Once

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Once
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Summary

Sherlock uses alphas once. It works for him. John Watson though isn't so easy to just cast aside.
Chapter 1

Sherlock started to eat a banana as the plate he’d rapidly cleared of poached eggs and toast was taken away by the waiter.

Easy access to food for the only time he felt genuinely hungry was one reason he always spent his heat in a hotel. An unlimited supply of fresh bed linen and towels was another. Mainly though it was the separation from his life, what he considered his real life, that the plush anonymity of a good hotel provided. That he Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective and toast of Scotland Yard was not the same as Sherlock Holmes needy omega.

One other way he distanced himself, rationalised, was to make an experiment of it. He had records of blood pressure and temperature along with details of each and every alpha for every heat going back five years. Ever since he’d been clean. Sometimes there were gaps of course, due to his condition, but the data had reasonable continuity across the years and he’d drawn some interesting conclusions.

He recorded the last of his scrappy notes for this episode on his spreadsheet and closed his laptop. A post it note he hadn’t noticed earlier was stuck to the lid.

*I know what you said but I have to ask. Can we do this again, please? You know where to find me.*

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Sherlock pulled the thing off and screwed it up, sighing heavily. This happened occasionally. He was always very clear with an alpha, one heat only. Yet in spite of their reputation for fucking around unbonded alphas could be remarkably persistent when they got attached.

Finding a new alpha for every heat could be tedious. The Internet, heat hook-ups and so on provided alphas aplenty but the thing was, they lied. Lied about their age, height. Worst of all they lied about their dimensions. That said, this time he’d had no issues. He felt utterly spent, a little sore and with the mental clarity that only the cocktail of pheromones an alpha gave off during a heat could provide.

He checked out of the hotel and headed to the tube hoping to get a little fresh air during the walk at either end, ease his aching limbs. The train was busy for mid-morning, tourists mostly, some late commuters.

He wasn’t quite sure what made him look at the young man, a beta by his size, there was something off. He was reading an A to Z and carrying a Union Jack carrier bag but he had tucked himself into the corner of the carriage with an economy that suggested he used the tube regularly and he knew exactly when to move to get off first at his stop. He wasn’t a tourist, just wanted to look like one.

Sherlock followed him off the train, he was just passing the ticket barrier and beginning to wonder if his brain was still hormone addled and he’d got it wrong when he caught sight of the man’s inner wrist. A small tattoo, a stylised rose, the mark of a gang of thieves who’d targeted wealthy tourists across the city for years until he’d helped Lestrade shut it down last year. Or so he’d thought. He threaded through through the crowd, gradually quickening his pace. He had been planning a quick discreet twist of the man’s wrist up his back and to press him against the wall till Lestrade sent someone. It wasn’t to be.

The man turned for some reason, caught Sherlock's intention in his eye. He shoved a group of elderly tourists aside as he made a dash for the escalator. Sherlock was after him but whether it was the stiffness or his large breakfast his legs were sluggish. He stumbled and half landed awkwardly on his forearm before righting himself. Just as he saw the man reach the bottom of the escalator another
figure at the edge of his sight line caught his attention.

Running full pelt through the crowd he carried an aluminium walking stick like a weapon. Assuming an accomplice Sherlock pushed himself extra hard, fighting his lethargic legs, only for him to run straight into Mr Walking stick who had stopped dead and turned towards him. The thief had been caught by an (unusually observant) police officer. He found himself on the filthy tile floor practically on top of the man, the alpha.

The scent invaded his lungs as he caught his breath. It was like his mother’s garden on a warm evening, lavender and rosemary. Green, herbal, clean. He realised, with embarrassment, that even through several layers of clothes he was aware of the alpha’s penis against his thigh. This one, he thought, wouldn’t have to lie.

The thought, the scent, the proximity, had something stirring, something he would have thought should be dormant until his next heat. If instinct had been his only guide he would have wrapped himself around the alpha and rubbed against him shamelessly. Tourists or not. Maybe it was his imagination but he would swear he could feel the blood rushing to the alpha’s groin. To swell, fill the dormant flesh.

The alpha cleared his throat. Rolled them over till Sherlock was sitting on the cold tile.

‘We’d have got him then. Are you ok?’ The alpha reached for his, now tender, arm. ‘It’s ok. I’m a doctor.’ A slight reassuring smile creased his face.

Sherlock winced in pain, it was at least sprained.

‘You should go to A&E, get it x-rayed.’ The alpha carefully helped him to his feet using his good arm. ‘John Watson by the way.’ The alpha added before they were rudely interrupted.

‘Is this yours sir?’ The policeman was holding out an almost professional looking digital camera in a bright pink case.

‘It was in a pocket. He’s got quite a few things.’

‘What? No! No, he is a thief though. Please ensure Detective Inspector Lestrade is told about his arrest.’ Sherlock said, struggling to concentrate on the business that had got them here in the first place.

The officer opened his mouth to say something else but thought better of it, walking away talking into his radio as his colleague hand cuffed the thief.

‘Can I borrow your phone?’ He said to the alpha. His was flat, charging electronics having been the last thing on his mind over the past few days.

‘My phone?’

‘Yes. I would rather tell Lestrade myself. Internal communication in the Met is not all it might be.’ The alpha handed him a top of the range phone, rather at odds with his plain, functional wardrobe.

‘What are you neighbourhood watch?’

Sherlock tapped out a message. Taking a discreet lungful of scent.

‘I’m a consulting detective, the only one in the world.’ The alpha drew a breath to speak but Sherlock neatly cut him off, handing the phone back.
‘You're an alpha.’

‘I am.’ Amusement was brightening the alphas face.

Kind.Sherlock thought, not a quality he had ever valued much before.

'I've just finished a heat. I'm due another in approximately fifty days. I will be able to be much more specific nearer the time. Would you be interested?’ Sherlock held his breath for a reply. The alpha leaned on his walking stick (though he didn't need it).

‘You're asking me to share your heat?’ The alpha asked licking his thin lips. There was quiet promise in the gesture.

‘Horrible,sentimental phrase –but yes. That is what I'm asking in the commonly understood meaning of the expression.’

‘I was thinking of asking you to go for a cup of coffee or something but I didn't think you'd want..with someone like…we've only just met?’ The alpha finished, flustered.

‘You are interested then, good. I usually go for three days but best allow yourself four. I don't like to use condoms so naturally I'll have clean results to show you and I will expect to see yours. Obviously I use hormonal contraception. I have your number.’ Sherlock nodded at the phone that now hung limply from the alphas hand. ‘Problem?’

‘I don't even know your name.’ The alpha sounded almost irritated but his eyes told a different story he looked awed almost.

‘The name is Sherlock Holmes and the address is 221b Baker Street. I'll be in touch.’ Sherlock turned and bounded up the escalator. His recently heavy legs now moving easily with a fluttering energy.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the comments and kudos on this. Sorry about making this look like 1 of 1, it was always going to be longer by it was nice to get so much encouragement!

By the way, anyone who's following my other omegaverse story, True Nature. This had not been abandoned, despite appearances and I should be posting a new chapter by the end of the week or thereabouts. This was a first go at case fic and I had written myself into a corner.

As Sherlock read the results from the screen he realised he was less than ten days from a heat. There were signs too of course, tenderness, mood changes but the confirmation made his stomach flip.

He was going to see John Watson again.

He had his hormone levels tested every ten days in the lab at Barts. He spent a lot of time there anyway and he didn't trust anyone except the highly competent if rather silly pathologist Molly Hooper to run the tests.

He tapped out the text, trying to school his face into disinterest so Molly wouldn't comment. The beta pathologist had ridiculous, ill-informed romantic notions about heat and bonding.

Heat on the 23rd +/- two days. Are you available? SH

Yes of course. I was beginning to think you were a wind up or a lovely dream.

The reply came as he pretended to examine a sample under the microscope, aware Molly was watching.

Good. 221b Baker Street. SH

I know, I remember. I've had to stop myself visiting sooner;-)

Sherlock struggled to keep a straight face even more. It was only days after they'd met that he realised he'd given the alpha his home address. Normally he was so careful to be anonymous.

He'd thought about changing things, booking the usual hotel but something always seemed to get in the way. Lestrade had a case, his brother needed something doing that was of national importance, Molly had an interesting cadaver.

It did give him an excuse to look into the alpha, if he was inviting someone to the flat he should know all about them he reasoned. He 'borrowed' a secure laptop from his brother to get into the service databases. Going on the basis that John Watson screamed military to anyone observing the man properly. He was right.

Captain Watson had been a skilled battlefield surgeon invalided home at the peak of his powers. A tremor in his hand following a nasty gunshot wound meant he could no longer operate, even in
civilian life.

He sent the alpha the other instructions for his heat in a series of texts. The explanation of the data he collected and his insistence that this was a one time only.

*Sounds very organised.*

Was the only, slightly sarcastic, reply he got.

I'm the event the last few days leading up to his heat were exhausting. Helping Lestrade chase a serial killer to ground in one of the city's seeder districts. Sherlock's knowledge of the back lanes and alleys had been what finally caught him but only after a struggle on the bank of the river.

Sherlock got home after two in the morning on the 21st. He'd not slept or ate in more than a day and barely drank so when it struck him he felt a little ropey he put it down to that.

He gulped a glass of water, scrubbed the Thames off his skin in a very hot shower and fell asleep on his bed still wrapped in a towel. When he woke up just before six to grey dawn he thought the dampness he felt was the towel wet beneath him. Only when he made to move did the wave of cramp correct him. He became gradually aware of the other symptoms. Sweat fiery then clammy, sensitivity to even the run of the sheet against his skin. He texted the alpha.

*It's starting, estimate I will require your knot in 2 hours 30 minutes. SH*

*You old romantic you. Be there soon. JW*

Sherlock noted the alpha had adopted his own habit of initialling texts.

He took the first of his measurements and laid the thermometer and blood pressure monitor within easy reach by the bed for later. Changing into a light dressing gown and curling on the couch to ride out the worst of the cramps.

When he heard the tap on the door he assumed it would be Mrs Hudson. The landlady often called in to check on him when he was due his heat, though she didn't call it that, too coarse. He'd deleted her euphemism of choice but it involved flowers.

He went to the door, unsteadily leaning on the frame as he opened it. The sight of the alpha, bearing a weathered khaki rucksack and a Tesco bag, took him aback.

‘You're too soon.’ He hissed, arms wrapped round himself as his insides twisted.

‘I wouldn't say that.’ The alpha regarded him with a professional eye as he dropped the bags. Moving to guide Sherlock by the shoulders into the room.

‘As a doctor you should know that knotting too early is..’ The alpha cut him off, looking horrified.

‘No,Christ no, I don't mean *that.* Just you look a bit-sit down before you fall down.’ Sherlock swayed, faint. The tone was brisk but gentle and he found himself firmly moved back to the couch.

‘You nothing to take, for the pain?’

Sherlock shook his head. ‘Everything makes me sick.’

‘It’s a bit late now for this time but before I go I'll write down a couple of names. There are some new things have come out recently on prescription. Anyway, when did you last eat something?
Drink something?’

Sherlock looked at him blankly, apart from the water when he got home he had no idea.

‘Right, sweet tea and toast then.’ John was moving towards the kitchen.

You don’t need to do this.’ Sherlock said, already relishing the prospect of something warm and starchy.

‘Of course I do. I said I’d help with your heat. This is your heat too. Did you think I’d just turn up for the fun bit?’

‘Alphas usually do - I mean, that’s all I expect of them.’ Sherlock corrected himself halfway through the sentence.

The alpha stepped back towards him. ‘That’s a shame. I am looking forward to the fun bit though.’ John leaned over ever so slightly, fingers rubbing across the nape of his neck. ‘You smell lovely by the way.’

Then he was gone and Sherlock heard rustling and banging in the kitchen for a few minutes. John returned with a tray of tea and buttered toast with jam, a hot water bottle wrapped in a pillowcase under one arm.

‘Old fashioned but it might help.’ John set the tray down and gently pressed the hot water bottle to his stomach. It did help.

John sat on the floor beside him sipping his own mug of tea while Sherlock ate and drank. The doctor voluntarily told him the same story as he’d read on his personnel file. He was so open that Sherlock felt almost guilty for having looked into him vicariously.

All the while the scent enveloped him. He wanted to be taken, knotted, of course. Fed and now drowsy though, he was also content to sit and talk for a while.

Alpha scent arouses omegas. Put indelicately it gets them wet, eases the passage of an alpha into their body. What it also does is lowers inhibitions, makes the idea of spending a few days with an alpha, maybe a stranger, inside you not just bearable but desirable, essential. As he spoke to John, he realised that he would have gladly spent time in his company anyway. It was unnerving.

The doctor asked about his work as a detective, asked if it could be dangerous. When Sherlock confirmed it could be John got a wistful look in his eye.

He must be so bored. Sherlock thought as sleep began to further cloud his brain.

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When he woke up the slant of the sun across the room told him he’d slept for a couple of hours. He panicked at first, that the Alpha would have left him. He needn’t have, his first full breath was loaded with scent, pheromones. Heavy but somehow also refreshing.

He’d been covered over with a blanket while he slept and was glad of it. He felt painfully aroused, slick between his thighs. He was also embarrassed, not at his condition so much, that was after all why the alpha was there. It was more that he'd fallen asleep, he would have doubted it was even
physically possible, before the first knotting.

‘Hello.’ John spoke cheerfully from the spare neglected armchair at the fireplace, curved round it's contours like it was made for him. ‘I think your body just needed sleep more than anything else. How do you feel now?’

‘Better. I'm ready now for...well.’ Sherlock wasn't normally shy of asking for what he needed but in his own living room with someone who'd made him toast it was different, it just was.

He got up and John watched, eager, as he stretched. He'd changed into a spare dressing gown of Sherlock's. The too long sleeves rolled up to reveal strong, lightly tanned forearms.

‘I hope you don't mind, I got soaked in that rain coming here.’ The alpha, tugged the collar and smiled broadly.

‘It's fine. Give me a minute.’ Sherlock gestured in the direction of the bathroom. His bladder was demanding his attention and he wanted to wash his face, clean his teeth.

When he came back the alpha stood up to meet him. The soft fabric of Sherlock's robe draped over his arousal.

‘Can I look at you, in this light? I've been watching you sleep and imagining. May I?’

Sherlock nodded and the alpha's hands went to the belt. He closed his eyes as it was carefully pulled away and fell to the floor.

‘You're lovely.’ John said simply. It seemed to be his favourite adjective. Hands skimmed down Sherlock’s arms.

‘Not all alphas think so. They don't like that I'm taller than they are.’ Sherlock said, babbling, unable to leave a silence. He'd been rejected more than once by alphas who seemed so unsure of themselves that an omega had to be fragile, frail. It had stung if he was honest.

‘Unbelievable. Anyone who complains about this doesn't deserve an omega.’ John brushed fingertips across his collar bones and down his ribs. ‘Can I kiss you?’

Sherlock nodded, he found this asking for permission novel but he liked it. ‘I know some alphas need additional stimulation to maintain arousal.’ He said formally. The whole situation had a closeness to it, even though John had barely touched him. The alpha just grinned.

He reached one hand up to Sherlock's neck, pulling his head down and pressing their lips together. The other hand grabbed Sherlock’s wrist, pressing his hand to the alpha’s groin.

‘Do I feel like I'm struggling to stay hard here?’ A rough whisper in Sherlock’s ear. He did not. If anything the sneak preview of a few weeks ago had rather undersold Captain Watson. He was long and thick and...

Further thoughts were shattered by another kiss. He was kissed by alphas occasionally but it was usually uncoordinated, graceless, a precursor to being fucked. This seemed to exist in its own right, soft and careful but insistent as John's tongue explored his mouth. He felt himself sag into the sensation.

‘Easy.’ The alpha said, holding him up. ‘I'm not knotting you on a hard floor, not with this leg. Besides, I want to take you on a bed the first time.’
‘Before we do. Can I see you?’ Sherlock said, not sure why he wanted to. Felt silly the only one naked he supposed.

‘Thought you’d never ask.’ John grinned, shedding his robe without ceremony. He stood in an unconscious parade rest for a few moments.

*For action not ornament*, Sherlock thought as he took in the compact, lithe form of the Doctor, his scar a violent blemish on his shoulder. The alpha moved to take his length in hand; he seemed very proud of it (as well he might be).

Sherlock felt fresh wetness between his legs. He used to fight this, to hate that he reacted to a well-endowed alpha this way. He’d made himself all but incoherent with cocaine on a number of occasions to try and blot out his heat. Now he welcomed the looseness in his hips, the instinctive urge to kneel, to curve his spine so that his body was presented to the alpha. He knew it was only by allowing his body this feral interlude that he could be what he needed to be the rest of the time.

He turned and walked wordlessly to his room, the alpha’s gaze like fire at his back.
Sherlock didn't turn round as he reached his bedroom door.

He could hear the creak of the alphas step behind him as he clambered onto the bed, positioning himself on hands and knees. Undignified- but now he didn't care. The urgency, the anticipation was bone deep as the mattress dipped under John’s weight.

A hand stroked luxuriantly down his back, round the curve of his arse and finally through the wetness at his entrance .

‘Is this ok?’ John asked, his voice ragged.

‘Its why you're here.’ Sherlock shot back, impatient now. The alpha laughed a little, nervous.

‘Alright, understood.’ John kept his touch light for a few seconds, feathering kisses up Sherlock's spine before he slid one finger inside him. ‘You're going to feel so good.’ John murmured, before adding a second finger.

