easy for me to lose my head here," he said fast before he lost his nerve. "Tonight I just need to talk with you. I . . ." he stopped short in the face of Mycroft’s plain amusement. Which might be masking disappointment; he figured Mycroft wouldn’t let him see that.

"You . . . hardly know me. Is that what you were on the point of telling me, Greg? Or . . . should I call you Detective Inspector Lestrade?"

"Don’t be daft. Of course, call me Greg. And that’s not it. It’s just – this case. This Maxim is too clever by half. I need – we both need – to just focus on tomorrow. I need to prepare you for what to say, how to answer their questions. I can’t let myself —" He couldn’t say it, so he drank down some more wine, and pushed the glass away. No more Dutch courage.

Mycroft made a show of moving to the farthest end of the counter. "I quite understand. Don’t concern yourself. I shan’t touch you. Tonight is strictly police business then, I gather. My mistake. I suppose I had better have some more of that wine if you’re going to cross-examine me – Detective Inspector."

Lestrade cursed himself, the case. How many times had doing his job hurt people he cared about? It was a police cliche, and he was living it. Now, he’d blown things before they’d properly begun. Maybe Mycroft thought he was retreating; uncomfortable with having strayed from his orientation. Maybe he was. Things seemed confusing here in London. They hadn’t in Mumbai.

Mycroft’s eyes were weighing him gravely. It was impossible to tell what the man was thinking. He was a detective -- he considered himself up to the challenge. And his promise to himself didn’t have to prevent him from getting to know Mycroft Holmes better. He put on an innocent expression as he cleared their plates.

"Right then. I’ll start with an easy question. What is it that you do, exactly? I mean at MI5. It is MI5, isn’t it?"

Mycroft smiled thinly. He was not falling for the innocent act. Lestrade immediately dropped it, and waited out the long silence for an answer. He was better at this than any other detective on the Homicide Squad and more than a few killers had confessed under his patient, judgmental silence.
"After a manner of speaking. What do I . . . do? That’s actually not an easy question. . .hmmmm. Protection, in the broadest sense. As to how that is achieved, well – let’s just say, I have a variety of resources at my disposal."

Lestrade nodded. He understood this. "Police protect, too. When we can. So we’ve that in common. In the Sleeping Beauties case we’re failing," he said bleakly. If he opened the topmost file, they would see an autopsy photograph of the latest victim. He appreciated that Mycroft didn’t offer him false reassurance.

Mycroft excused himself to take a hushed call on his mobile, then raised his voice harshly:

"Philips. I asked you to repeat it because I could not have heard you correctly. I expressly ordered you not to rely on tracking devices. He will always find them! You are quite certain you’ve lost him? How very unfortunate – especially for you, Philips. There are a number of open postings with frightfully high mortality risks. Anthea will contact you."

Mycroft was outwardly as composed as ever, but his eyes were very hard. He finished the last of his wine.

"Sherlock?"

"I’ve had him under very close watch since he returned to London. Well, I did have."

"But John –" Lestrade’s own mobile buzzed and he listened intently. "Doctor Hooper saw just saw John Watson at Barts. He told her I had called Sherlock in on the case."

"You have not, obviously."

"I would have, of course, if it were any other case. But John also said that Sherlock is determined go forward alone."

"He always has done – until John."

Lestrade pulled out a bottle of fine scotch and poured them each a stiff glass.

"Something stronger, under the circumstances. John and Sherlock — well, you know they’re just back from that retreat. Scotland, was it? And, well, ah - now Sherlock’s —"

"– I see," Mycroft said quietly.

The scotch soothed them for a few moments, but the news of this pregnancy was so incongruent with Lestrade’s idea of Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective, that he almost couldn’t believe it – except for Mycroft’s odd expression. Whatever it was, it was not surprise: Mycroft had expected this. Another reason for Mycroft to have been watching Sherlock more closely. This led to thoughts of children, a topic seemingly unbroachable between two Alphas. He was frustrated with himself: his mind seemed determined to tear apart his agenda for the evening. These foolishly domestic thoughts were nothing but a dangerous distraction. Mycroft’s voice wrenched his attention back to the case.

"Do you know where is John now?"

"Doctor Hooper said John wouldn’t tell her where he was going," Lestrade replied. "She said . . . he frightened her. But she gave him something – Sergeant Donovan already forwarded it to me. It’s a note from the pocket of one of the victims." Lestrade could not be angry with Doctor Hooper for giving in to John; an Alpha had an almost unconquerable drive to protect his pregnant mate.
He pulled up his mobile and they both looked at the image of blurred ink that had been soaked by rainfall into the cloth of the victim’s trouser pocket.

"Hants, AHE V-D 12:50 P3"

They stared at one other, stricken.

"Hants. Hantsfield Hall."

"Yes. And V-D 12:50 P3. . . that’s a train. Victoria station, 12:50 to Dorking, platform 3. It’s the nearest regular train passing near Tatsfield, Donovan checked it out. "AHE" is All Hallows Eve, obviously. Our last victim was going to Maxim’s party . . . but he didn’t make it."

"John couldn’t know what to make of this. If anything he will think Hants means, Hampshire. Not unless Sherlock told him something different, and he obviously didn’t," Mycroft said firmly. "The real question is, does Sherlock know about Maxim’s little Halloween party? Because it cannot be a coincidence that today of all days, my brother has apparently decided to both evade my surveillance and devote himself to solving the Sleeping Beauties case."

"They’ve barely been back from Scotland for a day. Only to my closest officers know about this evidence, and none of them would share it with Sherlock Holmes without my authority. Even Doctor Hooper wouldn’t know what it meant. But I’ll take precautions."

Lestrade called in a watch for John Watson and Sherlock Holmes in the vicinity of Tatsfield and began rehearsing tomorrow’s operation in his mind. Some minutes must have passed, because Mycroft cleared his throat politely, standing up.

"I'm very flattered you wanted to make time for me tonight, Detective Inspector. But I can see that you have more pressing concerns. I'd better leave you to it. We can meet at the Yard in the morning," Mycroft said formally. Lestrade put out his hand to stay him, remembering Mumbai and hands reaching for each other in the dark.

"No, I do want you here — I need to try harder to shut it off, sometimes."

"I quite understand. I should think serial killers are the worst cases."

"The truth is, there is still a lot needs doing before tomorrow. I'm waiting on the wiretap team."

"But you needed to eat. And you will need to sleep. But if you want me to stay, we ought to go over the plan, yes?"

"Yes." Lestrade opened his laptop and pulled up a satellite map of the town of Tatsfield.

"It’s a small village. And this Hantswood Hall stands apart from the village, on high ground. We just can't storm up in police vans. We’ll be sending plainclothes officers in separate cars. But Mycroft — about wearing the wire... you're really determined to do it? I know one or two likely young constables that would fill the bill."

Lestrade knew Mycroft would think this was the real reason he had kept this dinner engagement tonight: to talk him out of wearing a wire to Maxim’s house. He couldn't help it; imagining Mycroft with Maxim made him feel apprehensive and aggressive all at once. Neither of which was helping him keep his head and do his job.

"Do you really think that wise? Leaving this to a raw constable?" Mycroft wasn’t hiding his feelings now. He was offended. "These Omega boys... Maxim doesn't converse with them, I
shouldn't think. He won't be unguarded around some new boy. No, I have the best chance to catch Maxim saying something . . . incriminating," he said decisively.

Mycroft had deftly avoided telling him why he was so confident that Maxim would admit him to his private party and possibly, confide in him. It was pointless to pull his own not-insignificant rank with the Met to change things now. Mycroft would simply go over Lestrade's head. He was choosing to ignore Lestrade's feelings, which must be quite obvious.

Maybe he should make Mycroft pay more attention, Lestrade thought darkly, dimly aware that this was quite inconsistent with his intentions here. Strictly business.

"Just listen, Mycroft --"

"– There really isn’t anything you can say to dissuade me. If that’s why you brought me here tonight, I’m sorry to disappoint you. The Holmeses are not cowards," he said frostily.

"God! I never said – of course that’s not why – "

Mycroft’s face was stony. Lestrade shut his mouth. There was a long and uncomfortable pause.

Mycroft was actually called "the Iceman" in some quarters. This was wrong. Cool on the surface, yes; no one cooler. For example, after his prohibition tonight against touching, Mycroft had behaved with perfect decorum.

Too perfect.

In Mumbai he had felt what was underneath. But this was London. He was the one that needed a cool head now. Lestrade rubbed the back of his neck where it felt hot. Mycroft's very self-restraint was provocative; he seemed to be feeling it under his skin.

Lestrade thought that Mycroft knew this very well, and was quite enjoying letting him have his just desserts.

* * *

Finally his team called with a report. Now there was nothing to do but wait for tomorrow: All Hallows Eve.

Mycroft took custom-blended suppressants, and the aristocratic, arrogant scent was making him feel both aggressive and desperately needy. The presence of another strong Alpha for so long at time in his new flat was having its natural effect. This, he thought, would be a very good time to ask Mycroft to leave.

But there was one last thing that needed doing. He loosened his tie. Mycroft’s haughty, bold stare made him feel undressed.

Undressed. This was exactly what they needed to talk about.

"So . . . have you ever worn a wire before?"

"Naturally."

Lestrade didn't know what that meant. He plunged on. "I meant, in a situation where you would expect to submit. . .to a bodily search."

"I see. Then I admit, no. My sort of operation does not usually involve . . . such scenarios."
"Ah..." Lestrade tried, and failed, to picture what they did involve. "Look, there are two kinds of criminal that will always be on the lookout for a wire. Drugs gangs, obviously. And what we call extreme pornographers: Torture. Paedophiles. And snuff. After Mumbai, it’s clear that’s what we’re dealing with. These are snuff films they’re making."

"But do you really believe that is the motive for the killings - to create these films?"

"Motive’s not a necessary element for the Crown to prove murder. But it’s hard to see what other motive there can be. I think these Omegas are dying for the private amusement of an international sex ring. But without all the elegant trappings, these "Mysteries," if that’s what this is part of – it’s still just murder." What he had learned of Maxim’s practices – the Mysteries – fascinated and repelled him. He had a strong feeling that Sherlock was not the only Holmes who had some experience of the Mysteries. Lestrade was coming to realise that Mycroft might in some ways be more like Sherlock than he had known.

"Anyway, sit still – right where you are. Please. I need to test your wire."

"Very well. Who's going to fit me up tomorrow?"

Lestrade was taken aback. He swallowed hard. "Jesus. Mycroft. You don't think I'd leave it to anyone else? I'll do it myself. No one but me is going to be responsible for you, do you understand?"

He heard his voice getting louder. Mycroft lifted a brow.

"Quite," he said.

* * *

Lestrade pulled a little box from his pocket and held out its contents: a long, hair-thin filament tipped with a minuscule computer chip. Lestrade carefully threaded it in Mycroft’s hair. He could feel Mycroft’s breath against his face as he ran his fingers through it more than was really necessary, telling himself he was just making certain the wire was very secure.

"What will happen? If they should... search me, I mean."

Lestrade's heart skittered.

"If they do...maybe they'll just try to feel over your clothes. If they're really serious, they'll feel underneath, or even make you, ah.." He could not say it. A warm flush crawled over his skin.

"Disrobe?"

"Yes." Inside he thought, No, not happening. He reached for Mycroft's collar buttons, loosened that impeccable Asprey tie, and secured the end of the filament at the nape of his neck. The device was invisible and highly sensitive: they would be able to hear everything said between Mycroft and anyone in the room with him. If it worked. Wires were notoriously temperamental.

"They may do a very...thorough search."

Mycroft was regarding him cynically. This was really annoying and Lestrade scowled back at him. "You don't have to pretend to like it - but you can't seem nervous."

"I assure you I won't. Detective Inspector. But perhaps you would prefer to make certain of my nerve."
Now this was a direct challenge, Alpha to Alpha, and Lestrade was very tempted to give a demonstration. He imagined thrusting his hands under that crisp shirt, feeling the skin beneath. And more than that, he knew that now. His lifelong experience of Omegas had conditioned him to certain cravings, and his body was demanding satisfaction. He swiftly withdrew the wire and put it away, trying to mask this sudden surge of Alpha drives.

He took a deliberate breath. Mycroft exuded definite and precise territorial pheromones. The scent of an Alpha staking a claim. If he accepted this claim, even laid down one of his own. . .what then? He hadn’t felt this alive, wanted and wanting, in years. But vivid images of what he truly wanted frustrated him. His body would always want it and he didn’t know what to do about it.

For an Alpha to submit to penetration by another Alpha was extraordinarily difficult, physically and mentally. It was effectively taboo, an act unspoken of: what he did know, he had learned from his work in vice. He felt hotter imagining whether Mycroft had ever tried.

"Do you trust me," he asked impulsively.

Mycroft said simply, "Of course."

The answer disappointed him. It felt like maybe Mycroft didn't think he was much of a challenge after all.

"Do you trust me," Mycroft asked quietly.

His hands were around Mycroft’s arms, gripping hard. He didn’t want to talk anymore. He wanted to kiss him; his tongue in Mycroft’s mouth would soothe his craving a little. But he had to tell the truth. For better or worse, Lestrade possessed no artifice.

"No," he said honestly. "I don’t."

Mycroft didn’t seem surprised. "Good. It gives us something to work for."

He liked the sound of that. This close, Lestrade wanted to be done with holding back: he wanted to bite, to mark Mycroft’s throat. More than that. At their most primal core, Alphas needed to fuck; and so, his impulse was to fuck Mycroft: yes, that was exactly what he needed. He held himself very still. Together their pheromones were making something new and strange.

Mycroft leaned forward, and whispered against his ear.

"Do you know that I can scent you, what you want . . . right now?"

"I can’t help it," he gasped. This was not heat, but every bit as potent. "You don’t know what it’s like – you’re on suppressants, you don’t go with Omegas. I know it’s wrong." He backed away, tried to clear his head. "Go home. We’ll meet at the Yard in the morning. I’m sorry."

"Don’t be. And it is you who are wrong," Mycroft said enigmatically as he closed the door behind him.

Alone in their respective beds, they did not sleep. In a few hours, it would be time for Mycroft to go to Maxim.

###

An ancient track crosses Surrey along the North Downs, extending as far as the White Cliffs of Dover. Possibly the most famous story-telling contest in literature was held by pilgrims traveling this road, on their way to Canterbury. The road existed before even Chaucer’s time: fragments of Roman road are still to be seen there.

A tall figure and a smaller one tramped silently along the ancient track on a pilgrimage of their own. They endured a raw cold wind as the road climbed higher and a thick clinging mist swirled around them. At this line of latitude, there was no higher point until one reached Moscow: on a clear day, it was possible to see the tallest London landmarks - such as the Gherkin, which overlooked the home of one Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade of the Metropolitan Police.

"Hantswood Hall is there," Sherlock said to El Brujo at last, pointing to the next hill. It was crowned with a structure that glowed with artificial light through the mist.

Sherlock had been somewhat surprised to learn of Maxim’s purchase of the Hantswood estate. Their relationship was limited to sexual and erotic games, and neither was remotely interested the other’s domestic lives. But Sherlock knew enough to be aware that Maxim did not care for suburban life. Maxim had residences in cities the world over, all minimalist modern penthouses – excepting the tea estate at Kamala Kangra.

But regarding Hantswood Hall, as in so many other things, Maxim was secretive. Sherlock’s detective’s instincts were unaccountably provoked, and so he searched out the history of the estate. Tatsfield, the nearest town, was from the Anglo-Saxon, ‘Tot-hyl,’ meaning a watch hill. Concerning Hantswood Hall itself, an old tract of the district said:

"Hantswood was the name of the former wood here, meaning ‘a haunted wood,’ which is no more than a wood superstitiously supposed to be frequented by a ghost, or spectre, which haunts, hunts or pursues every person who enters it."

The same tract informed the reader that in the year 1661, the townspeople had accused the eccentric squire of Hantswood Hall of entering into a pact with the devil. The Hall was burned to the ground. No one could say whether the fire was started by the frightened townspeople or the squire himself.

Some said the fire caused by the Devil himself, coming to claim what was his by binding contract. When Maxim purchased the estate, only a few blackened walls remained.

"I will come with you as far as the gates, and watch for you," El Brujo said. "Remember, Sherlock, what I have said."

"Yes, yes," Sherlock said abstractedly. With a few hours distance he found himself imagining what he might have done differently, which was highly uncharacteristic - Sherlock never spared a thought for anything resembling guilt or regret, emotions that he was quite unaccustomed to. Even with these uncomfortable sensations troubling him now, he could not imagine how he could have prevented John from coming with him, or stopping him. There was nothing else he could have
He kept picturing John entering 221b, reading his hurried note. Looking at the pink test strips. He realised he had forgotten to ascertain exactly how long the pink "plus" signs would remain visible, and had an anxious feeling that perhaps the little symbols would have vanished before John could see them. His note might seem meaningless then. But then again, John was an actual doctor, and undoubtedly even he could deduce the meaning of his note: "Look in the bathroom," with the test strips, lying there.

No, by now, John knew that their lives were going to change, there would be a child. This still seemed completely unreal. He told himself he would think about it later. Nine months was a very long time to think.

El Brujo was interrupting this unprecedented chain of thought and admonishing him to remember, and so he tried. He never deleted El Brujo’s words, even when they seemed as obscure and trivial as the orbits of the planets had been to him. This thought brought forth another image of John, roaring at him in 221b: "But it’s the solar system!" And of John at Loch Linhe, gently mocking him as he tried to compare John’s warmth to the sun. Even here, so many miles from London and Baker Street, he felt John with him. But the feeling was not warm. He shivered. Now it was All Hallows Eve and the sun was long gone.

Because El Brujo had made a point of reminding him, Sherlock recovered his words.

###

"No place is free of history, Sherlock. This road is spoken of in one of your country’s oldest books, ‘The Canterbury Tales.’"

The name evoked an unpleasant memory of translating Middle English in school. Even then, Sherlock had divided knowledge into two simple categories: that which could, and that which could not have possible application to the solving of present-day murders. He had promptly discarded Chaucer as having no features of interest whatsoever.

"I fail to understand why you would read that rubbish," Sherlock had said, rummaging but failing to retrieve any reference in the feeble remnants of his memories of Chaucer to pheromones. That is what he had thought they were talking about before El Brujo had abruptly changed course.

"Because, Sherlock, not all knowledge can be gained through what you call evidence. Texts of all languages and of all times teach us about light and dark, good and evil, yin and yang - creation and destruction."

"The Omega Sutra is one, I suppose."

"Of course. And The Canterbury Tales, another. You were confused about the difference between these things – light and dark – not so long ago. You could have been lost, Sherlock. Think of why you were not. And you will know what you must do."

Sherlock had shaken his head gently, placing his hands almost fondly on the old man’s shoulders. He knew that El Brujo was trying to say that he was still in danger, what he would probably call a danger of the spirit.

"I don’t believe in supernatural powers . . . there are no powers beyond the human mind and body."

"What is mind? What is body? Chaucer warned of what in those days were called demons. This must be fate that tonight of all nights, we should be on the very same road; if we were to keep
walking to the east, Sherlock, we would be on the Pilgrim’s Path to Canterbury, just as Chaucer’s pilgrims."

"Demons!" Sherlock scoffed. "I assure you that Maxim Purcell is very much a flesh and blood man. Though if he is the Sleeping Beauties killer, people will certainly think him evil."

Sherlock understood more now about "good." John taught him these things, about goodness, and he could recognise this in John – even if he usually could not understand how or even why he was supposed to follow his example.

He also understood the concept of a thing being forbidden. As to "evil," however, Sherlock felt it to be an unrealistic emotional construct. There were acts which were illegal, of course. The taking of a life without reasonable cause was first on the list of "wrong things" in every human society.

Sherlock had met, and spoken with, many murderers. They were usually very ordinary persons. The police and press were perpetually surprised by this – "He seemed so ordinary, such a likeable fellow! Never harmed a fly!" But Sherlock never was. Something over ninety percent of all persons had at one time or another, mentally planned out the actual steps to murder someone – even though they never carried it out. When asked why they did not commit the murder, they said it was the fear of being caught that stopped them. Killing, Sherlock knew, was human nature.

True, some murderers were mentally disordered; sadistic and cruel. Was this what was meant by "evil"? Sherlock reserved judgment. It was not necessary to his methods to put moral labels on the conduct of criminals in order to catch them.

El Brujo was looking at him with an expression that was probably disappointment, Sherlock decided. He was more sensitive to the emotions of persons other than John, since the crossing. Was this his Omega nature, coming into its prime? He didn’t know. But he didn’t like the way he felt when El Brujo was disappointed in him; not as bad as disappointing John, but still.

And so he said, "Tell me, then, what Chaucer said. About – demons."

"Good. Listen, then. In Chaucer’s story, the demon says: ‘We will make ourselves into such forms as are most fit to capture our prey.’ Just as Maxim concealed his true self from you, Sherlock."

"Until the end."

"But we are not yet at the end, Sherlock."

With this warning lingering in his mind, Sherlock left the road to that led to Canterbury and turned his feet toward Hantswood Hall.

###

10:00 p.m., 31 October. Hantswood Hall, Surrey.

A slender Omega boy with curling reddish-brown hair and the suggestion of an almost juvenile moustache walked the last mile to his destination. From the hills above he could see police hidden in the wood. But this Omega had preternaturally sharp eyes, and they were easily avoided.
He silently approached Hantswood Hall from the rear via a construction gate. Earth-moving machinery towered over him, ethereal hulks crouching in the mist. There was a great deal of freshly turned earth spread over the ground and his feet sank down in it. The sensation put him in mind of newly dug graves. Which did not discourage him in the slightest from digging an exploratory hole, but there was nothing at all but hard ground and dead grass beneath.

The new Hantswood Hall was adjoined to the old in violent incongruity, postmodern cubes grafted to crumbling stone walls. The Omega boy rounded the corner and slouched toward a guard. His invitation card was inspected. No one really noticed where he had come from, and he was allowed to enter.

Of all the boys that had arrived for Maxim Purcell’s Halloween party tonight, this one seemed the least memorable.

To find out if the Sleeping Beauties killer was here tonight, he would need to walk the same path as the victims had. But he had no intention of meeting with the same end. Sherlock Holmes inhaled fresh pure air, almost as protection, before crossing the threshold.

###

It was a blindingly lit white room. An inlaid table held domino masks: red or black. The "guests" could not conceal a pheromone mask under a Halloween mask, then. This was the only visible sign that this was supposed to be a Halloween party. A male beta displaying utter disinterest handed Sherlock a red mask and waited for him to put it on. Knowing that unseen eyes were judging him, Sherlock projected frailty and craving as he put on his mask and stepped into the next room.

This was a candlelit space with indeterminate boundaries. Sherlock was slightly startled to find that there were both male and female Alphas here, numbering more than twice as many as the Omegas. A wave of strong odor drove home the Alphas’ intentions. Which were predatory. Rapacious. Yet the Omegas gave no alarm signs, no scent of fear. This was uncharacteristic of Omegas in a strange environment – and it was obvious to Sherlock that none of them was familiar with this place. He had expected the Omegas would be drugged; now, observing them, he was almost certain they were not. They were under a different kind of influence.

Outside of heat, such delicate Omegas as these should sense their danger, especially in a vulnerable group such as they made: lambs encircled by famished wolves.

Two Alphas, a male and a female, approached Sherlock; appraising. Sherlock and El Brujo had laboured to the utmost of their combined art and science to create the refined pheromone oil that transformed Sherlock to an innocent young Omega. All trace of Sherlock’s true scent was banished: that of a strong Omega who had taken the crossing, of a fertile Omega bearing the child of his bonded. He now presented as dull, uncomplicated and easily overmastered. It would have been less authentic if he had made himself unappealing, or even neutral. The Alphas closed in.

Sherlock smiled tentatively. Submissive, but not yet inviting. Things were moving faster than he had expected. If he tried to move away he would draw unwanted suspicion upon himself. And then he would find out nothing.

This close, the Alphas’ eyes were odd behind their black masks; that was the first thing Sherlock noticed. They shone with a mirror-like gleam. Sherlock wanted to observe them more closely but could not do so without seeming to challenge their dominance. He carefully looked away.

The female was very close to him now. It dawned on him that he should be concerned that he
hadn’t fully taken female Alphas into account in crafting his disguise. There wasn’t enough time to make a proper scent shield, El Brujo had muttered. They had gone with the probabilities. Well, operating without an appropriate number of base facts yielded wildly inaccurate results. Here was the proof.

And this female was trying to scent his every note.

"You’ve never been with a female before," she finally announced definitely, touching his cheekbone with a sharp black fingernail. Sherlock held himself still and considered the appropriate reaction. He decided to display reluctance, even revulsion.

"No, never. . . and I didn’t come here – for that. I wasn’t told about this part," he whined unpleasantly. He immediately expelled inhibitory pheromones. These would penetrate the Alphas’ neurons, signaling that here was a flawed specimen, not worthy of their attention and certainly not a candidate for reproduction. He felt a deep twinge of discomfort that was his consciousness of his newly pregnant state, and the feeling made him nearly panic. He did not know how to handle it. It was a sensation between unaccustomed vulnerability and the instinct to defend his body, and what it shielded, at any cost. He was already imagining the necks of these predatory Alphas snapping under his hands and he struggled to master his heartrate.

The Alpha female was not moving away. He was not sure how he would endure contact with her, or any of them.

Sherlock felt that Maxim was intentionally challenging both the Alphas and the Omegas with pairings that clashed with their natural permutations. There was nothing so especially novel in that – there were places where ‘permutation virginity’ was prized, and even sold. Some of the more exotic pairings involved Alphas and betas; but any pairing outside of a person’s natural orientation was considered deviant by many.

Maxim’s tastes were actually surprisingly narrow, time and again seeking out a particular Omega type. Yet Maxim’s sensibilities were also far too advanced to orchestrate this scenario for sheer entertainment’s sake. Orgies were not Maxim’s style: Maxim had to have a purpose other than mere titillation, Sherlock thought.

If he went with these Alphas now, would he find out if it was murder?

###

As with the concept of "evil," Sherlock did not understand "deviance." Sherlock had scornfully announced to John in 221b (before they had become bonded) his own conviction that gender and permutation were boring and irrelevant. What mattered was whether the mysterious powers of chemistry and attraction made a pairing worth having, worth fighting for. It was what bonded he and John together now, it was something that he and Maxim could never have had.

Now the air was abruptly changing: their faces were caressed by a warm, luscious cloud. It savoured of Maxim’s art. Sherlock sighed, focused, and dissipated the compounds through minute adjustments to his own neurochemistry – but he was again distracted by thoughts of the tiny life inside him. El Brujo had silently placed his hand over Sherlock’s still-flat stomach as he departed for Hantswood Hall, and Sherlock remembered this gesture now and almost unconsciously placed his own slender hand in the same place.

The female Alpha seized Sherlock’s other hand and arrogantly pressed it tightly against the bulge in her trousers. It was as she had said - he had never touched a female Alpha in this way.
Other than John and Maxim, he had hardly ever touched anyone at all.

Sherlock could feel the outline of her Alpha ridges. During the knotting, her ridges would swell and harden, binding her mate to her. Inescapably. A process that was notoriously more invasive than the knotting of a male Alpha. It was thought that female Alphas had evolved in this way to enable them to subdue and impregnate their chosen mate despite their relatively smaller, less muscular frames.

Sherlock avoided looking behind the Alpha’s mask into her strange mercury-like eyes. He thought he heard Maxim’s voice – from her lips? Behind him? Inside his head?

He didn’t want to listen, but the fact that he was hearing Maxim at all gave Sherlock an idea of what might be happening here. Just a short while ago he had said to El Brujo,

"I don’t believe in supernatural powers . . . there are no powers beyond the human mind and body."

He remembered the cold stone room at Kamala Kangra where he had been confined by Maxim. Maxim had tried many times to invade Sherlock’s subtle body with his own; it was the stimulation of the subtle body, Maxim had taught, that was the basis of the Mysteries. The subtle body, though, could not exist apart from one’s physical body, any more than one’s heart or limbs could. Sherlock believed that the nature of the subtle body was neurochemical.

The Alpha’s fingernails dug into the flesh of his hand to keep it pressed where she wanted it. She was drawing blood, and she knew it: her lips parted with anticipation and arousal.

"I don’t feel well," Sherlock said, and staggered a little, not entirely playacting. This wasn’t right. Maxim was not here, not physically, Sherlock was certain of that. But he heard his voice and felt his presence. This was not an hallucination or a trick: he felt in perfect possession of his senses.

The male Alpha said, "Don’t play games, everyone knows what’s happening tonight."

The female Alpha said, "Soon you’ll be feeling much better."

"It’s time, Sherlock," Maxim said from nowhere and from everywhere.

This was a moment when he could have fled. Everyone was leaving the room, the door to the front entry seemed unguarded. But there was never really a choice. Sherlock Holmes would not run away. The Holmeses, he thought, are not cowards. He would finally discover what Maxim’s game was. No more secrets. He would save these poor Omega boys.

The Alphas grabbed him by the arms and dragged him out of the room.

###

9:00 p.m., 31 October. The Village of Tatsfield, Surrey.
Pantha du Prince, *White Out*: listen here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwizQSCX0W4

John examined maps, train schedules. It was a welcome distraction, temporarily soothing in its very ordinariness. He didn’t remember hearing much about Tatsfield before; close though it was to London, he wasn’t entirely sure he had ever heard of it at all.

Tatsfield was a village of 1800 souls, 16 miles south of central London. It was not on any rail line. One could by circuitous routes take a bus, but he couldn’t waste the time; he elected to hire a car. As he navigated the M25, the radio announcer advised that it was the coldest Halloween on record. He imagined Sherlock in disguise, sleeping somewhere unsheltered, cold wind chilling his slender form. He almost missed the turning for the village. He glanced at the next car and zombie masks leered back at him, then sped away.

The roads were narrowing, climbing, and then to his surprise, the roads became rough and unpaved. He reached the village and parked in the high street. There was a small green, and a pond reflecting dark grey skies. There was a frigid breeze, but it was utterly quiet. There did not seem to be anyone about. He entered the apparent sole shop.

The Halloween decor was a few carved pumpkins like he remembered making as a boy, almost cheerfully snaggle-toothed, and a paper banner wishing him a "Happy Halloween!" There was a young man stocking shelves and listening to an iPod. John called out but the man evidently couldn’t hear. John tapped him on the shoulder and he leaped back as if shocked.

He was small and thin with brown eyes in a crafty sharp face. He regarded John with a hostile eye. "You gave me a fright. Creeping up on one like that." A beta. He rushed past John and stationed himself behind the register.

"Sorry. I’m looking for Hantswood Hall. I doesn’t seem to be on the map." John fingered the invitation card in his pocket. He didn’t know what sort of influence Maxim might have here. He decided to keep it to himself.
"You’re from London. The Hall isn’t on regular maps." The man turned his back, fiddling with something that John couldn’t see.

"So then you know I’m not from here. Can’t you just tell me the way?" John was getting itchy and his blood was restless.

The beta was clearly wary of John’s agitation. He evidently realised John would not leave until he was appeased, though, and finally produced a well-folded walking map from a drawer behind the counter.

"See, the Hall’s not actually in Tatsfield proper. Do you care about history? The parish boundaries were re-drawn —"

John shifted impatiently.

"– Well, you don’t want to hear about all that, then. Just take the turning off Gibbet Hill Road . . .you won’t miss it. They’ve made certain of that."

"‘They?’"

"The new owners, ’course."

"And who would they be?"

"Some foreign company – going to turn the old ruin into an hotel. We could use the custom. But the builders don’t stop here much."

He put the map away and pretended to busy himself with a stack of papers. The beta seemed in a hurry now for John to leave.

John didn’t budge. He was thinking about asking if he had seen anyone resembling Sherlock Holmes, even showing his photograph, and decided against this too. Sherlock would be in disguise and would want to keep his presence secret. He couldn’t allow himself to think of Sherlock confronting Maxim face to face. Thinking of Maxim’s face, he only saw his fists pounding it into a bloody pulp. He turned to go.

"You want to have a care," the man called after him. "There’s a fancy dress party at the Village Hall. All sorts of folk coming and going. Across the road."

John looked out the door, down the high street. Indeed, a few people in costume, ghosts and witches, were crossing the green. They were converging on what he presumed was the Village Hall.

"I’ll be careful," John said.

He climbed back into the hired car. Despite the man’s warning, there was no one in the street ahead.

But when he glanced in the rear view mirror John was surprised by how many more people there were, crossing the green.

To be continued . . .
The Omega Sutra. Chapter Seventeen. Spooky Action.

"People can die of mere imagination, so deeply may a mental image take hold."

Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales: The Miller's Tale

*bonfire*: from the Middle English, bon fir: bone fire, or a fire kindled upon bones.

Pantha du Prince, Behind the Stars:  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7320vUo0dI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7320vUo0dI)

All Hallows Eve. Hantswood Hall.

Sherlock was dragged out of the room. They were herded down a flight of stairs, then another.

They were no longer in the new Hall but somewhere beneath, Sherlock thought. The walls were old stone; irregular, massive. The stairs had been worn down with deep grooves.

At the end, there was a room. What once would have properly been called a chamber. Here he would learn the reason that Maxim had bought Hantswood Hall. This, he theorised, was the key to the case. The Sleeping Beauty murders had started after Maxim purchased the Hall, if you excluded Andrew Kearn.

In this room were massive stone blocks, just the size for a man to lie upon. Sherlock didn’t have to speculate because the male Alpha was pushing him, holding him down in deference to the female. Sherlock tried to block out her invasive hands, sharp fingernails that made his flesh crawl. He had a powerful impulse to fight or flee that sparked his blood like electric shock. Were these the hands that would kill, or did Maxim reserve that privilege to himself, as a sort of droit de seigneur? And why?

Around him, the behaviour of the other Omegas, which had been passive in the extreme, changed abruptly and they began the frantic supplication of heat onset, almost in unison. Sherlock swallowed down a confusing surge of rage, pain and even fear. These Omegas were being victimised in the ultimate sense. He had vague memories, not very well preserved, of his former life with Maxim, and even before Maxim: other greedy hands. Needles in his arm. Bruises on his skin. The homeless network rescued him when they could, but usually it was Mycroft. He could have buried these memories, but instead he brought them out often, lingered over them, kept them
alive. Only since John had these memories started to feel deeply wrong, something that he ought to try to delete. Not all memories had to be painful, he was starting to understand.

He removed his attention from his own body and avoided looking at the Omegas for now, because it was making him sick. Had he been like this with Maxim, and too blind to see it? A puppet, a toy to be used and manipulated?

He had to find a way to get them away from this place and from the cold Alphas, who outnumbered them two to one. While he worked frantically on this problem, Sherlock focused on observing minutiae; at this, even in this place, he excelled.

There were visible gouges in the centre of the stone. Just where, if a knife were to stab a man lying there in the heart, it would strike. On the walls there appeared to be embedded fragments of Roman mosaic, but he could not see the pattern. This might once have been a Roman bath; one of Britain’s largest Roman villa excavations was not five miles distant. There was the suggestion of soot on the ceiling, perhaps of the fire that had burned down the Hall, when the squire was accused of selling his soul to the devil.

There were things here to make a new fire, too: a large pile of dry wood in the middle of the stones. After all, it was traditional to light bonfires on All Hallows Eve.

Although he wasn’t sure it was correct to call a fire below ground a bonfire.

# # #

His fingertips groped at the edges of the deep gouge in the stone. Cold gooseflesh rippled over his skin (he had seen this phenomenon described in a forensic paper as “horripilation”, which he admired as more dramatic) as the female Alpha ran her hands over him, probing. From the edge of his vision he caught the flash of something metallic in the hand of the male Alpha.

“Sherlock did not care for classical history, but he had retained some facts relevant to building knowledge of murder. Human sacrifice was not considered murder until late in the Roman period -- but the idea of a human sacrifice was an occasional motive for murder in the present day.

Julius Caesar, who was generally considered a reliable historian, wrote, “The Gauls sacrifice human victims . . . the druids carry this out by building figures of immense size, whose limbs are woven out of twigs which they fill with living men and set on fire, where the men perish in a sheet of flame.”

The discovery of Lindow Man, a mummified “bog man” found in Cheshire, proved that the Celts also performed human sacrifice during Roman rule. Lindow Man was a hithborn youth, naked but for a fur band around his arm. He had been struck violently on the skull, strangled, and his throat cut: this was the “triple death” that pleased the bloodthirsty Celtic gods.

Sherlock recalled the earth-moving equipment outside, the fresh earth spread out. Maxim’s secret excavations.

So. A sacrifice of Omegas on All Hallows Eve. The date was meaningful, obviously. Superstitious beliefs about certain dates sometimes influenced murderers, particularly those of the psychotic or obsessive type. All Hallows Eve likely originated with the Celtic Samhain, the festival of harvest, of entering into the dark season. Bonfires were lit against the coming of winter.
The Celts believed that on Samhain, the spirits of the dead returned to their homes.

Sherlock focused harder on forensics, while the greater part of his formidable brain worked on how to get himself – and the Omegas – out of here alive. The Omegas’ sexual presentation seemed trancelike, yet frantic. Some of them were begging almost childishly, which was revolting. Strange.

Now his brain was flying down the paths of deduction. There was a pattern here that he should have seen before.

He had been misled by an erroneous assumption: that because Maxim habitually toyed with drugs, these Omegas were drugged. Here flashed fractured memories of days and weeks on end, indiscriminately dosing himself with Maxim’s elixirs, caring not at all for the risk.

He fully realised for the first time how lucky he was not to be dead.

###

It was the coincidence of the newspapers’ name for the murders that ought to have taken him down the correct path. It would have done, if he hadn’t been distracted. The fact of his pregnancy had indeed overtaken his faculties, just as he had always feared would happen if he ever allowed his Omega nature to rule him. The Omegas weren’t drugged at all.

He reviewed their symptoms:

Irresistible compulsion to sleep.

A zombie-like affect.

Limited cognition.

Uninhibited hypersexuality.

These conditions were unlikely to be accidental. Yet Maxim had never lacked for willing sexual partners and would undoubtedly find these passive, almost childish, and unresponsive Omegas to be very boring. He could not understand it.

Once, his mind would have been compelled to worry at this problem. Why did Maxim want these Omegas? Why did he kill them? Why here, why now?

Now, everything was different. He was nearly paralysed with the revelation that life was after all very precious, and short. He carried new life within himself. All that mattered was getting the Omegas away from Maxim and these cruel, vicious Alphas, away from this place where, he sensed, so many others had died before.

The Alpha pair were circling each other, pushing and looking for supremacy and the privilege of having Sherlock first. Sherlock took his chance. He swiftly stood up on the stone block and reconfirmed what he had already determined -- there was only one way out.

The only way they were getting out of here was if the Alphas didn’t, or couldn’t, stop them.

He needed to pour some blood into these shark-infested waters.

###
All Hallows’ Eve. A surveillance van in a wooded area near Tatsfield, Surrey.

Mycroft Holmes was sitting awkwardly at the back of a surveillance van. Lestrade, Donovan, and a wiretap specialist named Critchley – recruited from the anti-terrorism squad – were staring at the video feed. Hours had gone by without the slightest sign of anyone coming or going from Hantswood Hall. Mycroft had a very long time to think in the tense silence.

Mycroft recalled Maxim’s humiliating supplication in Mumbai, and swallowed his disgust. He was betting that Maxim would seize this opportunity to take what had been denied. If he was wrong, well – Maxim could exploit this opportunity for an even less pleasant purpose. But Mycroft was not overly concerned. He had the security of knowing that Detective Inspector Lestrade was looking after his personal safety.

For a man who believed in multiple layers of protection, it was strange that this single fact made Mycroft feel very brave, braver than he probably really was, despite his boast that the Holmeses were not cowards. The feeling reinforced his conviction that it was right for them to be together. He didn’t deserve him, if he allowed himself to consider the matter candidly --- Lestrade was good, even noble; when he tried to summon up any positive quality of his own, he could only say that he tried to do his duty: to his family, to his country. Both outdated virtues in these narcissistic times.

Lestrade was pulling back, though. Predictably. Bringing Lestrade to Mumbai had backfired, seemingly; perhaps Lestrade felt manipulated, even exploited by a situation he might never have chosen under ordinary circumstances. And Lestrade would be right.

Hadn’t he manipulated Lestrade, the entire situation, for just that reason?

###

He had always felt the undercurrent between them. Mycroft had therefore gone out of his way to find ways to cross paths with the hard-working detective; this hadn’t been as easy as he had made it seem.

The first time Mycroft Holmes met Greg Lestrade had been at a task force meeting after the 7/7 bombings. They had sat across a conference table, listening respectfully to what the other had to say – they were among the only cool heads on that terrible occasion.

Mycroft felt Lestrade’s eyes on him for just a beat longer than was polite between two Alphas, but it didn’t feel like a challenge.

The second time Mycroft met Lestrade was over Sherlock’s body waxy-pale, nearly skeletal body. Mycroft had been aware of Lestrade’s growing professional relationship with his brother -- and had been pleased for Sherlock’s sake. Sherlock needed contact with stable, strong persons of character. Such as Lestrade.

And so Mycroft had not been completely surprised when Lestrade had called Mycroft personally to notify him that he had found Sherlock alone in his flat, unconscious from an overdose complicated by lack of nourishment. Not for the first time.

The detective surprised Mycroft by lashing out as he entered the hospital room.
“I don’t want to have to bring charges, understand? But -- he can’t keep on like this, he’ll kill himself. It’s a miracle he hasn’t long since. You’re his brother, for god’s sake, Holmes - why don’t you bloody stop him?”

Lestrade was right, of course he was right. He ought to be able to stop Sherlock; he was the Alpha, he was the elder, Sherlock was his responsibility and no one else’s. He definitely could not let Lestrade, couldn’t let anyone at all see what he felt. He bit his lip, drew himself up.

“Do you think I haven’t stopped him, many times? Sherlock is very . . . headstrong. But if you will do me the personal favour of not bringing charges, I’ll clean him up. Again. Thank you.”

When the door closed on Lestrade, Mycroft covered his face. He didn’t think he could bear much more. He fell asleep at Sherlock’s bedside to the hiss of his respirator.

When he woke, after assuring himself that Sherlock was still breathing, he left the room briefly to find the doctor. Looking down the corridor Mycroft swore he glimpsed the back of a silver-haired head, a worn trench coat, disappearing quietly around the corner. Lestrade had been watching them through the window all that time. Well, watching Sherlock, at any rate. He couldn’t imagine why Lestrade should watch him staring hopelessly down at his lunatic brother. More evidence that he was a failure as a Holmes Alpha.

Mycroft had never really been able to endure the harms that Sherlock so heedlessly inflicted upon himself. Mycroft returned to Sherlock’s bedside, where he sat for a long time remembering that wasted face when it had been full of boyish health and life, so many years ago.

###

Watching Lestrade now as he professionally arranged his wire apparatus with a strong, steady hand, Mycroft couldn’t avoid the fact that Lestrade wouldn’t meet his gaze. Despite this effort at maintaining distance, being this close to Lestrade even under these grave circumstance felt secure, warm. The warmth of anticipation. Of the unknown future. Mycroft knew he would not be considered a romantic by anyone’s standards; but romantic or not, even he knew what it meant to have this feeling. It was inevitability.

I’ll be much better at advancing my cause than Sherlock was, when he wanted John Watson. Another pairing against a presumed orientation, Mycroft assured himself. I can wait, I won’t press; but I won’t let this chance slip through our fingers.

He believed it important Lestrade should start to trust him. He had therefore chosen not to bring in his own assets tonight. To do so would sorely offend Lestrade, even wound his Alpha pride. Over the past few years, Lestrade had occasionally had glimpses of Mycroft’s less clandestine handiwork. What he had seen would not, of course, inspire trust. To the contrary. Manipulation, betrayal, and the cold calculation of the cost of loss were indispensable tools of the game.

But in real life as in espionage, Mycroft thought, the way to earn trust is to give it.

###

Sherlock knew the trick of amplifying what he had been taught was the radiance - - what he thought of as the magnetism -- of his subtle body. The subtle body, he was convinced, was an electromagnetic phenomenon, poorly studied but with focus and discipline able to be developed and controlled like any other part of the body. The manipulation of the subtle body for sexual pleasure was an esoteric and powerful refinement that was the foundation of the Mysteries. Sherlock had mastered it in a month.
These were not ideal conditions, but there wasn’t time to waste. Elegance would have to yield to crude force. As if by an internal switch, he pulsed out this force and imagined it as a net that he could throw where he wished.

These Alphas were all practitioners of the Mysteries. At first they were confused as to the origin of this new influence, then even more when they were unable to resist. But then the Alphas began moving steadily toward him with those shining eyes, for the moment forgetting the Omega prey.

“Maxim is playing with us,” the female Alpha said. She was apparently the only one capable of defending herself. She was the one to watch. “He’s a rogue. Don’t look at him. Take him down.”

“She’s right,” Sherlock said slowly, lowering his voice alluringly. He needed to be very convincing. One of the most difficult things to manage was to modulate one’s voice when one was afraid, and his fear was threatening to overtake him. It was such an unusual feeling that as terrible as it was – how did people bear it? – he couldn’t help probing for the source of it, to try to root it out, and found something between losing John, and danger to the baby.

His hand drifted across his stomach protectively, a gesture he immediately regretted, it might give away his weakness. But he couldn’t help it. It made him feel as if John were here, remembering when John had made the same instinctive gesture, just a few days ago at Loch Linhe. It literally hurt to extend this part of himself, even falsely, to anyone other than John, and he knew that John could never forgive him, would never understand. He didn’t think he could maintain it for very long; it violated his bond.

He remembered John in 221b -- before Scotland, before they were bonded -- accusing:

*Congratulations, you did it. Managed to seduce your flatmate. I hope Maxim was satisfied with your report. Do you keep score or is there some sort of prize?*

“Well, I don’t understand it. No one’s coming.” Donovan had been staring at the surveillance feed for the past ten hours, seeing exactly nothing.

“If we hadn’t seen those catering vans come and go, I’d think we’d got the wrong information about tonight,” Lestrade said. Yet they had watched the vans very carefully; no one stayed behind.
“Sir, look.” This was Critchley, a surveillance specialist recruited from the Yard’s anti-terrorist squad. “This is five days ago.” It was an amazingly clear view from directly above the grounds of Hantswood Hall at twilight. A slow convoy of limousines entered the gates and discharged a large number of guests at the door.

“Where did you get this?” Lestrade asked sharply.

Critchley raised an eyebrow. “Er – it’s not strictly an official feed, sir,” he said. “In the anti-terrorism squad --”

“This isn’t the anti-terrorist squad. I’m trying to make out a clean case for serial murder against a British citizen, on British soil. That video goes well beyond Purcell’s security walls. Do you get it?”

“I just thought --” Critchley switched off the video. “But now we know. The Omegas are already inside. They’ve been in there for days.”

“This is my operation, is that clear? I don’t have a search warrant for inside the walls – wiretap only, right? I can’t use that video, or anything that I learn from looking at it; it’s outside the scope and right now we haven’t probable cause. As a matter of fact, we haven’t got a thing yet. In Homicide, we have to abide by a little thing called due process. Or the Crown gets nothing -- Purcell walks free -- more people die -- and I’m well and truly f**ked!”

There was a stunned silence that was broken by Mycroft Holmes, standing in the shadows at the rear of the van.

“And you certainly don’t want that,” Mycroft said without a hint of irony. “Detective Inspector,” he added after a beat.

Lestrade’s voice had gotten so loud that he was almost shouting. Donovan watched Lestrade glare at Mycroft; Mycroft looking blandly back.

Shouting and rough language on duty were so uncharacteristic of Lestrade as to be shocking. He wasn’t that kind of Alpha. To Donovan’s sharp eyes, he was like a bundle of dry tinder – all it would take was a single spark and everything would just explode into flames. Understandable for a middle-aged, recently post-divorce Alpha; he was just trying to find his bearings again, she figured.

And god knows, she thought, the Holmes brothers were both individually and collectively sufficiently obnoxious as to make even a man as patient as Lestrade lose his temper.

Lestrade took a deep breath but didn’t respond to Mycroft. Instead, he methodically checked Mycroft’s wire apparatus for perhaps the fifth time. Donovan and Critchley exchanged impatient glances behind Lestrade’s back. Lestrade kept delaying the “go” signal -- and they were a quarter of an hour behind time.

“Try to stay near windows if you can. We have you on tracking, here” -- Critchley demonstrated the glowing dot that showed Mycroft’s location -- “and we can hear what you hear.”

Critchley had already gone over this in painstaking detail, but it didn’t hurt to repeat it. He was getting the feeling that it was Lestrade that needed this reassurance, although it was unclear why that should be. He knew Lestrade had worked Vice, where undercover wiretap operations were routine.

“I understand,” Mycroft said dismissively. “Now I believe it is time for me to go. I shall be
considered fashionably late by Maxim’s standards.”

###

After his outburst of a few moments ago, Lestrade was now under complete control: calmly professional, and utterly confident. Seemingly. No one, Mycroft thought, knows what is between us. Mycroft’s entire life was built upon secrecy -- but here was one secret that he was finding very difficult to keep.

No, no one would know by their conduct what was between them. Lestrade was speaking to him now, in that calm cop’s voice. He swallowed hard and smoothed his face into its most remote imperturbability. The only thing that gave him some encouragement was the fact that, although the time had come and gone, Lestrade was still delaying the signal.

“Holmes. Listen. Don’t provoke Maxim. If we catch him, we catch him. You’re there to listen, and observe. If your instincts tell you that something’s wrong, then it is wrong. This operation can be aborted – just like any other.”

Mycroft’s heart sank. Lack of trust, second thoughts; Lestrade was still trying to get him to change his mind.

Over Lestrade’s shoulder, Mycroft saw Donovan’s ill-concealed fascination.

“Please don’t presume to lecture me on the ‘Moscow Rules,’” he retorted sharply, then wished he hadn’t. God, did he always sound like such a supercilious bastard? The fabled Moscow Rules were maxims of spycraft: Don’t harass the opposition, and any operation can be aborted: if it feels wrong, it is wrong, were among them.

“– there’s one coming -- where did that bugger come from?” Critchley exclaimed. On screen, a delicate Omega youth was slouching from out of the shadows toward the door of the Hall. “He didn’t come through the gate.”

The Omega went inside.

“Roll it back,” Mycroft and Lestrade said simultaneously. Other than a superficial similarity in height and build, the boy did not resemble Sherlock Holmes at all. Then again, his face never turned toward the camera.

“It’s not Sherlock,” Lestrade said finally.

“It most certainly is,” Mycroft said resignedly. “He can deceive nearly anyone – but not me. And I don’t believe there is anything we can do about it from here. I’m going in now.”

“Jesus. All right then. I don’t have to tell you to try to get him out of there.” Lestrade was well accustomed by now to Sherlock Holmes ignoring the inconvenient existence of the Met as well as the quaint rules of due process. “And just – remember what I’ve said.”

“I promise you that I do remember, Detective Inspector. Every word.”

As the door to the van shut behind Mycroft, Donovan said slyly: “Did you notice Mr. Holmes has adjusted his suppressants, boss? Purcell won’t be able to resist – he’ll fall right into his lap.”

“Shut it, Sergeant. Everybody focus,” Lestrade ordered.

Outside was a car with a plainclothes officer. As the car drove Mycroft to the gates of Hantswood
Hall, what Mycroft remembered was not Lestrade’s instructions tonight, but what he had said last night. And all that had been left unsaid.

###

The chamber felt unreal now, outside of time. They might have been here for minutes, or days. And it had perhaps been especially designed to enhance the Mysteries, because while he was terribly afraid, Sherlock had never felt more in control of his powers.

The Alphas felt it too. They began squaring off, pushing, clawing. “He’s mine! We had him first!” The male Alpha shouted, and just like that, the rage was ignited. The stench of ketones and aldehydes filled the air - the testosterone level skyrocketing in the blink of an eye, inducing a rutting frenzy.

Alphas in rut were not in heat. Rut rendered Alphas uncontrollably violent, attacking all other Alphas in range and forcing themselves on Omegas, in heat or not. Many countries had tried to harness the state of rut to create stronger, more violent soldiers. It always failed: an Alpha in rut could not be directed, nor act for any purpose other than his drive to rape and kill.

The Omegas cowered back from the loud clamour of the fighting Alphas, finally clustering together in a protective circle. Sherlock leaped nimbly from his stone to the next, confusing the Alphas. The closest Alpha bit and clawed and punched to keep the others at bay as he tried to get close enough to Sherlock to touch.

He leaped again.

The nearest Alpha seized his ankle, but the other Alphas tore at the offender. She was dragged to the floor.

Now Sherlock was poised on the stone nearest the door. The Alphas were blind to anything other than their rage to fight.

For a few moments, perhaps, there was a chance.

He stared down at the Omegas and they stared back up at him, dull-eyed. He pitched his voice low and clear and bent down as closely as he dared, trying to hold their vague gazes.

“Listen to me,” he said, but he didn’t think they could hear. But perhaps the attraction of his subtle body was working on them. He repeated himself and gestured commandingly for them to move toward the door, and they did. Pack instinct was finally driving them now. The Omegas looked to him as a substitute Alpha: he was confident and strong. Although none of them had any real awareness of what was happening around them, the uniquely pungent scent of rut penetrated their dulled senses. Soon they would stampede in an uncomprehending panic.

Sherlock leaped lightly to the floor and stumbled. His hand found a loose stone and he closed his fist around it with one hand and quickly wrenched the door open with the other. He pushed the Omegas up the stair. The Alphas noticed this movement, but they had eyes only for Sherlock.

He was cornered.

The closest Alphas grabbed him and tried to pull him away from the door -- the idea that Sherlock
was a rare prize to be handled with care had evaporated in the haze of rut. Sherlock struck out with the rock and was taken aback when it laid open the man’s face, blood spurting in an arc over the stones. The stone in his hand was sharp as an axe. It sliced the palm of his own hand and hot blood flowed to the floor. The air filled with copper tang as, with a strong sensation of deja vu, Sherlock felt a great crash and the entire building shook. Just as the Magnus had shaken during the storm.

Stone dust and earth showered down over the writhing Alphas. They looked like grey demons. Sherlock thought of John’s pale dusty face, after he had nearly blown himself to bits trying to shield him from the bomb.

The lights flickered once, twice, then were extinguished.

It wouldn’t be long even in the dark before the Alphas searched him out by scent. He had to get back to the door. He got on his hands and knees and tried to shield himself behind one of the stone blocks. He heard grunts and cries of the Alphas and a heavy thud as one fell to the ground and did not rise.

Sherlock could not find the door. He was disoriented. Was he going in circles? He tried again and again, barely escaping the grasping of Alpha hands by hacking blindly with the stone.

The door was not where it was supposed to be.

He was never going to find it.

Something strange was happening here. He could swear the door must have moved. In his mind’s eye, he could picture where he was hidden in the dark, behind the stone that ought to be next to the door. But his fingers flew across the wall without finding the door.

There was another thud and a scream. And another, a wet _thunk_ like a skull being split on the rock.

What he needed was to see, or he was never going to make it to the door.

In his pocket was a book of matches.

Heart thundering, he struck one.

In the circle of yellow light that extended barely beyond his bleeding hand, he saw dark movement rushing toward him. The Alphas were momentarily stunned by the appearance of the light, and they fell silent.

He saw the bare outline of the door, and blew out the match just as hands clawed him.

###

On the other side of the door, he sprinted up the stairs. At the top was the room that Sherlock thought led outside. The Omegas were cowering, dull again and seemingly having forgotten all about the Alphas.

“Sherlock,” Maxim said. “Stop.” The voice was incredibly loud; it was like the clang of a church-bell inside his head. He couldn’t hear his own thoughts and his feet felt as if they were sunk in wet mud.

Everything became very slow. Still, he was able to shout, and so he yelled at the Omegas, desperate to get their attention. They shuffled toward him.
Cold hands pulled at his neck, his arms, tugging him backward. He shook them off without looking back. The Mysteries taught another refinement, even more difficult to master than the projection of one’s subtle body to create sexual ecstasy. Some partners responded to pain that could be the other side of pleasure. He reached down deep -- deeper than he thought he should while he was carrying innocent life -- and pushed the invisible net out behind him, this time attuned to inflict pain. There was a bellow and a shriek and Sherlock achieved the front door, threw it open.

Sherlock shoved and pushed the slothlike Omegas out, one by one. The last thing Sherlock saw was the Omegas staggering across the grounds in the moonlight and Donovan and several other coppers were running toward the house to meet them. They were shouting, but he couldn’t hear with Maxim’s voice ringing in his skull. Any minute it would split open.

Then his vision clouded over. And when he could see again, everything was still dark, but this was a murky darkness, a darkness of substance.

He grabbed at the open door, but someone or something he couldn’t see was pulling hard at his legs. They felt as if they might be torn from his body.

There was a moment when he clawed at the wood of the door by his fingertips in his desperation to escape the house. He was yanked back with superhuman force. He felt a huge rush of air pass over him, and the door slammed shut.

The last thing he felt was his fingernails being torn from his fingertips, where they had lodged in the wood.

# # #

When Sherlock opened his eyes again, Maxim was bending over him. He was back down in the stone chamber.

Around him were bodies of dead Alphas. They looked as if they had killed each other in a frenzy. The frenzy he had caused, throwing them into rut? He could not look at their cruelly broken and twisted bodies. When he looked away, he saw vast quantities of blood and gouts of fleshy matter splashed and smeared on the stones. Something inside him shuddered and pulled at him, demanding something.

He had to get out of this place. Where were the police?

"Why do you think you came here tonight, Sherlock?"

"To stop you killing those Omega boys."

"Are you so sure? Let me pose a few questions. John Watson helped you, the night the Heatwave took hold. He touched you."

"You've been spying in 221b. That is pathetic, Maxim."

"Not spying. Yet you did not take the crossing that night -- though you were more than ready -- "

"I won't discuss John with you."

"-- and even after the crossing, you tried to break your heat, didn't you?"

"No. It’s not true." But now he knew that Maxim had penetrated his secret: he had recovered from
the blue dose. He had taken the crossing. He willed himself to prevent any signal of his pregnant state. He didn’t think his scent disguise would last much longer; perhaps only the overriding scent of freshly spilled blood was protecting him now. As many times as he had ever been in the presence of so much blood, this was the first time he had ever felt the instinctive recoiling of the Omega. It was wrong for a bearer of new life to be in the presence of so much death.

"You jumped into cold water. Trying to break your heat."

"The police are coming, Maxim. You’re going to prison."

"When you returned to London, you left John at once. To go where? Straight back to me, Sherlock."

"I came here because you are the Sleeping Beauties killer."

"No, you came because you are running from John. You are not bonded. The Holmeses don’t bond. Neither do sociopaths."

"Shut up. You told me once . . . that I was evidence that people can change." He hated the fact that he was trying to defend himself. But he couldn’t ignore Maxim’s words, perhaps because they felt true.

"Still not convinced? A bonded Omega would never come here alone. I have something you want."

"What?"

"A little bit of your soul."

Maxim’s voice was not the same. In Tibet, Sherlock had heard the monks singing like this, with strange otherworldly vibrations of the vocal chords. It was almost impossible to imagine the sweet-faced monks, their soft and gentle voices, making such unearthly, dissonant sounds. But they did.

Maxim’s face was changing now too, like soft clay. Sherlock once watched a forensic archaeologist reconstructing the flesh of a murder victim when only the skull remained. She had patiently layered the skull over with clay until it resembled a living person.

Maxim looked like that now. The tissues of his face were stretched over a different face beneath.

This face was not as good at hiding madness – evil – yes, now he recognised evil – as Maxim’s. It was this man who was stretching Maxim’s face into an unimaginably horrible grin. It was this man who was operating Maxim’s vocal chords.

He felt a sort of electric crackle in the air, all around them.

Maxim/not Maxim made a few incomprehensible sounds. Then it produced words, rough and halting, and the accent nearly unintelligible.

“How did I see you in Scotland and London, when I was in India? How is a man dead hundreds of years here now? How can I be here, and also with your brother upstairs, this very instant?”

“You’re talking about time travel, second sight, teleportation. But it’s a trick. Or an illusion.” Maxim had to have given him a hallucinogenic. It was not possible that another man’s face actually lay beneath Maxim’s own skin, or that an alien voice issued from Maxim’s throat.
The brain could be tricked into seeing and believing almost anything, but that did not make it real.

But the superhuman force that had dragged him away from the door had seemed very real. His fingertips burned where the nails had been torn away. It had to have been the Alphas, he decided. The only explanation. But they were all dead now. The house was dark and silent.

Somewhere, the clock struck dolorous notes. A quarter till midnight.

This was still Samhain, the night the dead returned to their former homes. Maxim grinned and nodded. The face beneath Maxim’s skin was becoming clearer.

“You are Squire Jonathan Talbott,” Sherlock said. “The villagers accused you of a pact with the devil.”

“They were right.”

To be continued . . .

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 17's title, "Spooky Action," is from Einstein: "physics should represent a reality in time and space, free from spooky actions at a distance." Einsten rejected the quantum physics theory of "action at a distance," or quantum entanglement: that particles separated in space, even at unimaginably great distances, can directly influence each other instantaneously, exceeding the speed of light. Einstein was wrong. Recent experiments verify the existence and behavior of "Spooky action at a distance."
To determine by what modes or actions light produceth in our minds the phantasm of colour is not so easie.

–Isaac Newton

Every contact leaves traces.

Edmund Locard, L'Enquête Criminelle et les Méthodes Scientifiques

I believe in the wonder

I believe this new life to gain

Like a god that I'm under

There's drugs running through my veins

I believe in the wonder

I believe I can touch the flame

There's a spell that I'm under

Got to fly, I don't feel no shame

The world is mine

Take a look -- what you've started

In the world flashing from your eyes

And you know that you've got it

From the thunder you feel inside
All Hallows Eve. On Gibbets Hill Road, Tatsfield, Surrey.

John Watson thought about what the nervous little shop clerk had told him. The Hall was being rebuilt; a hotel, the clerk had said. He had been plotting out how he would approach the Hall. He was prepared to present his folded invitation from the Omega boy’s pocket at the door, but in his present state he couldn’t hope to fool anyone, even if he tried. And he didn’t really think he could try. All he wanted was Sherlock.

His mind circled with images that were seared there, that he could never forget. Maxim and Sherlock kissing in Little Havana. Maxim grabbing Sherlock’s arm, Sherlock pulling back. Sherlock chained to a wall, fighting off Maxim’s assault. Whatever Sherlock’s disguise was tonight, it would have to be very convincing. Maxim Purcell knew Sherlock’s face and body so very intimately that he could not imagine how Sherlock could get away with it.

He had already decided that Maxim Purcell wasn’t going to get away with it.

The roads beyond Tatsfield village were unpaved. He found Gibbets Hill Road, and turned. As promised, he could see a glowing white structure on a nearby hill, shining through gathering mist.

He noticed that he could see his breath inside the car and that it was fogging up his windows. He rubbed at the window. The car’s headlamps shone on something dark moving in the trees. Teenagers fooling around in the woods on Halloween, probably. He didn’t have time to think about it.

Now the car was lurching and rattling. He could barely see through the mist but it looked like the dirt road was deeply rutted. There had been builders coming and going from Hantswood Hall, the clerk had said.

There was a fork here. One clearly led to the gates of Hantswood Hall. The rutted road continued down the other fork. He made a quick decision and followed the rutted road.

All Hallows Eve. The library of Hantswood Hall.

Mycroft had had no difficulty being admitted to Hantswood Hall. Announcing his name at the gate, he was ushered immediately to an elevator that discharged him at the door of a room that glowed with hidden lights, reflecting from glass and steel shelves. This was a library. Maxim was here, standing at a long table. On the table rested a single volume, very old looking. Maxim was wearing gloves to protect the fragile pages.
He looked up at Mycroft without surprise. His eyes had a strange gleam, but otherwise he seemed quite composed. Much more so than in Mumbai. On the whole, Mycroft thought Maxim seemed a great deal more dangerous now. His cold gaze seemed to look through and beyond him to something only he could see. Mycroft wondered if there was any way he could possibly see the wire threaded in his hair.

“You may have been told that I am a collector of rare books.”

“I was not. But I knew it.”

“Forgive me for forgetting your omniscience, Mycroft. I am assuming we are still on the same terms of informality that we enjoyed in Mumbai.”

“Of course, Maxim. Upon reflection, I find I wish I had been more . . . generous, on that occasion.”

“I will give you the opportunity to demonstrate whether that is true, presently. Have you ever seen an authentic copy of The Omega Sutra? No? What is interesting when one examines a genuine original is how much of the text has been lost over time in sloppy transcription and erroneous translation.”

“I had thought that The Omega Sutra was more about the drawings. Those need no translation.”

“That is just where you are wrong. I’ll tell you a secret. You are a man who enjoys collecting secrets. So am I. We have quite a lot in common, Mycroft. I’ve come into possession of a certain book. A book no one has seen.”

“Not even my brother?”

“I was wondering when you would mention Sherlock. I hope you appreciate that I did not – you had expressly told me not to. You see how I have respected your . . . instructions. But to answer your question, I did show him. But Sherlock did not respect what I offered him.”

Knowing what he did now about Sherlock’s condition multiplied his fear. Because of John, the seemingly impossible had actually happened. The thought of Sherlock and his unborn in danger in this place was deeply disturbing, and he shivered.

“For a man like that to take a blue dose, to choose to neuter. You would never make that choice.”

This was true. Although Mycroft had no present intention to breed, his reverence for the Holmes bloodline made any thought of choosing to neuter abhorrent.

Maxim regarded him knowingly. Mycroft realized that Maxim was a very good judge of character, better than he had known. His remark seemed almost to have come from reading his own thoughts just now.

“In that you are correct.” He didn’t mind admitting this to Maxim.

###

Mycroft had deliberately withdrawn from his suppressants since Mumbai. He told himself that it was justified. The Holmes dynasty possessed uniquely dominant and alluring scent signatures, both Alpha and Omega. In his early career at MI5, his superiors had encouraged him to learn how to wield them to maximum advantage. In deciding to pursue Maxim Purcell, he had made the considered decision that he would need every weapon at his disposal.
It had only been a short while, but he could already feel the telltale tingling in his blood as Alpha chemistry boldly asserted itself in his blood, in his flesh. Everything felt more alive, more vivid and tactile. He had had the devil’s own time of it to keep his hands off of Lestrade.

Maxim was smiling at him knowingly, and yet he was being drawn in, Mycroft thought. Maxim reached out his hand and placed it intimately on his chest. Possibly checking his heart rate. Possibly checking for a wire, as Lestrade had warned. Mycroft’s nerves were steady. He imagined his attraction pheromones unfurling themselves, wondering if he could still direct them after so a long dormancy.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to, Mycroft. I imagine you think you are very clever. You’re trying to make me want what I asked for in Mumbai.”

Mycroft let the memories float there between them for a moment. Then he laughed. “Don’t think you can hide the fact that you do. And I have to correct you. You weren’t asking, you were begging. Did I make a mistake in Mumbai? I came here to find out.”

“You came here to find out the truth about the Sleeping Beauties. And that’s all right. Once you know the truth, you will want to be with me.”

“The truth? Are you the killer, then?”

“That is not the truth I am speaking of. I have a question for you. How do you know that I am speaking to you?”

“Well, unless I am dreaming – which I am certain as I can be that I am not – I can hear your voice, and I can see that you are standing in front of me, speaking to me.”

“You hear my voice. What is hearing? Sound waves – waves of energy, impulses sent to the brain. And so Energy becomes Perception. Energy becomes Consciousness. Another question: when you say you can see me speaking - what is sight?”

“I’m sure you would prefer to tell me.”

“Your brain, telling you what waves of light energy mean. Consciousness it is simply the conversion of one energy form to another. What we call sexual energy is the strongest energy that most humans are capable of experiencing. And yet for so brief a time as to be meaningless.”

The Mysteries taught its practitioners to extend the sexual capacity and endurance of their bodies, especially the nebulous subtle body, through mediation, pheromone manipulation, and constant challenges under the guidance of a master. Mycroft had dabbled in the Mysteries as part of his clandestine work with MI5, but had never been drawn to conquer them as his brother had.

“And so through the Mysteries, you strengthened your subtle body.”

“Yes. But then I thought that to extend the limits of the Mysteries, I needed a stronger partner. But time after time, I failed.”

“Because they kept dying, yes?”

Maxim smiled enigmatically. “I don’t know what you mean by ‘dying.’ But I searched everywhere for a suitable partner. And that is how I met Sherlock. In Tibet.”

###
“Why did you choose my brother?” He really wanted to know. He understood why Sherlock accepted Maxim’s tutelage - Sherlock always went for the highest form of available data.

“Not for the reasons you might think, even though he is definitely within my preferred type. No, for his powers, of course. I have done some researches into the Holmes bloodline.”

“And I shall have to ask you to delete that information with prejudice.”

“It doesn’t matter now, anyway. In the end I was wrong about Sherlock. I blame John Watson. He was much stronger than I expected. There are always new things to learn, Mycroft.”

“From your candour tonight, can I anticipate that you intend to teach me?” Mycroft was starting to be very curious about that book on the table. Maxim’s eyes kept straying to it possessively.

Maxim stared at Mycroft for a long minute. “On a molecular level the human brain is a superconductor of energy. But it has a limitation. The easiest way to explain is to think about the power of mechanical engines. More horses, more power. I thought that binding Sherlock to me would give me this increase in power.”

“But then he bonded with John Watson.”

“Has he?” Maxim gave him a knowing look, a look that meant that he was privy to knowledge that Mycroft was not.

Was it possible that Sherlock had not bonded with John after all? There was the fact that he had left John’s side immediately upon returning to London -- despite his new pregnancy. Maxim obviously did not know about that, or of Sherlock’s presence here in the Hall. Yet. What did it mean? He felt ill; perhaps the Holmeses really were unfit for anything more than casual or arranged alliances. Bonding was almost unknown in the Holmes line. If Sherlock’s feelings for John had failed to evolve into a bond, what did that portend for his own life?

“Mycroft. Let me give you a taste, and then you can decide.”

Maxim stepped closer to Mycroft, inhaling greedily of Mycroft’s unadulterated Alpha scent.

When they were mere inches apart, he stopped. He did not touch Mycroft anywhere - masters of the Mysteries were able to experience, and to give, sexual pleasure without physical touch.

Mycroft didn’t think that Maxim intended to give him any choice at all, just the illusion of one. A trap.

###

After an indeterminate time passed, Mycroft noticed that he was being covered with a viscous liquid, warm and sensual. He had a mental image of a thick golden fluid flowing over his skin, very slowly. Although he knew that Maxim was somehow transmitting this image to his mind, these feelings to his body, it still felt breathtakingly, intoxicatingly glorious.

His cock immediately strained to this novel stimulation, he felt compelled to free it so that it, too, would be encased in the delicious warmth. This feeling traveled from the root of his cock to the tender flesh of his head, and the exquisite thrill to that tiny patch of sensitive skin expanded over the whole of his body. This ravishing pleasure was transporting and he could imagine wanting to stay like this forever. Forever and ever... the thought grew stronger, and he thought dimly that Maxim was planting that suggestion somehow.
He was not in control any longer of his body, it shook and shuddered on the brink of orgasm that was building but would not come, and he knew absolutely that this sensation would go on without end. He might have groaned, he might have involuntarily moved his body closer to Maxim. He could feel Maxim’s lips hovering near his, but something deep inside made him refuse to part them to let him inside.

There was an immense roaring in his head and then he felt himself looking down at his own body from somewhere above. From this vantage point, he could see that this was illusion, not reality. But most people wouldn’t care. If it was a drug, people would be slaves to it.

Was this what the Sleeping Beauties felt as they went to their deaths?

###

The road led to a construction entrance to the rear of the Hall. John didn’t know if there were security cameras here and couldn’t worry about it. He donned a gas/pheromone mask and pulled a rubber Halloween mask over it, all he could find on short notice. A werewolf’s head. It was supposed to be a Halloween party, and it was All Hallows Eve.

If anyone found him on the grounds, he was prepared. He would pretend he was drunk and lost.

If anybody tried to get in his way or stop him, he was prepared for that too.

He found the chain link gate ajar and walked onto the grounds of Hantswood Hall. This side of the Hall was not as brightly lit as the front. There were huge earth moving machines parked here and he was glad for the cover. John moved cautiously toward a row of French doors, crouching low. It felt like a night op, in Afghanistan. His pulse was slow and steady. He knew what to do.

His hand was trying the handle to the doors. He cursed under his breath at the werewolf mask. It was interfering with his field of vision. He was almost going to yank it off hand clapped down on his shoulder. He turned.

“What are you doing here,” demanded a tall, well-built Alpha wearing a black domino mask.

“Where’s the loo,” he said, slurring his words through his double mask. The Alpha looked him over. John knew he couldn’t hope to hide his real condition this close to another Alpha: the possessive rage of an Alpha separated from his bonded was unmistakable, throwing out scent signals to every Alpha in range to prepare them for battle.

The Alpha yanked on his shoulder and pulled him through the door. They were inside the Hall now. “You’re coming with me,” he growled. “Take off your mask.”

John reached up with his free hand, but not remove the werewolf mask. Instead, he reached into his jacket and withdrew a glass cylinder. The Alpha snatched at it, but too late. John snarled in the Alpha’s face and dropped the cylinder to the cold marble floor.

He took the little red and blue bottles from Sherlock’s hand and threw them away, and they heard them shatter. Sherlock smiled inscrutably. “I’m burning,” Sherlock said. “I don’t want to die like this.”

The cylinder shattered. The Alpha’s eyes instantly rolled up in his head behind his mask. He
John watched. When he was sure that the Alpha was not going to move, he knelt down and felt in the Alpha’s pockets. Nothing but a few small bottles of what looked to be pheromone elixirs. He took these and stood up. There was an open door across the room, and light beyond it.

Careful to step over the pool of blood flowing from the Alpha’s head, John moved toward the light.

# # #

The melting pleasure fell away from Mycroft’s body like cooling candle wax, and mentally he broke it and shook it off, where it crumbled into a golden dust around them.

“I knew I was right about you,” Maxim whispered. “You went outside of your own skin. A natural projector. But believe me when I tell you that if I chose, I could keep you where I want you.”

He wasn’t sure he could to speak. It took a few moments for him to regain control of his body, to make it respond to his mind’s commands. The strangely beautiful golden fluid had been like the web of a spider, immobilising and trapping its prey.

It was time to lay a trap of his own. He paused a long moment before taking Maxim’s hand, and placing it just where he had denied him, in Mumbai.

“An Alpha’s cock never lies,” Maxim said. Mycroft thought there was something wrong in the greenish gaze that stared back at him. But then they were both looking down at his hardness from the golden dream. Under a quick, sensual movement of Maxim’s hand he grew even harder.

“Why do you need the Omegas? What can they give you? And why tonight? If you want me to be with you, make me understand.”

“Make me believe that you want to,” Maxim said.

# # #

“----You’re trying to make me want what I asked for in Mumbai.”

(Mycroft laughing)

“Don’t think you can hide the fact that you do. And I have to correct you. You weren’t asking, you were begging. Did I make a mistake in Mumbai? I came here to find out.”

“You came here to find out the truth about the Sleeping Beauties. And that’s all right. Once you know the truth, you will want to be with me.”

They were all listening through headphones. The sound had been excellent up to this point, but Maxim hadn’t said anything incriminating, either.

And so Mycroft was putting his cards on the table. The tones of their voices left no doubt at all. This, then, was the reason that Mycroft had been convinced that Maxim would be willing, even eager, to admit him to Hantswood Hall.

Mycroft and Maxim had had an encounter of an obviously sexual nature.

An encounter that hadn’t been in London.
It had been in Mumbai.

In Mumbai, Maxim had been begging Mycroft for . . . something. Lestrade knew he had to stop himself thinking about it so he didn’t torment himself imagining what it was.

As if he didn’t already know himself, very well.

Mycroft had been very busy indeed in Mumbai. Juggling the sexual attentions of Maxim and Lestrade, and who knows who else? Mycroft and Maxim were playing games with each other, more than Mycroft had felt it necessary to reveal to Lestrade. Somehow, it had become useful to Mycroft make a conquest of Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade of the Metropolitan Police.

Now Lestrade knew he was just a pawn in Mycroft’s game. He ought to have known. It was common knowledge that in the end, everyone was.

###

Their headphones exploded with deafening static. They all yanked them off. Lestrade felt as if his ears would bleed.

“What’s happening? We checked that wire a dozen times!”

Critchley was fumbling with dials, squinting at computer screens.

“Sir, I don’t know. I still have him on GPS. But I think he’s lost the wire.”

Donovan and Critchley looked at Lestrade for guidance. They all knew what that probably meant.

The wire had been discovered. Or, Mycroft had discarded it. The only reason Mycroft would find that necessary was if someone was likely to be running hands through his hair. Maybe grabbing a fistful of it, Lestrade imagined.

He put the headphones back to his ears. Nothing.

The glowing dot that was Mycroft on the screen was motionless. It pulsed slowly, like a heartbeat. Whatever Mycroft was doing now, he was not moving around the room.

He felt sick and hot and needed to hit something. He took out a fistful of keys and opened the metal cabinet under the seats.

“Sir – we haven’t any cause for firearms –” Donovan said carefully. Lestrade was checking a standard-issue Glock.

“Wait – I’ve got something –” Critchley was exultant. “Shhh!”

(Maxim) “-- if I chose, I could keep you where I want you.”

Long silence. Sound of heavy breathing. Only Lestrade could know that sound intimately enough to be certain it was Mycroft. There was fumbling, rustling. As small gasp, immediately cut off; suppressed, maybe.

(Maxim) “An Alpha’s cock never lies.”

(Mycroft, breathless) “Why do you need the Omegas? What can they give you? And why tonight? If you want me to be with you, make me understand.”
(Maxim) “Make me believe that you want to.”

(soft moaning)

Lestrade was shaking from head to toe, violently, as if he were freezing. He removed his headphones, and Donovan and Critchley followed, relieved not to have to hear more.

He knew that sound. But he couldn’t allow himself to hear, couldn’t allow himself to care. He took a deep breath and his words came out hard and cold.

“There’s our probable cause. Maxim doesn’t deny that it’s going down tonight. He knows Mycroft is talking about the Sleeping Beauty killings. It’s an admission.”

“Sir, maybe we should wait – it’s not very clean, is it?”

Lestrade glared at Donovan. She was right, of course. “Let me worry about whether it’s – clean. Both of you -- take a firearm and cover me. We’re going in before he moves on the Omegas.”

Or on Mycroft Holmes, Donovan thought with a burst of revelation.

###

Moving toward the Hall, they were amazed to see half a dozen Omegas in red domino masks stagger out, dazed and but apparently unhurt. But neither Mycroft nor Sherlock emerged after them, and the front door shut again with a violent bang.

Lestrade didn’t have to think about it. “Donovan, get help, get them all checked out. Call down to Tatsfield, we’ll need somewhere to question them -- if they’re fit. Critchley, with me.”

“But sir –” Donovan was outraged. Left behind again at the brink of a spectacular arrest. Critchley would get all the laurels. He didn’t smirk but she knew he was gloating.

“Do as I say, do it now,” Lestrade said shortly. With all respect to Donovan, he’d rather take on Maxim Purcell with an anti-terrorism officer at his side. “Mask, Critchley.” He had seen the Omegas reeling and immediately suspected some sort of gas or pheromone intoxicant. They pulled on universal masks to shield them and entered Hantswood Hall.

Everything was dark and quiet. Somewhere there was a clock ticking. It was close to midnight.

Inside, the gps locator led them to an upper floor. There was a bright line of light under the door where Mycroft ought to be. On Lestrade’s signal they kicked it in.

To be continued . . .
That Horrid Craft and Company

Chapter Notes

For readers that are interested in the playlist to The Omega Sutra, you can listen here:

THE OMEGA SUTRA PLAYLIST

Enjoy.

G

The Omega Sutra. Chapter Nineteen: That Horrid Craft and Company

Here it is to be noted that the devil is more eager and keen to tempt the good than the wicked.

- Malleus Maleficarum (The Witches’ Hammer). Part 2, Chapter I: Of the several Methods by which Devils through Witches Entice the Innocent to the Increase of that Horrid Craft and Company.

Oh baby don’t you know I suffer?

Oh baby can you hear me moan?

You caught me under false pretenses

How long before you let me go?

(You set my soul alight)

Glaciers melting in the dead of night

And the superstars sucked into the
I thought I was a fool for no one

Oh baby I'm a fool for you

You're the queen of the superficial

how long before you tell the truth

**Supermassive Black Hole, Muse**  
[Supermassive Black Hole here](https://www.museband.com/supermassive-black-hole)  
(Yes I did. Tell me you can’t feel that. You're welcome.)

---

**Hantswood Hall, near Tatsfield, Surrey, 31 October, shortly before midnight.**

Maxim’s lean, elegant features were transformed to that of a bloated, dissolute rake, but Sherlock refused to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Somehow, Maxim was making him see these delusions. There was no other explanation.

As for why Maxim would kill in this ritualistic fashion, Sherlock told himself that Maxim had suffered a schizophrenic break. It was the influence of this strange place, even he could feel it. Maxim’s charisma and power induced the Alphas to be his tools. How often had weaker minds succumbed to the delusion of the stronger to commit horrible murders? Manson. Jonestown. Uganda.

He did not doubt that Maxim really believed himself possessed by the spirit of Jonathan Talbott, who had lived and (presumably) died on the grounds of Hantswood Hall. In those times, witches were hanged and burned by the thousands.

In those times, there was an authoritative guide for the education of witch-finders: *Malificus Maleficarum*, The Witches’ Hammer. This judicial case-book was used by educated men of science for the detection, prosecution, torture and execution of witches for three hundred years.

Sherlock had reviewed this work, curious how so many could be so systematically deceived. The book was very clear as to the means of proceeding to catch and execute a witch. In particular there were precise instructions for tortures of a truly astounding variety to wring a confession from the witch.
Before confession came accusation.

“So, Talbott. You are the Sleeping Beauty Killer. Part of your pact with the devil, then?”

“No, Sherlock, you killed the Omegas. And look around you – who made these Alphas kill one another? The part of you that is with me is a killer.”

“You’re lying. They do say that the devil is a liar. I’m not a killer.”

*Why murder?* Mycroft asked him once. *Why not medicine? Chemistry? Chess? It is the field best suited to my capabilities,* he replied. He did not add that without such employment, the emptiness that he carelessly called boredom led him down very dangerous paths. No, he wasn’t a killer. But sometimes, in his blackest moods, hadn’t he believed that he could be?

He felt that despair now. He was surrounded by death. He was tainted by it. He was unworthy of John, unworthy of the tiny life growing within him, so innocently.
'There isn’t much time left. I need you to come with me now, Sherlock,” Maxim/Talbott said.

“No. I’m leaving here, I’m leaving you, Maxim.” He walked confidently toward the stair, but as before, strong hands pulled him back. Invisible hands. The chamber filled with wind, battering them like the storm on the Magnus had. John.

The wind pulled Sherlock inexorably toward him. This was not a real wind but the power of the Mysteries, unimaginably multiplied. He could no longer believe it an illusion. When Maxim’s arms closed around him, Sherlock knew he would never escape. His child, John’s child, would never escape.

He backed away, fell back against one of the cold stones, and the wind pushed him down. He landed on the cold body of an Alpha, hacked to ribbons with a sharp blade. The blade was buried to the hilt in his chest.

Sherlock imagined the net he had thrown over the Alphas drawing around himself, wrapping itself protectively around that new and precious part of him and of John that could not protect itself. It took all of his strength. He was very, very weary. His weapon of last resort, the pain that he had inflicted on the Alphas, could not be used against Maxim/Talbott, who would eagerly turn the pain back on him, on the child within.

As if he could read this thought, Maxim/Talbott began to envelop him in a sheet of pure pain.

*John*, he thought. *I need John.*

He dove down deeper, enfolded that tiny spark of life and shut himself down.

#  #  #

John had intended to search the first floor, but he had a strong reaction when he saw an open door leading down a stair. This is where he had to go. This is where he would find Sherlock. He took off his masks. He wanted Sherlock to see he had come for him.

At the bottom of the stair he saw blood splatter; the body of a dead Alpha with a slashed throat. He didn’t waver. He had seen worse in Afghanistan. He had gotten himself out of there alive. He would get Sherlock and their unborn child out of this place; then he would take care of Maxim Purcell.

Then he would make sure that Sherlock never left again.

He stepped quietly down the stair, then bounded down the rest when he heard the voices:

“There isn’t much time left. I need you to come with me now, Sherlock,” a strangely accented voice said.

“No. I’m leaving here, I’m leaving you, Maxim.”

Now John saw the dead Alphas everywhere, clustered around a circle of bloody stone slabs. Grappling with Sherlock atop one of the stones was a wicked dark figure that seemed to John very like, yet unlike, Maxim Purcell. His features were blurred, but John had less than an instant to notice their strangeness as his vision was overtaken by a red haze of bloodlust.

*John. I want you, John.*

Sherlock and Maxim were locked together intimately, but this time in a death struggle. John’s
hand wavered, and he lowered the gun. There was no clear shot. And the glass phial in his jacket would harm Sherlock and the baby as much, or more, than it would harm Maxim.

John leaped. Sherlock was very pale; the light in his wide grey eyes was nearly gone. John felt the pain flowing from Maxim to Sherlock, and yelled with the agony of not being able to stop him, clawing and punching Maxim with a fury ten hundred fold beyond what he had unleashed upon Maxim the last time they fought. Kamala Kangra.

But Maxim fought back with a strength that seemed superhuman, and John’s hands kept slipping when he tried to pull him from Sherlock.

“Sherlock!” He screamed. The thing that looked like Maxim was trying to focus that terrible pain on him how, but he would never, ever let go. In one terrible flash he saw Sherlock rouse, recognizing him with eyes full of horror. This redoubled John’s strength; he got an arm around Maxim’s neck. Now he felt the pain slip, and he squeezed harder.

The thing gasped and croaked, sounding more animal than human. Sherlock pulled and strained until John caught the flash of something like dull gold. Maxim and John recognized the blade of the knife at the same instant. Sherlock was groping behind his back, and for the first time John saw that they were lying against the corpse of an Alpha.

There was a terrible equipoise as the knife hovered at Sherlock’s belly.

“John,” Sherlock gasped.

“Oh god,” John cried, and pulled Maxim away from Sherlock by inches with furious effort. Maxim struggled and growled. “Sherlock, do it,” he shouted.

Maxim’s body begin to vibrate, then quake beneath him in a grotesque imitation of rapture. The bands of Maxim’s power finally slackened. John hurled himself backward with a shout, pulling Maxim with him and they landed in a writhing heap. He could see the handle of the knife thrust between Maxim’s ribs. John prayed it had pierced his heart.

As they lay panting and gasping together, John saw a glimmering mist emanating from Maxim’s mouth. He could feel a deep cold radiating from this mist, it was colder than ice; colder than death, colder than the grave. His heart wanted to hammer its way out of his chest. Of everything he had seen and felt tonight, he could not reconcile this mist with reality. The mist curled toward Sherlock, lying still against the stone with Maxim’s blood spattered across his face.

He reached for the handle of the knife and drove it in deeper, then frantically put his hands over Maxim’s mouth to try and stop the mist from coming. Too late. The mist was settling over Sherlock’s face now.

Sherlock’s eyes were closed and John was glad he could not see it coming for him.

###

Mycroft’s back was to Lestrade. He was leaning against a long table upon which a single volume lay open under a pool of light. His hands gripped the edges of the table.

Maxim was kneeling in the shadows. There was absolutely no mistaking what he was doing. Mycroft’s back was a column of tension, his head thrown back in pain? Ecstasy?

“Maxim Purcell! Stand up and back up to the wall. Lestrade brandished his Glock to make sure Maxim was paying attention. “You’re under arrest for rape, kidnapping, murder and attempted
murder. We’ll get to the formal charges and the list of victims at the Yard. Mr Holmes, get back.”

Maxim laughed and stood up. “Mycroft, you play a deep game. I really was right about you.”

“Shut it, Purcell,” Lestrade warned. “Get your hands against that wall. I must caution you that you do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. I must caution you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. You have a right to a solicitor.”

“Of course,” Maxim said. He turned away and made an elaborate show of placing his palms against the bookshelves, spreading his legs provocatively. Lestrade’s face burned. He had never discharged his weapon in the line of duty. This would be a good time to break that record, he thought darkly.

“Are there any other Omegas here? Where is Sherlock Holmes?”

Lestrade thought he might invoke his right of silence, or demand his solicitor, but then he saw that his shoulders shaking. He was laughing.

“Sherlock,” Maxim said, “is here with us.”

Lestrade and Critchley looked around the room but there was no sign of Sherlock. Lestrade turned to Maxim, intending to cuff him, when a tremendous sound of explosives shook them as if the entire place was going to come apart. Lestrade leaped to protect Mycroft. The explosions kept coming, getting louder, until it sounded as if the earth beneath them must be splitting open. The sound was excruciatingly painful. Lestrade fought not to drop his gun and hung on to Mycroft with his free hand. It was impossible to move, or think. The room was spinning.

“Mycroft, get behind me! Maxim, stay where you are!” Lestrade shouted, but he couldn’t hear his own voice. Mycroft’s lips were moving but he couldn’t hear him. He reeled with vertigo. Maybe it the entire house was rocking on its foundations. They had to get out of here.

But when he stumbled to the bookcase, Maxim wasn’t there.

Lestrade hung on to the edge of the bookshelves, feeling their solidity, looking for a concealed door. The explosions abruptly stopped, leaving nothing but the harsh clamour of bells ringing in their ears. He was sure he would never be able to hear again. When he regained his balance, he released Mycroft from his grip. He was sure he must have left bruises on that pale skin. He was glad.

He scrutinized Mycroft’s face, expecting to see nothing there but glacial composure. None of this meant anything to Mycroft Holmes. There were always other games, other players. Mycroft looked away, but when Lestrade didn’t move, Mycroft finally met his gaze. Lestrade’s expectation was met. The man was cold as ice after all, he thought.

Iceman.

“He got past us,” Lestrade shouted. “We’ll have to search. Mr Holmes, go with Critchley, get out of the house.”

# # #

John pushed Maxim from him and seized Sherlock, pressing him to him and trying to somehow direct the cold mist to himself. He pulled Sherlock’s still face protectively into his neck and
wrapped him in his arms.

“No – No –” he screamed. “Leave him, take me,” he begged. It seemed to hear him somehow, because the mist stopped swirling.

“What will you give?” The voice that was Maxim’s and yet not Maxim’s asked. He could not say where the voice came from. Maxim was not moving his mouth; a thin mist still drifted from between his lips. Seemingly the voice was from inside his own head. “Would you give your soul?”

“Anything, everything, if you'll let him go. You can’t have him.”

There was an enormous cracking sound, as if an explosion were bringing the entire house down around them. There was a great rushing wind, and although he could not see it, John felt a giant door opening. Behind it was everything he had ever been afraid of, everything that had ever hurt him or could hurt him; but if he walked through that door it would close behind him, and Sherlock and their child would be safe on the other side.

Did the devil keep his bargains? There was only one way to find out. The door was opening wider and the wind rushing through it would pull him through. All he had to do was let go of Sherlock. Which he could never do.

There was another explosion, this one smaller, more real; it echoed through the chamber. This was a very familiar sound and even now, John instinctively ducked and threw himself over Sherlock.

Gunfire.

The rushing wind stopped abruptly. The door shut with a bang.

Maxim was laid out on the floor with half of his head blown off and a knife thrust in his chest.

“Help me,” John said, amazed that his voice worked at all, that he was present, alive. Sherlock was cold in his arms. Lestrade and Mycroft helped him to move Sherlock to one of the stones. He was breathing. John sobbed with relief.

“He’s alive,” John said, looking from Mycroft to Lestrade. Something in their eyes told him he didn’t have to explain. They all had felt what had happened this night. All Hallows Eve. It wasn’t over yet. They heard the deep chiming of a distant clock, beginning to strike midnight at last.

There was a shadow on the stair, and they all looked up fearfully.

It was El Brujo.

“Quickly. There’s no time. Throw him on the wood,” he said.

There was indeed a pile of wood in the middle of the stones, as high as a man. High enough to make a bonfire.

To the chimes of midnight, John, Lestrade and Mycroft hauled Maxim’s body up and threw it on the wood. Then they carried Sherlock to the top of the stair.

“Go, take him out of this house,” El Brujo said. “I will take care of the rest.”

# # #

As they brought Sherlock out into the fresh night air, the final toll of midnight struck. At that
moment roaring fire burst from the windows of Hantswood Hall, crawled up the walls, and pulled
down the timbers of the roof.

They pulled Sherlock far back from the flames as Hantswood Hall burned, imploding upon itself
in a fireball that would utterly consume it.

When they turned to take Sherlock to safety, John, Lestrade and Mycroft perceived a solemn ring
of dark figures in the wood. The figures surrounded the Hall like sentinels, bearing witness to the
burning.

In the glow, John could see that the figures were mostly in costume.

Ghosts, witches.

But there was one that wore the mask of a fox, and he could swear that the eyes behind it were
familiar. Later, he would realise that they were the eyes of the shop clerk from the village of
Tatsfield.

###

In the morning, it could be seen that nothing had been spared; Hantswood Hall was destroyed.
But when the smoke cleared, one could also see blackened stone and charred timbers,
corresponding exactly to the bones of the old Hall.

To be continued . . .
Chapter Twenty. The Sound of a Bullet.

The winner of the game is the player who makes the next-to-last mistake. – Savielly Tartakover

Hantswood Hall, 1 November, shortly after midnight.

“I’ve got to go back – there’s still a man inside,” Lestrade cried. The old man who had mysteriously appeared after he had shot Maxim Purcell had not followed them out of the burning Hall.

“No – look – he’s all right,” John said. Climbing the hill behind the Hall was El Brujo, outlined in the glow of the fire. Two figures emerged from the wood to meet him. John felt an instant of powerful relief. He had come to count on El Brujo’s wise, steady presence to guide his way in this strange adventure. But he sensed that El Brujo was not one to submit to questioning by the police.

“Sir, shall I get after him?” Donovan asked.

Lestrade looked after El Brujo. He thought he saw him turn at the top of the hill, but then he was gone. John was looking at him intently.

“No, that’s all right,” he said slowly. “He’s an innocent bystander. We have all the witnesses we need.”

He wanted to talk to John and Mycroft, but not in front of the others; there had been no opportunity, yet, to talk about what had really happened inside the Hall. And it looked like John wouldn’t want to go into it all now -- John looked sick with dread. Sherlock was seemingly unharmed, yet remote and not at all himself. To his eye, even Mycroft looked pale and shaken but was holding it all in rather well as he attended to his brother in the midst of the sudden chaos. Ambulances had been summoned for the somnambulant Omegas, and there was general disorder in getting them up the hill to Tatsfield in the dark over unpaved roads; the fire brigade was here, too, trying to douse the raging fire. John was loudly insisting on taking Sherlock to the nearest hospital, and Lestrade was astonished when a private ambulance materialized, apparently summoned by Mycroft. John and Sherlock were borne away, and Mycroft and Lestrade watched after them until the ambulance turned a corner and out of view.

This business concluded, Mycroft then commenced a series of murmured conferences on his
Hantswood Hall, 1 November, 2:00 a.m.

“They’re here, sir,” Donovan hissed.

Flashing red lights announced the arrival of Detective Chief Inspector David Quinn. Lestrade stood up and tried to make himself presentable. He was wearing a Met jacket and too-tight jeans lent by one of the constables. His own clothes, smeared with Maxim’s blood – and his gun – had been tagged as evidence. He knew he looked disheveled and tried to smooth his rumpled hair. He caught Mycroft looking at him with an unreadable expression that he firmly refused to interpret as something more than impersonal observation. This made him think about standing next to Mycroft, staring at each other’s reflections in the mirror, wearing bespoke black tie.

Mycroft took a step toward him, and for a wild moment Lestrade thought he was going to reach out his hand to touch his hair, but his hands stayed at his side. Lestrade was overcome with confused images of what those hands had recently been doing, been touching. He swallowed and turned away.

“Brass is taking the spotlight,” Donovan said sourly. She had a clear vision of the immediate future: She would be buried under reams of paperwork. Quinn and Lestrade would be giving press statements. Critchley maybe standing behind them, looking dangerous and competent. She grimaced.

“And the credit,” Critchley added, showing his own insecurities.

“That’s enough, both of you. Donovan, get those evidence bags in order.”

Critchley turned back to the audio tapes. He had been trying to make sense of what had happened. He had been trying to take Mycroft Holmes from Hantswood Hall on Lestrade’s orders, when an explosion had rocked the building and he had fallen to his knees. He must have struck his head, because when he opened his eyes Holmes was gone and Lestrade was pushing him through black smoke out to safety.

“When you learn the truth,” Purcell was saying on the audio, “you will want to be with me.” He sounded completely mad, and more than mad. His resonant voice raised goosebumps over his flesh. He could well believe Purcell was the Sleeping Beauties killer.

He wanted to ask Mycroft Holmes if Purcell had told him “the truth” about the murders, but Lestrade’s glowering looks made him keep his questions to himself. He returned to the audio recordings.

“Well, Detective Inspector, got our man, eh?” Detective Chief Inspector Quinn entered the Village
Hall and singled Lestrade out. He did not offer to shake his hand. “No, don’t say anything, you
know the procedure. You’ll be debriefed at the Yard. And you’re on suspension pending inquiry
into Purcell’s death. You knew that without me telling you, I’m sure. So -- Maxim Purcell is
dead, isn’t he? You can say that much.”

“He is. Purcell is dead,” Lestrade said. He was almost happy to focus on the sound of his bullet
flying, aim true, the sight of Purcell’s skull exploding. It pushed away other sounds, other images
that he could not afford to allow himself to dwell upon. “And my gun’s in evidence. Sir,” he
added for good measure.

“I’ll be taking over this investigation now,” Quinn announced loudly. “I want a briefing on
evidence and witnesses. Where’s your sergeant, Detective Inspector Lestrade?”

Lestrade indicated Donovan, but was shouldered aside by Mycroft, who stepped smoothly between
him and Quinn. “Mycroft Holmes.” He held out his hand politely and Quinn shook it. “As for
taking over the investigation, I’m afraid not. I shall be taking charge. A matter of internal
security.”

Lestrade’s Alpha rage boiled and threatened to spill over. Mycroft thought he could be relegated
to the background. A lesser pawn, not to interfere in the deliberations of his betters. This entire
investigation had implications that Mycroft hadn’t thought it necessary to confide to him. He
nearly punched Mycroft, then.

“You – what the devil do you mean, “taking charge?” Who are you? And who gave you the
authority –”

“Before you say anything more, there is someone who wishes to speak to you. Sir.” Mycroft
proffered his mobile.

“Detective Chief Inspector David Quinn here, Scotland Yard. Yes. Mr. Darroch - I beg your
pardon, Sir Nigel Darroch. I see. Well, of course -- the Yard will give the NSC its fullest
cooperation. Your man Holmes here, then? Very well. Thank you, sir.”

Quinn returned the mobile thoughtfully. “Good luck, Mr. Holmes. I’ve been ordered to turn over
the Sleeping Beauties files to you. I’ll get my officers on it, I’ll call you when it is done.”

“Not to concern yourself, Detective Chief Inspector. It’s been taken care of.”

Lestrade whirled. “What in the bloody hell –“

Whatever he would have said was drowned out by the din of helicopters landing on the green.
They all went out to watch as convoy of white vans arrived.

“If you would please follow my officers,” Mycroft shouted, indicating that Quinn should take the
Yarders with him, “we will take it from here.”

###

Lestrade swallowed his fury and followed Quinn, but Mycroft’s strong hand clamped down on his
shoulder and pulled him back around. He smacked Mycroft’s hand aside.
“Not you,” Mycroft shouted. “You’re coming with me.”

“Do I have a bloody choice?”

“No.”

Mycroft led him into a waiting helicopter. From above, Hantswood Hall was still burning. The fire brigade looked impossibly tiny, shooting water ineffectually on the inferno. The glowing red looked like molten lava. It looked like something from a nightmare. The mouth of hell.

The helicopter climbed, and passed through black smoke. When it emerged, the Hall was behind them and the London skyline was approaching.

The familiar landmarks - Big Ben, the Eye, St Peter’s, were brightly lit. He could make out the outline of the Gherkin. This made him think of his new flat, of last night: of the urges that he had struggled so hard to control. If he was honest with himself, was it any different now?

They sat almost knee to knee and Mycroft was watching him with an air of waiting. The helicopter was rocking and thrumming and there was no sound but the roar of the motor and the throbbing in his head, the sound of his bullet ricocheting in his own brain. He wanted to pull Mycroft down onto his knees, kiss him and lick him and show him once and for all that he wasn’t to be toyed with, that whatever games he had been playing -- with him, with Maxim Purcell -- had ended when he put his bullet through Maxim’s skull. His blood was singing with the primitive thrill of Alpha conquest. If Maxim had been a rival, then he had beaten him. He was the one still standing.

And if this business of “taking over the investigation” was supposed to be some sort of Alpha power play, he would be happy to show Mycroft how wrong, how very wrong he was. Any moment now he was going to reach out.

But then they were hovering, lowering, and landing gently on a narrow platform over the Thames. The pilot leaped out and opened the door.

“Your car, sir,” he said. A black saloon car was waiting at the end of the helipad. Lestrade stood rooted on the spot, the cold wind off the Thames whipping his hair. Behind them were glowing modern high rises. He knew this helipad; they were in Bridges Wharf in Battersea. Mycroft was waiting for him to get in the back of the car with him.

He was overcome with heavy weariness, something of the reality of the unreal events of this night was starting to break through the stronghold of his Alpha dominance. He blinked and swayed a little in the wind. Mycroft came to him, took his arm.

“Come with me, Greg,” Mycroft said softly.

Lestrade vaguely thought it would be good if he could read something into this, but Mycroft’s face was tight with concern and it was probably concern for him. He didn’t want pity from Mycroft Holmes. He didn’t want to want anything from Mycroft Holmes. He shook off the weariness and stood up straighter.

“Where are we going, then?” He imagined being driven to Mycroft’s own house, which he knew to be a spacious townhouse in Belgravia.

Mycroft looked uncomfortable. Lestrade wasn’t sure he had ever seen Mycroft look uncomfortable, though, so he couldn’t be sure.
“Ah – you’re to be debriefed. An office near here. Connected with the NSC. In a manner of speaking.” He held the door open.

###

Bridges Wharf, Battersea, London, 1 November, 3:00 a.m.

Lestrade’s heart thundered with the fury that he had been holding back since hearing Maxim and Mycroft, moaning and panting intimately in his ear through his headphones. He wasn’t going to forget that sound. He needed to keep it fresh in his mind, just so he could remember what was really going down here. Even the sound of his bullet flying from his gun wasn’t going to drown it out. He was done with being played.

“And who’s doing the debriefing? You? One of your puppets? Forget it. I’m not one of them.”

“Greg, stop – you don’t know what you’re saying. Just come with me, it’s for the best. I give you
my word.”

He took two slow steps into Mycroft’s space. “I don’t think so,” he said through gritted teeth. Teeth that wanted to bite, but he could never do that now. “If you want my statement, you can find me at the Yard.”

Mycrof’s eyes widened but he didn’t back away. It made Lestrade even angrier that he noticed how very blue they were, reflected in the lights of the highrise. A deep and mysterious colour he could lose himself in.

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Greg? You need to come in with me. Now. I’m trying to help you, you know. And you forget you won’t be going to the Yard. You’ve been suspended.”

Lestrade’s eyes clouded over in a red haze and his chest was heaving. “Right. Then I can’t be suspended for -- this –“

He hauled his fist back and clocked Mycroft in the jaw, a blow that Mycroft blocked with surprisingly strong reflexes. Lestrade laid in another one and then they were grappling against the side of the car, which made him even more furious because it felt like the hotel room in Mumbai, grinding against the wall in the dark. Lestrade stopped when he felt the hard muzzle of a gun at the back of his head. Mycroft’s pilot.

But Lestrade didn’t move and Mycroft didn’t push him away.

“It’s all right, Mark. I’ve got him,” Mycroft said, not taking his eyes from Lestrade’s face.

Pressed together, he could feel Mycroft’s cock through those impeccable trousers. It was hot and hard. Like his. He made sure Mycroft could feel it with one audacious thrust of his hips in his borrowed jeans. They were both panting hard and it wasn’t from their scuffle.

“An Alpha’s cock doesn’t lie,” he said coolly, backing away. He shook his fist out. It stung and his knuckles were swelling. Mycroft would have a bruise on his cheekbone. Served him right. That was nothing to the bruises he had inside.

He turned and started walking. It was very cold on the river. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket and put his head down against the wind.

He heard footsteps behind him. Mycroft was walking now too, and the car was crawling along beside them.

“Forget the debriefing. I’ll make a preliminary report tonight. But get in the car, Greg. I – just talk to me.”

“Bad idea. I don’t think you’re going to want to talk about it, and I don’t really want to hear about it anyway. Believe me, I heard enough. Leave me alone, Mycroft.”

He didn’t look back.

He would cross the bridge; take Cheyne Walk. He wondered how long it would take to get to Creechurch Lane if he kept walking along the Thames.

He decided it didn’t matter. He didn’t have anywhere to go tomorrow.

Only by walking away could he be completely sure he wasn’t a pawn in Mycroft’s game.
To be continued . . .

Chapter End Notes

Hey AO3 lovelies, look what we got!!! The magnificent mystradedooles made an illustration for this chapter, Lestrade face!punch Mycroft -- I'm so in love with it I could just burst. Enjoy, and let her know it!!!:

thedoodles face!punch mystrade
Chapter Twenty One. Resurrection.

*Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,*

*Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.*

*Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments*

*Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,*

*That, if I then had wak’d after long sleep,*

*Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,*

*The clouds methought would open and show riches*

*Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak’d*

*I cried to dream again.*

Shakespeare, The Tempest

The Kiss, Philip Glass, listen: **THE KISS**

A classified quarantine facility. Somewhere in London. 4 November, 3:00 p.m.

“What do you mean I can’t go with him – He’s my bonded! I’m , I’m his doctor!” John was roaring as he was dragged forcibly away from Sherlock the instant the ambulance doors opened. Sherlock was being wheeled away on a stretcher down a long white corridor. Sherlock was calling for him in a voice that sounded disoriented and fearful.

“Get the fuck off of me, I have to stay with him!”

“You can’t do that. Not yet, Doctor Watson. We need to run some tests.” John was struggling hard but there were five orderlies wearing masked hazmat suits holding him down. He almost broke free, but then he felt the pinch of a needle in his arm.
“Oh, god, Sherl ---“ he mumbled, and then he was gone.

###

Sherlock Holmes opened his eyes.

He heard the quiet beeping and hissing that told him he was in hospital. His hand flew to his belly and held his breath as he felt it carefully, all around, between his legs. There was nothing: no pain, no blood, no bandages or dressings. He started breathing again and looked around.

It was dark; it was the morning of the first of November . . . unless he had been asleep longer than he thought. He felt as if he had been asleep for a long time, but it was hard to tell. He presumed he had only slept at all because he had been given some sort of drug, and felt a sick fearful feeling that they somehow hadn’t known he was pregnant - - what did it mean if they didn’t know? Where was John? Surely John would have told them, made sure he and the baby were safe?

He sat up. There was some food on a tray by the bed and he devouring it without thinking, and was surprised at the clean empty plate. No doubt his body was requiring extra nutrients now. It was only natural. He was amazed at how good it felt to eat, to feel that fullness.

He sighed and tried to stretch. His muscles were stiff and unyielding. He would find John, John could be taught to give him the same massage he had given John that day in 221b. Soon he would feel much better. He felt a luxurious flood of arousal and contentment imagining it. John.

“Soon you’ll be feeling much better,” the wicked female Alpha was crooning in his mind. He shook away the memory. These were memories that he knew he would have to delete. He didn’t know why he hadn’t already done this. He knew these memories could hurt him. Hurt the baby, maybe. It felt very dangerous to remember the Alphas. And Maxim. And ---

His heart was pounding. He heard a shrill beep and the door to his room opened. There was light. He blinked and closed his eyes. He didn’t like this light.

A circle of doctors and nurses surrounded him. He felt this rather than saw it. He closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep.

“You’re awake, Mr. Holmes. Can you speak?”

“Hmmm?” For doctors, these people were exceptionally stupid. Somehow he couldn’t find the words to express this thought. His brain felt warm and sluggish and maybe like he would like to go back to sleep. Somewhere more comfortable than this horrible hospital bed. He wanted John’s bed in 221b. He wanted John in John’s bed in 221b. “John,” he heard himself say petulantly.

“Quick, he’s going out again – Mr. Holmes, try to stay awake, if you can,” one of the doctors said. A nurse held an ammonia ampule under his nose and he blinked away the acrid fumes and pulled away.

“No,” he said.

“We daren’t give him stimulants. The baby,” one of the nurses said, looking at a clipboard. “It’s been seventy-five hours.”

“Call Doctor Watson, maybe he’ll rouse for him again,” the doctor said.

John entered, rushing to Sherlock’s side, crushed to see him looking almost comatose again. His sleep was deeper than normal sleep and something less than a coma. Twilight sleep, the doctors called it. John thought he looked like a dark angel, lying there under the white sheets.

“Look, after all this time, you still don’t know what’s going on, do you? If Sherlock has caught some kind of virus, like you say, I would have caught it too. Before we came here, I was with Sherlock, physically proximate to him, I’ve held him in my arms, I’ve kissed him and breathed the same air. Unless it’s blood-borne – which I’d say is doubtful. You didn’t find any significant wounds or punctures. So you’ve got to let me stay with him now. If worse comes to worst you can give me amphetamines.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, Doctor Watson. We’ve tried everything else.”

“You really don’t have a clue, do you?”

The doctors looked at each other. John figured they did have some idea what was wrong with Sherlock, but they just didn’t know what to do about it. That made him afraid of what might happen, to Sherlock, to the baby. But he couldn’t afford the luxury of being afraid.

“Sherlock needs me. You know it’s true. We’re bonded. I’m the only one he really responds to. If he’s going to wake up, it’s going to be for me, do you understand? And if I catch it, whatever it is, you can study both of us. And those Omegas.”

Mycroft had been to see Sherlock daily, sometimes more often than that.

He would sit at Sherlock’s bedside, looking down at him with that controlled expression that perhaps only John could read as masking a deep and helpless sorrow for his brother. Mycroft had carefully answered John’s questions – this was a secure and classified research hospital, run under the auspices of the National Security Council. The facility was tasked with the study of certain biological and chemical agents and their effects on human subjects.

Sherlock could not be released from this place until they were certain that his condition was not communicable.

Mycroft was here now at the door to Sherlock's room, appearing as he always did: silently.

“Tell Doctor Watson what you know now. He deserves to know,” Mycroft said. John swallowed his fears and tried to steel himself for whatever they were going to say. He had not been allowed access to computers or any means of accessing the internet, and was desperate to do his own research.
“Well, Doctor Watson, we are split, actually. Some of my colleagues believe that the most straightforward explanation for Mr. Holmes’ inability to wake is that he has suffered some kind of brain injury. “

This was not what John wanted to hear.