Sherlock whimpered, it did feel good but, at the start of a heat, nowhere near enough.

‘Just checking you're ready love, don't want to hurt you.’

‘Even through the fog he could appreciate the gesture. Someone John's size could be painful without adequate arousal. Now though, at the start of a heat, it was a a chivalrous formality. Sherlock, presented as he was, could feel the wetness cooling on his skin, his body beyond ready for an alpha.

The endearment, the 'love',would normally have irked more but he let it go. When you're desperate to be knotted is not the time, after all, to get into how patronising you find pet names. Anyway part of him, a tiny but somehow growing part, preened at the sentiment.

John held Sherlock's hips still as he carefully eased himself inside. The wash of relief was instant and Sherlock moaned, his mind unable to focus on anything other than the single point of sensation. The sound was echoed by John and he felt the alpha shiver against him.

‘You feel like…’ John paused beginning to move, the alpha obviously fighting his urge to thrust hard straight away. ‘You feel like what I've been waiting for.’

Alphas would say all sorts when they were inside you. Sherlock had been called a slut, a whore. He'd been told he was loved and everything in between. He didn't have the time to consider it further.

The first time during a heat was invariably quick. It always seemed as if his body (and the alphas for that matter) has completed the act before his brain caught up. This time was no different. It was as if John had barely started to move, a confident, easy, roll of the hips, before Sherlock felt the pressure of the filling knot. He felt himself open further, drenched, as his body prepared. Instinct held him
stock still when he felt the alpha press the knot against him with purpose.

‘Are you ready?’ John breathed, kneading his hips. He had a sarcastic response, something about a written invitation probably, on the tip of his tongue but somehow a murmured please was all that passed his lips.

John pushed the knot home with a sharp broken sound, emptying himself in a series of violent pulses. Sherlock, the needy omega part at least, secretly loved this, the sensation of the alpha filling him with semen. The sheer volume a turn on.

He felt a mix of pleasure and pain for a few moments as his body accommodated the extra stretch of the knot. Then a sudden shock of pleasure tipped the balance. He shouted as he came, copiously, on to the bed below him. He was aware of John stroking his side through the shivery aftershocks, the alpha murmuring soothingly.

John’s head fell between his shoulder blades his breath warm against Sherlock’s skin. ‘Tell me that was good for you. I don’t think I’ve came like that in years.’ John carefully pulled Sherlock with him as he moved on to his side. Trying to get him closer (impossible in the circumstances).

‘If you’ve been abstinent for a long time an orgasm is bound to be intense.’ Sherlock said, trying to sound detached. From what he’d read and what John had told him the doctor had been close to death at one point and laid low for months after his wound.

‘That’s not what I meant.’ The alpha said drowsily. Within minutes he was breathing even and deep. As Sherlock lay, waiting out the tedium, he felt a nuzzling at his back that could only be John trying to scent him in his sleep.

He reached for the thermometer and monitor beside the bed. Taking his measurements as best he could in the position and noting them down.

Half an hour or so of acute boredom later there was the (always unpleasant) rush of sticky moisture as the knot shrunk and the alpha finally slipped out of him. He took the opportunity to move, clean up, fetch some water.

When he returned John had rolled onto his belly and was stretched across the bed. Sherlock took a few moments to watch him, paying particular attention to the exit wound scar.

Lucky he thought, though the man he’d spoken to earlier didn’t give the impression that he felt that way.

‘Where did you go?’ John said stirring, muffled by the pillow. He reached out a hand and Sherlock took it, unthinking. John pulled him back on to the bed and into a comfortable pheromone heavy embrace.

‘Water, get cleaned up.’ He said as he handed John a bottle, the alpha took a deep drink before setting it decisively aside.

‘I’d have done that.’ John said, frowning. Traditionally of course, the alpha took care of an omega during their heat. Sherlock didn’t expect it.

‘I’m only going to mess you up again anyway.’ John kissed along his jaw line and down his neck, taking his time around the scent gland. Sherlock knew the skin would be thin there just now. That alpha teeth would slide through like a knife through butter. After a few seconds John moved decisively away, away Sherlock realised from temptation.
The alpha stroked and kissed down his belly to where he was beginning to harden again. Rolling on to his back, John pulled Sherlock on top of him. Tugging his hair to hold him in position while they kissed.

The height difference was mostly leg and John manoeuvred them both until their cocks were pressed together. Wrapping his legs around Sherlock who took the hint, rolling his hips. Rubbing himself on the alpha the way he'd gladly have done in front of a tube station a few weeks ago.

‘I know it's not enough to get you off, not during your heat. Feels good though, doesn't it?’ John whispered in his ear, dragging his teeth across the lobe. Sherlock managed a gasping response.

‘Would you ride me?’ John continued. ‘I know not all omegas like to be on top.’ Sherlock though was already scrambling into position. Sherlock suspected it wasn't so much omegas didn't like to be on top as they thought alphas wanted to be in control and alphas must be pleased at all times.

Some alphas certainly would almost fight below you to take control back. John Watson though was the picture of submission. Mouth slightly open, hands resting lightly against Sherlock’s skin as the omega used him.

Like this the knot was less of a sudden shock, it crept up on him. Almost one nerve ending at a time. He closed his eyes letting the bliss and relief of another orgasm build slowly.

John took one of his hands, threading their fingers together. ‘Enjoying yourself?’ John said, with a soft caress to his tense thigh, sounding pretty far gone himself.

‘Yes. You're above average size for an alpha and I'm much more aware of your size, girth in particular in this position. It's- hmmm.’ Sherlock broke off, the knot beginning to overwhelm him.

The alpha took his other hand as well as they finished, more or less together.

‘We might need to work on your dirty talk. ’ John said, still holding his hands, now kneading the joints of his knuckles. Seemingly oblivious to the mess Sherlock had made across his stomach.

‘You know, I might just have a nice wank thinking about that one day-probably several days.’ Sherlock gave John a mock scandalised look before the alpha continued. ‘I might just think about you doing the same.’

That, Sherlock realised, was an interesting, appealing thought. He didn’t as a rule. Outside his heat physical desire was largely dormant but there was something about the idea of John thinking about him…

There was a lot said and written about knotting. Pages and pages of the sex guides provided to adolescents were devoted to it, how important it was for strong bonds and relationships. How good it could be with the right alpha. Once the pleasure had passed though Sherlock found it intrusive distasteful. He never ceased to be irritated that, due to a mechanism designed to give sperm the best chance of reaching an egg, he had to waste his time like this. Somehow John Watson took the edge off of all that. It wasn't anything specific it was just his manner, his presence.

John helped with the readings this time, noting them down.

‘What's the point in it all anyway?’ John asked as he put the notebook back on the bedside table.

‘I’m hoping long term to identify variables that affect the duration and intensity of heats. Personal interest but it may have some clinical use.’ Sherlock was a little defensive perhaps. He'd never been asked to justify the thing before.
‘How am I doing?’ John asked. With a playful shuffle of his hips that caused a pleasant shudder deep inside Sherlock.

‘It's not meant to be a comparison between alphas.’ Sherlock replied sharply.

‘Well, it's the weirdest situation I've seen blood pressure taken in and that's saying something. Not relevant to the detective work though, is it?’

‘You say that but sexual relationships are the most common background for murder. I have several pages on my website devoted to the subject.’

John shook below him with laughter.

‘Maybe just a bit not good, you know? With me in this position. Still, at least you've got something to put on your website. Not like me with my empty blog.’

‘What on earth do you have a blog for?’ Sherlock immediately realised how this sounded. ‘What I mean is...’ John broke in before he could back track.

‘No you're right. I'm an occasional locum who lives in a bedsit. I can't write about patients because of confidentiality and I've got bugger all else going on. Are you cold?’

‘Maybe a little.’ Sherlock replied, surprised at the casual care of the question. A strange feeling, not unpleasant, settled in his stomach. He tried to ignore it.

John handed him a blanket that was draped over the headboard. ‘That's the only thing about doing it this way, I can't keep you warm after.’ Sherlock threw the blanket round his shoulders. John picking up his hands again as soon as he had done so, squeezing.

‘This blog then, what is it for?’ Sherlock said, keen to move the conversation on. It felt intimate, everything felt intimate with John Watson.

‘My therapist said it would be good to write things down. I have a therapist.’ John looked away, embarrassed.

‘I thought you might, with the leg and all. Your walking stick, you've left it at home I notice. All those stairs, two bags and then you practically carried me inside. The day we met I thought you were going to hit someone with it. You don't need it to walk, not when you're distracted.’

‘You're very distracting.’ John grinned at him and Sherlock realised John had pulled the conversation right back to where he wanted it to be. Intimate, flirtatious.

They carried on that way through the rest of the heat. John was inside him, enthusiastically, when needed. The alpha all but took over the readings and even made some suggestions about the experiment.

In the lulls between matings John was diligent about caring for him. Running him baths, and insisting he drank water. Preparing occasional small meals of toast, soup and porridge. It was only late on day two as he accepted a bowl of porridge and honey that he realised John must have brought all the food with him.

Sherlock felt his body gradually unwind. Dump the good hormones into his nervous system. The ones that put him in mind of some of the better illicit prescription-only medication he'd taken once upon a time. The fevered need of his heat began to subside like a slaked thirst.

When he woke up, sometime near noon on the 23rd. Sherlock felt better, normal, functional again.
As he lay, still lazily sprawled on his belly, he began to make plans for the afternoon. Barts definitely, the yard probably. Then there would be all the tedious post-heat laundry and tidying. The very thing he usually went to a hotel to avoid.

All of that was derailed when he stretched and his fingers collided with the coarse hair and smooth warm skin of Dr Watson's thigh.

John was sitting up in bed, the pages of something being slowly turned as Sherlock ran a hand decisively upwards. Taking a primitive delight in the shape and weight of John's balls and rapidly thickening cock. Realising that his heat must not quite be over.

‘Keen this morning are we? John said amusement in his voice.

’ Sherlock heard whatever John had been reading being tossed aside and a hand landed in his hair. The alpha hummed, content.

‘Thanks for this. If nothing else it's kept me out of my bedsit for a few days.’

‘Is it that bad?’ Sherlock mumbled, nose nuzzling at the junction of thigh and pelvis. Surprising himself that he was asking the question and was interested in the answer. John's scent was strongest here, like a handful of crushed aromatic herbs.

‘No, not really.’ John sighed, the tension in his body changing. I shouldn't complain. It's for injured ex services to get back on their feet after discharge. Some of lads came home from Afghanistan on the same flight as me, their mates now. It’s just…’ John shifted a little uncomfortably. ‘You get to a point in the day where it's just you staring at four blank walls.’ John petted his hair meditatively for a few moments more. ‘Anyway, I think I'll join you down there.’

Sherlock let the subject be changed and John immediately slid down the bed.

John's hands went straight to his hair, brushing it off his face and looking at him hard. As if he was trying to remember, to find something. He kissed him gently, pulling back to let Sherlock come to him, which he did, arms winding round John's neck.

They'd kissed a lot. More than the average heat spent with a stranger (though it wasn't a variable he'd monitored). Usually as a precursor to intercourse, but not, he was remembering now, always. There had been one kiss in the kitchen, both of them spent and hungry, while they waited for the kettle to boil. Lazy and sensuous, enjoying the taste, touch, warmth of each other.

The readings had been different too, elevated yes, but there were hardly any of the huge fluctuations he normally experienced. Then again this wasn't a properly constructed experiment. He didn't usually do this at home.

He let the thought drift off as one of John's hands moved from his hair. Gently moving down the length of his throat, ribs, belly before slipping between his thighs. Sherlock let his legs fall open, he was wet and ready to be taken but the alpha liked to tease him. Circling his sensitive opening with a feather-like touch until he gasped and wriggled his hips.

John entered him slowly, the alpha grinning as he watched Sherlock's expression change. This time, which Sherlock was sure would be the last, was slow and languorous, drawing things out. ‘You're amazing.’ John said at one point holding him as if he couldn't get him close enough.

John's grip on him was gently possessive as they both finished. The alpha licked across the surface of his scent gland and murmured something about the taste of raspberry. Sherlock settled, ready to wait out the knot. It took him a few moments of stroking the length of John's back to realise.
‘You didn't this time… I meant it doesn't matter…’ He broke off a little embarrassed as he waved his hand between them. To indicate where they were still joined but not, this time, knotted.

‘What do you think I am seventeen.?’ John said with a playful kiss to his shoulder. ‘If you want knotting outside your heat you're going to need a younger alpha.’

‘Outside of…’ Ohh. Sherlock scrambled from underneath him, the over sensitised alpha gasping. Sherlock quickly crossed the room and pulled a sheet round himself.

John looked at him for a few moments, moving to pull the covers over himself. ‘You thought you were still…? Oh shit.’ The alpha scrubbed a hand across his face. Moving to the edge of the bed. ‘Sherlock I'm sorry. I thought you realised you were done. I thought we were…well doesn't matter. I'll be out of your way shortly.’

There were a few seconds where Sherlock stood quiet while the alpha scrabbled to gather his few belongings.

‘Wait.’ Sherlock twisted the sheet in his hands. John paused, a jumper, absurdly, covering his modesty.

‘Im not suggesting for a moment you did anything wrong. Tricked me. It's just- I don't normally do that. Please, have a shower, tea, whatever people do.’

The alpha paused, looking at the floor. ‘If you're sure.’ Sherlock waited on him to look up and nodded emphatically. Dropping the sheet and moving back to sit on the edge of his bed. John chewed his lip, looking at him.

‘Why don’t I have first go in the shower then. Let you dose a bit. Then I can organise us some food. Sherlock laid back in silent response and John tucked the covers around him. The alpha found a clean towel in the cupboard (he seemed to know where everything was very quickly) and headed to the bathroom. If Sherlock lying on his side allowed him to watch John go, well, that was just coincidence.

Half an hour later Sherlock was showered himself, clear-headed and starving. He headed tentatively through the house. The cooking smell making his empty stomach complain.

John was at the stove. He glanced up, almost shy, as Sherlock came in.

‘Tea in the pot. There was bread and some eggs left so I did French toast.’ ‘You'll be hungry.’ He glanced at Sherlock, a faint wicked glint in his eye. It had the feeling of an echo of something long gone and Sherlock felt a little sad for a moment. He arranged himself a mug of tea and took a long fortifying sip of the hot liquid.

John sat a plate of French toast in front of him, sitting down opposite with his own. They ate in silence for a while.

‘Thought we were what?’ Sherlock said finally. ‘Before, you said you thought we were something. What?’

John continued to chew for a few seconds before swallowing and taking a mouthful of tea.

‘I thought we were beginning something. I thought we had a connection. Not just the shagging, which was amazing by the way, something else.’

John didn't look at him. Continued to cut his food, didn’t wait for a response.
When this occasionally happened he tended to be cold. To point out the arrangement made at the outset and that he had no further use for the alpha. Somehow, now, that seemed crass and cruel. Actually he knew it was always crass and cruel, just he didn't usually care.

‘John, while I'm flattered I should tell you I consider myself bonded to my work.’ John looked up from his now clear plate.

‘Tell me you didn't feel something? I don't mean the sex. I'm a doctor with a big cock I should be able to service a heat.’ Sherlock laughed at his bluntness and John smiled. Reaching across the table to take Sherlock's hand. Sherlock let it be taken, to stretch out this moment before he had to disappoint John. Let him down gently. He looked so hopeful.

‘I'm sorry.’ He said pulling away. ‘I can't, it's for the best.’

John nodded, his smile, his confidence gone. The resignation didn't fit him Sherlock thought. Didn't fit a man like John Watson.

The noise on the stairs broke into the suddenly heavy atmosphere.

‘I keep trying to tell you he's indisposed.’ Mrs Hudson alongside a heavier tread.

There was the most perfunctory of knocks before Lestrade burst through the door.

‘Sorry didn't realise you had company.’ Lestrade said, hovering awkwardly. ‘I forgot about…’

‘I did try to tell him dear. In my day…’

‘Thank you Mrs Hudson, it's fine we were just finished.’

He avoided John's gaze.

‘There's been another one. The serial suicides.’ Lestrade said. Sherlock looked at him and read him, lightning speed. Four hours sleep, croissant for breakfast and he'd argued with his superior.

‘Surely there's no such thing.’ John blurted out. Sherlock and Lestrade turned to look at him in surprise.

‘Nothing to do with me.’ John shrugged. And waved a hand. ‘Carry on.’

‘Will you come?’ Lestrade said, an edge of desperation to his voice, always music to Sherlock's ears.

‘Yes, but not in a police car. Text me the address.’ Sherlock dashed about the flat, picking up jacket, coat and phone. He was buzzed on hormones and the thrill of the chase. A serial killer no less.

He'd almost forgotten the alpha.

John still had his hands wrapped round a mug of cooling tea, he seemed to have gotten smaller somehow. Sherlock looked at him for a few beats before the alpha got up. Shoulders round, hand extended. Barely meeting his eye.

‘Well, it's been a lot of fun.’

As Sherlock looked at him the half formed deductions of the past few days joined up in his head with the known facts. The discharge, the bedsit, the drunk brother. The therapist, the psychosomatic injury, the empty blog. As often happened, especially on a post-heat high, there was one more deduction than he expected.
He's got a gun. He's going to use it on himself.

Sherlock felt winded for a second, drew in a shaky breath.

‘You up to this? There's no shame in taking it easy for a day you know.’ John was close to him now, eyes darting this way and that, very much the doctor.

He wants to be useful.

Sherlock held up a silencing hand, considering. Anderson would be working this scene, Anderson wouldn't work with him.

‘You’re a doctor. In fact you’re an Army doctor. Any good?’

‘Very good.’ John drew his body upwards, puffed out his chest a little.

‘Seen a lot of injuries, then; violent deaths. Bit of trouble too, I bet.’ Sherlock continued, shrugging into his coat.

‘Of course, yes. Enough for a lifetime. Far too much.’ John's expression turned sombre but he couldn't quite hide the wistfulness Sherlock had noticed at the start of his heat.

‘Want to see some more?’ Sherlock said, fearing rejection for the instant before John's face lit up.

‘Oh God, yes.’ John's enthusiasm was electric. Added deliciously to the mix of hormones and adrenaline.

‘Come with me. The officer on forensics is a moron, your medical opinion would be very valuable to me.’

John looked at him steadily for a few seconds, checking he was serious. Then the alpha grabbed his coat, walking to the door without hesitation. His whole stance had changed, upright, strong. Sherlock had a sudden image of him in fatigues, stoically shouldering a pack before heading into the dusty desert.

They jogged down the stairs together. Sherlock hesitated as he opened the door, hand on the handle.

‘John, this doesn't change anything. I want to be very clear.’ He forced himself to meet the alpha’s eye.

John pursed his lips, nodding. ‘I know.’

Sherlock went out into the street. The sharp city air felt like a slap after days in the flat surrounded by the fresh green alpha scent. He raised his arm to flag the empty cab that was approaching.

‘One thing.’ John's breath was close to his neck and it felt almost obscene in public after what had passed between them. Sherlock glanced up and down the street but they were all but alone.

‘I can't promise I'll stop asking.’ John stepped nearly in front of him to open the cab door, holding it open as a flustered Sherlock stepped inside.
Several years earlier....

Sherlock placed the freshly filled specimen bottle on the table in front of Mycroft with a flourish.

He couldn't decide what was causing his brother greater offence. His latest sample for drug testing or the chunky mugs of tea in which the teabags still floated. Sherlock had deliberately chosen the no frills café for the meeting to annoy his older sibling. Small victories.

Mycroft tossed a paper napkin over the specimen bottle before beginning to fussily fish out and squeeze the teabag.

‘How have you been anyway, well? Are Scotland Yard providing you with some diversions?’ Mycroft said sipping the tea hesitantly.

Sherlock dearly wished they could get to the part of the conversation where Mycroft accused him of using and Sherlock stormed out but small talk seemed to be obligatory at these meetings.

The sergeant has me looking at some old files. They're interesting enough I suppose. Maybe they'll let me go to an actual crime scene soon.’

‘Maybe.’ Mycroft said, smiling with effort.

Sherlock knew that Sergeant Lestrade had tolerated him at first only because Mycroft had offered to pull strings at the next promotion round. The beta certainly deserved the rank of inspector more than his alpha moron of a boss. Sherlock though, had more than proved his worth on cold cases.

‘What about health-wise?’ Mycroft said, a little more hesitant. ‘Are you prepared for…’ His brother, an alpha who ran huge swathes of government with ruthless efficiency, was actually blushing as he stumbled over the word heat. Sherlock took a mouthful of his own tea, let him dangle for a few moments.

‘I'm prepared. Would you like to know the colour the dimensions of the device I've ordered?’

‘Sherlock!’ Mycroft glanced around but in the busy café no one was paying attention.

Mycroft went very still for a second, staring at him intently before reaching into his breast pocket. He placed an expensive looking business card on the table. A mobile number written in biro.

‘What's that?’ Sherlock asked, his interest piqued by his brothers growing embarrassment.
‘A discretionary option. An acquaintance of mine, an alpha. I understand his private life is …heavily scheduled.’

Sherlock grinned at the absurdity of it, his own brother suggesting a casual arrangement. ‘Would I have to send a compromising photograph brother?’

‘Needless to say Sherlock he is thoroughly vetted. I would never suggest such a thing if I imagined you would be unsafe. I know how you are Sherlock, how it affects you.’ His brother looked at him with unusual sincerity.

Sherlock had nothing to say. He knew his brother was right. It had been the terrifying lack of control during heat that had driven him towards drugs in the first place. Forged prescriptions to start with before he’d developed a taste for cocaine. The idea of his first properly clean heat in years scared him.

His last had been spent in rehab, the time before that he couldn’t remember. Probably for the best. He did know it was, ironically, the overdose that had saved him from the predatory alpha dealer he’d been desperate enough to buy from.

His brother got up from his half finished tea, unusually subdued.

‘I'll leave it with you.’ Was all he said as he left Sherlock staring at the card.

The following day he found himself sitting in another café. Fashionable and airy with blackboards and bare wood.

The alpha was a few years older than Sherlock. An insomniac, workaholic, a runner currently swimming for exercise due to a hamstring injury. He shared a tailor as well as a club with Mycroft. That much was all obvious.

The alpha meticulously spooned the foam from the top of a cappuccino as he explained everything else.

For various reasons he had no interest in a bond but he did very much enjoy what he described as the ‘pure physical release’ of a heat. The effect was, however, greatly reduced by a physical barrier so recent clean results, on both sides, were essential. Sherlock handed over the crumpled page for inspection like it was late homework, accepting a neat plastic folder in return.

The alpha’s approach, not lewd, not romantic but respectful was a revelation.

‘You should know, I’ve never done this before.’ Sherlock said looking into the amber depths of his Earl Grey tea. ‘I know my brother—my recent issues. He assumes that I’ve been promiscuous but…’

The alpha set his cup in its saucer carefully. ‘Well, I’ve done it before. Lots of times.’ He smiled coolly reassuring. ‘It’s ninety percent instinct Sherlock. You just need to let it happen.’

A fortnight later Sherlock let himself into a hotel room. Anonymous and corporate if upscale. Comfortable, quiet, private, safe.

The alpha was already there, still working on his laptop. His scent was pleasant enough, like woodsmoke. He glanced up at Sherlock. ‘How far along do you feel?’

‘Crampy and hot but not quite…’ Sherlock made a vague gesture with his hand.
The alpha nodded. ‘No rush get comfortable and have some tea. I have emails to finish anyway.’ The alpha turned back to his laptop. It was as if they were about to have some sort of meeting.

Sherlock did as suggested. Changing into a robe in the bathroom (absurd—the alpha would be inside him soon). Making tea and lying on the bed to read the police forensics manual he'd swiped from Lestrade's desk.

It wasn't long before things moved on, he'd read about this. Alpha scent accelerating a heat. One moment he was reading about the correct procedure for the collection of hair samples the next he was soaking wet and desperate for something inside him. The alpha turned to him, pupils blown, then turned back to his laptop to save the draft of his email.

He got up and moved carefully towards Sherlock pausing a few feet away. ‘Let it happen. You know what to do, what you need.’

Sherlock didn't think, just acted. It felt freeing. He hastily pulled off the suddenly scratchy robe. Rolling from his side to his belly and rubbing himself on the bed below for a few seconds, enjoying the friction before he realised that would never cut it. He found himself raised back on his knees before he knew what he was doing, stance widening a little.

‘That's it.’ The alpha breathed, his voice closer now and vastly different from the clipped professional tone from before. ‘It may hurt a little, first time and all.’

It didn't hurt, not really, not when compared to the relief. It wasn't just having something inside him, good, right as that felt. It was the mix of hormones, his, the alphas. An effect that only increased each time the alpha took him.

As he ate a surprisingly substantial room service breakfast three days later he found the rooms of his mind palace bathed in light. Details of the unsolved cases Lestrade had given him coming into sudden sharp focus.

The alpha had to call his name twice before he responded.

‘I have to get back to work Sherlock. Please don't rush your breakfast. I hope this was satisfactory.’ The alpha smiled politely. All trace of his baser instincts hidden under impeccable tailoring and expensive cologne.

‘Wait.’ Sherlock said hurriedly swallowing a mouthful. ‘You said you always do this the same way, different omega, hotel?’

‘Sherlock I...’ The alpha's face furrowed into polite pity.

‘No – you misunderstand me. I- this has been so civilised. I had wondered if I could do the same myself in future.’ The alpha looked hesitant. No doubt fearing the wrath of Mycroft. Before he left though he had filled two sheets of hotel notepaper with detail.

Hotels that were happy to cater for a heat. Usually levying a small extra charge for laundry and an exclusively beta staff. Websites that catered, safely, for casual arrangements, while discouraging those who were really looking for a bond.

Sherlock tucked the paper into his breast pocket and created a dedicated room in his mind palace before calling Lestrade with the news that he'd solved a fifteen year old murder.

**********
'Digitalis. A crude but effective poison.' Sherlock glanced at the small audience. ‘Or it would have been. Rather blows a hole in the self defence angle. Don't you think?’

‘I don't even know how you thought to check the shears.’ Lestrade said, shaking his head in awe.

‘Obvious. The garden was a mess, overgrown, yet we have one very clean, new cut on the digitalis plant. The house is a mess too. Washing up piled in the sink yet it has the cleanest plug hole in London. The omega obviously prepared the solution but then poured it away. Maybe he was disturbed or lost his nerve either way he was clever enough to realise that he had to make sure it was gone when the police came after he stabbed the alpha.’

Molly and Lestrade looked at each other for a moment smiling in disbelief and then back at him. He saw something travel across Molly’s face and he realised. He'd got carried away, forgotten about his wrist.

Thankfully Molly said nothing until Lestrade was gone but as soon as the policeman was out the door she was tugging at his cuff.

‘Let me see Sherlock, who hurt you?’ He tried to pull away but Molly was stubborn. He petulantly removed his jacket and pulled up his sleeve.

‘It's nothing.’

‘Sherlock it's a handprint! Who…?’

‘An alpha alright!’ He pulled his cuff back down.

‘He wanted to bite me, to bond. That thing you think is so romantic. I disagreed, he pressed the point. He came off much worse don't worry.’

Sherlock felt shaky and angry with himself. It had been going so well. His heats managed by a series of anonymous willing alphas, a respectable number of influential private clients and now Lestrade had let him on to a crime scene. Not snuck him in days after but walked him straight in past incredulous (and mostly stupid) colleagues.

He'd known there was something off about the alpha. Too loud, too affectionate, trying too hard. He'd organised this one too late, the work taking precedence. His investigations had been less thorough than usual. A mistake he wouldn't make again.

He'd acquitted himself well at the crime scene considering. He lacked the flow, the speed, focus he'd have after a whole heat spent with an alpha but he'd managed.

‘If you want to talk to someone you know where I am.’ Molly said, touching him lightly on the shoulder. She meant well Molly. As a beta female she thought they had a lot in common. He supposed she was right up to a point but she couldn't understand the intensity of the thing.

‘I'm fine but thank you.’ He said going back to his microscope though she still hovered.

He'd been lucky with the alpha anyway. Pushed him off quickly breaking his nose when his intention became clear. The question of how to tackle one very angry, bleeding alpha answered by the two wiry betas who barrelled through the door moments later.

‘Hotel security’ they said but the speed and efficient, discreet brutality they used to subdue the alpha, restrain him with a cable tie suggested a different paymaster. He had assumed his brother monitored
these liaisons, he'd been both relieved and alarmed to discover how closely.

‘Sherlock.’ Molly sighed, her pity infuriating. ‘I wish you wouldn't do this. I wish you'd find a…’

‘A nice alpha and bond? I know you do, you don't understand. What I'd have to give up.’

Chapter End Notes

The digitalis reference is inspired by an X Files episode-Eve I think it was called.
Chapter 5

If convenient come at once. SH

He fired off the text, following a few seconds later with

If inconvenient come anyway. SH

He flopped onto the sofa to await a reply. He did genuinely need another, unrecognisable, phone to send the message to the beta female victim, Jennifer Wilson’s, phone but he could just as easily use one of the cheap pay as you go phones he kept for just such an eventuality. The case was Interesting. Self administered poison, a word-rache-Rachel, scratched into the floor and now a missing pink phone which hadn't been in the missing pink suitcase.

He deserved of course to be told to fuck off but something told him John wouldn't do that.

He had been in such a rush to find the victim’s suitcase he knew had to be nearby before Anderson could get to it that he'd forgotten John. Ten minutes later, as he hauled the very pink case out of a skip he remembered . The possibly suicidal alpha he'd rejected and now, abandoned.

By then of course he was (technically) concealing evidence so he couldn't really go back to the scene. It didn't help the showing up he'd given Donovan.

He’d known about her and Anderson for months and now was as good a time as any to use it to his advantage. To try and deflect the attention from him, from John, who he felt inexplicably protective of.

John was obviously a highly competent doctor, a little sentimental perhaps at ‘a woman lying dead’ as he had put it, but nearly everyone was. The revelation had been how much Sherlock liked his presence. How much it helped his process. His phone buzzed where it rested on his chest. He was disappointed it wasn't a reply from John.

Interesting choice this time Sherlock. He says I'm not that frightening. MH

He's right. A little too close for comfort Mycroft. SH

My thoughts exactly brother. He's very loyal very quickly. MH

Sherlock shuffled to a seated position. Flicking back to his Conversation with John.

Could be dangerous. SH

He'd sent the message before it occurred to him that this could be counted as flirtation, almost foreplay with John. Before he had a chance to give it more thought another text came through.

Mrs Hudson said you had an alpha at the flat. Something you want to tell me? ;-) Molly

Sherlock was sometimes surprised that all the people he knew also knew each other-and talked about him. He'd reply to Molly later.
If, as he expected, John was being given a lift back in his brother’s car he’d be here soon. Sure enough less than twenty minutes had passed before the alpha (no trace of a limp) walked in the door.

‘You asked me to come. I’m assuming it’s important.’

Sherlock took a moment with his eyes closed, feigning disinterest, but really inhaling John's post heat scent. It made him want to sleep and not, he was alarmed to realise, alone. ‘Yes, of course. Can I borrow your phone?’

‘My phone - again - don’t you have a phone?’

The alpha sounded incredulous but he complied. Sherlock had planned to send the text himself really but for some reason he took the opportunity to test John Watson. The doctor, with a little grumbling, typed exactly as Sherlock dictated.

*What happened at Lauriston Gardens? I must have blacked out. 22 Northumberland Street please come.*

Sherlock explained the significance of the suitcase, why it obviously had to be pink. Why the murderer had made a mistake taking it and had to get rid of it in a hurry after he left the victim at Lauriston Gardens—but still had the phone.

Getting John to send the text, showing him the suitcase was all about seeing how far he would go. Sherlock was surprised, impressed. John had been kidnapped, interrogated (sort of) and was now blithely contacting a murderer and concealing evidence from the police.

All because Sherlock had asked him to.

Sherlock pulled his thoughts back to the case. He was banking on the murderer panicking at the text, trying to respond in some way. He settled in to wait while John paced.

‘Just met a friend of yours.’ The alpha said casually.

‘A friend?’

‘An enemy. Your arch-enemy, according to him. Do people have arch-enemies?’

‘Did he offer you money to spy on me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you take it?’

‘No.’ John was defensive.

*He’s very loyal very quickly...*

‘Pity. We could have split the fee. Think it through next time.’ About this he was serious. He’s done it before, one of Molly’s lab assistants. The money was useful but it was mostly the satisfaction of getting one over on Mycroft. It was months before his brother realised. He noticed John was smiling a little, pleased with himself. ‘What?’

‘Just, next time. I’ll be hanging around will I? Who is he?’

Sherlock ignored the first question. ‘The most dangerous man you’ve ever met, and not my problem
right now.’ He flounced out of his seat reaching for his coat. The phone rang with a withheld number right on cue.

‘Well are you coming?’ He said shrugging into the coat and tying his scarf.

‘Oh - so I am getting to hang around then. Where?’

Sherlock rolled his eyes. ‘Northumberland Street of course. Something better to do?’ He said, knowing that between confronting a serial killer and a quiet night in front of the telly there would be no contest for John Watson.

Northumberland Street was only five minutes walk away, just as well as his heat had been recent enough to attract lascivious looks from alphas. John glared back when he thought Sherlock wouldn't notice.

It was only after they were seated in the small restaurant, with its wine, candles and tables for two that Sherlock realised. He’d only ever been to Angelo’s place at lunchtime before. Then it was all working lunches and families with prams but this time of day...

‘Sherlock, a candle for the table - more romantic.’ Angelo winked as he placed the tealight in front of John.

‘I’m not his date.’ John said a little half-heartedly with a sidelong glance at Sherlock. Angelo, with considerable theatricality, told the story of how Sherlock had cleared his name (he had but only a bit) and insisted his money was no good before leaving them with menus.

‘You look very happy - what happened to a woman lying dead.’ Sherlock whispered sharply as he noticed the alpha trying not to grin.

‘They all think I’m with you - enjoying it while I can.’ John whispered conspiratorially behind his menu. Sherlock returned interested glances from other diners with a hostile glare.

‘I suppose you may as well eat.’ Sherlock said tossing his own menu on to the table.

‘So should you. Replace lost energy and all that.’ John replied running his tongue along his bottom lip in a way that reminded Sherlock of, well, a lot of things that could be very distracting from the work.

He purposely looked out onto the street. No sign of anything yet. ‘This is all just transport.’ Sherock gestured at himself.