Brain injuries were tricky and unpredictable and most of all, usually permanent. The war had taught him that, well enough. He refused to imagine Sherlock never recovering from this strange state: sleeping away his life, waking only seldom and then not fully. Almost as if he was under a spell.

(The Sleeping Beauties)

John kept those sorts of thoughts carefully to himself. The memory of what had happened in that stone chamber below Hantswood Hall would never leave him. He knew that in that place, they had been in the power of a force that was beyond his understanding. He tried very hard not to think of what had happened to Sherlock from the time he left 221b until John found him in a struggle to the death with an evil being that looked like Maxim Purcell, but was something more than human.

He did not discount the possibility that Sherlock actually was under some sort of spell. Afghanistan had shaken his belief in God and heaven to the core; the horrors of war conversely strengthened his belief in evil and hell. He had never articulated these grim thoughts to anyone, not even Sherlock. These things could not be described, only experienced. And he never wanted those experiences to touch Sherlock.

Especially now, when Sherlock was carrying their child. He looked at Sherlock’s chest rising and falling peacefully. It wasn’t his imagination that there was the slightest of a swelling of his flat belly.

“But a few of us, Doctor Watson, feel that Mr. Holmes has fallen victim to a rare neurological disorder: Kleine-Levin Syndrome. KLS is also known as Sleeping Beauty Syndrome. Less than two thousand cases have been reported. It is thought to be a genetic disorder with a viral trigger. But no one really knows.”

“No one really knows,” John repeated. “I thought this was some sort of secret government brain trust for biological warfare. Do you mean to tell me you don’t know how to treat him, if it is some kind of virus?”

The doctors looked at each other. Finally Mycroft spoke.

“I’m afraid not, John. If it is Sleeping Beauty Syndrome, it will just have to . . . run its course. I can tell you that a few of the Omegas appear to be recovered. So there is hope.”

John was told that KLS sufferers slept for days, weeks or even months, rousing themselves only to eat or relieve themselves. They were sensitive to light and noise, and some reported suffering from hallucinations of a nightmarish quality. The males exhibited an extraordinary hypersexuality. Both male and female victims had insatiable appetites and would eat vast quantities of food before returning to a sleep from which they could not be woken.

Fortunately, the syndrome seemed to have a tendency to run a course, with the victims recovering after months. Or years.

“Years,” John said. “Leave me alone with him, then. All alone. And when I come back out, I
want someone to tell me when I can take Sherlock home. If you can’t help him, I’m taking him away from this place.”

The doctors looked to Mycroft and he nodded. Everyone withdrew and the door to the long white corridor was shut. John drew the blinds to Sherlock’s room. If they were still watching or listening, he didn’t give a damn. He ran his hand over the cool white sheet that covered his slender form.

###

Everything was very dark and slow and quiet. If he could talk to describe how he felt, Sherlock might have said that he felt as if he were covered with warm black water. He liked to stay far beneath the surface.

But then he heard something: a familiar, beloved sound that brought him slowly back to the surface. Above the surface, he felt the pull of something like a shimmering light. If he let his eyelids part, the light would sparkle and blind him. He wasn’t sure he could stand the light.

“Sherlock, Sherlock, please you have to wake up now. Please try,” John said. John. He felt pressure on his hand, something warm at his neck. He could stay awake for this. Maybe.

There was a sound. Maybe the door opening. Another voice. He didn’t want any voice but John’s. He sensed that John knew this.

“Would you bloody leave us alone,” John said. His voice was harsh and he sounded very angry. Sometimes when John was very angry, he was really feeling something different. He didn’t think he had done anything to make John angry. He hoped not. He wanted John to love him, always.

He tried to tell John this, but his tongue was very slow and thick and he didn’t think he was saying proper words. John seemed to understand, though. He climbed into the high narrow hospital bed.

Sherlock remembered being in another narrow bed, where John had made him feel wonderful, amazing. He had no idea where that had been. Not this bed, this was a hospital and why was he in hospital? He felt perfectly well, if very sleepy. That other bed had rocked. He liked this memory of rocking. He started to go under the dark water again, feeling the soothing rocking that was also making him feel very warm.

He was drawn back toward the surface by something perfect and wet and alive parting his lips. He couldn’t move a muscle, his limbs were so very heavy. He didn’t want to move. He could feel John pressed tightly against him, and he was licking his lips, over and over. That is what he was doing, he knew because he remembered John doing this before. Unless that was a dream. If it was a dream, he wanted to stay in it. Every few circuits John would stop and breathe, “Wake up now, I love you, you have to wake up for me,” into his mouth. “I need you, I love you, I need you to come back, Sherlock, Sherlock,” he said, over and over.

###
His body wanted to wake up for John. He wanted to be fully awake to John, wanted to feel alive again. He could feel the heavy weights lifting a little, and he wrapped his legs slowly around John, then his arms. It felt strange but wonderful to move and to enfold John’s body to him. This was divine, this was perfect. They were floating upward together. The bed was falling away below them. He didn’t care if they ever made it to John’s bed in 221b. He didn’t care if he ever moved again at all.

He could feel John’s hardness pressing against his thighs, and the heaviness turned to a slow throbbing. It seemed they stayed like this for a long time, while John was groaning and nipping at his neck, which he felt as if from a very great distance. The only part of his body that seemed alive was his belly, his cleft, his womb. There was a baby there, and it was John’s and it was his. John had given him his seed and they had made a new life together. He felt a power surging from John over his body, pulling him in, wrapping him in John’s strength. He didn’t fight this feeling; he let it pull him toward John. He didn’t want it to stop. They were floating higher now.

“John,” he whispered. It seemed to be the only word he could say.

“Oh, god, you’re so wet, you’re so . . . you’re beautiful, you’re going to be all right. The baby’s all right. You just have to wake up for me. You have to come back, Sherlock. I need you. I’m telling you to come back now. I know you can hear me. I can feel that you hear me.”

He wanted to do what John wanted him to do. He felt radiantly happy in this deep warm place. It would be best if John stayed here with him. They would stay like this forever. Together. And he needed John here because beyond this place were feelings that were not happiness, not warmth, not life. And here the radiance was shining down over them, binding them closer together.

“. . . as cold and distant as Pluto.” That meant something. . . someone. Out there cold and dark.

John was making the cold and the dark vanish. This feeling he released, and it drifted far from him. The throbbing between his legs was the only feeling he cared for now, that and the shimmering radiance that surrounded them and was lifting him from dark waters, and John was giving this to him, making it grow, bringing him back to warmth and heat and life.

“Yes,” he said. This was another word he could say, maybe the only other one. “Yes. John.”

“God, I need to fuck you, do you know that? I love you, do you feel it? You’re so warm, you’re so wet. I know you want me, I feel it,” John was whispering against his ear. The words didn’t mean anything, he was going far away again but he felt his legs wrap tighter around his mate. His mate. This was a word that he liked very much.

“Wake up for me, I’m going to fuck you till you can’t stop coming. But you have to wake up for me.”

Fuck. Another word he very much liked. Fuck fuck fuck.

“Don’t, don’t don’t make me,” John was whispering against his ear again. His hardness was sliding between his legs, pressing there. There. He wanted John to keep pressing in that place. If he kept pressing, John would be part of him. “Don’t make me do it, you want me to, you want it,” John panted. His limbs were pulled down as if by lead weights, but he had to have more of John, and he parted them wider by inches.

“Yes. John,” he said. “Yes.” There was another word. He slowly thrust his hips up and back, and felt John’s cock pressing just so slightly against his cleft, his cleft that was glowing and hot. They were both glowing and hot, he and John together. What could he say, or do, that would make John
come inside? His brain would form no thoughts, no words, there were no words, there was only need. What he needed. What John needed. John was trembling with the strain of holding back, he could dimly feel the tension in the strong muscles of his back, the slick sweat as he stayed poised, rubbing and pressing but going not entering.

“If you want me, you have to say it, Sherlock, wake up and say it, now,” John commanded. “I love you, wake up, tell me you love me.” He pushed a little harder, just a fraction, and he could feel something smooth and hot lodged hard against his cleft, stretching it. It burned, perfectly. He tried to open his eyes to look into the radiance, but they were so very heavy even as his body was feeling lighter and lighter. He could hear something, someone, moaning and gasping and he thought these sounds were probably coming from his own mouth. He was greedy for it. But he wasn’t sure this wasn’t all in his head. There had been many dreams, and some of them had been very bad. He wanted to feel now, feel warm and safe and good. He thought he could feel warm wetness running down his thighs. He needed to feel that John was real.

“God, you’re driving me mad, you’re so, you’re so fucking gorgeous,” John thrust his tongue between his lips and kept thrusting, rocking his hips so that the head of hiscock was just pressing that little bit more against his cleft, just a fraction more and it would slip inside and fill him up, and something inside would detonate, implode and explode if he didn’t have John inside him now.

But John wouldn’t. John was very strong. He wanted to do what John wanted him to do. There was something he had to do for John. He pushed himself up, and the thick warm black waters streamed from his face and body, raining down somewhere far, far below, and he opened his eyes to the brilliance that enveloped them. It was golden, beautiful. He had never felt more alive.

###

Cool hospital air hit him in the face, and he opened his eyes wider to see John’s passionate face bent over him, aflame with lust under the glow of the fluorescent lights.

He found another word. “Please,” he said. “I love you.”

“Oh my god. You’re awake, aren’t you? Sherlock, you’re awake now. Say something else, say something for me, please please please,” John whispered.

“Fuck me, John,” he said, the only thing he wanted to say, the only thing that mattered. “Fuck me hard,” he whispered, and came with his lips pressed against the scar on John’s shoulder as John groaned and thrust into him with a burning stroke that would split him in two. He held onto his mate for dear life, because he needed to stay awake now and only John could keep him there. He came again to the feeling of his mate’s cum filling him up, his ecstatic groans stifled against his neck. He was still floating very very high, and it was John lifting him up.

They lay panting against the sheets. Sherlock looked up at John, blinking against the light.

“We’re alive, John.” He knew now that he had thought perhaps that they weren’t and that was perhaps why it was easier to just stay suspended in his somnolence. “You said the baby’s fine, I know it’s fine because you’d hardly take me that way if it wasn’t so that means everything’s going to be all right now isn’t it. We’re alive, we’re all right.”
John looked down at him with tears in his eyes. “Do you know that’s the most words I’ve heard you say – since we got off the train from Scotland? Thank god, thank god.” A hot tear struck Sherlock’s cheekbone and trickled down and he tasted the salt.

John kissed his forehead. “And yes, we’re going to be all right. I promise.” His hand stroked Sherlock’s belly, gently, firmly. There was nothing at all unconscious about the gesture now. It was possessive, protective.

Sherlock stretched, remembering that he needed to teach John how to give him a proper massage. And then there more salt teardrops on his face and he thought some of them were probably his own. Strange what pregnancy would do to a man. He licked the tears away and realised he was hungry again.

But he had another craving that was even stronger.

“John. I don’t want to be here. And I’m hungry. I need some of Thai --- you know, from the curry shop round the corner. Remember? John. I want to go home now.”

John looked very determined. He picked up the telephone next to the bed.

“Mycroft. He’s awake. We’re leaving. Now. And don’t even try to tell me you can’t let him go. I don’t want to have to prove I can break him out of here whether you like it or not. By this time you’d best believe I’ll do it.”

Sherlock grinned up at John, entranced. He like the sound of this. His brain was stirring and he was already analyzing the door, the corridor, weaving strategies for their escape. He had no intention of staying here a single hour longer. He almost hoped that Mycroft would deny John, just so they could have the fun of escaping together.

He figured that they had the ability to send some sort of tranquilising gas through the vents to subdue them both, though; but he also knew now that his brother was apparently in charge of their captivity. He smiled. Mycroft was always trying to keep him confined “for his own good.” Mycroft never seemed to tire of this, no matter how many times Sherlock proved that such efforts were entirely useless. Just as when he had evaded Mycroft’s net to find his own way to Hantwood Hall. This thought made him feel cold and the dark water was pulling at his limbs again. He gripped John tighter, and the water receded.

This time, though, with the baby to consider, he knew Mycroft would feel compelled to handle things differently. He knew how Mycroft revered the Holmes bloodline. His brother would do everything he could to ensure that he had a healthy pregnancy and brought forth a worthy Holmes scion.

“Mycroft,” he shouted lazily, “I’d listen to him if I were you. John is rather determined. So am I, for that matter. I assure you I’m feeling much better. Much. I’m going home. Do you hear, Mycroft?”

###

Mycroft heard.

After so many days of fear and anxiety over Sherlock’s terrifying state, to hear his brother
sounding quite alert, even in a good humour, was like a reprieve from the gallows. And while he
revered his country and tried always to do his duty to the uttermost, there were some considerations
that outweighed even duty. He had learned this too late, apparently.

Here he touched the bruise on his cheekbone and thought of Greg Lestrade, walking away from
him on Bridges Wharf. Duty had cost him too much. Nothing was more important now than
family. As little as he was wanted, Sherlock was really the only family was ever likely to have, now.

He pressed an intercom. “Process Mr. Holmes’ release. I want him clean and fed and ready to go
within the hour. Unless you can present me with irrefutable proof that his condition poses a danger
to anyone else. If you have any, bring it to me this instant.”

“No sir. Mr Holmes. . . er . . . seems to be recovering. Another Omega recovered today. We
don’t have anything new. But we have strict orders ---“

“You may consider your orders rescinded. I’ll get you something signed, sealed and in triplicate
for your files before my brother leaves. But I assure you that he is leaving. I can take steps to
ensure that my directive is carried out, but you really don’t want me to do that,” Mycroft said
coldly.

These scientists were all the same. Never seeing the larger picture. Or the smaller one, as the case
may be. The human heart.

With a heavy sigh, Mycroft stood up and consulted his personal agenda. The next several nights
stretched open. Blank white spaces. Now that Sherlock was going home with John in domestic
happiness, the shadows of Hantswood Hall apparently having faded, he could go home again too.
Not that he particularly looked forward to that.

Mycroft hadn’t found it necessary to tell John that he had a room here in the facility and that he
slept here every night, just as John did: he rose before dawn to check on his brother’s condition
before taking his car into the City while the streets were still relatively empty, to fulfill his varied
duties to The Government. He found he didn’t miss the comforts of his vast and empty Belgravia
townhouse.

He hadn’t seen Lestrade since their brawl at the helipad. Before Mumbai – before Lestrade in
Mumbai, he told himself with brutal honesty – Mycroft had been juggling several interesting
Alphas. These gentlemen had been leaving increasingly demanding messages on his personal
voicemail. He didn’t return the calls. He instructed Anthea to change his number. Then he
instructed her to deliver certain generous gifts together with clear instructions that they should
never attempt to contact him again. He felt no guilt at all in doing so.

Mycroft was under no illusions that any of the Alphas was interested in him for any other reason
than to be nearer to the source of power, a chance for advancement. He neither encouraged nor
discouraged these petty ambitions. Such machinations were to be expected. He didn’t make the
mistake of ever believing that he was wanted for himself, and he was never proven wrong.

Excepting by Lestrade.

Only Lestrade hadn’t wanted anything from him. Except the thing he hadn’t given him.

###
Mycroft watched through a hidden camera as Sherlock walked unsteadily out the doors with John’s arm wrapped around his waist. He had provided a car, and it whisked the happy couple away toward Baker Street. There was a camera in the car as well, but he switched it off.

There was only so much a man could take.

He closed his briefcase and walked down the same long corridor that had just delivered his brother back to his life. His own driver was waiting and he climbed into the back. He settled back in the comfortable leather, closed his eyes.

“Sir? Where would you like to go now?”

“Have I any appointments this afternoon, Anthea?”

“No sir.”

“This evening?”

“You’re all clear, sir.”

“Then I think I’d better go home.”

“Of course, sir. Chester Square, Mark.”

“Not there. I meant home. I need to see Mummy. Can you arrange it? Please.”

“Of course, sir. Just give me a moment.” Anthea turned and spoke quietly into her mobile.

“Dinner is at eight o’clock, sir. You’re expected.”

“I know what time Mummy serves, Anthea. But thank you.”

“That’s hours from now, sir. Are you sure we can’t drop you at Chester Square?”

Mycroft opened his eyes. Now they were passing the brutalist brown towers of the World’s End Estate. Cheyne Walk was near here. Across the Thames was the helipad at Battersea.

The last time he had seen Lestrade was to watch him walk, his greyed head down, heading northeast along Cheyne Walk as it curved along the Thames. Later he confirmed that Lestrade had walked all the way to his flat in Creechurch Lane, following the river until he was forced to turn away at Blackfriars Bridge; a six miles’ journey.

“No, Anthea. Thank you. I’ll get out here.”

Anthea raised an eyebrow but kept her thoughts to herself, as she always did, and watched Mycroft disappear in the crowds along Cheyne Walk.

To be continued . . . .
If you enjoy my tracks, the playlist is here: **THE OMEGA SUTRA PLAYLIST**
Silences and Secrets

The Omega Sutra. Chapter Twenty-Two: Silence and Secrets.

But that I am forbid
to tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul. . .

Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, scene v

So what you gonna do?
It's me that's haunting you.
It's me you'll have to face
On judgment day.
Are you gonna give release?
I'll never let you rest in peace.
Lookin' forward to the end -
It's better we die friends
Have to cleanse my soul...

Tricky, Devil's Helper.

All rights reserved Island Music Ltd., Lyrics by Adrian Nicholas and Matthew Thaws
Listen to The Devil's Helper

221b Baker Street. 4 November. Evening.

The first few hours of their return to 221b was going as well as John could have wished. Sherlock was fully recovered.

John told himself this hourly. It had to be true. No fever, good appetite. But silent.
This was not in itself unusual - Sherlock was prone to periods of intense absorption in a case, or the converse – despair at having no case sufficiently absorbing – during which he might not utter a word for days. John’s childhood had been marked by silences that could mean many things, nearly all of them bad. His mother’s silences that felt like hiding; his sister’s stolid silences that felt hopeless; his father’s silences that felt like judgment on them all. This led to other silences: the gathering of a drink-induced fury, or the marginally better silences when his dad took himself off to the pub, his mum lying fearfully in the darkened bedroom.

In Afghanistan, it was rarely quiet. But when it was, it usually meant an attack was coming their way. Those silences were sometimes, not always, but too bloody often followed by triage that John lost almost as often as he won.

And so, the first time that the silence in 221b stretched to hours, then days, John had been well able to endure it without trying to break it. The fact that it didn’t feel good to be shut out was something he was used to, anyway. Sometimes, fully aware of the irony, he took himself off alone to the pub, where the predictable, loud noises at least didn’t feel like rejection.

The truth was that silence was a temporary protection that couldn't last. John didn’t feel much like talking yet either, although he had what felt like a hundred questions that he wasn’t sure he could handle the answers to; even worse was his dread when he imagined trying to articulate answers to Sherlock’s inevitable interrogation.

Every night since All Hallows’ Eve, he had fought off sleep. Of course he had wanted to be awake for any moment when Sherlock might regain consciousness. But beyond that, there were the nightmares. He had been prone to nightmares his whole life, or at least as long as he could remember. Afghanistan gave them plenty to feed upon. But nothing had ever been like this. In these nightmares he was screaming, pleading, promising... but his words were whipped away by a dark windstorm that was slowly dragging him from Sherlock’s side.

He always awoke at the moment his fingertips lost their grip.

###

John occupied himself with mundane tasks in the long-neglected flat while surreptitiously watching for signs that Sherlock was seeking out news of the Sleeping Beauties case, which they had not spoken of since leaving the hospital. Sherlock had instantly seized his laptop upon entering 221b and was typing and muttering to himself. John’s curiosity finally won out.

"What are you working on there?" he asked casually.


John had already decided that one of his prerogatives as Sherlock’s bonded mate was to insist that Sherlock not keep secrets.

“Tell me what it’s about, then?” he asked pointedly.

“Forensics,” Sherlock said after a long pause.

John marched to the sofa, bent over Sherlock, and closed the laptop. Silvery eyes looked up at him
in surprise.

“I mean, Sherlock, what exactly is it you are writing about? I did go to medical school. Try me.”

John folded his arms and waited. A frown appeared between Sherlock’s brows.

“That depends on why you want to know, John.”

“Why I want to – because, Sherlock, we’re bonded. There’s been more than enough keeping secrets – all by you, I might add. I’m telling you right now that you’re not to be touching a thing to do with the Sleeping Beauties case. Or –“ He stopped before he would say Maxim’s name.

Sherlock looked away, reached to the table and began sifting through a disordered stack papers. Half slid to the floor and scattered. Oblivious, Sherlock plucked one from the pile with an exclamation of satisfaction. “Here we are.”

“You aren’t answering my question,” John said firmly.

Sherlock studied John’s face. “Am I to take it that I have to acquire permission to conduct my researches? From you? And account to you where I’m going, whenever I leave 221b?”

“If you like,” John said calmly. “No secrets. Before was different.”

He meant, before they were bonded. John knew he could easily find himself right back where they had started. Finding the will power to resist his gorgeous, charismatic, alluring, infuriating mate was sometimes very hard to come by. I’ve got to start as I mean to go on, he thought, and kept his hand on the laptop.

Sherlock bit his lip, considering. John knelt beside him, thrust his fingers in Sherlock’s dark hair and pulled him close. This was what he really wanted, to see clearly, deeply into his grey eyes; not like on the Magnus where they had been in darkness. Sherlock’s hand strayed to his neck to show John that he understood, that he remembered.

“It’s to do with the composition of fluid for the rehydration of mummified remains, and a new method for extraction of mytochondrial DNA from said remains for forensic identification.” Sherlock recited rapidly, unblinking. “Satisfied?”

John shook his head. He had a flash of the stone chamber below Hantswood Hall, piles of Alpha bodies. Blood fresh. Sherlock’s hand gripping a knife horribly near his belly.

“Depends. I think you would say I’ve got insufficient data.” He took a deep breath. “Are you doing this now because there are . . . ‘mummified remains’ . . . at Hantswood Hall?”

It was the first time he had asked Sherlock directly about Hantswood Hall. He hadn't thought he would, but the words rushed from his mouth unchecked. His heart clenched just saying them. The air around them changed.

“I don’t know,” Sherlock whispered.

“But – you suspect something?”

Sherlock nodded slowly.

“Then forget it. Forget everything about – that place.” John gripped his hair tighter, exposing his throat. Sherlock pushed John’s hand away and sat up.
“But John, you’re the one keeping secrets. Are you going to tell me about the nightmares? Or . . . shall I tell you?”

###

John swallowed hard. He had a strong feeling that to even speak of his dreams would draw the evil to them, into 221b. That was what this feeling meant. Or, that he was mad. Either way, there was only one clear way forward.

“I don’t want you to hear about . . . those things. I don’t want you to think about those things. The best thing we can both do – is forget.”

Sherlock regarded him gravely. He considered himself world-class at deleting, but John was not made the way he was. Obviously. No one was like John. And so, knowing he hadn’t been able to delete the terrifying memories of All Hallows Eve, it was a certainty that John hadn’t.

“Just now in the taxi. You dozed for a minute. You were talking in your sleep. You said, ‘take me.’ And you weren’t talking to me. Not that way.”

John knew this was true. The horrible voice -- Maxim/not-Maxim -- thundered in his head. If he stopped thinking about Sherlock long enough, he knew he would hear it right now. It was getting worse, not better. When he finally closed his eyes to sleep, he saw cold mist rising, a mist that would envelop Sherlock and take him and their baby if John didn’t stand in its way.

How to tell Sherlock that he was fairly certain- unless he was mad, which he was willing to accept might just be what was really happening here -- he had made a bargain with something that felt demonic -- if it was possible to know such a thing -- to give his own soul in place of Sherlock’s?

###

He took Sherlock’s hand, careful with his torn fingertips.

“Sherlock – I don’t know how to explain. It’s like the war, all right? If you talk about -- the enemy, about what he’s going to do to you, think about it all the time – you’re done for. The only way to fight it is to get it out of your head, and-- live. So that’s what we are going to do, Sherlock. We’re going to put it out of our heads, forget all about – Hantswood Hall – and live. You, and me, and our baby.”

“I can’t do that,” Sherlock said seriously. “You know I can’t. I have to understand what happened that night. We have to.”

John dropped Sherlock’s hand. After everything they had been through to be together, to come home safely, Sherlock couldn’t leave it alone, couldn't stop that restless brain of his from deducing.

“You have to? We have to? He’s dead, Sherlock. There’s nothing else you need to know. Leave the rest to Lestrade – “
“Lestrade’s out. Didn’t Mycroft tell you?”

“Tell me? No, Mycroft hasn’t told me a thing.” He had barely spoken to Mycroft; but his constant, steady presence at Sherlock’s bedside had helped him get through Sherlock’s mysterious slumber more than he would have imagined. If he had ever questioned Mycroft’s devotion to Sherlock, he couldn’t now.

“Mycroft is in charge of the Sleeping Beauties investigation now. And that tells me things that I didn’t know before.”

John could see Sherlock was withdrawing into his mind palace, neurons flashing.

“Oh bloody hell, Sherlock!” John exploded, springing up. It literally felt as if the top of his head would burst clean off. He wished it would – anything to relieve the cauldron of frustration bubbling inside him. How had he ever thought that being bonded to Sherlock was going to change things? He must be a complete fool. Sherlock was definitely treating him like one. He pulled at his own hair as if that would relieve the pressure building in his skull.

It didn’t.

“If this is about your stupid sibling rivalry with Mycroft – I’ll be damned if I let you go digging into things that should be left well alone, just to show up your brother. It’s done, you’re done, if I haven’t made that crystal clear.”

Sherlock took the blast of fury coolly, seemingly puzzled. “You’re angry. It’s not about me and Mycroft. Maxim –” he said slowly.

“Don’t dare say that name ever again, can you also get that crystal clear— god, am I speaking English? Of course I’m bloody angry -- you went off alone! I was going to wait to talk about this, but – yes, I’m very fucking angry — I expect a complete explanation as to exactly why you did that. Especially now. Especially – like that. That note.”

His throat felt thick and tight and he was not, he was not going to fucking cry. He put a hand over his eyes so that he didn’t have to see Sherlock’s unbelievably angelic face, mussed dark hair and healthy pregnancy glow. Because when he did, all he would see was Sherlock’s face as pale as marble, laying against an ancient stone block, blood all around. There had to be a way for them to just shut the door on it, and forget.

Sherlock’s eyes were wide and baffled but he didn’t flinch or try to back away, and somehow this made John ashamed. Sherlock was his bonded, he was an Omega; he was pregnant and had been through worse than he probably knew, even now. He needed to be treated with delicacy, allowed some peace and quiet to recover and get stronger, for his own sake and for the baby’s too. Sherlock needed to be cared for and protected, and it was his job and his job alone to do it.

John willed the anger to recede, and he knelt beside Sherlock again, and stroked his hair. This was still new enough that just the feel of the glossy curls under his palm did strange things to his heart.

Sherlock’s laptop gave a little ping. A new email. Sherlock’s eyes strayed to it, avid like they always were at the beginning of a case.

Less than twenty-four hours out of hospital.

Unbelievable.

“Waiting for a message then, are you?” John said coldly. Remembering the night it all began: 10:00. Little Havana. “Go on then. Open it. Let’s look at it together, shall we, Sherlock?”
If John didn’t know better, he might have thought the expression crossing Sherlock’s face was guilt. But he knew Sherlock didn’t feel guilt. Not like he did, which was almost always, and about everything. Sherlock swanned his way through life, John thought, without wasting his precious brain power, or space in his mind palace, over feelings -- let alone a feeling that sprang from knowing you had done something hurtful or wrong. Sociopaths didn’t think in those terms, John knew this. Just as he knew it wasn’t malicious. It just -- was.

Sherlock almost meekly opened the laptop and clicked on the new email. John leaned in and read along with Sherlock.

“Mr. Holmes,

Thank you for your inquiry of today. I am intrigued, and I do have some thoughts on the matter. I no longer travel and give no advice by telephone or email -- which suits me very well. It will also have to suit anyone who wishes to consult me. If, as you offered in your email of today, you are willing to undertake the journey to my clinic, I would be glad to meet you to discuss your case. If so, kindly book an appointment with my assistant.

May I say that your work in the advancement of forensic science has impressed me very much. I would like to help you, if I can.

Sincerely,

Edgar Jesperson, Ph.D., F.R.S.

Center for Quantum Neurophysics Studies, Dolphin House, Gorey, Jersey”

John shut the laptop again and hefted it in his hands. He wanted to throw it out the window. Sleep deprivation was hitting him hard but underneath it, the restlessness just under the surface of his skin signaled the advent of an Alpha storm. Probably, it had never really gone away.

“John?” Sherlock asked. Tentative, maybe a little worried. Like he didn’t understand what was happening to John. Now that they were bonded, he felt certain that Sherlock ought to be able to feel what was coming. Because there was no stopping it, and he didn’t even want to. It was a relief to give his Alpha passions reign.

Sherlock was going to learn that they did not rule him only in heat.

Oh yes. There were still lessons in bonding that Sherlock needed to learn.

# # #

“‘Undertake the journey.’ Sherlock. You knew -- this Jesperson – whoever he is -- .”

“ -- He is a neurophysicist --“

“--- don’t you patronize me, you unbelievable bastard, you’re leaving London to see this Jesperson. It says here, Jersey. The fucking Channel Islands, Sherlock. And you didn't say anything. When
"Nothing very mysterious John, really. I only sent Jesperson an email half an hour since. He was very prompt with his reply."

"I cannot fucking believe it. Not again. We've barely walked back in the door. And since when does the great and brilliant Sherlock Holmes consult with anyone?"

“When I need data that I cannot obtain for myself, obviously. Which is practically never.”

“Jesus Christ. When, exactly, were you going to tell me about this? No – don’t bother – you weren’t going to tell me. Keep me in the dark. I’ve been in the dark quite long enough. And so were you, Sherlock. So were you. Never forget that. And so now, you -- you aren’t going anywhere. You. Will. Stay. Here. And. Rest.”

He tried to tell his boiling brain that this was supposed to be about taking care of Sherlock and the baby. But right now it was hard to think at all.

“Rest!” Sherlock snorted. “I slept more in the past week than I have done in three months. I feel wonderful. If you’ll stop shouting and listen, John. I wasn’t going alone. Not like . . . before. And it’s not a secret. I just didn’t want to say anything -- in case he refused to see me. He’s a recluse. But of course, it was highly probable that he would agree to see me. You see, right there -- he says he knows my work.”

The haze of Alpha pheromones was climbing perilously close to rut now, but John was still able to feel scintilla of amazement that Sherlock should express desire for the good opinion of another person, even a retired neurophysicist. Sherlock’s eyes were sparkling, and John knew that it had nothing whatsoever to do with John Watson.

Sherlock Holmes was back on the case, like just other exceptionally fascinating case, apparently oblivious to the evil that had nearly consumed them.

“And there’ll be the train, and then a boat to get there, John. That always puts you in a good temper.” Sherlock was actually grinning now. Certain of getting his way. He always did.

John refused to rise to the bait or give in to temptation. He could already picture it, he and Sherlock together again, hunting for clues, the adrenaline rush of the chase. But the itching under his skin was turning into a burning, and words just weren’t going to be enough.

“I’m sure I haven’t been speaking the Queen’s English. You want us to leave Baker Street – to work on the Sleeping Beauties case? Together?”

“Precisely. It’s important, John –“


Sherlock’s eyes widened over John’s hand, but he nodded.

###
John dragged Sherlock by the hand. The fact that Sherlock try to didn’t bring the laptop with him so that he could return to the case the moment John turned his back didn’t mean anything. John could see Sherlock’s gaze locked onto it intently, knew that he wanted to but was starting to be afraid of what John might do.

This, John thought, was good.

He pulled Sherlock up the stairs, into his own bedroom, where he pressed Sherlock down onto his bed. Sherlock’s face lit up, and John could picture what Sherlock was anticipating. But whatever it was, it wasn’t this.

He reached into the nightstand and took a soft scarf, one of his own, and swiftly wrapped it around Sherlock’s wrist.

“This is going to hurt me,” he said sternly, fastening a handcuff over it and snapping it to the bedframe, “more than it hurts you. If you even try to mess about with this one, I’m putting one on the other wrist. Don’t try me.”

He didn’t sit on the bed with Sherlock, that wasn’t what this was about. He stood over him to watch his face. He knew he was being the worst sort of Alpha now, but the accumulation of events had finally shredded his self-control and he let it go without a backward glance. He was already feeling much better. Sherlock wasn't going anywhere.

Sherlock had that wide-eyed unfocussed look he got when he was tried to assimilate data that didn’t fit, wasn’t what he expected. This changed after a few moments to a hectic flush that he sometimes had, John now knew, when he had been craving some of Maxim’s drugs, maybe even . . . the flush of illicit excitement. Two bright blotches appeared on his cheekbones.

Sherlock twisted a little and stared at his wrist, bound with the shining silver cuff. John had gotten the cuffs from Lestrade months ago, but told himself he had never dreamed then that he would be using them like this.

Had he?

“This is – humiliating,” Sherlock said finally, his voice at its very peak of patrician scorn. The voice that could cut like a knife. But he was squirming against the sheets of John’s bed, and they both could scent the musky, acrid rutishness exuding from John. Too late.

John gave a short, hard laugh.

“Humiliating, is it? Humiliating as in, finding out that your mate is pregnant by a note taped to a bloody skull? Humiliating as in, finding out your supposed bonded Omega has run off after his ex-lover – who just happens to be a serial killer -- risking his life, risking our baby’s life?”

“If you won’t be civilized, John, I don’t have anything else to say. Other than, uncuff me.”

“No. I’m very unfucking civilized at the moment. And it’s perfect if you don’t have anything else to say. In fact I’m ordering you to just -- shut up. You will stay here, you will stay safe, you will stay under my eye. You and our baby. This is how I’m going to make sure that you do.”

Sherlock was fuming now. And, of course, he had no intention of shutting up.

“I knew going in that it wasn’t safe -- but safer for me than anybody else. Do you have any idea how many murders I’ve solved alone, John-- without you – let alone the assistance of Scotland Yard?”
John seriously considered going for another scarf. Gagging might well be in order here.

“Are you listening to yourself here? Do you even remember ---” He stopped himself because right now, he wasn’t sure what Sherlock remembered about that night and he didn’t want to bring it all rushing back on him if he’d managed to delete it. A trick he desperately wished he could learn, but he wasn’t put together that way.

“I promised myself the day you left that I’d teach you a lesson in bonding. I thought I’d done that already,” he said bitterly.

*I’ll do anything, everything – you can’t have him, take me,* he had screamed into the maelstrom.

Sherlock’s flush faded abruptly to white, as though the blood had simply vanished. He bit his lip and looked away. John rushed to the bed and would have unfastened the cuff. Almost. He reminded himself that this was about the baby now, and that he had to be strong. He turned Sherlock’s face, gripping his chin.

“What? Don’t you try to make me feel badly about this, Sherlock. It’s your own bloody fault, you bastard, don’t you know what nearly happened?”

“Maxim – he said . . . “ Sherlock whispered, but the words wouldn’t come.

John really didn’t want to know what Maxim had said. Apparently Sherlock did remember some things from All Hallows Eve, then. It seemed it was their fate to never be finished with Maxim Purcell. Even with his brains blown out and his body burnt to a cinder, Maxim still had the power to hurt them.

John leaned close. “What did Maxim say, then,” he asked softly, the name burning on his tongue.

“Maxim said . . . he said, we aren’t bonded. That sociopaths don’t bond. Holmeses, either. And it’s true. We don’t.”

###

John couldn’t think, his mind was gone. He climbed up beside Sherlock, pulling his arse tight against him, his chest pressed to Sherlock’s long back, his lips at Sherlock’s ear. He pinned Sherlock to the bed with his leg, no easy feat, and ran his hand along the tense muscles of his long arm, cuffed to the bedframe. Now Sherlock would listen. There wasn’t anywhere to go.

John closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. The last thing he felt like doing right now was talking but he could never let Maxim's words go unchallenged.

“Not bonded? Every word from that man’s mouth was a lie, don’t you know that by now?”

He felt Sherlock nodding against the pillow, something mumbled. It didn’t matter.

“You took a blue dose rather than let him touch you. That’s because you belong to me, and you know it. If I had to give it to you myself to keep you from him, I would have. Because no one can have this but me.” His cock had been wanting this for hours, to rut against Sherlock’s plush arse, to press into that incredible heat and tightness. It was time to remind him that he was owned.
“Halfway across the world I went to find you, nobody could have known he’d take you to that place, all the way to the Himalayas. You called me to you, and I came. Because you’re mine. Because we’re bonded.”

Sherlock turned his face into the pillows, maybe from shame. John knew there was something there that needed to come out, and now was the time.

“He gave you a Heatwave. Trying to force you to come to him. But you walked away. You went with me. Why did you do that?”

“Because --- because I had to.”

“That’s right. Because no one else can touch you. We’re bonded.”

“John –“ How to explain? Sherlock closed his eyes. John was right, of course he was right, he knew they were bonded, he should never have listened to Maxim. He should delete everything to do with Maxim Purcell, with Hantswood Hall. With Jonathan Talbott, a name that he had not mentioned to anyone.

But when he tried, his thoughts felt slippery. There was something wrong, and it was inside of him. In the world of emotions, he was lost unless John was there to show him the way, tell him how to go on. He could barely articulate his fears.

He imagined going on, never knowing more than he did now about what had happened that night. Never solving the puzzle.

It was impossible to solve a puzzle without touching the pieces.

“I don’t ever want anyone to touch me but you,” he said finally, which was true. It was also true that he had been having bad dreams of his own -- dreams of the Alphas, grasping at him, fighting to take him. He was starting to feel more deeply the sense of the wrongness of trying to do this alone.

*You have formed a bond with your new Alpha,* Maxim said.

*Not a bond. He is not inclined that way. But I can no longer imagine taking the crossing with anyone else.*

But being with John had always been about much more than taking the crossing.

Since the very first day, he had wanted – no, needed -- John at his side. And despite his duplicity in leaving John behind, John come to his side at Hantswood Hall. They had been saved from something unnamable, something unfathomable that had dealt them strange wounds that could not be seen, only felt. He hadn’t the faintest idea what do to with these ugly new feelings that couldn’t be deleted. Fear was a very new and alien feeling, but since that All Hallows Eve fears had plagued him. He wanted John to heal them, especially the gravest one of all: the one fear that was growing, dragging him down.

*I have something that belongs to you -- a little bit of your soul.*

It was the fear that this was the one thing Maxim had told him that was not a lie.

*to be continued.*
221b, London, 4 November, evening.

John ran his hand down his chest, over his swelling belly, between his legs. His touch felt soothing and warm but dangerous too. He would have wanted John Watson just for this soothing warmth that his presence engendered in him. But it was the danger that turned want into an imperative to have him for his very own. From the very first day he had felt it in even the very simplest touches—when he demanded John pass his mobile, just to see what he would do, curious what the touch of his hand would feel like. Now he knew what it was to have John’s fingers inside him. His legs parted, sparkles of greed electrifying him. John’s fingers insinuated themselves beneath his briefs and yanked them down.

John was watching his face as his fingers teased around the edges. Just this was enough to make them swell, he could feel it and he knew John could feel it too. His face burned. His wrist didn’t hurt, the soft scarf under the hard metal of the cuff was almost comfortable, but he evaluated the feel of it dragging on his arm, pinning him where John wanted him to be. In this moment it felt right. Perfect.

There was cold air against his back when John stood up. He waited. John wouldn’t leave him like this.

John opened the bedside drawer again. His heart hammered, imagining that John was going to pour lube over him, push inside. He groaned softly and squirmed against the harsh roughness of John’s sheets, that made his sensitive skin feel abraded. His nerves under the skin felt new, not like the electric itch of heat, but tender and alive to touch. This was undoubtedly part of the many changes coursing throughout his body, he could almost feel it happening by the minute if he concentrated and pushed away the bad feelings.

###

He heard the drawer close. A plastic bag such as was used at the Met for evidence was tossed in front of his face. Inside was something dark, cloth. Clothing.
“Open it,” John ordered. “You can use one hand if you have to-- those clever fingers of yours.”

Sherlock pried open the zip top of the bag. A faint distinctive odor emanated from the garments, and he tried to throw it away from him in disgust but John’s hand was faster, and he pressed the bag down under his hand to keep it there. Sherlock tried to wriggle off the bed to escape.

The female Alpha, with intrusive fingers. He would do anything to delete these memories. Other Alphas clutching at him. Those scents were assaulting him now, coming in a horrid stale wave from the polluted garments.

“You’re mine. You belong to me, Sherlock. Every inch,” John said, leaning down to run a strong hand back over his swelling belly, between, up over his cock that was hardening under John’s rough treatment. He knew he ought to be ashamed, but all he wanted was for John to come lay with him again, hold him close. His eyes burned, maybe with tears.

“So it ought to be impossible for me to smell your scent marks, fucking Omega aphrodisiac is what it is, and some Alpha bitch’s, both together of your clothes. On your trousers, on your flies. Where she touched you. And others. So many hands on your body. I’ve never smelled anything like it, and believe me between Afghanistan and the clinic, I’ve smelled everything. What did you do? To them? Because when I – what I went down those stairs –“ his voice cracked.

“-- I, I can’t. I can’t talk about it, John.”

“—when I went down those stairs, I almost couldn’t breathe for the rut those Alphas were in. I may not be a detective. But I know I’m not supposed to make unfounded assumptions. So I’ll ask you one more time. What did you do to the Alphas, Sherlock?”

“Where did you get this? It’s evidence.”

“I stole them. Forget it. Answer my question, Sherlock.”

Sherlock closed his eyes so he didn’t have to watch John’s face when he imagined it. "I... it was a manipulation. Of the subtle body, of one’s pheromones. To create a sort of .... net.”

“You can tell me later how it works. I think I get the basics. And?”

“If need be --- it’s not meant for a weapon, but if need be --- it induces. . . . ” His voice trailed off. He kept his eyes closed but he could feel John lay down again at last, and John’s breath against his neck. It was coming harder, and not with desire. Anger. His mate had abused his Alpha right of exclusive possession, and there would be a consequence. He trembled.

How had he thought that John could understand, let alone forgive? Bonding must have seriously impacted his mental faculties. It was worth it in every way, he told himself. . . . but it was very strange to feel almost dull. Perhaps the sleeping sickness, whatever it had been, was still lingering in him. His body wanted to submit to his mate, and right now his mind wasn’t far behind. With Maxim’s mocking accusations ringing in his head, the last thing he wanted to do in this moment was to resist.

“‘Induces’ -- what?”

“An, a rut. Heat takes a more time -- but in an emergency. . . . “

“So -- you threw some sort of, what, pheromone net onto them – and made them. . . . want to take
you? Sherlock -- what if they had?"

Sherlock opened his eyes and looked down at John’s hand, tightening around his free wrist. And because he was after all very brave, he looked right up into his eyes, which were very dark now, and very hard.

“You gave them that part of you, let them feel it and smell it, and it drove them mad, it drove them into a rut and they killed over themselves over you. You are bonded to me. What makes you think you have the right to use yourself that way? Leaving aside the unbelievable risk.”

Sherlock felt the blast of John's pain and fury and confusion. Everything is going wrong now and its all my fault and he'll never understand any of it because even I don't and I'm a genius and so then what will happen? “John -- It was the only thing I could do – make them turn on each other. Maxim would have killed them anyway. At the end of that night, they weren’t getting out alive. No one was.”

“And you shouldn’t have gone alone!”

“John -- you’re not wrong. Don’t you think I felt it the minute I walked out of Baker Street? But, John -- I knew you would have murdered Maxim. You know it too. Lestrade was on Maxim’s heels, he would have caught you, even Lestrade couldn't turn the other way if you did -”

“What did you think was going to bloody happen, then? Did you even have a plan?”

“Of course I did. Save the Omegas. Catch Maxim. Turn the evidence over to Lestrade. Nothing I haven't done dozens of times before, John. No one else was strong enough to deal with Maxim. It's what I thought. But I didn’t know, I didn't understand -- something happened to Maxim, something . . . changed in him, John. Even after India. El Brujo, he warned me. I didn’t really believe him.”

How could he believe such things? It was a mystery he knew he had to solve. John had to be made to understand.

“You didn’t understand— I don’t understand, either. And I never want to. After we leave this room, it will be as if it never happened at all, and we are never, ever going to breathe a word of it, or even think of it. We are starting a new life, we are starting a family. Everything is going to be – clean. For us and for the baby. That is what bonding is about. Am I clear?”

John’s anger was enfolding him completely, making them one. This was not the same as the jealous rage of heat. It felt awful and wonderful and Sherlock was angry too that they had come to this, that Maxim had brought them to this, when they deserved to be happy.

And then he realised that was a lie, he was the one that was ruining their happiness.

But he couldn’t do anything else.

He hadn’t ever considered before whether he could make John happy, real happiness, not just the euphoria of heat. All he had thought of was getting him for his own. Now he knew he owed John so much more than that. And yet, there was still only one thing he could do.

“I can’t do that, John. It isn’t over.”

“You can and you will. It is over, because I say it is. Do you have any idea at all what this feels like to me?”

John surprised him by getting back up off the bed, tossing the revolting bag out into the hall,
shutting the door and sitting back in the chair. He propped his feet on the end of the bed.

“Let me know when you’re ready to swear to me that you won’t even consider doing anything dangerous – wait, not what you think might be dangerous -- you never think anything is dangerous. You’re going to have to think first whether I just might possibly think it is dangerous --- and then, you have to talk to me about it. And after that, you have to listen to what I think about it. And probably, you’re going to have to give up doing some things the way you’re used to. I realise that this is a very new idea for you, Sherlock, so I’m going to give you plenty of time to think it over. Starting now. Meanwhile, I’m keeping you under my eye.”

###

Sherlock was quiet a long time, studying John’s stern face. This wasn’t a game. He should have known that, of course. His eyes slid to the handcuff. He knew that John expected him to try and roll to the nightstand to try and find something to pick it with. And so, he didn’t. Boring. Perhaps John wasn’t playing a game, but he suddenly had had more than enough of this darkness that had been cast over their homecoming. Talking clearly wasn’t getting them anywhere. Of course, talking never did.

He lay back with a heavy sigh. This would give John a front row view to that lean alabaster body, the slight but definite swell of his belly, the beginnings of a rosier colour at his nipples. He wanted John’s hands everywhere.

John didn’t look away but he deliberately didn’t look lower, between Sherlock’s legs, because if he looked he knew his control would falter, and that would defeat the entire purpose of the exercise.

Seeing John look so determined and strict had the inverse effect of driving away the bleak foggy feeling that seemed to be infusing his brain cells. This was a challenge, and Sherlock expected to overcome it. He always did. Well, nearly always, he amended, firmly closing the door to the room in his mind palace that held a terrifying memory of John holding him, screaming at something very powerful and wicked, that was wrapping his face in a cold suffocating mist.

They were here in 221b now, safe and alone after his long sleep, the hospital, doctors and nurses coming and going, measuring and prodding. He was eager to find out what it was like to be alone with John Watson for a very long time, outside of heat. Just the two of them, in perfect possession of their bodies and senses.

“If I’m to learn a lesson, John, hadn’t you better come up here and teach me properly,” Sherlock said, haughtiness gone, the irresistible low purr taking its place. “I’m a very quick study. You know that.”

“You are. But I think you’ll learn better if I stay over here.”

Damn it if his voice wasn’t already cracking. For all this talk of Sherlock belonging to him, his chances to taste what was his had been far too few. He considered himself to have a serious grievance in that department.

He shifted in the chair, because his trousers were uncomfortably tight. Was it at all fair that Sherlock could do this to him, with just that voice? He remembered the first night, the night he had heard Sherlock masturbating himself, and without seeing a thing just the sound of him had nearly made him lose his sanity. Maybe he had lost it, that night. Looking back at everything that had
happened to him since hearing those unbelievably erotic sounds, he figured he may very well have. And it was worth it.

“Now you know you don’t want to stay over there,” Sherlock purred, examining John with that laser-like gaze that saw absolutely everything, parting his legs much wider so as to leave absolutely no chance for John to avoid looking there without actually closing his eyes, or looking at the stains on the ceiling. “I know what you want.”

John looked. His half-formed plans to administer a very strategically placed disciplinary thrashing, possibly with the riding crop, seemed more urgently necessary now. Sherlock was incorrigible. It remained to be seen if he was untamable.

The knot of anger, fear, and uncertainty was loosening now. They were alive, they were home together, and there was nothing to stop him doing exactly as he liked with his bonded mate. He could sense the angry, almost burnt edge to his own pheromones melting into something hungry and covetous.

Sherlock was his. Surely it wasn’t wrong to want this.

They couldn’t ignore their permutations forever. He was an Alpha, Sherlock was an Omega and he was damned if he was going to pretend that things were any different than they were.

But it wouldn’t do to make things so easy for Sherlock. He made a mighty effort and ignored the magnetic pull that was propelling him toward the bed and looked away from those gorgeous long legs splayed apart so invitingly. He planted his feet firmly on the floor.

“I’m fine here,” he said. “Actually.”

Maybe this far across the room Sherlock would even believe it. Well, his bedroom actually wasn’t much bigger than a broom closet. And Sherlock saw everything; and what he couldn’t see, he could smell. Such as the fact that John was getting erect, which made sitting there on the hard chair very uncomfortable. With a soft curse under his breath John pulled at his jeans to try and adjust himself to accommodate his arousal. Impossible.

“I’ve been rather obtuse, I see. Usually you make what you want rather clear, John. But not some things.” Sherlock’s breath was coming faster and John’s rushed up to keep pace.

The room was filled with their scents, not heat but just the gorgeous natural mingling of their unsuppressed scents together with the familiar smell of his own bed, their own home. It was the first time they had been home alone, free of suppressants, long enough to experience this. Alphas were driven to mark their territory and their mate and his dark possessory pheromones were unfurling and expanding to infiltrate the room, to cover Sherlock’s skin, so that every time he took breath, he would know on a cellular level that he was possessed, that this was their home together, Alpha and Omega.

But there was something wrong. This place was still polluted with the lingering Alpha scents from the evidence bag. This goaded John on. He needed to remember what this was all about.

“I think I’ve made what I want clear.”

Sherlock let his free hand run over his own throat, where John had bitten it. The pale skin there was flawless now, all of the gorgeous bites from Scotland were long gone. He longed to bite again. John dug his fingers hard into the sides of the chair.

Sherlock’s hand was moving lower now. He was observing John carefully, making sure he was
watching as elegant fingers delicately touched, then rubbed the head of his own cock. John knew how sensitive his barely healed fingertips were and it made him furious all over again. He needed to shut these thoughts out, and so he did. He didn’t even try to pretend he wasn’t going to watch to see how Sherlock overcame this impediment to stroking himself off. Brilliant as he was, no doubt Sherlock had a plan.

With a deep intake of breath that signaled that there would be no rushing whatsoever, that he was completely in control of his passions, Sherlock palmed himself. There was no curling his fingers around his shaft. Just rubbing and stroking leisurely with the palm of his hand. His thumb, which was unhurt, he swirled around the crown of his head. John’s fingers positively tingled with envy.

“It’s clear now,” Sherlock breathed. “So tell me, . . . what you want me to do next.”

John felt a spike of aggression. This was what Sherlock had done with Maxim. Just as quickly the spike became a wave of voyeuristic lust. He would be the voice on the speaker now, directing Sherlock’s every move until he came.

“Take your hand away,” he ordered, throat dry. This was going to happen his way this time. He was going to make those bloody magnificent, obscene sounds come from that pale gorgeous throat. He had always wanted to. Yes, Sherlock had known what he wanted.

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed. He removed his palm, and they both looked at his long cock, dark pink skin over his head, snapped rigid against the tight skin of his expanding belly. How he wanted to touch it. How much more, to see Sherlock touch himself.

“Lick – lick your palm. Rub your head, just the tip.” He wanted this to last a long, long time. He wouldn’t touch himself till the end. He wasn’t as disciplined as Sherlock was, he had to make compensations. He wondered if Sherlock was somehow directing this with the invisible influences of the Mysteries. If so, it was only going where John wanted to take them.

Sherlock obeyed, just the palm of his hand rubbing a slow, sensuous circle at the very tip of his head. John could see his cock expanding, seeking the heat and friction of his own clever hand in a firm stroke. That was what he would want, it was what his own cock was begging for. Not yet.


“No. Just the tip,” John said fast. Sherlock had phenomenal control outside of heat. Maybe things would be different if he took some of that control away. His groin felt hot, it needed to grind up against Sherlock’s hardness soon in brilliant frottage, and he couldn’t even think of the tightness below, so good.

“No tricks,” he cautioned, well aware that Sherlock might well be able to pleasure himself by resorting to the Mysteries. “Just – do what I say. Just your palm.”

“What you say,” Sherlock breathed, and continued the slow, insistent circling. John could see the skin of his head darkening and shining as pre-come was slowly massaged into that sensitive place. Sherlock’s cuffed hand curled up to grip the bedpost, something to brace the tension of his long body against. Something about the scrape and rattle of the cuff against metal made it all seem exquisitely filthy, and John knew that he could never, ever have felt such unique sensations with anyone else, anywhere else. Just here, just now, just the two of them.
No matter how sensual, how perfect that smooth palm felt against his swollen head, he didn’t think he could climax unless John permitted him more stimulation; not if he was anything like John was himself. He didn’t really know. How much more? He had never seen Sherlock do this to himself, only heard it. The noises coming from Sherlock’s throat hinted that even this limited touching was having its effect.

“Everything --- it aches.“

“Yes. Your body’s changing. I did that, we did it together. You’ll get even more sensitive. This is just the beginning. If I want to, if you want me to, I can still fuck you. Later, only my fingers. In the end, not even that. Just my mouth,” his own mouth watered just imagining it; his lips, his tongue against that gorgeous cleft, his mate heavy with pregnancy, making him moan with ecstasy. “Tell me more. How it feels.”

“Ahhh,” Sherlock gasped, and his hips bucked a little under his palm and raised up off the bed. The cuff rattled. “I feel -- blood rushing down there. It’s --- glorious.”

It was definitely glorious: he was never going to stop watching this. John wanted to tell him to stop there, but the way Sherlock’s thighs were quivering he couldn’t find the will to even open his mouth. Sherlock’s cleft was very wet now, and he rubbed his thighs together in a futile effort to stimulate himself, or maybe to try to settle the empty feeling there. With one hand bound, forbidden to freely use the other, there was nothing but that light pressure to keep him open and stimulated but it wasn’t nearly enough to satisfy. He groaned.

Still, Sherlock’s face was glowing and the sounds from his lips told John that whatever was feeling from just the lightest touch of his own hand was better than anything John had ever done to himself. His hand was itching and he gave in and he rubbed himself just a little, feeling the satisfying length and hardness, so ready. But he wanted to make this last. He bit his lip to distract himself from the heavy feeling down there and took his hand away.

##

“Don’t close your legs, I want to see you,” he said, hardly believing how much he needed to see it. He had looked at every inch of Sherlock’s body in heat, but those memories were a gorgeous dreamlike haze. Here and now everything between them was crystal clear and razor-sharp. There had been a time, not so very long ago, when he could not have even imagined wanting to see his brilliant eccentric friend, Sherlock Holmes, like this. The knowledge that this was all for him now, that Sherlock would allow him this, even need it, felt like a kind of drug. He felt dizzy. He took a deep breath of the scented air, full of them both together.

“Nnnnnng John, I want to -- but ----“ he was parting his legs in obedience to John’s demand, and now his back arched up higher from the bed. Then he settled and began working himself with concentration, changing the speed and rhythm of his palm against the tip of his cock, experimenting, John thought. His soft gasps were starting to slowly come faster. John’s own cock swelled and tingled up and down its length. It was unbelievably difficult not to just touch himself. But he wanted to see Sherlock make himself come. He wanted to take for himself another thing that Maxim had had before him. He knew this was almost magical thinking, that it was like a spell to drive Maxim out for good, to take everything they had before and replace it with his love and his will.
The tips of Sherlocks fingers slid disobediently along his opening, so slick, and he looked straight into John’s eyes to see what he would do.

“No,” John said. Inside he was saying, yesyesyesgodyes but if there was a point to this, and his brain was rapidly forgetting what it was, it was supposed to have been to require Sherlock to actually listen to his wishes and then, to follow them. Precisely. For once.

“Ohhhhh, John, I --” Sherlock’s head tossed against the pillow. John promised himself that soon, he would climb on top and lick and kiss his throat, those impossible cheekbones.

“No.” Hardest word he had ever uttered in his life up until this very moment.

“Hmmmm, god,” Sherlock whispered, but he took his fingers away. He needed penetration now. A sensation so simple, so base, but so much more necessary than anything he had ever learnt or felt in the Mysteries. The Mysteries taught that the prolongation of pleasure through the least possible touch was the very pinnacle of erotic refinement. He had believed it, until John. When he told Maxim he would wait for John, deep inside he had know it would be like this. Now nothing could compare to the primal feel of John inside him, stretching and claiming his deepest place.

His body was more sensitive than any time since their heat, tissues growing and engorging opening itself to the baby. His body felt impossibly lush. What would if feel like in the months to come?

“John,” he whispered. “Let me, now.”

John was desperate too. “Do it, make yourself come so I can see.”

Sherlock’s hand moved faster now, a clever twist of his wrist and swipe of his thumb over his swollen head, slicking himself all over with his own lubrication. He stopped only to thrust a wet finger, then a second, inside himself with a gasp. With his cuffed hand, he pulled himself so that he could thrust his hips up even higher, so John could see everything. The handcuff made the loudest sound, rattling rhythmically against the metal bedpost and the headboard was banging the wall as he shook himself faster and harder. Soon John would be inside him and take him back to that place of brightness, the place he had sought from deep in black waters. John would drive all dark memories away. He didn’t want to draw this out, there wasn’t any reason to hold back.

“No -- John,” he cried, and John moaned with him as watched him come, his rigid cock shooting cum hard across his own chest, up to his throat. Sherlock panted, feeling it there, warm and sliding down. Maybe John would lick it away. His heart was hammering from his chest, anticipating more.

“John, please,” he begged. The craving in his core would eat him alive.

“That was unbelievable, you have to do that for me when I say,” John said roughly. Probably that would be every night. He imagined pulling out his mobile and demanding a performance if he was ever stupid enough to be out of the same room with his alluring mate ever again.

John hastily undid his flies, pushing away clothes as fast as he could, Sherlock reaching out with his uncuffed hand to help pull and tug until John was naked. He climbed onto the bed, kneeling over Sherlock, letting his cock finally have its satisfaction, pressing against Sherlock.

“Oh, god look at that,” he said, and lowered his mouth to Sherlock’s proffered throat and licked away the cum, relishing the feel of the pulse beating under the skin. John teased around the wet cleft, enjoying the last moments of anticipation. He held Sherlock’s bound hand down against the bed.

“Do you want me to take the cuff off now,” he asked, leaning down to kiss the palm gently, licking
between his fingers, careful with his wounded fingertips.

Sherlock sighed, watching with eyes still languid from orgasm. John had quickly learned during their heat that Sherlock's hands and fingers were nearly as sensitive as his cock and cleft. They looked into each other's eyes, dark to light, seeing in each other a perfect unity of desire that was the gift of a strong and true bond. Sherlock’s fears melted away under John’s possessive, passionate stare.

“Leave it,” he said.

# # #

John smiled triumphantly and pushed his fingers slowly inside, no thrusting, letting his fingers just hold them both there, waiting for the tight passage to fully accept him.

“You’re mine, you’re having our baby soon,” he said fiercely. The heat and slickness told him as much as the stark emotion on Sherlock’s face.

“We did that together,” he said in amazement, reaching his hand around John’s neck, taking John’s mouth. It had never felt truer than at this moment, John’s fingers deep inside him, so near his womb, their mouths and tongues locked, making a perfect circle. Almost perfect. He snaked his hand down to seek John’s cock, his hand sliding firmly and sensuously, up and down. He loved to go slowly enough to feel its heat and responsiveness under his hand, so alive. The rush when he touched John like this was like nothing else, and that was saying a lot for a man who had always been compelled to extremes. The slow burn of it was intensely arousing, and the feel of John’s hand inside was more intimate than the feel of his cock, no matter how perfectly it filled him. His passage was getting hotter and wetter with every stroke of John’s strong fingers, until he felt almost hypnotised by it. He willed himself to stay present in this perfect moment. John was having to make a stronger effort now hold back, he could feel it in the tension of his body trying to resist taking more, faster, harder.

“Please don’t make me come,” John whispered against his mouth. “I want it to last.” His cock was fighting him, but he would win.

“Oh yes,” he whispered, slowing everything down, breathing in time together. Sherlock was coming to understand that John had the instincts of an initiate too: the spirit of a hunter, the desire and the strength to draw out the chase, seeking after the climax, delaying the capture.

They caressed each other like this for a long time in a warm-skinned embrace that had their bodies rocking together, climbing high. Sherlock looked down at John’s sweat-soaked skin, the head of his cock shining and hard and red. Glorious. He gave it an extra stroke, just to feel it jump. John shivered and retaliated with an almost violent thrust of his fingers and it was the thought of John’s cock sliding home now, spilling into him, that brought him right to the brink again.

“Aaaaahhh, John,” he cried out. How all of his carefully acquired art fell away in the face of John’s possession of his body he could not understand, but he was glad.

“Wait, wait, love,” John whispered, smiling a little, perhaps at the memory of their game the night of the Heatwave. Sherlock pulled himself back from the brink, almost laughing at the intensity of what they were building. They trembled there together, then started again, dancing along the edge
of the wave of climax, until they were panting and shivering with exhaustion.

It was Sherlock who brought them to the final edge by slicking his fingers with his own wetness and gently rubbing his thumb right on the tight rim of John's hole, pressing the pad of his thumb just there, a promise. John swore and clung ever harder, imagining himself being opened as he had been at the cottage, the decadent sting of it. He thought he could easily become addicted to it. He thought that he could take even more. He groaned at the thought and sucked a divine mark into Sherlock’s throat as Sherlock teased him.

Sherlock subtly moved their bodies into one of the perfectly balanced positions of the Omega Sutra, impossible to achieve without two bonded bodies, melting as one. The pinning of his wrist cuffed to the bed made the rapture harder and deeper as the ecstasy this exquisite position took them deeper. It was everything he had imagined it could be when he had said he was prepared to wait as long as it took to have this. How right he had been, how he had been rewarded.

He waited until he could feel John's focus deepen, that John felt the power that the position gave them together.

“Do you feel it?” He asked. The astonished look of sheer want in John’s dark eyes was insanely arousing. He almost felt he couldn’t bear it.

“Beautiful, so beautiful, stay like this,” John whispered. In response he took John’s mouth and sucked on his tongue as if his life depended on it, and came in a glorious slow wave to John’s hand working him hard.

He was still shuddering with climax when John pushed him down and gripped his cuffed hand, then pushed his legs apart and drove his cock in, just four slow, hard, shallow strokes. They cried out together with each thrust. Then he slowly slid in deep, and held there, still.

“You’re holding back, for the baby,” Sherlock whispered. The thought made him blush and glow.

“Yes,” John panted. “I love you, always stay with me,” he said with one final stroke and then he came, tightening all over as though shocked. When he opened his eyes to look down he could see Sherlock’s belly shivering, his body jerking under him as he came again, calling John’s name.

# # #

They lay together, quiescent, enjoying the smooth contented glow that only bonded sex outside the insatiable drive of heat delivered. John mumbled something against Sherlock’s jaw about getting something to eat, and Sherlock hummed in vague agreement, but somehow neither of them was motivated enough to disentangle from their embrace. Sherlock’s breathing became steady and slow. John watched his body grow limp by degrees as he fell into a deep sleep. He felt an unaccountable pride that he had done this to Sherlock, delivered him safely to this contented place. He flashed on the three lonely test strips, pink plus signs lined up on the sink, the day Sherlock had left him behind to pursue Maxim Purcell.

He very gently unfastened the cuff from Sherlock’s wrist, and kissed the skin where it was redder under the scarf.

John’s last thought before he slept was that they would never be alone again, neither of them. Soon there would be three. His hand clasped Sherlock’s. He had fulfilled his vow.
John had given a lesson in the meaning of a bond, and Sherlock had learned it.

*To be continued...*
Chapter Twenty-Four: The Desires of the Undead

"We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances." -- Isaac Newton

LISTEN TO BELA LUGOSI'S DEAD Bauhaus, all rights reserved.

221b Baker Street. 4 November, midnight.

At midnight, John rose. John had an internal clock drilled into him from Army days that accurately counted out the hours, whether he wanted it or not. He rubbed his eyes. Nobody had switched on the electric fire and the room was too cold. John carefully unwound himself from his sleeping mate, stopping to run a light fingertip along Sherlock’s palm to feel his hand curl around it in response. This was good, this was ordinary light sleep, not the strange semi-coma of the days after Hantswood Hall. He turned on the fire and pulled the covers over Sherlock.

He quietly found his robe and went down to the kitchen and made himself a cup of tea. It was too cold here too, so he turned on the fire. The glowing light flickered over the skull’s empty sockets. John felt more than ever as though it had malevolent intent. He turned the skull to face the wall and promised himself that the thing would be gone from 221b before the baby came.

He sipped his tea, listening for any sound of Sherlock stirring. He was not really sure why he had awoken. He didn’t think it was another nightmare. He felt a bone-weariness that had probably been accumulating since the night on the Magnus and his body felt like he could sleep for a week. He stretched, wanting to climb back up the stairs and into his own bed with Sherlock, but he knew sleep wouldn’t come yet. Maybe he would read a little first.

Sherlock’s laptop lay on a stack of forensic journals, just where he had left it. John’s fingers twitched. Maybe he would just have a look. He settled down at the chair by the window and began to read.

“At this point it is no doubt necessary for some readers to be reminded of the purpose and function of the mitochondria before proceeding to enumerate the means by which this material can be extracted from mummified remains for DNA analysis. Some textbooks refer to it as “the energy power house of the cell,” and while I find this to be a gross simplification, it may be a useful mental aid to readers with less scientific minds. The mitochondria are protected by a honeycomb structure comprised of microtubules, and it is this structure that enables it to survive where other forms of DNA degrade. . .”

There were links to other research papers. It felt good to stretch his brain, he would perhaps surprise Sherlock and discuss this new work. He smirked, recalling Sherlock’s arrogant query whether he needed John’s permission to undertake research, or to leave 221b. This paper seemed
harmless in itself. Having thoroughly exercised his Alpha privileges tonight, he knew he needed to
tame his more possessive Alpha impulses. Sherlock had lived alone for a very long time, and was
not accustomed to accounting to anyone for what he did, or why he did it.

“. . . ‘The phenomena of human consciousness has been theorised to be the result of quantum
processes occurring the microtubules in brain cells. Microtubules are driven bioenergetically to be
in a coherent state. When the blood supply and oxygen cease, things go bad and the coherence
stops. If the patient is revived, the information gets picked back up again, and it is this simple but
elegant fact that explains the so-called near-death experience.’ (fn 35)”

John raised an eyebrow at this. He could not imagine Sherlock taking this sort of metaphysical talk
seriously.

But he had been told by more than a few soldiers who came back from the brink about the white
light, about floating above the operating theatre -- only to be yanked back from the light into their
own body. John could not help but think that this peculiar new work signaled that Sherlock felt
what he had felt down in that evil chamber --maybe not everything, but enough. Sherlock had
insisted that he could not forget, and tomorrow he would try to be calm and listen to Sherlock's
reasons why.

John idly consulted the citation, footnote 35.

Jesperson, E. Molecular Automata: Microtubules and the Fibonacci Lattice as B iocomputer.

Jesperson.

John closed the laptop, thinking about what Sherlock had said tonight. Sherlock thought there were
mummified remains at Hantswood Hall. John remembered the earth-moving equipment, the
ancient-seeming stone chamber below the Hall.

These ideas made him feel very uneasy. He stood up, pacing nervously.

There was a flash in his peripheral vision, through the window. In Afghanistan, those sorts of
fleeting impressions were the difference between life or death. He followed it, looking out into the
dark. Baker Street was quiet, no cars or people stirring.

He waited and watched. The hackles slowly stood at the back of his neck. He pressed his forehead
against the cold glass. He remembered the night of the Heatwave, the night he had thrashed a
predatory Alpha in the street. This felt like that.

Long minutes ticked by. He considered leaving the flat to take a walk up the street, do a little
reconnaissance. But looking back up toward the stair, where Sherlock was sleeping peacefully in
his bed, made him decide to let it go. Whatever it had been, it was gone. He finished his tea and
thought that even if he could not sleep, he ought to go back.

He climbed the stair and very gingerly lay down with Sherlock, and listened to the sound of his
steady breathing.

# # #
John wanted a normal, quiet morning at home before broaching the topic of the case, and their visit to this Jesperson fellow. Maybe he would make breakfast. He gingerly opened the refrigerator. It wasn’t as bad as he had feared. Bless Mrs. Hudson.

“We need milk,” John observed.

“I’ll get it,” Sherlock said. “I fancy a walk.”

John reached for his coat. “Fine. Let’s go,” he said, and held the door open for Sherlock. Sherlock cocked an eyebrow.

“You aren’t seriously intending to walk with me every time I go to the market.”

“Ask me again in a few weeks. Maybe a few years. Right now, the answer is — probably.” He smiled while folding his arms over his chest to signal that he was not going to allow Sherlock to quibble with him any more about it. “I’ll just ask Mrs Hudson if she wants anything,” He tried to be helpful, in return to that lady’s many kindnesses to him. He stopped to rap on her door.

“Oh, Doctor Watson, I thought you and Sherlock were away,” Mrs Hudson said vaguely. She was wearing a lavender apron and brandishing a wooden spoon. “That’s all right, though, I’m fine. Got eggs and butter this morning. I’m doing a lemon pound cake. But it’s turned damp, not good cake baking weather, you know. I find the damp just takes all the rise out of a cake. Still, pound cake is less temperamental, my mum always said. Next will be the Christmas pudding.”

“That’s fine, then, cheers,” John said, starting down the stair. Sherlock didn’t follow him.

“You said you thought we were away. Why did you think that, Mrs. Hudson?”

“Why, it was that man – I came down and there he was, hanging about the doorstep. Well, I’ve seen that look before. Anxious, he was. Hadn’t slept a wink in days, if you ask me. Man had some sort of business with Sherlock Holmes – and you too, Doctor Watson, no doubt of that.”

“Where is he -- did he say anything?” Sherlock’s eyes narrowed, poised to charge down into Baker Street. John put a firm hand on his shoulder.

“I asked him right sharp what his business was. He said he had “business with Mr. Holmes, but that it would have to wait.” I thought he had already knocked and found you were gone.”

“But we’ve just got back yesterday, why should you think we had gone again?” Sherlock demanded.

“You do come and go at the oddest times, Sherlock, really,” Mrs. Hudson said patiently.

"If he returns, make him wait, would you?” Sherlock said.

John felt the hackles on his neck rising again. The flash at the window. He bit back a curse at having failed to follow his instincts.
Upon returning from the shops, Sherlock refused John’s offer of cooked breakfast, rummaging in the kitchen and ultimately choosing tea and a single slice of dry toast. John tactfully refrained from mentioning morning sickness. Sherlock indeed disappeared for a while after a few bites of toast. There was a soft sound of retching from behind the toilet door.

John opened the door to find Sherlock gripping the edge of the toilet basin, looking pale and miserable. John simply helped him up and stayed with him quietly until he had washed his face and was steady on his feet. Sherlock frowned and put his hand to his stomach, but did not complain.

His mobile buzzed and Sherlock sighed, and took the call. John waited. A few muttered syllables between arrogance and annoyance told John who it was.

"Mycroft. He wants to talk to me. To both of us, actually. When I’m well enough, of course, he says. There really is still a case, you know. And I think it’s time we talk about it, John.”

Mycroft. John had been too dazed at Hantswood Hall to really process the fact that Mycroft Holmes was on the scene. Lestrade he had expected, of course, Donovan and other Yarders too; but Mycroft’s presence at Hantswood Hall that night had been an anomaly. During the long, anxious days in the secret hospital, John had never once thought to ask him about it. All that had mattered was Sherlock coming back to him.

“Well, tell Mycroft that you’re still not well enough.” John said desperately. He was starting to understand that events outside 221b would sweep them back into the real world, there was no stopping it.

“I wish I could. Mycroft knows better, of course. Surely it’s no coincidence, John, that he is texting me the very minute we’re back from the shops! He won't be put off much longer.”

“I don’t understand why Mycroft’s involved at all - surely it’s the Yard’s case?”

“No, the Yard's out altogether, John. My meddling brother has somehow contrived to be appointed some sort of-- what did he call it -- a ‘czar’, yes. For MI5. I believe the Americans coined the term. Vulgar. I'm sure Mycroft will invent another title for himself-- "

"--Wait, Sherlock -- 'Czar'? Czar of what, exactly?"

"Paranormal espionage, he says. The Sleeping Beauties case is his, now.”

John covered his face with his hands.

Paranormal espionage.

Whatever that was.

In a way, he was relieved. If Mycroft Holmes, the very embodiment of British pragmatism, was prepared to treat this case as involving something paranormal, something supernatural, at least it meant he wasn't completely off his nut.
"All right," John said, steeling himself. It was too early for a drink and it wouldn't be fair to Sherlock anyway, in his newly-pregnant condition. May as well get used to it. Even in the face of what they were about to talk about, just this thought made him grin, and he pulled Sherlock into a tight embrace and planted a warm and sloppy kiss on his lips before settling them both down by the fire.

"It's time," he said. "Tell me why you -- and Mycroft -- even think there is still a case at all. Maxim's dead. You thought he was the Sleeping Beauty murderer; Lestrade-- and I guess Mycroft-- thought so too. Isn't it true? Case closed."

Sherlock paused. *You killed the Omegas, Sherlock. The part of you that is with me is a killer,* Maxim/Talbott had declared.

This was his fear. This is what he had to know. Was it true?

If it was true, what did it mean?

No more secrets, John had said. Bonded mates didn't keep secrets. And he knew down to his bones that they were bonded. John was right. Maxim had lied, to try weaken him so that he would have been a dead Omega, one of the Omega sacrifices Maxim had carefully planned for All Hallows Eve.

"Yes and no. First, I have to tell you a little about the history of Hantswood Hall, and about a man called Squire Jonathan Talbott who died in a fire there, four hundred years ago. Talbott was supposed to have made a pact with the devil. And we all know how the devil takes his payment."

John blanched.

"In souls," he said. "Sherlock...at the end, down in that stone room. Something happened to you. To us. Do you remember anything, anything at all, after you stabbed Maxim with that knife?"

Sherlock closed his eyes, remembering. "I do remember-- stabbing him. With the knife." And how astonished those eyes had been -- still Maxim's eyes, underneath-- after initiating Sherlock into the Mysteries, to feel Sherlock pierce his body at last with the most brutal penetration of all. "But after that -- just the dark. And cold, something cold on my face."

"Nothing else?"

"Not until I woke up and you were with me, in the hospital. In my bed." He wanted to smile at this memory, but that felt wrong.

"Sherlock. I thought it might have been a dream, I thought maybe . . . . I had somehow lost my mind, god knows you put me through enough to do it," he said. "But in the end, I saw a-- white mist . . . it was coming from Maxim's mouth. He was down, I thought he might be dead already. This mist, it went to your face, it was -- it was going into your mouth. And I -- I" he wasn't sure he could say it. He shook his head. Sherlock looked ill. He gripped John's hand very tight.

"I have to know, John. Please."

"I told it to leave you, that it couldn't have you. I told it to take me instead. But it wouldn't, not at first."
"John." Sherlock was climbing across the sofa to get to him. John held him back.

"Just don't - Sherlock, don't -- I never wanted to talk about this."

"Keep going, you have to," Sherlock whispered. "You said no more secrets, John. If Maxim was out -- it was Talbott that was in control. I'll explain. Go on."

"All right. Talbott -- right. It was just a voice. It was-- so loud. It was in the wind, if anyone could explain to me how there was a windstorm down there. But there was. Or maybe it was my own head. I know I heard it. And I know it heard me too, because it did leave you. And then it came to me. It was going to take me instead. Then Lestrade shot his -- it's-- head off. And everything stopped."

This time Sherlock would not be prevented. He climbed over, pinned John's arms to the sofa and straddled him. He had had quite enough of playing at Alpha-Omega. Few things could stir him to anger but John was disappearing into himself, crawling back down deep, the way he had been when they had first met, when John had just returned from the war. He wasn't ever letting John go back to that place.

"You never should have done that, John. I've never been careful with my life -- I never much cared. Not about mine, not about anyone's. I know it's different now. But you -- you -- " he couldn't express it, but he could make John feel it, and so he kissed him, taking his face between his hands and kissing him hard and deep, as if even now he could bring John back, all the way back from that evil. John kissed him back just as hard, but in the end when they broke away, they both could sense the coldness all around them.

Sherlock didn't move his hands. He made John look, really look, so he could understand. Usually everything he really needed to know was in John's eyes.

"Why was he willing to trade? You, for me? John -- what did you do?"

But John's eyes were fathomless. "How does the devil take his payment, Sherlock?"

Sherlock shook his head. This couldn't be true. Just as Maxim's accusation - *I've got a little piece of your soul* -- couldn't be true.

"No, no, John. No."

"I did. I promised him my soul."

###

In Baker Street, a figure shifted in the shadows of the stair to a basement flat. A man, pale with dark shadows under his eyes. He looked as if he had not slept in a long while.

The pale man stared up at the window to 221b, unblinking. Then he sat down on his rucksack to wait.

His iPod was running low on battery. He swore softly under his breath. There was nowhere to charge it of course, but it was very important that he keep listening.

He had spent many clandestine hours using equipment for which he definitely did not have clearance, to enhance these precious recordings. These were the recordings from Mycroft Holmes’
wire feed from Hantswood Hall. Finally, he had with painstaking effort assembled it into a coherent whole.

*I've come into possession of a certain book. A book no one has seen.*

*You came here to find out the truth about the Sleeping Beauties. And that's all right. Once you know the truth, you will want to be with me.*

*On a molecular level the human brain is a superconductor of energy. But it has a limitation. The easiest way to explain is to think about the power of mechanical engines. More horses, more power. I thought that binding Sherlock to me would give me this increase in power.*

*Why did you choose my brother?*

*Not for the reasons you might think, even though he is definitely within my preferred type. No, for his powers, of course. I have done some researches into the Holmes bloodline.*

He had the entire restored tape on endless loop. He could listen to this voice pretty much forever. But he hadn’t slept in three days. As his mind finally gave way to a shallow, fitful sleep, the voice began to tell him something entirely new.

He wanted to wake up so he could listen more carefully, but the voice was telling him that he wanted him to stay as he was.

There was something only he could do, that he had been chosen to do.

“*And then, you’ll show me the truth?”* He asked eagerly.

*You will know the truth,* the voice replied.

# # #

Sherlock wrapped himself around John, and they were still, breath to breath, heartbeat to heartbeat.

"*He can't have it. Nor mine,*" Sherlock said. No more secrets. "*John, Maxim said he'd taken part of me, part of my -- soul. That because he had part of me, that I was the Sleeping Beauties killer too.*"

John was perfectly still. "*Is this what you've been hiding? Is this what your mysterious project is about?*

"*Yes. Because isn’t true, it can't be true, John - not the way it seems - demons and sacrifices on Halloween. There has to be an explanation that makes rational sense in the physical world. There has to."

"*But you always say, eliminate the impossible, and whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth? What is impossible, Sherlock, is that what happened at Hantswood Hall was caused by an ordinary man. Or anything natural. I know what I saw and I know what I felt. Unless -- it was some sort of hallucination, a gas-- maybe I might believe that. But I really don’t think so, Sherlock. It felt too real for that. It still feels like that. I’d give anything if it didn’t. And what I felt and saw"
made absolutely no rational sense in the physical world.”

Sherlock sat up, fixed John with his most intent stare. “What if there was a way for someone dead to take over, no, not take over exactly, but to -- merge, with a living person.”

“Someone dead -- do you mean, like a, a zombie? I can’t believe we’re talking about this. This is why I said I never wanted to speak of it. This is insane. It’s evil.”

“And that is exactly why I can’t leave it alone. Not zombies. Vampires.”

“Vampires --” His brain was on the brink of complete rebellion. Utter meltdown. He wasn’t having this conversation with the supremely logical, rational scientific genius Sherlock Holmes. “But vampires -- they’re supposed to drink blood, right? Did Maxim ever - wait, don’t tell me-- ”

“No, never, John.”

“-- but I didn’t see anything like that. . . There were a lot of Alphas down there, they’d cut each other to ribbons. But nothing that looked like something had -- drunk their blood.”

Sherlock reached for his laptop. “Not the kind of vampire you’re thinking of. Something altogether different. And worse.”

“Worse?” John actually laughed. He put his head in his hands. For a moment he had actually felt hopeful. If a vampire was what they were dealing with, all they had to do was go back to Hantswood Hall. If a knife, a bullet and fire hadn’t put the bloody thing down, he had seen all the old movies.

A stake through the heart would do the job. He was ready to go. Right now.

“Worse. A psychic vampire. An entity that feeds upon the psyche of others. Or their souls, if you will. Look at this.”

Sherlock showed John a photograph. It was an irregular oval with bright rays of light around it, like pictures of an eclipse. Next to it, another irregular oval. There were rays around it too, but very faint.

“This purports to be a photograph of a psychic vampire, immediately after having fed upon the psyche of another person. It grew stronger, the victim grew weaker. I don’t know if the photo is genuine - I’ve analysed, Jesperson may know more. . . ”

“Did this happen to you? Is that why all of the Omegas went into that strange sleep state? So this is what Maxim was trying to do -- taking souls? He meant it literally -- like some sort of food?”

“It wasn’t Maxim, John, not entirely. Something much more fascinating.” Sherlock ignored John’s furious look. “It was Jonathan Talbott. Dead four hundred years, but he was with Maxim. There is
something that they desire. All conscious things desire something, John. The most basic desire is hunger. You’re right when you say food, very interesting -- but I think it’s more basic. Food provides us calories, calories are energy. I think that what Talbott and Maxim were trying to do on All Hallows Eve was to accrue more energy. Now you understand why we need to see Dr. Edgar Jesperson.”

“No I bloody don’t, and no we bloody aren’t. Maybe your brain was affected by what happened, and mine was too. As in, we’re both going mad. Nothing you’ve said makes me want to do anything other than forget, just shut the door on it and forget. For your sake, for my sake, for the baby’s sake. Like I said.”

“But we’ve been over all that. John -- don’t you feel it? They want us to be afraid. When you are afraid, you are weak and when you are weak, that is one way they can take from you.”

“One way? What are the other ways?” For some reason, his mind went back to the night before, standing at the window at midnight, the hackles on his neck raised. Something had been out there, something that was waiting for them.

“John, you asked why I was consulting Doctor Jesperson. I don’t know very much -- yet -- about quantum neurophysics. I’m trying to get up on it. I’ve been rather distracted from my researches, since we came back to 221b. But it is always advisable to seek the highest source of data in any subject. In quantum neurophysics, that is Jesperson. His work is very controversial.”

“Do you mean-- he’s a quack?” John was baffled. “Why would you want to listen to someone like that?”

“In all fields associated with what is called “the paranormal,” researchers are considered to be quacks. I quite agree; I’ve never yet been proven wrong. But Jesperson. . . he has some ideas that are grounded in real physics. I want to talk to him about the case.”

John tried to remember what he had read last night in Sherlock’s blog. “But you said you were writing about mummified remains. And DNA testing. And -- microtubules.”

“You’ve been peeking, John. Well, that’s good. Jesperson has some ideas about the persistence of human consciousness outside the physical body. That consciousness ultimately resides during life in the brain cells called microtubules. In the case of mummified remains, John, the microtubule is a structure that survives for longer and in more intact condition than almost any other tissue in the human body.”

“And you’re thinking about mummified remains. . . because of this Squire Jonathan Talbott.”

“Good, John. How can it be that Talbott, not his body but his consciousness, or his soul, if you will -- was been present with us that night? Because he was, it was him. We simply haven’t enough data. The villagers burned down the Hall when he was accused of consorting with the devil. But what if his body wasn’t burned in the original fire? My hypothesis is, Talbott’s remains were preserved somewhere, in a mummified state.”

Now John understood. He had been operating under an assumption. Sherlock had always cautioned him against making assumptions: It is a mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence, John.

“You don’t think Talbott - or Maxim - was burned in the fire this time either, do you?”

Sherlock shook his head. “After what you told me just now, John -- that white mist --” John shuddered.
“The more we know, the more power we will have, John. We can’t turn away. That white mist, it may have been a phenomenon known in paranormal studies as ‘ectoplasm.’ Another area that has been plagued with nothing but sheer quackery. Well, there are a few puzzling cases. But if what you say you saw was actually happening --”

“It was.”

“-- then when El Brujo burned Maxim’s body, whatever spirit was animating it was already gone.”

“The house burned too, Sherlock. Everything is gone. Maxim is dead.”

“No dead. There is a word that I dislike, a gross simplification -- “undead.” It implies the animation of organic matter after natural death, but it could also describe the persistence of spiritual matter, after death. Yes. That mist, the mist that you so bravely drove from me - where did it go? Not back to Maxim’s body -- that really is burnt to ash.”

"Where could it have gone?"

"If I’m right, Talbott -- Maxim -- whatever they have become -- is still out there somewhere, undead. Seeking what it desires - what it didn’t get on All Hallows Eve."

“Well, we aren’t giving it. I’ll see it in hell first,” John said, and then caught his breath. The sheer stupidity of saying that aloud. Because he was certain that he had come very close to seeing hell firsthand.

Sherlock’s face was pale and stricken, and all the excitement of trying to piece together this uncanny mystery fell away. He took John’s hand.

“John. I must -- we must take this to the very end. You made a bargain with your soul. You’ve already given it to them.”

*To be continued. . . .*
Fibonacci Sequence

Chapter Notes

Readers who enjoy my tracks can listen to the playlist:

**THE OMEGA SUTRA PLAYLIST**

The Omega Sutra. Chapter 25. Fibonacci Sequence.

"I am Large, I Contain Multitudes."

-- Walt Whitman, Song of Myself

"*Mathematics is the language of nature.*"

**BT: Fibonacci Sequence** LISTEN TO FIBONACCI SEQUENCE

Creechurch Lane, The City, London, 4 November. 7:00 p.m.

Mycroft was aware that Lestrade would not welcome an impromptu visit to his flat.

But with several long and empty hours stretching ahead until dinner with Mummy, he found his feet following Cheyne Walk. It was already dark so late in the year, and bitterly cold. The dampness was turning to mist. The cold, clinging damp felt unpleasantly similar to certain sensations he had felt in Hantswood Hall, and this made him feel the hopelessness of his situation even more.

This, however, was not the time or place to explore those impressions. He was scheduled for his second deep neural debriefing in the morning, at which time no possible memory fragment or sensory impression from All Hallows Eve would remain unexamined.

Meanwhile, he rehearsed what he would say to Lestrade, given the chance. He wasn’t sure he deserved one. It was such a convoluted speech that it took a great deal of concentration, and before he knew it, the Gherkin loomed and he was in Creechurch Lane.
Lestrade’s flat was in a block of a dozen newly-restored period flats. Mycroft wondered if Lestrade had chosen the flat because he appreciated old buildings, or for more practical considerations. This was one of those things that his occasional snooping into DI Gregory Lestrade’s personal life had not revealed. It was the sort of thing, he thought, that would be properly discussed over a bottle of wine in Lestrade’s flat, with none of this Sleeping Beauties business between them.

He wished now that he had not allowed Lestrade to keep him at a distance before the Hantswood Hall operation. In respecting Lestrade’s own Alpha perogatives, and also Lestrade’s professional competence -- within the strict dictates of his own clandestine duties -- he had lost an important chance to build on what had started in Mumbai.

###

Mycroft looked up to the glowing rectangle that was Lestrade’s single small window into the street: the window he had looked out of, making bold innuendos in an utterly stupid effort to be witty in order to cover his guilt. He knew that there was another window, smaller, that looked out from the bedroom. But of course he had never seen it -- other than in photographs and video images which Lestrade would no doubt find utterly infuriating. He made a mental note to simply purge that file.

He pictured the tall windows and french doors of his own Belgravia townhouse and thought he had never been as comfortable there as he had for those brief hours in Lestrade’s miniscule digs.

Down the street he could see the little Italian restaurant where Lestrade had gotten their takeaway that night. He hesitated for only a moment. “The Holmes are not cowards,” he repeated to himself almost as self-chastisement, remembering throwing those haughty words in Lestrade’s face, rather than telling him the truth. Lestrade might not welcome an impromptu visit, but he would go all the same. He could bring an offering of takeout; the worst that could happen was the door would be shut in his face. Since it that was the situation currently, he didn't have anything to lose. He approached the restaurant and opened the door, stepping courteously aside for a compact blonde Omega female.

With the rote discipline of a professional spy he mechanically catalogued her apparel: smashing designer coat, new; vampish high-heeled black boots, also new; glossy makeup and hair just a little spoilt by the mist and damp; over all, a great cloud of expensive French perfume - Omega Obsession. She carried a bag of takeaway with a bottle of wine. She hurried across the street.

Mycroft didn’t need to watch after her to know where she was going.

Janet Lestrade, Greg’s ex-wife. Well, soon-to-be ex-wife. The final papers would not be issued for another ten days.

He smiled bitterly at the fact that he actually knew this bit of domestic trivia.

He took a seat at a table by the front window. From there, he could see Lestrade’s window. He ordered a glass of wine, and cut off the obsequious waiter. He consulted the time, and set his watch to stopwatch. He applied himself to his wine, then a second glass, leaving the excellent pasta untouched.

After precisely thirty-two minutes, ten seconds, the light in the Lestrade’s window went out.
Now he focused his attention on the door to Lestrade’s building.

Fifteen minutes passed, then twenty. It started to rain. After a half hour, Mycroft was certain that Janet Lestrade was not coming out again. He promised himself not to look at the CCTV footage in the morning.

He felt the strange yet familiar sensation in the centre of himself, a magentic tugging toward Lestrade’s flat. As usual, the sensation made him feel a little dizzy. He resisted this feeling, but it was unusually strong. He understood why this should be. It was obvious.

He took deep breaths and spent a few quiet moments making sure he was under control.

“Do you trust me?”

“No, I don’t.”

He was not, absolutely was not, going to project himself through the window of Lestrade’s flat to spy upon them invisibly from above.

He paid the bill and hailed a cab. Time for dinner with Mummy.

###

Lestrade pulled his hand from Janet’s grip. The wine was finished; she had tossed down three glasses in quick succession to his half-touched one.

Janet leaned back against the sofa, trying to tug him down with her. The cloud of Omega Obsession was giving him a headache and a hard-on at the same time, but he understood that was just scent memory. Janet had worn that perfume for years; his body remembered. Recent events notwithstanding, he and Janet had had some pretty spectacular heats together, over the years. But they had never bonded.

And that was all right with Lestrade.

Janet was apparently having second thoughts. Lestrade observed a faint bitemark on her throat and figured her latest encounter in the Alpha dating pool had left her disappointed. Janet always was.

Lestrade sighed.

“Come on, Janet. You’ve had a few too many. You know this is a bad idea.”

“It’s a brilliant idea, it always is. Don’t you remember?”

“Course I do. But at this stage of the game, I thought you’d consider it hate sex. Wait -- do you?”

“Would it make a difference? Which do you prefer?” Janet said archly, proffering her throat. He looked away from the mark. He also pushed away thoughts of other bite marks on pale skin, made in darkness.

“Look, Janet --” He stepped back from the sofa and put his hands up to stop her coming up after him. “It’s getting late. I’ll get you a cab. I’ve got an early meeting in the morning. Let’s just say, we have some good memories left. I don’t want to make any more bad ones.”
Janet’s lower lip wobbled and tears sprang up in her eyes, as they usually did when she was drunk. Lestrade was still affected, he had never been able to remain hardhearted in the face of women’s tears. Maybe this was why they had stayed married far too long.

“You arrogant prick. Since when did you get to be such a prize? I won’t be tossed out in the street like a -- like a--” her voice was starting to slur.

Lestrade turned off the light and gently took Janet’s hand and pulled her to the bedroom. “Awww, Greg, that’s a lad,” she murmured, trying to nuzzle his neck.

He pushed her down on the bed, swung her feet up and took off her boots, then covered her with the blankets.

“Go to sleep, Janet. You’ll feel better about this in the morning. You’ll be glad you didn’t shag your prick of an ex-husband. You’re right, as always -- I’m sure it’s my loss.”

“Damn straight,” she said defiantly, before turning over and falling immediately asleep, her lipstick staining his pillowcase.

He told himself he would toss it out into the rubbish in the morning.

###

Lestrade shut the bedroom door quietly and grabbed his warmest coat from hook by the front door. He went to the window and looked down into the street through the rain, remembering when Mycroft had stood right here, making him smile even in the midst of the horrible case.

He watched a large umbrella folding as its owner climbed into a taxi across the street. The umbrella was very like one Mycroft Holmes habitually carried. Not that he had had so very many opportunities to learn Mycroft’s habits. He closed his eyes. He was really going to have to get a grip. He was starting to see Mycroft everywhere.

As angry as he was with Mycroft, he regretted that night-- even if he couldn’t bring himself to regret having punched Mycroft in the face. Maybe if he had behaved differently, not pushed Mycroft, Mycroft would not have turned to Maxim so easily. Not that that was ever going to happen again. He still remembered the satisfying heft of his gun in his hand. But instead of the sound of his bullet, now it was sounds on that tape that rattled around his head. He knew he ought to be able to shake those sounds from his mind. But he couldn’t. Not tonight.

As hard-working and dedicated as he was, Lestrade was not prone to obsessing about things, not even his cases. He figured he knew what it meant that he couldn’t stop thinking about the tape of Mycroft with Maxim. He also figured that he was going to have to decide what to do about it.

He lay down fully clothed on the sofa and pulled his coat over himself like a blanket, watching the changing light from the street as it flickered across his ceiling. Alone in the dark, his mind began to play tricks on him. He dozed fitfully, he didn't know how long, and then he awoke feeling flushed and frustrated.

He was back in the hotel room in Mumbai. His cock hadn’t gotten the memo that he was furious with Mycroft Holmes because at this first unwilling jolt of those memories, it filled tight and hard against his jeans.
He hadn’t come for days, a quick wank in the shower where he very determinedly didn’t think of anything but getting it over with. He was irritated at Janet now too, for having brought her cloud of Omega Obsession into the flat, a scent that once had driven him wild with lust but now only mocked him. He reached down, unzipped his jeans. Janet was out cold, she always slept like the dead. Anyway, he couldn’t stop now even if he tried.

He slipped his hand around his cock, freeing it from his briefs, too intent to take the time to get his jeans off. His Alpha musk was strong, there was no question his cock needed some serious attention. Even though he never took suppressants, he hadn’t been in heat in a long time. Too long.

He imagined Mycroft’s hands, they were large and much stronger than he had suspected, stroking him possessively and hard, as they had in Mumbai. He groaned, bit his lip to keep it in. His cock and balls were on fire. He missed the rich musky Alpha scent that Mycroft gave off, wished he was covered in it, and just that thought made him shiver.

Now he thought about straddling Mycroft with his cock shoved up against his arsehole and before he could think it through, his own fingers were tentatively exploring down there. It was hot, and it felt thrilling and illicit. He thought he could almost come just from these light, intoxicating touches to his own skin. His hole shuddered, and he knew what he wanted. He flushed in the dark, groaned softly.

An Alpha did not allow penetration. That was not their nature.

His cock was already near to bursting and he’d barely started. His fingers, at first feeling thrilling down there, now felt dry and intrusive. There was nothing to hand to slick himself. He thumped his head back against the sofa.

Fuck it, he thought. Fucking. Since being with Mycroft, it was all he could think about. Was he really that base, that depraved?

Apparently, yes.

###

Lestrade's flat, Creechurch Street, the City, London, 5 November, shortly after midnight.

One of the downsides to his new flat had been that the sole bathroom wasn’t en suite. But he thanked the stars for that now, because he was able to duck into the bathroom and shut the door without Janet noticing a thing, even if she was awake in there, which she wasn’t. Anyway, this was familiar territory -- sneaking a wank while his wife was asleep.

He switched off the light. Now there was only the orangey glow of the nightlight. He shucked off his jeans and grabbed the bottle of lotion from the cabinet. His hand was almost shaking as he pumped his fist full of cool, fragrant slickness.

His breath was coming in heaving pants and he knew he wasn’t going to stop now. Logistics puzzled him for a minute, but he made a quick decision and closed the toilet lid and planted one foot on the floor, and knelt with the other knee on the lid. He leaned forward and rested his head against the wall, surprised to encounter coldness until he remembered this wall was covered with a large mirror.
In vice, there were evidence closets full of contraband vids. Alpha/Alpha penetration was among the acts deemed “likely to cause internal injuries”, and therefore obscene per se; it was prohibited by the Sex Crimes Act, as “tending to to deprave and corrupt persons who read, see or hear the act”. Pornographers observed the four-finger rule: - anything larger than four fingers penetrating an Alpha was contraband. There were sex toys intended for the satisfaction of Omegas, in varying sizes, and he had seen flashes of films and seized photos of Alphas being penetrated with such toys. It looked impossible. It looked incredibly, obscenely hot.

He closed his eyes against these images, even though he couldn’t see a thing. He definitely wasn’t trying for four fingers.

Was he?

He massaged his hole with his own fingers, which felt awkward and electric. He was feeling desperate for it and knew he wasn’t giving himself enough preparation, but suddenly all he wanted was to feel this unknown sensation. He pressed his middle finger in, slow but steady, amazed at how something so simple could feel so carnal. He shuddered at the new sensation, and his cock gave a deep throb, but he didn’t stop.

He thrust up harder, gripping his cock with the other hand, feeling the thickness of it, imagining its girth slowly breaching an Alpha’s tight arsehole. He groaned softly, let the illicit images wash over him. It was Mycroft he was thinking of, here in the dark he could admit that. Mycroft deserved to be bent over, to take his cock, he thought darkly. At that, he gave himself his first really strong thrust with his finger, which made him gasp out loud, it felt so perfect. Something deep in his core wanted this, and much more.

He imagined if Mycroft’s driver hadn’t been there at Battery Wharf, he could have pushed Mycroft down in the back of his car, his legs spread under him. He wondered what Mycroft would have done then.

His cock was running with precum now and he wasn’t far off from the orgasm that had been needing release for days now, the orgasm that Mycroft could deliver, but he wasn’t here. Lestrade felt cocky and pressed in with a second finger, and that felt even more perfect than just the one. He stopped, breathed deep, just letting himself adjust, his arsehole tightening and quivering. It burned, but it was a burning that he could come to crave, he could already tell.

Now it was time to pick up the pace, his cock couldn’t hold out much longer. He couldn’t reach his own prostate from here without some serious acrobatics and he satisfied himself with pumping his hand up and down, fucking himself, matching the rhythm on his cock. He felt his balls drawing up urgently and knew he couldn’t take much more. He wanted to draw it out, but it was impossible, the sensations were too intense, too real.

He fucked himself faster with his fingers. "Ohmygod," he whispered to himself as a shiver marched up and down his spine. It felt unbelievably good to be filled like this. He wanted to roar aloud with it. He leaned hard against the mirrored wall for support. If he turned the light on, what would he look like?

If Mycroft were here, what would he do if he saw him like this?

"Oh, My--" That did it, his frustrated cock exploded and his entire centre shivered with contractions that hit him like a punch to the gut. He cried out a curse, what he didn’t know, and grabbed a towel to stifle his groans as his body tried to accommodate the strong aftershocks that came from the intrusive feel of his own slick fingers buried in his arse.
Lady Anne Holmes' House, Prince's Gate Mews, Mayfair, London, 4 November 8:00 p.m. - 12:30 a.m., 5 November

Dinner at Lady Anne Holmes apartment in Prince's Gate Mews was never an informal affair. Mycroft handed his umbrella to Henry, the butler, and swiftly counted three strange umbrellas in the stand, one daintier than the others. Mycroft met Henry's discreet gaze.

"Who is it this time?"

Henry leaned close. "That Miss Olivia Urquhart again, sir. From Mr Carlton Davies' office," he murmured sotto voce. Lady Anne had preternaturally keen hearing.

Carlton Davies was the youngest MP ever appointed to the Security and Intelligence Committee, which reported directly to Number 10. Olivia Urquhart was Davies' Chief of Staff.

Mycroft briefly considered going right back out the door, claiming an emergency meeting. He knew well why Miss Urquhart was here tonight. But he really didn't feel like facing his empty house, and Olivia Urquhart was at least always pleasant company, unlike most of Lady Anne's circle. He allowed Henry to take his damp coat and went into the reception room to greet Mummy.

Lady Anne was tall and slim, like both of her sons, but her bone structure and clear grey eyes would reveal her anywhere as Sherlock's mother. Mycroft was more like his father, Sheridan Holmes. The Holmses did not kiss or embrace one another upon meeting, even in private.

"Good evening, Mother. Thank you for making room for me on short notice."

"Mycroft. It's lovely to see you." Her cool, formal tones did not entirely bear out her words. "And it's a wonderful coincidence that Miss Urquhart is able to be with us tonight. Her schedule is more gruelling even than yours."

The other guests were a married beta couple, the Monktons, whom Lady Anne had met on an adventure cruise to Antarctica. Mycroft surmised that a fourth dinner guest had been given a hasty excuse for breaking this evening's engagement so that Mycroft could be paired with Olivia Urquhart.

After dinner, Lady Anne led her other guests into the library for a nightcap, leaving him alone with her. He accepted a brandy and considered what was on offer.

Olivia had a keen mind, a ready wit, and was possessed of a dark, strong Scottish beauty: pale skin, abundant black hair and winglike dark brows above greenish blue eyes not very different in colour to his own. Lady Anne had once remarked upon this, seemingly in passing. It was then that Mycroft recognised that Lady Holmes had dynastic hopes there.
"I heard that you have lately been in India," Olivia said warmly. "And more recently, closer to home-- Surrey, wasn't it? I hope your trips have been successful."

Mycroft fixed her with a neutral gaze. He attributed her knowledge to her work with Mr Davies on a certain secret subcommittee of the Security and Intelligence Council. It was not exactly within bounds for her to have mentioned it publicly, even in the privacy of Lady Anne's dining room.

"It's a bit difficult to define 'success,' don't you find? It all depends upon one's perspective."

"I think it all depends on what you want to achieve," she replied.

She leaned closer into his space, and although he knew her only slightly, it felt like an unexpected intimacy.

He belatedly realised that he had hardly been out in public at all since stopping the suppressants. The unadulterated Holmes scent signature was distinctive, and notoriously seductive. He ought to back away, he ought to excuse himself and find a masking spray.

Olivia Urquhart was an unattached Omega, known in Whitehall circles to be unattainable. It didn't stop the Alphas trying, but thus far she had held firm. Mycroft respected a person of any permutation holding out for the best. He had grown up under the example of his own parents' arranged match, made for dynastic considerations. Anne and Sheridan had a passionless, sometimes bitter relationship that had disappointed them both. They had permanently separated when Sherlock was old enough for school.

The Holmses, with exceedingly rare exceptions, did not bond.

###

"Number 10 was very grateful when you agreed to take on this operation for Whiteshadow. This business up in Tatsfield, Maxim Purcell-- do you think it's contained?"

Now they were getting to it. This was the real reason Olivia Urquhart had come to dinner tonight. Number 10 had not been placated with his preliminary report. There were concerns. As well there should be.

"I hope so, for all our sakes," he said.

"I would have thought you of all people would have made certain of it," she said, fixing him with her intense greenish eyes. Her tone left it an open question whether this was meant to be a warning, or a rebuke.

He gazed back until she was forced to look away first. For all her poise, he was still an Alpha, and much, much more powerful than even she knew. Mycroft had been recruited into Whiteshadow while still a young agent with MI5 and had come very far indeed since that time.

"If anybody could have made certain of it, it would have been me," he agreed without a bit of vainglory. Simply stating the truth.

"The decoy operation-- the Sleeping Beauties case-- that was inspired. 'Hide in plain sight.' We can't have another bin Laden debacle."
"No one will put it together that the paranormal espionage program was the driving factor there. Excepting my brother, of course; one should never underestimate Sherlock. But he can be trusted not to go to the press. I promise you we won't have another bin Laden affair."

It had recently come out in the press that the Ministry of Defense had employed 'volunteer psychics' in an attempt to find Osama bin Laden to much public derision. Now the Whiteshadow Program, the highly clandestine unit established by Churchill during WWII for paranormal espionage, by policy employed legitimate operations as decoys to conceal its paranormal investigations.

###

Mycroft had been unsurprised to receive the summons to Whiteshadow's secret facility in North London upon completing his courses at Cambridge. His own father had been recruited into Whiteshadow at the age of 18.

The Holmes line was renowned in the halls of clandestine power for its strong strain of paranormal ability. Sometimes, however, those powers would not manifest without the proper trigger applied to the psyche.

"Holmes, we don't understand you," the then-director of Whiteshadow had said to him bluntly. "Your country needs your powers, just as it needs your father's."

"My powers...are not my father's."

"You haven't given us an opportunity to fully test that, Holmes. You haven't given yourself that chance."

"I made my choice long ago.". This was true. "I can serve in so many other ways."

"No one questions your talent. But no one can serve England as you can. Damn it, Holmes, one would think you were afraid to complete The Program."

Mycroft drew himself to his fullest height. He towered over the Director. "I am not afraid. Believe me when I tell you that my father....trained me very thoroughly. At home," He said. "But I'm not sure I can control it. That is the trouble."

The Director sighed, as if he had expected the answer but was deeply disappointed, anyway. He fixed Mycroft with a speculative gaze. "Ah, well. Perhaps you are right. And we always have your young brother, Sherlock."

Protective Alpha anger rose up in his chest. "Never. You aren't to touch him, is that clear? Anyway, Sherlock is a sociopath. I know you've read his file. You won't be able to draw out his powers. They are buried very deep. He is not at all introspective. And sociopaths don't experience pain. Or fear. Not like we do."

"No, not like we do." The Director was temporarily taken back to The Labyrinth, the literal maze of bottomless pain and endless terror that was the heart of The Program. It was the fastest and most reliable means of forcing complete soul projection; the dissassociation of the soul from the body.

The subject could not escape from The Labyrinth until he or she achieved soul projection, and
learned sufficient control to direct the soul to surveil the operators of the maze to discover the escape key.

###

Mycroft vividly remembered the first key he had obtained, out of body for over an hour, suffering the extremities of terror and agony inflicted by The Labyrinth in order to free the soul. He observed the numbers of the escape key, but they were disordered. It was a test, could he control himself to the extent of ordering the numbers?

He strained to hold himself still and coherent in order to assemble the numbers, order them correctly. This was done by targeted pulses of what the Eastern mystics and practitioners of the Mysteries called the subtle body, upon a specially constructed reactive plate, as measured by the Observers.

The numbers suddenly made sense and fell inevitably into place. Almost a gift-- the first and only gift he ever received in The Program.

0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8. . .

It was a Fibonacci Sequence.

He kept computing and entering the numbers, faster and faster, to escape all that pain, all that fear : 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377, 610, 987, 1597, 2584, 4181, 6765, 10946, 17711, 28657, 46368, 75025, 121393, 196418, 317811, ...

until the Labyrinth fell away and he was safe in the pure warm light of the Recovery Room.

Later, he was unable to remember how many Fibonacci numbers he had computed, and no one would tell him even though he knew perfectly well it was in his file. But it was considered a unique feat that Mycroft could use his analytical mind in that fashion while out of body.

And it had been an elegant key: the Fibonacci Sequence described the perfect spiral that a soul made when projecting out of body under the control of a conscious projector, just as it described so many other spirals in nature: a nautilus shell, DNA, galaxies.

###

The Labyrinth was endlessly programmable. No one had ever completed all of its levels. Mycroft himself had entered The Program as a Level Three projector. His father had trained him at home using rituals unique to the Holmes family, handed down generation by generation.

Although much less refined than The Labyrinth, his father's methods had involved sufficient pain and fear as to easily provoke projection in Mycroft, starting at the age of twelve.

Sherlock was now fifteen; and so far, Mycroft had been able to shield Sherlock by emphasising to
the family as well as to Whiteshadow that Sherlock was brilliant, but far too unstable to be a reliable agent.

But Sherlock's extreme brilliance had become too notorious, too tempting a prize. There was only one way.

"I've been holding back. I admit it. But promise me to leave Sherlock alone, and I'll take any level of The Labyrinth you think will strengthen my abilities."

"Your brother's abilities, forgive me for saying, seem likely to outstrip yours."

"In some things. But not in this. I've never seen the signs in him. You'll just destroy him trying to make him something he's not. And Sherlock-- he'll think it's a game, a game he can win-- until it's too late."

"Hmmmm. How far do you think you can go, Holmes?". The Director was looking greedy now. It was very hard to cross new thresholds in projection. They had never yet had an agent who could survive intact past Level Six. They both knew this.

"Level Nine," Mycroft said coolly. "But only if Sherlock is left untouched. Completely. If I find out otherwise, I'll withdraw entirely."

It was a fundamental fact that paranormal abilities could be enhanced by a variety of means, including psychic torture in The Labyrinth. But they could not be forced if the subject chose to withdraw.

"Very well," The Director said. "Good luck, Holmes." They shook hands.

Whiteshadow had greatly benefitted from Mycroft's bargain. Within a year -- a year that Mycroft assiduously suppressed from his active memory -- he had broken the barrier to Level Ten.

And Sherlock Holmes became the World's Only Consulting Detective.

###

"And Scotland Yard? They suspect nothing?"

"No. I let it be known that I had . . . personal reasons for wishing to cause Maxim Purcell to be investigated and publicly charged with murder. The officer in charge of the Sleeping Beauties case...never suspected I was conducting my own investigation of Purcell for Whiteshadow."

"After the bin Laden affair, all of our larger operations need legitimate cover. You've done well, Mycroft. Number 10 is most anxious for a briefing on what exactly you think we are faced with here. Your preliminary report says, possible soul transference."

He kept his expression impassive. He had already decided that the case was much worse than just soul transference. But he couldn't be sure. He needed to talk to Sherlock, and to John.

Even more, he needed to talk to Lestrade.

"Yes. But beyond that, you, and even Number 10, will have to wait until I have completed my analysis. It's been just a week. It is a ...difficult case."
"I have every confidence in you, Mycroft." She placed a delicate hand over his, just a moment too long. Her hand was warm, and her Omega scent superficially enticing, but no more.

Lady Anne appeared at the door.

"Here you both are! You've been dominating Olivia's time, Mycroft. It's very late, it's after midnight. I've barely had a chance to speak to her, and the Monktons have gone home. You are rarely so unsociable, Mycroft -- unlike Sherlock -- but in this case I can't say I disapprove."

She dropped down elegantly beside them and lit a cigarette.