‘Still needs fuel though, Order something just for my peace of mind.’ John leaned closer to his ear. ‘If you don’t I’ll hand feed you off my own plate.’

Sherlock turned back sharply meeting Johns eye. There was humour but also something steely, something of the commanding officer. He couldn't be sure the alpha wouldn't follow through on the threat, he couldn't be sure he wouldn't enjoy it if he did.

He huffed and picked up the menu, deciding to order spaghetti puttanesca. It was very good when he was in the mood to eat. They fell into a comfortable silence watching the street. When the food arrived he discovered he actually was hungry and John smirked when Sherlock cleared his plate first.

‘People don’t have arch enemies.’ John said, pushing his own plate away.

It took Sherlock a moment to register John was speaking, he was starting to wonder if expecting the
murderer to turn up was a waste of time. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘In real life. There are no arch enemies in real life. Doesn't happen.’ John said confidently.

Sherlock kept his eyes glued to the street. ‘Doesn't it? Sounds a bit dull.’

‘So, who did I meet?’

Sherlock really didn’t feel like explaining his brother at the moment so dodged the question. ‘What do people have then in their real lives?’

‘Friends, people they know, people they like, people they don't like, girlfriends, boyfriends, bondmates…’ John trailed off shifting in his seat.

‘As I explained before, not my area.’ Sherlock stared hard at the street outside number twenty two. It should not be possible, he reflected, to have this awkward a conversation with someone whose semen is inside you.

‘You know its fine, its all fine.’ John looked at him a little sad.

‘Thank you.’ He replied, awkward but sincere, taking a moment to meet John’s eye. When he turned back to the street a taxi had pulled up outside number twenty two.

The next few minutes were a blur. The cab wasn't the murderer. Apparently just an American tourist being taken advantage of by a cabbie. It took a chase round Soho to find that out though. Then the use of a stolen warrant card (Lestrade really should be more careful) to get away from the bemused tourist. Then they had to run away from real police (who could be sensitive about that sort of thing).

They slipped down lanes and dodged between cars. A final cut through an overgrown courtyard and they were back on Baker Street. Dashing through the front door and shedding coats before leaning against wall at the bottom of the stairs. Getting their breath.

‘That was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever done.’ John said, his scent amplified by exertion. Like this he smelt of summer. Cut grass and sun. Sherlock tried to shake off the romantic notion.

‘And you invaded Afghanistan.’ He said smoothly. John positively giggled. It was spontaneous, carefree, it was a relief to see him like this.

‘That wasn’t just me.’ John replied, then he was suddenly serious. ‘Look Sherlock I …’ He felt John move towards him, hesitant for an instant before…

‘Sherlock, what have you done?’ The landlady’s voice and tread on the stairs broke through the film of tension and he sensed John withdraw.

‘Mrs Hudson?’ He said, but he already knew the tone, disappointed.

‘Upstairs.’ She said. He bounded up, aware of John faithfully following behind.

The flat was chaos. Lestrade sitting in his chair while Donovan, Anderson and the others gleefully pulled the place apart. ‘What are you doing?’ Sherlock said, though really he already knew.

‘Well, I knew you’d find the case. I’m not stupid.’ Lestrade said, crossing his legs and relaxing into the chair.

‘You can’t just break into my flat.’ Sherlock snapped resisting the urge to correct Lestrade on his level of intelligence.
‘And you can’t withhold evidence. And I didn’t break into your flat. It’s a drugs bust.’

‘Seriously?! This guy, a junkie?! Have you met him?. He could feel John stiffen with anger behind him.

*Very loyal, very quickly...*

‘John...’ He pleaded, though he knew it was futile.

‘I’m pretty sure you could search this flat all day, you wouldn’t find anything you could call recreational.’

‘John, you probably want to shut up now.’

‘Yeah, but come on ... You?’

He hadn’t told John, why would he? The alpha was a knot to get him through his heat. No reason he needed to know. John was looking at him steadily now.

*I’m not what you thought I was.*

He wanted to say but didn’t. He was conscious of the police around him Lestrade at least had the decency to pretend to check his phone but the others took obvious delight in watching the two of them. It was Lestrade who broke the tension.

‘We’ve found Rachel.’

‘Who is she?’ Sherlock decided to focus on the case, a conversation with John would need to happen, later. He owed the alpha that.

‘Jennifer Wilson’s only daughter.’ Lestrade said.

‘Her daughter? Why would she write her daughter’s name?’ Sherlock said, partly to himself.

‘Never mind that. We found the case. According to someone, the murderer has the case, and we found it in the hands of our favourite psychopath.’ Anderson said, with obvious delight.

‘I’m not a psychopath, Anderson. I’m a high-functioning sociopath. Do your research.’ Sherlock shot back, noticing John suppress a smirk. ‘You need to bring Rachel in. You need to question her. I need to question her.’

‘She’s been dead for fourteen years. Technically she was never alive. Rachel was Jennifer Wilson’s stillborn daughter, fourteen years ago.’

‘No, that’s ... that’s not right. How ... Why would she do that...’ Sherlock thought out loud, genuinely confused.

‘Why would she think of her daughter in her last moments? Sociopath, I’m seeing it now. Anderson cut into Sherlock’s musing, obviously playing to the audience of his colleagues.

‘She didn’t think about her daughter. She scratched her name on the floor with her fingernails. She was dying. It took effort. It would have hurt.’ Sherlock said, agitated at the supposedly professional detectives inability to apply logic. Logic that would serve the dead woman better than this sentimental nonsense.
‘You said that the victims all took the poison themselves, that he makes them take it. Well, maybe he ...
... I don’t know, talks to them? Maybe he used the death of her daughter somehow.’ John at least was considering the problem.

‘Yeah, but that was ages ago. Why would she still be upset?’ Sherlock asked, suddenly realising the room was not just silent but heavily, awkwardly so. John was looking at him.

_Really not what you thought I was._

‘Not good?’ He almost whispered to John.

‘A bit not good, yeah.’ The alpha seemed embarrassed on his behalf.

‘Yeah, but if you were dying ... if you’d been murdered: in your very last few seconds what would you say?’ Sherlock worked through the thing in his head, trying to redeem himself, even if only to John.

‘Please, God, let me live.’ John said quietly.

‘Oh, use your imagination!’ Sherlock burst out.

‘I don’t have to.’ _Of course he doesn’t._

‘Yeah, but if you were clever, really clever ... She’s trying to tell us something.’ Rachel wasn’t a name, he could empathise with the grief for a lost child in spite of what they all thought, but sentiment was blinding them. Rachel, in this context, was a message.

‘Isn’t the doorbell working? Your taxi’s here, Sherlock.’ Mrs Hudson broke into his train of thought.

‘I didn’t order a taxi. Go away.’ He snapped, immediately feeling guilty. John went to the door to talk to her.

He was aware he ranted a bit as he tried to pull the last fragments together...

‘She’s cleverer than you lot and she’s dead. Do you see, do you get it? She didn’t lose her phone, she never lost it. She planted it on him. When she got out of the car, she knew that she was going to her death. She left the phone in order to lead us to her killer.’

‘But how?’ Lestrade looked typically puzzled.

‘Rachel!’ He looks at everyone triumphantly. They all look back at him blankly.

‘John, on the luggage, there’s a label. E-mail address.’

‘ jennie dot pink at mephone dot org dot uk.’ John read out.

Oh, I’ve been too slow, I’m not usually slow after...’ John cleared his throat, red faced, stopping Sherlock dead while Lestrade looked embarrassed and the rest of the police suppressed giggles. ‘She didn’t have a laptop, which means she did her business on her phone, so it’s a smartphone, it’s e-mail enabled. So there was a website for her account. The username is her e-mail address and all together now, the password is?’
‘Rachel.’ John moved to stand behind him, proudly perhaps and it made the resolution of the problem twice as sweet as usual.

‘It’s a smartphone, it’s got GPS, you can locate it online. She’s leading us directly to who killed her.’ He said, waking up his laptop and finding the right web address.

‘Sherlock, dear. This taxi driver …’ Mrs Hudson broke in hesitant, he ignored her.

‘We need to get vehicles, get a helicopter. This phone battery won’t last forever.’ Sherlock stood and paced, Lestrade already on his phone.

‘Sherlock, It’s here. It’s in two two one Baker Street.’ John said, staring at the screen.

‘How can it be here? How?’

‘Well, maybe it was in the case when you brought it back and it fell out somewhere.’ Lestrade said, glancing around.

‘We texted, they called back.’ John replied.

Lestrade was obviously about to go into some tedious tirade about chain of evidence when Sherlock noticed the man behind an anxious looking Mrs Hudson. A black cab licence glinting on his chest in the dim light. The second time tonight he'd see that badge.

Everyone trusts a cabbie.

Sherlock now understood, part of it at least. The cabbie, he was here because he wanted to show him the rest.

The weakness of all the greats, they wanted the attention, the adoration. He stood there knowing that Sherlock could simply turn him over to Scotland Yard. That he knew Sherlock wouldn't only made the whole thing more delicious.

John's phone on the table buzzed with a message.

Come with me.

Sherlock saw the glow of a screen as the cabbie put his own phone or Jennifer Wilson's phone back in a pocket and walked towards the door. The cacophony of Lestrade and his team arguing behind him was white noise.

‘Sherlock are you okay?’ It was of course, John who saw him go.

‘Fine, just going for air.’ He replied vaguely as he followed the figure down the stairs.

##########

‘How do you get them to follow you?’ Sherlock said, sighing with boredom as the cabbie produced a gun, well, a gun shaped cigarette lighter. Good enough though for the untrained eye. Especially given the dark, fear, alcohol in one case.

There has never really been any doubt he would go with the man, a deeply unremarkable beta (apart from the serial killing). Divorced, didn't see his kids, dying.

‘It gets better.’ The cabbie said, gesturing for Sherlock to follow him out of the cab and into an all
but deserted college building. Not where he personally would have chosen but interesting. Not as obvious, cliched, as some waste ground at least. They made their way to a lab classroom, sitting opposite each other on tall stools.

‘Ooh, I like this bit. ’Cause you don’t get it yet. But you’re about to. I just have to do this.’ The cabbie was buzzing with excitement as he placed two identical bottles containing apparently identical pills on the bench.

‘Sherlock Holmes - genius, in the flesh. That website of yours: your fan told me about it.’

‘My fan?’ That was interesting.

‘Pretty thing like you I bet you've got lots of fans.’

‘Something tells me this one isn't interested in my looks.’

‘No, well, that's not why we're here though is it.’ The cabbie goes on to explain, a good pill and a bad pill. The cabbie takes the one he doesn't choose. A fifty/fifty chance with the pills, or a bullet in the head.

‘I'll take the gun please.’ Sherlock said, calling his bluff. The cabbie hesitated before pulling the trigger, the small gas flame pathetically flickering for a second. ‘Well I look forward to the court case.’ Sherlock smiled tightly and made to leave hesitant because this, to him, was a problem only half solved.

‘Just before you go, which one would you have picked?’ The cabbie said casually and Sherlock stopped. He knew he should walk out, call Lestrade but he stopped.

‘Of course, child's play.’ It wasn't though. During the cab ride, their bizarre chat, he'd been going through things in his head. The cabbie’s background, the origin of the glass of the bottles, the colour of the granules in the seemingly identical capsules. He was seventy percent sure but no more than.

‘Come on play the game. Are you clever enough to bet your life?’ The cabbie goaded. He found himself opening the bottle tipping out the capsule, examining it. He was playing for time, he reasoned, thinking time, time for Lestrade to find him. He was not going to do this, absolutely not.

*John would be so disappointed...*

‘You'll do anything to stop being bored. You're not bored now, are you?’ The cabbie grinned as he lifted the capsule to his mouth. Sherlock somehow saw the blood bloom across the cabbie’s chest before he heard the shot.

The capsule fell forgotten from his hand as he clambered over another bench to the window. Expecting to see a Met marksman in the building opposite, a mess of blue lights and uniforms below but there was nothing, the place deserted.

A lone gunman then, a good shot but moral enough not to shoot until the danger to Sherlock was imminent. Probably military then....

*He has a gun...*

####

Sherlock fidgeted with the orange blanket bemused as to why they kept wrapping him in it.
‘It’s for shock.’ Lestrade said by way of explanation.

He’d called Lestrade as soon as he’d collected himself. Police and paramedics were now working the scene. The body bag being carried out on a stretcher as more forensics staff suited up to go into the building.

‘I'm not in shock.’ Sherlock countered, shrugging the thing off again.

‘Yeah but some of the guys wanted to take photographs.’ Lestrade said, slightly apologetic, with a glance to a couple of CID with camera phones.

‘So anything on the shooter?’ Sherlock said casually, aware nothing would be so suspicious as a lack of interest on his part.

‘Nothing to go on. I suppose someone like that, they've got enemies but…’ Lestrade shrugged. ‘You any ideas?’

‘Well I - will give it some thought.’ Sherlock made a show of hugging himself a little, and a matronly paramedic wrapped the blanket back round him with a gentle smile. Just then he noticed John, standing the other side of the police tape looking at him innocently.

‘I just need to talk about the-the rent.’ Sherlock said, thinking quickly, moving away from Lestrade.

‘Hang on! I've still got questions.’ Lestrade made to follow him.

‘I'm in shock, and I just caught you a serial killer, more or less.’ Lestrade looked at him and sighed, the inspector knew it would be easier just to let him go. Was accustomed to him losing interest before the boring stuff of paperwork, building a case got going.

‘Fine come in tomorrow, give a statement.’ Lestrade’s tone was indulgent as he walked off. He made a beeline for John.

‘Sergeant Donovan’s just been explaining everything, the two pills. Been a dreadful business, hasn’t it?’ John furrowed his brow, shuffled. The alpha was many things (so many) but an actor wasn't one of them.

‘Good shot.’ Sherlock said quietly when he got close enough.

‘Yes, must have been, through that window.’ John replied looking up at the building.

‘Need to get the powder burns out of your fingers. I don’t suppose you’d serve time for this, but let’s avoid the court case.’ In an instant he wasn't just thinking about John's hands but holding them. They were warm and steady.

‘You were going to take that damned pill, weren’t you?’ John stroked his wrists.

‘Course I wasn’t. Biding my time. Knew you’d turn up - or Lestrade.’

‘No you didn’t. It’s how you get your kicks, isn’t it? You risk your life to prove you're clever.’ The alpha was pulling him closer. He could see Donovan, Anderson out of the corner of his eye, the fools more interested in the romantic angle than the fact the alpha had obviously killed someone. For him.

Truth was he didn't know if he would have taken the pill, wouldn't have known until the last moment. He changed the subject.
‘Dinner?’ He asked. The plate of pasta felt like weeks ago.

‘Starving.’ John replied. They started to walk.

‘End of Baker Street, there’s a good Chinese stays open till two. You can always tell a good Chinese by examining the bottom third of the door handle.’ He owed John at least one meal. Though the Chinese didn’t let him pay either.

‘Do I want to know? About the door?’ John grimaced.

‘Probably not.’ He replied, smiling. *This is easy.* He thought, starting to relax. *It's never easy.*

‘Sherlock. That’s him. That’s the man I was talking to you about.’ John suddenly pointed. The man was in shadow but if he doubted his brother’s burgeoning silhouette there was no mistaking the well-groomed assistant or the polished Jag. He walked closer hesitantly.

‘I know exactly who that is.’ He could have this discussion now or later. May as well be now. He strolled towards his brother.

‘So, another case cracked. How very public spirited ... though that’s never really your motivation, is it? I’m concerned about you.’ Mycroft drawled, his best attempt at sincerity. John had stopped at his shoulder and the alphas shared a glance. Mycroft raised an eyebrow.

‘Good evening, Mycroft. Try not to start a war before I get home. You know what it does for the traffic.’ Sarcasm was how they communicated, no reason to change that now.

‘So, when—when you say you’re concerned about him, you actually are concerned? John paused behind him but he kept going, slowly.

‘As I said, I worry about him constantly. A burden i’d be happy to share Dr Watson.’ John just snorted in laughter before jogging to catch him up, he was close to laughter himself.

‘What are you so happy about?

‘My brother. Sharing the burden of worrying about me. He’ll be offering you a dowry next.’

‘I wouldn't take it.’

‘You should. We could split it, remember? Anyway it's not just that. I have a fan apparently. Moriarty is the name. The cabbie told me before he died.’

‘Who’s Moriarty?’ John asked.

‘No idea.’ Sherlock replied, cheerfully. He had a tricky problem and someone tolerable to talk to. That was enough.

#########

Sherlock, what is this?’ They were back at Baker Street John was staring into his bowl of food while Sherlock tinkered with his violin at the window. He hadn't touched it in days. Nothing like needing a cock inside you to make you lose your interest in Mendelssohn.

‘Beef and black bean sauce. Can't you tell? They're usually very good.’ Sherlock said, playing for time.
'Not the food. I meant…’

‘I know what you meant.’ The instrument squealed as he scraped the strings too harshly. The thing you want, I'm not sure I can give you.’

‘You don't know what I want.’ John countered, setting his bowl aside. He was sitting on the sofa. The one he'd brought Sherlock toast on. The one they'd fucked on twice during his heat.

‘Don't I? Statistically, eventually most alphas want the same. For now it's my arse and that's fine. I want a knot just as badly so that's- fine but in a year or two, once you've got a thriving practice again, you'll want me pregnant, all round bellied, broody. I'm not sure I ever want that. That's why you see, why I do this. Avoids disappointment.’