"Now then. We're all grown-ups here. I'm getting rather too old for diplomacy. So I'll just put it to you both. I've done my part to bring the two of you together. I don't do it for my own amusement. Are you ready to do your duty? Mycroft, you've put off your responsibilities far too long. Don't bother to mention Sherlock's folly. John Watson is a fine man but he has no breeding at all. The baby will be quite amusing for us all, I'm sure. Well, probably not for Sherlock. I have no expectations there, really. But you, Mycroft, are the eldest and are our heir. I know that means a great deal to you. And Olivia, my dear, I can appreciate a woman, an omega, holding herself out for the highest offer. I did, when I was your age. Believe me when I tell you you'll never do better than my son."

"I shall have to insist you not speak of John in that way, Mummy. And it is not folly."

Lady Anne simply shook her head as though to shake away an irritating memory and ground out her cigarette, then left them alone, shutting the doors firmly behind her. Mycroft listened. He didn't put it past Mummy to lock them in until she got her way.

Mycroft's head felt light and the room seemed very hot suddenly. Mummy was, of course, quite right. He had a responsibility to the family, even to his country, to breed an omega and deliver an heir or two, so that the Holmes line, and its strain of rare power, did not fail.

Seeing Sherlock and John so deeply fulfilled by their bonding had made him hope against hope that he, too, could still find such a mate. Something more than the cold convention that bound Mummy and his father. Perhaps his lifelong indifference to omegas could be overcome. After all, John had only ever been with females, mostly betas at that, before Sherlock.

Olivia was ideal. Brilliant, ambitious, beautiful without prettiness, she could be his match in nearly every way. And they got on very well. There had even been a not-unpleasant undercurrent of flirtation there of late. They looked at each other, each imagining.

He unconsciously touched his cheekbone where, he knew, there was a visible bruise from Lestrade's fist. Was that the last touch he would ever have? He knew he wasn't ready to give him up.

And yet, duty called, and Mycroft Holmes never shirked his duty.

He placed a cool hand over Olivia's warm one.

"My dear, I wouldn't want you to think I need Mummy to plead my case. But I want you to know that in this, I happen to think she is right. Will you consider it? I would be very honoured."

Olivia regarded him gravely, looked at his large strong hand covering her small one. Inhaled delicately of his rich Alpha scent, unique to the Holmses, rarified and powerful. It spoke to her. It spoke for her.
"I think Lady Anne possesses excellent judgement in most things," she said. "In this of course I must follow my own judgement."

"No doubt," Mycroft said.

"Before I answer, I'd like to ask you for something."

"Of course. And you needn't answer at all, now."

"Will you kiss me?"

Mycroft felt his heart skip a beat. But in any alliance, he was going to have to be able to give of himself, even if only in heat. He bent down and took her in his arms, no hesitation. He kissed her as thoroughly and with as much passion as he ever gave to his Alpha male liaisons, who had never complained. To the contrary.

Which was still approximately one-tenth of what he felt when kissing Lestrade. His cock felt even less. Heat, of course, would overcome that difficulty.

But whatever it was, it was enough. Olivia melted a little into his embrace, and her mouth was warm and willing, if not eager. They smiled, satisfied. It would be a good match.

"Yes," she said.

Mycroft felt as though he had just jumped from one of his helicopters without a parachute.

###

He was about to suggest that they call Mummy back in for a celebratory drink when his mobile rang. It was not a call he could ignore.

"My dear, I have to take this. The case."

He was gratified to see that Olivia was not offended in the slightest. Her eyes sparkled a little with excitement, which was natural, Mycroft told himself with no little confidence. He could do this. His sociopathic brother had managed to do it, and he was practically heartless. Well, the case with John was entirely different. But he was going to have to let go foolish dreams of bonding. It only struck in the Holmes line once in every four generations, and Sherlock had claimed those odds for himself. He felt a shockingly deep pang when thinking about it.

In any event, it didn't matter. Whether or not he was ready to give Lestrade up, circumstances seemed determined to take him out of his grasp, anyway. Lestrade undoubtedly despised him now, and it was glaringly obvious that he had run right back into the arms of his wife. He was surprised at how much that hurt. They had never bonded. Then it made him a little angry, that Leastade should hold himself so cheap. He was worth so much more.

The call was from one of his subordinates tasked with surveillance on Baker Street.

"Sir, we've got a strange situation. I did a routine playback on the CCTV."

"Well?"
"Conrad wasn't there. He didn't report in like he should. He's not answering his mobile. But another man was there, in Baker Street. Not one of ours. I ran him, he's with Scotland Yard. DI Critchley. I didn't want to take it further without informing you. Do you have any orders, sir?"

"Yes. Find Conrad now, put as many assets on it as you need. Send me the ID on Critchley, I'll take it from here."

He opened the attachment. Critchley's Yard ID. Definitely the same man who had been with Lestrade when they burst into the library at Hantswood Hall.

His face burned remembering what had been happening at that very moment. He and Maxim. He had not fully been facing the fact that Lestrade had probably seen too much, and definitely had heard entirely too much, that night. He hadn't felt the same since.

He wondered if Lestrade could help him feel right again; the last time he had felt entirely himself had been with Lestrade, in his flat.

Just when it seemed that forces were pulling him away from Lestrade, they turned around and were sending him right back in his path. What did it mean?

Only one way to find out.

"Olivia, I've got an urgent matter that's just come up. Forgive me. Believe me, I don't want to go, not now," he lied. "But I want to have dinner with you, we have a great to discuss."

Olivia calmly stood up and kissed him on the cheek.

"Ring me when you're free, then. But not too long," she said lightly. "My calendar is looking very interesting in the next few weeks.". She left before he could comment of this direct assault.

Evidently Olivia was coming into her heat very shortly. He felt a thrill, imagining impregnating an omega, breeding an Holmes heir. He heard Olivia and Mummy's muffled voices in the library. He felt a wicked urge to project into the room, watch and listen invisibly from above. That would undoubtedly be very enlightening.

But he was eager to leave now, and couldn't spare the time either for the projection or the recovery phase, as a rule three times longer that the time out of body. He had an important call to make.

Anthea had had the foresight to send his car around to Mummy's house, and he climbed in. Taking a deep calming breath, he was about to ring Lestrade when another call came.

This time, the news was worse than before.

###

Lestrade quietly crept back to the sofa, where he sagged down with legs like rubber. His arsehole protested just at the pressure of sitting, and he hadn’t thought he’d been that rough with himself.

He wondered how long it would take to accustom his hole to something bigger, thicker. He let himself remember the weight and heat of Mycroft’s cock in his hand. Damn if his rebellious dick wasn’t getting hard all over again. He reached down to touch himself again.
That was when his mobile rang. He checked the clock. At one o’clock in the morning, there could be only one reason for the call. Yard business. Even if he was suspended.

He groped for on the floor to find his discarded jeans and fished his mobile out of the pocket.

He looked down. Blocked number. With a raised eyebrow he answered.

“This is DI -- ” he said quietly, not to rouse Janet. His voice caught in his throat, sounding so rough and husky as to be pornographic. After all, his belly was still tingling with aftershocks and his arsehold felt strangely empty. He shook it off and tried again, cleared his throat. “-- DI Lestrade.”

The soft intake of breath on the other end told him who it was before he heard the voice.

“Mycroft Holmes. I’m sorry to have caught you... at a bad time.”

I have been bad, Mycroft. Would you like to know how bad? He couldn’t help grinning at the ceiling.

“What do you want, Mycroft?” A few hours ago, he would have coated the words with acid and spat them. Now, he couldn’t help putting a little seductive twist in the word “want.” He felt euphoric, free. The past half-hour had been very illuminating. Both inside and out. He felt as if he were glowing with internal fire that could only be quenched one way.

He definitely knew what he wanted.

“Want? Ah, I’m calling about your man Critchley.”

Lestrade was seriously impaired. The blood had left his brain and was still throbbing in his groin. The name drew a blank. After a moment his brain came back online.

“He’s not mine. I mean, I took him on temporary transfer from Counter-terrorism -- just for... the operation. Wanted the best for your wire.” Now the venom did creep into his voice. Those sounds.

(“You’re trying to make me want what I asked for in Mumbai.”)

“You weren’t asking, you were begging.”)

“Did you put Critchley on surveillance at my brother’s flat?”

“What? I’m suspended, Mycroft -- you know that. I didn’t order anybody to do anything at 221b or anywhere else. I thought you were running the show.”

“I thought I was too. He was part of your team, I thought perhaps--.”

Lestrade sat up.

“-- No, not me. But the Sleeping Beauties case is huge -- a dozen victims, more if you count India. It’s a career-maker. Maybe Detective Superintendent Quinn is trying to find a way around you, Mycroft. Maybe Quinn sent Critchley to interview Sherlock and John. Or surveil them.”

“I thought that might be the case, of course. But you see, we’ve just found a panda car near Waterloo Station.”

Lestrade was already standing up, pulling his jeans on.

“Tell me,” he said, all heat draining from his body. He felt on edge, an edge that was transmitting
“There was an officer in the passenger seat. Nobody noticed for a long time that she wasn't moving. Why should anyone notice a parked panda car? We’ve pieced it together that she had picked Critchley up in Baker Street and drove to Waterloo Station.”

“And?”

“She’s in a coma. Critchley’s vanished.”

The surreal happenings in Hantswood Hall came rushing back. His usually infallible cop’s instincts told him this was part of that nightmare.

"What can I do?" His frustration at his suspension made him feel maddeningly powerless.

"I have a team searching for Critchley. Unless you know anything about where he might be?"

"Not a clue. Back to his squad, I'd've thought. But I'll help, if you want my help.". He realised he still cared about the case, still wanted to get to the bottom of what had happened to all those omegas, what had happened on All Hallows Eve.

"I do want -- your help." There was a silence, and they listened to each others' breathing. "Will you listen to me now, Greg? I need to tell you what's really going on."

His body felt cold. His feelings of doubt and mistrust resurfaced.

"It would have been better if you'd told me before.". He said, more coldly than he felt inside. He sighed. "Okay then. I'll come to you."

"Thank you. I'm at Waterloo Station now. I'll wait for you."

"Look, Mycroft-- All I can say is, I'll listen. I've listened to loads of confessions," he said, and rang off.

He decided against leaving a note for Janet. The days when he had to leave guilt-tinged messages for his wife when he was called in by the Yard at irregular times were over. In a little more than a week she would be his ex-wife; he would be free.

He had never expected that by the time he earned his freedom, he wouldn't want it anymore.

to be continued...
A Hedge of Thorns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Omega Sutra. Chapter Twenty-Six. A Hedge of Thorns

And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.
Walt Whitman, Song of Myself.

Track: BT, Smartbomb:

LISTEN TO SMARTBOMB HERE

221b, Baker Street, London. 5 November. Late morning.

After a long silence which Sherlock instinctively did not try to break, John stood up very carefully, regarding him with cold eyes. He began pacing the floor.

Sherlock instantly perceived that his limp had returned with a vengeance, and he literally bit his tongue to prevent himself remarking on it, deducing the cause. Anyway, the cause was obvious.

John’s walk was different too, and it wasn’t just the limp. This was an alert, coiled stride. His footfall was nearly silent but for the creaking of the floorboards: John was aware of the limp, then; and doing everything in his power to bring it under his control. John looked down into Baker Street and Sherlock watched the outline of his shoulders become rigid. The tension that crackled around John was wary and aggressive, like a wild animal.

John had been like this in the beginning, the first days and weeks after they met. Not so long ago, Sherlock reminded himself, it had been just six months since John Watson had walked into the lab at Barts: so quiet, so unassuming. So dangerous. It was in his eyes that Sherlock saw the danger below the surface, with a sharp, surprising thrill of covetousness. He had detected with a spike of interest the superb control that allowed John to keep his voice so steady, unthreatening and unafraid, even if he couldn’t control the limp, the tremor of his hand, the pain that radiated from his shoulder.

Slowly, John had relaxed into the environs of 221b and found an outlet for all that dangerous tension: the thrill of the chase with Sherlock Holmes, and his stupidly unworthy “dates” with females (mostly betas) when he should have seen the obvious -- that he was meant for something far, far better, and that something was Sherlock Holmes, Sociopathic Consulting Detective.
During those early days, John had built and encased himself in a protective wall that was adapted, Sherlock thought, to enable him to endure urban life generally and Sherlock Holmes specifically. After that first day, Sherlock knew without a doubt that dead bodies, murders, and even killing with his own hand were not sources of anxiety or pain for John Watson. But something was. John was tormented by nightmares whenever he fell asleep. Slowly they had loosened their grip, but they still lurked.

John displayed a wry, deadpan sense of humour, and almost never snapped at Sherlock, even when his conduct was so selfish and hurtful that even he could feel it, and he almost never felt anything. But none of this had deceived Sherlock.

Underneath the dry wit and the endless patience something terrible was hidden, something that John kept carefully locked away deep. It had something to do with Afghanistan, something to do with the scar on his chest that he had never let Sherlock examine until they were bonded, and something to do with the fact that when he thought it necessary, John could kill in the blink of an eye and smile about it.

Even now, Sherlock hadn’t discovered what it was. Despite the fact that John Watson’s intelligence, while superior, was by no means naturally inclined toward the science of deduction, he nevertheless had hair-trigger instincts when it came to what Sherlock thought of as “the fear.”

Because all the available evidence pointed to the fact that at the back of John’s carefully constructed defenses was something that he feared with a fear that was almost uncontainable, something he hadn’t been able to escape and clearly could not delete. The fact that he could contain it at all had at first been a source of puzzlement to Sherlock.

As a sociopath, fear was fundamentally unknown in his own personal experience. But Sherlock had observed ordinary people in the clutches of deep fear. They were unable to withstand it; they displayed a variety of dramatic, reflexive and generally useless responses, but none of them the still steady endurance with which John faced the fear, every day.

As he came to know John better, his puzzlement developed into something that he felt about almost nothing in this world, other than the music of a few composers of exceptional genius: admiration that bordered on awe.

All questions that circled around the edges of the problem brought forth the instantaneous protective wall that clamped down around this unnamed fear, repelling all weapons, and Sherlock had tried them all. Well, nearly all of them. He had nursed a secret hope that if he ever had the chance to be with John the way they were meant to be, this final barrier would fall away and he would finally know the truth.

Events since John had taken him for his own, binding Alpha to omega, had not favoured opening that door. Not yet. But in the midst of the horror that was all around them now, another door had unexpectedly opened.

Sherlock watched John standing at the window, vigilant and deadly, the walls of his defenses swiftly and almost visibly flying up around him. This brought forth a rare pleasant childhood memory: a fairy tale in an old volume of Perrault, in French to improve his grammar.

As a child, Sherlock had enjoyed fairy tales very much: the stories were satisfyingly full of crimes
of the most gruesome and inventive sort. As such, he had committed them to memory, and had never yet had occasion to purge them from his mind palace:

\[\ldots\text{car il crût dans un quart d'heure tout autour du parc une si grande quantité de grands arbres et de petits, de ronces et d'épines entrelacées les unes dans les autres, que bête ni homme n'y aurait pu passer.}\]

(. . . in a quarter of an hour's time there grew up all round about the park of the chateau such a vast number of trees, great and small, and hedges of brambles and thorns, all interlaced with one another, so that neither man nor beast could pass through.)

*La belle au bois dormant.*

Sleeping Beauty.

“*No secrets,*” John had said.

Time to break the spell.

###

**Waterloo Station, London, 5 November, 1:30 a.m.**

Lestrade flashed his Yard badge and was escorted behind the scenes to one of the many secret hallways of Waterloo Station, a major international railway hub. Waterloo was provided with state of the art facilities for monitoring of the comings and goings of people through the vast station, to scan for contraband and weapons of all kinds, and to detain and interrogate suspicious persons.

Lestrade opened the door to a small room with an array of video screens displaying views from what he presumed were hidden CCTV cameras. Mycroft turned from the screens when he heard the door open. Lestrade didn’t even glance at whatever it was that Mycroft had been looking at. All he wanted to see was Mycroft.

The first thing he noticed was that Mycroft had a bruise on his cheekbone, and he swallowed hard. He had made that mark. He felt a rush of Alpha dominance that he knew he should be ashamed of, but wasn’t. Even if it wasn’t the sort of mark he wanted to leave, he had still marked Mycroft for everyone to see.

The second thing he noticed was that the room was close and warm and filled with the scent of Mycroft’s unsuppressed pheromone signature, so much stronger than it had been even at Hantswood Hall. In just a week, it had become overpoweringly bewitching, and he felt it knock him back like something inside had just detonated.

The cutting remark he had been about to throw out died on his lips.

They stared at each other. Lestrade’s heart was hammering and he thought that Mycroft’s breathing looked faster than it ought to. The silence felt electric, he knew he hadn’t felt this alive since the last time he had been in Mycroft’s arms. Even if he did have the muzzle of a gun at the back of his head.
Finally Mycroft broke the silence.

“Thank you for coming,” he said formally. “I’m looking for Critchley, and so far I’m not finding him. But before I tell you what I think he’s done, I’ll tell you why I think I can’t find him.”

“No,” Lestrade cut him off, scowling. “First, tell me about the officer in the panda car. Who was she? Where is she, is she going to be all right? I tried to find out, nobody will tell me anything except that it’s “classified” and that I’m on suspension so I should just piss off.”

Mycroft mentally kicked himself. Of course Lestrade’s first concern would be for his fellow officer. If Lestrade didn’t despise him already, he would now, thinking him heartless. Like Sherlock.

“It was a constable, an Elizabeth Stirling. Only a year on the force. She had been dating Critchley, apparently. She did not work with Critchley in Counter-Terrorism, of course. She was with Victim Support Services.”

“Was? Is she dead?”

“No. But she has not recovered from her coma, and the doctors don’t seem to think her condition is likely to change. She is stable, not degrading, not improving.”

“What happened to her? Did Critchley attack her? Was she drugged?”

“No drugs, she is perfectly clean and very healthy, other than her condition. There was not a mark on her. But yes, to answer your question, I do think Critchley attacked her.”

“What do you mean? An attack that put her in a coma and left no mark? Even suffocation with a cloth or pillow leaves signs -- she would have fought back, there would be skin under her nails, hemorrhage in the eyes.”

“None of that. What I am about to tell you is classified, and after you leave this room, you cannot repeat any of it.”

Lestrade glowered. “I’m no traitor. If it’s classified, my lips are sealed. Go on.”

“Elizabeth Stirling was the victim of a psychic attack. By Critchley. It put her in a coma. Something must have interrupted him, or she probably would be dead.”

Lestrade leaned back against the wall, away from Mycroft. The heady Alpha scent was making it hard to think. Why couldn’t he wear a masking spray, for god’s sake?

“A psychic attack. Now that I’ve not heard of. What do you mean?”

“I mean, Critchley attacked her by psychic means. I don’t mean psychic in the sense of a person telling the future, or second-sight, any of that. I mean, an attack upon her psyche. What makes up her consciousness, her spirit was . . . stolen from her. You could say her soul was taken.”

###

Sherlock remained very still so as not to disturb whatever mental state was gripping John now. He watched him was going to his desk drawer. Obviously to retrieve his gun -- stashed away just a
few hours ago upon their return to 221b. He watched John take it into his hand, heard him swear softly and Sherlock knew that it was because he felt he didn’t have enough ammunition. Whatever enough was.

John checked it over quickly and resumed pacing, this time with the gun gripped in his hand.

“I’m not sitting here in 221b like a -- a target -- waiting for this -- thing-- to come after me. Who knows if this thing - this psychic vampire -- keeps its bargains? It wanted you first, why would it stop with me? We need to find it. Now. Right now.”

John’s face was composed. His voice was soft and steady. No inflection. His eyes flickered with the fear, something in this was bringing it up, up to the surface, how could it not?

How could anybody not fear losing their soul?

“John,” he said carefully, “we will find a way. I know you won’t let anything happen to me again. And I won’t let anything happen to you. We’re going to find out how this thing, this soul vampire, if you will -- how it was made, how it works, and what it takes to stop it.”

“Stop it?” John said in that affectless voice. “No, Sherlock. That is not what we are going to do. We are going to find it, and we are going to kill it. I don’t care how it was made. If it can’t be killed, we are going to send it back to where it came from.”

Sherlock was relieved that John was saying “we,” and then experienced a moment of intense guilt when he realised what he had done to John, going after Maxim alone.

“But we have to know how it works, how it was made, to know how to find it and how to destroy it,” Sherlock said calmly. Surely John could understand this. His methods in this would be no different than any other case. They had never failed him yet.

“You don’t have any idea at all how to do this, do you?” John asked bluntly. “No more than I do.”

Sherlock wanted to disagree with that, he always had ideas, but only if he had data to back them up. Here, he didn’t. At least, what he knew didn’t seem to lead to any sort of hypothesis. “My first idea had been to consult with Dr Jesperson. He did win a Nobel Prize, you know.” he said. He himself put no store on such arbitrary awards, but he thought John might. However, John didn’t appear to be in the best frame of mind to discuss Jesperson’s curriculum vitae.

John was shaking his head. “Too long. I’m not waiting twelve hours or more to take the train, then the bloody ferry, to the Channel Islands to start getting a grip on this thing. Who knows if Jesperson can help at all? We start now. Get your coat on, come with me.” he commanded brusquely. Sherlock stood up warily.

“No, ” John ordered firmly when he saw that Sherlock was distracted by trying to deduce John’s intentions. John ignored him and was shrugging his coat on. He thrust his gun in his waistband. Then he went to the closet and rummaged in his old army duffle.

###

Sherlock watched John rummaging. What was John looking for in his duffle? He tried to remember his inventory of the contents of the duffle, but other than ammunition, and John’s tags
which he had instantly purloined and still didn’t know if John knew or not, the contents were boring and useless and therefore, unmemorable.

John withdrew three dull metallic objects. One he thrust in the pocket of his jeans. He stepped in close to Sherlock, and very seriously put a chain about his neck. Sherlock looked down.

It was a plain silver cross.

John put an identical one around his own neck.

“John, I said it’s not that kind of vampire,” Sherlock said, fingering the cold metal. He wanted to ask why John had these crosses, when he had never seen John wear one.

When Sherlock first made a quick, furtive search of the contents of John's duffle -- just 12 hours after John had moved his pitifully scant belongings from his temporary housing unit to 221b -- he had seen the silver crosses in the bottom of the bag. He had theorised they were property of other soldiers; perhaps John had promised to return them to their grieving families. They were promptly forgotten the moment he discovered John's tags.

Once he saw the tags, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about them. It made him feel the tingling sort of thrill that he experienced rarely-- when something was secret, or forbidden. Within four days after that, he snuck back into John's room, opened the duffle and pilfered the tags. Thinking about them now made him wish that he was wearing them instead of this strange cross.

John frowned slightly. “You don’t know that. The one thing I do know is that this thing, this vampire, whatever it is -- it agreed to take my soul in exchange for yours. Now that sounds like this thing operates under some kind of rules, even if we don’t know what they are. It made a bargain with me. We have a contract, apparently. If it can hear us right now, I figure it knows I don’t intend to keep up my end of the bargain. Since nothing bad is happening at the moment, I am assuming it can’t hear us right now.”

Sherlock tried not to gape at this display of what he had to admit was faultless logic.

“So, wear this for me. Just do it,” John said. “Now let’s go.”

Sherlock nodded, eyes wide. “Wait,” he said and went to his bedroom.

###

Lestrade let out a brief hard laugh of disbelief. But he saw the Mycroft was serious. Deadly serious.

“All right. . .” he said, not even trying to get his mind wrapped around the concept. “A psychic attack. ‘Classified.’ So I guess this is what you haven’t been telling me. Am I right?”

Mycroft nodded. “You are a very good detective, Lestrade. Probably the best in London, excepting my brother.”

“All I needed was a little evidence. Real evidence, not lies.”
“I’m sorry. What I said before, about it being classified, it is. Highly. But... I have no choice
but to put you in the picture now. You were present at the scene at Hantswood Hall. You shot
Maxim Purcell. Critchley was on your team; he was from Counter-Terrorism. By the way, that’s
how he’s evading CCTV. He’s got an experimental jammer. Camera simply can’t see him. It
renders pixels around him, fills in the space as it should look if he weren’t there. In holographic
dimension. We are looking into how he accessed this device -- even in Counter-Terrorism, his
clearance isn’t that high. As for the case itself -- you saw and heard things that night that you don’t
understand, isn’t that true, Greg?”

Mycroft looked at Greg with his best poker face. Which was very good indeed. He was betting that
Greg had seen and heard quite a lot. That was the problem, really.

“ You could say I saw and heard things I’ll never forget,” Lestrade said pointedly, confirming his
suspicion. "I’m not answering the questions here, Holmes. I thought this was supposed to be some
sort of confession. Wait -- you have no choice but to put me in the picture? I thought you were
telling me because -- are you telling me you brought me down here because I’m a bloody witness?
Because you still need me to make that statement? Somebody higher up ordered you to get me
down here, is that it? Need to file your report?”

A flash of Alpha fury hit him, and he liked the feeling of it burning through his veins. He took a
step into Mycroft’s space, then another.

“And somebody higher up ordered you to bring me to Mumbai, too, isn’t that right? Isn’t that what
you’re going to tell me -- the whole thing: this case, you and me -- it was all just a setup?”

This close, he could smell every note on Mycroft’s skin. His tie was loose and his collar
unbuttoned after what looked to have been a long day. His hair was a little mussed and his hands
wanted to -- something wasn’t right. Mycroft’s scent was making him drunk with aggression and
need. Omegas experienced fight-or-flight reflexes when threatened or cornered. With Alphas, it
was fight-or-fuck.

There was a low, elegant Omega scent, seeming to be wafting from the front of his suit jacket.
Female Omega.

Ripe Omega, coming on to her heat soon.

Lestrade bared his teeth. “You aren’t as torn up about all this as you’d like me to think, so you can
drop the act. You’ve been busy since I saw you last. I can smell her on you. Your Omega. . . Or
are you playing a game with her too -- if so, I pity her. How many can you juggle - me, Maxim
Purcell, this Omega bitch that I can smell all over you?”

###

Mycroft coloured. Lestrade saw that he was starting to lose his temper too, and this made him
glad. About time something got to the manipulative, smooth bastard, he thought.

Mycroft reached out and fingered the cuff of Lestrade’s shirt, which took some effort because he
had to tug under his coat sleeve to get to it and then, his fingers had to brush the back of his hand.
Mycroft dragged his hand up by the cuff and took a deep inhale.
“I’m not the only one whose been amusing himself with an Omega, Lestrade. I can smell her, right here on your sleeve. Before you washed your hands, you were touching her, your sleeve against her skin. You’ve been busy too. Would you like me to tell you who she was?”

Lestrade flashed on pushing Janet into the bedroom, into the bed, taking off her boots. He hadn’t changed his clothes. Ran right out of the flat when Mycroft called for him. No doubt her scent was still on his shirt. He was somewhat desensitised to it.

But the fact that Mycroft obviously knew it was Janet infuriated him that much more. He closed the distance, pushed his hand against Mycroft’s shoulder, hard. A definite Alpha move.

“You’re spying on me too, then? At my flat? And how long has that been going on? Before, or after Mumbai? Don’t you lie to me.”

Mycroft backed up, but not in fear or intimidation. It felt like an invitation for Lestrade to follow with a move of his own. And so he did.

Lestrade leaned one elbow against the wall beside Mycroft’s shoulder, effectively pinning him next to the long table against the wall. Mycroft looked at his arm, looked into his face, raised a cynical eyebrow, cool and composed as ever. Except for the flush in his face and the pulse in his neck. Lestrade was too good a detective not to see the signs, even if he hadn’t seen them this close and closer, in Mumbai.

“Before,” Mycroft said arrogantly.

“Bloody fucking hell, what gives you the right? I suppose you were ordered to spy on me, then? What’s this all about -- why the hell does MI5 give a damn about an overworked homicide detective?”

“It doesn’t. But I do.”

That stopped Lestrade in his tracks.

“It’s true. I had my own agenda for the Sleeping Beauties case. Specifically for Maxim.” Here Lestrade nearly snarled, and Mycroft moved his leg subtly so that their thighs touched, then interlaced his foot so that their legs were effectively locked.

“I’m prepared to tell you about it now. That’s why I brought you here. But I could have brought any detective to Mumbai, really. Anyone at all. I chose you. And yes, I’d had my eye on you from before. A long time before.”

Lestrade pushed back with one leg, he was nearly between Mycroft’s long legs now. Mycroft slid down a fraction, maybe unconsciously, to allow their hips to meet. Lestrade wasn’t ready for that yet, though, and he deliberately held himself back so that he didn’t just grind into him. His Alpha brain, rapidly losing all function, was screaming at him to do it already.

“Yeah? And why is that?” They were so close their breaths mingled, and their Alpha scents were almost toxic in density. In minute he wouldn’t be able to think at all, let alone breathe.

“Do you really need to ask?” Mycroft said, low and rough.

Lestrade smiled wickedly. “Maybe not. I think I’m getting the picture. But I still want to hear you say it. So yeah. Why were you watching me all that time?”

He put his free hand on the other side of Mycroft’s shoulder, and now Mycroft was entirely
pinned, he’d have to break through to get free. The Omega notes between them buzzed and made him itch. He was going to make sure that Mycroft Holmes didn’t smell like anything but him, for days and days and days.

“Because I wanted to.”

“And?” Lestrade gave slight nudge of his hips against Mycroft’s own narrow hips, just enough to encourage him in the direction he wanted things to go.

“Because -- I wanted you,” he said, and then there was no distance between them at all.

#
#
#

In the back of one of Sherlock’s drawers was a folded stack of handkerchiefs. Inside were John’s tags.

He had folded the tags inside one of the handkerchiefs at the bottom of the stack because he knew that even if John ever rummaged in his drawers, which he knew John wouldn’t do unless he was ill or injured and John wanted to bring him clean clothes, John wouldn’t look twice at starched linen handkerchiefs embroidered “SH”, a gift from his mother.

He put the tags around his neck and looked in the mirror on the back of the door. They looked perfect, he had known that they would. He put the cross under his shirt.

The weight of the tags, slight but noticeable, felt good. The black rubber silencers he wanted to get rid of; he wanted to hear the sound of the tags rubbing together, a constant reminder of John. But John had needed these little strips of rubber at a time when he had sometimes been in grave danger, when the least noise could mean death. He kept them on.

He came back out and let John take in the view. A slight smile curled the edges of his lips, not much; but it was enough. Inside, Sherlock felt a flicker of warmth. He had made John happy, he had pleased John, if only for a moment. He catalogued this feeling. He wanted John to feel like this pretty much all the time.

“I wondered what had happened to them. I couldn’t figure it out. How long have you had my tags?”

Sherlock almost thought he would lie. But that would be worse than keeping a secret, and so he sighed, closed his eyes, and said:

“Five months, twelve days, five hours, thirty-two minutes.”

Astonished silence. John looked gobsmacked. “Wait -- that’s five days after I moved into 221b, Sherlock.” His face softened just a little, the smile got a little warmer. Sherlock was glad he hadn’t lied.

“That’s right. Look how much time we’ve wasted, John.” He moved toward John, he wanted to hold him and make the barrier part for him. He wasn’t letting John go back to what he was before. He wasn’t letting Maxim, this thing, take that from him, or from John.

John held out a hand to stop him, firm fingertips against his chest.
“Wait - Sherlock. Where is the cross? I gave it to you for a bloody reason. You can’t just substitute my tags because you feel like it.”

Sherlock gave a derisive snort. “Why not? If the idea is for me to be protected --”

“You and the baby,” John said in a warning tone.

“--for me and the baby to be protected, your tags make me feel much safer. After all, they came with you all the way back from -- the war.”

The flat dangerous look came back and the invisible wall of thorns got thicker. He had known that it would, but there was no way to get through the wall without sustained attack. Attacks that did not hurt, but wore away resistance. That is what he thought he ought to do, anyway. He still was not terribly competent at knowing when a thing that he said or did hurt John, but bonding had helped. John felt a pain now, not physical but in his spirit. Sherlock could feel it too, even with his eyes closed so that he couldn’t see John’s face closing up.

“Those aren’t my original tags. They gave me those in hospital. When they thought--” his quiet voice trailed off and whatever fact he had been about to reveal was reeled back inside and locked away again.

Sherlock was instantly fascinated. He had made an assumption. Wrong, wrong, wrong. What had happened to John’s other tags, his real tags? He had lost them. . .maybe given them away? He growled a little at that, imagining some omega field nurse wearing John’s tags-- and nothing else. And he had noticed that the tags were too unmarked, too new-looking, of course he had. He had theorised that John had simply taken especially good care of them, maybe worried that he would lose them, and nobody would never know what happened to him if he died out there. Now he wished he had just asked John before. This was unbearable, suddenly everything was unbearable.

He ignored the thorns and put his arms carefully around John, who felt stiff and strong and smelled like pure Alpha. John just as carefully put his arms around Sherlock. He inhaled, let himself experience the deep security of this, John embracing him, John and him together.

“The cross is under my shirt. Next to my skin,” he said. “I’m putting your tags there too. I just... wanted to see how they looked. All this time, I never put them on. I knew couldn’t bear to take them off again, if I did. And so I waited until I could.”

John’s arms tightened around him, lips on his neck.

It was then he realised that he really was starting to lose his ability to think clearly. There was something else he needed to know.

He snaked his long fingers into John’s jeans pocket and felt around. John gave a small, surprised noise between protest and desire.

Sherlock’s fingers closed around the dull metal object, felt worn irregular edges, a circle with a hole.

“A key,” he breathed into John’s ear. “What is it to, John?”

# # #
John took Sherlock’s hand and dragged him to the door, and pushed Sherlock’s coat into his arms and waited for Sherlock to bundle himself well in coat and scarf.

“You said you always like to go to the highest source for any data. I think I know where to start looking,” John said, seeming more at ease now that they were on the move; taking action. But when he started down the stair, Sherlock could easily see that his posture was taut and guarded.

“All right, John. Do you want me to deduce it? Hand me the key.”

John handed over the key. “Don’t lose it. I can’t get another.”

Sherlock stopped at the foot of the stair. “You want to consult something, or someone, you think will give us data about this -- thing. If it’s a person you could just ring them up, you wouldn’t need a key. So, not a person. Something else. You said, it operates by rules. Where would one find rules pertaining to . . . the undead. To vampires, even soul vampires.”

He remembered the contents of the old volume, *Malleus Maleficarum*, ‘The Witches Hammer,’ that he had read all those years ago. That volume had been lent to him by a grateful antiquarian in recompense for solving a string of murders in the rare book community. ‘The Witches Hammer’ set forth rules for finding, punishing, and destroying witches.

Rules.

“It’s a key to a library. Or, a room in a library. You want to consult some books. Something . . . that you know can’t be found online, everything is online now. And therefore it must be something rare, something kept away from the public.”

John nodded, clearly enjoying watching his bonded mate deduce like lightning.

He had been unwilling, or unable to acknowledge other feelings for Sherlock for far too long, but from the very first John had openly showered him with unaffected admiration for his brilliant deductions, encouraging him to show off outrageously just to get that little spike of approval, even affection, that came when John praised the workings of his keen mind.

“That was amazing,” John said. “You’re right. It is a library. Well, a room in a library. And I’m not supposed to even have a key. Especially not this room.”

Sherlock’s face lit up.

“How fast can we get there?”

###

“If you’ve been spying on my flat, you know what really happened there tonight -- ” Lestrade said, allowing his lips to finally brush against Mycroft’s long elegant throat, temptingly exposed with his collar pulled open. As if he had been waiting for Lestrade to put his mouth there. He intended to oblige.

“-- and I hope you enjoyed the show.” He was filled with a hot wave thinking of it and there was no holding back, he let his hips go right where they wanted to go, grinding so hard, harder than he had in Mumbai, their cocks so hard it hurt.
Mycroft hesitated a fraction of a moment before pushing back just as hard, and now his long thigh
was thrust perfectly between Lestrade’s own, bloody fantastic pressure against his balls. Lestrade
clamped his teeth down on his collarbone and bit hard, harder than he had ever bitten Janet, or
anyone. Harder than he had bitten Mycroft in Mumbai.

It was time to get everything crystal clear.

“It’s not like that -- I’d never watch you with some Omega. I’m not into self-torture,” Mycroft
growled, writhing a little under his mouth, but not crying out. Lestrade smiled against his skin."I
wasn't spying, not like that."

“Never, I'll never do that, not now, don't you get it? I never want to see you with some Omega
either. I don’t want to see you with anyone. Not anyone, not ever, do you understand?”

He reapplied his mouth and teeth to the same bite, feeling the skin getting hotter under his lips. He
sucked hard. Now Mycroft groaned. Lestrade smiled with triumph, thrust his hands into Mycroft’s
hair, twisted hard, forced his mouth down and took it, teeth scraping, tongues tangling, moaning
into each other’s mouths as though they were in pain. Mycroft brought his hand behind Lestrade’s
head and crushed him in harder, taking the kiss deeper. Perfect.

Lestrade finally was forced to come up for air. Mycroft scent was like a drug, he was floating on
it, high and weightless. He needed to get back down to earth.

“We need to get out of here,” Lestrade panted. “Or it’s going down right here and now.”

Mycroft mumbled something in return but Lestrade was kissing him again, running his hands up
and down his lean body, obliterating whatever thought had been forming. All he could smell, all
he could feel, all he could think about was Lestrade.

Finally Lestrade loosened his grip a bit. “Mycroft. It’s three in the morning. Whatever is going on
with this case, everything you say you need to tell me -- it can wait a few hours. You told me that,
once. Come on, come with me, and then you can tell me everything,” he pressed in with his hips
again, his cock twitching and definitely ready for more despite his spectacular orgasm of just a few
hours ago.

He looked into Mycroft’s eyes, their blue-green depths gorgeously dark, pupils wide with arousal
and shining with lust. But behind the passion, something was held back.

“Don’t worry about Janet, it’s not what you think,” Lestrade said, guessing that was it. “We can’t
go to Creechurch Lane, she’s still asleep. Let’s go, let’s go to your place. Come on. Don’t worry
-- all I did was put her to bed. I never got into it with her. And I never will, not again. It’s over and
done. Even if it wasn’t before, it would have been. Now there’s only you.”

He pulled Mycroft in tight, rubbing his entire body up and down the length of him, the beginning
of scent markings that would only be finished when they were naked, skin to skin. His dick
throbbed. He might just come right here in his jeans, he was so wound up with whatever it was
that Mycroft Holmes did to his head and yes, his heart. Not to mention his cock.

He looked up at Mycroft again, expecting to see a desire that matched his own. Instead, there was
that hesitant flicker there. It was doubt; uncertainty. Something there was making him hold back.
Suddenly it felt as if there was a wall between them, coming out of nowhere, and a thorny one at
that.

Lestrade felt a sudden shock as if someone had dumped a pail of cold water down his back. He
stiffened and backed away.

“What, what is it? Don’t you want me? I thought you said --”

“I do, I do want you, Greg. You don’t know how much, or how long. I was in Creechurch Lane tonight, I was coming up to your flat. To try to show you. To try to explain. But then I saw Janet go up. I thought you’d gone back to her.”

Lestrade grinned happily. “You were there? You should have come anyway, I’d have sent her home in a heartbeat. Don’t you get it?” He was about to dive in for another kiss. Mycroft stopped him with a hand to his chest, hand feeling that heartbeat, so strong and fast.

“So what’s the problem? Let’s get to it.” His blood was up, it was going to boil over. In about twenty seconds, Mycroft Holmes was going to be bent over this desk and he didn’t give a fuck if any of these cameras went both ways.

“The problem is that something has happened. Since I left Creechurch Lane. Something important.”

Lestrade froze. “Tell me,” he said. He already knew it was bad, just from the tension and even anguish in Mycroft’s voice.

“I’m getting married,” he said.

_to be continued. . ._

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to all my lovely readers who are keeping me company along the way on the journey of the Omega Sutra, and especial thanks to those who keep encouraging The Omega Sutra with sustaining comments and kudos to support my muse and keep this story alive. Much gratitude from your writer, Sherlock fandom is the best.

G xxx
Shaken

The Omega Sutra, Chapter 27: Shaken

A storm rocks a ship on a sea
The wind shakes the leaves on a tree
And I'm a nervous wreck and I'm all shook up
And that's what you are doing to me right now

And I'm jumpin'
That's right, you got me shakin'

Jack White, I'm Shakin': [LISTEN TO I'M SHAKIN']

Waterloo Station, London, 5 November, 2:00 a.m.


Lestrade didn’t move a muscle, keeping Mycroft pinned to the wall with hands on either side of his shoulders. Not touching, not releasing him either. Just breathing hard. The tension in his right shoulder telegraphed that he was holding back another punch. Lestrade closed his eyes for a moment and hung his head.

Mycroft hated this silence. He took a deep breath and held back all the things he would have said to break it. Lestrade would leave him now, or not.

After what seemed like an hour but probably was only a few moments, Lestrade looked back up. In his eyes, determination had won out. Dominance, too. Mycroft stared right back; he definitely wasn't going to beg for understanding, or even forgiveness. He had pride.

"'Getting married?' The hell you are," Lestrade growled. It sounded like a curse.

Possessory pheromones enveloped him and Mycroft knew that if he were an Omega, he would instantly drop to his knees. Maybe to prevent himself from doing just that, he reached up and gripped Lestrade by the wrists, hard, unsure if he wanted to push Lestrade away or drag him closer.

"It's true."

Lestrade just shook his head, leisurely examined his face, his posture. A smirk appeared at the corner of his mouth as he slowly pressed back in, this time so teasingly as to barely be a touch at all, leaving him with only the feel of body heat between them. He wondered if Lestrade were trying to humiliate him, as he must have felt. Mycroft held himself still, not wanting to betray himself further.
“Seems there's more to this confession of yours than I thought,” Lestrade said, his mouth dangerously close to Mycroft's own, his warm breath on his face. "A lot more." His voice was gruff and he still sounded angry but Mycroft was starting to wonder if this was a tactic. The police had a variety of tactics to wring confessions from criminals.

# # #

Mycroft had a speech planned out, one that he had been sure would ruin things with Lestrade-- but would at least allow him to retain some measure of respect for having put an end to the charade, letting him know where things really stood.

“You deserve to know the truth,” he replied. The Alpha in him that was growling inside to take what it wanted was commanding him to turn Lestrade around and pin him against the wall, but he didn't have the right.

Lestrade laughed softly and he dipped closer to rub the side of his face lightly, so lightly, against Mycroft’s own, the merest prickling of stubble against his cheek. Scent marking. Still holding his body back away from Mycroft's, not giving him the satisfaction feeling him lose control. The thrill shot from the roughness against his skin straight to his cock.

“You’ve hit the main points. And I already know the truth. Since I walked in this room your pheromones have gone into overdrive. I know it, and you know it.”

He brought his lips to Mycroft's own, not crushing in with a demanding kiss but just breathing, open-mouthed to take in the magnificent scents, lips barely touching; almost not a kiss at all, feeling the warmth of each other’s mouths, waiting. Neither would give in to the other. They stood together like this for long moments in a tumultuous Alpha cloud that was pushing them to tear into each other, or tear each other apart.

Finally Lestrade reached back and pulled the door open. Fresh cool air broke through the cloud of pheromones.

"Let's go," he said, pulling Mycroft by the arm.

“Where?”

“Your house. Come on, now,” Lestrade said aggressively, gentleness abruptly gone. “I mean, NOW.”

They fairly flew down the dark secret corridors of Waterloo. In the elevator, they couldn't hold back, and pressed wildly together, taking deep inhales of each other’s scents, musky, rich and strong together, relishing the heat of their bodies locked together. When the elevator door opened -- too soon -- they were both shaking. Mycroft started to speak, but a hard look from Lestrade made him think the better of it. It felt too good to do anything that might stop this now.

So much for speeches.

Mycroft’s car was waiting. Mycroft beckoned his driver with the slightest nod of his head.

“Not that,” Lestrade said vehemently.
“Problem?”

Lestrade grinned wolfishly and waved down a beta taxi. “You of all people should understand. Territorial psychology. Police 101. A beta taxi’s neutral territory,” he said. “I’m not letting you try to turn the tables in that obnoxious car of yours. It’s like part of your armour -- I’ve noticed that.”

“So you’ve been watching me, too,” Mycroft said, feeling a thrilling shiver inside, just imagining it.

“Not close enough, obviously.” Lestrade said.

They climbed into the cab and dragged the curtain closed.

###

Mycroft barely had time to say, “37 Chester Square,” before Lestrade’s hands were on him, pushing him down. He could push back, but it was too late.

Lestrade was crouching over him, one hand reaching for the side of his face, the other pinning him against the seat cushions. His cock gave a painful throb but he wasn’t going to try thrusting up against him, like in the elevator. He could stay in control.

Instead of kissing him, Lestrade looked him in the eye with a stern, implacable glare.

Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade of Scotland Yard was going to cross-examine the suspect, Mycroft Holmes.

**Crimes:** Deception, Deviousness, Double-dealing.

**Motives:** Duty. Desperation. Dysfunction.

“What is it?”

“You don’t know her. Someone in government.”

“Do you love her?”

“No.”

“Does she love you?”

“I very much doubt it. No.”

Mycroft couldn’t decide if Lestrade looked relieved, or disappointed in him. When he was in full cop mode, Lestrade’s poker face was possibly even better than his own, which was saying a lot. He felt as if he were pinned not by Lestrade’s strong hands, but by his stare.

Lestrade leaned in a little closer. Looking for lies.

“Have you . . . had a heat together? Or are you going to --”

“-- Not yet. But I will.”
Now those words were truly, spectacularly arrogant, he knew that, and would have swallowed his own tongue rather than to have said them. But he wasn't going to lie to Lestrade anymore, not even about this.

Lestrade just smiled, the smile of an Alpha who has secured his prey. His hand rubbed Mycroft's cheek where he had roughed it with his own. It felt tender and possessive all at once. He ran his thumb over his lips, teasing but not pressing in, and Mycroft wanted to bite, to lick it, to suck it hard. He held himself still as he wondered how, exactly, he had gotten himself into this position.

"But I will," Lestrade said, full of his own brand of arrogance. "Look at you. You can barely keep your hands off me, and you haven't even bothered to take her yet. In an hour I'm going to ask you that question again and you'd best believe you won't be giving me the same answer."

###

**Mycroft's House, 37 Chester Square, Belgravia, London. 5 November, 3:00 a.m.**

Inside Mycroft's townhouse in Chester Square, all was dark and silent. But their first few steps into the hall brought a light from above.

"It's all right, Chance. I've a guest," Mycroft announced, voice under superb control despite the massive erection in his trousers. "Don't bother coming down. We'll take care of ourselves."

"Yes we will," Lestrade muttered, plucking at Mycroft's sleeve. "Right now."

"It's very early, sir. Are you sure I can't make your tea? Something stronger?"
Lestrade scowled threateningly.

"Nothing, Chance. Please go back up, I'll call if I need you."

"Sir." Footsteps retreated, a door high above closed.

"You should have warned me, but I should have guessed," Lestrade was grinning a little, with an almost bloodthirsty glint in his eye. "Where can we go that Jeeves up there won't hear? Not that I care."

Mycroft led him down the hall, jewel-toned Persian rugs and polished mahogany everywhere, opened a door and switched on the light. Lestrade gave it the homicide cop's once-over: a compact library, books lining the walls to the ceiling, dark-shaded lamps giving warm, intimate light. Long velvet draperies covered the tall window. There were armchairs by a fireplace, a vast leather sofa with worn pillows stacked at one end, and a desk with neat piles of books and papers. Not a room for show. Mycroft used this room often, Lestrade judged; it smelled wonderfully of him although it was spotlessly clean. It looked dignified, elegant and very expensive. Like its owner, Lestrade thought.

He held himself back from dragging Mycroft to the sofa, where he urgently wanted to go. He briefly thought of Mycroft's painful announcement, then decided he would simply push any thoughts of Mycroft's new Omega away. He wasn't going to hold back if Mycroft wasn't. He was already halfway to stopping the idea of this marriage altogether, he could tell.

Mycroft had his back turned, building a fire with actual wood, which made him smile a little: the room was perfectly warm and comfortable although the November air outside was frigid. Mycroft wanted the fire for comfort, or to cover whatever his feelings were. It didn't feel like a seduction ploy.

Seduction. The word bounced around his pheromone-saturated brain, evoking memories of tuxedoes in Mumbai, plush hotel robes and crisp hotel sheets. The problem, he decided, was he had let Mycroft take the lead in Mumbai, not understanding the rules of the game.

Now they were in London, and Lestrade had every intention of playing by his own rules this time.

To be continued...
The Omega Sutra, Chapter Twenty-Eight. Waterloo.

Track: Rapture, Nadia Ali/Armin van Buuren remix LISTEN TO RAPTURE

Mycroft's House, 37 Chester Square, 5 November 3:00 a.m.

When the fire was burning strong, throwing sharp crackling sounds into the quiet between them, Mycroft turned around.

"I didn't want to go up, anyway. This is my favourite room in the house." Lestrade thought he could have watched him a long time, outlined in the firelight that brought out the ruddy tints in his colouring, but his body was surging with hot electric impulses demanding relief. Time to enjoy the view from a much closer vantage.

Lestrade took his hand and pulled Mycroft to the sofa, pushing him down as he had in the taxi, legs astride his narrow hips, crouching over him possessively. If Mycroft were an Omega he would be parting his legs for him, inviting him in. Lestrade felt a deep carnal twinge, remembering his own fingers, deep inside. Not deep enough.

"It's already my favourite room," he said, hooking his fingers under Mycroft's loose tie, pulling it open. He had his eye on that flawless throat that needed his mark. His hands shook as he unbuttoned Mycroft's shirt, deciding at the last minute against just tearing it off of him. Now that they were here, all alone, he wanted to savour this. Mycroft surprised him by parting his legs, which had the effect of pushing his own legs even farther apart, pulling his too-tight trousers painfully against his swelling cock.

Mycroft reached up and began carefully unbuttoning Lestrade’s shirt with those long fingers and large hands that Lestrade knew the feel of, but still had the the thrill of the new. He was in a perfect position to ravish Mycroft's mouth and throat with kisses, but he didn't want to lose control and he wasn't entirely sure Mycroft wanted that. Not yet.

He hesitated, so many conflicting urges, then pushed his hand under Mycroft's undershirt, over his bare skin, feeling his heart jumping in his chest. He ran his palm over Mycroft's nipple, drawing out a soft gasp of surprise. Another area Alphas were not supposed to want touched, but he remembered that Mycroft's were surprisingly sensitive. He let his palm just brush there, small circles. Mycroft's entire body shook, but he took a deep breath, closed his eyes and became still. He promised himself then that very soon, he would lick and bite each one for a long time, feeling them harden under his tongue, listening to Mycroft finally cry out. He was overcome with a vision of slowly exploring Mycroft's body, all of it, with his mouth, his tongue, his hands, his cock, before the fire. More even than in Mumbai.

But in this moment his control didn't extend that far. His cock, rebelling against his trousers, was
begging to be touched. To distract himself, he leaned in and took a deep kiss that he intended to be slow and leisurely, but it quickly turned to hard and deep as Alpha fire raced through his veins, flickering at his cock. Mycroft reached a hand up behind his neck to pull him in harder. They were moaning softly into each others' mouths now, until they broke to pant and nip at each other's skin.

Mycroft was trying to push him away. This was very wrong. He growled possessively and bit harder. He wasn't letting Mycroft get away from him now. Probably ever.

"Don't you understand what I said at Waterloo?" Mycroft said harshly, looking both passionate and deeply miserable in the firelight.

Lestrade decided he would make it his job to drive away the things that made Mycroft Holmes miserable, starting with the surest way he knew. To answer this question, he finally allowed his hips and swollen cock to brush against Mycroft's, giving a single eloquent thrust.

"I understand that you have a top-secret government mission that you've been keeping from me. I'm guessing I'll have to come to terms with that, so it's not a problem," he retorted, fixing him with a determined Alpha stare. "I understand you think you're getting married. That's not going to happen, I thought I made that clear. So, that's not a problem. The only thing you said at Waterloo that I care about is the part where you told me you'd been watching me for a long time-- and why. That's definitely not a problem. That's why I'm here."

He slid down the sofa and quickly cast off his own shirt, unzipped his trousers with a gasp of relief, wriggled out of trousers and briefs, socks and shoes in record time.

Mycroft looked ready to argue but what he might have said was stopped in his throat by the mesmerising sight of Lestrade, entirely naked before him. "Oh, perfect," he said instead, the aristocratic voice he would use, Lestrade imagined, when examining an object d'art that he had determined to acquire.

"So watch, then. I know you've been off your suppressants . . . so you won't tell me to stop."

"Stop what?"

Lestrade unzipped Mycroft's flies, yanked down his briefs around his hips, admiring the greedy erectness of Mycroft's cock, the soft dark reddish-tinted hair there. The strong, bewitching Holmes scent hit him hard. He licked his lips.

"This," he murmured, and grasped Mycroft's thick cock in his hand, taking the flared head into his mouth, trying to find a way to master this new endeavour, licking and sucking even more devotedly than he would a female Omega's hole and clit. Mycroft gasped, but drew his knees up and apart, leaning up on one elbow to afford a clearer view. Lestrade felt a burst of lust and his skin bloomed, knowing Mycroft was watching every move.

An Alphas' cock was impossible to take all the way into one's mouth, even outside of heat, and while he surely was no judge Mycroft's had to be bigger than most. But he could savor what he could take. His own cock could wait, he'd already come tonight. The memory made him groan, which had the effect of making Mycroft thrust his hand into his hair, pressing a little, begging silently for him to go deeper, so he did, almost gagging but never stopping, the pure musky scent intoxicating him and going straight to his cock.

It was clumsy and sloppy and he didn't care. He wanted to imprint his scent on every part of Mycroft, and take every particle of scent from Mycroft into himself. He looked up to see Mycroft's cool blue gaze melting into a haze of desire. Mycroft released his hair, reached down and sought
out his nipple and squeezed lightly, then firm in recompense till they felt like hard pebbles, coaxing a sharp cry from his lips. He hadn't known that there was a white-hot electric line that went straight from his nipple to the base of his cock. So many new sensations, his body racing eagerly to take them all in.

He licked slowly up and down the long, gorgeous length of his veined shaft, spreading saliva and precum, feeling the bulge at the root that would knot Mycroft fast to an Omega. This made him growl angrily and his hole twitch. He would never let Mycroft give this to an Omega. All of this, all of this man, was destined for him, and him alone. The fact of their being Alpha males just sharpened the thrill, even though as it felt deeply right.

###

The sight of Mycroft in dishabille, shirt rucked up and undone, trousers open and down around his hips, so different from his debonair sartorial elegance in the outside world, staring down at him with an air of almost regal satisfaction as he worked his cock was so scorching that he didn't want to remove Mycroft's clothing, but he needed access, urgently. He sucked his own fingers and thrust them under Mycroft's briefs, behind his balls and up to where the skin felt so hot. He wanted to lick there, too. In their few encounters, they had teased there, but no more. He ran his finger suggestively around Mycroft's hole, his own throbbing in sympathy, pressing just the slicked tip of his finger, his heart pounding. Mycroft didn't flinch, and he back stared up at him with carnal intent.

"Let me," Lestrade demanded, pressing a little more. Everything in the room shifted, and his Alpha drive to penetrate was rapidly taking over. Not yet, not now, but soon, he promised himself.

"The desk, there is lube in the drawer, at the back," Mycroft snapped, making it sound like an order even as he pressed himself down against Lestrade's hand. Now Lestrade was forced to shake away the image of other Alphas here in this room, on this sofa before him: all those elegant male Alphas that Mycroft Holmes notoriously toyed with, before sending them away when their demands became too troublesome with a generous kiss-off present. Even he had heard the stories-- mainly because he had gone out of his way to find them out in his subtle detective's way.

There would be time to deal with unpleasant baggage later. He withdrew his fingertip gently and untangled himself, and strode to the desk, letting Mycroft have a good view of his naked body stalking across the room. He found the lube, snapped it open and poured it out into his hand. Mycroft had taken off his shirt and laid it down under him, pulling down his trousers around his ankles. Seeing Lestrade's faint frown, he held out his hand and pulled Lestrade down again.

"No, never here. I sleep here often. I like to be . . . comfortable. But there's never been anyone else here. Just you."

He couldn't help smiling a little at that, remembering masturbating himself just a few hours since. He almost wanted to tell Mycroft about it. But the Alpha in him bristled at Mycroft so readily perceiving his jealousy.

"That's good, then," he said roughly, "But enough talk."

Mycroft nearly glared. "Then you had better get up here and finish what you started, hadn't you? Now." Now that was definitely an order, and Lestrade obeyed by climbing up on the sofa, kneeling
and spreading Mycroft's long thighs wider apart, then slowly pressing in with a single slick finger.

The lube wasn't warm yet. He remembered the cold lotion from before, how it stung. He barely got to the first knuckle when it was too tight to go further. He didn't know what to do with this tightness, so much more intense than the embrace of an Omega's passage. With an Omega, he would stroke and reassure until relaxation permitted him to sink in deeper. He hesitated, stroked the pale flesh of Mycroft's thigh.

Mycroft sat up on one elbow. "I'm no shrinking Omega. I won't break. Do it," he said demandingly. Lestrade stared into his eyes, then held his breath and pushed in harder; this was a moment when Omegas always closed their eyes and buried their faces in his neck. But Mycroft was staring him down as if it were a contest. Maybe it was. His finger slid in deeper until he was all the way in, and he thrust even harder, experimenting with rubbing his thumb along the tender perineum. He was mesmerised by the sight of his finger gliding in that tight place.

"Fuck," he swore, "that's so good." Mycroft's lids lowered in luxurious satisfaction.

He just held there a moment, letting them both feel it. The room was absolutely silent. There was a sharp pop and crackle from the fireplace.

"You want to fuck me, don't you," Mycroft said, the words shocking and hot in the stillness. Lestrade heard his breath coming faster, but his patrician tones were cool and sharp. He pushed himself down on Lestrade’s hand.

Lestrade pushed in deeper at that, putting his shoulder a little behind it, imagining so much more. "You know I do. Soon, you'll let me."

"It's a crime. . .you know that, Detective Inspector."

Lestrade had a momentary fantasy, a jumble of all those foreign captials where Alpha/Alpha intercourse was not banned -- Paris, Rome, Stockholm. He and Mycroft together, uninhibited. He knew now he had never really been truly uninhibited, even with Omegas. Maybe especially with Omegas. Lestrade bared his teeth. "I'll take you -- out of the country," he retorted, "when you're ready."

"Then open me up," Mycroft ordered, and finally lay back against the cushions.

"Oh, god." Lestrade's fingers were not as long as Mycroft's, but they were thick. He worked his single finger in and out until he felt Mycroft opening to it, poured more lube over his fingers and pushed, pushed inside with a second finger, his brain on overload from the intensity of new sensation, the fantasy that he could do so much more. His cock was all the way there, and he rubbed himself against the sofa to relieve the urgency. Mycroft arched a little, parted his legs wider, silently giving his complete consent and inviting him in. He very hard tried to focus. He wanted to find that knot that he knew was supposed to be an amazing source of pleasure, but which he had never had pleasured himself.

"Harder," Mycroft said, but his voice slipped from ordering to begging and at that, the remains of his restraint fell away. He thrust in hard, as he would with his cock to a willing Omega, and his own cock throbbed impossibly hard and tight in response to Mycroft's muttered curse. He could watch him like this forever, pale skin flushing in the firelight, his suit wrecked, his dominant gaze giving way to his passion. But the time for finesse was over. Mycroft stretched his own hand down to stroke himself, brutally and fast.

"Feel that in your hand," Lestrade said, hardly believing he could say these forbidden words.
"Imagine. . . it's my cock, inside you. Down deep." Now he was getting there, he could feel that small knot under his fingertips, and he slowed down to tease it, explore it, unsure. Mycroft froze momentarily at the touch, then relax. His passage rippled around his fingers. "So deep," Mycroft whispered.

He pushed Mycroft's hand away. "Let me," he said. He took Mycroft's smooth, hard head into his mouth and sucked clumsily in time with the stroke of his fingers, feeling Mycroft finally give in to all of it. Too soon, he heard Mycroft's fist thump the sofa as his other hand grabbed his head and pushed it down, fucking his mouth as he came hard with a sharp cry. Lestrade barely held on, Alpha cum shooting in his mouth and down his chin. He felt Mycroft's knot swell just slightly and pulse under his hand, and here he knew exactly what to do, massaging the knot, drawing out the climax as only Alphas could experience. He pulled his mouth away or he would choke. Then he watched, fascinated, as Mycroft writhed and moaned under his hands, begging incoherently, pumping for long minutes as his knot struggled to come to life in erotic confusion. He thought he had never seen or felt anything so perfect in his life.

# # #

His own cock was a fraction of an instant from bursting. It felt sore and very, very ready. He tried to wait for Mycroft to recover from the haze of climax, but Mycroft was already climbing up, pushing him hard back against the cushions, reversing their positions by crouching over him, admiring his nakedness, his frustrated cock spread out below him.

"It's been my experience that a lover gives what he most wants to receive," Mycroft said wickedly, pouring lube over his fingers.

"Shut the fuck up about your other lovers," Lestrade gasped as Mycroft breached his hole without preliminaries with a single long finger. He didn't touch his straining cock at all, just murmuring his satisfaction to see it jump and harden even more at the feel of his slick finger. Mycroft slowly pushed it in, out, in, out. A smug smile wreathed his lips.

"You're so slick inside already, Greg. And open. I should have paid more attention to what you said before."

"--What?" Lestrade's mind was gone, utterly destroyed, permanently off-line. There was nothing but the feel of Mycroft's finger impaling him. It wasn't gentle or slow any more and his gut felt like something secret was unfolding inside.

"You said, I hope you enjoyed the show"" More thrusting with those long fingers "--- when I told you I was watching your flat tonight. You've been using yourself, haven't you?"

Lestrade grunted as Mycroft gave his finger a vicious little twist, so good, then drove in with a second. The stretch and burn of it was mind-blowing. His knew his cock was going to explode whether Mycroft touched it or not. As if reading this thought, Mycroft ran a single teasing finger along his shaft, smoothing the precum that was leaking steadily.

"Yeah---nnnnnggg --- but I wanted it to be you," he managed with a strangled voice. He needed to come, and waiting even another second seemed like torture.

"Patience," Mycroft said, but his voice was ragged too and then Lestrade knew then that Mycroft
wanted it all just as much, maybe more. Mycroft pushed deeper, and he felt a nudge against the
deep place that had never been touched, long fingers gently coaxing his prostate, and his entire
passage begin to shudder and quake. He clenched, unable to even utter a cry as he was seized with
the strange new rapture and all conscious thought obliterated. He couldn't even feel Mycroft's other
hand on his cock, stroking him through the orgasm, extending it with expert fingers that knew just
how to play him out until he collapsed, spent, against the cushions and slowly came back down to
earth.

Mycroft stayed bent over him, watching him sprawled on the sofa, panting, his arse still quivering
in exhausted ecstacy around Mycroft's fingers.

Lestrade's could form no words at all, but he reached out his hand to stroke Mycroft's thigh, gently,
trying to show what he felt.

"Mmmmmm, I missed touching you," Mycroft said seriously, slowly and carefully inching his
fingers out. Lestrade felt little erratic pulses, the emptiness afterwards, for the second time this
night.

"I couldn't take any more," he finally said when he could move his lips. "It was driving me right
out of my mind, I think."

Mycroft stood unsteadily, and finally kicked off his trousers. Letrade admired the view of
Mycroft's long bare legs, his crumpled shirt askew.

"Don't get up yet," Lestrade said. "It's not quite morning."

Mycroft glanced at his wristwatch. Lestrade was surprised to see Mycroft's face fall, and quickly
transform to the very coolest of his formal masks. Lestrade felt a surge of rebellion rise up in his
chest. He wasn't letting Mycroft Holmes shut him out so easily.

_To be continued._
Mycroft's House, 37 Chester Square, Belgravia, London, 5 November, 5:00 a.m.

Mycroft went to a cabinet and withdrew a decanter. He poured out two brandies, and quietly brought them to the sofa. Lestrade grabbed his hand as he proffered his glass, and held him there. Mycroft looked down at him with remote, glassy eyes. Lestrade pulled him down, gently put both of the drinks on the table, and put his arms around Mycroft. He hadn't ever really held him like this before, he realised, more for comfort than arousal. It felt good, or it would if Mycroft would relax a little into his arms, but he was stiff and unyielding, completely different to the overpowering heat of just moments ago. Even his gorgous scent seemed to be withdrawing, replaced by something strong, powerful, but not in the least sexual. Lestrade knew that scent. It was the scent of confrontation, of battle. His hackles rose and he let Mycroft go.

"What's happening?"

"I'm sorry, Greg. I've been very -- selfish, tonight. I didn't intend to be. I have a very early... meeting. I'm sorry." He reached down and drained his brandy in a single draught.

Lestrade scowled. "It's five o'clock in the bloody morning. You're joking. I don't get this -- but just don't play me, Mycroft. If you feel different now, if you want me gone, say the word. Just tell me you aren't going to -- her." He just wasn't going to let it happen like this.

"I really do have to go. But no, I'm not going to Olivia."

"Where on earth do you have to be at this time of morning? Are you going to the airport?" He started weaving schemes to force Mycroft to let him come too. He was on suspension, may as well take advantage.

Mycroft gave a short, painful laugh. "The airport! Hardly. How delightful that would be." He gazed at Lestrade's determined face, then closed his eyes, tipped his head back and ran his fingers through his hair. He would shortly be wired to sensors and electrodes. And then he would be back at Hantswood Hall, just as if he were still standing there on All Hallows Eve. In every sense that mattered, he would be.
"I can say that, there are some times when it is more advantageous than others to undergo debriefing. Three o'clock in the morning is ideal in some circumstances. Six o'clock in the morning is also a productive time."

Lestrade forced his brain to get back to work. Debriefing. The Sleeping Beauties case. Mycroft's top-secret project.

"What kind of debriefing is it, exactly," he asked bluntly. "Don't tell me you're getting this keyed up over a little harsh Q and A."

Mycroft smiled frostily. "That, I'm afraid, is classified."

"But it's to do with the Sleeping Beauties case, with that night?"

Mycroft paused, evaluating. "Yes."

"Then don't they -- whoever 'they' are -- want to talk to me? I was there. I'm the one that killed Purcell."

This was just what Mycroft had been trying to shield Lestrade from. Indeed, Whiteshadow was very eager to interrogate Lestrade -- Sherlock and John, too -- via deep neural befriefing. Mycroft had no intention of allowing that to occur.

"Maybe they do, but that's not going to happen."

"Look, Mycroft. You told me you were prepared to tell me about what was really going on with you, and Maxim, this classified operation of yours. Tell me now. I deserve to know. I'm going to get an answer, one way or another."

Mycroft finally sat down again, looking into the fire. He took a deep breath, that sounded almost like a sigh.

"I do want to tell you. I always wanted to tell you. To tell you everything would take hours. Days."

"I have hours, I have days. Whatever you need. But tell me."

Mycroft pulled trousers back on, pulled himself together a little. Putting his armor back on, Lestrade noted. But he didn't want to do or say anything that would interrupt Mycroft's disclosure. He sat silent and still, like the good cop that he was, and waited.

"All you really need to know," Mycroft said, "is that I am part of a classified espionage program. It was established by Churchill during the war. Operation Whiteshadow. We are tasked with developing paranormal abilities, in the service of the country. We are, in simplest terms, the paranormal espionage branch of MI5."

"'Paranormal espionage?'" He could hardly imagine Mycroft in such a role...but he could not deny that things had happened in Hantswood Hall that he could not explain. "All right. And so, I'm guessing you were investigating Maxim Purcell, all on your own, is that it?"

"Yes. For some time."

"Did you sleep with him? For the case? I heard you, on the wire," he blurted. He was even angrier now, thinking of Maxim's smooth, horrid voice.

"No. But he wanted me to. At Hantswood Hall, that night. . . he tried to show me part of his plans,
to try to make me help him, I think. Or maybe to trap me."

Lestrade thought he would be able to detect a lie if Mycroft were deceiving him now about such a thing. His pheromones would shift slightly, just speaking of it. Whatever Maxim had been to Mycroft, he hadn't been his lover. Lestrade relaxed slightly as he felt a weight he hadn't realised was so heavy, lift from him.

"The investigation didn't really become a priority until we received information from one of his former . . . partners that Maxim was claiming that he had found a way, what he called a key, to enter what he called 'the Golden Plane.'" Mycroft shivered a little, remembering the heavy golden fluid that had nearly trapped him.

"Can you tell me why that's important?"

"Not entirely. Mainly because it would take too long. But if you can imagine a large enclosed flat space. Say, a billiard table."

"Got it."

"The table is covered with balls, with almost no space between them. If I put pressure on one of the balls, it will move, and that movement will telegraph to all the others, and they will also move, even if only slightly. And so, one ball can influence a ball at the opposite end of the table, without touching it directly."

"That's not so hard to understand."

"No. But imagine if the balls were not touching one another at all. And I move a ball at one end of the table, in isolation. And the ball at the opposite end of the table moves in response. The one ball influencing the other, at a great distance, with no point of physical contact between them. And I don't mean by use of sound waves, or anything else the physical world as we understand it."

Lestrade took it in. This was not something he was going to be able to puzzle out right here and now, so he just opened his mind to accept, for now. That was what Mycroft seemed to need from him, and he wanted to give Mycroft what he needed.

"Okay. One physical object is -- influencing -- another physical object, without actually touching it. So, Maxim Purcell -- what was he doing, exactly?"

"There is -- theoretically --- a plane where all matter is connected, where time, space, and the laws of physics as we know them, do not apply. Or they do apply, but we don't yet understand. This plane -- theoretically -- exists all around us, surrounds us, we are always in it. If one could find a way to exist in that plane, one consequence would be total freedom of movement -- without physical or maybe even temporal barriers. This is the Golden Plane."

"Like - teleportation? 'Beam me up?' Time travel?"

"I suppose. Whiteshadow's interests are strictly pragmatic: the uses of such a breakthrough in espionage. That is why I was investigating Maxim Purcell. Your murder investigation, Greg . . . it was simply convenient cover. I’m sorry. Whiteshadow always operates under cover of conventional operations, where it can. And I really did want to help you put Maxim down for murder, if I could. An added benefit. If his powers were as he said, Whiteshadow would undoubtedly have cut him a deal, after the murder trial."

Lestrade nodded, feeling much calmer than he knew he should. He took a drink of brandy and let it burn. A little fuzziness wouldn't hurt at this stage of the game, he figured. He drank some more.
"But -- Whiteshadow has been around since the war, you said. 'Paranormal espionage.' I understand what espionage is. "The Moscow Rules.'" He shot a wry look at Mycroft, reminding him of their tense exchange in the operations trailer outside Hantswood Hall, Lestrade patiently trying to talk Mycroft through the proper steps of a safe undercover mission. Now he knew how ridiculous he must have sounded to Mycroft. But at least he had known that he cared, he thought.

"So, Mycroft," he said thoughtfully, draining his glass. "I guess what you're telling me is that . . . you're a spook. What does a paranormal spy do, exactly?"

Mycroft looked away, into the fire. It was dying. He wanted to take Mycroft back into his arms, but his combative pheromones were stronger than ever. They warned him to stay back. He thought he would probably risk it anyway. But first, he wanted to hear the answer to his question.

Without looking at him, Mycroft spoke with a voice that was stiff, guarded.

"I ought not to tell you. No one knows, you see. But . . . I want to. I need you to know."

"All right then," Lestrade said, feeling the shock begin to set it. A curtain had just been pulled aside, and there were things behind it he had never expected. Everything in Mycroft's tone, his posture, even his breathing, told Lestrade that whatever it was, it was something to be feared, even if Mycroft didn't fear it.

"You can trust me. Whatever you tell me, I'll guard it with my life. I swear." He felt the solemnity of the promise right down to his bones. This was real.

"Very well." There was a long pause. Mycroft's voice was harsh and tight. He stood up and turned his back on Lestrade. Lestrade knew it was because he didn't want him watching his face when he said whatever he was about to reveal.

###

"I am what is called a 'projector.' I am able to separate my soul from my physical body. And project it where I want to go."

Lestrade couldn't think what would remotely be appropriate to say in response to such a thing. He had sometimes thought that Sherlock Holmes, under his sociopathic persona, was actually quite mad. A madness that did not prevent him from being the most brilliant detective of the era. Maybe it was even the reason for it.

But he had never once suspected that Mycroft Holmes might also be mad. It seemed impossible. And Sherlock Holmes had often enough drilled the lesson into him, what to do when faced with impossibilities:

"Eliminate the impossible, Lestrade, and whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

It was impossible that Mycroft was mad. He was the sanest man, possibly, that Lestrade knew. He would doubt himself before he doubted Mycroft in that way. And so, this was the truth.

Mycroft turned around finally, his face closed and his eyes intense. Lestrade waited.
What mattered, in the face of this? What was important? What did he need to know?

"Is it safe?"

"For me, it is. At least, until Hantswood Hall."

Lestrade's heart skipped a few beats, and broke out in a cold sweat. He didn't want to think about those things, didn't want to remember that night. Especially not now.

"How -- were you born that way. . . or is there some sort of training? Does it -- does it hurt?"

Mycroft folded his arms, almost as if he were hugging himself. Now Lestrade really wanted to go to him, but he felt Mycroft's desire that he keep still now.

"Yes, I was born with it. I am what is called a 'natural projector.' I may as well tell you it runs in the Holmes line. It is very rare. We believe it to be . . . a very great gift. One that we give to serve our country."

Lestrade thought about that. "The Holmes Line." He felt the clouds part a little on the mystery of why, exactly, Mycroft Holmes should suddenly have made plans to marry an Omega, one that he did not love and who did not love him. And being a detective, he sorted through his recent memories for additional clues. Now he recalled the soft, even wistful expression on Mycroft's face when he had told him that Sherlock was pregnant, and they had toasted the coming baby. Not so hard to figure out after all, then.

But it didn't change a thing. He still had no intention whatsoever of allowing Mycroft to marry an Omega, but he understood that now was not the moment to renew his objections and try to impose his will on Mycroft Holmes. He would wait. For example, until tomorrow. There would be a way around it.

Mycroft was trying to smooth his clothing, then obviously recognised the impossibility of leaving Chester Square in this condition.

"I really must go, Greg. The debriefing, as I said. I'm not exactly presentable. I'll have to go up and pull myself together a bit." Here there was a ghost of a smile at this, and Lestrade launched up off the sofa and pulled Mycroft close to his chest, held him tight in his arms, heedless of the fact that he was still undressed.

"I don't understand it, not all of it, but I'm glad you told me. Promise me you'll come to me, after. If you can."

Mycroft relaxed into his embrace and he felt a fierce pride, that this proud and reserved man should trust him this way with a secret so precious. It affirmed everything he felt about the rightness of them, that they should be together.

"I'm glad I told you, too. It feels very . . . strange. You likely won't believe a word of it once you leave, Greg."

"I'll never doubt you again. Now you've told me the truth."

Mycroft kissed him, a real kiss, almost enough to start another round but he pulled away with a slight whimper of frustration. "I really have to go now."

Lestrade locked a firm hand on his shoulder and looked up into his face.
"Now don't think I didn't notice that you didn't answer my questions. Not all of them. This thing, this -- projection. You said you were born that way. My experience is all government agencies, the kind you're talking about -- MI5, clandestine ops -- have training programs. Did you have to take a training course?"

Even the courses to join the Met were challenging. He'd met a few black ops types in his times, heard whispers of the intensely grueling programs they had endured. Mostly they wore it as a badge of pride.

"A training course? As a matter of fact, yes. We all take the same course."

"I can't imagine for the life of me how how you would train someone to -- project their soul out of their body."

Mycroft tried to look away, but Lestrade held him firm. Mycroft could easily get away if he wanted to, Lestrade knew that. It was a question of if he wanted to or not. His detective's instincts told him that he had discovered the thing, the dark thing that Mycroft had been hiding, but clearly didn't want to hide any more. Maybe he couldn't. 

"It's quite simple, actually. You have to start with a subject with natural abilities, or at least extreme sensitivity. So no; not everyone can do it."

"And then?"

"And then," Mycroft said, very calmly, as though discussing whether or not there might be rain, or what the traffic might be like at the rush hour, "they torture you. And they keep at it, you see. They don't stop until your soul separates from your body. And even then, they don't stop. They ---"

"Oh my god, Mycroft," Lestrade said, putting his hands on either side of his face. He was pale but composed. One of them was shaking and he realised it was him, not Mycroft. Of course it wasn't Mycroft.

"You don't have to say any more. My god, that's inhuman. It's illegal -"

Mycroft smiled faintly. "Yes, it is, isn't it? Now if you'll excuse me, I'm late for my debriefing. Stay as long as you like, of course. Chance will make you breakfast if you like. But I'm afraid -- I don't wish to upset you --- after the debriefing. . . how can I put this-- I won't be in any condition to see you. Not for a few days."

"What in the hell -- No, you bloody aren't going to do that! It's been over a week - weren't you already debriefed?"

Mycroft nodded, silent. 

"Wait -- Mycroft. That night, at Bridges Wharf. The helicopter. You wanted to take me in for a debriefing. And I punched you. You know I'm sorry about that, right?" He reached up and kissed the fading bruise, ignoring Mycroft's suddenly awkward limbs in his way.

"I was actually glad, in the end, that you didn't come with me that night. Once I realised how deep they wanted to go. I was in the room when you came into the Hall, when I was with Maxim. And I was in the room downstairs. . . when you shot him. So you see, there isn't anything about those events that they can't get from me. If they go deep enough. They are going in for a second time this morning. So I need to leave now, Greg. I'll call you. . . when I can."

Lestrade pushed Mycroft against the closed door, held the knob tight to prevent him trying to open
"Are you saying that you've been submitting to some kind of debriefing process that hurts you -- just so I won't have to?"

"Exactly. And Sherlock. And John. Although in Sherlock's case, they might make an exception. He is pregnant."

Lestrade bent down and hastily pulled on his clothes, cursing when he bumped his knee on very solid mahogany table.

Mycroft opened the door. "I did say, no hurry. It's still quite early. I'm aware you're on suspension, so you can take your time. Unless of course, you don't want to stay, Greg."

Lestrade stood up, took Mycroft's hand firmly in his own. "I'm not leaving until you do. And when you leave, I'm coming with you. I'll give them whatever they need. It sounds like it's important. But I don't want you doing this thing again, Mycroft. Not for my sake. Over my dead body."

"Never say that. You don't know how easily that could be true, if you start playing around with things you don't understand. I've told you too much. And you can't protect me from Whiteshadow. I am part of it. I don't have a choice."

"Do you mean that you aren't allowed to quit?"

His mind was already forming a plan. In this plan, Mycroft would leave his strange, painful duties behind. He had hid his shock well, he thought, but as a Catholic even if not a very good one, he thought that it was an abomination, tearing your own soul out of your body. It felt wrong, even evil, and as a homicide detective he was unfortunately well versed in many different faces of evil.

Mycroft could start over. He was starting over too: leaving behind his difficult marriage, understanding his own deepest needs better than he ever had before. They could start over together. He didn't even worry about Mycroft's new Omega. Right now all that mattered was trying to stop Mycroft from being hurt, any more he had already been.

He wondered if anybody had ever tried to stop Mycroft from being hurt, or from hurting himself. The matter-of-fact way in which Mycroft spoke of his pain made him suspect that the answer was no. A huge well of protectiveness surged up in his chest, and he gripped Mycroft's hand tighter. Then it would be him.

"You have some very impractical notions for a Scotland Yard detective, Greg. Allowed to quit Whiteshadow?" He shook his head, but did not answer. "Anyway, it's a secret facility. You can't go there unless I take you."

Lestrade was working his mobile. "Wrong. I'm still on the Sleeping Beauties case, or I will be. I'll be cleared of Purcell's death. I want to finish what we started. Maybe now more than ever, after what you've said. If there's anything that your people can get out of me that can help, I want to do it. So, I'll go and let them debrief me."

"No, you won't. And I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you that I'm fairly certain that Maxim isn't actually dead." Mycroft looked at him intently. Lestrade held back an inappropriate guffaw.

"You did see me shoot him? You were there for that part."

"I think he managed to go out of body, at least for a brief period. He can't sustain it. If I'm right, he
was already gone by the time you shot him. But there was something else, that night. It felt like it was with Maxim, another voice. Another... presence. Something that felt different, something very-- well, it was wrong. It's why I need to go back under. We can't seem to focus in on it. Did you feel anything, Greg? Anything at all?"

Lestrade shook his head. Maybe Mycroft really was mad. Such things couldn't be true. Still, there was only one thing that he wanted to do now, which was to justify Mycroft's trust, and that meant finding a way to accept this incredible story. Mycroft had been living with it for a long time, obviously. He was starting to grasp the fact that without knowing this about Mycroft, one couldn't really know him at all. In fact, he didn't know anyone who claimed to. Not even Sherlock.

He cast his mind back on the night at Hantswood Hall to try and answer Mycroft's question.

"I suppose I probably did. I didn't understand it, but everything was happening so fast. You looked so -- out of your self, is the only way I can describe it, when I found you."

He remembered Mycroft's pale shocked face, just as he kicked the door in. Maxim kneeling before him. He pushed that ugly memory far away. "All I wanted was to get you out of there. So now, I'm going in. I'll just put it out over the wires that I'm ready to talk about shooting Maxim Purcell. If there's anything I know about spooks, it's that they're always listening. Your Whiteshadow agents will probably just send a car and bring me in, the minute I open my mouth. By the way, I assume they aren't listening right now - you'd never tell me all this."

"You're quite right. My house is safe." The way he said "my house" made him wonder what other houses weren't. His own? Sherlock and John in 221b? He filed this away for future consideration.

"Or maybe I'll just have you followed," he said. He was feeling very Alpha, and that made him feel unstoppable. He could do anything. They could do anything, together. "You've spied on me enough, admit it."

Mycroft frowned impressively but Lestrade could see that under his hard Alpha veneer, he was surprised and maybe touched by his tenacity. "Not spying, really."

"What would you call it, then?"

"Dreaming," Mycroft said. But he didn't let go of Lestrade's hand.

Half an hour later, Mycroft and Lestrade walked together into an anonymous warehouse in Battersea.

To be continued. . .
Laughing in the Face of the Devil; or the Etymology of Pregnancy

I begin to love this creature,
and to anticipate her birth,
as a fresh twist to a knot,
which I do not wish to untie.

-- Mary Wollstonecraft

221b Baker Street, London. 5 November, morning.

“Sherlock, get your gloves on, for Christ’s sake. It’s cold out, it’s November in case you’ve forgotten. You’re pregnant, please try to start acting like it.”

“Do you mean, like last night?” Here he crept quietly up to John and bent down for a kiss. John was withdrawn and remote but he did respond, Sherlock observed with relief. He decided it would not be good to press the matter. He wasn’t sure what he would do if John started actually pushing him away. Unthinkable. The invisible adamantine barrier seemed to him to be stronger now. Nevertheless, in a corner of his resourceful mind Sherlock began weaving strategies for what he might do to overcome such a circumstance. He was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to withstand it.

“I just don’t want you. . . catching cold,” John said quietly, looking around and locating the missing articles far more quickly than he could have done. Sherlock pulled them on.

Now Sherlock was discomfited. He was experiencing a feeling. He simply refused to call it 'morning sickness.' That was the sort of thing that got your mind going down predictable, boring paths. As if his own body had the same experience as every other body when . . . pregnant.

He despised the word.

Until he could come up with fresh new etymology of his very own invention, a return to Latin was in order. Latin was so very useful: in chemistry, forensics, pharmacology, botany, medicine. . .

“Anyway, I’m not pregnant,” he announced loudly.

###

This got John’s full and immediate attention. His face froze and turned white as paper in a flash and Sherlock cursed the very day he had been born with this sociopathic brain and runaway tongue.
that just couldn't avoid royally fucking up at the worst of all possible moments. Ordinarily he
didn’t care, not in the slightest, in fact he usually enjoyed wreaking emotional havoc, but this felt
like a knife straight to his own heart.

“John! No, no, not that, I didn’t mean -- of course everything’s, what I mean is, the baby, nothing’s
wrong. . . “ he trailed off.

John frowned severely, a grave, wounded look that almost made him tremble. He needed to fix
this, right now.

“What I mean is -- I refuse to use such a -- depressing word. It doesn’t do the entire--”

Here, Sherlock began a flapping gesture with his hands that encompassed his body, the region
of his stomach, and even John as the instigator of his present, unnamable condition, “ ---situation ---
justice. The words in common usage are. . . revolting.”

He was starting to realise that everything that was going to happen to his body now was not
everly, but largely out of his control. This induced a panicky claustrophobic sensation that could
only be soothe by finding something about all of this -- the pregnancy, the imminent arrival of a
new human being for whom they would be entirely responsible -- that he could impose his will
upon, that he could control. This would make him feel much better. And he had arrived at the
perfect solution.

###

He folded his arms and stared at John with his best, iciest stare to reinforce his right to redefine the
etyymology of the state of pregnancy.

John gaped, and then shook his head fondly.

“We could say, you’re . . . ‘with child,’” he said experimentally.

He hadn't actually been around many pregnant Omegas. His own medical practice, field medicine,
trauma surgery, even the clinic, had never yet required him to personally attend a pregnancy or
deliver a baby. And he had never spent any time at all in the company of a pregnant male Omega.

John regarded Sherlock's over-excited, flushed face with a concern that he took care to conceal. He
was uncertain whether this outburst signaled some new emotional instability in his mate brought on
by hormones; or, if Sherlock really was as outraged as his dramatics made it appear.

And so, John did what he ordinarily did when faced with a new peculiarity of Sherlock's: he took a
deep breath, summoned up his reserves of patience and forbearance, and listened carefully to see if
he could figure out which way the wind would blow.

Sherlock looked mutinous. Apparently the phrase was a heinous insult.

“‘Expecting?’”


“Now that would be mint,” John said, deadpan.

“Humpf. They are none of them suitable, John: ‘in the family way.’ And the worst: ‘a bun in the
oven,’ he said, acid dripping from every word.
John raised a skeptical eyebrow. “The very worst? How about ‘knocked up?’”

“Ghastly.”

“‘Preggers?’”

“Vulgar.”

“‘Up the duff,’” John said in a fit of inspiration, trying to get in the spirit of the thing.

“I beg your pardon?” Sherlock said blankly.

John sometimes found Sherlock had blind spots concerning common slang. He tried to remember that despite the homeless network and his varied connections with the roughest sorts of persons, Sherlock had had a very privileged, and he imagined a very sheltered upbringing. Not that Sherlock ever discussed his childhood. He wondered briefly if their having a child would open that door.

John understood all too well about closed doors. Therefore, he took great pains not to push too hard on any of Sherlock’s. As for his own closed doors, Sherlock was too emotionally limited even now to realise that he had any, he thought. Which in this particular instance, he was grateful for.

“‘In the club?’” he ventured. That one had been quite popular in the Army.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t eat pudding,” he spat, surprising John. “Although I suppose that might change. If my stomach decides to cooperate.” He concentrated on feeling serene over his abdominal disquiet. ‘Mind over matter’ was one of his guiding principles; he saw no reason whatsoever for that to change now.

“It’s all sheer rubbish -- vile abuse of the English language. I shall use entirely different terms, John. It will be a useful undertaking, don’t you agree? Not as useful as solving a murder or inventing a forensic technique, but still.”

He began pacing nervously to distract himself from feeling queasy. Sherlock knew he was not generous -- or at least what ordinary persons perceived as generosity -- but John was constantly encouraging him to think of persons other than himself.

This little project would be his gift to Omegas everywhere.

# # #

“All right then, but just calm down a little.” John said patiently. “Let’s hear it.”

“But you already know, John. Think! Latin, John. Latin. You did go to medical college. Latin is so clear, so descriptive. I am not pregnant, John. I am... gravid.”

Sherlock looked very serious indeed. He stopped pacing. His eyes flashed and he put his hands on his still-narrow hips. Everything in his posture dared John Watson to either mock or dispute him.

“Ah. Right. I do remember. You realise then that we have to say I ingravidated you.”

“Naturally. And instead of pregnancy -- so commonplace -- we shall say, gravidity.”

“I take it you are serious about all this, Sherlock?”
“Perfectly.”

“Then you know that being pregnant with your first child -- you are called, a primigravida,” John said, watching Sherlock’s expression.

Fierce concentration; self-righteousness. He sighed inwardly. Sherlock really was serious. They would have to revert to language he had last heard in his dimly-remembered course in obstetrics.

“There, do you see, John? One simple word instead of jumbles of ugly, crude -- ‘lingo.’”

“It could be taken just a little too far, though, don’t you think?” John said.

“I don’t see how. It’s perfect. Elegant. Precise.” Sherlock was looking very smug indeed.

“Well, for example -- when you are pregnant with your eighth child, there’s a precise word for that: Octigravida.”

Sherlock whirled and advanced on John. “John. Delete that word from your vocabulary. From your brain. Never say it again in my hearing. Wait -- just, never say it at all. Don’t even think it.”

“Nonigravida, for the ninth...decigravida, for your tenth...”

“John!” Sherlock looked ready to levitate with outrage.


Sherlock glared. John stroked his arm soothingly. He really didn’t want Sherlock upset today; rather, no more than they already were.

Because this nervous joking was fooling neither of them, really.

How could one laugh in the face of the devil?

On the other hand, maybe laughing was the only thing to do.

###

No, a quiet excursion to the library was John's only ambition for the day. Then they could make plans. Whatever plans could be made in the face of such a thing.

He thrust his gun into the back of his waistband and adjusted his coat to conceal it.

"Are you ready to go," John asked, finger ing his key to the obscure room. “Wait, Sherlock." Remembering his uneasy feeling from last night, he looked down into Baker Street.

There was a dark-suited man watching their door.

“Sherlock... there’s a man in the street. He's watching 221b. Maybe it’s the man Mrs. Hudson spoke with.”

“Ah, the man who has ‘business with Sherlock Holmes?’ Well, well... I don’t think we’re in a position to be taking any new cases at the moment... are we, John?”

Sherlock looked at John hopefully. This was meant to be a peace offering. At least he was asking
first.

John had said that he should ask John first ‘what he thought about it,’ before he did anything that John would consider dangerous.

Not that there was anything inherently dangerous about a stranger coming to 221b with business for Sherlock Holmes. The dangerous bit almost always came afterwards. He thrust away inconvenient memories of the varied means by which determined individuals had made their way into 221b for the purpose of attacking him, even killing him. Idiots.

Usually.

"Are you even listening to me?" John would sputter, with various intonations between anger (bad) and affection (good). Today, he would show John that he had listened. Because John had been very, very persuasive last night, and had employed means uniquely tailored to secure his complete and undivided attention to John’s demands.

Yes, John constantly surprised him. If he had ever suspected that being a bonded pair would render John somehow boring, he never could think that now. To the contrary. He was starting to have the sense that as intently as he had studied John Watson these past six months, he had just scratched the surface. He couldn’t help a small, secret smile.

Still, it was clear that John was disturbed, even as he tried to hide the signs from Sherlock. Rather than remark upon this, or worse, try to drag some sort of revelation out of his tense, withdrawn mate, Sherlock simply peered over John’s good shoulder, down into the Baker Street.

##

A man was indeed there. Expensive dark coat over a dark suit, slightly rumpled. Impossible to judge the shoes properly from this distance but they seemed somewhat dull, and he decided that balance of probabilities, despite his urbane appearance the man walked a good deal in the course of his employment; or, had chosen well-worn shoes because he had known he would be standing in Baker Street a good many hours.

He was tall, slender; businesslike haircut. Usually well-groomed but hadn’t yet shaven today. Wearing a bluetooth earpiece. He was very fit and alert, even nervous, but his posture sagged a little. Tired but fighting it.

If he hadn’t been distracted -- not the right word. . . upset -- no, that wasn’t it either -- Devastated?

Yes, that was the proper word, Sherlock decided. Elegant, expressive, precise. Too devastated by the thought of what John had risked for him, he might have noticed the man before John did. Devastated by John’s withdrawal that made him seem so very cold and hard, despite his kindness in attempting to be, or to act, normal.

##

Sherlock knew very well what it was like to pretend to be normal when you weren’t. He used to do it often, especially in school. As an adult, he had found it less and less worthwhile to try to seem normal, but there were times and places where one simply had to do it. On those occasions he could muster up a reasonable facsimile as long as it didn’t go on too long -- more than a day, for example.
One of the things that had made him instantly comfortable in John Watson's company was that he obviously didn't much care whether Sherlock was normal or not.

What John cared about, very much, was whether Sherlock did things that hurt himself, or other people. On the other hand, it had slowly become apparent that John was indifferent to whether he himself was hurt; but he was steel-willed in his determination that no one should know of it, if he was.

Sometimes, Sherlock thought he even sought it.

This was something he was familiar with as well. Or he had done, until John came and prevented him. Anyway it wasn't the same thing if you didn't feel pain or fear like normal people did.

He had been carefully observing John’s dark aspect all morning. It made him wonder, was John more practiced at pretending to be normal than even he had suspected?

If so, what did that mean?

###

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock had switched on his mobile. There were ten texts and twelve telephone calls from Mycroft since late last night-- or rather, very early this morning. He hadn't been strictly honest with John last night about Mycroft’s 'request' that they pay him a visit. In no way had it been phrased as a request. Whereupon Sherlock had turned off his mobile. They had just got home, after all; he thought he deserved time alone with John.

He sighed. Mycroft wasn’t going to permit them either the privacy or leisure to recover quietly in 221b. Mycroft could be quite draconian. He was sending his minions along to fetch them.

"I know who that man is," Sherlock snapped irritably. His stomach heaved perilously. Interesting. One's emotional state had an effect on the notorious 'morning sickness.'

"You recognise him?"

"Never saw him before in my life. But he's one of Mycroft's tedious agents. Mycroft’s ordered them to 'protect' us. They’re taking us to see him now."

"How do you know?"

"I'll tell you on the way,” he said evasively. John would be very angry to know that he had ignored Mycroft’s warnings. Well, not ignored, simply delayed attending to them until he was ready. “Shall we go? Let’s go make friends,” he said with false cheer.

Sherlock dashed across Baker Street to the dark-coated man, who held up his hands as Sherlock loomed over him.

John strolled more deliberately behind, trying to master his limp. He was struggling with dominant Alpha urges. He would readily have locked Sherlock in 221b today. Indefinitely. He knew he would have to resist the possessive greed that drove him to keep his mate confined, under his dominion. And so, he would give Sherlock the illusion of space, freedom. Today, anyway. Then, he would see how things went.

He stood well behind Sherlock, watching him closely, eyes on the dark-coated man for any false
move as he fingered the handcuffs in his jacket pocket.

##

"Mister Holmes, Doctor Watson. I need you both to come with me now. Please," he said, courteously enough. A dark car pulled up beside them. John shook his head in disbelief.

"Are you serious? We have somewhere we need to be. What does Mycroft want?"

"I’m allowed to say only that we were ordered to ensure no one was watching 221b, or following you. And that we are to bring you to our superior this morning upon your having arisen. . . unless circumstances required that you be disturbed before that time."

"What’s going on?" John asked.

"I'm to show you this." He held up his mobile and showed them a photograph. "Do you know this man? Have you seen him since your return to London?"

"No." Sherlock didn't find it convenient to mention that his brother had sent the same photo to his mobile, hours ago. He hadn't recognised the man.

Mycroft had identified him as one DI Critchley of Scotland Yard, apparently having been seen loitering across from 221b before killing his girlfriend, and disappearing at Waterloo Station. Mycroft had warned him very severely to go nowhere near this man, that he was implicated in Maxim’s unnamable crimes, and specifically that the death of Critchley’s girlfriend had all the marks of the Sleeping Beauties murders. Which was fascinating, of course, because the murderer -- Maxim -- was supposed to be dead. Sherlock presumed that even Mycroft perceived that this was evidence that Maxim apparently wasn’t as dead as Lestrade’s bullet should have rendered him.

Mycroft had refrained from warning Sherlock that he was sending men to pick him and John up in the morning. Mycroft had the great good sense to anticipate that Sherlock was just as likely to evade them as to cooperate-- depending on whether he had something else in the works that he was unwilling to put aside. Presently, that was likely to be Doctor John Watson. As such, Mycroft had prudently ensured, via his own private and ever-changing measures, that all was well within the walls of 221b during the night. He himself was rather preoccupied during that same time.

##

"Wait-- that man in the photo, he was with Lestrade. At Hantswood Hall, Sherlock. He's a cop. You never saw him, you were. . . " John didn't like to speak of Sherlock's strange, unexplained sleep. “Sherlock, let's go.”

"But -- "

John pushed Sherlock into the back of the car, no small feat. "If it's this important, we have to go, Sherlock. We should work together with your brother." He leaned in and whispered in Sherlock's ear: "You weren't exactly honest with me last night, were you? Pay him a visit, when you feel up to it. 'Mycroft wanted us last night, didn't he?"

"What if he did? If it was truly urgent, or dangerous, I knew he'd send someone. If not, it could wait. But I couldn't. And it’s all worked out quite well."

Sherlock leaned against John and slid his hand intimately down John's thigh, turned and nuzzled his ear before giving it a random lick. John swallowed hard and trapped Sherlock's wandering hand in his own. He still couldn't get used to the fact that they would apparently be doing things like this
in public. He hadn't expected that Sherlock Holmes would be one for public displays of affection. Clearly, he had been mistaken.

###

The car pulled into traffic. "Can we make a stop along the way? Say, no more than an hour?" John said casually.

"I don't think so," their companion said. "We are taking you to Mister Holmes now. His orders."

"My brother frequently forgets that while he works for the Government, I do not," Sherlock said with deep hostility. It was John's turn to stroke Sherlock's leg, which felt wonderful despite their uncomfortable circumstances.

"Look, just -- ," John said. "Hand me your mobile. I left mine in the flat."

Sherlock handed it over, rolling his eyes when he saw John punching in his passcode and scrolling Mycroft's numerous texts with bemusement that rapidly changed to irritated disbelief. Time to go on the offensive.

"You know my passcode, John?"

"When you were in hospital, Mycroft gave it to me."

"Ah."

"Might want to change it. Not much good if other people know your passcode."

"I was aware," Sherlock said loftily. There was a pause while John pressed speed dial and listened.

"And don't think I didn't figure out what it meant," John whispered. "Your passcode."

Sherlock looked ahead, nonchalant. "Did you?"

"The day we met. Backwards."

"You remembered the date as well then, John. Fascinating. But, I did use the Chinese lunar calendar. Who would guess such a thing?"

"Your brother."

###

"It's not exactly a danger zone, Mycroft. It’s just some old books. Take your 'friends'? -- Okay, fine, but he waits outside the door. Andrews, is it? I don't know how I'm going to explain it, but I'll think of something."

John leaned forward and handed the mobile to the dark-coated man.

"Look-- Andrews-- "

"I'm Philips, he's Andrews," he jerked his head in the direction of the driver.

"Fine. Philips. This is Mr. Holmes. He’s going to tell you to take us to Barts."

"Hospital?"
"Not exactly."

# # #


The drive to Smithfield was not long. John thought that Sherlock actually looked much better now that they were on the move. Andrews and Philips shadowed them as John led them under the Henry VIII arch, grey stone that once had been white. This led to the Pathology Department of Barts and the London Medical College. They took the elevator to the third floor.

Here were the doors to the Barts Pathology Museum, with a forbidding sign stating that access was restricted to staff only. John seemed unconcerned. He consulted his wristwatch.

"Wait," John said. "Sherlock, don’t try anything."

"You said that we were going to consult books, papers -- pertaining to ‘our problem,’" Sherlock hissed. "Why the Pathology Museum? Barts' library is in Whitechapel. And the other one is in Miles End." The maze of historic buildings comprising the Barts and The London Medical College were scattered between Smithfield, Whitechapel, and Miles End.

Sherlock sneered at Andrews and Philips, straining to overhear while maintaining professional
impassivity. They kept close, scanning the halls and elevator as diligently as if he and Sherlock had been royals. It wouldn’t surprise John if they usually did guard the Royal Family. In his experience, Mycroft Holmes would do anything at all to protect his brother.

“You’ll see,” he said. "It's just -- an old room, really. These papers are stored in what was the old Pathology Library, but they closed it up."

"You, an archivist, John? In pathology? Still waters do run deep." Sherlock was entranced.

He had always understood John to have been a solid, not brilliant, medical student with a decided calling toward field medicine and surgery. Certainly not research; and most definitely not pathology. John really never could stop surprising him. And he was excited by the prospect of seeing the Museum again. He had seen it before, of course, as well as the many other medical museums in London: all useful from a forensic standpoint.

But the Barts Pathology Museum was the most difficult of access, and it possessed a formal, classical beauty that elevated the meticulously ordered and catalogued specimens to a grand work combining science, architecture, and art. The entire setting spoke to his heart in a way few places did. He would happily have settled in for a leisurely exploration of this glorious kingdom of specimens, collected in the golden age of anatomy. Particularly the collection devoted to forensic pathology.

But their time was quite short, as decreed by that eternal killjoy, his brother Mycroft.

"Of course I'm not an archivist -- Mike! Thanks for coming, I know it’s out of your way.”

Mike Stamford was hurrying toward them, cheerful as always. “John! Sherlock! Your text was a welcome surprise. Something rare in the forensic pathology collection for Sherlock today, hmmm? Working a new case?”

Stamford beamed, looking back and forth at their faces. His fell, and John knew then that they made a grimmer pair than they had realised.

“Ah -- is everything all right? John, you look terrible, that’s the truth. Can I help?”

Sherlock moved shoulder to shoulder with John. “He’s perfectly fine, Stamford. We’ve been. . . traveling. Long trip,” he said through gritted teeth. Didn’t Stamford know that John hated attention
to be drawn to him when he wasn’t well?

Now Stamford saw the obvious. “Well, about time, gentlemen. May I offer my congratulations? And a celebratory pint? You remember The Old Red Cow, John. Now it’s got itself all redone, you won’t recognise it. But the food’s better than it ever was in our day.”

“Thanks, Mike. Soon, I hope. You’re right, we are working on -- a case. Can you get us in? I know how touchy they are.”

“It’s gotten worse. But I can still bring visitors, particularly a distinguished forensic criminologist such as Sherlock Holmes. Leave it to me. But . . . what about them?” Andrews and Philips were hovering with determined faces.

“Tell them the truth. Sherlock Holmes has bodyguards, these days. Two of them.”

“Three. There’s you, John,” Sherlock said smugly.

And so it was that the doors of the Barts Pathology Museum were opened to them. The minimal staff seemed reassured by Stamford’s bona fides for the visitors, and after a polite offer of a tour, they were left to their own devices.

To be continued. . .
Chapter Thirty-One: Runaway Angels

Track: Les Friction, Here Comes The Reign: LISTEN TO HERE COMES THE REIGN HERE

**Beloved, gaze in thine own heart.**

**Gaze no more in the bitter glass**

**The demons, with their subtle guile,**

**Lift up before us when they pass. . .**

*W.B. Yeats, The Two Trees.*

**Everyone run**

**Here comes the Reign**

**You made something**

**they can't take away**

**Now bring the fire**

**of the burning sun**

**on everyone**

**Lyrics to Here Comes The Reign, all rights reserved Les Friction**

**Barts Pathology Museum.  5 November, morning.**

The Pathology Museum was a Victorian jewel box, built in 1879 especially to house the collection. The regiments of mahogany-framed glass cabinets extended upwards in three galleries accessed by
a spiral staircase, the whole topped by a rectangular glass dome. The effect was incongruously light for a collection so inherently morbid.

John led Sherlock firmly past the cases, pausing a few times to indulge his raptures over some of the more outré specimens, then through an unprepossessing wooden door. This lead them to a short corridor with two doors. There was an air of neglect.

“This one takes you through the back of the old Pathology Library. And this,” he said, inserting the key in the lock of the smaller door, throwing it open with a squeal of unoiled hinges, “is the Pridiax Archive.”

The archive was a long room mounted with wooden shelves and covered with old paneling, floor to ceiling. The room smelled strongly of old books, parchment, and dust. There was a a scarred old oak table, a desk, and few wooden chairs. Also an old-fashioned brass lamp with green glass shades that was far too large for the little desk, obviously a cast-off from some much grander library. The shelves were filled with books, papers, and boxes, all of obvious age, stacked very neatly. The shelves had handwritten cards for labels, and Sherlock recognised the writing with a peculiar thrill as John’s own. He touched one of the cards.

“Don’t touch, Sherlock, you know better,” he said. He opened a drawer and found a box of white cotton gloves, and they both put them on. “These documents are hundreds of years old, most of them. The oldest one was from 1644, I think.”

“How did you ever find this place,” Sherlock said. “You weren’t a pathology student.”

“It was the quietest place I could find to study,” John said. He began pulling papers carefully from the shelves and stacking them on the table.

“I had a friend, she was studying pathology -- " he ignored Sherlock's glower at this -- "and she showed me this place. It was in much worse shape, then. They were using it to store old specimens that they didn't want for the collection, and old books too. No one else ever came here.

"Then one of the professors noticed me. One day he said they would pay me a stipend -- a generous one -- if I would organise the Pridiax books and papers. I didn't even know what they were. They were all still in boxes at the back. Had been for seventy years, or thereabouts."
"Why not send the lot to the Barts Archive? I recall there is a large collection, hospital records, that sort of thing."

"They tried. It wasn't possible. From a legal standpoint. Anyway, that's what I was told. I wondered, with all that money, why they didn't hire an actual archivist, even from another college. But then I realised that they really didn't want it known."

"Want what known?"

"That Barts' largest benefactor was secretly a demonologist."

Here John held up one of the volumes for Sherlock's inspection:

**Bibliotheca diabolica; being a choice selection of the most valuable books relating to the Devil; his origin, greatness, & influence ... with some curious volumes on dreams and astrology. ([New York] Scribner, Welford & Armstrong, 1874).**

##

Sherlock stared at John over the table. "Why not give them, or sell them, to the British Library, Oxford . . . I believe they would be very valuable."

John nodded. "You're right. They did have the Pridiax Archive appraised, after I got the lot in decent shape. I don’t know what the figure was. Anyway, I didn’t do anything very very scholarly, just put them in order, alphabetical, in categories. But to answer your question, Joshua Pridiax was a professor here at Barts, 1890 to 1919. His speciality was rare diseases. He traveled all over the world to bring back specimens for the pathology collection. This Archive has a different focus, as you can see."

“I recognised the name. Some of his specimens are quite remarkable,” Sherlock said with brio. John smiled weakly and Sherlock immediately stifled his enthusiasm. He knew that John was never squeamish, but he had a heart that pitied those who suffered from terrible illnesses. And so, it had been inevitable, Sherlock thought, that John had become a surgeon: surgery was risky, and John seemed to quite enjoy taking risks. But surgery also one of the most direct proofs of the power of medicine to heal, to conquer illness and even sometimes, death.

"Pridiax died in 1920. He left his fortune - a million pounds, family in ironworks, I think -- to the Barts endowment. But there was a catch."

"Ah. Just so. Barts had to take his personal papers. About demonology."

"Yes. Apparently, Pridiax was obsessed with this stuff-- demonology, witchcraft. His will stipulated that his papers be maintained here in the museum, together with his specimens. “In perpetuity,” was the word they used. His widow tried to stop them taking this stuff, actually. She wanted the papers burned, but she was traveling at the time, and Barts moved quickly. A million pounds was a lot of money in 1920."

"What happens if the papers aren't kept here?"

"The money reverts to some charity. The Trustees have to review it periodically to make sure old Pridiax's will is being followed. Somebody finally objected to them being just kept in old boxes."

##
Sherlock touched one of the volumes, bound in black leather with silver titles:

*The Dark Kingdom: Being a discourse on the powers and jurisdiction of the Prince of Darkness. London, By Private Subscription, Valentine & Sons, 1899.*

"Not exactly your area, John. Didn't this stuff give you nightmares?" he asked casually. He didn't think John would answer, but he intended to keep working his way through the hedge of thorns. John looked down, so that he couldn't read his face. Frustration gripped him.

"Look, I was a starving second-year, okay? I know that you can't relate. You obviously didn't have those sorts of concerns when you were in school."

Sherlock looked slightly abashed at this. It was true. He had been oblivious to the ease with which the ample Holmes fortune allowed him to sail through school without such mundane concerns as how to pay his rent, or where his next meal was coming from. But then he decided college was a bore and dropped out. He also decided that his generous allowance wasn't worth the price of Mummy and Mycroft's meddling, and he struck out on his own.

He was about to remind John of this when he realised that John had deflected his question about nightmares with an attack.

Interesting.

"Anyway, it was just a pile of old books and papers. I didn't even read them -- well, not after the first day or two. Most of it's impossible to decipher anyway."

Sherlock looked more closely at the shelved volumes, old leather in oxblood, brown, black, scarlet; some with elaborate spines, titled in silver and gold, some without any titles at all:


*An historical essay concerning witchcraft: With observations upon matters of fact; tending to clear the texts of the sacred Scriptures and confute the vulgar errors about that point. And also*
two sermons: one in proof of the Christian religion; the other concerning good and evil angels, By Francis Hutchinson(London: Printed for R. Knaplock [etc.], 1720)

Moeurs et pratiques des démons ou des esprits visiteurs d'après les autorités de l'église, les auteurs païens, les faits contemporains, etc. Par le chevalier Gougenot des Mousseaux ... (Paris, H. Vrayet de Surcy, 1854), by R. Gougenot Des Mousseaux.

He pulled one volume down at random and carefully opened it. It contained woodcuts of demons and witches.

Also papers: some loose, some in ribbon-bound folios. Sherlock thumbed them. Letters, printed tracts, handwritten transcripts.

These seemed to be legal proceedings.

Witch trials?

Sherlock began examining Pridiax's notes. They were in the flowing, spidery hand of a gentleman who would have been taught his penmanship in the Regency era.

"Are we looking for something particular? I do have a grasp on the general application of these materials to our . . . problem."

John shot a sharp look across the table, suspecting that Sherlock was being flippant. But seeing Sherlock paging intently and obviously seriously through the old papers, he replied,

"Yes. There are Pridiax's notes on the witch trials."

"Ah. And?"

"When I was in Tatsfield that night, Halloween. . . a shop clerk told me that the parish boundaries had been redrawn. It was an odd thing to say. Then, when you were in hospital, that strange sleep. . . I had so many hours to think, about everything. But even then I didn't remember. Yesterday, it came back to me. Pridiax had notes about a witch who had been so wicked, that the local priest applied to the Church to take his lands out of the parish."

"I thought you didn't read this stuff."

"I had to read a little, just enough to figure out where to group them. The largest part of the papers are on demonology. Then there’s exorcism, witchcraft, vampires, werewolves, spirit possession, reincarnation."

"So. . . our Jonathan Talbott, perhaps?"

"I'm trying to remember where they would be . . . here, the ones indexed to his map of the witch trials, here they are," John said, indicating a particular shelf piled with papers tied with string.

"Not a very sophisticated system, John."

"I told you, I'm not an archivist. The papers had been boxed up more or less in the order that Pridiax had left them. I thought it was more important to preserve them that way, as best I could."

John opened up the stack and divided it between them, and they worked in silence. John quickly
became discouraged. He hadn’t really remembered how difficult it was to make out Pridiax’s writing.