John got up and moved in front of the window, turning to face him. ‘Sherlock you have a magnificent arse and I won't deny that I would like to fill it, fill you, so…’ The Doctor stopped and cleared his throat. A shame, when his blood was up John had a filthy mouth. ‘...that I like the idea of you bearing my pups but it's more than that. You're brilliant, I've enjoyed this.’ The doctor stalked closer. ‘You *know* I've enjoyed this. What I'm saying is, if you need a medical opinion, if I'm available, I'm happy to help. Regardless of whether you let me near your arse again or not. Though I'm available for that too.’

Sherlock stepped away to the violin case. John's scent too good, too close. ‘It's late to be crossing town, even armed.’ They shared a grin. ‘There's a room upstairs. Mrs Hudson keeps it made up. You can sleep there tonight, if you like.’ John looked weary, doubtless they both did.

‘Thanks. I wasn't looking forward to finding a cab. John moved across the room towards the hallway. Out of interest, where do I get to sleep tomorrow?’

Chapter End Notes

A lot of dialogue from ASIP had been cut for this, or swapped round. Let me know if it doesn't make sense.

Much use has been made of the Arianedevere transcripts on life journal. Thank you!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Now with John POV. Was going to make it a separate chapter but seemed to make more sense interspersed with the Sherlock POV. Let me know what you think...

Molly placed a cup of coffee in front of him and hovered. ‘Is this the last time?’ She ran her fingers down the columns on the screen that related to his last heat. He always let her look at this. Another scientist kept the experimental part honest, stopped things like confirmation bias slipping in.

‘You know it is.’ He said coolly, sipping his coffee. The dates are clearly marked. ‘What?’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘You know what. Those readings are what you’d expect with an established bond. That paper I showed you…’ She started to flick through a pile of journals on a shelf.

‘I am aware of the literature thank you.’ He said sharply, turning back to his blood results. ‘Fifteenth of next month do you think?’

‘Sherlock!’

‘Molly…’ His tone was warning.

‘What was he like then?’ She said, backing away, moving across the room to her own workstation. ‘This last alpha?’

‘Interesting.’ Sherlock found himself saying. ‘He’s a veteran, discharged because of his injuries. He’s a doctor too actually.’ He stopped at that, finding he wanted to say more about John but he was unable to face the prospect of Molly’s romantic enthusiasm.

‘So, was it all the sex you found so interesting or was it something he did while you were out on a case?’ Molly looked at him pointedly.

‘Who have you been talking to? Lestrade?’ Sherlock knew that their caseloads had crossed over in the past but less so since Lestrade had moved to work at headquarters.

‘Sally Donovan. She’s in my gym, we go to the same spinning classes sometimes.’ Molly shrugged casually, sipping her own coffee. ‘Said you two looked very cosy the other night. John isn’t it? Is this a new thing then, one heat plus general dogsbody for the day after?’ Molly was warming to her theme.

‘John has a useful skillset. As i say, he’s a doctor.’

‘I’m a doctor, in fact I’m a pathologist, so I’m actually more qualified for dead people but you never ask me along what sort of Doctor is he?’

‘A GP now I believe, he was a surgeon until his injury, John’s…different.’ He replied, starting to get flustered.
‘Yeah, I think he probably is - yet here you are, trawling the internet for alphas.’ Molly finished with an evil smile. ‘Biscuit?’

‘No thank you. I have a doctor's appointment.’ Sherlock said, getting up and leaving abruptly.

He redressed behind the curtain while Dr Sawyer spoke to him, writing up her notes. ‘No problems I can see and you should get the results back in ten days.’

‘Thank you.’ He replied coming out from behind the curtain. He meant it sincerely.

John had recommended her, when he'd given Sherlock the names of the painkillers he should try as promised and Sherlock had mentioned he wasn't happy with his current doctor. The alpha sometimes did locum shifts at the clinic she ran.

She had none of the patronising, judgemental tone he was used to from his usual doctor( Now, he had decided, his ex doctor.) Nor had she done more than raise an eyebrow when he explained his heat arrangements and brought out his laptop to show her his spreadsheet when she asked about his cycle.

‘So how did you find out about us? A little bit of a trek for you isn't it?’ She said as she wrote a prescription. He knew she didn't just mean geographically. The clinic was in a decidedly poor area.

‘You were recommended by one of your colleagues actually, John Watson.’ Sherlock acknowledged to himself that he was shamelessly fishing for information but decided it was reasonable, now John was assisting him with the work on occasion.

‘I'm flattered I'm sure. You don't often get locums of John's calibre. How do you know him? Just, I know he's not long out the army.’ Sherlock waited a few beats Dr Sawyer was smart and the penny dropped quickly.

‘Oh, well that's…he's very suitable but he…’ She looked at him oddly for a moment-her face shutting down to a neutral professional smile. ‘Twice a day as needed.’

It didn't take much deduction to know there was something she was holding back. Something that was nothing to do with him. He reminded himself harshly.

‘So John, changed your last appointment, not like you, something come up?’ The therapist said, pen poised. Irritatingly calm as ever.

‘I met someone. Helped them with - a few things.’ John said defensively.

‘Come on John, not giving me much to go on. Not giving yourself much to read.’ She smiled at their standing joke about his trust issues, reading her notes upside down from across the room.

‘An omega, I helped him with his heat.’ Satisfied? He wanted to add but didn't.

‘You shared his heat?’ She clarified with surprise, scrawling something.

‘That's not how he'd describe it.’ John anxiously flexed his hands in his lap. She noted the gesture.

‘It's how you'd describe it?’ She persisted.
‘It's how it felt. It was more than that though, than sex, he has interesting work, an interesting life.’

‘One you’d like to take more part in?’

‘If he wants me to. I'm not sure what he wants, what he needs.’

‘You felt you needed to protect him?’

‘Of course, after what happened...but he's...-how he is would make that difficult. Impossible even.’

She nodded, still scribbling. ‘Ok - so let's talk about why you've no walking stick with you today..’

Afghanistan - two years earlier...

‘Just stretch your fingers for me-and then make a fist. Good, you're doing really well.’ John smiled at the anxious young alpha in front of him. Truth was he'd been lucky. An inch nearer the elbow joint and the shrapnel fragment could have been the end of his army career.

John well remembered the silent prayer he'd said to whatever god took to do with surgeons steady hands as he looked at the dirty grey fragment lodged malevolently in bloody tissue. Forceps glinting in his hand as he tuned out the white noise of the other casualties being brought in.

He sent the alpha on his way with instructions to come back in a week. He was washing his hands, glad to have dealt with the last patient of the day when Bill slid behind the curtain.

‘Got a minute Watson?’

‘Yeah. What's up’ When he met the other doctors eye the expression told him it wasn't a conversation to be had in the medical tent. ‘Shall we go for a wander then?’ Bill nodded and a few minutes later they were walking round a quiet area of the base. Only a few soldiers working around the storage containers.

‘It's a bit awkward actually. I've got a patient, first tour, he's presented. Least I think so. Can't do the lab test way out here.’

‘Why didn't it flag up at his enlistment medical?’

‘Beta parents but he's been having what he calls ‘trippy wet dreams.’

John nodded. Beta parents reliably meant beta offspring. The genetic anomalies rare enough that the army didn't bother with the expensive tests for beta recruits.

‘I've explained to him what I think. I could give him home medical leave but he's no family to speak of, parents dead. It may come to nothing and if a heat comes on at least he's with friends. He has asked if an alpha could see him through a first heat, if it happens, give him a chance to think.’

‘Theoretically, ethically. It would be fine if he consents, a surrogate. A natural heat would be best first time anyway . There are hardly any alphas here though, this unit…’ The penny dropped with John.

‘Bill I'm a doctor…’

‘Not his doctor though.’
‘Is there no one else?’

‘Thomson.’ Said with an eyebrow raise. John knew Thomson well, not a bad bloke really but boorish. ‘Look I’m not asking you for a limb. Just to have a lot of sex for a few days. It’s fun-from what I remember.’ Bill smiled wryly. He’d married young, nigh on fifteen years ago but it had been a largely passionless affair for the last few years.

‘If I did agree and I’m not saying I will, how would it work?’

His CO has agreed you can use one of the spare barracks out the far end of the camp. You’d have everything, bathroom, running water, guard - beta obviously.’

‘Practically the Dorchester.’ John said drily.

‘I can bring by food as needed. Just consider it, meet him?’

#########

The arrangements for surrogates were complicated, almost a courtship of sorts. They were meant to avoid any exploitation and give both parties the chance to back out at any point. The nearest they could get to the ‘neutral territory’ specified was the awning that served as one of the medical waiting areas. Out of clinic hours of course. Bill had laid on tea and biscuits and the whole thing was civilised.

It was obvious to John as soon as the young man, MacMillan, walked in that he was an omega. The scent was subtle, nothing like the bells and whistles of a presentation heat, but unmistakeable. His reaction to John was even stronger. It was obvious he’d never been in the presence of a compatible alpha before. Five foot ten of burly sunburnt soldier was soon blushing and awkward.

Part of John was hugely embarrassed both for himself and the omega but a gleeful voice in a corner of his brain whispered, still got it captain.

Bill went through the formalities, from STD testing to keeping their respective CO’s notified about when they were likely to be absent. ‘Ok, I'll leave you two to talk. Paperwork is open the table for signature if it all goes well.’ Bill took his leave.

They had an awkward minute or so and John considered offering him a custard cream, just to break the ice, when McMillan started to speak.

‘I didn't quite believe it till I came in here today.’ He laughed nervously. ‘I mean I've seen you round the base before and I thought you were interesting. Plus, I've always liked, preferred being penetrated but until now…you smell -nice.’ McMillan swallowed hard and took a gulp of tea.

‘It must be a shock’ John said gently.

‘Yeah. I mean, my mum died three years ago she’d be so pleased I can give her biological grandchildren after all. I know she was sad about that when I told her I preferred males but she wouldn't understand any of this.’ McMillan gestured between them at the hormonal fug that was starting to thicken around them. Something John estimated would turn into a heat within the next day or two.

‘If you decide to go ahead with me we'll go carefully OK? I'll explain things, go at a speed that suits you. You control this. What's your first name by the way?’ John was fighting the urge to move closer.
'Matthew, Matt.' He replied with a nervous grin.

'Well, for the duration of this call me John ok? No sir or doctor.' Matt nodded.

'You'll help me?' Matt asked, surprised.

'Yeah of course. Shall we?' John nodded to the paperwork. They signed and stood up to go.

Matt hesitated. 'Can we-I'd like to touch you? I don't mean-just..' He trailed off.

'Of course you can.' John said, going for his best disarming smile and holding arms away from his body.

Matt nodded and stepped into his space. John let him move in his own time. They started off in what seemed like a formal dance hold but then Matt gradually settled against him with a sigh. John moved to hold him loosely.

'I think I'm starting to get this now, I think it'll be Ok.' Matt said softly as he pulled John closer.

Sherlock fussily fastened his second second shirt of the morning.

The bloodstain may have made the first a write off. Fighting off the employees of prospective clients was an unusual start to the day but surprisingly productive inasmuch as when he asked his brother to arrange for the semi-unconscious beta to be removed it was discovered MI5 were interested in him too. Why the client wouldn't just accept that his alpha had obviously stole the rare diamond, Sherlock had no idea.

Now it was just after eleven in the morning and he had nothing to do. He glanced listlessly through his emails. Mostly boring but one from an acquaintance, Sebastian Wilkes, he’d been at university with caught his eye.

Not the potential case so much, which appeared to be a lot of nonsense about damaged property at the merchant bank Sebastian now worked for. The need for discretion was mentioned. Most likely just some drunken prank. No, it was the opportunity to show off that appealed.

Sebastian had been one of the the first alphas he’d used after he decided to start managing his heats this way. Sherlock hadn’t yet refined the process and though he had been clear about it being a one time only Sebastian hadn’t taken it in. It became obvious that Sebastian had assumed a successful heat spent together would lead to something more and pretty much implied that a junkie like Sherlock should be grateful have him. It didn’t help that their parents knew each other, moved in the same old money circles.

He typed a crisp reply. Advising that he would be there at 2pm. Sebastian could rearrange his calendar if he was keen enough. As he was shutting down the laptop he had another thought.

Available this afternoon 2? Could use a second pair of eyes. SH

It was twenty minutes before the reply came through.

Absolutely. Finished with patients by twelve. Get you at the flat at one? JW

Sherlock replied in the affirmative, remembering as he did so that he should probably try and locate
the machete that he had knocked out of his assailant's hand earlier before the alpha arrived.

They were riding the escalator into the bank's impressive lobby while Sherlock explained the essence of the case as he understood it.

‘Sorry,’ John broke in. ‘There's no medical angle?’

‘No, problem?’ Sherlock replied innocently. John had helped him on three further cases since they'd met. In only one had there been a medical aspect, a query about diabetes medication. ‘As I say, there has been damage. Art isn't my thing. Am I keeping you from something?’

John laughed. ‘No. Not at all.’

Sebastian's office was in a commanding corner. There was a tense moment when he introduced John as his friend.

‘Colleague.’ John had corrected his deliberate ambiguity with an eyebrow raise and a firm handshake while Sherlock noticed a flurry of things. ways to make Sebastian notice how smart he was. How well he was doing at this.

‘We were at uni together. This guy here had a trick he used to do.’ Sebastian said with a repulsive grin as they sat down.

‘It’s not a trick.’ Sherlock said sharply.

‘He could look at you and tell you your whole life story. You’d come down to breakfast in the Formal Hall and this freak would know you’d been shagging the previous night.’ Sebastian gave him a lecherous glance.

‘I simply observed.’ Sherlock retorted. Frankly, he hadn't even had to do that with Sebastian. When he'd been shagging (which was often in his uni days) he generally told everyone who would listen.

‘Go on, enlighten me. Two trips a month, flying all the way around the world – you’re quite right. How could you tell?
A stain on my tie from some special kind of ketchup you can only buy in Manhattan, the mud on my shoes!’ Sebastian looked towards John to share the joke with the other alpha.

‘I was just chatting with your secretary outside. She told me.’ Sherlock said. It felt like a clever sidestep, though a lie. Sebastian laughed before settling into a serious expression.

‘I’m glad you could make it over. We’ve had a break-in.’ He showed them through the busy trading floor, which stank of alpha, pto another office.

‘Sir William’s office – the bank’s former Chairman. The room’s been left here like a sort of memorial. Someone broke in late last night.’

‘What did they steal?’

‘Nothing. Just left a little message.’ Sebastian swiped the secure door open to reveal a vandalised painting, a line and a squiggle below in bright yellow.

Frankly Sherlock's first thought was that the yellow paint improved the dark turgid portrait, but the interesting bit was the locked room. Secure door, never opened and the only other means of entry a
He had realised very quickly that the squiggle wasn't just random damage. It was too precise, it was a message for someone. Who, would clearly, depend on where it could be seen from.

Sherlock moved around the trading floor to the amusement of the mostly alpha staff. Ducking behind pillars and desks. The target was clear. Eddie Van Coon, he worked on Hong Kong trades so the timing made sense too.

Once Sherlock has looked his fill at the room and the balcony and John has diligently taken notes Sebastian took them back to reception to show them the security footage. A classic locked room in some ways. The film images were taken a minute apart but the paint appeared between two shots. The vandal had come in through the balcony.

_Improbable but…_

‘There’s a hole in our security. Find it and we’ll pay you – five figures.’ Sebastian glanced between them as he produced a cheque. Obviously very pleased with himself to be throwing around such sums so casually. ‘This is an advance. Tell me how he got in, there’s a bigger one on its way.’

‘I don’t need an incentive, Sebastian.’ Sherlock walked away haughtily. He could do without the alpha of means routine. Still though he heard John behind him accepting the cheque on his behalf. Probably just as well Lestrade had him so busy he’d taken on little paid work recently.

‘Two trips around the world this month. You didn’t ask his secretary, you said that just to irritate him. How did you know?’ John said as they walked towards the cab rank.

‘New Breitling. Only came out in February. The time was right but the date was wrong. Said two days ago. Crossed the dateline twice but he didn’t alter it.’

‘What happened between you two? There was kind of a feeling.’ John continued, trying to sound casual.

‘I used him for a heat. Not long after I'd started managing things like this. Everything was explained to him but he seemed to think it was all just talk and I would be looking for a bond eventually. Him being such a catch and all.’

‘So you two have...right. Ok.’

Sherlock stopped sharply, turning to the alpha, backing him against a wall. ‘John I have been doing this for years. There are a large number of alphas who have had me. Our paths can cross but only rarely. If you will struggle with that, well, you may want to rethink this arrangement.’

‘No, you're right. I know that's what you did. I'm fine.’ John waved the comment away. There was a pause in which Sherlock failed to correct the past tense and they began walking again.

‘The next time, that's already planned isn't it? I mean it must be by now.’

‘Of course. It has to be done meticulously. I was lucky to meet you last time. Usually it's more trouble.’

_No more than five days._

‘You have done it like that before though, just met someone and you know-clicked?’
Sherlock thinks. He hasn't. For a while he worked his way through acquaintances. Then, probably after Sebastian, he realised that anonymity, though it had it’s own challenges was easier.

‘You haven't, have you?’ John's eyes burn into him a mix of annoyance and hope for a second before he schools it into something more neutral. ‘So what now then, do we go looking for Van Coon?’

‘Yes, we do. I have his address.’ Sherlock is grateful that John has decided to drop it for now. He had no shame or embarrassment about how he manages his heats but now is about the work and it says something that John understands that.

##########

John was muttering something about whether he'd heard of an Oyster card as they got out of the cab at a smart modern building.

Getting through the flats security door was straightforward enough, though John sniggered at the dizzy omega routine he put on with one of Van Coons neighbours and was impressed but alarmed with his athleticism at dropping on to Van Coons balcony from above. The glass door was unlocked.

The stale alpha fear smell assaulted his nose along with a faint smell of decay as soon as he got inside the flat and he already knew what he'd find as he broke down the locked bedroom door. Ignoring John's shouts from outside.

It could be a cliche. City boy shoots himself in the head in his immaculate luxury flat after he loses a fortune. Except he didn't. Van Coon is left handed (like John) the bullet hole is on the right. That would be enough for Lestrade but Dimmock turns up instead.

The alpha’s newly minted promotion to DI gives him an air of superiority though he doesn't want to rock the boat, not with a prestigious city firm. Dimmock is not going to be the one to question the ‘obvious’ suicide. He’ll leave that to the pathologist, ballistics. Even when Sherlock shows him the suspicious space in Van Coon’s still packed case and the perfect origami lotus that has been stuffed down his throat.

##########

He was going to enjoy this.

Sherlock squared his shoulders as he haughtily walked straight past the maitre d into the dimly lit restaurant. John trailing behind, his fresh, familiar scent grounding in the alpha heavy fug. Sherlock's heat was closing in on him fast and he knew his presence here would be doubly offensive for that reason.

‘The graffiti was a threat Sebastian.’ Sherlock said evenly, making sure he was heard by the restaurant generally.

‘I'm sorry, can you make an appointment?’ The alpha replied trying to sound superior but merely sounding flustered as he looked up from his lunch.

‘I don't think this can wait. Van Coon, he was murdered.’ Sherlock took in the discomfort of the faces at Sebastian's table.

The obviously costly but rather generic meal they were eating and the tired jokes he'd heard as he approached told Sherlock Sebastian was entertaining prospective clients. The whiff of scandal at his firm to say nothing of the loss of face at being talked to this way by an omega would likely be
enough to cost Sebastian his next Breitling. **Satisfying.**

They retired to the washroom leaving one of Sebastian's colleagues to try and salvage the client.

‘Managed the Hong Kong accounts Eddie. Lost five mill in a single morning; made it all back a week later. Nerves of steel.’ Sebastian said, scrubbing his hands dry with a towel.

‘Who’d want to kill him?’ John asked.

‘We all make enemies.’ Sebastian was being evasive but John kept on him.

‘You don’t all end up with a bullet through your temple.’

‘Not usually. Scuse me.’ The alpha turned away to look at his phone. ‘It’s my Chairman. The police have been on to him. Apparently they’re telling him it was a suicide.’

‘Well, they’ve got it wrong, Sebastian. He was murdered.’ Sherlock said, irritated that Dimmock was every bit the jobsworth waste of space he’d feared.

‘Well, I’m afraid they don’t see it like that and neither does my boss. I hired you to do a job. Don’t get side-tracked. You’re supposed to be the great detective these days. I think you were more use on your hands and knees.’

John stiffened beside him, minutely rocking backwards, probably to throw a well-placed punch but Sherlock stopped him with a gesture.

Outside the alpha stalked along beside him, the pheromonal response Sebastian had stirred still hovering like a mist around them.

‘Talking to you like that, I wish you’d let me…’

‘John I riled him up, his response was predictable.’

‘Sherlock he had no right...regardless of what you said..’

‘You misunderstand me. I was pushing him. We hit a sore spot you see, when we mentioned Van Coons enemies.’

‘You think he knows something?’

‘Not now I don’t no, he thinks he does but this isn't about insider trading.’ He made a mental note to pass that nugget to Lestrade for his financial crime colleagues. ‘it's too flamboyant, specific. Someone like Van Coon, he may have had enemies his boss wasn't aware of.’

#########

‘How is it going?’ John said as he walked in. The alpha had obviously had a hard shift at the surgery. It was written in his wrinkled clothes and askew hair (pulled by a vomiting two year old) but he still sounded convincingly enthusiastic, it must be exhausting.

After the lunchtime visit to Sebastian John had gone to work and Sherlock back to the flat to consider, absorbing himself in pictures of the crime scenes and of similar symbols which he pinned to the wall. He couldn't find the meaning and it annoyed him but otherwise he'd had a bit of luck.

‘Happened last night. Journalist shot dead in his flat; doors locked, windows bolted from the inside – exactly the same as Van Coon.’ Sherlock said, nodding at his laptop screen.
Searching for reports of similar crimes was part of his usual process but he hadn't expected to find one after Van Coons murder. A journalist, the same locked doors high floor flat scenario. *The killer who can walk through walls* the papers were calling it.

‘You think he's done it before?’ John came and stood at his shoulder. Sherlock getting up sharply as the alpha read because he knew how he must be starting to smell, knew it wasn't fair on John.

‘Brian Lukis, freelance journalist. Murdered at home doors locked from the inside. Sounds similar.’ John agreed.

‘Perhaps you can help me persuade Dimmock to let me have a look at this flat?’ Sherlock said with an eyebrow raise.

#########

The next day it felt as if the case got more complex just as he could feel his brain fuzzing at the edges with his impending heat. John was with him as they traced a library book of Brian Lukis’s back to its place on the shelf. The maddening yellow symbol drawn at eye level where the journalist would see it, panic and run home. To his death.

They investigated the possibility of the symbol being a bona fide graffiti tag with one of Sherlock's street contacts to no avail.

Sherlock thought he was doing well until he found himself doubled over with cramp in the middle of Trafalgar Square of all places. That was the point he realised John couldn't be around any more and sent him away. Ostensibly to get Lukis’s diary from Dimmock but really because he could taste the alpha’s scent with every breath and he knew John would be bombarded with his scent too. It was cruel.

He let the hotel know he’d be checking in and then, trying to delay the inevitable, went into Van Coons office on his way.

The omega PA was sympathetic, he gave Sherlock a glass of water and he took his newly prescribed pills. Before he left though he’d pieced together Van Coon’s movements the day he died. Worked out he was delivering the package from his suitcase to a particular street but couldn't narrow it down further.

The cab was within sight of the hotel when his phone rang.

‘Sherlock, I know where Lukis had been, where he was going, it all fits the Chinese connection too...can you meet me there?’

John was rushing his words in excitement, obviously on the move as he spoke.

‘That's good John, it fits I...I need you to tell Dimmock for me. I'll be away for a few days.’ Sherlock couldn't bear to say it and it was absurd because John already knew, of course he did. The sound changed at the alpha’s end and he realised that John had stopped somewhere to get a little privacy.

‘How are you feeling? Painkillers working?’ John said, his voice tightly controlled.

‘Good so far, no nausea. Thank you.’

There was a shuffle on the other end of the phone and then John's voice was clear but broken.

‘My offer still stands you know, always will.’
There was a long pause which Sherlock longed to fill but his brain couldn't find any form of words that would suffice, other than the ones John longed to hear.

There was a crackle on the line as if John had sighed.

‘I'll see you in a few days Sherlock, stay safe.’ John rang off.
The Lucky Cat looked innocuous. A shop in a prime location in Chinatown selling tat to tourists, an ideal drop off for smugglers. The shop would allow reasonably large sums of money to be explained and if they had the odd better quality item in the store room well that was for the more discerning tourist. No one would guess it was the real thing among, the waving cats and chopsticks.

The symbol was a surprise. John pointed it out, scrawled on the back of a piece of cheap porcelain. Number code, of course, it was obvious now. Smugglers would vary in intelligence considerably, code had to be simple.

He explained all this to John while they ate in a restaurant across the road from the Lucky Cat. They seemed to have picked things up as if nothing had happened. The strong smells of spice and sticky sauces covering up any scent from either of them. The rattles and hisses from the open kitchen filling any awkward silences.

'Why did they have to die then? I mean they're an asset, why kill them?' John said finally, finishing his own food.

'One of them must have gotten sticky fingered.' Sherlock said thoughtfully. He drifted into his own thoughts for a few seconds. Something was nagging him, a woman, a Chinese looking woman taking pictures on the street outside the shop earlier. He was sure he'd seen her before, just at the point his heat was starting but, as was often the case at the start of his heat, his memory was hazy. Why, even if they realised he was on to them, would the smugglers want his picture?

'So,' John broke in. 'How are you feeling anyway?'

Sherlock looked at him, deduced the questions he was really asking. Chose to answer one. 'I wasn't mistreated in any way, if that's what you're getting at.'

'Good.' John's response was carefully brief, neutral.

Sherlock chose that moment to go after the other little thing he'd noticed at the shop. Paying their bill quickly they crossed back over the road to the yellow pages propped outside the entrance to an upstairs flat, soggy, though it hadn't rained in days. The recent neat script of an name label above the door bell.

There was no answer, as expected, so they tried round the side, Sherlock swinging up via an awkward fire escape and through a window. Leaving John outside without thinking. A wet patch on the floor told him he wasn't the first to upset the vase at the window.

A bonded omega lived there but the visitor wasn't her alpha. Youngish. Her books and films told him she was a native Mandarin speaker. Her sour milk and stale laundry in the machine that she hadn't been back for about three days. He was starting to wonder how's the previous visitor had got out when it came to him in a wave of panic, they hadn't.

Before he had a chance to react something was wrapped round his throat, pulled tighter and tighter. He could hear John outside shouting, angry.

* * *

* * *

I'm Sherlock Holmes and I always work alone because no one can compete with my massive intellect!
Sherlock had all but passed out before his assailant let go. Shoving something into Sherlock's coat before he disappeared through the window.

When his breathing has got back to normal he adjusted his scarf in the mirror. The marks on his throat were reddish though not as widespread as he'd feared. There had been no hesitation, they'd done this before, probably many times. Within the last few days this organisation, perhaps this very individual had killed two, maybe three times. He'd been allowed to live. Why?

John was still pounding the door. Sherlock hurriedly reached into his pocket, drawing out a fragile, perfect origami lotus. A rather ostentatious calling card. Truly ancient crime syndicates were a bit of a pet interest and he realised now that he'd heard of the black lotus. He hadn't made the connection before because his understanding was they operated in the far east only. London was a highly unusual branching out. He opened the door to the irate alpha.

'Stale washing and sour milk, she's been gone three days. Soon Lin Yao.' He gestured at the name badge above the bell. 'We need to find her.' He said, walking swiftly, ignoring John's question about him sounding croaky.

They followed a lead, a scribbled note with a whiff of anxious alpha, to Soon Lin's workplace, the antiquities museum.

The alpha showed them Soon Lin's fragile ancient teapots, obviously in love with what he couldn't have. Made to be used, the alpha explained as he handled the pots and Sherlock couldn't help thinking that his own body was a bit like that, that it was something the cold logic of his brain and his insatiable reproductive system had in common.

When they found the symbol again, thoughtlessly scrawled across priceless marble, Sherlock watched John's face fall, Soon Lin was probably dead.

Outside the museum Raz, his graffiti artist contact caught up with them. He was a young alpha and Sherlock watched John watching him. He'd not used Raz that way. Even if he hadn't met him after he decided he preferred his heats to be an anonymous transaction Raz would never have agreed. His artistic temperament made him a romantic, in spite of his edgy medium.

Raz led them to a streak of the same paint. Buried in a mass of other graffiti on the concrete wall of a skate park. They split up to look for more.

It was only five minutes before John hurried over to get him to come and look at something.

'It was here, just now lots of it, how can they have?-so quickly.' The wall John was pointing at was black and a wet paint smell hung in the air. John's bemusement quickly turned to anxiety as he realised they were being watched. Sherlock grabbed him, he needed John to focus.

'Concentrate John I need you to remember. Do you remember what it looked like?' Sherlock had him by the shoulders, trying desperately not to think of the last time they'd been this close.

'Yeah I remember but never mind that I took a...What the hell?' John pulled roughly at his scarf, exposing his throat to the night air. Fingers cold and professional against his skin. 'These are new-thats why you were hoarse!' John took a step back, eyes fierce.

'I'm sorry, I should have let you in I was distracted.' Sherlock could barely meet his eye.

'Someone should look at that. I can't do this. I'm sorry.' John's voice was flat as he turned and walked off.
As Sherlock stood, shocked, his phone buzzed. A picture of of the symbols on the wall from John, no text.

*I'm sorry SH*

Three hours later he still had no reply.

#############

John was taken off surgical duties since he had agreed to be a surrogate and he was half-bored, reorganising his kit and chatting with one of the nurses when Bill Murray came to stand in his doorway. He extricated himself as quickly as possible and followed Bill towards the empty barracks.

‘How is he?’ John said, feeling his edgy anticipation was somehow a little inappropriate.

‘Terrified. Parts of his body he didn’t know he had three weeks ago are doing things, well, you know.’ John nodded, a little amused. It never ceased to amaze him that beta colleagues could spend whole semesters learning about the other genders but still be so prudish about knots and male self-lubrication and so on. They circled round the back of the barracks, avoiding the guard at the front door.

‘Ok so, here's the keys. Guard at the front has one for the front door only-just in case it goes on fire of something. Good luck.’ Bill shouted back over his shoulder as he hurriedly left.

John let himself in, the scent making itself known in a sudden rush as the door opened. He carefully locked it behind him. ‘Matt?’ He called out softly. Not wanting to startle but knowing on some level that the omega would know he was there anyway. He glanced around. Bill had been thorough.

The place, including the bathroom, was spotlessly clean. Lots of bottled water and a large box of various high energy, non-perishable food was stacked on a table.

John was still looking things over when the omega appeared beside him, silent on bare feet. Wearing only a pair of military issue shorts.

‘Hi.’ Matt croaked, mouth obviously dry. John reached for one of the bottles and opened it before handing it over.

‘Here, you need to drink plenty.’ John could feel himself getting hard at the sight and smell of him. He found himself relieved, he’d never had problems before but he’d had a niggling fear that he’d be faced with. desperate omega and suddenly become impotent.

Matt took several gulps as they walked back into the main dormitory. John surveyed it. Bill had joined three narrow camp beds together, well meaning, but as a nest it would never do. Alpha instinct took over and John dragged a dozen or so of the thin mattresses into a wide pile on the floor, covering then with sheets, crappy military issue blankets and pillows.

‘There.’ John said proudly. ‘We should be comfortable - ish.’

When he turned back Matt had removed the shorts and stood naked and slightly shaky in front of him. 'It's not like I expected, the sweat, this *itch* almost.' Matt raked fingernails along the skin of his belly leaving angry streaks. 'Is it normal? Medically I mean for it to feel this..' Matt flopped down into the nest.

‘Bill checked you over. No reason to believe there's anything wrong. If you like, I can keep an eye on blood pressure and stuff.’ It was a serious offer but John knew there was really no need.
Matt looked up at him and held out a hand. 'Can you come here? It's like you're a doctor like this. Take your clothes off.'

John stripped and lay down beside him, leaving space.

'Bloody hell.' The omega, propped on an elbow, was looking, John realised, at his cock. 'I knew alpha were big but....'

John wanted to say that only alpha proportions could give him relief but somehow every form of words he could think of seemed to be either too clinical or like a bad porn line. 'You say you've been the receiving partner before, with a beta?' Matt nodded.

'This'll go easier. The prep bit your partner normally has to do, you're kind of doing yourself. Opening, stretching naturally. Getting yourself wet.' Matt moved to drape himself across John's chest. John ran a hand down his back, stopping at the swell of his arse. 'Knotting can hurt, I'll give you warning though.'

From there things blurred. John, even though he knew it wasn't strictly true, felt like he was taking Matt's virginity and the first time was slow and careful. John talked him through the knotting, taking pride in the moment when the tension left Matt's body and he moaned with the pleasure of it.

After that it got more instinctive, fluid. There was something decadent, John decided, about fucking while listening to the ebb and flow of base life seep through the thin walls.

All too soon it was over and they were dressing in fresh fatigues.

'Thanks again.' Matt shook his hand and they both stepped closer as if to hug but not quite sure where to start.

'Do you know what you'll do?' John asked. Matt would be given the option of extended medical leave given his change in circumstances. If he wanted to stay with the unit suppressants would be mandatory.

'I'm going to stay on here. Take the pills, think about it.'

John gave him some advice about suppressant side effects and they stood in silence for a while. Drinking tea and eating the last of the biscuits.

Matt spoke first 'Look, I know how this could have been. If I'd been on my own, or with someone who didn't... If we did this again....'

'I wouldn't be a surrogate anymore.' John broke in gently. He liked Matt, he wasn't against the idea as such (though the army would be) it was just he knew it was a post-heat glow talking. 'You need to let this settle I think.'

Sherlock printed a large copy of the symbols from the wall in an effort to work. The location, next to one of busiest train lines in the city suggested they wanted as many people to see it as possible. He was sure it was some sort of call to arms but that put him no nearer the meaning of the thing. There was still no reply from John nearly a day later.

The sound of the front door had hope swelling in his chest but he knew the confident heavy tread on
the stairs and it wasn't John.

'I'm very busy Mycroft.' He said by way of greeting. Not looking at his brother who sank into a chair.

'As am I brother but I have made time to come and see you.'

Sherlock made a show of staring at the photographs for a few seconds more before flopping into his own chair, he knew he hadn't the patience to outlast Mycroft today.