But Sherlock, an expert of all types of calligraphy and penmanship, was in his element. He was bent intently over the pages, scanning the ornate handwriting with shocking rapidity. His brain was like a supercomputer, John thought, wrapped in the most spectacularly gorgeous hardware imaginable.

“Listen to this, John: This is from one Calcidius, the Commentaries on Demons:

“A demon is a sensitive, ethereal being: sensitive, because it always reflects, and no choice can be made without enduring desire; it is called ethereal because of its abode or the quality of its body.”

And there is a note here, too, Pridiax’s own thoughts:

“Two conclusions can be drawn: 1. The demons are not simply souls; 2. their nature is entirely different from that of souls stripped of their body in death.”

“But, what about what you said last night, Sherlock. The psychic vampire, that eats souls. That doesn’t sound like this. That’s not a demon.”

“Yes, John. I do understand there are supposed to be distinctions between these beings. But listen to this:

“The wicked demons are to be distinguished: these demons have an excessive partnership with matter, called the wicked soul. Unlike the ethereal ones, who are the fallen angels, these wicked demons can sometimes be observed, when they change into diverging shapes. . . . These wicked demons are the runaway angels.”

“An excessive partnership with matter. . . excessive implying, undesirable... this sort of demon changes into diverging shapes. . . perhaps it is trying to climb back up to the ethereal plane by doing so,” Sherlock said.

John rubbed his face. “I don’t see how that matters.”

“Look at what he says -- the ethereal demons are “fallen angels,” but the wicked demons are “runaway angels.” They have made a choice to flee heaven and God. They can be seen when they change their shape. . . I am certain that I saw Maxim’s face, changing before my eyes. . .his voice changed too.”

“I saw it too,” John said abruptly. “But let’s not say it out loud, okay? Anyway, here it is, I knew I remembered.”
They leaned together under the green glass shade, and Sherlock read the old manuscript aloud:

**A TRUE HISTORY OF THE APPREHENSION, TRIAL, AND STRANGE ESCAPE OF SQUIRE JONATHAN TALBOTT FROM THE JUSTICE OF HIS MAJESTY’S WITCH-FINDERS, THIS PAST NOVEMBER, 1661.**

“This pamphlet shall relate the discovery of a witch so wicked that his own parish was re-figured by the Bishop of Winchester, that his lands would be wholly outside of sanctified soil.

***

“What can be more abominable to God than that we deprive him of his divine right by permitting ourselves to become servants of Satan? I give you by example the matter of the accusations against one SQUIRE JONATHAN TALBOTT, of the Parish of Tats-field, taken before His Majesty’s Honourable Justices at the Assizes of the County of Surrey, according the records of said proceedings, being duly recorded.

"And when it was put to said JONATHAN TALBOTT that a black dog of monstrous size was seen to follow him wherever he so went, and that he had been seen to feed it; and moreover that by the testimony of diverse witnesses, such devilish creature was seen to have killed Thomas Carter, a poacher upon his estate of Hantswood Hall, and his young daughter too, and suspected of four other gruesome deaths in the parish, and that said dog must be his familiar, he replied only,

"If so be true, bring it hither, it must be hungry."

And there were many who saw the black dog in the street where TALBOTT was jailed.

***

"On the fourth day, TALBOTT being put to the torture, the learned judges asked once again what the cause was of the sleeping sickness afflicting the parish. TALBOTT answered, saying,

"Did you not sleep well in your own beds last night, learned colleagues? If I were able to call upon the Old Gentleman, would you have arisen from those beds this morning?"

On the next morning, the servant of Mr Justice Edenwhite sent word that he was afflicted with the
sleeping sickness. Three more days passed and one by one the judges each of them fell under the sleeping sickness, and the trial was adjourned.

There being none left willing to conduct the court, the villagers applied to the Magistrate for aid. JONATHAN TALBOTT was heard to laugh and say, “that by the time the Magistrate arrived, he would be free, for no power could hold him if he wished to be gone.” And men laughed at him, because the cellar was well lined in stone, and a man set to guard it day and night.

But on the morning of the tenth day, the Magistrate still had not arrived, but the cell was found empty, and the man who had been set to guard it was taken with the sleeping sickness. It was whispered that TALBOTT had been seen walking in the Hants-wood, and there were many lights in the old Hall.

The Magistrate sent word that he should arrive the next day, and to make ready by erecting a gibbet with which to hang anyone found guilty of witchcraft, because the Lord commands that THOU SHALT NOT SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE. And the gibbet was swiftly built that same day, and the men of the village made ready to take TALBOTT into custody again.

***

That same night, Hants-wood Hall was burned. It was said that the Devil himself came to drag JONATHAN TALBOTT into the fiery pit, because the Devil would not countenance TALBOTT daring to say that there was no power that could hold him, when he should have said, no power but that of his master.

The next day after that, the villagers sent a party to seek for the Magistrate on the road, and found his coach overturned and his horses gone mad. The Magistrate was within the coach, and found to be afflicted with that same sleeping-sickness as had taken his brethren.

# # #

“What does it mean: the sleeping sickness...the taking of the souls? The appearance of the devil...a fire...a black dog...“ Sherlock was lost in the puzzle.

“This ‘sleeping sickness’...Sherlock, it’s what happened to you. It was Talbott that night, it had to have been; you were right. It’s just like in this story. Talbott did something to you, he made you fall into that sleep state. And the Omegas, too -- but they all recovered, in the end. And this story doesn’t say if any of them ever recovered.”

“Yes. Talbott was trying to...take my soul, obviously, he and Maxim. All of our souls. We stopped them doing whatever it was they could have accomplished, with the Omegas. For that, they must have needed to finish whatever was going to happen down in that chamber, I’m guessing. With those bronze knives, and the stones. There would have been a bonfire. And then you brought me back, John, you stopped them taking me, and you brought me back.”

“Well, if you believe this story, and it is just a story, notice if you will how the devil treats Talbott- Talbott disrespected the devil. And was dragged to hell for it. Anyway, I still don’t understand how you woke up.”

“I think I do. We’re bonded, John.”
John shook his head. "Bonding is . . . there’s nothing like it, and I won’t say it’s not a powerful thing, maybe too powerful. But I’ve never yet seen it cause an illness, or cure one."

Sherlock was thoughtful, but said nothing more. John was suddenly ill from these arcane, wicked books, which was strange. In all the hours he had ever spent with these things, intimately cataloguing Pridiax’s occult collection, he had never once felt anything evil in this room. Now he felt a sort of cold dread. He started putting the papers and books back where they belonged. He picked up the tract concerning Talbott, hesitated, then put in his jacket pocket.

##

Sherlock didn’t notice. He had found a small book bound in red leather, with many pictures. John looked over his shoulder and saw ancient drawings, each page of which grew progressively more intricate and obscene, and he leaned down and stroked one of the pages with his fingers. Sherlock tried to snatch it from him, but John grabbed his wrist and held it there.

"The Omega Sutra. You . . . did these things with Maxim."

"No. He loved to look at it. With me. It was for . . . after the crossing."

John advanced on Sherlock, pushing his way between his legs and pulling him close with his hand at the small of his back, pressing him back against the desk. Sherlock’s eyes looked wide and so innocent, and for a brief moment it actually made him angry. Because whatever he had been up to with Maxim Purcell had obviously been far from innocent, and Sherlock should have known that.

"Did you promise to take the crossing with Maxim? Did you break that promise?" John seemed distrustful. Sherlock shivered.

"No, John, I've told you, never. I said-- it’s why he gave me the Heatwave. I told Maxim. . . I wouldn't go with him. That I wanted . . . "

John pressed up harder, and Sherlock was forced to back up until he was sitting up on the desk. He wrapped his legs around John, entrapping him as firmly as he himself was trapped.

"What did you want?"

Sherlock turned away, his face burning. Something about John's suspicion made him feel almost guilty, which was not right. He hadn't given himself up to Maxim.

"I told Maxim. . . I couldn't imagine taking the crossing with anybody but you. That I was prepared to wait for you."

"You were so sure then? That I'd come to you, in the end? Did you take advice from Maxim how to pull it off, maybe?" John's hand was at the back of his neck now, forcing him to look down into his face. He didn't like John's look, it was almost cruel. He jerked away. He was not terribly good at reading emotions, but he was very good at deducing motives. This felt like John was trying to hurt him. Which made no sense, he must be wrong. John would never do that.

Now he felt rebellious. John had no idea, really, what he had been prepared to give up. He felt his temper, usually inaccessible, rising up.

There was a knock at the door. "Time to go, Mr. Holmes."

"Wait," Sherlock said loudly. He felt John's possessive gaze searing him.
You belong to me now. Say it.

I belong to you now.

It was true.

But belonging did not mean he was John's property. They belonged to each other.

"John... I don't know what this is about," He said slowly, making sure his words were very clear. "But never say that to me again."

John smiled, and Sherlock didn't much like that either. There was nothing like warmth in it. John touched one of the drawings. A male Omega was seated on the edge of a bed, his legs wrapped tightly about the Alpha's waist, his arms wrapped around his shoulders.

There were both male and female permutations in the Omega Sutra but in this figure the Alpha was also a male, his stance wide, knees bent, holding his Omega steady with one arm as he thrust into him. His other hand was braced against the bed.

"What is this one?" John asked, his voice soft and warm now, all coldness gone. It went straight to his belly like fire.

Sherlock read out the title, but the drawing was a familiar one.

"The Thousand Strokes," he whispered.

There were words in Tibetan describing the act.

"What does it say? Can you read it?"

"Yes," Sherlock said. But he knew very well what it said. How many times had he fantasised, hopelessly, that John could be with him in this way?

Everything was different now, they were bonded, they had bred. They could have this now too. He suddenly had an intrusive vision of John standing between him and something cold and dark, keeping him and the baby safe. He knew what it meant. Despite his limp and the tremor in his hand, John was very strong.

Sherlock translated the ancient words:

"First, the Omega opens him/herself, legs and arms making a circle around the Alpha.

Second, The Omega holds him/herself still and silent, that the focus of the Alpha shall be complete.

Third, Alpha and Omega being prepared, the Alpha enters.

Fourth, The Alpha and Omega begin by being still together for the space of ten heartbeats.

Fifth, Whereupon, a single thrust by the Alpha, followed again by the stillness of ten heartbeats.

Sixth, Whereupon, thereafter, as many thrusts shall be delivered by the Alpha as the previous two together, thusly: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55..., each followed by the stillness of ten heartbeats, until the Alpha reaches the pinnacle.

This act contains within it the essence of Alpha and Omega, giver and receiver; and when both partners meditate upon the pinnacle without attaining it, they will at length reach the highest...
They stared into each other's eyes, pupils flying open with sudden lust, wide and black. John thrust hard between Sherlock's legs so that he could feel him, so ready.

"Do you want this for us? Do you want to feel me do that to you?"

There was a rapping again at the door. "Mr. Holmes, Doctor Watson, we have to go now."

Sherlock's hand reached down, touched him. "Yes," he breathed, "but not here, and we have to go."

John undid his flies roughly, dragging on Sherlock's zips and pulling his trousers down. Now they were both exposed. "Yes here. We going to start," he said, feeling the wetness between his legs, stroking gently with his fingers. "You want me to start. Tell me."

He didn't want to say no. He wanted to do it, he had always wanted this. He ignored the strange books and the men waiting outside the door. There was only the two of them.

"Yes," he whispered and wrapped his arms and legs around John, just like in the picture, just like in his own imaginings.

John thrust in and instantly stopped, and Sherlock shuddered and then held still as they counted out ten heartbeats. The power of the exercise was immediately made clear. It was almost impossible to maintain that stillness, to hold back from pounding into one another, the prohibition making it that much more tempting. Mindful that the act required him to be silent, he clamped his lips and teeth over John's shoulder, and bit hard. John's cock was thickening, lengthening, almost as big as when they were in heat. He couldn't have moved now if he had wanted to. But he didn't have to, that was not his role. His role was to remain still, and receive.

One thrust, and John made it count, pulling out slow, pushing in even slower, so that Sherlock could feel every inch, and the flare of his head when it breached him. Fully seated within him, Sherlock held himself still and silent around John's cock, and they waited out the ten heartbeats, no sound but their breaths coming harder. Sherlock felt his wetness flowing now, and when John withdrew for the next stroke, the slickness was divine. He wanted to cry out with how magnificent it felt, but he bit down harder on John instead, rewarded with a hissing exhale and a throb of his cock that told him that John felt this as much as he did. He felt the hard tension in John's shoulders as he held him up and held himself back at the same time, and thrust in again, slow and deep.

Ten heartbeats, and his own cock was on fire, hard and leaking, and he ground it against John's belly, swallowing the whimper that wanted to escape his throat. More wetness.

He knew what came next: two strokes. It was unbelievable that he felt more at John's two strong measured thrusts than he had ever felt before, even in the throes of heat, thrusting and pounding that did not end. The simple fact that there would be only two, and that he would have to wait for more with perfect stillness, was an exquisite form of torture. He was knew without a doubt that he was going to come, but only the Alpha's climax was to be delayed in order to find the higher plane. Nirvana. So long as he remained still and silent, he could come. And he wanted to, he needed to. He knew John felt it, pressing him in even closer to let his cock grind against him even harder with the next thrust, the first of three.

On the first thrust, he felt his balls draw up. On the second thrust, the hardness of his cock doubled and his head felt as if it was on fire. John paused just long enough to let him fully feel his
hardness filling him up, stretching him, sweetening the anticipation into almost pain before driving in with the third and final stroke, harder than any that had come before, and then the pause, and that was the end. The room fell away before a white hot flash as he came around his mate’s cock with as much control as he could, holding so still on the outside but shuddering violently inside, ripples and clenching that he knew John could feel all around him, cum flowing hotly between them, an orgasm that only began to fade at the tenth heartbeat.

But instead of thrusting again, five thrusts, he didn’t think he could take it, John pulled out swiftly and kissed him hard and deep when he did whimper a little to feel himself empty again. He clung to John, he never wanted to move.

“We’ve just begun, love. Don’t lose count. When we go home you’re going to feel what it takes to reach that higher plane.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, bit John’s lips. He loved to see them redden, loved to see John lick them. He opened his eyes again to look, and saw John looking back at him with so much love, such fathomless desire that the room and all the evil contained in the books and papers that surrounded them dissolved into nothingness.

They were floating.

“I’m already there, John,” he said.

# # #

Half an hour later, John and Sherlock walked hand in hand through the doors of an anonymous warehouse in Battersea.

to be continued. . .
 CHAPTER THIRTY TWO - BRIMSTONE

Track: Herbst9, White Ashes (Black Smoke)"
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBxKHx73XVM"

Vauxhall Arches, Arches 60 - 70, Vauxhall, London. 5 November, around 2:00 a.m.

Maxim Purcell was trapped in the material plane. So long as his soul was bound to a 17th century sorcerer and his demon familiar, he could not escape.

Earthbound, his powers constrained, Maxim was plagued by seemingly insurmountable obstacles to his ultimate desires. He remained determined to break through, and meditated upon this ceaselessly. But his immediate challenge was that in the here and now, this body was nearing the end of its usefulness. It was very hard for a psychic vampire to sustain two principal souls within one human frame.

Soon, they would have to move on to a new form. For this event, Maxim had grand designs: then, he would fulfill his schemes for himself, for Sherlock, and even for Mycroft. But to do it, he had to survive and stay strong.

His psychic hunger was becoming unbearable. He had an unquenchable appetite that material food would never assuage. Being a psychic vampire required a steady supply of malleable souls. Fortunately, they were to be found everywhere, briefly sustaining but disposable.

Souls such as Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s, souls possessing fluidity between darkness and light, embodied in beauty and strength, were the rarest of treasures.

# # #

It was desperate work to hang on, to remain present and intact in the body of Critchley. The
unlucky police officer had been their refuge of last resort when Maxim’s own body had been destroyed on the brink of his triumph. Critchley's soul was nearly gone now, all that remained was a tiny, almost powerless spark, fragments of memory and personality. And outwardly he was still Critchley-- unless one looked into his quicksilver eye, the sign of the occult force that animated him.

Maxim loathed this flesh. He detested its Alpha scent, crude and repellent, so different than the rich and powerful notes of Mycroft Holmes, the luscious amber musk of Sherlock. His soul longed to take flight.

But he and Talbott were spirit-bound now, a magical bond as strong, maybe stronger, than the soul bonding of Alphas and Omegas. If he tried to release from Critchley’s body now Maxim feared he would simply disperse: a formless, powerless consciousness, absorbed back into the infinite.

He and Talbott were spirit-bound, but not merged. Not yet. He knew that soon, Talbott would try to conquer his soul, as he had so many others. As Maxim himself had done to so many weak souls. He indulged himself in the precious memories of the erotic deaths of the Sleeping Beauties, their souls easily embracing his as they left their dying bodies behind according to the ancient ritual laid down by the great mage Aleister Crowley:

That the sacrificial one be bound and erotically stimulated by all means, high and low, pleasure and pain, by the efforts of devoted initiates taking turns together, without cease, denying the sacrificial one rest or sleep but persisting until the spirit departs and the body perishes in ecstasy.

As for the cause of his present imprisonment -- Maxim had finally admitted to himself that he was imprisoned--- he had been deceived, of course. One of Satan's names was The Deceiver.

He cursed the day that he had found that infernal book, but he needed it one last time.

He plotted how to accomplish this.

Clearly, he would need help.

# # #

There were faster, cruder ways to obtain fresh souls than Maxim’s elaborate indulgence when killing the Sleeping Beauties. This is why they had come to VoHo. Maxim and Talbott targeted a rent boy, hovering at the doors of a club under the Vauxhall Arches. He would serve.

They mobilised their earthly body. Critchley approached the boy, flashed some money, easily coaxed him into a shadowy corner. He wore dark sunglasses, which would ordinarily be very strange in the middle of the night. In this neighborhood it didn't rate a second glance.

When Critchley had him up against the wall he gave the boy the fatal kiss, sucking out his soul, unraveling it from the base of the spine and down from the top of his skull like an ethereal snake, swallowing it right into his open mouth.

Thus energised, Critchley waved down a cab.
"Where to?" The cabbie didn't even register the sunglasses. Critchley smiled.

"Regents Park." This time of night, it would be easy to find a secluded corner in which to open themselves to possession by the demon.

He had work to do.

Olivia Urquhart’s Flat, Primrose Hill, London. 5 November, 4:00 a.m.

Olivia Urquhart was an early riser.

This particular November morning she was methodically sorting through the day’s agenda items, many hours before she would take the helm of the office of Carlton Davies, MP and rising star in the Conservative Party. Due to her tireless dedication, as well as her not-inconsiderable brilliance, diplomacy and charm, Davies was on the fast track for Prime Minister. It could happen sooner than anyone had dared hope.

She was having tea in the kitchen with her bottomless stack of work papers, listening to the steady patter of rain. She scanned a classified report concerning Operation Whiteshadow. As usual, the report left many unanswered questions.

"Infernal obfuscation," she muttered with deep irritation. She wrote and underlined the phrase for emphasis in her firm, bold hand on the topmost sheet.

There was a soft knock at her back door. This door led from the kitchen to the garden. Which was walled, surrounded by wrought iron, and locked.

So there should be no reason at all why anyone should be at that door at four o’clock in the morning.

She briefly regretted having succumbed to the charms of her precious period flat, which had no security at all. She had nearly bought a flat in a new highrise, but in a fit of spontaneity had decided that her life had far too much in it of sterile security, and far too little of quirks and coziness.

As such, there were no security cameras, triple locks, alarms, or anything else between her and whoever was on the other side of the flimsy back door. Of course she had meant to install security, but her own private life was very far down the list of her priorities. The road to the Prime Minister's office did not allow for detours for reno projects.

She considered calling the police and reporting an intruder. But her mobile was upstairs on her nightstand and the nearest house telephone was in the study at the front of the flat. She stepped silently backwards so whoever was out there wouldn't hear her footfall.

Her dilemma resolved. A man’s muffled voice sounded through the door.

“Miss Urquhart? I'm with the police. Mr Holmes asked me to see that you’re all right.”

She paused. It was astonishing that he could have heard her footstep through the closed door.
“Mycroft Holmes? Why ever shouldn’t I be?”

“Could you open up? Please. So I can report that you’re all right.”

“Why doesn’t Mr. Holmes ring me himself?”

“I can’t say, ma’am. He is in charge of the Sleeping Beauties investigation. . . he is very busy I’m sure.”

Now she was feeling foolish. No one but one of Mycroft’s own men could be privy to these details.

She opened the door.

# # #

The man standing on her back doorstep looked very disheveled and exhausted, even though his face was shadowed under the hood of a rain slicker. She noted with relief that it bore a Scotland Yard insignia. Still, something about him was not what she had expected. Then again, she imagined the officers on the Sleeping Beauties case must be under a great strain.

“Forgive me, please come in out of the rain. Will you have some tea? I hope you don’t mind the kitchen,” she said. "May I take that?” She indicated the wet slicker.

“No,” he said. After a pause, he sat down at the table, water dripping to the floor. “Thank you.”

She placed a teacup before him. He put down his hood, head down. She thought he must be even wearier than he looked. He seemed nearly dead on his feet.

But this rude police officer wasn't even drinking his tea; he was just sitting there as if he owned the place. He leisurely consulted his watch.

“I’m afraid I have quite a lot of work to do before the office today,” she said firmly. Which was true. “As you can see, I’m quite fine. It’s not as if the Sleeping Beauties murderer is loose at my doorstep!”

The officer reached out and touched the Whiteshadow report she had just been marking up. He was reading her writing upside down, a skill she herself possessed. His shoulders started shaking.

She realised he was laughing.

Now she began to feel uncomfortable, actually nervous -- and Olivia Urquhart was never nervous. This officer was behaving very strangely. Really, Mycroft was starting off on the wrong foot -- having her watched at odd hours in the name of “protecting her.” She had taken the trouble to learn that Mycroft had voyueristic tendencies, but she had no intention of indulging them. Yet.

She stood up, intending to fetch her mobile and speak to Mycroft, or failing that, the man’s superior officer.

He put his foot out to block her path.

“I don’t believe I got your name, officer. I’ll see your identification now, I think,” she said very
sharply to cover her rising fear.

He tossed a card on the table, tapped it with his fingertip. It was a strangely flamboyant gesture, something of the flourish of a magician in it.

The card said, Detective Inspector James Critchley. It was a legitimate-looking Metropolitan Police ID. Still, something about his gesture, the way he moved his hand, was somehow unnatural; she felt an imperative to flee. Now.

He shrugged out of the jacket, and when it dropped to the floor a dark shadow unfurled, rising up behind him.

“*Infernal,*” he said quietly. “It is wonderful how often people anticipate my coming.”

He stood up and swiftly crowded her back against the wall almost faster than she could follow. Her admirable nerves betrayed her because her scream, when it came, was far too late.

He had her in an iron grip that covered her mouth. She clawed, but he seemed indifferent even though she could feel her nails gouging deep into flesh, drawing blood. Her twists and kicks were fruitless; he might have been carved of stone.

She finally stopped struggling and looked him full in the face, and the eyes looking back at her were opaque pools of quicksilver. His expression shifted as rapidly as quicksilver, too: greed, agony, fury, and a grim sort of mirth.

She panted under his hard hand, she couldn’t get enough air. She would suffocate in the peculiar atmosphere that radiated from him and began to envelop her. From it, there would be no escape. She had never directly experienced such a thing until this very instant: she knew that her belief that she ever had before was a laughable, almost childlike error.

It was the sort of thing you read about in books, saw in films. Heard preached about in church. Malevolent. Sinister. Evil.

###

“I’m not Critchley,” he said. “Not anymore. But he is with us. Shall I introduce myself?”

The voice creaked and rattled. It sounded as if it came from a great depth, as though this man’s vocal chords were being operated by some sort of remote power rather than his own body’s nervous impulses.

She shook her head in the negative. She didn’t want to know this thing’s name. She was dimly puzzled that she could move at all.

"No? Perhaps you prefer to guess."

Its breath had a faint foul odor, something like a factory smokestack on one of their tours to reach
out to industry. The odor made one think of fire, although paradoxically its breath was cold against
face. Smoke and sulphur. There was a word for this odor.

Brimstone.

Its cold hand moved to her throat, freeing her mouth, then tightened, a threat. No screaming. Her
heart ought to be hammering out of her chest but the truth was she couldn’t really feel her body
anymore at all. She was certain that the thing’s next move would be to hurl her into the air like a
rag doll, and break her bones against the stone floor.

The darkness behind him expanded and began to move. She perceived with a fatal sense of
inevitability that the darkness was in fact a pair of shadowy, immaterial wings. They blew an
invisible cloud of ill omen over her and with it, she was consumed with despair. But not disbelief.
This was frighteningly, vividly real.

"Speak," it commanded.

"You are...are you. . . the Devil?"

"You are a born flatterer," he said approvingly. "I am not He. I've never had the privilege of being
...personally presented. Yet. But I do His bidding."

"Then you are. . . "

"Go on!" Here a wide grin, showing strangely yellow teeth.

". . .a demon," she whispered. Her voice shook and her legs felt nerveless. Everything was getting
dark.

"Yes. Now, none of that," he shook her hard to make sure she stayed conscious.

She snapped awake. And then she couldn't help her haughty laugh. This thing-- this demon--
wasn't really harming her; it was talking to her. And so, it had to want something.

Just like politics.

"Let me go. I won't scream." Horrid visions of the demon assaulting her filled her mind. Of
course, it was an Alpha. Somewhere under the strange sulfurous odor was a distinct Alpha
signature, acrid and stale. She wondered if it was actually this Critchley’s own scent. . . or if
demons possessed permutations, the same as humans. She stopped herself from further
contemplation of this terrifying subject. What if it could read her thoughts?

The demon leered.

"No, you won't scream. And it wouldn't help you at all if you did."

Now she began to struggle again, with all her strength, which was utterly futile. The demon
pushed her down. There was a huge booming, cracking sound as if the entire flat had been rigged
with explosives. She covered her ears against the deafening sound. The demon watched her
cowering through those mirror-like eyes. And then it happened again. It was as though the whole
world were coming apart. She fell to her knees.

"Oh, God help me," she shrieked. Dimly-remembered prayers came to her lips.

"Shut up. You don't even believe in God. You haven't said a genuine prayer since you were a
child. Little Zoe Keller was so sick -- you prayed to God not to take her. But of course, in his infinite mercy, he did take Zoe, didn’t he?"

She gulped and closed her eyes. She never, ever permitted herself to think about her lost friend.

"Am I right?"

He pressed down on the top of her head with his cold hands, indicating that she must nod in agreement. She nodded.

"You are a liar, as well as a flatterer. The truth is that you asked God to take little Zoe instead of you, yes? Who do you think answered that prayer?"

"What do you want with me?" She was gasping, choking with fear, out of her mind with terror. The remaining fragments of her rational mind told her to flee but her body could not move from this spot: kneeling, a supplicant, pinned under the demon’s cold hand.

"Your help,” the demon said in a strangely confidential tone. "You are to marry a man called Mycroft Holmes?"

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You’re coming onto your heat. Slut. Make him come to you.”

She flared at the slur, then realised that it was important not to encourage him by reacting. “Why do you want that?” She asked sharply, the aristocratic tones that made her underlings jump.

“Temper, temper. All you need to know is that if you refuse me, I’ll take you instead. Omega bitch. You are already used to making such bargains, Olivia.”

“What do-- what do you want me to do?”

The demon smiled, a stiff, unnatural movement in a strangely weary human face. She shuddered and tried to turn away, but he forced her head up, made her look into his silvery eyes.

“Asking for a demonstration, Olivia? Invitations to demons are very powerful. And you are already on your knees.”

She made a lunge for the kitchen drawer, there were knives inside. He slapped her down with a slight gesture that knocked her flying, and her head struck against the edge of something hard. Maybe the marble counter. She saw stars, felt hot blood trickle. The demon advanced on her, tearing his trousers away as if they were mere paper, and his stale Alpha pheromones exploded into a poisonous fog of sulfurous musk that spoke shamefully to her Omega flesh, so close to heat.

Dark wings closed around her, and she shut her eyes tight against what was coming.

* * *

To be continued. . .
Sherlock, John, Mycroft and Lestrade sat together in a grey industrial space: smooth concrete floors, dull metal columns, tin ducting up the walls, high windows painted over with grey paint. There was a large metal door at the opposite end of this space. John noted a few obvious cameras and figured there were more unseen ones.

The cold radiated up from the concrete through the soles of John’s shoes and crept up his legs. He shivered and closed his eyes, just for a moment, in order to push away the things that must be kept away. His left leg throbbed. He felt Sherlock’s gaze on him, and he straightened and opened his eyes again to see Sherlock look away as if he hadn’t really noticed a thing.

Which meant, of course, that he had seen everything.

###

“We -- MI5 -- need to understand everything-- down to the smallest detail-- of that night,” Mycroft said seriously. “And so, we are asking you to submit to a deep neural debriefing.”

Mycroft made no mention of the Whiteshadow program, or of his own astonishing abilities. Having been sworn to secrecy, Lestrade kept his mouth shut but was disturbed by knowing, and John and Sherlock in the dark. Mycroft had assuredly breached some very serious security by revealing it, but Lestrade knew without question that Sherlock and John would never betray this secret. He intended to pursue this with Mycroft.

“How is it done?” Sherlock asked, instantly fascinated. John gripped his leg under the table, warning; as a doctor, the words “deep neural” had an ominous ring. He was already determined that there was no way that he was going to let Sherlock undergo such a thing, for the baby’s sake.

“It is far superior to hypnosis or sodium pentothal,” Mycroft said. “The portions of the brain where memories of the target events reside are stimulated. Theoretically, a person’s entire life could be reconstructed.”

“How do you know what’s real?” Lestrade asked. He had worked with hypnotists, and had a healthy respect for the good ones. The bad ones could ruin your investigation in a single hour. He was also thinking of the murderers who had been told to kill by irresistible voices and visions. They could describe their “reality” in great and vivid detail.

“It can only give us the reality in the subject’s brain. If it is delusion, that will be the end result.”

“Garbage in, garbage out,” Sherlock sniffed. He hugely resented forensic innovations that he had not invented, improved upon, or made obsolete. Then Sherlock flashed a rare smile at his brother. “How long do you suppose it will take me to hack your system?”
“I shall have to order you not to do such a thing. I don’t like to think of you being tried for cybercrimes whilst pregnant. I know how you love a good drama -- with yourself in the starring role -- but please try for once to think of your reputation, Sherlock. For your child’s sake.”

Lestrade bit his tongue so that he didn’t laugh out loud, unbelievable that he could even be thinking of laughing at a time like this, but Mycroft was perfectly serious and at his absolute most pompous. Sherlock looked highly pleased with himself. Apparently no day was complete without discomposing his brother, and nobody did it better.

###

"Let’s get to it, then. Is there any special preparation?" John asked impatiently.

"No; but there are drugs to facilitate the process. We have staff and equipment here for two subjects at once."

"But there are three of us," Sherlock shot out suspiciously. He already knew what was coming.

"Yes. Sherlock, the process is too risky for you, in your condition. For you, we have an MI5 hypnotist here."

Sherlock frowned. “Because of the drugs? Can they be dispensed with?”

Mycroft looked very stern. “Not entirely, and no. The process can be. . . painful. No lasting damage, but very stressful. Very bad for an unborn child.”

“Not happening,” John added, his voice tight. His hand on Sherlock’s leg gripped harder for reinforcement. “I mean it, Sherlock. No.”

“Really, John, Mycroft. You think I don’t understand? No promises about the hacking bit, though. Surely that’s safe -- for the baby, I mean. Might even be quite enriching-- I could explain to it, while I’m coding. They say the baby can hear you, it might as well listen to something that isn’t boring.”

Sherlock stretched a little, like a cat, and folded his hands gently over his belly. It was very interesting how comforting this felt. He wondered if the baby could feel it too, so early on. He liked to think that it did. And that feeling was so remarkable that his brain momentarily locked up and he was struck dumb, just smiling crookedly to himself.

He realised he had been just sitting there like that for some moments, because Lestrade looked amazed, Mycroft, wistful, and John, as if he wanted to take him in his arms and crush him with kisses. Time to get this over with and perhaps, if he was lucky, take John on a short journey to the Channel Islands. He was still convinced that Doctor Jesperson could be their best hope. Neurophysics could shed some light on the phenomena of psychic vampirism; better than old books of folk tales about witches and demons.

At least that is what he wanted to believe.

“Anyway, a hypnotist won’t get anything new out of me. I can remember everything in perfect detail until just before--”

Mycroft put his hand up. “Sherlock, don’t. I’m sure you and John have discussed it, but it’s very important not to influence one another’s memories. This case represents a breakthrough such as we never hoped for.”
John didn’t like the sound of this. He felt weighed down by the need to tell Mycroft and Lestrade what had happened, what they were really up against. He had personal experience in battling evil, and he knew what it was like to lose. Time was not on their side. He felt the pressure of time slipping away from them, like the feeling you got on the edge of the beach when the wave sucked the wet sand from beneath your feet.

“And I really, really don’t want to remember any of it,” John said, his voice rising with agitation. “In fact, I’m not sure what I do remember can even have happened. Not the way it seems. If this debriefing will help me remember, I’ll admit it -- I don’t really want to. But I will, if it helps us catch this thing. Wait -- you say you hoped for something like this? Don’t you know it’s -- evil?”

“Evil is a subjective construct . . . in this field,” Mycroft said remotely.

“Are you saying, Mycroft, that you don’t personally believe in good and evil? Right or wrong?” John’s voice was softer now but the words cut, razor-sharp. In his mind, a closed door was cracking open. Behind it was bottomless agony, endless terror.

And evil.

# # #

Mycroft unconsciously stepped back in the face of this moral inquisition. This was not what he had expected when he assembled them together. How could he answer? His words didn’t sound so noble in the face of John’s implacable judgment. Now he felt Lestrade's disapproval too.

Mycroft was aware of Lestrade’s faith: lapsed Catholic, yes; but a Catholic was a Catholic. Lestrade seemed to be weighing him anew, undoubtedly finding Mycroft Holmes a huge disappointment. The Holmeses did not practice religion. They placed what faith they had in their own powers and abilities.

Sherlock was obviously impatient with the ethical debate. “What about the case? The Sleeping Beauties murders can’t be ‘classified’ -- you can’t, it’s been too much in the press.”

“Hmmm. There’s been a new murder, and yes, that is classified, Sherlock. Because it’s clear Constable Elizabeth Stirling fell victim to a psychic attack. She was Detective Inspector Critchley’s girlfriend. You recall Critchley was with Lestrade, inside the Hall that night. And he’s been seen prowling around 221b. There’s a manhunt on. That’s our prime focus. He’s the new Sleeping Beauties killer.”

Sherlock and John exchanged a grim look. “Or the same killer. We’re ahead of you, Mycroft. Psychic attack - we have a psychic vampire. And Critchley isn’t exactly Critchley anymore. We aren’t finished with Maxim.”

Sherlock paused here, thinking that he was probably offending Lestrade’s professional sensibilities here. He was struck by an impulse to be courteous; John appreciated that, he knew.

“I’m sorry, Lestrade,” he said awkwardly, “I didn’t mean to, ah, cast aspersions on your markmanship. You certainly got your man. Well done you. Not your fault that we’re dealing with Maxim’s soul, not his body. Bullets aren’t enough, apparently.”

He glanced at John for approval, but John was tense and distracted and hadn’t really heard what he said. Sherlock was mildly annoyed. Possibly, he allowed, John was thinking of the baby. That would be understandable, he felt similarly. He decided he would be forbearing with John’s remoteness for now. Later, he promised himself he would recapture his full attention.
Lestrade nodded, mystified. The entire point of Sherlock’s unprecedented praise escaped him. But there was nothing new in that. “Er, thanks, Sherlock. I guess.”

John ground his teeth, frustrated. This was just the problem. Marksmanship. Nobody in this room could touch him for that, not that he wanted to talk about it. He didn’t want to talk about anything anymore. It was time to start shooting things. He really needed to find a way that his gun could work in this situation.

“Silver bullets?” he muttered under his breath. They needed more time at the Pridiax Archive. He felt that the answers had to be there, in the old demonologist’s books; not here in this cold sterile warehouse.

Lestrade put his face in his hands. It was starting to sink in. Mycroft had told him some remarkable things tonight. But not the part about psychic vampires.

“Look,” he said heatedly, “Elizabeth Stirling was a cop. As far as I’m concerned she died in the line of duty. Critchley being a cop -- no matter what you think he is now -- just makes it that much more a sin. I’m going to get our revenge on the bastard. With prejudice. I’m ready to get on it.”

John stood up. He couldn’t bear the cold under his feet anymore. He started moving around the room, restless, but then everyone was watching him and trying to look like they weren’t noticing that his limp was back. He wondered if he would have to go back to the cane. He swore under his breath and stopped.

“Lestrade’s right. We’re wasting time. When are we going to talk about how to stop this -- thing?”

“We will stop him, John,” Sherlock said steadily, reassuringly. “We all will.”

John felt exposed; he was the one that should be reassuring Sherlock, not losing himself in the fear that he felt all around him, and worse, inside.

##

**Operation Whiteshadow Research Station No. 3. Debriefing Room “B”**.

John looked around the room where he would be “debriefed.” Which, he gathered, meant he would be answering questions from complete strangers, some sort of MI5 scientist types, about everything that he remembered and didn’t want to remember about All Hallows Eve. His heartrate was already inching up. He took a deep shaky breath.

The room was dimly lit, perhaps meant to be a soothing sort of twilight. There were faint musical notes were in the background, almost too low to hear. Also supposed to be relaxing, he figured. He didn’t like it at all.

There was a clinical-looking bed, with soft yet serious-looking restraints. Also, an intravenous drip.

And next to the bed, an innocuous square box on a portable metal desk. Attached to the box by a cord was a sort of helmet, like you would wear cycling. This would be affixed to his skull.

There were two men in white coats. Doctors, or maybe a doctor and nurse. They watched him practiced, plastic expressions mimicking warmth and friendliness. John wasn’t fooled.
“Now don’t be put off by the apparatus, Doctor. It doesn’t deliver electric shock, this isn’t the 1930s. The headgear delivers electromagnetic impulses at 40 hz, which has been found to increase memory function and cognition.”

He felt strangely calm despite his racing heartbeat. It was almost inevitable that he should be in this place. He sat on the bed and allowed them to rig him up. His body felt very heavy already. He asked what was in the IV, but they would only say, “something that helps the process.”

The room was fading. Or it was here, but he was somewhere else. It was hard to tell. He close his eyes to try to clear the disorientation.

He felt his hand begin to tremble uncontrollably. His shoulder burned. His head was going to explode with pain that cut through it like an icepick. His pulse revved like a racecar engine and the calm of moments before vanished. The air felt very thin and cold and he couldn’t get enough air.

“Ah, I need a minute,” he said, trying to master himself. Trying to get back to calm. Soon they were going to make him remember; things he never wanted to remember, things he had tried for as long and hard as he could to forget.

“Take your time,” one of the white coats said.

Time.

He was falling backwards, back through space and time to a place outside of time; a place where time stopped, you were always stuck there, suspended in the same moment, a nightmare that never ended.

###

To be continued. . .
Warning for graphic description of torture.

Chapter 34. A Winter's Tale.

I dedicate this
to all those who did not live
to tell it.
And may they please forgive me
for not having seen it all
nor remembered it all,
for not having divined all of it.

- Dedication of Aleksander Solzhenitsyn to The Gulag Archipelago

Track: Les Friction, Torture: Listen to Torture

Savor the time and the trouble,

Just leave me trapped in the maze.

I'll live and die in this bubble,

But I'll never give in to your torturous ways.

It's torture,

I cower when you're near.

It's torture,

The scars born out of fear.

The horror,

Your soul so black and chilled.

It's torture,

The bomb was like any other bomb; their jeep flew into the air and exploded like any other jeep. John and his medic, O’Hare, were thrown out, flying high, glass and shrapnel and burning bits of rubber and plastic flying around them like a sandstorm.

O’Hare was on fire. They hit the ground, rolling, crashing against concrete rubble and twisted metal. John was stunned. When he was able to focus he crawled toward flames that were writhing on the ground nearby. His entire head reeling, his mind filled with white silence. Somehow he got his jacket off. It had been so cold that morning and he thanked God he had it now. He threw it over the flames. There was the distinctive smell of cooked flesh, strong enough to penetrate the smells of smoke and gasoline and burning rubber. O’Hare was screaming, mouth stretched wide, but John couldn’t hear. He pulled fragments of burning plastic off of O’Hare’s skin. His thigh was laid open to bone. He was glad he couldn’t hear.

It was going to be very bad.

It was amazing how much wreckage one jeep could make. He groped at his waist. No gun, no radio, no mobile. His uniform was in shreds. He was covered with a multitude of wounds of his own. He tried to pull O’Hare into the shade of a building on the side of the road, but then a shadow crossed the sun and he felt a hard kick to the back of his head, another to his gut, and he curled in on himself.

# # #

He looked up, squinting into the too-bright sun. There was a smell of foul breath on his face, and a thin young man with a deep tan and startling grey eyes was dragging him, searching him. There were other men standing behind him, watching. They were speaking in the Afghan tongue.

He croaked out the few words he knew, “I am a doctor,” and they didn’t believe him. He was wearing his gun holster. Empty. He clearly wasn’t a non-combatant. Not that that mattered here.

The men laughed, muttered. One of them reached down and tore his tags off. They all studied the tags, which clearly identified him as a doctor. Captain John H. Watson, M.D. One of them, who maybe could read, or had seen such symbols before, nodded sagely.

He put the tags in his pocket.

Then they put the hood over his head.
He couldn’t count the days. He wasn’t left in total darkness, but it was never really light either. He was in a stone room with a tiny window above his head, and a strong wooden door.

Whenever he was moved, which was often, they put the hood back on.

The first few hours he spent listening to O’Hare screaming, babbling, pleading, praying. O’Hare was an innocent youth of twenty-two from Devon. He wanted to be a doctor, and service in the Army was supposed to have paved the way. He had been in Helmand Province a bare two months. He idolised John Watson. John winced to see him blundering around Afghanistan, naive and coltish. A sitting target. He had tried to protect him when he could.

When he called out to O’Hare, helpless words of comfort and reassurance, someone eventually came and beat him until he stopped. By then it didn’t matter because O’Hare was quiet.

The first round of torture happened on that very first day.

These were sophisticated torturers. They knew the score. It was far better to torture without leaving marks. Deniability.

Also, the victim lasted much longer, which offered more variety. Delayed gratification had its rewards.

And so, at random intervals to keep him off balance and on edge, but no less than once a day and usually more, John was tortured. Thoroughly. By electric shock. They tried to vary the parts of the body, but no part was ever really spared.

Always, a wet towel was placed over his skin, which increased the horrific pain, but prevented telltale burns to his flesh. Torture that left no visible marks was in vogue.

As John spoke no Afghan and his torturers spoke no English, there was no purpose whatsoever to his torture.

It pleased them to torture him. He was their enemy.

Or perhaps, it simply alleviated boredom. Sometimes they made him wait a long time in the room, standing on his bare feet on the cold stone floor, waiting for them to start while they played cards and smoked.
One day, John perceived that there was one of these men for whom his torment was more personal.

On that day - the eighth day, as far as he could tell, he was hooded and marched out into what felt like a larger space. He was shoved onto his knees.

It felt like there was someone watching him who hadn’t been there before. He didn’t know how he knew this. He was almost hallucinating from lack of sleep, another of their favoured methods of torture. He estimated he hadn’t slept in four days. But now he was going to get perpetual rest.

He was going to be executed.

Everything came rushing down on him with an intensity and vividness unlike anything else he had ever felt in his too-short life. He tried to formulate a hasty prayer:

*Please God, let me live.*

He heard the countdown, the distinctive click of the gun, and then the bullet rang out.

Nothing happened.

It was all a game.

They all laughed.

# # #

The next day, they made him watch at gunpoint while they did the same to O’ Hare.

This was not nearly as amusing because O’Hare’s leg was so swollen from burns that he could not walk, let alone kneel. John knew he was delirious. ‘

But this day, too, it was all a game. After going through the entire mock execution, ultimately letting the bullet fly into the dirt, they pulled O’Hare shrieking with pain back to his feet. John tried frantically to communicate that he wanted to give the man medical aid, but they just shrugged, blank faces. Either they didn’t comprehend his pantomime, or more likely, didn’t care.

O’Hare would have extensive gangrene already, he knew. They had to know it too, if only because of the smell.

# # #

There followed a series of days, maybe three, maybe four, of particularly devoted and attentive torture, hour after hour, the shocks ripping through like ground glass being forced through his body down to the very cells. The pain was indescribably excruciating. His body suffered seizure after seizure and his muscles contracted in random spasms so violent that he was certain his bones would fracture. He knew it could happen.
Although electric shock torture was required much less exertion for the torturer than beatings, on these occasions his torturers found it necessary to work in shifts.

Sometimes they suspended him from ropes. Sometimes it was easier for them to tie him down to a table.

Nothing he could say, nothing he could scream, affected them in the slightest. It wasn’t as if he could tell them anything, anyway.

He would lose consciousness eventually. They nearly always roused him, started again with a vengeance. Sometimes they grew tired, or bored, or hungry, and left him alone for a while.

It was always very frigid down there, the stones radiating freezing cold into his body up through the soles of his feet. The freezing, thin winter air burned his lungs, which made his screams that much more agonising.

###

This pattern continued for an indeterminate period of time. All time was the same now.

He never really slept, even if he had the chance. You never knew when they were coming for you. Usually, though, it was at night. And when they left him alone in his cell, he was so wracked with pain that stayed with him, his sole companion, that sleep was nearly impossible.

He thought that if he ever lived to get out of here, that he would never be free of the pain. He never did get used to it. Every shock was as agonizing as the one before, or more.

###

He clung to the fantasy that an English-speaking torturer would materialise and ask him a question that he could understand at last, that then he would know at least what they wanted, even if it wasn’t something he could give.

Even though he knew by now that if there was something he could tell, there would eventually come a time when he would tell it.

This never happened.

When they finally gagged him, he understood absolutely that they were never going to want anything from him at all.

The torture took on an almost intimate quality, thankfully never explicitly sexual, but cloaked in ritual that both sides understood. They were on the same page.

There was no purpose to his existence, would never be any purpose to his existence, but to suffer agony upon agony, horror after horror.
This was the difficulty with deep neural debriefing, sometimes the mind was so deeply etched with certain traumatic memories that it could not be induced to go anywhere else.

Nothing was coming out about Hantswood Hall. But the white coats were not dismayed, not yet. The file had records about Afghanistan, about the PTSD. Nothing at all about his having been tortured. And so the subject's responses were unexpected. But in no way discouraging.

In MI5 generally, and Whiteshadow specifically, were well used to dealing with torture in all of its aspects. It was fundamental.

And so, the white coats were prepared to see if this subject's mind could be led through these deep-rooted memories of torture, to get to where they wanted to go.

"Doctor Watson. We want you to leave Afghanistan. You are not there any longer. It is over. You are safe, do you understand? We want you to think about driving in a car, driving to Hantswood Hall. Where did you hire the car?"

They kept at it, trying to trigger his brain to return to the beginning of that journey.

The subject wasn't responding. He was on another journey altogether.

"Up the dose," one said.

To be continued . . .
The Spark

Chapter Notes

Warning for explicit descriptions of torture in this chapter.

Chapter 35. The Spark

"A mighty flame followeth a tiny spark."

-- Dante, The Divine Comedy.

Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Winter.

John thought hard about killing himself. It would be very difficult; all he could do was dash his head against the wall, or perhaps starve himself, if they let him. He couldn’t decide if it was the unending pain, or the constant terror he had been reduced to, that made it more tempting that he should simply die.

But somewhere deep inside, a tiny yet steady flame burned that wanted life, and while he did nothing to nourish that flame, he also didn’t crush it out. It kept him going.

At some point, O’Hare must have died. He never saw him again. Then another wounded soldier was brought in, and as far as John knew, it was just the two of them. They were kept far apart from one another, but he could hear his voice. That was how he knew he was British too. In the beginning, he sounded just the same as he had: asking, arguing, begging, always ending with kicks or blows, shouting and abuse and laughter.

Then, silence.

# # #

He assumed his unseen companion was being tortured too.

He heard him being taken through a door sometimes, heard the stumble of his feet through his window, heard the men dragging him laugh and mumble, smelled their cigarette smoke as they
passed. He fantasised about having paper and a pencil with which to drop a note that the other man could find, that somehow they could establish some sort of communication. He even tried to imagine some way he could tunnel out of here, but he wasn’t even the slightest object with which he could dig even a spoonful of dirt.

He never heard the other man being tortured. But the torture happened in a place where no sound escaped. John knew this from long personal experience.

Even the sound of the other man being taken to the torture room invoked in him a Pavlovian response, terror spiked, and he cowered in his bed.

There were stairs leading down to the torture room. It amused them to knock him down it, sometimes. That was easy to do, he was bound and blindfolded. Sometimes, despite that faint flame inside, he hoped it broke his neck. John always imagined the torture room was a windowless cellar, deep below ground. He had to imagine it because they never took off his blindfold while they did their work on him. They didn’t want him seeing their faces, he guessed.

And this made him understand that they were intending to keep him alive for a while. It would be the day that they didn’t bother with the blindfolds that he would know he was done for.

###

He thought from the thinness of the air and the freezing temperatures that they were higher up the mountains than where he had been captured. The district’s “lords” who ruled over the opium trade had their homes up there. All that it meant to him, though, was that it was much colder than he would have been down in the valley. He was given nothing to warm himself but a thin, torn blanket, and he thought it likely he would freeze to death before winter was out, if they didn’t kill him first.

He had lost track of the days -- something he had sworn would not happen, but the shocks disoriented him so, it was very hard to tell one day from the next.

One day they brought him out together with the other prisoner, the first time they had ever seen each other’s faces. The strange faces were a revelation, they stared at each other, nodded slightly. They were alive. It was bitter cold and windy, and they shivered violently in their rags.

An older man came out, heavyset with silver hair and expensive-looking clean robes. The local “lord,” he surmised. John looked away from his face, somehow hoping against hope that he would not be noticed by this man. Sometimes he was completely amazed that he could still feel anything like hope.

But the man began yelling abuse at them, and held up a framed photograph of a handsome young Afghan man, flanked by three other men, wearing uniforms and carrying Kalashnikovs. One of them was this man.

John made a quick deduction with his feeble brain that this was the man’s son, and that the son was dead. No doubt, killed in the war. No doubt, killed by British soldiers. At least that was what the boy’s father believed. He had been wrong to hope. He instinctively steeled himself.

The man kissed the picture and put it aside. The other men said what sounded like prayers; not for them of course, but for the dead boy in the picture. Their voices were all familiar. John knew each
note of each voice, better than the voice of his own mother.

The “lord” strode to John and to his huge surprise, hung a silver cross around his neck. His hands were bound in front of him but they hadn’t covered his face this time. This gave him an idea of what was about to happen. He gestured, indicating John should say his prayers. He did the same to the other prisoner. John was astonished that the man should care for their souls at all, but perhaps he wanted a clean conscience, as much as could be.

This, John thought, was the end. He was filled with a fierce joy. He would be gone from here. Everything was over. He was ready.

Everything happened very fast. He heard the crack of a pistol and the sound of a man’s body slumping into the dirt beside him. He didn’t dare turn his head to look but in his peripheral vision he saw the man splayed facedown on the ground, twitch, then go still.

Then he felt a body move behind him, heard light footsteps in the dust, saw a shadow loom over him, and the click of a gun near his ear. With an unlooked-for return of hope, a wild, adrenaline-fueled surge, he thought that this was the last moment of his life, and if he was going to die right now, he could try to die fighting.

He kicked back hard, and his foot made contact with the shooter’s knee just as the gun went off.

The bullet meant for his head went through his shoulder like fire.

He rolled onto his back, still kicking, and the confused shooter tripped over John’s feet and the gun flew from his hand.

That was all it took. John’s hands closed around the gun as if a magnet had drawn it to him. He didn’t try to move from his back, there was no time for that, no time for anything but to clock the four men, the shooter halfway to his knees and three others watching from a distance, the whites of their eyes huge with amazed disbelief, reaching for their Kalashnikovs as he squeezed the trigger until he heard the empty click.

Four bodies hit the ground.

#  #  #

He pulled off his bonds with his teeth, bracing himself for an attack that didn’t come. Everything was unnaturally silent. He staggered to the fallen prisoner’s body. He had been shot in the head, but as sometimes happened, he still clung to life. John felt his own hot arterial blood spraying from his shoulder, hitting his face, and knew that he would bleed out soon. He pulled at his ragged shirt and made a rough hasty tourniquet at the shoulder, knowing it wouldn’t hold.

The man’s eyes were fading out. John gripped his hand.

“I’m John, John Watson,” he said. “I’m here.” It was all he could think to say.

A few snowflakes fell and melted on the man’s face.

He blinked once, twice, and was gone.
John searched for tags but of course, there were none. He took the man’s silver cross from his neck and put it in his pocket.

Then he stood up, already so dizzy with loss of blood and shock, and hastily rummaged in the fallen men’s pockets for bullets as he waited for a gunman to take him out. When he found bullets, he filled his pockets and loaded his new gun. He looked into their faces. These were his torturers. He had never seen their faces before. He wished they were alive to see his now.

Then he clenched his jaw against the pain and faintness and delivered coup de graces between their eyes. Just to be thorough.

He made his way out of the compound and into the streets. It looked like any other mountain town in Helmand. He staggered to a collapsed building a few yards away and sat down. There were no people here. He watched the remains of his shirt turn dark with his own blood, so fast. It started snowing harder. Everything got dark.

There followed a series of days, maybe three, maybe four, of particularly devoted and attentive torture, hour after hour, the shocks ripping through like ground glass being forced through his body down to the very cells.

Nothing he could say, nothing he could scream, affected them in the slightest. It wasn’t as if he could tell them anything, anyway.

"He's looping," one of the white coats said. "Let's bring him back."

Now they were getting concerned. Doctor Watson wasn’t coming back. They hurriedly prepared a hypodermic of something stronger.
John was only mildly surprised to see his body down there on the table, restrained, wearing a helmet attached to a long wire, that led to a box. His body was convulsing.

They were injecting his body with something in a hypodermic with a long needle. Something to pull him out of the dark, stop the pain. They didn’t know he was in the light now, or almost.

He noticed that he was apparently floating somewhere at the ceiling. His body didn’t hurt anymore. But the memory of pain was just there at his side, waiting to take him back. His mind was still in Afghanistan, a prisoner of pain and fear, where no one and nothing could be trusted; especially not these men in the white coats who had strapped him to a table and shocked his brain so that they could know everything they ever wanted to know about Maxim Purcell and Jonathan Talbott and the demonic force that he had promised could take his soul in exchange for Sherlock’s.

He knew now what was going on. This was the near death experience. These idiots had killed him on the table.

He thanked God that Sherlock hadn’t tried this. Then he felt sheer panic -- what if Sherlock somehow had done it anyway? Or worse, they put him through it, maybe against his will? What if it was happening right now, to him and to the baby. He had to find Sherlock.

# # #

He found that he could move his form. He could even see himself, something like a thin projection of what his physical body was like. He descended to the floor, away from the light shining above.

Could he pass through walls? How did this work?

He tried, and thought maybe if he concentrated hard he could do it. It felt possible. But just opening the door might be easier. He fumbled with the door handle, and it was locked from inside. There was a deadbolt. He started to work on that.

One of the white coats turned and stared.

“He’s projecting!” He shouted. “Jesus, we have to hold him. Doctor Watson, don’t be afraid. Stay where you are. Get help, call Holmes, now!”

This made no sense. Apparently they wanted to trick him into coming back to them. So they could shock him some more. Not happening. This was Afghanistan. He needed to find a gun. When he did, he would shoot these men dead.

Then it hit him. This wasn’t Afghanistan after all. Even though it felt like it. His body was freezing and wracked with agony. But he was in London, Battersea in London, impossible though it seemed.

If this was the end, if he was dead, something was probably coming for him now. Time to collect that debt. And when it came, he had to make sure that it never, never, thought of going for Sherlock. No matter what, he must be protected, he and the baby, from what was coming.
The door opened.

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On the other side of the door was an enormous black dog.

The beast was like no dog he had ever seen or even imagined, almost as high as a man. It exuded a sulphurous odor and had great red eyes that burned. It stood very still, it could almost have been a black marble statue of a jackal, some sort of idol.

John tried to look away but he felt himself forced to meet its stare; the beast’s entire being radiated cruelty and induced horror down to the very bottom of his soul.

“You tried to break your promise,” the dog said in the voice that could only belong to a demon.

John thought that surely the white coats must see and hear this, but they gave no sign. There was a great deal of frantic bustling about his body on the table, familiar to him as a trauma surgeon. They were trying to revive him.

“Do you know what happens when someone breaks their word to me?”

“I can guess,” John said. And he could. His entire mind, his entire being, was filled with Sherlock and the baby, and nothing could ever stop him from doing whatever it was going to take to keep them away from these strange hellish powers that were relentlessly pursuing them. Time to pay up. He owed it to Sherlock. It might be in his power to stop all of this madness; all he had to do was go.

“I swear I won’t break my promise. I’m ready now. But-- you have to keep your word. Sherlock can’t be touched. That’s how it works.”

“Yes,” the demon dog said. “But you aren’t going like this. I need you alive. I have work for you here.”

He felt a hot wind pushing his insubstantial form and then with a slam like a train wreck he was back inside the body of Captain John Hamish Watson, formerly of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, wracked with the aftershocks of freshly remembered tortures.

It felt like going to hell.

That was fine. He had survived hell once. He could do it again.

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Now the room was filling fast with a thick white vaporous substance, malodorous and animated with malevolent force. This was like the white mist that had tried to take Sherlock. The dog was summoning it up.

The dog stood utterly still with the hair on the back of its neck raised as the vapour rose around
them and swiftly engulfed the white coats. They slumped to the floor, and then the vapour was so thick he couldn’t see them and he didn’t know if they lived or died.

The vapour filled his own lungs, and he felt his soul turn black and hard around a warm core of radiance that was his bond with Sherlock. There was something horrifying about the way the cloud moved. He didn’t want it to touch him again. He could see the dog’s red eyes shining through as it moved to envelop it in a dense shroud.

John sat up on the table, breathed in and out, experimented with moving his body, turning his head. Everything worked but felt completely different in many indefinable ways; he knew now that he would never feel the same. He had been transformed. He felt toxic, polluted.

There was a gun laying at his feet. There should be no way for it to be there, but it was. It was cold and black and looked very tempting. He picked it up. He hesitated a long moment, his finger on the trigger. It felt perfect.

The demon dog laughed with a laugh that was neither animal nor human, but purely evil, from the nether regions. He didn’t know how he knew this, but it was as true as the earth traveling around the sun.

(It’s very very cold, so far from the sun.)

“No cheating. It won’t make a difference, obviously! Come,” it said, and John followed.

He remembered the conversation from seemingly a lifetime before,

“How do you know what is real?”

He didn’t know. Or maybe, he did, all too well. All he knew was that real or not, it was worse than any nightmare he had ever had, and his nightmares were very, very bad.

# # #

The door to the debriefing room flew open and the demon dog waited for him to walk out first, and so he did.

Sherlock was running down the corridor toward the debriefing room, then stopped short when he saw John framed in the doorway, a cloud of mist at his back. John felt the dog’s breath at his shoulder and he could tell that Sherlock could see its eyes.

“John! No!” Sherlock shouted, and his voice sounded very far away. "Stop, stay with me, John! Let him go!” He made a move toward him, to try to grab him, pull him away from the mist.

John aimed the pistol at Sherlock, a hot tear running down his cheek, knowing in his heart that he would have to make Sherlock believe it to keep him away. He had to save him from this fate, it was his alone now. Sherlock had never looked more beautiful to him than in that moment, pale and fierce and terrified by something beyond even the understanding of Sherlock Holmes.

They made a tableau of horror, the moment crystallising the reality of what had happened. It was over.
Now Mycroft was here, strangely unafraid. Mycroft was lunging toward him and Sherlock caught John by the sleeve, and John knew he ought to pull the trigger before he pulled them all down to hell with him.

“No, Sherlock! Let me go! I promised!” John shouted. “Mycroft, keep him back for God’s sake!”

Sherlock and Mycroft were very far away at the end of a long tunnel, all that remained of light in his world. He would go back to darkness. Much, much better him than Sherlock. He was used to it. Sherlock and their baby must stay safe in the light.

With a gust of hot wind that flattened everything in its path, the dog gave a deep growl and then they were sucked away toward an open door that John could only sense. The dog was at his side now and he was being carried along with it. He touched it for the first time, gripping its coarse black coat to keep from being swept away entirely. In the other hand he grasped the cross the white coats taken from his neck and put in his pocket. Because he intended to survive.

As he was pulled through to the other side, John shouted out with all his might with lungs still burning from the infernal mist,

“Sherlock!!! I’ll come back, somehow! Don’t you dare try to come after me!”

###

To be continued...
The Omega Sutra. Chapter 36. The Invisible Scars

*My brother, dearer than life, will I never look upon you hereafter?*

-- Catullus 65

**track:** Sigur Ros, Ara Batur. [Listen to Ara Batur, here](#)

Sherlock ran to the end of the corridor. There were alarms sounding, very loud, and flashing lights.

The concrete wall at the end of it was just what it should be - very solid, very cold. Nevertheless, he frantically pressed his hands all over it looking for a secret door, a hidden trigger, finding nothing at all. Yet for a few moments he had the uncanny sensation of an unseen void just beyond his reach, as if he were blindfolded and standing on the edge of an infinite precipice. Then, the sensation vanished. It convinced him that what he had seen -- John being swept away in white mist, almost faster than his brain could process -- had to have happened. Had to have been real, whatever passed for “real” any more.

The suggestion of two burning red eyes at John’s shoulder he desperately wanted to put down to a trick of the light but even that he had to accept with a deep creeping sensation. He supposed this must be what horror felt like.

Had John felt this too, or even worse?

As for how this thing had happened, here and now -- some sort of door to another place, there was only one explanation. His brother had brought John to this place, and here he had somehow been vulnerable to attack. His own body, bonded to John’s, still vibrated with echoes of a mysterious pain that had intruded upon him just minutes ago; he had pushed away the MI5 hypnotist, gone running out into the featureless corridor, and alarms had rung as the pain grew, and he felt very cold and afraid. This pain was dark and sharp and tingling like knives at his nerve endings.

Sherlock tried to soothe his body, tried to get on top of the pain and shut it out for the sake of the tiny life in his belly, as he knew he must.

###

Mycroft entered the debriefing room and found the white coats in a stupor, alive but senseless, and Sherlock standing stock still, eyes clouded over, and alarms were shrieking so loudly that he almost couldn’t think. Mycroft tried to go to him but Sherlock shouted over the clamour,

“You -- let-- this ---happen,” and rushed at Mycroft, but Mycroft refused to raise a hand to defend himself, then gently but powerfully restrained Sherlock with his arms around him, and let Sherlock howl. Mycroft virtually never exercised Alpha dominance over his headstrong Omega brother, and Sherlock hated it beyond anything when he did.
“Sherlock, no,” Mycroft said against his ear, over the piercing racket -- when would they shut it down?? -- as he tried to shape his voice into soothing tones. Still, his arms tightened harder around Sherlock, holding him back. “You’ll hurt yourself. You’ll hurt the baby.”

Sherlock fought and thrashed and wept tears of pure fury. This was real. John was gone. Finally, he stopped.

“Let me go,” he said coldly. Mycroft did, slowly, his hand still on Sherlock’s shoulder in case he started up again. But he abruptly knelt on the floor, next to the white coats. The alarm stopped.

“What did you do to John?” Sherlock shouted at them. The white coats could not answer; their eyes were dull and uncomprehending. Sherlock smacked one in the face to try to rouse him. Mycroft grabbed his hand.

“No, Sherlock. There is video,” Mycroft said. “We will find out presently.” Other white coats tried to rush into the room, and Mycroft allowed them to take the fallen ones and then forced them out just as Lestrade appeared, groggy but trying to shake it.

“They pulled me out -- what’s happened?” He saw Sherlock’s face. “Where’s John?”

Sherlock made a choked sound. “Taken.”

Mycroft said, “John’s vanished. Gone. I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay,” Lestrade said, trying to be calm in the midst of events so mystifying that he felt like he was going to completely lose his grip. He tried to focus. He had a hazy memory of standing in the library of Hantswood Hall, Mycroft turning to him with a shocked, pale face as sounds like huge explosions rocked the room.

“Where is Sherlock Holmes?” he had demanded.

“Sherlock is with us,” Maxim had replied, gloating. And then Maxim Purcell had disappeared into thin air only to reappear in the cold stone chamber below the Hall, with no apparent physical means to have done so.

If this is what had happened to John, the surreal memory gave Lestrade hope that John could still reappear somewhere else. Maybe, he already had.

# # #

Mycroft he set to work on the computer.

“With the alarms having been triggered, they’ll be trying to access the video footage. I want us to see it first. They’ll likely tamper with it. . . . there, I’ve put up a new firewall. It ought to hold for a short while. Until we’re done.”

They watched John standing next to the bed, looking at the white coats setting up the apparatus. Looking at the restraints. Mycroft thought he looked rather small suddenly, unlike his usual stance of quiet confidence, even subtle aggression. People underestimated John Watson.

The listened as white coats explained:

“Now don’t be put off by the apparatus, Doctor. It doesn’t deliver electric shock, this isn’t the
1930s. The headgear delivers electromagnetic impulses at 40 hz, which has been found to increase memory function and cognition.”

“Why is he so uneasy, John’s a doctor . . . he would understand....” Sherlock whispered. Sherlock used the word ‘uneasy’ almost to protect John. Because what he saw in John’s attitude was the fear. The expression in his eyes when they restrained him to the bed was haunted and determined.

There were a few preliminary questions, as would happen under ordinary forensic questioning. John answered these steadily enough-- to anyone other than Sherlock. Sherlock’s heart was already racing with dread, in sympathy with his mate’s fear that transmitted through his voice.

“Doctor Watson, I want you to tell us about the morning of 31 October, this past Halloween. Can you tell me what you were doing, immediately after you awoke that morning?”

There was a long pause. John took a deep shuddering breath.

The question was repeated.

In a soft, steady voice, John replied:

“Our jeep blew up... a bomb in the road. O’Hare, he’s on fire. . . his leg-- God, it’s so deep . . . I didn’t hear them coming.”

In a few more moments, John’s voice wasn’t steady at all anymore.

With a pale, almost ghastly greenish face, Sherlock lunged and switched off the video. Mycroft tried to support him but Sherlock jerked away and gripped the edge of the table, putting his head down. Lestrade had an idea he was trying not to vomit. They watched his back heave.


“Sherlock, you shouldn’t --”

“NOW!” Lestrade had never heard this voice from Sherlock, high-pitched and tight. Almost like a frightened child.

Lestrade swallowed the lump in his throat and grabbed Mycroft’s shoulder, and pulled him out of the room. Sherlock slammed the door and locked it from the inside.

##

Outside the door, Mycroft and Lestrade stared at each other. Lestrade still felt strange, woozy from the drug. He bit his lip, hard, to stop the stupid tears coming. All these years as a homicide cop, and he’d never gotten hardened to it. He was the one that would still shed a quiet tear for the victim -- especially those that had clearly suffered before they died, and there were far, far too many of those -- while the other Alphas drank coffee and smoked and joked about their beta mistresses.

“God damn it, Mycroft. God damn it. Tell me you didn’t know.”

Lestrade had been undergoing the debriefing at the same time as John. He knew how vivid the experience was. He leaned against the wall. His legs felt rubbery. It wasn’t necessarily the drug.
Mycroft leaned against the wall, next to him, as pale as his brother now.

“Of course not. Not a hint in the file. John never told anyone. Not even here, not his therapist, not anyone. No one suspected. Not even Sherlock, and they were-- are -- bonded.”

“What did he tell his unit then, when he went back?”

“John never returned to his unit. His gunshot wound became septic, he had lost a great deal of blood. He was delirious. . . even when they got him back, he was clearly mentally unfit. And they didn’t have his tags. It was more than a few days before he was identified. By the time he was able to talk, they just didn’t bother overmuch with debriefing. John told them he had survived a bombing, and that he’d been captured and held up in the mountains. He told them he was forced to give his captors medical aid, until he was able to escape. He was believed. We. . . I, rather, confirmed the statements in John’s file with the personnel who actually treated John. Both in Afghanistan, and in London.”

“But wouldn’t they have asked John? I mean, about--- the torture?”

“Yes, Greg. It would be standard. John denied it. He has no real scarring other than the bullet in the shoulder. Invisible scars, you could say. Yes.”

“God . . . Mycroft. You don’t think --- maybe he really didn’t remember. Until now.”

“You mean, did the debriefing bring it all back?”

They considered this silently. It was a terrible thing to imagine.

“Somehow I doubt it,” Mycroft said finally. “Looking back.”

Yes, looking back, Mycroft was virtually certain that John remembered it all.

###

It had been rather clear from the first that John Watson didn’t like to be touched. Not by anyone.

Not really even by the betas, except when he put himself to the task, which always seemed to Mycroft to be a determined effort to try to be “normal” in the ways expected of an Alpha male of his age and station in life, such as it was.

John had even held out against Sherlock, who was not exactly prone to touch himself -- not that Sherlock had deserved better from John, Mycroft thought. It had never been a surprise to Mycroft that when Sherlock was finally tempted into exploring his sexuality, it had been with the decadent Maxim Purcell - who had seduced Sherlock with the vision of sex without the necessity of physical touch. All the while playing a very deep game that Sherlock had been blind to for far too long.

Mycroft thought it very telling that when Sherlock finally capitulated as an omega, it should have been to an Alpha who himself was resistant to touch, who held himself apart.

It had been clear from the first that John had trust issues. For a long time, John Watson hadn’t trusted anyone or anything -- not even, or perhaps especially, himself. However, in retrospect he had done an impressive job in his quiet, unassuming way of deflecting attention to his unease. The exception that proved the rule, of course, was that he had unhesitatingly put his trust in Sherlock Holmes -- who had promptly dragged John Watson right back into the war: bodies and blood, wounds and death. And John had gone with him. Willingly.
It was a testament to the strength of John’s will that neither Holmes, famed for their brilliance and perception, had managed to penetrate John’s deepest secret. In a strange way, this gave Mycroft a faint glimmer of hope. John Watson was much stronger than any of them had given him credit for; but it also appeared that he was capable of a great deal more in the way of deception than they could have imagined. Lies of omission were still lies.

On the other hand, Mycroft was very sure that nobody other than those who actually had inflicted it -- his father, the Operators of the Labyrinth -- could detect that he himself had submitted to torture. Repeatedly. Willingly.

He understood that the fact that he had been willing made all the difference.

“I think John Watson thought about it all the time,” Mycroft said sorrowfully.

After a few moments in which he tried to formulate a plan for what to do next, about John, about Sherlock, and about the Sleeping Beauties case, Mycroft pulled his mobile from his pocket and fingered it nervously.

“If you’re thinking of using that to watch Sherlock in that room right now, don’t,” Lestrade said firmly.

“It’s too much of a shock for him,” Mycroft said. “He’ll be very, very ill. I’m--- afraid for him.”

“Yes, he will. We’ll have to deal with it. But they’re bonded. Nothing to be done. Let him be.”

Greg looked away. The pain in Sherlock’s face was something he couldn’t bear to look upon.

Now the entire idea of bonding, the magic of coming together and the mortal agony of being separated, hung between them painfully, two Alphas outside the rules.

# # #

Sherlock assumed Mycroft was watching him now even though he had locked him out, and he couldn’t let Mycroft force him away from here. Not yet. Mycroft would do it. And then he would never know. And so, he endeavored to kept some semblance of composure.

The monks in Tibet (And Maxim, a devious voice inside whispered) had taught him well. He managed after a desperate effort to slow his pulse rate and even to calm his pheromones. He told himself to remember the baby. Their baby, he reminded himself.

He commenced the video again. Inside he was weeping, screaming along with John. Baby or not, he just couldn’t stop. On the outside, though, he felt like he had turned to carved marble, cold and white, veins turned grey. John’s voice was like nothing he had ever heard before except in cryptic scraps from his nightmares. Now he would know it all.

No more secrets, John had said.

“...I don’t know this town. The mountains. I can’t...stop the bleeding. ...It’s snowing so hard. ...

(long pause)
“. . . They’re taking me to the room. They won’t stop . . . Oh God, they’ll never stop . . .”

(screaming)

John’s body, restrained on the bed, convulsed.

“He’s projecting!” One of the white coats was staring at the door. “Jesus, we have to hold him. Doctor Watson, don’t be afraid. Stay where you are. Get help, call Holmes, now!”

Sherlock paused the video, stilled. Closed his eyes.

“Projecting,” he whispered to himself. He knew that word. It resonated in a very deep corner of his mind palace.

He restarted and watched to the very end.

###

The cloud of horrible mist came. John’s lips were moving, he was speaking to something that couldn’t be seen -- but there was no sound except the white coats’ bodies hitting the floor. He slowed the video down, focused on John’s face, watched his lips moving. Then he accessed the master camera control and found the view to the hallway. From above, he watched himself and Mycroft run down the hall, grab at John. John’s arm stretched out, brandished a gun, unbelievably. Then John was yanked backward as if by a wire; but instead of colliding with the wall as he ought to have, he simply vanished.

John called out to him, promised that he would come back, that he mustn’t try to follow. That was all.

He bit his lip until it bled.

The video had a running time log. Entire time elapsed from when John entered the debriefing room until he vanished: ten minutes, thirty-one seconds.

He began keening softly, bit his fist. John was gone. The absence was palpable; they were bonded. But even before, he had always had a definite sense of John’s physical presence. They had very seldom ever been apart since the day they met (Five months, eighteen days, four hours, twelve minutes.) John was nowhere to be felt.

###

When Sherlock finally noticed that he was wailing, almost choking on tears, he took a heaving breath and rubbed the tears away with his knuckles. He started to curse but then he bit back on that as well. He realised that if the baby could hear anything now, or even sense anything, it was being subjected to anguish and horror, and nobody could protect it but him now. He simply had to stop, he had to stay calm and focused.

He wrung his hands together at his chest, as though he could keep the memory of John closer that way. He stared down at his watch. Mycroft would not let him stay here much longer. He had to clear a corner of his mind palace. Time to get to work.
He imagined throwing a switch in his brain, and this seemed to work. He steepled his fingers under his chin. Everything started moving fast. He had to clear his throat a few times before he could get the words out:

“We are going to find John,” he said as calmly and steadily as he could manage.

Sherlock was not accustomed to giving reassurance to anyone, especially not children -- he was more prone to terrifying them, he knew that, and then John had to take over, or Lestrade -- and this wasn’t really even an actual child yet, he supposed, more a being with an unknown capacity for thought and feeling. He hadn’t really had a chance to begin researching prenatal biology as he had intended, as he had proclaimed to John so long ago on the train from Scotland. He didn’t know what to do with the sudden memory of John’s face, so happy.

Anyway, what he had ever known on the subject had been long deleted. But that was all right. This was an area where he could make reasonable assumptions, under the circumstances. He would err on the side of presuming it -- the baby, he amended -- to be sensitive in feeling, and gifted with keen perception insofar as it was limited by being confined within the womb. He considered.

“Yes. We will find John Watson. That is your father, you know. Right. Now, the first thing you need to know about hacking,” he said, reaching for the keyboard, typing at lightening speed, “is that war doesn’t stop being war, just because you do it online. It can be is more risky to the enemy for you to hack through their defense server, than for a live army to march through its territory. So always take your opponent’s probable defenses into account. And the second thing you need to know is, it is truly astounding . . . . how often the password is “guest.” Not today, though. MI5 usually its wits about it. Not that is an obstacle. . . now what have we here.”

He stopped talking, read silently to himself.

###


“The subject must not be allowed to become discouraged, if he or she has any potential for projection Therefore, initial torture methods should be confined to brief and relatively mild episodes of simulated drowning, sleep deprivation, and sound and/or light disturbances. This will often suffice to cause brief episodes of projection in unusually sensitive or predisposed subjects.

“A knowledge of the subject’s lineage prior to engaging any level of the Labyrinth is, of course, desirable if not necessary. Note: It is presumed that subjects of the known bloodlines will be assessed on an individual basis by the Director.”

Sherlock screwed his eyes shut, crept down to that dark corner of his mind palace. There was something there. . . something about his father. Projection. Yes. He felt very peculiar, as he generally did when he contemplated Sheridan Holmes. He couldn’t get much closer to this memory now, though. It was enough to know it hadn’t been deleted.

He took a memory stick from his pocket -- he always carried one --- and downloaded everything he wanted, and the one thing that he definitely didn’t want but had to take anyway. Then he stood up on unsteady feet and opened the door.

Mycroft and Lestrade were standing outside, grave faces. He wanted to snarl something about them not presuming to know what he felt, or what this all really meant. He took another step forward.
Everything was starting to spin.

“Come with me now,” he ordered, taking deep breaths. “I have to go.”

He started confidently marching in the direction of where he remembered the door to the street was, his arms folded across his chest, hugging himself, marching stiffly past. There were MI5 types following them now, but Mycroft stopped them, and they were allowed to leave the warehouse.

It was raining hard and Sherlock welcomed the cold drops hitting his face. It shocked him to greater alertness, even though he knew it was important not to catch a chill. He could almost sense John’s disapproval. Just as he went to try and retrieve his coat and scarf, not having the faintest idea where they were, he felt the articles being put around his shoulders, surprised that it was Lestrade, not Mycroft.

Mycroft’s car pulled up. Mycroft tried awkwardly to assist him to climb into the back seat while Lestrade held the door open, and he begrudgingly allowed it because everything was swaying and rocking, and not in a good way. He ran his hand along the luxurious black leather seat cushion. Now Mycroft was sitting just precisely where John had been sitting just a few hours ago, and John had been holding his hand, so tight. He almost thought he could still see the impression of their joined hands.

He wondered if John had had some sort of premonition that he would go. But that couldn’t be true. He shook his head, he had to start thinking very clearly now. More clearly than he ever had before.

He was gulping air; he couldn’t get enough air.

“Sherlock, we’re here for you. Where do you want to go?” Mycroft said gently. A voice he used to use when Sherlock was a boy. He remembered that voice, how he had resented it. The older Alpha, coddling the young Omega. He bristled.

“Go? Where do you think? Don’t be stupid. Take me to Baker Street.”

“I think you ought to come to Chester Square,” Mycroft said carefully. “Or even to Mummy’s. I’ll come with you. You shouldn’t be alone.”

“I’m going to 221b,” he said, almost raving. He sounded deranged. “I won’t be alone. John’s coming back. He promised.”

Sherlock bent forward, retched, and vomited into his brother's lap. He didn't push his hand away when Mycroft pushed the hair back from his face, just as John would have done; just as if he were a child.

To be continued. . . .
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Omega Sutra. Chapter Thirty-Seven. Chosen.

Track: Les Friction, World on Fire: Listen to World on Fire, here

World on fire with a smoking sun
Stops everything and everyone.

Brace yourself
for all will pay,
Help is on the way.

I will cover you,
when the sky comes crashing in.

I'll go the distance,
lead the way to your darkest sin.

You know there's something
coming down from the sky above . . .

Lyrics to World on Fire, all rights reserved Les Friction.


John closed his eyes against the hot wind that was taking him so fast and so far. The demon dog stayed at his side. His hand felt nearly burned from the heat that radiated where he gripped it, but it was strangely tolerable, and he didn’t let go.

The journey finally ended. He was standing with the black dog on a barren hill, in the foothills of mountains crowned with snow. They were looking down in darkness under a full moon toward a small cluster of lights. He knew this place.

Afghanistan. This was a camp. Not his camp, but recognizably a Taliban camp. Of course he had to be dreaming. He was still on that table in Battersea. Those doctors had broken his mind. He had to put it back together.

“You are here,” the black dog said. “Believe what you see.”

“Why? I mean, why did you bring me here?” Now he could feel that it was real. Changed as he was by the demon’s evil mist, everything about this place spoke to him, body and soul. He had
been a fool, a child, to think he could ever forget Afghanistan.

The dog turned, and this time John refused to meet its red stare. The dog snarled.

“We have many purposes. All you need know is that one purpose... is to execute retribution.”

John felt an angry thrill course through him.

Retribution.

The word spoke to him. It felt like a kind of spell; maybe it was. His family were Catholic, and while he had never been especially devout in his youth, he had fragmented memories of his mother’s sister visiting a Jamaican “charm-woman” in the rougher part of town. This woman claimed to be a fortune-teller and a reader of cards. Sometimes when their mother was very sick, his aunt took them along with her and they waited outside while she “had a reading.” John usually listened in, if he could.

His aunt seemed to get a great deal of comfort from her visits to the mysterious woman and this used to make him glad; his aunt was kind, but had a very hard life as far as he could tell as a child. John liked to know that there was somewhere she could go that made her happy for a little while. His Scots grandmother, if she heard about the visit, would always strenuously proclaim from Deuteronomy:

“There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch. Or a caster of spells, or a consuler with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee.”

“Retribution,” he repeated the word. It rolled beautifully off his tongue.

“Go down. No one will challenge you. Look there. See the stone building. Look, it has a red light.”

He looked. He could see it.

“Go inside. You will know what to do. After, there will be a vehicle in the road. Take it.”

John gave a short laugh. “You must think I’m crazy to go down there. That’s a Taliban camp.”

Crazy. Definitely.

First, the fact that he was conversing, quite casually, with a clearly demonic creature. He supposed that would be his fate. He had asked to be taken to the darkness. Beings like this, and likely worse, would be his confederates now. He noticed the idea of going down into the camp didn’t really bother him. His hand closed around the new black gun.

“I say again, you won’t be challenged. You have been chosen.”

“Chosen for what?”

John hadn’t ever been chosen for anything. Anything he had ever had, he had had to fight to get. That was even true of Sherlock: he had offered himself to John, yet everything had opposed them from the start. As he stood here in the moonlight with the black dog, the dog that he now understood was a hell-hound, he knew how far apart they had been driven.

“You have lately been in Joshua Pridiax’s library. You were preparing for us. You read Calcidius.
Do you remember?"

John did remember. Sherlock had been reading to him, and he had read a little for himself, his own Latin rusty but still surprisingly serviceable after all these years. Sherlock’s beautiful voice came to him now:

“The wicked demons act as the revengers of crime according to the sanction of divine justice,” John recited. “These demons are called the runaway angels.”

“Yes. You are the arm of the avenging angel,” the dog said.

“You’re not an angel,” John said firmly. He never hoped to see one now, but he refused to blaspheme by calling this foul hell-hound an angel. He expected to be blasted on the spot for disputing with it. Instead it bared its teeth in something like the rictus of a smile, and its tongue lolled. But it answered him anyway.

“No, I’m not. I never claimed to be. I am a servant. Just like you. But know that the runaway angels are still angels.”

John nodded. He understood what he was being asked to do. His promise to return to Sherlock was obviously blocked by insurmountable obstacles, supernatural forces. He took a cleansing breath of the eerily familiar mountain air. Everything was so clear. He would wait.

While he waited, he would do what was being asked of him. As if he had a choice.

Someday he would feel an opening, an opportunity. He remembered better now than he had in months, his escape from his tormentors.

Sometimes a door opened when you least expected it.

This had been proven to him now, several times over.

# # #

London. 221b Baker Street.

“But it matters little for such an evil animal to know what species it is or what it looks like, the important thing is to kill it.”

-- M. Denneval, the Wolf-Killer of Louis XV, 1765

In 221b, Sherlock disappeared into one of the bathrooms to wash up, and Mycroft went to the other to do the same.

Left alone, Lestrade noticed that Sherlock had emptied his pockets onto one of the littered tables. His wallet, his mobile. A thumb drive. He eyed it, considered the likelihood that Sherlock had downloaded the video footage of John Watson being tortured relentlessly. He hoped not. He never wanted to see another moment of those scenes, and he definitely didn’t think Sherlock ought to be allowed to look at it again, even though he thought he could understand the compulsion Sherlock would be under. John was his bonded. He didn’t pretend to understand what could have happened.
to John, but it was obvious that Sherlock didn’t mean he was going to just walk in the door of 221b when he said that John “promised to come back.”

After a few minutes, Sherlock and Mycroft both reappeared, freshened; Mycroft had procured some old clothing that had to have been Sherlock’s as his own was quite ruined, and Lestrade chastised his Alpha nature for being unable to avoid, even at such a time, briefly taking in Mycroft’s long frame in the almost-too-tight garments. Mycroft was trying, ineffectually, to persuade Sherlock to go into his bedroom and get some sleep. Lestrade rolled his eyes.

He had worked cases with Sherlock for several years now and nobody knew better than he did -- excepting John, he thought ruefully --- how insanely driven Sherlock was when on a case. And nothing could ever be as big a case to Sherlock as the disappearance of John Watson. He had thought Mycroft would understand that completely. But instead, Mycroft seemed intent on repeating himself, insisting that Sherlock go rest, his voice getting more and more dictatorial, as Sherlock became more and more surly.

“Sherlock, I have never had occasion to say this to you since you came of age, but it’s my duty to say it now. As long as Father is out of the country, I am the Alpha of this family. Your child is the Holmes heir. I’ve tolerated your little fantasy your permutation is “irrelevant.” It didn’t matter, so long as you were unattached and unbred. But long as John is . . . gone, as an Omega you require protection. You will accept that protection from me, Sherlock. Or there will be consequences. Do I make myself quite plain?”

“Quite,” Sherlock said. Lestrade could almost see the flames shooting from his head, even as miserable as he was. Mycroft was just giving him the target that he needed for all that fear and pain. Any minute now, the Holmes brothers were going to start in on each other, and he didn’t fancy being the referee.

He figured that of the three of them, it might be him that went down for the count, in the shape they were all in.

“Now hold on,” he ventured. Two Holmes eyes stared at him with icy fury.

“What?” They both snapped in unison, freezing aristocratic hauteur.

“Sherlock, you brought this thumb drive back from the warehouse, right?”

Sherlock nodded, so beside himself with ire that he could barely communicate.

“Well, Mycroft and I haven’t seen it -- -no, no, I don’t mean I want to see. . . well, you know. John. I’m so sorry, Sherlock. You know that I am. I’m going to help, if I can. But I need to see the end. Where you said he . . . disappeared. We all need to watch it again, and figure out what we can from it. What it means.”

“I know what it means,” Sherlock snarled. “John sold his soul to the devil to save my worthless skin. It’s all my fault. I’ve got to fix this. I failed before.”

Lestrade figured he was talking about his lone attack on Hantswood Hall. Mycroft looked to be about to start another tongue-lashing about Alphas and Omegas, duty and protection. Sherlock looked like he was getting ready to show Mycroft what he thought about his protection. Lestrade took the thumb drive and pulled open the laptop on the table. It was John’s, he could tell because it had a beautiful screensaver of a green forest, then faded to a turquoise and white beach. Sherlock would never bother with such a thing.
“Passcode?”

“Enter 221b, then the postcode,” Sherlock muttered. “No space.”

He turned the screen so that Sherlock couldn’t see. The fact that Sherlock allowed this told him more than anything else about how harrowing this video of John must really be.

He fast forwarded at the highest speed to the very end, skipping over everything and squinting between his lashes to avoid seeing even another second of the horror that was John Watson reliving his torture. Then he reversed the video until the moment when John sat up from the table, seeming to feel himself to see if his limbs worked. The debriefing room was full of a shifting mist that seemed animated by an intelligence. Sherlock and Mycroft silently watched over his shoulder.

# # #

“Holy Mother of God, what is that beast,” Lestrade exclaimed when he saw the figure of the huge black dog. It appeared from nowhere. The hellish beast had red eyes that glowed. It was speaking with John, and John was talking back to the thing. He thought if he turned up the volume he could hear what they were saying, even over the alarms that had been triggered and were clamouring, spoiling the sound.

Mycroft and Sherlock said, again in unison: “What beast?”

Lestrade looked up. The brothers looked baffled, and were clearly staring at the screen where the enormous black beast was very clearly visible. The hair on the back of its neck stood up, and the hairs on the back of Lestrade’s neck stood up too.

“That black dog, what the hell is it? Where did it come from?” He demanded.

Sherlock and Mycroft sat down on the sofa together. Sherlock snatched the laptop away from Lestrade and the Holmeses stared and stared at the screen, then looked slowly back up, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. Lestrade was struck speechless himself, never having seen both brothers in such a state.

“Lestrade-- there’s no black dog anywhere in this video,” Sherlock said definitively.

“There is not,” Mycroft said. “I see nothing. And I assure you no dogs are used in our . . . program.”

“Operation Whiteshadow,” Sherlock said acidly. “Yes, I hacked your system while I was in that room. I told you I would. We need to talk, Mycroft. Clearly there is a great deal that you have been keeping from me.”

“Later, Sherlock. Right now, I want Greg to explain exactly what he sees. And then I want to know why he can see it, and we can’t.”

Lestrade looked at the brothers, almost wondering if they were trying to pull some sort of strange Holmesian joke on him. But they never would do that at a time like this. That meant he really was the only one of them that could see the black dog.

Well, other than than John.

Now he needed to sit down too.

Sherlock stood up and started pacing slowly, not his usual frenzied whirling. Lestrade wondered if
he was being more careful now because he was pregnant. “Point to the --- what is it? Beast, dog -- be specific, Lestrade, if you can,” Sherlock said, calmly, no venom now. “Did this ‘black dog’ take John? I thought I saw red eyes in the mist. But it was very faint, and then it was gone. I thought I must have been mistaken. But was I right after all?”

He had never seen Sherlock so vulnerable. He would grasp at anything at all that could help find John and bring him back. He touched the computer screen.

“It’s not a dog,” he said softly. “And yes, it’s eyes are red. Red like hell fire.”

Even putting his finger upon the image of the black dog was made a strong thrill go through his hand and up his arm. He felt a gathering rage. He remembered what he was supposed to do. This beast was evil. It had to be defeated. These words were absolutes coming to him from long-ago exhortations, a commandment handed down long ago that rang inside his head to the peal of a bell from an unseen church:

“Thou shalt hunt the beast and all its kin to the ends of the earth; and thou shalt slay it without pity.”

He looked up. Mycroft touched his arm, then held on tightly. “Greg, why can’t we see it, too? What does it mean?”

He pushed the screen away again. He didn’t want to look at the beast any more, it was unclean. It had the power to pollute men’s souls.

“I suppose you know that my name, Lestrade, is after a town in France. It’s where we're from. Originally.”

“No,” said Sherlock, blank.

“Yes,” said Mycroft, colouring a little.

“Well, it is. Lestrade-et-Thouels. It’s in the south. The Midi-Pyrenees.”

“Well,” Sherlock hissed, losing patience now. “What the -- what are you trying to say, Lestrade?”

How to answer that? Knowing Sherlock, only by the most direct route, no preliminaries.

“Have you heard of Le Bete --- sorry, The Beast of Gevaudan?”

Sherlock frowned. “No -- wait, maybe. Yes. There was a plague of murders in the region of Gevaudan. 1750s? It was thought to be a werewolf. The creature was never caught.”

“1760s. Some people say it was a werewolf. In my family, it was called the Hell-Hound. And it’s not true that it was never caught. Because my family was chosen to kill it. They took an oath to kill it, and they did.”

“Really. That’s a -- very interesting family legend, Lestrade. You aren’t asking me to believe ---” Sherlock looked like he wanted not to believe, not to know. But his logical mind couldn’t find purchase here.

“I’m not asking you to believe, Sherlock. I know it sounds mad. But everything about this, from the very beginning, has been mad. So I’m just going to tell you: from what I know, our Hell-Hound looked pretty much like the beast in the video. That’s the thing that took John away.”
John hiked down the hill to the stone building with the red light. It was set well apart from the rest of the camp, and the reason for this was very apparent. His lungs and muscles burned strangely, as though animated by blood that had been mixed with acid. It propelled him forward and sharpened his appetite for what he knew was coming.

Through the windows he heard a very faint, familiar sound. It was a sound that had been forced from his own throat, a thousand times over. It sounded like it was coming from below ground. A cellar, perhaps.

He turned to look back up the hill, but the hell-hound was gone.

He checked the new gun. It was fully loaded. He wished he had some blacking to darken his face, like they used to do on night ops. But the hound had promised no one would challenge him.

If the creature had lied, he knew what was in store.

He crept quietly to the corner of the building, crouched and looked around the corner. There was a guard outside sitting in a chair, half-dozing. John swung around the corner on silent feet and put the muzzle of gun to the side of his head and pulled the trigger before he even knew John was standing there. The sound, even slightly muffled by blowing through brain and bone, cracked and rang out in the night air. There was stirring in the camp. John ignored it and pushed open the door.

There was no one inside, but there was bright light coming from below. That was where the screaming had been coming from; but it was quieter now. They must have heard the shot because there was confused shouting. John bounded down the steps. His heart soared. He had been wrong to doubt.

There were two men here, young Taliban, high on opium from the looks of them despite their purported abstinence. Opium was everywhere in Afghanistan. These two had been beating a bound and captive man. One had been using an iron pipe. It looked like this had been going on for a long while. The man was in very bad shape. But still conscious; he watched John with terror. John knew he thought that he was coming to kill him.

John easily dispatched the torturers with two rapid shots as their own shots went wide of the mark and ricocheted through the little cellar. John instinctively ducked, but miraculously the stray bullets struck neither of them. Then John delivered two more more bullets between the eyes. Then he untied the frantic prisoner, who he now recognised was also an Afghan.

“You’re coming with me,” John said. “You’re safe now.” He figured the Afghan wouldn’t trust him, might think he was being dragged to an even worse fate by an enemy soldier. “It’s all right. I don’t care why they had you.”

He hoped that part was true. He didn’t even know if this man understood his words. He hoped they sounded reassuring.

“I’m just a translator,” the man gasped, and collapsed into John’s arms.
If this was one of the circles of Hell, John thought it was one he could live in for a while. He pulled the man with him back out into the dark with as much care as he could, half carrying him over his shoulder.

Sure enough, there was a vehicle waiting as the hell-hound had promised. It was actually an armoured Humvee. John threw open the door and put his man almost tenderly inside, then climbed in after him.

There were a few other soldiers in the back of the Humvee, British Army by the looks of them, but their uniforms were irregular. They didn’t seem surprised to see John, and didn’t ask him any questions.

The driver looked back and met John’s gaze. John knew then that the driver, at least, wasn’t human, although he had the shape of one. But his eyes were like liquid quicksilver.

“Where are we --” John started to ask.

The driver shook his head in a grim negative and John knew he had to just shut up. It didn’t matter where he was being taken. Wherever it was, he figured he would have work to do. The Humvee started off down the road, eating it up faster than should have been possible. It almost felt like flying again.

As the Humvee zoomed along, he examined at the faces of the other soldiers, illuminated by the moonlight that streamed through the windows. He realised that they were like him. He thought they all looked like they had been out on an op for a long, long time. Mostly they looked away from him, down at the floor. John wondered if they were praying, and then he wondered what they were praying for.

He tried to summon up a prayer, something from the Bible, something from when he had been a child. But all that would come was,

“For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord.”

Since he was pretty sure that all that had happened up to this point meant that he was already an abomination unto the Lord, nothing he could do would make things any worse.

But just maybe, if he learned how to play this game, he would get his chance; he could find that open door that led back to Baker Street.

To be continued . . .

Chapter End Notes
Dear readers,
Those who have made it this far, my thanks and congratulations on your stamina:). Your devoted author greatly appreciates feedback to feed the muse.

G x
The Third Level of Manifestation

The Omega Sutra. Chapter Thirty Eight: The Third Level Of Manifestation

The hammer of the gods
will drive our ships to new land,
to fight the horde and sing and cry:
Valhalla, I am coming!
How soft your fields so green,
can whisper tales of gore;
Of how we calmed the tides of war.
We are your overlords.

--Lyrics to Immigrant Song, all rights reserved, Robert Plant, Jimmy Page.

Track: Karen O with Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross: Immigrant Song (cover version, yeah ...but now you know how hard Karen O can rock.).
Listen to Immigrant Song HERE
Paddington Station, London. 5 November. Bonfire Night.

A tall male figure in a worn overcoat sat on a marble ledge on Platform 1, watching the rushing crowds that were a little more raucous than the ordinary. This figure had every appearance of a man if you didn’t look too closely at his restless eyes which had an extraordinary luster; or notice the preternatural stillness with which he held himself, hour after hour.

Also, if he removed his coat, in certain light his dark wings were faintly visible. He was careful not to let that happen.

# # #

The Runaway angel, whose name was Sollas, was watching Paddington Station in the Third Degree of Manifestation: physical materialisation in the earthly plane.

It was right, Sollas thought, that he should be called to this place tonight: The Fifth of November, Bonfire Night. That night when Guy Fawkes was both celebrated and vilified, praised and damned, for rebelling against his king and country.

Sollas preferred to think of himself as a rebel rather than a Runaway -- running away sounded cowardly. If Sollas was willing to speak about that time -- which he wasn’t, he almost never spoke at all --- he would have said that running away from the light and from the Divine, was the bravest thing that he had ever done or ever could do in the endless millennia of his immortality. He was a rebel angel, not a coward.
Sollas’ seat was in the shadow of a life-sized statute. He often stopped to visit it in his walks through the city. He thought that the feeling he had toward this statute, and what it represented, might be pity, or even love. He wasn’t sure. His long struggles on the earth, and in darker places, had distilled what Sollas thought might be the shadows of human emotion into his dark and bitter heart.

The Great National Railway War Memorial was a bronze statute of an English soldier of the First World War. He wore a long overcoat not unlike his own, and a scarf wound round his neck (carefully detailed to show, Sollas thought, the hands of the one who had made it for him). He was reading a letter from home. The warrior’s face was noble, heroic even, but softened with longing by this communication from loved ones he had left behind to battle a great enemy.

Inside the plinth supporting the bronze soldier was a sealed casket containing a roll of vellum, inscribed with the names of 2,524 men and women who had been railway workers, before being swept away and destroyed by the convulsions of war. In this way, the statute contained the spirits of those dead men and women. One soul, embodying thousands.

Sollas’ hand lightly rested against the plinth that contained the hidden casket as he scanned Paddington Station, a soaring iron-ribbed edifice that was as much a cathedral as railroad terminal in its own way. He was looking for the one soul among the many, the one soul that embodied not thousands, not yet; but perhaps dozens. He had stopped three in as many days. It felt like London was being invaded, infiltrated.

A plague was coming, and Sollas was going to stop it if he could.

###

He didn’t have long to wait. Railway stations, the Underground, the Vauxhall Arches -- these places were a banquet for the soul vampire. In former days, it might have been Whitechapel, the London Docks, Smithfield Market. Anyplace where crowds gave anonymity, dark bustling streets where seedy commerce thrived and nobody looked too hard into anybody else’s business, these were the places where the soul vampire hunted.

Weak souls in weak bodies were its favored prey. Sometimes, if the vampire was strong and possessed the skill, it acquired a fresh body, shedding the old like a serpent shedding its old withered skin for fresh new skin.

A slim Alpha male in dirty jeans and a motorcycle jacket was prowling the edges of the platform, trying to fend off its telltale weakness. To a human, the Alpha would look like any other lackluster slacker that had hit the party a little- or a lot - too hard. To the penetrating eye of an angel, the young man’s aura was unstable; its colour reduced to a silvery flicker. His aura was nothing like the radiant jewel-tones of strong human spirits, the amber radiance of the Runaway angels, the dark cloud that clothed the Fallen. The creature was a soul vampire, and it was looking for its next fix.

###

Sollas stood and tracked the vampire as it scanned the dizzying cornucopia of choices: young and old, Alpha, omegas and betas, male and female, the rare neuter, easily detected by the pure steady aquamarine of their auras. The vampire was in a hurry though, and quickly zeroed in on a young beta musician, handsome, so slim as to be almost frail, his guitar slung over his back. The choice signaled that the vampire was either very new or had been unable to replenish its energies for a
long while: betas were almost childishly easy to take, but were meager sustenance for an Alpha vampire.

The beta was distracted, fiddling with his mobile, shifting his guitar, and had no sense of the danger at his back.

Sollas, like all of his kind, both was drawn to and shrank from music: it was a reminder of what the Runaways had fled to come down to the world, and of what they could never have again. But his feelings of guardianship stirred for this fragile life and it spurred Sollas to intercept the vampire as it subtly crowded his prey.

The vampire wouldn’t strike in the middle of the well-lit station but would shadow his chosen until an opportunity arose to strike in darkness: giving the fatal kiss that sucked out the bright soul.

Sollas was capable of moving almost faster than the human eye could follow in the Third Level of Manifestation: his physical body.

He was also capable of flight if necessary. But allowing humans to see him perform these feats was forbidden, and while Sollas by nature was a rulebreaker, he and his brothers were trying to atone for their transgression. So far, there was no sign at all they were succeeding-- but eternity was a very long time. They weren’t giving up.

Sollas followed the vampire through the crowds spilling out of the doors of Paddington Station into the street. He could almost reach out and lock his hand on its shoulder. The vampire’s overwhelming hunger and growing weakness prevented it from sensing that it was hunted, too.

# # #

Sollas could hear music from a live band, it must be nearby -- there was scattered clapping and cheering. He wondered if the young man was on his way to play his guitar at one of the almost macabrely festive gatherings of Bonfire Night, where the citizens burned villains in effigy.

He remembered a time when the burnings were real: Christian martyrs at the Roman games, witches at the stake, heretics in the Auto da Fe, the Wicker Man, the immolation of widows in sati. One of his brother angels had told him the story of the viciousness of the druglords, kings of underground empires, who punished by the burning tire. So many cruel ways humans had devised to snuff out their almost unimaginably brief lives.

Sollas was under no illusion that it was the entirely the malign influence of the Fallen that induced such depravity in men.

The streets near Paddington were well-lit and crowded. There were no secret places here where the vampire could do its work. Sollas stayed with the vampire as it pursued the beta, rallying its fading energies, waiting for its chance.

The beta was hurrying now, not because he sensed the fate that was on his heels but because it was almost time for the bonfires. Sollas’s keen ear heard the beta speaking into his mobile as he walked, with the warm voice that meant he was talking to his lover, he was on his way to meet him? Her? They would be together in minutes, the beta said. Not the frenzy of heat and obsession between Alphas and omegas, but the current of a hopeful love in his voice was in its way just as strong. Betas loved by choice, it took a very real kind of faith and hope for them to give of themselves in this way, he thought.

Sollas felt an uncomfortable stabbing sort of sensation -- Sadness? Fear? As he imagined the beta’s
soul being consumed by the vampire. The emotional capacities of the Runaways varied by their individual paths of experience on earth: his feelings were nothing like what he imagined human emotion to be, but he hoped these embryonic shifts of energy were at least shadows of the real thing. Even these nebulous sensations were infinitely more than he had been capable of when he first fled to earth.

He was changing. Whatever it was, the sensation drove him to risk seizing the vampire in full view of the human crowds so that this beta could go on its fragile way and live to play music for at least one more night. Even an angel couldn’t always give more than that.

###

He clamped his hand hard at the back of the vampire’s neck, and at the touch he had a spark of greedy craving to feel its neck bones snap it under his grip. He imagined throwing the body in front of the speeding bus hurtling toward them, watching its polluted flesh smash into nothingness.

But before he could act on this impulse, two things happened.

First, when his fingers touched it, Sollas sensed he had been wrong -- this creature had accumulated more, far more, than a dozen souls. Ordinary soul vampires were not driven to consume more than they needed. This one was different.

Sollas didn’t have time to consider why this should be, because the second thing that happened was that he was tackled hard by a dark figure that drove him back.

There was only one thing that could move an angel - another angel, and this had to be one of the Fallen. Humans around them screamed as they struggled on the pavement; the vampire escaped Sollas’ grip and he lost sight of the beta in the crowds. The feeling of loss that the beta had kindled flared up into dull fury mingled with despair as Sollas grappled with the Fallen one.

They kicked and punched and dragged each other along the street, struggling to hide and restrain their powers in the presence of so many mortals. The pain they inflicted on these bodies was meaningless: they were immortal and their wounds would not last a single hour.

The Fallen was trying to stop him from interfering with the strange vampire. Sollas wanted to see the angel’s face but it was too fast even for him, it kept behind him, pinning him. He didn’t avoid the Fallen as much as his brothers, but didn’t think this was a Fallen that he had ever known before. It didn’t matter what material form he took because those were changeable; but this angel’s spirit felt foreign.

He could speak the word and his brothers would rush to his aid, didn’t think the Runaways would understand a minor angelic war being started in the streets of London over the fate of a lone beta. But he wasn’t giving up. He broke from the angel’s grasp, almost an embrace.

###

Finally they were facing each other, having somehow maneuvered themselves into a narrow mews off the road, no doubt so fast that the watching humans were still standing puzzled, looking an empty spot where they would swear, later, that they had seen two men fighting furiously.

“The new vampires -- what are they to you? Whatever it is, we won’t let you. This stops here.”

“Are you starting to care? Or maybe you’re starting to play God -- you’d like to pick who lives, who dies. Take my advice -- that kind of thinking gets you in trouble. And what can you really do about it?”
The Fallen was much shorter than Sollas, with a hard compact body like a dancer, or maybe a boxer. He had a dark, dangerous face: long sharp nose, deep-set black eyes under black brows against olive skin, a shock of black hair worn longish, thin lips over dazzling teeth. A gypsy, Sollas thought.

Sollas had taken to thinking sometimes about the bite that Alphas and omegas shared to mark each other as owned. What would that be like? He couldn’t imagine it, it was outside his understanding. The angels were owned only by the Light. The Fallen was staring him down with the mocking pride that was their strength and their downfall.

“Maybe I don’t care anymore about getting in trouble,” Sollas said, and realised it was true. He wasn’t sure that anything mattered, even after all this time. In this moment all that he wanted was to stop the vampire and save the oblivious beta, if he lived. “I’m not letting you corrupt London with these -- unholy creatures.”

The Fallen smiled, beautiful and vicious like all of his kind. Sollas smiled back, just as beautiful, maybe not vicious but every bit as strong-willed, and ripped away his coat to let his wings unfurl.

Their shadow fell over the dark angel’s face for the merest instant and then Sollas was soaring, shedding his material body, becoming a transparent apparition.

This was the Second Level of Manifestation.

The beta’s aura still shone brightly, a rosy red that often signalled romantic love and passion. He was playing his guitar, laughing and singing a childish rhyme that had probably been made up for the occasion. They were preparing an effigy of someone in Parliament, maybe; Sollas didn’t care about such things. The beta’s lover was with him now, a robust blonde girl with a guitar of her own.

The frustrated vampire had faded into the edges of the crowd, seeming to give up. He was weak, getting weaker, urgently needing sustenance. The beta and his lover stood close to the bonfire and the crowd sang and cheered as the effigy was lit with a torch and the fire blazed out, casting a glow over their excited faces. Sollas saw the vampire moving at the very edge of the crowd - - now it had targeted a young girl alone, almost a child.

All restraint was finished.

Sollas darted down fast as thought, seized the vampire by its arm and threw it into the bonfire as the flames roared and climbed higher, consuming the effigy to the cheers of the crowd.

He had snapped the vampire’s neck in midair before hurling it into the flames. A shower of sparks exploded into the air like fireflies as the vampire was consumed.

It was the only way to be sure.

His wings had borne him far, far away before the cheers of the crowd, including the beta and his lover, turned to screams.

To be continued. . .
The Gift of Fate

Chapter 39: The Gift of Fate.

Do not be afraid; our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.

— Dante Alighieri, Inferno

track: Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross, What If We Could? Listen to What If We Could, HERE
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221b Baker Street. 5 November. Bonfire Night.

“I’ve only got one question, Lestrade.” Sherlock was still pacing, striving to quell his despair with the distraction of analysing the problem from a safe emotional distance. Anyone who didn’t know him very, very well -- and the only persons who qualified were in this room -- would have thought that him the very picture of self-possession.

“You want to know if John -- is he alive?” Lestrade replied bravely.

“Of course not. I’d know it instantly if John was-- if he was--”

Lestrade interrupted: “-- don’t say it, then.” The thought hit him like a hammer and he was overcome with guilt: having taken John Watson for granted, not having looked deeper. If this was how he felt, he could not imagine what Sherlock must be feeling despite his obvious effort at locking it all inside. It was far too soon for this almost frightening calm.

But Lestrade was used to dealing with the loved ones of missing persons. One thing he knew was that you couldn’t judge someone’s inner state at such a time by how they seemed on the outside. Sherlock’s emotions, when he showed them (Lestrade had long since discarded the fiction that Sherlock didn’t have any) were unpredictable in the extreme.

“What I want is to know, obviously, is if you can track the -- creature. And if you can show me how to see what you see.” Sherlock’s grey eyes were drained of colour, and they fixed him with a glassy stare that was not haughty, not icy. Just afraid.

It was remarkable how willing Sherlock was, Lestrade thought, to accept the idea of an invisible hell-hound having made off with John Watson. Whatever Sherlock had feared happened to John, then, must have been worse even than this. He recalled Sherlock’s words at the warehouse -- “John sold his soul to the devil to save my worthless skin.” Sherlock looked ready to fly back out the door in pursuit of the beast -- even though it was obvious that his legs weren’t going to support him much longer.

Lestrade didn’t answer immediately. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the feelings he had when his finger touched the image of the black hound:
Revulsion.

A primal lust to hunt, to kill.

There was nothing like it, although he had been told of it. All that remained now, though, was a residual twinge. So far as he knew, that meant the infernal beast was nowhere near.

“No. I mean, I can’t teach you to see it. You’ve heard stories of families with their own ghost? Or a family curse?” At this, Lestrade noticed that Mycroft had a faraway look signaled that he was reflecting on something more, Lestrade thought, than the disappearance of John Watson. “Well, it’s like that for the Lestrades and the Hell-Hound. We have the sight -- whether we want it or no. But I don’t feel it now. The thing must be gone.”

“‘Gone’? Whatever do you mean, ‘gone’? Where does it go?”

They all fell silent. It was obvious that the hell-hound’s regular abode was not in Battersea. Just as it was obvious where its regular abode must be.

“Our hell-hound -- the Beast of Gevaudan -- would appear from nowhere, kill, and disappear. No one could track it, no one could trap it. It would reappear miles away, in places farther than it was possible for a natural creature to travel. I have a map marked with the attacks. There were over a hundred.”

“Are you saying it’s going to kill him, then? Try harder,” Sherlock hissed, suddenly snapping into fury. He loomed over Lestrade, gripping him by the shoulders, shaking him hard, his fingers digging in ferociously. “You can’t just give up, try, damn you!!”

Lestrade didn’t push him off, just put his hands over Sherlock’s and gripped them just a moment, trying to communicate sympathy and solidarity, as much as he could. Sherlock froze, then dropped his hands and hugged himself as though to prevent himself from either greater violence, or perhaps collapsing against Lestrade’s shoulder.

“I’m not giving up, I promise you that. If it was going to kill him, I have to think it would have done it right then and there. Nobody could stop it, the thing was invisible. But even if it walked right through the door, I don’t have what I need to take it out. I could try my gun -- but I don’t think so. It’s not a real dog.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Sherlock muttered. “Not a real dog. Your gun worked very well on Maxim -- but his body was real, alive . . . just possessed. Possessed.” He fell into silence.