'How are you anyway?' His brother began conversationally.

'I'm fine, busy as I say so...'

'I don't need details Sherlock. I just need to know you're -well. The lack of an alpha, the parcel.'

'The alpha cancelled, unavoidable-a funeral. The package, what do you deduce? An omega, alone during a heat... Shall I go on?'

'No, I quite get the picture.'Mycroft held up a restraining hand. 'Did it occur to you...'

'Probably'

'Did it occur to you that Dr Watson stood ready to serve?'

Sherlock laughed at the unintentional innuendo.

'Dr Watson has served that way before. You know my rule.'

'I do, I thought perhaps...' Mycroft looked at him with obvious embarrassment and curiosity.

Sherlock made a scoffing noise. 'If you're finished.' Sherlock gestured at the mess of work scattered about.

'Ah yes, quite a diverting little matter. I glanced over it. You're doing rather well just missing one thing.'

'What are you up to Mycroft?'

'Nothing, I happened to be at a loose end, these affairs of state, less absorbing than you'd think.'

'I shouldn't think they're absorbing at all.'

'Well then, Soo Lin Yao. Have you found her?'

'No, if she's still alive she's being held. If I could just work out this code...'

'Is she though?' Mycroft said with a smile. 'Think again. Assuming Soo Lin is alive, where would she be?'

'Chinatown, she must know people who would be able to hide her to...'

'You're overcomplicating Sherlock, always a weakness.'

'I can't think...'Sherlock snapped in frustration. If he could only be left alone with his work perhaps. ..Oh. 'The museum.'
'Exactly, public, secure and..'

'She can continue her work.' Sherlock finished.

'Care for a little legwork?' Mycroft looked at him and for a moment it was like they were children again, off running through the woods executing some mad scheme.

'It's after ten how will we get in?' Sherlock said, already going for his jacket.

Mycroft just smiled.

#########

They didn't have to hide long in the restoration room till she emerged from a ventilation duct and began work on her precious teapots. Sherlock felt bad interrupting her, she obviously took comfort in the ritual.

'Fancy a biscuit with that?' He said by way of an smart arse opener, immediately wishing he hadn't when he was forced to catch the scalding hot teapot when she dropped it.

'I had to finish ... to finish this work. It’s only a matter of time. I know he will find me.' Soo Lin said, settling the pot carefully on her workbench.

'Who is he? Have you met him before?' Sherlock said gently.

'When I was a girl, living back in China. I recognise his ... 'signature. Only he would do this. Zhi Zhu.

'Zhi Zhu?' Mycroft broke in.

'The Spider.' Soo Lin unlaced her shoe and took it off. On her sole, at the heel, was a simple tattoo of a lotus flower inside a circle.

'You know this mark? Every foot soldier bears the mark-everyone who hauls for them.' she said, a deep tiredness seeping into her voice.

“Hauls”? You mean you were a smuggler?” Mycroft said surprised. Sherlock couldn't help but be a little charmed at his brother's naïveté that the young, pretty omega did the same work as the dead alphas.

'I was fifteen. My parents were dead. I had no livelihood; no way of surviving day to day except to work for the bosses.'

'Who are they?’ Sherlock said, hoping that she might have a little more insight about why an ancient Chinese syndicate was branching into the west.

'They are called the Black Lotus. By the time I was sixteen, I was taking thousands of pounds’ worth of drugs across the border into Hong Kong. But I managed to leave that life behind me. I came to England. They gave me a job here. Everything was good; a new life.'

'The tattoo isn't all they gave you is it?' Sherlock tapped a spot on his own neck.

'It's a work bond. Means nothing.' Soo Lin smiled sadly.

'A bonded omega is less suspicious at borders, airports I suppose.’ Mycroft said, hanging back from them in case he startled Soo Lin. 'Then he came looking for you.’
Yes. I had hoped after five years maybe they would have forgotten me, but they never really let you leave. A small community like ours – they are never very far away. Soo Lin was tearful and Sherlock couldn't help but wonder, given where she'd chosen to live, how far away Soo Lin really wanted to be.

'He came to my flat. He asked me to help him to track down something that was stolen.'

'And you’ve no idea what it was?' Sherlock said.

'I refused to help.'

'So you knew him well when you were living back in China?' Mycroft continued.

Oh yes. He’s my brother. Two orphans. We had no choice. We could work for the Black Lotus, or starve on the streets like beggars. My brother, he never forgave himself, for this.' She gestured at the bond bite.

'Now- he has become their puppet, in the power of the one they call Shan – the Black Lotus general. When I turned him away. He said I had betrayed him. Next day I came to work and the cipher was waiting.' She stared into the middle distance.

'Can you decipher these?' Sherlock spread the various photos of the symbols on the bench in front of her.

'These are numbers. The line across the man’s eyes – it’s the Chinese number one.’ She pointed.

'And this one is fifteen. But what’s the code?' Sherlock said, trying to hide his impatience.

'All the smugglers know it. It’s based on a book ...'

As Soo Lin made to reach for something the few lights that had been on in the echoing room went out.

'He’s here. He's found me.' She said, resigned somehow in the darkness.

Sherlock was up, already moving to the door.

Mycroft ushered Soo Lin into a cupboard before they both hurried towards the main foyer. The light controls were bound to be at the main security desk but he-Zhu Zhi- was already in the gallery above and shots rang out over their heads. Mycroft bodily pulled Sherlock behind a pillar. They stood listening, watching for what seemed like hours. The next single gunshot was sickening because they both know what it meant.
'Are you alright?' Sherlock passed his brother a cup of what passed for tea in Molly's office. It had been liberally laced with Scotch from a bottle left over from the Morgue's Christmas drinks at Dimmock's suggestion.

'I will be, I knew there was a reason I avoided fieldwork.' Mycroft said, as he took the mug shakily.

'I know what you were trying to do Mycroft. I know and I appreciate it.' Sherlock said quietly. There was the faintest smile from his brother before Molly was gesturing through the glass.

'We only need to see the feet.' Sherlock said, smiling to keep her on side as he joined her with Dimmock beside the two body bags.

'The feet? Oh I see, the tattoos. I thought there was something in them ...' she trailed off with a glance to Dimmock.

'So either these two men just happened to visit the same Chinese tattoo parlour or I’m right about the black lotus.' Sherlock said, gesturing at Van Coon’s feet.

'This was being looked into you know, I can run an investigation.' Dimmock said sharply.

'By who? Its clearly one if the most significant...' Sherlock glanced back through to Mycroft in the office who raised his eyebrows disapprovingly at his outburst. 'Is this your first multiple murder enquiry?' He continued more calmly.

'Yeah, first murder of any sort actually, if Greg wasn't on holiday...' Dimmock sighed and leaned wearily against the wall. 'What do you want?'

'I want every book from Lukis’s flat and Van Coon’s compared to look for matches. I'll do it. Send them to Baker Street.'

'Their books?' Dimmock said incredulous and Sherlock was forced to explain the book code.

'I thought you were collecting for charity or something.' Mrs Hudson said looking with dismay as the living room of 221b rapidly filled with crates full of books. Motes of dust drifted up from them in the low, late afternoon sun.

'I'm afraid not. I'll get rid of them all after.' Sherlock replied, the crates just kept coming.

'Will Dr Watson be coming to help?' She asked, trying and failing to sound casual.

'I dont think so, I better get on.' He steered her towards the door. He'd tried to convey to her the day before that there was a good chance John wouldn't be back at all but she wasn't having it.

They met Molly, squeezing in past the delivery driver.

'Just as well I came to help.' She said surveying the crates.
'Was this Mycroft's idea?' He snapped.

'A bit.' Molly confessed. 'That doesn't make it shit.' Mrs Hudson left them, shaking her head and muttering. 'There was something else too.' She took a sheet of paper out of her bag and handed it to him. 'What happened?'

Sherlock glanced at his most recent post-heat blood results. Every painful desperate minute of the three days reduced to bland numbers on a spreadsheet.

'The alpha cancelled last minute. I had to...I was alone.'

Molly looked at him steadily. 'Bollocks.' She said finally.

'Excuse me?'

'You heard me. You know what I think? It went one of two ways. Either you never had an alpha arranged at all or you cancelled the alpha last minute.'

'Why would I do that?'

'You wanted to ask John and then bottled it - clearly. Where is he by the way? Your brother wouldn't say.'

' My brother doesn't know everything - John's busy.' Molly nodded, obviously not believing a word but not quite wanting to push. She started to open the crates.

By two in the morning they had found twenty six matches from the collections but none that made a readable message. Molly, who had to work the next day, had gone to nap in the spare room.

Sherlock had know Lukis had a lot of books but hadn't realised Van Coon had a spare room full. It complicated matters that they had both seemed to favour bestseller list thrillers.

He started to put a few back into the crates, just to clear the sofa. As he tossed in a copy of 'The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest' a slip of paper dropped out. A shopping list, mundane stuff. don't assume he has anything!! Was underlined at the bottom. Sherlock realised with a fluttery , queasy feeling that the book was John's. He'd been reading it on and off during Sherlock's heat.

He suddenly found his own exhaustion overwhelming. He pushed a couple of hardbacks to the floor before lying down heavily.

The next he knew he was being shaken awake none too gently. 'Sherlock!' He opened his eyes to his brothers irritatingly well-rested face. He wiped away drool with his hand and realised Johns book still rested on his stomach.

'Where's Molly?' He said hoarsely.

'Gone home to change before her shift, it's nearly eight. Any progress?'

'No.' Sherlock said. Setting the book aside.

'Luckily I've had more success.' His brother dropped a flyer on the table. 'Yellow Dragon Circus, Chinese, one night only. I took the liberty of booking tickets. Immigration records were most revealing.'

'How long are you going to do this Mycroft?'
'Until you manage to persuade your assistant back.' Mycroft picked up the paperback and turned it over in his hands.

The circus was in a small slightly tatty theatre, the entrance festooned with paper lanterns. Mycroft was of course right, it did make sense. Especially given how difficult an exit visa could be.

'Two tickets for Holmes to collect please.' He said to the attendant at the desk, distracted by his train of thought.

'Three Sherlock, we have a guest.' Mycroft said, staring, pleased with himself, over Sherlock's shoulder. When Sherlock turned to look there was Mycroft's assistant, standing behind a very pissed off and slightly embarrassed John Watson.

'Did he kidnap you-again?' Sherlock said staring straight ahead at the pool of light on the darkened stage. He needed to break the tension, even if only so he could work properly.

'Not exactly he, that is to say his minion, told me you needed my help urgently. It was implied it was life and death -the usual. I was kind of relieved they got in touch to be honest. I'm sorry . I shouldn't have left you there, like that. Especially when I knew those bastards were still nearby.' John sighed and looked at his feet. 'I really hope this isn't your idea of a date-this is -art.' John glanced around the sparse crowd with distaste.

'No, but it may be my brothers though.' Sherlock joked weakly. 'I'm sorry too, really. I'm used to working alone. I should never have left you outside and I certainly shouldn't have tried to hide what had happened.' Sherlock glanced sideways at John but it was too dark to judge the alphas expression.

They were shushed by someone in front of them and fell into watching the escapology act. A masked man was chained up and had to free himself before being impaled by a crossbow. The mechanism controlled by a weight that dropped, slow and menacing, on a rope from the roof.

'Don't do it again, please.' John's whisper at his ear prickled pleasantly down his neck.

Mycroft had disappeared and Sherlock's phone soon lit up with a message.

A little avant garde for my taste. No need to thank me. MH

The music and lighting changed for the next act. A spotlight following an acrobat high above the stage on a sort of trapeze. A small, strong acrobat.

'You could almost imagine he could walk through walls.' John whispered.

'Indeed, my brother has his uses. I assume if I sneak backstage you'll follow? There may be a scuffle.'

'I'd be disappointed if there wasn't.' John said, already lookin for am inconspicuous route.

'Probably halfway back to China by now.' John said, resigned, as they climbed the stairs to Baker Street. They'd found a relevant paint tin backstage at the theatre and called Dimmock after a very brief scuffle.
'No, they won't leave without what they came for.' It was always a long shot, getting Dimmock to raid the theatre.' Dimmocks rant about his overtime bill was still ringing in their ears. 'Back to the books I suppose.'

'It's like the British library in here.' John said as he surveyed the room. Moving a pile of paperbacks so he could sit on what Sherlock had come to think of as John's chair.

'I found one of yours by the way.' Sherlock handed him 'The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets Nest'. John took it, wordlessly tucking the list inside.

'I'm beginning to think it's a book everyone would own.' Sherlock said, hands on hips, regarding his own shelves.

'The Bible?' John ventured, coming to stand beside him.

'Too many versions.' Sherlock wearily rubbed his face.

'Tired, hungry, pissed off?' John asked, moving closer, close enough to be worth a deep, soothing inhale of scent.

'All of the above.' Sherlock scrubbed hands through his hair.

'Well I'm starving. Why don't we order food in then, afterwards, I can try and help a bit.'

'Fine, that Thai menu is in the kitchen drawer. You can order, you know what I like.'

'I certainly like to think so.' John said with a smile and a wink (an actual wink) as he moved to the next room to phone for the food.

'Do you want a glass of wine?' John said moving to the fridge. 'I put a bottle in here a couple of weeks ago, we never got the chance to drink it.'

Sherlock wasn't sure he actually responded as he stared at the books but a cold glass was pressed into his hand.

John stood beside him.' So, there was something I wanted to show you. Tell me if it's taking a liberty.' John handed Sherlock his phone. The screen was showing a draft blog post, titled A Study in Pink. It was a description of the the taxi driver case. John nervously sipped his wine as Sherlock read. 'You don't like it?' he said finally.

'So I'm brilliant and amazing but spectacularly ignorant about some things.' Sherlock said a little too shrilly as he reached the end.

'You don't like it.' John looked disappointed.

'No I don't like it - that much.' Sherlock saw no point in lying. '...but then I can be spectacularly ignorant.'

'I won't post it.' John shrugged.

'No, post it. Its fine its... if it helps you. You have rather, well, glossed over, how we met.' Sherlock handed him back the phone.

'Well amazing, ignorant, best shag ever. A lot for one blog post.' John laughed nervously. The doorbell rang. 'Saved by the bell.' John mumbled, stepping away and digging out his wallet. Glancing at the the mess of blown up with photographs on the coffee table as he passed.
'Nine mill? What is that, something to do with the gun used at the museum? Can you get plates out?'

John went down to get the door.

Sherlock turned abruptly to see what John had been looking at, the copy of the message he'd shown Soon Lin. He hadn't noticed it before but in tiny neat handwriting there it was - *nine mill*. She'd been translating. While he'd been getting shot at, the book had been on her desk. His phone rang rudely.

'What?' He snapped.

'Sorry to bother you at this time Mr Holmes. Can you put your brother on he's not answering his phone.' Anthea, his brothers assistant. Confusion gave way to panic before he answered.

'I've not seen him for two hours or more. Have you?'

'No.' She answered. Losing some polish and gaining some resolve. 'We have procedures. I'll be in touch.'

Sherlock didn't get the chance to tell her that this was more likely to be as a result of his mess than whatever shady diplomacy his brother was currently involved in.

'John!' He grabbed his coat and ran down the stairs stopping halfway because - nothing. He could hear nothing. 'John?' He shouted again into the suffocating silence. The panic spreading and re-settling.

Outside the street was quiet a group of tourists walked along slowly, reading an A-Z and pointing up at the architecture. Sherlock ran towards them. 'Entschuldigen Sie bitte!' He shouted, having identified them as German. Then he froze because he remembered, too late, the book that had been on Soo Lin's workbench.

##########

The cab moved at a glacial pace as he stared at the decoded message.

*Nine mill for jade dragon den black tramway*

He'd had the presence of mind to call Anthea and Dimmock, the inspector's reluctance understandable given the circus debacle.

The black tramway was one of those half abandoned industrial sites that only the homeless, criminals and Sherlock seemed to bother with. He slipped in through a side door that swung carelessly open. The burst padlock hanging limp. If confirmed what he had already realised, he was expected.

The echo of voices carried along the empty tunnels, the faint glow and sooty smell of braziers leading him on. They were backed into one of the dead ends, the space protected by piles of nondescript junk coveted in plastic sheets.

'I am Shan.'

Sherlock recognised the female compere from the circus and realised she had also been the one taking his picture. She commanded the space like a second rate Bond villain, waving a handgun around. Soo Lin's brother stood off to her side, gazing blankly ahead at where John and Mycroft were tied to grotty chairs.

'What does it tell you when an assassin cannot shoot straight? That he is not really trying.' She drawled, looking at Mycroft. 'We wanted to make your brother inquisitive Mr Holmes. We hoped he
would find the empress pin for us. Perhaps this will sharpen his mind, taking his brother and his alpha.'

'I'm not his alpha. It's not like that.' John was emphatic.

"Oh I know you are not bonded and have had a disagreement but the evidence is there, you follow him like dog. Then there is this cheque. Who gives a cheque for five thousand pounds to an acquaintance. Forgive me if I do not believe you.' John sighed, sagging forward in his bonds. Sherlock realised that John's hands were loose. The alpha was holding them behind his back waiting for an opportunity. Sherlock took his chance.

'Tell me, do you make it your normal practice to kidnap dangerous men when carrying a useless weapon?' Shan was levelling the gun in his general direction but skirting through the shadows as he was he made a poor target.

'Mr Holmes, good of you to join us. Dangerous men?' She scoffed looking at them with disdain.