“I don’t give up, Sherlock, especially not on this.” Lestrade continued, repeating for emphasis. Sherlock was listening in there, somewhere. “All I’m saying is that I need help. I have to go see someone. I’ll go right away.”

“Who do you need to see?” Mycroft said. He hadn’t actually spoken the words, “hell-hound” yet. The words sounded fantastical falling from Lestrade’s lips. But Greg Lestrade of all persons, serious and dedicated cop, weekend football enthusiast, loyal friend, he would never just dream up such a thing.

And then there was his own experience. As a Level Ten Projector, Mycroft Holmes sometimes encountered immaterial beings, strange energies. Some of these inspired deep horror and repulsion. It was his duty to observe and report these encounters, but not to seek contact.

But he had never felt or seen anything so solid and menacing as this evil hound evidently was to those who had eyes to see it. And he had never really considered whether these energies were
actually evil, demonic. It seemed he was going to have to adjust his thinking about many things.

# # #

“I need my uncle’s help. He’s a priest. He lives outside of Lestrade-et-Thouels. It’s his job to help. Unless anybody has a better idea, I’ll start out in the morning.” Lestrade rubbed his face, took a deep breath. The Holmeses were not in the habit of seeking assistance from anyone. But they needed his now, whether they liked it or not. The best thing he could do for Sherlock would be to act like the cop he was.

“If you’re staying here in 221b tonight, Sherlock -- “ Sherlock gave no sign of hearing him, but he kept on anyway. “--if you’re staying, I'll stay with you. Once the hell-hound appears, that means it has work to do. It could come again. I don’t think you should stay here -- it’s too obvious. You should come with me to France. In fact, I think we should all stay together now. If you won’t come with me, you should let Mycroft take you somewhere safe.”

“Yes, he’s done so marvelously well at that!” Sherlock snapped. “This is my - our home. Anyway, where is ‘safe’? This hell-hound took John through a solid wall. In Battersea - a place no one could have known we were going. No one except you, Mycroft. So-- the hound was shadowing us? Tracking us?”

They all considered the vision of the invisible hell-hound tracking John and Sherlock, invisible and relentless.

“So you see it doesn’t matter where I am.” Sherlock said.

# # #

Sherlock settled himself into one of the leather chairs by the fire and gazed at the skull. Then he stood up again and plucked it from the mantelpiece, weighing it in his hand. He picked with his fingernail at a residue of cellotape with a fragment of paper stuck to the skull’s forehead.

Mycroft silently approached and took the skull from his fingers. He looked around and thrust it at the back of the nearest cupboard and shut the door. Sherlock said nothing, staring as the skull disappeared, unable to think of anything but the stupid note, of the day he had left John. He wanted to scoop his own brain out of his own skull and pound it into bits for that bit of stupidity. John would still be here today if --

He couldn’t finish the thought. He clutched at John’s tags instead.

“Is there any reason why the beast should come back?” Mycroft asked.

“These creatures play games. From what Sherlock has said, they were expecting something to come after John. They’re bonded. I can’t believe this creature and its master don’t know it. Where one goes, the other will follow.”

“All right. I suppose you’re wondering why I’m not trying to convince you that all this is impossible, that there is some sort of -- rational explanation,” Sherlock said, his voice shaky and unnaturally quiet, nothing like his usual ringing, confident tones.

Lestrade thought it wasn’t just the shock -- he was likely trying not to upset the baby. His sister had been like that, firmly believing that all sounds, all sensation and emotion, transmitted themselves to the womb. She used to play classical music, and always spoke in a warm, soothing voice during her pregnancy. Lestrade had quite liked to listen to her. And sure enough, her son had been a happy, easy baby and a calm, bright, curious toddler. This pleasant memory made his heart sink for
Sherlock. If John didn’t come back, and soon, he couldn’t imagine how Sherlock would cope alone.

“You could say that. Look, I wasn’t supposed to tell about the Hell-Hound to anyone outside the family,” Lestrade said cautiously. “But Mycroft trusted me today by telling me something very important, too. I think it’s a sign that we are meant to be in this together.”

He gave a look full of meaning to Mycroft. Maybe he hadn’t trusted Mycroft Holmes before, and maybe Mycroft hadn’t deserved it; but now everything was going to be different.

“A sign? Do you mean, like fate?” Mycroft said. On All Hallows Eve he had sat in that little police van, letting Lestrade adjust his wire, trying his hardest not to look into his eyes. He had thought then that no matter how far apart they had seemed at that moment, what was between them was inevitable. Meant to be.

“Yes, like fate,” Lestrade agreed. He wanted to hold Mycroft’s hand, but he wouldn’t do that in front of Sherlock, who was looking paler and more fragile by the moment.

“Fate,” Sherlock said dully. “I just can’t see it yet; how it works. John and I . . . we were at the Pridiax Archive. Just this morning, before ....”

“Yes, I recall John calling about that,” Mycroft said in a seemingly offhand manner. He was determined to speak of John normally, as though he would return any moment.

####

When Sherlock was a child, prone to strange fits of frustration that agitated him to such a degree as to make it almost unbearable to watch, Mycroft had been able to calm him, sometimes, by talking to him for a long time in this very calm and certain voice. It almost didn’t matter what he said, something in the tone of his voice got through to Sherlock when nothing else did. He knew it wasn’t because of himself. It was because his voice was just another way in which he strongly resembled their father.

“You must tell us about the Pridiax Archive. What did you find there?”

Sherlock briefly, without emotion, explained John’s involvement with the Pridiax Archive at the Barts Pathology Museum. “John thought we could find answers there, all those occult books. Maxim was always a great collector. But it’s too obvious, don’t you see? I want to consult Edward Jesperson, the neurophysicist. In Jersey. All of these -- phenomena -- can be explained by the rules of physics, biology, chemistry. It must be so.”

Sherlock returned to the window. Mycroft and Lestrade shared a sorrowful look. It was obvious Sherlock was watching for John to come home, as if he had just gone out to the shops.


Sherlock gave no sign of having heard; his hand reached up and he began reflexively rubbing at his neck with one hand, his other clutching at the tags he wore around his neck. As all Alphas would, they knew Sherlock was rubbing the spot where John must have made his first Alpha bite to mark him as his own.

“Sherlock, I want you to tell us something. Then, I think, you should rest. I agree with Greg. We’ll leave together in the morning. If you want to go to Jersey to see this Jesperson, we’ll go. Then we’ll go to Greg’s village.”
Mycroft crossed to his brother, not trying to turn him from the window. They looked out together. They had lost track of time; it was already dark. It was Bonfire Night, he realised belatedly. One couldn’t see any of the fires from here, but he saw the coloured sparks of the fireworks against the night sky, heard the booming that rattled the windowpanes just a little. This only made things worse; he briefly wondered if John cared for fireworks. John hadn’t been living in London last November. But the answer was obvious - the sparks and explosive crackle of the rockets could have nothing but terrible associations for John Watson.

“What did you say?” Sherlock said dully.

“About what you said after the debriefing... that John had “sold his soul to save yours.” Did you mean--”

Sherlock turned now, regarding his brother with an expression that smote Lestrade’s heart; the look of a lost child. Lestrade had seen it too often: children abandoned, children whose parents had gone missing. Or were dead. He had seen worse things in his work, but not many.

“-- what I mean to say is, were you speaking literally?”

“Of course I was,” Sherlock whispered. “Would I make something like that up?”

“Of course not,” Mycroft hastened to assure him. Perception was not imagination. No one had a less vivid imagination than Sherlock Holmes. “But I’m in the dark, and Lestrade is too. Tell us what you believe has happened.”

# # #

“Very well,” Sherlock said with a deep intake of breath. The ache of John’s absence was too much, he couldn’t endure it anymore. Soon he wouldn’t be able to withstand any of it, and he wasn’t sure he even wanted to even if he could. All of his attention seemed to be riveted on the baby now, and that meant quiet, peace, and rest. At least that was what he supposed. He felt his body and his mind demanding to shut down altogether and crawl into someplace dark and silent.

He reminded himself that it would do their child no good if he hid in the flat like a frail omega while the strong, brave Alphas went to hunt down his mate for him. Nobody would possibly be better at finding John Watson than he was, the world’s greatest detective: but more important than that, their soul bond kept tugging at him, pulling him toward the windows and door of 221b.

He knew that John wanted him to stay here, that he had given everything to ensure that he and the baby would be safe. But what John didn’t understand was that being safe wasn’t a life. The only life he wanted had John Watson in it, the real, living John Watson that he needed more than London air, not the memory of their too-brief life together. He told himself this was best for the baby too. It had to be.

So, he would go over the facts as he understood them. He wanted to tell the story. It would clarify his thinking.

“It’s rather simple. Maxim was -- is -- possessed by the spirit of Jonathan Talbott. Talbott had built Hantswood Hall and sometime thereafter, he made a pact with the Devil. John and I read an account of his trial in Pridiax’s archive. Talbott escaped the witch-finders, though. A sleeping-sickness infected the town; no one would sit as judge. Talbott went free. A black dog was seen with Talbott before the Hall was burned the first time. Talbott was supposed to have burned inside. I have my doubts. But there he lay until Maxim bought the ruins of the Hall.
“Maxim must have bought the Hall for its associations with Talbott and the Devil. He was always fascinated with the occult, but I didn’t understand that he had gone deeper. I think Maxim was dabbling with something he didn’t understand until it was too late. By then, he was under Talbott’s power.”

“So you’re saying that Maxim brought Talbott back from the dead?” Lestrade hoped this was a one-time thing. He imagined graveyards of London giving up their dead, led by packs of black hounds with burning red eyes.

“Or Talbott used Maxim to bring himself back. I think it was Talbott that needed to sacrifice the omegas on All Hallows Eve. He used Maxim to effect his plan. But we interrupted whatever they were hoping to achieve. They still wanted me, but John bargained to go in my place. By which I mean, they wanted my soul, but John gave his instead. And now they’ve taken him.”

# # #

Lestrade thought about this, treating this like a case. He tried to imagine it was a hostage situation. One hostage had been traded for another. Why did the kidnappers accept the trade?

“We still don’t know why they were willing to do that, though. To take John, I mean. If you were what they really wanted, why accept John instead? When I came down into that cellar, you weren’t in much shape to resist -- now don’t take offense.” Lestrade almost hoped that this would cause Sherlock to flare up in his usual manner, but he didn’t even perceive the bait, let alone rise to it.

“I think,” Mycroft said, “that the only reason they didn’t take Sherlock with them is that they couldn’t.”

“Then that applies to you, too, Mycroft,” Lestrade said sharply, remembering the audio on the wire, Mycroft in the power of some sort of erotic spell, Maxim trying to take more, stopping only when Lestrade broke in on them. He still remembered the feel of his foot kicking in the door, the gun in his hand. “Maxim made it clear he wanted you too, Mycroft. But he didn’t get far.”

He scowled and Mycroft flushed red with mixed anger and shame. Lestrade let him feel it. He wasn’t angry anymore -- not very, anyway -- but he still felt down deep that Mycroft deserved to pay a little for losing sight of what was real.

# # #

“I think it’s time we put together a timeline. I want to review all of the evidence in the case -- starting with the most recent. We need to watch the video records of our debriefings -- no, not John’s,” he reassured Sherlock as his head snapped up with eyes that shot out pure agony as he remembered John reliving his torture.

Mycroft worked his mobile, then nodded toward John’s laptop. Lestrade rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

The first video file was Mycroft, dated five days previous. There was already a helpful transcript attached, but he wanted to watch the real thing. Going to the source was always the best way to handle evidence. He wanted to ask for a pair of headphones, but Sherlock was looking nearly catatonic.

He went to John’s desk and dug around and found a flimsy pair there. Sherlock looked up at the sound of the drawer opening, stared at the headset hanging from Lestrade’s hand.

“When I play my violin -- it helps me think, sometimes, you know -- sometimes I forget how long
I’ve been at it --- and then the sound . . . the sound, you see, it’s not always . . . I don’t always play music. It troubles John. Sometimes. And so he uses those, I believe, to listen to --” Sherlock didn’t finish, looked puzzled. He frowned. “I don’t believe I ever asked him what it was. That he listened to.”

He swayed a little, and Mycroft caught him neatly by the elbow and propelled him toward his bedroom. Sherlock stumbled along by his brother’s side, not leaning into him, but Lestrade thought just by the line of his shoulders that he desperately wanted to. Mycroft shut the door and Lestrade heard muffled murmuring, then silence.

After a few minutes, Mycroft emerged with an expression that Lestrade hadn’t expected.

Mycroft looked ferocious.

“‘We’re going to get John back. I don’t care if it’s this Hell-Hound, or its master that’s behind it. I won’t stand for it. I’ve started wars for less.’

Lestrade’s eyes must have gone wide at that because Mycroft folded his arms and added, “Well, I suppose the word ‘war’ is a flexible term.”

Sherlock’s door opened again and his head, dark curls already askew from his pillow, emerged. “Lestrade. . . if you find anything in there, you know, on his laptop --- was what he was listening to, music, anything -- you’ll save it for me?”

“‘Course I will. I won’t change a thing, I promise. I’ll tell you if I find anything. Now get some rest.”

“Don’t let me sleep,” Sherlock said querulously. “I’d do it all myself, much faster than you ever could, just. . .” Lestrade figured he wanted to say that it was the pregnancy affecting him this way, but they all knew it really wasn’t.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft said waringly.

Lestrade had never been more amazed in his life as without protest, even nodding in agreement, Sherlock turned away and shut the door behind him. Lestrade hoped Sherlock would sleep. Sleep might be the one place where Sherlock could find relief from the pain of being severed from his bonded.

So long as he didn’t dream.

###

Mycroft discreetly checked his mobile. Sherlock was curled on the bed, on top of the covers, his face to the wall with his knees drawn up.

Mycroft looked closer.

Sherlock seemed to be clutching something to his chest. Now he could see that it was, of course, one of John’s jumpers. Sherlock shifted restlessly.

Finally he tugged one of the soft sleeves under his cheek and was still. He didn’t bother wiping way the tears that trickled steadily down his face, running down his neck, because he knew John’s sleeve would catch them.

###
The Opposite of Angels

Chapter 40. The Opposite of Angels

“. . . angelos quidem partim bonos, partim malos, numquam vero bonos daemones legimus.”
(Some of the angels are good, and some bad; but we have never read of good demons.) Augustine,
The City of God

Track: How to Destroy Angels: Welcome Oblivion: Listen to Welcome Oblivion HERE


That night, John dreamed of an angel. The angel was very beautiful; he looked like a man but
illuminated from within, perfected in some indefinable way. The angel held a book in his hand, and
was reciting from it. He had wings that folded against his back as he read. John recognised the
passages from Sunday school readings. He had been an indifferent student, he had generally liked
to hear the more violent and dramatic bits in the Bible.

This was a story of King David from Isaiah. Satan induced David to count the numbers of men.
This offended God, because the men belonged to God, not King David. God gave David a
Solomonic choice of punishments to be inflicted on his people.

David chose three days of pestilence.

More terrible than the pestilence was the image of the merciless angel who delivered it on God’s
command:

“The angel smote the people down, standing between heaven and earth with his flaming sword turned on Jerusalem.”

Seventy thousand men died in three days.

John remembered his youthful terror at this. There was a census in England every ten years. Would the census bring down God’s wrath on England? Would God send a pestilence to wipe all them out?

The story of David and the numbering was an lesson in a hard fact: God was more than willing to inflict punishments ostensibly innocent men -- and angels meted out the sentence.

The angel in his dream closed the book.

“What do you think?” The angel asked.

“Angels are supposed to be beautiful, and good,” he said. “They announce the birth of Jesus. They sing in heaven. This story isn’t . . . fair.”

“Why?” the angel asked.

“Well, Satan tempted David to count his men. But the angel killed the seventy thousand.”

“Yes,” the angel said. “Pride was Satan’s downfall.”

“But David wasn’t punished - the people were,” John argued.

“It hurt King David much more to see his people struck down than any harm against his own person could have been. David begged God to punish him instead.”

“Did God punish David?”

“No, he was merciful,” the angel said. His voice was musical and melancholy, or maybe even a touch resentful. “God is always merciful.”

###

The next morning, John monitored their driver closely. The man -- who was not a exactly a man -- never slept, his quicksilver eyes always staring, watching, monitoring him right back.

His nerve endings jangled continually with a pain that never settled into a singular feeling, instead by turns searing, dull, or tearing. This was the pain of the separation of a bonded Alpha from his omega. Pregnant omega: it was much, much worse than the first time, when Maxim took Sherlock.

Then there were the intermittent stabs of sharper pain that meant Sherlock was in terrible distress; he would rather have been strapped back down in that evil cellar than knowing Sherlock was in pain as well. He refused to think about the baby at all, because if he did, he was afraid it would unman him entirely and this was the very worst time and place for him to be weak.

Still, when he didn’t feel pain anymore it would mean he was dead. Or, Sherlock was. So he
sought it out and kept it at the forefront of his attention. This wasn’t hard; John knew how to live with pain as a constant companion.

But he clung to hope, too. Once, he had hoped and been rewarded. He was a prisoner, even a sort of slave now, he supposed. But as long as he kept breathing real air, his feet walking on real earth, that meant he was still connected to Sherlock in the real world.

###

Sometimes they stopped to make a camp, eat and sleep. Whoever was running this show wanted them to do their jobs effectively. That meant keeping them alive.

“Why do they need us?” John asked his comrades. “Seems to me they can do whatever they want.”

He replayed his journey from London to Afghanistan over and over. The hell-hound had brought him here could do anything it liked, he imagined. Why not this?

“I mean, if they want to take out torturers and free prisoners, why not just do it with -- magic, or whatever it is that makes this whole thing work?” John pursued, gesturing to the Humvee, to themselves (they were six, not counting the driver).

They called their missions “the op,” and they all understood what was required. Kill torturers and abusers - the perpetrators of the worst horrors of war -- and free the prisoners. Move on. Repeat.

John had felt so alone in Afghanistan, last time. His torment had seemed so very solitary. Now, sheer number of violators, abusers, rapists and torturers they encountered in their travels brought home to him that what had happened to him was in fact horrifyingly, mind-numbing commonplace.

The others weren’t curious about the purpose of their mission. Some didn’t speak English. The others just gave him hard looks. John recognised the problem: they were prisoners, all of them. These men didn’t want to be sent someplace worse for getting out of line, they had all said as much.

“Watch and learn, Watson, and don’t fuck up. Fuckups go someplace you really don’t want to know about. It’s hot down there,” one of them said the first time John tried to shoot the driver. His comrades had remorselessly taken him down, taught him a little lesson.

He had tried to escape, too. He thought maybe with a huge amount of luck, he could make it to the British camp in Helmand on foot. But the driver always was in his path, and evidently had eyes in the back of his head.

###

“Just do the op, Watson. You can’t escape,” said of of the men, older than the others, finally seeming to take pity on John.

This was MacKenzie, and he was a very tough Alpha. He was tall and thin and grizzled, with wary blue eyes under bushy brows in a weathered face. Something about him reminded him of Sherlock, which perhaps explained why he just couldn’t let the man shut him out like the others did. That, and the fact that MacKenzie exuded resignation, but perhaps not yet defeat. Not yet.

The debriefing, and his memories of the last time he had been in Afghanistan, he kept to himself.

“Look, Watson, I’ve tried. I’ve been here longer than anybody. It’s no good,” MacKenzie said waringly, seeing John’s desperation to get back to his bonded.
“Have you seen it? The hell-hound?” John whispered. He always felt watched. A few times he had seen the flicker of ruby-red eyes in unexpected places.

“We all have. One way or another.”

“Did it talk to you?”

MacKenzie regarded him silently for a moment, looked around to see if anyone else was paying them any attention. Seemingly everyone else was asleep in their tattered sleeping bags. The night was clear and cold. John couldn’t help remembering other cold Afghan nights under thin blankets.

“I was here before, right? But after my tour, I went home, and I got in some bad trouble with an omega --- don’t ask me about it, okay? It wasn’t my fault . . . but I was going down for a very long time. I wasn’t going to rat out my mates, was I? The first night in my cell, I must have been right out of my head. I said some things I shouldn’t have. . . and that dog, it appeared. Nobody else could see it. It said it had a job for me. And that if I did a good job...someone would be grateful. So grateful, that I would get a big reward. And if I didn’t . . .”

“It never said what?”

MacKenzie shook his head. “No. But I’d rather get a reward than the alternative.”

“Listen -- it talked to me too . . it said I was “the arm of the avenging angel.”

“We’ve been handing out the vengeance, no question,” MacKenzie replied with grim satisfaction. “Whoever’s running the op wants to put the hurt on these bastards. That’s enough for me. I wish I’d been able to do half as much when--- never mind. There’s nothing waiting for me back home except a life sentence for escaping. I reckon.”

John had put the hurt on more men than he cared to count by this point. He theorised that the blackness that filled his veins when the hell-hound sent him back into his body made him impervious to pain. Excepting the pain of severance from his bonded. He felt no remorse.

On the other hand, could he honestly say he wouldn’t have done just the same in London, if he had come across such horrors -- and knew he could never be caught?

Was he even still completely human?

###

“I said, what about you? An omega waiting for you at home? You have that look.” MacKenzie was looking at him curiously.

John broke from his reverie and made a decision. This time, he couldn’t go it alone. And so, he confided in MacKenzie about Sherlock: the strange story of Hantswood Hall, and the hellhound that had inexplicably brought him here.

“Look, before I was brought here, back in London,” John felt a certain reassurance when he said the word London, “Sherlock and I were looking at books about . . . the occult.”

MacKenzie shook his head to discourage him saying more and John hesitated; if he did say more,
something might well overhear. But he knew he needed help, and MacKenzie was the only one willing to even listen.

“I think the hellhound must have been following us.” He shuddered at the image of the hellhound tracking Sherlock. If it was after Sherlock and the baby now, without him to protect them—this would drive him out of his Alpha mind, and so he tried to imagine instead that Sherlock was here, and that Sherlock was helping him to reason this out. It hurt more than it helped, but he did it anyway.

“This creature knew I’d been looking at an old book about demons. It talked about runaway angels, it said they were ‘wicked demons.’ But the hellhound said, the runaway angels are still angels, and you are the arm of the avenging angel. Why would a hellhound do the work of angels?”

“I don’t know! Anyway, isn’t the devil just a fallen angel? I saw that in a movie.”

“But the hellhound didn’t say fallen, it said runaway; and there’s a difference, according to the book. Wouldn’t demons want to help torturers, not stop them?”

“Look, I don’t understand all this stuff about old books. What’re you trying to do?”

“I guess I want to know . . . if the avenging angel is a runaway angel . . . and according to that book, a runaway angel is actually a demon . . . who’s running this show? Angels....or the opposite of angels?”

MacKenzie sat up. “Do you see any angels or demons here? What’s your problem, Watson? Look around! It’s just us, the driver, and the op!”

John grabbed his arm and wouldn’t let him go. He leaned up and whispered so the others wouldn’t hear.

“I have get out of here. I figure it matters who’s running this show, because it’ll make a difference what happens if I get caught. Maybe it won’t be just me that gets punished, that’s my problem, MacKenzie. I told you about Sherlock, you know why.”

John knew that he was ignoring the message of his dream: the vengeful angel in Isaiah had slain thousands of men. Men who were innocent. You are the arm of the avenging angel, the hellhound said.

Would an avenging angel hesitate to punish him, then, if he opposed them?

But in his dream the angel also said, God is always merciful.

There was really only one way to find out.

“Aw, Watson, you bastard. I ought to tell you to piss off.”

“But you won’t.”

MacKenzie groaned. “What’re you going to do, then?”

“My mate would say, I need more data,” he replied bitterly, aware that these modest deductions were a feeble echo of his brilliant mate’s powers.

He wondered if Sherlock had uncovered any clue at all to his strange fate. He hoped not. If
Sherlock had any idea that he was roaming Afghanistan (Pakistan, too; he was pretty sure that this operation did not respect international boundaries), Sherlock would find a way to follow in spite of his injunction. The ache in his chest slowly twisted like a jagged blade. He remembered the bronze knives in the cellar of Hantswood Hall, Sherlock plunging it into Maxim’s chest.

He imagined Sherlock’s too-thin frame wracked with these terrible stabbing sensations; stubbornly refusing comfort.

The idea was intolerable, unendurable.

“I’m going to hijack the Humvee,” John said. “And I need your help.”

# # #

London. 5 November. Bonfire Night.

Olivia Urquhart applied a heat strip to the soft skin under her arm and put it in the test kit.

“Right on time,” she muttered, looking into the bathroom mirror. Thick makeup covered her bruises and her face looked strange reflected back.

She had taken heat leave when she noticed people in her office looking at her oddly, taking in her unusual cosmetics and her growing omega scent. Covering her fury was much, much harder than covering her wounds. She replayed the scene of her uncanny violation over and over. No, it was impossible to just accept her fate, and Mycroft’s.

She didn’t intend to take it, as the saying went, lying down.

Yes, she was still right on time to come into heat. But the anticipation she had felt when first accepting Mycroft’s proposal had been supplanted by dread. She had felt a lurking presence since the night of the demon’s visit and knew she was not the only one aware of this.

The demon was going to try to trap Mycroft as he was brought powerless by their heat, that wasn’t hard to predict. Of course, she had tried to warn him. But every time she tried to contact Mycroft, reaching for her mobile, trying to scribble a note, even trying to go to his house, she was filled with unbearable pain and terror that paralysed her. She refused to believe this a post-traumatic symptom: it was some sort of prohibitory spell, obviously.

# # #

Mycroft (or more likely, she thought, Lady Holmes) had thought of everything for their first heat assignation, booking them a retreat at a very exclusive red hotel in the country.

Olivia hadn’t been offended in the slightest when Anthea, and not Mycroft, had delivered the invitation: a proper, old-fashioned printed card from Smythson’s accompanied by the traditional masses of white orchids. These were customs followed only in the oldest, most aristocratic families, customs which dictated that if she fell pregnant they would instantly be wed. Lady Holmes had already made clear that there would be a lavish society wedding, she had already heard a few envious whispers.

She was going to have to think of a way to escape the trap that was drawing ever nearer to
destroying them both.

She consulted her files from some of her more unusual assignments to the Security Committee. It wasn’t too hard to find practitioners of the magic born of Brazil’s African roots in Bayswater, London’s largest Brazilian community. Senhora Maldonada was a medium who claimed to consort with Pomba Gira: a powerful feminine spirit reputed to be a punisher of the abusers of women, and a supporter wronged lovers. She did not fear men, and Olivia hoped she wasn’t afraid of men possessed by demons, either.

At the Hotel Brasilia, Senhora Maldonada held court: an omega of indeterminate age; Her once-lush figure had gone heavy, her long coarse curls were dyed jet black. She wore a scarlet blouse and matching lipstick, and heavily made up black eyes. She looked like a faded opera singer in costume for Carmen. But she had great dignity, and Olivia impulsively decided to trust her.

“You want help to bond an Alpha, yes?” She asked, eyeing her barely suppressed omega agitation, the beads of heat fever starting to gather at her brow.

“No, I don’t care about bonding. Actually.”

“An omega who does not care about bonding! What do you want, then?”

Olivia told her.

“A trabalho.” Senhora Maldonada said gruffly. “A work. You are nearly out of time. Go out and bring back these gifts. Then you will follow me. I know a propitious place.”

###

At midnight, Olivia followed Senhora Maldonada into an abandoned building in Kensal Green, and emerged into St. Mary’s Catholic Cemetery under the fireworks of Bonfire Night. Maldonada picked her way to the foot of a tree where two paths met to form a rough “T.”

“The crossroad is her place.” Maldonada showed her how to arrange the gifts (champagne, a dozen red roses, and a bottle of perfume -- Guerlain’s Mitsouko). They lit the candles. Olivia’s throat stuck as she realised the enormity of what she was doing. The candles flickered and cast strange shadows. Maldonada was a much more ominous figure now, standing amongst the gravestones, than in bourgeois environs of the Hotel Brasilia. Still, there was no question now of running away. She had a very good idea what was waiting for her. She unfolded the paper that Maldonada had given her and read out the prayer:

Queen of the Seven Crossroads! Do not turn from me, but save me with your gentleness and passion... Yours is the force that destroys my enemy... . .

She waited.

Maldonada slowly underwent a what could only be called a transformation. No longer an old woman with poorly-dyed hair, she had become regal and seductive, with a carriage like a dancer. This, Olivia knew without doubt, was Pomba Gira.

Maldonada/Pomba Gira frowned. “This is not a matter of love.”

Olivia showed her bruises and wounds. “Revenge,” she said, but at the sound of the word “love,” her skin tingled. Heat was almost here. It was terrible to have these feelings standing with all the dead laying around them. Maldonada touched one of her scratches. They weren’t healing.
“The demon abused you with his lust and his fury.” Her face darkened. The last of the Guy Fawkes fireworks burst. “This Mycroft Holmes, your fiancé -- him, you do not love.”

Far from abandoning her nascent breeding arrangement with Mycroft Holmes, the demon’s attack made her doubly determined not to be driven away. Mycroft Holmes had drawn an exceedingly powerful and dangerous enemy: just as in politics, this meant that Mycroft himself was more powerful-- and dangerous-- than she had known.

These evil forces would pursue him with or without her, obviously. But she could turn her ill fortune into opportunity. She sensed a great future for herself and for their children: no longer the faithful and thankless handmaiden to power, she might hold the reins herself. That was worth fighting for.

“No, not love. But we are promised. He will be the father of my children.”

“Then you ask my intercession with the Prince of Darkness to recall his servant?”

“Yes. . . . Please help me.” She couldn’t remember when she had last really needed anyone else’s help. It was not easy to be humble, to beg. But she instinctively felt this was the correct choice.

“I will try,” Maldonada/Pomba Gira said ambiguously. “It is hard for Lucifer to refuse me. But neither is he easy to appease.”

Pomba Gira extended her hand and Olivia took it. Then she understood she was expected to kiss it, and she did. She felt terror recede a little, felt herself strengthened. This was what it felt like to gird yourself for battle, she thought. It felt good.

# # #

London. 221b Baker Street. 5 November, Bonfire Night. Near midnight.

Sherlock arose and quietly returned to work. Lestrade and Mycroft held back solicitous remarks in the face of his fierce expression. He was no longer pale and disheveled, Sherlock was preternaturally composed.

Sherlock announced: “Maxim awoke a man, Jonathan Talbott, who had been dead over 300 years, a man who had made a pact with the devil. The usual currency with the devil is souls; so, Talbott sold his soul to the devil, we can presume that much. But what do people bargain with the devil for? What did Talbott get in return?”

“Wealth, fame, love. . . or immortal life,” Mycroft said.

“Correct. Let us examine these motives. Maxim had more wealth than he could spend in five lifetimes; it would be Talbott’s now, if he wanted it.”

“Fame?” Lestrade threw out.

“Talbott was practically a recluse, never showed a sign of desiring fame in his lifetime and so far as we can tell and he’s not seeking fame as a serial killer - no taunts to the police, am I right,
“I don’t think so,” Lestrade said. “There weren’t any messages from the Sleeping Beauties killer on my watch - none that were deemed genuine. But I’m officially off the case, remember?"

“A killer that wanted his name splashed in the papers would have rattled the Yard’s cage by now.... So, not fame.”


“Not bad, Lestrade, not bad; but I think not--- the Sleeping Beauties victims conform to Maxim’s ideal, but the evidence points to Talbott being the one in control now. I think the murders started out as one thing and ended up something else entirely. It would be useful to know what Talbott’s permutation was during his lifetime . . . I have a feeling perhaps a beta. Betas can be quite ruthless as well as devious. Talbott was known to be a witch, or wizard as the case may be, and a learned one at that. It was harder in those days for Alphas and omegas to apply themselves to arcane studies, so many distractions, no really effective suppressants. . . .”

Lestrade and Mycroft were silent, neither wanting to disturb the flow and push Sherlock back below the surface of the omega distress that was waiting there to claim him. It was a great relief to see Sherlock’s brain come back online with something like his usual intensity and brilliance.

“So -- not wealth, not fame, not love . . . that leaves-- immortality.”

Sherlock stopped short as the sound of sirens drowned him out.

“What’s going on out there?” Lestrade looked down into Baker Street. “It sounds like every police car in London is sounding off. Maybe a fire - it is Bonfire Night.”

But there was no telltale glow against the dark. Mycroft’s mobile buzzed.

“What are you saying?” Mycroft hissed. “I see. Then go to Plan Liverpool at once. No, I won’t be joining you. Try to keep this line open.”

Sherlock’s eyes were steady on his brother’s face. “Anthea?”

“Yes. Whiteshadow have been called into the field. Several operatives have been found dead. The modus operandi is like the Sleeping Beauties. But they were far outside the, ahem, profile.”

“Sherlock...” Lestrade said slowly, staring at his own mobile. “Turn on the telly, now.”

# # #

The television was filled with reports of dead bodies being found throughout London.

Witness: “It looked a little bit much for public, if you know what I mean. Snogging, they were. But then he just -- fell. The other one ran off so fast it didn’t seem possible.”

Reporter: “There have been over one hundred and four unexplained deaths in the past twenty-four hours. Some of the victims are reported to have been seen with potential attackers. So far, there are no suspects and no clues to the seemingly random attacks. The NHS has not yet confirmed or denied questions about a possible biological agent at work.”
“Vampires,” Sherlock said. “It’s not just Talbott and Maxim now -- there’s got to be more than one. I have to get out of here. I hope your armoured Bentley is still down there, Mycroft.”

“Over a hundred dead!” Lestrade said, shocked. “If it really is vampires, like you say, we’ve got to find out how they’re spreading.”

“Yes, of course,” Sherlock said abstractedly, suddenly calm again, concentrating deeply. “Hmmm.” He steepled his fingertips under his chin. “Actually, no, that’s not it. It was John that pointed that little fallacy out. . . John said, the important thing wasn’t to find out how all of this works. John said - - John says, the important thing is to kill it. Or send it back where it came from.”


“I’m going to beat the devil at his own game,” Sherlock said, his blood aching with loss.

# # #

To be continued . . .
"The devils have will to hurt, but they want power." St. Augustine

Just one step at a time
And closer to destiny
I knew at a glance
There'd always be a chance for me
With someone I could live for
Nowhere I would rather be

Is your love strong enough
Like a rock in the sea
Am I asking too much
Is your love strong enough?

Just one beat of your heart
And stranger than fantasy
I knew from the start
It had to be the place for me
Someone that I would die for
There's no way I could ever leave...

Lyrics to Is Your Love Strong Enough, Bryan Ferry, all rights reserved.

Track: Bryan Ferry, Is Your Love Strong Enough? Listen to Is Your Love Strong Enough? HERE

London. 221b Baker Street, 6 November. Early morning.

Sherlock noticed that Mycroft hadn’t answered his question about the Bentley and didn’t seem to be completely following, although he was watching Lestrade closely. Sherlock saw that for
perhaps the first time in his life, Mycroft Holmes had a deeper concern than protecting his younger brother, let alone the nation.

Mycroft’s distracted -- that Alpha scent --- combative surface notes, but harmonious . . . and their shoulders are touching now and Mycroft is looking like that at Lestrade, pheromone fog of course but more than that, they are going to be together now and that means . . . . I’m really all alone in this.

Before John, the sole person that actively cared at all for the welfare of Sherlock Holmes was Mycroft: insufferable, meddling voyeur that he was. Even though Mycroft was the one that always said caring is not an advantage.

And what would it be like if everything changed? Stupid, stupid -- I never considered this outcome -- Mycroft is always proclaiming that bonding is an appalling failure of self-control but look at him now, him and Lestrade just look at the two of them, it’s obvious they’re on the brink.

He paused, overcome with memories: John flinging himself over him as the bomb in Hampstead Heath blasted them, the perfection with which their bodies fit together; John almost forcing himself into his bedroom the night of the Heatwave, how much he had needed him. John's first Alpha bite, the stormy night on the oil rig. These feelings he recognised in his brother’s avid gaze upon Lestrade, which Lestrade returned, Alpha to Alpha.

He turned away, it was too intimate to look upon.

# # #

“T’m wanted back at the Yard,” Lestrade said over the crescendo of sirens.

“And I’ve been summoned to Whitehall,” Mycroft added. He and Lestrade exchanged a look, completely of the same mind. “But we are not going.”

"Are you completely sure? Lestrade, Mycroft? It’s all my doing, if I hadn’t --- "

For either of them to lose the other now would be an unimaginable sacrifice. No one could know it better. And it was a sacrifice he was asking. He knew that. To get John back, he would risk everything. Not the baby, not that, he prayed. But anyone helping him would risk everything, too.

"-- don't, Sherlock," Lestrade said. “John Watson-- he's, well, he's like a brother to me. Anyway, you can't do it without me. Neither of you can.”

"No, I suppose we can't," Mycroft said simply, turning to his brother, bravely holding himself in check, clearly seeing all. It made him happy, just for a moment: if Sherlock Holmes perceived a thing, that meant it was real, true.

He couldn't hold back any more. Mycroft put his arm around his brother's shoulders, the Alpha protecting his omega sibling, and this time Sherlock wasn't fighting him.

"Thank you," Sherlock said, and put his arm just as stiffly around his brother. It felt nothing like John, John was all he wanted. But it felt comforting and he wanted the baby to have that feeling now.

"Oh bloody hell," Lestrade said, and put his arms around them both, a tall armful of slender, prickly, infuriating, fascinating Holmeses. His life was never going to be the same -- if they got out of this alive. "Just tell us where to start, Sherlock."
“First, your eponymous village, Lestrade.”

Mycroft consulted his mobile. “That may not be as easy as you think. There seem to be quite a number of persons in Baker Street. They do not seem to be particularly benign. And my car seems to have disappeared. I do hope we have firearms on hand.”

###


John and MacKenzie launched their attack just as the driver was climbing into the Humvee. There was a large village nearby, and MacKenzie thought he and the rest of the men could steal vehicles down there -- if John managed to steal the Humvee.

The driver thrashed and punched threw them off like mere toys with the supernatural strength John had expected. When MacKenzie screamed at the others to get back, they hesitated just long enough.

John summoned the image of Sherlock carrying their child, a pregnant omega lost and desperate without his Alpha.

With a roar he tore the driver’s hand from the door of the Humvee and tried to climb into the cab. But it wasn’t enough. He was flung into the air and landed with a bone-rattling crash. He heard the Humvee’s engine roaring and saw the remorseless silver eyes of the driver behind the wheel. He was going to run him down.

“John!!!! Go go go go!!” MacKenzie screamed, and he pulled himself to his knees, then his feet. Too slow. “Oh god please no,” he prayed aloud as the smell of sulphur rose up around him.

He started running hard. There was growl at his shoulder and he didn’t dare turn his head to meet the fiery gaze.

It seemed he had been wrong about consequences, after all.

The Humvee struck. He thought something important broke, like his spine. His eyes followed the Humvee uncomprehendingly as it sailed past him through the air and crashed, wheels spinning. He flashed back to the bomb that wrecked his jeep, time blending the present and the past in a kaleidoscopic jumble.

There was snarling and savage barking. Not one, but two hell-hounds were tearing at each other, foaming at the mouth and snapping over his inert body in a surreal battle. Their snapping jaws barely missed his face. They were fighting over him and he couldn’t move so much as a fingertip. His vision was narrowing to a small point of light in darkness. Maybe it was all over.

“Sherlock,” he said. The bond between them felt as strong as ever, an invisible, unbreakable golden chain that bound their hearts and souls. In his mind, he held on tightly to the chain. Everything was bathed in a radiance of an indeterminate colour, maybe of every colour. There was a sharp agonized howl from one of the hell-hounds, and it ran away.

John waited for the driver to emerge from the wreck of the Humvee and finish him off.

###
A beautiful fierce face was bending over him. It was the angel from his dream. He had an impression of jewel-like sapphire eyes and golden hair in a face more noble than any sculptor could render. An impossibly beautiful face, remote and terrible and sorrowful.

He was starting to feel like maybe he could rise. He looked around and saw his own body laying there. Unlike the incident at the Whiteshadow research station, he could easily see that this time his body was broken beyond repair. His head and torso were bent at grotesque, impossible angles.

There was a hellhound was here too, sitting at the side of the angel. The fire in its eye was a soft reddish flicker and it didn’t feel malevolent, which was confusing. Nothing made sense. He felt like wanted to ask questions, but the only important thing was his urgent need to get to Sherlock. He figured there was only one way to do that in the shape he was in. He hoped it didn’t take much longer to die.

“So John, stay,” the angel said. “Take my hand.”

He didn’t think he should do that.

The angel’s hand stretched out to his ephemeral one.

“I have to go to my bonded now. Where are you taking me?” John pulled his hand away. He felt very free, even though the pull on the golden chain was stronger than ever -- the pull that was his bond to Sherlock. He wasn’t going into the light, even with an angel. He wasn’t going anywhere but 221b Baker Street.

The angel nodded gently, understanding his thought. John realised that he understood the angel too. They would help each other.

“No more than a single day and a night. Twenty-four hours,” the angel said. “Then you must return to this body without fail, and I must return to angelic form.”

“It’s just a reprieve, then -- and then I’ll die, is that what you’re saying?” He thought maybe he could find a way to avoid returning to his body. If this angel would lend him the power to return to Sherlock, he would gladly accept that gift. But he wouldn’t coming back. He would stay with Sherlock.

That meant he would be a ghost, he figured.

Better than the alternative. It was fine.

“You won’t die if I can prevent it,” the angel said. “But I am not an angel of death.”

“What kind of angel are you, then?” he asked. It seemed important to know.

“I’m an angel of music. Or I was. That was a long time ago. Take my hand, John, or it will be too late.”

He took the angel’s hand.

Even the rapture of consummating his bond with Sherlock could not compare with the beauty of the ineffable sensations infiltrating his soul; he was embraced and absorbed into a form that was like, and yet utterly unlike his human body. He watched his broken body gently transform into vibrant good health, his wounds and fractures vanishing faster than thought. He looked down into
the face of John Watson, where his eyes glowed with a radiance and intelligence that could only be
that of the angel.

The angel experimented with moving John’s human limbs, and laughed.

John tried moving his body too, and almost knocked the angel over.

“Gently,” the angel said. He was moving his own mouth, his own body, and it was very strange to
see. John tried moving his new form more gently.

“Wait,” the angel said. He stood up and walked over to the Humvee, and John was astounded to
see his own body working perfectly now, fractures that should have been impossible to mend had
simply vanished as though they had never been. The angel leaned into the cab of the Humvee. John
figured he was checking on the driver, but all he did was wrench the rear-view mirror free. He
brought it to John so he could see himself in the reflection.

He was an angel, all right. There were even wings behind his shoulders. But the oddest thing was
that his own face, John Watson’s face, looked back at him in the mirror. The angel stood at his
side and they looked at each other, almost twins except for the almost blinding radiance of John’s
angelic body.

“Angels may appear in whatever material form they choose. You are going to your bonded, you
want to look like John Watson, yes? Or would you prefer another appearance? It is only for a single
day and night.”

John smiled and experimented with moving the wings. He felt amazing, there was no containing
these feelings, indescribable. The gentle movement nearly blew the angel off his feet. The angel
grabbed his shoulder to brace himself.

“I’m fine looking like this -- I mean, with my own face. I guess the wings are mandatory?”

“For now, yes. How else do you think you’ll get to London?”

“You’re joking,” John said. “What happens if you don’t come back? Why are you helping me?
What happened to the driver and -- the other hell-hound?”

He didn’t really expect answers, but the angel said, “The last is easiest to answer. The driver and
the hell-hound have returned to their masters.”

“Their masters... the runaway angels, right? Why did they bring us here?”

“There isn’t a lot of time. They will return in force, and soon. But you are only partially correct. We
are barred from the Light. But some of us still fight the Dark. The Runaways are trying to serve in
ways that they believe may, in time, regain our place in the Light. We conceived a scheme to
harvest the souls of the most wicked of men.”

“Harvest their souls? How --- so when me and the men, when we take out these animals, these
torturers--- we’re doing it for you? Where do you take them?”

“That I cannot reveal. The Runaways take the lives and harvest their souls to prevent them from
doing evil on earth, but even more importantly to prevent them from going into the Dark. When
they go to the Dark, they strengthen the Fallen’s power. Without our intervention, these men’s evil
deeds earns them a fast ride down to the Dark, where they are welcomed with open arms . . . and
given work suited to their natures.”
“And so you are one of the Runaways?”

“Yes.”

“You’re an angel?”

“Angels who are barred from the light, yes.”

“Then why capture me? Why did the driver try to kill me when I tried to escape? Why did you save me?”

“Some of the Runaways . . . have lost hope. One of my brothers was watching over you and your men. He betrayed us; he has been seduced by the Fallen. You didn’t have a way of knowing this, John. The Fallen have been using you for their own ends --- you will see that of course, the scheme can work both ways.”

“Works both ways . . . but we set all the victims free, all of them - -I saw them, there was always someone waiting, doctors and nurses and --- are you telling me it was all a fake?? That I handed those poor people over to . . . the other side? And when we took out the torturers --- we were just sending them into the arms of . . .”

“Yes. The Fallen have them now.”

“Jesus Christ, tell me it’s not true, you tell me it isn’t true!” He grabbed the angel by the throat and shook him with all the strength in him, which seemed to be infinite. He stopped when he saw that his own face was turned purple under his angelic hand.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry -- everything feels so -- I can’t seem to control --- anything.”

The angel gasped for breath. “What a terrible feeling, how do you bear it? I thought you were killing me, there was no air, my lungs. . .”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me.” He didn’t understand it. He was a vessel filled with the bottomless pain of the loss of his bonded, but also the inexhaustible love and passion that the bond signified. Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock, was the sound of the beating of his heart.

“That is the problem. You have angelic form, but your emotions are your own -- but without the frailty of the human body to temper them. There is no limit to what human emotions might drive you to do, with your immortal strength to bear them. You must try very hard to reign them in. It is only for a day.”

“Do you know anything about Sherlock?”

“The Fallen are mobilising a plague of vampires in London. They seek great numbers of souls, but the souls of the Bloodlines beyond than anything else. Your bonded is one: Sherlock is of the Bloodlines, and he has already lost a piece of his soul to one of the Fallen.”

“Maxim. And Jonathan Talbott,” John growled. “They wanted him, Maxim told Sherlock he had part of his soul, that he had made Sherlock a murderer along with him. But I never heard anything about any Bloodlines. Do you mean the Holmeses? Something special about them?”

This made perfect sense. The first time he had ever set eyes on Sherlock Holmes he had known he was in the presence of a different order of being altogether. Mycroft too, in a different but
consistent way, emanated this sense of otherness.

# # #

“Yes. The Holmeses are of the Bloodlines. More than that, I can't tell you now. Go to him, it's time for you to go to London.”

“What, just .... fly?”

“Just fly. But when you get to London, cover yourself. Here ---” the angel handed him a crumpled raincoat. ”--- you can’t just walk around with wings. And you also can’t -- angelic manifestations cannot . . . .consort with mortals, do you understand? It’s forbidden.”

John absorbed this, but it didn’t matter at all. He pushed away the intrusive memory of Sherlock and the blue dose, of believing that he and Sherlock could never consummate their bond as Alpha and omega. This was just for one day, the angel had said.

Afterwards, he would get his own body back and everything would be as it was before.

“All right. Do you have a name? You know my name, but you haven’t told me yours.”

“Sollas. My name is Sollas.”

“Sollas. Thank you,” he said. “It’s --- well, it’s a miracle. It’s maybe the third miracle of my life. I guess I’ve had more than my share.”

He was filled with gratitude so huge that he almost could burst with it. The angel nodded, understanding him perfectly: the first miracle being his escape from his torturers in Afghanistan; the second, his bond with Sherlock Holmes.

John thought of London, of Baker Street, of 221b and of Sherlock Holmes. He took a deep breath, his wings beat of their own accord, and his human body, the Humvee, Afghanistan, and the earth itself vanished. In a mere instant he was over Baker Street.

# # #

It was early morning, and there was a terrific cacophony of police, fire brigades, and throngs of people milling in the streets in a panic. Already he had a hollow feeling inside. He had been so filled with a feeling of utter invincibility that hadn’t thought he could really feel fear in this body, but he had been wrong. Anything that threatened Sherlock had the power to instill terror down to his core.

The front door was too public, too dangerous, too many people watching. He noticed that he could actually see the faint colour of light that enveloped humans, Sollas had given him a last warning about that, and about the lack of colour that was the mark of the soul vampires. Sure enough, there were perhaps a dozen humans lurking in the street below that were cloaked in a steely gray colour. Vampires.

He did some recon and decided to enter 221b through the upstairs window. He perched precariously on the window ledge without the slightest fear of falling -- that wasn’t what he was afraid of. He pulled the coat on around his wings. He looked in the window.

No one was there. 221b was dark. The bed looked rumpled, as if Sherlock had lain in it recently.

But the flat was empty. Sherlock was gone.
To be continued....
“Play the opening like a book, the middle game like a magician, and the endgame like a machine.”

-- Rudolf Spielmann

Track: Les Friction, Save Your Life: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shCLy3DcPk0

Hantswood Hall. 6 November, early morning.

Jonathan Talbott strode over the remains of his former home, the ashes of the second destruction of Hantswood Hall. Talbott stepped over a charred beam, noticed a fragment of bone, perhaps the remains of one of the Alphas who had died here on All Hallows Eve. A night that had nearly crushed his schemes. Now it seemed that the Runaways were prepared to oppose him, too. Talbott had last hunted just hours ago at the Guy Fawkes bonfires, where his prey had an unexpected guardian -- a guardian angel, no less. A Runaway angel had descended like a thunderbolt and hurled Talbott’s body (it had been a slight rent-boy then) into the bonfire.

Talbott suspected that it had been more than his own powers that had saved him from the bonfire. This was not a comfortable thought. This new vessel - an Alpha -- had been so conveniently skulking around the bonfires: such a powerful form and unquestioning mind felt like a gift from the One whose burning eye watched over his labours.

In his thoughts, Talbott avoided announcing the name of the Prince of the Fallen - Lucifer.

One might get an unexpected visit.

Even though he had recently fed, Talbott struggled to master his craving for fresh souls. It was starting to feel it more a curse than a gift -- which raised certain suspicions that Talbott dared not indulge.

###
His expensive new trainers left footprints in the ashes. The trainers belonged to Talbott’s new flesh vessel: a blooded member of the ‘Suspect No 1s’ gang -- this age’s answer to the vicious highwaymen of his mortal life. There were more just like him in London’s bleakest streets, many more. A generation waiting to become soul vampires.

*This new age has delivered me revelations,* Talbott thought. He was still very much a man of the seventeenth century and felt the biblical force of the word ‘revelation’ deeply. He rubbed his hands. *Soon,* Talbott assured himself, *soon we shall see the Age of New Revelations. Soon, the Pseudothyrum will be opened.*

In his mortal life, Talbott had been an alchemist. A principal requirement for the study of alchemy was inurement to failure but in this modern world, failure was unacceptable. This was wrong. Yes, All Hallows Eve had been a failure -- but the winter solstice was approaching. Then the Pseudothyrum, the Secret Door, the work of lifetimes, would be opened.

The Pseudothyrum would enable the Dark to lay seige to the Light.

In Talbott’s time, learned men studied Chapman’s English translation of Homer, which Talbott knew by heart:

> How much our suff'rance was, how much we wrought,
> 
> How much the actions rose to when we fought.
> 
> Forth then, and sing the wooden horse's frame,
> 
> which, by force of sleight,
> 
> Ulysses brought into the city's height,
> 
> When he had stuff'd it with as many men
> 
> As levell'd lofty Ilion with the plain.

Talbott’s Trojan horse would be stuffed with the souls of men.

###

Talbott could feel the wood all around, watching him as though it overheard his plotting. It recalled the days of his persecution as a witch. He pulled the hood of the gangster’s dark jacket up before climbing down into the dark.

Talbott pulled aside remains of police tape and shone a pocket lantern over the blackened stones. He found what he was looking for: three stones set in a certain pattern, beneath which hid a secret door. Behind it, a modern steel casket just large enough to protect his grimoire. His fingers outlined words and signs he had made nearly 400 years ago.

His gangster body owned one of those devices -- mobiles -- with a magical map that instructed one
how to go from one place to another. Talbott’s next stop was an exclusive beta retreat in the country, favoured by families of the Bloodlines for breeding assignations. But in this moment, in the ruins of the stone chamber, Talbott savoured the memory Sherlock Holmes’ omega allure, born of the purity of the Bloodlines. An allure so overpowering that he could still smell it, still taste it; so strong, it had driven the Alphas mad. He was almost surprised that the fire could overcome that divine scent.

Predictably, these thoughts stirred Maxim. It was time to send Maxim into the Dark. Maxim could have done nothing without his grimoire, and Talbott reckoned he had no further use for his disciple-turned-rival. He had taken all that he could from Maxim, including a treasure more valuable than all his great wealth: a fragment of Sherlock’s soul. Talbott fingered the phial that hung from a chain about his neck. To those who could see, it glowed. It would draw Sherlock to him.

It had been many generations since the Bloodlines had been actively hunted. This had made them arrogant, even careless.

So much the better.

###

221b Baker Street, London, 6 November. Early morning.

The noise down in the street was getting more ominous. There was a scream.

“Okay, okay, hold on -- even with guns, we’re going to need backup. Especially with --”

Sherlock actually glared at Lestrade. He brandished John’s pistol. “-- You were about to say, ‘especially with Sherlock pregnant.’ I’ll thank you to keep your thoughts concerning my state to yourself. Better yet, don’t have any thoughts about it at all. There’s no need, it’s no one’s business but mine. . . John’s and mine.”

Lestrade took a step back. There were few sights more terrifying than Sherlock with a gun. His brain simply worked too fast and his hand couldn’t keep up, there was the problem, Lestrade speculated. The hand wobbled dangerously.

“In fact, just stop saying ‘pregnant,’” Sherlock added.

“I didn’t actually say anything,” Lestrade replied. The telephone at Yard dispatch rang and rang. No answer. He tried Donovan and put her on speaker.

“Sir, I can’t talk - I’m on quarantine brigade in Lambeth. Where are you? The Super called you in.”

“Listen, Donovan -- I’m pretty sure it’s not a virus. These things aren’t human.”

“Not human? Sir, did I hear you correctly?”

“Believe it. We think they’re vampires. But they don’t want blood, just your soul --- just listen, all
Sherlock would usually have delighted in overhearing Donovan rattled. But as Lestrade hesitated, he snatched the mobile.

“Donovan. Listen to me carefully. Get your riot gear on. Go with live rounds and Tasers. I think these things can move from body to body, so don’t touch anyone and don’t trust anyone either. And get out of London, you of all people aren’t going to be able to stop this.”

Lestrade snatched the phone back. “Do as Mr Holmes says. That’s an order. Call when you can.”

“I’ll try, sir --- I have to -- Oh, Jesus Christ!”

Silence. Lestrade stared at his mobile in disbelief.

“Lestrade, focus -- she’s too far away, you can’t help her. Get a gun --- look under the sofa cushions. Mycroft, I suggest you arrange for transport -- your particular brand of help might prove useful for once. Follow me.”

Sherlock sprinted down the stair to Mrs. Hudson’s door.
There were maybe six men there, and more behind. Lestrade’s heart sank. Alphas. A gang of Alpha vampires. They emitted predatory ketones frighteningly close to rut -- except that Sherlock’s pregnancy ought to mark him as off limits. Then Lestrade wondered if other Alphas might be as drawn to Mycroft’s seductive unsuppressed scent as he was. The hair on his arms stood up.

“I’m Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade of Scotland Yard. I’ll shoot the first one of you that puts a foot in the door,” he shouted, holding the gun steady.

The Alphas hesitated.

There was a terrific crash of breaking glass and rhythmic thrumming that drowned out all other sound as the closest Alpha leaped. Up close, his eyes were silvery and dead. According to Sherlock, he could end up like this -- like Critchley -- if he shot one of these creatures like he had shot Maxim Purcell. Just a few days ago, Critchley had been an ordinary cop like him; god -- or the devil -- knew what he was now.

Lestrade recoiled as the Alpha tried an obscene parody of a kiss and he didn’t bother debating the question further. He pulled the trigger and blew a hole in the vampire’s chest. He threw the body in the path of the other Alphas and sprinted up the stair toward the cacophony that could only be the sound a helicopter hovering over Baker Street.

He nearly collided with Mycroft, who was trying to cover the stair with a gun braced awkwardly in both hands.

“Greg --" Mycroft gaped at the wet blood spatter coating Lestrade’s chest, then gestured him toward John’s bedroom, where a man-sized rescue cage swung crazily at the shattered window.

“Give me that and get in, you’ll get yourself killed,” Lestrade screamed over the din. He snatched Mycroft’s gun and pushed him into the cage, effectively preventing any Alpha posturing. Mycroft’s eyes held his as they both recognised that he might not make it after him. Their fingertips brushed, and then the cage pulled him up.

Maybe thirty seconds before the cage could be lowered again. Lestrade watched the bedroom door with both guns ready. He figured there were two scenarios.

One: these things were after Sherlock and Mycroft. That meant they would keep coming.

Two: they were a pack of hungry vampires looking for a soul fix. In that case, his bullet ought to send them down the road for easier prey.

As a cop, he cringed at the thought-- but as an Alpha male, only his family counted now. He faced the fact that this meant Mycroft, Sherlock, John, even Mrs. Hudson; his cop family too. Now he remembered Janet, left behind sleeping in his flat. That was more than a day ago. Where was she now?

The cage was taking too long. He couldn’t hear a thing over the "copter. Were the vampires coming? Mycroft was shouting down at him:
“The cable’s stuck! Take our hands!”

Sherlock and Mycroft reached down and Lestrade swore before thrusting the guns in his belt, climbing to the windowsill, and kicking out the remains of glass. From here, he had a view of pandemonium in Baker Street -- people fleeing, people in pursuit, cars crashing, fire.

The helicopter lowered and he wrenched his eyes from the long fall down to the pavement. He reached up with both hands. For a stomach-churning moment his feet dangled and swung above the street and the cold wind of the ‘copter’s blades buffeted him, but Sherlock and Mycroft held firm and hauled him up. They collapsed in a heap on the cold metal floor and the ‘copter pulled up and away, picking up speed and hurtling north.

“Thanks,” he panted. Sherlock had already rolled away. Mycroft didn’t let go, feeling around his chest where the blood had soaked his shirt.

“Are you hurt?” Mycroft said, close against his ear.

“I’m fine,” he said. “The vampire isn’t.”

Lestrade wrapped himself around Mycroft and glared at Sherlock, daring him to drop one of his cutting remarks. Sherlock looked right back, surprising him with the tiniest lift to the corner of his lips. He abruptly turned away, though, to help Mrs. Hudson strap into a seat.

# # #

Lestrade looked around. The Yard had helicopters, but none like this. It was huge and fast and bore the crest of the Royal Navy. He opened a chest under one of the seats. Guns, ammo clips, knives, grenades, night vision goggles, and camouflage gear were his reward. He grinned. Cops generally weren’t allowed even so much as a gun. The odds were looking better. He stripped off his blood-soaked shirt and replaced it with a Royal Navy T-shirt, camouflage jacket, and an ammo belt.

Mycroft was trying hard to appear not to be watching, but the sudden lustful scent in the air betrayed him. They were both running on nothing but adrenaline and Alpha hormones at this point; he felt light-headed and disoriented from lack of sleep. Lestrade vaguely recalled that Sherlock had agreed to begin their search for John in his family’s ancestral village of Lestrade-et-Thouels.

Which was in France.

Which ought to be south.

“Why are we heading north?”

“Because,” Mycroft said, “I cannot reach Mummy nor Olivia Urquhart through any channels and I’m afraid they’re in danger. They are almost certainly together, and I know their location. We’re nearly there.”

Lestrade grimaced and strapped himself into one of the seats. Mycroft followed suit.

Lestrade fingered his new knife.
Sherlock studied his brother’s face, posture, and expression.

“You didn’t really, Mycroft,” he said. “A breeding match-- arranged by Mummy?”

“It made perfect sense,” Mycroft said coolly. Lestrade didn’t even try to hide the iron grip of his hand on Mycroft’s thigh, clenching possessively. “At the time,” Mycroft added.

“So where are we going?”

“Sordwell Manor.”

“Sordwell Manor!” Lestrade exploded. “That’s-- that’s a breeding retreat!” Lestrade had assisted the locals on a particularly ugly murder on the grounds.

“Yes. Well. Things have been moving rather fast, and I haven’t had the leisure to make certain . . . arrangements,” Mycroft said with irritating composure.

“I’ll arrange ---” Lestrade started, but then they were landing. The copter’s lights shone over a vast green lawn and the portico of a grand country estate. All was dark.

###

Sordwell Manor, Gloucestershire.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” Lestrade said, resigned. He assured himself that it was their mother they were concerned for and tried to ignore the idea of Olivia altogether. He saw Mrs. Hudson grip Sherlock’s hand, saw Sherlock’s squeeze in return. It came to him that Sherlock had always responded to Mrs. Hudson as if she were his mother, a very great difference to Sherlock’s typically cold affect when his own mother was mentioned.

Sherlock had always insisted that his parents be left out of the picture on the many occasions when Lestrade had pulled Sherlock back from drugs and neglected wounds. He never wanted Mycroft, either-- but Mycroft always found out, and he always came. But Mycroft also respected Sherlock’s wishes. It didn’t take a Scotland Yard detective to see that there was something about their parents that Sherlock - -and Mycroft -- didn’t want exposed to the light of day.

“Mummy arranged a dinner for the three of us. I’m very late -- five hours, to be exact. Neither of them answer their mobiles, but they are traceable here. To Room 237.”

“And no one answers the hotel phone, correct?” Sherlock said.

“Correct. I can only presume they are being prevented from answering.”

They all thought about what was preventing them.

“But you’ve no idea what’s inside that old dark house,” Mrs. Hudson pointed out sensibly.

“There’s only three of you --”

“Five -- Horne’s with us, and there is Mark as well,” Mycroft said.
Horne was an older, grizzled man who the copilot tonight. The other man, Mark, was younger and possessed of blond, dashing good looks. Lestrade thought he looked more like a model or an actor than an operative. He recognised the man as Mycroft’s pilot from the night at Battersea Wharf. More muscle was good, but he didn’t like the easy informality of Mycroft calling his pilot “Mark.” Lestrade shot Mark a look, just to make things clear. Mark was inscrutable (as all of Mycroft’s minion’s seemed to be), and returned to checking his gun.

“I shot one of the vampires on the stair,” Lestrade said loudly. “Regular bullet to the chest seemed to work just fine. We’ve got plenty of ammunition.”

“Don’t be thick,” Sherlock said impatiently. “We’ve made enough noise landing to wake the dead, why hasn’t anyone come out? Mrs Hudson is right, the place is too dark. Look at all the cars -- there must be at least twenty people inside -- - it’s an obvious trap.”

“Who’s setting the trap?” Lestrade asked.

“I should think it obvious that it is someone who wishes to entrap us: Mycroft and me, I mean. I believe we have established that is Jonathan Talbott, perhaps with Maxim Purcell still in his power.”

“As this is a trap -- thank you for that illuminating piece of advice, Sherlock,” Mycroft said, "what is obvious is that it would be preferable to know something, rather than nothing, before we go in shooting.”

Mycroft rolled up his sleeves, unbuttoned his shirt, removed his tie, and lay on the cold metal floor of the helicopter.

“Mycroft --- what are you doing?” Sherlock whispered.

Lestrade understood.

Mycroft was going to project.

“I cannot be disturbed for the next ten minutes. I shall project. When I return, we shall know what is inside.”

Sherlock consulted his fresh memory of John’s debriefing video. One of the white coats was turning away from John’s thrashing body and staring at the door. “He’s projecting!” the white coat shouted.

An iron band of anguish tightened around Sherlock’s chest.

“‘He’s projecting’ they said, Mycroft -- they said John was projecting. Whiteshadow. This is an excellent time for you to explain about Whiteshadow---”

“No, Sherlock, there’s no time. Explanations about Whiteshadow will have to wait,” Mycroft commanded.

“But if ten minutes should pass without you waking-- are we to rouse you?”

“That has never yet occurred. But no. If I do not awaken, stay with me -- if you can --- and contact Whiteshadow. This number, in my mobile, code word ‘Doncaster.’ Now be quiet, Sherlock.”

Sherlock shut his mouth. Mycroft closed his eyes and became still. His breathing slowed, then
seemed to stop. Sherlock delicately felt for his pulse. All the colour had drained from Mycroft’s face.

“He looks like a corpse,” Lestrade couldn’t help hissing. He wished he hadn’t seen this. After tonight, he would make Mycroft swear never to do this again.

“Yes,” Sherlock said. He set his stopwatch and scrutinised his brother’s face, seemingly fascinated but unconcerned.

“What if there are vampires --- but they aren’t inside the house? What if they’re really outside right now?” Mrs Hudson asked, starting to panic again.

Sherlock and Lestrade looked at each other over Mycroft’s body. Neither one of them knew the answer to that.

They kept their guns at the ready.

###

Mycroft looked down to watch Lestrade’s stricken face, as he watched over his inert body. His soul nearly refused to depart, but he was drawn by waves of fear and anger emanating from Sordwell Manor. He wrenched himself from Lestrade and maneuvered to the upper windows of the house. He was rewarded. There were shadows behind the dark windows.

Mummy and Olivia Urquhart were sitting at a table in a darkened room. A breeding suite. It instantly felt dangerous. The Holmes Bloodline was gifted with hyperacute powers of observation, stealth, and cunning; but the force that he felt all around was unknown, mysterious. It both drew and repelled him. As a Level Ten projector, he easily moved through windows and doors, and he did so.

Room 237 was lavishly decorated for an intimate dinner party. Mummy’s cool blue eyes were afraid. He had never seen Lady Anne afraid. She looked right through her son’s insubstantial form. The feelings of repulsion grew stronger.

He turned to Olivia and unaccountably, she seemed to see him clearly. “Get back,” she shrieked.

A circle punctuated with unfamiliar symbols shone up from the floor as though lit from below. Mycroft was struck with a blast of something, a black energy that wrapped itself around him like a serpent.

He tore at it with his insubstantial but still strong hands, and it separated into tentacle-like strands as they struggled. Now he saw that the tentacles emanated from the arms of a huge dark man.

The dark man was murmuring words that Mycroft could not understand, but he felt power in them. He saw a glowing phial on a chain around the dark man’s neck, and it drew him as though it were his own heartbeat. What was inside? It was so familiar as to be indescribable. He knew he had to take that phial, no matter the cost.

###
Mycroft Holmes knew no magick, although Whiteshadow had operatives who reputedly did.

The Holmeses rejected magick as a point of pride, preferring their innate skills and their private rituals of reason, self-discipline, and mediation. He remembered the golden honey-like fluid that Maxim had used to try to ensnare him, drenching him with pleasure nearly impossible to resist. Resistance. He had to resist the dark man’s spell, he had to draw it away from Mummy and Olivia. He mentally threw up a barrier, imagining an impregnable door closing in his mind, not knowing how long he could sustain it.

They wrestled silently, neither giving way. Time felt altered. Mycroft was sure that the ten minute mark must have come and gone. Something more than resistance was required.

Olivia stood up and seized his insubstantial hand, and now his brain filled with imagines of the black tentacles being destroyed by electric shock, then fire, acid, and finally cutting blades. Yet each of these weapons was cast back upon him with even greater force until he was nearly paralysed with agony that would surely kill a lesser man.

“Mycroft! Stay with me, don’t cross the circle!” Olivia shouted. The circle of symbols glowed ever brighter.

A being emerged from the shadows: taller even than the dark man, radiating heat and smelling of sulphur, with reddish eyes in a distorted face of superb ugliness.

It could only be a demon.

###

The demon approached with heavy, deliberate steps that thudded with a metallic clang if its feet were made of lead. Keen blades of terror sliced him, but one thing Mycroft had learned from his father was not become paralysed by either pain or fear. He redoubled his efforts. He could see Mummy from the corner of his vision crawling toward the door.

The demon came on. It gripped a phial in its crude, clawed fingertips. It uncorked the lid. A windstorm rose around them and seemed to be pulling Mycroft toward the phial. He remembered the impossible storm in the stone chamber at Hantswood Hall, the sounds like thunder that shook the walls.

The phial around the dark man’s neck glowed more brightly.

To his amazement, Olivia declaimed unintelligible words of an unknown language, obviously a spell. The demon and the dark man paused, rooted to the spot, growling and snarling their fury. The windstorm swirled less violently.

At this moment, two things unbelievable things happened.

First, there was a thrumming sound of the helicopter and Sherlock burst in through the window. He instantly shot the dark man, who staggered but did not fall; laughing unnaturally, he released Mycroft and greedily stretched his black tentacles toward Sherlock. Sherlock fired again, but his gun went flying in an inexplicable path that defied the laws of physics so that the bullet somehow ricocheted. It struck Sherlock in the shoulder and blood sprayed from the wound.
“Mycroft!” Sherlock shouted, struggling. The demon smiled, an unbearable sight, with dazzling sharp fangs that seemed to be dripping as it also moved toward Sherlock where he crouched, blood pooling below him far too fast. Mycroft moved in front of his brother, between Sherlock and their malignant opponents. He didn't know what else to do, and so summoned forth again those images of horrific pain and sent them into their path. The dark man howled and recoiled, but the demon just grinned and licked its leathery lips.

Then the second unbelievable thing happened.

The moonlight from the window was blocked by a rushing form that emanated its own radiance, shifting in colour, brighter than the moonlight. Sherlock looked up with a face transformed not by pain, but by strange joy. The fluttering form crashed into the room bringing a windstorm of its own. The dark man was flung hard against the wall, where he bounced and crumpled.

Olivia’s words grew stronger and bolder, and now she addressed them directly to the demon, who snarled and cringed and backed away as the bright, blurry being engulfed it.

Mycroft could not follow the fight, it was too fast. But the bright being was apparently indomitable, because the demon finally screamed its fury and curled upon itself in defeat. It snatched up the body of the dark man and vanished with a bone-chilling roar in a cloud of sulphur.

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#

Mycroft felt the familiar pull of his own heartbeat, together with something new: Lestrade’s strong heart, demanding his return.

Mycroft could hear the helicopter hovering outside and a gangway of sorts was laid across the windowsill. Lestrade crossed it with his limp body slung over his strong shoulder, no mean feat. He saw Mark enter after, going directly to Mummy, who was slumped against the far wall, pale as chalk. Olivia, apparently unhurt, hastened to help her.

“Mycroft, Mycroft, you have to come back now,” Lestrade said, frantically rubbing his bare chest over his heart and running his hands along his face. With a soul-rattling snap, he was back. Mycroft drew a first, shuddering breath.

“Oh god, please say you’re all right,” Lestrade said fervently.

“Not me,” Mycroft whispered; it would be a while before he was in command of his body again. He was about to say, *Sherlock’s been shot*; but Sherlock was stretching up his bloody hand toward the bright form.

The radiant being coalesced before their eyes into the outlines of Doctor John Hamish Watson, last seen in the company of a hellhound at Whiteshadow Research Station Number Three in Battersea.

As John and Sherlock’s hands touched for the first time since that day, John’s shifting radiance settled into a steady glow.

And then John’s wings unfurled.

Lestrade and Mycroft stared.
John Watson was an angel.

John bent over Sherlock with a sharp cry and caught Sherlock up in his arms.

"John," Sherlock said with a trembling voice.

"I told you I'd find my way back somehow," John said. He spread his dazzling wings and folded them very gently around Sherlock, obscuring them both from view.

To be continued.....
The wondrous appearance of John Watson as an angel reinforced Lestrade's conviction that they were surrounded by supernatural forces, pursued by evil.

Just a few short minutes had ticked by as Lestrade watched over Mycroft and Sherlock looked out into the dark, waiting for Mycroft’s spirit to return -- but then they saw a strange glow in the dark windows and there was no chance he was going to just stand by while Mycroft’s spirit was assailed. *Change of plan, we have to go after him*, he had shouted to Sherlock, but Sherlock was already throwing the gangway across the window sill, going in shooting.

Lestrade had no idea what Sherlock had seen when he crossed that threshold. Now he was afraid Sherlock would never be able to tell him.

###

Lestrade’s nerves jangled like strings ripped from a violin and he growled from somewhere deep. Seeing the hellhound on the video had unlocked something inside him and he fought the compulsion to touch the faintly glowing circle on the wall, big enough for a large man to stand in -- or pass through. Or a demon, he thought. He didn't know where the idea came from; he just knew a demon had been here. He rubbed Mycroft's hands in his, they were too cold. Mycroft was trying to speak. Lestrade could sense his urgency and fear, fear for Sherlock but more than that.

"Was it Talbott?"

"Not sure," Mycroft croaked.

"Demon?"

Mycroft nodded in the affirmative. "Olivia knows."

That was what he was afraid of. Was Olivia a victim here too, or....

"Are they gone? It doesn't feel like it."
"Think so. But we need to go."

Lestrade instinctively turned toward the window where the helicopter was hovering. At that very instant Mrs Hudson came scrambling across the gangway, falling into Lestrade's arms as it fell from the window with a screech like metal fingernails on stone. The pilot's screams were cut off by the engine's whine as the helicopter lurched away. After a beat, the crash; the conflagration bathed the room in a hellish glow.

Everything was out of control. They had come here intending to act together, and now it felt as if they were being pulled apart.

###

John ignored the chaos; Sherlock was all that mattered. Time, time, there wasn’t much time. John tore a strip from Sherlock’s shirt and made a field tourniquet. His hyperacute senses revealed things that he supposed only angels ever saw, such as the fact that Sherlock’s gushing blood glinted gold -- was it because Sherlock was one of the Bloodlines?

He pressed his hands hard against the spot that should slow the flow of precious blood. Sherlock winced and clenched his teeth, his face pale, so pale beneath the amber glow of his aura. Too much pain, but he wouldn’t say so, of course. Sherlock always thought he could bear what no one else could.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how -- I don’t know my own strength,” John said. He tried to gentle his immensely powerful hands, hands that were coated with that golden-tinted blood now. “Somebody help me -- I need a medical kit.”

“Mark, get out there and find something,” Lestrade ordered.

But Mark didn’t move. Olivia nuzzled closer, inhaling Mark’s Alpha scent.

“You aren’t in command here,” Mark snapped, and his hand went to his gun while he grasped Olivia about the waist with the other.

God, what timing. Olivia was on the brink of full blown heat.

Olivia was a liability.

This made something malicious twist inside.

Lestrade pulled his gun in response. “Steady, now.” He held up his free hand, placating; he had to stop this getting out of hand. Mycroft was still so faint and Sherlock was badly hurt.

“You don’t want to do that,” John said, not looking away from Sherlock’s face. His exquisitely fine senses let him hear the brush of hands on guns, feel the tension, smell aggressor ketones. He didn’t know this Alpha, but he was threatening Sherlock. John turned his head slightly to bring Mark into his field of vision.

“What the ---” Mark was so drunk on pheromones that he hadn’t even registered John's presence -- or the fact that John had wings. Mark gasped and his hand clenched harder at the gun.

###

John flashed back to his dream of the vengeful angel, an angel who smote the men of Jerusalem. *You are the arm of the avenging angel*, the hell hound had said.
John slowly took his hands from Sherlock’s body and imagined Mark’s gun shattering into a thousand harmless pieces. Slivers of gray metal and black plastic instantly fell from Mark’s hand.

“Holy Mother of God!” Mark stared at the shattered remains of his Glock on the plush carpet.

Lestrade made his move. He knew that Mark, as a field operative, had to know the drill: standard police protocol in a crisis was to cuff Alpha/omega couples showing heat sign and administer suppressants -- not that Lestrade had any on hand. There really wasn’t anything else to do.

“Both of you in there, now,” Lestrade indicated the bedroom of the breeding suite and made sure they saw that his own gun was intact.

“Mark, Olivia: do as Detective Inspector Lestrade says. Lock the door from the inside. That is an order,” Mycroft said, glaring at Mark balefully.

“Mr. Holmes, I’m -- I’m sorry,” Mark gasped. “This hasn’t ever happened, I don’t understand -- but it’s too late, I can’t stop.”

Olivia was past the point of speech.

“Lock the door and I won't cuff you,” Lestrade said. "But don’t come out until I say -- or you’ll regret it.”

He kept his gun on them until he heard the key turn on the lock. The door was extremely solid and, he was relieved to note, soundproof. It would be. Sordwell Manor was an exclusive and very private breeding retreat for those who could afford its astronomical fees. No vulgar breeding cries would escape from behind the closed door.

###

John was trying to think fast, like Sherlock. The gun had shattered just from his thought, his will. Sollas had mended his grotesque wounds -- could he do that right now, for Sherlock? This power felt infinitely strong. Probably too strong, he couldn't bear to think he would hurt his mate. He shaped the power into something soothing. No pain.

He ran his hands over Sherlock’s wound and imagined the pale flesh of his shoulder flawless as it ought to be, as he remembered it the last time he had held Sherlock in his arms in 221b. He willed the torn skin and blasted sinews and veins to knit together.

Sherlock’s aura glowed brighter under his hands and Sherlock’s eyes locked onto his, so wide and astonished. It was as if he had never truly seen Sherlock, how strong he was, nor paradoxically how fragile, until this moment. Unbearably beautiful, incomparably brilliant, so reckless of life. John’s heart -- did angels actually hearts? he wondered -- swelled as though it was breaking apart. He perceived that some of his strongest Alpha urges had been unavoidable, but still wrong.

Hearing Lestrade mention handcuffs, he remembered cuffing Sherlock to his bed. If he could go back in time maybe he would still have done it, but he would take back the ugly dominance that had driven him. He should never try to constrain Sherlock’s spirit, only to protect it. Sherlock loved him, but if he tried to make Sherlock fundamentally change who he was for him or even for their child, his fire would dwindle and go out. He desperately wanted a chance to prove to Sherlock that he understood this now.

###

John lifted his hands and removed the tourniquet. Sherlock’s slender shoulder was perfect again.
He leaned down and kissed it reverently, and when he was certain that Sherlock truly was healed, he took him into his arms. He wanted to bask forever in the shimmer of Sherlock’s aura.

But the grandfather clock ticking in the corner felt like it was lodged inside his head: a single day and a night, the angel said, and that meant dawn. He was almost out of time.

“Don’t let go, John.” Sherlock reached for his hand and clasped it, putting it over his belly where the baby was nestled. John looked down and saw that under their clasped hands, Sherlock’s aura glowed a little brighter. A strong spark traveled up from Sherlock’s belly and through his hand. He closed his eyes.

The baby was a girl. He knew this now, this was something that the angels know. His eyes welled up with hot tears of agony and gratitude mingled together. He had been given this chance, he had been allowed to save his mate and child when they needed him the most. Perhaps that was the only reason that Sollas had sent him here like this. Why did they have to be in this strange place, everyone all around? Even Lady Holmes was here, standing over them now, pale but steely, watching him hold her son with eyes that seemed entirely too knowing, even unsurprised.

He glanced at the window and saw the sky lightening. Dawn. No time.

“Sherlock, I don’t know to tell you this. When the sun comes up, I might not be like this --”

“You’re really an angel.” Wide eyes contracting now with fear. Too much fear even for Sherlock Holmes. “Are you . . . dead, John?”

“Maybe,” John said. He could barely choke out the words but he knew what he needed to say. “When the sun comes up, I might be John Watson again. But it might not work out. So let me say this.”

“No.” Vigorous shaking of the head, Sherlock’s curls, still damp with his own blood, shaking too.

“If I can’t stay, Sherlock, if I can’t --- at least now I know for sure there’s something else after we die. Remember that. I’ll be with you, even if you can’t see me. Do you know how much I love you?”

“Yes,” Sherlock whispered. “I - I love you, John. I can’t, you can’t, you can’t go. I didn’t even have a life until you. I don’t know how --- how would I do the rest of it without you, now? I won’t let you.” He seized John in his long arms and held him in a stranglehold that caught up his wings too. Sherlock shivered.

“Sherlock. Listen to me. Our baby, it’s a girl. I wanted so much to be a father with you. She’s what we did together, she’s what we were for, maybe.”

He looked into Sherlock’s face, watched a million thoughts and feelings passing through those brilliant grey eyes, and Sherlock opened his mouth and John knew he was going to tell him to stop, to shut up, it wasn’t true, he didn’t want to hear this. John kissed him instead, a chaste kiss that nevertheless he put his entire heart and soul into, and Sherlock finally seemed to understand the truth because he held him even tighter and his lips were desperate and tender under his. “No, no no no no,” Sherlock murmured against his mouth.

He already felt this borrowed body starting to vibrate, he felt like he was losing his shape. He concentrated fiercely on holding steady for just a minute longer.

“I can’t change this, Sherlock; I did my best. We’ll live through our daughter, and you have to live for her. You have to promise. You’ll do brilliantly, you’ll be amazing, just like you always are with
everything. She’ll be . . . so lucky. Tell - always tell her how much I love you both. Tell her that I’ll always watch over you. And that I’ll be waiting for you.”

The sun touched the windowsill. He was filling with a new kind of light, more light than it was possible to contain. It was almost too late to warn Sherlock about what Sollas had said, even though he didn’t know what it meant. But he was strangely glad now for all the solitary hours he had spent in the Pridiax Archive, mulling over demonological texts. He had a frame of reference.

“Sherlock, listen to me -- The Fallen angels sent vampires to London -- The Fallen want you and Mycroft because of the Bloodlines. There were evil things here tonight and, one of them felt familiar. I think it was Talbott. And he has a demon with him. You were right, Maxim really did take a piece of your soul. Talbott has it in a little bottle, around his neck. You have to get it back.”

Why had Sollas allowed him to come here but fail at this? Sherlock would never be safe until he had that bottle. He swore to himself he would keep trying.

He was melting, shimmering, but he could see from Sherlock’s expression that he was trying to concentrate on his words.

“What must we do now, John?” Sherlock had never asked him such a thing, but he clearly recognised that for once, John was the expert. John could almost laugh at this: it took him being an actual angel to persuade Sherlock that he knew things that Sherlock didn't. Sherlock kept his eyes locked onto his, even though John imagined Sherlock couldn’t actually see him any more.

“Find the Runaways. Find the angel named Sollas.”

John's hand, clasped in Sherlock’s, faded away. John watched as his body turned phantom-like, then shadowy, and finally dissolved altogether. He tried to squeeze Sherlock’s hand. Nothing.

But he wasn’t going anywhere, either, which was not at all what he had expected.

If he wasn’t getting his real body back, what was happening? He was the one that needed to find Sollas.

He said Sherlock’s name over and over, but Sherlock couldn't hear him anymore. He watched Sherlock stare at the place where they had just been together, holding each other close.

Sherlock reached down and grasped something delicately between his long fingers. It was a shimmering white object.

It was a feather.

# # #

Nobody knew what to say. Lestrade tried first, tears running.

"Sherlock. . .you really are all right? There was so much blood...and John-- it was a real miracle--"

"Yes. I'm not hurt, not any longer. Thank you. But it is. . . over now. Please don't--” Sherlock closed his eyes. He wanted to be alone with his memory of John.

He couldn't feel John, who was standing at his shoulder, trying to figure out what it meant that he was still here, when no one could see or hear him. He still had wings and he tried beating them forcefully. Sherlock frowned but then became obviously distracted by something else. His lips were moving and John rather thought he was reciting back to himself everything that he had just
said. Sherlock possessed a photographic memory, but when he needed to be utterly sure he would remember a thing, he repeated it aloud, and never more than once.

"We won't, then," Lestrade said, choking back the tears and clearing his throat hard. Was John truly gone? He thought Mycroft and Lady Holmes looked rather composed about having seen John appear, and disappear, as an angel. But now he knew Mycroft would tell him whatever he knew about it, if anything, in good time.

Mycroft kept his own counsel, although he was very much affected. The meaning of John's appearance both gave him hope and devastated him, and he didn't have the faintest idea what to do with these feelings, so hard on the shock of his horrifying battle. Lestrade would know. But this wasn't the time or place. He sat up and tested his limbs. Everything worked, if a bit weak. He watched the roaring fire from the wreckage of their helicopter.

"How did you know to come after me?"

"There was a light the window. It looked-- wrong," Lestrade said. "But mostly it felt wrong. I could feel the evil, it was so strong. I couldn't just wait."

Mycroft squeezed his hand. "If you had, we would both have been in that helicopter just now. You were very reckless, Greg. But very brave." He would never forget watching Lestrade carrying his own body, that bold risk. That he should be willing to risk such things for him took his breath away; in his frail state, all he wanted to do was rest in Lestrade's arms. Lestrade seemed to understand. He squeezed his hand back, ignoring Lady Holmes' judgmental eye. He wanted to kiss Mycroft, too, but knew that was something that would make Mycroft uncomfortable, or worse, in his mother's presence; maybe Sherlock's, too. He didn't want to be one of those kinds of Alphas, perpetually marking their claim.

Well, except where this purported match with Olivia was concerned. He glared at the closed bedroom door. Neither of them had tried to come back out again. Perhaps the Olivia problem had solved itself.

"Poor bastard," Lestrade said of the pilot. "That crash was no accident. Talbott doesn't want us getting away so easy. I don't want to leave you, but I've got to get us a car. There's plenty in the car park. Wait here, it won't be long. Lock the door behind me."

He tried to carry himself with total confidence. He had to pass the circle on the wall to get to the door, and it made his bones twinge. He didn't touch it, though. He went into the hall where morning light was finally streaming through.

###

As soon as Lestrade left, Lady Anne tried to go to Sherlock but his eyes opened, and at his cold stare she hesitated and stopped short. When she turned to Mycroft, Mrs Hudson went to Sherlock and sat at his side. She knew he wanted to lean against her for comfort, and also that he wouldn't; and so, she leaned her head against Sherlock instead, heedless of the blood.

"Mycroft," Lady Anne said softly, trying to appear as though the scene didn't affect her; she and her youngest son seemed always destined to be so very far apart. Some things could not be changed. "I know you don't care to hear this. But I think it is time you called your father and told him everything."

His father. Sheridan Holmes had his own resources. Sheridan Holmes’ life was one of pure espionage played out at the very highest levels. He could be anywhere. Even here. His stealth was
unequalled. Sheridan would be horrified, disgusted even, at Mycroft having breached the solemn code of secrecy regarding the Holmes powers by confiding in Lestrade, and even more so at the reason Mycroft had done it.

"It is a possibility that Father is projecting at this very moment, watching us all. He's done it before."

# # #

"Mummy. Mycroft. I think we ought to discuss our -- interesting-- family dynamics, now is as good a time as any. After all, when were we three last together in the same room?" Sherlock said with a touch of his customary disdain to conceal the fact that he desperately needed to understand John's warning. "The first order of business will be a thorough explanation of this 'projecting.' And what is meant by 'the Bloodlines.'

"You don’t need to be tempted into--- well, into meddling with projection, or the Bloodlines. It's what I've always tried to protect you from, Sherlock." Mycroft didn't add, at such a price. Sherlock’s emotional state was precarious; he was of course prone to epic quarrels with Mycroft over much less provocation than this. He advanced on Mycroft.

“But you don't need protection, is that it? You --- and Father, can cope with it, but not me? "He’s projecting," they said-- they said at that warehouse of yours, John was projecting. Whiteshadow, Mycroft. Your debriefers seemed quite familiar with this phenomenon -- projection. “Get Holmes,” they said. Why did that happen to John?"

“Very well. Whiteshadow had developed intelligence that Maxim Purcell was attempting sustained projection into the Golden Plane,” Mycroft said rapidly. "Projection is the separation via conscious will of the soul from the body. There are some who call it astral projection, you are no doubt familiar with such things, Sherlock."

"Yes. Charlatans bandy the term about, even today. I've broken more than a few fake seance rings. And the Golden Plane is taught by the monks in Tibet."

"Just so. It is not these ideas that are secret so much as our refinements of them, and the fact that we -- Whiteshadow -- trains its agents to do this for espionage purposes. Penetrating the Golden Plane would allow Maxim to travel freely across space and time. It is the holy grail of physics, also of paranormal espionage. That is Whiteshadow's mission."

Sherlock delivered a withering look at his brother that would have made a lesser man quail. “I gather as much. So, you’ve been keeping some rather serious secrets, Mycroft, as usual -- but these secrets involved Maxim Purcell and therefore involved me. And . . . John. I hacked your server, back at the warehouse."

“You what!? After I expressly forbade you?"

The subject must not be allowed to become discouraged, if he or she has any potential for projection. Therefore, initial torture methods --” here he paused, his voice breaking, breathing hard.

“Sherlock, stop --”

“--- initial torture methods should be confined to brief and relatively mild episodes of simulated drowning, sleep deprivation, and sound and/or light disturbances. A knowledge of the subject’s lineage prior to engaging any level of the Labyrinth is, of course, desirable if not necessary. Note:
It is presumed that subjects of the known bloodlines will be assessed on an individual basis by the Director.... ‘Initial torture methods’... ‘the subject’s lineage’... ‘the known bloodlines’... I repeat: why did it happen to John, specifically? Did you do it to him on purpose? Make him feel -- ". He couldn't say it. ‘Or perhaps I should ask Father. If either of you meant for John to go through that-- I'll kill you,” Sherlock said with terrible calm.

“I wasn’t planning on any such thing,” Mycroft said. He couldn't really blame Sherlock for his suspicions. Suddenly he had them, too. “Sherlock-- I’ve always tried to protect you from--- these things. It is too dangerous. You never know when to stop, Sherlock. You get into quite sufficient trouble here.”

“‘Here’?”

“In... the physical plane. The real world.”

"But what is all this about lineage, bloodlines? I insist you answer me."

Mycroft set his jaw. "That is a family secret even I am not privy to. The Holmeses are one of the Bloodlines, I can confirm that much. And we possess certain...talents that others do not. More than that, even I can't tell you."

"Only the eldest Alpha is given the full knowledge, and then only when he or she is to enter into an approved breeding match," Lady Holmes announced. "But this is an exceptional circumstance. It is foolish to cling to tradition when the world might well be coming to an end! The Bloodlines are families: very old families, and very pure of breeding."

"Families. And what is so distinctive about these families-- especially our own -- that it is kept such a secret?” Sherlock asked, as he stroked John's lost feather with his fingertips. John listened invisibly at his side. He experimented with touching him with his hand. Some invisible force kept them from contact, like opposing magnets. John groaned in frustration. But at least he could be here, he could see Sherlock and hear him. He could even smell him. That in itself was heavenly, and infinitely better than the alternative.

"I wish your father was here," Lady Anne was saying. "It's his place to tell you."

Mycroft and Sherlock snorted in unison. When had such a thing ever happened? Sheridan Holmes was so ephemeral a presence in their lives as to almost be a ghost.

"Go on, Mummy," Sherlock said challengingly. "Surprise me."

"Very well."Lady Anne slowly withdrew a golden medallion from around her neck, a familiar object that had been kept from scrutiny by her sons' curious eyes their whole lives.

She proffered the medallion to Mycroft, and he took it. Mycroft and Sherlock examined the gold surface together: it depicted a woman in an angel's embrace. The embrace looked ecstatic, carnal, even wicked. Anything but pure.

"The Holmeses -- all of the Bloodlines-- are descended from angels," Lady Anne said.

Sherlock looked up. "Fallen angels,” he corrected.

To be continued...
"The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena."


Do you hear me?

If I sing with angels
Will you hear me?
If I sing with angels
Will you cross the line?

I’m holding out
’til we’re out of time
Would you pierce the veil?
Would you cross the line?

I can feel you here,
souls redefined
I can’t let go

of our desire

Come back to me...

Lyrics to Come Back To Me, Les Friction: Come Back To Me

Sordwell Manor, Gloucestershire. Morning.

"The Holmeses -- all of the Bloodlines-- are descended from angels," Lady Anne said.

Sherlock looked up. "Fallen angels," he corrected.

Sherlock considered this new reality.

Not long ago, he would never have credited such a tale. "I don’t believe in supernatural powers . . . there are no powers beyond the human mind and body," he had proclaimed to El Brujo on All Hallows’ Eve. Afterward, he had clung to his faith in science and reason: "It isn’t true, it can’t be true, John - not the way it seems - demons and sacrifices on Halloween. There has to be an explanation that makes rational sense in the physical world."
But what was true was that John had been taken from him by a hell hound -- and had returned to him an actual angel. And John had saved him. Not for the first time. Now maybe anything was possible. Divine power, demonic power. Power to bring John back.

He touched his shoulder where the miraculously healed flesh still felt the touch of John's hands. Angel's hands. The horrific sensations he had felt before, pain at being torn from his bonded, was gone. In its place was the truth, radiating from the place where they were joined as one, soul-bonded: John was with him. He could feel it, even if he couldn't see him. Just as he had promised. He wouldn't leave him alone, the way he had found him.

When John Watson made a promise, he kept it.

###

Sherlock Holmes was, under ordinary circumstances, deeply uninterested in family genealogy.

If called upon to recite the name any of his Holmes relatives -- beyond Mycroft, his father, and Mummy -- his mind palace was devoid of corresponding data. But today he had learned something worth knowing about his family. His Bloodline. From this moment, he began to overhaul his mind palace to create a bright, new space. This space was necessary to accommodate data pertaining to angels: their angelic ancestor, and the one John told him he must find, the angel called Sollas.

Sherlock considered the fact - if Mummy was to be believed, and why should she lie about something so preposterous-- that some part of him, too, was... an angel? It didn't feel as foreign as he might have expected. Hadn't he felt this otherness, always? Hadn't others felt it too?

He smiled faintly. It followed that their daughter, his and John's, also had this rebellious blood. Not blood, actually -- he knew that the fluid that flowed in angel's veins was properly called ichor. He inspected his still-bloody hands curiously. Under any other circumstance he would have plunged straightaway into experiments -- with himself of course the subject, Mycroft was prone to squeamishness where actual bloodshed was concerned -- to isolate the proportion of ichor to human blood.

He carefully tasted his wet fingertip, sticky and darkly crimson. Was there a subtle distinction in taste, odour or consistency that he had failed to perceive before? Mrs Hudson snatched his hand away and gently wiped it clean with a handkerchief.

"Angels, is it? Well, then," she said, accepting the Holmes family secret with equanimity. "It's not such a surprise, really. You've always been my guardian angel, Sherlock."

Secrets.

With the exception of Mrs. Hudson, all of them had been keeping them, it seemed. Now it was necessary to discover absolutely every secret thing about the Holmes Bloodline.

Because what was really important, the thing that Sherlock's mind seized upon amongst a disorienting kaleidoscope of surreal experiences from this night, was that from this moment, anything to do with angels might be the thing that brought John back to him.

###

Lestrade returned. He was instantly wary of the atmosphere in the breeding suite. The Holmeses were strangely silent, and too far apart.

Lestrade crossed to Mycroft, searched his eyes to assure himself that he was truly recovering from
the projection. Also, to read his intentions regarding Olivia, whom he didn't trust in the slightest.

"What's going on?? You're all so . . . quiet."

Mycroft flashed a peculiar look his way. Lestrade couldn't define it; perhaps hopeful, or perhaps doubtful. It went as quickly as it had come, but Mycroft didn't speak. Mrs Hudson, not Lady Anne, was tending to Sherlock's bloodied skin and clothing. Sherlock was completely absorbed in his own private train of thought, which was in itself nothing unusual. Lady Holmes' back was turned; Lestrade thought she might be texting someone. Nobody seemed inclined to attend to the matter at hand -- their perilous circumstances.

He was going to have to take charge, then.

"I'm getting us out of here. But we need to get Olivia and Mark safely away from us. They'll put us at risk -- and I can't have that."

Mycroft nodded, regarding the closed bedroom door.

"Unless you -- you weren't thinking of taking her with us, Mycroft?"

"We must. But not for the reason you might imagine," he replied. "What happened to Olivia -- it's my fault. She was obviously targeted because of her association with me."

"Is it obvious, Mycroft?" Sherlock said quietly. "I had thought everything that happened with Maxim was my fault. But now we know that I -- we -- are being targeted for what we are. Which we obviously can't help. And so you've no need to feel . . . responsible."

"'What you are'? What are you talking about?"

Mycroft shot a warning look at Sherlock. "Ah -- a topic for later, perhaps," he said uncertainly. The odd look returned. Now Lestrade knew what it was. Definitely doubt. Self-doubt? Doubt about him, or doubt about them together? When they got to safety, he would make Mycroft tell him what it was.

"I'll count on it. But you can sort out your feelings about Miss Urquhart later. I've got us a van. But we aren't taking them to France, not in their condition." Lestrade crossed to the closed bedroom door. "Mark. Miss Urquhart. I found suppressants. I don't want trouble -- but you're taking them, one way or another."

He pushed the hypodermics under the door.

Precisely fifteen minutes later, the minimum margin of safety, Lestrade opened the bedroom door. An almost sickly-sweet musk hit them. Lestrade struggled against the Alpha urges awakened by heat pheromones, like clockwork springing to life after long disuse. He might even need suppressants of his own, soon; but he really didn't want to do that. Not with Mycroft smelling like he did, even here: elegant, powerful, seductive.

But it was hard to think strategically, logically, when his mind and body were thrumming with pheromone overstimulation. It felt glorious -- and in this place, all wrong. He was a cop, and a hellhound hunter. The people who were so dear to him now - even Lady Holmes, for Mycroft's sake -- all needed him to be on his game. He shook off unwanted voluptuousness and took a step inside the bedroom.

It was empty. This was no locked-room mystery: a rope of bedsheets trailed through the open window. Used hypodermics were scattered on the floor. One them, almost certainly Olivia, had
had the almost unimaginable force of will required to administer the suppressants in the face of their cresting heat. He heard the inevitable roar of a car engine.

Olivia and Mark had fled. They were gone.

"Well, that's that," Lady Anne sniffed. "Mycroft, I can't understand why you allowed her to go with that pilot, in her state! You ought to have asserted your claim. It's why we're here."

"Mummy. . . I made a serious error with Olivia. I won't enter a breeding match. Not with her. Not with any omega."

Lady Anne absorbed this news and turned to examine Lestrade, appraising, calculating. She was clutching something that hung from her neck by a golden chain, fingering it reflexively.

"I've told Mr Lestrade about Whiteshadow," Mycroft continued, his voice strong. No doubt there now. "'Things are going to be different in this generation, Mummy."

Lestrade pulled his badge from the pocket of his borrowed camouflage jacket and offered it. “Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade. But this isn't the time for formalities. I saw John. We all did. John’s an angel -- maybe he's in heaven now. I'm sorry, Sherlock. I don't know. But what I do know is that something's hunting your sons, Lady Holmes -- and it comes from hell."

"Hell is a little outside Scotland Yard's jurisdiction, Detective Inspector."

"We see our share of hell on earth. But I have a different qualification. Mycroft did tell me about Whiteshadow, and 'paranormal espionage' -- I guess you know all about it, Lady Holmes. So maybe you won't be surprised to hear my family secret: the Lestrades happen to be hellhound hunters. That's what took John. And I'm afraid that's what's coming next for your sons."

He looked out to study their escape route one more time across the grounds of Sordwell Manor, all bounded by a wood blazing with autumn leaves. In the car park, Lestrade had felt more than seen firey eyes and dark sleek bodies, low to the ground and moving fast. It might have been the leaves agitated in the wind.

He stared hard into the wood. Whatever had been there before, was gone. A cloud passed over the sun and the lake reflected grey sky like quicksilver. Like Maxim Purcell's eyes the instant before his bullet tore his skull apart.

He fervently wished them all safe under the harsh, pure sunlight light of the Midi-Pyrenees.

Time to go.

Lestrade organized them in a tight procession and led them out of Sordwell Manor. The grounds seemed quite abandoned. Only Sherlock watched out the window of the van as the Georgian manse disappeared from view, and kept on looking long after. Everyone knew what he was thinking -- what if John couldn't follow? Where was he?

Impossible to know where John was now, of course. Except the obvious. Nobody knew what to say, and miles of deserted road flew by in silence.

# # #

The Port of Bristol

“Demons reputedly cannot cross water,” Sherlock declared, as though continuing an argument. “A
sea voyage will be safest -- we shouldn't hazard an airplane, not after what happened to the helicopter -- and the TGV train would make an admirable trap. We need a ship, Mycroft.”

So it was that they boarded a Royal Marines vessel at the port of Bristol, mysteriously commandeered by Mycroft. Their party was smaller by one: Lady Holmes refused to accompany her sons to France. She was met at the dock by an equally mysterious car supplied, Lestrade imagined, by the Holmes paterfamilias, Sheridan Holmes.

Lady Holmes considered her sons. She could plainly see that each was entangled in a consuming love match. In scions of the Bloodlines, true bonding was rare and every precaution was taken to prevent it. Like all of their kind, her sons had been taught that caring was a weakness, that love was game for losers, and that desire led only to downfall. "Feelings" had cost their angelic forbearer everything. He had lost heaven for the sake of a woman. And so, she had never anticipated such a fate for her sons.

“Sherlock -- you can’t really mean to go to France? In your condition? Mycroft, you must make him see reason. Surely . . . we should stay together, as a family?” Her feeble words failed to move even herself. She knew perfectly well they were useless even before she heard Sherlock's answer.

“A hell hound took John from me," Sherlock said gravely. "Lestrade’s family know how to fight them. And you will be safer away from me, and Mycroft -- if these demons wanted you, they would have you already. You were in their clutches in that room last night, but they left you free."

"Sherlock. Don't dare doubt me. I know as much -- and as little -- as you do."

"Very well. Anyway, you needn't worry -- I am going with family."

Lady Anne smiled bitterly. "Worry. Perhaps you'll understand when you have the baby. I hope you are considering something other than your own interests for once, Sherlock. You have a duty to safely carry on the Bloodline, you know. But if you won't come with me, then I shall go to Cornwall. Alone, as usual."

The Holmeses kept a remote estate in Cornwall. Mycroft had vowed never to return there; Sherlock found the countryside unspeakably boring. Even if her husband was waiting for her there now, she still would be. Lady Anne felt a tenuous pain that no urgency, no feeling like that driving her sons could stir the withered tie -- never a bond -- between her and her husband. He was watching over her now, of course; but unquestionably she would find at the bottom of his concern some Machiavellian purpose. One in which she was just another convenient tool, no more nor less valuable because she was his wife. Well, it wasn't as if things had ever been different between them. It was futile to expect change now. All she had left was her sons, and they were slipping away.

"One word of advice for you both," she added as she slipped into the back of the waiting car. "Don't take sides in a war you don't understand."

Mrs Hudson called out after her, “I'll watch over them, Lady Holmes."

But the door was already closing.

###

A ship bound for France
Boarding the ship for France, Sherlock wanted to shut everything out and *think* -- everyone was crowding him, trying to coddle him, to distract him. The feeling was like . . . claustrophobia, that was it. His brain was being suffocated by a thick blanket woven of images, thoughts, emotions, and even smells as they all crowded together to eat their first real meal in days. He caught Mycroft and Lestrade exchanging worried glances.

They didn't understand yet.

It was going to be fine.

Probably.

He was part angel.

There had to be a thousand ways that this could be important, but all he cared about now was that it was yet another way that he and John were connected. Even though he couldn't see or hear John. Over the hubbub of ship's noises, his ears strained for John's calm, steady voice, hearing nothing. He wouldn't give up. He couldn't.

Later, alone in his tiny cabin, admonished for the millionth time by Mycroft to "get some rest," Sherlock lay on a narrow bunk and listened to the creaking of the ship while he thought about what else it meant to be part angel. Sherlock deduced that this -- angel's blood --- was the reason his father and Mycroft were able to practice this *projection*.

Sherlock recalled long, dull afternoons in Cornwall, his restless six-year old self pinned under Mummy's eye while Mycroft and their father were locked away in the study. Mycroft would eventually emerge pale and silent, and refused to answer his little brother's sharp questions.

After various attempts to spy on them - failures, all -- little Sherlock had decided he didn't care in the slightest what they were up to; it was a waste of his valuable time. He quite explicitly wasn't wanted or needed. Only Mycroft was wanted. Probably it was something to do with him being an Alpha, and him being an omega. And anyway, Mycroft hadn't seemed to be enjoying whatever it was. Even at that age, Sherlock had been puzzled by Mycroft's inability to enjoy himself (filching cake from the kitchen definitely didn't count in Sherlock's book).

Sherlock, on the other hand, was perfectly capable of amusing his solitary self with up to a dozen fascinating and productive experiments before teatime when he could manage to not be caught. Mummy always said he should be cultivating other talents; as an omega, he would someday be expected to . . . well, at that age he wasn't sure what was expected because he always deleted it, to Mummy and his father's eternal frustration.

And so for the first time since those long-ago childhood days in Cornwall, he turned over and over in his mind the question of why it was that his father should choose to share this rare talent with Mycroft, but not with him.

Mycroft could project.

His father could project.

He, and Mycroft, and their father, in fact all of the Holmeses, were in some part angels.

John could project. Just before being taken away by the hell-hound, John had projected.

Now, John was an angel too.
Sherlock couldn't sleep. He took a walk instead out on the deck, letting the fresh cold air and clear stars over the Atlantic bring fresh vigor to his unruly thoughts. Sherlock's attention wanted to dwell in these ephemeral childhood memories. Now he was distracted by a much more recent memory, quite fresh in his mind palace: he and John, looking through antique volumes in the Pridiax Archive.

"The runaway angels have an excessive partnership with matter, and can be seen when they change into diverging shapes."

A clear image of the brittle yellow page from Calcidius' old volume swept away all other thought. This was confusing. He didn't want to think about finding the runaway angels now, he wanted to think about projection and how he might accomplish it for himself. Without resort to Mycroft. After a lifetime of actively preventing him from doing what was apparently his birthright, Mycroft surely would never permit it now.

"Find the Runaways. Find the angel named Sollas," John was saying. His voice was calm and reassuring but also very stern. This was a command. A command from an actual angel.

Sherlock steepled his fingertips under his chin. It wasn't going to be as easy to get around John Watson as it had been before.

"All right, then. I will," he muttered under his breath.

There was still an uncomfortable disapproving feeling hovering about him.

"I promise," he added softly.

"What did you say?" Lestrade was at his side, his expression carefully considerate as he looked out over the dark water. He obviously thought Sherlock was starting to lose it, and was afraid he'd fall overboard. Or throw himself over. Sherlock snorted. Lestrade couldn't understand.

"It seems the so-called fallen angels are divided into opposing camps," Sherlock announced, oblivious to the fact that he had been silent for hours. "There are the Fallen, and there are the Runaways."

"No doubt this was what Mummy meant about 'taking sides,'" Mycroft said from the darkness. Of course he would be here too. Spying. "I haven't the faintest idea how you distinguish between them, if you're correct. I've never met an angel. . . well, excepting John, of course."

"But we will have to find a way to track them down. I must find a Runaway angel named Sollas. That is what John said -- says -- I must do. How does one find an angel?"

"I think we should start with our own forbearer. No matter how many ages ago he, ah, transgressed, he still exists. Angels don't die."

"Anyway, aren't the Holmeses are entitled to protection from angels," Lestrade asked, "instead of being hunted?" Mycroft had confessed the Holmes family secret to him, alone in their cabin. Mycroft's concern had been that Lestrade would conclude that the Holmeses -- himself especially -- were simply not quite human, and therefore to be rejected as freaks, monsters. Lestrade had
silenced his fears the best way that he knew how, which still felt heart-stoppingly thrilling: holding Mycroft close, kissing him, telling him that he wanted him for himself, no matter what.

Seeing Mycroft's face, still as death during projection, had given him a dose of reality -- what would it be like if Mycroft wasn't there for him? He already couldn't bear to imagine it. He could barely get his mind around the whole "paranormal espionage" thing, but learning that the Holmases really were not completely human was something he decided was simply beyond his ken, and therefore not worth worrying about. He would stick to what he knew, and what he was meant to do. Like being a cop, fighting hell-hounds. Like being with Mycroft Holmes.

###

"I'm not certain that the fallen angels, at any rate, concern themselves with protecting humans from anything." Sherlock closed his eyes and retrieved data he had kept from an old serial killer case:

"And in those days there were born beautiful daughters to the sons of men. And the Angels desired them. The Angels said, 'Come, let us chose for ourselves wives from the sons of men.' And the women bore giants that turned against the men, and devoured them; and they devoured one another's flesh and drank the blood from it."

"Is that Genesis?" Lestrade asked. "I don't remember the bit about flesh-eating giants. Or drinking blood."

"No, the Book of Enoch. Apocryphal. Which means, censored by the Catholic Church."

"'History is written by the winners,'" Mycroft retorted. "Censorship is a matter of perspective."

"Why am I not surprised at your quoting Orwell. Lestrade -- you know why I’ve found the Bible useful."

"Unfortunately, I do. I had a case once... our killer was on about the Book of Revelations. We caught him before he got to the Second Angel."

"Indeed. Charles Manson was a prime example. Revelations tells one version of the fall of the angels:

"And there was war in heaven:

Michael and his angels fought against the dragon;
And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil,
And Satan, which deceiveth the whole world:
He was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."

The Holmases had come from angels -- but rebel angels.

Cast out.
Outcast.

###
Behind his haughty, unfeeling facade, Lady Anne’s revelation of the origin of the Holmes Bloodline had left Mycroft shaken. Later that night, in his bunk, musing over the events of the past days to the rocking of the ship, a fragment of unwelcome memory rose up of a long-ago Christmas in Cornwall.

A snowglobe. Mycroft had liked to shake the glass globe, transforming the tranquil world into something magical, full of movement and life. Sherlock was part of this memory, too.

Sherlock, aged four, had broken the thing, of course. Sherlock was putting his inquisitive finger in the puddle to show Mycroft the glitter.

“You see, it’s not real. This isn’t snow,” Sherlock lisped. “Q. E. D.”

“Indeed. You’ve quite proved your point, Sherlock.”

Mycroft had cleaned up the wreckage and even managed to bind Sherlock’s cut fingertip under his preternatural scrutiny. Sherlock was fascinated with wounds and generally preferred to allow his spilled blood to flow unhindered.

Sleep wasn’t going to come. Mycroft stole a glance at Lestrade, sleeping lightly. He finally pulled out his mobile. He had downloaded the transcripts of their Whiteshadow debriefings; he could read them right now if he wanted to. He was perfectly aware that waiting until Lestrade fell asleep to read them was akin to voyeurism. It was the sort of covert behaviour that Lestrade was unlikely to appreciate.

Still, there was no question of not looking. He was going to start with Lestrade’s interview, right now.

“Detective, please describe your thoughts upon entering Hantswood Hall.”

“I’m taking Maxim Purcell out.”

“Why? What is his crime?”

“He touched my mate. I’ll make him pay for that.”

It was wrong, taboo, perverse for an Alpha to claim a bond with another Alpha. Such a bond was far outside the pale of social convention as well as the letter of the law. Alphas had been tried criminally for such forbidden relationships even within the past few years.

Mycroft had skated on the edge with his past Alpha dalliances because he made it clear that they were temporary amusements. The Holmes name carried sufficient weight that it was considered a ‘phase’ that would end when Mycroft took up his family duties at last and married a suitable omega for breeding.

“What is his crime?”

He couldn’t quite grasp the enormity of it. And so, he did what he always did when faced with an emotional dilemma too difficult for him to untangle; he forced his mind to focus on practical considerations. These were quite grave.

Aside from being a clear declaration of Alpha/Alpha bonding intent, Lestrade's statement was damming in connection with Maxim’s death. It could be made to look as if Lestrade had shot Maxim Purcell with premeditated intent.
If the bureaucratic universe as they knew it ever recovered from the present infestation of soul vampires and demons, Lestrade could very well be charged with murder.

“He touched my mate.”

Mycroft watched Lestrade’s sleeping face. Strong, handsome, sensual, sometimes he looked world-weary but other times, almost painfully innocent. His lips parted and he said something very softly, maybe his own name.

My mate. He couldn’t deny the heat and electricity that fairly crackled between them despite their fears and exhaustion.

Two Alphas. A forbidden bond, an impossible one.

Lestrade, perhaps sensing his shift in mood as a bonded mate must, woke and sleepily reached out. Mycroft climbed down and into his arms, breathed in his rough Alpha scent. He heard his deep inhale, felt the press of Lestrade’s face against his neck as he pulled his collar aside, breathing in. The skin there prickled and glowed and craved the mark of his bite. Too fast, everything felt so fast.

He pulled Lestrade’s mouth to his instead. But Lestrade wasn’t put off so easily. He pulled back after a bite to his lower lip.

“Mycroft. I’ve been married before, I’ve had omegas before. This is different.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

But Mycroft recalled the sick feeling he had when he agreed to marry Olivia Urquhart; the surge of hopeless longing for a true mate, mingled with envy for what his brother and John Watson shared.

“Maybe I don’t. I don’t know what it feels like to bond,” Lestrade replied passionately. “But I know what I feel for you feels like I always thought it should. I only feel right when you’re with me. I feel sick when you’re gone. There’ll never be anyone else. I’ll never have another omega. Tell me you feel the same.”

He considered Lestrade, his hair rumpled, his dark eyes intently demanding. There was no doubt there. Now that they faced the darkness that had taken John from Sherlock it felt like a crime, even a sin, to deny these feelings.

“It’s true what I said -- that very first night, in Mumbai. I always knew it was you.” Mycroft felt a huge surge of pure relief to say it out loud. He felt light, he could float. “Your scent is the only one that I’ve ever dreamed about.”

Lestrade was all Alpha now, pushing him down against the cushions, his hands roaming, hungry and covetous. “When this is over, I want to lock you away somewhere for days and days and just . . .”

A fire in his belly roared to life and his brain flooded with images of Lestrade having his way with him; turning the tables and holding him down until he begged for mercy. Lust. Sleeping and waking together, companionship. Love.

“You’ll give up this breeding match idea for good, then --- no more omegas,” Lestrade growled. Lestrade gripped him at the back of his neck firmly, to show he was serious.

Mycroft stilled. He watching Janet Lestrade go up to Lestrade’s flat. He ought to have gone straight
up and told her to go, told Lestrade what he wanted, what he needed.

He had a plan, but wasn’t sure Greg would consent even to this much.

“Not exactly,” he said steadily, and this time he inflicted an Alpha bite of his own, silencing questions about the future.

# # #

Alone in his cabin again, Sherlock was convinced that he, too, must be capable of projection --- astral projection, as Mycroft described. Surely being an omega shouldn't stop him. It had never yet prevented him from doing anything else he really wanted to do. After all, had he been Maxim's star pupil in the Mysteries. This wouldn't be a leap too far.

And Mycroft hadn't actually said Sherlock couldn't do it - he had only said that he was worried that he would "get into trouble" if he did.

As for Mycroft's admonition that while he was carrying the "Holmes heir," he must accept his "protection" as Alpha in John's absence . . . perhaps that "protection" --- which he knew very well was another word for "incarceration" -- could be safely avoided. . . if he was very, very careful.

The thing was to escape Mycroft's insufferable surveillance. The trip to France was looking increasingly fortuitous. Mycroft surely hadn't had time to install webcams in this tiny cabin, for example.

His heart was racing now. He chewed the inside of his lip so that he wouldn't give himself away by grinning inappropriately -- just in case he was wrong and Mycroft was watching after all. This was the answer, this was the way to bring John back. John obviously wasn't being permitted (he growled a little at the thought of John being forcibly prevented - nothing less than insurmountable force would suffice) from staying at his side, even though he was an angel; and angels presumably could do anything. But apparently not this.

Sherlock would have to find John himself, and bring him back.

He felt an odd tingle, as if John's eyes were shooting daggers at him. This was a sensation he knew rather well, even though he usually ignored it. He ignored it now. Instead, he focused on the life in his belly. A tiny girl, forming cell by cell, hour by hour by hour.

But he was momentarily stopped short by the memory of John's agony in Afghanistan, relived on the vile video from Whiteshadow; also, his brother's pale, harrowed face when he woke from projecting at Sordwell Manor.

He took a deep, shaky breath and swept away these doubts. He could find a way to do this. Just as in the solving of crimes, there would be more than one way to achieve this projection.

There must be. He would find his own way.

_I understand what I have to do now_, Sherlock said inside, intending to be reassuring.

The feeling of dagger eyes did not abate. Sherlock told their daughter, over and over, that everything was going to be fine.

_Don't worry, I won't hurt you_, he added. _It might even be --- good._

This was his mantra as he fell into the deepest meditation that he was capable of without drugs.
Then he went deeper.

###

The rough churning of the sea and his trance returned Sherlock to the oil rig Magnus, and then to the train that took him and John to their first heat, at Loch Linnhe. In such a short span, everything was different. Changed. He was changing.

He was going to be a father.

He couldn’t really recall the last time he had ever spent time with his own father. Years, he reckoned. He wanted to talk to him now, though. About many things: the Holmes Bloodlines, about Maxim and Talbott and the Sleeping Beauties. About soul vampires, and projection.

But soon his stomach churned uncomfortably. His trance was taking him back to into the past, a rare visit from his father to his solitary rooms at uni.

"It is very commendable, Sherlock, for you to cultivate abstinence," his father announced, regarding Sherlock's monk-like quarters, his experiments the only decor. If the milieu worried him, he gave no sign. "Be rigorous with your suppressants. Your mother and I know very well that mistakes last a lifetime."

Sherlock occupied himself with his notes, not meeting his father’s eyes. His experiment was a success, perhaps the only sort of which Sheridan Holmes might appreciate. Sherlock was fully aware that he was unstable, undesirable, and unwanted -- in the Holmes family as well as in the world at large.

"I’m leaving for Tibet," Sherlock said by way of answer. "Believe me when I tell you that the very last thing that is likely to happen to me, the very last, is that I should breed. Smell this."

Sherlock proffered the beaker. It contained a quantity of deceptively pretty yellow-gold liquid. It was a spectacularly vile pheromone repellant. His father took a deep inhale, put a fingertip in the liquid. He deliberately drew it across his son’s throat.

"There. Now you’re quite untouchable," Lord Holmes said to his son approvingly.

###

But Sherlock's body was bent on proving this ugly memory wrong. He needed his Alpha's touch.

He would project. If he could project, as Mycroft had described (projection is the separation via conscious will of the soul from the body, Mycroft had said), he could find John and bring him back. He went deeper still into his trance.

He worked on his subtle body, and he coaxed it into roaming from him, but it felt nothing like traveling outside of his body, like being free. He had to free his soul.

He finally was forced to admit that the problem was that he didn't know how to find his soul. He wasn't a religious person. The subtle body was simply a function of the nervous system; a different way of feeling and perception.

But the soul, that was a different thing altogether. He had never given his much thought. But the angels were supposed to be concerned with souls. Wasn't there an angel that guarded heaven, and kept your name in a book when your soul came to be admitted to heaven? St. Peter? Gabriel? He
didn't know. This wasn't like the data he had saved because it helped solve murders. How did you find your own soul?

Was it easier, or harder, if one was part angel already?

He was at a loss. John Watson was the only person who had ever recognised his soul, and John had saved it -- he supposed that it had needed saving. That was the truth. If Sherlock Holmes had a soul, it belonged to John Watson. And without John here to help him, he wasn't going to find it on his own.

This made him feel incredibly empty, hollow. Worse than before John, even. Worse than his bouts of drug addiction, worse than suffering through getting himself clean. He hadn't really understood how much emptiness John had filled until John was gone.

Not gone, he argued with himself. John's not gone. He's here and you don't know how to find him. It's like blood trace -- you can only see it when the luminol lights it up.

It was a poor metaphor he knew, because if anything, John was the light and he was the blood. But it helped him focus his thoughts and energies to think of it as a forensic problem.

If he just focused hard enough, there had to be trace evidence of John Watson that he, the world's greatest and most observant detective, could uncover.

# # #

Hours passed as Sherlock tried, and tried again, to isolate his soul and project it out to find John. Finally he fell exhausted into a kind of stuporous sleep.

When he woke, he felt strangely restless with omega craving. Every breath of the close air in this confined cabin space was rich with pheromones, ripe with the fertile, spicy scent of early pregnancy. His core swelled, full and heavy and needy. These feelings might grow stronger even than heat, or even a Heatwave. His heart pounded. He thought he knew what was coming: An omega (particularly a pregnant omega) separated for long from his bonded could be driven into a pheromone trance: aphrodisia.

The state of aphrodisia was rare -- brought on during times of war or other cataclysmic events, because nothing less could drive a bonded pair apart. Aphrodisia had evolved for a sole purpose -- to render the Omega helpless to any impulse other than luring his mate to return, and to inexorably draw the Alpha back to his mate's side.

But in these days of suppressants and alleviants, aphrodisia was nearly mythical. Sherlock knew almost nothing about the chemistry of aphrodisia. He had never even planned to allow himself to enter heat, let alone to bond. The idea that he might fall into aphrodisia, or need to overcome it for the sake of his unborn child, had never entered his imaginings.

He tried not to resist it. But it didn't feel like heat had, when he had John right there to hold him and to guide him through the confusing, overwhelming tides of feeling. This felt desolate and desperate. John might be here, but it was clear that he couldn't touch him any more. What would he do if John never could? Inconceivable. He groaned. His body responded to his fears by redoubling its siren call, a scent net that molecule for molecule was constructed to seek his mate.

If he listened, he could hear the wind rushing by the ship, the throbbing of the engines as their vessel struggled against the waves; also his own heartbeat, the sound of his own breathing in this
warm, enclosed space while his body helplessly pulsed out an aphrodisiac potion to draw John Watson back to him. He tried to focus on those sounds and sensations, and not on his own skin. But it was no good. The scent was as intoxicating to the omega as to the Alpha, so mesmerising that all he could do was writhe on the sheets, gasping in lungfuls of heavily scented air. His cock and his hole felt heavy and taut and wet; if he touched himself, he thought the skin there would burn with heat. He gripped the sheets hard.

Finally he heard something else besides his own panting. Something that sounded like John's quiet, calm, loving voice, carried on the wind. The words were indecipherable.

“John? I can feel you, you're here. I believe you are with me,” he said with conviction. Soon he thought he wouldn't be able to speak at all. John had to come. How could he not come?

When the sun comes up, I might be John Watson again. But it might not work out.

The sun had risen and set. Now he was traveling on the ocean. Still, even if John was up against time, he would find a way to stay with him, Sherlock thought dimly.

And if time was against them, there wasn't anything more he wanted to do with whatever precious minutes were left them on this Earth than to feel John's body pressed against him. Into him.

Sherlock wasn't ashamed of these feelings. His entire life he had more or less abused or at best, ignored his body and had tried, he thought, to live a life of the mind. He had actually envied computers, once. Before John. He had striven to be as rational and lacking in feeling and emotion as a machine. Then John had brought him to a place where all of him - heart, mind, body, soul, all of it mattered. John made all of the parts of him that felt disjointed and ill-matched melt into one beautiful whole. His Alpha.

"John, just be with me, I can't ----” Sherlock stopped. He moaned a little, imagining John's touch, needing it with a craving stronger than hunger or thirst or even lust. Without it, he wasn't sure he might not lose his mind, or even the soul that he couldn't find alone.

But John would never let that happen. John had promised to watch over him.

"I feel you, I swear. You have to --- you have to cross back over," he said. He wasn't losing his mind after all. He could feel John's presence, his heart, his spirit. Any moment now, he would feel his touch too.

###

John Watson folded his wings impatiently to climb into the bed with his mate. The wings got in the way of what he wanted, which was to be skin to skin with Sherlock.

Sollas had warned him, There is no limit to what human emotions might drive you to do, with your immortal strength to bear them.

But no warning could have prepared him for this onslaught of seductive chemistry storming through his angelic, divine flesh. It was immortal, but it wasn't incorruptible. Far from it. He would take his omega, it was his right, and nothing could be permitted to stop him. The harsh force that had at first repelled John's touch shimmered between them. Then it started to dissolve under the magnificent waves his omega was pouring out to sweep him back, and to bend under the strength of his own will, his love and his desire for his bonded.

He wanted to roar with this power that almost felt as if it could burst through his skin, uncontainable. He didn't know why Sollas had given him this body -- but he wasn't going to give it
back. He was a real angel now, and he wasn't ever going back to what he was. Just let them try to take him from Sherlock: the fallen angels, runaway angels, and the demons. Heaven and hell. Only with this power could he truly keep Sherlock and the baby safe. He had strength enough now to combat anything. This wasn't Afghanistan. The memory of his torture held no pain for him anymore. He never had to be in Afghanistan again.

*Angelic manifestations cannot . . . .consort with mortals, do you understand? It's forbidden.*

He mentally cursed Sollas -- yes, angels were capable of curses. Angels could cut down multitudes, bring plagues, defeat entire armies. How had he ever allowed himself to believe it was forbidden for him to touch Sherlock? He reached out his hand and pushed steadily against the force, and felt it yield at last with a brittle snap like punching through glass. On the other side was Sherlock's glorious face.

He stroked Sherlock's face with his hand, inhaled the aphrodisiac that spoke to his senses like nothing else in heaven or earth ever could, as an angel or a man. Everything he was or ever would be now was bound together with Sherlock. Sherlock looked up at him with lustrous grey eyes, struck wide with wonder. But he wasn't afraid. He pulled John close, buried his fingers in John's hair, reached around to stroke his wings.

"You crossed over, you came back to me," he said. "You know, I'm part angel, too. I think that's how we did it," he said as they kissed, open mouths melting together. It felt exactly as it should, and amazingly new. Being an angel meant everything was new again.

"I was there when you learned of it," John said. "I just couldn't get you to hear or see me and I couldn't touch you. But we did it. Now we can't let anything keep us apart again."

The precious scent and heat rushed up from his mate's skin and over his like a firebomb, and he was engulfed.

They exulted in the divine power that shook them and made them tremble. The aphrodisia scent grew if possible more potent, until they both were dizzy with euphoria. John looked into Sherlock's eyes, brave and passionate and full of desire, so different to the questioning, fearful look there before the crossing. Sherlock parted his legs, incredibly slick and ready, to invite him in.

"You know . . . this isn't my body," John whispered. "I traded places with an angel. So I could see you. But he never came back. And I'm staying this way, so I guess it is my body now. I'm pretty sure that he never. . . . he said that consorting with mortals is forbidden."

"John Watson, are you trying to tell me that you're a virgin?"

John nodded. "In a way. But I remember what you feel like. What we feel like. I need to show you. That scent, Sherlock, god it's so. . . I can't bear it, I never want it to go away . . . .but I never want you to have to feel this way again. Now, Sherlock."

He gathered his strength and then he held it in check so that it wouldn't tear them apart. He thrust inside his mate with an Alpha cock that felt transformed to molten gold and at that single thrust into that heat, that unbelievable tightness, they cried out and came together. Unsated, as the Omega Sutra taught, they began again: the Thousand Strokes, orgasm after orgasm for the omega in blissful stillness, superb control in the Alpha, no sound but their breathing together. This time, they climbed to heights that only the angels can ever reach and John wrapped his wings tightly around them so that even in Paradise, they wouldn't ever be lost again.

# # #
On the forest floor, a gluttonous midnight picnic was spread out on a rough cloth. Oil lamps lit the scene, making it appear deceptively romantic. Maria Padilha, incarnate tonight in one of the infinite aspects of the spirit Pomba Gira, was impatient. She fingered a little vial around her neck. It did not contain the essence that her lover sought; but if she was fortunate, she might capture it for herself.

For ages upon ages, the Prince of the Underworld had collected the bright souls of the Bloodlines, the scions of fallen angels. Even she did not know what use he made of them. Sometimes she consorted with them for his sake, to trap them. The Bloodlines were much more interesting prey than ordinary men and women. The fact that Lucifer's plans regarding these souls was kept secret was increasingly maddening. Lately there had been a restless, greedy intensity in Lucifer's pursuit of the Bloodlines that sparked her curiosity to unmatched heights.

Lucifer had never yet been tempted to sire his own spawn. She shivered. What power would she wield if she could deliver him a child of his own? What would he not do for her, what would he not give?

Silently, Lucifer appeared at her side, as he always seemed to do when she was weak enough to betray her thoughts.

He was not as fond of costumes as she was. Still, he had been careful with his attire tonight and was looking especially suave in meticulously tailored hunting gear.

"What happened to our midnight picnic?" She pouted, but only a little. Lucifer had more tolerance for this sort of thing from her than anyone else. "I'm dessert, of course."

She spread her legs to remind him where he belonged.

"Patience. I'm hunting fresh game. Dessert can wait. But you can join me. I know how much you enjoy a really fine hunt."

Maria Padilha stilled herself. Innumerable red eyes clustered around them in the trees, low to the ground. One of these beasts, no doubt bigger and more vicious than all the others, Lucifer held at his side by an iron chain. Its hot tongue lolled and its eyes burned, she could almost feel their fire on her skin. There was a sound of growling, and then howling all around as the moon broke through the clouds.

The Devil's hell-hounds.

"I'm not sure I'm in the mood for hunting. You are too easily distracted, my love. Perhaps someone else will appreciate my gifts." It was always better, she found, to hold her price as high as possible with Lucifer. Within limits. Making him jealous was one of her prime amusements, and the reward was truly earth-shattering when she played it right. If she played it wrong, it could take years before she could withstand another game.

"Suit yourself. Perhaps you prefer to be the game," Lucifer said. Maria Padilha took a step back.

"Lucifer, I --"

"First, drink that potion around your neck. Then you had better run, my beauty. Run fast."

Lucifer's gaze was hot and pitiless. There was nothing there like the lust and jesting playfulness
that he sometimes shared with her, and her alone.

This wasn't a game.

Maria Padilha realised that he knew everything about Sordwell Manor, how she had helped the Holmes Bloodline scions to escape. If he knew that much, he probably guessed the reason why she had done it. Her fury at being foiled overpowered her fear, and she hurled the poison in the face of Lucifer's hell-hound. It snarled and snapped and strained against his chain as a burning welt was raised up in his horrid flesh. But the beast endured the pain and waited for his master's order.

"You should be so obedient," Lucifer said, leering.

"I'm not one of your dogs," she spat back.

But then her bravado evaporated as the army of hell-hounds lunged through the trees, fangs snapping at her heels. If she ran very fast, she might make it to the river.

Then again, she might not.

To be continued . . .
The Omega Sutra, Chapter 45: Corruptible.

Fear and panic in the air
I want to be free
From desolation and despair
And I feel like everything I saw
Is being swept away,
Well I refuse to let you go
I can't get it right
Get it right,
Since I met you.
Life will flash before my eyes
So scattered and lost,
I want to touch the other side.

Map of the Problematique; all rights reserved, Matthew Bellamy and Muse listen to Map of the Problematique HERE

London. Paddington Station. 7 November. Night.

A person looking very closely at his fellow passengers in the tube might have been amused by the man who looked just like John Watson, teetering on the edge of imminent collapse from apparent excess of drink. His face was nearly pressed the window glass, transported with a childlike joy.

The train shuddered to a stop and the man who looked like John Watson stumbled out into the too-bright spotlights that had been rigged to illuminate every dark corner of the station. Police in riot gear barked out warnings: To prevent attack by soul vampires, stay clear of other passengers, proceed by the nearest route to their destination, keep in well-lit public places and avoid the dark.

The Runaway angel, Sollas, tried walking more slowly to get better control over John Watson’s body. He missed his wings. He missed vanishing into invisibility. It was astonishingly hard to
command this clumsy body. Sollas wasn’t used to anything at all being difficult— other than being denied re-entry into Heaven, and the thing that brought him here tonight. Sollas commenced a halting circuit of Paddington Station, trying to accustom himself to this form of flesh and blood, impossibly fragile yet throbbing with strangely vital energy. He was now an Alpha male in his prime.

Everything was completely familiar and utterly new.

Human eyes saw colours and shapes very differently than the angels did — no telltale auras revealing angels, demons, Alphas, betas and omegas. And soul vampires. The sheer shabby realness of human vision was enchanting, heartbreaking. He wanted to laugh and he wanted to weep, and didn’t know the difference, really, between the two. He touched his face with his hands and looked curiously at the wetness of tears on his palms.

Passers by were looking at him as if he were mad, or drunk, and he had seen enough humans in both conditions to know that if he didn’t master this new body and his surging emotions rather quickly, things might go very badly for him. And he couldn’t have that. Sollas the Runaway angel was here in Paddington Station, inhabiting a borrowed Alpha body belonging to John Hamish Watson, for a very particular reason.

The reason was love.

* * *

Angels weren't allowed to love humans.

Angels were allowed to exercise compassion and guardianship, feelings rather like what he saw most (not all, tragically, but most) human parents give to their children. This love was called by the Greeks, agape. But love, real love, the love that was carnal and romantic, sacred and profane, Sollas had observed first impassively, then as ages passed into ages with growing curiosity, then finally with longing to experience the love the Greeks called eros. But that love, God reserved only to humans.

Sollas devoured every writing he could find, in every language: novels, plays, and poetry written by the so-clever humans about love. Shakespeare might have written the very best poems and plays about love, Sollas thought. With Shakespeare, Sollas tasted many loves: unrequited and fulfilled, star-crossed and doomed, happy and tragic. He watched over lovers, too, year after year, century after century, in all their variety.

But the writer that had got him thinking about taking the step from imagining love, and finding it for himself, was C.S. Lewis:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket — safe, dark, motionless, airless — it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell."

Even to question God's purpose in denying this love to the angels drove him ever farther from regaining Heaven. He had thought that all he wanted, his entire purpose, was to find his way back home. But... it gnawed at him.
Love.

Perhaps the very reason he had fled Heaven was to find this forbidden thing. The fallen angels never hesitated after their fall from Heaven: consorting with human women, they had created an unholy race of demi-angels. Was he really any better than the Fallen? After all, the truly pure and entirely good angels remained loyally, steadfastly in Heaven where they belonged.

Sollas and his brothers had chosen the real over the ineffable, freedom over bliss. But he wasn't entirely free, of course. Could he be? Should he be?

He didn't even care about the answers anymore. From the moment he heard his beloved's voice, his heavenly ideals of purity and obedience seemed entirely . . . trivial. What was Heaven worth to him, if it denied him this for eternity?

Sollas was an angel of music. He was not surprised, then, that love's thunderbolt struck through the voice of a young woman, singing Irish tunes in Paddington Station to scattered applause and the jingle of coins tossed in her box. Sollas was stuck by the modesty of it, that little box: she didn't expect much, it was clear. He listened day after day, only leaving Paddington when she was not there.

Her name was Bridie Carter, and it was the most beautiful name in the world to him.

* * *

He had thought long and hard what to do. He was madly, impossibly, head-over-heels in love with Bridie, and couldn't really explain to himself how this should be. He had known hundreds, thousands of humans in varying degrees. Only Bridie seemed to call to his heart.

Bridie was a beta. Bridie was dark-haired and small and fragile. He could imagine her resting her head on his Alpha shoulder. He could imagine talking to her about his self-doubt. He could imagine making love to her as humans did, in fact if present circumstances in the world were less dire he doubted he would think of much else.

Despite her fragility, Bridie sang Irish ballads with a power, soulfulness and wit that enchanted him, and he couldn't really explain that either. He had heard the most perfect music that had ever existed, the music of the spheres. But he would rather by far hear Bridie's warm voice echoing in Paddington Station's vast spaces, than any of the music of Heaven.

He had never spoken a word to her.

***

Sollas had been thinking how to attack the problem. Interesting now that he was an Alpha male, the problem was framed with such a violent and possessive word: attack. He felt ashamed. He wanted to be direct and honest, wanted to just walk up and say, "Come away with me, now, right now. I love you."

He purchased a rose from a shop in the station, closing hastily at the onset of the curfew. He was momentarily frozen with fascination at the riot of colours, not the stained-glass glow that angels perceived but somehow purer and more intense for their simplicity; the feel of the flowers under his hand, the petals so soft... he hadn't ever felt velvet before with human senses, but he had read of rose petals described as "velvety".

He inhaled their scent. Under other circumstances, he could happily have stood for hours, maybe
days, drinking it in. He knew that Alphas and omegas were possessed of exceptionally keen sensitivity to fragrance and here was the proof: he experienced a ripple up and down his body, gentle but thrilling, just from the scent of the rose.

He had no trouble choosing the proper colour: there were white, red, lavender, coral, pink. He chose red. Perhaps his (John's?) Alpha nature chose it for him. Red, the colour of heat. He felt himself flushing. Bridie was a beta. It was just one reason that it was out of the question that they should have heat together. The other reason nearly made the tears spring to his eyes again.

Red was also the colour of human blood. Bridie Carter suffered a rare blood disease. Once, he had cured her of it. Its immediate return was proof of the implacable, unknowable hand of God upon her, and he knew better than to try again. How many times had he intervened, saving humans that he had come to care for, only to watch them wither and die in time?

The problem was, he could keep John's body for just a single day and a night, no more. He was perfectly aware that humans could and did readily mate without knowing each other more than a few minutes in a bar or on darkened dance floor, or in circumstances even more sordid. He wanted nothing like that for him and Bridie.

But time was against him.

* * *

Sollas stood at the front of her audience, and listened to Bridie's last song.

*Come over the hills, my bonnie Irish lad
Come over the hills to your darling
You choose the rose, love, and I'll make the vow
And I'll be your true love forever.*

Red is the rose that in yonder garden grows
Fair is the lily of the valley
Clear is the water that flows from the Boyne
But my love is fairer than any.

He applauded a little too wildly when Bridie finished. She looked at him and smiled shyly, unsure: it wasn't easy to be a busker in the Underground, and she had had to grow a tough skin against her own nature. Sollas gently tossed his rose into her box. Just then a police officer warned them gruffly to clear off for the curfew, or risk being locked inside Paddington Station. Bridie hastily collected her backpack and her little box, thrust the rose in her buttonhole, and turned to go.

"It's not safe, you know, walking alone this time of night," Sollas ventured, because it was true. Now that he was an Alpha male, he felt the primal urge compelling him to guard and protect this woman. It was very different that an angel's feelings of guardianship. He would hurt anyone that tried to hurt this woman. "The soul vampires, they come when you're alone. Will you let me walk with you?"

He was alarmed by a sudden faintness that passed over her face, and he tried to ignore his knowledge that the disease was gripping her faster now. All humans had to contend with the unpredictable, implacable onset of death. But she nodded, and allowed him to walk with her.

The crowds seethed with the undercurrent of fear that added to the feeling of doom over them. There was talk that the entire city would be quarantined by midnight.
"How did you know I'd sing 'Red is the Rose'?"

"I've had the pleasure of hearing you sing before. . . I'm in Paddington Station almost every day," he said. His face felt on fire. This was true as far as it went, but it was also a lie because it concealed the real truth. It was not in the nature of an angel to lie. The truth wanted to burst from his lips.

Bridie looked him over carefully and Sollas imagined what she was seeing, looking at the form of John Watson: Coiled, surer on his feet now than just a few minutes ago. Rugged face set with fathomless blue-green eyes, framed by expressive crows-feet. Hair unremarkable until the light hit it just so, and then the gold shone subtly. Capable hands; healing hands. A strong Alpha body that had lived through torment and injuries that would have put most men straight out of this world and into the next. A man almost infinitely capable of endurance and self-denial, but also of the strongest of passions.

"Well. The rose is beautiful. Thank you. But tonight's my last night. They're closing the shops and putting the buskers out for good."

"You'll be safer that way, Bridie," he said. He had constantly guarded Bridie since the Fallen had unleashed the soul vampires in London. He could never allow her such a fate. Almost anything but that.

"You know my name. What's yours?"

"Gabriel Sollas," he improvised. "You can call me Sollas."

***

"I've been hired for a party in Docklands tonight. I've got to hurry. The Pan Peninsula Towers. These new skyscrapers are still strange to see, don't you think? Sometimes everything seems to be changing so fast."

"I wish I could tell you how well I know that feeling."

Time, time -- there was only so much of it and he didn't know what he'd do if it went by wasted, yet every moment in Bridie's presence was a precious gift even if he never touched so much as her fingertip. But then his heart sang as she put her slender arm trustingly through his.

He felt a warning sense on the back of his neck, and he turned to see just a flash of a beautiful, greedy face in the crowd. Then then it was gone. He put his arm around Bridie's shoulder, thrilling to the feel of her warmth next to his body. The soldier's instincts of John Watson urged him to get out of the crowded station into a safe place. He started pulling her toward the street.

"Look, I wish you'd skip the party. It's not safe out tonight."

"Skip it? I can't just beg off at the last minute. The agency will put me off the list and I need the money."

"Will you let me take you in a taxi, then?"

"You're like my guardian angel tonight! Thank you."

Sollas smiled. Bridie felt the truth.

***
The views from the Pan Peninsula Towers, at 147 metres, were among the finest that could be had by anyone who wasn't an angel. They looked out at the glitter of nighttime London: London Bridge, Big Ben, The Eye. They were forty-eight floors up from the streets.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything more beautiful," Bridie said quietly. She seemed exhilarated and also a little sad. He watched her in profile against the lights, trying to conceal his own feelings. He wondered if she was thinking about her illness. He knew that she was aware of its return, and admired her determination to keep on with her normal life, especially her music, regardless.

"Neither have I," he said.

* * *

The rooms booked for the party were empty. The rumours of quarantine meant that the entire building seemed abandoned. A caterer was there, putting out delectable nibbles-- but not a single guest.

"Everyone else was wise enough to stay home, I suppose. Well then---"

The building intercom blared out, "The Pan Peninsula is under quarantine with immediate effect. Do not attempt to leave. Lock your door. Police are armed and will act if anyone disobeys. Further instruction is forthcoming." Bridie took a gulp and tried to look brave, but he saw the fear in her eyes and he thought he wouldn't be able to endure seeing her terror if things got really bad.

"It's okay. I'll stay with you, you won't be alone."

"Not me, mates," the caterer said. "I'm leaving the key on the bar if you want to lock yourselves in. But I'm going home to my wife and kids, and they aren't going to bloody stop me with a bloody quarantine."

The caterer left, banging the door after him.

Bridie took Sollas's hand. He locked the door, and they waited.

***

They opened the doors to a terrace with a vertiginous view over London. The air was cold and clear, and the wind buffeted them. Every light in London was on in an attempt to deprive the vampires of the cover of darkness and the city looked more glowing than ever; deceptively festive from so very far above.

But it was a view that Sollas had seen countless times from even better vantage points and he was distracted by the realisation that he was very hungry, ravenous in fact. It was a rather terrible sensation. The room was furnished with vast leather sofas, plasma televisions, expensive art and that gorgeous view through walls of windows. What he wanted, though, was food.

"Well, we ought not to let all these lovely nibbles go to waste, what do you say?"

Apparently she was now able to read his mind. He delightedly examined the array of posh appetizers, but the selection of chocolates possessed a siren call and an irresistible, darkly sweet fragrance. He put one in his mouth.

"That must be really amazing chocolate. You look as if you've never tasted any before," she observed.

He swallowed. When disguised among humans, angels could eat human food, but they couldn't
taste it. He understood now knew why humans spoke of chocolate as "divine." He wasn't going to be able to keep up this charade much longer. He wanted to tell Bridie everything. Even more, he wanted to feel everything, and wanted them to feel everything together.

How did Alpha males ever keep themselves under control?

"It's the best chocolate I've ever tasted," he said truthfully.

"I want some," she said, and leaned in, and bit off some of the chocolate for herself. This was just too much: her warmth and scent, bending in close, with delicacy possessed only by betas. Sollas reached out and touched her face, and when she didn't pull away, just looked into his eyes with curiousity and the spark of something more, he touched his lips to hers.

Soft, so soft; slow, delicate. Her lips parted a little, and he took her warm exhale into himself, holding perfectly still. He didn't know what to do now, how to even do this. Kissing. The sweetness of the chocolate on their lips was nothing to the overwhelming intimacy of being pressed so close together, tasting and smelling each other.

His body filled with a crackling, electric power. It felt not unlike the passionate adoration of angels in Heaven, but greedier, shockingly base. Adoration alone would not satisfy him now. He was an Alpha.

She somehow slid into his lap and just like that, his cock was pressed between her thighs, impossible to hide what this Alpha body wanted. He wouldn't ask that from her, she was a beta and a frail one at that. Just being this close was more than he had dared to dream, and the thought of his heartbeat must be deafening, she had to be able to hear it. But she didn't pull away, and he panted there, holding back without knowing exactly how to do it. His cock, rigid and tight-feeling with Alpha need, wanted to grind up, in, inside. Bridie understood, he thought, but she pulled away, and his heart fist sank then sang-- she wasn't stopping him, in fact she was helping. Gentle, clever fingers helped with his clothes, and he followed her lead. He knew what to do-- but for this, for once, someone else beside God actually knew more than he did.

Still, before he could process what was happening, his bare cock was in her hand, and his fingers were stroking her wet cleft, exploring. It was the closest he had been to heaven since he left it.

He needed her to know that.

"I have to tell you something."

"You want to stop now?"

"No, but --"

She nipped his neck. "Life is short, Sollas. Carpe diem."

He gave a short laugh. His was even shorter than hers, just a few more precious hours.

Now Bridie pulled back too, steeling herself, he thought, for rejection. "Oh. I thought you wanted . . . it's because I'm a beta."

"-- No, no, it's not that. Please. It doesn't matter you're a beta-- what I mean is...."

She smiled at his confusion. "You talk more than most Alphas."

He almost growled his frustration. But he had to tell her, and she had to have a choice. He didn't
want either of them to regret this. Eternity was a long time to have regrets.

"What you said before, that I was your guardian angel. Have you ever felt... that you really do have a guardian angel?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Just... do you?"

She bit her lip, and he watched her thinking. Angels could hear human thought and he had listened to hers often, but was glad he couldn't now. This was what he had wanted, to be with her the way humans were. Deprived of his angel powers, he marveled at how humans could really understand each other at all, relying only upon their vivid yet vastly limited senses.

She made a decision.

"Okay. I don't know you, but I feel... close to you, somehow. I can't explain it. So I'll tell you. I really do have a guardian angel." She told him about having been very ill, and her miraculous cure. "Now I'm sick again. But my angel is there for me. I can feel him, protecting me and watching over me."

"What-- What if he can't? Save you again?"

"Then that's what's meant to be," she said calmly. "I shouldn't even be here at all. Every minute, every day, is a gift and I don't want to waste any of it. It's why I'm still singing even though my doctors say I shouldn't. It's why I let you kiss me. More than kissing. So why are you asking about my guardian angel --- and what is it you have to tell me?"

"It's me. I'm your angel."

* * *

Le Vieux Prieure, near Lestrade-et-Thouels, Departement Midi-Pyrenees, France. 8 November. Evening.

An imposing bear-like figure of a man with shaggy silver hair and a still-black beard appeared at the top of the hill in the fading afternoon light like a denizen of a former age: wrapped up against the onset of winter's chill in a huge overcoat, boots, and a rifle slung over his shoulder. Jean-Marc Lestrade ushered Lestrade and his companions behind the imposing wrought iron gates and carefully locked them up behind them before stopping to greet his nephew.

"Uncle Jean-Marc, it's so good --" Lestrade dropped the pleasantries at his uncle's keen look under grizzled brows. "We're very grateful for your help," he said instead, and they embraced for the first time in thirty years.

* * *

They all settled down before a cavernous stone fireplace with snifters of Armangac, and a feeling of safety and peace settled over the group for the first time since London. Jean-Marc shed his overcoat to reveal his priest's collar. His sister, Aude, who looked after the house and her brother as chatelaine, quickly saw that Mrs. Hudson was in need of a hot bath and rest after her valiant ministrations to Sherlock during their flight from England, and quietly took her to her room.

"When we came here when I was a child, my father told me you could roast an entire ox inside that fireplace," Lestrade said.
"500 years ago, this house was a working monastery," Jean-Marc said. "Our outer walls were part of the fortifications for the old village. It's all in ruins now, this house is all that is left. Your father was right: in those days, there were fifty monks living and working here, and the fireplace was often used in that way. Now we are just two, and those guests we sometimes take in who want peace, and quiet. Or sometimes, help."

"Do you get many visitors here, then? Do you keep an inn?" Mycroft asked politely. Le Vieux Prieure was indeed a haven of peace, quiet, and simple luxury. The thick stone walls, ancient low beamed ceilings, and simple furnishings made him imagine staying here with Lestrade for a long time. When this was over. Hadn't Lestrade promised? "When this is over, I want to lock you away for days and days... I'll take you out of the country, when you're ready."

Jean-Marc turned his bright eyes on Mycroft and suddenly he flushed, realising the utter inappropriateness of his carnal thoughts in the presence of a priest. But Jean-Marc just laughed.

"Not an inn, exactly. Those who need this place, find it, and are welcome. The Bible teaches us: 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.'"

* * *

Everyone looked down. Jean-Marc took a long sip of his brandy, and settled back to wait with a patient, knowing air. Lestrade broke the silence first.

"Look, everyone -- Uncle Jean-Marc knows why we're here, he knows about John and the hellhound. It's not right to keep secrets from him under his roof. I wanted to wait until we were all here together to tell him the rest."

"It's all right," John said. He stood up. John wasn't any taller than before, but he seemed to loom over them. Lestrade could well imagine being afraid, even terrified, of him. He remembered John crashing through the window at Sordwell Manor, thrashing the dark magician and his horrid demon with a supernatural, implacable rage.

John closed his eyes. How to say it? "I've never been... good... at telling things about myself. So I'm just going to show you, but only this once. And hope I don't need to again."

John's body began to change from ordinary, dangerous John Watson to a being of power, lit from within by subtle radiance that shone from his eyes most of all, and tinged the edges of his beautiful, impossible wings. Everyone stared, especially Sherlock, who wasn't afraid and who stood with John and took his hand.

Jean-Marc fell to his knees.

"No, no, please --" John said. "Don't. I didn't choose this, it was given to me. I'm not from Heaven. But I'll do everything in my power to protect us all."

John reached out and raised Jean-Marc up. By the time that Jean-Marc was able to look into his face, John was back to himself.

"A lifetime of faith, and I've been rewarded with a vision of the angels. God shows us that he is watching over us, he has sent us his own warrior."

John said, "I'm a soldier. But the angel who gave me his power said that he was an angel of music."
"During the war in heaven, all of the angels fought, such battles as we can never imagine. Even the angels whose duty it was to make music in Heaven."

"John," Sherlock interrupted impatiently, "Your wings. They look different than before."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, they've changed. Before, I suppose you would say, they were... silvery. Now they look darker, as if... they're tarnished."

Jean Marc stepped back. "Wait... you said you're not from Heaven, John. Are you a fallen angel? One of Lucifer's own?"

Jean-Marc withdrew a large silver crucifix from around his neck and held it out while groping for his rifle with the other.

"No, Uncle," Lestrade said. "John is a good man, as good now as before he became what he is now. John saved us in England from some... terrible things. Things I can well believe were from the devil."

"There are Fallen angels, who were cast out for following Lucifer in his pride. John is not one of them. Don't you dare accuse him, or reject him," Sherlock said, low and fierce. The very idea that John should have to defend himself made his blood boil. His blood that wasn't entirely human. Ichor. Sherlock bared his teeth and strode forward to snatch the rifle away. His reflexes weren't as fast as the priest's, which was surprising, and he easily jumped out of Sherlock's reach.

But Jean-Marc put the rifle down at the look in Sherlock's eye.

Yes. let this priest beware, Sherlock thought. He'll have more than John to contend with if he's going to think of going against us.

"And since we are telling the truth, Lestrade, you won't mind my telling your uncle that my brother and I are ourselves half-angels. We're the ones you want to watch. Because our Bloodline was made by the Fallen. If that means you won't help us, we'll leave now and take our chances with hellhounds-- anything else that hell has to throw at us. We've made it this far."

"Sherlock, stop," Mycroft said firmly. Sherlock shut his mouth. "We can't keep on alone, surely you see that by now. We came here for good reason. The forces against us are numerous, and they are very, very deadly. Yes, evil. So everyone, calm down. Jean-Marc, I apologise for my brother. He's very passionate about his bonded. He's also pregnant."

John held Sherlock in a firm embrace, soothing and calming his anger. "It's all right, we're safe, I'm safe," he murmured against Sherlock's ear. "We can do this together."

Sherlock visibly relaxed and allowed John to seat him in a chair by the fire, and John sat by his feet, gently stroking his arm to steady him and the baby. Their fight wasn't over, but while they had this haven of safety he wanted some peace and comfort for his mate. While they could.

* * *

"We came here for help," Mycroft continued. "Lestrade told us your story, Jean-Marc. About your family being hellhound hunters. Greg is the only one of us who can see them. We need to even our odds. I assure you that Sherlock and I have just learned of our, ahem, heritage. We don't serve anyone. We're fighting as hard as we can against... evil things. Will you help us?"
"With your help, showing me what I need to know, I'll be able to do this for myself. You won't need to be involved if you don't want to be, or can't," Lestrade said curtly. He was surprised at how much it hurt to know that Mycroft would be rejected for his blood by a priest of the Church.

"It is not for me to judge," Jean-Marc said, still wary. "I will help you. It is time for you to learn what you are meant for, Gregory. I've seen the hounds in the mountains, and in the forest, for the past two weeks. I killed one," said simply, as if he had brought down a hare. Everyone gaped.

"Oh yes, hellhounds can be killed. There are other ways to deal with them, but I am a priest, not a sorcerer. Killing is the most direct. And easiest-- if you know what you're doing."

"What happens if you don't know what you're doing?" Mycroft asked. He always liked to know the worst case scenario in any situation.

"What do you think, Mr Holmes? They take you to hell. Or anyplace that the devil wants to put you to work. There are many places that can be called 'hell on earth.' The devil's hand is on those places."

John said, "I saw hellhounds, and so could my angel. His name is Sollas. But I don't know how to stop them. Sollas had one that he had, I suppose you would say, tamed," John said, remembering the hellhound with the softly glowing eyes that seemed to respond to Sollas's wishes. He also remembered the flame-eyed hellhound that had taken him from the Whiteshadow warehouse in a cloud of brimstone, its coat that felt like fire.

He was determined to stay an angel to protect Sherlock, and maybe that meant he would be able to fight them this time. Only one way to find out.

"I'm pretty sure I saw hellhounds in the woods, outside of Sordwell Manor." Lestrade told Jean-Marc the story as well he could of the demonic attack at Sordwell Manor. "They didn't try to come after us, though."

"No? Then they are tracking you. Hellhounds are relentless hunters. They are very disciplined. They will not attack until they are bidden by their master."

"Well, then, we managed to get out of there. We thought we might be able to lose them by traveling by ship."

"It only delayed them, I'm afraid, my son."

"Then they'll keep coming. They took John once. We all figure they'll come for him again until they get him."

"You are correct. The Devil does not give up the hunt once he unleashes his hounds. But we are safe tonight. I've been looking out for them all day, and have seen no sign. We will start our work tomorrow. You, especially, Sherlock, as you are with child, should sleep," Jean-Marc said, an olive-branch.

"Wait. John, I still want to know why your wings are changing colour," Sherlock asked. He couldn't let go of it. In science, outward change usually signaled internal change as well. "Do you feel different than before?"

"Maybe." If anything, he felt more powerful than when Sollas made him an angel. He didn't want to frighten Sherlock with thoughts about what that meant. He had already decided that he would never go back to what he was. Maybe he had lost some final connection with his human life in making that choice.
As for why his wings should be getting darker, he had a suspicion there too. But that wasn't important. Not yet.

"The angel that made me is one of the Runaway angels," John said. "They left Heaven of their own free will. They weren't cast out, not like the Fallen. He told me... they were trying to earn their way back by fighting the Fallen. And he told me that the Fallen want Sherlock-- and Mycroft-- because they were "of the Bloodlines," because they're part angel, too. One of their creatures, Maxim Purcell, stole a piece of Sherlock's soul. They want all of it. That's how this started. I promised them... I would trade my soul, for his. They won't stop coming until they get it."

John's fury at the knowledge of Maxim's invasion of Sherlock's spirit was even greater now than when he was still a man. He would tear this place apart stone by stone, as easily if it were made of paper, reduce it to rubble, if the stolen fragment of Sherlock's soul were hidden there. He imagined tearing Maxim apart instead. It steadied him.

You are the arm of the avenging angel, Sollas said.

"That is how they are tracking you, Sherlock," Jean-Marc said. "You'll never be free of them unless you get it back."

"What if we can't?" Sherlock, too, liked to know the worst case scenario, and he was a natural pessimist.

"Then you must destroy it, rather than let it remain in the Devils' hands."

"We can't let that happen. We'll get it back, Sherlock, and soon. I promise."

* * *

They all followed Jean-Marc to their prepared rooms. At the threshold of the room set aside for John and Sherlock, Jean-Marc pulled his silver crucifix from his neck and held it out.

"It's all right, thank you, Sherlock has one that I gave him. He never takes it off, do you, Sherlock?"

Sherlock proudly withdrew his cross, tangled up with John's tags. Then he sighed with false weariness. He wanted this meddlesome priest to go, right now. He was still feeling the aftereffects of aphrodisia. He had no intention of wasting their precious time alone resting. John frowned at him and gestured toward the bed sternly. Sherlock was almost certain John could overhear his thoughts.

"You can bless it, we would be grateful," John said.

Jean-Marc nodded. "I will do that, of course. But this is for you, John. I want you to promise me you will wear it, and never take it off. If for any reason you feel you must remove it, promise you will come to me immediately, but don't remove it under any circumstance. Do you swear?"

John frowned at the implication. But he took the crucifix, an antique, weighty thing, and put it around his neck. It felt as if it had a power of its own.

"I swear I won't take it off. Not for anything," he said, remembering the silver cross that Sherlock wore now around his own neck, and the day that he survived the Taliban bullet, while the other prisoner met a different fate, his blood spilling out under the falling snow.

The other cross, the one worn by that poor slain soldier, he had taken with him from Afghanistan.
That cross was the one he had put around his own neck the day that he and Sherlock had gone to the Pridiax archive. The day the hellhound took him away.

Right now, the angel Sollas should be wearing that cross, hanging around the neck of his mortal body.

He hoped it was protecting Sollas as it had protected him.

**Pan Peninsula Tower, Docklands, London, 7 November. Night.**

The fear and doubt were back in Bridie's eyes. Sollas was crushed to be the cause. To prove what he has said was true, that he was her angel, Sollas told her five things about her that no other living person knew, that he knew from watching over her and hearing her thoughts, knowing her spirit.

"It's impossible. Angels don't just... roam around Paddington Station!"

"They do if they're in love. But tonight, I'm not an angel. I traded places with a man... he needs to be an angel to do what he has to do. And because I needed to be a man, too. For you."

"For me... I knew you were different. You look at things like a child, like it's all new. Wait -- did you say you're in love with me?"

Sollas watched her consider this. She was a little afraid, but she believed.

"I am. I'm in love with you. Please, don't be afraid. I fell in love with your voice first, I think. I wanted to know the person who made that music. And when I did, I couldn't help loving you."

Bridie said, "This can't be happening."

A sharply melodious voice issued from the back of the room. "How wise she is, for a human! More accurately, it shouldn't be happening. Because it's against Heavenly Law, isn't it, Sollas?"

A muscular angel with the face of a gypsy and the dark wings of a fallen angel stepped out of the shadows. Sollas recognised his beautiful, cruel face: it was the Fallen he had fought in the streets on Guy Fawkes Night.

"You stay away from her," he growled, and stood between the Fallen and Bridie. "Get behind me, Bridie. What is your name?"

"Names are important, yes? Names give power: power over demons; some say, the right name will give you power even over God. You won't have a chance to try to use mine against me, though. You've left it too late. I am Kasdeja."

Kasdeja. A powerful fallen angel, one who commanded armies of lesser demons. He was feared for his unique power to tempt and corrupt men through the knowledge of the dark arts.

Sollas considered pushing Bridie out the door, getting some distance between her and this evil angel. But he couldn't know what was on the other side, and he couldn't abandon her. What little power he had to fight, he would spend to protect her. If he failed, at least she was destined for heaven.

"I don't want your little beta. She's not long for this world anyway, as you well know. I'm here for
you. I remember Guy Fawkes Night: you're killing our vampires. And my favourite hellhound told me of your meddling with our operation in Afghanistan. I thought I warned you on Guy Fawkes Night not to try to play God. I presume that is why you borrowed the body of John Watson."

"Go back to Hell."

"Not without you. Your Alpha body is strong, but you can't fight an angel now."

"Touch her and you'll find out. And don't call yourself an angel, you corrupt fiend."

But he understood why Kasdeja was here for him now. For an immortal, he had been foolish to hope that he could hide from the Fallen for even a day and a night. They Fallen were always so alert to transgression. And opportunity.

"You are corruptible too, Sollas. You've broken God's Law. Consorting with mortals is forbidden. The Runaways won't have you. You're one of the Fallen now."

"I'll never be one of you. And I haven't---"

"Taking an Alpha body to fuck a human is enough. But soon you won't have to worry about these little impediments. The Fallen take what we want. And wasn't that what you are doing here? If you are useful, we might even give her to you, after."

* * *

"Sollas, what is he saying? Oh my god, don't hurt him," Bridie begged.

"If you could read his thoughts, you'd know just how impure Sollas' intentions are. Not very angelic! Come, Sollas. By morning you will be an angel again -- but you'll be on our side."

Kasdeja seized Sollas with an iron grip, using his wings to drag him. Bridie grabbed his other arm and tried futilely to pull him free.

"Bridie let go! Run!" Sollas screamed. Bridie wouldn't let go, pulling with everything she had, and they wrestled with the demon.

Sollas felt his black power upon him and knew it was hopeless. Kasdeja was the fallen angel of whom it was written: *he taught the children of men the wicked smitings of spirits and demons, and the smiting of the soul.*

Kasdeja tossed him against a wall with what Sollas knew was great restraint. He felt wrapped in a horrid wave of helplessness mixed with pain. The Fallen wanted to subdue him and take him, not kill him while he was mortal.

A sharp pain shot from Sollas's left shoulder as he crashed against the wall. John Watson had survived a horrendous bullet wound there, and the pain helped him focus. Maybe some part of him was still John Watson, even now. He saw Kasdeja put a burning hand on Bridie and she fell back with a scream. Any moment he was going to kill Bridie to stop his resistance, and Sollas knew what he had to do.

He summoned his remaining strength and courage to throw himself over Bridie's body, praying that Kasdeja's darkness did not taint her as he grasped the plain silver cross that John Watson wore around his neck and called for his brothers:

"Lamael, Salaquel, Rajiel..."
Kasdeja rushed at him but a radiant flurry of wings surrounded him. Sollas' brothers had answered his call. Kasdeja spat and howled and threw fiery bolts at the Runaways, calling his own brothers, the Fallen:

"Azazel, Danjal, Kokabel, Tumael!"

A storm of dark wings swarmed them, pitiless dark eyes flashing, and the angels circled one another, poised for battle with their divine weapons that they had not used against one another for eons.

"Come with us, Sollas, or she pays." Kasdeja hissed. "You know I can do it. Your brothers don't want you to have her. Come with us and have everything you desire."

"Sollas! You have taken a human form? What have you done?" Rajiel was the most pure and remote from human life of all the Runaways. He would never understand this.

"If you love me, protect her," Sollas cried, and was overjoyed to see them instantly form a circle of protection around Bridie. But the Fallen were just as quick to move against them, and the Runaways were outnumbered.

How long could they keep her from Kasdeja if he chose to lay his powers over her? A touch was all it would take, and she could become possessed. Tormented in ways he could not bear to imagine.

Kasdeja was turning his empty black eyes toward her horrified face. Sollas knew that he had to choose now. He took a last look at the woman he loved and would never have in the way he had longed for.

"Sollas!" Bridie wrenched her gaze away from Kasdeja to meet his, bewildered and lost, as if she knew what he would do.

"Bridie, I love you. Brothers-- don't stop me."

Sollas sprinted to the terrace, hit the railing, heaved himself over, and jumped.

* * *

Falling felt something like angel's flight.

On the way down, Sollas sent up a prayer for absolution of his sins.

John Watson's body hit the street before he could finish.

To be continued...
All the Monsters of the Earth

The Omega Sutra. Chapter 46. All The Monsters of the Earth

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

--Hebrews 11:1

Track: Louder than Words, Les Friction: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zopSw3gud5M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zopSw3gud5M)

*Le Vieux Prieure, near Lestradet-Thouels, Departement Midi-Pyrnees, France. 9 November. Morning*

The next morning dawned with the loud rumble and clap of thunder. John woke with a start. He had been in a deep, long, intensely frightening dream. Yes, he could still dream-- being an angel on the outside hadn’t changed who he was on the inside.

He had dreamed of that long, terrible op in Afghanistan, the hellhounds that had fought over him, and of Sollas’s words. And of the people too, the poor tortured men and women he had thought they were saving. The doomed hopelessness of his fellow soldiers. A troop of the damned.

The dream was frightening. The souls of the prisoners he had thought they were freeing haunted him, and the fate of the other soldiers: MacKenzie, and the others who had been too afraid to help him. Where were they now?

The dream frightened him because it made him remember too well the grim satisfaction he had taken in executing his hellish assignments. He could do the same now and more, much more, if he had to. For Sherlock and the others. He inspected the tips of his wings.

Darker.

*You are the arm of the avenging angel.*

John shook off the dream’s visceral despair and went to Sherlock.

Despite John’s exhortations, Sherlock had not slept. He admitted that he had sat up hour after hour,
watching out the window.

“I’m observing the storm,” he said.

John understood. Sherlock was grasping onto scientifically knowable, verifiable data, observation of the physical world that still made sense and worked in the ways that he could predict and usually control. He reached for Sherlock’s hand, too cold, and warmed it in his, and brought a quilt from the bed to wrap around his shoulders. They watched the storm together through tiny windows set deep in the old stone walls.

The lightning periodically gave fragmented glimpses of the old village that still clung to the outer walls of Le Vieux Prieure. Sherlock thought the ruins sinister. Such a subjective, emotional construct -- after all, it was only crumbling walls and collapsed roofs -- was new to his way of seeing the world. *One has to change one's theories in the light of new facts,* he reminded himself.

"Sound travels at a speed of one-fifth of a mile per second," Sherlock said. The boom of thunder shook the house. Lightning flashed, casting his cheekbones into relief. John watched Sherlock's lips moving, counting the beats between the flash and the thunderclaps. He smiled, trying to be happy to be here, to focus on this small moment. Becoming an angel had in no way lessened his fascination with Sherlock's innate beauty and grace. To the contrary.

But John had been considering the inevitable thought -- the physical was transitory. Transitory as the storm that was blowing across the sky. If he kept this angelic body, he could not die, even if he wanted to.

But Sherlock would. Day by day, Sherlock would change physically, perhaps even mentally, from what he was in this moment. John experienced a deep gut-wrenching stab of grief mingled with tender compassion that must be a shadow of what real angels felt, contemplating human mortality. Then, because in his heart and soul he was still Doctor John Watson, formerly of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, he firmly shut the door on these morbid thoughts, as he had had his dream.

Anyway -- living through eternity without Sherlock? Without their daughter? Impossible. He already knew that angels could not foresee the future. There must be a way through this, together. There had to be.

He pulled Sherlock into his arms, and held on tight.

* * *

"Three miles," Sherlock said.

"Yes."

Sherlock was counting between the lightning and the thunderclaps.

"The speed of sound is affected by both temperature and humidity-- notice the quality of the thunder, the crack means we are closest to the main branch of lightning. That is the most dangerous part. The lower rumble is the sound of the lightning's lesser branches."

"You do know that I probably don't have to worry about being struck by lightning anymore," John
said lightly. He ran his fingers slowly through Sherlock's hair, which he had learned sometimes had a soothing effect but he did it just as much to enjoy the feeling under his fingertips.

Another flash; another window-rattling clap of thunder.

"One mile. The lightning is getting closer but based upon the direction of the storm, I believe it likely it will pass us by... Yes, I did actually think of that, John. But I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to our daughter. She no doubt hears and feels the thunder."

"How exactly is knowing how close the lightning is getting reassuring!? Just-- tell her she's safe, that's all she needs to know."

Sherlock turned to stare down at him, narrowing his eyes appraisingly. "Are you speaking as an angel, John, or as a man?"

John drew him closer, looked back into those pale eyes that reflected back the dark. "As her father. As your Alpha. I'm still me inside, you know. That hasn't changed. That won't ever change."

Another flash and boom.

"A mile and a half. You see, the storm is passing us by-- just as I said."

John watched Sherlock bend down slightly, addressing the region of his belly. Only Sherlock Holmes could sound wistful that they weren't actually going to be struck by lightning.

"Come here," John said, and brought Sherlock's mouth to his, shutting out the storm, the Priory, and everything else in the world. If these intense and dangerous feelings flowing through this new body were meant be a warning that he wasn't supposed to be doing this with a mortal -- or, perhaps, doing this with a half-angel --- then whoever was doing the warning was going to have to adjust their expectations, he thought. Sherlock's mouth under his was perfect and warm, and still a little desperate because he couldn't be sure John wouldn't disappear again. It was a sensation to savour, that his mouth felt just the same, and yet new and unexplored by this body. He didn't want to stop, he wanted to pull his mate back to the bed, where they could thoroughly relieve him of this body's quasi-virginal state. Sherlock, always observing, unwound himself from John's arms and fell back gently onto the high wooden bed piled with plump featherbeds and faded quilts.

"What are you thinking... did he -- did he made a mistake, John? Sollas? And when the sun comes up, you'll be gone again? Your wings are getting darker, surely that means something."

He concentrated hard. Sollas had told him that angels could appear in any form they chose. He had chosen to look like John Watson, but if he really tried, he must be able to hide his wings altogether. He closed his eyes, imagined himself as he was, as a man, scars and all.


He felt his body trembling all over just like an earthquake he once experienced as a real soldier deployed in Helmand, a powerful jolt and shudder where the whole world moved -- and then it stopped. He opened his eyes. Sherlock was staring up at him, his mouth slightly open. John smiled. It was not easy to amaze Sherlock Holmes.

"They're gone. They just -- vanished. Dissolved like mist. Your wings."

"I guess that means I have some control over what I look like. I was pretty sure I could. But I did it for you." John followed Sherlock into the bed, kneeling over him, trying to endure the sensation
of time freezing in this particular moment and all the while, running out fast.

"No one has ever touched this body but me," Sherlock whispered. He his elegant hands up and down John's chest, then along John's back, exploring where the wings had been, all flawless smooth skin now. He turned John gently and tasted the skin where the wings had been. John felt himself harden, so fast, impossible not to when Sherlock was touching his sensitive skin with that mouth -- yes, more sensitive even than his real skin, if that was possible. He seemed to have a million more nerve endings than before and Sherlock seemed to know how to tease and pleasure every one. This led his mind once more to the Mysteries, the Omega Sutra, and Maxim Purcell. They still weren't finished. But with this body, he would wipe every trace of Maxim from Sherlock's body, from his memory, from his mind, from his soul.

"John."

He had somehow pinned Sherlock beneath him, covering him, his hands exploring that divine omega hole, eliciting such unabashed, greedy groans that it blotted every other thought from his head. He could take his bonded now, with this kind of strength he could go for hours. Days. Forever.

"I can give you anything you want, anything at all. But you have to tell me, and show me," John said, watching Sherlock's face as he thought about this, the colour that crept up, the light in his eyes. "You would have to trust me completely."

"I do. But. . ."

"I know. I won't hurt you, or her. We are going to have a long, long time to figure out how this works. I'll be very gentle," he said fervently, hoping (not praying, that would be very wrong) that he was as strong as he felt.

Sherlock grasped John's hand, wet omega on his fingers, and licked each one slowly. John took it back and licked too. Sherlock's magnificent scent seemed different to him too, stronger and sweeter and drawing his mouth down like a magnet.

"That's it, John, kiss me there."

Heavenly, that was his thought, and it was probably literally blasphemous for an angel to have such a thought but there it was, his mate's gorgeous tight hole, wet for him, luscious under his tongue and lips. He took his time, letting it build, savoring every cry and moan, feeling his bonded's narrow hips rocking under his hands, coming slowly undone under his mouth, drinking in the taste of him.

"John, ah, dear god," Sherlock gasped. A tiny part of his brain was taken back to the very first time John had touched him, the night of the Heatwave. How much he had wanted to ask for this, how sure he had been that he would never have more than that single night. It made him crave John's fingers inside.

"Please, John, do you remember ---the Heatwave. You said you knew what to do. I need your fingers."

John slowly pushed in a single finger, hypnotised by the sight. His mate's passage clung hard to his hand, warm and wet, just like it had that night. But this was very different than the night of the Heatwave. He could look, and touch, as much as he wanted. There was no reason to try to control any of it. The Heatwave was all about Maxim Purcell in the end, and that memory needed to be replaced with new pleasures, entirely their own.
"I want to watch you. If I wasn't like... like this, I think you'd stop my heart," John said. He worked his fingers inside, firm and slow and not too high, licking everywhere he could reach, the feel and taste driving him. It was impossible to catch the omega fluids running strongly down his arm but he lapped what he could, almost delirious with it. Beautiful, it was, to watch and feel Sherlock writhing against his hand, under his mouth, his taste and luscious scent surrounding them until there was nothing else. Sherlock came, and came again, and John exulted in the strength that allowed him to keep on long after his human body would have demanded rest, the power to hold his Alpha impulses back for Sherlock’s sake.

"Don't stop," Sherlock begged, "Please, John, it feels like heaven," he whispered, wickedly perverse, his eyes gone dark and wide and full of heat. And so he didn't stop at all, finally climbing up and plunging his cock hard and steady but just gently enough into that delicious tightness, locking their mouths together so that he could feel his mate crying out into his open mouth. He slowly coaxed Sherlock into a trembling trance as he thrust through each orgasm, keeping his mate poised in that perfect state of pleasure that he knew Sherlock craved. Now he would always be able to give it to him.

His last thought as he allowed his body to release with glorious climax was that seeing Sherlock's face transformed by rapture was the only kind of heaven he really needed.

* * *

"You know we have to keep on with-- this, I don't know what to call it. It's not a case. It feels like a war." John said afterward. Sherlock finally wanted to sleep after staying up all night thinking, and was drowsing a little against John's shoulder.

John watched out the window, there was a pale sun rising through low grey clouds. It was a new day. "I'm not running from hell hounds and neither are you, or our daughter. I want to find out if this priest can really help as much as Lestrade thinks he can. If not, we have to find another way, together."

Sherlock looked guilty at this. He knew they shouldn't be shut away in this room, away from everyone. But his body was starting to demand more rest, warmth and food. His stomach rumbled. He sighed.

"I know it. We have to face things. I haven't told you, John -- But... I hope you can forgive me for... all of this. Everything that's happened. If I hadn't ever gone with Maxim ---"

"Shhhhh. Now we know about you, and about Mycroft. The Bloodlines, right? I think something much bigger than Maxim Purcell or Jonathan Talbott is after you, and everything that's happened so far just proves it. Yes? So there's no forgiveness needed. It's not your fault. If anything, it's your parents fault, for keeping you and Mycroft in the dark your whole lives."

"There is that. Mycroft and I had it bad enough as it was, I assure you. I don't say that I wouldn't have wanted to know. It is always better to know everything."

"And we will. But first, let's feed you up."

Everyone gathered in the kitchen for breakfast. Jean-Marc dropped a large leather satchel on the floor before sitting to eat.
"Sherlock," Jean-Marc said, "Gregory tells me that you are the greatest solver of crimes in the entire world. He says that you are able to see evidence that no one else can see. That is a very great gift, but perhaps it is also a curse?"

Sherlock stilled. "Certainly not a curse. I have never thought of my abilities as anything other than the result of very hard work and discipline. What I do, others could do if they were willing to follow my methods."

"You are not a man of faith."

"No... or I should perhaps say, I was not. I had never seen evidence to support any of the world's faiths. I learned many valuable things in Tibet, but faith wasn't one of them."

"But now you have seen," Jean-Marc said firmly. "And you have learned what you are. When we have time to ourselves, perhaps we can speak of faith, you and I. But this morning, I wish that you would share your gift and enlighten us, Sherlock, with your observations on the crime that concerns us."

"Crime?"

"Last night John informed us that this Maxim Purcell stole a piece of your soul. That is surely a very serious crime, yes? You want it back?"

Sherlock had indeed been thinking about what it meant that Maxim had managed to steal a fragment of his soul. He hated thinking about having been so thoroughly duped by Maxim. It was not in his nature to dwell excessively upon his failures, but there was no room now for injured pride and vanity.

"I can only agree. Very well. John told me that Jonathan Talbott has got the piece of my... my soul now. He wears it in a vial around his neck. If that is true, Talbott got it from Maxim, before Maxim died."

"I also saw a vial around the neck of the man -- the creature -- we fought at Sordwell Manor," Mycroft said. Lestrade met his eyes seriously, remembering. "The substance was very, ah, beautiful, I suppose. It glowed. I very much felt compelled to take it. Surely this was the vial that John spoke of?"

"And Jean-Marc is right. I do want it back. Maxim told me at Hantswood Hall... that he had "a little piece of my soul" -- and for that reason I had somehow-- participated in the Sleeping Beauty murders. It must give him power; or at least, he believes so."

"All right, then let's solve it," Lestrade asked. "It's a theft. I have to say, they are going to a whole lot of trouble to get at you. It's going to be a fight to get it back, they won't just leave it where we can easily get at it. So, how will we? Where is this Jonathan Talbott now?"

"I'd rather know what he wanted it for," Sherlock said. "I presume he had it with him at Sordwell Manor, because he needed it... why? Obviously, to entrap me and Mycroft as well, perhaps."

"Lestrade's right, they want both of you. It's a huge bloody chess match is what it is, and you're the pieces they're after. I'm just a pawn, I guess." John said. "You are brothers. Sollas said - they wanted you for your Bloodline, he specifically wanted me to tell you that. So that's what's important. Remember what I said in 221B, Sherlock."

"Of course I remember. 'This thing operates by rules, even if we don't know what they are.' Please describe for me with particularity, Mycroft, what happened when you projected into that
Mycroft repeated his experience fighting the dark powers, and Olivia Urquhart's surprising assistance. "The man wasn't Maxim, not outwardly, of course, because Maxim is dead. But as I said, he wore a vial around his neck, and I sensed a presence that was like Maxim, but a great deal more cruel, and wicked. In his physical form, which of course is temporary, he was a black man in, ah, I believe one would call it "street gang" attire. But he had powers I can only ascribe to black magic. And there was a... demon that appeared to be under his command."

Jean-Marc and Aude crossed themselves.

"That man was Jonathan Talbott. So far as I am aware, Talbott's first appearance after returning from the dead was in Maxim's body, on All Hallows' Eve. I must know how it was done."

Sherlock said urgently. "If it can be done, it can be undone." He frowned, sifting through his store of knowledge concerning reincarnation. The facts were slim and generally quite dubious.

"Whiteshadow has operatives that deal in magic," Mycroft said with distaste. He never interacted with the Sortes Division, who were cultivated for their gifts in the foretelling of future events, but also for certain other abilities: casting effective spells, reading minds, or other paranormal abilities.

"I am not thinking of magic... Not yet. But I suggest we learn to exploit their methods. I have never yet encountered a system of knowledge that I was not able to expand and improve upon. I am unfamiliar with magic -- excepting the arts of legerdemain and prestidigitation in which I am of course an expert."

Sherlock tossed an apple from a bowl on the table in the air, where it seemingly vanished. He plucked it from behind Mrs. Hudson’s ear, and everyone had a much-needed moment of surprised, delighted laughter. Sherlock smiled. For a moment John was sure he was thinking of showing this little trick to their daughter, then teaching her to do it herself. He had a moment's daydream, picturing it. It gave him hope.

But then he was back within the cold stone walls of this hospitable but forbidding place, far from home, and the dream floated away.

"We don't have time for that, Sherlock," John said firmly. Now he was starting to imagine what it would be like if they were still running like this, months from now, Sherlock heavier with child. They needed to end this now. "Kindly stop showing off and let's focus-- where is that vial?"

Sherlock accepted the rebuke. Not because John was an angel, but because John was right. He sighed. "Well. Maxim was always a collector. Principally of rare books... perhaps he discovered some rare book at Hantswood Hall... maybe he needed to actually speak to Talbott to find it, or how to use it... But Maxim never expected to be overpowered by Talbott. He never believed anyone could... beat him. If we could find that book, or even what it was, perhaps we could summon Talbott ourselves, get him in our power."

John placed his hands firmly on Sherlock's slender shoulders to remind him that he would never again be under Maxim's influence. Through the cloth of Sherlock's shirt he could feel the bones beneath the thin skin and the rush of warm blood under his hands. He ran a fingertip over the place he had healed Sherlock's bullet wound. It took perhaps more force of will now than when he had been a normal human man to resist losing himself in these simple sensations. Time didn't mean what it had meant when he was a man -- he imagined he could have stood there for a year and it would have felt just the same as a second, or as eternity.
John had lost the raincoat that Sollas had given him. Aude had offered him a long wool overcoat to conceal his wings. After his "experiment," he very much wanted to alter his manifestation to resemble his ordinary self, but he was powerfully mindful of a sense of growing evil all around and his body resisted, telling him that he needed the fullness of these powers.

"A rare book? Maxim said he had a book that no one had seen," Mycroft said. "He had a book in his hands that night. I thought it was the Omega Sutra. But the place has burned. The book would be burned, too."

"A book, a book...." Sherlock steepled his fingertips, picturing in his mind the vast shelves of esoteric volumes that Maxim had kept in his pristine library. Thousands of volumes. He had seen only Maxim's choicest pieces -- he had thought. Apparently there was one he hadn't been privileged to see.

Or had he?

"When I came to Sordwell Manor -- that man, he wasn't a man," John said. "His light was wrong, I could see it."

"And how, exactly, did you happen to come to Sordwell Manor that night, John?" Mycroft asked. "You couldn't possibly have known we would go there."

"No. I went to 221B first. We do actually... fly. I know it seems --- well, you just have to believe me."

"Of course we believe you, John," Lestrade said firmly, with a pointed frown at Mycroft, whom he clearly thought was taking the wrong tone. "You don't have to prove anything to us, or anybody else."

Mycroft looked only slightly abashed. "I certainly didn't mean --"

"-- Yes, you did, Mycroft. I don't think either of us in a position to doubt an actual angel. We are only half-angels. I believe John Watson outranks either of us on the heavenly scale," Sherlock said smugly. "By a rather great degree, I would imagine."

Mycroft took a sip of coffee to mask his discomfiture. He hadn't yet had the opportunity to consider all of the possible consequences of their astonishing bloodline. But being in some manner subject to John Watson's presumably superior -- make that vastly superior --- powers was an idea that would take a great deal of getting used to for the most powerful man in England, for whom prime ministers, presidents, and kings were simply pawns in his game. As John had always been. He had thought.

John was looking at him as if he could read what he was thinking, which was appalling. Even in Whiteshadow, no operative had ever been able to penetrate his interior processes. The very idea shivered his blood.

"John -- ah, I think it only fair to ask -- can you, ahem, read our thoughts?"

John laughed. "Yeah, sometimes. But no better than I did before, so don't look like that. Not to worry. And I don't know about pulling rank on the two of you. I'm not sure I'm a real angel, not the way that Sollas was. I just know I'm not a man anymore, and I've got his body, or what passes
for a body for an angel. Maybe that makes me a half-angel too."

"So glad you agree, John, I knew you'd be reasonable --" Mycroft said smoothly. He could still recover control of the situation, for all their sakes.

"Don't be so sure," John said. "If anybody does anything that puts us-- especially Sherlock-- in danger that I don't know about and agree to first, I'll be testing my new powers on them. I think I can probably inflict some damage. I stopped that horrible thing at Sordwell Manor."

"John," Sherlock said, his voice nearly purring with satisfaction at watching John in full Alpha display, with the added beauty and magnetism of his new powers. *John is going to be a terrible distraction. Worse than before. Books-- you are supposed to be thinking about Maxim's books,* he reminded himself. But what he said was, "You were on the point of telling us how you actually found me at Sordwell Manor that night."

"All I can say is that was like. . . a chain, pulling me. I've felt it before when I've been away from Sherlock, but this was a hundred times stronger. I couldn't go anywhere else. When I saw the lights in the window, I knew Sherlock was there, and I knew he was being attacked. You saw what happened next."

"So you saw them. Talbott, and his demon," Jean-Marc asked.

"I did. And what's more... if I saw him again, or anything like him, I would know it. They had a strange, well, aura, I guess you'd call it. The wrong colour. But this Talbott-- why did Talbott -- whatever was speaking through Talbott -- agree to take me instead of you, Sherlock? Back at Hantswood Hall? At the time, I was still -- just me. Not an angel. What they really want is you, and Mycroft. I can't understand it. But they knew what they wanted to do with me, once they had me."

John told the story of what had happened to him in Afghanistan, his unlikely comradeship with the hardened Alpha soldier MacKenzie, whom he had just visited in his dream.

"It was all about the Fallen trying to harvest souls of good people, people who would have been destined for heaven. And taking on the souls of their torturers as new recruits. That's what Sollas told me. We didn't know it was happening. We thought we were rescuing them-- oh, god," John had to stop. The dream needed to stay gone. "I'd do anything to go back....I need MacKenzie to make it. I want them all to make it. If I can just go back --"

"No, John. You must take care of your bonded now. That is why your angel sent you to him," Jean-Marc said. "The others are in God's hands."

"God's hands. God's hands!!! If you saw what I saw, I don't think you would believe that was a good thing, anymore. It was-- hell on earth." Despite his bravado with Sherlock, John halfway expected a bolt of lightning to crash through the roof and strike him down for possibly blaspheming. Everyone fell silent, staring at John, clearly expecting the same thing.

But nothing happened. He promised himself then that he would find a way to help the other soldiers who had been trapped with him on that long, long op.

"Ever since All Hallows' Eve, John, they have pursued you even more relentlessly than me, or Mycroft. It is more than just the devil taking his due." Sherlock considered this. He could accept that his family bloodline was coveted by mankind's great enemy; that John should be chosen, however, was baffling and unthinkable.
"The answer to that question is simple, Sherlock. It is because of your bond," Jean-Marc said. "Have you not realised this? Your bond with John is unbreakable, literally. John shields you. He is your Alpha. Not all Alphas and omegas experience true soul-bonding. You and John, however, clearly have this bond. The church once had a special ceremony for it. Those things are all too old-fashioned now, they went with the Latin mass, I'm afraid. Pity. Many times I have found that the old ways are the best."

"Are you saying then that they ---" 

"You know and I know that we are not just dealing with Talbott. We are dealing with the Great Enemy: the Devil."

"So, they believe they must separate me from John to get what they want?"

"Yes. But killing John wouldn't work; killing your bonded would kill you too, Sherlock, and quickly. I think you know this."

"That is a scientifically unproven fact," Sherlock said somewhat weakly. But he knew now that it was really true, he felt it. So many things he never would have credited-- soul-bonding. Magic. Reincarnation. Angels. Demons. All true.

"They tried and failed to break your bond. If they should kill John before gaining power over you, Sherlock, they would fail. Because you would die too. At least your spirit would go out, and I expect they want that much more than your corporeal form."

"Maxim tried to persuade me at Hantswood Hall that I wasn't truly bonded to John. Trying to use suggestion to break our bond. I had been susceptible to his suggestion before, you see."

In Tibet.

* * *

Dharamasala, Tibet. 3 years ago.

After months of study with the monks of Dharamasala, Sherlock left the monastery and purchased a blue dose in the hut of the old shaman who was known for the power of his special mixture: it would render an omega a complete neuter with just a single sip.

"So, you believe you have experienced every facet of your omega sexuality, as closely as you have studied how to live without it," Maxim had said from the shadows of the back of the hut. He was closing a large antique-looking trunk, fastening the lock. Sherlock couldn't help imagining what fascinating potions might be inside. "It is hard to see how you could have done so. You are still rather young."

"My age doesn't come into it. I have sufficient experience to know I can well live without it," Sherlock retorted. "I have lived without it all these years. All that remains is to settle the question once and for all. Uncertainty is a needless distraction."
"Distraction? From what?"

"My work."

"You are uncertain because you know that there is another choice. You haven't considered all of the available evidence. I can't believe that the great Sherlock Holmes would make such an elementary mistake."

"You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Maxim Purcell."

"Trust me, Mr. Purcell, I am as familiar with the 'evidence,' as you say, as I need to be."

"The fact that you are discussing it with me at all, and have not yet opened your bottle, means that you are willing to be persuaded otherwise, Mr. Holmes. By someone who can offer you true knowledge. Secret knowledge. Perhaps that is why you are here in Tibet after all. Not to close the door, but to learn to open it. Are you willing to do what it takes?"

"Certainly not. I came here to buy a blue dose. Why should I be interested in anything else, especially now?" He uncorked the bottle and the pure, bracing fragrance of the blue dose filled the room. He felt calmer than he had in months. Years.

"Because it took you six months in Dharamsala to actually come here. That is a rather long time to contemplate your, as you call it, 'uncertainty.' Tell me, does your master approve your choice?"

"He neither approves nor disapproves. But he agrees that I must choose."

"Then choose, by all means. But wait a while longer. Let me show you what you need to know to make a truly informed choice."

"You are presuming I would be at all interested in you. I assure you, I am interested only in my work."

"Is that so?" Maxim fixed him with a stare that Sherlock knew was intended to be hypnotic; he smirked and looked back. It would take a great deal more than such simple parlour tricks to affect him. But then Maxim took the slightest step closer into his space, and enveloped him in an invisible cloud that began as warmth, and quickly grew to something hotter. Sherlock was fascinated, imagining some sort of pheromone cloud, but could not perceive the source. There was no discernible scent beyond Maxim's natural Alpha pheromones, which were admittedly enticing, but well within his capability of shutting out. This was something entirely different. The sensation was coming from Maxim himself, who was not touching him anywhere although it felt as if he was stroking him everywhere with clever, clever hands. These were feelings he could almost wish would continue. He almost never felt that way about... feelings.

The feelings stopped, leaving him feeling cold, alone, and strangely hollow.

He put the cork in the bottle.

* * *
"But the vial -- what happens if we can't get that vial back?" Lestrade asked, frustrated. He was running short on patience with debating the metaphysical. He had come here to learn to fight hellhounds, and he was starting to itch for it. "What is it that these things -- Talbott and demons and hellhounds -- want with you and Sherlock, Mycroft? I mean I understand about ...what you are. But what will they do with you?"

"I think I know, but probably Sherlock should explain," Mycroft said, "because it all starts with Maxim, doesn't it, Sherlock? What was Maxim trying to do, that he couldn't do without turning to magic? Without raising Talbott from the dead?"

Sherlock and Mycroft exchanged a bitter look; Sherlock had long ignored Mycroft's warnings about Maxim and worse, evaded his protection. "He wanted me to be his star pupil in the Mysteries. Which simply put, is the giving and receiving of... pleasure without physical touch. But Maxim was never satisfied. He always wanted more, much more. More than I, or anyone, could possibly give. Maxim believed-- with some accuracy-- that pleasure and pain were simply impulses of the nervous system, which are electrically based and theoretically able to be prolonged indefinitely. Infinitely.

"Maxim was... a hedonist. Maxim wanted to live in a state of unending pleasure of mind, body and spirit. That could be called Nirvana. I think that Maxim came to believe he could get there by using our spirits. I think he found a book that taught him how to do it. And I think Jonathan Talbott wrote it. Maxim thought we would be his shortcut to paradise. But... I want to live in the world."

"So, Maxim wanted paradise," Jean-Marc said. "But paradise is in Heaven. There is only one way to go there. Men have already lost paradise on earth. That, of course, was caused by Satan. And by Adam and Eve, who thought they could disregard God's instructions without penalty."

"Remember, Maxim said: "I've come into possession of a certain book. A book no one has seen," Mycroft observed. "We must find out what book it was. In any event, Maxim was certainly attempting to reach other planes, that was Whiteshadow's interest in him. His purpose was secondary to Whiteshadow. To accomplish that, one must use astral projection," Mycroft said. "Whiteshadow has found no other way."

"What else did Maxim say, Mycroft?" John asked, that soft voice that was so very frightening, if you paid attention. People that failed to pay attention regretted it.

"On a molecular level the human brain is a superconductor of energy. But it has a limitation. The easiest way to explain is to think about the power of mechanical engines. More horses, more power. I thought that binding Sherlock to me would give me this increase in power,". Mycroft recited. He had a photographic memory, which was very often a true curse. He lacked Sherlock's skill in deletion. His perfectly sharp memories could cut deeply.

"Astral projection a particular and unique gift, which was given only to the Nephilim," Jean-Marc said. "Which is why they need you, don't you see? They will be hunting others of your kind."


"Yes, precisely. The Dead Sea Scrolls tell of an astral journey by one of the Nephilim, whose name was Mahway." Jean-Marc pulled an old book from the shelves and began to read:

"Mahway mounted up in the air like strong winds, and flew with his hands like eagles. He left behind the inhabited world and passed over Desolation, the great desert, and Enoch saw him and
hailed him, and Mahway said to him: "The Nephilim await your words, Enoch: we, and all the monsters of the earth."

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"It would appear that Maxim may have been trying to become one of the Nephilim himself. Which would seem to be impossible."

Why did you choose my brother?

Not for the reasons you might think, even though he is definitely within my preferred type. No, for his powers, of course. I have done some researches into the Holmes bloodline.

"More horses, more power," Mycroft said. "They want -- us. All of us, I assume, whoever we are. The Nephilim."

"Yes, Mycroft," Sherlock said intently. "Maxim made a try for you too, but found you less than vulnerable."

"My years of training in Whiteshadow were not for nothing."

"And you might have thought of that, Mycroft, instead of excluding me. You and Father."

Sherlock’s petulance masked unhealed wounds, John could see that better than before.

“You have no idea. You weren’t excluded, Sherlock. You were... spared.” Mycroft said with more mildness than Lestrade thought Sherlock deserved. Mycroft had been very indulgent of Sherlock, since the night they learned he was going to have a child. Lestrade wanted to say something to Sherlock, to make him understand Mycroft’s sacrifice, but he didn’t have the right, not if Mycroft wasn’t ready. He remembered Mycroft’s halting confession in the safety of his library: They torture you, you see. Until your soul separates from your body.

“But, think, Mycroft -- Maxim was not able to take you either, in the end. We understand now why Talbott and Maxim failed with me: because of my bond with John, our bond with each other. It protects us— but it also makes us targets. Have you followed my train of deduction?"

"I am always thinking, brother mine. Perhaps you should endeavor to do the same. I believe you are attempting to make a suggestion about, ah..."

"You, Mycroft."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Mycroft snapped acidly. “I assure you, you are mistaken. Your mental faculties are slipping. It is to be expected.”

Mycroft was, as usual, far ahead of Sherlock. He was willing to accept that this rogue priest knew more about the mysterious phenomenon of soul bonding than any of them. The Holmeses actively discouraged bonding. Was this the true reason? To avoid weakness and vulnerability, to keep the mind sharp and clear, certainly; but now it appeared there was another reason, greater than he could have imagined.

Bonding with Sherlock was the reason for John’s terrible ordeal. He had come under the power of the Fallen. He had lost his life. Mycroft had a strong suspicion that John would not be allowed to live with Sherlock, on earth, indefinitely. If Jean-Marc was right, he and Sherlock were targets
because of what they were, their hybrid blood -- but without his bond to Sherlock, John could have stayed safe.

Lestrade was looking hard at him, but he wouldn't look back. He knew what he had to do. He turned to his Whiteshadow skills in visualization: He turned his back a moment and closed his eyes, imagining that the warm, sensual honeylike sensation that Maxim had thrown over him in reverse: A cold, slick fluid like quicksilver encased him, penetrated his veins and his heart, and then it froze solid. Cold, cold as ice.

Iceman.

Mycroft turned back serenely. Everything that had felt confusing and dangerously right before was a grave and selfish mistake, one that was clearly against his own nature. Now the path forward for him and for Lestrade was clear. But what he said was, “I believe that we came to you, Jean-Marc, because you could teach us some very specific skills, not to endure lessons in the quaint customs of your church.”

Lestrade saw, and worse, felt the change. It was strangely painful to see Mycroft looking so cold. He even thought he could feel the coldness as a physical thing, like swimming in ice water, but of course that wasn’t possible. They weren’t really bonded, no matter what they had felt last night. Obviously Mycroft didn’t want them to be; if he was able to control it, then obviously it wasn’t a bond at all.

Mycroft was right, as usual: there was work to do, and dreaming about something that wasn’t going to happen was a dangerous distraction.

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"Very well. Enough talk, then," Jean-Marc said calmly, unmoved by Mycroft’s rebuke. Aude and Mrs. Hudson whispered together and left the room unnoticed. Jean-Marc unpacked his leather bag, making a neat row of peculiar-looking firearms.

“Each of you, take one. They are not loaded.”

Everyone stood back and allowed John the first pick. John chose one, hefted it in his hand. It had four barrels, and was covered with intricate engravings of symbols and writing that he couldn't make out. The weight of it and the polished wooden grip felt very good in his hand. Sherlock, Lestrade and Mycroft each took one. Jean-Marc's weapon was of the same design, but more a rifle than a handgun, a fearsome weapon.

Jean-Marc withdrew a carved box inlaid with symbols from a shelf and opened it. Inside were
rows of gleaming bullets on velvet lining.

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow, holding one up to the light.

"Yes, they are silver bullets. But these are hellhounds, not werewolves. This is a very special kind of silver."

“That’s all there is to it? Silver bullets?” Sherlock asked, eyeing his new toy with delight.

“As neither of us can see the hellhounds, I fail to see how firing a gun will help,” Mycroft said, eyeing his own pistol dubiously.

“There is more. I’ll show you the real secret of these weapons shortly. And it should be clear that accuracy is not the strength of these guns. Follow me.”

“Wait -- werewolves?” Lestrade asked. “You’re not serious?”

Jean-Marc smiled. “I am always serious, Gregory.”

“Great,” Lestrade muttered under his breath. They followed Jean-Marc out into the driving rain to a medieval chapel on the far side of the Priory grounds. Inside, there were stained-glass windows, depicting the slaying of the Beast of Gevaudan.

“The first victim was killed not far from our Priory. In all, there were over a hundred deaths, and thirty survivors.”

“If the Beast of Gevaudan was a hellhound, how did anyone survive?”

“Because not all of the attacks were by the Beast – even though there was more than one Beast. There was a ferocious pack of wolves in the area and the hellhounds used them as footsoldiers, as you will. Some of the wolves were caught and killed. One was even stuffed and sent to the King at Versailles -- but the slayings did not stop.”

“Why was this area attacked?” Sherlock asked. “Why should hellhounds attack so many people, all in one area?”

“It was a punishment,” Jean-Marc said. “And for you to understand, I will have to tell you a very old story about the Lestrade family.”

The True Tale of The Beast of Gevaudan

“There was once a nun of this Priory, who in those years – we are talking now of the year 1764, confessed to her priest that she had been befriended by a stranger. A man.

“He was dark and handsome, of course, and always dressed in black clothing, much richer than any she had ever seen. He had first come to her in the garden, of which she had the charge because of
her skill with herbs. He appeared at any hour, even in her room when it was locked. But no one else could see him. He seemed to be suffering some great sorrow about which he refused to speak, the nun said. He told her nothing about himself, but something in him made her willing to tell him her innermost secrets. She knew that these visits were unnatural, and confessed. She undertook increasingly harsh penance, but she admitted that she continued to see her strange visitor.”

“Did she have a choice?” Lestrade asked.

“According to the story, he told her that he would leave forever if she once asked it of him, but she never did.”

“What happened?”

“She told him he was causing her so much confusion and pain that she wished she could die. But she would go to hell if she killed herself. He begged her to abandon her vows, and she steadfastly refused. But he would never use force against her. She told the priest that he never touched her, although she confessed that she desired that he would.”

“What happened?” They asked in unison.

“As I said, she took increasingly harsh penance. She fasted and prayed. She prostrated herself on the stone floor in this chapel for many hours. The Bishop was consulted, and he authorised an investigation into whether the nun was possessed. The night that the Bishop’s letter came, there was an unseasonable blizzard, and the Priory was snowbound. It was a day and a night before the snow was cleared. When they opened the chapel doors, the poor nun had frozen to death where she lay. Right where you are standing now. In one hand, she held a silver rosary hung with a true relic of St. Michael. No one could tell where the simple woman could have got such a treasure. In her other hand, she held a fistful of black fur. The priests tried to burn it, but it would not burn.”

They all looked down at the stone floor, imagining the nun’s suffering.

“Freezing to death can be very peaceful,” John said gently. He hoped that it had been that way for her.

“Very moving,” Sherlock said. “But she obviously didn’t kill any hellhounds.”

“No. The very next day, the first attack occurred. The attacks differed from wolves in that this beast consumed only the heads of its victims. Many were found on the steps of this chapel, but no one ever saw it happen. The priests knew, of course, that this was a punishment by the Great Enemy.”

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“Men hunted the Beast to no avail. One day, a shepherdess came to the Priory. She was the nun’s sister, she said, and had a dream that she should come to the Priory, and she would be given a sign. One of the priests took a risk and told her her sister’s story. The shepherdess stayed the night where her sister had died. And she was given a sign: a vision of St. Michael slaying the Dragon, and of the silver rosary. She made a vow then that she and her family would kill the Beast, and prayed for St. Michael’s protection.”

“So, she decided to fight back?” Sherlock said. “Surely that was rare for a woman in those times? Is this the woman?” He pointed to one of the stained glass windows, showing a woman wounding the Beast with a spear.
“Rare, but remember Joan of Arc. Yes, that is she.”

“How did she kill the beast -- with a spear? It seems incredible,” Lestrade said.

“Because of her vision, the priests gave her beads from the rosary. The silver was forged with other metal to make a spear-tip. She used something else too, a preparation from a local herb. One day she was in the fields, and a red-eyed black dog or wolf attacked. She screamed, but no one else could see it. She buried the spear in the creature’s chest and killed it.”

“What happened to the creature’s body?”

“The witnesses saw the beast appear on the ground as if by magic, and then disappear in a puff of smoke. I can attest that that is precisely what happens when you kill a hellhound. They are supernatural animals, of the Netherworld. In ordinary people, the sight of the hellhound means that it has come to take you.”

“To look into its eyes three times will kill you, they say,” Lestrade said. “I don’t know if it’s true. I never saw one, until the night one came for John. So… the nun and the shepherdess – they were our family? Lestrades?”

“That shepherdess was our grandmother of four generations past, Gregory. She caused all of the Lestrade family take a sacred vow to fight the hellhounds, and they did, because of her vision. Michael is the Archangel who drove Lucifer from heaven at the Fall. And Michael is the guardian of souls at the hour of death. And he must have accepted our vow, because the Lestrades can see the beasts, to better kill them.”

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“So what do we do?” John asked. “I have to believe that if these things come at me again, it’ll be different this time.” His body fairly pulsed with a burning power at the thought. He imagined tearing the evil hounds apart. Could he do it? Surely an angel could -- but was he a real angel?

“I don’t presume to teach you anything, John. But I want you to keep one of the guns, the same as the others. I want you to have every protection we can give you. But you will know what to do. I believe that you have been given this form for good reason. God is showing you extraordinary favour. You must pray to be relieved of doubt, and to have faith in God’s strength.”

“I will,” John said.

“He’ll take the gun,” Sherlock said. “I believe you mentioned that this nun, Lestrade’s great-great grandmother, used some sort of local herb.”

Jean-Marc pulled a bottle from his pocket, and carefully poured few drops of oil onto each bullet before loading the first pistol. Sherlock examined the bottle, smelling the oil. “This,” he said, “is angelica root oil.”

“We make it from the root of the herb Angelica Archangelica. Aude grows it in our garden. It is called St. Michael’s Oil. Very good for fighting forces of the Devil. One more thing, and we will be done. Mycroft, you come first.” Mycroft advanced uneasily.

“A tiny drop of this preparation in your eye. It will sting, but until the sun sets, you will be able to
see the beasts. Not as well as we do. You will see them only as shadows with red eyes.”

Mycroft, and then Sherlock submitted to the drops, holding their skepticism back with difficulty. They loaded the guns. They followed Jean-Marc out of the little chapel, not before he said a prayer and blessed them all, even John. Without prompting, John showed him that he still wore his cross.

“Very good. Now to shoot. We will go to the woods. That is where I have seen them, three in the past week. Someone sensed you were coming.”

“Do you mean we are just going to walk out into the woods and start shooting?” Mycroft said, appalled.

“If they are out there, it’s better that we face them. There is no benefit to waiting. But I have to ask you – are you certain, Sherlock, that this is right for you? You have more than yourself to think of.”

Sherlock for once didn’t snarl or try to deny his state. “I have to stay with John. That’s all I know. I have to protect him, and he protects me. But we have to stay together now. That’s the way that it is. If you think you understand anything about soul-bonding, then there really isn’t anything else to say. I’m not staying behind with Mrs. Hudson and your sister, if that’s what you’re suggesting. I know it’s dangerous. Maybe this time I’m the one that’s going on faith, for once.”

John shook his head. “It’s not what I want, Sherlock. I don’t want you to do this. It doesn’t feel right. But I won’t let us be parted, so that’s what it’s going to have to be. Just promise to stay behind me and not to shoot unless you’re told. Can you do that?”

“Of course,” he said innocently. After all, John had brought him back and healed him the last time he’d been shot. He could do it again. He figured he was the safest of any of them, but tactfully refrained from mentioning it.

***

A forest near Lestrade-et-Thouels, Departement Midi-Pyrnees, France.

The forest of stunted pine was cold and wet after the storm. Jean-Marc passed around a little flask full of an eau-de-vie they made themselves at the Priory, and everyone, even Sherlock, took a swig to keep out the cold. John considered testing whether he could influence the weather, but thought that it would draw attention to him, if anything was out there looking for him.

They practiced shooting at tree stumps with ordinary bullets, and the four-barreled guns fairly exploded the wood to smithereens. It was almost fun, more than they really thought was right. Even Mycroft was in the spirit of the thing, and drank somewhat more of Jean-Marc’s eau-de-vie than Lestrade would have expected. He kept a careful distance from Lestrade, but allowed him to correct his posture and aim. Lestrade was a trained firearms officer with the Met, and while Mycroft had received extensive training of his own with MI6, he couldn’t quite deny himself the feel of Lestrade’s hands on his arm, helping him aim the strange, unwieldy pistol. Still, he quickly moved away when the lesson was over.

“Do you see them in the day?” Lestrade asked. It was daytime when John was taken.

“Yes. They prefer the night, but they come in the daylight. It doesn’t hurt them.”
“Wouldn’t it be better to barricade ourselves in the Priory?” Mycroft said.

“They can pass through walls, remember?” John retorted. “And Aude and Mrs Hudson will be safer there with us gone. If they’re coming for us, it doesn’t matter where we are. This is where Jean-Marc has seen them, right? I’m all for flushing them out. I want this over.”

Jean-Marc marched them a little way into the forest, and Lestrade walked beside him in silence.

“Do you feel it?” Jean-Marc whispered.

“Yes,” Lestrade said. “It feels like something’s watching.”

“It’s on our left,” John said.

“The left-hand side. The Devil’s Way.”

They stopped, and listened. “Everybody over here,” John said. A fallen tree offered them cover. He wanted to fly over the trees to see more than he could from down on the ground. But even a moment away from Sherlock could be a terrible risk, and he stayed at his side.

“I hear them,” Jean-Marc whispered, and put his fingers to his lips to silence them all. There was a slight rustling in the trees ahead. They readied their guns. It was like being back in Afghanistan, John thought.

There was a louder rustle and a pair of soft red eyes flashed in the gloom, finding John.

“There,” Lestrade said, and was about to blast when John’s hand stayed him.

“Stop,” he said. “I know him. It.” And the black hellhound came slinking through the trees toward him. It was indeed the hellhound that had been with Sollas. It crept to John and lay submissively at his feet. He gave a soft growl.

“Don’t touch it, John,” Sherlock said. “Shoot it.”

“It doesn’t look like the others,” Jean-Marc said. “The fire has gone out of it. But I’d shoot it all the same, John. Let me,” he said, raising his rifle.

“No! It saved me, in Afghanistan. I think Sollas . . . tamed it. It belongs to him. It’s trying to tell me something.” John put his hand on the creature’s head and closed his eyes, mindful that looking into them might be very dangerous. He received a vivid image of hellhounds, dozens of them, slinking through the forest without a sound, and something else, even more terrible, behind them.

“They’re here, there’s dozens of them,” John said. “He showed me. And there’s something with them. Something really bad.”

“Don’t touch that creature again, John,” Jean-Marc said. “The Devil’s creatures are liars, just as he is.”

But he stopped when he saw a ring of ruby-red eyes in the trees, getting closer.

“I see them now,” Lestrade said. “Everybody get ready.”

John saw too. “Sherlock, they’re here. Stay behind me.”

He unfurled his wings and they all shot at the red eyes as they closed in.
The first wave came faster than arrows, and they fired and felled more than half, and fired again. John’s hound charged and fought as viciously as he had in Afghanistan, driving them back. But when the hellhounds charged again in even greater numbers, John could only do one thing: He pulled Sherlock into his arms, and lifted them both high into the air.

The hellhounds followed. He knew that they would, because he had traveled through air, space, and probably the other planes that Mycroft spoke of when the hellhound came for him. But as he had hoped, they could not come as fast or as far as his angel wings could take him. John fired down on them from above, and Sherlock held on hard and imitated him. The hounds fell with hideous wails, and dissolved into black clouds that stank of sulphur before they could reach the ground.

Now they were going for Lestrade, and it seemed that the onslaught of hounds wasn't going to end. John remembered Jean-Marc’s warning that it was Sherlock and Mycroft that they wanted-- and they would do anything to break a bond that interfered with taking them. Obviously, these creatures of hell saw what Mycroft denied.

There were bullets flying everywhere but at some point, it dawned on John, the bullets would run out. He remembered the feelings he had drawn upon at Sordwell Manor, wrestling with the demon. He let it fill him, like being shocked a thousand times more than a man could survive, but he just let it build, and he prayed to God to prove to him that he had been given this power to fight darkness. And then a glowing column was shooting from his hand, and the hellhounds were running to escape. Those that didn’t, vanished howling into smoke.

Except one.

Mycroft stopped to reload, and Lestrade jumped in front of him as a shield, just as a hellhound came from behind and knocked Lestrade to the ground. The foul beast, bigger than the others, crouched on Lestrade’s chest, opened its slavering jaws and sank its fangs into his throat. Mycroft could see only shifting black shadow covering Lestrade, no way to shoot without shooting him too, even as Lestrade’s arterial blood arced and flew across Mycroft’s chest. “Jean-Marc! John!” He shouted.

“St. Michael Protect Us!” Jean Marc cried, and leaped on the thing. John’s hound sank its teeth into its hindquarters and pulled, growling monstrously. In the same instant, John was there, and he threw the hound from Lestrade, all but crushing it. Jean-Marc shot it before it hit the ground. It disappeared in a puff of putrid vapour.

There were no more hellhounds. The sense that something darker and greater than the hounds was lying in wait for them vanished. The forest fell silent.

John put his hand over the gaping tear in Lestrade’s neck. So much blood loss. It was going to be a near thing. “Take his hand,” he said to Mycroft. “Talk to him.”

“Greg, stay,” Mycroft said, barely able to get the words out. “I . . . need you to stay.” This wasn’t supposed to happen. Greg was supposed to be the strong one who knew how to deal with these creatures, his family legacy. He remembered the warm feel of Lestrade’s hand on his arm, strong and true. Was it just minutes ago? Lestrade’s hand was cold in his now. “John, do something, please.” He had never begged for anything in his adult life, but he was begging now.

“I am,” John said, feeling a sort of burning poison in the wound while the flesh, impossibly, healed and closed under his hand, just as he had done for Sherlock. Lestrade was as still and paper-white
as if he was already dead and gone, but John could feel his vitality flowing strong under his hands, and he was breathing softly again. But his aura was dimmed and the colour looked somehow corrupted.

His hound was whining softly at his feet. John understood.

Lestrade would live.

Whether he had been saved, that was the question.

_to be continued_…
Chapter 47: A Celestial Exequy.

It doesn't hurt me.
Do you want to feel how it feels?
Do you want to know that it doesn't hurt me?
Do you want to hear about the deal I'm making?
You, and me.

If I only could,
I'd make a deal with God,
And get him to swap our places,
Be running up that road,
Be running up that hill,
Be running up that building.

You don't want to hurt me,
But see how deep the bullet lies.
Unaware I'm tearing you asunder.
There is thunder in our hearts.

Track: Placebo, Running Up That Hill (The Deal With God) (Lyrics Kate Bush all rights reserved)

listen here


The mausoleums and gravestones of the Victorians celebrated death with a luxurious morbidity. Tonight, the fog blanketing Highgate Cemetery recalled the famous London fogs of old, dense and almost tangible, and the night watchman enjoyed the extra frisson that the atmosphere brought to his routine.

Most of all the night watchman loved the very oldest graves: the Dickens family; exotic Egyptian Avenue, built like a temple; the graves of such romantic figures as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his
wife, Elizabeth Siddal, who had died of an overdose of laudanum. Rossetti had infamously opened Siddal's grave seven years after her burial, wanting poems he had put her casket. Elizabeth’s corpse was said to be perfectly preserved. Her luxuriant copper curls had grown to fill the coffin, and people whispered that Elizabeth was a vampire. Even today, the Friends of Highgate Cemetery found it necessary to guard against erstwhile vampire hunters.

As such, the night watchman took his duties seriously. He performed his customary rounds with a warm parka, a flask of hot tea and a bright flashlight. But tonight the most remarkable internment in the long history of the storied graveyard happened almost before his eyes, and he never saw a thing.

Three angels surrounded a figure on the wet ground before a Classical mausoleum: The archangel Raphael; Rajiel, Sollas's brother angel; and Sollas. Sollas was a disembodied flicker outshone by their light. Sollas couldn't could look into Raphael's face, its beauty and sorrow and love for his brothers felt like a kind of wound.

With the gentlest thought, Raphael lifted the marble slab to reveal a crypt that had lain empty for over two hundred years. Rajiel lifted John's body and placed it inside. Cold mist swirled inside, curling around him.

"It's my fault," Sollas said. "John Watson was a good man. He faced evil in his life and didn't falter. I wish I could undo … what I've done."

"Regret! You are deluded," Raphael said, the musical voice that sounded just like heaven. Home. "Regret is for men. You presumed to work your own will on the earth, but in doing so you have been debased. God has me, and Michael, and Gabriel to do his will, he doesn’t need you. And see how you make innocent men pay."

Rajiel wept tears of ichor sprung from shame and longing. Sollas wept too, in spirit.

"God--" Sollas wanted to say, God was wrong to punish John Watson for the crimes of the Runaways, but of course that was the kind of thinking that had made him come down here in the first place. Trying to outthink God, wanting to experience things he was never meant to have.

Raphael turned toward Sollas, reading his thought before he even had it. "What will you do with me?" he asked instead.

"If you believe I'm here to take you back, you're even more deluded than I thought. I came to warn you. The Fallen are plotting a battle the likes of which we have never seen."

"Haven't you seen us? We are doing our best. We're fighting them, every day. With all our strength. What we have of strength."

"I hope you don't expect a reward."

"You hope. We still hope, you know. Unless you say there is none."

"There is always hope," Raphael said.

Rajiel said, "Raphael, let me watch over Sollas. He won't commit this. . . abomination again."

They all looked at John Watson's body in the dark crypt. Like all humans, he looked so much smaller without the spark of his spirit.

"Very well. This possessing of humans --- it's a vile trick of the Fallen and their demons. Angels
must not incarnate in human flesh unless God requires it. You know that flesh is corrupting, Sollas."

Sollas couldn't swallow his words anymore. The image of Bridie was close to whatever passed for his heart. "There is nothing corrupt about love."

Raphael would never sneer, but his words did: "That was only true before we shut the gates of Eden. You are fortunate, Sollas. You could be sent down with Lucifer. Some say you deserve it. Instead you'll stay here, on the earth that you so love. But you will never again take a human form."

Rajiel quieted Sollas from further argument. Raphael was perhaps of all angels the most terrible in his wrath. Righteous wrath, he reminded himself. "What will you do about the Fallen?"

"What will we do? Fight. But traitors have no place with us," Raphael said. Sure enough, they could feel his anger now, which must be a pale reflection of God's. It was as strong as on the day they had run away. Time in heaven was nothing. And of course, they could only feel what he wanted them to feel. Which was what God wanted them to feel.

"If you need us, we will come," Rajiel said anyway. "Even if we aren't wanted."

Raphael's silence at this gave Sollas more hope than he had felt in eons. He would not order the Runaways to stay away entirely.

It also meant that Raphael was feeling something like what in humans would be fear, even if he wasn't showing it.

Raphael turned away to say words of blessing over John Watson's body. Sollas prayed too. His prayer was that Raphael might relent and let John Watson's spirit go into the light, as it was meant to.

"You're wrong again, Sollas," Raphael said. "John Watson may yet prove a better angel than you."

"You mean, you've been told to let John stay... as he is now. Why?"

"John Watson is needed most exactly where he most wishes to be. His bonded is of the Nephilim Bloodlines...Sherlock Holmes. The Fallen are hunting the Bloodlines. What will happen when they succeed? Are the Nephilim still monsters? Or have they learned to use their gifts wisely? Do they even want to?"

Sollas couldn't help arguing. This still felt strange. True, he was an angel of music. But ages on earth had brought him to the feeling that there was more to existence than heaven, even for an angel. He suspected that God thought so too, but Raphael could never understand that.

"You call them monsters-- If God didn't want the Nephilim born, it would have been impossible."

Raphael smiled serenely. "I see your thought, Sollas. God forbade it. Therefore it should have been impossible. God revealed his word to man through his Son and his prophets. God speaks to the angels, we hear him. But God has no words for the Nephilim. The Nephilim are alone. They are not men; they are not angels. The prophet Enoch was allowed only to warn them: the Nephilim might hope for redemption, if they repent their evil ways. But for them, there is no promise of redemption."

"Are you saying they are outside of God's mercy?"
"No. I am saying that God has given the Nephilim the freedom to choose their own side."

With that, Raphael vanished.

Rajiel moved to close the crypt, but Sollas stopped him and made it shine inside. “I want to see him,” he said. This man, John Watson, had given him a taste of real life. All he had been able to do with it was end it. He still could feel the cold wind rushing around him as he hurtled over that balcony and down to the street.

John's body looked as whole and strong as the day he had been taken from London.

"Why did Raphael do this? I thought he said--" Rajiel said.

“—that John Watson was a better angel than I am? Maybe. But maybe not forever. I’m glad, in a way. John deserves to look like the man he was. Goodbye, John. I can never thank you enough.”

Rajiel sealed the crypt. Together, they read the inscription above it:

_In Memoriam_

_Surgeon Captain John Watson, 66th Berkshire Regiment_

_Loving husband to Millicent Agnes Watson_

_B. 25 April 1845 - Missing presumed killed in action, Battle of Maiwand, 27 July 1880_

_“Honi soit qui mal y pense”_

_“Let him who thinks evil of it be ashamed,”_ Sollas translated.

Sollas knew then whose side he would fight on.

# # #

_Le Vieux Prieure, near Lestrade-et-Thouels, Departement Midi-Pyrenees, France. 10 November._

In a quiet room in a crumbling turret of the Priory, Lestrade lay shivering under heavy quilts. There was a blazing fire against the cold from the rain that had turned to wet snow and freezing damp, but he didn’t seem to feel its warmth.

John sat at the edge of the bed, raising Lestrade’s lids to look into his unseeing eyes, pure black, two eclipses. The bite of the hellhound had been healed over by whatever power he had
summoned in the forest, but in its place was a red, crescent-shaped scar showing wicked marks from canine teeth. It was hot to the touch.

"Are you sure you can do no more for him?" Jean-Marc asked sharply.

John had been tending to Lestrade all night, trying everything he could think of as a doctor, and also with his new powers. He could feel a power flowing from his hands and over Lestrade's body, but it never seemed to take hold. Jean-Marc prayed over Lestrade from an old book in Occitan, the ancient Romance language of Provence. "Not the Bible," he had said shortly.

"As a doctor, I've done everything that can be done, and more. This isn't something that an antibiotic or a rabies shot is going to cure. It's . . . unnatural. I figure he'll either come out the other side, or he won't. More than anything, I think he needs to feel us near him. All we can do is, not to leave him alone, ever."

John put his hand on Lestrade's forehead. It was burning, but his touch could not cool it no matter how he tried. He wiped Lestrade's brow with an herb-soaked flannel. If he couldn't work miracles, he could at least give his friend this simple care.

Jean Marc watched him doubtfully. He didn't actually look as if he believed John. Believing in angels meant that he could not imagine John lacking the power to do something he truly wanted to do. He was plainly beginning to suspect that John was not, perhaps, what he seemed.

John didn't try to prove him wrong. He had the same doubts. His wings, hidden beneath his coat, were still darkening steadily.

Lestrade muttered softly. John couldn't make out his words, but he knew what Lestrade wanted. Lestrade reminded him of a painful and beautiful memory of caring for Sherlock during the Heatwave, watching over him in the Blue Angel Inn. Even then, unconscious and feverish, Sherlock would call out for him. He hadn't thought they were truly bonded then. But he had been wrong.

"He wants Mycroft Holmes," Jean-Marc said softly.

John shook his head. "I know. He says he won't come near him. I'll try again."

"You must. He needs strength to fight. Can't you see he's fading?"

"But—your family, the Lestrades, your story. You are the hellhound hunters. This wasn't supposed to happen."

"And no Lestrade has ever fallen to a hellhound before now. Can't you guess why it happened to Gregory?"

John remembered Lestrade, jumping in front of Mycroft.

"I think I understand. What do you know about what happens next?"

"It was the alpha of their pack that bit him. Very powerful bite."

Jean-Marc showed John a picture from his book: an old woodcut, showing a man transformed into a wolfish form.

A werewolf.
"Nothing in there about a cure?"

"If he lives, there is no cure," Jean-Marc said. "None but death."

"How long?"

"Before he turns? The legends say at the full moon, but this is the bite of the hellhound. They say that in such a case, the turn can come at other times as well."

"How? When?"

"I wish I knew," Jean-Marc said.

* * *

"The heads... the heads. Why only the heads?"