'Certainly, Captain John Hamish Watson of the fifth Northumberland Fusiliers and then my brother practically is the British government. That gun is semiautomatic. In here it will ricochet, it could hit anyone, it might hit you. She made you choose didn't she Zhu Zhi? A long time ago. By the time Soo Lin came to you it was too late.' Sherlock could see John itching to turn and look at him, he played for time. Dimmock or more likely Anthea was bound to turn up soon.

'You have me Mr Holmes, this is mostly for show.' Shan handed the gun to Zhu Zhi. 'This on the other hand.' She pulled the cover off the ornate crossbow setup from the circus, it pointed at John and Mycroft. 'Will i choose a volunteer Mr Holmes?'

John took his chance with a decisive dive, knocking over Mycroft so the both fell clear of the bolt that splintered against the sooty wall. The echoes were chased by another sharp crack. Zhu Zhi fell, blood gathering in an inky puddle on the filthy floor. By the time Sherlock had checked on John and Mycroft she was gone.

#########

'You're going to have to explain it better than that. An A-Z?' Dimmock stood beside the ambulance where John and Mycroft were being checked over.

Sherlock sighed. 'Its perfectly simple. Soo Lin Yao had an A-Z on her desk in the restoration room at the museum. She'd lived in London for years why did she need it right there in front of her? Why would a far east based smuggling outfit use an A-Z anyway? Conclusion? The A-Z had only been used recently, since they moved operations into London therefore Soo Lin was still smuggling.'

'She never left.' John said joining them, a cut to his forehead had been dressed.

'I think she tried but she was forced back into it somehow. Probably all that saved her life then was her specialist knowledge. Then, on a recent trip an opportunity presented itself. The pin was valuable, easily concealed and she could find a private buyer through her museum contacts. She told Zhu Zhi. Told him they could both get away, new identities, plenty of money. She miscalculated though. He was in too deep, with Shan. By the time Soo Lin realised, it was too late to run on her own. That night at the museum was her last attempt with him, that's why she told us, she wanted to try and bring them down if she couldn't get away. Van Coon, Lukis, they were collateral damage.'

Dimmock, who had been scribbling hurriedly in his notebook as Sherlock spoke, looked up, expectantly. 'So, where's the pin now?'
'I couldn't think of anywhere safer for it.' The alpha said, smiling nervously. They were in one of the smaller side rooms at the museum. The alpha had a display case open and was feeling around under purple silk that was being used to display Roman pottery fragments. 'She said she'd had a burglary and didn't think it was safe in her flat.'

'You didn't know what it was worth?' Dimmock said doubtfully, holding an evidence bag open for the modest jade pin, only distinguished by the dragon design.

The alpha shook his head in embarrassment. 'This is my area, the Mediterranean. The Chinese stuff I probably know as much as you. She told me it was her mother's. When she asked me to keep something so personal safe for her I thought it meant something. I don't blame her, you know?'

'You mind don't you?' John said casually across the table, buttering toast. 'That Shan got away.'

'It was a vast network John we've barely scratched the surface.' Sherlock felt edgy, yes he was still tired but there was something off about the street outside. Like someone had subtly moved the furniture.

'You cracked the code though. Maybe now Dimmock can get the rest.' John was being kind. Sherlock appreciated the effort.

'Yes but we both know all they need is another book.' His eye just caught a hooded figure running off down the street. A stylised eye had been drawn on the junction box on the opposite pavement. It seemed, to Sherlock at least, to be looking straight at his front door.

Chapter End Notes

I hope no one is too offended by the change of ending here.
Chapter 9

Grovelling apologies for not touching this for so long.

There's more divergence from season 1 than with previous chapters. I'm still hoping to be in the spirit of The Great Game though.

Headlights flashed across the insubstantial canvas ceiling above him. The intrusion reminding him that this was against regulations, several. John could name them, he'd looked them up. He didn't care.

'Sorry, I should have gone. I just get so tired after.' Matt arched into a luxurious stretch. Scent blunted somehow by the suppressant.

'I get so bloody tired all the time.' John grumbled.

Matt smiled at the ceiling. 'Three more weeks.'

'Three more weeks.' The tour was nearly over and they'd been seriously short handed recently. Home leave couldn't come soon enough.

'We've not talked about...will you come and stay with me, for the leave?' John said quickly.

'I can, if that's what you want I thought...' The omega sat up abruptly. 'Things are different out here.'

'I know, we can see how it goes.' John leaned in for a stroke of his hair. No need to say that, safe at home, they might hate the sight of each other.

The first time had been spontaneous, unnervingly instinctive, Matt just came to his tent in the early hours and wordlessly curled alongside him on the bed. Fatigues still gritty under Johns fingers as he peeled Matt out of them. The omega impatient because they needed to take their time outside of his heat. Only later did John find out that Matt had narrowly missed being hit on patrol that day.

When he found Matt, just to talk he told himself, it happened again. A quick pheremone driven encounter in the corner of a dark storage unit.

In uniform everyone looked the same but John could feel the slight roundness in Matt's hips and belly that had developed since he presented. After that they took every chance they could. Regulations or not.

##########

The scent of anxious alpha grated on Sherlock's already taut nerves as Mrs Hudson showed Raz into the flat.

'You know how you asked me to keep an eye out for something?' Raz grimaced at the pun.

'Yes, you usually just email though...' Sherlock had asked Raz to do a little looking around for him. To check if the graffiti eye that had appeared opposite Baker street had appeared anywhere else. It
'Yeah, so I found one when and where I wasn't really looking and...can I just show you?' Raz gestured between his tablet and the sofa where Sherlock sat. Sherlock nodded impatiently. The alpha wasn't remotely attractive to him, not really but sitting so close, after a basically unresolved heat, there was a certain pull.

'I was taking my little brother to the doctor when I saw this.' A familiar eye, A5 sized, powder blue paint, was drawn beside a clinic sign. 'I didn't understand it until I was waiting for him to come out and I saw ...'

'John.' Sherlock broke in flatly.

Raz nodded, relieved he'd worked it out. 'I remembered him being with you. I got chatting to the receptionist, he works a few other places too. A couple of them are tagged and then there's this.' Raz swiped to an image of a white handrail a chain of several eyes in a deep purple seemed to wind around it. The effect was oddly serpentine and the association made Sherlock's gut twist unpleasantly.

'This is where John lives?' He said, mouth dry.

Raz looked surprised for a second and Sherlock realised John's scent would be all over this place. Realised Raz was probably wondering why it wasn't all over him. 'Yeah, I mean don't get me wrong its secure, you can tell its run by ex military but..

'Yes, of course, thank you Raz.' He said, polite in his absent mindedness, his brain whirring as he showed Raz out.

He came back in, ignoring Mrs Hudson's chatter, to the flipchart pages spread over his bed. He stood on the chair, looked at them from above. It was the only way to get a proper overview in this space. He hadn't wanted John to see them, not yet but it couldn't now be avoided.

The eyes stared back at him. Several colours, several different hands, numerous locations. They could be bold or subtle, playful or sinister but they were following him, had been since the taxi driver (or 'A study in pink' as John styled it.).

Three on Baker Street itself not including the one he'd seen being scrubbed off the tube station sign by staff. A further seven on the various ways he'd approach the flat on foot. At least five, maybe more (he was trying to avoid the all seeing eyes of CCTV when he checked) within the immediate vicinity of Scotland Yard. Four in the vicinity of Vauxhall Bridge, where he met his homeless network.

He made a slightly separate grouping of the images Raz had brought today. Staying on the chair as he pulled out his vibrating phone.

*Got one. You free? GL*

'How are you doing anyway mate? You seem a bit better.'

'Yeah, I am a bit.' John glanced at his companion before looking awkwardly round their surroundings. The beer garden was fairly full. It was one of those promising days of early spring. Just warm enough and dry enough to sit outside.
'Has he helped then? This detective?'

'Maybe, I mean therapy has its place but, being useful. I missed it.' Mike was an old, old friend but talking about Sherlock was difficult, different to when they'd share the details of every conquest at medical school.

'It'll all work out you know. There's more to life than being shot at. Another round?'

John slid his eyes to his phone.

_Bored...SH_

'Best not.'

John arrived at Baker street to find Sherlock ushering Lestrade out of the door.

'I should have something tomorrow.'

'Do you think? We've been working on it for a couple of weeks...' Lestrade looked doubtful as he nodded an acknowledgement to John.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, as if there was no comparison. 'Come in John, we have mildly diverting work to do.'

'Lucky us.' John mumbled. Sherlock had moved to the sofa where he had flopped down, listlessly glancing through photographs. Pyjamas covering his thin frame. 'Still bored?'

'Missing person, barely worth my time.'

John sat at the opposite end of the sofa. Feeling mildly guilty for the way his eyes were drawn to Sherlock's collarbone, his belly where the T-shirt rode up. To say nothing of his scent, darkly fruity.

*Like red wine by candlelight.*

John's brain unhelpfully supplied. Sherlock was looking at him with a little too much understanding for his liking.

It shouldn't surprise John given who he was dealing with. He hadn't exactly been subtle in declaring his initial interest. Sherlock looked different though, a sort of open curiosity that boldened John. He felt himself lean closer.

'I wouldn't be too hasty brother.'

The moment crumbled and they both turned. Mycroft Holmes leant on his umbrella in the doorway. Holding a file in one hand. His scent and expression impossible to read, no doubt through long practice, though John was sure Mycroft knew exactly what he'd been thinking.

'Another one if your palace intrigues Mycroft? I'm not that desperate.' Sherlock sighed.

'Oh I think you might be interested in this. It ties into the little matter Lestrade gave you, though obviously Scotland Yard can't be trusted with all the details. Dr Watson I believe did have the necessary clearance. He's discharged of course but I think we can stretch a point in the circumstances.'

Sherlock turned to him with a quizzical expression and John realised, with quiet pleasure, that
Sherlock hadn't deduced that detail. 'You may as well.' Sherlock made a languid bored gesture as he shifted on the sofa. Revealing, to John's keen eye, a scant half inch of hip bone.

'Niall Gray, captain as was. Honourable discharge from the Yorkshires four years ago at which point he moved to continue aspects of his work in a civilian capacity.'

'MI6?' John asked, impatient with Mycroft's circular way of talking. Mycroft gave him a look, as it to say how quaint.

'Officially his wages were paid by a contractor.'

'Mercenaries?' John shot back with a knowing huff.

'Why don't you get to the meat of the thing Mycroft? John and I have better things to do.' Sherlock broke in. 'Lestrade has told us he is missing. What else?'

'He worked on supplying equipment to groups who, in the strictest official sense, shouldn't have it. This will surprise Dr Watson I think not at all.'

'No.' John said, trying to remember what seemed like a lifetime ago. 'I used to work on med support for special services. The rumours were true.'

'Aren't they always - partly at least?' Mycroft said casually. 'Unfortunately we know little more than Lestrade about this. Gray was last seen in the lobby of a budget hotel two miles from his sisters home in Hemel Hempstead. He checked in and left a bag in his room but he never slept in his bed, used the shower or ate breakfast the following day. The alarm was raised when a chambermaid found the bag the following lunchtime.'

'What about his sister?' John asked, taking out the notebook it was now his habit to carry.

'Never saw him, hadn't been aware of his coming to visit.' Mycroft replied.

'Suicide?' John asked. 'He took himself off and...we've just not found him yet.'

'Lestrade suggested that.' Sherlock broke in. 'but if it were that simple you wouldn't be here.' He pressed the tips of his fingers together, waiting for a response from his brother.

Mycroft looked conflicted for a moment. 'He's not the first.'

A couple of hours later one of Mycroft assistants had hand delivered a copy of another file. Another missing ex-soldier but that, at first glance, was the only similarity. Kenneth Wood had been an NCO from a poor background while Gray was a privately educated officer. Wood was from Dundee, Gray from the home counties. There had been six months between the disappearances. Lestrade would doubtless have checked but there would have been nothing to suggest the cases were linked without knowing about the programme.

Sherlock sat, still in his pyjamas, while he went through the file. He was aware of John making tea, taking notes, generally busying himself as the minutes turned into hours. 'Well' he said finally. 'Nothing we can do until tomorrow. We'll go and see their homes, we'll need to go to Grays flat in Wapping and Wood had spent time at his parents recently so we should see that too...' He trailed off
when he turned to look at the clock. It was nearly 10pm he’d been at this for the better part of four hours.

‘You're still here.’ He blurted to John who sat calmly on the sofa flipping through a newspaper.

‘You noticed. I was waiting for a break in the stream of consciousness to suggest food. Mrs Hudson brought up leftovers.’

‘You should just have gone. I don't want to keep you back.’ Sherlock felt defensive. He didn't want the responsibility of John at his beck and call. More than that he didn't want the responsibility of John in the middle of whatever else was happening.

‘From what?’ John said, defensive in his own way. 'I've no shifts this week so far and I met Mike Stamford for a pint this afternoon. My dance card is pretty empty apart from a physio appointment on Thursday.’

Sherlock stared at him for a moment, wanting to say something placating but not knowing where to start. He became conscious of the smell of food and his belly rumbled. A dish of what looked like lasagne sat on top of the stove.

‘You don't need to do this now you know. I'm not incapable , I'm not in...'He paused, his irritation ebbing away.

‘I know.’ John said a little sadly.

‘I am hungry though.’ Sherlock said, by way of apology.

‘I know.’ John suppressed a smile. 'Oven's on.’

They had a quiet interval of an hour or so while tea was made, food heated and served up. It was measured, soothing. So unlike the normal peaks and troughs of his usual casework, working till he more or less collapsed with low blood sugar or sheer exhaustion. Sherlock finished his lasagne and set the plate aside.

There's something I should tell you.’ Sherlock started so hesitantly that John paused, putting his forkful back on his plate. 'Actually its easier to show you. Come on.’

He went to his room where the photographs were still spread on his bed and as he turned to the following alpha he realised that leading John to his bedroom was not the best way to go about things - too late now.

'I'm being watched-we are being watched.' He gestured at the bed. John looked intently and he felt a pang, a mix of anger and sadness when the alpha picked up the picture from the clinic.

‘You don't think whoever it is -there's a lot of kids here, you know?’ John pointed at the picture.

‘I can't be completely certain but there's no suggestion anyone else is in danger. In fact if you were to stop helping me perhaps..’ He broke off as john shook his head. Though actually Sherlock suspected it might be too late for that now. The case that was developing had a decidedly military flavour, that wasn't an accident.

‘No, I'm not being bullied into anything. Who is this?’

‘I think Moriarty.’ It was the first time Sherlock had voiced this aloud. 'I think its one individual. They had a hand in the taxi driver business, I think in the jade pin business too. There are hints around
other cases.'

'One person?' John sounded doubtful.

'Nor literally doing everything but pulling the strings. I think they're working up to something. Crime it has a normal rhythm, ebb and flow. Drugs, stolen goods move in a pattern. In London, over the last few days, something has happened. Everything slowed. That's why I've been so bored.'

'I don't understand.' John set the picture down and stepped towards him.

'They're working up to something, something big and I-we-are mixed up in it somehow. Lestrade and Mycroft bringing me the same thing at the same time. That's no coincidence.'

_The universe is rarely so lazy._ His brother's voice sombre inside his head.

John nodded. 'Well, first I'm going to finish my lasagne. Then, you can tell me how I can help tomorrow.'

#############

John sighed and shuddered against Matt's shoulder as he emptied himself inside the omega. Matt having already spattered the floor below them. It was laughably undignified.

The two of them, in uniform but bare arsed, shagging on a consulting room floor. Normally John wouldn't have considered anything so unprofessional but the handover to the next unit was nearly done, they were basically waiting on their transport tomorrow.

There was a shuffling about as they cleaned up with paper towels and zipped up. Managing something approaching a post coital cuddle propped against the wall.

'You need to stop John, thinking of me like a fragile virgin you've corrupted.'

'I dont.' John lied unconvincingly. He was surveying the detritus of his packing on the floor. Matt deserved more. A bed, a proper date even but their precarious position was only able to give them a series of rushed, if exciting, fumbles in quiet corners. A few weeks quiet should give them the opportunity to see if they had something more.

They heard the rhythmic step of the CO approaching and scrambled to their feet. Muscle memory pulling them to attention.

There was the gesture, given this was a consulting room, of a tap to the door before the CO barrelled inside.

'At ease.' She barked impatiently. 'What are you doing down here McMillan?'

'Helping the doctor Ma'am' Matt half lied smoothly and john fought a snigger as he shifted and felt his cock move stickily inside his clothes.

'Anyway I need volunteers.' She continued. 'The next lot aren't set up properly yet. I've said we'll do one final patrol.'

#############

How often had the unit done this run? Countless and this, this shitty mess, had to be today.

John put painful pressure on his shoulder, running through the field triage manual in his head.
Anything to stop him thinking about Matt. The familiar scent mixing with gunpowder and blood as he was dragged to cover. Anyone would have done it for him and John would have done it for anyone. That's how it worked, had to work out here but it hadn't been just anyone.

Then John could do nothing but lie and listen, each sound all too clear. The rapid footsteps, the shouts in a language John recognised but didn't understand, the sickening click of a weapon ready to fire, the last ditch shouts as Matt pleaded.

The shot that saved Matt came from Thomson, boorish Thomson. It struck John then, with pain blurring and bittering his mind, that if he'd just turned Bill down, sent Matt to Thomson then, neither of them would be here.

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