Sherlock was talking only to himself as he paced up and down the Priory library. He had devoured the Priory’s esoteric collection of books about the Beast of Gevaudan, hellhounds and spectral hounds of all sorts: cadejo, barghest, Black Shuck, gytrash, with special attention to the works touching upon the transformation of man into wolf: Lycanthropy. Because Sherlock had seen the beast that had bitten Lestrade: a wolf from hell, massive, black, supremely powerful. What was coming next was obvious.

He had found no recorded cure. If Lestrade turned werewolf, the only end would be to shoot him with one of his own family’s silver bullets. The only person he suspected might resort to such a thing was the priest, Jean-Marc.

Therefore, Sherlock had stealthily returned to the room where Jean-Marc had taken them to load their guns, and comprehensively pilfered all the silver he could find. The silver was now well hidden.

###

As he paced, Sherlock turned over and over in his mind the new facts as he worried one of the silver bullets between his fingers. New evidence, of which there was a remarkable quantity.

The rules of the game had changed with finality. A lifetime of devotion to logic, science and reason left him feeling rudderless, a ship with no guiding star. Still, he had faith in his basic abilities. He painstakingly followed the chain of evidence backward. Where had it all really begun?


Maxim Purcell. Jonathan Talbott.

Maxim’s head exploding from the impact of Lestrade’s bullet.
Maxim’s head.

Something about heads? Jean-Marc was telling the story of the Beast of Gevaudan: “The attacks differed from wolves in that this beast consumed only the heads of its victims... The priests knew, of course, that this was a punishment by the Great Enemy.”

No, that wasn’t it. He retrieved the memory of John, furious with him in 221b. Why was he angry? They had just come home from Scotland, their first heat, that was it. But Sherlock had wanted to leave the same day to consult with Dr Jesperson, the physicist.

About mummies.

“Jesperson has some ideas about the persistence of human consciousness outside the physical body. That consciousness ultimately resides during life in the brain cells called microtubules. In the case of mummified remains, John, the microtubule is a structure that survives for longer and in more intact condition than almost any other tissue in the human body.”

“And you’re thinking about mummified remains... because of this Squire Jonathan Talbott.”

“Good, John. How can it be that Talbott, not his body but his consciousness, or his soul, if you will -- was been present with us that night? ...What if his body wasn’t burned in the original fire? My hypothesis is, Talbott’s remains were preserved somewhere, in a mummified state.”

John hadn’t been impressed. In his mood as Sherlock’s new alpha, he had simply tied him to his bed and forced him to see the light: they weren’t leaving 221b, weren’t going anywhere at all unless they both agreed it was the right thing to do.

Which lesson Sherlock had promptly disregarded, going after Maxim alone to Hantswood Hall.

Clearly he should have let John keep him tied to the bed.

Maxim. The Mysteries. “I’ve got a little piece of your soul, Sherlock.”

Hantswood Hall.

Maxim. Talbott. Mummified remains.

How had Maxim done it? Talbott had made a deal with the devil. John had made one too, his soul for Sherlock’s.

“I’ve got a book that no one’s seen.”

What had Maxim done with his special book? Talbott returned from the grave. Talbott had possessed Maxim, undoubtedly an unexpected result. How had it been accomplished? Could he summon Talbott himself, and reverse the course of events?

Jean-Marc had given Sherlock the key to a tall cabinet containing a surprising number of books on the occult and demonology.

“I admit I am a little surprised that a priest would have such books. Are you an exorcist?”

Jean-Marc shook his head. “No. But Provence was the center of the Cathar faith. They believed in two gods, the Good God and the Bad God. The Cathars believed in transcending our material bodies, indeed the material world altogether, which they believed was the work of the Bad God, so that our spirits could live in the light. Almost none of their written works survive. The
Inquisition destroyed it all. They were considered heretics.”

Sherlock looked at Jean-Marc closely. “Are you saying that you are a Cathar yourself?”

Jean-Marc closed the key in Sherlock’s hand. “I am saying that we at the Priory have always found it important to know the works of Enemy as well as to know God.”

# # #

Many hours later, he was no closer to forging a clear path forward, and his frustration was almost a tangible thing in the room with him. He didn’t notice that Mycroft was watching over his shoulder as he read one of the priest’s old books:

_We will in this place inform thee farther, that those souls do still love their relinquished bodies after death. Hence it is that the souls of the dead are not to be called up without blood or by the application of some part of their relict body. In the raising therefore of these shadows, we are to perfume with new blood the bones of the dead. We should also allure the said souls by supernatural and celestial powers duly administered, even by those things which do move the very harmony of the soul, as well imaginative as rational and intellectual, such as voices, songs, sounds, enchantments; and religious things, as prayers, conjurations, exorcisms, and other holy rites._

He felt dizzy and out of sorts. These books were crammed with an almost insurmountable quantity of information, and trying to create any sort of system that he could actually work with seemed impossible. He felt as if he were climbing a mountain in weighted boots, and whenever he achieved the summit, it grew farther out of reach. It wasn’t as straightforward as chemistry, or forensics, or mathematics, although he was intrigued to see that some of the books had strong veins of all of these disciplines. But it was like looking at familiar data through a kaleidoscope. He would have to experiment for years to prove to himself that even a single line of any of these books worked the way it was reputed to work. He didn’t have time.

It was time to consider alternatives. In his experience, there was generally more than one way to arrive at a solution to a problem. Some were more elegant than others. He idly examined the contents of a cabinet containing antique musical instruments. A lute. A recorder. A violin.

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock looked up, surprised to see Mycroft was here. He was carrying his overcoat and his briefcase. Sherlock wondered that he had kept hold of it, after all their travels since leaving London. The umbrella, however, was missing.

“Mycroft. What are you doing?”

“Have your powers of observation sunk so low?”

“Right. You’re leaving. Why?”

“I find myself repeating my question.”

“Because--- Mycroft. I think you’re making a mistake. Stay with Lestrade. Anyone can see—“

"No, Sherlock, that’s precisely the point. Anyone can see. And it’s hurting Lestrade. I brought
him into this mess. He was on the point of going back to his wife, did you know that? They had filed for divorce and the papers were nearly final.”

“Lestrade doesn’t love Janet.”

“Yes, I know that. But I was rather sure he was going back to her anyway. Even though he denies it. And so, I brought him in on the Sleeping Beauty case. And afterward…. Well, let’s just say, I could have chosen another officer. But I chose Lestrade. It was very, very selfish. I see that now. Everything that’s happened since that day has been my fault. What happened in the woods, Greg was protecting me. I have to leave him alone now, before it’s too late.”

“You can’t. You heard what Jean-Marc said -- to both of us. Bonding protects us. It keeps us safe, together. Safer, anyway, than alone. Don’t you feel that? I do. It took me too long, Mycroft.”

Mycroft laughed, softly but bitterly. “Don’t speak of bonding, please. I happen to think our family was quite right to suppress it. We aren’t meant for bonding, Sherlock. Don’t you see? I do understand that you and John, well, what is done is done. But I don’t want anything now for myself. I just want Lestrade to be free of me, and safe. I am prepared for the consequences to myself. Let’s just say that my years in Whiteshadow weren’t for nothing. But I must go forward alone. I don’t want to create more danger for you, either, Sherlock. Or the baby. No, I think everyone is far better off if I am gone.”

“You’re an idiot, Mycroft. Don’t you know that if you leave him like this, it’ll very likely kill him?”

“Those are old wives tales, Sherlock. Anyway, we can’t be bonded. I don’t wish to be indelicate, but without heat—“

“You’re saying only Alphas and omegas can bond after heat. It’s not true. I can tell you that it isn’t.”

“What are you saying?”

“I took that blue dose. To stop Maxim.”

“But, you’re—“

“Pregnant. Yes. I was given a rare gift, and it reversed the dose. My point is that it didn’t matter, Mycroft. There was a time when we both believed we would never have a heat at all, because of the blue dose. But I assure you, we were truly bonded, as strongly as it is possible for two persons to be. I know that now because I know what I felt then, and I know what John felt too. You aren’t being honest with yourself.”

“I never claimed that honesty was my strongest suit. It is overrated,” Mycroft said sharply. It didn’t deceive Sherlock. What Mycroft really felt was sorrow.

“You can lie to your brother, and you can lie to yourself. But you can’t lie to Lestrade. That’s why you’re really leaving.” This was John, who had appeared silently at Mycroft’s shoulder. “He’s waking up now. The only word he’s said is your name.”

Mycroft covered his face with his hands. “Thank god. But don’t, John. Just don’t. Do you think I want to see worse happen to him? What about next time? I won’t have him killed over me. I’m leaving. I would tell you to take care of my brother but I already know that you will. I don’t approve of his new studies, John—“ Mycroft closed Sherlock’s book with a thump of finality.
“I’d advise you to make Sherlock see sense. If anyone can, you can.”

With that, Mycroft was gone. There was a sound of a vehicle rumbling. Mycroft had called upon his resources and procured a car, and probably an airplane, Sherlock imagined.

“Stop him, John,” he said urgently. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

John clenched his fists in frustration, but all he did was put his arms around Sherlock, and ran his fingers through Sherlock’s hair instead. Just being at his side, touching him, feeling the vibrant life he contained, was a true miracle. He didn’t want to tempt fate.

“I wasn’t sent here to play God, Sherlock. Far from it. Isn’t that what got the Fallen into so much trouble? I think I’m supposed to protect you, and I will. But Mycroft has a mind of his own, and so does Lestrade.”

“Let the chips fall where they may? I never expected that from you, John.” Sherlock couldn’t hide his surprise and worse, his disappointment. He could count on one hand, less actually, the number of times that he had ever felt let down by John Watson. John pulled him in tight, breathed in the warm scent at his neck until Sherlock relaxed in his embrace, offered his throat. He couldn’t do anything else. John growled a little and sucked a fierce alpha bite where the last one had begun to fade, and the sensation of John’s lips on the tender skin made him quiver and cling to his bonded, his hands tight on John’s strong shoulders.

“Yes, that's exactly right,” John murmured against his neck. “Because if Lestrade feels for Mycroft even half of what I feel for you, I guarantee you they won’t be apart a single night. One way or another. It’s what you might call an act of faith.”

###

The door to the library door burst open, and Jean-Marc appeared, brandishing one of the hellhound pistols they had used in the wood. John stood in front of Sherlock, his hand out, threatening.

“Step back, Jean-Marc,” he said. “Put that down.”

“That I will!” Jean-Marc threw it to the ground with a clatter. “It’s not loaded. And there’s no more bullets. Someone’s taken all the silver. Who would do such a thing?”

He glared at Sherlock, and Sherlock glared back.

“What’s happening? Why do you want it?” Sherlock and John exchanged a look, their hearts sinking together.

“It’s Gregory. I was only gone for a moment and I locked the door behind me. He’s gone. He must have got out through the window. That’s a drop of twenty feet, or more. You know what this means.”

John consulted the time. Midnight. It was snowing hard. They all followed Jean-Marc back to Lestrade’s empty room. Jean-Marc shone a light below. A clear line of footsteps could be seen in the snow, leading away from the Priory.

“They’re human footprints,” John said, relieved.
“Yes and no. Look at the length of the stride,” Sherlock said. “The placement of the footprints. That is not Lestrade’s natural gait. The thing that made those prints was loping on two legs. Not running. The pattern is canine in nature.”

“I need those bullets, Sherlock. It’s not your decision to make. He may harm innocent lives. Do you want their blood on your hands?”

“He won’t kill anyone,” Sherlock said. “All he wants is Mycroft.”

###

The snow and ice was piling up fast on the roads, and Mycroft cursed the inadequate Mercedes that had been sent by Whiteshadow, and the even more inadequate driver. The car fishtailed, headlamps flickering crazily along the line of dense trees along the edge of the road.

“Stop. I’ll drive myself. Wherever did you train?” Mycroft snapped. It helped take his mind from the tearing pain in his chest. He refused to refer to it as his heart.

“Sorry, sir. All the proper drivers are called out, you know. All Whiteshadow agents are deployed. I was on a hiking trip when I got the call.”

Mycroft took a closer look. The boy was still just a student. A beta. Recruited, no doubt, for some special paranormal talent. Not his driving. What he intended to say was, “Call for air transport. Marseilles, one hour.” But instead, he sighed and opened the door to trade places from back to driver’s seat. He was consumed with thoughts of turning the car around, speeding back to the Priory, where Greg needed him. He was wrong to leave. He could still turn back.

A shadow crossed the car’s headlamps. A large shadow.

“Did you see that, sir?”

Mycroft shut the door. He had a regular gun in his briefcase and had had the foresight to load it with a few of Jean-Marc’s special silver bullets, just in case the hellhounds decided to come after him again.

“Shut up,” he hissed. He crouched behind the car, peering into the dark trees. He thought he heard the crunch of a footstep. It sounded heavy. And there was the soft breathing, almost panting; it was this that raised the hair on the back of his neck and hard gooseflesh over his skin. His heart was pounding hard.

But he wasn’t afraid.

He shivered, but it wasn’t the cold. It was anticipation.

“Greg. It’s you. I know it’s you.”

A strained growl. Not entirely human, but still recognisably Greg’s gravelly voice. It really was happening. The hellhound bite had changed him.

“Turn off the headlamps,” he said calmly. The frightened driver obeyed, and now all they had was faint moonlight shining on the snow that was falling fast around him. A dark figure stood at the
edge of the road, he would have said it was Greg but the outline wasn’t quite right. The figure took
a step forward and the moonlight shone over his face. Greg’s face, but not quite. He had never
seen a werewolf, a shape-shifter as Whiteshadow called them. But he knew immediately that this
was what Greg was now.

His heart lurched with pain and shock and something more. Yes, he could feel his heart now, and
it was breaking. Greg was different, damaged, and all because of him. His hand flew to his mouth,
he bit the back of his hand to hold back whatever undignified sound would have issued from his
mouth.

Greg took a long step forward. He was taller now, too, which seemed strangely right. He was
bigger, heavier. Not entirely human. His face was bearded, silver-black; his brows and hair were
thicker silver too. His ears were more like those of a wolf than a man. His black eyes were fixed
on his, still Greg’s eyes, and they said everything: anger and abandonment. Love and lust. Dread
and despair.

“You left me,” Greg said, his voice rough. Feral.

Mycroft thought backing away into the car would probably be wisest. But he didn’t do that. He
watched, mesmerised, as Greg advanced, and then Greg’s arms (thicker, stronger) were pinning
him against the car. He remembered Waterloo, that intoxicating night when Greg had refused to
accept that he would marry Olivia. How right he had been.

Mycroft swallowed, looked into Greg’s face. It was terrifying to see him like this, himself and yet,
not. But he didn’t want to be anywhere else.

Greg smirked, and the moonlight gleamed on his sharp teeth. Some part of Mycroft’s brain
registered this, but it was far too busy absorbing and classifying the ways in which Greg’s Alpha
chemistry had changed. The new scent was overpowering his thought processes, it was built
around Greg’s own pheromones but with a powerfully wild overlay that was making his heart race
that much faster.

Greg slowly removed one of his arms so that Mycroft was free to escape if he chose, and actually
grinned. He licked his lips.

“Go on then,” he snarled. “You think you’re free to go --- do it.”

Mycroft hesitated a moment. Then he held Greg’s gaze as he reached out to touch the soft grey fur
on the top of Greg’s newly massive hand. It was softer than he had imagined it would be.

“T’m not free,” he said. “I’ll never be that. I did this. I wish it was me, instead. Don’t you see --
I’m dangerous for you.”

Greg’s hand trapped his, dragged it to his mouth. Licked the palm of Mycroft’s hand, with the
result that his cock could no longer resist its attraction to this familiar, strange body, and he was
almost in pain from the hardness of it.

“You are dangerous for me. And I’m dangerous for you. And that’s what we are,” Lestrade said,
setting his teeth into Mycroft’s palm, which elicited a groan that he couldn’t have held back if he
wanted to. Lestrade pushed him hard against the cold metal of the car, and then there was no
denying his cock, it found its place against Lestrade’s thigh, felt Lestrade’s new hardness, and
every square inch of his skin yearned. Even though he feared it, too. Lestrade dropped his hand,
leaned into the soft skin of his throat, under his jaw. He seemed to relish the scent more than
before. Of course he would smell things more keenly now.
“See, you aren’t going,” Lestrade said.

“I can’t.” It was all that Mycroft could manage.

“It’s over. Unless you’re going to shoot me now,” he grabbed the outline of the gun in his coat pocket and pulled it roughly against his chest. Mycroft pushed his hand away. It took all his strength and he suspected that Greg simply allowed it.

“I’d sooner shoot myself,” he said, truthfully. He stroked the thick silver hair on Greg’s head, already so possessive of it. So obvious. “It’s my fault.”

“Stop. Maybe it’s what I’m supposed to be. Maybe it’s what you need me to be. It feels….”

“What does it feel like?”

Lestrade nuzzled harder into his throat, and his sharp teeth were going to draw blood, he could tell.

“It feels. . . better. So good, Mycroft. I don’t know if I can stay much longer. . . I need you?”

“I feel it,” Mycroft whispered, because he could. The hard rush of craving was almost humiliating. It was confusing, too -- why should this feel better, even more right than what they had felt before? “I can feel it because we’re bonded. I know that now. I was -- I was coming back to you.”

Bonded. It had to be true. To anyone else, Greg would look like a sort of monster. To him, he was his mate, made even more desirable, more beautiful. His body wanted to open to him, even now.

Greg was panting and grinding so hard against him, he thought he would tear their trousers, tear their skin. He felt Greg’s hands on him, the nails that were near to being claws. His hands twisted in the dark silvery fur on the back of his neck, inhaling the magnificent musky animal-like scent mingling intimately with his own, Alpha both submitting to Alpha and overmastering.

“Is that true? You were coming back? Don’t say it because you’re afraid,” Lestrade said, his voice scraping a deep line from Mycroft’s heart and straight to his cock. Lestrade leaned down and took his mouth that was all hot wetness and unnatural sharp teeth, willing him to give himself over. He wanted to feel this new strength, feel them clutch and rip at each other.

With a sharp bite to his tender lip that drew blood, Lestrade pulled away. His breath misted the frosty air. The car seemed to vanish. They might have been alone in this winter world.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Mycroft gasped.

“You should be,” Lestrade said, and ran away with his long loping strides into the wood.

The snow fell even harder, blinding Mycroft and enveloping everything in soft silence.

_to be continued…_

If you’ve made it this far, dear reader, my deepest gratitude! Your comments and kudos sustain me in this journey. G x
Dear patient readers, thank you for making it this far! I hope you enjoy the latest installment of The Omega Sutra. Your comments and kudos keep me going, and make all the difference. Thank you so much for supporting this omegaverse journey.

G x

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The Omega Sutra. Chapter 48: LET THERE BE NIGHT

_For Spirits when they please_

_Can either Sex assume, or both; so soft_

_And uncompounded is their Essence pure,_

_Not tied or manacled with joint or limb,_

_Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,_

_Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose_

_Dilated or condensed, bright or obscure,_

_Can execute their aerie purposes,_

_And works of love or enmity fulfill._

---- John Milton, Paradise Lost

Track: A Thousand Details, Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross: https://www.youtube.com/watch?
Le Vieux Prieure, near Lestrade-et-Thouels, Departement Midi-Pyrnees, France.  11 November.  Night.

Outside the Priory library, Jean-Marc prowled with a heavy step and heavier thoughts. Sherlock and John had been closed inside the library all night, where Sherlock was studying the darkest books. Jean-Marc wanted them to hear his boots against the stone floor. He wanted them to know they were guarded -- but from ill, or from doing ill? He hated this doubt.

He was almost sorry now that he hadn’t burned the dark books years ago, but he had always loved the Priory’s books-- even the dark ones-- as though they were the children he would never have. He wished he could prevent Sherlock from touching them, but John wouldn’t let him interfere.

He considered Gregory, cursed by the hellhound’s bite. He considered the saturnine Mycroft Holmes, who had left them, abandoning his own brother. He considered the ever-darkening wings of John Watson. He considered the mysterious and brilliant Sherlock Holmes, who had hidden the Priory’s blessed silver in their hour of greatest need.

At first, Jean-Marc had believed he was chosen by God to protect these strangers from the evil that pursued them. The Lestrades had been chosen to fight evil in other dark times. But he thought now that perhaps God had sent these men to the Priory so that he could stop them.

Restless, he pulled out his bible and allowed it to fall open at random, knowing God might condemn it as a kind of divination. Jean-Marc closed his eyes and pointed, opening them to see his fingertip poised over a verse in Ephesians:

Revêtez-vous de toutes les armes de Dieu, afin de pouvoir tenir ferme contre les ruses du diable. Car nous n'avons pas à lutter contre la chair et le sang, mais contre les dominations, contre les autorités, contre les princes de ce monde de ténèbres, contre les esprits méchants dans les lieux célestes.

Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the assaults of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, and against the worldly governors, the princes of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness, which are in the celestial places.

There was a window where he could look out for Gregory’s return. He closed the bible and put it back in his pocket, staring out at the thick snow falling while he tried to center himself.

###

The library contained hundreds of volumes in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and more obscure languages, some unknown even to Sherlock.

“This isn’t going to work,” Sherlock said with a sweep of his long arm at the stacks of books. “It would take years to master this. If that’s even possible.”

“I don’t know how long we have, but it isn’t years.”
“All Hallows Eve was their first attempt. . . that was not a coincidence. They must try again on the winter solstice. It is the darkest day.”

“Winter solstice is around Christmas Eve, isn’t it? Then we still have weeks yet.”

“By modern reckoning, but the Romans observed winter solstice in late November. The chamber below Hantswood Hall was Roman. . . perhaps even pre-Roman. I still have to understand what really happened there. . . to both of us.”

“Have a little faith in yourself. Go with what you can understand.”

“What I understand, John, is hard evidence. Clues!” He toppled the nearest pile of books with a resentful shove. John patiently picked them up. “ Couldn’t these Runaway Angels have given you some practical help?”

“Shhhh. I think he gave us the best help he could. Sollas warned us they want you for your bloodline. Now, you know why he did. And he gave me his own body to keep you safe.”

“We keep each other safe.”

###

Sherlock surprised John by withdrawing a violin from the cabinet of antique instruments. Tattered green draperies bathed Sherlock with a peculiar glow and turned his eyes the colour of sea-glass. Sherlock looked up to meet John’s gaze, and John thought for a moment that Sherlock knew just what he was thinking. Being an angel wasn’t going to change that.

Sherlock picked up the bow, and began to play. The music was like nothing he had ever played for John before, the bow swooped, attacked, strained against the strings to produce strangled discordant notes. The music wrapped itself around them, it became the air that they breathed, the beat of their hearts, frightening and seductive. It made him want to crush the instrument, break the bow, never hear another note from Sherlock’s hands on the strings, he was jealous of Sherlock’s fingers, they were making love to the instrument, alternately hard and soft, fast and slow, and it made him feel sick with desire. Sherlock’s hands should never touch anything like that but his own body.

Sherlock’s eyes met his, huge black pupils with a brilliant sliver of silver encircling them like a lunar eclipse, and he thought Sherlock was telling him what to do, what he wanted John to do. The music grew faster, wilder, and the room became dark, cold, and still, recalling the stone chamber maybe under Hantswood Hall. Pizzicato, glissando, bariolage, loure, jete, sautille, Sherlock’s bow attacked, relentless and seductive. John thought that if Sherlock didn’t stop, something terrible would happen. Maybe something terrible was already happening. But Sherlock wouldn’t stop.

John rose up, let his body expand to hold his and his fear, so that he was looming over Sherlock. He could feel the air moving against his face as the bow sliced through the air like a rapier, and he could hear Sherlock’s fingertips as they struck the strings at the neck of the instrument. Just as he was about to seize the violin, smash it, maybe, the music changed to a bold throbbing note that planted itself between his legs and squeezed.

There was no denying now that this music was a kind of sex.
He gasped. Something deep inside was being teased open by the confusing cacophony. Only Sherlock could open it.

“Sherlock,” he gasped, reaching for Sherlock’s wrist, stopping a sinuous stroke. He unfurled his wings, the dark silver-grey of gunmetal, and watched their shadow darken Sherlock’s face. His fingers flexed and he needed to break something, break the violin. Break Sherlock.

“Stop it, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s eyes were locked with his, and he was covered now with a delicate sheen of sweat from the rigour of his playing, multiplying his spicy scent, the essence of his fertility, enlarging it until it and the music were the same substance, intoxicating him. His cock was full and it could get fuller, infinitely hard, no limits really to what he could do, what he could be, for Sherlock’s sake.

He squeezed Sherlock’s wrist and knocked the violin away, tossed the bow to the ground. The broken note vibrated in the space between them.

He ignored his cock that wasn’t really a cock at all, if he wanted to think about it, which he really didn’t. He reached for Sherlock’s instead, feeling its outline, the delicacy of real, living flesh over steely hardness, take in the wave of omega scent that rose from between his legs. He felt the pang of loss, missing his own real body, John Waston’s real flesh and blood, the arms that had held Sherlock down at the crossing, his cock that had taken his mate’s hole on the crossing, his knot that filled him with new life inside. He even missed the sense of extreme exhaustion when being driven by the exhilaration of heat. He felt further than ever from his real body’s sense memories.

The feel of Sherlock’s cock under the palm of his hand still felt new and strange and as gorgeous as the sensation was, he bitterly regretted that the crossing was the only heat they would ever have together.

Whatever they had now, he wasn’t a man anymore.

###

The unexpected spell of the violin over them both broke with the clatter of the bow hitting the floor. A new and delicate sensation, an Omega sensation, stole through Sherlock’s veins, making him want to bury his face against his Alpha’s shoulder, feel his arms encircling him, and so he did.

*We keep each other safe.* As soon as thought it, he regretted it, it wasn't true and he didn't really have to right to claim that he had kept John safe. He pressed his nose against John's neck, inhaled deep.

This body wasn't John's real, true Alpha body, the living body that had saved him from Maxim, the powerful yet gentle body that had taken him on the crossing. Yet the scent that this body gave off was absolutely John's, or rather *exactly like* John's own. But Sherlock perceived that this scent, comforting and aggressive, sensual and subtle, just as John himself was, was ultimately just an incredibly intricate copy of John's real scent. John's actual, physical scent emanated from John's beautifully lined and scarred skin that had walked the real earth for a lifetime, and seen real war, real pain, and finally real love and true soul bonding with his omega. This angel body, a perfect facsimile of John Watson, knew nothing of this.

It was too much to bear. The idea that John's real body was somewhere else, being used by this
angel Sollas, sparked feelings of possessive longing and a whisper of jealousy. After all, he knew now about the fallen angels, taking beautiful human women for wives, creating the Nephilim bloodlines. Angels breeding with women. What was Sollas doing now with John Watson's body? John's body was his, and his alone.

He bit John's throat hard to soothe himself, and John made a murmur of contentment in response. The rest of the world, the demonic books, the Priory, demons and hellhounds and werewolves, vanished from their thoughts as they clutched at each other greedily.

With these feelings came the beginnings of the irresistible languor of pregnancy for Sherlock. In this moment he was able to block out everything else and think of his own omega body, changed inside and out since the crossing, and still changing. He hummed softly to himself, imagining the vibration transmitting into his still-flat belly to the tiny life growing there.

John felt his impulse, the hum against his throat where Sherlock had bitten, and clasped his hands over Sherlock’s larger ones. All of John’s own senses were heightened now by his mate's pregnancy, soaking in his scent, and he was grateful that Sollas's body had learned to mimic his own senses and responses so perfectly. It would be a kind of hell to miss any of this.

Even outside of the phenomena of aphrodisia, pregnant omegas gave out a uniquely enticing odour that bound their mate even more closely to their side. The scent of pregnancy also told every Alpha in range that they had been bred. Times of hardship, such as war or crisis, acted as a suppressant of an omega's fertility. Thus, a pregnant omega was a more desirable war-prize than the untired virgin, and would be captured and taken by a more powerful Alpha to ensure possession of an omega proven capable of breeding and ensuring survival of the line.

This was one of the reasons that in past times, aristocratic omegas had been kept sequestered, with only their Alpha permitted to see them and experience their pure scent. He held Sherlock tighter.

“It’s impossible… your scent, it keeps getting more…” John murmured. “I can’t ever let you out of here now, not like this. Every Alpha for a hundred miles will try to take you.” He was aware of the virtuous Jean-Marc, who was a priest but still an Alpha. He could hear him pacing outside the library door. Was he protecting them, or was Sherlock’s scent drawing him?

He wanted to push away these unworthy suspicions but instead he found himself quietly barring the old door.

“Maybe the old ways were best.” In some parts of the world the old customs had never ended. John had come upon secluded omega harems in some of the remoter mountain towns of Afghanistan, so unchanged by time that they easily could have been a thousand years ago.

Something in this gloomy place seemed to be heightening Sherlock's omega allure, more even than in 221b. But the thought of home, of London, made the books surrounding them feel actively oppressive, and John's temptation was polluted with a cold drop of dread. A copy of The Omega Sutra lay just a few inches from his hand. The memory of the Pridiax Archive, the Thousand Strokes, dazzled John -- but he also remembered the feeling then of something unholy at his shoulder.

Just a few hours later, Whiteshadow had broken through his painstakingly-built walls enclosing the memories of his torture. And then the hellhound took him.

Even here, he still felt something unholy at his shoulder.
Maybe the old ways were best, John was saying.

His face burned, remembering The Omega Sutra, The Thousand Strokes, John's power, even then. He knew John was there, too. His scent must have given him away, because John was pulling him even tighter, holding him steady, leaning in to bite and lick at Sherlock's throat as he held a possessive hand over his belly and thrust his cock hard against his thigh. It wasn't only his wings that were changing, John's cock was changing too – growing undeniably longer and thicker now, bigger even than in their heat.

Sherlock's eyes strayed to the Book of Enoch, open on the table where he had left off. The fallen angels were being punished by the archangels, for consorting with women:

“The fallen angels were beautiful as stars. The archangels stoned them from heaven above, and bound them hand and foot, and cast them in the abyss of the earth.”

Sherlock's music, together with this sudden ripeness, was triggering almost brutal urges. In what he thought of now as his "angel body," John clung to very razor edge of control. Sollas had tried to warn him about this, but Sollas hadn't intended that John keep his angel body for this long.

He could feel change happening, whether he wanted it or not.

Sherlock hissed with shock at the unexpected sharpness of the bites John was pressing into his neck, his shoulder, and he bit back harder in return until he felt a tiny drop of hot sweetish fluid hit his tongue. It was nothing like the earthy copper tang of human blood. He drew back. His mouth was flooded by an ethereal sparkling savour. He felt like he could drink it forever.

His tongue vibrated with a burning tingle that expanded to fill his mouth and travel down his throat, a shadow of the tingling lightness that followed consumption of that rarest and costliest of Japanese delicacies, fugu sushi, a single taste of which could paralyze and then kill you with deadly neurotoxin if improperly prepared -- or if the chef was inclined to murder you. It was one of Sherlock's favourite dishes. He felt paralysed now by this singular sensation -- he had always been so little susceptible to the temptations of food and drink that so there was really nowhere in his mind palace to classify and categorise this sensation, nothing that could adequately describe it. He couldn't help trying, though, even now, grasping at inadequate comparisons -- hundred-year-old brandy, oils of bergamot and sandalwood, chocolate, tobacco... then there were lighter impressions too: rain and citrus and green leaves and something mineral-like, like crushed gemstones. He froze, locked in sensation, inarticulate.

John drew back too, and looked into his face.

"What is it?"

"John --- your blood, your -- it's ichor, it's, it's... it feels, it feels like--"

John had never seen Sherlock's face lit up in quite this way, not even in heat. To anyone else, he imagined, it would be a little frightening. But he stroked Sherlock's belly soothingly as Sherlock's long fingers gripped his shoulders hard.

"You can tell me. What do you feel like? Anything you feel is okay."

There was a long silence. Sherlock rubbed his face in John's neck, scenting the tiny wound where
he had bitten through John's flesh, lapping at it like a cat.

"It feels like...I feel like... John--- John. I want to eat you alive," Sherlock groaned against his throat. He straddled John's leg, leaning in and pressing his cock hard against John's hip, rubbing his hole against John's thigh as he dove in to mouth at John's throat again. His fingers tore into John's zips and freed his cock, now unmistakably grown to something not quite human.

"You can have whatever you want, everything you want," John gasped. "You can't hurt me."

Sherlock stopped at that, staring into John's eyes, their storm-churned blue deepening to the colour of the night sky, pulling them down together. Sherlock groaned and opened his lips, letting his incisors graze along the flesh there, out of the corner of his eye he could see it changing colour, but not like a human bruise. This flesh wasn't human at all. It looked like someone was slowly pouring out melted gold under the surface of John's skin where he was sucking.

He closed his eyes, it was too tempting. Instead, as John tore his trousers and pants right off his body to the floor, he simply climbed up and without shame or hesitation slid up until he was poised on the head of John's newly-massive cock, where his whole body wanted to swallow it. John's fingers tried to fill him up, stretching and widening him. He had a pregnant omega's elasticity, nowhere near where it would be in the end, but enough to nearly swallow John's hand to the knuckle, and this felt almost like John's knot at the crossing.

He could feel his fluids running down John's arm, and stopped sucking at John's neck to look down and see it and look at John's face. John was shuddering, quaking, and they weren't even joined yet.

###

"But I can't hurt you, god, ahhh, Sherlock, Sherlock-- I can't stop --" John gasped, pulling his slick hand free only to replace it with the hard tip of his impossible cock, rocking against his loosened wet hole, thrusting where Sherlock was trying so much to open himself that much more-- what would it feel like, he thought faintly, if he could take John inside himself now?

"I can't hold it back," John cried sharply as with an audible crack his wings opened, darkly radiant, and his flesh faded to translucency threaded with a visible network of veins like lace made of pure gold. John's wings surrounded him, a trap from which Sherlock would never wish to escape, dark feathers with tarnished silver tips pulling him closer still to his golden-tinged flesh until the only air he could breathe was the even headier scent, exotic and ineffable yet still at its core the essential scent of John, unleashed by John's wings.

"Hold on," Sherlock said, "stay John, don't change, you have to stay John." He was terrified that John would lose his shape altogether, and become what he really was underneath, something celestial and inhuman.

"You're my bond mate -- you, you. . . bred me, our child is in me now," he said, words tumbling out and lost behind the sound of blood rushing in his ears, John's growl as he fought to stay intact. "You're mine, and I won't let you go again, do you hear," he shouted, his body wanting to prove the ownership that his lips were proclaiming, and so he pounded down on John's cock as if he could force his body to open by sheer force of will, and for a moment it felt like it really would, he could feel the entire tip of the head, hard and smooth, coated with his own fluids, pressing perhaps an inch inside. It felt like trying to fuck a living stone, something adamantine with hot life flowing within. He wanted it more than anything, and he pushed harder, stretching his hole so taut he was afraid he would actually tear something, but John instantly held him back, knowing with his superlative senses just how much he could take.
"No more, love," John groaned desperately. He hadn't power any longer, it seemed, to keep this body shaped as what he needed, John Watson's shape. This body was on the verge of something unimaginable. He held on to even Sherlock tighter, if he lost Sherlock's touch he thought he would lose everything.

Sherlock whined in frustrated delirium, biting down harder than ever into John's throat as he pressed down and gained an infinitesimal fraction more of divine penetration that did nothing to slake his hunger for something unnamable.

A fresh droplet of John's ichor sparked his tongue and the craving to devour his mate took him. Sherlock opened his lips wide, grasping an expanse of warm scented flesh between his teeth, and bit down savagely.

The ichor exploded into his greedy waiting mouth. Unlike in heat, his mind sharpened and he saw a page from the Book of Enoch come into harsh focus:

“ And in those days there were born beautiful daughters to the sons of men, and the Angels desired them. . . . and the women bore giants that devoured one another ' s flesh, and drank the blood from it. ”

It was an intensely beautiful sensation of relief, feeling the golden ichor gushing down his throat. But the craving for more of John's essence just intensified and he gulped and bit like a wild animal, and John did nothing more than hold on tight and tip his head back to allow his mate to take what everything he wanted. Gouts of delicious ichor coated his tongue, filled his mouth and ran down his neck, and he felt locked to John in a way he never had before, not in the crossing, not when John had woken from his sleeping sickness. He wasn't ever letting go, not with his mouth or his body which was vibrating now too, shaking just like John's. They were trembling together like the plucked strings of a violin as Sherlock felt his body changing, shape-shifting, the individual molecules almost perceptibly sliding and expanding and rearranging themselves in a way that felt more right and more real than his body had ever felt in his life.

He gasped in ecstasy against John's throat as he felt something sharp and strong and light freeing itself from the region of his spine at the same moment as his hole miraculously expanded to slide down, divinely, and take John's prodigious cock inside as though it were created there, whole, in that very moment.

They froze, staring at one another, and Sherlock saw himself reflected back in the pools of John's eyes. There was something new there. Something that made John pull back, touch with a gentle fingertip Sherlock lips and the sharp new teeth that rested against the plush cushion of his lower lip, still dripping with golden ichor from the wound he had torn in John's throat, already vanished.

Something that made him release one possessive hand from clutching at Sherlock's magnificent arse to stroke at the new appendages that had sprung from his back, silvery-grey and lavishly feathered, unable to beat because they were encircled by John's own wings.

# # #

Sherlock covered John's open mouth with his own, tongues exploring the new sharpness of his ivory incisors, the flavour of John's ichor on Sherlock's tongue. Their cocks were both full and heavy, eager for orgasm but without the urgent inevitability of human lust. Even if he couldn't control its shape, John could control this body's power. Now Sherlock could match him, maybe forever. It seemed like sorcery that at this moment, he was being given just what he most needed -- for his mate to be able to follow him completely, and lead him too -- to allow them to climb the erotic heights that this body promised. No more holding back.
"You're so beautiful, I wish you could see yourself, it's like you were meant for this. You must have been, always. I want to give you everything now," John said, allowing himself to thrust up hard into Sherlock's newly-formed hole that seemed to know how to stroke and suck him as perfectly as Sherlock's own mouth.

Sherlock pushed John back -- strong, Sherlock was incredibly strong now, nearly as strong as he was -- until John fell with a crash into one of the huge tapestry-covered chairs where Sherlock pinned him down, looming over him with new teeth that gleamed and glorious wings that spread out for the very first time, delivering a wave of omega scent that still had the power to hypnotise him. John lay almost stunned against the cushions as Sherlock rode his cock hard.

Sherlock gasped, on the brink of orgasm and perfectly under control. "You'll take it back," he whispered, licking and sucking at John's chest.

He basked in the open adoration in John's gaze and luxuriated in the feeling of absolute power. It surged through his veins, better than any drug, better than heat. He wanted to come, wanted to watch his omega cock paint John's newly translucent angel skin, wanted to feel John's come inside him, semen that must also be something like ichor, and he intended to find out. The thought drove him on.

Everything felt tight and shivery around the intense fullness of John's cock, he could take it in easily but still, it seemed impossible that he had done so. He looked down and watched its hard girth pounding into him, the shadow of his new wings crossing John's face, clenched tight, hanging onto the edge of climax, his face glowing with a passion that was more than human.

"I love you," John gasped, his palm over Sherlock's belly, reminding them both of what was to come. "I bred you, you're mine. Forever."

"I'm yours," Sherlock whispered, hesitating on a downstroke so that they both shook, tightness and hardness that wanted to explode. "I want to feel you come, John," he said, leaning in for what he wanted maybe even more, another bite, another exquisite drink.

"Anything," John said, giving a strong, slow roll of his hips, pressing his cock inside to the fullest inside Sherlock. His omega, who was some kind of vampire angel now, for god's sake, the knowledge making their pleasure almost terrifying.

"Then do it, come," Sherlock ordered, and what he had thought was unconquerable control crumbled. He watched through his lashes as Sherlock's alabaster body working over his, every muscle, every inch of skin radiant and powerful, taking him in, his shape the same but new, built just for his angel body. Sherlock's new wings encircled them both, his red mouth parted and panting, the sight of it and the sharp little new teeth there made him want to fuck his mate's throat, and he promised himself that he would, very soon, even the instant he finished filling him up with his seed. He could feel every slick inch of Sherlock's hole as it slid tight and hot over his massive erection, and he vibrated inside his mate like a tuning fork as his balls drew up, bursting to deliver come into his bonded's passage, jetting against his womb, where he had planted his seed.

"Suck me," he cried as the climax hit like the upheaval of an earthquake, 10 on the Richter scale, coming on fast, buckling and breaking him as he shouted unrestrainedly and he held Sherlock's head hard to him while Sherlock leaned in to suck the ichor from his throat. He wasn't sure which sensation was making his cock pump and shoot more, his hole or his mouth, and he didn't much care.

Sherlock kissed him hard and deep, biting with gorgeous little stings of his new teeth as he kept thrusting down through John's orgasm without mercy, knowing that John would rise again just as
hard without pause, and he did, enough to jolt Sherlock out of his intense focus and wring his own climax free. His cock pumped beautifully over John's golden skin, just as he had wished, and he pushed his fingers in it as he rocked with a brilliant orgasm that floated him to a point in the infinite distance, and he thrust his come-soaked fingers between John's lips and felt him come again, the golden semen drenching his thighs and John's knot pushed the lips of his hole apart as though this were heat.

Sherlock groaned and resisted his body's new power and instinct to mould itself perfectly to John's shape, he wanted that burn and sting of resistance, the incredible stretch of the fullness of knotting, but sensitivity to the life inside his belly made him hold back from this indulgence. He let his body slowly accept the knot, locking them together without the unbreakable force of Alpha/omega knotting. After all, it seemed they were both some kind of angels now, and they could do what they wanted, anything and everything.

After they had their fill of climaxing, they lay in each other's arms, giving each other the new pleasure of stroking one another's wings.

Sherlock watched the wound he had opened on John's throat heal again, and lapped up the last drops of golden ichor.

###

"I was right, after all," John said. "I'm going to have to lock you in here, probably forever. You are the most amazing-looking creature I have ever seen. On the planet. In the entire universe, I guess. And that's saying a lot, because I thought that before. But now. Ah...I really, really can't let you out like this."

Sherlock tried to look incensed at this, but he was secretly very pleased at John's obvious enchantment with his new looks. He could feel his longer incisors, and he ran his tongue along the pleasing sharpness. After a few moments, though, they retracted. Interesting. He could see the ends of his wings, almost like John's, but smaller, and not so dark. He wanted to find a long looking-glass to admire himself.

But John was looking very stern, and he realised that John was actually serious.

"You can't mean it. And I'd get out anyway, now. I don't think anything can stop me, not anymore," he said arrogantly. He was already imagining the many advantages to his new form.

"Then I wish you hadn't done it. I shouldn't have let you." He had thought that he might have left petty human feelings like guilt behind but it wasn't really the case where anything that might be dangerous to Sherlock and their child was concerned. The guilt came roaring back like a vengeance.

*You are the arm of the avenging angel.*

He stood up, prowling the perimeter of the room, imagining ways to barricade Sherlock within.

"Don't you see - you were right, you said yourself that I'm meant for this. This is what I'm supposed to be. The Bible and the Book of Enoch both say so. The children of the angels and human women were giants, and they became... blood-drinkers. That means, vampires. Of some sort. And... they ate each other's flesh. But surely that part's not literal," he said hastily. "I'm not a giant, either, after all."

He had enjoyed tearing into John's throat far too much. He swallowed and looked down.
"Anyway, the fact that it was you, that I drank ichor, not human blood, or even . . Nephilim blood, may be why-- this -- happened. And that means that Sollas must have known it would happen, sooner or later."

"I don't think Sollas expected any of this. And as for giants, you've got a massive brain, and a massive ego to match." He was feeling a little calmer. He wasn't going to let this unexpected change throw him off. He was still John Watson, in heart and soul if not in body, Alpha male and Sherlock's bonded mate, father of their unborn child.

Sherlock wasn't going to be allowed to get out of hand now with his shiny new powers. He could already see the wheels turning behind those bright eyes, more brilliant than before.

He was pretty sure that his powers as an actual angel were still much stronger than whatever Sherlock had assumed by drinking his ichor. He was still a hybrid, half-breed angel and human.

Maybe the transformation wrought by his ichor was even temporary, John thought half-hopefully, half-regretfully. The truth was that as long as he had this body, he wasn't human anymore, and that made a painful and ultimately unbridgeable difference between him and his mortal mate.

"The old ways really may have been for best, sometimes," John said, remembering the old harems in the hills of Afghanistan as he pressed the old iron hinges and locks of the library door into a mangled lump that could never be opened, and imagined the door turning from oak to impenetrable granite, which it did.

Sherlock's clothes were more or less destroyed, he had torn them to bits. Thankfully there were piles of blankets and pillows here, and he pulled a blanket from the stack and draped it around his mate to warm him and the baby. Even with the changes that apparently had imposed themselves on Sherlock's body, he still felt bound as his Alpha to ensure his safety and comfort. He wanted Sherlock to be as comfortable here in the library as possible.

Because Sherlock wasn't going anywhere.

####

Ingrained social constraints upon omegas together with Holmes family’s rigorous suppression of feeling had effectively caused Sherlock to repress his own omega nature his whole life. He had truly thought it was because gender and permutation were boring and meaningless. A costly distraction.

Now he knew differently. Sherlock knew he ought to snap something defiant about “the old ways,” but he was fully aware of the irony that in this moment, all that mattered, all he could feel, was desire to be ravished again by his mate.

Perhaps it was the unfolding of his omega nature under his strange new powers, but now he understood that at least for him, that meant much more than the mere “chemistry” he had always supposed governed the attraction between bonded pairs. He had been keenly aware of shifts in his own chemistry since taking the crossing with John up until this very moment, where he could still feel John's ichor buzzing on his tongue and golden ichor-tinged semen coating his passage. He shivered.

But he knew that chemistry alone wasn’t what reduced the entire universe down to just the two of
them, the points of contact between their skins, the mingling of their breath and the intertwining of their scents. And for all of their dramatic changes -- John's angelic flesh, his own new teeth, the impossible, incredible fact of their wings -- all of this was just a small fraction of the mysterious amalgamation of heart, mind and spirit that was their bond.

Still, some things remained the same. Almost against his will, his brain overrode his cravings for the moment, that sharp focus wrenching his attention back to the enigma that threatened to bring them down.

“John, that’s just it, don’t you see? The old ways.”

John drew back with a near groan. He could imagine that Sherlock was fully able to guess that he had been indulging in vivid Alpha fantasies of Sherlock locked away for his eyes alone, for his pleasure and nothing else. Or that he still treasured the memory of handcuffing Sherlock to his bed in 221b.

“The old ways?” John was proud of how controlled his voice sounded, watching his mate intent on thinking something through. Sherlock wasn’t even paying attention to the door he had destroyed and rebuilt to keep him in, keep him safe.

“The old ways, John: alchemy. Magic. Maxim said he had a book no one had seen, and I think it Talbott wrote it. I need to get inside Talbott’s head.”

“Inside Talbott’s head? But that book’s not here, is it?”

“No. But we do know something about the man. Remember, John -- the Pridiax archive. We saw an account of Talbott’s captivity during the witch trials. An eye-witness account, in fact. I think I can remember most of it.”

“I remember putting it in my pocket, actually -- but I never saw it after, well, that day at Whiteshadow-“

Sherlock never wanted to talk about John’s torture. He would never forget John’s voice or his screams, and talking about it would bring it all back, for him if not for John.

“Stop. They – Whiteshadow -- would have scanned it after searching you,” Sherlock said, seizing his mobile. “Ah hah! Here it is! Mycroft downloaded it. And Whiteshadow conveniently has transcribed it.”

"... And when it was put to said JONATHAN TALBOTT that a black dog of monstrous size was seen to follow him wherever he so went, and that he had been seen to feed it; and moreover that by the testimony of diverse witnesses, such devilish creature was seen to have killed... and that said dog must be his familiar, he replied only, "If so be true, bring it hither, it must be hungry..."

“It’s about a hellhound, John. It must be. I didn't realise it at the time, of course.”

“Yeah. I guess you're right. And Talbott was feeding it. I don’t think I want you getting in Talbott’s head.”

Sherlock wasn’t listening. His brain was fully back online. “John... that hellhound-- it helped you in the woods. Why?”

“It belongs to Sollas,” John said. “It’s not a real hellhound, not like the others. But I still don’t trust it.”
“Well, it could have hurt me, and it didn’t.”

“Sherlock -- if you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, the last thing we should be doing is messing about with hellhounds.”

“But it showed you that the others were coming. What else can he show us?”

John thought about the battle in the woods, putting his hands on the hound’s head and seeing through its eyes. Maybe, the hound could tell them about Sollas.

Sherlock’s eyes lit with a wholly inappropriate relish as he saw John relent. John took off the remains of his shirt, torn in their passion, and improvised a blindfold.

“I don’t know if he’ll come. Don’t move this from your eyes, promise me. You can’t look at him. Not ever. Even now.”

“How do you call him?”

“His name,” John said, “is Dante. Dante, come.”

The hound walked forward from the shadows in the corner of the library as if he had been sitting there all along. He crouched attentively at John’s feet with a look of grave intelligence.

“John – I can hear him, he’s here. Can I speak with it?”

John took Sherlock’s hand in his and placed them both on Dante’s head, just as he had done in the wood.

“Just think of what you want to know. You’ll see it in your head, if it works. That’s how it worked for me.”

###

They saw a stone manor on a hill above a dark forest, which they recognized as the grounds of Hantswood Hall.

Then they saw a tall, hawk-nosed man with curling grey hair. It was in fact a sixteenth-century wig. This was Jonathan Talbott.

Then they saw the library, a long table piled with bottles and beakers, strange devices, plants, and books stacked all around. John didn’t know what he had expected to see, perhaps black wizard’s robes and a pointed hat, but Talbott gave the impression of wisdom, power, and above all, determination. The man reminded John of Sherlock himself, intent on his own kind of magic: chemistry, forensics, experiments in 221b, and for the thousandth time John swore he would see Sherlock home safe again.

“Did you serve Jonathan Talbott?” Sherlock asked. Dante’s answers transmitted silently through their joined hands.

“Once. I serve Sollas now.”

“Did Talbott really sell his soul to the Devil? And why?”
“Yes. He wanted two impossible things.”

Now Dante showed them a scene: An aristocratic omega lady in a tapestried room. Talbott was giving her an astrology lesson. The lady had haughty features and a full, sensual mouth that showed her passionate nature.

They saw that Talbott loved her with the hopelessness of a beta bewitched by an unattainable omega. She was bonded to an Alpha and almost-- but not quite-- indifferent to Talbott’s suffering. As sometimes happened between omegas and betas, she enjoyed tormenting him.

Riveted, they watched as Talbott dropped a ruby-red fluid into the lady’s goblet. She died in his arms-- proving that the fluid -- a love potion -- had worked, but that breaking her bond was fatal.

They removed their hands. Sherlock could feel John’s dominant gaze even through the blindfold and knew that John was thinking of Maxim Purcell, all he had done and maybe was still trying to do to try to break their bond.

“So, the two impossible things that Talbott wanted were that the lady be restored to life, and that she would love him in spite of her bond. Yes?”

“Yes. Lucifer – that is what he calls himself -- promised Talbott would have her back in return for a great service. Talbott died in the fire at Hantswood Hall and his ghost remained.

"And then Maxim Purcell raised him from the dead. I was wrong, John. It wasn’t immortality that Talbott wanted, after all. But my assumption was reasonable -- it is unusual for a beta to become so obsessed by a bonded omega.”

John smiled grimly. Sherlock still didn’t understand much about love. “I’m sure he didn’t have a choice.”

“Hmmmm. I wonder --- perhaps it was her scent. Unusually sensitive betas can be susceptible.”

Sherlock was rapidly scanning through the books again, seemingly oblivious to Dante and to John. Dante watched him with patient, wise eyes, and John shuddered.

“Well, we’ll never know now,” he said. "The lady’s been dead for hundreds of years.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said abstractedly, “but I wonder... dogs have nearly perfect scent memories. I imagine that applies to hellhounds as well. Or more so. Dante saw this lady in life.”

“I don’t like where this is going. You’re going to try to entrap Talbott by …”

“I can’t perform the kind of magic in these books -- but my abilities with the chemistry of pheromones are better than anybody in the world. Well, almost.”

“Talbott was beta, Sherlock,” John argued stubbornly. "And remember, Talbott's a soul vampire now.”

The idea of attempting to lure Talbott to them was obviously forming, crystalizing in the unstoppable circuitry of Sherlock’s mind. John studied him, stalking around the library wrapped in a wine-coloured blanket and nothing else, his new teeth had withdrawn and his wings were tucked in under the blanket, and he looked almost like his own self. His heart swelled with love and fear.

“She is the only thing that I can be reasonably sure Talbott wants for himself,” Sherlock retorted confidently. “His persona is still very strong, or he wouldn’t have been able to overpower Maxim.
I’m betting that Talbott he still wants his end of the bargain. His omega lady.”

“Wrong. Talbott only wants you. And Mycroft.”

“No, his master does, ultimately. Never forget that Jonathan Talbott sold himself to the Devil – Lucifer – for her sake. You of all people should understand that, John.”

“It’s not the same thing,” John said uncertainly. He didn’t like to think of his own barter, his soul for Sherlock’s. He had been wondering if the darkening of his wings was a sign that the trade was already accomplished.

He thought he ought to feel something if that was so, but maybe it didn’t work like that.

“I’m going to ask Dante to teach me her scent.”

John held both of Sherlock’s hands tightly. “And the answer is no, Sherlock. It’s time to consider other options. Dante, leave us.”

Dante slunk back and vanished.

###

“Other options? Such as?”

“Such as trying to find a place where they can’t find us. We got what we came here for, we know what to do if the hellhounds come after us again. But it didn’t exactly help Greg.”

“You don’t mean you want to run, John?”

“No. We keep moving, stick together, fight when we have to fight. Not running away. I mean fighting guerrilla style—”

*This is called guerrilla warfare... Perhaps this is not your style,* El Brujo had said, his bright eyes measuring John’s mettle. *Style doesn’t count. Only winning,* he had replied.

“Like Afghanistan, John?” Sherlock’s eyes were tight with concern, now that he knew more about everything that had happened in Afghanistan, all that it had done to him.

"Like Afghanistan. We were always on the move. London isn’t safe, so we find another place, and another. And if we make it past the solstice, maybe it will be all over.”

“But no matter where we go, John, someday we have to confront Talbott. I, for one, would rather do that before our daughter is born.”

“The lesser of two evils,” John said. “And what do you plan to do if you get Talbott to come after you?” He couldn’t bear the still-fresh memories of Sherlock disguised as a naïve, delicate Omega, throwing a roomful of powerful Alphas into a frenzy of rut to tear into him.

“No, not like before. I see it in your face, John. I’ll get him to come to me — and then you’ll do the rest, if that’s what you really want.”

“Which is what, exactly?”
“Cut off his head and burn the body. That’s how you kill a soul vampire. You stopped Talbott once already. And you’re an angel now.”

“I don’t know if that’s completely true.”

“John. It’s the only way.” Sherlock was, as always, completely sure of himself and of his ability to sway John.

John took a moment to appreciate how truly glorious his mate looked when he was imagining the triumph of his schemes.

But it was the image of Sherlock actually giving birth on the run in some cold and comfortless place, or worse, that forced John’s hand.

“Sherlock, I’d say I’m sorry for this, but it would be a lie. I don’t ever want to lie to you, and I don’t think angels are supposed to lie.” He gathered his strength and enfolded Sherlock in his arms. Sherlock’s body was stronger now, it no longer felt like cradling a hummingbird’s egg in the palm of his hand.

"Sorry for what," he mumbled against John's shoulder, and then he finally looked and saw what John had done to the door.

John silenced Sherlock’s inevitable howl of protest and thrashing with a look that was implacable and full of love, and held him firm and steady. Sherlock stopped squirming and shut his mouth.

“I’m not letting you do it, Sherlock,” he said quietly, because if he started shouting he would lose his temper, and he couldn’t let that happen to them. “Since this whole thing started, every time you’ve messed about with pheromones, it’s ended up nearly getting you killed. You’re too good. Nobody knows body knows better than me. You’ll just drive Talbott, whatever he is now, mad with wanting what he can’t have, and you’ll pay the price. If Talbott comes, he’ll come at the solstice, like you said. I’ll handle him alone.”

“So, the old ways really are best, is that what you’re saying? Just because I’m a chemistry genius and happen to be gravid, you’re confining me in this tower -- like some bloody fairy-tale princess?”

“I know I can’t win any arguments with you, so I won’t try. So, yes, Sherlock, you’re absolutely right. That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

Sherlock sat down carefully on one of the library chairs, eying him warily, clutching the blanket around him. “The John Watson I know wouldn’t try to control me with brute force.” He eyed the door that had been turned to stone with a scornful curl of his lip. The teeth didn't show any more, John noticed. Apparently he could control that much.

Surprisingly, he realised his own body had returned outwardly to what he wanted it to appear to be -- ordinary John Watson. He found a blanket for himself and covered his own wings.

“I’m not exactly being brutal. I was as gentle as I know how to be -- wait -- oh God, did I actually hurt you?”

He knelt at Sherlock’s feet, ran his hands over Sherlock’s body, lingering over his belly as Sherlock watched with sulky outrage.

“I’m very strong, stronger now. . . but jostling me about like that -- with your stupid wings, you don't know your own strength, John. It-- it makes my stomach turn,” he spat crossly, like a child. “You’re still a doctor, you ought to know better.”
John kissed Sherlock’s forehead, then pressed his own forehead there. “I’m sorry. But I can’t have anything else happen to you. I keep thinking, what if, any minute, I stop being some kind of angel and go back to being just plain John Watson? And something bad happens to you, and I could have stopped it by being stronger when I had the chance? If that means you’re angry with me for making you feel like a – what did you say?”


“Hmmm,” John sighed. The idea of keeping Sherlock locked away in this tower was giving him an utterly devastating Alpha high, and Sherlock knew it. He could almost swoon to the image of Sherlock with his new powers, wearing something to suit him, something better than this antique blanket -- a dark silk robe, maybe, bringing out the exoticism in his new, undeniably vampiric looks. . . Maxim had dressed Sherlock up like that, a gorgeous kimono that hung open enticingly.

Maxim had used real chains to imprison Sherlock, and he wasn’t behaving much better.

“I do like sound of it. You’re too bloody gorgeous for your own good, I’ve told you before and I know you love to hear me say that, too. But don’t think you can get around me like this,” he sighed regretfully, kissing Sherlock’s lips softly but drawing away when he needed to linger, before Sherlock could bite back with his new little fangs.

He felt control slipping like a sleek fish from his grasp, he wasn’t sure where it would end.

He had sworn that he wouldn’t let anything stop him being with Sherlock in every way that a bonded pair could be, even if it was “forbidden to consort with mortals.” The universe apparently had different plans for them, and things had gotten far past the point of "consorting."

*We may as well both take a blue dose*, he thought rebelliously, blocking out Sollas’s admonition. His eyes flicked to his own wings, gleaming like silver-tipped gunmetal. Sherlock's were nearly the same.

He wondered if drinking his angel blood -- ichor, Sherlock called it -- had given Sherlock wings like his. The intricacies of human - angel genetics threatened to boggle his mind and with an audible groan, he pulled back.

Sherlock looked up at him, rare confusion flickering in his eyes.

“John—“ he said feebly, and John caught him in his arms just as he pitched over and was sick on the carpet.

###

John helped clean Sherlock up, thankful for the comforting supplies Aude had thoughtfully laid in for them.

Sherlock, for once, didn’t fight him, and lay back against the pillows on the long library sofa with only a token protest, stretching and almost preening like a great cat. Outside, the snow was still falling steadily, and John expertly stoked the fire with fresh wood. His own body felt the cold, but did not suffer from it, just as he felt the heat, but knew the fire would not burn him.

But he was sure that Sherlock was not quite like him, despite the wings. He knew Sherlock felt the cold, he could see the gooseflesh on his slender arms and the little shiver as he drew closer to the fire. Human blood still presumably flowed through Sherlock's veins.
John prayed that he would keep his powers of apparently infinite regeneration, and that Sherlock would never need -- or wish -- to drink any other blood than his own.

Sherlock huddled in a bundle of quilts, seeming quite content. John knew he should be suspicious at Sherlock’s unexpected placidity and braced to resume their ill-matched battle of the wits, but he had no power at all to resist when Sherlock tugged aside the quilt to demand, “Bed, John.”

He climbed in next to his mate, and for a moment everything felt utterly perfect. The locked library tower gave a convincing illusion of safety and seclusion.

"How do you feel?"

"Admittedly morning sickness isn't my favourite sensation."

"It should pass."

"I refuse to believe otherwise."

"Let's try to distract you from that bad tum then. Roll over."

John rubbed his hands along Sherlock’s long back and around his new wings to soothe him, combing through the feathers with his fingers, a strange and pleasurable sensation. The feathers had an iridescent gleam.

Still, some things were just the same as always. It was distressingly easy, for example, to feel the knobs and indentations along his elegant spine. Sherlock had given him an acupressure massage in 221b not so very long ago, before the crossing.

He remembered how powerfully aroused he had been and how angry too, that Sherlock could manipulate him so very well and yet seem so out of reach.

He tried to move his fingers the way Sherlock had done, and was rewarded when Sherlock hummed luxuriously and began to release a comforting yet erotic Omega scent, one that made him want to draw the covers over their heads so they could sleep in each other’s arms for days. He was on the verge of making a connection there, when Sherlock’s most velvet voice, poignantly sleepy, rumbled in his ear:

“Don’t poke at me so. I know I need to eat more. I’m hungry, John.”

John promptly went in search of food and drink for Sherlock, like a good Alpha. To do that required him to fly through a high window that he immediately barred to Sherlock, creating an impenetrable wall of thorns. Sherlock didn't try to break through.

He was convinced he could do all he needed, right here.

###

Sherlock called up a strong memory, almost a vision, of walking in cold mist, with El Brujo at his side. This was the road to Hantswood Hall, also the old road to Canterbury.

“Tell me, then, what Chaucer said. About – demons.”

“In Chaucer’s story, the demon says, We will make ourselves into such forms as are most fit to capture our prey.”

There was only one form fit to capture his prey – the omega lady who Talbott had sold his own
soul for.

He had no idea what Talbott's lady had looked like. But he could mimic her scent, an omega scent that would call to Talbott like no other.

He tied John's blindfold back around his eyes and called to Dante, and he heard Dante's soft growl in acknowledgment as he appeared from the shadows once more.

“I must know her scent, Dante. Even what she looked like, if I can. You knew her, Talbott's omega. You are the only witness— the only creature on this earth now that can show me this. There must be a way for me to know what you know. Sollas wants you to help me.”

“For the Bloodlines, there is a way. It is an abomination of the Nephilim. Sollas would not want that.”

“An abomination?”

“Yes. But you already know it. All the Nephilim know it.”

He considered that. There was very little known about the Nephilim, very little written of them. He couldn’t claim to have read it all, but in light of his recent change, he easily called to mind once again the words from the Book of Enoch:

“The Angels said, ‘Come, let us choose for ourselves wives from the sons of men.’ And the women bore giants that turned against the men, and devoured them; and they devoured one another’s flesh and drank the blood from it.”

Now he recalled that there was something more.

Something about the Nephilim defiling themselves with beasts.

This had brought down God’s wrath, the flood that only Noah survived.

It was not the eating of animal flesh that was the abomination. The Book of Enoch told of insatiable appetites – cannibalism. Bestiality. Drinking of blood.

Sherlock contemplated this list of abominations.

In this context, only one seemed remotely possible, or endurable.

The idea was both perversely enticing and utterly repulsive. Before this very day, taking John's ichor into his mouth and drinking, Sherlock had always had an inhumanly scanty appetite. His parents, far from trying to overcome this, had encouraged him. In hindsight, it made a kind of sense:

Rigorous suppression of carnal appetites.

Relentless cultivation of a lofty emotional detachment.

The Holmeses were trained to repress all of those weaknesses of body and spirit that had caused the downfall of angels, all those ages ago.

“There is the baby to think of,” he muttered. Still, John's ichor still tingled in his mouth. He already wanted more.

“All creatures must know their true natures. This was the nature of the Nephilim.”
“Was?”

“That is the purpose of the Bloodlines,” Dante said. “To breed only those who have proven their ability to control their appetites and passions. Capable of resisting temptation for a lifetime.”

“It’s a bloody breeding program!”

He had to admire the audacity, and the brilliance, of the plan. Recalling his own upbringing, his father’s strict admonition to “cultivate abstinence,” it was clear that he had been deemed unworthy. It had been his parents' plan that he be culled from the line.

###

“So, Dante. Sollas sent you to help us. So, help me. You knew Talbott’s omega lady. What else do you know about Jonathan Talbott? What does he want with my soul? And my brother’s?”

“It is not Talbott that wants, but his master.”

“You don’t know any way of stopping him?”

“These things... were put into motion centuries ago. He is a powerful soul vampire now. But you and your brother are Nephilim. Still you are not in possession of your full powers. And they know this.”

“If I do this thing...” Sherlock's flesh crawled at the thought, and yet he already felt his mouth watering. "What will happen to my child?”

“What you drink, she drinks. But unless she drinks the living blood from her own lips, it will not change her.”

Sherlock was still and silent, knowing he should think about this more carefully, much more carefully -- but John would be returning any moment.

“All right. I understand you, Dante. An abomination. Let me deal with that. I have a simple question -- it is one of mere procedure – do I allow you to... bite me? Or...the reverse?”

He could almost picture Dante’s grimace.

“It is you who must take. My scent memories will become yours. You will be able to make her scent for yourself, if you wish. But once you do this thing, there is no way back. You will change. Your... appetite will not be quenched.”

If this is my true nature, so be it, he thought recklessly. It's just another kind of drug. And John will know what to do. John always knows what to do.

Sherlock knelt beside the hellhound and leaned in to its throat, finding the place where the vein was close to the surface. The unnatural creature was warm, which he hadn't expected, and still smelled just faintly of brimstone. But something in him must already be changing, because his teeth ached and lengthened, and he could sense the bittersweet odour of this creature's strange blood pumping beneath the skin.

"Don't move," Sherlock said, and bared his teeth.
Lucifer's mansion in the Pyrenees, Chateau Malrocher, not far from the village of Lestrade-et-Thouels. Same night.

In a crumbling chateau buffeted by the snowstorm, four figures brooded over a chequered board. Their concentration was not disturbed by the howling wind that flung slates from the rooftops with a crash, or the snowflakes that gusted through through broken windowpanes and evaporated with a sizzle when they touched the player's unnatural flesh.

The game today was Enochian chess. The Renaissance occultist Dr. John Dee claimed that the magic upon which this game was based had been transmitted to him by angels.

Partially concealed in a hooded armchair, a fifth figure watched the game, following every move with cruel intelligence.

“If you move your red king there, he is captured,” Lucifer observed from the shadows. “Semjaza, you're clever. Remind your brothers what happens next”

“The Red King’s army is frozen.”

“Frozen. Stalemate. Not checkmate. Do you see? Is this the way to capture the Holmes brothers?”

“No, Your Most Awful—“

“— I’ve told you. In these times, in this place, ‘Sir’ will suffice. How do you intend to break this stalemate?” Lucifer sounded almost mild, which didn’t bode well for any of them.

“Sir? I can't presume. You exceed us all in strategy.”

“Why do I need generals, then, if I have to answer everything for myself?” Lucifer said quietly, without the slightest hint of rancor. They quaked. The pieces on the four-fold board shook.

Lucifer employed generals, commanders, soldiers and servants of every rank to do his work, because acting by his own hand was the surest way to attract God’s notice. Terrible and costly punishments were meted out to Lucifer whenever he acted on his own account. The Most High was perfectly capable of imprisoning and tormenting Lucifer for aeons. God had done it before. Some, but not all, of these events were told of in human stories, with some degree of truth. The Book of Revelations, for example, promised that God would someday imprison him again. Therefore, Lucifer showed his own hand only when he was sure he could seize his prize, a prize worth the risk. It was an eternal game, a very great game, the only game truly worth playing.

Semjaza’s power was enchantment, in the sense of binding by words of power. Once, he had taught these powers to their children, the Nephilim. But the first Nephilim were long dead now. Their descendants, the Bloodlines, did all they could to divide themselves from the Fallen. This could no longer be permitted. The Bloodlines must be brought back into the fold.

Semjaza bent over the board, trying to see the pieces and the Board not as inanimate things, but according to their secret, celestial meanings. After a few minutes, he confidently executed the maneuver called “seizing the throne.”
Lucifer sighed, stood, and bent over the board, casting his long shadow over them all. None of them looked at his face. Without looking, they could deceive themselves that all would be well -- deception being one of the very most cultivated talents of the Fallen.

Lucifer captured the Yellow King.

“The Usurper is usurped,” Lucifer announced. "And what happens now? Can you see?"

Semjaza stammered, “Both the Red King and the Yellow King are captured.”

“Fire and Air. And?”

“And. . .both armies--” Semjaza continued, “-- are kingless.”

Lucifer’s smile was vulpine. He knocked the pieces to the floor, where they rolled loudly and came to rest at their feet. “Both armies lose. When will just one of my servants bring me two kings?”

“We still have Sherlock's spirit vial, Sir.” Semjaza declared. “The winter solstice is the time. We wait just a few more days…”

“Waiting! For the last time. Someone will wish he had paid more attention to the Bloodlines. The Pseudothyrum will open to me-- I'll be the one making the rules. The first thing I’ll do is get rid of all those celestial laws: solstices, perihelion, aphelion. . . well, maybe not the very first thing."

He recited the hated words: “And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness.”

Now Lucifer was imagining his triumph and forgot all about Enochian chess.

Semjaza, who really was very, very clever and thus always alert to opportunity, pressed this momentary advantage.

“So how will you do it, Sir? Get rid of celestial laws?”

“I’ll just put the lights out,” Lucifer said.

To be continued. . .
Cover art for The Omega Sutra
Chapter 49: The Barbarous Names

Track: You're Here, Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t=12&v=Uzzb_56k1c0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t=12&v=Uzzb_56k1c0)

Mycroft followed huge canine footprints through the snow for a long while, the snow falling faster and faster until he could no longer make out the outline of the wolf’s paw. Once or twice, he heard the distant, unmistakeable howl of a wolf. It pierced his heart, even as a wolf he could recognise the sound. It wasn’t a warning, he felt. The wolf was calling him, and its howls drew him on. Just when he thought the cold would be too much, he saw a dark cottage in the woods ahead.

It was obviously a summer cottage, closed for the long winter. He stumbled in the dark, found wood for the stove, and lit it. There were no electrics, but in the glow of the stove he found an oil lamp. He cast off his icy wet coat and clothes and laid them by the stove to dry. He found blankets to wrap himself in and settled into an armchair by the fire to watch out the windows into the dark. Mycroft was waiting.

He was about to drop off, the warmth and exhaustion stealing over him, when an unmistakable silhouette appeared at the window. He stood and unlatched the door and opened it wide. Swirls of snow and sharp wind gusted into the room, and after it came a huge, silent, silver-coated wolfish creature. The beast turned its intense brown eyes to his, and Mycroft saw that this was indeed Lestrade.

Mycroft reached out his hand and lightly touched the creature’s shoulder. It was covered with silvery fur, so soft under his fingertips.

“Come,” he said, and held up the lamp to lead him to the bedroom at the back of the cottage, although he suspected that the werewolf’s sharp eyes didn’t need the light. He climbed into the bed and without hesitation, invited the beast in.

Lestrade stood still, looking down at him in the flickering lamplight. Even in this form he was obviously thinking, considering, both as a man and as a predator. He shuffled forward, sniffing Mycroft’s scent, licking at his lips as though to taste it. Mycroft waited. At last, with a guttural snarl he leaped onto the bed, crouching over Mycroft. Mycroft gazed at the werewolf, taken aback by his beauty as Lestrade gently touched his cheek with the back of his fur-coated hand, careful not to let the sharp claws scratch his skin. Mycroft sighed. The tenderness and control of the gesture was completely unexpected. He lay back against the pillows as trustingly as if they had been back in his own study.

He breathed in deeply. There was a strong and unmistakeable scent, his Alpha’s scent that he knew like he knew his own, and underneath, something musky and clearly animal. There was a damp, roughened spot in Lestrade’s fur and he didn’t have to see it to know what it was, Blood from this night’s kill.

“What did you kill, Greg?” He didn’t even particularly care about the answer for himself so much as for what it would do to Lestrade, to be compelled to be a killer of men, he who had so relentlessly punished murderers.

Greg shook his head. “Deer,” he said, words hard to form, his mouth and teeth something between wolf and man. His beautiful canines gleamed. “Felt good.”
The werewolf slowly, tentatively lowered himself until covered Mycroft’s waiting body with his own. Mycroft just as slowly reached up to run his fingers through the soft fur at the back of Lestrade’s head, stroking, relishing the silkiness of his ears, then twisted his head to expose his throat in an unmistakeable invitation.

Lestrade bit hard, hard enough to make him gasp, hard enough to draw blood, and then lapped at the wounds with the abandon of an animal. Mycroft moaned at the beautiful brutality of being taken by something beastly, something that wanted him and him alone. This was their true bonding bite, the sharpness of teeth painful but necessary. His cock instantly swelled in crude sympathy, but he tried to forget about his cock and instead reached up and sank his mouth into the lovely fur at Greg’s throat, there was a thinner place where he could almost draw blood of his own, and he tried, hanging on and gripping tight to his powerful shoulders.

He exulted in the wild sound of Greg’s growl in response as his cock became a thick invader lodged against Mycroft’s thigh. Mycroft felt himself tossed lightly over onto his belly, his cock pressed into the featherbed mattress and a werewolf plastered against his back, all heat, fur, muscle, and desire. So long denied, their Alpha natures broke free, and Greg was pushing his newly massive, masterful cock into the warm tight space between the soft flesh of Mycroft’s thighs until he came with a long moan that shivered Mycroft’s flesh, because it was so much more like Greg than a wolf, and then he was coming too, his cock grinding down into the mattress.

They watched each other as their breaths slowed, their bodies luxuriating after orgasm, the edges of heat threatening to spill over, to take them someplace entirely wilder, where there would be no gentleness. Greg’s clever eyes raked Mycroft’s naked limbs, soft sparse hair on his slim pale body reddish-gold in the light of the oil lamp. Mycroft stroked Greg’s fur with his long, elegant fingers, marveling in the change in his beloved. He tucked his head into Greg’s muscular shoulder, not really wanting to sleep. Especially as he had questions.

“Will you . . . turn back? In the morning?”

Greg grunted, shrugged, jostling Mycroft. “I s’ppose.”

“That’s the legend, isn’t it? That the werewolf feeds, then turns back to an ordinary man again when the sun rises?”

Greg was licking his throat and very obviously didn’t much care at the moment if he ever turned back to being an ordinary man. Mycroft felt he couldn’t really help but feel the same. But Mycroft saw the question in his eyes, too. He kissed Greg, warm and soft with a hint of sharpness from his fangs that he was obviously trying to restrain with difficulty.

“It doesn’t matter, Greg. I’ll stay up with you and watch tonight, all night. But whatever happens, whatever comes, it will be all right. We’ll find a way to make it all right. And I’ll never leave you, never again. Do you understand?”

Greg bit him again, this time on the pure unmarked flesh of the crook of his neck, and they wrapped themselves in each other, watching the dark window for the first signs of dawn.

###

It was a simple enough task – hot food to nourish his omega. John actually wanted a domestic chore just now. Something fundamentally human. He was galvanized, too, by the thought of their daughter, inconceivably tiny and wholly dependent on them both. Principally Sherlock, of course,
for the almost unimaginable 8 months to go in Sherlock's "gravidity," by John's calculation. His lips twitched a brief grin, remembering Sherlock's smug determination to redefine the etymology of pregnancy on their last peaceful morning in 221b, before the Pridiax Archive, before the Whiteshadow warehouse in Battersea. He held back the memories of what came after and instead, summoned up the glowing memory of that last morning: the sun streaming through the draperies, the light filled with dust motes dancing gently over piles of Sherlock's books, glancing upon a faint mark around Sherlock's wrist from being cuffed to the bed by his Alpha. Putting the silver cross from Afghanistan around Sherlock's throat, Sherlock proudly putting on the dog tags he had pilfered from his Army duffle, all those months ago.

("Five months, twelve days, five hours, thirty-two minutes," Sherlock declared. "Wait -- that's five days after I moved into 221b, Sherlock." "That's right. Look how much time we've wasted, John.")

In the kitchen, all was quiet save for the constant ticking of an antique clock. His grin faded. Time was slipping by too fast, and if angels were free of the ravages of time they still couldn't stop it. The solstice was coming, and with it, the evil that hunted his bonded.

Now he almost wanted to flee from the ticking of the clock and considered using his powers to just produce sustenance for Sherlock. Still, fragments of memories of home tantalised him: the rare cooked meal shared in quiet contentment in 221b, so different from their usual hurried bites snatched on the run, or even the stimulating restaurant dinners after a case. And so John regarded Aude’s abundantly stocked pantry, and assembled a mouth-watering array of sausages, hams, and cheeses on a tray and set it out on the table. Then he knelt down to try to read the hand-lettered labels on a gleaming row of jars. All in French, or something else he couldn't make out.

But John’s domestic preoccupations fell away at the sound of booted feet behind him.

John turned. Jean-Marc held a crucifix in one hand and in the other, a very old book. He had only a moment to see Aude clutching a bottle of greenish powder, a cloud of which was already settling over and all around him.

“That’s wholesome food,” Aude said. “Your Sherlock doesn’t want that any longer.”

“What --”

He tried to sweep the dust away but the silvery-green cloud clung to him like iron filings to a magnet. John staggered like a marionette whose strings are cut. He struggled, but Aude flung another cloud of the strange powder at him and it turned his body to jelly.

“This is angel’s thorn. It is also called angel’s bane. Women of the Priory have cultivated it for ages. It grows only in these mountains.”

He thrashed in vain. “Why are you doing this?” Would it cripple him? It was already hard to even speak.

“You cannot imagine why we might wish to trap an angel?” Aude smiled, and he wondered why he had ever thought her a simple, kind woman.

“That stuff can’t last forever.” The paralysis didn’t affect his heart, and it was consumed with a very un-angelic desire to grind his adversaries to a pulp.

(You are the arm of the avenging angel)

“It will last long enough,” Jean-Marc said. He opened the old book.
John beat his wings, but the angel’s bane settled over him like it had a will of its own. He instinctively disliked Jean-Marc’s voice as he began to read. Aude drew signs on the floor with the powder. The words seemed to seize him, twisting like a hedge of thorns, a not unfamiliar kind of pain. He bared his teeth and steadied himself to endure an onslaught.

“I summon you, and I call upon you by your true name. Hear me, ARGOBRAO REIBAT, AOTH SABAOTH, you are the one the winds fear.”

John wanted to cover his ears, but could not even raise his hands so much. A harsh growl rose up in his throat. The words felt like acid poured over cuts from a thousand knives. He prayed that their bond would not deliver it to Sherlock, this time the sharp tugging in his centre told him that Sherlock could feel this too.

His voice was almost paralysed, too, but he forced the words out:

“Stop! Hurting me hurts Sherlock and the baby!” he screamed.

He hadn’t thought pain would mean anything to an angel -- but a childhood memory came to him, a sermon from the village priest, something about Lucifer being thrown into a lake of fire to be tormented day and night, forever and ever. This agony must mean he really was already one of the Fallen. Just as he had been on the endless op with Mackenzie, just as he must have been from the moment he traded his own soul for Sherlock’s.

It didn’t matter. He had known pain always, it seemed. He concentrated. He imagined throwing off this powerlessness but it felt like trying to throw off a cloak of made of lead. At length a cloud of dust slowly rose up and swirled around him, but not fast enough. His body was going to fly apart, agonized drops of ichor and whatever comprised the flesh of angels. His mind blurred back to that dark cellar in Afghanistan. He saw the cold white mist that tried to take Sherlock away at Hantswood Hall. He saw Sherlock drinking golden ichor from his own throat, his relentless spirit sealing their bond even more deeply. This final vision unlocked whatever power this body had to give and John struck out with something white-hot and furious.

Jean-Marc flew through the air and struck the stone wall, his eyes staring up, horrified.

Sherlock appeared with Dante and instantly seized the bottle from Aude, baring his new teeth, as the hellhound drove her back and held her still with the threat of his snapping jaws.

Sherlock was fascinated to find, as Dante had promised, that he was strongly tempted by the scent of her skin, and even more by what flowed beneath. Aude closed her eyes against the sight of them, muttering prayers.

“Sherlock -- don’t open that bottle, don’t let any of it touch your skin. She called it angel’s bane.”

“I felt you, John.” Sherlock’s wings hovered agitatedly at his back. He wanted to go to John, but he could see John struggling to suppress his incandescent anger, that he didn’t want Sherlock to see it, see where it came from. In this, John was unchanged from before, and so Sherlock knew what to do. He nodded firmly and looked away until John was composed.

“It’s over now,” John said. “They were trying to ---” he couldn’t say the word.

Exorcism.

“I am familiar with this. It’s very rare.” Sherlock was carefully examining the remains of Aude’s symbols without touching, proving he was still possessed of the supreme arrogance of the world’s only consulting detective. He pocketed the bottle of angel’s bane, which still held a quantity of the
greenish powder. “What kind of priest attacks an angel?”

“They don’t believe I’m really an angel, Sherlock.”

Aude regarded her brother’s unmoving body. “You’ve killed him,” she said quietly.

John had taken lives before, and always, he had thought, for good reason. Serving his country, defending others. Sometimes, defending himself. This felt different. He had used the body of an angel, Sollas’s gift, to kill. But he couldn’t imagine making a different choice. Whatever Jean-Marc had been doing had made him feel like he was being taken apart. He wasn’t going to let that happen again.

Not to himself, and never, ever to Sherlock and the baby.

John and Sherlock looked at each other, really looking at their new, different forms. It felt like another crossing. John took Sherlock’s hand and felt the rampant blood flowing under Sherlock’s skin. It felt hot, flushed with life. He looked up to see the tips of sharp teeth gleaming on the plush cushion of Sherlock’s bottom lip. A tiny red droplet rested delicately at the corner of his mouth.

“You are under the power of a demon, both of you,” Aude whispered harshly. “Can’t you smell the foul blood on Sherlock? For him, it’s too late. But not for you, John Watson. Jean-Marc was cleansing you. He was driving out the demon.”

John shook his head. Ice prickled his veins at the words. “I don’t care what you think we are. I know what we are, that’s enough. We’re leaving this place, Sherlock. Now.”

“We can’t trust her,” Sherlock said coolly. John couldn’t disagree.

Dante patiently sat guard. How much easier it would be to just kill her too, John thought. A small twist of the neck and she would break under his hand. John saw her determination to fight, to live. And to stop them if she could. Just one little twist. . .

Sherlock took the old book from Jean-Marc’s still-warm hand and scanned the pages, stopping at one with a small hum of surprise.

“Some of these drawings are from The Omega Sutra. I think they must study it in the Priory.”

Aude glared.

Even here, Sherlock’s heart beat faster at the sight of the exquisite images. They had the formal stiffness of medieval illumination, with still-vivid colors and gilding laid down centuries ago still nearly fresh on the pages. The style was completely different to the sinuous Eastern intricacy of The Omega Sutra that Maxim had shared with him. But the acts of erotic and obscene intimacy were familiar.

The truth was, Sherlock kept a very secret room in his mind palace that was reserved for the very choicest ones, images he found the most alluring, the most arousing, that in stolen moments he imagined John. . . The Thousand Strokes was one, of course, and it was here. Heat rushed over him with a single glance. The pictures glowed softly, drawing him in, acts still unknown to his body maybe, but not to his dreams. John’s hand was on him, gripping hard, steadying, possessive.

There was something else. He had heard Jean-Marc’s voice echoing in the halls. The book had lists of strange words, seemingly meaningless. He thought he knew what they were.

Sherlock held the book up to Aude’s face.
“Tell me, Aude. Do they mean something to you? Something . . . more than what they seem? Was Jean-Marc using the barbarous names to call something? To use against John?”

“Get thee behind me, Satan,” Aude spat.

John’s temper flared up again. He was glad that he could feel anger. In Afghanistan, down in that cold stone cellar, he had lost the ability to feel emotion, even anger, even fear. Anger was a kind of power, and there he had had none. He saw himself again, small and shivering, twisting helplessly, heard the abject, absolute humiliation of his pleas, smelled the hot copper of blood spurt from his shoulder in the snow, the cold press of the silver cross that he took from his dead companion.

His fingers itched and clenched at his side beneath his wing. John imagined a pit opening and swallowing Aude. In that pit she would feel fear and cold and hunger.

And pain.

With a crack the stone opened directly beneath his hand. A dark crevice now yawned at their feet.

“John. Stop now.”

Sherlock seized John’s clenched hands in his larger ones, forcing him to look up into his face. John had tried to confine him in the makeshift tower prison, a solitary harem. Like the “old ways.” And he had indeed felt the age-old temptation of an omega to yield, to allow himself to be kept by his Alpha.

Omegas weren’t supposed to overmaster their Alphas.

The stone cracked and widened. John’s eyes were clouded with the visions that were consuming him. Sherlock knew immediately what they were, the pain from the angel thorn had triggered the very thing that John tried his hardest to keep behind his very own wall of thorns. John didn’t try to shake him off, but Sherlock felt tremendous waves of pain, anger and even fear telegraph through his palm.

He thought of the baby and instantly released his grip. But he didn’t stop trying to draw John back into his gaze, back to here and now. Aude was praying loudly, her wide eyes on the huge gaping crevice, leading down to darkness below. Dante looked down too, growling softly. The stone floor started to heave and buckle.

“John.”

Sherlock backed away from the dark maw, instinctively clutching at his stomach, and tripped over the fallen body of Jean-Marc. The fading warmth of skin, the newly tantalizing scent of blood leaking from a wound in the back of his skull. Sherlock stared at the still-bright crimson, slowly trickling.

Aude’s prayers stopped at a horrid wet sound. John turned away from the dark crevice.

“Sherl-”

Sherlock was crouched low, quenching his thirst with gore. At the sound of John’s voice, he looked up, blinked innocently, and licked the smeared blood with the satisfaction of a great cat.

* * *

John made a temporary prison for Aude by binding her with twine from the pantry and closing her
inside, Dante posted at the door.

Then John filled the huge stone trough sink with hot water and rinsed all the powder away. Then he drained it, filled it again, and made Sherlock climb in. He allowed John to cleanse the blood from his face and throat, which he did with as great a concentration as if he were performing surgery.

“Are you going to tell me what happened to you?” He finally said. “Why...”

Sherlock inspected a bit of blood still clinging to his fingertip. John snatched it and wiped it clean.

“I know how to trap Talbott now. I asked Dante to show me. He knows his omega lady’s scent. To know it for myself, I had to...“ He swallowed. “You know what I did, John. I’d just done it to you. You wanted me to. You know this.”

John’s eyes were stretched wide, as though he was looking at something that could destroy him. That was probably true, Sherlock thought.

“I had to drink Dante’s blood to learn her scent, down to the molecules. There was no other way. And for my kind -- “

“‘Your kind’?”

“My kind, the Bloodlines, half-angels, the nephilim. It’s our nature. We’re blood drinkers. It’s not exactly a secret. Read the Book of Enoch, the Catholics weren’t able to get rid of it entirely. And that’s probably the least of our vices, actually. We are the reason why God sent the flood to destroy all of his creatures save the ones on Noah’s ark.”

“But --” John looked at Jean-Marc’s corpse. Exsanguinated, white as milk. Hardened as he was, the thought of all that strong man’s blood drained through his mate’s sensual mouth made his own blood shiver. “It’s-- it’s not the same as drinking from me, Sherlock. I’m not human anymore, you can’t hurt me. I don’t have real blood. And I’m your bonded, I know I wanted you to do. . . that to me. With me. But. . . drinking real blood from a real person, Sherlock, Jesus Christ --”

Sherlock half-smirked. “Exactly. In a certain light Christianity can be considered a blood-cult. Maybe . . . the Bloodlines are part of that. Somehow. Anyway, are you truly afraid I won’t be able to control myself? I only. . . turned, I suppose you could call it, not an hour ago. I didn’t expect---well, how it would feel. The smell of it. I won’t be surprised a second time. And I didn’t kill him, John. He was. . . dead already.”

He refrained from stating the obvious, which was that John Watson had killed the priest.

But nobody’s eyes could see through him like John’s, not from the very beginning. Now that he was an angel it was a thousand times worse, or better. This felt worse. He hung his head.

“John. Say you still trust me.”

John didn’t answer. He climbed back into the stone trough. He still felt unclean. He concentrated on the feel of water running over his body, willing it to do its work. This triggered a memory of sitting on the edge of the tub in 221b, letting the hot water run over his bruises after the bombing in Hampstead Heath. Sherlock pushing his way into the little steam-filled room, how very impossible it had seemed in that moment that they would ever be bond mates. He wondered what the dark thing that was apparently possessing him now would do to them, to their bond.

Say you still trust me.
He wiped the last of Jean-Marc’s blood from Sherlock’s lips, then kissed them. He could almost feel it—the closing of another of the innumerable invisible doors that they kept passing through, each one leading to a darker place. His bonded was a blood-drinker now. A real vampire, albeit some sort of angel, too. This very moment, blood of a dead priest was flowing in his veins. And it didn’t trouble him in the slightest. It almost felt inevitable.

“Jean-Marc was trying to perform an exorcism,” John said. “On me.”

“I asked him about that, you know. If he was an exorcist. He denied it, but I think Jean-Marc was comfortable with the sin of falsehood. And he was using a very specific kind of spell on you, John. He was using the barbarous names.

“Tell me what that means, ‘barbarous names.’ I think I remember something about it from the Pridiax papers. It’s to do with demons.”

“It’s to do with calling up a demon and subduing it, by using their true names. Those names are called ‘the barbarous names.’ That is what Jean-Marc was doing to you, that is what his words meant. So... what did it feel like?”

John scrambled back from Sherlock. He was the one that felt polluted.

“Sherlock. I felt the words working. On me. Or whatever’s inside me.”

“Are you saying that you think we should have let them finish the exorcism? They were killing you!”

“If it was working, it’s because switching with Sollas hasn’t changed anything. Inside, I belong to...”

“Don’t ever say that. Don’t even think it. Inside, you belong to me, John Watson.”

John sighed. “I do.”

John touched Sherlock’s now-spotless lips with his fingertip. Sherlock didn’t resist as John ran his fingers inside Sherlock’s mouth, feeling the edges of his sharp new incisors. He sucked gently at John’s finger, unable to resist.

“We need to get moving. You said... you know how to trap Talbott. I guess that means I know where you want to go.”

“No, John. I don’t want to. But I have to. We have to. You saw what Dante showed me.”

Dante approached and looked up from one to the other with his soft reddish eyes. John frowned down at the hellhound.

“I suppose you’re to blame for this, you damned beast. I never should have trusted you.”

Dante whined at the threat in John’s voice. John tucked his wings close against his back. There was a long row of wooden pegs with various thick wool coats, and he took one for himself and another for Sherlock.

“You said we have time until the solstice. We aren’t going to be parted and we aren’t risking the baby.”

“Of course not. But why do you say this, John?”
“Just making it clear that us trying to leave the Priory the way I came here is out of the question. Even though you have wings now too.”

“Ah. I feel quite certain that Mycroft is still close. He’ll take care of it.”

“In the meantime, I still need you to eat something.” Sherlock looked both guilty and smug at this, but John wasn’t having any of it. “I mean real food.”

Aude’s warning still rang in his ears, that Sherlock wouldn’t want the Priory’s wholesome food any longer. Because of what he had become. John offered him the tray he had prepared, watching Sherlock struggle with more than his customary aversion to food.

“For the baby,” John added sternly.

Sherlock nodded and nibbled on a fragment of cheese and they both held their breath, John unable to prevent himself from picturing Sherlock heaving up a river of blood. But Sherlock smiled after a moment, a real smile, and took a bigger bite.

“It’s all right. It tastes wonderful. I’m still famished,” he said. “She must be growing.”

John placed his hand over Sherlock’s minute belly, wanting to feel what he had felt before, the clear impression of their unborn daughter, safely ensconced within the womb. But that vision wouldn’t come. He could feel Sherlock’s warm skin, the thrumming of blood beneath, but nothing more.

“Keep eating,” he said. “I’ll fetch your mobile. Tell Mycroft we need the fastest, safest way back to Hantswood Hall.”

##
John and Sherlock’s preparations for the return to Hantswood Hall were simple. John took nothing but two rough overcoats to cover their wings and the remains of the Priory’s silver that Sherlock had hidden from Jean-Marc. Sherlock took a suitcase full of the Priory’s most arcane books, Aude’s vial of angel’s thorn, and a laptop which Mycroft had thoughtfully provided when he arranged their transport to return to England. Mycroft himself had refused to leave France.

“Until Lestrade is prepared to travel, we are staying. Believe me, I am aware that my presence is urgently required in London. But I can’t go.”

“No, you should stay,” Sherlock said softly. “He needs you. There’s no one else now.”

“Of course not. Nor will there be. Ever.”

“So you’ve chosen sides in this war after all, despite Mummy’s warning.”

“I’ve chosen my own side. For once. I hereby recuse myself from attempting to save the world.”

Sherlock and Mycroft embraced without any trace of their old reserve.

“You and John should do the same, you know. You don’t have to go to England. If you stay, we can keep moving, keep hiding. That was John’s plan, I know. You must think of the baby.”

“So everyone is always telling me. I don’t know why. I do, I assure you. But our problems won’t go away by running. You know this, Mycroft. But – thank you.”

Sherlock looked down as they were borne away in their chartered airplane. He saw Mycroft raising
his hand in farewell, watched as the stone walls of the Priory shrank. He could swear he also saw a tall dark shape, bigger than a man, standing in the wood behind Mycroft.

The North Downs, Surrey

John was keenly aware of the approach of nightfall as the winter solstice grew nearer. While his present senses did not really need the light, John felt compelled to watch the fading winter light’s retreat, the approach of fast-moving shadows spreading like spilled ink. As the countryside was swallowed by the dark, John thought the undulating hills and dales looked like beasts crouching low, impatiently waiting to lunge at unsuspecting prey.

Sherlock stood by quietly, observing John at his nightly vigil. He had always appreciated the usefulness of darkness. He found it quite soothing. Nighttime was when he was most in his element. John’s unease telegraphed itself, an unwelcome feeling that he wished to dispel. He touched John’s shoulder, intending perhaps to reason with his mate, but John’s expression stopped him. He took John’s hand and squeezed it instead, and they continued on their way.

The darkened road was crossed with fragments of stone that marked an old Roman road and overshadowed by ancient beeches, the same road that Sherlock had traveled with El Brujo on All Hallows Eve. The road that led to Canterbury.

(“Texts of all languages and of all times teach us about light and dark, good and evil, yin and yang, creation and destruction.” “The Omega Sutra is one, I suppose.” “Of course.”)

As it always did, thoughts of the Omega Sutra sparked a tiny carnal flame that he could not help lingering over, gripping John’s hand more tightly. John didn’t stop, but there was sudden heat where his palm met Sherlock’s and he darted a quick, darkly covetous look.

They climbed the rise of a small chalk hill. All was quiet. There was the familiar pub at the end of the narrow lane, a few huddled stone buildings straggling up the hill. Sherlock led them to a small outbuilding across from the pub, hidden from unwelcome eyes by a tumbledown stone wall. Inside, Sherlock wrote out a series of numbers on a scrap of paper.

“Give this to the owner and he’ll give you the case.”

“What if he doesn’t have it any more?”

Sherlock didn’t answer for a moment. “If it isn’t there . . . we will have to return to London, where we will attract a great deal of attention in places where we assuredly would not wish to be noticed.”

“No more than here. Stay well hidden. Don’t leave here for any reason until I come back with the case.”

There was nothing John wanted more than to return to London and Baker Street, but with the approaching solstice their plan seemed to have taken on a power of its own, and he hadn’t tried to change their course. Also, as he looked on the lonely pub, he felt a sort of dreadful lure, not unlike what he had felt traveling in Afghanistan with the soldiers of the damned – converging with silent footfall upon some remote outpost with only the moon and stars to light their way, the cold thrill of knowing that in moments the silence would be broken by screams.

###
John entered quietly, keeping his shabby overcoat on, ordered a pint and sipped, pretending to watch muted telly. The place was deserted, which suited John. After a few minutes, he slid the paper across the bar.

“I’m here to collect this.”

The barman was a rugged Alpha. He paused from his slow polishing of the taps and scanned the paper, holding it close to his face, trying to catch lingering scent.

“I remember who left it,” he said finally with a sharp look that put John’s hackles up. “You’re not him.”

They were not far, as the crow flies, from the village of Tatsfield, John knew. Or the charred remains of Hantswood Hall. Had this man been one of the figures in the woods on All Hallows Eve, watching the Hall burn? John looked over his strong frame, into his close-set eyes. The sluggish boredom of moments ago was gone. Now there was only the gleam of greedy lust. Maybe his own eyes reflected back a different kind of lust, just as greedy.

John pictured the bodies of Maxim Purcell’s Alphas sprawled in the dark stone room deep below the Hall, the stench of fresh blood and Alpha rut. Was he one of those Alphas, the ones who fell into rut and slaughtered one another over Sherlock? He had thought they were all dead, but he had been in no shape that night to notice if one had managed to escape. And they had all been masked.

It didn’t matter. He was certain now that the man was one of Maxim’s Alphas from All Hallows Eve. He could almost read the man’s thoughts, they were written in his face and in the abrupt shift in his pheromones. This had been a mistake.

This Alpha remembered Sherlock, he wanted him.

He would go hunting for Sherlock.

John forced himself to stillness.

“No, I’m not him. But you’re going to bring it to me anyway.” He looked hard at the publican, willing him to comply. John could sense the case, almost picture it, and when the man obediently pushed the door to the back he imagined that he caught the minutest whiff of faded particles of Sherlock’s omega scent. He moved to follow it. He would take the case, this man would never stop him.

But the publican had returned with the case. The perfect scent of his mate wafted up as he set it down with a thunk and faint rattle of glass. He inhaled deeply and laid his palm on the battered leather skin of the case. Sherlock’s scent from before the crossing, then after the crossing too, overlain with artificial odors of working-class beta and naïve, weak virgin omega. He should not have been able to tell the difference, they were so brilliantly crafted. But his angel form knew, it was as plain as night and day.

The tarnished brass lock bore a number of bright, new-looking scratches.

“You tried to open it.” His hands flexed into fists just like his real body would have done, but the black burning in his belly was nothing like human. His wings felt tight and angry trapped under his coat.

The man looked away. “It . . . worries at me. Day and night, it does. Since he left it.” He licked his lips and pulled a tyre iron from under the bar. His lust had clouded his wits. He couldn’t perceive the threat that was just inches away. “Now -- you open it here in front of me, and clear
John smirked.

A black tremor shot along his arm and into his hand that was already wrapped around the man’s throat. For thinking of Sherlock. Craving Sherlock. The idea, too, that Sherlock might have wanted the man to feel this way was like a jagged knife splitting him in two. John watched his face turn purple, his eyes crimson as the tender capillaries swelled and burst. He was going to squeeze the life out of him. He knew he could have easily destroyed the man with a blast, this crude brute force was pointless but he really needed to feel the tiny crunch as the hyoid bone snapped, the flutter of his pulse against the palm of his hand.

John counted the beats as the heart grew sluggish, then stopped. He looked into his bulging eyes as the light went out, that greedy lust extinguished forever.

# # #

John dragged the body behind the bar and stared at his work for long minutes. Sherlock would be getting nervous, he had taken too long. He couldn’t let Sherlock see what he had done.

He tried to will it to just disappear, hoping against hope that his powers extended that far, but the corpse shuddered in a grotesque imitation of life and did not vanish.

He could set fire to this place with a thought, incinerate the body. Most of all, obliterate all traces of his omega’s scent. No, fire was too conspicuous. It would be too much like the fire at Hantswood Hall, the villagers appearing mysteriously from the surrounding wood. Fire would draw people, and they needed to get away quietly and unnoticed. No one could find the body, not until they were far from here.

He decided to drag the body into the cellar. The pub was over 200 years old, and the cellar was a low-ceilinged, earthen box. There was a freezer chest, but the dead man’s body was much too large for it. He cursed himself, looking down at the still-warm body with its bulging, sightless eyes that would never look at Sherlock again.

He considered the enormity of what he had done. It ought to be knocking him down with shock and horror.

But it didn’t.

He would tear the corpse limb from limb. Then it would fit in the freezer chest. He would have to be careful of the blood. Sherlock had always been keenly sensitive to the slightest trace of blood, now more than ever since his change.

He imagined returning to his mate, coated with gore. He imagined Sherlock, licking him clean. The images made him feel depraved, unclean, and very hard. But he didn’t stop. It was the work of mere seconds.

Above, there was a sound of heavy feet on the wooden floor. The evening drinkers were arriving. Someone shouted for the publican.

John left the pub with his head down and the case under his arm. As he closed the door, there was a shrill metallic screech from above. He looked up.

“The Devil’s Punchbowl,” the faded pub sign proclaimed, creaking mournfully in the wind.
John opened his coat to hide the case and made his way in the deepest shadows of the street. A single coal-black feather fell out, and a freezing gust carried it away.

###

John was relieved when Sherlock ignored his return. He silently put the case on the rough table. He had thought that Sherlock would want to get to work on his pheromone potion at once, but Sherlock was oblivious, examining one of the ancient volumes he had taken from the Priory, mouthing words silently as he read along. His long fingers traced the words. He leaned over Sherlock’s shoulder to look closer.

The words looked completely foreign, possibly Latin or Greek. They hurt his eyes somehow. He pushed the book aside. Beneath was another old book, illustrated with a crude woodcut of a werewolf.

“I thought you were leaving Greg’s case to Mycroft. Did you find something there to help?”


“I feel sick about it.” And he did feel sick. He tried to shake it off, but the unnatural feelings that possessed him at the pub weren’t going away.

“Lestrade was trying to help us, and he put himself out front. He’s paid a terrible price. According to all known data on the subject, lycanthropy is irreversible. But it’s the fact of the change itself that fascinates me. Lestrade can change from human form to wolf form, and back again. According to Mycroft.”

“I don’t know where this is going, Sherlock -- but you’ve already changed. So have I. You can’t want to change more. I won’t let you.” John reached down Sherlock’s lean back to stroke the silky new wings folded under his coat. Sherlock turned his face up, pale with flushed cheeks and plush lips. His belly swelled slightly against his shirt. His sharp new incisors were neatly retracted in the absence of fresh blood.

“But that’s how we’ll trap Talbott. I need him to believe I am his omega. The entire plan depends upon it. You’ve been able to change, John – for a time, you were invisible to me. And you have wings, you’re an angel now--”

“--- I’ve told you, that’s not what I really am—“

But Sherlock rushed on, determined to make his point. “-- and when we – you and I, at the Priory, your shape when we were together – you were inside me, John. And you... changed your shape, I. . . felt it.”

With omega reticence that he still surprisingly possessed, he blushed. John leaned in and took his mouth hard, pressing in and licking the tips of those sharp, sharp teeth. He thought of them moistened with fresh blood. He thought of other blood, even fresher. He felt himself fill and harden again, heavy and hot.

“John –“

He had Sherlock bent over the chair, open and gasping, before he quite knew how it had happened. He had never seen Sherlock look so perfect as in this moment, bent and subdued under his hand.

“Stop talking,” he snarled, and took his cock into his own hand, remembering how he had made it swell and grow, how he could fill his omega in ways no one else ever could. This angel form
would do whatever he required. And he would make Sherlock do what he required.

“John, John -- what?” Sherlock was pressed against the table, looking back at him over his shoulder, eyes shining. Not with desire. This close, he could smell recently-washed foreign blood on his mate’s skin, foul and pungent. Underneath, the unmistakable odor of death, something he had always been able to identify since his earliest memory.

A very fresh death.

John had killed, then. Within the past hour. And had concealed that fact from him.

Much worse than that terrible fact was that John was unmoved, seemingly, by the experience.

This was so very unlike John Watson that Sherlock’s heart sank. Something was wrong with John, and at this point he had no trouble deducing what it was.

“John,” he said, low and reasonable, as if his heart wasn’t starting to hammer a tattoo into his sternum, “let me go.”

John shoved Sherlock’s head down hard against the table, admiring his struggles, the sharp snap of his teeth rattling in his skull at the force. “Don’t you look at me. You want to be his omega lady, do you?”

The very idea made him feel like he would detonate, leaving nothing for anyone else to covet, ever again. In fact, this felt inevitable. Perfect. He pictured the publican. Now they would both be torn apart, together.

“You want it so badly, you’re always plotting to make them come after you, it’s all you’ve ever done since this whole thing started. I tried to teach you at Baker Street. I tried to teach you at the Priory. And you defied me, Sherlock.”

“. . . defied you?” Sherlock gasped. Not believing, not understanding. But he would make Sherlock understand everything.

“Yes. Now you will learn.” He held Sherlock down easily, his thrashing as pointless as that of a butterfly pinned to a velvet case. He vividly pictured this, Sherlock with his silvery wings spread behind him, laid out on black velvet, pinned and helpless, but struggling hard-- because that was his nature.

He needed to be taught his place.

He wondered if Sherlock’s flesh would still bruise as it did before the change, and forced Sherlock’s head back to impress a vicious Alpha bite on his throat. Sherlock kicked and howled.

He was rewarded by a purplish-crimson mark with edges like a spider’s web woven of gold thread. He wanted to cover every inch of Sherlock’s skin with his Alpha mark, turn his creamy white skin entirely to red and purple and gold, listen to his screams as it was proved that there was not a single inch that was not his Alpha’s to mark and to claim. To possess and destroy.

The idea burrowed into his mind until he could see nothing but the most perfect mark that he would create on Sherlock’s body, a mark that would truly bind them. This mark had a shape that he seemed to have always known. He didn’t understand why he hadn’t done this long ago. When Sherlock bore his true mark, nothing would ever come between them again.

###
To do this work, he needed access to Sherlock’s heart. He tossed Sherlock onto his back, held him easily with one hand, while the other he willed to become a cutting blade. Instead, his hand transformed into a black claw with dagger-like nails that gleamed.

John shouted his exultation and bent to make his sign on his omega’s heart.

Sherlock fought with everything he had, kicking and biting and grasping for anything that he could use as a weapon. But he overmastered Sherlock easily, muttering epithets as he struck Sherlock once, twice, until he lay still, panting: half-breed, a bastard angel, bloodsucking vampire, omega whore ---

Sherlock stared as the words fell from John’s lips, cutting like razors. John was drawing a sign with his claw-like hand on the bare flesh of his chest. A stinking mist rose from the cuts. His heart galloped, skipping beats.


John laughed. It wasn’t a trick of the light that created the loathsome shape animating the mask of his face. John’s wings spread wide all around them, now tipped with sharp claws that pierced and stung, and tears sprang to Sherlock’s eyes to see how those wings had changed, the feathers no longer silvery but black as coal. The wings grew impossibly huge until they filled the room, enveloping Sherlock in an unbreachable wall of darkness.

(. . . in a quarter of an hour’s time there grew up all around the park of the chateau such a vast number of trees, great and small, and hedges of brambles and thorns, all interlaced with one another, so that neither man nor beast could pass through.)

Fast as a cobra, Sherlock grabbed at the soldier’s crucifix that John had placed around his neck in Baker Street and brandished it in John’s face. To his everlasting amazement and horror, John howled like a jackal and fell back as if he had stepped on a mine.

Sherlock scrambled free, grasping desperately for the one thing that might save them, the book that had hurt John’s eyes. He seized it and it fell open-- as if by magic-- to the place he needed. A slip of paper in his own hand fluttered out, and he caught it before John could stop him and pressed it to his forehead.

He forced up from his mind palace all he remembered about the rite, a pre-Christian vestige of Greco-Egyptian magic. Its purpose: to drive out demons.

An exorcism.

“This incantation from ancient Greek, Hebrew, and Sumerian, differs from all others I have so far studied. Reputedly taken from an ancient scroll excavated in Thebes, it does not attempt to deploy magical forces from some divine higher power. Rather it affirms and proclaims the practitioner himself as divine, and orders the demon submit itself to the practitioner’s personal, god-like power. “

“ARGBRAO REIBAT, AOTH SABAOTH,” Sherlock stammered with as much confidence as he could summon.

One was supposed to imagine that the scrap of paper was a serpent, swallowing its own tail. He watched John carefully. He was standing before him, growling and vibrating, and glaring at him with a ferocity that turned Sherlock’s blood to cold metal, but he stayed forcibly rooted to the ground, held by some invisible force. Sherlock could only hope -- he did not, even now, think of
praying – that the force was created by some power in the vibrations of the words, as he had
learned from his attempts to understand it.

“I call upon you by your true name. Hear me.”

John held his hands over his eyes. “Stop, Sherlock. Please.” He tried to smack the book from
Sherlock’s hand, and imagined making it vanish or at least fly from Sherlock’s hand, but his
angelic power was seeping away. He could see it go, it was a black gelatinous mass that trembled
and clung to him like quicksand, steadily dissolving as Sherlock’s voice rang strongly. He was
terrified of what would happen to him when it was all gone.

The thought of Sherlock being here, and him being forced away again galvanized him. If he could
just get to Sherlock’s heart, this would stop and Sherlock would be one with him. Sherlock didn’t
understand, he had to make him stop.

“Sherlock, you’re taking me apart! It will end me!”

Sherlock stopped. John looked shrunken and terribly afraid. His eyes looked like a trapped
animal’s. His powerful black wings drooped like black rags over cracked bones. They couldn’t
hold Sherlock prisoner now. The incantation was starting to work, but it was also hurting John.
Maybe killing John.

Sherlock bit back a cry at this. He didn’t think he could actually do it until he saw the green fire
behind John’s eyes, the infernal eyes of the demon that had taken possession of John. “Not you,
John. What is in you. Now, listen to my words! I am the one who possesses immortal fire.”

John writhed and shrieked, the sounds more horrible even than his screams in the Battersea
warehouse, and something inside Sherlock crumpled and faltered. The cord of their bond was
stretched so thin he was sure it would break. Without that strength, without John, he might as well
walk into the abyss that he sensed was yawning open, stretching wide to claim them all.

John clawed at Sherlock, at himself, at the air. Something was being ripped from him, a thing that
had burrowed into him, down to the cells. He had been invaded and conquered before he had
understood the rules of engagement. He couldn’t lose it without losing himself, no matter what
Sherlock did to him. He tried to hold it within himself, even though keeping it inside made him feel
like an abomination.

If it answered Sherlock, he was doomed.

A visceral scream that was nothing like John Watson’s, even in his darkest hour of torture, was
wrenched from him. Sherlock gasped to see a white mist, stinking of brimstone, billowing from his
mouth. This was the mist, he knew, that had almost taken him at Hantswood Hall. But John had
made his bargain with the Devil in his place. He would do anything at all, even bring John pain,
and worse, to free him.

The mist turned to water. Water gushed from John’s mouth, and then there was a rushing sound of
water all around them. Water ran down the walls, rose up from the ground, brackish water that
smelt of decay. In an instant, it was halfway up Sherlock’s chest. The cold of it made him shiver
violently. The scrap of paper and Jean-Marc’s spell book were both sucked away by the swirling
water. The water began to form a sucking whirlpool.

John shut his mouth, but the water flowed ever faster. He looked exultant.

“My heart is encircled by a serpent. BAABNATH ABRASAX TOTH.”
“Sherlock, you’re killing me, stop,” John whined. But it was a vile, croaking voice trying to mimic John’s, with nothing of John’s humanity in it. Sherlock kept on.

“I am the one who begets and destroys. You will not take John Watson.”

“He is already ours.”

John’s eyes were misted over like dark quicksilver, like the eyes of the Alphas at Hantswood Hall, and Sherlock’s eyes spilled hot tears to see it. Wherever John Watson was, this was not him. But for a moment, the demon sounded like John in every way. “Sherlock, please, if you love me you’ll stop, you’re killing me, this is your last chance – “

Sherlock risked all and pushed through the whirling water to John, and pulled him into his arms. His stomach heaved as he sloshed in the rising water. Soon it would be over both their heads. It was at John’s chin.

“I am the one whose mouth burns. Come forth, demon, and reveal to me your true name.”

At that, he grabbed John’s dog tags that he had worn around his neck since the night they left Baker Street, and pressed them to John’s forehead. This time he screamed with John Watson’s true voice. But the water began to recede as John’s fingertip traced a crude symbol on his own chest, as his limbs began to transform their shape from human-like form, to strange tentacles and claws. Sherlock covered his ears as John howled. Sherlock swore he could smell burning flesh and sea water. It must be an illusion. This is not John’s real body, he reminded himself.

He recognized the bloody symbol from the *Dictionaire Infernal*. John was growling wetly as though his own throat was being torn out, tentacles that looked like dripping seaweed sprang from somewhere in his back and reached for Sherlock, trying to suck him down, and Sherlock embraced what was left of John.

“Now! Give me your name!”

The demon writhed, changing its shape, kaleidoscope-like. Now it was a sea serpent under John’s skin.

“John! Fight it with all your strength! Fight for me!”

John seized Sherlock’s hand and pulled his tags around his own neck. His chest heaved and body wracked with spasms as before Sherlock’s eyes, John’s body tried to change into a sea monster from a primal nightmare. Sherlock was terrified that John would be torn apart.

He clung more tightly to John’s thrashing form. Tentacles with sharp teeth sliced into his wet skin, and burned with the demon’s venom.

“Now John! Cast it out!”

“Focalor,” John cried with a guttural groan from between chattering teeth, eyes were stretched wide. “My name is Focalor.”

“John! Hold on!” They held each other, dripping and shivering. Sherlock placed a protective hand on his belly. “I name you Focalor. Subject to me this demon.”

The water instantly receded, reversing itself in violation of nature, flowing backward and up. Within the black water was a shifting hideous shape of whipping tentacles, scaly limbs, snapping claws. A cruel, degenerate face leered out at them.

“What is your command?” Its voice surprisingly civil. For a demon.

Sherlock said barely had time to say, “I command you to wait,” before he collapsed altogether with John. John dragged him into a hard embrace, every inch of their drenched bodies pressed together. He took Sherlock’s mouth with his lips and pressed inside, letting his own warmth return warmth to his mate, stealing back the cold from Sherlock’s frigid lips until they melted under his, pressing his palm over Sherlock’s belly until the shivering stopped. He ran his hands over Sherlock until he was perfectly warm and dry. He ran his fingers through Sherlock’s curls, and the black water evaporated under his touch.

“You saved me,” John said.

“You saved yourself. I just brought the magic.”

“How on earth did you do it?”

“I can’t really explain it. It’s very old magic. Let’s just say, it’s a good thing I keep my mind palace up to date. . . Focalor,” Sherlock said carefully, watching for any sign that the demon was turning on them, “I believe you are reputed to have power over the sea and winds. Am I correct?”

“You are.”

“And you are bound to obey me now, do you agree?”

“For a time. You may not find my service. . . pleasant.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Sherlock. . . I don’t want this creature anywhere near us, do you understand? Order him to go far away from us, and never return. Ever. Do it now. Right now.”

“But John, he can’t harm us now. In fact, he can’t harm anyone or anything—not if I command him not to. There are things I want to know that could take years to discover on my own. If I could discover them at all.”

They looked at the demon, hovering coolly in a slow swirl of dark water. The demon looked back at them. He had reshaped his face to resemble a handsome man, a soldier. That didn’t make it easier for John. He looked away. The mark, Focalor’s sign, was still visible on his chest. He frowned.

“What do you mean, ‘for a time?’” Sherlock inquired sharply.

“Because your time, Sherlock Holmes, is about to run out.”
From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were; I have not seen
As others saw.

-- Edgar Allan Poe.

Sherlock tried to keep the demon under his eye. The demon had inflicted grievous ravages upon John’s body. The damage to John’s soul was likely incalculable. He touched John’s face. It was set into hard, expressionless lines. John’s eyes were fixed and vacant, staring at nothing visible.

Sherlock’s omega sensitivity to his mate was no less now than before his transformation. Sherlock gripped John’s cold hand. It was like marble. Now only the most ephemeral of threads anchored John’s spirit to his body. Maybe the only thing still keeping John here at all was this place where their flesh met, palm to palm.

The Priory’s library had taught Sherlock that that the usual purpose for summoning a demon was to obtain material desires -- gold and jewels, or to further more primal human passions -- love, or revenge. The spells often contained disrespectful language to humiliate the demon, which purportedly established mastery. The well of fear and hate that was boiling up inside tempted him to scream curses at the demon. He bit his lips for a long moment until they nearly bled. He shook until he was sure the demon could hear his teeth rattle.

Whatever happened, however long it took, no matter the cost, he would exact revenge for this hurt to John. Being an omega hadn't held him back when there was something he really wanted to do. But that was largely because before John, he had suppressed and manipulated his omega impulses until they were nothing more than a faint ripple in his cold blood. He had new powers, and he would do all he could to increase them. Other omegas, dominated by the will of the Alphas, were battered and sunk by pheromone-driven tidal waves. In a cottage by a Scottish loch he had yielded everything to John, but he would yield to no one and nothing else. And he would make this demon, and all of the demons who were against them, even the highest, pay the price.

Sherlock's newly malleable, winged and fanged body seemed almost to be an independent being with a mind of its own that was hidden to him. He saw himself lunge at the demon, tearing at its oily green-blue flesh with his sharp teeth. But the hovering demon expelled a wave of dank air smelling of decaying things, and his fury chilled to ice.

“Focalor,” he addressed the demon with cold courtesy, "I thank you in advance for your. . . aid.”

The demon's voice surprisingly resolved from its horrifying, gelatinous notes to a cultured tone that rang out like an actor declaiming Shakespeare.

“I can only perform works according to your demand, Sherlock Holmes. Whether this aids you or not is up to you.”
Sherlock clasped John’s hand more tightly and was disturbed by the unyielding quality of it. It felt like rigor mortis. He heaved a deep breath.

"How long have you been-- inside John? Possessing him?"

"The move from occupancy to possession can be challenging. I don't boast when I say that in this case, few of my kind could have done it at all -- his body is not his own, not actually human, as you well know. As for how long it has been, you ought to know."

And Sherlock did. There had been certain troublesome signs in John that had disturbed him. In the rush of events since their flight from London he had found it easy to misinterpret them. His powers of observation and deduction had failed them both.

"Since. . . the Priory. "

"You deduce correctly. Your escape in the woods was narrow and as you now must understand, only temporary."

"Don't dare threaten us, demon. You must never possess John Watson again in any way, ever. That is my first command."

Focalor nodded impassively but the grey waters surrounding him churned and shifted. “Very well.”

“Nor harm John in any way, ever.”

With a slight curl of his lip, Focalor nodded again.

“I believe it is required that you speak your agreement, Focalor. State that you will obey, if you please.”

“I shall obey. I shall not, in future, cause John Watson . . . harm.”

Sherlock considered whether the demon's concept of “harm” was materially different to his own. Also, there was the fact that, as Focalor had said, John’s spirit and his true, human body were divided now. The demon might attempt to evade his command by this means.

“Either in John’s corporeal body, wheresoever that may be, or in his spirit, or his soul, you shall never harm him, do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly clear. ” An oil-slick tentacle emerged from the water. The demon smiled, but the tentacle whipped around his head restlessly. "You reason like a lawyer, Mr. Holmes."

###

Sherlock looked to John, fully expecting John to chastise him for choosing to spend precious time with protecting his mate rather than saving himself. But John seemed not to be listening. Sherlock gathered John into his arms with a choked cry.

“What’s wrong? What have you done to him?”

“You mistake me for my better, Mr. Holmes. What has been done to John Watson, was done by the command of another, as you must well know. But as to your first question, in forcing me to vacate John Watson’s corporeal form so violently, it has become irreparably damaged. I say nothing more than the truth when I tell you-- it was never intended to be used like this. And surely not for so long.”
Under any other circumstance Sherlock would have demanded to know why, and how. “Then repair that damage, now.”

“You fail to appreciate the meaning of ‘irreparable.’”

Irreparable, irreparable, the word ricocheted around the inside of his skull. He rubbed his hands over John's chest, where the cold skin was etched with signs that seemed to move every time his eyes moved. He could almost read them if he could just focus.

“At least -- remove your signs from him, Focalor.” He could not let John hear him falter. He kept his voice low and steady. Focalor would feed on any weakness.

Focalor extended a pale appendage. Sherlock recoiled from the cruel thing touching his mate and snatched John away. But the signs were already fading by some power other than the demon's. Focalor's visage twisted. The moment the signs were gone, John sank to his knees as if the sigils had been the only thing keeping him upright.

Sherlock knelt and cradled John in his arms. The angelic radiance and power that John had possessed was gone.

*Irreparable, irreparable.*

“John! You must hold on, you know you can do it. You did before.” He kept his voice steady. He could never allow that the last thing John Watson should hear was his voice, afraid.

“No time.” John's voice was being forced from his lips by a mighty effort, as though to speak and to move now required strength beyond even John's indomitable will. "Make it release you-- from all of this. Promise.”

Then he fell silent. He might have been a corpse, or a statute. Sherlock laid his hands over John's cold chest, now pure and unmarked. There was a faint rise and fall. He gripped his wrist. A feeble pulse beat there. But his eyes did not meet his. Whatever they saw, it was deep within.

###

Sherlock stared at John's vacant face, his nearly inanimate form. An invisible blade was slicing his flesh, pressing down into his bones. This was the first stab of a severed Alpha-omega bond. His nerves sparked at the approach of infinite pain. Colours were fading, sounds dampening to a thin, shrill whine. It would probably go on forever.

His blood turned to rust and his heart grew sluggish. Any moment it would refuse to beat.

As though from high above he replayed the memory of when John had vanished before, seized by the hellhound. He saw himself literally folding in upon himself, and despised his weakness. He had been halfway to dead, and if it hadn’t been for their unborn child (daughter, John knew it was a girl), he might have actually gone.

But he hadn’t.

And their bond had not been severed. And John had returned. What had been done before, could be done again.
“Bring him back!”

Focalor's triumphant grin should have warned Sherlock of his mistake. Focalor immediately began muttering. The sound sparked an unspeakable dread, boring in deep into his brain. If he listened to the demon for much longer he felt probably would understand the demon's tongue, and maybe his thoughts would be in these demonic syllables.

"Sherlock! No!" It was a mere vibration that escaped from John's still lips, as though it came from somewhere else, very far away. It carried deep sadness, infinite anguish.

“Stop! Don’t! I take it back, leave John alone,” Sherlock gasped.

Focalor snarled. He had thwarted the demon, he had chosen correctly. But John would speak no more.

"I'm sorry, John." Sherlock whispered. "I'll save you, I'll bring you back, I promise." He turned to Focalor. The demon looked on Sherlock, but with a strange focus that seemed as if the eyes were being operated from some remote power. This, Sherlock imagined, was likely true.

“What just happened -- this isn't even John’s real body. You must tell me -- where is John’s real body now.”

“I am not omniscient,” Focalor said. “I could find out. It may take more time than you are given. But I will send one of my servants to inquire.”

“Time -- how much time do I have? How long must you serve me?” What if this was all an elaborate deception to distract him from his plans? If he walked outside, would he find that John was really still down the road at the pub, that this was all an illusion?

“I must serve you until dawn.”

Could he order the demon to take them on orbit around the earth, always just ahead of the sunrise? It was tempting. But if there was a way to alter the relentless approach of the solstice, it would already have been done. What he needed from Focalor, he needed now. Behind the closed shutters there was a gradual change of light. Dawn was coming soon.

The powers arrayed against them had sought one thing almost above all others – to destroy his bond with John. In exorcising the demon, he had seemingly served their design by his own hand. John was gone. The too-human sensations of loss that he had spent a lifetime trying to guard against -- pain, sorrow, even hunger, felt like quicksand, threatening to pull him under.

Sherlock carefully straightened John's silver cross. The evil waters had left traces of slimy mud on John's body, and he carefully wiped it away as he sent up a vow that he would bring John back to life.

###

John had brought his case from The Devil’s Punchbowl. Now he opened it. There were fresh, bloody smears on the handle. Blood spilled by violence smelled different to other blood. He had the urge, even now, to lap it up. He shuddered. The case still held an impression of strong evil, an extension of the presence that hovered before him. It had driven John to kill.
He shook off these thoughts, and the doubts and suspicions that this was all just an elaborate deception. He must put his whole mind to the task of beating the Devil himself.

Inside the case was his precious collection of pheromone elixirs, the rarest and choicest to be found anywhere in the world. After his communion with Dante, he knew exactly what to do. But Focalor was required to serve him and could make things easier, possibly.

"You heard John. I wish to be released. Both for myself and for my child that is to be. I require you to do this. I command it."

Focalor's form turned colour at this, from sickly gray to flashes of quicksilver like lightning. "You ask too much of your spell. Only within my powers can I obey you. I cannot unmake the path you have been set upon, I cannot counteract the powers that claim you."

"Then I shall ask for something easier. What if I were to command you to destroy Jonathan Talbott. Right now."

Focalor leered. His teeth were sharp and translucent. "You are making my service very easy, Sherlock Holmes. That person is out of my power. I would not have been given this task otherwise."

This confirmed that what he had tried to deduce about Jonathan Talbott had been correct. Jonathan Talbott's soul was held by a binding contract. The Devil, if that is what he was, would not allow one of his minions to spoil the bargain until he had collected every last penny he was owed.

"Is this also true for Talbott’s omega lady? You know the woman of whom I speak?"

"Yes. She too is the subject of a bargain with which I am unable to interfere. The lady is in the nature of . . . collateral."

Sherlock cursed. “What can you bloody do, then?”

Focalor transformed into a human appearance in the blink of an eye. The demon's choice was, for some reason, that of a Hessian soldier from the eighteenth century. Sherlock remembered them from childhood books, passed down from his great-grandfather. Sherlock wondered if this was a clue. The Hessians were mercenaries.

Mercenaries fought for the highest bidder.

Focalor made an ironic bow. “That is a broad question. I can do many things. But I did warn you that you might not enjoy my service."

Focalor began polishing the hilt of a long sword.

“You are the one who does not seem to be enjoying himself,” Sherlock said. “All that power, and all the time in the world. I thought you left heaven to be free to pursue your own . . . desires. Yet you don’t seem to have much freedom, demon."

Focalor shrugged, a strangely human gesture, but his eyes were a telltale dark quicksilver, bringing back memories of the stone chamber below Hantswood Hall, the shining quicksilver eyes of the Alphas. On the whole, Sherlock preferred Focalor in his pure demonic form. The form he had chosen, that of a soldier, was an affront. As if this outwardly noble appearance could lull him into a mistake. After all, he had once trusted a soldier at first meeting. Focalor must know this.

“Freedom. Who, after all, is truly free? Soon, things will be very different,” the demon said.
"You’ll see. In fact, you will be the first to see."

“Unless things go wrong, Focalor. And haven't they gone wrong already? You might wish you were fighting for a different side. Mine, for instance.”

Focalor laughed, an urbane sound that reminded Sherlock unpleasantly of Maxim Purcell.

"The Bloodlines are useful in many ways. The Holmes Bloodline is indispensible. But even the great Holmeses are as mere children to the Fallen. Children do not lead. They must follow, and obey. Or if they rebel, they must be punished."

"Do you mean as you have been punished? If I ever see you again, Focalor, perhaps you will tell me your own story. But now, tell me why the Holmes Bloodline is 'indispensable.' What can we do that your master cannot do for himself?"

"In the ancient days, humankind knew our story and their poets handed it down, by memory, generation to generation. It took more than a year to tell. But if you wish, I will tell it."

"Be quick. I won't be tricked into running out of time."

###

"Humans today sacrifice everything to expediency, to instant gratification. Which we applaud and encourage! You mention 'my master.' That is an error. Did you know, for example, that the Vatican has ordered its faithful to pray to no other angels but Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael?"

"An error? You mean... I must name him? Very well, The Devil. Lucifer, Satan, what you will. Is he not your master?"

"Allow me." Focalor swiftly searched Sherlock's volumes from the Priory. "These are nearly useless, you know. But to show my good faith, here are the few that have some value. Ah, here is Le Livre des Secrets d'Henoch."

"The Book of the Secrets of Enoch.' What has it to do with the Bloodlines?"

"Like many books that pretend to tell our story, this one contains a fragment of truth:

"Then the prince Satanael rejected the Lord of Light. And three of them were cast down onto earth from the Lord's throne, and they broke their vows, and saw the daughters of men, and took them to themselves as wives."

"This story is in Genesis, it is not new to me," Sherlock said. "Wait. Three -- three were cast down?"

"A triumvirate, the Romans would call it. And you are no doubt familiar with the concept of the Trinity."

Sherlock's mind worked furiously. "One of these books spoke of particularly of three. It said:

'The Spirits are governed by the natural and universal Hierarchy of things. Three command Three through the medium of Three.'
"So you serve three masters -- three fallen angels. Did you know that of all power structures, a group of three is the weakest? Never mind. And so this Satanael, or Satan, is one of three?"

"Yes."

"And Lucifer? He is one of these three powers?"

"Much greater than powers. The word does not mean to us what it means to you. But yes, Lucifer is another. And the third is of particular importance to you, Sherlock Holmes."

"Who is he?" His blood, so sluggish just moments before, rushed in a torrent. His heart jolted against his ribs. He could feel change brewing in his blood, the human blood mixed with ichor he had sucked from his mate's veins, and the pungent, potent brew that was hellhound's blood. He looked to John, so pale and still -- the steady, calm force he had taken for granted since this Alpha had entered his life. And although John's stillness was of a different kind for now, he could still feel the thread of his strength like a band around his beating heart, and it gave him courage.

"Who is the third? All flee him, but none escape. You and your brother are the last of the pure line of Samael. Well, not the very last, you may still hope."

Focalor pointedly scrutinized Sherlock's barely swelling abdomen. Sherlock covered it with his hands.

"Don't look," he said. "Samael. What do you mean -- 'all flee him, but none escape'?"

"Samael means 'Venom of God.' Samael is the Angel of Death. And this is why, Sherlock Holmes, your entire life you have walked the path of your fate, irresistibly drawn towards death."

It was Sherlock's turn to laugh. "I don't believe in fate, or destiny. Or breeding, for that matter, 'pure' or otherwise. Even with my recent -- shall we say, alteration-- I'm stronger, I'm faster, and I can do things now I couldn't possibly do before --- things that no human could do. But I'm still me. I'm still Sherlock Holmes."

Focalor looked at him steadily. "Are you? People always believe what they want to believe."

"Anyway, it doesn't explain Mycroft. He's tried every way he knows to tempt me to the straight and narrow path."

"It isn't my duty to persuade you. As for Mycroft Holmes, Samael is also a dispenser of justice. An upholder of the law, executing judgments from which there are no appeal."

Sherlock considered this, considered whether it fit. And whether Focalor could lie to him about such a thing while he was under the power of his spell.

Balance of probabilities, and as impossible as it sounded, Focalor was telling the truth. At least so far as the demon knew it.

###

"If we are Samael's children, then, why are we being hunted?"

"It would take centuries ---"
"In ten words or less, demon! Time is running out."

"Very well. I give you three words: Heaven's secret door."

"Preposterous!"

"We can never return to heaven through the front gates. It's been tried, many times. They are very beautiful, you know, the Pearly Gates -- made entirely of an infinite number of pearls, formed by the tears of angels when they weep for joy at the beauty of the divine Presence."

"So you are trying to go home?"

Focalor looked crafty. "Even your spell cannot compel me to reveal our plans to you, a mere Nephilim -- even if you are chosen. You cannot understand. Now, listen, as you should know this much. After a long time, and many failures, we learned of the Pseudothyrum."

"That means 'hidden door' in Latin."

"Yes. This was the gate that Enoch passed through on his journey to heaven, where God transformed him from a lowly human into an angel. Not just any angel, but the most powerful, honoured above all others." Focalor's voice dripped with jealousy and hatred. "God gave Enoch a new name: Metatron. And God opened to Enoch all of the secrets of his creation."

Sherlock had read this ancient apocryphal story. In it, as Focalor had said, Enoch the man was transformed into an angel, the only such transformation in biblical literature.

John Watson had made such a transformation.

Focalor seemingly could read his thoughts. "Enoch was the only man ever to become an angel, until your John Watson. It is a sign that the time has come for the secret gate to open."

"I suppose your masters think I am the one to open this Pseudothyrum. That is what they want with us."

"Yes. It is your fate, whether you believe in it or not. Samael has always possessed his own path to send the souls of men to the gates of heaven. But after the Fall, the gates were locked against Samael. The Holmes Bloodline has been refined over centuries for its rare abilities. Now you will open the door, and we will follow."

"I presume that the effort will result in my death?"

"All mortals die."

"I'm not human anymore. I suppose I never was."

"The Nephilim are not immortal."

"But -- Talbott was promised it, wasn't he? Immortality. And so, it can be done. If anyone can obtain special dispensation from death itself, it ought to be the Holmeses, correct? We are in the family, as you say."

"What would you do with immortality? Your bonded Alpha is gone. This is your destiny. You will see the reconquest of heaven."

The light under the door brightened. Focalor looked less like a soldier and more like the monstrous form that had emerged from John. He hated the demon's matter-of-fact statement. The demon was
trying to weaken him. He had to believe this: John wasn't really gone.

"One last thing, Focalor! You knew Talbott's omega lady."

"And how do you know of her, I wonder?" The demon drew closer, and appeared to be enjoying traces of scent from Sherlock's dampened skin. "Ah. You are learning fast, Sherlock Holmes. You made a blood bond with a hellhound. Clever. Wouldn't you like to know how it works?"

The demon was toying with him, trying to run the clock out on his service. He should tell the demon to shut up, but it was true. He did want to know how the blood bond with Dante had worked.

"You are a chemist, you will understand. There is a chemical found in the human brain, formed in the pineal gland. This chemical is found in all things that have a corporeal form, even creatures not of your world. It opens the mind of the Nephilim to perceive things that mere humans cannot. By drinking their blood, the Nephilim can gain knowledge from the minds of other beings. This is how you absorbed Dante's memories."

"You are speaking of DMT?"

"Indeed. N, N-Dimethyltriptamine. A few of your more adventurous scientists have experimented with it. You might be surprised to hear that your brother Mycroft Holmes is quite familiar with it. Even with its relatively feeble reaction in the brains of humans, your scientists dubbed it--"

"-- the Spirit Molecule. I have heard of it. A black market hallucinogenic."

"Yes. 'The Spirit Molecule' is what they call it. They are not entirely wrong; "through a glass darkly," as the Bible says."

He wanted to ask more about Mycroft, but he felt the demon was beginning to play the part of Scheherazade.

"Tell me the name of Talbott's omega lady, now."

"I freely give you one of the secrets of the Nephilim, and you want to pick the bones of ancient history. Very well. I cannot stop you wasting your chances, or your life. Her name was Blanche, Countess Montacute. A rare beauty. And a whore, of course."

In his strange, aquatic form, the demon's obvious relish for Lady Blanche was repellent. This was the sensual weakness that led to the Fall. And had created his bloodline, leading to this very moment in time.

"I know that we -- the Nephilim -- can change our shapes. I haven't yet mastered this power."

He didn't want to say that without John, he wasn't sure he could actually do it. John had been his guide in this, as in so many other things. Memories of his body entwined with John's, both of them shifting, changing with the other, threatened to make him weak with loss. He carefully shut the thoughts away and focused on his plan. He had to believe it would work.

"So, Focalor, I order you to turn me into Blanche Montacute. Make me look like her, smell like her at the height of her omega powers. Until the solstice is over."

"The loss of your Alpha has weakened you, Sherlock Holmes."

Focalor knew his weakness, then. Sherlock tried to stand firm and close his mind to the demon,
who he suspected again of somehow reading his thoughts. But he did not think that demons could not actually read minds. Demons were simply very perceptive in reading the million little tells that gave away human feelings and motivations. This was, of course, much his own stock in trade as a consulting detective, a lifetime ago and worlds away. He refused to acknowledge the cold finger of doubt and even guilt that touched his spine. Were his abilities really just an inheritance from a demon?

"In your present weak condition, even with all I could do, it would take at least a day and a night. Shape-shifting requires great power and even greater control. And it would cause you excruciating pain. We love that word, you know - -excruciating. From the Latin *cruciare.*" Focalor sounded disappointed.

Sherlock held his hand over John's cross. "'To crucify.'"

"Just so. And so, much as I might enjoy it, there is no time for me to shape you into Lady Blanche. But because you command it, I give you this."

With a flourish, Focalor tossed a photograph at his feet. Sherlock picked it up gingerly, wary of a trap. It was an old silver daguerreotype. He looked closer. It resolved into colour and sharp dimension like no photograph Sherlock had ever seen. It was like looking through a window at a real person.

A woman wearing a lace-trimmed dress in a style not worn since the sixteenth century looked directly at him. Her pale green eyes regarded him boldly. Her blonde hair was caught in a net woven with pearls. Her features were perhaps unremarkable, but her expression was cunning and sensual. Her coral lips curled in private amusement. She held a book open in her lap.

"This is impossible," Sherlock said. "She can't be Blanche Montacute. Photography wasn't invented for another 300 years."

"The image is a mere toy. It will not last. Neither, I fear, will you."

The room was filling again with black water, starting as a trickle that became a maelstrom, sweeping the demon away. From within the waters, Focalor cried,

"You cannot escape your blood, Sherlock Holmes!"

Pale winter sunlight shone through the shutters. The vile water vanished as swiftly as it had appeared.

Sherlock fell to his knees in the mud, holding John close. He hoped against hope to find John somehow returned to life, now that the demon was gone. But John's trance, if that was what it was, could not be broken no matter how he tried. Still, John breathed softly and his heart beat faint but steady. He clutched at John's wet clothes, pressing his face into them to capture his scent.

The relentless approach of the solstice forced itself upon his reluctant brain. He must focus on the problem at hand -- Jonathan Talbott. The strange photograph of Blanche Montacute's was already fading. He intended to memorize every curve and line of her face, but the book in her hands drew him.

Dante had shown him that in life, Jonathan Talbott had been Lady Blanche's tutor, instructing her in science, the arts, and probably, the occult. He considered the likelihood that the book in the photograph had been given to Lady Blanche by Jonathan Talbott. Her elegant finger was pointing to the open page. He held the photograph closer.
The illuminated drawings were strange, yet as he looked on, they became more familiar.

*I have a book that no one has seen,* Maxim had said.

It was The Omega Sutra.

###

Unlike the other times when John had actually vanished, this separation felt vast, as though the entire universe was between them.

*Irreparable.*

He could feel no trace of John's presence. And when he looked away for a moment, he thought that John's face was actually changing. He caught a glimpse of something haunted, beautiful, and infinitely sad shifting across or even under John's dear features. But when he tried to look more closely, it was gone. He kissed John's cold lips. They still yielded under his, but did not move. He carefully checked the chain of John's silver cross, the twin of the cross that John had given him, to be certain it was secure.

"I'm going to bring you back, John. I swear to you that I will. Just hold on. I will keep you with me."

Focalor had said he had sent one of his servants to find John's real body. That body had been destroyed, John had told him, on the infernal operation in Afghanistan -- killing evildoers, helping the Fallen to harvest their souls. John's body had been broken when his demon captor had run him down with a too-real Humvee as John tried to escape.

And then an angel had appeared to trade places with John. Sollas. Once, John had told him to try to find the angel Sollas.

He knelt to say a brief prayer. "Sollas. I hope you are watching what's happening down here. If you know about this -- the Pseudothyrum, and the Bloodlines, and the solstice -- it's time you sent help. Bring John back. Please. Ah, I know you saved him once, but that proves to me that it can be done. If you saved him once, you know -- you know he deserves it."

Silence. He had never been much of a one for asking anyone's help, and least of all not from angels, but after all he had just had dealings with a demon. They seemed much more common on earth than angels, however, based on his admittedly limited experience.

"If you want me to try to stop this -- the Pseudothyrum, the hidden gate -- being opened, I'm asking for something in return."

More silence.

"John said you would help, damn you --"

Sherlock faltered and stopped. It was probably a mistake, or worse a sin (heretofore a very abstract, foreign concept to Sherlock) to try to bargain with the angels. Demons were the ones that dealt in bargains. And as he had just learned, the Holmeses were descended from a fallen angel. A demon. Perhaps he was just showing his true colours.
Well, he had never been one for prayer, either. He believed in himself. And John. That would be enough.

He carefully removed John's torn, wet clothing and dressed him in clean clothes from his pack. John was able to slowly move, almost as a reflex, but he seemed mindlessly unaware of Sherlock and his surroundings.

Then Sherlock turned to the blood-smeared case and inhaled the still-tantalising, exquisite odours that wafted up from the bottles. Nearly all were potions he had blended by his own hand. They were crafted to affect his own chemistry perhaps more intensely than they would anyone else's.

But he had made them before becoming bonded to John, and before his transformation. Although he could still appreciate his own artistry in the delicate chemistry, the vials of pheromones no longer had the power to move him as they once had done.

He opened one bottle after another, breaking seals, opening stoppers. The scents triggered memories of orgiastic pleasures. He nearly dropped them in disgust.

No scent but John's could move him now.

# # #

After several failed efforts, Sherlock nearly howled in frustration.

He had lost some vital sensitivity, and possibly his skills blunted now by time, by his transformation, and even by his bond with his Alpha? He hadn't reckoned on this. It was far too late to try a different plan. And he was running out of his pheromones. Unless he could truly create the illusion of Blanche Montacute, by changing his shape and his scent, he didn't know how he could hope to challenge Jonathan Talbott. After all, Talbott had had 300 years, maybe more, to plot and plan. And clearly he had powerful help.

The Bloodlines, apparently, were to be left to their own devices. This the fate of the Nephilim so far as he had read in the apocrypha. The Nephilim were troubled with strange nightmares during the days when they roamed the earth as monsters, drinking blood, destroying everything in their wake. They asked the prophet Enoch if God would grant them mercy and redeem them, as God had promised for humankind. Enoch said only that they might hope. But there were no promises for the Nephilim.

He took a deep breath and thought hard. Chemistry, while often susceptible to serendipity, was best approached with systematic rigour. His error, he realised, was in automatically reaching for the familiar, thinking about scent in his habitual ways.

He was different in almost every way from what he had been when these vials were made. The scent that he needed would be different in every way, too, from any he had made before. A pheromone potion to match a uniquely compelling omega female, dead for 300 years, calling back the scent memory of Lady Blanche that he had absorbed from Dante, still fresh in his mind and in his senses if he could manage to capture it in pheromone oils, like a painting of the woman herself made entirely of scent molecules.

Systematic rigour was all well and good, but the system itself must now be altered.
He turned to the stack of books Focalor had set aside. One nearly crumbling old volume released a compelling scent, musky and rich, when he gently opened the cover. Within were the kinds of alchemical symbols and drawings that he was well familiar with by now, but had rejected as both unscientific and needlessly cryptic. There were some handwritten lines too, written in a faded hand in the margins. He suppressed his near-panic at the passing minutes and hours and let the images and language flow through his mind without letting logic and reason shut them out, or trying to order them.

He unfurled his wings until they brushed the ceiling because it made him feel more powerful. He would not be weak, no matter what Focalor had said. Forgetting all shame, all civilized reticence, he rubbed at the congealed blood that was thickly smeared on the case from the murder that John had been forced to commit. He licked the sticky blood from his fingers until he felt his teeth lengthen and his mouth water.

Everything came into sharp focus.

He gently pulled John down to the floor so that they could lay side by side.

He kissed John's tags and the silver cross and held them clenched in his hand, and closed his eyes. As he had been taught in Tibet by his teacher, Damchok Rinpoche, he sunk into a deep trance, deeper even than in faraway Kamala Kangra, when Maxim Purcell stole a piece of his soul and trapped it in a vial. He would get it back.

He let the open vials of scent guide him. In his mind's eye he saw himself mixing a few precious drops here, others there, stunning scents of amber, grass, jasmine, chocolate, moss, and rose; also the sharper scents of stone, smoke, and metal, and even darker things--the soil of the grave, and funeral incense. All the while he kept the image of Lady Blanche before him. The surge of power he had felt in calling the demon out from John returned without warning and his mouth and tongue began forming strange words. Something inside his mind turned like a key in a lock and he understood what the symbols in the old book meant. He quickly stood up and without hesitation, he let his hands mix the pheromones.

The finished vial gleamed in his hand that glistened with the oils. He looked down. The photograph of Blanche Montacute faded away. But he felt she was somehow with him, and that wherever she was, she knew that a small part of her had been reborn in this rough hut on the Tatsfield high road, not far from she had lived and died. He stopped and spoke only to Blanche:

"Lady Blanche, what I am about to do, I must do for me and mine. But if I win, if it is in my power, you will be free. So if you can hear me, or if you can see me now, help me if you can."

A slight breeze stirred in the little room, tipping over one of the bottles. The bottle had been a gift from El Brujo. He was too grave to smile at the memory of the old man but it made him quietly glad all the same. He added a single drop from the fallen vial to the mixture. He inhaled the pheromone potion, and her presence came to him as strongly as if she were standing there, alive. It penetrated deep.

The scent was the perfect match for the scent memory that Dante had given him. There was no doubt that it was Blanche Montacute's omega scent signature. It must have bewitched Jonathan Talbott, body and soul, before a stronger force took him.

He had read old stories in the Priory's books of the lost craft that was called pheromancy. He had created the living scent of an omega woman who had been dead for centuries. In her time, he would have been burned as a witch. He doubted whether anyone else on earth, even today, could have done it. He shook with awe.
He had a brief vision of himself as Jonathan Talbott, as though they had switched places, centuries ago. He saw himself in Jonathan Talbott's alchemical studio as he had been shown by blood-bonding with Dante, a fascinating place full of arcane and curious objects. He was mixing rare potions to bewitch an omega that had captured his stony heart. Then the vision faded and he was alone with John, the priceless pheromone vial in his hand.

Pheromancer.

"The only one in the world," he whispered as he carefully wrapped the vial and closed the case.

# # #

He knelt at John's side, rubbing his cold hands and searching his vacant but still-bright eyes. He was in an agony of indecision what to do with him. For what he was about to do, it would be very hard for him to guard John, as he was utterly unable to fend for himself. He wished very much for Mycroft and Lestrade, who could guard John while he did what he must before the solstice. But after the incident at the Battersea warehouse, he no longer trusted any of Mycroft's minions and would not call upon their help.

He needed to move. He had heard sirens in Tatsfield village. John had clearly murdered the barman. They would be searching for a killer on the loose. Any minute his hiding place could be uncovered. He had little doubt his powers would allow him to escape, but delay was his greatest enemy. There was nothing for it but to take John with him and try to find somewhere he could be left in safety.

"I'm sorry, John, I'll try not to hurt you," he said, kissing him softly, gazing once more into his eyes, trying to find some response in the dark blue depths. It must have been hope that made him think he saw an answering flicker there. He shook him. "John? John, can you hear me?"

Whatever it was, was gone. He sighed. There was nothing for it.

He stretched his wings to their fullest, feeling their strength. Flying in broad daylight would create panic in Tatsfield, but there was nothing else to be done. There was every chance that even with photos from ubiquitous cellphones, no one would believe it.

He pulled John upright and held him tight, the familiar solidity giving comfort that he didn't deserve.

"If you can, try to hold on, John. I'm going to take you with me. I promise -- I won't let you fall."

As he was about to take flight, John's body dissolved and vanished in the space of a heartbeat. In its place was something luminous.

Something terrifying.

Sherlock opened his mouth to shout John's name, but he could make no sound.

"I am Sollas," it said. "Be not afraid."
Chapter 52: Return to Hantswood Hall

*Dost thou do wonders to the dead?*

--- Psalms 88:10 - 12

Sherlock remained standing, but his knees shook with an involuntary impulse to kneel. He wanted to examine the angel, but for the first time in his life he understood what it meant to avert one's eyes. And so he stood, eyes downcast, like a penitent. Or a prisoner.

He was able to find his tongue. "Can you bring John Watson back? In his real body? Please. I -- I beg you. You did it before."

There was a hot burning fire in his chest that was the knowledge that it was this angel, this Sollas, who had taken John's real body. John's real body which was meant to be his, and his alone.

"There is no time." The angel's voice was high-pitched and musical, if melancholy. It had the solemn feel of the tolling of a bell.

The ache of his severed bond with John was growing minute by minute.

"Impossible. John said you would help us. You must bring him back."

The radiant light was shifting, resolving into a shape that was like a man, very tall, with pale, nearly translucent wings, as different to his own as a swan's to a common crow's.

"I will help you. We all will. We are coming with you to Hantswood Hall."

Now that he was able to look at the angel, Sherlock gave it a scornful sneer. "Come with me? Too little, too late. John is gone. And I'm going to find a way to bring him back. Do you understand? What if I can't stop Jonathan Talbott after all? Can you even stop the Fallen from taking me? You know what they want me for, I presume."

The angel had a grave, noble face that looked nothing like John Watson, but it still felt something like John's gaze, strong and loving, looking back at him.
"Yes. We know why they want you, Sherlock Holmes," Sollas said. "But that doesn't mean you have to do it."

There were soft, urgent voices near the door. Sherlock imagined police hunting for the killer of the publican from The Devil's Punchbowl. Sherlock was about to warn Sollas, then realised that the angel certainly needed no warning. Sollas reached out and pulled Sherlock into his arms.

Everything went white.

###

Sollas was at his side in the wood above Hantswood Hall. They looked down at Hantswood Hall together. Sherlock imagined that Hantswood Hall might have somehow risen again since the fire on All Hallows Eve. But the charred timbers were still there, like the blackened carcass of a monster, seeming to shift restlessly under clouded moonlight.

It was very dark in the wood, but Sherlock didn't need light to sense the presence of evil below, and all around. He saw the occasional glint of reddish eyes of hellhounds between the trees. Dante was here, and he stood guard at Sherlock's side with his black fur standing on end.

"I suppose you could just kill me now," Sherlock observed. "If I'm the one to open the Pseudothyrum -- or Mycroft-- why haven't you just killed us? Destroyed the Holmes Bloodline? If it can't be done without us."

Sollas sighed. "You are right. Some of us... tried. Long ago, and not so very long ago. There are so many things in the world that we would change-- or even destroy-- if we could. But the Nephilim were allowed to survive even the Flood. We must not supplant our will for God's. Or we will remain outcasts forever. No better than the Fallen. If it is meant to be that the Pseudothyrum opens tonight, it will open."

Sherlock's smile was bitter. Both the demon Focalor and the angel Sollas believed that this was his fate. All his life he had struggled against his omega nature, against the restrictions that society set upon a male of his permutation, and perhaps most of all, against the implacable judgment of the Holmes family as to his proper place in the world. Only John had ever understood, and let him be himself, on his own terms.

Well, until he had become possessed of a demon, at any rate.

The low clouds parted for a moment to reveal a bright sliver of the moon.

"It is the solstice," Sollas said. Then the moment passed and the clouds covered over the moon again, gathering with a restless roiling that was more than just the wind. Sherlock held himself very still, and listened. Faint but horrible wailing floated down from above, surrounding them. He met Sollas's pale gaze and was saw that Sollas felt the horror of it, maybe more than he did.

"It is the crying of harvested souls. From the vampire plague. In London, and other places now too. The Fallen have trapped them."

"John told me. He said you saved him, when they were... forcing him to help. You said you aren't supposed to do things that are against God's plan. Did God tell you to save John then? Why can't you bring him back?"
Sollas looked away. "I don't know what God's plan for John Watson is. But I saved him. You needed him to keep you strong, to help you find your powers, to get you as far as you have come tonight. And -- for a selfish reason. Someday, I may be able to tell you why."

"I assure you, if we survive, you will confess to me why you had a selfish need for John Watson's body. He is my bonded, and his body belongs to no one but himself and to me."

He refused to allow the angel to keep his eyes cast down. When they met, grey-blue to ephemeral gold, Sollas nodded his understanding.

They began the walk through the woods, down to Hantswood Hall.

###

Sherlock carefully uncorked the vial of pheromones that he had made. The air was saturated with Blanche Montacute's omega scent. He slowly rubbed it over his skin, with particular attention to his throat. The scent was so completely beguiling that Sherlock could well imagine himself a female omega in her prime.

"I'm going down to Hantswood Hall. I know what I have to do. All I ask is that you don't interfere."

"I won't," Sollas said. "I'm coming with you. You won't see me. We are all here, all of the Runaway Angels. And the Fallen. See them fighting, even now."

The boiling black clouds and violent tossing of the trees in the wood looked like the approach of a terrible storm, but now Sherlock knew that it wasn't.

Sherlock stepped over the charred remains of Hantswood Hall. There was a red domino mask, singed but unburnt, lying at his feet. He well remembered being handed a red mask on All Hallows Eve. He reached down and wiped the ash from it, and put it on. He remembered, too, the way to the entrance to the stone chamber, but that didn't matter. Something was indeed pulling him there, step by step, an invisible cord that felt like the opposite of his bond to John, something that his spirit struggled against.

He had no torch but he found he could see very well in the dark. He followed Dante's dark outline as he padded ahead on stealthy feet. Had his blood-bond with the hellhound given him this gift?

There was a dark crevice between the litter of burnt beams and blackened stone, and Sherlock easily cast them aside, something he could not have done before his change. Dante whined eagerly and leapt first into the passage below. When his feet touched the stone floor, Sherlock could almost hear the echoes of the screams of the alphas from All Hallows Eve, tearing each other to pieces the frenzy of rut. There was the same scent in the air now, raw and animalistic, a rarified alpha scent of toxic strength. An ordinary omega would have lost all control at the first tendril of scent.

There was an uncanny glow, not from fire nor any electric light, that shone upon the familiar, worn stone steps, now blackened by fire. He remembered Sollas's warning that the angels and demons, Runaways and Fallen, were fighting here tonight. There was a vibration in the air all around him like a rough wind, surrounding, pushing and pulling at him like opposing magnets at the threshold of the chamber. Here the scent was very strong.
Standing at the stone platform that had been an altar in the pre-Roman times, and would be again tonight, was a gaunt figure. Before him was a bloody lump resting neatly on the stone. He held a dripping knife. At his feet lay a powerfully built black man with eyes staring wide, a glistening hole in his chest.

The bones of Sherlock’s ribcage ached, just where John, possessed, with his demonic claw had drawn a sigil and tried to pluck out his own heart. Sherlock gasped at the pain. He could feel the sigil being raised there again as though it had always been there, as if John himself had put it there. He could have wept at the thought, but he intuited that it was just another trick of the demon to distract him when he most needed his powers of intellect and concentration.

The figure did not move. He seemingly was frozen by that magnificent scent, the intoxicating odor of Blanche Montacute. Sherlock did not speak, but took a step forward, keeping his tread light, like the noble omega lady of all those centuries past. In drawing closer, Sherlock was able to observe three things through the frame of the domino mask.

First, that the haggard face of the figure before him was vaguely familiar. It somehow brought Lestrade to mind, but it was surely not Lestrade. Something about Lestrade...

The man -- or what remained of him -- had been a police officer, that was it. Mycroft had sent his photo to Sherlock's mobile, on that last day in London. This was the man that had been loitering around 221b. A suspect in the Sleeping Beauties murders, Lestrade had said... Crichton? Craige? No. Critchley. Detective Inspector Critchley, the wire-tap specialist. He was barely recognisable, almost cadaverous, as though he had stopped eating proper food. He watched Sherlock with quicksilver eyes, animated by a spirit that was not his own, and hadn't been for quite some time. Since All Hallows Eve, to be precise.

Second, there was a black cord hanging about Critchley's neck. From which hung a slender glass vial that faintly glowed. Sherlock felt down to his cells that it was this that had drawn him here, as inevitably as the other powers that conspire to bring him to Hantswood Hall for the winter solstice.

And this man Critchley had been there too, at Hantswood Hall with Mycroft and Lestrade, as they had told him afterward. Critchley had somehow got hold of the vial that contained the piece of his soul that Maxim had stolen.

_I have what you want - a little bit of your soul. You killed the omegas, Sherlock. The part of you that is with me is a killer,_ Maxim Purcell had said to him in this very place, just before his face shifted to reveal the visage of the black magician Jonathan Talbott just beneath the skin.

Third, tangled with the black cord holding the spirit vial hung pair of ordinary earbuds. There was a tinny, staccato sound coming from them that could be heard even over Critchley's laboured breath, as his lungs desperately absorbed as much of Blanche Montacute's scent as possible. With his newly hypersensitive hearing, Sherlock could just make out what Critchley had been listening to through those earbuds: the familiar, hypnotic sound of Maxim Purcell's voice, speaking to Mycroft on All Hallows Eve:

"You came here to find out the truth about the Sleeping Beauties. Once you know the truth, you will want to be with me. ... Consciousness is simply the conversion if one energy form to another. What we call sexual energy is the strongest energy that most humans are capable of experiencing. And yet for so brief a time as to be meaningless. ... I thought to extend the limits of the Mysteries, I needed a stronger partner, but time after time, I failed. ... And that is how I met your brother Sherlock."

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"Why did you choose my brother?"

"For his powers, of course. I have done some researches into the Holmes bloodline..."

The blood rushing in his ears drowned out the rest. The chain of circumstances that had dragged him to this ancient chamber once more had been forged so very cleverly, Maxim lulling him into arrogant carelessness with the intrigue of the Mysteries, using the power of Talbott's dark magic to open doors that Sherlock would never have walked through of his own accord, taking from Sherlock what he would never have freely given.

Would he?

Behind Talbott's power, as Focalor had revealed, was a demonic triumvirate, Hell's Trinity: Satan, Lucifer, and the Holmes's own forefather Samael, the Venom of God.

Sherlock knew that if he was ever to be strong enough to be truly free again, strong enough to get John back, he must take back his spirit vial. It was calling to him. If what Maxim had told him was true, the piece of his soul that he had managed to steal was the part of himself that had always understood what it was to be a killer. That even desired, perhaps, to kill.

But first, he would have to get close enough to take it. He took another cautious step forward, and watched Critchley tremble as the cloud of his scent moved with him. He thought he saw Dante's red eyes behind Critchley, waiting for a sign.

Sherlock slowly reached out his hand and touched the cold stone slab of the altar. There was blood dripping from it, and Sherlock tried to resist it, but Dante was quivering with some strong impulse, almost pointing Sherlock to the bloody flesh of the dead man, the still-warm heart and it seemed that Maxim's thievery hadn't taken every bit of his killing spirit after all, maybe his rebirth as a half-angel, a Nephilim descended from the Angel of Death, his blood-bond with a hellhound, gave him more than enough of what he needed tonight.

After all, he had drunk the ichor from John's angelic body, and this would save him. He was almost sure of it.

"Is it you, at last?" Critchley said, his voice creaking with that unnatural vibration. Critchley's vocal chords were being played upon by some other power than his own, the same strange intonation that Sherlock had heard behind Maxim's own voice as Jonathan Talbott took him over.

"Yes," Sherlock whispered. But he needn't have. A feminine voice, an omega's voice, covered his own. "Yes," it said.

The faint apparition of a long, pale arm enveloped his own, and a ghostly cascade of golden hair rippled about his shoulders. The spirit of Blanche Montacute was here, surrounding him like a cloak. Sherlock briefly paused to consider whether she had been sent by Focalor himself to foil his plans, or if her spirit had been summoned up by the Runaway Angels to aid him. But there was a coldness in the room, colder than the stones, darker than the darkness, and Sherlock sensed the first glimmer of the opening of a vast door, a door that John had saved him from once entering by forfeiting his own soul, and there could be no turning back or hesitation.


For a few long moments the tinny mumble of his recording of Maxim Purcell's speech on endless loop was the only sound. Critchley stood transfixed, staring at the ghostly form of Blanche
Montacute, inhaling lungfuls of her ineffable scent, apparently blind to the presence of Sherlock Holmes behind it all.

"So long I have waited, my lady," Critchley said at last. Sherlock felt that he had played his hand correctly. He took another step closer, and Critchley, who was in truth the vessel of Jonathan Talbott, rushed with outstretched arms to take his beloved omega.

As Sherlock had seen with Maxim Purcell on All Hallows Eve, DI Critchley's drawn face now shifted, crumpled and dissolved into the powerful, cruel face of Jonathan Talbott.

"I know you will forgive, Lady Blanche, what I have done. And for what I will do. Everything I have done, I have done that we should be together. Tonight, of all nights."

Before Talbott could touch the vision of Blanche Montacute, Sherlock shoved at the stone slab with all his strength, and it flew through the air as though it had been nothing more than paper. He reached inside the stone-lined crypt beneath. His fingers closed around a familiar-feeling object, and he withdrew an ancient book bound with heavy clasps of gold and jewels that sparkled even in the dim light.

There was an image tooled upon the old leather that was unmistakable.

It was The Omega Sutra.

# # #

"Do you remember this book, Jonathan?" Blanche said, her voice hinting of voluptuous memories that Sherlock had no trouble imagining.

His heart fairly knocking a tattoo against his ribcage to match the burning of the sigil on his chest, Sherlock opened the book. He turned the pages of The Omega Sutra, letting image after image burn themselves into his soul, each more exotic, decadent and depraved than the last, hunting for what he wanted, what was needed.

As he had done once before, trapped in Maxim's tower in Kamala Kangara, he brought John Watson close, closer, ever closer in his mind. But this time, Sherlock did not shut John out. This time, he could do what was needed only with John's help, even if John was what anyone else would accept as dead and gone. Sherlock could feel John with him, the soul-bond between Alpha and omega, the bond that survived even death.

Unfortunately, he could also feel what John wanted him to do. He could feel John's will, almost hear John's voice, strong and clear and right.

"Burn it, Sherlock. Before it's too late. Burn The Omega Sutra."
Chapter 53: Faithfulness in Abbadon

Shall thy steadfast love be declared in the grave, or thy faithfulness in Abbadon? Are thy wonders known in the darkness?

--- Psalms 88:10 - 12

Burn The Omega Sutra.

John's voice was ephemeral but commanding.

His hands trembling, Sherlock slowly laid The Omega Sutra open. The illuminated pages glowed, jewel-like. The centuries had not marred the book. The gilt caught the light like sparks. This was the very book that Blanche Montacute had held in the magical photograph, a book that the black magician Jonathan Talbott had given her. Talbott must have hidden The Omega Sutra beneath these stones in 1661, when the villagers of Tatsfield had come to burn him for being a witch. Although the book looked older, much older even than that.

Or had it been the devil himself who had come to burn Talbott for not living up to his bargain? Which story was true? It seemed very important, in this moment, that he know the truth. This was the book that Maxim must have discovered when he bought the ruins of Hantswood Hall, telling Mycroft on All Hallows' Eve:

"I've come into possession of a certain book. A book no one has seen."

Sherlock knew now that it had been Jonathan Talbott's malignant spirit that had guided Maxim to find The Omega Sutra beneath these stones, and slowly used Maxim to raise himself up from the underworld.

Critchley's earbuds were droning on in the close air of the subterranean chamber:

Maxim: "I'll tell you a secret. . . . I've come into possession of a certain book. A book no one has seen."

Mycroft: "Not even my brother?"

Maxim: "I was wondering when you would mention Sherlock. . . . But to answer your question, I did show him. . . . Have you ever seen an authentic copy of The Omega Sutra?"
Now he remembered. Maxim trying to tempt him to take the crossing with him. Maxim crossing that cold white room, bringing the carved box that proved to contain The Omega Sutra. The very same ancient book that lay before him now.

"Some things cannot be learned through books," he had said then, refusing the proffered gift, refusing Maxim, knowing in his heart that John was his only true mate.

But even in the act of refusal, The Omega Sutra stirred him, spoke to him. It filled him with dread as much as it aroused his desire. Something told him that he could not resist it, the fabled book would be the instrument to turn him into the very thing that he had most feared when he agreed to enter The Mysteries-- a mindless omega, slave to uncontrollable tides of heat and breeding, trapped in a decadent prison built from the powers of rarified pheromones, The Mysteries, and The Omega Sutra.

***

Was The Omega Sutra the key? It had to be. The ancient book had haunted him at every turn since he had met Maxim Purcell. Before that, if he was honest. Even before he had seen the first poorly-made counterfeit in a remote village in Tibet, rumours of The Omega Sutra had always plucked a chord of uneasiness mingled with seduction. Sherlock had thought by now that he knew The Omega Sutra well, but listening to Maxim's familiar voice, lecturing Mycroft on All Hallows' Eve, revealed the necessity of employing the original text, not bastardised copies that had lost much of their power over the centuries.

He looked down at the open book. The illustrations seemed to be shifting, the figures moving-- but maybe that was the flickering light. He touched it to see if it was really moving, and thought he felt an electric quiver under his fingertip.

But there was no time to examine The Omega Sutra now, not with Talbott, no longer Critchley at all, advancing on him with a deadly eye flickering with Jonathan Talbott's evil intelligence, and the howling of the harvested souls of the dead battering at the walls.

"Your time, Sherlock Holmes, is about to run out," the demon Focalor had said, and Sherlock knew without a doubt that it was true.

He quickly turned the pages. The ghostly hand of Blanche Montacute floated gently over his own, perhaps trying to help him. He wondered if he was already falling into a trap. Blanche Montacute had been, after all, Talbott's beloved, his prize. Would her ghost betray him? He could only hope that she wanted nothing more after all these centuries than to be set free.

Burn The Omega Sutra, John was saying, more urgently now, his voice coming from somewhere dark but near. His heart was going to burst from his chest.

Whatever he did next might be his last act on earth.

***

Talbott took up The Omega Sutra. Without hesitation, he turned to an the very end of the book. Sherlock had never seen an image like in any other copy of the book.

An omega of indeterminate permutation was on their back, bound with silken ropes which held their legs wide. The Alpha leaned over, his posture dominant. He was penetrating the omega, but not with his cock.
Sherlock had tried to skimmed the difficult text-- an amalgamation of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin-- and struggled to read it. Some of the words seemed to be in an unknown tongue. Talbott began to read. His voice had a peculiar intonation, the accents of an English nobleman unheard since the Restoration era, completely at odds with the ghastly face of the possessed Critchley, whose vocal chords were being forced to recite the ritual:

"Unlocking The Gates. The omega being prepared with perfumes mixed with their proper rites, and abundantly anointed as has been taught, the Alpha enters his omega with his right hand clad in the Raven's Head. The Alpha shall withdraw three times, and yet again three times, and three times more, until the Raven's Head shall breach the First Gate, neither the Alpha nor the omega being permitted release. Thereupon the Raven's Head seeks the serpent within the Second Gate. When the Second Gate is opened, the Alpha shall beat, as upon a drum, six times to the beating of the omega's heart, and again six times, and six times more. And the Alpha shall deny himself and the omega the release. The omega shall swoon and wake, three times and three times, and three times more. Upon the Ninth Awakening, the Serpent shall rise and the Raven shall pierce the Third Gate, whereby Alpha and omega being of one flesh and one spirit, shall release ecstasy eternal and unlock the Hidden Gate. What is hereby opened, no one can shut, and what is hereby shut, no one can open."

Every profane word was like an acid drip in his veins. Ecstasy eternal. This was what Maxim had hunted for over years, searching across continents for the rarest, most powerful pheromone potions and occult rituals within the grasp of his limitless fortune: a nirvana of endless, timeless ecstasy transcending all physical and spiritual limits.

Dozens of the most exotic and refined omega males, the Sleeping Beauties, had forfeited their short lives to Maxim's obsession.

But then Maxim had found something that changed everything. He raised Jonathan Talbott up from the netherworld, and Talbott had taught Maxim the true power and purpose of The Omega Sutra.

The Omega Sutra wasn't a ritual to achieve sexual nirvana.

The Omega Sutra was a ritual for building a key to unlock a door. A door that was hidden. A door that was forbidden to all but Enoch, who was transformed from a man to the most powerful of the angels.

Sherlock looked closer at the shimmering colours of The Omega Sutra's final illustration. The Alpha's hand, wrist and arm, clad in a tight black glove, were buried in his omega's divine passage. To the elbow. A golden band clasped high upon his upper arm where, perhaps, his arm might at length reach. The Alpha's attitude was not of gentleness, but of a relentless, endless assault. The omega's mouth was a slack, crimson hole. The omega was swooning, eyes closed in a seemingly ecstatic trance.

Or perhaps, Sherlock thought with a shudder, the omega was dead.

Like the Sleeping Beauties.

Perhaps that was blood staining the omega's lips crimson.

* * *

While he just might, theoretically, survive the depraved ritual depicted in this obscene drawing, Sherlock knew without a doubt it would destroy his unborn child, and in a manner that was unspeakable. Talbott gave every evidence of being convinced by the illusion of Blanche
Montacute, but the deception could not go on for many minutes longer. Blanche Montacute was a beta. She could not fulfill the ritual. If Talbott was truly intent on completing the ritual tonight, the winter solstice, he would have to turn his attention to Sherlock.

The pheromone potion was weakening. His own omega pheromones were rebelling, responding against his will to the atmosphere of this ancient place, and to the call of The Omega Sutra itself. He willed himself to be the beauteous Blanche, flesh and bone. Focalor had warned that this sort of shape-shifting was lengthy and painful, but maintaining this illusion was everything, literally life and death to him now as the power of his pheromone potion alone was fading fast. The sensation of transformation ground through him. He wondered if this was something like what John had suffered, down in that horrible cellar in Afghanistan. John. He kept him and the baby in his heart and pushed through the pain.

He looked down. It wasn't working fast enough. He thought his skin might be a shade paler, perhaps his hands a bit more refined. But he was still himself.

He could not let Talbott break free from Blanche's spell.

"Show me now, Jonathan. We... may never have this chance again," he said, and it was Blanche Montacute's musical voice that drew Talbott forward.

Sherlock was almost certain he was convinced. They were very close together. Sherlock held out his delicate hand, inviting Talbott to touch. Sherlock could see the unholy light in Talbott's eyes, the intelligence there not yet overcome by Alpha passion. Even clothed in Critchley's seemingly frail body, Talbott was very strong. He had the discipline of centuries.

Sherlock knew then that he had misjudged: Talbott and Blanche were not like him and John. Whatever had passed for love, or even obsession, during their lifetimes had been left behind by Talbott long ago. Whatever drove Talbott now, it wasn't love. It was revenge.

"How many times in life did I wait for you to say it," Talbott said, his eyes rake over the illusion of Blanche's form. "Once, there was almost nothing I would not have given to share this with you. But when I breach the Gate, The Omega Sutra will have no more meaning, beloved," Talbott said. "So watch me perform this wonder. And we will ascend together, as was promised."

Talbott took Sherlock's outstretched hand and drew him closer, his eyes fluttering at the intoxication of her scent. And then they snapped open. He pierced the veil of Blanche's scent, and discerned what lay beneath, and the illusion was spoiled. But it had gotten Sherlock close enough. Sherlock's hand darted to Talbott's throat, frantically seeking the black cord.

Talbott snarled and tried to push Sherlock away, but after all Sherlock found that his new powers allowed him to resist and fight back. But not enough to overpower Talbott, whose powers came from hell itself. They were wrestling now, grappling, and Sherlock flashed back to his nightmare fight in this very same chamber on All Hallows’ Eve, blood everywhere.

His spirit vial glowed greenish, a tiny spark that quivered, agitated, like a minute shooting star that had been trapped. All he had to do was take it from Talbott, as it had been taken from him. He dug for the hazy fragments of memory from his time in Kamala Kangra.

With Maxim Purcell.

They stared into each other's eyes, neither giving way, reading certain death there.

* * *
Talbott began shouting words in an unintelligible tongue. The Barbarous Names, summoning the Fallen to his aid. He could feel the cold mist gathering, just as it had on All Hallows' Eve. Soon the Fallen would be here. The air stank of sulphur.

Sherlock reached deep within himself, as he had been taught in The Mysteries. Down deep where one could see the colours of one's subtle body. He found the one that Maxim had treasured the most, the one that glowed like a rose, and sent it forth, seeking the place that he knew must exist, the vulnerable place where Talbott's desire for Blanche Montacute still burned with a cold, cold flame.

It narrowed to a fine tendril and snaked its way through that tender spot and pierced Talbott's dark armour, and a responding bolt of pain shot through him like a javelin.

Sherlock fell back to the stone floor, and he wasn't there anymore.

* * *

Sherlock was floating.

Not floating.

Projecting.

His spirit moved from his body so much more freely than when he had struggled to raise himself up through dark waters, back to John, in his unnatural sleep after All Hallows' Eve. Projection was the Nephilim's gift, according to the Book of Enoch. His real body was laid out on the floor below, his wings spread wide. Dante guarded him, but even the hellhound was cowering. Dante had once served Jonathan Talbott, and knew better than any living creature what he was capable of.

There were hundreds of dark stains on the stone floor. These were the Alpha's bloodstains, the Alphas who had torn each other to pieces in their rut frenzy. There was newer blood from the slain body of Talbott's most recent vessel, still faintly shimmering. Faintly glowing was Blanche Montacute's spirit, and a dark space that was whatever remained of Jonathan Talbott.

An angry red that flickered within that dark space.

Sherlock's spirit, an evanescent cord of desire, quested toward that red flicker.

"Maxim. I know you're still in there. You can stop this. Help me."

There were powers encircling the chamber, the Fallen that were drawn by the Barbarous Names, waiting to rush through the Pseudothyrum, the Hidden Gate. Waiting for Talbott to take Sherlock in the ritual of Unlocking the Gate, an erotic death that would give them the key to enter that forbidden gate and return home to lay siege to heaven.

There was an answering throb in that red flicker, and it expanded and reached toward Sherlock, a faint thread as fine as spider's silk.

* * *

Critchley was being manipulated, pulling on a black glove painted to resemble a raven's head. He stretched the glove over his long, frail-looking hand and it glowed with eldritch power of its own. This was a cursed object, created by Talbott for this very night.

The purpose of this peculiar glove became clear when Critchley pressed a tiny concealed button in
the palm. Small, glittering blades shot from the fingertips. He pressed his fingertips together and the blades fit cunningly, a savagely sharp tip to the raven's beak.

". . . thereby, the Raven shall pierce the Third Gate, and the Alpha and omega shall release to ecstasy eternal, being of one flesh and one spirit, and unlock the Hidden Gate of Heaven."

The earth continued in its orbit toward the moment of the winter solstice, when Talbott would complete the ritual by releasing those silver blades.

"Maxim. Come back to me, come to me now." He had to find the power to draw Maxim's trapped spirit out.

Using this part of himself to touch anyone but John should be impossible, or at least unbearably painful. But he found a moment of pure joy to find that it was not so. His bond with John was unbreakable, had always been unbreakable. He felt John with him now, even more strongly than before, perhaps because he was moving as pure spirit now, as John must be, his John. John was near, very near. John wanted him to do this, John was giving him this strength, more than he could hope to have alone. He had thought that the Mysteries were powerless here, but that was because he was only using half of himself. But try as he might, he could not see John, could not find him and bring him close. His spirit body felt him, though, and when he located the source of that feeling, his heart froze.

Just as on All Hallows' Eve, there was a black door here. This was not the Pseudothyrum, which would only appear when the ritual devoured both his body and his spirit. Even the angels believed that he was destined to open the Hidden Gate for the Fallen, on this night, in this place.

But now Sherlock knew without question that the door he was destined to open tonight led not to heaven, but to hell.

Because that was where John was.

* * *

"Maxim. Help me. Please." With every atom of his being he pulled at the reddish flame that was Maxim's spirit. Talbott lashed out with torturous spells that tried to bite and bind him, raising sigils across his shaking body on the cold floor, and as terrifying as it was to turn and leave his body behind, that was what he knew he had to do. John had done it for his sake, and now he would do it for John's. He used the words that had drawn out Focalor from John:

"I am the one that possesses immortal fire, I am the one whose mouth burns! I am the one who begets and destroys. My heart is encircled by a serpent."

A familiar presence radiated passion, anger, and even a kind of love as its answering pulse grew stronger.

"I call you by your true name, Maxim Purcell, come now, release yourself! Maxim!

The slender red thread became a red chain that supported and surrounded him. It was Maxim, or what remained of him. No longer seeking to possess and destroy Sherlock, freed from the evil that had driven him to kill in the name of paradise.

Sherlock touched the black door for the first time. John's voice was behind it, warning, begging him to stay away.

("Don't you dare come after me," John shouted as a hellhound dragged him from the Battersea
And Sherlock was terrified but unsurprised when this door yawned open for him without the slightest resistance, beckoning.

"Guard the door, Maxim. I'm begging you. Keep Talbott back. You owe me this much," Sherlock said, and took the first steps into the darkness below.

There was horror and agony in every virtual footfall along the path downward, into the dark. He had expected it to hurt, and it did. He had expected to be afraid, and he was. The feelings were so vast and enveloping that there could be no words sufficient, these were new sensations that made all other pain and fear seem nothing but a dream.

It didn't matter. Only one thing mattered.

"John! Hold on, I've come for you! I'm taking you back, John!"
Chapter Summary

The Final Chapter of The Omega Sutra.

Chapter 54: Monstrum

-- And is it not wonderful, for Satan himself transformeth himself into an angel of light.

-- 2 Corinthians 11:14

Les Friction: Who Will Save You Now: https://youtu.be/vI0FETSHAy4

The anteroom to Hell began at a dark doorway that gave onto a large gaping hole lined with sharp stones, like the mouth of an actual beast. This was the place called in the Middle Ages the hellmouth. And it felt alive, as though it might close and grind Sherlock between those long sharp teeth.

Beyond was a dark road shrouded in thick white mist, so heavy that Sherlock could not see his own hand. Or the spirit-form of his own hand. He was nothing but pure (or impure) spirit in this place, but like John, his spirit wanted to manifest in his human form. He felt his heart beat and his blood rushing, whether it was an illusion of projection or the reflection of feeling of his real body laid out in the chamber below Hantswood Hall, he could not know. If he still had wings or fangs, he couldn't feel them here. He felt like Sherlock Holmes, the omega that had bonded with John Watson in an arctic storm in the North Sea. Soon, he knew, Talbott would try to work his black magic on his vulnerable body that he had left behind and then, he would know for sure.

The hellmouth did not close over him. The mist swirled and clung to him as he stepped onto the dark road. He heard a soft growl and Dante was at his side. He had passed through the door too.

"This is your home, Dante. Help me. Where is John?"

Dante gazed up at him and the soft glow of his eyes turned to fire. Sherlock felt his anguish, his blood-bond with the hellhound a feeble echo of the soul-bond he had with John. Still, he stopped a moment for pity, and put his hand on Dante's head.

"I'm sorry. This isn't your home anymore. It's not going to be ours, either. We will find John."

Dante stepped with a cautious paw into the white mist, and Sherlock walked with him.

There were pale flickering lights that cast feeble circles to illuminate whatever was behind the strange mist. Sherlock stood in the light and peered at the outline of familiar-seeming shapes obscured by the shifting fog. It looked like... the outlines of structures. Buildings. All dark.

He moved closer, reached out his hand, and felt solid metal rods, a railing, the arrow-tips coated
with something wet and dark that smelled like iron. Something in this spirit form throbbed and ached in response. He still craved blood.

His foot struck a solid obstacle, which proved to be a step.

_This isn't real._

He climbed the step and confronted a rough wooden surface. A door. He put out his hand, which shook as much as if it were his own flesh, and felt for what he feared to find.

It began to snow. It wasn't really cold here, nor warm either. The tales in the bible, Dante, Milton, about the fire and ice of hell didn't seem to be true in this place. Still, it was snowing. The door was being coated with snow, falling faster and faster and he rubbed the snow aside to try to feel what was beneath, what could not possibly be beneath-- but then his fingertips felt it and it was as real as anything he had ever felt in his life.

A doorknocker. An elongated ring whose every bump and groove was imprinted in his sense memory.

He didn't knock. He pushed the snow away impatiently, then realised it wasn't actually snow at all, and wasn't melting. He held up his fingers and rubbed and it left a grayish smear on his fingertips and floated away.

Ashes.

It was raining ashess.

The mist wasn't mist. It was smoke.

Sherlock frantically rubbed the ashes from above the doorknocker. Three numbers, 221. He felt about the door, the ashes falling faster and making it impossible to see. But the B was gone.

There were tears running down his face, and wondered if his real body was crying. All John had wanted was to take them both home to 221B. He wiped the tears away and felt the ashes rubbing across his face. He tried the door handle, but the door was locked.

_This isn't real_, he told himself again.

Then he kicked in the door.

The wood splintered and gave and the brass numbers fell to the ground with a sharp ring that was instantly swallowed up by the smoke. He ran up the stair to 221B with Dante at his heels.

* * *

Mycroft and Lestrade stalked swiftly down the hill, keeping to the shadows of the trees. Hantswood Hall below was dark. The sky was black with boiling clouds and flashes of lightning, a storm that looked like the beginning of the end of the world.

Since his transformation, Lestrade's normal eyesight was incredibly keen, and he saw hellhounds and other shapes -- the villagers of Tatsfield, and other darker things -- surrounding the Hall. Mycroft kept up with him easily. He had drunk Lestrade's blood during their time in the isolated cottage in Lestrade-et-Thouels, and Lestrade had freely given him what he needed, triggering the manifestation of Mycroft's own natural powers at last. Still, they were greatly outnumbered here. Hantswood Hall was surrounded.
"We should have gone with him."

"We couldn't. I wasn't ready and neither were you. Now, we're both strong. We'll find him."

"Sherlock's here. I know it. I can feel it."

"Of course he is. It's the winter solstice. I feel it too."

They were at the back of Hantswood Hall, where ancient yew trees that formed part of the park of the original hall still grew. There was a tall wall and iron gate beyond the trees. There was a dark figure standing at the gate.

"You won't do much to help Sherlock Holmes like this," he hissed. "Hurry."

"El Brujo," Mycroft said, unsurprised. "It took you long enough."

* * *

The stairway to 221B was choked with the acrid smoke, but Sherlock's feet knew the way and he fairly flew up the steps, Dante at his heels. He was prepared to kick in the door to the flat, but it was ajar. He pushed it open, and entered.

The flat was a degenerate shambles. It looked like it had been abandoned for decades. Snowy ashes drifted slowly through broken windowpanes, clogged the grayed, splintered mantelpiece. The ash on the floor puffed clouds around his feet.

A strange, bright figure sat in his old chair, the leather torn and battered. The wallpaper was peeling in long tattered strips. He did not want to look directly into its eyes. He had a fleeting impression of the shape of the creature's face, darkness and power and pride. Its hands rested on its thighs. He glowed with a strange radiance resembling the light when Sollas had appeared, but as different as the warm flame of a candle to a star.

The being was filled with light, but Sherlock still had a sense of overwhelming darkness. The light dazzled him and he averted his eyes. He felt different than when he met Sollas, too. Then he had felt compelled to fall to his knees. This being filled him with terror and made him want to crawl. He resisted with every fibre of his being.

The light finally faded to a bearable glow.

Sherlock had the feeling that the being, or man, which is what he now looked like, had been waiting here for him for a very long time. He flicked a finger toward Dante and Dante crouched, whining, and was silent.

"Do you know me?"

"I could guess. But I never guess."

"It was all actually Lucifer's plan, you know. I know of your struggles with your own brother, Mycroft Holmes. So perhaps you can appreciate the position I find myself in."

"All I know is that you are tearing the world apart because of it. And that it's not for me to help you, no matter what anyone believes. You must either stop yourselves, or do what you will. But not through me -- or me and John. Because anything you do through me, you do through John."

"You truly are a son of the Fallen, Sherlock Holmes! Listen to you. That strength of will, that self-
determination. I will give you a hint. There is a saying attributed to me by the Fallen's prophet, Milton. Surely you know of it. All you English boys read Milton."

The man smiled, a terrible grimace that showed his mouth and teeth as though he would devour Sherlock on the spot.

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven," Sherlock replied. "Then you are the one called Satanael, or Satan. I've spoken to your demon, Focalor."

"Only because I wished it. And Milton was ultimately wrong. Not that I deny saying it -- I don't deny it. Those that say I am a liar are lying, you see."

Satanael gave another little flick of his finger and a fire burst forth in the fireplace, like a miniature mouth of hell. Instead of casting a warm glow over his beloved 221B, his and John's chairs, the fire served only to coldly illuminate its ruin.

"But since dear Milton wrote Paradise Lost, I have formed a greater design. And so there should be a new chapter, and it will record my new motto---

"-- I'm here for John Watson. Give him to me, let him go. And then we can speak of your plans, which I understand you cannot achieve without me. So let us start, shall we, with that gesture of--
good faith on your part."

"Do not interrupt. I will tell you my new motto. It will help you understand."

"If you must."

"Better to reign in Heaven than to reign in Hell."

* * *

"I brought what Sherlock took with him from the Priory, when he returned to Tatsfield." El Brujo withdrew three hellhound-pistols. "I made bullets with the last of the Priory's silver. We will need them against the hellhounds."

"We have our own strength against hellhounds now." Mycroft and Lestrade exchanged a steady glance. They had fought before together, but not as they were now. They were stronger now.

"But you are still only two. And Mycroft -- you are fully Nephilim now. And you will need to shift. There is little time for that."

"Not Nephilim exactly. Technically, we are Rephaim."


Lestrade stared. "Where did you learn that?"

"I spoke with my father."

"Rephaim, death-angels. All the more reason to fight for life, and against the dark. And while you, Mycroft, may have learned to shift, Lestrade needs help -- there is no full moon here."

"You forget that I am still officially a senior officer of Whiteshadow Division. And I have access to certain objects and, ah, mixtures. This one -- " Mycroft produced a metal cylinder -- "induces lycan transformation. Reputedly, I have not tested it myself. It is reportedly exceptionally painful, much
more than lunar shifting. And so, I don't--"

"Shut it, My. I said I'd do it. It's for Sherlock and John."

"I rather thought we were saving the world."

"That too."

* * *

"Focalor said you were a triumvirate, but to reign means absolute power. Where are Lucifer and Samael? Why are they not here?"

Satanael's smile grew wider.

"Ah. So. I presume that means... that this is a coup."

"You Holmeses are really quite brilliant. Even amongst the Nephilim. Although you are properly the Rephaim,' the Faded Ones,' from amongst the dead. The children of Samael. But I want you to consider me as if you were my own, as you should be. I am the only one left."

"But I won't do anything -- unless you set John free."

"That is easily done. After you submit to The Omega Sutra and perform the rite of Unlocking of the Gates of Heaven, John will meet you on the other side. Hell will have no more meaning. We will be in paradise. Isn't that worth dying for? Eternal life. Eternal paradise."

Sherlock looked around him. Ashes drifted across the filthy, torn carpet that once had glowed scarlet.

"But this is the world you made. Why does London look like this here? I presume you can make your world -- hell -- look however you please. Why not make your own paradise here?"

"As above, so below. In this particular instance, I am showing you a glimpse of the immediate future. A future you can foreclose forever. The vampire plague has now overrun London. And other cities. It is like the days of the Black Plague, which is merely yesterday to us. The people are all in hiding. They are running out of food. Soon they will run out of water. The bodies of the dead are burned, day and night. Whole regions of London have been burned to the ground, trying to root the vampires out from their enclaves. And so, the smoke and the ashes. Without you, this will never stop."

"Sherlock! Go back!" It was John's voice, strong over pain. He was upstairs. And he was being hurt.

They were hurting John.

"You see how easy it is to make you comply. You were very clever with Jonathan Talbott. We should perhaps have expected that a Holmes would find a way to outwit even the greatest black magician that the world has ever seen. Always the same weakness. Love."

Sherlock ignored Satanael. They were not really here. This was all illusion.

But John's agony was not an illusion.

"But it isn't an illusion. That is where you are wrong. Focalor explained to you about the Spirit Molecule. It is in the brains of all corporeal beings. And the Nephilim and Rephaim are much more
sensitive to it than mere humans. Your brain, down in Hantswood Hall, has been flooded with it. It stimulates the brain, the nervous system, in ways that are quite exceptional. It makes you see and experience things that cannot be seen with the mortal eye. This vision before you is quite real, quite as real or even more real than London itself. But I assure you it is also the real future of London. Unless you acquiesce."

Sherlock had prepared a series of signs on a large paper that he had learned from the Book of Solomon, reputed to capture and hold even the highest orders of demons. Then he had added some of the signs that he had seen raised on John's body before he vanished, signs he believed had been drawn on John's flesh by the angels themselves to bring that body back to heaven. Whether these powers could control Satan himself remained to be seen. He knew that he was supposed to draw the sign on the floor, but there was no way to accomplish this that Sherlock could see. Satanael was watching him with predatory eyes that he could almost feel burning his skin away. He thought any moment that his skin would shrivel and reveal the bone beneath.

"I prepared a letter for John, to say goodbye. Let me read it to him, and I will go with you," he said with as much anguish as he could summon up. Which was completely unfeigned. He thought his heart would burst and his blood was turning to water as Satanael gazed at him long and hard. Then he snatched away the paper.

"You don't think I'll be deceived by one of our own children? These common little signs --" He unfolded the paper almost playfully, then froze with a choked cry of pure rage.

* * *

Sherlock rushed past Satanael and up the stair, and threw open the door. He didn't pay attention to the heavy panting of Satanael rising up behind him as he struggled, filled with a volcanic fury, didn't see the stair dissolving into ash with every step.

But it wasn't John's bedroom. It was a filthy cellar with rough concrete walls. There were dark spatters everywhere, on the walls, on the floor.

There was a tiny barred window high above and ashes drifted through. There was graffiti in a foreign letters, Arabic script, and a huge red word that he could barely make out scrawled above John's head:

INFIDEL.

John was tied to a metal mattress frame leaning against the wall. His body was clothed in scraps of rags. His skin bore more wounds than actual clothing. He saw Sherlock, and screamed.

"No no no no no---"

This isn't real this isn't real this can't be real

Satanael waited until Sherlock noticed his presence, and then gestured to John. John writhed.

"It's very simple. I will do this forever. Or I could stop, and let him go. All you have to do is submit. The time is now. The solstice is here. Go back to your fleshly body, Sherlock, for just an hour more. You know what The Omega Sutra requires of you. It will be over soon, and I promise, you will meet John Watson at the gates of heaven."

Sherlock's head sank in defeat.

"Let me hold him one last time."
Sherlock laid himself over John, and willed him to feel their spirits touch, entwined as they had truly always been. He didn't speak aloud, but sent his thoughts to John, as he had been taught in the Mysteries, and prayed that John had taken in enough of it from being his bonded to be able to hear.

*John, don't shrink away. Open yourself to me.*

John's horrified eyes opened and blinked, unbelieving.

*This is not real. It's a trick. I won't.* But his lips were not moving.

Satanael showed no sign of hearing the silent communion, spirit to spirit, bound by love.

Sherlock looked at himself and saw that he looked like what John must be imagining, which was his old self, the Sherlock Holmes of 221B Baker Street, wrapped in his coat and scarf for the first time in he couldn't recall how long. John was meeting him in their shared imagining, or dream, or whatever power their bond was giving them in this moment. This was the true power of the Nephilim -- the power of traveling in the dream-world.

The evil cellar faded and fell away and became John's room in 221B, tidy and familiar. The bedsheets were rumpled and Sherlock knew that in his torment, John had been trying to dream of them together in that bed, safe and warm.

*Trust me, John.*

*If it really is you, leave me if you can, and if you can't, I don't want you here to see this.*

John didn't quite believe that Sherlock had pierced through into his own vision to make it their own, soul to soul, together.

*I'll always be with you. Now, come to me. Remember the Pridiax Archive. Remember the cottage. Remember the Priory. You and me, together, one. No fear. You are right, it isn't real. It isn't real. Just us, we are the only real thing. Come to me.*

When he felt John bind with him, strong and secure, one heart, one mind, one soul, he pulled John away from the horrible metal and rearranged the space -- *it wasn't real, none of it was real*, and if it was all just an illusion created by the Fallen in his tortured body and brain down below, then he could twist it to his own purposes, perhaps, even if only for a moment. If it would be long enough.

He pictured the night that the Alphas had attacked 221b, when they jumped from the upper floor windows into the waiting helicopter. He didn't have time to try to mould such a convincing illusion as that, but he imagined the folding ladder in the ceiling in the landing at the top of the stair in Baker Street.

Then he reached up and pulled it down and rushed up the ladder until they were standing on the roof of their flat in Baker Street, looking out over a darkened London, shrouded with smoke and ash. Big Ben was the only visible light, a distant twinkle as faint as the North Star.

Everything was very dark, and they couldn't see the rooftops across the street or the pavement below. Down there might be three stories down to the street, or it might be a bottomless pit leading to the depths of hell.

Now he and John stood on the very edge of the rooftop, hand in hand. It seemed as though they were suspended in space, had always been suspended here.

*It doesn't matter,* Sherlock told himself, told John. *It is all illusion.*
Satanael shook off the power of the sigil and was on the roof with them now, but it had bought Sherlock that precious instant. Dante leaped onto the roof after them, but was restrained by Satanael, who came after them bringing complete darkness that reached for them like a physical thing.

"No matter what, don't look back! Never, ever look back," Dante cried.

John and Sherlock held each other's hand tight, and exchanged a look filed with boundless love and complete understanding, and jumped.

* * *

Sherlock awakened on the cold floor of the chamber below Hantswood Hall. He opened his eyes. The Pseudothyrum still glowed above. He felt the dark hearts of the Fallen surrounding him, waiting for him to open it by sacrificing himself. The Omega Sutra was open by his side.

The cold, dark door was here too. The door to hell itself yawned open. And John's spirit was poised there at the threshold, reaching for Sherlock but slowly being pulled back despite his struggling.

Without thought Sherlock's wings emerged and he was at John's side once more. He would never let John be dragged back to hell. He was being pulled back with John because their spirits were entwined, and he would never let go, never again.

It was his destiny, he had been told, to open the Pseudothyrum. It was Sherlock's fate as a child of the Angel of Death, who had a unique path, it was said, to take the souls of the dead to heaven.

As above, so below.

The Angel of Death must therefore also possess a unique path to take souls to hell.

If he could unlock one door, could he lock another?

He scrambled for The Omega Sutra, loosening his hold on John, and shouted out the final words of the ritual:

"What is hereby opened, no one can shut, and what is hereby shut, no one can open."

Then he threw The Omega Sutra into the open fire, where it exploded in a burst of black fire.

"John, come to me, I have you! Don't let go!" He wrapped John in his wings. Behind him, the black doorway opened still wider, pulling John relentlessly back. Sherlock looked into John's dear, agonized face full of love, refusing to give up.

Sherlock willed the door to close with all the strength of his whole love for John.

And in that instant, everything went black.

* * *

Mycroft rushed to his brother's side. Sherlock was blindly groping for the crosses in his pockets.

"I can't see -- help me, find the crucifix, find them both," Sherlock gasped.

Mycroft found the silver crucifixes that Sherlock had carried into Hantswood Hall, the plain silver crosses that John had brought back from Afghanistan and put them in Sherlock's hands, too shocked to question. He supported Sherlock as he quickly felt his way to the door and wedged the
crucifixes into the keyhole. Mycroft joined with Sherlock, and El Brujo drew protective sigils around them, and cried, "I summon you, Michael, to our aid!"

Lestrade, ferocious in his huge, wild wolfen form, guarded them as they tried to bind the door.

A bright light, too bright to look upon, materialised and covered the door with a shimmering, star-bright brilliance that was nothing like the dark light that had shone from Satanael. The light resolved into a shape like a sword. Behind the door a muffled howling froze their hearts. It shook with the whole fury and power of Satan and the Fallen.

"Put your hand on the door and speak the words," the archangel Michael commanded from within the radiance. Quaking, blind, Sherlock obeyed.

"What is hereby opened, no one can shut, and what is hereby shut, no one can open."

A sound like the death of a thousand souls howled and groaned behind the door.

"Again! Together!"

"What is hereby opened, no one can shut, and what is hereby shut, no one can open," Mycroft shouted with Sherlock. Only Sherlock, and perhaps the archangel Michael, heard John chant with Sherlock, his voice strong and steady now, and free of pain.

Everything was silent, as though he had lost the power of hearing as well as sight. He had read that being in the presence of an angel could destroy human senses and could drive a man mad. He prayed he would not lose his reason too as he collapsed to the ground insensible, John's spirit cradling him as he fell.

"It is over," Mycroft said.

* * *

When Sherlock awoke again, he felt warmth on his face, but it was still dark. There were ordinary daytime sounds, distant cars, birds in trees. He was apparently laying on grass somewhere, out in the open. John was still with him. He felt at his belly and knew, probably because John was helping him to know it, that the tiny burgeoning life there was safe.

"I can't see, Mycroft. I can't see," he said slowly, not really believing it yet. "Is this real? Is it over?"

Mycroft's voice shook. "It is over. I'm sorry, little brother. I'm so sorry. We must get you to hospital."

He blinked a few times experimentally to see if there was even a hint of light, but all was dark. He covered his face for a moment, sighed and knelt, and allowed Lestrade and Mycroft to help him stand. He wasn't going to wallow in self pity. The winter solstice was past. John's spirit, soul-bound, was with him, close and protective. Heaven, hell, the angels and the Fallen, were no longer his concern. He had survived. He had fulfilled his destiny, even. Now, they would go home.

"It will be all right, Mycroft. It can't be helped. Please don't --"

"But you're blind --"

"Stop. I'm aware. I was told not to look back, you know. Dante warned me. But he trapped John at the door --"
"Don't. Don't speak of it yet, Sherlock."

He felt Lestrade's arm around his shoulder. Lestrade smelled terrible, like some kind of zoo animal.

"That's quite enough of that, Lestrade. You smell. Where are we?"

"Hantswood Hall. The garden behind the old Hall," a familiar voice said. It was El Brujo.

"I want to go home. Why are we still here?"

"One final thing we must do. I have found Talbott's grave, you see," Mycroft said.

Sherlock thrilled to understand Mycroft. "Are they gone?"

"Talbott was inhabiting the form of DI Critchley. You remember Critchley, Lestrade's colleague. He is, for lack of a better term, Talbott's human host now. You were unconscious, you were projecting, you didn't know what was happening down in that chamber. When it became clear that the plan wasn't working, Critchley disappeared. We think."

"Disappeared? You mean escaped? Then tell me -- are we at Talbott's grave? We must open it at once and --"

"-- and destroy the head," El Brujo said firmly.

"I know," said Mycroft. "But we didn't know where it was until last night, did we? There was a little map folded into The Omega Sutra that showed where Talbott was buried. I believe he intended to eventually raise his own body. For the brain, of course. Fortunately, the paper fell out before you burned The Omega Sutra."

"Don't say that name. But that was indeed fortunate," Sherlock said drily. He knew he was indeed fortunate, but it was very hard to take it all in. And John was still dead.

"Did you really have to burn it? It was an invaluable, ah, specimen."

Sherlock was adrift, not being able to see Mycroft's face. He didn't like his tone, though. The covetous lust that The Omega Sutra sparked in everyone who touched it. Himself most of all, perhaps, beside Talbott himself.

* * *

"Never speak of that book again," El Brujo said sternly. "Open the grave and do what you must. And then burn the map."

"But can we really do this now? Shouldn't we be trying to find Critchley?" Lestrade said. "Remember the Priory? Uncle Jean-Marc said that it was a crime, that Maxim had stolen a piece of your soul and that Talbott was keeping it from you. And we couldn't get it back. I tried, we both tried. I even saw it, it was on a cord around Critchley's neck. It glowed green. But -- "

It was impossible to describe the fight they had waged around Sherlock's insensible body: the demons and the Fallen had appeared, trying to somehow force Sherlock to complete the ritual of the Unlocking of the Gate. And the Runaways and actual angels too had appeared. Lestrade had been sure they would all be torn to pieces in the battle. There had been nothing to do but stand back to back with Mycroft over Sherlock's body, and he wasn't ashamed that he had finally had to pray to God to save them all. He had no idea if his prayer had been answered. But they were all alive.
Except one.

"--It doesn't matter anymore," Sherlock said. "That piece of my soul -- Maxim said it was the part of my spirit that was most like him. The part that was a killer, do you see?"

He was overcome with memories of the Priory, of Jean-Marc trying to exorcise the demon from John, and John killing the strong priest where he stood. And what happened after. He would have to tell Lestrade. But not yet.

"And I thought I needed it, to fight them. I thought I needed it to make me strong. But now, I'm letting it go. Nothing is worth more fighting now, don't you see? I lost John. I saved him, but I lost him. So do it now."

Several hours of hard digging later, a stone crypt buried ten feet below the earth opened to the sunlight for the first time in four hundred years. Within was a shriveled body wrapped in elaborate linen strips inscribed with sigils.

Lestrade took up a sizable rock and smashed the skull.

It cracked like a monstrous egg to reveal an astonishingly well-preserved lump of tissue, shriveled and brown but still recognisable as Talbott's brain.

They each took a turn trampling it beneath their feet, Mycroft and Lestrade helping Sherlock when he insisted fiercely, until nothing was left. Then they took the body and burned it, scattering the fragments of bone and brain from Talbott's skull within the fire.

It took a surprisingly long time to burn.

Sherlock was troubled by the smoke. A few ashes floated up and landed on his face, and he remembered John's story of escaping from the torture chamber, only to be shot and left for dead, Afghan snow falling all around.

He also remembered Satanael's warning, that the smoke and ashes of the dead were coming to wrap London in fog and the dark.

* * *

They were finally leaving Hantswood Hall in Mycroft's long black car, a thin finger of smoke rising up from behind the woods the only sign of the demonic battle that had taken place there.

Before they had left the vicinity of Tatsfield, they were accosted by a tall man standing in the road, holding out his hand commandingly. They stopped the car.

"What is it," Sherlock demanded. He was already nearly going out of his mind without his vision, and his hyperactive senses of hearing and smell were struggling to provide him with data that his eyes could not.

He could almost scream with frustration, except that he felt John's calming presence with him, and he remembered that despite everything that had happened, he still had a solemn duty to try to remain calm, even serene, for the baby's sake.

"Sherlock," a voice said, musical and sad. It was a voice he had heard before.

"Sollas." He didn't know what to say or how to feel. Lestrade and Mycroft had begun to try to recount the battle of Hantswood Hall, all that had happened while he was absent in spirit,
projecting. He knew that the Runaway angels had come to fight the Fallen and to protect him. And that Sollas had been there.

But it hadn't brought John back to him. And he had no more idea where John's body was than before. Seemingly a million years ago he had ordered the demon Focalor to tell him, and Focalor had promised to find out.

"Sherlock, I'm ordered to take you with me. Your brother and friends may not come," Sollas said. A seed of a suspicion grew.

"Where is John's body? I know that you know, Sollas. You had John for yourself -- are you keeping John's body? What did you do with him? Do you have John?" He was raving now, and had flung himself out of the car, swaying blind, furious and frightened all at once.

Could it be that Sollas had been against him all along?

"Sherlock. I understand why you feel this way. Believe me that I would never, ever do anything to harm you or John. Your bond and your love were sacred. I know where John's body is now."

"How is that possible? You told us that John -- " Mycroft was suspicious too. Sherlock had told them in as few words as possible of their struggle, of exorcising the demon Focalor from John, only to have the body John had borrowed - Sollas's body, in fact -- vanish. "Don't go alone with him, Sherlock."

"He must come alone. It is not up to me."

Mycroft, Lestrade and even El Brujo were all talking at once, but Sherlock listened only to an inner voice that he knew came from John. "I'll go. What else can they do to me now? Mycroft, Lestrade -- I will meet you in London," Sherlock said. "But be very careful. I believe London will be very different now than when we left it. The soul vampires are stronger than ever, I'm sure of it. And the Fallen aren't destroyed, you know. They are still where they were before, more or less. Which is all around us. I may have locked the door to hell last night, but it's not the only door. I believe there are, in fact, seven gates to hell."

"And only two to heaven," Sollas said.

* * *

In a secluded corner of Highgate Cemetery, three angels gathered around the blind detective. He only had their word, really, that this was Highgate Cemetery at all. But something about the cool silence and the slippery moss beneath his feet made him believe it. Sollas took his hand and placed it on a marble stone set into one of the crypt walls.

He ran his fingers slowly over the name carved there:

*Surgeon Captain John Watson, 66th Berkshire Regiment*

The hope that had filled him when Sollas came was crushed. They weren't bringing John back. It was true, what Focalor had said. The damage to John was irreparable. He wasn't meant to stay on Earth as long as he had done after he died. John had done it all for him, to protect him, using the body that Sollas had lent him. But that was months ago, and they had put John's body behind this marble plaque to rot. They never meant to bring him back.
This was all there was. A mismarked grave.

"You have it wrong! That's not even his proper regiment. Can't you show him that last respect? Does he mean nothing to you, after all? And haven't I done enough? I did what was right, didn't I? I turned back from Talbott and The Omega Sutra. I didn't let the Pseudothyrum be opened. I locked one of hell's gates on Satan himself, and from what he told me before the end, Lucifer and Samael were trapped down there too. I saved the world, and all I want now is to see John properly buried."

He crumpled to the ground and laid his head against cold marble and let the tears come into his blind eyes. They had put John in a grave that didn't even record his most public honour, although Sherlock his Army service had in many ways been the very least of John's many acts of selfless heroism, the only reason at all that he and their baby were still here. He would tell their daughter about it, every day.

He heard the angels murmuring together. He could only hear snatches:

*Nephilim.*

*Pseudothyrum.*

*Rephaim.*

*Monstrum.*

"I may be a monster, but John Watson never was!" He raved. "It's you that are the monsters! You can never know what I've lost. Now-- just go away. Leave me alone with him. I'll have the stone replaced myself."

A hand was placed gently on his head. He was filled with warmth, something like the warmth of John, John's love and John's heart, but it couldn't be. He blinked away tears, humiliated to have let even the angels see him at his weakest.

But he was wrong, apparently, because when he last expected it, help was given to him after all.

The blackness lifted. In its place was white marble, green trees and mossy ground, and a sliver of grey sky above. There was a rectangular black space in front of his dazzled eyes and he plunged his hands, unbelievingly, into the cool empty space.

"Sherlock."

He spun around and fell into the warm and very human arms of John H. Watson, formerly of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers.

* * *

221B didn't look anything like his vision in hell.

Their chairs were still before the fireplace, not ragged and filthy but gleaming black leather and comfortable red brocade; the rug was still crimson, and there were no ashes floating in the air.

Once Sherlock was convinced that it was all real, that they were really home, he nearly dragged John to the bed.

"I never want to leave this room, not for the rest of our lives," he swore, removing clothing at an alarming pace, John laughing fondly and not resisting at all.
"I think you said something similar in Scotland. Do you remember Loch Linhe?"

"Do I remember Loch Linhe?? Let me show you," Sherlock said wickedly.

* * *

The next morning, Mycroft and Lestrade presented themselves for tea. Mycroft brought the day's Times, which reported with terse solemnity that London was under emergency military government, and that the prime minister had stepped down in the face of the horrific crisis of the vampire plague.

The new prime minister, the headline announced boldly, was none other than Olivia Urquhart.

"She's having the troops set up shrines all over London, Some sort of cult. "Pomba Gira," they call it," Lestrade said.

"I am given to understand on good authority that the devotees of this 'Pomba Gira' have nothing whatever against werewolves," Mycroft said. "So you're quite safe, Greg. And in other news, not for publication in the Times, of course, I've been asked by the new Prime Minister --"

Here Greg snarled viciously with his new wolfen teeth at the mention of Mycroft's alliance with his former fiancée, which Mycroft quite actually enjoyed. He patted his alpha's arm soothingly and knew that Greg would make him pay, delightfully, later.

" --- strictly on the basis of need and, of course, merit, to take over Whiteshadow Division. We are needed now more than ever. Sherlock, you know you too are needed."

John stood up, scowling blackly. "No. Definitely no. He's got other things to do. More important than bloody Whiteshadow. For the next seven months, more or less. And after," he growled.

"Of course, of course," Mycroft said acidly. "I know you are so looking forward to raising the sole new scion of the Holmes line in a generation in the midst of a plague of vampires in London."

Sherlock opened his mouth to argue, took in his alpha's warning glare, and thought the better of it. Anyway, he could get around John. He usually did. And John didn't want to admit it, of course, but he was already getting restless.

There was a rapping at the door and Mrs. Hudson popped her head in.

"It's so good to see you all back together again, it does my heart such good," she said warmly, looking fondly over their gathered faces, Everyone looked rather different, of course, each in their own ways, which was understandable. But it felt like home again, despite the horrors facing London outside the confines of their flats.

Mycroft had installed what he assured her were impenetrable barriers in their block around Baker Street, but she didn't really understand what he meant as she still, on safe days when the sirens weren't going off, could walk to the shops and back, almost like the old times -- except for the soldiers on every street corner, and the constant reports of the dead in the news.

"Anyway, there's a delivery for you downstairs."

"You didn't bring it up?" Mycroft was in one of his more astringent moods. Lestrade gave him a sharp elbow. "Apologies, Mrs. Hudson. I'll just go down and fetch it, shall I? Sherlock isn't to disturb himself in his condition," Mycroft said with every sign of sincerity.
"No, Mr. Mycroft. I mean, the three of you should go down."

John and Lestrade stood with Mycroft. "Why?"

"You'll see."

They thumped down the stair. Sherlock heard a long silence, and then someone giggled. It might have been John. It was definitely John. His heart soared. He couldn't remember the last time he had heard John laugh.

He made a mental list of all the things he could do after Mycroft and Lestrade left that would make John laugh some more.

There was some undignified grunting and thumping on the stair, and then the door was pushed open with a blast of the scent of fresh pine.

John, Lestrade and Mycroft hauled what had to be the biggest Christmas tree ever seen in Baker Street into the room. Sherlock stared. He had utterly lost track of time, hadn't even looked at his mobile. He stared at the front page of the Times.

It was December 24th.

"Merry Christmas," Sherlock said finally, as they all stared at one another in disbelief, then one by one burst into laughter that didn't stop until they cried.

* * *

That night, Sherlock was restless. He sat for a long time watching John breathe, still unable to quite believe in the miracle that had given him back his eyesight and brought John back to life.

Life.

Sometimes he thought he could feel a tiny kick in his belly, but it was far too early and he figured he was imagining it. Sometimes he wondered if he had imagined most of what had happened. He had been told that his kind was especially susceptible to the brain chemical called the Spirit Molecule, that they could see things that ordinary people couldn't.

Did that make it real? Not real? He still wasn't completely sure.

He opened his laptop and found the old email from Dr. Jesperson, the Nobel prize-winning physicist who had agreed to meet him at his home on the isle of Jersey. John had been so furious at him arranging meeting away from London behind his back that they had had quite a row. Not without ultimately satisfactory result, but still. John had told him that he needed to ask him first before he did anything that would remotely be considered dangerous. And before, he hadn't really listened but he knew now, of course, that John was right, John had always been right. He would talk to John in the morning. Maybe they could go together, before pregnancy made travel completely impossible.

And Mycroft, of course, would want to be involved. Perhaps Jesperson could be of some use to the Whiteshadow Division.

With these interesting plans in place, Sherlock sat in his chair, admiring the Christmas tree. It had taken several hours of digging to find the box of ornaments, and he had promised to do better about keeping the flat tidy, or at least hygienic. There was the baby to think of. Sherlock wondered if his new powers extended to magically causing his messes to just vanish. He decided he would try.
There had to be some benefit to being, well, half-angel. Beyond being granted miracles in return for saving the world.

He adjusted one of the ornaments, one Mycroft had made in school when they were children. He didn't know if Mycroft knew he still had it. It was just paper and glue, which is why he was attracted to the greenish glow of the thing. That was peculiar. He touched it, and it fell.

Behind it was a tiny vial on a black cord. It glowed green. It pulled at him somehow, and he realised this was what had made him restless and drawn him from his warm bed with John. It was his spirit vial.

Sherlock drew back, looked around the flat for a hidden intruder with a cold sweat breaking out all over. He groped for the poker from the fire.

The last place he had seen that vial had been around the neck of Talbott, who had been possessing the body of Critchley. But Talbott would never have returned the vial to him. Talbott, and whatever remained of him, was truly gone now. They had burned his body and destroyed his brain. No, it was impossible that Talbott should have brought the vial back to him.

Eliminate the impossible, and whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth.

Talbott had also subdued and captured Maxim Purcell’s spirit. Sherlock had called on Maxim’s spirit at Hantswood Hall. To resist Talbott with his last strength, and help him, to choose his side. He believed he had felt Maxim’s spirit answer him. He wanted to believe that Maxim had helped him.

Had Maxim somehow survived? Had he taken Critchley’s body, and thereby recovered his spirit vial? It was Maxim who had stolen it in the first place.

I have a little piece of your soul, Maxim had gloated on All Hallows Eve. The part of you that is a killer is with me. You killed the Sleeping Beauties.

It was a message from Maxim, then. Maxim wanted Sherlock to know he was still here, somewhere, somehow, moving about incarnate in London.

He called Mycroft.

"Send me the CCTV for whoever left the Christmas tree," he said.

"You don’t think I looked at it immediately? It was an ordinary vendor, the same as has been selling in Marylebone Road for ten years. He says this is the last year, though." They both knew why.

London was becoming almost a ghost town: those that could leave, had left. The rest huddled indoors. No one was safe. The Underground had been abandoned. It was the haven of the vampires now. London felt something like he imagined it had during the Blitz. Except vampires were harder to fight even than Nazis, as Whiteshadow was discovering.

"What is it, Sherlock?"

Sherlock was tempted, very tempted, to say nothing, to hide the vial and think this through secretly. But things were going to have to be different now. Everything was different. And after Hantswood Hall, the last thing in the world that Sherlock Holmes wanted was to be alone.

"I'd rather show you. Come round the flat in the morning. It's not an emergency. But I rather think
our old friend Maxim Purcell is still with us."


"If you're sure it can wait. I'll double the watch on Baker Street."

The old Sherlock would have sneered. "Thank you, Mycroft. I'm very grateful," he said instead.

He pulled the spirit vial out of the branches of the tree and held it in the palm of his hand. Maxim was right. This was a part of him that he had been missing. It felt glorious to hold it, to feel that power.

He padded into the kitchen and found an old tea tin. It had a picture of a tea estate on it, with snow-capped mountains behind it.

Kamala Kangra.

He nearly smiled at the aptness of the impulse that made him reach for it, but then he was so angry and so filled with terrible memory of that time that he sank against the edge of the kitchen sink, his knees weak. Even becoming a true Nephilim hadn't made him immune to human weakness. The truth was that he found it harder than ever to shut out emotions of all kinds: love. Hate. Fear.

He crushed the tea tin under his foot. It reminded him of crushing Talbott's skull. Then he threw the crushed tin in the bin, ignoring the faint scent of exotic tea that wafted up.

Then he found a proper jar and dropped the spirit vial inside, and screwed the lid tight. It looked like a trapped firefly.

He put it in on the mantle, where they would both be sure to see it in the morning. Then they would decide what to do.

* * *

Sherlock was still what he was -- a Nephilim, a Rephaim, in fact. He had dark wings that with his new powers of shape-shifting, he could conceal with concentrated mental and physical effort -- but which he far preferred to stretch out luxuriously and allow John to stroke and groom until they shone.

John couldn't stop caressing his still-miniscule belly. Sherlock was only just approaching his first trimester. The night that Sherlock had taken the omega pregnancy test and run off to confront Maxim Purcell at Hantswood Hall had been Halloween. It was incredible to realise all that had happened in these short weeks, a lifetime and more had passed-- but they were still here, home in 221B. Their bond had kept them together, through hell and back.

Sherlock's skin glowed now with a light that was more than just the fabled omega pregnancy glow, because he was still infused with the power of angelic ichor that he had drunk when John had inhabited the body of an angel. John didn't miss it. He was never one to pine after things that he just couldn't have -- except once, when he couldn't let go of wanting Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock looked more magnificent even than the memorable day he had dove into Loch Linhe during the crossing, his skin glowing and covered in raw alpha bites. It made John want to make some more, and so he did.

He licked Sherlock's ivory flesh to soothe it, although Sherlock protested that he loved the ache of his alpha bites.
They held each other tight and kissed for hours, John too sensitive to try to take his mate now in his early pregnancy, even though his cock was hot and eager to plunge into that tight wet place. He drove them both mad with pressing just the tip into his mate's passage, then withdrawing, over and over, Sherlock sighing _please, please, John_ against his lips. It made him remember that first night, the terrible Heatwave that Maxim had dosed him with, their edge game when John thought all he would ever have was the chance to touch him with his hands to end his drug-induced pre-heat, and that they could never be together. And that thought was enough to dissolve his self-control, and with as much tenderness and care as he could summon he slowly pressed inside, as Sherlock wrapped his legs around him and drew him in closer.

"There, there, I've got you," he whispered as Sherlock came in a glorious shuddering spasm, his face radiant with ecstasy and love.

"You're here, John, you're really here," Sherlock whispered afterwards. "I still keep thinking you'll disappear."

He would always be grateful that when Talbott recited the terrible ritual of Unlocking the Gate from _The Omega Sutra_, that John had been absent, trapped and tortured even, but he would never have to imagine that horror. Sherlock felt it fading every day.

"No, never, I'll prove it," John said easily, gentling him with his hands as an alpha should for his nervous omega. Sherlock had more reason than anyone could to be nervous now, he knew. He would be spend the rest of their lives, if he had to, trying to reassure him that this was real, that the past was truly over and done.

Sherlock shifted restlessly under his greedy mouth, groaned to feel John's teeth set into his precious flesh, but they had a rule never to allow Sherlock to return it.

He still had a Nephilim's taste for blood.

John was tempted, very tempted, because the feeling of Sherlock's mouth and teeth on him anywhere made him instantly hard. But as always, he was the practical one in their partnership.

"I know I can hold back, John," Sherlock teased, looking up with wide-eyed innocence from under his dark curls.

He laughed.

"Just a _tiny_ bite." Sherlock was quite persistent.

"No, thank you, love. I've been dead quite enough for a lifetime. I'll give you an extra bite to make up for it."

The skin bruised gold and purple now, the ichor making a fascinating pattern that he could watch forever, and he promised himself that he would.

* * *

**Epilogue**

Sollas followed the slender form of Bridie as she hurried into the posh hotel in Mayfair.

She was wearing a Dickensian costume, which he found utterly charming even though it was slightly ridiculous. She was doing Christmas carols for the night in the hotel's cozy pub, and Sollas was going to watch. Nothing in this world made him happier than hearing Bridie sing. Well, maybe one other thing, but he was taking his time and would choose his moment, and he knew he could only hope.

Bridie would not have forgotten the terror of their night together, when they had made love and within an hour she had watched helplessly as Sollas threw John Watson's body off the balcony of the Pan Pacific Tower, crushing it beyond hope of saving, or so he had believed at the time.

Raphael had taken pity on him after the Battle of the Gate, and had touched Bridie and cured her illness, for now. No promises, though, Raphael said. She could be hit by a car tomorrow, Raphael warned patiently, gravely, still not understanding Solla's passion for a mere mortal creature, feeble flesh and blood. Raphael had also withdrawn his prohibition against Sollas possessing another human and so, he had saved a human he had found too late, consumed by a soul vampire in the bowels of the Underground where Sollas always hunted for the vampires now, a frail male beta body on the brink of death, his soul already gone to feed the rapacious ones.

He was surprised to find the man had a beautiful singing voice. Raphael had allowed him to keep his angelic powers, and he knew he could easily become one of the most famous singers in London, if he wanted. In the world.

But he would never let that happen. He didn't want that kind of life. The only audience he cared for was singing "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" in her lovely high voice, in an old-fashioned costume two sizes too big:

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,

Let nothing you dismay,

Remember, Christ our Saviour

Was born on Christmas Day

To save us all from Satan's power

When we have gone astray

When she finished, her pretty cheeks flushed with warmth and health, he clapped the loudest and left a red rose in her basket, but left before she could see who he was even though he felt her staring at his back.

And so he went out into the street where he would wait until she left the hotel, and would walk behind her quietly through the dangerous London streets to see her safely all the way home to her tiny flat, clutching the rose in her hand.

He hummed a Christmas carol to himself and waited for her light to come on. Tomorrow he would introduce himself, tell her the truth.

It started to snow.
Hello lovely readers,

Yes, I just posted the final chapter of The Omega Sutra: Chapter 54, Monstrum.

For all of you that have generously supported me along the way, you have my sincere and humble thanks.<3

I would never have finished without the constant support, friendship and wisdom of the brilliant and incomparable Maggie-Conagher. A million thanks and all the love, Maggie.

I'll be posting some notes in this afterword about some of the research that went into writing this monster of a fic. There is a reason the final chapter is called Monstrum.

G x

P.S. The Omega Sutra is first in a planned series. The next installment in the series will be set in London, and concern the fight against the vampire plague. Click to the next chapter to see the teaser cover.
Teaser for The Blood Sutra

Chapter Summary

Teaser for The Blood Sutra, the upcoming sequel to The Omega Sutra. London is under siege by a vampire plague. Can Sherlock Holmes save his beloved city?
Chapter Summary

The Omega Sutra is complete! I made a book trailer to celebrate. Enjoy!

https://youtu.be/NgPemyXzOJw
Trailer #2 for The Omega Sutra

Chapter Summary

It has been nearly a year since I completed The Omega Sutra! The sequel, The Blood Sutra, is coming soon. Subscribe to get updates:) Meanwhile, enjoy this teaser trailer for TOS.

G x

https://youtu.be/hVXyq9kM_PM
Chapter Summary

A gift from borgopass <3
End Notes

Readers who enjoy my tracks can find the playlist here: 
THE OMEGA SUTRA PLAYLIST

Art:
From the brilliant msaether: See Johnlock art here

In Russian: Russian Translation

Enjoy.

G
Works inspired by this one:

Covers for The Omega Sutra by Ghislainem70 (ettuinarcadia), Art for The Omega Sutra commissioned from anotherwellkeptsecret by Ghislainem70 (ettuinarcadia), Teaser for The Blood Sutra, upcoming sequel to The Omega Sutra by Ghislainem70 (ettuinarcadia), Book Trailer for The Omega Sutra by Ghislainem70 (ettuinarcadia), Holiday Cover for The Omega Sutra by Ghislainem70 (ettuinarcadia)

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